

EARTH'S LAST ENCORE

LOGAN PETERSON

CHAPTER ONE



THE GIRL BEYOND THE HORIZON

The stars had become humanity's enemy. Their bright futures had been reduced to a flicker.

Holding this flicker close to his heart, a soldier expelled a chilling breath through a tight-fitting breathing apparatus and plunged a stake deep into the freshly dug earth. This makeshift headstone sat at the tip of a steep drop-off on the edge of a lonely mountain. The wind raged against the heavy clouds covering the sky. Bittersweet satisfaction peeked across his face when the headstone didn't waver amidst the elements.

He brushed the dirt and dust from his mute black uniform. Then he snapped his legs together and proudly saluted the grave before him. "For your sacrifice and victory. You may be gone, but our best is just beyond the horizon. I'll..." he paused, contemplating his following words, feeling their ever-present weight, "...take it from here." He had no tears for the dead. Instead, he offered his sweat.

He started walking away from the drop-off, passing many similar graves.

The communicator on his ear chimed before a young man's chipper voice resonated from it. "Out there again, I see."

The soldier smiled and couldn't wait to reveal the news. "It's finally finished, Julian! I buried the last one."

"I'm happy for you, Duck. Your dad would be proud seeing what you've done for all of them."

Duck's face soured slightly. "He should be buried here, too."

Julian joked, "The greats find more interesting ways to die."

"That was him, alright. If only I—"

"Don't even start. Just do what you can, and things will work out. They have another mission for ya. Could be something valor worthy."

"I bet it's just more stray asteroids."

"Then it shouldn't take very long. You can hurry back, and we'll celebrate you finishing the memorial. I have some strong stuff I want to try."

Duck's face tightened. "Ugh, no thanks. I'm not trying another failure in your long line of alcohol experiments. Even a mad scientist would have quit by now."

"You baby. Getting sick is part of the drinking experience."

"Usually preceded by a nice buzz. Not bleeding out the nose."

"Suit yourself. Call me when you get back. Alcohol or not, I wanna celebrate."

"You got it, doc."

Duck's earpiece went silent. As the wind died, light came down onto the gravesite, bringing his uniform to life. Its solid black color gave way to glimmering silver stripes and a holographic American flag patch on his right shoulder. On his left was a golden iris insignia. The sun caught his eyes as he looked up. They were silver and artificial. As his augmentations adjusted, he bathed in the intense light from the sun. Earth's bright yellow star had grown large and ominous.

"Hang in there, big guy. We still need you." He then called, "Masterpiece, let's go!"

A gold and maroon spacecraft pierced the dusty air. Its thin, curved wings stretched outward. The craft gracefully lowered until it was hovering inches above the ground and remained there without twitching or swaying. Duck put his hand on the round, black-tinted cockpit window, and his silver eyes illuminated. The glass window peeled away, allowing him to climb into the cockpit. Once he was inside, the glass reformed itself into an airtight sphere.

He sat in a deep seat and replaced his respirator with a helmet. The helmet was not just a protective device; its cables stretched throughout the cockpit. His eyes illuminated the helmet's fibers, and an outline of him appeared on the control panel. He frowned as he read, "Fifty percent, after a little digging?"

Slowly, the Masterpiece lifted vertically into the air without the shake of propulsion or the sound of spinning fusion engines. It broke through the cloudy peak and into the upper atmosphere in seconds. Duck got a complete view of the ominous star that warmed the solar system. His augmented pupils shrank as he looked at the sun and absorbed its dwindling power.

On top of the control dashboard sat a small Ficus. Its tendrils spilled over the dash. It, too, soaked in some much-needed rays. "Sorry buddy. I know it's not much."

Once the Masterpiece broke through the atmosphere, Duck looked down at the now blue-and-brown planet that was Earth. After a few seconds, he had to look away. His mind returned to those at the graveyard. *If they could see what they fought for now. Why did I have to be the only one to live?* These thoughts were a plague with no cure. All Duck could do was push them to the corner of his mind. The mission, whatever that was, needed to be his focus—for those remaining on Earth and for himself.

He ordered, "Get me connected to Command." His earpiece chimed, and Duck spoke, "This is Encore-0. Go."

An anxious operator replied, "We need you to check out something in the Martian constellation, Lieutenant."

“So, it is more asteroids.”

“We’re not sure yet. Dr. Wellington thinks it could be alien life readings.”

Duck’s brow furrowed. “The Envoy?” His soul started stirring, and he gripped his dual yoke controls, ready to engage.

“Maybe. We’re getting scrambled readings because of the Martian radiation. Could you move in closer so we can piggyback off your ship? And whatever you encounter, do not engage.”

He scoffed. “I can handle it.”

“Just to be safe. You’ve never seen combat, Duck—I-I mean, Lieutenant Diaz.”

Duck sighed and shook his head, used to the nickname. “I’m still an officer.”

“Of course. My apologies, sir.”

Another voice, deep and empathetic, came on over the radio. “Diaz, this is Vernon. We haven’t had any Envoy readings since their final attack. If it is them, we need to be extra careful.”

“Commander, I can handle it.”

“I know, Lieutenant. You hold the same spark as your father. But even he knew there were times to prepare and plan. No matter what, humanity will see tomorrow. Our best is just beyond the horizon!”

Duck quieted his burning soul to a flicker. “Roger that. Over and out.” His silver eyes glowed along with the cables connected to his helmet. His ship made the jump into deep space. In the cockpit, Duck’s shoulders shrunk. “Most advanced super soldier reduced to an antenna.” Vernon’s words echoed in his mind. “The same? We’re not the same at all.”

The Masterpiece accelerated quickly, passing the moon in minutes and heading toward a red cluster in space. Duck’s eyes sparkled, and the brilliant silver light broke into a soft glow. The Masterpiece’s gyroscopic mechanism malfunctioned, sending Duck flying like a bowling ball through space. Once the Masterpiece regulated itself again with a sudden halt, Duck’s neck jerked back.

“Shit!” The control panel now read thirty percent. “Masterpiece, what’s going on?”

A comforting female AI voice resonated within the cockpit. “I apologize, Lieutenant. The system was overloaded due to your volatile Encore energy. I advise you to ease back on the power you’re supplying.”

He reached up, placed his fingers next to his augmented eyes, and grimaced. “Can’t I do even this?”

The Masterpiece took this as a directed question. “It can’t be helped. Your augmented Encore body wasn’t meant to be sustained by a dying star.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” *It’s not just the sun. It’s me. Defective and still breaking.* As the Masterpiece sat in space, he saw a glimpse of the Earth in his heads-up display. The blue light filled his eyes with purpose. *Still, the commander’s counting on me. I can still do something for humanity.*

“How long will it take given a limited power supply?” Duck asked.

“Approximately one hour.”

“Nearly ten times as long?” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Fine, that’ll have to do.”

An hour and fifteen minutes later, he arrived at the Martian constellation, sweat dripping from his face. Duck looked out to where the bright red planet had once orbited; now, all that was left was a mesh of radioactive asteroids held together by gravity. He kept his craft close to the asteroids as he searched.

He flipped a few switches and began to relay any incoming signals back to Earth to be analyzed. After a minute, his fingers got restless. He could see the signal’s origin on his monitor. As long as he was careful, surely there’d be no harm in checking it out.

The Masterpiece weaved through the massive Martian rocks. Some were the size of continents, and their spinning and constant crashing together made predicting their movements extremely difficult. Duck flew close to these moving rocks, paying no mind that one

wrong move could crush him. His Encore eyes expanded his depth of view, and the Masterpiece channeled that sight into precision. Even with his lower energy output, he could chip a pebble off an asteroid without scratching the paint.

Then, amidst the red chaos, a light like no other caught his eye. Duck licked his lips and flexed his fingers around the yokes. The light was surprisingly small. Too small to be a spacecraft. As Duck flew closer, his nerves started dissipating, and a warmth settled in so that he felt like a bug approaching a UV lamp.

A young woman was suspended in open space. The light Duck had seen was her long golden hair. Her complexion seemed metallic in its blackness but also exuded warmth. An encasement of sparkling particles adhered close to her body. When it caught the light from his craft, it shone like diamond dust. Duck surveyed the area but didn't see any signs of another spacecraft or the wreckage of one. "How the hell did you end up out here without a ship?"

Duck turned back on his comms and radioed in, a little disappointed. "I have a humanoid alien female. But she's, like, floating in space without a ship. Is this the reading you were tracking?"

"Good work, Lieutenant. Now that you're close, these readings aren't even close to the Envoy. Is it alive?"

"I have no idea."

"Bring it in, but do an ocular scan, just to be sure."

"Roger that."

Duck's helmet extended downward, connecting with his uniform. Each part of his uniform sealed off any exposed points and began regulating oxygen. Just like that, his uniform had converted into a spacesuit. He disconnected the cockpit's cables from his helmet and ensured the fasteners on his suit were secure. He connected a safety line from his suit to the cockpit and gave it a good tug. Before opening the canopy, he paused. "Shit, almost forgot." He grabbed a plastic box and placed the Ficus inside of it. "That was almost the end for

you, buddy.” The cockpit’s glass window folded backward as though it were made of gelatin.

Duck jumped out of the cockpit, holding onto the safety line as his suit emitted small bursts of air, pushing him toward his goal. He reached out and grabbed her by the arm. “Alien captured.” Even as he held her, the particles remained close to her skin. He also noticed a pair of striking white gloves against her pitch-black skin that gleamed like polished obsidian.

His arm wrapped around her slim and tender body. She was squishier than he’d expected. Duck pulled her back to the cockpit and set her inside, and a second seat formed around her, supporting her body. Once the canopy closed and oxygen returned to the ship, the particles surrounding her collected into her white gloves, which slowly turned black. Once the particles had dissipated, Duck noticed that her skin had slightly luminous spots throughout, as though stars had been imprinted onto her body. Her clothes were conventional. While the material and stitching styles were foreign, they weren’t far from what any fashionable woman would wear. However, Duck did question whether or not heels in space were practical.

He took off his helmet and leaned in for a closer inspection. Using the small flashlight stored in his suit, he inspected her eyes. They were regal green and the most human part about her, even the pupil dilation.

She didn’t wake up even with his intrusion. Duck sighed in relief. “No sign of Envoy possession. You don’t have anyone else in that head of yours, do you?”

He reset the cables on his helmet, and his eyes glowed silver as his ship sped back toward Earth. Curiosity and maybe some nerves made him continually look back at her, but he found her lying peacefully each time.

As Earth came back into view, he radioed Command. “This is Encore-0. I’m coming down for re-entry. Alien remains unconscious.

Ocular scan showed no Envoy possession. Requesting medevac upon our arrival.”

“Affirmative, Lieutenant. We’ll send a medevac to retrieve it.”

“Roger that. Encore-0, out!”

Before descending, he noticed his silhouette on the monitor flashing orange and reading fifteen percent. He asked the Masterpiece, “How long would it take me to charge up to fifty percent?”

“You would need two hours of direct sunlight to photosynthesize properly. However, my calculations can’t be exact with the degrading sun.”

“You gotta be kidding me.” He looked at the sun making its way past the horizon. His eyes twitched, and the light they emitted softly flickered. “Direct sunlight, that would only waste more time.” He shook his head, remembering the trust Vernon had put in him. “Whatever. This is more important.”

He set his controls for re-entry, and the Masterpiece started its descent. He looked back at the alien with sympathy. “If you are alive, I hope you’re a good one.”

Once safely through the atmosphere and in the blue sky, Duck soared around a large military base surrounded by an even larger makeshift settlement. Enormous craters littered the landscape, and a giant radiating piece of Mars nestled into the once snow-covered Rocky Mountains. The land was dead.

His ship swayed as the light in his eyes waned. He took one hand off the controls and grasped at his forehead. His status screen read five percent. “You like taking everything I got, don’t you?”

His craft descended vertically onto the runway. The Masterpiece extended its fins toward the ground, holding itself in place. Duck sighed in relief and removed his helmet. The see-through cockpit opened, and a scalding breeze brushed his short brown hair. Men were already arriving with a stretcher to transport the alien.

While Duck unstrapped the alien, her right arm twitched, and she opened her eyes. She eyed him up and down as she came to. Duck

paused in surprise. He had released only a “Hel—” when she swung her left arm around his shoulder. Quickly, he leaned back and snatched her wrists. Her strength couldn’t match his, but that didn’t provoke a concerned or frightened expression. Duck stared her down with a fierce gaze, calling for the men, “She’s awake! Don’t come any closer!”

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulled him toward her, and gave him an open-mouth kiss. Duck’s eyes were right next to hers, and instead of pulling away, he hesitated. As their eyes met, he saw a mirror into his own emotions. But when she bit down on his lip, he snapped out of his close encounter. With relative ease, he broke her vice grip and pulled back, hitting his head against the side of the cockpit. He pulled a firearm from his suit, pointed it at the same eyes he had just admired, and shouted, “If you can understand me, don’t move!”

She licked her lips, and her gaze became somewhat glazed over, like she was looking through Duck. A few uncomfortable seconds passed, and right before Duck thought he should shake her back to reality, she smiled and pronounced with a regal tone, “Do not fear, human. I have come to save you.”

Her comment flooded over Duck like a wave. He asked skeptically, “Save me? What the hell are you talking about?”

She brought her hand up to her chin and pondered for a moment. “Apologies, I did not mean that in the singular term. I have come to save humanity from your dying planet.”

He was stunned by her declaration but knew he had to take control, regardless of her intentions. With his gun pressed against her forehead, he threatened, “If you mean what you say, don’t resist. Put your hands behind your back and stand up slowly.” His eyes were fierce and focused but green with a lack of experience. His hand shook as he held his gun tightly against her skin.

Keeping a dignified composure, she complied with his demands and assured him, “Do not be so fearful, I have no weapons. You can even check under my clothing.”

Duck secured her arms and pushed her up toward the edge of the cockpit. "That won't be necessary. Just do as I ask."

With her head outside the cockpit, she took a deep breath into her chest. The sun shined down on her hair and illuminated the softly glowing constellations on her skin. As Duck got out, he grabbed her by the hands again and pressed his gun to the small of her back.

"I told you not to worry. I would not risk ruining the relationship between our species before it begins," she promised.

"Then you shouldn't have bitten me."

"Apologies. I only remember passing out in space, and waking up to your face startled me. I was simply defending myself."

He blushed. "That so?"

She turned her head back toward him and smiled. "Oh, how rude of me. I didn't even ask your name."

After a brief hesitation, he murmured, "What?"

"A name. I assume you have one. You can call me Hannily." The sincerity and kindness in her voice shook Duck's guard.

As he looked more and more at her face, he started to soften. Trying to think of something else, he turned to the soldiers. "Her name is Hannily. She has no weapons and has apparently come to save humanity. Take her to Commander Limbani immediately."

They both saluted, "Yes, sir."

Suddenly, his vision blurred, and his body got heavy. Unable to keep himself up, he collapsed to the side. One soldier grabbed Hannily's freshly bound arms and pulled her away from him. She struggled and asked, "What's happening? Is he okay?"

Barely conscious, Duck replied, "Calm down, I'm fine." To the soldiers, he repeated, "Get her to Vernon!"