SCARLET by Marissa Meyer. She did not know that the wolf was a wicked sort of animal, and she was not afraid of him. One Scarlet was descending toward the alley behind the Rieux Tavern when her portscreen chimed from the passenger seat, followed by an automated voice: “Comm received for Madem oiselle Scarlet Benoit from the Toulouse Law Enforcement Department of Missing Persons.” Heart jumping, she swerved just in time to keep the ship’s starboard side from skidding against the stone wall, and threw down the brakes before reaching a complete stop. Scarlet killed the engine, already grabbin g for the discarded portscreen. Its pale blue light glinted off the cockpit’s controls. They’d found something. The Toulouse police must have found something. “Accept!” she yelled, practically choking the port in her fingers. She expected a vidlink from the detective assigned to her grandmother’s case, but all she got was a stream of unembellished text. 28 AUG 126 T.E. RE: CASE ID #AIG00155819, FILED ON 11 AUG 126 T.E. THIS COMMUNICATION IS TO INFORM SCARLET BENOIT OF RIEUX, FRANCE, EF, THAT AS OF 15:42 ON 28 AUG 126 THE CASE OF MISSING PERSON(S) MICHELLE BENOIT OF RIEUX, FRANCE, EF, HAS BEEN DISMISSED DUE TO LACK OF SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE OR NONSPECIFIC FOUL PLAY. CONJECTURE: PERSON(S) LEFT OF OWN FREE WILL AND/OR SUICIDE. CASE CLOSED. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE OF OUR DETECTIVE SERVICES. The comm wa s followed by a video ad from the police, reminding all delivery ship pilots to be safe and wear their harnesses while engines were running. Scarlet stared at the small screen until the words turned into a screaming blur of white and black and the ground seemed to drop out from beneath the ship. The plastic panel on the back of the screen crunched in her tightening grip. “Idiots,” she hissed to the empty ship. The words CASE CLOSED laughed back up at her. She released a guttural scream and slammed the port down on the ship’s control panel, hoping to shatter it into pieces of plastic and metal and wire. Aft er three solid whaps, the screen only flickered in mild irritation. “You idiots!” She threw the port at the floorboards in front of the passenger seat and slumped back, stringing her curly hair through her fingers. Her harness cut into her chest, suddenly strangling, and she released the buckle and kicked open her door at the same time, half falling into the alley’s shadows. The grease and whiskey scent from the tavern nearly choked her as she swallowed her breaths, trying to rationalize her way out of the anger. She would go to the police station. It was too late to go now—tomorrow, then. First thing in the morni ng. She would be calm and logical and she would explain to them why their assumptions were wrong. She would make them reopen the case. Scarlet swiped her wrist over the scanner beside the ship’s hatch and yanked it up harder than the hydraulics wanted to let it go. She would tell the detective that he had to keep searching. She would make him listen. She would make him understand that her grandma hadn’t left of her own free will, and that she most certainly had not killed herself. Half a dozen plastic crates filled with garden vegetables were crammed into the back of the ship, but Scarlet hardly saw the m. She was miles away, in Toulouse, planning the conversation in her head. Calling on every last persuasion, every ounce of reasoning power she had. Something had happened to her grandmother. Something was wrong and if the police didn’t keep looking, Scarlet was going to take it to court and see that every one of their turnip-head detectives was disbarred and would never work again and— She snatched a gleaming red tomato in each fist, spun on her heels, and pummeled the stone wall with them. The tomatoes splattered, juice and seeds spraying across the piles of garbage that were waiting to go int o the compactor. It felt good. Scarlet grabbed another, imagining the detective’s doubt when she’d tried to explain to him that up and disappearing was not normal behavior for her grandma. She pictured the tomatoes bursting all over his smug little— A door swung open just as a fourth tomato was obliterat ed. Scarlet froze, already reaching for another, as the tavern’s owner draped himself against the door frame. Gilles’s narrow face was glistening as he took in the slushy orange mess Scarlet had made on the side of his building. “Those better not be my tomatoes.” She withdrew her hand from the bin and wi ped it down on her dirt-stained jeans. She could feel heat emanating from her face, the erratic thumping of her pulse. Gilles wiped the sweat off his almost-bald head and glared, his default expression. “Well?” “They weren’t yours,” she muttered. Which was true—they were technically hers until he paid her for them. He grunted. “Then I’ll only dock three univs for having to clean off the mess. Now, if you’re done with target practice, maybe you could deign to bring some of that in here. I’ve been serving wilted lettuce for two days.” He popped back into the restaurant, leaving the door open. The noise of dishes and laughter spilled out into the alley, bizarre in its normality. Scarlet’s world was crashing down around her and nobody noticed. Her grandmother was missing and nobody cared. She turned back to the hatch and gripped the edges of the tomato crate, waiting for her heart to stop hammering behind her st ernum. The words from the comm still bombarded her thoughts, but they were beginning to clear. The first wave of aggression was left to rot with the smashed tomatoes. When she could take in a breath without her lungs convulsing, she stacked the crate on top of the russet potatoes and heaved them out of the ship. The line cooks ignored Scarlet as she dodged their spitting skillets, making her way to the cool storage room. She shoved the bins onto the shelves that had been labeled in marker, scratched out, and labeled again a dozen times over the years. “Bonjour, Scarling!” Scarlet turned around, pulling her hair off her clammy neck. Émilie was beaming in the doorway, eyes sparkling with a secret, but she pulled back when she saw Scarlet’s expression. “What—” “I don’t want to talk about it.” Slipping past the waitress, she headed back through the kitchen, but Émilie made a dismissive noise in the back o f her throat and trotted after her. “Then don’t talk. I’m just glad you’re here,” she said, latching on to Scarlet’s elbow as they ducked back into the alleyway. “Because he’s back.” Despite the angelic blond curls that surrounded Émilie’s face, her grin suggested very devilish thoughts. Scarlet pulled away and grabbed a bin of parsnips and radishes, passing them to the waitress. She didn’t respond, incapable of caring who he was and why it mattered that he was back. “That’s great,” she said, loading a basket with papery red onions. “You don’t remember, do you? Come now, Scar, the street fighter I was telling you about the other … oh, maybe that was Sophia.” “The street fighter?” Scarlet squeezed her eyes shut as a headache started to throb against her forehead. “Really, Ém?” “Don’t be like that. He’s sweet! And he’s been here almost every day this week and he keeps sitting in my section, which definitely me ans something, don’t you think?” When Scarlet said nothing, the waitress set the bin down and fished a pack of gum from her apron pocket. “He’s always really quiet, not like Roland and his crowd. I think he’s shy … and lonely.” She popped a stick into her mouth and offered another to Scarlet. “A street fig hter who seems shy?” Scarlet waved the gum away. “Are you listening to yourself?” “You have to see him to understand. He has these eyes that just…” Émilie fanned her fingers against her brow, feigning heatstroke. “Émilie!” Gilles appeared at the door again. “Stop flapping those lips and get in here. Tab le four wants you.” He cast a glare at Scarlet, a silent warning that he’d be docking more univs from her fee if she didn’t stop distracting his employees, then pulled back inside without waiting for a response. Émilie stuck her tongue out after him. Settling the basket of onions against her hip, Scarlet shut the hatch and brushed past the waitress. “Is table four him?” “No, he’s at nine,” Émilie grumbled, scooping up the load of root vegetables. As they passed back through the steamy kitchen, Émilie gasped. “Oh, I’m so daft! I’ve been meaning to comm and ask about your grand-mère all week. Have you heard an ything new?” Scarlet clenched her jaw, the words of the comm buzzing like hornets in her head. Case closed. “Nothing new,” she said, then let their conversation get lost in the chaos of the cooks screaming at each other across the line. Émilie followed her as far as the storeroom and dropped off her load. Scarlet busied herself rearranging the baskets before the waitress could say something optimistic. Émilie attempted the requisite “Try not to worry, Scar. She’ll be back” before backing away into the tavern. Scarlet’s jaw was starting to ache from gnashing her teeth. Everyone talked about her grandma’s dis appearance as if she were a stray cat who would meander back home when she got hungry. Don’t worry. She’ll be back. But she’d been gone for over two weeks. Just disappeared without sending a comm, without a good-bye, without any warning. She’d even missed Scarlet’s eighteenth birthday, though s he’d bought the ingredients for Scarlet’s favorite lemon cake the week before. None of the farmhands had seen her go. None of the worker androids had recorded anything suspicious. Her portscreen had been left behind, though it offered no clues in its stored comms, calendar, or net history. Her leaving wi thout it was suspicious enough. No one went anywhere without their ports. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Not the abandoned portscreen or the unmade cake. Scarlet had also found her grandmother’s ID chip. Her ID chip. Wrapped in cheesecloth spotted red from her blood and left like a tiny package on the kitchen counter. The detective said that’s what people did when they ran away and didn’t want to be found—they cut out their ID chips. He’d said it like he’d just solved the mystery, but Scarlet figured most kidnappers probably knew that trick too. Two Scarlet spotted Gilles behind the hot top, ladling bécha mel sauce on top of a ham sandwich. She walked around to the other side, yelling to get his attention, and was met with annoyance. “I’m done,” she said, returning the scowl. “Come sign off on the delivery.” Gilles shoveled a stack of frites beside the sandwich and slid the plate across the steel counter to h er. “Run that out to the first booth and I’ll have it ready when you get back.” Scarlet bristled. “I don’t work for you, Gilles.” “Just be grateful I’m not sending you out to the alley with a scrub brush.” He turned his back on her, his white shirt yellowed from years of sweat. Scarlet’s fingers twitched with the fant asy of chucking the sandwich at the back of his head and seeing how it compared to the tomatoes, but her grandma’s stern face just as quickly infiltrated the dream. How disappointed she would be to come back home only to find that Scarlet had lost one of their most loyal clients in a fit of temper. Grabbin g the plate, Scarlet stormed out of the kitchen and was nearly bowled over by a waiter as soon as the kitchen door swung shut behind her. The Rieux Tavern was not a nice place—the floors were sticky, the furniture was a mismatch of cheap tables and chairs, and the air was saturated with grease. But in a t own where drinking and gossiping were the favorite pastimes, it was always busy, especially on Sundays when the local farmhands ignored their crops for a full twenty-four hours. While she waited for a path to clear through the crowd, Scarlet’s attention landed on the netscreens behind the bar. All three w ere broadcasting the same news footage that had filled up the net since the night before. Everyone was talking about the Eastern Commonwealth’s annual ball, where the Lunar queen was a guest of honor and where a cyborg girl had infiltrated the party, blown up some chandeliers, and tried to assassinate the visiting queen … or maybe she’d been trying to assassinate the newly coronated e mperor. Everyone seemed to have a different theory. The freeze-frame on the screens showed a close-up of the girl with dirt smudges on her face and strands of damp hair pulled from a messy ponytail. It was a mystery h ow she’d ever been admitted into a royal ball in the first place. “They should have put her out of her misery when she fell on those stairs,” said Roland, a t avern regular, who looked like he’d been bellied to the bar since noon. He extended a finger toward the screen and mimed shooting a gun. “I’d have p ut a bullet right through her head. And good riddance.” When a rustle of agreement passed through the nearest patrons, Scarlet rolled her eye s in disgust and shoved toward the first booth. She recognized Émilie’s handsome street fighter immediately, partly due to an array of scars a nd bruises on his olive skin, but more because he was the only stranger in the tavern. He was more disheveled than she’d expected fr om Émilie’s swooning, with hair that stuck out every direction in messy clumps and a fresh bruise swelling around one eye. Beneath the table, both of his legs were jogging like a windup toy. Three plates were already set out before him, empty but for splatters of grease, bits of e gg salad, and untouched slices of tomato and lettuce. She didn’t realize she’d been staring at him until his gaze shifted and collid ed with hers. His eyes were unnaturally green, like sour grapes still on the vine. Scarlet’s grip tightened on the plate and she suddenl y understood Émilie’s swooning. He has these eyes … Pus hing through the crowd, she deposited the sandwich on the table. “You had le croque monsieur?” “Thank you.” His voice startled her, not by being loud or gruff as she’d expected, but rather l ow and hesitant. Maybe Émilie was right. Maybe he re ally was shy. “Are you sure you don’t want us to just bring you the whole pig?” she said, stacking the three empty plates. “It would save the servers the trouble of running back and fo rth from the kitchen.” His eyes widened and for a mom ent Scarlet expected him to ask if that was an option, but then his attention dipped down to the sandwich. “You have good food here.” She withheld a scoff. “Good food” and “Rieu x Tavern” were two phrases she didn’t normally asso ciate with each other. “Fighting must work up quite an appetite.” H e didn’t respond. His fingers fidgeted with the straw in his drink and Scarlet could see the table beginning to shake from his bouncing legs. “Well. Enjoy,” she said, picking up the dishes. But then she paused and tipped the plat es toward him. “Are you sure you don’t want the tomatoes? They’re the best part, and they were grown i n my own garden. The lettuce too, actually, but it wasn’t wilted like this when I harvested it. Never mind, you don’t wa nt the lettuce. But the tomatoes?” Some of the intensity drained from the fighter’s face. “I’ve never tried them.” Scarlet arched an eyebrow. “Never?” After a hesitant moment, he released his drinking glass and pick ed up the two slabs of tomato and shoved them into his mouth. His expression froze mid-chew . He seemed to ponder for a moment, eyes unfixed, before swallowing. “Not what I expected,” he said, looking up at her again. “But not horrible. I’ll order some more of those, if I could?” Scarlet adjusted the dishes in her grip, keeping a butter knife from slipping off. “You know, I don’t actually work—” “Here it com es!” said someone near the bar, spurring an excited murmur that rippled through the tavern. Scarlet glanced up at the netscreens. They showed a lush garden, flourishing with bamboo and lilies and sparkling from a recent downpour. The red warm th of the ball spilled down a grand staircase. The security camera was above the door, angled toward the long shadows that stretched out into the path. It was beautifu l. Tranquil. “I have ten univs that say some g irl’s about to lose her foot on those stairs!” someone shouted, followed by a round of laughter from the b ar. “Anyone want to bet me? C ome on, what are the odds, really?” A moment later, the cyborg girl appeared on the screen. She bolted from the doorway and down the stairs , shattering the garden’s serenity with her billowing silver gown. Scar let held her breath, knowing what happened next, but she still flinched when the girl stumbled and fel l. She crashed down the steps and landed awkwardly at their bas e, sprawled across the rocky path. Though there was no sound, Scarlet imagined the girl panting as she rolled onto her back and gawked up at the doorway. Sha dows cut across the stairs and a series of unrecognizable figures appeared above her. Having he ard the story a dozen times, Scarlet sought out the missin g foot still on the stairs, the light from the ballroom glinting off the metal. The girl’s cyborg foot. “They say the one on the left is the queen,” said Émilie . Sca rlet jumped, not having heard the waitress approach. The prince—no, the emperor now —crept down the steps and stooped to pick up the i rl reached for the hem of her skirt, tugging it down over her calves, but she couldn’t hi de the dead tentacle wires dangling from their m t knew what the rumors were saying. Not only had the girl been confirmed as a Lunar —an illegal fugitive and a danger to Earthen s n managed to brainwash Emperor Kai. Some thought she’d been after power, other s riches. Some believed she’d been trying hat had so long been threatened. But no matter what the girl’s intentions were, S carlet couldn’t help a twinge of pity. Afte only a teenager, younger than Scarlet even, and she looked wholly pathetic lyin g at the base of those stairs. “What wa s th ting her out of her misery?” said one of the guys at the bar. Roland jutted h is finger toward the screen. “Exactly . I’ve nev thing so disgusting in my life.” Someone near the end leaned forward s o he could look around the other patrons at er seen any m n ot sure I agree. I think she’s kind of cute, pretending to be all helples s and innocent like that. Maybe instead of Roland. “I’ her back t o the moon, they should let her come stay with me?” He was met with robust laughter. Roland thumped h sending n the bar, rattl ing a mustard dish. “No doubt that metal leg of hers would make for a r eal cozy bedmate!” “Swine,” is palm o uttered, but her comment was lost in the guffaws. “I wouldn’t mi nd the chance to warm her up!” Scarlet m new added, and the tables rattled with cheers and amusement. Ange r cl someone awed its way back up throat and she half slammed, half dro pped the stack of plates back o nto th e booth’s table. She ign Scarlet’s ored the startled expressions a round her and shoved throug h the c rowd, circling to the b ac k of the bar. The bewildered ba rtender watched on as Scarlet p ushed some liquor bottles o ut climbed up onto the counter that stretched the length of the wall. Reaching up, she opened a wall pan el ac gl asses and plucked out the netlink cable. All three screens went black, the pala ce garden and cyborg gir l v an wed u p around her. Scarlet spun to face them, accidentally kicking a bottle of wine off the bar. The glass shatt ered o it as she waved the cable at the incensed crowd. “You all should have some respect! That girl’s going to be execu te lle d. “She should be executed!” The sentiment was enforced with nods and someone lobbing a crust of bre ad at S ca on her hips. “She’s only sixteen.” A brash of arguments roared up, men and wom en alike clambering t o their fe et and t girl tried to kill a Union leader! “Hey, hey, everyone calm down! Give Scarlet a br eak!” Roland yelled, his confi dence bo d his hands out toward the jostling crowd. “We all know crazy runs in her family. First that old goose runs off , and no laughter and jeers marched past Scarlet’s ears, but were muddled by the sound of her own rushing blood. Wi thout kn suddenly halfway ove r the bar, bottles and glasses scattering, her fist connec ting with Roland’s ear. He yelpe d and s not crazy!” She g rabbed the front of his shirt. “Is that what you told th e detective? When he qu es tioned him she was crazy!” he yelled back, the stench of alcohol flooding over her. She squeezed the fabric until h ay she keeps herself holed up in that old house, talks to animals and androids like they’re people, ch ases fo n!” “I’m not one tinge surprised that Granny Benoit split her last rocket. Seem s to me it’s been comi ng a lo back into Émilie, who’d been trying to get in between them. Émilie screamed and fell back onto a t able in , looking like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to smirk or snarl. “Better be care ful, Scar, or you’re g oing to had one hand wrapped around Roland’s neck, lifting him clear off the floor. The tavern fell silent. The fighter, ’s g agging. Scarlet gaped, the edge of the bar digging into her stomach. “I belie ve you owe her an a pology,” t d in search of the ground. “Hey, let him go!” a man yelled, leaping off his sto ol. “You’re going to kill him! ” He g rasped the fighter’s wrist, but he might h ave grabbed an iron bar for as much as the limb budged. Flushing, the man let go and pulled back for a punch, but a s soon as he swun g, the fig hte r’s free hand came up and blocked i t. Scarlet staggered back from the bar, dully noting a tattoo of nonsensical letters a nd numbers stamped across the fighter’s forear m. LSOP9 6 2. The fighter still seemed angry, b ut now there was also the tiniest bit of amusement in his expression, like he’d jus t remembered the rules to a game. He eased Ro l and’s fee t ba ck to the ground, simultaneously re leasing him and the other man’s fist. Roland caught his balance on a stool. “What’s wrong with you?” he cho ked out, rubbing hi s n eck. “Are you some lunatic city transplant or som ethi ng? ” “You were being disrespectful.” “Disrespectful?” barked Roland. “You just tried to kill me!” Gilles erupted from the kitchen, s hovin g through the swinging doors. “What’s going on out here ?” “This guy’s trying to start a fight,” someone said from the crowd. “And Scarlet broke the screens!” “I di dn’t break them, yo u idiot !” Scarlet yelled, though she was n’t sure who ha d sai d it. G illes surveyed the dead screens, Roland still rubbing his neck, the broken bottles and glasses littering th e wet floor. He glo wered a t the stree t fighter. “You,” he said, pointing. “Get out of my tav ern.” Scarlet’s gu t tightened. “He didn’t do any—” “ were you planning on causin g today? A re you trying to get me to close my account ?” She bri stled, her face stiI l burning. “Maybe I’ll just take ba ck the delivery and we’ll see how your custome rs like eating spoile d vegetabl es from no w on.” Rounding the bar, Gilles snatched th e cable o ut of Scarlet’s hand. “Do you really think you’re t he only working farm in France? Honestly, Sca r, I only order from you becaus e your gran dmother would give me hell if I didn’t!” Sc arle t pursed h er lips, holding back the frustrated reminder tha t her grandmother wasn’t here anymore so ma ybe he should just order from so meone else if that’s what he wanted. Gilles turned his a tten tion back t o the fighter. “I said get out!” Ignoring him, th e fighter held his hand out to Émilie, who was still half curled against a table. H er face was flu shed and her skirt was soaked through with be er, b ut her gaze glowed with infatuation as she left herself b e pulled to her feet. “Thank you,” she said, h er whisper carrying in the uncann y s ilence. Final ly, the fighter met Gilles’s scowl. “I will go, but I hav en’t p aid for my meal.” He hesitated. “I can pay for the brok en glasses as well.” Scarlet blinked. “What? ” “I don’t want your money!” Gille s scr eamed, soun ding insulted, which came as an even further shock to S carlet, who had only ever heard Gilles complain abo g him dry. “I want you out of my ta vern.” The f ighter’s pale eyes darted to Scarlet, and for a moment she sens ed a c onnection between them. Here they were, both outc he buried the thought. This man wa s tr ouble. He fou ght people for a living—or perhaps even for fun. She wasn’t sure whic h was worse. Turning away, the fighter ke an apology and shuffled toward t he exit. Scarlet couldn’t help thinking as he passed that despite all si gns of brutality, he looked no more mena cing now tha d the bin of potatoes out from the lo west shelf, dr opping it with a thud on the floor before lugging the cra te of t omatoes on top. The onions and turnips w wo trips ou t to the ship again and tha t made her an grier than anything. So much for a dignified exit. She gra bbe d the ha ndles of the lower bin an d hoisted th ?” Gilles s aid from the doorway, a to wel draped ov er one shoulder. “Taking these back.” Heaving a sigh, Gill es braced h imself against the wall. “Scar—I didn d that un likely.” “Look, I like your grandmother, and I like you . Yes, she overcharges and you can be a huge sti ng in my side and you’re both a little both hand s defensively when he saw Scarlet’s hackl es rising. “He y, you’re the one who climbed up on the ba r and star ted making speeches, so don’t try to d her nose at him. “But when it comes right down to it , your gra nd-mère runs a good farm, and you stil l grow the best tomatoes in France year after account.” Scarlet tilted the bin so that th e shiny red glob es rol led and thumped against one anot her. “Put th em back, Scar. I’ve already signed o e walked away before Scarlet could lose h er temp er again . Bl owing a red curl out of her face, Scarlet s et the crate s down and kicked the pot ath the shelves. She could hear the cooks chortlin g over t he dining room drama. The story had alr ea dy taken on a legendary air from the w ng to the cooks, the street fighter had broke n a bott le over Roland’s head, knoc king him unconsci ou s and crushing a chair i n the process. He would Émilie hadn’t calmed him down with one of h er prett y smile s. With no interest in correcting t he s tory, Scarlet dusted he r hands on her jeans an n. A coldness hung in the air between her and the tav ern staf f as she made he r way to the scanner beside the back door—Gilles was milie’s giggles could be heard out in the dining room. Scarlet hoped she was o nly imag ining the dropped g lances. She wondere uld spread through town. Scarlet Benoit was de fending the cyborg ! The Lunar! S he’s clearly spl it her rocket, just l ike her … just wrist beneath the ancient scanner. Out of habit, she inspected the d elivery order t hat appeared on th e screen, making sur e Gilles hadn’t en tried and noting that he had, i n fact, deducted three univs for the smas hed tomatoe s. 687U DEPOSITE D TO VENDOR ACC OUNT: BENOIT ENS. She left through the back door without sa ying good-bye to anyone. Though sti ll warm from the s unny afternoon, th e shadows of hing compared with the sweltering kitchen and Scar let let it cool her dow n while she reorganized the crates in the ba c k of the ship. edule. It would be late evening before she got home. She would have to ge t up extra ea rly to go to the Toulouse poli ce station, otherw whole day in which no one was doing anything to rec over her grandmother . T wo weeks. Two who le weeks of her grandmother bei Helpless. Forgotten. Maybe … maybe even dead. Mayb e kidnapped and killed and left in a dark, wet ditch som ewhere and wh ustrated tears steamed her eyes, but she blinked them back. S lammin g the hatch, she r ounded to the front of the shi hter was there, his back against the stone building . Watchi ng her. I n her surprise, a h ot tear leaked ou t. She swiped at it halfway down her cheek. She returned his stare, c alculati ng if his stance was threa te ning or not. He stood a dozen of her ship and his expression seemed more hesita nt than dangero us, but then, it had n’t seeme d dangerous wh ed Roland either. “I wanted to make sure you were a ll right,” he said, is voice almost lost n the jum bled no i e splayed her fingers on the back of the ship, annoye d at how her nerv es were humming, li ke t he y couldn’t d ecide if she s r flattered. “I’m better off than Roland,” she said. “Hi s neck w as alread y starting to bruis e w hen I left.” His ey es flashed toward served worse.” She would have smiled, but she di dn’t have the ener gy after biting bac k all t he anger and fru stration of the after gotten involved at all. I had the situation under cont rol.” “Cl early.” He squinted at her lik e he w as trying to fig ure out a puzzle. “ ht draw that gun on him, and such a scene may not h ave helpe d your cas e. As far as not bein g crazy, that is.” Hair p rickled behind her ctively went to her lower back, where a small pistol wa s warm against her skin. Her grand ma had given it to her on her ele venth birthda y with the paranoid ver know when a stranger will want to take you somewhere you don’t mean to go. She’d taught Scarl et to use it and Sc arlet hadn’t l eft home wit hout it si nce, ulous and unnecessary it seemed . Seven years later and she was quite sure not a single person had ev er noticed the gu n concealed un der usu al red ho w did you know?” He shrugged, or what would have been a shrug if the movem ent hadn’t b een so te aw the handle whe n you clim bed up et lifted the back of her sweatshirt just enough to loosen the p istol from her waistb ake in a calmin g b reath, but the air n and garbage stink of the alley. “Thanks for your concern, but I’m just f ine. I have the deliveries … behind o n eve ward the pilot’s door. “Do you have any more tomatoes?” She paused. The fighter shrank back f urther into s till a lit Scarlet imagined she could smell the tomato flesh on the wall behind her. “I can pay,” he quickly added. She sho king sheepish. “I’m e pl d, keeping her eyes on him, and reopened the hatch. She grabbed a tomato and a bundle of crooke d carrots. “Here, the , that’s all right. We hav e to e, the tomato disappearing in his large fist and his other hand gripping the carrots by their la cy, leafy ste too,” she said, tossing them . “ Wha tumbled out of her. “They’re carrots. Are you serious?” Again, he seemed embarr assingly aware o f them from every angle H ttempt to make himself seem smaller. “Thank you.” “Your mom neve r made you e at your vegetables, di f having said something unusua l. thing shattered inside the tavern, making Scarlet jump. It was followed by the roar of laughter. “Never m d she?” T heir gazes clashed and the a r again, whisking her ID across the ship’s scanner. The door opened, for ming a wal l between them, an ind. Th ey’re good, you’ll like them.” She s g it seem darker than before. He flinched back like a criminal in a spotlight. “I was wondering if you could use d th floodlights blinked on. They acce tuated th enly understanding why he’d waited for her, why he’d stalled so long. She scan ned his bro ad shoulders, bulky a f armhand?” he said, the words s n rred in his r k that was dangerously mischievous. “The money’s good at the fights, but it does n’t make fo r much of a c arm s. He was built for manual lu lab or. “You’re ur appetite in there, I think I’d lose my shirt with a deal like that.” She flushed the secon d she’d said it—n areer. I thought maybe you could pa y me in food.” She al, and she hurried to fill the space before his reactions caught up. “What’s your name, anyway?” That awkward shrug a o doubt he was now imagining her with her shirt off. Yet, to her s gain. “They call me Wolf at the fights.” “Wolf?” H ow … pr edatory.” He ed a grin. “You might want to leave the street fighter bit off your resume.” He scratched at his elbow, where the strange tattoo could b arely be seen in the dark, and she thought maybe she’d embarrassed him. Perhaps Wo f was a beloved nickname. “Well, they call me Scarlet. Yes, like the hair, what a clever observation.” His expression soften ed. “What h air?” S carlet settle d her arm o n top of the door, rest ing her chin. “Good one.” For a moment he seeme d almost pleased with himself and Scarlet found herself warming to this stranger, this anomaly. This soft-spoken street fight er. A warni ng tin gled in the bac k of her head—she was wasting time. Her grandmother was out there . Alone. Frightened. Dead in a ditch. Scarlet tightened her grip on the door frame. “I’m really sorry, but we have a full staff alrea dy. I don’t need any more farm hands.” The glint f aded from his eyes and in an instant he was look ing uncomfortable again. Flustered. “I understand. Thank you for the food.” He kicked at the stem of a dead firework on the pavem ent—a remnant fro m last night’s peace celebrations. “You sh ould head to Toulouse, or even Paris. There are more jo bs in the cities, and people around here don’t take too kindly to strangers, as you may have noticed.” He tilted his head so that his e merald eyes glowed ev en bri ghter in the wash of the ship’s floodlig hts, looking almost amused. “Thanks for the tip.” Turning, S carlet sank into the pilot’s seat. Wolf shifted toward the wall as she started the engine. “If you change your mind about needing a hand, I can be found at the abandoned Morel hous e most nights. I may not be great with people, but I think I’d do well on a farm.” Amusement touched the corners of his lips. “Animals love me.” “Oh, I’m sure they do,” Scarlet said, beaming with fake encouragement. Sh e shut the door be fore m ut tering, “What a farm animals don’t love a wolf?” Four The captivity of Carswell T horne had gotten off to a rocky start, what with the catastrophic soap rebellion and all. But since being transferred to solitary, he’d become the personification o f a wel l-mannered gentl eman , and after six months of such commendable behavior, he’d persuaded the only female guard on rotation to lend him a portscreen. He was quite sure this would not have succeeded if the guard wasn’t convinced he was an idio t, incapable of doing a nythi ng other than counting the days and searching for naughty pict ures of ladies he’d known and imagined. And she was right, of course. Thorne was mystified by technology and couldn’t have done anything useful with the tablet ev en if he had had a step-by-step in struct ion manual on “How to Escape from Jail Using a Portscreen.” He’d been un successful in accessing his comms, connecting to newsfeeds, or scouting out any information on New Beijing Prison and the surrounding city. But he sure did a pprecia te the suggestively naugh ty, if h eavily filtered, pictures. He was scrolling through his portfolio on the 228th day of his captivity, wondering if Señora Santiago was still married to that onion-smelling man, when an awful screeching disrupted the cell’s peacefulness. He pee red up ward, squinting at the smooth, glossy w hite ceiling. The sound ceased and was followed by shuffling. A couple th uds. More grinding. Thorne folded his legs atop his cot and waited while the noise grew louder and closer, hiccupped and continued. It took him some time to place th is new strange noise, but after much listening and p ondering he was convinced it was the sound of a motorized drill. Maybe one of the other prisoners was remodeling. The sound stopped, though the memory of it lingered, vibrating off the walls. Thorne glanced around. His cell was a perfect cube with smooth, shiny white wall panels on all six sides. It contained his all-white cot, a urinal that slid in and out of the wall with t he press of a button, and him in his white uniform. If someone was remodeling, he hoped his cell would be next. The sound started again, more grating this time, and then a long screw punctured through the ceiling and clattered to the center of the cell’s floor. Three more dropped after it. Thorne craned his head as one of the screws rolled beneath his cot. A moment later, a square tile fell from the ceiling with a bang, followed by two dangling legs and a startled cry. The legs wore a white cotton jumpsuit that matched Thorne’s, but unlike his own plain white shoes, the feet attached to those legs were bare. One wore skin. The other a plating of reflective metal. With a grunt, the girl released her hold on the ceiling and fell into a crouch in the middle of the cell. Resting his elbows on his knees, Thorne tilted forward, trying to get a better look at her without moving from his safe position against the wall. She had a slig ht build and tanned skin and straight brown hair. Like her left foot, her left hand was made of metal. Stabilizing herself, the girl stood and brushed off her jumpsuit. “I’m sorry,” Thorne said. She spun toward him, eyes wild. “It seems that you’ve stumbled into the wrong jail cell. Do you need directions to get back to yours?” She blinked. Thorne smiled. The girl frowned. Her irritation made her prettier, and Thorne cupped his chin, studying her. He’d never met a cyborg before, much less flirted with one, but there was a first time for everything. “These cells aren’t supposed to be occupied,” she said. “Special circ umstances.” She surveyed him for a long moment, her brows knitting together. “Murder?” His grin grew. “Thank you, but no. I started a riot on the yard.” He adjusted his collar, before adding, “We were protesting the soap.” Her confusion grew, and Thorne noticed that she was still in her defensive stance. “The soap,” he said again, wondering if she’d heard him. “It’s too drying.” She said nothing. “I have sensitive skin.” Her mouth opened and he expected sympathy, but all that came out was a disinterested “Huh.” Drawing herself up, she kicked the fallen ceiling tile out from beneath her feet, then proceeded to turn in a full circle, surveying the cell. Her lip curled in annoyance. “Stupid,” she muttered, nearing the wall to Thorne’s left and placing a palm against it. “One room off.” Her eyelashes suddenly fluttered as if dust were stuck in them. Growling, she smacked her palm against her temple a few times. “You’ re escaping.” “Not at this very moment,” she said through her teeth, roughly shaking her head. “But, yes, that is the general idea.” Her face lit up when she spotted the port in his lap. “What model portscreen is that?” “I haven’t the faintest idea.” He held it up for her. “I’m putting together a portfolio of the w omen I’ve loved.” Pushing herself from the wall, she snatched the portscreen away and flipped it over. A tip of her cyborg finger opened, revealing a small screwdriver. It wasn’t long before she’d undone the plate on the underside of the port. “What are you doing?” “Taking your vid-cable.” “What for?” “Min e’s on the fritz.” She pulled a yellow wire from the screen and dropped it back into Thorne’s lap, then sank cross-legged to the floor. Thorne watched, mystified, as she tossed her hair to one side and unlatched a panel at the base of her skull. A moment later her fingers emerged with a wire similar to the one she’d just stolen from him, but with one blackened end. The girl’s face contorted in concentration while she installed the new cable. With a pleased sigh, she shut the panel and tossed the old cable next to Thorne. “Thanks.” He grimaced, shrinking away from the wire. “You have a portscreen in your head? ” “Something like that.” The girl stood and ran a hand over the wall again. “Ah, that’s much better. Now how do I…” Trailing off, she pushed the button in the corner. A glossy white panel slid up into the wall, ejecting the urinal with smooth precision. Her fingers fished into the gap left between the fixture an d the wall, searching. Inching away from the neglected cable on his cot, Thorne cleared his mind of the image of her opening a plate in her skull, once again calling up the personification of a gentleman, and attempted to make small talk while she worked. He asked what she was in for and complimented the fine workmanship of her metal extremities, but she ignored him, making him briefly question if he’d been separated from the female population for so long that he could be losing his charm. But that seemed unlikely. A few minutes later, the girl seemed to find what she was looking for, and Thorne heard the motorized-drill sound again. “When they locked you up,” Thorne said, “didn’t they consider that this prison might have some security weaknesses?” “It didn’t at the time. This hand is kind of a new addition.” She paused and stared hard at one corner of the alcove, as if trying to see through the wall. Maybe she had X-ray vision. Now that he could find some good uses for. “Let me guess,” Thorne said. “Breaking and entering?” After a long silence of examining the retracting mechanism, the girl wrinkled her nose. “Two counts of treason, if you must know. And resisting arrest, and unlawful use of bioelectricity . Oh, and illegal immigration, but honestly, I think that’s a little excessive.” He squinted at the back of her head, a twitch developing in his left eye. “How old are you?” “Sixteen.” The screwdriver in her finger began to spin again. Thorne waited until there was a lull in the grinding. “What’s your name?” “Cind er,” she said, followed by another swell of noise. When it died down: “I’m Captain Carswell Thorne. But usually people just call me—” More grinding. “Thorne. Or Captain. Or Captain Thorne.” Without responding, she wriggled her hand back into the alcove. It seemed like she was trying to twist something, b ut it must not have budged, as a second later she sat back and huffed with frustration. “I can see that you’re in need of an accomplice,” Thorne said, straightening his jumpsuit. “And lucky for you, I happen to be a criminal mastermind.” She glowered at him. “Go away.” “That’s a difficult request in this situa tion.” She sighed and dusted the flecks of white plastic from her screwdriver. “What are you going to do when you get out?” he asked. She turned back to the wall. The grinding persisted for a while before she paused to roll her neck, working out a crick. “The most direct route out of the city is north.” “Oh, my naive little convict. Don’t you think that’s what they’ll be expecting you to do?” She jabbed the screwdriver into the alcove. “Would you please stop distracting me?” “I’m just saying we might be able to help each other.” “Leave me alone.” “I have a ship.” Her gaze darted to him for only a beat—a look of warning. “A spaceship.” “A spaceship,” she drawled. “She could have us halfway to the stars in less than two minutes, and she’s just outside the city limits. Easy to get to. What do you say?” “I say if you don’t stop talking and let me work, we won’t be getting halfway to anywhere.” “Point taken,” Thorne sa id, holding up his hands in surrender. “You just think it over in that pretty head of yours.” She tensed, but kept working. “Now that I’m thinking of it, there used to be an excellent dim sum bar just a block away too. They had mini pork buns that were to die for. Rich and succulent.” He pinched his fingers tog ether, salivating over the memory. Face scrunching up, Cinder started to massage the back of her neck. “Maybe if we have time we could stop in and pick up a snack for the road. I could use a treat after suffering through the tasteless junk they call food in this place.” He licked his lips, but when he refocuse d on the girl, the pain on her features had tightened. Sweat was beading on her brow. “Are you all right?” he asked, reaching for her. “Do you need a back rub?” She swatted him away. “Please,” she said, hands braced between them. She struggled to draw in a shuddering breath. As Thorne stared, her imag e wavered, like heat rising off maglev tracks. He stumbled back. His heartbeat quickened. A tingle filled his brain and raced down his nerves. She was … beautiful. No, divine. No, perfect. His pulse thumped, thoughts of worship and devotion swimming through his head. Thoughts of surrender. Thoughts of compliance. “Please,” she said again, hiding behind her metal hand. Her tone was desperate as she slumped against the wall. “Just stop talking. Just … leave me alone.” “All right.” Confusion reigned—cyborg, prison mate, goddess. “Of course. Anything you like.” Eyes watering, he stumbled backward and sank blindly down to his cot. Five Scarlet’s thoughts seethed as she hauled the empty crates out of the