

CYPHER: REVOLUTION

Eileen Sharp

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CHAPTER ONE

ERASURE

JOSHUA STOOD IN THE WRECKAGE of what used to be a ship, staring out into the night. Pieces of the crash were everywhere, from shards of plastiglass to remnants of the cockpit. Scattered cargo containers littered the ground, most of them cracked, some of them crushed under each other. Though his mind rapidly collected details of the crash, nothing he observed told him anything important. He didn't know why he was on the ship or where it had been going, nor did he remember the impact. Even more disturbing, he didn't know who he was.

In the distance, he heard the whine of other engines approaching. Stumbling out of the debris, he climbed the hill. The roar of ships grew louder and lights burst over the hill, blinding him. He put up shaking hands to ward off the glare.

Shadowy figures emerged in the swirling dust, and soon Joshua found himself surrounded by medics and security police, all in the chaos of engine noise, commands, and questions. He didn't recognize their uniforms, but they all spoke Common.

The transports they used were intraplanetary class, not designed for space travel. His mind registered this and the fact that none of them were equipped with weapons. He wondered how he knew that or why that particular bit of information stood out to him.

A medic found him and led him into one of the transports. The bright interior made him blink, but he could see the hull was constructed with hexagonal shapes and the dominant color was a sterile white.

He caught his thin, gangly reflection in the wide windows that spanned the hull.

Deep, liquid red eyes stared back at him. The two medics in the transport with him didn't have red eyes. In fact, no one that he'd met so far looked like him. There was something odd and untouched about him that he couldn't quite reconcile. He realized that everyone else he'd encountered so far had imperfections, small scars or weathered skin, but when he looked down at his hands he saw only smooth, perfect skin. Nothing about him told him anything.

The medic asked his name.

"Joshua," he said, the answer coming easily.

"Surname or last name?" the dark-haired man asked.

Nothing came to mind so he shook his head.

"Do you know where you came from?"

Again, he had no answer for that. Was that odd? It seemed like he should know that.

"It's amazing," the medic said as he flashed a light in Joshua's eyes, "that you don't have a scratch on you. Not even a bruise. You're very lucky."

"I am?"

"Yes, very."

He thought about that. Whatever had happened during the crash, he had been well-protected.

Who was he and where did he come from?

The cut on Caina's hand hurt, but it wasn't too bad. She sat in the hospital waiting room, clamping the kitchen towel around the wound. La Croix Medical Center had a shiny, new feel to it, like most things on the colony. Only fifty years old, Remington was the baby of the Twin Galactic Alliance, but there were definitely some advantages. Everything was new, and they'd needed a premier with colonial administration experience. Her dad fit the role perfectly. He was busy all the time with his new position, but she was happy for him.

The cut on her finger wasn't a big deal. It wouldn't take long to fix, though it had ruined her attempt to cook her Dad a birthday breakfast. The orange she'd been slicing nearly looked just like a flower until she'd nicked her finger on the final cut.

A medic and two colonial security officers walked into the hospital, escorting a tall young man. He looked lost and bewildered, his face smudged with soot and his clothes coated in dirt. He was almost childlike as he followed the officers. He was thin, good-looking, with dark brown hair. He turned to look around him and she caught a glimpse of red eyes. A lot of kids in the upper school levels like to change their eye color, but she'd never seen anything quite like this dark, blood red.

She watched as he stood obediently at the admissions desk until the medic gestured over to the waiting area. The young man walked over and sat down next to her. He seemed lost in thought, scanning the curved wooden beams and sparkling glass that made up the lobby.

His gaze made his way to her. She was unprepared for the intensity of his gaze, lost in the powerful red color.

She held up her towel-wrapped hand. "I cut myself making breakfast for my dad. It's his birthday."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that," he said. His voice was deep, clearly past the cracking stage. He was probably four or five years older than she was.

"Did you get hurt?" she asked. He wouldn't be in a medical center if he were perfectly healthy, of course; she was just curious.

"No," he answered, and then hesitated as if realizing he should offer an explanation. "I was in a transport crash and I'm having trouble remembering things."

"Were you the pilot?"

"Uh, no. Well, maybe. I don't know," he said, looking down at his hands.

This was getting better by the minute, she thought. "Do your parents know?"

"I don't know who they. . . I mean, I don't know."

"Were you with your friends?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't know."

Astonished, she stared at him. "You really don't remember anything."

His mouth quirked up in a half-smile. "Nope."

She held up her cell band and asked, "Can I take your picture?"

"Sure."

She stood up on her knees and held out her cell band. He looked at her with a confused expression and she almost laughed. "You have to look at the camera."

This didn't seem to clarify anything because he started searching around the room. She stifled a laugh. "No, silly, here," she said, waving her wrist.

"The wrist thing?"

"Right."

He caught on then and stared dutifully at the place where the lens would be.

She smiled, and the cell band made a helpful clicking sound. She sat back on her knees and examined the picture. She looked pretty good, her practiced smile not overly fake, but his face had a bewildered expression. She showed it to him, turning her wrist so he could see the picture on the screen.

"You look great. I look lost," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Do you want to take it over again?" she offered. She could reproduce her picture smile a million times.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I think it represents us fairly well."

"I hope you figure everything out," she said.

"Thanks. Me too."

Her mother came back into the waiting room, stopping for just a microsecond when she noticed the boy, probably taking in his eyes. She smiled at Caina. "Okay, honey. They're ready for you."

Untangling her legs from beneath her, Caina gestured at the young man. "He was in a transporter accident and he has amnesia."

Caina read the skepticism on her mother's face, but there was a hint of sympathy, too. It was hard not to see how alone this boy was. It was in the way he looked too deeply into everyone's eyes as if searching for something.

As if it might help, Caina added, "He doesn't even know his name."

"My name is Joshua," he said apologetically, glancing over at Caina. "It's one of the few things I seem to know."

Caina blushed. "Oh, I didn't ask, I guess. I'm Caina, and this is my mom."

He smiled politely. "Nice to meet you."

Her mom tilted her head, her expression speculative. "Take care."

As they walked away, her mother asked, "Have they found his parents?"

"I don't think so. No one was with him."

"That's sad."

Caina could tell her mom was interested, maybe even worried about Joshua. "We should check up on him when they're done with my hand."

"Maybe."

The medics fixed Caina's cut in a matter of minutes. Caina examined the small bandage stuck on her finger, and wiggled it. It didn't even hurt now, even though it had bled a lot at first. Her parents were calm when she'd cut it, but there had been a fair amount of blood. Being an only child, she was used to a lot of attention, even though her parents tried not to spoil her.

They'd thought about having other kids, but the three of them were pretty happy the way they were. At least they used to be. Caina wouldn't tell her parents, but since they'd moved to Remington friends had been hard to find.

"Can we check on Joshua?" she asked her mother as they were walking out.

"Well, I'm sure he has people taking care of him."

"He doesn't know anyone and he doesn't remember anything. I bet they don't even know who his parents are."

"They'll run his DNA and find out soon enough. He probably doesn't need anyone prying into his situation right now. What he needs is rest and some medical care, which he has."

"But he's all alone!" Caina protested. "Couldn't her mother see that? He had nobody. Caina, he won't be alone forever. Someone is probably looking for him, and the last thing he needs is us bothering him."

"Well, what if you're wrong and he doesn't have anyone?"

"Why are we arguing about this? We don't know anything about him."

Caina wouldn't give up. There was something about Joshua that told her he needed someone to care about him. "Okay, then let's make a deal."

Her mother sighed loudly. "Every time you make a deal I lose. But okay, go ahead. What is the deal?"

"We check up on him. If the hospital hasn't found his family and he doesn't have anyone who knows him then we can visit him."

"Deal. Because when we ask, I'm sure we're going to find out his family has been contacted and he's on his way back home."

"Fine. It's a deal."

They called the hospital later that night, and they were told his family had not been found yet but he was being examined and to come back later the next day. Disappointed, but vindicated in her suspicion that he was alone, Caina glanced at the picture on her cell band. His dark red eyes stared back at her, his face empty and solemn.

Joshua did not have a lot of time to sit for long in the nicely furnished room they gave him. A knock came at the door soon after he arrived. He let in the thin man with dark skin. The man had a long, intelligent face and sharp eyes. A small patch on his shirt identified him as a psychologist.

"Hi, Joshua. I'm Dr. Calloway." The psychologist's gaze was direct, professional.

"Hi." Joshua answered.

Dr. Calloway went to the stuffed easy chair next to the bed and sat down. Joshua stood by the window, his hands in his pockets.

Dr. Calloway leaned back in the chair. "So you're having trouble with your memory."

Joshua gave a hesitant nod.

"I'll be honest, we're not sure if it's a natural block caused by trauma or an erasure, but the solution is the same."

"What's an erasure?"

"It's kind of a trend now. People wipe out memories they don't want—heartbreaks, a negative experience, any number of things. I think it's dangerous, but until someone proves it fries your brain, people will still do it. Some of them go wrong, but not many. It could be what happened to you, I don't know."

"So I did it to myself?"

"Maybe." Dr. Calloway continued, "Normally we would leave remembering up to you, but colonial security has a concern."

Joshua slid his gaze over to the doctor. He had arrived on a mystery ship and claimed not to remember anything. His friendly but thorough interrogation with Colonial Security last night had given them little information. In his opinion, they'd be stupid not to be concerned.

"We're going to try a memory stimulant. It should help you focus."

"Even if I had an erasure?"

"Nothing is truly gone. Your memories are always there, whether you can get them or not."

Joshua found this comforting, and for the first time he relaxed. He felt like he could trust the confident psychologist.

"Just sit down on the bed and we'll get started," Dr. Calloway said.

"Just like that? Sounds easy."

Dr. Calloway drew a blue strip out of his pocket. "Yes, it's fairly easy. I might be overpaid."

Joshua's mouth twitched in a smile as he sat on the bed.

"Hold out your arm, please," Dr. Calloway instructed.

The doctor put the strip on Joshua's arm with cold fingers. "You won't feel much. I'm going to leave you alone so you can start focusing, but I'll check in on you. Okay?"

Joshua gave a nod. After the door closed behind Dr. Calloway, Joshua looked down at the blue strip stuck on his skin. His heart beat a little faster as he waited for the drug to reach his brain and unlock his memories. Maybe he didn't want to remember. He shook off the dread.

At first the burning sensation was almost pleasant, then it most definitely was not. His veins burned and his head raged with pain, spiking in a blinding headache. He paced, pressing his hands against his eyes, acrid nausea filling his mouth. He found the window control panel and darkened the glass to black. He wanted to slice his head open and relieve the pressure.

A knock sounded and Dr. Calloway entered, though Joshua didn't look up. He felt a cool hand on his arm. "What's happening?"

"It hurts," was all he could manage.

"Sit down, I'll be right back."

Joshua found the bed, holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth. He'd been worried about what people thought of him, but now he didn't care, the excruciating pressure blotting out everything else. The pain took over and he threw up on the shiny floor.

Cypher

The door opened and other people came in, but he didn't look up, his hands pressed against his eyes. He spent the next two hours in agony, with a bewildered medical staff taking tests and offering any painkiller that might help. He finally lost consciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPASS

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Joshua woke. The blankets were twisted around his legs as if he had wrestled them in his sleep, and Dr. Calloway sat beside the bed. "We're going to have to try a slower, more traditional approach," he said.

Joshua closed his eyes and smiled wryly. "Apparently."

He slept again, not quite as deep, the meds wearing off. He dreamt he was marching in a black-clad military squad, his feet keeping perfect cadence with hundreds of other soldiers. Their heels hit a slick white floor, the sound echoing in a large room. He turned with them, all of them moving as one. He almost felt as if he no longer had his own body, that his mind simply rested in it and observed. The soldiers stopped and drew out plasma guns. He heard the hum of the charges, like a hive of bees. They powered them down and the hum subsided. Then he marched again.

Coming out of the dream, he heard sounds through the wall—medics talking about him, other patients' whispers, and more importantly, reports about the accident. They'd found four bodies, he heard a female medic say. The only survivor was the young kid with altered red eyes.

He sat up. The night of the crash, security officers showed him pictures of four strangers, but he didn't know who they were. They must have been the crew. Had the accident been his fault? He closed his eyes, trying to remember something, anything. Was he a criminal? His imagination ran wild, conjuring scenes of violence and destruction and then trying to find a reason why he wouldn't be responsible for any of it.

Disturbed, he slid out of the bed. He found the window controls and cleared the dark glass to reveal the blue mountains. He didn't remember seeing any bodies, but he hadn't looked for them either.

A knock sounded at his door.

"Come in," he said.

A smiling young woman in a medic uniform peeked her head in. "You're awake!"

"Yep," he answered, tugging at the clothes they'd given him, which were rumpled. He definitely looked like a patient.

"Would you mind a visitor?" she asked.

"No one knows me."

She looked behind her and then back at him. "Well, there's a young girl who says she met you in the lobby."

Remembering the girl who had taken his picture, he answered, "Oh yeah, sure."

Stepping into the room with her mother, the girl gazed around his hospital room, her small, delicate face and green eyes shy. Her mother wore her silver-streaked dark hair swept back in a loose knot, and gold jewelry on her fingers and around her neck.

The girl tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Hi. We heard you were still in the hospital so we thought we'd come by. Have you had any news about your family?"

"No," he said, unsure of what else to say and certain that a detailed description of his reaction to the memory enhancing meds would be too much information.

Caina shared a look with her mother that probably meant something, but he wasn't sure what it was. "Sorry to hear that."

"It's okay. Even if they don't find them I'm sure I'll remember." He glanced down at her hand. "How is your cut?"

She held out the lightly bandaged finger. "Pretty good. Want to see? They glued it together."

"Sure."

She pulled the wrapping back to reveal a neatly sealed cut. He towered over her, looking down at the tidy repair.

"Wow. That's good. Does it hurt?"

"Nope. They gave me some stuff."

Her mother said, "I hope you don't mind us checking up on you."

"Oh no, it's nice to have visitors, actually. I haven't had anyone else stop by. No one knows who I am."

She held out her hand. "I didn't introduce my self earlier. My name is Jenna West. We'd like to help you find your family if you don't mind the intrusion—my husband has a lot of contacts with the other colonies."

The offer surprised him. He had no idea where to start, and he could use the help. "Thank you, I would like that."

"Dad knows everyone. If anyone can find your family, it's him," Caina said, her pride in her father obvious.

Joshua wondered what his own father was like and if he was searching for him. "I appreciate it," he said.

Caina smiled. "Great. And if you ever get a 'wrist thing' we can talk."

"Ok. If I do, I will."

After they left, he sat next to the window. It would be nice if they meant it. No one else seemed to care. That wasn't entirely fair, he realized. Most of them were people doing their jobs. He sighed. It was so strange to feel like this, so disconnected, as if he didn't belong anywhere or to anyone, but he knew someone must be worried about him somewhere.

He spent days with Dr. Calloway trying to coax anything out of his mind, not just memories but maybe familiar scents, tastes, music and even abstract things like colors. Anxiety gnawed at him as he reached for any kind of memory, but it didn't feel like a wall he could break through. The amnesia stretched out like a vast space, a great black hole of nothing. It felt so absolute. He fought the suspicion that there were no memories to find. He had a past, he reminded himself.

The crash itself was a mystery. The craft had no markings, not even a manufacturer. The four crew who had died had no ID's and like Joshua, they matched no database in any planetary system. None of their belongings gave any indication of where they were from, including their clothes, though it looked they had all worn uniforms. These were not renegades or pirates. They had belonged to an organization or a colony of some kind. Joshua was the only survivor and the only hope of learning anything.

One week later, despite their efforts, they made no progress with his memory. Whatever Joshua's mind had locked away, it had sealed it very well. The origins of the crew and the craft remained unknown, as did his past.

Mrs. West's offer of help was all he had left, but he hadn't heard from them and assumed they'd forgotten him.

Driven by loneliness, he twisted holomaps around trying to find a solar system that felt familiar. Planets with two suns, giant red suns, blue dwarfs, old stars, and ringed planets; he stayed up late at night searching the universe. One night he became mesmerized with one sun system in particular. Weary from staring at so many, but excited that he recognized one, he zoomed in on the name of the planet that looked familiar. Huron. He paused, and then smiled to himself. He'd landed on Huron, near the Remington colony. So he recognized where he already was. The comfort of being able

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to trust his memory eased some of the aching loneliness. If he made new memories now he could be assured they would stay with him.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT ALONE

Three weeks after he'd arrived on the Remington colony, Dr. Calloway came into his room, but he didn't sit down in his usual chair. He had the air of someone with a big revelation, which made Joshua nervous. He knew he couldn't stay in the hospital forever; they must have made a decision about him.

"I have some good news for you."

Joshua leaned back against the window. "Okay."

"Since they can't prove you're a threat, they've decided you aren't one."

That was good, he supposed, but he had nowhere to go. It wasn't anyone's responsibility to take care of him and they had only kept him at the hospital because they wanted to be sure he posed no danger.

"Okay," he said again, feeling anxiety creep in.

"We're taking you to an agency home for a while. You can enroll in school and start a new life. Getting into a regular routine may help bring your memories back. Until then you'll still see me every week."

He was glad he was getting out of the hospital and that Dr. Calloway was going to keep working with him. He didn't want to resign himself to having no past.

The term "agency" was a euphemism for orphanage, he discovered. He didn't think of himself that way, but it was an apt description of who he was, especially without any memories.

The two-story yellow house with the big yard was almost like a regular home, except it had a dining hall for the forty-some children and a main office. Several house

parents lived there as well, and he liked most of them, except for one couple who obviously worked there for the money, not the kids. They weren't mean, they just didn't have a lot of patience, and they didn't develop any real bonds with their charges.

Joshua had no trouble settling into the house routine, although he was the only one his age. All the other kids were a lot younger. At least it meant he got his own bedroom.

On the second week, he came home from school and stepped through the door to find one of the younger girls sitting stiffly on the couch. She wore a pretty lavender dress, her blond hair done up in curls. She was about seven, and her eyes looked up at the door with such eagerness that he glanced behind him to see if anyone else was there.

"Hi, Joshua," she said, her smile fading, and her eyes staying trance-like on his gaze. The kids were kind about his red eyes, but they couldn't hide their fascination.

Closing the door behind him he asked, "Are you waiting for someone?" He regretted not remembering her name, but there were so many kids. He hoped she didn't notice.

She looked down at her hands as she twisted them. "A mom and dad are coming to talk to me."

She didn't elaborate, but he understood all too well. Every child here had one wish that permeated the very air they breathed.

"Good luck."

Her smile trembled. "Thanks."

Going up the stairs, his chest felt tight. He understood how much she wanted to belong. He didn't know anything about his past, but being alone was a feeling he didn't like. It gnawed at him like a constant ache, even when he tried to distract himself with school, it was always there. It amazed him that he could be surrounded by people, yet still feel as if he weren't connected to them. It was puzzling but very real.

He went to his room and closed the door. The agency had given him a cellband when he'd arrived, though it was monitored and he couldn't access any net portal they deemed inappropriate for children. It didn't take him long to find Mrs. West's contact information. He sent her a simple message asking how Caina was doing.

Her answer came back quickly.

Caina is fine, thanks for asking! Her finger has healed nicely. How are you doing?

I'm doing good. School is great and I'm doing well in my classes.

How is the memory coming along?

Nothing new, but that's okay.

Anything from family or friends? Hope you don't mind my asking.

They haven't found anything, unfortunately.

He tried to make it sound like he didn't care. There wasn't anything she could do

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