

1.

# HUNTER

8 HOURS REMAINING

**THE GUY FROM MARS** didn't know I was coming.

"Hi?" he says, with an upward inflection that asks who I am, what I want, and why I'm standing here when he's already checked everybody off his list. I can tell he doesn't like loose ends. Messes up his filing system, probably.

He's guarding the airlock with a tablet in one hand, wearing a United Nations jumpsuit and a confused expression. I'm not sure what kind of formal processing I expected, but this is an underwhelming way to arrive on a new planet.

This guy is here to welcome diplomats and corporate officers from all over Earth and the orbital colonies before they shuttle down to the surface. You'd think the UN would have laid on whatever flourishes they could manage for our arrival, but instead it's me and one nervous bureaucrat called . . . I squint at his badge. **NATHAN**, apparently.

“This is the shuttle, right?” I prompt. “All aboard for Mars?”

“I thought I had everyone already,” Nathan says, frowning at his tablet, then looking up at me with a narrowed gaze, as if I might be a hitcher. “What’s your destination?”

I unleash a smile on him. Never hurts, right? “I’m here to transfer to the GravesUP compound.”

“Then nobody at GravesUP knows you’re coming. I’ve logged in everyone expected for this shuttle.”

*True, Nathan.* My mother and sister have no idea I’m on the way. Warning them would have meant giving up my advantage, and I didn’t spend four months lying about my location, crammed into a tin can of a freighter and eating meals out of foil pouches for nothing.

“It’s a change of plan,” I explain, which has the benefit of being true. “The captain was saying there’s no rides from Orbital down to the Graves compound today because of a dust storm. She thought I could get a lift to the UN base—to Pax—and then have my guys send a rover over to pick me up.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Nathan sighs, like a man used to nobody respecting paperwork the way he does. “Got a name?”

I actually look down at myself, as if my body might have somehow transformed while I wasn’t looking. I literally can’t remember the last time this happened.

Our parents always kept our faces out of the newscasts—the best way to keep safe is to be unrecognizable. But I don’t spend much time with the general public, so occasionally I forget that most people don’t know me on sight. Everyone I encounter in my daily life sure does.

I've never been a fan of *don't you know who I am?*, but it's going to be hard to avoid it this time.

"My name's Hunter Graves."

"All right, let's see if there's a free seat. I gotta tell you, that dust storm's messed up a lot of people's plans," he says, tapping at his screen as I mentally count down.

*Ten, nine, eight . . .*

"Actually, the dust has nearly reached Pax too, but we should be able to—"

*. . . seven, six, five . . .*

He looks up. He blinks. "I'm sorry, did you say *Hunter Graves?*"

*There it is.*

"At your service," I reply.

"As in . . . as in *Graves?*"

As in, this is basically my family's planet, is what he means. We were fastest. We were first. And everything here, including the orbital platform we're standing on, runs on GravesUP systems.

"That's me," I tell him, hefting my bag on my shoulder in a subtle show of impatience. "Pleased to meet you, Nathan."

The bag isn't uncomfortable. It weighs exactly ten kilos—or at least it did on Earth. It'll be three-point-something on Mars. I took the standard personal effects allotment, in some kind of misguided attempt to show Mom that I was all business, and then regretted it every day of the four-month trip from Earth. I should have brought a stack of luggage taller than me—at a minimum, some decent bedding, some media gear worth using, and rations that actually qualified as food.

Seriously, I skipped breakfast this morning on the freighter. The calories just weren't worth the suffering. I'll be at the GravesUP compound in a few hours, diving face-first into the brunch of my dreams.

"Hunter Graves," poor old Nathan repeats, staring at me like I'm about to disappear, or start sparkling, or something.

"Hunter Graves," I confirm. "Of GravesUP Industries, on my way to join my family. I'll really owe you one if you can get me down to Pax today."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Graves. No problem at all," he replies, trying to . . . stand to attention, I think? "Why don't you get yourself settled on the shuttle, and I'll get the paperwork figured out for you. When you arrive, just tell the port crew you need a message transmitted to your compound, and they'll get that done for you."

"Nathan, you're the best."

Slipping past him, I stride onto the waiting shuttle, stow my bag, and sink down into the last remaining chair. The shuttle's crowded, mostly with folks in United Nations jumpsuits, and it smells like ozone and feet. *Seriously, get me to my family compound. I have seen the real world, and it's a red-hot no from me.*

It's strange, walking into an unknown crowd like this with zero security—feels like I left the house in just my underwear—but nobody seems to pay me any special attention.

As I pull on my shoulder straps, I can see the red planet below through the viewport. The ground's rough, the gleam of the sun just gilding the horizon as it starts to rise. Huge craters look like little polka dots, and mountain ranges are flattened by distance.

This is home sweet home for the next while—assuming Mom doesn't sling me back up into orbit and onto the first ship heading for Earth. I'm sure it'll be my twin sister's first suggestion.

Despite everything that's coming, I feel an unexpected tug toward the planet below. From Earth this place is nothing more than a red star, but up close it's so solid, so real.

*Hey there, Mars. This should be fun.*

2.

## CLEO

7 HOURS, 55 MINUTES REMAINING

**BREAKFAST IS THE BEST** time of day to hustle people—they're still sleepy.

I scan the Pax cafeteria for a target, and zero in on a woman who's trying to carry a breakfast tray in one hand and a kid in the other while herding an extra kid through the busy morning crowd with a bump of her hip.

"Let me take that for you," I say, swooping in and relieving her of the tray before she has a chance to protest. "There are some tables on the other side of the hall there, we'll get you settled."

She glances at me for a moment, but she doesn't care that she doesn't recognize me. The usual population of the United Nations Mars base is about fifteen hundred people, but at least a third of that turns over weekly, as people head out to national

or corporate compounds or return from duty. That's what's helped me stay anonymous in the three months since I got here.

It's no effort to let the crowd part me from my target, and a moment later I'm twisting away with her breakfast tray, ducking behind a couple of Martian-tall engineers and on my way to freedom.

*But, Cleo, I hear you ask. Why don't you just grab one of those yummy, yummy muffins yourself? Why did you steal that poor woman's breakfast? The line's really not that long!*

Well, to get breakfast, I'd need a registered handprint. And to get my handprint registered, I'd need to be a legal resident of Mars. And that's where we run into a problem.

I hitched a lift in on the sly and scammed my way down to Pax, but getting to a larger station is proving a lot harder than I anticipated. More often than not I'm hungry, and every minute of every day is spent figuring out how to blend in—because if I'm caught, I'll be deported quicker than you can say *Cleo has not-so-nice friends waiting for her back on Earth*. The life of a hitcher isn't all I hoped for, to be perfectly honest.

By this point, I know my way around Pax better than most of the residents, partly because I hide out in places they'd never go. I have to be creative, because every centimeter of space here is precious. Most of Pax Station is underground. If you flew over the top of us, the solar arrays would be most of what gave us away—big black panels angled toward the distant sun. This place is all about efficiency—nothing like the chaotic Jerhattan neighborhoods I grew up in.

Lucky for me, though, the hustles aren't that different, and the people here are the kind of easy marks I could have taken before I learned to read.

I scoot through the crowd and try not to reflect on the fact that, for all the people here who are pretty scammable, I'm not really coming out on top.

Still, right now I'm cruising out the cafeteria door, and taking a left to head toward water reclamation and the hydrogen plant. I've got muffins to spare, so not everything's terrible. I'll hole up somewhere in storage to eat them, and then I'll go check the transport bays. Optimism comes easier on a full belly.

Maybe today's the day I'll find a way onto a transport to one of the really big settlements, where an easier life awaits.

Maybe today's my lucky day, just waiting to begin.