

IXIONIAN FATED MATES

CHOSEN BY
THE
ALIEN WARRIOR

SKYLA STONE

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BOOK 1

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PNK PUBLISHING

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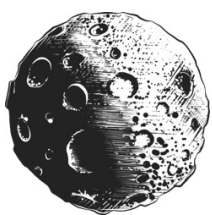
Epilogue: Cherise

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CHAPTER 1

CASSIAN

IN MY THREE years as a member of the troops, I've never seen the meeting hall this lively. Whenever we're called to assemble here, it's a guarantee of another routine task: a deployment to an outer region planet to supervise excavation efforts, or maybe a mission to take care of some urban unrest—and that's if we're lucky. Nobody likes being stuck at the base, but at least we have showers and hot food; interplanetary assignments make for weeks of dehydrated rations and sponge baths, not to mention a guarantee that you'll want to rip out your teammates' eyeballs by the time you finally get back home.

But this... this is different.

"It could be nothing," Jace insists for what must be the third time. His arms are folded over his broad chest, brow furrowed in puzzlement. "How many times have these rumors proven to be true?"

"None," I say.

"Rhetorical question, but yes. Exactly."

"This isn't just a rumor, though." Ambrose has a certain fierceness to his pale amber eyes—less like excitement, more like hunger. His tongue works around the edges of his lips, curling over his sharp teeth. "When has a *rumor* ever done something like this?"

He's right. The entirety of our ranks is murmuring among themselves, with the occasional laugh sounding out against the

domed ceiling of the meeting hall. I don't know who first came up with the idea, but it's taken hold of them all now.

I'm less enthused. Even if it *is* true, there has to be a catch. Right?

If word of mouth can be trusted, the higher-ups have made the decision to roll out a program. A very bizarre program, at that... and one which, at least for the overeager ones like Ambrose, seems too good to be true.

"I don't know." Jace still sounds dubious. "But I don't think it proves anything."

"Besides, the birth rates aren't rumors. That data's public."

"If it had to do with the birth rates, they wouldn't be bringing in another *species*."

Before Ambrose can object, a louder voice rises over the sea of murmurs.

"Settle down, soldiers! All at attention!"

Commander Azrael Emrys has a deep voice to match his impressive stature, and it's more than enough to shut everyone up. He strides to the front of the room and stands for a moment without speaking. He might be scanning the crowd, silently taking attendance, but his inky eyes make it impossible to tell. I think those eyes are half of what makes him so intimidating: it's impossible to read anything in those twin pools of black.

"From the sounds of it," Emrys finally continues, "you've all made up your own minds as to what this meeting concerns."

"Is it true?" Ambrose calls from beside me. I flinch at the sound, and he shoots me a teasing smirk. He will get written up for that later, no doubt, but it's clear enough that discipline is the last thing on his mind right now.

Emrys doesn't humor him with a response. Instead, he taps a switch on the wall, dimming the lights around us, leaving only a column of silver light on the plinth where he stands. Another wave of excited murmurs runs through the room.

"*Quiet*. Take your seats."

I don't need to be told twice, though I hear a few others grumbling. I can't blame them—the stools in the meeting hall are little more than cold metal blocks, and nobody ever walks away from a long session without one *suster* of a sore ass. If Emrys is telling us to sit, though, that means that we're finally about to hear what's going on, and nobody is objecting to that.

He waits for complete silence before continuing. “As some of you seem to already know, there have been several conversations taking place within the higher ranks of the Ixionian militia.” His voice is as flat as his eyes. Is he having fun, drawing it out like this? Even I'm beginning to blister with impatience. “Many officials have noticed a certain decrease in morale, the High Commander being among them. Considering the value of our collective mission, this is unacceptable.”

“*Kest*,” Ambrose whispers beside me. “It really is true.”

That's not even the biggest thing weighing on my mind following Emrys's words. High Commander Vestra is someone to be obeyed, not seen. I don't think a single one of us—aside from Emrys, of course—has ever met him face-to-face, and with good reason: he's far too busy overseeing the running of the entire base. But if even he's noticed a decrease in morale....

“After careful consideration of your individual needs, as well as several diplomatic exchanges with the other planets in our alliance, an agreement has been made concerning the militia's future direction. This agreement will impact all of you in a very personal way.”

It may be my imagination, but the Commander sounds almost annoyed. Seems like he wasn't involved in this particular agreement. I can't say I'm surprised—though he may be our commander, he doesn't operate in the same circle as those who are truly responsible for our duties, the High Commander included.

“Over the next few days, each of you will be matched with a female of human descent.”

Bawdy cheers fill the hall, and Emrys doesn't even try to quiet them down this time. I glance to either side. Ambrose is whooping alongside them, his taloned hands cupped around his mouth to amplify his voice. Jace's expression is a closer match to how I feel. His jaw has dropped slightly, and the black slashes of his eyebrows have risen so high that they're threatening to disappear into the silvery scales at the base of his horns.

I don't know what to think. Good for the rest of them, but I have no idea what I'll do with a human partner. I almost want to ask whether the program is optional, but I know Ambrose would just about laugh me off the planet.

That's right, Cassian. Because it would be mainching ridiculous. What's wrong with you, anyway? Scared of a human?

Scared of a human, no—of course not. Fearful of a *female* human, on the other hand....

How can I possibly know what to expect?

At long last, the volume in the room returns to a low enough level that Emrys can make his voice heard.

“Needless to say, this program is highly experimental. It may be altered or aborted at *any* point, so I would advise all of you overeager susts to keep your excitement down.”

“Fat *mainching* chance of that,” Ambrose whispers gleefully. I don't think I've ever seen him this delighted.

“The process is fairly straightforward. The humans will be brought to our base here on Ixion in groups of ten over the next several days. A randomly selected squad will be given the opportunity to converse briefly with each group, after which the members will be given their choice of mate.”

That term, *mate*, spurs so much excitement that I can feel it like static in the air. Emrys isn't mincing words, that's for sure.

“You'll be sharing your private quarters with her for the next several weeks—perhaps longer, depending on how much it impacts your performance. You're welcome to do whatever you'd like with your assigned partner, with the obvious

exception of violence. These females are not your toys; they're a part of a crucial diplomatic exchange. I advise you all to *remember that*. Discipline will be severe, with a more-than-likely chance of permanent expulsion from the force. There will be no second chances."

Expulsion? *Kest*, they really are taking this seriously. If you're cast out from the military, you may as well be cast out from society as a whole. Back before my own service started, I used to see the occasional ex-soldier in the streets, huddled in cheap canvas blankets. Some people gave them handouts—scraps of food, drink tokens, that sort of thing. Not me. I kept my distance. Something about the glazed look in their eyes made me uneasy. Like they were looking straight at the end of their lives, knowing that every day would be the same, right up until their bodies gave up on them and they were carried away for cremation. No family, no friends, no burial; just cleaned up and incinerated like any other piece of trash.

"Any inquiries should be filed in a typical manner. We will be conducting periodic reviews of your questions, as well as formal and informal assessments of the program's success. I advise you all to take this *seriously*. Some of you like to forget the importance of our mission. Do that now, and you'll regret it."

Our mission: mediate, modernize, maintain. These are probably the first words learned by just about every Ixionian child. Those three words dictate every decision that we make, every planet that we approach, and every law that we establish. In theory, at least. More than half of my comrades have proven to be more than a little trigger-happy, and as long as we get our work done, our overseers don't give a flying *sust*.

"That's all the information I have for you now. You may resume your normal duties."

At Emrys's touch, the lights come back on, revealing a sea of faces ranging from thrilled to terrified. Conversations break out like wildfires within the crowd as we all get to our feet.

“This is *mainching* incredible,” Ambrose says with a barking laugh. “Finally rewarding us for all the slaving away that we do.”

“Amazing is one word for it.” Jace, wide-eyed and thin-lipped, seems closer to the other end of the spectrum of responses. “It could be an absolute disaster. What he said about expulsion....”

“C’mon, all he said was no violence. That so hard for you?”

Jace seems not to have heard him. “The cultural differences are going to be drastic. Even our *languages*—”

“Humans speak Common,” Ambrose interjects. “Maybe not particularly *well*, but how much of a vocabulary do you need, really? I’m all set so long as mine knows how to say ‘yes,’ ‘more,’ and ‘harder.’”

I laugh at that, more out of discomfort than anything else. Ambrose has always been the type to brag about his supposed exploits. Lend him an audience, and he’ll have you believing that he’s slept with every sentient species this side of the galaxy—before he reached military age, of course. Even he isn’t stupid enough to violate our vows of celibacy; that’s the sort of thing that will put you on the streets with that same haunted look in your eyes.

Except, apparently, that’s going to be changing.

“I suppose there’s nothing to do but wait and see,” Jace sighs as we file out of the meeting hall and into the metal-walled atrium. Industrial stairways crisscross above us, leading to the other branches of the base: living quarters, mess halls, commissary, drill stations, and senior officers’ suites. A quick check of the pager clipped to my belt informs me that I’m due for a target practice session. I’d rather go for strength training any day of the week, but at least I’ll be able to get my mind off of things. That’s more than a little bit of a relief, because I can’t help feeling like something is wrong with me.

Jace and Ambrose don’t ask what I think about the news. They’re too busy arguing over whether it’s the best or worst

idea they've heard in their lives. That seems to be the general sentiment, based on the scraps of conversation that I pick up from the rest of the crowd. But I don't feel especially swayed in either direction.

As a matter of fact, I don't really feel anything at all.

The whole thing is too strange. I like routine; I like stability. Aside from deployment periods, army life is pretty much monotonous, and I've never had a problem with that. Eating, sleeping, working out: I could live my whole life that way without a complaint.

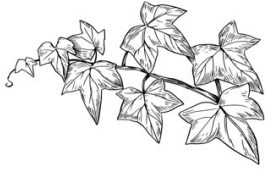
But now there's this.

A big part of me is tempted to file an inquiry like Emrys suggested. As I break off from Jace and Ambrose to head for the shooting range, it begins to compose itself in my head: *Will it be possible to opt-out of the upcoming program concerning female humans, if a soldier feels that it will be more of a detriment to his performance than anything else...?*

It sounds so pathetic that I have to fight back a physical cringe. No, I'm not going to try and worm my way out of this. Not without giving it a real try. Maybe it'll be a disaster, or perhaps it'll be... something else. Something good.

All I can do is wait and see.

CHAPTER 2



“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Deryn asks for what feels like the hundredth time.

I hold in a sigh. She usually isn't hesitant like this. If anything, she's the one pushing me to dive into new things, dragging me along with her even as I complain. That dynamic has certainly landed the pair of us in more than one sticky situation in the decade that we've been friends, some more extreme than others. In all fairness, though—it makes sense that this would be the thing to push her to her limits. It's probably the most insane decision we've ever made.

But we *have* made it. At least, I have. And once I've set my mind to something, nothing steers me away. Least of all, a series of redundant, ultimately meaningless check-ins courtesy of Deryn.

“Yeah.” I lift myself onto tip-toes for a moment, trying in vain to get a glimpse of the registration desk. We've been here for about an hour already, and only just made it inside the building; women are lined up all the way around the block. More than I would've expected, that's for sure.

Then again, if I'm stupid enough to do this, why wouldn't anyone else be?

“We could still just... y'know. Leave. Plenty of other people are doing it.”

“I know. I've got my own pair of eyes, you know.”

Deryn huffs, but doesn't respond. I don't need to look at her to know that she's chewing on her lower lip again, her eyes

narrow as she silently argues the whole thing out with herself again. I'm not worried, though. If I go, there's no doubt that she's going to come with me. There's no way she'd let me have an opportunity as bizarre as this one without being right there beside me.

And *bizarre* is exactly what this is.

When it first hit the news programs, a lot of people, myself and Deryn included, assumed that it was some weirdly widespread joke. It wouldn't be the first time the networks joined together to pull off an elaborate hoax—none of us have forgotten the infamous cheese-planet story from a few years back—but something about this was different from the start, almost too elaborate to be anything but true. An exchange with Ixion, of all places? Actual displacement of our own population in order to help satisfy theirs? Hell, it sounded like that bridal auctioning nonsense from back in ancient times, and historians are still arguing over whether that even *happened*.

But, as it turned out, this is very real indeed. If I had any last shreds of doubt before, they're gone now. I'm looking the truth of it right in the eye, and its steely glare makes me more certain than ever. For a reason that I can't quite put into words, this is what I *have* to do. And the money won't hurt, either.

"You know, you're right," Deryn says suddenly. I glance back at her, and see exactly what I expected: her shoulders are squared, and her dark brown eyes alight with characteristic determination. "Something like this? We'd be crazy *not* to do it."

"Right."

Someone clears their throat loudly, and I realize that the line is moving again. I follow it forward, each step lighting something in my stomach. *Closer*. It's stupid, really; I'm not getting physically nearer to Ixion, just to a physical exam and a shitload of paperwork. However, it still feels as though I am. I can't even imagine how it'll feel once I'm strapped into the ship itself. The thought is enough to give me chills. I've never been off-planet before. None of us have. If we were rich

enough to afford something like that, we'd be sunning ourselves on a luxury liner somewhere halfway across the galaxy. Instead, we're here, patiently waiting our turn to be measured, labeled, and sent off to the stars, just like any other commodity.

A micro-eternity seems to pass before we finally reach the front of the line, and now that I'm up here, I can see the reason for the holdup. Only one person is working at the registration desk, and he barely looks old enough to have a job at all, let alone one as important as this. He drops my questionnaire tablet three times while trying to transfer it from the box to my hands, which is almost impressive.

"Fill this out, then head through those double doors," he instructs, pointing over his shoulder at a blank wall. A dark green pair of doors, presumably the ones that he meant to indicate, sit a good ten yards to the left. "There'll be some physical testing. Then your examiner will take the tablet and give you your next instructions."

"Is there more than one person working behind those doors?" I ask, a smirk tugging at my lips.

The poor kid looks even more confused. "Is there... what?"

"Nothing. Forget about it." I take the tablet and tuck it under one arm. "Hang in there."

As I walk away from the line, I can hear him repeating his pitch to Deryn, word-for-word. They really should've automated this part of the process. Sure, I understand the sentiment behind putting a human in charge—he's substantially less hackable than a bot, for one thing—but from the looks of it, he's frazzled enough to be screwing things up way worse than anyone who might be doing so on purpose.

Other women are standing around in a ragged sort of circle, some sitting, others leaning against the walls, all of their faces blue-tinted in the glow of their tablets. I slide cross-legged onto the floor and take a look at my own. It performs quick scans of my face, teeth, and retina, then displays a number of questions, ranging from the obvious to the

downright weird. Name and age, yes, but it also prompts me to write a bit about my drinking habits, my allergies, and my history of pet ownership.

“Maybe it’s a compatibility thing,” Deryn suggests from above me.

I jump and nearly drop the tablet in the process. “Fuck. Don’t creep up on me like that.”

“I wasn’t *creeping*.” She plops herself onto the floor beside me. “But that’s what it must be, right? I mean, unless the Ixionians, like, condemn all dog lovers to death on sight. Which they probably would have warned us about beforehand.” Her plump lips screw into a quizzical twist. “Maybe they *eat* dogs. Maybe *we’re* going to have to eat dogs.”

“You never know, I guess.”

She continues to speculate, but I tune her out and return to the questions.

In ticking this box, you confirm yourself to be, to the best of your knowledge, free of all sexually transmitted infections, as well as any related afflictions that may impact intercourse (describe, in detail, in the provided space).

I can barely keep from snickering out loud at that. ‘Afflictions that may impact intercourse,’ indeed. I’m tempted to type ‘Ask my ex,’ but I doubt the officials would be amused. Instead, I check the box and swipe to the side, expecting more questions. To my surprise, the screen turns green, with a new message displayed in large white text: *THANK YOU, IVY ALECTO! YOU MAY NOW PROCEED TO YOUR PHYSICAL EXAMINATION.*

Physical examination. Yeah, I’m not looking forward to that. I sigh and get back to my feet. Deryn looks up in surprise.

“You’re done *already*?”

“Why not? It’s not that long.”

“I’m still trying to remember the name of that cat I had in elementary school. Remember him? The one who looked like

he had a little mustache?”

I could point out that she's spent more time pondering the reasoning behind the questions than she has actually answering them, but I hold back. “His name was Ducky.”

“*That's* it! God, what was I thinking, naming a cat Ducky?”

“You weren't thinking. You never are.” I pat her on the head, and she swats me away.

“You're a bitch.”

“So I've heard.”

“Good luck getting your pussy probed, smartass.”

“Good luck remembering the names of your fourteen other cats.”

Her voice follows me all the way to the double doors. “I haven't had *fourteen* cats! Just, like... well, there were the three from when I was a baby, and then Ducky, and then Clover, and then Clover's kittens....”

I smile to myself. Whatever's waiting for us on Ixion, I'm glad she'll be there with me. Not that I would ever admit it.

Shouldering my way past the doors, I find myself in a long hall, segmented by thin curtains that are cut way too short of achieving any real privacy. Another man, this one as alarmingly old as the other was young, sits hunched over a desk to the side.

His rheumy eyes find mine. “Name. Last, first.”

“Alecto, Ivy.”

He hammers something into the tablet in front of him. “Stall seven, with Nurse Waters.”

“Got it.”

I try not to look into the other stalls as I pass them, but it's almost impossible not to. Just about none of what I see looks like something I'm going to enjoy. I can't say I'm surprised. It's not like they're just going to take our word for it when we

say we haven't got any STIs; come to think about it, it seems pretty pointless to include that question in the first place.

To my substantial relief, Nurse Waters is a woman—about the age my mother would be, if she were still around. Her mannerisms are brusque, which I much prefer to the overly friendly attitude that medical staff all too often tend to adopt.

“Shoes off. Good. Stand on the scale. Back straight, arms at your sides.” She frowns at the readings. “You couldn't hit a hundred pounds soaking wet.”

“That's what they tell me.”

“Hm.” Nurse Waters turns her back, and I hear the distinctive *shlick* of rubber gloves being yanked up to her wrists. “Clothes off, now. All of them.”

Yeah. There it is. “D'you have a robe, or—?”

“No robe. It won't take long.”

That turns out to be a big fat lie. I'm poked, prodded, tested, and examined in every way imaginable over the next half hour—urine, stool, and blood samples included, all in that same tiny stall.

“What do you even need all this for?” I ask, scowling as she takes a hair clipping. It glints in her fingers, golden auburn against those baby-blue gloves.

“That's not information that I'm permitted to disclose.”

“Wait, what?” That can't be right. Can it? “But it's my *body*.”

She looks up at me, and there's a tilt to her finely lined features that looks almost cruel. She sure as shit isn't reminding me of my mom anymore.

“You girls signed a contract. You're selling your bodies. This is nothing compared to what those soldiers have in store for you.”

Her words follow me long after I leave the exam hall.

It's just old lady bullshit. Of course, she doesn't approve of something like this; why would she?

And yet that voice keeps playing in my head, over and over, as I fill out more paperwork and wait in more lines.

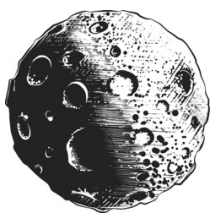
You're selling your bodies.

That's not even true. There's no part of the contract saying we *have* to sleep with the soldiers. Of course, some will—most will—but I don't have any intention of being one of them. And it's not like we're going to be their slaves. It's a partnership. Mutually beneficial.

This is nothing compared to what those soldiers have in store for you.

Hours later, when our ship finally blasts off, and the city shrinks to nothing beneath the porthole, I aim a middle finger squarely at it.

Kiss my ass, Nurse Waters. This one's for you.



CHAPTER 3

CASSIAN

EVER SINCE ROLL call this morning, the energy in the base has been almost unbearably high. When we declared ourselves present, each of us was given a number. Any ambiguity as to what they represent was gone as soon as we saw the ship touch down through the commissary window. Now bawdy jokes litter the air, intertwined with a few more earnest expressions of excitement; even Jace's ambivalence seems to have hit a breaking point, and his voice is as eager as anyone's.

"What do you think they'll be like?" he asks me in the gym. We've been here for nearly an hour with the rest of our ten-man group, waiting for our evening assembly time, and almost all of it has been spent gossiping like kids. I've at least made some effort to practice my lifting, but it's not easy when my spotter has his head in the clouds. At this latest question, I let the weights sink to the ground with a sigh.

"Uh, I don't know." I wipe the back of my hand over my forehead. "You mean physically? They're human, so... soft skin, probably long hair... normal other than that, I imagine."

I'm pretty sure he isn't even listening to me. His eyes are trained on something over my shoulder. I doubt I would see anything if I were to turn around—something tells me that whatever's got him captivated is all in his head.

"Watch them try to put us with some ugly *susts*," another soldier chortles.

Ambrose, loitering beside him, gives his head a firm shake. "Not happening. Not to me, anyway. You better believe

I'm getting the prettiest of the pack."

"Yeah? You wanna fight for it?"

"I will if I've gotta."

They devolve into lighthearted bickering, and my attention wanes. Jace's question keeps lingering in my mind. What *do* I think they'll be like? Probably eager. Flirtatious, maybe. Chances are that they're as excited as the soldiers; this must be like a vacation.

Thankfully, I'm not given long to wonder.

"Cool it!" Commander Emrys barks as he strides into the room. Those two words are much more effective than any formal call to attention would be. Everyone shuts up, waiting with bated breath to find out our next instructions. The tension in the air is almost stifling.

"You're all going to follow me outside, and we're gonna head over to Block C. Once we get inside, you line up against the wall, arm's width apart, and await further instructions. Got it? Good. Let's go."

Practically tripping over ourselves in our overeagerness, we march after him.

Block C, our destination, is a primarily disused building—it was initially for conferences, I think, back when meetings were actual events rather than murmured exchanges behind closed doors. I've never been in here before. It's not much more than one long room with an uncomfortably low ceiling and a bristly wall-to-wall carpet that reeks of cleaning supplies. Someone has set up a number of stools, not all that different from the ones in the meeting hall, against the far wall. Emrys points us to stand opposite them, with the reminder to keep an arm's width apart. Nobody else speaks, but Ambrose's lips twitch, and I can imagine what's going through his head: *Why the harsh rules, boss? Are they gonna take turns shooting at us or what?*

Once we're relatively settled, Emrys stands in front of us and gives a sharp nod. "Each of you was assigned a number between one and ten this morning. That number dictates the

order in which you're going to be paired with one of the exchanges."

Exchanges? Is that what they're calling them now? Something about the word puts a sour taste in my mouth.

"You'll be given a few minutes to get to know each of them, after which the selection process will begin: number one picks, then number two, and so on down the line. Try arguing, and you'll be sent to the back. We're trying to make a good impression here."

"So it's all our choice?" Ambrose bursts out, making no effort to mask his glee. "They have to go with what we decide?"

"Out of line, Drake. Feeling hungry for demerits today?"

Ambrose shuts up, and with good reason. A write-up is one thing—he's received enough over the years to paper the walls of his quarters—but being sent to the back of the line is serious business for him. At breakfast, he told me that he'd been given the number two; *mainched* if he's gonna let *that* go in a hurry.

Still, I wish Emrys had answered his question. I'm feeling wildly unprepared for whatever this is. No matter how hard I try, I can't picture what's about to happen. My imagination is a buzzing blank.

Then the back door opens, and I don't have to imagine any longer.

They file in at a steady pace—ten of them, for the ten of us—and walk straight over to the stools, where they proceed to sit. I can't take my eyes off of them. Some stare back, while others keep their gazes fixed on their feet or pointed straight ahead; their postures range from stiff-necked to flirtatious, chests thrust forth and hips swinging in unmistakable invitation. Their heights and builds are different, too, and their skin is anywhere from alabaster to the deepest umber.

Like anyone else, I've seen human women before—or pictures of them, at least. But pictures could never capture how *soft* they are. Something about the way they move, even

the tensest of them... I can practically feel the warmth of their skin from across the room. Or maybe that's just the sensation of blood rising to my own cheeks.

"Welcome to Ixion," Emrys tells them curtly once they've all been seated. "On behalf of all of us, and of High Commander Vestra most of all, I hope you'll come to consider our planet a second home."

The words are so clearly rehearsed that it's hard to keep from laughing. The absurdity of the whole situation rolls over me in a giddy wave. Before now, I don't think I quite believed that the plan was really going to go through, but here it is. Here we are, and there they are, and—

Oh, *kest*, I must have gotten too caught up in my own thoughts again, because my squadmates are crossing the room now. I scramble to catch up with them, but still manage to be the last to reach the opposite wall. At first, they all seem to be paired off already, and panic flares in my chest; then my eyes meet those of a dark-haired, dun-skinned woman a couple of seats down. Oh... she's one of the ones who was walking with that special sway. Her lips are unbelievably full. As I make my way over to her, I find that I can't look away from them.

"Hello, you," she says. "You seemed a little lost on your way over here."

My mouth is dry. I have no idea what to say. "Just taking my time." *Kest*, that doesn't even make sense. "I'm surprised no one got to you first."

She laughs at that, a low, purring sound; I can't tell whether the stirring inside of me is desire or anxiety.

"This is so... weird," I say. *Good one, Cassian. They'll be falling over themselves trying to get at you after that.*

"No kidding. And you're still on your home planet." She taps one finger against those shapely lips. "For us—for me, anyway—this still feels like a dream." Suddenly, her face breaks into a broad smile. "I'm Deryn Sevene."

"Cassian Auberon."

"That's a mouthful. Do they ever call you Cass?"

“Uh... no.” *Do they ever call you Der?* my mind retorts, but I keep my jaw clamped shut; something tells me I’ve already mainched this conversation up. I manage to stutter my way through a few more meaningless sentences, and it’s a relief when Emrys finally calls to us to switch partners.

The next one that I speak to is tall and exceptionally well-built, with a waterfall of blonde curls cascading down her full chest. She talks so much that I can’t get a word in edgewise, which is honestly something of a relief after the awkwardness of that last exchange. Then Emrys tells us to switch again, and I find myself in front of a pale ginger girl who looks like a stiff breeze could send her flying. She’s pretty—maybe the most stunning of the bunch, with huge green eyes and features as delicate as spun sugar—but she’s also an even worse conversationalist than I am. We spend most of our allocated minutes finding excuses to look at the floor.

“All right, switch it up!”

I scan the line, hoping to find someone more promising this time, but the others are too fast. All of the women that I haven’t spoken to seem to already have partners... except for one at the very end of the line whom I’ve barely noticed before now. She’s slim, but not as waifish as the redhead; I can’t quite see her face behind a roughly cropped curtain of golden-brown hair. I don’t think about walking over, but suddenly I’m in front of her, and she’s scrutinizing me with the most intense eyes I’ve ever seen. She’s as captivatingly beautiful as some of the others. Still, something about her appearance seems more approachable than some of the women. She looks like someone I might meet in a planet-side bar—if I were someone with the permission to leave base and chat up women in bars, which isn’t something any of us have ever been allowed.

But *kest*, it’s a day for stranger things to happen.

“Hello,” I say.

One slender brow cocks. “That’s all you have to say?”

The word *approachable* no longer seems to apply here. In fact, her tone is completely at odds with her appearance.

“Do you have... a different way of initiating conversation? On your home planet, I mean?”

“Depends. For someone in your position, I’d be trying to get out as many questions as possible. Seems like a waste of breath to open with a *hello*.”

I swear her eyes shift from brown to green with the rise and fall of her voice. Is that something that humans can do? I didn’t think so, but I’m starting to realize that I know very little about these strange people.

“And now you’re just gaping at me. Figures.”

“...I’m not *gaping*.”

“Oh, really?” She makes a show of unfocusing her glare and dropping her mouth half-open, like a child zoned out in front of a game of Battalion. Before I can protest, she straightens out again. “That’s what you look like.”

“You can’t say that. You don’t know what *you* looked like, just then.”

“I’ve seen enough of my own face to have a good sense. Don’t you have mirrors on Ixion?”

“Of course we have mirrors.” Annoyance is beginning to overcome my embarrassment. “What kind of a question is that supposed to be?”

“A better one than *that*.”

Kest, this girl is impossible. And yet I’ve somehow exchanged three times as many words with her as I did with any of the others. For whatever reason, it’s just easier.

“That’s a lot of criticism you’ve leveled toward my approach,” I say. “But I can’t say yours seems much better.”

“Excuse me?”

“First, you attack me for saying *hello*—”

“I didn’t *attack* you—”

“And now you’re mocking my expressions, as well as implying that my planet lacks basic universal necessities. It’s

your planet too now, you know. You ought to get used to it.”

I stop to catch my breath, and it strikes me that our surroundings have gone quiet. Uncomfortably quiet. A quick glance to either side shows me why: just about everyone else in the room has their eyes on us, including Commander Emrys, whose black gaze is unreadable as ever.

“Switch,” he says dryly.

The rest of the conversations pass by in a blur, some of them more stilted and awkward than others. Suffice to say that none of them go swimmingly. I’m not used to being flirted with, if that’s even what this is. It feels forced, to say the least—and forced is the last thing I want in this... whatever this is. *Partnership* seems too formal, *relationship* too genuine.

What was the word Emrys had used earlier? *Exchange*. That’s all this is. An exchange.

When we’ve each finished speaking with our tenth and final stranger, Emrys instructs us to line back up on our side of the wall. I find myself across from the first woman I spoke to, the one with the enviable lips and thick, dark hair. I can’t be sure, but I think she flashes a wink at me.

Try as I might, I can’t seem to stop thinking about the approachable/unapproachable woman with the golden-brown hair and captivating eyes. I hadn’t even gotten her name. She certainly hadn’t seemed to *like* me, which is probably the first requirement for something like this program to work. It’s hard to foster a sense of companionship if your “companion” needles you constantly. But every other woman I’ve spoken to seems to pale in comparison to her. I find myself wishing I were going first, so that I could keep anyone else from claiming her.

Claiming. The word, so innocuous in this context, sends a sudden flare of heat through me, my skin almost vibrating with the intensity of it. My pulse ratchets up as I look for her in the lineup, and find that she’s not looking my way—no surprise there. But just the sight of her, the memory of her flashing eyes, and the panicked thought that someone else might take her, has my pulse racing and my cock hardening. I’ve never

been one of the soldiers who found our celibacy particularly hard to manage, but suddenly I feel parched with need.

I want to *claim* her, and I don't even know her name yet. It's ridiculous, even for someone as touch and sex-deprived as we are.

“Starting with number one, each of you will now make your decision, and the two of you will join in the middle of the room. Any objections on the part of either party, now or in the future, should be followed up with me and only me. Because of the nature of this project, swapping in private is not permitted, even if it's mutually agreed upon. That enough formal talk for you? Good.” He clears his throat. “Number one.”

The lucky number one is an older member of the group by the name of Avann. He chooses the woman with the long blonde curls, who saunters over to him with a wide grin on her face. I can't help but feel relieved. He's signing himself up for a whole lot of listening and very little talking, but that won't be a problem for Avann; he's always been good at staying mellow.

Ambrose is next. He doesn't so much as blink before declaring his pick: “The lovely Cherise Hallowsswift.”

Just as I expected, Cherise Hallowsswift is the red-haired girl who didn't seem to know how to look me in the eye. It doesn't take a genius to know that Ambrose's criteria are almost entirely in the physical realm. She seems like his type: fragile, quiet, perhaps in need of some big burly hero to woo her, defend her, and whisk her off to bed. Especially the latter.

“Ambrose Drake and Cherise Hallowsswift. Recorded. Number three!”

Three and four take slightly longer to choose, but seem happy enough. I can't stop sneaking glances at the girl with the scruffy haircut and the unbelievable eyes. It's hard for me to believe that anyone's going to pick her; I'd be willing to bet that she's going to end up as *de facto* number ten. The thought makes my pulse leap again, though all logical sense should tell

me I'm signing myself up for nothing but grief by choosing her.

"I *repeat*. Number five!"

Kest, that's me. I take a slow step forward, trying to keep my thoughts clear as I take stock of the remaining women. The one across from me definitely winks this time. My conversation with her may as well be eons ago; I can't remember a single word that either of us said, much less her name. As a matter of fact, I'm starting to realize that I may not know *any* of their names. Things like that don't tend to stick in my head. And now everyone is watching me. Waiting.

So I do the only thing that makes sense.

"You," I say, looking my target straight in her strange-colored eyes.

She gawks at me. I'm sure that my friends are doing the same, but I don't turn to look. I just walk to the middle of the room, stop, and wait. After the world's longest hesitation, she does the same. Her movement is cautious, almost feline, each step light and deliberate.

Standing, she doesn't even come up to my shoulder. She has to crane her neck to hold my gaze, and she sure as *kest* doesn't look happy about it.

"Cassian Auberon and Ivy Alecto," Emrys says.

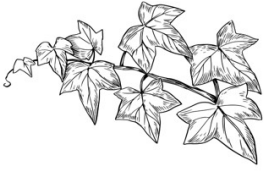
Ivy Alecto. It suits her better than anything I can imagine. In a way, it's like I've known it all along.

For a wild moment, I'm suddenly sure that she's going to back out at the last second, claiming that she would rather go back to her own planet and forfeit her stipend than be paired with the likes of me. Panic clutches me at the thought—but she does no such thing.

"Recorded."

And just like that, the matter is settled.

CHAPTER 4



I FOLLOW Cassian back to his quarters in a state of disbelief. The sights surrounding me are breathtaking—huge industrial hallways, bay windows overseeing a landing strip of scrubby blue grass, hulking machines whose purposes I can't even begin to imagine—and yet I can't seem to take any of it in. The same question keeps pounding against my skull, repeating over and over and over until it's all I can do to hold back from screaming.

What the fuck have you gotten yourself into?

He doesn't even speak to me until we step into a strange glass structure connecting two of the base's several gigantic buildings. It's a greenhouse of sorts, I think, though the plant things growing here are just about every color *but* green. An uncomfortable amount of them flaunts what seems to be an excess of thorns. It's ridiculous of me to think that they look like teeth... but I still resolve to keep my distance.

"Sorry for the long trek," he says. I don't think he realizes how quiet his voice is. With his back to me, it's a wonder I can make out the words at all. "I don't spend much time in Block C... well, none at all, actually. There normally won't be this much walking involved."

"I can walk," I say stiffly.

He tosses me a quick, odd look over his shoulder. "Of course you can."

I'm glad he's chosen to take the lead; it gives me a chance to look at him without being accused of staring—or worse,

Cassian *noticing* that I am, in fact, staring. We were treated to video footage and plenty of pictures of the Ixionians before leaving. Still, all the videos and photos in the world couldn't have prepared me for how uncanny and even unsettling it is to see an alien in real life at last—and to find said alien so very... handsome.

It's hard to see much of his body, since he's wearing dark grey army fatigues—long pants and long sleeves regardless of the weather. His feet are booted and his hands gloved, leaving only his neck and face available for my perusal—and not even that from behind. But the sight of his face during the matching ceremony is plenty to stew over.

It's clear, even in the uniform, that he's muscular. His fatigues aren't fitted, but they can't hide the tension of the fabric in his upper arms, the way they curve over his ass and cling to his thighs like he's never skipped leg day in his life. His neck and face are a lovely violet shade, rising up to close-cropped, military-cut dark hair topped with the real showstopper—a pair of twin ram-like horns that gleam a stunning violet only slightly darker than his skin. His mouth is a gold-brushed green, like he's wearing lipstick on his full lips—but no makeup is that perfect. It's just *him*, and I'm torn between horrified fascination and attraction all at once. His eyes are that same greenish-gold shade, shifting color when he speaks, and I saw them change at least once as we talked—with amusement or irritation, I couldn't entirely be sure.

We make it through the greenhouse without a single attack from the things that may or may not be plants, and I release a breath that I hadn't realized I was holding. If Cassian notices, he doesn't say anything about it. I'm a little bit grateful for that. A little.

“This is the barracks,” he explains as we move into the lobby of a new building. It's cool and calm, white-walled, more like an overpriced hotel than how I would have imagined an army base. Then again, this is Ixion. They can afford whatever the hell they please. It's damn *chilly* in here, though. I cross my arms, rubbing my palms against the goosebumps that have sprung up upon them. I remember with a twinge of

regret that my synth-lined parka is back with the rest of my clothes and belongings. They told us as we disembarked that we could expect our luggage to be delivered to our designated quarters by sundown. Never mind the fact that there are three suns to account for.

“It’s cold,” I mutter. It isn’t meant to be a complaint—more of an observation—but it comes out sounding like one all the same.

“Cold?” Cassian sounds confused. “I’m sorry. Uh....”

Wait. Is his kind even warm-blooded? Instinct tells me that they are, but those scales.... Despite myself, I’m suddenly self-conscious.

Ivy, you are miserably out of your depth.

“It’s fine,” I amend, willing him not to turn around and see how tightly I’m clutching myself. “Not that bad. Just didn’t expect it after that last area.”

He doesn’t reply at all. I’m getting the sense that he doesn’t talk much, and honestly, that’s fine with me; I’m not here to make friends, and certainly not more-than-friends, unlike most of the other women. Even Deryn seemed to be taking that weird speed-dating game in earnest. With a pang of nerves, I realize that I don’t know when I’m going to see her again.

Cassian leads me to a small glass elevator. It’s clear that it isn’t meant for more than one person at a time, and I end up with my back pressed hard against the wall, arms still drawn close to my body.

He types a number into a keypad. “Hold on; it’s pretty fast.”

“I think I—”

My voice narrows to a yelp as the lift shoots upward, leaving my stomach far behind. My balance wavers, and I try to catch myself against the wall—but the whole damn thing is smooth glass; who thought to build something like this without a railing—?

Cool, smooth hands close around my forearm. I let them stay there just long enough to get myself upright, then quickly pull away.

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

He doesn’t make any snide remark about how I’m very clearly not good; instead, he just gives a slight nod.

“Personal space?”

“Personal space.”

“I get it.”

Never mind the fact that personal space is a pipe dream in this tiny tube, which has now decided to start moving sideways. I look down at my feet. They’re just about the only place I *can* look other than at him. Strange, staticky chills are racing along my arm where his fingers wrapped around it. Maybe I’m allergic to Ixionian skin. That’d be just my luck.

It’s with no small amount of relief that I feel the elevator coming to a halt. It’s slower to stop than it was to start, which is also good—I’m not keen to nearly fall on top of him a second time.

“My room number is 572,” he tells me as the door slides open. “You put in the code, and it takes you right there.”

“Convenient.”

He gives me that odd over-the-shoulder glance again, the one that might be mocking or might be genuinely amused. It’s hard to tell with those wide cat eyes of his. I can only hope that I’ll get better at reading aliens’ expressions at one point or another. Otherwise, I can kiss any prospect of a social life goodbye... not that I’m looking for one.

Then a second frosted glass door slides open, and all of my musings are swept from my mind as we step into the room that will be my home for the next several months.

My initial impression is that it’s *bright*. Nearly everything is the same shade of sleek white, as featureless as it is clean. I can’t help feeling out of place; *alien*, I think, with a touch of

irony. It's pretty, but not what I would call comfortable... and then I notice the bed.

I don't know what I was expecting—a narrow bunk, perhaps, or even a frameless mattress on the floor—but, as I keep having to remind myself, this isn't like home. Everybody knows that Ixion's army is grossly overfunded, and it's easy to see where they spend the excess budget. The bed is as wide as it is long, topped with a rumpled mess of a comforter and a generous array of pillows. For a moment, I'm gripped by an insane urge to take a running leap and throw my whole body across it like an overexcited child, but I push the compulsion aside and force myself to take in the rest of the room.

It isn't exactly spacious. Behind the bed, a picture window stretches the length of the wall, half-covered by a pair of blackout drapes. At its foot is a long set of drawers. That must be where he keeps his personal effects, because the rest of the surfaces are pretty much blank, aside from an assemblage of unfamiliar food wrappers. The only item of furniture with a noticeable layer of dust is a small desk perched in one corner, and something that might be a miniature refrigerator sits opposite it, backed by a couple of cabinets. Near the end of the left wall is a door that I can only hope leads to a private bathroom... and that's it. The place where I'm going to be living for the foreseeable future is two hundred square feet, tops.

"It's not much," he says. I don't argue.

Now that we're finally here—on our own, facing one another, no longer being bombarded with an endless parade of otherworldly sights—I let myself take a good look at Cassian himself.

I need to tilt my head up in order to do so properly. All of the Ixionians are taller than any human man I've ever seen, and the one who's decided to pair with me must be pushing seven feet. As I look at him, he unzips and strips off his jacket, baring his arms to me for the first time.

It's all I can do not to gape. Not at his muscles—they're impressive, but I've seen my fair share of ripped guys back on

Earth. It's what's *on* those arms that leaves me stunned—scales running from his shoulders down to the backs of his hands, black and shiny until he moves under the light, and then I see them gleam emerald and amethyst. They're startlingly beautiful, and it takes me a moment to recover as he tosses his jacket aside, remaining in place almost as if he's—letting me look at him.

He's still covered almost entirely, from fingerless gloves to steel-toed boots. Only his head is unprotected, and for obvious reasons: those horns, thick as my forearm and curving out from a short, well-kempt cut of black hair. His eyes are already shaded by his broad forehead and heavy brows, but the shadow of his horns darkens them until all I can make out is that sharp green glow. Stubble-grazed cheeks culminate in a blunt chin and remarkably full lips, which are currently pursed in what seems to be some sort of deep contemplation.

The sight of those lips sends an unexpected thrill through me. It startles me into absolute stillness for a moment, because if there was anything I hadn't expected, it was to actually be *attracted* to my—alien. I don't know what else to think of him as. Certainly not the Ixionian term that I've heard used more than once—*mate*.

If I have any say about it—and I was assured that I would—there won't be any *mating* happening between us. Regardless of how muscular he is, or how intensely bright those golden-green eyes are, or how soft his full lips are—that's not what I'm here for.

I wonder what running my fingers over his horns would feel like.

Swallowing hard, I shove the thought down as deeply as I can, into absolute oblivion, before I can let it go any further.

After a few moments of awkward silence, he goes over to sit on the edge of the bed. Now that we're alone, he seems incapable of meeting my eyes. I wander over to the desk and run a finger along the edge. It comes away gray. I wince and wipe it off on the edge of my shirt.

“Do you ever use this thing?”

“Uh... no, not really.”

“Not the studious type?”

“I spend most of my time in the gym.”

Of course he does. I roll my eyes, keeping my back to him. I would have thought a military soldier would have to keep his room dusted, but maybe the Ixionian brass has more pressing concerns than whether their recruits are keeping their rooms in white-glove condition.

Like arranging *companions* for them.

“Well, you can keep doing that,” I tell him flatly. “I have plenty to keep myself occupied.”

No reply. It seems like I’m going to have to get used to talking to myself. Cassian seems like he would’ve been a better match for that girl Cherise, who managed to last the entire journey here without speaking a single word.

But he does say something, after a few long moments of what must have been contemplation:

“If that’s what you’d like.”

I turn and see with a tiny thrill that he’s been staring at me the whole time. His head is tilted ever-so-slightly to the side, as though asking a silent question.

My first instinct, for some reason, is to respond with a question of my own: *If what’s what I’d like?* But that would be idiotic. Instead, I take a deep breath and run a hand through the thick fall of my hair, tucking it behind one ear.

“All right. I won’t beat around the bush. I see your big bed, and I see your—” I gesture vaguely at his torso, now only covered by a fitted tech-style shirt that does nothing to hide how broad or muscled his chest is. “And I know what all of you are thinking we’re here for. Some of those other women may have been happy enough to give it to you. Not me.” When I’d walked into the hall earlier, I’d felt confident in my decision. Now, with my skin still tingling from the touch in the elevator and my pulse beating a little faster from appraising

his entirely not unattractive body, it's starting to feel a little like protesting too much.

But I came here to fulfill my contract in the strictest sense and make some extra cash, not fuck an alien. Regardless of how gorgeous or muscled or—anything else he might be.

He blinks. “You mean—?”

“I mean that not one of the contracts I signed said anything about me providing you with anything. Not my time, not my attention, and certainly not my body.” I stumble a bit over the last words and hasten on, hoping he didn't notice. “We're roommates. That's it. I'm companionship so you don't have to feel so alone at night—or whatever. And since you don't use this desk, I'm going to go ahead and claim it as my side of the room.” I point towards the refrigerator and the cabinets. “That side is yours. Same with the bed; there's plenty of room for us both with space in the middle.”

At this point, I stop to catch my breath. His expression is still mild, though something about those narrow pupils is still unsettling. His lips, I now decide, are definitely natural. I can't help but wonder what sort of biology is behind that aureate glow.

“All right,” he says finally. I wait for more, but it doesn't come.

“That's it? Just *all right*?”

“Unless you had something else you wanted to say.”

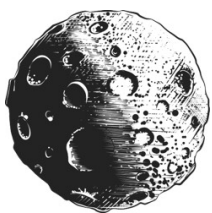
My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. I don't know what sort of response I expected from him, but this certainly isn't it. It feels like there *is* something more that I want to say, and yet the only thing coming to mind is another question.

“...Why did you pick me? There were plenty of us left, and I don't think you and I got the best impression of each other. So... why?”

He catches me off guard once again, this time by not hesitating at all.

“I don't know.”

And, for better or worse, I believe him.



CHAPTER 5

CASSIAN

MY FIRST NIGHT with Ivy may very well be the strangest of my life.

I go to dinner alone. She claims not to be hungry, which I find hard to believe after such a wild day, but I don't want to push her. It seems like we're on decent enough terms, at least for now, and with any luck, it'll stay that way.

I felt her eyes on me the entire walk back to the barracks. It was a strange feeling, being *inspected* by someone who isn't my commander or even a part of the military. I couldn't say she didn't have a right to do so—she's going to be sharing space with me, and I can't deny that I must be as strange to her as she is to me. But still, it felt—odd.

And oddly arousing, in a way. I hadn't been able to stop myself from teasing her a little, slowly stripping off my jacket in hopes of getting a reaction out of her. And I had, I suppose, just not the one I'd found myself hoping for.

Sex is off the table; she's made that clear. And I'd never force a woman. So it seems like my celibacy will continue—all the while spending time in close proximity with a beautiful woman who will share my bed. It sounds like a special kind of torture, but there's nothing I can do about it. Like many things during my time in the Ixionian military, I simply—resign myself to it.

By the time I get back to my—*our*—quarters, she's locked herself in the bathroom, and I can hear water running from inside of it. A duffel bag sits on the side of the bed that she claimed as her own, spilling over with more clothing items

than I can imagine any single person owning. I loiter for a bit before knocking on the door.

“I’m busy.”

“...Okay.”

She remains ‘busy’ for the next forty-five minutes, at which point I’m beginning to wonder whether I should be worried. I’m just on the verge of knocking again when she emerges in a cloud of shower steam. Her hair is tied back, exposing the contours of a more heart-shaped jawline than I expected, and she’s dressed in a strange uniform of navy blue: loose-fitting pants and a button-up shirt with a low collar.

“What’s the occasion?”

She scowls. “What do you mean?”

“The outfit.”

At first, she just stares at me; then, little by little, a smirk begins to tilt her lips.

“You mean my *pajamas*?”

It’s such a silly-sounding word that I can’t help but let out a snort of laughter. She folds her arms and tips her chin up, indignant.

“What’s so funny?”

Kest. She’s being serious. I manage to school my expression back into a sober one. “I’ve never heard of... those. Before now, I mean.”

Her eyebrows lift. “What do you wear to bed, then?”

Apparently, my silence constitutes an answer. With very little success, I try not to take offense at the startled look that twists her face.

“Right. Well, you just stay on your side, and there won’t be any issues.”

Half an hour and zero words later, we’re in bed, lights out, dutifully distanced. I like to open the window at night, but I

haven't forgotten her comment about feeling cold, and nights on Ixion tend to be brutal.

I can feel her warmth even from across the mattress. My mind wanders back to the moment in the elevator, when I barely managed to stop her from smacking headfirst into the floor. The way her skin burned against mine... it was even softer than I expected, but that wasn't the only thing. It was almost like touching sun-baked metal—sudden, shocking, fiery—but with the opposite effect: instead of instantly drawing away, I wanted nothing more than to stay. To keep holding her, and just see what would happen.

But she wasn't having it. Just like she isn't having it now. And I'm fine with that... of course I am.

What other choice do I have?

It feels like it takes hours to fall asleep, but once I do, it's deep and dreamless. In no time at all, my alarm is going off.

Ivy springs up before I do. Her hair is a tousled halo, limned in gold by the pale morning light. "S'that?" she mumbles, scowling.

"Alarm."

"That noise is... fucking awful."

Something about her emphatic tone brings a smile to my face as I reach over to flip the buzzer off. "Yeah. I don't disagree with that."

"Can't you... change it?"

"Pretty sure it's regulation."

"*Pretty* sure? You mean you haven't even *asked* to change it?"

"Uh." In truth, the option never occurred to me, but I don't want to say so, when she already seems to have decided that I'm an idiot. "No, I mean, I'm sure. It's regulation."

"Well, I hate it," she declares, and drops back onto her pillow.

I do my best to get dressed in silence—she seems irascible when sleepy, to say the least, and I don't want to press a bad mood—but as I'm pulling on my jacket, I see to my surprise that she's on her feet, headed toward the bathroom once again.

“Wait up,” she says, voice still blurry with sleep.

“You can stay in bed, if you want—”

“Do they serve you breakfast in this place?”

I bite back another smile. “Regretting that skipped supper?”

“Shut up. Give me five minutes.”

I spend about three of those minutes debating whether I ought to just leave anyway. I don't consider myself impatient by any stretch, but if she keeps treating me like dirt, I'm gonna break at one point or another. I don't know what she thinks this whole program is about, but it's pretty rich of her to try and boss me around after last night's speech. If she's not going to 'provide anything' for me, why does she expect a personal tour of the whole *mainching* base?

But I'm not that cruel. It's been less than a day, after all. Maybe she's just not a morning person.

That last part, at least, is confirmed within the hour. Ivy is practically glowering when she comes out of the bathroom. Her brushed hair, along with her modest getup of sweatpants and a thing that I think is called a hoodie, somehow manages to make her look worse rather than better. Without the haze of drowsiness to soften it, her expression is downright grouchy.

“You alright there?”

“Coffee,” she says.

“Sorry—what?”

“Coffee. You have coffee here.” Desperation is beginning to creep into her voice. “You need to have coffee here. On this planet. Tell me you do.”

“I... don't know what that is, but probably?” Her face grows even darker, and I hasten to reassure her—she looks

about ready to eat me alive if I can't provide her with whatever it is that she's asking for. "They're making a lot of accommodations for all of you. If... coffee... is necessary, I'm sure it'll be available."

Ivy seems to take my lack of complete certainty as a minor tragedy; it's safe to say that her mood doesn't improve from there. She makes a point of avoiding my eyes the entire time that I lead her to the mess hall. She even braces herself against the walls of the glass elevator, presumably to alleviate even the slightest risk of making physical contact with me again. Maybe I should take offense, but for whatever reason, I just don't. She's fascinating to me in a way that I can't quite describe, and I find that I like watching her, even when she looks like she would be having more fun at the wrong end of a firing squad.

I don't get even that much for very long, though. Upon reaching the hall, we're informed that it's been divided into two sections: one for the women, and one for the soldiers.

Ivy, it seems, couldn't be more thrilled with the news, and she darts off without a word of goodbye, leaving me to walk in alone. Luckily, it only takes a few moments to spot Jace and Ambrose huddled together at one of the several small triangular tables. I stride over and set my hands on the back of the remaining empty chair.

"There he is!" Ambrose exclaims with a certified *kest*-eating grin. I don't need to ask him to know how his night went, but I have a feeling that I'm going to be finding out all about it whether I like it or not.

"Here I am," I say, sliding into the seat. "You two look like you have a lot on your minds."

"More than you can imagine."

"You might want to get some food first," Jace advises. "He isn't going to spare you the details, and believe me when I say they're sickening."

"Honestly, just hearing that is enough to erase my appetite."

Ambrose throws his head back and lets out a loud, barking laugh that draws eyes from more than a few tables around us. “Jealous, the both of you. I can smell it on you.”

“Probably better than what everyone can smell on *you*,” Jace retorts.

“Oh, yeah. Think I’ll never shower again.” He extends his dark purple tongue and makes an obscene show of sucking along the length of each of his fingers. “Tastes like a dream, even the day after.”

“You’re a freak, Drake,” Jace says, but I have no doubt that the lightness of his tone is meant to egg Ambrose on. Whether or not that’s his intention, it works wonders.

“Sure I am. And so is *she*. *Kest*. Like you wouldn’t believe. I had a feeling—that’s why I picked her, y’know. It’s always the little, quiet ones who are feistiest behind closed doors. That’s one lesson I learned a long time ago.”

Yeah, we know. I don’t say it aloud, however tempting it may be. Ambrose is one of a select few who claim to have been involved in all sorts of exploits before their mandatory service began. Here in the army, we’re banned from relationships entirely, physical or otherwise—at least, we were until yesterday—but there are no regulations against experimenting in your younger years. Most of us don’t, and people like Ambrose just love to flaunt their experiences with the intimate realm in the rest of our faces. Usually, I don’t care much; I tune him out, or sometimes laugh along with the bawdier stories. Now, though, his crassness plants something sour in my stomach.

“In any case, Jace here says that he’d wager his time was even better than mine. And his girl was too worn out after—how many times did you say? Two?”

Jace nods. His eyes, silver-lit green, are distant and dreamy.

Ambrose shakes his head with exaggerated solemnity. “Rookie numbers, my friend.”

“Quality over quantity. That’s what I think.”

“And I think you sound like you’ve got it *bad*. You don’t want to get that obsessed with her, you know. Unless you plan to end up marrying a human.” He snorts at himself, as if the very prospect is completely ridiculous—which it is, for the most part. Most legal unions aren’t interspecies, but there’s always the odd one out.

“Cassian, please. Someone needs to get this joker to shut his mouth,” Jace says. “What about you? That girl, now *that’s* what I’d call feisty.”

“I...” I’m suddenly self-conscious. It seemed fine in the moment, but sitting here now, it’s more than a little obvious that there was something of an unspoken expectation regarding last night. Even *unspoken* is pushing it. Plenty of the guys were being quite vocal, indeed. “We actually, uh, didn’t. Yet.”

Ambrose looks downright scandalized. Jace, to his credit, tries to keep his expression neutral, but the surprise flashing through his eyes doesn’t escape me.

“You didn’t do *anything*?” Ambrose demands. “Tell me you at least got your mouth between her legs, if nothing else.”

That’s not what I would have expected from an ‘at least.’ I shake my head.

“Oh, you’re missing out. Let me tell you, they taste as good as they look. And you saw how it looks.”

I give my head another quick shake, half-hoping that he won’t register it.

No such luck.

“Oh, now you’re just *mainching* with me. Did you make her sleep on the floor, or what?”

“No—no, of course not. That would be awful.” I pause for a moment, trying to remember the name of the bedclothes that Ivy insisted on wearing. Still, it’s impossible to think under the pressure of my friends’ twin stares. “We just... I don’t know. She changed into softer clothes in the bathroom and then wore those to bed, so... I didn’t see anything.”

“Tragic, truly. You’ll get there, though.” Ambrose nods sagely. “I believe in you.”

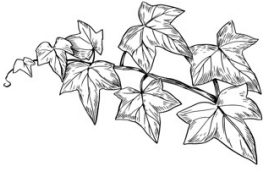
“Thanks. Means a lot.”

“Let me give you some tips, yeah? I’ll tell you what mine and I did. First things first, no wasting time, she got down on her skinny little knees—”

“Gonna go grab some food, actually,” I say, standing to do just that. “Don’t wait up on me.”

The far-from-robust breakfast buffet is on the other side of the room, and his laugh follows me all the way there.

CHAPTER 6



“I MEAN, Ivy, I really can’t tell you. I really can’t. I wish I could, but there aren’t any words... hell, I’m never sleeping with a human man again. It’s nothing in comparison. *Nothing.*”

Deryn has been repeating such sentiments for the past fifteen minutes now, which, on the bright side, has given me ample time to eat. I have to admit that I’m impressed with the cuisine that they’ve provided for us. It’s all synthetic, of course, but they’ve done a pretty damn good job with it. Even the eggs taste only a tiny bit off.

“...And I get why you’re hesitant, I really do, but... *ugh*. It was *huge*—in the best possible way. And his *tongue*—” She leans back in her chair and gazes up at the ceiling high above us. It’s a lovely ceiling, I’ll give it that: crisscrossed with metal and polymer, sure, but it’s almost artful in its own way. From what I’ve seen so far, this sprawling army base boasts just about every imaginable type of architecture. Cassian’s quarters were some of the sleekest, most elegant rooms I’ve ever seen; this, on the other hand, is almost rustic, and the wide, low room where we first met looked like something from a late 20th-century period piece. Not to mention the greenhouse. It’s almost overwhelming, but something tells me that I’ll have plenty of time to explore.

“Ivy? What’s so funny?”

“Hm?” I blink back into the present moment. Deryn is watching me with her lips pursed and her thick eyebrows drawn tightly together.

“You were smiling at something.”

“Oh. That’s nothing. I was just thinking about... the ceiling.”

“The ceiling,” she repeats, her voice flat. She seems almost upset with me, and it takes me a moment to figure out why.

“Oh, Deryn, no—I’m sorry.” I reach across the table for her hand, which she reluctantly presses into mine. I give it a tight squeeze. “I swear I’m not laughing at you. I was just... thinking about something else.”

“That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“Really. I promise.” I try to laugh, but it sounds fake even to my own ears. “I mean, shit, there’s a lot going on. I’m just feeling a little off. That’s all.”

She still seems dubious, but at least decides to humor me for now. “Well. In any case. I think you’d feel better if you, you know... did what we came here for.”

“What we *came here for*? Really?”

“I mean, yeah.” Deryn shrugs. “I don’t see why there’s any use beating around the bush.”

“The contract said—”

“You read the contract?”

“Of course I did. And it said that we aren’t obligated to do anything for or with the Ixionians, including....” My voice drops a few notches. “Sexual favors.”

“Seriously?” Her expression has begun to shift away from confusion, and closer to the zone of worry. “So you’re saying that you actually aren’t going to sleep with him? After you were so eager to come here? I know you said it was for the money, but I thought... I guess I assumed... that there had to be *something* else.”

I have no idea how to tell her that she’s right; there absolutely is something else. The problem is that I haven’t found it yet. But Deryn has never been one for the abstract... then again, neither have I.

“Look,” I say just to break up the uncomfortable silence. “I’m sure I’m not the only one. The guy I got paired with is kind of closed off, anyways. Yours seemed nicer.” Another half-truth. The sapphire-skinned Ixionian who’s already stolen Deryn’s heart was undoubtedly polite when I had my turn speaking with him. I’m pretty sure he also opened with a ‘Hello,’ though... and I didn’t give him shit for it. I suppose that could be a factor.

“Oh, he’s nice, all right,” Deryn agrees, nodding voraciously. “Honestly, I kind of wanted yours—he’s so *big*, you know—but Jace is perfect. I mean... *perfect*, perfect. I could have told him that I loved him, just last night. I thought about it. Shit, I almost *did*.”

That pushes her infatuation over the edge from merely cute to rather alarming. I don’t want to judge her any more than I want her to judge me, but I can’t help being a little disbelieving. “All that because of a good fuck? I mean, did you even have time to *do* anything else?”

As soon as the words pass my lips, I realize that they may have been too harsh. Deryn, however, doesn’t seem to mind.

“Well, we had dinner together. And we just... talked a bunch. Before and after. About our lives, our families, our dreams... stuff like that. I could just listen to him for hours. I *did* just listen to him for hours.”

It seems as though she’s content as long as she’s talking about Jace in some capacity, which is a relief. I don’t want to say anything about Cassian right now, positive or negative. It feels like some sort of violation—which makes no sense; if anything, it should be the opposite. We’ve barely had anything that could constitute a proper conversation. Even if I wanted to describe him, I don’t know how I would.

But my luck only lasts so long before she circles back.

“You probably aren’t the *only* one, you know.”

“I know.” I don’t need her consolation, either, and I’m about to say so when she points across the room.

“Like, look at her. She’s not exactly glowing. Do you remember which one she ended up with?”

I turn around to see that she’s indicating none other than that tiny girl called Cherise. I do indeed remember who she ended up with, and I find it hard to believe that the two of them stuck to any sort of chaste cuddling. Deryn is right, though: she looks far from happy. She’s sitting alone, slim shoulders hunched, gazing down into a mug of coffee. From what I can see, she doesn’t even have any food on the table in front of her.

“It was that guy with the really long horns... y’know, the twisty ones.” I gesture with a twirl of fingers above my head. “He made a big point of calling her *lovely* and everything.”

“Right. What the hell d’you think happened?”

Deryn may be the type to gossip and speculate, but I’m not. I stand, lifting my food tray as I do.

“Let’s go find out.”

She starts to protest, then sighs and shuts her mouth. Probably a good move; that wasn’t an argument that she was going to win. She follows a few steps behind me as I approach the other table. Cherise doesn’t look up.

“Hey.”

Her fingers tighten around her coffee mug, and she gives her head a little jerk, as if trying to shake something off.

“You’re Cherise, right?” I set my tray on the table, hoping that that’ll give her a hint. If it does, she shows no indication. “I’m Ivy; this is Deryn.”

“I know.”

Deryn and I share a quizzical glance. She shrugs and mouths something that might be, *Let’s get out of here*, but I’m not giving up that easily.

“You looked a little lonely over here—”

“I’m not lonely.”

“Well, what would you say to some company?”

This is finally enough for her to lift her head. Her eyes are a pale, pale green, large enough to be flirting with the uncanny, as though she's an alien as well. They seem to take up half of her face, while the rest—flower bud lips, pointy chin, pixie-like nose—exists only as an afterthought. She's pretty, but almost *too* pretty, crossing back over into the territory of just plain weird. I feel bad for thinking so, but I can't help that she gives me the shivers.

"I don't need company," she says. Her voice is thin but somehow musical. "I don't want company."

"Well," Deryn interjects, "if that's the case, I gotta say that you might've come on the wrong trip."

The girl's transparent eyelashes lower in a slow, bovine blink. I can feel Deryn bristling beside me. She doesn't like when people are difficult. That's where I come in.

I set my tray on the table and take a seat. Her little nose wrinkles slightly and she turns her gaze back to the coffee mug, but shows no other reaction.

"Well, no need to talk," I say.

Deryn's voice strains. "Ivy—"

"It's fine." No matter how I angle myself, I can't seem to get the girl to look at me again. "She doesn't need to tell us anything. But now that I'm here, I'm not carrying this shit all the way back across the room."

With a groan of resignation, Deryn drops into the seat next to me. I almost expect her to ditch us at this point, but she does no such thing. She doesn't do anything at all for several long moments—and then, when I least expect it, she speaks.

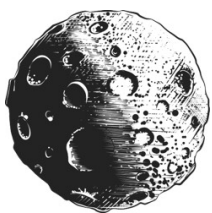
"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes," she says, and finishes her coffee in one long swig. "I'm Cherise."

"Nice to meet you, Cherise."

She has nothing to say to that, which isn't surprising. Something tells me those are the only words we're going to get out of her for a while. But it's a start, and a start is good enough for me.



CHAPTER 7

CASSIAN

I DON'T SEE Ivy again until evening. It's about what I expected, but I can't help keeping an eye out during my drills and exercises. I catch glimpses of a fair few of the other women, and not just the ones that are paired with our platoon; there are so many that I imagine most soldiers must have a match at this point. Tall, short, slim, curvy. Some who look like they're in shock, and others who are already strutting around as if they own the place.

But none of them are her.

“What're you looking for?” Jace asks at one point, as we're working through our stretches on the side of the running track. I've been watching in the direction of a distant crowd for a while now, trying to see if I can spot her golden brown hair somewhere amidst the gaggle.

I blink, startled, and hastily return my focus to the worn astroturf below me. “Nothing.”

Naturally, he doesn't fall for it. “Yeah, sure. I noticed them too. What do you think they're doing over there, anyway?”

“I don't know. Looking at us, maybe. Same as we're looking at them.”

“Huh.” He takes a moment to consider this while I focus on my breathing. *Hand under the ankle, lean back, bend in the knee....* “Maybe. Not much of a point, though. It's not like any of us can tell who each other are from this distance, though.”

I bring the stretch to the brink of pain, savoring the shivery burn of my muscle, then release it with a low grunt. Jace

seems to take the noise as a sign of agreement, which is fine by me. I'm not interested in arguing, but I know he's wrong. Even from this distance, I'd know her if I saw her. I'm sure of it.

Our evening meal is taken separately. That's going to be the case with all of them, according to the rumor drifting through the mess hall; apparently, Ixionian meat is rough on human stomachs.

"The more you know, the softer they are," Ambrose says with a derisive chuckle.

Avann, the mild-mannered soldier who got the first pick of the women, shrugs lightly. "I wouldn't assume that. For all we know, their food might make us sick, as well."

"Nah. No way." He takes an oversized bite of green-tinted steak, as if doing so proves some sort of point. "Whatever's on that planet of theirs is probably even weaker than them. I mean, it's got to be, right? Seeing as they're the dominant species."

"That's not how it works, you *mainching* idiot," another soldier laughs. "It's about the chemistry."

"I'll show you chemistry," Ambrose mutters, jerking his free hand in an obscene motion as he takes an even bigger bite with the other. Even I have to laugh at that.

Our evening briefing follows dinner, and it's clear throughout that everyone's more than a little anxious to get back to the barracks—myself included, despite my certainty that Ivy's resolve has no chance of wavering. She probably won't even want to look at me.

But that doesn't mean I can't look at her. And looking at her, I've come to realize, is something that I enjoy quite a bit.

When I get back, she's already there, hunched over and scribbling at the desk she claimed as her own last night. A thrill courses through me at the first glimpse of that hair, a coppery curtain that doesn't quite obscure her profile. It's

messier now, a far cry from the sleek locks of this morning. I don't know how they deal with all that hair when it seems to tangle so fast; she's stashed a good amount of strange little tools in the bathroom, but I couldn't tell you how to use them with a gun to my head. And the hair is sensitive too, according to everything that Ambrose had to say at breakfast... though others countered him, claiming it varies between women. I find myself wondering where Ivy falls on the spectrum, but shove the thought aside. It's not as though she'd ever let me touch her. Why waste time speculating?

She flinches and looks up as I close the door behind me, slamming the power button of a tablet and pulling it close to her chest. I lift my hands, palms out.

“Hey. It's just me. Sorry to startle you.”

She squints at me in a way that's almost suspicious, as though she isn't convinced that I'm not lying about my identity. Then, after a moment, she nods and puts the tablet back down, though both of her hands stay tightly wrapped around it. I can see just enough through her fingers to determine that it's an old model, one of those ones with a thick plastic backing.

“What's that?”

“None of your business.” Her words come out so fast that I know she's been holding onto them, waiting for me to ask.

I shrug and cross to my side of the room. “All right, whatever suits you. I guess you found the library?”

“Library?” She swivels around in her chair, eyes wide.

“...Or not.”

“What library?” she asks. She sounds different than when she asked me things before: higher-pitched, far less demanding, far more curious.

“It's on the south side... near Block C, actually. The place where we... met.” *Met* feels like the wrong word for the selection ritual that we underwent, but I can't come up with anything better that doesn't sound downright creepy. “I don't

ever go over there, really, but I hear it's pretty well-stocked. Though, if you brought your own reading material...."

Confusion colors her face for a moment. "My own—? Oh. That."

"It's fine. I won't pry."

"No, it's... it's not that. Just... it isn't reading material, that's all."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. Last I checked, tablets that old can't run anything much heavier than a text document or a few short videos. "...I see," I say finally, and sit on the edge of the bed to work on taking off my boots. It's a long process, what with all the zippers and buckles to deal with—yet, when I look up, she hasn't turned back to the desk. She's still watching me, and if I had to pinpoint the expression on her face, it would be annoyance.

"...Yes?"

"Well?" The tilt of her lips deepens into a proper frown. "Are you going to ask me or what?"

I try not to smile. I get the feeling that too much enthusiasm will scare her off, and that's the last thing I want when she's finally speaking more than three words to me at once. "I assumed it was none of my business."

"It's not. At all. But...."

Her pause lingers in the air. I don't bite. Not yet. She's testing me—or maybe just playing with me. Either way, I'm not falling for it.

"...I'll still tell you, if you want."

There it is. I give a thoughtful nod, as though the idea has only just occurred to me. "All right. If you're sure. What's the tablet for?"

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think she's fighting a smile of her own now. "I'm writing, not reading. It's a journal. To keep track of... whatever happens here."

This time, I don't have to feign my surprise. "Really? You write?"

"Not anything *real*," she says quickly. "Only the journal. I just... I like to keep track of the things that happen to me. The big things, at least. And this whole trip is, you know, a pretty big thing."

"Of course." That sounds plenty 'real' to me, but I don't contradict her. "Well... thanks. For telling me. I promise not to sneak a look."

Wrong move. She whips back around, shoulders bunching together. "You'd better fucking not."

"I won't, I won't. Sorry, that was a bad joke."

"Where I come from," she growls, "jokes are supposed to be funny."

And, by the same instinct that told me to take it slow, I know that's all I'm gonna get for the rest of the night. I'm a little disappointed, but my head is light with elation nonetheless. We had a conversation. A real conversation. Maybe even the first of many. The more I talk to her, the more I realize how much I enjoy it. It's difficult, more like some game of wits than banter with my friends ever is... but I don't mind playing games every so often. And there's no denying the fact that Ivy Alecto makes for a formidable opponent.

My prediction turns out to be accurate: between that moment and the time that we climb into our opposite sides of the bed, neither of us speaks another word. I find that I don't mind all that much. She keeps writing, and it doesn't take me long to discover just how much I like watching her write.

Bent over her tablet, typing furiously, she passes into a state of utmost concentration, to the point where she doesn't seem to know or care about the fact that I keep my eyes trained on her while she does it. Every few lines, she pauses to scan her work, her lips move rapidly as she feels out the shape of the words she's written. She follows this with a curt little nod that must be subconscious, or, on occasion, a frustrated

shake of the head, followed by another even faster rush of typing. Sometimes, from what I can tell, she goes over the same portion several times before she's satisfied.

For someone who claims not to be a writer of anything 'real,' she sure seems dedicated. She doesn't let anything interrupt her, not even her own hair, which continuously slips out from where she has it tucked behind her ear. Once again, I wonder how she would react if someone else were to touch it... to pull it, even. Ambrose said that his girl's cries of pleasure were sweet and rapid, perfectly in time with his thrusts, but that a good tug on the hair could drive her halfway to a scream. A *good* scream; he was quick to clarify when he saw the look on my face.

I can't imagine Ivy screaming... but even the thought is enough for a flush of heat to race through my body, inciting a quick shiver. Her prickly attitude makes the thought of vulnerability all the more compelling. Overwhelming someone as delicate as Cherise is one thing—and not one I'd like to think about for too long—but Ivy is different. There's no chance she would be driven to such a thing through force alone. She would need to submit willingly. She would need to trust her partner enough to show a softer side... a side just as susceptible to pleasure as it is to pain.

Kest. I can't think like this. She and I have an agreement—or something close to it, at least. She made it perfectly clear from square one that the relationship between us isn't going to be a physical one—no, more than that, we aren't to have a relationship at all. I'm starting to wish that I hadn't agreed so readily. But then again, what would I have done? Argued with her? This isn't some trivial matter; she clearly had her mind made up, and there'd be no use trying to change it. I wouldn't *want* to change it.

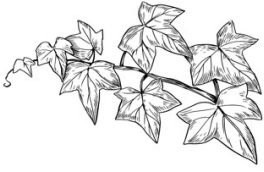
Still, there's no harm in imagining—no. No, that's not true at all. Imagining is, in fact, hurting a whole lot, both in the realm of my emotions and below the waist of my cargo pants.

I *know* that her lack of interest is nothing personal. It shouldn't weigh on me like this, and I refuse to let it. Even talking to her was a mistake.

But for tonight, just until she finishes up with her journal, I'll keep watching her. The curve of her chin, the rise and fall of her chest, the way she slides her lower lip under the edge of her teeth whenever she pauses to think... it may frustrate me. Still, it's also deeply calming in a way that I can't describe.

Just a little longer. Just for now.

CHAPTER 8



THERE ARE *three suns here on Ixion, and from what I can tell so far, each of them plays by its own rules. The largest of them, I'm pretty sure, is called Corsia, and is the one that the people here are referring to when they talk about 'the sun' as a singular entity; i.e., dusk is when Corsia sets, and dawn is when she rises. She's bright white, just like the one back home, but her little sisters are more of an ember orange. I think that means they're near the end of their life cycle—not sure, though*—NOTE TO SELF: Look this up!!!

I haven't seen much of the outdoors otherwise, which is a shame, because it seems like the plants here are incredibly weird. There's an indoor garden/greenhouse-type thing that we went through at one point, but I was pretty overwhelmed—I can't remember the specifics right now. I'll have to go back and take notes at some point. Other than that, though, the base is pretty much kept clear of wildlife. It actually doesn't look that different from home, aside from the sun thing and the fact that the grass is blue. I guess that's a little disconcerting, but I'm sure I'll get used to it.

The base itself is MASSIVE. Of course, I don't have experience in the army back home, but this place is pretty much a small city. It even has a sort of skyscraper structure on the northern end, though I'm not sure what rooms it contains. I haven't seen anything outside of the base, not even when we were touching down—we broke through the clouds, and this was all in sight. I'd normally get claustrophobic, or at least feel a little trapped, but I guess "normally" is a moot concept at this point. For whatever reason, knowing that I'm

surrounded on all sides by famously impenetrable stone walling is actually kind of comforting. Plus, there's more than enough going on to keep me entertained. It'll take me weeks just to explore the whole place—I hardly know where to start. I spent today in the barracks, the dining halls, and outside, just wandering the perimeter of the first few buildings. My legs are pretty sore now.

The living conditions are nice. The shower is heavenly, the food is pretty okay, and the bed is comfortable. I was matched with

My fingers come to a halt without my permission, hovering just over the keypad. I mentally prompt them to keep going, but it's like I've suddenly forgotten how to type—the muscle memory has completely sapped out of my hands. I frown down at the keypad. C, C, C... right. Bottom row, three from the left. Where it's always been. I knew that. What the hell is wrong with me?

Whatever. Just a brain blip. I give my head a firm shake and refocus.

I was matched with Cas

I hammer the backspace key.

I was matched with a soldier named

My heel taps frantically against the floor, the way that it does when I'm stuck on a tricky bit of phrasing. Backspace, backspace....

Each of us was matched with a soldier, like they said we would be. They had us go through a weird little process where we all took turns talking to one another, and then the soldiers were given their choice of partner. I expected a little more autonomy, but I don't know why, now that I think about it. We're the ones being paid, after all. I guess we're lucky enough to have as much control as we do.

The one that I'm living with is named

...Damn it. Try as I might, I can't focus. Our conversation last night is still too bright in my mind's eye. One would think the incessant dreams would be enough to get it out of my

system, but it still won't leave me alone. His questions, his patience, the curiosity in his pale eyes....

I don't realize what I'm doing until I'm staring at the first paragraph.

The door slid open, and my heart jumped in my throat. I struggled to shut down the tablet, almost breaking it in the process, and pulled it close to my chest as I whipped around to face the entryway. It was Cassian, of course—I wasn't expecting anyone else, but the sight of him was somehow still enough to make my stomach drop.

I'm not one for narrative writing. Facts are more my style. And yet something about Cassian can't be captured by facts. I can't quite believe what I'm doing, even as I continue; still, there's no denying that the words are flowing now. I don't know whether I could stop if I tried.

"Hey," he said, "it's just me. Sorry to startle you."

Every time I see him, I swear he's taller than I remember. He was practically towering over me, and the fact that I was sitting down didn't help. He must be packing at least two hundred pounds of solid alien muscle. Fleetinglly, an absurd concern crossed my mind—what if he rolled over in bed one of these nights and crushed me in my sleep?

He was eyeing me with an innocent sort of curiosity, and I realized that I still had the tablet in a death grip. I slowly set it back on the desk, still not releasing it from my hands. I could see the question in his gaze, and it didn't take him long to give in and ask it.

"What's that?"

"None of your business."

Maybe that was too harsh, but he didn't seem to mind. He just shrugged and turned away, heading towards the bed. "All right, whatever suits you. I guess you found the library?"

That was a sentence that I certainly didn't expect to hear. I spun my chair to face him. "Library?"

“Or not,” he amended, and I didn’t think I imagined the edge of laughter in his soft voice.

“What library?”

“It’s on the south side. Near Block C, actually. The place where we....” His extended pause made the next word all the more uncomfortable. “...Met.”

Met, indeed. But his awkwardness wasn’t my problem just then.

If this place really has a library, then I have about ten times more exploring to do than I expected. Finding my way around the base is one thing, but if I can access all the information that I want about Ixion itself—and probably countless other planets, too—well, I could spend my whole life here and never get bored.

“I don’t ever go over there, really,” Cassian continued. “But I hear it’s pretty well-stocked. Though, if you brought your own reading material....”

I didn’t know what gave him that idea until his eyes lowered toward the tablet in my hands.

“It’s fine; I won’t pry.”

“It’s not that.” For some reason, the idea of me having brought something to read all the way here was humiliating. Like I’m an impatient child who can’t be bothered with something as dull as the galactically famous central Ixionian military base. “It isn’t reading material, that’s all.”

He took several seconds to absorb that, then shrugged and sat down, reaching for his boots. “I see.”

I waited a bit to see if there was anything else coming, but he seemed entirely absorbed in his task.

I can’t get used to the way that Cassian is just... okay with things. No arguing, no interrogation. Just “I see.” It doesn’t make any sense to be fazed by passivity, and yet here I am.

As if he could feel my eyes on his back, he turned towards me again. Both of us spent a moment waiting for the other to speak.

He was the one to bite.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to ask me what?”

“I assumed it was none of my business.”

“It’s not. But I’ll still tell you, if you want.”

Cassian nodded slowly. “If you’re sure. What’s the tablet for?”

My lips twitch. “I’m writing, not reading. It’s a journal. To keep track of whatever happens here.”

“Really? You write?”

“Not anything real. Only the journal.” I was starting to feel silly again. “I like to keep track of the things that happen to me. The big things, at least. And this whole trip is, you know, a pretty big thing.”

“Of course.” He seemed on the edge of saying something else, but his eyes dropped eventually, and I turned back to the desk.

“Well, thanks for telling me,” he said. “I promise not to sneak a look.”

I snapped, “You’d better fucking not,” and flashed him a glare.

His hands lifted in that same defensive palms-out gesture he used when he first entered the room. I wish he would stop doing that; it makes me feel like a wild animal being held at bay.

“Sorry, that was a bad joke.”

“Where I come from, jokes are supposed to be funny.”

My fingers finally still, and I find myself staring at a tremendous block of text, completely out of line with the rest of my journaling. What the hell just came over me? Since when do I write without stopping to review every couple of

paragraphs? Since when do I write anything like this? Am I trying to be some sort of romance novelist?

The word *romance*, even in the soft tone of a throwaway thought, sets my cheeks aflame. Without thinking about it, I highlight and delete the entire passage. Only once it's gone from my tablet screen do I realize a breath I hadn't realized myself to be holding.

No more of that... whatever it was. Back to where I was before.

The one that I'm living with is named

Oh. Great.

I type it out all at once, barely noticing that I hold my breath as I do so.

The one that I'm living with is named Cassian Auberon. He's fine.

'Fine' isn't the right word at all, but I don't know what else to write. What would be the point in describing him, anyway? Nobody's ever going to read the journal except for myself, and I doubt I'm going to forget my would-be alien mate anytime soon. The endless rereading of yesterday evening is enough to prove that.

Would-be mate. I hate thinking of him that way; it makes me feel like my whole chest is sinking. *It's okay,* I remind myself. He agreed with my conditions. I don't have anything to worry about. It's not like I don't trust him. Just....

Deryn's partner is named Jace. She's over the moon. A lot of the couples are.

I'm doing my best to befriend a woman named Cherise, who barely ever talks. I don't know what her deal is. She seems angry about something, but I don't know what. She seems determined to hate this place, which makes no sense—all of us came here voluntarily, after all.

And I don't think there's much to complain about. With all the amenities, this feels more like a vacation than a job. I'm a little homesick, but the truth is that there's not much to miss

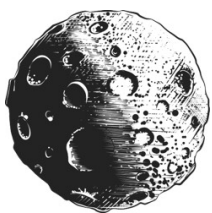
back there. I have a feeling that I won't be growing tired of Ixion anytime soon.

Apparently, there's a library around here somewhere. I'll give it a look first thing tomorrow. I could use something to read—exploring on foot is great, but it gets my legs pretty damn sore, and I wouldn't mind the opportunity to kick back for a few hours. My bed is so comfortable it's almost offensive.

My bed. His bed. Our bed? Does it even matter?

Of course it doesn't. I start a new paragraph and go from there, describing everything: the food, the plant things, the weirdly antiquated interior of Block C... everything but him. There will be plenty of time for that later, when I'm not possessed by the urge to dramatize our every interaction.

I keep writing. Sentences compound into paragraphs, which blossom into pages. The familiar flow is like a cool salve on the burn of my strange, lingering anxiety. And yet, no matter how hard I try, perfect concentration eludes me. A part of my mind is still somewhere else, trapped in the way I felt when we spoke last night, wondering what the hell it is that makes the thought of him so damn unshakable.



CHAPTER 9

CASSIAN

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG for the two of us to develop a steady routine. I get out of bed at my usual time, turning the alarm off after the first beep, and get dressed in the dark. Ivy usually stretches out across the whole bed once I'm gone; from the little noises of pleasure that she emits, I'm pretty sure she isn't conscious of doing so. I leave as quietly as possible, get breakfast with the other guys, and carry out my typical duties, not seeing her again until after dinner. The evenings are just as consistent: we exchange minimal greetings, she journals while I pretend to be otherwise occupied, she takes a long shower, and we climb into opposite sides of the bed. The next day is the same... and the next, and the next, and the next. Before I know it, a couple of weeks have passed, and I could still count the number of proper conversations that we've had on one hand.

The evenings are pleasant, though. I find myself looking forward to them more and more, even landing myself a couple of demerits for my distraction during drills. It's during those later hours, with Ivy at the desk and me lying back on the bed, that I let my mind go all the way. I watch her bite her lip, murmur under her breath, and adjust her hair; if she has any idea of how often I stare, she gives no indication.

I tried to keep myself from fantasizing, but I know at this point that it's hopeless. Even if I do manage to keep my waking thoughts tame, they come back with a vengeance as soon as I'm dreaming. And that's far harder to control: on multiple occasions, I wake up sweat-slicked and throbbing, acutely aware of her soft, warm body just an arm's reach away

from mine. It takes more than a while to calm down enough to get back to sleep, and it shows in my performance the next day. Azrael Emrys's indecipherable eyes seem to be lingering on me more than usual, but that may be nothing more than a product of my paranoia.

The look that Ambrose gives me during our lunch break, on the other hand, is all too real.

"No offense, but are you sick or something? You look like a walking corpse."

"...None taken, I guess."

"No, seriously." He swipes a finger under his eyes, indicating the sunken crescents that must be below mine. "You ought to stop by the medbay."

"I'll pass."

He and Jace exchange a glance that makes my skin crawl. The two of them have always been close, but we're meant to think of ourselves as a triad; that's what we've always done. Ever since the women arrived, though—ever since Jace slept with Deryn for the first time, if I'm being honest—the two of them have been shutting me out more and more. It's more than just isolating; I can't help but feel as though I'm the subject of their condescension. It isn't hard to believe that they've been talking about me behind my back, and moments like this are all the more evidence of just that.

"You know," Jace says carefully, "you can tell us about it."

"Tell you about what?" Now I'm really starting to get irritated. "I haven't been sleeping well. That's all."

"Well, yes. We figured that much—"

"Figured more than that," Ambrose interjects, smirking.

"—And, like I said, you can tell us about it."

He tilts his head in a motion that, if anything, seems to be suggestive. I just stare.

"Oh, come on!" Ambrose whines, bracing his forearms on the table and leaning in closer. "We're *happy* that she's finally

keeping you up. And we get it if you want to keep things more private, for sure. But can't we at least celebrate?"

My mind is a humming blank. Both of them are clearly waiting for me to say something, but I have no idea what.

And then it clicks. The realization is enough to spur a dry laugh.

"That's not... it's not like that. She's not like that. We haven't... no. We haven't done anything. It's just... not really in the cards for us, I guess."

Ambrose looks nothing short of horrified at this. "Not in the cards for you? At *all*?"

"Didn't think it'd be that shocking," I mumble, lowering my eyes. My food has never looked less appetizing—though, in all fairness, I've never been one for bright pink stew.

"I mean... it isn't *shocking*," Jace says. "Just worrying."

"It's both," Ambrose adds, his voice a little too bright.

"Thanks, man. That means a lot."

"Worrying in a good way!" Jace protests. "Well... good that we're worried. Not so good that there's something worth worrying about in the first place. Just... have you considered talking to Emrys?"

"What the *kest* would I say to Emrys about it?"

"You know... you remember everything he told us the day we got matched, right? We aren't allowed to switch partners on the sly, but we can file for it formally if things aren't working out. And at this point, if it's been such a long time and you're still not... you know...." He waves a hand vaguely in the air. "If you're really not interested in her, maybe you should just come clean about it."

The idea of me being uninterested is so bizarre that it takes me a moment to realize he's being serious.

"*Kest*, no. It's not that. I'm... definitely interested in her." Saying the words out loud is enough to stir my stomach; the sensation is so powerful that a wave of genuine dizziness

washes over me, and I need to take a moment to catch my breath. “Very, uh, interested.”

“Well then, what’s the *mainching* problem?” Ambrose demands. “You want to be with her, so be with her! That’s what they’re here for, anyway, isn’t it?”

“They’re technically here for—”

“Quit it with the *technicalities*, would you?” Genuine annoyance is beginning to creep into his tone. When I look up, I find myself on the receiving end of a glare. Jace just looks more worried than ever, which is somehow even worse. “You’re just making excuses, and you’re clearly starting to feel the consequence of holding back. Are you trying to prove something? Some sort of weird nobility complex?”

“That’s harsh,” Jace murmurs.

“He needs ‘harsh’ at this point, since nothing else is going to *mainching* work!”

“I don’t have a nobility complex, okay?” I sigh and fold my arms, cupping my hands around my elbows. “It’s her. She’s... she doesn’t want me.”

I brace myself for a laugh or some other jibe, but it doesn’t come, not even from Ambrose. Instead, the two of them let my words hang limply in the air, and I feel more pathetic with every passing second. “I mean... she doesn’t want anyone. That’s not what she’s here for, she said.” The attempted justifications are making me feel even worse, and yet I can’t seem to keep from babbling. “That was the first night, and I agreed, and we just... nothing has changed since then. At this point, I’m pretty sure it’s not going to, and it’s not like I’m going to try and force her to do anything she doesn’t want.”

Ambrose finally does what he’s best at and interrupts me, which is somewhat akin to a mercy killing just now. “So you talked about it once, and that’s it? Didn’t press it at all, didn’t give her a chance to change her mind? Have you considered that she’s playing hard-to-get on purpose?”

I don’t know how to tell him that I do, in fact, know that she isn’t just playing with me. It’s more gut instinct than

anything else, but I'm sure of it. I've gotten to know Ivy in a particular way that transcends speech entirely, something born from the long nights that we've spent sitting in silence and sleeping with our backs turned. There's something trusting there, something that a person with Ambrose's brashness could never understand. Even trying to describe it feels like a betrayal, somehow. My time with Ivy is ours and ours alone... in a way, it's more intimate than any sort of sex.

Then there's the fact that I *haven't*, in fact, tried to press the issue, not even once, and to Ambrose, that would seem absurd. I can imagine his not-so-subtly judgmental comments all too well; I don't need to actually hear them.

"I just don't think it's gonna work out," I say.

"What about talking to Emrys?" Jace suggests again. "If it's really that hopeless, why not file for a switch? I'm sure you're not the *only* one whose match isn't working out. There must be an exchange that could be made."

I appreciate the attempt at reassurance, but he's never been a good liar. And even if he were, I wouldn't be convinced. Switching isn't an option. The thought of sharing a room with anyone other than Ivy is... well, suffice to say that it's enough to make my stomach clench painfully. "Good thinking, but no. It's fine... it's really fine." I manage to swing a grin onto my face, and I can only hope my optimism is more convincing than Jace's. "You guys don't need to be *that* freaked out about me not getting laid yet, you know."

"It's not—"

"I'll see you tomorrow." I'm already on my feet, grabbing my tray and heading for the bussing station, and if either of them replies, I don't stick around long enough to hear it.

The whole conversation rattles me more than I want to admit. Just as I'm about to head for the barracks, I swing around and make my way to the gym instead.

It's empty and dark here, just the way I like it. I don't quite realize that I've decided to go for a swim until I'm treading

water, smooth coolness seeping through my whole body. I coach myself through a few long, deep breaths; they echo against the cavernous ceiling. I pull in one last lungful of air, close my eyes, and plunge forward.

The water creates a bubble of perfect silence around me. I swim with no goal in mind, one stroke at a time, focusing on the gentle pressure against my skin. Being partially amphibious, all of us have an affinity for the water, but I've never met anyone who loves it quite the way that I do. Practice during the daytime doesn't cut it for me. When I truly need to relax, I can only do it here: lights out, pool abandoned, utterly alone with myself and my blissful lack of thoughts.

At least, that's the usual case.

Tonight, even the water isn't enough to shake the discomfort from my skin. I try for a few laps, then give up and climb out, tenser than ever. Frustration pulses through me as I pull my clothes back on. I hate this, I've decided—the whole *mainching* thing. The exchange program, the stupid process that paired us with people we'd just met, the idiotic compulsion that led me to choose Ivy, of all people.

Everything except for her. No matter how hard I try, I can't bring myself to hate her.

It's only once I get back to our room that the prickling anxiety finally leaves me alone.

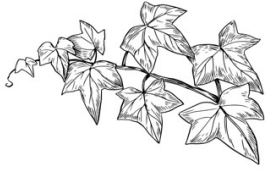
Ivy murmurs a monosyllabic greeting as I step through the door, not bothering to look up from her work. She's especially concentrated tonight: the words fly from her fingers, and her lower lip is firmly resting between her teeth.

The sight of her melts me. That's the only way to describe it. And, at that moment, I understand what I couldn't put into words under the pressure of Jace and Ambrose.

It's okay that she doesn't want to be with me. I'll never file for a switch, because nobody else would be able to make me feel quite like this.

For better or for worse, I can't trade the evenings when I get to watch her write. Not for the world.

CHAPTER 10



IT'S NOT EXACTLY my intention for Cherise to become my new project. Still, I can't deny the fierce sense of triumph that I feel when she finally begins to open up to me.

It takes time and patience—a lot of patience, enough to earn Deryn's exasperation. But she can deal with it, because she has Jace to occupy her time; more and more frequently, she's off somewhere with him while Cherise and I wander the base together. Cherise technically has a partner as well, the one named Ambrose. Though I'm quick to pick up on the fact that their relationship is less than savory. At first, I assumed she was indifferent toward him, just as she tends to be towards everyone. But the more I get to know her, the more I realize she practically despises him.

As a matter of fact, according to her own words, she despises all of them.

"It's all about the sex," she says, wrinkling that pointy little nose. We're on the south side of the base, an area occupied mainly by insane-looking obstacle courses and running tracks. There's a little hill here that Cherise particularly likes, under the cover of a tree not too dissimilar to a willow. Though she doesn't say so in as many words, I'm pretty sure that she's fond of the cover that it provides, along with the sturdiness of the trunk against her back. Up here, on the high ground, she can see everything that's going on, from the needle-like building at the crest of the base's northern end to the disposal units lining the south wall. There's no room for anyone to sneak up on her. When the weather's nice, I've

learned she can often be found here, braiding strands of that strange deep blue grass. Today is no exception.

“*All* about sex?” I repeat. The comment came out of nowhere, as far as I can tell: one moment, we were sitting in silence; the next, she was hissing derision through her perfect teeth.

She nods. “It’s all they think about. All they talk about. Day in and day out. Nothing but sex.”

I trace the path of her glare and find that it’s fixed on a complex rope course perhaps a hundred meters past the base of the hill. A platoon of Ixionians are making their way across it, their playful shouts sculpted into unintelligible noise by the smooth current of the wind.

“Well... some of them, I suppose.”

She gives her head a vehement shake. “All of them. Why else do you think they would set up something like this? Your friend thinks she’s found a partner, but she hasn’t. We’re sex slaves with a stipend. That’s it.”

I don’t consider myself an idealist by any stretch of the imagination, but that seems a little extreme even to me. It’s not like she says it with any trace of regret, either. It’s just a fact in her mind, and I have a feeling she has no intention of budging on the matter.

But I’m no more acquiescent than I am idealistic, and I’m at least going to put up something of a fight.

“Not all of them even *have* sex, though,” I argue.

She lets out a little snort, and manages to make even that look pretty. “Right. There are freaks like that dead-eyed commander. I’d be surprised if they even reproduce.”

That also seems extreme, to say the least. “No, I mean—not even all of the soldiers do. Some of them are really just... living together. I think.”

For the first time all afternoon, she looks up at me. Her eyes are so pale that they seem almost transparent, closer to discs of glass than functioning body parts. She studies me for a

long moment, perhaps trying to discern whether I'm messing around with her.

"Just living together?" she repeats. Her voice, usually a whisper, has lowered to a growl. "I don't know what fantasy world you're living in, but I have to say that I'm jealous."

"I—"

"No. You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe there is some couple that's reading each other bedtime stories and giving each other foot rubs and covering their eyes when the other one undresses. That sounds like its own type of nightmare, all things considered. Easier to work for two hours a day than twenty."

She seems to really believe it, too. I briefly entertain the idea of telling her about Cassian, but that doesn't feel fair to her or to him—or to me, for that matter. Instead, I just shrug and give a wordless, noncommittal murmur.

Cherise's attention returns to her hands, which are occupied with a braid of grass that's grown to a respectable six inches. I don't know how she keeps up such a repetitive task without dying of frustration, but her focus is as deft and intent as ever. "A paycheck's a paycheck, in any case," she sighs, her voice soft as a spring breeze once more.

Those words fill me with a wave of sadness so coldly intense that I almost shiver. It shouldn't break my heart to hear her say so when it's what I've been telling myself all along. And yet....

"Right," I mumble. "Paycheck's a paycheck."

The braid suddenly twists in her hands, straining until it's on the verge of splitting apart. "But *shit*," she says, voice dripping with poison, "I'd give anything not to have been saddled with that bastard Ambrose."

"He's that bad? Does he...." My stomach clenches. "Does he force himself on you?"

"He's a cock with legs, to be generous, but no. He's not a bad person so much as an unbearable one. Thinks he knows everything about women, but has no idea how to pleasure one."

And listening to him try to flirt is like nails on a chalkboard... worse, really. Can't think of that asshole's smug little grin without cringing." As if to punctuate her sentence, the braid does break, and she's left holding two limp halves, gazing down at them with a blank expression. "I don't hate that friend of yours, but I hate how she feels. I hate that anyone is capable of feeling like that in a place like this. I..." Something shifts in her face, like she only just realized that her little weaving effort has gone awry. She tosses the broken pieces onto the ground, where they cut snaky lines into the blue wave of still-living grass. I wait for an end to her sentence, but it never comes.

"Hey," I say after we've sat in silence for a while. "I... I'm really sorry about you and Ambrose. You could try filing for a switch, right?" My hope is half-hearted, but I've always thought that half is better than nothing.

"How optimistic of you," she says dryly. "I don't think so, Ivy. Everyone else is convinced that they've *fallen in love*, if you haven't noticed." She cocks her fingertips in air quotes around the offending phrase. "So unless you're willing to give yours up, I'm afraid I'm shit out of luck."

My body's response is sudden and severe enough to scare me. My throat closes up like I've got a bad flu, my stomach roils, and the entirety of my skin seems to set itself on fire. Temples pounding, I try to take a deep breath, but it feels like swallowing hot coals. It takes several scalding seconds before I can even begin to conjure a response. Lucky for me, Cherise is busy brooding, her fingers rustling through the undergrowth.

What the hell is wrong with you, Ivy? I close my eyes, ignoring the way that scarlet beats against them. *Stop it. Stop this.* I don't know what's worse—the idea of Cherise with Cassian, or the idea of myself with Ambrose. What I do know is that there isn't a chance on this goddamned planet or any other that I would let something like that happen.

"No," I finally say.

Cherise looks up. "Hm?"

I struggle for a moment to remember what her original suggestion even was. “I’m... not willing to give mine up. I don’t... I don’t think you two would be a good fit.”

Disinterest clouds her face. “Mm. Don’t really want him, anyway. It was hard enough getting used to one of these jarheads; I’m not jumping with excitement to do it all over again.”

“...Right. Of course.” Then, before I can stop myself: “You just *really* wouldn’t be a good fit. At all. Like, I can’t even imagine it.”

“I appreciate the transparency, but you don’t need to be jealous.”

“Jealous—?” I start to laugh, but it comes out closer to gagging. “I’m not. Jealous. I’m not jealous. I mean, sure, I’m not tripping over myself to be with Ambrose, either, but—you and Cassian... bad idea.”

“I see.”

From her tone, she *sees* a lot more than I wish she did, and maybe even more than I do. But I don’t have time to linger on that. For a reason I can’t name, I need to get out of here, and the sooner, the better.

“Listen... I’ll see you later, okay?” I brace myself against the tree trunk to pull myself to my feet; it’s unexpectedly pliant under my fingers, almost spongy.

Cherise doesn’t react, other than to murmur a small “Okay.” For a moment, I’m torn. I don’t want to leave her alone. I’ve seen how the others treat her, or rather how they *don’t* treat her. To the rest of the women, she may as well be a stray shadow. They don’t know about her bitter edge, or about the startling bursts of articulacy that so often punctuate her silence. They’ve never bothered to find out.

But I can’t. The thought of spending another moment here makes me reel with nausea.

I hesitate for one more instant, on the verge of saying something more, then turn away and hurry down the hill. Gravity embraces me to the point where I almost pitch over,

but I manage to catch myself on a stray knoll, pulling several blades of grass free from the soil in the process.

“Hey there, gorgeous. Need a hand?”

I look up, and my breath catches in my throat.

Ambrose.

He grins down at me, teeth starkly pale against his copper skin. He must have been one of the soldiers on the rope course: he’s shucked his shirt, and sweat shines on his exposed abdominals. There’s no denying that he’s a handsome one, but something about being physically beneath him makes my instincts ring with discomfort. I clamber to my feet and shake my head.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“Of course, of course.” He inclines his head. “I’m not sure if we’ve met before. I’m—”

“Ambrose Drake,” I blurt out.

Rather than looking surprised, he chuckles to himself. “Well, yes. And you’re Ivy Alecto, but I thought we might as well do something along the lines of a proper introduction.”

I toss a swift glance back up the hill. If Cherise is watching us, I can’t tell; her face is hidden behind a cloud of windswept red hair, further disguised by the lazy tendrils of the not-quite-willow tree.

“...Right. Well, good to meet you.” I favor his extended hand with a swift shake, acutely aware of how sharp his clawed nails feel against my skin, then draw away. “Sorry, but I need to be on my way.”

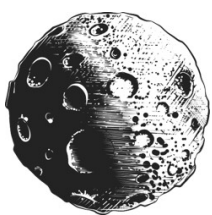
“Of course. Have a good one, Ivy.”

“You... you too.”

It’s only once I’m halfway back to the barracks that I realize: Ambrose is the first Ixionian I’ve touched, skin-to-skin. Cassian helped me in the elevator, but his sleeve was a barrier between us. I was grateful for that at the time... but now, somehow, I’m far less sure.

I'm far less sure about a lot of things—

No. Cherise threw me off, that's all. I give my head a firm shake, teeth clenched, and once again resume my trek toward the place where I can finally be alone.



CHAPTER 11

CASSIAN

GOING to bed early has never worked for me, so I don't know why I keep trying. It always seems like a good idea in the moment, when my muscles ache and my eyes are already gumming up with exhaustion, but things play out the exact same way every time: I shuffle around beneath my blankets, restless in the dark, until long after I would have fallen asleep on any other night. If I do manage to drift off, it's only in uneven snatches here and there, more often than not punctuated with discomfoting dreams. By the time my alarm beeps, I'm twice as tired as I was to begin with.

I know all of this; I know the patterns of my body. But, kest, it's hard to resist those plump pillows when I feel like the walking dead.

Ivy and her journal aren't helping. The monotony of her typing has become almost hypnotic to me, tantalizing in its regularity. If I were to lie down now, surely even the blue-white glow of the room's light through my eyelids wouldn't be enough to keep me awake. I'd be gone in moments, adrift in a current of dreams, pleasantly haunted by the constant backdrop of her hands at work.

Don't do it. Come on. You know better.

Even as I struggle against it, I let out a jaw-cracking yawn. Ivy pauses for a moment, but I don't know whether it's a response to me or just another instance of her careful deliberation. In either case, she resumes soon enough, once more spurring that soporific buzz against my temples.

I can't handle this. I stand up abruptly, which she doesn't seem to notice, and deliberate for a second about whether or not to say anything. I feel strange going to shower without telling her, but it's not like she ever does the same for me. And striking up any sort of conversation with her feels risky right now. It'd be too easy to let it slip out that I'm *sust* near getting lulled into dreamland by the familiar rush of her fingers on the tablet. She would probably find a way to be offended by that.

Instead, I traipse to the bathroom without a word. If she hesitates as the door slides shut behind me... but, no, of course she doesn't. What reason would she have?

As soon as I'm under the hot water, I realize I've made a mistake.

I don't shower at night, as a rule. I've never liked it. It leaves my skin too slick against the sheets, and I always wake up feeling as though I've been dunked in oil, wrapped in a damp rag, and left to rot.

But here I am, and *kest*, it was the wrong decision. I've been taking my nightly frustration as a given, committed to the knowledge that I can only find relief in my sleep, but now....

Now, I can't ignore just how much her presence has hardened me, my cock aching almost painfully. I haven't touched it since well before Ivy arrived. Before, I didn't feel the urge as often—there's not much on the base to stir me to arousal. But ever since I met Ivy, I've felt the lust building, like a tide ready to break loose. I've been too embarrassed by my reaction to her to risk relieving it in the shower with her on the other side of the door—but I don't think I can bear it any longer. The ache is too overwhelming.

My first instinct is to panic. I can't go back into our room like this. She'd be able to see easily, even if I were to cover myself with a towel, and it's not like I can take care of it when she's right next to me in bed. That leaves me with only one real option, and my hand knows it before I do.

Doing this is wrong. It's only going to hurt me... and yet a faint gasp tears free from my lips as I begin to touch myself, quickly deepening into a moan as I wrap my hand around my

thick, aching cock and start to stroke. I've done this before—everyone has—but I had no idea it could feel so deeply pleasurable. This is much, much more than a sense of gratifying physical stimulus. It isn't about me at all; it's about her, and my attempts to resist thoughts of her are trailing down the drain alongside the steaming shower water.

Tastes like a dream, Ambrose said. I know her smell, but her taste... hard, hot breaths crest my lips. Even as I fight to wrestle it down, one memory is rising to a boil inside of me: the time that I gripped her arm in the elevator. It was brief, and she pulled away with a respectable amount of strength for someone so seemingly delicate. Yet she was so impossibly supple, even more so than I imagined from the silken sight of her skin. She's built so differently, even at the very surface. If she's so foreign and yet so inviting on the outside, I can't possibly anticipate the softness that might lie within—

I lean back, closing my eyes and savoring the hot water as it streams down my cheeks and temples, beading at the crest of my parted lips. Ivy burns against the darkness of my eyelids: her lips, her swift fingers, the way that her movements are somehow delicate and spirited all at once. How would she take me? As irrational as it is, a vision begins coalescing in my mind. I could stop now. I could step out, shower still running, and walk into the bedroom where she sits mere meters away. Her eyes would widen at the sight of me, unable to resist following me as I crossed over to my side of the bed and leaned back into the pillows. I wouldn't do anything, wouldn't need to do anything but wait as her breath came faster and faster, and when she couldn't bear it anymore, she would finally ask... no, she would beg for me to let her touch me.

My chest is pounding as hard and fast as my cock. Dexterous fingers, full parted lips.

I'm sorry....

Don't be. Come here....

Or what if I were to resist her? To tease her and watch those enigmatic eyes darken with frustration as I satisfied myself in bed beside her? I can see her upper lip curling back,

her thin shoulders tensing as she fights against breaking her own rules. A losing battle, we'd both know, but she may well be the stubbornest person I've ever met.

Go on, I would say at last, and I can hear the cry of vexation that would shiver through her as she wound her fingers in the sheet.

I can't....

You can do whatever you want.

Steam blossoms around me as I stroke myself, faster and faster—I'm not going to last long, not long at all—

Her head is finally dipping towards me, her furrowed brow melting into dazed bliss as she finally allows herself to flush her heat against my own. It would take so little. Even through those thin sleep pants of hers, the brush of something fiery with need, soft against hard—my hand moves yet faster—the weight of her hip bones, the moan of furious surrender mixed with ecstatic relief....

I know it's coming just before it does, giving me just enough time to bring one hand up and clamp it over my mouth. Even with my fingers crushing my lips, the sound that rips out of me is tremendous. Thick waves of pleasure thrum through my frame, juddering all the way from my head to my curling toes, and I'm barely aware of the wall as I slump against it.

I come back to myself in full only once I'm on the ground, my head and shoulder braced against the wall, shower water pattering down indifferently. My lungs heave against my ribs. I... don't know what to think. I *can't* think, at least not outside of the simple phrase rolling through my mind like a series of aftershocks.

So this is how it's meant to feel.

And that isn't even true. *It*—I can't stand to assign a more explicit term—isn't meant to be a solitary act, alone in the shower like a shameful adolescent. It's intended to be reciprocal. Not my hand administering those hot, swift strokes, but rather....

A new spell of dizziness threatens to overcome me. I combat it by slamming the flat white button to turn the water off. The relative chill that follows is a welcome one; I was beginning to feel as though I would melt into nothing if I spent another instant consumed by overbearing heat. I close my eyes and breathe steadily—in through my nose, out through my mouth—until my heart has finally slowed to a more reasonable rate.

I can't look at her when I go back into the room. The sound of her typing pauses for a moment when I step through the doorway, and my cheeks burn at the thought of her looking at me, even with a towel wrapped around my waist. Her definition of modesty, apparently, is contagious. I quickly cross to my side of the bed and sit, forcing myself to stare out the window towards the setting suns. Orange light spills across the field, painting a deep contrast with the blue shadows of the grass. I watch it until my eyes burn, and I still don't look away. I would be lying if I said that it distracts me from what just happened in the bathroom. Every one of my scales is humming with a strange current, conscious of every sound that comes from Ivy's corner of the room.

Maybe it was a fluke, I try to tell myself, to no result whatsoever. I may not be the best at understanding my feelings, but I trust them enough to know that this is something unprecedented. I can imagine Ambrose laughing, calling me a starry-eyed dreamer—albeit in cruder words. But I can also imagine Jace. Jace and that odd smile that he's been flaunting lately; Jace with a certain gleam in his eyes that's never been there in the past. The thought of speaking to him about this briefly crosses my mind, but I dismiss it. I can't even describe what's happening to me. How the *kest* would I go about explaining it to someone else—even if that someone is my best friend?

My thoughts loop around themselves, wearing down the same track over and over, and yet I can't seem to get tired of it. Minutes creep by, punctuated only by the patter of her fingertips. Every recollection of those precious moments in the shower sets off a faint aftershock through my entire body. The hundredth time is no less potent than the first.

I could do this forever, I think.

When the sun finally sinks past the horizon, neither of us bothers to turn on a light.

She gets in bed shortly after I do, following her usual evening shower. Heat billows off of her when she emerges, so I have an acute awareness of her presence even in the perfect darkness. As always, she crawls onto the very edge of her side, barely stirring the sheets, and curls up.

“Ivy?”

“Yes?”

It’s only once she responds that I realize I have no idea what I intend to say, which seems to be a problem when it comes to speaking with her. I hesitate for a moment before asking the only question that comes to mind.

“Why did you sign up for this in the first place? If you didn’t want to be partnered... why volunteer at all?”

She sighs, but doesn’t seem exasperated so much as melancholic. “Money, mostly.”

I could leave it at that. I *should* leave it at that, but my mouth is once again getting the better of me, running on without my permission. “Mostly?”

“Yeah.”

“So there’s some other thing? If it’s mostly money... what else is it? Only if you want to tell me.”

The ensuing silence makes it clear that she definitely doesn’t. I scowl into the darkness. What compelled me to ask such a stupid question in the first place? I know how private she is. It’s just about the only thing I know about her at all, aside from the one thing that she likes—writing—and the one thing that she dislikes—me. The fact that she answered my first question was far more than I expected; why did I think it would be a good idea to pry even deeper?

I lie there without moving, my eyes fixed on the darkness before me, until my thoughts teeter in the direction of the shower once again. I give my head a tiny jerk, barely enough to disturb the pillow. Nope. I can't afford to go there. Not when she's so close to me. Not when I can hear her breathing... more, even now, pulsing in and out with the distant regularity of sleep. *Kest*. How late is it, anyway? She's never been out before me, so long as I can remember. I try my best not to squirm, overly conscious of how it may disturb her.

"I don't know," she says.

I freeze up. Is she talking in her sleep? Did I somehow manage to move enough to rouse her, despite my best efforts to remain stock-still?

I don't quite realize I'm holding my breath until she speaks again.

"You're right. There is something else, but... I don't know what it is. I haven't been able to figure it out."

I exhale in one swift puff, light with relief. Ivy seems to take it the wrong way; her next words are curled with irritation.

"Sorry to bother you. People who ask questions generally want answers."

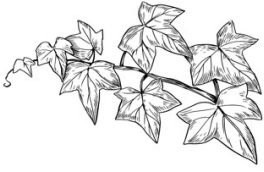
"No... no. It's not that. I just thought you were asleep."

This time, her hesitation is brief.

"I thought you were, too."

By the time the implication of her words hits me, I'm already dreaming.

CHAPTER 12



IT TURNS out that my encounter with Ambrose at the foot of the hill isn't an isolated event. For one reason or another, he seems to have gotten it in his head that we're friends; at least, that's the best I can tell from the smirks that he angles toward me whenever I happen to pass him by. I'm not even sure how he manages to appear so often—I rarely see Cassian outside of the evenings. Yet, Ambrose, despite being in the same platoon, must cross paths with me a good three times a day.

Cherise doesn't seem interested in bringing him up again, which is certainly fair. At the same time, I know she hasn't forgotten the conversation we held under what I've come to think of as her tree. That sharper side of her personality has been cropping up more and more often, but I understand at this point that it isn't always venomous in nature. Despite being the quietest person I've ever met, Cherise has real spirit. Her laugh, on the rare occasion that I can coax it out of her, is impossibly sweet, and she isn't afraid to land a lewd joke when the opportunity presents itself.

I don't know whether or not she actually listens when I read to her, but I like to do so anyway. My most recent visit to the library left me with an armful of volumes on the basic sciences of the planet, more or less all of the -ologies: geology, ecology, neurology, biology. It's a latter one of these that sits in my lap now, fragile pages flapping idly in the breeze. I'm skimming it more than properly reading, just voicing the occasional interesting fact that I stumble upon. This isn't a book that was written to be understood from the human perspective. It's not exactly easy to understand the functions of

various organs when I don't recognize the names of those organs in the first place.

"So the scales are for protection," I note aloud. Cherise is sitting with her back to the tree, seemingly half-asleep, the veins of her translucent eyelids stark beneath the glare of the sun. "That's why their patterning is so inconsistent: they grow thickest around the most sensitive organs."

"Mm."

"Eyelids, temples, the hollow of the throat, critical nerves in the limbs...."

I almost bite my tongue off in a hurry to shut my mouth before the words reproductive organs can slip out. Neither of us needs to know about that. Though, come to think of it, I suppose she already does. Hell, maybe I'm the only one in the dark. My eyes skate down the remainder of the page, but there's no additional detail. Not that I'm looking for it in the first place.

"I guess that makes sense, right? With them being naturally good soldiers. The, you know, protection."

She doesn't reply at all this time. Maybe she has fallen asleep. Resolving to keep quiet, I turn to the next page, where I'm greeted with a pair of full-body diagrams. The sheer difference in size between them is enough to still my breath in my chest. All this time, I assumed that the females of Ixion would be just as burly and broad as the males, but it looks like their average build is only slightly less diminutive than ours. Other than scales of their own and more harshly angled faces, in fact, it seems like the standard Ixionian woman isn't that different from us at all. Even the horns are missing.

The male figure is the opposite in every way. My eyes automatically dart from patch to patch of scales, aligning them visually with what I just read.

Heavy protection behind the ears provides a powerful defense against cranial trauma.

While the back of the knee is mostly covered, a small area above the thigh is considered to be a particularly vulnerable

spot, and should be covered with care at all times.

The scaling of the penis is uniquely fine and smooth to allow for—

“I started working in the brothels when I was fifteen,” Cherise says.

I nearly drop the book in my haste to slam it shut, heat rearing in my cheeks. I see with a swell of relief that her eyes are still closed, but it still takes a moment to fight past the sudden bolt of adrenaline. It doesn't help that she had made the statement as though it were the least interesting thing in the world.

“You... did?”

“Don't stare at me.”

“I'm not,” I lie. I have no idea how she knew that I was watching her in the first place.

“Yeah. I did. The same old story that you've heard a thousand times. Synthetic drugs, one living parent in an impossible amount of debt, and gunshots around the neighborhood at night. So I left, and I found work at the only place that would hire someone like me. It's the only job I've ever had. I'm good at it.” There's no pride in her voice.

I don't know what to say. I think she can tell, because she keeps talking after a moment.

“Anyway, this whole thing paid a hell of a lot better than anything I've done before. So I took the chance. I don't regret it, either.”

“You don't?”

She shakes her head and opens her eyes, but still doesn't look in my direction. “Not for one moment. Not even when Ambrose is... well.” The little gagging noise that she makes somehow manages to sound as delicate as anything else that comes out of her mouth. “And it's not just because of the money. I feel... I don't know. I feel like I belong here, somehow, more than I've ever belonged anywhere.” Sarcasm

twists her tone. “Maybe I’ve got some alien blood of my own. Never really knew my mother, so who’s to say?”

My breath comes hot and fast to my lips. Is she saying what I think she is? I want to tell her that I’m the same way, that I’ve always felt an indescribable pull toward the stars, and yet I can’t risk sounding like I’m trying to make this about me. Over the past few weeks, I’ve become all too familiar with her capacity for shutting herself off at the slightest provocation. When that happens, it can take days to reach the same degree of ease we’d previously established.

“I don’t know. Maybe it sounds stupid.” Before I can protest, she’s on her feet, hands crossed tightly at her waist. Despite the day’s pleasant warmth, I glimpse a rash of goosebumps across her pale forearms. “I need to go.”

“Wait—”

“I’ll see you, Ivy.”

With that, she sets off down the hill, her shoulders pulled in so that she looks even smaller than usual. Half-standing, I stare after her. I couldn’t have said anything wrong—I didn’t say anything at all. What possibly could have sent her running off in such a hurry?

I’m not given long to wonder.

“And here we are again,” Ambrose announces from behind me. “Funny how these things tend to happen, don’t you think?”

I brace one hand against the tree trunk and pull myself the rest of the way to my feet. My jaw is stiff enough to ache; I take a deep breath, forcing some of the tension out of it, before turning to face him.

“Funny is one word for it.”

His characteristic grin grows even wider at that. “Did you have another in mind?”

“Um. Coincidental? Weird?”

He chuckles. “Maybe so. Truth be told, coincidence isn’t much of a factor this time. I figured I’d find you here.” The

sun shines straight into his starkly pale eyes, turning them into flat, featureless coins.

“Me, or Cherise?”

I think I know the answer before he says it, and sure enough: “You, of course.”

I toss a glance over my shoulder. Cherise has already vanished in the distance, leaving us very, very alone. Something hums in the distance like an incoming plane. The air tastes suddenly thicker, almost metallic.

“Well...” I steer my focus back toward Ambrose and his unyielding grin. “You found me.”

“I certainly did. Listen.” He takes a step forward. I resist the urge to match it with a backward pace of my own. “Cassian and I are close. Very close. And I don’t mean to invade *your* privacy, but he may have let it slip that you two... well, that you haven’t been as lively as some of us behind closed doors.”

Cassian told him that? Indignance rises in my chest, but I don’t really have any room to talk. Deryn and Cherise are well aware of the situation with Cassian and me; why shouldn’t he tell his friends too? Still, there’s no denying the sting of betrayal running through me. I wish he had at least asked.

“Cheri and I got off to a great start, as I’m sure she’s told you. But things have been winding down a bit lately. You don’t mind that I’m telling you this?”

I shake my head mutely. It’s not that I *mind* it; I’m just baffled. We’ve talked once in our lives, and now he’s confiding in me?

“Well, hear me out. If Cassian’s icing you out, and Cheri is doing the same for me... why not have a little fun, ourselves?”

His tone is so smooth that it takes a moment for the meaning of his words to fully land. Once it does, I can’t shake my head fast enough.

“No. That’s....”

“Oh, I *know* it’s technically against the rules.” He braces an elbow on the tree trunk and leans against it. This time, I do take a quick step backward. “But I think we can find a loophole, if it comes to that. It’s not like we’re swapping. Just... going in for a little extra.”

“Thanks, Ambrose. I’m flattered.” *But after what I’ve heard from Cherise, you’re about the last person I’d want to sleep with on the planet—on any planet, for that matter.* “But you’re looking in the wrong place. My agreement with Cassian”—I struggle to ignore the way that speaking his name makes my face grow hot—“is a mutual one. I’m not interested in him, or in any of you. Sorry.”

The smile finally loosens into a softer expression. He doesn’t scowl; his lips still have an upward tilt, but it’s a smaller, sadder one. He sighs and pulls away from the tree, nodding slowly.

“I understand. Worth a shot, I figured.” Suddenly, he drops his jaw open, and he extends a forked tongue, deep purple and overlong. He runs it in a lazy spiral through the air, then laughs again. “Taste that? There’s a storm coming.”

“A storm?” I only realize now that Ixion has had nothing but clear weather since my arrival. As stupid as it seems in retrospect, I didn’t once consider the fact that this planet could *have* storms.

“That’s right. Best get inside... I have a feeling it’s going to be a rager.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I bid a quick farewell and hasten down the hill, noting as I do that the metallic quality of the air has become even more prominent. All the while, I swear I can feel his eyes on my back—but when I turn, I can see nothing but the outline of Cherise’s tree against the rapidly darkening sky.

Ambrose isn’t joking about the storm. It picks up less than five minutes later, deepening the air outside to a poisonous-looking mossy green. The wind howls like an army of ghosts, and rain

scores the windows of the atrium in droplets as big as my fist. Still, the glass—the stuff that *looks* like glass, I remind myself—holds up just fine. The other women's stark faces and hushed voices suggest an anxiety akin to my own. Still, the Ixionians don't seem bothered whatsoever. As far as I can tell, this is completely normal to them.

Still, I can't shake my unease, and I'm not sure that it's entirely the fault of the apocalyptic weather. Even the greenhouse, which I've come to adopt as a little chamber of solace between the bunks and the dining halls, feels swept up in the turbulence of the outdoors. I'm used to some of the plants swaying with something uncannily close to sentience, but now there isn't a still tendril in the place.

It's only once I reach our room that I feel as though I can breathe again.

A gust of heat and rush of sound tells me that Cassian is showering. That makes this the second time in as many days, which is more than a little uncharacteristic for him; I've gotten the sense that the dragon-scaled Ixionians don't need to clean themselves nearly as often as those of us with softer flesh. Still, I won't complain. He's always warmer after a shower, and I've come to appreciate the way that it touches me from across the bed. I could use that tonight more than ever.

Out of habit, I try my best to write. There's so much to describe, what with the strange storm, but my mind keeps lapsing toward Ambrose and his smile. I don't want to put that in my journal. I haven't felt this much hesitance since the first time I tried writing about Cassian, but this is different. With him, I knew that my memories would be clearer than anything I could put into words. With Ambrose, I just don't see what's worth remembering in the first place. If anything, I'm sure that both of us would rather forget his far-from-successful attempt to get something going between us.

I jot down a few notes about the pellets of rain and the jaden hue of the air, then call it a night. It's far earlier than I'd generally go to bed, but Cassian's wide window is as dark as any night, punctuated only by silver eruptions where the raindrops meet their ends. I get my pajamas together and wait

outside the bathroom door. When Cassian emerges, wreathed in steam, he does a double take.

“Ivy. You’re back.”

“Yeah, well. I wasn’t planning on leaving you forever.” Before he can respond, I slink past him and roll the door shut behind me.

The shower, as always, is nice. I haven’t quite been able to get the hang of the pressure valve—I tend to end up fluctuating between a light mist and a downpour hard enough to sting my shoulders—but the water is warm. I can’t imagine myself getting tired of the purplish gel that seems to be the soldiers’ only hygiene product. I haven’t touched my own soap since my first week here. Somehow, the not-quite-floral scent of this stuff feels more like home than what I’ve been using all my life.

When I emerge, Cassian is already in bed with his back to me. The lights are on, but he’s drawn the blackout curtain over the window. Tension seeps out of my shoulders. I hadn’t realized how much the sight of the rain was fazing me, but I can’t deny the relief I feel now that it’s gone. I don’t mind bad weather. Hell, I *liked* a good thunderstorm back on Earth. This, though... this is just too much.

I crawl in on my side and nestle beneath the ever-so-soft sheets. Wordlessly, Cassian flips the light off. That’s the closest we tend to get to a goodnight. I don’t expect anything more, and I don’t get anything more—that is, until I’m teetering on the verge of sleep.

“Are you okay?”

At first, I think that the words are all in my head, leaking out of some nascent dream. But as I come back to myself more fully, I realize they’re most definitely from him.

“What do you mean?” My own voice is slurred with drowsiness.

“I... would think it’s self-explanatory. Are you feeling alright?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“...Sorry I asked.”

“No—wait.” I prop myself up on one elbow and turn to face him, even though I can’t see a thing through the pitch darkness. “It’s okay. I’m glad you did. I... I don’t know.”

I expect him to laugh at me, but of course he doesn’t. The only response I get is a faint rustle of blankets as he readjusts his position. It occurs to me now that I rolled away from the edge of the bed at some point when I was half-asleep; at this moment, I have no idea how close we are to one another.

For some reason, I keep talking. “There are... a lot of things that I don’t know, I guess. Now that I’m here. More than I thought. You’ve probably... shit, you’ve probably been deployed to all sorts of places I can’t imagine, but this is my first time on another planet. It’s... profound. Like my body and mind both know I’m not supposed to be here. That it isn’t natural. But at the same time....”

And there it is again, that nagging sensation that was on the tip of my tongue earlier, when I was sitting under the tree with Cherise. Before the storm. I can’t articulate it now any more than I could then, but I don’t need to, because Cassian is speaking again.

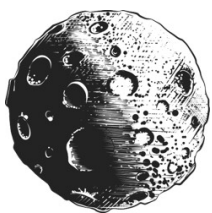
“Ivy?”

“Yes?”

“...It’s going to be okay.”

Despite myself, I smile, settling back down against my pillow. Sleepiness hits me all at once, darkly inviting, but I stave it off just long enough to reply.

“Yeah. I know it is.”



CHAPTER 13

CASSIAN

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT, I'm unable to shake the feeling that there's something she isn't telling me. It even crops up in my dreams, albeit in the most abstract of ways: images of Ivy with her back turned, or a claustrophobic loop of motion where I'm unable to open a door with her trapped behind it. Every time I pull myself to my feet, my sweaty palms slip against the smooth metal, and I end up on the ground again. Throughout the endless loops, her voice never changes. She's whispering something from the other side, but it's too low for me to make out the individual words. When I try to call out to her, I find that my throat is entirely sealed.

The blaring of the alarm is what finally rouses me. Blurry with the remnants of my nightmares, it takes me a moment to remember where I am—a moment too long for Ivy, who groans and twists at my side. I slam it into silence, and only then realize that she's far closer to me than usual. Close enough that I can feel the heat rising off of her skin and the quick, even pulses of her breath.

As if she can feel me looking at her, her eyes spring open, and I quickly cast my own gaze aside. Comprehension hits her a moment later, and she mutters a handful of her strange expletives under her breath as she shimmies farther to her side of the bed.

“Didn't mean to,” she says. “Sometimes I roll over in my sleep; I... wasn't trying to get in your space.”

“Hey, it's okay. It happens.”

“Whatever. Sorry.”

She was so *mainching* close. My body aches and my cock hardens at the thought of everything that could have happened if I weren't so careful not to push, not to make her uncomfortable. She's been in my bed long enough that her scent clings to the sheets, even after they're washed, I'm sure of it. I can still smell her whenever I walk into the room, whether she's here or not.

An apology of my own teeters on the tip of my tongue, but I hold it back. I don't want to make this more uncomfortable for her than it already is. Instead, I stand, willing my throbbing erection into submission, stretch, and cross the room to my closet. I've showered every night since that first time I gave in and stroked myself to climax with thoughts of Ivy, unable to stop myself. One taste of the pleasure, and I can't get enough. It feels like I'm barely holding back the tide of how badly I want her, like a flimsy dam built up to contain my need, but it's all I have. My hand—and every filthy thought I can imagine of what I'd do to her if she ever expressed a desire for me.

It doesn't take long to pull on my uniform, and by the time I turn back around, she's sitting straight up. Her eyes are wide and intense as ever in the weak morning light. I still haven't figured out how they manage to be so green and so brown all at once.

I expect her to whisk away as soon as I'm facing her, but she doesn't. She only lifts a hand, runs it through her bed-mussed hair, and then—to no small amount of surprise from me—she speaks.

“...Hey.”

For a moment, it's like my mouth forgets how to reply. By the time I regain the use of my tongue again, I'm worried that she's going to interpret my hesitance as something more than it is—but she still watches me with those mesmerizing eyes. “Hey, uh... what's up?”

Her face sours. “Just saying hello. Is that so strange to you?”

“Of course not. I... To be honest, I'm not used to you talking in the morning.”

I don't expect that to soften her expression, but for some reason, it does. She tilts her chin back and cocks her head to the side, a tiny smirk nudging her lips.

"I could say the same to you."

"You started it."

She shrugs. "I'm offering a casual greeting. Not exactly unusual. That's what you did, back when we were first paired. Or have you forgotten?"

I haven't forgotten. I don't think I could forget in a thousand lifetimes—but I'm not about to admit that. "Right. I guess so."

"What's up' with you, then?" She frames air quotes around the first couple of words, but the sarcasm doesn't feel malicious. As a matter of fact, it's benign enough that I find myself giving her a real answer.

"I just want to make sure you're okay, I guess." From the moment the words are out of my mouth, I half-regret them—but there's no going back from here. "You acted weird last night. And this morning. Not that it's a *bad* thing, just... well. You asked. There's the answer."

She doesn't mock or dismiss me instantly, which I take as a good sign. Instead, she lets out a low sigh and gathers her legs onto the bed, wrapping her arms around them and resting her chin on her knees.

"Yeah, well. I guess there is something."

I wait.

"I had a weird... thing yesterday. With Ambrose."

My stomach calcifies. "You..." *Keep it together*; I urge myself, but my thoughts are rapidly spiraling out of my control. Ambrose. Of course, it would be Ambrose. It couldn't have been some other soldier, some guy I didn't give two *susts* about; it had to be one of my best friends. "I thought you weren't... interested in that sort of thing."

Her brow dips. "What sort of thing?"

“You’re the one who said it.” I can’t stand to look at her anymore, but I also can’t look away. “You had a ‘weird thing’ with Ambrose. I get it. I’m sorry I asked.”

“Cassian—”

“Really. It’s none of my business.”

“*Cassian.*” She straightens up, fully scowling at this point. “Will you listen to me?”

“I don’t particularly want to hear the... the *sultry details* of —”

“It’s not like that!” she snaps. “You’re right. It’s not what I’m here for. Do you think I’m going to turn you down, and then go and hook up with some playboy that I barely even know? Thanks, but I happen to have standards.”

I raise an eyebrow, confused by her terminology. “Playboy?”

Ivy lets out a small huff. “Yeah. A guy who sleeps around.”

“Sleeps around?”

I can see her jaw clench, and somehow even in her frustration, she’s still stunningly beautiful to me.

And probably to Ambrose, too.

“A guy who has sex with a lot of women. Which—I thought you guys didn’t, and that was the whole point of this program. To give the soldiers a chance if any of us wanted to—”

“Not all of us follow the rules,” I say dryly. “Especially not Ambrose.”

Now I don’t know *what* to think, especially about the first part. As if turning me down was somehow more difficult than doing so with Ambrose. “You mean you didn’t...?”

“Of course I didn’t. Good thing to know that’s where your mind goes, though, I guess. Never took you for the perverted type.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” My frozen insides are rapidly melting, giving way to a hot rush of shame. “I didn’t mean to....”

“Yeah, well. Neither did I.” She pauses for a moment, but plows on before I can press any further. “He said some shit about how he knew that we—that you and I—weren’t... doing that. And offered himself to me, instead.”

As her words set in, my awareness narrows to a single burning point. Offered himself, did he? He went up to her, fully aware of our arrangement, knowing perfectly well that there were sanctions in place for anyone who violated the official partnerships... all of that, and still he took it upon himself to ask—no, to *proposition* her.

At that moment, I’m just about ready to kill him.

“Cassian?”

“I have to go,” I hear myself say. “I’m late.”

“Late for breakfast? But you just—”

“I’ll see you later.”

“You aren’t going to—”

I’m out the door before she can finish. My breath hitches and my temples pulse as I ride down the elevator, laser-focused, a single goal dominating my mind.

He’s there when I arrive: sitting at our usual triangular table at the edge of the mess hall, a mug of stimulant in one hand, tossing his head back in that signature barking laugh at the words of someone from the next table over. No sign of Jace. I feel myself shaking as I close the distance between us. He hears me approach and glances over, grinning—before he can say a word, I slam my balled fists hard into the tabletop with a *bang*.

His smile freezes in place. “Whoa, there. You got something on your—?”

“Shut the *kest* up.” My voice comes out louder than I meant it to, and silence flattens the air as those seated around us turn to check out the commotion.

“Whoa, whoa.” He lifts his hands in mock surrender. “What’s up?”

“She told me what you did.”

The lingering smile slides off of his face like water. Sick satisfaction alights inside of me, but I’m far from finished.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” I growl. “I don’t know what made you think you had any right to do something like that. But from now on, you keep your *mainching* hands to your *mainching* self, or I’m going to—to....” My mind is a buzzing blank. I can’t think of anything drastic enough to match the way that I feel. It looks like my sentiment has gotten across all the same; for once in his life, Ambrose actually looks frightened.

“Okay, man. Okay. I get it. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” A laugh spills out of me, wild and overly loud and entirely unlike myself. “Tell me something. Were you planning to let me know after you slept with her? Or was that just gonna be your little secret?”

Murmurs erupt in clusters around us, and I’m wrenched by another wave of satisfaction. If I’m lucky, word will travel back to Commander Emrys, and Ambrose will get what’s coming for him.

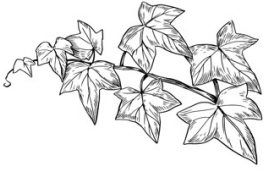
“Of course I would have told you.” Hurt is beginning to creep into his tone, but if it’s genuine, I’ll eat my horns. “I wasn’t trying to go behind your back. I just—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear *kest* from you right now.” With a slow, ragged breath, I pull back from the table. I’m dimly aware that my whole body is shaking, and trying to hold still only makes it worse. “Enjoy your *mainching* breakfast. If I hear another word from her... if I hear that you....”

I leave it at that. He can fill in the blanks for himself. Without another word, I storm out of the mess hall, not so much as glancing in the direction of the food. Normally, I wouldn’t dream of leaving without at least a mug of stim—but today, I don’t need it. The white-hot fury is more than enough

fuel, and something tells me that it won't be leaving anytime soon.

CHAPTER 14



OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS, I've managed to devour just about everything that the library has to offer, print and digital alike. Some volumes are unreadable, written in a foreign tongue that I assume to be traditional Ixionian. Whatever it is, it's constructed of endless sprawling curlicues out of which I can't so much as discern separate characters. I don't blame the single weary-looking librarian for the collection's sparseness; from the lack of company I've had over all my hours perched on the rubbery cushion of the place's solitary armchair, the Ixionian soldiers can't be called the most erudite of folks.

Besides, I don't mind the emptiness—or at least I didn't so long as I had enough substance to keep me somewhat entertained. Now, having reached the depths of the literary abyss that teeters between the obscure and the straight-up mythological, I'm getting pretty tired of it. Fiction writing, intentional or otherwise, has never interested me. Anyone can make up a story; not just anyone can make a damn solar system.

There's also the fact that the more hours I spend reading about Ixion, the less time I want to spend hidden within the books' pages. The whole world isn't some hypothetical—it's around me at this very moment, even if its more exotic regions are hidden behind the towering walls of the military base.

The library isn't lacking when it comes to the lore on the base itself, either: if I'm to believe half of the shit I'm reading, there's more hidden information and integrated technology in this single span of buildings than can be found on the entirety

of my home planet. Ixion's power doesn't come from nowhere. The people at the helm of this place are just as smart as they are dangerous, and I may very well be sitting on a hotbed of their most vital secrets. And there's just about nothing that I love more than a good secret.

It's this thought that, on the morning following the storm, propels me in a different direction than usual. I have a quick solitary breakfast of oatmeal studded with some unfamiliar fruit, then take a minute in the atrium to examine the wall-wide map of the base. I haven't spent much time here before, preferring instead to explore on my own, but at this point, my own wanderings have yielded just about as much as I can hope for.

The map lacks any convenient "you are here" marker, but the central facility is a small enough building—horizontally speaking, anyways—that it isn't hard to determine my general vicinity. To the east are the dining halls, while the west tunnels lead through the greenhouse, marked rather unnervingly as 'NURSERY,' and over to the barracks. North of them are an array of administrative buildings, including the commanders' quarters; I can't help but notice how their living space seems to be about the same size as the soldiers', despite their drastically smaller numbers. Stratocracy isn't exactly egalitarian, I suppose. The southern swath of the map is consumed by an impressive assortment of outdoor recreation and training facilities. I can pinpoint the location of Cherise's tree overlooking the running track and ropes course. The northeastern corner is dedicated to the landing dock—the place where we first touched down, I suppose—and the rest of the map's top half depicts various conference buildings, which I've come to understand are primarily in states of disuse. Only two of them, 'ADMIN' and 'SPIRE'—the latter surely being the needle-like tower that soars far above the rest of the base—has their own labels. The library, marked as 'ARCHIVES,' sits nearby. Lastly, the entire eastern border is marked as a single gray block with the nondescript title of 'MAINTENANCE FACILITIES.'

Well, none of that is exactly useful. Not that I expect the most-interesting-slash-top-secret areas of the base to be

proclaimed in the form of emboldened text, but it would be nice to get some sort of lead. My eyes drift to a second map mounted beside the first. This one is a cross-section of the central building in which I now stand, displaying its myriad levels like a gravity-defying layer cake. Multiple vast gymnasiums, a swimming pool, a honeycomb of 'BRIEFING ROOMS,' an armory, a clinic... and there, at the very top, the thing I've been looking for: 'RESTRICTED ZONE.'

The harshness of the label gives me hesitation, but only for a moment. It's not like I'm some sort of spy; I'm curious, that's all. If the doors are locked, I'm not going to try and break in. If they aren't... well, anyone who might catch me has no way of knowing that I'm snooping on purpose. I'll just tell them that I got lost.

Without further ado, I start towards the twisting glass staircase that leads to the upper reaches of the facility. I've made my way up the first few levels before, but the burning of my legs was enough to discourage anything beyond that. The bullet-fast elevators of the barracks are nowhere to be found here. It makes sense, I suppose; the whole place must be constructed to optimize the fitness of the soldiers. I'm not going to let exhaustion detract me from my goal this time, though.

This firm resolve is beginning to waver as I reach the fifth floor or so. There really are a hell of a lot of stairs, and it doesn't help that the average Ixionian's legs are a good several inches longer than mine; I feel like a child trying to heave myself from one to the next. Each landing is more tempting than the one before. When my lungs feel as though they're trying to knife their way out of my chest, I finally succumb to temptation and flop down on a cushioned bench, wiping sweaty hair out of my eyes.

Once I catch my breath, I begin to get a proper grip on my surroundings. This is definitely farther up than I've been before. Heights usually aren't enough to make me squeamish, but the view through the landing's transparent floor is enough to make that oatmeal roil a bit uneasily in my stomach. Figures crawl through the atrium like insects, so indistinct with the

distance that I can't so much as separate human from Ixionian. Afterthoughts of rain scatter across the broad windows, dappling the whole place with silver shadows. The remainder of the storm is negligible compared to last night, but it's still far more than would be considered normal back home. The air outside is thick and violet, with plumes of mist drifting through it like giants' breath. It's a miracle of engineering that the wind doesn't rock the building this far up.

Bit by bit, the ache in my legs becomes less unbearable. Still, when I glance up, the double helix of the staircase twists far enough to make my lungs twinge in apprehension.

Okay, fine. Maybe I won't be getting all the way to the restricted zone today. But it'll be a good challenge for me to work towards in the future. Hell, I could use a regular workout, and these stairs sure are providing that much.

For now, though, there's still this floor. At first glance, it looks about the same as the others: a transparent balcony ringing the atrium, circumscribed by a solid wall rife with unlabeled doors. I don't know how these soldiers are expected to know their way around with nothing but that single plain map as guidance. Maybe that's also part of their training—honing their navigational instincts or something. Can't say I'm envious.

I heave myself upright, wincing a bit as my weight resettles on my feet, and approach the nearest door. It has no visible knob or handle, but I've learned to expect that much. I brush my hand over the silvery surface, and it slides open with a faint pneumatic hiss. On the other side is a glass-walled hallway. For a moment, I hesitate. The literal transparency puts me on edge, even though nobody has told me that I *can't* set foot wherever I'd like within the base—blatantly restricted zones notwithstanding. But there's no one visible on the other side—just a practical jungle of strange machines, stretching farther than I would have thought possible from the base's external appearance. Eyes wide, I take a slow step inside. The door whispers shut behind me.

What *is* this place? The machines are almost too populous for me to make any sense of them. I walk slowly down the

corridor, arms tight at my sides, looking around on all sides.

It isn't until I reach the very end that everything makes sense. The hall splits into a T shape, and I can finally see the other side of the walls that back the vast room. From this side, they're solid. *Mirrors*. That's what it is. The whole place is bracketed in gigantic mirrors, playing off of one another until the metal equipment replicates and re-replicates itself into an illusory infinity.

With that much figured out, the shapes of the metal things themselves settle into something recognizable. This isn't some sort of behind-the-scenes machinery room—it's the Ixionian equivalent of a gymnasium. The broad rungs set against the ceiling are climbing bars, and the massive cog-looking things are the wheels of stationary bicycles. It's beautiful, in a way, but also a bit eerie; I can't even imagine the raw strength that would be needed to operate half of this stuff. It's even more unsettling to think that I sleep next to someone capable of wielding that much power, every single night. Unsettling... yeah. That's the word for it.

A sudden noise from down the hallway's left branch causes me to jump. *Come on, Ivy; don't be a wimp*. I peek back around the corner. Before, I was too distracted by figuring out the mirror fuckery, but now I see what I was missing: another room is down there, past the larger gym. This one isn't full of exercise equipment, but it's still far from empty. A row of Ixionians stand with their backs to me, moving in perfect sync as they perform a series of strenuous-looking stretches. Fascinated, I find myself wandering closer. The soldiers are wearing the same cargo pants that Cassian pulls on every morning, but their torsos are bare, giving me a full view of their muscles as they roil and twist. Before I know it, I'm close enough to make out the trails of sweat branching down their backs. The sound I heard before rings out again, and this time I can clearly make it out as a voice barking commands.

“On the ground, now! Forty lifts, down you go... back straight, Kairos, and don't you forget it!”

Kairos. I know that name—and I know the voice, too, I realize as the soldiers drop to all fours and begin a rapid series of one-handed push-ups. It's the commander. The one who oversaw the matching process. And Kairos, Jace Kairos, that's Deryn's mate, which means—

This is Cassian's platoon.

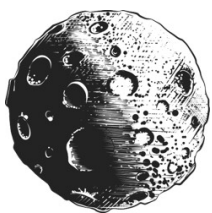
My eyes dash down the line of bodies before I can stop myself, and there he is at the very end of the line. That skin, night-dark and yet so strangely chromatic, is a world away from the bolder, brighter tones of his companions. His shoulders tense and release, tense and release with each movement. From this angle, I can make out all of his curves: broad pectorals, tight stomach, and lean biceps that nonetheless seem to carry his weight with no effort whatsoever. I've never seen him working out before, and something about the motion is nothing short of mesmerizing. So rhythmic, so regular... I know he's an elite soldier, I *have* known, but I somehow never quite processed the implications of it all. First, the gargantuan machines, and now this... I can't describe the feeling taking root inside of me. Something like fascination, or perhaps....

“On your feet! Pair up, now....”

The commander's voice shocks me out of my paralysis. Almost tripping over myself in my franticness, I hasten back down the hallway, through the equipment room, and back onto the landing. My heart flutters against the back of my throat. It's still true that I probably wouldn't have gotten in trouble, but what was I thinking, just standing there and gawking? A blush gnaws at my cheeks. I don't want them... I don't want Cassian to think I'm some sort of sick voyeur. That's not what this is. Not at all. I'm curious; that's it. And since when is curiosity a crime?

The answer, of course, is never. And yet the burning not-quite-guilt refuses to leave me alone for the rest of the day. Even at nightfall, when I slide wordlessly into bed, as always, I can't shake the hot sensation that seems to have rooted itself permanently around my stomach. Cassian's weight across from me feels more significant than ever, somehow.

The feeling is far from a welcome one... but, no matter how hard I try, I can't bring myself to dislike it.



CHAPTER 15

CASSIAN

I RECEIVE my assignment in the morning when I least expect it. Commander Emrys has just finished reciting our schedule for the day, which I've learned to tune out—it's easier to just follow the crowd—when he lifts a clawed hand, signaling us to remain seated.

“Auberon, Silvius, Sabine, Callisto. You stay here; I have more words for you.”

Jace's eyes meet mine automatically. His mouth quirks downwards in an expression that I know all too well: *Sorry*, it means. *Nothing I can do*.

I flash my own grimace of understanding. I don't want him to worry, but the truth is that Emrys's words have turned my gut to stone. I don't know about the rest of them, but I can't help thinking this has something to do with Ivy. We still haven't broken any rules as far as I know, but it's no secret that we aren't exactly following the implied protocol. As for the others—Avann Silvius, Wester Sabine, and Calix Callisto—as far as I know, none of them are in a similar predicament. Then again, I suppose I haven't been the most social person lately, especially in the last couple of days since I blew up at Ambrose. He's been giving me the cold shoulder, and it's not like I can blame him for it. At the same time, though, I don't regret what I did. Not one bit.

The rest of the soldiers trail out of the room, leaving only the four of us scattered throughout. Emrys spends longer than he needs to in silence, his monochromatic eyes shifting from one to the next, before he finally dips his chin in a nod.

“Congratulations, you four. You’ve been selected for an off-planet mission.”

I can only stare. I’m sure the other three are doing the same. An off-planet *mission*? We’ve been to different systems before, of course—it’s part of our regimen, to ensure that we have practice adjusting to different atmospheres, chemical and cultural alike. But those have been exercises, just simulations in which the greatest thing at stake was a bad case of space warp-induced nausea. If he really means that this is a mission proper....

“You’ve consistently outperformed your peers over the past several weeks. Well done, but don’t get too excited. You will be conducting a routine checkup on a lesser holmium mining colony. All automated, of course. The bots are due for their bicentennial maintenance touch-up, and you’ll be accompanying the workers in case of local resistance. Which is calculated at about a point-zero-zero-two percent chance, by the way.”

“Local resistance?” Calix Callisto repeats. He’s a younger member of the platoon, lithe-limbed with slender, branching horns and scales of dazzling silver. I’ve barely spoken a handful of words to him in my life, but he seems likable enough, if a bit naive. I won’t deny that I wouldn’t expect him to be chosen for something like this. “Are they... civilized?”

“To the point of being able to sign a contract with us, yes. When it comes to whether or not they’ll forget the terms of that contract and launch a defensive strike in response to it being upheld... like I said. Point-zero-zero-two.” Emrys plows onwards before any of the rest of us get the chance to voice our questions. “Silvius, you’ll be acting commander for the duration. Expect to commit four days round trip, from launch to landing. Thorough briefs will be sent to your rooms, where you can now return to prepare yourselves. Departure is promptly after your evening meals.” With that, he turns to leave. It’s only when he reaches the door that he turns back, angling a quizzical scowl towards the rest of us, who are still perched atop our none-too-uncomfortable seats. “Something wrong?”

Avann opens his mouth to voice what we're all thinking, but Emrys cuts him off with a humorless laugh. As indecipherable as the commander's eyes may be, I'm almost certain that he's rolling them in exasperation.

"Of course. You're free to bring or leave your matched members of the exchange program at your own discretion, depending on whether or not you think their presence would be advantageous." The words couldn't be more clearly rehearsed. "This isn't a trick or a test; the choice is yours. Anything *else*?" When we don't respond, he brushes the door open and gestures for us to leave. "Well, then, what's keeping you?"

I start packing, and every action feels like it's in slow motion. I don't know why I'm so unsettled. We've been warned time and time again that we should expect things like this to be launched on us without forewarning. It's all part of our adaptability conditioning. And yet somehow, I've made the mistake everyone warns against: I've gotten too comfortable in my routine. Now I get to deal with the consequences.

It doesn't take long to shove four days' worth of essentials into a backpack; I've just finished when my pager buzzes. That'll be the briefing. I give it a quick glance, but there's not much more than what Emrys told us already. Avann is the acting commander, and the expected duration is four days. Our assignment is to escort a maintenance team to perform routine upkeep on a robotically conducted holmium mining operation. As dry as the words are, I can't help but read them over and over, as if doing so will somehow make the whole situation easier to comprehend. After my fourth pass through the details, my eyes drift out of focus, and before I know it, I'm looking across the room at Ivy's desk. No—*my* desk. It's always been my desk. Her tablet sits there, positioned perfectly in the center. I wonder....

The door slides open, and I almost drop my pager. Ivy stands there, one hand on the frame, looking almost as surprised as I am.

“Cassian—I didn’t—”

“I’m leaving,” I blurt out.

The expression that crosses her face is indescribable. For a moment, I think she’s actually angry at me—and then it lapses back into the stoniness to which I’ve become all too unfortunately accustomed.

“Why?”

How is it that her words always manage to surprise me, regardless of how matter-of-fact they may be? I should be used to her bluntness by now, shouldn’t I?

“I... have a mission. I didn’t know, or I would’ve told you sooner. It won’t be long, just four days—”

The tension in her jaw vanishes so swiftly that I half-wonder whether I imagined it in the first place. If anything, she looks bored... as usual.

“...Is that okay?”

She scoffs. “What kind of a question is that? I’m not the boss of you.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Have a good time. I’ll... well, I’ll be here.”

With that, she walks straight to the bathroom and shuts the door hard behind her.

The click of the lock that follows is unmistakable.

When the four of us meet up at the dock, both Calix and Wester are accompanied by their respective partners, whom I only vaguely recognize from the matching process that seems to have taken place a hundred years ago. I can’t help but feel relieved to see that Avann, at least, is on his own, even more so when he doesn’t acknowledge my own solitude beyond a brief sympathetic glance. Other than the expected murmurs of greeting and wisecracks pertaining to the oddity of our situation, none of us say anything at all until after we’ve taken off. It’s only some hours later, as I gaze through a porthole into

the blue-black unfolding of infinity around us, that he approaches me.

“Cassian?”

I startle briefly at Avann’s voice, and he waves a gentle hand in apology. I didn’t hear him enter the viewing bay; I thought he was still in the ship’s lounge, drinking and exchanging speculations with the other four.

“My bad. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

I shake my head mutely and turn my eyes back to the porthole. I always forget how much I love watching space as it dilates around me. Even with the ship’s perfect artificial gravity, I feel somehow weightless... and weightlessness, for reasons beyond my comprehension, is precisely what I need right now.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

I shake my head again. I hear more than see as he takes a seat in the surveying booth adjacent to mine. The cushions are old and a little bit squeaky, like most of the things on this single-story vessel; I guess Ixion isn’t inclined to lend their finest equipment to a mission as mundane as ours.

“They get a little loud sometimes, don’t they?”

I have no idea whether he’s referring to the women or to Calix and Wester. As if in response to my confusion, an eruption of laughter sounds from the other room—I flinch hard enough to bite my tongue.

“... Yeah,” I mutter. “They really do.”

“Evera talks a lot. Not that I mind, really—she’s sweet. She really is.”

Evera... I don’t recognize the name, but the other words cause a memory to click into place. The woman with the cascades of golden hair and vivid green eyes—too green, not amber-shaded like Ivy’s. She said so much during our single brief exchange that I was left dizzy.

“She seemed sweet, yeah,” I say.

He laughs gently. “You don’t need to lie; I know how she comes across. I think all of them are different behind closed doors. Just like the rest of us, I suppose.”

A snaking constellation wanders past our viewpoint, so slowly that my eyes barely detect its motion. In reality, I know that we’re streaking past it at an incomprehensible speed, and yet I can’t help but be calmed by the illusion of graduality. I wish more things in life could play out with such patience.

“Right. I suppose so.”

“Well.” Avann clears his throat. “I certainly don’t mean to make assumptions. I hope that you’re doing well, that’s all.”

“...Yeah,” I say, somehow unable to look away from the stars. “Yeah. You too.”

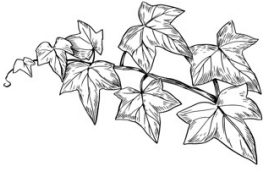
The bunks are far less comfortable than the viewing booths, and Wester’s snoring from above me isn’t exactly helpful. For a while, I work to convince myself that it’s all in my head—I’ve certainly been known to psych myself out when it matters the most—but after what feels like an expedited eternity of tossing and turning to no avail, not to mention a triple dose of somno-pills, I’m forced to confront the fact that I’m pretty much done for. No matter how many times we’ve been coached in the standard breathing method meant to send us off to dreamland, I still can’t overcome my anxiety when I need to.

As for that anxiety....

It’s the sound that I’m missing, I think. Not a clicking, exactly, but a regular rhythm of soft against hard, pausing every so often, then resuming in even more eager of a rush. Ebb and flow, ebb and flow, like the emerald tides that I hadn’t glimpsed since the years before I was drafted into the army along with the rest of my class.

The endless night spirals around me, and I remain prone with wide-open eyes, unable to shake the profound weight of her absence.

CHAPTER 16



IT DOESN'T MAKE sense for things to feel this much quieter with Cassian gone, considering how little noise he always made in the first place. If anything, I ought to be relishing in my solitude, able to be as loud as I please without any risk of irritating my roommate... if I can call him that.

And yet that isn't the case. It's quiet enough to make my brain itch, and sleep is nearly impossible. At one point, I heave myself out of bed and go straight to the door, figuring that a decent midnight walk might put me in my right mind—but the frosted-glass panel doesn't respond to my touch. I try pressing harder, tapping, and even feeling for a handle in the dark, despite knowing full well that no such thing exists. No dice. Shit, does the elevator not run at night? I suppose it makes sense, what with the other details I know regarding what seems to be a pretty strict ruleset, but still... I can't help but feel a surge of claustrophobia, which only worsens when I begin to think about where Cassian might be now. In the middle of space? Or has he already landed at his undisclosed destination?

I eventually crawl back into bed, and I suppose I must sleep at least a little bit, because it isn't too terribly long before morning light begins to limn the blackout curtains. My eyes feel sticky, almost double-lidded with exhaustion, and my mouth carries a sandiness all too reminiscent of my teenage years' worst hangovers. I don't let it hold me back, though; I've spent enough time tossing and turning in that damn bed. It's not my custom to take morning showers, but I rinse off anyway, just to get rid of all the baked-in sweat of my restless

night. After that brief delay, I walk alone to the dining hall, spot Deryn, and take a seat beside her.

“Mornin’,” she mumbles through a mouthful of toast. “You’re late. Busy reading or what?”

“No, not at all. Actually....” I shove a runaway strand of still-damp hair behind my ear. “I’ve pretty much cleaned out the whole library, to be honest. I was wondering—I guess I don’t even know what you’ve been getting up to these days. Other than, y’know, the obvious.”

Her smirk doesn’t reach her eyes. Slowly, she sets the remainder of the toast down, swallows, and gives a furtive glance from side to side before speaking.

“I mean... truth be told....”

My attention, previously hazy and anxious, snaps into focus. I know that secretive tone. Has she also been curious about what this base may or may not be hiding? Of course she would be; there’s a reason that the two of us have always been close. She may not be a risk-taker on the same level as me, but she has that same insatiable curiosity. Not even someone as handsome and—apparently—sensually talented as Jace Kairos could detract her from that sort of thing forever.

She bites her lip, clearly on the edge of spilling. I allow her a few seconds of grace before leaning in close, tucking my shoulders against my ears. “So? What is it?”

Deryn shakes her head. “I’ll tell you later, okay? Unless you have plans?”

My back relaxes. The disappointment must be evident on my face, because she tips me another smile, this one far more genuine. “Look, it’s not like I’m gonna keep it from you, yeah? This just isn’t the time or place, really. And I guess I haven’t gotten much of a chance before now, because....”

“...Because I’ve been spending so much time with Cherise.” The words have a metallic weight in my mouth. What was I thinking, all that time? Of course I care about Cherise—at this point, I would go so far as to call her my friend, though I have little faith that she’d return the favor—

but it's Deryn and only Deryn who's had my back from the beginning, even with the Jace thing to contend with. Come to think of it, I've been pretty shitty to her on the whole, tuning her out every time that she brought up the subject of her happiness. She never would have done the same to me.

"It's okay," she says quickly. "I mean, you don't need to apologize for spending time with her..."

"Okay. I won't apologize. But I won't keep it up, either. You're my best friend, remember? The least I can do is bother to hang out with you every so often."

"...Right." She nods sharply and picks up her toast again. "You're damn right. Let's go for a walk after this, okay? Away from... all this."

"Perfect. And... thanks, Deryn."

"Thanks for what?" She flashes me a wink, and I can feel it: just like that, it's as though there was never a thing between us in the first place.

I expect her to start off along the northern path of the base like I so often do, but I'm in for a surprise. She doesn't give the administrative buildings and library a second glance. Instead, I'm trailing her straight across the azure lawn, seemingly headed right at the broad metal wall arcing up toward the atmosphere. Excitement surges in my stomach. I've never been this close to the base's border. Does she know something I don't? A way out, perhaps? But if she does, she isn't revealing it just now. She turns sharply once we hit the wall, and I hurry to fall in behind her. Beside us, the metal is nearly blinding beneath the glare of Ixion's triple suns; I find that I need to hold one hand to the left side of my face to block out the worst of the brightness.

Deryn's pace is brisker than what I'm used to, and there's a stitch growing in my ribs by the time she decides to speak. "So," she says, "things have been... different lately. Between Jace and me, I mean."

I'm so startled by her words that I almost trip over my own feet. Jace? What the hell does anything have to do with Jace? I correct my footing and hurry forward, the pain in my gut all but forgotten.

"For a while, you know, things seemed perfect. Too good to be true... which they were, I guess."

Is she messing with me? I bite back my compulsion to ask her if she's lost her mind. After what we discussed earlier, I owe her the space she needs to explain.

"It's just like... it fell apart as quickly as it came together, y'know? Not that I dislike him or anything. To be blunt, the sex just... lost that special glow from before. Ugh, that sounds sentimental. But you know what I mean."

I have absolutely zero idea what she means, as a matter of fact. I still don't understand the emotion that she was describing in the first place, let alone the way that it's apparently fallen away without a trace.

"It's what they call the honeymoon phase, I think. The time just ran out. Not that we haven't still been sleeping together; I think we can do a decent job of, you know, satisfying each other, but... if it had been like this from the beginning, I don't know if we ever would have started. I get where you're coming from now."

"Wait." This time, I can't stop the words from spilling past my lips; I'm too damn confused. "Where *I'm* coming from? What did I ever—?"

"With your own match. That Cassian guy." She glances over her shoulder at me, waiting for a response. When I say nothing, her footsteps slow and then halt, and she turns around to face me properly. The glare from the metal wall doesn't seem to bother her—I feel like an idiot standing here with my hand aside my cheek, but it would look even worse if I were to let my eyes water freely. The last thing I want is for her to think I'm crying or something.

"You, uh..." She folds her arms and raises one dark eyebrow. "You still aren't sleeping together... are you?"

“No. Of course not. Why would that even be a question?”

Her jaw works as though she’s chewing an invisible stick of gum. I can’t help but feel exposed, scrutinized, as though she’s peering at me through the lens of a gigantic microscope.

“...I guess I’ve been saying all this shit about my own problems, without ever checking in on you. Asshole move from me. Is something wrong? Or...” Her second eyebrow lifts to join the first. “Is something *right*, compared to what was happening before?”

“I hate that you’d say it like that,” I groan. “Like I just said, of course not.”

“Then why so shocked? Is it *that* outlandish to imagine that *young love* doesn’t last forever?” She spins the phrase with a lilt of sarcasm, making me feel even worse. I’m not trying to speak poorly of her and Jace. I’m not trying to speak about them at all. I’m....

What *am* I trying to do?

“I’m not shocked, Deryn. I mean, I’m surprised, sure, but I’m mostly just glad that you told me.”

“Yeah? Then what’s the weird face about?”

Even beneath the cover of my hand, the light off of the wall is suddenly too much. My eyes flare with involuntary tears, and I whisk around as fast as I can, forcing myself to stare down at the grass—but even that has somehow become blinding.

“Ivy?”

“Sorry, I—I’m gonna go lie down for a bit.”

“Are you—what’s wrong? Hey—”

My feet are carrying me away automatically. “Breakfast just isn’t sitting with me, I think,” I call as loudly as possible, hoping that she can hear me despite my turned back. “I’ll—I’ll talk to you later, okay? Thank you so much for talking to me; I... thank you. I’m sorry.”

If she replies, I'm moving too fast to hear it. Shame is compounding in my chest, warm and thick. What the fuck am I thinking, turning my back on her like this when we were finally being honest with one another? Or, more accurately, when *she* was finally being honest with *me*—because I may not know what the truth is, but I'm damn sure that it wasn't whatever I spewed out back there.

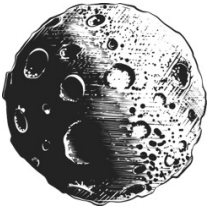
I don't plan on pausing until I get back to the room, but I find my footsteps stilling as soon as I reach the greenhouse. The thick, verdantly scented air forces my lungs to slow down, filling me with lightheadedness in the wake of my hyperventilation. A bright purple, tuba-shaped blossom undulates gently at my side. I think I saw its picture in one of the library books at some point, but I can't recall its name.

I wish I knew why I feel like this. My life up until now has had its ups and downs, but I could always depend upon the constant factor of my own rationality. Ever since landing on Ixion, that rationality has been gone, as though it hadn't quite made it onboard by the time the ship blasted off. No matter how hard I may try to quell my uncertainties through reading and writing, there are some things that I can't deny even to myself, and I'm starting to think that some of them... hell, that *all* of them have to do with Cassian.

So what? I demand silently of myself, my eyes still fixed on the purple plant. *Who cares if you're catching feelings? You don't need to act on it. Nothing has to change.*

Yet the thought of him returning from the mission makes my head spin. Nervous—am I *nervous*? Things have been fine with us. Things will *stay* fine with us. I ought to go apologize to Deryn, though even the thought of doing so fills me with embarrassment.

She was wrong to compare herself and Jace to Cassian and me. That's all I know for sure. Their relationship began differently, and every cell in my body is insisting that our endings won't be the same, either. I don't quite know what that means yet... but I suppose time will tell.



CHAPTER 17

CASSIAN

THE MISSION IS JUST as mundane as Commander Emrys described it. The planet, a dwarf, called Upsilon V, consists of little more than the holmium mine and a small hive of locals who seem to be refusing to emigrate out of sheer stubbornness. I can't claim to understand what's keeping them. The whole surface is a jagged desert of ashy-toned rock, punctuated here and there by the argentine glimmer of its remaining holmium reserves. The mechanics are denizens of Upsilon Prime, which apparently shares a not-quite-reciprocal relationship with Ixion. They spend most of the time cracking jokes in their own language; from the looks that they shoot us between bouts of laughter, it isn't hard to guess the subject of such hilarity. The other soldiers and I take turns monitoring the situation, rifles slung over our backs, feet and minds equally numbed by the repetitious nature of our patrol.

“Have you seen the way they look at us?” Avann asks me at one point as I relieve him of his shift, his voice a rustling undertone. “Something tells me we're here more to keep them in line than to protect them from unruly locals.”

I keep my agreement to myself. Questioning our commander's integrity isn't a good look, even within a private exchange. Avann seems like a good-natured guy, but that doesn't mean I can trust him not to say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

It doesn't help that I'm still struggling to sleep. Days and nights, shifts and breaks, blur together into a soupy mess, and by the time we finally begin our return journey, I couldn't be more relieved.

The closer we get to Ixion, however, the more that relieved feeling escalates into something uncomfortable. I've never been the type to get airsick, but I find myself biting back nausea as I strap myself in for the landing. Am I nervous about reporting back to Emrys? As far as I can tell, we did our job perfectly—but that's not enough to quell the churning of my stomach.

Our descent goes smoothly. An officer is there to greet us, and he takes us back to Emrys, who receives a verbal report from Avann with few comments.

“Well done, soldiers,” the commander drawls. “Protocol followed to a T; no complaints here. You're off for the rest of the day—not that there's much of it left. Go ahead to the mess hall and get your grub before sundown. I'll see you lot tomorrow.”

The word *sundown* is enough to make my head spin, and it's not until I'm standing outside of the door to my quarters that I realize why.

Ivy. Is she on the other side? Showering? Writing? In bed already? How am I going to talk to her? I don't know if we're friends at this point. What if she's unhappy to see me? Why would she be anything *but* unhappy, now that I'm here to take back her precious privacy? And why the *kest* do I feel like an intruder in my own space when she's the *susting* visitor in the first place?

The elevator lets out a low ding, warning me that it's about to begin its descent to the lobby. Faced with no other choice, I press the door open and step into my room.

She's sitting at the desk, just like any other night. Her profile is strikingly perfect against the blue-white glow of her tablet's screen, from her sharp little chin to the wave of copper-dusted hair that springs over her temple. Her pale eyelashes flicker in a surprised blink as she pulls back to face me.

“Cassian.” Her voice is bare of the slight sarcasm that I've come to expect. “You're back.”

“Yeah,” I say, unable to think of anything else. We hold each other’s eyes for a long beat. My heart is hammering so loudly that I’m almost positive she can hear it. I must look like a gaping idiot, but I can’t pull my gaze away from her. If it were up to me, I don’t think I ever would.

But the moment, like all moments, comes to an end. She murmurs something as she turns back to her tablet. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say her words are “Welcome back,”—but I’ve all too often been guilty of wishful thinking.

The night continues to play out with something almost resembling normalcy. Draped in the exhaustion of my sleepless mission, I elect to go to bed on the earlier side in the hopes that her typing will bring me the solace that I’ve so sorely lacked. As urgent as my simmering arousal feels after being trapped in a spaceship with no personal space—I want to be next to her more than I want to get off on my own and feel some relief. That thought is oddly alarming, but I push it aside as I climb into bed. The overhead light flicks off, I pull the blankets up to my chest—and Ivy stops.

At first, I think she’s just rereading her last few sentences, as is her custom. And yet the seconds wind by without any indication of her resuming her work. I’m on the verge of asking whether something’s wrong when I feel the gentle depression of her weight on the other side of the bed. That’s not normal; she hasn’t even been to the bathroom, and I don’t think she’s ever skipped a nightly shower in all the time I’ve known her.

Do I say something? Do I ask what’s wrong, or will she just snap at me again? I don’t want to invade her privacy, but I don’t want to leave her alone if she’s upset, either.

My conundrum is evaporated by the soft lilt of her voice in the darkness.

“We can try.”

I open my eyes and am greeted with absolute darkness. She’s turned off her tablet, then. I prop myself up on one elbow and twist partway onto my back, not wanting to muffle my voice against the pillow. “What do you mean?”

“We can try... if you want.” She sounds marginally more defiant this time, but her tone is still far gentler than what I’m used to. I’m brought back to the couple of times that we’ve talked in the dark. She likes it better that way, I know. She doesn’t like being vulnerable when she feels like someone is watching her.

And if this means what I think it means—what I desperately, agonizingly hope it means—she’s offering to take that vulnerability to a whole new level.

I shift the rest of the way over until I’m on my right side, facing her. Her small, quick breaths are audible in the space between us, thrumming along nearly at the rate of my own racing heart. Is she closer than usual, or am I imagining things? I slowly extend an arm across the gulf between us, my fingertips skating the sheets, until I make contact with the spill of her hair. She lets out a tiny gasp, but doesn’t withdraw. I lift a thumb and trap a strand between it and my forefinger.

“Are you sure?” The scratchiness of my whisper reminds me that I’ve been holding my breath. I try to inhale, but the capacity of my lungs seems suddenly to be nonexistent.

“Yes.” The single syllable is soft yet firm.

That’s all I need. Quivering, suspended between disbelief and anticipation, I shift until I’m above her, a hand braced on either side of her head. Her warm breath ghosts against my own lips. The darkness is absolute, yet I’m aware of every part of her beneath me, every curve, twist, and pooling of fabric. She hasn’t changed into her usual nighttime clothes. She’s still wearing her shirt, but there’s no mistaking the feeling of bare legs against mine. My ankle caresses the side of her foot, and I can feel her toes curl in response.

I don’t know whether or not to tell her that I haven’t done this before. Something close to shyness flutters in my chest. One of my hands drifts to her side, just above her hip, while the fingers of the other caress her hair. Bit by bit, I lower myself down—and then her slender fingers close firmly around my wrist.

“What?” I freeze with my body a hair’s breadth above hers, aching with need. It’s all I can do to keep myself from collapsing against her. My voice rasps past my trembling lips. “What’s wrong?”

“Not yet,” she murmurs. Her voice is a low purr, stirring against her throat. “Let me help you.”

And then she’s shifting swiftly below me, pressing her hands into my waist and urging me forward until I’m kneeling above her, my thighs braced against her biceps. I whimper as that sweet, steady breath of hers brushes against my erection. I can no longer tell which of us is the one closing that distance; if anything, it feels like we’re being drawn together by a force outside either of our control. I’m wildly lightheaded, thinking of nothing but the ever-narrowing space between her mouth and my cock... and then that space folds into nothing, and I’m not thinking at all.

Her lips caress my tip, and she makes a little noise that sends a thrill coursing all the way to my tailbone. I’ve never in my life been so grateful for my habit of sleeping naked. I shudder, resisting the urge to press forward too quickly. Her hands sweep circles across my abdomen until they find the base of my cock, and her fingers begin to wander downwards, exploring its hard-ribbed sides with a curious lightness. Ever so gradually, she allows more and more of me into her mouth. Her tongue swirls with a patience that I can’t comprehend. Each and every motion is so pleasurable that I can’t even think about my release; I’m already overwhelmed, and undoubtedly too passive on top of her, too visibly inexperienced—

Then she parts her jaw more widely, allowing me into even tighter, softer depths, and I realize that she’s only just getting started.

I’m faintly aware of my shuddering moans as she moves her head up and down in perfect tandem with my hips, her tongue gliding in a long stretch along my cock as her warm throat teases its head. She’s moving faster now, or I am, or perhaps we both are. A frantic fervor begins to build inside of me, and suddenly it isn’t enough. I want her. I want more of her. I want to feel her breasts, her waist, her thighs, and the

softness nestled between them... more, *more*—I can't tell if I'm begging her aloud, but everything is escalating, and I can't—I can't—I *can't*....

My eyes roll back in my head as sensation spirals out from my core, spasms wracking my thighs. Utter relief courses through every part of me. I've never felt euphoria like this. I didn't know it was *possible*. Colors that I can't name flash nonsensically through my mind's eye. I feel... but there's no word for how I feel, other than '*feel*' itself, the simple yet infinite encapsulation of my senses themselves in their entirety

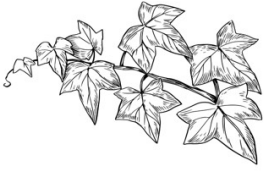
Gradually, tingling with aftershocks, I feel her drawing back from me. Her breath hitches, and for a second, I'm terrified that I hurt her—but that's not it. She's giggling. Actually *laughing* at me. In my hazy bemusement, I can't help but join her.

"You're so eager," she whispers, the pitch of her words riding up and down with each irregular breath. "I never thought... you would be so fast."

"That was... I've never felt anything like...."

"*Was?*" Ivy pushes herself onto her elbows and I fall back into a half-kneeling position, almost losing my balance. Her chest heaves against my belly as she laughs again. "Oh, no. We're not done yet. *It's my turn now.*"

CHAPTER 18



CASSIAN MOANS as I twist beneath him, guiding him back down until our shoulders are in line once more. He's even less steady than when we began; his forehead brushes over mine, and his whole body pulses with the last vestiges of orgasm. My own heartbeat is flighty and urgent in my throat. I can still feel the lingering weight of his cock in my mouth: heavy and hot, shaped in heavy ripples, unlike anything I've seen or felt before, with a tip as pronounced as the horns on his head. The thought of that blunt curve inside of me stirs up a level of apprehension that can only be matched by my primal, unapologetic need.

I don't know what's gotten into me. I don't know if I want to know, or if it even matters. Reasons be damned, what *does* matter is him, and me, and the fact that we're here—together—finally. In a way that I never could have anticipated, everything suddenly makes sense. Maybe we'll pretend to forget by the time those three suns crest the horizon, but dawn is so many hours away. That isn't enough to compel me to take things more slowly. We could have all the time in the world, and there would still be none to waste.

I'm already wet from the sweet sound of his moans, but I still dip a hand below the band of my underwear, probing the eager folds beneath. I'm not ready to take him just yet. I've felt how big he is, and even this mindless desire isn't enough to make me do anything stupid... anything stupider than what I've done already, anyway. My forefinger finds my clit and rubs gently against it, urging a whimper out of me.

“Are you okay?” Cassian’s voice is husky, roughened from the force of the moans that still echo in my ears.

“Fine,” I breathe. “I’m... mm... good.”

“Should I—?”

“Shirt.” I catch his forearm with my free hand, pulling it to the collar of my oversized tee. My fingers work furiously, teasing my labia until I ache with sweet frustration. “Take my shirt off.”

“Are you s—”

“Shh.” I lift my hips just enough to graze my soaking panties against his cock. He’s already half-hard again, and the touch draws a weak moan out of him. “Just do it. Please do it.”

He doesn’t need to be told a third time. His blunt claws curl into the fabric, and for one wild moment, I think he means to rip it straight down the middle—but then he’s tugging it gently upwards until it hikes up beneath my armpits. I don’t want to stop touching myself, but I force myself to bring my hands over my head until my knuckles brush the cool, hard headboard. Cassian pulls the shirt off the rest of the way in a whisper of cloth, and then I let my arms fall to my sides once more, my breath somehow coming even faster than before. The sudden rush of air chills my shoulders and stomach, but only for a moment; before I can so much as shiver, he’s back above me, the scaly patches of his skin burning hot against mine. One of his fingers hooks under my left bra strap and tugs at it cautiously, almost hesitantly, as if asking me what to do next.

“Go on,” I murmur. He pulls harder. I wait, fists knotted into the bedsheets—but he keeps working at the strap, more and more insistently, until an involuntary giggle spills from my lips.

He stops at once. “What’s wrong?”

The bafflement in his voice only causes me to laugh harder. “It—no—it’s okay,” I manage to say. “Sorry. It’s just... it’s in the back. The clasp. The straps don’t come undone on their own.” Saying the words aloud renews the hilarity; I press

a hand over my lips to stifle an inelegant snort. Cassian hesitates a moment longer, then lets out a slightly nervous chortle of his own. The sound is sweet enough to quiet me. I arch my spine slightly, and he reaches into the hollow between my shoulder blades, probing until his fingers brush the rear strap of my bra. It takes him a few tries to release the clasp, which I can hardly mock him for; even I have trouble doing the damn thing singlehandedly. Finally, the pressure on my breasts comes free, and I exhale in relief.

“There you go,” I murmur, shrugging off the straps. “Now come here....”

I reach behind his head and tangle my fingers in his short, soft hair, taking care not to pull... or, at least, not to pull *too* hard. His head tilts willingly until his lips brush my collarbone. He grazes it with the softest of kisses, and I find myself wondering how his lips would feel against mine... but that’s not what this is. It can’t be. It *can’t* be, because....

No matter. This isn’t the time for distractions. It takes very little to instead coax my thoughts back to the sensation that I do know now: those silken scales melting seamlessly into rougher skin, hard and slick all at once as I played my tongue around them. When I’d brushed them ever-so-slightly against the grain, he had started moving with greater desperation, his entirety contracting with a tension that I don’t think he even realized. It was all too clear that this was new for him—but it was for me as well, much more than I’d expected. As much as the dry descriptions in those old books had fascinated me, they couldn’t compare to the feeling of it, the clean, strong strangeness that was so unlike anything I ever could have dreamed of knowing back on Earth.

I want more of him. I’m curious in a way that I’ve never been. I want to know him completely. I want to understand how he works against me, which unexplored regions his foreign shape could discover within me, and what new mystique our contrast could create....

I breathe in and out, acutely conscious of how my breastbone presses against his chin. The scent of his hair, thick and coniferous, fills my nose, and electric chills plunge down

my sternum. I curve my body more sharply and urge his head farther down. His mouth traces a path down the swell of my breasts until it reaches my aching nipples. I gasp, and he takes the cue to pause there, licking and sucking in small, curious twists of motion.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Oh, yes. That’s it.”

His tongue speeds up, and my pulse hastens to match it. My left hand dips back below my waistband. He’s fully hard now—I can tell without even touching him, from the jerky rhythm of his breath and the overwhelming heat radiating from his body. That’s all the assurance I need to tug off my panties. It’s no small feat, what with the sweat slicking my thighs, but I manage to kick them down past my knees. Far enough to spread my hips, baring myself to him in full. Arching my back, I weave my hands into his hair and pull him none-too-gently down to where I burn most fiercely. He lets out a long, low sound, a purr more feline than human, and nestles the tip of his nose into me. I quake around him, biting down on an expletive as the angle of his head tips into something more extreme and I feel the first brush of his lips across my shuddering folds.

His slowness is exquisite, but it’s driving me wild; it’s all I can do to keep from crushing myself into him with abandon, all nuance of pleasure collapsing in the stead of sheer need. I try to assuage myself by pulling more tightly on his hair, but it’s too soft, too willing... then the side of my hand brushes into his horns, and he moans into me with such low-pitched chords that I can feel the aftershocks all the way up to my chest.

Intrigued, I caress a thumb against the base of the other horn, probing the stiffer strands of hair that shield its sensitive base. He convulses slightly, and I respond by curling my hands around the two marble-smooth appendages. They’re so thick that my index finger can barely form a ring with my thumb—but I manage to do so, and his breath comes even more quickly, punctuated with whimpers. I slowly slide my hands up and down, working the horns as I would his cock. From the way that his movements redouble in ferocity, it’s the right

thing to do. Keeping a firm hold of him, gentle but commandeering, I guide his mouth fully against me.

His tongue is a revelation. It's rough, even coarse, and yet each tiny barb has no more resilience than a sliver of warm wax; they bend and spread around the throbbing expanse of my vulva. It feels almost ticklish, as though I'm being caressed in a thousand tingling directions at once. I must make some sort of noise, because he begins lapping me up more eagerly. The very tip of his tongue teases penetration, just grazing the edge of something deeper. I can feel an orgasm rising in me all at once: everything else whites out as I thrust against his hot, wet mouth, enveloping my clit entirely within its strangely textured valleys. I move faster and faster, more and more roughly. Then I don't move at all, but instead unravel beneath him as pleasure shudders outwards from my core in broad, bowing waves. I'm used to this part being over all too soon, but God, it won't stop, and my breathing is so ragged that my vision blooms with stars.

"You're so... soft," he whispers against my inner thigh as my heaves of ecstasy, at last, begin to ease. I make no response. I couldn't if I tried. I only lie there, letting the occasional shiver traverse me, acutely aware of every sensation: the rumpled sheets against my back and shoulders, the sweat beading on my skin, the gentle nuzzle of his cheek as he rests it along the curve of my hip bone. I can tell he's being gentle with me, and yet his weight is still close to overwhelming. I know without a doubt that he could crush me with ease. Perhaps it's wrong that such a thought should arouse me, but I've long since abandoned any notion of what should or shouldn't; it all fell apart the second I allowed our skin to finally meet.

I can scarcely believe the next word that rises to my lips, and yet at the same time, I've never known anything to be more true.

"More."

He's so fast to oblige that I know he's been waiting for it. His head begins to move back downwards, but I grip his horns

again, more aggressively this time, and he halts with a huff of surprise.

“Up here. Please... I want you inside of me.”

The blankets rustle as he lifts away from me. My body screams for want of his heat, but it's only an instant before he's settling against me again, this time in absolution, so I can feel nothing but him above and the mattress below. He's so much taller than me; his chin brushes the top of my head, but I keep one hand entwined in his hair, still grazing the edge of his horn, unwilling to relinquish the power that it gives me.

I ought to be exhausted already, but I've never felt more awake. My senses are ringing, acutely aware of every irregularity in his body, every scaly patch, every curve and twist that doesn't quite align with what I've come to expect from human men.

Closer. Deeper. More.

I think I say something to him, but I'm not sure what. I can't even hear myself think at this point. I wrap one hand around his cock, the tip of my thumb wandering its unfamiliar curves, and dig my fingers deeper into his hair at the same time, pressing him wordlessly forward. He bends in compliance, and I sigh as he pushes against me. He still doesn't quite know where to go; I smirk into the darkness and gently urge him in.

And once he is in—

Oh, God, it's nothing like I ever could have expected.

The hard, foreign shape of him is a perfect match for my willing softness. As he bucks his hips with greater and greater confidence, his contours urge me farther open. His cock is rippling inside of me, actually vibrating against the tender walls of my opening, sending haphazard spirals of sensation into places that I never even knew myself to possess. I jerk my hips forward, jaw gaping, frantic beyond all else to feel his motion in my deepest reaches.

“Cassian,” I manage to say. It's a wonder that my shuddering lips manage to frame the word with such

articulacy. “Cass—”

And, damn him, he pauses again, still deep inside of me, his lips lingering just above mine. “Ivy,” he breathes back. “Ivy, are you—”

“Shh.” Somehow, I manage to remove my hand from his hair and poise a shaking finger against his soft lips. Even as he holds still, the involuntary pulsation of his rippled cock continues to tilt me closer and closer towards my peak. My lips are half-numb, and I know I must sound drunk or stupid, but I need him to know; I need him to keep going. “I am. I am. Don’t stop; please don’t stop unless I ask, okay?”

“Okay,” he moans. My thighs shiver and clench around him. My feet are riding up near his waist now, my calves desperately pushing him closer, closer, closer. The ridges of his cock massage my clit, and the fact that he doesn’t even know what he’s doing to me—the fact that he’s still so very cautious—only makes me hotter and slicker, more and more desperate to feel him in his entirety. I want to tell him to give in and use me, to show me what he craves, but I’m far past the point of forming words.

He lifts his shoulders and flexes his back upwards, driving himself further into me and leaving me gasping in the sudden absence of his chest’s weight. Then he’s twisting downwards until his lips find the edge of my jaw, sloppily spilling into the soft spot just behind it. A shower of chills erupts beneath my skin as his prickled tongue caresses my earlobe. He sucks softly at it, then gives a tiny nip, and the sound that comes out of me is nothing short of an animal.

We’re both crying out now, frantic in our aggression, and a thought flashes through my mind—what if he can’t, what if I’m expecting too much, what if—before his voice shatters it, weak and genuine and so, so desiring.

“Ivy,” he moans.

My lips frame his name in return, but no sound comes out. I’m beyond sound; all I can do is whimper mutely as something connects—something more profound than our bodies, something more important than I could ever imagine.

For a precious instant, the sparks that have been flitting between us coalesce fully into flame, and nothing in this galaxy or any other could matter more.

My surroundings return to me in intervals. The bed, soft as ever beneath me. My skin, drenched in rapidly drying sweat. And Cassian—pulling out gradually, naturally, none too harshly as I quiver around him. My hands fall limply to my sides, fingers curling towards my palms. Ever so slowly, I begin to rock my hips back and forth. I can feel the insistent heat of his seed deepening within me, and all I can do is coax it deeper, *deeper* as my body gradually seeps towards absolute relaxation.

He doesn't speak. I don't, either. As soon as I can feel myself properly again, I reach down and pull my panties back up, secretly savoring their cooling dampness. Cassian takes the cue and quickly moves aside. As soon as he's gone, I miss his warmth; I hurry to bury myself back under the comforter and pull it all the way up to my cheekbone, shoving my nose into the pillow. My heart is still thundering in my ears, so heavy that I'm halfway to a headache.

Halfway to a headache, yeah—but *God*, I feel so good. The eclipse of pleasure is already evading my memory; it's too perfect for my mind to replicate it in the aftermath. All I know is that it was the best I've felt in years, in ages... *ever*, maybe. It wasn't just sex. It *was* sex, and fucking amazing sex at that, but it was also everything I ever felt throughout the most desperate my star-swept life, unable to pull my eyes away from the infinity above me. It was about more than the pleasure; it was about him and whatever may come with him, good or bad, for better or for worse.

I keep breathing. As I do so, my thoughts realign themselves into more familiar patterns. Facts present themselves in a stark parade, one after another: I'm still on Ixion. I've slept with Cassian now, though the euphemism feels laughable. I'm comfortable—really, truly *comfortable* in this bed for the first time that I can recall. I missed him. I missed him so much, the same way that I used to miss the sky

when I was trying to fall asleep in the smallest room of my parents' old rundown house.

I missed him, I suppose now, even before I knew him.

My fingers tighten around the corner of the pillow. Homesickness hits me in a brutal wave, but it's different now. I'm not yearning for something unreachable; I know exactly what I'm looking for. I just can't understand how to close the breach that has once more widened between us.

Ivy?

And now I'm imagining his voice. That crosses the border from yearning to desperate. Scowling into the darkness, I beat my pillow into fresh plumpness and settle down again, my knees now curled tightly against my chest. Clarity is returning to me in uneven stammers. I know better than to be *lovesick*. Whatever's gotten into me, I'm sure it will be gone by the time I open my eyes tomorrow, just like every other drunken mistake I've ever made. Never mind the fact that I'm not drunk. Never mind the fact that this isn't—

“Ivy?”

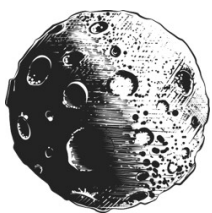
It's not my imagination this time.

“Should—I mean, do you... do you think we should—do you want to talk?” His words fall hesitantly into the air, each one softer than the last.

I don't have an answer to any of his half-uttered questions. I want... shit; I have no idea what I want. I stare at the darkness of my eyelids until it burns as fiercely as any sunrise. My breath, painstakingly paced, continues to play in defiance of my desperate lungs.

“What do you mean?” I murmur at last.

But he's already asleep.



CHAPTER 19

WHEN MY ALARM rouses me the next morning, I don't hurry to open my eyes. The dreams clinging to my half-conscious mind are too perfect, and I can't risk letting them get away from me. Like all the best ones, they have no definite form, only a potency of sensation that defies description: a suffusion of heat, the static of raw energy, every part of me cradled in unbelievable softness. I have no doubt that this is the sort of high that I could feast on to the end of my days.

And yet the *mainching* alarm insists.

Groaning, I reach blindly out, sleep-numbed fingers fumbling for the switch. It takes several good moments to locate it, and by the time that precious silence finally returns, Ivy is grumbling and shifting from the disturbance.

Ivy.

Oh.

No wonder my dreams were so good.

I hold the sheet close to my chest as I sit up, flooded with an unusual self-consciousness. She's still asleep, I think—or at least pretending to be, which is probably for the better. I have no idea how to even begin to talk about what happened last night. Chances are that she doesn't even want to talk. The whole thing feels surreal, and I can't help but worry that she's going to treat it as such. It was an impulse, that's all. Just an impulse... and yet there's no denying the way that it made me feel. I was somehow *full* in a way that I'd never been before. Did she sense it too? How could she not? I know with utmost

certainty that such a sensation couldn't exist in an individual. It was something created between us, something that neither of us could produce on our own—or with anyone else, for that matter. To think that she might not feel the same way....

Kest. I can't do this right now. Not if I want to get breakfast before head count. Keeping my eyes carefully diverted to the warm lump of blankets that conceals Ivy, I pull on my fatigues and check my pager. My schedule looks pretty standard, which is a relief. I can't imagine taking in new information when I'm... well, when I'm like this.

I feel like I'm moving in slow motion as I descend into the lobby and cross through the tunnels. More than that, it's like everyone around me is walking faster than usual, as if compelled by a sense of urgency that eludes me entirely. Even once I reach the mess hall, I can't bring myself to the same wavelength as everyone else. Has my platoon's energy always been this high in the morning? How did I never notice?

Even Jace, who gestures to the empty seat beside him as soon as he sets eyes on me, seems somehow off. Ambrose, parked as usual in the third chair of our little table, looks downright mutinous; I expect him to snap at me when I sit down, but he instead surprises me by launching into impassioned speech.

"They should call the whole *mainching* program off at this point," he growls. "It's clearly not working. You can *tell* it isn't working—look at how uncomfortable everyone is."

"Wait, what?" Is he somehow accusing me of its failure? I set down the piece of fruit that I was about to pop into my mouth. "The program? You mean the exchange?"

He gives a dismissive little jerk of the chin that might be a nod. "Do you know how long it's been since Cheri and I have done it properly? Well, I'll tell you: last night marked two full weeks. Two *weeks* of her turning me down every single night. No wonder I got desperate enough to make a move on your girl, Cassian."

That's probably the closest I'm going to get to an apology. I decide to play along with it. "Yeah, well. You know she's not

into that sort of thing, either.” The lie rolls off my tongue with tremendous ease, enough so that it takes me a second to realize the fact that it isn’t even accurate. Even as last night occupies the entire sphere of my senses, it still feels like something not-quite-real—less of a dream, more of a myth.

“Right,” Ambrose growls. “Maybe she had the right idea all along.”

His words sour my insides, and I hurry to shift the conversation in a new direction. “What about you, Jace? You and... Deryn, right? Are you—”

Before I can finish my sentence, our pagers trill with a familiar warning: five minutes to headcount. I still haven’t eaten a thing. I look down at my plate, consider trying to work through a mouthful of fruit, then give up and dump the whole thing.

It’s a relief in multiple ways when we line up for headcount. For one thing, we’re forbidden to speak unless addressed by Commander Emrys, so Ambrose doesn’t have the chance to harp on me any more than he already has. And Emrys himself seems to be the only one besides me who isn’t jittery with unrest. He calls my name; I stand at attention; he nods and tells me to get back in formation. It’s steady, easy, *normal* in a way that I didn’t even realize I had been craving.

“Right,” Emrys says after the attendance check is complete. “You’ve all read your schedules. If not, that’s your fault; you’ll need to go back to your quarters and get your muffs unless you want your eardrums blasted to bits. The rest of you, follow me to the shooting range.”

A handful of soldiers, including Ambrose and Calix, slink out of the briefing room while Emrys watches, his expression impervious. Some of the other guys heckle them—fewer than usual, it seems, but maybe that’s just because Ambrose’s voice is usually the loudest of them all. I can’t bring myself to join the mockery; it was something of a miracle that I remembered to bring my own muffs, considering how scattered my brain has been so far today.

The rest of us follow Emrys in a straight-backed line, measuring our steps in perfect synchronicity. The shooting range is several floors up, and the clacking of our boots against the staircase echoes through the entire atrium like a mechanized imitation of rain. The rhythm is somehow hypnotic. As we press upwards, my mind wanders again, moving in a direction of its own: through the tunnels and the greenhouse, up the elevator, and back to my room. Our room.

Yes. Oh, yes, that's it.

My cheeks and stomach tingle at the memory of her voice. The sounds she made, the warm yet exotic scent of her sweat, the softness of her hair as I wound it between my fingers... my only regret is that the lights were off. I want to know whether her eyes were open, whether her face was flushed, how her bare breasts looked as they heaved with every gasping breath....

The toe of my boot collides with the next step, and I stagger, fighting to regain my balance. *Kest*. I make up for the mistake quickly enough, but I hear murmurs behind me nonetheless.

What happened to the top performer that Emrys hand-selected for that mission, huh? I ask myself silently.

The truth is that I have no idea. I wasn't this distracted before; if anything, my yearning for Ivy drove me to work harder than ever. But this is something different. It's not necessarily a desire to sleep with her again, or even to look at her; I want to *be* with her. I want to ask her about her journal and her home and her family. I want to know what runs through her mind when she watches the stars at night. I want to know why she came here, even though she herself said she isn't sure. Maybe I could help her figure it out. Maybe—

But now we're here at the range, and I need to cram those thoughts down to the best of my ability. Failing to march in formation is one thing, but I can't afford to make a mistake while holding a *susting* gun.

The shooting range is a long, expansive room with a low ceiling, featureless save for the array of targets lined up at the

end. Scrubby fake grass, worn down by years and years of soldiers' heavy footsteps, crunches beneath our boots as we line up between thick metal dividers. The individual stalls are narrow to the point of flirting with claustrophobia; I don't have quite enough room to hold up both of my elbows—but that's an intentional part of their construction. We're expected to have perfect form, our bodies flattened so as to provide the smallest possible target for any adversaries.

There's something inane about that, and about the entirety of our combat training, I speculate as I load up a sniper rifle. I don't think Ixion has been in a proper war for as long as I've been alive. We've been the dominant power for so long that nobody is foolish enough to resist us. I suppose that's largely because our troops remain so polished, ready to jump into action at the slightest provocation. It's almost paradoxical; if we want to keep things peaceful, we need to keep up our mandatory training, one generation after another.

The irony of it all seems more pertinent than ever as I raise the scope to my eye, letting the rifle's body settle naturally against mine. All of this work, in a way, is for nothing... which raises the question of what comes after. The expectations are mundane enough. Settle down with a partner, live off of our post-service pensions, and produce children who can continue the cycle. That's it. That's all I've ever seen myself becoming: another cog in the machine, another number in the system, another—

“Stop, everyone! *Kest*, Auberon, what's gotten into you?” Emrys barks. I jump and nearly misfire, but manage to overcorrect myself at the last moment. I glance over my shoulder to see the commander glowering at me, one arm half-extended and the other lifted defensively in front of his chest. Humiliation fills me even before I realize what I've done.

“I—”

“I said that those without muffs needed to go back and fetch them, did I not?”

“Yes, and—”

“You didn't go back. You came straight here. Correct?”

“Because I already—”

“If you have them already,” Emrys continues, his voice dropping to a low rasp, “then *why can you hear me right now?*”

Oh. My eyes drop to my belt, where the protective earmuffs hang, as if waiting patiently for me to notice them.

“I, uh, wasn’t thinking. Sir. Apologies.”

His lip curls. “You’ve been doing well lately. You know that. I don’t want to see you *mainching* this up. This isn’t playtime, you know—if I hadn’t stopped you just now, you’d be in serious danger of permanent hearing damage. You know what that means?”

“I wouldn’t pass my physical.”

“Which leads to...?”

“Expulsion.” Maintaining eye contact is harder than any exercise that Emrys has ever put me through, but I know full well that letting my gaze drop would be a dire mistake.

“Correct. And if the reason for your expulsion is physical incompetence due to negligent actions, you don’t receive...?”

“A pension.”

Emrys doesn’t say anything else; he just watches me evenly for so long that my skin starts itching. At last, he gives me a curt nod and lets his arms drop to his sides.

“You’re a good soldier, Auberon. Don’t let it happen again.”

“Yes, sir.”

He steps back and raises his voice back to a shout, which once more spurs me to flinch—I can only hope that he doesn’t notice. “Resume! And if I see another trigger finger doing its job prematurely, you’ll all have something to show for it.”

If he says anything beyond that, I don’t hear it. I secure the muffs over my ears, and they greet me with their usual hollow, ringing silence. With the shuffles and echoes of the others obliterated, I’m once more left to myself and my thoughts,

which are all too eager to resume drifting. I force myself to double and triple-check my form and my safety before raising the rifle again. With my eye to the scope, I'm brought back to where I was before Emrys's interruption.

Just another soldier in the system. My finger slides over the trigger. That's right. Nothing new, nothing different, nothing more.

For the first time in my life, I find that there's something else I want.

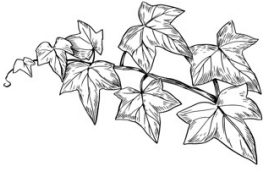
Something more than what's been prescribed to me.

Something worth fighting for.

I fire, and my bullet buries itself in the target, a faint ribbon of smoke issuing from where it landed.

Dead center.

CHAPTER 20



I KEEP my eyes shut tight as Cassian gets out of bed, trying not to imagine how his body looks in the pale morning light. He thinks I'm asleep, and I intend to keep it that way. I'm not ready to talk to him. I'm not sure that I'm even ready to talk to myself.

He shuffles through the closet, whistling under his breath. Does he notice that he does that? Something tells me it's subconscious. As tune-less as he is, I can't help but find it somehow charming—and that, naturally, just drives me even deeper into the quicksand of confusion.

The truth is that I don't understand a damn thing about last night. No—maybe that's an unfair assessment. I *understand* it all too well. Every moment won't stop replaying in my mind, as a matter of fact, and I'm not in any hurry for those details to start fading. The motions all make sense: I told him we could try. He moved on top of me. I sucked him off—the crudeness of the words in my mind incites a tiny shiver of pleasure—and then I let him into my body, unapologetic, unhesitating, uncovered.

Oh, shit. Uncovered.

I nearly sit bolt upright, but I can still hear him rustling around with his clothes. My teeth clench involuntarily. *Get out of here, get out....*

After what feels like twenty minutes but likely isn't more than five, the door whispers open and his footsteps fade into the elevator. It's only when the pneumatic *whoosh* of its

descent reaches my ears that I finally allow my eyes to spring open.

“Shit,” I say, sitting up and letting the sheets fall to my sides. “Shit, shit, shit.”

I’m a responsible person. I’m a *rational* person. So what the sweet fuck was I thinking?

The answer is obvious. I wasn’t thinking. Not even one bit. My brain handed its control entirely over to more primal desires, and now I’m going to have to deal with the consequences.

“Okay,” I mumble, running my fingers through my hair. That’s a mistake, because it reminds me of how it felt when he pulled on it last night, his heavy fingers wound tight against my scalp. I tried my best not to let him know how much I enjoyed that; it was somehow hotter to think he was doing it for his own pleasure.

Fuck, I’m in trouble.

I force myself to stand up and plod into the bathroom, driven by vague notions of showering. I glance at the mirror by habit, reminding me that I’m wearing very little on my lower half and nothing on my top. Great. I step closer and curl my hands over the basin, narrowing my eyes at my reflection. My hair is an absolute rats’ nest, fluffing out to the point where it seems wider than it is long. A quick inspection of my collarbone yields no marks, which is a good thing—*whatever* it was that happened last night, I’m sure as hell not in a hurry to let anyone else know. I can only hope that Cassian is the same... but of course he is. I trust him, for whatever reason. Enough to keep his mouth shut, at least.

Other than that, there’s no reason for me to look any different, and yet I can’t shake the feeling that something has changed. My eyes are brighter, or my skin is clearer, or something equally ridiculous. Total bullshit, of course. Still, I stay there staring at myself for far longer than I have any reason to. I straighten my shoulders and cock my head, watching as the woman in the mirror does the same. I feel taller, in a way. I feel *pretty*.

“Right. That’s enough of that,” I say loudly, turning my heel and crossing over to the shower. The jet of hot water is mercifully noisy, enough to drown out at least some of the frantic confusion in my gently pounding head. I bury myself beneath it and focus on the regular steps of the routine that I missed last night. Shampoo, conditioner, and soap under the arms, around the neck, and between the thighs. When my hands approach my hips, I throb involuntarily, which in turn spurs a harsh grimace. If there was any doubt in my mind as to the veracity of last night’s events, here’s the soreness to prove otherwise. He was *big*. It didn’t hurt at the time, but this morning is a whole different story. I’ve never been with a guy who was packing quite that much. Not to mention the *shape* of it—the hard ridges, the curved tip....

Fuck. Even the thought of it is causing a fresh pang of want to flare inside of me. “Get it together, Ivy,” I say. Sudsy water spurts into my mouth, and I spit it out with a groan.

After a thorough rinse, I shut off the water and towel myself dry in a series of quick, harsh movements that my aching body doesn’t appreciate in the slightest. Then I sit on the cold floor, legs folded, and force myself to think through the issue I’ve been avoiding all this time.

First of all, I don’t even know whether humans and Ixionians are capable of reproduction in the first place. I feel like I should have read about that at one point or another, but if that’s the case, I can’t have done more than skim. I assumed that it would never be relevant to me, I guess—or was perhaps too afraid to admit the opposite. It all seems almost painfully evident in retrospect... but that’s not what I need to be focusing on right now.

So. Reproduction may or may not be physically possible. I make a mental note to get that cleared up as soon as possible. If it is, the question arises of whether or not human-based birth control will be sufficiently effective. Finding that answer is going to be a whole lot harder, assuming that any relevant studies have even been conducted in the first place. It’s hard to imagine that they have—but I can’t think like that. *Stay*

optimistic, girl, I urge myself. You never know. Now, come on—what's next?

If the meds don't work, then it becomes a matter of whether or not it's my time of the month. I've always been pretty consistent, and some back part of my mind has kept track even after I started taking the pills a couple of years back. The issue is that time on Ixion doesn't align with time on Earth. The changes are negligible enough—a few more minutes to the day, a few less days to the month, so and so forth—but they add up. At this point, I have no idea what day a calendar at home might land upon. Even if I did, the process of keeping track is so intuitive that the date alone wouldn't be helpful to know; I need to face the fact that I've completely lost track of my body's rhythm.

Now, where the hell does that leave me?

If I remember correctly from the brief we received when we first landed, there's a pharmacy of sorts in the northern sect of the base that's stocked with human medicine. Would they have any type of morning-after treatment? I can't imagine that they would, considering that we're all women, and that our job here is to—

Wait.

I groan in a mix of relief and exasperation, lowering my head into my palms.

This isn't some wild mystery that I'm navigating. We *came* here to sleep with them, for fuck's sake. Of course there will be information at the ready. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, I'm nearly positive that they gave us a full rundown of risks and remedies when we initially signed up for the program. Was that part of the paperwork that I agreed to so long ago, listed on the tablet handed to me by the single attendant of a tiny registration desk?

Whatever the case, I sure don't remember a thing about it now.

But I know someone who will.

Deryn isn't a hard woman to track down. I don't see her at breakfast, but that's no concern. I toss back three imitation eggs before my mind catches up with my body, and a pang of panic shivers through me—isn't increased hunger a symptom of... the thing that I refuse to name?

No, come on; it doesn't start showing this early....

...At least not when your partner is a human.

Less than five minutes later, I'm barging through the cloudy glass door of the room with a plasticky, clearly temporary sign reading 'Guest Spa.' I've never been in here before, and the punch of overly moist air hits me hard; I spend a moment just catching my breath, trying to recalibrate myself with the surroundings.

The so-called spa is populated with fully automatic massage chairs, scattered throughout a landscape of imitation plants. Warm mist flows from hidden vents in the floor, to the point where I can barely see five yards in front of me, but I think I can make out the edge of an old-fashioned bar somewhere to the left. The temperature here must be at least ten degrees above the rest of the central building. Everything about it is crafted to cultivate pure relaxation, and it makes me so viscerally uncomfortable that I want to melt into the floor. This is absolutely not my stomping ground—but it is Deryn's. And right now, I need her help.

It doesn't take long at all to find her. Dressed in a one-piece bathing suit, she has her feet up, her head back, and her eyes obscured by some sort of faux-leafy green object that vaguely resembles a gel-based face mask. From what I can tell, she's at the epitome of relaxation, which almost makes me feel bad about what I'm about to do. Almost.

"Deryn," I say. She groans and adjusts her shoulders slightly, but gives no other response. Is she asleep? "*Deryn*," I try again, and this time she mumbles some words that I can just barely parse.

"Time's not... up yet."

“I’m not—that’s not the point.” I give her warm shoulder a gentle shake, and that’s enough to startle her into an upright position. The quasi-mask falls wetly into her lap.

She squints at me, rubbing at her eyes. “Ivy?”

“Yeah. Listen, I have to ask you something.”

Bit by bit, her expression shifts into focus. She swings her legs around until she’s sitting on the very edge of the seat, still scowling. “Uh. Okay. Ask me something here? How did you even...?”

“Because I know you. Listen, please.” I hate the tug of desperation in my voice, but there’s nothing I can do to suppress it. “When you and Jace—”

Her laughter, a sharp bark, startles me so severely that I take a step backward. She turns her sour gaze towards the floor and kicks vaguely in the direction of an imitation fern.

“Yeah. Me and Jace. I bet you want to hear about that right now.”

“Deryn, I—”

“You know, this is shitty enough without you making a whole thing out of it.”

That’s when it hits me. Of course, of course, of *course*—how could I have forgotten so soon? Am I that bad of a friend? Confronting her about Jace now, after walking out on her when she finally told me about her situation....

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I say, fully aware that my tone is limpid at best. “I, uh—I’ll get out of here. I’m really sorry. Forget about it.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she grumbles, lying back again.

I reach down to retrieve her mask, only to be met with a defiant palm when I straighten up again.

“Just leave, please. Sooner the better.”

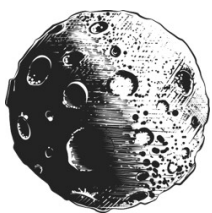
And I do.

I think Deryn is upset with me, and I can't really blame her. Hell, I'm upset with myself. Things are weird, to say the least, and I feel like I have nowhere to turn to aside from this journal. Cherise comes to mind, but she's been more withdrawn lately. When I went to tell her what Ambrose said to me on the hill that day, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. And the fact is that I haven't really made any friends here aside from those two.

C and I didn't use protection. I don't know how I could have been so stupid. I ended up going back to the library, and every source that I uncovered claimed that meds like mine should still work, but that I should keep an eye out for any "unusual anatomical symptoms" anyway. Yuck.

The more I think about everything, the more lost I feel. I don't know how to talk to Cassian, but every moment that we spend in silence just makes that awkward barrier all the more difficult to overcome.

Part of me wishes I had never signed up for this stupid program in the first place. But I think another part of me—a much bigger part—is insistent that this is the best choice I've ever made for myself. Almost like it's what I've always been meant to do. That's what scares me the most.



CHAPTER 21

CASSIAN

IVY DOESN'T SAY a single word to me all night, which is somehow worse than if she yelled abuse for hours on end. She wants to pretend that nothing happened. Of course she does. Am I really that surprised? Did I actually expect that she would... want to do it again, even?

I don't know. There's just so much that I don't know. I wish there was a way to stop thinking entirely.

Ambrose is the one who gives me exactly that.

"All right," he says as we're departing the briefing room for the evening, Emrys's latest announcements already slipping away from our short-term memories. "I've just about had it with this. What do you say, guys—we hit the canteen tonight. Swill away our sorrows. You know how it goes. Yes or yes?"

Jace nods emphatically. I open my mouth, ready to reject the offer out of sheer instinct, but something compels me to pause. Why shouldn't I? What's the alternative? Going back to my room, sitting in that awful soupy silence until it's a reasonable time to go to sleep, hating myself more with every sentence I hear Ivy type out... I think it might just be enough to drive me insane.

"Sure. *Sust* it."

"Yeah?" Ambrose's eyes widen into two perfect circles of pale amber. "Awesome, man! That's what I like to hear. Look at you, all grown up."

I wince as he claps a hand against my shoulder, forcing out a humorless laugh. He sure has a way of getting on my nerves, but he's also had a few good ideas in his life, and this is definitely one of them. So what if I've never been much of a drinker? I've never been one to sleep with human women, either, but here I am.

I can count on one hand the number of times that I've been to the soldiers' lounge—or the 'canteen,' as Ambrose so affectionately refers to it. The building, a round dome of tarnished metal, is positioned near the main entrance to the base, which makes it a prime spot for meeting up with civilians. As I understand it, the not-so-secret purpose of the place is to work off one's excess libido. Flirt with some random lady, maybe get handsy in the bathroom, and then go back to your quarters and rub one out to the memory of her touch. Some guys love it. I can't think of anything more depressing.

But, well, here I am.

The place is pretty packed, with myriad Ixionians and a healthy scattering of foreigners filling the booths and bar. At first, I don't see how we can possibly fit ourselves in, but Ambrose is practically a professional; he sashays past groups of drinkers with a practiced step, leading Jace and me to an empty corner with a table not unlike the one where we have our meals. He grins and gestures widely towards it.

"Behold, our little chamber of solace. Get comfortable, because this is going to be a long night."

I slide into the seat with its back to the wall, craving some semblance of stability. This is good—from here, I have a view of the whole place, from the pulsing neon floor tiles to the string lights draped from the ceiling. Ambrose is already at the bar, exchanging words with a rather stunning Ixionian woman, who after that passes him a tray of three tall glasses, filled to the brim with some electric blue drink. He blows her a kiss and laughs as she pretends to catch it, then hurries back over to our table with his bounty in hand.

“I could’ve asked you what you wanted,” he says, passing the glasses around, “but you’d probably choose something disgusting, so I’m sparing you the pain. You want to get drunk? These bad boys will get you drunk.”

I purse my lips around the metal straw and take a slow sip. The drink is freezing cold, sending bolts of pain straight to my temples; Ambrose snorts with amusement as I half-choke.

“Never said it was the most pleasant of experiences, did I? Drink up, buddy. The faster you get it in you, the less painful it’ll be.”

That doesn’t seem like the most watertight of philosophies, but I’m already in this deep. Might as well go all the way. Taking a deep breath, I push aside the straw and go straight for a gulp. My throat and sinuses sting badly enough for my eyes to fill with tears, but I don’t let that stop me; I take a second huge swallow, then a third. By the time I set the glass back down on the table, I practically see stars.

It takes me a moment to realize that Ambrose is making a show of applauding me. “Atta boy!” he cheers. “See? You’re a natural. Gonna forget your woes in no time.”

“I don’t have any *woes*,” I mumble, which causes both of my friends’ brows to shoot up in obvious skepticism.

“Defensive much?” Jace murmurs around his own straw.

“I’m not defensive,” I insist, which does me about as much good as a kick to the face.

“Hey, I get it,” Ambrose says, edging closer to me. “*Kest*, I’d say J and I finally get where you’ve been coming from all along, you know? With the girl trying to ice you out and all.”

“Don’t,” Jace begins, but Ambrose either doesn’t hear him or doesn’t care.

“I’m almost jealous, y’know? At least you didn’t have anything to work with from the start. Nowhere to fall when you’re already at rock bottom, and all that garbage. Me, on the other hand—I *had* something going with Cheri. Something really good. And now....” He rubs two fingers together to imitate a flame fizzling out. “Pow. Nothing. Just gotta share

my room with someone who does nothing but glare at me. And the rooms are already small, you know?”

As he speaks, his words seem to spool out into slow motion. When I nod, the lights around me leave faint trails in the periphery of my vision. Maybe I didn't need to gulp down the drink quite that fast... or maybe I did. Maybe it was exactly what I needed. I toss back another swallow. Ambrose is right: it doesn't hurt as much going down now. As a matter of fact, I'm actually beginning to feel warm, all the way from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. I'm starting to get a sense of why he likes this stuff so much.

“And J almost has it *worse*,” Ambrose continues after taking a long drink of his own. He elbows Jace, who looks more miserable than ever. “I mean, the two of them were *connecting*—”

“We still have a connection,” Jace insists. He stares down into the pits of his glass, but something tells me he isn't seeing anything there. “It's just different now. That's it.”

“Different. Right.” Ambrose flashes me a look that's easy enough to decipher: *See? He's in denial. Completely down in the dumps*. I'm less sure. Jace isn't the type to pretend that things are better than they are; that's Ambrose's job.

“It really isn't so bad,” Jace insists. “And I don't regret it. I just... it just wasn't working.”

“That's what they all say, isn't it?” Ambrose gives his head a meditative shake, which for some reason just makes me irritable. Why is he so confident that he has the answers to everything at all times? Before I can stop myself, my own lips are moving, words tumbling from them at a far quicker pace than I'm used to.

“Leave him alone, okay? We've all got our own *kest* to deal with.”

“True, true. I'll lay off.” His voice doesn't carry an ounce of regret or apology, but Jace flashes me a grateful glance regardless. Before I can say another word, Ambrose has started off on a completely different tangent. My attention

wanes. I sip my drink. In what seems like no time at all, the three of us have drained our glasses, and Ambrose is standing up to get us seconds.

“Another round of the same?”

“Yeah,” I say automatically. As he walks off to collect the drinks, a slow wave of trepidation threatens the edges of my mind. Should I not have said that? How long have we been here, anyway? Only a few minutes, but I’m already feeling more than a little buzzed.

“You shouldn’t try to match him,” Jace says, as if reading my mind. “He drinks like a madman. If you try to keep pace, you’ll be on the ground by the time he starts slurring his words.”

I huff out a little laugh. “You sound like you’ve got your fair amount of experience with it.”

“More than you.”

The words would be condescending from anyone else, but there’s no trace of cruelty in Jace’s voice. He’s stating a fact, that’s all. I nod. “Yeah. I’ll slow down.”

“Your body’ll thank you for it. Trust me.”

And I do slow down, at least for a little bit. It takes me a good while longer to finish the second drink, and by the time the glass is empty, I’m starting to see what Jace was talking about. Ambrose is bright-eyed and verbose as ever, but I feel vaguely suspended, like I just stepped off a cliff and am waiting for gravity to do its job. My perception narrows until I can only focus on the lights and music. It’s good music, too, with a bass that I can feel rattling my ribcage. Is there a dance floor in here? I suddenly can’t remember. I squint past the circular bar, trying to see what’s on the other side, but the whole place is such a mess of crowded chaos that I can’t make sense of it at all.

“*Cassian!*”

I startle back to attention. Ambrose is watching me with narrowed eyes. “You go deaf there for a second?” he asks, but doesn’t wait for an answer. “You want thirds or what?”

“Thirds, uh... yeah.” My tongue feels strange against my teeth, almost numb. The trails left by the lights are longer now, spiraling into a wild web of color. When I blink, I feel like I’m clipping through reality itself. Definitely too much, and definitely too fast. I don’t belong in a place like this. I should go home. I’ve almost decided as much when Ambrose returns with the next round, and I’m trying to find the words to tell them when I all at once remember what’s waiting for me there.

Ivy. Ivy’s coldness, her refusal to speak to me, the barren distance of chilly bed sheets that she maintains between us.

I toast the other two and drink more deeply than ever.

The rest of the night is a jumble of disconnected scenes floating in a sea of detached apathy. At some point, Ambrose wanders off. I ask Jace where he went, and am told that he disappeared with the pretty bartender a while back.

“He’s not s’posed to do that,” I protest. “She’s... I mean, he’s not... allowed to sh—” I give my head a little shake, trying to straighten out my thoughts, but it only confuses them further. Jace, at least, seems to get the picture.

“I think all of those rules are pretty bendable lately. With the exchange program and all. Cassian, you should drink water —”

But I’m already tuning him out. Exchange program. My brain won’t even let me decipher why those words make me feel so empty, but the sensation is unmistakable.

I keep drinking.

Time passes in a way that doesn’t quite seem linear. The lights above us change color, from blue to green to yellow to orange to pink to violet and back again. Watching them with my head tilted back against the wall, I let my senses spin out of focus, falling apart into a million fragmented pieces like the galaxies looming overhead....

And then I hear a familiar voice.

“Might mean a promotion, might just mean that he trusts me not to *sust* things up as most of the guys at my level. It’s a pretty low bar, I’ll tell you that.”

I can't hear the response, but that doesn't matter. I slowly let my head list to the side, wondering whether I was imagining things... but there he is. His back is to me, but the lithe form and short horns of Commander Azrael Emrys are unmistakable.

"Mhm." His shoulders shift in a long sigh. "Of course, but it's the *High Commander*. Almost feels like a trap...."

Another pause as his unseen partner responds.

"Quarters, yeah, and the offices—only the private ones, so I don't imagine they'll—I mean, I don't think he's even authorized to... right. In any case, we shouldn't be talking about it here."

"He always was the playboy," Jace mumbles suddenly. It takes me a sluggish moment to realize that he's talking about Ambrose and not Emrys. "Running off with girls... breaking the rules... but some rules're meant to be broken, you know?"

"Yeah." It takes several moments for the meaning of his words to register in my mind. "Wait, what?"

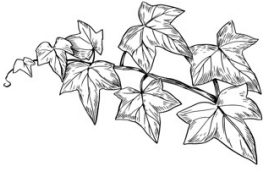
Jace leans across the table. His pupils are pinpricks against ice-green irises. "Cassian, I'm gonna tell you something. But you need to keep it a secret. Promise?"

"Promise. Of course." Curiosity, the first proper sensation I've felt for a while now, rears in my chest.

"There've been talks lately... people've been quesh—" He hiccups. "...Questioning orders. Me and Deryn... and others, too... something's going on. Something weird. You should... you should know that."

I want to ask what he means. Maybe I even do. But I'm past the point of processing a thing that either of us says. When I close my eyes, the world sways around me, and I don't fight it. I don't fight anything at all. I just lose myself in the music.

CHAPTER 22



I DON'T MEAN to stay up waiting for him, but it seems that I can't help myself. At first, I dismiss my worry when he doesn't show up. I should be grateful for the extra space. It's not like he's obligated to share his whereabouts with me at all times, especially considering the fact that we haven't spoken a word to one another over the past couple of days. Yet unease still forms a hard lump in my throat, which only grows as the minutes tick by. No matter how hard I try, my mind won't stay on track, and my journal entry ends up wandering into the same trenches of anxiety.

It's late, an hour or more past the time when Cassian usually comes back. He didn't say anything about leaving. Aside from mealtimes, I've been here all day, and he hasn't packed a bag, so he can't be out on a mission. His schedule has always been consistent. I don't know where he could be. I don't know why I care so much. He can take care of himself, after all.

I try to hold those words at the forefront of my mind as I close the tablet and strip for my shower. *He can take care of himself.* It's true; of course he can. It's not like he would just drop dead somewhere. So why am I so worked up about it?

I don't expect him to have magically appeared by the time I emerge from the bathroom, but my stomach still sinks when I see the empty room. Robotically, I take my pills—flinching a little bit at the sight of the small blue oval of my contraceptive—and crawl into bed. *Everything's fine.* No matter what, he'll be here in the morning, and then I'll be able to laugh at whatever ridiculous notions got into my head. It's that thought,

repeated ad infinitum until the words have practically lost their meaning, that finally allows me to drift into a shallow, fitful sleep.

Brr. Brr. Brr.

That goddamn alarm. I groan and curl more tightly around myself. I still can't believe that he's never so much as asked whether he can change that godawful sound that it makes. It seems like he's not in a hurry to shut it off this morning, either, because it's still going: *Brr. Brr. Brr. Brr. Brr.*

“For fuck's sake—” I spring up and whirl to face him, my frazzled morning brain more than ready to chew him out—but he's not there. His side of the bed is immaculate. Untouched.

He never came home last night.

Last night's anxiety is at once supplanted by a wave of outright dread. I'm on my feet in instants, throwing on the first clothes I come across and barrelling into the elevator. I don't know what I'm doing or where I'm going—only that I need to find him, and I need to find him *now*.

The elevator seems to take a thousand years to descend. Still bleary with sleep, I shift my weight from one foot to another, trying without much success to coach my mind away from the direst of scenarios. It briefly occurs to me that I never shut off the alarm, and that it still must be blasting away with that awful noise. *Brr. Brr. Brr. Brr. Brr.* I know it's my imagination, but I could swear that I actually hear it, as if the sound is following me.

Finally, the elevator's glass panel slides open. I start off at a half-jog. Lobby, tunnels, greenhouse, central building. The atrium is relatively crowded, as tends to be the case at this point in the morning. I whisk my gaze from one side to another, trying in vain to catch a glimpse of familiar dark scales. Nothing.

Maybe he's at breakfast. Perhaps he had some sort of overnight training that he neglected to mention to me, and now he's getting ready for a whole new day. It's not much of a

hope, but I'm already walking toward the cafeteria before it's fully formed. It's something, and *something* is all I can ask for right now.

I'm almost at the door when an unfamiliar Ixionian, silver-skinned with antler-like horns, reaches out to stop me.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he says. His voice is pleasant, almost melodic, which somehow makes me feel even more frantic. "The human dining area is—"

"I wasn't born yesterday," I hiss. He recoils, startled; I don't care. There's not enough room in me to feel bad for some stranger right now. "I need to talk to someone."

"I don't think you're allowed—"

I don't hang around to listen. He halfheartedly tries to step in front of me as I close the distance between myself and the door, but I easily dodge around him and press forward.

The soldiers' dining hall is much bigger than ours, and significantly more polished. Pale beams of sun arch through a tremendous skylight. The colors and textures of the food scattered across the tables are topped in strangeness only by the smell, which triggers a gag in the back of my throat. All of these things register on a secondary level of consciousness, while my immediate mind hyper-focuses on the only thing that matters.

God damn it, Cassian, where are you?

The answer, it would appear, isn't here. The more I look, the more the soldiers look back, prodding one another for attention until nearly all of their gem-colored eyes are fixed on me, silence swiftly blanketing the whole room. I can feel my throat reddening with self-consciousness. Their expressions range from curious to hostile, but none are friendly. None are welcoming. And none are his.

Then a low voice pierces through the awful lack of sound.

"Ivy?"

I whirl around to see none other than Deryn's mate, Jace. The concern is written across his handsome features, and one

hand is extended as if to grasp mine.

“What are you doing here?”

The answer is right there, lingering on the tip of my tongue, but it’s as if my lungs have frozen over. I don’t know how to say it with so many ears listening in. My instincts tell me to turn tail and bolt away like a frightened rabbit, yet I’m rooted to the ground.

Miraculously, Jace seems to understand. He raises his voice and turns towards his comrades, his gentle expression diving into sternness. “Do you mind?” he barks. “We’re having a private conversation over here!”

Slowly, brushfires of conversation reignite amidst the soldiers’ ranks. Several of them are still watching me, but at least the low hum of their voices is enough to provide some semblance of confidentiality.

“It’s Cassian,” I half-whisper. “I... he’s gone. He never came home last night.”

Jace inhales sharply. “Ah, *kest*,” he mutters. “I knew I shouldn’t have left him there.”

“Left him where?” I take a step closer, fists balled at my sides. “What happened to him? Where is he?”

His sharp teeth worry his lower lip, and he glances around once more, perhaps in search of any obvious eavesdroppers. I’m on the verge of snapping when he finally replies.

“We went out last night. Him and Ambrose and me—”

“Went out? Out of the base?”

“Let me finish, will you? We went drinking at the lounge. He got... well, we all got pretty messed up. It got late. I... should have made him walk back with me, but I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Nausea fills my throat and stomach. Drinking? Since when does Cassian drink? I don’t know everything about him, of course I don’t, and yet that specific notion feels profoundly *wrong* somehow. It isn’t supposed to be that way. It just isn’t.

And the rest of it, what Jace is saying now... he just *left* him there?

“Why would you—” No. That’s not helpful. Gritting my teeth, I force my mind to align itself. Irrationality isn’t going to get me anywhere. “So you don’t know where he is?”

“Well... still there, I’d imagine. The end of the night’s a bit of a blur, but I’m pretty sure he was in no state to be going anywhere on his own.”

“Fuck. Okay.” It takes all of my willpower and then some to keep from lashing out at Jace, demanding how he could possibly leave a friend in a situation like that. There’ll be plenty of time later. Right now, finding Cassian is the priority. “Where is it? The lounge?”

“By the main northern entrance. The circular building has a domed roof; you can’t miss it. Look—” He glances behind himself. Following his gaze, I see Ambrose at a nearby table, watching us with narrowed eyes. The sight of him causes yet another flip of anxiety in my gut. Jace turns back to me, and I wrench my eyes from the cold stare of Cherise’s mate, forcing myself to instead focus on the soldier in front of me.

“I would come and show you, but we’re almost due for headcount, and I can’t afford to take a demerit. Like I said, the place is easy to spot. I’m sure he’s there—I’m *sure*.”

The repetition is far from encouraging. If anything, it sounds like he’s urging himself to believe it with questionable success.

I just nod. “Okay. I’m going.”

“Thank you, Ivy.” Concern creases his forehead. “And... I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Yeah,” I hear myself say, “you fucking better be.”

With that, I rush out of the cafeteria and head straight for the northern entrance of the base.

Jace was right: the lounge is unmistakable. As soon as I spot a dome-shaped roof in the distance, I up my pace; by the time I

reach the door, I'm practically sprinting. I stumble down to walking speed, panting hard. I couldn't get here fast enough, but now that I'm confronted with the building itself, I'm almost afraid to go inside. What if he isn't there? Where would that leave me? And—perhaps even worse—what if he *is*? How can I handle seeing him like... well, I can't even imagine.

To hell with it. I've done enough speculating. Jaw tense as a spring-loaded trap, I push open the door and step inside.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. There are no windows in here, and the lights are low, like a store after hours—which, I suppose, is precisely what this is, in a sense. A couple of drowsy-looking patrons sit around the circular central bar at staggered intervals; other than them, the only sign of life is a maintenance worker whisking up the remains of last night's revelry.

But where the hell is Cassian?

I've almost given up when I see him.

It's a wonder that I even recognize him, seeing as he's little more than a huddled heap in the back corner, and yet I'm absolutely certain. I close the distance between us in a few brisk strides. He's slouched over the table, face buried in his folded arms, shoulders rising and falling with the steady breaths of a deep sleeper. Relief and repulsion fill me in equal measure. How much did he have to drink to get himself like this? What the hell was he *thinking*?

"Cassian." No response. "*Cassian.*" I give his shoulder a quick, firm shake. He groans and shifts slightly, but still doesn't wake. "God damn it—"

"Give it up, little lady," a patron calls from across the bar. From the slurry mess of his consonants, he's been at it since last night. "Better not waste your time with that kinda lowlife."

"He's not a fucking lowlife," I snap, staring daggers at him. He mumbles something else into his drink and mimes an obscene gesture in my direction. I fight past the urge to march over there and see how he likes the taste of the floor against

those leering lips, instead focusing back on Cassian. I'd dump a glass of water on him if I had one, but I'm not about to ask the bartender for something like that. Aside from that, my options are pretty limited. I give them each their due consideration, then take a deep breath, ready a hand, and smack him as hard as I can across the shoulder.

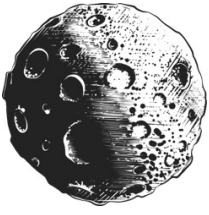
He yelps and springs upright, nearly falling off of his seat—I just manage to catch him and ease him back into stability. He blinks rapidly, long lashes fanning the cloudy gleam of his golden-green eyes. It doesn't take long for recognition to creep into them.

“Ivy?” he mumbles. “What—”

“Come with me.” I hold out a hand. He stares dumbly down at it.

“What're you... where are we going?”

“Home.” Since he's not getting the hint, I go ahead and twine my fingers with his, wrenching him unsteadily to his feet. “I'm taking you home.”



CHAPTER 23

LATE AFTERNOON light leaches through my eyelids, unforgiving in its intensity. I try to recoil, to pull myself back into the welcome recesses of sleep, but to no avail; if anything, it seems only to be getting brighter. With a groan, I roll over onto my side, and that's when it hits me.

Pain jackknives through my head. I hiss through my teeth, and at once become aware of the fact that my tongue feels like someone hung it out to dry overnight. My entire mouth—no, scratch that; my entire *body* is itching with thirst, to the point where I can't so much as think about anything else. I need water. Everything else comes next. But in order to get water, I need to get up, and in order to get up—

“Here.” A warm, smooth hand presses against mine, guiding my fingers around the rim of a glass. Keeping my eyes clenched shut, I sit up just enough to let the glass tip toward my sore lips. Cool water fills my mouth, and it's just about the best thing I've ever tasted—I gulp down one swallow after another, my throat struggling to keep up, only stopping when the hand pulls away from me.

“Not that fast. You'll make yourself sick.”

I'd know her voice anywhere, but I've never heard it like this before. She doesn't sound angry, confused, or bored—she doesn't even sound like she did on the night that changed everything, when her tones dipped into new, sultry depths. This is different. This is... *gentle*.

“Ivy—”

“Shh. Stay down. You’re safe, but you’re pretty damn sick.”

“...Sick?” I repeat. How could I have gotten sick? I try to crack my eyes open, but slam them right back shut when the bright light brings on a fresh wave of nausea. *Kest*. I guess I am sick.

“You messed up last night,” she says evenly.

Last night... why won’t my memory work? Straining to retrace my steps is physically painful. Apparently, I did indeed mess up, if this is the outcome. I can’t remember ever feeling this awful in my life.

“What’d I... do?”

“You drank. A lot. Don’t ask me why, because I can’t tell you.”

Drank. Drink. Water. I lift my hand again, and she’s there at once, helping me down another few steady swallows. I feel like I could toss back a whole ocean and still be thirsty.

“Hold on. I need to refill this.”

She pulls away, and soft footsteps signal her movement toward what must be the bathroom. I half-open my eyes again, and this time manage to keep them that way, forcing my surroundings into some semblance of focus. I’m in bed. My bed. The sight of the wall across from me is something that’s grown all too familiar over the last few weeks; I’ve spent a lot of time perched on this side of the mattress, gazing at nothing. Lowering my gaze and slowly raising myself up on one elbow, I see that I’m sprawled inelegantly atop the blanket. I still have my clothes on. Whatever happened, it couldn’t have been pretty.

“I told you not to get up,” Ivy reprimands as she walks back over. She doesn’t look too good, herself. Her hair is even messier than usual, and gray crescents scoop beneath her eyes. It’s as if she hasn’t been sleeping—but, considering the tone of the light painting the room, the bigger question is why I *have* been.

Ivy takes a seat—it looks like she’s pulled her desk chair over to the bedside—and holds out the glass. This time, I manage to hold it on my own. I get in three long swallows before nausea rears up again. I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp a hand over my mouth, eyes watering; it subsides bit by bit, rocking through me in great dizzying waves.

“...Ugh.”

“That about sums it up, I think.” Setting the glass aside, Ivy pulls her legs up and wraps her arms around them, tucking her chin against her knees. Her transient eyes, more brown than green at the moment, betray nothing.

“What... do you know what time it is?”

“Not quite dinner. You’ve been sleeping pretty much all day, which is a good thing. However awful you feel right now, I can promise it was worse about six hours ago. It’s a miracle you didn’t throw up when I was bringing you back from the lounge—I was positive you were going to at a couple of points.”

Lounge. That word triggers a rush of far-from-welcome memories. Last night... I do remember last night, or at least bits and pieces of it. Ambrose and Jace took me to the lounge. I had... how many gigantic glasses of that icy blue drink? Definitely three, and in rapid succession. After that, things get hazier, which probably means I didn’t slow down for a while. Ivy said that she brought me back a few hours ago, which means... *kest*, is it really possible that I was there all night long?

“Stop thinking so hard,” she scolds. I’m not sure whether I’m imagining the humor that touches the corners of her mouth.

“You don’t know how hard I’m thinking.”

“You wish. You’re more expressive than you realize, you know. Right now, you look like you’re working through a set of quantum physics problems.”

I narrow my eyes at her, and she cocks her brows in response. We hold a stare between us for a long moment,

silently challenging each other to be the first to break away. When we finally do, it's simultaneous: she brings a hand to her lips to stifle a giggle, casting her eyes down, and I let out a chuckle of my own as I blink slowly, careful not to trigger another wave of pain in my head.

"You're ridiculous," she says—and then, a bit more harshly, "You scared the shit out of me when you didn't come home last night."

"I'm sorry." I really mean it, too. I hope she can tell. "I didn't know what I was getting into. I'm... not much of a drinker, really."

"You never struck me as one. Which is a big part of why I was worried in the first place." She suddenly seems very preoccupied with her fingernails, inspecting them one at a time with careful precision. I wait for her to say something else, but she doesn't. I don't mind. The silence is pleasant in its own way. Gradually, my eyes drift shut again. I'm not sleepy, exactly; I just can't handle the light right now. Which is a *susting* shame, because, despite her visible weariness, I can't remember Ivy ever looking more beautiful than she does right now. I feel as though I could gaze at her forever without growing bored for a single instant. As absurd as it sounds, it's the truth; I can't imagine anything more intriguing than the tilt of her lips and the kaleidoscope of her eyes.

I realize all at once that I'm in far, far too deep.

An absurd compulsion floods my mind. I want to tell her that I love her. I haven't even admitted it to myself—though I guess that's what I'm doing right now, in a way—and yet I want her to know. What is there to stop me? Why should I be afraid of regret? After last night, regret is my middle name; what's the harm of taking one last risk?

The words are halfway to my lips when she speaks up.

"Cassian?"

The weight of what I was about to do comes rushing in, and my stomach swoops with alarm. I must still be a little

drunk to be thinking like that. Flushing, I manage to mumble a tiny “Yeah?”

“Why did you do it? Last night? What... what was going on?”

That’s quite the question, and I’m not all that sure that I have an answer to it.

Exhaustion suddenly begins to fill my body—or maybe it was there already, and I’m just now allowing myself to feel it. I sink deeper into the mattress as her words trace wandering spirals through my mind.

“Things are... weird,” I mumble. My eyelids droop. What did she ask me again?

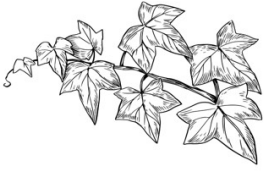
“What things are weird?”

“Everything. The program... things aren’t going the way they wanted.” I’m half-asleep already, but I cling to my scant recollection of what Jace told me last night after Ambrose left us alone. “Talks... people are... questioning....”

“Questioning? Questioning what?”

Her voice is the last thing I hear as my thoughts slide away once more.

CHAPTER 24



I WAIT, but Cassian remains silent. After several long moments, the shift in his breathing tells me he's fallen asleep again. I don't know how he does it so quickly, but I'm glad. He needs the rest after what he pulled last night.

Still, I wish he had elaborated just a bit more. Maybe he's delirious—maybe his words don't mean anything at all—and yet something tells me that isn't the case. *Talks... people are questioning....* Questioning what? The effectiveness of the exchange program? Are they going to bring it to a premature end? My lungs stutter at the thought. I can't go back home. Not now. For a moment, I want to follow in his idiotic footsteps and load up on a good several drinks on my own, just to banish the thought of being bundled onto the ship and jettisoned back to Earth along with the rest of the women—but that wouldn't do either of us any good.

The more I consider the possibilities, the colder my skin grows. Of course it's going to end at some point. I've always known that. The whole program is temporary, experimental; we aren't even getting *paid* til it's over, for fuck's sake. I should be eager for it to wrap up... but who am I kidding? I sigh, watching the steady rhythm of Cassian's shoulders as they rise and fall. At this point, trying to deny what's happening is laughable at best and dangerous at worst. Like it or not, this has become about much, much more than a simple paycheck.

I rise abruptly to my feet. I can't stand this anymore. If I spend another minute watching him, my chest is going to burst. He'll be fine now that he's gotten some water in him. I

refill the glass again and leave it at his bedside before getting into the elevator.

It's a sheer instinct that starts me in the direction of the library, even though I know perfectly well that there's nothing in there to interest me. Just being there is nice: the stillness, the quiet, the narrow racks of old paper books and faintly humming data plugs. More than anything, it's just a good place to sit and think, which perhaps explains why these blockheaded Ixionian soldiers barely seem aware of its existence.

I'm only halfway there, however, when my path intersects with that of an all too familiar figure.

Deryn and I both have our eyes trained on the ground, which is why we nearly run headlong into each other. I mumble an apology at the same time as her, then do a double take. Her expression goes cold as soon as our eyes lock together.

"Oh... sorry," I say again, this time with a more genuine emphasis. I hope she can understand that I'm talking about more than the almost-collision just now. At the very least, she doesn't brush me off right away; instead, she crosses her arms and regards me with steady, dark eyes, her jaw as tense as I've ever seen it. It takes several beats for me to realize that she's waiting for me to continue.

Shit, okay. I can't afford to botch this opportunity. "So..." I glance from one side to another. The people walking nearest to us are well out of hearing range, but my voice dips to a lower pitch nonetheless. "I really screwed up the other day. I wasn't thinking—"

"Clearly."

"Yeah." A cool breeze ruffles the blue grass and blows my hair into my face, giving me a few extra moments to think as I comb it out of my eyes. "Well... yeah. You were being vulnerable, and I was too caught up in my own head, and I acted like a complete bitch."

“And how about when you decided to come after me later, when I was in the middle of a spa session?” she demands, her upper lip curling with contempt. “It’s shitty enough that you would bring it up again after just walking away like that, but when I’m *obviously* doing my best to relax? Are you insane?”

I almost respond that, yes, I very well might be at this point—but that isn’t what she needs to hear. “All I can say is that I’m sorry. And I’m working on it. I know that it was wrong of me. I just... I really hope that you’ll give me another chance. Even if I don’t deserve it. And I promise not to bring up Ja—uh, not to talk about him again.”

She contemplates me as though I’m some vaguely disturbing art display. I have to bite on my lower lip to keep from babbling. If I keep going, I’m just going to sound desperate, and I know that’ll shut her down faster than anything. She doesn’t want me to beg her for forgiveness, which is something that I’ve always appreciated. With the apology hanging between us, the only thing left is for her to settle on a judgment.

I see it on her face before she says the words. Her brow eases, color returns to her lips, and she lets out a little sigh as her shoulders drop to their usual half-slouch. “Yeah. I get it. You obviously have a lot of your own stuff going on.” While her tone isn’t unkind, it isn’t exactly gentle, either. Even that much is more than I deserve, really.

“Who cares what I have going on?” I do my best to pipe levity into my voice. It doesn’t work very well beyond making me sound like I’ve just downed a sizable gulp of helium. “That’s not what this is about. I shouldn’t have overshadowed your problems with my own in the first place. Do you....” My first instinct is to ask about dinner, but the cafeteria doesn’t open for a while yet. The second option that comes to mind, in its own way, is just as stupid. “Do you want to get some drinks?”

That’s enough to surprise a laugh out of her. “Seriously?”

“Why not? There’s a lounge up by the northern entrance. We could, I don’t know... have a few cocktails and complain

about that asshole Jace. Or just work on forgetting about him.”

She laughs again, this time with far less humor. “Yeah, well. That’s... not really the issue.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...” Deryn looks to the side and swallows audibly. “I don’t think the situation with Jace is what you’re imagining.”

That catches me off guard. “It’s... not?”

“We’re still getting along. I mean... in a way, we’re getting along better than ever. Because—” She huffs and scowls at the ground, kicking a heel against the grass. “We shouldn’t talk about this here.”

“Okay. Okay. Uh... should we go back to the wall?”

“The wall?” For a second, she looks utterly confused; then comprehension creeps into her eyes. “You mean the border. No. Absolutely not. That’s where they have the most ears, which is why....” Her words trail off into a growl of frustration. “We can’t do this here.”

“You already said that. What do you mean, ears?”

“Y’know, Ivy... considering that you’re one of the smartest people I know, you can be pretty dumb sometimes.” She whisks her gaze from side to side, then steps in close to me, her voice shrinking to a conspiratorial whisper. “We can talk, but we need to do it later. Tonight. Understand?”

“Tonight?” A thousand thoughts are racing through my mind at a breakneck pace, each of them vying for my attention. The one that makes it to my lips is the most obvious: “I can’t at night. They lock the doors.”

“*Quiet,*” Deryn hisses, flapping a hand at me.

I have no idea what’s got her so worked up; we’re still several yards away from the nearest potential eavesdropper. Nonetheless, I go along with it and keep my own voice to little more than a rasp. “I’ve already tried going out at night. It doesn’t work. The doors to the rooms shut off, and the elevator —”

“Oh, come on. Since when has something like that ever stopped you?”

I only stare, and she groans with frustration.

“Has this place seriously dumbed you down that much, Ives? You were the one who dragged me through all those abandoned factories when we were kids. I thought urban exploration was, like, your *thing*.”

I can't help but feel defensive, and need to consciously keep my voice from rising in response to her derision. “It still is my thing! I've been looking around here a lot, too. There's something going on around the top floors, I'm pretty sure, and I've pretty much scoured the library—”

“Yeah, yeah, that's great. Try scouring your bathroom tonight, okay? The shower floor grate is pretty easy to wiggle free; just be careful once you're in the tunnel.”

All I can do is gape at her. It feels like I'm at the butt of some ridiculously convoluted joke. Where is she getting all of this from? And what the hell does it have to do with what I was saying about Jace? Cassian's sleepy words nag at the back of my mind. What had he been saying before he drifted off again? Why hadn't I paid closer attention? People questioning something—questioning the exchange program, I think—that's all I've got.

“Come on, Ivy. Keep up with me.”

“Okay. Okay. Bathroom grate.”

“Bathroom grate, tunnel to the underworks. Then head to the nursery basement. It's straightforward enough if you can keep track of the direction you're facing.”

My pulse is steadily quickening, each beat sending a tingling wave down my spine. “The nursery—the greenhouse? It has a *basement*?”

“Yeah, and it's about the only place around here that has some genuine privacy. They can't transmit video from there; it interferes with the health of the roots or some shit. They won't notice a little foray here or there, but nowhere else is safe for repeated gatherings.”

“You keep talking about *they*. Who the hell are ‘they?’”

Deryn shakes her head. “Just remember what I said. I’ll see you later, hopefully. And *don’t* mention this to anyone. Not even Cassian—not even me, once we start walking again. Got it?”

I don’t, not even a little bit, but it’s not like I can just say that. “...Yeah, I got it.”

“Good.” She takes a deep breath, rolls back her shoulders, and resumes speech at a normal volume, which is enough to startle me into a flinch. “So! What were you suggesting? Drinks? What, before dinner?”

I want to grab her by the arms and shake her violently until she starts making sense again, but that’s pretty clearly going to get me nowhere. Instead, I take a second to recalibrate my thoughts and catalog everything that she’s just said. Bathroom grate at nighttime. Tunnels to the greenhouse basement. It sounds utterly insane, but it also ignites a spark of vibrant curiosity deep inside of me. Whatever I’ve stumbled upon, I intend to keep pursuing it at whatever cost necessary.

But not now. Right. Okay.

“I mean, it’s still a while before food opens up.” I can only hope my attitude comes across as similarly flippant to hers, especially when a pair of hard-muscled Ixionians come striding in our direction. I force my eyes to stay on Deryn and not list the space that the soldiers occupy in my peripheral vision. “I’m not saying we should get *drunk* or anything.”

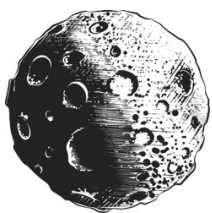
Deryn’s laugh is crystalline. “Maybe later. I don’t want to spoil my appetite with all that sugar. How about I show you the spa?”

“Eugh. Not really my thing.” My cheeks perk up in a plastic smile. “I was just headed to the library, myself. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yeah, for sure! See you then.”

The significance of her words isn’t lost on me, nor is the clap of her hand against my shoulder as she moves past, spring

in her step, looking for all the world like nothing but a pleasant exchange of greetings has just transpired between us.



CHAPTER 25

CASSIAN

WHEN I NEXT WAKE UP, my head is far clearer. Outside of my window, the suns are sinking, painting the patchwork of fields and running tracks in a sleepy crimson. I've missed the evening meal, then, but that's fine; my stomach still doesn't feel like it could handle much beyond water. Speaking of which, a full glass sits at my bedside. I take a long, slow drink, closing my eyes to better appreciate the coolness against my scratchy throat.

"That's been sitting out for a while. I can refill it if you want."

"It's good," I murmur. Her voice doesn't surprise me—I've come to expect her presence, and I like it that way. It's not so different from being alone, really: Ivy doesn't drain me the way that others do.

"Okay, well. Just tell me if you need anything. I'll be right here."

I doze on and off as the reddish sky deepens to a dusky purple, then to the colorlessness of night. Having slept the day away, it's hard to urge my body into anything more than a fitful nap. Ivy also seems restless, pacing the room and periodically typing out a few lines before sighing and sitting back, arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"Are you okay?" I finally ask once I'm sure it's well past her usual shower time.

"Fine."

I know better than to trust a response that comes so automatically. I leverage myself into a sitting position and try to get a better look at her. Awash in the cold blue glow of her tablet, she looks wearier than ever—and not a bit less beautiful for it. I briefly consider leaving her alone, but I know I won't be able to get any more sleep until I can be sure that she's all right.

“You can tell me what's wrong, you know.”

“Nothing is wrong.” Irritation is beginning to creep into her voice; rather than leaving her alone, I double down.

“Something obviously is wrong, or you wouldn't be staying up late and—”

“Why's it any of your business how late I stay up? It's not like you told me a damn thing when you decided to disappear last night.”

“Is that what's making you so upset? Ivy—”

“Why are you so determined for me to be upset?” In a single fluid motion, she rises from her chair and sweeps around to glare directly at me. “Can't you take no for an answer?”

“What... that's isn't... that's not what this is about at all,” I argue. “I just care about your well-being, all right? Is that so hard to believe?”

“If you cared about my *well-being*, you would know better than to disappear on me like you did. How do you think I slept? You could have been *dead* for all I knew.”

Maybe I ought to feel guilty, but I'm more baffled than anything else. Why would she worry about me because of something like that? Granted, I know I would have panicked if she were the one to vanish, but that's different. She's not familiar with this place in the same way that I am.

“Of course I wasn't dead—”

“Of *course*? What about this is a matter of ‘of course?’” she demands.

Without thinking about it, I rise to my own feet. My stomach teeters in protest, but quickly rights itself. “All of it. You’re being completely—”

“Are you seriously that stupid? You’re saying you would take it in stride if I just never showed up one night?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. You’re not being fair.”

“*Fair?*”

We’ve been moving closer with every word, and now I’m at the point where I need to tilt my head downwards to maintain eye contact. She isn’t even a tiny bit intimidated by my stature as it towers above hers; her eyes are fiery amber.

“Yeah. Fair. Why do you think I wouldn’t worry about you?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, you goddamned blockhead.”

“That’s different?”

“How?” she demands. “How is that different?”

“Because—” I try to say it, but my voice refuses to cooperate. I swallow hard, press my nails deep into my palms, and force the words through my teeth. “Because I care about you. Far more than you care about me. That’s it, all right? That’s it.”

At first, she only gawks at me. Frustration has ignited a red glow in her cheeks, causing her vivid eyes to stand out more than ever. Her lip curls back, and for a second, I’m convinced that she’s going to spit on me—but then her hands close around mine and she pulls, forcing me to bend over her until the distance is closed and our lips crash together in a hot, harsh collision.

My thoughts blow away to nothing. Ivy’s body curves towards mine, her small, soft stature curving to accommodate my firmer physique. As much as I want to lean into her with my full weight, I force myself to hold back; any further, and I’d send both of us toppling to the ground. She’s trusting me with her entirety, all of her strength pouring into the force of her touch. At first, all I can do is kiss her over and over,

hungrily, frantically. I barely have the chance to breathe. Dizziness sweeps through me, and, unable to stand it any longer, I swing her around and throw her back onto the bed. She lands sprawled on her back, her chest heaving and her shirt hiking up to expose her flat stomach. Her own breath is desperate and ragged. I don't give her a chance to catch it. Instead, I climb on top of her and lower my face back to hers. She whimpers and tilts her chin upwards until our lips meet again. This time, she presses deeper, teasing me with the tip of her tongue, and I slide her lower lip between my teeth and bite down gently, drawing forth the sweetest of moans. Her hands find my sides and pull me down by the shirt until I'm grinding against her; two thin layers of fabric are all that separate our bodies from one another.

“Fuck,” she gasps, her voice filling my mouth. “You’re so... so....”

I never get to find out precisely what I am, because her words dissolve into a faint cry as I plunge one hand beneath her shirt and scramble to find the back of her upper undergarment. This time, I know how to undo the clasp, and release it on my first try. Her skin is impossibly hot and smooth against my palm. She's so small; I could encircle her entire waist between my two spread hands if I wanted. Small, yes, but I know that she can take me. That she *wants* to take me again, and as soon as possible, from the eager shifting of her hips and thighs beneath my own.

I move my lips to the edge of her jaw, trailing gentle bites as I reach down to loosen my belt. She pulls her own waistband down, wriggling until it's around her knees, then kicks her panties all the way off. With her lower half bare, she holds her arms above her head. Her chest swells with heavy breaths. It's dark, but not as dark as before. When I pull back, I can see everything that I need to, outlined in the moonlight: the subtle yet enticing curves of her figure, the bright spill of her hair, and the vivid intensity of her eyes as she locks them with mine. They gleam in an unspoken challenge that I'm all too eager to accept. Her breasts are small but full, heaving with every breath she takes. The silver gleam from our

window creates a constellation out of the faint freckles along her shoulders and collarbone.

I want to tell her how beautiful she is, but I'm beyond words. I have only the language of my body, and I intend to use it down to every last syllable.

Before, I was driven by desperation, by the urge to reach a climax. But this time, truly taking in the sight of her, I can't help but surge with curiosity. There's so much to explore. So much to taste. Gently, knowing that my teeth are sharper than what she's used to, I lean down and nip at the soft skin below her ear. She gasps—I start to pull away, but her hands are on the back of my head, urging me closer. *More*, her motions say, *more, more*. She shivers when I run my tongue along the soft shell of her ear, and her whimpers deepen to a moan of pleasure as I begin to nibble at its lobe. It takes all of my self-control to resist biting down hard and seeing just how much her tender flesh can take... but I do all the same. I don't want to hurt her... at least, not any more than she desires.

She twists beneath me, hips grazing my stomach, and manages to adjust one arm enough to slide a hand against my cheek. Her thumb runs along the edge of my lips, playing in the space between my teeth and her neck; then, breath coming harsh and fast, she dips into my mouth with two fingers, running them over the sensitive spires of my tongue in a motion that's almost frantic. A wave of arousal blindsides me at the action, strong enough to make me lightheaded. I'm only dimly aware that I'm salivating, slickening her fingers as they caress my tongue and teeth with greater curiosity. I suck and lick at her soft, salty skin, and she presses her thumb into my canine so hard that she lets out a little gasp of pain.

"You're so sharp," she murmurs. Her voice is smoky; I can feel it rumbling in her fragile chest. "The way you're built... you're a carnivore, aren't you? You're a hunter... a predator. I can sense it in you."

I respond by gripping her beneath the shoulders and lifting her with ease, cradling her to me until our foreheads brush together. As I watch, she withdraws her fingers from my mouth and slips them into her own. Her eyelashes flutter. "You

taste even better this way.” She’s completely surrendered herself to my support—if I were to release her now, she would collapse to the mattress in a limp mess. But I won’t. I can’t fathom letting her go if the world itself depended on it.

The frame of her ribcage shifts beneath my hands, ever so delicate, as she lifts her hands and twines them behind my neck, leaning in for another long kiss. Her breath is hot, uneven, almost suffocating. I can’t get enough of it. I slide my pointed nails along the still-wet spot behind her ear. Her retaliation is immediate: her hands move back to the top of my head, cascading chills down my back as they plunge through my hair and find a home at the base of my horns once again. It’s all I can do to keep from crying out. She’s so precise, careful, and rough at once, pushing me almost to the point of overwhelming sensation before pulling back and running her fingers over my scalp again, soothing me as I’m wracked with shivers.

“You like that so much,” she murmurs against the corner of my mouth. “I thought the scales were for protection, but you’re so sensitive....”

I don’t know how to tell her they are—that nothing has ever affected my horns like her touch; it’s as if they’re conduits for her unique electricity, alight with a sensation that plunges straight through my core.

She keeps kissing me—my nose, my cheeks, my eyelids, growing messier and messier all the while—then pulls back and contemplates me with a mischievous eye, fingertips still brushing along the sweet spot where scales and skin melt together. “Eat me out again,” she whispers with a light tug. “Please... I want to feel your tongue on me.”

It’s a plea, not an instruction. I consider making her wait, making her beg, but I want it as much as she does. I bite her lower lip, just firmly enough to remind her who’s in charge, then slip my hands beneath her thighs and part them to expose the soft pink of her sex. I can smell her wetness from here, hot and carnal. I want to devour her. I bend down and start by kissing the hollow of her hip bone, taking my time, savoring the heat against my cheek as I move closer and closer.

Only when I, at last, lay my tongue out against the soft, slick flesh of her folds do I realize what she's been planning all along. She curls in towards me, her small body forming a perfect arch, and lowers her own head until her lips are pressing the very tip of my left horn. I buck up by instinct, sliding it in deeper; she's quick to receive it, and now its upper inches are caught between her eager tongue and the impossibly delicate flesh of her inner cheek.

Our mouths explore one another, growing faster and more eager as my tongue and horn simultaneously press more deeply into her. It's almost better than when she let my cock down her throat; even the graze of her teeth feels incredible, as though scratching a deep itch that I never realized I had. She hasn't so much as touched me below the waist, but that doesn't stop me from being pulsingly, achingly hard.

It's only when I can't bear it for a moment longer that I pull back, rising above her once more and shoving her back against the pillows. A tiny huff of surprise emerges from her lips, which I can now see are swollen from my biting—in the same motion, I press myself inside of her, and that huff turns to a sweet keen of unexpected pleasure. The hesitance that I felt the first time has vanished. I know just where to go, just how to fill her. She contracts around me and shifts her hips, fingernails grazing my back, urging me to go deeper. The sensitive underside of my cock shudders as I oblige, twisting until I find an angle that spurs a thin scream of ecstasy.

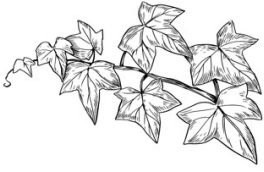
“Oh, that's it... you're so fucking... so....”

She may not have the words for what she means, but I understand all the same. Though this is only our second time, the motions come so naturally that it may as well be our thousandth. It's the most instinctive thing in the world. Our bodies should be mismatched, should be incompatible; we're separated by lightyears of empty space and millennia of evolution, yet it feels as though every second was building to the way that we fit perfectly together here and now.

Every movement I make—every thrust, every kiss, every beating breath—is mirrored by her own. A part of me was sure that we would never be able to capture that star-swept feeling

of our first time again, but I was wrong; I was so, so wrong. It's back again, and it's even fuller than before. Neither of us has anything left to hold back. Any remaining apprehension was burned away with that first meeting of our lips, and all that's left to do now is revel in its ashes.

CHAPTER 26



AFTERWARD, I lie awake, forcing myself not to give in to the waves of drowsiness that threatens to overcome me. My limbs are laden with the exhaustion of the purest kind, a complete sapping of strength that comes only with absolute bodily surrender. I've let him cum inside of me again, and every natural instinct implores me to let his warmth settle within me. I want nothing more than to lie across his chest and listen to the beat of his heart until the world fades away.

But I can't. There's somewhere that I need to be.

I wait until I'm absolutely sure that he's asleep. I haven't forgotten our argument from earlier, even if it was immediately eclipsed by what followed. He said he would be worried if I weren't to come home one night, and this—sneaking off under the cover of dark without a word—is undoubtedly far worse. The irony doesn't escape me, nor does the creeping sense of guilt. But I didn't make any promises to Cassian. I did make a promise to Deryn, and it isn't one that I intend to break.

Finally, the space between his slow breaths tells me that he's out. No time to lose. It was already late when we started, and the act itself may have been minutes or hours, for all I could tell. From the moment I pulled him into that kiss, it was as though the entire outer world was put on pause, incapable of affecting the space between him and me....

Damn it. I need to keep my head on straight. I slip out of bed without a sound, careful not to disturb the blanket enough to rouse him, and pull my clothes on in the dark. Deryn's

instructions have been running through my mind all afternoon, and I know them at this point like the back of my hand.

I can't risk turning on the bathroom light. Instead, I feel my way along, fingertips pressed into the cool wall, until I reach the shower. I crouch and run my hands across the grate at its base. It doesn't cover the entire bottom, just about a third; I've never given much thought to what seemed like nothing more than an oversized drain. And that's precisely what it is—but it's an oversized drain; I'm very sure that I'll be able to fit inside.

This is insane, a part of me insists. I don't deny it, but I don't stop, either. It's no more insane than what just transpired in the bedroom, is it? I push against the grate and wobble it carefully from side to side. Deryn was right: it's surprisingly loose, enough so that I don't know how I never noticed before. I suppose there's no reason to solder the thing in place; it's not as though a typical Ixionian soldier is going to be removing it for the purpose of attending covert meetings in the middle of the night. Or maybe it is. The truth is that I don't have a damn clue what's waiting for me.

It takes a fair amount of wiggling and adjustments, but it isn't long before I manage to work my fingers under one edge of the grate. When I lift it up, the metal squeals in protest, and I freeze with my heart pounding in my ears. *Stay asleep*, I silently implore Cassian. *I don't want you to worry about me. Just stay asleep and I'll be back before you know it.*

Moving more slowly, I widen the gap until there's enough space for me to slip inside. Cool, damp air rises from the emptiness. I give it a quick sniff, wary of the reek of sewage, but it actually smells as clean as the shower itself. Vaguely unable to believe my own motions, I readjust and lower a foot into the chute. I can't feel anything but space. Jumping headlong into it doesn't exactly seem like the best idea in the world. Still, I think it's safe to assume that Deryn had no plans to send me plummeting to my death, no matter how much I may have pissed her off that day at the spa.

Okay. Here goes nothing.

I slide my other foot in and scoot forward until I'm sitting on the very edge, my legs swinging freely. I grit my teeth, close my eyes, and let myself drop.

My feet hit the ground at once, before I'm even in up to my shoulders. Relief floods through me, quickly supplanted by alarm as I realize that I'm sliding; the metal beneath my feet is set at what must be at least a thirty-degree angle, and slicked with moisture to boot. An involuntary yelp escapes my mouth as my balance skews and my legs fly out from under me, banging my tailbone in the process. I scrabble for something to grab onto, but the tunnel seems to be perfectly smooth, and I can't stop myself from sliding down faster and faster. All I can do is lie back, lift my hands up to protect my head, and pray that I'm not going to crash.

Thankfully, it's not long before I'm ejected inelegantly onto a flat metallic surface. My knees and elbows bang in a way that I'm sure is going to bruise, but it could be a hell of a lot worse. Slowly, making sure not to hit my head on a low ceiling, I get to my feet. I still can't see anything, but as far as I can tell, I'm in a larger, wide open space. A cool current of air buffets my cheeks and lips.

Tunnel to the underworks, then make your way to the nursery basement... it should be straightforward enough if you keep track of which direction you're facing.

Which *direction am I facing?* After the unexpected slide that I had just endured? I scowl into the darkness, trying to parse through the last few minutes. I was facing the wall that separated the bathroom from the bedroom when I slid into the opening. The descent, while disorienting, was almost definitely in a straight line. Which means that the door to the bedroom, and therefore the elevator, would run parallel to my right side... placing the greenhouse lies somewhere to my left.

I'm not confident, not even a little bit, but I have to start walking in one direction or another. I suppose this one is as good as any.

I find the wall and keep one hand firmly against it as I start forward. Whether or not I end up finding my way to this

nursery basement place, I'm sure as hell not going to let myself get lost on the way. Of course, being able to make my way back to the chute doesn't mean much when I've got zero chance of climbing back up... but I can't think about that right now.

It takes a while to make my way through the darkness when I need to place each foot in slow motion, all too aware of the possibility that one wrong step could send me plunging into some unexpected pit. I'm entirely alone, accompanied only by a steady dripping noise and the occasional chill of a puddle against my bare feet. When the light finally begins to warm my vision, I'm half-convinced that I'm imagining it out of sheer desperation—but no, it's as real as anything else in this frigid dungeon of a place. Just a little ways ahead, the wall curves, and something beyond its bend flickers with a vague amber glow.

I creep closer, every muscle on edge. It makes sense that the light heralds company, and I don't know whether or not the people waiting for me are sure to be friends. Yet it seems that there's nobody there at all. The ceiling flaunts a scattering of dusty bulbs, each of them encased in a wire cage and coated generously with dust. They reveal my surroundings, which are exactly what I expected: rusty walls and a water-streaked floor, all of them wrought from dark, heavy-looking metal. The hallway narrows before me, culminating in a door that looks as though it hasn't been touched in centuries, so old that it actually has a proper handle. There's a sign on it, but it's illegible behind yet more clots of dust. I roll my sleeve over the heel of my hand and scrub against it. The label is that same strange language that fills so much of the library. Damn it. I hesitate for a beat, then grip the handle and twist it. To both my delight and alarm, it opens without so much as a squeak of resistance.

The room in which I then find myself is far sleeker. It's completely empty and fashioned in an octagonal shape, with a door fitted into each panel of its walls. They're also labeled in those letters that I can't read, but it's no matter; I can see exactly where I need to go. Each door contains a glass panel

along its top, but only one of them is crowded with a tangle of leafy, jewel-toned vines.

My footsteps still as I reach the doorway. Trepidation is thick in my stomach... but I didn't come all this way for nothing. Turning back now would be the stupidest thing I've done all night—and that, for better or worse, is saying something.

With that thought, I open the door and step inside.

The light in here is dim and red. It takes my eyes several moments to adjust after the relative brightness of the previous room, but once they do, I can only gape at what lies before me.

Deryn said something about roots down here, and it's all too clear what she means now. The walls, ceiling, and even floor are almost entirely obscured by overlapping trunks of thick organic growth, varying in texture and breadth, all of them shaded the same low crimson beneath the lamps burning above.

But all of that registers only in the periphery of my mind. The rest of me is consumed by the figures before me. I expected a handful of people, five or six at the most, but this group is closer to twenty, standing in a semicircle around the edge of the room. Most of the faces are only vaguely familiar, those of Ixionian soldiers whom I've glimpsed on occasion while strolling outside. A few, though, I know very well indeed: Deryn, of course, but also Jace and the silver-skinned soldier who tried to stop me from going in the wrong dining hall the other day—and, somehow, Cherise.

All of them are watching me, their expressions ranging from curious to leery, with a single exception: Deryn is grinning like a shark.

"I *told* you," she says, elbowing Jace. The two of them are standing far closer than I would have expected after the things I've heard, almost to the point of brushing shoulders. "Didn't I?"

"I never doubted you," he insists, but there's no masking the surprise in his voice. Deryn is well aware; I know that

satisfied look on her face better than anything.

One Ixionian takes a step forward. I recognize him as a member of Cassian's platoon, though I can't recall his name. He shares similar ram-like horns, but their resemblance ends there; next to the looming physique and broad, blunt features of this man, Cassian seems positively dainty.

"Ivy Alecto," he says. "So you did come."

"Uh, yeah." I can't help but feel as though I've been shoved under a microscope. However, the discomfort pales in comparison to my raging curiosity. "I came. Mind telling me what exactly I came *to*? Because I've got zero idea what's going on here."

He nods. "I'm Avann Silvius. And this... well, there's no name for who we are. Not yet. We—"

"We're the ones who know what the hell's really going on here," Deryn interrupts. The grin still hasn't left her face. "I'm glad you made it, Ives. Welcome to the resistance."

Resistance, as I learn over the next half hour or so, is a rather extreme word for who these people are. Whether they're actually resisting anything is debatable; less so is the fact that they're operating in absolute secrecy, right beneath the nose of the army's overseers. If Avann Silvius's words can be trusted, a certain amount of disquiet has been brewing in the military for quite a while now, exacerbated by the reports of soldiers who have been sent to the outer reaches of nearby solar systems.

"In the simplest of terms, we haven't been told the truth," Avann says. "We're being played by those who have the power to do so. Made to follow orders we don't understand from people we have no reason to trust."

"Isn't that how all militaries work?" I respond automatically. A few of them snicker at that, Deryn included. Avann only gives me a sad smile.

“Where you come from, that very well may be the case. But we understand things differently here on Ixion. The role of the soldier is everything to us. To carry out your time in the army is an honor, an act of heroism; for most of us, it’s nothing less than our purpose in life.”

“So your purpose in *life* is to see to it that others are *dead*. Got it.”

“She’s not wrong,” Cherise murmurs. I startle slightly; I’d almost forgotten she was there. Out of everyone here, she’s the one whose presence surprises me the most—and also the least, in its own way. I thought her cynicism was entirely a product of Ambrose’s behavior, but I’m far less sure of that now. How long has she been a part of this? How long has *Deryn* been a part of it? And most importantly, how the hell was I obtuse enough that I never realized something was going on?

“No, she’s not,” Avann agrees. “As a matter of fact, she’s nicely summarized the reason why we’re all here. Other people, people we don’t even know, are making the decisions that govern our entire lives. The most recent example of this being, of course, the exchange program.”

My skin grows cold.

“We have reason to believe that the program is a direct response to the unrest that’s been rising in our ranks, meant to distract us from digging any deeper. Senior soldiers aren’t keeping their mouths shut the way that they used to. If their reports from the outer reaches can be trusted, we aren’t fighting half the wars that our superiors claim. As a matter of fact, we may not be fighting any wars at all.”

“All right, all right,” the silver-skinned soldier interrupts. “Enough with the newbie prep session. She hasn’t even given us cause to trust her. Are we here for a reason or not?”

Avann’s gaze doesn’t break from mine. “We are. And you are as well, Ivy, if you so wish. But Calix is right: before we go any further, you will need to swear to secrecy. You’re Cassian Auberón’s mate, no?”

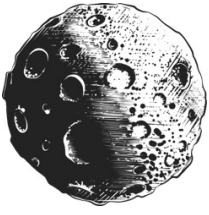
Mate. I suppress a shiver. “Yes.”

“His heart is in the right place, but that doesn’t make it safe to talk to him. Outside of this room, privacy can never be guaranteed. If you want to involve him, you’ll bring him straight here—just as Deryn did with you. Do you understand?”

I glance around the ring of strangers and half-strangers, suddenly feeling very small. I have a thousand and one questions—and if I walk away now, chances are that I’ll never get a single answer.

And then there are the restricted floors. They, I think, are what haunt me the most. I’ve known for a while ago that there’s something more going on within the workings of this base, something to which the soldiers themselves aren’t even privy. Now, my every suspicion is being confirmed in the bright green eyes of the warrior standing before me.

“Okay,” I say. “Yeah. I’m in. Where do we start?”



CHAPTER 27

CASSIAN

THE FIRST WORDS out of Ivy's mouth the next morning: "Cassian, just don't."

"Don't what?" I look back over my shoulder, shirt pulled halfway on. She's still snuggled tightly in bed, clutching a pillow over her eyes, mouth fixed in a patently displeased twist.

"The whistling thing. It's grating on my damn brain."

"Whistling thing?" I can't for the life of me think about what she's talking about.

"Yeah, of course you don't even notice that you do it."

"What—"

"You always do that in the mornings. When you're getting dressed. I just... can't handle that right now, okay?"

"...Okay." I make a conscious effort to keep my lips pressed together as I finish up. It's honestly a bit embarrassing to think that I'd do such a thing subconsciously, and if it's been irritating her this whole time.... "I'm sorry it was bothering you."

"Talking is bothering me, too. Just—just be quiet."

I frown. "Is something wrong?"

"Are you hearing yourself? Are you hearing *me*?"

"Don't tell me you snuck out and got wasted last night," I say half-jokingly. "Not that I could blame you after—"

"It's none of your business what I do."

Now I'm genuinely taken aback. She must be angry at me after last night. Maybe I went too far. The thought tightens a hot band of guilt around my stomach. Ivy was the one who initiated the kiss, and she seemed all too willing to keep going afterward, and yet....

"Okay. I'm sorry if I did something wrong. I'll get out of your hair."

Her only response is to groan and pull the pillow farther down so that it covers her ears as well. I strap up my boots as quietly as possible, take a quick glance at my pager, and step into the elevator without another word.

Maybe her attitude is just throwing me off, but as the day progresses, I can't help feeling more and more sure that something is wrong. Jace seems exhausted, and Ambrose is even more restless than usual, kicking up clods of dirt as we wait for our turn to run a timed ropes course. Even the weather isn't quite right: clouds shift too quickly across the pale sky, as though some unseen behemoth is stirring our atmosphere like a massive pot of soup. It isn't cold, but it isn't warm, either; everything is intermediate, indecisive.

"See that?" Ambrose asks abruptly, gesturing towards a hill swelling up on our left. At the top of it is a long-limbed tree, its drooping branches motionless despite the tug of the wind. "That's where Cheri used to sit. I could always see her from here."

He makes it sound like she's dead or something. I elect not to pry—after Ivy's outburst this morning, I don't want to step on anyone else's toes—but he goes on of his own accord.

"I don't even see her at night anymore. *Kesting* ridiculous."

"Maybe she's sick of you pressuring her," Jace offers wearily. I wince in anticipation of Ambrose's response, and sure enough, he wheels on our friend with heatless fire in his pale eyes.

“Pressuring her? What do you know about me *pressuring* her? You two been chatting it up? Tired of your own girl, so you’re trying to get mine?”

“You know that’s not what’s going on,” Jace sighs. “You’re the one who said that you’ve been struggling to get anything out of her for weeks now.”

“Yeah, well, I stopped trying. Believe it or not, I’m not some kind of monster.”

“I never said you were.”

“But Cheri sure seems to think so, from the way she’s avoiding me.” Ambrose’s boot catches in the roots of a small orange shrub and kicks it across the field with grim satisfaction. “The whole thing’s gone off the rails. I say that the sooner we send these poor girls home, the better.”

“Hey,” I object automatically.

He turns his scowl toward me. “Thought you would be all for it. Don’t tell me you’re going all soft on yours now?”

“I’m not *soft*; I—”

But then Commander Emrys calls our names, and we step up to the beginning of the course. It’s a grueling one, a good two miles long with no shortage of ducking, climbing, and twisting past obstacles; by the time we’re done, both of us are panting too hard to continue what may or may not have been an argument. I’m sure that’s for the better—and yet, when I get another glimpse of Jace’s downcast expression, I can’t help but feel once more as if there’s something all too vital that I’m missing.

After what happened this morning, I’m sure that Ivy won’t be in any hurry to get back to the room, and that turns out to be exactly correct. The room is empty when I get back after dinner, with no telltale murmur of water from the direction of the bathroom. I can’t tell whether I’m relieved or disappointed. I pull out my pager and scroll through it vaguely, reviewing the social pages that I’ve been neglecting for so long. It looks

like I'm not the only one; they're scant at best, with only a couple of other soldiers posting complaints about their schedules or rumors regarding tomorrow's dining menu. It takes several minutes of scrolling before I come across a single post that even mentions the human women, and it does so only in passing. *Think the heating's busted on barracks fl. 09 — xchange partner feels it too. Where 2 file a complaint?*

Maybe it's to be expected. It only makes sense that everyone would begin to lose interest sooner or later... but that doesn't stop my anxiety from gnawing a broader and broader hole inside my chest with every passing instant. They're going to be sent back. I just know they are. After so many weeks of sitting in silence night after night, something is finally sparking between us, something that I can't help but feel as though I've been waiting for all my life... and it's too *susting* late.

The door opens. My pager drops into my lap.

"Oh," she says, face expressionless. "You're still up."

"I, uh..." I double-check over my shoulder, not sure what to expect. It's past sundown. I must have been more lost in my thoughts than I realized. "I guess I was waiting for you. After what we talked about... well, same thing. I guess I couldn't rest with you gone."

"Mm." She crosses her arms and stares down at the ground. Is she waiting for me to speak? What could she possibly be expecting me to say?

"Look, Ivy, about this morning—"

"What makes you think I want to talk about this morning?"

"Can you just tell me what's wrong?" My own voice is beginning to warm with irritation. Whatever her problem is, it's not as though there's a thing I can do about it if she doesn't explain it to me. "I want to help, okay? I—"

"Who said I need your help?"

"If it's something I did—"

“It’s not something you did. Not everything in my world revolves around you, you know.”

I lower my gaze. She’s right, of course. I didn’t think that I was implying as much, but I suppose my own perspective has been more than a little biased for a while now. Her world may not revolve around me, but it’s getting harder and harder to deny the fact that mine does around her.

“Right,” I murmur. “I’m just... if there’s anything I can do to help—if I can just listen, even—”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“What? I never—”

“You don’t have a right to anything about me. It’s because of the sex, isn’t it? I slept with you twice, and now you think that I’m going to treat you like... like we’re a married couple or something?”

I can’t bring myself to look back up at her. Is her voice shaking, or is that just my imagination?

“Because we aren’t. And we never can be. Don’t you know that?”

“I...” My hands twist in my lap. “Of course I do.”

“If you actually think—” Her voice cracks. My own throat is stinging, but I refuse to indulge it with tears. She takes a deep, shuddering breath, almost a sob, then presses on.

“It was just sex. I don’t know what kind of world you’re living in that makes you think it could have been anything else. But where I come from, that sort of thing happens all the time. It doesn’t mean... it doesn’t mean anything.”

Each word drives a sharp pain deeper and deeper into my chest. *Stupid. How could you be so stupid? She said from the start that she didn’t want anything; why couldn’t you listen? How did you let it come to this?*

“I... I guess I thought...” My lips are numb, smearing my words into something unintelligible. I squeeze my eyes shut, swallow hard, and try again. “I’m sorry. I did feel something. I

thought that you did, too. Looking back, I can see... well, I was obviously wrong. And I'm so sorry if I hurt you."

"Hurt me? When the hell did I ever say that you hurt me?"

"You didn't! You didn't. Just... just in case. I wanted to make sure."

"I—" She lets out a sound that might be a scoff of derision.

I would give anything to crumple into myself and just vanish—from the room, from the planet, from her, from myself. I wish that the whole program had never taken place in the first place... but, no, I don't. I'm lying to myself. I *want* to wish for that. But I don't. Not even a tiny bit. If this is all I'll ever get from her—if she leaves the planet hating me for what I did or didn't do—it will still be worthwhile to have known her, to have spent so many nights listening to the wordless flow of her thoughts, to have gotten the chance to try and make sense of the color of her eyes. Of that, all of that, I have no doubt at all.

"I'm sorry," I murmur again. It's all I can think to say, and even that much seems to upset the boundaries that have risen so suddenly around her. Slowly, still biting back tears, I look up and register with a dull pang that her eyes have never seemed quite so bright. She's staring at me with her face distorted in a wild grimace, regarding me as though I'm some sort of monster. Maybe I am, to her. Maybe I always have been.

"I want you to be happy." I don't mean to say the words aloud. I doubt she can even hear them; they're scarcely more than a breath, only stirring the air before my bone-dry lips. There's more that I want her to know, but the words won't come. She keeps staring at me with those fierce, fierce eyes, looking for all the world as though she's never been more disgusted in her life—and then she turns tail and storms out of the room, shoulders hunched, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as if to protect it from me and whatever grotesque intentions she imagines I may possess.

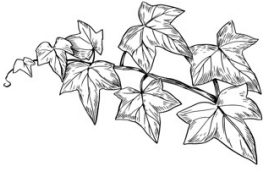
The frosted glass panel slides shut. I let my shoulders slouch and implore the rest of my body to relax. *Go ahead and*

cry now, since you need to so badly. My own inner voice is acrid with revulsion. I can imagine what I look like—wide-eyed, shivering, hunched over on the edge of the bed—and the thought is so pathetic that my lips curl in an involuntary cringe.

Come on. Cry. It's not as though you can possibly be any more ashamed than you are already, is it?

And yet, no matter how hard I try, the tears still refuse to come.

CHAPTER 28



FOR SEVERAL HEARTBEATS, the door is motionless under my touch. I'm struck by the sickening notion that it's too late, that I'm locked in for the night and there's nowhere I can go to get away from him. I'm on the verge of punching the damn thing with frustration when it finally slides open, and I can't get inside quickly enough.

It's only just closed behind me when the first cry escapes my throat. It doesn't sound like a whimper or even a sob; it's closer to a sheer explosion of hurt, the noise of a child who's just stumbled upon the stiffening body of a deceased pet. I wind my fingers into my hair and dig my nails against my scalp, as if doing so can keep my head from erupting. Tears won't come fast enough, and the dryness scorches my eyes with pain until I physically can't keep them open. I don't feel myself backing up until I'm in a corner, my shoulders quivering against the cold, careless walls of the lift as it sails downwards.

What were you thinking? I ask myself over and over, the words echoing more loudly in my head with every repetition. *What were you thinking, what were you thinking, what were you thinking?*

I was thinking that I can't keep doing this. That I can't set us up for even more hurt; that a clean break would be better, easier than drawing it out to the last minute. Because if there's one thing I learned last night—learned over and over, repeated by so many voices that I lost count of how many times my insides wilted—it's that the break, clean or not, is inevitable.

‘Intel,’ they claimed, has proven that the exchange program is being deemed a complete failure. We have a week at most until the announcement is made publicly, and perhaps two more before the other women and I are escorted back home in that same cramped shuttle. Forms filed, paychecks processed, contracts concluded. For all intents and purposes, it will be as though the entire disaster—that’s what they kept calling it, a *disaster*—never occurred in the first place.

I’m just so tired.

The elevator begins to slow, and I struggle to school my face back into something presentable. There’s no hiding my swollen eyes or flushed cheeks, but I can at least hold my lips still and wipe away the few tears that have managed to streak their way to my chin. I’m not looking forward to being in public, but it’s better... *anything* is better than being alone with Cassian right now. I’m afraid of what I might do. Of what I might *not* do.

When the glass door swishes open, it reveals a mercifully empty lobby. Well aware that someone could wander in at any time, I refuse to let myself relax; I do, however, allow myself a few moments of pause, slumping against the wall.

I don’t know where to go. Never before has the whole place felt so unwelcoming, so truly *alien*. If anything, I wish I could go back to the basement—that area Deryn called the underworks—where there was nothing but cool air, damp walls, and perfect darkness. There, I could at least let myself crumple without the fear of being perceived by unwelcome eyes. But it’s not as if I can just slip into the bathroom unnoticed, and I doubt I could trace my way back from the convoluted way out that I was shown at the end of last night. It led us all the way back to the atrium, from where we had to double back to reach the barracks. *They’re only locked from the inside*, Deryn explained in an undertone. *There’s technically no curfew, so you can go in at any point. The problem is that they won’t let you back out til daybreak.*

The dark implications of her words didn’t escape me, but I had a thousand other things on my mind, and now is no

different. Stupidly, selfishly, I almost wish that we were all still ignorant of whatever may be going on behind the scenes.

That wouldn't do anyone any good, though. The program would be coming to a close with or without my knowledge. If anything, I guess it's better that I could be prepared.

I force one deep, shuddering breath through my lungs, then another. I did what I had to do. Now I can only—

The door across from me, the one leading to the atrium, flies suddenly open. I spring to my feet, guard up—until I see with a wave of relief that I'm facing the only person in the world whose presence is actually welcome.

Cherise Hallowsswift.

"Ivy," she says, a rare note of surprise lighting her voice. "You're out late. Well. If you can call this *out*."

"I could say the same to you."

She rolls her eyes. "Right. I guess you don't know."

"Oh, great. Another thing I don't know, huh?" I try to inject my tone with some ironic bravado, but I come across as sounding more pathetic than anything else.

"No, nothing like that. I've been doing this for a while now. Ambrose has usually passed out at this point. I could only deal with so much of his whiny desperation. It wears you down after a while, and I don't have much energy to spare these days."

"Right. Because you're—"

Her slim eyebrows plunge in warning, and I catch myself just in time. Right. The thing that Deryn said, and that Avann reiterated last night: aside from the space below the greenhouse, nowhere within the base's looming metal walls is guaranteed to be safe. Anyone could be listening at any time. The fact that nobody seems to know the names or faces of those silent observers only makes them all the more frightening. It's a damn shame, too, because I have enough questions for Cherise that I could probably double the contents of the base's scant library. Deryn was able to explain her own

involvement simply enough—Avann told Jace; Jace told her—but Cherise is an absolute mystery, especially considering the fact that Ambrose was nowhere to be seen in the circle of would-be insurgents.

“Well. Anyway. I don’t blame you for avoiding Ambrose.” The venom in my own words takes me by surprise, and not in a wholly unwelcome way. I press forward, carried by that unexpected momentum. “That’s why I’m here, too. I can’t stand to be around *him*—you know, mine—at this point. You know how it is.”

Her sea-glass eyes narrow to slits. “Do I?”

“Of course you do. You’re the one who... y’know, all the shit that we’ve talked about.” I don’t know where the urge came from, but I suddenly need her to launch into one of her rants again. I want to hear her musical voice tilt into discordance as she denounces the soldiers as a whole. I want her to call them inhuman, call them chauvinistic, call them repulsive; I want her vile words to coax hate out of a heart that, no matter how hard I try, refuses to stop loving.

“All the shit we’ve talked about,” she repeats evenly.

“Oh, come on, Cherise. The soldiers. The... the way that they do nothing but cause pain; the way that no amount of money could make this worthwhile, the way that we’re...” My memory strains to recall her exact words. It couldn’t have been that long ago that we talked under the not-quite-willow tree, and yet it feels like a lifetime and a half. When the phrase clicks into my head, my mouth instantly floods with sourness. “Sex slaves with a stipend.”

“I said that, yeah.”

For whatever reason, she seems determined to keep her tone neutral. Or maybe determination has nothing to do with it; perhaps she genuinely doesn’t care.

“Well?” I prompt. “Don’t you believe it?”

“Do you?”

Screw it; she *must* be acting belligerent on purpose. I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I don’t have the patience

for it. “What do you mean, do I?”

“It’s a simple enough question.”

“That’s what I’m saying, isn’t it? You were right. I thought you weren’t, but I know better now. I’ve learned better. So—thanks. I guess I’m thanking you, because if not for—if not for that...” My throat is beginning to close up, doing its best to eclipse my words. I refuse to let it. “I could have landed myself somewhere even more ridiculous than where I am now. And if that’d happened... I don’t know what I would have done.”

I can’t stand it anymore. Tears burst free from my eyes in twin streams, racing down my cheeks as though they couldn’t be more desperate to escape me. I don’t blame them. Never in my life has there been a moment where I most wish that I could break free of my own body, my own self, my own miserable mistakes.

Cherise doesn’t make a move, but I think something in her face softens. Maybe it’s just her features blurring behind a screen of tears, reducing her to a pale smudge rather than the doll-like girl I’ve come to know so well. She watches in silence as one sob after another clambers up my throat. I try wiping my nose and eyes with a sleeve, but it’s no good; instants later, my face is sopping wet all over again.

“Oh, Ivy,” Cherise says at last. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

I nod, not even sure what I’m agreeing to. She could be referring to just about anything on the planet—on *any* planet, for that matter—and ‘bad’ would be a perfectly apt descriptor.

She sighs and finally closes the distance between us. Her arms circle around my neck, and I don’t resist as she pulls me close and brings us both to our knees, tilting my forehead into her shoulder at the same time. She smells good—clean, like fresh linen, with a whiff of some Earth-based flower whose name I can no longer recall.

“It’s okay to cry,” she murmurs. One of her hands drifts to the small of my back, rubbing in small, steady circles.

“Don’t want to fucking cry... don’t want any of this.”

“I know.”

I don't know how long we stay there, half on the ground, my tears gradually soaking a huge swath of her shirt. She never loosens her hold, just keeps me close against her with her hand tracing that same slow circular motion at the base of my spine.

After a while, I manage a wet little chuckle. “Got your shirt all messed up.”

“Oh no, not the shirt,” she mutters with a lilt of sarcasm.

I laugh weakly again, then pull back and blow my nose inelegantly into the elbow of my own blouse. Cherise reaches over to brush a few straggled strands of hair out of my eyes.

“Listen, Ivy. Are you listening?”

“Yeah, I...” I take a deep breath and wipe my hands all the way down my face, forehead to chin. “Okay. I'm listening.”

“I meant what I said that day.” Her voice has grown almost stern. “And I mean what I'm saying now, too. *It's different for you.*”

“It...” I shake my head slowly. “What?”

“There's something different with you and Cassian. I don't know what it is, but I can tell that it's there, and I think you can, too. It's been clear for a while now, no matter how hard you try to deny it.”

“Well.” I try to shrug, but it ends up feeling more like a convulsion. “Yeah. Pretty much. It's not like it matters now.”

“What do you mean? Of course it matters.”

I don't want to say it out loud; the words sting as I force them between my lips. “The program's ending. We're going back home... everyone at that stupid meeting treated it as a fact, so don't try to pretend otherwise.”

“I'm not pretending.” She shifts her hands until they're cupping my cheeks, then tilts my head up so that I have no choice but to look her directly in the eyes. Her voice lowers to

a scarcely detectable rasp. “Those people want change. *We* want change. That’s why we’ve been gathering.”

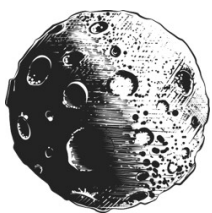
“You think they’d care? About something like that? Aren’t there more important—”

She brushes her thumbs over my lips to silence me. “Who are we to decide what is or isn’t important? Wouldn’t that make us no better than them?”

I’m afraid to let myself acknowledge the weight of her words. But I promised I would listen to her, and I’m not going back on that now. Not after everything she’s done for me tonight.

Her following words are so faint that I practically need to read her lips in order to understand them.

“These people want a change, Ivy. A real change. Whatever it takes. And a revolution without love... well, that’s no revolution at all.”



CHAPTER 29

CASSIAN

I MAKE a genuine effort to sleep over the next hour or so. We've been taught no small number of techniques: measure your breathing, relax one muscle group at a time, and count carefully backward as though you're a surgical patient going under for an operation. I'm sure that the strategies would work, too, if not for the fact that they won't stop being interrupted by the memory of her face twisted with what could only have been hatred.

As much as I wanted to cry at first, it won't happen now. I even try to force out sobs, burning my throat with force as I make a conscious effort to heave my lungs, but it only makes it sound as though I'm being asphyxiated. Maybe grief is to blame, or maybe shock, or something else entirely—I don't profess to know one way or another—but I don't feel devastated so much as deeply, profoundly hollow.

And the worst part of it all is that my feelings, or lack thereof, aren't even the thing keeping me awake. I'm waiting for her. I can't possibly rest until I know that she's safe in bed, and maybe that's hypocritical, but I don't know how to fix it. Each passing minute exponentially increases the pressure in my chest, until my mind starts concocting absurd scenarios that I can't even stand to put into words. My heart is a frigid rock, growing heavier and heavier as the night spins onward.

Then the door opens, and the rock becomes a meteor.

I sit straight up, which wasn't the plan at all. I was determined that I would remain prone and keep from disturbing her when she finally returned, but it seems my body

has a mind of its own. She at least doesn't seem alarmed. If I'm not imagining things in my dull delirium, she even smiles a little at the sight of me.

"Hi," she says.

"...Hi."

She slowly wipes at her eyes and cheeks. Her whole face is flushed and puffy with tears, which I do my best to pretend not to notice. And of course, she still has the nerve to look unbelievably beautiful.

"I didn't think you would still be up."

"Yeah, well... you know."

I don't bother to state the obvious.

"I know." She works a long, shaky sigh through her lungs. "Listen. There are... a lot of things that I need to tell you."

My first thought is that she's going to break up with me, closely followed by a reminder from the ever-dwindling rational part of my mind that we were never a couple in the first place. "All right," I say, trying and catastrophically failing to coach my tone into neutrality. "Let's—"

"Let me change first."

That's not what I expected, but I'm in no position to argue with her, nor do I even particularly want to. "Sure. I'll... I'll be here."

"Right." Her mouth curls into the same half-smile that's etched itself permanently into my memory, and my chest flares with something that I won't even try to name. "Don't go running anywhere, soldier boy."

Kest, I'm done for.

A part of me hopes she'll hurry the process, but when has she ever? The shower water starts running moments after she closes the door behind her. I sit back, resigning myself to a decent waiting period. It takes me a good few minutes to realize that I'm smiling.

When she does emerge, I'm brought back to our very first night in a dizzying rush. I've learned that she owns quite a few of those strange sets of sleep clothes, but this is the same navy blue getup from then, complete with its cute little collar. Her hair is damp but relatively tame, and her face looks much better than before: still reddened, but from heat rather than tears. I don't even want to kiss her so much as just look at her for as long as she'll let me.

But I don't. I know that she hates when people stare, so I direct my eyes toward my lap instead. I realize then that I'm still wearing my uniform; no wonder I couldn't even begin to fall asleep earlier. It's hard to believe that I didn't notice the stiff bite of my waistband or the tightness of my shoulder pads. Then again, a lot of things are hard to believe lately.

Ivy settles on the edge of the bed, back to me, and combs her fingers through her hair. After a few moments, she half-whispers a hesitant request: "Would you... turn the lights off? I've never known how you do it."

"Oh—of course." My hand flies to the switch by my bedside, and we're instantly plunged into warm darkness. I would miss the sight of her if not for the fact that it's so solidly burned into my imagination. "There's a little panel just behind the headboard. I think your side has one, too. Just, you know, for the future."

"Right." There's a certain breathiness to her voice that seems almost wistful. "The future."

Whatever that means, I know better than to pry. Instead, I wait, just as I've been doing all night. It's much easier with her beside me, even knowing she can't possibly have anything good to say. I know with utter absoluteion that she's safe. That's enough. Not ideal, not even good—but *enough*.

"Okay," Ivy murmurs. The blankets shuffle. I've come to memorize the exact pattern of her climbing into bed: a long *whoosh* as she pulls the covers down, a gentle bouncing of the mattress when she settles in, and then a period of gentle tugs and whispering sheets while she makes her adjustments, tucking in every corner to ensure the utmost comfort. I didn't

even realize that I knew the sounds so well, but they're now as familiar to me as a well-worn lullaby.

The next part is far less easy to anticipate. She twists in bed beside me until the distance between us is half-closed. I freeze up. After what happened earlier, the last thing I want is to push her boundaries—but all my hesitance earns is a huff of exasperation.

“Come on, Cassian,” she says. “Get over here.”

She doesn't need to tell me twice. I'm there in an instant, close enough that I can feel that cold, sharp touch of the paste she uses to wash out her mouth at night. It stings the cracks in my well-worried lips, but I don't make a move to withdraw.

“Listen to me,” she whispers.

“I'm listening.”

“Cassian... we're plotting an insurrection.”

I feel like my rib cage has abruptly turned inside out. My mouth opens, closes, opens, and closes again. I'm suddenly grateful for the darkness; I'm sure I've never looked more idiotic in my life. She waits. I almost wish that she wouldn't. Eventually, I manage to get an unwieldy grip on my voice, which will have to do for now.

“Who's *we*?”

“A lot of your friends. Cherise. Deryn... and me, I guess. After last night.”

“Plotting an insurrection.”

“Right.”

“Against...” I can't even begin to make sense of it. I half-expect her to burst into laughter at any moment, amazed that she was able to lead me on for so long, but it doesn't happen. The longer we lie here in silence, the more my confusion mounts. “So, a rebellion? Who are you rebelling against?” *And how did you find out that this was happening? And, most of all, why are you telling me right now, like this?*

“Quiet,” she pleads, bringing a hand to my lips. Her touch sends chills racing down my spine. When she next speaks, her words are that of a ghost, half-imagined. “We can’t let them hear us. And I can’t tell you anything else, right now. You just need to trust me.”

“Who is—who are—what’s *them*?”

I can feel her twisting with discomfort. “The others will explain it better than me. Saying this much is already a risk, but I... I couldn’t stand to keep you in the dark any longer.”

Any longer? How long has it been already? *A lot of your friends*, she said... who does that include? Jace? Ambrose? “What about—”

“Please, Cassian. I know that I’ve been... erratic lately, but I just need you to trust me a little longer.”

“How much longer?” Maybe I sound desperate, but *sust* it; desperate is exactly what I am.

“The night after tomorrow. That’s when they’re—we’re—meeting next. Will you come with me?”

A *yes* is on my tongue before I give it due consideration, but I bite it back just in time. “Just tell me that this isn’t some sort of joke. I want to believe you, but...”

“It isn’t. It isn’t. Like I said, I just need you to trust me. Please.”

I’ve never heard her beg in earnest like this. It should feel wrong, but it doesn’t. Not at all. For whatever reason, despite everything that’s happened over the past few days, I *do* trust her. I can’t imagine that I ever wouldn’t.

“All right,” I say at last. “Fine. Yes. I trust you.”

“And you’ll come? The night after tomorrow.”

“I’ll come.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, and an instant later, she’s gripping me by the collar of my shirt that I still haven’t removed, pulling me close until her lips graze my own. It’s a far softer kiss than anything from before, quick and chaste,

and that somehow makes it all the more powerful. Electricity arcs all the way to the soles of my feet. I could pull her closer and bring our bodies together more violently, crushing her mouth below mine, pinning her underneath me and losing myself once more in the indulgence of her perfect curvature... but I don't. I can't bear myself to shatter this spun-glass moment, even if doing so would bring me back to those nearly incomprehensible galaxies of pleasure. Instead, I slide a hand against her cheek and tilt her head down until my lips find her forehead. I press myself into her softness, inhaling the sweet scent of her freshly cleaned hair, and a delicate breath spills from her lips.

“What other secrets,” I ask, the words grazing her skin, “are you keeping from me?”

None, I wait for her to say. I won't believe her when she does. How could I? But when her words do come, they aren't what I expect at all. Somehow, she still manages to surprise me with her every action. She's as unpredictable as the far reaches of the universe, where light and heat and matter gyrate out of sync with everything that we've come to understand as reality.

“You know,” she whispers. “You know... and I think that means it's not much of a secret anymore.”

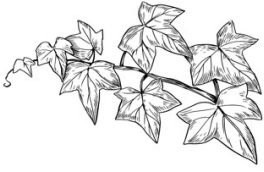
“Say it. Please say it.”

“I don't need to.”

“Please. For me.”

But all she does is sigh.

CHAPTER 30



OVER THE NEXT FORTY-EIGHT HOURS—OR whatever the equivalent might be in Ixion's not-quite-right days—Cassian teaches me a new definition of restlessness. It seems as though we can't be in the same room without my needing to cut him off from asking another leading question, reminding him with a flash of my eyes and a sharp gesture of my hand that we aren't as alone as we may seem. His attitude, in general, is spacey: the morning after I tell him that the meetings are being held, he has to double back twice to our room to pick up something that he left behind. Both times, I nearly jump out of my skin, half-convinced that a guard of some sort has come to take me out of the picture. But no such dystopian debacle occurs. As a matter of fact, things are remarkably close to being normal as far as the outside world is concerned. Deryn and Cherise are so good at acting nonchalant that it's almost a little uncanny. I have troves of questions for them, but no opportunity to ask. Cherise's feigned ignorance, furthermore, extends to more than just the secrets that I've unearthed; she also seems to have forgotten our exchange entirely in the empty lobby. I'm grateful for that, but also a little sad. As vulnerable as I felt in those moments, we exchanged something more profound than the words spoken out loud. It was as though the last traces of her icy visage had finally melted away, showing me the girl who hid behind that bitterness with such stolid determination.

But no. She's that same old prickly Cherise, and Deryn is as playfully sardonic as ever. By the time the next meeting finally rolls around, I feel as though nothing less than my actual sanity is hingeing upon it.

I've thought carefully about how I'm going to do this, beat by beat. Cassian begins to settle onto his side of the bed, as usual, pulling his tight green undershirt shirt up over his head, and that's my cue to make the first move.

"Hey."

His eyes snap to mine. The question lingering in them is utterly obvious, and I find myself grateful—not for the first time—that there aren't cameras to accompany the audio devices supposedly planted throughout the barracks.

I ease what I hope is a sultry touch into my voice, tilting my head to get deeper into character. "I was going to ask... would you like to shower with me?"

"Oh." Is he genuinely surprised? The arch of his eyebrows sure makes that look like the case. "Oh, I... yes. Of course. I would love to."

He begins to discard his shirt, but I lift a hand to stop him. "No need for that. Come on."

With a puzzled nod, he obeys, following me to the bathroom with the shirt still half-on. I wish he would pull the damned thing down; there's just about never been a worse time for me to be distracted by the tight sheen of his scale-streaked abdominals. I train my eyes on the ground. *Keep it together.* The grate from the shower slides free even more easily this time, perhaps due to my previous efforts having loosened what little remained of any sort of bonding material. I heave it up with a low grunt, shove it to the side, and turn around to see Cassian gaping at me.

"What?" I blow a rogue lock of hair off of my face.

"That's... not what I expected you to do."

In the highly unlikely event that someone does happen to be listening in on us, I can only imagine what sort of scenario *that* might lead them to envision. Thinking fast, I snatch up the momentum and keep going, each of my words double-layered with a red herring of innuendo.

"Well, go on." I stand and gesture toward the chute. "It won't bite."

“Is it... should I...”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting shy.” I cock my head and widen my eyes at him. *Just get in the damn thing already, would you?* “A little wetness never hurt you before.”

“Only a little?”

“Just trust me when I say that it’ll be smooth. There’s a lot more that can be done in the shower than you soldier boys seem to think.” *Fucking hell, just kill me now.* “Or do you need me to show you how it works?”

He huffs a hard breath out of his nose. “I think I can take care of myself.”

“Good. Let’s see it.”

Cassian steps up next to me and glances back and forth between me and the dark opening several times. His pupils dilate with visible curiosity—or perhaps it’s anxiety, like a cat startled by a loud noise. I give him a harsh couple of nods, which he returns; then, taking a deep breath through his gold-touched lips, he lowers his legs into the abyss. The floor level that had reached my shoulders is barely above his waist, and for a moment, I’m worried that he’ll actually be too big to fit. Before I can object, though, he slides further down, and an instant later, vanishes from my sight entirely.

“There,” I murmur, no longer sure whether I’m acting for the spies or for myself. “Easy does it. That’s a good boy.”

Now I’m making myself blush. Determined to get my mind out of that particular rut, I waste no time in dropping my own feet into the hole. The motions that follow are no less alarming for the fact that I expect them: my stomach still lurches as my bare feet skid on the damp surface, and moments later, I’m once again covering my head with braced arms as my body goes shooting down the miniature waterslide.

My lighter weight must mean that I travel faster, because Cassian and I come out the other end at almost the exact same time. I’m thrust forward by momentum and crash ungracefully into him, drawing a pained “*Oof*” from both of our mouths.

“Shit. Sorry,” I whisper.

“You couldn’t have given me any warning?” he demands, his voice echoing in the damp darkness. I thrust my hands blindly forward and manage to clap one over his lips out of sheer luck.

“Stay quiet. We’re not in the clear yet.” My lips dance against his ear, and a part of me can’t help but wonder whether it sends warm shivers branching through him the same way it does for me. “Just hold my hand and follow me; I know where to go.” My fingers find his, and together we pull ourselves to our feet.

Realistically, I know that I’m moving more slowly with Cassian in tow, yet the journey seems to pass in half the time that it did the other night. The cavernous *drip-drip* and the sheer weight of the blackness are far less intimidating with him at my side. Every so often, I give his hand a little squeeze just to remind myself that he’s still there. Without fail, he returns it, his broader grip nearly drowning my own slender fingers. It’s a feeling that I could get used to.

Soon enough, the amber haze I remember so well begins to disturb the air ahead of us. Glancing back over my shoulder, I can see that Cassian’s pupils are wider than ever, leaving nothing but a pale green ring around twin inky pools. When he sees me watching him, he lowers his lips to me and murmurs an offer.

“Do you want me to go first?”

I fight to stifle a laugh. “I’m the one who’s done this before,” I remind him, my low voice weaving between the muted cacophony of the rivulets around us. “Trust me.”

The last words are to myself as much as him. With that, I walk up to the door and open it, leading both of us into the dark octagonal room that I’ve come to think of as a sort of hub.

I hear a gasp flicker in his throat, and his grip on me tightens instinctively. I can’t blame him for being shocked. It was alarming enough for me to discover that all of this lay under our feet all along, but he’s been living here for years.

From his perspective, it must feel as though reality itself has come unhinged.

I give his arm a gentle tug. *Come on. We aren't there yet.* He follows me at a much slower pace than before, his head swiveling from side to side to take everything in, until we arrive at the door, whose glass is overrun by those creeping vines.

I gesture to the door to indicate that we're going inside of it. He nods. The alarm on his face has become overcast with something stonier. With no further time to waste, we step into the root-infested nursery basement.

The group waiting for us is smaller than before. The silver-skinned soldier is gone, as are a few of the others that I recognized from Cassian's platoon. The only faces that I know here are those of Avann, Jace, and Deryn. Some of the others dip their heads in greeting to me, which I return out of obligatory politeness.

"So you've decided to join us again." Avann's voice, practically booming in the close quarters, is almost enough to make me jump out of my skin. What with the near-silence that Cassian and I have been maintaining all evening, it's the loudest noise I've heard in hours.

"Yes. And I brought him with me." I immediately feel like an idiot for including that particular addendum. It's not as if the broad-shouldered Ixionian looming behind me is a sight that anyone could possibly miss.

"Avann," Cassian says, his own tone flat with shock. "Jace... you really are here."

An easy grin spreads across Jace's cheeks, the likes of which I've never seen before. It makes him look younger and brighter, much more the type that I can picture forming a genuine relationship with my best friend.

"You finally made it."

"You never told me... I mean, no one ever...."

"Telling people isn't exactly easy," Avann says with a humorless chuckle. "I imagine—that is, I *hope* that Ivy has

already told you about the audio recorders planted throughout the base.”

“A little bit. But—”

“Listen. We don’t have much time to play catch-up here.” I can’t tell whether Avann’s brusqueness is a matter of informality or just sheer impatience. The slow, carefully articulated words from two nights ago are nowhere to be heard now. “We’ve gotten our hands on some data that’s going to change our entire trajectory. Or Calix has, to give credit where credit is due.”

“Calix is involved with this?” Cassian blurts. A few of the other soldiers toss annoyed glances in his direction; Jace’s smile crystallizes into a wince.

“Cassian, listen,” Avann rumbles. “We’re glad to have you here, but you’re out of your depth. The best thing you can do right now is sit back and listen. There’s a lot to learn in doing so.”

Cassian lowers his head. I rub my thumb along the inside of his wrist in what I hope is a reassuring gesture; he returns it with a weak attempt at a squeeze.

“As I was saying, Calix bore witness to the tail end of a data transference a few days ago that contained vital information. He’s been working on jamming the systems for a while now with the help of a few allies working in maintenance, but there hasn’t been a breakthrough like this before. It almost certainly didn’t go undetected, which is why he isn’t in attendance today. But even the partial information is worth whatever cost it may incur. It gave us something that we can actually use.”

A low whistle comes from one of the assembled soldiers; I can’t tell which. My heart thrums in my throat. Something we can actually use?

“If Calix’s decoding is accurate, there may be a much lower threshold for involvement with these particular secrets than we anticipated. In other words, the people lying to us aren’t just the army’s most elite generals. Communications

regarding Ixion's less savory goals are traveling intra-base, and information is going straight to High Commander Vestra."

Murmurs of alarm dart through the room. Cassian's grip on my hand shifts from firm to rigid. Personally, I'm awash in nothing but confusion. High Commander Vestra? I don't know if I've ever heard the name before in my life. My best guess is that it belongs to the Ixionian who greeted us via screen-based proxy when we first arrived, expounding upon his gratitude for our presence in a message that sounded suspiciously pre-recorded. Deryn, at least, seems equally baffled. When I catch her eyes, she just shrugs.

"If this is true—if the High Commander truly is involved in the fabrication of interplanetary conflicts—it's both good and bad news for us. It means that certain figures of power which we assumed to be on our side almost certainly aren't. But it also means that proof of these corrupt practices is likely within our reach. If we can procure and disperse it, their entire network of lies will collapse beneath them. The only question is *how*."

"Emrys," Cassian says.

Everyone turns to stare at him this time, Avann included. My chest twinges with sympathy; his frigid expression, which I once may have taken as a sign of stoicism, I can now clearly identify as a thin mask for his anxieties. Cassian isn't accustomed to speaking out against his superiors, and there's no mistaking the power dynamic in this sweltering room, even if he and Avann do technically hold the same rank.

"Emrys?" Avann repeats. "You think the commander is involved?"

"No." He swallows hard. "I'm sure he isn't. If he were, he wouldn't be so... he wouldn't be the way he is. He'd at least pretend to enjoy his duties."

"So we have a commander on our side," one of the other soldiers huffs. "Great lot of good that'll do against someone like the High Commander."

“It’s not that.” Cassian glances from side to side before resting his eyes on mine. He’s seeking support. And I may have no idea what he’s going on about, but I’m sure as hell going to give it to him. I smile—a genuine smile, pretending for a moment that nobody else can see us, that there’s not a soul in the world other than his and mine. We gaze at each other for a long moment, unblinking, and then he gives a single firm nod.

“It’s not that,” he says again, his voice much more assertive this time. “He has access to the High Commander’s private offices. If this is really so secret, that must be where it’s all being kept, right? He mentioned it the other day. I... don’t think he meant for me to hear.”

“So what?” Deryn asks. I’m surprised to hear her speak up, but it seems that I’m the only one; the others shift their attention to her, as attentive to the single other human in the room as they’ve been to any member of their own ranks. “What are we supposed to do? Steal the access codes?”

“Emrys is smart,” Avann says, shaking his head. “It’s no good.”

“I could ask him,” Cassian says.

Jace scowls. “*Ask* him?”

“Yeah. What’s the worst that could happen?” He’s clearly uncomfortable beneath the pressure of all the eyes on him, but he doesn’t let his voice quiver. Pride warms my breastbone at the sight.

“The worst that could happen, Cassian, is that you could face expulsion.” Avann’s tone is skeptical but not condescending. I may not know exactly what ‘expulsion’ entails, but I think I might be a few steps ahead of the rest of them. If Cassian is cast out from the military, would that mean that their rules no longer apply to him? Would he, in other words, be able to pursue any relationship that he so pleased?

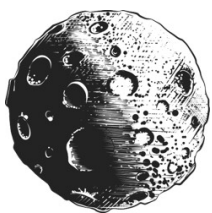
The percussion of my heart begins to escalate.

“I know,” Cassian says.

I wonder, for a moment, whether he's doing this on purpose, whether he *wants* to be branded an outcast—but he gives me no time to speculate.

“I'll talk to him. But... I might need to know another thing or two about exactly what I'm asking.” His tongue twitches across his dry lips. I reach out a second hand and clasp it over the first, clutching his in both of mine. He slants me a quick look, and this time he returns the smile that I flash him.

“So, then.” He turns back to the wide-eyed semicircle of his—*our*—comrades in arms. “Am I still out of my depth? Or can you spare the time to help me ‘play catch-up’ now?”



CHAPTER 31

CASSIAN

IT'S ONLY when I'm standing outside of Commander Azrael Emrys's office, watching the seconds tick down until our scheduled meeting, that I realize just how stupid of a move I'm making.

Needless to say, I didn't get a significant amount of sleep last night. Avann and the rest told me enough to keep my head whirling until dawn, trying again and again to make sense of their many absurd statements.

Most of our wars, they said, don't exist at all. That's the reason why only senior soldiers are ever sent on 'real' missions: they're only a hair's breadth from retirement. They get paid off for their sworn silence with a promise of peace for the remainder of their lives. Who would ever go back on a deal like that?

An ever-growing number of ex-soldiers who are tired of keeping their mouths shut. That's who, apparently. Bit by bit, they've been pipelining information into select members of the current ranks. They tell stories of huddled, tear-streaked civilians, of mass graves that reek in the midday sun, of barren lands, stripped and boiled of every natural resource they ever bore.

We have little doubt that there were wars at some point, Avann explained. Generations ago, most likely. But honorable fighting comes at a steep price. Lies, on the other hand—well, they cost nothing at all, so long as you play your cards right.

It's the very simplicity of it all, I think, that makes it so difficult to comprehend. If the executive powers of our planet

have been sustaining themselves on nothing but lies, how could they possibly have come this far? How did nobody hesitate long enough to realize that the pieces weren't lining up? That was perhaps the thought that plagued me most insistently during last night's void of sleeplessness, and it always wound up bringing me to the same realization: *I* never questioned anything. I never stopped to ask exactly why the so-called war heroes of our military were mythologized, hewn in carved stone and orated legend rather than flesh and blood. I never wondered where we got the resources for the endless battles supposedly being fought across the galaxy. I never even considered the reasons for that very endlessness. Ixion has always been victorious in perpetuity. Why dwell on the fights themselves when they were taking place elsewhere, far from the ever-safe sphere of our own precious planet?

If I had anything resembling good judgment, I would have waited at least another day to contact Emrys. The chances of me being able to articulate the situation when I can't even wrap my own head around it aren't exactly momentous. But for whatever reason, I got up this morning swamped in a weary haze, pulled out my pager, and booked a meeting with the commander for this very afternoon, during our hour-long midday break. I stumbled through our morning drills, trying and failing not to look at Avann or Jace—and now I'm here.

Waiting.

I've never actually been to Emrys's office before, simply due to the fact that I've never had any reason. Ambrose, who collects demerits like he's getting paid for it, tends to make visits about every other week; from the way that he described the place, I thought it would be far more imposing than it is. In actuality, the door marked with our commander's name is one of many lining a small hallway on the first floor of Admin Block D. Benches sit along the opposite wall, interspersed here and there with a gaudy fake plant or a small gray fountain dribbling water. It's hard to imagine that this is the place where Emrys himself spends so many hours, but I suppose I don't know what else I would imagine. Despite having known him for years, the commander is still an impressively blank slate.

The door slides open, and my mind empties.

Azrael Emrys evaluates me with his pure black eyes, expression unreadable as I leap to my feet. “Auberon,” he says. “Here I thought there had been an error in the schedule.”

“No, sir.”

He sighs and waves a hand. “All right. Come in.”

His personal office is somehow even more barren than the building’s halls. A wide screen behind his desk spews trails of data I don’t understand, constantly shifting and realigning its many graphs and tables. The desk itself is bare save for two tablets, much more high-end than Ivy’s ancient block. Aside from that, there’s a stiff chair for me, an equally uncomfortable one for him, and a rack of drawers with prominent electronic locks glowing red. Nothing else. No inspirational quotes, no images of his family, no ambient screens portraying scenes of nature to ease one’s busy mind.

It makes me sad, somehow.

Emrys takes a seat behind the desk and gestures for me to do the same. I quickly obey. For a long time, he does nothing but gaze at me, and I’m just starting to feel as though I’m being unwillingly tested when he finally speaks up.

“It’s about the program, isn’t it?”

“What?”

His emerald lips press into a near-invisible line. “The exchange program. You want out of it. You aren’t the first one to come in with a complaint, you know.”

“No—no. Not at all. I...” It only strikes me now that I have no way of knowing whether we’re being monitored here, as well. My head pounds with exhaustion as I navigate my possible courses of action. I can’t just ask him to go on a walk outside. But I also can’t put all my cards on the table if the higher-ups are listening in.

“You what?” He sets his elbows on the desk and twines his fingers together. “Believe it or not, I don’t have all the time in the world.”

“It’s a private issue,” I blurt out. “I...” *Kest*, what was I thinking? All that time waiting on the edge of my seat, and I still didn’t manage to prepare myself with the most basic precautions. “I would feel better if I knew nobody else was listening in.”

“What are you going on about, Auberon?”

“I need to talk to you.” I stare hard at him, trying with all of my strength to find some sort of emotion in those empty eyes. *Please, please understand this. Come on. Please.* “I need to talk to you alone.”

That thin mouth twists, and my stomach begins to sink, sure that I’ve already messed up beyond repair—but then he dips one hand below his desk and fidgets with something out of sight. The air in the room changes. An ambient humming that I hadn’t even noticed in the first place fades gradually into nothing, until I find my ears blanketed with the sort of silence that I can only associate with being alone—*utterly* alone in a way that I haven’t been since before I began my duties. The difference is so profound that it almost brings tears to my eyes.

“There you go,” Emrys says, his face still betraying nothing. “No one listening but you and me. You’re smart, Cassian. Smarter than you think. Now tell me what you need.”

I don’t know if he’s ever called me by my first name before. Hearing it in his voice fills me with a warm sort of confidence, and I feel my shoulders straighten instinctually.

“Sir, we have concerns regarding the activities of the High Commander.”

If my words surprise him, he doesn’t show it. “Go on.”

“I don’t wish to give the names of the others involved for their own safety, and I... I understand that I’m transgressing boundaries by even being here in the first place. If this... if this results in my expulsion, I accept that. But it’s too important for me not to try.”

“Listen, Auberon.” *Kest*, the last name is back. “I’m not going to nominate you for expulsion. I’m not going to tell a

single soul, in fact, that this conversation ever took place. But I'm also not going to participate in whatever this is."

"Sir—"

"The business of my superiors is not my concern. Do I trust them?" He shrugs. "Do I need to? Absolutely not. They give me what I need. I follow orders. No one gets hurt. I would advise you to do the same." With that, Emrys sits back in his chair and begins to reach under his desk.

"No—wait!" I don't mean to raise my voice, but it comes out as half a shout. He pauses again, eyes narrowing.

"Have I not made myself clear?"

"You have—you have, sir." I pull in a deep breath. "But... please. You know me, after all this time. You know that I wouldn't do something like this if it didn't matter—*deeply* matter."

"If you didn't *think* it mattered," he corrects.

"Sure, fine. If I didn't think it mattered. Yet you're the one who just said that I'm smart, sir—and if you truly believe that, I need you to trust me. You know I've never asked anything like this before—"

"You haven't."

"—But I can't overemphasize how important it may be."

He slowly withdraws his hand from the button concealed beneath the desk, and I pounce on my chance.

"I need the passcode for the High Commander's private quarters."

"No," Emrys says, but the response seems more automatic than decisive. There's a certain curiosity in his voice that warms me with a bright bloom of hope.

"If I'm caught, I'll swear before any court of law that I got it from you out of force. If you can back that up with your own account, you shouldn't have anything to worry about."

"I don't think you realize quite what you're suggesting, Auberon."

“I realize more than you think I do.” My breath catches in my throat. Somehow, I know that these next few moments are going to decide everything. This is my last chance to back out, to pretend that this never happened, and go back to living the life that I’ve always been promised: a few more years of duty followed by lifelong peace and prosperity. All I’ve ever thought to dream of, and now I’m uprooting it for the sake of a conspiracy that I only learned late last night in the far reaches of the base’s underworks.

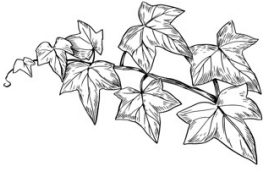
But that’s not true. That isn’t why I’m doing this, really. It’s been a much longer time coming. In a way, I’ve been headed down this path ever since the day that I first wondered at the enigma of Ivy’s ever-shifting eyes.

“If I can do this,” I say, fighting with all my strength to keep my voice from trembling, “the people of Ixion will finally have the knowledge they deserve. I’m not trying to start an uprising. I’m not trying to incite violence. My only goal is to broadcast the truth so that everyone can see it. And, Commander—I know you’re with me on this, even if you don’t want to admit it. I know because you never would have turned off that microphone in the first place unless you had similar suspicions. This is your chance to change something for the better. Are you going to take it or not?”

Azrael Emrys locks me into his obsidian gaze. I stare back at him, unblinking, my hands balled into aching fists in my lap.

We stay like that for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 32



“WE DID IT,” Cassian says before the door even closes behind him. “*Kest*, Ivy. We did it.”

I freeze with my hairbrush mid-stroke, staring at him. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen him so exhilarated. Framed in the doorway, he’s practically glowing: a grin rakes up the side of his hard jaw, curling into the vertex of glistening scales. His chest is heaving beneath his jacket, and even his hair is mussed up as though he’s been running his hands through it; stray cowlicks jump at the base of his horns and crest his forehead.

“You did it,” I repeat, unable to comprehend the words even as they’re in my own mouth. Part of me wants to ask *what* he did, even though I know that doing so would be utterly idiotic; it’s not as if he can say it out loud while we’re here in his quarters. And yet it’s so hard to believe without explicit confirmation. It’s not that I didn’t trust him to convince his commander—no, screw it. That’s absolutely what it is. I thought he was setting himself up for failure, even though he was doing so intentionally, but proof of the opposite is standing right in front of me, big goofy smile and all.

I’m proud of him. Immeasurably, unspeakably proud. And yet, somewhere in the very back of my chest, a cold nagging sensation has begun to arrive. If expulsion had been the outcome, we would have found a way to make things work. Now, though, the stakes are higher than ever. If we go through with this, and if he gets caught, something tells me that the consequence won’t be anything quite so benign.

And yet, at this moment, with him closing the distance between us and gripping my upper arms in his hands, I can't contemplate that. I drop the hairbrush and lean in to let him hold me, pressing my ear against his chest until the steady *thun-thun, thun-thun* of his heartbeat drowns out everything else. To think that I once questioned whether he might be cold-blooded... but I know his warmth all too well now. Far better than anything else on this strange dream of a planet.

"Ivy, listen," he rumbles. I feel his voice more than I hear it, his low register thrumming through my whole body. "No matter what happens—no matter where we end up with all this—I want you to know that—"

"Shh." I reach up to press two fingers against his lips. His breath stops short, and I can feel surprise tensing his firm muscles. I can't bring myself to look him in the eyes; I don't want to see the joy leave them. At the same time, I know the words I just stifled all too well, and I can't take them right now. I can't afford the distraction. I need every last scrap of focus and strength to get through what's waiting ahead of us.

"Not now," I say, half-hating myself for it. "I know, but... please. Please, not now."

"Okay." The words stir against my fingertips. "Okay. Not now."

"Once we're on the other side of this, yeah?"

"... Yeah."

I'm suddenly terrified that he's going to draw away, his luminous energy dulled by my words, but he does no such thing. Instead, he clenches his arms more tightly around me than ever, solid but not harsh.

I shouldn't let myself rest against him. I should pull away, support my own weight, not even let either of us be tempted... but I can't. I can't, I can't, I can't.

So I allow myself this much, and we stand there for several long minutes, unwilling to even begin to imagine what might lie ahead.

We descend to the underworks in silence that night. Now that Cassian knows the drill, he takes the lead, and I can't deny that the subtle show of confidence flusters me just a bit. I've never been the type to fall for the assertive, masculine type, but there's something about the ease with which he does it: silent, serious, not trying to imbue his actions with any sort of exaggerated machismo. He's the first person in a long time, maybe the first person ever, who truly makes me feel safe.

We arrive at the nursery basement earlier than before, making it the first time that I've been there before the group has fully assembled. Rather than the imposing semi-circle that I've come to expect, the scattering of Ixionian soldiers are wandering throughout the room, some examining the wild growth that explodes across every surface, others sitting cross-legged on the vented flooring and exchanging soft-spoken words with one another. Avann is nowhere to be seen, but Jace and Deryn are here; upon catching sight of us, they give a couple of little waves in our direction. An involuntary smile spreads over my cheeks as I return the gesture. Something about the casualness of the mannerism makes me feel far more secure than any more grandiose method of greeting.

"What are you going to say to him?" I ask Cassian quietly once the other two turn back to one another.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's not like you...." My fingers, half of their own will, extend to brush along a soft-looking vine. Fiery pain scorches them, and I withdraw with a huff of surprise, previous thoughts fleeing my mind as I stare down at the beads of blood welling against my skin. "What the fuck?"

Before I can make another move, Cassian catches my wrist and brings my hand to his lips. Taking care not to catch my skin on the teeth that I now know to be quite sharp indeed, he presses his tongue against the injury and sucks at it gently. My face fills with color. I don't dare turn around to look, but I can't help but feel as though all the eyes in the room have turned to me.

“It looked fuzzy,” I mumble, staring at my feet.

“Prickly would be more accurate. You need to be careful with these things.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that idea.”

He grazes my knuckles with a faint kiss, then lets my hand drop. It’s hard to tell in the underground gloom, but I think his eyes are twinkling.

“Sir,” I say, pulling a faux pout over my lips, “are you *laughing* at me?”

“Not even a bit,” he replies solemnly. “Your suffering is of the utmost—”

I’m halfway through giving him a not-so-tender shove in the chest when a noise causes both of us to glance to the side. Everyone else quickly follows suit, then scrambles into more attentive positions as they catch sight of Avann approaching. Yet he completely ignores them, choosing instead to stride right up to Cassian and me until we’re practically nose-to-nose—or nose-to-upper-belly, as is the case between the towering umber-skinned soldier and me.

“Report,” he says shortly. “Did you speak to him?”

“I did.” Cassian’s voice is firm, but I know him well enough at this point to detect the faint current of anxiety running beneath it. I would give him a squeeze of reassurance if not for the fact that there’s no inconspicuous way to do so.

“And?”

“I have the passcode.”

Murmurs of excitement erupt in the ranks throughout the room, stilled only when Avann lifts a hand for silence.

“Where?”

“Memorized. He wouldn’t give it to me any other way.”

“There’s no physical record?”

“None.”

“Then you’ll be the one to perform the mission itself.”

“...Yes,” Cassian says, clearly realizing the significance of the word only once it’s already weighing in his mouth. “Yes, I suppose I will.”

My mouth goes chalky. I try and fail to catch Cassian’s eye. Avann starts to say something else, but I interject before he can do so.

“Then I’m going too.”

“No,” Cassian says at once. “Absolutely not.”

“Absolutely yes,” I hiss. I try to stand up as tall as possible, but Avann still needs to dip his chin in order to regard me properly.

“Cassian is a trained soldier,” he says. His voice is mellow but unyielding. “He’ll be able to handle the situation most capably.”

“You think I’m gonna slow him down? Is that it?” I demand.

Avann is silent.

“Well? Is it?”

“Ivy—” Cassian starts, his voice cracking.

“No. He wouldn’t be here without me. I’m coming with you.” I startle myself with a dry laugh. “I think you might be surprised by just how well I can take care of myself.”

Avann sighs and brings a hand to his chin, rubbing his thumb along its blunt edge. “It’s irresponsible,” he says. “You’re a civilian—”

“Exactly.”

This time, I’m not the one to interrupt. It’s the voice of a different woman that cuts across his, and when he steps back in surprise, I see with a furious swell of pride that Deryn is standing there, hands at her hips, eyes full of dark fire.

That’s my best friend.

“She’s a civilian,” Deryn continues, “and so am I. But that’s not all. We’re also humans—or did you manage to forget

that? The exchange program is a big deal. We signed the damn contracts; we know how important it is to maintain relations between your planet and ours.”

“That’s right,” I add, my momentum building on hers. “You’re the ones who have been saying that Ixion knows full well how to dispose of its own soldiers, right? That’s not us. They’re going to have to think twice before they take any action to harm me.”

“Or me.”

I don’t try to argue. In a way, it was never really a question. She and I have done so much together, practically the least of which ended up being our venture to an alien planet. It would be ridiculous to try and keep her from joining me now.

“They have a point, you know,” Jace says, stepping up to Deryn’s side. Gratitude wells in my chest. I haven’t had much time to get to know him, but he’s done nothing but help me at every turn, and now is no exception. “It could be the four of us. Two soldiers who know our way around. Two civilians to make sure that they don’t try to pull anything dirty. It’s not exactly foolproof, but I can’t imagine anything that would be.”

Cassian lets out a noise, not unlike a whimper. I hate hearing him hurt, and I wish I could take it away, but there’s no chance that I’m going to let him do this alone. Neither of us would let the other thrust themselves into this kind of danger on their own; the only fair option is to stand together.

“This isn’t a game,” Avann growls low in his throat. “It’s not a test. Not a trial. It isn’t just about risking your own skin. If you can’t pull this off, you could be responsible for the devastation of more lives than you could imagine. Are you truly prepared for that?”

I reach out a hand, and Cassian closes it in his grip. I lift my chin and look at Avann square in the moss-colored eyes.

“Respectfully,” I say, “I don’t believe I have a choice.”

His broad chin dips in something between a nod and a bow. “Then that settles it.”

“Avann, please—” Cassian begs. He’s not the only one to do so, either: many of the other soldiers clustered throughout the room are voicing objections.

“Those two have barely grown out of their kiddie uniforms ___”

“The human women? Is this some kind of joke?”

“The *least* you can do is send some men who actually know what they’re doing....”

“Why not just give it up now?”

“Playing favorites with his own platoon; we should have expected....”

“*Quiet.*”

The power of Avann’s voice is such that he doesn’t need to raise its volume in the slightest. His low, brassy gravitas is enough: the complaints and murmurings die out almost at once. He moves to the middle of the room and turns in a slow circle, glowering at each and every one of those around him. “If anyone disagrees with the decision to send Cassian Auberon, Jace Kairos, Ivy Alecto, and Deryn Sevene to retrieve the High Commander’s communication logs—in other words, if anyone else would like to volunteer *himself* for the duty—feel free to do so now.”

The only noise is the gentle dripping of the irrigation pipes lining the walls, backed with the sigh of thousands of leaves as they twirl in the stillness, perhaps sentient, perhaps listening as closely as any of the rest of us.

“Then it’s decided,” Avann declares. “It’s best that the specifics are known by as few of us as possible, to ensure that they remain secret. Consider this meeting officially adjourned. If all goes well, we’ll gather here again in two days’ time. If not, keep your ears open and your eyes wide. No matter what, this is far from over.”

It takes several minutes for the rest of them to disperse. Many begin to walk towards Avann, clearly intending to protest further, before losing their audacity and veering in a different direction at the last moment. Deryn watches all of

this with a rather smug grin, occasionally leaning over to murmur something in Jace's ear.

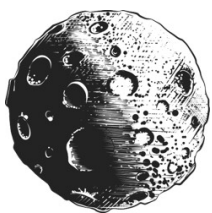
I almost envy the ease between them. Cassian says nothing to me at all. I want to tell him that I'm sorry, that I know it hurts and I wish there was an easier way, but it's impossible to do so when he won't so much as look in my direction.

Please, I urge him silently. Please understand....

Finally, with a deep, shuddering breath, he turns towards me. One hand moves to my shoulder, and the other cups my cheek. "Ivy—"

But it's too late.

"Gather round," Avann calls. "We have a mission to plan."



CHAPTER 33

WE DECIDE UNANIMOUSLY that the best time to make a move is midday, during the hour that we're given to rest and recharge. Jace suggests that cover of the night may serve us well, but Avann is quick to shut him down: "Nobody goes in those offices past sundown," he says. "They're sure to have a secondary alarm system installed. Entry during the day will be less suspicious; by the time they realize that the people in the room are unauthorized, you should have been able to get what you need."

What we need is still a nebulous concept. The information delivered by Calix could hardly be vaguer—as a matter of fact, it doesn't seem to consist of much beyond the fact that there's *something* to be found *somewhere* in the High Commander's space. Something that's sure to expose, at the very least, that we're being played like toy soldiers in a scheme that's lasted for generations.

"The files," Avann explains, "are going to be in a data stick. We don't know the size or color; we don't know whether it's going to be labeled. Your task is to find it, transfer the contents to your pager, and use that pager to broadcast all of the information base-wide via the social network. It is nothing less than utterly critical that you ensure you have the correct data *before* you release it. If you send the wrong information—private information—you're making it all too easy for them to frame you as the enemy in the eyes of our would-be comrades. At the same time, the High Commander and his associates will be clued into the fact that we know something is amiss, and they'll take whatever steps necessary to take

much better care in hiding it. This will quite literally be our only chance.”

“No pressure, though,” Deryn mutters.

Avann isn't in the mood to take a joke. “Yes, there is. More pressure than you're even imagining. More pressure than *any* of us can comprehend. If you don't feel up to the task of—”

“Hey, hey.” She lifts a hand. “Calm down. Just trying to inject some levity into this shit.”

“Levity will come afterward if we're lucky. Right now, you need to focus.”

As we continue to iron out the specifications of our task—reviewing maps, choreographing our moves, closing any loopholes that emerge—I find my own focus drifting time and time again to the quiet, solemn-faced woman beside me. Ivy seems somehow smaller than I've ever seen her before, and the reason is obvious: she's scared. I can feel the shadows of it in my own heart, swathing all of my senses in a state of dully buzzing dissociation. She isn't letting herself think about what might be coming. I wish I could do the same. I wish I could stop her; I wish I could protect her. I wish I could do anything other than what I'm going to do.

But I know one thing with absolute certainty: I'm not going to let harm come to a single hair on her head. If she wants to go with me so badly, fine. But if anything tries to get between her and me, it won't be meeting a pleasant end.

It's almost ironic, in a way. Three years... it's been three years since I was formally enlisted. All that time, I was preparing to battle an enemy that doesn't even exist for a cause that I only thought I understood. Only now, upon learning that I never had any reason to fight, have I finally found something worth fighting *for*.

“It's late,” Avann says at last. “Get as much sleep as you can. Once tomorrow comes, you know what to do.”

Murmurs of assent drift between us. Ivy, who's been holding my hand this whole time, gives it a rough squeeze; I return it at once.

You're going to be safe, I tell her silently. Nothing is going to happen to you. I love you, and you'll be okay no matter what. Galaxies weren't enough to keep us apart; why should this be?

And even though I know it's impossible, I could swear that I hear her answer, whispered in the back of my head through that same star-swept connection that I've finally allowed myself to embrace.

I know.

Any effort to sleep is useless. By instinct, we start out on opposite sides of the bed, but last only a couple of confusing minutes before we simultaneously realize the absurdity of what we're doing. I turn to her side just as she moves towards mine, and we meet without a word, lips brushing together, my arms sliding around her waist, and her hands snuggling against my bare chest like it's the most natural thing in the world. She burns against me as though she herself is another star, unbridled, incandescent.

I need to tell her that I love her. What if this is my last chance? I won't consider the possibility of losing her tomorrow, but what if it's the last morning that I ever live to see? The thought of leaving her alone is borderline unbearable; to imagine doing so without her even knowing how I feel, how I've felt all this time....

She nuzzles against me with a tiny whimpering noise that fractures my heart. I want to hold her closer, but anything more would crush her; she's like a lover of glasswork, and I can feel myself being undone by the paradox that she contains: the only way to love her with all the passion that I possess is through agonizing, meticulous constraint.

No harm is going to come to her. I'm entirely assured of that fact. But I'm a different story, and it occurs to me now,

with no small amount of wonder, that this is the first time I've ever truly feared death.

I never wanted to die, not exactly, and yet for one reason or another, I assumed it to be my destiny. If I were to be killed as a soldier, I would never have to think about what may come after. There would simply be no after.

Now, though, I'm clinging to the prospect of an *after* with every cell in my body. I can't leave her. I can't allow us to be robbed of the future that, as I now know with absolute certainty, we were always meant to have together. More than anything, I can't leave her unprotected. If I die, I'll have failed her, and never in an infinity of lifetimes could I forgive myself for being unable to defend the one thing that matters most to me in the universe.

Her breathing is slow and steady, warm exhalations brushing my skin with every few passing seconds. Seconds that bring us closer to whatever fate has in store. I can't tell whether she's asleep, but I hope she is. I don't want her to be kept awake with worry. I don't want her to feel the relentless hammer of my heart, doubling and tripling its rate as though doing so will be enough to keep me alive through whatever impossible odds we come to face.

She slid into my life with such ease that I almost didn't notice. I had no idea how much she meant to me until I was in far, far too deep. Now there is no world without her. Her presence, cradled in my trembling arms, is all I've ever been looking for. The truth isn't that she's come to light my life, or to give it reason. No... if I'm being honest with myself, before she came along, I didn't have a life at all. It's as though my whole existence has been underwater, and I've at last burst to the surface, only to turn and find a tidal wave headed straight toward me.

There's no question in my mind that I would die for her. Doing so would be easy.

But I *can't*. And that's what scares me the most.

At some point before dawn, I say the words. I don't even think about it. Even if Ivy is asleep, I need to hear them aloud.

"I love you."

She sighs against me, but nothing more. I think she's dreaming, and I tell myself it's a good thing. She deserves every last moment of peace that I can provide for her.

Besides, she knows already.

I'm sure that she does.

The three suns beat down unforgivingly as Jace and I make our way to the administrative buildings the next day. The High Commander's offices, as well as those of the men who work with them most closely, are arranged vertically in a building known as the Spire. His private rooms are at the very top... which is where we're headed now.

We're both armed. It wasn't too difficult to procure a pair of pistols from weapons storage; the old-fashioned models that still fire metal bullets aren't exactly kept under lock and key. Light guns would be both more effective and easier to conceal, but we agreed that it wasn't worth the risk of filing a rental. The less of a trail we leave behind, the better.

Ivy and Deryn meet us at the base of the Spire, just as we agreed. Upon catching sight of us, they go inside first, their voices elevated in some fabricated babble about the architecture.

"Looking back, I can see why I haven't checked this place out yet," Deryn says with a bubbly giggle. "Heights and I aren't best friends with one another."

"Tell me about it," Ivy agrees. In its affected pitch, her voice sounds nothing like herself. It's disquieting in a way. "Do you think gravity works differently or something? Or is it always just on the verge of falling over?"

"Ugh, don't *say* that!"

They step through the automatic doors, and Jace and I are right behind.

The first floor of the Spire is completely featureless. It's constructed in a perfect circle with sloping walls, so there are no corners and, therefore, no shadows to speak of. The effect is an unnerving one. In the center of the room sits a cylindrical glass elevator, its array of buttons glowing green through its entirely transparent walls.

"Wow," Deryn says with another false giggle. She glances over her shoulder towards Jace and me. "Hey, you guys. Wanna share the ride?"

"It's certainly big enough," Jace replies. I don't know how he manages to keep his voice so breezy—my heart feels as though it's about to leap out of my mouth and dash itself against the too-white, too-clean floor. "What brings you two here?"

"Exploring," Ivy says at once. "We realized we've never been here, so...."

"It's not the most interesting place," Jace chuckles. "Not much exploring to be done, I'm afraid."

"Oh, come on," Deryn purrs. "You know perfectly well that we have very different ideas about *interesting*, don't you, darling?"

"Well then, see for yourselves."

The elevator is several times larger than the ones in the barracks, and the four of us fit in with plenty of space to spare. I take my pre-planned position in front of the gleaming keypad and take a deep breath, the numbers from Emrys echoing again and again in my mind as I tap the button marked 'PENTHOUSE.'

A message flashes across the glass in clean green text, echoed by a cool voice that plays over hidden speakers: "You are attempting to enter a restricted area. Please input a passcode."

This cues a second keypad to pop up in front of the first with a faint whooshing sound effect. I don't breathe as I type the numbers and hit the enter key. For a moment—far too long of a moment—nothing happens, and my stomach goes icy at

the thought that I may have made some sort of mistake. Then a confirmation message glows white across the glass screen, and an instant later, the elevator is whisking us silently upwards, straight for the Spire's very top.

We played out every step of the operation last night over and over, making sure that it was entirely watertight, but that doesn't stop my heart from hammering in my chest when we arrive at the highest floor. My hand twitches as the elevator stills, yearning for Ivy's, but I catch myself at the last minute. I can't let something like that slow us down. Not now that we've come this far.

Unlike in the case of the barracks, the door doesn't open directly into the High Commander's quarters—or maybe it does, only those quarters are extensive enough to merit a central hallway rather than consisting of a single room. It's just as painfully white and edgeless as the main floor, with nothing to distinguish one of the four plain doors from another. I can't imagine how it would feel to live in a place as profoundly blank as this... but this isn't the time for imagining.

Jace gestures to the door farthest to the left and angles a questioning look toward the rest of us. A few quick glances later, our plan is set. We each step up to a different one of the four doors and push them in simultaneously.

When mine slides open, it takes me a moment to process exactly what I'm seeing. This doesn't look like any place I've ever known—and then, with a dull pang somewhere between disgust and reverence, I realize that I'm looking at a *bathroom*, of all things. A solid half of it is taken up by a sunken tub with so many different-shaped taps that it may as well be some sort of gigantic chemical mixing vat. The wall opposite is lined with rack after rack of plush towels. A vast window on the far end of the room reveals the sprawl of the entire military base, soldiers trekking along their designated routes like tiny, uniform insects. The thought that the High Commander sits here on the daily, watching us from the seclusion of his oversized bathtub, makes me feel sick.

“Everyone! Over here!”

Jace's voice drags me from my reverie. Breathing hard, I force myself to close the door again and step back into the hallway. Ivy and Deryn are already just behind me, while Jace is holding the leftmost door wide open, waving frantically with one hand.

"This is it," he says, breath scratching in his throat. My stomach plummets at the realization that he isn't making any effort to dampen his voice. At this point, our success depends on the clock, which is ticking downward faster than any of us can possibly realize.

I'm the first one into the room, followed by Ivy and Deryn. Sure enough, there's no question that this is the High Commander's command center. A massive rack of data sticks stands opposite us, blinking sporadically in a myriad of different neon hues. The rest of the walls are lined with presumably locked cabinets, and a semicircular desk occupies the majority of open space. Countless info displays glimmer across its multidimensional surfaces. This makes our public archives look like an absolute joke: it's the most information I've ever seen contained in a single room, with nothing else coming remotely close.

How the *kest* are we going to find the right stick?

"I'll watch the door," Jace says. "You three—you know what to do."

There's no time to object. I give him a terse nod, he flashes me a smile. Then the door slides shut, leaving me with Ivy, Deryn, and the staggering array of digital information laid out before us.

"Well," Deryn says after a few heartbeats' worth of silence, "what are we waiting for?"

That's enough to scare us into action. Ivy begins working on the cabinets, while Deryn and I start to scour the back walls. A swell of relief crests within me as I see that the columns are at least labeled, followed by another pang of hopelessness upon realizing that each of those columns contains a hundred sticks or more.

“How the *kest* are we supposed to do this?” I groan.

Deryn tosses a quick sideways look in my direction before resuming her perusal of the data rack. “You all say that, huh?”

“Say what?”

“*Kest*. What’s it mean, anyway?”

“...Nothing, I guess. It’s just an exclamation.” I don’t understand why she’s bringing this up now, but I also don’t mind for some reason. It gives me something meaningless to go on about as I scan column after column of data labels. “You lot have words like that, too, don’t you?”

“Sure, but they *mean* something.” She crouches down to examine one of the lower rows, then growls softly to herself and stands up again. At first, I think she’s leaving the conversation at that, but she resumes after a moment. “Come to think of it, most of them are either referring to sex or to feces. Not the most creative.”

“It’s no use,” Ivy interjects, hurrying over to us. She meets my eyes for a second, then shakes her head. “All of them are locked. If it’s in the cabinets, we haven’t got a chance in hell.”

“There’s one!” Deryn pipes up. I startle, thinking she means that she’s found something promising, but her searching hasn’t paused. “*Hell*. That’s a solid cuss word, right there.”

“What are you—?” Ivy starts, wrinkling her nose, but I cut in.

“So what’s that one mean?”

“Hm... how would you describe hell, Ivy?” Deryn twiddles at one stick, growls deep in her throat, and keeps looking. “Something exactly like this whole situation, maybe? Suspended in agony for what may or may not be forever? I sure know that I’ve never been this stressed in my fucking life. Brings a whole new meaning to a *needle in a haystack*, doesn’t it?”

I don’t know what that means, either, but I decide this isn’t the best time to pry. *Maintenance Duties, Promotion Records,*

Station Blueprints... any of these could theoretically contain the information that we need, but none are guaranteed. My heart is pounding so hard and fast that it's making me nauseous. I need to get Ivy out of here—but I can't do that until we have the data.

"Hell," she says. "It's... where you go after you die. If you're a bad person."

"You don't go anywhere after you die," I object automatically.

"Depends on what you believe in."

"Do you believe that you go to... a place? *After* you're dead?"

"Honestly? These days, I don't know what to believe."

Before I can speak another word, a pounding against the door causes me to half jump out of my skin. Jace's voice is muffled by the wall between us, but I can still make out his words clearly enough: "*The elevator went back down! Hurry up; they're coming!*"

No. No, no, no—I double my pace, the labels blurring before my eyes, but it seems sure that we've lost already. I know Jace better than almost anyone, and I'm all too sure that he won't hesitate to break out that old analog pistol by the time that opposition arrives. He'll have a good reason for it—there's no way to negotiate our way out of something like this—but I still wish there was a way to make him stop. Everything feels inevitable now, entropic, like we've pulled a pin and are just waiting for the grenade to do its job.

Deryn's thoughts lie elsewhere. Her face ices over, and she abandons the wall of data sticks, bolting to the door and hammering a fist against it. "Jace? Jace, let me out."

He must say something that I can't hear because she suddenly thrusts her whole body against the door. It doesn't budge.

"No, Jace, goddammit—we talked about this, remember? They won't hurt you if I'm there, they—they... no, no, come on...."

My skin grows cold. I can imagine all too well what's running through my best friend's mind. Sure, Deryn's presence may cause hesitation on the part of the security guards. But what if it doesn't? How could that possibly be a risk worth taking?

"Cassian," Ivy whispers. "Look at this."

I turn back to face her. She's crouched close to the floor, fingers pressed against a tiny section of data sticks in the lower right corner of the wall. Her lips frame something inaudible, and then—impossibly—she smiles.

"This is it."

"What? What did you find?" I nearly trip over myself in my desperation to reach her.

"The exchange program is what aroused major suspicions in the first place, right?" Her eyes meet mine, and they're the brightest green-gold that I've ever seen. "It may not be perfect, but... I bet this will have enough to make the people start questioning."

For a moment, I feel as though I won't be able to look away from her. Bent down like this—expression intent, thin shoulders hunched, either not knowing or not caring that her hair is in her eyes—more poignantly than ever, I wish I could live in this moment and just *watch* her until I couldn't stand it anymore.

But Jace is shouting something else now, and Deryn is still hammering on the door, and it's now or never for them. For her. For all of us.

I follow the path of her slim fingertips and see a fresher-looking label, clean black print on a white background, that reads *XCHANGE PROGRAM*.

It's a gamble—one *hell* of a gamble, to use their strange word—but hasn't every part of this been so, in one way or another?

"Yeah." I snatch up the first data stick, hoping against hope that it'll be the one describing the foundation of the program, and whip my pager out of my pocket. My hands shake as I

fight to slide the slim prong of the stick into its corresponding slot. It's as though I'm caught in a bad dream, unable to make the simplest things work—but then it clicks into place, and my fingers are racing across the screen to open up my social tab. I don't think I'm imagining the rush of footsteps in the hallway, nor the shouts that accompany them.

Come on, come on, come on....

Upload. Release. Confirm.

A blue progress bar snakes across the screen, followed by a low beep of confirmation.

“*Kest*,” I whisper. “We did it.”

Ivy clutches my shoulders with both hands. I want to see the expression on her face, the wild triumph that must surely be crazing her eyes, but I can't bring myself to look away from the pager's softly glowing surface.

“We did it,” I say again.

As if on cue, the gunshots erupt.

I leap to my feet. Deryn has pulled back from the door and is now cowering against a wall, her face waxy, her eyes huge and blank. I can make out silhouettes through the frosted glass... so many of them. Too many.

I feel Ivy rise at my side, and I wrap an arm around her, edging her behind me. With my free hand, I draw my pistol and aim it straight at the door. A *boom* sends the whole room quivering. My finger finds the trigger and curls around it.

Boom.

Boom.

Ivy struggles to escape my grasp, insisting something about how they'll hesitate before shooting her, but I'm not going to let her go. Jace's thoughts—the thoughts, I'm now realizing, that may very well have been his last—are now rebounding in my own head.

Not you. Never you. I don't care what it costs.

The door shatters in a massive explosion of glass fragments, showering the room from floor to ceiling. I barely see Jace's limp body hit the floor before the masked troopers come storming in, rifles raised, every single muzzle pointed straight at me.

My arm tightens around Ivy.

“Drop your weapon!”

I can't tell which of them is talking. The voice is distorted, metallic, and as indistinct as the figures themselves. There must be six of them at least, maybe eight... needless to say, we're miserably outnumbered.

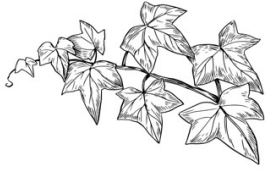
I narrow my eyes.

“Shoot me if you want,” I snarl. “But it's too late. Everyone is going to know the truth in a matter of minutes. I don't know who you are; I don't know what you've been promised. All I know is that it's only a matter of time—a very *small* amount of time—until this whole base turns on itself. And when that happens, there's only one thing you need to consider.”

Ivy stops struggling. Instead, she clings tightly to me with all her strength, holding onto my jacket as though I'm her only tether at the end of the world itself as I spit out my final question.

“*Which side are you on?*”

CHAPTER 34



THE EVENTS that follow may as well be a dream.

The first of the alarms begin to sound instants after Cassian shouts his demand to the array of faceless soldiers standing before us. At once, they start to turn towards one another, confused, and Cassian takes the chance to bolt for the door with me in tow. Several of their guns go off, but by some miracle, they miss us; I barely have time to close a hand around Deryn's wrist before we're barrelling through the hallway, past Jace's prone and motionless body, and into the elevator.

Deryn's sobs are noisy but dry. They tear out of her mouth in a steady stream, harsh and unrelenting, as the door slides shut before us.

I'm nowhere near crying. Hysterical, maybe; if anything, I want to laugh, but it wouldn't be a happy sound. No matter how many times I run the last few minutes through my head, I can't make any sense of them.

"Did we do it?"

I can barely make out my own voice beneath the volume of Deryn's cries, but Cassian knows all the same. He slides his hand into mine, and I instantly tighten my grip around it. The shape I've come to know so well is, as always, a perfect fit against mine.

"I think so. I guess we'll see."

"It's crazy, isn't it?" I murmur. "To think that we've released everything, just like that—the fact that it's out there

waiting, and it's possible that nobody else even knows. Like the whole world is screaming, and we're the only ones who can hear it."

He doesn't answer, just takes a step closer to me so that my head brushes against his shoulder. I pull in a long breath of his piney scent, overridden by the salty bite of sweat. The elevator seems a thousand times slower going down than it was going up, as if we're sinking to previously untouched depths, past the room where the roots hum, past the layers of silt and bone that I spent afternoons studying in the library, passing into the boiling core of the planet itself.

It's almost impossible to conceive that, mere minutes ago, we were telling Cassian the meaning of hell.

As if I had any idea.

But, like all things, it does end. With one hand in Cassian's and one in Deryn's, I stand as tall as I can and face the atrium that once more sprawls out before me, as featureless as it was when we ascended. For a moment, Deryn's sobs pause, and I can almost believe that the whole thing was some horrendous mutual nightmare, that we've been given some precious second chance....

And then the sirens begin.

"We can't waste time," Cassian says.

I nod. "Just what I was thinking."

We move as fast as we can, Deryn stumbling in our wake, and burst outside. All the usual foot traffic on the base's sprawling paths has come to an abrupt halt, Ixionians and the occasional human glancing about them as if looking for the source of the sound. Voices fill the air, some of them confused, some of them panicked, some of them even laughing, all backed by that awful searing klaxon. It sounds more like an organic scream than a signal of warning, and it sends a rash of goosebumps darting across my arms despite the pleasant warmth of what's shaping up to be a beautiful summery day.

The weather is wrong. The sky ought to be on fire, and yet I've never seen it so clear.

Cassian has frozen, his lips pressed tight and his eyes lashing from side to side as he takes in the sight before him. After several seconds of this, I give him a shove that's none too gentle.

"Don't freak out on me now," I hiss. "What do we do?"

He blinks and shakes himself as though startled out of a daze. "I didn't think we would make it this far... I..."

Fine, then. If he's going to crap out on me now, I'll take matters into my own hands.

"The northern gates are the closest. Let's get out now and figure the rest of this out later."

"No... no, we can't. Security will only be heightened with the alarms activated." He heaves in a deep breath. "Getting out won't be an option. Not right away, at least."

"What about the dock? Can you, I don't know, hijack a ship? Get us off the planet?"

"I can't. I might know someone who can, but there's no time. Ivy, we have to—"

I never hear what we have to do, because a thunderous voice is suddenly rolling out from what must be the same hidden sound source as the alarms. It's loud enough to make my teeth rattle in my skull, and yet somehow familiar in a way that I can't seem to place.

"Attention. Attention, all. A serious security breach has been detected. Soldiers and citizens, beware that we are under a form of attack. Do not trust any information broadcast to you by unfamiliar sources; the only definitive truth is that with which the authorities provide to you."

It's somehow that word, authorities, that makes it click in my mind. This is the voice of the High Commander, or at least some sort of emulation of it. From the way that Cassian's jaw has clenched, he's all too aware.

“While there is no threat of physical violence at this time, precautions shall be undertaken until absolute security is re-established. Guests of the exchange program, please congregate in the atrium of the central facility. From there, you will be escorted to a safe and comfortable location. Soldiers, move at once to your platoon’s designated emergency station. Your commanders will meet you there and deliver further instructions. I repeat, there is no threat of physical violence at this time, and all information broadcast is not to be trusted unless it comes from a secure administrative source.”

“I have to go,” Cassian says.

My grip on him tightens until my knuckles grow white. “Are you insane? They’ll know who’s behind this any minute from now, and that’s if they don’t already. You need to run, you need to hide—”

In a sudden burst of strength, he twists his wrist away from my clutch and sweeps around to face me, cupping my face between both of his warm hands. My head tilts back out of no will of my own, and for a moment, I can see nothing but the misty green of his eyes. His pupils are dilated, and at that moment, I realize that he’s even more terrified than I am. This is his home, this is his life, and he’s just pulled the pin to let it explode.

“I can’t run, Ivy. I can’t hide. This is my only chance. I’ll do everything I can, I promise I will, but that starts with this. You and Deryn go where they told you.”

“But—”

“Do you trust me?”

Something inside me breaks. “...Of course I do.”

“Good. Now move. I’ll do everything in my power to be under the jordzun tree at the crest of the southern hill. They shouldn’t be able to hear us there. Midnight. Only come if it’s safe; do you understand?”

Jordzun. A connection forms in the back of my mind, manifesting in the form of a sketch that I must have seen in one of my many books. He’s talking about the false willow.

The very place where Cherise and I used to spend our afternoons, back when everything was easy.

“I understand.”

“Good. Now go.”

He presses a quick, hot kiss to my forehead. Before I can say another word, he’s bolting across the grounds, following a number of other soldiers I vaguely recognize as other members of his platoon.

It’s only when Deryn speaks up, her voice cracked and aching, that I realize how long I’ve been staring after him.

“We need to go,” she says.

“Yeah.” I nod slowly. “Yeah, we do.”

The atrium is so crowded that I can barely see the walls. It reminds me of something, and it doesn’t take long to figure out what: with all these packed bodies and so little semblance of organization, it’s as though I’m back on Earth, filling out the paperwork on the tablet handed to me by the single over-stressed attendant. I thought I was getting easy money, nothing more... but that isn’t true, is it? There had always been something more, whether or not I was willing to acknowledge it. I’ve come to the same conclusion a number of times since I first let Cassian touch me, but it hits differently now that he’s gone. The hollowness I knew before I met him is back, and worse. Worse because I’m conscious of it. Worse because I don’t know what’s going to happen, or if that empty feeling will ever go away again.

It feels like hours before we’re finally corralled into the “safe and comfortable location” that the High Commander’s disembodied voice had promised us. An unfamiliar Ixionian barks at us to start up the stairs, and my heart skips a beat at the realization that I may finally be seeing what they keep locked away on those upper levels. Is that what it is? Some sort of emergency shelter for attacks?

After only a couple of flights, however, we're ushered onto the landing. I'm disappointed but not surprised. Why would they have such a place, anyway? It's been made clear to me that the base has never been in danger of an actual attack, and, indeed, that it never will be. Unless, of course, that attack comes from within.

But things seem to be keeping quiet for now. The rest of the women and I follow our stone-faced guide into a broad, flat room that appears to be a lounge, perhaps for soldiers on their daily break. The few chairs and sofas scattered about are quickly filled, but I manage to get Deryn and myself a spot in the corner, where we can at least have our backs against the wall.

When the last of the women has entered, the door closes, and the clack of its lock is unmistakable. A few nervous glances travel throughout our ranks. I stare at the scrubby carpet between my crossed legs, tracing meaningless patterns in it with a stray finger. I don't think I can stand to make eye contact with anyone right now. I'm too afraid, as ridiculous as it may be, that they'll somehow realize that I know something—and at the moment, it feels as though that sort of pressure may be enough to make me explode.

Slowly, conversations begin to pick up around the room once more. My attention drifts from one to the next, paying little heed to any of the words themselves, until a specific phrase turns my heart in my chest.

“Did you see what was leaked?”

The speaker of it, hunched close to the ear of a friend, is a lovely almond-eyed girl with straight hair and a perky nose that reminds me of Cherise's. Cherise—I haven't seen her. Scanning the room now, I can't make out any sign of familiar thin shoulders or wispy red hair. Worry festers within me, but not enough to drown out the hushed words of the girl nearby.

“It's about us. About the program. Wester saw it right before it was taken down, and he thinks a lot of the others did, too. It said...” Her voice lowers even further, and I'm only

able to pick up a few words, no matter how hard I strain my ears.

“Distract... compliance... no, not at all... the contraceptives... there’ve been rumors... last straw....”

I’ve got no clue what she means by *contraceptives*, but her other words cause my stomach to flip. Last straw. Isn’t that exactly what Avann and the rest of them hoped for? Is she saying that it worked? That whatever batshit crazy plan the four of us carried out was actually worth it?

And if so, why does it feel so much like defeat?

Deryn’s voice jolts me back to myself. “Do you think Jace is alive?”

I can’t meet her eyes. Guilt swells within me as I realize that I never even contemplated the question that must have been haunting her this whole time. “I don’t know,” I say truthfully.

“He looked dead, didn’t he? He was just... lying there... and you heard the gunshots....”

“But they wear armor.” My voice is so dull that I’m unable to convince even myself of the words I’m saying. “Right? Isn’t there a bulletproof layer to those vests?”

“Do they even use bullets?” I can hear the stoppage rising back up in her throat, already sore from crying so much earlier. “Or just fuckin’... fuckin’ laser guns or something?”

“I don’t know,” I say again.

“It’s funny....” I sneak a glance and see that she’s laughing now, wiping tears from her eyes as she does. “I thought he was the one. For a while. You know? And then I realized that he—he... he was a good friend, a good lover, but not that. So I told myself that the one didn’t exist. But I was wrong... and I realized that, I think, when I saw you. Both of you. Ivy... I did love him, in a certain way. But I’m glad that you and Cassian made it out. You were—supposed to, I think. I’m not making sense. Am I making any sense?”

And to that, I have no answer at all.

I don't know how late it is when they finally let us go, but it's clear that the suns have long since set. Despite their initial response to what's only being referred to as "the breach," the guards are awfully lax at this point; maybe they think it's a false alarm, or perhaps they're just as tired as the rest of us. They may not be human, but they're close enough, after all. As soon as we reach the atrium, it's easy enough to slip away from the crowd, behind the stairs, and out the side door.

I don't know whether it's my imagination, but it seems even warmer now than it was during the day. I take a deep breath, listening to the faint peeping of creatures that can't possibly be crickets, and set off for the false willow.

He's there. I somehow knew he would be, midnight or not. As soon as I catch sight of his tall silhouette against the backdrop of galaxies, I quicken my pace. Soon I'm running up the hill, lungs heaving, the long grass's dewy blades streaking my calves.

I stumble to an abrupt halt that nearly sends me sprawling, but Cassian catches me by the shoulders. "Thanks," I wheeze, a self-deprecating joke on the tip of my tongue—but when I look up and meet his eyes again, I forget anything I was going to say.

"We don't have long."

"I know." I push my hair back behind my ears, mussed from the sudden jog. "They told me I need to get back to our room."

He nods. "I don't think I'll see you tonight... it's hard to say. It's hard to say a lot of things right now."

"Then don't," I beg softly. "Don't say anything."

I stand on my tiptoes, yearning for nothing but closeness, and yet he still holds me ever so slightly back.

"I don't know what's going to happen now," he whispers, his breath warming my lips. "In the next day, or the next hour, or the next minute. It's spreading... everyone knows now."

They know that the whole thing was just an attempt to keep us quiet... keep us satisfied... and everything else is going to follow. It's only a matter of time before infighting begins."

"I know," I say, unsure whether or not that's the truth.

"In any case... I don't want to waste any more time. It feels... redundant, almost, to be saying it now... but I guess I never have. Out loud, that is. When you could hear me. I—"

I bring a finger to his lips. If I hear the words now, with the world collapsing around us, I don't think I'll be able to take it.

"I love you too," I say instead.

We move together in perfect sync: his hand fills the small of my back, my spine curves, and our lips meet in a warm, firm, desperate kiss.

In the space of a single gasp, he twists me around and pinned me against the rough bark of the very tree where I spent so many afternoons trying to think of anything that wasn't him. His hands pin my wrists above my head and his body crushes into mine. He's hot and hard even through both layers of clothing that we wear, and I feel myself opening in instant response, so fast that it almost hurts. This isn't like our times in bed, when we were first learning to trust one another, first exploring the geometry of one another's strange, foreign bodies. Now we know what we want. Now there's nothing to stop us.

He snarls like an animal and grinds against me with such fervor, his bulge insistent against me, that I almost think I'm going to cum on the spot. Then, at the last moment, he withdraws, and we both gasp for air, suspended with an inch of air between us. He's still holding my hands against the tree, and I'm grateful; if not for his iron grip, I would doubtlessly collapse into the grass. My legs seem to have forgotten how to work. Vaguely, through a vision feathered with giddy dimness, I can see his silhouette, his twisting horns cutting black swathes against the backdrop of the stars.

Undo me, I beg silently. Desecrate me, annihilate me, rebuild me from the ruins. Show me colors that I've never

known. Help me feel the heartbeat of the universe.

He releases me in a sudden motion, then catches me around the waist before I can fall. He only needs one hand to support my waist; with the other, he delves beneath the waist of my pants. I would help him rip them off if I could, but my muscles refuse to obey me. It turns out that he doesn't need any aid: the rip of splitting fabric rents the air, and then my pants and underwear alike are pooling at my ankles, exposing me in my entirety from the waist down. I gasp as the cool air flows against me. Have I ever been outside like this? Have I ever felt the night air, so soft yet so hungry, against my bare body? If so, it was nothing like this. I feel raw and alive and so, *so* fiercely hungry.

I'm so dizzy with a need that I don't register how he's stepping out of his own cargo pants—but then he's palming his cock and urging its head against me, and I don't even hesitate, just curve upwards so that he can go in all at once—he's too much, it's too fast, but I've never been so grateful for pain. It's different, so different when we're standing; gravity pulls me against him, urging us yet more closely together, and I can't help whimpering as the thick, hard rings of his member slide against me, urging out a sensation so primal that calling it *pleasure* isn't nearly enough. Each time I think I've hit my limit, he pulls me more against him with renewed strength. The strain is almost unbearable until another shuddering ripple overcomes my entrance and swells inside of me, backed by a grunt of pleasure from the deepest reaches of his chest.

I'm dimly aware as his free hand moves beneath my shirt, and then one sharp nail edges against my nipple, and my vision goes gray with the extremity of sensation—the tree bark is rough against my bare legs, he's filling me and holding me and rooting me to the ground as the universe sprawls around us—there's nothing but him, there's never been anything but him, he's hitting me in all the right places and every motion is mutual, every touch lights me on fire, until I can't hold back anymore and cry out at the top of my lungs, let myself unravel against him like we're the only two people who exist, ever have existed, ever will.

He takes the brunt of the fall as we crash into the grass. The world spins, he undulates within me, and waves of perfect sensation rush against me as we tumble down the hill, each on top of the other, the whole world a kaleidoscope of grass and sky.

When we come to a halt, both gasping for breath, I'm on top. His heavy-lidded eyes gleam in the darkness; I let myself gaze into them for several long beats, then give up and dive in to kiss him, cradling his face in my palms, savoring every inch of his body and lips against my own.

"I love you, Ivy Alecto," he whispers against my lips.

"And I love you, Cassian Auberon." I've never meant the words as much as I do at this moment, even if it feels like insanity that I'm saying them now, here, in this place, to this alien man.

I don't know what's waiting for us. I don't think that I want to know. All that matters is this. Now. Him holding me, me holding him. The heat of my body against his. The two of us, united, with all the strength I've ever yearned for. All the power of the stars.

EPILOGUE: CHERISE

When the sirens go off, I know that I need to hide.

The problem is, hiding isn't easy in a place like this.

I haven't got long to consider my options. Or many options to consider, for that matter. Maybe the underbelly of rebels coordinated a meeting place during one of the last couple of meetings. They wouldn't, if they were smart. But it's not like I was there to say so.

A voice sounds over hidden loudspeakers. *Do not trust any information broadcast to you by unfamiliar sources. The only definite truth is that which the authorities provide to you.* It's outright satirical. Then again, I haven't seen much evidence that this planet is a hotbed of critical thinking.

It drones on, delivering instructions: soldiers to their places, women to ours. Right. At least now I know that the central building's atrium is one place where I *won't* be headed.

Alternatives flash through my mind—bunkers, underground, the weak spot in the wall that I found the other day—but I land on the same thing that, in a way, I knew it would all along.

That doesn't mean I have to like it.

It's a quick jog to the admin buildings, and I've got a way of slipping beneath people's notice. The crowds are strutting about to their prescribed destinations like this is some kind of doomsday. They don't spare a glance for me, not even when I slip through the door. I make my way straight to his office and march in. He never locks it; now is no exception. Just as I

expected, there he is, bent over the overlapping displays of his desk with an expression caught between triumph and terror.

They all call his jet-colored eyes unreadable. I know better.

“Cherise,” Azrael says. His lips tighten. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“That greeting’s getting old.” I close the door. “Did you do this?”

“Are you insane?”

“Nice try. I asked first.”

“I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“And I’m not one of your little soldier boys. I *asked you first.*”

He rises to his full height, which is enough to give me pause for the first time. When he takes a single wide step around the desk, leaving nothing between us, that pause crystallizes into the first few seeds of panic.

“I want to be very clear about something, Cherise,” he says. His voice is etched into the air like frost in a windowpane. “You’ve been a valuable asset over these past several weeks. The information that you’ve provided to me has been invaluable.”

“Information?” I fight the fragility of my heart as it flits, birdlike, against the base of my throat. “I’m the one who approached you. You wouldn’t know a damn thing if not for me. I’m the one who figured out that the pills were fake. Nobody else ever realized. You—”

He moves so fast that I have no time to react. In an instant, he’s a breath away from me, arms planted firmly on either side of me, so I have nowhere to go between his bulk and the wall at my back. Even this close, his eyes are nothing but black. I can see my own reflection in them, distorted into a convex mockery of my face. I look scared. I don’t want to look scared. I don’t know how to stop.

In the distance, the sirens rage.

“Who do you think I am?” he breathes. “Tell me, Cherise. Am I a tool for you and your little friends?”

I can't find my voice. It's as though my lungs have vanished, leaving me with nothing but mounting dizziness in their stead.

“I told you that I took your tip. That I'm giving them a chance. If they succeed, I'm on their side. If they fail, I'm not. This isn't about favors or morals or *loyalty*. It's about winning and losing.”

But I don't believe him. Not entirely. Because he's shown me something, some side of himself, that nobody else has seen. And there must be a reason for that—even if I don't know it yet.

His body is close enough that I can feel its every movement. He's solid, but never still. The shiftings of his muscles are impossible to describe. Lithe. Animal.

“Well?”

I finally find my breath again, taking an unwilling gulp. His scent floods me. It fills me with senseless, illogical images of black sand beaches: sea salt, dark sky, and night water. I could drown in his eyes, and it wouldn't be a good thing.

“Winning and losing.” My voice is moths' wings. “I understand.”

He steps back. For a second, unsteady and reeling, I wish he hadn't.

“Then why are you here?” he asks.

“I need to hide.”

He takes his time appraising me. For the first time, it occurs to me that he might not be willing to do this. If it looks like we're on the losing side, netting me would be of no small value. I don't know what methods they might employ if they wanted information out of me. I don't know what they're capable of doing. I don't even know if my friends—*friends, friends; still such an odd word, still so strange to think I have friends*—are still alive.

“Stay here,” he says at last.

“Here?” I repeat dumbly.

“They won’t come here.”

“How do you know?”

“How many more questions are you going to ask me,” he growls, “before you learn that you aren’t entitled to answers?”

We glare at each other for several more moments. Another loudspeaker announcement sounds from outside, too garbled by distance for me to understand.

“You’ll stay here and wait for me to return,” Azrael Emrys says, “or you’ll go out there and let them do what they please. Whatever choice you make is no concern of mine.”

“You’re heartless,” I blurt out. My skin instantly goes hot with terror—but I’ve done it now. No way to take it back. “Has anyone ever told you that before?”

He doesn’t blink. Neither do I.

“Once,” he says. The faintest glint of amber is my only sign that his lips are moving at all.

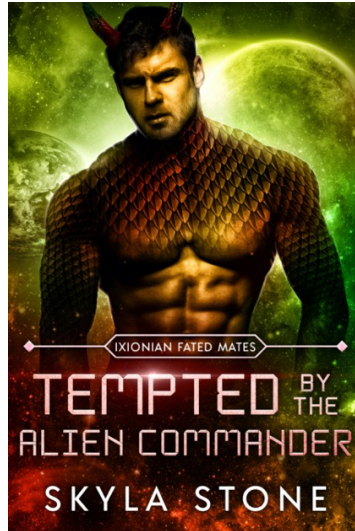
“I’ll stay.”

“Good.”

He’s gone without another word, leaving me alone, feeling smaller and more lost than ever on this strange dream of a planet.

This time, he locks the door.

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