

Lo was deep in the vegetable patch picking tomatoes when the alarm sounded. Great hawking wails cut into the thick summer air. The sound was coming from the loudspeakers at HQ, a mile down the hill on the banks of the Saugatuck River.

*Whoop, whoop, whoop.*

Red alert: full safety protocol.

Lo didn't just hear the alarm; she felt it as a fizzy heat that exploded in her brain and radiated through her body. In a fraction of a second her wires had twitched her muscles into gear. Fingers tingling, she reached for her weapons glove—but she wasn't wearing her holster today. It was sitting on the dining room dresser. Close enough, she'd thought when she set it down there this morning. Not close enough now.

Swiveling on her bare feet, Lo turned and made for the house without regard for the strawberries. Toes bleeding red pulp, she vaulted over the animal fence and sprinted down thick green lawn toward the back of their patched white cottage. Her worn denim cutoffs and old one-piece swimsuit moved with her like skin. The rose-gold waves of her hair, cut above her shoulders for the season, bounced up and down behind her, cooling her neck. Although her feet made little noise, her electrified body broke the air with a crackle. Hens and sheep scattered, unnerved by the disturbance. Only the cow stayed put, lazily chewing away at the grass.

“Move,” Lo screamed.

The cow didn't move. It didn't know fear, which was why it would ultimately become meat. Lo leaped with ease over the stubborn animal. Bounding onto the worn deck, she flicked away the grape vines hanging from their DIY pergola. The back door was now within arm's reach, but the sight of the smoking barbecue stopped her dead in her tracks. Helena. Lo's heart lurched as she

remembered firing up the rusty old Weber half an hour earlier, ready to start cooking the minute her wife walked through the door back from delivering food and supplies to the power plant in Norwalk Harbor. Naturals didn't usually work the convoys—they were just a liability—but one of the engineers had needed medical attention. Lo felt like screaming. Instead, she closed her eyes, opened the comms channel wired into her frontal lobe, and tried to exchange a message with the convoy. Total silence. That suggested they were still beyond comms range.

Torn between racing out to the Saugatuck/Norwalk Road to look for the convoy and heading straight down to HQ to deal with the emergency, Lo squeezed her fists so hard that sparks flew out on either side. Safety protocol demanded that she hide and await further instruction. The only problem was that she was supposed to be the one giving the instructions. She should never have agreed to take a day off. Animals and ferals and other scary things lurking in the wilderness didn't take days off. But her crew had insisted. It had been over a month. She'd been kind of tetchy lately. It was *summer*. Lo should listen to the people who cared about her. She'd listened.

*She should never have listened.* Frustration coursed through every wire in her body. She needed to do something before she burst, but it needed to be the right something...

"Whaaaaaat?" she roared as she swiveled to face the sound of the sirens.

No reply. Lo deployed all her senses, straining as she grasped in the ether for the nature of the emergency. Silence prickled at every hair on her body. Usually if the sirens went off Lo was overwhelmed with messages, women cramming her head full with their fears: creatures inside the perimeter, unknown boats out in the Sound, evidence of tampering at the fence. Even when the sirens weren't wailing away she was constantly barraged: meetings here, disputes there, permission needed. Hell, sometimes she couldn't think straight for all the friendly hellos and how-are-

you? This wasn't normal, this hollow silence, this echo chamber in her skull. Where was everyone?

Lo looked up into the fading blue of the early evening sky. Pat and Marie were scheduled to fly the pods today, but there was no sign of them in the air. She checked to make sure no one was coming through the dense vegetation surrounding the property. Not even a squirrel. She listened for company in or near the house. Nobody. She reached out for other minds. Nothing. As far as she could tell, she was completely alone. It was the strangest of feelings. Nine hundred survivors were living together in close proximity in this modest New England village: eight hundred were women, seven hundred were telepathic to some degree. Lo hadn't been truly alone in some thirty years.

Head down, thumbnails pressed into her forehead, Lo tried to isolate Yaz in the comms room. First she zapped her with static, a practice they all hated because it reminded them of the occupation. Then she beamed her a message: *what—where?*

Lo's eyes blinked and shoulders tensed as she expelled each word from her mind. As always it rankled that she couldn't transmit more than three short words at a time: *thump—thump—thump*. Her personal communications weakness wasn't the problem here though. The problem was a complete comms breakdown. Lo feared a serious problem at HQ. Responding to the sirens had to be her first priority. However, before Lo could even begin to move, the alarm changed.

*Whaap, whaap, pause.*

Orange alert: heightened vigilance.

Lo felt reason return as her system switched down. It was only a minor alert after all, probably relating to the comms glitch. She still needed to get to HQ, but she now had a few seconds to think properly. First things first, that barbecue. Lo looked across at the collection of rain-water-filled buckets they kept on the edge of the old deck. Focusing her gaze on the nearest one, she narrowed her eyes into a hard stare. As the energy surged out through her pupils,

she raised the bucket into the air, rolling her head as she controlled its upward arc. Eyes, mind, and wires as one, she tilted the faded green plastic tub and doused the fire in one great hiss. On a whim she flung the empty bucket high over the abandoned house filled with medical supplies next door—aiming for the perimeter fence half a mile away. She had her strengths. Then she turned toward the back door.

She wasn't going anywhere without her weapons glove.



The first time Lo had killed anyone with a glove was thirty years ago, right when the occupation was coming to an end. Three years before that a fleet of spheres had turned Earth's cities into sink holes in a cacophony of sonic booms. When they were done obliterating the cities, the attackers landed, in millions of beautiful flying glass pods. Out of those pods came an army of small fragile creatures with pinched faces and delicate silver-coated skulls—*Ruurdaans*. They looked so benign until they began their cull: crushing, incinerating, and composting. The Ruurdaans liked to obliterate their victims. They only used the glove if time was of the essence—even though they must have known the glove was by far the best way to go. Zap, sizzle, body on the ground. After a while people even got to begging to die that way. Lo would have had to be able to speak to beg. She did nothing, just let it all happen to her. Silence equaled survival. Helena still counseled a number of women who had never regained their voice.

When the Ruurdaan cull was done, nothing but a handful of young women in a state of near-vegetative fear remained. That was when the bantam aliens began a program to wire them for labor. Telepathic conduits made complete Ruurdaan control possible, and biotech enhancements made the women better workers. For three years Lo operated a pod—moving debris (often bodies) and overseeing a small team of outdoor laborers. Who knew if the Ruurdaans had a better long-term plan for them? They never

said—and now nobody would ever really know—because the Ruurdaans all died of some kind of plague three years after they arrived. They left a world bereft of any kind of organized civilization, sparsely populated with strangely altered women, littered with great mounds of eight-foot round glass pods. They also left millions of gloves.

When the Ruurdaans first began dying of their plague, Lo grabbed the nearest free pod and flew away from her work camp in Fairfield, just ten miles up the road from Saugatuck. Looking down upon the repurposed university campus that had been her home for the last three years, Lo saw hundreds of debilitated Ruurdaans crawling out of their mobile glass habitats, gulping as if seeking uncontaminated air. At first she just gave a small cheer. Then, realizing that even as they died the creatures were still trying to connect with the minds of their slaves, Lo flew back down, grabbed a glove, and began finishing the little fuckers off. That was thirty years ago. That was the first time.

The last time Lo had killed someone with a glove was a year ago...

Believe it or not—life is stranger than fiction—three years earlier *another* group of aliens had shown up fifty miles north in Madison, Connecticut. When discussing the unlikely event, Lo often liked to invoke the analogy of the native Americans, also periodically assaulted by a wave of new weird, scary people. “I don’t care that they didn’t have enough information. Those guys shouldn’t have even been a tiny bit welcoming.” Of course, the women up in Madison just went and repeated the mistakes of history.

To be fair, it would have been a challenge to repel the incoming aliens, *Orbiters* as they were called. Apparently, 2000 of them just floated down from the sky in heavy metal crates. Lo’s crew of forty fliers would have struggled to cope with an invasion of that scale. Madison—a town without any strong-wired women—had no hope. They didn’t even try to fight. They didn’t even call for help. They made *peaceful contact*. Idiots. Soon after the event, Lo received a report from the mayor, Gail Benson, describing the aliens

as mostly tall, well-mannered, humanoid males with advanced technological skills. Whatever. Lo wanted nothing to do with any kind of alien. A small and vocal minority of Saugatuck's women, however, were curious about the new arrivals. What if these Orbiters knew something about Ruurdaan wiring? Maybe they could tell them why they weren't aging, or if they would age? Maybe they could even restore their fertility? It was impossible to deny the importance of those questions. After considerable debate, the council persuaded Lo to organize a diplomatic visit. A date was set.

Then came the bad news, filtering through in the usual patchy reports. Some of the Orbiters had turned out to be exiled criminals. Others were damaged ex-junkies. Even the good ones were religious whackos, members of a strange missionary group who neurotically scrubbed and bleached. Saugatuck postponed the date indefinitely. Not long after they sent their regrets, Gail reported that she had expelled five hundred of the Orbiters. She didn't say why or how; she just said, *please be aware*. Soon after that, rumors started circulating that the exiled aliens were attacking vulnerable settlements in the area. Lo beefed up the perimeter fence, increased security measures, and hoped the Orbiters weren't stupid enough to try attacking Saugatuck.

Try they did. Last summer an armed group had attempted to steal food and supplies (including five kilos of marijuana) en-route to Norwalk. Dina and Leslie were doing the run that day—two strong and experienced women with excellent wire-skills. The road was booby-trapped on all sides, had been for years. It should have been an easy delivery. However, all of a sudden, halfway down the road, seven tall hairy men emerged from the dense undergrowth and fired a couple of rifle shots into the lead jeep, striking both its front left tire and the driver, Dina. The jeep came to an abrupt halt. Leslie, trapped behind in the second jeep, ducked under the dash and beamed for help. By the time Lo and her crew reached the scene, Dina was already dead from a bullet wound to her aorta. Leslie lay frozen in a coil of terror on the floor of her jeep while

the men loaded supplies from the rear storage compartment into their backpacks.

Lo and her crew disarmed the men before they had a chance to shoot again, burning the weapons right out of their hands. The men began shouting their excuses: Dina had been struck by a ricocheting bullet, they'd never intended to hurt anyone, look, they hadn't even touched the other woman. Lo didn't care about intentions. She lashed out with a furious, grief-stricken passion. Most of the others followed her lead, their bodies literally pulsating and glinting with anger. When they were done they threw three dead bodies to the wild dogs and told the surviving four Orbiters to run for their lives. As far as Lo knew those hairy wildebeests were still out there somewhere—three of them hobbling around on poorly healed fractures, one of them blind. It was an extreme measure but it seemed to work as a deterrent—because that had been the last time...



Just as she opened the back door to fetch her glove, the phone on the far wall started ringing. In a single move, Lo sailed across the kitchen and pulled it from its beige plastic cradle, jerking the ancient hand-piece to the limits of its cord.

“Helena?”

“No. Sorry. But thank God I caught you in time...”

It was Janine, one of the “younger” women, twenty-two when her biological clock stopped ticking thanks to the Ruurdaans and their wires. At fifty-five she was still a bubbly little blonde with a seemingly endless supply of blue mascara and a penchant for short low-cut dresses. Janine ran everything social in Saugatuck, organized all those events and committees that Lo considered a waste of time and energy. She used to be a flight attendant, economy class. Now she could fly like a top gun, first class. It was a contradiction that had long ceased to interest Lo. All that mattered was

that the woman did her job without too much argument. Lately there had been way too much argument.

“What’s the problem?”

Janine replied, “There’s no problem per se, just an unusual situation. A small spaceship has landed at the dock and two men have come out of it.”

“What the fuck? You let them land? Where are you?”

“I’m calling from your office. Don’t worry, I can see them fine from here. And I didn’t *let* them do anything. They couldn’t be stopped. But they’ve got their hands up and they’re clearly unarmed. I talked to them before I lowered the alert. They’re friendlies.”

Lo almost hung up and ran for HQ, but it would take too long.

Her voice was tight. “Are you crazy? Men in spaceships are by definition invaders. There are probably two thousand more coming up behind them, like in Madison. Reinstate the red alert, Janine. Shoot them medium-hard in the hands and legs, then get the pods to remove them to Cockenoe Island. If they try anything funny, go ahead and stun them. I’ll deal with them when they come back around.”

“You’re not hearing me, Lo. We *can’t* remove them to Cockenoe. All the pods are, like, frozen in the sky. Our comms systems are down. The only thing working are the landlines. And anyway I’m not shooting them. They’re *friendlies*, Lo.”

“Let me talk to Ruby.” Lo remembered assigning her to this slot with Janine. Ruby had been one of the women at the Norwalk convoy with her last summer.

“Sorry, she’s not here. Leslie’s with me. She swapped her bar assignment with Ruby tonight so we could work a shift together.”

Nobody had run that past Lo.

“You can explain later. Now get back downstairs and start shooting. Leslie too, if she’s capable. I’m not saying kill this bunch of guys—just remove their alien asses.”

“No, not this time, Lo. You need to get down here, but you need to come down easy. These men are displaying an American flag and

a peace sign on their clothes. One of them says he grew up here in Saugatuck, over on the other side of the river where you lived. He says his name is Will Warren. Warren, Lo! He says that you. . .”

“I said shoot them and remove them, Janine, *and that’s an order.*”

Lo sucked in sharply as she slammed the phone back onto its cradle. No way. Absolutely no way. Her father, Will Warren II, was buried in the garden of their old place over the river, and her brother, Will Warren III, was most likely interred in the cement pancake of what was once Cape Canaveral. He had been a psychiatrist to the astronauts. Lo used to fantasize that he got away. But to where? The moon? Mars? Nobody could survive out there in the barrenness of space, and the Ruurdaans definitely wouldn’t have allowed anyone to return. No. These so-called friendlies were messing with them. She didn’t know who or why, but she smelled the shit-bag of a Trojan horse.

Lo grabbed her glove-holster off the dining-room dresser and began wrapping the clear stretchy band around her hips as she raced through the house to the front door. She gave the porch steps a miss and flung herself through the air toward the big glass pod parked on their overgrown driveway. As her feet touched gravel, she suddenly swiveled and headed down the front lawn toward the remains of their old street. The pod might be the safest choice, but according to Janine the pods weren’t working. Besides, running was faster across short distances, and a ground approach offered the benefit of stealth.

Hitting the weedy broken surface of the road running, Lo slipped her hand into the holster on her hip, passed it through the stretchy holding-band of the glove, and slid her first two fingers into the beam conduits. The rubbery Ruurdaan substance molded itself around her hand, contouring itself to her flesh, feeling for her pulse, her energy source. As she gathered speed, internal dampeners scrambled all pain signals, allowing her to override her natural limits. Her feet barely touched the ground. It took two minutes to get to the bottom of the crumbling road, two more to

sprint past the community park on her right. She crossed Riverside Avenue, ran straight across the front terrace, and along the side of the big faux colonial building that used to be the Saugatuck Boat House. She stopped short when she reached the back corner of the gray wooden structure. She peered around at the grassy back lawn leading to the river and the dock.

What she saw jarred her senses. Usually at this time the dock would be alive: women coming in from a day of fishing, gathering to share their catch, helping pack up. Now the dock was virtually empty. A number of boats appeared to be pressed up against each other in the water, pushed aside to make way for a strange craft—a blocky pyramid, like an inverted yacht made of dark-red metallic Legos—bobbing half-submerged at an unnatural angle in the river. A chain-link row of thin gold metallic slabs connected the opening in the craft to the dock. Two very tall men in skin-thin unitards stood, arms loosely raised, at the lawn end of the dock. Twenty feet away on the grass Janine was just standing there, chatting in a sequined pink tube dress. Long, skinny Leslie looked frozen stiff standing next to her, her distinctive cascade of shiny brown hair lying perfectly still on her bright floral slip. The get-ups reminded Lo that it was Friday. TGIF. That meant probably upwards of a hundred women were hiding in the vicinity, nervously awaiting instruction or the all-clear. Lo sensed their presence, but none of them were communicating. In spite of the siren blaring intermittently, an eerie silence prevailed.

The men were disconcerting too. One was a pale-faced twenty-something with stringy brown hair, scrawny beard, and droopy moustache. Built like a beanpole, he was tall, at least six feet, but nothing like the Orbiters that Lo had fought last summer. He was wearing a pewter-colored unitard with a glowing yellow peace-sign on the chest. He was also grinning and nodding at her crew. Next to him stood a towering blond. This guy had to be almost seven feet, closer to forty than thirty, skin the color of watery oatmeal, a growing-out buzz cut and very well built. His unitard was

dark blue and featured the stars and stripes glowing brightly on the front. Once upon a time the peace sign and the flag might have reassured her. Now they were both a joke.

Lo looked up and saw two glassy orbs hanging low in a sky just beginning to hint at sunset. Neither were moving. In one of the pods she recognized Pat's distinctive bulk and bushy helmet of hair. Using her glove to deflect what was left of the sun up onto the pod, creating a flash of light, Lo managed to catch Pat's attention. Pat threw her hands up in frustration. In the other pod, Marie began making similar gestures. Something was clearly rendering their pods little more than sky decor. Lo indicated that the fliers should stay in position. There might be more intruders in the air, and if necessary the fliers could try crashing their pods into the uninvited spacecraft. Lo hoped it wouldn't come to that, but she knew the two women up there would do it if she asked.

Lo began running down the lawn, glove hand raised. The two men looked up but made no move to withdraw, arrogant in their nonchalance. Without breaking stride, Lo pointed her trigger fingers and shot the long-haired grinning guy in the right foot. He cried out as he dropped to the ground, grabbed his injured extremity, and rolled into fetal position.

Janine shouted out in protest. "No. There's no danger."

There was always danger. Lo saw that Leslie had begun to shake like a wet dog. Someone needed to end this bullshit and get that woman some medical assistance.

As she willed the energy back into her right hand, simultaneously stirring the air to create a barrier with her left, Lo took a long hard look at the piercing blue eyes of the massive blonde with the striking knife-edged nose. They weren't right. He wasn't right. He should be begging for her consideration at this point.

The guy just shrugged and winked.

She fired at his knee.

"That's for not calling home in thirty years," she said.