

## CHAPTER I

It's impossible to ignore an alarm that's going off *inside* your head. Which is probably why Syntex put it there instead of on my bedside table. The blasted thing screams across three different octaves, growing so loud and relentless it rattles the nerves inside my teeth. *Christ-that-was*. I curse and throw a pillow over my face, half a second before I remember why that's a terrible idea.

Too late.

The jolt of electricity surges through my brain. It's only the tiniest bit of current, barely even a spark. But damn, it hurts. Every single time. You'd think I'd have learned my lesson by now: urgent alerts aren't optional.

Jarvis has already turned the lights on in my room and their glare is bouncing off the bare, white walls, brighter than is polite for . . . *argh*, 4.14 a.m. It's no wonder I feel like death is tap-dancing inside my skull. Lena and I were drinking until past one.

"Status report," I bark, because there's no point wasting words berating the computer in my head. Most of the other Walkers don't even bother naming their units, but I've never liked the term *it* much, and CIP—short for Cerebral Intelligence Processor—felt too clinical for me. So I named him after the AI bot from this pre-Annihilation movie Dad and I used to watch, back before my decision to join the program drove us apart. I downloaded the actor's voiceprint and everything, so that they'd sound the same. Peter something, I think. Or maybe it was Paul. In my defense, I was eight at the time, and it seemed like a good idea.

“Incoming mission,” Jarvis tells me. “Confirm clearance code to commence data stream.”

And just like that, I’m fully awake.

“Walker designation W914.” My legs grumble in protest as I slip into a pair of shorts and a loose tee. Technically, no one can see me right now, not unless you count the cameras, which, somehow, I never do. Still, this isn’t the kind of thing I like doing in my underwear. Jondi likes to do it naked, and he likes it more when some unsuspecting soul happens to walk in on him. He’s just that kind of special.

The second my voiceprint is recognized, the screens along the back wall flicker to life. My performance stats on the left, my host’s personnel file on the right, and the mission details in the center. *Damn.* I shake off the fuzziness as the full scale of his predicament hits. Not only has Lieutenant Cole Risler gotten himself stuck inside a classified server farm, he’s gone and done it on the wrong side of the Demarcation Line. Which is a problem since everything west of Texas and the Dakotas belongs to the totalitarian militia that cleaved the United States in half. Now, we’re divided into the United American State and the Western Block. And yes, they hate the name almost as much as they hate us spying on their technology.

Judging by the information populating my ocular display, Risler’s chances of breaking out of there alone are pretty much non-existent. He’s trapped in a closet, security outnumbers him four to one, his gun’s showing as empty, and it looks as though his on-board computer—a sub-skin unit with a holographic screen in his wrist—has been damaged, so he’s lost access to most of his tactical mods.

He’s out of options, basically.

They usually are when a Walker is tapped.

“Secure channel ready?” I ask, tying my hair back into a messy bun.

“Affirmative. Beginning transmission.”

A familiar click sounds in my ear and then panicked breathing fills my mind.

“This is Captain Sil Sarrah of Walker Division Nine,” I say. “You’ve been recommended for immediate extraction. Please speak your consent to authorize the Meld.”

A pause and then, “Are you *defective*?” Risler’s words ooze contempt. “I don’t need your help.”

Oh good. He’s not just stuck, he’s in denial.

I mute my transmission for a moment, squeezing the bridge of my nose with two fingers. I’m too hungover for this. “Jarvis, prepare to initiate neural link.”

“I’m sorry, Captain”—he flashes me a giant permissions error—“but the Lieutenant has not yet consented.”

“He will,” I mutter, familiarizing myself with the building. Risler might not want to admit he needs a teenage girl to save his incompetent ass, but he’s going to let me inside his head for the same reason he let Syntex put Meld structures there in the first place. He doesn’t want to die today. And he knows I’m his best chance.

I unmute the line. “Lieutenant, your odds of evading capture are at 14.96% and dropping. Authorize the Meld.”

“Piss off, Junker bitch.”

It’s not the worst thing I’ve been called, but I *really* hate that word and I’m running out of patience.

“12.47%, Lieutenant.”

“*Shit.*” The indecision in his voice rings clear, equal parts desperation and disgust. He’s moving towards the inevitable right on schedule. “What are your stats?” he finally asks, because field agents are nothing if not predictable.

We so don’t have time for this. We never have time for this, which is why I know at least three Walkers who flat-out refuse to answer that question. Lena, for one, tells these entitled pricks that her stats are the best they’re going to get so they can either suck it up or die.

But since my record is perfect, I have no reason to hide it.

“I’m at six hundred and fifty-seven missions and a hundred percent,” I say, knowing full well it’ll impress him. No other Walker in the history of the program has ever scored that many

wins without a loss—let alone at eighteen. I beat the last guy's streak over a year ago.

"But we're fast approaching the point of no return here, Lieutenant," I add. "Security are headed your way."

"No. I can't do it." Despite my credentials, Risler won't relinquish control. "Just talk me out of here."

"You know that's not how this works." Sweat beads a chain around my neck, my pulse quickening. Before Syntex perfected neural link technology, Walkers *were* expected to just talk field agents to safety, which made for a terrible rescue strategy since the idiots refused to trust our judgment and do as they were told. So now we take over completely. That's what they sign up for when they opt in to melded extractions. And what they promptly forget the moment they've messed up bad enough to need one. "Now do I have your permission or not?"

"Screw you."

"You've got five seconds to reconsider that answer, Lieutenant. Once your odds drop below 10%, I get to write off this mission guilt-free." When the carrot fails, I reach for a lie and a sharp stick. Because there's no way I'm handing Miles a report that says we're down an agent thanks to my lack of persuasive skill. And there's *absolutely* no way I'm letting Lieutenant Stubborn here single-handedly ruin my stats.

"Four."

Risler's breathing intensifies; sharp exhales whistling down the line. An alarm echoes somewhere in the distance, along with faint yelling I can't yet make out.

"Three."

He lets out a colorful string of curses. He's creative; I'll give him that.

"Two seconds, Lieutenant."

"Okay, do it. Do it now!"

"I need you to say the words."

"*I give you permission! Christ-that—*" His next curse cuts off as Jarvis initiates the Meld.

All at once, my vision goes dark. I've heard other Walkers describe the experience as hurtling through a tunnel filled with bright lights and synthesized sounds, but I think they're just bigging up the tech for the Reggies, because I've never seen jack. The process is quite seamless, actually. One second I'm standing in my room, then the next, I'm in a broom closet, in Lieutenant Risler's body, looking at the world through his eyes.

It takes me a moment to adjust to my new reality. Risler's a foot taller than I am, and close to twice as wide, nothing but solid muscle packed under his clothes. Not that his size much matters. Once the neural link connects us, I literally *become* my hosts, irrespective of their sex or stature. So Risler's hands become my hands, his arms moving readily at my command, grazing a stack of shelves that's crammed full of cleaning products. And wow, is Lena gonna flip when she hears about this . . . I bite back a giggle. This grown-ass man really is hiding in a broom closet.

I quickly take stock of his—sorry, *my*—condition and supplies. The unit in my wrist ate a bullet, so that's the bulk of my scanners and audio enhancers out. Weapons-wise, I'm down to the knife sheathed at my ankle and the sedative darts implanted in my thumbs, but those are only helpful in close combat and that's something I'd like to avoid. The door to the closet is locked, though, and judging by the mass of bodies running past it, security doesn't know I'm in here, so that's good news. As is the slim case of nanodots I find in my pocket. Risler brought along enough to hold about ten terabytes of data, and they're all flashing full.

*Not as useless as you look, then . . .* I tuck the case into my boot for safer keeping. Classified server farms are where the militia keeps the good stuff. Records of their military assets, citizen health data, projects in active development . . . everything our government wants to know about how the other side lives. Helping them spy on the Western Block isn't just one of Syntex's most lucrative contracts; it's how we prioritize our own R&D and beat other tech outfits to market. Being first means being the best and being the best means we're better placed to influence legislation.

Which makes the files on these dots every bit as important as Risler.

The Lieutenant keeps quiet for now, but no doubt he'll start backseat driving in a minute or two, once the shock of the Meld wears off. Why my hosts bother having an opinion, I don't know. Letting me into his mind has already spiked Risler's survival odds by a factor of ten, and that number will continue to rise as Jarvis pushes me new information. Blueprints, security feeds, known guard rotations . . . whatever we have on this facility. Before his wrist unit was damaged, Risler had access to this stuff too, but without a CIP to process and analyze the data in real time, he's nowhere near as effective.

Hell, if we weren't so damn valuable, Syntex would probably cut out the middleman altogether and send us into the field, but the reality is, we're far too scarce a resource. On a good year, only twenty-odd kids test into the program—it takes a specific combination of DNA markers and blood morphology to withstand the Walker-level tech, otherwise the implantation process kills you, or hardware rejection does—so once they make us, they like to keep us close.

Outside the closet, the alarm drones on, a piercing cry that echoes down the neural link. I wait for the survival odds Jarvis is calculating to spike above 85% before stepping into the corridor, treading lightly on my new size thirteens. From here it's a straight shot down the hall, then two lefts and a right; three entirely deserted corridors according to the cameras. After that, well, things will get trickier.

"You're heading the wrong way. The closest exit is behind us." The Lieutenant's found his voice again.

Super.

"We're not taking the exit," I say, pressing my back flush against the wall. Every time I run an op I find myself wishing they'd give us a mute button for the hosts, but the last time Syntex tried that, it almost ended in a mutiny. So I'm stuck with him.

Risler's outright screaming by the time I make it to the stairwell.

What he doesn't know is there's an old ventilation shaft on the third floor. And what I don't want him to know is he'll be jumping down it. The shaft lets out on top of the dumpsters, so unless they've been throwing out old machinery or knives, his body will survive the fall, give or take a few minor injuries. Based on my projections, it's the escape route with the greatest chance of success. And since I'm steering this ship, it's the one he'll be taking.

I leap the stairs three at a time—it's easy in this body; Risler's in excellent shape—then pull to a stop behind the door, consulting the camera feeds again. One security guard left on this floor. Armed. I wait for him to disappear around the corner before edging out into the corridor.

The access panel is exactly where the schematics show: snuggled between two rooms, low to the ground and sealed shut by a few rusty screws. In my own body, I'd fit through this shaft comfortably; as Risler, it'll be a tight squeeze.

I reach for the knife at his ankle, turning the blade into a makeshift screwdriver. The Lieutenant quiets down once he realizes I have a plan, though I'm sure that'll change the moment I unhook this grate and he gets a glimpse of what he's in for. Then he'll really let me have it.

The first couple of screws give easily, but the last puts up a fight. By the time I tease it free, the guard is halfway through his next sweep of the floor.

"You're not seriously thinking of jumping?" Risler asks as I poke his head into the shaft. He was probably expecting a network of ducts to crawl through instead of a steep, dark drop. The seemingly endless abyss is a terrifying sight, unless you know what's waiting at the bottom.

"It's the safest route out, Lieutenant."

"Like hell it is! Find a different way!"

I ignore him, throwing a leg over the rim. But before I can compel the other to follow, a sharp pain lances through my skull and my vision blurs at the edges, flickering to black. Then I'm

back in my room again, my mind filled only with silence.

For a second I stand there dumbly, watching the words *neural link terminated* flash across the screens.

*Terminated?* That doesn't make any sense. Terminated *how?* By *who?*

There are only two ways to terminate a Meld: either I give the order to kill it, or the host I'm melded with dies. But I'd have felt it if Risler bit the dust on my watch. By all accounts, it's quite the memorable sensation.

Dread chills a path up my spine, seeping into my bones like a nuclear winter. "Lieutenant?" I call out, though I already know Risler can't hear me. The faint hum I've lived with since my CIP was implanted is gone, and without it, I have no idea what to do. When you spend your life filtering out the noise, silence is the true nightmare.

"Jarvis?" I try to reach him too.

No reply.

Shit. I swallow a mouthful of bile. Jarvis can't ignore a direct command. Even if I'm not actively using him, he's always there, standing by in case I need something. Which means the problem isn't on Syntex's end, it's with me. My systems are offline.

*So get them back.* I will myself to action, trying every fix I can think of. The connectivity options on my screens, recalibrating my CIP through the online console, the restart button behind my left ear.

Nothing.

Double shit. That means it's a power issue, though why my backup hasn't kicked in, I don't know, and right now, I can't spare the time to figure it out. I left Risler with one foot dangling over a three-story drop and a security sweep only seconds from his location. If he dies, my perfect record dies with him. And I've worked too damn hard to let that happen.

I lunge at my desk, throwing open each of the drawers in turn. The few possessions I own crash to the floor, scattering loudly across the cold tiles. "*Christ-that-was.*" The curse rips from my



throat, half whimper, half growl. Where the hell did I put my hard line?

I finally find it hiding at the back of my closet, tucked behind an old box of family holoforms. I must have thrown it in there during one of my cleaning sprees. Mess makes me feel untethered, and it's not like I expected to need it anytime soon.

I *shouldn't* have to need it.

Not yet.

I tear the plastic film open with my teeth, but my hands are shaking so hard it takes a couple of tries to snap the cable into the port at the back of my neck.

*Come on, come on, come on.* My foot taps a staccato rhythm against the bedframe as I wait for the system to reboot. Seventeen whole seconds go by before the Syntex logo—a double helix forged of bone and metal—dances across my retinas, and then finally—*finally*—Jarvis breaks the silence.

“My apologies, Captain. I appear to have experienced a temporary shutdown.”

Yes, like I didn't fucking notice.

“Get me the Lieutenant now!” I scream at him.

“Yes, Captain. Neural bridge will be back online in thirty-eight seconds.”

*Argh.* This so can't be happening. I rake both hands through my hair. While I wait, I check the camera feeds from the facility. Tracking shows Risler is still inside, which means the idiot didn't jump or he'd be halfway to safety. Damn. This one's on me. I should have told him what was waiting at the bottom of that shaft. Syntex always says transparency is key to getting our hosts to trust us. And sure, I see their point, but given all the abuse the field ops throw our way, can you really blame us for toying with them a little?

“Opening secure channel in five”—Jarvis has always loved a good countdown—“four, three, two, one . . .”

Risler's panic fills my mind again, his breaths coming hard and fast. Since security has him on his knees behind the guard

station, he can't give me an earful without also giving away the game—though I very much doubt he wants to. He's unarmed, surrounded, and his wrist unit is a dead stick. When I ask for his consent he mutters *yes* without hesitation. He even throws in a *please*.

The Meld launches me back into his head, and naturally, there's a gun pointed at it. I don't stop to offer him an explanation; I simply use his body to incapacitate his captors. Gun or no gun, it's easy to gain the upper hand when your tech shows you what everyone else is gearing up to do. And when you've studied a dozen martial arts since you were eight. And especially when the guy threatening your life is too busy screaming *who do you work for?* to have noticed the shift behind his prisoner's eyes.

He'll definitely have heard of Walkers—every tech outfit in the world has been dying to get its hands on our CIPs since the program first launched—but we're rare enough that the Reggies never suspect we're running an extraction until their analysts crunch the numbers after the fact.

We are a myth, basically. Thoroughly modern ghosts.

By the time Gun Man gets off a shot, I've already ducked clear of the barrel and the bullet hits one of the control panels instead. Good. A sharp elbow knocks the pistol out of his hand and then I feign left, drawing back in time for two of my captors to slam into each other. While they're off balance, I take out their legs, sending them both crashing to the ground, their limbs tangled together. The third guard I tackle, pitching a knee to his groin. Given Risler's size and strength, he won't be getting up anytime soon. Or having kids. Which just leaves Gun Man, who lunges at me full pelt.

*Big mistake.* With a pinch of my thumbs, I activate the sedative darts buried beneath Risler's skin. Then all it takes is a split second of contact and security is down for the count. The entire fight—if you can even call it that—lasted maybe a minute.

"Where the hell did you go?" The instant it's over, the Lieutenant's attitude returns.

So much for gratitude.

Dick.

With security on this floor incapacitated, the main door has now become the safest route out, though this extraction is no longer clean. The guards had a body scanner, for one, and they might well have had time to catalogue Risler's mods, so that's a bit of a cluster. Keeping proprietary tech out of competitor hands is why Syntex developed the Mindwalking program in the first place. It's never really been about protecting their agents; they're more concerned about protecting their IP. Can't win the game if the other team has your playbook, and you can't steal theirs if they know which parts of you bite.

The whole *tech before people* thing used to bother me on some level, but hey, we *are* saving lives in the process, so I guess it comes out a wash.

Anyway, what's done is done. Risler is still alive and he'll be leaving with a devastating amount of data, which means that as far as *my* stats are concerned, I'm golden.

Assuming, of course, I get him out in one piece.

I take off running, snatching up the guard's gun on my sprint to the door. Half a clip to the glass does the job of any access chip, then the rest I spend clearing my path to the fence.

"An extraction team will be waiting at your scheduled rendezvous," I say once I'm safely through the hole Risler cut on his way in. "As long as you stay off the main roads, you shouldn't encounter any more problems."

That's the perk of infiltrating clandestine targets: they never want to admit they've been hit, which means they won't report him. It'll be days before they pull together a log of the files he stole, and weeks before they come clean to their superiors.

By sunrise, Risler will be a ghost.

I don't stick with him until the pickup. Melds fare better over short stints, so now that he's out of danger, a desk jockey will guide him back to the airstrip, five clicks away.

My part in his story is done.

Risler doesn't honor me with a thank you—they never do—but at least he doesn't curse me out of his head. I give Jarvis the command to terminate the neural link, and the next second I'm back in my room, soaked through with sweat.

Only then does the scale of my equipment failure truly sink in, sending me collapsing down to the bed, my body shaking to the bone. Not one, but both of my power systems failed tonight, even though I've barely just turned eighteen.

This isn't supposed to happen yet.

Not like this. Not this badly.

I'm supposed to have more time.