

A GHOST SHIP

DEAD

A SALVAGE CREW

SILENCE

UNSPEAKABLE HORRORS

S. A. BARNES

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DEAD SILENCE

S. A. BARNES



NIGHTFIRE

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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To my mom and dad, who let me read whatever I wanted as long as I didn't wake them up with nightmares. See? I told you it would pay off. Also, can you leave the bathroom light on?

1

NOW

Verux Peace and Rehabilitation Tower, Earth, 2149

My head is throbbing again, a white-hot line of pain from the back of my skull down to the right side of my jaw, and a dead man is signaling me from across the common room. His hand waves frantically in a “come here” gesture, his eyes wild with panic.

Resolutely, I turn my gaze away from the hallucination and attempt to refocus my attention on the living visitors across the scarred and battered plastic table from me.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” My tongue feels thick, unwieldy. That’s the drugs. Both too many and not enough.

“I said, you lied to us.” Reed Darrow leans forward impatiently. An older, executive-type in a black suit and a vintage watch paces just behind him, supervising our conversation, with a thoughtful—and yet still disapproving—scowl.

“About what?” I’m confused. It’s not difficult to do these days, but with Reed, a junior investigator from Verux’s QA Department, I’m almost always clear. He’s been in here every few days since the *Raleigh* search and rescue team dropped me off into Verux’s care three weeks ago.

Max Donovan, my other visitor, clears his throat loudly. “Verux wants to help you. But we need you to help us help you.” He nods at me in encouragement, his familiar face wreathed in wrinkles I’m not yet used to. He was just an investigator for my employer the last time I saw him, but now he is apparently the head of the whole QA Department.

“I’ve told you everything I remember.” My skull fracture is, according to the Tower doctors, healed. And during the month-long return trip to Earth, the *Raleigh*’s MedBay staff tested me for every virus, bacteria, and parasite under this sun. Not to mention all the “exploratory” diagnostics and procedures over the last three weeks in the Tower. The results are always the same: the visions, pain, and memory loss are likely psychological, not physical in origin.

Reed ignores me. “You know, some people think you murdered your crew for a larger share of the find before taking that escape pod.”

I stiffen, hands clenching against the urge to hit him.

“Then you hitched a ride back here with the *Raleigh* team, gambling that we’d buy this whole amnesia and psychotic break story and you could hide in the Tower.” He waves his hand around, as though conjuring an image from thin air.

The Verux Peace and Rehabilitation Tower is a dumping ground for all the broken and damaged. Including me. Verux has more ships, more crews working in space than any other corporation. And sometimes docking clamps don’t disengage. Sometimes people can’t handle the isolation of years in space. Sometimes a coolant leak contaminates the oxygen, killing off brain cells before it can be corrected. Shit happens. Sometimes even to you. Sometimes even if you can’t remember it.

I swallow hard against my dry-as-dust throat. “My crew ... they’re dead, but I didn’t kill them.”

“You sure you want to stick with that story?” Reed asks with a terse smile. He holds up a folded piece of paper—real paper, which means it came from the highest levels of Verux. “We’ve been monitoring K147,” he says.

Just the sector name makes me flinch. I lost everything there.

“So?” I ask.

“We’ve got movement, Claire,” Max says gently.

Not possible. My lips go numb, and a loud hum starts up in my ears. “The *Aurora*?” I whisper.

Max nods.

“Your ghost ship is on the move, Kovalik,” Reed injects with smug satisfaction.

Max leans forward in his chair to meet my eyes. “Maybe it’s time you tell us everything again. From the beginning.”

2

THEN

Sector K147, two months ago

I have a loose screw. Somewhere.

Amazing. We've been living on other planets and moons for a hundred years and visiting space for even longer than that, and still, a tiny piece of metal with misaligned grooves can fuck everything up.

"How's it going out there, Kovalik?" Voller's voice pierces the quiet of my helmet, drowning out the soft and soothing rush of oxygen. Somehow he's louder out here than he is in person.

I ignore him.

"Kovalik," he sings out my name. "Hellloooo?"

"It's fine. Better if you'd shut up and let me concentrate." I grab for the screwdriver dangling on a tool tether attached to my suit.

He sighs, the noise right on the edge of a petulant whine. "Lourdes says we've still got a wobble in the signal, TL. And we're going to miss the rendezvous with the hauler if we don't leave soon." As if I'm unaware of those things as team lead. But then again, Voller excels at stating the obvious and being exceptionally annoying while doing so. After twenty-six months in close quarters, I'm ready to murder him for that as much as for the snoring that rumbles through the air vents into my quarters, keeping me awake. Unfortunately, he's a good pilot.

I ignore him and focus on checking the beacon hardware, particularly where we've merged new with old. Software updates can be uploaded via signal from anywhere, but hardware? Hardware is hands-on. And even with years of practice and gloves designed for delicate work, it takes concentration. Snap off a piece or lose too many screws and it's a whole operation to get replacements all the way out here at the edge of the solar system.

Not that there are any replacements, as this is the last beacon. Not just for this tour or this sector, but the *last* last. For us, anyway. The next time the commweb—a

network of beacons throughout the solar system designed to boost ship and colony transmissions for virtually instantaneous communication—needs an upgrade, a Verux SmarTech machine will be at the controls.

The machine will probably lose fewer screws.

But no need for commweb maintenance teams means no need for commweb maintenance team leads. No need for me.

This is it. The last time I'll be out here. Not just as TL, but forever. No more peace and quiet of the vast emptiness. No more endless field of tiny stars surrounding me. No more ship with bright lights to beckon me back from the dark.

I shove that thought down. Way down.

Maybe it's the receiver. I slide my hand along the metal support structure, pulling myself along to the other side, trying to avoid getting tangled in the process. My tethers to the beacon and our ship, a commweb sniffer called the L1N4—LINA—keep me from floating away but they're also a pain in the ass.

I tighten up every screw I can find, and eventually, my comm channel crackles. "You got it, TL," Lourdes, my comms specialist, says. Her husky voice is softer in my ear. "Cycling up now. Come back in from the cold."

The gentle tug on the red LINA tether tells me that someone is at the cable controls, ready to reel me in on my signal. Probably Kane, my mech and second-in-command. He doesn't like other people touching the mechanics of LINA, even something as simple as a winch. Anything can break, he says. And repairs are limited out here.

Not that that matters now. I'm fairly sure LINA will be scrapped once we're done anyway. She was already old when I inherited her with this sector assignment. Battered, scratched up, smelling of overheated metal, with shitty airlock seals that are pretty much a full-time job to keep hard-foam-repairing even with Verux swapping them out for equally shitty replacements every time we finish a job.

But LINA is home.

After unhooking the blue tether from the beacon structure, I reattach the far end to the designated loop on my suit. As I do, my gloved fingers brush over the carabiner that connects me to the red tether, to LINA and the future I no longer have.

My whole life I've wanted nothing more than to be out here. Away from everyone. That is the beauty of space. There's nothing out here. Sure, stars, planets, and communication beacons, but no people.

And now ... that's all over.

For a moment, I consider it, my hand hovering over the latch. It would be so easy: flip the safety catch, unhook myself from the tether, and just ... push off. Float away. Eventually, I'd have to decide between freezing to death or suffocating as my suit ran

out of juice, but it would be *my* choice. My choice out here among the stars, the distant glimmering planets, and the absolute silence of space.

“Kovalik?” Kane asks. “Are you ready?”

No, I’m not. I’m not meant to be dirt-side. Not for long and certainly not forever. Without a ship, you’re trapped. Bad things happen when you can’t get away. Just the thought of being permanently gravity-bound and surrounded by so many people again makes my breath rush in and out faster.

Guess that means suffocation will probably end up being a problem first.

“Team Lead Kovalik, do you copy?” Kane repeats, his voice taking on urgency.

“Claire?” Lourdes breaks in.

“Come on, Kovalik.” Voller sounds irritated. “I have a redhead and a packet of Scotch waiting for me on the *Ginsburg*. Just because you can’t handle—”

“Shut up, Voller,” Kane says.

My fingers settle on the safety catch.

“Kovalik. Don’t move. I’m on my way,” he adds.

My vision blurs with tears, smearing the star field into a general haze. Of course Kane wouldn’t just let me go. He would make sure they retrieved me, like a rubber duck plucked out of bathwater. He’s good that way. Never mind that a duck, rubber or otherwise, has no place outside the water.

It would take him fifteen minutes to get suited up and through the airlock on a secondary tether, and in the meantime, per standard protocol, our ship’s log would be recording everything, transmitting back to Verux.

There might be one thing worse than never being up here again, and that would be being locked up in the Verux Peace and Rehabilitation Tower on Earth. In Florida. What’s left of it anyway. That’s where the company sends all their broken eggs. I’ve heard that once you’re in, you never leave, not even for a look up at the stars.

I take a deep breath and blink to clear my vision. “Negative,” I say, forcing my fingers away from my tether. “I copy. Five by five. Momentary ... glitch.”

“Yeah, right,” Voller mutters.

I ignore him. “Ready when you are, Behrens.”

Kane retracts the tether, slowly pulling me to safety, even though it feels like the exact opposite.

★ ★ ★

“What was that about?” Kane asks, as soon as I’m out of the airlock and stripping out of my enviro suit. I hang it, along with my helmet, on the peg that’s marked with my name above it on a curling piece of magnetic tape. It’s hard not to view that bit of

flawed tape—and everything else on board—with an overly sentimental fondness, simply because it’s about to be gone.

I avoid Kane’s gaze as I yank my jumpsuit back on over my T-shirt and compression shorts. Blue eyes that bright are rare these days, outside of old film, and it feels like Kane’s see right through me.

“Nothing.” I run my fingers through my hair, the sweat-dampened blond strands sticking to my forehead and hanging in my eyes. Now that I’m back inside, my momentary flight of suicidal fantasy seems foolish and pathetic. I could have put my entire crew in jeopardy by forcing them to attempt a rescue. We may not always get along, but keeping them safe is my job. A job that I wanted so badly I’d been contemplating offing myself at the loss of it.

My face hot, I push past Kane and stick my head over the railing for the ramp to the lower deck.

“Nysus,” I call.

No response.

“Nysus!” I shout.

A second later, he leans out of his favorite hidey-hole, the “server maintenance bay,” which is little more than a nook with a door, near the engine room. “What?” He blinks up at me, spiky black hair ruffled from his hands, gaze dreamy and impatient, still mostly focused on whatever he was doing before I called for him. Probably something on the Forum.

“We set?” I ask.

He nods. “Bank’s open.”

Ignoring Kane still hovering nearby, I turn and head up the ramp to our primary level, then down the narrow alleyway through the small galley to the bridge. Kane follows me but more slowly because he has to bend slightly to keep from smacking his forehead on the overheads. LINA, like all sniffers, is small. We’re a short-term vessel. The haulers bring us out and bring us back, handle resupplies. So, there’s just enough room on board for five crew—pilot, comms, tech, mech, and team lead—and the equipment necessary for our work.

The bridge itself is barely bigger than those old-fashioned space capsules, the ones Verux has on display in their company museum. There’s enough room for three of us in here at a time. Four, if someone’s willing to loom in the doorway. But there are seats only for comms, pilot, and me, the team lead. I end up standing most of the time anyway.

“Status?” I ask Lourdes, who’s folded up in her chair at the communications board, one side of her headphones pressed to her ear. Her curly dark hair has grown

in again where she shaved it, and she's braided it all to one side, away from her preferred listening side.

She swivels to look at me, her expression cautious. A thin gold necklace gleams against her brown skin, the tiny matching capsule at the center containing a tightly rolled scrap of scripture. Her verse, assigned by her church. "Testing alignment and connection now. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, more sharply than I meant to.

Her eyebrows go up in surprise, eyes widening with hurt, and I relent.

"Just got a little ... light-headed."

Voller, sprawled out in his chair behind the controls, with his safety restraints dangling and dragging the floor, turns to make sure I see him roll his eyes.

Lourdes starts to say something, but then her gaze goes distant and she presses her hand to the headphone against her ear.

"We should talk," Kane says to me, the second he emerges from the corridor, as if Lourdes and Voller were not present. But even if they weren't, this is not a conversation I'm having.

I ignore him and look to Voller. "Are we good to go?"

"As soon as you give the word," he says, cracking his knuckles. It's his tell in poker. I don't play with them, but I've watched enough to know. This is what he does when he has a decent hand. He's impatient, eager.

Kane steps closer. "Kovalik..."

"It was nothing," I say, and try to make it sound like the truth. "You do your precheck?"

"Hey, guys," Lourdes says. "I think I've got something."

"Yeah, Kane, it was nothing," Voller says, mocking. "If Kovalik here wants to become a permanent resident of K-fucking-middle-of-nowhere-147, whose business is—"

I glare at him. "That is not what I was—"

"Shut up, Voller," Kane says at the same time. "I'm the designated medical—"

"Who wants to get into her crazy pants?" Voller offers.

In shock, I go still.

"Watch your mouth," Kane says sharply.

"Why are you always defending her?" Voller demands. "We're not a real team. We all just got stuck with a shitty assignment for the last go." He shoots me a disgusted look. Clearly, I am part of said shittiness. "Who the fuck requests permanent assignment out here?"

Voller is not wrong. Under normal circumstances, this is an eighteen-month gig or more, with no breaks, no close-by colonies to visit or the chance to sleep in your own

bed. No one ever *wants* to be assigned to the most distant section of the commweb, L52 through K147.

No one, of course, except me.

I asked for this section when I made team lead eight years ago, and Verux couldn't wait to unload it. Which I guess gained me a bit of a reputation. But there's more freedom out here where no one is watching and usually a new team with each go-round, which I prefer. Even with the bonuses, it's rare for people to volunteer for the L–K run.

This time, especially. Because it's the last time, the rotation is even longer than usual. Twenty-six months and counting, as we do final checks and minute tweaks, the final human hands to touch the beacons before the machines take over.

Kane took the assignment only because he needed the extra money. Voller ended up out here by default, all the better sectors taken by pilots who don't have a permanent smirk and possible personality disorder. Lourdes is still green, just out of training, and forced to go wherever the company sends her. And Nysus, well, Nysus is Nysus. He doesn't care what section we're in as long as he has access to the Forum.

"Show some respect," Kane says, pushing past me to stand over Voller's chair. "You're not in charge here."

"Maybe I should be," Voller says defiantly, his gaze moving to me, daring me to say something.

I should interject, shut this down before it gets physical. Kane is right; I am the one in charge, theoretically. At least for a little while longer. But I can't seem to make myself speak up. It's as if leaving that tether in place took the last of my energy and I've got nothing left to give now. Besides, what's the point?

"Hey!" Lourdes shouts, catching all of our attention. "I said, I think I've got something."

After a moment, Kane steps back to stand next to me, but his cheeks are still flushed with anger. When Kane is involved, cooler heads—his—will usually prevail. Usually.

Tensions always run high at the end of a rotation in my experience, but the two of them have been at each other's throats from almost the moment they walked on board at the start of their assignment with me. Kane might be in charge of the engine and the function of LINA, but Voller is the one who controls her. They are perpetually locked in conflict, one in charge of the body, the other in charge of the brain.

"Oh, good," Voller says to Lourdes, smoothing a hand over his wrinkled T-shirt. Today's shirt says FUCK ME with a smiley face sticking its tongue out. I can't tell if

it's meant as an invitation or an expletive. Knowing Voller, probably both. "You can do your job. Can we get out of here now?"

Lourdes ignores him. "It's an automated distress signal. I think," she says. "One of those R-5 repeating beacons."

My interest flickers vaguely to life, surprising me. "Out here?" I ask. There's nothing out here. Verux's exploratory vessels should all be well out of range, even with the upgraded network. Unless one of them came back early.

"But it's weird. No ship name, no personalized message, no other data. Just coordinates and the preprogrammed SOS. And it's not transmitting on the emergency channel." Lourdes pauses. "At least not on the emergency channel we use now." Her forehead wrinkled in thought, she swivels in her chair and picks up her tablet, fingers flying across the surface in a query.

"It's just an echo. Old data. The new hardware probably has something to do with it," Voller says, sounding bored.

"Nysus?" I ask the air. "Are you listening?" It only took me a couple days on this tour to realize that my brilliant but introverted tech had wired the internal comm channels on the bridge and common areas to stay open, permanently. He could always hear what was happening, even if he chose not to respond.

"It's ... possible," Nysus says after a moment. As always, he sounds distant, distracted. Like he's on an entirely different ship than the rest of us and we caught him at a bad time. "The upgrade allows the network to pick up weaker signals. It could be that we have an overlap, fuzz."

"See? Told you. Ghost signal." Voller swivels in his chair, tapping in coordinates, and the engine pulls itself from idle with a rumble that I feel through the decking. "Let's go. Bigger and better things ahead. Even for you, Kane."

Kane, leaning against the bulkhead, flips him the finger.

"Or it could be that we're picking up a signal from a ship at a greater distance than expected. The new hardware is one hundred and twenty percent more efficient," Nysus says.

Voller groans.

Unreasonable hope sparks bright desperation in me. "If it's an emergency, we're obligated to try and render aid," I say, after a moment, trying to sound normal, as if this were not the stay of execution that I'd given up waiting for.

"No, no, you don't." Voller turns in his chair and stabs a finger in my direction. "I know what you're thinking. If we miss the rendezvous with the *Ginsburg*, we're stuck out here another month. With no extra pay. Just because you have nowhere to go, rejected for transport and stuck at a desk job for the rest of your life, some has-been wannabe captain, doesn't mean that's true for the rest of us."

His words ring out shockingly loud in the small space. It's nothing Kane, Lourdes, and Nysus don't already know, but hearing the facts spoken aloud brings a new level of humiliation.

Shame heats my face, and I can't meet Kane's eyes. If he needed any more proof of what I was contemplating out there, on my last space walk ...

"I say, if it's not on the emergency channel, it's not an emergency." Voller raises his hand. "Who's with me?"

"Voller," Kane begins, shaking his head in disgust.

"Except this is not a goddamn democracy," I say, startling myself with the fervor in my tone. I'm not one for forcing my authority down anyone's throat. Being team lead was never my aspiration, just a side effect of my desire to stay out here as long as possible.

Kane's head jerks up, his mouth open in surprise.

"Actually," Lourdes speaks up, "about that. I think it *is* an emergency channel."

"But you just said—" Kane begins.

"It's just not the one we use now," Lourdes says. "They're on the old channel." She holds up her tablet. "I looked it up. When Verux did the last big upgrade, after they bought out CitiFutura, they changed the emergency channel designation. Fifteen, maybe twenty years ago. Before our time."

Before *their* time, but not mine. Possibly not Kane's, either. He's only a few years younger than I am, I think, and fifteen years ago, I was eighteen, walking out of a Verux-sponsored group home and on board my first Verux sniffer for a training assignment.

"I remember that," I say. "The merger." That was big news even in the home.

Nysus speaks up. "She's right."

"Why would anyone use an old channel?" Kane asks.

"I'm not sure it's a deliberate decision. I mean, we learned about it in class. Automated distress beacons are ... automated. They get triggered, they go off as programmed. Old channel, new channel." Lourdes lifts her shoulder in a shrug. "Just means someone's out there pretty far with some seriously old hardware."

That rules out a Verux exploratory vessel. They were all top of the line when they left a few years ago.

"How far?" I ask.

"According to these coordinates? Into the Kuiper Belt, for sure," Lourdes says. "Ninety-some hours from our current location."

"No," Voller says, shaking his head. "No way. That's the opposite direction we need to go to meet the *Ginsburg*, and way the hell outside our assignment."

“That’s no one’s assignment,” I remind him. The last of the commweb beacons stop well before the asteroid belt. It’s the end of the road, so to speak. Just a bunch of rocks, ice, and dwarf planets too small to be of interest. Billions of kilometers away from everything else. Which doesn’t sound so bad at the moment.

“Exactly,” Voller snaps. “It’s in the middle of fucking nowhere, and it’s dangerous. We’d be off charted and tagged space, and there’s all kinds of random shit floating around out there. The company doesn’t want a commweb maintenance team messing around with that. If you’re so worried about the signal, contact Dispatch and tell them to send somebody else.”

“It’ll be months before they can get another ship out here, though,” Lourdes points out. “If they have to launch a—”

“They’re not going to launch anything,” Voller says. “I’m telling you, it’s a ghost signal.”

The sound of them arguing makes the steady ringing in my left ear worse. I have limited hearing on that side. Childhood illness. The only sounds that come through loud and clear are the perpetual buzz and crackle of tinnitus. Verux doctors tried to correct it when I was a kid, but all they succeeded in doing was making the tinnitus louder and clearer. They wanted to try again, but I was done.

Lourdes straightens in her chair, flicking the braided ends of her hair over her shoulder. “So you’re the communications expert now, Voller? Is that it?”

“Oh, come on, you’re basically a goddamn trainee and—”

“Enough,” I say sharply.

The three of them look to me, and I sense the expectant silence on the open channel from Nysus.

“Someone is in trouble. We’re obligated to try and render aid. Chapter five, regulation thirty-three.” Of course, those same regs also suggest contacting Verux Dispatch first, if at all possible. But that wouldn’t be the first regulation that we ignored out here, away from the corporate types who made the rules without ever leaving Earth gravity. We’re also supposed to be in Verux uniform and strapped in at all times. As if there’s anyone else out here to see us. As if there’s anything we might run into. And if our micrograv generator fails, we’ll be in more trouble than safety restraints could help.

Besides, if we contact Dispatch, they’ll just hold us up to get permission from succeeding layers of management, each passing the buck until they reached someone actually willing to make a decision. If someone’s really in trouble, every minute counts.

“Voller, set a course to the coordinates Lourdes gives you,” I say.

Voller opens his mouth to protest, and next to me, Kane tenses. But I’ve got this.

“I might be a has-been, wannabe captain,” I say. “But if you want that shiny new job of yours to stay yours, you’re going to do what I say until we’re back on the *Ginsburg*. You might not care what I think, but I bet your new captain, a *real* captain”—I can pretend that designation doesn’t hurt, sure—“will have a different opinion.”

With a sullen look, Voller closes his mouth with an audible click, and then swivels in his chair to face forward.

Lourdes shoots me a grin. She’s a good kid. With a better future than all of us. And I’m glad to have been part of that on my last rotation, if nothing else.

“Okay, let me know when you’re ready,” she says to Voller, with exaggerated patience.

I wait for his response, just in case he tries to push her. “Kid, I was born ready,” he says, sounding sulky. But his hands fly across the boards without hesitation.

Lourdes rolls her eyes but recites the coordinates.

Turning away, I head for my quarters. It already feels too ... close in here. Too many people, too many emotions. Not to mention the sensation of having just escaped the guillotine with a close haircut.

Voller was right; I might have just earned myself another month out here. But at the end of that month, there will be no continuance, no mysterious signal to chase.

I’m done. After this, no more ship, no crisp pinpoint of stars on an eternal black background, no more control.

And *people* everywhere.

The thought sends panic scabbling at my ribs like claws again.

I’ll have to find a place to live. Some tiny closet-sized cubicle to call home, where I’ll be able to hear my neighbor coughing for the next thirty years as I shuttle back and forth on sweaty, overcrowded pub tran between “home” and my desk with thousands of mind-numbing pages of training manuals to review and revise based on my “years of valuable experience.” I’m only thirty-three, almost thirty-four, and it feels like my life is over.

Kane follows me. I sense him behind me, the question before he speaks it. I pause at the threshold of the tiny galley. I can still smell the orange-y scent of Lourdes’s tea in the air.

“I said I’m fine,” I say. If I turn around now, Kane will be a few paces back, arms folded over his chest, forehead furrowed in concern. In fifteen years, I’ve worked with eight different crews, thirty-six different team members. Some more skilled than others. Some ... more challenging. Leave it to the last team, my last rotation, to contain the one person I’ve encountered with a better bullshit detector than mine and the moral compunction to use it.

“I don’t believe you,” Kane says quietly. “Talk to me.”

Because of his extra training as our medic, Kane knows more about me than anyone else on board. That should make interacting with him so much worse. People who’ve heard my story usually can’t help themselves, staring at me with disgust or a mix of pity and prurient curiosity that feels like a violation. But Kane is different.

I’m caught between the impulse to get angry, to push back and reinforce my long-guarded boundaries, and the desire to face him, to open my mouth and let the words come spilling out. The latter feels like a physical force pushing against my insides. He would listen, I know, his gaze carefully fixed on me.

Just the idea of that makes my chest tight and warm with emotion.

And that cannot happen.

I could blame it on the length of this last assignment or the shitty vulnerability that comes from being booted out of the only job you’ve ever loved. Maybe I would feel this connection with anyone with a kind face and a sympathetic ear who happened to be nearby at the impending worst moment of my life.

But it’s more than that. I’ve heard Kane and his daughter talking on video chat a few times over the past couple of years. The warmth and affection in his voice set off this powerful and dangerous ache in me.

Kane makes me feel like somebody. He makes me *feel*.

Jesus. Is there anything more powerful, more dangerous than that?

I close my trembling hands into fists, trying to ignore the damp sweat on my palms. “I don’t have anything to say, and we’ve got work to do.” Never mind that this is part of Kane’s job, checking up on us. Particularly when one of us seems inclined to push off into the nothingness.

Kane sighs. “Claire. You scare the hell out of me sometimes, you know that?”

Startled, I turn to look at him. “Why?”

He eyes me carefully, and I force myself to remain still beneath that gaze. “It’s normal to be upset that things are changing, to worry about what the future holds. But you?” He shakes his head. “I’ve never met anyone so determined to prove that they don’t care. It’s terrifying.”

Kane’s words strike a soft spot at my core with swift and painful accuracy, like a driving punch, and I recoil, my teeth landing on the edge of my tongue and sparking surprised tears.

But I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin to face him head-on. “Then I guess it’s a good thing you won’t have to put up with it for much longer.”

“Claire…” he begins. “That’s not what I meant—”

“And I don’t care what you meant,” I say. “See? You were right.”

His jaw snaps shut, and a dark ruddy color floods his cheeks.

“Check with Nysus, make sure he’s working with Lourdes to track the signal.” A bullshit assignment because rabid dogs and the reincarnation of his personal hero, Berkeley Blue, couldn’t keep Nysus away from a mystery signal, but an assignment nonetheless.

I turn away from Kane and quicken my pace, trying to ignore him and the odd mix of pride and hurt welling up inside me. Pride that I’ve managed to at least partially fool him; hurt because I still somehow expected him to see through the act.