

PROLOGUE

In Which Gamma Team's Day Gets Complicated

In Cat's professional opinion, things were already going to shit by the time the pteranodon attacked. In theory, the addition of a reptile the same size as a four-year-old child would mean it was time to panic; in reality, it was just another Day at the office.

So when the aforementioned reptile swooped over her head with a soft *whomp* of displaced air, she immediately drew a bead on it with the Peacekeeper and tapped her ear.

"Darwin, what the *hell* is that thing?" Cat asked, watching as the creature wheeled over the shallow water of Azalea Pond, giving everyone a view of its pale, wrinkly underside.

The zoologist's voice, when it came through the bud in her ear, wheezed and sputtered with exertion. "What the hell is *what*, Ca—JESUS FUCK, IS THAT A PTERANODON?"

"I DON'T KNOW, DARWIN," Cat hollered back, "IS IT A *FUCKING* PTERANODON?"

"Commander," the New Kid called, fumbling for the clip to his sidearm. "Um. I think Captain Renault might be getting ready to charge after all."

Cat relaxed from her defensive stance and pushed a thumb against one caffeine-deprived temple. "Specs, what the hell is a pteranodon doing in my city?"

The big man in tactical gear standing beside her wiped sweat from his lips and swallowed. "I don't know, Cat. There's never been any historical evidence for them this far north."

Cat eyed the reptile suspiciously as it landed on a low-hanging branch, panting. "Try telling it that."

"Maybe she's lost," Helix offered, looking over the data on her tablet. She tapped her own ear and said, "Darwin, what period do they come from?"

"How the hell should I know?" Darwin's voice chirped from the open channel. "Where in my job description does it say *paleontologist*? I guess right below where it says *babysitter*, and *trail guide*, and—"

With a tap of her finger, Cat ended the transmission. "Tell your brother that if we survive, he's fired."

"Mm-hm," Helix said, eyes flicking over the screen. "Fired. Got it."

Turning to the man in gleaming greyscale armor behind her, Cat holstered her weapon and said, "Grunt, I want two Dogs on this thing at all times until we can send it home. Everybody else, get ready to move out."

"Yes ma'am," Grunt replied.

"Specs, you're on point with me," Cat said, finger-combing her short blonde hair out of her face. "Let's go talk Captain Renault down before they head north and find Belvedere."

"Cat—Cat, just wait—"

She spun around. “Wait for *what*, Specs? There's a regiment of very confused 18th century Frenchmen holed up in the Ramble, and last time I checked, you're still the only one here who speaks French.”

“Cat,” he said, holding up his hands, “do you really think they're going to listen to a black man? Or a woman?”

Cat stared at him, taking in the obvious dark walnut tone of his skin, and then with a mini scream of frustration she drew the Peacekeeper again and fired a single round into a nearby rock. Half of it melted into a glowing puddle that blackened the grass like Cajun fried fish. As the silence lengthened, Cat holstered the gun and drummed her fingers on her leg with a sigh.

“Feel better?” Specs asked, raising both eyebrows.

“You know what, I really do.” Looking back over her shoulder, she barked, “New Kid, with us. We're going to play a game of Telephone.”

“Telephone?” he asked, following the closest of his team members as though tugged along by the very end of a short rope.

Cat glanced back at him as they trekked towards the rougher high ground of the Ramble, where their new friends were headed. “What, they don't have sleepovers wherever you're from? Telephone. I tell Specs, he tells you, you tell Captain Renault. But in French.”

“French? Commander, I—I can't speak French.”

“*Really?* You *can't*? Oh, well, there goes the whole day. We might as well pack it in now. Specs, tell the twins we're done here, Beta can come deal with the pteranodon. I'm sure they've got a dinosaur expert.”

“What the commander means,” Specs told the scrambling man, “is that she's going to tell me what to say, I'm going to translate it into French, and then you're going to repeat it to Captain Renault.”

“Why me?”

Cat threw a glance over her shoulder. “I'm not touching this one.”

Snorting softly, Specs said, “From far enough away, you pass.”

“Pass—oh. But wouldn't—wouldn't the others be better?” the New Kid asked, looking at the group of Watchdogs fanned out around him.

“Maybe so,” Cat said. “But I want their focus on our surroundings.”

“O-okay.” Swallowing gamely, the New Kid began following Specs better than the bigger man's own shadow.

Cat didn't blame the kid a bit. Given the choice between herself and Specs, she would have done the same thing; the historian was twice his commander's size, and a good deal more pleasant.

They came around a copse of trees and there, huddled around a pool at the base of an anemic waterfall, was a pack of animals that didn't require Darwin for identification. A three-quarters blind octogenarian wouldn't have mistaken them.

More dinosaurs. People-sized dinosaurs.

Cat sighed and closed her eyes. “Oh. Fuck. Me.”

TWO DAYS EARLIER

Cat

The forty-eight-hour countdown to the Day Out of Time had begun approximately thirteen and a half hours earlier, at midnight. Like all seasoned agents, Cat Fiyero could swear that there was some kind of demonic game show clock in the back of her mind, slowly ticking its way towards utter chaos. The resulting tension along her shoulders and jaw made her disinclined to pet-sit, but that was exactly what was about to happen anyway.

The New Kid was cute in a wide-eyed, Labrador puppy kind of way. He glanced around the lobby of the Cirius Trading Company twice, as if to reassure himself that the only other people were the two agents in black, the single security guard hunched over in a misleading slump, and the double row of imposing portraits on the wall behind him. The snarling black dog on his new badge gleamed in the fluorescent lighting like the toy Sheriff stars Cat's brothers had worn in the seventies.

Stepping away from the front desk, he walked blindly past a marble wall chiseled with dozens of names, tucking the badge into his back pocket as he did so. Before it disappeared, Cat could just make out the metallic circle and upside-down L at the bottom of the badge that marked him as hers.

"I have scars older than this kid," Cat grumbled under her breath. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Specs smile, but it could just as easily have been for the benefit of the man-puppy heading their way.

"Commander," the New Kid said, offering Specs his hand. "Kevin Harrison, reporting for duty."

"Christ, I don't have time for this," Cat said, rolling her eyes. "Give him to Hill."

Specs put one hand on her shoulder. Still smiling down at the New Kid, he said, "I'm Lieutenant Forrester, actually. You can call me Specs. This is Commander Fiyero."

The New Kid's brown eyes went wide as he looked at the middle-aged woman in front of him. "Oh—sorry, ma'am."

"*Ha*, not yet. Give it two days and you'll be real sorry." As she led the way through the corridors, Cat glanced back at him and asked, "So are you a chipper or a natural?"

"A—a what?"

"Do you remember the Days naturally, or did they recruit you from some other agency and give you a chip?" Specs clarified.

The New Kid swallowed. "I've always remembered."

Something about his voice worked like water on Cat's tough old hide, and her steps might have slowed down just a bit.

"Did you have anyone to help you?" Specs asked as they came up to the first security checkpoint.

“Uh, no,” he told the floor. “I didn't have anyone. It was just me.”

“Rough time,” Cat admitted. “Hold your badge against the screen, right in the middle of the box.” She waited for the New Kid to follow her instructions, and when the screen turned yellow she nudged him aside and pressed her own badge in the same space. Specs copied her, and the screen softened into green.

“Did I do it right?” the New Kid asked as the door opened with a soft beep.

“You did fine,” Cat said, leading the way over the pressure pads concealed beneath the tiles. The little group was halfway down the next dull grey corridor before she spoke again. “What did they tell you before punting you down here to me?”

“Um—well they, they sort of explained it, but then my—I guess he's my handler, or my recruiter, I dunno—he started talking about some old calendar made by, by what's his face—”

“The Gregorian calendar,” Specs supplied, eyes sparkling as he warmed up to the topic. “The last of the old solar calendars. Introduced to the Western world by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 and eventually superseded by the Georgian calendar in—”

“Give it a rest, Specs, he can read the *Damn Handbook**,” Cat said.

The historian *harrumph*-ed. “In 1745,” he finished primly, clasping his hands behind his back.

They reached the end of the hall, where a slim panel waited. Cat and Specs showed the New Kid how to peel back the lid over his right eye so the retina scanner could do its job; when this screen flashed its yellow warning, they leaned in as well. The door swooshed open, revealing a circular elevator into which everyone stepped. Cat scanned her badge on a new panel and the elevator began to descend.

“It's all got something to do with—with the extra day, doesn't it?” the New Kid asked, rubbing his eye.

“It has everything to do with it,” Specs said. “Basically, when the West transitioned from twelve solar months to thirteen lunar ones, there was a single day left over.”

“A day out of time,” the New Kid offered. “Yeah, I remember that from school.”

“Exactly. This 'day out of time' didn't really fit in anywhere, so the reformers decided to plop it down right in the middle of the year and collectively shrug their shoulders.”

“A healthy attitude if I ever saw one,” Cat added.

At that moment the elevator finished its descent and began to move laterally. When it stopped at last and the doors opened, the New Kid's mouth fell to somewhere near his knees.

The New York City Doghouse was an impressive one-point-two miles, nearly half the length of the park under which it was buried. A long bank of computers stretched out before them, and a full-sized hospital took up the right side for as far as the eye could see. Men and women in various forms of dress—from jeans and suits to lab coats and tactical uniforms—passed in front of them, generating a soothing level of chatter that made the massive space feel strangely intimate.

Cat tapped the tragus of her right ear, waking up the bud burrowed behind it. “Cat to Gamma officers. Come meet your new playmate.”

“Rodger-dodger,” Darwin said. “Affirmative. Over and—”

“Out,” Cat interrupted. “Helix?”

The younger woman's voice was tense over the connection. "Can't right now, Cat. Playing with the building blocks of life."

"You're officially excused. Millennia?"

"On the way, Captain my Captain!" Millennia said a beat later. "I'm downstairs though, so it's gonna be a minute. What's the four-one-one Cat, is the new guy a babe? He doesn't have a bud yet, does he?"

Cat sighed. "No, but this is still an official channel, Millennia. Which reminds me: If anyone is passing near the Bog, pick him up a seedling, will you?"

"On it," Darwin answered, and Cat cut off the transmission.

"Gamma," the New Kid repeated, rolling the words around in his mouth like a cherry pit with a stubborn bit of fruit still clinging to it. "That's Greek, right?"

Specs eyed the back of his commander's head and coughed. "It's the, ah, third letter of the Greek alphabet."

Technicians twenty yards away and with their backs to the elevator banks shuddered in the sudden basilisk-cold glare emanating from Cat's eyes. The New Kid opened his mouth, looked Cat over, and abruptly came to a decision.

"So what's the Bog?" he asked.

"Botanical Studies," Specs said. "The New York Doghouse has over a dozen sectors in all, each with their own specialists. For example, you can usually find me down in the Historical Archives—fondly called the Sticks by everyone *except* the historians, ahem—"

"Oh come on, Specs, don't be such a *stick* in the mud," Cat said, and the frigid halo around her thawed a bit as she cracked a grin.

The big man cleared his throat. "You're not as funny as you think you are." To the New Kid he added, "A lot of the agents like their little nicknames."

Nodding, the New Kid said, "I noticed. Cat, Specs, Millennia—does anyone go by their real name here?"

"As far as you're concerned, that is my real name," Cat replied, waving a lanky young Indian man over. He had warm brown skin and a shock of black hair that stood straight up from his head, and there was a specimen jar cradled carefully in his left hand.

"This is our animal whisperer, Darwin," Cat said as he approached. "His twin sister Helix is our specialist in really tiny things. Darwin, this is the New Kid. He's not important enough for a real name yet."

"Well, put me down as 'pleased as punch' to meet you," Darwin said, shaking the New Kid's hand with his free one. "And I'm a zoologist, you barbaric gunslinger."

"My bad, Captain Planet," Cat said. "You got the bud?"

Darwin handed the specimen jar over. "Picked it off some new Bravo twat in the elevator. Idiot didn't even feel me."

"I thought you got here a little too fast. Good man." Cat untwisted the lid, revealing a green seedpod no bigger than a pinky nail. It quivered as she picked it up.

"What's that?" the New Kid asked, peering in for a closer look.

Cat let him have a peek, and then held the seedpod against her ear. "Your bud."

"My—my what? What are you doing?"

"Tuning it to the Gamma frequency." Holding it out to him, she said, "Come 'ere."

The New Kid backed away from the innocuous little pod. “Uh, no?”

“It doesn't hurt,” she insisted. “Just hold still.”

“What the commander means,” Darwin explained, “is that we're going to insert this little pod into your ear canal, where it will take root and link you to the Gamma hive mind.”

“What *Darwin* means,” Specs said, frowning down at the zoologist, “is that they're like plastic ear buds, but organic. We use them to communicate.”

“How?” the New Kid asked, looking only slightly less worried. “It's a plant.”

“Darwin, you want to take this?” Cat asked. “And that was only a request in the barest sense of the word.”

He sighed. “It's a waste of my talent, but fine.” To the New Kid he said, “The buds in each group are linked by psychic wavelengths as a defense mechanism. That's what Cat was doing before; she was adjusting your bud so that it can pick up the Gamma signals. We all have them, see?” Darwin turned his head, proving that there was indeed something that looked like a tiny green nodule tucked inside of his right ear. It was only about half the size of the seedpod. “It's really not a big deal, so quit freaking out.”

“And they just—they just transmit, right?” the New Kid asked. “They can't, like—make you do stuff.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Darwin said, rolling his eyes, “this isn't the SyFy channel. We aren't plant people. There is no hive mind. If you're so damn worried about it, there's a whole chapter on Arcturus orbitonia in the Damn Handbook*.”

The New Kid inhaled and blew the air out in a slow stream, puffing his cheeks out as he did so. “Okay. Okay, let's do it.”

“Remember, don't fidget,” Cat warned as she positioned the pod at the opening of his right ear. “It'll tickle, but that's just the bud trying to find her way.”

“Right,” the New Kid said. His nose wrinkled when the seedpod cracked open and a thin green shoot tentatively poked its way out. It felt around the inside of the New Kid's ear, tripping the sensitive nerves like burglar alarms, until it finally nestled just behind his tragus.

“They prefer dark places,” Darwin explained as he took the empty pod away from Cat. “No, don't rub! Let the poor thing settle in before you go abusing her like that. Now she's dormant at the moment, but all you have to do is tap the skin over her—yeah, right there—once to talk, and once to close the line. This part is important, okay?” Darwin paused until he was sure of the New Kid's undivided attention. “That line will stay open until you tap it again, so unless you just have no personal boundaries—cherish them if you do, 'cause they won't last—for *fuck's sake*, don't forget to turn the bud off. Two taps in a row shuts her down completely so you can't hear or talk to anyone, which is exactly what Cat will do to your skull if we ever have to hear you getting *intimate* with anyone.”

“Amazing,” the New Kid breathed, his hand unconsciously drifting up again. Cat smacked it away.

“Any more pressing questions?” she asked.

The New Kid turned in a slow circle. “So many.”

“Well, Millennia can answer some of them, and Helix can take care of the rest.

They're the only ones you haven't met yet." Snapping her fingers, she added, "Oh, and Grunt. Specs, later on, would you take him by the training roo—"

"I'll do it!"

The excited offer came from a red streak that suddenly appeared on the outer rim, bouncing in excitement. In the professional background of white lab coats and black tactical gear, the newest addition was a breath of acrylic-scented air. One side of her head was shaved, exposing olive skin underneath a coat of dark baby down. The rest of her hair had been left shoulder-length and dyed a violent shade of chili-pepper red. Her exposed ear was lined with silver hoops and studs, and a single tiny diamond graced her elegant nose. The grinning mouth underneath it was a soft shade of Washington apple red. Something with long claws was tattooed on the arch of one shoulder, peeking out as if waving hello.

"Speak of the surplus-clad devil," Cat said, clapping the shorter woman on the shoulder. "He's all yours, Millennia. Play nice with your new toy, or they won't send us another one."

"Before you drag him off to your bower, he really does need to meet Grunt," Specs said. "And he'll need to see Helix for his vaccines."

"Got it, *mon muffin petit chaud*," Millennia said.

The smile on the historian's face widened. "It's *petit muffin chaud*. A few more lessons wouldn't kill you."

"Any time, babe." Millennia blew him a kiss and took the New Kid—who still looked a little alarmed by the word "bower"—by the hand. "Come on, handsome. Let's go meet Captain Blue Eyes."