



RLAKERS
PROMETHEUS
REBOUND

Copyright © 2008-2013 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including the use of information storage and retrieval systems, without express written permission from the copyright owner.

Certain stock imagery © iStockphoto.

Cover design and internal design © 2013 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

The ODC Roundel circle/star design is trademark and service mark of The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

All Art of War quotations come from the 1910 translation by Lionel Giles, which is public domain in the United States and other applicable countries and/or territories.

All Ronald Reagan quotations come from transcripts of public speeches.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions, establishments, places, events, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and/or are used fictitiously. Events or situations described in this book with reference to real locations, institutions, establishments, and/or actual living persons are historical, merely coincidental, and/or fictionalized with the intent to provide the reader with a sense of reality and authenticity.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid, without knowledge of the author or publisher. The author and publisher claim no rights in, and expressly disclaim any liability potentially arising from, the accessing and/or use of any referenced websites. Neither the author nor the publisher guarantees, approves, or endorses the information, products, and/or services available on such websites, nor does any reference to any website indicate any association with, or endorsement by, the author or publisher.

First Printing, October 2013

ISBN-13: 978-1492701439

ISBN-10: 1492701432

To all those who have sacrificed
in service to their nation.

Many of us dream of being heroes.
You *are* heroes.

Day 1,529 of Incarceration

Med Bay 5, Bunker 18-B, Groom Lake Facility

37°15'04" N, 115°49'26" W – Elev. 4,284 feet

(178 feet below ground)

The room is stark, sterile. Row upon row of 4-inch white tiles cover each wall, stretching from floor to ceiling. The floor itself is waxed to a high shine. Medical machines line the periphery, beeping, whirring, blinking, and an analog clock reads 10:27. Everything is white.

The patient perches at the center of the room.

Stock-still, sitting on the very edge of the small bed, the patient stares at the floor... then explodes into motion.

Immediately, alarms begin blaring. The figure rips a device from the wall, pauses, then drops it before speeding towards the entrance in an ungainly lope. Throwing up spindly arms, the patient crashes into the door at speed and bursts through into the hallway beyond.

The alarms continue, unabated.

The patient yells, incoherent. One long white hallway leads to another, and a sharp right turn reveals still another. But this hallway is occupied.

Two burly forms collide with the fleeing figure, clamping hands around arms to prevent struggle. But struggle persists as the patient is marched back to that stark, sterile room. Struggle continues even as the thrashing form is ultimately strapped to the bed with wide leather cuffs.

Then all falls motionless as the patient spies the needle: a long silvery hypodermic joined to a glass syringe, brimming with some cloudy substance. The contents of that syringe spell death.

The patient's effort intensifies then, head jerking back and forth, even as the needle is forcibly injected. Slowly but surely, the effects become obvious. Eyelids droop, motions become jerky. But with one final, monumental exertion, the creature rips one arm free of the band encircling it.

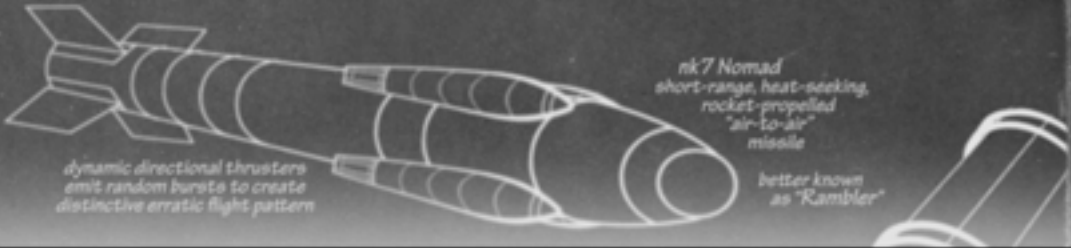
Pausing just out of reach, the attendant leans over the supine form, momentarily transfixed by startling blue eyes set in an ashen face. Even as those lids tremble, the piercing eye contact is

maintained, and the patient manages to raise a three-fingered hand.

“The Nymph.” The words come out as a croak, barely decipherable. “Tell him it’s the Nymph.” Then the eyes roll up, and the fingers slacken. A wadded ball of paper drops from their grip. The doctor arrives, and the procedure begins under the observation of two military officers. Twenty minutes later, the one known as KLINE stops breathing.

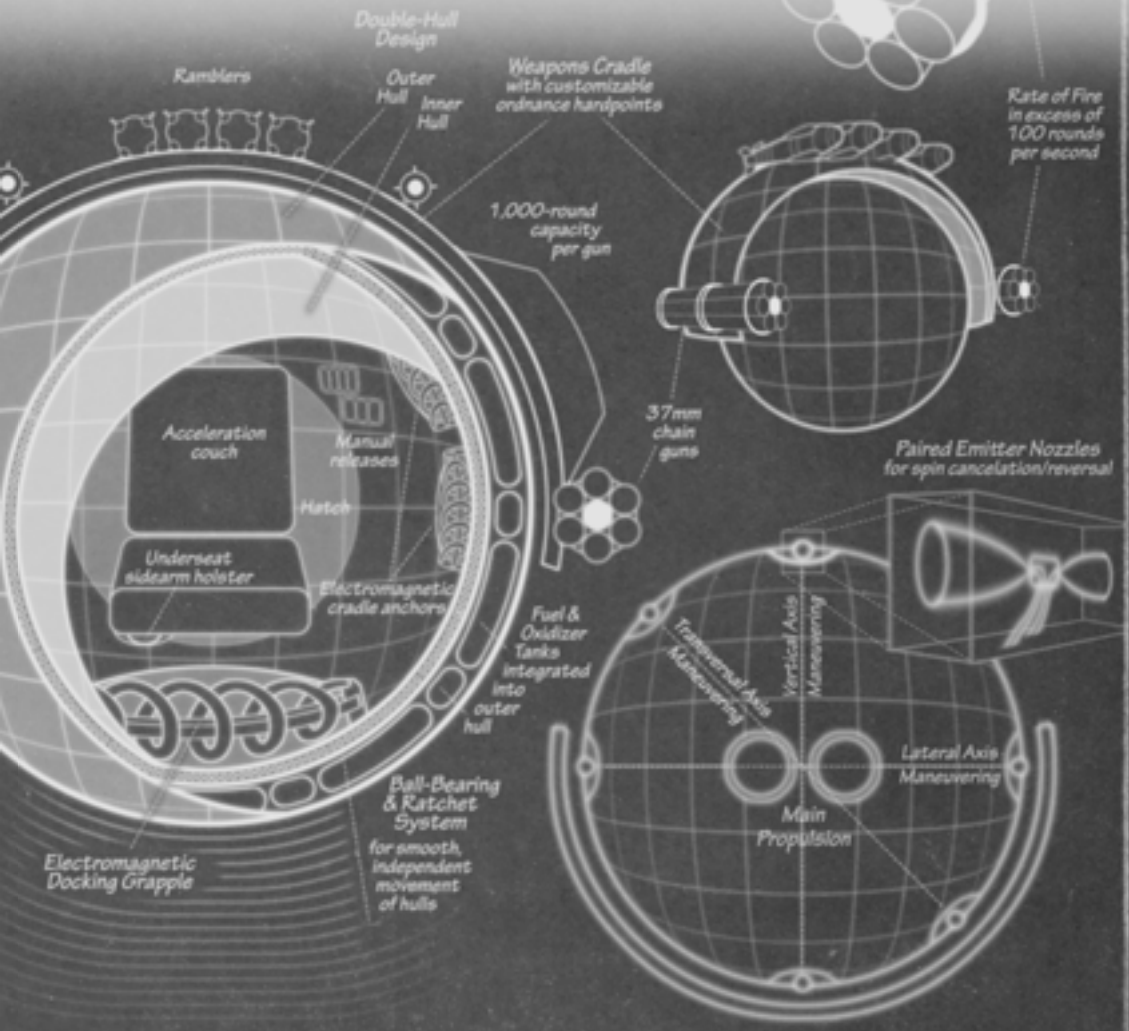
Standing to the side in that stark, sterile room, the older of the two uniformed figures smoothes out the wadded paper... and nearly stops breathing as well.

This paper contains the key to everything.



BOOK ONE

CULTIVATION



Revision 1.42a
Logged 6-20-84

The V-Series DESTRIER

All warfare is based on deception

~ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*,
sometime between the
4th and 6th centuries B.C.

I couldn't help but say to [General Secretary Gorbachev], just think how easy his task and mine might be in these meetings that we held if suddenly there was a threat to this world from some other species, from another planet, outside in the universe. We'd forget all the little local differences that we have between our countries, and we would find out once and for all that we really are all human beings here on this Earth together.

~ Ronald Reagan
Fallston, Maryland
December 4, 1985

Friday morning
February 7, 2014

“They’re going to kill you.”

Kara almost misses a step. In disbelief, she pulls the cell phone away from her ear, double-checks that she doesn’t recognize the number. “Who is this?”

“This is a friend,” the earnest voice says. *“You have to listen—”*

“I’m hanging up now.” Kara doesn’t mind a good prank, but this is just tasteless.

“No wait! This is Kara Dunn, right? Project lead on Rampant?”

“Who is this?” she demands again. Obviously this isn’t just a random prank; the caller knows her.

“You and your friend are in terrible danger. They’re all around you, they could—”

“Goodbye,” she says firmly and ends the call.

“Who was that?” Viviane asks.

Kara shrugs uneasily. “Prank call.”

The two women are in the midst of their morning run, on a wooded trail in a park not far from the townhouse they share. Usually Kara revels in being outdoors, but suddenly the trees all around seem ominous in the predawn light.

A branch snaps and she jumps, glancing behind her. Oh. Just another runner, about thirty yards back. Bright green warmup jacket—same guy they overtook a few minutes ago.

Viviane gives her an odd look. “What’s got into you? Something about that call?”

Kara brushes it off. “It’s nothing.” She loves Viviane like a sister, but the younger woman can be a bit of a drama queen. The last thing she needs is to think they’re in some sort of danger.

Shoving the phone back in her pocket, Kara retrieves a hair elastic and tries to put it to good use. She’d recently started wearing her dark hair short, and she’s mostly happy with that

decision, except that it's so much harder to keep out of her face now.

Her phone rings, and she barely stops herself from jumping again. Same number. With a grimace, she cancels the call unanswered.

"Paul?" Viviane guesses, angling for a look at the phone, which Kara turns away.

"What makes you say that?"

Viviane shrugs. "I don't know. You always frown like that when Paul calls. Ever since you broke up, I mean."

Kara snorts a laugh. Yes, Paul had been annoyingly insistent in the weeks since she ended things, hoping to patch things up with her. All he'd accomplished was to blow rapidly through what goodwill she still felt for him.

The obvious question occurs to her: Could her ex be the one behind this stupid prank call? It must be *someone* who knows her, and Paul's taste in movies certainly evidenced a love for the cloak-and-dagger stuff.

"Well anyway," Viviane says conversationally, launching back into the monologue she'd been in the midst of when the strange call came. "Taylor and Dane are back at it again. You'd think they were salesmen working on commission, not fundraisers on the same team. But Jenny was telling me last week..."

Try as she might, Kara can't stay focused on Viviane. Usually she appreciates the mostly one-side exchange while they run. Great exercise or not, running is torture; having Viviane along, with her never-ending store of the latest gossip, keeps that torture bearable. But at the moment, that strange call continues to occupy her thoughts.

As if on cue, the phone tweedles, this time indicating receipt of a text message. With a sigh, she pulls it up. Same number. *itll happen today. u wont leave park alive*

A chill runs through her. This prankster actually knows where she is right now? That's creepy.

Another tweedle: *tall man, green jacket. hes one of them. killer. waiting for the right place to do it*

This time Kara *does* miss a step, stumbling forward until she catches her balance again.

Viviane stares at her. "You sure you're okay?"

“Yeah, fine,” she lies, pulling herself together. Again, there’s no question of whether to tell Viviane what’s going on. The girl would freak.

Viviane takes her reassurance at face value and picks up again in midsentence, while Kara slowly turns to glance over her shoulder. The man in the green jacket is still there, about the same distance behind. Unintentionally, she catches the man’s eye and, not knowing what else to do, gives him an uncertain smile and wave over her shoulder. For the longest moment, he doesn’t react, but then he waves back, just as uncertainly.

This is ridiculous. It’s gotta be some sort of elaborate prank. *I don’t believe you*, she texts back at her unknown caller, finding the little buttons difficult to hit while running. Disbelieving or not, she anxiously awaits his response, even as Viviane transitions into a tirade about her supervisor’s lack of managerial talent.

Tweedle. try to loose him. green jacket. youll see. blue shirt will take his place

Kara thinks about it for a moment. The whole thing is absurd, and yet... a new suspicion takes root. *If* this isn’t a prank, *if* this isn’t Paul or one of his friends, then maybe it’s not about Kara at all. Maybe this is about Viviane.

She gazes surreptitiously at her closest friend. Shorter and slimmer than Kara, but with the same coloring—fair skin, blue eyes, chestnut hair worn long—Viviane has sometimes been confused for her younger sister. Her far *prettier* younger sister.

Then again, maybe it’s about Viviane’s dad. Although Kara’s never met the man—Viviane’s relationship with him is very strained—Kara knows that her friend’s father is a very important, very powerful figure in the military. Is it possible someone might attack or kidnap Viviane to get to him?

The hair slowly stands up on the back of Kara’s neck. Yes, that sounds quite plausible, much more likely than Kara being targeted herself.

Coming to a decision, she stops abruptly, dropping to one knee and pulling loose her left shoe’s laces in a fairly smooth motion. “Hold up a second,” she says to her friend, impressed at her own level tone. She repositions herself a little as she begins retying, so she can keep Green Jacket in her peripheral vision.

Her tension grows steadily as he approaches, and there's no need to pretend to have trouble with the laces—the fumbling comes quite naturally. The man draws level with them...

And tosses them a friendly smile on his way past. Kara stares after the guy, momentarily forgetting her shoelaces.

“Um, Kara?” Viviane says from where she jogs in place, keeping up her rhythm.

“Huh? Oh. Right.” She returns to her laces, remembering belatedly what that last text had said: *blue shirt will take his place*. Of course. Even if Green Jacket was stalking them, he couldn't simply have stopped, not unless he wanted to attack them here; it would have been too suspicious.

Making a frustrated sound, Kara pulls out her knot again and restarts, taking painstaking care as she glances back the way she came. Nothing. She looks left and then right again. Green Jacket is almost out of sight around the bend, but no one new has come up behind them. Kara finishes the one shoe, then goes ahead and re-ties the other, taking plenty of time to double-knot, giving the universe plenty of time to produce someone in a blue shirt. Viviane makes impatient noises all the while, but in the end, Kara is satisfied—and relieved. This is just someone messing with them. As she returns to her feet and the women set off again, she strings together a few choice words for Paul and his games. Just in case it's him.

But almost immediately, she hears the sound of footfalls behind her. Her dread returns in an instant as she turns to glance over her shoulder. Short guy, muscular build. Blue shirt.

Kara gulps.

Tweedle: *told u so*

Kara struggles to think. This whole thing is outlandish. *Surely* someone is just having fun at her expense. Someone here in the park with her; he's watching her... he can see Green Jacket and Blue Shirt running near her... that doesn't make them killers.

She fumbles out a return text: *They don't look like killers*.

The phone tweedles back almost instantly: *guns in fanny packs*

Kara blinks, glances back over her shoulder. Sure enough, the guy's wearing a big honking fanny pack. Large, unstylish, and

obviously heavy, judging by the lack of bounce. And as she thinks about it, she realizes Green Jacket had one too.

What do I do? she texts, then jerks away as she realizes Viviane is trying to read her screen.

“Please,” Viviane begs her sincerely, “*please* tell me you’re not getting back together with Paul.”

“Huh? Why do you say that?”

“That’s like a dozen texts in a minute. You never talk to anyone else that way.”

“Yeah. No. I mean—” Kara makes a sound of frustration. “Just... sorry, I can’t text and talk at the same time.”

Viviane seems to accept this explanation, even though she herself never has difficulty doing exactly that.

Tweedle: u know the old stone bridg?

Yes, Kara texts back.

loose blue shirt and meet me there. they wont make a move not yet

Ok, she texts back.

The old stone bridge, one of her favorite places in the park. The path splits maybe half a mile ahead, the main trail continuing on while the branching trail meets a small stream soon after. Considering the low volume of water involved, the bridge is extreme overkill, but it’s quaint and fun. The sort of place couples go to get their pictures taken.

Half a mile to the branch... that means Kara has about five minutes to decide whether to go through with this.

“Viviane...” she says slowly, interrupting her friend’s characterization of the new grantwriter her agency just hired.

“When was the last time you talked with your dad?”

The non-sequiter obviously surprises the other woman, and she’s a moment responding. “Um. Yesterday.”

Kara blinks. “Yesterday?” It’s so rare that they talk, after all.

“Yeah. Twice.” She adopts a hurt look—the one that usually arises when her father comes up in conversation. “He called to say he’d be in town today. Wanted to take me to dinner, meet Gregoire finally.”

Despite the scary uncertainty of the present situation, this stokes Kara’s curiosity. “You finally told him about Gregoire?”

Viviane scowls. “*No*. But Daddy doesn’t need to talk to me to find out whatever he wants. Super spy Air Force general has other ways of getting info. He already knew about Greg.” She pauses. “Seemed hurt I hadn’t told him myself, though.”

“Well, you guys *have* been dating... what, six months now?” Viviane doesn’t answer. “You say you talked twice?”

“Yeah, he called back last night. To *cancel*,” she spits out the word. “I could’ve told you that would happen. But he was ‘so sorry.’ Turned into another *long* apology about all the times he wasn’t there for me,” she says bitterly. “Another *long* explanation about how everything he does, it’s really about me. How I’m the center of his world. How his purpose in life is to protect me.”

Kara frowns. She’s heard all this before, and it really does sound like the excuses of a man who failed spectacularly as a father... but what if there *is* something to it? Something more than ‘making the world a better place,’ something more along the lines of trying to protect Viviane specifically?

The turnoff to the bridge isn’t far. If Viviane really is at some risk, following the instructions of this strange caller might save her friend’s life. And if it really is just a joke? At worst, it’ll mean some laughs at Kara’s expense. Boiled down like that, it really isn’t a difficult choice.

As they approach the fork, Kara refreshes herself on the lay of the land and plans her move. The bridge path branches off to the right, after which the main path takes a rise and bends shortly thereafter into a thick copse of trees. Yes, this will be perfect.

Kara deliberately bypasses the branch and runs a dozen yards before stumbling, clutching at her calf. Viviane catches her arm and helps her a few steps further, lowering her to the ground. Blue Shirt is on them almost instantly. “Everything okay?” he asks with apparent concern.

Swallowing hard, Kara forces a smile. “Sure, fine. Just a cramp.”

The man wavers. “Anything I can do for you? It’d be no trouble.”

“Nope!” Kara says brightly. “I just need a couple minutes. We’ll be fine, thanks.”

“Okay, he says,” and continues along the main path.

Kara waits until the man takes the turn out of sight, then waits another two seconds before leaping to her feet. “C’mon!” she says to her friend with quiet, forced enthusiasm. “Let’s go this way.” She drags her friend back to the branch, as quietly as possible, ignoring Viviane’s blessedly silent bewilderment. Taking the turn, she goes into an all-out sprint, and Viviane is forced to do the same. And there, finally, is the bridge.

With a finger to her lips, Kara grabs Viviane and guides her off the path, down to the stream, and then under the bridge. They settle onto the dry leaves, backs to the underside of the arch, Viviane automatically mimicking Kara’s quiet movements.

“What the heck are we doing?” Viviane hisses, uncertain whether to be amused or confused.

“Hiding!” Kara hisses back even softer. She casts around for an explanation, a story, anything she can say to make this make sense. “We’re... playing hide and seek. With a friend of mine.”

Viviane just stares at her like she’s crazy, but then her lip twitches, and Kara knows the other woman is amused enough to play along for a while.

A thought occurs to her, and she pulls out her phone to mute it, motioning for Viviane to do the same. And then there’s the sound of footfalls approaching quickly, someone else in an all-out sprint. They pound down the path the women just left, then onto the bridge above them before coming to a sudden stop. Silence then, followed by short bursts of stomping—Kara guesses the person must be running back and forth on the bridge above them, using it as a good vantage to search the woods all around.

A voice speaks, so softly she can’t make out the words. The sound comes and goes, intermittently, and it takes her a few moments to realize she’s just barely hearing one side of a hushed phone conversation. Then the footsteps are pounding again, back the direction they came, eventually fading away to nothing.

Heart thudding, Kara turns to look at Viviane. The other girl gives her a questioning look, as if asking how much longer they need to huddle in this uncomfortable position.

“A little longer,” Kara replies softly. She’s about to say more, but then the dry leaves are rustling nearby, almost right on top of them. Eyes wide, Kara looks around for something, anything to defend herself with—

And a man steps casually into view—someone new, not either of the men who may or may not have been following her. He takes in the sight of the two women, scrunched up beneath the bridge, and smiles. “Kara Dunn?” he asks.

Kara moves out where there’s more room and straightens, approaching the man cautiously. “Yes...” she says slowly. “Are you the person who called me?”

The man gives her a warm smile, and she can’t help but smile back, a little of the tension easing out of her shoulders. And then there’s a gun in his hand, rising up to point at her.

Everything happens quickly after that. Viviane gives a bloodcurdling scream, jumps up and cracks her skull into the bridge above her, and collapses without another sound. The gun comes level with Kara’s head, letting her look straight down its barrel. And the man’s finger tightens on the trigger, even as his smile turns decidedly ugly.

Then his body is spinning, to the left, to the right, back to the left again, before he finally crumples, his prone form coming to rest near Viviane’s.

And through it all, Kara remains frozen in place, unable to move or speak.



The bicycle cop finishes reading through the text messages on Kara’s phone, then chews his lip thoughtfully for a moment. Raising a radio to his lips, he contacts a colleague elsewhere in the park. “Check back along the main path, maybe in the parking lot. We’re looking for a male suspect, Caucasian, bright green warm-up jacket.” He eyes Kara as he says this, catches her confirming nod. “Also another male Caucasian, blue t-shirt. Short—you’d say, what five-six? Five-seven?” Another nod. “That match anyone there?”

The radio isn’t silent for long. “*I see them, both suspects.*” “Understood. Over.” Kara’s cop returns the radio to a clip on his chest. “They’ll take the men into custody and bring them here, if possible.” He pauses, giving her a measuring look. “You sure you’re okay?”

Kara, trembling beneath a blanket, is most definitely *not* okay. But at least she's doing better than Viviane; true to form, the younger woman had outshone Kara from the moment she awoke. Even now, she has all three of the EMTs looking after her. Of course, she'd actually sustained a real injury—unlike Kara who, despite years of martial arts training, froze up completely.

Unbidden, her eyes turn yet again to the still form beneath the sheet. Looking down the barrel of that gun, she'd thought it was all over. It was only the greatest stroke of luck that this cop had come biking past at that exact moment and, seeing a woman about to be shot, had responded with instant, lethal force.

Not that she'd believed it at first. The timing was a little too coincidental, and the situation had already driven Kara to the edge of paranoia. But she'd called 911 and they'd confirmed he was a real cop. Only then had her heart rate begun to slow a little... and that was when the trembling started. The ambulance hadn't been long in arriving after that. They'd provided the blanket and set to work on reviving Viviane.

"I'm fine," Kara tells the cop unconvincingly, forcing a smile.

"Can you think of any reason someone would want to hurt you or your friend?" he asks. "Do you have any enemies?"

She shakes her head. "No. Of course not—enemies?" She laughs weakly. "Who actually has enemies in the real world?"

"Tell me about that first phone call again," he says, handing the phone back to her. "Walk through what he said, and what you said, step by step."

To the best of her ability, she does so.

"What's this about 'rampant'?" he asks. "What's that?"

"It's a video game. Released last year."

He shows no sign of recognition. Of course. "So you're a video game developer?"

She sighs. "I was. It was just a short thing. I'm back here now, teaching at the university. Finishing up my PhD."

"And you can't think of anything—something connected with your work or any projects you've been on—a reason for someone to attack you."

She shakes her head yet again, at a loss.

“Well, I’ll be interested to hear what your alleged stalkers have to say for themselves.”

Interestingly, the two men—when they arrive handcuffed and escorted by two more cops—exhibit nothing but shock at the suggestion they were involved in an attack. A search of their fanny packs reveals nothing suspicious; Blue Shirt has a nice camera with telephoto lens, while Green Jacket is carrying a veritable pantry of snacks to keep his blood sugar within acceptable ranges. The two are such unlikely criminals that even Kara begins to doubt they were anything more than fellow runners. The cops eventually cut them loose.

And then sit her down to explain the great unlikelihood of an elaborate conspiracy against her.

“But you read the texts!” Kara says, lowering her voice. Viviane is absorbed with the ministrations of the EMTs, and Kara doesn’t want to draw her attention. “So maybe those guys weren’t involved. But someone *did* attack us, just like this guy warned me!” She shakes her phone to indicate the mysterious caller.

The cop exchanges a look with his fellows, then smiles apologetically at her. As if embarrassed that she’s missing the obvious. “Miss Dunn... if you would, try calling your anonymous friend back.”

Frowning, she does as she’s told. A moment later, a phone starts ringing—from beneath the sheet where the dead body hides. She can’t help but turn crimson from embarrassment.

“See?” The cop says gently. “No conspiracy. Just one guy. He convinced you to leave the main path—which gets a lot more traffic—and meet him here, where he could attack you without anyone around.”

Kara buries her face in her hands. “How could I be so stupid?” There’s an awkward silence. “But why? Why would he attack me?”

“I think we’ve established there’s no reason why anyone would want to attack you. Some people are just sick. But Miss Dunn...” He waits until she looks up. “The important thing to remember is that you’re safe now. As terrible as it is, this man can’t hurt you anymore. And since he was acting alone, you can go back to your normal life without any fear.”

She swallows past the lump in her throat. And this time, she succeeds in keeping her gaze away from the body. “You’re right.”

The cop gives her a brilliant smile. “But I *do* hope you’ve learned your lesson. There’s safety in numbers. If you ever have any concern that someone is following you or wants to hurt you, get to a public place and stay there. Call the police if need be. That’s what we’re here for.”

“Of course. And...” She abruptly feels like an even bigger fool. Here this man saved her life, coming out of nowhere at exactly the right moment and taking an incredible shot, and she has yet to even thank him. “Officer, thank you *so much*.” Her lip trembles.

“My pleasure,” he says, his smile growing. “Again, it’s what we’re here for.”

One of the other cops returns, a reserved Viviane trailing after him. “Ma’am, if you’ll come with me, I’ll give you a ride home.”

Kara nods her appreciation, throwing a blanketed arm over Viviane as they follow him to his cruiser. It’s only as she’s climbing into the back of the car that a discordant thought strikes her. If her attacker truly had been working alone, then who was it that had come chasing after her, stomping around on the bridge trying to figure out where she and Viviane had gone? Or did that have nothing to do with their adventure today?



The bike cop helps muscle the body into the back of the ambulance, then climbs inside with two of the EMTs before pulling the doors closed. For a long moment, no one speaks. Then:

“That was close.”

“Way too close,” the ersatz cop agrees.

More silence. All three men give a start when the door opens of its own accord, admitting the short man in the blue shirt, who closes the door behind him. He eyes them for a moment. “Guess I’m off the team now.” He grimaces. “Sorry, guys.”

Ignoring the newcomer, one of the EMTs growls, “How long is he gonna let this go on?”

The cop can only shake his head. “He puts way too much faith in her ability to protect herself. Obviously.”

“No,” Blue Shirt disagrees, taking a deep breath and letting some of his frustration bleed out as he exhales. “He’s protecting her, not just from this kind of thing”—he indicates the body—“but from the truth of what’s going on. He’ll keep her in the dark as long as possible, for her own good.”

“But what *is* the truth?” the other EMT demands. “Why is this one woman so important?”

The cop sighs. “I wish I knew. But that’s the old man for you. Always plays it close to the vest.” He clears his throat, then leans forward to unzip the bag and reveal the assassin. “Come on, let’s get to work.”

Friday evening
February 7, 2014

“Can I sit here?”

Skylar McClinic looks up from the window with an amused frown. “I don’t know, can you?”

The man standing in the aisle—a major, according to his lapel insignia—flashes a big grin. “Yes, ma’am. Seating assignments don’t mean much on the Dreamland Express—it’s more like riding the school bus than the commercial flights you’re used to.”

Which makes sense. This *isn’t* a commercial flight. More of a commuter trip, though she still can’t believe a single Air Force installation has the personnel to fill up an entire 737 for a daily commute between here and Vegas.

Of course, Skylar’s response had been as much a commentary on the man’s poor grammar as a question of seating assignment, but she lets it go, waving him toward the seat next to her.

“So,” he says, eyes dancing with humor and energy. “First week here? Whaddya think so far?”

Skylar gives the man a closer look, only belatedly recognizing him as one of the other pilots she met this week—one of maybe fifty. “Sorry... remind me...?”

“Barrett Williams, ma’am.” He grows suddenly solemn. “I’m the chief morale officer for this unit. Whether you’re looking for a good laugh, or maybe some of the good stuff smuggled on-base, I’m your—”

“You’re so full of crap, Twix.” This from a petite blonde woman as she collapses into the seat on Barrett’s other side. The newcomer doesn’t even look over, just slumps down and eyes the other passengers as they file aboard.

Barrett hooks a thumb at his new neighbor. “And that’s Anna Haynes—Sweeps—my better half.” Haynes snorts, but offers no confirmation or denial.

Skylar has no trouble remembering Haynes. She's already had half a dozen encounters with the pilot, whose attitude consistently teetered on the knife's edge of disrespect. "Better half?" Skylar questions.

"Nah, not really," Barrett assures her. After all, there are regulations against that sort of thing. "She keeps trying, though." He lowers his voice confidentially. "Been chasin' me for years—" He breaks off with a grunt, no doubt the result of his better half's elbow inserted into his ribs.

Skylar gives them a noncommittal smile and pulls out a paperback novel.

"Well?" the dark-skinned man persists, giving no indication that his chattiness will soon abate. "What do you think of our operation, Colonel?"

Skylar isn't a full-bird colonel, of course, just a lieutenant colonel. But considering what a mouthful that rank is, a simple 'colonel' is considered appropriate address. "I don't know..." she says, glancing around at all the other people filing onto the plane. "I hardly think this is something we should be discussing here."

Barrett shrugs but plows right on, though he *does* lower his voice. "Let me see if I can guess. You were personally recruited by one Carl Grant, brigadier general, who said you'd have the chance to change the world. He was skimpy on the details, but when you found out the posting was *here*, you figured you'd be a test pilot. You'd be flyin' stuff like the SR-71, the Stealth fighter, 'cept *better*—stuff no one's heard of yet. The newest, top secret-est tech. And you thought, heck *yeah*, baby, sign me up!"

Skylar can't help but crack a smile. "I take it that was your experience?"

He shrugs. "Somethin' like that. Then we get here"—he seems to encompass Haynes in this—"and it's all simulators. Then more simulators. And I betcha next week is gonna be..." He turns to his friend. "Did you hear what they've got scheduled for next week? Oh, simulators? Oh, okay." He turns back to Skylar. "More simulators."

"Well, it's a space combat sim—unless they ship you to orbit, simulator's about your only option."

"Hey, space is cool," Barrett insists. "I don't mind shippin' to space."

“But I’m sure they’ve got other stuff in development here,” Skylar continues. “One way or another, they’ll get us into a real cockpit soon enough.”

Barrett’s brows rise. “They tell you that? ‘Cause I’m just sayin’, four years of doin’ this now, I’m ready for somethin’ diff’rent.”

Skylar’s eyes pop a little. “Four years?”

“Yep. Same project, the whole time.” He shrugs. “Changed simulators a couple years ago—this one’s much better—but even that’s pretty dull by now.”

“Plus,” Haynes breaks in, “Peterson can’t script missions worth—” This time she’s the one that grunts as Barrett’s elbow digs into *her* ribs. Which is just as well. Everything about this project—about this whole military installation—may be unorthodox, but Skylar can’t sit by and listen to her subordinates badmouth general officers without taking disciplinary action.

“You know the crazy thing?” Barrett says hurriedly. He drops his voice further. “It’s not even secret.”

“What’s not?”

“What we’re doing, these simulators we spend so much time on? It’s just a video game.”

“I know it seems that way—” Skylar begins.

“No, I mean *really*. An actual commercial video game. You can pick it up for fifty bucks at any gaming shop. Or online. Tompkins’ mom actually bought him a copy for Christmas.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Our hardware’s better,” Barrett admits. “*Much* better. But the *software* is exactly the same. Even the mission editor Peterson uses—*General* Peterson,” he amends. “He uses the same mission editor that was packaged with the game.” He turns to Haynes, snapping his fingers impatiently. “What’s it called again? The game?”

“*Rampant*,” she replies disinterestedly.

Skylar feels a sinking sensation. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, ma’am, it doesn’t.” Despite the tone of Barrett’s complaint, his eyes are still dancing; he obviously enjoys sharing gossip with someone new. “Commercially available video game, released in the last year—but we had it at least a year *before* that.

A full squadron of pilots drilling on this software, every day since then—that ain't cheap. People cost, equipment, facilities usage, the fact that we're based *here* of all places... Air Force is *pourin'* money on this thing. So what gives?"

Skylar wishes she knew. Barrett's description of Skylar's recruitment was pretty much spot-on, except that she and her long-time associate—Col. John McLaughlin—had come as a package deal. But Barrett was right about her excitement, her sense of anticipation. In some people's minds, the words "test pilot" might equate with "crash test dummy," but for her it meant flying the latest and greatest in cutting edge tech. Of course, her first week here had been nothing but sims—that and introductions to the pilots she and John would be working with—but that hadn't fazed her. Obviously the real work would be coming.

But now she wonders.

At the nose of the plane, John comes into view, one of the last passengers to board. Maybe John knows more. After all, as a full colonel himself, John is now the top-ranking pilot in Grant and Peterson's outfit. And though he probably *shouldn't* share what he knows, he and Skylar have been flying together for years. Skylar was in the man's wedding, for crying out loud; he'd better share what he knows.

Skylar exhales and leans back, trying to expunge this sudden concern that she's made a terrible career move. Trying to remember to relax, that this commute marks the beginning of her weekend leave, a chance to relax after a very long week.

"I think it's safe to say something's coming," Haynes pipes up. "Drills may be same as ever, but the number of pilots has doubled this year. I'd say someone's ramping up for something."

"Maybe they *will* ship us out to space," Barrett adds wistfully. "Wouldn't that be somethin'?"

**Monday morning
February 10, 2014**

“Wednesday’s assignment is in your syllabus,” Kara says, wrapping up the lecture. “At the very least, the program you turn in has to compile and provide the specified output. But feel free to get creative—that’s a great way to bring your grade up.”

A hand goes up. “You mean like extra credit?”

She gives a wry smile. “No. As I explained in our first session, when you meet the minimum requirements, I will award you the minimum satisfactory grade—a C.” There are the usual groans, but she pushes through. “If that’s what you want to shoot for, that’s fine. For most of you, this class is just a requirement; only a few of you will choose to major, so I won’t expect you to prioritize this class. But if you want an A, you’ll have to impress me.”

“Seriously?” someone calls. “I have to do *extra* work just to get an A?”

“You’re not in high school anymore.”

“But—”

“You still have a week to drop my class, but I’m not going to argue this with you.”

“Dr. Dunn,” someone calls from the back of the lecture hall, waving another hand. “I have a question.”

Kara sighs. “Remember, just ‘Kara’ is fine. I’m a grad student, not a professor. As I’ve already explained.” It always amazes her, the frequency with which she has to repeat certain things during the first few weeks of a new class.

“Oh,” her questioner says, momentarily diverted. “I just added the class.” He pauses, confused. “So... you don’t have a PhD?”

“Nope. I’m about three-quarters done with two different doctorates—one in CS, one in Physics—but unfortunately that doesn’t add up to a full degree.” This draws a few overly-enthusiastic laughs. “What was your question?”

“Well, I’ve been all the way through your syllabus—”

“Oh, so someone *did* read it,” she says with a grin. More overly-enthusiastic laughs.

“—and it doesn’t say anything about video games.”

Kara frowns. “Why would it?”

The student seems surprised. “Well, um, this is a programming class. Eventually you’ll be teaching us to make games, right? You know, flight simulators, 3D shooters, that sorta thing.”

Kara can’t help but laugh. “No, that ‘sorta thing’ is outside the scope of an intro programming class. And it’s not the kind of programming most developers do anyway.”

A different hand goes up. “But isn’t that what *you* do for a living? I mean, that’s the whole reason I chose to take this class, because you’re teaching it.”

Kara’s smile fades. “You’re talking about *Rampant*?” The kid nods, and a number of other students perk up. “Yes, I was project lead on the team that developed *Rampant* for DactiSoft. After the game released last summer, I returned here to finish up my degree. Degrees,” she amends. “At the moment, I teach for a living.” And, fortunately, collect on scholarships, since the pay offered to grad assistants is hardly stellar.

A student on the front row gives her a winning smile. “So maybe this class isn’t about gaming, but you could still show us some stuff, right?”

She’d gone through this same thing with her intro class last fall, right after she’d returned. She never anticipated becoming famous making video games—especially a quasi-educational one that did poorly in the marketplace—but somehow word had gotten out on campus all the same. At least it had enrollment figures up for the intro class, but as far as her department chair was concerned, that was the only positive to come out of Kara’s stint with DactiSoft.

She sighs. “When I said video game programming was outside the scope of this class, I meant that it requires a skillset far beyond what you’ll develop here. If you choose to major, some of the upper level classes might introduce you to the concepts you’d need, but even then, you’re not going to take on any large-scale video game projects. Maybe some card games, board games. Probably nothing 3D.”

“Why not?” Smiley asks.

“Because of the sheer amount of effort involved in creating that kind of game. Not just programming, but testing as well. I managed a team of forty at DactiSoft, and it took us three years to put out *Rampant*.”

“Then what’s the point of this class?”

“To give you a foundation for software development. Upper-level courses will build on that foundation. And if you graduate with a comp sci degree, you can apply for programming jobs. Yes”—she staves off the predictable questions—“maybe you get hired by a game developer, though competition is stiff. But there are plenty of other rewarding careers out there. Like I said, most programmers do *not* write video games for a living.”

A girl in the second row asks, “When you finish your doctorate, are you going back to game development?”

Kara’s wry smile returns. “I think it’s safe to say that I’m done with video games.”

Judging by the number of disappointed faces, Kara’s guessing she’ll be getting ten or fifteen drop notifications before Wednesday’s session rolls around.

“I think that’s all for today,” she concludes. “Remember that I keep office hours from now until 11:30, so feel free to drop by. That’s Matthews 328, upstairs.”

The students file out, except for that girl from the second row. Kara wracks her brain for a moment, eventually coming up the girl’s name: Calin. Calin Tennison. This is now the third week of class, but Calin had already followed her back to her office twice before, peppering her with questions about programming and, well, anything else she could come up with. Each time, Calin had clearly struggled to keep the conversation afloat, which tells Kara the girl’s attention is probably less about interest in the subject and more about making an impression; out of a class of a hundred, she’s hoping Kara will specifically remember her, and perhaps, reward her interest with a better grade.

Kara stifles a smile as she finishes packing up. These students arrive from high school, and they think they’ve got the game all figured out; they have no idea just how transparent they are.

Of course, after what Kara survived over the weekend, student antics don't bother her nearly as much today as usual; though Calin follows her all the way back to the third floor, jabbering the whole way and then another half hour after reaching Kara's office, Kara manages to avoid rolling her eyes. Much.

Eventually, though, she has to kick the girl out, office hours or not. She has far too much work to do on her dissertation as it is, and conversation had long since turned from software development to other matters.

"No, it's okay! The girl says brightly. I completely understand. I'll just be here in the lab." She points, as if Kara doesn't know that the glass-enclosed undergraduate computer lab is situated across the hall from her tiny office. "You know, working on my program for Wednesday."

Kara drops wearily into her chair. Finally. No students, no distractions, no gun-toting maniacs—she puts that last thought firmly out of her mind. Just her and her laptop, and a few hours to make progress on her long-neglected dissertation... the dissertation she keeps finding reasons to avoid, even after five months back on campus.

She calls up her abstract and reads through it, trying to decide where to focus her efforts today. Trying to push past the complete lack of interest she feels at the moment.

In her mind, she'd never left academia on a lark to develop a video game. Rather, she'd been working on concepts relating to space age personal transportation, and the gaming industry had sought *her* out; her research had only continued during her years of game development, culminating with *Rampant's* release, which had garnered hundreds of thousands of data points she needed. After all, what better, *broader* way to simulate and test space age concepts than under the guise of entertainment?

Unfortunately, her department chair had never seen it that way, nor had her advisor or most of the other faculty whose opinions she generally respected. Some academics are only willing to go so far in their definition of serious research, and certainly Kara's methodology fell outside those bounds. "UFOs and Ray Guns," that's what one colleague had called her work. Which was rich, considering that academics in both her fields—comp sci and physics—tend to be some of the biggest geeks

around. If she had a dollar for every time she'd heard peers arguing vehemently over whether Kirk was a better captain than Picard, she wouldn't have needed all those loans and scholarships in the first place.

With a start, Kara realizes an hour has passed, during which she has done little more than stare at her screen and think bitter thoughts. With a groan, she pushes the laptop back and lays her head down on her crossed arms. She has half a mind to jettison the entire project and start fresh on something new... which is just plain discouraging.

Her phone rings. "Hello?"

"Hello, Kara? It is Gregoire."

A genuine smile spreads across her face at the sound of that cultured French accent. "Hey Greg, what's up?"

"I have a question I must ask you. In person," he adds, sounding nervous.

Kara's forehead creases. "Okay... You're coming up to the house tonight, right?"

"No-no. I mean yes! I am coming, but I must talk to you without Viviane. Please, I will come to you."

Feeling a little concerned, Kara says, "Well sure, okay. Can we talk over lunch?"



"Status report."

"Subject is at the food court."

"Still?"

"She's finished eating, but yessir, she's still talking with the roommate's boyfriend. Hard to tell how long she'll be."

"I see. Be advised, we may have a situation along subject's typical egress route."

"Need backup?"

"No, remain in position unless you hear otherwise. Could be a feint." Long pause. "Either way, I think the old man is finally ready to make a move."

"Copy."



With a laugh, Kara pushes back from the table and crosses her legs. She watches Gregoire as his own smile slowly fades; he'd been sharing a story of his early days adjusting to culture in the U.S. The events really weren't that funny, but the man has such a way with words, he could retell MacBeth and have his audience howling with laughter.

The silence lingers, and he begins fiddling with his wadded napkin.

"Greg," Kara begins, "I appreciate lunch. You really know how to treat a girl." They share another laugh at that. Campus food isn't that bad, but the selection does tend to be limited and overpriced. "But what's going on? What do you need to ask me without Viviane around?"

He nibbles his lip thoughtfully for a moment.

"I mean," she adds, "if word gets back to her that I'm seeing her boyfriend on the side, you know how she'll get." She says the words playfully, though of course Viviane *is* prone to overreaction.

"Not with you, Kara," the Frenchman says with a more sober smile. "You, she trusts." He sighs. "Kara, I want to marry Viviane."

"Oh," she says stupidly.

"Oh?" he repeats uncertainly.

"No, sorry," Kara hastens to say. "You just surprised me." She takes a moment to process this. "Have you talked to her about this?" No, Kara realizes immediately, of course he hasn't; if he had, Viviane would've already told Kara all about it. "Why are you telling *me*?"

A smile flickers across the man's face. "I ask for your advice. And your permission."

Kara blinks at this. "My permission? I... don't know how it is in France, but here, the guys usually ask the father..." She trails off.

"Exactly." Greg sighs. "But he is not in her life. I do not think he even knows I exist."

"You'd be surprised."

“Besides, if I ask him, it might make Viviane cross with me. But you... you are like family to her.”

Kara allows a look of dismay to cross her face. “Well sure, we talk about being like family, like sisters. But Greg, this is different.”

“No, hear me out. Her father, he comes, he goes. You have been constant for her. How long, you have lived together? Nine years? Ten?”

“We met... almost eight years ago,” Kara says thoughtfully.

“And even when you move to Utah, still you talk, still you are best friends. More than that. You watch out for her, like parents should.” He gazes absently out the window. “I know Viviane. She will be happy, me asking *your* permission.”

Kara drops the argument, saddened as ever by her friend’s tough upbringing, her lack of family.

“So?” Greg asks leadingly. “Do I have your permission?”

She thinks about it, though she doesn’t really need to. For herself, personally, marriage doesn’t hold much allure. But for Viviane, it would be a good thing, and Gregoire really is perfect for her. “Yes...” she says slowly. “But be careful.”

This surprises him. “Careful? How do you mean?”

“I mean, don’t just pop the question on her. Ease her into the idea, give her time to think about it. Sound her out.”

“But... that will ruin the surprise.” He frowns. “You American women, I thought you *like* big surprise proposals.”

Kara smiles. “Yes, in general. But Viviane...” Her smile fades. “Greg, Viviane has commitment issues.” She raises a hand, staving off his automatic defense of the girl. “I’m not being negative, just honest. She has a heart of gold, and she lives to help other people. That’s why she can’t seem to leave the nonprofit sector, even for better pay—but look how many different charities she’s jumped around between. Plus, as good as she is to her friends, you know how she lets stupid little things end good friendships.” Kara sighs. “She just... she sabotages things sometimes. I don’t know if that’s a result of her upbringing, or just something about her, or what.”

“You’re saying she won’t want to commit?”

Kara frowns. “No... I’m just saying she’s scared of being locked in—to *anything*, even stuff a lot less scary than marriage.

Which is why you shouldn't surprise her with the idea, then expect her to make an immediate decision." Kara shakes her head.

"Instead, make sure she knows *you* feel that kind of commitment to her. Sooner or later, the M word will come up naturally, and if she's not ready yet, you can still back away from the conversation." Kara gives a wry smile. "Honestly, you pop the question now, out of the blue, and Viviane's likely to bolt. And then things would be weird between you."

Gregoire nods slowly. "Not the answer I hoped for."

"Sorry."

"But it does prove you are the right person to ask. Her father, he never could have said all this."



A few minutes later, having made excuses about returning to her work, Kara is passing through a little known exit of the student life center, within which the food court resides. It's really more of a service entrance, letting out onto a back alley as it does, but she long since learned it was the quickest way back to Matthews Hall.

The gap between the building and its neighbor, the library, is less than six feet, and there are no facing windows. In short, it's the perfect setting for a mugging. Usually that thought makes her smile; this is a very safe campus, after all, and it's broad daylight. But after last week's near-death experience with the mugger—or murderer, or rapist, or whatever he was—she finds herself less comfortable with these surroundings than normal. Which is why she experiences a sense of relief as she approaches the end of the alley.

Just as a van comes squealing out of nowhere.

It slams to a stop, neatly blocking the opening, its side door already sliding open. And in her shock, Kara freezes. *Again*, she freezes, staring in disbelief as two masked men reach out and grab her, pulling her roughly into the back of the van, which is already in motion once more.

By the time she starts screaming, there's a hand over her mouth, tight enough that she can't get any purchase to bite. Her

hands are pinned too, which leaves her legs. She lashes out with a wild kick, and she's rewarded with a curse.

"Enough," a firm voice commands.

The hands holding Kara seem to slacken for a moment, and she renews her thrashing.

"Miss Dunn!" that voice comes again. "You will not be harmed. Unlike the man you met last week, we only want to talk to you." As an aside, he adds, "Sit her up."

As Kara comes to a sitting position, she sees there are at least two other people in the wide-open back of the van, a young woman and an elderly man—probably the one who had been speaking. The man's appearance is striking, full of vitality despite sagging jowls and a head full of snowy hair. She subsides warily under his intense gaze, and at his sharp nod, the other hands release her.

Licking her lips nervously, Kara glances around. The men who grabbed her are now removing their masks, giving her some space... though one of them remains between her and the door. At the rear of the van, the door is similarly blocked by the young woman, who—

"*Calin?*" she demands.

"Yes, ma'am," Kara's student replies crisply, nodding.

"But—"

"Really, Miss Dunn," the older man says, "you have nothing to fear. We simply needed some privacy to talk, and there are too many prying eyes and ears on campus. For that matter, there are eyes and ears *everywhere* you normally spend time, your home especially." He straightens up, as much as possible in the back of a utility van. "You have my word of honor you will not be harmed in any way. But you need to hear me out."

"Who *are* you?" Kara finally manages. "Why should I believe you?"

The man's smile is so sudden, so high-intensity, Kara almost flinches. "Allow me to introduce myself," he says. "I'm Brigadier General Carl Grant of the United States Air Force." He pauses. "But you would know me better as Viviane's father."

**Monday afternoon
February 10, 2014**

They park the van at a fast food place not far from campus, at which point Gen. Grant's team starts filing out. Through the window, she watches the two men head into the restaurant, even as the driver takes up a casual position on a nearby sidewalk bench. Kara levels a glare at Calin Tennison as the girl sidles past, but it has no noticeable effect. She hops out, gives Kara an unreadable look of her own, then slides the door closed.

Leaving Kara alone with Grant.

At this point, most of Kara's fear has fled, replaced by anger. Mostly anger about being forced into the van and finding out one of her students was part of it, but it doesn't help knowing that the man in charge is also Viviane's father. Kara has picked up plenty of vicarious anger at this man over the years, even though she's never met him.

But despite her best intentions, she's a little curious too.

"We should be safe here for a while," Grant says.

This takes Kara aback. "Safe?"

"Certainly. You don't frequent this establishment, so there's no reason for anyone to expect you here. We can speak at length without being observed."

"Why would anyone care about me?"

"Well, your attacker last week is hardly the only one interested in kidnapping or killing you."

"What?"

Grant sighs. "Indeed. My team has been providing your security for more than a year now." He waves a hand dismissively. "We trade out personnel frequently, of course, so that you and others wouldn't notice. But in that time, there have been three abduction attempts that we caught before you knew anything was amiss. Not counting last week, obviously."

"What?" she demands a second time, with perhaps even more intensity than before. What Grant says is so absurd, and for so

many different reasons, Kara's not even sure where to begin. "Assuming that's even true," she finally manages to say, "*why?*"

The corner of the man's lip rises. "Because you possess very specialized knowledge, knowledge that will prove very valuable in the coming months."

Kara bites back another inane, kneejerk response, angrily squeezing the bridge of her nose instead. "I don't have a *clue* what you're talking about. What knowledge?"

"Why, the knowledge you developed while working on *Rampant*, of course."

"This is about a *video game*?" she demands.

"Absolutely. Or rather, the very real science behind the game. Your work in the area of space combat weapons conceptualization. Your theories with regard to feasible, maintainable propulsion systems. All together, it's nothing short of groundbreaking."

"It's just a *game*."

"Even you don't believe that," the general counters. "If *Rampant* was primarily about entertainment, you would have taken it to one of the big firms instead of a tiny outfit barely acknowledged in the industry, known only for its educational software products." He leans forward, his eyes bright with excitement. "Miss Dunn, what you accomplished with *Rampant* was inspirational! A so-called game that taught basic concepts of matter, energy, force, thermodynamics, mechanics... all in the guise of flight training and mission briefings. And you explored more theoretical concepts within the gameplay engine itself... you truly presented space combat and exploration as it *would* be, unlike so much of the farcical science fiction we've been subjected to in the last few decades."

He pauses. "It's a shame the title wasn't more successful. I suspect that in the next few years, colleges would have seen a surge in applicants with a stronger grasp of the physical sciences. But the failing wasn't the product—quite simply, I don't think DactiSoft was equipped to handle the marketing and distribution."

Kara stares at the man. "What I meant was, why does the Air Force care about a video game? And why in the *world* would anyone want to hurt me because of it?"

Gen. Grant ponders the question for a long moment, eyes on her as his excitement ebbs. “I’m afraid I’m not in a position to answer that question at the moment.”

“Seriously?” Kara bites back her anger. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You just kidnapped me—”

“Only temporarily,” he interjects.

“—to tell me that my life is in danger, all because of knowledge I acquired while developing a *video game*, but you can’t be any more specific than that?”

“The video game is secondary, Kara; you of all people know that. It’s the science behind it that’s so valuable. And the knowledge you’ve acquired—not just the data you’ve collected, but your personal knowledge and experience—will soon be in high demand. At this point, only a few nations are aware of the situation, but they’re scrambling to secure the people with your specific kind of knowledge.” His lip quirks again. “You just happen to be more famous than most, thanks to *Rampant*.”

Kara feels a cube of ice settling in her stomach. “But the only reason the military would care about my research—you’re saying we’re gearing up for a war in *space*? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“I’m not saying anything of the kind,” he responds with a sly smile. “I’m afraid I can’t comment on matters of national security at the present time. You don’t have the proper clearance.”

“So... what? This is a warning? Just a friendly ‘hi, hello, try not to get kidnapped or killed’?”

“Why, no. This is a job offer.”

“*What?*” she demands yet again.

Grant tries—and fails—to completely stifle a smile. “The U.S. Government would like to hire you as a contractor on a sensitive project for which you are uniquely suited. I cannot say more until you’ve completed reams of nondisclosure forms and acquired the proper clearances. But I’m sure you can fill in the blanks.”

Despite herself, Kara barks a laugh. “You want to hire me for a job, but you won’t tell me anything about it.”

“In essence, yes.”

“Viviane’s right. You’re crazy.”

Grant's jaw tightens, his mirth disappearing. "On a more administrative level, the job pays well and would require an initial six month commitment. We're prepared to offer \$93,000 as the annual starting salary, along with full hospitalization and coverage for dental and vision as well." His expression gives no further indication of humor.

"And if I refuse? You'll just take me anyway?"

"No. That would hardly encourage you to give our project your best effort." He pauses, grimaces. "Though... eventually, we *would* need to place you in productive custody. We can't afford to let the enemy or any rival nations get their hands on you."

"Well isn't *that* convenient," Kara says bitterly. "So I might as well go with you willingly, is that it?"

Grant falls silent for a long minute, alternately watching her and gazing absently out the windshield. During that time, he slowly sags, his age becoming more apparent. "I don't know if I can convince you of this, Kara," he says sincerely, "but I *do* want what's best for you. I... I know how much Viviane cares about you, and I would never intentionally do anything to hurt her, no matter my unintentional failings in the past." He sighs. "The fact is, no matter how important you are to Viviane, your continued involvement in her life is putting her at the same risk you face."

He gives Kara a chance to think about that. Assuming he's not just blowing smoke about the danger Kara's in—and the attack last week suggests he's not—then Kara has to grudgingly admit it's true: she herself is putting Viviane in danger by continuing to live with her. But this is all so sudden, it's kinda hard to process as quickly as Grant seems to expect her to.

"So..." he continues. "We can take you into custody, hide you away, place you in a program like witness protection where you can go mad with boredom. *Or,*" he adds with a smile, "you can accept my offer, continue your research in a real-world setting—complete with a real-world budget—and get your student loans paid off in the process." He sobers again. "Kara, you *do* need to know... this is your opportunity to change the world. I cannot exaggerate this: you are in a unique position to affect the life of every person on this planet—and for the better," he hastens to add. "Please. Do not be precipitant in your decision."

“Look.” Kara tries to draw her thoughts into a semblance of order. “Aside from what happened last Friday, you’re asking me to take a lot on faith. And for all I know, that guy *was* just a mugger, working alone. Which, by the way, is exactly what the cops said.”

Grant’s smile returns. “Those police officers you spoke with were all men in my employ.” Kara blinks as he continues. “As were the emergency medical personnel, and even the two joggers. Part of what your ‘mugger’ told you was true, after all. Those men *were* keeping tabs on you, though only for your protection. That was the very reason he needed to draw you away from them before he approached.”

Kara massages her head, still struggling with a whole host of objections. “If I’m really in so much danger, and there have been so many attempts to kidnap or kill me already, why haven’t we had this conversation before now?” She thinks for a moment. “Just the cost of personnel to keep me under surveillance, without me knowing, that has to be expensive. Plus the risk that I would get hurt anyway... This just isn’t adding up for me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he says, sounding genuine. “To your first point, you are well worth the cost involved, and I wanted to preserve your blissful ignorance as long as possible. To your second point, this security detail is the best, and I have the greatest confidence in their abilities. That said... now that you know what’s going on, I would prefer not to continue tempting fate.”

“I’m not sure what to tell you,” Kara says. “But I’m not about to just accept your offer on blind faith.”

“Nor would I expect you to, my dear.” He sighs. “My team will return you to your home or office—whichever you prefer—and give you a chance to think things over. We will continue our surveillance. When you decide to accept my offer, as I have every confidence you will, you can reach me at this number.” He hands her a rather generic-looking business card.

“*If* I accept,” she asks, making very clear that she does not share his confidence, “what then?”

“You’ll have a few days to pack up and say your goodbyes. Like I said, powerful people are interested in you right now, so it would be best to keep up appearances. We’ll make it look like you got a job offer you couldn’t refuse. Certainly the other people

watching you will wonder what's going on, but hopefully they won't be spooked into doing anything drastic. Which should help keep Viviane safe until you're gone."

"Yeah, speaking of Viviane," Kara says, seizing on something that's bothered her since Grant first started this crazy pitch. "It seems awfully coincidental that you desperately want to recruit me for your project *and* I just happen to be your daughter's roommate."

"There's no such thing as coincidence, my dear," Grant offers with an enigmatic smile. "How do you think I became aware of your research in the first place?"

Kara stares at him for a long time, but the elderly man doesn't say anything more. "Can I go now?" she asks finally.

"Absolutely. Promise to think on my offer."

"I would have a hard time thinking of anything else at the moment," Kara says bitterly.

Monday evening
February 10, 2014

Kara finds Viviane entangled with Gregoire on the sofa when she arrives home that night. She'd had Grant's team drop her off on campus, but she'd accomplished little after returning to her office—little more than examine and re-examine Grant's story and offer from every conceivable angle. And ultimately, she decided she needs Viviane's opinion.

On certain elements, at least. She's not about to share the whole story with the girl.

Greg glances up and smiles at Kara's entrance, but Viviane is so fixed on the TV that Kara wonders what the news piece is about; the other woman is paying the kind of attention usually reserved for major disasters or tragedies. But oddly, Kara realizes after watching for a moment, this is mostly old news.

"...announced that Out of this World Tours will be making its initial public offering in the next two months. In an interview today, CEO Jeff Donnegan shared that capital raised from the IPO will finance the initial test flight phase of its Longship orbiter..."

Watching her friend, Kara can't help but smile. "Viviane," she calls.

"—otherwise known as OWT—made news last month with their announcement of the Longship prototype, the first spacecraft capable of carrying more than two hundred passengers into orbit, and also the first of its kind to enter development by a space tourism concern. Although early investors have been buying their tickets for years at a million dollars per seat, this is the first time..."

"Viviane!"

The girl gives a start, then scrambles for the remote, quickly muting the television. "Sorry," she says. "I just... this whole thing sounds so familiar. The company name, the logo..."

"It has been on the news much lately," Greg offers, by way of explanation.

“No, it’s not that. Even this guy, Donnegan. I could swear I know him.” She keeps staring at the screen for a moment, then wrenches her attention over to Kara. “Sorry. How was your day?”

Kara opens her mouth to respond, realizes she has no idea what to say. “It was... different.”

“Make any progress on your paper?”

“The dissertation? Um, no. Not really.” Kara purses her lips. “Listen... weird question, I know, but can I go look through some of your old photo albums?”

Viviane’s forehead bunches, but she shrugs. “Yeah, sure.”

Kara hears the TV unmute as she climbs the stairs to the bedrooms. Viviane’s room is packed full of girly items, like jewelry and keepsakes and lots and lots of pink, but she also has several dozen photo albums and scrapbooks. Kara locates the oldest one and begins flipping through. Carl Grant doesn’t appear frequently in those photos, but he’s definitely there—enough for Kara to confirm the man she met today really was Viviane’s father.

Dang. That would have made this decision a lot easier. No less scary, but definitely easier.

She rejoins the lovebirds downstairs, manages to convince Viviane to shut off the TV. “Viviane... I have another weird question for you.”

The girl’s face lights up. “This sounds like fun.”

“Well actually... I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your father again.”

That takes her by surprise—Greg too. In fact, by the look on his face, it’s clear he’s wondering if this is related to his conversation with Kara earlier today. “Why?” Viviane asks.

“Just... trust me.”

The girl does an admirable job of not scowling. “He’s in the Air Force. That’s probably the most important fact about him. He turned 80 last year, and he’s *still* active duty, as far as I know. Which is supposedly against the rules, but apparently the rules don’t apply to him.”

Kara had been wondering at Grant’s age. “I never realized your dad was so...”

“Old? Yeah. He was pushing 50 when I was born. Mom was younger, but not much. Maybe 40, I think. They say that’s why...” She swallows and falls silent.

“Viviane, I know you’ve had your problems with your dad—he’s terrible at keeping promises. But... would you say he’s an honest person?”

It’s clear the other woman wants to ask why she’s being questioned like this, but mercifully, she holds off. “I guess. No, not always. But after he got religious, yeah. At least, I can’t think of any times he wasn’t.” She licks her lips. “I don’t know. Mostly, he wouldn’t tell me stuff. There’s a lot I just don’t know about him.”

“So you don’t know anything about his work?”

“Not really, no. Just that it’s important.”

Kara gives her friend a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, Viviane.”

“No, I didn’t mean that sarcastically.” She smiles a little. “I mean, it *is* important. He took me to the White House one time, introduced me to the President.”

Kara blinks. “Really?”

“Yeah. I was seven. It was just the three of us in his office—”

“You mean the *Oval* Office?”

“Right. And the President put me in his lap and told me how proud I should be of my daddy, that he was doing really important work.”

“You never told me that story.”

Viviane shrugs. “It meant a lot to me at the time. Later—I mean like, as an adult—it just made me angry. I get it, okay? Daddy’s important, his work is important. It’s just *me* that’s not important.” Kara fears a histrionic episode, but Viviane maintains control. “Kara, why are you asking me all this?”

The moment of truth. “Well... Viviane, I sorta met your dad today.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I said.”

Viviane stares at her for a long time, thinking it all through. “He’s trying to recruit you, isn’t he? Because of your research.”

Kara blanches. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he’s been trying to get me to introduce you for years. He always mentions you, even though we barely talk. He wants to know about you, how you’re doing, what’s up with your

research.” Her tone is definitely turning bitter now. “As if he couldn’t just call up his spy buddies and find out everything there is to know about you *without* my help.” With a sob, Viviane turns and buries her face in Greg’s chest. Greg, in turn, looks at Kara uncertainly.

Kara finds herself unsure what to say. That was typical in her early association with Viviane, but not lately. “Yes,” she admits belatedly. “Your dad came to recruit me. Offer me a job.”

There’s a pause. “You’re going to take it,” her friend’s voice comes, muffled by Greg’s shirt. “Aren’t you.” There’s no question in the girl’s tone.

Kara stares out the window. Is she? As ridiculous and shocking as the whole thing is, as angry as Carl Grant makes her, Kara’s objections are steadily eroding. Whatever else he may be, Grant is apparently not a liar, and she believes he loves his daughter. So it’s probably true that Viviane is in danger as long as Kara is around. Maybe Kara should just move away. But a cross-country move would mean upturning her whole life, trying to transfer to a different university; because if she stayed local, it would defeat the purpose unless she cut herself completely off from Viviane, which would be hard. And even then, what would it accomplish? It might protect Viviane, but it would also hurt her, and Kara herself would likely still be in danger. And no matter what she chose, if she didn’t join Grant’s team, they’d eventually take her into custody anyway.

Feeling trapped, she whispers, “Yeah. I think I have to take the job.”

“Why?”

“It’s... it’s a chance to do something real with my work,” she stumbles through the first rationalization that comes to mind. “Not a game. Not just research. Something... real,” she finishes lamely.

Viviane pulls back and meets her gaze. Looking vulnerable, with the tears pooling in her eyes, Viviane is nevertheless as beautiful as ever—a sight that would cause any man’s breath to catch, as Greg immediately demonstrates. But when she speaks, Viviane sounds as old and tired as Kara has ever heard her. “Don’t you see, it’s happening again. The military, duty”—usually Viviane spits this word out spitefully, but today it comes out

sadly—“again, they’re stealing away someone I love, someone I need.”

“Don’t you think you’re being just a bit melodramatic? It’s not like I’d be abandoning you entirely. I mean, yes, I’d be moving out, but we’d keep in touch, *better* than just ‘in touch.’ We’d burn up the airwaves like last time, when I was with DactiSoft. It may not be ideal, but it works.”

Viviane just shakes her head sadly. “No, Kara, it doesn’t. If you’re following dear Daddy into one of his projects, you might as well be entering a black hole. It’s not just that you won’t be allowed to talk about *it*. You actually won’t be allowed to talk about *anything*. Maybe, *maybe*, they’ll let you mail or email back and forth, but there will be people poring over every message, removing anything that might possibly convey info that’s supposed to be secret.” She suddenly giggles at Kara’s shocked expression. “What, Daddy didn’t mention that?”

“Um, no.” And with that admission, all is apparently forgiven. Viviane is now convinced that Kara is also a victim in this situation. She throws open her arms to draw her into a hug.

“Did you already accept the job?” comes Viviane’s voice from behind her back.

“Yes,” Kara lies after just a momentary hesitation. Her rationale for making this decision probably sounds shaky as it is; if she admits the truth, that’ll require more explanation, and she’s not about to tell Viviane of the danger they both face.

“Do you know where you’ll be working?”

“No, not really.”

“I can take a guess. He didn’t tell you much of anything, did he?”

“No,” Kara whispers. The question now repeating in Kara’s mind is *What have I gotten myself into?*

She doesn’t realize she’d spoken the thought aloud until Viviane’s voice answers. “You *don’t* know what you’ve gotten yourself into. That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”