

THE DEATH HOLE BUNKER

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch started the standalone novella “Death Hole Bunker” to explain something in her Diving universe to herself. Two major novellas and a novel later, she might have a grasp on what’s going on in her Diving subconscious. (The novel, *Ivory Trees*, won’t appear until 2024.) She’s stunned and pleased at the great reaction to her Diving legal thriller, *The Court-Martial of the Renegade Renegades*, and wants to thank *Asimov’s* readers for their support. That full novel will appear in paper and ebook forms in the fall of 2023. Her novel, *The Kirilli Matter: The First Book in the Qavnerian Protectorate*, appeared in February. Despite the name, the other thing to know about *The Kirilli Matter* is that it’s the first Fey novel in decades. It starts a side series (which seems to be what Kris does) that explains (see a pattern?) the history behind Fey relations with another country.

That’s just her fiction novel output. She also writes a weekly business blog on her website, kriswrites.com, and puts up weekly free fiction. She has stories forthcoming in *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock* as well as a few anthologies. Her story “Grief Spam” from *Fiction River* appeared in *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2022*. And yet, she never feels like she’s writing enough. . . .

THE DEATH HOLE BUNKER

Six mummies on the stairs leading into the bunker. And it was an actual bunker, too, not some cave that had much too smooth walls. Hogarth adjusted the pack he’d slung over his shoulder. He was wearing an environmental suit, and he had climbing gear—not that he’d needed it so far.

He was a bit surprised by that. He was surprised by all of it.

The mummies were sprawled on the stairs as if they had all fallen while in transit. They were dressed in tattered clothing that looked deeply unfamiliar. The mummies

he'd found in the past were wearing clothing that usually followed some kind of style from the Enterran Empire's history, something he could recognize.

But these were different in ways he couldn't quite yet process.

He didn't try to process the mummies at all. He had learned long ago not to look at them too closely—their wizened faces, their crabbed hands. One of his early team members had quit after encountering a mummy, saying the sunken eyes and the mouth, curved into a circle, looked like the person had been screaming when they died.

Hogarth couldn't get that idea out of his own head, so ever since, he'd tried not to look at the faces. They all ended up like that, the lips sunken inward so that only the teeth remained, the eyes sunken as well—sometimes with eyeballs and sometimes not. He tried not to think about expressions or how, exactly, these people died, and he always, always failed.

These days, though, he prepared his team for a gruesome discovery. No one had been truly surprised in years—not this team, anyway.

They were one level up. They moved a lot slower than he did. He was team leader, not because he owned the company (which he did), but because he was willing to risk death every time they explored one of these caves.

Or what he had thought was going to be a cave. The fact that this was a bunker did surprise him. Stairs, actual walls designed by a human being, all of them leading somewhere. He'd never really encountered that before, not when he was exploring death holes.

Death holes had appeared all over Wyr for decades, maybe centuries. Some kind of energy blew through the surface, creating the death holes, which often destroyed homes or entire blocks, sometimes entire sections of a city.

The city of Vaycehn had relocated twice that he knew of because of the death holes.

Within the last year, though, there had been no death holes. No repeated problems with existing death holes. Nothing.

Some thought it was just a lull, but Hogarth believed something was different.

He had made his living exploring the caves found underneath a lot of the death holes, unable to go too deep into some of them because there was a feeling he would get. He'd told some of his team members about the feeling, but no one else. Refusing to explore based on a feeling sounded strange to him, but he had relied on that gut instinct from the start.

The feeling was powerful. His skin would crawl or the hair on the back of his neck would literally rise, even though he had seen nothing to cause the sensation.

Every now and then, he had a guess. Some of the caves had once been inhabited. Someone had shored up the walls or built ceilings—which the death holes had blown through. The remaining ceilings would sometimes have lights that would flare on, always startling him.

A member of a different, earlier team had once asked him if the lights had caused his feelings, and he had thought about that for a while. Then he remembered that he'd had feelings in dark caves that had clearly been tunneled by the power of a death hole. So the lights, the former habitation, none of that had caused whatever it was that he felt.

And he was always the only one who felt it. It didn't matter who else was on his team—none of them could feel the skin tingle. None of them ever had their hair rise up.

He'd even lost a few team members back at the beginning, when they wouldn't listen to him about the change in the air. They would put on helmets and say that their environmental suits would protect them.

Then they would march inside an area that something in his inner being shouted was a death trap.

Two never came out. One had stumbled and fallen near the part of the cave he'd entered, close enough that Hogarth could grab his feet and pull him out.

But the man was already dead. Maybe a minute inside that strange area, and the man had died, his oxygen gone, his body dehydrated so badly that the coroner had thought Hogarth was lying about how long the man had been in the cave corridor.

That incident still gave Hogarth the shudders, but it hadn't stopped him from exploring the tunnels blown by the death holes. Sometimes the tunnels revealed nothing, and sometimes they contained little treasures—a dropped piece of jewelry or mysterious bits of technology that no one seemed to understand.

Hogarth believed that people had lived in some of the tunnels centuries ago, maybe because the surface of Wyr was uninhabitable and an entire civilization repurposed the caves. There was nothing in the history of Wyr that confirmed any of his theories, from the uninhabitable surface to some strange civilization, lost to memory. As far as recorded history knew, people had lived on the surface. He had found throughout his career, though, that there was a lot that recorded history didn't know.

There was a myopia in anything the Enterran Empire did that he found annoying, a requirement, really, to ignore what had come before the Empire. So whoever had established Vaycehn had been lost to time.

Hogarth did know that Vaycehn came first, because its citizens often left the beleaguered city and founded other towns, other cities, other villages. That history was clear and linear.

But the history of Vaycehn was not.

Just like the history of the death holes.

People said the death holes had always been a part of Wyr, and maybe that was true. But there were communities all over the planet that had never had a single death hole explosion in their recorded history.

The communities around Vaycehn did, and of course, Vaycehn itself had always had death holes.

Some believed that was because Vaycehn was in the SeBaze Mountain Range. Death holes often appeared in the range, even in the uninhabited areas.

Hogarth believed that the death holes did emanate from something underneath the range, but what, he wasn't certain. Still, others believed that the death holes were simply a feature of Wyr, even though they didn't appear in other parts of the planet.

Many people listened to Hogarth, though. He was considered an expert on the caves.

That was because he mapped them. After nearly a decade of work, he'd gotten the city fathers in Vaycehn to pay for his explorations. Having the cave system mapped meant that parts of Vaycehn wouldn't succumb to a death hole.

Hogarth believed—and so far, nothing had proven him wrong—that the death holes came from inside the caves, rather than creating the caves, as some scientists thought. He also believed—even though he couldn't figure out how to do the research to back his ideas up—that the feelings he got, those back-of-the-neck creepy-crawlies, were caused by the same thing that caused the death holes.

But no one wanted to do the research based on his hunch. He wasn't going to do the research either. He was an explorer, a sometimes treasure hunter, and an adrenaline junkie. There was no way he was going to sit in a room and run all kinds of diagnostics or whatever it was scientists did just to explore a hunch.

When he explored a hunch, he literally explored. That was how he started mapping death holes in the first place. He had a hunch they led somewhere, and he had been right. They did.

They always did.

Since none had appeared in the past year—the longest stretch without even a

small death hole—he had started exploring death holes far from Vaycehn.

Death holes had a look, even if they occurred in an unpopulated area. Vaycehn was surrounded by mountains that left the city in a bowl. There were other, smaller valleys that were also bowls, a few in the area where Vaycehn had originated.

But some had been unoccupied forever, at least according to existing records. He'd explored two unoccupied valleys and hadn't seen any obvious death holes.

Then he moved farther away from the city and its previous sites, and he found a hidden box valley that showed evidence of massive death hole activity.

Death holes always left a mark on the land. The hole wasn't really a sinkhole, even though that was often the cumulative effect. Death holes blew the ground outward and upward, as if someone had fired a weapon underground, a weapon with enough power to cut through layers of rock and dirt. The rock and dirt flew into the air and sprayed across the surface—or what was left of the surface after the death hole had blown through it.

Sometimes the holes collapsed in on themselves, filling the tunnel, always leaving a dip in the land. The dip was a sign of a death hole, just like the mounds of dirt around it.

Ancient death holes had the dip, but it wasn't always visible. What was visible were the mounds. They fell only on one side of the dip, so the pattern always looked like a hole and then a series of mounds.

That was how he had found this particular death hole. The dip was more of a divot now because so much time had passed. The mounds were tiny inclines, but the pattern was familiar. He'd gone over it several times, looking at it from all angles, even measuring it from above.

After many years of doing this work, he had equipment to dig out the tunnel without ruining its edges.

He had done that here, then encased the edges so that the hole wouldn't collapse in on his team. He had gone in first, rappelling downward until he found what he believed to be the cave. It had looked like any other cave that had sparked death holes, and it hadn't caused any uncomfortable feelings for him.

He'd brought the team down, and they were going to explore.

Which was when Raemi found the stairs. Raemi was his second; she had been with him almost from the beginning.

Sometimes he thought she looked like a mummy herself—over the years, her skin had grown darker, wrinkled, and tighter against her skull. She spent too much time in the sun along the SeBaze Mountain Range, and as long as he knew her, she hadn't eaten enough.

She had beckoned him over, and he had gone, and they both stared down into the extreme darkness that the stairs disappeared into.

When they had stood at the top, discussing their next move, Hogarth hadn't even seen the mummies.

Neither had anyone else. All eleven of the other team members had looked and none of them had seen anything. So Hogarth put Raemi on notice: she was to follow him if he gave the signal. Then he put Mehmet, his third, in charge of the team on the surface.

Then Hogarth had pulled on his helmet and turned on the oxygen as a precaution. He was going deep into another hole, and the surface had been covered for a long time.

For all he knew, the oxygen was limited down here to whatever had accumulated after they had dug out the cave.

The farther down he went, the fresher the air got, though, at least according to his suit. The suit also told him that the temperature was comfortable, not the chill he

usually found when he went deep underground.

Those two facts made him uneasy. He'd encountered this kind of strangeness one or two times before, registered it, and then had to flee the cave because he got that creepy-crawly feeling.

There was no such feeling here. Nothing except human-made walls, perfectly cut stairs, and a darkness that the lights on his palms couldn't really penetrate. He was loath to turn on his headlamp only because it distorted things.

And then he found the mummies. Six of them, sprawled. Six of them, all of whom seemed to have died at the same time—but he wasn't sure of that. They had tumbled face first, though, which led him to believe that they had fallen going *up* the stairs, not down.

He couldn't know that either.

So he contacted Raemi through the comms in his helmet.

"Mummies," he said.

"Plural?" she asked.

"Six of them. I want to head deeper, but I also need someone to record all of this. A second witness at least."

He needed one more witness because the Mummies of Wyr were considered valuable. The City Museum of Vaycehn preferred to acquire the mummies—usually as a donation, claiming that since the mummies had once been people, they needed to be treated with respect.

Others, though, were willing to pay exorbitant prices for any Wyr mummy. Hogarth could take advantage of that if he wanted to. Because this part of Wyr was uninhabited and unclaimed by Vaycehn, which was the only place that mummies had been found (so far) on Wyr.

He could claim ownership of them, and sell them with impunity.

He didn't want to do that, though, because he partly agreed with the museum. The mummies had to be treated like the people they had been. Only the museum sometimes failed at that. The museum was often as guilty of exploiting the mummies as the antiquities dealers were.

He was going to need scientists and forensic specialists and others who could identify these mummies, in case they had still-living families. He also had to protect the mummies.

In the past, former members of his team had talked about mummy discoveries, and a couple of former members had actually stolen the mummies from him and sold them.

Of course, the thieves had never worked for him again, but that didn't really matter. The damage had been done—to him, to his sense of trust, and to his reputation.

Raemi understood. Now they had one person on their team who was in charge of contacting the experts, even before the rest of the team learned about what was going on.

Raemi would initiate the procedures, and then she would join Hogarth. That way, if one of the current team members got it in their head to steal a mummy, Hogarth and Raemi would be in the clear. They would have tried to do the right thing.

Hogarth paused on this part of the stairs, crouching to look at the mummies. That was when he noted the strange clothing, even stranger because it had started to decay—and the decay was recent. In the past, when he discovered mummies, the clothing was often intact, sometimes looking as fresh as it had when the mummy had put it on the day of their death.

Here, though, as Hogarth looked, he realized that not only was the clothing starting to decay, but the mummies didn't look quite as fresh as the ones he had found in the past. It actually looked like something had nibbled on the skin of the closest mummy before giving up.

He shuddered a little and peered into the darkness. The stairs continued as far as

he could see, even when he turned his palm lights down there. He finally relented and turned on his headlamp—broad beam, so that he could see as much as possible.

He still couldn't see the bottom, although he did see a landing and the beginnings of another flight of stairs. His heart was pounding harder than it had on a job in a long time.

He wanted to continue down the stairs alone, but he needed to wait for Raemi. The procedure they were using wasn't official—no authority recognized it—but it had worked in previous cases where someone had tried to steal from one of the sites that Hogarth had discovered.

Authorities might not recognize his procedures, but they certainly relied on them when they needed evidence.

It took nearly ten minutes before Raemi picked her way down the stairs. She hated stairs, particularly those without handholds of some kind. She saw them as a dangerous enemy, preferring a steep incline in a death hole tunnel to something carved out of stone, like these were.

She stopped one step above him, two steps above the closest mummy. She turned on her palm lights as Hogarth turned off his headlamp, so that he wouldn't blind her.

She looked at the nearest mummy, then went down a few steps to the next, and the next and the next, until she had seen all six. Then she climbed back up to Hogarth, and made a point of gesturing at the comms.

He had thought they were on a private channel, but clearly, she wanted him to check.

"You know these are worth a fortune, right?" she asked.

He nodded.

"We can't let the others down here," she said. "I had Mehmet contact our experts, but I had him climb out of the tunnel to do so."

"These look different," Hogarth said. "Clothing, decay, positioning."

"We've never found so many at once," she said.

She was right; they'd found more mummies in a different cave near the edge of Vaycehn, but not gathered in one place.

Then she tilted her head toward him, her eyes looking big inside her helmet. "You usually feel that tingly thing whenever we find mummies."

"I know," he said. "I'm not feeling a thing."

"Maybe it's the helmet. . . ?" she asked, her voice trailing off.

He shook his head. "It's never been a problem in the past."

But that didn't mean it wasn't a problem now.

"My readings say that the air here is fresh and normal." Raemi sounded just as surprised as Hogarth felt. He had never encountered air this fresh in one of the caves. "You think there's another exit somewhere?"

"Maybe," he said, "but you usually don't encounter that when you go down."

He resisted the urge to call up the map of the area on the visor of his helmet. He knew where they were. The tunnel went underneath the hidden box valley. From mapping others had done nearby, and the things he had seen, there were no other points where a person could enter this area from below.

Air like this—fresh air like this—usually came from a nearby entrance. He supposed he could have missed it, but he didn't think he had. He had mapped this part of the valley floor himself, augmenting the flyover he had done of the entire valley. He had seen no obvious death holes, no obvious entrances, and certainly nothing lower than he was right now.

And there was one other thing.

"Air wouldn't regulate the temperature," he said. "Not like this."

Every other cavern he'd been in had been cold this far down. Fresh air coming in

might have been warmer, but it wouldn't have warmed this area and made it comfortable. His suit told him that the air was 32 degrees—what his father used to call “sleeveless weather.” Certainly not cold, and definitely not that underground chill Hogarth had braced for.

Raemi nodded. Then she took off her helmet. Her black hair was tousled, her cheeks a bit flushed. She took a deep, ostentatious breath.

“This air is fresh,” she said. “There’s nothing tainting it that I can sense.”

She waited, as if she expected Hogarth to remove his helmet as well.

He looked down at the mummies. She was right; he had never found mummies in such an accessible place, where he could touch them and extract them. He'd never found mummies without feeling at least a little bit of a tingle, one that bothered him so much that he wouldn't retrieve the mummies.

He wouldn't allow his team to do so either. He always let the so-called experts do it, and often, he would leave before the mummies were extracted. He didn't even want to know if any of the experts were injured or died. He knew it had happened, but he tried to ignore it.

He never considered mummy retrieval part of his business.

He let out a nervous breath. Sometimes, when he found a mummy, the tingly feeling was faint, almost nonexistent. Maybe Raemi had a point; maybe Hogarth couldn't feel a truly faint tingle because of the environmental suit.

He brought up his hands and slowly disconnected the helmet. He took a step down, past the first two mummies. Then he took another, and another, until he was at Raemi's side. No tingle. Not even one he could conjure with his imagination. He felt fine, maybe better than fine, because now he was breathing fresh air instead of oxygen from his environmental suit.

The very idea of that made him shaky. Not the kind of shaky that went with the creepy-crawly feeling. The kind of shaky that he felt whenever he encountered a situation he didn't entirely understand.

He peered up the stairs. He couldn't see the cave level. He had gone down too far. And if he continued down, he—and possibly Raemi—would not be able to run out of here quickly.

In the past—the long ago past, when he was first exploring caves—a moment like this wouldn't have stopped him. He had thought that he was fearless, and maybe he would have been if the stairs had been empty.

But the mummies were a warning sign of something.

He glanced at Raemi. She shrugged, as if saying, *This is your decision.*

If he left, he would never come back. He knew that. The mummies would upset him even more in hindsight. Besides, there would be experts here, trying to figure out what the mummies were.

And mummies sometimes led to other things. Little bits of treasure that he could use to continue his work, to augment the money he earned from the City of Vaycehn to map the caves.

He would always wonder what was down there. If his experience in other caves were any measure, he wouldn't find anything at all. Or he would find a blockage, beyond which there was something that made him deeply uncomfortable.

Maybe the tingle-causing energy was farther down now. Maybe it had receded. Maybe he wouldn't be able to go down all of those stairs.

He didn't know at the moment, and he needed to know.

“All right,” he said. “I'm going to see what's down there. You want to come?”

“Yep,” Raemi said. “That's why I'm here.”

He put his helmet back on. He didn't trust that fresh air. After a moment, Raemi put her helmet on, too.

Then they followed the usual procedure. He went first, and she followed a few meters behind.

There were a surprising number of stairs. He should have started counting them from the moment he encountered them, but he did not. He started at the first landing.

The stairs were steeper than he was used to, and there were a dozen of them that went down to the next landing. The landings were wide and square, turning the stairs in a zigzag pattern.

According to his suit, the air did not get colder, nor did the freshness fade. The suit wasn't recording a breeze, either. There were no lights, other than his helmet light and the lights on his palms. Raemi had turned on her headlamp as well, and the light bobbed as she made her way down the stairs.

Finally, Hogarth reached the bottom of the stairs. They ended in another square landing-like platform, but he suspected this was the actual floor. At the opposite end of the square, a door loomed. It was partially open, which bothered him more than it would have if it had been closed and locked.

He hesitated before stepping onto the floor. It looked uneven. Then he realized that he was seeing particles. They had gathered like dirt around the open door, and they also covered the floor itself.

He waited until Raemi joined him, then dipped a foot onto the floor. The particles stirred, looking like black snow in the light of the headlamps.

He recognized the particles. He had seen them in death hole caves, usually in the ones where he found mummies—or saw mummies in the distance, just before fleeing because of the creepy-crawly feeling.

"You're still not feeling anything?" Raemi asked.

Apparently she had had the same thought.

"No." He checked and doublechecked, then felt a thread of worry: Had he lost the ability to have that feeling? Did that feeling really matter, or had he always been reacting to the strangeness of the circumstance?

He shook off that last thought. The feeling had been caused by something external, and it was always visceral.

"I've never seen the particles settle like this," he said. "There are usually some that float."

So that was a difference, too, something that he had seen but not entirely understood until this moment. He took a deep breath of the air in his environmental suit. It tasted metallic, and he found that incredibly reassuring.

"You stay here," he said to Raemi, without turning around to look at her. If he did, he might see concern on her face, and he didn't need that at the moment.

He stepped onto the floor. Particles rose around him, circling as if they were attracted to his suit. As he walked, they continued to float. They rarely went higher than his head.

The particle pile was deep, though. He shuffled as he walked, stirring up the pile all the way to the door.

Some of the particles were stuck underneath the bottom of the door, and looked almost like some kind of dried sludge. He wasn't sure if those were different.

What was different—what just registered—was that everything in this space, from the stairs to the landings to the walls to the ceilings and floors, was at straight angles. Like buildings in Vaycehn. Like land-based design throughout the Empire.

The death hole caves were usually arched, without angles or corners, except in a few odd places. The death hole caves reminded him of the military space ships he had served on. Most had rounded designs in their corridors and public spaces because, he was told, it was a better use of the space.

He reached the door, and examined it for a moment. He didn't want it to cut his

suit or to transfer something unidentified onto him. He saw nothing dangerous, though. No sharp edges, nothing obvious that might hurt him.

He threaded his fingers together and pushed his gloves into his skin, making sure they were tight. Then he grabbed the edge of the door, and tried to move it outward, ever so slowly.

For a moment, it wouldn't budge. He wondered if that was because of the material underneath or because it had been in the same position for a long, long time.

Then it moved with a loud squeak and groan. Particles floated everywhere, brushing against his visor, but not sticking to it.

He peered inside the door, seeing blackness for just a moment, before realizing that it was simply particles, floating in front of him.

He pushed the door a little farther, so that he could fit inside the opening, then waited for the particles to settle.

It took longer than he expected.

As the particles settled, he couldn't see the outlines of a room like he'd expected. He saw edges of things and, because he had no context, he couldn't tell exactly what he was seeing.

He slowly shoved an arm inside the room, not wanting to disturb any more particles.

When his elbow breached the space, something hummed, like some kind of circuit. He nearly jumped backward. He had experienced that humming sound before, and it usually presaged the start of the creepy-crawling feeling.

He waited. No feeling. But the light inside the room was changing. Far from him, he saw a faint light—pale grayish white and horribly thin. As he watched, the light moved toward him along the ceiling.

Something he had done had activated motion sensors, maybe, or maybe opening the door to this width had done the same thing.

Whatever it was, it was clear that these lights hadn't been used in a long time. Some of the lights were yellow, other had a layer of particles along the bottom—although he couldn't tell if that layer was inside the light fixture or attached to it, like the sludge beneath the door.

Some of the light was coming out of the sides of the fixtures, which was why the light seemed so thin. Other light seemed to almost rain down on him, as if there were holes in part of the fixtures.

"What do you see?" Raemi asked. She sounded impatient.

"Lights came on," he said, and slipped inside the room.

It wasn't as big as he had expected, given the lights. The room was long and narrow, with walls that looked like some kind of brushed metal. The metal surprised him. Metal hadn't been used for buildings or for ships for centuries.

The metal wasn't rusted, which he found somewhat amazing, too, considering most places he explored underground were dank and cold.

The room was filled with tables and shelves. From what he could tell, they were also metal. But he only saw parts of them, since they were all covered with various items.

Close to the door, he couldn't see what the items were, because they were covered in particles. Farther back, there seemed to be fewer particles, but that might also be his perspective.

"I think it's safe to come in here," he said, and walked in just a bit further, stirring up more particles.

He stopped at the nearest table. The table came up to hip height, but with the items on top reached his ribcage. He gingerly ran his gloved hands over the items, trying to dislodge the particles without making too much of a mess.

They rose up and floated. Beneath them were what appeared to be blankets and

bags. They were remarkably intact for being in a room like this.

He stepped past them to the next table.

The items on it didn't form neat piles. They were scattered, of varying heights and shapes. Some of them seemed to have toppled on the far side of the table.

He peered at that first, and then gasped.

He recognized the shapes. They looked like twigs entwining off a branch. No one stored twigs and branches in a room like this.

His heart started to pound. He tried not to make an assumption, but as usual, his mind was leaping ahead of him.

He brushed the twig nearest him, touching it very carefully, because if it was what he thought it was, it would be very fragile.

The particles floated and circled, but they wanted to return to the surface of the twig. Still, he got close enough to see the color—a whitish ivory—and some writing engraved on the surface.

Familiar writing.

His breath quickened.

"Raemi, I need you," he said.

"Almost there," she said.

He didn't want to move quickly. He didn't want to damage anything.

"Behind you," Raemi said.

"Look here," he said, "and tell me what you see."

He stepped slightly to one side and pointed.

She bent at the waist and carefully brushed the twigs. Then she stood up quickly, losing her balance ever so slightly.

He caught her so that she didn't try to stop herself from falling by grabbing a table or one of the branches. She pivoted slightly and gripped his arms.

"These are Ivory Trees!" she said, breathlessly. "And there are a lot of them."

His mouth went dry. That was what he had thought as well, but he had been afraid to admit it.

Ivory Trees were not real trees, nor were they made of ivory. In fact, ivory would have cheapened them, since ivory was a substance that could be made in any lab.

Ivory Trees were made of a material that no one seemed able to replicate. Even trying to extract part of an Ivory Tree didn't really work. Bits of them didn't seem to have DNA, which meant that they were not organic, and the parts that were removed by someone didn't respond well to most tests, dissolving or disappearing as someone experimented on them.

Occasionally, some scientist would do something that would cause a bit of an Ivory Tree to explode, but no one knew what that something was, since the scientist who triggered an Ivory Tree explosion never survived.

Ivory Trees were valuable, though, because they were beautiful and rare. They always came in branches and twigs, suggesting that there might actually be an Ivory Tree somewhere.

Where, no one knew. The bits of Ivory Tree that had floated around the Enterran Empire had come from different sources. Hogarth knew of only three—a derelict ship found far from here more than a hundred years ago; an escape pod filled with Ivory Tree bits found close to the shared space with the Nine Planets; and one small Ivory Tree that appeared to be intact that was in the Enterran Empire Museum on Ukkende.

That small tree had been captured in a space battle centuries ago. Its beauty had inspired countless people to search for more Ivory Trees, but with little luck.

Some claimed they had found bits of an Ivory Tree only to lose those bits or claim (when someone tried to take one) that the bits had been stolen. He believed the theft claims, even though the Enterran Empire and most of its art and antiquities dealers

did not. They didn't seem to account for the fact that there had been at least three attempts to steal the Ivory Tree in the Enterran Empire Museum over several decades.

"If this is really an Ivory Tree," Raemi said, "we are rich beyond our wildest dreams."

Hogarth didn't say anything. She had leapt from the discovery to selling the bits of Ivory Tree. He hadn't had that thought at all. He had been dealing with the practicalities. How did he get the bits out of this room without his team knowing? Or did he want them to know?

He trusted his team, but he wasn't sure how much.

He pressed his hands together and looked around the room. Every surface was covered in particles. Every surface had a different shape, which meant there were other items here.

And in the back was another door.

He and Raemi had found some kind of treasure trove and it was one he couldn't just walk away from. He would have to report those mummies because his team knew about them, and if someone from the City Museum of Vaycehn or the Empire's Antiquities division showed up, then they would explore this area just like he had.

He wasn't even sure how to lay a claim to all of this. Had he been in space, he could have registered a shipwreck with the Empire. The first person to find the wreck and claim it would be the person who could profit the most from any treasure inside.

But on land? It varied from no community to community. The problem was worse here in Wyr, because there was no planetwide government. Some areas were unaffiliated, and this was one of them.

He wasn't sure, though, if that made them subject to Empire salvage laws or subject to something else, some kind of regional division or something.

And of course, he hadn't asked about that before he arrived here. He had never discovered a trove this big.

He had figured if he found a few items, he would pocket them. If he found a dozen or more, his team would pocket them as well.

That was what he had done in the past in any unaffiliated area. He'd fought to keep some of his salvage in the cities and villages around Wyr, and he'd tangled with the Vaycehn government more than once.

But something this large? If everything on these tables were valuable, then it would take him a year or more to properly catalogue it all.

He didn't have that kind of time—not to keep this space secret.

Raemi was looking at him, not at the pieces of the Ivory Tree.

"We're not going to keep this, are we?" she asked.

"Some of it, maybe," he said. If they found small Ivory Tree pieces, the kind that they could pocket.

Then he realized that if any of them sold Ivory Tree bits, even to private collectors, the authorities would know where the bits came from.

He sighed. "This is too big for us, Raemi."

She glanced at the bits, then frowned at him. "We can do it," she said.

"Not with the mummies," he said, and hoped she would understand.

She brushed off some items on another table. Nothing from an Ivory Tree, but some black pottery with a white design along the curved sides.

Raemi picked up a vase. "That's a drawing of an Ivory Tree."

He peered at it. She was right: the branches of an Ivory Tree were unmistakable.

He walked carefully toward the first table, with the blankets and bags. Many were plain, but one of the blankets was made of fabric that had a repeating design—and that design appeared to be an Ivory Tree.

What had he stumbled into? Now he wanted to climb the stairs and look more closely at the clothing on the mummies. Did the clothing have an Ivory Tree design as well?

Raemi set the vase down. She inclined her head toward the back of the room.

"What do you think is through that door?" she asked.

More rooms. More items. More mummies? He had no idea, and for the first time in his life, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to think . . . what he needed was time, time to sort this out, time to figure out who was entitled to the salvage, and time to hire someone to help him, someone who was not Raemi.

She saw only the money, and while he valued that, it wasn't everything. She would probably laugh if she knew he was thinking that. But there was more here, a history that had clearly been lost, and something else, something mysterious.

He wasn't sure he dared keep it to himself.

"Are we going to explore?" Raemi asked.

Hogarth was shaking his head before he even realized he was doing so.

"Not yet," he said.

"So we'll figure out what's here?" she asked. "Catalogue it?"

"Record it," he said. "We have to make a visual record."

That was simple enough. But the rest of it? He had no idea.

"Are you going to talk to me or not?" Raemi asked.

Particles had adhered to her environmental suit, making her look like she was part of the room, something covered and abandoned, maybe for centuries.

He had to get ahold of himself. He needed to move forward, needed to make some choices.

But he couldn't make any choices until he knew what they had found. And he wouldn't know that until he figured out how big this place actually was.

That settled it: he was going to have to trust the team—with some information, anyway. Not all of it.

Certainly not about the Ivory Trees.

"We're going back up," he said.

"We can't just leave this here," Raemi said. "We've opened it up. Others will find it. We'll lose—"

He held up a hand, stopping her.

"We're going back up." He spoke slower, as if she couldn't understand him otherwise. "And we're going to tell the team that we found an underground bunker. We're going to see where the rooms lead, which might take the rest of the day. They're to wait on the surface. If they don't hear from us by morning, they can come searching."

She suddenly looked alarmed. "You think we can get trapped down here?"

"You think we can't?" he asked.

Her mouth opened slightly. Apparently, the thought of riches had chased anything sensible out of her head.

He didn't need someone beside him who wasn't thinking clearly.

"Look," he said, "you go up, and tell them that I'm going to explore. Don't take them to this room, but maybe catalogue what you can from the mummies. Come get me if I don't come back by morning."

She shook herself, as if she realized she had just been demoted from his main assistant.

"No," she said. "You need me."

No, he wanted to say, *you just want to see what other treasures are here.*

But then, didn't he as well? Wasn't he thinking about what kind of treasures he might find in this very strange place?

"Then shape up," he said as harshly as he could. "You're going to need to be thinking clearly about *exploring*, not about getting rich."

She leaned her head back as if he had hit her. Then she nodded, just once.

“Fair enough,” she said. “Let’s go tell them what we’re going to do.”

“Not all of it,” he cautioned.

“Not all of it,” she repeated. “But we will impress upon them the fact that we might die, and that’s why they’re not coming.”

He sighed silently and struggled not to shake his head. That was not why she wanted to do this with him. No matter what she said, she wanted to see what other treasures this bunker held.

She wanted to treasure hunt, in a way that the two of them never had—which was why he had never seen this side of her before.

It worried him.

He hoped he could control her, if he needed to.

And of course, he hoped he wouldn’t need to.

* * *

2

The team was not happy about being left behind, especially when Hogarth asked them to catalog the mummies. Cataloging was meticulous work, but it had to be done if something was going to be sold.

Hogarth wouldn’t sell the mummies. If he sold anything, it would be something a mummy was wearing, something it held, something that was currently hidden beneath the body. He’d sold a lot of rings and other jewelry that way. He’d sold some mysterious tech that he hadn’t understood, primarily because the mummy it had come off of had been catalogued, and that intrigued the buyer.

So he wanted the mummies catalogued, and he made sure the team knew they would share in any profits . . . if they did the cataloguing right.

That mollified them, but not as much as telling them how dangerous this excursion would be. He stressed the risks, not just for them, but so that Raemi could hear it as well. He talked about dying because of one unforeseen mistake, part of his life that he had accepted. More than accepted, really. It was a part that made him feel alive.

He didn’t confess that. Instead he made himself sound like a bit of a martyr: *I do this so you don’t have to, so that we can all do this job well.*

They seemed to buy it. The discontent eased, and they were willing to do the work while he explored.

He couldn’t dissuade Raemi, though. She wanted to know what was down there, and that meant she was going to take risks she hadn’t taken in years.

He would have to keep an eye on her, which annoyed him.

Before going back into the cave, he had taken a pack from one of the team members, and asked others to hand him things the pack was missing. Door wedges, blocks that would make sure that nothing closed on him, extra oxygen, a knife, and one laser pistol. He attached three huge oblong water bottles the size of his forearm to his utility belt, but didn’t attach them to the system inside his environmental suit.

The water bottles were only for emergencies.

He made Raemi do the same, and for once she didn’t complain about the fact that water bottles added a lot of extra weight.

He was as prepared as he knew how to be. He wanted to survive if a ceiling fell in on him, blocking his way back, or if one of those doors closed and locked him in.

He believed his team would be able to get him out. He had to believe that, or he wouldn’t be able to explore anything.

He and Raemi walked down the stairs again. He reached the mummies, with the team behind him, and stopped to remind them that at this stage, they couldn’t touch

the mummies, not until the experts showed up.

"Under no circumstances," he said before leaving the team, "are you to tell *anyone* about the bunker we found. Just tell them we are going deeper in the cave network and we're not sure what we're going to find."

The team remained silent. No one nodded; no one acknowledged him.

Mehmet stood toward the back.

He looked weak, at least by Wyr standards, but he had been raised in space on a trading ship he couldn't wait to leave behind. That skinniness hid a wiry strength that Hogarth had relied on more than once.

Mehmet looked doubtful, as if he didn't believe anything that Hogarth said. If Hogarth had to guess, he would have thought that the mummies made Mehmet nervous.

"Both of the things you're going to tell others are true," Hogarth said, mostly to Mehmet. "We *are* exploring deeper in this cave network, and we are not sure what we're going to find."

Mehmet nodded, and that made Hogarth feel better.

He had to trust his team, and ever since Raemi's response, Hogarth did not. He felt very alone here.

Maybe the mummies bothered him as well.

He pivoted and headed down the stairs again, putting his helmet on as he went. He was going to wear a full environmental suit the entire way. He had already told Raemi that she would have to as well. At any point, they could get trapped or that strange fresh air could stop. He wanted them protected, not gasping for breath or inhaling something they shouldn't while they tried to assemble their suits.

She said she understood in a voice that led him to believe she wasn't paying attention. So he added one more caution:

"I have no idea what those particles will do to our bodies," he said. "I don't know what they are, and you don't either. In all of my years exploring like this, I've never inhaled a lot of particles. I plan to keep it that way."

That little speech got her to check the connections for her helmet. He had finally gotten through.

He walked down the stairs, making sure he catalogued the route, recording everything from his helmet. He had it set to take in the entire space—from the front and back and sides to whatever was above him and the stairs below. He would review it all later to see what he'd missed.

He usually missed quite a bit when he was as focused as he was now.

He hadn't told Raemi to do the same thing, like he normally would have. He hadn't told her for two reasons: first, if she failed to do so, he wanted to use that as an example of the fact that she wasn't thinking clearly; and second, he didn't want her to have as much access to information as he did.

If she thought of it all on her own, well, then, everything was well and good. But if she didn't, then he had reasons to bar her from further exploration.

He didn't wait for her to keep up with him as he descended. If he had been on his own—or if Raemi had been acting like herself—then he would have slowed down, maybe even figured out when or how these walls and stairs had been built.

But he didn't. He had given himself a deadline with the team, and that deadline might not have been sufficient.

When he reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs, he pushed the door all the way back. He used a wedge to hold the door open, and then he placed a block on the wall near the doorjamb, something that would (in theory) keep the door from closing all the way.

The door was heavier than expected. Metal doors often were. He found them more

dangerous than regular doors, because metal doors sometimes succumbed to their weight; they often closed on their own.

He looked over his shoulder at Raemi. She watched him do the work and didn't help, just like he had instructed her. He did hope that she would speak up if she thought he needed to do more.

After all, her life would be at risk, too, if he did anything wrong.

"We're not going to see what's on those tables or even beside them," he said for maybe the dozenth time. He was so worried that she would be distracted. He couldn't tolerate that. "We're going to map out this entire place first. Then we figure out what we've found."

"I got that," she said with more irritation than he wanted to hear. He wanted her to be the old Raemi, the one who was as cautious as he was, the one who usually instructed the team to slow down and think before doing anything unusual.

"All right," he said. "You're going to follow me. Do exactly what I do."

Usually he added, *Unless it proves too dangerous to do so*, but he didn't want to give her any excuses.

He stepped into the room and paused. The lights had remained on, which bothered him on some level. Were they set to shut off long after they were activated? Or had they been activated by something else?

He deliberately had not moved near the door until he was ready to enter, so the lights couldn't have been reacting to him—could they? They hadn't activated when he had been at the bottom of the steps earlier.

Nothing else pointed to some other kind of movement activation. The particles had settled from his first visit here, and his arrival in the room hadn't caused any of them to rise—or at least to rise very high. Some were floating around his feet now, but he supposed he had to expect that.

The settled particles made everything in the room look like it was coated in black and gray gunk. He couldn't even see the Ivory Trees any longer, but he recognized the shape of them on that second table.

He counted ten tables—five on each side of the room. The tables were wide and all seemed to have something on their surface. Some also had items underneath, and to the side. The walls deeper in seemed to be shelves, but he wasn't certain. They might have been something odd, like the trees, something he didn't recognize.

No matter. If he had to label this room, he'd call it the storage room. Or the front room. Right now, it was all he had.

There was an aisle in the center and that was where he walked, going as slowly as he could so that he would disturb the fewest number of particles.

He realized, halfway through, that he was breathing shallowly, a side effect of moving slowly and of thinking about the particles. He made himself stop and take regular breaths. Then he pressed on, without looking back to see how Raemi was doing and without asking for her input.

The door on the far side of the room was the same size as the door through which they had entered. This new door was metal as well, and, judging by the actual hinges on the side, it opened inward. He wasn't sure he would be able to open it at all. He expected it to be locked. Then he would have to cut through it, which made him uneasy. Maybe he could simply remove those old-fashioned hinges.

With that thought, he looked over at the hinges. They did seem removable, which was good. He had no idea what awaited him in the next room, and using some kind of heat or a laser or something else to open that door might activate—what? More particles? Something that might explode? Bad air?

He wasn't sure, and he really didn't want to find out accidentally.

Raemi was being unusually quiet. He turned, half expecting her to be inspecting

something on one of the tables. But she had followed instructions. She was walking slightly behind him.

She had paused because he had paused. Particles swirled around her, but not around him. It was as if his passage through the room had blown all of the particles backward.

He didn't say anything. He wasn't sure what there was to say. So he turned back to that door.

This was where he made the decision. They could just as easily go back, deal with the mummies and all of the treasures in this room, and not know what was further ahead. What was ahead might complicate things.

But it would be better to know, especially if one of the experts got it in their head to go down the remaining stairs. Usually the experts that Hogarth had brought in did exactly as he told them, particularly when they were in a dangerous space, like one of the death hole caves.

But this space looked a lot less dangerous to the untrained eye because of the stairs and the finished walls and the familiar furniture, like tables.

He thought this space much more dangerous because of it.

"Are we still getting fresh air?" he asked Raemi. He needed her to do something; monitoring the environmental system might be more than enough.

"Yes," she said. "But there's no breeze, not in here."

Or the particles would be constantly disturbed.

"Thanks," he said. "Keep monitoring that, would you?"

"Oh, trust me, I am," she said. "I'm concerned about the entire environmental system."

Good. Let her worry about that. He would worry about the door, and the room beyond.

He took a deep, steadying breath, and reached for the door handle. It was a lever that should either go up or down, depending. He tried down first, and heard something click.

So he pushed slightly on the door.

It gave.

He pushed harder, and it moved. Then it got stuck, as if it were blocked by something. He cursed ever so slightly.

"Can we get in?" Raemi asked.

"Don't know yet," Hogarth said. He put more effort into his push without leaning his body weight on the door. The last thing he wanted to do was tumble into the room and activate something that shouldn't have been activated.

The door slid even more, its old-fashioned hinges creaking.

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

The door was open wide enough that he could peer inside.

He leaned in just a little and saw only floating particles in darkness. He turned on his helmet light, which made the particles look like snow on a particularly dark winter night.

He blinked, trying not to let the odd reflection off of them interfere with his ability to see.

His eyes couldn't adjust, though, which told him that the darkness was profound.

He pushed the door just a bit more, and it stalled yet again. Only this time, the opening was wide enough for him to step through.

Rather than do so, he illuminated one of his palm lights and turned his hand toward the interior of the room.

Ghostly shapes appeared in the thin light. Chairs. Another table. Some kind of equipment on a counter. Dishes that actually looked like they'd been used.

The particles continued to swirl, but less furiously now. Their presence told him something else: there was no one else in this area.

He put a block on the doorjamb to make sure the door wouldn't close on its own. With the hinges on the outside of this room, going in was even more dangerous than the other room.

That thought caught him.

"Don't follow me yet," he said to Raemi. He'd never experienced a set-up like this, and he really did not want to get trapped.

"Okay," she said, and she didn't even sound reluctant. He was a bit surprised. He would have thought that she'd want to go with him.

Unless she wanted to stay so she could look at the items in the other room.

He made himself take a deep breath again. He had never experienced distrust like this with Raemi before. With other team members—the ones who had betrayed him—yes, but not Raemi.

Perhaps he was feeling this way because she was acting like they had, and it was having an impact on him.

He had to shake them from his head. Raemi had been trustworthy for years. He had to give her the benefit of that doubt.

He slipped inside, and a light came on. The light first appeared above him and then it ran forward from his position, heading all the way to the back of the room.

The light was thin and brownish. He looked up. Particles had adhered to the long fixture, but he couldn't tell if the particles were inside or outside.

The light made the entire room look like it was tinged in sepia, even though the floors, the furniture, and the walls were coated in particles. They looked brown here, instead of black, and he wasn't sure if that was the light or if it was the particles themselves.

There didn't seem to be as many particles, either. They had swirled slightly when he stepped into the room, but had settled down quickly.

He surveyed the area before him. It couldn't be any more different from the room before it. This one was set up for living. There were chairs in a small grouping near the door, with some kind of smaller table in front of them. There was a longer piece of furniture, which he would have called a couch, but he couldn't be sure, on the far wall. To his right was a counter that appeared to have equipment on it, but not equipment for work. Judging by the dishes beside it, that counter was used for meal preparation.

There were open shelves behind it with more dishes and what appeared to be a sink of some sort.

And then there were doors on either side of the counter, leading who knew where.

His heart started pounding. He didn't want to go through more doors without Raemi behind him.

He also didn't think he had enough items to brace all of the doors.

He turned around and let out a small breath. Raemi was standing behind him, waiting patiently. She didn't move guiltily like people had in the past when they were concentrating on the treasure instead of the job at hand.

She was completely focused, just like she was supposed to be.

"We need to brace this door," he said to her, "and you need to come in here."

She pulled out one of her door wedges and handed it to him. He pushed the door as far as it would go, and stuck the wedge underneath it.

He hadn't located whatever caused the door to stick initially. He hoped it was nothing more than the door itself, not having been used in years (decades? Longer than that?). Then he went deeper inside, and grabbed the nearest chair.

Particles rose off the surface, but didn't go very high. They seemed heavier here, and he wasn't sure exactly why. A mystery for later, then.

He scooped the chair toward the door. When he reached it, he shoved the chair in front of it.

Raemi raised her head, her eyes wide with surprise. "You're worried about this."

"I don't want to be trapped here," he said. He had never encountered rooms before, and he was discovering that he feared them a lot more than a basic cave—even one that had suffered cave-ins in the past.

She nodded ever so slightly, as if she didn't want to think about it. Then she peered at the room.

"Someone lived down here," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "And I want to see what's behind the doors by the counter."

"I'll wait here. I'm going to record all of this before we change it too much." Raemi was back to being herself, and Hogarth was profoundly grateful. The mistrust, piled on top of the strangeness of this place, had him more on edge than he had been in years.

"Thanks," he said as he walked to the nearest door.

The particles swirled again, but didn't rise past his thighs. He was right: they were heavier in here, and a different color. The brown that overlaid everything in this room was coming from the particles themselves.

"Still monitoring the environment?" he asked, because he was suddenly nervous about it.

"Only that breeze is missing," Raemi said. "The air is weirdly fresh, and the temperature hasn't changed."

It should have. The air should have been stuffy and unused in here, and the temperature should have been different, especially behind that metal door.

A shiver ran down Hogarth's spine. He waited a moment, to see if the shiver was caused by the creepy-crawly feeling that came with whatever trouble he'd encountered before, but the hair didn't rise on the back of his neck, nor did his skin crawl, not exactly.

The shiver had come from the strange situation—or so he hoped. Since he had never encountered metal doors and rooms before, he had no idea if they muted that energy that caused the tingly feeling.

With that thought, he moved more slowly toward the door. Part of him stood aside in his own mind, astonished that he was acting so cautiously. He used to love exploring, but this—this just felt odd and dangerous.

And, he reminded himself, it was completely in his control. He could abort.

He swallowed hard, then went forward. He hadn't gotten this far in his life by being a coward or by overthinking. He was doing both at the moment.

So he reached the door, examined it, and saw that it too opened inward. He grabbed the lever and pushed it down. Something clicked, and this time, the door started to move on its own.

He had to let go of the lever because he was, essentially, holding the door closed.

The door swung easily and slowly inside the room. He wondered if all of the doors had been designed like that—to move with such ease into another space.

Another question he couldn't answer immediately.

He peered in, illuminating the room with his headlamp. The beam found a bed, another chair and table, and clothes sprawled along the surfaces, as if someone had been planning to use them.

There was an open closet on the wall to his right, and a partially open door on his left. If he turned his head just right, he caught a hint of what was behind that door.

It looked like a bathroom.

But he wasn't going to check on any of it—at least not right now.

He pulled the door closed and walked behind the counter to the other door. It

opened just like the first, swinging inward, revealing another bedroom that couldn't have been more different. The mattress was barely above the floor, and the room was incredibly neat. No clothing anywhere except in the open closet, which was on the opposite wall from the one in the first bedroom.

There was another door on the wall to his right this time. Clearly the bedrooms shared a bathroom, and it was behind the area designated as a kitchen.

This underground windowless space, hidden from above, was clearly set up for at least two people to live in, and maybe more with the other door in the main room, waiting for him to explore.

He pulled the door closed, feeling truly uneasy. Something bad had happened down here.

Were the mummies that he'd found the people who had lived here? Had something happened to cause them to flee and collapse on those stairs? A loss of this near-perfect environment, perhaps? Or something else? Something that usually caused the creepy-crawly feeling for him?

"What is it?" Raemi asked. She sounded almost scared.

Or maybe she did sound scared. Because Hogarth was beginning to realize that he was.

"Bedrooms," he said. "Two so far."

Raemi visibly shuddered. "I'd hate to live down here. There's no windows. No real light."

"And so far," he said, "only one way out."

She clasped her hands together tightly, then looked around. "What is this place?"

He shook his head. "I'd be suggesting that we leave, but it's pretty clear that no one has been here for a long time."

No one alive, anyway.

"Maybe we don't go further . . .?" Raemi said.

Another decision point. He took a deep breath, thinking about it. He doubted he'd be back down here—at least this far in. He was tempted to leave it all for the experts, and never see this place again.

But he had promised himself early in this career not to let fear of the unknown stop him, and yet he had allowed himself to become comfortable. Too comfortable. Even though he was exploring death holes all over Wyr.

Here, he was encountering a fear of the unknown like he hadn't felt since he had started out.

"We're not going to explore deeply," he said, "but I'd like a map of this place, even if it's just in my head. If you don't want to go too far inside, then you can monitor the doors for me."

"You're uneasy, too," she said.

"Yeah." He didn't like the fact that his mood was so obvious. "But right now, I'm not going to let that stop me."

She tilted her head a little, making the light reflect off her visor. He couldn't see her expression, but he didn't have to. That movement meant that she didn't agree with his plan, but she wasn't going to argue with him.

Hogarth walked around the counter and went to the third door. It also had a lever handle, but it opened outward, into this room. The third door was also wider than any of the other doors, and it looked a lot more rusted.

He frowned at it, then grabbed the handle before he had the chance to change his mind. He pulled down and the door shook, as if he had put force on it.

He didn't like that, but he didn't like much about this suite of rooms. He hadn't heard a click, but that didn't mean anything. Maybe there was no latch here.

He pulled the lever toward himself, and the door swung open easily. Raemi came

to his side, and handed him a block for the doorjamb. Then she helped him prop the door open.

More particles swirled out. They were dark, but he couldn't determine the actual color in this brownish light. He turned his palm lights at the open door, and let out an involuntary sound of surprise.

The room appeared to be bigger—a lot bigger—than these others. He couldn't see the ceiling and he couldn't see the other side of the room. Something large and ungainly blocked his view.

Raemi peered over his shoulder, added her helmet light to his. All of the lights—from the palm lights to the headlamps—did little to dispel the gloom.

"What the hell is this place?" she asked.

He shook his head and stepped inside, because if he didn't, he never would.

His suit told him that the air was cooler in here, but just as fresh as it had always been. And, his suit told him, there was a breeze.

As he moved, the particles swirled just a little, then settled. There didn't appear to be as many of them here as there had been in the other rooms.

His heart was pounding. His palms might actually have been sweating. No lights went on as he stepped in, so he couldn't see what was in shadow, but whatever it was, it was large.

He looked up. He couldn't see a ceiling, even though that didn't mean there wasn't one.

The walls were curved upward, as if the room was more of a dome than an actual square room with a ceiling.

Then lights went on all around him, bright and vibrant. He blinked, the lights hurting his eyes.

"There," Raemi said.

Hogarth turned just a little. Raemi had pressed a gloved hand against the wall. Apparently something beside the door activated the lights.

"Thanks," he said, and whirled around again.

The large thing—the unbelievably large thing—was also an impossibly large thing. It was a spacecraft. Not a huge one, not like the ones the Empire usually flew for its military exercises, but a medium-sized one, more like a pleasure craft or something that someone would use for their own personal travels.

Only he'd never seen this design before. It was as boxy as the rooms he had just left, square and ungainly, with something that looked like skis underneath. The ski-like things were turned upward on each end, pointing to the ship itself.

He had never seen a ship design with an obvious up-and-down. Nor had he seen one with a series of what looked like windows around one end. There was a ladder that had been deployed on the side of the ship that he stood on, and that ladder led to a closed door.

Hogarth wasn't about to try that door. He wasn't going to get into a strange ship at all.

He walked deeper into the room, and realized that it was much bigger than he had initially thought. Ten or more ships like that might have fit in here. On the wall directly in front of him, there appeared to be display screens and other equipment, as if someone would stand there and work some kind of controls.

He looked behind him, but didn't see anything similar on the far wall. Instead, he saw containers lined up against the wall. Dozens of them. They looked vaguely rusty, which meant they were made of metal. Or maybe something had dripped on them from above.

"Where are we exactly?" he asked Raemi.

She had known him long enough to answer, "What do you mean?" instead of

explaining that they were in some kind of underground bunker.

“What’s above us?” he asked.

He rarely looked up that information with his own equipment. When he was underground, he focused on exploring. He would figure out where the death hole had carved its path of destruction when he returned to the surface.

This time, though, he needed to know. Raemi usually tracked such things.

“We’ve left the valley,” she said. “If my coordinates are right, then we’re under one of the mountain peaks.”

Coordinates on their equipment weren’t always right. Being underground sometimes confused the system.

He let out a breath.

There was no way to get a ship in here—at least from this direction. He had no idea what existed on the far side of this room, but he would doubt that any of the doors were large enough to bring a ship like this inside, let alone a lot of small ships.

This room could accommodate more than the small ships, though. It could accommodate larger ships. Or one very large ship.

He walked a little deeper inside and looked up. The light from his helmet couldn’t penetrate the darkness, and there were no lights coming from above. All the interior lights that Raemi had activated ringed the entire large room, revealing its emptiness and its preparedness for more ships.

But Hogarth knew he was deep underground. There were only two ways the ship had gotten in here—either it had been assembled here or it had come from somewhere else, maybe above.

“Are you getting recordings of this?” he asked Raemi.

She nodded.

“Let’s walk around the space, see if we see anything else that we can . . . I don’t know . . . try to figure out.” Hogarth wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Maybe a platform on the floor that rose up to the ceiling—wherever that might be—or maybe an indication that this ship had been assembled here.

He started to walk around when Raemi grabbed his arm.

“I’ve had enough,” she said. “I think this is beyond us.”

He peered at the ring, the empty space, the possibility of more doors. He and Raemi had gone a long distance underground, if her positioning was correct. And, if she was correct, there was an entire mountain on top of them.

It was beyond them. Mummies, artifacts, an abandoned living quarters, and now this ship with all of these containers nearby. This had been something a long time ago, but what kind of something, he did not know.

He wondered if he should even tell the experts about it when they arrived, or maybe just leave it at the mummies. He didn’t make that suggestion to Raemi, though. He would consider it as they made their way out of here.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They turned around, and Raemi went through the door first. Hogarth groped for the lights as he left, somehow pressing them off. He felt the weight of the darkness behind him.

He took the wedges and blocks off the door.

Then he stepped into the creepy living quarters. The lights were still on here, but he couldn’t control them. Raemi almost ran forward. She was more unnerved by this place than he was.

But when she reached the room filled with artifacts, she stopped, and he braced himself for whatever she was going to say. He wasn’t sure he was going to like it.

“Let’s at least take one piece of an Ivory Tree,” she said. “We might be misidentifying it. And knowing what we’ve found might make a difference.”

One piece of an Ivory Tree might fund their work for years. Or make them both well off.

"No," he said. "Either we leave everything or we work on figuring out how to excavate this thing."

He stalked past her and reached the main door, leading to the staircase. She had better follow, or he'd remove the Ivory Tree from her grasp and put the damn thing back.

For the first time in his career, he had found something that was better excavated by people with real experience, people like archeologists from a university or experts connected to the City Museum of Vaycehn, or maybe even the Death Hole Council, even though he personally thought they were useless. Still, letting them deal with all of this would get him off the hook.

Off the hook for what, he wasn't certain. But this was bigger than him, bigger than his ego, bigger than a simple exploration and a minor theft.

Raemi hadn't joined him.

He leaned toward the door. The lights were still on, and sure enough, she was standing near the Ivory Trees.

"Raemi," he said. "We're not bringing those."

She held up a piece no larger than her fist. It had broken edges on each side, so it clearly had come off of something else.

"This will be enough to let us know what we found," she said.

"We don't need to know," he said.

"I need to know," she said. She tucked it under one arm and picked her way out of the first room.

She had dislodged a lot of particles. It looked like she was in a storm of black snow. As she picked her way out, the particles continued to swirl and rise, almost like they were attacking her.

His stomach flopped. He had no idea what those were or what their purpose was. It wasn't until this moment that he had actually thought of them as some kind of defensive weapon, designed to keep people from doing exactly what Raemi was doing.

He wanted to caution her, but he already had, several times.

All he knew was that this action on her part was going to end their working relationship, and maybe their personal one as well.

He moved into the stairwell. She could take the pieces off the door. He wasn't going to go up those stairs side-by-side with her, just in case the experts had arrived. He didn't want them to think he was complicit in what they might call a theft.

Still, he couldn't stop himself. He paused on the first step, and looked, watching her step out the door behind him. She stopped long enough to grab the door block and yank it.

Then the door swung closed as if it was being pushed from the inside. It hit her on the arm holding the Ivory Tree.

A loud bang echoed in the small space, and a light so bright that it hurt flared.

Something shoved Hogarth to the stairs. He stumbled, fell, caught himself, even though his ears were ringing and he couldn't see anything except a fritzing black-and-green light in front of his eyes.

His breath caught. His suit wasn't saying anything about being compromised, which was good, since his hands and knees were bruised. He didn't remember falling, but he clearly had.

He scrambled upward, feeling his way as he went. He couldn't hear. He couldn't see. At least the air in his suit was fresh.

He climbed on his hands and knees until he reached the next landing, getting away from whatever had happened. His brain was foggy, his balance compromised. He couldn't stand up, no matter how much he wanted to. He only knew he was on

the landing because he couldn't feel another step.

He sat there for a moment, blinking, wishing he could see. His head ached and his ears were ringing. He had no way of gaining information from his suit or in any other way, not until his sight and hearing returned. Right now, he had no idea if the air was compromised, if there was smoke or even flame, because he couldn't feel anything through his suit.

He had never thought of environmental suits as dangerous before. He didn't know if his was saving his life or forcing him to make terrible decisions. He had no idea what was going on, not exactly.

And Raemi. He had no idea if she had followed him. If she was all right. If something had happened to her down there.

He leaned forward, conscious of the fact that very little in his body was working at the moment, except his sense of touch. He felt the exterior of his suit, with his gloves on, feeling for rips and tears or sore spots on his skin.

Up from his ankles, his calves, his thighs, his hips. Nothing really — or rather, nothing unexpected, considering he had fallen against stairs. Nothing he could feel through two layers of thick protective material, either. No rips that he could find.

He would have no idea if the suit was compromised, no idea if it was blaring a warning, or trying to flash a bright light at him.

He didn't even try to talk to Raemi because he knew he wouldn't be able to hear her response.

He kept blinking, waiting. He had to breathe slowly, calm himself. He hoped all he had was flash blindness, not something more permanent. He didn't want to think about something more permanent.

But his hearing—after a sound that loud, he might not get that back for a half hour, an hour, maybe more.

He wasn't sure if he should pull off a glove, try to see if the air was hot or if some debris was falling. He might actually be in danger by staying on the landing. Maybe he had to go higher.

Maybe he had to go back for Raemi.

He kept blinking, and he thought something was emerging. It looked like fuzz and then he realized that he could see, but what he was seeing were those damn gray particles.

As if he was in a blizzard, as if the snow visibility was maybe a meter, maybe less.

But he breathed out a sigh of relief. He could see and his suit wasn't telling him that it was compromised.

"Change to text only," he said aloud. At least, he hoped it was aloud. He could feel the words emerge from his throat, but that amplified quality that every human took for granted when they spoke was gone. He wasn't even sure the words had come out as words until he realized that a red cursor blinked in front of him, just like it was supposed to do.

"Is there smoke?" he asked. "Fire? What's the air quality? The ambient temperature?"

Probably too many questions for the suit to deal with in this mode, but it had to. He needed answers. He needed to go get Raemi, if she hadn't already passed him.

The suit told him with numbers that took a moment for him to comprehend that the air was unbreathable due to the amount of debris and dust that surrounded him, but the suit detected no smoke, no fire that it could register.

There had been an explosion, and the suit hypothesized, in its mathematically precise way, that this part of this bunker might be compromised.

RECOMMEND EXTRACTION, the suit said.

Extraction. As if someone could come and help him.

Maybe someone could, but who would help Raemi? If she was still behind him, anyway. He had been blown forward. Maybe she had too.

Part of his foggy brain wondered what they had touched. What had they altered? What had they triggered?

Not that knowing right now would make any difference. His ears still rang and it felt like his entire head had swollen to five times its normal size. He still wasn't sure he could stand up.

"Can you locate Raemi?" he asked the suit. "Can you contact her? If so, answer me in text. I can't hear."

The cursor blinked. Whoever had designed that as a prompt should have been crushed the moment they suggested the idea. He had never seen such an annoying blinking light in his life.

Finally, the cursor stopped blinking, replaced with *RAEMI IS OFFLINE*.

"What does that mean?" Hogarth asked. "Does that mean you can't contact her or does it mean that she's not in her suit?"

COMMUNICATIONS APPEAR TO BE DOWN. RAEMI DOES NOT SHOW UP ON ANY NORMAL PROXIMITY MEASURE.

Or at least one that the suit could reach.

His heart rate increased. Offline. Raemi was offline. And she shouldn't have been. She was suited up just like he had been, so her suit should have talked to his. But maybe it took the force of that explosion differently.

If she had passed him, then she would have been accessible, right? Or maybe the entire communications system was down.

"Contact the others," he said. "Let them know we're in distress."

EMERGENCY BEACON WAS ACTIVATED THE MOMENT THAT THE EXPLOSION HIT, the suit said. *HELP SHOULD ARRIVE SOON.*

He knew better than to ask if the suit had some kind of knowledge about help arriving. It had already told him that communications were down. That "help should arrive soon" crap was probably something the manufacturers installed to make people feel better.

Even though he wasn't sure if he could stand, he had to go back down and find Raemi. If she had gotten past him, maybe the others would find her, but he had a feeling—a horrible, sick feeling—that she was still down there, in the dust and debris.

He tried to stand, swayed, and nearly fell forward. So he sat back down, and scooted toward the stairs. He climbed down them like a toddler just learning how to negotiate stairs, feet, then butt, then hands. His hands found ragged bits of something hard—rock? Metal? He didn't know. His feet pushed against even more hard things.

That horrible sick feeling was growing worse. He made it down to where he thought he had been standing when he was catapulted forward, and there, the particles no longer looked like snow.

They looked like the aftermath of a snowstorm—rock formations, small hilly inclines, trees—all covered in centimeters of snow. Too much snow.

SENSORS SHOW NO PATH FORWARD.

The suit sent him that in bright red flashing letters.

"I just came from here," he said.

YOU LEFT BEFORE THE EXPLOSION. NOW, THERE IS NO PATH FORWARD.

He'd never had an environmental suit argue with him before.

"There has to be," he said.

The cursor blinked. Apparently the suit had no response to that.

He stood on the lowest step and used his hands to push at the snow-, well, particle-, covered items. They didn't budge.

He yelled Raemi's name, even though he suspected it would do no good, through

his helmet, through the debris before him, without comms.

Even if she could hear.

Her hearing was probably as damaged as his. Maybe more, if she was near that stuff. He hoped whatever had fallen had come from the ceiling, not from somewhere else.

Then he looked up, and realized that his helmet light was still on. That was why the particles had initially looked like snow. Because they had been visible in the light.

But the ceiling in this stairwell looked like it was intact. So were the walls.

His heart sank, and his breath hitched. He made himself breathe again, stunned that the air was fresh in his suit when everything around him was covered in dust and dirt and particles.

Everything.

All that material—it had to have come from the door. It obviously hadn't come from above.

Obviously.

He was shaking. He felt it.

If he pushed against the rock, he might push it onto Raemi. He couldn't do this without equipment, equipment that he had on the surface. Equipment he had used a hundred times when he explored death holes.

But not like this. Never like this.

He turned around and climbed up the stairs on his hands and knees, going faster than he thought possible. He was still grabbing rocks and debris and bits of items he couldn't quite identify. He had to reach the nearest level. Or the surface.

He needed to get to the surface, and to help.

He needed his team.

He needed someone to help him.

And save Raemi.

* * *

3

Hogarth had no idea how long he climbed. The climb up seemed to take forever. The climb down hadn't taken that long. And with his brain fog, he couldn't remember how many landings this staircase had, how far up he had to go.

When he reached the next landing, the air cleared a bit. The particles were scattered on the stairs like dirt after a dust storm.

Then, suddenly, hands grabbed him and pulled him up. Helmeted faces peered at him, and people were waving their arms.

It took him a moment to realize that they were talking to him. He shook his head, and pointed to his ears.

The movement made him so dizzy that he nearly fell over, but the hands holding him held tighter.

He pointed behind him, gestured, didn't know how to tell them without comms, without any way to send information, that Raemi was down there.

Finally he tried to take off his helmet, but the hands kept him from doing so.

He waved his hands even more.

"Raemi," he shouted. "You have to get Raemi."

A few people nodded, then started down, but he grabbed at them. They stopped, confused, and he gestured with both hands, going down and then up, miming digging with a shovel.

They didn't seem to understand. How could they?

He tried to take off the helmet again, and the hands held him firmly. He shook

them off, staggered, nearly fell down the stairs, but someone else caught him.

Dammit, they had to understand. They had to listen.

He grabbed his helmet before they could stop him, shut off its connection to the suit and pulled up the visor.

The air tasted of chalk and dirt. He coughed, then said, as loudly as he could, "You'll need equipment to get Raemi. The passageway came down on us. She doesn't have comms. Neither do I."

Someone gave him a thumbs up, then the nearest person grabbed his helmet and pushed the visor down, activating the seal from the exterior, like people could do in an emergency. He protested, then realized, yes, indeed, this was an emergency.

Two team members ran up the stairs, while others ran down. Some stayed with him.

He was swaying and coughing, and those damn dots were in front of his eyes again. There hadn't been another flare, but his eyes weren't acting right, and he was dizzy, and his stomach had grown queasy.

He grabbed the nearest arm to brace himself. He would climb the rest of the way up, get out of this hellhole, explain what kind of equipment they needed.

He started up, swayed again, and started to fall backward. Someone caught him, then turned out all the lights. His head lolled, and he thought: *I NEED TO KEEP MOVING.*

But he couldn't.

He couldn't.

So he stopped.

* * *

4

Hogarth was surprised to wake up in a bed, under cool crisp sheets. The room was dim and had a trail of pale lights that ran around the edges of walls, floor, ceiling, and door, as if marking all of them. An open door with a pale light illuminating a bit of the interior revealed a bathroom.

There were handles on the side of the bed, but they were in a lowered position, so no one thought he needed to grab something when he got up.

They would have been wrong. His head ached so badly that turning it slightly made him nauseous. His ears still rang, and his eyes burned as if the room was filled with smoke.

He raised his hands gingerly. He watched them come up, but looking at them move made him dizzy. He closed his aching eyes, and reached for his ears.

They were bandaged.

He felt the rest of his face, found no more bandages, but as he worked, he realized his throat ached, and his entire torso was sore.

"You have a concussion," a woman said. Her voice sounded loud and underwater at the same time. "But we had to keep you unconscious, despite the risk, because we are doing a lot of repair on your lungs. In those few minutes that you had your helmet off, you inhaled something that pretty much destroyed them."

"What?" he asked. At least he could hear himself now. His voice sounded raspy beneath the constant ringing in his ears, but he had a voice and something that passed for hearing.

He was surprised at how much that relieved him.

"And it didn't do your throat any good. Fortunately, you had breathed through your mouth only, not your nose, or you'd be sore there too. We were able to repair most of it in the first try, but we're tweaking it all now. You were very badly hurt."

He blinked his eyes open. The woman, a shadow in the dim light, was standing

near the main door.

“What happened to Raemi?” he asked.

The woman let out a small sigh. “Raemi was so close to the blast that she died instantly. You do not want me to tell you anything else.”

But he did. He needed to know all of it. He had never made a mistake this big in his work. People had died, but not because of him. Not because he wanted to explore something. Not because he hadn’t foreseen any of it.

Raemi. Raemi was dead.

He couldn’t quite wrap his brain around it. He had never lost someone this close before, someone he actually cared about.

“What happened to us?” he asked.

The woman shook her head. “I’m your doctor. Let me get someone who actually knows.”

And then she walked out of the room.

Hogarth closed his eyes, his heart pounding. He was upset, but unsurprised. Somehow he had known that Raemi might not make it. Maybe he had known that she was already dead.

If only he could have blamed it on her greed, but he couldn’t. After that conversation in the first room, she had calmed down. She had helped with the exploration. She had acted like herself. . . .

Hadn’t she?

Something tinged the front of his aching brain. She had, but then she had taken part of an Ivory Tree. A small part. And she had a reason for it, although he couldn’t remember the details.

That couldn’t be it, though, since no one else had ever had an issue with an Ivory Tree. They were pretty and valuable, but useless, as far as he knew.

The more likely scenario was that the bunker itself attacked the moment she tried to carry something out of it. That had probably been some kind of failsafe, something that protected whatever was inside that space.

Or maybe it had nothing to do with the items in the bunker, and everything to do with the bunker itself. Maybe no one was allowed to leave without some kind of code. Maybe it had a wide variety of ways to attack whoever had breached its systems.

The door to his room opened again, and this time Mehmet entered. Hogarth recognized him just from his body shape and his stance. Mehmet always leaned a bit to the right. His skinny shoulders were never properly aligned with the rest of him.

“They finally woke you,” Mehmet said.

Hogarth could barely hear him. Unlike the doctor, Mehmet wasn’t speaking loudly. Instead, it sounded like Mehmet was speaking through a bad comm system, one that didn’t work well at all.

“I woke up on my own,” Hogarth said.

“Yeah, because they let you,” Mehmet said. “I wanted them to keep you awake the whole time, but I had no say.”

Why would Mehmet want him awake? Something was going on. Hogarth had no idea how long he had been unconscious, how long Mehmet had been waiting.

How long Raemi had been dead.

“They told me they needed me unconscious to repair damage,” Hogarth said.

“That’s what they say,” Mehmet said. “I guess they did a lot of risky things to save your life.”

“What happened?” Hogarth whispered. He wasn’t talking about the blast as much as he was talking about himself. He had no idea what happened or how it happened or how he ended up here.

Mehmet knew him well enough to answer the question that Hogarth wanted to

ask, not the one he did ask.

"You inhaled those strange particles. They coated your lungs. Tried to seal them. You barely survived," Mehmet sounded matter of fact, even though his voice was shaking.

Seal his lungs? Hogarth tried to understand what Mehmet meant. The particles—they formed something that closed up his lungs?

How had people lived with those particles, then? Was that how they had become mummies?

Mehmet was shaking his head. "You shouldn't have taken off your helmet."

The words stabbed at Hogarth, making him feel as if his injury—as if Raemi's death—was his fault. Maybe it was.

They didn't have to go into that room.

"I thought Raemi was alive." Hogarth's voice broke. Maybe she had been. Maybe if he had gotten to her quicker . . .

"No one could have survived that blast," Mehmet said. "It blew out the door, collapsed a wall, and caused a crater that went even deeper underground."

Hogarth blinked. He didn't understand. That wasn't what he saw at all.

"But the debris," he said. "It was piled high, not like something that went underground."

"Yeah, it was piled," Mehmet said. "You only saw the top of it."

The top of it. Hogarth had seen so much, and it had been just a bit.

"And Raemi was under it?" he asked.

"No. She got blown sideways." Mehmet shook his head. "I'm not telling you anything else, because I don't want to think about it."

"Mehmet," Hogarth said. "I was with her. She couldn't have died in that blast. She is probably still there, trapped somewhere. She—"

"We found parts," Mehmet said. "Okay? We found pieces of Raemi, just like we found pieces of the door and the floor and the wall. We found *pieces*. I'm not saying anything else about that. Not another word."

Pieces. Parts. And Mehmet, cutting off discussion because he was so traumatized.

That wasn't Mehmet at all. He had always been sensible. The man that Hogarth could go to if Raemi wasn't around.

Now Raemi wasn't around.

And Mehmet—he wasn't sensible. He wasn't calm. He snapped at Hogarth, and Hogarth was the one who had been injured.

Who had nearly died.

"Do they know what caused the explosion?" Hogarth asked. He had to bite back the rest of the question. He'd almost added *besides the exploration*.

Because he knew—they probably knew—that nothing would have exploded if he hadn't gone down those stairs. If he had waited with his team by the mummies.

If they had figured out what those mummies were, exactly.

Like he had assigned them. The team had probably recorded everything, done everything they could for the experts.

"Who is *they*?" Mehmet spat out the words, and Hogarth finally understood what was going on.

Mehmet was furious. At Hogarth. Probably rightfully so.

Mehmet had been the one to deal with the aftermath. Mehmet had been the one who found Raemi, and Mehmet had been arguing that they wake up Hogarth sooner.

To accuse him? Or to talk to him?

"Anyone," Hogarth said. "Does anyone know?"

"I thought maybe you did," Mehmet said.

Hogarth frowned, remembering. Trying to put everything together.

He had gotten out of the door, but he had been empty-handed. Raemi hadn't been.

He shook his head, and stopped almost immediately. The movement made him both dizzy and nauseous.

"We were leaving," he said. "I was just a bit ahead of her. She seemed fine. Everything seemed fine. And then . . ."

The flash. Something forcing him forward. The stairs, colliding with him or him colliding with the stairs.

He had clearly been blown free.

And Raemi hadn't.

Mehmet waved a hand, as if he didn't want to hear.

"I stayed until they finally woke you because there are some things you need to know. I figured you'd have questions. After that, I'm gone."

"Gone?" Hogarth asked. What did that mean?

"The team disbanded," Mehmet said. "They want nothing to do with any of this. Ever. Neither do I."

"This?" Hogarth asked. Everything was moving so fast that it made his head spin worse than it already was. Was he having trouble understanding because he just woke up or was it because of his injuries?

"The bunker, the mummies." Mehmet waved a hand. "I'm done. You know, I should have known. We've been exploring *death holes*, for godsake. *Death holes*. At some point it would catch up to us, I suppose. We were stalking death. Of course it would catch us."

And finally everything crystalized.

Death holes blew outward from underground. Death holes usually blew upward with such power that it ripped through layers of dirt and stone and rock, sometimes tearing buildings apart, destroying entire blocks.

Sometimes the sides of mountains blew off. And people died.

There hadn't been a new death hole in more than a year, but that didn't mean they had stopped.

This one had blown sideways, not upward.

"You think this was a death hole?" Hogarth asked.

Mehmet tilted his head, just like he always did when a new idea hit him.

"I didn't say that." He spoke slowly. "Do you?"

"The mummies," Hogarth said. "They usually show up near death holes."

Inside the area where the death hole had originated, in fact.

He had to squint to maintain his concentration. He was exhausted. Just this much conversation was hurting him.

"It would have been a small one," Mehmet said. "The stairway is still intact."

"You said it went down, not up." Hogarth brought his hand to his face, one of his nervous gestures. He usually ran the hand along his skin, but he had to stop.

His hand was trembling too much to even touch his skin.

"If death holes go down, too, then everything on Wyr is unstable," Mehmet said.

"Everything on Wyr *is* unstable," Hogarth said. "We just lie to ourselves about it all the time."

He thought Mehmet knew that, thought the team understood it. Maybe Hogarth hadn't understood it fully either, though. He had been taking items from the death hole passages, not doing some kind of scientific exploration.

No one was doing scientific exploration, and everyone was happy that the death holes had stopped, at least for a while. But if they went deeper underground, then at some point, the surface would just cave in, not blow out.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Mehmet said. "I'm not doing this anymore. That's part of what I need to tell you."

Part. Hogarth frowned, then stopped himself. Even that movement of his forehead hurt. He had to think hard to smooth it out.

"The team needs you, Mehmet," Hogarth said. "I need you. With Raemi gone—"

"There is no team," Mehmet said. "They left. All of them. This was the end of it, for everyone. They're gone. That's the other thing I needed to tell you."

Hogarth wanted to shake his head. He had to grip the sheets hard. "It doesn't matter," he said. "We can hire new people. I've done that half a dozen times. That's how I found you."

But not Raemi. She'd been in the first group, all the way back.

His heart twisted. He regretted this entire trip, everything. He had treated her so unfairly, thinking of her as greedy, when she'd been at his side forever.

Why did the last trip have to be so negative? Why, if someone had to die, couldn't it have been at the end of some victory, something—

"No," Mehmet said, bursting into Hogarth's thoughts. They had gone along a strange side trip, which, again, was how he knew he wasn't well.

"No?" Hogarth asked, wondering if he'd missed more.

"No, there will be no new team, at least not with me." Mehmet took one step closer to the bed. Hogarth still couldn't see his face clearly. "And not with anyone else you've hired. No one is going into those death holes again."

Hogarth had been through this before. When he'd lost the two greedy bastards, years ago, his entire team left, blaming him. He could get through this again.

Once he healed. Once he figured out what was going on.

"Can we talk when I'm better?" Hogarth asked. He was getting woozy from exhaustion.

"No," Mehmet said, "because I am leaving Wyr. I have no idea where the others have gone, either, but I stayed, to tell you about Raemi and the team, but mostly to let you know that this—everything—it's your problem."

Hogarth frowned, and this time, despite the pain, he couldn't quite relax his face. He was concentrating hard and trying to figure out what was happening in this conversation, and he was feeling lightheaded. He needed to track it.

"Everything?" he repeated.

He usually wasn't slow on the uptake, but he was on this day.

"I didn't know this, but maybe you did and didn't tell us." Mehmet's voice dripped contempt. "This part of Wyr, there's no real government here."

Hogarth knew that. He had told the team that, so how could Mehmet say he didn't know it?

"Which means that the entire area is a kind of finders-keepers place," Mehmet said. "You find something valuable, you own it. It's yours if you want it."

Had Raemi known that? Was that why she was so focused on the Ivory Trees?

A shudder ran through Hogarth.

"The mummies, whatever is behind that door, it belongs to you now, Hogarth," Mehmet said. "The damage, that's on you, too. And if someone wants to go after you for Raemi's death, then that's on you as well."

That would have been on Hogarth no matter what. That was the way that the team worked. But he didn't say that, since there was no need.

The team had been Raemi's family. She had no one else.

Hogarth took a deep breath. He had to say this clearly.

"If that's true," he said, "whatever we found, it belongs to the team, not to me."

"We don't want it. The others have already left, didn't you hear me?"

"I heard," Hogarth said. "But . . ."

He almost mentioned the wealth inside that room, the Ivory Trees, the entire bunker. But he had no idea if the death hole, or whatever it was, had blown backward

as well, destroying what was inside.

“The mummies,” he finished. “They’re worth something.”

“You said you would never sell human beings,” Mehmet said, viciously.

“They’re not human,” Hogarth said. “They’re the remains of human beings.”

“Fine distinction to make now,” Mehmet said. “You going to sell the pieces of Raemi, too?”

The words hung between them.

Hogarth supposed he deserved that.

“No,” he said. “That’s not what I meant. I’m not being as clear as I want, Mehmet.”

“Then be clear.” The words were whip sharp, as if Mehmet didn’t want to hear any more. But he didn’t move, so there was that, at least.

“The mummies were dressed. They had to have had items on their bodies that had value. You catalogued them, Mehmet, or you were supposed to. There was value, right? A lot of value.”

“We had never seen anything like what they were carrying before,” Mehmet said. “I was going to tell you that when you came up, but you were in such a hurry. You and Raemi wanted to get back to that room. You wanted something from down there, or to explore. You were so sure that there was more to it—”

“There was,” Hogarth said. “We found other rooms.”

But he wasn’t going to mention the spaceship. That just stretched credibility, particularly when he had a head injury.

He wasn’t going to mention the Ivory Trees either. He didn’t want Mehmet to react like Raemi had.

“I’m just saying,” Hogarth said, as carefully as he could, “there’s money. We would be able to handle whatever came our way.”

“I’m not going down there again,” Mehmet said. “I’m not going in any caves again, and neither is anyone else. We don’t want any money. We just want to get away from here. It’s all yours, Hogarth. That’s what I’m here to tell you. It’s all yours.”

The bunker, the death hole, the pieces of Raemi.

Hogarth closed his eyes. He didn’t really want any of it either; and yet, there was a mystery here. Something that still intrigued him.

He opened his eyes, afraid he had fallen asleep, afraid Mehmet was gone.

But Mehmet remained.

“The experts,” Hogarth said. “Did they ever arrive?”

“No,” Mehmet said. “We were left to try to rescue you all by ourselves.”

Hogarth tried to imagine it—the team hearing (feeling?) the explosion, and reacting. He didn’t even know if they had been on the surface or beside the mummies.

The team had come—he remembered them coming, as a unit, and he had pulled off his helmet to talk to them. He had no idea who ran into the dirt and debris. Nor did he know who had gone up to the surface for more help.

Did the team try to get to Raemi and fail? Did they try to dig her out? Did they wait for some authorities?

He wanted to know all of it, and he didn’t want to know any of it. He was getting so tired. He needed rest, and he had a feeling that he might never really rest again, not deeply. Not securely.

He would think about Raemi, about bringing her in deeper into that bunker, about the Ivory Trees and the disaster.

“But,” Mehmet was saying, “I did take the mummies to the experts you had hired for the last job. They’d seemed honest enough. They’re using the recordings that I made and the location, and the information about the bunker, to figure out what we—what you—have.”

That was a commitment then. Because the experts cost money. It was probably too

late to stop them. They would have already racked up a lot of charges.

"Thank you," Hogarth said. He wasn't sure he meant it.

Mehmet nodded, then took another step forward. His face was no longer in shadow. He looked older. Lines had formed along his mouth and nose, and his eyes were sunken.

This disaster had taken a severe toll on him.

He surveyed all the medical equipment, then looked Hogarth directly in the eye.

"I hope you recover quickly," Mehmet said. Then he flailed with both arms, as if he wasn't sure what to say next. He was clearly too angry to be as kind as he normally would have been.

"Thank you," Hogarth said.

"I've left detailed notes in the team systems. You'll be able to find everything. We recorded a lot, too, so you'll have that." Mehmet's tone was flat, as if he didn't want to say much more.

"May I contact you when I start into all the materials?" Hogarth asked.

"No," Mehmet said curtly. Then his expression softened. "I mean . . . I'm only available for the next week or so. Then I'm going home."

Home? Mehmet didn't have a home.

It took a moment for it all to register.

"The freighter?" Hogarth asked. "You're going back to space?"

Mehmet hated space. He hated the way he had grown up. He hated traveling everywhere and never stopping anywhere.

"Yeah," Mehmet said. "It's safer than living planetside. I'm done exploring. And if you were smart, you'd be done, too."

He pivoted and stalked out of the room before Hogarth could even think of stopping him. As the thought flitted across Hogarth's sore brain, he considered yelling after Mehmet.

But he didn't. Mehmet had the right to make his own choices, and he had done so while Hogarth was still unconscious. Judging by the way Mehmet looked, there would be no argument that would convince him to stay.

Everything was on Hogarth now.

Although he could probably walk away from it, too. He had a variety of excuses. He'd lost his team. He might have lost his health. He'd certainly lost mobility, at least for the foreseeable future.

But he wasn't ready to give up.

He wasn't a sentimental man, so he couldn't convince himself to stay and work for Raemi's sake. Raemi was gone, and that hurt his heart, but her death had no impact on his choices.

He wanted answers. He *needed* answers. And he wouldn't be able to get them until he had healed.

He wasn't even sure how he would get them. A team like the one that had just left him wasn't the answer. If he wanted to know what happened in that death hole, then he would need real experts, not just some random hired folk, but the people who studied it all for a living.

Maybe he and Raemi had activated whatever it was that caused death holes. Or maybe their presence—and the explosion—beefed up the automated security down below.

Or maybe there was another entrance. There had to be. Not one created by a death hole, but somewhere else.

His heart rate increased and he felt more awake than he had moments ago. He was interested again.

This was just a setback—a particularly nasty one, true—but a setback nonetheless.

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He would need to raise funds (maybe sell the mummies?) and he would need a new team, a lot of planning, and a real goal.

Maybe he could even get one of the universities to participate, with a promise of the proceeds.

He smiled for the first time since he'd woken up.

He could lie to himself and say that this was what Raemi would have wanted, but it wasn't. Raemi would have stopped at that first room. She would have looted it for the Ivory Trees and everything else that was down there.

And maybe he would do that, too. But he had to assume that all of that got destroyed in the explosion. Or maybe that it was all blocked off.

He wouldn't be able to do any of the planning from here. He needed to recover. He needed to take the time to become whole.

He was about to embark on the next stage of his life, and that stage would be completely different from what had come before.

He needed to get ready for that—so that he could do whatever it took to understand what had happened, and what he had found, and maybe, just maybe, figure out what caused the death holes.

It was time to stop looting and time to start learning.

And he would do all that, as soon as he woke up from this next, most necessary, nap.