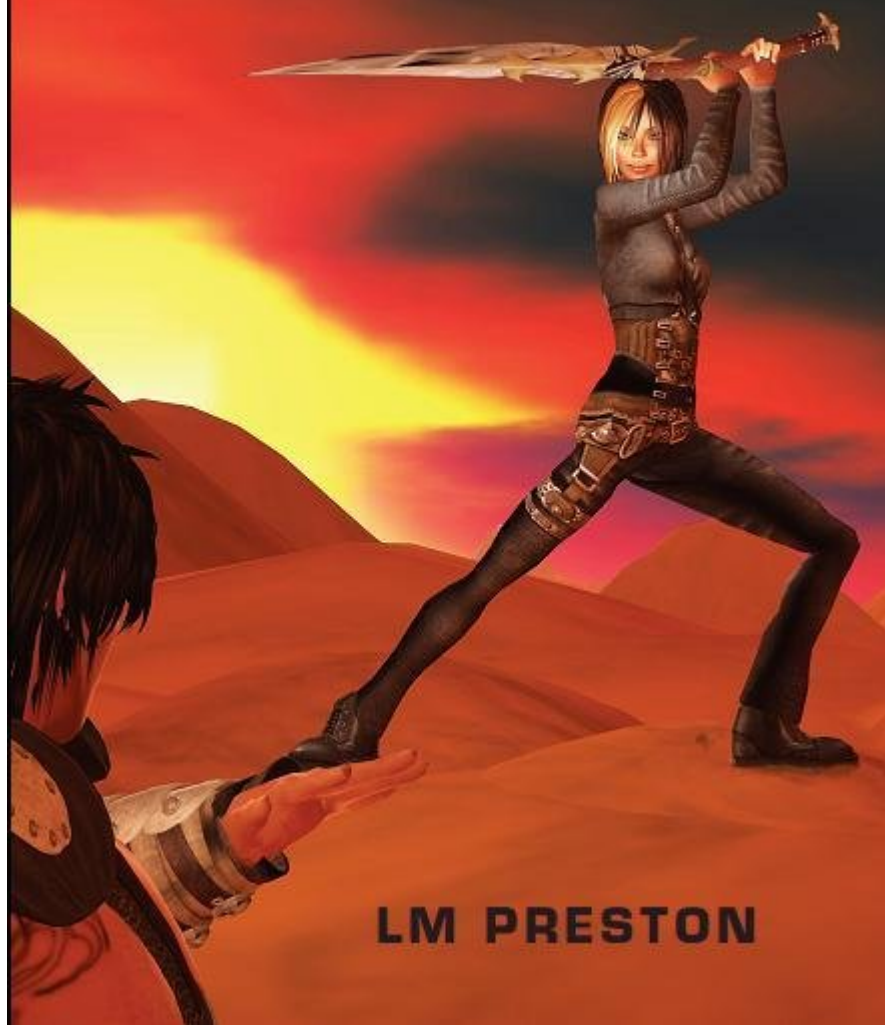


THE PACK



LM PRESTON

T H E P A C K

Chapter 1

She often walked this way home, listening for all the familiar sounds. Adjusting the handle of her small bag across her chest, she strolled slowly on the long suburban block that stretched quietly in front of her. It was night out, but it made no difference to Shamira, for she lived in the dark for most her life. She heard the quietness of the evening while she walked a comfortable pace on her journey homeward. There were no birds, no rustling trees, and no one walking the streets. Only the slight hum of the generators could be heard in the quiet of the late evening while it pumped fresh oxygen into the air.

Suddenly, out of the stillness, she heard someone approach, and she turned slightly to judge who it was. Shamira could tell the footsteps weren't friendly, but then again, neither was Shamira. A mischievous smile crossed her face that some would mistake for innocence, the furthest thing from her mind. The footsteps continued to fall quickly toward her, and Shamira slowed down to lure them closer. She knew that *he* came. *Only one scum for my trap today.* She had dealt with others before, but tonight, she only had time for one.

He grabbed her by the neck. *Typical. Why do they always go for my neck? This is too easy.* She smiled to herself again, and figuring she wouldn't work too hard to bring him down, she swallowed in preparation for the attack. Restlessness rose in her in anticipation of the fight. Time was slipping away, and she had to get home before her mother did. *This has to go quickly,* she thought regrettably, for she hated to rush things. She waited to see what her captor had planned for her, and she stood seemingly docile with his thick arm circled around her neck.

"So, what do I have here? Ooh, I've hit the jackpot tonight, baby!" He shoved his nose in her hair and sniffed, "A pretty, sweet-smelling girl all alone. You have no choice, you know. You're coming with me. I have got plans for you, sweet thing," he growled in her ear. She inhaled the smell of his putrid breath. The coarse hair on his arms scratched her neck. She squirmed away from him a bit, and his bulging belly pushed against her back.

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“Hey! Stop, dude! Let her go!” She heard a voice in the distance. *Shoot!* she said to herself, knowing she would have to play helpless now. She had traced this creep for weeks, and now some goofball would-be hero would mess it up for her. *Dang it! No one must know*, she reminded herself, for no one could know what she did when she was alone. *Great, I won't get any information out of this creep tonight*, she grimaced.

She felt her attacker slack up just a little, but couldn't resist the urge to hurt him, like she knew he had hurt others. She lifted her leg high and stomped down on his foot with all her might, cracking his bones on impact. He instantly let up his tight hold. She turned precisely enough to step out of his reach. He yanked her long braid, a move she didn't anticipate, but she smiled at his obvious feeling of superiority over a girl he knew was blind and helpless. A smile slipped to her face at the knowledge that he'd been tracking her for sometime. She thought to herself, *I may be blind, but I'm definitely not helpless, you filthy son of a bastard*. Letting him think he had the upper hand, she allowed him to pull her back into his grasp by her hair. Her back was bent back like a bow, and she sensed his jaw was unprotected just above her nose. *Not surprising. It's always this way. They all get cocky in the end*. She braced herself to head-butt her captor in the chin, hopeful that he would bite off his hanging tongue that dripped a disgusting stream of spittle on her nose.

Then, she heard it. The guy that yelled out in hopes of stopping the attack had run up behind the oaf that was too dumb to

realize that the gig was up. Just then, her self-appointed savior stepped in to save the day and snatched her target away by his neck. She heard him drag the scum slightly away. There was a grunt and rustling, and with a *thump*, the fat, smelly attacker was dealt a kick to his head after he crashed to the pavement. *Hum, that sounds familiar, only I kick harder. It appears the kid has some skill. He's sloppy, of course, but skillful enough to do the deed.* She heard the boy land one last kick for good measure, and her self-imposed hero walked over to her rescue. "Great. Now I have to play grateful," she muttered to herself.

"Thanks," she spat out most unconvincingly. She couldn't help it. This was her only set-up for the night, and now she had to find another way to control the rage inside her and solve the mystery of the missing kids on Mars. *It looks like another night in the training room. So freaking unfulfilling.* She rolled her eyes.

"I guess you're welcome," the boy said, "but you don't really sound too grateful." He tried to take her hand just like all the others who thought she was a poor, blind, invalid little girl. Disgusted, Shamira jerked away. She didn't need his help or want him there. He'd disrupted her planned attack, and the last thing she needed was for him to touch or pity her.

"I had it handled," she said and then started to walk toward home. As she headed off, the temperature changed. It was getting late. She could always tell. She tried to ignore him and hoped he would get the message. The last thing she needed was a nosey

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tagalong.

“You could’ve fooled me,” the boy pressed. “He had his arm around your neck!” He made the fatal mistake of touching her again. She didn’t think, only reacted as she grabbed his hand and held it steady, yet firmly before he made more than a whisper of contact. Shamira did not like to be touched. It angered her immensely. Many people touched her freely, like they had a right to simply because her eyes appeared unseeing. They always assumed she needed their help, but they were all mistaken; she didn’t need anyone’s help. Shamira always fought her own battles—some of which she even created because she hungered to fight. There was an urge inside her, something she barely controlled. She breathed deeply and tried to hold it back, but it was barely at bay.

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t stop. He didn’t get the message and decided to stick around. He moved a distance away, but she knew exactly where he was. She had to breathe deeply to avoid doing something they’d both regret. She was getting angry again, just like she always did when someone treated her like she was helpless. They didn’t know about this rage inside of her, this burning, this constant hunger for a challenge, someone deserving of justice—something she could barely hold in. She stood down, calmed down, and waited, relaxing enough to drop his hand. She knew exactly how this was going to go. First, there would be his concern, then pity, and then his hand again as he tried to help. *I don’t have time for this today. I’m already late.*

“Look, don’t touch me, okay? I don’t like it, and you don’t have the right.” She moved past him to walk home.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but it’s obvious that you need somebody to walk you home,” he said then reached out to touch her shoulder just like she knew he would.

That’s it! The dam inside her broke. *I was angry before, but now I’ve had enough playing with this self-righteous imitation hero!* She slid out from under his outstretched hand, smoothly ducked, and then turned around to land a solid punch to the boy’s face. She didn’t stop, either, but instead punched him again and again in the chest to make him backoff.

He took the battering, but yelled, “I won’t fight you back! I don’t hit girls.”

“Err! Leave me alone! Go away! I can take care of myself! I will hurt you, so just leave! Leave!” Dismissing him, she turned away and ran all the way home. She ran quickly and smelled the sweet aroma of manufactured air and the quiet *hum* that was Mars.

Whoever he was, she would remember him—his voice, his smell, and her dislike for him. *He dares to pity me.* She would teach him to pity alright. They would meet again, and when they did, she would not hold back. She’d make him stay out of her way.

Chapter 2

Shamira's run home was warmer than usual. The Martian summer day that marked the end of school made a smile slip quietly across her face while her light jacket flapped behind her. *I hate school!* It only brought her grief and greatly tested the control of her temper, which could cause terrible things to happen if she were to ever let it go unchecked. The wind blew with the smell of dirt and dryness. She loved the smells here. They weren't overpowering and allowed her time to ponder over them. The smell of that boy had

been somewhat musky with a touch of spice, like he had recently washed. *Unfortunately, my captor smelled like he hadn't had a bath in weeks*, she reflected, cringing a bit when the memory filled her nostrils.

On her run home, she took time to calm down and put out the fire of power that threatened to spill over inside her, to go deep, deep inside. She didn't want her parents to know this part of her. They tried so hard to help her control it, but even they didn't know she had her own ways.

She hated being late. When her mom got home from work with her younger brother in tow, she liked to start on dinner right away. She knew her mom's job was demanding and took a lot of the kindness out of her, but Shamira didn't care. Her mom was perfect to her. But Shamira's mom didn't feel the same about her. It was clear that Shamira's brother was the favorite. Her mom adored her brother, and Shamira admitted to herself that she adored him too. He was the only one she truly loved to touch. He loved her just the way she was, even with her imperfections.

Her dad wouldn't be home until late. He was working an extra shift because one of the Elite members of the Security Force had disappeared. This troubled both her parents since they were part of the Elite team. The Security Force kept law and order on Mars, and Shamira's parents worked so hard to accomplish this feat that she couldn't help wanting to help them. It was what drove her out into the night. She had her ways of investigating, and it was easy because

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most people ignored, pitied or deemed her harmless and helpless. She had heard that there were thugs kidnapping the children of Security Force workers, and she wanted to put a stop to it.

With Shamira's imperfection, it was easy to remain hidden and to collect a lot of information that her parents might never want her to know. She had her ways of investigating, and it was easy because most people ignored or discounted her while thinking her an invalid. She didn't mind, really, because in the end, it made her stronger, or so she liked to think.

She slowed when she approached the house, and the dust and dirt of Mars kicked up when she skidded to a stop at the front door. She took a whiff. *Spaghetti. Mom must have had a good day today.* Her mom only made spaghetti on the good days. The days that Shamira wasn't home to start dinner, her mom always cooked. On the bad days, her mom would order takeout. The pizza delivery driver knew them pretty well, since most days lately were bad ones. Also, lately Shamira was always late. It just seemed to be taking longer to control the burning within.

Her dad used her lack of control for this power within her as an excuse to teach her so much. Everything he taught her, she thirsted for and obsessed to make it perfection. She loved it mostly because it was his gift to her, something that only they did together. Although the raging beast within her was mostly caged, the gift of time and skills her dad gave her were only tools to help her control it. She had gone so far beyond what he had taught her that she had to

dummy it down when she was with him. She didn't want them to fully know this side of her, this hunter that she had become. When she was with them, she would always be the daughter they wished for. She refused to lose their love by revealing her innermost raging urges.

The door opened, and she smelled the garlic bread and her brother's unique, sweet smell. She was now at peace, for the beast was caged, and she was home. David met her at the door. She reached out her hand and tousled his warm, silky head. He laughed, then stood up and said, "I'm getting too old for that, Meera!"

"You're never too old for your big sis to do this," she said and tickled him. He doubled up and almost fell to the floor.

Then her mom came to the door. Shamira could feel her contempt as it hung deeply in the air. She could feel her mom size her up before she fussed, "Hmm, I wondered when you'd show up. Do you have a death wish? Do you *want* to get hurt? Mars is not safe, yet you roam around aimlessly like you are in some carefree garden. Shamira, I called you on the earlink. Why didn't you answer me?"

"Mom, can I come in please? You're in the doorway, and I really have to go to the bathroom," said Shamira. She started to move side to side like she really had to go badly.

"Yeah, right. That isn't working this time. Get in here. Now," said her mom. She pulled Shamira into the house, and then quickly closed the door. Shamira figured she'd tried this tactic too many times now. Her mom had already figured out that she didn't have to

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go to the bathroom. She wondered if she should play her story out or just deal with the argument with her mom.

“Mom, you know I hate wearing the earlink. It interferes with my hearing, the one thing that helps me stay balanced and know when someone approaches. If you interfere with that, then I have to concentrate harder just to get around,” Shamira responded. She gave up the bathroom pretense and stood still in front of her mom. She felt David’s hand grab hers. He always sided with her in a fight with her parents, and she loved him for that. It was the two of them against the world.

“By the way, where are you coming from? School had no extracurricular activities today. Where do you keep going every night? I’m sick of this. I’m sick of you worrying us to death. It ends tonight. No more side trips from school! No more. Do you hear me?” Shamira knew her mom would be angry. She also knew that she wasn’t going to stop what she was doing, at least not until she could find those kids—all of them. So she stood there, bowed her head like she was sorry, and took a deep, soothing breath.

“I’m sorry, Mother. It won’t happen again,” Shamira said in the small voice she used when her mom got this way. She kept her head bowed since she didn’t want her mom to see the rage within her.

“I’ve heard that before! It’s not working anymore. You will get tagged! That way, we won’t have any problems finding you on your long walks home!” her mother added with a pointing finger. Shamira held still when her mother’s strong finger pushed against her

shoulder. It hurt a bit with its heaviness and sharpness.

“Mom, I don’t want to be tagged like a dog. I promise! Just give me another chance, please? I promise, Mom. I promise,” Shamira said with a broken voice, on the verge of tears. If they tagged her, she would have to stop what she was doing. It was the first time she’d ever felt useful, needed, and free. *Please don’t take that away from me, Mom*, she pleaded in her head.

“Fine, but this is the last time. I promise you with every bit of my being that if you get lost or show up late again, no begging or pleading will stop this. You will get tagged if I have to drag you to the doctor myself. Your father won’t save you this time. You brought this on yourself.” She turned and walked back toward the kitchen.

“Shamira, why don’t you want to get tagged? Mom and Dad are. They couldn’t be part of the Security Force if they weren’t. I thought you wanted to be on the Force when you grow up? You’ll have to get tagged sometime if you want to work for them,” David reasoned while he absently rubbed her arm.

“I’ll never get tagged, even if that means not joining the Security Force. I just can’t, you hear me? You don’t ever let them do it to you either. I’ll always find you, and I don’t need a tag to do it,” she said and lifted her arm up to rub down the silkiness of his hair.

“I told you, I’m too old for that,” David said, then hugged her. He then tickled her sweet spot under her arm, and she instantly came out of her melancholy. Only David could do this for her. Her baby brother was the most perfect boy of all.

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“When you’re finished sulking, get in here and eat this great spaghetti I made. I was happy when I got home until I didn’t see my little girl,” her mom yelled from the kitchen. *Of course she rubs it in*, Shamira thought with a smile. Besides, she hadn’t been a “little girl” for a while now. She was sixteen and felt even older from all the secrets she kept. She headed to the table, knowing that was her cue to eat. In spite of everything, she was still hungry.

She sat down and waited for her mom to prepare her plate. Comforted by this little thing her mom loved to do for her, the only thing, in fact, that her mom did for her. Shamira was sure her mom did this for David, too, but it still felt nice to be so loved sometimes.

“So, how was work today?” Shamira asked. She grabbed her fork and twirled the spaghetti around slowly, teasing her hunger with the smell of the sauce and cheese.

“Today was better than the rest of the week. We got a lead on Lieutenant McCann. It looks like we’re dealing with a new secret organization. How they managed to form it without us knowing is beyond me. Well the good part is we now can figure out who the players are and crush them before they get any momentum.” Her mom smiled, and then said, “We’re also close to finding McCann. Although there is some interference with the location devices, we’re confident he will be home with his family before this coming Monday,” her mom said excitedly. Her mom loved being the key Detective and Agent of the Security Force. She was a hunter just like Shamira; only she got paid for it. Her mom’s work was also

something they both liked to share, and Shamira couldn't help but consider her mother's gift of information.

"Well, do you think they hurt McCann? I like him." Shamira said. She started to think of a way to track him. She decided then and there that she would give the Security Force just two days before she would attempt to find him herself. Her main focus had been on finding the kids, but she didn't like it at all that McCann was now a victim as well. Kids of various Security Force Elite members and the Mars Planet Police were sporadically kidnapped over the years, never to turn up again. Shamira swore she would find them and bring pain to those that took them. As she sat there daydreaming of what she would do to those who hurt the missing kids and Officer McCann, she heard a *crack*. Without realizing she was doing it, she'd pressed her fork so hard onto her plate that the plate snapped in two. She gulped and turned toward her mother, knowing she wouldn't be pleased.

"Shamira! Look at what you did! How did you do that? Oh, never mind. Just clean it up, will you?" her mom said. She knew her mom was disgusted with her now. It was usual for her mom to get angry with her when she appeared clumsy. *Well, it can't be helped now*. She was a bit angry with herself, too, because she was still really hungry. She got up, gathered the mess, and threw it all in the trash. She didn't miss a single piece of glass when she wiped the table clean.

"Shamira, I'll make you another plate," David said. He got up quickly and scooped a big fresh helping of spaghetti on her new plate.

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She heard the heavy metal spoon slide against the glass plate and sat down. She liked letting David feel like he could take care of her.

“Thank you, David. You’re the best little brother a girl could ask for,” she said and picked up her drink to take an embarrassed swallow. She didn’t need to turn to her mother to feel the woman’s angry glare. Shamira quietly picked up her new fork and ate in silence.

“Well, I have to go back in late tonight. You and David will be here with your dad until morning. We need you to watch him until noon. Don’t go anywhere but to the park. Do, you hear me, Shamira?” her mom said with an obvious threat in her voice. Shamira didn’t hear her all that well since she was concentrating hard at not breaking another plate, but she answered anyway to avoid further wrath and disappointment.

“Sure, Mom. What time will Dad get home?” she added and then put the fork down.

“He’s on his way. We have a surprise for you, but we’re going to wait to share it, considering your recent punishment,” her mom added. She got up and went to the kitchen cleaner.

“Punishment? What punishment?” Shamira asked. She tried to appear calm.

Her mom hesitated a moment for effect, then said, “Well, you will not be going out without your earlink. If you don’t wear it, it’s automatic tagging. That’s the punishment for at least for one week.”

Shamira couldn’t win. “Fine, I’ll wear it for the term of my

punishment,” she replied. She didn’t want to add fuel to her mom’s fire, so it was best to agree quietly.

“Good. Now, come give me a hug,” her mom said. Shamira was temporarily in shock. Her mom rarely had time for hugs. *Something more must be going on at work than she’s willing to share,* Shamira contemplated. She stood when her mom came over and gave her and her brother a much treasured group hug. Shamira felt an inner peace and joy when she hugged her mom tightly back. Her mom was slim, packed, and firm, a tall woman with a great inner and outer strength, which she needed to do her job well as a Security Force Elite member. Shamira loved the smell of sweet roses that came from her mom’s skin, a smell unique to her.

“You know, it’s a little unsettling how you appear to have sight. You look at me and move like you’re not blind at all. If it weren’t for those extreme pale blue eyes of yours, I’d think you could see. Sometimes it makes me forget that you are,” her mom said and sighed before she continued, “Shamira, I may be hard on you, but I do love you, you know.”

“I know, Mom. I love you too,” Shamira said and then hesitated to let her mom go.

“I love you both! Always,” David added with a tight squeeze.

“Enough of that, you charmer,” Shamira said and then rustled her brother’s hair.

Chapter 3

Her mom left to put David to bed and read to him about Earth, part of their evening ritual. Shamira didn't remember anything about Earth. They'd come here when she was newborn. Her parents couldn't turn down the chance to work as Elites on newly colonized Mars. They were right under the head of the Security Force Elite Leader on Mars, a coveted position Shamira had heard them mention to others. They'd been chosen from their birth and trained to serve on the Security Force as Elite members since they were children. On

Mars, her parents' organization was the law, the order, and the leading power. It was an opportunity neither of her parents could turn down. They simply had no choice.

Her earliest memories were faded except for one: the day she died. Her parents said the Security Force were the first ones on the planet. They came a year before the other settlers. However, the oxygen management system had bugs in it that caused it to fail. She was asleep in her room when it happened, and her parents lost consciousness before they could get to her. Shamira was the only child on the planet at the time. She had been born healthy, but when the air system failed, she stopped breathing. Her parents told her that when they awoke after the air was regenerated to find her dead, they were frantic. They carried her to a makeshift hospital.

They tried everything on her to revive her and finally experimented with injecting her with the enhancements only used on the Security Elite in hopes of bringing her back to life. Little did they realize it was a double-edged sword that saved as well as doomed her to a life much different than any other. She finally came back to life after being clinically dead for several hours. It took months for her to recover, and when she did, she was blind.

These pensive thoughts filled her mind, but Shamira pushed them away. Mars was her home. She loved it here, and it was a part of her. She knew and understood its people. She had survived, and that was all that mattered. *I wonder if they know that in order to save me, they turned me into a freak?* Exhausted after her

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reminiscent thoughts, she went to her room to take a quick nap.

“Wake me up in two hours,” she said to the home network system. It would make sure her bed shook at the designated time. She wanted to greet her dad with a big hug when he got home. Unlike her mother, her dad was really touchy-feely with his family and loved to hug and kiss them all the time. He was just that type of guy, and she truly loved that about him. Her dad was the only hero she’d ever need.

The bed shook promptly after two hours passed. Shamira woke up to run to the bathroom and brush her teeth. Throwing cold water on her face, she smiled at the knowledge that her dad would be home in just a few minutes. She brushed her long hair and slipped on the pajamas she was too tired to put on earlier. She walked to the living room and felt the lights come on upon her entrance. Even though she couldn’t really see the lights, she could feel their warmth when she walked through the house. She had asked her parents when she was younger why it would warm up slightly when she walked through the house, and they explained that the smart house they lived in tried to make it comfortable for them.

She heard the door open when she entered the room. She instantly smelled her dad, and he smelled like a spicy winter day. She ran into his arms and hugged him. He was built of pure muscle, tall, stocky, and hard with the stubbly beginnings of a beard: the result of being away at work for days. She felt totally safe in his arms. He was her dad, her friend, and her champion. He laughed and squeezed her

back, then kissed the top of her head.

“Hey, pumpkin! I knew you’d be up waiting for me. I missed you all today,” he said. He pushed her away gently to look down at her.

“Sure you did. How did you have time to miss us when you were working so hard?” she asked with a laugh.

“You’re right, honey, I was working hard. Your mom—the poor woman—has to get up in about an hour to go into work again.”

He walked past her and put down his suitcase. She heard him walk to the safe and put away his guns, which he rarely ever needed because he was so skilled at martial arts. He could kill a man with his bare hands, and the technosuit all Security Force Elite members wore enhanced his natural strength five times over. He had told her that all of the Elite Force members were fitted with them before they left Earth. The suit was a second skin. She could tell the difference in her parents’ skin texture and the feel of other people’s skin when she was younger. Yet, they didn’t tell her about the suits that only the Elite 200 wore until she was older. She had found out that the Elite leaders of the Force acted as the leaders of each Sector. They were groomed on Earth for the role. The main computer on Earth tracked them until they died and their signal was lost.

As far back as she could remember her father had been training her. He told her it was her job to train her brother. He said she had to learn how to train the next generation of Security Force members since he dreamed of the day her brother and she would

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take their parents' places. Also, he used it for a technique to help her control the power. The power was something her mom noticed in her when they brought her home from the hospital after her death. When she came home from the hospital, she was much different than the baby they had come to Mars with. They hadn't told her about the power personally. It was something she dug up on her own out of the home network system database bank that held all the conversations and records in the home. They knew she knew how to use the system, but what they didn't know was that she had figured out how to hack into it. She smiled at the thought.

“Dad, what have you guys been working on? Both of you are working longer hours than before. These last six months, we haven't even been able to train together.” There was a slight whine in Shamira's voice. She lived for those training sessions. When she worked with her father, he was a worthy adversary, someone that pushed her technique by his sheer strength alone. Her dad didn't even realize that he had long stopped holding back with her and that she'd taken him to the limit of the super strength gained by his technosuit.

“I know you miss it. So do I, pumpkin, but we have a major storm brewing at work. This crime organization is a much larger problem than we expected. Your mom left work on a good note today, but that's going to change when she returns to her office. We lost the one so-called lead we had. I, for one, am not going to be the one to spoil that for her, so I guess she'll find out at work.” He sniffed

at the air briefly and asked, “Hey, did she make spaghetti?” He went over to the kitchenaid, a wall appliance that served food and beverages, and then touched the front to go through the food catalogue.

Shamira answered, “You know she always does when she comes home happy.”

“Yeah, and I’m starving,” he said. He got a glass of water from the kitchenaid.

“Sit down, Dad. I’ll fix your plate,” Shamira said with a smile.

“You spoil me just like your mom. Sure, I’d love that.” After he took his seat, Shamira walked over to the kitchenaid and pressed in the request for a plate of spaghetti. It came out warm, ready and on a plate. She reached in and grabbed it out of the dispenser door. Placing the plate down in front of him, she sat down and grinned.

“What are you smiling about?” He lifted an eyebrow, and stuffed a fork full of food in his mouth.

“Well, I’m punished, you know. You weren’t here today to back me up or to tell Mom that I just require twenty more hours in the training room,” Shamira added with a giggle.

“Your mom’s not going to let me get away with that one anymore. I was warned before I got home not to go soft on you,” her dad said while he talked between bites. She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Well, that’s okay. I guess I can deal with the punishment. Are you and Mom are going back to work together? She said I have to

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watch David in the morning.”

She rested her head on her hand, as if watching him. She did it to goad him, because he often said he was spooked by the fact that she didn't *act* blind.

“Yeah, when I wake her up, we have to go. I was barely able to get away. Look, today you both stay inside. Don't go out. There is a lot going on right now that requires the Security Force's attention elsewhere, and I don't want to risk yours and David's safety, okay?”

“Why? Mom even said we could go to the park. You know David loves to go outside and play with his friends. I don't like being cooped up in the house either, and I know he won't. Dad, you *know* I can protect him. He's starting to take his training seriously. He can fight off most would-be bullies on the playground,” Shamira added. She figured it was best to play naïve. She didn't want her dad to know that she had an inkling of knowledge about the missing kids.

“It's just not safe, okay? I think I've shared too much with you as it is, so just take my word for it. You've been staying out later and later. I have a feeling, from reports of injured bad guys, that you have been on a scene or two. I'm not positive yet, but the injuries some of these guys have sustained—near death in some cases—makes me wonder if it's not someone who has been trained to do the job. The only person besides your mother and I to know those techniques lives in this house. I warn you, Shamira, I better not find out it's you. If I do, your training ends. Do you hear me? You will go back to being a normal girl,” her dad said with seriousness in his

voice. He lay his fork down. She felt his pensive stare, like he was touching her face to find out what she was hiding. She effortlessly displayed calmness and nonchalance.

I'll never be normal. "Dad, you know I need the training. You know it's a good outlet for me. What else can I do? I'm not hurting people. You didn't teach me to seek out a fight, right? So why would you think I could do those things?" she asked, hoping he believed her lie. She fought to keep perfectly natural since he could read her like a book. Those kids depended on her being able to pull this off. She forced herself to relax.

"I know the training keeps your nervous energy under control. But, you could try more meditation or relaxation therapy. And that's exactly all you'll be doing, Shamira, if I find out you're acting like some kind of vigilante. You understand?" he added, sliding his chair back when he stood and wiped the spaghetti sauce from the corner of his mouth.

"Sure, Dad. Hey, Mom said you had a surprise for me. She didn't get a chance to tell me what it was," Shamira added, trying to switch the subject. She was more than a bit curious about the surprise.

"Oh? She didn't tell you because you're on punishment. I can't hold it in much longer, so I'll let the cat out of the bag. I'll tell your mom, and she will forgive me, of course. She can't help it. She thinks I'm hot," Shamira's dad said with a laugh.

"You crack yourself up, Dad." She stood up and started to

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jump up and down like a kid while she chanted, “So tell me, tell me, tell me!”

“We got you an appointment to go to Earth and get your sight regeneration surgery. We had planned on getting it done after the accident... I mean, shortly after you lost your sight... but the colonists were coming to Mars, and your date got pushed back. We never planned on you growing up blind. People don’t suffer with those ailments anymore, and we’re sorry we kept you this way for so long. It couldn’t be helped. Flights to Earth are only once a month, and the surgery is a rare procedure. Not to mention we just couldn’t get off work. We have gotten approval to do this.”

He came over and gave her a hug that she sensed was full of regret for all her suffering. Even though her parents felt bad about it, being blind never bothered her. In some way, Shamira felt like she could see more than anyone else could.

“Wow. Well, I don’t know if that is a good thing or a bad thing. Dad, I just don’t know if I’m ready to see. I like myself the way I am. I want to be happy, but I just... well, I don’t know,” she said. She pulled out of his reassuring hold to sit back down in her seat.

“I know, I know. This must be hard for you. I thought you’d be happy, though—happy to see my ugly face, your mom’s beautiful face, and your brother,” he said, trying to laugh over her discomforting response.

“I already see your faces. I know you. I can really *see* every part of you all that you don’t notice yourself. I can find you in a

crowded room. I can tell when you're within a mile. I *feel* you. I *sense* you. I see more than you'll ever know," Shamira said heavily.

"I know, sweetheart. You'll never stop being able to see in that way. It's a part of you. It's who you are now. But this is a chance to grow - to improve. Just, think about it, okay? I have to go get your mom, so go back to sleep. I don't want her to know I've been talking to you yet. She'll know by the look on your face that I let the cat out of the bag," he said, then pressed his hand to her shoulder.

"Okay. Goodnight, Dad," she said and stood up. She didn't turn back but headed straight to her room, where she fell on her bed and cried. *I don't want to change.*

