

Chapter 43

Celia heard the automatic locks disengage as Prince Osmond's fingers slid around the well-patinated handle. No one without the proper biosignature entered or exited this room. He pulled open the thick stone door, and they all four stepped out into the dim wood-paneled hall. Getting out of the Prince's private study was a good start, but they needed to find their way off the well-guarded royal estate and escape this private planet before the Soul Guard Auditors arrived.

"I insist you return to catalog the entire collection, Master Finwë." Prince Osmond stopped in the center of the hall and addressed the darkness. "Is everything set?"

Celia's stomach tightened.

"As planned, your Grace." A voice grumbled from the shadows.

She backed into the open doorway, straining to see the lurker.

Pawley stepped into the light, wearing a footman's uniform. Now clear of the Prince's sealed study, Celia's TexCom system blipped back to life with a backlog of missed messages. She felt like something had already happened. But what?

Status? @Ph'avellCWO5

"Excellent. And the sleeping arrangements?" The Prince asked.

Please report. @Ph'avellCWO5

"All guests have retired and Lady Vickers' rooms are ready. Perkins insisted on escorting the Gurch and Thandarian back to the guest house." Pawley answered.

"My gardener has quite the soft spot for strays." The Prince looked back at his chief of security. "And tomorrow's guests?"

The guests are gone, but they're still a lot of footmen out here. We'll stand-to, staged for a hard EVAC. Over. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia struggled to piece the timeline of messages together and keep a focus on the Prince.

A thick-necked fella in a bird suit told us you're staying at the house and 'suggested' we go back to the cottage. I ain't leaving until I know where you are. Over. @Ph'avellCWO5

"They'll arrive before breakfast." Pawley's scarred face grinned into a warped grid.

C, I think Ph'avell may take on the entire security team. @CVickersLCDR

Perkins offered to take us back. Said there's something happening. Over. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia needed to defuse the situation.

She wrapped her arms around Finwë and Jacey's shoulders, "If you haven't guessed, we're invited to stay in the main house tonight."

The Soul Guard will be here in the morning. What's your twenty? @CVickersLCDR

Jacey made an anxious moan.

"A token of my appreciation." Prince Osmond nodded. "My man will escort you to your rooms." Prince Osmond's pale skin glowed in the warm light of the study.

We need to get off this planet. Stand by. @Ph'avellCWO5

The Prince had played them into a corner. Either the Auditors convict them in custody or else a court of public opinion would, if they escape. Celia couldn't see a way out that didn't end in tragedy.

On the plus side, Doc hacked the access gates and the estate lighting grid. So on your go, we'll kill the lights, and you get to the tunnels. We'll link up down there and beat it to the skyport before anyone draws a bead on us. Just say when. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia glanced past the main corridor intersection and remembered sneaking through the servant doors when they were kids. Not much of an escape if she misremembered.

"If my grandad could see me now." Jacey said.

"You honor us, your Grace." Finwë bowed in the open doorway.

"Excellent. We all benefit through cooperation. Wouldn't you agree, my dear?"

So long as cooperating meant serving the Prince.

"Yes, Your Highness." Celia gritted out a smile.

When. @CVickersLCDR

Copy. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia coaxed Jacey closer as she readied to run. She jumped when the angry strikes of dress heels rounded the corner. *Damn.*

Stand to Chief, Emilia stormed in. @CVickersLCDR

Emilia wobbled some as she took in the scene.

“Isn’t this lovely, father? You abduct my best friend to leave me nursemaid for my witless brother.”

“Sorry to abandon you amongst your family and friends.”

Prince Osmond pushed the study doors wide open.

“Shall we resume our discourse on pre-Folding Enari culture?” The Prince bunched his lower lip up like a heavy-handed politician playing up to a crowd.

Emilia peered into the study below heavy eyelids. Celia’s heart sank at the smell of wine on her friend’s breath. The Princess’ eyes narrowed as she searched for gaps in her father’s defenses. Celia had seen this look before—it never ended well.

“Maybe we should send for the rest of Celia’s companions?”

“It’s late.” Prince Osmond said.

Emilia glared, “True. We mustn’t keep the Auditors waiting.”

Celia caught a hint of surprise in the Prince’s face.

“Why do you insist on embarrassing me in front of my guests?” Emilia hissed.

“One day, Gods willing, you’ll understand the importance of family and find the will to do what’s necessary to protect it. Your brother would have understood.” The Prince tipped his head toward the bodyguard. “It seems the Princess is tired.”

Emilia sagged at the comparison. Celia had seen it their whole lives. Hunter could do no wrong. Even when he did. While Emilia could do no right. This was cruel, even for the Prince.

“I don’t need to be put to bed,” Emilia slapped Pawley away. “Selling someone out because of the fur on their skin will not keep us safe. You’re as bad as the monsters you summoned. I know what’s important, and what’s right.” Emilia set her jaw. “Maybe Hunter did too...”

Shit. Things are going south, Chief. Stand by. @CVickersLCDR

The Prince nodded.

Pawley’s massive hands enveloped Emilia’s arms. “Let’s call it a night, Your Highness.”

“You will *all* remain in your quarters until the Auditors arrive. Now I suggest you follow Pawley.” Prince Osmond gestured to the main hallway.

Execute. Execute. Execute. @CVickersLCDR

A holoscreen opened before the bodyguard as Emilia struggled in his grip.

“Your Grace, the other two are escaping down the main driveway in the carriage. I’m

dispatching pursuit vehicles." Pawley said.

"What a splendid first impression this will make for your new masters, father." Emilia hissed.

The hallway went black.

Celia dragged Jacey toward the servants' door a dozen strides away. A disorienting negative of that last moment flashed in her retina with every blink, as she strained and stretched forward in the blackness for escape. They had to get out. Gods knew what would happen if they fell into the hands of the Auditors.

Fin, grab onto Jacey and follow across the hallway. @CVickersLCDR

A swell of audible confusion from the Prince, Emilia, and Pawley filled the dark.

Emilia's heels drummed against the floor as she howled, "Let go of me!"

"What's going on?" The Prince bellowed.

"I *said*, let go." The Princess strained.

"Code three. Code three. Alpha and Beta teams, to the Prince's study." Pawley growled.

A resounding "Oof," punctuated the awkward scuffle, followed by the thud of a body falling.

Go. Door. Celia Vickers. Return soon. @Fin00

"Who dares..." Prince Osmond's voice wheezed in the pitch.

Where the hells did Finwë go? The escape was hardly a plan, but it was all they had. And when did he learn to use his TexCom? Security was coming, and they needed to go. Celia kicked off her heels into the darkness; no dancing tonight.

Fin, we have to go now. @CVickersLCDR

Go. Soon. Wait. @Fin00

Celia's outstretched hand slapped the wall, and she let out a breath. Emilia struggle with Pawley in the pitch while Prince Osmond hollered obscenity-laced orders. *Where the hells is that door?* Celia's hand swept across the paneling, searching for the hidden handle. Then beams from photon emitters appeared down the main hall. Time was running out. She heard a loud thud followed by louder Gurch curses in the black.

Fin, where are you? @CVickersLCDR

"I am here, Celia Vickers." The warm air from Finwë's whisper brushed her cheek while his

firm hands led her to the now open service door.

A thunder of footfalls approached as white-hot light sliced the darkness.

Jacey led the way down the stairway, and Celia followed Finwë. *The door was still open!* She stopped halfway down and doubled back. They had to cover their escape. Weapon lights reflected off the polished floors, silhouetting the open door. Celia's arm couldn't reach the edge of the door. She would have to lean out into the hall. They were out of time.

Ma'am, where are you? @JCortEgn02

A sparkle caught Celia's eye as her fingers found the door's edge. It was the charm bracelet Celia gave her. The Princess looked confused and scared. She wanted to tell her everything would be okay, like during thunderstorms at school. But they were no longer kids. And things weren't alright. Quintessa entered the corridor, and Emilia rushed to embrace her mother. Celia lost balance and flopped into the corridor. Then a figure rounded the corner and caught her in the beam of a photon emitter. Loud voices echoed unintelligible shouts in the hall. *Shit.*

Sprawled on the floor with her rumpled evening gown around her, Celia waited for the penny to drop. She hoped the team would still make it to the ship. There was a hollow crash and a heavy thud. Her would-be captor lay unconscious before her. Her eyes adjusted—and Clarence stood above the man with a shattered vase in his hands. He aimed his photon emitter away from them, and the world disappeared as they stared at one another in the reflected light. Then the young footman motioned to the service door and turned back toward the gathering crowd around the royal family. Celia pulled the door shut and locked the latch.

Locking the service door. @CVickersLCDR

Don't lock it. Let 'em guess where we went. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia scotched down the stairs to the service corridors. Finwë and Jacey were still there. Finwë gripped her by the elbow and led them through the black tunnels.

"What the Hells was all that about? You can't leave us. What if something happened to you? It's pitch black,"

"I can see in the dark., Celia Vickers."

Celia had no words.

* * *

Just locking the service door. @CVickersLCDR

No, don't. Let 'em guess where we went. @Ph'avellCWO5

Celia felt her way down the stairs where Finwë gripped her by the elbow and led them through the black tunnel. Celia grabbed his arm.

“What the Hells was all that about? You just can't leave us like that up there. What if something happened to you in the dark?”

“I would not get lost, Celia Vickers. I knew where I was going.”

“It's pitch black.”

“Enari, see in the dark.”

“Since when?” Celia's words died in the darkness.

Without some night vision device, to the aid of ocular implants, there was no way anyone could see in the dark.

We're on the move. @CVickersLCDR

Copy. We'd send you the map, but commander butterfingers here deleted that portion of the manor's database. But we still have control of the lights. @Ph'aveilCWO5

No worries, it'll take a bit to remember all the turns, but we're on the way. @CVickersLCDR

Celia gripped onto the Enari's shoulder and listened to his descriptions to navigate through the pitch with Jacey holding onto the train of her gown.

If you need, we can turn the lights on down here. @Ph'aveilCWO5

Negative. Besides, there is a large group of armed guards above us. @CVickersLCDR

Things were coming back to her, like the back-to-back rooms of tables and chairs. That was just a few turns away from the main aqueduct passage. However scary the tunnels seemed, as a child paled compared to the moment. They made it to an unoccupied outer tunnel, and Celia spotted a glow ahead.

We're here. @CVickersLCDR

The trio entered the bloom of light, while the Chief knelt in the darkness with everyone's pack. Hamilton worked on a tablet attached to the control panel.

What happened to your shoes? Hamilton looked back from his little control center. “And how did you get here with no light or a map?”

“Too hard to run, and heal and it turns out Fin can see in complete darkness.”

“What was that all about? Why did the Prince call the Auditors on us?” Jacey looked back where they came “Are we in trouble? What if my family finds out... We didn't... I didn't...”

"I don't know, but we'll make this right somehow," Celia said.

Ph'avell studied the Enari. "You don't have cyber implants, right?"

"We don't have time for this. The guards are everywhere." Celia looked at her dirty feet.

"Understood. The carriage decoy won't last long," Ph'avell said.

"Carriage?" Celia tried to keep her voice down. "What about Perkins?"

"We wouldn't leave the old Nørn out to dry." Ph'avell's fangs showed as he grinned. "So we tied him up near the house." He looked at Hamilton. "Figure it out?"

"Not yet." The Gurch grumbled as the overhead light turned on. "I could use some help."

Jacey kneeled and Hamilton handed over the control pad as Ph'avell handed out their bags. When Finwë took his, Celia saw he had the Prince's hunting knife tucked in his belt, the small shield secured to his forearm, and the black pitcher under his arm.

"That's what you left us for," Celia's words were a sharp hiss, "to steal those?"

"Tis my duty to reclaim these for the Ernil."

"Your duty?" She yanked the pack's strap tight. "We don't have time for this."

Fin's sticky fingers don't make the shortlist of our current problems. @Ph'avellCWO5

You're not helping. @CVickersLCDR

"I think that's it." Jacey dashed off a few lines of code. "What's an Ernil?"

"These should not be in the hands of those who have not earned them." Then he raised the ewer, "Whilst this should be in the hands of no one."

The tablet flashed, then a section of lights further down the tunnel glowed.

"Are you nuts?" Celia gasped.

"Undoubtedly." Ph'avell stretched with a groan. "Doc lit up the tunnels to the gate-house. Which is where the carriage headed. So, which way do you think they'll go first?"

"I've timed *these* lights to shift toward the skyport and shut off behind us." Jacey snapped the control pad back in place. "But we'd better get moving. It's going to get dark here soon."

The crew headed toward the ship and Celia moved next to Finwë.

"This isn't over. We're not thieves."

Celia was an excellent runner. It was her quiet place, but the events of the evening, paired with no shoes on the slimy stones, were enough to make her snap.

They paused for Hamilton to catch his breath.

“Upgrade your footwear.” Ph'avell slapped her pack.

Celia dug out her trainers and put them on as the crew ran ahead. The advancing lights sparkled off the damp stones of the abandoned aqueduct. On any other occasion, it would look beautiful. Now it was thousands of signal flares betraying their position. Her iridescent ballgown wasn't much better. She laced up and sprinted after them. By the time she caught up, they made it to a junction framed in a perfect stone archway, and Hamilton tumbled to the floor, gasping for air.

“Are...you..trying..to..kill me?”

Hamilton's hyperventilating made it impossible to listen for pursuit. They waited a minute for the loud breathing to subside, but the space darkened as the overhead lights moved on. Then a primal noise shattered the tension. The cacophonous noise grew louder and into a recognizable pattern.

“Dogs,” Ph'avell said as his tail whipped the air.

The crew ran as fast as possible as an ever-expanding gap formed between Hamilton and the rest. Celia knew the exit wasn't too far ahead, so she slowed their pace to keep Hamilton closer. It would be a quick dash to the hangar from there, but she didn't have a plan if the dogs caught up.

The damp tunnel ended into a large circular stone chamber, fringed in a neglectful green fuzz. Jacey and Finwë were halfway up the spiral stairwell to the doorway out when Hamilton plowed into the room. His throat gurgled as he struggled to draw air into his lungs under his own weight. Celia and Ph'avell tried to pull him to his feet as rapacious barks rippled off the walls of the dark corridor.

“Hamilton, we gotta get up these stairs.” Celia struggled to get a solid grip as his giant limbs went limp.

“I can't...”

They pulled in vain against his slack and prodigious form.

“It's stuck shut!” Jacey yelled from above.

“Shit. Chief, get up there and help.” Celia said.

“I'm not leaving you here.” His fur bristled as he set his eyes to the dark abyss. “Those things don't care who you are, family or not.”

“At least you three can get out.” She propped Hamilton up on his bum.

“Not an option,” Ph'avell snarled.

He pressed his snout to Hamilton's.

"Others will die if you don't get your fat ass up those stairs. So, move it, or I'll gut you here and now." Sharp claws extended from the tips of Ph'avell's thick fingers.

Hamilton struggled to his knees, but failed to stand. In a flash, the Thandarian struck the Gurch in his rear end, which sent the doctor scrambling up the stairs like a mountain goat. Ph'avell's fur was coarse, and he seemed dangerous.

"Get him to unstick that door while I'll keep those hounds from ruining this well-crafted escape."

"No martyr shit, Okay?" Celia tried to catch his eye.

A black vignette grew at the edges of Hamilton's vision as he struggled up the last few stairs with Finwë and Celia's help. Celia nodded toward a sliver of dark blue between the door and the jamb. Hands pointed to the door and instinct said this was the outside—and that meant safety. Hamilton groaned as he heaved his considerable frame against the door and the corroded metal door howled in protest.

"Keep going." Celia sounded scared.

A horrifying roar filled the chamber below as the guard dogs flooded in. Hamilton thought it was the animals, but remembered the terrifying look on Ph'avell's face before he swatted him away. The sound of gnashing teeth and slavering fury drew Hamilton's attention away from the seized opening.

Below, Ph'avell backed up the stairs, his tail swished back and forth as he fought with two of the sleek hounds. Celia yelled as two other dogs worked their way around the Thandarian's flank, crouching for the attack. It looked as if she was about to charge down when Finwë handed her his bag and stepped to the landing's edge. The Enari drew the ancient knife from his waistband and looked directly at Hamilton.

"The door, if you would, good Doctor."

Then Finwë leaped into the scrum of fur and flesh. Hamilton took a step back when his heel caught on the uneven stonework, and he stumbled back into the door. The portal shrieked its last protest and swung open into the night—splaying him onto the chilled night grass.

"C'mon Doc," Jacey helped Hamilton to his feet, "I've got orders to get you to the ship."

The two moved into the darkness as a terrifying sound of something losing its hold on life issued from the open doorway.

The heady, cold stall of the silent skyport sent a shiver down Hamilton's spine as he oriented himself in the moonlight. He envisioned dangerous beasts spying from the dark woods around, but saw or heard nothing.

VOZ, we're at the airfield and need to leave now. Run pre-flight sequence Beta-6. @JCortEgn3
Initiating. Is this an emergency?

When isn't it? @JCortEgn3

Bio-signals from Warrant Officer Ph'avell and Finwë are concerning.

Jacey tapped Hamilton on the waist and motioned toward the hanger. They kept low to the edge of the nearest hangar. Preparing to run the last distance to their hanger Hamilton heard a faint mechanical buzzing in the air.

VOZ, is there active mech in the area? @HMerriweatherLCDR

I detect a class 9 micro UAV, six meters above your position.

Jacey and Hamilton fell back against the wall, and the Gurch fished out the tetrahedrons.

VOZ, configure three hunter-killer mini avatars. @HMerriweatherLCDR

Understood.

The small pyramids clicked into three identical formations and darted from his large palm. The mechanical buzzing raised and lowered in pitch. There was a high-pitched whine, followed by a crackle and pop from above a moment before. Hamilton spotted something metallic land in the grass a few meters with a soft thud. The Dragonfly hummed as various systems surged to power as the two disconnected the support umbilicals.

I detect two land-borne units and one airborne unit approaching.

Gentlemen, we have inbound OPFOR. We need to be off this rock in two shakes. @CVickersLCDR

Celia made it to outside the hangar but couldn't commit to going in until she heard from Ph'avell or Finwë. *Where the hells are they?*

Chief, Finwë report. @CVickersLCDR

Incoming.

Celia spotted the cockpit lights as they crested the tree line on the far end of the field. An energy blast struck the grass a few steps away and slammed her to the cut stone floor. Served her right to stand in the open. She shook the fog clear and scrambled for cover.

I recommend you come aboard, Captain.

Without thinking, Celia charged across the hanger and dove forward. Her hand caught a stanchion, and she swung onto the ramp as another energy bolt slammed the back wall.

Eleven-seconds before two ground vehicles enter the field.

Ma'am, shall we rendezvous with them at another location? @JCortEgn3

Celia ran through the cargo bay into the ready room.

Negative. Powered up the ship's armaments. @CVickersLCDR

Seriously? We only have six shots. @JCortEgn3

If someone wants to come at us? We'll bring the fight to them. @CVickersLCDR

Celia tossed Finwë's and her pack into her locker and grabbed her carbine. She hit the bottom of the ramp in eleven-seconds.

Jacey, on my mark, lay down cover fire, and make that ship go away. @CVickersLCDR

Affirmative. @JCortEgn3

Execute. Execute. Execute. @CVickersLCDR

A moment later, the hanger filled with the resounding thump of particle cannons spitting death. By the second course of fire, the aerial threat retreated and Celia made it to the hangar doorway.

Prep the med bay—we have injured. @Ph'avellCWO5

Copy. @HMerriweatherLCDR

Celia poked her head out from cover and spotted two shaky figures in the thermal optic as two pairs of lights emerged from the off-black forest wall and fired on her crew. She placed the lead vehicle in the center of the reticle and pulled the carbine's trigger. The buggy swerved off course, and she fired on the second. Her crew mates staggered to her position as she continued to fire. She kept focus on her optic, but it looked like they held one another up as they passed.

Jacey, take off once these two are on the ship. @CVickersLCDR

We're not leaving you behind. @HMerriweatherLCDR

You better not, @CVickersLCDR

The security agents fired upon her position, and the small aircraft continued to fire and retreat from the tree line. Celia switched her targets up to cut down on a lucky shot. Without its energy shields, the Dragonfly could not withstand many direct hits. And they couldn't activate them on the ground.

I have them. @HMerriweatherLCDR

The Dragonfly glided forward, and Celia launched another volley downrange before she rushed after the moving ship. Energy bolts whizzed by as she flung herself onto the ramp, but her lead foot stepped on the long gown and she landed short. Her hip slammed into the trailing edge of the ramp and she slid back. Her hands and feet scrambled for purchase, but the surface was slick with a dark liquid. *Shit*. The shimmering fabric offered little friction, and Celia dreaded the four-meter drop. In a last-ditch effort, she hooked the carbine's buttstock into the ramp's main hydraulic arm to stop the doomed slide. Celia grabbed the side of the ramp and swung her leg over the edge and rolled on top. *Motherfucker*.

I'm on board. @CVickersLCDR

The ramp closed, sliding her into the cargo hold, and Celia reflected on how she wiped away the rest of her life in a matter of hours.