

IXIONIAN FATED MATES

ENCHANTED BY THE  
ALIEN REBEL

SKYLA STONE

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BOOK 3

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PNK PUBLISHING

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Epilogue: Trace

Deryn

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 Created with Vellum

# CHAPTER 1





## TRACE

“*KEST*,” Calix mutters, leaning close until his breath clouds the faux-glass porthole. “That’s Ixion, isn’t it?”

“Never seen your own planet before?” I tease.

“Not from this far. Was always too wiped out after missions—I usually just slept through the landing.”

“I remember that. That time after Upsilon... I swear you were snoring louder than the engine.”

If he feels any indignation, he doesn’t show it. His silvery blue eyes are glued to the planet that we’re rapidly approaching, and I can’t really blame him. My own stomach is knotted with anxiety, and Commander Azrael Emrys’s words from minutes before are still echoing in my head:

*At the designated time, our soldiers will break out of formation and turn their weapons on anyone who attempts to restrain them. Their goal is to create a diversion, during which we will close in on High Commander Vestra. Trace and Callisto; Auberon and Silvius. Until we reconvene, you’re to stay in those pairs. Your life is in their hands, and theirs is in yours.*

Calix’s life in my hands... it’s almost too much to comprehend. Sweet, strong Calix with his perpetual platinum glow and his smile that reaches a little higher on his right cheek than on his left. I don’t know how I’ll live with myself if I let any harm come to the best friend I’ve made all this time in space.

But I'm no pushover. I can move fast; I'm strong enough to handle myself. And I'll do whatever it takes to get us through this safely.

Ixion hurtles ever closer.

"We should sit down," I murmur.

"I'll be fine," Calix says absently. "You know, I can't actually remember the last time I used a safety harness—"

"Callisto," Commander Emrys snaps, "get the stars out of your eyes and strap in *now*."

He turns around with a hefty sigh and seems somewhat surprised to see the rest of us already seated. I tip my chin towards the spot beside me, and he makes a whole show of settling down and snapping on his harness, all while Emrys stares daggers.

Any other time, I'd be laughing alongside him. But my chest is too tight for that right now.

My fingertips graze the back of his hand. "Focus."

*Right.* He doesn't speak the word aloud, but I can read it in the way that his lips press tightly together.

He's scared, too.

I go a step further and entwine my fingers with his. Calix's grip is tender but strong, and I can feel the vicious beating of his pulse through his soft-scaled skin.

*Keep holding onto me, and I'll keep holding onto you, yeah?*

"Get ready," Emrys shouts as the entire ship begins to vibrate. "We don't know what's waiting for us."

The velocity is almost too much.

The world erupts.

I'm thrown forward in my seat, teeth gnashing painfully together. Around me, the entire ship groans with the impact, and a brief thrill of horror seizes me as I realize that this thing isn't going to fly again anytime soon. This was a one-way ride.

“Everyone okay?” Azrael shouts.

I open my mouth to respond, only to be caught in a vicious coughing fit as my throat fills with smoke. Silver clouds are saturating more of the air with every second, to the point where I can barely make out my surroundings.

I don't even realize I'm still clinging to Calix's hand until he squeezes hard, his nails cutting into my skin.

I return it, hoping that the tightness of my grasp will communicate the words that my mouth can't shape: *I'm okay. Don't worry about me.*

“We need to get out of here,” Ivy says between coughs of her own.

As if in agreement, the hull of the ship whines and begins to buckle around us. I don't need to see the ceiling to know that it isn't going to hold much longer. I rip away my own safety belts and see through watering eyes that Calix is doing the same. His gaze snaps up to meet mine.

*Hang on, his ice-blue eyes are saying. Just stay with me, and we'll get through this.*

“This way!” Cassian calls from somewhere to my right. “Emergency exit's open!”

I follow at Calix's heels. He jumps to the ground in a quick, fluid motion, then turns and crouches, lacing his fingers together to provide a step for me. I take it gratefully—the drop is steep even for him, and my stature is far from that of an Ixionian.

From the second I hit the ground, I can hear the gunfire. It pelts like wicked hail against the ship's frame. It doesn't take me long to process the fact that we must have been shot down.

*This wasn't supposed to happen.*

“Trace. Here.”

Calix presses something smooth and hard into my palm. A pistol. Shit, of course—in the chaos of our crash landing, I completely lost track of the blaster that I meant to grab. I don't know how well I can do with something this lightweight, but

it'll have to work for now. I check that it's loaded, only to find a bizarre tube of violet gel in place of a regular magazine.

Oh, no. This is one of those laser guns. I've never fired such a thing in my life.

Don't have much choice now, though.

"Cherise and Ivy, go for cover!" Azrael barks. "The rest of you, with me!"

We're still cloaked in smoke from the ship's ruined engine, but I can just make out the sharp horns and broad shoulders of his silhouette cutting through the haze.

I readjust my grip on the pistol, share one last glance with Calix, and follow the Commander's lead.

Several moments later, once the debris has cleared enough for me to get a proper view of the base, my heart skips a beat.

The whole place is nearly unrecognizable. I can make out the outline of the main building, but everything else—the navy blue grass, the administrative buildings, the lone willow-like tree at the crest of the hill to the south—has been torn asunder. Bodies are slumped here and there, and it's impossible to tell from my vantage point whether they're human or Ixionian—and whether they're unconscious or dead.

Adrenaline wobbles my knees, but I refuse to stagger.

*Focus.* That's what I told Calix, but maybe I'm the one who needed to hear it. *Focus, focus, focus.*

Right. There's a job to be done here. And I'm going to see it through.

"Trace! Watch your six!"

I turn on my heel, whipping my pistol to eye level as I do. Bearing down on me is an Ixionian I don't recognize, with a shaved head and a heavy sneer stretched across his green-scaled face.

"Human trash," he spits. "Look what your people have done to—"

I pull the trigger before he can finish. Light blazes from the gun and the Ixionian's face contorts briefly before he crumples to the ground. It's over almost before I've processed my own movement, leaving me to blink away deep red afterimages of the blinding beam.

I don't know if I've just killed someone for the first time. There's no time to check. I can only turn back around, sprint to catch up with the others, and hope that the bastard will stay down.

When Azrael first laid out our plan, I thought he was exaggerating by saying that we might be attacked—but if that soldier was any indication, the loyalists aren't holding back in the slightest. And there's no hiding the fact that I'm human, not to mention Cherise and Ivy.

I can't panic. I need to keep my eyes on the next step. We'll just need to fend off any aggressors for however long it takes to reach Vestra. There's no other way.

I can see our target now: a tall, almost spire-like structure protruding between the half-crushed administrative buildings, stark beneath the bruised orange of the fire-torn sky. It doesn't look like it should still be standing, and that alone tells me all I need to know. Something so resilient can only be of the utmost importance. There's no doubt in my mind that High Commander Vestra is in that very building.

But if we want to get there, we'll have to make it through this bloodbath first.

Azrael leads the way, dodging and weaving through spats of gunfire with an ease that's almost elegant. This is all muscle memory for him. Cassian and Avann play it more cautiously, sprinting from one point of cover to another in fits and starts, while Calix and I take up the rear.

I may not have the training that the men do, but I've always had a knack for choreography—and that's all this is, really. If I relax, the process orchestrates itself. Check blind spots. Stay in motion. Always know the next spot of relative safety. Calix and I naturally slide into complementary motions, each of us covering the other's back.

Despite the fact that they were ready for us, the base's soldiers are awfully disorganized. I guess all the practice in the world flies out the window when your life is truly being threatened for the first time. The smarter ones keep their distance, aiming from afar. Others barrel through the place as though they *want* to be killed.

Are they shooting their friends? Are commanders executing their own soldiers? How is it that the galaxy's most renowned military power has been reduced to *this*?

Sprint, duck, check, sprint again. Vestra's building is close now, and I'm starting to lose myself in the flow. Calix's shoulders brush mine as we spin in a quick semicircle, minding our angles. But no one is approaching us now. Not when there are easier targets to pick.

"Move in on my count!" Azrael's voice. My concentration breaks for a second as I strain to see exactly where he is.

A second is all it takes.

My lungs burn as the breath is knocked out of them. I don't have time to catch my fall. My jaw hits the ground so hard that white light flashes behind my eyes—and before I can process what's happening, a rough hand yanks me by the shoulder and forces me onto my back. My vision is obscured by the leering face of that same soldier.

I guess I should have double-tapped.

I grope for my gun, but it must have flown from my hands when he attacked me. Frantic, I try to push back at him. Useless. He must be three times my weight—accounting for the body armor.

"Weak little thing," he sing-songs. "Want to play rebel, do you?"

He laughs as I thrash beneath him.

*Calix, where the hell are you?*

The soldier reaches to his belt. I catch a glint of silver. A blade. Getting closer by the second.

“I always thought you human things were ugly. You’re an especially nasty one, too. Maybe if we took care of those big bulging eyes of yours—”

He drops the knife. I barely manage to twist out of the way in time to avoid getting impaled—it still grazes my cheek with a hot, bright sting. Above me, the soldier continues to mouth words, but no sound comes out.

Then he collapses sideways into the dirt. Standing in his place is Calix, even paler than usual, with both hands wrapped around a smoking blaster’s handle.

“I never liked that guy anyway,” he mutters.

“What took you so long?” I grab his extended hand and pull myself to my feet. “He said he was going to take my *eyes* out.”

“Had to get the angle right. If he fell on top of you, that’d be game over.”

“Well, you’ve sure got a penchant for dramatic timing.”

“Callisto! Get over here now!” Azrael bellows.

It takes a moment for me to spot him—and once I do, my stomach sinks.

The others have already made it to the target—even the other women managed to make their way there. Cassian and Avann are ramming the door while Cherise, Ivy, and Azrael keep a lookout.

The likely events of the next few moments play out in my mind: they’ll get the door open, and then they won’t be able to waste time waiting for us.

If they don’t barricade themselves inside, they’ll be risking the whole mission—but without a weapon, I’m even more of a walking target than I was before.

I can’t stay out here.

We need to get over there.

*Fast.*

“Calix—the door—”

His gaze follows mine, and comprehension flashes lightning-quick across his face.

“You first, I’ll cover you—”

There’s no time to argue. Abandoning any notion of grace, I tuck in my elbows, lower my head, and bolt as fast as I can for the door to the spire building. Shots whistle past me, but I can’t afford to check whether my path is clear. I need to focus on moving and trust Calix with the rest.

“Trace, here!”

I practically fall on top of Ivy, gasps pouring from my mouth. She grabs my arm and steadies me.

“You okay?”

“Not remotely close,” I admit. “But I’m here now. And Calix—”

My hair whips my cheek as I look back over my shoulder. *Shit*. He’s making his way over, but it isn’t going to be fast enough. There are too many enemies to dodge—with his brilliant silver scales and white-blond hair glowing even in the murky half-sunlight, he’s an even more prominent target than me.

Voices of the loyalists split through the air as they close in on him.

*“He’s one of them!”*

*“Kill the traitor!”*

“Cassian,” I say, “give me your blaster.”

Ivy replies before her mate gets the chance. “What? Why?”

“There are too many. I need to help him.”

I can’t think about anything but his exposed back. I should be there to cover for him. My uselessness makes me feel physically sick, and for a second, I wonder wildly whether I’m going to vomit.



Cassian growls as he rams his shoulder against the door once again. It shudders on its hinges. “Almost there. I can’t go in unarmed.”

“But Calix—”

“Take mine,” Avann says suddenly.

I’m too desperate to question his eagerness. More soldiers are coming at their allies’ calls, and it’s a wonder that Calix hasn’t been overwhelmed already.

Avann’s blaster thunks into my arms with enough force to make me stagger. Shit, it’s heavy. But that means it’s manual. No more playing with glowsticks—this thing is the real deal.

*Pick off the ones on the perimeter. Don’t shoot at the closer ones until you’re sure you won’t hit him. Keep calm.* Panting, I nestle the stock under my arm and thread my finger through the trigger.

The spire starts to creak.

“Oh, *kest* it all,” Azrael hisses.

“What?” Ivy glances back and forth between the rest of us. “What’s happening?”

I feel paralyzed—on one side of me is Calix, now practically crawling through the grass to avoid the web of gunfire raging overhead. On the other, are my friends—my team, my mission.

And then, the first of the cracks spring across the surface of the metal structure.

Avann and Cassian leap back, and Azrael snatches Cherise in his arms before dashing to safety. The tip of the spire wobbles overhead. More cracks dart across it until the whole thing looks like it’s made of pebbles.

When the building begins to lurch forwards, it all clicks in my head.

This is a trap.

*Calix—*

But before I can move, the behemoth comes thundering down, missing me by a few yards and knocking me off my feet with the impact.

My head clangs like a rusty bell. The air is full of dust, my eyes are stinging, and I think my arm might be bloodied where the stock of the blaster scraped brutally against it.

But that's not what matters.

What matters is the massive wall of broken metal rising before me. Splitting the battlefield in two.

*How the hell will I get back to him now?*



## CHAPTER 2

## CALIX

AS VESTRA'S tower comes surging down, filling all of my senses with stinging clouds of colorless dust, my mind can only conjure a single word:

*Seriously?*

Then the moment of disbelief passes, and I *just* manage to launch myself out of the way before the massive rain of debris begins to make contact. The initial impact knocks me to the ground, and I don't have much momentum to get away from the path of danger, but I need to try. I cradle my blaster to my side and perform a quick combat roll, making sure to angle toward the ground's slope rather than against it. Scraps of building material create a messy tattoo over my neck and shoulders. I roll again, then hunker down with my face to the grass, hands laced protectively over the back of my head, and wait.

When I was a kid, I always thought that the bigger you were, the more slowly time passed. I could never make sense of my parents, whose relaxed demeanors seemed lethargic in comparison to my constant hyperactivity. I wished time and time again that the world would catch up to me, and then maybe I wouldn't be so utterly bored. Smaller was faster, and faster was better.

And yet I never thought time could stretch itself out quite to *this* extent.

In a weird way, it aligns with the misinformed logic that little me always swore by. The tower is huge. Of course, it'll

be moving in slow motion. But as an adult, I ought to know better. Gravity doesn't discriminate.

So how come I've been sitting here for well over a solid minute, only for the wreckage to *still* be pummeling my back?

When I can't stand it anymore, I sneak a glance. Sure enough—Vestra's stupid compensatory skyscraper is still in motion, chunks of metal and concrete continuing to peel away from its broken skeleton. I was wrong to think of it as rainfall. It's more like a landslide.

And it's only getting worse.

*Kest.* I gotta get out of here.

I climb to my feet, wincing as returning blood flow fills me with a thousand pinpricks of static. As I take in my smoke-clotted surroundings, my brain scrambles for a new objective. A place to go next. Anything.

I'm kidding myself if I say it's anything but her.

It's crazy how much I need Trace back with me, considering the fact that I went through a good couple of years of training before I even knew she existed. But right now, being on the battlefield without her feels about as practical as trying to climb a mountain without legs. Until we find each other again, I'm in danger—and even worse, so is she.

One problem. She's on the other side of the collapsed tower. And that's probably the stupidest place I could be headed for right now.

But what choice do I have?

I compromise by electing to skirt the perimeter. With my auto rifle held alert, I begin to make my way through the field of collapsed brick and siding.

The process is a painstakingly slow one. I can only see a few feet in front of me at any given time. On several occasions, I backtrack to avoid an unexpected obstruction. After the first few times this happens, I can't even be sure if I'm still headed in the right direction.

That doesn't stop me. Not like there's anywhere else I can go.

Still, none of that is the worst part. It takes me a long time to figure out why my heart is beating at triple pace—and then the realization hits me like yet another chunk of crumpled metal.

The silence.

I'm not sure when it started. At some point, as I've been picking my way through the battlefield, the last vestiges of the destroyed spire found their way to the ground, and in their absence: nothing. No outcries, no gunshots, no bellowed orders attempting to make sense of the chaos.

I may as well be the last person in the world.

Something crunches wetly under my foot, startling me back to myself. I frown and step back, only to be greeted with a sight that sends my nonexistent lunch straight to the back of my throat.

It's a body. I don't look too closely, but it seems like I've caved in one of its dust-mottled cheeks. Could I really have done that with a single step? Are our bodies so fragile and easy to shatter beneath our shared delusion of invincibility?

My vague urgency gives way to outright panic.

I need to get to Trace *now*.

I pick up the pace. No time to stop and wonder about that poor bastard whose face I half-smashed—if I do, I think I might fully up and vomit.

*Slim little thing like you's never gonna make it.*

No, no, come on—not their voices. Not now. Please, not now.

*Seems like the type who grew up playing commander, don't you think?*

*Obviously thinks he's something special. Maybe if we show him how things really work around here—*

I shake my head like it'll physically dislodge the jeering memories. I proved those stupid trainees wrong, didn't I? I've made it this far, in any case, whereas they....

*Might as well have been the one whose face you just crushed.*

It makes me feel better to think so. Maybe that makes me a bad person, but I can't bring myself to care. Right now, conflicted morals are the last thing I need to worry about.

After a few more sweat-laden minutes, the dust is finally beginning to clear from the air. My adrenaline subsides, making way for the delayed pain that laces my muscles. I don't spare it a single moment of my attention. I'm finding my team. No matter what.

“Callisto?”

My lips grow numb.

Rasping, weary. But undeniably him. Emrys. I raise my watering eyes until I can make out two blurred figures, one of them bizarrely lopsided with extra gear.

“I'm here, Commander,” I manage to say. It's scarcely a whisper, but even that much hurts my smoke-scoured throat.

*Let her be there. Let her be one of them.*

Then the inertia of everything hits me violently, and I drop my blaster to wave with both hands, shouting at the top of my lungs, ignoring the way it sets my lungs on fire. “Sir! I'm here!”

“Stay there.”

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I squint, trying to make more sense of the approaching shadows. Both Ixionians. The horns of the figure on the left look like Avann's, meaning that the other one must be the Commander. Then Cherise is surely the smaller thing held against his side.

No Trace. *Kest*. Any notion of relaxation drains from my mind. I can't relax yet. I can't give up until I know where she is.

“You’re all right,” Commander Emrys says when they finally reach me. He looks worse for the wear, his vest half-shredded and his overlong hair thick with sweat. Avann isn’t much better off, and though Cherise seems unharmed, her face is even whiter than usual.

“All right’s a stretch,” I mutter, reaching down to lift my blaster back up. “Where’s Trace?”

Emrys shakes his head. “Haven’t seen her. Auberon and Ivy are missing too. We got separated when Vestra sprung that *mainching* trap.”

“Trap?” I repeat.

“You don’t think that tower just decided to fall for no reason, did you?”

“No, but I...” I guess I don’t know what I was thinking. Maybe it had been hit by one too many spare bullets, or some of our allies decided to do the whole assassination thing their own way. “So Vestra isn’t even dead?”

“Well, I doubt he would want a front-row seat to the detonation of his own bomb.”

I can tell by the creeping sarcasm in his tone that he’s exhausted. He must also be aware of how his leaderly air has begun to slip, because he clears his throat and continues in a far more serious manner.

“In any case, I won’t trust that he’s dead until I see the body with my own eyes. And the same for our comrades. We can assume that they’re trying to find us, just like we’re trying to find them.”

“So what do we do next?” Cherise asks.

Emrys’s arm tightens around her. “We get *you* to safety. Off this base—off the planet, if we need to.”

I’m shaking my head even before he finishes. “We’re not leaving the others.”

“For all we know,” the Commander retorts, “they might have already left us.”



How am I meant to respond to that? Trace wouldn't abandon me. I *know* she wouldn't. But it's not like he's going to trust me on that when I can't justify it through anything beyond a gut feeling.

I won't go without her, though. Not until I at least try to do the right thing.

“Commander, I—”

A flash of movement is my only warning. I can't even blink before weight crashes into my side all at once, punching me straight to the ground with an impact that makes my ears ring.

I'm too stunned to move. I can taste blood—must've bitten my tongue. Disorientation, pain, exhaustion... all of it threatens to overwhelm me, and for a second, I'm so dizzy that I feel as though I'm sliding off the surface of Ixion itself—

A rough hand takes me by the shoulder and flips me onto my back. Coughing, I squint upwards. My gaze is met by the single dark eye of a blaster's barrel.

“Who are you?” a voice demands. There's some sort of filter distorting it, making it impossible to determine a gender.

I work on catching my breath to answer, but apparently, that's not prompt enough for the stranger's liking, because the blaster is now prodding below my chin. The chilly bulk feels somehow spring-loaded, like anything could set it off. I breathe through my nose and try to muster a voice.

“Callisto. Calix Callisto.”

Another voice, likewise erratic in its modulation, sounds nearby. The blaster withdraws slightly, and I can finally get a proper view of my attacker. They're clothed in all black from head to toe, their face obscured by a strange helmet. The visor is shaded to prevent me from getting so much as a glimpse into their eyes. Between that glossy dark dome and the pincer-like tubes curling at the helmet's base, I feel as though I'm being stared down by an impossibly gigantic insect.

They exchange a series of inaudible murmurs with their companion, who's a bit shorter and slimmer but otherwise

identical. I tilt my head to the side. The other three are there, just a couple of arm's length away from me. Looks like they're on their knees. Of course—just my luck to be the one who gets the *sust* kicked out of him for no reason.

I'm in the midst of calculating the odds of getting to my blaster in time, figuring that I at least might be able to cause enough of a distraction for the others to make a move, when one of the helmeted figures says something that I can understand just fine.

“That's Cherise Hallowswift.”

She can hear it, too. “What? What do you want with me? Who *are* you?”

The strangers exchange a few more muttered words, and then the blaster is finally withdrawn from my face, and I can breathe again. I'm so flooded with giddy relief that it takes me a moment to realize that the figure is extending one expectant gloved hand toward me.

“I don't have anything for you—” I start, but they cut me off immediately.

“Don't be stupid. You're coming with us.” They give the hand an impatient shake. “Go on and take it.”

And, having no other option, that's exactly what I do.

## CHAPTER 3



*SIX MONTHS PREVIOUSLY*

“SO, TELL ME,” one of the other girls says. “Are you looking for any particular sort?”

She’s tall, blonde, voluptuous, and chatty. All things that I’m not. She also seems to think that the two of us are friends, though the truth is that I can’t even remember her name. And at this point, it’s definitely too late to ask.

“What do you mean, any particular sort?”

“You know—what kind of men do you like to go for? Me, I want someone big. Around the shoulders as well as below the belt. Truth be told, it’s a struggle for me to be satisfied by anything less.” She says it like it’s some sort of dark, shameful secret, but we both know she’s just bragging.

I shrug. I haven’t given the whole thing much consideration, and I don’t have the experience to really know what I do and don’t like. Messing around with a few guys as a teenager does not make me an expert.

In any case, I didn’t come here for sex. It’s the adventure that intrigues me. Being a role model for your siblings is flattering and all, but it doesn’t take long for it to get damn exhausting. This is my chance to do something different. To be someone else. And if I have to sleep with an alien soldier in order to make that happen... I suppose there are far worse prices to pay.

“Well?” the blonde prompts.

“Same, I guess. Big, strong... I like someone who can make me feel safe, you know?”

I don't know why I said that last part. I don't need protecting. She seems to like it, though, judging by the grin curling her cheeks.

“Oh, but of course. Though I suppose our own preferences aren't all that matter. It's us who are the merchandise, after all. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough.”

Merchandise? Who talks like that? I have no idea how to respond, but luckily I'm not given the chance. The little waiting room where our ten-woman shipment has been sequestered—a place that, if you ask me, bears a bizarre resemblance to an old-fashioned office building back on Earth—grows suddenly dim. A screen hums to life on the wall that we're facing. The various conversations around me fade to nothing, replaced by a few coughs and the creak of our hard-seated chairs as we all shift into position to watch.

The first thing we see is an emblem. A configuration of star shapes clustered around an Ixionian word—I've always thought that the shape formed by the unfamiliar letters resembles the silhouette of a swan. All of us know the image before us like the backs of our own hands. Even if we had somehow managed to avoid the broadcasts that have been playing in the background throughout our whole lives, the insignia was stamped across the piles of program paperwork that we had to sign for good measure. Ixion's self-obsession verges on masturbatory sometimes. Not that I would dare to say anything like that; conceited or not, this planet is still the biggest power in our galaxy by one hell of a long shot. Even the cockiest people know better than to piss off an authority like that.

The emblem fades, replaced by a smiling Ixionian against a plain backdrop. He has exceptionally long platinum-colored horns extending from either side of his dark brown crew cut, each of them narrowing to what looks to be a razor-sharp point. The horns themselves are decked out in an array of variously sized metal bands. If I remember my galactic history correctly, they're the equivalent of badges worn by human

soldiers. Indicative of rank. And someone as decorated as this, can only be a High Commander.

“Welcome, dearest members of the first-ever Earthen-Ixionian exchange program,” the man on the screen intones. His Common is perfect, though spiced with the same smoky accent that the rest of his planet possesses. “It is my greatest pleasure and honor to greet you. I hope that your journey was safe, swift, and comfortable.”

Someone laughs at that. I don’t.

“I am High Commander Vestra, the overseer of Ixionian Military Base fifty-seven. My soldiers and I are thrilled that we’ve been selected to host such a historical delegation.”

Thrilled, pleased, honored. The superlatives are already starting to get old. At the same time, the notion of participating in something ‘historical’ sends chills skating up my spine.

“You find yourself now in the administration district of IMB57. As you begin to explore and grow more comfortable in your surroundings, you’ll find that we house a wide variety of facilities. At your disposal are gymnasiums, eateries, relaxation parlors, study rooms, and so much more. Ixion is whatever you wish to make of it. We’re here to ensure you have the best possible experience on our beautiful planet.

“After this message, you will be escorted to another administrative building, where you will meet the soldiers who will be partnered with you for the duration of your visit. Each platoon consists of ten soldiers, which is why there are ten of you.

“After much consideration of the best possible way to assign you each, my colleagues and I have concluded that you will get the chance to exchange words with each and every candidate. Don’t be shy; this is your chance to get to know them and to determine who best suits your needs as a companion. Once all of you have held your brief conversations, the soldiers will pick their preferred partner in a pre-designated order.”

Right. Of course, it's all going to be up to them. I can only hope I'm not the last one standing, paired with some poor soldier who has no more interest in me than I do in him. I can already tell that there's going to be a hierarchy forming here, and I don't like it one bit.

“It is my sincere belief that you will enjoy your time here on Ixion. All additional instructions and clarifications are to be provided by your host soldier. Now, without further ado, go forth and meet your mates!”

The insignia blares across the screen again, and moments later, it goes dark.

My heart beats faster as a pair of uniformed Ixionians escort us out of the building, across a stretch of bright blue grass, and towards another door. I don't regret this—regret is a strong word, after all—but I'm beginning to feel genuinely nervous for the first time since submitting my name.

No turning back. My fate is behind that door.

I follow at the heels of the blonde woman, straight into the building that will change my life forever.

In contrast to the pleasant warmth outside, the new room is frigid enough to raise goosebumps along my forearms. It looks just like the place we just vacated, with one obvious exception: standing along the opposite wall are ten horned soldiers. My breath is hot. I've seen plenty of Ixionians before—but there's something different about knowing that one of them is going to be my bedmate for the foreseeable future.

They're all so astoundingly big. I'm not short and certainly not weak, but the top of my head couldn't reach a single one of their shoulders, and their arms are bulging out of their combat jackets, rock-solid even from this distance. Some are larger than others—the smallest among them is a young-looking, silvery-scaled creature with ash blond hair, while the largest is an umber-skinned hulk whose eyes are far too green to ever pass as human.

We move to sit down on the chairs that await us. I don't know how I feel about the way that some of the soldiers are

peering at our figures. There's something hungry about their gazes—and not just in a lustful sense.

“Welcome to Ixion,” says an eleventh soldier, standing slightly off to the side. From his position and intonation, I assume this is their platoon commander. I'm glad he's not a part of the matching pool, because he looks the farthest thing from friendly. “I speak for us all when I say that I hope you'll come to consider our planet a second home. At this time, as was explained, you will pair up and introduce yourselves. After a few minutes, pairs will switch, and you'll converse with someone new. You may begin now.”

I don't even have time to panic before one of them, thank goodness, is in front of me. He's around the middle of the pack in terms of build, with deep blue skin contrasting against mint-hued eyes. He smiles as his gaze meets mine, but says nothing. Waiting for me to make the first move—or the second, I suppose, since he was the one to approach me.

“Hi,” I say. My voice sounds cooler than I mean for it to be. “What's, um—what's your name?”

“Right. I suppose that's as good a start as any.” He laughs. It's a soft sound, not boisterous. Good. I can't deal with a rowdy conversation partner right now. “I'm Jace Kairos. And you?”

“Trace.”

“No way! A rhyming couple—how fortunate is that?”

As anxious as I am, I hadn't even noticed. Now I just feel silly—but his joking manner at least does something to relieve the steely tension permeating my frame.

“Ha, yeah—lucky pick, I guess.”

“Sure thing.” He glances from side to side, then lowers his voice conspiratorially. “Truth be told, Trace, I don't think I'm going to be very good at this whole talking thing. Like, I don't know about you, but we weren't given the clearest of guidelines. If they wanted us to get to know one another organically, we at least could have done it at a bar or something, don't you think?”



“I don’t drink, actually,” I say and instantly regret it. I try to make up for it with an awkward smile. “I hope that’s not a deal-breaker or anything.”

But Jace doesn’t seem fazed. “For me? No.” He tilts his head ever so slightly to the right, lifting his eyebrows meaningfully. “But Ambrose over there? The one with the twisty horns?” His pointer finger twirls to illustrate. “Life of the party, that one. Not always in a good way. And I say that as his best friend.”

“Noted.” I like Jace more and more. Doubt I’ll be lucky enough to end up with him, though. “Anyone else I ought to look out for?”

“Depends on what you’re looking for in a guy. If you were the rowdy type, I wouldn’t recommend Cassian. Got a lick of impatience in you? Then Avann definitely isn’t your guy.”

“Honestly, I feel like I won’t remember any of these names,” I admit.

“Hey, that’s fair. A lot of new information at once. I get it. But you’ll remember mine, right?”

“I’m not one to forget a good rhyme.”

He opens his mouth to say something else, only for the commander’s voice to drown it out: “Switch!”

I’m surprised by how sorry I am to see Jace go—especially when, as luck would have it, he’s immediately supplanted by the very twisty-horned one that he told me to watch out for.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he purrs. “What do you have to offer?”

My nose wrinkles. “Nothing that’ll interest you, if that’s how you always talk to women.”

“Your loss,” he says with a shrug and a smirk.

Yep. Definitely not for me.

The cycle keeps going, one after another. A couple of them stick in my mind, but not for long. Not so much as the first. By the time we’re lining up again, ready for them to make their picks, my heart is actually fluttering with excitement. If the

choice were up to me, it couldn't be easier. I didn't expect to want something this badly.

The first soldier—I think he was the one who Jace claimed to be overly patient—chooses the blonde girl who wouldn't leave me alone before. The second goes for a petite redhead who might just be the prettiest person I've ever seen, in a really dainty sort of way.

The third is Jace.

He steps forward slowly, his eyes turned down and his hands clasped in a show of thoughtfulness. I'm already beyond relieved. This is going to be so much easier than I—

"I choose Deryn Sevene," he says.

What?

I don't waste a minute pretending that I heard him wrong. Deryn Sevene. I don't even know who that is. I want him to look up at me, to see the betrayal on my face—*But you'll remember mine, right?*—and yet he does no such thing. The commander says that his choice is recorded. He steps back. The next name is called.

I'm so hurt, so confused, that I tune out the next few rounds. When I hear my own name spoken, I flinch involuntarily.

"Trace. I, um... I choose Trace."

The one to speak the words is the smaller blond that I noticed before. I remember our conversation only for the way that I was unwillingly fascinated by his silver horns. They branch out like antlers, so seemingly delicate, by far the most distinctive of any I've seen.

But aside from that? Nothing. I don't even remember his name before the commander says it—and once he does, I'm still not stirred by any particular recognition.

"Calix Callisto and Trace Morrow. Confirmed."

Locked in.

## CHAPTER 4



*PRESENT DAY*

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Ivy asks, her hand jostling my shoulder. I look up to see her peering down at me, with Cassian standing just behind her. “Did you hit your head?”

“Yeah. I’m fine, though. Just... just a little dazed.” It’s the truth, so long as *fine* is an apt descriptor for feeling as though my hammering heart is about to fall out of my mouth.

“Are you sure? You were really close—”

“I’m good. We have to get going.”

“Right.” She pulls me to my feet and dusts her hands off on her dark sweatpants, which doesn’t do much to diminish the huge swathes of dirt and grease staining her skin. Having been thrown off my feet a frankly exhausting number of times at this point, I imagine that I’m even worse for the wear.

“Safe to say that didn’t go as planned,” I mutter.

“No shit. We gotta get off this planet. Regroup with the rest of them—try to make contact with Jace.”

“The others? But they’re right....” A quick glance from side to side is enough for the words to die in my throat. The three of us are the only ones standing, ringed by gigantic heaps of debris. The damn thing must have split into pieces on the way down, forcing us into tiny groups—assuming that Avann, Azrael, and Cherise didn’t get crushed outright.

Cassian nods shortly. “If I know the Commander as well as I think I do, he’s going to want everyone to get off-planet as fast as possible.”

“Not exactly convenient that the ship blew up, then,” Ivy mutters.

“The hangar isn’t far. All we have to do is find something to fly and get moving. If they haven’t mobilized an airforce yet, we can stay in orbit until we make contact... unless the communication lines are tapped....”

“We’ll figure that out when we get there,” Ivy says, and I’m inclined to agree. “Which way to the hangar?”

Cassian leads us along what I assume to be the most efficient route, though the wreckage and smog don’t make that very easy. We end up doubling back several times, Cassian cursing under his breath. On a couple of occasions, he stops moving entirely to glare at the sky and recalibrate our position. Ivy and I meet one another’s eyes. I can tell she’s silently urging me to be patient, but I know I can’t do it for much longer. This graveyard of a base is driving me insane—and I need to know that Calix is all right.

*“Sir! I’m here!”*

I whirl around. That was his voice. I know it was. I open my mouth to reply, but Ivy catches me by the arm and squeezes hard.

“Don’t.”

“Are you serious?” I yank away from her. “That’s him! We —”

“This way,” Cassian says suddenly.

“You sure?” Ivy demands, her pitch heightening.

“Yes. Positive this time.”

“Okay. Trace, come on.”

“But that was *him*,” I insist. “That was Calix—”

“And by the sound of that, he’s found someone. But we can’t afford to go wandering off.”

“Isn’t regrouping the whole point?” I look between the two of them, uncomprehending. “You’re saying we should just leave him to save our own asses?”

“I’m *saying*,” Ivy hisses, “that we need every second we can get. Did that sound nearby to you? He may as well be at the other end of the damn base. If we get caught up chasing each other in circles, we’ll be committing suicide. And truth be told, shouting like that probably isn’t a good idea. We have no idea who’s around.”

*But it’s him, I want to tell her. I can’t leave him any more than you can leave Cassian.*

That’s not the same, though. She’d be furious at me for even suggesting a parallel between the two.

“Trace.” Her voice is softer now. “I’m not trying to trick you into anything. What good would it be to go back when we’re so close? How will we help him?”

Shit. I don’t want her to be right. But how *would* we help him? I’ve lost two weapons in a row now, and Ivy never had one to begin with. If Calix is in danger, we’ll just be lining up for the slaughter. And if he isn’t, then we can afford to wait.

“Okay,” I say. “Fine. But if we can’t make contact from orbit, we *are* coming back for him.”

“We are. I promise.”

After everything we’ve been through—our first escape from Ixion, that awful jungle planet, and now this—I don’t have any choice but to trust her.

I turn towards Cassian. My voice sticks to my throat like watery glue. “Fine. Let’s go.”

He leads us through the steaming remains of what must be one of the administrative buildings. Shattered glass speckles the collapsed metal skeleton, crunching under our heels. I’ve been trying not to look at the ground, but I can’t avoid it now unless I want to trip and slice my hands and knees to ribbons.

I keep my vision zeroed in on the space right in front of me. I don’t want to see the bodies.

“There it is. Straight ahead.”

I dart through the rest of the glass as quickly as I can manage, then double my pace to catch up to Cassian and Ivy. Miraculously—or perhaps because it was built that way on purpose—the looming silver walls of the spaceship hangar are barely scratched. The only scar it bears is a small access door to one side, which is hanging off its hinges, creaking in the slow, smoky breeze.

“We’ll head in there,” Cassian instructs, gesturing towards it. “We can operate the main door from inside. You two stay behind me.” He hefts his blaster.

“Do you think there’s going to be trouble?” Ivy asks.

“Truth be told, I don’t know what to think at this point. Didn’t expect them to be ready for us. Didn’t expect the tower to be rigged. The only thing left to do now is hope for the best.”

I throw one last look over my shoulder as we follow Cassian inside. The air is still as gray and hard as a stone wall. No more than ten yards of visibility at the most.

*Calix, I know you’re out there. And I’m not abandoning you. I’ll be back as soon as I can.*

If our positions were reversed, I’d want him to do the same for me. Use his head, save himself, and come back with a plan.

He’s my partner. I need to trust that he can take care of himself.

“Trace?”

*Hang in there.*

“Coming.” I jog over to where Ivy stands beside a small ship, less than a quarter the size of the one we came in on. Cassian is already halfway up the ladder leading to its belly.

“That’s it?” My gaze skates across the rest of the cavernous hangar. There are vessels of just about every imaginable shape and size—all in decent working condition, so far as I can tell. “Shouldn’t we go for something more...?” More what? More *anything*, really.

Cassian's voice echoes down as he pulls himself up through the hatch. "Smaller the ship, the harder it is to track."

"And to shoot, for that matter," Ivy adds.

"That too. Come on up, and we'll get out of here."

Ivy steps back and nods at me. "You first."

I grasp the cold rungs and pull myself up two at a time. Ivy's right behind me, and as soon as we get ourselves into the cockpit, Cassian hits a button to retract the ladder. Ivy kicks the hatch shut, he reaches for the throttle, and the tiny ship begins to vibrate as the engine stutters to life.

Cassian is halfway through strapping himself in when he freezes. "Oh, *kest*."

"What?" Ivy leans over his shoulder, a curtain of cinnamon hair hiding her face from my view. "What's wrong?"

"One-person ship. There's only one belt."

"Do we need to go back out?"

"No time. Can you hold on?"

Ivy looks back at me, and I give the ship's interior a quick once-over. It's pretty damn bare, but there's a cargo net laced along the back wall. I step over and tug at it. Stable enough. I shoot her a nod, which she returns.

"Yeah. We can hold on. Just do me a favor and don't crash us, babe."

"I'll do my best."

Ivy joins me, knotting her hands around another section of the net. We stand shoulder to shoulder—not that we have any other choice, considering the breadth of the space.

"Why'd you say that?" I ask. My voice is mostly covered by the sound of the engine; Cassian is oblivious, but I know Ivy can hear me just fine.

"Say what?"

"You told me to go first."

She takes a short breath. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."



“You know, that’s about the best way to convince me that it does, in fact, matter.”

“Look, Trace—let’s not do this now, okay?” Her hazel eyes are wide, pleading. “We need to focus on—”

“You don’t trust me,” I say evenly.

“What?”

“You don’t trust me. You thought that I’d run off if you went first. That I’d go back for Calix.”

“Of course I didn’t,” she says, but the slump of her shoulders tells me all that I need to know.

I’m not mad at her. Not exactly. But considering the fact that I’m about to blast off with no company aside from this woman and her mate, her mistrust is a far cry from encouraging.

“Trace, listen—”

I don’t get the chance to do so, because that’s the moment Cassian kicks us into drive. The ship snarls, the door at the front of the hangar rolls up, and I’m thrown back against the cargo net as we shoot forward.

My teeth jitter. I hold on for dear life. Faster, faster, faster—and then Cassian shouts something unintelligible, and we’re shooting upwards, blasting past the smoke, through the deep navy blue of the mid atmosphere, and finally breaking into the vast blackness of space—a blackness that has somehow become familiar to me.

The engine slowly grumbles back to a reasonable level. I loosen my death grip on the net. I can see out of the corner of my eye that Ivy is trying to look at me, but I refuse to meet her gaze.

“Ivy,” Cassian calls from the front. “Come here and see what you can do with the comms. Check Jace, Ixion, everything.”

“Okay,” she says woodenly. “Yeah. I will.”

As soon as she steps away, I sink down to the ground and curl my arms around my knees.

This is the moment when Calix is supposed to give me a light punch in the shoulder and a stupid shit-eating grin. *Hey, wonder girl, what's got you so down? You did pretty well back there, you know.*

*I left you behind, idiot.*

*And you're gonna come find me. Think I'm worried about that?*

"I've got him," Ivy exclaims.

I'm on my feet without even thinking. "What?" I demand, half-running over to where she's crouched. In front of her is an ancient-looking comms unit. I can't make sense of the array of dials and frequencies on display, but apparently, she can, because a grin of triumph has washed away all of her anxiety from before.

"I've got him already. Listen—"

A whirring sound scrambles and rings, then steadies into a grainy voice.

"Ivy?"

My stomach sinks.

It isn't Calix. It's Jace. And I should be happy that we picked up his signal. I *know* that I should be.

But I've got a bad, bad feeling about this.

"Is the Commander with you?" he asks.

"He's not." Ivy's chewing her lip. She knows. "Can you send us your coordinates?"

A slow gust of air exits my lungs.

*There it is.*

"Yeah—you in a safe place?" Jace asks. "Out of monitoring distance?"

"Not yet," Ivy says. "But we can be."

“How long?”

“...Minutes, if we have to.”

I turn my back. I can't stand it anymore. I know that she's doing what's best—for herself and Cassian, for the rebellion, and probably even for me, in a certain way—but *damn* if I'm going to sit around gaping at her while she willingly betrays me.

“Call me then.”

“I will.”

“Sounds good. Over and out.”

The transmission lapses back into static, and a moment later, it shuts off entirely. Ivy takes a deep breath. I can tell she's gearing up to say something to me, but I don't want to hear it.

“We'll be back for him, Trace.”

“I know,” I say. My lips are numb. I don't even have the strength to be properly angry at her. “We have to.”

We try to rest. There's no real nighttime in space, of course, but the ship has a built-in function where it periodically reminds us to rest, supposedly in line with the natural circadian rhythm of the average Ixionian, which is primarily the same as a human's. A history of insomnia no doubt has me biased, but I can't help wondering whether the thing's busted. Ivy and Cassian are happy to head off to bed whenever the cool, toneless voice tells them to do so—it's not like they're going to sleep right away, though. I would rather stay here in the cockpit than endure the sounds of the cock-pitting that they're going to get up to. This way, I at least have enough space to think. To think and to watch the stars.

I used to find the sky boring to look at, or at least repetitive. And I had every right to feel that way; down on Earth, when you've seen one star, it's safe to say you've seen them all. But everything changes when you're up here in the middle of space. The galaxies glow not only silver and gold,

but fuchsia and lime, bloody vermillion, and the deepest azure. Shapes of faraway nebulae seem eerily sentient: hulking pillars of gas watch with infinite patience as we hurry by, our own lives as insignificant as atoms.

It's enough to paralyze me with chills.

I wish Calix were here.



## CHAPTER 5

## CALIX

THE TWO MASKED figures lead us through the devastated base, carefully moving through the worst of the wreckage. It seems like they know where they're going, but I can't imagine how; it's a *mainching* wasteland out here. Everything looks exactly the same. Even having lived here for a couple of years, I may as well be a complete stranger to the place.

I sneak a couple of glances toward Emrys. His face is stony, and Avann just seems as dejected as he always is lately. I want one of them to say something—it's clear that this bizarre masked duo has had more than enough of my mouthing off—but they remain as silent as everything else in this wretched, eviscerated landscape.

“Here,” one of the figures says at last, bending down. With the other's help, they shove aside a massive chunk of concrete. It looks to me like all the other debris littering our surroundings, but they must know what they're doing—and sure enough, it scrapes aside to reveal a gaping black hole in the ground below. Something tells me that I wouldn't be able to see the bottom even if the air was clear.

Without a word, one of the strangers slips inside. I wait for an echo of impact. Nothing. The other one steps back and gestures with their blaster.

“Go.”

“Uh... anyone else wanna give it a shot first?” I half-joke.

Helmet Number Two doesn't seem to like that very much. They give me a sharp whack on the shoulder with the end of their rifle, nearly knocking me straight into the pit.

“No time to waste. Shut up and move.”

“Just trying to lighten the mood,” I mumble—but I’m not gonna press my luck any farther. I toe at the edge of the opening, then lower myself until my legs are dangling over the edge. Cool, damp air rushes upwards, sending a rash of goosebumps across the backs of my arms.

*I really* do not like this.

But something tells me that our friendly little escort is ready to blow my head off if I give them a single further lick of annoyance. I tighten my teeth, close my eyes, and slide off the edge.

I find out right away why there was no sound before. The so-called drop isn’t a drop at all—unless you’re expecting one like I did, in which case the two or so feet of dead air serve as a perfectly serviceable tailbone bruiser. After that, the pit twists into a steep metal tube, and I coast down its surface with ease.

My head buzzes with *déjà vu*. It’s almost like....

*Aha*. That’s right.

I think I know exactly where we’re going, after all.

The pipe doesn’t go for too long, which is lucky considering the fact that I can barely fit in the thing. After several seconds, I’m ejected onto the cold floor with a splash. I don’t get the chance to recalibrate before a bright light is flooding my vision.

I yelp and pull back. “Do you mind?”

“Get up.”

Right. My new best friend. “Working on it. It’d be a lot easier if you weren’t trying to blind me, you know.”

They’re not amused. “You need to learn how and when to shut up.”

“So I’ve heard. Look, now that we’re down here, would you mind—”

The rush of air at my back is just enough warning for me to twist sideways, narrowly avoiding what would have been an extremely awkward collision with Azrael Emrys—especially seeing as Cherise is in his lap. The light manages to catch her disgruntled expression before the two of them get to their feet. Then the beam settles into something more even; I still can't make out Helmet Number One past the glare, but at least my surroundings are decently visible.

Sure enough, we're exactly where I thought we were.

"Callisto," Emrys observes. "You're on the ground."

"You were, too, a second ago." I push myself to my feet and wipe my hands on my pants. "Sewer water. Nice."

"Wait," Cherise says. "You're—"

She's interrupted by Avann coasting down the pipe, followed just a few moments later by Helmet Number Two, the latter of whom hops promptly to their feet, flicks on a flashlight mounted at their shoulder, and finally pulls the smooth chromium bubble off of their head.

Beneath it is a woman.

A human woman.

"Oh," I say.

She shakes out her dark hair and combs a hand down through it, taking such a deep breath of the sewage-laden air that I shudder to imagine how stuffy it was beneath the helmet. I think I recognize her, though it's hard to be sure; I'm not great at telling the humans apart from one another. She has sharp black eyes, a strong chin, and full cheeks, currently flushed with exertion. When she sees me staring, she scoffs.

"What's with the look? Are you really that surprised?"

Without the added distortion from the mask, her voice is low and pleasant. Less so is that of her friend, whose laughter bubbles like a child's. I look back to see that she's removed her helmet as well.

Now *her*; I do recognize.



“Rumor had it all of you were dead,” Deryn Sevene says, smirking. Even in the dull light, her crystal blue eyes manage to gleam mischievously. “Glad to see that’s not the case. Most of the rest weren’t so lucky.”

My head whips back and forth between the two of them. “Are you two going to explain what’s going on now?”

She ignores me, turning instead to the dead-eyed soldier beside me. “Avann, shit—I hardly recognized you. Holding up all right?”

He’s silent. I focus on readjusting my vest, which was pulled askew by the bumpy trip down. Silence thickens the air, stifling—before Emrys finally speaks.

“Evera Aisling is dead.”

No elaboration. No mention of the details that we learned from Cherise later on—how Avann’s mate had been sabotaging us intentionally, sneaking behind our backs, doing everything in her power to keep us away from Ixion and the rebellion.

“What...?” As soon as the question begins to cross her lips, Deryn seems to think better of it. She fiddles with her flashlight.

“We should get back,” murmurs the one whose name I can’t recall.

“No,” Emrys growls, and for once, I’m grateful for his stoicism. “We aren’t going anywhere until you give us an explanation for all this.”

“*All* this?” Deryn repeats. “I don’t have every answer in the world, you know... but I’ll see what I can do. Shall we walk and talk?”

Emrys glances towards Cherise before giving a quick nod of consent. “So long as you two lead the way. I’d rather keep my back clear.”

Deryn shrugs. “Suit yourself. C’mon, Asa.”

The second woman follows, and I keep to their heels alongside Avann, Emrys, and Cherise. Deryn’s voice echoes

through the tunnels, guiding our way just as much as the erratic beam of her light.

“Extremely long and boring story short, things went to shit when all of you decided to leave.”

“We didn’t *decide* to leave,” I object. “We were just following orders.”

“And you were right to do so,” Emrys adds.

“Can we keep the bickering for later, boys?” Deryn groans. “Do you want to know what’s going on or not?”

He and I lapse into a begrudging silence, the tension between us thick as quicksand.

“I’ll take that as a yes. After you took off, things got a little more... well, not to put too fine a point on it, but they were pretty tyrannical. There were rumors that the women... uh. Things didn’t look very good for us.”

“What were the rumors?” Emrys demands. Always the sensitive type, that one.

“Rumors aside, we weren’t sleeping in the barracks anymore,” Deryn says grimly. The other woman, Asa, lowers her head slightly, as though the memories are too heavy to bear. “Same room where they rounded us up the first time, but now it was for days on end. Like livestock. No news, barely any food... we didn’t know what they had planned, but it didn’t take a genius to realize one thing: Earth would *not* be happy if they knew how we’d been treated. From there, it logically follows that these fuckers had no intention of sending us back.”

My stomach churns as I try to imagine what she’s describing. All those bodies close together, reeking with sweat and fear, tempers running short as their hunger clawed through them like so many wild animals....

*What if Trace had been—*

No. She wasn’t. That’s all that matters. If I even start to picture it, I’m going to lose control. And that’s the last thing any of us need right now.

“It became clear pretty quickly that we couldn’t stay there. So we started talking—planning. We figured out we could trust one of the soldiers that brought us food, and he agreed to carry messages between us and any other men who were willing and able to help. Then, one day... we broke out. You saw how the base looked? Some of that’s from today, but the central building has been vaporized for a while now. Not everyone made it.”

The ground is beginning to slope beneath our feet. I don’t remember any part of the sewers like this, though I suppose I didn’t exactly make a habit of exploring them. The air tastes different, too—watery and cold, with a distinct mineral tang.

“We couldn’t leave the base. We’d last about three seconds before someone told the authorities—not exactly easy to disguise a group of thirty extremely human women on a planet as—sorry—ridiculously homogenous as this one. Consequently, we went to the only place where we knew we’d be safe.”

“Underground,” I say.

“You’re a clever one, aren’t you, Callisto?” Deryn’s voice is drenched with sarcasm. “Yeah. Underground.”

“But these aren’t the sewers.”

“Again—my mind is blown by how quickly you catch on. Yeah, these aren’t the sewers. We had to go deeper... a lot deeper.”

Her voice is beginning to echo in the darkness. Is the tunnel widening around us? Then I catch a faint glimpse of amber light ahead of us, something other than the beams of the flashlights. For a second, I think that I’m imagining it... but the closer and deeper down we get, the more I’m sure. There’s something ahead, right around the corner.

“As I said,” Deryn continues, “that’s the short version. We’ll fill you in on the nasty details later on. But what matters is that we made it. We’ve been down here ever since... and now, so are you.”

With that, she turns around and gestures for us to go ahead. The others hesitate, but I'm too curious.

I step around the corner of the rocky, water-streaked wall, and my mouth falls open at the sight that awaits me.

“Welcome,” Deryn says, “to the new resistance.”



## CHAPTER 6

## CALIX

I DON'T KNOW how to comprehend what I'm looking at.

Inches in front of me is a steep drop; beyond that drop lies a gaping cavern. It must be at least the size of the atrium in the now-destroyed main building of the base; its farthest corners are shrouded in thick coils of subterranean mist. Jagged stalactites overhang the buzz of activity: women, a good couple dozen of them, hurrying about and filling the cave with the echoing ambiance of urgently raised voices. Some of them are sparring with one another, paired off in swift exchanges of hand-to-hand combat. Some are sifting through piles of supply crates, presumably documenting their contents. Still, others huddle over a large, chunky metal console that could hardly look more anachronistic beside the natural rockscape.

“You did... all of this?”

Deryn laughs. She knows my question is rhetorical.

I can only continue to gape.

An underground resistance—literal or otherwise—I thought that meant a thrown-together refuge, maybe a series of messy bed rolls strewn through a dripping tunnel system. Something that would give them a chance of surviving.

But these women aren't just here to survive.

They're here to *fight*.

I don't realize that Emrys is walking up behind me until he speaks.

“This is... impressive.”

I'm pretty sure I've never heard such high praise from him.

"Yeah, well." Deryn laughs without a trace of humor. "Turns out you lot aren't the only ones who can throw together a decent army. Now come on, enough gawking. We have work to do."

*Can you believe this?*

I almost say the words out loud before I realize that she can't hear them. She's not with me. She's... I don't know where she is. Down here already, I can hope—but I know in my heart that's not the case.

Just as I know that, wherever she is, she's okay.

She needs to be.

"Callisto, move your ass!" Deryn barks.

I blink and look towards her. I didn't think I was spacing out too badly. Still, all the others have already disappeared in the direction she's pointing: down a thin, sloping segment of the wall. From what I can see, it forms a tenuous switchback all the way down to the base of the cave, where everyone else is presumably waiting.

"Are you serious? I'm gonna fall right off that thing."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. If your beefy-ass commander can handle it, so can you. *Go.*"

*Uh, Trace? Sorry if I end up falling off this thing and smashing my head open before I can see you again.*

And so, with Deryn at my heels, I slowly begin to ease myself along the ledge. It doesn't help that I can literally feel her breathing down my neck, evidently uninterested in maintaining even the slightest semblance of personal space.

"Hey, uh, Deryn—"

"You're a real daydreamer, aren't you?"

"...What?"

"I mean, either that or you were just having some sort of trauma flashback, which I suppose isn't all that far from the

realm of possibility. It's been weird lately."

My left boot scuffs a couple of pebbles, which go raining down the side of the cliff. I wince but keep myself in motion.

"Well? Are you blanking on me again?"

"I don't really know how to respond to that, I guess."

"I'm just saying—you're different from the rest. Flightier. You don't really seem the soldier type, to be honest."

"Thanks."

"Hey, I never said it was a bad thing."

Of course, she doesn't know about everything I had to endure when I first joined the military. She doesn't mean for her words to hurt me as much as they do—but I can't ignore the way that they sting.

"Sure. Whatever. I'm kind of trying to focus right now."

"See? Like that. None of the rest of them talk like that. It almost makes me wonder... who was your mate, again?"

"Partner. Trace Morrow. *Is* my partner."

"She's still alive?"

"If you knew her, you wouldn't sound so surprised." We're at the first corner of the switchback now. Grimacing, I lean against the wall and slowly turn myself around, then start moving again. Okay. Halfway there.

"Anything surprises me at this point. I mean, there are what—thirty of us left? And over a hundred in the initial program. Ten—"

"For each platoon," I finish. It's strange to hear those statistics now. Back when this all started, we were being bombarded with them left and right. How long ago was that, now? A handful of months? It may as well be a lifetime.

*One foot after the next; keep it going.*

But she's not done yet.

"It's almost like you're scared of something. Are you scared of something, Callisto?"



“Right now, I’m scared of falling off this *mainching* death trap of a path.”

She seems to consider that. “Huh. Fair enough.”

Finally, *finally*, I take the last couple of steps onto solid ground, leaving Deryn with no further excuse to interrogate me.

From here, the cavern seems even larger. It’s like a gymnasium of sorts—if gyms were carved from the bones of the planet rather than built upon its surface. The amount of echoing voices makes me a little bit anxious, sure, but Deryn doesn’t need to know that. Nobody does.

At first, I can’t see where the rest of our party went. You’d think it would be a challenge to lose track of a couple of towering horned figures in this nest of smaller, lither humans, but the sheer scope of the place makes it hard to take in very much at once.

Preoccupied as I am, I notice a girl approaching out of the corner of my eye. Still, I figure she’s got something else on her mind—right up until she comes to a halt and clears her throat, a high but soft little sound.

“Excuse me, sir—newcomers are subject to mandatory screening.”

I look down in surprise. The woman speaking to me is pretty and wide-eyed, dressed in what seems to be a long white lab coat, with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She looks too young to be here, which is no surprise; I’m starting to realize that humans, in general, have a weirdly youthful look about them. Her lips, perfectly bow-shaped, purse slightly as she waits for my response.

“Oh. Okay. Where do I go for—”

“Kira! He’s with me.”

I’m actually relieved to hear Deryn catching up behind me. If there’s anything more complicated to handle than a confusing woman that I know, it’s a confusing woman that I don’t know.

“Oh! Hey, Deryn.” Kira has a sweet dimpled smile, her white teeth gleaming brightly against the soft ochre of her skin. “Um, so we still have to follow protocol—”

“No stress. This way, Callisto.”

Kira leads both of us to a corner of the cavern occupied by a large white tent. Something’s painted on it in big red letters—but I never quite got the hang of reading other languages—no matter how easily I managed to grasp the verbal component. All those lines just look like nonsense to me.

“Where did you guys *get* all this stuff?”

“Oh, you know. Dropped down from the sky.” At the look on my face, Deryn groans and drags her palms across her cheeks. “No, doofus. We’ve been looting the base whenever we get the chance. And you should be grateful—otherwise, we wouldn’t have found your sorry asses.”

*Doofus*. That’s a new one. It’s probably for the best that Deryn doesn’t give me a chance to express my undying gratitude to her and her fellow looters before we reach the tent, and Kira beckons for us to come inside.

“Should I be worried?” I ask out of the corner of my mouth.

“Yeah, probably. If we decide that we don’t like you, you’re getting tossed right back where we found—holy *shit*, Callisto, the *look* on your face. And here I thought Cassian was stupid.”

I know her jesting is all in good humor, but *kest*, it’s making me miss Trace more than ever. She’s not like this; she pokes fun at me for plenty of reasons, but having questions is never one of them. There’s a certain bitter lash that comes with being mocked for genuine curiosity.

Kira springs to my rescue, softly admonishing me. “Don’t listen to her. That isn’t true at all. We just need to run a few tests to make sure that you aren’t carrying any infections.”

“Infections?” I repeat. As far as I know, infections aren’t really a thing on Ixion anymore. We’ve got more than enough

funding to keep any illness from being a concern. “What, is there a new mutant plague on the loose or something?”

The inside of the tent is warm and brightly lit by a couple of standing lights. Kira heads straight over to a crooked metal table and pops open a box lying atop it. I can't see what she's doing over there, but the glassy clinking noises don't give me a particularly good feeling.

“We hope not.”

Whatever *that* means. I shoot a sideways look at Deryn, but she's busy examining her nails.

“You hope not?”

“We haven't ruled out the possibility of bioterrorism.” Kira turns around again, now wearing blue rubber gloves and brandishing a slender silver tube. “They know we're still around somewhere, 'cause we keep giving them trouble. It's all too likely that they might give up playing chase and just poison the atmosphere in the hopes that it'll spread to the rest of us. So we run routine tests: everyone weekly, newcomers when they first arrive.”

“And what kind of... tests... might those be?”

“Just a routine blood sample. Then we'll send you over to quarantine with your friends until the results come back clear. It shouldn't take more than an hour. Arm?”

All I can think is that Kira looks way too young to be taking anyone's blood. I'd only trust someone with years of experience to do that. And yet it seems that I've got no choice.

“You're a doctor?”

She half-smiles, not showing her teeth this time. The expression is alarmingly apologetic. “I was a medical student back on Earth.”

“And have you stuck one of those needles in someone... like me... before?”

“Well, there were the two that came ahead of you. They haven't keeled over yet.”

“Just get it over with,” Deryn urges. Her voice is less forceful than I’d have expected. When I glance over, I see that her eyes, usually darting about with mischievous curiosity, are fixated firmly on her own hands.

*Not fond of sharps, huh?* I could tease her, but I hold back. I’ll keep that one in my pocket for later. Right now, I merely extend my arm and wait for Kira to do her thing.

It’s over in a matter of seconds, with only the briefest of pinching sensations. I flex my forearm and wince as Kira packs up her tools.

“That’s it?”

“For now. But if you are secretly housing a bioweapon, we’re gonna have to do some follow-up.”

“Understandable, I guess.”

She strips off her gloves and flings them into a nearby bin. “Just try to avoid touching anything outside of the quarantine area until we get back to you. Deryn, would you show him the way?”

“Gladly,” says Deryn, whose grayish pallor tells me all I need to know. I’d feel bad for her if she hadn’t been giving me so much *kest* just a few minutes ago. As it is, I keep quiet as she leads me out the other end of the tent and straight towards another, which is virtually the same save for the plastic sheeting that encases it.

“Hold on,” I say as she reaches out to unsnap the front tarp. “Just a second. The whole blood test thing... it’s just a precaution, right? They don’t actually think that there’s bioweaponry involved? Because I’m worried that the—”

“Really not interested in having this conversation at the moment, Callisto. How about you save it for your diary?”

She wrenches the tarp open and steps inside, leaving me with no choice but to follow.

## CHAPTER 7



*SIX MONTHS PREVIOUSLY*

“UM. CALIX? ARE YOU IN THERE?”

I don't know whether or not to knock on the door. Having spent less than a day on Ixion so far, I've decided that my least favorite thing by far is the single bathrooms. Sure, they make sense on a logical level—it's not like the barracks were built with guests in mind—but when I'm coming back from dinner craving nothing more than a hot shower, it's not fun to find that the place is already occupied.

“Sorry, yeah,” he calls back. “Everything all right?”

“I was just gonna shower—if that's okay.”

“Of course. I'll be out in a sec.”

This guy is nice. I'll give him that. Not nice in a slimy way, but genuinely kind. He at least treats me like a person, which is more than I can say for a good few of the men in the platoon. I guess I should be grateful for my flat chest and leanly muscled body. They've never put me on the top of anyone's list when it comes to looks—but this time, that did me a favor.

Then again, maybe Jace wouldn't have ditched me if I had some proper curves to speak of.

Before I get the chance to dwell on that particular bitterness any further, the door creaks open. Standing there is Calix—sans shirt.

He's blinding. Not in some exaggerated metaphorical sense—the broad expanse of his bare chest is literally silver, with scales even more dazzlingly pale than his skin. Elegant pectorals flow into a slim, flat stomach, bracketed by prominent hips, and below that... well, anything else is covered up by his cargo pants.

For now.

“Hey.” He grins. “Sorry about that; I didn't hear you come in.”

“It's fine.”

“Do you want me to, uh...” He twirls a fingertip vaguely in the air. I wish it didn't remind me of the gesture that Jace made earlier. “I can go grab us some drinks, if you'd like, or else—there's an entertainment screen, but I don't really ever use it...”

“I don't drink, thanks. And I don't watch pictures, either,” I say with a short laugh.

“What about games?” He raises his eyebrows. “Racers, builders, survival...?”

“Hm. I thought you said you didn't use your screen.”

“Yeah, because doing that stuff alone is no fun. But if you want to give it a shot, I'd be... I'd be willing.”

“You were going to say ‘I'd be game,’ weren't you?”

“I believe,” Calix says, stepping lightly past me, “you have a shower to take.”

“Right.”

I manage to keep the grin off of my lips until I close the door behind me.

Okay, fine. So he's charming in a certain kind of way. I'll give him that. I doubt I'm going to be proposing marriage anytime soon, but if he does have some good games, I don't see why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves. A silly, antiquated sort of excitement sizzles in my chest at the thought. Maybe this will be like the sleepovers I used to have at the houses of my

more well-to-do friends. Back when we were kids, we'd play survival games until dawn broke. Of course, by the time we reached our teenage years, we would fool around a bit, too, more often than not. It was all lighthearted fun, shared with people that I loved unconditionally.

And I've missed it. I've missed it a lot.

I shower quickly. I don't bother with shampoo; my luggage was delivered earlier, but I haven't unpacked yet. I decide that it's better not to experiment with the oddly colored bottles lining the shower shelves. For all I know, Ixionians wash themselves with acid or something. Instead, I scrub as thoroughly as possible, flip off the water, and towel myself dry.

That's when another predicament arises: my nightshirt is tucked in my bag, right next to the toiletries. My rumpled clothes stare at me accusingly from the floor. I could put them back on... ugh, no. These are the same things I wore all day, including the stint in that sweaty little rocket shuttle. Instead, I wrap the towel tightly around myself, making sure to cover my breasts and thighs, and evaluate myself critically in the mirror. Hm. Good enough for now.

Stepping back into the adjoining room, I see that Calix is sprawled out on the bed, one knee propped up, ice-blue eyes narrowed toward the screen that's unrolled on the opposite wall.

I pull myself onto the mattress beside him. Oh—wow, this is a nice bed. I wiggle a little bit, getting myself comfortable.

“Any preference?” Calix asks. His fingertip dances back and forth, scrolling through the options with the help of the motion tracker mounted above the screen. “I'm more of a racing guy myself...”

“I like survival,” I say.

Calix says nothing. After several seconds of silence, I glance over to find that he's fully gawking at me.

“What?”

“You like survival games?”



“Sure. You don’t?”

“I mean, I... you know, honestly, that stuff terrifies me. But I’ll put on a brave face. I’m the soldier here, right?”

“Are you?” I smirk.

“Can I ask something stupid?”

“Stupider than what you just said, you mean?”

“Well, I imagine that’s subjective. But sure.”

“Go for it.”

“...Ah, no. Now you’ve got me thinking too hard about it.”

Is that a blush silvering his cheeks? I don’t get a chance to ask before he presses onward, apparently determined not to dwell on whatever subject he just dropped.

“Okay. So.” He runs a hand through his ashy blond hair. “Survival it is. Let’s see what titles I’ve got, uh...”

“Were you going to ask if you could kiss me?”

Calix’s hand drops, and the screen returns to a soft neutral gray. He curses under his breath, starts trying to re-key the startup sequence, then stops and slowly turns to me. This time, he’s definitely blushing.

“Well... what if I was?”

“It’s what we’re here for, right?”

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “Yeah, I guess it is. But if you’d rather stick to the games, I get it.”

“I think we’ll have plenty of time for games.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard, and the edge of his teeth creeps over his lower lip. He lowers his head and looks up at me through the pale, nearly white lattice of his eyelashes.

He’s shy. Even more so than I am. That’s cute—he’s cute, just in general. And being around him doesn’t make me feel half as anxious as I feared it would.

He also looks like he doesn't have the faintest clue what he's supposed to be doing.

I can work with this.

I lean forward, bracing the heels of my hands on the plush mattress, and press a single chaste kiss to his lips. I can feel his breath leaping in his throat. Has he never done this before? Careful not to go too fast, I kiss him again, then withdraw slightly.

"Just one thing," I say. "A rule. If that's okay."

"Of course. Anything." His eyes are wide and earnest. They also keep flitting down to gaze at my lips. I don't think he realizes how obvious it is.

"No strings attached."

"Right. No... wait, what?"

Maybe it's an Earthen saying. "We can do this, but I'm not really available. For an actual relationship, I mean. I just want to enjoy myself while I'm here, you know? Sex is fine, and friendship is more than fine, but anything beyond that..."

"Oh. Oh, of course," he says in a messy rush. "I never meant to—"

"Right. Yeah, I know. I know you didn't." Now I'm blushing too. I've always hated conversations like this, as necessary as they are. "Just, you know, covering my bases."

"Sure. For sure."

Neither of us can stand to meet each other's gazes for a moment. I'm worried at first, sure that I ruined whatever we'd just started... because even if I don't have the words for what was beginning to happen, I can't deny that I enjoyed it. That I wanted more... that I still do.

Then his hands fly to my cheeks, and a thrill surges through me, burning the doubt from my mind as he crushes us into a kiss once more.

## CHAPTER 8



*PRESENT DAY*

“...FEW more stim pills in the compartment by the manual throttle, I think. They’re probably stale, though.”

“I’ll take it. I’ll take fuckin’ anything. Seriously, the way that you guys are so advanced as a society, and you haven’t even harnessed the humble coffee bean—”

Ivy’s voice suddenly shrinks to nothing, followed by a whisper.

“Is she asleep?”

“Maybe so—”

“I’m not,” I mumble, forcing myself to sit up. A cringe-worthy bolt of pain runs through my neck. I must’ve dozed off leaning against the wall—and from the stiffness filling my body, that was a good several hours ago.

And they haven’t noticed until now. That shouldn’t hurt as much as it does—I should be used to loneliness by now.

Ironically, it’s part of growing up with a big family. People say the oldest sibling gets first dibs on everything in life, but that isn’t true at all. If anything, I’ve always been skipped over entirely in favor of my younger siblings. They’re always the ones to be comforted, to be praised, to be given the first hug after a long absence, or the last piece of sweet meat when we’re running low.

In a way, that loneliness is a big part of why I left in the first place.

And now it's back.

On this ship with Ivy and Cassian, I can feel myself stuck in a similarly peripheral existence. Every word between them, every glance, contains a depth denied to me. I know they don't do it on purpose, but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

My mind catches up with my body.

Wait.

Several hours.

That means we must be close.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I pull myself upright. Cassian and Ivy are standing in the doorway that leads to the bunk room, guilt splashing both of their faces.

"Sorry," Ivy says with a wince. "Should've been quieter. I thought you'd be in bed."

"Yeah, no. Is Duvalik close?"

Duvalik: our destination, described by Cassian as "the kind of place where everyone wants to visit, but nobody wants to live." He's never been there, nor has anyone he knows personally, but supposedly its infamy is nothing to scoff at. It's a lot harder to track down a particular criminal, he explains, when the whole planet lives and dies by its various routes of deviance.

"Very close," Cassian says, apparently just as eager as I am to leave the subject of my sleeping arrangements behind. "Pre-landing adjustments will kick in any minute now, and then it's just a while longer until we start into orbit, get passage cleared, and begin our descent."

"Passage cleared?"

"They need to make sure that we're not armed. Not on a large scale, anyway. Even Duvalik doesn't want to be blown up by a gang of errant space pirates."

Space pirates, indeed. I just hope there isn't a price on our names.

Cassian slides into the pilot's seat and wastes no time checking various display readouts, none of which make any sense to me, while Ivy gets back to work calling up Jace. Her lower lip juts out with concentration as she fiddles with the dials in front of her. She shoots me an apologetic grimace whenever a particularly shrill frequency violates our ears.

My own face stays stony. Right now, I don't owe her a damn thing, least of all forgiveness. First, making me board the ship ahead of her out of some unearned lack of trust, then agreeing to travel to Jace's outpost rather than staying behind for Calix.... She probably thinks she's doing what's best for us all, and maybe that's true. In her position, I doubt I would have stayed behind for Cassian. But that doesn't change the fact that, over the last day, she's lost any right to call me her friend. For now, we're still allies. Whether that's subject to change is up to her and her actions.

The buzzing radio finally solidifies into words: "Kairos here."

"Jace, it's Ivy. We're almost in orbit."

"Ivy! Great. Listen, there's a bay where you can land on the outskirts of Jyrespa—that's the market city that runs along the equator, smack dab at about thirty-seven longitude. They won't ask too many questions, so long as you can avoid looking suspicious. Take the train downtown. I'll be waiting for you at a pub called Mattalo's. Keep your heads down, and you'll be fine—people tend to mind their business around these parts."

"Roger that," Ivy says as Cassian gives a nod of understanding. "We'll be seeing you soon, then?"

"I'll head out right now. Remember to act casual."

The line goes silent. I sigh and turn away, folding my arms. The exotic syllables echo in my head. Duvalik, Jyrespa, Mattalo's. A bizarre homesickness fills me, but it isn't Earth that I miss. I don't know if it's Ixion, either.

The ship shudders suddenly, tipping me off my feet. I only just manage to catch myself on the wall. Cassian curses and apologizes.

“My bad—we’re in orbit now, landing as soon as I get eyes on that city he mentioned.” Glowing lines and squares of text form a matrix across the main viewport, crowding it with information that scrolls by far too quickly for me to read. “Grab onto something—I wouldn’t count on this being a smooth descent.”

With that delightful reassurance, he twists a lever, and the ship’s nose begins to tip. I head back to the cargo net and tangle my fingers in it, pulling myself flush against the wall.

“Trace,” Ivy says as she joins me. She’s doing the same thing I did during liftoff—trying to use our distance from Cassian to mask her words. “I know you’re angry. You have every right to be.”

“Let’s not do this right now.”

“I just want you to know—I meant it when I said that we would go back for him. I’m not a liar. And I don’t break my promises.”

Her voice is hard and even. For better or for worse, I find myself believing her. We aren’t going to be getting chummy again in a hurry, though.

“Good,” I say simply.

There’s no more time for words before the ship shakes again, this time much more forcefully. I clench my jaw hard against the rattling of my teeth, squeeze my eyes shut, and lose myself in the bellowing roar as we make for Duvalik’s surface.

Funnily enough, the landing base feels more like an Earthen jet port than Ixion’s utilitarian docks. After disembarking, we’re shuffled through a long, crowded tunnel full of colorful storefronts, surrounded by the most incredible variety of sentient species that I’ve ever seen in one place before. There are humans and Ixionians, yes, but also feathered tripeds,

hairless violet-skinned creatures, chittering bat-eared beings that stand only as tall as my knee, and countless others, all of them exchanging words in their own distinct languages and dialects.

I can see what Cassian means about this place. It seems perfect for someone who's trying to get lost.

The interrogation that we undergo is thankfully automated. We're directed to tiny booths, where a screen flashes questions for us to verbally answer. I don't know how it picks up our individual voices amid the hubbub of the place, but it never once forces me to repeat a statement. I give a false name, explain that I'm here on vacation, and deny any involvement with a number of "danger groups" listed for my convenience. A retinal scan then confirms my species as human, which thankfully isn't suspicious in a place like this, then informs me that my review is complete.

*Welcome to Duvalik, REYNA VEILLEY! Enjoy your stay! Please remember to keep your registration tags on your person at all times.*

A slot below the screen spits out what looks like a freshly stamped dog tag, bearing my pseudonym, as well as a string of numbers that I can't decode. I lift it cautiously, expecting the metal to be hot, but it feels as though it's been sitting out for hours.

Ivy and Cassian are waiting for me outside of the booth, both of them craned over an incredible rarity: an actual paper map. Cassian's fingertip trails along the intersecting trails printed across it in ink of varying colors.

"This must be the train that he was talking about." He taps a thin blue line. "Leaves pretty frequently. We can get on the next one, and it'll take us straight to that Mattalo place."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Ivy agrees. "Trace?"

"Yeah." The sooner we start off, the sooner we'll find Jace—and the sooner we find Jace, the sooner we can get back to Calix. "Let's go."



The train ride is both uneventful and long as hell. The three of us sit together, me across from the two of them, my cheek pressed against the window to watch the monotonous cityscape streaking past us. The air on Duvalik is orange and smoky, as are the rows and rows of towering buildings that seem to stretch on infinitely in every direction.

I'm exhausted. Little to no sleep last night, extensive space travel, and a plethora of new sights... all draining, all overwhelming. I want to curl up under a blanket and will it all away.

Instead, I'm here, bumping along an uneven train track. Headed for Jace Kairos, of all people.

I used to hate him. It wasn't fair then, and it wouldn't be now. It wasn't his fault that he'd made more of a connection with someone else—he was just doing what was best for himself and probably what was best for her as well. I can't even remember her name. Over the last few months, my resentment has grown stale.

After all, if not for Jace's rejection, I never would have gotten to know the soldier who's somehow become my friend.

My best friend. My partner. We used to joke that we were a couple in every sense but the most obvious one. Somewhere along the line, it stopped feeling funny and started feeling sad.

My eyes start to drift shut. The repetitive clanking of the train is soothing in its own strange way.

*Calix....*

I imagine him sitting next to me, offering his shoulder for me to rest my head. He'd play with my hair—not an affectionate gesture so much as a curious one; he's always said that its texture fascinates him, thick and coarse in contrast to his own lightweight silken locks. I like when he does that—far more than I'd ever admit. If he knew that I love his touch so much, he'd get self-conscious about it, and then half the magic would be lost. The casual thoughtlessness comforts me like nothing else.

The more I think about it, the more I can practically feel the caress of his slender fingertips. *I miss you*, I tell him silently.

In my mind's eye, he laughs softly. *C'mon. It's only been a couple of days.*

*I know. I just wish you were here.*

*Aw, come on, wonder girl. No need to get sentimental. You're handling yourself just fine without me.*

*I'd like to see how you'd manage being stranded with these two. They're insufferable.*

*Hey. That's not fair. They need whatever comfort they can get.*

*Comfort is one word for it.*

*What else would you call it?* His hand moves to my cheek. Its warmth feels so real... so real.

*Rampant horniness, maybe?*

*And you say you wish I were there.*

I nudge at his shoulder. *Now you're just being childish.*

*It makes you smile, though.*

It does. Slowly, determined not to break the veil of the half-dream, I reach over to brush my fingers along the curve of his belt. I can feel his body heat bleeding through the taut fabric of his jacket.

*You want me to tell you what I'd do to you if you were here?*

*C'mon, that's just a tease.*

*Oh, yeah?*

*Yeah. I don't need you to tell me anything. I want you to show me.*

Damn it. He's got a certain sort of teasing that never fails to get me excited, even when I've been in the most sullen of moods. I don't think he even realizes the impact that he has on me. On my body.

*Right now? Right here?*

*Where else?*

I want to point out that we're in public, but I've just started to open my mouth when I realize that isn't true. The train car has faded away, leaving us in a strange, starry void. There's no sky above my head, no ground beneath my feet. I feel like I'm underwater, at the base of a deep crystal-lined pool, but I can breathe just fine.

Calix practically glows in the darkness. His fingertips lead trails of luminescence through the inky space. I press my own hands against both of his. His smile gleams against the shadow.

*I've missed this, he says.*

*Who's the sentimental one now?*

*Don't act surprised. You're the one who was always calling me a softie.*

His palms coast down my arms, cradling my waist and pulling me close. I'm not really surprised to find that both of us are naked; his member, already hard, presses hot and firm against me. I can't resist a sigh of pleasure as I rub myself gently against him. I love the way that my lips part around his firmness, teasing both of us as my entrance throbs with need.

Calix leans down to nip at my throat. My head falls back, giving him full access to the smooth arch of my neck. He's always been a biter. More curious than harsh, like he's savoring the flavor of me and my salty sweat. Though heavy-lidded, my eyes stay cracked open. Just enough to follow the sparkling shape of him, to watch the twist of his lean muscles as he wraps his arms around my waist to pull me closer. Our shoulders touch and my breasts swell as I flex my shoulders yet further, using my soft shape to fill his.

*Please, he whimpers. Please. I want to be inside of you.*

*Not just yet, big boy.* One of my hands slips down to his thighs. I curl my fingers along the underside of his cock. I can feel the blood flow fluttering beneath the smooth ridges of his

skin. Resisting my own need, I continue to tease him, tracing out the little semicircles that I know he loves so much.

*It's like you're really here, I sigh.*

*I know. It's like you are, too.*

I don't know what he means by that, but I'm too heated to care. Logic is the last thing on my mind while I'm floating in space, my body entwined with that of a silver-horned rebel alien. I palm his throbbing member and begin to play with him in earnest, curling my fingers more tightly, pressing him just to the point of pain before loosening up again. I know what he likes. And he knows what I like, too: those persistent little bites, his sharp nails dancing across the ripple of my spine, caressing me like something precious beyond belief.

When he finally enters me, my mouth falls open in a paroxysm of pleasure. Here, in this weightless void, there's nothing to restrain us, no gravity against which we must battle, only the allure of one another. I pull him closer and closer still, my hips rolling against his, while my hands entangle within his silken hair. I love exploring the strange protrusions of his horns, their whorls and curves, twisting like delicate tree branches. He's so *responsive*; every shift of my fingertips spurs a new sound or motion from him.

*I wish it could have stayed like this. I wish it could have stayed this easy.*

Not even my dream-self speaks the words aloud, yet he still replies.

*Me too. Maybe it will be again—someday.*

I can feel his voice thrumming through his hard-muscled chest as I curl against him. I've had my share of good dreams, but never anything like this—so visceral, so specific. I can feel each of his individual hairs brushing against my tingling fingertips, can hear every ragged breath from his lips as he thrusts harder against me, the motions so easy, so natural, so....

*Smooth.* I'm used to desperation from him. Insatiable thirst. He never disguises his want—never slows down. And he

isn't slowing now, either... but it feels different. Perhaps it's the void in which we're immersed, guiding our motions, letting him go deeper than ever, touching parts of me that I myself have never known.

A new sensation begins to radiate through me. Am I climaxing already? Calix is the fast one, not me—but there's no denying the deep, tingling shudders coursing through my core.

*No. This is something different.*

Something electric. Pouring through my whole body, from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. My feet flex, and my back arches; confounded and tantalized, I half-slacken against him, but he only grasps me all the more tightly. I need to hold on. If we fall away from one another, the charge between us will break. But if I keep going, finding more and more places for our skin to connect... my eyes are closed, but his silver glow burns through them, broadening, blinding, wrapping us in an icy corona of wild, shivering sensation—

“Trace.”

The void becomes a vacuum. I don't have time to resist before I'm snatched out of the silver-stained darkness, my body solely my own once more, thundering back into reality with a none-too-gentle jolt.

My eyes spring open. I'm soaked in sweat and shaky with need. Ivy is leaning over me, a hand on my shoulder.

*Shit.*

Did they see what... whatever just happened?

And, for that matter, what *did* just happen? I was asleep, or something like it....

But that wasn't a dream.

“Trace?” Ivy asks again, her brow furrowing. “Is everything okay?”

I look past her towards where Cassian is still seated. He seems immersed in his map again. Is he averting his eyes out of embarrassment, or is he just genuinely distracted? My

cheeks surge with heat as I imagine what they may have just witnessed. Thankfully I've never been one to talk in my sleep—I can only hope that my motions didn't betray me.

“Fine. Everything's fine.” I pull myself upright. My cheek is half-numb, imprinted with the harsh line of the window frame. “Just dozed off.”

The concern lessens slightly. “Yeah. Of course. You must be exhausted.”

“Is, um... are you? Okay, I mean?”

“I'm fine. We're here. Cassian says the bar is just a short walk away.”

*Bar?*

Wait—that's right. The bar where Jace is meeting us. Because we're still here, on this Duvalik planet. Calix is leagues away—a greater distance than I could possibly conceive.

But I *felt* him. I know I did. I've spent my whole life trusting my body, relying on the messages that it sends me, and right now, every cell of it is screaming with a single insistence:

*That was not a dream.*



## CHAPTER 9

## CALIX

I WAKE WITH A START, my heart banging in my ears.

*What just happened?*

My head pounds as I try to remember where I am. It's dark, but not the same darkness. The bizarre floating pool is gone, and Trace is gone with it—fumbling from one side to another, I can feel only empty air where I'm used to the curves of her sleeping form. Even the mattress feels different.

I can't make any sense of it. She was *right there*. We were closer than we'd ever been. And now she's gone without... well, without a trace.

*Am I losing it?*

My lungs heave, urging me back into reality one breath at a time. Right—of course, this isn't my mattress. I'm not in the barracks. Not on the jungle planet, either, or the ship....

Ixion. *That's it*. I'm back on Ixion, below the base. Lying on one of the thin bedrolls pilfered by the underground resistance. My arm aches faintly from yesterday's blood draw, which thankfully confirmed that my body hasn't been laced with any strains of secret bioweaponry. The air is thin and cold, seasoned with the mineral tang of the vast underground. It's dark, save for a scattering of safety lights that hang like stars from the stalactites above.

Trace isn't here.

She *was* here, though. I felt her. I'm absolutely sure of it. As Deryn was all too eager to point out, I've got a pretty



active imagination, but my mind alone couldn't possibly conjure anything on the level of what I just experienced.

I *felt* her. I felt her more profoundly than I can recall ever having done in the past. As a matter of fact, the vestiges of her touch are still lingering on my skin, soft and confident wherever her hands caressed me.

How can she already be gone again?

I close my eyes, but without any hope of falling back asleep. That's out of the question. If I could just reconjure her image.... No. It's useless. I can picture her well enough, but it's not the picture I miss, and physical sensation isn't so easily harnessed by the mind's eye.

What woke me up in the first place, anyway? This cavern is dark and silent as the grave. And whatever jerked me into awareness, it seems that it didn't bother anyone else.

It felt almost as though I weren't being pulled from the vision so much as *pushed* from it, like the inky cove where I'd found myself suddenly capsized, simply deleting the space that our bodies previously occupied.

*Trace? Can you... can you hear me?*

Nothing. Of course not.

I stare at the ceiling and wait, wide awake, for the underground's fabricated dawn.

It feels like hours before the others start to stir. The first to rise are farther away from me, on the outskirts of the sleeping bay. Women's whispers float over to me through the still air—none of them voices that I recognize, but still reassuring by virtue of their presence alone. I'd been starting to feel as though I was the only living thing in this vacuous stone pit.

Bit by bit, more lights bloom into existence. A broad-shouldered figure sits up on the cot beside me: Azrael, his movements uncharacteristically sluggish with drowsiness.

"Cherise?" he mutters.

The sound of his voice hurts my stomach. It's so easy for him: he can call out her name, and she's right there to respond,

already blinking the sleep out of her eyes as she reaches a hand out to him.

*You're one lucky maincher, Commander. What I wouldn't give....*

I'm not being fair, and I know it. Avann's partner is dead. The same can probably be said of Deryn's—I can't remember who matched with her, and I don't plan on prying. Trace, though—she's still out there. I can't sit back and give up now. She's waiting for me. Counting on me.

More lights buzz on. Conversations are beginning to fill my surroundings with a sleepy murmurs. Prominent among them is Deryn's voice, coming from the other side of Cherise and the Commander.

“Guess it's my job to play tour guide, right? Fuckin'... did Asa run off already?”

“Go get some breakfast.” I don't recognize the new voice. “I'll take care of them.”

“You sure?”

“Just be ready to owe me one.”

“Absolutely. You're a lifesaver.”

*Wait.* As much as Deryn gets on my nerves, I don't want to be stuck with a stranger—but by the time I manage to sit up, I can only make out her back receding through the miniature labyrinth of bedding. Perched on the mat adjacent to her is a girl with warm golden-brown skin and a wavy waterfall of black hair, her jaw currently flexed in a magnificent yawn as she stretches her arms high above her head.

“Mm... h'okay,” she says, scrubbing at her eyes with the heels of her hands. I immediately match her voice to the one that was speaking with Deryn. “Let's see... how many of you are there? Commander guy, I know you. Cherise, hi. And you?” She blinks clarity into her even brown gaze and tilts her head in my direction. “I've seen you around. Nice horns, bucko.”

My fingers instinctively lift to the top of my head. I can't tell if that was a compliment or an insult. She seems genuine enough, but it's always so hard with these humans; they'll lead you on for an hour before letting it slip that they've been laughing on the inside all along.

"Nice hair," I say. That ought to be a safe enough remark, right?

She smirks and tosses it back and forth. "Yeah, I bet it's all over the place right now. Shall we do introductions? I'm Blythe. Blythe Xanthos. And you are?"

"Calix." I catch myself on the edge of asking which soldier she was matched with. If her position's similar to Avann's, there would probably be no quicker way to earn her loathing.

"Calix, cool. And on your other side is...?"

"Avann Silvius."

*Kest*, I don't think I'm ever going to get used to the way Avann's voice sounds... and that's when he even bothers to talk. The stale silence is even worse. He used to possess a full, rich baritone, the type that could convince even the most stubborn people to listen to whatever he might have to say. Now, he sounds like his throat has dried to a husk.

Blythe isn't bothered. Of course, she doesn't have a basis for comparison. "All right. You four are gonna stick with me for the day. It's pretty exciting, you know—" Another yawn perforates the sentence. "We've only had one of your lot up until now. And I think he's getting pretty sick of being interrogated."

"Wait—what?" I'm on my feet before I even think about doing so. "There's another one? Another Ixionian?"

"Sure there is. Wester something. Asa Winters brought him down."

"*Mainching kest*—Wester?" I laugh despite myself. For the first time since getting down here, I'm actually relieved. "Crazy bastard, of course, he made it. Where is he now?"

She shrugs. “Beats me. I’m not his babysitter. We’ll run into him sooner or later.”

*Sooner or later* isn’t what I want to hear after learning that one of my best friends has somehow survived. I can argue with Blythe—but I can’t argue with Azrael, whose patience is far more extensive than mine and who’s currently nodding along with her every word.

“Fine,” he says. “Where to first?”

“Nutrish. Gotta have our fuel for the day. Right this way, gentlemen. Uh, gentlemen and Cherise.”

And with that less-than-elegant flourish, she leads us away from the bedding area, which is already being cleaned up by a couple of other women: they systematically take either end of each mat, roll it up, secure it, and toss it into a growing pile in one of the shallow recesses lining the cave wall. They’ve made it into a science.

That’s not the only routine these women have perfected, either. Kira, the medical student from before, is sitting beside a metal case, distributing something too small to see among the occupants of a single-file line. Blythe leads us to the back of it. I feel awkwardly childish, like I’m back in pre-military school waiting for my turn to use the washroom.

Blythe turns to face us, bouncing from one foot to the other as she explains what we’re looking at. “Rations are pretty sparse, so we stick to a single meal. You can get that whenever you want, so long as it’s no more than one per day—I’ll show you later. Morning nutrish is stim pills, ’cause we’ve got about thirty thousand of those. You still can’t take more than your designated allotment, though. That’s less a matter of limited supplies, more about doing our best to ensure nobody’s keeling over from a heart attack.”

It doesn’t take long to reach the front of the line. Kira smiles, her soft eyes glinting with recognition as she presses a couple of pills into my palm.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Biohazard. Sleep all right?”

“I’ve had better nights.”

“Haven’t we all?” The smile melts into an apologetic grimace. “But we’ll make it out of here.”

“Yeah. That’s the whole point of it all, right?”

“Exactly.”

With that, I pop the pills in my mouth and step aside. Kira has an equally cheery greeting for Avann, but he doesn’t return it. He doesn’t say anything at all, just accepts the capsules and pushes them one at a time past his cracked lips.

“So, here’s the deal,” Blythe says once we’ve all reconvened. She claps her hands twice, then rubs them together. “First rule is that the rules are changing, and I mean changing *all* the time. So take everything I tell you with a grain of salt.”

I’m not sure what salt has to do with it, but I think I get the gist—enough to nod along, in any case.

“For now, here’s what we’re working with. North corner, combat training. Some of us know a lot more than others, and we’re doing what we can to close the knowledge gap so that anyone is ready for a fight.” She gestures to the zone I noticed yesterday, where women were divided into sparring partners; right now, the few who are there seem to be occupied with warm-up stretches. “South, supply processing. We have a dedicated team to sort through the stuff that recon brings down from the surface. That’s *not* your concern, by the way—the last thing we need is someone else messing up the numbers. Pretty much everywhere else is devoted to recon and signal interception, which is where you *do* come in. We’re gonna need your knowledge of the base. Expect a whole lot of questions—especially you, Commander Emrys.”

“But the base is *gone*,” I say. “I mean—you weren’t up there after the last fight. The whole thing’s turned to ash.”

“Well, that’s one piece of info. Get ready to shell out about a thousand more.”

“So you’ve established a passable center of operations,” Emrys growls. *Passable* means he’s impressed, for sure—but

also that he's already found problems. "The work you've done is good, especially for untrained civilians."

"Well, thanks." Blythe shrugs. "Just doing our—"

"Still, I don't see an endpoint. You can't run a rebellion by treading water. What's your plan? How are you going to get the upper hand?"

I expect her to be fazed by his intensity, but she doesn't so much as blink. "That's gonna be largely up to you, I imagine."

Her comment actually catches him off guard, which is quite the sight to behold: he frowns and shifts his weight, doubtful shadows lingering over his eyes as he glares down at her. "Up to me?"

"You're our lucky catch, Commander. We know that soldiers are fighting on the surface. Our objective so far has been to strike up contact with them, but we haven't found any consistently safe lines of communication. We *can't* do this alone. With you and your men, we might be able to swing it."

"My men," he repeats.

I stare down at my boots. I know that I'm not his first choice of soldier for something like this—or his fifth, or even his eighth. Sure, I'm good at what I do, but all the raw skills in the world can't make up for my lack of experience, and I'm the youngest in the platoon. Avann, if anything, is worse off. As for Cassian... well, I can't even be sure whether Cassian is still alive.

"I know there aren't many of you left," Blythe says. "Not a whole lot of us, either. But we've come too far to give up now. We aren't stopping 'til they're done, or we're dead. So, what do you say? Are you with us?"

For a tiny, searing moment, I'm convinced that he's reached his limit. He still has Cherise. I wouldn't blame him if he chose to take her and run.

But Azrael Emrys doesn't give up that easily. He beckons with one gloved hand, glancing back towards me; I step up to his side without a second of hesitation.

“Count us in,” he says. “Where do we start?”

## CHAPTER 10





## TRACE

THE TRAIN STATION, if you can call it that, is practically nonexistent. Not so much as a turnstile stands between us and the array of low-roofed buildings that I can only assume to be downtown Jyrespa. Duvalik's hot, dry air aches against my throat, and there isn't a single plant in sight. I can't tell whether the grainy film coating everything is dust or sand, but either way, it's enough to crowd my throat with violent coughs.

Ivy is also hacking away into her sleeve. Cassian alone seems unbothered; he narrows his eyes into the grit-thick breeze, one hand raised to shield his gaze from the sun.

"There," he says suddenly. "That must be the place."

I follow his line of sight over to a squat, domed building with a sprawling bronze roof. To my surprise, the flickering neon letters hung over the cloth-draped door are in an alphabet that I can read: MATTALO & BROS FINE FOOD + DRINK.

"Fine food and drink," Ivy reads between coughs. Even her strained aspiration isn't enough to disguise the sarcasm in her voice. "Yeah, it sure looks like it."

"Let's go."

Ivy stays at Cassian's side, and I keep close behind them as they walk up to the door. Cassian shoulders it open. After the unforgiving brightness of the outdoors, the bar is too entrenched in shadow for me to make out a thing. A screen of odiferous smoke drifts through the air, carried along currents of hushed conversation in a dozen more languages that I don't recognize.

Great.

“This isn’t exactly my scene,” I mutter as we step inside.

“Tell me about it,” Ivy agrees. “I say we find Jace and get the hell out of this shithole.”

“Careful what you say around these parts,” Cassian says. “Locals can get awfully defensive of their home turf.”

She cringes. “Ugh. Right.”

Taboo or not, her words are spot-on. The whole place literally smells like shit. As my eyes gradually adjust, I manage to see that there’s no floor; we’re walking directly on top of some hard-packed brown stuff that I can only hope to be regular dirt.

My mind once again flits to Calix. To what I would say if he were here. I can imagine the way his lips would quirk, how he’d mutter some equally crude joke back to me out of the corner of his mouth. He always knows when not to take me seriously. He—

“Over there.” Cassian grabs Ivy’s wrist and moves to do the same with mine before quickly thinking better of it; instead, he uses it to point at a dirtied booth along the perimeter, where the familiar figure of Jace Kairos sits hunched over a chipped tankard.

He looks up as we slide in opposite him, and the pensive tilt of his mouth morphs into a grin of genuine relief. “You guys made it!”

“Wasn’t gonna let a train stop us now,” Cassian says. Their hands join in the middle of the table, and their laughter is so full that it’s hard to keep a smile off my own lips. “It’s good to see you, Jace.”

“You too, man.”

“Last I saw, you were a crumpled mess on the floor of Vestra’s private chambers.”

“And you left me there.” Jace tips his drink accusingly in Cassian’s direction. Despite the direness of their words, both men are still smiling. “I could’ve died, you know.”

“Hey, I thought you *were* dead.”

“Hey, boys?” Ivy interjects. “This is all super heartwarming, but could we maybe hurry things along a bit?”

Jace tosses back a swill of liquor, then nods and springs to his feet. “Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

He waves to a couple of other patrons as we depart the bar, murmuring greetings that I can’t quite make out.

“Looks like you’ve been making friends,” Ivy observes.

Jace laughs in a single harsh bolt of noise. “Friends, yeah. That’s one word for it. Exile gets pretty lonely—if you’d believe it.”

“Ugh. I can’t even imagine.”

After the reeking dankness of the bar, even Jyrespa’s seething heat is a relief. I blink the brightness out of my eyes, then turn to regard our host. Under the stark sun, I can get a better look at Jace, and what I see is enough to make my stomach drop.

He’s limping. Heavily. I don’t know how I didn’t notice it before, but one hand is clasped around the head of an old-looking metal cane, which he uses to pull himself forward step by painstaking step. From the way his lips press together, it’s obvious that he’s in no small amount of pain. And while I may not possess any real medical knowledge, I know how bodies work. This isn’t a temporary hindrance. Something in his right leg has been irreparably damaged.

I’m not the only one to pick up on it.

“Shit,” Ivy breathes. “You—”

“Yeah, I know.” He starts to move a bit faster, as though drawing attention to the injury makes him all the more determined to overcome it. “Tried seeing a doctor, but the people around here aren’t the type that you want poking around in your muscular system, if you know what I mean. They don’t make a habit of cleaning their instruments, for a start.”

Ivy winces. “That’s rough.”

“I did what I could. I think I can safely say that it didn’t, uh, heal correctly. But I make do.”

“I had no idea,” Cassian murmurs. “If I’d known you were so....”

“Oh, don’t bother. From what I hear, you weren’t in a position to do a thing. Now hurry up; you’re supposed to be the one with working feet, aren’t you?”

He leads us down an alley, past a number of ramshackle huts and food stalls populated by hawking merchants. When he finally swerves into a building, it’s so sudden that the rest of us nearly trip over each other.

“Quickly,” Jace mutters. “He doesn’t like bringing attention to himself.”

“Who’s ‘he?’” I can’t help but ask.

“Doesn’t like spreading his name, either. Let’s call him the shopkeeper.”

Once all of us are inside, Jace closes and bolts the door behind us. Dusty shafts of light lay golden fingers across several wooden shelves, some of them stocked with sacks of greenish burlap, but most are bare. A tiny creature skitters into the shadows from where it was helping itself to one of the bags, leaving a trail of dark grain in its wake.

“The shopkeeper?” Ivy repeats. “One hell of a shop.”

“You could say it’s a euphemism. He helps people out, mostly.”

A floorboard creaks.

“Helps people out as in... donates to children in need? Or ensures that people are, uh, never seen alive again?”

“To be honest, I avoid asking those questions.”

Jace makes his way to an empty shelf and knocks on its side with practiced familiarity. For a moment, nothing happens—then a low, splintering lurch fills the air, and the whole thing shifts aside, revealing a dark and craggy passage behind it. Aside from a line of flickering string lights stapled to the

ceiling, there's no illumination to be seen. At least the smell is decent. Unlike Mattalo's—and the outside, for that matter—the air seems fresh enough, filled only with a vague trace of sawdust.

“Cozy,” Ivy remarks.

“You'd be surprised. Come on.”

Jace waits for us to get inside, then pulls a lever to cover the entrance once more. A final *clunk* rattles the walls around us; flecks of plaster fall from the grimy ceiling, settling over our hair and shoulders like dry snow.

“When you said you had a place,” Cassian admits, “I wasn't picturing anything like this.”

“Well, Duvalik isn't known for its real estate. But it is known for its anonymity, and as far as that goes, I'd say I got a pretty sweet deal.”

I can't tell if the passage is actually narrowing or if I'm just imagining it. What I am sure of is the fact that it's positioned at a slight decline; by the time we've walked for five minutes, we're surely all the way underground. The lights are sparse but consistent, and it's not like there's any way to get lost... yet somehow, that doesn't quite manage to put me at ease.

“Almost there,” Jace says just as my chest is beginning to hitch with exertion. The walk itself isn't that far, but navigating over the bumpy ground is a workout in and of itself. I'm impressed that he manages to get past it so easily—though I suppose he had plenty of practice, having been stuck with the bad leg for however long now.

Calix would get a kick out of this. He loves anything that he deems to be adventurous. During the nights when neither of us were interested in sleeping together, I would pull out the tablet that I brought from home, loaded up with all my favorite old mystery stories. He was always happy to lie in bed beside me, arms folded behind his head, eyes half-closed as he listened to me read aloud. I would often think that he'd drifted

off to sleep, only for him to ask a question about an unfamiliar word or reference.

*What's a red herring?*

*Does it really get that cold on Earth?*

*The time you guys call the twentieth century... that was two hundred years ago, or three?*

For the most part, I was able to supply answers. But neither of us had ever managed to figure out what a “deerstalker” was supposed to be.

*Once this is all over, I'll tell you everything, I promise him silently. The weird smells, the tiny lights, the hidden passage. Every last detail.*

Ivy is the first to notice the door at the end of the tunnel. She picks up her pace, tugging Cassian along beside her. “Up here—this must be it, right, Jace?”

“Go ahead and open it.”

She shoots him a dubious look, then shrugs and does so. Though carved of wood, this door doesn't seem to be disguised as the back of a shelf. It swings open easily at her touch, and the four of us step into the place where Jace has been living for all these months.

*Oh. Oh, wow.*

The room isn't big, but it doesn't need to be. We're standing at the top of a slope leading into a sunken ring. Poised in the center of the ring is an old-fashioned swivel chair. Other than that, there's not a piece of furniture in sight. Instead, every last inch of the circular walls is covered with electronics. Monitors of all shapes and sizes, knobs and levers, buttons and switches... whatever this monstrosity of a machine is, I'm willing to bet that someone could dedicate their whole life to figuring out all of its intricacies.

And while Jace may not have had a whole life to spare, he sure has had a lot of time on his hands as of late.

“This is insane,” Ivy breathes.

“I’ll take it you mean that in a positive way.” Jace limps briskly past us and over to the chair, where he seems more than a little relieved to finally take a seat. At once, his hands are flashing across the switchboards, moving faster than my eyes can follow them. “Yeah. It’s a whole lot of old equipment, but it gets the job done, more or less. I’ve gotten pretty fond of it, to be honest.”

Cassian shakes his head in awed disbelief. “You must be able to connect to anywhere in the galaxy from here.”

“That’s the idea. And it’s been going all right so far. I got you all here, after all.”

I step forward cautiously. Surrounded by so much technology, I can’t help feeling as though breathing the wrong way would be enough to screw something up. “What about Ixion? I mean Ixion itself, not just its fleet. Can you connect to the planet?”

“Yeah. Found a few ports. That’s how I spoke with the resistance, planned everything out.”

I can’t tell if he’s avoiding my eyes or if he’s genuinely fixated on whatever he’s typing out. *Oh, come on.* If there’s any time to abandon the awkwardness between us, surely it’d be now. I elect to keep talking, pretending that I don’t notice the preoccupation that he’s most likely feigning.

“It seems like planning everything out didn’t go so well. The base was destroyed by the time we got there.”

“Right.” He grimaces. “And my signals have been dead ever since then.”

“You need to fix them.”

“Trace....” Ivy says.

I ignore her. She’s dragged me this far. It’s time for me to start calling the shots.

“You need to fix them, and you need to find Calix Callisto. Chances are he’s with your Commander Emrys—maybe Avann Silvius, too. We aren’t going to get much farther without them.”

Jace nods slowly. “Okay. Got it.”

“And make sure to—”

Vertigo tumbles through my head, skewing the whole room sideways. I only just manage to catch myself on the edge of one of the machines. The others are saying something, voices raised in concern, but I can’t make out the individual words.

*What the hell...?*

“I’m fine,” I mumble, unsure if that’s a proper answer to any of their questions. “Just tired.”

I *am* tired, but that’s not what’s going on here. My stomach reels. Am I sick? Have I been poisoned?

To my relief, Jace’s voice begins to take on a recognizable shape again. “There’s only one cot,” he’s saying, “but I figure we can sleep in shifts?”

The others chorus their agreement. Hands are on my shoulders, too soft to be anyone but Ivy’s. Someone must flip a lever somewhere because a strip of metal below one of the screens suddenly slides away. A long stretcher extends from the empty space, complete with a rumpled sheet and an inch-thick mattress. To my inexplicably weakened body, it may as well be a waterbed.

“Ixion,” I say as Ivy guides me into a horizontal position. The countless screens and glowing points of light spin before me in a bleary matrix. Whatever’s happening, I’m not going to let them off the hook. “Contact Ixion. Find Calix.”

I don’t have time to hear Jace’s response before the darkness closes over me.





## CHAPTER 11

## CALIX

I KNOW that the work we're doing is important. Irreplaceable. I know that our arrival has changed everything for the fate of these women, the fate of the rebellion, and the fate of our planet. I understand that the value of each word from my mouth can't possibly be underestimated.

But, *kest*, I'm bored.

"Do you know what the reinforcing metal is called?" asks my curly-haired interrogator. I've already forgotten her name. Actually, I'm not sure if she ever told me. She's barely looked up from her tablet, where she's jotting down every word I say at a pace that's exhausting just to watch.

"The reinforcing metal?" I repeat, frowning.

"On the hangar. You said that it was imbued with something that helped it to resist damage."

"Oh... right. No, uh... no. I have no idea what it's called."

"Hmm. And do you know anyone who would?"

"The Commander, maybe?" I dig my heel into the floor and tilt my chair onto its back legs, shifting until it teeters on the very edge of a backwards collapse. Over the last several hours, I've gotten pretty good at that particular trick. "You'd have better luck with, I don't know, an engineer. Or a maintenance worker."

*Or literally anyone other than me.*

"Fine." She snaps the tablet shut and rises from her own stool, an action that barely does a thing to increase her height.

“I’m going to go cross-reference these notes with my coworkers. I’ll be back shortly. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I mutter as the heavy white tarp falls shut behind her.

I don’t know how long I’ve been in here. Pretty much as soon as Blythe was done giving us her little overview, we were dumped into a series of tent-like cubicles, more or less the same as the makeshift med-bay where Kira took my blood yesterday. Whatever this canvas-like material is, they sure have a lot of it. It serves the dual purpose of being effectively soundproof and utterly exhausting to look at. The sheer blankness makes me feel as though my sanity is draining out of my body, to the point where I half-jokingly wonder whether that’s their very plan.

I tip the chair forward, then back again. Top-tier entertainment, that.

*Hey, Trace. Is this stuff thrilling, or what?*

I don’t expect her to reply—that would be ridiculous—but the ringing silence still feels like a bit of a punch in the gut.

The thing is that I’m sure there was *something*. Whatever happened last night, it’s not leaving me alone. And I don’t want it to, either. As soon as darkness falls again—or, to be more specific, as soon as the women decide to engage the switches that arbitrarily deem it to be nighttime—I’m jumping right into bed and getting to work to see if I can find a way to feel her again.

It’s not even about the sex. Well—it’s not *only* about the sex. I can’t deny the fact that I wouldn’t mind getting the time to finish properly. But more important than that by a long shot is the connection itself, the tangibility, the certainty that what I felt was her genuine, objective presence. It was surreal in the best of ways, and I want it back. Need it back.

*Mainch* it. Who knows how long the curly-haired girl is going to take this time? She’s been through several note-comparing sessions already, and they never seem to yield any worthwhile results.

*Do me a favor, and don't have a random breakthrough this time, okay? I need a moment to myself.*

I close my eyes. That's a start. Still, the tent's white tarp burns through them, leaving me in a pathetic imitation of darkness that's nowhere near the inky immersion of last night's not-dream.

*Get it together.*

Focus. If I can focus, I can find her. I need to believe that.

How did last night begin...?

Her voice. That's it. Half-asleep, drifting in half-dreams, I could have sworn that I heard Trace's voice calling my name.

*Calix.*

She said that she missed me. I teased her for that, saying that it'd only been a couple of days... she said that she wished I was there with her. I remember admonishing myself a bit for that. The real Trace would never be so sentimental... and I told her that, too, or something like it. I called her wonder girl. I've learned over time that she rolls her eyes at most nicknames, but she seems to have a fondness for that one. I don't even remember how it started... probably at some point during our combat practice, when I realized just how capable she is of kicking my ass.

I try invoking it now. Might as well start somewhere.

*Hey, wonder girl. How's life in the void?*

No response, of course, but I find that I don't mind. It's nice just to pretend I'm talking to her, to imagine that she can hear me, wherever she is.

*Me, I'm dying of boredom. I mean, who knew that a rebellion could be so quiet? It makes me miss fighting with you. Then again, pretty much everything makes me miss fighting with you....*

Dizziness swirls through me. *Kest.* I must be focusing too hard, forgetting to breathe. It wouldn't be the first time.

*Then again, for all I know, you're like a hundred times more bored than me. Better bored than in pain, at least. I'm pretty sure you aren't in pain. I mean, maybe it's just idealism, but I feel like I would know if you were. Does that make any sense? Of course, it doesn't. Oops—almost forgot to breathe again, there. Have I ever mentioned that I'm a massive idiot? Well, you don't need me to tell you that. As a matter of fact—*

*Calix?*

My heart stutters and twists like it's made of rubber.

*Trace?*

I'm kidding myself. I must be. Did I actually fall asleep? That'd be a whole new level of boredom... but no, I can't question it. I'm vaguely aware of my eyes flitting beneath their lids. Whatever this is, I'm going to hold onto it with everything I've got.

*You're here.* Her voice is so clear, grasped by that specific wondering tone, that she always reserves for moments of genuine fascination. Like when I told her how it never snowed on Ixion, no matter how cold it got. She really liked that one for some reason.

*Yeah. I'm here. Full disclosure, though—I'm not really sure what 'here' is.*

*It's the place where you are.*

I roll my eyes internally. *Yeah, okay. You got me there.*

*I can't see you. I want to see you.*

Her honesty is heartbreaking.

*I want to see you, too.*

*So why aren't you looking?*

Looking. Right. The trick is going to be opening my eyes in the dream space without also doing so in real life. I start with something smaller. A flick of my wrist, a curl of my fingertips. So far, so good... if I ignore the pressure steadily mounting in the back of my skull. I don't remember that from

before. Maybe it was just overshadowed by the breadth of pleasure filling the rest of my body.

*Calix?*

*I'm trying. It's hard.*

*Can you feel me?*

I flex my hand again. I can feel *something*, all right... cool, smooth.

*Is that you?* Ugh. I feel like my head's collapsing in on itself. My eyes throb viciously. No hope of opening them now. *Trace? Is that you?*

*Calix?*

*I'm here, I—*

*Calix? Calix?*

*Calix?*

“Calix?”

That's not right. *Come back, hold on—hold on....*

“Calix, hey, can you hear me? Can you move your hand again?”

I respond with the most articulate comment I can muster: “Ugh.”

“Good. That's good. You're okay.”

I know this voice. It's soft, careful... I can't quite place it, but I know it doesn't belong to Trace.

*Kest.* I screwed up.

Then more of my surroundings begin to fade into place, and I realize that I *really* screwed up.

I'm on my back, my shoulders and elbows stinging. My lungs are full of the mineral edge I've come to understand as the mark of the caverns below Base 57. A headache pulses on and off like a ball being tossed between my temples. A barbed ball, maybe.

“Calix?” the woman asks again.

“Ow.”

“Yeah, I can believe that. It looks like you took quite a spill. But you’re okay; you’re okay.”

The more she says that, the less convinced I feel. Never in my life has someone telling me I’m ‘okay’ been a *good* sign.

“He’ll be fine. Just give him some space, all right? You can ask your questions later.”

Someone else murmurs some words that I don’t quite catch, followed by footsteps, and then the first girl again. This time, I manage to put a name to her voice. It’s that medical student. Kira.

“We’re alone now, Calix. You’re okay.”

“What,” I mumble, “am I *okay* or something?”

She laughs—a sweet, genuine sound, not patronizing in the least. It reminds me of... well. Don’t even need to say it.

“Do you know what happened back there?”

I dart a tongue over my lips. My whole mouth is uncomfortably dry. I try cracking my eyes open, only for the flood of bright light to send them squeezing shut again.

“Hold on, Calix. I need to check your pupils.”

“My... pupils?”

“That’s right. From the sound of it, you hit your head. I just need to make sure that you aren’t concussed.”

I grit my teeth and force my eyes open. They sting and water as Kira’s light scopes them out, but she’s mercifully brisk.

“Looks fine to me. But I’m happy to tell them otherwise, if you need an excuse to stay out of questioning for the rest of the day.”

“Kira—wait. What’s your last name?”

“Huh?” Concern heightens the pitch of her voice. Through slitted eyelids, I can see that her lips are pursed in confusion. “What...?”

“Just tell me. Last name. Please.”

“Um. Kane.”

“Kira Kane,” I say, “you are an actual lifesaver.”

She snorts and sits back. “You scared me for a moment, there.”

“I’m a scary guy. Want to tell me what the *kest* is going on?”

“You really don’t know?”

I try to shake my head, only for pain to rocket through it once again. Better to stick to verbal responses, for now, I guess. “I really don’t. Please, enlighten me.”

“Well, I mean, I don’t really know either. You were alone. There was a... a crash, I guess, and then Nissa came back and found you unresponsive on the floor.”

Nissa. Right. I suppose that’s the name of my delightful interrogator, though I still don’t remember her telling it to me.

“They called me over, and you were still out of it when I got here, but only for a few seconds. All in all, it couldn’t have been more than a couple of minutes, which is probably fine. The bigger concern is whatever caused you to collapse in the first place.”

The more I hear, the more I wish we could just leave the whole topic behind. I don’t even want to begin imagining how Azrael is going to react to the news, not to mention Deryn. And I know better than to think there’s any chance of keeping my predicament a secret somewhere as enclosed as this *mainching* cavern.

“My guess,” Kira continues, “is either exhaustion or dehydration. Likely both. You’ve been through a lot over the last couple of days.”

“Mm. You can say that again.”

“I’m just grateful you didn’t pass out when I was taking your blood yesterday. That would’ve been a real pain.”



“Ugh. Don’t make me think about it,” I mutter. Bit by bit, I manage to lift myself into a sitting position. My head still hurts, but it’s not as overwhelming as before. My consciousness has fully returned now, and the prevailing sensation throughout my whole body is utter and complete confusion.

“You don’t have any idea, do you? What could’ve caused it? And please don’t be embarrassed to say anything; it’s for your own good.”

A lie is primed on my tongue. It would be so easy to deny it, say that I don’t have a clue what might’ve caused whatever just happened.

But, weirdly enough, I *want* to tell her the truth. Not out of any concern for my own health, but because there may well be a chance, however slight, that someone with her knowledge could understand what’s going on.

“Okay,” I say. “This is going to sound *mainching* insane.”

“Try me.”

I blink some more of the blurriness out of my eyes. I can mostly make her out now: Kira is sitting back on her heels, arms crossed, peering at me with genuine curiosity.

“Well... I was sort of trying to do something.”

She says nothing. I take that as a cue to continue.

“A really weird thing happened last night. And I swear I wouldn’t be telling you if I didn’t think it was real, or at least important, or... I don’t even know. I made, like... I guess you’d call it a psychic connection.”

“A psychic connection?” Kira repeats. She doesn’t seem to be mocking me, but maybe she’s just good at hiding it.

“Maybe that’s not what I should call it. But I swear—seriously, Kira, I *swear*, I made some sort of contact with....”

And now there’s this. The constant conundrum. Trace and I call each other partners, which is easy enough, but it’d be all too easy for someone else to misconstrue the word. ‘Mate’ is even worse.

“...With the girl I was with from the exchange program. Trace Morrow. She’s... I mean, she’s my best friend, and I lost track of her during that last fight. So maybe it’s survivor’s guilt or whatever, but—” I can’t even finish my own sentence. Not due to fearing the possibility, but just because I genuinely don’t believe it. “No. No, I would bet anything that I actually communicated with her. We talked. We...” Okay, nope. She doesn’t need to know that part. “Well, anyway, I’d never felt anything like it. I don’t know what else to say.”

“And you were trying to find that connection again, just now?” Kira taps her little flashlight, the one she used to check my pupils, against her lower lip. “Or am I not understanding?”

“No, yeah. That’s exactly what happened. I tried reaching out to her again, and it was... working? I think? Sort of? And then I was waking up on the floor, with you telling me I was okay or whatever.”

For a long while, she says nothing. I fill the silence by testing my arms and legs, making sure that I didn’t twist anything on the way down. The longer I sit here, the more confused I feel. Confused and embarrassed and about seventy other things to boot.

“I’ve never heard anything like that,” Kira says at last. “And—sorry if this is stupid, but... psychic connections, or whatever... they’re not normal for Ixionians?”

I chuckle, then grimace. “Sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you, I promise. I just...”

“No, I get it. Like I said, stupid question.”

“Not as stupid as the *kest* I’m spewing.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t say that. You’re telling the truth, right? I mean, maybe you are delusional. That’s the easiest explanation. But the more time I spent in med school, the more I realized that simplicity and accuracy are rarely companions. Occam’s Razor be damned.”

At this point, she may as well be speaking a different language. I just nod along, silently thinking that Occam can do whatever he pleases with his personal hygiene products.

“My only guess right now... well, I wouldn’t even call it a guess, really—but I wonder if it had something to do with the signal.”

“The... signal?” I repeat, feeling stupider than ever.

“Oh... it’s just pseudoscience, really. But yeah, the people working on our connections picked up a transmission right around when you would have collapsed. There’s only circumstantial evidence that things like radio waves can interfere with mental functions, so I seriously doubt that’s it...” She trails off.

“Well?” I prompt.

“Hm?”

“What was the transmission?”

“Oh—we couldn’t figure it out. Too scrambled. Probably wasn’t even meant for us.” With that, she rises to her feet. “I need to get back to work, but I’ll keep brainstorming. In the meantime, just... please let someone know if you start feeling weird again, okay? I’ll go ahead and tell Nissa that you’re out of commission for the day.”

“Appreciate it.” I take her proffered hand and pull myself to my feet. My knees feel a little watery, but other than that, I seem pretty much normal.

“It’s my job. Oh, and Calix?”

“Yeah?”

“*Hydrate*,” Kira implores and smiles as she leaves the tent.

## CHAPTER 12



## TRACE

MY HEAD HURTS. Not just a faint ache, either—the rusty grasp of dehydration has its claws rooted firmly and irrevocably in my temples. My mouth is dry, too... and as my awareness fades in, so do other nodes of pain. Like my whole body has spent a good couple of hours rattling around in a human-sized blender.

I haven't been hungover since I was a teenager. Did I drink last night, after so many years of temperance? What could've prompted me to screw up so badly? It doesn't make any sense... but my bleary thoughts can't conjure up any other explanation for the soreness and the amnesia lacing through me.

*What....*

I crack my eyes open, and my memories begin to fall back into place.

No wonder everything hurts so badly—I've been sleeping on this metal slab that serves as Jace's excuse for a bed. The screens and controls hum all around me, as glaringly vivid as ever. It doesn't take me long to set eyes on the others: Jace in his chair, Cassian and Ivy bent over his shoulders to scrutinize whatever's glowing on the readout in front of them.

*Think, Trace.* What happened to me? I remember the sudden wave of exhaustion, more potent than anything natural. I managed to lie down, and moments later, I was asleep... or sort of asleep. Stuck in that same void. But Calix wasn't there... or was he?

Trying to remember makes the headache worse. It seemed almost like he was calling for me, and I was reaching out to him, and then... nothing. No brush of his fingertips against mine—only that dwindling voice as he shrank away into the darkness that surrounded me.

I sit up slowly. The metal cot creaks and Ivy's eyes find mine; relief shines clear in her eyes.

“Trace. There you are. How do you feel?”

The other two quickly turn towards me as well. Concern is written across both of their faces. I hate it—I've always hated the feeling of people worrying about me. As if I can't take care of myself... though, to be fair, I guess I've given these guys every reason to believe as much.

“I'm fine,” I say. Half a lie, but it's all they're gonna get from me. I could tell them about the not-dreams and how I felt Calix's presence so acutely... but chances are they'd just start treating me like a basket case, and that would be doing everyone a disservice. I need to figure out what's going on for myself first. Then I'll consider sharing it.

“Adjusting to a new atmosphere can be exhausting,” Jace says. “More so than you expect. It creeps up on you.”

“Yeah, that's probably it.” I just want to move on from this—especially because Ivy looks far from convinced, and I'm not in the mood to be scrutinized by her right now. “Anyway—it's been a while, right? You guys must have made some progress.”

“An hour or so,” Ivy says.

Jace nods and swerves back around toward his screen. “I have a few lines out on Ixion, but no trace of Calix so far. Are you sure he's there?”

“Pretty sure.”

“I'll keep looking. Wouldn't be surprised if he's trying to keep a low profile.”

*Not from me. He wouldn't hide from his partner.*

“I thought I was picking something up just a couple of minutes ago, actually, but that’s gone dead. Possibly cloaking technology at work—if it is, it’s pretty smooth. Just fell completely off my radar.”

I swing my stiff legs onto the floor, wincing as the tired muscles spark with pins and needles. “Completely off your radar?”

“Any more detail is just a bunch of jargon. I’m gonna see what I can do. I want to find him too, Trace.”

I’m surprised by the candor in his voice. “You guys were friends?”

“I always got along with him better than most, I would say. Not that he was tough to befriend; most people just didn’t bother.”

My eyebrows dip. Calix never said anything about being a loner. If anything, I’ve always found him charismatic, if a little awkward, around the edges.

“What do you mean they didn’t bother?”

“Oh, you know—the youngest member of the squad, a bit of a romantic, a little trigger happy—though he’s gotten better at that, last I heard. It was easy to poke fun at him, so a lot of people did. And if you made yourself out to be his friend, you were setting yourself up for that same kind of humiliation.”

Juvenile behavior for professional soldiers, though I suppose those on Earth aren’t any better. From what I hear, the military often brews chauvinism more efficiently than the locker room of an underfunded secondary school.

“In any case,” Jace continues, “I’m sure you were good for him. *Are* good for him. He seemed to like you a lot.”

If he’s attempting to assuage the awkwardness of the exchange, it isn’t working very well. I purse my lips and look down at the scratched concrete floor. If I wanted to inflame things, I could ask him whether the woman he chose over me was ‘good for him’—but there’s too much at stake for me to dwell on stale resentment. Maybe this is even his way of apologizing, however pathetic it may be.

“I am,” I say instead. “Good for him, I mean.” Certain and unapologetic. Jace can take that however he’d like. “And that’s why I’m not going to leave him alone, wherever he is.”

“Of course. I won’t, either. Let me just—”

He’s cut off by a rapid pounding at the door. I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound, just barely managing to catch myself on the edge of the sleeping pallet. The sound comes again. *Bang, bang, bang*—just somebody knocking, but the effect is amplified tenfold in the tiny chamber.

“Jace?” Ivy hisses. “What the hell is that?”

Jace’s expression has gone stone cold. “Probably nothing good.”

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

“Are you accustomed to, um... visitors?” Cassian asks, his voice barely more than a breath.

Jace doesn’t reply, which is an answer in and of itself. Grasping his cane, he heaves himself to his feet and hurries to the door as fast as his leg will allow him.

“Kardo? Is that you?”

The voice from the other side is strangely accented, more Earthly than Ixionian, but with a raspy undercurrent that seems almost reptilian.

“Jace. You need to leave right now.”

Shit.

*What the fuck?* Ivy mouths in my general direction. I just shake my head.

“What do you mean, leave right now? Here, I’ll let you in —”

“No!”

The voice is so forceful that Jace freezes with one hand inches from the door handle.

“No, Jace. You leave. Anyone you brought with you—they need to leave, too. I don’t want trouble.”



How does this person—Kardo, I guess, presumably the one that Jace was calling the ‘shopkeeper’ before—have any idea that the rest of us are here? Are we being watched?

Judging by the hard clench of his jaw, Jace is just as puzzled as the rest of us. He takes a deep breath, opens his mouth to speak, then pauses and seems to think better of it. When his next words come out, they’re grating and measured, stretched with false patience.

“All right. I just need to finish a couple of things up. I’ll be gone by the end of the day.”

“Not soon enough; I don’t want trouble!” Kardo insists again. I wish Jace would open the door. Something about the disembodied voice has me feeling leery, as though there might be more people listening in from the other side.

“Come on, now—when have I ever given you any trouble?”

“Things change, Jace.” He sounds nearly on the verge of tears. I’d chalk it up to hysteria, but this isn’t just some innocent townsman; this is a person who owns an elaborate secret hideout, tucked away through a covert passage and disguised as some sort of supply store. Someone, in other words, who ought, by all means, to be prepared for any so-called trouble.

Whatever could have upset him this much is no laughing matter.

“I’ve been a good tenant, haven’t I?” Desperation is crawling into Jace’s tone. “I paid in advance. You know that I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“I’m sorry. *You need to leave.* Now.”

Jace takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair.

“Give me an hour, Kardo. You’ll never know I was here.”

“I’ll do everything I can. Be well.”

“You too, man... you too.”

Footsteps thunder down the hallway. Just one pair of them, from the sound of it—I don't know whether to consider that a good sign or a bad one.

“Is he serious?” Ivy asks, the syllables dropping like stones into the ringing silence that follows. We all know that the question is rhetorical.

“I... I'm sorry.” Jace shakes his head. “I have no idea what he's thinking—I mean, he never....”

They all seem incapable of doing anything more than staring at one another in dismay.

Fine. If no one else is going to take charge, I guess I will.

“We can worry about reasoning later,” I say. “If he wants us to get out, we need to get out.”

“I don't have anywhere else to go,” Jace says again.

“We'll figure it out together. But right now, we need to *move*.”

For a single horrible instant, I'm certain he's about to argue further—but then he sighs and dips his head in acquiescence.

“Okay. I'm going to need your help—all of you. There's a solid terabyte of data in these machines that we can't afford to leave behind. If we work together, we can extract a good chunk of it. I'm going to have to wipe the rest. Maybe Kardo's just being paranoid, but if not....” He shakes his head. “*Kest*, I should have been expecting this. *Everything* is here. Plans, maps, comm codes... if someone busts this open, the entire movement is good as dead.”

“Just tell us what to do,” Cassian says.

Ivy nods firmly, folding her arms.

“Thank you... all of you.” Jace heaves a breath. “There should be memory sticks in the cabinet under the bed. There are six or so different ports that we can utilize simultaneously. Everything's labeled pretty well—Cassian, you do maps. Ivy on the codes. And Trace, can you handle the spec data?”

His eyes, frost-green, lock with mine. Something shifts in his face that I can't describe. For a moment, beneath the exhaustion and emaciation darkening his features, I can almost see the cheery soldier who joked about our names rhyming so long ago.

He hasn't forgotten. Not any more than I have.

Strangely enough, his silent acknowledgment makes it feel less important than ever. We're both different people now. And I'm not here for him. I'm here for Ixion. I'm here for Calix.

"Show me what you need," I say, "and it's good as done."



## CHAPTER 13

## CALIX

COMMANDER EMRYS, not very shockingly, is displeased.

“This isn’t enough,” he says bluntly once we all reconvene, this time with Deryn and Asa joining us.

We’re in the corner previously taken up by the beds, huddled close together; though they pretend otherwise, the others in the cavern are stealing glances towards us whenever they think they can pull it off.

“Hours of interrogation, and you’ve gotten no further? What about the broken transmission? Vestra isn’t just going to sit around and wait for us to take our time launching an insurrection against him.”

Blythe winds her fingers into her wavy hair and tilts her chin back, frowning towards the stalactite-ridden roof looming far above. Asa exchanges a glance with Deryn, who nods.

“As we’ve said, that’s why you’re here, Commander,” Asa says. “You have strategy; we have force. We just need to know where to apply it.”

“It’s not *enough*,” Emrys insists. “These are highly trained soldiers, and you—”

“We took you down easily enough, didn’t we?” Deryn interjects.

I can’t stop my eyebrows from shooting upward. That’s a bold play. Even the other women look a little alarmed by her obstinance.

“What?” She shrugs broadly, hands upturned. “It’s true. We’ve got the element of surprise in our favor. You four came with us because we made you think that you didn’t have a choice.”

“Wrong,” Emrys says. The heel of his boot grinds against the stone. “We went with you because you clearly weren’t loyalists. In times like this, anyone with a mutual enemy should be considered an ally.”

Blythe’s wayward expression snaps back into focus, and her hair tumbles down in a dark cloud as she thrusts out her hands emphatically. “Yes! See, this is the kind of insight we’re looking for!” Her voice echoes through the cave, effectively dissolving any last bit of surreptitiousness that we’d been maintaining.

“Insight,” Deryn repeats, rolling her eyes.

Asa takes a step forward into our little circle, one palm held up for silence. “Fine. We hear you, Commander. So, who are our other allies, and how do we get to them?”

That’s enough to shut everyone up for the time being.

They’re all thinking hard, but when I try to do so, I’m only rewarded with a surging headache. Though I followed Kira’s instructions and hydrated to the point that honestly felt extreme, I don’t have much to show for it so far—aside from an aching bladder, that is. I’m starting to think that the only way to clear my head will be a decent night’s sleep, yet I’ve never felt more bracingly awake.

“I have an idea,” a new voice rumbles from behind me.

No, that’s not right. This voice isn’t new. As a matter of fact, it’s wonderfully, wonderfully familiar.

“Wester?” A grin springs to my lips as I whirl around. “You *maincher*, where have you been hiding all day?”

“Some of us have work to do. Beyond swooning in interrogation rooms, that is.”

Wester Sabine stands half a head above me, strong-jawed and crimson-skinned, his broad lips twisted into a familiar

smile atop his thick dark beard. He looks just like I remember, combat jacket and all, with one notable exception.

“You’ve gone bald,” I observe.

“Shaved my head, you mean.” He scowls in mock offense. “It’s a matter of practicality, Callisto. You wouldn’t understand.” He tugs at one of my overgrown locks for good measure, hard enough to make my eyes water.

“Right. Because you’re ever so famous for your practicality.”

“Save the flirting, boys,” Emrys snaps. I roll my eyes and stand aside to give him room to approach. He scrutinizes Wester up and down before giving a tiny nod of approval. “Sabine. It’s good to see you.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

“But there’s no time to waste on salutations. You said you had an idea. What is it?”

Wester, as always, pulls off a seamless segue from lightheartedness to stark professionalism. “There are more soldiers on the base who have defected. They’re waiting for an opportunity to join us, but we’ve hidden too thoroughly. They don’t know where to look.”

“And why haven’t you retrieved them already?”

“We tried,” Deryn says. “You think we were running around on the surface during a deadly firefight for the fun of it? Just our luck that we happened to snag the few soldiers who *also* didn’t have any idea what was going on.”

“Deryn,” Asa says suddenly, “let’s go get everyone else back on task. We don’t need every ear in the cavern listening in on this.”

She drags the shorter woman off without waiting for a reply.

Even Emrys can’t disguise his relief. He lets out a small sigh before nodding at Wester.

“Go on.”

Wester is quick to obey. “The heat of battle isn’t really fertile grounds for recruitment. It is one thing, though: a chance for us to snag an extra fighter here and there, since some quick helmets are enough to disguise anyone’s identity in a situation like that. But to implement a real movement, we need to infiltrate the base itself. And that’s something that human women won’t be able to pull off—nor will a solitary soldier. Now that there are more of us...” He gestures broadly towards Emrys, Avann, and me. “Give me a partner, and I’ll get the job done.”

The Commander narrows his jet-black eyes, mouth twisting in contemplation. “You won’t last. Security must be ramped up to max.”

“Security?” I repeat, making no attempt to disguise my bafflement. “Sir, what security? The place is *pulverized*. I’d be surprised if they haven’t completely relocated by now.”

“They won’t relocate,” Wester says, shaking his head; his long ruby horns bow with the weight of the motion.

“He’s right—they won’t,” Emrys agrees. “MB57 may be in rough shape, but no part of the outside world will be half as sturdy as whatever remains. If the remaining soldiers are anywhere, they’re there.”

“Let Calix and I go,” Wester says.

“Uh, sure,” I mutter. “Go ahead and volunteer my ass.”

“You’re the youngest soldier on the base. Avann’s been around for ages, and everyone knows the Commander. But you and I? We can pull off anonymity if we need to.” He winks. “Besides, it’ll be like old times. Sim partners, remember?”

Working together for a training simulation is a far cry from traversing an active battlefield littered with genuine blaster bolts... and yet I can’t deny that there’s something a bit tempting to the prospect. Wester and I always were a solid team. And he makes a good point about me being unrecognizable, loathe as I may be to admit it. I doubt a single person outside of our platoon would know my name, much



less the fact that I've stationed myself firmly on the side of the rebels.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, we could pull it off."

"Whoa," Blythe protests. "So we finally got more soldiers on our side, and now we're using them as cannon fodder? And you...." She waves toward me. "Are you really that... undistinctive? You glow silver, for fuck's sake."

She glances towards Cherise, perhaps looking for support. But the slim redhead is silent as ever, wide-eyed and grim-faced, while she catalogs everything transpiring around her. The careful mode of observation reminds me of Trace. Then again, what doesn't? I see parts of her everywhere, in the corners of the other women's gestures, the particular notes hit by their vastly varied voices. Never real. Never complete.

"Let me think," Emrys snaps. His eyes are angled to the ground, lower lip caught beneath his sharp front teeth.

"We'll give you space." Wester nudges me on the shoulder, his next words a low murmur. "Quick word?"

I let him pull me aside. As soon as we're a decent distance from the others, leaning against a wide fissure in the wall, the facade of casualness drops like a curtain from his face.

"What's going on?" he demands, his thick brows cast low over his eyes.

I swallow. "What do you mean?"

"Emrys. Avann. They aren't acting like themselves. *Kest*, even you seem more distant than usual. They pumping the air full of toxins up there, or what?"

"I hope not," I reply automatically, "seeing as Kira's tests didn't pick anything up."

"I'm serious."

"So am I! I don't know what you're talking about." The whisper rasps harshly against my throat. "What do you mean, I'm *distant*? We've been talking for, like, two seconds."

“Since when does Avann act like a *mainching* robot? And Emrys, actually listening to people? You sure they didn’t switch bodies?”

“It’s nothing... it’s incidental,” I say, forcing an exaggerated shrug.

“Nope. Not buying it.”

I guess we’re doing this. “Fine. Avann....” I glance back, just to make doubly sure that we’re out of earshot. “Avann lost his mate.”

“His mate? You mean his exchange partner?”

“I... yeah, that.” I don’t have the slightest idea how to convey that Evera was so much more than that. “Sort of. They were close... I mean, you’re close to yours, right?”

“Asa?”

“Wait—you’re with Asa?” Did I know that? Wait—yes, of course, I did. We all went on a mission together once, for *kest*’s sake. I just never saw them as much of a couple—and neither did Wester, apparently.

“I’m not *with* anyone,” he snaps. “Look around, would you? Not like people are prancing about holding hands. Other than you guys, I’m the only soldier down here. And I’ve got a lot on my mind, all of it a good deal more important than... girls.”

“They aren’t just *girls*,” I object. “They’re women, adults—fighters. They’re as capable as any of us.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got the same problem.” When I don’t reply, his tone grows dismayed. “Oh, no. Come on, Calix—I know you’re smarter than this. This is exactly why the celibacy law was instituted in the first place! So that we wouldn’t become distracted!”

I feel sick. I don’t want to be arguing with my friend, especially since we’ve only just reunited—but at the same time, I can’t stand hearing him talk like this.

“Wester. Listen. We’re standing down here in the midst of an active rebellion, trying to figure out how to survive until

tomorrow, and you're trying to persuade me that the *law* has good intentions?"

He shakes his head, unwilling to meet my eyes. "And what about Emrys? What's his excuse? He didn't get a partner."

"He... found one."

"You're joking."

"I'm not."

Wester raises his hands to cover his eyes, groaning softly. "Well, we're dead."

"Look." I can't help bristling. "I'm going with your suggestion, aren't I? I said I'll come to the surface with you. Nothing's getting in the way of that. I'm sorry if we aren't—aren't acting exactly the way you want or whatever. A whole lot has changed in the past few weeks—if you didn't realize. These things are bigger than you."

He lowers his hands and casts his gaze aside, a deep sigh shifting his chest. With the words still hot on my lips, I already regret them. Maybe there's a grain of truth to his worries. Maybe I've been letting myself get too distracted, too led astray by the thought of a woman who isn't even on this planet any longer.

"I—"

"No. You're right." When Wester looks back up, his wry smile is barely visible behind the thick scruff of his beard. "It is bigger than me. But it's bigger than you too, Calix. Bigger than you or your mate."

"She's not my mate. I—Avann and Evera, Cherise and the Commander... we're different from that. She's my friend. That's all."

"Okay." But there's no conviction in his voice. He keeps watching me, that same sad little smile in place. I don't know what more to say. Whatever thought he's got in his head now, I'm sure that nothing from my mouth could possibly dislodge it.

"Sabine! Callisto! Get back over here."

Commander Emrys strides towards us, hands tucked into the straps at the side of his jacket, a characteristic scowl sunk into his features.

“Enough gossip,” he snaps. “You have a job to do.”

“You mean—?” I start, but he doesn’t let me get another word out.

“I’ve made up my mind. Your plan is approved. Now, I’ve been informed that the evening meal is rolling out. Eat. Sleep. First thing tomorrow morning, you’re to report to me for a debriefing. And I’d advise you both to get that... *peppy* attitude out of the way on the sooner side because it’s not going to do you any good on the field.”

With that, he’s off again, striding intently towards a line on the other side of the cave where a number of the women have already gathered, presumably for food.

“Peppy,” Wester echoes. “Don’t think I’ve ever been accused of that before.”

I laugh. It hurts my throat. “Hey. Are we... good?”

“Guess tomorrow’s gonna prove that for us, isn’t it?”

I don’t know what I was expecting.

“... Yeah. Yeah. I guess it is.”



## CHAPTER 14

# CALIX

## *SIX MONTHS PREVIOUSLY*

I'M TRYING to remember how I'm supposed to do this, and I'm terrified at every moment that I'm making the wrong move. She was the one to kiss me the first two times, yeah, but those were quick and light, her lips firmly closed all the while. Now, I'm pushing it further.

My tongue skirts the bow of her upper lip. She sighs softly, sweetly—and then her mouth falls open, accepting me into her, and *kest*, I was not ready for the wave of arousal that shudders through me now.

She definitely has more experience with this than I do. She seems to know exactly where to place her hands: one thumb below my jaw, the other just above my collarbone, both of them moving in slow, steady circles as she gradually pulls me on top of her. Even with my eyes shut, I'm vividly aware of her shape below me; I can feel the heat of her breasts inches from my bare torso, the smooth length of her thighs beneath that damp towel.

I keep going. I test her plump lower lip between my own teeth, rolling it back and forth, teasing... I think she likes it, from the soft little whimper she makes in response. Her hips lift slightly. I hear the rustle of the towel as it slips down, and I lift myself up for a moment, arched above her, letting my eyes open and take in the view before me.

She looks both everything and nothing like what I expected. Her breasts are small and not quite so symmetrically round as what I envisioned, but that only excites me—they're

the perfect shape for my hands. I waste no time in gently grasping them, my thumbs rubbing back and forth over the dark buds of her nipples. She arches her back and lets out a noise that I can only describe as a purr, low and warm. Her belly, which I imagined to be flat and smooth, instead ripples with taut muscle.

I lower myself against her until I can feel her heart beating in tandem with my own. Her kisses get faster, more insistent; she grasps my jaw and insists upon her mouth against mine.

I'm fully hard by now. Is that too fast? I don't know—and, increasingly, I also don't care. Desperation is building in me, unlike anything I've ever felt before.

“Mm,” she moans, jerking her hips forward. Despite the towel between us, it's enough to trigger a dizzying surge of pleasure. My jaw sags as I return the motion. Even the friction of my pants against my throbbing cock is wickedly pleasurable. I had no idea that I could get off on so little, on—

“All right, big boy,” Trace whispers. Her hot breath shivers through my ear, suffusing my body with chills. “That's enough playing around.”

Her nails rake down my chest, leaving trails of sweetly pulsing sensation in their wake. Even if I could open my eyes, I wouldn't be able to see straight. But I can't—can't look, can't speak, can't do anything but feel as she reaches down, pulling her towel and my cargo pants away in the same clean motion.

A quiet gasp trails past her lips. “You... oh.”

“What?” My voice comes out as a croak. “What's wrong?”

“Your shape....”

Her fingers caress my cock, exploring each of its slender, hyper-sensitive branches. It's unbearable in the most delicious of ways.

“There are so many parts.”

Had I been less overcome, I might have laughed. I don't know what she means by that, what she was expecting, or—

anything. I don't know anything. I'm relying on her to guide me.....

And guide me, she does.

Oh. Oh. The swell of her sex is firmer than I expected, insistent in its own way as it gyrates against mine. Soft, that's what everyone says—that humans are soft, breakable. But that's not what I'm feeling right now. Trace greets me with smooth, warm, rich insistence, and the tips of my cock are throbbing with pathetic need....

“Tell me if you need me to stop,” she breathes.

I don't have time to ask what she means before her fingers are curling around the base of my member, and oh, kest, the last thing I could possibly do is tell her to stop. I've touched myself before, of course, and never once realized how big of a difference it could make to have somebody else applying the pressure. I'm simmering with excitement from the sheer unpredictability of her caresses. One moment she's tantalizing me with slow strokes, her fingers bent into a ring around my breadth; the next, she's tracing soft circles with the pad of her thumb, feeling each tender branching appendage, edging closer and closer to the aching head of my main shaft.

I think I understand it now. The need to be consumed by her, to feel her on every side of me, to fill her with myself. My hips buck forward involuntarily. I find the soft lips of her vulva and spread them, all the while easing my cock closer to the wet and welcoming space between them.

“Hold on, there,” she murmurs, grasping my wrist and steadying it before I can guide my way fully inside of her.

I pause, faintly bewildered. Does she want to stop now? That feels almost cruel. Of course, I'll ease off if she needs me to, but she seemed just as eager—

“It's okay, Calix.” Is she laughing at me? “I just need to grab something.”

With that, she slides out of the bed, leaving me hot and heaving upon the sweat-dampened sheets. My head spins. It sounds like she's fumbling with something on the other side of



the room, though it's hard to tell past the heavy thud of my own heartbeat in my ears. The glow of the forgotten entertainment screen paints the whole of the room in unwieldy liquid silver, further adding to my sense of luxurious disorientation.

“Here.”

She's back, her legs shifting against mine as she burrows back in beside me. The feeling as my cock brushes her smooth skin is almost unbearable.

“This might be a little chilly,” she warns me.

Chilly? I want to laugh—and then a shiver jolts through me as cool, thick liquid glides against me, coaxed by the slim shape of her fingers.

“Wh—”

“It's just lubricant. You're big, you know... might need some help getting in smoothly.”

Kest, that's right. Lube was never an issue when I was taking care of myself, but of course, it would be now. “You must think I'm... really bad at this,” I mumble through half-numb lips.

“Bad? Why do you think that?”

“Because...” It's hard to keep my thoughts in line. “I barely know what I'm doing.”

“Well, for someone who barely knows what he's doing, I'd say you're pulling off a damn excellent job of it. Now come here already.”

She doesn't need to tell me twice. Her hands join with mine, and together we shift until I'm on top of her again, my back arched, my erection trailing its many tips along her thigh until I finally reach the hot, pulsing point of no return.

As soon as I begin to enter her, the lube's pervasive chill burns away to nothing. Instead, I'm warmed to the point of sweet staggering agony, the whole of my body clasped with a shaking sensation that I cannot and will not escape.

She cries out as I thrust into her. At first, I'm afraid I hurt her, but then her fingers are knotting in my hair and pulling me even closer, even deeper. Her soft textures part willingly beneath my tougher Ixionian skin, shifting to accommodate my bulk. We're drastically mismatched, but her tightness only adds to my pleasure—and from the way her quick gasps fill the air, the sensation is mutual.

“Mm, yes—yes, Calix, keep going....”

As if I could stop. More and more need builds within me, mounting until I can't even breathe past the molten hunger filling my body. I'm reaching my full hardness now, expanding like a night-blooming flower, locking myself into her. If I tried to pull out at this point, I don't think I would be able to without hurting us both.

I manage to give one, two, three more thrusts—and then the fourth breaks me. I'm faintly aware of my own outcry as I shudder and jerk, filling her with more hot cum than I knew myself to be capable of releasing. The pleasure keeps going and going, thrills of it arching through me every time that I think I'm done, until at last, I can't move at all anymore; I slump against a pillow and gasp in air, my mouth dry, my whole body slicked in a film of sweat.

Her hands wander to my loosened member, still half inside of her. Tiny huffs of breath work through her lungs as she teases her own entrance, and soon she's quaking in what must be an orgasm of her own—I can feel her convulsing around me as she emits a chain of long, harsh gasps.

“...Sorry,” I mumble when both of us are silent at last.

“Sorry?” she repeats, still breathless, her voice heightened with bewilderment. “What are you apologizing for?”

“That I wasn't good enough for you... that you had to, you know, do it yourself?”

She actually snorts with laughter at that, rolling away from me as she does so. Her heel knocks against my shin in a soft kick. “Are you serious?”

“I... yes?”

“‘Good enough’ has nothing to do with it. That’s the first time in my life I haven’t needed to fake it, you know. If anything, I should be the one apologizing—I actually can’t believe it happened so... fast.”

I don’t know what to say. Should I be content with that, or should I promise even more?

After a few moments of silence, she spares me the dilemma.

“If that’s how good you can get me off on the first try... I think we’re gonna get along pretty damn well.”

Euphoria flutters through me. I haven’t even been thinking about how much more time we’re going to have. But of course, we’re only just beginning. This is precisely what the program is for: satiating the need that’s been denied to us for so long. And if tonight is any indication, I might as well be able to make a friend in the meantime.

“Still up for a survival run? Or are you just scared that I’ll beat you?”

My muscles feel too wobbly to even imagine controlling a game, but I’m not going to let her get away with teasing me like that.

“Scared? You wish.”

“Fine. Let’s see what you got.”

As I boot up the system once more, I can’t keep a smile off my face. I know it must look ridiculous, but it’s impossible to shake. My whole body is alive with a warm afterglow. I can’t remember the last time I felt so light. I can still taste her lips on mine, can still feel the sense of utter rightness and completion when I locked myself inside of her. I always thought sex would be about reaching a climax—little beyond that. And maybe it usually is, but that’s not what happened between Trace and me just now. It’s the sheer intimacy that awes me the most. I’ve never felt someone else’s body so closely... never felt my own body so closely, for that matter.

I don’t feel transformed so much as expanded. Like having sex with Trace unlocked a part of me that’s always been

dormant... a part that was yearning to be freed without my knowledge... a part that, already, is hungering for more.

Maybe it's too soon for such a thought, but I don't care. I'm confident in its truth: I wouldn't complain if things were to stay like this forever.

## CHAPTER 15



# TRACE

## *PRESENT DAY*

BY THE TIME we make it outside, night has fallen across the rusty city of Jyrespa. It's completely different from the baking hubbub of daytime. The air is dusty and cool, and small red eyes lurk here and there in the shadow, blinking erratically; it's impossible to tell whether they're organic or artificial in nature.

My companions seem as wary as I am. Jace limps along at a speed that must surely be painful, while Cassian and Ivy never let their shoulders drift more than a few inches apart. They're both weighed down with satchels, as am I: Jace's data sticks rest at the bottom, piled beneath the weak assortment of provisions that we were able to pull together, including the sheets and pillow from the cot. I can still feel the aftermath of its stiffness in my muscles, which twinge here and there with a charley horse that I'm forced to ignore.

"We can't be out on the streets this late," Jace says for what might be the third or fourth time. I don't think he even realizes that he's repeating himself at this point; the words are more of a nervous compulsion than anything else, just like the way that I can't stop twisting at locks of my hair.

"Hey," Ivy points out, "at least there aren't as many people."

"That's the problem. People know better than to come out at night."

“What does *that* mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

I’ve never heard Jace this snappish, and that just puts me even more on edge. If he’s afraid, I can’t help thinking that he has a very legitimate reason for it.

Ivy, to her credit, is still trying to focus on the positives. “It’s probably for the best that we didn’t stay there, anyway,” she says. She’s shorter than the rest of us, and her breathlessness is audible as she struggles to keep pace. “Like you said, Jace—having all that shit in one place was just asking for a disaster. No matter what, it’s all split up now, right?”

“Split up and half lost,” he mutters.

I try to focus on putting one foot in front of the next as we continue down the gravel alleyway. Jace has been leading us in an increasingly convoluted pattern of twists and turns. It’s too dark to tell whether we’ve been on this particular road before. It’s all I can do to make sure that I don’t trip on a stray rock and tear my face up on the rough ground.

Jace isn’t wrong. We lost a good portion of the data in our haste to leave—maybe not half, but close enough. When Ivy asked whether we’d managed to get all the important parts, he only laughed.

*Every part is important. I just have to hope that this doesn’t ruin us for good.*

It’s hard not to lose that hope, especially in the middle of these dark and lonely streets. But I have one thing to hold onto—the visions of Calix. Deep-set certainty is pumping through me with every heartbeat. The knowledge that he’s alive, that he’s waiting for me—and if that’s the case, then surely we still have something worth fighting for.

“There should be a junkyard close by,” Jace murmurs after another long, stagnant silence. “That’s probably our best bet?”

“A junkyard?” Laughter clings uneasily to the edge of Ivy’s voice; like me, she must be hoping that Jace has decided

to make an ill-timed joke. “Yeah, I think I’ll pass on that, actually.”

“We’re less likely to be bothered in a place like that. It’s somewhere to shelter until morning. The best we’ve got.”

I close my eyes for a moment. It hardly makes a difference in the dark.

How can it be that we’ve fallen this far? I can still remember my first night with Calix. I thought his bed was the most comfortable thing I’d ever felt. We weren’t planning to have sex, but it happened anyway—casually, naturally. Falling asleep, I’d thought vaguely that joining the exchange program may have been the best decision I’d made in my entire life.

And now we’re angling to sleep in a junkyard.

*Wherever you are, Calix, I hope that you’ve at least got a decent excuse for a bed.*

“Just up here.” Jace begins to hike faster, letting out a small grunt of pain with each step. I can’t imagine how his leg feels after so long on these uneven roads. “See the smoke? That’s where we’re headed.”

At first, I have no idea what he’s referring to. Then, squinting, I begin to make it out: a thin column of blurry gray, doing its best to drown out the few tired-looking stars that still manage to wink down at us.

“And should I ask why the junkyard is smoking?” Ivy asks weakly.

“That’s the incinerator.”

“Oh, good. The incinerator.”

“As long as we stay on the edges of the yard, we should be fine.”

His use of *should* doesn’t escape me, and I’m sure Ivy doesn’t miss it either. I guess that’s the best we can hope for at this point.

As we get closer, the shape of the junkyard begins to fall into place around us. Heaps of metal scrap and discarded



piping loom like a behemoth's rusting skeleton, illuminated from behind by a deep orange glow that must be that of the incinerator. To my relief, it doesn't smell; it looks like this is more of a deposit for industrial leftovers than civilians' garbage.

"Cozy," Ivy comments.

She said the same of the hideout behind Kardo's store; Jace replied with a breezy *You'd be surprised*.

He says no such thing now.

"Are you going to be able to get far in there?" I ask him softly as we reach the edge. A chain-link fence is erected around the perimeter, but it's falling apart in several places that I can see. The much bigger barrier is the junk itself, piled so high and unevenly that my still-sore muscles ache just looking at it.

"Do I have a choice?" he murmurs back.

A few yards ahead of us, Cassian rattles one of the fence's broken edges. It twists under his grip, widening to a sizable gap that should be able to fit even an Ixionian's broad shoulders.

"Look," he says as the rest of us catch up to him. I follow his orange-limned fingertip, but can't discern anything beyond more disjointed rubbish. "The sheet metal there... we should be able to get some shelter beneath it."

"Perfect," Jace sighs, sounding genuinely relieved for the first time since he set eyes on us back at Mattalo's. "Let's go. Cassian, you cover the rear."

"Roger that."

It takes Jace a painstakingly long time to edge his way over to the place indicated by Cassian. More than once, I consider offering to help him, but there's no use; I know he would reject it before the words were even out of my mouth.

I can't help thinking about how easy it would be to fix his injury back on Ixion or even Earth. Head transplants have been perfected for over a decade now; a messed-up leg would be a

breeze for most qualified doctors. But Duvalik is a C-class planet. If there are any capable medics here, it's not as if he'd be able to afford them anyway.

Finally, we manage to make it to a large wedge of corrugated sheet metal propped up against a small hill of waste. A slim gap reveals a space beneath it like a shallow animal's den. Not comfortable-looking by any means, but it's protection from the cold drizzle of rain that's begun to leak from the brown clouds above us, and a decent enough place for someone—or four someones—who are looking to hide.

“I thought it would be bigger,” Cassian admits.

“It's fine.” Breathing harshly, Jace tosses his cane into the opening, then uses both hands to heave up his bad leg. The second leg follows, and he slides down to the bottom with a faint grunt. “Tight squeeze,” he calls up, “but there's some room down here.”

I rake my eyes doubtfully across the scene. The sheet metal may be protecting a pocket of safety for the time being. Still, its tilted position is far from a stable one. If something were to dislodge it, it would come crashing down on our heads—and I don't doubt that a load of much heavier trash would be quick to follow. The more I think about it, the more it resembles a straight-up deadfall trap.

“Trace?” Ivy asks from behind. “Everything okay?”

*No, everything isn't okay. We've lost the slight advantage we had. We don't even know who or what might be after us. We're sleeping in a junkyard, for shit's sake.*

*And Calix still isn't here.*

But I don't say that. I don't say anything. I just haul myself up and over the edge, down into the cramped hovel of shadows and rusty stench, away—for now—from the touch of the mounting storm.

Everything is... warm.

Warm and soft and smooth, weightless as a dream.

Is this a dream?

*I don't know, wonder girl. What do you think?*

As if conjured into being by the sound of his voice, Calix's lithely muscled form is suddenly beside me. It's too dark to see anything other than a vaguely glittering expanse of deep violet, but his silver skin has a sort of glow that transcends the senses, almost like something burning beside me.

Burning, but not painful.

He's like molten mercury, and the draw I feel toward him is nothing short of magnetic.

*You're here. You're here. You're here.*

I can't help repeating the words, as if doing so will somehow absolve us of the bitter truth. But he knows better, and so do I.

*But this is real*, he reminds me, brushing his fingertips across my collarbone. Warm as he is, the gesture makes me shiver all the way down to the tips of my toes. *Somehow, it's real. I know it is. I know... you.*

He's right.

*Of course, I'm right.*

*You're cocky; that's what you are*, I tell him, and with that, we fall together as though ours is the only gravity that matters.

No clothing, no barriers. Only instant contact. His multi-limbed cock flares with heat and hardens against my thigh. I can feel his breath against my ear as he sucks in a harsh, almost pained gasp. I match it with a whimper of my own as abrupt, searing need flashes through my entire abdomen, and my hips flex upwards involuntarily.

I want to talk to him more—I *miss* talking to him—but the lust brewing within me is so much more than a want. It's a need, like food, water, or air, and if I can't satisfy it, I'm afraid I'll suffocate.

My fingers knot in his hair. It's gotten shaggy even since I last saw him. Faster than human hair would grow, unruly and

impossibly soft. When I pull against it, urging his lips to my throat, he growls—I can feel the vibration course straight through to the tip of my clit, which twitches with desperation.

But the growl doesn't signal protest. Next thing I know, he's biting me over and over again, littering a constellation of sweetly stinging nips all along the curve of my neck. The bites aren't hard—his teeth are sharp enough that any more than a graze would easily break my skin. His control astounds me. He simply refuses to hurt me, regardless of how the restraint makes his body shake and his throat rumble.

My hands shift to find his horns. They're so much softer than they look, velvety like a young buck's, and I know that they're tender too; for a moment, he almost slips up, almost bites too hard, but I twist my head in perfect time for our lips to come together instead, wide and wet and frantic.

The kiss is messy, as are those that follow. His ridged tongue swipes across and beneath mine; his electric spearmint flavor makes my whole mouth tingle. I lace the fingers of both hands into the branches of his horns. I swear I can feel them twitching faintly beneath my touch, mirroring the way that his cock swelled and hardened upon contact with my smooth skin.

*I want to fuck them*, I think suddenly—and because we're in a space like this, a space with no secrets, he knows at once.

I can feel his surprise—first a nervous spark, then a slow, half-shameful current of want, building dizzyingly fast into a comet of fiery thirst.

*I'll hurt you*, he warns me, but I don't care. I can't get the idea out of my head. That soft bristling texture is like an infinitely subtler version of the one dancing across my lips, and I know that a horn will be able to go a hell of a lot deeper than his tongue ever could.

I can't pull away from him. Not for a moment. Not even to shift our position. Instead, I make my way downwards through a tapestry of touch. I stroke his sculpted pecs and his tight stomach, kiss his shoulder and the hollow of his throat, and both of his hardened nipples. The motion is far smoother than anything we could achieve in the real world. There are no

awkwardly twisting sheets or complications of gravity. We *flow*, shifting through and against one another. The next thing I know, I can feel his mouth between my legs, panting one hot breath after another onto my aching pussy. At the same time, my tongue discovers the first fork of his cock, just an inch or so from the base, and curls into the divot between its two branching members.

He shudders and moans. The motion of him in my mouth is enough to make me giddy. I almost tell him it's okay, that this alone is enough, but then I feel his strong fingers spreading my thighs, and I know what's coming.

I know—but nothing could have prepared me for how it feels.

I've kissed and stroked his horns a hundred times, but the nerve endings of my fingers and lips simply weren't enough to capture its exquisite complexity. Hundreds, thousands, *millions* of tickling tendrils and smoothly layered scales twist inside of me. His shape is utterly foreign and yet somehow perfect. Hitting all the right spots, hurting just good enough. Made for me and me alone.

My jaw sags with pleasure, and he takes the cue to push harder into my mouth, filling it up until my lips are flush with the base of his cock. Hot alien flesh is filling both ends of me now, and still, it isn't enough. I grasp at him, nails grazing his scaled chest, rolling my hips against his strong, heavy horn.

He twists his head to the side, shifting his uneven shape within me. My whimper is stifled by his cock in my throat, as is the near-scream of shock and ecstasy when he bites into the soft flesh of my inner thigh. He's harsher here than he was with my neck, and I'd have it no other way.

I quicken the movement of my hips. I can feel it tingling inside of me, the promise of explosive pleasure, of perfect and complete union with him.

I can feel it all. His swollen veins. His shivering skin. Most of all, his *strength*.

And I let it all in, and I give myself to him. Our bodies form a perfect trembling arc as I come on his horn, flickering and pulsating around its strangely tender breadth, taking everything he'll give me. At the same time, my mouth fills with his silvery ejaculate, and it tastes like spearmint and stars. I can savor and swallow it with all the leisure I please, because nothing could hurt me, not here, not in this perfect, perfect place that will never belong to anyone but us and us alone.

I don't know how it happens, but we're facing one another again—my mouth empty and gasping, his curled with lazy indulgence.

I kiss him again, softer now, and he returns it in fashion. Even his barbed tongue is gentle against my sore, throbbing mouth. We're sharing the taste of his cum now, letting its tacky warmth thicken the texture of each kiss. I'm dizzy and dazed and utterly weightless, but there's nowhere for me to fall. His arms are firm around me.

*I'm safe, I think... and he hears, of course.*

*Yes, you are. Safe with me, always.*

There's something new to his voice. A tenderness that's never been there before.

I keep kissing him. Longer and deeper than I have before. My fingers play across his horns, and we don't need words. We don't need anything but each other.

He holds me there for a long, long time.



## CHAPTER 16

## CALIX

TRUE TO HIS WORD, Commander Emrys is ready to go first thing in the morning.

It's a distinct sort of torture. I want nothing more than to lie here for another hour and reflect on every last detail of what happened last night, on the impossibly pleasurable duality of us both inside one another, of how hot and soft and wet she felt as she sucked my cock and clenched around my horn....

But duty calls.

I'm still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes and the sex out of my mind—the latter being largely unsuccessful—when he pulls Wester and me aside, his voice low and rapid as he rattles off instructions.

“First things first: protecting the movement is absolutely paramount. You *cannot* take any risks when it comes to divulging information. Your task is reconnaissance, not recruitment. *Only* approach those whom you know to lean in our favor. Do *not* tell them anything explicitly. Be casual, probe for opportunities, and be ready to report back with every last detail. Callisto, I know that social nuances aren't your strong suit. Let Sabine take the lead when you need to.”

Something tells me that this isn't the time to point out his own apparent lack of what he calls *social nuances*. At this point, I know better than to be offended by the Commander's characteristic harshness. I just nod and swallow my second stim pill, hoping that my face doesn't betray the fact that I'm still half in that not-quite-dream world.



“The other facet of your mission is to survey the current state of the base. Identify security measures and assess them in as much detail as possible. If you think we’ve underestimated their levels of preparation, do *not* pursue the mission. Come back immediately and report what you’ve seen.”

“Yes, sir,” Wester and I say together.

Emrys stares long and hard at each of us, perhaps conducting a last-minute evaluation of our capabilities. I manage a solemn expression; I can’t pretend that it doesn’t make me nervous. I’m not accustomed to this sort of responsibility. Even on the jungle planet, Avann and Cassian were always happy to take charge. But now Cassian’s gone, and Avann may as well be. Aside from the Commander, Wester and I are the only ones left.

“Fine,” Emrys says, at last, looking aside. “Go now. No time to waste. And remember, above all else, that we *must* keep our secrets. If you’re forced to choose between betrayal and death, you know what to do.”

It’s not until we’ve put a good amount of distance between the Commander and ourselves that Wester begins to laugh.

“Sweet *kest*,” he snorts, “I can’t believe he talks like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seriously? If we need to choose between betrayal and death... what does he think we’re walking into, anyway?”

I frown at the rocky floor and hook my thumbs into my belt loops, shrugging slightly. “It’s pretty rough up there. People being killed and all.”

“People being killed because they’re *careless*. Don’t you remember why we’re doing all of this in the first place? Ixion is a sham. Our history is fabricated. We’re nothing but a bunch of fakers who have terrorized other planets into bowing to our imaginary power. Once we get ourselves together long enough to leverage a little pressure on those deluded loyalists, their

stratocracy is going to crumble like an insect hive on the wrong end of a blaster.”

I wish I could share his enthusiasm, but the images of my comrades’ crumpled bodies are still emblazoned upon my mind’s eye. Whether or not they know how to use them, the unavoidable truth is that the loyalists have weapons. A lot of weapons. And from what I’ve seen, not even the most carefully cultivated strategies can hold up under the weight of sheer firepower.

But I keep my mouth shut. Confidence is good, right?

It’s about an hour’s walk to the place that Wester refers to as the B Exit, a good deal farther away than the place where Asa and Deryn led us down before. We eventually move past the craggy natural tunnels into the more familiar labyrinth of pipes and machinery. I can’t help noticing how cold and quiet it is now, compared to the noisy heat when MB57 was still active. It feels eerie, like the base itself has died and left us to trudge through its corroded innards.

“We scattered the underground entryways around the base,” Wester explains, “so that our patterns are never predictable. B is gonna place us right around the obstacle courses. Remember how fun those used to be? You were pretty good at them, too, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m fast and all that.”

“No kidding. Faster than I could ever be, that’s for sure.” He rustles a hand in one of his pockets. “You think we should go ahead and take the extra stim pills now? I doubt we’re gonna be up here for longer than a day, after everything Emrys said.”

“Probably better to stay cautious.”

“Since when are you—”

He breaks off, and it doesn’t take much imagination to guess why. There’s an obvious explanation for my newfound hesitation in situations like this, and it’s not one that he’s happy about. If Wester’s managed to convince himself that our relationships with the women are the epitome of personal

failure, then so be it. There are more important things to focus on right now.

“Here we go,” he says at last, grasping a ladder rung bolted into one patina-blistered wall. A smoggy shaft of light glows at its top—unlike the other entryway, this one doesn’t have a cover. “Pretty sure this thing used to be an actual maintenance entryway, so there’s no sewage to paddle through.”

“That’s a plus.”

“Tell me about it. The first time I came down here... well. No need to dwell on that.”

He takes a deep breath, and as he does so, I realize something: he’s afraid. That’s what all this chatter is about. Wester has never been quiet, but the constant talking isn’t normal, either. He’s filling the silence. Leaving us no room for doubt or hesitation.

And right now, I find that I’m grateful for it.

“Shall we?”

He’s slower than me going up the ladder; I stay a few rungs behind him to give him space. The higher we get, the harder my heart pounds. I realize that I don’t want to know what MB57 looks like now. I’m scared of it being unrecognizable, but even more terrified of the opposite. I’m not the same person that I was before. I don’t know how I’d be able to cope with seeing the place that was once my home.

The air hits me first, still smoke-clogged. I blink hard against my watering eyes. After getting used to the cold, clear atmosphere of the underground, it’s worse than ever up here. I can barely see as I haul myself up and onto the scarred dirt, and it’s not until I wipe the stinging grit out of my eyes that I manage to get a decent look at my surroundings.

The first thing that hits me is a disturbing sort of awe. The extent to which they’ve already managed to rebuild isn’t just impressive—it’s downright uncanny. Some things are still a mess, most notably the practice track gouged to pieces before us and the admin buildings smoking in the distance, but the central facility is nothing short of pristine. It gleams in the

center of the torn-up ground and smog-choked air, an uncanny monolith of white and silver.

“This doesn’t feel right,” I breathe.

“Keep it casual, now,” Wester growls out of the corner of his mouth. “Can’t afford to look surprised by any of this.”

He starts off towards the building. My every instinct is screaming at me to stop, to turn back around and jog back to the cave and tell Emrys that something is wrong, that we need to reform our strategy and do it fast.

But I don’t.

I follow my orders.

“They must’ve had some serious maintenance bots cleaning this up,” Wester mutters as we edge closer. His gait is admirably lackadaisical, with no trace of hesitance as he wanders his way toward our destination. “I suppose maintaining appearances is just about the most important thing to do at this point.”

“Yeah... appearances.”

Maybe I’m remembering wrong. Perhaps the chaos of the battle before left me so confounded that the images themselves became distorted, my mind insisting upon things that weren’t there.

“Remember our cover,” Wester says. We’re only a few dozen yards from the central facility now, and his voice is as quiet as the low wind that eases through the eerily empty base. “But only if someone asks. Can’t be too eager.”

“Right.” We talked about it on our way here. If we’re met with suspicion, we’ll say that we were knocked out during the last fight and spent the previous day too disoriented to remember where we were. Only once we found one another were we able to piece everything together and determine what had happened. As alibis go, it’s far from airtight, but we’ve got nothing better—and with any luck, nobody will be in a state to question us anyway.

I still want to turn around. But that's the coward in me talking. The clueless rookie that I was always accused of being, no matter how hard I tried or how well I performed. I was always told that I couldn't handle real war—by hypocrites, sure, but it's not like that made it sting any less. This is my chance. I can't prove it to those long-gone squadmates... but I can still prove it to myself.

*Everything is going to be—*

At that moment, something strange happens.

A ray of sun parts the lingering smoke, and the building *shimmers*.

Its perfect white-and-silver surface dilates like something underwater—and as I stare at it, my pace slowing to a halt, I swear for a moment that I can see *through*, all the way to the desecrated stretch of admin buildings on the other side.

*What in the....*

A voice rings in my head. Deryn. Her tone flippant, all of our footsteps echoing as we made our way down the sewer tunnel.

*You saw how the base looked?*

Another shimmer. My chest is freezing cold.

*Some of that's from today....*

“Wester,” I try to say, but I can't find my voice past the thrashing of my heartbeat.

*But the central building has been vaporized for a while now.*

Vaporized. Not scarred, not crumbled, not even blown up.

Vaporized.

No amount of bots can rebuild something like that in a day. It's not possible.

“Wester!” This time, the name hurls itself from my lips at full volume. He turns back to me, horror dampening his brow—horror at me, at what he thinks is a dire mistake... but, as if

it can feel that his eyes have turned away, the mirage of the central facility flickers off at that moment, revealing the line of artillery that sits in its place.

My veins surge with adrenaline. Battlefield instincts. The same thing that guided me to move so fluidly with Trace, each of us covering each other's backs, never caught by surprise. I trusted them then. I need to trust them now.

“It's a trap!” I bellow. “They were expecting us! *It's a sustaining hologram!*”

I don't wait for comprehension to touch his face. I need to trust my partner. I need to do my job.

I whirl around and sprint for the entry to the tunnels.

Bolts patter the ground around me like acid rain, scorching black pockmarks across the already scarred ground. Something stings my left heel, but I can't let it stagger me.

I can see the entrance now, and I can still remember Emrys's words, as clear and fierce as the air knifing through my lungs:

*If you're forced to choose between betrayal and death, you know what to do.*

Maybe he would think this constitutes betrayal. Their guns are trained on me. They'll see where I'm going.

But they probably watched us emerge. They know anyway. And if I don't get to the cavern before they do, nobody's making it out.

I need to go.

I need to warn them.

I swing my legs over the lip of the cavern entrance and let myself drop.



## CHAPTER 17

## CALIX

I DON'T KNOW if Wester is alive. I don't know if I'm going to be fast enough. I don't even know whether I can count on my own survival from one second to the next.

But I do know one thing.

I have to keep running.

Blood surges through my veins like liquid steel. Flashbulbs of white light flare behind my eyes with every agonizing footstep. Without anyone to guide me, I can only hope that I'm going the right way; I don't have Wester or Deryn's expert knowledge of the underground. I don't have anything at all aside from my own desperate instincts.

How could we have been so stupid? How could we fall for such an easy trap? How is it possible that all of our progress could be lost in the span of a single misstep?

That doesn't matter. What matters is that I keep on moving.

The mineral scent of the caves washes over me. I'd cry with relief if I had any breath. Not too much farther to the switchback—

*Kest.* The switchback.

Can't slow down. But if I slip off of it, I'm liable to break my neck.

The air is growing cold around me. I'm getting closer. Deeper. No time to think.



*There's a difference between being strong and being dexterous, you know. That's how I beat you in arm wrestling, remember? You weren't quick enough. You never are.*

Her voice is underscored by my heartbeat, sounding so clear that her warm lips may as well be against my ear. It wasn't long ago that she teased me with those words. We were still on the ship. Had no idea what was waiting for us on Ixion's surface.

*Oh, come on. I'm plenty quick.*

*Compared to your big, buff comrades, sure. But I know plenty of gymnasts who could put you to shame.*

Am I imagining the spat of blaster fire behind me? I can't turn around to check.

*Look, it's one of the first things they teach you in the military. Go too fast, and you lose your precision.*

*Sure, if you're lazy.*

I can see it now, beyond any doubt: the glow of the cavern yawning before me. Everyone's down there. Working, planning, breathing. They have no idea that they may have minutes left to live.

And if I don't get there fast enough, they won't ever know. Not until it's too late.

*Are you calling me lazy?*

*Of course not. I'm saying you don't trust yourself enough. You overthink things. You want precision? Listen to your body. Follow its rhythms. That'll show you a thing or two about precision.*

I hit the top of the switchback, throw myself into a hard right turn, and keep running.

I've seen how Trace moves. There's a reason I admire her fighting style so much. She treats the air like water, trusting her reflexes, letting her weight fall naturally, and guiding her however it pleases. Gravity doesn't control her because she isn't afraid of it. Simple as that.

One foot in front of the other. The slope could always be slimmer. Doesn't matter how far it is to the ground so long as I don't fall.

The first bend is rearing up before me already, the sheer stone wall impassive in the face of my desperation. Every muscle in my body wants to tense up, to brace for a brutal impact, but I can't—won't—allow it.

*Now or never.*

I surrender to my inertia and let myself barrel forward. Then, at the last possible instant, I push off from the balls of my feet, and for a moment, I'm actually weightless as I reach the apex of my jump. My knee bends, my hand collides with the wall, and I twist in midair to face the next leg of the switchback.

I land lightly on all fours. A flex of my fingertips pushes me upwards, and then I'm running again, gaining speed by the instant. Giddiness floods me—*I made it, I made the turn, and I didn't fall*—but it's not finished yet. I don't need to look over the edge of the slope to know that I've got a long way to go.

*Thanks for the tip, Trace. You've got no idea how much I owe you for that one.*

I'll just have to hold out for long enough to tell her in person. That's as good an incentive as any.

When I finally stumble to a halt in the middle of the cave camp, I'm lightheaded with vertigo. I bend over and grasp my knees, heaving for air, only vaguely aware of the concerned voices swelling around me.

“Calix?”

“What's wrong?”

“What happened?”

“Where's Wester?”

“He's gone,” I wheeze. “They're coming. They expected us. We need to get out *now*.”

I shakily straighten back up as the cavern erupts into exclamations of horror. The veins in my eyelids ache when I squeeze them shut. I'm more emotionally exhausted than physically; speaking the words aloud has drained my last reserves of denial. And now that I've made it this far, I don't know what to do next.

"Soldier. Talk to me." Azrael Emrys grips my shoulders, forcing me to look him in the eye. "What do you mean they're coming? Is Sabine dead?"

"I think he is. I'm not sure." I suck in a long, shuddering breath. "They saw me go back down. I had to...." I refuse to let my voice crack. "I'm sorry. I had to warn you."

"Don't be sorry." His fingertips bite into me. "Look at me. *Look* at me."

I force my gaze up, locking his jet-black eyes with mine. He nods sharply.

"You did the right thing, Callisto. Don't you dare apologize for it."

"...Thank you, sir."

He grunts and releases me so suddenly that I stagger sideways.

"Asa," Emrys barks. "Get the people you need and take all the supplies you can get. Stim pills, medicine—nothing that will weigh you down. We need to move fast."

"Move *where*?" Deryn's voice. "We can't face them head-on, not like this!"

"Then we go the other way. We go deeper."

"*Deeper*? Are you shitting me?"

"We'll just be trapping ourselves," Asa Winters insists. She looks more harried than I've ever seen her, eyes glittering and cheeks flushed all the way to her ears. "They'll follow us. We don't know how far the tunnels go. If they—"

"You mentioned explosives," Emrys says.

That's news to me, but not to Blythe Xanthos, who shoulders her way to the forefront of the gathering crowd. Her hands are lifted, palms out, eyes wide and imploring as she frantically shakes her head. "Those bombs haven't been safety tested!"

Emrys ignores her and presses on. "We'll use them to cave in the tunnels. Cut them off, at least long enough to get a head start."

"But what if the remote switch doesn't work?" The pitch of Blythe's voice escalates with desperation. "Or if the radius is miscalculated? We could blow ourselves up too!"

"That's a risk I'm willing to take."

"You can't—you can't just let us die!"

"That's exactly why we're going to use the bombs," Emrys snarls. "If we stand by and do nothing, we're setting ourselves up for slaughter. You all said that you wanted my command, *so follow it*. Get the supplies. Get the explosives. *Now*."

The women rush to fulfill his orders, their footsteps echoing all the way to the roof of the cave. He watches them go with his jaw set, impervious to the horror on Blythe's face as she continues to gape at him, then turns back to me.

"I need to lead them, and I'm not risking civilians. You and Silvius will take up the rear. That means you'll also be responsible for detonation."

I force a deep breath through my aching lungs and nod sharply. "I understand."

"He's seen how the explosive works; follow his lead. Try to create some space. Risk as few people as possible."

"Of course, sir."

"Good." For a moment, something strange flickers across his taut features. If I didn't know better, I might even mistake it for a smile. "Keep it up, Callisto. We're getting out of here."

"Yes, sir."

The next few minutes—or maybe only seconds—seem to creep and rush at the same time. I’m transported abruptly from one moment to the next: now Avann is giving me a solemn handshake; now Deryn and Asa are ushering everyone towards a narrow fissure near the back of the cave; now Blythe is pressing a short metal rod into my hand, her eyes bright with fear.

“You’ll be okay,” she says. If her voice is meant to sound reassuring, she does a pretty poor job of pulling it off. “I’ve got the bombs rigged to the tunnel entrance. If you’re at least two hundred meters away, you’ll be out of range. You’ll know you’re there when the walls open up a bit more. They *should* be able to detonate from that distance—it’s hard to say with all the rock—but I... I’m sure. Pretty sure.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” I say, accepting the tool.

“You worry about yourself,” Avann adds from beside me. “We’ll take care of this.”

She manages a teary smile, nods once, and takes off with the rest of the women.

It’s surreal to watch them leave. For the third time today, I’m forced to press back against every one of my instincts. I can definitely hear the encroaching army now, the hammer of heavy weaponry and armored boots filling the air above me. My body wants to follow the women. To get away. To survive. But I don’t have that luxury.

“It’d be pretty messed up, wouldn’t it?” I murmur into the stillness of the now-empty cavern. “If this is the end for us.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not dying.”

Something about Avann’s tone makes me uneasy, but he doesn’t give me any time to dwell on it.

“They ought to be far enough ahead by now. We should get going.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go.”

I lead the way into the tunnel. It’s more of a crack, really, so slim that we need to turn sideways to fit through it. Stone

presses me from the front and back, scarcely leaving my chest any room to move with each stilted breath. The detonator is slippery against my sweat-drenched palms.

*Two hundred meters. Then we'll be safe.*

One step at a time. Side to side. *Trust your body.*

I can't hold back a messy gasp of relief when the walls finally begin to broaden around us. It's too dark to see, but I can hear Avann letting out his own grateful sigh when he, too, reaches the end of the bottleneck.

"Okay," I say, thumbing the button at the detonator's end. "Here goes nothing."

I press it down.

Silence.

*Oh no.*

"*Kest*," I hiss, my stomach sinking violently; "*kest, kest, kest*, that's not supposed to—maybe—"

I try again to the same effect. A third time, a fourth—I extend my arm back into the narrow funnel as far as it'll go, silently begging the stupid thing to work, knowing in my heart that there's no chance.

"We'll just have to run for it," I say. "They'll have trouble getting through there just like we did. If we get enough of a head start, maybe we'll be able to lose them. Maybe—"

"Calix."

"Maybe they won't even be able to lug their stupid guns through there in the first place. Or maybe they'll trigger the bombs just by trying. Blythe said that they were still going through safety tests, right? That could turn out in our favor. The—"

"*Calix.*"

Avann's hand closes around mine. Around the detonator.

"Go," he says.

“What? No.” He must be insane if he thinks I’m going to leave him behind.

“Give it to me.”

“Absolutely not. We—we can figure this out,” I insist. “There has to be a way.”

“There is a way. This is it.”

“Come on, don’t talk like that—please don’t.” My voice aches in my throat. “I already left Wester behind. Not you too, man. Not you too.”

“You need to go. Trace needs you.”

*Trace....*

It’s then that I realize something: I haven’t heard his voice like this in ages. This is the old Avann Silvius speaking—rational, determined, brave enough to make the rest of us look like sniveling cowards. It’s as though, for the first time since Evera’s death, he’s finally woken up.

“Don’t,” I say again. But this time, it’s only a whisper, thin and pathetic in the drowning blackness.

“I’ve been waiting for a chance to make myself useful again,” Avann says. “To do the right thing. To see that my actions truly matter.”

“By *susting* killing yourself? Do you even hear the words you’re saying?”

“Killing myself?” he repeats softly. “No. I’m not killing myself. It’s too late for that. I haven’t been alive for a long time. Not since she left me.”

“Avann....”

“Do me a favor.”

His hand twists against mine, and the sweat-slicked detonator slips out before I can stop it, straight into his grip. I cry out and try to snatch it back, but it’s impossible in the dark—and when his voice sounds again, I know by its growing faintness that he’s already started back down the bottleneck—back towards the bombs.

“Make sure that you see Trace again. Find her. No matter what. And once you do... hold onto her. Don't you give her up. Not for anything in the world. Promise me that.”

But he doesn't give me a chance to promise. Before I can find my voice, the world flashes pure, scalding white, and I'm blasted backward as the tunnel explodes.



## CHAPTER 18



## TRACE

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG for me to acknowledge that I'm not going to be sleeping tonight. The rain alone, skittering across the corrugated metal panel like splashes of hot oil, is enough to lodge a pulsing headache between my temples—and that's to say nothing of the soreness permeating my whole body. There's not nearly enough space to lie down properly; I'm forced to half-sit with my cheek jammed against a wedge of scrap plastic.

And worst of all is the proximity of the others. Jace can't bend his leg properly, meaning he takes up twice his usual amount of space. Cassian and Ivy, meanwhile, are wound so tightly in one another's arms that it's impossible to tell where one ends, and the other begins. They take up less space that way, but it's somehow worse than the alternative. The loneliness spearing my chest is far more painful than any mundane muscle cramps.

So, after trying in vain to drift off for an hour or so, I resign myself to staying awake—breath coming quick, eyes open despite the darkness, listening to the storm as it churns away above us.

My memories bring me some small modicum of comfort. Memories of home, of my family, of Calix.

Before we were separated, I'd thought of him as my best friend—but not my only one. Now I struggle to think of anyone else who could compare. I trust these people well enough, but I don't feel like *myself* around them the same way that I do with him. With Calix gone, it's harder to breathe. Harder to laugh. Harder even to think.

I'm so tired. So, so tired. If I could just get some rest....

But rest, like most things in life, seems to sense my desperation. The more I need it, the more determined it is to evade me.

I want to dream of him again. I don't care if it's all in my head; if this is what reality looks like, I'll more than gladly accept delusion.

Besides, I still can't shake the sense that there's *something* else there.

Insanity? Maybe.

But what if it isn't?

These thoughts play through my mind repeatedly, turning in lopsided circles as the hours pass. Calix, home, Ixion, Duvalik. Occasionally I'll be on the verge of nodding off when a sudden sound jerks me back to my senses, mouth dry, heart racing, certain that someone or something has found our hiding place.

Sooner or later, the moment will pass. It always does.

Somehow, eventually, the sun begins to rise. No more use in trying. I pull myself up into a proper sitting position and run a hand through my hair, squinting in order to discern the outline of my fingertips in the dim light. I think at first that the other three are fast asleep—a dull shock thrills my stomach when I glance to the side and see the twin amber moons of Jace's eyes in the murky half-dark.

“Shit,” I mutter with a weak laugh. “Startled me.”

“Sorry.” His voice is no more than a tiny flicker of sound.

“It's fine. Just—”

He raises a finger to his lips, then points over my shoulder. I turn my head slowly, half expecting to see something terrible—but he's just gesturing to Cassian and Ivy, who are still snuggled close together on my other side. Her cheek rests

against his chest, and one of his hands is tangled in her hair, wound tight so as not to let her go even in his sleep.

I lower my eyes. It feels wrong to watch.

“They’re sweet, aren’t they?” Jace murmurs.

“Yeah. They are.” This time, I match my voice’s volume to his.

“I’m sorry, you know.”

I frown. “What for?”

“You know... I mean, surely, you know.”

I say nothing.

“I didn’t regret the decision I made. Not exactly. But I regretted what I did to you.”

I don’t know why he thinks now is a good time to do this. I guess it’s the closest thing we’re going to get to privacy, but I would just as soon leave the matter behind for good.

“Well. I appreciate it. But the past is in the past.”

“Trace—”

“You’re sweet. I mean, I don’t know you that well, but you seem to be kind enough. I don’t think we would have worked together, though. It... it hurt for a while when you picked her over me. Would I have it any other way? No. Calix is better for me than you’d ever have been. No offense.”

He grins and lowers his head, flicking absentmindedly at the gravel-ridden ground between us. “Ouch. Point taken.”

“Jace...”

“No, seriously. I get it. And I’m glad. Really. You always deserved someone who could make you happy. I’m glad that Calix could be that for you.”

*Can be, damn it. It’s can be, not could. He isn’t going anywhere.*

I don’t say that. I don’t say anything at all apart from a quiet “Thanks.”

Only then are we finally able to sit in silence. The dawn continues creeping to life, slower here than on Ixion or Earth... though the latter is getting more difficult to remember with each passing day. It's almost impossible to fathom the fact that my parents and siblings are still back there, going about their normal lives. At least, I assume that they are. Surely, they've heard of the unrest on Ixion—unless the government has somehow managed to keep the conflict under wraps. Are they worried about me? Have they tried to contact me? Or are they still living beneath a dome of peaceful oblivion, confident that I'm doing them proud, sequestered on my faraway planet?

Stupidly, irrationally, a new idea slips into my mind: how would my parents react if I were to introduce them to Calix?

I can imagine my mother's stoicism, her firm refusal to believe that he's "just a friend." My father would be the opposite, full of unsubstantiated certainty that his little Trace would never do something as scandalous as entering a relationship with an alien man. The sex is one thing, but he wants grandchildren, and—

Ivy jerks awake with a sick, gurgling moan, blowing the thoughts from my mind.

Cassian is instantly alert, his arms encircling her tightly. "Ivy?" he demands. "Ivy, are you alright? What's wrong?"

She shakes her head. Even beneath the shade of our scant metal shelter, I can see that her skin is a waxy yellow-green, her eyes standing out like hollow pits.

"Okay—okay, let's get you out, let's get you some air—"

There's no time. Ivy's shoulders convulse, and a distorted retch splits the air as she dry heaves. In a messed-up way, I guess it's a lucky thing that we haven't had anything to eat since reaching Duvalik; no matter how desperately her stomach contracts, nothing comes out. Cassian rubs her back and murmurs something softly to her, too low for me or Jace to make out.

“It could be the atmosphere,” Jace says, though he sounds far from convinced. “It can have... adverse... effects—Trace, what about you? How do you feel?”

I don’t bother to answer. He can see perfectly well that I’m fine. Whatever’s wrong with Ivy is happening to her and her alone.

Each wave of gagging is more violent than the last. Real fear is beginning to build in me, potent and angular like a heated blade—and then the attack, at last, begins to subside. I can’t tell whether she’s sobbing or laughing with relief as she relaxes into Cassian’s waiting arms, hair plastered across her face with a deluge of sweat.

“Fuck,” she mumbles. “Fuck. Ow.”

“Are you okay?” Cassian asks again. “I mean, are you—”

This time, she’s definitely laughing—but the tears in her eyes don’t escape me.

“Uh, yeah. I’m great. Totally awesome.”

“We should get out of here. I don’t know what I was thinking,” Jace mutters with a shake of his head. “There’s all sorts of *kest* in this junkyard. I’ve probably been poisoning you this whole—”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Ivy murmurs.

“Then what is it?”

She stays quiet, her eyes downcast. Cassian’s grip on her tightens.

“Well... in any case,” Jace says after an unnervingly long silence, “we need to get out of here. Staying in one place is the worst thing we can be doing, especially if Kardo wasn’t just being paranoid.”

“Yeah,” Ivy says, but it’s clear that she isn’t really listening. She and Cassian are staring at one another. Whatever’s passing between them hangs heavy in the air. They know something we don’t, and I’m scared to even imagine what it may be.

I can't stand it any longer. I turn back to Jace, propping myself up on the gravelly slope and wincing as my legs sear with soreness.

“Okay. Where do we go next?”

“Well, we might be able to—”

Light blinds us in a sudden blast, accompanied by the shriek of metal on metal. I throw my hands in front of my face by instinct. It's too bright—can't see—then a shadow looms over us, tall and heavy.

“Well, now,” an unfamiliar voice drawls. The hard toe of a boot prods my chest. “I hate to break it to you, but you four are *awfully* bad at hiding.”

## CHAPTER 19





## TRACE

AFTER SO LONG SPENT UNDER the shade of the metal sheet, my eyes sting with tears from the unforgiving force of Duvalik's sunlight. When I try to shield my eyes, the impatient boot of our assailant simply knocks my hands aside.

"Come on, now; none of that. I want to see that pretty human face of yours!"

"Leave her a—"

Jace's voice breaks out into a yelp of pain as the weight withdraws from my chest. I scrabble upwards into a half-seated position. The shadow above me has its hands knotted in Jace's collar, lifting him so far that his feet barely skim the ground.

"And you... little Mr. Freedom Fighter, is that right? How's the leg?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Ivy snarls from beside me. The nausea-induced shakiness from before has completely left her, leaving the usual brashness in its place.

"Nobody you need to worry about, sweetheart."

He releases Jace, who drops to the ground. I brace myself for the impact of his wounded leg, but he lands on his other side, letting out only a hard *oof* as the wind is knocked from his lungs. I squint upwards, one hand angled as a visor over my eyes, and finally, I get a proper view of my attacker.

It's a man. At least, I think it is, judging by the rough voice and the square shoulders. His whole face is shaded by a wide-brimmed hat, cut out of something that looks like red-stained

leather. However, the horns protruding from either side are enough to reveal that he's Ixionian—or something close to it. Everything else is impossible to discern beneath a dark duster jacket. Even his hands are covered by gloves in the same russet shade as his hat. How the hell he manages to dress like that in this planet's blazing heat is as much of a mystery as anything else about him.

“Look,” Jace wheezes, still struggling to catch his breath. “We don't want trouble—”

The stranger laughs, teeth flashing wide beneath the shadow of his hat. “Don't want *trouble?*” he echoes. “Well, that makes you one of a kind. Don't think I can remember the last time I met a rebel with, ah... nondisruptive intentions.”

“How the *kest* do you know who we are?”

“Come quietly, and maybe I'll tell you.”

“No chance.”

The man lets out an exasperated drone of a sigh and makes a show of kicking around a few metal scraps, sending them clinking down the slope of the junkyard.

“Listen up, soldier boy. Kairos, isn't it? Or are you Auberon? Eh, doesn't matter. I'll tell you what does matter: you're coming with me. Might not think you are, but that's the truth. Make it easy for me, and I'll take you all out for a drink and explain things nice and thorough-like. Make it hard, and I'm not afraid to be just as rough with you as you want to be with me. Got it?”

Ivy is practically spitting with anger. “Who do you think you—”

“Easy,” Cassian murmurs. “We don't need things to get any more difficult than they are already.”

“He's right.” I'm as surprised as anyone else to hear the words from my own lips. The other three look at me, and though the stranger's face is still hidden, I'm willing to bet that he's doing the same.

“I mean, the shopkeeper made it clear that something’s going on,” I continue uneasily. “And if—”

“The shopkeeper?” the man crows, seemingly delighted. “Got old Kardo on your side, did you? A good friend of mine. Trust a geezer like that; I’d say you can trust me. But you better make up your mind quick—there’ll be morning scouts ’round these parts soon enough, and that’s a surefire way to net yourself a game over.”

“Scouts?” Jace repeats. “Since when does the yard have scouts?”

“Since the price on your name skyrocketed, soldier boy. So? Are you coming, or are you coming?”

And at that moment, I think even Ivy knows we have no other choice.

The man in the coat leads us to the sort of dive bar that makes Mattalo’s look like a luxury lounge. It’s barely more than a shed tucked into the back of yet another winding alleyway, filled with more smoke than air, its thin wooden bones rattling with every blast of the scalding wind.

He perches on a stool dead center, leans forward on both elbows, and orders something in a language I’ve never heard. The bartender, a slim-faced alien with twin tails rustling around her cloven hooves, quickly pours five shots of lime-green liquid and drops them on the countertop in front of us. The rest of us pull away, but the man wastes no time in tossing back the drink. The bartender wordlessly refills the glass.

“Nothing? Really?” He sounds almost genuinely offended at our suspicion. “What, you think I’m gonna poison you?”

“Yes,” Ivy says without missing a beat.

“Well. Least the girl’s honest.” He takes a second shot, then heaves a deep breath as the next is poured. “Right, right. I’ll drink ’em if you won’t, I s’pose. Best ought to get straight to business then.”

Out of the harsh sunlight, I'd been hoping to finally get a glimpse of this guy's face. No such luck. If anything, it's even more difficult to discern his features in this murky shithole. He stays hunched forward, shoulders tight around his ears, and twirls his shot glass thoughtfully between his fingertips. I don't know how he manages to keep from splashing the green liquid all over the place.

"So, here's the thing. You four have got a problem on your hands. A big, big, big problem."

"Other than the civil war, you mean?" Ivy snorts.

I frown in her direction. I'm used to her being a bit rash, but nothing to this extent. In any other company, I'd ask her if she's feeling all right... though I suppose earlier served as proof enough of that not being the case.

"Well, I'd say it's certainly related," the man says. For what might be the first time, there's not even a trace of irony in his voice.

"So everyone knows about the war now?" Jace asks quietly.

"Everyone and their mother. Don't like it any more than you do, but it's facts. Word travels fast, you know. Faster still when people are trying to keep it under wraps."

A sudden senseless urge hits me just then: I want to ask him what he knows about Calix Callisto. If he's familiar with Cassian and Jace's names, why not the other errant rebels? I'm sure he could at least give us the planet where Calix is now, if not Ixion....

The notion's absurdity catches up to me just in time. What the hell am I thinking? Here I was, blaming Ivy for her bizarre attitude, but it seems like mine is no better. Why can't I just let it go? Calix deserves my faith in his capability on all accounts. I have no reason not to give it to him.

"The rebellion's one thing," Jace murmurs, "but you know our names."

"And so I do."

“Well? What gives?”

A long sigh passes through the shoulders of the dark duster coat. “I got good news and bad news for you. Any preference which comes first?”

None of us say a word. I don’t know about the others, but I can’t help feeling as though it might be a trick question in disguise.

“All right, then; it suits me fine to make my own choice. Let’s start on the bright side. The good news is this: your names, unlike the existence of your little revolution, are far from common knowledge. They’re only traveling through a particular few routes of the more unsavory sort. If I were to walk up to any old codger and ask him what he thinks about Jace Kairos, he’d spit in my face and send me flying ass-first off his doorstep.”

I feel Jace flinch beside me at the sound of his own surname. I can’t blame him for it.

“As I said, that’s the good part. Enjoy it while you can because you won’t be as keen on the next bit.” He downs a third shot and gestures in my direction. “You gonna have that?”

“Oh. No. No thanks.”

“Fair enough.”

The stranger takes it for himself, gulps it down, and lets out a long sigh that reeks of liquor. It takes all of my self-control not to gag.

“Well, now, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Again—not many people out there know about the bounty on your own special heads. I’m one of them. Lucan Dravonai’s another.”

Our reactions couldn’t be more different. Ivy and I only frown. Jace and Cassian, on the other hand, jump so violently that they may as well have received electric rods to their spines.

“*What?*” Jace hisses. He grips the edge of the bar, knuckles shining white against his deep blue skin. “How—

why—what would even make you *say* something like that?”

“Told you you wouldn’t be happy about that part,” the stranger mutters.

“Should I know this name?” Ivy asks. “Because I’m getting the sense that I should.”

“You’d be better off not,” Cassian says, his voice thin, “but if he’s telling the truth, I don’t think you’re going to have any choice.”

“Course I’m telling the truth!” the man with the hat exclaims. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“We don’t know who you are,” Jace says. He sounds like he’s trying to convince himself more than the stranger. “We haven’t even seen your *face*. We have every reason and then some to suspect you’re lying to us.”

“Maybe so. But tell me one thing. Just what sort of advantage would that give me?” He flicks his fingers irritably. “No, no, never mind. I know your answer: you *don’t know*. There are a lot of things that you don’t know, aren’t there?”

“Why would Dravonai be after us?” Cassian demands.

“Because you’re a hot commodity, of course! You don’t need me to tell you that. Vestra’s spitting at the gills for you two. Less so for the ladies, no offense—don’t think he considers them to be as much of a credible threat.”

Jace shakes his head. “You’re avoiding the point. This is *Lucan Dravonai* we’re talking about. Doesn’t Vestra have better targets?”

“Well, you tell me. Far as I can see, he certainly doesn’t. I’d guess that you’re the only rebel boys still running around outside his jurisdiction. He wants to get you back. Clean everything up nice and easy. Needless to say, this rebellion is a real stick up his ass, and his priority is to get the whole thing over and done with—the sooner, the better.”

“That’s why Kardo kicked us out.” Jace’s voice is hollow. “Of course.”

“Okay, fine,” Ivy says suddenly, thrusting both of her hands forward in exasperation. “I’ll go ahead and ask. Who the hell is Lucan Dravonai?”

“Hm,” the stranger drawls. “Where to begin? Drav—”

But Cassian is shaking his head. “No. No. We can’t afford to waste time with theatrics.”

The man tosses back another shot. “Suit yourself, soldier boy.”

Cassian nods shakily, his eyes glued to the warped wood grain of the bar. “Dravonai is a bounty hunter,” he says. “Vestra’s best. Remember what Avann said? About how some senior soldiers have tried to spread the truth in the past... but they’ve been chased down? Taken out?”

“...Gotcha,” Ivy half-whispers.

“His clear rate’s a beauty.” The wide-brimmed hat bobs forward. “Your *mainchin*’ army might be little more than a joke, but the same sure can’t be said of Lucan Dravonai.”

“Okay. Okay.” Jace swallows, pulling in a deep breath through his nose, and runs both hands through his hair. “First question. Does he know we’re here?”

“On Duvalik? ’Course he does. This particular spot? Not so much. I didn’t go through all this trouble just to feed you into some other guy’s trap. In fact—”

“Second question,” Jace continues, raising his voice. “Why are you telling us this? I don’t need your name or your face or... any of that, if sharing them is such a problem for you. But we need a reason to believe you. You have to give us *something*.”

A gusty sigh seeps out from under that red-brown hat. Several seconds lapse by. After so many shots of liquor, and with his head ducked so low into his chest, I half-think that he’s fallen asleep here and now—but just as I’m about to suggest to the others that we get the hell out of here, the stranger’s rusty voice sounds once again.

“Tell you what. Since you asked so nicely, I’ll give you two of them.” He flicks up one gloved finger. “I don’t care for Lucan Dravonai. He’s a slimy sack of *kest* with no morals whatsoever to speak of. Most people in our business, we’re doing it for a reason other than money. Yes, we are,” he adds when Ivy scoffs, his tone shadowed with indignation. He waits for her to grow quiet, then raises his other index finger and steeples the two of them together. “Number two—and I’m gonna be real honest for a second here—I like what you bunch are up to. Sneaks and liars rub me the wrong way. Vestra and his men, they’re both of those and more. You don’t get to know my name. You don’t get to see my face. Because I’m not willing to put my own life on the line. But I don’t think your rebellion is worth any old bounty. I think you’re fightin’ for somethin’ real. And I want to see you win it. Those good enough reasons for you?”

Jace’s response is to rise to his feet.

“We need to get going,” he tells us. “I’ll figure it out as we move. But we can’t afford to waste any time. Come on.”

He gives a hard jerk of his head, then half-jogs from the bar, back into the harsh Duvalian sun. With no other choice, the rest of us follow suit, leaving the man in the hat behind us, chuckling softly as he swills back what remains of our untouched drinks.





## CHAPTER 20

## CALIX

IT TAKES me a long time to remember how to move.

All of my limbs are stinging from being bashed against the cave floor, but that's not what paralyzes me. I could be pummeled that hard twenty times over and still land on my feet.

But the echoes of Avann's voice, calmer and evener than I'd heard it in recent memory, are far more difficult to shake.

*I'm not killing myself. It's too late for that.*

*I haven't been alive for a long time. Not since she left me.*

His devotion to Evera Aisling was always a mystery to me. To most of us, I think. More so than ever after she hurt Cherise, after she revealed that she'd been sabotaging us all along....

And still, he loved her. I'm willing to bet that he didn't want to. I'm equally sure that his wants had no bearing on the matter.

*I haven't been alive....*

I wish I didn't believe him, but I don't have that luxury. If anything, his last words were the most earnest thing I've ever heard from him.

*Promise me—*

Frantic footfalls patter the tunnel behind me. I can't find the strength to turn around, not even when I hear Deryn's huff of relief.

“Calix,” she says. Her hand light paints the ground silver. “Shit. I thought you—we heard the explosions, and when you didn’t come... but you did it. Right? I mean, of course, you did. The entrance is—but... wait, where’s Avann?”

I don’t answer. I don’t need to. She’ll figure it out soon enough.

“Oh...”

And there it is.

“But... why? Why would he...?”

“We were out of range,” I say. I hate how toneless my voice sounds, how robotic—but I don’t have the energy for anything more. “We couldn’t activate it from where we were. He went back down there with the detonator. And now...” I tilt my chin towards the heap of rubble in front of us, visible to me for the first time thanks to Deryn’s light. It’s a solid wall now—even the dust has settled. It’s so thoroughly sealed that there may as well have never been an entrance there in the first place.

That spells doom for more than just Avann. If we can’t find another way out of here, we’re done for.

“We... we should go,” Deryn half-whispers. “The others are waiting. The Commander... everyone.”

“Right.” I still don’t move.

“Calix, I... I didn’t really know him. But I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s what he wanted.” I don’t know if that makes things better or worse, but I still feel like it needs to be said. “He wasn’t being impulsive. He was... he...”

“Calix,” she says again, her voice straining. “We need to go.”

I nod mechanically. Still, the rest of my muscles refuse to obey me. *Come on, come on....*

He told me to find her again. He made me promise that I would, no matter what it cost.

*Don't you give her up. Not for anything in the world. Promise me that.*

I grasp Deryn's extended hand and haul myself to my feet, breathing hard. I can tell that she's trying to meet my eyes. I don't let her.

"If there's anything I can do—"

"Let's just go," I say.

She pauses for far longer than I'd like. I wish I couldn't feel her eyes on me.

"Okay," she says at last. "You're right. Let's go."

Deryn leads me down the winding tunnels for what feels like forever. I know it's my fault for being so slow, but no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to pick up my pace. To her credit, she voices no impatience. Now that we're finally moving, I guess we don't have any reason to be in a hurry.

"Did you find a place?" I ask after a while. My throat is dry, my tongue grainy with dust from the explosion. Any attempt to swallow makes my saliva feel like glue.

"Not exactly, but things look pretty promising." She couldn't be more palpably relieved to have something else to talk about. "The cave systems start branching after a while, and there are a few big gulches that make it look like it goes on for a hell of a long time. It's getting deeper too, but not by that much. We're almost positive we'll find another way up to the surface. It just... might not be for a little while. Or a long while."

"But it'll be away from the base."

"Yeah. Yeah, it has to be by now. We'll just have to be careful about, you know, not walking straight into another military base. Or some other sort of death trap. The best case scenario is that we turn out somewhere in the middle of nowhere... are there even nowhere's on Ixion? Back on Earth, you know, you're never out of spitting distance from a city hub."

“Depends on what you mean by *nowhere*,” I mutter.

“Just, you know, if there—”

She stops suddenly, throwing out an arm to stop me. I recoil from her touch.

“Sorry,” she mutters. “We’re almost there. I just... there’s something else I should tell you.”

She takes a few deep breaths, perhaps working to find the right words. I just wait.

“Kira Kane didn’t make it.”

My veins crystallize. Every pump of my heart is cold and glassy. It takes me three tries to find my voice again.

“What do you mean, she didn’t make it?” I ask at last.

“I wish I could tell you. She’s half the reason I doubled back. Thought that maybe she’d gotten lost in the tunnel somehow. Never mind the fact that it’s pretty much a straight shot. But... she’s not. She’s just gone.”

I turn my head slowly from one side to another, then shake it hard and fast like I’m trying to shed water from my hair. My pulse strains against my eardrums.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. I... maybe she’s okay. Maybe she found another way out.”

“Or maybe we left her in the tunnels,” I say. Deryn knows it as well as I do. There’s no use pretending otherwise. “Maybe we went too fast, and she was crushed when Avann pulled the trigger.”

“Maybe so,” Deryn says weakly. “I don’t know, okay? I just don’t know. But I... I don’t want to believe that. And until there’s proof one way or another, I’m not going to pretend to have any more idea than I do. I just thought it’d be better to say something now. So that if you need time to process or whatever, you’ll have it.”

The notion is sweet to the point of being pathetic. Time to process? I hadn’t even finished comprehending the loss of

Wester before Avann went and blew himself up. And now Kira, dark-eyed Kira with her precise hands and her patient manner, is probably dead as well.

For the first time, I realize that we might be on the losing side of this all.

Avann's voice: *Promise.*

Kira's: *You're telling the truth, right?*

There's one thing left to do. For both of them. For the rebellion. For myself.

For Trace.

"Space," I say.

Deryn frowns. "What?"

"What you were just saying. You're right. I do need space."

"Oh. Right. Do you want me to—?"

"No. Let's keep going. For now. But when we settle for the night... or to rest, whatever, whenever that is—I need a space of my own. A separate cave or something."

Deryn hesitates, chewing her lip. She drags the toe of one shoe across the uneven stone floor.

"What?" I demand.

"Like—sure. Yeah, we can do that. Just as long as... well...."

I'd tell her to spit it out, but after everything else, I'm too tired to be cruel. I just wait.

Finally, she heaves a sigh. "You're not going to hurt yourself, are you?"

"What? Of course not." A weak smile warms my face. "No, I'm not going to hurt myself. There's just something that I need to take care of. Alone."

She sighs again, but this time the sound is heavy with relief. "Thank fuck. Okay. Sorry. Then yeah, we'll work something out. Of course."

“Thank you.”

She nods and starts forward, but I hold out a hand to stop her.

“Deryn? One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“I... I know you don't like me very much.”

My words startle a laugh out of her.

“Uh, yeah. You could say that. And I know the feeling's mutual, so no need to rub it in.”

“I just wanted to ask if we can, you know... put that aside for now. Focus on getting through this. Once people stop dying and all that, we can go back to chewing up each other's asses.”

She rolls her eyes, shoulders slumping in overdone exasperation. “It's not a matter of chewing each other's asses, pal. You couldn't maintain decent banter if you had a gun to your head. That's half of what I don't like about you.”

“Uh. Okay. So truce or no truce?”

“Truce. Only 'cause I feel bad for you.”

“Sure, fine.” I narrow my eyes and point a finger straight at her chest. “But I'll tell you what. Once I get Trace back, she'll rip you a new one.”

“So she's your guard dog now?”

I think I remember what a dog is, but I'm not going to press my luck. No need to give her easy ammo to mock me even more.

“Call her whatever you want. Just watch your back.”

“Words of truce if I ever heard them. Let's go.”

As I follow Deryn into the next cave, Trace's smirk glows in my mind's eye, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

## CHAPTER 21





## TRACE

THE ABJECT TERROR radiating from Jace and Cassian is contagious. They're walking twice as fast as before as we exit the little bar, and their tense expressions aren't enough to disguise the fear that permeates their every motion.

My skin burns beneath the gaze of every stranger. I wish I knew something—anything—about this Dravonai person. His appearance, for one thing. He's presumably an Ixionian, but other than that, I have no clue, and I can't exactly keep an eye out when I don't know what I'm looking for.

"There's a shuttle," Jace says. "We'll take it... somewhere. Doesn't matter where. We just need to put distance between ourselves and him."

"How could he even be tracking us?" Ivy asks. It's a relief to hear her say the exact thing that's been troubling me. "We've been careful, haven't we?"

"I don't claim to know his techniques, but he got his reputation for a reason," Jace growls. "I'm willing to bet that his main tactic is intimidation. Especially after seeing how the shopkeeper was acting... Kardo's a tough guy. Not just anybody can get him shaken up like that."

"And what about that freak in the hat?"

"What about him?"

"I mean..." Ivy tries to lower her voice—quite the feat, considering how out of breath she is from trying to keep up with the rest of us. "What if *that* was Dravonai? What if he's playing us, and we're *still* walking into some sort of trap?"

“No,” Cassian says quickly. “That wasn’t him. Too short and too gruff. Dravonai is....”

“Imagine Emrys with half the bulk,” Jace interjects, “but somehow twice as strong. Long horns, slender, crazy tall.”

“Is this guy a bounty hunter or a supermodel?” Ivy mutters half to herself.

The men don’t laugh.

“Neither,” Cassian says. “He’s a soldier.”

“I thought all soldiers were bullshit.”

“Not Vestra’s pet.”

“Less talking,” Jace urges. “We need to move.”

By the time we finally reach the shuttle station, even I’m nursing a stitch in my side. The building is a shoddy-looking warehouse, its surfaces shimmering with watery mirages beneath the midday heat. Sweat slicks every inch of my skin. I’m so glad that I didn’t accept the stranger’s drink. I can’t imagine being able to stay on my feet if I were anything but dead sober.

Jace thankfully takes the lead when it comes to procuring tickets, and soon the four of us are piling into a tube-shaped car of beaten white plastic. There are no separate compartments, and the benches lining either side are packed tightly, leaving us to grab onto a few standing poles. Fans whir busily in a rusty ceiling grate, but they barely put a dent in the heat.

He could be here. He could be anywhere. I can’t afford to forget that for even a moment.

When the shuttle’s doors seal shut, Jace lowers his head towards Ivy and me, speaking quickly and softly.

“I got us unlimited one-way. We’re going to ride this thing until all the people around us are gone, and then we’ll keep going for a while longer. End of the line, if we have to.”

“Won’t that be suspicious?” I murmur back. “Better not to bring attention to ourselves, right?”

Jace's heavy brows shade the pale amber of his eyes, and a vein throbs visibly in his temple. I don't think I've ever seen him this stressed out, not even when we were struggling to download the data back at Kardo's.

"You're right," he says at last. "Unpredictability is better. If we don't make plans, he can't anticipate them. Just follow my lead."

The shuttle rumbles to life. I nearly lose my footing as the floor wobbles and jerks beneath me. I know it's better to keep my eyes down. Still, I can't help glancing at the people around us, trying to find anyone who might fit Jace and Cassian's less-than-thorough description of the man called Lucan Dravonai. Tall, thin... I wish I could ask them more. With the shuttle roaring along, though, I'd need to half-shout if I wanted them to hear me, and I'm not stupid enough to risk something like that.

At my side, Ivy squeezes her eyes shut. Her skin has that same cast from before, greenish-yellow and beaded with sweat. At this point, there's no denying the fact that she's sick. My stomach sinks at the prospect. Disease is obsolete on Ixion, but we all still got a complete set of vaccinations before the program began, just in case. Whatever bug she's caught, it didn't originate there. Unless something from the jungle has a ridiculous incubation period, chances are about a hundred to one that Duvalik is the place that made her sick. And a place as wretched as this is sure to harbor no small amount of nasty illnesses.

I don't let my thoughts follow through to their logical conclusion. Losing Ivy isn't an option. Not to something like this. Not when we've all come this far.

But the longer I watch her, the darker and deeper my horror grows.

*Arriving at Redwater Outpost. Next stop, Redwater Outpost.* The calm, smooth voice that crackles from a pair of mounted speakers is almost humorously out of place, especially considering the sputters of static that distort its every syllable. *If your destination is Redwater Outpost,*

*prepare to depart the car swiftly and safely. Thank you for choosing Desert Sun Express.* The announcement repeats in two or three more languages. I look towards Jace, but his expression is distant, his eyes unfocused. Not stopping here, I guess.

I swallow and immediately regret it. Dehydrated as I am, my throat feels like two sheets of sandpaper grinding against one another.

Ivy sways beside me. She needs to sit down. As the shuttle pulls to a halt, I glance around, trying to scope out a free spot, but the crowd is brutal; as soon as one person rises, two more are already squabbling to fill their seat, and we're off again before I can even try to reason with any of them.

"Hey," I murmur as quietly as possible. "Hey, Ivy."

No response. Her lips are clamped tightly shut. I can only hope that she hears me.

"We'll make sure you can get off your feet in a minute, okay? I promise. As soon as possible. And we'll get you water; how does that sound? Water and a place to sit, or even to lie down." I'm babbling at this point. It hurts my cracked lips, but I push on regardless. In trying to comfort her, I'm at least somewhat able to distract myself from this living hell. "We'll get off this planet; how about that? I mean, screw this place. Nobody can argue with—"

*"Attention, passengers."*

This voice, low and brash, could hardly be more different from the last one the speakers spewed.

It's not pre-recorded.

My heart squeezes tight in my chest.

*"Stay where you are. The shuttle's stopping for a safety sweep. Cause trouble for the rest of us, and you'll get kicked off. As long as you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear."*

Shit.

“What do we do?” I demand as the announcement repeats in the other languages. Fear is darkening the corners of my vision. I don’t care about being overheard anymore. “Is it him?”

The starchy pale tone of Jace’s cheeks, harsh against his cool blue scales, tells me everything I need to know.

*How? How is that possible?*

“Cassian?” Ivy whimpers. She sounds nothing like herself. “Jace? What do we—”

“Quiet!” Jace snaps. “Just—just be quiet. I’m thinking.”

“There’s no time to think!” she protests. I’m not all that surprised to see tears swelling in her eyes. “Do we run? We can’t run, can we? But we have to—”

Disturbed by the commotion, a few of the other passengers pull farther away from us and turn their eyes in different directions. Their body language is clear as crystal: *Not my problem, they’re saying. I don’t know them. I want them gone as much as you do.*

“Ivy.” Cassian grips her forearms and pulls her against his chest, clutching the back of her head. “Come on, sweetheart. Keep it together. We’ll be okay.”

She mumbles something else that I can’t make out. The shuttle is starting to slow now, bucking and whistling unevenly. The metal pole burns against my palms.

*Damn it, Jace, tell us something... just give us something to do already, would you?*

But he’s no Azrael Emrys. He’s no Avann Silvius. He’s just another soldier—a soldier who’s been out of commission since the very first attack all those weeks ago. He’s not built to take charge in a situation like this. None of us are.

Jace’s words from before return unbidden to my mind.

*End of the line, if we have to.*

That’s what this is. We’re trapped. There’s no back door, no second chance.

This is it.

Facing what's almost certainly its end, my life suddenly feels very thin. I spent so much time expecting a breakthrough that never came. It's not that I thought I was destined for greatness exactly. I just always imagined that I would find something. Something fulfilling. Something to make me feel like my existence was more than yet another fluke, trivial at best, wasteful at worst.

The air around me is rancid with sweat and foreign breath. A strange fever seems to have overtaken me, as if Ivy's mystery virus chose this moment to ensnare me in its greedy claws.

*I'm so sorry.*

I had my moments, at least. Teaching my youngest sister how to cartwheel. Winning my first platinum holomedal. Feeling the blood grow weightless in my veins as I entered space for the first time. Moving with Calix across the battlefield, beating him time after time in survival games, allowing myself to be overtaken with warmth as I surrounded my body with him and his sweet, fresh scent, a scent that was more of my home than anything on Earth ever could have become.

The shuttle grinds to a complete halt.

Those memories are worth something, I guess. My time off-planet. Getting to know Calix. It wasn't magnificent or grandiose. It didn't make me special. But those moments of contentment... they were all I could ever ask for, really.

Jace's head hangs low. I know that he's out of ideas. Vague scenarios skate through my mind, each as impossible as the next. I have no doubt that the people boarding the shuttle will be armed. If we run, they'll shoot us down. If we fight, we'll be demolished. If we play innocent, they won't be fooled.

Those words again: *end of the line.*

I wish I could see him one last time. To thank him. To say goodbye.

Wait.

Maybe I can.

It's an insane prospect, but no more insane than the experiences I've had. The impossible exhaustion that overtook me back at Kardo's, the starry void where I could have sworn that I felt his skin on mine, the words in his voice— unquestionably more potent than anything my imagination could ever conjure—

*Hey, Calix.*

The door at the end of the car slides open. Shouts split the air. Passengers flatten themselves against the grimy walls, all of them terrified, none of them with as much cause for it as us.

*Some partner I am, right? Getting killed and not even in action. I guess survival games and real life are pretty different in the end, aren't they? Maybe you'd have done better. Perhaps you'd have thought of something at the last moment. You're good at that. But not me. Turns out that when it matters the most, I can't think of anything at all... well, anything but you.*

The people standing near us begin to part, their arms and paws and hooves all raised in surrender. I feel my hands lift as well, as though they're being puppeteered by some force beyond my comprehension.

*Calix....*

*Trace?*

My knees give out as the world collapses into a supernova of white.



## CHAPTER 22



## CALIX

DERYN DOES THE EXPLAINING. I thought that would make it better, but it doesn't, really. I still have to sit here and watch as the faces of the survivors transform, sinking to a whole new level of hollow hopelessness. Some of them are standing in a loose semicircle around us, but most have found divots in the tunnel wall where they can slouch or sit, their heads hanging, too exhausted to stay on their legs for a moment longer. Right now, they don't look like rebels. They don't look like fighters at all. They look like exactly what they are: civilian women, far from home, lost and lonely and utterly terrified of the mess in which we've all found ourselves.

"Kira, too?" Blythe whispers. She looks a lot smaller with her shoulders slumped in defeat.

"She still might have made it," Deryn insists. The forced optimism is almost worse than if she didn't say anything at all. I think she knows it, too. Just doesn't know how to stop herself. "In any case, we have to keep pressing forward. Right? That's the best we can do for her. For Avann."

"For Wester," Asa adds softly. She's standing on the edge of the small crowd, chin inclined downwards, hands cupped around her elbows.

"For Wester," Deryn agrees. "For everyone we've lost, and for everyone we still have."

*For Trace*, I think—and something tells me that all the rest of them are doing the same thing. Silently reciting the name of a special person, a person worth fighting for. All of us must

have someone like that. If we didn't, what reason would we have to be here at all?

“Callisto.”

I turn to face the voice of my Commander, head lowered, unable to make myself look him in the eyes.

“I'm sorry,” I mumble. “I know that I... I mean... I guess there's nothing I can say.”

“Nothing you can say, hm?”

“Other than that... again... I'm sorry. More sorry than I can ever tell you.”

My eyes fill with a brutal stinging sensation.

*There we go.* I suppose it was only a matter of time before I lost it. Just like I always do when the pressure is the worst, when my resilience matters the most. It's what made me an easy target when I was younger, and it's what makes me a failure now.

I don't want to keep talking. I know my voice will catch in my throat, shredding my words and making me sound more pathetic. But I can't stop myself.

“I shouldn't have left Wester behind. I shouldn't have let Avann go back. And I know that apologizing can't undo that, but I'm still sorry. I want to do better, sir. I—”

Heavy hands settle on both of my shoulders. My voice dies in my chest.

“You did everything you could, Callisto.”

I'm startled enough to look up, and the sight that greets me is something that I would never have expected. Not in a million years.

Azrael Emrys is smiling at me.

It's not a happy look. Far from it. I may not be able to read his shining black eyes, but on anyone else, I would call his expression a sad one.

Nonetheless: a smile.

“You did well,” he says.

“Two of your men died—”

“And you didn’t.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. I wasn’t any better than them; I—”

“I never said you were. But am I right, Callisto, in assuming that you didn’t shove Sabine headfirst toward the enemy? That you didn’t force the detonator into Silvius’s hand and make a run for it?”

“Of course not, but—”

“They made their choices, and you made yours. It’s thanks to all three of you that the rest of us are safe. Trace Morrow has done you a lot of good, you know.”

Heat floods my face. “Trace? What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen how you two work together. It says a lot. Now come on; there’s a ways left to go before we can get some rest.”

He gives my left shoulder a squeeze, nods brusquely, and starts off down the winding stone tunnel, calling for the rest to follow him.

Cherise, to my surprise, stays behind. She’s a near-permanent fixture at his side these days, almost certainly more due to his concerns than hers, and it’s almost unsettling to see her on her own. Without the hulking Commander for contrast, she seems far less minuscule. Not nearly so delicate.

“I don’t think he always realizes the impact of what he’s saying,” she murmurs to me.

I laugh through my nose. “Yeah, no *kest*.”

“He can be a bit of an idiot like that. Don’t take it too hard. Honestly, I think he does see what’s really going on, even if he doesn’t have the vocabulary for it.”

*What’s really going on?* Am I supposed to know what that means? If anything, I’m more confused than ever—but I don’t get the chance to ask Cherise what the *kest* she’s talking about

before she sets off to catch up with him, almost completely unhindered by her ever-fading limp.

Other than Trace, I think human women might be the most baffling creatures I've ever encountered. And she isn't always an exception, either.

I shake myself internally. With Cherise gone, I'm the only straggler. I send one last glance over my shoulder, as if doing so will somehow conjure Avann or Kira—but there's nothing aside from endless walls of rock, growing darker by the instant as the others' lights recede into the distance.

*I know you can't hear me, Avann. And I know I didn't say it when I should have. But I'll do it. I'll do what you asked. I swear it, on anything and everything.*

He was always a lot smarter than me. The least I can do is listen to the last thing he ever said.

With those silent words uttered, I turn around—

—And trip on something that isn't there.

Vertigo swipes through me. There's no time to catch my balance before I'm falling, falling....

Falling even more....

What the *kest* is going on? Did I stumble upon some hidden gap in the rock? Is this what happened to Kira? Everything is dark now, and grasping at the air yields nothing. Somehow, impossibly, my entire world has been overtaken by colorless space, and I'm *still* falling—

No, not falling.

Floating.

*Calix....*

*Trace.*

Okay. This is new.

The other times, the half-dreaming times, I was sure it was all in my head. Of course, that didn't necessarily mean it didn't have some root in reality—but it was different from

whatever's happening now. Now, there's no question. The star-struck, deep blue void is here, all around me, so clear that I can smell its salty tang.

And if it's here, then so is she.

"You came," she whispers.

That's different too. I can *hear* her voice, not just feel it. I glance from side to side. The motion lags slightly, like I'm underwater. At least something's the same as before.

"I can't see you," I say.

"I'm here."

Fingertips brush my shoulder. I inhale sharply and wheel around.

There she is. Her dark skin shines faintly against the glittering expanse, and her eyes are twin comets cutting through the abyss.

"You look good," I say.

She laughs. It echoes through the vastness.

"Seriously? That's what you have to say?"

"Should I be saying something else?"

She ruffles my hair. It feels amazing—better, in a way, than anything more intimate.

"I can't believe how much I miss you," I say.

Her grin fades like a waning moon.

"What?" I bring my fingers to her cheek. "What's wrong?"

"I'm glad you're here."

"*That's* what's wrong?"

"No, you ridiculous thing." Despite her teasing tone, Trace's face has grown solemn. Her eyes flicker back and forth as if searching my face for something hidden. "Of course not."

"Should I guess again, or...?"

It's so effortless to talk to her. I don't even need to think about the words before they've departed my lips. Maybe it makes me look ridiculous, but I find that I don't really care about that, either. For once, I'm too light with euphoria to be troubled by self-consciousness.

"How did you get here?"

"Didn't realize I was gonna be quizzed."

"I'm serious, Calix."

She is. I can tell by the lowering of her voice, the widening of her eyes. A little bit of my errant joy trickles away into the nothingness churning below us.

"I... don't really know, I guess," I admit. "I wasn't trying. I was... walking. And then I took a step forward, and it wasn't there anymore. *I* wasn't there anymore. I was here instead."

"That doesn't make any sense," she murmurs.

"Well, yeah. Tell me about it."

"Shush. I'm thinking."

I obey, occupying myself instead with the black storm of her hair. It's far more tangled than I've seen it before, and I instinctively begin to work my fingers through the worst of the knots, as tender as possible, determined not to hurt her scalp.

"I called you," she says at last. "I called out to you, in my mind. And then everything flashed white, and now you're here."

"Right."

"I'm here."

"Yeah."

"*We're* here."

"We sure are."

"I'm going to die."

"*What?*"

Her expression hasn't changed. Still that same soft wonderment, those slightly unfocused eyes. But I'm not going for it. I heard what she said, clear as anything.

"Trace, what are you talking about?"

"I came here to say... to say goodbye."

"Nope. No."

I don't want this to feel so certain anymore. I want to go back to the dream-state, so that I can tell myself that this is nothing but a ridiculous nightmare. I pull my hands away and pinch my arms as hard as I can, enough to spur a yelp of pain. Nothing changes. I'm still here. Trapped.

"Calix, listen to me." Her voice is firm—*businesslike*, even. As if she hasn't just uttered words that could end my world. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me? Surely so. How could she not?

"Like *kest*, I'll listen to you! Maybe if you stop saying—"

"Shush, and *listen*."

I don't want to obey, but I fall silent automatically. She nods and moves her hands to my shoulders in a strange, bitter echo of Emrys's earlier gesture.

"We're on a planet called Duvalik. Me, Cassian, Ivy, and Jace. There's some sort of bounty hunter after us, a man called Lucan Dravonai. I think he's—no. I'm *sure* that he's found us."

"I don't—"

"Listen, Calix. *Please* just listen to me. If I'm still here, still talking to you, that means I'm not dead yet. So maybe we stand a chance. Maybe they somehow...."

She gasps suddenly. My hands fly to her waist, but when I try to clutch at her, my fingers move through her skin and close on empty space.

"No, come on," I hiss. "Stupid *susting* universe, you're not gonna pull a joke like this—"

“Calix, *talk to someone*. Talk to Azrael. Tell him about Duvalik. About Dravonai. If this is real—and it has to be, it *has* to be real—then we can use it. This isn’t over yet. Promise me you’ll tell him.”

“Only if you promise me that you won’t die.”

“Please....” Her eyes are wide, but I somehow know that she can no longer see me. She extends a hand. A sickening chill passes through me as her fingertips sink past my chest. “Please, for m—”

She vanishes mid-word. I shout for her, kicking and grasping at the void, but it’s useless. There’s nothing. Trace is gone.



## CHAPTER 23



# TRACE

## *THREE WEEKS PREVIOUSLY*

WE'VE DONE IT. Made it through the blaster fire. Made it off Ixion. Made it all the way to a planet that the men could define only with a string of letters and numbers, half of them in a language I've never heard before.

It takes me about ten minutes to decide that I hate it here.

I can't even figure out the worst part of it all. The heat and humidity are certainly good candidates, as are the oversized bugs that slice through the air like disgustingly juicy boomerangs, their buzzing a plague on my already aching head. It's also so bright that I can hardly keep my eyes open—in the sunlight, that is, under cover of the canopy, I may as well be blind. Shifting frequently back and forth between the two isn't exactly helpful.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I mutter without looking up. Avann has me stacking some fallen branches against the clearing's broadest tree trunks, the idea being to construct makeshift shelters, and it's damn sweaty work. If anyone else were to bother me, I'd resent them for it. Calix barely gets a pass.

“You know,” he says, “if you ask me, I'd say it's high time we take a break.”

“Yeah.”

The insects buzz; the wind troubles the broad, waxy leaves that surround us, murmur softly.

“Is that just, like, a sympathetic sort of ‘yeah,’ or...?”

I drag the back of my hand across my forehead. Sweat wastes no time in swelling back up to replace that which I’ve wiped away.

“It’s a ‘yeah’ as in, yeah, I’d love to take a break. I’m less sure that Avann would be keen on it.”

“Avann is AWOL.”

“Wait, what?” I sit back on my heels and look around, frowning. Sure enough, there’s no sight of Avann, nor of his golden-haired mate. Cassian and Ivy are still here, but they’re standing against a nearby tree with their foreheads touching, her giggling as he murmurs something into her ear. They aren’t hard at work by any stretch of the imagination.

“He and Evera gallivanted off into the woods a while back,” Calix explains. “You didn’t seem to notice, so I figured I might as well be the one to break the news to you.”

“I appreciate it.” I indulge in a long, deep sigh, then shade my eyes and squint up at him. “You sure haven’t broken a sweat.”

“Cold-blooded, remember?” He flashes me his inner elbow, its scales dazzling silver beneath the sunlight.

“What? You aren’t cold-blooded.”

“Just making sure you’re still thinking straight. Heat stroke is nothing to be trifled with, you know.”

I roll my eyes so hard that my head hurts. Hopefully, the gesture is enough to disguise the fluttering in my chest. I don’t know what it is about Calix, but the more ridiculously he acts, the more attracted to him I feel. There’s something so earnest about his mannerisms, like he’s genuinely having fun when he talks to me. I don’t think anyone’s ever treated me that way. To say it feels nice would be a tremendous understatement.

“Well, thanks to you,” I say, “I think heat stroke is the least of my concerns.”

“In other words, I’m your savior?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I can’t keep my lips from twitching. “Especially since I know you’ve got an ulterior motive up your sleeve.”

“What do you mean?” He thrusts his arms outwards. Like the other two men, he ditched his undershirt the moment we arrived; he’s wearing only his unzipped combat vest, which now parts to expose his none-too-modest pectorals, practically glowing beneath the sun’s glare. “Nothing up my sleeves to speak of. I don’t even have sleeves.”

I school my face into the most disapproving expression I can manage. “You’re embarrassing.”

“I do my best, wonder girl.”

“Nope. Don’t try to pull that slick nonsense on me. Motive, now.”

He does a remarkably poor job of feigning thoughtfulness. “Uh... I want to have sex with you?”

“Then why the hell didn’t you say something sooner?”

He laughs and extends his hands. I twine my fingers with his and pull myself to my feet, no longer bothering to stifle the grin that spreads across my lips. His eyes glint as he pulls me in close, and somehow the burn of his chest is a welcome heat, so very different from the baking glare of the sun.

“Not here,” I murmur, though I graze my lips against his collarbone as I do so, unable to stop myself. “Not where everybody can see.”

“Who’s going to see?” he whispers back.

I lean back for a moment, just enough to peek around his shoulder. He’s not wrong: the space previously occupied by Ivy and Cassian is now vacant, just like the rest of the clearing.

“Don’t be ridiculous. They could come back at any point.”

“All the more reason to hurry.”

I'm not used to him being so cocky, but I would be lying if I said it wasn't devastatingly attractive. Maybe it's the heat getting to me, or maybe there's some sort of aphrodisiac in the very atmosphere of this strange jungle planet—but either way, it's safe to say that I'm not exactly thinking straight.

"You're impossible," I tell him.

"I thought you liked me that way."

I swat at him, and he ducks away, laughing.

"What's with the attitude?" I demand, holding back a grin of my own.

"Being cooped up on that stupid ship for so long has me restless."

"Restless?" I drum my fingertips on his chest. "So that's what we're calling it now."

"You know, the longer you dawdle, the more likely it is that they'll come back before we're done."

I could point out how that won't be an issue if we don't start in the first place, but at this point, we both know that I'd be kidding myself. Instead, I draw my hand downwards until my thumb can trace the sleek curve of his hip bone. I hook my ring finger under his waistband and pull, then release.

He winces as the elastic snaps back into place. "Ugh. Has anyone ever told you you're a bit of a sadist?"

"As a matter of fact, you'd be the first. Now do you want to stop flirting and get down to business, or should I go back to shoving branches against tree trunks?"

"I can think of something better to shove against a tree trunk."

"Oh, for the love of—"

My breath flies from my chest as he lifts me in one smooth motion, hands tucked beneath my thighs, and thrusts me none too gently against the nearest tree. I retaliate by wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling his vest roughly off his shoulders as I do so.

I've never done anything like this out in the open, or even with the lights on, for that matter. Premature humiliation warms through me, almost dizzying in its intensity. But I don't stop. It's too late. No going back now.

So much of his skin and scales lie shamelessly exposed, twisting and gleaming as though he's slicked with pure stardust. It almost hurts to look at him, but at the same time, I know that I can't stop. Sleeping with him in the darkness was one thing, but now I can see him; I can see every curve and angle I've come to know so well, and the thought of all the times our bodies twined together sends a fierce thrill pounding through me.

Does he have any idea how stunning he is?

Impossibly, my face grows even hotter at the thought. The friction of my legs against his has pulled down his waistband, exposing a stretch of soft, curly hair that's even paler than the shaggy locks tumbling around his ears. Looking at it makes my heart race even faster. We've done this countless times, but the feeling blooming inside of me now is a new one. I feel... embarrassed? No. It's more than that. I'm almost... shy.

"Wait," I murmur.

"Mm?"

"Save it for later," I tell him. I regret the words as soon as they've escaped my lips, but what's done is done. I tug his pants gently back up, and he reluctantly lowers me to the ground.

When he releases his hold on me, the shock of my own weight is almost enough to make my knees give out. I clutch at the knobby bark of the tree behind me and take a deep breath.

"You okay?" His eyes gleam bright with concern from beneath his mussed white-blond hair.

"Yeah. Of course."

"I'm sorry if I—"

"No. You're fine," I murmur, reaching a hand up to rub the back of my neck. Why is it so impossible to shake my

unsteadiness? “I think the... the heat is worse than I thought.”

“Let me get you some water.”

I don't object as he hurries over to our meager heap of supplies. It's easier to breathe without those ice-bright eyes trained upon me. My shirt is rumpled from his touch, and I try to focus on straightening it out. However, my eyes can't stop flickering back to the curve of his spine as he rummages for a water canteen. I can see the pull of muscles in his back as they shift beneath his angular shoulder blades, rippling beneath silvery scales with an understated strength that I know all too well.

“Your man's looking good.”

I nearly jump out of my skin. Heart racing, I whip my head around to see Evera emerging from the trees, the usual smirk on her stupidly perfect lips. Her hair is a messy golden tornado; what with that and the lingering pink glow of her cheeks, it's not hard to guess what she and Avann have been up to in the forest.

“He's not my man,” I say blankly.

“Oh, come on.” Her voice sinks to a whispered purr. “You can be honest with me.”

“I am being honest with you.”

“Hmph. If so, you're missing out. I wouldn't mind getting a feel of him. He's smaller, but there's something cute about that, I think.”

The bizarre shyness from before drains out of me, leaving me wracked with hollow fury. What makes her think she can talk about him like that, as though he's some sort of animal put up for sale?

My words are brisk: “You can keep your hands to yourself.”

“Ooh.” She makes a show of pouting. “Seems like I struck a nerve. Are you sure that there's nothing going on there? I won't tell.”

“I can't find the stupid water anywhere.”

Calix's voice startles me almost as much as Evera's did. He lopes back, scratching at the base of his horns in irritation. I force my eyes down to the ground. I wish he'd hurry up and put his shirt back on; I can sense Evera gawking beside me, and it makes me feel downright nauseous.

"Oh, Evera. There you are."

"And there you are," she replies, her voice honeyed.

"Yeah—uh, say, have you seen the water canteens anywhere?"

Damn it. His tone is so light, so obliviously friendly. I want to somehow communicate that he ought to be colder towards her; friends aren't supposed to let friends fall prey to flirtations from stupid... stupid... ugh. I can't think of a strong enough word.

"Hm... I haven't. Did you check inside the ship? Maybe there's an extra in there."

"Good thinking. I'll go see what I can dig up."

She folds her arms to watch as he jogs over to the grounded ship and pulls the door latch. My eyes flicker between her and him, back and forth. My jaw is clenched so tight that I feel like my teeth might crack.

"Like I said," she says when he vanishes inside. "You're missing out."

"Just leave him alone, okay?" My voice is louder than I meant for it to be, but I physically can't seem to lower it. "He's not interested in all that."

"Just because that's the case with you...."

With that, she shrugs and wanders off, leaving me to fume in silence.

I've never been fond of Evera, to put it lightly, but I decide here and now that I hate her. Calix isn't a fucking trophy for her to collect. None of them are. I ought to tell Avann what she was saying, just to see how he'd respond....



No. That's not me. I don't have anything against him, and I'm not petty enough to start conflict where there is none.

But if she knows what's good for her, she's going to leave him the hell alone.



## CHAPTER 24

# CALIX

## *PRESENT DAY*

I JOLT awake plastered in sweat, my chest heaving as if I've just run a marathon, gasps ripping past my trembling lips.

No. This can't be happening. I won't let it.

*Came here to say goodbye—*

It must have been a nightmare. The alternative... no.

No, *kest*, I won't let there be an alternative.

But I have to check. If it's real, if she's in danger—

“Calix?”

Awareness of my surroundings returns to me in jagged pieces. I'm on the ground. Again. From the throbbing above my left eye, I took a nasty fall on the way. A brush of my fingers yields no blood, but that doesn't mean I didn't hurt myself. I know that head injuries are no joke.

All of this scrolls by in the back of my mind. Half-realized. The forefront of my consciousness is completely consumed by her.

“Duvalik,” I say.

“What?”

I pry my eyes open, cringing as the motion sends a lash of pain through my head. My vision is blurry; everything around me is a mess of rock and swaying light beams. Enough to

make me nauseous. I clamp a hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut again, and wait for it to pass.

“What’s wrong with him?” a gruff voice demands.

“I don’t know—I think he hit his head; he’s saying nonsense—”

“It’s not nonsense,” I snarl through gritted teeth. “It’s a *susting* name. *Duvalik*.”

Boots scrape the floor, followed by a rustle of fabric as someone crouches before me.

“Talk to me, Callisto.” Emrys. “What are you saying?”

“Du. Va. Lik.” Do they not understand the concept of *mainching* urgency? It’s like my surroundings are moving through gelatin, a thousand times slower than the racing of my mind. “Tell me you know where that is.”

“Duvalik’s a wasteland. What are you on about?”

“It’s where they are. Trace, Cassian—all of them. And....” What was the other name? I know I recognized it, if only vaguely. “Someone’s after them. Dranai, Dronai....”

“Dravonai.”

“Yes.” I force myself to open my eyes and meet the Commander’s perfectly black glare, ignoring the agony that lances my skull. “They’re on Duvalik. This Dravonai guy is after them... they’re in danger.”

Emrys’s upper lip curls back, his sharp teeth glinting beneath the sporadic beams of light. He says nothing.

“Please,” I croak. “Please... you need to believe me. We need to help them.”

“I want to believe you, Callisto. I do. But you’re gonna have to give me something to work with here. And don’t just say it’s your *mainching* intuition.”

“I—” My chest is too tight to breathe. *This can’t be happening*. “I saw something. I had a, a... a vision.”

“You had a vision.”

“Please, Commander, we don’t have *time* for this!” I try to get to my feet, only for my legs to give out from beneath me. Soft human hands grip me by the shoulders and elbows, but I just shake them off. Someone yelps in pain, and I don’t have time to look and see who, before my spine thuds hard into the rocky wall. My head’s quick to follow, and the impact against my already sore skull is enough to make me see stars.

“Cherise,” Emrys growls. “Look at me. Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

Cherise. Is that who I just flung back? She sounds as winded as I am.

“*Kest*, I’m sorry—” I start.

“No.” Emrys digs his fingers into my shoulders so hard that I swear I feel my bones grating together. “Not another word from you, Callisto. Not until you can *get yourself together*.”

I struggle against him, fully aware of the futility of doing so and still unable to stop myself. His grip may as well be wrought of metal for all the good my writhing does.

“They could be dying *right now*,” I snarl. “Don’t you care? Don’t you give a *kest* about the lives of your men? Or is it more important for you to teach me my *susting* manners?”

Emrys’s jaw is clenched so hard that it quivers slightly. His eyes are wider than I’ve ever seen them; they look ready to pop out of his skull. My arms have begun to grow numb, where he cuts off my circulation, but I don’t care. I can’t afford to care.

“It is not your place,” he says, his voice little more than a deadly whisper, “to question my authority.”

“Yeah? Then quit it with the power play and *do something!*”

I’ve done it. I’ve gone too far. Maybe I ought to be afraid, but I’m not. There’s no room left in me for fear.

Then his hold on me releases, and I crash to the floor in an ungainly heap.

“You’ve always been a rash one, Callisto,” he says.

Tears spring into my eyes. I ignore them. “I’m going to do everything I can to help my friends,” I hiss through my teeth. “If that makes me a bad soldier, then so be it.”

“Nobody is calling you a bad soldier.”

A harsh beat of laughter scores my throat. How do I even respond to that?

“I mean it. But if you don’t learn to control that temper of yours, you’ll end up finding yourself in a world of hurt. And not everyone will be as forgiving as me.”

He reaches a hand down to me. When I ignore it, he grabs my wrist by force and hauls me to my feet, ignoring my yelp of protest.

“Now,” he says, “tell me about this vision you had.”

For the first time, I take a proper look at my surroundings. We’re in the same tunnel where I fell. Cherise, Deryn, and Asa stand nearby, their expressions ranging from curiosity to alarm; the others must have gone ahead to scout. That’s a relief, however meager.

“I saw Trace,” I say. My voice trembles, but I push through it. “I lost my balance and fell, and then I was... somewhere else. With her.”

“So you knocked yourself out and had a dream?” Deryn asks, frowning. “That doesn’t seem—”

“Quiet,” Emrys orders. “Go on, Callisto.”

“It wasn’t a dream. It can’t have been.”

“Why not?”

How can I answer? How am I supposed to describe the way that I *felt* her, her smooth skin as clear as the rock walls that surround us now?

“...Because I know dreams. And this was different.”

“It’s happened before, hasn’t it?” Cherise asks suddenly.

“Yes,” I admit after a slow pause. “It has.”

Her face gleams in the darkness, so pale that it looks almost sickly. “How many times?”

“Twice, I think. Once when I was sleeping. Once when I was awake—I mean, I started out awake. I guess the vision takes me out while it’s happening.”

Her expression is impossible to read. A slow, silent nod is the only indication that she’s even listening to me.

“And has she... told you things before?” Emrys asks.

“Sort of. I mean, we’ve communicated, but it’s been... incidental. This was different. She told me to tell you that they’re on that planet and that the Dravoi person is after them.”

“Dravonai.”

“Dravonai, whatever. Who is he anyway? I swear I know that name—”

“You probably do. He might just be Vestra’s most prized possession. If there’s a single soldier on this planet who knows how to make use of his training, it’s Lucan Dravonai.”

“Lucan, yeah! She said that too, that first name! But—”

Then the rest of what he said catches up to me.

“Wait. What do you mean, can make use of his training?”

“Dravonai’s a bounty hunter.” Emrys’s tone is brusque, and his taut face is just as unreadable as his mate’s. “If Vestra has unleashed him on Auberon and the others, they’re good as —”

“No!” I blurt out. My voice echoes on the tunnel walls. “No. Don’t you dare say that. We’ll stop him. Duvalik, right? We keep moving until we find a way to reach the surface, and then we—”

“You don’t give the orders here, Callisto.”

It takes all the willpower I have not to scream in his stupid, stoic face.

“What do you want me to do, *grovel*? How many ways do I need to tell you that they’re in *danger*?”

“If it’s a matter of minutes,” Emrys says evenly, “then there’s nothing we can do. No. Stop. Arguing the facts won’t get you anywhere.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” I demand. “What the *kest* can we possibly do?”

“With what we have right now? Nothing.”

“But—”

“If you’re right about this connection, we’ll need to get it back.”

“Oh, come on!” Deryn exclaims suddenly, mussing her hair with both exasperated hands. With everything going on, I’d almost forgotten she was there. “How are we supposed to hinge our next move on something that could be... a sickness or a delusion?”

“I am not *deluded*,” I snap.

Her eyes are wild and helpless when they find mine. She’s not angry, I realize then—she’s desperate. This is her battle, too; there’s no backing out now. All of our lives hinge on the fate of the rebellion now.

“Look.” I force a slow breath; it stings my sinuses like chlorine. “I’m probably the last person whose word you want to take at face value. I get that. But this is about more than me.”

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to believe you, Calix—it’s just that—”

“I believe him,” Emrys growls. “And right now, it’s my decisions that matter.”

A new sensation flutters in my chest, so delicate that I’m frightened even to give it a name. But if I were to do so, I think that name would be *hope*.

“We’ll catch up to the rest, and we’ll find you a place where you can focus on trying to make contact again, Callisto.



Once you do, there are a number of other things you'll need to ask her. How she knows about Dravonai, for one thing. Who's with her, for another. If this works, we'll have a tool more powerful than anything Ixion's technologies could conjure up."

For a moment, absurdly, I want to refuse. The thought of the connection between Trace and me being considered a *tool* is sickening, invasive. I don't want anything or anyone else to encroach on that timeless, starry void of ours.

But reason quickly catches up to me. I'm being ridiculous. If I let her die, there won't *be* a space to speak of any longer.

And there's still time. She isn't dead. Not yet. If she were, I'd be able to feel it. My assurance on that matter isn't caused by any sort of denial. I know it, as easily and certainly as I know that the suns will rise tomorrow.

Avann is gone. Wester is gone. Kira is gone. But Trace is alive, and—no matter what it takes—I will find her.

## CHAPTER 25



## TRACE

“PLEASE,” I beg him. “Please, for me—”

But it’s too late. If he does promise, I don’t get the chance to hear it—because he’s disappearing again, his silver skin fragmenting into a thousand diamond-dust pieces until he looks like nothing more than a constellation of himself.

Crying out does no good. Vertigo is spinning through me. I’m being pulled back to the waking world, seized by a force far beyond my control—either that or I’m dying. This is what it feels like to die—

“Come on, Trace, snap out of it!”

I blink. My eyes are dry, stinging; everything around me is a mess of blurry shapes and colors. Bright figures move rapidly across a backdrop of beige. When I blink again, my eyelids drag with exhaustion. I’m tired... more tired than I’ve ever been.

Tired but alive.

“Trace.” This time I can recognize Ivy’s voice, airy with relief. “You back with us now?”

To my mild surprise, I look down slowly and see that I’m sitting upright, my knees bent into half a crouch. Sand... I’m in the middle of a heap of sand—and as my vision finally swims into focus, I realize that around me is even more sand, stretching as far as I can see in every direction. Jace and Cassian are here, too, watching me with wary, measured gazes.

“What... happened?”

“Something fucking weird,” Ivy says. “You just—blanked out. You weren’t responding, weren’t even blinking... it was spooky. Thankfully your legs still worked, or we’d be a steaming pile of corpses back on that shuttle right about now.”

What a delightful image. But there are more important matters to concern myself with than Ivy’s evocative language. “You’re saying we got out?”

“Of course, we got out. We’re still breathing, right?”

“It was a close one,” Jace murmurs. “Too close.”

“You actually did us a favor, freezing up like that,” Ivy adds. “You served as a good enough distraction—or I guess it would be more accurate to say that you gave us an excuse to start shouting for medical help, and *that* was a distraction, and then people got nervous and started a bit of a stampede because they thought someone had been shot, and we managed to get our asses out of the shuttle and leg it. I think it also exploded? But I didn’t look back to check. Too focused on dragging you with us, but thankfully your body knows how to sprint on autopilot.”

“The shuttle *exploded*?”

“Sure sounded like it,” Jace says. “Not much of a surprise, really. Those things are made cheap, and just a little bit of blaster fire....”

“So... wait.” I massage my temples with my fingertips, but it doesn’t do any good. I’m still so exhausted that my whole body is trembling. “If the shuttle exploded, does that mean we’re safe? Dravonai is dead?”

Jace shakes his head. “I wouldn’t count on it. Not by a long shot.”

“Dravonai’s resilient,” Cassian adds grimly. “A little explosion isn’t going to do much to set him back. We should keep moving.”

“Stop,” Ivy snaps—the venom in her voice startles me, and judging by the widening of Cassian’s eyes, he’s more than a little taken aback as well. “We can’t just start running again. Not until we make sure that Trace is okay.”

“I am. I am okay.” I’m not exactly lying. *Okay* is subjective, right?

“Oh yeah?” Ivy’s growing more and more worked up by the moment—flushed patches are beginning to emerge on her cheeks, forming a sickly contrast with her strained yellowish pallor. “Then do you want to explain why you just freaked the hell out and had a... a seizure or something?”

“I didn’t have a *seizure*.”

“So what was it?”

How am I supposed to answer that? My mind is a buzzing blank, utterly unable to come up with anything half-convincing. The only option I’ve got is, to tell the truth—and, ironically, the real explanation is probably the least convincing one I could provide.

“I was... communicating,” I say at last, staring down at my hands as my fingers curl and uncurl, curl and uncurl. “I was talking to Calix.”

“To *Calix*?” Ivy repeats.

“I know it sounds ridiculous,” I mumble, “but it’s true. We’ve been able to do it for a while... it started with dreams, but I sort of figured out that I can make it happen, if I try. I thought I was going to die, so I...” My voice trails off. I’m suddenly embarrassed by the prospect of telling them how desperate I was to speak with him one last time. They won’t understand; they’ll make assumptions.

To my relief, the others are seemingly too baffled to dwell on the details. Jace is gnawing at his lower lip, brow furrowed in contemplation.

“Telepathy,” he says slowly. “That’s what you’re talking about.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“We—” Ivy looks back and forth between the two men. “Do we actually believe this?”

“Believe it or not, it’s the truth. I’ve got nothing else to tell you.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” she hastily amends. “I do trust you—of course I do—but don’t you think you might just be sick? Imagining things? You looked... you looked *dead*, honestly. If I didn’t—”

She stops so suddenly that I freeze up for a moment, thinking that something has happened—that Dravonai himself has slunk up and stabbed her in the back—but of course, that isn’t the case. She’s only thought of something important, judging by the look on her face... or has she? Her hazel eyes are unfocused, and her mouth is clamped tightly shut.

“...Ivy?”

She shakes her head and waves a hand in dismissal, turning slightly away. A curtain of honey-brown hair falls across her face, but not before I see even more of the color drain from her skin. She practically looks like a corpse.

“All this time talking about what’s wrong with me—what’s wrong with *her*?” I demand.

Cassian’s response is to kneel beside her, reaching one hand out to slowly stroke her shoulders. “It’s okay,” he murmurs, followed by something else inaudible. Ivy just shakes her head.

“The stress is getting to all of us,” Jace says. As if that’s a sufficient explanation.

“Yes, but—”

“Let Cassian take care of her,” he urges. “This telepathy thing—we can’t just let it go.”

I want to tell him that we also can’t ‘just let go’ of the fact that our friend has taken violently ill out of nowhere, but the truth is that there’s not much we can do about it. Cassian knows her better than us. As much as it pains me to do so, I know that the best course of action is to give her space and let the two of them work it out.

“Right.” I take a deep breath of dry desert air. How anything can live out here is beyond me... then again, maybe nothing does. As far as I can tell, we’re the only organic beings from here to the horizon. “The telepathy thing.”

“It could be valuable, couldn’t it? If we used it to exchange information... how did it form? Could you set it up with someone else? Or teach one of us how to do it?”

That’s a lot of questions. I try to take them one at a time, but all my answers come out equally sloppy. “It just... happened. I don’t know. I don’t really have any idea how I’d be able to teach it, since I don’t know how it started in the first place....”

Fine, so I’m not being entirely truthful. But there’s no way in hell I’m going to tell Jace Kairos that the connection initially manifested by way of a wet dream. I’d sooner lose the whole war than admit something like that.

“Right. Okay.” The disappointment in his voice is almost enough for me to feel bad. Almost. “Well... did you learn anything valuable from him?”

“There wasn’t time. You all shook me out of it before I could ask.”

He swears under his breath. “If only—”

“I did tell him something, though.” I run a hand through my tangled hair, trying and failing to get it to stay behind my ear. “A couple of things. About Duvalik. About Dravonai. He knows where we are now... maybe he’ll be able to come rescue us.”

“That’s something.” Jace nods. “That’s good... that’s really good, Trace. I wonder whether—”

He’s cut off by violent retching from Ivy’s direction. We both turn towards her instinctively, only to see that she’s on her hands and knees, gagging bile into the sand, shaking like a leaf as Cassian continues to massage her shoulders.

Pushing past my exhaustion, I crawl closer to them. “Come on,” I snap, “you can’t just expect us to—”

Cassian lifts a hand for silence. I can barely contain myself, but I clench my teeth shut for Ivy’s sake, not wanting to stress her out even more. She continues to heave for several more seconds, then subsides at last, leaning back against Cassian with her eyes closed and her mouth distorted in a

weak grimace. Sweat slicks her face, dampening her hair around the edges of her forehead.

“Okay,” I say. “New priority. We need to get her help.”

“M’fine—”

“No. No, you clearly aren’t. And you aren’t going to convince me otherwise, so just... just stop that, all right?”

“She’s telling the truth.” Cassian’s voice is strained. “It really is fine... she isn’t sick.”

“Isn’t sick?” I pride myself on being a far cry from temperamental, but I’m starting to feel as though they’re messing with me on purpose. “How can you say that? Do you *want* her to get worse?”

“I’m going to get worse no matter what,” Ivy mumbles. “Might as well not waste all of our time.”

“Your health isn’t a waste—”

“It is when there’s nothing to do about it.”

“Why wouldn’t there be anything to do about it? What—?”

“Fuck it,” Ivy mutters. “Fine. *Fine*. You want to know what’s going on so badly? I’ll tell you.”

Cassian frowns. “Wait—”

But Ivy ignores him. She locks eyes with me, glares, and spits out the words as though they’re nothing but another mouthful of bitter bile.

“I’m pregnant.”





## CHAPTER 26

## CALIX

“ANYTHING ELSE YOU NEED?” Emrys asks.

There are a lot of things I could name. A drink, for one thing—or a mattress, or maybe just a place to put my head that’s marginally softer than a literal rock. But the Commander wouldn’t be interested in my sarcasm. And, if I’m being honest with myself, even I know that now isn’t the time for it.

“I think I’m good. Other than... privacy, I guess. I need to know that nobody will be walking in on me.”

“Fine.” He nods shortly. “And how long are you going to take?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, I haven’t exactly tried to do this before.”

He raises one heavy eyebrow. “Not even a guess, hm?”

“...No?”

Emrys rolls his eyes as though I’ve done him a personal offense, but leaves it at that. “Good luck, soldier.”

“Thanks.”

And with that, he turns on his heel and stalks out of the room.

Well, calling it a *room* is an exaggeration. What I’ve got to work with is a tiny sub-cave, not even high enough for me to stand up straight. Not that I need to stand up; the only thing I’m here to do is lie still, close my eyes, and do everything I can to contact Trace again.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter as I lean back on my elbows. Emrys’s light fades around the bend of the narrow tunnel, leaving me in the deepest darkness I’ve ever known. What am I supposed to do from here? I’m not even remotely tired; on the contrary, I’m still worked up from Trace’s sudden disappearance the last time we managed to make the connection.

I should have asked her how she did it. The force of her signal was enough to literally take me off my feet. There must be a way for me to do the same back to her... but how? And what if she’s still in danger? If I were to end up being responsible for incapacitating her while she was trying to flee this Dravonai person....

No. I can’t think like that. Waffling around isn’t going to do any of us any good.

Wincing, I let myself sink the rest of the way to the floor. The stone is freezing against the back of my head. Closing my eyes makes no difference whatsoever, but I decide to do so anyway. In training, we were told that blocking off one sense serves to heighten the rest of them. I certainly don’t feel as though I can hear or smell any better this way, but it helps to relax. Sort of.

*Okay. Here goes nothing... Trace?*

My neck is already starting to ache from the awkward angle. I adjust it slightly, which does nothing whatsoever to help.

*Trace, I know you’re running for your life and everything, but do you have a minute to talk? I, um... can’t really do anything else until I contact you.*

I breathe in and out, in and out, trying to conjure up that glittery void of not-quite existence. In the past, all I really had to do was imagine....

No. Who am I trying to kid? I didn’t just imagine the *space*. I was thinking about her: about her touch, her soft musky scent, the way that our bodies twisted together... even in the dark, I can feel myself blushing. What’s my problem? I

spent so long taking our relationship for granted, feeling shameless in our intimacy... and strictly speaking, nothing has changed. Not between us. If anything, we've grown closer.

But something feels different... *everything* feels different. My stomach twists when I think of her—when I remember her softness, the way she opened herself up to me... I'm faintly aware of my hips moving and even more distantly grateful that I can be alone for this. The heat in my cheeks is beginning to suffuse my whole body, making me feel somehow heavy and weightless at the same time. Now that I've started, I can't seem to stop thinking about the feeling of her lips against my thighs, the urgent need that flashed through me whenever she dared to nip at the sensitive edges of my scales....

How many times have we slept together? How often have I given myself over to her without a second thought? I was shy on the first couple of occasions, but ever since then, it's been routine. An easy way of attaining mutual pleasure. Until we were separated, I never... *fantasized*.

But now....

I suddenly don't want the connection to work. I don't want her to see me like this, all worked up—I don't even know how I would meet her eyes. But inertia has taken over. I'm on this path now, and I don't think I could stop if I tried. I can no longer distinguish the stone from my skin nor my skin from the air; everything is fluid, like I'm caught on the very edge of a dream and somehow lingering there, neither awake nor asleep. If consciousness could be translated to states of matter, my thoughts right now would be made of plasma.

*Trace*. Her name comes more easily than anything. *Trace, are you there?*

I don't see her, but I feel something—a curious little spark, like a fire trying to light itself amid all this nothingness. Somehow, I know that it's her. I don't need a voice or a face to recognize her at this point. It can't be anyone or anything else, because she's the only thing in this entire galaxy that makes me feel like this. Like I've spent my whole life in a haze and am only now learning what it means to be wide awake.

*Trace... it's me. Can you hear me?*

A wave of warm affirmation spills through me. She may not be close enough to form proper words, but she's still communicating.

*Are you okay? I ask. Did you make it out?*

Articulated or not, her message couldn't be clearer: *yes, yes, yes.*

*Listen, I—*

The space around me trembles suddenly, like still water disturbed by a sudden droplet. My senses and not-quite senses distort, winding me; I only just manage to regain my balance, tenuously keeping myself in this in-between realm. Far, far away, my body stiffens and twitches. I'm exhausting myself, and all too quickly.

This isn't supposed to happen. I haven't had enough time. *Kest*, she's not even properly here yet.

*I don't have long. We need to talk. We need to figure out what we can—*

I can't do it any longer. I feel as though my essence is being held together by white-hot wiring, slipping loose around the edges. It's too hard. I'm shifting—falling—

Frantic, ragged gasps rip through the darkness of the cave. It hurts to breathe, but I gulp in the air nonetheless, like a man back from the verge of drowning. My eyes ache. My head feels as though it's been filled with heavy shards of stone, grating against one another whenever I so much as blink.

It wasn't like this before. Exhaustion I can deal with, but this pain—this is too much. And it isn't going away.

In fact, it's getting worse by the moment.

Did I go too far? Am I dying? Is that what this is, this sensation of slipping away from myself...?

No. She's alive. She's safe. I refuse to give up.

Without thinking, I thrust my hand into my mouth and bite down as hard as I can.

The pain is sharp and immediate, but it's good. It's what I need. My splintered consciousness manages to coalesce, if only for a moment, around the point of contact between my teeth and my skin. I force my jaws to clamp even tighter; I can feel hot blood welling up and struggle to keep from gagging.

*Get yourself together, soldier.*

I don't know how long I stay there, muscles spasming randomly, clinging for dear life to the agony in my hand. But at some point, breathing starts to become a little less impossible. My thoughts begin to disentangle themselves from the panicked mess that they had become. I'm able—or almost able—to think logically again.

At last, my hand falls limply to the side. I no longer have the strength to hold it up. I feel like my whole body has been steamrolled.

I never thought it would be easy. But I wasn't expecting something anywhere remotely close to *that*.

What am I supposed to tell Emrys? He doesn't take no for an answer. If I let him know that forcing the connection again might just be enough to break me, he'll only glower and tell me to try harder, to toughen up for the good of the entire rebellion....

I can't stay here. I can't lie in the dark and strip myself of my sanity by trying to force a connection that refuses to come. I'm not going to sit by and perform experiments for Emrys when Trace is still out there—because, whatever she told me with her sweet spiritual touch just now, I'm absolutely positive she's still in grave danger.

I've got no other choice. I need to get to Duvalik.

But right now, I can't even move. Even breathing is hard enough. I'll need to stay here, trapped in this coffin of a cave, and wait for my strength to return.

It better not take very long.

## CHAPTER 27



## TRACE

“TRACE? YOU ALL RIGHT THERE?”

“I... think so. Sorry.”

Jace narrows his eyes. He’s practically nose to nose with me—when did he get so close?

“Are you sure? You looked like you... spaced out again. Were you talking to Calix?”

“No.” Is that the truth? I heard him, or at least I thought I did... but he was different. Strained, fragmented....

“You don’t look good. Maybe you ought to take a break.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me rephrase, then. You *need* to take a break. I don’t want you messing the rest of us up.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out. What were we even doing before the dizziness overtook me? Memories fight to realign themselves within me. Ivy’s sickness. Her confession. And after that... we kept moving. That’s right. We went as far as we could, roughly following the lines of the shuttle track, constantly on the lookout for any sign of Dravonai. We made it to this seemingly abandoned station: a warehouse like the other one, its walls half rusted through, filled nearly to the roof with a plethora of scrap metal and the skeletons of disused shuttle cars. Cassian led Ivy off to get some rest in one of the darker corners, then came back to help Jace and me as we rummaged through the junk, looking for something—anything—that could be usable. Jace said something about being able



to fix up an old car and get it in decent condition for off-planet travel... and after that, nothing.

“Trace?”

“Sorry... yeah. I guess you’re right.” I close my eyes and drag a slow breath through my nose. The exhaustion from before has grown even worse, and I can feel my whole body shaking. “I’ll go do that.”

I can feel the concerned eyes of both men on my back as I retreat aimlessly through the piles of scrap. They think I’m concealing something from them. But I’m not—or if I am, I’m keeping it just as effectively from myself.

I *did* feel Calix’s touch—didn’t I? Wasn’t that his voice filling my head? Something was wrong, though. His tone felt... pained. And he didn’t approach me with the shy, tingling caresses that I had come to expect. Instead, it felt like he grabbed me by the wrist and pulled with all of his strength....

What could have happened to make him sound so frantic?

The harsh grating of metal on metal fills my ears, drawing forth a wince. If Jace really can get us transport off-planet without having to enter any settlements, he’ll be a hero for it. But from the little that I was able to help, I doubt he can even get a shuttle running on land again, let alone in the sky—mechanical genius or otherwise.

I kick away a few unidentifiable rusted scraps, settle awkwardly on my side against the trash heap, and let my eyes finally drift shut.

My thoughts melt into dreams almost instantaneously. The man in the red hat, the cramped and sweaty shuttle car, the haunted look in Ivy’s eyes when she finally told us the truth... all of them twist and merge, running through one another like the colors in an oil spill.

*Pregnant? Is that even possible?*

The glint of tears in Ivy’s eyes, the way Cassian’s shoulders slumped in surrender.

*I don't know. It shouldn't be, should it? But I know... I've known for a while now.*

*What are you going to do?*

*The same thing as always, I guess. Keep trying to live.*

I felt terrible for her. I still do. I didn't dare to ask whether she'd stopped taking her birth control. The exchange program had been so strict, ensuring that we kept ourselves sterile at all times... cross-breeding, as far as any of us know, has never taken place before. That's part of what made the program so radical in the first place. If any human ever has fallen pregnant by an Ixionian—or vice versa, I suppose—it was taken care of quietly and privately. I didn't ask Ivy whether she'd thought about that, either. It's none of my business....

Except that it is, in a way.

Because if reproduction is possible between our species, that changes everything.

Somehow, bizarrely, I'd almost forgotten that sex is *meant* to lead to children. Never in a thousand years would I have imagined myself and Calix as... parents.

But now I am.

And—terrifyingly—I think I like the idea.

*Keep trying to live....*

The vision of Ivy's eyes changes. They grow pale, slanted—more blue than green, more silver than brown.

*Who am I to you, Calix? Who are you to me? What might we be together, if I could only... if we just...?*

*Just what?*

His voice. Unmistakably. It isn't like last time, though. It's soft, faintly laughing, the same way that it's always been before. Is this real, or just a fantasy? I can't see anything... I don't know if I want to.

*Don't hurt me again... please.*

*Trace, I never meant to hurt you.*

That's him. Logic be damned, I would know him anywhere. There are some things that no mere imagination is capable of conjuring.

*What happened? Why did you sound so desperate? Why can't I see you now? Why—*

Warm, strong arms close around me from behind. I gasp softly at their tenderness. I didn't even realize I had a body until he was here to hold it; it's as though I manifested solely to exist within his gentle grasp.

*I'm here now, aren't I?*

I don't think I'll ever get used to the way that his scales feel against my bare back: ridged around the edges, impossibly silky at the center. I arch my spine into the shape of his chest.

*Tell me what's going on. Tell me that you're okay.*

*It was wrong... we can't force it. The connection has to come naturally... we have to be truthful.*

*I don't understand....*

*Please, Trace. His fingertips wander below my breasts, and he stretches his thumbs to cup them fully. It's so fragile... if we strain too hard, it's gone. I don't want to lose you again.*

I don't know how he does it, but the words are like a balm against my flaming temples. It's so easy... so easy to let the rest of the world fade away. Even Ivy's secret seems to have no bearing on this place. There's nothing to fear. Nothing to risk. Nothing to lose except for the sensation itself.

*You're right... you're right.*

My head falls back, and I allow my body to be enveloped entirely within his. Is this how he feels when he moves inside of me? But this is more than that. He isn't just surrounding a part of me. He's everything, everywhere, larger than any human man could ever be. I can feel his erection against my lower back, hard and hot and throbbing. I've memorized the textures of his member, the strange ripples and whorls that spin across his semi-scaled flesh, and yet each one never fails to send a shiver to my depths.

A thin trail of pre-ejaculate trails across the dip of my spine. I love feeling this, feeling him, knowing how much he wants me. And it *is* me that he wants, just as I want him. In this weightless place between worlds, as dark and infinite as outer space itself, I can admit that without fear of repercussions.

I don't know if he can hear my thoughts. A part of me hopes that he does, that he somehow knows what I'm thinking. What I'm feeling. What—now, of all times—I'm finally allowing myself to believe.

Then the soft spikes of his tongue fold around my ear, and there's no room left to think of anything but the feeling.

Calix's legs shift, wrapping around mine and pinning them back so that my wet-slicked vulva is exposed to the cool, empty air. I whimper and twist.

*No—come back, let me feel you, please....*

I thrust diagonally, frantic for the hot weight of his thigh once more. What enchantment allows him to drive me to desperation with such ease? I'm meant to be cool... collected... rational... and yet I don't want that. I don't want any of that.

I only want him.

*Can't we stay here forever? Isn't this where we belong? Not in any war, not in any rebellion, not stranded on separate planets... just here, safe, learning and memorizing one another in the midst of the stars?*

*I'm here now, Trace. I'm here now. Don't think about the future. Just be here with me.*

*Then let me feel you. Stop teasing, and let me touch you again.*

He twirls me around in one smooth movement, then crushes me to his chest. Our hips shift against each other, and when his hardness connects with the soft swell between my legs, my mouth falls open in silent ecstasy. The sensation filling me is more than just a physical one. So much more. The constraints of the physical world no longer matter. We are so

much more than our bodies—and at the same time, we're nothing but the friction of our skin as it moves together, smooth and rough all at once, impossibly heavy and miraculously weightless.

There's something else lingering on my lips. Something we both know. Something that, until now, I've been too terrified to say.

*Calix—*

But then his lips crush against mine, tingling with stardust, and even I'm not strong enough to resist.



## CHAPTER 28

## CALIX

“SO YOU AREN'T DEAD. I suppose that's good in the long run.”

I groan.

“Yes, well. You would say that, wouldn't you, Callisto? Come on now; let's get you out of here.”

My eyelids are the heaviest they've ever been... and yet, at the same time, I feel alive, rejuvenated, in a way that I haven't been for far too long.

Not by coincidence, my thighs are also soaking wet.

*Kest.*

“Commander,” I mumble, wincing. A reddish glow compels my eyes to crack open at last, only to slam immediately shut—Emrys is apparently trying to fry my brain with the intensity of his hand light.

“Well? Did it work?”

As slowly as possible, I begin to edge my feet closer together. If I can just cross my legs, he won't be able to see the stain that's undoubtedly darkening the upper half of my pants. The key is to keep it subtle.

“Callisto?”

“Did it work?” I repeat distantly. “Did, um... did what work?”

“Are you serious? Did you contact Trace Morrow, or did you just sit here jerking yourself off for the past three hours?”

“What? No, I...” My thoughts begin to align themselves, and not a moment too soon. I lift a hand to shield my eyes, wincing. “Three hours? Has it really been three hours?”

“Indeed it has. Three hours of the rest of us biting our nails, and you were—what? Taking a nap?”

“Of course not!” I’m aware of how unconvincing I sound, but I haven’t the faintest idea of how to fix it. It’s not that I’m lying; I’m just not telling the entire truth, either. “I tried. I think I managed to get a hold of her for... for a moment. But it was hard. It... hurt.”

“It hurt?” Emrys repeats, audibly unimpressed. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Now I’m starting to get annoyed. I squint up at him through the cracks between my fingers. “It means that I was in *susting* pain, Commander. It was exhausting. Draining.”

He heaves a sigh. I ready myself for a verbal walloping, but what comes next from his lips is nothing like what I expected.

“Are you all right, Callisto?”

“Am I—what?”

“Spare me this one thing, and *don’t* make me repeat myself.”

I gradually start to sit up. I swear I can feel each vertebra of my spine crackling as I do so, wailing in protest as I finally move from the freezing stone floor. I may not feel as though three hours have passed, but my body is all too aware of it.

“I... yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Hmph. Good. Then get your ass back out, and we’ll keep moving. A couple of the others have gone ahead; they say there’s a campable spot nearby.”

He starts to turn away, muttering angrily to himself as he fights to navigate the minuscule tunnel.

“Wait,” I say.

He huffs. “Yes? What now?”



“I can’t. I can’t just... camp. I need to get to Duvalik.”

Emrys’s shoulders sink.

“I know you think that. And I gave you a chance. But—”

“No. You don’t understand.” My fingers curl into my palms, nails biting hard against the sensitive skin. “I *need* to get to Duvalik. We need to find a way to get out of these caves, and I need to find a ship, and we need to get there. Please... please believe me.”

“Callisto....”

I sit and wait for him to continue, my breath motionless in my throat. For a moment, I think he’s going to agree—and then the long shadows of his horns shift from side to side as he shakes his head. Without another word, he starts down the tunnel.

All I can do for several seconds is gape after him. Then, as soon as my still-sluggish brain catches up with me, I pull myself to my feet and half-crawl, half-jog after him, hands braced on the uneven walls of the tunnel. I can still feel the wettened fabric of my cargo pants with every step, but that’s suddenly become the least of my concerns.

“Emrys, wait—wait!”

I hiss as the heel of my left hand catches on the sharp edge of the rock. I don’t look down; I don’t want to see whether it’s bleeding or not. All that matters is catching up with the Commander and forcing some sense into him, regardless of what it takes to do so.

I can still feel fragments of her with every motion. Her lips on my neck, her fingers trailing my breastbone, her soft thighs caressing mine... but, more than anything else, the insistence of her heart thrumming through her chest, perfectly in tandem with mine.

She was frightened. Even when she stopped herself from saying the worst of it aloud, I could tell she wanted me there. She was—*is*—so alone, and so desperate, and—

My head knocks against an errant lump of stone, punching my thoughts momentarily from my mind. At this point, I'm starting to itch outright. I don't want to spend a second longer than I need to in these disgusting caverns. I need to feel the fresh air again. I need to feel reality. I need to feel *her*.

Finally, just as I'm beginning to think that I'll lose my *susting* mind, space opens above my head. Grunting, I pull myself to my feet and take off at a sprint down the widened tunnel, making straight for the bend around which Emrys and the others lie.

His back is to me when I approach, head lowered as he mutters something to Asa and Deryn in a low undertone. I hold back from shouting out his name, instead electing to keep quiet as I stalk up to him. Only Asa seems to notice me, and she says nothing.

"...Told you!" Deryn is saying. "We shouldn't feed into the delusion. He needs help, not encouragement. If we keep this up, he'll just get sicker and sicker, and we can't afford to —"

"You don't need to persuade me," Emrys says. "I made my mistake. Let's move on."

"And just how much was hinging on that little mistake, huh? What are we supposed to—"

"Hey," I say quietly.

Emrys whirls around and Deryn's face turns instantly stiff. It's satisfying in a way to catch them so off-guard—in the moments before he regains his mask of stoicism, the Commander almost looks guilty.

"There you are," he growls. "Took you long enough. We need to keep moving. Scouts say there's a slope up ahead that might get us closer to breaking the surface."

"Good."

That wasn't the answer he was expecting. I don't give him to react with more than a confused scowl before pressing forth.

“The sooner we get to the surface, the sooner I get a ship and make for Duvalik.”

“Don’t play games. You know I won’t permit that.”

“I also know if I need to choose between following your commands and making sure Trace is safe, I’m going to choose her. Every. Single. Time.”

Emrys rolls his shoulders back, rising to his full, admittedly impressive height. I swallow hard and keep my eyes locked with his, refusing to budge an inch. He can try intimidating me all he likes. I’m sticking to my guns.

“I’ve just about had enough of your insubordination, Callisto. This isn’t just about you and your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my—”

“Oh, spare me. Did you hear what I just said? This is *bigger than you*.”

“Azrael. Stop.”

The Commander looks as surprised to hear Cherise’s voice as I am. She slips out from beside him, her delicate jaw set, her eyes steelier than I’ve ever seen them.

“You’re forgetting what we’re here for,” she says. “You’re getting ahead of yourself again.”

“Not now, Cherise. We’ll talk about this later.”

“No, we won’t.” She grips him by the forearm, an action that compels me to flinch away by instinct—I don’t think I’ll ever understand how she manages to be so aggressive with him and walk away with her head intact. “The rest of the world isn’t going to wait, is it?”

“We can’t afford to be impulsive.”

“We can’t afford *anything* at this point. We’ve lost every bit of advantage that we ever had. Avann and Wester are gone. The base is demolished. Vestra was thinking far enough ahead to set that trap.”

“The solution isn’t just to flee the planet,” Emrys insists.

“According to what? Your military strategy?”

“According to—yes. Exactly.”

“And you’re good at that, aren’t you? You’re an incredible strategist.”

Emrys looks outright baffled at this point, and I can’t claim that I’m faring any better. I’m certainly grateful to Cherise for defending me—at least, I think that’s what she’s doing—but what in the world is she going on about?

She presses on, not bothering to wait for him to come up with a response. “The problem’s that Vestra is even better. Everything you know, all that training—he has it, too. That and more. From here, our best play is to be unpredictable. You think that going after the others is an absurd idea? Good. *So does he.*”

“...That is a good point,” Asa murmurs, tapping her forefinger against her lips. “It probably won’t be hard for Calix to slip under the radar. What reason would Vestra have to monitor small-scale vehicles? People leave the planet for business and leisure all the time. And from there, we can launch a proper two-pronged attack. One that *nobody* will expect.”

Cherise smiles—a full, genuine smile, not just a slight smirk. Have I ever seen her do that before?

“Exactly.”

“It’s a big risk, but it might just work,” Deryn admits.

Out of the informal leaders of the group, that leaves only Emrys.

His eyes gleam black and impassive.

I hold my breath, ball my hands into fists at my sides, and wait for his decision.

## CHAPTER 29



## TRACE

“GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HIM!”

My eyes fly open.

At first, I have no idea where I am. Half-light illuminates small mountains of unidentifiable objects, glinting here and there with tiny metallic winks. There’s no sky above me, only a blank expanse of gray. My whole body is sore—sore, but also strangely light, as though I’ve just had either the best workout or the most restful sleep of my life. Or even both, somehow at the same time.

Then the cry comes again, proving itself to be more than an errant scrap of a dream, and I sit straight up.

*“Move right now, or I’ll shoot!”*

Ivy.

Her voice echoes off the walls of what I now remember to be the abandoned shuttle station. So I really did fall asleep, somehow—for hours at that, judging by what seems to be early morning light—and now I get to face the consequences.

“You’ll shoot, will you? With that broken blaster?”

I’ve never heard that voice in my life, and yet I’m somehow instantly sure of who it belongs to.

He’s found us.

*Oh, Calix... I’m so sorry.*

“You think it’s broken, huh? Feel like trying your luck?”

There must be something I can do. *Think, Trace. Think.* I rise to my feet as silently as possible, trying to determine where the others are. Shit. I should have stayed close. From the way that Ivy's shouts reverberate against the looming warehouse walls, she could be anywhere.

"Luck has gotten me a long way, Miss Alecto. I don't see why it should fail me now."

"Everyone slips up at some point." Her voice is remarkably steady. "You missed us once, didn't you?"

"I may have let you slip by. All for the better; I prefer to do my work in private."

A shadow shifts in the corner of my eye. *There.* I start to creep closer, placing each step carefully to ensure that I don't give myself away. From the look of it, Dravonai has his back to me. Good. Judging by the misshapen silhouette and the desperation in Ivy's voice, he has Cassian restrained. I don't know why he hasn't just shot him already. There must be something else he's trying to get... but what? Is it possible that Vestra wants us alive?

I'm so focused on Ivy and Dravonai that I nearly trip over Jace.

I catch myself at the last second, my hand just barely closing around a rusty pole jutting from the nearest trash pile. My eyes water as its uneven edge slices my fingertips, but I keep my lips clamped shut. I can't afford to cry out. Not now.

He's crouched over that same shuttle, the one that he claimed he could fix up to get us into space. When his eyes lift to meet mine, they're wider than I've ever seen them; his lips are trembling, but his hands remain miraculously steady as he continues to work. I understand at once: he must be close. If Ivy can keep Dravonai occupied for long enough, we might actually have a chance of getting out of here.

But what about Cassian? And what if the shuttle doesn't hold up? It looks awfully flimsy, even with the hours of reinforcements that Jace has built into it. If I just had a damn blaster, I'd be able to take him out from behind... there are

probably a few lying around amid all this garbage, but chances are that they're no more useful than the one that Ivy is wielding.

Jace gestures swiftly with one hand—the shuttle, the roof of the warehouse, Dravonai, me.

*How long?* I mouth, shaking my head.

He winces. Not very promising.

“What are you waiting for, then?” Ivy hisses from the corner. “If you're so confident, why not kill us and be done with it?”

“I prefer playing with my food. Always makes it taste better in the end.”

They're *both* stalling. Is Dravonai waiting on backup? Heart thumping in my chest, I sneak closer and closer, ignoring the frantic waving of Jace's hands. There's an invisible clock ticking somewhere. I don't doubt that Dravonai has the upper hand; if someone doesn't make a move soon, we won't stand a chance against him.

Another piece of jagged piping juts in front of me. This time, I'm careful as I duck under it, making sure not to catch my skin on its rusty-toothed edges. If I can just....

*Aha.*

Perfect.

I use both hands to lift the pipe, making sure not to let it disturb anything else. Just one thrust to the back of the head... I'm close enough now to get a proper view of the mercenary, and I realize that he's wearing a hood fashioned with slits for his scythe-shaped horns. That'll make getting a swing on him a bit harder, but I know I can do it. I just need to focus. Hold myself steady.

Ivy's eyes dart to mine, then away just as quickly. Droplets of sweat bead across her forehead. I can tell from here that she looks horrible, and no wonder—more than one life depends on her fate. As for Cassian, I'm not even sure if he's conscious; there's no sign of him struggling against Dravonai's restraint.



“I don’t believe you,” Ivy spits in his direction. “I think you’re nervous.”

“Nervous?”

So close now. I raise the pipe over my head. I can’t be positive that I’ll avoid hitting Cassian, but this is my chance. I have to—

My palms sear with pain as the pipe is ripped away from them. I don’t even have time to blink before there’s an arm around my throat and the cold nose of a blaster at my temple, jutting none-too-gently against the edge of my skull. Cassian grunts as he hits the ground, and Ivy bolts to his side.

“Mm, no. I wouldn’t say I was *nervous*.” Lucan Dravonai’s voice is right against my ear. I struggle vaguely, with no real belief that I’ll achieve anything. “I just wanted to give your friend plenty of time to catch up with us. If I killed you then and there, she’d scurry off. But you’re all the same, you know. You think you need to play savior. You think you’re brave for refusing to save your own skin, but the truth is the opposite. It’s pathetic, really.”

Tears well in my eyes. All of this... *all* of it was for nothing. We got so far—we even escaped the stupid shuttle, only for him to catch up with us less than a day later.

“But I think we’re ready to go now, aren’t we?” The gun twists against my temple. “Time to say goodnight. Oh, wait—I almost forgot.”

Still pinning me against his chest, Dravonai whips around, levels the blaster, and fires a single shot in the direction where I came. Jace cries out in shock as a tiny bloom of flame spurts up from the shuttle—then, within the passage of mere seconds, the fire spreads to two, three, four times its size.

“You’re quite the crafty bunch, aren’t you?” Dravonai chuckles. “I respect it. Truly, I do. But I’m afraid I can’t afford to let you get away. If it’s any consolation, a fuel tank that collapses with one blaster bolt wouldn’t have lasted an instant in space. You’d be blown into a million pieces... at least this is the less painful way to go.”

My knees give out, but he doesn't let me drop. His forearm tightens against my throat, pinning me by the neck, and he only laughs as I kick and wheeze, struggling to get a single breath into my lungs.

“Go on, poor thing... rest now. I'm sure you did your best.”

I don't want to die here. I want to see Calix again. But with my vision dimming, as I fight for air, there's no chance of slipping out of my body again. I'm trapped in the physical world, aching, sweating, and suffocating.

No way out.

It's over for me.



## CHAPTER 30

## CALIX

“ASA,” Emrys says at last. “You’ll go with him.”

At first, I can’t process that he’s being serious. It’s not like the Commander is known for making jokes, but he’s not exactly famous for his willingness to negotiate, either.

It’s real. It’s happening. He’s letting me go.

“But first,” he presses on, “we need to find a way back up. And that’s going to be a lot easier said than done.”

Asa nods, as do the others. My head feels distant as it bobs along, as though it belongs to someone else.

*Cherise, I owe you my mainching life.*

But Cherise doesn’t even look at me. She just fades back into her perpetual position at Emrys’s side like a tiny pale shadow.

That woman, I’m sure, will never cease to fascinate me.

“Right. Scouting teams!” Deryn calls out. “Let’s check out that slope!” She rattles off a list of instructions, but I don’t process a single word. I’m still trying to comprehend the fact that we’re doing this.

It’s real.

I’m going to see Trace again.

Upon initial investigation, the promising upward stretch reaches a plateau. For several long minutes, I’m terrified that we aren’t going to be able to make it after all—but then Blythe

Xanthos's triumphant cry splits the air up ahead. Moments later, she's jogging back to us with a grin wide enough to light up the whole tunnel.

"Do you have any idea," she asks, "how amazing fresh air feels after being down here for so long?"

"Show me," I say, stepping forward. "Show me now."

She leads the way through yet more tunnels, skirting the edge of a still underground lake, and finally up a gravelly incline so steep that I have no choice but to climb up on all fours, each motion sending an ominous shower of pebbles cascading back to the cavern floor.

"Almost there, Calix!" Blythe calls back.

"I can't see anything yet—"

"There's a bit of a ridge coming up. Cross that, and the light will show you the rest of the way."

*I'm coming, Trace. You just hang in there.*

Just as Blythe said, it's only a little bit farther before I feel the ground evening out. I haul myself over the edge, and sure enough, I'm staring straight at a near-perfect circle of light—not the golden glow I'd been expecting, but instead a watery gray that's somehow a thousand times more of a relief to see. Even from here, I can feel the sweet, warm-tinted freshness.

Rain. It's raining.

"Calix? You good?"

I'd forgotten Asa was behind me. "Yeah, of course. We're close now."

I take a deep breath, reach up, and close my fingers over the lip of the ledge.

It's gonna be a tight squeeze. That's for sure. But it's not like I'm gonna let a little discomfort stop me now.

The first gulp of clean surface air is better than anything I could have imagined—and I've only been underground for a couple of days. No wonder Blythe is so giddy. Looking around, I see we're partway up a mountainside roughened by

scrubby plants and numerous boulders. This has to be Mount Kore, whose double shadow always brushes the northern end of MB57 at the end of the day; in the distance, I can make out the spires of the city, shining through the drizzly mist.

For a single long moment, I close my eyes and just *breathe*, reminding my body what it feels like to be outdoors, to be alive.

Only a moment, though. We have work to do.

“Okay,” I say as Asa climbs out behind me. “First things first, we need to find transport. The good news is that I think I know where we are, and there ought to be a landing strip near the top of the mountain. Blythe?”

“Mm?” She’s sitting on her hands beside me, head thrown back, eyes closed as the rain patterns over her smooth brown cheeks.

“Tell the Commander that we’re on the southern slope of Kore. There ought to be a dock closer up to the peak—we used to run flight practice drills here.” I don’t mention that they stopped when construction was finished on the main hangar, well over a year ago now. I just have to hope that they never bothered to take the old training ships down—and, come to think of it, that the ships are in any sort of shape for long-distance travel, which is far from a guarantee.

Well, hope’s gotten me this far, hasn’t it?

“Will do,” Blythe says. “Just give me a minute here... the rain feels so good.”

I don’t have the heart to press her. Besides, Blythe has shown herself to be nothing but reliable until now. I trust her to get it done.

The rain grows heavier as I lead Asa up the mountainside, grabbing onto errant plants to maintain my balance. She follows me in such perfect silence that I occasionally find myself glancing over my shoulder to make sure that she’s still there.

With each step, the same words run through my head, again and again, a stubborn mantra:

*I'm coming, Trace. I'm coming, Trace. I'm coming, Trace.*

An hour or two later, I finally see it looming through the mist. The dock is old and rickety, clearly fallen into disuse—but there's a small fleet of ships parked upon it, and that's all I need.

“Are those even going to fly?” Asa asks softly.

“The fuel in these things takes years to expire.”

She steps up to the nearest of them and kicks at its side, spurring a hollow crunch. “...It's not the fuel I'm worried about.”

“They may be old, but they're military-grade,” I say, fighting to persuade myself as much as her. “Designed to withstand all sorts of *kest*, the least of which is the vacuum of space.”

“If you say so.”

“That's it? No trying to talk me out of it?”

She holds perfectly still, back to me, rain dripping off of her sodden black hair. “I don't really have many ties left here, Calix. With Wester gone....”

*Kest.* How do I always forget that the two of them were together?

“I... I'm sorry. I wasn't—”

“It's not like that.” She shoots a quick, stern glare over one shoulder. “And I'm not interested in your apologies. I don't blame you for the choices he made. Now do you want to sit here and dwell on it, or should we go and find the others?”

“Okay. You're right.” I hesitate for a moment, wanting to say more, not knowing what that *more* could possibly be. “Let's go.”

She resumes her silence once again as I open the hatch of the nearest ship, slide into the pilot's seat, and jam the heel of my hand against the old-fashioned ignition button. Nothing. I

can feel Asa's eyes on me as I climb back out, teeth rolling across my lower lip.

"Just unlucky," I say. Rain rolls down my forehead and catches in my eyelashes. "Doesn't mean that all of them are dead. We have to keep trying our luck."

Asa says nothing. It's probably better that way.

Thankfully, I don't have to waste too much time making a fool of myself. The third ship's engine readily leaps to life, and I quickly gesture for her to join me. She makes her way inside, wincing against the bellow of the ancient vehicle, and slams the hatch shut behind her. It does little to stifle the noise.

"What is this?" she half-shouts as I hammer in coordinates.

At least there's a semi-updated destination manual programmed into this piece of trash. Looks like Duvalik isn't as far as I thought, either—if we can safely maintain hyperspeed, it won't take more than an hour to get there.

"Calix!"

"Huh?" I barely glance up.

"What *is* this?"

"Training ship. Didn't I say that already?"

"Right, and that's all well and good, but—no seatbelts?"

Is that the sort of thing that Asa Winters worries about? "Not in a model this old. That's what the safety grips are for."

"Safety grips," she repeats. "Fine. Can you just tell me that this thing isn't going to blow up on us?"

"Sure. This thing isn't going to blow up on us."

Before she can protest anymore, I wrench the accelerator, and the roar of machinery drowns out my thoughts as we rocket into the atmosphere. Away from Ixion. Towards Duvalik.

Towards Trace.

And though I know she can't hear me, I make my silent promise once more as we launch into hyperspace, closing my



eyes, absorbing the momentum of our takeoff and projecting it upwards, outwards, forwards.

*Hang on. I'm coming.*

## CHAPTER 31



## TRACE

“GO ON, poor thing. Rest now... you did your best.”

The roof of the warehouse explodes.

I cry out as the blast wave knocks me clean off my feet, sending me sailing through the air and landing hard on one of the scrap heaps. The pain is instantaneous. Stunned, still dizzy from lack of oxygen, it's all I can do to hold myself together, sprawled on my back, wheezing as I struggle to drag one gasp after another past my bruised throat.

Shouts and smoke flood the air. My ears are buzzing too hard to make out individual words, but I'm almost positive I can hear a woman's voice that isn't Ivy's.

*I'm not dead yet, damn it.*

“Quickly, quickly—come on, get on board!” the woman cries out.

“Trace—” Ivy's hand finds mine, fingers entwining firmly and instantly. When did she even get here? “Can you get up? We gotta go.”

I let her pull me to my feet and proceed to overcorrect my balance, falling hard against her side—she catches me with a hard grunt of effort.

“Sorry—”

“No time. Let's move.”

The smoke and sawdust have only grown thicker over the last few moments. I have to trust that Ivy knows where she's going, because I sure as hell don't. The best I can do is cling to

her arm as we stumble past piles of rubbish, willing my nerve-loosened legs to keep from giving out.

“Here! Grab on!”

I reach blindly forward and close my fingers around the blazing hot rung of a metal ladder. Hissing with pain, I release it again, and my grip on Ivy slackens as well. Then, before I can get ahold of her again, an all-too-familiar arm closes over my throat once more.

*No, no, no—*

A blaster bolt fires.

For the second time in as many minutes, I barely manage to catch myself from falling—or rather, I’m flailing for something, *anything* to hold onto when a strong hand closes firmly over mine.

Eyes gleam through the smoke.

Stunning eyes, pale blue—a blue that I would know anywhere.

For a moment, neither of us can speak. We can’t even breathe.

And then his arms fold around me, pulling me so close that it almost hurts, and my whole world is his lithe, lean muscles and spearmint scent. I can feel his heart hammering against his chest—I’m just tall enough for my cheek to align perfectly with it.

All I can think is that I need to hold on. I can’t let him go. Not ever again.

His lips are as desperate as mine as mine are for his. As soon as I tilt my chin up, he’s there to meet me, and it’s like I don’t need oxygen, only his warmth and taste and confident softness.

Then, after an amount of time that I couldn’t possibly think to measure, the dizziness sets in, and he catches me as my knees buckle.

Lips brush against the top of my ear, sending a wave of chills across my skin.

“Hey, wonder girl. You need a lift?”

“You,” I whisper, “certainly took your sweet time.”

“Sorry about that. Traffic was a nightmare.”

He pulls me up, past the burning ladder, and into the cockpit of his ship. I fall against the metal hull with a gasp of relief, wiping my hand over my sweat-drenched forehead.

“Is that everyone?” the female voice asks.

“Looks like it. Grab the hatch for me, and let’s get our asses out of here.”

With a burst of steam, the opening in the bottom of the ship begins to slide shut. As we lift off, I can just discern the tall, hooded figure of Lucan Dravonai, sprawled on his side with one leg gushing blood, his wild grin growing farther away with each passing moment.

“You’ll regret this, you know!” he shouts, barely audible over the roar of the ship’s engine. “Think I’m going to give up? You and me, we’re only just—”

The hatch locks into place.

“Good riddance,” the woman mutters—and this time, I recognize her voice. It was one of those which I heard most frequently during our time on Ixion, back when our lives still retained some semblance of sanity. Asa Winters. “Who the hell was that freak, anyways?”

“Bad news, that’s what,” Jace says. “But he’s off our tail now.”

Their voices fade into the background as I half-walk, half-stagger over to the pilot’s seat, and sink to my knees beside it. Calix glances sideways at me, turns his focus back to the controls, then sneaks another, longer look, his eyes glittering. Even those few seconds are enough to melt me. No vision or dream or psychic link, no matter how potent, could ever have captured the true brilliance of that vivid, vivid gaze.

“Don’t even say it,” I warn him shakily. “I know how it looked, but we were doing just fine, thanks.”

“Oh, yeah? Want me to drop you off for round two?”

I slap his shoulder lightly, and his lips twist into an exaggerated wince.

“Oof. Take it easy, would you? We aren’t all running around holding standoffs against mercenaries.”

I roll my eyes. It’s incredible, I reflect distantly, how easy it is for us to slip back into the casual banter of what I can’t help thinking of as *the before times*.

“Listen up,” I tell him, “because I’m only going to say this *once*. And if you miss it, that’s on you.”

“Listening.”

“Thanks for the save. I really thought I was finished for a second there.”

“Hey.” The humor slides away from his face, leaving a rare solemnity in its stead. He looks much younger when he’s not trying to rev up the jokester persona. “I wasn’t just gonna let you go. Not a *mainching* chance.”

“I...”

“Hm?”

What was I going to say? I suddenly can’t remember, but I doubt it matters anyway. With the terror of the past half hour slipping away, I’m filled with so much lightweight euphoria that I imagine I could fuel the whole ship with nothing but the energy of my sheer relief.

Silent laughter is gleaming in Calix’s eyes again. “Was that an apology you were going to give me?”

“Nice try. No repeats, remember?”

“I guess I’ll just have to pull off another heroic save one of these days.”

“Go on and keep dreaming, but I don’t intend to land myself in another situation like that anytime soon.”

“You might have no choice in the matter,” Jace says from behind, startling me slightly. I’d somehow managed to forget the other four people crammed into this tiny vessel.

“Well, yeah, Kairos. You don’t say.” Calix blows a stray white-blond lock of hair out of his eyes. “Read the room, though, man.”

But Jace isn’t the only one impatient to get back on track. Asa is the next to speak, leaning over Calix’s other shoulder so that she can get a look at the navigational computer. “Where are we headed now? Back to Ixion?”

“That’s our best bet.” Calix traces a finger across the screen’s diagram of data points, following some pattern that I can’t make out. “The Commander’s waiting for us with the others.”

“Others?” Ivy asks eagerly. “How many of you are there?”

Her words cause a shadow to fall across both Calix and Asa’s faces. Shit. That’s not a good sign.

“Women? A couple dozen.” Calix lets out a long, hard breath. “As for the soldiers... it’s just Emrys and me now.”

Silence falls throughout the ship as we all take a moment to absorb that. Only Calix and Emrys... along with Cassian and Jace, that’s four Ixionians on our side. Just four.

“I... I’m so sorry,” I breathe.

He smiles humorlessly, without meeting my eyes—but when I reach out to graze his shoulder with my fingertips, he doesn’t pull away. As a matter of fact, I could almost swear that he leans in just a little bit closer.

“It’s fine, though,” he says after a long moment, shaking his head as if to clear it of any lingering distress. “Because we got off the planet, and we got you guys back, and now we’re going to go back and show Vestra that we’re more than just his playthings.”

“I can’t,” Jace says suddenly.

All three of us—Calix, Asa, and myself—swivel our heads around to frown in his direction. He’s leaning against the back

wall of the ship compartment, staring down at his folded arms, his mouth set in a thin but firm line.

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Cassian asks quietly—the first time he’s spoken since getting on board. Soft as his voice is, I can still hear the pain pulsing gently through it with far too much clarity. It’s no wonder that he’s hurting, either. Jace is his best friend—his only remaining friend, really. He’s only just learned that the majority of their platoon is gone for good, and now... now what?

“I have unfinished business on Duvalik.”

“Are you serious?” Ivy demands. “Are you fucking serious?”

He doesn’t answer her. “Calix... drop me off. It doesn’t matter where.”

Calix sighs through his teeth and lowers his head. I hate seeing him like this—tense, stressed, nothing like himself. His face isn’t built to sustain such rigid lines.

“No, no, no—” Ivy gapes at him. “What do you mean, unfinished business? You have unfinished business on *Ixion*, for fuck’s sake!”

“And just how much help do you think I’ll be in a fight?” he asks, gesturing towards his bad leg.

She has nothing to say to that.

“I’m a liability. Anything I can do to help will be more useful from a distance. And you all can’t take the data sticks back to *Ixion*—it’s far too big of a risk. Let me have them. I’ll keep them secure—separated, this time. I promise. And besides...” He sighs. “I won’t be able to live with myself until I know that Kardo’s all right. He’s not the only person I owe on Duvalik, either.”

“What about Dravonai?” I ask. “You heard what he said. He *will* find you, you know.”

“Good. I’ll do my best to serve as a decent distraction.”

“Don’t do this,” Cassian says. He reaches out a hand, clasping it firmly around his friend’s shoulder. “Jace—please.”



He shakes his head. “I have to.”

Silence fills the air while the two alien men stare at one another, long and hard.

Then my stomach drops as Calix flips a lever, engaging the ship in a descent.

A sigh parts my lips, and Ivy swears softly. I’m not sure whether I’m imagining the shine in Cassian’s eyes.

But the next words come from the person I least expect.

“I’m going with you,” Asa says.

At first, I’m sure that I must have misheard her. Do Jace and Asa even know one another? What business could she possibly have on Duvalik?

Ivy is the first to reply, and she does a perfect job of articulating my own thoughts: “Like *hell* you are.”

“You mentioned data sticks. We can’t afford to entrust those to one person—especially someone who can’t run if he’s being chased.” She jabs an elbow in the direction of Jace’s leg. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

I can barely believe it. He’s actually *smiling*.

“The Commander isn’t going to be happy with me,” Calix mutters.

Asa chuckles. “Not like that would be anything new.”

“You’re nuts. All of you.” Ivy shakes her head.

“It makes sense, actually,” Cassian murmurs. “I don’t like it either, but...”

“Are you serious? Don’t tell me you’re going to do the same—”

“Of course not.” He pulls away from Jace and grips his mate by the forearms. “Never.”

“Well,” Calix says, “this is the end of the line. Go if you’re going, but I’m getting the *kest* off this planet.”

Just as the last word leaves his lips, the ship rocks with the force of the surface collision. Through the blaster shield, I can see nothing but an endless storm of sand. Probably better that he landed in the middle of nowhere, but shit, it looks brutal out there.

Jace pulls himself upright and limps over to the hatch, which Asa pulls open. It releases with a long, piercing creak, and a gust of heat immediately swarms the crowded cockpit.

“You’re not seeing the last of me,” he says as he lowers himself onto the ladder. His amber eyes blaze, and I realize then that I believe him. He isn’t fleeing—far from it. This is just the next stage in the journey.

“Good luck,” I say.

Jace smiles and nods toward me. “You too, Trace. You’ve got this. I know you do.”

With that, he drops out of sight, followed moments later by Asa, who doesn’t say anything at all.

Ivy lets out a choked, disbelieving noise that could be a sob as easily as a laugh. None of us speak as Calix angles us to take off once more; upon seeing that nobody else is doing it, I kneel down and pull the hatch shut.

“Hold on,” Calix murmurs. “No seatbelts in here.”

I hurry to my feet and grab onto the nearest solid surface, which just so happens to be his upper arm. Though he doesn’t look at me, his soft sigh doesn’t escape my notice, nor does the way that he leans ever so slightly against me as we catapult into space once again.



## CHAPTER 32

## CALIX

I DON'T KNOW the last time that I slept. There were the visions, of course—the awful time that I forced them to come, just about killing myself in the process, and then the few that I slipped into almost by accident. And though the latter had rejuvenated me at the moment, they weren't the same as just getting some real, proper *sleep*.

From the looks of it, I'm not going to be getting that sleep now, either.

The last few hours are a blur, their events so tangled within one another that I can't even attempt to pull together a reasonable chronology. Maybe I dozed at some point amid it all, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes.

I managed to get us back to Ixion, docking on Mount Kore, and found Blythe and Deryn waiting for us. They weren't happy to see Asa gone, even when I explained that it had been entirely her own decision—I know that I'm not going to forget the fire of Deryn's glare anytime soon. Once they calmed down, though, they gave us the latest news: Commander Emrys and the rest of them were still underground. They'd found another tunnel system that seemed to loop back around to the base while avoiding the previous network of caves; it ended, of all places, in the basement below what had once been the plant nursery. The same place where we all used to gather back in the early days—when Avann Silvius was our leader, and the notion of rebellion was a perpetually whispered one, a mirage with no real plans in place to substantiate it.

“That's our point of attack,” Blythe explains, her dark eyes unusually serious. She gnaws viciously on an already ragged

thumbnail. “Emrys has got it planned out. All of us will be there—almost all of us. We need a strike team to go straight for the High Commander. Two or three people max. People who can—”

“Calix and I will do it,” Trace said.

I try to meet her eye; she dodges away. Lips pressed together, brows drawn close—I always admire her stubbornness right up until she turns it against me, which is clearly what is happening just now.

“We, uh... we will?”

“Yes. Like we were supposed to all along. One more try. And this time, we’ll get it right.”

Then that dark, clear gaze turns on me, silently challenging, and I know there is no use in trying to argue.

With that decided, we shift to discussing our timing—which isn’t really a discussion at all. Food is running out underground. Every moment of delay worsens our chances, makes it more likely that the soldiers will break through the cave-in, that Dravonai will find Jace, or that Vestra will get his head out of his ass and realize that we’ve been taking the mountaintop shuttle off-planet.

*Tomorrow, we agree. We’ll go tomorrow.*

The others return underground.

Trace and I elect to remain on the mountaintop, seeking whatever shelter we can in the rusty training depot while the wind and rain tear on the outside, oblivious to the fact that our lives are teetering on a razor’s edge.

We haven’t said anything to each other since the rest of them left.

She sits with her back to me, leaning against a wall. It’s lined with old notice boards, their liquid crystal displays long since shattered by the elements. What would they have shown off back when we actually used this place? Team building activities? Extra strategy seminars? Strength training meetups? And all of it was made up to keep us in check. None of it real;

none of it carrying the weight of blood and sweat and flesh that I've come to know so well.

I don't know why it's so much harder to talk when we're alone. It should be easier in the absence of Ivy and Cassian and their constant long looks towards one another, always making everyone else in the room feel as though we're intruding upon something... but in a way, that helped. It gave us an excuse to laugh. To act as if nothing had changed between us.

*Act* being the key word.

Because that isn't true at all.

Everything has changed.

And even though it shouldn't be possible with my best friend, sidekick, and partner—I actually feel *shy*.

“Are you scared?” I ask at last.

“Are you?”

“...Yeah. I guess I am, a little bit.” I'm surprised by how easy it is to admit. “I'm pretty... what do you call it? Pretty *fucking* scared.”

She laughs; her shoulder shifts, and though I can't see her face, I know what she's doing. Toying with her hair, trying and failing to get it to stay behind her ear. The way she always does when she's nervous. I could watch that forever—the bend of her wrist, the curve of her neck.

“Me too,” she says. Her voice is so soft that I think at first I may have imagined it—but then she sighs, long and heavy, and that's as good as repeating herself.

“Why? You're going to make it out just fine. I know you will.”

“I'm not just scared for myself, Calix.”

“I'll be fine too.”

“You're a shit-ass liar; you know that?”

She finally turns to look at me, and for a moment, I actually *do* believe what I just said; the smile on her face makes me feel all but invincible.

“I’m really glad we found you.” I don’t know where the words are coming from now, and I don’t know how to stop them either. “I missed you so much. Right up until the end, I still sometimes wondered, you know... if it was just my imagination. If I was going crazy because I missed you so *susting* much. But it was—is—real, right? All of it. Kira said that it was possible, and she was right.”

“Kira?”

There’s no hint of familiarity in her voice. *Kest*, we have so much catching up to do... so little time to do it. “Another woman. She’s... she’s gone now.”

“You didn’t—?”

My stomach drops. “No. *Kest*, no, Trace; are you kidding me? I never could. I... she was a doctor. She took care of me when all of it was happening, and I ended up telling her about the... I mean, I didn’t tell her much. But she believed me, which felt nice.”

I’m babbling, which probably isn’t doing much to aid my credibility. I expect her to hurl something vicious or snarky at me, and I will have earned it if she does—but the words that fall at last from her lips are softer and more tender than ever.

“Come here. Please... I’m cold.”

I’m cold, too, I realize. Freezing. I pull myself along the floor until I reach her side, then straighten up on my knees and extend my hands. Hers slip into them automatically. I close my fingers around her wrists, and for a moment, we stay like that, still not quite meeting each other’s eyes, listening to the shared breath that moves between us. My thumbs move in slow circles along the soft concavity of her palms. My heart eases; I already can’t remember why I was getting so worked up.

“That was really good,” she whispers after several seconds have passed. “What we did in that... in the other place.”

*Real.*

“Yeah. Yeah, it sure was.”

“Could we... do you think we could do it again? Make it that good... even here, like this?”

A shiver passes through me. I can feel the burn of her whole body, so warm and soft and ready beneath the ragged remains of her shirt and pants. Thunder booms above.

“I think we could make it that good anywhere, if we wanted,” I breathe. “If we were willing to try.”

“And are you? Willing to try, I mean?”

“It was your rule,” I remind her gently. “Not mine.”

She makes a small, soft noise of confusion. “My rule?”

“Yeah. Don’t you remember? No strings attached.”

“No strings attached,” Trace repeats.

Her eyes finally lift to meet mine, and I feel my scales shift and tighten, as though something cold has brushed the back of my neck. But this isn’t cold. Not even a bit. This is the warmest thing I could ever imagine.

“Well... so much for that.”

The words have barely passed her lips before they crush against my own.

Heat floods through me, blood softening and stiffening parts of my body in turn, lighting every last particle of my skin with hungry, heightened sensitivity. Trace doesn’t waste any time. She guides my hands to her chest and holds them there as our tongues twist together, showing me the rapid beat of her heart as it plays perfectly in tandem with mine.

*It was never another place.*

The realization is as shocking as it is simple.

*Never another dimension. It was something that we made together. That we’ve been making all along. We were just finally brave enough to explore it.*

And just like that, we’re gone from this rainy mountaintop. We’re adrift in nothingness once more, but this time it isn’t



dark. This time, our bodies are glowing, flooding the infinite space with silver and gold. The two of us, together, a binary star.

I don't waste any time. I couldn't take things slowly if I tried. My whole body is waking up, finally letting itself acknowledge the fact that she's *here*, that my dreams are quite literally coming true. Her skin burns fever-hot wherever I touch it, and I touch as much as I can, seeking at first to simply connect wherever possible, regardless of what part of her I'm caressing or vice versa; my mouth to her shoulder, my thigh to her chest, the sole of my foot to her smooth, supple calf.

I've never been this bold before, and I can tell that she likes it. I drag my sharp nails along the back of her neck, and she groans and arches back, inviting me toward the curve of her throat. I don't hesitate before diving in, nipping and sucking, thrilled by the salty tang of her sweat. It's a delicate game; my teeth aren't made for playing with human skin. Despite the primal need ravaging my senses, I force myself to hold back, to maintain that perfect balance between pressing and piercing. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt her, but the line dividing pain and pleasure is a remarkably fragile one, and never in my life have I been so eager to toe it.

*Let me look at you*, she urges silently. I don't want to stop, but I've got no choice. I need to give her what she wants, the same way that I need air to breathe. I withdraw, tingling with weightlessness, only faintly aware of my physical body as it extends before her, showing her everything I have. Everything I am.

*I've always wanted to ask... are all of you like that?*

*Like what?*

Her fingertips skate lightly over the silver shape of my cock; its branching members have swollen so wide with need that I'm forced to spread my thighs to keep from paining myself.

*This... this part of you. Is it always the same shape as your horns?*

If my breath weren't coming so hot and fast, I would laugh. What sort of a question is that?

*Why wouldn't it be?*

*I... I guess humans aren't so... diverse. We're all shaped pretty much the same... and we don't have anything like that; we....*

Her meaning floats between us, inarticulate, but I understand it all the same. She thinks it must be embarrassing for us to display our horns for anyone to see, showing the public exactly what we look like below the belt.

*I guess I've never thought of it that way.*

Her response once more contains no words; it's only a soft, fierce sensation that I understand at once. She's *proud*. She likes that my horns are there for everyone to see; she likes that everyone else knows how uniquely I'm shaped. Though she would never admit it out loud, she wants people to be jealous of what I have... what *she* has. She wants the whole world to know that I'm hers and hers alone.

*You must think I'm grotesque.*

I don't mean for the words to form, but it's not as though I can control them when we're communicating like this. I can't hide my thoughts from her any more than I can hide them from myself—and I've always been absolutely terrible at that.

*No. I think you're exceptional... I think you're beautiful. And I want you inside me. Now.*

It's not going to be so easy to enter her when I'm already this hard. My offshoots are so erect that I'm afraid of abusing her entrance; it's not typical for me to expand this broadly while I'm still on the outside, but I can't control myself. She drives me too *susting* crazy.

*You're embarrassed*, she notes with a touch of humor as her fingers curl around the base of my member. *Why are you embarrassed?*

*This... no one sees this part, usually. No one sees it get quite this big. It only happens once I'm already inside... and I*

*don't want to hurt you, and—*

*Hurt me? Silent laughter. I'd like to see you try.*

And with that, she pulls me up and into her, and both of us cry out with our minds and mouths alike. Perhaps I ought to have been more concerned with hurting myself than hurting her; sopping wet as she is, I'm far too big for what we're attempting, and my cock's smaller protrusions ache as she forces my main shaft past her quivering lips. I'm half in and half out; the need is greater than ever, and my vision is scored with dizzy, frantic swathes of starlight. My own natural lubricant pulses out so rapidly that I can feel my glands aching, the same way that my mouth will sometimes hurt when I bite into the food I've been craving, rushing to pump forth saliva almost more quickly than it can physically withstand....

And then something else starts to happen.

I think for a fraction of a second that I'm already climaxing, here and now, not even fully inside of her as she thrusts with and against me—but that's not it. This is a sensation that's entirely new—thick and prickling like static, wreathing and suffusing every point of contact between us... and before I can even wonder, I'm somehow the rest of the way in. It shouldn't be physically possible for my throbbing, distended shape to fit past her soft, round human opening—but as the electricity-infused discharge covers us both, it seems almost as though I'm being magnetically drawn up and into her, like every last twitching tendril of my sex has found a part of her where it perfectly, miraculously aligns.

My tongue swipes across the curve of her ear; her fingers are lacing themselves in the divots of my horns; we're rocking together as my hips roll again and again, perfectly in time with the dilating paroxysms of her oncoming orgasm. Our limbs twist together, deep brown and pale silver entwining like shadow and moonlight.

And yet here, in this space that we've made with nothing but each other, nothing is so literal. Our pleasure is infinite. There is no place where she ends, and I begin. We're fused,

mated, inextricable. Every last sensation belongs to us both as we shudder towards a climax as hot and wide and blinding as any supernova.

I stay inside of her even as the rigidity flows out of me. Her relaxation flows into mine; we hold each other closely and loosely, unable, or simply unwilling to allow ourselves to fully separate once again.

At some point, we will have to draw apart from one another. But I'm not afraid of that as I once was. There is something of myself inside her now, just like how a piece of her has, likewise, inextricably bound itself to me. We've found something, created something.

They say you can't make something out of nothing. But with the catalyst of that thrilling electricity, I'm willing to bet that there are always exceptions—that such things may, by all laws of the universe, be impossible, but by no means does that mean that they can't be real.

## CHAPTER 33



## TRACE

I WAKE UP BEFORE HIM, still immersed in darkness, my ears filled with the chorus of crickets.

*No, not crickets. There aren't any crickets here... just something else. Something that sounds like them.*

My forehead is nestled against the hollow of Calix's throat, and I can feel him breathing in the slow, steady pace of dreamless sleep. Good. He needed the rest.

I feel like a different person after last night. Complete? Renewed? Neither word is quite right. My world has shifted beyond recognition, and myself with it... but in doing so, everything has somehow become more familiar than ever.

*Calm.* Perhaps that's the right way to think of it. After last night's heat storm, my body and mind feel cool—though I'm not without my fair share of soreness; nevertheless, I'm full and refreshed in a way I've never been before. Ready to take on whatever's waiting for us... but not quite yet. I have just a bit more precious time before the sunrise calls us to arms, and I intend to savor every second of it.

The light comes gradually, gray before it turns golden, outlining the curve of his body: his slim waist, his strong shoulders, the silky tufts of his white-blond hair. I graze my fingertips across the slender branches of his horns, shivering as I remember the sight of him fully erect last night. I'd thought that I was only ever imagining just how complex his shape was inside of me, that the pleasure was exaggerating the sensation... but now I've seen what it looks like. Branching, antlered, shaped in a way that somehow touches parts of me

that I never even knew existed. It makes sense now, to think that Cassian and Ivy were able to conceive. Once I got over the shock of it, his foreign shape actually felt *more* natural than anything human. Like we were made to create something together....

I can't think about that now. I can't afford to hope.

He stirs slightly at the brush of my fingers, but still doesn't wake. I hope he's dreaming now. I hope that, wherever he is, he can feel my touch.

The minutes roll by, never long enough. I can see his eyelashes now, long and soft and ever so pale, like ice crystals settled lightly on his cheeks.

How would it feel to have a lifetime of this? The thought alone makes my heart ache. If this were my view every morning, I can't even imagine getting out of bed... except that I would have to, because all the rest of our days would surely be just as precious. His laughter, his adorable attempts at bravado, the quiet way that his muscles and eyebrows shift when he's genuinely focused, when he doesn't know that I'm watching. Countless hours of that. Thousands of meals cooked and shared together, millions of kisses, decades' worth of nights that I wouldn't need to spend alone.

For a lifetime of that, I would give anything.

If I could just freeze the passing of time, just hold in this one breath....

But then the first of Ixion's two suns peeks over the horizon, illuminating the depot's faux-glass windows with bracing white light, and I know that I can't afford to wait any longer.

"Calix." I shake his shoulder gently. He whines and squirms, trying to tuck his nose against my shoulder. Despite the way his every move makes my heart flutter, my voice manages to stay remarkably steady. "Calix, come on. Stop being cute. We have a war to win."

"That," he mumbles without opening his eyes, "was probably the worst emotional whiplash I've ever felt in my

life.”

“Tough. Up you get, pretty boy.”

“Pretty boy?” He drags himself slowly upright, and his scale-lined jaw parts in a massive, bone-shaking yawn. “I kinda like that.”

“I’ll just have to work on something more annoying, then. Still trying to get you back for *wonder girl*.” I turn away and begin to get dressed, the movements practiced and methodical. I can’t help wincing as I pull my dirty shirt back over my shoulders. Once this is all over, I’m going to be in serious need of a shower.

“What’s wrong with *wonder girl*? It’s accurate, isn’t it?”

“Is that what you think?”

“Of course I do.”

It’s a good thing my back is turned, because I can feel my cheeks darkening at his words. Something about his sheer earnestness never fails to take me aback.

“Well, I think *pretty boy* is accurate, too. So maybe I’ll have to stick with it.”

“Win-win. I like it.”

Our breakfast consists of a couple of tablets that he dredges up from one of his vest’s seemingly endless array of pockets. They’re stale and chalky, but they’re also the first thing I’ve eaten in recent memory, and it’s all I can do to keep from begging for another—I know that these things pack a lot more punch than it seems.

“Emrys and the rest are probably launching by now,” I murmur, squinting out the window. I can’t see anything happening down at the base. Aside from the city skyline in the distance, there’s only the mountainside, deceptively peaceful, dotted with colorful plants that I’ve never seen before in my life.

“Probably.”

“We should go.”



“Yeah.”

Neither of us moves.

“This is... kind of the worst,” Calix says, once it’s been too long for us to avoid acknowledging the weight between us.

“I know.”

“I wish we could have figured it out sooner, you know?” He darts a glance sideways at me. By instinct, I hold out a hand, and he twines his fingers immediately with mine. “I wish we hadn’t wasted so much time.”

“Do you think it was a waste?”

He lowers his head and frowns faintly. He’s always like that when he decides to mull something over—I could ask him whether he thought the weather was nice, and for at least a few seconds, he would look as though he were trying to solve the deepest mysteries of quantum physics. I don’t think he realizes that he does it, either. He’s so much more open than he realizes, so different from me—transparent where I’m guarded, straightforward where I’m withdrawn.

“No,” he says, sounding mildly surprised. “No, not at all. Even if we didn’t know... or didn’t say it... all this time with you—*all* of it—it’s been the best thing ever to happen to me. Beating me in survival games... fighting for *actual* survival... and even when we were apart, finding a way to see one another. Yeah... yeah. I don’t think I missed out on anything at all, really.”

I bite my lip...

“We still haven’t, you know.”

“Hm?” Soft surprise colors his voice.

“What you said about us not knowing and not saying it. We still haven’t... said it. Assuming that you’re referring to what I’m thinking.”

“Oh.” He blinks. “Oh. Of course. I meant... saying it out loud, saying that I love you. I—”

I think we both forget to breathe for just a moment. I expected the words to be obsolete at this point. Unimportant compared to everything we've gone through, to the things we've told one another without the aid—or hindrance—of any literal language. But hearing him say that seems to connect a fuse in my heart, filling the world around me with a vivacity that I could never have imagined it to possess.

“I love you,” he says again; “I love you so much, wonder girl.”

“I love you too, pretty boy.”

We turn towards one another in a single simultaneous motion. I expect the kiss to be a quick one, and it almost is, but then his hand cups my jaw, keeping me from pulling back. The scratchy-soft edge of his tongue urges my lips open, and I let it in, let him fill me, allowing myself to give in to my desires one last time before we set off into hell.

It shouldn't hurt this much. I haven't even lost him....

*Yet.*

He's so soft. So right. And for a moment, I want to say *fuck it*, to find a ship and get out of here and never look back. The whole rebellion, the friends we've made... right now, kissing him, I feel like none of it matters. We've been apart for so long. If he's taken away from me again, now that we've finally, *finally* gotten the chance to be together....

*It isn't fair.* I don't communicate the words to him. I cast them out towards the uncaring sky, no less ferocious for their silence, and my eyes sting so badly that I'm sure I'm about to cry.

But I don't.

Instead, I linger just long enough to memorize his taste, somewhere between cool stone and spearmint, and then I place my hands on his waist and gently push him away.

“All right, you,” I murmur. “There'll be plenty of time for that later on.”

I don't say the other thing. The thing that we're both thinking, even if both of us are far too afraid to admit it:

*But what if there's not?*



## CHAPTER 34

## CALIX

“THERE IT IS,” Trace whispers from her perch atop my shoulders. “It’s happening.”

My stomach lurches. I wish I could see it with my own two eyes, but the angle of the base’s wall and the mountain’s slope makes it impossible to do so. Lifting her up is the closest I can get.

“And the guards at the north gate?”

“I’m looking... can you step a little bit to the left?”

Gripping her shins, I carefully edge myself to the side. She may be small, but she’s dense with lean muscle, and it would be all too easy for a misstep to topple our balance and send us both barreling headfirst onto the sharp rocks of the slope. That sure would be one way for an assassination to fail before it began.

“Yeah, they—nope—oh—okay. They just got... electrocuted or something, I think... I don’t know if they’re dead or—never mind.”

“What do you mean, never mind?”

“The bodies are smoking. I think we’re good to go.”

Sure enough, the words have barely left her mouth before the scent of roasting meat fills the air. Morbidly, it’s enough to make my stomach growl.

“Okay. Good,” I say, desperate to wrench my mind away from that train of thought. “Ready to get down?”

“Go ahead.”

I bend my knees and crouch forward so she can hop off my shoulders, landing lightly on the ground. Despite the harsh angle of the mountain slope, she makes it look as though it's the easiest thing in the world.

"You better teach me that gymnastics stuff once this is all over," I tell her.

"Ha. I absolutely will. Might take you a while to get to my level, though—I've been doing this all my life."

I keep saying that sort of thing, and I don't know whether it's making me feel better or worse. *Once this is all over... after we're done here... when we come out on the other side.* I'm trying to speak it into existence, to make myself believe—but half the time, it feels like I'm jinxing us instead.

I need to cut it out. I know better than to indulge in that superstitious nonsense.

But when your life's on the line, I guess skepticism gets a whole lot harder to wrangle.

We help one another down the rest of the mountain, instinctively balancing each other whenever one of us starts to trip up. Sometimes—more than half the time, really—I feel like Trace notices that I'm slipping before I do; by the time my stomach starts to drop, she's already got my arm locked securely in her strong hand.

"I don't know how you lasted so long without me," she mentions on the third or fourth of these occasions.

"I almost didn't."

And that's the truth, too. If we hadn't reunited when we did, I don't want to imagine what would have become of me.

The smell of meat grows thicker and thicker as we descend, and by the time the ground levels out beneath us, it's strong enough to make my eyes water. There are other underlying scents, too—burning rubber and plastic, along with something metallic that I'm horribly suspicious might be boiled blood. At least that's enough to douse my appetite; my mouth watering at the reek of my dead ex-comrades isn't a sensation I want to experience again in a hurry.

“Okay.” Trace looks at me expectantly, and it takes me a moment to realize what she’s waiting for. Then it hits me, and I hastily whip the old-fashioned radio from Commander Emrys out of my pocket, holding its fine mesh to my lips.

“Commander, are you there? We’re past the northern border.”

His response crackles to life at once. “Good. We have eyes on Vestra, over.”

“Already?”

Trace elbows me.

“Already, sir? Over.”

“Affirmative. Looks like they’re not trying to hide him this time—he’s got a nest near the main hangar, over.”

*What?* That doesn’t seem right—and from the look on Trace’s face, she’s equally suspicious.

“Another trap?” she asks in an undertone.

“Maybe. We should be careful. I—”

“What was that? Callisto?”

“Sorry, sir.” I clear my throat. “But what if they’re trying to trap us again? They did before—twice, with the spire and then the hologram. Maybe we should—”

“That’s why you’re our strike team, Callisto.” His voice crackles, and for a moment, I think I’ve lost the signal—but then it returns clearer than ever. “If this is a trap, you’re the only ones inside of it. Do what you can, and we’ll move in if we see a chance. Over and out.”

I slowly slide the radio back into my pocket. I can’t seem to move my eyes from the patch of grass in front of me.

“Calix? What does he mean?” Trace demands. “Is he saying that—?”

“We’re the ones springing a trap,” I breathe. Dizziness swarms through my head, but I remain almost perfectly still.

“That’s his plan. To make a counter-trap. And you and I are the bait.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Emrys wouldn’t do that, would he? Or he at least would have told us—”

“If he had told us, nobody would have been willing to do it.”

“I would have been—” she starts.

“But I wouldn’t let you. And you wouldn’t let me.”

An errant breeze blows past us, carrying a fresh waft of the guards’ burning bodies as it does so. The sounds of battle in the distance sound fake, canned.

Trace’s next words come out flat. “So, he wants us to sacrifice ourselves.”

“No.” Now I’m the one shaking my head so fast that my vision blurs. “No, absolutely not. He trusts us—trusts that if anyone can get through this, we can. He’s not the sort to throw soldiers out as cannon fodder.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Too late now. We can’t waste time.”

Almost robotically, I turn and start for the hangar. Trace stays close at my heels.

“Calix—”

“You should stay back.” My voice is calm and detached. I sound nothing like myself.

“Like hell, I’ll stay back! You’re useless without me, and you know—”

I turn around without thinking and clasp her face in my hands, staring desperately into the impossible depths of her rich brown eyes. Blaster fire crescendos in the distance. My lungs sting with the putrid smoke.

“If I have to make a choice between certain death for myself,” I rasp, “and possible death for us both... you know what I’m going to choose.”



She shoves me back, the heels of her hand pressing my breastbone hard enough for me to stumble.

“You can save your heroic sacrifices for another day,” she hisses. “But you aren’t pulling off any of that kamikaze bullshit now. Not as long as I’m your partner.”

*Partner.*

How long have we been calling one another by that term? Since the first fight of the rebellion, at least. Probably longer. Partner in crime, partner in bed, partner on the battlefield.

But never before has it meant quite *this* much.

Now, there’s a whole universe contained in those two sharp syllables.

The universe that we built together.

And I cannot—will not—fight against that.

“Okay,” I say, my tongue leaden. The uncanny smoothness disappeared from my voice as suddenly as it arrived. “Okay. You’re right. Let’s go.”

It isn’t hard to make it to the hangar. Not for the two of us. Emrys and his team fitted us both with blasters before leaving us on the mountaintop, and we once more fall into the dance that we’ve practiced so many times—but now it’s more polished than ever. We understand each other’s bodies and psyches completely, inside and out, and every movement we make is matched by another, mirrored as we watch our blind spots and cover our backs.

*Partners.*

“Up there,” Trace says. The vibrations of her voice course through me as her shoulders tense against me. “Don’t look now, but I can see them.”

“How many?”

“Not a lot, I think. Vestra, he....”

“He’s the one with all those *susting* baubles on his horns. Hard to miss.”

“Yeah. I know. He’s there. And....”

*Well?* I want to urge her. But I hold back. I know that she’s thinking, planning.

“Okay,” she breathes at last.

I know that tone. It means that Trace has her mind set on something, and nothing in the world is going to stop her from getting it.

“Okay, fine. They want a distraction?” A harsh laugh splits her words. “I’ll give them a fucking distraction.”

“Trace, wait—”

“Hey, jerk!” Trace screams at the top of her lungs. “I’ve got a present for you!”

She grabs me by the forearm, and before I can so much as try to ask what’s happening, I’ve been spun around, my weapon knocked from my hands, the cold tip of a blaster caressing my temple with the deadliest of kisses.

*Her blaster.*

“Don’t shoot!” Trace’s voice is right against my ear, painfully loud. “Trust me, it’ll be a whole lot better for you if you hear me out!”

Between the smoke and the spotty sun, I can barely make out what lies ahead of us. The hangar and several soldiers... dull metallic glints warn me that Trace’s blaster isn’t the only one pointed at my head. Somewhere amid those blurry figures is a halo of bright gold. Vestra, bedazzled with accolades. I always forget just how impressively wide the span of his horns is.

*Trace, what...?*

I don’t know if she can hear me, or if our connection works that way at all. There are a lot of things I don’t know—might never know—

She shoves me hard. I stumble forward.

“Trace—”

“Move,” she snarls, knocking the end of the blaster hard against my skull. My mind is a buzzing blank as I obey her, pulling my shaky legs closer and closer to where the rest of the soldiers stand.

It seems to take ages before we’re close enough for me to see Vestra’s eyes. They gleam a sickly, acidic violet. He’s smiling.

“Well,” he murmurs. “What have we here?”

His soldiers fan out around him like the petals of a flesh-and-metal flower, their sights covering every angle. At least three of their weapons are trained on the two of us.

“I know who you are,” Trace says—and though I can’t see her, I know she must be staring straight into those poisonous eyes of his. “You’re the leader of all this.”

“And you’re one of those scummy little rebels.”

“I’m not.”

What could she possibly be playing at?

“Or—I don’t know.” Trace’s voice starts to waver, then crack. “I was, I guess...? I didn’t know what was going on, okay? I came here to make easy money. I didn’t want to be a part of all this.”

“Few people did. Such is the way of war.” Vestra lifts a hand, and his soldiers ready their weapons.

“No—no, no, no, wait!” Trace cries out. Her shaking grip on the blaster slams it against my head again, hard enough this time for me to see stars. “Please—do you know who this is? This is Calix Callisto. He got away from you before. More than once. It’s him, and their commander, and someone else, I don’t know—but they’re the only three left. Please... please. He knows everything. More than I do—they have a plan. I don’t know it, but they have a plan. Kill us, and you lose it. But send me home....”

Her voice grows soft, and her grip on me slackens ever so slightly. This works well enough as a set-up, I guess, but what does she expect to do with it? If she’d just let me keep my

*mainching* blaster, I could have made a move right now, taken him out before he knew what hit him.

“Send you home?” Vestra repeats evenly.

“Yes. Send me home. Pay me what I was supposed to get, and I—I’ll disappear. Or I’ll be your diplomat! I’ll tell everyone that the soldiers were terrorists, that you were heroes for taking them out. Anything, just... please. I want to go *home*.”

This isn’t working. Whatever she’s trying to do, it’s not distracting them enough. Emrys hasn’t called the shot. *Come on, come on....*

“You’re a smart little girl, aren’t you?” Vestra draws.

“I just want to go home.”

“We just might be able to arrange that.”

My heartbeat doubles. That’s good—right? If she had just taken thirty seconds to tell me her plan before... or is she making it all up as she goes? Would she dare to take a risk like that?

“But first things first. You’re going to need to drop that weapon.”

“I can’t. He’s too strong,” she whimpers. “He’ll hurt me.”

Wait....

“He won’t hurt you, little girl. Not if he wants to keep his scalp intact.”

“I’m scared... he’s so strong.”

And then I get it.

I wrench against her grasp, suddenly and violently. She cries out, but Vestra’s voice overpowers hers, thundering through the ranks of his guards: “Don’t shoot, *mainch* it! I want that soldier!”

She struggles back against me with all of her strength—or what would be all her strength if she were someone else. But

this is Trace. My Trace. Trace the gymnast. Trace the wonder girl.

*Like a dance. Like we can predict one another's motions....*

I thrust myself forward. She whimpers and twists; we hit the ground together, hard. Then her weight is gone—and I manage to lift my head, still aching from where the blaster knocked into it, just high enough to see her backing in towards Vestra, half in a crouch. Her eyes are stretched wide with terror, her blaster aimed straight at my forehead. The High Commander's burly arm lifts by instinct, guarding her... guarding her against *me*.

Or so he thinks.

"Please," she whimpers as her finger curls around the trigger. "Please, don't let him hurt me."

She whirls in a perfect one-eighty-degree turn, black hair whipping through the air, and Vestra doesn't have the chance to respond before the bolt lands squarely between his eyes.

## CHAPTER 35



## TRACE

HIGH COMMANDER VESTRA COLLAPSES, and I collapse with him, flattening myself to the ground as the shots ring out. I don't know if I'm going to make it. I don't know if I'm sacrificing myself... or, far worse, sacrificing Calix.

I killed that bastard. I did it.

But if the cost is what I fear....

*No. No. No.* I can't allow that. It must have worked. Emrys must have recognized what to do, and Calix must have gotten down fast enough, and....

At least one body falls to the ground beside me, hard enough for the grass to shiver. Tears slicken my face, hot as blood. I can't tell when they started, and I sure as hell don't know how to stop them.

I can't look up. I won't. If I stay like this, ignorant, then there's still a chance. Then....

“Trace, are you okay? Say something, please—”

And then his hands are on my shoulders, and I'm whirling around, not even looking, just burying my face in his chest and holding on with everything I can, all the strength I've ever had.

The shock twists and stutters inside of me, shifting from numbness to white heat and back again.

*Did we do it? Are the soldiers down?* The words won't come to my lips, and I can't stand to pull away from him long enough to get a good look for myself. But as the seconds pass,

the possibility of failure narrows to a hairline crack, then to nothing at all.

We're still here. Still breathing. We must be okay.

And yet I can't stop crying.

It's not sweet crying, either. It's ugly, snotty, and pathetic. I wish Calix didn't have to see, but I also know that I can't possibly let him go, that my arms would refuse to release him even if I tried.

When my voice finally manages to come, I barely recognize it. "I thought... I thought...."

His lips brush the top of my forehead, the soft spot where hair meets skin.

"I know. But it's okay."

Easy for him to say. I cling tighter, gasping in that stone-and-spearmint scent like my life depends on it.

"I was so sure... when I went for it, and they aimed at you, and—"

"But I'm fine, Trace. See? I'm fine."

As if I can see anything at all past the tears gushing down my face. It's nearly impossible to feel relief through the distress gripping my body. I've always hated crying. I hate how it makes me look, how it makes me feel, and how I don't know how to end it once it starts.

Footsteps sound behind me, along with a low murmur of voices. Women's voices.

"That was quite the stunt you pulled, Callisto."

Emrys. Emrys is here... they all are. How much time has passed? I could have sworn it was less than a minute, but if the whole thing is over... even if Vestra's personal guard was gunned down right away, surely it must have taken time for them to clear up the leftovers. That means I've been here—on the ground and then in his arms—for half an hour at least.

"No." From my position cradled against his chest, I can feel how vehemently he's shaking his head. "Not my stunt—"



not at all. It was Trace. Every bit of it was Trace.”

“Hmph. Well, whoever came up with it, your coordination was remarkable.”

“For real,” Deryn adds. “I would’ve loved to see you two rehearsing that shit last night.”

Neither of us says anything, but his arms tighten ever so slightly around me. I somehow manage a smile through the constant pulse of tears.

The rest of them don’t get it. They think we’d had a plan all along; they have no idea that the whole thing hinged on our connection, on his ability to understand my every word and motion. But we don’t need to explain. Hell, they probably wouldn’t understand even if we tried.

And I’m just fine with that.

“Well,” I murmur a few hours later, watching with unfocused eyes as the wind blows through the patches of overgrown blue grass. “The whole base, all to ourselves.”

Calix chuckles. He’s sitting cross-legged with my head in his lap, fingers busy shredding grass blades. Even as exhausted as I know him to be, he can’t hold still to save his life.

“Not much of a base.”

I roll my eyes, which is definitely a mistake—they’re still swollen and aching from this morning. I doubt my face will feel normal until I’ve gotten some proper sleep. That’s the issue with crying so infrequently—whenever the tears do creep up on me, they’re nothing short of brutal.

“How very optimistic of you, Calix.”

“Just telling the truth. This place is a wreck.”

“It’s better than nothing, though. Willing to bet that it’s a *whole* lot better than those caves.”

“Ugh.” He shudders, jostling me slightly. “You don’t even want to know.”

“That Duvalik place wasn’t exactly full of fun and games either, you know. I don’t think I’ve ever sweated that much in my life.”

He chuckles and combs his fingers through my hair. It’s a matted mess—not like I’ve had much of a chance to brush it lately—but he doesn’t pull at the knots; his motions are soft, gentle, each of them executed with the utmost caution.

“Yeah. We could probably both use a shower before whatever comes next.”

*Whatever comes next....* “I don’t even know if I want to think about that.”

“The shower or the war?”

I try and fail to wrestle back my smile. His idiotic humor has no right to be as funny to me as it is. “The war, silly.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe the worst of it’s over.”

“Mm. Maybe so.”

I don’t think either of us believes that, but there’s no need to dwell on it right now. If anything, we ought to be enjoying this moment of peace, however brief it might be.

We don’t know how long we have until the other bases choose to engage. There’s been communication between Vestra and the other High Commanders, but that’s all we know; whether the other military bases have been dealing with insurrections of their own is, for now, anyone’s guess. Last I heard, a group of the others were knee-deep in decryption attempts, seeing if they can pull anything from Vestra’s encoded messages. That’s more than enough to make me thankful for how little I know about computers.

My eyes start to close. I’m not sleepy—far from it. Just more relaxed than I can remember being in a long, long time. The way he plays with my hair is incredible, sending little shivers across my whole scalp. I don’t want him ever to stop.

“Trace?”

“Yeah?”

“I know you don’t want to dwell on it, but that really was incredible. Thinking on your feet back there.”

“You’re right,” I murmur. The memory makes my stomach heave dangerously. “I don’t want to dwell on it.”

“I know, but—”

“Do you have any idea how it felt in those moments? To think that I was going to lose you? To think that I would be *responsible* for—?”

I can’t go on. My throat is tightening again.

“Shh... shh. It’s okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. Just... you’re really incredible. And I need to make sure that you know that.”

“No need for the reminder.” The words come automatically, and I’m surprised to find that I really mean them. I know that what I pulled off was impressive. Terrifying, yes—but why feign humility when that may very well have won us the battle? “I’ve got a pretty damn good idea.”

“That’s my girl.”

*My girl.* I don’t know if anyone’s ever called me that. I think I like it.

“Calix...”

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to. I know that he’s listening.

“Whatever does happen—we’ll stay together, right?”

“Of course, we will. You think anyone else could ever compare to you?”

I shift slightly. He’s not getting it.

“I don’t just mean like that. I mean... you’ll stay by my side. Physically. Turns out that I... I don’t like sleeping alone very much.”

“Oh... oh, Trace. Of course.” He leans down, cupping the back of my head and lifting it slightly at the same time, so that his lips can touch my forehead once again. “Next time a giant

building crashes between us, I don't care what a jarhead like Azrael Emrys has to say about it. I'm finding you."

"And I won't go running off the planet."

"*Please*. That'll make things a..."

He trails off, pulling back as he does. I frown and tilt my chin, trying to get a look at him. His head is turned away, and all I can make out is the silvered edge of his jaw.

"Calix? What's wrong?"

"Shh. I'm trying to think."

I don't want to wait, but I do. When his hand stills on my hair, though, I reach up to tug at him, urging him to resume his gentle strokes. He does so at once.

"*Hell*. Is that it?"

What could he possibly be on about? "Is that what?"

"The word that you use all the time. A *hell* of a lot easier. Is that what you say?"

"I—" *Are you serious?* "I do not use that word *all the time*."

"That's not the point!"

I bite hard on my lip, but it's not enough to keep a giggle down.

"Oh, and now you're laughing at me."

"I'm not laughing at you, and you know it."

He pulls ever so lightly at my hair, not nearly enough to hurt.

"Well, come on. At least tell me whether I got it right."

"You got it right. And it's true." The knot of amusement in my chest loosens, and my breath evens out as I let my eyes close completely. Ixion's twin suns warm their tender lids. "So long as we stick together, it'll be... a *kest* of a lot easier?"

"Uh, no. That's not quite right."

"Guess I have a lot to learn."

“Guess I have a lot to teach you.”

And as our lips connect once more, I know that this is it. Not Earth, not Ixion, not Duvalik, not space. Only him. Only Calix. Only this.

Right here, right now, with him.

*This* is my home.

## EPILOGUE: TRACE

“You know,” I say, marveling at the words even as they depart my lips, “I could get used to this.”

Calix smirks and arches one slender brow, an expression of such devilish charm that I nearly lose track of what I was saying. “Is that so, wonder girl?”

I settle for prodding him in the side instead—though I make sure to angle it in such a way that I can brush my hand across his belt on the way. He growls, half a tease and half a warning, and I can’t quite tame my smirk.

“Yes, *that is so*, you cocky bastard.”

“You think that this”—He waves a hand in the air, indicating our general surroundings—“is, what, pleasant?”

I take a moment to process it all, leaning back in the blue grass and scanning the horizon. Some of the base’s ruins are still smoldering, even after last night’s rain. Despite the embers blooming in their depths, they don’t look like the product of recent destruction. They look almost ancient. Romantic, in a sense. Hauntingly beautiful.

Beyond the ruins, the walls are still intact. I don’t know if I’ll ever see the rest of Ixion, and I’m okay with that. From the way Calix has described it to me, it sounds a bit harsh out there. No harsher than Earth, maybe, but it’s not as though those two planets are our only options.

Which brings us to the third point of scenery. The sky.

The last of the thunderclouds have melted away, and the three setting suns each cast a different glow across the

heavens, pink and green and clearest cerulean all melting into one another. Bright as they are, they aren't quite enough to obscure the stars.

I've always thought that the stars seem to hang lower here than on Earth. Like I could reach out and touch them, as childish as that sounds.

And the truth is that they *are* close. Closer than I ever could have dreamed.

I tilt my head against Calix's shoulder and let my eyes close. The impression of the endless constellations above still lingers on the inside of my eyelids. Indefinite and infinitely promising.

"Maybe not here," I say; "maybe not now. There's still a war to be fought... but if we made it through this, we can make it through anything. Because we won't be apart again. Not ever. I just know it."

*I know it too*, he tells me without words, his strong fingers closing around my wrist. His thumb skates over the soft skin of its inner side, pressing into the pulse of my veins, tracking each and every beat of life that courses through me.

"There's a place for us," I promise him. "Somewhere. And when we get out on the other side of this, we're going to find it. A planet with skyscrapers and waterfalls and mountains... I've always wanted to see the mountains."

"A planet with no war," he agrees. "And with orchards of *delicious* native fruit."

"Fruit, huh?" I chuckle. "You've sure got your needs figured out."

He laughs as well, and the vibration thrums warmly against my cheek. "Well, I wouldn't call them *needs*. Just preferences."

He doesn't have to elaborate. I know that he and I are thinking the exact same thing.

*The only thing I need is right here. Right beside me.*

*And nothing, nothing in the entire universe, will ever come between us again.*

***Can't get enough of Trace and Calix? [Click here](#) to read a sizzling bonus scene from *Enchanted by the Alien Rebel* from Trace's point of view.***

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## DERYN

I'M THRILLED that we won the battle.

Really, I am.

Even if I weren't a little too invested in this crazy-ass alien war—which, at this point, it seems that I very much am, never mind the fact that I came here six months ago to get laid and get paid, and certainly *not* to start an insane outer space rebellion—even then, it'd be reward enough just to be out of those awful caverns. Every second spent in the moist, stinking voids that had somehow become our base camp made me feel like I was inching a little bit closer to hell. If I never go underground again, it'll be too soon.

But I'm not exactly having a blast right now, either.

I don't know what the fuck that creepy-eyed commander was thinking when he plugged me in this room with the others. Ivy's pretty good with machine stuff—I've seen her geek around plenty of times over our decade of friendship—so it makes sense that she'd be here. And the scaly alien soldier named Cassian is connected to her at the hip at this point, so that's a no-brainer.

Me, though? Cracking ciphers? It's downright comedic. I'm starting to suspect that Emrys just wanted me out of the way so that he could focus on his *important* duties, whatever those are supposed to be.

“There are other defectors listed here,” Cassian murmurs, frowning at the tablet screen in front of him.

He's sitting at a table while Ivy and I have plopped down on the floor. Around us lie heaps of messily discarded tablets, and still more of them line the half-emptied shelves on the wall of the data center. Probably years' worth of information in this place and almost none of it is accessible thanks to a plethora of bullshit codes. Go figure.

"More than just us," Cassian continues, clearly trying to get a reaction out of us.

"Mm." Ivy's intently chewing a strand of her hair as she scans lines of incomprehensible data. It's a nasty habit of hers that she's had since she was a kid; I've long since given up trying to make her stop. Some people just can't be fixed.

"At least, I think that's what this is... *kest*, Ambrose is on this list."

*That* name sure throws me for a loop. I laugh out loud before I can stop myself, bemused by the sheer unexpectedness.

"What's funny?" Cassian asks.

What *isn't* funny? "Uh... Ambrose Drake? That playboy dickwad who tried to sleep with everyone in sight after Cherise got tired of him? Not exactly rebel material, if you ask me."

"Ambrose is a good person," he argues, clearly hurt. "A little misguided, but... good. I'm glad he did the right thing... I ought to let Cherise know."

*Misguided.* Sure.

"Do Cherise a favor," I say, stretching my arms high above my head, "and do *not* bring that guy up to her. Now or ever."

"Why not?"

"Just trust me on this one, pal."

I have to admit that it's pretty hilarious to imagine the look on Ambrose's face if he were to find out that Cherise is sleeping with the Commander now. Quite the upgrade for her, I should think.

“I wonder if he made it out... I don’t understand any of this aside from the blacklist. But that much is clear enough. He was rebelling... him and a few others, it looks like. From different platoons....”

“Maybe they were, like, executed.”

“Deryn,” Ivy snaps.

“What?”

She glowers at me over the edge of the tablet. “They’re *friends*. Don’t be a jerk.”

“How am I being a jerk? It’s just realistic.”

“There’s no need to sound so *hopeful* about it.”

Did I sound hopeful? I didn’t mean to. It’s not like I *want* to see Ambrose executed. Not in a super literal sense. Knocked down a few pegs, sure—that guy was always a pain in the ass, especially with that snarky smile of his—but that doesn’t mean I want him *dead*. It almost hurts that Ivy would think something like that, but I don’t press the matter. She’s distracted. She’s also been acting like she’s on her period or something, which is all kinds of weird, considering that all of us are on mandatory birth control. Maybe she and Cassian have been fighting.

“I wasn’t trying to sound hopeful,” I mutter. Thankfully, the other two seem content to leave it at that.

I look back down at my own tablet. The sight of its jumble of nonsense text is enough to make my head hurt. I’ve never been a fan of reading, even when I *can* make sense of the letters in front of me.

“Does Emrys really think we’re gonna get anywhere with this?” I ask nobody in particular. “Or is he just trying to keep us busy?”

“A little bit of both, maybe,” Ivy muses. “If we can figure anything out, it ought to be helpful. But things will probably be a whole lot smoother once we can make contact with Asa and Jace again.”

My lips go numb.

She keeps talking, casual as ever, flicking to scroll the tablet screen as she does so. “I don’t know how much was on those data sticks, but even if that’s not helpful, I bet he’d be better at cracking this sort of stuff. He sure seems that way, anyways.”

Everything feels very far away. Like I’m hearing her from the other end of a long, long tube.

“Or maybe I’m just... whoa, Deryn. You okay?”

I can’t answer. I can’t think. I can barely breathe.

“Cassian, there’s something wrong with her—”

I withdraw by instinct as he approaches. I don’t want anyone touching me right now.

I don’t want—I—

“Jace?” I whisper.

“Deryn—”

“Did you say—Jace?”

“And Asa, yes, on Duvalik—shit, Deryn; do you...”

Her words fade away. They don’t matter. Nothing does.

*Jace.*

Jace Kairos. Green-amber eyes, strong warm kisses, a scent like sunlight on fresh soil.

“Jace is dead,” I say carefully. “He died. Weeks ago.”

“What? No!” I’m faintly aware of Ivy’s jaw dropping. “No, of course, he’s not dead! He got away, remember...?”

“Remember *what?*”

“Oh... oh, fuck.”

“What’s going on?” Cassian demands. “What are you—”

Ivy and I ignore him. The rest of the planet may as well have dropped out from under the two of us. We’re staring straight at one another now, and the color drains from her face, just as I’m sure it did from mine a few moments ago.

“You didn’t *know*?” Ivy whispers.

“Is this—is this a fucking joke?” I mean for my words to come out sharp and stern, but my voice can’t seem to keep from trembling. “Are you insane?”

“He said he was communicating with factions on Ixion. I thought that meant you; I thought....”

“The informer,” I say. My tongue is almost completely numb; I’m slurring like some kind of drunk. “The person on Du—whatever—on that planet. That you were talking about. With the data sticks. That... all this time, that was *Jace*?”

Even as she nods, I still can’t let myself believe that it’s true.

Jace Kairos, my assigned mate, the best friend I’ve made since leaving home, is not supposed to be alive.

I *watched* him get shot. Back during the first move we made in the whole fucking rebellion, when we broke into High Commander Vestra’s personal quarters. I saw him crumple to the ground, limp and lifeless. That was the moment I knew—*really* knew—that this wasn’t a game any longer. And sure, they’d done everything they could to clean up in the aftermath, to make it look like he hadn’t been murdered by his own fellow soldiers—like he hadn’t existed in the first place, for that matter. But I had *seen* him die.

Or so I thought.

All that time. All those nights spent alone in the bed that we once shared. All the tears I shed, all the questions I tortured myself trying to answer....

“How?” I ask. “How the *fuck* can he be alive?”

“He got away... Deryn, you really didn’t—”

I glower at her fiercely enough to stop those words dead in their tracks.

“Yeah,” she says instead. “He got away to Duvalik, and we eventually made contact with him... we met up.”

“You saw him? You were with him?”

“Deryn....” She shakes her head slowly. The forgotten data pad’s screen dims, then goes dark. “I don’t know what to say. I thought you knew. I thought you didn’t want to talk about it, after... you said he and you weren’t... that you’d decided not to be together anymore. Didn’t you not want anything to do with him?”

We did decide that I guess. A whole fucking lifetime ago, we said we were better off as friends. Before I saw him fall. Before I spent those nights alone. I was a different person back then.

But now....

I can’t fucking believe this. I *can’t*.

I don’t realize I’m moving until I’m already on my feet.

“Deryn?”

“I need to find him,” I say. “I need to go there.”

“To Duvalik? Hell no, you don’t. That place is a nightmare. Listen, you—”

But I’m not listening anymore. I don’t care that she’s calling after me. I don’t care that Cassian lifts a hand to try and stop me from leaving. I make straight for the door of the data center, through the cold hall of the half-destroyed admin building, and out onto the torn-up mess of dirt and grass that was once called Ixionian Military Base 57.

*Jace.*

I don’t care anymore. Nobody else will, either. There’s no reason for me to be missed. I know I’m a poor excuse for a leader—not as strategic as Asa, not as charismatic as Blythe. And they have Emrys now, anyway.

The rebellion will be fine.

I have a different mission now.

I’m going to find Jace Kairos.

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