



Femme

A Wanderer of Worlds Novel

Chapter 1

Delia Strange

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The Big Bad Wolf

Kaley Blackburn had no luggage and it felt absurd to travel without it. Seated across from her, a woman was reading a paperback. The cover showed a bare-chested man embracing a woman in ragged white clothing. Kaley didn't need to see the title to know what kind of book it was.

Her gaze dropped to the low modern coffee table between them. A trio of stubby green candles were lined on a crystal tray, their candle-light lost in the overpowering glow of fluorescents. They were there for their citrus scent and to add to the ambience.

The man standing just inside the doorway of the waiting room also added to the ambience. He wore a blue uniform—not dark enough to be navy—with an assault rifle cradled in his hands, the barrel pointed safely at the floor. He stood at attention; unmoving, unwavering.

What big guns you have, Authorities.

All the better to protect you with.

Two chimes caught Kaley's attention. There was nothing to see overhead except for lights and a few discreet speakers embedded in the ceiling. An overly-loud disembodied voice made an announcement.

"Last call for Femme at gate four. Departure time confirmed for nine hundred."

The armchair was so plush that Kaley had trouble extracting her phone out of her jeans back pocket. The cushion expelled a wheeze of air that she pretended didn't bother her but her heated cheeks proved otherwise. She brushed a few wispy blonde strands out of her face and woke her phone to check the time. There was ten minutes to go.

A whispered conversation began behind her and she tried her best not to listen but there was nothing to distract her

from it.

“I wish I’d looked up my ranking online.”

“Didn’t you get your letter?”

“I always get them late because I transferred to wuss.”

Kaley screwed up her nose. The Wynnum University of Scientific Study had a stellar reputation and she was disgruntled when other students spoke its acronym instead of spelling it out.

To avoid listening, she decided to start up a conversation of her own. She thumbed her way to her mother’s number in her contacts list even though she knew it by heart. As she listened to it ring she couldn’t help but smile, anticipating the reaction to a second call for the day.

“Kaley? Have you forgotten something?”

Kaley laughed softly and shook her head. “No, Mum. They just made final call. I wanted to talk to you on my phone before I portal out.”

“Oh, honey, you’re a sweetheart,” her mother said. Even though there was no tremor in her voice, Kaley imagined she could hear the emotion behind those words. Whenever her mother felt touched, her eyes glistened with tears. She would often excuse herself to wipe them away in private before they fell. Kaley didn’t understand the motivation behind it but she thought it was elegant.

“I’ll call when I get to the hotel,” Kaley promised again.

“No rush,” her mother said warmly. “Did you remember to pack your inhaler?”

“They’ve got something different for that over there. Something better.”

“Will they let you bring it back with you?”

“I hope so,” Kaley gushed.

“Your dad would be so proud of you.”

Kaley was shocked into silence. Her mother rarely brought up her father without being asked first. Kaley had noticed this since primary school. She’d asked her mother why she never spoke about her dad. Her answer had come in the form of a question. ‘Don’t I?’ so Kaley hadn’t pursued it. She knew plenty because she’d never been

afraid to ask and her mother was always forthright with her answers.

When the silence extended, her mother filled it with more revelations.

“He said you would achieve more than both of us combined. Silly man, you were only a baby.” Kaley could hear the smile in her mother’s voice. “But he was right, wasn’t he? He wasn’t just talking about his hopes, he was talking about your future. Who knew that you’d be travelling between *worlds*?”

Kaley listened to the air on the phone, unsure how to continue the conversation. Nothing seemed appropriate. She could hear a dog barking excitedly in the background and knew it was the neighbour’s Jack Russell. Someone would be walking past the house and it was going mental like it always did.

“Mum, are you okay?” she asked and instantly regretted it. Her mother had shared something lovely without prompt and Kaley was short-sighted enough to ask if her mother was feeling alright.

“I’m okay, honey. I just woke up feeling old,” she said with a chuckle. Her words and laughter sounded light enough to appease Kaley’s concerns.

“I’ve got to go, they’re ushering us in. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Kaley ended the call and stood to pocket her phone. As she lined up, she pulled the plastic travel card out of her other pocket and handed it to the blue uniformed attendant. The woman turned and inserted the card into a sleek silver machine at her side. The screen flickered once before Kaley’s image appeared. She stood impassive as the attendant checked her against the screen. Even though Kaley knew there was going to be no trouble, she held her breath until she was asked to press her palm onto a tablet the attendant thrust towards her. She waited until a beep sounded and then the woman waved her through.

What security you have, Authorities.

All the better to contain you with.

She was shown to her seat by a different attendant, this one friendlier than the first but still performing his duties in a perfunctory manner.

Fifteen seats were lined in three columns with lots of space around them. The seats were very comfortable and reminded her of dentist chairs with adjustable height, footrest and back. She could position it herself using the button panel at her left hand. She experimented with it to get herself comfortable.

What a big chair you have, Authorities.

All the better to sleep with.

“Have you portalled before?” someone asked from the chair beside hers. Kaley recognised a curly haired brunette from the huge lecture halls at Uni but didn’t recall her name. The mess of dark curls made her distinctive though this girl normally kept to herself.

“Yes, but not to Femme,” Kaley said. “I visited Prospect on the weekend of my twenty-first,” she said with a grin. The brunette answered Kaley’s smile with a huge one of her own and Kaley decided she liked whatever-her-name-was.

“What’s it like?”

“Prospect? It’s like Vegas but it’s cheaper to portal there than to fly to the States.”

“Really? How is that possible?”

“A lot of the tourist worlds are really cheap. Not like Femme. I’ll have to get sponsored if I plan on visiting again.”

“I think we all will,” her new friend replied. “I don’t think any of us has been to Femme before.”

“I have,” a new voice interrupted.

Kaley looked up at the intensely green eyes of Ronika Howard before she selected a seat for herself in front of them, exiting her portion of the conversation as immediately as she’d entered it. Kaley looked back at the brunette beside her who was struggling to hold in laughter. Kaley liked her even more. She needed someone on this trip to remind her to have fun.

“I’m Kaley,” she said.

“Teresa.”

They settled into their seats when the attendant came by with a round pill of swirling blue and green and a plastic cup of water to wash it down with. Kaley thought it appropriate that it resembled her beloved planet Earth before popping it into her mouth. It didn’t take long for her to feel light-headed and sleepy. She fought against it so she could watch the next stage, but was only awake long enough to see the attendants fitting oxygen masks onto the travellers seated ahead of her.

What big masks you have, Authorities.

All the better to keep you alive with.