

**Monday**

**Arcadia**

**DPA headquarters, 10:00 a.m.**

The lobby of the Department of Planetary Affairs swarmed with anyone who was not on duty or performing a vital role. The energy and noise of so many people bounced off the vaulted ceiling and assailed the crowd.

Officer Lysandra Carlisle stood at attention at the back of the crowd on one side of the automated doors in full uniform—working, vigilant, annoyed. On the other side of the doors her partner, Officer Matt Holloway, was giddy, which was even more annoying since she had to work with him. The jostling of so many bodies kept triggering the automated doors. As soon as they started to shut, the crowd would shift and the doors would open again. Annoying.

The vortex of activity at the center of the room swirled around a black porous rock, not much bigger than a bowling ball, resting on a clear pedestal. The meteorite had crashed only a few miles away, bringing with it a new form of energy and a new era in human history.

Elbie, as they were popularly called, were an extraterrestrial form of energy that had come to earth on this meteorite. A small group of teenagers had found the meteorite. What happened that day fourteen years ago was now a matter of public record. The Department of Planetary Affairs, and the room they were gathered in, was the culmination of that historic event.

A man loomed above the crowd, one hand posed on the rock and the other held up to quiet the crowd. An immediate hush fell as everyone stilled. The man was an anomaly. He was the most famous guest the department had ever hosted. His mussed red hair touched the collar of his designer button-down, and his sharp jawline was still slightly pink from this morning's shave. The laugh lines around his eyes and mouth were deep from years of weather exposure.

"I would like to thank your leaders, Commanders Draegg and Eriksson, for indulging me in this small obsession of mine." His Australian accent was thick, like he was auditioning for a movie role and wanted to be convincing. "It is a great honor and privilege that I, Xander Hansen, get to serve this brilliant organization by bringing to you the very best of what I have to offer in modern security technology."

Applause and cheers followed.

Lysandra shifted on her feet and glanced over at Matt. His full attention was on the guest of honor, and the biggest smile was on his face. She wanted to throttle him. Xander Hansen was all he had talked about for the last week, and she was over it the minute it had been announced that Xander would be making an appearance.

Xander rubbed his hands together. "I am so excited to be here with you fine people. I look forward to talking with each and every one of you. Damn the man..."

Many in the crowd retorted, "Let's make a plan." Applause filled the room as he waved and bounded down, disappearing into the sea of people.

The crowds funneled out through the main entrance, following Xander Hansen as he began his tour of the DPA's one and only facility. Lysandra let her shoulders drop as the last of them left the lobby. Commander Eriksson had not moved from his position behind the monument, hands behind his back. With the last of the crowd gone, he approached them.

“Holloway, Carlisle.” He nodded at each of them in turn. To a casual observer it might appear that Eriksson was constantly puffing out his expansive chest, but Lysandra knew by the clean lines of his haircut that it was his military training that made him stand that way at all times. “Orientation for the new security system will begin at eleven hundred hours. Until then, you are free to go.”

“Yes, sir,” Lysandra and Matt answered in unison.

Eriksson left without further word. The security detail for having someone as high profile as the CEO of the Vixen Corporation created a lot of extra work for him, less time to harass her. Lysandra immediately unzipped her uniform jacket and pulled the radio link out of her ear. This was her signal to everyone that she was not available.

She loosened her dark hair from a tight bun and let it hang loose over her shoulders. “I cannot believe that you are being suckered by that megalomaniac in designer jeans.”

Still beaming from his brush with fame, Matt bounced as they walked along. “He’s not a mega—whatever. Would a maniac do the Charlie’s Angels pose for the pictures of total strangers?”

“Yes! Obviously. I just witnessed thirty minutes of that bullshit.”

Matt pulled out his phone as they walked. “If he’s in the cafeteria, will you take my picture with him?”

“Absolutely not. I’m getting my coffee and walking right back out.”

“Jealous.” Matt play-punched her in the arm.

The empty cafeteria echoed with their footsteps. “Aw man.” Matt dropped his chin.

Lysandra grabbed a cup and started to fill it with aromatic black coffee, one of her favorite smells. “I don’t like him.”

Matt picked some fruit from the cooler case. “What did he ever do to you?”

Lysandra shrugged. “I don’t have to like everyone.”

“You haven’t even met him. Talk to him.”

“Matt, I have no reason to talk to him. Meeting him is not going to make my day or change my life. If that’s what floats your boat then go find him. I have to go see Kwin anyways.”

Matt stopped and put his hand on her shoulder. “Again?”

She waved her hand. “There is a standing order that I get evaluated once a month.”

“Blow it off. You’re fine. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“No. Yes. And I doubt it.” Lysandra took a sip of coffee. “See you at eleven.”

She headed for the medical center. The only time she went there was for her mandated evaluations, which after eight months seemed like a waste of time, but Commander Draegg insisted on it. Apparently in the medical world brain injuries were monitored closely for the first year.

Being made an Elbie host against her will had caused her brain injury. Doing the examination was easy; the thing she hated most about the visit was that it was a reminder of everything that had happened. Each examination was like being forced to relive the worst day of her life once a month.

A side effect of having an Elbie occupying her brain was that she couldn’t use her telekinetics at the same time. For a moment she had been able to override the Elbie’s control of her to protect her brother. The electrical feedback inside her head had put her in a coma for a week. By the time she woke up, they had already had his funeral.

She took a moment outside of the medical center to clear her thoughts. She pressed her palms to her eyes and took some deep breaths. When the feeling that she might cry passed, she walked into the medical center.

The medical center was the busiest place on the base. With the help of the Elbie, many neurological disorders were being studied in ways not possible before. Kwin, one of three Elbie that worked with the human staff and patients, supervised the whole program.

Contained within a silver robot, Kwin walked up to her, the rubber soles of his feet squeaking on the tiles, his yellow eyes glowing brightly. "I thought I might have to report you AWOL to Commander Draegg."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Lysandra took a seat on one of the empty exam tables. "Wouldn't miss this for the world."

"If that's sarcasm, please indicate. I can't tell with you."

"It will always be sarcasm."

"Thank you." Kwin's metal digits pressed several electrodes across her forehead. "Anything to report before we start?"

"Nope." The tests were the same each time, so the results could be measured against each other.

He pulled a privacy screen around them. "Let's start." He stood in front of her and held up his right arm. "Go ahead."

Lysandra focused visually and then mentally at his hand and began pushing against it as hard as she could.

Kwin's robot body existed for one purpose: to generate a force field that allowed him to remain constituted without the help of a human host. Earth's gravity messed with Elbie, but the human mind provided the perfect environment for them. Behind his metal chest plate were actually three Elbie—three brilliant points of light that orbited each other in their own hidden universe.

He stumbled back. "Stop." He recorded the results. "Let's go the other way."

She focused on his hand again, only this time she worked on pulling it towards her. To pull on something had always been the harder of the two movements; he was able to apply the same amount of resistance either way.

"Stop. Good." Next he had her lift a series of weights. The electrodes on her forehead measured the time and effort it took.

After making contact with humans, it was impossible for the Elbie to go back to being only a type of energy. For the few Elbie that didn't want to have a human host, a robot body also allowed them to interact with the world around them. Autonomy of sorts, but they didn't like being alone either so they shared the same space.

Kwin saved the recording from the lift test. "Next." He rolled around a tray with four aluminum cans. Devoid of any liquid, each can contained a sensor.

Lysandra groaned. "Can we skip this one?"

"Of course not. We need it to compare with your previous results."

"I have never used my power to crush cans. This is a completely useless skill."

"It is the truest test of all of them. If you can apply pressure from all angles at once, it demonstrates control and skill."

She shook her head. "Where will I ever use this? It's pointless."

“The faster you get through it, the sooner you’ll be done.”

She stared the robot down. “Did Draegg tell you to say that?”

He nudged the tray table at her.

Since she was obviously not getting out of this exercise, Lysandra set her sights on the first can. To apply pressure from all sides did take significant effort. The first can flew off the table and clattered to the floor, bent in the center. The next one she managed to smash vertically. She looked at him.

“Keep going. All four of them.”

This time she used her hands. If she mimicked the motion, it helped for some reason. She focused on crushing the sides and switched to pressing the top and bottom. The can crackled and snapped until it was a lopsided wad.

“Better.” He recorded the results on his tablet. “One more.”

Ready to move on, she twisted and pressed on the sides of the can.

“Let’s go.” He started walking across the room, his mechanical joints whirring evenly as he went. In the back corner of the room hung a punching bag. What made this bag different from an ordinary bag were the sensors inside of it. Lysandra followed along behind him, psyching herself up for the next set of tests. She had to admit, she loved this part.

Kwin set up the recorder and she started a round of punches and kicks. The first round was done with no telekinetics to set the baseline. The second round she would reinforce all her hits with her telekinetics. This was how she usually used her telekinetics, to enhance her fighting.

She started with a basic jab, roundhouse, and uppercut punch combo. Being forced to come into the medical center once a month just reminded her that what she thought had been the best days of her life had actually been an elaborate web of false memories that Esben had planted. Esben. She leaned into the punches with her whole body. His stupid handsome face and perfectly tailored suits. Pretending to be in love with her so that her brother, Brendan, had to do his bidding.

Out of the habit of routine, she moved into a similar combination of kicks, alternating legs. While she had spent her days and nights thinking she was part of Esben’s inner circle, her brother was being teleported all over the planet capturing Elbie for Esben and his partner in crime, Varoth. Esben had made her believe they were a couple—no, made her *feel* it, to the core of her being. She could still feel it there, lurking in the background of her thoughts.

She started the cycle over again, this time with mental reinforcement. Punches first. He played the part so well. *Jab*. Their connection had felt like absolute truth. *Cross jab*. It was a lie. *Hook, right*. Every kiss. *Hook, left*. Every caress. *Uppercut, right*. Every second—*uppercute, left*—of every day, lies.

Now kicks with reinforcement. Lies told to her by Esben—*front kick, right*—became his truth. *Front kick, left*. So much so—*roundhouse, right*—that he betrayed Varoth. *Roundhouse, left*. Lysandra paid the price—*back kick, right*—for Esben’s change of heart. *Back kick, left*.

The result. *Jab*. *Cross jab*. Waking up to the horror—*hook, right left*—that she was a prisoner in her own body. *Uppercut, right left*. That the love of her life—*jab, cross jab*—was in fact her enemy. *Hook*. And in the end—*uppercute, jab*—Brendan lost his life. *Cross jab, jab, cross*—

“Whoa, whoa! Lysandra!” Hands pulled her back.

She blinked and looked around, out of breath. “What?”

“That’s plenty.” Kwin let go of her arm.

The punching bag swung wildly from the ceiling anchor. She pushed her hair back. “Are we done?”

“Yes. We have all we need.”

“Great.” She peeled the electrodes off. “I have to get to the security center. Make sure you file that report so Commander Draegg stops worrying.”

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Inside the security center, her fellow officers had gathered as Commander Eriksson started to explain what this afternoon would entail. Next to him stood three men in gray uniforms that said “Stronghold Security” on the front pocket.

A lanky man stepped forward. White hair, severely parted to the left, swooped across his young-looking forehead. His sharp cheeks and chin followed the line of his body as it tapered from his shoulders down to his feet. “Thank you, commander.” His English accent enunciated each syllable precisely. “You may call me Kaine. Today, we’ll be showing you the important features of your new smart security system. Over the next two days, my staff and I will be training each of you in all aspects of it. Let’s start with the most advanced part first.”

Kaine turned his head toward a glass room that had been constructed onto the far wall of the security center. “The Vault. Because the DPA is on a completely independent grid, it has to be its own backup. In the event of an emergency, all vital records will be transferred to the systems in this room in less than five seconds and transmitted to a dedicated satellite as a backup.” People parted as he walked through the group, like his personal bubble demanded its own space.

He stopped at the entrance to the room, turned, and faced the group without looking at anyone specific. “What cannot be transmitted are Elbie. Elbie must be transferred either via a person or an artificial environment to get from one point to another. Since they are considered a limited and precious resource by your government, it is the top priority that they are secured under any circumstance. All Elbie not in active service will be stored here.” He reached behind his head without looking and pressed a button on a panel inside the Vault. At the center of the small room the floor plates separated, revealing another level. “Once the area below is secure, the floor will close itself up. The door to the Vault room will seal as an extra layer of protection. The Vault can withstand a nuclear blast. It has a self-sustaining generator beneath it that will keep the system up and running for three months. If needed, there is life support for two people for three months. The more people, the less time you’ll have.”

Lysandra leaned forward on her tiptoes. From her vantage point at the back, the space in the floor looked to be less than ten feet across. Any more than three people in there would be hellish.

Kaine continued, “Emergencies can include: cyber-attack, forest fire, or biochemical attack, to give a few examples. Over the next couple of days we will be running drills for each scenario as part of your training. Any questions?”

A few hands went up. Lysandra looked around the room. Matt, up at the front of the group, took avid notes. Eriksson had disappeared as soon as the talking started. Her communicator

chirped in her ear. It was an urgent-notice alarm. She looked at her watch. A message from admin read: "Report to room 101 immediately."

Room 101 was where Eriksson liked to do all his briefing and debriefing sessions. The last time she had been called into that room resulted in a yelling match with him over her use of inappropriate language for official reports. Nothing came to mind when she tried to imagine what she had done wrong this time. No point in keeping him waiting, that only made things worse. She started for the door.

Matt stepped into sync with her. "You too, huh?"

Lysandra flashed him her watch. "Looks like we might get out of this training thing."

"Aw come on, this is the most exciting thing to happen around here in months."

Life at the DPA meant stability and routine—something Lysandra had never had her entire life. "I could do with some chaos."

"That's the spirit." Matt veered into her shoulder and took out his phone. "Look, look, look." It was a selfie of him with Xander Hansen. Xander had his arm around Matt's neck as the two of them flashed peace signs with wide eyes. "He's so awesome."

"This is a serious man-crush you have." Lysandra pushed the phone out of her face.

"You just have an aversion to rich men."

Lysandra did not appreciate the not-so-veiled reference to Esben. "Anyone that likeable is up to something."

"Stop being so paranoid." Matt looked at the picture one last time before putting his phone away.

"Media mogul, World Cup sailing team owner, mass transit guru. The man is definitely compensating for something."

"All he needs to do is acquire Disney and AT&T and he could rule the world."

Lysandra shivered at the thought of it. "New subject, please."

They arrived at the conference room. The door was locked; it was set to private meeting. Matt swiped his ID card. Access granted. Inside, Commander Eriksson and Agent Ian Reynolds were talking between themselves, but they stopped suddenly when Lysandra and Matt appeared.

"Holloway, Carlisle." Eriksson stood up and beckoned them in. "Let's talk."