

A dramatic sky scene with a bright meteor streaking across a cloudy, golden-hued sky. The meteor is a bright, glowing line of light that starts in the upper left and streaks diagonally down towards the right, ending in a bright, glowing trail. The sky is filled with thick, golden-yellow clouds, and the overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden, and brown tones. The text "Falling Stars" is overlaid in the upper right corner in a large, bold, black font.

# Falling Stars

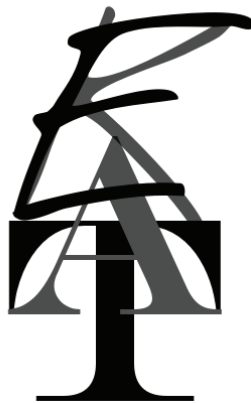
**Erin M. Klitzke**

# Falling Stars

A short work in the *Epsilon* universe

By

Erin M. Klitzke



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# Dedication

*The first one, as always, to my family and friends,  
who supported me when no one else would.*

# 1

“Ah Captain Anders, welcome to station Beta-17.”

In my life, I've known a multitude of people. Some have given a damn about me. Some haven't. It doesn't matter much to me anymore -- not like it used to. As time passed and I grew up, I realized that there were more important things to life than people actually caring about you as a person.

Like getting the job done.

I saluted the man sharply and held it for a moment. “Thank you, Colonel.”

He gestured for me to stand at ease. “I trust the flight in wasn't too tiring?”

For the past five years, I've forced myself to forget everyone and everything I've ever cared about for the sake of my job. That's fine, because everyone and everything I've ever cared about is dead -- they all died when my home was destroyed. But that was a long time ago. All I care about now is getting my job done. That's my life, my story. Everything I've done, everything I've created, including my identity, centered around that. Getting the job done, one way or another.

I became a starfighter pilot at a young age, but I didn't become a *great* starfighter pilot until I stopped caring about whether I lived or died and started caring more about the mission rather than myself. It made sense at the time.

That was about to change, but I didn't know it yet.

“It was a long flight, sir, but not too tiring. When will I get to meet Major Winchester?” I've done solo ops for so long, I don't know what it's like to fly with anyone else anymore. That's why my new assignment is so tough. They're asking me to start flying the dropships for our ground troopers. Command said that they want me to do it because I'm the best damned ace they've got, and only an ace can get these guys in and out alive. I'm not sure if I believe it, but orders are orders, and I haven't made it a habit to disobey my superiors. Considering that this life is all I have left, it's not a good idea to do anything to jeopardize what I've built. So I won't.

“Right now.” He pointed toward a door at the far end of the hangar. “Up the door, take a left. Name's on the door.”

I saluted Colonel Finneas March again and waited for his gesture of dismissal before I walked away, to the door and down the hall. I wished I wasn't nervous about this new assignment, but I was. I'm not strong enough not to be, or distant enough. I wish I was. It would make my life easier.

I lifted my hand to rap on the door to the unit commander's office. I'd heard that this unit was a particularly tight one, and better than most -- sort of like me, I guess, except they actually knew how to play well with others, something I tended to lack. They were a group of specialists, the documents told me, some

paratroopers, some heavily specialized in this and that.

*I'm yet another specialist to add to their cadre, I suppose*, I thought. I exhaled a breath and knocked on the door, only to hear a muffled "come in" from beyond. I pushed open the door and slid inside. "Major Winchester?"

The man behind the desk was broad-shouldered and tall, even seated. He glanced up from his writing and looked at me. "Can I help you with something?"

I saluted him, waiting for him to return the gesture. "Captain Catherine Anders, late of the thirty-second air wing."

He motioned for me to relax. "So you're our new pilot. Your personnel file is somewhere in that pile over there. I glanced through it. Noticed you're a solo ace. Why'd you take this assignment?"

I eyed him a moment. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Always."

I shrugged. "Command asked me to, sir. I couldn't well say no. My superiors made it very clear to me that your unit, sir, needed someone of my caliber in order to continue in your duties." *You know, most units would be happy to pick up an ace fighter jock as their chaffer, no questions asked. So what's with the third degree here?*

Winchester nodded thoughtfully, getting up from his chair and neatly stacking the pile of papers he was working on before bending over and slipping it into a drawer. He was as tall as I had assumed he was, his black hair cropped short. He walked over to me and extended his hand. "I'm Kiros Winchester--most of the team calls me Kir."

His calloused hand dwarfed my own as I shook it. "Catherine Anders--calsign, Cat."

Winchester nodded. "I saw that in your file. A loner, eh?"

"Better not to leave anyone behind if I go, if you catch my meaning, sir. I'm sure it's noted in my file that my social skills are somewhat lacking."

He half smiled. "It *is* noted. I wouldn't worry about it too much--this unit doesn't have much in the way of those sorts of skills and graces, either. You'll fit in fine."

*If you say so, sir.* "Of course, sir. I haven't received my barrack assignment or duty schedule yet. I was lead to believe you would have those for me."

He snapped his fingers. "Of course. Give me a moment to find them. They're in a drawer someplace." He turned back toward his desk and moved to it. He rifled through drawers, looking for the documents for me. "So, you're from Gattica Province?"

I felt myself tense up at the mention of home. I couldn't hear the words *Gattica Province* without remembering the carnage and devastation of its destruction. Of the population of a quarter of a million people, only several hundred had survived--most of those in the service and thus far away from the province when it died. The province had ceased to exist in one day and one night of fire and terror--at least, that's what the talking heads on the vid said. I'd never been able to bring

myself to go back there, to Gattica, after it died. It hurt too much, then. It was pointless now. “Yes, sir. I grew up there.”

“We have a couple of brothers from Gattica in the unit--my second-in-command and our sniper/logistics man. I’ll introduce you after--ah-ha! Found them.” He came up with a manila folder, which he handed to me. “That should be all the information you need. You answer to me and to Colonel March, the base commander. I assume you’ve met him?”

I nodded, thumbing through the folder. After a moment, I tucked the folder under my arm--all it contained were the standard fare for a new assignment, including a bunk assignment and my duty schedule. “Who do my briefings come from?”

“Either myself or the colonel. Most of the time, I’ll be the one handling your briefings. The colonel usually likes to remain fairly ignorant of the unit’s activities--he claims it’s safer that way.” Winchester grabbed a jacket hanging on the back of his chair and shrugged it on. “C’mon with me, I’ll introduce you to the unit.”

*He seems like a decent enough guy,* I thought as I followed Winchester to another section of the base, this section obviously given over to the units housed there--in this case, the only unit housed there, the Iron Vipers under Major Kiros Winchester.

We stopped in front of a wide doorway. He motioned down the hall. “You’ll have private quarters down that way. I didn’t see a reason to subject you to the squad 24-7.” Winchester jerked a thumb toward the door we stood in front of. “This is home for us. The bunkroom doubles as a rec room. Briefing room is down at the end of the hall; showers too. Mess is back the way we came.” He grinned, a flash of white against dark flesh. “Ready?”

I shrugged. “As I’ll ever be. Lead on, sir.”

He nodded and pushed open the door. Inside, I could see the various member of the Iron Vipers, some reclining on bunks, some at a table playing cards, a few more at computer terminals or flipping channels on the vid unit. “Over there by the vid are Dale Varras and Marissa Conrad. Tasha Lin is the one on the terminal there, the other one is Todd Pelas. Liv James, Jack Linstrom, and Mikhal Carrey are over there with the deck of cards, Jen Peters and Pat Levine are the two there...” Winchester frowned a moment, then glanced up at one of the soldiers sitting on their bunks. “Hey, Pat, where’s the XO?”

The man Winchester spoke to, a blonde sitting on one of the upper bunks, glanced up from what he was reading. “Med appointment about an hour ago. Should be back shortly.” He looked back down at his book. “Medtechs wanted to take another look at Con’s eyes or something.”

Winchester nodded and turned back to me as the soldier kept speaking.

“That our new pilot?”

Winchester glanced back over his shoulder. “You bet. Behave yourselves this time so we don’t lose another.”



Pat Levine just grinned at us and went back to his book. Winchester shrugged off his jacket and tossed it onto one of the bunks.

“That’s most of the unit, ‘cept for the brothers I was telling you about. I’m sure if you wait a couple of minutes, they’ll show. I forgot about Con’s appointment this afternoon--he caught a flash-bang point-blank about a week ago. Medtechs said they don’t think there’s any permanent damage but they keep checking up on him to be sure. Last word we got was a few weeks before he could see again and a little while after that until he’s back on active combat duty.”

*Rough life in this unit.* “Is he your sniper or your XO?”

“Sniper and logistics. You wouldn’t happen to be a crack shot, too, would you?”

“No, sir, I wouldn’t consider myself a crack shot.” *Pretty desperate to not be without a sniper. That doesn’t bode well.* “Is he your only one?”

Winchester shook his head. “Nah. Liv’s got training in it, too. Con’s usually better for logistics, to tell you the truth. It’s just nice to have an extra sniper, y’know?”

Behind us, the door swung open, admitting two men--one dark-haired and sharing the somewhat slight build that I had, the other with blond-brown hair and silver-blue eyes. The dark-haired one wore an olive green bandana over his eyes--he was the “Con” everyone had been referring to. My heart skipped a beat. I knew these men--knew them better than I had ever known anyone in my life.

Winchester turned, grinning. “Speak of the devil. Captain Anders, this is Lieutenant Connor Davies and his brother, Captain Lucian Davies.”

I could feel my heart thudding against my breastbone and I could hear the blood pounding in my ears. Lucian looked toward me and extended his hand. I willed my own hand not to tremble as I shook his. I started to calm down as I realized that there was no hint of recognition in his eyes. His voice was the same as I remembered. “It’s good to meet you, Captain. From your uniform, I assume you’re our new pilot.”

*My fiancée doesn’t even recognize me.* Relief tinged with regret flooded through me. Five years ago, I was ready to spend the rest of my life with this man, the one who stood before me. I had thought him dead for the last five years--I had forced myself to forget him in order to go on with my life.

Now here he was, standing in front of me, not knowing who I was. I didn’t want that to hurt, but it did--it *did*. I forced a smile and hoped it didn’t *look* as forced as it felt. “That’s me. Cat Anders.”

“Lucian Davies--unit calls me Luc.” He released my hand, then guided his companion’s hand--*my brother’s hand*--to mine. Connor grasped my hand with a surprisingly strong grip.

He smiled a little. “Con Davies. Welcome to the team, Captain Anders.”

*He has to know. He’d know my voice. He must know my voice. But if Luc doesn’t remember me...* I shook his hand and released it. “It’s good to meet you, Lieutenant.”

Lucian slung his arm across Connor's shoulders. "C'mon, bro, let's get you back to bed."

Connor nodded. "Right, right. Just don't let me trip over anything, OK?"

I watched them walk away, toward a back corner of the room, barely concealing a wince at Lucian's easy laughter and his good-natured response to Connor. "Sure, bro, sure."

*No, no, no! It shouldn't hurt this much. It shouldn't hurt! They've been dead to me for five years! They're still dead to me! That's what I want. That's what I need. I looked away from them. But they're not dead. They're alive, and Connor's the only family I have. And Luc...*

*No. I can't. I have a job to do, and so do they. To each other, we're dead. That's all there is to it.* I looked at Winchester. "So those two are the brothers you wanted me to meet?"

Winchester nodded. "They were a couple of the only people to walk out of the rubble at Gattica--well, to come out of it, anyway. I'm not sure either of them quite walked out of it." He patted my shoulder. "They're a couple of good guys. Anyway, I'll let you get settled. Squad has a briefing tomorrow."

*Tomorrow? I'm not technically on-duty until Monday...* "Sir--"

"You're not on this one--we're heading out with another unit." He gently turned me around and steered me out of the barrack. "Walk with me, Captain. I have a favor to ask you."

"A favor to ask or an unspoken order, sir?" I glanced toward him. His expression betrayed some indignance and some offense at my statement.

"A favor, Captain. Believe me, if it was an order, I'd let you know." He escorted me down the hall, where he'd told me my bunk was. "With the unit on assignment, that means we're going to have to leave Connor behind here alone. His current condition makes it hard for him to get around on his own and generally function normally, and he was talking about getting some work for the team done while we're on deployment. Ordinarily, I wouldn't ask this of you, but I don't want to hand him back over to the medtechs right now. I mean, he just got out of their hands, and it's bad enough they want him in as often as they do..."

I stopped walking and looked at Winchester. "Sir, the sales pitch is lovely, and I really do appreciate your candor and the explanation, but I do think that you could make this easier on both of us by cutting to the chase."

He nodded. "All right, then. I'm asking you to be Connor's eyes while we're gone. We shouldn't be long, but..."

"It's the principle of it, I know." I shrugged. "If that's all you need, sir, I'll do it."

His eyes lit up--I don't think he'd actually counted on me agreeing, at least not as quickly as I had. "You will?"

"Sure thing. It's the least I can do." *For the brother I thought I lost. God, what am I doing? What's wrong with me? I thought I'd made my choice. But Luc...I need to know what happened. I need to know why he doesn't know me, and only Connor*

*will know the answer to that, if anyone does. Besides, the instant Connor actually sees me, he'll know, and then it'll all be over...God, what's wrong with me? Five years of cultivated forgetfulness, frigidity. Five years, wasted. I can't let knowing that Luc and Connor are alive affect the way I operate. My life means nothing. The mission is everything.* I pointed down the hall. "My barrack's down that way, right?"

Winchester nodded. "Right down that way. I'll leave you to settle in. You might join us for dinner later."

I shook my head. "Thanks for the offer, sir, but I think I'm going to grab some rack time--it was a long flight in. When do you all leave tomorrow?"

"Early--around 0600 is briefing, and we'll be gone shortly after that."

I nodded. "Understood, sir. Good luck on your mission and have a good evening." I saluted him and then headed for where he'd said my barrack was.

The room was tiny, a single, and my gear was sitting on the narrow bunk. I turned up the lights as I let the door close behind me. *This is home. Welcome home, Cat.*

I started to unpack my things, stowing most of it in the footlocker under the bed that I noticed now had my name emblazoned on it. I hung up my flightsuit and dress uniform before I turned down the lights and changed out of my clothes, selecting something suitable to sleep in, moving to the tiny bathroom I had all to myself--quite a shift from the communal facilities I was used to.

I wished the scalding water that poured over me in the shower would burn away the memories of my past. Once, I'd almost been able to forget completely home and everything not of my service in the armed forces--I'd been able to forget Gattica and all that went with it. I'd wrapped myself completely in the tragedy that was Catherine Anders's life, the story I'd told the intelligence officers that had interviewed me when I defected from E-Fed to the Alliance. In that story, the new history I'd written for myself on the long flight from Io to Alliance space, I was Catherine Anders, who'd lost her new husband along with the rest of her family when Gattica Province died. She was alone in the universe, an ace pilot with nothing to lose. I'd had the skills to back up part of that. Everything else came with the numbness born of my total certainty that everyone I'd known and loved was gone. All the reports said no one from Roanoke, where I'd been born and grown up, had survived unless they were off-world at the time. As far as I'd known, everyone was gone. The story hadn't been a lie, not entirely. Only parts of it had been fabricated, and there was no way to check those facts beyond accessing my E-Fed service file. No one had bothered to do that, only talked to my squadmates and subordinates. None of the Fallen Angels had gainsaid my story. As far as they were concerned, whatever I'd told the Alliance military officials was true.

I hoped that I'd be able to completely focus on accomplishing my missions, as I had before I'd found out that they were alive. I didn't want to allow the knowledge of my brother and fiancé's survival to affect me. If I did, if I allowed myself to think about it, I risked losing everything. The only "everything" I had was the

knowledge that I had nothing to lose. I couldn't allow myself to lose that mentality, because if I did, I lost my edge and that could--and very likely would--be deadly. It would have been different, had it just been my life at risk, but I was responsible for the transport of a squadron of commandos, and to place their lives at risk was unacceptable. I could not let other people pay the price for my own unfocused mind, which was why I couldn't afford to *have* an unfocused mind.

After I got out of the shower, I pulled on a pair of shorts and a tank top and crawled into bed, the room dark and the doors locked. I curled up with one of the few mementos that I had allowed myself to keep through all of those long years. The tattered and patched teddy bear had been a childhood gift from my family. Connor had picked it out, our parents had paid for it. One of the other things was neatly folded at the end of my bed--a tartan blanket that Connor and Lucian had given me a long time ago. If I'd been smart, I would have gotten rid of them a while ago. I guess my sentimentality got in the way.

That first night, for the first time in five years, I cried myself to sleep.

## 2

The Iron Vipers' barrack was quiet the next morning, and empty except for the two 'brothers' in the back corner, talking softly to each other. I kept a respectable distant and cleared my throat to get Lucian's attention. He turned, then nodded at me. "Morning, Captain."

I nodded back. "Good morning to you both. Captain, don't you have a briefing to get to? It's almost 0600."

He nodded. "I do. Con and I were just talking, is all. We really appreciate what you're doing."

I shrugged. "It's no big deal. Who knows? Maybe the lieutenant will improve my bad attitude." I tucked my hands into my pockets.

Lucian laughed, then glanced toward Connor, who was smiling faintly. "Well, bro, looks like we're leaving you in good hands. We'll be back sooner rather than later."

Connor just nodded. "Sure thing, Luc. You guys be careful out there, all right?"

"As always." Lucian patted Connor on the shoulder and stood up. "Bye, Con."

Connor waved. "Bye, Luc. Good luck."

Lucian smiled, nodded, and left the barrack with a steady and confident smile. I waited until the door clicked shut behind him before looking back at Connor. He sat there, quietly, his hands in his lap. It was a long while before he broke the silence.

"Are you who I think you are?"

I didn't know how to respond. I wasn't even sure he'd heard my name.

"You changed your last name, Cat."

I swallowed hard, trying to figure out why I felt so close to tears. "Yeah. Yeah, I did. Con, why didn't you tell me you were alive?"

My brother shook his head, shifting to lie back down on his bunk. "I wasn't sure if you were alive, or what side you were on." He felt around for his blanket and pulled it up. "So when did you change your name?"

"When I switched sides and joined the Alliance. I brought most of a squadron with me when we found out that Earth was responsible for the bombing." I tried to shove aside the pain of Gattica's destruction as I again brought it to mind. "What about you and Luc? Brothers?" I bit my lip. "He didn't recognize me, Connor. Why?"

Connor was quiet for a long moment, then sighed. "It was after Gattica died. We hadn't thought that either of us was hurt that bad--I had some broken ribs, he had a real nice gash on his head. Well, turns out he had a closed head injury. I just...I didn't know what to do. First I lied so I could get in to see him while he was being

treated and then when the relief workers that the Alliance sent finally got around to actually taking down lists of survivors, I just told them that Lucian and I were brothers so I wouldn't lose track of him later. After he regained consciousness, we realized the head injury had killed his memory of just about everything. I haven't told him who he really is or anything since then."

I shook my head, sitting down on the edge of his bunk. "How did you survive? I was told the entire city was completely wiped out."

"They lied. Five people survived." Connor rubbed at his forehead. "Sabrina's in school on Epsilon right now. Luc and I are supporting her. She'd been down in the root cellar and Luc and I had gone down to get her when everything went to shit. That's how we survived."

*Sabrina's alive, too? The image of Luc's smiling, blond-pigtailed little sister filled my mind's eye. How old would she be now?*

He sat up again, his shoulders slumping slightly. "She's nineteen now. Second year at the university in Zephyr." It was as if Connor had read my mind. "Luc doesn't even realize she's his little sister." He rubbed at the blindfold over his eyes. "Although, maybe with your help—"

"I can't," I snapped. *That was harsh. I shouldn't have cut him off like that. I shouldn't have done that. But I can't do what he wants me to do.*

"Geez, Cat, why not? You loved each other. Don't you want him back?" He sounded hurt by my response, the knee-jerk denial of my help in recovering Lucian's memory.

*Part of me does, Connor, but I can't afford to give in to that part of myself.* I shook my head. "It's not that."

"Then what is it, Cat? I don't understand why you'd react like this if it wasn't." The expression on my brother's face was openly confused. There was a hint of desperation there, too--I knew he had to be desperate to help Lucian, who was obviously really the last thing he had left of the life he had known after my departure and before our home was destroyed.

I hung my head, squeezing my eyes shut and curling my hands into fists. "I can't afford attachments, Connor. The only reason I'm as good at my job as I am is because I'm alone in the universe. I thought you were all dead. I had nothing left. Nothing to lose and everything to gain, mission after mission after mission. All I have is the job. I *am* the job." I turned and reached for his hand. "Connor...don't get me wrong. I'm happy you two lived, but..."

"We've managed to totally screw up your life without trying. I understand that." He took my hand and squeezed it. "But I can't understand how you can possibly think that the reason for your apparent skill is because you have no attachments, Cat. You're good because you just are--not because you're alone."

I shook my head. "Connor...I don't have fear because I'm alone. The fearlessness makes me better than I would be otherwise--than I *could* be otherwise." I reached out and grasped his upper arm at the shoulder, squeezing gently. "Please, Connor,

you have to understand. I can't afford what you're asking me to do--and considering that your life and his life and the lives of the rest of your squad are in my hands..."

He hung his head. "...none of us can afford it. I hear what you're saying, Cat, I just...I don't know. I guess I just don't want to believe it."

"It's the only choice we have, Con."

"Yeah. I know."

### 3

Connor and I didn't discuss the matter again, at least not for a while. I could tell he wanted to--I suppose that I couldn't blame him for that. He'd always loved Lucian like a brother, and he more than anyone else had been overjoyed when Lucian asked me to marry him. Now, with everything that had happened, I guess he'd started to have trouble with the lie he and Lucian were living--Lucian didn't know it was a lie, of course, but Connor did. It must have hurt him, I think. He'd always had trouble with lying, ever since we were children. I supposed that he really hadn't changed in that regard.

We came back into the unit's barrack a few days after the Iron Vipers had left on their mission to hear a woman's voice humming softly. There was a strawberry blonde woman standing next to one of the bunks, arranging pictures on her bulletin board and personal effects in the mesh netting that hung from the bunk above. Connor stopped just outside the open door when he heard the humming. "Cat," he whispered hoarsely, "Cat, quick, who is that?"

I frowned. "Just a girl, Con."

"What does she look like? Tell me what she looks like!" There was urgency in his hushed whisper.

*Connor, what the heck is going on with you?* "About our size, duty uniform. She's got her back to us. There's not much I can see."

"Hair color?"

"Strawberry blonde. Looks long, too, but she's got it twisted up." I raked a hand back through my short-cropped hair. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong," he mumbled. "Help me to my bunk, will you? I think maybe I'll listen to music for a while."

I just nodded and put my arm around his shoulders, beginning to guide him back to his bunk in the corner. *Do I really want to know what's going on with you, Connor? I really need to keep my distance. For your sake, for my sake--for everyone's sake.* It was strange. I'd only joined the Iron Vipers a few days before, but already I was beginning to find the silence between Connor and I disconcerting. Something like that hadn't happened in years. Over the past five years, I'd come to revel in the silence. *I can't allow myself to change. Distance keeps me and those I am charged with safeguarding alive. My fearlessness makes me superior. I have nothing to lose.*

*But I do...* I gritted my teeth and tried to kill the thought, shove it away. I didn't have anything to lose. I couldn't have anything to lose.

As I helped Connor toward his bunk, the woman looked up from what she was doing. Her brow furrowed slightly as she looked at me, but her eyes lit up when she saw Connor. "Connor Davies, aren't you going to say hello?" She had a Brit's



accent, something I hadn't heard in years. I'd met a few people with such an accent, but not recently. Not since I'd left E-Fed.

Not since I'd found out what they sent Mat Taylor and the Screaming Eagles to do five years ago at Gattica. Not since my CO told me and turned a blind eye as I stole an entire wing out from under him and took it to the Alliance.

For a moment, I wondered if she was like me in that, another defector. The thought evaporated as Connor turned and smiled weakly at her.

"If I could have seen you, Maryanne, I probably would have. I'm guessing you're back?"

Her eyes widened when she saw the blindfold over Connor's eyes, expression melting into one of concern. "Aye, Connor, I'm back. Intel finally decided I didn't know anything beyond what I'd already told them." She came over to us, taking both of his hands. "Connor, what happened to your eyes?"

"I was stupid. Caught a flash-bang a bit too close. Temporarily blind with nasty light sensitivity. No permanent damage, though." He grinned at her a little. "It's a shame we were down a medic for that run, huh?"

She bit her lip, reaching up and touching his cheek lightly below the blindfold. His expression went slack and he drew her toward him in a hug, squeezing her tight against his chest. I felt a pang of empathy, of regret.

*I'm never going to have that with Lucian.*

"I'm sorry," Maryanne whispered.

"Shh," he whispered. "Not your fault. What about you? How are you doing? I imagine you *look* a lot better than you did the last time I saw you." He grinned wryly and sort of tipped his head toward me slightly. I think he might have winked, but with his blindfold, I couldn't be sure. It would've been like him to do something like that, though.

I had to fight down a smile despite myself.

Her arms tightened around him for half a heartbeat, then she released him and held him at arms' length, looking him up and down. "I'm all right. Knee and shoulder still stiffen up without warning sometimes, but it's not too bad and I'm cleared for duty. Next time the squad rolls out, so do I. I'm guessing they're out on assignment right now, huh?"

He nodded. "Yeah. They left me here with this one," he jerked a thumb in my general direction. "Cat, please tell me you didn't move on me, because if you did, I'm going to feel *really* stupid."

I smiled a little. "Right where you left me, Lieutenant." I extended my hand to his friend. "Captain Catherine Anders, callsign Cat. I'm the Vipers' new pilot."

The other woman's grip was firm. "Lieutenant Maryanne Cooper. Unit medtech." After releasing my hand, she turned back to Connor. "Do you want to go get some coffee with me? We can sit down and catch up."

He smiled. "I'd like that. Cat, you don't have to come."

I nodded. "Call if you need something." I left him to Maryanne and went back

to my quarters, where I pulled off my boots and curled up with my bear. *Distance. I have to keep my distance. Damn you, Connor! I'm not supposed to care. I'm not supposed to be this close to tears.* I'd dreamed of a similar reunion between Lucian and I, a lot like the one I'd just witnessed between him and Maryanne. I hated to admit that to myself. I'd always known it wasn't going to happen, though, and eventually it was, in part, the pain of that knowledge that motivated me to forget. They'd been dead to me. Everyone had been.

It didn't matter that I loved him. It didn't matter that I still did. I couldn't allow myself to feel the pain. *There is no pain. There is no one. I am alone, one pilot in the void. One ace in the hole. Alone. I'm alone, and that's the way it needs to be.*

That night, for a second time since joining the Vipers, I cried myself to sleep.

# 4

Connor spent a lot of time with Maryanne after that--he didn't seem to much need me. I didn't mind so much. I spent some time in the flight simulators and at the firing range. I also spent a lot of time thinking, mostly about how to maintain my distant, removed attitude, trying to figure out how to forget even though I was constantly reminded.

Every time I heard them, saw them, it was like rubbing salt in an open wound. Leaving, though, was out of the question. The Iron Vipers needed me, and in order for the Alliance to win this war, this war that had started with Gattica, they needed the Vipers. I couldn't abandon them. I needed to find a way to abandon my feelings instead. By worrying, I would do a disservice to them all. It dulled my edge, made me somehow a lesser pilot than I was. I couldn't afford that. Command sent me here because I was the best, and the Vipers needed and deserved the best. I couldn't let anything jeopardize that.

But damn, it was hard to stop *feeling*.

The rest of the Iron Vipers returned several days after Maryanne's arrival. I didn't realize it at the time, but the slide I could not stop started then. It began when I started eating with the squad, then progressed to me playing cards with some of them late into the night. I flew for them, of course--that was my job, after all. We ran several missions, mostly short ones with morning drops and late-night extractions. Winchester and I would spend hours in his office sometimes, planning out their drop-zones and waypoints, the extraction details and the emergency evacuation options. I didn't realize it then, but I'd begun to care about these people, despite my deep desire to maintain my distance, to keep them at arms' length. It just wasn't working.

It was a few weeks after I'd come to the Vipers when Connor slipped quietly into my cabin as I was curled in bed, reading. By now he'd gotten a feel for the layout of my room and managed to cross it without much incident. He sat down on my bed and just waited for me to say something before he spoke.

I set aside my book after a long moment. "Something wrong?"

He shook his head. "Not really. Maryanne's in the hall. She won't come in unless you say it's okay."

I frowned. "You're planning something?"

Connor grimaced. "I guess I am, but it's kind of important. I...I have a really hard time keeping secrets from Maryanne, y'see. I know it's a huge favor to ask, but she'll eventually figure it all out, Cat, you've gotta realize that..."

It took me a moment to figure out exactly what he was saying. "You want to tell her! You want to tell her who we are!"

“Who Luc is, too. She’ll figure it out sooner rather than later, Cat. It’s easier for us to tell her now so we can keep it quiet rather than have her sort it out on her own. I’m kind of surprised she hasn’t figured it out already, after so long with the unit.” He frowned. “I don’t want to blow your secret, Cat, really I don’t, but Maryanne needs to know. She’s the unit medic, for Chrissake.”

*She’s more than that.* “You love her, don’t you, Con?”

He hung his head and nodded. “Very much, Cat. Very much. I don’t want to have to keep this secret from her.”

“We don’t want most of what we get, Con,” I sighed. *God, why am I doing this? This could mean my career—hell, my life—ending up in the toilet. But I’m doing it anyway.* “Bring her in.”

His head lifted. “You mean it?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t. Bring her in before I change my mind.”

He grinned and hugged me--I hadn’t quite expected that and was caught off-guard. After a heartbeat’s hesitation, I haltingly hugged him back. *What am I doing? Damn it all...*

“Thanks, Cat,” he said quietly, then released me and got up, turning and moving slowly toward the door. “By the way,” he said, “do you mind if I dim the lights? Medtechs said it’d be okay to lose the blindfold as long as the lights are low, and I’d like to be able to see you *and* her. It’s been a while, y’know?”

“That’s fine,” I said quietly. I got up and turned down the lights while he opened the door and pulled Maryanne inside. I locked the door as he sat down on my bed and she sat down in my desk chair. I leaned against the door. “I turned the lights down Connor.”

He nodded slowly and untied the blindfold from around his eyes. Connor blinked and squinted, letting his eyes adjust, then smiled. “Thanks, Cat. Now please, come over here where I can see you.”

I blushed a little despite myself and came over to sit next to him on my bed. His gaze followed me and he smiled while tears gathered in his eyes. “Like I remembered,” he said quietly, looking me up and down. “Like I remember from the last time I saw you.” He hugged me again, tightly, then released me slowly. I stiffened as his arms went around me, then sagged. I didn’t want to admit how good it’d felt, and how much I regretted not hugging him back a second time.

Maryanne frowned heavily as she got up and moved toward us. “Connor, what’s going on? You and Cat know each other?”

He looked toward her and smiled a little. I knew that he was still tearing up, presumably just from the emotion. “And you,” he whispered. “God, Maryanne, you’re so beautiful.” He hugged her, too, then let her go and sat back. He swiped at the tears in his eyes and on his face as he nodded. Maryanne sank down on the bed, on the opposite side of him from me. “Yes, Cat and I know each other. Better than most people, I suppose you could say.”

It took hours to explain everything--about me, about him, about my defection

in the wake of learning that E-Fed had been responsible for the bombings of the province, not the Pharridan or the Ealves as the home government originally tried to claim. I felt myself going cold inside, and Connor called me on it. We got into a shouting match about the way I'd been living, how he didn't like it and that I was all right with it. I told him if he didn't like it, he could leave. Maryanne just sat there, looking helpless.

After that, they left me there in my solitude, with my thoughts. If I hadn't been on call, I think I would've started drinking. Instead, I just sat there on my bed and cried until I didn't have any tears left at all.

# 5

Connor and I barely spoke throughout the next week and a half. Once, Maryanne came by to talk to me, but there wasn't much conversation. She talked, I mostly cried. I just didn't want to admit the truth. I didn't want to face the pain or the hard road that would lay ahead of me if I *did* face the truth. I think, somehow, she knew what I was feeling and she understood what I was going through. I don't know how or why. At least she understood enough to just sit there with me and just let me cry.

Connor, meanwhile, when he and Maryanne weren't attached at the hip, spent almost all the rest of his time with Lucian--the pair were almost inseparable. Connor's eyes recovered to the point where he was placed back on the active duty roster, and the pair wasted no time getting out to the range to make sure Connor's skills with a sniper rifle hadn't atrophied. I tried not to pay attention. It just hurt too much.

The Iron Vipers, despite my best efforts, had begun to change me. Connor had been right about that. More and more often, I found myself eating with them, talking with them, playing cards, hanging out. It was a camaraderie that I hadn't known since shortly after Gattica died, not since the squadron I'd brought with me was broken up, scattered among a half-dozen units. I didn't even know how many lived to this day.

The self-imposed distance I'd kept between myself and everyone else for the past five years was definitely waning--the gap was closing, faster and faster. Maybe it was the Vipers. I didn't know what it was. I still tried, though, to remain fearless while flying, to stay focused on the mission and nothing else, so I maintained the edge that had gotten me the job. I'd done it, or at least I thought I had.

I hoped I had.

Major Winchester called me into his office one afternoon for a briefing. I knew that he'd noticed changes in me, but had never said anything about them. When I arrived in his office that day, he was as grim as I'd ever seen him. I sat down in the offered chair, frowning at him. "What's up, Major? Why the grim face?"

He dropped a folder onto the desk in front of me. "Simple question with a simple answer, Captain. Take a look."

I flipped open the file and my guts turned to ice. *Demar. They're sending the Iron Vipers to Demar.* Demar was the nightmare for any unit. What seemed like forever ago, a war ended on Demar, only to have another start a handful of years later. It was some sort of cursed world. The last time I'd heard, no one had dared touch the place, simply because of everything that had happened there. Flipping through that file, though, it rapidly became apparent that fear of the place had

worn away. Earth forces had landed on Demar, which was dangerously close to one of the colony worlds that was a member of the Alliance. From what the file was telling me, I was supposed to drop the Iron Vipers on Demar and then hide out behind Demar's moon, Astros, and await the signal to pick them up again. I shivered. *Demar. Dammit, why Demar? Why are they going to send the squad to Demar, of all places? If anything would break me, even before the Vipers happened to me, this is it. Demar. Why us? Why the Vipers? Damn!*

"I see that you like this about as much as I do." Winchester sank down behind his desk and shook his head. "We leave as soon as I brief the squad, so I'd suggest you get ready and start stocking the transport."

I nodded woodenly. "Do you want me to requisition the medical gear, or will Maryanne do that?"

Winchester thought for a long moment. "Do it. Maryanne will requisition more, but considering where we're going..."

"We can't have too much. I hear that, sir. I'll requisition whatever I can."

He patted my shoulder. "I really appreciate it, Captain. Maybe between you, Con, and Maryanne, we'll have enough to get us out of there alive."

I shrugged. "It's my job to make sure you guys come home alive, Major. I don't intend to ruin my reputation *or* my track record anytime soon." I tucked the folder under my arm, intending to go over my flight path and other mission specifics after I requisitioned what we'd need.

Winchester nodded, still looking grim. "We won't be changing waypoints or anything for this one. Mission's going to run the way it's planned. We don't have choices on this one." He sighed, his shoulders visibly slumping. "You're dismissed, Captain."

"Thank you, sir." I saluted and left his office, starting down the hall to my quarters, where I'd drop off the file while I requisitioned gear. *Dammit! Demar. Why Demar? Why this unit? Dammit. If I really do lose them, this'll be the time it happens!* I almost stopped short in the hallway as pain hit me--I hadn't expected it to hurt like that, thinking about losing the Iron Vipers, and Lucian and Connor with them. It wasn't that I hadn't expected it to hurt, just not like this. After all, I'd already come to terms with losing Connor and Lucian, five years ago, and I'd been alone for years already--why should now be different?

*I came to terms with losing Connor and Lucian then, and being alone, but in the deepest, darkest corner of my heart where I lock away the things I don't want to feel, I know that I don't want the life I'm living. I want my Luc back. I don't want the distance I've tried to maintain, the distance that I've been allowing to slip. I want my brother back. I want to live life--I don't want to watch it march past me. I want friends again, people who care about me. I want to be afraid again--afraid to die, afraid to lose people around me. I want emotional attachments again. I want to be afraid of losing again, not of failing, but of losing.*

I slumped against the door to my quarters as the thought hit me. Me, afraid?

*I'm already afraid. I'm afraid of losing. I'm afraid of failing. I'm afraid of losing this team, of letting them down.*

*I'm afraid of losing my friends.*

I had never quite thought of the Iron Vipers like that before--as my friends rather than as people I just happened to work with. But they were my friends. Somehow, somewhere along the line, they'd crossed the line I'd drawn in the sand between being colleagues and being friends. I *cared* about these people. I didn't want them to die, and not just because of my reputation and career. I wanted them to live because I'd become part of them, and they had become a part of me. After five years of being alone, it came as quite a shock for me to realize that for the past several months, I'd hardly been alone at all--well, maybe not a shock to realize it, but a shock that I'd finally gotten the guts to admit it to myself. Wouldn't Connor be proud of me? I squeezed my eyes shut and exhaled a long breath. Now wasn't the time, though, not for any of it. I'd deal with it all after the mission was over. First, we had to survive Demar. Then Connor and I could talk...maybe. I wasn't sure.

I composed myself and headed off to requisition the supplies I'd said I would. After that and arranging for the supplies to be delivered to the Vipers' dropship, I went back to my quarters and got ready to go. Reading over the mission specifics, it seemed pretty cut and dry. Simple scouting run for the Vipers--they were to gather more intelligence, possibly attempt to disrupt communications or supply lines if the opportunity presented itself, and then get the hell out of Dodge. It wasn't a hard mission. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have even worried about it. But the destination was Demar, and Demar ate units alive.

My mission prep didn't change, though. I still followed my routine. The ship and supplies were ready to go by the time Connor and Maryanne arrived, toting more supplies. Both made eye contact with me while I was doing my final checks of the ship as they boarded and started to stow gear. I offered them a tight smile and continued my work. Connor appeared at my shoulder before too long.

"So. Demar, huh?"

He nodded grimly. "We don't know what to think. Usually they'd pass us up for recon. But since it's Demar, we have to go."

I sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I know. Any other place and I'd not be taking you there. I don't want this run, Connor, I really don't."

"It's our job, Cat."

"I know it is," I said quietly. "That's why I'm doing it. I'm scared to death, though."

He looked at me. "Of failing?"

I shook my head. "No. Of losing you guys." I punched a few controls. "You'd better get going. Kir's going to want you there for his little pre-boarding pep talk."

His face was reflected in the viewport. He smiled at me, weakly, and patted my shoulder before he turned and disembarked. Through the viewport, I watched him



hook up with Maryanne and walk toward where the rest of the Iron Vipers were massing around Kiros Winchester, the only commanding officer they'd ever had. They were all there, among them, my fiancée, standing next to his commanding officer, smiling grimly at the men and women he called his friends. I could only hope that all the Iron Vipers would come home from this one alive.

## 6

The waiting was always the worst part. There's nothing to do but sit and watch the stars and wait, either for the emergency extraction call, or for the timer to hit zero, meaning it's time to go pick up the troops. Waiting is the worst part. There had been no call for an emergency extraction, so I hoped that meant things were going well. I was just left to sit and watch the counter tick down the final seconds, then hit zero.

When the counter *did* hit zero, I got underway after than I ever had before. I was totally on the ball, focusing on everything I needed to do to pick up the Iron Vipers and bring them safely home.

I guided the dropship through the atmosphere along one of the variant flight paths I was allowed to take, setting down, eventually, in a sandy and grassy depression near a cliff side. Within moments of my setting down and getting prepped to open up the hatches and let the squad in, the men and women of the Iron Vipers came tumbling down into the depression. I quickly cycled the hatches open. The Vipers never stopped running. They filled the dropship and Kiros slapped the control to close and lock down all the hatches. "Cat, take off!"

I didn't bother with any sort of head count as I started lifting. Behind me, Connor spoke, almost panicked. "Kir, you said we'd regroup and --"

"That was before they nailed Liv and Jack, Connor. Sit your ass down." I'd never heard Kiros Winchester be quite that forceful before. *Shit, what's going on?*

"Respectfully, sir, it's our duty to--"

"Your ass in a seat, Lieutenant! You heard Maryanne. Unless we get Liv and Jack back to base, we'll lose them both."

"So we're just going to leave Luc back there to die."

I froze for a split second. *Refocus, Catherine, refocus. Don't think about that. Don't think about it. Just fly. Get the people aboard your ship home. Just get them home. Home.*

*There is no home if he's not there.*

Kiros sighed. "He knew the risks, Connor, and he volunteered. No matter who it is, I won't give up two lives for one. I'm sorry."

*We're leaving Luc behind. I can't believe I'm letting this happen. God, the mission. Focus on the mission.* I held my tears inside and flew the Iron Vipers away from Demar, where they had left their friend behind.

*I can't let it end here.*

The dropship was almost silent for most of the trip back to the Vipers' home base. Connor knocked himself out with a sedative from Maryanne and slept. Meanwhile, Maryanne worked with one of the others, I wasn't sure who, to do

what they could for Liv and Jack. Kiros and the rest of the team sat in silence throughout the flight.

When we got back to base, most of the Vipers went to debrief. Meanwhile, I went back to their barrack and brewed coffee. I tried not to think about the fact that Lucian wouldn't come back from debrief with them. It was hard, though--damned hard. I found myself sitting on his bed and looking at the pictures pinned up on his bulletin board. They were mostly of him with the Iron Vipers, or with Connor, or with Sabrina. There were a few of just the Vipers, too, including one of Connor and Maryanne at some bar far away. They looked so happy, it just made the hurt worse.

I closed my eyes and bit my lip. *Lucian...God...I can't just leave you there with them. I can't just leave you there to die. I don't want to lose you again. God, I can't lose you again.*

The doors to the barrack opened and the Iron Vipers, minus Liv, Jack, and Lucian, began to filter in. I stood up immediately and made a beeline for Connor, who looked like he'd been holding back tears all through his debriefing. Maryanne gently disengaged her hand from his and took half a step over as I came up and hugged my brother. Connor put his arms around me and just started to sob. I felt my own tears start to come as I just held him while he cried. I knew that the rest of the Vipers must have been looking at us funny. *I don't care if they are. We can explain once we're both back in control.* I swiped at my tears, rolling silently down my cheeks, as Connor and I held each other.

He calmed down after a few minutes and Maryanne got us over to a bunk to sit down--hers, I was pretty certain. I went poured them each a cup of coffee, which I brought over to them, before going and getting a cup of my own. Kiros was frowning at me heavily. "Cat, will you please explain your sudden change in behavior? I'm getting a little worried here."

I smiled weakly. "I guess it was just something that was a long time in coming, Major." I patted Connor's knee as I sat down next to him. He glanced at me and smiled back at me, but only faintly. Neither of us had much to smile about. Maryanne had her arm around him and he was sort of hunched over, holding his coffee mug in both hands. "But there's an explanation that you'll eventually get. Right now, though, I want to know what Luc was doing when you guys left him there."

Pat turned away from the coffee pot with a mug in his hand. "Cat, don't bring it up. We feel bad enough about it as it is..."

I looked him straight in the eye. "If I don't ask, my chances of finding him are slim to none."

Kiros choked on his coffee, managed to swallow it, and then wheeled on me. "You're planning to do *what*?"

I looked at him, meeting his gaze. "I'm going to bring Luc back."

"That's putting your entire career at risk."

“I know,” I said quietly. I glanced at Connor and Maryanne, then looked back at Kiros. “He’s worth vaping my career, though. I know that.”

“Cat, you and Luc never talk,” Kiros’ tone indicated he was trying to verbally sort out exactly what was going on inside my head. “You’re a loner, don’t play well with others. Suddenly you’re ready to back to that damned place to rescue a man you barely know? It doesn’t make sense.”

Maryanne looked at him. “Kir, it makes sense when you have all the pieces of the puzzle. I’m sure. I know it must.”

I nodded slowly. *Thanks, Maryanne.* “I suppose I should explain...and I will as long as you tell me what Luc was doing.”

Connor shook his head slowly. “He doesn’t have to, because I know, and I’m going with you.”

“And what he forgets, I’ll remember.” Maryanne smiled at me bravely.

It was almost enough to make me start tearing up again. *Thanks, guys.* “Well, I guess that solves that. If you decide you don’t want our careers vaped, Major, all it takes are orders penned by you after we’re gone.” I stood up to get rid of my cup of coffee when he held up a hand to stop me.

“Sit back down, Captain. You owe me, at least, an explanation. I’m sure the rest of us would like to hear why and since when the three of you are conspiring with each other, too. Connor and Maryanne I’d expect to conspire together, but nothing like this and certainly not with you.”

I had to smile--at least a little--at that. “Fair enough--I suppose a story is a fair trade for orders being cut.” My smile faded as I raked my hand back through my hair and leaned against the bunks. “When I defected from E-Fed to the Alliance, I became someone I wasn’t. If you try to back-check the names of the people I listed as my parents, you’ll find that there isn’t a record for them. That’s because they don’t exist. You see, I wasn’t born Catherine Anders.” I glanced at Connor, then looked back to Kiros. “I was born Catherine Davies.”

Connor spoke up then. “Cat was engaged to my best friend, six years ago. His name was Anders--that’s where her current name comes from.”

I nodded. “I took his name when I defected--fresh start, y’know?” I took a gulp of my coffee. It was becoming lukewarm now, or at least it wasn’t as hot as I liked it. “When I defected, I walked away from another life, one I thought was over. I found out, when I joined this unit, that the life I walked away from hadn’t ended like I thought it had. I discovered that I still had living family--something I thought I’d lost forever.”

Kiros frowned. “So what are you two saying? You’re obviously on the same page, you and Con, but I’ll be damned if I can figure you two out.”

Connor lifted his head. “Kir, Cat’s my twin sister. That plain enough for you?”

“So how does Luc figure into all of this?”

My throat swelled suddenly, the hurt starting to rise again. *I can’t have lost him again.* I couldn’t bring myself to speak. *God, not again. I can’t lose him again. Not*

*this time.* In the end, I didn't have to.

"The man we know as Captain Lucian Davies is her fiancée," Maryanne said quietly. "Luc's real name is Lucian Anders. He has a younger sister on Zephyr, in school. He doesn't know. He doesn't know any of it."

Kiros looked from me to Connor to Maryanne, then went through each of us again. "You know, Maryanne?"

She nodded slowly. "They told me a few weeks ago, at least some of it. The rest I figured out on my own."

"Luc has some pretty serious amnesia." Connor's voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Anything that happened before he woke up after the head injury noted in his file might as well have never happened for him." He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment before looking up at Kiros. "So far as he knows, I'm all he's got in the world. He doesn't know that I'm not his brother, he doesn't know that Sabrina Anders is his sister, and he doesn't know that Cat is his fiancée."

Kiros looked between us again. "So why didn't you say something, Captain?"

*God, he'd have to ask that question.* "Let's just say that my way of coping with the pain was to forget." I wiped away the tears that had started to roll down my cheeks. "But I'm sick of being alone, now, so it's time for me to suck it up and deal. I can't do that, though, without him. Is that explanation enough for you, Major, or do I have to go through the entire life story? I'd really rather not."

He shook his head. "Get out of here. Bring him home."

I nodded grimly. "That's what I intend to do." *That's what I intend to do--and I'll do it or die trying.*

# 7

The sun was setting on Demar as Connor, Maryanne, and I looked down at the camp the E-Fed forces on the world had set up. I smiled grimly. *They haven't changed anything. Maybe we can actually pull this off without one of us getting killed.* I glanced at Connor. "All you have to do is make sure that no one has the chance to sound an alarm if we miss them. You can do that, right?"

He smiled at me, matching the grimness of my own grin. "Are you kidding me? Hell yeah, I can do that. Daylight, full dark, doesn't matter. I can do it. Especially when it counts."

I nodded, then looked at Maryanne. "You ready? By the time we get down there and in position, it'll be dark enough to make the strike."

"Roger that. Let's get going." She looked at Connor, who smiled a little more at her and drew her against him in a tight hug.

"Be careful," he whispered.

"I will be," she whispered back, then kissed him. "We both will be, and we'll bring him back."

He nodded, then looked at me. "Good luck."

*We'll need it.* I tossed him a jaunty salute and a wry grin before I double-checked my gear and started out. Maryanne was close behind me. We'd decided to strike at night, when most of the camp would be drunk with their success at capturing Lucian. We'd managed to figure out using sensors from the dropship where Lucian was located in the camp, which made the job Maryanne and I had to do that much easier. While Connor covered us from on top of a rise with his sniper rifle, Maryanne and I would infiltrate the camp, grab Luc, and get the hell out of Dodge. At least, we hoped it would be that simple. If it wasn't, she and I were both armed to the teeth, carrying guns, knives, and explosives. We hoped it wouldn't be too rough, though, and if we managed to do things right, it would be a fairly simple run. We only had one shot at it, though, and both of us knew that. That increased the pressure on us tenfold. As if the pressure wasn't bad enough already.

Maryanne and I carefully made our way down from the rise where Connor had stationed himself, guarding the approach to the shuttle as well as covering us from above. We circled the camp, making our way to the far end of it, where the sensor sweeps had told us Lucian was being held.

We had to slit three throats before we got to Lucian. I don't regret it. It was something that had to be done--it was something we had to do. And damn, they deserved it, for everything they'd done...for everything E-Fed had done.

To this day, when I close my eyes, I can see him the way we found him, on the edge of that camp. His wrists had been secured to a heavy metal rod that was

obviously very hard for him to hold up, even as strong as he was. The rod itself was secured with a chain at either end to the top of a pole, driven deep into the ground. The rod hung at a level that forced Lucian to keep standing, but did not ease the pressure the rod placed on his shoulders and neck. It was obvious when we got there that he'd been beaten, and blood had soaked through a bandage wrapped around his abdomen, the wound on the left side. He didn't look good at all.

I had to bite back tears and fight to focus so I could cover Maryanne as she worked Lucian loose from his bonds. I could hear her cursing almost silently as she fought a battle with his bonds. "No good!" She hissed at me. "I need your help. Come over here, hold him."

I swallowed, holstered my gun, and nodded, moving over to hold him up while she worked his wrists loose of the bindings that held them to the rod. Once she got one loose, she looped his arm over my shoulder. His wrist was bloody and raw from the binding. *Oh God. Luc...* He didn't make a sound as Maryanne got his other wrist loose. She looped his other arm around my other shoulder and took out her gun as I lifted him. I cursed in a whisper. "Damn, he's heavy."

Maryanne looked around. "C'mon, let's get out of here before they realize we've taken out three of their people and kidnapped their prisoner."

I nodded. "Sounds like a plan to me." I carried Luc back up into the hills, Maryanne covering me. We took a longer way around going back to the ship than going to the ship, hoping to remain hidden from the guns of the enemy.

Connor had begun shooting when Maryanne and I got back to where he was. "Camp's awake," he told us, "but it just happened a couple of minutes ago. Found one of the bodies. They don't know that you've got him yet. How is he?"

Maryanne shook her head. "I haven't looked at him yet. Better get aboard."

I nodded and started toward the ship, still carrying Lucian. Maryanne was quick to follow while Connor continued to take shots when he could get them, which appeared to be often. I unloaded Lucian onto a bunk we'd readied for him and then hurried to the cockpit and started to get ready to liftoff. Connor heard the engines rev up and got up, grabbing his gear and dashing toward the ship. Once he was aboard, he slapped the control to close the hatches and lock them down. "Go, Cat, go!"

"We're gone." I guided the dropship through a fast take-off and ascent, using the planet's gravity to whip us out of orbit a little faster and help us build the speed up to jump out of the system. I glanced over my shoulder as I ran us up to our jump point. "How's he doing, Maryanne?"

She shook her head. "Don't ask. Probably a good thing he's unconscious, because he must be in a *lot* of pain. Sooner we get him home, the better off he'll be."

*God, Luc...please hang on. I'll get you home.* I returned my attention to the controls, forcing myself to focus more on getting home quickly and safely and less on the reasons why it was important to do just that.

I radioed ahead on Maryanne's orders to get a medical team waiting for us when we set down on base. Word reached us that Kiros had, indeed, cut orders for us while I was preparing to lift from the base earlier that day. We were all tired--it had been a very long day. Maryanne had managed to stop the bleeding from the wound in Luc's side and made him comfortable--he never woke up, though. In a way, I was silently thankful for that. I wouldn't have to explain this to him. Not yet.

Kiros and a medical team met us on the deck as Connor and Maryanne wrestled a stretcher with Lucian strapped to it off the dropship while I shut down. I could hear him saying something to them as the medical team whisked Lucian away to the base hospital. He appeared at my shoulder a few minutes later, as I was getting ready to leave. He patted my shoulder. "You did good, Cat."

"Thanks," I said quietly. "It was something I had to do."

He nodded. "Yeah, I realize that. Your, uhm...your brother told me to tell you that he'd take the first watch, since he's gotten sleep in the past forty-eight hours and you and Maryanne haven't. He'll wake you in ten hours."

I nodded, closing my eyes. *Please be all right, Luc. Please be all right. I can't lose you again.* An incredible sense of relief filled me, despite my worries about Lucian surviving. *God, it's over. We brought him home. It's out of our hands now--he's here, he's home, he's safe. It's out of my hands.*

*It'll be OK. He'll be OK, and we'll have the chance we should have had...the one I should have given us as soon as I found out he was still alive.* "Thanks, Kir."

He patted me on the shoulder again. "Go grab a shower and some rack time, Cat. You did a good job today." He left me there, then, sitting in the cockpit of the dropship, where now, I felt more at home than I'd felt anywhere in a very long time.



# Epilogue

When I slipped into Lucian's room at the base hospital twelve hours later, I wasn't really sure what to expect. Connor hadn't said much more than that he'd be all right with a little time and rest, and that he'd been awake for long enough for them to do a little talking. While I was searching through most of my possessions to find the single thing that probably meant more to me than anything--whether two days ago I would have denied it or not--Connor told me that he hadn't told Lucian the truth about anything--that would be up to me. I'd responded that I wasn't sure what I'd do. We agreed to keep each other abreast of what was going on--since we were in this one together.

I found Lucian awake when I got to his room, staring at the wall on the opposite side of his bed from the door. He must have turned his head toward me when he heard me come in, because after closing the door quietly behind me, I turned around to find him looking at me, his brow furrowed slightly. I smiled a little at him. "Hi."

"Hi," he said quietly, his voice hoarse. "Can't say I expected to see you here."

I shrugged. "Well, you know. Sometimes people surprise you."

"Guess so," he said, staring up at the ceiling as I sat down in a chair next to his bed. "Sorry if it seems like I'm skipping all the small talk and stuff, but there's something that's really been eating at me since I talked to Connor earlier. Why would you, of all people, go with him and Maryanne to rescue me? I thought you hated me."

*Geez, is that what it seemed like? Damn it all. I didn't realize it came off like that. God, I came off as hating the man I love. Imagine that.* I shook my head. "I don't hate you, Luc. As for the whys...it was my idea in the first place."

He was clearly confused by that. "You? It was your idea?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it was. Sorry if my behavior made it seem like I hated you. I had my reasons--I felt like I had to keep my distance, you know? But I'm over that now. No more keeping my distance, not from any of you. Something someone said to me finally sunk into this thick skull of mine."

"Why?" He looked at me. "Why would you do something like that? Putting your career on the line for me?"

I smiled. "You were worth it." That only appeared to make him even more confused, which prompted me to stifle a laugh. *It's now or never, Catherine. Tell him. Tell him the truth.* I leaned forward. "I'm going to tell you a story, okay? Once upon a time, there was a girl who fell in love with someone she'd known all her life. The boy she fell in love with and her brother were closer than brothers themselves. Everyone was happy, and everyone was happier when the boy asked the girl to

marry him. Then, about a year later, something terrible happened and it seemed like everything changed. The girl was away when that terrible thing happened, and she thought her family and the love of her life were dead. So she tried to move on. It took her five years to realize she'd failed." I showed him the engagement ring that he'd given me years ago, the simple diamond ring that had made me the happiest woman in the province—maybe in the known civilized world. "I was that girl, and six and a half years ago, that boy got down on one knee and asked me to marry him. When I said yes, he gave me this ring. I tried very hard, after Gattica died, to forget him. I thought I had, until I met two 'brothers' from my home province. Then I realized I'd never really forgotten him at all."

He gently took my hand in both of his, wincing slightly--it must have hurt to move his shoulders and wrists, especially given the way his wrists were bandaged. He examined the ring on my finger, his brow furrowing a little bit more, frowning a bit in concentration. Then, after a long time, he looked up at me, tears starting to gather in his eyes. His voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Catey?"

I started to cry almost immediately, throwing my arms around him and hugging him. I felt him wince, but then he put one arm, then the other around me and held me as he, too, began to cry. "I gave you that ring, six and a half years ago. And then a year later, Gattica and the fire and the pain and then the darkness...God, Catey, I'm sorry," he whispered, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry. How could I have forgotten?"

"You, at least, had an excuse," I whispered back to him. "It's all right, though, it's over now."

"I always knew that there was something about you..." He swallowed hard. "We have a lot of time to make up, you know. You and Connor, you guys have to help me sort out everything now...it's starting to come. Slow, but it's coming now. No more darkness before five years ago, but still shadows."

"We have all the time in the world, Luc, all the time in the world. The three of us, we're not going to lose each other again. I promise. What matters now is us, and I mean that." *Now that I have you back, Luc...for the first time in years, everything's right.*

He kissed my temple and held me there. We just stayed there, together for the first time in five and a half years. I was there for hours before he fell asleep, and stayed a little longer after that. That night, for the first time in five and a half years, the tears I cried myself to sleep with were happy.

The End

# Extras

Don't miss an exciting sneak peek at the first novel in the *Epsilon* universe, *Broken Stars*!

# Epsilon: Broken Stars

*Set nearly one hundred years after the events of Falling Stars, a new set of heroes lives uneasily with the legacy of a war they didn't start, one that never quite ended...*

# One

15 August 2260

Perie, Caldin – *Borderworlds*

“Identification.”

I flipped my card at the customs officer, struggling not to wince at the stab of pain through my ribcage the motion created. I shifted my bag uncomfortably, waiting with measured impatience.

*Just want to crash.* I rubbed my forehead, watching the man as he fumbled to run my ID. I sighed a little. *Worse than Carmiline, but this time it's because he's young.* “Turn it around. Sometimes that helps.”

He looked at me nervously—couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen years old—and smiled slightly, obediently flipping the card around and scanning it again. The beep and smile that followed earned a nod from me—and from his supervisor, who I could see standing behind another young officer a few slots over. He'd gotten it working. He handed the card back. “Everything seems to be in order, Mr. Terrel. Enjoy your stay on Caldin.”

I nodded, tucking the card back into my jacket and starting to limp onward, into the spaceport proper.

“Mr. Terrel? Would you like me to call someone to give you a hand?”

I turned to look at the customs officer as a hand touched my arm. I tensed momentarily, then relaxed and shook my head a little, not bothering to check to see who had me by the arm. The grip told me all I needed to know. “Looks like my help's already here. Thank you, though.”

The young man nodded slightly and I turned toward the woman at my elbow. Haley Brink shook her head at me, smile lopsided. “You look like hell. Let Harm take your bag.”

I leaned on her and let John Kathe take my bag, managing to smile at him and his partner. “I feel like hell. You have a car?”

She nodded, tucking herself under my arm and starting to lead me through the milling throng of people making their way through customs. “It's not far. We decided to have mercy on you.”

“Thanks.” My smile faded before we ever made it to the car, a utilitarian, all-terrain model, probably a fuel-cell model popular this far from the centers of civilization of the Epsilon Alliance and the Drillin Imperium, Epsilon and Earth respectively.

John shook his head. “We didn’t think you were going to be here for at least another week.”

I shrugged with one shoulder as he opened the door of our ride for me. “If I waited any longer to come, I was going to go crazy. I came as soon as I was cleared to travel.” *Barely cleared to work, but it matches the cover story, at least.* I tried not to groan as I settled into the seat, but I *did* finally begin to relax for the first time since leaving Varice for the Borderworlds. Pain pulsed through my spine and ribs and my knee throbbed, but for the first time in two months, I stopped feeling sick to my stomach. Maybe Colonel Traverse had been right. Maybe a change of scenery *would* help. I leaned my head back as John and Haley climbed into the front seat of the car. It eased slowly up off the ground as John started the engine. I closed my eyes.

“Melissa’s made arrangements for an apartment for you.”

“I’ll have to thank her after I sleep for a week,” I mumbled in Haley’s direction. *After I swallow enough pills to sleep for a week.*

“You won’t have enough time to sleep for a week. If you wanted to keep sleeping, you should’ve stayed on base.” Haley was twisted in her seat, looking at me with one arm hooked around the backrest. “You’re going to hit the ground limping, Aaron. As fast as you can.”

I lifted my head, squinting at her. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“You’re not surprised.” She smiled wryly at me. “You knew what you were stepping into.”

I managed to return the smile. “Yeah. Helping the resistance. Can’t do that until I’ve got wings, though.”

“Matt’s doing some groundwork. Tonight, you’re coming with John and I to have some dinner at the local hub of resistance activity. You’re going to be seen. Hope you’re comfortable with your cover story.”

*Comfortable enough to make it work, anyway.* I nodded a little. “I’ll be fine. Am I likely to run into anyone I’ve met before?”

They looked at each other in the front seat. Haley shrugged. “Don’t think so. I haven’t seen anyone that matches anyone we’ve been able to match to your reports. We’ve been prepping this for a while. Colonel Traverse was pretty certain you were going to take the assignment.”

*He’s watched people lose enough to know two things happen. Either you break and walk away, or you break and keep going. He knew what I was going to do. I don’t have anything else. Just the job.* “He wasn’t wrong,” I murmured, looking out the window. The sun was climbing higher in the pale sky. “Where’s the Alliance post?”

“Down that street we just passed, about a quarter mile,” John answered, concentrating on keeping clear of a few scooters along one side of the roadway. “You probably won’t be going there much. Matt and Melissa are the known Alliance contacts. A few of the local higher-ups with the resistance know about Haley and I. Objective for us is to make sure that you’re even lesser known.” He

tossed me a grin. “Don’t make it hard on us, Taylor.”

“I’ll try not to, John.” I closed my eyes and tilted my head back again. “Customs here always so...young?”

“The kid that checked you through? He’s scared shitless. Second week on the job—and he’s resistance. Ship you came off of was rumored to have a lot of refugees from Carmiline on it. That means there could have been any number of Imperium plants aboard. In his mind, anyway. As worlds go, Caldin’s pretty safe right now.” Haley shook her head a little. “Caleb means well enough. He’s just a kid.”

“I noticed,” I mumbled, shaking my head. “Resistance has a lot of kids in it.”

“Wouldn’t you have joined, if you grew up out here instead of on Epsilon?”

*Of course I would have. That’s why I drew this assignment.* I winced. *Low blow. You knew the answer to that. I’m here because I can relate to the people here and that’ll help me build a rapport and help them.*

“Stop picking on him, John.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t picking. It’s a fact. It’s what they’ve got. He knows it, too.”

*Carmiline.* I exhaled. “Cell in Tavren was fifteen people. Nine weren’t older than twenty.”

Haley sighed a little, shaking her head. “It’s what the Borderworlds have to offer. All they’ve got are the ones who stay behind because they love their homes or their families and can’t stand to leave to find someplace safer. Or can’t afford it.” She rested her chin on the back of her seat.

*Or can’t win appointments to the Academy, or can’t get into school off-world. Or any number of reasons. God knows it’s only going to be so long before the Imperium starts press-ganging them into service.* “I know,” I said quietly. The sick feeling was coming back and I straightened in my seat, wincing. “Giving them a chance at a different life is about half the reason I took this assignment in the first place.” *Have to make some kind of difference. Resistance has to be able to do something where the Alliance won’t—or can’t. Bloody mess out here, but they won’t violate treaty unless they can deny they’ve done it, and that’s why we’re out here. Plausible deniability.* “It’s time I made some kind of difference for them.” *Like she did on Carmiline. I owe the people out here at least that much, for all the shit they’ve pulled.* This was *personal* for me. When you’ve got the two generations before you in service to the enemy, you end up with more than a little to prove—to yourself and everyone else, too.

Haley watched my face and nodded slightly, slowly. “Just don’t get in over your head. Might find it easier to do than you think, all things considered.”

*She knows me too damn well.* They all did, though, every one of our graduating class of SpecOps. Something about the small size of every group and the intensity of our training, the sheer amount of exposure to each other, meant that inevitably one of two things happened: either you got damned close, or you started to hate each other. With the class of ’57, it had been the former with occasional bouts of

the latter, bouts that most of us got over quickly when we got a little distance and a little perspective.

I shrugged as John pulled the car up in front of a tall, gray building, as non-descript as any I'd ever seen. *I need to forget. Can't get over my head, but I need to forget, at least for a while.* "I'll be fine."

She shook her head at me. "You always say that, even when you're not going to be fine."

"It's a great defense mechanism." John opened the door on my side and I gripped the roof of the car to help lever myself out. My ribs screamed and I grunted, squinting a little and trying not to let the hurt show.

John shook his head at me and just watched. "They should have kept you the extra week." He took me by the arm as I was about halfway out of the car and pulled me out and upright. I choked on a gasp as my knee slipped in a direction it shouldn't have before I could wrestle it back into proper positioning.

John let go of me like I was a live power cable, just staring at me as I leaned against the frame of the car, glad for its solid, unmoving weight. I swallowed twice, glaring at him as pain painted my vision with a reddish tinge.

"Next time, don't help," I told him, eyes tearing. *Better not have done any damage to it. Damn. I'll look when I unwrap it.* I braced one hand against the frame of the car, learning to breathe again as he pulled my bag and cane out. Haley stood nearby, shaking her head.

"He's right, they should have kept you. You going to be okay?"

I smiled humorlessly. "I'll be fine." John handed me my cane and I straightened slowly, grunting as my back slowly aligned itself again. The garage area was fairly non-descript and I raised an eyebrow at them. "What's this?"

"Building where your fifth-floor apartment is. We're a few blocks from the spaceport—you'd walk between them, if you could manage more than a hobble, I'm sure." Haley smiled a little. "Come on. We'll get you upstairs, and then we'll come pick you up for dinner."

"And if I need you before that?"

She shook her head slightly, squeezing my arm before letting go. "Call."

• • •

A shower helped with the aches and the funk I didn't realize I'd picked up while switching between commercial transports somewhere between here, Carmiline orbit, and Varice. I hadn't been able to catch a nap, though—Haley and John had failed to mention that the apartment Melissa had gotten for me was in a particularly *loud* one. I hadn't heard so many stampeding footsteps in the halls since the last readiness drill at Collins-Ross.

Flipping channels on the vid didn't do me much good, either, though it got me the local weather report for the next four days, which I supposed was of some use.

I ended up laying on the couch and staring at bare walls for two hours, trying to sleep instead of thinking, before someone rescued me by pushing the call button at my door.

I pushed myself up slightly against my elbows, craning my neck to see the door as I shoved my hand down between couch cushions for my service weapon. It was probably unnecessary.

"It's open," I called, forcing all caution out of my voice. Caldin was supposed to be a safe planet, quiet, neighborly. The kind of place you could leave your doors open at night and not think twice.

No one knew I was here. No one but my colleagues and commanders, and most of them were far away. I was being paranoid and blending in all at once. It felt strange.

Haley entered, grinning at me. "Going native already? Surprised you didn't lock up." The door clicked shut behind her.

I shrugged with one shoulder, sitting up slowly. "Something like that. Figured no one but you guys and the landlord know I'm here." It was a lame excuse, but she seemed to buy it. "Is it time?"

She nodded. "Ready to go?"

Whether I was or not really didn't matter. I nodded a little, slowly sitting up and reaching for my cane. "Let me grab my jacket, then we can go."

"This one?" She moved away from the doorway and picked up the battered leather jacket from where I'd left it, across the back of a chair in the kitchenette. She tossed it at me when I nodded.

*Clatter. Ting, ting, ting.*

"What's this?"

*Oh no.* I clawed the jacket from my face and started to limp quickly toward the source of the sound. "It's nothing." *I thought I'd packed it away.*

Haley had crossed the floor and picked up the small box that had popped open when it dropped out of the jacket's pocket. She picked up the simple ring that had bounced free and slipped it back into the slot in the box, holding it up for me to take when I reached her.

A bare shadow of my own pain reflected in her eyes as I took the box. "For her?"

The lump in my throat was trying to choke me. I nodded, closing the box and setting it slowly on the edge of the countertop. "Yeah," I managed, shaking my head a little. *Don't lose control. Don't let go. Don't let go.* I took a deep breath and struggled to exhale it slowly. "I should have left it on Varice."

"With who? With Marc? With your stuff in storage? Maybe." Haley stared at the box and shook her head slightly. "When were you going to ask her?"

I shrugged a little, following her gaze. "When I stopped being terrified she was going to say no."

She looked at me and sighed. "Put your coat on. Let's go."



I licked my lips and nodded, tearing my eyes away from the box and pulling on my jacket. *Thanks for not saying what everyone else kept saying, Haley. I know she wouldn't have said no. That didn't make it easier to ask.* I swept the box into a drawer, so I wouldn't have to look at it as soon as I came back to the apartment. I talked so I wouldn't have to think. "So you're going by the Trey Connelly ID, right?"

"Still," she said, opening the door. "And the friendship between you and Harm and I goes back to before colonization."

I snorted softly and limped out into the corridor, letting her lock the door behind us. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Nearly six local. Feel up to walking? It's not far."

"Within half a block?" She nodded and so did I. "All right. Lead on."

We took the lift down to the street level and started down, past several buildings like the one that they'd gotten me set up in and toward an area where the buildings weren't as tall. Haley walked slowly, strolling almost, taking her time and not forcing me to move faster than was comfortable, which I was silently grateful for. Walking still hurt more than I cared to admit, but being upright and limping was a vast improvement over being flat on my back or rolling around in a wheelchair.

"So the others will be there?"

"Tabs and Kyle? They'll be there. Harm's probably already there, waiting." Tabitha Lane and Kyle Rezek were the cover identities for two other Alliance SpecOps operating off of Caldin, Melissa Cordare and Matthew Lawless. We'd come up through training together. I nodded slightly.

"We're sure there's no one else going to be there that's going to know me?"

"I already told you that one. There's someone I want you to meet, though. You'll probably see a bit of him before you've healed up all the way." She shifted her shoulder bag, grinning at me. "He's one of the doctors at the local ER." She leaned in closer and whispered in my ear. "Best as we've been able to figure, he's also the head of the local cell, maybe even more than just the local cell." She gave me a meaningful look as she straightened again, body swaying away from me for a moment. "His name is Lucas. You'll meet him. I think you'll like him. Seems like you two have a few things in common."

I gave her a questioning look then shook my head. *Let it go. You'll find out soon enough.* "We'll see, I guess. He'll be there?"

"Usually is, after he gets off shift at the hospital. He's one of the good guys, Wil. You'll have to give him the benefit of the doubt." She tilted her head. "Are you allowed to drink?"

"Nothing alcoholic," I told her. *As nice as oblivion might be...breathing is probably something I need to keep doing.*

"Right. Should've guessed." She threw her arm around my shoulders and hugged me briefly. "We'll look out for you."

"Thanks, Trey." I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to settle into my

new skin. There hadn't been much opportunity for me to develop this personality, just a month's worth of time coming up with his background, the quirks. But actually being Wil Terrel...that wasn't something I'd had time to practice. *This could either go really, really well, or really, really badly.*

She led me to where the roadway from the spaceport ended at a cross-street in a T-intersection. Just to the left of the intersection point stood a two-storey building of brick what looked to be local stone. The wood-framed windows were narrow and treated with a coating that left the doings of whomever was inside hidden from the casual observer. The sign above the door said the place was Gamgee's Bar and Grill.

"This is it?"

She nodded. "Local hangout, probably the best food in town. Come on." She smiled at me, pushing open the heavy front door and holding it for me.

I barely got a look at gunmetal walls and wooden tables before I was deafened and engulfed in a bear hug by someone who clearly knew me even if I was having trouble processing how I knew him. I blinked, struggling to breathe, staring at a shaven head and an upper body that could bench press two of me. It only took a moment or two more to click, by which time I was starting to be in desperate need of breath.

"Jack," I gasped, "air."

The ex-Alliance Marine blinked, rearing back, and set me on my feet again quickly. I stumbled back, into Haley, who thrust my dropped cane back into my open hand, murmuring a question.

"You two going to need a room?"

I swallowed, nodding as I caught my breath.

"Friend of yours, Jack?" called the woman behind the bar as she wiped up a spill—probably Jack's drink, I realized, knocked over when he'd bumrushed the door to greet me.

He nodded vigorously as I straightened up slowly. "Was with us on Carmiline."

The woman behind the bar grinned. "No wonder you're so happy to see him."

"So happy they should get a room," Haley piped up from behind me. "You've got those, right, Kal? Let the boys catch up in peace." She ducked past me, smirking, and made her way over to where John was holding up a wall.

I shook my head a little, limping forward. "Preferably one with chairs, ma'am?"

The woman grinned, nodding. "Can probably be arranged." She left her rag and moved to the wall to one side of the bar, swiping a keycard through a slot to reveal a short hallway beyond. "First room on your left should be unlocked," she told Jack and I as we made our way to her. "Another brew for you, Jack?" She looked at me. "Anything for you?"

"Coffee's fine," I said. "Black, whatever's local."

She nodded. "Just be a minute and then I'll leave you to business."

Something about the way she said 'business' told me she knew exactly what

Jack was about—and further still, that she didn't exactly *mind* that either. I cast a sidelong glance at Jack and limped into the room, finding my way to a chair at a small, round table in the corner. Jack let the door close behind him and joined me, easing slowly down into his chair, watching me struggle to get comfortable.

*So much for assurances*, I thought ruefully. "Didn't expect to find you here, Jack."  
"Why the hell not? This is where your partner sent us."

There was that sick feeling again. I swallowed bile as the girl from behind the bar brought in Jack's beer and my coffee. She smiled as she set down my mug in front of me. I managed to smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. And if you call me ma'am again, I'll beat you with that cane. It's Kallyn. Got it?"

My smile began to feel a little more real, at least for a few seconds. *I think I could like her*. "Got it. Thank you, Kallyn."

She nodded firmly, then turned to Jack. "Poke your head out if you need something"

"Sure thing, Kal. Thanks." He watched her go, then looked back at me. "Where is Flannery, anyhow? I want to thank her."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "Caren never made it off Carmiline. No body found, so the Alliance is thinking captured." My eyes stung and breathing was suddenly hard. I swallowed again, willing the lump in my throat to disappear. It seemed disinclined to obey.

Jack stared at me, jaw agape and pale eyes wide. "Lieutenant, I..."

I shook my head. "She was doing what she always did, Jack. There's nothing left to be said or done. Just...just the waiting and the hoping." I wrapped my hands tightly around the ceramic of the mug, letting the warmth bleed into my fingers as I stared into the black. "Thanks anyway, though."

He nodded slowly, closing his mouth and similarly cradling his glass with one hand. "So why are you here? Flying solo? Left the service?"

For half a heartbeat, I considered lying to him. *He wouldn't believe me if I told him I'd left EAF, though. If Caren was dead, yeah...but not if she's just MIA*. "Flying solo," I said quietly. I took a sip of coffee, hoping it would burn through the lump in my throat. "They sent me to help the resistance." I swirled my coffee around in the mug. "Basically, to join it."

"As who? Not Dr. Merrit."

"No, not Dr. Merrit." That had been my identity on Carmiline.

"Then what? As Lieutenant Aaron Taylor, disgusted and repulsed by the loss of his partner?"

I winced, leaning back hard. My ribs twinged, eyes stung. I shook my head. "No. As Wil Terrel, whose wife died on Carmiline." I watched him as the words sunk in, then added, "I could use your help, Jack."

"Anything you need, Lieutenant. Wil."

My throat swelled to match the lump, so I just nodded, looking down into the

swirling dark of my coffee. *What now?*

“How close to the truth are you treading?” His voice was quiet, he was leaning across the table toward me, his glass cradled in both hands. He hadn’t drunk a drop since we’d sat down.

“I never saw a body,” I mumbled. “The house...nothing but ashes. She was supposed to be there, but I never saw a body.” I closed my eyes. “Truth is, I remember leaving that last safehouse with her and heading out into the preserve. I don’t remember much after that until they had me drugged up to my eyeballs on the transport out. She wasn’t there. They said they waited, but she never came and they had to go.” My fingers tightened around the mug. “I should have been able to make her stay there with me.” Jack squeezed my arm. I didn’t look up at him right away, knowing that I’d see as much guilt in his eyes as I was feeling down in the deepest levels of my guts.

“It was cruel of General Hunter to send you out here, to make this call.”

*Big assumption to make. General Hunter probably didn’t make the call. I shook my head. They had no other choice. I had no other choice.* “I had her and the job, Jack. There’s nothing left for me in the universe except for this job.” *This job is the only shot I’ve got at stopping him. At making things right. At...at finding her again.*

He was silent for a long moment. “I didn’t know.”

“Most people don’t know. I don’t advertise it.” I rubbed my eyes. “My mother died while I was at the Academy. I was an only child.”

“And your father?”

I winced, shaking my head. “Don’t ask.” He’d left when I was eight. I could remember he and my mother talking all night the night before he left. In the morning he was gone.

Ten years later, I was at the Academy, learning that he’d been just like his father after all—a loyal soldier for the Imperium. Some people made the connection between me and Daniel Taylor. It mattered to some of them. To others, I was the only thing that mattered, me, my actions and my choices. Those people knew where my loyalties lay and never questioned them.

Either Jack didn’t know or didn’t care who my father was. Either way, I already knew that I had his trust, if only because Caren had known and trusted me, and he’d known and trusted her. He spread his hands. “All right. I won’t.” He patted my arm again. “If it makes you feel any better...we all got off Carmiline. My whole cell and then some.”

*At least it wasn’t for nothing.* I took a deep breath, nodding. “It helps a little. It does.” I looked down into the mug again then took a deep draught of my coffee, pushing myself to my feet by sheer force of will. “We should go out there.”

He nodded. “Establish your street cred?”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, that.”

He threw an arm around my shoulders. “I think I can help with that.”

*Epsilon: Broken Stars* is available wherever ebooks are sold.

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# About the Author

Erin M. Klitzke has been writing since she was an adolescent, though most of those early works will *never* see the light of day. She got her BA in history and anthropology from Grand Valley State University and her MA in history from Oakland University.

She lives in Detroit's northern suburbs and enjoys reading, sewing, gaming, and renaissance festivals when she's not creating her own worlds. You can find her on the web at [www.embklitzke.com](http://www.embklitzke.com), e-mail her at [doc \(at\) embklitzke \(dot\) com](mailto:doc@embklitzke.com), and follow her on Twitter at [@EMBKDoc](https://twitter.com/EMBKDoc). You should probably do all three.

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