

THE VANISHING
OF EARTH'S MOST
POWERFUL HERO

SHATTERED

LEE WINTER



CHAPTER 1

LENA MARTIN STOOD STILL UNDER the falling snow and listened. She held her breath, willing herself to hear beyond the yowling wind ripping through towering pine trees. Actually, *not* breathing was a mercy in Oymyakon, Siberia. With the temperature at -70°F , a thousand needles stabbing her throat probably felt more pleasant than inhaling would right now.

She resisted the urge to stamp her feet for warmth, knowing that any noise would alert the nearby marauder. Beast Lord. Three hundred pounds of muscle and sinew wrapped up in an unstable guardian. Supposedly one of Earth's beloved superheroes, Beast Lord seemed to have lost his mind in the middle of this godforsaken place.

She couldn't entirely blame him. Oymyakon wasn't exactly a balm for the soul, frequently topping the coldest-place-on-Earth lists.

Lena had come across Beast Lord half a dozen times in the several months she'd been out here, catching glimpses of his furred arms and shaggy head. She had been adept at each encounter in not earning his wrath, which could result in a howl so loud it would perforate eardrums, shatter windows, and flatten trees with its percussive power.

Once or twice he'd swiveled his head her way, their eyes locking. Beast Lord's deeply lined, craggy face was disturbing when his burning, wild, red eyes fixed on hers. His tanned face was sunken; his clothes torn and dirty. He'd sure gone to hell in a hand basket since she'd last seen him on the news feeds. Maybe the Paleo diet wasn't agreeing with him.

She had never been as close as she had been today. Lena could smell his body odor, earthy and primal, and could easily make out deep, long, clawed footprints in the snow. She frowned as she examined them. They stopped in the middle of nowhere, as though Beast Lord had leaped off to one side suddenly.

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Lena spun around, her heart leaping as she tried to pick his shape from the trees. Where the hell was he?

Her answer came as the blurred, hairy giant hurled himself toward her without warning, in three enormous bounds. Stretched across his powerful shoulders was a sleeveless, worn, black leather jacket. His ripped jeans were dark with grime, beneath which emerged thick-soled, bare feet, fast and large, and dark with hair.

Lena flung herself to the side, only just avoiding his bulk squashing her. The “whumpf” as his body impacted next to hers caused the snow to shudder, and Lena bounced off the ground, landing on her knees.

Beast Lord’s clawed hand flashed out sideways, slashing blindly. Lena lifted her arm to block him. She stared at the rush of blood with a strange, stunned detachment. A second later the pain registered and seared through her.

He backhanded her, tossing her onto her back. Beast Lord flung his arm across her chest, pinning her in place with such force it crushed the air out of her lungs. Lena lay helpless and dazed, acute pain engulfing her.

“You’re persistent for a common, I’ll give you that,” Beast Lord growled.

She wheezed by way of answer, feeling like a wrecking ball had landed on her chest.

Beast Lord lifted his head and howled, a primal, eerie, aching cry that shattered the stillness. It created a wind blast—trees bent, groaned, and uprooted themselves, and snow flurries slammed into Lena’s body. She shivered uncontrollably beneath her three layers of thermals and thickly padded coat.

Lena waited the roar out, studying her target. She had long wondered if wolf sensibilities applied to Beast Lord. Now she was close enough to test it out, she’d try that tack. Her eyes watered as the howl persisted, and snow and plant debris shuddered and vibrated, the wind whipping it all up in her face.

He stopped, waited for the echo to die down, then turned to look at her. His arm at last shifted off her chest, and he stared intently. Surprise lit his features when he tilted his head for a better look at her ears. Probably expected to see blood running from them.

Asshole.

If she wasn’t using a special set of earplugs, she’d be deaf by now, her eardrums pulped from the acoustic blast this close to its source. The high-

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tech ear pieces filtered sound and turned into white noise everything except for humanoid voices.

His body reared up suddenly and then dropped forward to crouch over her, a meaty, hairy fist planted on either side of her head, his massive thighs pinning her narrow hips.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t end you now,” he demanded. “I’m tired of you following me. How long am I to be your prey? Do you never give up?”

“No,” she said as air began to flow back into her lungs. It still hurt like hell. “I don’t give up. And no, you won’t end me. Because guardians aren’t killers. You’re heroes, remember? You protect humans like me. The commons. You’re forces for good.”

“It would be so easy,” he said, eyes flashing in realization at the truth of his statement. “So easy to just make you go away and give me some peace. I thought you’d give up. But you never quit.”

He peered at her and seemed to be weighing his options. Lena felt no fear, just a strange calmness as he decided her fate. She inhaled deeply, regretting it as the frigid air clawed at her lungs. The pain woke her up. To hell she’d go out like this.

“You think I don’t know how it feels for you?” she asked softly. “I know you miss them. Your people. The guardians. They’re like your pack, aren’t they? They miss you. They want you back.”

“*Tagshart*,” he swore in his native tongue. “I’m an embarrassment.”

“No,” Lena said earnestly, staring into his eyes. She lifted her bloodied arm up and touched his shaggy beard with her gloved hand. “You made a few mistakes. You didn’t mean to. The locals got scared about some strange beast running around shattering their windows and frightening their animals. But it’s just a mistake and it can be made to go away. That’s what I do. Fix the mistakes. No one outside of the Facility would ever know. Besides, don’t you know what the most important thing is?”

He leaned forward, listening intently.

“Without you, they’re incomplete. A pack without one of its members is like a body missing a limb.”

He inhaled harshly. “Don’t you know what they’ll do to me?” he rumbled. “I can’t go back. I need to be free. I need to be out here. Not trapped in some city, playing fetch for the commons.”

“I know,” she said. “I know. It’s like a call for you, isn’t it? Being out here?” She began combing his shaggy hair softly, soothingly, with her

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fingers. "You need to be free," she repeated back to him. "You need to roam. It's in your blood."

"Yes." His head dropped forward in agreement. "Yes. I have to. I can't be what my people want. Or what your people want."

"Hey, it's okay," Lena said. "Your leader understands. He's not angry with you. He knows why you're out here."

"Tal's not mad?" His head tilted up, hope lighting his eyes.

"Of course not. He misses you. He wants you to come home, so he sent me to ask. You're needed back there." She ran her fingers behind his head and patted the back of his neck like one might a domesticated dog, and watched his body language shift to even more docile.

"I didn't mean to run." Beast Lord's voice cracked and his strange blood-red eyes implored her to believe him. "I just *had* to get out of there. The city. The demands. You don't know what it's like. How could you? You're a common."

"We can never know what you go through," Lena agreed, injecting every ounce of sympathy into her voice. "Being a hero has its burdens, I know that. But you can't carry them alone. Don't forget, your people are waiting for you. They can help. They understand. It's time to stop running. Come home with me. You'll wonder what you were so afraid of. It'll be okay."

She gave his shoulder a thump of solidarity.

His body sagged.

She had him. She knew she had him. Lena just needed to...

A vibration and soft ding came from her FacTrack. She frowned. Her employers wouldn't contact her mid-assignment unless it was an emergency.

Beast Lord sat back on his haunches warily as Lena gingerly shifted her jacket sleeve off her wrist to study the screen. She narrowed her eyes.

An urgent recall order?

She tapped out "1d?" asking for a day's delay before returning home. Even with half a day's grace she knew she could bring Beast Lord in, docile as a puppy, now she'd gotten through his defenses and connected.

The screen lit up instantly: "NOW."

Damn it.

She tugged her sleeve back down and looked at the guardian, who hadn't taken his eyes off her. Lena didn't like his expression as he fought

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to work out what was going on through the haze that had been weakening his faculties of late. He'd have figured out she was a tracker weeks ago, but until this moment her subtle manipulations had gone unnoticed.

Beast Lord's face darkened as he joined the rest of the dots. Yes, of course, she'd been hired to return him to his people, with force if necessary. There was no kinship between them. No bonding whatsoever.

This was business.

The dawning expression of awareness, doubt, hate, and mistrust told her the exact moment he realized he'd been played—and well. “New orders?” he hissed.

“You might say that,” Lena said quietly. “But that doesn't change anything. We...”

His eyes became mere slits.

Lena knew that look. *Ab crap*. An ego-dented Beast Lord was an especially dangerous creature.

“Piece of *tagshart*,” he suddenly howled at her, and his enormous arm lifted high to deliver a vicious blow.

She kicked her legs out and away from his thighs, which had been bracketing her knees, and rolled quickly to her side, unsheathing her hip Dazr under her coat as she moved. He leapt to his feet, towering over her.

Lena had to waste precious time pulling off her glove, which was too thick to manipulate the weapon. She hadn't been expecting a direct confrontation today or she might have risked frostbite and worn her thinner pair.

The split-second delay was all it took to give him the advantage.

“Lying *shreekopf!*” Beast Lord thundered. His fistful of rapier claws sliced toward her.

Lena forced herself to stay calm and, with practiced skill, tapped off the safety and flicked up the Dazr's setting to maximum with her thumb.

“You have no soul!” he thundered.

She squeezed the trigger.

“You know you're a broken piece of...”

A blue electrical field shot out from the gun, and Lena cartwheeled to one side to avoid the now paralyzed guardian crashing back to the ground.

She slowly got to her feet, pissed beyond belief. Why had she been recalled now? What a waste. She thumped the snow off her knees with her

hands, peering at Beast Lord's prostrate form in distaste. A voluntary return was always so much easier. They knew that. She'd been so damned close.

Beast Lord was staring at her mutinously, but his vocal cords were as locked up as the rest of his body trapped under the shimmering electrical netting.

Lena gave him a slow, unimpressed smile. She shifted the safety back on her Dazr and rammed it into her holster. "I *am* aware by the way. What you said? Broken and soulless. Yep, nailed it. That's me."

She lowered herself to a squat and met his flashing eyes. "You also left out a cynical, cold-hearted, manipulative, scheming bitch with massive trust issues."

Lena tilted her head and added: "You really think anything that your kind could say to me could have any effect? I've heard it all. But as worthless as you think I am, for all your people's alien powers, none of you has ever beaten me. Your attitude's the worst. All guardians ever do is whine. 'Oh poor me, life's so hard, I can't take it.' Hell. You *do* remember that we let you take refuge on Earth? All we asked in return was that you use your skills to help us. As an added bonus, everyone loved you. Not that you're worthy. Shit, it's the biggest con going."

She peered harder into his eyes and offered him a sneer. "Aww...look at you, all bitter and angry because I played you and said what I had to so you'd want to come home. You're *alive*, asshole. Alive to moan about your sorry life thanks to *my* people. So show a little damned respect."

She lifted her arm and flicked her FacTrack to a different menu, selected the emergency evacuation code, and hit the "Retrieve" button. She pointed a focused blue beam at Beast Lord, and waited three seconds for it to lock on to him and give an acknowledging beep.

"All right. I've relayed your coordinates to the guardians at Moscow's Facility. They'll pick you up in an hour or so. I won't wait; I have somewhere else to be—urgently, apparently. You'll be fine. After all, you've got all this nice fresh air to suck in and all this freedom that you love so much. I'd make the most of it if I were you."

At his venomous glare, she gave him a knowing look.

"You'd kill me now if you could, wouldn't you?" Lena taunted. She rubbed her forearm through its shredded sleeve which bore three deep, bloodied, curling, parallel scratches running up it, courtesy of his attack

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earlier. “Well, just be glad us commons who you hate so much have more restraint than you do.”

She shook her head and turned, leaving him in his awkward tangle of limbs.

“Humanity’s heroes, my ass,” she muttered, as she began the trek back to her base camp. “You’re fucking pathetic.”

CHAPTER 2

LENA HOPPED FROM FOOT TO FOOT, wrenching on her black jeans. Her ass briefly landed on the lime-green armchair that had come with her semi-furnished apartment along with the crappy, glass coffee table that should have met its end dozens of times. God knows she kept almost running right through it when she was late. Like today. First day back at work after her recall from Siberia. She'd landed back home late last night.

Thick black socks, shiny black boots. Check. She dumped the boots beside her with a thud and shook out the socks. She slipped one on and, thanks to the jet lag, almost landed face first on the coffee table. Instead, she managed a last-minute dive onto her lumpy sofa that was drowning under the bright pink cushions her neighbor had bequeathed upon her as a housewarming present.

Lucky her. Until then she hadn't known pink came that loud.

Bra. White T-shirt. Done and done. Lena raked her fingers through her blonde hair, which fell in a messy sweep that never quite stayed out of her eyes. She was overdue a haircut, but it was a low priority. Black padded bomber jacket. Lena slid it on, zipped it up, and almost felt human.

Finally, the pièce de résistance. Black leather cuff. She'd made it herself at shop class back in high school. Turned out halfway decent, much to the teacher's surprise.

Armor on. Good to go. She tightened the wrist buckle on her cuff, pleased to see it covered the claw marks left by Beast Lord, as she headed to the bathroom.

She studied herself in the cracked mirror. Lena had never gotten around to asking the landlord to fix it when she'd moved in. She was rarely here enough to care. Yup, ready. She gave a savage nod. Both visions of herself nodded back.

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Okay, if she sprinted the six blocks to the subway, she could just make the 7:40 a.m. express and be in before it was obvious to everyone that she was late. Her fitness, unlike the condition of her one-room apartment, was outstanding, so it was totally doable.

BANG! BANG-BANG-BANG!

Her apartment door almost rattled off its frame.

Lena sighed. No one but her neighbor—she of the lurid pink cushions—ever bothered her. And since the elderly woman knew not to bug her in the morning unless it was an emergency, Lena knew her day was about to turn to crap.

She forced on her civilized smile and opened the door.

Mrs. Josephine Finkel stood before Lena, a frantic expression on her face. “Blood!” she gasped. “*Everywhere!*”

Lena’s eyebrow lifted and she nodded once, as though being called to random bloodied emergencies was common. Which, come to think of it, for her it pretty much was. Not that Mrs. Finkel knew that.

“Lead on,” was all she said, locking up behind her.

* * *

On her hands and knees on a small balcony, hemmed in by potted plants in various states of age and morbidity, Lena scrubbed a widening pool of blood and feathers. It was a rather vicious-looking double pigeon homicide. She side-eyed Bernstein, the plump, smug-looking cat responsible.

It shut its moody green eyes and yawned.

This was not quite Bernstein’s worst crime scene, but it was up there.

Lena plucked an errant feather out of her hair and considered the feline’s owner. Mrs. Finkel was a sprightly woman for her age. Seventy-one years young, she’d tell anyone who’d listen. Which lately mostly extended to telling the ruthless Bernstein, her goldfish Woodward, and Lena.

The chatty widow had worked all over the US on some of the biggest newspapers—as Lena knew all too well from having her ear bent whenever Lena surfaced to collect her mail, still shaking off the dust from far-flung places.

Pinkish water splattered as Lena dunked her scrubbing brush in the bucket. She wrinkled her nose in disgust, trying to keep it off her clothes.

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Damn it, she should be at work by now, finding out what the big emergency was that had yanked her out of Siberia so suddenly. But it was a bit hard to argue a work emergency with Mrs. Finkel given the old woman had no clue what she did for a living, let alone why it was occasionally vital to the human race. For all her neighbor's natural curiosity, as befitting her former profession, she had never once asked Lena what she did. Nor had she ever enquired too closely about the array of injuries—from black eyes to strange scars and crippled knees—that Lena often brought home from various assignments.

No, she held her own counsel. Lena liked that about her. She also liked her sharp mind, which made her tales from the news desk not entirely terrible to bear for the tenth or eleventh time.

Lena hefted the bucket and trudged inside to flush it down the drain. One more rinse across the balcony, and she'd be out of here. Easy.

* * *

Lena perched on the edge of a blue, embroidered, oversized sofa, gaze sweeping a mounted stuffed pheasant to her right, a faded world map on the wall behind her, a typewriter by the windowed desk, and a now relieved Mrs. Finkel in front of her.

Lena was stuck with a cup of tar that her neighbor liked to pretend was coffee. In all their years living across from each other, the other woman had never mastered the art of making liquid caffeine that tasted ingestible.

"Thank you, again, dear," she was saying, stroking her fat black cat.

Bernstein swished his tail in Lena's direction and blinked at her. She narrowed her eyes. Smug little shit.

Grimly swallowing more tar, Lena said: "No problem." She wondered whether two sips was sufficient before she could put the cup down and bolt. She wasn't sure which was worse—the coffee or having to be sociable.

Mrs. Finkel laughed. "So uptight, dear. We need to find you a way to relax."

"So you keep telling me."

"I'm never wrong. You know, my granddaughter's about your age. And no, no, don't give me that look again—she's not like most other young women. Diane's a war correspondent. Oh, the stories she can tell. She's very

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engaging. She's stateside at the moment, and climbing the walls for things to do and new people to meet. She'd drag even you out of your shell."

"I like my shell," Lena said honestly.

Mrs. Finkel laughed. "Well, if you ever change your mind, here's her card. She's always telling me how boring people her age are. You aren't boring, though, are you, Lena?" Her grey eyebrows lifted with a hint of mischief, as they always did when she subtly probed Lena's working life.

It was a game they played. The shrewd widow always inched the door open a sliver, in case Lena was feeling chatty for once. But Lena never could say a word. No one even knew guardians had meltdowns or went rogue, let alone needed trackers, such as Lena, to find them. That didn't fit the heroic narrative at all.

"Oh, I'm very boring," Lena said, pocketing the business card out of politeness. She'd stick it on the fridge and promptly ignore it. "You know me."

"I wish I did," Mrs. Finkel said wistfully. "It's not for want of trying. Whatever it is you do that has you disappearing at all hours, for months on end, it can't be all that your life is, can it? You need friends, dear. A hobby, perhaps?"

She pinned hopeful eyes on Lena, who smiled, placing the unfinished drink on the wooden coffee table and rose.

"I have to go. I'll have to run for the train."

"All right, then. Sorry to have detained you. Thanks for all your help with the mess. Don't forget, call Diane. Make friends. Live a little!"

When Lena made no comment, Mrs. Finkel gave her a long-suffering sigh, her eyes twinkling. "I don't know why I bother."

Lena gave her a wave over her shoulder and opened the door. "Me either. I'm a lost cause."

"No such thing," Mrs. Finkel protested as she shut the door behind her.

* * *

Lena caught sight of the clock on the ostentatious spire at the top of her company's American headquarters. She was *really* late. She quickened her pace as she rounded the side of the black glass-and-steel edifice that had been her workplace for half a decade.

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The Facility. What a nice, clean, impersonal name for what they did in there. If only people knew. She hurried to the front of the building, taking the stone stairs two at a time.

Lena detested being late for one reason—she liked to know what was going on. And all the decent gossip happened before eight on Mondays outside Dutton’s office. Not post-ten.

As she entered the Facility’s granite foyer, her senses were immediately assailed by the booming, competing giant screens on opposing walls, broadcasting the daily superhero news feeds. Which guardian had saved who and what and how overnight in a light-and-sound spectacle.

Lena rolled her eyes at the excuse to parade an array of straining muscles and cleavages for the commons to get weak-kneed over. Surrounding her in ten-foot-tall, high-definition vision were scenes of adoring fans, their perfect superstars, and the tearful rescued, all on an endless loop.

They were certainly beautiful. But to Lena, the guardians would always be little more than “the talent.” It was all kabuki theater these news reels; everything for show. Censorship was rife. No imperfections in their glossy PR image ever allowed. God forbid.

Even so, it was a little hypnotic. She sometimes watched to find out who was ascendant in the Facility’s world order. Knowledge was more than just power. Knowledge meant control.

And Lena Martin preferred control in all things.

Her eye caught sight of new Talon Man footage. The orange-suited, lantern-jawed leader of the Guardians’ Confederation smiled his toothy, gleaming smile and announced how every guardian lived to serve. His voice resonated across the foyer.

Lena snorted. Sure they did. Three parallel scars on her arm said otherwise.

She flashed her ID at the security guard who was part volcanic rock, part god-only-knows-what. He grunted in reply—which was the most that particular guardian ever said to anyone. She’d never bothered to ask his name, and he’d never volunteered it.

At the elevators, she laid her palm on a chrome wall pad. The doors opened and a computer voice sounded. “ID accepted, Lena Martin, 1342-22A. Tracker First Class. Access granted for sub-levels ten to seventeen. Enter.”

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She stepped inside and felt the floor drop. It seemed slower than usual.

“Come on,” Lena muttered, acutely aware of the time. She stared at the dropping numbers in irritation.

A sharp blue light flashed suddenly around the cabin. A random security check, assessing her credentials at the molecular level. It was an unobtrusive reminder that the guardians trusted her, and the other human subcontractors who did their menial work, about as much as she did them.

The elevator stopped at sub-level eleven. Two more trackers got on. She nodded out of professional courtesy, but she had a healthy dislike for both Wills and Rossi.

“Got a big day?” Wills was asking his colleague.

“There’s a runner and a splat on the eastern division board,” Rossi said. “I’ll take the splat. Easier since it’s Becky’s birthday tonight. My kid’s gonna be ten.”

A splat. She swallowed in revulsion. When superhero powers failed, they really did. Or sometimes they overestimated their own abilities at stopping an out-of-control train or pulling out of a dive and so on. Why Rossi thought cleaning up deceased talent was “easier,” she’d never know. She might not think much of guardians but it was still revolting seeing them in that state. She was glad she no longer did that beat. Having T-stats as high as hers had its perks. She got some say in assignment choice.

“Hey, that’s great. Say hi from me,” Wills said. “I’ve got a break on the south side. Shouldn’t take too long. They already got him cornered in a warehouse. Keeps calling for his mommy.”

Both men laughed.

What asses. Guardian meltdowns—breaks—were happening a lot more often these days for some reason, not that her bosses acknowledged it. In such cases, to be even slightly effective, the Facility needed to send in a tracker who could project empathy. They would pat a guardian’s hand and tell them it was going to be okay. That they’d get help. That they’d come to the Facility and be looked after real nice.

What a joke. The Facility didn’t have a clue what “help” meant. Their secrets ran a lot deeper than being in denial about the fallibility of its super members.

Rossi turned to her. “What you got, Silver?”

Lena shook herself out of her reverie on hearing her nickname. "Not sure yet. Haven't checked in."

Rossi whistled, glancing at his timeslide. It was some flashy piece of pure platinum in vogue with all the commons right now. Completely redundant, of course, since he also wore his FacTrack which showed the time, as well as being a databank, multimedia player, GPS navigation, and satellite communications system.

"Shit, you're gonna get toasted being this late."

"Whatever," Lena said. "Not like I'm that easy to replace."

And it was true. Rossi and Wills exchanged pointed glances. But she wasn't talking herself up. No one could do what she did. There was daylight between her and the rest of the office. She was the top tracker internationally this year. Same as last year and the year before, when she'd finally beaten Hastings in the London Facility office, which was the international HQ for guardians.

"You just hauled in Beast Lord, didn't you?" Rossi whistled. "Tricky catch."

She shrugged nonchalantly, but her bones were still aching from the cold. She wondered if she'd ever feel warm again.

"We any closer to a result on the pool?" Rossi asked curiously.

Lena gave him a thin smile. Beast Lord was a hotly debated topic. At certain times every decade, he became half wild. No one had ever told the trackers why. Hell, maybe their alien bosses didn't know themselves. So the trackers had a betting pool of theories, ranging from brain-chemistry changes to mating season.

"Nothing new," she replied.

Rossi shook his head. "Figures. He doesn't seem the chatty type." He turned back to Wills. "Here's what I don't get. Those guardians hiding in the middle of nowhere, like Beast Lord, why even bother us with it? Ain't causing commons any problems, right? Just give us the clear-and-present-danger jobs. Not like the masses would be any wiser. They're clueless. They wouldn't know, we wouldn't tell, everyone wins. Right?"

"Are you kidding me?" Lena interrupted, incredulous.

"What?" Rossi's head snapped around, facing her. "I just mean this is such a waste of resources. Come on, Silver, you can't have been too happy freezing your tits off in Siberia over a crazy dipshit like Beast Lord. Look,

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it's basic math—sometimes the talent runs. So what? Let them, I say, as long as they stay low and off the news feeds. We've got enough crap on our plate with all the extra breaks and splats these days."

Lena glared at him. "You know why. Hell, your kid knows why," she said in exasperation. "People have a right to know that all the talent in the super zoo is being monitored at all times. It keeps the twitchy masses from losing their paranoid minds about having aliens loose among us."

"I know *that*." Rossi gave her a long-suffering look. He folded his arms. "I meant the public doesn't have to *know* they're missing. Why don't we use our trackers better? Stick to the guardians who are actually a threat, not the ones who've gone to ground?"

Lena threw her hands up. "You're a damned tracker, Rossi. You know better than anyone else how much raw power guardians have at their fingertips. Now how much damage could a runner do if they went psycho *while* they were off the grid? What if we couldn't even find them in time, let alone stop them using their powers on us?"

"One is hardly—"

"What if it's not just one?" She glared.

"Come on, Silver, they're harmless." He eyed her uncertainly.

"Yeah? Tell that to the residents of Oymyakon after all their windows have been shattered every time Beast Lord decides to howl at the moon or whatever shit he gets up to. Tracking guardians protects humanity from potentially lethal weapons." She gave the now-subdued man a withering look. "I can't believe I have to explain any of this to a freaking tracker."

The elevator came to a stop with a shudder and a ding. Lena strode out, ignoring the pair, who changed the topic to debating how bad Rossi's splat would be.

Gross.

"Silver!" came a bark from the end office as she took her first step into the Trackers' Control Room. She looked up to see the thin, pinched features of her boss, Bruce Dutton. He was in his mid-forties, and had a nervous tic which made him blink too often. The man reminded her of a highly strung, bespectacled, bureaucratic stork. He was smart, though, and fair, so she tolerated him.

"What time do you call this?"

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Lena rolled her eyes. She didn't make a habit of being late, so what was his damned problem? She didn't answer, instead raising her chin and sauntering over. "Need me?"

"Check the attitude." He sighed, pointing at the visitor's chair. "Sit."

She plopped into the seat opposite and folded her arms.

"Welcome back from Siberia. Hope you dodged frostbite?"

Lena drummed her fingers on her forearm, waiting for him to get to the point.

"Fine," he muttered at her non-response. "Upstairs has stepped up the urgency on rounding up all the overdues and getting them back under thumb. Time is a critical issue. We're not stopping for niceties anymore. Just tag them and bag them."

Well, that explained her emergency recall. Lena took no small pride in the fact that when a guardian had been on the run for more than a month, their file stamped "Overdue", it was Lena they called in to get fast results. Due to her survivalist skills, Lena's specialty was the off-the-grid runners—the sneaky, clever ones hiding out in godforsaken places, their communications timeslides torn off as they eluded capture. She wondered how long she'd be packing her bags for this time.

"How late are we talking?"

"This one hasn't checked in for at least eighteen months."

Lena bit back a shocked gasp. *Eighteen months?* Not only was that an unbelievable length of time for an overdue to be gone, but how had she missed hearing about it?

"We've sent four trackers over that time, each with solid leads," Dutton said. "Good trackers too. They all came back saying there was nothing. No trace at all."

He tapped a few keys on his keyboard, and a holographic projection appeared between them. Lena studied the back of the floating image, waiting for it to rotate to the front. "Who is it this time?"

"Surprised you don't recognize her. She was high profile ten years ago. Like, top-tier famous."

Lena leaned forward as the hovering shape turned to face her. A lean, muscled, tall torso encased in a black, figure-hugging costume slowly pirouetted. Dark, smooth skin. A closely cut shadow of hair which

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emphasized sharp, high cheek bones. Generous, wide lips and deep brown eyes that drilled right into you. Eyes that said she wasn't taking any crap.

Lena started, swallowing her gasp. She was part of history, this one. An actual founder. And she was more elusive than all the other aliens on Earth put together.

Shattergirl had been the forgotten guardian until about ten years ago, when she was outed by paparazzi, catapulting her into the stratosphere as the first lesbian superhero the world had ever seen. Shattergirl had not hidden her displeasure at that. She had an attitude as fierce as her skills, which were twofold—she could fly, and she could fling objects about with her mind, to shattering effect.

“Seriously? Shattergirl’s an overdue?” Lena could hardly believe it. Founders never ran. Some of the second-generation guardians did, sure. And their kids’ kids were even worse, needing a white-knuckled tight rein. Teenage rebellion crossed all barriers and genetics, it seemed. Most of her day job involved third-generation guardian brats.

But the founders, the original group of aliens to make their home on Earth, were supposed to be the standard bearers of their people. They didn't break or splat or anything else. They were the reason the whole world had fallen in love with their kind. So a founder *running*? Hell. This was unprecedented.

“Yeah.” Dutton ran his hand over his thinning hair. “Hence the panic from upstairs. Surprised you, of all people, hadn't heard about it.”

“Have you forgotten I was in Outer Buttfuck, Siberia, for the past four months?” Lena lifted her eyebrow. “Only got in last night. When did I get the chance to see any internal briefings on this?”

“Wasn't on the in-house briefings. But I know how good your under-the-table intel is. Thought for sure you'd heard something. For the record, this one is marked as a full news blackout, inside and outside the building. You know the drill.”

She did. Their vaunted super bosses routinely censored their people's failings from newscasts if it was within their ability. Occasionally minor stuff slipped out on the indie media channels, such as a costume malfunction, but the guardians' PR machine was pretty effective at controlling the big stuff. It helped enormously that Lena, along with the other commons at the

Facility, had all signed non-disclosure agreements. So, to the world at large, no guardian had screwed up in any major way. Ever.

“So, let me understand this,” Lena said, “a founder, an actual icon no less, has been on the run for *eighteen months* and no one’s seen her anywhere? How is that even possible? Who’d you send before me?”

“Sachs, Ferretti, Cragen, and Miller.”

She stared. They were all elite trackers.

“I suspect,” Dutton continued with a sigh, “that Shattergirl somehow knows when they get near. Her spy network must be as good as yours. Every time she finds out we’re coming, she relocates before we get close. Hence, the reports that all say ‘no trace of her found.’”

Lena considered that scenario, knitting her brows together. Overdues tended to be loners, not part of any network. All her instincts told her Dutton was dead wrong. Shattergirl barely seemed to tolerate her own people, let alone Earth’s commons. The idea she was networking expertly to evade capture seemed ludicrous. It had to be something else.

She tapped her lip. From what she knew, Shattergirl did not suffer fools at all, was scary smart, and, unlike her eternally beaming brethren, refused to fake a damn thing. Lena smiled. Having a real challenge and a halfway decent guardian to track would make a change for once. She straightened.

“Why the screaming hurry that you had to recall me from Beast Lord mid-capture? I had to send him home in restraints, but I was *this* close to a voluntary return. You know that’s always better for rehab long term.”

“I know that, but we’ve just received a credible tip-off.” He tapped his computer keyboard. “Shattergirl’s been reported on Socotra. It’s the first fresh lead in six months.”

“Socotra? Where the hell is that?”

“Did you pay *any* attention at school, Silver?”

“Enough to know it was a waste of my time,” Lena said, shooting him a shit-eating grin.

Dutton sighed and pointedly pressed a key. “Okay, I’ve uploaded it all for you. We need this overdue back by August twenty-first. I know it’s less than a week, but at least we’ve narrowed it down to one tiny island for you. That deadline is fixed, by the way. Talon Man has his thing planned.”

His thing. Right. That was one word for the over-the-top extravaganza marking the first centenary of the guardians’ arrival on Earth. No expense

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had been spared. You couldn't even buy tickets for it anymore, no matter how much you offered the scalpers. Obviously it wouldn't do to have only forty-nine of the fifty founders present to celebrate landfall.

"Now I understand," Lena said, checking her FacTrack had uploaded Dutton's data packet. The file blinked at her. She gave him a knowing look. "I get why you so badly need my silver tongue."

"Thought you might," Dutton said. "We need this. Questions from the highest level will be asked if there's a spare seat on that podium come the end of next week."

"Yeah, god help us if the guardians look unable to control one of their own," Lena muttered. "Fine, leave it with me. Fortunately, I have skills the precious guardians don't."

Dutton's shoulders relaxed for the first time since she'd sat down, and he offered a rare smile. "I knew you were the tracker for this." He adjusted his glasses. "Oh, and Socotra?"

"Yeah?"

"It's also called the Island of Bliss."

Lena grinned, pleasantly surprised. "Anything above freezing is bliss to me right now."

"I'll bet." He looked at her seriously. "Pack your Dazr."

CHAPTER 3

LENA UNBUCKLED HER SEATBELT ONCE they hit cruising altitude, little yellow light be damned. She ignored Air Yemenia's shopping channel playing on multiple screens overhead. No, she did not want a "half tola of genuine Arabic oud perfume." She scrolled through her FacTrack and called up the archival vids menu.

The early black-and-white data reels she'd loaded up on the founders before leaving home were interesting. Of course, she'd seen the footage before over the years, but a refresher couldn't hurt. She pressed "Play" on the video of first contact with the founders.

Fifty super-fit humanoid survivors had suddenly appeared on the lawns of England's Houses of Parliament—the epicenter of Earth's power at the turn of the last century—as their spaceship broke up in the upper atmosphere. It was all avidly captured by movie news crews for the cinema houses.

There they sat, strange-looking creatures, barely humanoid a few of them, these oddly dressed refugees from another world. They ignored the growing, fearful crowds of hatted men in long coats and women in narrow, ankle-length hobble skirts and high blouses. They didn't blink at the parade of rickety, black vintage vehicles and horse-drawn carriages, nor even seem to notice when a row of converted double-decker buses creaked to a halt.

From them disgorged a snaking line of soldiers, quickly surrounding the arrivals. In the silent, crackling, monochrome vision, Lena watched an officer with a wide, white mustache and matching bristling sideburns shout a command. The soldiers' weapons snapped to shoulder height.

She held her breath as the gathering mob hungrily watched the aliens' reactions to this provocation. The beings didn't so much as twitch, but their gazes shifted to one among them. Then a shimmer of electrical, flickering energy sprung up around them.

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The officer's mouth opened and bellowed a single word. The caption read: "FIRE!"

Smoke, recoiling weapons, contorted faces in the crowd...chaos filled the footage, everywhere except at the very center of the scene. The aliens hadn't even flinched.

Bullets had hit the shimmering protective dome, melting into it.

The commander ordered the men to repeat their attack, yielding the same result. The soldiers lowered their weapons helplessly.

The founders continued to sit there, in the strangest impasse ever seen. Lena supposed it was disturbingly human to fire at the aliens first and try to make peace second. But it was 1916, and half the planet was gripped in a war, so nerves were long frayed. In the hours and then day that followed, there came the first feeble attempts at diplomacy.

Lena jumped the archival footage forward.

Representatives of most nations—many already in London to discuss the war efforts—came and went, trying to reach the aliens in their various tongues. Each government's agent made assorted demands, bribes and appeals, but, as was plain to see in the footage, none received a response.

The aliens waited for thirty-seven hours until their group's empath, Mind Merge, had assimilated enough of the planet's languages to work out the patterns and nuances of each, and finally began to speak in the dominant one.

Lena watched the disbelief on the crowd's faces when Mind Merge suddenly opened his eyes and spoke in perfect King's English, looking directly down the camera lens, explaining his group's plight. His statements were added to the silent footage in subtitles, and screened for months in cinema houses worldwide.

She closed that video. She didn't need to see the news footage that immediately followed, of the riots and hysteria, religious vigils, and other doomsday predictions that an invasion was imminent. As the months rolled on, every founder became part of a charm offensive and made it their mission to win over planet Earth and its anxious people.

Well, every founder except one.

Lena jumped ahead to the footage of the first global press conference. She pinpointed the dark-skinned woman hanging back, silently watching proceedings with mistrustful eyes, her arms folded, as their leader, Talon

Man, leapt through the diplomatic hoops and amused the throngs with his charismatic routine.

Shattergirl looked unimpressed and irritated to the point of miserable.

Lena snorted. She couldn't blame her. Politics were a cure for insomnia. She skipped forward three months to the most famous footage of all. The day the world's media had gathered at Regent's Park in London for a demonstration of the new arrivals' abilities. One by one, they showed what they could do. It was one part theater, one part silent plea to their new world to allow them to make a home here.

She watched as the rugged Talon Man soared elegantly before landing in front of a tree and whittling at it with the sharp protrusions that ran along his arms and legs.

His movements were faster than the old movie cameras of the day could follow, so he appeared as a blur. When he stepped back, it was a stunningly accurate carving of their host nation's prime minister. The man in question, watching in the crowd, beamed as the media behind him could be seen apparently "oohing" in delight.

Lena shook her head. *Pure circus.*

She ran the video forward again, past guardians with dragon breath and super strength, ones who could melt rocks, or jump a hundred feet. Then, it was Shattergirl's turn. She stepped into the center and, without a word, turned her head sharply to the side, before slamming her hands together in a clap over her head.

Two black automobiles parked on the street suddenly flew into the air above the greened area, smashing spectacularly, raining debris on the grass before them. There appeared to be some sort of startled shout of dismay from two reporters, no doubt recognizing their respective company vehicles, and the faces of the rest broke into laughter.

Shattergirl's expression betrayed nothing as she lowered her arms and stepped back.

In the background, Lena could see furious looks shot at her by several of her group, remonstrating with her silently. She grimly pressed her lips together and stared them down. They broke her gaze and didn't make eye contact for the rest of the segment.

Lena wondered why she'd never seen this footage before. She checked the vid's details. Her eyebrows shot up. Shattergirl's segment had never

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aired. Huh. Well, with forty-nine other talents putting on a show, the news editors of the day obviously preferred to skip the one unwilling to pretend that this was anything but a debasing dog-and-pony show.

Her fingers tapped her FacTrack and loaded up the video of the day of signing the Pact. It was the guardians' peace deal with the people of Earth. They received a guaranteed safe haven, where they would not be hunted, and the guardians would regulate and govern themselves, and ensure none of their kind stepped out of line.

They were assured, given that a world war was raging, they would be allowed to remain neutral in all human politics, and any country that sought them out for military ends, covert or overt, would lose the services of all guardians within their borders forever.

The guardians agreed, in turn, not to break any human laws except to save a life. They also conceded they would wear special tracking timeslides, alien tech they'd brought with them to Earth, as part of a registry of their whereabouts, updated weekly. And they agreed to always make themselves and their special talents available for the protection of the people of their adopted planet.

It took Lena ten minutes of hunting the crowd scenes to find Shattergirl hidden in the throngs of the clapping, back-slapping world leaders, diplomatic hangers-on, and guardians at the signing. Eventually she spied her, leaning against a pillar, rubbing her temple. She looked like she was thoroughly over everything and utterly miserable.

Lena jumped ahead two years. London. Opening day at the first Facility of a dozen to be set up worldwide to educate, heal, train, and govern guardians. In a stark contrast to landfall, this time the crowd was cheering their protectors' arrival in their city.

She spent another hour studying photo after photo of Shattergirl from news events. The talent's ability to shift large, dense matter effortlessly saw her appear often at landslides, mine collapses, fires, building implosions, and earthquakes.

Many photos captured her profile staring darkly at a horrific sight after having pulled the people to safety. She ignored the thanks of those around her as though they were as ridiculous and pointless as the requests for autographs and photos.

LEE WINTER

Lena was getting the picture now. Shattergirl did her duty as a guardian, sure, but rarely was she at any of the group photo ops. When she *was* caught on camera at some media or political event, it was always wearing the same pained expression. Lena zoomed in. She had seen this exact look before. Many times, in fact, and not on Shattergirl.

A startling theory formed. She could be way off base... Hell, she probably was.

Lena skipped to the last piece of Shattergirl footage. The video from just over a decade ago that made Shattergirl, until then a virtually unknown guardian, world famous. This was also the only interview with her in all the time she'd been on Earth. Lena hit "Play."

"Shattergirl, Dave Monroe, *The Daily Express*. Do you have any comment on the photos in the paper today which caught you kissing a mystery woman? Are you a lesbian?"

"By what right do you ask me this?"

"As a journalist. I—"

"By what right do you assume to know any part of my private life?"

"Well, the public would really like to know—"

"How does their curiosity give them any rights to my personal business?"

"You're a public figure, a guardian. *And* a founder. Shattergirl, you face scrutiny because you've chosen to be in the public eye."

Her eyes flashed darkly. "I chose *none* of this. Not one part of this was ever my choice."

"But—"

"No! And shame on you for asking."

"Now come on a minute, I—"

"Shame. On. You."

Her parting, enraged glower was flashed around the world and sparked an international debate about what rights, if any, the guardians had to their privacy. Of course, such thorny issues were forgotten by the next month. But for a young Lena, Shattergirl's blunt interview had been the most telling thing any guardian had ever said in public in the past century.

She'd been sixteen back then, in awe, and had damn near cheered Shattergirl putting the reporter in his place. How much simpler things had been then. Before she'd learned the truth about guardians. Before she'd seen how pathetic they really were. Weak. Whiny. Entitled.

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Lena considered her options for bringing Shattergirl in. Every instinct told her that with one so smart, the best offense would be no offense at all. Lena's best skill was in getting others to open up to her. To keep them talking and talking, and to slowly bend them to her point of view over days or weeks, while convincing them the decision to return home was all *their* idea. In this area, she was unmatched.

She knew she could swing even this most private and reluctant guardian if she was on her A-game. And really, when wasn't she?

With a cool smile, she turned off her FacTrack and closed her eyes.

* * *

Lena dodged an orange-and-white goat on the heat-shimmering tarmac as she followed the disembarking passengers from Air Yemenia's weekly flight into Socotra. The desolate, squat, cream-and-white terminal building looked like it had been dropped in the middle of what could pass as a vast salt plain, bounded by distant purple mountains.

Hot winds laced with microscopic amounts of sand pummeled Lena. Her mouth was instantly sucked dry, and her eyes blinked back grit. She could smell dust on the whipping wind, with a hint of fusty goat. *This* was the Island of Bliss? The longer she was here, the more she wondered why Shattergirl would come to any part of Yemen.

Despite her boss's claim it was only one little island, Lena had now learned the Socotra archipelago had four small islands just off the Horn of Africa, according to the guide book she'd read on the plane. She had ruled out three of the four islands on the way over, as being too tiny or barren to interest Shattergirl. So that just left this, Socotra's main island, as her likely destination. It had enough of a main town for a guardian to obtain supplies, and also enough isolation to hide out, undisturbed, for as long as she wanted.

Lena made it to the front of the queue and placed her Dazr on the customs official's counter, careful to block anyone else from seeing it. The exotic weapon, by law, always had to be declared at airports, but it was also "need-to-know" only. She slid it next to her global authorization papers and waited.

"What is it?" the Middle Eastern man asked her in heavily accented English.

LEE WINTER

“A Max-fire Dazr. It’s a special gun. It shoots a mesh around a person and holds them for an hour to a day, depending on the setting.”

“Not that,” he grunted. “*That.*”

She followed his gaze to her arm. A curling, deep, parallel set of three scratches spiraled up her forearm.

Lena considered her response. She could hardly say an attack by the mentally unstable Beast Lord. She wasn’t entirely sure whether anyone around here had even heard of Beast Lord. Besides, she was under standing orders not to disabuse commons of the notion guardians were anything but cuddly, safe, and, most especially, sane.

She self-consciously lowered her leather cuff that had ridden up, to hide the scars. “A disagreement with a cooking knife.”

“Three of them?” Disbelief settled on his face.

She blinked at him innocently, shrugged as though she could barely remember the incident, then offered her most winning smile.

Suspicion now radiated from him. The official made a science of shuffling his papers. “Reason for visit?” he barked.

Lena studied his aggressive body language with growing disquiet. She had talked suicidal guardians down from mountain ledges. She’d convinced one who’d threatened to blow up an entire suburb with his creepy lava eyes to instead go to sleep. She simply explained to him that he was really, so very, *very* tired. And he’d just closed his eyes and curled up and slept, right where he was. Yet some pissy customs officer was looking at her like she was selling him a bag of dead squirrels? She clearly needed a holiday; she was losing her touch.

“I’m a writer,” Lena said earnestly. “I hear your island is very beautiful. I plan to give it a big write-up. Lots of eco-tourists will come if I write favorably. That would be great for your economy. And it’d mean more local jobs.”

He gave her a cynical grunt. Their eyes locked for an uncomfortably long silence. Finally, he broke the staring contest and stamped her paperwork, shoving it back. “*This* gets you in.” He tapped her travel authorization from the Facility that made her untouchable at airports the world over. “Not your words. And, so you know, they don’t give these sorts of papers or issue fancy guns to writers. Now go. And get medicine, *sabbh?*” he said, waving a finger towards her arm. “Be more careful with your *knives.*”

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He flicked his gaze over her shoulder. “*TÁLIN!* NEXT!”

Lena swallowed in irritation. It felt like something acidic nesting in her throat given how unused to being doubted she was. She headed moodily for the exit. Definitely needed a holiday.

* * *

Lena needed to bum a ride and a group of newly arrived European scientists looked like a good target. It shouldn't be that hard, Lena decided, as the head scientist turned out to be a tall, Slavic woman with considerable charm and bright eyes that seemed to like what she saw in Lena. Or maybe she was just being friendly.

Her name was Larsen. Anna Larsen. Doctor. They were the only two women in the terminal, so that had broken the ice somewhere between the baggage counter and the walk to the exit.

A little mild flirting never hurt anyone, Lena figured, especially if it got her into town without having to face the flea-bitten car rental counter, and a queue to rent a battered vehicle that looked older than Mrs. Finkel. Given taxis were non-existent, she'd suck it up and try a charm offensive.

She gave the scientist a bright smile and mentally flicked through her small-talk repertoire while she examined her quarry. Larsen was blonde. Legs up to her chin, although she'd wisely hidden them from the locals, who, Lena's travel book noted, comprised devoutly religious goat herders, date farmers, fishermen, and a few enterprising types making the most of the eco-tourism boom as guides and trinket sellers.

Like Lena, Dr. Larsen wore a colorful cotton headscarf.

“You come here often?” Lena asked, voice light, as they matched strides.

“Every chance that I get,” Dr. Larsen replied, reaching for her backpack. She paused, as though examining her curiously over her choice of words. “And this is your first time here.”

“How'd you know?”

“You stopped on the tarmac to stare at the goats.”

“Oh. I guess you're used to them then?”

“You get used to a lot of things out here. For example, soon I am to be enjoying a biosystem that has no match anywhere in the world. It is astonishing. ”

“You study plants?” Lena asked, as the scientist struggled to gather a second and third bag from the collection area. She stepped up to help. “Where to?” Lena asked, indicating the bags.

“My colleague should be waiting outside for our team. And do I ‘study plants’? What a question! What else is there to life but studying plants? Truly, nothing is more important.” Her pale eyebrows lifted, daring Lena to disagree, amusement on her face.

Lena shook her head and gave her an incredulous look. “I’ll have to take your word on that one,” she replied with a laugh. “But mark me down as a skeptic for now.”

They reached a white SUV which contained three men who seemed to be arguing across several different languages. Lena hefted Dr. Larsen’s largest bag into the rear of the vehicle then stepped back as the scientist put the rest of her luggage in.

Lena looked at her hopefully. “Care to give a skeptic a lift into town?” She rammed her hands in her jeans pockets and grinned.

“That depends. Do you think I could convert you on the road to Hadibo? About how plants are the meaning of life? And that is literally the truth by the way.”

“Never know your luck,” Lena said easily. “But, seriously, I wouldn’t hold your breath. Plants are nice enough, but give me a cold beer at the end of the day, and that’s everything I need in life right there.”

“A challenge?” Dr. Larsen teased. “Well, how can I miss this chance to convert an infidel. Yes? Climb in.”

And so Lena found herself with a quartet of scientists heading to some place called 20 Street in Socotra’s main town of Hadibo. The team wanted to stop to pick up supplies before heading off to one of the remote eco-campsites. They were in an animated, nerdy discussion for most of the drive. Lena tuned them out until Larsen, in the front passenger seat, turned to face her.

“We amuse you, do we not?” Her voice was accented, light; the tone curious.

Lena sighed, already over being sociable. But the price for the ride was right, so... She smiled politely. “Not at all.”

Well, it was the truth. Boredom and amusement were poles apart.

“Ah, so we bore you with our fascination.”

Lena met her eyes in the rear mirror, startled.

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“Of course, you are wondering why this dreary topic is so interesting to us. Hmm? So, Lena, do you know what endemism is? Or endemic species?”

“I think I missed that class.” She fidgeted and glanced out the window, hoping Larsen would get the hint.

She did not.

“Endemism,” Dr. Larsen repeated the word appreciatively as though she was savoring a fine wine, “is a species found in one place only. And this island is bursting with hundreds of such species that never spread to the mainland. A third of the plants here you will never see anywhere else on Earth. Out here you can see giant trees that defy gravity. They have bulging trunks and hang off the sides of steep cliffs. The shapes, the roots, the bark, they look very foreign to Western eyes. Socotra is called the most alien-looking place on earth for this reason. It is our scientific mecca and why we are so very excited.”

She paused for a breath and smiled. “Not just us. You should talk to the anthropologists. Many Socotrans ignore Arabic and speak their own tongue, Socotri. It’s ancient, and so poetic and lyrical, but it drives us all to madness.”

“Madness? Why?” Lena asked in spite of herself.

“It has no written form. Imagine it. Try working out place names when every foreigner phonetically guesses at the spelling, each flavored with their own nationality. The result is that everything here has nine or ten or even twenty spelling variations. It makes all the scientists and tourist operators tear at their hair.”

The other scientists laughed in recognition.

“But I’m sure you’ll find that out for yourself,” Dr. Larsen said. “Occupational hazard? *Ja?*”

Lena’s eyebrows shot up.

“I was behind you at Customs. You are a writer?”

“Yes,” Lena said tightly. She turned away again to stare out the window and this time Larsen took the hint.

* * *

The vehicle rumbled past cream-colored sandstone buildings. The storefronts were crumbling and worn, the streets white with sand, and drowning in rubble and dusty piles of trash.

LEE WINTER

Market stalls, wooden structures with a few umbrellas and bright sheets pinned up to shield customers from the sun, were lined along the street. Local men, many with headscarves, milled around in their futas, wraparound, calf-length cotton skirts in colorful checked prints. Several women in longer, ground-scraping skirts and blouses stopped to haggle with the vendor selling chunks of pink, freshly killed, goat meat.

A hotel they rattled past looked in better condition. Its old, arched stone window frames reminded Lena of a style she had seen in Morocco once.

Their vehicle came to a stop and the doors sprang open as eager scientists piled out. The smells instantly assailed her—a mix of spices from a nearby eatery, the dark, earthiness of raw meat, trash which was getting nosed through by stray goats, and more ever-present dust.

Lena jumped out along with the scientists.

“No sightseeing,” Dr. Larsen called to her colleagues. “Get just your essential supplies. We leave for base camp in thirty minutes.”

A boy scampered past in worn jeans, rolled up at the ankles, and a white, short-sleeved shirt. He paused to spin around and pull a silly face at the scientists before running off, his clopping brown feet barely staying inside his overlarge leather sandals.

Lena grinned at the back of his head. *Cheeky.*

She tried to imagine the six-foot-tall Shattergirl striding about this chaotic, dirty street, with her regal bearing and aloof, thousand-yard stare. Even hiding herself under a traditional headscarf, Lena couldn't picture it at all. Which made sense. Who runs away to the most alien backwater on earth and then stays in town? No, Shattergirl would be far from here.

“You could continue on with us,” Dr. Larsen suggested, as she dropped her own backpack on the ground and locked up the vehicle. “You'll see much more beyond the tourist stuff.”

Lena shifted uncomfortably. Her throat constricted at the idea of spending extended time in company. The job was so much cleaner and easier when she didn't have to think about civilians.

“Come,” Dr. Larsen goaded her with a smile. “I promise you no electricity, no shower, no bathroom, no phone reception. What is not to love? You cannot write your masterpiece from Socotra's main street. You may as well be back home.”

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“Maybe later,” Lena suggested diplomatically. “I want to get a feel for the area first. Mix and mingle.”

Dr. Larsen nodded. “Later. When you are tired of civilization, then you come and stay in the one-billion-star hotel. Out there? Under the heavens? *That’s* the real Socotra.”

Lena couldn’t disagree, but she had work to do. She pulled up the Arabic translator app on her FacTrack, gave the scientist a wave, and headed up 20 Street, hoping that at least some of the locals knew one of the new-world languages and not just Socotri.

She strongly doubted her translation device extended to *unwritten* languages.

* * *

After twenty-eight minutes, Lena knew her instincts had been right. The locals she’d spoken to had looked at her like she had two heads when she showed them Shattergirl’s picture and asked if they’d seen her. Only one local woman had said anything useful, and even then it was a tenuous lead at best. Nope, town was not where Lena needed to be.

She ran for the SUV, which was now crammed to the gills with chattering scientists about to head off again.

“So,” Dr. Larsen said, rolling down her window as Lena approached. “You feel daring after all?”

Lena shook her head. “That depends. Where are you going?”

“To Mars.”

“To...Mars?”

“Well, it may as well be.” Dr. Larsen smiled. “We’re off to Homhil Plateau. There’s an eco-camp there, and a few interesting biodiversity clusters among the *Dracaena cinnabari* that Karl is most anxious to get his equipment on.”

Lena stared. “Okay.”

“The dragon blood tree,” Dr. Larsen said. “Around here they use its red sap as a panacea for medical conditions. If you cut the trunk, it bleeds. Violinists prize the resin for varnish. It is also used as toothpaste and—”

“Sorry I asked,” Lena cut in. “But before you go, I wanted to ask about something an old local lady just mentioned. She says Socotra has a

protector, a hermit, who lives in the caves, is a bit scary, makes a lot of noise if people intrude into its space.”

The car exploded into conversations of various accents.

Dr. Larsen gave her a pained look. “You had to start this debate again? Is it real, is it not? Socotra’s Iblis?”

“Iblis?”

“Generically, a genderless devil figure, a smokeless fire. An all-seeing demon.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Socotra’s Iblis, specifically, supposedly rains boulders bigger than buildings down on people disturbing it. We have trouble keeping guides who avoid the area for superstitious reasons.”

“Boulders?” Lena felt a surge of hope. “So it’s real?”

“That depends on who it is you ask,” Dr. Larsen said.

“Where does it live?”

“Again,” Dr. Larsen sighed, “everywhere, nowhere. It’s likely not real. A myth.”

Lena opened her FacTrack and brought up the topography of Socotra. “Looks like most of the caves are in the middle of the island and some are to the east. So can you narrow it down for me? Where does the demon supposedly make the most noise?”

“Central,” came a German accent. A scientist in the back seat behind Dr. Larsen leaned out the window and beckoned to her. “There.” He pointed to an area on her map. “Around the Dixam Plateau. Three main caves around there, next to a wadi.”

Wadi. Lena thought back to her notes she’d read up on the flight. A valley or ravine.

“Most of Socotra’s scientists lose guides around here,” his finger shifted left, “and especially here.” He tapped the screen near a swirl marked “Marshim Cave” and scowled. “I was trying to get to the area last expedition, eight months ago. Never got close. Too many sudden rock falls. Which was not right at all—the area is geologically stable.”

Lena squinted at the sun and tried to get her bearings. “Are you guys going anywhere near there?”

Dr. Larsen shook her head. “No. We’re going east. As you can see, you need to head almost due south. I hope you’re a good hiker.”

“I’m okay.” Lena prided herself on her fitness.

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“You’ll need to be.” Dr. Larsen studied her. “It’s only twenty kilometers, but it’s rugged going once you leave the road.”

Lena nodded.

“One more thing.” Dr. Larsen leaned forward and gave her an intent look. “If you find this Iblis demon, tell it to stop scaring the *dritt* out of the locals. It’s important the work we do and we need their help to do it.”

Lena snorted. “But what if this Iblis has a good reason to scare everyone away?”

“What could be more important than science?” Dr. Larsen seemed genuinely perplexed. “It explains everything that we are. Everything we can be.”

The other scientists murmured in agreement.

Lena avoided her usual sarcastic rejoinder. If they’d seen half the crazy shit she’d seen—things that defied everything these people thought they understood about the natural world—they’d have to rewrite their textbooks. She exhaled. At twenty-six she was way too young to be this jaded.

Lena fixed a smile and stepped back from the vehicle. “Thanks for the ride in. Happy hunting your endemic, ah, things.”

A chorus of multi-accented farewells sounded, and the SUV started and then roared away in a cloud of white dust.

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BY LEE WINTER

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