

UNHEARTED

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HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

We are the last of our kind.

We will not fade into the dark. We will tell our story to the stars and in this way we will never die—we will be Undying. Perhaps only the stars will hear us until we are nothing more than a memory. But someday a race will find the power we left behind—and they will be tested, for some things are better left unknown. Some stories left untold. Some words left unsaid.

Some powers left alone.

Ours is a story of greed and destruction, of a people not ready for the treasure they guarded. Our end came not from the stars but from within, from war and chaos.

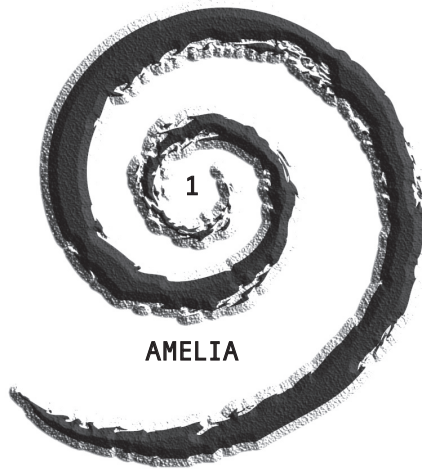
We were not, and never had been, worthy of what had been given to us.

Within the mathematical cipher of this message lies a key to build a door into the aether. Beyond the door, beyond the aether, you will face your trial. The worthy, the chosen, will find the power we died to protect, and rise into the stars.

Know that the journey is unending. Know that the dangers ahead will be many. Know that unlocking the door may lead to salvation or doom. So choose. Choose the stars or the void; choose hope or despair; choose light or the undying dark of space.

Choose—and travel onward, if you dare.

—Excerpt from The Undying Broadcast (orig. “Unidentified Signal Alpha 312”)
decoded and transliterated by Dr. Elliott Addison, University of Oxford



THIS IS REALLY, REALLY NOT GOING THE WAY I'D PLANNED.

The two scavengers below are talking to each other in Spanish, laughing and joking about something I can't understand. Lying facedown against the rock, I wriggle forward just enough to see the tops of their heads over the edge of the overhang. One of them is taller, bulky in the shoulders. He's around thirty or thirty-five, and easily twice my size. The other one's smaller, a woman, I'm guessing, by the way she stands—but even she'd have the edge on me if they knew I was here.

You were right, Mink, I should've taken that gun. At the time, it felt good to surprise the Contractor—to make her eyebrows shoot up underneath her bangs and stay there. "I don't need a gun," I'd scoffed, not bothering to add that I wouldn't know what to do with one anyway. "No one will ever even see me down there." Because if I were home, if I were scavenging a city on Earth, that would be true.

But studying the topographic surveys and satellite images of Gaia's surface didn't prepare me for just how barren this landscape

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is. This isn't like the ruins of Chicago, full of sewer tunnels and half-collapsed skyscrapers, with infinite places to hide and move around unseen. There aren't even any plants on this barren world—nothing but some microscopic bacteria in the oceans, and that's on the other side of the planet. Not surprising, given that something about Gaia's two suns gives off a flare every generation like clockwork and nukes the whole world. There's just open desert on either side of the canyon, and I'm screwed.

I'm screwed.

The raiders are filling up their canteens at the little spring under the overhang, the same spring marked on our pirated maps, which drew me to this spot. Though I can't understand their language, I don't need to know the words to tell that they're grumbling about the dusty, sandy quality of the water in the pool. Like they don't get how lucky they are that there's water *on* this planet in the first place. That there's air we can breathe—sort of—and the right temperature and gravity, though the solar flares dashed all hope of a permanent colony here.

It's still the closest thing we've ever found to a habitable planet, besides Earth and Centaurus. And one of those is rapidly dying, the other far beyond the reach of our technology.

We only found Gaia because we followed the instructions left by ancient creatures long dead. There's no telling when we'll find another world like it, unless we find more coordinates in the ruins left by the Undying. Ironic that the aliens called themselves that in the very broadcast describing the way they wiped themselves out.

I hold my breath, hoping that the scavengers don't look around while crouching to replenish their water. My pack isn't exactly well hidden, since I wasn't expecting company, but they haven't noticed it yet. *Idiots*. But I'm an even bigger idiot, because I broke my cardinal rule—I let go of my stuff. I put it down because I wanted to see what was over this ridge. The desert is marked by groupings of immense rock formations stretching up toward the sky, swept into shape by the wind, and by water that's long gone now. I'm going to

end up marooned a billion light-years from home with no supplies because I wanted to admire the damned scenery. Just a few chunks of red-gray rock stand between the raiding duo and my only hope at survival in this terrain.

Not only does the pack contain my food rations, my climbing gear, my water, my sleeping mat, and everything else I need to live out here—it contains my breather. The atmosphere here's got just a little more nitrogen than Earth's. Eight hours a day or so, you need to strap on a breather and suck in oxygen-enriched air, or you stop being able to think straight, and then your body shuts down. And my breather—my lifeline—is in the bag a meter or two from a pair of raiders.

The man lifts his head and I jerk back, rolling over and gazing up at the empty blue sky. The light of the binary suns is harsh on my face even through the protection of the kerchief, but I don't move. If I don't get my stuff back, I'm dead. I won't even be alive when they come to get me in three weeks, much less carrying enough loot from the temples to pay my exit fee.

My mind scrambles for a solution. I could call Mink—except my sat-phone is in my pack, and the comms satellite won't be over this part of the planet for another six hours anyway. And even if I did find a way to signal her, she made it clear when she dropped me on this rock that I was only getting a ride back off the ground again if I had something to make it worth her while. It costs big to smuggle scavengers back and forth on official supply shuttles through the portal to Gaia, a shimmering gateway in space patrolled and guarded by International Alliance ships. She's not going to bother getting me back through to Earth unless I can pay.

I *have* to get that pack.

“Tengo que hacer pis,” says the man, making his partner groan and walk off a few steps.

I hear the sound of a zipper and then a grunt, and then—after half a second—the sound of something trickling into the spring water.

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Oh, for the love of— Very nice, asshole. Like you're the only ones on this planet who might've wanted to use that spring.

“Ugh,” protests the woman, echoing my sentiments exactly. “En serio, Hugo?”

I tip my head just enough to get a glimpse of the guy standing, feet apart, over the spring, with his hands cupped around his groin—then I slam my eyes shut again before I can see any more. *I so didn't need that visual.*

I ought to try to get the jump on them while he's busy peeing, but my hands are shaking, and not from lack of O₂. I put up a good front with Mink, and even with the other scavengers I beat out for this job when Mink quietly put out word she was looking. A few knew me from the fences in Chicago, others had come from farther away and only met me while we all scabbled to get hired. The kid, the little girl, the one who's going down all by herself to raid the temples. *What a badass*, they said, laughing. *What a punk*. But in Chicago, no one ever saw me.

The reason I was so good, the reason I convinced Mink to let me work for her, was because no one *ever* saw me. I never had to fight over turf. I never had to run anyone off. I never had to hold off two experienced and probably armed raiders while I retrieved my gear.

I try to breathe, sucking in air through the kerchief and making it clamp against my chapped lips. I feel for a moment like I'm suffocating, like someone's put a plastic bag over my head—I have to remind myself that it's only cloth, that I can breathe fine, that I don't need that extra oxygen dose for hours and I'm just scared. *Just wait*, I tell myself. *They haven't seen your pack yet. You're fine.*

But like that thought was a jinx, the very next sound I hear is the woman's voice, sharp with surprise, summoning her partner. The guy's fly zips back up and booted footsteps crunch across the loose stones and sand—heading toward the boulder half concealing my pack.

“¿Esto pertenece al grupo?” A boot connects with fabric and something hard beneath it. They're kicking at my pack.

But that's not what makes my heart sink. Because while I don't understand what they're saying, I do know one of those words. Some of the gangs in Chicago spoke Spanish. *Grupo* means "group." These two aren't here alone. Mink warned me there were other contractors using this supply-and-survey mission to smuggle raiders down to Gaia's surface, but I assumed they'd be in ones and twos, like me.

Which means I either get my stuff back now, or they take it back to the rest of their gang, and I have to try to take it back from half a dozen looters instead of two.

I move before I can talk myself out of it and roll over to drop off the edge of the overhang, only a few meters from the scavengers.

The woman jerks backward, half stumbling in her surprise. "Qué chingados!" she blurts, hand going to her waist, where something in a holster glints in the light.

The guy's less jumpy, though, and merely tenses, watching me suspiciously—and standing between me and my gear.

"I just want my stuff," I say, deepening my voice until it makes my throat ache. I can't make myself look any bigger, but with all my gear on it's not blatantly obvious I'm a girl. Maybe if they think I'm just a short man, they'll think I'm less of a target. I point at the pack. "My stuff," I repeat, more loudly, glancing between them.

I'm wishing I'd paid more attention in Languages before I dropped out—maybe I'd speak more than a few words of Spanish. The only A I ever got was in math, and though it might be the universal language—the Undying broadcast proved that—it doesn't do me much good right now.

"Who the hell are you?" asks the man. Though he speaks with an accent, he tosses the English at me easily. *Well, at least that's something.*

"Amelio," I shoot back. Not exactly true, but close enough. "And I'm here same reason you are. Just give me my stuff and I'll be on my way."

The woman is recovering from her shock, and straightening as

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she comes to stand beside her cohort. She's in her mid-forties, I'd guess, with a sun-weathered face. The layer of dust coating her features lightens her skin by a few shades—the dust splits as she grins. “Just a kid.”

The guy grunts agreement, and in an easy motion pushes his coat back so he can hook his thumb into his pants pocket—and, coincidentally, I'm sure, reveal the pistol resting in the holster at his side. “Maybe we take your stuff, enjoy the extra O₂, and you run back to Mamá, kid.”

I suck in a lungful of air, waiting until I'm sure that frustration won't make my voice rise. “My ‘mamá’ isn't back for weeks, just like yours. Give me my stuff. Trespassing's bad enough, you really want to add murder? You're not gonna shoot me. I'm one of Mink's raiders. Cross her and you'll wake up dead once you get back to the station.” It's a bluff—true, Mink's my backer, but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't give a damn if not all her crew came back from Gaia's surface.

The man, who's easily a head and a half taller than I am, rubs at his chin. There's a few days' worth of stubble there, and the movement rasps audibly through the dry air. “Nobody gonna find you here,” he replies. “No body, no crime, eh?”

“Hugo,” the woman breaks in, squinting at me. “No es niño, es niña.”

Shit. I know enough Spanish to understand that. So much for trying to look less like an easy mark.

“Take off your helmet,” the man orders.

My heart, slamming in my rib cage, overrides my brain. “No.”

The guy steps forward, hand still lingering at his waist by his gun. “Take off your helmet or take off your shirt, your pick.”

Instinct tries to make me reach for my knife, but I know it'd be a death sentence. I'm outmanned and outgunned. Trying to figure out if I'm a young man or a girl isn't going to keep him occupied for much longer, and the truth is these guys won't care I'm only sixteen. They won't care that they'd be killing a minor. They've

already broken the IA's planetary embargo just by landing on Gaia, and that's a life sentence all by itself.

The International Alliance doesn't mess around when it comes to off-world law, not after it lost the project that brought Earth's nations together in the first place. Three hundred people boarded that ship headed for Alpha Centauri, the star system closest to ours in the vast emptiness of the cosmos, trying to reach the *only* potentially Earth-like planet we've ever found. Maybe the reason they failed, the reason they were left to drift and die in space, is because people like this managed to con their way on board and mutiny. The only way these two got here is the same way I did—by breaking the law—and breaking one more law isn't going to bother them.

I swallow hard, gritting my teeth. Millions of light-years from home, standing on the surface of an alien planet, it never truly hit me until now that the biggest thing I'd have to fear here would be another human being.

Tension sings through my body, the effort of staying put threatening to knock me down—half of me wants to run, the other half to fight, and caught between the impulses I just stand there, frozen. Waiting.

And then a new voice breaks into the conversation. "Oh, thank goodness, I thought everyone might have left!" The words cut through the tension like scissors through a rubber band, and all our heads go snapping toward the source.

A boy not much older than me appears over the lip of the overhang and then comes sliding down the slope of loose scree, laden with a pack so large I could fit inside it with room to spare. He drops it to the ground with a thud, straightening with a groan and rubbing at the small of his back. He's got brown skin and black hair in tight curls cut close to his head, and a broad smile that looks like it could charm the rocks right out of the ground.

His clothes scream money, with matching khaki cargo pants and vest, a spotless button-down shirt, and boots so new they're

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still shiny on the toes through their fine coating of dust. He's tall and lanky, with that slight stoop to the shoulders that comes from hours spent poring over tablet screens and keyboards.

Academic, my mind sneers. His type would show up occasionally in Chicago, studying the weather and the climate and whatever else contributed to the mass exodus, and they'd almost always get chased off by a scavenger gang. *What the hell are you doing here? The LA doesn't even have the surface open for research crews yet. Hence us bad guys taking advantage of the empty space while we've got it.*

He glances between the three of us, brow furrowing. "Where are the others?" he asks, the vowels elongated and the Rs softened—English or something, like someone on TV. When he gets no reply, he tries again. "Da jia zai na li? Waar is almal? Wo sind alle? No?" He jumps from one language to another without skipping a beat.

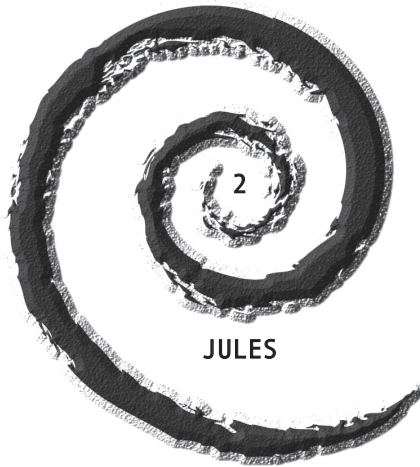
Silence sweeps in to follow him, his smile dimming a few degrees in confusion. It hangs in the air, thickening and thickening until finally the woman snaps. "Who the *hell* are you?"

The boy's smile flashes back into brilliance at this, and as though he'd gotten the politest of greetings, he steps forward to hold out his hand. "Jules Thomas," he says, inclining his torso a little. He's bowing. *He's actually bowing, what the hell?* "It's a pleasure to meet you all. If you'd be so good as to direct me to the expedition leader, I can present my credentials and—"

He's cut off by the click of the safety coming off a pistol, as the woman pulls it out of her holster and levels it at the boy.

Jules stops short, smile fading and hand lowering. His eyes flick from the gun to the face of the woman holding it, then to the other raider, and then, finally, to me. And whatever he sees written on my face—fear, exhaustion, general *what-the-actual-hell-is-going-on* panic—makes his smile vanish.

"Oh," he says.



WELL, THIS COULD CERTAINLY BE GOING BETTER. “I’M THE LINGUISTICS and archaeology expert,” I say, slowly and clearly, lifting both my hands to show them I mean no harm. “I was hired by Charlotte Stapleton—you’re with the expedition from Global Energy Solutions, aren’t you?”

“Global Energy,” the woman echoes, gripping the gun like she’d really appreciate the opportunity to use it, if I’d just be so kind as to step a little bit closer.

Mebercule. It’s all I can do not to utter the epithet out loud. I knew when I signed on with Global Energy Solutions’ plan to bypass the law that the crew I’d be joining was rough around the edges, but I expected to live through my first five minutes of the expedition.

At least they’ve got decent security, I suppose. That’ll be an advantage, once we’ve sorted this out.

“I’m Jules Thomas,” I say again, in case it helps. It’s not my real surname, of course. I didn’t need Charlotte’s repeated warnings not

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to reveal my true identity. I know better than to let anyone in this crew aside from its leader know who my father is.

“¿Quién carajo es esto?” asks the woman still sighting down her pistol at me.

“I told you,” I say, starting to feel like a glitching audio file. “I’m Jules Thomas. These were the coordinates I was given—I’m supposed to meet the expedition leader here. Tengo instrucciones para reunirse con su jefe aquí.”

“You can keep saying that as much as you want.” The last guy—just a kid, to judge from the higher pitch of his voice—finally speaks up, gruff behind his kerchief. “But I really don’t think these are your people, dude.” The gun swings around to train on him for a moment when he speaks. But that would imply he’s not part of their group—which means these are raiders, from more than one group. And that not all of them are as noble-minded as Global Energy Solutions.

“I’m beginning to think the same,” I mutter.

“No talking,” snaps the woman.

I risk one more question. “How likely is it they’re about to shoot us?”

“Very,” says the boy, easing his weight back as the gun swings around to me again. I can’t make out his face behind the kerchief and goggles and helmet, but there’s a tension in his voice that ratchets mine up another notch.

I wonder if they name a major landmark after you if you’re one of the first people to die on a new planet.

“You can take my pack,” I try, pointing at it, playing for time as a plan starts to slide together in my head. “I’ll show you how my equipment works. You’ll like it. I’ve got food, too. Chocolate.”

Both the armed thugs fix their attention squarely on me for that last one—even if it’s not to their taste, it’s worth a fortune on the black market. And here, luxuries will be in short supply. Whoever they are, someone in their group will want it. I brought it to make

friends with the other members of my expedition, a preemptive strike before any of them could decide that the smart kid would be a good target for mockery—but I'll just have to charm them without it.

The boy's edging around behind them while they're distracted, and as he reaches for his pack, I suddenly realize his intent. He's going to grab it and leave me here. *Can I blame him?* Maybe he'd go bring back help, but I don't think this can wait. This duo looks awfully trigger-happy. If he makes a break for it, I'll pay the price.

"You stay put," the woman orders me, then jerks her head at her companion. The big guy walks forward to pull open my pack, then tip it over, and I wince as something inside clanks against a rock. The boy jumps, eyes flicking from me to the pack they're searching and back.

"Please don't," I say quietly, risking a look straight at the boy for a moment.

The man rummaging through my pack only laughs, but I'm not talking about him banging my stuff against rocks. I'm speaking to the boy behind him, who's standing by his gear now, looking back at me. If he bolts, I'm not going to last long enough to catch up with my expedition.

"What is this?" The big man's holding up my set of picks and brushes, eyeing them with wary suspicion.

"It's for, ah, cleaning the rocks."

They both stare at me like I'm an idiot, and given they're the ones stealing my possessions at gunpoint while I look on helplessly, it's hard to argue with their assessment. "The tent," I say. "You'll like the tent, it's fully automated." My eyes flick up toward the boy, though it's hard to tell for sure if he's looking at me from behind his goggles. "Really surprising."

The boy shifts his weight, silent, light on his feet. A step closer to the woman with the gun. He's quick—he's at least picked up some inkling of my half-baked plan.

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The man fishes out the bright blue package holding my tent, turning it over in his hands. He looks up at me, brow creasing. *Doesn't look surprising*, he's clearly thinking.

"Pull on the orange tab there," I say, standing a little straighter, sucking down a long lungful of air. Forcing my body to calm, be ready, like I do in the pool before a polo match. "Anaranjado."

He nods, turning it over in his hands once more, finding the tab. Without further hesitation, he tugs on it, leaning down to see what will be revealed.

The tent unfurls in 2.6 seconds, just like the manufacturer promised, struts shooting out and snapping into place, the bright blue canopy exploding into being. A tent pole strikes the big guy across the nose and I dive for him, slamming his body into the ground with mine, winding both of us. I'm gasping for breath as I push myself up far enough to punch him, pain shooting up my knuckles to my shoulder as his head snaps back. *Mebercule, I should've let Neal show me how to throw a punch without breaking my hand*. But before I can turn, a deafening sound cracks somewhere above my head, echoing off the rock all around us to come rolling back again and again.

I scramble to my feet, just in time to see my opponent start to lunge after me—then stop dead only a few centimeters away. I gasp for breath and stumble back, expecting to see his partner leveling her weapon at me—instead I see her on the ground, unmoving, and the boy's standing over her with the gun pointed at my assailant's face.

Except it's not a boy at all. *Her* helmet's on the ground, a bit dented where she must've used it to bludgeon the woman beside it. "Nice one," she pants, not taking her eyes from her target. She's short, with pale, freckled skin and choppy black hair streaked with pink and blue. Now is *not* the time to stop and admire the view, though *deus*, she's something else.

"Get his gun," she's saying, holding her own stolen weapon steady.

“His what?” I’m still staring at her, trying to process what’s going on.

“His gun, genius.” She nods at the pistol lying perhaps a meter away from the guy, who’s practically snarling with rage, but unwilling to risk getting shot. “Their buddies will have heard the shot. Now would be an excellent time to run like hell.”

I inch forward so the guy can’t grab me, then hook my foot around the gun and pull it toward me. As I’m stooping to retrieve it, the girl’s voice goes harsher again as she orders the man, “Take your shoes off.”

“Shoes?” he repeats, brows raising.

“Zapatos,” I translate, though from the guy’s face it wasn’t the language barrier making him hesitate. Shoving the gun in my jacket pocket, I shoot my own curious glance her way. “May I ask why?”

“So they can’t follow us,” she replies. “Not quickly, anyway. Grab hers too, in case she wakes up.”

Clever. I reach down to pull the boots off the unconscious woman, who gives a tiny groan, but doesn’t wake. “Have you done this before?”

I earn myself a quirk of a smile from the girl. “I’m improvising. But I’ve been doing that my whole life. Shove the boots in your pack, let’s go.”

“If we can spare another half a minute, I’ve got an idea.” I jerk my chin toward the guy with his hands up. “Señor, quitarse los pantalones.”

Evidently the girl knows the Spanish word for *trousers*—she starts laughing as the man spits furious curses. “This is going to be ugly,” my new partner predicts, gesturing with the gun that the man should do as I’ve asked.

“I would imagine so,” I agree. “But it’ll be embarrassing, as well. They’ll have to lie to their friends, say we were big, strong, many in number. They won’t want to say a couple of teenagers did this. It might put the gang off trying to track us down.”

She hikes up one corner of her mouth, grudgingly impressed,

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and I tell my hormones to shut down the celebration—making her smile at me should *not* be my priority right now. Although it's a lot more fun to think about than the guy who's glaring furious daggers at me while pulling off his trousers. He kicks them toward me and I stuff them in my pack. With her gun still trained on him, the girl and I slowly back away from the clearing.

And then, once we're far away enough, we *run*.

We scramble past a pile of boulders until we're out of sight, then slither down into the nearest canyon, taking a path along the rubble at the bottom, where we won't leave footsteps. We run until my lungs are burning, pain shooting along my ribs, throat contracting.

Eventually, we slow by unspoken consent when we reach a stream—I double over to rest my hands on my knees, gasping, and she drops to one knee to dip a hand into the water, scooping it up to splash it across her face. Then she cuts a look sideways at me, eyes dancing with unexpected amusement. Relief forces its way out of me in a quick huff of laughter, which sets her off. Snickering isn't helping us recover, and the lower oxygen levels make running extremely ill-advised. I suppose I should be grateful to Gaia's oceanic populations of hardy little cyanobacteria for what oxygen there is, because I definitely wouldn't enjoy making this trek in a spacesuit. But it takes forever to catch my breath.

I fold down to sit beside her and spare my aching legs, leaning across to offer my hand. "We haven't been formally introduced. I suppose you heard me say it before all the unpleasantries began, but I'm Jules." I don't add my fake last name this time. The lie of it would feel too slimy, when offered to a girl who just saved my life.

Something about my voice seems to amuse her, making her mouth twitch. "Jeez, Oxford." She stares at my hand for a couple of beats, then leans across to slowly shake it, her palm warm against mine. "Nice to meet you."

I'm trying not to show my surprise—I wouldn't think she'd be

able to tell where I'm from just by my accent. "Do I get to learn your name?"

I get the impression I've asked a much more personal question than I intended—she gazes at me, measuring, taking a long moment before she replies. "Amelia," she says eventually. I hope that pause was her deciding not to lie. "Mia."

"Well, I'm in your debt, Amelia." I don't ask for her last name. After all, she's not getting mine.

She shrugs. "We can afford to rest a little. They're not coming after us without shoes. Or pants."

"Is it possible we just committed the first robbery in the history of Gaia? I mean, they tried first, but we succeeded."

She just shakes her head as she stares at me, lips parted, breath still coming in heaves, skin smeared with dirt. I'm pretty sure I look just as bad. The last few days have been awful—my father's face on the vid-call screen as he understood my coded hints about my plan, the swell of my own fear as I walked onto the shuttle that would bring me to Gaia, not to mention the attempted holdup we've just escaped—but I can't deny that just now, despite it all, I feel *alive*.

In a few moments we'll have to pull out our breathers and let our lungs have a break, not to mention make a plan to try and salvage this fiasco, but for now we're still running on adrenaline.

And I'm not so sure about this planet, but I know I like this girl. Not having my expedition waiting for me—that's a blow I almost can't stop to think about now. But managing to run into someone who could help me in my mission . . . that's lucky enough to give me hope.

The girl eyes me, scratching the underside of her chin with the butt of the scavenger's gun. "Oxford?"

"Yes, Amelia?"

"You better not have been lying about that chocolate."

Deus. I *really* like this girl.