

Prologue

Lee woke to the smell of burnt flesh and gunpowder. He groaned, his ears still ringing from the explosion, and pushed himself up. The fine lunar sand rolled off his back and jacket sleeves as he rose. The chilly night air around him was silent beside the sound of his own breathing. The gunfire and the bomb were all quiet now.

He checked himself. All his limbs were attached. His hands were fine. He could recall his birthday and hometown. His head throbbed with every heartbeat. Nothing else in his body shouted at him. He touched his forehead and found blood. Well, he had been knocked out. He pulled out a wipe from his medical bag and cleaned the cut, then his hands.

“Our father in heaven,” he whisper, “holy is your name.”

Where were the others in his group? Surely he wasn't the only one left. That didn't seem fair. He turned, but the area around him was deserted. Maybe they'd moved on without him.

He tapped the communication device in his ear, but it didn't work.

The ground around the compound was littered with tiny craters from explosives. He didn't see any movement or hear anyone call out to him. He stood slowly, hands away from his body. Although quiet, there still could be a sniper who would shoot him. He didn't think the gunmen would care that he had a medical icon sew into his uniform, assuming he could even see it through the the layers of gray dust. Lee was with an anti-government terrorist attack. That was enough to kill him.

But no shot came.

“Hello?” he said. His breathe billowed up in front of him. “Anyone?”

No one answered.

He started walking, scanning for a body that wasn't dismembered. He found one, but the skin was cold to the touch.

Was the raid over? Had they destroyed the government database? Why was the compound quiet? Had both sides managed to obliterate each other? Government backup must not have arrived yet.

Lee pulled out the ear communicator, cleared it, and reinserted it. This time, it connected. A female voice answered.

“Doctor Lee?” she said. He didn't recognize her voice, though she sounded young, maybe a teenager. Why did they have a kid on the comms? He shook his head. Things were different here on the moon than on earth. She was probably a legal, capable adult.

“I need you to pull an active space image of the area,” he said. “Set the filter to show temperature. With as cold as it is, it should be easy to find a warm body.”

“Doctor Lee,” she said. “We need you to go into the compound and destroy the memory banks.”

He sighed. It was a suicide mission, going in alone. That's why he'd signed up, wasn't it? Better him than someone else.

“...Your will be done on Earth as in Heaven,” he whisper to the ground. He paused. Did that prayer even matter here on the colonized moon? Life away from earth was never in God's will for mankind. He pushed the thought aside. That was United World propaganda talking. God lived within, which meant Lee brought Him wherever he went.

“I don't have any explosives,” Lee straightened

“I can guide you to a fallen comrade who does,” the girl said.

He found the body and removed four explosives—plenty for the task at hand. He stuffed them into his medical bag, then unslung his rifle, though he wasn’t sure it would do him any good if he actually encountered government soldiers.

“Go through the main entrance,” the girl said. “The doors are open, and I don’t see anyone in the first room. Then go to your left.”

The main entrance doors lay on their sides, the hinges blown off. He weaved through the broken metal. The room was empty, and beside the charting by the doorway, no sign of an attack. The lights flickered off, but powered on again at half brightness.

Lee turned to his left and went down the hall with his rifle up. He stayed to one side, walking carefully so not to make a sound. His ears listened, but he heard nothing.

“You’re going to need to take a right at the next junction,” the girl said. “I know there was fighting there earlier, but the cameras are damaged, and I can’t see the hallway now.”

Lee reached the intersection and paused. No sounds reached him. Still, someone could be there, keeping quiet like he was. He knelt, drew a deep breath, and turned the corner.

There were bodies laying on the floor.

He held his position for a few more seconds in case an enemy walked in, but everything was still. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and approached the bodies. Opposition fighters, but there were dead government soldiers around the corner.

He froze. One of the men was Captain Blake.

“Do you see this?” He whispered, adjust the built-in camera in his uniform.

“Yes, I see him,” the girl said.

This was the strike team Lee had been assigned to, the team that was to penetrate the compound and destroy the data banks. He closed the captain’s eyes and whispered a prayer. Who would be the new captain for the opposition now? Captain had two second-in-commands, preferring to have two to confer with. The three worked well together, but now it was unclear whether Rider or Kashmen would be the new captain.

“What do you want me to do now?” Lee said.

“Keep going. We need to destroy the banks.”

He didn’t meet anyone after that, alive or otherwise. When the attack started, most of the soldiers went into the upper levels. Still, he thought he’d meet someone. Had they really incapacitated *all* the guards?

“...your kingdom come...” he whispered the prayer to himself over and over. His footsteps echoed off the walls.

“Stop,” the girl said. “Go through the door to your right.”

After forcing the door open, Lee stepped in. A light dangled from the ceiling from one end. Broken glass tubes and unknown liquids lay scattered across the floor. A shattered screen lay against the wall. There was no bodies or blood.

“What happened here?”

“I think a missile hit right above the room,” she said. “Do you see the tech at your 8 o’clock?”

Lee scanned the room. Against the wall sat six large memory banks, encased in metal cylinders, that reached from the floor to the ceiling. With the banks destroyed, it would bring down the lunar network and also eliminate multiple criminal records.

He unslung his bag and pulled out the explosives.

“...give us today our daily bread...” he whispered as he attached the first explosive and activated it. They were small, only 6cm cubed, but plenty powerful to atomize the banks.

“...forgive us our sins, as we forgive others...”

“You’re doing fine, there you go, just one more,” the girl said. “I’ve got an evacuation ship on it’s way to pick you up when you’re done.”

Was he really going to survival another raid? He shouldn’t have lived through the first one. Lee activated the last explosive, then picked up the detonation trigger.

“Lee, behind you!” the girl said.

Lee spun to his right. A moment later, he heard a gunshot and felt an explosion of pain in his lower back. He collapsed onto the floor. In front of him stood a government officer in a dark blue uniform with a raised pistol in his left hand.

“Don’t shoot,” Lee gasped, raising a hand. “Don’t shoot.”

He leaned against the metal data banks. He pressed his hand against his stomach and felt blood oozing through his jacket. The had bullet passed completely through him.

He’d never actually been shot before. Nicked by a bullet, maybe, but never hit anywhere solid. He didn’t know if he had the resolve to insert a bullet plug into himself. He pressed hard against the wound, which flooded his body with pain, but he knew he was in danger of bleeding to death if he didn’t.

“Doctor, you need to detonate the explosives now,” the girl’s voice was hollow. “If he stops you, all this would have been for nothing.”

The explosion would kill him—she had to know that—one of the explosives was centimeters from his head. The force of the explosion would be enough kill the guard two meters away.

“Your will be done, on earth, as it is on heaven,” he whispered the words.

This was the mission.

He still had the trigger in his hand. It was a small device, like a short, fat pen with a red button at the top. His fingers trembled as he moved his thumb over the button. He pressed it. All he needed to do now was release it, and the whole room would be consumed with fire.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the metal frame. The girl started singing. He recognized the melody but didn’t know the words.

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” he whispered.

It was time to go home.

Three years later

Chapter 1

I catch myself strumming my fingers against the table. I've been here half an hour, and impatient fidgeting is a dead give away that I'm waiting for someone. I take another drink from my mug. With the lunar food shortage, all I could order were drinks.

I remove my cAs, tap the screen, and double check that I have the right place and time. All correct, and they know they're meeting Skylar Driven. Oh no, maybe they thought Skylar was a man. Should have sent a picture, or at least what I would be wearing.

The dim lights and loud music of the bar fills my senses. Tables dot the room with bigger booths along the wall. I check each patron again; a woman flirting with the barkeeper, who's cleaning a glass. A family with a youngster in a booth. A handful of couples. A gang of three giggling. I slide the cAs back in my pocket. Doctor Lee definitely is not here.

A broadcast about the new lunar admiral plays on the bar's screens. He was sworn-in on the 314th annual anniversary of the moon colonization—they always swear in new leaders on the anniversary. His skin is a beautiful shade of dark pink. There's something about the kiss of the earth sun that takes years to wear off. It's amazing how different earth-born humans look compared to us lunar-born humans. Environment, environment, environment.

I sigh and take a drink. I have no idea why anyone would want to leave earth to live on this rock.

I shiver. I chose to sit by the door, and the cold seeps through the hinges and rubber seals. It was the best spot where I could watch the entrance and have a clean exit.

The side door opens. The hair on my arm stands up. Two Government Officers, an earthling transfer and an older man, enter. The men greet the barkeeper by name, then remove their heavy coats and sit into the corner booth. The barkeeper brings them steaming mugs. The two talk, laughing about something, then pull out a book and start going through it.

Virus! I should have insisted on a different meeting spot. If my contact ever shows up, I'll have some words for him.

Twenty minutes tick by, and I decide to wait another five, then another five after that. I order another mug, this time a hot one. I'd order food if I could, but the bar is only serving dinks with the current food shortage. I sip hot liquid. Where is Lee? Maybe he was caught and is now being dragged away to a prison.

Pray for him.

I'm still not use to the idea of talking to God. I start reciting a prayer for Lee's safety, eyes open, of course. All religions are outlawed by United World. We believe that humans are created by God in His image. *The divine appearance*, we call it, and because of it, all humans are valuable. I glare at the two Gov in the corner. To them, United World gives your value, and if they can give it, they can take it away. Our core values and United World's values are incompatible.

The door opens again, and this time two men enter. I don't know the first, but the second is Doctor Lee. Both men look lunar, but I know Doctor Lee is earth-born. He's been on the moon long enough for the dry air and lack of sunlight to have taken its toll. He looks more tired than

the last time I saw him. He has nothing but his medical bag slung over his shoulder and a backpack. At least he travels light.

Both men sit down, and the second man, a 20-something with shaggy blond hair, orders a drink.

“You’re late,” I say, more sharply than I meant to.

The man shrugs and leans, tipping his chair back.

“Had some trouble, sorry.” He puts his hands behind his head.

“Any I should know about?” I say.

“Na, I handled it,” he grins. When his beer arrives, he drinks half of it before setting it down on the table with a thud.

“Watch it!” I say. “Do you want them to look at us?”

“Them?”

He didn’t notice the Govs in their booth? I nod slightly toward corner. He starts, almost falling over in his chair. I roll my eyes before I can stop myself. How has this idiot not gotten himself caught or killed yet?

“We should go,” Lee moves to stand, but I catch his arm.

“We’re just friends meeting for lunch. Play the part,” I say. “Leaving right after you’ve arrived is a classic sign of an illegal trade.”

“So how long are we staying?” the blonde man says.

I really should learn his name so I know what not to name my future children.

“20 minutes, or after they leave,” I say.

The man swears.

“It isn’t like they’re timing us. We’re just background to them.”

“We play it calm, okay?” I say. “We should talk. Pass the time. Look like we’re *old friends*. So, how are things on your side of the moon?”

“Yeah, like I’m telling you anything,” the man glares at me and takes another drink. “And now you’re taking our best doctor.”

“Well,” I say, flashing a smile as if he’d shared something sweet about his kids, “we are very grateful for an emergency response doctor who meets all our needs. We appreciate it.”

“Appreciate it? Why you—”

“You seem to be forgetting that I wanted to leave,” Lee says.

The man scoffs, drains his drink, then sets it down, softer this time.

“Enjoy your new doctor,” he stands, putting on his coat.

“You have to wait,” I say. “You show up with Lee, then leave by yourself. Anyone with eyes can see we’re doing an exchange.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

He glares at me, then leaves, slamming the door behind him. I wince. We might as well be holding a neon sign that says *look at me*. I exhale and glance at Lee.

“Our best plan now is to stay calm and keep talking,” I say. “If we leave in a hurry, we’re caught.”

Lee nods.

“I know your voice,” Lee says. “Have we met before?”

“Yeah,” I say. “The last Blake Raid...I, um...”

I can't hear the Govs. I glance at them, and I make eye contact with the rookie. He looks away. The other is already on his cAs. Looking up someone, maybe. If they look me up, they'll find a missing child with no adult criminal activity. If they look up Dr. Lee, then we have a problem. I glance at Lee, my new cargo and ally. I know he can handle himself on the battlefield, but this is different.

"You have any experience with hand to hand fighting?" I say.

"No. Do you have an equalizer?"

I'm surprised he knows the smugglers' term.

"One," I say. "You?"

He shakes his head. Why on moon did they send him without a weapon?

"You've probably been made," I say. "I'm going to get us out of this. When things break out, go for the door onto the train platform. Cross the tracks, and wait in the alley for me behind the clothing store."

"What if you don't make it?"

I don't answer. He has no way to contact our base, and I don't have time to slide him an earpiece or explain how to contact Jeremy through our secret network.

I shove back my chair and go to the bar. "Can I have three shots of vodka, and a bottle of dry whiskey?"

The barkeeper draws his eyebrows together. "A dry whiskey?"

Virus, these people don't even know what a dry whiskey is!

"Forget the whiskey, just the shots. Make it quick."

I'd probably get them faster if I flirted, but I'm not in the mood. I look back at Lee; he looks relaxed, bored even. He knows how to keep his cool. Good.

I see two Govs rise and start walking toward our table. The earthling should be easy enough, but lunar-borns are harder to deal with.

My drinks come. I down one, then head for Lee. I set another shot on the table and shove it toward him. Some of the liquid sloshes over.

"Drink it," I say. "It will dull the pain somewhat if we get into a fight."

Then I turn and am standing in front of the lunar Gov. He nods at me. I can smell the tangy scent of his drink on his breath.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need to—"

"Well, hi there, handsome," I say, smiling and stepping into his personal space. He doesn't move.

"I need to talk to your friend," he says.

"Oh, please, I'm sure we can resolve this, sir." I glance at Lee, who sits rigid, eyes locked on me. "Whatever my uncle has done, I'm sure we can find an acceptable compensation for you and your men. Anything at all."

I wink at him.

He doesn't react.

"Relax, take a seat, and have a drink on us." I raise one of the shot glasses.

"Ma'am, you need to—"

I throw the shot of vodka into his eyes. He jerks back, hands instinctively going to his face. I hear a chair behind me fall as Lee runs for the door. I punch the Gov in the gut and follow that by breaking my mug on his head. Some shattered glass cuts my wrist.

I bolt for the exit. Lee is already through. A chair falls over, and the thudding of boots tells me I'm being followed.

"Shaw, stop!" the lunar shouts. "Stand down!"

Couldn't resist the hunt, ah? Rookie mistake. Then again, that's why over half of new transfers don't make it one year.

When I burst through the doors, I'm hit with the biting midnight air. The cold freezes my lungs from the inside. I'm standing on a train platform, and a few meters out are the train tracks, about a meter down. Downtown is a popular spot to shop and spend time with family and friends during *golden days*.

Lee is still on the platform. Virus, I told him to cross the tracks! I slide against the wall and draw my pistol, pushing Lee behind me. If the Gov does come out, he won't be prepared to come face-to-face with a barrel. Unlike his superior, he hasn't been on the moon long enough to know military personnel aren't the only ones with firearms. That always seems to catch the new transfers by surprise. The sidewalks are empty this time of month, so no civilians downrange.

Before the doors have closed behind me, the transfer charges out. I aim my gun. I don't look at his face, just aiming at the center of his blue jacket. That's all he is; a uniform. I pull the trigger. The sound of the gunshot shatters the frozen air. He grunts, then collapses, still alive when he hits the ground. He falls on his back, hand pressed against the center of his chest. I charge forward, slamming the door shut, then grab his pistol from his holster and fling it onto the tracks, just in case.

"Let's go Lee." I shove my gun into my belt and jump off the platform onto the tracks and start sprinting. I glance behind me, but I'm alone. I stop and turn. Lee is still on the platform kneeling next to the Gov I just shot. Of all the—

"Lee!" I scramble back. He doesn't respond. I climb onto the platform. Lee has his medical bag beside him and has already cut open the uniform. His face is forced, calm.

"I need you to relax," Lee says as he injects something into the Gov's neck.

"What are you doing?" I say. "He's the enemy. Do you know what he would have done to you if he had arrested you?"

Lee removes a cloth-like screen from his medical bag and puts it over the Gov's bullet wound. With a few taps, a colorless image appears. I lean closer. I see movement on the pad that I think is the guard's heart. Next to it is a black tunnel, which I assume is my bullet wound. I think I hit the top of the Gov's right lung.

I straighten and glance around us. It's too open here. Sure, the other Gov isn't going to be coming through that door, probably, but we are exposed on three sides.

"I can't protect you here," I say. "We have to go."

"It would be pretty foolish of him to hurt me or you while I'm treating his comrade." Lee pulls out a metal rod with a wire attached to the top. "What caliber do you shoot?"

I sigh. "40 solid tip."

He adjusts the pad so the bullet wound is exposed. Staring at the screen, he guides the rod through the tunnel the bullet left. A bullet plug? If it is, it's more sophisticated than the ones I've seen.

A dull horn fills the the chilly air. I straighten, staring down the empty tracks. The horn sounds again, this time louder. When the train arrives, it will cut off the path to my ship.

"We have to go," I say.

He doesn't answer.

Lee isn't a big man, but there's no way I could drag him away against his will. Maybe I should have had Jones come with me. He could have carried Lee off like a sack of grain. I shift my weight between my legs, then moan and grab Lee's backpack and swing it onto my shoulders. Virus! It's heavier than it looks.

Lee guides the rod. When in place, he expands it until the hole is filled, stopping the bleeding. He checks a few more things, then rolls up the pad and throws it in his bag. He pulls the Gov's jacket back over his exposed skin, then removes his coat and throws it over the guard.

The train rounds the corner, lights blinding me. Lee stands and jumps onto the tracks, sprinting toward the other side. I hear metal dragging as the train applies its brakes. I suck in a big breath of icy air, then jump down and charge after Lee. We cross the tracks and duck into an alley behind the closed shops.

"My ship's in a parking garage up here," I whisper to Lee.

"You didn't park in the bar's garage? Angel did."

I roll my eyes before I stop myself. Of course he parked in the bar garage. What mistake didn't he make?

Well, I now know that I'm never having a kid named Angel.

The cold air sucks warmth like a vacuum from my body. I lost my gloves somewhere in the scuffle. I put on my hat and pull my scarf up over my nose. My hot breath warms my cheeks.

We run several blocks to the east. Only about half the businesses are officially open at this time of the lunar-month. Unless they have a parking garage, any customer would freeze walking to their shop. The stores' dark windows look like the eyes of an empty mask. Proximity force-fields hum as we pass.

We finally reach my ship. She's small and she looks like a junk yard ship, but she's fast and mobil. I punch in the code, and the force-field covering the large opening drops. My breath pours out into the night like smoke. I draw in a new breath through my nose. Lee does the same.

"Get buckled in," I say.

I climb into the pilot's seat and start the engine. I rev the engines a few seconds, trying to get more heat into them so they don't lock up in this bitter air. I call Connor. He answers at once.

"Where are you?" I can tell by the stress in his voice that he knows I'm in trouble. Of course; after being more than hour late, he's hacked the government activity in the area.

"Back at the garage where I parked the *Eclipse*. 18th street, parts supply store."

There's a pause on the other end.

"You've got a partial squad coming your way on foot, they're less than a block out. They're also sending air backup."

Of course they are. Well, I know how to take care of them. I power my ship's protective force-field and pull out into the alley. *Bang!* I jump. Someone is shooting at us, but my force-

field absorbs the impact. Connor wasn't kidding when he said they were close. The lunar from the bar and four more of the Govs stand in the alley, pistols drawn. The lunar wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. His eyes are still red from the vodka I threw in his face, but he's still here. I smirk. That's lunar-born for you.

I ease the *Eclipse* low to the ground and rev the engines hard, which kicks up a ton of fine moon dust. The Govs pull back, hands up. I command the *Eclipse* to shoot straight up like a rocket, and we join the airlines above the city.

I wrap my thawing fingers around the controls. One problem down.

"You got a tail," Connor says. "Government quad-barrel."

"Hey, we can't make it easy, now can we?"

I turn sharply and head back toward the city. The quad follows, but has a much wider turn radius than I do. I tap my fingers against the steering wheel.

"Why are we going back in?" Lee says.

"Best way to hide is to look as if you're not hiding," I say. "Plus, the crowd helps."

I drop sharply and merge into traffic. Not a busy stream, but it's heading toward the center of the city. The quad follows us, sirens blaring. Half the ships pull off. The other half keep flying.

I increase my speed. I head for the tunnel, which is the only east entrance into the lower city. This lunar city was one of the first to be built underground, but half the city was already built above ground, earth style.

We fly through the mouth of the dark tunnel. Only one row of blue lights glow beneath us. Ships fly in a string of metal. I kill the lights and slow our speed.

"There's a small access tunnel up ahead," I say. "We can escape that way."

Lee nods. Unlike at the bar, his face is a mixture of worry and harden resolve.

"I'll get us out of here," I say. "Just hold on to something."

The opening to the access tunnel comes into view. I wait until we're almost on top of it, then jerk hard to my right. Something slides across the floor in the back compartment. My ship is small and can maneuver better than the government quad, so they shouldn't be able to follow me. Sure enough, the big ship goes flying by, missing our turn.

I smile, turning on my ship's lights and speeding ahead. Lee sighs and relaxes.

"You're in good hands, doctor." I smile. "This isn't my first time dodging Govs."

An obstruction appears on my scanner. I slow, but see the trouble a moment later. I stop the ship suddenly, jerking us against our restraining belts. Ahead of us, the tunnel is completely filled in with concrete. A single grid vent allows air flow.

"Connor!" I yell, turning the ship around. "Our exit is blocked. What's going on?"

"I don't know," he says. "It's new—it wasn't there when I checked a week ago."

Just my luck.

I speed down the tunnel. If the quad was slow, we may still be able to get out before it circles back around. Instead, I meet the quad in the tunnel. I jerk to a stop, hovering in front of the larger ship. The quad fills the whole tunnel. We could squeeze through if it were to move to one side, but it's dead center at the moment. It starts broadcasting on short-distance system, telling us to surrender. I groan and turn the audio off.

Father, give grace.

“I’ll get us out of this,” I say. “You’ll be fine.”

“That sounds like a lie you tell to a dying man.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” I say. “Do you know how forcefields work?”

“It’s a protective sphere around the ship,” he says. “That’s all I know.”

“Normally, a ship this size can’t produce a strong force field, but I have a custom generator.” I power down the engines, channeling my energy into my force field. I also change my fuel ratio, which will make the engines burn hotter, but won’t be a problem in this weather. I creep forward until I’m under the ship. They move slightly, blocking any escape.

“Skylar?” Lee says.

I make the final adjustments to my forcefield, then reach for the forcefield switch above my head.

“Hold on tight,” I say.

I activate my force field, creating a sphere around my ship, most of the energy funneled to the top and bottom. My ship is like a toy inside a ball, and that ball is pinned between the tunnel floor and the ship above me. The forcefield shoves their ship upward, bending its metal. The top of quad straps against the ceiling. My engines strain, but hold. A gap opens in front us.

I drop my forcefield and lunge forward. We slip through the gap and turn hard to the left, flying against the flow of traffic. My ship is small enough I can hug the ceiling and stay clear of ships. We’re exit the tunnel, and I rev the engines and bolt into the black sky. I fly out of the city into the lunar desert.

“Are they following us?” I say.

“Nothing yet,” Connor says.

“Copy that. We should do the balloon trick, just in case.”

“What’s the balloon trick?” Lee says.

“It’s a way to erase your fuel trail.” I feel for the forcefield switch above my head. “You increase your forcefield strength to max, then expand it until it pops. The forcefield pushes any traceable fuel particles away.”

I kill the power to the thrusters, funneling all power to our forcefield. We could take a missile hit at this density. I expand the forcefield until it’s too weak to even hold its shape, and dissolves. We glide on silently. The ship moves on momentum alone, leaving no vapors that can be traced. We start to drift downward as the momentum drains. I adjust the tilt of the wings to keep us going. The longer I can keep us in the air, the better.

The cab is silent besides the sound of us breathing. I glance out my side window. At this height, you can see the curve of the moon and the faint glow of the sunset.