



THE ALIEN
INFILTRATOR

INTERSPECIES ALLIANCES

ERYN IVERS

THE ALIEN INFILTRATOR

An MM Alien Romance

Interspecies Alliances

Book 3

ERYN IVERS

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The Alien Refugee

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HE'D SCOUR out his entire being if he knew any prayers with the power to do so.

More than twenty years before the events of **The Alien Emissary** and a few short years after the brutal Klah'Eel invasion of Southern Tava, refugees of all kinds work to build new lives for themselves on the tropical planet of Carta.

Ha'ral came to Carta fleeing the horrors of the war – both the horrors that he witnessed and the horrors that he inflicted. He became a guard and dedicated himself to becoming a new man. A patient man. A kind man. A man who would never raise a hand in anger.

Maybe even a man who might deserve the playful smiles and casually intimate touches of the handsome human pickpocket who hangs around his patrols.

But Zyk came to Carta fleeing horrors of his own and finding out who Ha'ral used to be might be more than Zyk can bear.

A *very* steamy 20k word short story set in the Interspecies Alliances world featuring a man yearning to be better, a man yearning to heal, and a happily ever after.

Content Warning for on page violence and implied past sexual trauma.



Chapter One

“THE SMOKE-SMELL IS NEVER GOING to come out of this room.”

Leon Hess rolled out his map of Southern Tava onto the huge, sturdy table in the center of the room. “Open a window, then.”

“Yeah, obviously, but that’s not going to be enough.” Joan picked her way through busted furniture and chunks of plaster and threw open all the windows she could reach—even the broken ones.

Leon ignored her and grabbed a few things to weigh down the curling edges of his map: half a chair leg, a couple hunks of rock, the used canister of a smoke grenade. Once the map was spread out beneath him, he surveyed it with his hands braced on the table. He pulled a red pencil from his pocket and tapped it a few times on the wooden surface. He took a deep breath, swallowed, stood up straight, pulled his shoulders back, and then tapped it a few more times on his palm.

“Did you cross it off yet?” Garrett strode into the room, and his exuberant voice with his still-there rural accent bounced off the bullet-pock-marked walls. He had a cut over his forehead that had been bandaged but needed to be redressed.

Leon shook his head. “Not yet. I was just about to.”

“It’s just a mark on a paper, Garrett.” Joan tsked but still came to watch as Leon again leaned over the old map—

marked up with various colors of lines, Xs, circles, and words—and poised his pencil over the dot labeled Ralscoln.

Then Leon slowly and deliberately circled the city and wrote: Retaken.

Garrett let out a whoop, and even Leon allowed himself a small, tense smile. He stared at the words for a second, letting them sink in.

Joan put her hand on his shoulder. “We did it.”

Leon showed her a slightly less tense smile and nodded. “For now.”

Garrett clapped his hand down on Leon’s other shoulder and stared at the map with a grin. “Finally! Well, this was fun. I gotta go see about the barricade.”

“Garrett,” Leon called to him before he left. “See who of the soldiers are ready to move to the front. We can only give them another day of rest. This is just getting started.”

That sobered even Garrett. The younger man nodded crisply and disappeared out the ruined doorway.

Joan sighed and moved around to the other side of the table. They both trailed their eyes up to the northern edge of the map, and eventually, Leon pointed to the numerous small circles in green ink dotted throughout the continent.

“What’s the status of all the orbital and atmospheric guns?”

“We managed to take maybe eighty percent of them?” Joan pulled a pen from her pocket and started making small marks next to some of the circles. “So we don’t exactly have air superiority, but we can definitely blast any Klah’Eel ships out of the sky that get within Southern Tava air or orbit space.”

Leon raised his brows and nodded. “That’s better than I expected.”

“Yeah, I was pretty proud of us, actually.”

“And what about all the other cities?”

“No surprises there.” Joan pulled out another color and started marking the continent’s scattered small cities and towns. They were numerous but minor—Ralscoln far outstripped them all in size. “The Klah’Eel in each one with a Resistance cell will be too busy fighting our people to help out the main force. And any of the cities without a Resistance cell never had enough Klah’Eel to be a problem anyway.”

Leon watched her mark which cities had the most fighting and which were already primarily held by them or the Klah’Eel. The people in the cities outside of the main thrust of the war would simply have to hang on and hope for the end of it. But Leon knew from experience that hanging on was never simple.

Leon turned his attention to the line of cities along Southern Tava’s northern border. “Tell me about the cities at the front.”

Joan tapped her finger over Yol, Kaston, and Loral.

“Yol doesn’t have enough food stockpiled to defend against a siege—some of it got ruined when a ship’s water tank leaked,” she said. “And Loral doesn’t have enough ships to support an evacuation if we lose it.”

Leon nodded and knocked a knuckle against the table’s wood as he leaned over his map. He glanced up at Joan when she didn’t continue. “And what about Kaston?”

Joan made a face. “There’s just...some interesting intel coming out of Kaston.”

Leon straightened. “What sort of interesting intel, Joan?”

“Some of the inventory numbers don’t line up.” She crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “Some of the operations have been randomly foiled by a stray patrol. Things like that.”

Leon’s jaw clenched. “Traitor.”

“No evidence.”

“But you have a bad feeling.”

Joan nodded. “I do. I want to send Sebastian.”

Leon's heart jumped, and a sensation skittered over his skin as though his entire body had been jolted by electricity just by the sound of that name. He shoved the excitement out of the way and internally scowled at his reaction. "Alright. When he gets back. What else do you have for me?"

"That's it for now. I need to go see how my agents are settling in. We found the security room, so we'll set up base there."

"Good. I'll be in the barracks."

Joan left, and Leon took another few moments to stare down at the map and the red mark he had just made over Ralscoln. He shouldn't have been the one to make that mark or to order their black flag hoisted over this building. He shouldn't have been the one to claim the capital of Southern Tava for the Resistance.

It should have been the former owner of this map. It should have been Farlon.

And it should be Farlon that would stand on that balcony two doors down that looked out over the courtyard and announce their victory over the invaders...once it finally came.

Leon swallowed around the lump in his throat. But it hadn't been, and it wouldn't be, and it all fell on Leon now. And he was doing it.

He pulled his shoulders back and strode out of their new war room and into the grand hallway. The capitol building of Ralscoln, and indeed the entire city, was grand for what had once been a largely forgotten frontier city of the Human species state. It spoke to the pride of its inhabitants. Their pride in their sovereignty, and their ability, and their independence.

It had survived the Klah'Eel invasion and occupation, largely intact, and remained a symbol of the people who had been here before and were still here.

And it would survive the Resistance taking it back.

Leon surveyed it as he walked to the office wing they had converted into a barracks. The damage was cosmetic, not structural. As soon as they repelled the Klah'Eel's attempts to retake the continent and established their independence on the intergalactic stage, Leon would make sure they poured resources into reestablishing this symbol.

Leon was ruminating on that day and what it would take to get there as he crossed the courtyard of the U-shaped building when he caught sight of a figure by the barricade entrance. He stopped short, as though a string attached to his chest had pulled taut at the sight of that figure and prevented him from going anywhere but toward it.

The physical body didn't draw him in—Leon found the sight of the klah'eel former governor of Southern Tava repellent—but the way it moved. Leon would recognize that grace, that cocked hip, those rapidly moving hands, and that toss of the chin anywhere. They dragged him in like a moth to a flame.

"I'M afraid I don't recognize you at all, klah'eel. You'll have to leave if you don't want a bullet in the face."

"Oh shut the fuck up, Tucker, even you're smart enough to recognize me." Sebastian threw his hands in the air. "I am wearing the body of the former governor of this continent!"

Tucker sneered and shook his head. He raised his gun and pointed it directly at Sebastian's chest. "Nope."

Indignation easily topped any fear Sebastian might have had of the likes of Tucker, the racist foot soldier, and he stepped forward against the gun barrel and pointed it at his own face. "You've seriously never seen this face on any screen ever? Look closely."

Jason, the second guard at the barricade, and a reasonable man, knocked Tucker's barrel to point back at the ground. "Come off it, Tucker. You know it's Sebastian."

Tucker rounded on Jason. “Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. It still means I should put him on the business end of my gun.”

Sebastian slammed his hand into Tucker’s shoulder to force him to face him and realized with a cruel delight that there were benefits to inhabiting a giant klah’eel when you had problems with a human. That delight increased when he smelled Tucker’s sudden spike of fear through the governor’s nose. “Do you have any idea what I’ve been doing for the Resistance?”

“Do you have any idea what *we’ve* been doing?” Tucker recovered fast and jabbed his finger at the still-smoldering capitol building behind him. “We’ve been laying down our lives while you’ve been hiding and skulking.”

“Is that what you think I do?” Sebastian threw his hands wide.

Jason shoved Tucker. “No, of course not!”

“As far as I can tell, you’re a dangerous and useless worm waiting to turn on us!” Tucker shrugged off Jason without looking at him. “I have no idea what you do.”

Fury mounted in Sebastian’s chest, and he inhaled the smell of Tucker’s ever-present underlying fear of him and stalked toward him. “I’d be happy to show you if you—”

A commanding voice sliced through the standoff. “Stand down, torvar.”

Sebastian deflated at the sight of Leon Hess striding over with an annoyed glint in his intense eyes. He scowled and waved a hand at Tucker, who had stopped posturing at the sight of their leader too. “Tell that to this idiot.”

Hess’s unreadable but always and forever disapproving eyes stayed still on Sebastian, and he spared barely a glance at Tucker. “Let him in.”

“And what about them, sir?” Jason gestured to the two people behind Sebastian.

Hess’s eyes flickered to them and widened as though he’d just noticed them. Sebastian had no idea how he could have

managed to miss the appallingly dressed Oliver Turner in his banquet regalia and the half-cyborg Captain Mal'ik.

“They come too,” Sebastian sneered victoriously, then side-stepped Tucker and finally made it onto the safe side of the barricade. He hadn't relished walking around on the outside in a klah'eel traitor's body with two strangers following him around. He'd gone to the old headquarters first, only to find that leadership had moved to the taken capitol building, resulting in hours more exposure than he'd anticipated.

There was a pause, presumably as Hess decided whether that was okay or not, and then the sounds of footsteps as Sebastian got his way. He walked to a mostly rubble-clear area and then turned to face his leader and his guests.

“What is this, torvar?” Hess demanded as he came to meet him, keeping a wary eye on Turner and Captain Mal'ik.

Sebastian's frustration flamed up at Hess's tone and address after everything he'd just done.

“*This* is me bringing the Resistance two of the greatest tools it didn't know it was going to get.” Not to mention returning triumphantly from enacting a harrowing bit of terrorism and misdirection, but that had been his job, so he wasn't going to demand recognition for it. Not that it wouldn't have been nice.

Hess just raised an eyebrow and waited for him to continue, and Sebastian put his hands on his hips with a sigh and relented.

“Captain Mal'ik is here to help us defend against the Klah'Eel's counterattack.”

Hess pulled his shoulders back and down and regarded the hulking klah'eel soldier. Hess wasn't a particularly tall man, and he definitely wasn't compared to Mal'ik, but he still managed to give the illusion that he didn't look up at him. “Our intelligence said you were probably going to be *leading* that counterattack.”

“I was.” Mal'ik lifted his chin. “I changed my mind.”

Hess turned his piercing stare on Oliver Turner next. “And you were supposed to go running with your tail between your legs.”

Sebastian saw how Mal’ik’s spine went up like a dog’s ridge and wondered if he should have somehow warned Hess of their peculiar relationship, but Turner beat them both to it with an unbothered scoff. “And I’m sure there will be times when I wish I had. But trust me, you’ll be very glad I didn’t.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“You will, Hess.” Sebastian stepped forward, and that got Hess’s dark eyes back on him. They flicked up and down his body, and Hess’s upper lip curled.

“Is Tesh still in there?”

“No.” Sebastian shook his head.

Governor Tesh had been a two-timing bastard. He’d thought he was smart enough to play both the Klah’Eel empire and the Resistance and come out unscathed and with a boatload of profit. The Resistance had found his disloyalty to be very useful for a time. That time had ended.

“Good.” Hess nodded sharply and turned away from him. “Then get out of that disgusting body. I’ll take our guests from here.”

Sebastian watched Hess walk away, shepherding Turner and Mal’ik before him, and only his pride kept his impotent frustration from showing on his face.

He gritted his teeth. He knew almost as much about the Resistance and their plans and their intelligence as Hess—if not more! It was *he* that did all the espionage, all the infiltration, all the things that would have been impossible if not for his being a torvar.

He risked his life for this cause, for his leaders, for *Hess*, and yet the man still just walked away like—

Sebastian spun on his heel and stalked toward the other side of the capitol building. It was fine. This was nothing new. Hess would come around eventually; he would have to. It

would be illogical for him not to with everything Sebastian did for him. And if Hess was anything, he was logical.

The Resistance had only just taken the capitol building a couple of days ago, while Sebastian had been blowing up communications towers and dignitaries at a Klah'Eel summit to give them the opening, so he strode around like he knew where he was going and was instead hopelessly lost.

They would have had to set up a makeshift medical wing somewhere, but this huge building was a maze. His barely banked frustration started to mount again after the tenth suspicious glance was thrown his way as he walked around in a klah'eel body when he finally caught sight of a dirty blond head he recognized.

Sebastian's heart lifted. "Colin, thank god, this place is a labyrinth."

The briefest flash of confusion crossed Colin's bruised face before recognition replaced it, and he grinned and opened his arms for a hug. "Sebastian, you finally made it! Always late to the party."

"Fashionably late." Sebastian shrugged a shoulder and then wrapped Colin in a hug that was made awkward by Tesh's size. The insinuation that he was never around for the real work of the Resistance would have rankled coming from anyone else, but he knew Colin didn't mean it.

Colin stepped back. "Looking for Maxwell?"

"Yes. Please tell me I'm close. I don't feel like wandering around as a klah'eel among a bunch of men who have just been killing klah'eel for any longer than I have to."

Colin nodded sympathetically. "If it helps, we didn't have to kill that many."

"It doesn't." Sebastian put his hand on his hip and sighed. "That just means there are a few men who want their turn at it."

"Dramatic." Colin rolled his eyes. "Maxwell's just at the end of this hall."

“Thank god.”

“Drinks later?”

“Many of them.” Sebastian nodded heavily and then dragged himself down the hall. He really did wish he could have many drinks later. A long night of cold drinks and loud, rowdy crowds and regaling Colin with the stories of his adventure.

But he’d seen what was on that data stick Oliver Turner had hidden in his ridiculous pendant. He didn’t think rest was in his cards any time soon.

Sebastian got to the large room at the end of the hall and peered in. What appeared to have once been a very large lecture hall or auditorium had been converted into a makeshift medical wing. Tables, stretchers, some gurneys, and any other available flat, man-sized surfaces had been lined up in an orderly way throughout the room. To the right was a wall of hanging fabric to make private compartments.

Most of the beds were occupied by sleeping men and women bandaged or splinted, and one man with his foot suspended in a sling from a cumbersome lamp post scrolled through his data tablet. Overall, a full-to-bursting clinic, but still a reasonable amount of carnage for having taken Ralscoln’s seat of government.

“Maxwell?” Sebastian rapped his knuckles on the doorframe.

“Just a moment!” A sweet tenor voice with the soft drawl of a rural Tava accent came from one of the compartments at the end of the room. After a few beats, a short, slight, human man with rectangular glasses and blood splashed all over his front appeared from behind some old curtains. His face lit up. “Sebastian!”

“Maxwell.” Sebastian smiled and something loosened in his chest. He strode quickly toward him. “Got a body for me? A human one?”

“I’ve got better than *a* body.” Maxwell turned and waved over his shoulder. “Follow me.”

He opened a discreet door Sebastian had noticed but not paid any attention to, and they left the auditorium for a cluster of smaller rooms that must have been used for speaker preparation. Sebastian sighed and leaned back against the door as soon as it closed.

It felt overwhelmingly good to be alone with a friend.

Maxwell looked at him with a sad little smile. “Tough job?”

Sebastian shrugged. “Probably easier than what everyone had to do here.”

“Who could say.” Maxwell’s mouth twisted. “I am sorry. I —”

“Stop.” Sebastian cut him off as he did every time. “You’re needed in this role, not mine.”

Maxwell’s mouth twisted again as he obviously wrestled with his guilt, but this time, at least, he didn’t make them re-hash their usual exchange. Maxwell, like Sebastian, was a torvar. But he, like every other torvar Sebastian had ever met, kept it a secret. He stayed in the body he had lived in his whole life. He was, for all intents and purposes, the human doctor Maxwell Terry, the sweetest man anyone had ever met in their life.

And Sebastian was a body-hopping parasitic worm.

But a damn useful one.

Maxwell sighed. “Well, let’s at least get you into something more comfortable.”

“Oh, Maxwell!” Sebastian flattened a hand against his chest. “I didn’t know you were interested in me like that.”

Maxwell huffed a laugh and rolled his eyes, and Sebastian smirked and straightened up from the door and followed him. Maxwell led him to another room where a man was lying on a table with a respirator strapped around his head and an IV dripping into his arm. Sebastian stopped at the sight of the familiar, long, lean limbs and the striking dark hair against pale skin.

“That’s mine.”

“It is.” Maxwell looked very pleased with his little surprise. “Hess ordered it taken with us. He said you’d need it when you met us here.”

“Well, I don’t *need* it.”

Any living body would have done. A captive traitor or a brain-dead casualty were the usual candidates. But this was the body that Sebastian had inhabited for the past few years, always leaving it in Maxwell’s care at headquarters when he went out on a job and returning to it afterward, and he was undeniably attached. “You didn’t need to bring it. You could have used the space for more bandages or antiseptic or something.”

Maxwell raised an eyebrow. “We have plenty of bandages and antiseptic.”

Sebastian still regarded his body with a little frown. “It’s odd that Hess would insist on bringing it.”

“Is it? He was right that you’d want it, at least.”

“But why would he care?” *That* was what was bothering Sebastian. “Why would he care about my bodily comfort? He doesn’t. Which means he’s just insisted on bringing the body to make *himself* more comfortable. So he doesn’t have to remember what I am or what I do.”

“Sebastian—”

“My being a torvar is all well and good when he needs me to go blow something up, but god forbid he actually acknowledges me or what I am outside of that.” Sebastian threw his hands in the air.

“Sebastian, do you want to get in the body or not?” Maxwell’s voice sharpened just enough to get through to him.

Sebastian sighed. “Yes, I do.”

“Good. In you go.”

Sebastian would typically never let anyone see him do this. It was awkward even in front of Maxwell, who, though he was

a torvar, had undergone gestation along with the fetus he'd inhabited and been born in his body. He'd never once left it.

Maxwell averted his eyes, and Sebastian took the opening gracefully. He grabbed the wrist of his usual body with Tesh's hand and then unhooked himself from the remnants of Tesh's brain stem. He raced down Tesh's arm under the thick klah'eel skin and then tore out the back of his hand.

Everything was dark and hazy in his simple eyes—just large, blurry shapes—but Sebastian felt his way up his body's arm, climbing rapidly to that soft hollow just under the skull that called to his instincts. He re-opened the scar tissue there with a quick claw slice and clambered inside.

He found his usual anchors, and in just barely a moment, he opened his eyes, and Tesh's body hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Maxwell glanced back at him and clearly avoided looking at the klah'eel body on the ground. "How are you feeling?"

Sebastian sat up and rolled his joints. "Hungry."

"Right." Maxwell stooped to dig around in a cupboard and then stood with a couple of ration bars. "These should tide you over until dinner."

Sebastian took one gratefully and started chowing down as Maxwell perched on a seat that must have once gone with this table-turned-gurney. Sebastian didn't need to be watched over after climbing into a new body. He often switched bodies three times in as many hours, sometimes in as many minutes, when on a job. But a body that had been lying bedridden for days was harder to readjust to, and besides, he'd gotten used to these quiet debriefs with Maxwell, so he didn't say anything.

Maxwell started his updates after Sebastian set aside the empty wrapper of his first ration bar. "So Colin and Garrett have been at it again."

"Shocker." Sebastian opened his second bar. "What about this time?"

"Something about the pool table and the dartboard." Maxwell shrugged. "I can never keep it straight."

“Oh, see, now that’s actually important.” Sebastian dropped his ration bar to his lap, fixing Maxwell with a serious stare. “The dartboard requires a lot of space. You need a clear line of sight to the board so you don’t take anyone out, and you also need to be far enough from the board for the game to be properly difficult. Garrett keeps trying to take necessary dartboard space for his stupid pool table because he can’t fathom the idea that just because the dartboard is not physically occupying the space doesn’t mean the dartboard doesn’t need it.”

Maxwell just smiled softly and nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

Sebastian shrugged and picked up his bar again. “Garrett is just an idiot.”

The degree to which the dartboard and the pool table were, in fact, not important could not be overstated. Sebastian didn’t doubt the soldiers had already found a room to turn into a cantina, but he did doubt anyone had bothered to bring the pool table as part of their original assault.

But it felt good to pretend. It was freeing for them to sometimes care about things that didn’t matter rather than be crushed by the reality of the things that did.

Sebastian sighed and ran his hand through his hair, which desperately needed a wash, as he thought back to the things on that data strip. “The Turners have made something awful.”

“Turners as in the Turner Corporation Turners?” Maxwell tilted his head. “I thought you were stopping them. Wasn’t that the whole goal of your job?”

“It wasn’t the whole goal. And I was stopping them from buying out our continent. I wasn’t stopping them from”—Sebastian grimaced and waved a hand about—“everything else they were doing.”

“What else were they doing?”

“Making weapons.”

“Well, sure, all the powerful corporations are making weapons.” Maxwell stood, gathered up Sebastian’s wrappers,

and threw them in a waste basket in a corner. “That’s where the money is.”

“Not weapons like this.”

“What is this—”

“Doctor?” A hard rap on the door back to the auditorium interrupted him. “Doctor, do you have the torvar in there with you?”

Maxwell grimaced. “His name is—”

“Yeah, I’m here. What do you need?” Sebastian hopped off the table and then cracked his back, sore from lying on the hardwood for who knew how long. It was sweet that Maxwell tried to defend him, but also useless.

Two soldiers Sebastian had seen around but had never been introduced to came into the room.

The first glanced down at Tesh on the floor, went pale, and then looked back at Sebastian. “Hess says you need to meet him in the war room.”

“Now,” the other added and then nodded to Tesh’s body lying in an unceremonious heap on the floor with much less concern. “And we need to take that out.”

“Will you at least give it to his family?” Maxwell asked, decent as ever.

“He doesn’t have any family.” Sebastian shrugged a shoulder. “We checked back when he first became governor.”

A slight grimace came over Maxwell’s face as he no doubt considered exactly why Resistance leadership might have been checking for Tesh’s family, but it passed quickly, and he nodded.

Sebastian headed to the door the two soldiers had just come in from. “Thanks for the body, Maxwell.”

“Thank Hess,” Maxwell replied.

Sebastian just shook his head. “I will not.” Then he stopped with a flicker of irritation. “Where’s the war room?”

“Center of the building,” one of the soldiers told him. “Top floor. Big table in the center. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.”

The trek back through the recently taken capitol building was much more pleasant in a human body, not least because instead of suspicious glares, he got either completely ignored or a few friendly smiles from soldiers who recognized him. Well, still a few suspicious glares from soldiers who recognized him, knew him to be a torvar, and didn’t trust him because of it. But nothing new there.

It also simply felt much more natural for him to be in a human body. Sebastian had inhabited one for as long as he could remember. It wasn’t until he joined the Resistance that he’d first jumped into a klah’eel. He’d been in a qesh since then too. He didn’t like the overwhelming assault on his scent while he was in a klah’eel, and he hated needing to think about the color of his skin when he was in a qesh. No, human bodies were definitely the most comfortable.

The war room did prove impossible to miss. It was labeled as Conference Room 1, but Sebastian could see the familiar sight of Hess through the doorway. He was bent over a huge table, with his muscular arms braced against it, staring down at presumably his beloved map with a glare so hard it was like he thought the force of his will alone would win this war for them.

Hess was alone in the room, and Sebastian approached silently and leaned on the doorframe with his hip cocked out. He stared at the strong jaw, straight nose, and serious dark brows for a moment, admiring of and simultaneously frustrated by them. Then he rapped his knuckles hard on the doorframe and smirked when Hess started.

Hess scowled and straightened up. His eyes flickered down Sebastian’s new body, but Sebastian couldn’t read anything in them. “I hope you’re willing to risk that. You won’t have time to find a new one.”

The exhaustion Sebastian had kept tamped down ever since Captain Mal’ik had broken him out of Klah’Eel custody

threatened to rear up at the implication that there would be no rest, but Sebastian kept it at bay. He waved a hand and came into the room. “Bodies are a dime a dozen during a war.”

“Dead bodies.”

“And traitors.” Sebastian shrugged. “Which are just dead bodies still walking around.” That’s what his current, pretty, long-limbed body had been: a Klah’Eel spy, until Sebastian had wriggled into him and solved that problem for them.

“That’s the spirit!” Joan came striding in with a handful of data tablets, and Captain Mal’ik and Oliver Turner trailed after her. Mal’ik looked as untouched and stoic as ever, Turner still bright-eyed with this exciting adventure, and Joan had bags under her eyes but the wild look she got when she had a bone in her mouth. “I’ve got a traitor for you.”

“No.” Hess’s dour voice took the skip out of Joan’s step. “He needs to go to the factory.”

“The what?” Sebastian frowned and leaned his hip against the heavy table, which did indeed have Hess’s map stretched out atop it.

“That factory will still be there in three days.” Joan dropped her data tablets onto the table. “Kaston might not be.”

“It will be the first place the ground forces hit.” Captain Mal’ik stepped up to the table, dwarfing Hess, and Hess’s spine pulled up straight.

“Because that’s what you would have done?” Hess raised a dark brow.

Mal’ik’s orange eyes glanced at him, but he didn’t react to Hess’s tone. “Yes.” He dragged one of his long fingers along the routes of the map. “It will be easiest to get the armored brigades down this road to Kaston, and then, after taking Kaston, to continue following the road deeper into the continent toward Ralscoln.”

“That may be, but there are other cities along that road before Ralscoln.” Hess pointed out Libha, Ferry, and Livel. “Kaston is not our last line of defense.”

“No, but it’s a good one.” Joan frowned at him. “And we have people stationed there. A lot of them.”

“I’m not saying we abandon it. I’m saying I need the torvar somewhere else.”

“Where do you need me?” Sebastian cut in. “What factory? And what traitor? If you want me to do something, explain it to me because I’m fucking tired, and I don’t have time to parse through all this cryptic bullshit.”

“A chemical production facility two systems away.” Oliver Turner grabbed one of Joan’s data tablets, and she opened her mouth to protest but decided against it. Turner stepped up to Sebastian’s shoulder and angled the data tablet so they could both look at it. “It’s on this desolate ice planet here because most of the waste materials are toxic and no one cares about the ecology of desolate ice planets.”

“Except the people living on them,” Sebastian muttered.

“No one who lives on a desolate ice planet has the political clout to do anything about it.” Oliver waved the thought away. “This chemical plant is owned by my family and is perfectly outfitted to manufacture the fear gas in bulk and at speed. Using high-speed freight, it could have that gas transported here in two days, three days at the most.”

The fear gas.

Sebastian had glanced through the information Oliver had stolen for them. He’d seen some of the videos of the experiments, but he hadn’t been able to make himself watch them all. A chemical weapon that forced its victims into the most hideous and overwhelming state of fear, with all the terrible decisions and lack of inhibitions that came with it.

It was a horrifying creation, and Sebastian was struck anew by the fact that a person had decided to make this—and that that person’s brother was Oliver Turner, who was standing right next to him and pretending he cared.

Sebastian took a disgusted step away. All Oliver Turner cared about was Captain Mal’ik, and Sebastian was not of the

opinion that that romantic drivel offered him any sort of redemption.

“You need to sabotage that factory,” Hess ordered, and Sebastian was already nodding.

“Of course, I—”

“And he can do that after he roots out the traitor in Kaston,” Joan cut him off. “The Klah’Eel will be there in days. All of our defenses will mean nothing if we have someone on the inside selling us out.”

“And holding Kaston will mean nothing if that gas is unleashed on us before we’re prepared for it,” Hess snapped back.

“So you’ll sacrifice Kaston?” Sebastian raised his voice over Hess’s bark as he finally caught up to the conversation and the argument at hand. “We have men there—”

“I know we have men there!” Hess slammed his palms down on the table and leaned forward toward Sebastian. “I stationed them there.”

Sebastian wasn’t intimidated by Hess’s intensity, he was too self-righteously enraged, and he mirrored Hess’s stance against the table and leaned forward to face him. “And they went. For you. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

This close, nose-to-nose, except for the heavy table between them, Sebastian could see something flash through Hess’s dark eyes before he lifted his upper lip in a snarl. “Of course it means something to me, but that was before”—Hess lifted his arm and jabbed a finger in Turner’s direction—“his fucking family got involved.”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Those men trust you to—”

“Those men trust me to win this war, and we can’t do that if shiploads of that gas get onto this planet.” Hess punctuated his words with more stabbing motions in Turner’s direction and at the map they were both braced over. Sebastian opened his mouth, but Hess jerked back to standing and cut him off. “And you’ll do what you’re ordered to do. Or do I need to find someone else?”

Sebastian slammed his mouth shut again, a hot shame and a coiling sense of guilt and obligation tangling up in his stomach. He gritted his teeth, straightened, and put his hands on his hips. “There is no one else.”

“Exactly.” And Hess turned away from him, ending his argument just like that. Because Sebastian wasn’t going to say no to him, disobey him, or betray him. Not really. And Hess knew that. Sebastian was too fucking loyal, and he’d worked too fucking hard for this Resistance, for Hess, and for Farlon before him.

Sebastian had loved Farlon, but how he hated Hess...

“Farlon wouldn’t have made this decision,” Sebastian hissed, just loud enough for the room to hear it under Hess telling Joan and Turner what to plan. Everyone froze, even Turner, who probably didn’t even recognize the name.

Hess turned flinty eyes on Sebastian. “Farlon isn’t here. And he would have never asked for your opinion anyway, torvar.”

Sebastian felt the cut of that in his chest and had no one to blame but himself for provoking Hess to it.

So he turned on his heel and stormed out.

Chapter Two

SEBASTIAN DRAGGED himself into the makeshift spy room he'd been directed to. After storming from the meeting, he'd found a bed in the barracks and collapsed to sleep. His nap had only been long enough to remind him how tired he was, and then Colin mercilessly kicked him out of bed and told him Joan was asking for him.

Anyone else and Sebastian might have grumbled that they could come get him themselves, but if he knew Joan, she was running on even less sleep than he was. Sure enough, he found her standing over a desk scattered with data tablets—a poor woman's version of a wall of screens—holding a mug of klak that was no longer steaming.

“No rest for the wicked, huh?” Sebastian dropped himself into a chair that was missing a leg across from her. He tensed as it groaned under his weight, but it held.

Joan took a sip of her cold klak and made a face. “Plenty of rest for the wicked. No rest for the heroic.”

“Right.” Sebastian rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. “Let's get started, then. Where am I going?”

Joan shook her head. “We're waiting for Oliver.”

“Oh, is he getting to rest then?” Sebastian scowled.

“I don't think he's resting.” Joan raised an eyebrow. “He's saying goodbye to Captain Mal'ik.”

“Goodbye?”

“Captain Mal’ik and Hess are headed to Kaston first thing tomorrow morning,” Joan said. “Try to get the defense as ready as they can.”

“Even though they’ll be stabbed in the back.” Sebastian tossed his head and refused to verbally admit that it spoke well of Hess that he wasn’t completely abandoning Kaston. He was putting himself in harm’s way to stand with them.

“Do you want to talk about you and Hess?”

“No.” Sebastian didn’t blink at the blunt question. Joan didn’t answer right away, and Sebastian couldn’t help but fill the silence, “You don’t agree with him either.”

“I don’t need to agree with him to follow him.”

“Neither do I!” Sebastian threw his arms out wide. “I’m here, aren’t I? I’m the best asset he’s got!”

“And he knows that.”

“He doesn’t act like it.” Sebastian crossed his arms and briefly considered fighting the pout on his face but then decided it wasn’t worth it.

Joan sighed. “How do you want him to act, Sebastian?” She went on before he could answer. “You know what he’s like. He’s got a lot on his mind, a lot on his shoulders, and a lot of decisions to make. He doesn’t have time—”

“To what? Say ‘thank you’? He doesn’t have time to say ‘thank you’ or ‘good job, Sebastian?’” Sebastian scoffed. “Or hey, maybe even ‘Sebastian,’ the whole thing, instead of ‘torvar’? It’s not that much longer.”

“You’re asking for things he won’t give you, Sebastian,” Joan said, and her voice was infuriatingly gentle. “He’s a good leader, a good man in a fight, but he’s not...” Her lips twisted, and Sebastian knew what she would say before she got the words out. “He’s not Farlon.”

Sebastian looked away, still scowling, then shook his head. “I don’t believe it. I mean, I know he’s not Farlon. But I’m killing myself for that man, and I don’t believe he’s incapable of seeing it.”

“You’re killing yourself for him or for the Resistance?”

“For the Resistance, obviously,” Sebastian snapped, letting his mouth go as his mind recovered from the stumble. “I just meant because he’s the leader. He’s our symbol, really, at this point. And he’s the one that orders me out to all these nice places all over the galaxy.”

Joan had a look in her eye that Sebastian didn’t like. “And he’s not anything else to you?”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes at her. “Well, he’s also an asshole, a bigot, and a prick.”

Joan smirked at him over her mug. “Anything else?”

Sebastian tilted his head and thought about it for a moment. “And a heartless, soulless jerk.”

At that moment, Turner swept into the room, pretty clothes a little askew and a touch of red rimming his stupidly pretty eyes. “Are we talking about your fearless leader or me?”

“Who could tell?” Sebastian sneered at him to hide the relief at the end of his questioning.

Joan sighed and gave Turner an apologetic look. “He’s in a mood. He’s not always like this.”

Turner waved her concern away. “The first time I met him, he was a conniving governor intent on rooting out my secrets, and the second time I met him, he blew me up and nearly killed me.”

Sebastian held up a hand to stop him. “Second time was me; first one wasn’t.”

Turner cocked his head. “It wasn’t?”

“That meeting you had with Tesh? When he put you in a courtyard so your scent cream would sweat off?” Sebastian shook his head. “That was all Tesh. I was in someone else at the time.”

“Ah. Well, I feel even less bad that you killed him, then.” Turner shrugged a single shoulder at Joan in a more elegant way than a shrug should be. “In that case, the first time I ran

into him, he was trying to kill me. A little attitude is an improvement.”

Sebastian had to grudgingly admit that that was quite pragmatic and magnanimous, and he kicked over a chair for Turner to sit in. Turner gave him a little smile and sat down.

Joan placed a tablet in front of each of them. “Alright, let’s get started.”

LEON SAT at his war table with his map in the dark early hours of the morning, alone, and glared at the empty doorway that had silhouetted Sebastian yesterday afternoon. He watched in his mind’s eye as Sebastian’s lean and graceful form stormed out like an impotent panther and felt the acid tang of the words he’d said in his mouth. He’d known he hadn’t needed to go there. But Sebastian hadn’t needed to go there either.

Joan walked in holding two mugs of klak—none of that overly fragrant coffee humans still bound up with Earth obsessed over. “Sebastian’s getting ready to leave now.”

Leon clenched his jaw and looked back down at his map, even though the lines and marks had long since stopped coalescing into anything meaningful in front of his aching eyes. “Good.”

“Did you sleep?”

“No.”

Joan set one of the mugs beside him with a soft thud, careful not to get it on the edge of the map, worn and stained though it already was. He glanced up at her and saw the judgment in her eyes, for what he wasn’t sure yet, but he was sure he’d find out soon. She circled the table and sat in a chair across from him.

“You should go see him off.”

So the judgment was for his little spat with Sebastian. He'd wondered if he would be berated for that by more than himself. He groaned and dropped his head back to give the ceiling a turn at being glared at.

"He gets under my skin like a splinter." He bared his teeth. "Like shrapnel."

Leon had experience with shrapnel. He still had the scars on his left thigh from a previous entanglement. And the way Sebastian dug at him—impossible to ignore, ever-present, all-consuming—felt just like it.

"Yes," Joan observed in a mild tone. "I believe he does it on purpose."

He didn't, though. Not always. Leon swallowed. Sebastian got under Leon's skin just by existing. Just by throwing that cocky grin around, by standing with more grace than Leon had ever seen a man possess, by his sheer terrifying competence.

Leon was the villain to the Resistance's enemies, but Sebastian was the terror. And it was Leon that directed him, and it gave Leon a thrill he'd never felt before. But it was like holding a viper, and Leon never knew when it might bite him instead, so he kept poking at it just to get the bite over with so he could stop dreading it.

Maybe if the viper that was Sebastian just bit him already, Leon could stop obsessing over him—*feeling* him under his skin whenever he was around or mentioned or when Leon's mind wasn't occupied with something else for long enough.

Leon groaned and dropped his forehead into his palms. He was losing his metaphor.

"You know all he wants—"

"I don't care what he wants, Joan." Leon lifted his head from his palms and glared at her. "There are more important things right now."

Joan pressed her lips together, then shrugged. She stood. "Fine. Enjoy your shrapnel, then."

Joan got all the way to the same doorway Sebastian had stormed out of when Leon finally bit out a question. “Is he leaving from the hangar?”

Joan looked back at him and had the grace not to smirk. “Yeah. The near one just off the eastern wing.”

Leon nodded and then listened to the deliberate click of Joan’s boots on the pitted hardwood as she strode off down the hall.

He sat there for a few moments, warring with himself. He didn’t have to go see Sebastian off. In fact, he shouldn’t go see Sebastian off. Nothing good would come of it. And it was a waste of time. He was leaving himself in under an hour.

And he didn’t want to go see Sebastian anyway. He didn’t want to feel unbalanced and...not out of control exactly, but like his control was slipping and sliding out of his hands and he was constantly readjusting his grip to keep it. He hated that feeling, and a not small part of him hated Sebastian for making him feel that way.

But before the last echoes of Joan’s footsteps had even faded away, he was dragging himself out of his chair and heading for the hangar.

Their holding base in the capitol building was just beginning to stir awake. There were the sounds of gear clinking as it was readied, the faint smell of klak and morning rations being prepared, the murmur of the quiet voices people used before the sun had fully risen.

Walking out of the exit of the eastern wing, Leon breathed in the crisp morning air and nodded to the guards.

“Good morning, sir!” chirped one of the newer soldiers, younger. Leon didn’t recognize him. He was clearly a morning person. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Leon glanced up at the sky, the pink and oranges of sunrise just beginning to paint over the gray of the morning. “Yes. Be safe. Stay alert.”

“Yes, sir.”

And then he carried on toward the hangar, turning his mind toward supply shipments and how long they might take to get to Kaston and how much they could spare to have there if Kaston fell and they lost it all. It was easier to think of these things instead of beautiful sunrises he didn't know how to appreciate and beautiful men he didn't know how to talk to. These things were more important anyway.

Of course, as soon as he was let into the hangar—on which they had put a heavy guard considering its strategic importance—and he saw Sebastian standing by a commandeered high-speed klah'eel ship, he wished he'd thought more about what he was going to say.

He shouldn't have come at all. But weren't leaders supposed to give their men final words of strength and encouragement before sending them off on dangerous missions? Missions that could always be their last mission?

Farlon had always done that. Seeing the man—not tall, not broad, but always so sure—striding toward him before every operation had always filled Leon with purpose when he had been a soldier.

And it was hard to imagine any mission being Sebastian's last because it was hard to imagine Sebastian ever failing, but if it ever was, would Leon be able to swallow the guilt and regret of not even telling him goodbye?

But now he had dithered at the entrance for too long, and Sebastian had spotted him. The younger man closed the hatch on his fuel tank, turned toward Leon, and put his hands on his cocked hips. He was too far for Leon to make out his facial expressions, but Leon could see the confident lift and tilt of his chin.

Leon inhaled deeply, pulled his shoulders back, and approached.

“What do you need from me, Hess?” Sebastian asked as soon as Leon got within speaking distance. He wasn't using a fighting tone, but Leon faltered and stopped a few steps short of where he'd intended.

“Nothing. I’m just here to wish you luck.”

“No, I mean in general.” Sebastian waved his hand around as though to encompass the whole world. “Clearly, I displease you, which means I must not be giving you something that you want. So, what else do you need?”

The muscles up the side of Leon’s neck tensed, and his jaw twitched. “You don’t displease me.”

That was mostly true. Sebastian didn’t displease him so much as Leon’s own reaction to him displeased him. As for what Leon wanted that Sebastian wasn’t giving him... That, he simply couldn’t bear mentioning.

Sebastian gave him an unimpressed look that told Leon exactly how convincingly that had come out. “Would you like to try that again? With feeling?”

“You don’t displease me,” Leon repeated and almost winced at the realization that he was indeed trying it again, and he was indeed trying it with more feeling. He felt ridiculous. “You meet every expectation.” That didn’t sound right either. “And often exceed them.”

Sebastian sighed. “Hess, look, I’m trying.” He walked toward him until he was closer than Leon had originally intended. Sebastian, in this body, was slightly taller than Leon, and Leon fought the urge to shrink down, pulling himself up taller instead. “I just want to solve this problem between us.”

“There’s no problem,” Leon replied automatically. This close, Leon could watch all the lightning-quick emotions flit across Sebastian’s face. Leon had never seen Sebastian pretend to be someone else. Surely when he did, he managed his expressions better. Whenever Leon saw him, his lips were always twisting in thought, in smiles, in sneers, his eyebrows sliding around in judgment or gentle tease. Now they were pinched with frustration, and his lips were pressed thin.

“You can tell me. I can take it.” Sebastian stopped just far enough away that Leon didn’t have to obviously look up at him. “Where am I falling short?”

“Nowhere.” Leon took a step back. He shouldn’t have done this after a night of no sleep. Sebastian’s dogged determination was a great boon on a mission, but it was terrible to have it turned on himself. “Good luck at the chemical plant.”

Leon turned to put this terrible decision behind him, but then a firm hand grabbed his elbow and yanked him back. Leon reacted on instinct and punched out toward the assault. Sebastian’s redirected the blow smoothly, which spoke to how many close combat situations he’d found himself in.

“What is your problem with me, Hess?” Sebastian stepped even closer and grabbed Leon’s left forearm again, utterly unflustered to have almost taken Leon’s fist to his nose, while Leon yanked his arm back, horrified to have nearly struck him. His heart was pounding, and the hair on the back of his neck was sticking up. “And don’t try to tell me you don’t have one.”

Leon needed to get out of this situation. “Let it go.”

“So you admit it?” Sebastian’s eyes blazed, and Leon bared his teeth in a snarl.

“Yes, Sebastian! I have a fucking problem with you!” He had a problem with how he couldn’t stop falling into his eyes no matter what color or shape they were. He had a problem with how his fingers twitched and his hands ached to touch whenever Sebastian stood close enough. He had a problem with the way his cocky grins and his utter surety made everything seem manageable in a world that was out of control, and Leon couldn’t stay away. Leon yanked his arm back. “But it’s *my* fucking problem, so let it go.”

Leon had half turned on his heel—he’d almost made his escape—when he caught the crash of Sebastian’s face out of the corner of his eye. He’d seen devastation on Sebastian’s face before—when they lost soldiers; when they’d lost Farlon—and it had killed him then. It didn’t hurt him any less now.

He turned back. “Sebastian—”

But Sebastian had wiped the vulnerability away and replaced it with brittle stoniness. “Fine. I’ll let it go.”

He turned away, and this time, it was Leon who grabbed his arm before his self-preservation instinct could get the better of him. “You don’t understand.”

Sebastian only glanced back at Leon and didn’t give him a full view of his face, but he didn’t pull his arm away either. The muscle was lean but pliant under Leon’s fingers and warm against his palm. Sebastian would give in if Leon pulled him closer; he knew he would. Sebastian fought him with words, but he’d always given in to Leon in his actions.

Leon’s mouth went dry.

“You don’t understand,” he repeated around a tongue that felt like it had both dried out and swelled up, so it stuck in his mouth awkwardly and made it difficult to form words.

“Yes, I do.” Sebastian’s tone was caustic, but the furrow between his brow was too deep, and the shine on his eyes too bright for the tone to be believable. “It’s because I’m a torvar.”

Leon’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth, but Sebastian wasn’t done.

“You love my usefulness, but you’re sickened by my reality.” Sebastian tried to pull away, but Leon tightened his grip. “It’s normal, it’s—”

“It’s not true.” Leon pulled Sebastian around and grabbed his other arm. It was only once he’d gotten two hands on the man and was holding him just barely an arm’s length away that he realized how dangerous of a position he’d gotten himself into. “I am not sickened by you, Sebastian.”

Sebastian looked at him warily. As though he was too afraid to like what he was hearing. Leon wondered how he had survived for so long, wearing his emotions like that. “Do you realize this conversation is the first time you’ve ever used my name? And not just called me ‘torvar.’”

Guilt rolled up Leon’s throat. “That...that’s not about you.” It was about keeping him separate and apart. It was about holding Sebastian back because he hated how strongly he wanted to pull him close.

“It’s my *name*, Hess.” Sebastian scowled but stayed in Leon’s grip. “How can you say it’s not about me?”

Why was Leon even doing this? Hadn’t he just told Joan less than an hour ago that he didn’t care what Sebastian wanted? But that had been a blatant lie. Leon hated the way he felt specifically because he *did* care, and he couldn’t afford to care about things right now. Not when there was so much at stake and so many people relying on him.

But when Sebastian tried to pull away again, Leon didn’t let go. And Sebastian didn’t fight him. He stayed in Leon’s grip, patient, waiting. Leon almost laughed. Sebastian was the most energetic person he knew. Constantly in motion, doing things, talking to people, working. He was impulsive almost to a fault, and he was never patient.

And now he stood in Leon’s grip, patient for him.

Leon could send him on his way now. Sebastian would go. He’d do his duty. He’d do it well. He always did.

And Leon would have hurt him. Would have let him go feeling like he wasn’t enough, and Leon knew what it felt like to feel like you weren’t enough. He knew the corrosive effect on the inside of feeling like you lacked something, and the very last person in the world that Leon felt was missing anything was Sebastian.

Sebastian’s expression morphed into pained frustration, and he tried to pull away again. “I need to—”

Leon tightened his grip and pulled him in. He came just as easily as Leon knew he would, bending right to Leon’s will, and Leon saw his eyes widen just before he closed them, and Leon captured his lips.

Leon had played this moment in his head more times than he ever should have. He’d imagined all the ways he could be lucky enough or brave enough or foolish enough to find himself in a position to kiss Sebastian. It had felt like such an impossible and unattainable dream that he’d always stopped it right as the moment before dragged out. It had seemed too hard, too difficult, too complex, utterly beyond him.

But it was easy.

The softness and pliancy of Sebastian's lips under his. The way his breath caught and his muscles loosened as he melted into Leon. The heat and nearness of his body. A surety and confidence replaced Leon's hesitancy, and he pushed Sebastian backward and pressed him up against the hard metal of the ship behind him.

Sebastian went easily, and when his back hit the ship, his eyes started to flutter back open, but Leon captured his lips again before they did. He kissed him roughly, heart pounding in his chest and his fingers flexing against Sebastian's biceps.

He wanted.

He wanted so much, it was like a thing inside him that raged and struggled and didn't know where to go. Leon hadn't done this enough—with anyone—to carve out the usual grooves for his desire to flow through. And he'd never wanted like he'd wanted Sebastian from the first time he'd set eyes on him, before he even knew what he was.

Leon slid a hand up Sebastian's throat and felt his Adam's apple bob against his palm as he swallowed. He left Sebastian's lips, dug his thumb and his forefinger under Sebastian's jaw, and forced his head to the side so he could get his teeth onto the rim of Sebastian's ear. Sebastian gasped softly and squirmed, but not away.

Leon worried at the skin between his teeth, then kissed it and husked into Sebastian's ear, "Touch me."

Sebastian's body shuddered against Leon, and then lightning went up Leon's spine at the pressure of Sebastian's hand against the front of his pants. He groaned and dropped his head onto Sebastian's shoulder as Sebastian rolled his palm.

"That's right, like that," Leon growled into Sebastian's neck and pressed up tighter against him, trapping Sebastian's hand between them, and rolled his hips into it. Sebastian moaned softly as though it was Leon's hand on *his* length, and

Leon lifted his head to nuzzle just behind Sebastian's ear. "Shh."

He shushed him and stroked his thumb against his throat, feeling his pulse fluttering beneath it. He dropped his other hand down to his ribs to feel them expanding and collapsing as Sebastian breathed heavily. Pleasure thrummed through Leon's body, making his thighs shake and his breath catch, but his mind was more centered and clear than he could ever remember it being.

Sebastian's pliancy, his obedience, the eagerness in his body consumed and focused him.

Leon turned Sebastian's face toward him and hovered over his lips so he could feel the hot puffs of his breath against his own. Sebastian's eyes opened again, his pupils dilated and unfocused, and Leon stared into them. "You're perfect, Sebastian."

Sebastian whined, and his fingers spasmed against Leon's length and then pressed against him again with more urgency. "Hess."

"This is my problem." Leon dragged both hands down Sebastian's body, feeling his muscle, his heat, his movement that even now was graceful as he twisted and pressed against Leon. He pressed his forehead against Sebastian's. "This is what I want from you that I'm not getting."

Sebastian's eyes flew wide, and he made a choking sound. Leon dragged the calloused pad of his thumb over those lips, open with shock and slick with saliva.

"Every time I look at you, every time I think about you, I want this." The words were tumbling out now that he'd started. Now that he had Sebastian squirming in his arms, with Sebastian's hands on him, and waves of pleasure rolling through him. "And I can't stand it. I can't stand wanting you like this."

Sebastian swallowed and licked his lips, the tip of his tongue flickering over Leon's skin. "I can give you this." Sebastian brought both hands to Leon's groin and started

undoing his belt with quick, urgent motions. Leon's balls tightened, and he bit off a desperate groan at the implication. "If that's what you want, I can—"

A loud clang echoed through the hangar—deafening in its suddenness—and Leon shoved Sebastian away and lurched back.

He spun around to see a tech walking toward one of the ground transports looking down at a data tablet, completely oblivious, the heavy metal door having slammed shut behind him.

When he looked back, Sebastian was dragging the back of his hand over his mouth, wiping away the shine of spit and the last evidence on him of what they'd been doing. When he dropped his hand back to his side, he looked completely unflustered and unfazed. Leon stared at him as he put a hand on his hip, cocked it out, and leaned back casually against the ship behind him.

Heat flooded up Leon's neck, and he dropped his gaze and frantically zipped closed his pants that Sebastian had halfway undone and redid his belt. What sort of fool had he just made of himself? Years of burying his pining, trying to throttle it dead before anyone could see it, and one slip and it was out.

When he marshaled himself enough to pull his shoulders back and meet Sebastian's eyes again, he wondered how he had ever thought Sebastian was easy to read. Sebastian looked back at him with a placid expression, too calm to be read as closed off, too blank to tell Leon anything about how he felt about what Leon had just done.

But Leon knew how he felt about what he'd just done. He felt out of control and exposed and angry about it.

Sebastian tilted his head. "So, I guess this means—"

"Nothing." Leon cut him off with a quick, sharp chop of his hand. "This means nothing."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed poisonously, but then he shrugged. "Of course."

Leon tried to say something about hoping his mission went well or some other stupid platitude he'd been meaning to say when he first got here, but the words stuck in his throat.

Sebastian shook his head, then straightened and turned back to the cap on his fuel tank. He unscrewed it, realigned it, and screwed it back in again. Then he picked up the pack leaning against the ship's wheel and moved toward the cockpit. "Try not to die at Kaston before I get there."

Leon once again failed to think of any suitable reply, and within a few moments, Sebastian disappeared into the cockpit, and the engines of the ship roared to life. Leon stepped back quickly, the winds of the ship lifting off buffeting him and almost drowning out the tech's alarmed yell.

"What's he doing? The door's not open!" The tech stared at Sebastian's ship rising up in the center of the hangar, slack-jawed, with the data tablet dangling precariously from his fingers.

"Well then, open them!" Leon snapped, and the tablet fell as the tech dashed off to the door controls.

Sebastian's ship zipped through them as soon as they started to crack open, rolling onto its side to fit, and filling the hangar with the scream of punched engines.

Leon shook his head as the tech came up to him. The lanky man stared after the rapidly shrinking dot of Sebastian's ship. "I guess he was in a hurry."

Leon scoffed as he turned to leave. "And he's a show-off." And damned if Leon didn't find that unpalatably attractive.

YOU'RE PERFECT, *Sebastian*.

Sebastian couldn't make the words stop playing on a loop in his head as he navigated around the ice planet Orin's tidally locked moon, hiding in its shadow and observing the guard ships circling the planet. He'd only just woken up from the chemically induced slumber he'd put himself in to handle the

incredibly uncomfortable amount of Gs he'd had to put up with to get here within one Tava day. The autopilot had gotten him out here, but now it was time for his expert experience to guide him. That would be easier if he could focus on it.

Perfect for what? Perfect *as* what? The words didn't actually mean anything, no matter what they'd done to his lower belly and his heart at the time. And were continuing to do as Sebastian replayed them, trying to perfectly capture the husky desperation in Hess's voice as he'd said them.

One of the guard ships came close enough for Sebastian to read the Turner Corporation logo emblazoned on its side, and he killed his engines and coasted in the darkness until it had passed. He marked down the guard route on his old school paper notebook. A pattern hadn't emerged yet, but it would.

You're per—

Sebastian scowled and forced himself to listen to what Hess had said after.

And I can't stand it.

Yeah, whatever Hess was feeling about Sebastian, Hess hated it. So it didn't matter what he'd meant when he'd called Sebastian perfect. The insult and the degradation and distaste, it was all still there.

Sebastian ripped a piece off one of the blank sheets in his notebook and then ripped that piece in half.

Thank god that oblivious tech had come in when he had.

Sebastian ripped his half into fourths and then shredded one of the fourths into eighths.

Sebastian had been about to drop to his knees. Would have already been on his knees if Hess had given him the space to get there. Anything to give Hess what he'd wanted in that moment.

Touch me.

The sixteenths were too small for Sebastian to rip any further, so he started in on his second half.

Did he have any sense of pride at all?

Halves into fourths.

Was he that goddamn desperate for Hess's approval?

Fourths into eighths.

To yearn for a man who treated him like that?

Eighths into sixteenths.

And Hess had shoved him away like embarrassing trash the second someone had walked in. He could still feel the dull pain of the metal hitting his back and the much sharper pain of reality crashing back in.

Sebastian gathered up his little pile of confetti, crushed it in his palm, couldn't find the trash compartment, and then threw it into a corner without looking very hard.

One of the guard ships cruised past Orin at a fifteen-degree angle from Sebastian's position. Sebastian marked it down and then looked up the patrol routes he'd already marked. Finally, a repetition.

Hopefully it was the beginning of a pattern and Sebastian wouldn't be here for two days waiting for an opportunity. He pulled a ration bar from his pack more for something to do than because he was particularly hungry. Stopping this gas might be important, but the longer he was here, the less likely Kaston would make it past the first assault.

And Sebastian really wanted to make sure Kaston made it past the first assault.

Another half a day and a few ration bars later, and Sebastian was pretty sure he'd identified the pattern, and—more importantly—a hole in their surveillance that he could slip through. He didn't dwell on what could have happened back in Tava during the twelve hours he'd sat behind Orin's moon. It was too dangerous to broadcast a signal to ask someone, and even reading a signal could pop him on some surveillance systems.

He'd seen a small freight ship leave the planet during his surveillance as well, and there was nothing he could do but

hope it hadn't already been laden with fear gas.

He had a job, and all he could do was do it.

Sebastian found a hatch to the exhaust pipe of the ship and tossed his patrol notes into it, along with the ration bar wrappers and anything else that could too easily give away his aim or his origin. They would burn away to nothing and give nothing away about him. Not that the planet didn't know who its main enemy was at the moment.

He tucked the data strip Joan had procured for him into a front pocket on his jacket, the most easily accessible to someone not in his current body, and checked the keenness of the knife hanging on his hip. Then settled into the pilot's seat to wait for his opening.

In another few hours, it came. He turned the engines on to the lowest settings they'd go and inched along over the moon's surface, sticking to valleys and gullies and the edges of small mountains for as long as he could.

As soon as he had a straight shot down to the planet, he stopped and waited until he saw the guard ship he was waiting for cruise close. It would be the last one to cross this flight path for two hours, and for one of those hours, all other ships were heading in a different direction. There would be no eyes on this little patch of space.

Sebastian let the ship get far enough away that he could no longer make out the T in Turner Corporation with his naked eye and then gunned the engines at full throttle. The fancy sport ship commandeered from some klah'eel bigwig and given a lick of black paint shot forward and slammed Sebastian back into his seat.

He whooped delightedly at the rush a fast ship always gave him. He kept the throttle forward and an eye on his gravity meter until he had cleared the moon and then killed the engines dead.

The sudden silence made Sebastian's breath and heartbeat sound deafening, and the darkness made his eyes ache with the sudden need to adjust. But he coasted down to Orin on his

momentum and then Orin's gravity as silent and invisible as a ghost.

The planet was far from the system's sun, plagued by cold and dark and a thin atmosphere. Its only sentient habitation was the factory Sebastian was here to sabotage and the sad little company town that had sprouted around it to support the workers. Orin's only saving grace was its tidally locked moon that provided Orin with reflected light and some semblance of a day-night cycle.

Of course, it was also that moon that had given Sebastian the cover he needed to slip onto the planet. So geography giveth and geography taketh away.

Entry into Orin's atmosphere, such as it was, wasn't tough, and Sebastian rode it out until the last minute, turning on the engines with just enough time and force to keep him from smashing into the planet's surface without alerting anyone to his presence.

He maneuvered the ship through the icy wasteland, around the craggy tips of bergs, and through the occasional massive crevasse until his instruments started picking up the radio buzz of a nearby settlement. It would be mostly humans out here, working for a human corporation, but not entirely. The Turner Corporation was very much a multi-species conglomeration these days.

And now he had a decision to make. Namely, how far in to take his ship and thus how long to go on foot. There wasn't enough atmosphere on Orin to breathe, so he was limited by the capacity of his oxygen tank.

Leave his ship too soon and he'd be cutting it close with his supply, or possibly miss it altogether and die of asphyxiation right outside the borders of the town. Leave his ship too late and he drastically increased his chances of being spotted and the alarm being raised—higher likelihood he made it out alive, but lower likelihood his mission succeeded.

Sebastian sighed, nestled his ship against a shadowed snowbank, and turned off the engines. Mission came first.

He double-checked his gear and supplies to ensure he wasn't leaving anything behind—he likely wouldn't be returning to this ship. And then, with a bout of sentimentality, he flipped open the vanity mirror next to the cockpit and glanced at himself. This body probably wouldn't make it off this planet either.

Every time I look at you, I want this.

Sebastian always looked different, so maybe Hess had meant every time he looked at this body with its pretty contrast of dark hair and pale skin. That would explain why Hess had brought this particular body from headquarters when they took the capital. And his comment about Sebastian being willing to risk this body when he'd met him at the war table.

Sebastian tightened the straps of his oxygen tank with enough force that they bit into his skin uncomfortably. That was probably it. Hess just liked this body and hated that it was Sebastian inside it.

Sebastian pulled on a heavy mask and goggles and some thick gloves, covering every inch of skin from the biting cold that waited for him just outside the ship's door.

But then, Hess had treated Sebastian with the same active disdain and arm's length distance for years, ever since they'd met. Surely it wasn't just the body he was wearing that got to Hess.

No, of course it wasn't; it was that he was a torvar. It all came back to that. It was very simple, and Sebastian couldn't reason his way out of that no matter how intent his brain seemed to be on it. Like Hess had said, whatever had happened between them in the hangar meant nothing.

All thoughts of Hess finally cleared from his brain when the door of the ship slid open and a fierce cold flooded over him.

“Fuck.” He pulled his limbs in close and ducked his head. “Fuck. That's cold.”

He felt like he wasn't even wearing the thickest synthetic wool outerwear he'd ever lain eyes on. The thin, dry air seeped

into every crack in his armor he hadn't realized was there. The nice, thick warmth of the ship dissipated into the cold without a trace.

At least there wasn't any snow.

Sebastian tucked his hands into his armpits and trudged down the small gangway and out into the cold. At least there wasn't any wind either. No snow, and no wind, so really, what did he have to complain about?

Other than the cold that was already forming ice crystals around the edges of his goggles.

He hoped he was going in the right direction.

After a couple more hours of plodding in the dim twilight that passed for day on this sad planet, Sebastian caught sight of the towering, black, windowless building that housed the chemical plant. A series of smokestacks lined one side of it, billowing innocuously colored white gas—that Sebastian assumed was pure poison because wouldn't that be just like the Turners—out into the thin atmosphere where it dissipated almost instantly.

As Sebastian wound around some icy foothills, the blocky low maze of buildings surrounding the factory came into view. That would be where the workers and their families lived and Sebastian's best bet at making it into the facility.

Oliver Turner had detailed maps of the facility itself, but it was doubtful that maps of the ramshackle, piecemeal, build-it-as-you-need-it company town even existed. Sebastian would have to find his own way in there. Or find someone willing to show it to him.

He crouched behind a rock and observed the windowless little town. There were not a lot of entrances, which wasn't surprising. They wouldn't need to travel out into the cold nothingness very often. They needed to travel into the factory and send and receive goods from the couple of large hangars that Sebastian could identify from their distinctive roofs, but none of that helped him.

They must have maintenance exits, though, doors to the outside so they could fix up the walls that were standing up against the elements. And judging by the make and material of those walls—clumsy sheet metal welding—they would need to be fixed often. There wasn't anything that looked like an exit that he could see from here, though.

Sebastian checked his oxygen gauge. The air inside had crystalized into ice along the glass and made it hard to read, but it *looked* like Sebastian probably had enough oxygen for a scouting expedition around the perimeter in search of an entrance. And well, even if he didn't have the oxygen for a scouting expedition, he didn't have the oxygen to go back to his ship either, so there was that.

The factory stood to his left—with definitely no entry points—and the town stretched off to his right, so with a cursory glance out from his rock for security, Sebastian stole from his hiding place and followed the edge of the town away from the factory.

It was slow going now, so close to his target, trying to stay hidden and keep an eye on the town's wall so as not to miss any entrances. He had to stay low, and he found himself grabbing onto rocks with his gloved hands and scrabbling over the ground like an insect or the worm that bigots always called him.

All the way around the town, on the side opposite from the factory with his fingers so cold they were just dull aches on the ends of his hands, Sebastian's oxygen meter beeped in his ear to warn him of his imminent demise, and he decided that this was absolutely his worst mission ever.

And then, finally, he caught sight of a yellowish light stuck on the wall, glowing valiantly against the persistent dimness of the world. He made for it with a groan of relief, not bothering to even entertain the thought that it wasn't what he was looking for.

He tried to stay cautious, but he got clumsy in his haste, and by the time he was at the door and caught the sounds of

voices, there was nothing to do but throw himself against the outer wall of the town as the door swung open.

Thankfully, it swung out toward him, hiding him behind it instead of framing him in front of it.

“No! No-no-no, p-p-p-please!” The urgent pleas of a man—too clear to be muffled by a helmet or oxygen mask—dissolved into chattering teeth.

“Then hand them over,” coaxed another voice, muffled by a helmet and full of the cruel humor Sebastian recognized from the most hated soldiers during the occupation. “Come on.”

“N-n-no, my family.” The man was finding some strength. “My family needs them. M-m-more than yours.”

“Your family don’t come into it,” said a third, helmeted voice, nasty and slimy. “Hand it over.”

“N-ah!”

Sebastian saw a short, thin man—unnaturally slim, probably from a lifetime of malnutrition supplemented with ration pills—stumble past the gap in the door above the hinges. He pressed himself back tightly against the wall as his view was blocked by the dark uniform of a guard.

“Give ’em here, or we close the door and come pick ’em off your frozen corpse in an hour.”

“How would your family like that?”

Sebastian couldn’t see the man from here, but he could imagine the despair and impotent rage on his face. He’d seen it countless times on many others.

“I-I-I-I-I I hope you ch-ch-ch—” the man was completely losing his ability to speak in the cold. Would he even survive out here long enough to give them whatever they wanted? Any oxygen for him to breathe was coming out of the town, and his blood was probably crystalizing in his veins. “—choke on—”

“Yeah, yeah, we know.” The guard obscuring Sebastian’s view stepped forward and snatched what sounded like a crinkling bag from the freezing man.

“Ain’t for us, though,” said the nasty voice, still in the town’s warmth.

“N-n-now let m-m-me in.”

The nearest guard suddenly barked out a laugh. “Let yourself in!” Then he sent the small man sprawling onto the icy ground and shut the door with a loud clang.

Sebastian—suddenly exposed—stared at the shivering tangle of limbs in front of him. The man whimpered and twisted and managed to get around onto his side and open his eyes. They locked onto Sebastian’s and flew wide.

He opened his mouth, and his blue lips twitched, but he was far past speech.

Sebastian’s oxygen alarm beeped insistently in his ear, spurring him to action. He shoved himself off the wall and hooked his clumsy gloved hands under the man’s underarms. He pulled a thin limb over his shoulder, and when he stood, the man was so small, Sebastian lifted him from the ground.

“I got you,” Sebastian muttered, hauling him to the door. “You’re not freezing today.”

Thankfully, the bastards had left the door unlocked—if it locked at all—and Sebastian heaved it open and dragged them both inside. Even through his own thermally insulated clothing, Sebastian could feel how much warmer it was inside the shelter, and he slammed the door shut behind them to keep it that way.

He eased the man onto the ground and leaned him back against the wall, then glanced around. They were in a long corridor with a couple of doors on the town side and no one in any direction. Sebastian had the feeling they were in a remote place as far as the town went, but he wasn’t eager to test that hypothesis.

He looked down at the man who was significantly less blue, breathing hard, and staring up at him.

“Who”—the man paused to lick his chapped lips—“who are you?”

Sebastian paused to look him up and down, and then nodded decisively. He could speak again and didn't look injured, so he was the best Sebastian could do at the moment. Sebastian pulled off the glove of his right hand and cupped the back of the man's neck, his skin still freezing cold to the touch.

"You'll find out in a moment." Sebastian smiled grimly, and the man blinked up at him. "Your day's about to get a lot worse, I'm afraid."

Chapter Three

SEBASTIAN UNHOOKED his barbs from his body's brain stem and raced down his arm toward the freezing cold beacon against his palm. He burst out of the wrist and tore through the man's thin skin on the back of his neck. Just as the man started to generate a scream of pain and surprise, Sebastian hooked into his brain and shut the cry down, fighting the instinct that wanted him to crush the man's center of consciousness and take this body all for himself.

Sebastian wriggled into place, tightened his grip, then opened his eyes.

It was really, fucking cold.

Really fucking cold, and his chest was still heaving from shock and the lack of oxygen outside, and the ground looked very close, and his arms were too thin. Sebastian rolled his shoulders and then wriggled his fingers and toes. But at least it all worked.

"What did you do?" The little ball of fear in the back of his mind shivered as hard as the man had when he was in control of his body.

"I think you know," Sebastian replied silently as he turned to his old body lying on the floor. He pulled out the data strip from his old body's front pocket and then patted around on his new body for a new pocket. The only option was a front pants pocket. One had a hole, but the other was still structurally sound, so Sebastian tucked the little strip into it. There was

nowhere to hide his knife, so Sebastian reluctantly left it on his old body.

Then he heaved himself up, immediately went dizzy, and braced himself against the wall.

“That’s what happens when your brain never got all the proper nutrients growing up.” The man seemed to have reconciled with his predicament remarkably quickly. Perhaps that was another thing that happened when you eked out an existence under the thumb of others without a day of hope.

Once the world stopped spinning and the blood finished rushing to and from Sebastian’s head, he grabbed hold of his old body and dragged him toward the door.

He was weak as all hell, too, though he should have seen that one coming.

“Yeah, that too.”

“Well, this sucks.”

The man didn’t add any more commentary while Sebastian threw open the door to the cold—so, so much colder without protection—dragged his old body into the dim, icy wasteland, and left him in front of the door because it was too damn cold to drag him all the way around behind it, but Sebastian sensed his unease.

“Don’t worry.” Sebastian let himself sigh and slouch for a few moments against the door once he’d finally closed it on the horrible outside. *“He’s been dead a long time. And he was a bastard when he was alive.”*

“You gonna do that to me when you’re done with me?”

The frank question surprised Sebastian. Most people couldn’t bring themselves to mention the horrible. *“Not if you’re helpful.”*

“And what do you need help with?” There was no trust in that trapped consciousness, but Sebastian wouldn’t expect there to be any, so he didn’t take it personally.

“I need to get into the factory.” Sebastian glanced left and right and found neither side to look any different from the

other. *“We’ll start with, which way do I go?”*

“Are you going to destroy it?”

Sebastian scowled. *“I asked which way do I go?”*

Hesitation and obstinance leaked out from the trapped consciousness, and Sebastian forced himself to release his mounting tension. He was in. He could breathe. He could take a moment to be kind to another person struggling against the all-powerful species states and their allies.

“Look, hard as it is to believe while I’m wearing you like a meat suit, I’m not here to hurt you.”

“But you wouldn’t care if you did either.” The man was stubborn, and did Sebastian detect a hint of nobility as well? *“Me or anyone else.”* Ah yes, he did. *“You know, no matter how hard it is for you to believe, we working men are actually capable of caring about other people, and we don’t just sell them out for ourselves.”*

“People like the owners of this factory?”

“No, fuck them.” Sebastian felt the sudden urge to spit on the ground, as must have been the man’s custom whenever the factory owners were mentioned. *“I mean the people that work at the factory. That need this job.”*

“I hear you.” Sebastian nodded. *“I—”*

A pair of guards appeared around the corner to Sebastian’s left, and he turned quickly to start walking to his right, that decision made.

“Are you allowed to be here, or should I be running?”

“I’m allowed to be here. Maybe pick up the pace, though. You might have noticed they don’t particularly care about rules here.”

Sebastian duly stepped faster, his new short legs working double time to keep up what would typically be an average pace. *“So I did. What did they take from you?”*

More hesitation.

“I’m not here to destroy the factory,” Sebastian said, turning the corner and coming to another long passage. If his sense of direction was correct—which it almost always was—this was heading in the direction of the factory, so he took it. *“I just need to set it back a bit. It’s making something horrible.”*

“It always is.”

“Something they’ll use on people I can’t let them use it on.”

“You mean the Resistance.”

Sebastian stumbled in surprise. Though, to be fair, he’d been close to stumbling in this ungainly body ever since he started walking in it.

“We do get news here, you know.” Sebastian had the feeling the man would have crossed his arms if he’d still had control of them. *“Maybe not very timely news, but I know you’re the torvar from the Resistance.”*

Sebastian hadn’t realized how far his infamy had spread. He expected to be known by all the Resistance’s enemies and allies, and perhaps even people a degree of separation from them. But by some random factory worker two systems away? He didn’t know how he felt about that.

“You’re right. I am that torvar,” Sebastian admitted, not that the man sounded like he needed any confirmation. *“I’m here to sabotage this factory, but not permanently, just enough to buy us some time. I don’t want to hurt you or any other workers here. And if I didn’t care about you, you wouldn’t even be around to be having this conversation.”*

“You need my help.”

“I would like your help.” Sebastian paused as he came to a T intersection. *“I don’t need it.”*

They stood in physical and mental silence as the man mulled, and then Sebastian felt the release of a sigh. *“I do usually cheer for the Resistance when we get news stories. Left.”*

Sebastian smiled and took the turn. *“I’m glad you’re on our side.”*

“I didn’t say that. But there’s no love lost between the people here and the damn species states.”

They wound their way through the maze-like town toward the factory. As they got closer, the hallway started to widen, more doors started opening, and they saw more people walking through the corridors, loitering in the open doorways. Most were all as unnaturally thin and short as the man Sebastian was in. Sebastian flashed everyone that made eye contact with him a little smile with a nod and tried to look like he was trying to get somewhere quickly, which he was.

“What’s your name?” Sebastian asked the second time someone looked at him a little longer than one usually looked at a stranger. *“If someone calls to you, I need to know it.”*

“Noah. Noah Hughs.”

“Are you popular, Noah?”

Bashfulness in the back of Sebastian’s mind. *“I mean, I’ve been around for a while. People know me.”*

“So yes, then.” Sebastian mentally grimaced. *“Try to steer us around your usual haunts.”*

“Well, obviously.” Affronted. The barrier between their emotions and consciousness was starting to break down ever so slightly. This was why Sebastian hated wearing people with the people still inside. *“I’ve already been doing that. There’s no getting around the market, though.”*

Sebastian wanted to stamp his foot, but at least he knew that was purely him and not something this body was accustomed to doing. *“Really?”*

“Really. You think they let us build this town however we want? Wave at that guy.” Sebastian waved at the sandy-haired man sitting on an old paint bucket whetting a kitchen knife with a pile of knives next to him. *“There’s choke points all over the place. In case we riot.”*

“You guys do that often?” Sebastian wasn’t judging. He’d been in his fair share of riots. Well, rather, he’d been in more than his fair share.

“Once or twice.” Sebastian’s shoulders twitched to shrug, which was not from Sebastian because he only shrugged with one shoulder. *“When we needed it. But anyway. Choke points. Market’s one of them.”*

“Well, no way out but through,” Sebastian repeated his usual mission-time mantra.

“We’re almost there.”

Coming down a narrow hallway, Sebastian heard the drone of many voices, overlapping and mixing and talking over one another. No one was immediately visible, so he took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders. Hiding in plain sight—this was why he was invaluable to Hess.

By Hess, of course, he meant the Resistance.

Sebastian got to the end of the narrow hallway, and without warning, it opened into a huge room crammed with stalls and people and even a few little tents. It would have looked like an open-air market if not for the stifflingly low ceiling held up by a smattering of irregular pillars, all tagged with graffiti and posters.

Sebastian peered at one of the pillars as he passed it. Some of the paint-scrawled messages were typical youth nonsense—gang-like names, dirty words, the like—but many of them were also informative: times and dates for meetings or sales, the names of guards to look out for, some that looked like nonsense but that Sebastian detected a thread of subversion in that he wasn’t in-the-know enough to understand.

The market, such as it was, wasn’t exactly busy or bustling. Crowded definitely wouldn’t have been the word. The drone of sound came more from a dozen quieter conversations rather than a hundred people struggling to be heard over a tumult.

Sebastian tried to make as straight a line through it as he could, heading for the larger opening he could see on the

factory side of the room. He slid his gaze over the faces of everyone he passed, assessing threat, intent, recognition. As his eyes passed over the slightly horsey face of a brown-haired woman with striking green eyes a few stalls away, he felt a stab of panic that wasn't his own.

"Who is that?" Sebastian demanded. The woman saw him and started heading over, her pretty green eyes tight.

"No one." But that stab of panic hadn't been Sebastian, and only one other person was in this head.

"Don't lie. She's going to be on us any second." Sebastian put as much threat and steel into his voice as he could. He hated threatening people—at least, threatening not-bad people—and hated pretending to be the kind of person who didn't hate it.

"My wife."

"What would you say to her?"

"What...what do you mean?" Confusion from Noah and exasperation that was all Sebastian.

"She can't know I'm in here. It's better for everyone, so when she gets here, you need to tell me what—"

"Noah." The woman was on them, speaking softly and reaching out, so Sebastian took her hand.

"How was your shift?" Sebastian let the words flow from Noah's consciousness and out of his mouth without a pause to filter them. The pause, no matter how slight, always tipped off something instinctual in people. He just had to hope Noah didn't blow his cover. That Sebastian's claws were hooked into his brain stem was clearly not incentivizing him as much as Sebastian was used to.

The woman shrugged a little distantly. "Fine." She tightened her grip on Sebastian's hand. "Do you have them?"

Hesitation from Noah, but it felt natural. "I...had them, but..."

"But Neumann," the woman finished with a heavy sigh that seemed to bring her small frame even closer to the floor.

She closed her eyes, grimaced, then squeezed his hand again. "I'm glad you're alright."

Another hesitation, and this one Sebastian didn't like. "*You are okay. And you'll be better when you get me out of your brain, so let's get this over with.*"

"I'll get more." Sebastian swayed forward and put a comforting hand on the woman's upper arm, hoping that was right. "I'm going now."

The woman frowned. "We can't—"

"Don't worry," Sebastian let Noah cut her off. "I'll be back soon."

"*Kiss her forehead,*" Noah ordered, and Sebastian hurried to comply, pulling Noah's wife in close and planting a soft kiss on her forehead. The tenderness leaking out of Noah's consciousness made him ache, and he pulled back quickly. With a last, forced smile, he passed her and picked up his pace toward his goal.

"*What did they take from you?*"

"*Ration pills.*" Noah had apparently finally decided that there was no point in insisting on secrets from Sebastian. "*For my daughters.*"

"*Oh.*"

"*They're twins, and so they're both at that age when they should be growing a lot, but...*" But they weren't because they couldn't get the nutrition they needed out here in the middle of nowhere. Sebastian felt Noah's heavy, ashamed sigh. "*I don't want them to end up like me.*"

"*I'm sorry.*" Sebastian grimaced. Ration pills didn't work miracles. They didn't replace actual vegetables and proteins, but they'd at least help the kids make it into functional adulthood.

"*Neumann and his nasty little crony don't even have families.*" Noah seemed to be relishing the chance to rage now that he'd given in. "*They're just taking them to sell to some*

other desperate family at an even greater markup than I bought them at."

"The worst and most common type of bastard." Sebastian seethed on Noah's behalf, but it was a familiar enough feeling that he knew it was his own and not a bleeding out of Noah. *"I've seen a lot of their kind. Every species has them."*

Sebastian made it across the market without any more incident and stepped into the corridor with some relief.

"Yeah... We're almost there now. Down to the end of this hall, then turn right."

There were no people in the hallway now, so they must have left the bulk of the town behind.

"Okay, it's that door there at the end."

The sounds of mechanical whirring and voices could be heard faintly on the other side of the heavy metal door, but instead of a handle or a button, there was a blocky, worn keypad.

"567845," Noah said without hesitation.

Sebastian didn't plug it in. *"That's not yours, is it? You don't want to be linked to what I'm about to do."*

"It's Neumann's."

Sebastian grinned and punched the code in. *"I think you and I could get along, Noah."*

The door slid open to reveal a simple factory line: a large forward path lined with screens, buttons, and levers, and men and women pressing and pulling them. It was all more digitized than Sebastian had been expecting, but he supposed the chemicals were too dangerous to work with by hand, and the Turner's factories were more state-of-the-art than the crumbling old ones Tava still had.

"Alright, I've got you in. Now what happens?" Noah's tension was like a headache, pulling along Sebastian's scalp.

Sebastian ignored it for a moment, walking down the factory line and riffling through his memories of the maps

he'd studied, turning them this way and that in his mind to get his bearings. It clicked into place as he reached the end of the line.

He needed a console on the factory's closed network. His maps told him there was one several paces down to his left, tucked into an alcove. He could go to it now, complete his mission, grab a ship from the hangar a little bit farther than the console, and be in and out just like that. No one the wiser until centrifuges started shaking themselves apart and vats started overflowing.

Noah's tension spun tighter as though he could feel Sebastian's thoughts. "*What happens now?*"

"*Now we find me a new body.*" Sebastian turned away from the sure victory when a low, thrumming drone filled the air. He froze.

Noah's panic spiked through his mind. "*That's the security alarm.*"

"*I know.*" Sebastian swallowed.

"*It means—*"

"*I know what it means. Now shut up.*" Sebastian tightened his claws around the little parcel of Noah's consciousness, and Noah curled away into fearful silence.

It meant that the factory was on alert but wasn't ready to sound the full alarm yet. Turner had told him about the mechanism. Shrieking sirens panicked people and flicked on their fight-or-flight instincts. Good for a fire, but the last thing the factory wanted was to trigger anything like a fight response from its perpetually simmering workforce.

The low drone meant security knew there was a leak, a plot, a threat, and they were coming to crush it. Workers were supposed to drop to their knees and wait when they heard it and hope they wouldn't be dragged away.

Sebastian looked over his shoulder to where he could make out the opening of the alcove. That's where he was supposed to go. He was supposed to finish it. Do his job. Sacrifices had to be made for the cause.

The heavy drone pressed on his mind.

Then Sebastian faced forward again, in the opposite direction, and scurried off, Noah's short legs rushing over the ground. Sebastian had sacrificed plenty for the cause. He wasn't going to force other people to as well.

Sebastian uncurled his claws from Noah's mind and felt him tentatively raise his consciousness again. *"Do you...do you know where you're going?"*

"Yes." Sebastian came to another intersection, looked both ways, thought for a second, and then grinned ferally in a way Noah's muscles obviously found foreign. *"I know exactly where I'm going."*

Another spike of fear from Noah, this one having nothing to do with Sebastian's claws hooked into his brain. *"I don't go this way."*

The drone of the alarm changed its pitch, scratching at his mind just as he had managed to tune it out.

"But I do."

"But with the alarm—" Noah cut off as two sets of heavy, measured footsteps sounded from around the corner, even though no one could hear him but Sebastian. Sebastian ducked into an open doorway—a small break room, empty—and pressed himself against the wall inside as two guards strode past.

"Are the workers secure on line C?"

A muffled, answering chattering from a radio.

"Good. We're on our way. Neumann will be just behind us."

The guards' footsteps faded away quickly.

Sebastian ducked back out and hurried down the hallways faster now but as silent as he knew how to be.

The alarm whined over his footsteps, which was the only good thing about it. It was awful, tightening something inside him slowly and insistently. He gritted his teeth.

“It’s like it’s specially designed to make you want to crawl into the floor,” Noah growled, twisting in his mind as if he could escape the sound.

“It is.” According to Sebastian’s conversations with Oliver.

The alarm changed pitch again.

Then more guards, and these ones Sebastian didn’t hear until they were almost on him, their footsteps covered by the alarm’s new tone. He threw himself into a room without checking it and pressed into the corner.

There were more than two this time, moving quickly, and Sebastian caught a snatch of their conversation as they passed.

“They found a body outside the walls.”

“Another one?”

“Not a worker this time.”

Then Sebastian snapped ramrod straight at a loud voice from inside the room with him. “Noah Hughs? What the hell are you doing in here?”

Sebastian turned slowly, a self-satisfied smile curling across his lips. The room he had hidden in was a small locker room with two rows of dingy metal lockers. Between them, bare-chested with a shirt in his hands, stood a handsome man with a nasty expression and a familiar voice, though the one time Sebastian had heard it, it’d been muffled by a helmet.

Sebastian closed the door behind him. “Neumann, right?”

Neumann’s eyes narrowed dangerously, though they flicked to Sebastian’s hand as he engaged the lock. “That’s sir to you.”

“What are you doing?” Noah was all but cowering in the back of his mind, and Sebastian ignored him.

“Were you going to leave him out there?” Sebastian put his hands on his hips, cocking one out, and tilting his head as he sized up the man in front of him. Much taller than Noah—grew up eating proper meals—and above average height in

general. Muscular, trim. Clean-shaven face. Attractively straight nose and bow lips. A good catch.

That nose crinkled, and those lips twisted in confusion. “What?”

“Noah. Noah Hughs.” Sebastian took a step closer, though not within arm’s reach yet. “Were you going to leave him out on the oxygen-less surface of this godforsaken planet?”

“Why the fuck are you talking like that, Hughs, you imbecile?” Neumann stepped up chest-to-chest with Sebastian and shoved him. Good strength. Sebastian stumbled back against the wall.

“*He was!*” Noah confirmed. He had stopped cowering, perhaps in the face of Sebastian’s obvious lack of fear. “*He’s done it before. To friends of mine. Acquaintances. No one cares when a few workers spend too long on the ice and don’t make it back.*”

Sebastian shook his head and tutted. “And after you stole his daughters’ medicine, you were going to leave them fatherless and his sweet wife a widow?”

Neumann scoffed. “I don’t give a damn about your malformed brats *or* your malformed wife.”

“That sounds a lot like a yes?” Sebastian raised his eyebrow as he stood straight, looking up at Neumann so steeply it made his weak neck hurt.

“No one would have missed you then.” Neumann’s bared his teeth like an animal and advanced slowly. “And no one’s going to miss you now.”

“You know, I really do think a lot of people *would* miss him.” Sebastian met him until they were a hairsbreadth away, and a flicker of doubt passed through Neumann’s eyes at the unfamiliar behavior. “But I feel very confident that no one will miss you.”

Sebastian snapped his arm up to grab the back of Neumann’s neck and raced down Noah’s mercifully short limb. For a moment, he worried he had still misjudged and that

Neumann would shake off the weak arm before Sebastian got down it and Sebastian would be left wriggling on the floor.

But when he burst from the soft skin of Noah's inner wrist, he was met by the warmth of Neumann's neck, and he ripped and burrowed into it without a moment's pause. This time, he followed his instincts to find the conscious mind that used to inhabit this brain and crushed it between his claws, snuffing out the vile little mind as it screamed with terror.

When Sebastian opened his eyes, it was like he was in a different room. He blinked and looked around, letting all of the angles slowly align and make sense. Aside from the fact that he had done a one-eighty, the massive change in height made everything look different.

Then Noah's muffled growls of pain reached him, and Sebastian quickly dropped to his knees. Noah was curled to the wall, holding his bleeding, torn-up wrist close to his chest. Sebastian looked around for the shirt Neumann had been holding and dropped in their struggles, then quickly grabbed Noah's wrist and wrapped the cloth around it.

"That's it." He tightened the wrap and pushed it back to Noah's chest. "Keep pressure on it. I didn't tear anything vital. You'll be okay."

Noah looked up at him with narrowed, searching eyes. "Is he...still in there?"

"Nope." Sebastian shook his head. "Not like it was with you. He's dead for all intents and purposes."

Noah smiled grimly. "I guess you're not supposed to thank people for killing people, but..."

"But anyone who really thinks that never knew someone who really needed killing."

Sebastian dug around in his pants pocket, smiled victoriously, and pulled out his prize.

"I believe these are yours." He held out the small bag of pills and nodded to Noah's left hip. "I will trade you for what's in yours."

Noah frowned and dug around in his pocket. He pulled out the data strip, looked at it for a moment, and then handed it to Sebastian. “I won’t ask.”

“You’ll know soon enough anyway.” Sebastian took it and passed him the pills. Then he stood and held his hand down to Noah. “Can you stand? Walk around?”

“Yeah.” Noah took his hand and heaved himself up. “I feel fine. Well, except for this.” He held up his wrist. “And my head kind of hurts. But it’s mostly fine too.”

“Good. The headache’s normal.” Sebastian turned toward the lockers and was relieved to see the one labeled *S. Neumann* standing open. He pulled out a new shirt and a uniform jacket. “I’ll escort you out. Move quickly.”

“Thank you.” Noah turned to him just before they went back out into the hall. “For not killing me. And for getting my daughters’ medicine back.”

Sebastian twisted his lips in the closest approximation of a smile he could manage at such a dismal sentiment. “I’ll say you’re welcome for the medicine. But it’s a shit world if you have to thank someone for not killing you.”

Noah shrugged. “It is a shit world.”

Sebastian didn’t have anything to say to that, so they went back into the hallway and hurried back the way they had come. Noah walked ahead, holding his wrist, hunched, and looking put-upon while Sebastian strode behind him with a cruel smirk that came a little too naturally to this face.

The alarm droned on around them, varying its pitch here and there, wriggling into the brain as sure as any torvar.

“How long until they up the severity of the alarm?” Sebastian stepped close and lowered his voice even though they were alone in the hall.

“Not long now. If they can’t find the threat or figure out that body, they won’t have a choice.”

The radio on Sebastian’s belt crackled. “Neumann. All the workers are accounted for, and none of them look suspicious.”

“Not all of them.” Sebastian gave Noah a shove to put him back farther in front of him again. “I found an extra. I’m bringing him now.”

They rounded the corner back into the factory line they’d entered and found all the workers on their stomachs with their hands over their heads and the guards standing among them holding rifles as though this was a hostage situation. Sebastian supposed it sort of was. He eyed the men’s long guns. Was he expected to have one of those as well? And would it stand out that he didn’t?

He shoved Noah into the room. “On your belly!”

One of the guards—short and squat, with a sad wispy mustache—aimed his rifle at Noah as he went down. “Where did he come from?”

“That’s a great fucking question,” Sebastian replied, already backing toward the door. “There might be more.”

“And where are you going?”

“To find them!” Sebastian yelled over his shoulder, already back out into the hall and heading toward the console he should have been heading for earlier. He didn’t like shoving Noah back into this situation, but there was no alternative. To be caught sneaking around would have been worse.

He hurried down to the console, wincing as the alarm hit a sudden high note and started drilling into his ears, and skidded to a stop in front of it. It was already on, so now he just needed to find a port. There had to be a port. Sebastian slid his hands frantically around its top, its sides, its bottom, fingers searching for an opening.

Where the fuck were the ports?

“Neumann! What the hell are you doing?”

Sebastian whipped his head around to see the squat guard standing just in front of the factory line door but coming closer. And still holding that gun.

“Get back in there and watch the workers before they do something stupid,” Sebastian barked.

The guard's face convulsed in shock and disdain. "You don't give me fucking orders, Neumann." Damn, Sebastian had been hoping he was a higher rank. "I give you fucking orders." Damn again.

Sebastian dropped his eyes back to the console. Where. The. Fuck. Were. The. Ports!

"Neu—"

"I'm looking for any suspicious activity reports." Sebastian blurted the first thing that came to his mind, anything to delay the man's understanding as he advanced. He was still coming down the hall, getting closer and closer, and thank god for that. His overly large gun would be a lot less useful the closer he got.

"That's not a security console," the man said slowly and threateningly, and Sebastian knew the game was up. The guard planted his feet, just out of arms reach, and raised his gun. Sebastian's heart jumped into his throat. He'd had plenty of guns pointed at him since he joined the Resistance, and it never got easier. "Step away from the computer."

Sebastian straightened slowly. He lifted his arms and turned to face the man. There was no love lost in those beady eyes. Why did S. Neumann have to be such an unlikeable man? This probably would have been a lot easier if he didn't seem intent on making everyone his enemy. Where was that nasty crony he'd had? Not that he was probably the sort of man who would step up and defend him.

"Tell me what you were after."

"I was looking for suspicious activity reports. To figure out where to look next."

"But that's not a security console."

"I was confused."

"You were confused." The man's fingers flickered over the trigger, and his eyes narrowed. Then they flickered across Sebastian's face, down to somewhere a little lower, and narrowed further in confusion. "Where did that blood come—"

Sebastian ducked and lunged and tried to come up under the gun. But the guard knew his business and swung the butt of it into Sebastian's jaw. The world flickered in front of Sebastian's eyes, spinning and darkening, as his body struggled with the hit and his claws lost their purchase on Neumann's brain.

He righted himself before hitting the ground and hooked a hand around the heel of the guard's boot. He yanked with all his might and pulled the man's leg out from under him. The gun flew away and hit the wall with a clatter, and the man fell with a thud.

Sebastian scrambled to get the strong position, but the guard proved adept yet again and booted him in the stomach. The air whooshed out of his lungs, and the guard toppled him over and was on top of him. In no time at all, it was a ground fight.

Sebastian hated ground fights. They were brutal and dangerous, and they were double, triply hard in a new body he didn't yet fully know the limits of.

The guard straddled him, and he bucked and rolled and managed to flip them but found himself locked between the man's thighs in a strong guard.

Over and over they went, burrowing close to each other to blunt each other's strikes, biting and clawing, and throwing their weight. Sebastian's muscles screamed to end it, and he itched to leap from this body and into the guards, but they were scrambling too quickly. There was so much motion that he might end up outside both bodies, writhing around on the floor and inviting a boot to squish him and turn him into nothing but a smear on the polished concrete floor.

Finally—finally!—Sebastian landed an elbow in the man's face and used the opening to get behind him. He wrapped his legs around the man, an arm around his throat, and stretched the man as long he could go.

The guard started scrabbling and flailing, trying to get leverage, and Sebastian pulled them both long to deny him it. He tightened his arm around the man's neck, felt the ridge of

his windpipe, and heard the man's pained choke. But that wasn't what Sebastian was going for. He adjusted his grip until he got the man's throat onto the V of his arm and flexed his muscles against the man's arteries.

Sebastian could tell the man knew what was happening by his sudden renewed struggle, but in moments, it was over. As soon as the man went still, Sebastian released the choke and fell back heavily on the ground, the man a dead weight on top of him. He closed his eyes and panted.

He didn't know if the man was dead. He could have ensured it, but Sebastian didn't want to. He had killed. He had killed scores at this point. But to feel a man's life drain out of him, to choke it out of him, to hold on through the death throes... Sebastian shivered. It was worth it to avoid death himself, but only just.

After a few moments, and a dangerous few moments at that, Sebastian opened his eyes, looked up at the console just a bit above his face, and scowled.

There were the fucking ports. *Behind* the damn thing.

Sebastian rolled the guard off him, hoping he was still alive, but not having the time to check, and heaved himself to his feet.

He pulled the data strip from his pocket and plugged it into one of the elusive little ports. The light on the strip flickered on, red, then orange, and after a few moments, green.

Then with a pop like a small firecracker, it self-destructed, half falling onto the floor like so much tech junk and half melting into the port.

And that was his cue.

Sebastian left the guard on the ground, trusting someone else to deal with him, and took off toward the hangar. The time for stealth was far past.

Before Sebastian had even reached the end of the hall, screeching alarms blared to life, and red lights flashed overhead. He looked over his shoulder to see the guard still lying facedown on the floor, so it wasn't that someone had

already found the body. It was that the factory's system had discovered the virus.

That or what the virus was doing to it.

A low grinding sound slowly rose into Sebastian's conscious awareness, so slow he couldn't say when it had started and gotten loud enough to hear over the screaming alarm. But it got louder and louder as Sebastian ran down the halls. When he passed a group of guards going the other way—themselves too panicked to question him—it was even louder than the sirens.

When he skidded to a halt in front of the hangar doors, it had become deafening, and the ceaseless grinding and the ceaseless increase ratcheted up his stress level even beyond the normal levels of escaping a hostile building.

Sebastian searched the door frantically with his eyes and hands, searching for a handle or a button or a keypad. He yelled with frustration when he found no keypad and only a—

A huge explosion roared from somewhere close enough to shake the ground but far enough not to take him out. And still, the grinding sound grew and grew. Maybe that damn virus was going to destroy the factory after all.

Sebastian turned back to the place where there was no keypad and only a stupid scanner. What the hell was it supposed to scan? Sebastian pressed every one of his fingers against it, then knelt down and stared into it with each eye even though it hurt and left little white splotches in his vision. Nothing.

He scabbled around on his person, searching for a fob or data tablet, or a keychain, or—he let out a cry of success as he found a bar code on the other side of the ID hanging off his chest. He tore the ID from his shirt and pressed the code against the scanner.

The blasted little machine flashed green, and the door hissed open just as a smaller explosion sounded from the other side of the factory.

Sebastian rushed inside the hangar, finding it full of ships and empty of people. He had to give credit to the Turners' guards. None of them seemed to think of fleeing an obviously doomed factory. *They* didn't know it wasn't going to be blown sky-high.

Then again, Sebastian wasn't so sure of that anymore either.

He zeroed in on a ship small enough to pilot himself and fancy enough to have speeds up the level he needed to get back to Tava's system and ran over to it. He had the codes to open the exterior hangar door courtesy of Turner, so as soon as he climbed into the ship, the giddy relief was already bubbling inside him.

He was unstoppable now.

He opened the exterior doors up to the sky and was just lifting the ship out of them as the horrible grinding finally ceased with a spectacular explosion. He saw the red plume of fire on the other side of the factory, then turned his ship away and hit the throttle.

Zooming away and leaving the destruction in his wake, Sebastian let out a cackling, delighted laugh. The escape was always his favorite part.

Chapter Four

LEON LOOKED up from his stack of paper covered with conflicting intelligence reports and watched as Captain Mal'ik clapped a young man on the shoulder. When Mal'ik pulled the man into an embrace that could only be described as fatherly, he dropped his gaze back to his papers and scowled.

They were in Kaston now, at the local Resistance headquarters. Specifically, Captain Mal'ik was down in the back alley behind the building going over last-minute training with some of the soldiers on street fighting, and Leon was standing in his office window, which overlooked said back alley, watching him and regretting it.

It had been an easy and obvious choice to do so at first. After all, Leon had to be sure the turncoat klah'eel captain would be useful to them. Leon had heard too much of Mal'ik to think he would betray them. The man's reputation for fairness and honor had preceded him even more than his combat abilities.

Leon had seen enough from his window to believe those things, but what he hadn't counted on was seeing the open adoration in his soldiers' eyes. They looked at him with trust and eagerness to please, and openness to feedback. Even now, as the session was closing, they clustered around him, hanging on his every word even though they came from a mouth armed with tusks.

They never did that with Leon.

Leon tossed the stack of hard-copy data reports on the table next to the window. They were only useless, frustrating, and confusing at this point. They would defend Kaston from the western side, where the northern forces would most likely come from. They would have contingency squads in the other entrances, hoping they would buy enough time for the bulk of the defenders to arrive if the attackers did something unexpected.

He glanced through his window again to see Mal'ik still talking to the young man he had embraced. Then Mal'ik looked up, and his bright orange eyes met Leon's. The klah'eel nodded, and Leon forced himself to nod back politely rather than sneer out of some pettiness that should have been beneath him.

Then Mal'ik looked back at the young man, said a few words, looked back up at Leon, and headed for the building entrance. Leon sighed. He was coming up here. As well he might, he had finished with all the squads at headquarters, and he should debrief Leon. It was reasonable.

Leon snatched his mess of papers from the side table and plopped them onto his desk. He stood behind his desk, thought about how extreme their height difference was, and then sat behind it instead. He imagined Captain Mal'ik—every inch the huge, towering klah'eel that Leon had hated and feared in equal measure since he was ten years old—striding into the room while Leon sat in a chair and stood back up again.

He had just straightened his spine and pulled back his shoulders when Mal'ik's heavy tread echoed down the hall, and the next minute there was a knock on the door.

“Come in.” Leon planted his hands on his desk and leaned forward as Mal'ik entered. “Report.”

“You've got good soldiers.” Mal'ik closed the door behind him and walked to the front of the desk, where Leon would have had chairs if he ever wanted anyone to stay long enough to sit in one. “Hardworking, surprisingly experienced for an unofficial outfit—”

“We’re only unofficial because the species states won’t recognize us.”

“—and very loyal.”

“They fight for themselves and their families and a cause they believe in.” Leon lifted his chin. “They’re the most loyal group of soldiers you’ll ever find.”

Mal’ik tilted his head and crossed his arms over his broad chest, his metal limb clicking and clinking as it moved. “They’re loyal to you too.”

A lump formed in Leon’s throat, and he paused to swallow around it. Loyal. To him. What did that even mean, really? “They trust me to lead them to victory. To finish what *you* started twenty-five years ago.”

“They do trust you.” Mal’ik nodded.

“And they seem to love you.” Leon didn’t know how that had escaped. He clenched his teeth shut. The lack of sleep, the stress of the assault on the capital, the tension of the incoming invasion, everything he’d been working for since he was a child too young to be working for anything finally coming together, and then Sebastian... Leon was losing his grip.

Mal’ik narrowed his eyes in a way that looked too shrewd on a scarred soldier’s face. “Some of them do, yes. Some of them have known me for a long time.”

“Like that young man you were talking to?” Leon raised an eyebrow. The young man he had pulled into a hug like Farlon used to do to him.

“Do you know that young man’s name?” Mal’ik’s voice sharpened, and Leon was almost taken aback. He had perhaps taken for granted the calm steadiness Mal’ik had displayed so far.

Leon didn’t reply. He did not.

Mal’ik’s upper lip curled up. “Do you know any of their names?”

“They don’t want me to know their names,” Leon snapped. “They want me to send them to the right place at the right time

to accomplish what we've all been fighting for.”

Mal'ik actually scoffed at that. A short, sharp, derisive, and dismissive sound that shocked Leon and stabbed into somewhere vulnerable just behind his ribcage. Leon bared his teeth and curled his fingers into fists against the wood of his desk.

“Maybe they don't love me. But they *trust* me because they know I will do whatever it takes to make their sacrifices worth it.” Leon straightened and lifted his chin to give Mal'ik a look as dismissive as the one Mal'ik had given him. “I won't change my allegiance as soon as my feelings get in the way.”

Leon had expected the barb to hit—surely Mal'ik felt some guilt over betraying his country?—but instead, Mal'ik just snorted with that same air of derision and dismissiveness. “No, I don't think anyone is worried about your *feelings* ever posing a problem.”

Leon locked his jaw and seethed inwardly as Mal'ik turned on his heel and left, not even bothering to close the door behind him. The man had no goddamn idea what he was talking about. All *Captain* Mal'ik had ever done was what he was told to do, showing kindness to everyone he came across because he would never have to make decisions for them. Decisions about them.

It must be so easy never having any responsibility, never needing to make the hard choices, never having it all come down to you.

Leon had just been about to work himself into a true mental lather, still standing ramrod straight at his desk, when a familiar tread echoed down the hallway. His stomach twisted in anticipation.

After a moment, an unfamiliar body, holding a man Leon couldn't ever help but recognize, walked in.

“I see you and our dear Captain Mal'ik are getting along well,” Sebastian quipped in greeting, tossing a meaningful look over his shoulder to where Mal'ik's stomping footsteps were only just fading away.

“Oh, is he *dear* to you, too, then?” Leon’s voice snapped, and his lip curled before he could get ahold of himself. He wished he could blame that on the lack of sleep too, but Sebastian had always shaken his grip.

Sebastian blinked at that, eyebrows going up and lips pulling down into a little frown. He was in a handsome enough man, a little more brutish and masculine than Leon was used to him looking, but he still had that same sashay in his hips as he closed the door behind him and walked a little closer to the desk. “Not particularly.”

“You *were* the one to bring him.” Leon pressed his lips together before adding, with the unpleasant realization that maybe he should be more grateful about it, “And I hear he saved you.”

“You know why I brought him.” Sebastian put one hand on his hip and waved the other one casually. “And I didn’t need saving, though it was a nice thought. I also brought Oliver Turner. Do you think he’s dear to me?”

“Is he?”

“Of course not!” Sebastian looked completely affronted, and the exaggerated expression of utter insult made Leon’s lips twitch and his shoulders loosen.

“I take it the mission was a success?”

“As usual.” Sebastian smiled crookedly and leaned his hip on Leon’s desk, making Leon swallow awkwardly. It was only when Sebastian was around that he wished he had a chair after all, anything to keep him from getting so close. “It worked like a charm.”

“What did?” Leon refocused on Sebastian’s face and tried to also refocus on the conversation instead of the fact that Sebastian was less than an arm’s length away and Leon could reach over, grab the collar of his shirt and haul him across the desk to him.

“That virus. On the data strip.” Sebastian spread out two fingers to indicate the length of a data strip, as though Leon didn’t know. “You could hear the centrifuges shaking

themselves to bits all through the factory. Went up like a pile of fireworks while I was leaving. Where did Joan even get that?”

“The Carta Cartel. They’ve been investing in their science branch recently.”

“Like a proper corporation.” Sebastian chuckled. Carta orbited the same sun as Tava and was never more than a planetary hop, skip, and jump away, thanks to their similar orbits. It was also a Human planet, and as such, the majority of refugees that had fled Tava when the Klah’Eel invaded—of which there had been *many*—ended up in or at least passed through Carta. Carta had been woefully underprepared for the influx of desperate people, and one of the results was a positively booming criminal underworld. “Well, they certainly know their business.”

“Hopefully.” Leon’s lips twitched in a smile again, more of his burden lightening in the face of Sebastian’s usual indomitable optimism. “They have more contacts than us. Joan is reaching out now about finding someone who can help us with this gas. You bought us time, but that’s it.”

“I hope I’ve bought us that.” Sebastian grimaced. “I did see one ship leaving before I could get into the factory. Just a small one, but there’s no telling what it had in it.”

“They were always going to have at least some window to get something out.” Leon pressed his lips together. “You did the best you could.”

A hopeful brightness flashed across Sebastian’s face that muted itself quickly into something more guarded. He held Leon’s gaze for a moment. Leon’s heart thudded. Then the guard over Sebastian’s expression closed all the way down, and Sebastian dropped his eyes to Leon’s desk and all the papers and old data tablets spread across it. “So, I’m here about a traitor?”

“That’s correct.” Leon pulled himself away to go stand by his window again. He didn’t have any relevant information on this in a hard copy anywhere, didn’t want it leaking out. “Joan

doesn't have anything concrete. Mismatched inventory, mostly."

"Could just be a little graft."

Leon nodded. "Could be. Hopefully it is."

"But hope is a silly thing to pin the defense of a city on."

Leon glanced back at him with an agreeing smile, and his heart jumped to see the same almost shy smile on Sebastian's face. He turned quickly back to the window, though his eyes weren't even seeing the sad back alley in front of him.

He shouldn't have lost his composure back in that hangar. He shouldn't have even gone there and put himself in that position. That event took up so much space in this room with them, it was like a third person.

"Any other evidence?" Sebastian asked.

"There was a job that went south just yesterday." Leon dug into his recent memory through the pile of internal turmoil Sebastian brought up in his mind. "A warehouse complex to the north. Should have been heavily guarded. We sent a group to figure out what they had there. Maybe steal something. Maybe blow it sky-high."

"What happened?"

Leon turned away from the window and shrugged. "Nothing. There was nothing there. Nothing and no one."

Sebastian smiled ruefully and nodded. "Sounds like a leak if ever I heard one."

Leon nodded.

"Pretty bold response to leaked intel, though." Sebastian straightened from the desk and cocked his head, his eyes narrowing in thought. "You'd think they would have just doubled the guard or swapped out some of the sensitive stuff. They practically told us they knew we were coming. They've severely compromised the integrity of their agent, whoever they are."

“I don’t think they’re worried. They don’t think we’ll have the time to do anything about it before they’re on top of us.”

“We might not.” Sebastian’s gaze sharpened, and Leon scowled at the challenge in it.

“I knew we might lose Kaston when I sent you to that factory.”

“And we might.”

Leon bared his teeth. “And I don’t care.”

“You don’t care about what it will cost us?” Sebastian braced an arm on the desk and leaned across it, and Leon was very thankful he was well away near the window.

“I don’t care about winning battles. I care about winning wars.” Leon puffed his chest, not interested in being pulled down into unhelpful emotions.

Sebastian raised his voice, one of the only people that ever dared to do it to Leon. “People die in battles, and more of them die in lost battles.”

“I know that!” Leon snapped, making a few ill-advised steps toward Sebastian and slamming his fist down on the desk, his frustration getting the better of him. “I’ve been in a goddamn many of them, and more than you have.”

Sebastian opened his mouth, and Leon braced for whatever scathing retort would come next. But then he closed it, pressed his lips together, and let a breath out his nose. Something of the fight went out of him, and Leon’s own hackles smoothed down.

They were left standing on opposite sides of the desk, leaning toward each other with their hands braced on the surface between them and their gazes locked. Sebastian’s new body had unusual green eyes, but it hardly mattered. When Leon looked into them, he saw confidence and competence, passion, a fiery need to prove himself, an eagerness to please, the same tornado of things he always saw and was sucked in by whenever he was foolish enough to look.

This was why he tried to never look at the man. It was almost impossible to make himself stop once he did. And Leon had always thought Sebastian was at his best when he was in motion: graceful, flamboyant, and deadly. But that was wrong. Sebastian was at his best when he was still as a statue in Leon's gaze, frozen in something like anticipation.

The upswell of embarrassment at that thought broke the spell, and Leon turned away to look at a wall instead. He snatched up a piece of paper without looking at it so he could pretend to be thinking about anything other than Sebastian within grabbing distance.

If Sebastian was anticipating anything from him, it was more harsh words and casually cruel comments. And even if he *was* anticipating Leon laying hands on him again, it was probably a dreadful anticipation. Not a hopeful one.

Leon inwardly cringed at the memory of his brutish behavior.

But Sebastian was still standing there, still staring at him as the silence dragged and dragged. Leon could see him from the corner of his eye but couldn't make out his expression.

Leon swallowed to make sure his voice wouldn't come out raspy. "You're dismissed."

That finally spurred Sebastian into motion. He leaned back and put his hands on his hips. "Not a fan of this body then, are you?"

Leon frowned and, in his confusion, gave in and looked over at Sebastian. "What?"

"This body." Sebastian stepped back and swept an arm down to encompass his perfectly suitable body. "You couldn't seem to get enough of the last one, but I guess you don't like this one?"

Leon stared at him, mouth falling slightly open, paper—whatever it had been—utterly forgotten. He shook his head, bewildered. "Were you not listening to me?"

That made Sebastian scowl, but Leon was certain a little exposed hurt was in his face. He didn't think he imagined it.

“All I ever do is listen to you, Hess.”

“I don’t care about your body.” Leon almost laughed the words. Maybe it wasn’t such an absurd assumption, but Leon had been wrestling with this pining for so long now he knew it inside and out. He knew what it was about and what it wasn’t. “It’s never been about what body you’re wearing.”

That same vulnerability Leon had glimpsed in the hangar came back into Sebastian’s eyes. The look that seemed to say Sebastian liked what he heard but didn’t dare believe it. “Well, what is it about then?” He dropped his chin a little, pulled back, and curled in a little, as though bracing. “And on that topic, what is *it* anyway?”

Leon moved around the desk, and when he rounded the corner to Sebastian’s side, he didn’t imagine it when Sebastian uncurled toward him. Almost as an experiment, to see what would happen, he stepped close and reached slowly for Sebastian’s cheek. Sebastian’s eyes widened, then—somehow both miraculously and inevitably—he swayed forward and turned his stubbled cheek into Leon’s hand.

Sebastian’s eyes closed, and he nuzzled into Leon’s calloused palm before they fluttered open again. He met Leon’s gaze and bit his lower lip, and Leon groaned aloud.

It occurred to Leon for the first time that perhaps Sebastian was deliberately manipulating him. Maybe this surprise and confusion, the guileless wide eyes, was all for show and Sebastian knew exactly what he was doing and which of Leon’s buttons to press to get him just where he wanted him.

But Leon didn’t believe that.

Leon had watched him for years, and Sebastian was no liar and no sneak, no matter what role he served in the Resistance. With Sebastian, what you saw was what you got, and Leon could never get enough of what he saw.

He brushed his thumb over Sebastian’s lower lip and pulled it from between his teeth. Then he slid his hand around to the back of Sebastian’s head and tangled his fingers into the short hair. He pulled until Sebastian’s head was lower than his

own, and Sebastian winced at the pain, but his muscles and shoulders dropped down lax.

Sebastian didn't move. He stared at Leon with his neck craned back uncomfortably, his body loose, and his eyes bright with—yes, yes, Leon was sure of it this time—anticipation. Clarity and confidence flooded Leon's system.

Leon smiled, crooked with just a flash of his teeth, and stepped chest-to-chest with Sebastian and pulled on his hair to keep him looking up at him. "It's about you, Sebastian."

Sebastian's hands came up to Leon's chest, his fingers grabbing at his shirt. "Hess—"

A whine, a desperate little whine, and Leon couldn't bear to hear the rest of it. He tugged Sebastian's mouth to his and swallowed the little sound.

Perfect. Leon had meant it when he'd told Sebastian he was perfect. The way his mouth yielded and his body shuddered, the way his fingers scratched at his chest through the fabric, trying to get closer but not daring to pull at Leon.

Leon pushed him back against the desk, pinning him next to it and leaning over him. Sebastian was *his*. A deadly, predatory, terrifying thing, and in this moment, like this, he was all Leon's. Squirming against him, whining against his mouth, letting himself be arched over the desk, ready to go wherever Leon wanted him and be however Leon wanted him. He bit at Sebastian's lip hard enough to make him gasp.

"Take off your shirt."

When Sebastian's eyes shot wide and he froze, Leon realized he couldn't bear to make the same mistake he'd made last time. After just a beat, Sebastian's hands flew to the collar of his shirt and the buttons there, but Leon caught his wrists. He stilled them before Sebastian could start undoing his own shirt. "Or leave."

"What?" Sebastian's mouth dropped open, and the question came out in a shuddering breath. The heartrending disappointment in the syllable almost had Leon reverting back to the same brutish form he'd been in at the hangar—so certain

Sebastian wanted this—but he pushed through. He had wanted this man for too long to do it all wrong now.

“You’re the most valuable soldier I have, Sebastian.” He tightened his grip on Sebastian’s wrists for emphasis, then let them go. “That won’t change, whatever you do now.”

Sebastian’s brows furrowed, and his eyes darted to the door, but he didn’t move.

“So if you don’t want what I’m about to do to you”—Leon said the words slowly, deliberately, almost savoring them but too afraid to in case Sebastian ran for the exit and it all came crashing down—“then you should leave. Now.”

Sebastian actually pulled back, but not from Leon, from the door. He pressed back against the desk and reached for Leon but then stopped at the last second, and that display of submissive restraint did things to Leon he didn’t expect. Something like a growl built in his throat, and Sebastian’s breath caught. Sebastian lifted his chin and gave it that familiar, defiant tilt. “I don’t want to leave.”

The relief came fast and hard, and Leon’s knees almost buckled with it. It wasn’t all in his head. It wasn’t years of longing finally warping his grip on reality. And it wasn’t Sebastian too afraid or confused to defy him. It was Sebastian—*Sebastian*—yielding to him willingly, trustingly.

Leon lunged forward, capturing Sebastian’s mouth and bending him back over the desk. He invaded him with his tongue, and Sebastian opened to him with a moan, the most perfect, unabashed sound. Their hips slotted together, and Leon could finally feel just how eager Sebastian was. Leon pulled his mouth away and braced his hands on the desk to keep them still, digging his fingers into the wood.

“Take off your shirt.” He pressed his forehead against Sebastian’s so he could stare into his eyes as the dazed look from their kiss faded away. “I won’t ask again.”

Sebastian’s hands flew to his shirt. Leon left him barely enough space to get his hands between them to undo the buttons and kept him bent back over the desk.

As the buttons were undone, the shirt slid open and showed off a toned, muscular chest with a dusting of coarse hair, but Leon didn't care about that. He cared about the reveal, about the deftness of Sebastian's fingers as they jumped to do his bidding. He cared that Sebastian exposed himself to him on command.

Sebastian had to twist awkwardly to get the shirt off his shoulders, Leon refusing to budge and standing like a stone wall over him. He enjoyed Sebastian's twisting and squirming, and even more the expectant look Sebastian gave him when he finally tossed the shirt away into a corner.

Leon smiled slowly. "And your pants."

Red bloomed on Sebastian's cheeks, and this time, his sure hands shook as he undid his own belt. Leon stared at his face for a few moments—the flush of his cheeks, the glisten on his lips as his tongue flicked out over them again—and then looked down to where Sebastian was opening his pants.

He was hard in his underwear, and precum dampened a spot on the fabric just over where the head was jutting into it. Leon let himself touch just for a moment and thumbed over it, and Sebastian gasped, his cock kicking.

Leon put his hands back on the desk but leaned forward to nuzzle Sebastian's ear. "Take it all off, Sebastian." He bit at the rim. "You know how I want you."

"Yes." Sebastian shoved his pants and underwear over his hips. They got caught on his boots as he tried to step out of them too quickly, and he stumbled forward and caught himself with a splayed hand over Leon's chest. He snatched his hand back with a nervous look, but Leon just smiled, and the nervous look fell away.

"Eager?"

Sebastian swallowed, and for a second, Leon thought he would deny it out of principle, but then he nodded. "Yes."

"Good." Leon grabbed Sebastian's face with both hands and dragged him into another kiss. Sebastian flowed into him,

lips parted, pressing his naked body against Leon's clothes. So vulnerable. So obedient. All for Leon.

Leon explored with his hands down Sebastian's body. He dragged his fingers down the muscles of Sebastian's back, rippling as Sebastian pressed and squirmed against him. He scratched his nails over the smooth swell of Sebastian's ass and swallowed Sebastian's answering gasp.

And then, with more confidence than Leon had expected of himself, he slid his hand around to the front of Sebastian's hips and cupped his cock and balls.

Sebastian's mouth broke away as he moaned, and Leon pulled back to get a better view. He needed to see Sebastian's face the first time Leon got a hand on his cock. Sebastian's brows pinched, his lips parted, and his eyes shut tight.

"Look at me," Leon ordered, and Sebastian's eyes opened again instantly. That was what Leon needed to see, the emotions and sensations cascading through them on display and exposed. "Don't close them again."

"Yes, sir."

A bolt of pleasure shot down to Leon's balls so strong he almost came then and there, and he had to freeze as he wrestled himself back under control. Leon had been called 'sir' more times than he could count. But never by Sebastian and not like that.

Sir:

He hated it. He hated the reminder of where he stood. Above, in front of, in charge of. The reminder of the responsibility that sat so heavily on him, that crushed him so far into the ground that sometimes he felt he couldn't move. The pressure and the ever-present certainty that he tried to ignore but that lurked nonetheless that he would disappoint. That he would fail. That when they had all decided he would lead them—when Farlon had decided he would lead them—they had all made a terrible mistake.

But when Sebastian said it like that, with his pupils blown wide, his chest flushed, and his cock hard, standing in Leon's

arms and looking up at him, it didn't mean any of that.

Leon grabbed Sebastian's head with both hands again and pushed him down—not hard enough to force, but hard enough for it to be more than a strong suggestion. “Get on your knees.”

Leon had barely applied any pressure before Sebastian hit the ground, obeying before Leon had even finished the order. Because he wanted Leon to be in charge. He trusted Leon to be in charge, and for once, Leon trusted himself.

“Undo my belt.” Leon could trust himself because in this, he knew he would make all the right decisions. Give all the right orders. Because the only orders he had to give were the ones that made Sebastian's eyes light up, his cock jump, and his lips part on those gasps and moans, and who knew what else Leon could get from him.

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian undid Leon's belt with quick, sure movements, but this close and watching this intently Leon could see his fingers shaking.

“Open my pants.” Leon braced both hands on the desk in front of him, looming over Sebastian on his knees at his feet, trapped between him and the desk at his back, and perfectly happy to be there. Sebastian undid the button on his pants, unzipped it while chewing on his own lip, eyes glued to Leon's crotch, where his underwear still covered him but did nothing to hide his iron-hard shaft. “Show me I should give it to you.”

Sebastian's wide eyes ripped from his covered cock up to his face. “What?”

“Show me it'll be worth my time to take it out.” Leon watched Sebastian's face closely. “Show me how bad you want it, how hard you'll work.”

Yes, this was right. Sebastian's eyes blazed with determination. He didn't even add another ‘yes, sir’ before falling against Leon's legs, bracing his hands against Leon's thighs, and getting his mouth over the cloth-covered ridge of Leon's cock.

Leon groaned as he watched him, the sight of Sebastian's efforts doing him in almost more than the feel of them. He licked and mouthed and nuzzled at Leon through the fabric. Naked and on his knees between Leon's boots, he whined at Leon's underwear, which was rapidly getting damp with saliva and precum.

Sebastian's cock jutted out, flushed red, almost purple, with precum beaded at its tip. His arousal wasn't at all diminished by the position Leon had him. The very opposite, because this was *right* and god, did it ever feel right.

Very carefully, Leon lifted one of his feet and nudged the underside of Sebastian's cock with the tip of his boot. Sebastian's whole body jolted, and his fingers spasmed against Leon's thighs. Leon nudged it again, and Sebastian's hips twitched. He shuffled closer on his knees and stretched his mouth over as much of Leon's still inaccessible cock as he could.

Leon put his foot back on the ground, hooked a hand under Sebastian's chin, and pulled it up to make him look at him again. "Eyes open."

Sebastian's eyes flew open again, and his face twisted into a guilty look. "I'm sorry."

Leon shook his head and stroked his thumb over Sebastian's red lips. "You're perfect."

That made an open, vulnerable look flood over Sebastian's features that was almost too much for Leon. Could it really be that Sebastian didn't realize how breathtaking he was, how valuable? Impossible. His cockiness and confidence, the way he held himself, he had to know.

But Leon had spent too long pondering, staring down at him with his thumb on his lip, and Sebastian was squirming again. Leon chuckled as he watched Sebastian's Adam's apple bob. Such an impatient man trying to be so patient for him.

"I think you've more than earned my cock." Leon grabbed Sebastian's hair again. "Get your mouth on it properly."

Sebastian lunged forward, pulling his own hair against Leon's grip, and Leon braced, willing himself to keep his control, to drag this out as long he could. Sebastian yanked down Leon's underwear and swallowed his cock down as he bobbed up.

Oh fuck, oh fuck. Leon bit his lower lip so hard he nearly broke the skin, but he refused to close his eyes on this scene. Sebastian knew what he was doing—that was clear. Far more than Leon did. He would have felt insecure if there was any room in his body for anything other than overwhelming pleasure.

The heat, the slick, the pressure, and the flickering of Sebastian's tongue over his head, too much to let him rest, but easing up just before it became overwhelming... Leon panted open-mouthed. Was there anything Sebastian couldn't do? God, he was good at this too?

Sebastian must have remembered his directive again because then he looked up and met Leon's gaze. Leon's balls tightened, and his thighs shook at the sight. Sebastian, naked on his knees, his fingers white-knuckling the fabric of Leon's pants, his eyes wide and searching for approval, and his mouth stuffed with Leon's cock.

Leon let go of the desk to get both hands on Sebastian. He carded through Sebastian's sweat-damp hair and brushed his thumbs over Sebastian's cheekbones to wipe away a couple of tears that had leaked out, then over Sebastian's lips stretched so wide.

Sebastian whined, and Leon gasped at the sensation. Sebastian pushed forward even farther, until his nose brushed the coarse, dark curls at Leon's base. Leon's fingers seized up in Sebastian's hair when Sebastian whined again and he felt the fluttering of Sebastian's throat around his cock.

God, his throat. Was that how far down him Leon was? That was how far down Sebastian wanted him? Leon couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes this time. He had never felt anything like that. His hands roamed wildly around

Sebastian's face and hair. He hadn't had a lot of mouths on his cock, but none had felt like this.

A mewling sound forced Leon back to the world beyond the haze of pleasure he'd disappeared to. Sebastian looked up at him, breathing hard through his nose. He'd eased off just for a moment, and when their eyes met, he forced himself back down again, that fluttering tightness around Leon's head too much.

"Swallow me, Sebastian," Leon managed to get out through gritted teeth. "I'm going to come down your throat, and you're going to swallow."

Sebastian's hips twitched, bouncing his own drooling cock, and he gave short, sharp nods, as much as he could with Leon's iron rod down his throat.

Leon was really going to do it. He couldn't believe this was happening. Pleasure like he'd never felt built inside him, every fiber of his being shaking, Sebastian—perfect Sebastian—mewling and straining over him. It was perfect. It was a dream he'd never even dared to have.

"Sebastian, Sebastian, fuck—" Leon let it all become too much. He let it mount to an impossible height, then let it break on a yell, "Sebastian!"

His hips thrust as he came, erratically and messily, and Sebastian grabbed them and hung on. He kept his mouth sealed around Leon's cock, and Leon gasped and shook as Sebastian swallowed, dragging more and more pleasure out of Leon until he didn't have any more to give and it was just exquisite pain.

He yanked on Sebastian's hair until he popped off. The cold air on his wet, softened cock was a small kick of unpleasantness, but Leon's mind was too focused to care about that. He yanked Sebastian's hair again until Sebastian stumbled to his feet. Leon crowded into him and pushed him back.

"Hess—"

"Get on your back for me."

Sebastian's eyes were dazed, as though he were the one that had just had the best orgasm of his wildest dreams, but he obeyed without hesitation, propping his bare ass on Leon's desk and lying back over the papers and data tablets scattered there. "Yes, sir."

Leon shivered at the words and at the display. He pushed Sebastian farther up the desk, crinkling the papers under him and knocking a tablet to the floor. He stood between Sebastian's thighs and hooked his arms under his knees to lift and spread him. The decadence of the move and the liberties he was taking gave Leon pause for a moment, worried it was maybe too far, but Sebastian let out a moan and arched his back.

Leon flexed his fingers against Sebastian's flesh as pure, free confidence flowed through him. It was right. It was all still right. *He* was right. "Touch yourself."

Sebastian moaned again, louder this time, and now that Leon's cock no longer had a monopoly on his blood, he had the wherewithal to hope that no one was passing in the hall. Or if they did, they had the good sense not to open the door.

"Yes, sir." Those beautiful words yanked Leon away from that worry, and he watched from his perfect vantage point as Sebastian reached down and wrapped his hands around his own cock.

"Look at me."

Sebastian's eyes forced open again and gazed at Leon over his displayed body. "Yes, sir."

"Now stroke yourself."

Sebastian pinched his brows and caught his already red lower lip between his teeth as he gave himself one long stroke from base to tip, but he kept his gaze locked on Leon.

"Faster."

"Hess, I—" But he sped up his hand and cut off his own words with a mewling gasp.

Leon broke their gaze to look down at Sebastian's cock, shining with precum, the head appearing and disappearing in the circle of Sebastian's fist. "Faster."

And Sebastian obeyed. His legs shook in Leon's grip, his hips twitched, a continuous litany of cries and moans fell from his lips, all on Leon's orders.

Leon dug his nails into Sebastian's thighs, where he held them up and spread. "Finish yourself, Sebastian. Let me see you."

Sebastian threw his head back, his teeth clenched tight and his hand flying over himself. But then he lifted it again and caught Leon's gaze. He snarled as though in pain, and then his face went gloriously slack and his back arched. "Hess—Oh, god, Hess."

Leon watched Sebastian come with a feeling of near transcendence. The beautiful, dangerous man twitched and writhed before him, emptying himself over his own chest, and Leon's name—his family name, at least—still issuing from his lips in a drawn-out moan.

He could have never even imagined it. He could never have imagined that Sebastian might like to be here with him or that he could give Sebastian this. Without thinking, too caught up in the awe of it, he released one of Sebastian's thighs, set it carefully back on the desk, mindful of how sore the cramped position might have made him, and cupped Sebastian's cheek.

Sebastian stilled at the touch. His abused lips parted, and he blinked up at Leon. The pleasure cleared from his gaze, and Leon found himself caught in those clever, shrewd eyes. Despite the fact that he was still almost completely clothed and Sebastian was still naked on his back on the desk, Leon suddenly felt exposed.

He lifted his lip and opened his mouth, something cruel on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back.

Despite the suddenly sick feeling of fear tightening his throat, and the certainty that he had just made a terrible

mistake, a mistake that would haunt him and cost him everything, he didn't *want* to be cruel to Sebastian.

He didn't want that sick feeling either.

He swallowed and forced his lips that had been about to snarl to quirk into some semblance of a smile instead. "I've never cared about your bodies, Sebastian."

Sebastian let out a quick patter of surprised laughter. "You have to admit they have their perks, though."

Leon did not have to verbally admit any such thing. He eased Sebastian's other leg back down and stepped back, giving Sebastian space to prop himself up. Sebastian levered himself onto an elbow and looked down at the mess of his chest. Tucking himself away, Leon surveyed the mess of his desk and decided that Kaston would likely be won or lost in the next few days and that whatever he had here was no longer useful. So he grabbed a few papers, crinkled them, and shoved them at Sebastian.

Sebastian took them with a raised eyebrow and wrinkled nose. "I usually like a nice warm washcloth, but I guess I'll make an exception today."

He was probably just being facetious and whiny for his own amusement, but the comment reminded Leon of how clearly experienced he had been, and he didn't like the cold, prickly feeling that gave him. So he shrugged and turned away. "No time for warm washcloths today."

"No, maybe next time."

Leon liked the leap of hope that gave him even less. "You're optimistic."

He heard Sebastian hop down from the desk and the rustle of fabric and clink of a belt, and then turned back around to see Sebastian putting his clothes back on. "I always am."

"I know." It was one of the things that drew Leon to him, though he'd never admit it. "I need to go to the defenses."

"And I need to catch a traitor." Sebastian pulled on his shirt and did up the buttons. When he finished, they stood on

opposite sides of the room and stared at each other silently.

It was the most awkward few moments of Leon's life. He longed for it to end but had no idea how and found himself rooted to the spot, staring blankly at the man he had pined for for years.

Sebastian let out a snort of a laugh and shook his head. "Be careful out there, Hess."

And then he was gone.

Chapter Five

SEBASTIAN CLOSED the door behind him, his hand shaking on the knob, and walked as carefully as he could down the hall. His legs still felt like jelly. His whole body still wanted to melt into a pool of post-orgasmic goo.

He glanced around as he walked, not ready to see anyone yet, feeling like what he and Leon had just done must still be painted all over him, obvious for anyone to see. Well, there were a few smears of cum painted on his chest he hadn't managed to fully wipe off that he could feel drying, but no one could see those.

He looked down at himself to check, absurd as that was, and scowled. People could certainly see that his buttons were all one off, though. He ducked into a window alcove and behind some drapes to undo and redo them.

Just as he'd gotten the line of buttons undone and was starting to redo them back up, he heard a door open and close and then brisk heavy footsteps that he definitely recognized. Hess was coming this way. Despite what they'd just done, or rather, because of what they'd just done, Sebastian shrank back into the alcove corner.

He tucked himself safely out of sight behind the drapes, careful not to rustle them and give away his position. They had already said their incredibly awkward goodbye; Sebastian had no desire to redo it so soon. So he hid behind some curtains as Hess walked by with the taste of Hess's cum still on Sebastian's tongue.

Once he had passed, Sebastian couldn't help peeking out to watch his departing back.

He really was a very attractive man. Maybe not handsome as such, too stocky and utilitarian, but he had an intense presence and innate command that Sebastian had always found overpowering, even back when Hess was just another soldier.

Command. Sebastian shivered and sat down heavily on the ledge in the alcove. The man certainly had a way with commands. And he seemed to have a particular way of commanding Sebas—

Sebastian shook his head and then dropped it into his hands. There was no time for this. He could play he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not later, if they both survived this. And no, he wouldn't even play that. That was silly. Hess didn't love him. Hess...was confusing and probably confused.

Even if he had cried out Sebastian's name when he'd come as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

No, no, no.

Traitor. Invasion. Defense.

Sebastian pushed himself up to standing, then immediately sat back down as his knees gave out. He couldn't blame that on his orgasm, though. That was pure exhaustion. Days of living behind enemy lines at that summit, and then explosions, capture, interrogation, escape. Then a night of rest and more enemy lines, explosions, and escape. And now more enemies—these on their way and hidden behind *their* lines—probably explosions, and hopefully escape.

He was *tired*.

So tired.

The body he occupied was well-rested, and that helped, but it did nothing for the mental exhaustion or the ways his claws ached in his body's brain stem. He just wanted to sleep. Really sleep, not knock himself out to survive high-speed travel. But that was out of the question.

Sebastian braced himself, forced himself up again, and kept his feet this time. The Resistance needed him, his comrades needed him, and Hess needed him. And he never let them down.

He threw the curtains aside and strode out into the hallway and came face-to-face with the second-to-last person he was interested in seeing—too distracted mastering his exhaustion to have heard the footsteps.

Garrett lurched back as they almost collided, then looked Sebastian up and down and frowned. “Who are you and what are you doing up here?”

Sebastian considered playing himself off as a new recruit inspired to join the Resistance by the impending invasion. He could say he’d gotten lost in the snaking, half-hidden Kaston headquarters. He was here to find a traitor, and subtlety helped with that, plus he wouldn’t have to deal with the asshole’s bigotry.

But as much as Sebastian disliked Garrett, he was also certain he was not the traitor—too devoted to Hess—and he was loath to hide from him. So instead, he swept a hand up to his chest and dropped his mouth open in exaggerated hurt.

“Garrett, you wound me. Still? After all these years?”

Garrett’s confused expression gave way to disgust immediately, and his backwater rural accent came out thick in his sneering. “Ugh, of course. And what are you doing skulking around up here? Does Hess know you’re back?”

“I’m not skulking”—he’d been hiding, it was very different—“and I’ve already spoken with Hess.” And done a lot more. He briefly wondered what Garrett would think of that but never even considered sharing it. Far too intimate and, oddly, far too precious.

“And where is he? He’s not in his office.” Garrett pulled Sebastian away from his musings as he crossed his arms and loomed. He was tall and even taller than Sebastian’s current body, a fact he seemed to enjoy.

“He just left. Off to check the barricades.” Sebastian put a hand on his hip and raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you be there? Or are you planning on hiding at headquarters when the Klah’Eel get here?”

Garrett just sneered. “Hiding is your job, torvar.”

And then he pushed past Sebastian with a hard shoulder check, like the most stereotypical schoolyard bully, and went off down the hall in the direction Hess had gone.

Sebastian shot a glare at his back as he left and rolled his shoulder.

Colin and Maxwell would say Garrett was just afraid of him. And fine, he should be, but there were plenty of people afraid of him but not also mean to him. And there were plenty of people who had figured out they didn’t need to be afraid of him!

“Small-minded son of a bitch,” Sebastian muttered to himself as he left down the hallway in the opposite direction. Speaking of Colin and Maxwell, they should be around here somewhere if they weren’t already at the barricade. Sebastian’s stomach rumbled. Food should be around here somewhere too, and the mess was as good a place as any to start sniffing out a traitor among the men.

Unlike the Ralscoln capitol building, Sebastian knew the Kaston headquarters as well as his childhood home. He navigated quickly through it while there was no one to see him, but once he got out of the offices—mostly abandoned now that the war had actually started—there were more people around, and he modulated his walk and his speed.

Now he would be that confused recruit. New, desperate, and scared, but too full of put-on-a-brave-face-son-type masculinity to show it. Looking around as he got to the mess, there seemed to be a lot of those.

He eyed his comrades as he got into line and shuffled along the counter, having his tray filled with simple but good, hardy Tava fare: the kind of meal you served soldiers when it might be their last. Many of the people he recognized, all the

Resistance members who were still smiling, joking, and at ease, the people who had seen enough dangers not to be bothered now. But even more of the people were unfamiliar.

He spied Colin's dirty blond hair with a mental sag of relief and sidled over.

Colin was chatting with a woman Sebastian didn't recognize, but he looked up and gave Sebastian a friendly smile when Sebastian set his tray down. "Hello, have we met?"

"Once or twice, maybe." Sebastian shrugged and sat down on the bench beside him. He tapped Colin's foot three times under the table, and a sudden flash of realization lit his face before he quickly tempered it.

"No, we definitely have." Colin clapped Sebastian's shoulder, and the lies slid off his tongue. "I helped you at target practice the other day when your gun jammed."

"Right, that was you." Sebastian forced a smile that seemed befitting of the sort of new recruit who panicked when their gun jammed. It didn't feel right on this face, and now that Sebastian was paying attention, he noticed his hands had all the right callouses for frequent gun usage. Hopefully no one questioned his story too closely.

"Well, I'm Colin, and this is Sheila." Colin motioned to the woman across the table. "My cousin."

Sebastian abruptly paid more attention, pulling his focus away from stuffing boiled root vegetables into his mouth. Colin didn't mention family often, but Sebastian had always gotten the distinct impression it was because they were too important to him rather than nonexistent. He could relate to that.

"Nice to meet you, Sheila." Sebastian reached across the table and suddenly felt guilty that he had to give a fake name. Meeting his best friend's cousin, and he couldn't even properly introduce himself. "I'm Neumann."

"Nice to meet you too." She smiled, and it lit up her tired eyes in a way that almost hid the bags under them. "I don't

think I've seen you around before.”

“Are you around a lot?” Sebastian raised his eyebrows. That would surprise him, considering he didn't recognize her.

“She has been.” Colin nodded with a quick, suspicious look to Sebastian that broke his affable expression for a moment. “She joined up a couple months ago when we started planning to take Ralscoln. You wouldn't have been around, I don't think.”

The implication was that Neumann was new, but he and Colin knew it was because he had been too busy preparing for the attack on the summit in Northern Tava to have spent much time in Kaston. Sebastian shook his head. “No, I wouldn't have. What do you do?”

“Logistics mostly. Not a lot of physical strength in these arms.” She laughed and held up her right arm and flexed her bicep, which Sebastian had to admit was scrawny. She tapped her own temple. “Plenty of mental strength up here, though. And I've loved learning from Martha.”

“Do you work with her closely?”

Sheila perked up. “Oh, do you know her?”

Sebastian knew Martha Hyland better than most, and she knew him better than anyone in the Resistance, but he shook his head.

“Only heard of her. She's one of the founders, right?”

“Only one left,” Colin nodded grimly. “Her, Hilda—she died before my time, but I think Hess knew her—and Hilda's brother, Farlon. It's a shame you missed Farlon. He was a good man.”

Sebastian let the sadness hit him and occupy the ache in his chest Farlon's death had left. Then he pushed it away. “I've heard.”

“Martha's wonderful, though.” Sheila reached across and patted his hand, as though to make him feel better for having missed the Resistance's greats. “Brilliant and competent. I

have been working closely with her. Trying to build up Kaston's defenses as much as we can."

"Sheila's from Kaston." Colin pointed his fork at Sheila as he ate, a note of pride in his work. "Knows the city inside and out."

"That's a lucky break for the Resistance." Sebastian smiled at her. Knowledgeable of the city. In the Resistance's supply chain. Fairly new. Could it be that easy?

Colin suddenly grabbed his upper arm and spoke in a friendly, upbeat tone completely at odds with how hard he dug his fingers in. "You know, I just thought... We should grab you another gun. Maybe a different type that's less likely to jam."

"But I'm still eating! Can it wait?" Sebastian's stomach roared in protest as Colin tugged and pulled his fork, loaded with gravy-covered meat, away from his mouth.

"No, because we have to go to the barricade soon and the good guns might be gone."

Colin clearly wanted something and it wasn't to get a new gun. Usually Sebastian could accept that, but he really was starving. "No, Colin, seriously—"

"No, *Neumann*, seriously, come with me."

With a stubborn last-ditch effort at sustaining his meat suit and his sanity, Sebastian grabbed his plate and fork and carried them with him as Colin hauled him out of the mess hall. He shoveled more food into his mouth as they walked toward the armory, Colin's hand still on Sebastian's arm. No one seemed to understand that a torvar had as much bodily need for food and sleep as the next person.

"Alright, Sebastian, what was that?" Colin finally let him go when they got to an empty corner of the huge basement room they used as an armory. Sebastian glanced around to make sure no one could hear them, but Colin was at least mindful of his cover.

"What was what? I was being friendly with your cousin. Who, by the way, you've never mentioned before."

“You were not being friendly. You were being interrogative.”

“She didn’t notice.”

“I noticed.”

“Well, that’s because you know me. She doesn’t. Which is interesting.”

“It’s not interesting, Sebastian. You don’t know everyone.” A woman with a data tablet started to walk past them, and Colin grabbed a gun from a shelf. “This one here doesn’t hold quite as much ammo, but it’s real smooth and easy to reload so rookies like it—” he set it back on the shelf once the woman was passed. “Why were you interrogating my cousin? And why are you pretending to not be you?”

Sebastian pressed his lips together but restrained from waving his fork around as he talked as he normally would have. He quickly loaded the rest of the food in his mouth and set the plate aside as he chewed and swallowed before answering. “You know there’s only one reason I’d be hiding among our own men.”

“My cousin is not a traitor.” Colin jabbed his finger into Sebastian’s chest.

Sebastian gently pushed Colin’s hand back down. “I didn’t say she was. But Joan thinks someone is, and there isn’t a lot of time.”

“There’s no time.” Colin shook his head. “The Klah’Eel are just over the Kuval Ridge. We’ve seen the lights from their ships.”

Sebastian grimaced. “I know.”

“If Joan was worried about a traitor, you should have been here days ago, weeks ago!”

“I was a little busy starting this whole thing a week ago!”

“And where were you yesterday? Or the day before?”

“I”—Sebastian thought about his long trip to the factory and then lying in wait, seething about how he had wanted to be

here and how Hess had sent him out there instead—“I was doing something important.”

“Ugh, I know.” Colin sagged and scrubbed his hands over his face. Then he straightened, a tired and determined look in his eyes. “Well, where do we start?”

Sebastian smiled gratefully. Good old Colin. As solid a comrade as anyone could hope for. “Have people left to the defenses yet?”

“Some, but not most.” Colin glanced at a man with a data tablet and picked up a gun, turning it idly in his hands and pretending to study it. “We’re not expecting the attack for several hours, so most are here getting fed, getting supplied, getting ready, you know.”

“How are the food stores?”

Colin shrugged. “Fine, I haven’t heard anything, and I walked past one of the ration rooms yesterday, and it looked good. Maybe too full, if anything.” He frowned and squinted at the gun in his hand. “This is a shit piece of hardware, though.”

Sebastian leaned in next to him to get a better view. “Is it?”

“Yeah, look at this.” Colin passed him the gun and pointed to a line of rust and cracks. Then he turned back to a shelf and grabbed another one. “This whole rack is like that.”

“Interesting. Martha wouldn’t usually let something like that get past her.” Sebastian lifted the gun to his shoulder and peered down the sights at a blank wall. “Balance feels off too.”

“Maybe it’s just those.” Colin wandered off to a shelf a couple of racks over and picked up one of the guns. “These look fine.”

Sebastian went in the opposite direction, examining hardware as he went. They all looked fine too.

Colin came up behind him and looked over his shoulder at the perfectly suitable grenade Sebastian held in his hands. “Maybe that was just a bad box?”

“Maybe.” Sebastian set the grenade back and looked around the room. “There sure is a lot here, though.”

“Well, we did just start a war with an empire who specializes in war.” Colin grinned crookedly. “We had to stockpile to be ready.”

“Sure, but there’s a lot *here*.” Sebastian went to wave his hand about but caught himself at the last minute and settled for a more subdued, encompassing head nod. “In this room. In this building.”

Colin looked around as though just noticing how full it was. He was a good man but a trusting man. Maybe too trusting. “Maybe. A lot of it will be taken to the barricades, though, when we all head out.”

“I guess.” Sebastian wasn’t convinced, and he’d been doing this long enough—and nonstop since he started—to trust when it felt like he’d gotten his claws into something. “When exactly did Sheila join up?”

Colin’s eyes narrowed. “Sebastian.”

“Colin.” Sebastian returned. “Just answer the question.”

Colin was as committed to the cause as Sebastian, and he relented with a sigh. “Couple months ago. She’s always had a head for numbers, and she needed a job.”

“Why?”

“Because her husband died, Sebastian, and she’s got two little kids.”

“How did her husband die?”

Colin gaped at him for a second as though he couldn’t believe Sebastian was still pursuing this line of questioning, and Sebastian was reminded that Colin almost never saw him on a job. Time for an unpleasant reality check, then.

“Tell me how her husband died, Colin.”

“An old landmine.”

Sebastian grimaced, at least, and Colin nodded.

“Yeah. He wanted to get into farming. Sheila said he had a real green thumb.” Colin crossed his arms. “Bought some land off some guy for less than it was probably worth. Went out to decide what crops he wanted to try his hand at and was blown sky-high.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sebastian said honestly. “I suppose that made the Resistance all the more attractive?”

“Something like that.”

The landmines had been placed by the original invading Klah’Eel force decades ago. They’d mined the countryside on their ultimately unstoppable march to Ralscoln and then never bothered to clean up after themselves—partially from disorganization and a lack of capital, but partially, Sebastian was sure, because they just didn’t give a shit.

The Klah’Eel government the Resistance had toppled, with Governor Tesh at the top, had always insisted they were gathering the funds, the manpower, the technology, but they’d always dithered. Higher priorities had always come up, the funds had always evaporated in a cloud of corruption, and civilians had continued to be blown up in their own fields.

The Resistance had tried to help. They’d probably demined more of Southern Tava than the Klah’Eel ever had. And they’d lost more men to it as a result.

“Had she had an interest in the Resistance before that?”

“She’d supported me, if that counts?” Colin shrugged. “She was interested in raising her two kids and not much else beyond that.”

“Where are those kids now?”

“Here.”

“Here, here? In headquarters?”

Colin shook his head. “No, with one of our aunts on the city’s west side.”

“How much family do you have in Kaston?” Sebastian cocked his head. One cousin and yet another aunt. “Are you from Kaston?”

“Yes. I am.” Colin gritted his teeth, and Sebastian felt a little bad for prying. It was far out of line with their usual friendship, where they dealt with only what was in front of them, never behind or forward. “They’re all here.”

“I see.” That was some rotten luck. All his family here, in the first city to see combat with the Klah’Eel army in decades. In a city Hess said they could afford to lose...

Sebastian felt sick.

“What?” Colin grabbed his shoulder and shook until Sebastian met his eyes again. “Why do you look like that?”

“Just thinking about the war. I’m sorry.” Sebastian shook his head. And then kept pushing. “Why aren’t her kids here? Headquarters must be safer than some civilian house on the *west* side of all sides. And there are other kids here.”

A few rooms of them, in fact. Safe rooms were specifically set up for the families of Resistance members and supporters. Sebastian hadn’t checked on them since he’d arrived, but he assumed they were getting near capacity.

Colin scowled and crossed his arms. “Except it must not be safer if you’re here looking for a traitor, is it?”

“Yes, but she didn’t know that.” Sebastian didn’t catch himself before putting his hands on his hips, but he left them. All the better to say *unless she did* without actually saying it.

The look on Colin’s face told Sebastian he’d heard the unspoken words anyway. Still, he shook his head.

A bell in the room went off them, a sound they were both intimately familiar with.

“Sixty minutes.” Colin smiled grimly. The one-hour bell usually signaled when a team of Resistance soldiers would go out on an operation—sabotage, espionage, or some other aggressive action. They had never had to defend before. And Sebastian had never felt like he was running out of time before.

“There you are!” Sheila herself came in then, moving with quick, nervy movements. “I was wondering if you’d still be in

here.” She smiled at Sebastian. “Did you find a new gun?”

“Yeah. I was thinking this one felt good.” Sebastian held up one of the unbalanced and rusted rifles and studied Sheila’s face as her eyes flicked to it.

She blinked.

She knew. Sebastian was *sure* she knew.

“Wonderful.” She kept smiling anyway and then turned to Colin. “We need to head out.”

“We’ve still got an hour.” Colin pointed at the bell near the ceiling that had just gone off, but Sheila shook her head.

“Everyone else has an hour.” She walked forward and grabbed Colin’s wrist, and started tugging him out of the armory. “I need you to come with me to bring a truck of rations to the western barricade.”

Sebastian stepped smoothly in front of her, thankful for the breadth of Neumann’s shoulders that made it so easy to bar her from the door. “Surely you’ll get even more help if you just wait an hour.”

Sheila came up short before she ran into him. “I don’t need more help. Just someone to lift some boxes and hold a gun while I drive. Just in case.”

“I can lift boxes and hold a gun.” Sebastian motioned to his new—awful—gun. “Colin seems pretty important around here. He should probably help see the men off.”

Sheila’s hand tightened around Colin’s wrist so tightly the tips of her fingers went white. She was running from something. And the little frown on Colin’s face as he looked down at his wrist meant even he was starting to realize.

Sebastian glanced around the armory to make sure all the other logistics people had stepped out, sent some thanks to the universe for that, and then pulled the door behind him shut. He slid the deadbolt into place with the loudest clang he could manage, going for maximum effect. Then he turned back to Sheila. Her face paled, and she shrank back toward Colin.

“What do you know, Sheila?”

“Wh-wh-what do you mean?” Her mouth pinched as she tried to keep her lips stiff. Not a natural-born liar, then. Not by any means.

“You know what I mean.”

Sheila jerked back and looked up at Colin. “Colin. This man—”

“Doesn’t fuck around.” Colin shook his head. He set a hand gently on her shoulder and turned her to look at him. “What do you know?”

She stared up at him with wide eyes, then at Sebastian, and back at Colin. Her eyes started to shine, and a traitorous bit of guilt bloomed in Sebastian’s throat. The unpleasant feeling distracted him enough that he almost missed the expertly thrown groin kick coming straight up his A-frame.

Colin lunged. “Sheila!”

Sebastian managed to twist at the last second to take the blow along the meat of his inner thigh instead of straight into the Neumann family jewels. It hurt like a son of a gun, but not nearly as much as it could have.

Sheila tried to slip past him in the chaos, and she got her hands on the deadlock before Sebastian hauled her back. He threw her back into the room and into Colin’s arms, then advanced on her.

“Alright. Give it up,” he snarled. “Tell me what you know, or your two kids will be missing a dad *and* a mom.”

“Sebastian!” Colin stared at him, horror-struck, but Sebastian just snarled harder.

“There will be a lot more orphans if the Klah’Eel take Kaston.” Sebastian stuck a finger in Sheila’s face. “You think you’re the only Resistance soldier with children? There’s a whole bunker of them in the basement, so tell me, why aren’t yours with them?”

Sebastian had thought threatening her children would quell her—fragile as she seemed to be—but he had clearly

underestimated a mother's protective instinct. She drew herself up tall, and her eyes flashed, no longer glistening with tears.

She looked to the bell, and Sebastian couldn't help following her gaze for a moment even though the bell couldn't possibly tell him anything. It didn't have a timer. How long ago had it gone off? Time was so hard to track amid an argument.

Soldiers should be filling this room at any second.

And Sheila wasn't saying anything.

Fuck.

Sebastian had played it all wrong.

"Sheila." He dropped his hand and gentled his voice. "I know you're not the enemy. I know you're not a villain."

"And I'm not an idiot either." Sheila lifted her lip. "You're the torvar."

Sebastian nodded. "My name is Sebastian."

"It doesn't matter."

Then all three jumped at a sudden banging on the door behind Sebastian. "Hey! Who's in there? Unlock the door. We've all got to get our supplies!"

"The horned bastards are going to be here soon," supplied a second voice, followed by a chorus of aggressive agreement.

"Sheila, please, if you know something, we need to know it." Sebastian grabbed her shoulders. "There could still be time."

"There's not any time." She pushed him off and turned to Colin, clutching his shirt. "They promised to get out Janie and Alfie, and they said there'd be less violence if the Resistance was got out of the way. I had to!"

"You had to what?" Colin grabbed her wrist and shook her. "What did you do? What's going to happen?"

"I don't know, I just know I had to be out of here as soon as the bell rang. And instead, I came to get you."

Sebastian became aware of a faint hiss, and he waved them quiet. “Shut up. What is that?” But any sound he heard was drowned out by the banging on the door.

“That.” Colin pointed up at a ceiling corner, and Sebastian followed his finger to a vent. His heart stopped.

“Oh no, no, no, no.” Sebastian stumbled back against the door and got his fingers on the deadbolt to open it but stopped. A yellow gas issued out of the vent, billowing around itself and falling cloud-like into the room. The soldiers behind the door kept hammering.

“Shit, we have to get out.” Colin pushed Sheila ahead of him toward the door. But Sebastian kept himself planted firmly in front. “Sebastian, open the door!”

Sebastian shook his head. “No.”

“What the hell do you mean no?” Colin looked back at the gas filling the room and eddying around their feet. Then the hissing got louder, and they all looked up to see it streaming from the vent just a few arm’s lengths from their heads. “I don’t know what that is, but I don’t think it’s fucking good.”

“We can’t let it out,” Sebastian yelled. The gas was on him. It had a faintly sweet smell that was—disconcertingly—almost pleasant. “This room is supposed to be filled with people right now. That’s who they’re hoping to get. We can’t let it out.”

“Sebastian!”

Sebastian had never heard Colin’s voice that panicked, but he ignored it and instead banged on the door behind him.

“Get out,” he screamed through the heavy metal, desperately hoping they would hear him. He looked down, and his stomach dropped to see the gas slipping out the gap under the door and into the hallway...where all their men were. He slammed his fist against the door. “Get out of the hall! It’s a trap! Run! It’s a trap!”

“Move!” Colin’s grabbed Sebastian’s shoulders and yanked, but Sebastian held on to him. The momentum took them both spinning away from the door. Sebastian’s grip

slipped on Colin's sweat-slicked skin, and Sebastian realized his own body was also sweating profusely.

His heart hammered, and his lungs heaved, but his mind, safely encapsulated in his true torvar form, stayed his own.

“Colin, it's okay. It's okay!” Sebastian tried to force Colin's wild eyes to meet his own. “The gas won't hurt you. It's okay! It's just fear, Colin. It doesn't mean anything.”

“Get out of my way!” Colin swung at Sebastian, and Sebastian had to let go to dodge the blow.

He'd lost hold of Colin, and he'd lost track of Sheila. Just as Sebastian remembered about her, she opened the door to the armory, and it swung open and crushed her behind it. A mass of Resistance soldiers rushed in, screaming and yelling in a frenzy.

A wall of bodies slammed into him and knocked him to the ground, and Sebastian just managed to roll behind a shelf before he was trampled.

The gas was everywhere, blinding him and suffocating him with its sickly-sweet smell. His heart raced, and the cacophony of screaming and begging and shrieking roared in his ears. He almost pulled his claws out of Neumann's brain, the sensory overload too much, but to leave his body lying prone would be a death sentence.

He had to get out.

These people were his friends, but these people weren't themselves.

He scrambled around the shelf and toward a door and came face-to-face with a semi-automatic rifle. He ducked, and a spray of bullets soared over his head. The gunshots rang in his ears. Bodies fell behind him, and his foot slipped on blood.

People pushing in and out clogged the door. He shoved and pushed and wriggled, trying to ignore the sound of gunfire and battle and the certainty that he would feel a line of bullets tearing across his back at any second.

And then a bloodcurdling chorus of screams issued on instinct, over the fear that had a hold of them all.

“Grenade!”

LEON WOULD NEVER ADMIT to how eager he was to get out of the land cruiser at the western barricade. It wasn't a long drive—the streets were near empty in anticipation of the coming assault—but the stretch of sitting in tense silence with Captain Mal'ik had been near unbearable. He had never felt quite so inadequate in all his life, and he had been feeling inadequate for as long as he could remember.

He had also never felt so exposed, tensing up every time Mal'ik's nostrils flared, certain that the klah'eel smelled Sebastian and sex on him.

As soon as Leon's feet hit the ground, he slammed the door shut behind him and snapped at the guard that had greeted them. “Where's Hyland?”

The man's eyes widened, and he took a step back. He pointed to an apartment block just in front of them. “T-top of that building, sir.”

Leon nodded and made for the building without bothering to orient Mal'ik. The man probably already knew the city from the time he had *invaded* it. He would figure out how to make himself useful.

Martha Hyland, who half the Resistance called Martha as though she was a kindly great-aunt, was standing at a window with a data tablet in her hands when Leon found her. She was alone, staring into the distance and idly tapping her finger on the edge of her tablet. Leon closed the door behind him and let some of the tension fall out of his shoulders with a sigh.

She turned at the sound and smiled. “Leon. I was wondering when you'd get here.”

“Quick as I could.” Leon came to stand by the window next to her and looked out to Kuval Ridge. He couldn't see the

Klah'Eel buildup directly, but he could see the flicker of lights against the low clouds.

"I don't doubt it." Martha brought up a few things on her tablet and handed it to him. "We're in a good position."

Leon blinked a few times and forced his tired eyes to absorb all the numbers and lines in front of them. Supply caches, amounts, locations, and estimates for how long they'd hold out. Martha Hyland was the head of operations for the Resistance and had been since the Resistance was only three people. They'd have never grown to be what they were without her.

He handed the tablet back. "Are we really?"

"As best we could be. Except for the obvious."

"The traitor." Leon squeezed his eyes shut, allowing himself to show a weakness he'd never shown to anyone except the woman who had fed and clothed him when he was nothing but a war orphan. "Farlon would have never had a traitor at a time like this."

"Farlon never managed to see a time like this," Martha said with enough sharpness to make him open his eyes. "He dreamed about it plenty, and he knew you could get us there. And here we are."

"Here we are," Leon repeated with a slow nod. "What are our weaknesses?"

"We've managed to get more supplies into Kaston than I thought we would." Martha set her tablet down and looked out across the strip of city that could be seen from the western-facing window. "The numbers say we have enough to withstand a siege for a week at least, which buys us not an insignificant amount of time."

"But?"

"But we haven't distributed it well, and most of it is still sitting at headquarters." Martha shook her head. "Something's been gumming up our plans to strategically place caches throughout the city. Trucks were not where they needed to be

when they needed to be there, not having the fuel, or going to the wrong place.”

“The traitor.”

“If there *is* a traitor.” Martha raised a finger. “We don’t know for certain. Maybe it’s just dumb luck.”

Leon sighed and massaged his temples. “I should have brought Sebastian here sooner. He’s got a nose for that sort of thing.” He had been questioning the decision to send Sebastian to the factory from the second he made it, the what-ifs running round and round in his mind.

But Martha shook her head. “From what I hear of it, all the most perfectly located rations in the world wouldn’t help us survive a siege if that gas could be dropped on the whole city. We wouldn’t last a day.”

“I know.” Leon did know. He *did*. But knowing things never seemed to make them feel any better. “He’s here now. At headquarters, actually.”

Maybe even with the taste of Leon still on his tongue. Leon hurriedly shoved and kicked that thought aside. What an inappropriate time to think it.

“That reminds me, the Ralsdi family is moving their own headquarters back to Ralscoln.”

Leon blinked at the non sequitur and took a moment to rearrange his mind out of its war state and into its political one. “That’s good.”

“It is good. Puts us in a much stronger position when we get to the negotiating table.” Martha nodded decisively, and Leon could already see her working out the back-and-forth of peace talks they were a few battles out from ever seeing.

Still, the Ralsdi family—the founding family of Ralscoln—lent them some legitimacy if they publicly recognized the Resistance’s governance of the city. Publicly being the key word. They had been supporters of the Resistance for as long as Leon had been aware of the shadow network of donors and allies that kept the Resistance afloat. When the youngest Ralsdi son had been killed by Klah’Eel soldiers in a skirmish,

they seized the opportunity to become more vocal about their dislike of the Klah'Eel occupation.

But Leon couldn't even think about that right now. He was still obsessed with counting their bullets and bandages, hoping it would be enough.

"Is there anything else I should know?" Leon asked before turning to leave.

"Movement." Martha stiffened, eyes still trained out the window.

Leon turned back with a frown. "What?"

"Movement." Martha raised a hand and pointed out the window.

Leon turned to it fully and braced his hands on the ledge.

The lights reflecting off the low cloud had flared and brightened, flashing different colors. Ships rose over the ridge.

"Shit," Leon swore just as sirens screamed to life in the streets below him and on the rooftops overhead.

For a moment, he couldn't breathe.

He remembered those sirens. They hadn't been there when the Klah'Eel had first invaded, but they'd been erected quickly in all cities and towns within the first few days. Too many nights to count in those first couple of years he had spent running, hiding, and fitting his small body into any hole of shelter he could find while those shrieked in the air.

He hadn't heard them since.

"Leon!" Martha's hand grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around broke him out of his cold-sweat-soaked reverie.

Suddenly he was back, no longer the terrified child but the man that child had grown into.

"Get somewhere safe." Leon grabbed her wrist and squeezed it in the closest thing to an embrace he had time to give. "Manage the supplies."

Then he took off back to the stairs and took them in leaps and bounds up to the roof.

Tables with rifles, radios, and ammunition had been set up around the huge, flat area. Floodlights, off for now, and flags, furled around heavy poles, lay in the center. Captain Mal'ik stood at the roof's edge and looked into the maze of streets below. Kaston had arisen organically as settlers had streamed in, and the streets and buildings formed anything but a sensible grid.

“Anti-aircraft?” Leon demanded of the first man to approach him. Leon recognized him, knew he was experienced, and that he'd led many of their operations. But if Leon had ever known his name, it escaped him now, and he remembered Mal'ik's dismissive scoff with a twist of frustration.

“All accounted for.” The man pointed to all the surrounding roofs and the large, manned, anti-aircraft and missile guns—weapons that had taken the Resistance years and years to procure—set up on each one. They would keep this command site as safe as possible while they directed the ground fighting below and would hopefully stymie any of the Klah'Eel's observational ships or drones.

“Radio.” Leon held out his hand, and the man quickly placed his own radio into it.

“It's already tuned to command frequency.”

“Report,” Leon barked into it as he strode to the western corner of the roof, and everything fell away.

All the chronic worries—the certainty of his own inadequacy, the incessant what-ifs and questioning ever spinning around his mind—fell away like nothing. It sloughed off and left him in command, confident and powerful.

He lost himself then to the rhythm of the fight, flush with the energy of it like he had been when they'd taken back Ralscoln. He paced around the roof, surveying the defenses and the men and shouting down words of strength and encouragement to them.

“This is your fight!”

“This is your home!”

“This is your planet and the planet of your families!”

Things that he believed down to his very bones.

The tension between him and Mal’ik blew away like smoke, and they circled back around to each other constantly, putting their heads together and comparing and dissecting what they saw, planning ahead.

“The barricades are weakest on the eastern side.”

“But if the enemy gets there, they’ll have been fortified by the men that fell back.”

“The machine guns have the best angles on Tule Street.”

“We’ll funnel them through there.”

But it wasn’t until they could make out the lights of land cruisers speeding toward them just beyond the bulk of the city and the lumbering shapes of armored vehicles that they were convinced of what was about to happen. And it wasn’t until the whine of an incoming missile, then the deafening explosion, and the blinding firework as one of the anti-aircraft guns shot it out of the sky that they were certain.

Mal’ik straightened up first, dropping the arm he’d lifted to shield his eyes. “The attack’s coming from the west.”

“Good to guess right about some things.” Leon turned to the man who had given him the radio and shouted to be heard among the din of battle. “Get me a line to headquarters.”

“Have them send everything they’ve g—” Mal’ik’s words were cut off by another missile being shot out of the sky, but this one was too low to be safe. The debris rained down into Tule Street, and Mal’ik and Leon raced over to that edge of their roof, though Tule Street was still a block over.

Leon raised his radio to his lips first. “What’s happened?”

A long, crackling pause in which Leon’s heart rate ratcheted up another notch, and then, “Nothing! We’re fine. No casualties.”

“Thank god.” Leon dropped his radio and shouted back to the man in the center of the roof. “Where’s that line to headquarters?”

The man looked up from his data tablet with wide eyes, a hand over his earpiece. “They’re not responding!”

“What?” Leon stormed over as though his presence might force them to pick up. “What do you mean?”

“The connection’s gone through”—the man turned the screen toward Leon before he could snatch it away to show him the green connected readout—“but they’re just not responding.”

“Why—”

A loud drone filled the air as a low-surface ship swung toward their position. Leon threw his belly to the ground, jarring his arms on the hard surface. Then the rattle of gunfire drowned out the sound of the ship, and it sped off, repelled by their defenses. For now.

Mal’ik was at his side in an instant, hauling him back to his feet. “What’s their ETA?”

“We don’t have one!” Leon barked back, vibrating with frustration.

Mal’ik opened his mouth, probably to express the same incredulous fury Leon felt, when the door to the roof opened and Martha ran out.

“Headquarters is captured!”

The world slowed. Martha raced toward him, but the seconds between when those words left her mouth and when she grabbed his arm stretched out infinitely. That couldn’t be. Not captured, not yet. Under assault, maybe. Undersupplied, sure. Going to get here late, even. But captured? Without sending any vehicles, without sending any men?

“We need to evacuate!” Martha shook him with both hands, and time slammed into Leon again.

He knocked her arms off him. “What are you talking about?”

“We’ve just started!” Mal’ik’s own denial layered over Leon’s. “We haven’t even lost a man yet.”

Martha rounded on him. “And we’ve lost everyone at headquarters!” She turned back to Leon. “Or nearly, at least. One runner got out to warn us. He’s on the first floor.”

Leon left them both and ran for the stairs. He catapulted himself down them and into the building’s lobby. “Where’s the man from headquarters?”

“Here, sir!” A young man, barely old enough to have been accepted into the ranks, pushed himself from the wall and limped toward him. He had a gash in his left thigh and was as pale as the white wall behind him.

“What happened?” Leon demanded, striding over to him.

“I think it was a gas attack, sir.” The boy did his best to stand up straight, and he didn’t flinch when he looked into Leon’s eyes. “When we reported to the armory, the door was locked. We banged on it, but I don’t think anyone answered. And then this yellow gas started coming out from under it. Then the door opened, and”—the boy’s face crumpled—“and it was the worst thing in the world.” The boy swayed.

Mal’ik strode from the stairs and grabbed his shoulder. “Ethan.” Mal’ik turned the boy to look into his face, and Leon realized with a start it was the young man Mal’ik had embraced down in the alley. “What was it? What did it do?”

“I don’t know.” The boy shook his head. “I don’t know, but it was terrifying. And everyone was going crazy. And people shot each other. And some of the grenades went off. I was still in the hall, and I ran.”

“Who else ran?” Leon didn’t dare touch the boy with Mal’ik’s big, protective hands on his shoulders, but he stepped into the boy’s line of sight. “Who else got out?”

“Not many.” The boy swallowed. “I nearly ran right into a squad of Klah’Eel just when I got out. They shot at me.” He looked down at his wounded leg, a mass of dried blood and singed fabric. “They mostly missed.”

“They could have fought back.” Leon spun to face Martha, who stood at the base of the stairs with a stern expression. “They could be holding headquarters.”

“They’re not.” Her tone was brutal and final. “They’re not responding to hails and”—she jabbed a finger upward at the roof they had just come from—“you can see Klah’Eel ships hovering over the building.”

Leon turned to Mal’ik, and Mal’ik met his look grimly. Leon’s heart convulsed. If even Mal’ik thought it was a lost cause, then it was. His hands shaking and trying to hide it, Leon turned to the soldiers gathered around their little tableau.

“Call the retreat.” His voice came out as an unimpressive rasp, and he swallowed and tried again. “Call the retreat! Every block within a six-block radius of here needs to be cleared of all our men and women. Get everyone to the evacuation ships and tell the roof gunners to cover and follow them.”

“And get the gunships in the air first,” Martha added before anyone dispersed. “They need to cover the evacuation ships and prevent any fire from falling on civilian structures. The Klah’Eel won’t care if they take out the people of Kaston while taking us down, but we will.”

As everyone left, Leon moved on with an overwhelming instinct toward the door. Martha and Mal’ik followed him, but when he broke toward the land cruiser still sitting in the street from when they drove up, Martha caught his arm.

“Where are you going?”

Leon ripped his arm away. “Headquarters.”

With a snarl, Martha grabbed his arm again and wrenched him around. “It’s gone, Leon. They’re dead or captured—”

“Not yet!” Leon snapped. “Sebastian wouldn’t be yet!”

Martha’s mouth fell open, and her grip loosened.

Leon didn’t care what he’d just said or what he’d revealed. He spun and ran for the cruiser.

He thought he'd been ready to fly away from Kaston and leave it burning behind him with too many of his men in it, and maybe he still was, but he hadn't conceived of leaving Sebastian behind to burn with it. The possibility had never entered his mind. Leon had never thought of Sebastian as in danger. Sebastian only ever *was* danger.

But now Sebastian was trapped in a doomed building with klah'eel with guns and ships circling around him, and it was all Leon's fault.

What had he done, what had he done, what had he done?

Leon skidded to a halt in front of the cruiser, then slammed into the side of it as a weight hit him from behind.

"Do not get into that vehicle, Hess." Mal'ik's hard voice cut through Leon's dizziness from his impact with the cruiser, and Leon twisted and lashed out to unpin himself.

"I have to! He's still back there." Leon managed to get an arm between them and bring an elbow up under Mal'ik's jaw. He had to fucking get back to Sebastian.

Mal'ik grunted and fell back, but with the awkward angle, Leon hadn't been able to get enough force to knock him out of the fight. "He was gassed, Hess."

"He doesn't go down that easy." Leon itched to take the inch of space he had to try to get into the cruiser again. The seconds ticked away and away, and Sebastian's chances went with them, but if he let his guard down even the slightest bit, Mal'ik would be on him. "He's still fighting and I can't leave him back there."

"You have to!" Mal'ik crouched low with his hands up, side-stepping this way and that to find an opening. "You can't be caught here, Hess. You're too important—"

"He's too important!" Leon yelled, his voice rising and his hands shaking. His cold sweat made him shiver. "And I left him there. I brought him to a doomed town, and then I left him, and I can't leave him—"

Mal'ik fainted left and charged right, and Leon was ready. He lowered his shoulder and planted it into Mal'ik's chest, not

willing to dodge out of the way and farther from the cruiser's door. The shock of the impact jittered through his smaller frame, but he still managed to cock an arm back and land a solid uppercut to Mal'ik's core before Mal'ik locked him in a vice-like grip.

"Hess, look at your men," Mal'ik snarled in his ear as he clamped his strong arms around Leon in a painfully tight hold, pinning his limbs to his body, too close for Leon to get another strike in. His metal arm dug into Leon's side, pressing bruises into his ribs. "Look."

Leon struggled, unseeing and intent only on getting back. Sebastian was dying. Sebastian needed him. Slowly, inexorably, Mal'ik squeezed so tight, Leon's lungs started to collapse. Leon saw stars, and his vision closed in.

When he finally went limp, Mal'ik loosened his hold, and Leon gulped in a desperate breath. When his vision cleared, he looked beyond them.

His soldiers stared at them with wide eyes. Confusion and muttering rushed between them. More soldiers ran out of the alleyways and stopped at the sight of the scene. Martha snapped at them to move to the evacuation ships, but they didn't answer to her; they answered to him.

"You are making a scene," Mal'ik growled firmly but quietly and almost kindly. "They are watching you to figure out what to do."

Leon let out a shuddering breath, and his core went cold and dark. He opened his mouth as his world crashed in on itself. "They need to leave. We all need to leave."

"That's right."

Mal'ik let him go, and Leon stepped out toward his men with his shoulders back and his head held high as though he hadn't just been in a fistfight with their new klah'eel captain and still had the blood oozing from his split lip to show for it.

"To the evacuation ships! Now! Go!" Leon jabbed one finger toward Martha and waved with the other hand. "Follow Hyland! Go now!"

Leon allowed himself one quick thought of Sebastian: a frozen image of him with a cocked hip and confident smirk—all his many bodies rapidly changing in and out, but Sebastian always the same—then pushed him resolutely away.

He and Mal'ik ran the evacuation of their post with a few scattered reports of evacuations at the other barricades. The old ships they'd procured and hoped to never have to use groaned under the weight of the soldiers crammed into them, two, sometimes three times the licensed capacity, but they all took off.

Mal'ik, Martha, and Leon slid into place in the last ship to leave their base among the gunners who had stayed to cover the retreat, the sounds of air battles still raging around them. The small handful of gunships they had was doing magnificently, but the Klah'Eel ships were still sweeping closer and closer.

“You should have been on the first one,” Martha growled at him as they lifted from the ground faster than was safe, with the ship shaking. He was pressed against the hull, Mal'ik to one side of him and Martha to the other, neither apparently willing to let him out of their sight again.

“I was *not* going to be the first person to abandon my post.” Leon leveled a glare at her. “I had to see at least some of my men out.”

Even if one in particular was left behind...

“This is the ship most likely to be shot down, and if you go down with it—”

“He's on a ship, Martha. Let him be.” Mal'ik came to Leon's rescue, and while Leon *hated* being defended like that as though he were a fragile child, he *felt* fucking fragile, and he didn't need Martha's scolding.

Martha pressed her lips so tightly together Leon knew another scolding was in his future, but at least it wouldn't be at this moment. Finally, she looked away, over the heads of their men and out one of the small windows at Kaston's lights as they sped over it, low and fast.

It didn't matter. There was nothing Martha could say that Leon was not already berating himself with.

Fool.

Overly emotional fool.

Foolish to the point of treacherous.

Was that what putting the cause first looked like? Was that what putting their mission, their work, and his leadership first looked like? Brawling with a comrade so that he could throw himself away for one man? He had prioritized one man over all of them, and the shame of it clogged his throat with bitterness.

He had always known Sebastian was dangerous for him. This was why he had always hated how Sebastian made him feel, the strength of it, the pull. And when they had been together... Leon squeezed his eyes shut. Whether to try to hold the memory back or to savor it more clearly, he wasn't sure. The bright eagerness in Sebastian's eyes, the give and obedience, the feelings of confidence and certainty and tenderness... He should have known something that felt so indescribably good would be so terrible for him.

He opened his eyes and met the gaze of one of his men. The slightly built man looked at him with quizzical eyes through rectangular glasses. The doctor. M...something. M something, Max something? Leon couldn't remember. He remembered he was damn good at his job, though. And had stayed until the last ship despite not at all having the look of a fighter.

Leon nodded at him respectfully, and the man nodded quickly back and then looked away. Leon dragged his eyes around to the rest of them. None of them seemed to be looking at him or pointedly not looking at him. He wondered how much they had seen of his display, and he wondered what the men who had seen it would tell the others.

There were a few ways it could be spun: that he was a heartsick fool that cared only about his single torvar soldier was one, but that he had been as mad with fury and grief over

their loss and the loss of their men as any of them was another. And either way, he had seen reason—had had to see it with Mal'ik's arm around his neck, but he had seen it either way.

But he doubted anyone had the energy or the inclination to analyze such things right now. Least of all him.

They soared out of Kaston's perimeter, the sounds of gunfire and explosions fading away, their ship steady as it ceased evasive maneuverers. Leaving Kaston to the Klah'Eel before they'd even gotten a chance to defend it.

Chapter Six

THE MOOD of their escape ship had lifted by the time they flew over Ralscoln. They had all sat quietly with their feelings enough, and while the loss was discouraging, the evacuation had mostly been a success. The Klah'Eel were advancing, and they had lost Kaston, but they had not lost so very many men. Losing the men at Kaston's headquarters was a blow but not a death knell.

If only Leon could get his chest to understand that. It still felt as tight as when Mal'ik had been crushing him whenever he thought of Sebastian. Which had been the whole damn flight.

They landed in the capitol's courtyard with a soft thud, and the doors hissed open. Squished to the side as they were, Leon, Martha, and Mal'ik let most of the men out before following them in single file.

The setting sun blinded Leon for just a moment as he stepped out, and then his vision cleared, and he saw Joan and Oliver Turner standing under the arcade in front of him. Joan looked grim, but that was to be expected, and Turner looked as though he was carved from marble.

As Leon watched, though, he saw Turner's whole body twitch, and then he started striding over imperiously. For a moment, Leon was taken aback, being advanced on in such a way, but then Mal'ik brushed past him. Turner's proud stride broke into a run, his face collapsed into utter relief, and he flung himself into Mal'ik's arms.

Mal'ik wrapped his arms around him, and Turner all but disappeared into his bulk.

"I'm fine. I'm—"

"I know you're fine." Turner's snap could barely be heard, muffled as it was in Mal'ik's chest. "I can see you're fine. I just—"

Turner cut himself off with an angry sound, and Mal'ik chuckled and kissed the top of his head. He whispered into Turner's ear, and it was only because Leon was still so close, frozen to the spot, that he could hear what he said. "I love you too."

Leon watched them with an empty, sinking feeling that flared into something hot and angry.

As soon as he realized that burning feeling was jealousy, he spun on his heel and stormed away. What a stupid feeling. And besides, even if he and Sebastian *were* together, Sebastian would never fling himself into Leon's arms like a damsel like Turner had done. Ridiculous.

Leon's steps faltered, and he nearly fell to the ground before catching himself against the wall.

Sebastian wasn't going to fling himself anywhere because he....

Leon stared down, unseeing at the elegant molding along the bottom of the wall. Sebastian couldn't be dead. Not dead, not Sebastian, not after everything he'd done and everywhere Leon had sent him. One mistake by Leon and he was *dead*?

No, he was only—

"Hess, we should talk." Joan's voice broke into Leon's spiraling thoughts, and he straightened up quickly and turned to her. She closed her mouth as soon as she saw him and frowned. "But maybe you should get some rest first."

"What do we need to talk about, Joan?"

"Just...the usual." She continued to hesitate, and Leon turned to face her fully with the sternest glare he could

manage. She sighed. “I need confirmation on which city to fall back to next.”

“Libha. But confirm with Captain Mal’ik as well. Have you found a scientist for us yet? For the gas?”

“I think we’ve about got the Carta Cartel to agree to a sit down with us. They’re considering lending us one of theirs.” Joan dropped her data tablet to her side and bit her lip. “Is that what happened at Kaston? The gas?”

“It looks that way.”

“I thought Sebastian—”

“He did,” Leon assured her with a sharp nod, not allowing for a second the idea that Sebastian had failed in a mission. “But it took him a day to get there. Some got out before he got in. Let’s hope we’ve seen it all.”

Joan took a deep breath and nodded, then backed away. “I’ll let you rest.”

Leon didn’t argue and started down the hall again to his quarters on the most direct route he knew in this twisting, still unfamiliar building. Resting seemed like an impossible task, but he desperately wanted to be alone.

He picked up his pace as he got closer to his rooms, not wanting to be waylaid so close to sanctuary. When he finally pulled the door open and closed it behind him, he let out a deep sigh. The room was small and unfamiliar—some office of some low-level bureaucrat that the Resistance had stuffed a cot into—but it was full of familiar things: his own blankets and pillow, his chest of clothes, a few pictures of him with Martha, Hilda, Garrett, some lost comrades, and Farlon. His muscles loosened. His bones settled.

He dragged himself over to a chair by the window that overlooked the courtyard. The sun had just set, leaving the sky still smears of red and orange, and Leon deemed that plenty enough light and didn’t turn on his desk lamp or the overhead.

A room of his own.

Leon never took the luxury for granted, but he didn't know if he could ever give it up. A lifetime spent in bunkers and barracks and camps was not a life that had a lot of privacy or peace. And while Leon still didn't have much peace in his life, at least he got a few pockets here and there. And at least now he could fall to pieces in the privacy of his own four walls.

So Leon put his head in his hands and let it all hit him. He let the memories, the feelings he'd suppressed and the feelings he hadn't, shudder through him again. The fear. The chaos. The faces of his men—brave, scared, determined, trusting. The sounds of their guns booming, the sounds of the Klah'Eel's.

And then the crushing news of defeat out of nowhere, unprepared for, shocking.

The loss of Kaston. The loss of all those men. And the loss itself. Defeat as the very first outcome of this war *he* had started.

Sebastian.

Leon stood, kicked his boots off, and took off his clothes. The sun had faded, but the light pollution from Ralscoln and the floodlights and spotlights they had in the courtyard lit his small room bright enough. He opened the door to the tiny bathroom. It didn't have a shower, but it had a sink, and right now, Leon would rather rub himself down with a cold, wet towel than go through the public army showers they'd rigged up on the lower levels.

Leon had made the wrong call with Sebastian every step of the way.

At every decision point he'd come to in his relationship with that man, he had chosen wrongly.

First, to avoid him.

Then, unable to do that, to hold him at arm's distance—not near as close as he wanted but too close to nullify his feelings.

And then to be dismissive and cruel, to lash out just because he didn't know how else to keep his feelings in.

He could have been kind or—god forbid—honest. Would it have been so terrible for Sebastian to know what Leon thought of him? For Sebastian to know that Leon thought him awe-inspiring, captivating, and terrifyingly competent? Leon chuckled grimly at that as he wiped some water from his face. It seemed ridiculous now because Leon knew Sebastian would have loved to know that.

Sebastian may not—certainly wouldn't have—returned his feelings, but he would have still loved to know that someone thought that of him, eager to please as he was.

And when Leon's feelings, or some twisted version of them, at least, finally had come out, he could have chosen to be kind and honest. Kind and honest but still firm in his duty to the Resistance first and above all else. Instead, he'd been domineering and physical and had *still* fucked up as a leader at the last second.

Every. Wrong. Decision.

He was a hopeless and inadequate disaster, and Farlon should have chosen someone else.

Leon threw the now filthy towel he'd used to clean himself into a corner and stalked back into his room. He pulled on a pair of pants and his favorite threadbare shirt and sat next to the window again.

After a moment, he pulled out his data tablet and opened up Farlon's speech—*their* speech.

Farlon had worked on the speech for as long as Leon had known him. Leon could remember sitting in bunkers and hollowed-out buildings and in the holes in the ground between operations while Farlon read it to him aloud, trying out the phrases and the words and the intonation. At first, Leon had just listened and learned, but as he got older, he began to give opinions and feedback, and Farlon listened to him and adjusted the words and read them back to him.

The victory speech.

The speech Farlon would give when they finally drove out the Klah'Eel, that now he never would. It had changed over

the many years as the invasion ended, the occupation dragged on, and the situation became more hopeless. But Farlon had never stopped working on it until the day he'd caught half a bomb's shrapnel.

It was Leon's speech now, Farlon had told him as he lay dying a slow death in a Resistance hideout. It was Leon's speech to write and give for both of them.

Leon read through the words again and his latest additions recounting the capture of Ralscoln. Then with a heavier heart, he set about adjusting it to include the loss of Kaston. He wrote and tweaked and rewrote and read quietly out loud to himself in the harsh artificial light from the courtyard as the night dragged on.

SEBASTIAN LINGERED.

He leaned behind a column of the arcade, just out of the sight of the guards standing in front of the capitol building. The great entrance blurred in front of his eyes, and he tried to blink it clear again.

God, he hoped that building was real.

He hoped he wasn't having some beautiful hallucination while he lay rotting and dying and hiding in a crumbling shelter in Kaston.

If it was a beautiful hallucination, it was prolonged and elaborate.

It encompassed the day he had spent hiding from the invading Klah'Eel and the desperate night-time escape out of the city. Then the next day hiding in the field, and the night picking his way through crops hoping to god he didn't hear the tell-tale click of a landmine. And finally, stealing a ship to race back to Ralscoln but not before he'd caught a gatlung in the gut from one of the guards in the hangar he'd infiltrated.

He winced as he dragged himself around the column. Yep, that gatlung gash was definitely still there. And definitely still

bleeding, judging by the warmth still trickling between his fingers.

He'd spent the flight trying to hold his guts in, but here he was, goddammit. He was not hallucinating.

"Oh, please don't shoot me," he muttered as he stepped out of the shadow of the arcade and started across the courtyard. The sun had set, and the white floodlights drowned out the half-moon hanging over the capitol building and threw everything into sharp and unforgiving relief. The guards saw him instantly and raised their weapons.

"Don't—" Sebastian's voice broke as he tried to raise it, his throat hoarse and dry and his stomach throbbing. He wanted to raise his hands, but the effort felt insurmountable, and to uncurl his body from around his wound felt like it would stretch it open and rip him in two.

"Freeze! Identify yourself."

Sebastian stopped. That wasn't hard; it was harder to keep going. He swayed there in the center of the courtyard. He was still in Neumann, and almost no one had ever seen Neumann before. He licked his dry lips. He wished they'd come closer. He didn't think he could speak loud enough for them to hear him from here.

He opened his mouth and braced for the loudest sound he could manage, but then the heavy doors opened, and a figure stormed out.

Sebastian blinked in confusion. The lights in his eyes made it hard to see, and his fuzzy, blood-starved brain struggled with every new concept.

Then the figure rushed down the stairs and past the barricade, and Sebastian's knees went weak with relief.

"Hess."

His legs gave out completely, and his knees hit the flagstones with a terrible crack, but then Hess was there, grabbing his arms before he could fall face-first into the ground.

“Hess.”

“Oh, thank god.” Hess pulled him to his chest. “Sebastian, thank god.”

Sebastian didn't bother with words. He didn't even bother to hold himself up anymore. He just let himself collapse against Hess's broad chest. He'd done it. He'd made it. He was done.

Pain lanced through his stomach to remind him that he was hardly out of the woods yet. He clenched his teeth against it, but he must have let out a whimper because Hess pushed him back and took a hard look at him.

Sebastian forced himself to pull his hand away from his stomach, but he didn't dare look at it. “I—”

“Shut up.” Hess snapped. Then he swept Sebastian into his arms and lifted him from the ground. “Get the doctor. Now!”

Hess carried him across the courtyard, not quite as though he weighed nothing but with purpose and speed. When the guards didn't react right away, he barked at one again, and the guard took off running.

Sebastian managed a hum of agreement and a mumbled, “Doctor would be good.”

Hess shot him a scowl and growled down at him. “Shut up. Stop talking.”

For some strange reason, probably blood loss and fever delirium, Sebastian giggled at that. It had never felt so nice to be told to shut up and stop talking. People weren't usually holding him when they said that, cradling him in their arms and taking steps two at a time. Hess glanced at him in astonishment, and that just made Sebastian giggle more.

“Get the doctor here *now*,” Hess roared over his shoulder. Were there people there that Sebastian couldn't see? Or was Hess just shouting into the building, assuming someone would eventually do his bidding? It was probably a safe assumption if he was.

They stopped in the middle of a hall, and Hess looked over his shoulder. “Open this door.”

A hand reached around Sebastian and turned the knob, and Hess kicked it open. So there were other peop—

Sebastian let out a short scream when Hess laid him on the bed and his wound pulled.

“Fuck.” Hess reached for him again, but Sebastian twitched away instinctively.

“I’m fine.” Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut as the pain faded back, then sank into the beautifully soft mattress with a groan. “I’m fine. Oh, that feels good.”

Dangerously good, perhaps. Like maybe his body was too eager to fade away into the comfort of sleep. But he could barely remember why he might want to fight that. Other than that Hess was standing right over him with an anguished expression that made something else hurt inside him.

He started to raise his hand toward him, but then a kind face with rectangular glasses and a deep frown appeared in front of him, and Sebastian’s lips pulled up into a smile.

“Maxwell.”

“Stop grinning like an idiot.” Maxwell sat on the bed at his hip and started peeling apart the layers of ripped fabric coated in mud and blood around his midsection. “You’re dying.”

“Am not—” Sebastian gasped as agony shot through him when Maxwell pulled a piece of fabric that felt like it had been embedded in his skin. Hess appeared at Maxwell’s shoulder with a snarl, but Maxwell shot him a look, and he backed out of Sebastian’s line of sight again.

“Are too.” Maxwell started threading a nasty, curved needle with thick black thread.

“Am not.” Sebastian eyed the contraption. That was going to hurt. Except usually, that was the second hurt, inflicted after Maxwell poured burning antiseptic all over him. Had Maxwell done that yet? Sebastian didn’t think so. “Neumann is going to die. Not me.”

“Well, we don’t have another body for you, so if he dies, you die.” Maxwell arranged himself with his suture over Sebastian’s open wound, which Sebastian very much still did not want to look at. He could feel Maxwell starting to poke at its edges and arrange pieces of cloth to sop up the blood still flowing and trickling out of it.

Sebastian jutted his lip out stubbornly. “You’d be more upset if I was dying.”

Maxwell shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. Now get ready.”

“I am—agh!” Sebastian locked the scream behind his teeth at the last second. He reached out blindly, and a warm hand caught his. He squeezed it tightly as the waves of agony rolled over him, administered with Maxwell’s cool, smooth, professional movements, stabbing into his skin and pulling over and over again.

Sebastian tried to keep count of the number of stitches Maxwell stuck into him, hoping it would indicate how long this would all last. But after only five, he lost track and just existed in the pain, anchored only by the broad hand still gripping his. A second hand wrapped around his, and Sebastian clutched at it, squeezing so hard he felt the bones in it start to flex, but it helped in some small measure.

When the pain finally eased, it took several more moments for clear hearing and eyesight to return as his other senses remembered how to function.

“...be fine for an hour or so,” Maxwell was saying. “Garrett and I will—”

“Fuck Garrett,” Sebastian muttered hoarsely, blinking his eyes open.

Maxwell gave him an unimpressed look. “I see you’re back with us.”

“Will he make it that long?” Hess asked Maxwell without bothering to even look down at Sebastian.

Sebastian wrinkled his nose. That was rude of him. Sebastian tried to move his hand so he could poke Hess for his

lack of consideration when he realized he couldn't move his hand at all.

Because it was still clasped tightly between both of Hess's.

The movement did make Hess glance back down at him, though. They locked eyes, and Sebastian's breath caught at the rawness in Hess's normally steely gaze. Hess glanced down at their clasped hands, and his eyes widened briefly as though he were as surprised to see them as Sebastian had been.

Sebastian felt Hess's death grip on him loosen, and his panic spiked. His hand clenched around Hess's. "Don't..." *Let go.* But Sebastian swallowed the rest of the words before they could get out.

Hess's lips parted, and something more complicated than simple rawness flitted through his eyes. He didn't say anything, but he nodded slightly and tightened his grip again, enveloping Sebastian's blood- and grime-slicked hand in the warmth and roughness of his own.

Maxwell cleared his throat, and Sebastian jerked his gaze back to him with a vaguely guilty feeling. Maxwell glanced between them with narrowed eyes that made Sebastian think he knew more than he let on—and disapproved—before settling his gaze on Hess.

"As long as he doesn't start moving around or pull those stitches, he should make it."

Maxwell turned to the door, but Sebastian made a choked noise and reached for him with his free hand. "Wait, Maxwell, isn't there"—he flushed with shame to ask for it but forced it out in the face of the night of agony that loomed before him—"something you can give me for the pain?"

Maxwell shook his head with a firm expression. "It'll just give you a false sense of security. You'll move and bleed out."

"But all night? Maxwell, ple—"

The door swung open and nearly took Maxwell out. He just managed to reel back before taking the old wood in the nose. Martha pushed her way in with Joan hot on her heels.

Martha started speaking before she'd finished moving. "I heard Sebastian made it back?" Then her eyes fell on Sebastian, swept him from head to foot, and turned to Maxwell. "Is he going to make it?"

"Yes." Maxwell gave Sebastian a hard look. "As long as he doesn't move in the next hour."

Sebastian gritted his teeth. "I don't have a goddamn death wish, Maxwell."

Maxwell didn't miss a beat. "But you're not exactly careful."

"Are you sure you can't give him anything for the pain?" Hess asked, dragging Martha's eyes to him, then inevitably down to their hands. And then her eyes narrowed just like Maxwell's. Sebastian felt a defensive urge to pull Hess a little closer, as though just the look in Martha's and Maxwell's eyes would take him away.

"I'm sure." Maxwell nodded crisply, then side-stepped Martha and Joan, squeezing past them in the tiny room to get to the door. "I'll be back."

Joan stepped around Martha and sat on the edge of the bed. Sebastian winced as the slight movement sent pain ricocheting up his stitches, and Joan gave him an apologetic look. "How are you feeling?"

"Like we should make Maxwell head of interrogation." Sebastian groaned. He shook his head. "He looks so nice, but..."

Joan laughed and patted his knee. "I'm sure he's doing what he thinks is best."

Martha stepped forward with a hard look. "We need to debrief you."

Joan's mouth fell open, and she jerked her head up. "Right now?"

Hess's hands tightened around Sebastian's. "It can wait, Martha."

“No, actually, it can’t.” Martha jabbed a finger at Sebastian. “He’s cognizant and talking, and we need to know what happened at Kaston’s headquarters.”

Joan frowned. “He’ll be cognizant and talking in the morning too.”

“Not if he bleeds out.” Martha waved a hand at the blood soaked into the sheets surrounding Sebastian. “We can’t risk waiting until the morning.”

Hess pulled himself up straight, and his eyes flashed. “Push him now and he might not make it to morning.”

“He might not make it anyway, and he’ll take everything he knows to the grave.” Martha stepped up to Hess, and they stared at each other with hard, inscrutable eyes.

Sebastian watched them and the ticks and twitches that flicked across their faces. It was like they were having a whole conversation that Sebastian couldn’t hear.

But it didn’t matter.

“I’ll do it.” Sebastian tugged on Hess’s hand to get his attention. “I don’t want to die with this information, and I don’t want the Resistance to piss away eight hours waiting for it while I sleep.”

Martha didn’t even glance down at him, her eyes still riveted to Hess. “Leon?”

Hess glanced down at Sebastian without any of the rawness or nuance that had been in his gaze before. The same familiar wall was up, and Sebastian had no idea what was behind it. Then Hess untangled their fingers and let go of his hand, and even though Sebastian’s heart clenched, he resisted the urge to pull him back in.

Hess stepped back and nodded to Sebastian. “Debrief him.”

Martha’s posture loosened, and Sebastian realized just how much she had been tensed up and leaning toward Hess as though they might physically engage with each other. She

nodded and grabbed a beaten chair from the beaten desk across from the bed.

She settled into it with her data tablet, and after one last look of misgiving, Joan pulled out her own.

Sebastian started to push himself up to sit, but Joan put a hand on his chest. “Don’t. You heard Maxwell.”

He had indeed heard Maxwell. And he felt the pain Maxwell had wanted him to feel and that, more than anything else, convinced Sebastian to fall back against the pillows. His stomach curdled to do it, though. He had been through more than a few serious debriefs with Martha and Joan but never for something as horrible as what he had just come out of. And to lay down helpless and in pain while he relived it was the last thing he wanted to do.

But they didn’t always get everything they wanted.

Hess stepped back out of the way of Joan and Martha and crossed his arms. He leaned against the wall but didn’t take his eyes off Sebastian. His hard, intense gaze settled heavily over Sebastian like a grounding weight.

Martha brought Sebastian’s attention back to her with a kind grip on his hand. “Start at the beginning.”

And so Sebastian did.

He told them about the day it took him to get out to Orin and about the ship he saw leaving as he waited to find an opening, and Joan interrupted for her first question.

And from there, it took off into a barrage of questions interspersed with Sebastian’s painstakingly detailed narration. His mouth had dried by the time he got to the part where he escaped the planet, turning his tongue heavy and his mouth fuzzy. In his stillness, the pain from his wound had crystallized into a clarity that made it possible to feel every single suture, pulling and rubbing through his skin.

When he got to the part of the story where he arrived in Kaston and paid a visit to Hess, he forced himself not to glance at the man hovering in the corner of his eye. He resisted the urge to swallow or hedge and skipped lightly over their

tryst and on to infiltrating the base. Neither Martha nor Joan batted an eye.

And then nausea set in. At first, Sebastian couldn't feel it through the pain of the gash nearly cutting him in half, and then he couldn't feel it through the wall he had put up against the pain, but it grew and grew until it choked him, and he had to pause to swallow it down.

“What's wrong?” Joan looked up from tapping on her tablet when he paused mid-sentence.

“Nothing.” Sebastian shook his head and continued, even as a cold sweat broke out over his forehead and along his neck.

He didn't want to go back there.

His heart rate picked up as he retraced his steps beside Colin down into the armory. He could feel his pulse in his sutures. He stared up at the ceiling and clenched his jaw.

He didn't want to go back to these memories, but he told them about finding the faulty guns and about the bell ringing and about Sheila appearing to get Colin out.

Martha's hand twitched around his own, and he paused and glanced at her. Joan and Hess looked at her as well, and a tick appeared in her jaw as she ground her teeth together. She had miscalculated. Sheila had been Martha's risk, and it had cost them all everything and they all knew it. Sebastian rotated his wrist so he could grasp her hand.

“Continue,” she said after a moment.

Sebastian unstuck his dry mouth. “Well, after that...it... That was when...”

His heart beat in his chest, pounding blood painfully through his wounds. His skin broke out in a cold, clammy sweat and none of his breaths pulled in enough oxygen. He squeezed his eyes shut as though that would keep his memory frozen in that moment just before the gas began to hiss in through the vents.

He had been so focused on surviving in all the time between that moment and this that he hadn't ever really gone

back. He hadn't sat with what he had seen, hadn't thought about it, hadn't remembered it, but it was all rushing back now faster than he could handle.

The horror and terror.

The senseless violence of his friends and comrades.

The screams of the children in the basement.

"Sebastian." Hess's voice snapped through the air and landed on Sebastian like a slap.

Sebastian wrenched his eyes open and turned his head to face Hess.

Hess stared at him, jaw set, shoulders tight, arms crossed, and fingers digging into his own biceps so hard the tips were white.

Sebastian felt perfectly caged in that gaze, as though Hess's glare had put up iron bars all around him. As though he couldn't get out and nothing could get in. His heart rate slowed, and the sweat dried on his throat. He licked his lips and took as deep a breath as his body could handle.

Hess nodded slightly with just the tiniest thread of approval. "Tell us what happened."

So Sebastian did.

With as much detail and detachment as he could, he described the gas as it had issued from the vents and filled the room. He described the mounting panic in Colin's and Sheila's eyes and the chaos that ensued when the other soldiers forced the door open.

He told them about his mad scramble to escape and about the screams and pleas that had filled the air. About the killing and the blood and the Klah'Eel waiting for them outside the building.

"How did you escape?" Joan cocked her head with a small frown.

Sebastian twitched a shoulder in as much of a shrug as he could manage. "Slipperiness and luck. And the fact that I

could still think, unlike everyone else. It affected my human body, but not *me*. I wasn't the only one to escape, though. Others made it into the alleyways."

"And they gunned down everyone who didn't," Martha concluded.

"No, actually." Sebastian closed his eyes to bring the remembered images into better focus. "They weren't shooting much. Capturing, mostly. They were taking people alive."

Joan hummed and tapped into her tablet but didn't say anything. Neither did Hess or Martha, though they glanced at each other. Sebastian bit his lip as his sluggish mind finally wrestled with that thought.

"Why would they do that?" he asked. "Why capture our men instead of kill them?"

Leon shook his head. "Don't worry about that now."

"But—"

"And then where did you go?" Martha prodded him.

Sebastian looked at her, then Hess, then dropped it, too tired to fight anyone.

"And then I tried to get out of the city. I could see the Resistance ships already evacuating. I knew it wasn't worth trying to get to a barricade." Sebastian relaxed back into the bed as the rest of the words flowed out more easily. The rest was boring and simple now that the attack was over: a looping series of running and hiding, running and hiding, until he'd finally all but crashed his stolen ship outside the capitol building of Ralscoln.

"You're slurring again." Joan stopped him as he tripped over his words, trying to come up with the name of the town he'd stolen the ship from.

"Sorry." Sebastian grimaced and rallied his strength again, grasping at it even though it felt as if it was bleeding right out of him along with the blood that had escaped the sutures.

"No." Martha shook her head, then gave his hand a squeeze before letting it go. "We're done. We got everything

we needed.”

Sebastian nodded and let go again of all the strength he'd gathered. He closed his eyes, and he might have whimpered, but he couldn't tell because the pain pulled him under. It was everywhere and everything, consuming him slowly.

He felt a broad hand take his and heard the low rumble of Hess's voice, then Martha's low reply, but he couldn't make out their words. He pulled weakly on the hand that held his. “Hess, please.”

“Shh.” Calloused fingers pushed his sweaty hair from his forehead. “Just a little longer.” And then, “Where the fuck are they?”

“I hear them.” That was Joan, followed by the scrape of a chair. “I think they're coming.”

Sebastian groaned and opened his eyes again. “Who?”

But no one answered him.

The door swung open again, and this time Joan almost took it in the face. Maxwell stepped in briskly and opened the door as wide as it would go. “Everybody out now.”

Joan and Martha glanced one last time at Sebastian and then quickly complied, disappearing out the door and into the hall. But Hess kept his hand clasped around Sebastian's.

“You too, sir.” Maxwell frowned.

Hess's grip tightened. “I'd like to stay.”

“There's barely enough room to bring the gurney in as it is.” Maxwell shook his head and then crossed his arms and nodded at Sebastian. “And he deserves at least a little privacy, don't you think?”

Understanding dawned on Sebastian like the most beautiful sunrise, along with a healthy dose of indignation. He dropped Hess's hand and fought to lever himself up onto an elbow, snarling through the pain. “You goddamn liar, Maxwell. You *do* have a body for me.”

Maxwell's lips quirked up into as much of a shit-eating grin as Sebastian had ever seen on his face. "I do. And you can get into it as soon as there's room to bring it to you."

Sebastian looked up at Hess, but Hess was already striding toward the door. He threw an unreadable glance back at Sebastian before stepping into the hall. "I'll be right outside."

Then the end of a gurney appeared in the hallway and began maneuvering awkwardly to get into the room. Sebastian saw a glimpse of Garrett's scowling face as he pulled the thing back and forth until it was angled to get in the door, and then Maxwell grabbed it and pulled it inside.

"Thank you. We won't be long." Maxwell squeezed around the gurney to the door. "Can you please find another mattress and some sheets? We'll need to replace the ones in here. They're ruined."

To Sebastian's surprise, Garrett just nodded. Then Maxwell closed the door, and it was just the two of them and a brain-dead body.

"What the fuck, Maxwell?" Sebastian groaned, and he tried to push himself to sit. "You had to torture me?"

Maxwell quickly dropped to his side and looped an arm under his shoulders so he could sit up closer to the body. "Let's just get you safe. Then we can discuss my methods."

Sebastian recognized the body as soon as he saw it. Shorter and slimmer than Neumann, Sebastian had always liked the high cheekbones and pointed chin. A little reminiscent of Oliver Turner now that Sebastian thought about it, but much less pale. Sebastian had taken it from a bureaucrat at a factory owned by some Human corporation that didn't care that their wages were too low to support their workers.

Sebastian managed to drape his upper body over the side of the gurney and flop one of his arms into touching distance with the prone, pristine body lying there, and that was close enough.

With an almost overwhelming sense of freedom and relief, Sebastian unhooked his barbs from Neumann's brain stem and

burst out of his dying body. He skittered down the outstretched arm and over the chest of the bureaucrat until he got to the nape of the man's neck. With a quick slice over the old scar tissue, Sebastian slid in.

Hooking in his barbs and opening his new eyes, Sebastian could have cried.

The pain was gone. All gone, and the memory of it already fading fast.

A laugh bubbled up his throat, and he grabbed at his own stomach, reveling in the painlessness of it all. He sat up, still huffing out a few lingering chuckles.

“Oh god, that sucked.” He pushed his hands through his hair and shook his head, then looked at Maxwell. “Do you have any idea how much that sucked?”

“I don't think I can even imagine,” Maxwell admitted. He shoved Neumann's lifeless body back onto the bed. “Look what you escaped.”

Sebastian looked, and his breath caught. “Shit,” he breathed. He'd known it was bad—he'd felt it after all—but looking at the gory mess that was left of Neumann, his gorge rose. “Is that...intestine poking out of that hole there?”

Maxwell prodded the bit of gray flesh visible between one of the sutures and the edge of the gash. “Yes, I think it is.”

“Oh god.” Sebastian covered his mouth and looked away. “No wonder you and Hess were so freaked out.”

“You almost died, Sebastian.”

“Yeah, I see that now!” Sebastian swung his legs around to the other side of the gurney and stood shakily.

“You know I didn't enjoy torturing you, right?” Maxwell stood too, and the earnest look on his ever-sweet face was enough to melt away the last bits of Sebastian's resentment.

“Of course I know that, Maxwell.” Sebastian sighed, still keeping his eyes averted from the body he'd almost died in. “I wasn't in my right mind. You were afraid I'd be an idiot and die before you could save me.”

Maxwell grimaced. “Essentially, yes.”

“*You* know I’ll never trust you again, though, don’t you?” Sebastian pointed a finger at him and then wagged it. “That was a one-use trick, and you’ve used it up now.”

Maxwell chuckled and batted his hand back down. “Well, hopefully, I never have to. Try not to get disemboweled again, hm?”

“Yeah, I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Sebastian stretched and rolled his shoulders, but when he tried to take a few steps in the small room, his legs shook, and he listed sideways before managing to grab the desk and hold himself up.

“Are you alright?” Maxwell quickly skirted the gurney and helped him to sit in the chair squished up against the wall.

“Yeah.” Sebastian pressed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes. “Just...tired, but not.”

Maxwell lifted Sebastian’s chin and tilted his head back and forth to take a look at him. “You should try to get some sleep.”

“How am I supposed to sleep?” Sebastian pulled his chin back and waved an arm to encompass his own body. “I’ve *been* asleep for weeks.”

“That body has, but *you* haven’t.” Maxwell crossed his arms. “That’s not the same thing.”

It wasn’t, but Sebastian still scowled. “How would you know? You’ve only ever been in the one body.”

Maxwell’s eyes narrowed. “And you’ve never been to medical school.”

“Not like they teach you any *torvar* anatomy in medical school,” Sebastian muttered. “Unless maybe it’s how to tear us out.”

“No, actually, not even that.” Maxwell sighed and leaned against the desk. He brought his hand up to the nape of his neck and trailed the fingers thoughtfully along his skin. “I’ve been about able to figure out exactly which structures all our barbs and hooks lock into, though.”

“Huh. That’s interesting, I guess.” Sebastian had never thought much about exactly where he put his claws. It was all instinctual.

A couple of firm knocks on the door made them both look up, and then Hess’s voice came from just the other side. “I’m coming in.”

“Shit.” Maxwell pushed off the desk and grabbed Sebastian’s shoulder. “Do you feel safe?”

“What?” Sebastian recoiled with a frown. “What do you mean ‘do I feel safe’?”

Of course he felt safe; he was *finally* safe. He’d dragged himself through the mud and practically bled out in a ship to get here. But Maxwell’s serious gaze and the strength of his grip on his shoulder spiked his panic.

“Hess will try to keep you here,” Maxwell spoke low and urgently, and his fingers dug into Sebastian’s shoulder. “Do you want me to insist on taking you away?”

“Away? From Hess?” Sebastian yanked his shoulder free on some defensive instinct. “No! Why—”

But then the door opened, and Maxwell stepped back smoothly.

Hess glanced between them briefly, but his eyes settled on Sebastian the longest. Some of that rawness had returned, and when Sebastian twitched his lips in a small smile at Hess, Hess swallowed. Then Hess looked back at Maxwell. “Garrett’s here with the mattress.”

“Good.” Maxwell’s voice returned to its regular cadence, and Sebastian hid his confusion. Whatever had disturbed Maxwell, he didn’t want Hess to see it. Maxwell tilted his head at the remnants of Neumann still in the bed. “Help me get him into the gurney so we can get rid of him?”

Hess nodded and rolled up his shirt sleeves past his elbow. Despite—or maybe because of—his exhaustion, Sebastian found himself trailing his eyes along his leader’s muscular forearms with more than a passing admiration. Once the hands attached to said forearms looped under Neumann’s shoulders

and lifted the squelching body off the soaked mattress, though, Sebastian quickly looked away again.

Hess and Maxwell got the body onto the gurney, and once Hess stepped out of the way, Maxwell started pushing it back into the hall. He stopped once he came abreast of Hess. “Sebastian is fine, but he needs rest. We have plenty of good beds in the medical wing.”

Hess shook his head before Maxwell finished his sentence. “He can stay. He’ll have my bed; I don’t need it.”

Maxwell sent Sebastian a loaded glance that Sebastian couldn’t interpret but nodded and continued pushing the gurney back into the hall. He turned back to Sebastian one last time before leaving. “Call for me if you need anything.”

“Will do.” Sebastian raised a hand in farewell. “Thanks for saving my life, Maxwell. As usual.”

“Anytime, Sebastian.”

Once he’d left, Hess stripped the sheets from the bed and tossed them out into the hallway. Then he heaved the mattress off the bed with a grunt.

Sebastian started to stand. “Here, let me—”

“No.” Hess waved him down without looking at him and pushed the mattress out the door. “Sit. I can do it.”

So Sebastian plopped back down in the chair and fidgeted with his fingers as he watched Hess come back into the room, holding a pile of clean linens. He’d be lying if he said a part of him wasn’t enjoying the show of Hess knocking the door closed with his boot and then setting about making the bed. Quiet, pattering, and domestic.

Hess had said the bed was for Sebastian, so for Hess to set it up for him was...sweet.

But a larger part of Sebastian couldn’t quite settle into the sweetness. He twisted his fingers around themselves and bounced his knee. Staring at the back of Hess’s head while Hess pulled the sheet straight, Sebastian felt more like he was being ignored and avoided than cared for. Isolated.

“I’m not tired,” Sebastian finally muttered with more petulance than he had intended.

Hess finished stuffing the pillow into its case, then set it on the bed and turned around slowly, his face impassive. “The doctor said you need rest.”

“Yeah, well, the doctor doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” Sebastian shoved himself to standing, swayed slightly, but managed to stay up without grabbing onto anything.

Hess nodded to the newly made bed behind him. “Try to lay down at least.”

“I don’t want to lay down.” Sebastian strode to the far side of the room and then spun on his heel and paced back. “I’m too…” Sebastian waved his hands in the air and clenched and unclenched his hands.

“Too what?”

“Too…” Sebastian made another series of complicated motions in the air as he did another lap of the room. “My muscles itch, but my claws ache.”

Hess cocked his head. “Your claws?”

“Yeah, my—” Sebastian waved to the nape of his neck, then flushed and shook his head. Hess didn’t want to think about his damn claws. He paced back and forth again. “Never mind.”

Hess crossed his arms with a frustrated growl. “Sebastian.”

“What?” Sebastian stopped in the center of the room and spun to face Hess. He crossed his arms and puffed his chest out in a mirror of Hess’s pose. “What do you want? For me to just go to sleep? With all this in my head?”

“What’s in your head?” Hess asked firmly, the frustration frustratingly gone again.

“Everything! All of it!” Sebastian uncrossed his arms, unable to hold them so still any longer, shifting from foot to foot. “The fucking”—Sebastian couldn’t bring himself to talk about it directly again, and he waved vaguely in the direction of Kaston, far away—“that day.”

Sebastian swung away to resume his pacing, but Hess grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise and dragged him back. “Goddammit, Sebastian, just stop moving.”

Chapter Seven

SEBASTIAN'S FEET FINALLY FROZE, and he stared down at Hess's broad hand around his arm with a lump rising up in his throat. He swallowed, not ready to look up into Hess's face and expecting Hess's grip to drop off him at any second, but it didn't. Hess held him tight and firm, and when Sebastian finally spoke, his voice came out small. "Moving is the only thing that stops the thinking."

Hess grabbed Sebastian's chin with his other hand and pulled his face up to look at him. "Does it, though?"

After a moment, biting his lip to keep it from trembling, Sebastian shook his head.

Hess's grip on his chin gentled, and he stroked a thumb over Sebastian's jaw.

"No, I didn't think so." Hess quirked the corner of his lips. "I've spent enough hours pacing myself to know that."

"Staying still doesn't stop it either, though." Sebastian wrinkled his nose but made no move to pull himself free of Hess's hands. They felt too good—grounding and solid and real after everything that had happened in the past two days. Firm and authoritative and the blessed opposite of chaotic.

"Sleep does." Hess's eyes roved over Sebastian's face in the same way they had back in the office at Kaston, searching, ascertaining, like he was about to take a great course of action and weighing the likely results before he did so. Anticipation

shot up Sebastian's spine, and he took a half step closer so he could feel the heat of Hess's chest.

He dropped his eyes to Hess's lips, still set into a firm line, but Sebastian knew how soft they were. "But I can't sleep."

"Not yet."

Then Hess hardened his grip on Sebastian's chin and yanked Sebastian's mouth to his.

Sebastian yielded with a groan. Such a strong wave of relief swept through him that his knees weakened. But it didn't matter because Hess wrapped his other arm around Sebastian's waist and held him so tightly against him that Sebastian didn't need to hold himself up.

Hess kissed demandingly, angling Sebastian's face with firm motions that opened him up to be plundered and devoured. He swept his tongue into Sebastian's mouth, twining around his and then withdrawing and making Sebastian sway forward with a little whine. And then Hess rewarded his neediness with another kiss. He ran his calloused thumb over Sebastian's lower lip before nipping it hard and making him gasp, then plundered him again.

Sebastian didn't realize they'd been moving, too absorbed in the push and pull between the softness of Hess's lips and the sharpness of his teeth, until his back hit the wall. Hess stepped in and all but crushed Sebastian against it, pressing the hard line of his body against Sebastian's until Sebastian felt trapped.

Hess braced his forearms against the wall on either side of Sebastian's head and then nosed into the hollow under his ear with a deep inhale. "You're alive."

Sebastian clutched at Hess's hips as his hands shook. "I'm alive."

He dropped his forehead onto Hess's shoulder, and Hess gave a shuddering sigh. Tears stung at Sebastian's eyes, and he quickly turned into the fabric of Hess's shirt to soak them away. He didn't want to cry. If he started crying, he wouldn't stop, and he didn't want to break down into tears.

But then he felt Hess's body shake against him and a fresh sob choked up his throat. He tightened his grip on Hess and buried his face into his shoulder, pressing his forehead into the warm skin of Hess's neck. Hess pressed against him even tighter as though he could swallow Sebastian's body with his, and Sebastian bit down on the next sob even though there was no hiding the way it wracked his body.

"Shh." Hess moved his lips to Sebastian's ear and kissed it softly with a whisper. "You're alive. You're safe. You're mine."

You're mine.

Those words in Hess's voice sent a surge of electricity into the overwhelming emotions choking Sebastian's mind, jolting them into a new form. They twisted into something else inside him, and he gasped.

Hess pulled back and put his forehead against Sebastian's, and Sebastian's pulse skyrocketed when he saw that calculating look in Hess's eyes. He remembered being pressed against that heavy desk in Kaston with Hess's hands on him and his orders in his ears.

For a while at least, Hess could make everything right. And Sebastian desperately wanted him to make everything right for him because god knew he couldn't do it himself right now. He just wanted to stop thinking, and to stop remembering, and to stop asking himself what came next and next and next in this endless series of things they had to do which would become things that they had done—

Hess tangled his fingers in Sebastian's hair and pulled his head to the side, making his neck twinge with pain. He leaned down to Sebastian's ear, and Sebastian felt his teeth against him as he spoke. "Focus, Sebastian."

Sebastian's spiraling thoughts snapped back to the pain in his scalp, the smell of Hess surrounding him, and the hard heat of his body. "Yes, sir."

The words rolled off his tongue, and as soon as he said them, a warmth trickled down his spine, and he wanted to say

them again. He closed his eyes with a little sigh.

“Anything, sir.”

Hess growled a pleased sound in his ear, and his approval wrapped around Sebastian. “That’s right.”

Hess released Sebastian’s hair and stroked down the side of his face to his neck. Hess rubbed his thumb along the muscles that had just been straining. Then that roguish half smile that Sebastian had seared into his memory appeared again, and Hess pressed his hand around Sebastian’s throat.

He didn’t put any pressure on his windpipe or his arteries, just trapped his head back against the wall and made Sebastian’s pulse beat against his palm. He petted his pulse point with his thumb. “Open your pants for me, Sebastian.”

An odd feeling of gratitude swelled up in Sebastian. Hess was accepting responsibility for him, accepting the control over himself that Sebastian didn’t want to have anymore, and he gave it happily away.

“Yes, sir.”

Sebastian kept his eyes on Hess as he dropped his own hands to his pants. He remembered how much Hess had needed to see his face when they did this. He swallowed, feeling Hess’s palm against his throat, as he slowly undid his button and zipper.

“Good.” Hess nodded his approval before dropping his gaze down to Sebastian’s groin. The hand at his throat restricted Sebastian’s movement too much to look down, but he felt himself twitch and lengthen when Hess’s eyes fell on him.

He hadn’t been ordered to yet, but Sebastian slid his thumbs under the waistband of his underwear and slowly eased them down over his cock. He savored the feeling of exposing himself to Hess, knowing it was what Hess wanted of him.

“That’s right,” Hess murmured, eyes glued to where Sebastian was pulling the cloth down over his sack. “A little farther for me.”

Sebastian nodded and pushed his underwear all the way out of the way. He opened his pants a little wider so that the most intimate parts of his body were fully available to this man who had him up against a wall with his hand on his throat. Without thinking, he dropped his own hand to his balls, but then Hess gave his throat a squeeze.

“Hands off.”

Sebastian immediately plastered his hand to the wall, a knot in his stomach. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Shh.” Hess kissed the words off his lips, and the knot untangled. “I’m not interested in your apologies, Sebastian.”

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian sighed as Hess’s hand appeared where Sebastian’s had been, cupping his balls with a featherlight touch.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’ve never done a wrong in your life,” Hess murmured into his ear, his fingers tracing and stroking teasingly over the skin of Sebastian’s sack. “And you’re not going to do anything wrong now. Not while I have you like this.”

Sebastian let the praise and the certainty soothe him. Hess was right. How could he do anything wrong when he wasn’t the one in control?

Hess leaned in and kissed Sebastian gently, sweetly, and then whispered over his lips, “I want you just as you are, Sebastian.”

Sebastian shuddered. “You have me.”

“Mm, I do, don’t I?”

Sebastian heard Hess’s smile in his voice, then felt it against his lips just a moment before Hess squeezed him and wrenched out a gasp. Sebastian bucked up toward him, but Hess pulled back with a chuckle before he could get any friction against his cock.

“Not so fast.” Hess rolled Sebastian’s balls in the palm of his hand, and Sebastian’s eyes closed as he dropped his head

against the wall. Hess's thumb stroked against his pulse point. "You wait for my orders."

"Yes, sir." Sebastian forced his hips to stay still as Hess fondled him. It was torture, and Sebastian couldn't decide if he liked it or not. He got a jolt of excitement every time Hess dragged a finger up the seam of his sack, thinking he'd finally—finally—get to his cock, only for him to have to bite back a groan of frustration when Hess would loop around and bypass it again.

Just when Sebastian thought he might finally disobey, Hess reached back farther and rubbed against his taint.

"Oh god." Sebastian grabbed the front of Hess's shirt instinctively and widened his stance to give him more access.

"You like that?" Hess chuckled as he took the opening and slid a finger up to Sebastian's hole.

"Yes." Sebastian nodded against the hand still at his throat. When Hess rubbed a circle along his rim, he nodded even more vigorously. "Yes."

Hess growled and bit the shell of his ear. Then he worked just the tip of his finger into Sebastian's dry hole. "Goddammit, what I could do to you if we had a bottle of lube..."

"Gun oil."

Hess pulled back with a scowl, but Sebastian's hole was still twitching around the tip of his finger. "What?"

"Gun oil," Sebastian whined and gave in to the temptation to twitch his hips to better feel just that suggestion of intrusion. "You have gun oil, don't you?"

"Sebastian." Hess took his hand out from between Sebastian's thighs and put it firmly on Sebastian's hip, ignoring Sebastian's plaintive whimper. "I am not sticking gun oil inside you."

"Why not?" Sebastian scowled and, after debating with himself for a moment, pouted out his lower lip. If he was

going to beg to be fucked, he might as well do it properly. “It’s slick; it’ll work.”

“Because that can’t be good for you.” Hess took his hands from Sebastian’s throat and hip and gave him an unimpressed look. “It’s not exactly approved for internal use.”

“So?” Sebastian spread his arms wide. “At the rate I’m going, I’ll have run through this body in like two days. Who cares if it gets a little reaction?”

From Hess’s consternated look and lack of immediate rebuttal, Sebastian knew he’d found an opening.

“I’ll be fine with a little gun oil, Hess, or hell *a lot* of gun oil.” Sebastian pushed himself off the wall so he could get chest-to-chest with Hess again and wrap his fingers into the fabric of his shirt over his heart. He lowered his voice. “But I won’t be fine if I never find out what you’d do to me with it.”

“Sebastian.” Hess grabbed Sebastian’s wrist and pulled his hand off him, but not before Sebastian felt the way his heart had beat at his words.

Sebastian felt the bones of his wrist flex in Hess’s tight grasp, and he licked his lips. “What would you do to me, Hess?”

Finally, Hess growled and spun him around to face the wall. He shoved him toward it. “Take off your clothes, and you’ll find out.”

Sebastian barely managed to keep in his whoop of delight as he finally shoved his pants and underwear down to the floor. He toed his boots off and stripped off his shirt at the same time, and within seconds he had his forearms and forehead braced against the wall, ready for whatever Hess had in mind.

He heard Hess’s soft laugh and the sound of a drawer closing, and he blushed but didn’t move. With a deep breath, he loosened his shoulders and let the stress fall out of his back. He closed his eyes and focused on the grit of the wall against his skin, the smooth floor under his feet, and the measured footfalls of Hess coming up behind him.

He was so focused and ready, he jumped when Hess gently cupped the swell of his ass and then stroked his broad palm up and down his back. Sebastian hadn't known what to expect—a slap on his ass perhaps, or two fingers plunged in hard and fast before he could react—but it hadn't been for Hess to drape himself across his back with a shaky sigh.

He snapped rigid again in surprise and then just as quickly softened back down as Hess ran his hands up his chest and down his flanks. It felt *good*. Simple and warm and good. Worshipful came to mind, but Sebastian shoved it away again. Hess might want Sebastian to be alive, and he might want to fuck Sebastian, but he certainly didn't *revere* Sebastian.

The things he said when they were intimate...those were just things he liked to say in the heat of the moment. Hess got turned on by their dynamic—so did Sebastian—but it didn't mean Hess meant what he said about wanting Sebastian and about Sebastian being perfect and being his and all of that other nonsense.

Sebastian knew all that, but then Hess touched him like this, as though Sebastian was the missing piece of his world, with his lips on the nape of Sebastian's neck, and Sebastian couldn't help but feel like maybe he did mean it, but—

“Stop thinking.” Hess scraped his teeth just beside the scab Sebastian had made to get into the body and then shoved the bottle of gun oil into one of Sebastian's hands. “And start prepping yourself for me.”

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian took the bottle and braced awkwardly to drip some of the slippery liquid onto his hand. He started to spread his legs but had to catch himself against the wall with a gasp when Hess grabbed his hips and yanked them farther from the wall.

He tilted Sebastian's hips up and then grabbed his cheeks and spread him. Sebastian threw an incredulous look over his shoulder and was met with Hess's challenging half smile. When Sebastian didn't move right away, Hess's smile grew, and he circled both his thumbs a little closer to Sebastian's hole. “Go on.”

Sebastian's face flamed as he reached behind himself and touched the tip of his oil-slick finger against his own hole. He swallowed, hesitating under Hess's intense gaze, his exposed rim twitching and his heart beating in his chest.

When Sebastian still hadn't moved, Hess growled in the back of his throat and flicked his eyes up to Sebastian's. He used his thumbs to pull Sebastian's hole open under his own finger. "Prepare yourself for me, Sebastian."

The rumble of Hess's voice up his spine and the feel of his glare on his body won out over any other feeling swirling inside Sebastian, and he plunged his finger into himself.

"Oh fuck." Sebastian dropped his forehead against the wall as his hole spasmed.

"Good." Hess's voice gentled, and he rewarded Sebastian with a gentle squeeze of his ass.

Sebastian breathed hard through his nose and then slowly withdrew his finger, hyper-focused on the slight drag and clenching muscle and knowing that every twitch and spasm was on display for Hess.

And this was what Hess wanted.

So, Sebastian thrust his finger back inside and groaned at the combined burn and Hess's hands clenching against him. Without giving himself a chance to adjust, Sebastian forced himself to thrust out and in again.

"That's right, Sebastian." Hess kneaded his ass, and Sebastian whined. Hess had told him to prep himself for him, and Sebastian damn well would. He plunged his finger in and out of himself, biting his lip to keep in his grunts. "God, you're good at that."

Sebastian melted under the praise, his knees shaking. He *was* good at this, and he could do better. He clenched his free hand against the wall and, on his next thrust, shoved in a second finger.

"Fuck, you're beautiful, Sebastian." Hess's voice and hands were worshipful again, and Sebastian whimpered. The words felt so good, he'd do anything for those words and those

touches. He crooked his fingers to tug at his rim each time he pulled out, and Hess groaned. He rubbed his fingers against his rim again, tugging it open to make more room for Sebastian's fingers. "So good for me."

Sebastian could do three. Typically he'd give himself more time, but for Hess, he could fucking do it. He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut, and readied his next finger, but before he could, Hess caught his wrist.

"I think you're a little too good at that."

"Sir?" Sebastian looked over his shoulder, his heart falling, but found Hess's eyes bright.

"You're gonna have to work harder for me than that, Sebastian."

Sebastian's heart jumped back up, rising to the challenge even before he knew what it was. "I can do that."

"I know you can." Hess spun Sebastian around to face him, then pushed him down to his knees.

Sebastian hit the ground instantly, his mouth already watering. He reached for the front of Hess's pants, already tented out impressively, but Hess caught his oil-slick hand.

"Oh no, you stick these back inside yourself."

Sebastian's eyebrows shot up, and he looked into Hess's face, his searching, evaluating, focused gaze. Sebastian licked his lips and nodded.

Hess smiled, delight and confidence flashing through his dark eyes, and released Sebastian's wrist.

They kept eye contact as Sebastian reached down between his thighs to press his two fingers into himself. This angle was different, a little more awkward and a little more intense, and Sebastian closed his eyes with a soft grunt as the pleasure-pain spiked and tangled with the little bit of illicitness and dirtiness he always felt when penetrated.

"You keep that hand moving, do you understand?" Hess opened up the front of his pants, and Sebastian forced himself

to look up at his face instead of the heavy cock being unwrapped for him right in front of his nose.

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian swallowed and demonstrated his understanding with a few shallow thrusts, being so good and obedient no matter how much he wanted Hess to just let him swallow his cock already.

“I want you ready for me by the time I stop you, you understand?” Hess finally shoved his underwear down and gave his own flushed cock a stroke from base to tip.

Sebastian whined at the unfairness of it and didn't bother to tear his eyes away this time. He thrust into himself a little faster, pleasure and arousal sparking through his hips even with his cock hanging neglected. “Yes, sir.”

“Then get to work.” Hess tangled his fingers into Sebastian's hair and pulled him into Hess's hips, and Sebastian all but fell opened-mouthed onto his cock.

God, he loved this. He wrapped his free hand around the base of Hess's cock and swallowed down as much of it as he could with a moan. The smell and the heat and the taste and the pressure against his soft palate that forced him to tame his gag reflex and fight for his breath.

He'd always liked to suck cock, and he'd sucked plenty, but Hess's might have ruined him. Or, more precisely, Hess might have ruined him. It wasn't just his cock; it was Hess's hands in Sebastian's hair and the way he crowded Sebastian back against the wall and towered and loomed over him. Hess overwhelmed him and filled him up until there was no room left inside him for anything else. Anything but Hess and his firm hands and shaking thighs and his voice all around him and the words he said.

“Fuck, Sebastian, just like that. Fucking look at you; you're perfect.”

Sebastian whined and pulled back to suckle on Hess's crown and tip as he spread his thighs wider. Hess groaned and dropped his hands to cup Sebastian's face.

“You gonna stick another finger in there for me?” Hess stroked his thumbs over Sebastian’s cheekbones and along the lips he still had around his head.

Sebastian took a deep breath and nodded, then kissed and licked down Hess’s length, not wanting to risk biting down in pain if it was too much but not willing to take his mouth off him either. He could take three now, though, no doubt about it. He could use some more oil, but more than that, he just needed more...

Sebastian growled as he bore down and forced his three fingers into himself. As soon as he got them inside, he let out a sigh of relief and sank down around Hess’s cock again. He sucked and tongued in almost a daze, lost in the burning stretch and the fullness from both ends.

He could exist in this moment forever, filled just to the point of breaking but not past it. Hess’s hands on him, and Hess’s cock just barely thrusting over his tongue, his hole clenching and stretching and sending not just sparks but whole waves of pleasure through him.

Slowly, he started bobbing along Hess’s length again, slick and sloppy, with drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. He could finally start moving his fingers again, in shallow thrusts enough to work himself up.

It turned out he couldn’t exist in the moment forever because he still wanted more. The pain faded and faded until it was gone and it was all pleasure and want and need. He dragged his lips up and down Hess’s length, burying his nose in the bush at Hess’s base one second and then wrapping his tongue around Hess’s crown the next. He swayed and rocked his hips in time with his fingers in his ass, riding himself and searching for that angle that would shoot him off to the next level.

“Oh fuck, Sebastian.” Hess dropped his hands to Sebastian’s shoulder and pushed him away gently, but Sebastian let out a cry anyway, the pleasure he’d lost himself in dropping away. “Oh don’t worry, you’re not done yet.”

Sebastian came back into himself when Hess hauled him up to his feet, his knees creaking, and steered him toward the bed. At Hess's nudge, he let himself fall gracelessly onto his back with his head at the foot and his foot on the pillow and indulged in a luxurious stretch. "Mm, beds are good."

"I know." Hess chuckled and took off his shirt.

Sebastian quickly pushed himself up onto his forearms so he could get a better look. He'd seen Hess shirtless before—he'd seen most of his comrades shirtless; there wasn't much privacy in a militia—but he'd never gotten to really appreciate it.

The man was solid, bulky muscle, and he looked exactly as good as Sebastian had always suspected he might. He wasn't beautiful, but Sebastian liked that. His muscles were functional, pragmatic, brutal even, maybe, and the sight of them made Sebastian lick his lips to savor the taste of him that still lingered there.

When Hess shoved off his underwear and pants, kicked them to the side, and moved to get onto the bed, Sebastian reached out, thinking he'd finally get to touch. But Hess caught his wrist and pressed it onto the bed beside his head.

"Let's see how you did." Hess leaned over him and kissed his slightly sore lips, then sat back between his thighs.

Sebastian, still propped on his forearms, let them fall wide and was rewarded with a smile.

"Oh!" Sebastian fell back onto the bed with a gasp when Hess grabbed the back of his thigh and hitched his knee over Hess's shoulder. Then he managed to bite down on another surprised sound when Hess circled his swollen, stretched opening with a finger.

Hess watched Sebastian's face as he poured a little of the gun oil onto his hand and then brought the pad of his thumb to Sebastian's hole.

Sebastian twitched his hips toward him, bouncing his leaking and now nearly purple cock against his own stomach. "I'm ready for you."

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Hess turned his head to nip the inside of Sebastian’s knee, then slipped his thumb easily into Sebastian’s well-lubricated hole. He twisted and tugged Sebastian’s rim lightly, and Sebastian’s cock kicked. Hess smiled. “You did good.”

Sebastian licked his lips. “I did what you told me to.”

“Yes, you did.” Hess replaced his thumb with his finger, and Sebastian let out a happy sigh at how much deeper it could go. He wanted Hess deep inside him—he wanted it so much more than he’d ever be able to admit when he wasn’t lust-drunk, even though he had a sneaking suspicion that the want was always there.

“Hess,” Sebastian breathed and rocked his hips to fuck himself on Hess’s finger. Hess slipped in a second one without Sebastian even needing to ask, and Sebastian tossed his head back. “Hess.”

“Shh.” Hess pressed a kiss to Sebastian’s knee, and Sebastian rocked more insistently. “You’re doing so good for me.”

“I’ll do anything for you.” Sebastian said the words without thinking, clutching the mattress with his hands and mindlessly fucking himself up onto Hess’s fingers and falling deeper into the pleasure. If he meant them, they should scare him, and even as far gone as he was, a hook of terror took hold in his stomach.

Would he really do anything for Hess and for the way Hess made him feel? Hadn’t he already?

“Sebastian.” Hess met Sebastian’s hips with a hard thrust of his fingers and yanked Sebastian’s mind back into the present. He ran his hand up and down Sebastian’s thigh and pinned Sebastian with his shrewd eyes. “Focus.”

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian started to reach for him but then dropped his hand back onto the bed. His job wasn’t to reach, it was to obey.

“You’re not done yet.” Hess removed his fingers but cupped Sebastian’s ass, caressing his thumb over Sebastian’s

hole.

“No, sir.” Sebastian shook his head frantically. God knew he wasn’t done, his balls ached, and his cock felt like it might explode. And Hess’s was still hard and hot and tacky with Sebastian’s drying spit as it brushed against the back of Sebastian’s thigh.

“You’ve got more work to do.” Hess pushed Sebastian’s knee off his shoulder and back onto the bed and then grabbed Sebastian’s hands and pulled him up to sit.

Sebastian sat up quickly, but then they both blinked when they came face-to-face, as though surprised at the predictable results of their actions.

But what really surprised Sebastian was the tenderness he could see in Hess’s eyes from this close and the answering bloom of affection in his own chest. Hess recovered first, cupping the back of Sebastian’s neck and pulling him forward, but Sebastian closed the last of the distance.

They kissed softly, with a give and a take at odds with everything they’d done before. Hess coaxed instead of demanded, sliding his tongue gently along the seam of Sebastian’s lips and into his mouth, and then he yielded when Sebastian asked for entrance in turn.

Sebastian reached up and touched Hess’s jaw, running his fingers along the strong line and the stubble, and Hess sighed into the kiss. That concerning bloom of affection grew, and Sebastian’s other hand shook as he brought it up to grab Hess’s face, hauling the man closer—as close as he could get.

Hess let himself be pulled in and let himself be kissed with all the sudden, strange desperation Sebastian felt. It was different from lust or desperation to come. Sebastian knew how to slake those. But he didn’t know how to solve this need to let Hess know that he...meant something. That he was important, and that Sebastian *needed* whatever this was, and that Sebastian needed to give this to Hess.

“Hess.” Sebastian broke away with a little whine when he realized kissing wasn’t enough to satisfy him, and Hess ran a

hand down his flank. But Sebastian didn't want to be soothed; he wanted to be wrung out. He pressed forward and kissed over Hess's rough jaw, then down to Hess's neck. "Hess, please—"

Hess nipped his ear. "You never have to beg me."

Sebastian tried to grab at Hess's body again, but Hess caught his wrists before he could touch him. Sebastian let out a shaky, frustrated sigh. "Tell me what to do."

"Ride me."

Lightning shot up Sebastian's spine, and his hole clenched.

Hess grabbed Sebastian's ass again and hauled him up onto his lap, with Sebastian's thighs on either side of his waist. Their cocks brushed together, and Sebastian's pulsed with excitement at the promise of pleasure.

Hess kneaded Sebastian's ass and rubbed his fingers over Sebastian's hole as he whispered in his ear. "Ride me until you make yourself come on my cock."

"Oh god, yes."

Hess lay on his back, his hands still locked onto Sebastian's hips. But he didn't control Sebastian's movements; he just rubbed circles with his thumbs over Sebastian's hip bones.

Sebastian raised himself on his knees and readied to position himself over Hess's length, but then he caught the way Hess's eyes brightened. He took a moment to stretch and twist and knew he had guessed right when hunger flashed through Hess's eyes.

"You're beautiful," Hess breathed. Then he smirked and grabbed Sebastian's hands and placed them on the headboard above his own head, pressing down firmly in a clear order. "You'd be more beautiful if you were working harder."

Indignation flared up in Sebastian's chest, and he gripped down hard on the headboard. He sank down onto Hess with one smooth motion and a deep moan.

“Oh god.” Hess’s head slammed back onto the pillow, and his hands clamped down on Sebastian’s hips hard enough to bruise. The muscles of his neck tightened and bulged, and his biceps flexed.

Fuck, why wouldn’t he let Sebastian touch?

Sebastian stared down at Hess below him as he raised himself up and slammed himself back down with another cry. The man was so fucking beautiful Sebastian wanted to get his tongue and his hands all over him, but instead, all he was allowed to do was ride his gorgeous—

“Oh fuck yes, that.” Sebastian threw his head back when he scraped his prostate against Hess’s length, and his whole body lit up. He forgot about the unfairness of not being able to touch and lifted and dropped himself again at the same angle. “Oh god.”

“Look at me, Sebastian.” Hess grabbed Sebastian’s chin and forced his head back down.

“Hes—ungh!” Sebastian’s eyes rolled back as another impossible wave of pleasure hit him.

Hess tightened his grip on Sebastian’s chin and ran his hand down Sebastian’s side. “Faster, Sebastian.”

“I—fuck—I’m trying,” Sebastian panted as he picked up his pace, his thighs burning and shaking from the strain and the tight pressure building and building in his hips. “I—”

“You can do it. That’s it.” Hess scraped his nails over Sebastian’s ribs, then down his stomach, and wrapped a loose fist around Sebastian’s length.

“Hess!” Sebastian cried out as his weeping cock finally found friction. He thrust his hips up into Hess’s fist, then down onto Hess’s cock, and his ass hit Hess’s hip bones. He rocked between the two sensations, his hips clumsy and his mind spinning out of control.

“That’s right, Sebastian.” Hess’s voice was so deep Sebastian could feel it more than hear it. “You look so good for me.”

“Hess. Hess, I want you—” Sebastian gasped as he nailed his prostate and his cock throbbed and his hole clenched. “I want you to come, please. Please, Hess.”

Hess groaned and grabbed Sebastian’s hair with his free hand and pulled. “You want me to come, Sebastian?”

Sebastian’s wires were so crossed, the pain in his scalp just made his cock kick, and he thrust into Hess’s hand with abandon. “Yes. Yes, please. I want you to come.”

Hess snarled and tugged on Sebastian’s hair. “Then make me come.”

Sebastian dropped his chin to his chest with a sob, and even though his muscles screamed, he bounced himself faster. He could do it. He could fucking do it. He hadn’t found his breaking point yet.

But then Hess tightened his grip on Sebastian’s cock, and Sebastian’s thrusting turned frenzied as a spike of panic rushed through him because it felt good. It felt too good. So fucking good that he couldn’t last.

“Hess,” he whined and then choked off as he nailed his prostate and sparks flew over his vision.

“I’ve got you. Fuck, I’ve got you, Sebastian.” Hess’s hand cupped the side of Sebastian’s face, and Sebastian turned into his rough palms.

“I-I’m gonna—” Sebastian bit the side of Hess’s thumb as he brought himself closer and closer to the edge, unable to stop himself.

“Come for me, Sebastian.” Hess dragged his thumb over Sebastian’s lip and pulled on Sebastian’s cock. “Come for me.”

With one last burst of agonized effort, Sebastian sped up his hips and careened over the edge. Pleasure filled him up and pulled him under as he came all over Hess’s chest and fist, waves and waves of it pummeling him. He clenched around Hess’s iron length and cried out as every spasm sent pleasure ricocheting back into him and making his cock spurt again and again.

“Oh fuck, Sebastian.” Hess’s moan echoed all around him, and then Sebastian felt him pulse inside him. “Sebastian.”

Hess grabbed the back of Sebastian’s head with both hands and pulled him down into a kiss, and Sebastian went, too limp and floaty to even think about doing otherwise. His shoulders strained, and the change in angle sent another spike of pleasure-pain through his oversensitive prostate, but he melted into Hess’s soft lips.

He sighed into the gentle—*worshipful*—touches and sated kisses, letting his mouth be angled and entered and then turned another way to be kissed again. Hess smoothed his clean fingers through Sebastian’s hair and traced a finger along the shell of Sebastian’s ear and made him shiver.

With one last kiss, Hess carefully lifted Sebastian’s hands off the headboard and then eased his hips back up. Sebastian groaned as he slipped off Hess’s softening length, his hole finally registering how sore it was, and Hess quieted him with another sweet press of his lips.

Sebastian let Hess roll him onto his back, but when Hess pushed off him, Sebastian let out a whimper before he could stop himself.

“Shh.” Hess soothed a thumb over his lips. “Just give me a second.”

Then he disappeared into a small room, and Sebastian heard running water. After a few moments, Hess reappeared with his chest clean of Sebastian’s cum, holding a wet cloth. He sat on the bed beside Sebastian’s hips and wiped away the bits of spend that had made it all the way up to Sebastian’s chest as well.

Sebastian let out a pleased sigh at the warm water and settled heavily onto the mattress.

Hess chuckled. “You said you preferred a warm washcloth.”

Sebastian frowned as he tried to remember when he would have had a post-coital preferences conversation with Hess. His mind had gone sleepy and pleasantly distracted as said warm

washcloth moved down his soft cock. Then he remembered Kaston and snorted. “You listened.”

“I always listen when you speak, Sebastian.” Hess slipped the washcloth between his thighs.

Sebastian spread them with a little gasp and let Hess clean him with gentle thoroughness. He closed his eyes and wondered if maybe he’d died after all because Leon Hess fucking him until he couldn’t move, then sweetly washing him up with a warm washcloth afterward was the most heavenly experience he’d had to date.

It didn’t seem real.

It didn’t seem possible now that Sebastian’s brain was slowly starting to work again. It couldn’t be as good as it felt, something must be wrong, or something must be in Sebastian’s head.

He opened his eyes and reached out to touch Hess’s bare thigh beside him—as though to confirm it was all real after all—but once again Hess caught his hand. He pressed it to his lips, then smirked at Sebastian over it.

“Don’t you dare tell me you can’t sleep now.”

Sebastian stared at him for a moment, then threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, is that what this was all about, then?”

“Perhaps.” Hess’s smirk stretched into a smile, and Sebastian’s heart nearly turned itself inside out. So that’s what he looked like with a real smile. God, of course he looked good. He had the best goddamn smile Sebastian had ever seen.

“You were trying to wear me out, were you?”

“I believe I succeeded in wearing you out, actually.” Hess cupped Sebastian’s face with his hand and stroked his cheek with his thumb. “Go to sleep, Sebastian.”

Sebastian watched Hess get up off the bed and turn away from him with his inside-out heart in his throat. Seeing Hess’s back made him feel suddenly cold and alone, and the full-sated feeling in his chest started to empty. He reached out for him. “Hess.”

But in the split second before Hess turned around, Sebastian dropped his hand back to the bed. He was being ridiculous. That wasn't what they were. If Hess had wanted to give him a warm body to fall asleep against, he would have given it to him. Sebastian shouldn't ask for it.

And even if Hess would give it to him if he did, Sebastian shouldn't fool himself like that. He already read too much into things, got too attached. Why the hell would he dig himself in any further?

"Yes?" Hess turned back to him with a soft but distant look.

Sebastian just swallowed. "Goodnight," he finally said, then rolled onto his side to face the wall and squirmed around on the bed to get under the covers.

"Goodnight, Sebastian," Hess rumbled from behind him.

Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut.

The good news was at least that blissful I-must-be-dead-I'm-in-heaven feeling had gone away. The disappointment in Sebastian's chest and the stinging in his eyes felt very much real.

Chapter Eight

SEBASTIAN AWOKE MUCH MORE SLOWLY than he had fallen asleep. His body didn't feel quite ready for the endeavor, and he didn't rush it. Instead, he luxuriated in the unique and perfect warmth of a bed in the morning after a good night's sleep. As the inclination came to him, he let his consciousness expand into an awareness of the light in the room: a sweet yellow sunlight.

Then he heard a soft scratching and an occasional creak and the quiet murmur of a voice talking only to itself. He listened to the calm, unhurried sounds for a while, basking in the softness of the bed and the sunlight bright behind his eyelids.

Finally, he opened his eyes.

He saw Hess first, sitting in a chair at a small desk with his broad back to Sebastian. The scratching was from him writing with a proper pen on a proper piece of paper, and the creaks were from him shifting his weight in the chair. He muttered quietly to himself as he worked, and Sebastian could imagine the gears whirring away in his mind, but he still looked calm and almost peaceful.

He had put clothes back on, which was a shame since the only better sight Sebastian could imagine waking up to would be a view of the muscles rippling over his shoulders. Still, the content and almost domestic quality of the sunlight on his dark hair and the quiet sounds of his working made Sebastian reluctant to break the silence.

When Sebastian realized he was staring at the back of Hess's head and the glimpse he had of his hand holding the pen with a dreamy, stupid little smile, he yanked his eyes away and looked around at the rest of the room.

The little space had clearly been an office at one point and not the office of anyone important. To make it a bedroom, a cot had been shoved in along with a standard resistance footlocker. A few well-cared-for weapons lay here and there. The only things of note were a few pictures propped up on a shelf that looked too out of place to have belonged to the former occupant, but they were still too far for Sebastian to make out.

Beyond the pictures, the tiny space contained nothing else of note. Fittingly utilitarian.

The most notable thing about it was, of course, the enigma of a man sitting at the desk.

Sebastian stretched with a heavy sigh.

Hess's entire body tensed.

Sebastian pushed himself up to sit and put his feet on the ground. "What are you working on?"

Hess's muscles loosened back out after a beat, but Sebastian could still see a tightness in his neck that hadn't been there when he'd thought Sebastian was asleep. Hess glanced at him over his shoulder. "A speech."

"For what?" Sebastian bent down over his thighs and touched the floor to stretch his back. Oh how he'd missed this body and its flexibility.

"Media event tomorrow." Hess's voice muffled as he turned back to his work. "The Ralsdis got ahold of some footage and first-hand accounts from the gas attack on Kaston. They've packaged it up and released it and raised holy hell in the intergalactic community."

Sebastian snorted from where he was still bent up over his knees. "Sounds like them. They ask you to give a speech on that big balcony out front? Beam it out to the whole system?"

Hess rustled some papers. “That’s right.”

Sebastian straightened and stood. The concrete chilled his bare feet, but the air had enough warmth that Sebastian could justify being naked for a little longer. “Who’s protecting you?”

“While I’m on the balcony?” Hess didn’t turn to face Sebastian, still bent over his speech, though he hadn’t written anything since Sebastian had spoken.

“Yeah.” Sebastian put his hands on his hips as he trailed his eyes along the back of Hess’s neck and the curious rigidity there.

“I don’t know, though I’m sure Joan has it figured out.” Hess paused, then tapped the end of his pen against the desk and turned around. “Actually, I’d”—Hess cut off with a swallow when his eyes fell on Sebastian, and a grin spread over Sebastian’s face as Hess’s eyes roved over Sebastian’s bare body. But then Hess yanked his gaze back up to Sebastian’s face and continued as though he hadn’t stopped—“appreciate it if you’d be my guard. Now that you’re back.”

Sebastian nodded crisply. “Of course.”

Sebastian usually guarded Hess during these events if he was available. He could blend in and move fast and had better eyes than most. All his time being an assassin had made him good at spotting others. Still, it made Sebastian ridiculously giddy to know that Hess wanted him at his side.

“Thank you.” Hess turned back around.

Sebastian tried not to let the dismissal get to him. He had something he wanted to investigate anyway. So as Hess scratched away on his paper, Sebastian wandered over to the pictures that had been calling to him.

He realized as he padded over that he knew so little about Hess that he had no idea who to even expect to see. A mother? Father? Siblings?

Lover?

No, Hess wouldn’t have a picture of a lover. Sebastian would have heard if Hess had had a lover in the Resistance.

They'd both been in the Resistance for years, and he had never heard of Hess taking a lover. But probably no one had ever heard of him and Sebastian, so maybe clandestine lovers were what Hess always did.

If Sebastian even counted as a lover.

Sebastian scowled and shook his head as he got all tangled up, getting jealous of the possibility of another lover while simultaneously not even sure what he counted as and if he wanted to count as anything anyway.

In the end, he shouldn't have worried because the shelf didn't have any pictures of any lovers.

It had a picture of a young—*very* young, still with the soft nose of a child—Hess with a much younger Farlon and Martha.

And another picture from around the same time, judging by Hess's age, with a woman Sebastian could only assume was Hilda based on her similarity to Farlon.

Sebastian shook his head. He knew Hess had been with the Resistance longer than most, but he hadn't realized he had been with the Resistance longer than almost *anyone*. He was barely older than Sebastian. It hadn't occurred to Sebastian he'd been with the Resistance since he was a damn child.

He looked at the pictures on the other side of the shelf. These were more recent. Hess looked like the man Sebastian knew him as.

There was one of him and Farlon again, smiling at the camera.

One where he and Joan looked to be in a heated discussion but with beers between them rather than a map.

Him and Garrett, with Garrett's arm swung around his neck and a giant grin on his face, with Hess looking nonplussed but with just the hint of curl around the corner of his lip.

Sebastian scowled at that one. He had never understood their closeness. Garrett had joined not much before Sebastian,

but he'd already wheedled his way into Hess's good graces by that time. Considering that Garrett was a colossal dick, Sebastian had always taken that as a sign that while Hess knew his way around leadership and the cause, he was clearly a poor judge of character.

"What do you see in Garrett fucking Twal anyway?" Sebastian turned back toward Hess and motioned to the picture.

Hess snorted and didn't look up. "He asks me the same thing about you."

That sent a surprising spike of uncertainty through Sebastian. "Does he know about..."

Hess looked up when Sebastian trailed off, and Sebastian waved vaguely between them. Hess furrowed his brow. "About how I feel about you?"

Sebastian's heart jumped into his throat and choked off any attempt at a reply.

Before Sebastian could unstick his heart from his windpipe, Hess looked back down at his desk. "No. I don't think so. He just doesn't trust you."

"Cause he's a dick." Sebastian scowled. That unnecessary sentence could get out, but he hadn't managed to force out a question about what exactly Hess meant by *how he felt about him*.

"Because he doesn't trust easily and because he hates deception." Hess set his pen aside, blew on his writing, then tucked the pieces of paper away into a bag on the floor beside him.

Sebastian put his hands on his hips. "I am not deceptive."

"No." Hess chuckled as he stood. "No, that's what I keep telling him."

Sebastian watched as Hess unfolded himself from his chair and set his desk back to rights. Having him fully dressed and Sebastian completely bare reminded Sebastian of Hess's office

back in Kaston, and he twitched at the memory. Maybe they had a little time...

No, if they had any time at all, Sebastian wanted to find out more about how Hess *felt* about him. “Wha—”

“We should get going.” Hess spoke just as Sebastian had finally managed to start the question. “There’s a war room meeting we’re both expected at.”

That jolted Sebastian out of his thoughts. “But breakfast!” Sebastian felt his face crumple and didn’t even try to stop it because his stomach growled at the same time. This body had been in a coma for weeks; its stomach contained nothing but acid.

“I’m sorry.” Hess gave him a suitably pained look as he picked up his data tablet. “I wanted to let you sleep.”

Sebastian sighed and moped back to the bed. “It’s okay.” Someone—Hess, presumably—had folded his clothes while he’d slept. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“It shouldn’t be long.” Hess waited until he’d pulled his clothes on, then opened the door for him and motioned him out into the hall. “The mess will still have breakfast by the time we’re done.”

“It’s fine, like I said.” Sebastian waved his hand. He’d been hungry before, and he’d be hungry again.

They left the room together, and Sebastian let Hess take the lead. He didn’t actually know where he was since he’d never fully familiarized himself with the capitol building in the first place.

They didn’t say anything as they walked down the hall, turned a corner, and walked down a new hall... The longer the silence went on, the harder it became for Sebastian to figure out how to break it.

For a while in that room together, things had felt easy, but now they were out of that room, so Sebastian didn’t know what they were out here. Not that he’d known what they were in there either, but it also hadn’t seemed to matter quite so

much. Whatever they were, Sebastian was free to be himself, but out here...

Wait, since when had he ever been anything but himself, even out here?

Since when did he worry about offending or upsetting Hess? Well, that was easy. Ever since he'd realized that whatever was simmering between them wasn't a mutual loathing but something a lot more complicated and something that Sebastian wasn't ready to compromise or throw away.

Sebastian finally screwed up his courage enough to open his mouth, but then Hess spoke up at the same time, and he popped it closed again.

"How are you feeling?" Hess asked with a glance in his direction.

"Great." Sebastian shrugged, then scrunched his face up. "Well, hungry as fuck, and a little sore...somewhere." Sebastian gave Hess a sidelong look and was intensely gratified to see a little pink in the cheek above his stubble. "But a lot better than when my guts were falling out of my belly."

"Was there any damage done to you?" Hess shot him a quizzical look.

Sebastian scoffed loudly. "Hess!" Sebastian turned to walk sideways and frown at him. He made big motions toward his midriff. "I was practically cut in half." Then he dropped his hands. "Or do you mean, after, when we—"

"No. Not that. I mean, damage to"—Hess scowled, then his lips twisted, and his nose wrinkled as he looked almost embarrassed. He gestured vaguely toward Sebastian's face—"to *you*."

"Oh. No. Nothing permanent, at least." Sebastian turned to walk forward again. It felt oddly nice to be asked after. Really asked after. "Don't get me wrong, the lack of blood flow would have gotten me soon if I hadn't gotten here when I did. I can't survive outside of a body, and I can't survive inside a body that's not alive."

“What happens?”

Sebastian glanced at him. They were of a different height in this body, Hess being slightly shorter than average. No one ever seemed to realize that, given how much larger than life he always seemed.

Torvars, as a general rule, did not give out the details of their physical realities. Aside from it being generally distasteful to others, torvars were a despised and hunted race, and they guarded their weaknesses closely. There weren't that many of them, and stories of purges had come down through the generations crystal clear. Sebastian was already an anomaly, living out as he was, and as his infamy grew, he was certain there were torvars out there that resented him for it.

But Hess looked so thoughtful and curious and just a little concerned that Sebastian found himself answering anyway.

“I suffocate, essentially.” Sebastian waved to his chest and throat. “I can't breathe. I don't have the organs for it. Without an external circulatory system to bring me oxygen, I'm done for.”

Hess frowned. “That must be unnerving. To need something outside of yourself like that.”

“Not really.” Sebastian shrugged. “You need a circulatory system too. But you're stuck with just the one. If that one goes, then *you're* done for.”

Hess chuckled. “I guess so.”

As they turned into a wide hallway that Sebastian finally recognized as the one leading to the war room, Hess slowed his pace. Sebastian slowed to follow and glanced at him, but Hess looked straight ahead. They walked slowly and quietly all the way to the closed door of the war room, and Sebastian thought maybe the tension was all in his head when Hess suddenly stopped.

“Would you have breakfast with me?”

Sebastian blinked and turned to face him. “What?”

“After this meeting, of course.” Hess nodded to the door but then shook his head, his jaw set and his eyes betraying nothing. “You don’t have to. You’ve been medically cleared and debriefed.”

“I don’t have to have breakfast with you?” Sebastian repeated, still trying to follow.

“No. Your time is your own once we’re done here.” Hess moved to take a step toward the door, but Sebastian caught the front of his shirt before he could.

“But I *can* have breakfast with you?” Sebastian clarified. “And you would *like* to have breakfast with me?”

Hess glanced down at Sebastian’s hand on his shirt, still holding him in place, then back up at Sebastian with the barest traces of color in his cheeks. But he still managed to give Sebastian a half smile that seemed almost confident and made Sebastian’s heart flutter. “I would, yes. If you would like to.”

“Yeah.” Sebastian realized how tightly he held Hess’s shirt and quickly let it go. He awkwardly petted the wrinkles down, then glanced into Hess’s eyes again. In the morning light, at this range, Sebastian could see they weren’t just a single unitary dark brown but had swirls of amber shades and a softness that Sebastian wanted to fall into. “I’d like that.”

Hess’s surprisingly pretty eyes crinkled at the edges as he smiled and nodded. But then he took a step back, and Sebastian’s hand fell back down to his side, and a disconcerting thing happened.

Sebastian watched Hess reach for the doorknob, and it was like watching the security systems on a ship turn on. Outwardly nothing changed, but the aura around the ship seemed to hum and spark, and looking at it gave him a feeling of dread and caution. What had once been approachable was now dangerous, and Sebastian could feel it in his bones.

Sebastian followed Hess through the doorway, his own guard coming up in response, and quickly took the measure of the room.

Garrett and Joan leaned against the wall to his left. Joan had her nose buried in her tablet, her fingers dancing across it. Garrett had his arms crossed, his jaw set, and his eyes narrowed as he glared across the room.

On Sebastian's right stood the people he was glaring at, Captain Mal'ik and Oliver Turner. Neither paid Garrett any mind. Oliver Turner stood with his back to him, looking out the window over Ralscoln. Mal'ik simply stood, still and straight as a statue, except for the fingers of his metal hand, which tapped against his thumb rhythmically.

In the center, Hess's usual position over the map, hunched Martha. Sebastian pulled up at the sight of her. The same field of danger that Hess had buzzed around her, and it was not an aura Sebastian was used to feeling from her.

Garrett spoke first, with a caustic tone that Sebastian was very used to feeling from him. "I see you managed to slither out of Kaston, as usual."

"And I see you managed to dodge any of the fighting at all," Sebastian replied lightly. "As usual."

Mal'ik had stopped his fidgeting. "We're glad to see you survived," he said in his rumbling voice, with an oddly kind tone.

"Oh." Sebastian blinked. "Thank you."

"Not all of us," Garrett muttered.

Joan spoke louder as she stepped forward. "But most of us." She waited until Martha had conceded her spot to Hess, then approached the table. "We need to get started. Every second counts."

"I agree." Hess nodded.

Something in his eyes and tone put Sebastian's back up, but Joan didn't seem to notice it.

She turned her tablet toward Hess. "I've spoken to Captain Mal'ik, and given his experience and our admittedly limited intel, we believe our people are probably being held somewhere in this region."

“That area is littered with mines.” Garrett looked over Joan’s shoulder to see her screen. “That could work for us or against us.”

Joan nodded. “If we put together a team of people familiar ___”

“No.” Hess didn’t even bother to glance at the tablet, and Sebastian’s stomach sank as he watched the confusion register on both Joan’s and Garrett’s faces.

“On the ground is better,” Joan frowned. “We can’t get any ships in close—”

“No ships either,” Hess spoke calmly, almost flatly.

Joan’s frown deepened, and Garrett looked pitifully confused, but they were the only ones. Martha, Mal’ik, and Turner looked on stoically. They knew what was coming, and so did Sebastian, but he damn well wasn’t going to sit by and let it happen.

“Hess, you can’t be serious.” Sebastian strode up to the table with a growl, ignoring the way Garrett flinched when he got close.

Hess met his gaze evenly. “No rescue operation.”

Sebastian couldn’t believe he’d thought those stony eyes soft just moments ago. But he *had* thought they were soft because they *had* been. He planted his hands on the table and leaned in. “Hess, they’re our people. They were ready to die for the Resistance.”

Hess didn’t miss a beat. “Then they still are.”

“The Klah’Eel won’t kill them,” Mal’ik said calmly, but his tone seemed to incense Garrett.

“Why the fuck would we trust you?”

Turner let out a condescending bark of laughter as he turned away from the window to face them all. “Do you ever get tired of having the same thoughts over and over again?”

Sebastian snorted. “He doesn’t, actually.”

“Fuck you.” Garrett shoved him hard enough that Sebastian stumbled, and Hess’s hand snapped out to grab Garrett’s wrist. Finally, a fire kindled in Hess’s eyes, and he curled his lip and opened his mouth, but Joan didn’t let him get in a word.

“Hess, look, we have at least two dozen men there.” Joan pushed her tablet under Hess’s nose as though whatever she had there would somehow convince a man who had already made up his mind. That fire that had lit when Garrett put his hand on Sebastian doused immediately, and Hess dropped Garrett’s arm.

“I know how many men we have there, Joan.” Hess firmly but gently pushed Joan out of his space. “I know where they are, I know how they’re being treated, and I know how to get them back. And we’re not going to.”

Joan clenched her teeth. “But why?”

Garrett’s kicked-puppy face hardened as understanding finally dawned on his pitifully dim brain. “Because we can’t split our forces.”

Sebastian scowled. “Oh, now you’re a tactical expert?”

“He’s right.” Mal’ik stepped forward and joined them at the edge of the table. “More than likely, they’re still there because the Klah’Eel want to bait you out.”

“They’re counting on us to be undisciplined,” Hess said to Garrett. Then he turned to Sebastian, and though his eyes were cold and hard, Sebastian saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “Emotional.”

“You mean they’re counting on us to not be like them.” Sebastian raised his hand and pointed north. “You mean the best thing we can do is be cold, and calculating, and unfeeling, and disloyal—”

“No one here is fucking disloyal,” Garrett snapped.

Sebastian turned on him. “We’re leaving our men to rot in Klah’Eel cages!” Sebastian snarled, then turned his snarl on Hess. “Men that followed you, and trusted you, and gave you

everything, you're leaving to suffer and die. That sounds pretty fucking disloyal to me."

"Better to lose a few men than the whole war." Martha spoke for the first time and her voice sliced through their arguments with an uncharacteristic ruthlessness that brought Garrett and Sebastian both up short. But her furious eyes bore solely into Sebastian. "We knew we might lose Kaston and we did. We will *not* throw away everything else because *you* cannot stand to live in a world that doesn't cater to your pampered ideals."

"Martha," Hess growled a low warning, but Sebastian barely heard him over the pounding in his ears.

How dare she? She knew how much he had sacrificed. She knew more than anyone! How dare she throw it all back in his face like a fucking insult?

"How d—" Sebastian started forward with his fists clenched, but Hess held up a placating hand, with his eyes still on Martha.

"What?" Martha turned her sharp gaze on Hess, but Hess didn't blink.

"You've made your point."

"Have I?"

"Yes."

The blood pounding in Sebastian's ears simmered to quiet as he watched Martha and Hess stare each other down. What the hell was happening between them? They had stared at each other like that the night before, when Martha had wanted to debrief Sebastian and Hess had wanted him to rest. Hess had lost that silent argument, but he didn't look at all like he was going to lose this one.

Martha physically conceded with a step back. "Alright."

Sebastian opened his mouth, ready to take any hint of opening to press his point, but one look from Hess and he knew it would go nowhere. Whatever steel was in his spine that had warded off Martha wasn't going to bend for him.

Sebastian gritted his teeth. Of course Hess wouldn't bend for him. If Hess wasn't going to bend for the men he'd spent apparently his whole life fighting with and leading, then he wasn't going to bend for Sebastian. Sebastian wasn't that fucking special.

He spun around and paced to the window that Turner had been looking out of, and Turner stepped to the side to make room for him. Sebastian saw Mal'ik inhale as he walked past, and Sebastian shot him a poisonous look.

“Keep your nose to yourself, klah'eel,” he growled quietly enough for just the three of them as he planted himself in front of the window with his hands on his hips. He'd been in enough klah'eel to know their sense of smell could border on mind reading when people got this worked up. Hell, Mal'ik probably even knew what was going on between Hess and Martha, but Sebastian was in no mood to ask.

And he was in no mood to be broadcasting his distress to a hulking ex-captain of the enemy. Even if the giant of a man was strangely kind. Sebastian sighed and shot Mal'ik an apologetic look. Mal'ik had asked Sebastian his name, after all, back when he'd been breaking him out in Northern Tava, and almost no one ever asked Sebastian his name.

Mal'ik gave him a little nod and turned back to the table as the conversation stiltedly resumed.

Sebastian only half paid attention to the words, trying to keep his breathing and his heart rate and his fury in check. Something about the Carta Team fetching the scientist from the cartel, something about who was on the team, something about Garrett being pissy—but what else was new?—and something about when they were leaving. Sebastian didn't care because all he could think about was their men.

So many men abandoned, and *Hess* abandoning them. Hess, who Sebastian had followed practically to the ends of the earth. Hess, who had held Sebastian's hand as he screamed in pain. Hess, who had kissed him and put him to sleep in a bed he had made.

Sebastian screwed his eyes shut and ground the heels of his palms into them. This was not rational thinking. This was him letting his emotions cloud reality. Just like Hess had accused him of. Acting emotionally. Sebastian was getting emotionally attached to a man that didn't exist because he was telling a story to himself that wasn't true.

Hess wasn't kind, and Hess didn't care for him.

Then he paused, cocked his head, and looked over his shoulder as a confusing sentence from the conversation behind him made its way into his conscious mind. "What?"

The conversation quieted, and everyone glanced at each other and back at him.

Sebastian turned all the way back to face them as his stomach twisted back around in on itself, and just after it had finally settled after his last outrage. He pointed at Turner. "You. You just quipped about being on the wrong side of species state patent laws."

Turner tilted up his chin, but Sebastian had studied him enough to know that that move was defensiveness disguised as aggression. "I did. I'm wanted enough as it is. I doubt the authorities will come after me for patent fraud."

"Your family's patents?"

"That's right."

"The gas."

Turner nodded, and Sebastian looked between him and everyone else. Turner's face was studiously smooth, Mal'ik's stoic, Garrett's hostile, Joan uncomfortable and unhappy, Martha's and Hess's unyieldingly hard.

"It's not patent fraud to make an antidote, or a defense, or a neutralizing agent, is it?" Sebastian took a few slow steps toward them, and Joan shrank back. She was a clever woman, but there was a reason she didn't go to the front lines. She was the weak link. Sebastian focused in on her. "Is it?"

She licked her lips. "We're not making an antidote for it, Sebastian."

Sebastian had to ask because he needed to hear the answer, because the place where his mind was going couldn't be tolerated. "Then why are we getting a scientist from the cartel?"

Martha stepped between him and Joan. "This has all been discussed extensively, and a decision has been reached."

"Why"—Sebastian raised his voice to a shout and pointed his finger at the window in a rough approximation of the direction of Carta—"are we getting a scientist from the cartel if we're not making an antidote?"

"Because we are making a duplicate!" Hess snatched Sebastian's hand out of the air and spun him around to face him. "Because *I* have decided that it is a weapon we need."

Sebastian swallowed. He twisted his wrist around to grip Hess's hand with his own and lowered his voice. "So, while I was still struggling to get back after being dosed with that poison, you decided you needed some for yourself?"

"This isn't about you." Hess tried to tug his hand back, but Sebastian held on.

"It doesn't have to be about me. It's about Southern Tava, and Ralscoln, and everything we've been fighting for."

"And what is it you think we're fighting for?" Hess stopped trying to free his hand and pulled Sebastian closer to him, his grip hard and his face harder. "What is it exactly?"

"Something better," Sebastian spat. "Something better than the invasion and the occupation. Something—"

"No, we—"

"That gas *was* the occupation, Hess! Don't you get that?" Sebastian yanked himself out of Hess's grip and looked at everyone else. "Don't any of you get that?"

No one said anything, and revulsion rose in Sebastian's throat.

"No, of course you don't," he seethed. "Because none of you have ever experienced it. None of you have ever even

seen it. You've just sat here so pleasantly removed and decided you *wanted* it."

"It's not that simple," Martha snapped.

"Maybe I didn't describe it well enough for you," Sebastian turned on her. "The fear and the treachery and the distrust and the violence, it was like the first decade of the occupation all rolled up into one little canister and unleashed on a people. *We* cannot do that."

"We can." Hess didn't raise his voice to match Sebastian's, and that crushed him more than if Hess had screamed in his face. "What we cannot do is lose."

Sebastian turned back to him, ignoring everyone else's watching eyes and didn't bother to hide his heart breaking. "Hess..."

"We are not fighting for 'something better.'" Hess's upper lip curled as he quoted Sebastian back to him. "We are fighting to drive out the Klah'Eel. And if we don't use everything we have, we will lose. They will stay, and they will cement their hold, and Southern Tava will disappear."

Sebastian shook his head and backed toward the door. "With you in charge, Southern Tava will disappear anyway."

Garrett stepped after him with his fists clenched. "You—"

But Sebastian didn't bother with him. He half fled, half stormed out the door, his eyes and throat burning. Sickening and familiar impotence overwhelmed him as he got out into the hall, and he staggered and caught himself.

He hadn't felt that since before he joined the Resistance. He thought he'd finally conquered feeling like there was nothing he could do, no value that he could bring, no real person that he could be.

This morning, even with everything going on around him, he'd felt like he'd finally found a full life for himself, and now he was back to being an empty, useless, animated human body.

He heard the door to the war room starting to open up behind him, and he quickly pushed himself off the wall. He

hurried back down the hall and to the stairs, not wanting to see anyone that was going to come out of that room.

Instead, Sebastian spent the better part of an hour stalking through their new headquarters in a lather. He indulged his fury with Hess's decision and his hurt that Hess would make it even in the face of Sebastian's pleading. He lost himself to the embarrassment of thinking that because Hess fucked Sebastian like he was his whole world that he *meant* anything to him. And he wrestled with the shame that he had been foolish enough to nurture feelings for the man, even when he had known—had *always* known—that Hess was cruel and uncompromising.

It was one thing for Sebastian to be loyal to his leader; it was another for him to have started to fall for the man.

Idiot.

But after hours of walking back and forth through the capitol building, getting the lay of the land, finding the cantina and the mess—and finally eating—and all the escape tunnels and familiarizing himself with the building and feeling his feelings to the utmost, boredom finally overtook him.

He found Maxwell in the auditorium-turned-medical-wing where there were always things that needed doing, and Maxwell raised an eyebrow at the sight of him but put him to work without asking any questions.

Sebastian worked away the hours tending to the men and women who had barely made it out of Kaston, disinfecting medical tools and organizing and restocking bandages. By the time Maxwell approached him with a tired but satisfied smile as he dried his hands, Sebastian's anger had ebbed into a simmering grumpiness.

"Night shift just got here," Maxwell said as he tossed his used towel into the hamper Sebastian had emptied earlier. "Shall we head to the cantina?"

Sebastian snorted as he tucked his last box of reorganized bandages onto a shelf. "You don't even like the cantina."

"No, but you do."

Sebastian huffed a guilty laugh. “I really do.”

“So, let’s go.” Maxwell nodded to the door, and Sebastian followed after waving a goodbye and a good luck to the night shift. “I just need to pick up someone along the way.”

“Who?”

“Oliver Turner.”

Sebastian stopped. “I’m sorry, what?”

Maxwell kept walking a few paces and then turned back to face him with a patient expression. “I invited Oliver Turner to join us for drinks tonight, and he accepted. We’re going to pick him up.”

“What do you mean you invited him to join *us*? You didn’t even invite me to drinks until two seconds ago!”

Maxwell’s patient expression didn’t waver. “Were you ever going to say no to drinks?”

“Well, no—”

“So it was a safe assumption.”

“But *why* are we having drinks with Turner?” Sebastian threw his hands into the air.

“Because he doesn’t have any friends here.”

“Because he’s a bad guy!”

“He’s not a bad guy, Sebastian.” Maxwell turned and kept walking down the hall, and Sebastian followed him in a sulk. “He’s sacrificed a lot to help us here, and I’ve found him to be a very engaging conversational partner.”

“Ugh.”

Maxwell did not dignify that with a reply.

They wound through the capitol building until they got to a long hallway of rooms, and Maxwell knocked on one. After a pause, Oliver Turner opened it, striking the same impressive figure he always had. Despite his new attire of old, worn, whatever-he-could-get-his-hands-on-out-here, he still wore it

like the expensive clothes Sebastian had first seen him in, and he still had every hair in place.

Sebastian scowled. “You’re sure you’ve got the time for us? Wouldn’t you rather be holed up with your klah’eel captain?”

“Of course.” Turner shrugged a single shoulder. “But he’s holed up with your leader, so I guess you’ll have to do.”

Sebastian refused to think too much into *your leader*. Hess *was* his leader, and Turner hadn’t meant it in the same way Sebastian had meant *your captain*. Even if Sebastian’s heart had skipped and twisted as he’d said it.

He turned on his heel and waved a hand over his shoulder. “Whatever. Let’s go before all the alcohol’s gone.”

“Don’t worry.” Maxwell chuckled. “We’ll run out of bandages before we run out of alcohol.”

Sebastian led the way to the cantina with a stomping stride as Maxwell and Turner chatted behind him. Maxwell asked how some injury Mal’ik had sustained was healing. Turner said it was fine, paused, and then admitted that the ports for his mechanical arm were starting to hurt him and asked if Maxwell had any lotion. Maxwell did and offered oil for the machinery as well.

Turner thanked him.

Sebastian gagged.

The saccharine sweetness between Turner and Mal’ik was too much for him. Absurd and out of place in this world.

He burst into the cantina and sought out the bar just as the bartender let out a cheer.

“Sebastian!” Jun called with outstretched arms. “It’s been too long.”

“Jun!” Sebastian mirrored the motion. “The most important man in the Resistance.”

“Come over here! I found something I think you’ll like.” Jun waved him over and then ducked under the bar. He came

back up just as Sebastian got to the counter and set a crystal decanter with a pale amber liquid in front of him. “Found it in some fancy office after we took the place.”

“Oh, now that looks special.” Sebastian popped out the crystal stopper and took a whiff. His eyes watered at the potency, and he blinked the tears away with a grin. “Smells special too.”

“That’s just what I thought.” Jun laughed and grabbed some mismatched glasses from the top of the bar—a couple of crystal ones that matched the decanter, a crystal one that didn’t, and a tin one. “Want a round?”

“How about a round for everyone here?” Sebastian raised his voice and looked around at the crowd in the cantina. They’d all turned to look when he’d entered, with the usual mix of friendly recognition, distrust, and wariness. But now most of the eyes brightened. He turned back to Jun. “They all deserve a taste of the good stuff after what they’ve done for Southern Tava.”

“They all deserve more than a taste!” Jun pulled out more glasses from his store and lowered his voice as he threw Sebastian a smile. “I’m telling Martha it’s coming out of your wages, though.”

Sebastian smiled back and shrugged. “I’d expect nothing less.”

Then he let himself be surrounded and buffeted by the crowd. He hugged and laughed with the friends among them, passed drinks around, and clinked glasses. He found Jason, who he hadn’t seen since he’d tried to get past Tucker at the barricade while he was wearing Tesh, and they took a shot together and cursed both assholes. The cacophony of voices ringing in his ears, the press of bodies, and the smell of alcohol surrounded him like a blanket and softened the edges of all his anger, frustration, and pain.

After a while, he disentangled himself, took his half-full glass, carefully balanced two others in his other hand, and made his way to the tall table in the corner where Maxwell and Turner had set up.

When they'd entered, Turner had been on the receiving end of even more hostile looks than Sebastian, and Sebastian would have felt bad for him, except, as far as Sebastian was concerned, he completely deserved them.

Sebastian pushed them each a glass. "Alright, drink up. This might even be fancy enough for your taste buds, Turner."

"I doubt it." Turner took a sip, made a show of thinking about it, and shrugged an elegant shoulder as he set it back on the table. "It'll suffice."

Sebastian snorted despite himself and sat in one of the chairs. "Yeah, okay."

"So, Oliver, I hear you have a friend that got us our connection to the cartel?" Leave it to sweet Maxwell to start the friendly small talk.

Turner made a face. "I don't know that I'd call Bryant Harrison a friend."

"Ha, no, I don't think that you should." Sebastian scoffed and then took a swig. "He doesn't like you very much from what I saw."

"The feeling was mutual." Turner shrugged, and Sebastian narrowed his eyes.

"*Was* mutual?"

Turner tapped a long finger against his glass—one of the crystal ones, of course. "I might have changed my tune."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. "Yeah, we'll see how long that lasts."

Maxwell glided the conversation past Sebastian's barb. "Is that why you're on this Carta Team with Garrett?"

"Wait, you and Garrett are both on that team?" Sebastian straightened. He'd been too busy fuming to pay attention to that part of the meeting. "Who else is? What are you doing?"

Turner took a sip of his drink. "We're going to Carta and meeting with the cartel on behalf of the Resistance to negotiate a lease on one of their scientists."

“A lease?” Maxwell wrinkled his nose.

“That’s how they phrased it.”

Sebastian frowned. “The Resistance is sending you and Garrett to represent us?”

“As well as Mal’ik and Joan.” Turner nodded.

“Oh, now that sounds like a fun bunch.” Sebastian snorted and amused himself with picturing the four of them crammed into a ship small enough to escape out of Southern Tava’s atmosphere without the Klah’Eel seeing.

Turner smiled thinly, and Sebastian knew he could see the same image in his head. “Indeed.”

Maxwell moved them on with a smile. “You’ve been working with Joan, haven’t you?”

“I have.” Turner looked away from Sebastian and smiled back at Maxwell, but the expression seemed to go through a few subtle iterations—cold, distant, overly cheery—before settling into a cool friendliness. He swallowed, and Sebastian almost laughed. He was just as uncomfortable with being here as Sebastian was with having him here. “I’ve been helping her sort through reports and draw conclusions. The Resistance’s espionage capabilities are very impressive.”

“Are you surprised?” Sebastian sipped his drink and raised an eyebrow.

Turner met his gaze evenly. “Not really. Not after what you did in Northern Tava.”

Sebastian gave him a grin that bared more teeth than necessary.

“Don’t mind Sebastian, Oliver.” Maxwell rolled his eyes. “He’s not as bloodthirsty as he’d have you think.”

“I never said I was bloodthirsty.”

“But you’ve certainly spilled a lot of blood,” Oliver said lightly before taking a sip of his drink.

Sebastian grimaced. That was true. There was a reason he had the reputation he had, regardless of whose orders he’d

been acting on. He doubted all the people he'd killed much cared that he hadn't enjoyed it. Neumann probably didn't. The people he'd dose with fear on Hess's orders certainly wouldn't.

Sebastian leaned back, tossed the rest of his drink into his mouth, and enjoyed the burn of it down his throat.

"Fine. You're right. There. We've all got plenty of blood on our hands." Sebastian set his glass down, spread his fingers wide, and shook them demonstrably in front of him. "We're all even here. Happy now, Maxwell?"

"Happy." Maxwell chuckled. He cocked his head at Turner. "Is that why you brought the data strip to us? Are you atoning for the blood on your hands and the sins of your family?"

Sebastian scoffed before Turner could answer. "He brought us the data strip because he's in love with one man." He held up a single finger to drive the point home. "One man. He doesn't get morality points for that."

"That's true." Turner gave Maxwell an apologetic look. "I didn't exactly do it for the greater good."

"There's something to be said for caring about a person." Maxwell frowned and tapped his glass thoughtfully. "I think you're better for caring about one person than not a single person at all."

"True." Sebastian sneered as he spun his empty glass on the table—he'd gotten the tin one. "Then you'd be just as bad as Hess."

He stopped his spinning glass and hung his head with a groan.

He supposed it had been too much to hope he'd managed to bury that fury under alcohol and socializing already.

Turner and Maxwell exchanged a glance. A *knowing* glance. Sebastian frowned at them, then decided he didn't fucking care because he didn't fucking want to think about Hess. He pushed himself up from the table.

“I want to play darts.”

“Colin set the board up over there.” Maxwell nodded his head to a nearby corner.

Colin.

Sebastian remembered his friend’s face as the gas crept up into his nostrils and felt the pain of it in his chest. Maxwell must have seen it in his face, too, because he reached out and put a hand on Sebastian’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. Did he...make it?”

“I think so.” Sebastian nodded. “I’m pretty sure I saw him getting loaded into the back of some Klah’Eel ship.” At least, Sebastian desperately hoped it had been him.

“I’m sorry.” Maxwell squeezed his shoulder, but Sebastian shook his head.

He shrugged Maxwell’s hand off. “Whatever. Come on, you’re playing darts with me.”

“I’ll watch from here,” Turner said with a distrustful glance at the board.

Sebastian scoffed. “You will not. If Maxwell’s going to force me to endure your company, you’re at least going to play the game I want to play.”

Not waiting for Turner to agree, Sebastian stomped over to the board and started tapping on its screen to choose the game. He chose the easiest and simplest one Colin had loaded up; he wasn’t going to be completely cruel to Turner.

Turning around to announce the start of the game and start explaining the rules, Sebastian’s heart sank to see Garrett striding over with a twisted sneer. Did he have to? Now? Couldn’t Sebastian have one evening?

But before Sebastian could gear himself up for a fight, Maxwell stepped easily in front of Garrett and stopped him with a hand on his chest. Garrett looked down—far down since their height difference was not trivial—at Maxwell with a scowl that eventually softened as Maxwell spoke. Sebastian couldn’t hear them from this distance over the din of the bar,

but Maxwell said something, Garrett replied, and then Maxwell threw back his head and laughed.

Laughed! As though Garrett could be witty, which Sebastian was pretty damn sure he couldn't be.

They said a few more things, and then Garrett shook his head, rolled his eyes, and walked back to a table against the far wall.

A table with Martha at it. Sebastian met her eyes. They looked at each other for a second, and then Sebastian spun back around to his dartboard. He loved Martha. He really did. But he didn't want to talk to *her* right now either.

"Turner, where—oh." Sebastian cut off his own bark when he realized Turner was beside him, watching him mess with the board and waiting patiently for instructions. Sebastian passed him a handful of darts. "These are yours."

He explained the rules, made sure Turner understood them, and started the game.

Then he immediately stopped it because Turner's throwing technique was beyond horrendous and needed to be fixed if they were ever going to play a real game. So he lined him up and started putting him through some practice exercises.

"Do you really think Leon Hess doesn't care about a single person?" Turner asked after throwing his last dart in their third practice round and stepping aside for Sebastian.

Sebastian barely managed to keep hold of his dart before throwing it wildly off-center in surprise. He glanced at Turner to see him looking at Sebastian with that too-thoughtful, too-curious expression and composed himself enough to throw his dart dead center before replying. "Yeah. I do, actually."

"So you think he does all this just because he's an angry, power-hungry, would-be dictator?" Turner watched as Sebastian threw another dart, just off-center this time. "It's a pretty common assumption among the Klah'Eel."

"I didn't say that." Sebastian shook his head. He threw his last dart and then went to retrieve them all. It was the first round he didn't have to stoop to the floor, Oliver finally

having managed to get them all on the board. “I think he’s definitely an angry control freak. But I think he cares a lot about Southern Tava’s independence and what the people have gone through, what they deserve, and the wrongs the Klah’Eel have committed against them. To be honest, I think he even cares about the people in some abstract, distant way.”

Oliver took the darts Sebastian passed him and lined up again. “But not a single person.”

“Nope.” Sebastian grabbed Oliver’s elbow before he could throw his first dart, readjusted his grip, and then let him go and nodded for him to continue. “Not a single person. Not the individuals. Not the soldiers, not the citizens, not anyone.”

Not him.

Oliver threw his last dart—one very near the middle—but didn’t concede his position. He studied Sebastian with narrowed eyes, then looked at Maxwell, who was sitting on a stool next to them, happy to not have been roped into their little practice session.

“Okay, what is it?” Sebastian put his hands on his hips and looked between the two. “What do you two so desperately want to say? What?”

Oliver tilted his chin. “That’s just not what Mal’ik thinks.”

Sebastian gave Oliver a scornful look, then waved his hands and shooed him off the dart-throwing spot. “And what the fuck would Mal’ik know about Hess? He’s only been here for like a week and a half.”

“He was at the barricade in Kaston when we got word that headquarters had been overrun.” Maxwell finally spoke.

“He was with Hess,” Oliver added, watching Sebastian’s face instead of Sebastian’s dart.

“So?” Sebastian threw his second dart with too much force, and it bounced off the digital board and onto the floor. He sighed. It was amazing how much Hess could get to him without even being here.

“So he saw how Hess reacted to the news.” Oliver didn’t go to pick up the darts once Sebastian had thrown his last one—even though it was his turn—so Sebastian grabbed them again himself.

“Let me guess.” Sebastian repositioned himself, not feeling like guiding Oliver through the motions again, and Oliver looked way more intent on titrating useless information to him than learning how to throw a dart properly. “He was furious and frustrated and disbelieving. But ultimately level-headed and decisive.” Sebastian allowed himself a grim little smile. It was one of the things he’d always admired about Hess, one of the reasons he followed him so loyally. “He’s good under pressure.”

Another glance between Oliver and Maxwell, and this time Maxwell spoke. “He wasn’t this time.”

Maxwell’s tone finally made Sebastian drop his hand to his side and turn to face him. “What do you mean?” He looked at them both. “Go on. What happened?”

“He tried to get back to headquarters.” Maxwell stood from his stool and took a step toward Sebastian as though to be closer in case anything happened. “He tried to get back to you.”

The sounds of the bar dimmed around Sebastian. “What?”

“He told everyone to evacuate, he made the right call there, but then he tried to get to one of the land cruisers and go back to headquarters,” Maxwell continued. “He was insistent. Wild. He and Mal’ik came to blows.”

“What?” Sebastian repeated in a higher pitch, spinning to Oliver now.

Oliver nodded. “Mal’ik said he had to incapacitate him before he would see reason.”

“He did,” Maxwell confirmed. “I was there. I’ve never seen Hess like that.”

“But that...” Sebastian’s palms got clammy, and his skin flashed both hot and cold. Hess had reacted like that? About him? In front of everyone? With Kaston burning around him?

“That wasn’t about me, specifically. It was about...Kaston, or something.”

Maxwell gave him an almost sympathetic look. “It was about you.”

Hess had tried to get back to him. Sebastian crossed his arms in front of him and looked down. With all his plans falling apart and his men watching, Hess had tried to get back to *him*. Sebastian shifted, feeling off-balance, then lifted his head to scowl at Maxwell.

“What, did he think I would be taken down that easily?”

Maxwell raised his eyebrows in an unimpressed look. “No, actually. Martha and Mal’ik thought you would be taken down that easily. Hess insisted you would still be fighting.”

Oh. Sebastian tried to stifle the pleased, proud feeling that gave him and keep his lips from curving up into a giddy little smile, but from Maxwell’s narrow eyes, he wasn’t successful. Under Maxwell’s searching look, Sebastian finally understood something that had confused him at the time.

“That’s why you asked if I felt safe with him last night.” Sebastian straightened and pointed at Maxwell as the realization clicked into place. He pointed the finger back at himself as he continued, “*I’d* always known that Hess was an asshole”—then at Maxwell—“but *you* never seemed to think so. I wondered why you thought I should be moved.”

“He was being irrational back at Kaston, and he was being irrational when you were brought in.” Maxwell pulled himself up tall, revealing a hint of the steel he had in him. He played the sweet doctor so often, people could forget he had a spine of iron. “Irrational men are dangerous men.”

“It sounds a lot like he means the opposite of harm to Sebastian,” Oliver finally spoke up with a frown.

Maxwell just shook his head. “You’re thinking rationally.”

Oliver didn’t look convinced, and Sebastian didn’t reply right away. He knew that buried somewhere in Maxwell’s history was something deeply unpleasant. He didn’t know specifically what it was, but he had seen the scars of it every

once in a while when that steely, uncompromising look came into his eyes. This was one of those times, and Sebastian wasn't completely convinced that Maxwell's fear of irrational men made any sense when applied to Hess.

Hess was rational to a fault. Extremely thorough and thoughtful, with every decision justified by facts, evidence, and sound logical arguments. Sebastian could have laughed. That rationality with a complete lack of any tempering humanity was exactly his issue with Hess.

"Hess doesn't *mean* anything for me," Sebastian sneered at Oliver. "And he certainly doesn't mean anything *to* me."

Hess's attempted brave—foolish—rescue back at Kaston. Hess sweeping him into his arms and depositing him into his own bed when he stumbled home. Hess's sweet words and his worshipful touch, and the way he had looked at him this morning when he'd asked him to breakfast. None of it meant anything coming from a man who could make the decisions that Hess could make—who could leave their men to rot and take for himself the worst possible weapon Sebastian had ever encountered. And so none of it meant anything to Sebastian.

"Hess is a cold, heartless asshole." Sebastian grabbed his data tablet off the table next to Maxwell and made a connection to the dartboard's screen. "He doesn't care about anyone, and he certainly doesn't care about me."

He rifled through the stored images on his data tablet until he came to *that* shot. The one that had played over every screen in every system across the sector. The one the newsreels loved and loved to hate. He flicked it up onto the dartboard screen, and in a second, the dark, intense eyes of Leon Hess stared down at him from it.

"He might win this goddamn war, but he'll whittle us down to nothing in the process," Sebastian growled as he stared at that image. It had been taken on the roof of the capitol building that they now stood in, just before Hess had ordered the blank, black flag of the Resistance to be raised over it. Hess glared at the camera with a gun pointed straight into the lens, seconds before he pulled the trigger.

Sebastian had always thought he looked so striking in it.

He grabbed the rest of the darts and lined himself up.

“Sebastian...” Maxwell’s warning voice did nothing to slow Sebastian once he’d gotten on a roll, and he didn’t even turn around.

“Did you know he knew Kaston was compromised?” Sebastian threw a dart, and it landed on Hess’s chin. “He knew Kaston was compromised, and he did nothing about it. He sacrificed it and everyone in it without a second thought. And he won’t even save them now!”

It was easier to feel the anger. Self-righteous anger was an easy feeling to hold. The hurt and disappointment and the confusion, those were the feelings Sebastian hated. The warm, fuzzy feeling he’d had this morning when he’d woken up in the quiet of Hess’s room, with Hess’s soft, tired smile on him.

Sebastian threw another dart, and this one hit Hess’s cheek. What did Hess’s feelings even mean? They couldn’t mean anything if he was still willing to discard everything Sebastian said about the gas, about what it could do, and about what he had seen. And what did the feelings of a man that could unleash such horror on people even matter?

“Sebastian.” Maxwell’s voice had a harder note in it now, but Sebastian just threw his third dart.

“I don’t care, Maxwell. If it wasn’t for him—”

“Sebastian,” Maxwell barked, and *that* made Sebastian turn around because he’d never heard such—

Sebastian froze.

Hess stood beside Maxwell, watching Sebastian and the board with a cool expression.

Sebastian glanced at the board—Hess’s face, darts stuck into his chin, his cheek, and his forehead—and swallowed. Hess never came down to the cantina. *Never*. He hadn’t expected...

Sebastian shook off his shame.

He narrowed his eyes at Hess and planted his hands on his hips. He finished his sentence in a clear voice that carried right over the silent bar. “If it wasn’t for him, Colin would still be here to play with me.”

Sebastian felt every eye on him and lifted his chin. Questioning and complaining about Hess or leadership wasn’t a crime in the Resistance. They weren’t an army. They needed to vent sometimes, and they were allowed to as long as they did their duty. But Hess’s face on a dartboard? No one had gone that far.

Hess’s expression gave nothing away. If what he saw bothered him, Sebastian wouldn’t know. Sebastian looked into his dark eyes, and it was like looking at a blank wall.

After a moment, Hess turned away from him and toward the crowd.

“We suffered a crushing setback at Kaston,” he said in a calm, carrying voice that managed to be audible throughout the room while still being intimate and sincere. “I won’t pretend that you shouldn’t be angry. I won’t pretend that *I’m* not angry.”

And for just a moment, they could all see and hear his anger in his clenched fists and his rough voice.

“I won’t pretend the loss of comrades is easy to bear or that it should be.” Hess looked around at them all, and, from all their expressions, they hung on his every word. Hell, Sebastian hung on his every word. “We have started a new stage in our struggle. When this is over, we will have either driven the invaders from our home once and for all... or we won’t be here anymore.”

A poignant pause.

“I trust each and every one of you. I believe in your strength, and your commitment, and your valor. I know that none of you could ever let me down.” Hess pressed his fist to his own chest. “And I would die before I let *you* down.”

And then he walked out, his heavy, decisive footfalls ringing in the quiet bar, fading away as he disappeared into the

hall. The room stayed still for another moment, then broke out into a buzz of low conversations.

Martha stood from her table, put a hand on Garrett's shoulder to keep him seated, and followed Hess out the door. Garrett shot Sebastian a disgusted look, and Sebastian turned away from him and all the other eyes on him. Not everyone was as pissed off at him as Garrett. He wasn't the only person in the room angry at Hess for Kaston; he was just also angry at other things.

Nonetheless, he wiped Hess's face from the dartboard and tried not to flush when Maxwell sighed.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

Sebastian didn't need to see Maxwell to know he was shaking his head.

"You just have to make a scene."

"And I don't feel bad about it." Sebastian jutted his chin out at him and gathered his darts. He shoved half of them into Oliver's hands, who took them with his lips still sealed shut as though afraid to set Sebastian off. "Do you think you're finally ready for a real game?"

Oliver took the darts, stepped out of the throwing spot, and raised his hands. "Whatever you say."

Sebastian scowled, lined himself up, and ignored all the eyes he could still feel on him. "Good."

Chapter Nine

LEON KEPT his footsteps measured and clear and slow even as the door to the cantina slammed shut behind him. He wouldn't stop to break down, and he wouldn't run to his room to do it there. He would walk. Dignified. Confident. Slow. Until he got to the privacy of his room.

“Leon!”

He winced at the sound of Martha calling after him. He hadn't seen her there in the cantina, but then he hadn't been able to see anyone. All he'd been able to see, even when he wasn't looking at him, was Sebastian's defiant scowl and the disgust in his eyes.

“Leon.” Martha caught up to him and put a hand on his arm, but he didn't stop walking, and she fell into step beside him. “He didn't mean it.”

Leon snorted at the absurdity of that statement. “Yes, he did. Sebastian never says anything he doesn't mean.”

“That doesn't mean he's right.”

“He is, though, isn't he?” Leon stopped and turned on his heel to face her. “In the most basic sense, he *is* right. If it weren't for me, his best friend would still be here. They would all still be here.”

And Sebastian hated him for it.

The thought twisted itself like a knife into Leon's heart, right next to the knife twisted there by the thought that he

hated himself for it too.

He was responsible for the losses and misery of dozens, if not hundreds, of people. And he was set to be responsible for the misery of dozens more, with no guarantee that it would all be worth it in the end. He didn't know if they'd be able to drive out the Klah'Eel. He didn't know if they'd finally win their freedom. He didn't know that anything would even be better if they did.

All he knew was that he carried the speech that Farlon had worked on for decades, and he had to give it. He had to do whatever it took to give it. He had to *try*. Hundreds, thousands of people counted on him to try. They believed in him. They knew that he would do whatever had to be done to win them their freedom and make all the suffering worth it.

The irony was that even Sebastian believed in him; he just also hated him for it.

Leon turned and kept walking, and Martha growled after him. "You have to let him go."

"I can't let him go. I don't even have him." Leon didn't want to stop. He wanted to get as far away from that damn bar where Sebastian was throwing darts at his face. But Martha took two long steps after him and grabbed his arm.

She yanked him back around to face her. "Don't be fucking glib with me, Leon."

"What the hell do you want from me, Martha?" Leon ripped his arm out of her grasp and waved back down the hall they'd come. "You saw him back there. I don't have him."

"But I know how you feel about him." Martha stepped in close, as though ready to fight him about it, but Leon couldn't deny it. She'd seen him in Kaston, and she had known him too long to be fooled anyway. She jabbed her hand into the center of Leon's chest. "And I need you to harden your heart."

Leon frowned and resisted the urge to rub the sore spot she'd just hit. "What are you talking about?"

"Stop caring about him, stop listening to him, stop pining for him. You can't have him, Leon!" Martha thrust her finger

back toward the cantina. “You can’t have him.”

You can’t have him. The sentence rang in his ears, but it sounded so familiar that it settled into his mind with barely a ripple. He’d been saying it to himself for years. He took a step back, his hands shaking. “I already fucking know that.”

“Do you?” Martha matched him step for step. “Do you know what’s at stake?”

Leon clenched his fists. He’d never forgotten what was at stake a day in his life. “I always know what’s at stake.”

“Then listen to me.”

“I *am* listening to you, Martha.”

She grabbed his shoulders in a firm grip, but Leon could feel her trembling through her grasp. “You and I don’t have the luxury of loving people.”

Leon pressed his lips together, his instincts fighting what already felt like a losing battle against that thought.

“Sebastian can care all he wants. He can *feel* all he wants. But you and I have to do better because you and I have fucking responsibilities.” Martha’s eyes shone, and Leon suddenly remembered her face when she had found out Sheila, the protégé she’d taken a chance on, had sold them out to the enemy.

Leon grasped one of her wrists, grounding them there in that hallway. “I know that.”

“You can’t afford—Southern Tava can’t afford—for you to be distracted by him, Leon.”

“I know.”

“I wish it could be different.” Martha softened her grip and smoothed her thumbs over his shoulders. “You deserve to be happy, Leon. And so does Sebastian. You both deserve to be happy, but—”

“But we don’t all get what we deserve,” Leon finished for her. It was one of the first hard truths he’d learned as a child,

stumbling, terrified, and newly orphaned in Ralscoln. “I know.”

Martha sighed and finally let her hands fall to her sides. For a moment, she looked as old as she really was. A weary woman of over fifty, with graying hair, who had spent half her life in a war she had lost all her family to.

Leon let his shoulders sag. “Is there anything else, Martha?”

She shook her head. “No.”

They looked at each other for a few more moments, then Leon pulled his shoulders back again. “You should go back in.” Leon nodded back to the door of the cantina. “Tell Garrett I’m fine. He’s probably starting a fight with Sebastian already.”

Martha snorted a tiny laugh. “Not with the nice doctor sitting right there.”

Leon didn’t know what the doctor had to do with it, but he was too tired to care. Hurt, disappointment, and resignation had sapped away whatever strength and energy he’d had that had made him seek out Sebastian in the first place.

Hope. That’s what that strength and energy had been.

But the hope was gone now, and all he wanted to do was go to sleep.

LEON STUMBLED through the next morning on autopilot. He dragged himself out of bed, washed up in the sink, and brushed his teeth. He choked down some food in the mess, then planted himself in the back of the room as Joan gave the Carta Team briefing. He tried to pay attention as she flicked through her dossiers on all the major players of the cartel but found his mind wandering and his eyes crossing after just the first two: the human and klah’eel founders, Zyk and Ha’ral.

Once she was done, he stepped forward to wish them all goodbye and good luck. He gave an affectionate embrace to Garrett, a cool nod to Turner, and a companionable handshake for Mal'ik.

A spike of discomfort jolted him briefly out of his fugue when Mal'ik tightened his grip and Leon realized he was about to ask him about what had happened in the cantina with a look of sympathy Leon had never seen on a klah'eel.

For years he had been nothing but a soldier, lieutenant, leader, and brother-in-arms, and now, all of a sudden, everyone was interested in his *feelings*. His obsession with Sebastian had gone from his own private torment into some sort of public spectacle, which was even worse.

He extracted himself quickly and turned to say his farewell to Joan, but she held him back while the other three members of the Carta Team filed out.

"I just want to go over your speech one more time before I leave," she said, pulling out her data tablet as though she were going to take notes on it. He supposed she very well might if she thought any of it could be useful in her negotiations with the cartel.

He nodded and listed off his major goals: condemn the use of the gas on civilians, highlight the Turner Corporation's heartless creation, remind everyone that this was the same corporation the Klah'Eel had planned to sign Southern Tava over to.

"You're going to put a little feeling into it, right?" Joan raised an eyebrow as he ran down his list.

He scowled at her. "Yes, of course I am. I've done a few of these before, you know?"

More than he could count at this point. He could orate in his sleep.

"Yeah, I know, but you're just..." Joan wrinkled her nose and waved a hand at him.

"Tired," Leon finished for her with a flat look. "I'm just tired, Joan."

“Fine, fine, but you’d better have bucked up in”—she looked at her data tablet—“three hours. That’s when you’re walking out on that balcony.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“Good. I need to leave, but you might as well get up to the staging room now and prep.” Joan pointed at the ceiling and the three floors above them. “Sebastian should be there.”

Leon stiffened, and not subtly enough for Joan to miss it. She narrowed her eyes.

“He’s always your security at these things.” She crossed her arms. “He may be mad at you, but we both know he’d take a bullet for you if he had to.”

“A bullet for the Resistance,” Leon couldn’t help but correct her. “He’d take a bullet for the leader of the Resistance.”

“Same thing.” Joan rolled her eyes. “Now get up there. Everyone else still has security work to do.”

There was no use putting it off, so Leon went back to his room and grabbed his bag with his papers and data tablet, then slowly climbed the long staircases up to the room off the grand balcony.

Opening the door, he expected the sight of the other man to hit him like a blow. He clenched his teeth in preparation for the onslaught.

But when he saw Sebastian standing there engaged in some animated conversation with another soldier with his hands flying all over the place, Leon’s heart lifted. His muscles loosened. Sebastian threw back his head and laughed at something the other man said, and Leon smiled.

Maybe that shouldn’t be so surprising. Leon had always been drawn to Sebastian’s grace, wit, exuberance, and flamboyance. And he had always known he couldn’t have them. Nothing was really different now, other than that Leon had stopped denying it all.

Sebastian caught sight of Leon as he closed the door, and his expression dropped into a disdainful scowl. Even that could only make Leon snort under his breath. It was all exactly the same.

Leon walked to the cluster of chairs around a low table and dropped into one with his data tablet. “Don’t mind me. I’m sure the premises will secure themselves.”

“The rest of us have been working since breakfast while you’ve been sitting around chatting with people.” Sebastian turned to him with a hip cocked out. “We get to chat too, now and again.”

Then he turned back to the other man, who Leon could now see was covered in soot.

“Thanks for checking the fireplace, Jason. I owe you one.”

The man—Jason—laughed. “Oh, don’t you worry. I’m gonna collect on that one.”

Sebastian saw him to the door with a ringing laugh of his own. “Try to not have any nightmares.”

“Fuck you!” Jason called back down the hall without any heat.

Leon looked up at Sebastian quizzically, and for a second, it looked like Sebastian was just going to scowl at him, but then his expression broke into a little smile.

“There were spiders,” he admitted with a face. “A *lot* of spiders.”

“Ah.” Leon nodded in grave understanding, and he saw Sebastian try to fight the grin and then turn away just before it overtook his face so that Leon couldn’t see it. So Sebastian didn’t want to share his smiles with Leon. Fair enough.

He took out his data tablet, intending to use the next few hours as productively as possible. He had to go through the defense plans Mal’ik had drawn up and the intelligence reports from Joan. If he was lucky, he might even get through all the supplies reports from Martha. Apparently, there was even some good news in those. The Ralsdi family had managed to

smuggle them quite a cache of “donations,” and Leon was curious to see what they’d been given.

He heard Sebastian move about the room, then flop into one of the arm chairs across from him.

“About yesterday...”

Leon’s heart jumped into his throat.

He looked up from his data tablet to see Sebastian looking torn. Sebastian at a loss for words and looking unsure, even insecure, was unusual and distinctly unpleasant. Leon waited for him to continue, and when he didn’t, he unstuck his own tongue from the roof of his mouth.

“What about it?”

And which part of it? The early morning when Sebastian had woken up in his bed, content and naked and still smelling of sex? Or the meeting when Sebastian had looked at him like he was a monster? Or the evening when he’d used a picture of Leon’s face for target practice?

The *need* to know gripped Leon, and he fought against the urge to grab Sebastian and shake him and demand to know which part of yesterday he wanted to talk about and what he wanted to say.

“Never mind.” Sebastian shook his head and pulled out his own data tablet from his pack

Leon about exploded.

He bit back the demands to know more and forced himself to look coolly back down at his own work. Sebastian had said never mind, so Leon wouldn’t mind it. Leon had made his position as clear as he could.

Leon cared immensely, absurdly, for Sebastian and adored every single thing about him, and Leon would also continue to put the cause of the Resistance first.

If Sebastian didn’t want to talk about it, Leon didn’t get to make him.

So he stared at military drawings from Mal'ik and tried to make himself pay attention to them instead of the man across the table from him and the soft sounds he made as he read something interesting.

"HEY."

Leon wrinkled his nose, mumbled, and pulled away from the thing shaking him softly.

"Hey, up and at 'em, Hess. You're almost up."

The sound of Sebastian's voice, more than the words he said, finally got Leon to open his eyes. He sat up and scrubbed at them and swallowed around his dry mouth.

"We're about twenty minutes out from the start of this little show." Sebastian left his side to move a curtain aside and peer out one of the windows. "You should get ready."

Leon dragged himself up, shook himself awake, and scratched at the stubble on his jaw. "How long was I asleep?"

"A couple hours." Sebastian eyed him as he let the curtain fall closed and checked the gun at his hip. "I think you needed it."

Leon nodded. "I probably did."

Sebastian didn't look at him fully, just kept messing with the gun in his hand. Leon wondered if it actually needed any servicing or if Sebastian just needed something to do with his hands. "You don't sleep through every night, do you?"

Leon huffed a humorless laugh at the question. "No, I do not." He wasn't sure he could even remember the last time in his life he regularly slept through the nights.

"I took a look at your speech notes." Sebastian holstered his weapon and put a hand on his hip.

Leon glanced at his bag, which was hanging open with his notes hanging out. He raised an eyebrow at Sebastian. "You

went through my bag?”

“I recognized the paper.” Sebastian shrugged a single shoulder in that casual, almost disrespectful way Leon had always been strangely attracted to. “From yesterday morning. I was curious.”

“And what did you think?”

Sebastian lifted his chin. “That you’re a shameless hypocrite.” The hand on his hip flexed, he seemed to hesitate, and then he took a sudden step toward Leon, hands spread wide in front of him, beseeching. “Why are you like this, Hess?”

Leon recoiled from the sudden advance but managed to keep himself from backpedaling. “Like what?”

“Like...” Sebastian waved a hand violently at the bag, and his face screwed up with a frustrated scowl. “You used my words. About the gas. About how it was a distillation of everything terrible about the occupation. You listened to me.”

“Of course I did.” Leon frowned, and his hand twitched to reach out to Sebastian before he thought better of it.

But Sebastian saw, and he glanced at Leon’s hand before glaring back up into Leon’s face. “But you’re still going to use it yourself.” Sebastian shook his head slowly. “You *get* it, but you don’t...care? Really?”

“Of course I care, Sebastian.” Leon grabbed Sebastian’s wrist just before Sebastian stepped away, his own frustration flaring up. “How can you really think I don’t care? I just—”

“You just don’t act like it.” Sebastian shook off his arm.

Leon clenched his fists. “I just have more responsibilities than *feelings*.”

Couldn’t Sebastian understand? Couldn’t he at least try? *He’d* fought for their cause for years too. He’d sacrificed himself and others and ran intolerable risks, but he drew the line here? Right at the finish line?

“It’s not about *feelings*, Hess, it’s about—” A loud horn sounded, then a muffled cheering and applause. Sebastian

visibly deflated, sagging. “That’s your cue. Go on and give a rousing speech condemning a weapon you’re planning on using.”

“Sebastian...” Leon rubbed a hand down his face. He shouldn’t get so worked up about this. Sebastian had always fought his decisions. He’d always followed them. And he’d never cared for Leon. And Leon had gotten on just fine. He didn’t need Sebastian’s blessing now, wasn’t that exactly what Martha had been trying to tell him? He had to stop caring about what Sebastian thought of him and focus on doing what he had to do. “Fine.”

Leon lifted his chest and his chin and hardened his face. He shrugged on the mantle of ideology and leadership and everything Farlon had left him.

Sebastian looked again out the window and then nodded at Leon. “All clear.”

Leon threw open the double doors and strode out onto the balcony into a wall of cheers and blinding sunlight. For a moment, he couldn’t see anything as his eyes adjusted, but he didn’t dare blink, just stared out into where he knew people were gathered.

He planted his hands down on the banister before him and leaned into the transparent microphone set up for him. “We have already thrown ourselves over the precipice.”

The words flowed on as his eyes adjusted, and he began to see the crowd of people gathered before him. People standing, some dirty, some clean, all looking gaunt, tired, and fierce, filled the courtyard in front of him. Some were his soldiers. Some were civilians. They all looked up at him with fire in their eyes.

There were a few qesh, and a handful of klah’eel, but most were humans. Humans like him who were trying to make a life and had been foiled by their own grabby species state and then abandoned to the clutches of another.

But not for long.

Behind the crowd, sitting on the top of armored vehicles for the view with a quick getaway, were the Ralscoln elite. The old money of Ralscoln who had been here longer than almost anyone and who would be here much longer afterward: the Harons, the Wells, and the founding family themselves, the Ralsdis. The Ralsdis sat front and center of the old money families: attractive wife and husband striking a regal pose with their pretty daughter, Sarah, sitting next to the ever conspicuously empty fourth seat where the killed son used to sit.

“They have always had one weapon they wielded more often than all others.” Leon paused to let them all consider what that weapon was. “Fear.”

A ripple of agreement and resentment went through the crowd.

“They have made us afraid to lose our homes, our lives, our loved ones.” Leon clenched his fist in front of him. “They have made us fear them, fear each other, and now they have found a way to make us *fear* just for the sake of it.”

Leon saw Sebastian moving out of the corner of his eye. Sebastian had followed him out onto the balcony, the better to keep an eye on the surroundings and the crowd, but he stayed mostly out of Leon’s field of view.

As Leon continued to rail against the gas, he heard the crackle of Sebastian speaking into his radio. He broke eye contact with the crowd long enough to glance at the roofs of the surrounding buildings where they’d set up snipers and observers for the event. He caught the glint of sunlight off a barrel.

“I don’t know—I can’t know—if this is a war we can win.” Leon leaned forward, as though he could transmit the urgency of his words to the crowd by getting closer to them. “But it’s a war we can’t—”

The radio behind him crackled again, and Sebastian barked into it loud enough for Leon to hear. “Get him. Fucking bring him down.”

“—afford to lose,” Leon continued. “For the sake of—”

“Down!” Sebastian slammed into Leon, and they crashed to the balcony floor as gunshots rang through the air. Bullets flew past them and cracked into the masonry behind them, showering them with shards of rock. “Back inside!”

Leon gasped for breath, trying to recapture the air their hard fall onto the concrete floor had knocked from his lungs. More gunshots rang out, and then a hissing and the sound of glass breaking in all directions.

Sebastian’s hand wrapped around Leon’s wrist like a vice, and he hauled Leon back away from the banister.

“Goddammit, Hess, move!” Sebastian yanked on him again.

Leon’s lungs finally filled, and he scabbled across the ground after Sebastian.

He belly-crawled across the balcony that now seemed enormous until he made it across the threshold of the double doors. Sebastian scrambled after him and slammed the doors shut. They wouldn’t hold against anything, but at least the curtains across their glass hid them from view.

“Well, everyone’s got plenty of fear now, I’m sure,” Sebastian snarked as he got his feet under him and put his back to the wall, though he still didn’t stand all the way up. He already had his gun in his hand, held ready at his chest and pointed to the ceiling. “Were you hit?”

Leon did a quick scan of his body, knowing from experience how adrenaline could hide wounds, but he came up empty. “No. I’m good. You?”

Sebastian glanced down at his hip, where a line of red was expanding into the cloth. “Just a little scrape.”

Leon reached for him. “Sebas—”

“Little. Scrape.” Sebastian fixed him with a firm glare.

Leon clenched his fists but nodded. They didn’t have time. “Where did the shots come from?”

“I don’t know.” Sebastian moved to the door and pressed his ear against it. Leon didn’t need to be so close to the door to hear the screaming and shouting and more gunfire. “Everywhere.”

“But you saw someone.” Leon stayed low to the ground as he went to his own bag, still sitting on his chair, and pulled out his pistol. “You were telling security to bring him down.”

“Yeah, but obviously, he wasn’t alone.” Sebastian reached up to the door’s handle, slowly cracked it open, and peered out. “Clear. Stay close. I’ll find us a way out of this rat trap.”

“We’re not getting out.” Leon checked the bullets in his gun—plenty—and joined Sebastian at the door. “We’re defending our headquarters. A cheap assassination attempt isn’t going to scare us off.”

He made to push open the door, but Sebastian caught his arm. “That wasn’t just an assassination attempt. This is an attack.”

“All the more reason to mount a defense.” Leon yanked his arm back. His heart still pounded in his chest from the near miss, but now it was getting his blood up. Energy fizzed up and down his spine, and his gun felt cool and steady in his hands. The sounds of fighting filling the air wiped away his exhaustion. “We have plenty of soldiers and—”

“That’s the problem.” Sebastian pushed in front of him as he tried to make it out the door again. “Didn’t you see the canisters?”

Leon paused. “What canisters?” He hadn’t seen anything, too busy trying to breathe again and follow Sebastian to safety.

“They were shooting canisters into all the windows on the first floor.”

“Who’s they?”

“I couldn’t see them.” Sebastian shook his head. “Not well. They were just spies in the fucking crowd, same as the one guy I did see. The Klah’Eel do have their own intelligence operatives, you know.”

Leon looked Sebastian up and down. He was as nervy as a live wire, fingers twitching against his gun, eyes wide but brows low. “You think it’s the gas.”

“I know it’s the gas.” Sebastian looked out the door again. The hall was still clear, but more sounds of fighting echoed up from the marble stairwell. “And we need to get the fuck out of here before we get caught in it.”

Leon frowned, unnerved by Sebastian’s clear agitation. “But it doesn’t affect you.”

“Hess.” Sebastian dropped his gun down and, for a moment, seemed to have forgotten the door as he stared at Leon in disbelief. “It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“Then what—” Leon shook his head. The obvious thought came to him, but that obvious thought was ridiculous. Sebastian was too distressed for it to be about that. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” Sebastian waved a hand in the air—luckily the one that wasn’t holding his gun. “Of course, you. I can’t let you get caught in that. I can’t let them do that to you. You can’t—” Sebastian cut himself off, pressed his lips tight together, and shook his head as though shaking the thoughts away. “Besides, it doesn’t matter if I’m affected or not. It’s not the gas that’s dangerous. It’s the other people.”

Leon bit his lip, searching Sebastian’s profile as the other man looked resolutely out into the hall and not at Leon. The hall was still empty, so Leon took the chance and reached out for the nape of Sebastian’s neck. He felt Sebastian go loose and pliant against his hand, and he pulled the other man toward him until Sebastian faced him fully.

“Hey.” Leon pressed their foreheads together so that all they could see was each other, even though they could still hear the bloodcurdling screams from civilians outside and soldiers below. He wished he could just give Sebastian what he wanted—get them both out of here as quickly as they could. But running wasn’t an option. Not yet. “Push through.”

Sebastian scowled and grabbed Leon’s collar, tangling the fabric in his fist but holding Leon close, not pushing him

away. “It’s not a matter of pushing through, it’s a matter of not getting yourself killed.”

“This isn’t about me.” Leon moved his hand from the back of Sebastian’s neck to the side so he could run a thumb along Sebastian’s jaw. God, it felt good to touch him softly, even now in these circumstances. “We have to go down there and join the fight. I can’t abandon my men.”

Furious emotions flashed across Sebastian’s face, even as he turned his cheek into Leon’s hand. “You were willing to abandon our men in Kaston.”

“There’s a difference between a tactical preservation of our forces and running away to save my own skin.” Leon shook his head. “That battle was already lost. This one isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.” Sebastian pulled away with a snarl. He stood and knocked the door open. “You’ll see. You can’t help them.”

“Maybe.” Leon followed Sebastian’s example and stood to his full height. They rushed down the hall, all caution thrown to the wind. “You said you saw canisters being shot into the lower levels?”

“Yeah, but there could have been more. I only caught a glance.” Sebastian slowed as they approached the marble staircase and held his gun at the ready.

“Unless that was all they had.” Leon pressed himself against the hall wall and craned his neck to look around the corner and down the stairwell. “They couldn’t have gotten anything from another factory already.”

“Or they have plenty and just need a few more minutes to get an angle on the top windows.”

Leon raised an eyebrow but didn’t take his eyes off the stairwell as he crept closer to look over the banister. “And I always thought of you as optimistic.”

“I’m optimistic, not fool—oh fuck.” Sebastian grimaced and looked away as they both leaned far enough over the banister to see the broken bodies of two men on the stairs two floors below. Whether they had tossed themselves or each other to their doom, it was impossible to tell.

“Shit!” Leon pulled back just at the last minute as a gun barrel entered his sight range and bullets flew past his head. They buried themselves in the ceiling below and rained plaster dust on his head.

“Stay away! Stay the fuck away. I’ll kill you. Don’t come any closer. I’ll kill you!” The shrill voice of a man out of his mind echoed up the stairwell, and Sebastian grabbed Leon’s arm and pulled him farther down the hall and away from the screams and the bullets.

“Definitely the fucking gas,” Sebastian muttered as they hurried down the hall. “Fuck the Turner family and fuck the Klah’Eel.”

Leon didn’t disagree. “There’s a service stairwell farther on. There.”

“I see it.”

The drone of a low-surface ship suddenly whirred past the windows, and they broke into a run as the staccato rapid-fire of a machine gun filled the air. They raced down the hallway toward the door. Leon was certain they would hear the shattering of windows and the thud of bullets embedding in the floor behind them at any second. As they threw open the door to the service stairwell, they nearly took out a man running through their landing.

“Stop!”

“Freeze!”

Leon, Sebastian, and the third man all had their guns on each other in an instant. But the third man dropped his gun in the next, his face blooming with relief.

“Sir! You’re alright!”

“I’m fine.” Leon lowered his weapon too, and after a beat, so did Sebastian. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know.” The man ran both hands through his hair even though one of them still held his gun. “There were men in the crowd. They started shooting and throwing these yellow smoke grenades into the building. A few grenades dropped

into the crowd, and the whole courtyard went crazy. And then two ships just flew in and started shooting.”

Leon’s jaw dropped. “At the civilians in the courtyard? Surely that was too blatant a massacre, even for the Klah’Eel?”

“No, at us on the roof, and—”

Plaster rained down on them as a hail of bullets tore through the roof above. Sebastian grabbed Leon’s arm and dragged him down to the landing below as he spoke. “They must have gotten into the hangar and stolen some of our ships. There’s no way they would have gotten their own ships all the way from the border without our guns taking them out.”

“Then we need ships of our own to defend against them.” Leon knocked his knuckles against the banister as the beginnings of a plan whirred through his mind. “We have to get into the hangar.”

“No.” Sebastian grabbed Leon’s hand, yanked it from its fidgeting, and forced Leon to face him. White plaster coated his hair and eyebrows. “We have to get as far away from here as possible. We can’t defend against chaos. We can’t rally insane troops. We have to remove ourselves from the situation and hope everyone else can too.”

The sniper from the roof grabbed at Sebastian. “We can’t ___”

“Not you too!” Sebastian ducked the arm and knocked the man away from him. “I don’t care—”

“And the doors,” the man said desperately. “They were shooting at the roof *and the doors!* We can’t get out that way. They’ll blow us to bits.”

That pulled Sebastian up short. His face went blank as his mind turned, and Leon knew where it was going. When Sebastian spoke next, even he didn’t sound convinced. “Then we’ll take a window...”

Leon shook his head. “They’ll see us, and they’ll shoot us. This building has a wide perimeter.”

“Ugh, and we thought that made it safer.” Sebastian groaned and rubbed the heel of the hand not holding his gun into his forehead. When he dropped his hand down, he smeared the white powder of the plaster into a paste with his sweat. “They’re trying to trap us in here with just that stuff and ourselves. Bastards.”

“Then they’re idiots.” Leon cut the air with a swipe of his hand and started down the stairs again. If the ships were targeting the exits, then making it to the hangar was out, but there had to be more they could do. People they could evacuate at least. “This is the capitol building of a city that’s been at war for decades. They really think there’s no escape routes?”

The sniper followed after him quickly. “Are there?”

“There are tunnels, but the tunnels are down, and so is the gas,” Sebastian growled, but he followed and didn’t try to pull Leon back again.

“So then, why don’t we stay up here?” The sniper stopped and looked between Leon and Sebastian. “If they’re not going to invade the building and they’ve poisoned the downstairs, then why go anywhere?”

Leon clenched his fist. “There are men down there—”

“Who we can’t help,” Sebastian snapped. “We’ll just make it worse. We’ll be fuel for the fire.”

Leon turned away from him and planted his free hand on the banister.

Sebastian was right.

Everything he knew about this weapon told him that there was nothing he could do about it. Not yet; not here. *Nothing* he could do... He gritted his teeth. It had been years since he’d felt so powerless, and he hated it. All the energy that had animated him when the attack began gnawed under his skin.

It had to be better to go forward. It had to be better to push through than to stay still and cower.

He felt Sebastian's hand on his shoulder, but before the other man could say anything, breaking glass sounded from the floors above them, followed by small explosions and long hisses.

Sebastian's hand on his shoulder convulsed and tightened, and Leon heard him swear under his breath. "Fuck."

They looked up and saw bright yellow gas seeping into the stairwell from the crack under the door to the hall. It spilled onto the landing and began to fall down the stairs toward them.

The sniper took a few steps back and almost tripped down the stairs but caught himself on the handrail. "That doesn't look good."

Sebastian swallowed with his eyes trained on the softly falling gas and his fingers still digging into Leon's shoulder with a death grip. "It's not."

He didn't let go of Leon, holstered his gun, grabbed the sniper's wrist, and pulled them both down one more landing.

Then they stopped.

The level just below them—the ground level—lay blanketed in a haze of yellow. The screams and the gunfire had grown less frequent and only punctuated the constant drone of whimpers and sobs every once in a while with a sudden shock. A sickly-sweet smell tickled at the edges of Leon's nostrils, and he sneezed and rubbed his nose.

Sebastian gave him a wild, fearful look. Then he looked at the sniper, who had his nose wrinkled up as well. He spun around to face them both, grabbing their shoulders and pulling them in close.

"Look at me. Both of you. Really look."

Leon obeyed, staring into Sebastian's urgent eyes with an uneasy feeling growing in his stomach.

"Keep. Your. Heads." Sebastian's grip tightened to the point that Leon was sure he'd leave finger-shaped bruises on

his shoulder. “No matter what you see, no matter what you think, no matter what you feel. Keep your heads.”

Then Sebastian turned from the sniper and put both hands on Leon’s shoulders. “Stay with me. Promise me you’ll stay with me. That you’ll trust me.” He gave Leon a little shake. “Promise me.”

“I promise.” Leon grabbed Sebastian’s wrists. “I trust you with everything, Sebastian. I always have.”

Something heartbreakingly vulnerable flashed through Sebastian’s eyes, and then those eyes dipped down to Leon’s lips. Leon’s heart jumped, and he started to sway forward, but too soon, Sebastian turned away and pulled out his gun.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

A long wail reverberated down the corridor as they descended the stairs and waded into the yellow fog. Leon’s heart jumped at the sound, then continued to beat wildly afterward. Sweat broke out on his palms.

Just as their feet hit the corridor floor and they stepped away from the stairs, Leon grabbed Sebastian’s elbow. “Do you know where they are? The tunnels?”

He recoiled, shocked by the sound of his own voice, strained and thin and almost an octave higher than usual. Sebastian must have heard too, because he cringed before giving Leon some grotesque attempt at a comforting smile. “Yeah, I found them yesterday. I know where I’m going.”

Leon swallowed and forced himself to nod a few times. “Of course.”

They made it several paces toward the central part of the building—their footsteps curiously quiet and muffled by the heavy gas in the air—before the sniper broke.

“I don’t want to do it,” he said suddenly and stepped back away from them both. He raised his hands in front of him, squeezed his eyes shut, and shook his head back and forth. “I don’t want to do it. I don’t like it. I don’t want to be here.”

“I know.” Sebastian reached out an open, placating palm. “I know. But it’s okay. It won’t hurt you.”

“I just—I just... I don’t want to go any farther.” The man wrapped his arms around himself and ducked his chin into his chest. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“It’s the only way to go.” Sebastian took a careful step toward him, his hand still open and outstretched, his voice soft and coaxing. “We’re gonna get out of here, okay? Remember, it’s not real. It’s just—”

“No!” The man screamed when Sebastian took another step, and Leon’s racing heart stopped. “No, I’m not going! Stay back!”

Leon clutched at his chest as his heart restarted and reached for the wall to steady himself. His knees buckled, and he fought the gravity that wanted to pull him down into a small, tight ball at the base of the wall where no one would see him. Where he could hide from it all.

Sebastian had both his hands up now. “Calm down, try to calm—”

“No, stay away from me! You can’t trick me! I know what you are!” The sniper yanked his sidearm out of its holster, and his screams echoed through the eerily quiet hallway. “You won’t take me!”

“I won’t, I won’t!” Sebastian stumbled back quickly and ran into Leon.

Leon saw the gun, saw Sebastian’s wide eyes, and acted on hair-trigger instinct. He wrapped an arm around Sebastian, yanked the other man behind him, and in the same movement, pulled his own gun from his hip and sent two bullets into the man’s chest.

“No, stop!” Sebastian knocked Leon’s arm wide, but the damage had been done. The sniper reeled backward, grabbing at the wall, his eyes rolled back, and then he crashed to the ground.

Reality hit Leon hard. His stomach convulsed, and vomit fought up his throat. He slapped a hand over his mouth and

wrestled it back down. He'd shot his own man. He'd shot his own man dead in a heartbeat.

"Oh fuck." He turned into the wall and put his forehead against it, breathing hard. He'd killed his own man. He could kill someone else. He could kill Sebastian. There was no telling what he could do.

"Hey! Hess! Stop!" Sebastian's desperate voice broke into his black spiral, and Leon looked over to see Sebastian kneeling next to the sniper. The sniper who now sat up, gasping and pushing weakly at Sebastian. "He's got body armor on, he's fine, he's—Fuck!"

The sniper regained his breath enough to swing a hard right hook at Sebastian, and Sebastian just managed to get his forearms up enough to block the blow.

"I'll kill you!" the sniper screeched and started to scrabble around on the floor, probably looking for his gun.

"Go-go-go-go!" Sebastian scrambled back toward Leon and pushed and shoved him down the hall. "Go!"

The urgency in Sebastian's voice meeting the rising panic in Leon's chest spurred Leon into running more than the logic of Sebastian's orders, and they barreled down the hall as gunshots rang after them.

They'd only cleared a corridor when Sebastian grabbed him and yanked him around a corner, then pressed him against a wall. Over Leon's own thundering heart, he could hear more gunshots in the hall they'd come from, from more calibers of guns than just the snipers, and multiple voices screaming and shouting.

Leon squeezed his eyes shut and pressed himself back into the wall, wishing it could open and swallow him up inside it.

"Sebastian." His own voice sounded so small, but even still, it seemed to echo in the hall, and Leon had a spike of terror that it would bring everyone in the building down upon them. His hands shook, his legs felt like jelly, and he couldn't breathe. The horrible, sweet yellow gas clogged his lungs.

“Hess, hey, Hess, open your eyes.” Sebastian’s cool, calloused hands cupped Leon’s jaw and tilted his face up. “Open your eyes.”

Leon bit his lip against a whimper. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to see. He just wanted to wait until it was all over, or maybe just die so it could all end right now.

But he forced his eyes open.

And air flooded back into his lungs when he did. Sebastian. Clever, competent, fearless, Sebastian gazed back at him.

“Hey.” Sebastian ran his thumbs over Leon’s cheeks and his lips quirked into a sweet, confident smile. “We’re gonna keep moving, okay?”

Leon managed an affirmative twitch of his head. “Yes.”

“Good.”

Sebastian grabbed his hand, tangled their fingers together, and pulled him down the hallway.

He didn’t move slowly, and Leon realized it was because there was still a fight raging in the hall they had just left. The yells and shouts and screams bounced deafeningly over the marble floors. And it was getting closer.

“Not much farther.” Sebastian gave Leon’s hand a squeeze and picked up the pace.

But then the sound of ships roared overhead.

“Back!” Sebastian shoved Leon against the wall and braced his hands on either side of his shoulders. He hunched over him as though to shield him completely with himself. The sounds of machine gunfire echoed down the hall, but much too far away for it to hit them.

No, hit Sebastian. Any bullets would have had to go through him to get to Leon. Leon grabbed for Sebastian, his mouth opening, but his fear- and horror-addled mind had no words to string together.

But Sebastian was already looking over his own shoulder, checking the hallway, and then grabbing Leon's hand and pulling him back down it.

"That was bad. That was very bad." Sebastian shook his head and muttered as they hurried down the hallway. "That's going to get everyone out of these rooms, and we don't want to run into anyone... Oh goddammit."

Sebastian stopped and looked left and right, but they were in the middle of the hall, with no doors nearby. Leon wondered what he could be looking for and then heard running feet. Multiple pairs of running feet were coming straight down a hallway that would turn into theirs.

Sebastian started backpedaling and shoving Leon. "Go back, go back—"

"You!"

A soldier Leon recognized but didn't know stood in the hallway in front of them, a finger raised and pointed straight at Sebastian. Dust and blood covered every inch of him, and he held what looked like a piece of twisted rebar in his right hand.

A group of three more manic-looking soldiers stood behind him.

"Tucker." Sebastian let go of Leon to raise both of his hands. He backed away slowly, and as he got to Leon, Leon could see that he'd gone completely pale. "Tucker, don't be crazy."

"You did this!" Tucker started stomping toward them, his eyes wild, his veins popping out and flushed with blood. "You traitorous worm! You did this!"

"No, no, no—"

Tucker's roar cut off Sebastian's frantic begging. Tucker broke into a charge, and Leon reached for his holster. His stomach dropped to find it empty, his gun lying far away in the hallway where he'd shot the sniper.

Then Sebastian lunged past him. "Hess, run!"

Sebastian met Tucker with a vicious roar and immediately locked them into a tight grapple. “Get to the tunnels, Hess, go!”

But there was no way in hell Leon could leave Sebastian behind. No matter how much terror coursed through his veins, how much sweat gathered in his palms, or how much his heart threatened to beat itself to death, Leon couldn't leave Sebastian behind. Not again. Not here.

He jumped forward and slammed his elbow into the jaw of one of the men coming to help Tucker. Then he turned and brought his knee up into the stomach of another. Adrenaline raced through his veins and, for a moment, eclipsed even the fear.

When one of the men managed to land a palm strike to his nose, snapping his head back, a laugh cracked out of him, and he snapped out a kick up the man's groin. A fight he could do. A fight he could always do.

For a few brief, glorious moments, he lost himself in the brawl. He threw and took punches. He felt the air rush out of someone's lungs as his shin made contact with their ribcage. He grunted as his back slammed into a wall, and then he slid out of it and spun to drive his assailant's head through the plaster. He left that limp body where it lay.

Everything else had been driven from his mind in a bout of beautiful battle until Sebastian's panicked scream brought everything to a standstill. The sound chilled Leon's blood, and a shudder shot down his spine. He spun around, eyes searching in the chaos and the yellow fog for Sebastian, forgetting the two men still in front of him.

Tucker pressed tightly against Sebastian's back with an arm around his neck. Sebastian scrabbled at the arm with his eyes wide, but that wasn't what made Leon's stomach drop with horror. Tucker bared his teeth and stared intently at the nape of Sebastian's neck, where he had his other hand. As Leon watched, Tucker jerked that hand free and exposed a long, bloody combat knife.

“No!” Leon shoved past one of the other men, rushing toward them.

But Tucker brought the knife down again into the back of Sebastian’s neck, and Sebastian screeched a horrible, inhumane sound. His whole body twisted and jerked. Tucker held on around his neck and brought the blade down again and again.

Just before Leon could get to them, a pair of arms wrapped around his knees from behind, and he crashed to the ground.

Sebastian’s body hit the floor. Blood poured out of it. The eyes that stared back at Leon were wide and lifeless.

“Sebastian!” Leon kicked out at his attacker and tried to drag himself closer to the body.

Then he froze in some instinctual, petrified horror as a huge, white, segmented creature almost the length of his forearm skittered around over the top of Sebastian’s head, down his face, and onto the floor. Its dozens of legs down the side of its body raced around, and its body twisted this way and that.

“Get it!” Tucker stomped his heavy combat boot just inches from the worm, and the worm recoiled and twisted around on itself to get away. “Get it! Get it!”

The man still on his feet ran past Leon toward the worm and stomped at it. The worm twisted around again and raced away, only to be cut off by Tucker’s frantic attacks.

Sebastian.

Sebastian couldn’t breathe.

They wanted to crush Sebastian under their boots.

Leon roared and lunged for them.

Chapter Ten

SEBASTIAN FELT WARM.

A sort of cocooning warmth surrounded him and made him feel like a small child tucked away somewhere dark and calm. He burrowed into that feeling. He never got to be anywhere dark and calm—everything was always flashing lights and yelling people.

He never got to just sit.

He shifted and realized with a little confusion that his claws were mostly free. Just a few of them were anchored into the most crucial parts of his brain stem. Had he disconnected himself? He would never have—

The memory of Tucker’s knife searing into his flesh flashed before him. The blinding horror of feeling himself cut free of his body, the scramble on the ground, suffocating, blind, *dying*—

A consciousness brushed across his, and Sebastian anchored all his claws into place with a vicious suddenness. This was his body. He braced his claws to tear through the consciousness that had touched him. This was his. His-his-his

“Sebastian, wait!”

Sebastian froze. His claws started to shake. That voice felt so familiar, even in his head. The feel of the mind next to his, reaching out for his...

“H...Hess?”

“Hey.”

Oh god, what had he done? Sebastian pulled his barbs free in horror, curling them into himself, but many wouldn't be disengaged that easily, and he felt the hands and arms of his body pull into his chest. No, Hess's hands and arms, Hess's chest. Sebastian had taken Hess's body. He was plugged into Hess's brain.

Oh god, oh god, what had he done? How did he undo this? How did he get out?

“Hey, hey, calm down.”

He could just cut himself out; he could just leave. Hess was still here, he hadn't crushed him, but he'd almost crushed him! He'd almost snuffed out Hess's entire existence with one panicked move. Why had he—

“Sebastian,” Hess's stern commander's voice cracked through Sebastian's mind, and he winced. “*We need to keep moving. Open my eyes.*”

Sebastian opened them. And then he frowned and blinked a few times to make sure he'd really done it. They sat in complete darkness—a cool, dry, quiet darkness.

“*The tunnels.*” Sebastian pushed himself shakily to his—Hess's, their?—feet and put his hand on the wall to anchor himself in the nothingness.

“*That's right. We're not very far in, though. I didn't get very far before...*” Uneasiness and confusion leached out of the little spot in Sebastian's mind where Hess's consciousness was corralled. Uneasiness, confusion, and the sense of being deeply disturbed.

“*Before the paralysis set in,*” Sebastian finished for him. He took a few shaky steps down the hallway, then a few more confident ones.

“*I didn't know that would happen.*”

Sebastian grimaced, and the guilty, frustrated look felt surprisingly natural on Hess's face. “*I'm sorry. It's a secretion*

from my barbs. I can't control it."

"It's a good thing I got into the tunnel before I put you in then."

"Before you..." Sebastian reached up to the back of his—Hess's—neck and found ragged, torn flesh that stung when he touched it: a hole that wasn't at all like a torvar slit. *"You...put me inside yourself?"*

Sebastian felt Hess try to pull away, but there was nowhere for him to go, and his emotions bled out to Sebastian—uncertain vulnerability, the remnants of fear. *"There were no other bodies, and you had stopped moving. You were dying. I was afraid you were already dead."*

Holy shit.

Sebastian stumbled over his feet and stood in shock in the hallway, supporting himself with the wall against that world-shaking revelation. No one put a torvar inside their own head. No one. Hess had cut his own neck open and put Sebastian inside him, giving himself over completely.

Defensiveness bristled from the tiny, tightly coiled ball in the back of Sebastian's mind that was Hess. *"I didn't know what else to do."*

"I could have killed you," Sebastian said aloud in his shock.

For some reason, that uncoiled Hess, and Sebastian felt his shoulders twitch to pull back. *"You didn't."*

"I almost did." Sebastian forced his feet to keep moving. They had a lot of ground to cover.

"But you didn't."

They walked on in silence, Sebastian trailing a hand along the wall and feeling for any change in the air that might indicate another passage meeting theirs. But he was so wrapped up in the feel of Hess right there next to him, he was only half paying attention.

Finally, he acknowledged the truth that kept poking at him, demanding to be voiced. *"You saved my life."*

Aching tenderness. *“Good.”*

“Thank you.”

Sebastian could feel Hess’s cynical laugh and feel him almost shaking his head. *“Of course, Sebastian.”*

Sebastian’s name in Hess’s voice, even when that voice was more a sensation than a sound, still lodged warm fuzzies into Sebastian’s chest.

After a few more minutes of walking, the wall under Sebastian’s hand disappeared. They’d come to a turn. Sebastian ran through his mental maps, then nodded decisively in a way that was far more Hess than him and took it.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Hess asked.

“Yeah.” Sebastian hesitated, debating, then just said, *“Safe house.”*

Suspicion, and then Hess finally stopped trying to make himself small in Sebastian’s mind. *“I can feel you lying.”*

“I’m not lying.” Sebastian scowled. He and Hess could barely be in the same room without the tension boiling over. How in the hell were they going to survive being in the same body?

“But you’re not being honest.”

“It is a safe house. It’s just...a little bit more than that to me,” Sebastian admitted. *“You’ll see when we get there.”*

Sebastian could feel Hess’s shifting frustration and waited for him to say something, but then the frustration got tamped down, and Hess said nothing.

They kept walking, Sebastian feeling out for a right turn but also with one mental tendril outstretched and resting lightly over Hess’s consciousness, simply too curious to look away.

“I can feel you hovering,” Hess finally grumbled.

“How would you know?” Sebastian mentally yanked back nonetheless. *“Maybe it always feels like this when you have a torvar in your head.”*

“No, you’re hovering.” Hess shifted in his head. *“You’re too close.”*

Sebastian bit his lip, unnerved by Hess’s certainty. He was right, of course, which just drove home how exposed Sebastian’s mental state was to him. And Hess was exactly the person Sebastian had the most confused mental state about. He didn’t *want* Hess to be able to see all the feelings he—

Sebastian stubbed the toe of his boot into a raised pipe, tripped, and slammed his knee into the ground.

“Ow.”

“Ow.”

“Sorry.” Sebastian rubbed his—Hess’s—knee apologetically and climbed back to his feet.

“Try to be a little careful. Unlike you, I only have the one body.”

“Well then, maybe you should try stretching it now and again.” Sebastian shrugged, dropped his shoulders, and picked up his knees a little higher to make sure he didn’t hit any more hidden obstacles.

Defensive confusion. *“What’s that supposed to mean?”*

“You’re so tense!” Sebastian threw his arms into the air, and his muscles rebelled at such an emotive motion. *“How do you live like this?”*

“I’m not tense. I’m controlled.”

“No, you’re constricted.”

And then, to Sebastian’s surprise, Hess laughed. *“Compared to you, I suppose I am.”*

Sebastian was saved from thinking of how to respond by his hand dipping into the alcove he’d been looking for. *“Finally!”*

“What is it?”

“Supplies.”

Sebastian squatted and felt around the ground for the backpack he knew was there. Sure enough, his hand caught on a strap, and he pulled the pack toward him. He felt around inside until his hands closed on cold metal. Then he closed his eyes and flicked the switch.

White light flared behind his eyelids, and after a few moments, he slowly blinked them open.

The small lantern blazed like a sun in the small space after so much darkness, and he set it as far from himself as he could while still using the light to inventory the pack.

“You know these tunnels well.” Admiration and pride bled out from Hess, and Sebastian blushed.

He shrugged a shoulder, and it actually felt very natural. He and Hess must shrug the same. He pulled out a water bottle and opened a cap. *“I have to use them a lot for jobs in Ralscoln.”*

“And you can navigate them in the dark.” Hess’s consciousness sagged a little in relief as Sebastian took a swig. They could both feel the discomfort of their dry, parched throat. *“You’re impressive.”*

Warmth and pride flooded through Sebastian, and he ducked his head as he opened a ration bar. Hess thought he was impressive. Ugh, he was ridiculous. He already knew that; Hess had told him he was his most valuable soldier, hadn’t he? But still, it made his heart beat faster. But actually, that was Hess’s heart. What a mess.

He took a bite of the ration bar to distract himself—and because their stomach was rumbling—and then immediately fought the urge to spit it out. *“What the fuck?”*

Sheepishness from Hess. *“Oh, right.”*

Sebastian looked at the perfectly normal bar, then grabbed the wrapper and brought it closer to the light to see if there was anything weird about it, but it was perfectly normal too. *“Why does this taste so bad?”*

“I hate them.”

Sebastian debated forcing another bite down and quickly decided against it. There'd be plenty of food where they were going and that had been intolerable. *"What are you talking about? You eat them all the time!"*

He closed up the pack, pulled it over his shoulders, picked up the lantern, and racked his memory to make sure that was true. It definitely was. He'd seen Hess chewing on ration bars many times back when they'd been more of a mobile unit—before they'd taken the head of government at Ralscoln.

"Doesn't mean I like them." Disgust bubbled up from Hess, and Sebastian almost laughed. After tasting those things with Hess's mouth, he didn't know if he'd ever be able to eat one again.

"But your face never showed it." Sebastian lifted the lantern when they got to a T intersection, checked the nonsense-looking marks he'd scratched into the wall years ago, and went left.

"My face doesn't show a lot of things."

"Like how you feel about me?" Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut as soon as the thought happened. He'd always been terrible at controlling his mouth; controlling his thoughts was even more impossible. Then again, he'd berated himself for not getting the words out back in Hess's room that morning. Maybe this was a good thing.

Hess paused, and Sebastian felt him reach out to stroke affectionately across his consciousness. *"Like how I feel about you."*

Despite himself, Sebastian mentally turned to that feeling like a flower to the sun, soaking it in and reveling in it. *"You care about me?"*

Hess slid closer, emanating wry humor. *"Care about you might be an understatement. I've been obsessed with you since the moment I saw you. You were trying to convince Farlon to let you join the Resistance."*

"And I'd brought him an entire truckload of guns I'd stolen to make my case." Sebastian laughed out loud as he

remembered Farlon's bewildered expression—torn between absurd pleasure at the present and deep concern about actually accepting Sebastian into the ranks.

"You captivated me," Hess admitted, and his consciousness pulled away, but Sebastian followed, needing to hear more. *"The way you moved, what you'd done, I couldn't look away. I still can't look away."*

Sebastian breathed shakily. He wanted to fall into those words, but he was afraid he'd lose himself in them. Hess had never said any of this before that day in the hangar, had never even hinted, and Sebastian had been buzzing around him for years. *"Why did you never tell me?"*

"Because I didn't want to feel this way—"

Sebastian's blooming heart shriveled up and crashed back down to the ground.

"No, stop." Hess's command arrested Sebastian's quick emotional descent. *"It has nothing to do with you being a torvar. I don't care about that. I can't even tell you how much I don't care about that other than how fucking amazing you are when you take advantage of it."*

That...helped. That helped more than Sebastian wanted to let it. If it wasn't because he was torvar, then what else was so wrong with him? *"But then why did you hate having feelings for me?"*

"Because they were..." Hess's consciousness writhed in the confines it had been forced into, and Sebastian could feel an itch to pace in his legs. *"...overwhelming. And distracting. And there were—are—so many more important things that need my attention. I couldn't—can't—be losing myself every time I see you."*

"So instead, you were cruel to me!" Sebastian shoved at him as he recalled all the dismissive looks, all the sneers, all the times he'd heard "torvar" spat from Hess's lips. He'd agonized over why Hess hated him for years. He'd worked his fingers to the bone just trying to get Hess to really see him,

and all that time, it had never been his fault at all. *“You couldn’t face up to your feelings, so you took them out on me.”*

“Yes.” Hess oozed cloying guilt. *“And I’m sorry. You did nothing to deserve the way I treated you, and I have no excuse. I was wrong, and I’m so sorry, Sebastian.”*

Sebastian’s fury sputtered in the face of Hess’s pure contrition. He wanted to be irritated at that too, but he had nothing to say. He wanted to be so many things: irritated, dismissive, unaffected, disdainful, anything other than overwhelmingly desperate to sink into Hess’s affection.

Hess *cared* about him. Was captivated by him. *Him*, as he was. That regard of Hess’s that Sebastian had worked for for years... he had it!

But he wished he didn’t want it.

He tried to ignore Hess sitting quietly in his mind—solid and stable and present. But of course, he couldn’t manage that either.

They walked on for hours more. They moved faster with the lantern, and the fresh water from the supply cache helped buoy them along, but they still had a lot longer to go in a body on the edge of exhaustion.

Sebastian scrubbed at his aching eyes for the dozenth time. *“Ugh, how do you live like this?”*

Amusement. *“That’s the second time you’ve asked me that.”*

“And I still don’t have an answer!” Sebastian groaned and rolled his shoulders. *“I’m so tired.”*

“I know.” Their shoulders twitched in a shrug. *“There always seems to be something more important to do than sleep.”*

“Something more important to do.” Sebastian rolled his eyes. *“So there are too many important things for you to sleep, and too many important things for you to be with me—”*

“Being with you was never an option.”

“Only because you never let it!” Sebastian yanked his feelings back, but he’d already thought the damn thoughts.

Hess uncoiled from his corner of their mind, expanding and stretching and pressing on Sebastian.

“Do you want it to be an option?” Hess loomed closer, and Sebastian backpedaled. *“Do you want to be with me, Sebastian?”*

Sebastian physically stumbled and mentally tried to hunker down behind a practically nonexistent psychic wall. *“I didn’t say that.”*

He wasn’t ready.

He wasn’t ready because every fiber of his being wanted to fall into Hess’s strong and adoring arms. He wanted the driven, stern, handsome man for himself. He wanted to feel all of that intensity turned to him.

Which meant somehow he had forgotten that Hess was also dangerous, callous, and cruel. He had been cruel to Sebastian. He had betrayed their men at Kaston. He was poised to wage chemical warfare across the continent he claimed to love.

Sebastian cringed away from Hess’s overwhelming presence, but then Hess fell back again.

He didn’t press Sebastian; he just sat back down in the corner of his mind, something a little like sadness and a little like regret dripping out of him.

Sebastian crept tentatively back out from behind his wall and was only then struck by how odd that was. How the hell did Hess have all the power here? Sebastian was *in* his body with his claws poised right over Hess’s very existence.

Even in the rare times that Sebastian allowed the other consciousness to exist, he was always in control. But not with Hess.

In some ways, it was a relief. Sebastian hated the draining sense of guilt and responsibility that came with controlling

someone else. But with Hess, the fact that Sebastian was in control seemed more like a technicality than an actuality.

They walked on and the better part of another hour dragged by.

Their pace slowed from brisk stride to dogged slog.

Sebastian stared at the gray walls sliding past. And then stared some more. And finally broke when he could no longer take the lack of stimulation. *“So why did you come to the cantina the other night?”*

“Hm?” Hess’s consciousness turned back to him after a delay. Sebastian had been able to feel him curled into some sort of introspection, thinking, thinking, thinking. It was almost impressive how absorbed Hess could get in his own mind. Though Sebastian supposed that was one reason they had been so effective in the Resistance together over the years. Hess thought; Sebastian acted.

“The other night. You came to the cantina.” Sebastian was not going to bring up exactly what he had been doing in said cantina when Hess arrived, and he was certainly not going to apologize. *“You never come to the cantina.”*

“Oh. Right.” Hess heaved a sigh through their mind.

Embarrassment. Shame? Sebastian felt for the emotions intently. No doubt they’d have been invisible on Hess’s face if this were a normal conversation.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Do we have to do this?” Hess’s mind twisted. *“Haven’t we talked enough?”*

“No, because I want to know what you wanted to talk about then.” Sebastian stamped his foot as he walked. *“I want to know what you would have said if you hadn’t found me frothing at the mouth and throwing darts at your face.”*

“You weren’t frothing at the mouth...”

“No, but I was throwing darts at your face.” And he was still not going to apologize for it, Sebastian resolutely decided. Even if the pain from Hess inflamed his guilt.

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters to me!” Sebastian snapped out loud, and he jumped at the sound of Hess’s voice reverberating back at him in the stone hall. *“It matters to me, and you’ve spent the last decade or so lying to me, so you owe it to me to come clean now.”*

Hess felt like he might push back against Sebastian, but instead, he retreated into something like a defensive position. *“It was foolish.”*

“Tell me.”

More stubborn silence.

“Tell. Me.”

“Do you remember Farlon’s speech?”

Sebastian paused in the hallway and blinked at the non sequitur. He kept walking and wrinkled his nose. *“He gave a lot of speeches.”*

“Not this one.”

Sebastian realized what Hess was referring to with a rush of sadness. He remembered talking to Farlon about it and listening to Farlon recite snatches of it to him as he worked on it. *“Oh. His victory speech.”*

“Yeah.” Grief.

Grief so strong, Sebastian staggered.

He had known Hess and Farlon were close. And he had known on some level that taking over after they lost Farlon would have been hard on Hess. But the man had slipped so seamlessly into the role that Sebastian never really thought about it. He hadn’t realized the depth of Hess’s pain until he stared now into the yawning chasm of it.

Searing pain. Choking inadequacy. Crippling obligation.

Sebastian swallowed against it all. *“What about it?”*

“He passed it to me.” Hess curled into his spot in the corner of Sebastian’s mind. Sebastian reached out and wished he could hold the man better than in this pathetic facsimile of an embrace. *“He said it was my speech now. And that I need to give it for the both of us.”*

“And...” Sebastian grasped for the words. How could Farlon have put that on him? He had lain the whole weight of the Resistance’s leadership on Hess’s shoulders when he’d left them. How could he have saddled him with such an emotional anchor as well? *“And you will.”*

“I have to.” Hess’s familiar intensity flamed up in their small, shared space. *“I have to.”*

“I know.” And Sebastian did know. With a sinking feeling, he began to understand that this was something Hess had to do.

Hess’s intensity banked down into embers as quickly as it had flared up. *“I’ve been working on it. Adding to it. When I came to find you in the cantina, I was going to ask you to read it.”*

“Me?”

“I thought it might...” Hess’s consciousness twisted as though he wanted to look away, but of course, he couldn’t because he was trapped here as a prisoner in his own mind. *“...help you understand me. It was stupid.”*

“It wasn’t stupid,” Sebastian said with a sudden vehemence. It wasn’t stupid. It was telling. Touching. *“I’d like to read it sometime.”*

Even though Sebastian thought he was already finally starting to understand him.

The flare of hope that flamed briefly out of Hess’s consciousness was almost painful to feel. Sebastian reached for it, felt Hess tense, pushed forward anyway, and then felt Hess finally give and allow Sebastian to settle close to him.

They spent the last leg of their journey in increasingly comfortable silence.

LEON KNEW they had reached their destination when he felt Sebastian's mind tighten on him before pulling away.

It was an odd feeling to have Sebastian so close, both a dream and a nightmare. His entire essence rebelled against the exposure and the helplessness, the very things he'd spent nearly a lifetime trying to avoid. But then, it was those things that kept him from lying, obfuscating, and lashing out and doing all the things he had been doing to sabotage his relationship with Sebastian over the years.

So it was odd. He had settled with identifying it as odd.

And so it was odder still, and a bit disconcerting, to feel Sebastian—who had been mentally hovering and cuddling for almost their entire time together in Leon's body—pull away and push Leon into a corner.

Leon twisted against the pressure. *"Why are you pushing me?"*

"I'm not." The pressure alleviated immediately, and Leon settled back into the strange little alcove he'd carved out for himself in his own mind. *"At least, I didn't mean to."*

Leon didn't comment. He got the impression that Sebastian wasn't as experienced with sharing a body as Leon had somehow expected. *"Are we there?"*

Sebastian swallowed, and Leon felt the anxiety in his throat. *"Yeah."*

They walked down a flight of stairs and to a heavy metal door. Sebastian flipped open the covering of a keypad on the door's right, input a code, pressed a button, then flipped the covering back down.

Nothing happened.

Leon poked out at Sebastian. *“Is...the door going to open?”*

Sebastian nodded even though Leon felt it rather than saw it. *“Yeah, just give it a second.”*

Leon had expected a smart-ass remark, not that tense reply, and he retreated to his corner, feeling wary.

After a couple more minutes, heavy metal mechanisms scraped together on the other side of the door, and it swung open.

Leon stared in shock at the woman who had opened it. Tall, willowy, older, and elegant, Leon recognized her instantly but couldn't believe his eyes. *“Is that...Alice Ralsdi?”* Alice Ralsdi, wife of the powerful politician William Ralsdi, the direct descendant of Ralscoln's founder, from whom the city took its name?

Sebastian didn't answer him. Instead, he opened Leon's mouth and said, “Hi, Mom.”

Hi, Mom.

Mom. Mother? Alice Ralsdi? Mother of Sebastian... Ralsdi?

Leon's mind spun.

“Sebbie.” Alice Ralsdi stared at them, and the color drained from her face. “What did you do?”

She grabbed Sebastian—Leon's—arm and dragged them to her side of the door. Then she slammed it shut and redid the numerous heavy locks.

“I didn't do anything.” Sebastian pulled his arm free as Alice slid home the fourth huge deadbolt.

Alice spun back to them and looked them over with a pinched expression. “Is he still in there?”

“Yeah.” Overwhelming awkwardness flooded out of Sebastian's consciousness. So much awkwardness that even Leon found himself cringing. “Um, Hess, this is my mom, Al —”

“I know who she is!” Leon snapped, unable to handle the embarrassment of the most mortifying introduction of his life.

“Right.” Sebastian stopped mid-sentence, which was even worse with the disbelieving look Alice gave them.

“Oh god.” Alice threw her hands over her face in a dramatic gesture that would have confirmed her relationship to Sebastian if there were still any doubt. “Come on. Your father’s in the living room.”

Sebastian’s father.... William Ralsdi.

Alice led the way up the stairs on her side of the door and into a hallway dimly lit by yellow lights. Sebastian turned off their lantern and stowed it in the backpack. Finally, Leon regained his footing enough to confront Sebastian.

“You—You’re—” And then everything slotted into place, and Leon went slack with the realization. *“You’re the Ralsdi son. The one that died in the occupation.”*

Sebastian pressed his lips together and pulled his shoulders in. *“That’s me.”*

“Was it faked?”

“Yup.” Some of the tension finally leaked back out of Sebastian. *“I wanted to join the Resistance. And William Ralsdi Jr. couldn’t just disappear.”*

William Ralsdi, Jr. So the Sebastian that Leon cared so much for wasn’t even real—

“I’m real.”

Leon recoiled. *“Get out of my head.”*

“I’m sorry.” Sebastian’s consciousness pulled back immediately. *“I didn’t mean to. You were being so loud...”*

Leon slowly uncoiled. *“Your...mother. She called you...?”*

“Sebbie.” A little heat warmed the back of their neck. *“Short for Sebastian. My middle name. It’s what my family’s always called me.”*

“Your family, the Ralsdis.”

“Yeah...”

Leon’s mind reeled with the implications. “*Your family the Ralsdis. Who founded Ralscoln. Who are all secretly torvars.*”

“*And you can’t tell anyone.*” Sebastian came to a stop, and suddenly Leon felt the cold, ghostly prick of vicious claws again.

Alice stopped and looked back at them with a guarded expression.

“*You can’t tell anyone, Hess. This is my family. My family. You can’t—*”

“*I won’t,*” Leon reassured him quickly, twisting away from the claws he somehow knew were closing in on him.

The impending doom disappeared instantly, and horror spilled out of Sebastian. “*I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—*”

“*It’s okay.*” Leon couldn’t blame him, as uncomfortable as the situation had been. “*I understand.*”

“Everything alright?” Alice put her hand on her hip and lifted her chin in a perfect copy of Sebastian’s favorite, challenging pose.

“Obviously not, Mom,” Sebastian grumbled as he restarted walking and brushed past her. “I hate sharing a body.”

“Hey.” Alice stopped him with a hand on their shoulder, then pulled them back into a hug. Leon’s mind tensed automatically, but with Sebastian in control, they sank into Alice Ralsdi’s embrace. “I’m glad you’re alright. I didn’t know if you’d made it out.”

“Hess got me out.” Sebastian wrapped his mom in a tight hug.

Alice squeezed them, then pushed them out to arm’s length and looked into their eyes. “Thank you.”

Leon realized with a start that she was talking to him. He grasped for Sebastian. “*I don’t know what to say to that.*”

Sebastian laughed, and Leon jolted with surprise to hear his own laugh echo in the bare hallway. “I think he’s a little

overwhelmed, Mom.”

“Right.” Alice chuckled and shook her head. “Let’s just go up and figure this out.”

Only a few minutes more of walking took them through what seemed to be a labyrinthian bunker and to another heavy metal door. This one hung open, and through the doorway, Leon saw a cozy, well-furnished living room.

They stepped out of the concrete tunnel, into the inside a wood armoire, then out into the nicest room Leon had ever been in. Everything was warm and soft and clean, and Leon felt very keenly the dirt and grit and blood on him. After a life spent in bunkers and hideouts, he felt as though he were intruding on a place he had no right to be. The casualness with which Sebastian walked into the room and sank into the comfy couch did not make him feel any better.

Alice bolted the metal door behind them, slid the false back of the armoire into place, then closed its ornately carved doors. She turned back to the room and frowned.

“Darling?” she called as she moved to sit on the couch across from him and Sebastian. “Your father was just here.”

“I’m back!” William Ralsdi, head of the oldest and most powerful Southern Tava family and longtime secret Resistance benefactor, walked in carrying a food tray. “I was getting Sarah and some...” He trailed off at the sight of Sebastian in Leon sitting on the couch.

Sarah Ralsdi—rising political star in her own right—walked in after him and raised both eyebrows. “Oh god.”

Leon wished he could go back—alone in his own body—into those concrete tunnels and turn off all the lights. He had never felt more out of place and off-balance in his entire life.

“Hey, Dad. Hi, Sarah.” Sebastian moved his hand in a jaunty wave that felt absurd to Leon’s muscles.

“Oh boy.” William Ralsdi heaved a sigh, set the tray down on the low table between the two couches, and sat next to his wife.

“I feel like maybe the emergency code would have been more appropriate, Sebbie.” Sarah shook her head a few times, then sat on her father’s other side, giving Leon the impression they were under interrogation.

Sebastian wasn’t tense at all, though. He shrugged and pulled a plate of meat and vegetables toward himself. “If I’m not bleeding, it’s not an emergency.”

“Is he still in there?” Sarah asked.

Alice nodded, still staring at Sebastian and Leon. “He is.”

“Oh boy,” William repeated with more intensity and leaned his elbows on his knees.

That was the second time a member of the Ralsdi family had asked that, and their reactions hadn’t exactly been encouraging. “*Would they have preferred that I—?*”

“*No, of course not.*” Sebastian didn’t speak out loud, but his arm jerked, and he almost dropped the food off his fork and onto the table. Then he grimaced. “*I mean, it might have made things less...precarious. But of course not.*”

Leon did not find himself convinced.

“Apparently, he saved Sebbie.” Alice leaned forward and took a dinner roll from the little basket on the tray.

An abashed smile spread across their lips, though Sebastian obviously attempted to stifle it. Yet there was no denying the self-satisfied pleasure that leaked out of him. “He’s the one that put me here.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Alice looked up at them sharply, the tone of her voice uncannily similar to Sebastian’s.

“Hess put me in here.” Sebastian tapped their temple. “Some bigot high on that fear gas ripped me out of my body. Hess saved me.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s very...”

“Look, he cut a hole in himself for me.” Sebastian twisted around and dropped his chin to his chest to show them the

ragged gash—scabbing over quite quickly, perhaps a side effect of the torvar poison—on the back of Leon’s neck.

“You sound proud of this.” Leon reached out for Sebastian’s burgeoning feelings of delight and honor, forgetting for a moment the panel of family members across from them.

“I...am, I guess. I mean, you...” Sebastian turned back around to stop showing off his scar to his family and blushed. *“I never imagined someone would do that for me. And they should know you did.”*

“Leon Hess did this?” William clarified, staring at them intently.

“Well, I’m sitting here in Leon Hess’s body, aren’t I?” Sebastian lifted his chin. “And he can hear you, remember?”

“God, that’s creepy.” Sarah shuddered, picked up a dinner roll, and crossed her legs.

Leon eyed her body language. *“Isn’t she a torvar too?”*

“They all are, yeah.” Sebastian glanced at his sister before shoving a fork laden with too much food into his mouth. *“But they’ve been in their bodies their whole lives. They’ve never had to share one.”*

To his family, he said aloud, “Look, we need somewhere to lie low, and as you might have noticed, I need a new body.”

“That’s for sure.” Alice snorted. “We can get you one in the morning.”

“In the morning?” Sebastian sat up. “I was hoping you’d have one in the bunker.”

“We do.” Alice shrugged a shoulder. “In the other house’s bunker.”

The other house’s bunker... The surrealism of this conversation was harder to grasp than the strangeness of sharing a body with Sebastian.

Sebastian groaned. “Not this one?”

Alice's face softened, and she shook her head. "Not this one. We haven't replaced the one you took a couple months ago."

Leon shivered. He understood that it made sense for a torvar family to keep extra bodies on hand, especially given that their younger son was an underground Resistance agent. But it was still uncomfortable to think about the most well-respected family on the continent stashing human bodies in underground bunkers at all their houses.

"You'll stay the night, and we'll have the body ready in the morning." William reached across the table and clasped Sebastian's knee in the most fatherly move Leon had seen from anyone in a long time.

But Sarah shook her head. "You might want to lie low here longer than that anyway. The capital is in chaos."

"Ask them what happened to the crowd." Leon pressed on Sebastian, and Sebastian twitched in Leon's body. Leon felt him push him back a bit.

But then he asked, "What happened to everyone in the crowd?"

The three Ralsdis across from them exchanged looks, then Alice met their gaze with a grim expression.

"About what you would expect, I think." She clasped her hands in her lap. "Violence, terror. Fighting, screaming. There were definitely casualties. We were far enough not to get caught in it, and we evacuated quickly."

"It was ending by the time we were getting away anyway." Sarah sighed and grabbed another roll from the dwindling supply in the basket. "There was a breeze, and the gas was already dispersing. The target wasn't the civilians; it was the Resistance."

"Yeah, but it hit civilians." Sebastian waved a hand in the air. "With TV cameras live-streaming the whole thing. What were they thinking?"

"That they couldn't get bogged down in a war of attrition?" William sat back and drummed his fingers along his

knee. “You’re right. The Klah’Eel maintain international support for their occupation by painting the Resistance as terrorists. This breaks that illusion. It gives away the desperation of their position.”

“They would have preferred to take the continent city by city. But they planned to do it with the gas.” Leon would have smiled if he’d been in control of his body, so maybe it was good that he wasn’t. It would have been a cruel smile. *“You took that from them.”*

“Well, write that one under the successes category, then.” Sebastian’s satisfied aggressiveness matched his own. *“Better they hit us with it than the people of Libha.”*

Then Sebastian pointed at William and Sarah. “Well, they’ve given you two a gift. I expect you’ll run with this?”

“Oh, I’ve already called my favorite Qeshian reporter.” Sarah gave a mischievous smile Leon could swear he’d seen on Sebastian’s face before.

William nodded. “And I’ve called an emergency meeting of the Southern Tava Congress—such as it is—for tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’ll be all over the screens by tomorrow morning, talking about how actions like these cost us our son.” Alice pressed a hand to her bosom. “And countless other sons and daughters of Southern Tava.”

Sebastian laughed. “Perfect. Thanks, Mom.”

“It’s not totally wrong, you know.” Sarah fixed Sebastian with a stern look. “We hardly ever see you.”

Leon could feel Sebastian’s tangle of guilt, tinged with resentment. “Yeah, I’m a little busy.”

“And we’re proud of you,” Alice said firmly, with her eyes trained on Sarah.

Sarah raised her hands. “I didn’t say we weren’t!”

“Alright, it’s late.” William, who sat between them, shook his head and started gathering the plates that Sebastian had cleaned off back into the tray. “You two must be tired.”

“Exhausted.” Sebastian nodded and heaved them onto their feet.

“Staff’s all gone for the day except for the security outside.” William picked up the tray and stood. “So stay away from the windows, but other than that, you should be safe here.”

“Your old room has clean bedding, so why don’t you sleep there.” Alice stood as well and came around the table to them. She put her hands on both of their shoulders and smiled at them, and Leon had to remember that that warm, motherly smile was for Sebastian and not for him. “We’ll fetch you in the morning as soon as the body is here.”

Then she gave them—Sebastian—a kiss on the forehead, squeezed their shoulders, and stepped back.

Sarah just eyed them. “I’m glad you’re okay, little brother. But I’ll hug you when you’re not...” She gestured up and down their body. “Leon Hess.”

That made William turn just as he reached the door. “And welcome to our home, Leon. It’s a pleasure to have you. A shame, under these circumstances, but I look forward to getting to know you once the body situation has been resolved.”

“Tell him thank you and that I look forward to it as well.” Leon thought that a perfectly suitable reply, but he felt Sebastian hesitate nervously. *“What?”*

“It’s just weird to think about you talking to my father.” Sebastian seemed to cringe, but outwardly he nodded. “He says thank you, and he looks forward to it as well.”

Leon mused on that as Sebastian finished his goodbyes and his family trickled back out of the room. On the one hand, talking to Sebastian’s father did deeply disturb him, considering he still wrestled with his feelings over Sebastian himself. But on the other, he very much did want to speak with William Ralsdi, benefactor and ally of the Resistance. The Ralsdi family kept a safe distance from the Resistance, their

communications completely mediated by Martha and dead drops.

Leon had a sudden realization. *“Martha knows about you, doesn’t she?”*

“That I’m William Ralsdi Jr.?” Sebastian put a surprising amount of sarcasm behind his own name. *“Yeah, she knows. She’s the only one. Well, Farlon did too, but...”*

“Right.” Leon looked out through his own eyes that he couldn’t control on the tidy hallway they passed through. Such a warm, lived-in, happy family home. Sebastian’s home with Sebastian’s family. It had never occurred to Leon that Sebastian had a home and a family beyond the Resistance. He had always assumed Sebastian was...like him.

Leon swallowed. But he wasn’t. When Martha had said he couldn’t have Sebastian, he had thought she meant only that his duty prevented him. But now he realized she meant more than that. She meant that when all of this war was said and done, men like Leon and men like Sebastian didn’t end up together.

They turned down another hallway, and Leon felt Sebastian reach for him. *“You’re being very quiet.”*

Leon reached back and let their consciousness brush together. It was pleasant. He should have let himself touch more before they were forced into a body together. *“What do you expect me to say?”*

“I don’t know.” Sebastian screwed up his face. *“Don’t you have questions?”*

“Would you answer them?” Leon felt a strange sort of vulnerability in Sebastian, almost an ache.

“Of course, I would.” Sebastian stopped in front of a door and tapped his fingers along the handle. *“You’ve earned honesty from me, at least. I mean if you”*—there was that vulnerability again—*“if you want to know anything.”*

Leon pushed closer, and Sebastian’s consciousness melted against him. *“I want to know everything.”*

Sebastian tightened his hand around the doorknob and leaned his forehead against the wood. He bit his lip. *“You mean that?”*

It struck Leon again that Sebastian didn't seem to know his own value, that he didn't realize how breathtaking and amazing and fascinating and desirable he was. It mystified Leon because it had always seemed so obvious to him, and because Sebastian had never displayed any doubt about his own abilities in anything else.

“Yes.” Leon expanded from his corner and pushed his feelings of burning curiosity and possessiveness and lust and near obsession into Sebastian's mind. He felt Sebastian shiver. *“Now are you going to open this door or not?”*

Sebastian swallowed. *“I'm going...”*

He opened the doors into a spacious but dusty bedroom. Leon took a cursory inventory of the setup—carpeted floors, a bed in the center, a large floor mirror next to a large wardrobe, shelves with bits and bobs, and a desk—but he mostly reckoned with the idea that he could ask Sebastian anything. He could get answers to all the questions he'd never dared to think he had. And some that he couldn't have ever imagined he'd have.

But Leon had always been good at asking questions, thinking, and puzzling out a situation and a plan of action. He started with the basics. *“Did you grow up in this house?”*

Sebastian answered instantly, with the same obedient openness as when he gave reports after missions. *“Not just in this house. There's another one outside of Ralscoln that we went to when the situation in Ralscoln was too precarious.”*

“How long has your family been inhabiting the Ralsdis?”

Sebastian scrunched up his nose. *“We are Ralsdis. At least, we are the Ralsdis as people think of them. The family story is that we were living in a group of klah'eel raiders that attacked the first human colonists of Tava. When we began to lose, we switched bodies.”* Sebastian shrugged his shoulder.

“So by the time the Ralsdis founded Ralscoln, they were torvars.” Leon had spent a lot of time studying the history of Southern Tava, the better to appreciate it and give speeches for its freedom, and he felt the ground shifting under his feet with that realization.

“That’s right.” Sebastian closed the door behind them and shut them away in the bedroom together. *“My ancestors.”*

Leon tried to recognize the insecurity welling inside him and struggled to rein it in before Sebastian could feel it. Leon had spent so long, so high up in the Resistance, speaking so often and so eloquently about the history and pride of Southern Tava and not exactly hiding but never advertising the fact that he was not from here. His parents had moved him here as a child as part of that calamitous wave of human immigrants that had sparked the war with the Klah’Eel. He was an outsider.

“Are you disturbed?”

Leon came back to himself to find Sebastian still standing near the door, with one arm crossed over his stomach and clasping the other. The submissiveness of the posture was so absurd both in Leon’s body and from Sebastian’s control that Leon snorted.

“You’re very concerned about whether or not I find you disturbing.”

Sebastian hunched his shoulders. *“Well, of course I am. You’re the only person who’s ever—never mind.”* Then Sebastian shook himself and stepped farther into the bedroom and through to an attached bath.

But Leon latched on. *“Who’s ever what?”*

“Who’s ever...” Sebastian stopped at the sink and waved his arms around in a complicated motion that seemed to encompass both the whole world and his own body. Then he dropped them down with a frustrated little sound. *“You didn’t ask why I joined the Resistance.”*

Leon paused at the topic changed and debated between either pushing the original question or seeing where Sebastian

was going. He went with the latter. *“I was still getting to that.”*

“Do you want to know?”

“Of course. Why would you ever leave all this? Your home and your family. You were still helping to liberate Southern Tava, so it can't have been duty.”

Sebastian sighed and planted his hands on either side of the sink in front of him in a move that clearly came from the muscle memory of Leon's own body. *“Because here I would always be alone.”*

That didn't make any sense. *“Your family clearly loves you.”* They had not looked or acted at all how Leon imagined a cold and distant family would.

Sebastian waved his hand. *“Of course they do. But only they would. Because only they would ever know who I really am. Everyone else is just forming an opinion on a carefully constructed lie. Whether they love me or hate me, none of it's real.”*

“And in the Resistance, you're real.” Now it made sense. It all made sense: Sebastian's aggressive flamboyance, his outspokenness, his willingness to be the only out there anyone could ever think of...and his desperate desire to please.

Sebastian slumped heavily on his arms braced on the counter. *“Yeah.”*

Leon felt an overwhelming surge of protective affection and an accompanying wave of frustration with his confinement and paralysis. *“Look at me.”*

Sebastian frowned, still staring down the marble sink, and shook his head. *“What are you talking about?”*

“Look at me, Sebastian.” Leon hardened his voice. *“Look up.”*

Sebastian jerked his head up instantly and met Leon's gaze in the mirror over the sink. Leon reached out his mind for him, trying to take up as much space in their shared consciousness

as he could, and he felt Sebastian yield and make room for him.

“I see you,” Leon growled. Sebastian swayed forward, and it killed Leon to see because he knew exactly what he’d do if he had his own goddamn body. *“I have always seen you.”*

“Hess—”

“Leon.”

“Leon,” Sebastian repeated. Even in the confines of their minds, Leon could hear the shake in Sebastian’s voice.

Arousal shot through him, and Sebastian jolted. The sensation of the answering bloom of warmth in their lower belly flooded through Leon and then pinged back out of him into Sebastian, and Sebastian gasped.

“I have always seen you, Sebastian.” Finally, Leon remembered that he did have his own goddamn body. And better than that, he had Sebastian inside it, inside him, where Leon could have never been brave enough to let him. *“And I have always wanted you.”*

Chapter Eleven

SEBASTIAN STARED into the mirror and into the intense eyes of Leon Hess and felt his heart—Leon’s heart—pound against his ribcage.

Technically, he controlled that strong body in the mirror, but with Leon pressing in on his mind, he felt more like a vessel. He felt like an instrument with Leon as his confident wielder. He melted into that feeling even as the positive feedback loop of their desire ratcheted up his anticipation.

“Take off my shirt.” Leon’s voice settled into that hard, smooth, commanding tone that made it so easy for Sebastian to obey him and impossible not to.

He pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it to the ground, and his mouth watered at the sight.

He had always been attracted to Leon’s solid bulk, the heaviness of his muscles, and the immovable strength of his presence that had been as much about his body as his charisma. Even when Sebastian had resented him, he’d always wanted to touch. He had been denied so much that night at the capitol, but now... Sebastian moved a hand to drag it over the ridges of Leon’s stomach. And stopped. He clenched his jaw. No, he still hadn’t yet been given permission.

Pleased pride stroked over Sebastian’s mind, and Sebastian leaned into that feeling.

“Good,” Leon rumbled in his mind. *“Now my pants.”*

Sebastian undid Leon's belt and dropped his pants, then remembered with startling clarity the feel of this cock in his mouth. The memory sent a pulse of arousal through his stomach, which bounced off Leon in his mind and reverberated to him twice as strong.

He dropped his head and groaned as his cock swelled, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "*Leon.*"

He felt Leon's struggle for control, then the moment he found it. "*Turn on the shower.*"

"*Leon!*" Sebastian fisted his hands on the counter, surprised frustration making him growl.

"*We're filthy.*"

"*I—*"

"*Shower, Sebastian,*" Leon's voice cracked in his mind.

Sebastian flinched, then shuddered as his cock twitched. He wrestled his breathing under control and stumbled to the shower to turn it on. A knee-weakening flood of affection rewarded him. "*Good.*"

Once the water warmed, Sebastian stepped in eagerly, hanging on Leon's consciousness, waiting for his next order.

Leon nudged his mind toward the corner of the shower where Sebastian's bath soaps sat. "*Get started.*"

Sebastian swallowed.

That, at least, was permission to touch. He reached out shakily for the shampoo, nervous now with Leon's attention so heavy on him. But he sighed with relief once he tipped his head back into the warm spray and massaged his scalp.

The simple pleasure of the sensation flowed between them, and Sebastian closed his eyes. Dirt and bits of debris streamed down his back and swirled down the drain, and the hot water loosened Leon's perpetually tight muscles.

Moving his hands from his hair, Sebastian finally let them fall down and stroke across Leon's chest. His skin was as warm and his muscles as hard as Sebastian had always

imagined they would be, and he sighed. He dragged his palm over one muscular pectoral and felt Leon's mental equivalent of a gasp.

"Squeeze," Leon murmured to him.

Sebastian tightened his grip, bringing both hands to Leon's chest and digging his fingertips in. God, he'd wanted to get his hands on Leon. He groaned and scratched lightly, letting the pain skitter across his skin and morph into pleasure.

"You didn't let me touch." Sebastian closed his eyes as he stroked and squeezed. *"That night when we were together."*

"I..." Leon's mind ebbed and flowed next to his as he came in and out of the pleasure sensations. *"No."*

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because I didn't know you wanted to. Because I was in control. Because I was afraid—"

Then Sebastian's nail caught across a nipple, and they both gasped.

Leon's mind tightened on him like a vice. *"Again."*

Sebastian bit his lip and flicked his nipple again, sending a little shock of pain and pleasure up his spine.

"Again."

Teeth digging into his lip, Sebastian forced himself to drag the calloused pad of Leon's thumb over the tight, sensitive bud, and he whined.

"Keep going. Don't stop." Leon bore down on him overwhelmingly.

Sebastian surrendered. *"Yes, sir."*

As soon as the words left his mouth, heat shot down to his balls, and he cried out. Leon's arousal filled him, and he'd do anything for that feeling. He leaned his upper back against the cold tile of the shower and pressed his chest into his hands. He worried at his nipples, flicking and twisting.

The overstimulation stung, and Sebastian screwed up his face. “Leon, it’s—” but then he clamped his mouth shut again. It wasn’t too much. He could do it. He could bear it for as long as Leon told him to.

But Sebastian had Leon writhing under his hands too. Sebastian could feel the pleasure, the restraint, and the will spilling out of Leon and into him, their sensations and feelings twining together and amplifying.

“Leon,” Sebastian gasped. He forced himself to give himself a vicious pinch, and finally, Leon relented.

“Enough! Enough.”

Sebastian collapsed against the shower wall and caught his breath as the warm water pattered against the back of his head and shoulders. Leon soothed across his mind, and Sebastian closed his eyes and leaned into it.

Then Leon’s soft touch turned firm. *“We’re not done.”*

Sebastian huffed a tired laugh, then smiled. “Good.”

Leon’s chuckle shivered through them, and Sebastian licked his lips in anticipation. *“Turn off the shower, and get in front of that big mirror out there.”*

“You want to see yourself?” Sebastian smirked as he stopped the water and grabbed a soft, maroon towel to dry off the bulk of the droplets.

“No, I want to watch you while you pleasure me until you come.”

Sebastian tripped over his own feet and banged his hip into the bathroom counter at that, and he felt Leon’s own smirk.

“Not so graceful when you’re gagging for it, are you?”

Sebastian flushed and shoved at Leon in his mind. “Oh shut up.”

“I like it.” Leon pushed back against him. *“I like knowing how bad you want it, and how hard you’ll work for it. I like knowing I can give it to you.”*

“Will you?” Sebastian lifted his chin as he tossed his towel aside and strode to the large mirror leaning against the wall. Every nerve ending fired on all cylinders, telling him about the warm air just this side of too hot, the inch-deep plush carpet under his bare feet, the drop of water sliding down his chest and past his still hyper-sensitive nipple.

“Yes.” Leon unleashed a wave of desire and yearning that made Sebastian gasp. “*Look at me.*”

Sebastian jerked his eyes up to the mirror, and there stood Leon Hess, stern and imposing. Or maybe that was the Leon Hess standing inside him, tightening his grip and overpowering him. Sebastian yielded instantly, relief and lust and surety coursing through him as he gave himself over to Leon’s controlling grasp.

“*Fuck, Sebastian,*” Leon hissed as a jolt of desire shot through them, and warmth flooded Sebastian’s system. He did that. He drove Leon crazy. Just like this, just as he was, he gave Leon everything he wanted. “*On your knees.*”

Sebastian’s knees, already weak, buckled instantly at the permission, and he sank onto the soft carpet.

“*Lick your palm.*”

Anticipation zipped through them both as Sebastian laved his tongue over Leon’s broad palm, dragging across the callouses that Sebastian had felt on himself before.

“*Now touch me.*”

Leon’s eagerness, as much as his own, ran through Sebastian as he finally wrapped his slick palm around his cock. He dropped his chin to his chest with a groan and, without thinking, reached out to tangle his thoughts with Leon’s.

Sebastian, Sebastian, Sebastian.

Sebastian could feel Leon’s entire focus wrapping around him. He could feel his lust, his longing, and something deeper and stronger that Sebastian didn’t dare name.

“Look at me,” Leon commanded, his control ever present even though Sebastian could feel the rising pleasure in him.

Sebastian forced his head up and moaned at the sight. He tightened his grip and sped his strokes.

It was Leon’s body on his knees before him: Leon’s broad shoulders and strong chest heaving with breathless pants, Leon’s thighs spread wide on the floor, and Leon’s flushed cock disappearing into Leon’s calloused hand. But it was Sebastian’s wrecked expression on Leon’s handsome features.

“Leon.” Sebastian reached weakly for the mirror before dropping his hand when he recognized the futility of the gesture.

“Oh god, Sebastian, look at you.” Leon’s mind swirled around him, and every thought felt like a touch against his skin. Leon surrounded him and filled him, and Sebastian just wanted more and more. *“God, yes, look at you. You’re perfect.”*

Sebastian whined and dropped his second hand to his balls, cupping them and squeezing.

Excitement jumped from Leon and into Sebastian. *“Reach farther.”*

Sebastian bit his lip and tentatively reached past his balls—Leon’s balls—and brushed the sensitive skin of his taint. Nervousness flared up with the excitement, and Leon pressed on him.

“Farther.”

“Leon.” Sebastian couldn’t stop saying the man’s name as he watched his hand disappear between his thighs. “Leon.”

“Go on.”

Sebastian’s breath nearly stopped as he rubbed the pad of his finger against the furl of Leon’s tight hole.

“Oh god.” The vulnerable, erotic sense of invasion bolted out of Leon into Sebastian as Leon’s opening twitched against his finger and his hips jolted. And then Sebastian realized with a startling certainty that Leon had never done this before.

No one had ever touched Leon like this. No one had ever breached him, invaded him, been inside him. He'd never given anyone that control over him and never allowed himself that sort of pleasure.

But Sebastian, he trusted. He had said it himself: he trusted Sebastian with everything and always had. And he trusted Sebastian with this.

"Leon." Sebastian pressed against Leon's opening, just enough to breach the first ring of muscle with the tip of his finger, and just that sent him tightening and groaning. "Oh fuck."

Leon's mind whirled and shuddered against Sebastian before he managed to articulate a thought. "*Do you have anything in here? Anything not gun oil.*"

Sebastian huffed a delirious laugh and then cast about in his memory. "Yeah."

"Get it."

Sebastian lurched to his feet and stumbled to the bedside table. He yanked it open and pulled out a half-empty, ancient bottle of lube from his teenage days before he'd left to join the Resistance. Thank god for a young man's hormones.

Then he all but threw himself back onto the floor in front of the mirror. He popped the cap of the lube, hands shaking, then paused and stared at it. Waiting for instructions or waiting for permission, he wasn't sure.

"Let me see you, Sebastian."

Sebastian obediently looked back up at the mirror, but this time Leon chuckled in his mind.

"Not that part of you. Lean back."

Understanding shivered down to Sebastian's balls, and he slowly lowered himself back to lean on his elbow, looking down Leon's body to meet his own gaze in the mirror. Licking his lips, he propped his feet flat on the floor and let his knees fall wide.

Pride and praise flooded out of Leon. "*So obedient.*"

“For you.” Sebastian closed his eyes just for a moment to soak in the affection and satisfaction pouring into him. “Just for you.”

“That’s right.” Leon seemed to swell in size again, pushing against Sebastian and grabbing at him. *“Now fuck yourself for me.”*

“Oh god.” Sebastian cried out as his balls tightened with the order. “Yes, sir.”

He dropped the bottle of lube as his cock throbbed at that, and it rolled a few inches in the thick carpet, leaving an oily, damning line behind. He growled in frustration and grabbed it, managing to smear enough onto his fingers to satisfy him, then reached between his thighs.

Leon’s body. He was in Leon’s body with Leon inside him, twisted up on the floor just as Leon wanted him so that he could do whatever Leon said.

Sebastian plunged his middle finger into Leon’s hole.

“Leon!”

“Oh fuck, Sebastian.”

Leon’s muscles spasmed and tightened, clenching around the finger Sebastian had buried inside him to the knuckle. Jolts of pleasure and pain bounced between them.

“Leon.” Sebastian panted until he caught his breath, then slowly started to make tiny motions with his wrist. He wrenched his eyes back open, and once he caught sight of Leon’s ass sucking in his own finger, his wrist thrust of its own accord.

“More,” Leon growled at him, but Sebastian was already dragging the finger out and pushing it back in, and he felt Leon’s higher thinking dissolve with the sensation.

“Yes, sir.” Sebastian pumped his finger in and out of himself in earnest, his attention torn between the filthy view of it and the feeling of Leon inside him experiencing it all for the first time. The pain, the stretch, the burn, the confusion about

how it could feel so good and so wrong and so right all at the same time.

It was beautiful. Obscene and beautiful and touching, open and honest, and Sebastian fell. He fell so hard he terrified himself, but he couldn't make himself stop. He wanted Leon. He wanted to be with Leon, and stand beside him, and serve him, and protect him, and delight him. He wanted to follow him everywhere he went and help him do everything he did.

He wanted to choose Leon over everything else because Leon had chosen him for this.

Finally, Leon scratched his way back, and Sebastian felt him anchor himself against him. *"More, Sebastian. You can take so much more."*

He could. For Leon, he could take anything. He grabbed the lube, haphazardly squeezed some more onto his fingers, loath to fully remove the one still pumping inside him, and then plunged in a second one.

"Oh Leon." Sebastian tossed his head, the size of the additional stretch taking him by surprise. "Leon."

"Harder." Leon's mind clamped down on him. *"Fuck yourself harder, Sebastian, come on."*

"I—" Sebastian gritted his teeth and shifted so he could fuck himself rough enough to bounce with it, but the angle was so hard. "I'm trying, I—oh!"

As he twisted to get better leverage, his fingers suddenly nailed his prostate, and his pleasure cracked through.

"That," Leon cried. *"That, again!"*

"Yes, sir," Sebastian whimpered and prodded around until he found the spot that made the world shake. Then he rubbed at it mercilessly, with Leon bearing down on him. "Yes, sir, oh god, Leon."

"You're doing good. Fuck, you're doing so good, Sebastian."

"Leon."

“Get a hand on your cock. I want to see you come.”

Sebastian whined and fell onto his back so he could wrap his other hand around his throbbing length. He forced himself to pull and tug as the sensations started to mount and mount, and he shook and found himself scared to go over the edge.

“Leon, I’ve never—Not with—I don’t—”

It wasn’t just his body; it wasn’t just his pleasure coursing through him—he wasn’t alone. He’d never come with a passenger. And Leon was no passenger. He’d always thought of any other mind in his body as a separate, hostage presence. But Leon was *with* him, shaking apart and coming undone.

How could he let go when his body wasn’t his own? How could he give in?

“You can do it, Sebastian,” Leon panted in his ear as though he lay beside him, right there, watching him, commanding it. *“You’re doing so good, Sebastian.”*

“Leon.” Sebastian whimpered and whined, but he didn’t stop.

“Harder.”

“Leon!”

“Harder!”

Sebastian pressed hard on his prostate, and his orgasm ripped through him.

He threw his head back with a long cry that broke into gasping whines as his cock pulsed and the muscles of his ass clenched around his fingers, sending rhythmic, insistent shocks of pleasure up his spine.

Slowly, the waves ebbed, and Sebastian’s muscles loosened. He pulled his fingers free of his ass with a hiss, then melted back into the carpet. He panted until he had enough oxygen, and then he swallowed. He reached out carefully.

“Leon?”

Velvety soft, warm, dreamy affection reached back for him. *“I’m here.”*

Sebastian sighed with relief and closed his eyes. He stroked his hand over the soft carpet and smiled a smile that could only be described as dopey.

Leon laughed. *"We're going to get sticky."*

Sebastian snorted and waved his hand half-heartedly in the air before letting it fall back to the soft ground with a thud. *"Then we'll take another shower."*

"What about your warm washcloth?"

"Overrated."

Leon laughed. *"How long are you going to lie here?"*

"Until my legs want to move."

"You mean my legs."

Sebastian shrugged and stretched until he was spread-eagle, enjoying the pull on his pliant muscles. *"Same, same."*

They lay for a while longer, Leon not prodding him to move despite his words. It was a lovely, comfortable silence, and so slowly, a little guilt started to creep into Sebastian's mind, and it didn't come from Leon's. He sighed and sat up, careful not to let any semen congealing on his stomach drip onto the floor.

He looked at the mirror with his best look of contrition, as difficult as the expression was to make with Leon's facial muscles. *"I'm sorry for throwing darts at your face."*

Leon didn't say anything.

Sebastian cringed as he stood and made his way back to the bathroom. After he'd given himself a perfunctory rinse to clean off the bulk of the lube and spunk, and Leon still hadn't said anything, Sebastian reached out to find that Leon had erected something of a mental wall. Whether it was to keep Sebastian out or himself in, Sebastian couldn't say.

He toweled off and went back to his wardrobe to see if he still had pajamas. When he opened the doors, and Leon still hadn't replied, Sebastian dropped his arms to the side with a huff. *"I was just upset. And hurt. And disappointed."*

That got a reply from Leon. *“I know. I didn’t expect an apology.”*

“Why?” Sebastian pulled himself up and stuck his hands on his hips. *“Do you think I’m incapable of knowing when I’ve gone too far?”*

“Maybe.”

Sebastian snapped his mouth open to defend himself but then recognized a teasing tone in Leon’s voice. *“Jerk.”*

“You were angry with me for a reason, Sebastian,” Leon finally said in a more serious tone. *“That reason isn’t gone. I am winning this war, and I am giving that speech. Whatever it takes.”*

Sebastian stared at the dusty pile of clothes in his wardrobe. Leon was right. Sebastian *had* been angry with him for a reason, and an extremely valid one. He swallowed as he opened a drawer and found a soft shirt and some old sweatpants that didn’t smell too musty.

“So the attack didn’t change your mind?” he asked with an attempt at a neutral tone. *“About your methods?”*

“No.” Leon finally brought his wall down, and he brushed against Sebastian with a tinge of regret. *“And neither can you.”*

Sebastian pulled on the clothes with a whole new swirl of guilt in his stomach. Because he *wasn’t* angry at Leon anymore, but perhaps he still should be. He didn’t want anyone else subjected to what they had been subjected to. He didn’t want Southern Tava to be won at that cost.

Leon’s touch turned affectionate, and he nudged against Sebastian. *“Let’s go to bed.”*

Sebastian nodded and turned back to the big bed with a sigh. *“I don’t even know how that works with you.”*

“I sleep like everyone else when I bother to take the time.” Leon chuckled.

His levity eased Sebastian’s anxiety, and Sebastian let go of his guilt and frustration to be dealt with later.

“No, I mean, I don’t know how to sleep with another person in here with me.” Sebastian grabbed two of the decorative throw pillows and tossed them to the ground. *“I’ve never tried.”*

“Am I just another person?”

“No.” Sebastian snorted as he climbed into bed and settled himself in the covers. A real bed blew a cot or a sleeping bag out of the water any day, and he burrowed into the sheets with a sigh. *“You’re the most controlling and confusing man I’ve ever met.”*

Leon’s laughter rolled through their mind, and Sebastian wished he could be in a separate body so he could hear that laughter ring through the air. For once, it sounded genuine and free. Not so cynical and resigned.

“Do you make a habit of sleeping with other people?” Sebastian bit his lip and winced. There he went again. Why did he have to be so grabby? Why couldn’t he just take what he was given and be happy with it?

“Considering I don’t make a habit of sleeping, it seems unlikely I’d make a habit of sleeping with other people,” Leon pointed out in an amused tone.

Sebastian fiddled with a loose thread on the edge of the sheet. *“I suppose that makes sense.”*

“Honestly, I haven’t shared a bed with another person since I got out of the barracks and no longer had to share whatever mattresses we could manage to scrounge together.”

“And am I just another person?” Sebastian tugged at the thread.

Leon poked him. *“Are you fishing for compliments?”*

Sebastian blushed. *“Maybe.”*

Leon laughed again and expanded from his spot in their mind to press against Sebastian. *“No, you’re not just another person, Sebastian. You’re my most valuable soldier, an insufferable smart-ass, and the most captivating man I’ve ever met.”*

Sebastian rolled onto his side, hugged a pillow to his chest, and buried his face into it as though he could hide his giant grin and burning cheeks from a man who could feel his giddiness. *“Flatterer.”*

“No one has ever called me that before.”

Sebastian snorted. *“Well, have you ever said things like that to anyone before?”*

“No. I’ve never felt like this about anyone before.”

“Well, there you go, then.” Sebastian rolled his eyes but still felt like he might burst with joy. How many times had he lain in this very bed, hugging this same stupid pillow, and wondering if a man would ever say these things to him?

Say them and really know who he was saying them to?

How could he sleep when...

But then he yawned. Right, teenage dreams coming true or not, he’d fled a brutal attack today and not the first one of his week. And Leon’s body clearly hadn’t slept a full night’s sleep since it had reached maturity.

Leon chuckled into his mind, then reached out and touched him with heartbreaking tenderness. *“Goodnight, Sebastian.”*

Sebastian all but melted and burrowed into the covers that now smelled of both home and Leon. *“Goodnight, Leon.”*

SEBASTIAN WOKE TO SOMETHING ANNOYING.

It didn’t *quite* annoy him enough to rouse him, but just enough to make him scrunch his face and roll over. He batted at the air, pulled a pillow over his head, and buried his face in the sheets, but the thing was still there.

What was it? It was like it was—pacing. Inside his head.

“Leon?”

The pacing stopped. *“You’re awake.”*

“*Yeah.*” Sebastian groaned and sat up. He rubbed a hand down his face. “*Kinda hard to sleep with you buzzing back and forth in here.*”

“*Sorry. I didn’t realize you could feel that.*”

“*What are you thinking about?*” Sebastian had always thought it must be exhausting in Hess’s constantly thinking mind. Now he was sure of it.

“*Nothing.*”

“*Liar.*” Sebastian rolled his eyes as he pushed himself from the bed and tottered to the bathroom.

Leon chuckled. “*Everything. So it might as well be nothing.*”

Sebastian splashed some water on his face, and now that he was more awake, he could feel Leon’s presence in his mind more distinctly. His very *tired* presence. Sebastian scowled at his face in the mirror. “*Did you not sleep?*”

“*I tried.*” Leon seemed to sag, and the exhaustion leaked out of him. “*I think maybe you need a body to sleep.*”

“*Aw shit, I’m sorry, Leon.*” Sebastian grimaced and pushed his hands through his hair. The last thing the man needed was to miss another night of sleep, and Sebastian had just taken one from him while he snoozed contentedly in his body. “*I’m trying to get out of here as fast as I can.*”

“*I know.*” One of their shoulders twitched to shrug. “*It’s fine.*”

“*It’s not fine. What time is it?*” Sebastian went back out into the bedroom and peeked around one of the heavy, blackout curtains. Light had just barely begun to brighten the sky, which meant the staff wouldn’t be in yet. “*It should be here soon.*”

Too impatient to wait, Sebastian went back out into the hallway and started down to the kitchen.

“*Dad’s an early riser. He’s probably around here somewhere,*” Sebastian told Leon as they walked down the dark hall and felt a little curl of awkwardness. “*What?*”

“It never occurred to me that I might meet your parents one day.”

“Oh.” Sebastian blushed hard and scratched the back of his neck. Right. He was introducing Leon Hess to his parents. And he was introducing him as... *“As what exactly?”*

Oh god, he hadn't actually meant to ask that.

“Never mind, ignore that.”

Or answer it.

What were they? Sebastian had been asking himself that for days, but as he came to the door to the kitchen, he realized that answering that question was his responsibility now. Leon had come clean about where he stood. The question now was, where did Sebastian stand?

“Sebbie!” His father's surprised greeting derailed Sebastian's train of thought, and Sebastian gladly let it wreck, too overwhelmed to consider it. “You're up early.”

“Morning, Dad.” Sebastian smiled at his father, who stood barefoot in the kitchen with a cup of klak, his hair sleep-mussed, but his eyes bright, just as he had for as long as Sebastian could remember him. Sebastian hopped onto one of the stools by the counter and tapped his own forehead. “Apparently, Leon can't sleep in here. He's been up all night.”

His father's face fell. “Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. It didn't occur to me.”

Sebastian shrugged. “How would we have known?”

“Well, your mother's downstairs getting the body ready.” His father topped off his mug and nodded toward the drawing room and their most used tunnel. “We can go now.”

“Is the staff coming today?” Sebastian asked as they walked back down the hall.

His father shook his head. “No, we've told them that Sarah's come down with something. We should have the house to ourselves.”

“Ask him if there’s been any word from the capital,” Leon ordered.

Sebastian cringed. He’d momentarily forgotten about that, so caught up in Leon’s presence and their situation.

“Have you heard anything from the Resistance?”

“A little.” His father nodded, opened the drawing-room door, and motioned for them to precede him. “Martha got in touch.”

“Martha made it?” Relief flooded out of Leon.

Relief that Sebastian mirrored, though to an admittedly lesser degree. “Martha’s alive?”

“She made it out through the tunnels with at least a dozen others.” His father opened the armoire and its false back, then started leading them down the stairs into their own tunnels. “The capital’s been lost. All it took were a few Klah’Eel shock troops. But the Resistance is very much intact.” He threw them a surprisingly devious look over his shoulder. “I’d have loved to see the look on Klah’Eel command’s faces when they realized Leon Hess got away after all.”

Sebastian snickered. “You’ll have to record a speech, Leon. We’ll beam it out to every station we can reach. They’ll shit themselves.”

Leon seethed with righteous anger, and Sebastian could imagine him so clearly, standing straight and solid with a cold and determined look on his face. *“Good.”*

They turned down a different corridor than the one Leon and Sebastian had come up, and after a few paces, got to a door. His father pulled it open and motioned them inside. “Here we are.”

“Sebbie!” His mother smiled at him from over a prone body on a gurney. “You’re up early.”

Leon felt amused as he poked at Sebastian. *“How late do you normally sleep in?”*

“As late as I can,” Sebastian replied shamelessly. *“You should try it sometime.”*

“Give me back my body and maybe I will.”

Sebastian laughed and entered the room. *“I’m going!”*

His mother raised her eyebrows. *“Something funny?”*

“Leon’s just being impatient.” Sebastian shrugged a shoulder, but then his parents exchanged a look, and he frowned. *“What?”*

His mother gave him a placating smile. *“Nothing.”* She gestured to the body: a young man with a jagged scar from the edge of his right jaw to the tip of his left collarbone that must have been his undoing.

“How did he get like this?” Leon radiated discomfort, amplifying Sebastian’s. *“Your parents didn’t—”*

“No.” Sebastian shook his head quickly. *“We don’t do that anymore if we can help it, haven’t for generations.”*

“Right.” Leon still sounded slightly concerned but also convinced, which Sebastian was grateful for. *“So then, how did this man get here, comatose, in your parents’ basement?”*

Sebastian traced his finger along the scar across the man’s neck. *“Probably bled out, went brain-dead before they could save him, but not before they could save the body.”* Then he shrugged. *“My family’s built up connections over the generations we’ve been here that can make sure any unclaimed bodies like that come to us. And maybe occasionally some claimed ones too.”*

Leon didn’t reply right away, and Sebastian sighed.

“I know it’s unsavory.”

“It is what it is.” Leon’s presence in his mind fluttered a bit as though it were shaking off the conversation. *“It’s what makes you possible, so I’ll take it.”*

Sebastian blushed hard and ducked his head, acutely aware of his parents in the room with them and that damned inscrutable look they kept giving each other. *“Like I said, flatterer.”*

His father cleared his throat. *“Are you ready, Sebbie?”*

Sebastian nodded and pulled his shoulders back. “Yeah. Just prepping Leon.”

“*Sebastian...*”

“*Are you ready?*” Sebastian cupped the back of the neck of the body on the gurney, bringing Leon’s palm to the man’s nape.

“*Yes, just, before you go...*”

“*What?*” Sebastian cocked his head, fighting off the awkwardness of his parents still staring at him with shrewd expressions. “*What is it?*”

Overwhelming frustration. “*Damn it, never mind. Nothing.*”

His mother put her hands on her hips. “Sebbie?”

“Just a minute.” Sebastian scowled at his mother. “*Leon, what?*”

“*Nothing, just go.*” Leon pressed on his mind in a way that felt like pulling as much as it felt like pushing.

Sebastian hesitated, suddenly reluctant to break the connection. He’d never be this close to Leon again. That was probably all for the best, but what if Leon put his walls back up? What if he was cold and callous and never let Sebastian close again?

“*Leon—*”

“*Just go. They’re waiting.*”

Leon felt in turmoil, and it pained Sebastian to pull away. With a force of will, he unhooked his barbs from Leon’s brain and felt their minds slide free of each other. In their last connection, moments before Sebastian cut himself free, he felt Leon grasp at him.

“*Shit. Sebastian, I love you. I lo—*”

And then instinct propelled Sebastian out of the slit in Leon’s neck. He raced down his arm, down to somewhere he could breathe and survive, and sliced smoothly into the

waiting body on the gurney. He tightened his barbs into place, snapped his eyes open, and he inhaled on a gasp.

He sat up quickly, too quickly, and he swayed and slid sideways.

“Fuck—”

“I got you.” His mother’s arms came around him and righted him before he could fall out of the gurney.

“Leon—”

“I got him,” his father said calmly before Sebastian could even form the question. “He’s—whoa there.”

Sebastian wrenched his head around to see Leon lurching out of his father’s grasp, shaking his head, and clutching the back of his neck. He flinched when Sebastian’s father put a hand on his shoulder, but didn’t shake him off, and finally looked back up at the three of them with a dazed expression.

“Oh god.” Leon blinked a few times and then brought his other hand up to his head. He dropped his forehead into his palm. “Oh god.”

“What’s wrong?” Sebastian leaped from the gurney and stood in front of him instantly. *I love you.* “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, just”—Leon didn’t lift his head but raised a hand up as though to fend Sebastian off—“just the worst fucking headache I’ve ever had.”

“I can see how having Sebastian in your head for over twelve hours might do that,” Sebastian’s mother said dryly as she came around the gurney and handed Leon a water bottle.

Sebastian scowled at his mother. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Here, sit down, give it a second.” Sebastian’s father directed Leon to a seat in the corner after he’d grabbed the water, then moved around him to get an angle on his bleeding neck. “And let’s take a look at this.”

Sebastian hovered uselessly as Leon drank some of the water, his eyes still screwed shut, and Sebastian’s father cleaned and bandaged the hole Sebastian had left in his neck.

The more it became apparent that Leon was perfectly fine, if a little exhausted and hurting from Sebastian's occupation of his body, the more irritated Sebastian became.

What the fuck had that been?

Telling Sebastian he loved him while Sebastian was halfway out of his mind? Before he could respond? And now Sebastian was all alone in his own mind, and the only way he could communicate with Leon would be to physically open his mouth and say words out loud with his parents very much within earshot.

Which, of course, was out of the question, so all Sebastian could do was sit and seethe when all he wanted to do was grab Leon and shake him and ask him if he really meant it, and if he did really mean it, then Sebastian—

Then Sebastian what...loved him too?

The thought shook him enough that Sebastian took a clumsy step back and bumped into his mother, who was bringing over a ration bar. Sebastian glanced down at it and shook his head without thinking. "He hates those."

His mother raised an eyebrow at him. "Okay, then."

"Thank you. I just need some sleep." Leon waved a hand and pushed himself up to his feet. Sebastian's father slipped an arm under his shoulders when he swayed, and Leon slumped against him.

"Here, let me help." Sebastian hurried forward, but his father snorted.

"I think we've got it."

Frustration burst into Sebastian's chest, all his own, and now that he had full rein of his mind, it expanded to fill the space. He scowled and opened his mouth, but then Leon gave him a subdued, crooked smile. The fight whooshed out of him, and Sebastian settled under that steady gaze.

"I'm fine, Sebastian." Leon managed to clap a hand on Sebastian's shoulder as Sebastian's father helped him back into the hallway, and the heavy warmth of it made Sebastian's

heart leap. He wanted to grab Leon's broad hand and clutch it to his chest, but Leon had already let it drop. "I just need to sleep."

Sebastian fisted a hand and propped the other one on his hip. He gritted his teeth and popped his chin out. "And then we need to talk."

Because damn Leon Hess if he thought he could drop that sort of confession on Sebastian and then totter off for a nap without having hell to pay for it later.

Leon looked over his shoulder with an unreadable expression and nodded. "Of course."

Sebastian watched his father help Leon back down the hall with an impotent swirl of emotions when he finally realized his mother standing at his side, looking at him. He glanced at her

She raised an eyebrow. "Talk about what?"

Sebastian waved a hand and spun around to grab the ration bar Leon wouldn't have wanted. "Nothing. Resistance stuff." He ripped the bar open and bit off a slightly too-large piece. He chewed it anyway and said around his mouthful, "We'll need guns and ammo too. We didn't get any out of the capital."

"We have plenty. We'll get you some." His mother eyed him as he chewed through the dry husk of rations. "Come on, let's get you some real breakfast."

Sebastian sighed and wrapped up the remains of his bar. "Yeah, you're right."

Leon and his father had gone far enough ahead that Sebastian and his mother didn't run into them as they made their way back into the drawing room. As his mother bolted up the hidden door, Sebastian wandered into the kitchen and found Sarah perched on a stool at the large island with a steaming mug of klak.

"Sebbie! You're—"

“Up early, I know.” Sebastian shushed her with a hand and climbed onto the stool next to her. He grabbed her mug, took a swig that burned in his mouth, and then scowled and shoved it back at her.

Sarah received said mug with a raised eyebrow. “I was going to say in a new body.”

Oh, right. “Yeah, that too.”

“And you seem so happy about it,” she remarked dryly as she took a sip of her mug.

Sebastian wrinkled his nose and propped his elbows up on the counter. He dropped his chin into his hands. “I am. I’m just hungry.” And confused. “This body’s stomach is empty.”

His mother came back in and sashayed over to the cabinets. “Well, lucky for you, I think I still remember how to make pancakes.”

“Pancakes for breakfast? Chaos in the streets? An unprovoked attack by the Klah’Eel?” Sebastian’s father came in and grabbed himself a fresh mug. “Feels like when you two were kids again.”

Sarah snorted and crossed her legs. “Well, we should at least admit that this one wasn’t unprovoked.”

His mother waved over her shoulder as she haphazardly poured ingredients into a large bowl. “We’ll admit it in private.”

His father nodded and pointed a finger at Sarah. “But we’ll present a united and uncompromising front in public.”

Sarah raised her mug in a salute. “Always.”

She and Sebastian’s father had been consolidating yet more power in the local Southern Tava legislature as Sarah grew older. Turned out two Ralsdis in politics were even better than one. It helped that Sarah had recently become engaged to Robert Haron, the son of another well-respected old family.

The Harons and Ralsdis had nothing like the power of the oligarchic Turners, who held sway within the entire sector, but

they could undoubtedly nudge the future of Southern Tava in the direction they wanted.

“How’s Leon?” Sebastian asked as he watched his mother spoon globs of batter onto a hot, spitting pan.

“He’s fine,” his father replied without looking at him, too preoccupied with watching his wife cook with a look of concern. “Just very, very tired.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he sleeps much, even when he doesn’t have me in his head.” Sebastian twisted his lips and tapped his knuckles on the counter thoughtfully, thinking of how tired Leon had looked before the speech and the deep exhaustion Sebastian had felt in his bones.

A funny silence happened then, and Sebastian looked up from the counter to catch the tail end of another glance between his parents.

Then his father looked at him with a small smile that didn’t touch his eyes. He idly stroked his fingers along the edge of his mug and said mildly, “I didn’t realize you and Leon Hess were so close.”

Sebastian recognized this tactic. Whenever his parents wanted to *talk* to him about something, his father started the conversation because his mother was too much like him: all bluster and no tact.

“We work closely together. You know how much I do for the Resistance.”

“Of course we do,” his mother interjected as she clumsily flipped a pancake, getting a bit of batter over the edge of the pan. “We’re very proud of you.”

His father nodded in agreement. “Yes, very proud. Our family has always believed in the cause.”

“And in Hess,” Sebastian felt the urge to clarify. “You supported Farlon grooming him as his successor. You could have pressed him to choose someone else.”

His father nodded again. “Yes, we believe in Hess’s dedication and capability.”

Sebastian straightened and lifted his chin. “But?”

Sarah sighed. “But Martha told us he’s planning on duplicating that gas and using it.”

Despite his best efforts, that took the defiance right out of Sebastian’s spine, and he slumped back to the counter. “And you disagree?”

“We wanted your opinion.” His father came to stand across the island from him and set his mug down. “You’ve been through it twice. Do you think that weapon is usable?”

Sebastian pressed his lips together and looked between his father and his sister, who both stared at him hard. He wanted to say that it was because Leon had decided it was, and clearly his family had something against Leon that they were unwilling to articulate, and that infuriated Sebastian because he didn’t *want* them to be against Leon but...

He dropped his head. “No.” He groaned and scrubbed at his face with his palms. “No, I think it’s the worst thing ever created. I think it’s the fucking occupation in a canister.”

His father tapped his forefinger against the counter, and Sebastian could imagine the careful expression on his face as he hummed.

Sebastian dropped his hands and looked back up at him. “But maybe that doesn’t matter. Maybe all that matters is that it works.” He threw his hands wide. “Maybe it’s worse to have done everything we did and to have promised so much to everyone to throw it all away and lose it all now because we wouldn’t take *one more* step.”

His sister nodded slowly in the spitting image of their father. “Is that what you think?”

Sebastian spun to her. “What does it matter what I think? I’m not the one that makes decisions.”

“You make a decision every time you take an action, Sebastian.” His mother sent him a sharp look as she plated the misshapen pancakes, then set them between them.

“Yeah, I decide to be loyal.” Sebastian grabbed one of the pancakes but ended up gesticulating with it before he took a bite. “I decide to be dedicated. I decide to follow the people that I promised to follow.”

Sarah set her mug down hard. “And to what ends? Or should I say, through what means? How far—”

“What, we have a problem with my loyalty now?” Sebastian threw down his pancake and pointed at his sister. “I’ve followed you plenty, with all of your political schemes.” He rounded on his father. “And yours! You’ve been funding and supporting the Resistance for decades, but all of sudden, *I’m* the only one that has to bear a moral responsibility?”

His father shook his head slightly and didn’t raise his voice. “We didn’t say that.”

“He has to bear some, though!” Sarah *did* raise her voice. She pointed a finger back at Sebastian. “You have to live with the decisions you make, and you can’t keep outsourcing your moral responsibilities to other people.”

“I’m not outsourcing anything,” Sebastian cried. “I’m trusting and supporting the people I’ve chosen. The people like you, and like—”

“Leon Hess?” His mother slid her question in like a dagger, and it punctured Sebastian’s indignant outrage. “He’s someone you’ve decided to trust and support? He’s someone your comfortable having make all your decisions for you?”

The kitchen fell silent as his mother’s stinging question settled in the air.

Sebastian rolled his lips together and stared down at the counter. That was the question, wasn’t it? It had been for a while. He hadn’t realized his family had caught on to it as well. He swallowed as he set the stupid pancake back on the plate, his empty stomach rolling too much for food.

“And so what if I am? So what if he is someone I’ve chosen?” He looked up again at them when they didn’t answer and found their faces torn and unsure, eyes darting between each other. “What if I have decided I’d follow him to the ends

of the planet? What if I...” He took a shaky breath, his family’s eyes on him burning into his skin “...what if I love him?”

His family reacted instantly.

The blood drained from his father’s face.

His mother looked like she had just had all her worst fears confirmed.

His sister dropped her head into her hands with a groaned, “Oh God, Sebbie,” and it was her that his tornado of insecurity targeted.

“Hey! You don’t get to have an opinion on my love life.” He rounded on her with a snarl. “I’m in love with a man who gave up his body for me. You’re marrying a man who doesn’t even know what the fuck you are.”

“He knows enough!” Sarah jerked her head up with a furious glare in her eyes. “He’s a *good* man, he has *good* values, and he’d—”

Sebastian rose and clenched his fists. “He’d drop you in an instant if he knew you were a parasitic—”

“Enough!” His father slammed his fist down on the counter. “Both of you.”

Sebastian spun away from them all and hunched his shoulders.

It wasn’t like he didn’t know what a fool he was. It wasn’t like he didn’t know Leon wasn’t exactly the knight in shining armor he’d always wanted. He knew damn well that there were things Leon would do, and that he’d ask Sebastian to do that... made Sebastian question himself and who he was.

But he also knew that no one made him feel the way Leon made him feel—so seen, so awe-inspiring, so powerful, so special, so adored—and in that way, Leon was everything Sebastian had ever wanted.

And Leon wasn’t just anyone. They’d fought together, bled and sweat together. Sebastian had a front-row seat to Leon’s

strength, dedication, and brilliance. Leon was special, and he was Sebastian's. And Sebastian was his.

So why shouldn't Sebastian be loyal? Why shouldn't he give himself over to Leon?

He pushed himself up to standing.

"Sebbie, wait." His mother reached for him, and he batted her hand away.

"Get in touch with Martha," he snapped over his shoulder as he stalked out of the kitchen. "Leon and I need to be leaving as soon as he's up."

Chapter Twelve

LEON SLEPT FOR HOURS.

Sometime in the mid-morning, he'd woken up blearily and registered the light streaming in through the cracks in the curtains. But he'd also registered the warmth and the softness of the bed, the quiet, and the fact that no one was banging on the door, asking him for things, or telling him things, or waiting for him to ask them things...

He pulled the covers up to his chin and went back to sleep.

The second time he woke up, the sun's angle was different but still bright, so he figured he'd made it to late afternoon. He sat up with a yawn and a deep sigh. The last time he'd slept so long or so deeply had to have been years before Farlon died. Back when he had more missions and fewer responsibilities.

He swung his legs out of bed and couldn't resist smiling at them. They were doing what *he* told them to do. They were his again. His body was his own.

And—somewhat less fortunately—so was his mind.

Oh, and he'd handled *that* little transfer of power brilliantly. He groaned and dragged himself to the bathroom to wash the sleep out of his eyes. Panic had spiked through him as Sebastian had pulled away from him, disappearing back out into the world where there were so many barriers between them. Most of those damn barriers were erected by Leon.

He'd felt his opportunity slipping away. He'd been so certain he'd never manage to get the truth out if he had to

force it out through his lips. And now, as he splashed water on his face and stared at his reflection, he knew he'd been right.

Sebastian, I love you.

He'd never have been able to say that for the first time if he'd had to physically stand in front of the man, force his mouth open, and force the truth out of his throat. Even now, his body tightened, trying to shield the vulnerability and maintain control.

And that was how it should have been.

He tossed the hand towel down with a frustrated snarl. What was wrong with him? Every time he tried to do right by Sebastian, he did wrong. Sebastian didn't deserve that sort of pressure from him. Sebastian didn't deserve to have his feelings and emotions and his desires twisted up in a man like him. A man who could never give him everything...who could never give him *anything* but a few rough kisses and a few orders it would kill him to follow.

It had felt like taking care of Sebastian to tell him how amazing Leon thought he was, how wonderful and beautiful and desirable.

But it had been selfish.

His stomach rumbled and pulled his thoughts away from his deserved self-flagellation, so he scrubbed his hand down his face one more time and headed for the door. He needed to eat, and then they had to get back to the Resistance.

He padded down the hallway, expecting he'd eventually run into some Ralsdi or another, but he still jumped when a door just in front of him opened quietly. William Ralsdi stepped out, looking much more put together than when Leon and Sebastian had found him in the kitchen, and with a cold air that put Leon's back up.

"Hess." William stepped out into the hall and blocked Leon's path but motioned for him to enter the room he'd just opened in a way that managed to make the move look inviting rather than controlling. "Could we speak for a moment?"

“Of course.” Leon nodded. William Ralsdi wasn’t a man to be brushed aside, especially by the leader of the Resistance that could only exist with his charity.

He stepped into the room and did a quick visual sweep. If Leon had ever bothered to picture what William Ralsdi’s office might look like, it would have been this: dark wood, plush carpets, a high ceiling, and an imposing desk. Given what Leon knew of Sebastian and his fiery, impulsive attitude, he wondered if this was really who William Ralsdi was, or whether this was just the careful persona of William Ralsdi, the politician.

And somewhat more importantly, he wondered which William was dealing with now. Whoever he was, he was a different man than the one who had helped Leon out of the tunnels and back into bed this morning.

“Take a seat.” William waved a casually imperious hand to the chair across from his desk, then went around behind it and seated himself in his own imposing chair. “I’ve been hoping I’d get a chance to speak with you ever since you took over after Farlon, may he rest in peace, but it’s been difficult.”

“I understand it would have been politically fraught.” Leon sat carefully, keeping his spine straight and strong. But he let himself lean against the backrest, the better to show William Ralsdi that he wasn’t completely in control here.

“True, but Farlon and I always managed to find a way over the years.” William sat back in his chair, crossed his legs, and tapped one long forefinger against his armrest. “Of course, now I’ve got you here, and I’m not sure whether I’m speaking to the Resistance’s leader or my son’s lover.”

Leon fought to keep his face impassive.

Had William heard them last night? Had Sebastian said something to him? If Sebastian had said something, then what? How Leon hated politicians. It was impossible to read William’s opinion on the matter, but Leon was sure William read every tick of Leon’s muscles.

Leon inclined his head slightly. “The Resistance comes first.”

William arched a brow. “And Sebastian comes second? Or does he not even rank that high for you?”

Leon clenched his jaw. He didn’t know Ralsdi, and he didn’t owe Ralsdi anything on a personal level. The man’s opinion of him meant less than nothing to Leon beyond what it meant for the Resistance. But that wasn’t what got under his skin and made his stomach sick.

What made him sick were the words he had to drag out of his throat. “Sebastian comes second.”

William’s politician’s mask broke with a sneer. “Well, isn’t that just what every father wants to hear.”

Leon swallowed and replied when he was sure his voice would come out steadily. “I can assure you it’s not what I want to say.”

But it was what he had to do. He didn’t get to ride into the sunset with Sebastian. Not if he had to leave Southern Tava behind him under the thumb of the Klah’Eel. He would not betray his duty. He had responsibilities to the people that had died and to the people that were alive and counting on him to make good on all their sacrifices.

He couldn’t put Sebastian ahead of that.

William stared at him for a second, then slouched forward and put his elbows on the desk. He ran a hand through his hair and then down his face, destroying the put-together persona he’d had on. “Honestly, I would have thought of something nasty to say about your dedication to the Resistance if you’d told me Sebastian came first.”

Leon quirked a mirthless smile. “So, no right answers here, then?”

“No.” William shook his head and returned his empty smile. “No right answers here for anyone.”

When William didn’t continue, Leon leaned forward to mirror his position. “What did you want to talk about, Mr.

Ralsdi?”

“Well, there’s not much I can say about my son. He’s making his choices.” William shrugged his shoulders up high and then dropped them down. “He always did want to be seen, and clearly, you see him, so maybe that’s the best a father can ask for.”

Leon winced. “I think a father could ask for a little better.” Someone who didn’t have to say Sebastian was second and someone who wasn’t wanted across the sector as a terrorist would have been the least of what Sebastian deserved.

William nodded with something a little like acceptance in his eyes. “The fact that you see that, at least, speaks well of you.” Then William sat back up, and a bit of his politician’s face returned. “No, I want to talk to you about the gas. The Resistance’s strategy.”

“The strategy is simple.” Leon had been ready for this, and he nodded. “The Klah’Eel have tacit support for this particular invasion but little goodwill for their general occupation considering the burden of all the refugees on the surrounding planets.”

William nodded. “True.”

“And they have even less support among their own populace.” Leon raised a finger. “The Klah’Eel are a people proud of their army, no doubt, but even warrior people want schools and hospitals, and infrastructure, and they’re sick and tired of their government pissing all the public funds into hanging on to a violent, poor, human-infested piece of a secondary planet.”

William snorted. “You have a high opinion of Southern Tava.”

Leon chuckled. “Speaking from their point of view, of course.”

“Of course. Well, I see where you’re going with this.” William rubbed his jaw with the back of his hand thoughtfully. “Make us more trouble than we’re worth. Make them hurt so that their own people call them off.”

Leon nodded. "I think it could work. We can't beat them outright, and the intergalactic community isn't interested in supporting us."

William cocked his head back and forth, as though weighing thoughts on either side of his brain. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. Emissary Serihk has been raising holy hell about the Klah'Eel's mishandling of the peace treaty that *he* negotiated. The Klah'Eel may be under more political pressure than you realize. The Qesh, in particular, are horrified by that gas."

"Maybe." Leon scoffed. "But by the time they're horrified enough to do something about it, the Klah'Eel will have already overrun us, and then they won't care."

"You think you can get it duplicated before the Qesh or the Humans find their morals?" William raised an eyebrow.

"We already have people meeting with the Carta Cartel to get them to lend us their main scientist."

William raised both his eyebrows. "The qeshian one?"

Leon shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Hm. Well, if it is, he's very good. He could be enough."

"The only alternative to using it ourselves is to neutralize it, but what does that give us?" Leon raised his chin. "Then we're back where we were before we even knew about the weapon. Back when the Turners were going to take us. No intergalactic support and facing a far superior force."

"We still chose to start this war then," William pointed out.

"Because we'd never get another chance once the Turners got ahold of us. But you know what our odds were."

"Not good, I know, I know." William leaned back in his chair. "I know."

Leon rolled his shoulders back and looked levelly at William. "I feel very confident in this decision."

"You feel confident it's the best way to win the war," William clarified.

“I do.”

“But do you feel confident it’s the best thing for Southern Tava?”

Leon narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure I understand the difference.”

William sighed. “After all these years, I’m not sure I do either.”

“Farlon chose me because he knew I’d do anything to win this for us.” Leon leaned forward and put his hand on the desk. “Because he knew I’d do anything for him.”

William tilted his head and narrowed his eyes shrewdly. “How old were you when Farlon found you?”

Leon kept his face guarded. “Eight. Why?”

“Because he was a damn good commander and a damn good speaker.” William tapped his forefinger over a whirl in the wood. “But I’m not so sure he’d have been a damn good father.”

Leon’s hand on the desk clenched into a fist. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

A swift series of knocks echoed in the room before William could reply. William opened his mouth, but before he could even tell the knocker to enter, Sebastian threw open the door and strode in. He stopped in the center of the room and crossed his arms.

“Leon. Come on. It’s time to go.”

Leon hesitated for a moment—thrown by Sebastian closed-off, aggressive posture and the waves of tension rolling off him.

“Now.” Sebastian’s snapped to him and then back to his father. “We don’t really have a lot of time. There’s a war going on.”

“Of course.” William stood gracefully and extended a hand to Leon. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Hess.”

Leon debated with himself for a moment, then decided he'd prefer William Ralsdi as an uneasy acquaintance than an enemy. He shook his hand. "And you, Mr. Ralsdi."

"I've got our packs waiting next to the tunnel." Sebastian pointed with his chin back out into the hall. Then he unslung a small bag he'd had around his shoulder and tossed it to Leon. "Here are some clothes and boots. They should fit enough. I'll wait outside. Dad?"

Sebastian waited until William nodded, and they both went out into the hall, leaving Leon alone in the office. Leon opened the bag and changed out of the old, thin pajamas and into the sturdy, well-fitting enough clothes he found in the bag. Had he been the one to turn Sebastian tense and snapping? Was this Sebastian's reaction to his ill-thought-out confession?

Leon laced up his boots with a sigh. He'd have thought by now that he'd be used to failing at everything, but he still felt the shame of the inadequacy twist in his chest every time. He braced himself and stepped back out into the hall to find Sebastian leaning against the wall in front of him, arms crossed and a deep frown creasing his face.

Sebastian looked up as he opened the door and stared at him for a second, eyes narrowed and assessing. Then Sebastian suddenly straightened off the wall, and Leon started. He fought the urge to step back as Sebastian advanced on him.

But once he got to him, Sebastian ran a hand gently up Leon's jaw. He didn't tug Leon toward him but instead slid himself close and slotted their mouths together. The tension groaned out of Leon, and his arms came up around Sebastian's waist.

Sebastian hummed back and brought his other hand up to cup Leon's jaw. He held Leon's face as he kissed him, first gentle and chaste, then deep and desperate, then back again.

Leon followed him, holding him tight and letting him do whatever he wanted, kissing him back however he wanted.

He hadn't known he'd ever get to kiss Sebastian again. He still didn't know if he'd get to kiss Sebastian again, but he'd

greedily take whatever he was given. And he'd give what Sebastian asked of him in this.

When Sebastian pulled back, Leon leaned after him and barely managed to lock his bereaved sound behind his teeth.

"We have to get going," Sebastian murmured, though his eyes stayed on Leon's mouth.

Leon licked his lips and saw Sebastian take a breath. "Yeah."

After a beat, Sebastian tore his gaze away and looked back down the hall, but Leon's heart jumped when he reached out and took his hand. Sebastian laced their fingers together and drew him down the corridor. "We got in touch with Martha while you were sleeping. They're hiding out in the old hospital."

Leon's mind struggled for a few moments to comprehend Sebastian's warm grip on his hand—the last time Sebastian had held his hand, Leon had been chemically terrified out of his mind—and Sebastian's urgent and professional tone. Eventually, he delineated and ordered the pieces of his mind enough to respond. "Is that close to here?"

"Not very close, but not too far," Sebastian said. "If we leave now and go through the tunnels, we should be there before nightfall."

They closed in on the drawing-room door, and Leon glanced down at their clasped hands. Was Sebastian's family in there? And was Sebastian going to keep holding his hand in full view—

Leon got his answer when they arrived at the door and Sebastian lifted his chin, tightened his grip, and pulled Leon into the room with him. Sarah, Alice, and William Ralsdi all stood in the room, and they all dropped their eyes down to Leon's and Sebastian's clasped hands with masked looks. Leon couldn't read their expressions, but whatever Sebastian saw made his hand twitch in Leon's. So Leon firmed his grip as well and pulled back his shoulders.

Leon had no idea what message Sebastian was trying to send, but he'd back him up whatever it was.

Alice Ralsdi pushed through the tension first. She put her hands on her hips and gave them a bright smile in a way that reminded Leon forcefully of Sebastian. "You two ready to leave?"

"Yeah." Sebastian let go of Leon's hand and went to his mother. They embraced so tightly, Leon averted his eyes with an intense feeling of intrusion. He didn't belong here, inserting himself like a wedge into this tight family.

William stepped forward and pulled Leon's attention to him. "I'm glad to have finally met you, Leon. I can see why Farlon chose you."

He reached out a hand again, but this time Leon detected something almost conciliatory in the gesture, and so he took it without hesitation. He shook the older man's hand firmly. "Thank you."

"No, thank you for everything you've done." William gave his hand a last meaningful squeeze and then let him go. "Good luck."

"I need to thank you as well." Alice's small, manicured hand grabbed Leon's shoulder and turned him. Before Leon could react, she pulled him into a tight hug, and every muscle in his body went rigid. She didn't let go, though, and leaned the side of her head against his. "Thank you for bringing Sebastian back to us."

A lightning-quick memory of the horror and terror as he watched Sebastian being torn from his body and thrown onto the ground snapped through Leon's mind, and he squeezed his eyes shut. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I didn't do it for you."

"I know." Alice leaned back but kept her hands on his shoulders and looked into his face. "And that makes me all the more grateful."

Leon, guilt swirling in his stomach, didn't have a reply to that, so he just nodded.

Luckily, Alice didn't seem to expect one, and she grabbed a small bag off the chair beside her and pressed it into his hands with a smile. "I've also packed you a little something."

"Packed me something?" Leon frowned down at the bag.

"To eat," Alice clarified with a laugh. "I know there's no time for you to have a proper meal right now, and Sebastian told us how you feel about Martha's ration bars, so I made you a few from my own recipe."

"Oh." Leon blinked, and his stomach rumbled. He couldn't remember if anyone had ever packed him a lunch before. "Thank you."

"They won't keep as long as Martha's." Alice put her hand on her hips. "But I think they taste better, and you can eat them as you walk."

Sebastian left off whatever quiet conversation he'd been having with his sister in the corner and came over. "We've got to go, Mom."

"I know." Alice reached out to Sebastian, fended off his weak defense, grabbed his head roughly, and pulled him forward so she could plant a kiss on his forehead. "Be safe."

"Always."

Then with last nods of farewell, Sebastian and Leon picked up their packs, walked down into the gloom of the tunnels, and left the peace and warmth of the Ralsdi home behind them.

After they'd closed the last of the heavy doors behind him and made it into the tunnels under Ralscoln proper, Leon opened the bag Alice had given him.

Sebastian shot him a look and snorted. "I wouldn't eat those if I were you."

"Why not?" Leon pulled one out and unwrapped the paper from around it. It wasn't dehydrated and preserved like one of Martha's and glistened with some sort of gooeyness.

"Because my mother is a terrible cook." Sebastian leaned over to look at the bar in Leon's hand and then shuddered. "Trust me, Martha's are better."

Leon despised Martha's ration bars with a simple and bone-deep hatred, so he found that hard to believe. He took a bite, chewed, swallowed, and shot Sebastian a triumphant grin. "You're wrong."

"What?" Sebastian's surprised bark of laughter rang around them. "You like those?"

Leon chewed through another half of the admittedly somewhat bland and rather claggy bar. "Yes."

Sebastian snorted again and shook his head, but his words came out full of affection. "You're crazy."

After Leon had cleaned out the bag, they moved quickly through the tunnels, more concerned with getting to their destination than stealth or secrecy. A full belly of food and hours of sleep did wonders for Leon's energy levels, and he found himself enjoying the hard pace, the miles disappearing beneath them, and the quiet and competent companionship of Sebastian beside him.

It surprised him that Sebastian wasn't nearly as talkative on a job as he would have expected. Always buzzing with energy and quick with a joke or a snide comment at base, Sebastian on a mission channeled all of that energy into his task. He moved with smooth focus and Leon found himself falling back just a little farther than he needed to so that he could watch him.

After a few hours of this, Sebastian must have caught on because he threw a roguish smile over his shoulder at him and gave his hips a sway. "Enjoying the view."

Leon grinned unabashedly back at him. "Yes."

Sebastian let out a patter of laughter and didn't say anything, but he glanced back a few more times, and Leon could see the smile playing around his lips and what looked like a little red on the back of his neck, though it was hard to make out in the harsh electric lantern light.

Just as Leon's enjoyment with the march was starting to tip back over into actual exertion, Sebastian stopped at a narrow grate hidden in a shadowy alcove.

“Here we are.” He passed Leon his flashlight. “Hold this for me, would you? Aim it here.”

Leon aimed the wide beam of light at the muck-covered floor where a series of iron bars had been driven into the stone to block up the grate.

“Alright, let’s see here...” Sebastian muttered to himself as he squatted down, grasped the bottom of one of the bars, and started tugging and pulling at it. “This first one’s always the worst; I can never quite get the right—there we go.”

The bar’s tip suddenly slid through a muck-hidden groove on a slight diagonal, and Sebastian pulled it free. He leaned it against the alcove wall and then did the same to two more bars set into furrows at slightly different angles.

“That should do it.” He stood and twisted his torso to crack his lower back with a grunt. “You go first; I’ll close it up after us.”

The gap where the three bars had been was just wide enough for Leon to get his chest through if he took off his pack and shimmied sideways. He did so and then pulled his and Sebastian’s pack in after him.

It took Sebastian a couple of moments to slide the bars back into place, and then he smeared the mud and grime back into the grooves to hide them. He gave the bars a final shake to make sure they held.

“Perfect.” Sebastian wiped his dirty hands on his pants and took his pack and flashlight back from Leon. “Entrance is just at the end of this hall.”

“Do you know all these tunnels from memory?” Leon asked as Sebastian took the lead again.

Sebastian shrugged a shoulder. “Almost, but not quite. I leave a lot of marks at intersections for myself so I know where I am and where I’m going.”

“I didn’t see any.” Leon frowned as he thought back and tried to remember anything that looked like a man-made mark. But then again, he’d been mostly focused on the man himself.

“Well I don’t make them obvious.” Sebastian laughed. “Last thing I want is to help out some Klah’Eel spy.”

They came to a dead end, and Leon almost asked if they’d made a wrong turn after all when Sebastian flipped his flashlight to point up, and Leon saw the outline of a trap door. Leon reached up, and sure enough, without jumping or a pole, the door was just out of the reach of his fingertips.

“Yup.” Sebastian chuckled. “It was a bitch to use back when I was in that tiny body. You remember it?”

Leon let out a laugh as he remembered the slight brunet Sebastian had occupied for a time a couple years ago. He’d been feistier and more caustic than normal when he’d been stuck in that diminutive frame, and Leon laughed again as he imagined Sebastian in the little body jumping at this trap door, swearing and cursing.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Luckily, this body is taller. And I have you anyway. Give me a boost.”

Leon nodded, dropped to a knee, and braced his other leg to take Sebastian’s weight. He grunted as Sebastian launched himself high enough to grab the underside of the trap door and keep himself balanced on Leon’s thigh.

Sebastian gritted his teeth and pushed. Then he growled and adjusted his grip and pushed again, face scrunching up with the strain. “Oh goddammit, I think something’s blocking it.”

Leon grimaced as his leg reminded him that Sebastian wasn’t exactly light. “Could it be locked?”

“No, it doesn’t lock. The closet that it opens into locks.” He banged his fist a few times, hard and rapid, against the heavy metal. “Hey! Hey! Anyone in there?”

“Fuck.” Leon winced as Sebastian’s shout echoed and clanged down the tunnels. “What if someone hears you?”

“That’s the point.” Sebastian flipped the flashlight in his grip and banged the metal end against the door, filling the tunnels with a deafening cacophony. “Hey! Pay attention in there! Someone open up! Let us in! Ah, there we go.”

Sebastian's voice fell to a normal volume, and he stepped off Leon's leg and onto the ground. Leon tried subtly rubbing the feeling back into his knee as he stood, but Sebastian saw and crinkled his nose apologetically.

As the echoes of Sebastian's screaming faded, thuds, muffled shouts, and some scraping came from above them, and then a slow creaking and grinding as a crack of light appeared around the edge of the trap door.

"Hess?" The voice of a young man came from the backlit silhouette above them, and Leon turned his flashlight up to see the face of a soldier he recognized, though Leon didn't know his name. "Hess!" The man disappeared, but Leon heard him shout back into the building, "It's Hess."

A flurry of commotion followed, and a ladder lowered down to them. Leon waited for Sebastian to climb up, but Sebastian just planted a hand on a cocked hip and motioned with his other for Leon to get a move on. The soldier at the top let out a delighted laugh at the sight.

"Sebastian?"

Sebastian grinned up at the man, and Leon's heart thudded to see the open happiness and ease on his face. "Hey, Jason!"

"And Sebastian too!" The man shouted over his shoulder and was met with another chorus of cheers. "Both of you get the fuck up here."

They clambered up the ladder and were all but pulled into the crowded closet. Numerous hands reached out to pat and clasp them, and while Leon had to focus on keeping his cool and composure under all the attention and touching, Sebastian basked in it.

He reached out to clasp forearms, shake hands, and give clumsy embraces to as many people reaching out to him. When they finally managed to extricate themselves enough to stumble out into the hallway, the color was high in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. Leon didn't know what his own face looked like as he stared into Sebastian's joyful eyes, but judging by the way a certain shyness crept into Sebastian's

grin, Leon had to guess that he looked as mushy and lovestruck as he felt.

Sebastian opened his mouth, but the first soldier—Jason—interrupted him by throwing an arm around his neck.

“Drinks, Sebastian!” the man declared. “We have to compare our daring escapes. And I still never heard how you managed to get that bomb under that table up north.”

Sebastian laughed at his friend but pushed lightly at his arm and looked back to Leon. “Can’t Jason, I have to—”

“Go.” Leon raised a hand to stop him. “I’m just going to debrief with Martha and start planning. Go have a nice time. You deserve it.”

Sebastian bit his lip, and Leon could see the conflicting desires in his eyes, but then he nodded. “Yeah, alright. I’ll see you later?”

Leon could only nod, already feeling a twinge of envious regret as Jason tugged at Sebastian and dragged him in the opposite direction. “Sure.”

He watched Sebastian’s back disappear into a crowd of people, though he could hear his crowing even after losing sight of him. Just before all the soldiers dispersed, Leon caught the arm of a straggler.

“Where’s Martha?”

“Makeshift headquarters.” The woman jerked a thumb over her shoulder in the opposite direction of where the makeshift bar must be. “I’ll show you, sir.”

“Thank you.” Leon followed the woman through a few hallways, cleaned of debris but with windows boarded up tight enough to keep in the light. They turned a corner, and the woman pointed to a room at the end of the hall with a door ajar.

“In there, sir.”

“Thank you. Dismissed.” Leon nodded his thanks again and then pushed open the door.

Martha had her back to him with her arms crossed, but she turned when Leon rapped a knuckle against the old wood. A smile broke out over her face, and she strode forward to meet him. Leon stood stock still in surprise as she closed the distance between them and pulled him into her arms.

“Leon, thank god,” she murmured into his hair, then tightened her grip so much Leon could feel the pressure around his ribs.

All the tension went out of Leon in a rush. He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, but his words still came out choked. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

“I thought I had lost you too.” Martha didn’t let go, and Leon finally managed to bring his arms up to return her embrace. “I thought I would be the last one left.”

“No. No, I’m okay.” Leon shook his head against her shoulder. Farlon. Martha. Hilda. Leon. For a while, they had been all the others had. Leon and Martha were down to just each other, but two were still infinitely better than one. “I’m okay.”

After a few moments, Martha sniffed and pushed him out to arm’s length. Red rimmed her eyes, but no tears fell. “So the Ralsdis took you in, huh? I suppose you know everything now? About them and Sebastian.”

“I do. It was...” Leon twisted his lips. “A shock.”

“I’m sure.”

“But I haven’t forgotten what you said after that night in the bar.” Leon pressed his lips together and hardened his heart, just as he’d been told. He turned toward a table piled up with old maps and charts. “I know I can’t have him, not really.”

“No, Leon.” Martha tightened her fingers into his shoulders and pulled him back. “I was afraid.”

Leon let himself be diverted from the maps and looked up warily. “What do you mean?”

“After I saw you that day in Kaston, throwing everything away to get back to him.” Martha held his arm with one hand

but crossed her other over her chest to wrap around her own shoulders. “I was afraid we’d lose everything at the last moment, and I was afraid of what Farlon—”

“I won’t make the same mistake again.” Leon’s face burned with shame. He’d already ruminated on all the ways he’d let Farlon down. “I know what my priorities are. I know what Farlon—”

“Farlon’s dead,” Martha snapped. “I shouldn’t be afraid of what he thinks, and neither should you.”

Leon’s jaw dropped.

“I should have been more afraid of losing you.” Martha dropped her hand from around herself and jabbed him in the chest. “*You’re* what I have left, not Farlon.”

“We...” Leon’s hands shook, and he clenched and flexed them to make them stop. “We have his memory.”

Martha sighed and patted his chest softly with the hand she’d just jabbed at him. “And that’s it. Now, all we really have are you and me and the Resistance and a war and a hell of an uncertain future. We don’t need to make it worse by trying to live up to all the dreams of a dead man.”

Leon swallowed.

Forcing himself to nod felt like finally letting go of the edge of a cliff he would never climb up.

He braced for his stomach to fall out, for the fear and the loss to hit him...but it didn’t. Instead of plummeting to his death, he landed straight onto his feet, and he stood solid and secure for the first time in years.

He found himself shaking, then stepped forward swiftly to wrap his arms around the woman who had raised him. “I love you, Martha.”

“I love you too, Leon.”

They held each other tightly for a few moments, shaking each other with a shudder or repressed sob now and again but with their faces stubbornly dry and set.

“And to set the record straight, Leon,” Martha said as she released him. “I was wrong to tell you to let Sebastian go.”

“No.” Leon shook his head and fended off the hope Martha offered him. “No, you were right.”

“I was wrong,” Martha insisted. “All we have is the living, Leon, and if you can have Sebastian, you should damn well take him. He’s a good man and—”

“And he deserves someone who will treat him like one.” Leon cut his hand through the air. “He deserves better than someone who will put him second. Someone who will make him do the things I might make him do.”

Martha bit her lip. She looked back at the table of maps and charts that Leon had tried to make a break for before. She sighed. “So don’t.”

Leon shook his head and pushed past her. “It’s not that simple, and you know it.”

Even if Farlon was dead. Even if Farlon was never going to see Leon give that speech. Even if Leon didn’t owe it to him... he owed it to someone. He owed it to years of effort and sacrifice. His own and the effort and sacrifice of others. Martha and Sebastian weren’t all he had—he had the weight of responsibilities and expectations and the knowledge that he’d come too far to turn back now.

Martha didn’t reply, and Leon groaned and closed his eyes. He rubbed his temples as all the conflicting emotions of the past week ran around in his head and revived the headache he’d put to bed that morning. Life had been simpler when he’d managed to fool himself and everyone around him that he didn’t really even have feelings.

He dropped into a chair at the table, and it groaned under his weight. “Do you have numbers for how many of our people got out of the capital?”

Martha didn’t call him out on his deflection. Probably because she didn’t have any better idea of the right course of action than he did. She handed him a data tablet. “Some. We’ve been attempting a roll call.”

Leon took it and started scrolling through the names.

Chapter Thirteen

BY THE TIME a soft knock on the door pulled Leon from his thoughts, he'd let Martha go to sleep and moved himself to a room a couple of hallways away. The room was dusty and small, but it had a bed and a desk, which had always felt more than enough for Leon.

"Come in," he called as he set the data tablet aside and rubbed his eyes. His heart did an absurd little flutter when Sebastian appeared in the doorway.

"You said I'd get to see you later." Sebastian closed the door behind him and lifted his chin.

Leon slowly spun his chair toward him and gave him a half smile. "And now you're seeing me."

"Only because I came and found you."

"Well, one of us was going to need to do the finding."

"It could have been you." Sebastian put a hand on his hip.

Leon raised an eyebrow. "The last time I came and found you in a bar doesn't rank among my most pleasant experiences."

Sebastian's face fell. "That was a low blow. I said I was sorry."

"And you're more than forgiven." Leon traced his eyes up and down Sebastian's body, taking in his tense, expectant posture and his guarded but still vulnerable expression, and made a decision. He pushed himself from his chair and took

the couple of steps needed in the small room to bracket Sebastian against the back of the door. He saw the way Sebastian's eyes lit up, then took Sebastian's jaw in both hands and kissed him.

The way Sebastian went so soft in his arms could never get old; Leon was sure of it. He angled Sebastian's head to kiss him deeper, and Sebastian let out a little moan and wrapped his hands around Leon's neck.

Leon broke the contact of their lips with a chuckle. "You smell like you've brought the whole bar back with you."

Sebastian wrinkled his nose. "Some clumsy oaf spilled a whole cup of liquor on me. Why he had a whole cup is beyond me."

"Hm." Leon hummed doubtfully, then pulled Sebastian's lips open with his thumb and plunged his tongue inside. Sebastian gasped, and Leon felt his cock twitch against him as Leon licked the inside of his mouth. Then he pulled away and braced his forehead against Sebastian's to keep him from coming back for more. "You taste like the whole bar too."

Sebastian laughed and whacked the side of his head lightly, though he still had his arms wrapped around his neck. "Well, I didn't go to drink water."

"Are you drunk?" Leon cocked his head. "Can you get drunk?"

Sebastian rocked his head back and forth. "Ish. My body can feel the effects, but my mind is pretty much the same."

"So why do it?" Leon asked. He contented himself with petting his thumbs across Sebastian's cheekbones, luxuriating in his nearness and his touchability and a conversation that wasn't an argument. "If it doesn't numb your mind, why bother?"

Sebastian frowned. "Do you drink to numb your mind?"

"I don't really drink." Leon shrugged a shoulder and then kissed Sebastian's nose and each of his cheeks.

Sebastian blushed under the kisses. “But when you do. Is that why?”

“Yes.” Leon would have thought that obvious. He’d assumed the obviating quality of alcohol was its best one and why so many in the Resistance turned to it, at least now and again. “Why do you?”

“For the comradery,” Sebastian said as though that answer was just as obvious to him. “I like all the people, and the noise, and the nonsense.”

“I hate that part.” Leon wrinkled his nose and then nuzzled it into the hollow of Sebastian’s ear.

Sebastian laughed. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

Leon smiled at the feel of Sebastian’s laugh rumbling through him. He’d always had the most amazing laugh. Leon could pick the sound of it out of an entire crowd of laughing people with barely a thought, no matter what body Sebastian was in. He kissed across Sebastian’s throat to the hollow under his other ear.

Sebastian shivered when Leon breathed across his skin, and Leon felt his fingers twitch against his scalp as he pulled Leon closer to him. “Leon.”

“Mm.” Leon growled at the breathiness in Sebastian’s voice and nipped his ear lobe. “What?”

“I love you.”

Leon froze.

After a beat, he put his hands against the door and pushed back, but Sebastian tightened his arms around his neck. Sebastian pressed their foreheads together and pouted out his lower lip. “You said it first.”

Leon sighed and dropped his hands down to Sebastian’s hips. “That doesn’t mean you need to say it back.”

“Well, I did.” Sebastian scowled. “I am. I love you.”

That familiar guilt twisted in Leon’s chest. What had he done? “Sebastian, you know—”

“That the Resistance comes first for you, I know.” Sebastian eased up his death grip around Leon’s neck and let him pull away to a distance that was more comfortable, though they kept their hands on each other. “I pay attention. I’m not an idiot. I know your priorities.”

“Then—”

“And I don’t even know that I dislike that about you!” Sebastian’s inability to stay still reared its head, and he threw his hands up. He paced across the room and out of Leon’s arms. “I mean, I *like* that you’re dedicated and passionate and brilliant and intense.”

Leon swallowed. He wasn’t sure anyone had ever complimented him with that sort of stridency.

“And you’re handsome and intoxicating.” Sebastian spun back to him and advanced like a panther. “And the way that you look at me makes me feel like I’m the most incredible man to have set foot on this planet.”

“You are.”

Sebastian reached for him. “And you love me.”

Leon caught Sebastian’s hand before it could touch him. “Lots of men could you love you, Sebastian.” Leon steeled himself and pushed through. “Lots of *better* men. You don’t have to settle for me just because I keep pushing myself on you.”

Sebastian’s eyes flicked sadly to the hand Leon still held away from himself. “Why won’t you ever let me touch you?”

“What?” Leon deflated. “I have.”

“No.” Sebastian pointed his chin at Leon’s hand clasped around his wrist. “You always stop me.”

“You kissed me this morning.” Leon shook his head. “And the night before that, you”—he swallowed—“you touched me plenty.”

“You only didn’t stop me this morning because you thought I was going to punch you.” Sebastian scowled.

Leon couldn't disagree; he had thought it a distinct possibility.

Sebastian nodded pointedly and continued, "And the night before that was a bit of an extenuating circumstance."

Leon licked his lips and let go of Sebastian's wrist. He raised his chin and pulled his shoulders back. Sebastian's lips quirked, and he raised an eyebrow. Leon nodded.

Sebastian huffed a laugh and brought both hands to cup Leon's face. Leon blinked a few times at the aching tenderness in his touch, and Sebastian's half smile smoothed into something soft. "What are you so afraid of, Leon?"

Leon looked away and chewed on the inside of his cheek as he struggled to articulate the anxious, guilty, defensive feeling churning in his stomach. "That I'll...sully you."

Sebastian threw his head back and let out that beautiful laugh. "That you'll sully me? Leon, you put me naked on a desk and ordered me to come all over myself."

Leon flushed. "I know."

"And you had me jamb three fingers up my ass while I sucked your cock."

Leon flushed harder. "I know."

"But you think letting me touch you is gonna be the final straw?"

Leon tried to pull his face away, but Sebastian held him fast, so he sighed. "There's a difference between doing something to you that I know you'll like and taking something from you that I don't deserve."

"Leon." Sebastian petted his thumbs over Leon's cheeks just like Leon had done to him. "You think you take something from me when I touch you?"

"Don't I?" Leon arched a brow. "I don't deserve any of this from you, Sebastian."

"You told me lots of other men could love me." Sebastian cocked his head, and Leon winced. It seemed a cruel thing for

Sebastian to bring up with his hands still gentle on Leon's face. "Do you realize lots of other men could love you too?"

The next words left Leon's mouth in a dull, flat tone, as a boring weighty certainty that he'd always had. "No one's ever loved me."

"*I love you.*" Sebastian's hands tightened on his jaw and gave him a little shake. "Whether you like it or not. And Martha loves you, though I know she has a hard time showing it. And Garrett loves you—as much as his mind is evolved enough to comprehend the feeling at least."

Leon snorted. "You two really have more in common than you realize."

Sebastian scoffed. "I'll let that insult slide only because I'm still trying to convince you that I love you."

"I don't doubt that you love me—"

"*And* that you deserve my love." Sebastian shook him again.

"I don't—"

"And also that it's not really up to you." Sebastian let him go and put his hands on his hips. "I've already made my decision. My mind is made up. Would you like to keep arguing?"

Leon chuckled and leaned back against the wall. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the concrete with a sigh. Arguing with Sebastian had always been the most exhausting thing. He usually pulled rank to get his way and end the discussion, but he couldn't bring himself to do that here. He was so sick of trying to stay away from Sebastian. "Not really."

"Would you like to do something more fun?" Sebastian's voice took on a mischievous tone, and Leon opened his eyes.

"What do you have in mind?"

Sebastian grinned wide enough to show a canine. "Something that makes up for all the touching you denied me the last time we had a bed and two bodies between us."

Leon raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?” He pushed himself off the wall. “Show me.”

Sebastian let out a delighted laugh and pushed Leon back against the wall before Leon could even blink. “Finally!”

He slid against Leon’s body and buried his face in his neck.

“I thought about this all evening,” Sebastian said against his neck and bit at the tendon there.

Leon gasped but managed a reply. “I thought you were drinking all evening.”

“I was.” Sebastian rucked up Leon’s shirt, and Leon let him pull it over his head. “I was drinking and thinking about this.”

“About—Oh god.” Leon slammed the back of his head against the wall as Sebastian ducked his head and swiped his tongue over his nipple.

Sebastian laughed again and then teased the hardening bud with his tongue. He brought his hand up to Leon’s other one and tweaked and pinched it. “Yeah, I remember how good this felt for you.”

“Sebastian,” Leon growled and grabbed the back of Sebastian’s head, pressing it against his chest.

Sebastian hummed and sealed his mouth over Leon’s chest. He sucked and licked and rolled his tongue over his nipple until it started to hurt, then the pain sparks morphed back into pleasure.

“Enough.” Leon finally tugged on Sebastian’s hair.

Sebastian gave him one last broad lick but immediately pulled for his other side. “I’m not done. Please, Leon, let me have more.”

Leon groaned, let him go, then cried out at Sebastian’s enthusiastic assault. His knees shook, and he pressed back against the wall to keep himself upright. How he had thought letting Sebastian touch wasn’t giving him anything, he had no idea. Sebastian moaned and sighed as he sucked on Leon’s

chest and roamed his hands over his torso as though he were finally feasting after a long fast.

Just as Leon approached his breaking point, Sebastian finally left his abused nipples.

He slowly dropped to his knees, kissing and licking down his abs as he went. “God, your body, Leon, fuck.” He ended in a hiss and licked at the skin along the waistband of Leon’s pants. “I’ve wanted to get my hands on it for so long.”

Leon’s head spun with the words and lack of blood flow. That couldn’t be. Sebastian hadn’t pined for him. He knew that much, at least. He shook his head. “You hated me.”

Sebastian gracefully rose to his feet with a snort. “Maybe I did, or maybe I didn’t, but even then, I could appreciate *this*.” He grabbed Leon’s sides with both hands and squeezed his muscles. He dropped his head and bit at his collarbone. “A man would have to be blind not to appreciate this.”

Leon kept shaking his head. “Then men are blind.” His lovers were incredibly few and far between, and his encounters had been no more than quick work with hands in dark corners.

“No.” Sebastian undid Leon’s pants and shoved them down his hips. “They’re just intimidated by you.”

Leon frowned. That did make a bit of sense. He wasn’t exactly approachable. And he would have rebuffed anyone bold enough to try.

“Which means they don’t deserve you.” Sebastian stripped him bare, then cupped his balls. “They wouldn’t be as good as I am anyway.”

Leon twitched his hips up into Sebastian’s grip. “No one’s as good as you.”

Satisfaction flashed through Sebastian’s eyes. “Flatterer.”

Leon grabbed the back of Sebastian’s neck and pulled him in for a wet kiss. He moaned into his mouth when Sebastian wrapped a hand around his length and then broke away. “I think we should make use of that bed you mentioned.”

“I agree.” Sebastian laced his fingers with Leon’s again and pulled him over to it. He spun Leon around and pushed him to sit at the edge, then sank down to kneel between his thighs. “I’ve already got some ideas.”

Leon caught his chin and tilted it up to look at him. “You really can’t get enough of my cock, can you?”

Sebastian smirked. “I really can’t.” He pulled his chin free and dragged his tongue from the base of Leon’s cock up to his head. “And you don’t want me to.”

“Fuck, I really don’t.” Leon spread his thighs wider and grabbed Sebastian’s hair again. “Suck me, Sebastian.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cheeky fucking man.

Leon groaned through his teeth as Sebastian swallowed him down with a challenging glint in his eyes. How did he already know everything about how to turn him on? How to touch him, and how to suck him? Was Sebastian just that fucking good? Was Leon that fucking easy?

Or was he just this easy for Sebastian? He stared down at the dangerous man between his thighs and bit his lip as he thrust shallowly into Sebastian’s mouth. Sebastian moaned in encouragement and slid his hands up the back of Leon’s thighs. He let him thrust into his mouth for a while longer, then popped off and pulled Leon closer to the edge of the bed.

Leon let himself be moved, leaning awkwardly back on a hand as his ass slid halfway off the mattress. “Sebastian?”

“You’ll like this.” Sebastian threw him a smile and then pulled off his own shirt in one smooth motion.

Leon reached out to run a hand down the center of his chest. “I do.”

Sebastian laughed and batted his hand away. “No, not this. I mean after this.”

Sebastian undid his own pants and his full cock sprang up. Leon made an appreciative noise. “You’re right.”

“Stop it, not this either.” Sebastian shimmied out of his pants and underwear and threw them to the side. “I mean this.”

Sebastian sucked his index finger into his mouth. Leon only had a moment to frown in confusion before Sebastian reached down behind Leon’s balls and touched his entrance.

Leon inhaled sharply and went rigid.

“Shh.” Sebastian shushed him, then mouthed along Leon’s base and up his shaft. “You remember how good this feels.”

Leon did. God, did he ever, but he’d had Sebastian with him then. He’d had Sebastian’s sensations to hang on to and Sebastian’s experience to draw from. And besides, nothing had really been done to *him*; it had all been to Sebastian, at least that’s what he’d told himself.

Sebastian rubbed the pad of his finger against Leon’s opening, sending shocks of pleasure through his hips, and sucked on his head. Leon bit his lip, and Sebastian pulled back just enough to speak. “Let me in, Leon.”

Leon realized he’d clenched every muscle in his body, and with a force of will he could be proud of, he made himself relax.

“Oh fuck, that’s right.” Sebastian sank his mouth down over Leon’s cock as he sank his finger into Leon’s ass.

Leon cried out at the double sensations and grabbed Sebastian’s head and shoulder. He panted as he clenched and twitched, but Sebastian pushed him onwards, bobbing up and down on his cock as he thrust his finger into him. It felt even better than he remembered—so much more vulnerable and so much more raw when it was just him and Sebastian’s hands on him. Sebastian reaching inside him.

Sebastian rubbed over that spot that sent stars up behind Leon’s eyes, and Leon let out a deep, reverberating moan.

“Oh god, Leon, fuck.” Sebastian pulled off his cock, and Leon looked down to see that Sebastian had his other hand between his thighs, frantically pulling and tugging on himself. “Please, for the love of god, make that sound again, Leon, please.”

He impaled himself on Leon's cock again, sloppy and messy, and fucked Leon's ass with his finger desperately. He hit Leon's prostate and wrenched another moan out of his throat.

Leon's body spun tighter and tighter as Sebastian worked him. He swung between thinking the tension would snap him in two and being certain he'd merely dissolve into the sensations Sebastian assaulted him with.

Sebastian pressed on his prostate and tongued his slit, and Leon keened. "Sebastian!"

"I'm close." Sebastian pulled off and laid kisses up and down Leon's cock. "I'm so close, Leon."

"I—" Leon gasped as Sebastian thrust into him and felt his opening twitch and clench. "I can't—oh fuck, Sebastian."

Sebastian ground down on Leon's prostate, and Leon threw his head back with a broken cry.

"Yes, Leon, that, ooh—" Sebastian choked off his own moan with Leon's cock, and Leon felt him gagging and gasping around it.

Sebastian was coming.

Sebastian was coming between his thighs, driven over the edge by the sounds he'd forced from Leon's body.

That, more than anything else, destroyed Leon.

He drove his hips up into Sebastian's throat and came with a brutal yell.

He snapped from the tension just like he knew he would.

He dissolved into sensations.

When he floated back down, Sebastian was licking him clean. He reached down blearily. "Sebastian?"

"Right here." Sebastian crawled up his body, slowed down by some need to place kisses on every inch of skin he encountered on the way. He finally made it up to Leon's head and smiled down at him. "I told you you'd like that."

Leon huffed a disbelieving laugh. “I didn’t doubt you.”

He pushed himself shakily back up to sitting, and Sebastian rolled to the side to let him.

Sebastian flopped his head onto the pillow. “Will you share the bed with me this time?”

“I shared a bed with you last time.”

“No.” Sebastian scrunched his nose. “You shared a body with me last time. That’s different.”

Leon smiled and leaned over him to kiss his scrunched-up nose. “I’ll share a bed with you this time. I think we should clean up the mess you made on the floor, though.”

Sebastian tsked and waved a hand at the window. “This place has boarded-up windows and black mold in the foundations. A little semen on the floor isn’t going to make a difference.”

Leon shook his head. “You’re terrible.”

“No.” Sebastian wrapped his arms around Leon’s neck and pulled him down onto the bed with him. “I’m tired. And so are you.”

“Oh, am I?” Leon turned onto his side to put a hand over Sebastian’s hip.

“Yes.” Sebastian nodded. “You’re always tired because you never sleep.”

“I slept this morning.”

“I don’t think one late morning is enough to counteract a decade of poor sleep habits.”

Leon laid his head on his pillow and let his eyes give in to the heaviness. “Well, how about one late morning and one early night.”

“This is definitely not an early night. The sun set hours ago.”

Leon snorted and wrapped an arm around Sebastian. He pulled him close and sighed contentedly at the feeling of their

warm, naked bodies pressing together. “Don’t be picky.”

Sebastian let himself be cuddled, then burrowed into the heat of Leon’s skin. When he threw an arm around Leon’s chest and clutched at the expanse of skin over Leon’s ribs, painfully adoring fireworks went off in Leon’s heart. “I’m always picky.”

“Shh.” Leon nuzzled Sebastian’s temple and kissed the side of his head. “Go to sleep.”

“You go to sleep,” Sebastian mumbled back.

“I am.”

And he was. The exhaustion of the week and the pull of the warm bed and the warmer body beside him were too great for him to resist. When Sebastian didn’t say anything, Leon thought they had finally proved too much for Sebastian to resist either, but then Sebastian shifted.

“Leon?” he murmured, voice cloudy with sleep and his eyes closed.

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

Leon’s heart expanded in his chest. He tugged Sebastian even closer. “I love you too.”

Sebastian tangled their legs together and tucked his head into the hollow of Leon’s shoulder. “And Leon?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I’m glad I found you.”

Leon swallowed as his eyes pricked. It was a silly thing to say, really. It didn’t make much sense. They had known each other for years. They’d been thrust into each other’s path more than anything else. Leon had been inflicted upon Sebastian more than Sebastian had found him.

And yet it also made perfect sense. Because Leon wasn’t now the same person he had been when he first saw the breathtaking man with the loud hands and the louder voice.

He just wished he knew exactly what Sebastian had found.

“SIR! SIR!”

Sebastian shot bolt upright in bed as someone pounded on the door so heavily they threatened to break it down.

Leon snapped up beside him in an instant. He grabbed Sebastian and yanked him away from the door and halfway behind him.

Sebastian yelped as he fell sideways. “Le—”

“Sir, Mar—”

And then the door *did* break down, or rather, the lock gave away, and the door slammed open and knocked a hole in the weak plaster behind it. Jason stood on the threshold, fist still raised, mouth open, and eyes bugging out at them.

Leon sat upright, naked as the day he was born, but with the sheets tangled around his hips. Sebastian sat up half-propped on his hands, equally naked but without the benefit of the sheet.

“Uh...” Jason’s fair skin flushed to an extreme shade of red, and Sebastian felt the burn of his own embarrassment spread up his chest.

“What the hell, Jason?” he snapped, refusing to give in to the temptation to cover his groin with a pillow.

“What is it, soldier?” Leon asked in a much calmer voice. Sebastian gaped at him, shocked that he could find his leadership voice while caught naked in bed with a lover.

Jason snapped his eyes away from Sebastian and over to Leon. “Martha’s calling for you. Joan is on the line. It’s urgent.”

“I’ll be right there.” Leon nodded crisply, and for a moment, Sebastian was afraid he was going to toss the sheet off himself, but he didn’t. “Dismissed.”

Jason fled back down the hall, not bothering to close the door.

Sebastian dropped his head with a groan. “Well, that was mortifying.”

Leon untangled himself from the dignity-saving sheet and grabbed his pants. “Body shy? You?”

“No, of course not.” Sebastian pushed himself up. “But that doesn’t mean I want to flash my crusty dick around to a friend.”

Leon tossed him his shirt and huffed a laugh, but when he spoke, the mirth was already draining out of his tone. “I think we’re about to have more important things to worry about.”

“We always do. Joan is in Carta, isn’t she?” Sebastian yanked on the rest of his clothes and followed Leon into the hall.

“She should be.” Leon led the way to the room they’d designated as headquarters. “With Garrett, Mal’ik, and Turner.”

They found Martha standing in the center of the room, arms crossed and staring at the receiver on the table.

The receiver crackled with static, and Joan’s voice came out garbled but understandable. “Where the hell is Hess? We don’t have much time.”

“I’m here.” Leon strode into the room and planted his hands down on the table. He leaned over the receiver. “Why are you calling? This isn’t a secure line.”

Sebastian took up a spot next to Martha and nodded. “The Klah’Eel could be intercepting this.”

“Is that Sebastian?” The relief was so palpable in Joan’s voice that it came through the bad audio. “Thank god. We’ll need him.”

“Speak cautiously, Joan,” Martha snapped. “The Klah’Eel —”

“Hopefully have no idea.” Joan’s voice came out loud enough that Sebastian winced. “We’re on Carta. We’re with the Carta Cartel, and they think they’ve rigged something up to sneak this communication in. But it doesn’t matter! There’s no time for talking in code.”

Leon glanced back and met Sebastian’s eyes. Sebastian didn’t try to look any less grim than he felt. Sebastian had never heard Joan sound so frantic, and from the furrow in Leon’s brow, neither had he.

Leon looked back at the receiver, his hands pressed so hard into the table in front of him the tips of his fingers turned white. “What’s happening, Joan?”

“The Turners are sneaking a freight ship into Tava.”

“With the gas?” Sebastian shouldered his way past Leon to get to the speaker, as though being closer would make the words make more sense. “How?”

Martha pressed up just behind him. “They should barely have been able to make enough to *fill* a freight, much less get it ready for transport and arrive already.”

Joan’s scoff sounded like a particularly loud burst of static. “Well, they’re not exactly following proper shipping protocol.”

Sebastian’s mind flew through the possibilities. “Mercenaries? Smugglers?”

“Looks like a smuggler freight,” Joan confirmed. “But it’s definitely guarded by Turner security ships.”

“How could the Turners have even made that much?” Leon shook his head. “Sebastian blew up their factory.”

Sebastian gritted his teeth. “The Turners have other factories.”

“Or it’s a decoy.” Leon rapped his knuckle on the table.

“They’re going through a lot of trouble to hide a decoy.” Joan sounded even less convinced than Sebastian. “The cartel’s scientist thinks it must be some particularly unstable

variant. That they must have skipped at least half the refinement process.”

Sebastian straightened up with a stray bit of hope. “So then, how do we know it’s still effective?”

“The same way we know it’s not a decoy,” Joan all but screamed at them, and the static peaked loud enough to make all three of them wince. “They wouldn’t do all this for an ineffective freighter-load of shit.”

“And what is ‘all this’?” Martha demanded. “Where are you seeing this freighter? None of our observation points show anything.”

“All of our observation points are in Southern Tava.” Joan’s voice dropped back down to a normal level. “You don’t have the angle to see them.”

“Why not?” Leon banged his palm on the desk. “Where are they?”

Sebastian turned away and closed his eyes. He pushed his brain to draw out the planet and the system and the orbits. He snapped them open as it all clicked into place. “They’re behind the moon.”

Leon let out a low groan of understanding. “Their visual would be blocked from us but perfectly visible to Carta.”

Sebastian ran his hands through his hair. “They wouldn’t have known we’d have people there. They thought they could sneak in.”

Joan’s voice crackled back at them. “And they still might. The moon is only over Southern Tava for another three hours. After that, it—Fuck.”

“Joan?” Leon grabbed the receiver. “Joan, what happened?”

Muffled voices through the static, and then Joan said, “Cartel says the line isn’t secure anymore. We’re cutting out—”

Joan’s voice disappeared and left only the mind-numbing drone of static. Leon turned away, rubbing his fingers over his

temples, and then Martha switched it off. They stood there for a moment in the deafening silence.

Leon dragged his hand over his face and pulled his shoulders back. “If the Klah’Eel get their hands on an entire freight of that gas, this war is over.”

“In days,” Martha agreed. “Forget duplication, forget an antidote, forget even getting Garrett and Joan and Mal’ik back here to help.”

“But we know about it now, and we know where it is.” Sebastian put a hand on his hip and rubbed the other one over his mouth as he thought. “We still have air bases all through Southern Tava. We can scramble some fighters...”

Leon shook his head before Sebastian finished his sentence. “They have fighters too. Turner ones. They’ll have better ships, and their pilots will be better trained. We’d never be able to take out the freighter before it crossed into Northern Tava.”

“We don’t have to take out the freighter. We just have to get Sebastian onto it.” Martha pulled out her tablet. “There’s a Turner-affiliated factory near Ralscoln. He can pretend to be one of theirs.”

But Leon still shook his head. “Too many points of failure. Sebastian would have to get into the factory, take a ship, convince the fighters to let him in and not shoot him down, and then take control of the freighter all by himself. All without alerting the ship so that it doesn’t skip subterfuge and just burn down to Northern Tava.”

Sebastian put his hands on his hips and lifted his chin. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“I don’t think I want to bet the future of Southern Tava on it,” Leon replied with a hard look. He turned back to the receiver and stared at it as though it had the answers.

“Well, what’s your better idea?” Martha dropped her tablet down to her side with a razor-sharp tone. “We have three hours to pull something off.”

Leon didn't reply right away, but Sebastian and Martha both knew better than to push. Sebastian could practically hear the hum of an overheating computer as Leon thought, and for a moment, it comforted him. Leon had always been the thinker. Leon made decisions and then wielded Sebastian to enact them. The arrangement had worked out well for them so far, and for a brief moment, Sebastian thought that Leon would save them again with another brilliant maneuver.

But then he spoke.

“We'll shoot it down over Kaston.”

Such a strong cold gripped Sebastian that his lungs froze. His throat closed up, his skin went clammy, and a chilling sweat broke out on the back of his neck. He forced down the ball of ice in his throat and shook his head as his denial pushed back on the idea. “How would we even? The moon...”

“It has to leave the cover of the moon.” Leon took Martha's tablet from her limp fingers. He tapped on it a few times, then turned it around to show them a map. “The moon's going over the ocean. If they want to get that gas to Northern Tava, and they want to get it soon, which they do, then it has to burn fast from right here”—Leon tapped on the screen at Southern Tava's border, and then on a place just over into Northern Tava—“to here.”

Martha spoke with a flat voice. “They'll be vulnerable then. There are some orbital guns between here and Kaston that could hit that range. They're still held by the Klah'Eel, though.”

“That's where Sebastian comes in.”

Sebastian could feel Leon's eyes on him, but he couldn't take his own off the little dot on the map that said ‘Kaston.’ There were more dots around it too. Cities and towns he had been to. And there were even more that hadn't warranted a dot on this map, but they were still there.

“Sebastian?”

Sebastian slowly pulled his eyes up to Leon. “You don't... you don't actually mean this.”

“It’s got a lot higher chance of success than sending you up there to take that ship.”

“Yes, but...” Sebastian licked his lips. “To bring down a ship that size, that low in the atmosphere, carrying that gas...”

“It’ll devastate the region,” Martha finished for him in that same flat voice.

“We don’t know that,” Leon said quietly.

“Yeah, but we can fucking guess.” Sebastian clenched his fists. His words came more easily as the nightmarish dream quality of reality finally faded away. “It’ll be like dropping a bomb of the stuff on the whole area—”

“It’s a lot bigger than any bomb,” Martha muttered.

“*Worse* than dropping a bomb.” Sebastian swept an agreeing hand at her. “On *our* area, Leon. Our cities. Our people.”

“We don’t know what will happen if we shoot down that ship,” Leon growled.

“Yes, we—”

Leon raised his voice over him. “But we do know that if that ship gets through, we’re *done*.”

“Leo—”

“Do you hear me?” Leon grabbed the front of Sebastian’s shirt, and Sebastian dropped his mouth open in shock. “We. Will. Lose. We will lose everything. The war will be over. The Resistance will be gone. Southern Tava as a *concept* will be gone.”

Sebastian grabbed Leon’s fist and let out a shaky breath. He opened his mouth to speak but then had to close it and swallow and inhale again before he could manage it. “I—” Another swallow. “I hear you.”

Leon loosened his grip on Sebastian’s shirt, and Sebastian felt like he might shatter as he settled heavily back onto his feet. His hands shook. Leon moved his hand to Sebastian’s shoulder and brushed his thumb over Sebastian’s skin just

above his collar. Sebastian could feel him trembling through the touch.

“I need you, Sebastian.”

Sebastian’s heart seized painfully in his chest, and he squeezed his eyes shut. “I know.”

Leon cupped Sebastian’s cheek with his other hand. “I need you to do this for me, Sebastian.”

Sebastian opened his eyes and had to blink against the sting. “I know.”

Then nausea rolled up Sebastian’s throat, and he pushed Leon’s hands off him. Immediately, part of him wanted to yank them back and clutch the warm, calloused palms back to his cheeks. But the other part of him couldn’t breathe in the suffocating little room.

“I know,” he choked out again before turning and fleeing back into the hall.

LEON WATCHED Sebastian go with the greatest sense of self-loathing he’d ever known.

Self-loathing had been his near-constant companion since the Klah’Eel had invaded his hometown and he’d left his mother and father behind, never to be seen again. And yet this was the first time he thought he might be physically sick with it.

He turned and braced his hand on the wall. Then he dropped to his knees as he gagged and clamped a hand over his mouth. He gagged again, squeezed his eyes shut, and pressed his forehead to cold concrete.

He was not going to be sick.

He was not.

Martha set a hand on his shoulder.

Leon reached up and grabbed it tightly. “We win if we do this.”

Martha squeezed his hand back.

“We don’t just not lose. We win.” Leon swallowed. “Kaston is still where the majority of the Klah’Eel forces are. It will break them. The Klah’Eel people will never keep funding this bullshit war when that catastrophe hits. And the intergalactic community won’t even let them. It’ll be too far even for them to turn a blind eye.”

Martha still didn’t reply.

“The fact that we shot down the ship ourselves won’t even matter.” Leon shook his head, and the rough concrete scraped against his skin. “They’ll understand we did what we had to, and besides, we’re not a recognized state. They won’t hold us to the same standards they’d hold the Klah’Eel to. We would win.”

When Martha only squeezed his hand again, he pulled his forehead from the wall and looked up at her.

“Martha. We would win, am I right?” Leon could hear the shake in his own voice, and he ignored it.

Martha took a slow, deep breath and let it out just as slowly. “I think you’re right.”

Leon stood, but he didn’t take his hand off the wall, too certain he wouldn’t be able to stand on his own two feet if he did. He stared at a crack in the plaster, dark and jagged and crumbling around the edges.

“It wouldn’t make any difference to Sebastian.” Leon closed his eyes as he thought of the broken look in Sebastian’s eyes before he’d left the room. The broken look that Leon had put there. “And it wouldn’t make any difference to the people of Kaston.”

“No. It wouldn’t.” Martha stroked his shoulder with her thumb.

“It would make a huge difference to Farlon, but he”—Leon broke off and fisted the hand he had on the wall and pounded

it lightly against the concrete—“he’s not here anymore.”

Martha’s hand on his shoulder clenched. “No, he’s not.”

“He’s not here, and so he doesn’t matter.” Hess banged his fist harder on the wall and then turned around. He and his stupid fucking speech that he’d hung around Leon’s neck like a goddamn millstone. “Him, Hilda, my parents, the people that died in the invasion and the occupation, and the people we’ve already lost at Kaston, none of them matter—”

“Leon!”

“Not as much as the people that are still here!” Leon pulled himself up straight and pushed her hand off. “They matter, and they trust me, and I’m going to fucking earn it for once.”

Martha grabbed his shoulders again, her brow furrowed and her eyes furious, and Leon knew she was going to give him some platitude about all the work he’d done so far, but he didn’t want to hear it.

He grabbed her wrists. “Tell Sebastian to get ready to take that fucking ship.”

The furious glint in Martha’s eyes disappeared, and Leon saw a flash of relief and sadness in them before she yanked him to her chest and wrapped her arms around him. She held him so tightly Leon’s ribs flexed. For a moment, she didn’t speak, but Leon could feel her shuddering breaths. Then she pressed a kiss to the side of his head. “You’re making the right call, Leon.”

“I know.”

And for once, he did know. He had no idea if their half-baked plan would work or if the Resistance would survive, but for once, he knew that he didn’t have to question this decision.

Martha released him and rushed out the door, leaving Leon standing steady in the room.

He wasn’t going to break his people or his country...or Sebastian. Not anymore.

But god, he also hoped this worked.

Leon grabbed a discarded data tablet from the table and pulled up a map of the surrounding area. It didn't take him long to find the Turner-affiliated factory Martha had mentioned. Political rivals of the Ralsdis, its owners had been some of the primary agitators for the Turner 'investment'—Leon had always referred to it as a 'sale.'

As such, the Resistance had run a number of operations on the plant: sabotages, espionage, theft. Sebastian himself had even been on a few. They knew its layout and security systems well, so if there was anywhere that Sebastian had a shot of infiltrating on such short notice, this was as good a place as any.

He looked up as footsteps echoed down the hall—Martha's brisk clip and a stumbling, off-kilter tread—and frowned as Martha appeared with a thunderous expression.

She hauled a soldier behind her—a familiar soldier, Jason, Sebastian's friend—and all but threw him into the room. "Tell him!"

Leon stood straight and dropped the tablet back to the table. "Tell me what?"

Jason's white skin had gone pale and sallow, and he pressed his lips so tightly together they went whiter still. But his eyes blazed with defiance.

Martha shoved him farther into the room. "Tell him!"

Jason stumbled forward a step but still held himself straight. "Sebastian's gone."

Chapter Fourteen

THE FLOOR DROPPED AWAY from Leon and his stomach with it. “What?”

“He left and I helped him.”

“And where did he go?” Leon lunged and grabbed Jason’s shoulders, envisioning bashing the man’s head through a wall. But by the time he made contact, his mind had already moved on. Instead, he threw Jason out of his way. “Don’t answer that; I already know.”

“Leon!” Martha chased him into the hall as he strode down it, his legs chewing up the ground in front of him as his mind raced.

“Get me a radio!” he called over his shoulder as he turned into a stairwell and took the steps two at a time up to the hangar level. When he burst out into the huge room, a young woman met him with a radio and a confused look on her face.

“Sir!” She held the little box out to him. “Martha called, she said—”

“Thank you.” Leon snatched the radio away and tuned it to the first Resistance frequency. “Sebastian!”

Static.

“Sebastian, pick up the goddamn radio!”

Static.

Leon tuned it to the next frequency. “Sebastian!”

“He disabled the communications.” Jason and Martha finally came out of the door just behind him, and Jason pointed to a tangle of wires on the hangar’s floor a few ships’ lengths away. “He didn’t want you ordering him back.”

“Goddammit.” Leon dropped the radio to the floor and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. He should bash his own head through the wall. Too little and too late. Always. Always! If only he’d let Sebastian make him see reason just a little sooner. If only he hadn’t pushed Sebastian to the point of driving him into a suicide mission. “Goddammit!”

He spun around. This wasn’t over. This was his mess, and he was going to fix it.

He jabbed his finger at the woman who had given him the radio. “Get a land cruiser ready for me!” Then a finger at Martha. “Get me a recon communication set. When I find him, I’m not letting him go ghost on me again.” And finally, a finger at Jason. “Wake everyone and put them on high alert. Martha will brief you once I’m gone.”

Everyone scattered to do his bidding, and Leon left the hangar to the nearest armory.

It had been a long time since he’d geared for a mission. He’d been behind a desk or a screen for all but the taking of the capital and the defense of Kaston, and even then, he’d been more leader than participant. But when he stepped into the familiarly organized room, his hands knew exactly where to go and what to grab.

Clothes better suited to fighting and sneaking than the ones he had on.

A couple of pistols and enough ammunition to make sure he got some use out of them.

A serrated combat knife.

A small bag of miscellaneous tools.

A heavy flashlight that worked as a club just as well as it worked as a light source.

He pulled on his boots, stuffed a garrote in his pocket, and left.

When he came back to the hangar, a small black land cruiser idled next to the exit, and Martha stood beside it, holding a small case.

Martha withheld the box when he came abreast of her. “It doesn’t have to be you that goes.”

“Yes, it does.” Leon held out his hand, and Martha pressed her lips together and handed him the small box with the two earpieces. “I need to help him, Martha. And if this all goes to hell, and we can’t get him onto that ship, and the Klah’Eel land that gas, then I need to be responsible for that too.”

“Alright.” Martha grabbed the back of his head and yanked him forward. Leon stumbled and almost reared back on instinct, but then Martha pressed her lips to his forehead. “I’m proud of you, Leon.”

Leon swallowed as Martha released him. “I know.”

Martha jerked her head to the cruiser. “Now get going. I’ve input the factory’s coordinates into the navigation. The way Sebastian flies, he might already be there.”

“Damn that man,” Leon grumbled as he climbed into the cockpit. He kicked up the engines, and Martha backed away. She didn’t stay to watch him go, though. With one last nod, she spun on her heel and left back into the stairwell.

Leon gunned the ship out the exit, slamming his back into the chair and half a smile onto his face. He hadn’t been in the pilot’s seat of a ship for a long time, but his hands remembered where to go as well as they remembered the layout of a Resistance armory. He pushed the speed until the buildings outside blurred beneath him and glanced at the navigation console. Still the better part of an hour before he’d arrive at the coordinates.

He’d have to find a place to land, and then he’d have to break into the factory and find Sebastian, and then they’d... Leon shook his head. He’d have to do this one step at a time. It

was no good getting lost in all the impossible things he had to do.

Find Sebastian. Leon clutched that directive tightly to his chest. It strangely comforted him—slowed his heart rate, evened his breathing—to center himself around the man that mattered to him the most.

How ridiculous Leon had been for so long to not have seen it sooner. He'd let himself be ripped in two by what he'd thought were the competing forces of his love for Sebastian and his love for his country. But they weren't competing at all. They were the same damn thing when it all came down to it, and this mad dash in the dark through the outskirts of Ralscoln proved it.

Once Leon saved Sebastian and helped him save Southern Tava, he'd never dismiss or deprioritize him again.

Leon didn't let himself think about the alternative.

As he sped closer to the coordinates on the factories, Leon killed his lights and spun down the engines to a low hum. He pressed the ship down to the ground as low as he dared and coasted quietly up to the factory compound.

It was dark and quiet, as Leon would expect. The factory, and others like it, hadn't been doing great business before the war—part of why the owners had pushed so hard for the Turner investment—and most production in Southern Tava had ground to a halt the moment Leon had raised that black flag over the capitol.

Still, the compound was large and sprawled out in every direction. Sebastian would be impossible to find in that hulking maze, but Leon didn't need to search the whole maze for him. Sebastian needed two things: a body with the right biometrics and identification and an interplanetary ship.

Leon turned along the perimeter—not wanting to fly over the fence and trigger any sensors—and cruised until he saw a large ship park beside a hangar. He maneuvered down to an area across the fence from it, and his heart leaped as he made out a small land cruiser half-hidden behind a boulder.

Sebastian.

He wrestled his heart back into place and all but threw his ship down behind the matte-black-painted ship. He was on the right track, but he wasn't successful yet. He turned off all standby power on the cruiser to keep it as hidden as possible with his haphazard parking job and leaped out of the ship.

Stumbling down the embankment to the stretch of open ground in front of the fence, his heart leaped again to see a subtle but man-sized opening cut into the chain-link. The optimism faded quickly. Beyond that, the dusty ground smoothed out into concrete.

Not that Leon had the tracking abilities to have used the dusty ground anyway. He'd spent most of his time fighting in cities. Garrett could have done it. Hell, Garrett could have probably tracked Sebastian over the concrete itself, but Garrett wasn't here.

Leon eased himself through the hole in the fence, careful not to snag his clothes or rattle the chain-link, then crouched on the inside. Great, he was in the compound, but now what?

He paused there for a moment, surveying the surrounding buildings and flexing his hands in frustration, when he heard a sharp yell and saw a flash of light beam briefly out the window of a nearby building.

Without pausing to evaluate, Leon took off toward it in a low, silent run. Coming up to the window, he heard a series of grunts and curses and the thud of blows on flesh. He raced along the outside of the window until he came to the corner of the building. Then threw himself back the way he'd come.

A guard with a flashlight strode toward the door of the building, around the corner from Leon.

"Hello?" the guard called as he advanced on it, but no more thuds came from the building now. "Stevens, is that you?"

Then suddenly, a loud crash and a curse and "Roberts!"

"Stevens!" The guard rushed into the door, and Leon skirted the corner and came in right behind him.

He absorbed the scene in an instant.

The guard that must be Roberts stood bent over on the other side of the large toolshed, holding the side of his bleeding neck.

A man dressed in mechanic's overalls lay sprawled on his back in the middle of the room, as though he had just been thrown there.

And Stevens stood just inside the door, already raising his gun.

“Shoot him!” Roberts sputtered. “Shoot him! He’s a worm!”

“No!” The man in overalls raised his hand, his eyes wide as he scrabbled backward. But he was too exposed to make it anywhere. “No, please—”

Just as Stevens got his gun up, Leon cinched his garrote around the man's neck. Stevens dropped his gun as his hands went to his throat, but he couldn't slide his fingers under the wire Leon had cutting into his skin. Leon stood tall, yanked back on his hold, and held on tight as Stevens kicked and clawed and eventually thrashed and twitched.

Sebastian didn't waste a second of his opportunity. He launched himself from the floor and buried a knife in Roberts's throat.

In seconds, both guards fell to the ground with twin thuds.

“Leon.” Sebastian left his victim and stumbled toward him. Leon opened his arms, and Sebastian fell into them. He buried his face in Leon's chest and wound his arms around his waist. “I fucking hate having guns pointed at me.”

“I know. You're alright.” Leon held him close and kissed the top of his head. “I've got you.”

“You...” Sebastian suddenly stiffened in his grip, and the hands he'd clutched Leon's back with appeared at his chest. They started to shove, but then they grabbed Leon's shirt instead and held him close. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming after you.” Leon reached to grab one of Sebastian’s hands, but before he could, Sebastian shoved him away.

“I’m not going back with you.” Sebastian disengaged and then raised a finger at Leon. He tilted his chin up in that challenging way. “I’m not taking those guns for you, so if you think you can persuade me, you’ve wasted a lot of valuable time.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Leon raised two placating hands, but the fire in Sebastian’s eyes and the tremble in his lips told him Sebastian wasn’t done.

“I’m done following your orders just because you’re giving them!” Sebastian chopped his hand through the air as though he could sever his old bonds just like that. “I don’t care if I’m your most valuable soldier. I don’t even care if you love me or not”—the shake in his voice gave away the lie to that, and Leon’s heart cracked in his chest—“*I am taking that ship, and I am taking it far, far away from here!*”

“And I’ll help you.”

Sebastian’s mouth, already open and twisted up, ready for another tirade, froze, then softened. “You will?”

“Yes.” Leon reached slowly for Sebastian’s hand, and when Sebastian didn’t pull it away, he took it and drew Sebastian back to him. “I’m not giving you any orders, Sebastian. I’m here to help you.”

“Really?”

Leon tried not to let the pain of Sebastian’s tiny, disbelieving voice show on his face. “Really.”

Sebastian stared at him for a moment, his eyes so open and vulnerable and his lips shaking. Then he swallowed, sniffed, nodded, and pushed Leon lightly back again. He turned around and surreptitiously wiped his eyes with one hand while waving the other flippantly. “Good, because I need someone to pretend to be my supervisor. Or rather”—he dug around in his pocket and pulled out an ID card, glancing at it—“Carey Hartle’s supervisor.”

Leon smiled at him with his heart feeling too full of fondness for his own chest, then looked away to start checking the bodies for anything useful. “You have a plan then?”

“‘Plan’ is a strong word, but I have some ideas.” Sebastian looped his arms under the shoulders of the guard he’d killed and started dragging him behind a particularly full shelf that was shielding Sebastian’s old body from view. Leon felt a twinge of unease to see the body he’d slept with last night empty and vacant. “I’ll grab a maintenance ship and start flying up there. When they ask who I am—”

“You think they’ll ask before or after they shoot?” Leon tore off his kill’s shirt to wipe up some of the blood Sebastian had smeared all over the floor.

“Hm, good point.” Sebastian dragged the guard Leon had killed over to where he had dropped the other bodies and squished them all into place as best as he could. “Okay, I’ll hail once I get into range and tell them I was sent to make sure their ship is ready for the burn down to Northern Tava. They’ll have to go fast to avoid the Resistance guns if the secret got out, and they don’t want to be blowing an engine with that cargo.”

“Would they expect a random mechanic to know what sort of cargo they were carrying?” Leon surveyed their handiwork and deemed it good enough that a passing guard wouldn’t look in the window and immediately raise the alarm.

“Maybe not.” Sebastian shrugged and hopped up on a tool bench. “I’ll just imply that I know it’s volatile. It’s why I was sent up, after all.”

Leon nodded. “And then they’ll call down to verify your story.”

“And you’ll answer and tell them that it’s all gotten the proper approvals from all the proper people through all the proper channels, blah-blah-blah.”

“And I’ll make sure this factory doesn’t go into high alert and blow your cover.” Leon circled a finger to encompass the compound they were hunkered down in.

“That’s the idea.” Sebastian hopped off the tool bench and put his hands on his hips, but then he made a face. “I do sort of wish you’d brought some backup.”

Leon let out a bark of laughter. “Why? You think I can’t do infiltration all by myself?”

“Well.” Sebastian’s sheepish look made Leon laugh again. “I mean, *I* always do it. Even before you were in charge, you didn’t usually—oh shut up, never mind.”

Leon chuckled one more time and then shook his head. “Don’t worry about me. Just get up to that ship and back down in one piece.”

“That’s the plan.” Sebastian went to the window and peeked outside it. “I already know which maintenance ship I’m taking.”

“One more thing.” Leon pulled the box of earpieces out of his pocket and held one out to Sebastian. “Don’t disappear on me again.”

Sebastian winced and popped the earpiece into place. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Leon popped his own into his ear.

“I just didn’t know if I’d be able to keep going if I had to hear you ordering me back.”

“I know.” Leon put the box back in his pocket. “I’m the one that should be sorry. And I am. But we can talk about that once this is all over.”

“Right.” Sebastian nodded crisply—all business and purpose and competence—and Leon felt a surge of attraction. God, the man was good at his job. “You see that panel of windows up there?”

Leon looked out the window and followed the line of Sebastian’s finger up to a series of five windows that looked out over the ship park. “Yeah.”

“That’s the control room for the factory’s hangars.”

“So that’s where I need to be.”

“Exactly. I’m going to take that ship.” Sebastian moved his finger to point at a sturdy, unassuming maintenance ship parked right next to the start of the runway. “I should be able to get to it and start it up without being seen, but I need you to make sure the control room is empty so that no one sounds the alarm when one of their ships starts to take off in the middle of the night.”

“Consider it done.”

“That’s also where the Turner ship will likely call down to, so you need to be available to take their call.” Sebastian continued sweeping his finger around to all the different things that could be seen from that vantage point. “You’ll also need to keep people out of it, so they don’t see our ships out past the fence. And now that I think of it, you’ll be in a good spot to know if anyone’s about to stumble on our little kill room and —”

“Sebastian.” Leon quieted him with a hand on his shoulder. “Consider it done.”

Sebastian huffed sheepishly. “Sorry. You know, I’m suddenly realizing I might have trust issues during a mission. I almost never have a partner.”

Leon squeezed his shoulder just once before letting it go. “You can trust me.”

“I know.” Sebastian’s hand twitched toward him but then stopped, and instead, he just pointed his chin out to his targeted ship. “Shall we?”

“Yes. Still one more thing, though.” Leon cupped Sebastian’s jaw and pulled him into a soft kiss.

Sebastian flowed into him, softening like butter on a warm plate, and wrapped an arm around his neck.

Leon wished he could kiss him all night, and he hoped beyond hope that he’d get to kiss him more some night in the future. But those thoughts were for later. He gently pulled back, soothing Sebastian’s needy sound with one last chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. “I love you.”

Sebastian's eyes fluttered open, still looking a little dazed. "I love you too."

Leon smiled but nudged Sebastian's hip to push him back. "Now, we should go."

"Right." Sebastian gave his head a shake, and his eyes sharpened again. He unwound his arms from around Leon's neck and stepped away. He checked his gun again before stuffing it into an oversized mechanic's pocket. "Let's go."

With a quick check of their surroundings, they stole back out of the toolshed and into the open. They didn't give each other one last longing glance as they split up. They each had jobs to do.

The hard times the factory had fallen on—for which the Resistance was at least partially to blame—meant that security was light. Leon moved cautiously as he jerry-rigged a window open and slipped in, then crept through the halls as silently as he could. But he saw no one until he made it just outside the control room.

A guard strode, whistling down the hall toward the door, twirling his baton around with his back to Leon. It was such an easy hit Leon would have felt guilty if he hadn't known that every guard still on the beat in this factory had been complicit in breaking the workers' strike a few months ago.

Unfortunately for Leon, Sebastian hadn't been far off the mark when he'd worried that Leon might be rusty. The guard turned at the last moment at the sound of Leon's too-heavy tread. His eyes went wide, and his mouth opened to yell.

But unfortunately for the guard, Leon wasn't completely out of practice yet. He slammed his fist into the guard's face before he could make a sound, then wrapped his garrote around his neck. He twisted, pulled, and then just waited it out.

"Is that a struggle I hear?" Sebastian's crackled in his ear.

"Nope," Leon lied through his teeth. "Clean and easy."

"Mm-hmm." Sebastian's cockiness came in crystal clear through the Qeshian military-grade hardware. "Are you in the control room yet?"

“About to be.” Leon stooped and pulled the limp body over his shoulder before walking to the control room door in a crouch. He eased the door open and peered inside. Finding it empty, he pushed in and dropped the body, shoving it under a desk. He approached the console of hardware set up along the panel of windows. “Alright, I’m in. Can you see me?”

A head poked out from behind the maintenance ship Sebastian had pointed out, then pulled back in. “Nope. Too dark and far away.”

“I can see you.” The light of the waxing gibbous moon shone down on the ship park and runway like a spotlight. Leon glanced up at it with a feeling of dread he’d never associated with a celestial body before. There was a ship hidden up there that was about to change everything. How and in which ways, Leon wasn’t sure, but he was certain that nothing would be the same after tonight.

“Well, hopefully, no one else does.” Sebastian appeared on the tarmac again, then climbed into the ship. “Here goes nothing.”

“Good luck.”

“Yeah, you too.” The ship lit up as it turned on, then the headlights dimmed immediately back down. Sebastian started taxiing it out to the runway at a much higher-than-regulation speed. “These earpieces can reach the moon, right?”

“Yeah.” Leon surveyed the tarmac and surrounding buildings to see if anyone had noticed Sebastian bringing the ship out to the runway. A smaller ship with thrusters could have been gone by now, but maintenance ships had so much machinery built into them they needed momentum to take off. “I told you. I don’t want you disappearing on me again.”

“Right.” Sebastian’s voice had some sort of quality to it, something thoughtful, but Leon couldn’t identify it. After this. They’d talk about all of it after this. “Right.”

Then Sebastian gunned the engines and rocketed down the runway. He lifted off before getting even halfway down it and then twisted off into the sky, straight into the moon’s light.

Leon shook his head with a little chuckle. “You fly like a maniac.”

“Well, you gotta enjoy the simple things in life, you know?” Sebastian’s smug smile came in clear through his voice.

“No, I’m not sure that I do.” Leon took to studying the console in front of him, taking his best shot at identifying each knob and screen and button and switch.

“Shocker.” And there was Sebastian’s eye roll.

Leon chuckled. He found the main communications panel and tapped the top of it. That was important, and the factory designers had known it—it was plated with inch-thick metal to prevent sabotage. Then he found what looked like the alarm and factory communications system. Those were also important but, thankfully, currently silent.

“You know,” Sebastian mused in his ear after a moment. “I’ve sort of missed having you in my head.”

Leon half smiled to himself as he turned about to survey the room properly. He stood with his back to the wall of windows and faced a wall of screens and charts. On his right was the door he’d come in from and on his left was another door. They’d open to face each other and catch whoever was unlucky enough to be in the room in a perfect crossfire. Leon grimaced. It wasn’t a room he would have chosen to defend.

He sighed and sat in the seat at the console. “To be honest, I’ve sort of missed being in your head.”

“Really?”

“I mean, not the paralysis part.” Leon watched as Sebastian’s ship completely disappeared into the sky. “But—and I’m sure I’ll regret this soon—having you talk at me so much.”

“You like when I talk at you?” Sebastian asked slyly. “Even when I’m being a smart-ass?”

“You’re always being a smart-ass.” Leon rolled his eyes. “There’d be nothing about you left to like if I didn’t like that

part of you.”

Sebastian paused. “I can’t tell if that was a compliment or an insult.”

“Why don’t you just focus on getting up to that moon?”

“Because it’s boring,” Sebastian groaned. “It’s literally just turn up and go forward until I get there.”

“You mentioned that once you take the ship, you want to take it far away.” Leon leaned forward and rested his elbows on the console as he did a visual sweep of the quiet, empty tarmac. “You have a place in mind?”

“I do, actually. I thought about it on the way to the factory.”

“Where?”

“That Qeshian outpost on Ulhra.”

Leon chuckled. “Ah, you are indeed a Ralsdi.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sebastian asked with an edge of defensiveness.

“Always thinking three political steps ahead.”

“I don’t know if this counts as three steps ahead.” Sebastian sighed. “One and a half, maybe. But I really do think Emissary Serihk wants to end the war, and this little gift might be just the opportunity he needs.”

“You want to gift him a terrorist weapon?” Leon raised an eyebrow even though he knew Sebastian couldn’t see it.

“Okay fine, ‘gift’ was the wrong word. Show of goodwill.” Sebastian’s tone said he could see Leon’s eyebrow raise as well as Leon had seen his eye roll. “We took the bad, bad weapon from the Klah’Eel and didn’t use it ourselves. So we’re the good guys. That’s got to count for something.”

Leon stood from the console and crept quietly to one of the two doors that entered the control room. He was not so convinced they could make themselves out to be the good guys so easily. Leon had taken a seat of government with no small amount of violence, and Sebastian had nearly killed this

Serihk and his lover. He didn't think they were going to get out on the right side of history quite yet, but he wasn't about to share his pessimism with Sebastian when he was already halfway through his suicide mission.

Sebastian tsked through the earpiece. "I can feel your doubt."

"No, you can't." Leon stuck his head to the door and listened for a moment, then turned to the other door. "You're not in my head."

"I might as well be." Sebastian was quiet for a moment, and Leon could hear the beeps and clicks of him messing with the ship's controls. "Trust me."

"You know I do." Leon pressed his ear to the other door. He was moments away from declaring that side clear as well when he heard a very soft thud.

"Alright, I'm clearing the moon." Sebastian's voice settled into a smooth and professional cadence, the usual flippancy and wit toned down to nothing. "I can see the perimeter."

"How many fighters?" Leon lowered his voice and crouched, retreating to behind a desk.

"A lot. Not that it would take much to stop me, I don't have any guns. Why are you whispering?"

Leon fingered his garrote in his pocket. "Because someone's coming."

"Should I back off? Wait until you've—shit. They're already hailing me."

"Take the call. I'll deal with this."

As soon as the words left Leon's mouth, the door opened, and a large man walked in. A very large man. A klah'eel. Leon saw the horns on his brows silhouetted against the banks of windows as he walked in front of them.

"Engineer Carey Hartle from Facility Yuni here to perform emergency maintenance on your vessel." Sebastian's voice through the earpiece, though perfectly audible to Leon, came

in too quiet for the klah'eel to even twitch as he paced across the room.

Leon stayed as still as he could and breathed as shallowly as he dared as he watched the klah'eel guard stop in front of the windows and look out. Carry on, carry on, carry on, Leon willed him to continue his patrol. Clearly, the guard did not have his full attention on his job, or he would have smelled the cooling body just a few desks away from him and Leon's anxious sweat just one desk over.

Sebastian continued trying to convince the smugglers the Turners had hired to let him board. "Look, man, all I was told was to make sure your ship doesn't blow up when you go racing down to the planet. You want to send me home? Fine, I'd rather be asleep anyway. But maybe you want to call down to my superiors before you go getting yourself in trouble."

Leon gritted his teeth as he watched the klah'eel turn away from the windows and start toward the door on the other side of the room. Go, go, go. If the smugglers deliberated long enough, and this guard moved on fast enough, then this whole thing could b—

"This is the Barzen calling down for the control tower of the Yuni facility. Do you copy?" The speaker on the communications panel of the console crackled to deafening life in the silent control room.

"What the—" The klah'eel guard turned to it at the same time Leon lunged at him. The man outweighed Leon by a huge margin, but Leon had spent years bringing down klah'eel. He got the garrote around his throat and used his shorter stature to pull so far down, he pulled the klah'eel's back into an arch.

"Yuni facility, do you copy?"

The klah'eel twisted before Leon could choke his blood off completely and slammed his skull into Leon's solar plexus. He fell back with a gasp and just managed to get his arms up in time to catch the klah'eel's wild punch on his forearms. He caught the next kick on the same forearms and bit back on a yell as the pain rocketed up the bones of his arm.

“Yuni facility—”

“Leon, they’ve got three gunships on me—”

Leon dropped his arms and found himself looking down the barrel of a gun. On instinct, he swung to the side and clamped his hand down on the barrel. He slammed his fist into the klah’eel’s gut and used the opening to yank the gun away. He flipped it around, put it under the man’s chin, and pulled the trigger.

“Leon!”

“Yuni facility, do you—”

Leon slammed his hand down on the reply button just as the sound of the gunshot faded away. “I copy, I copy. I was just getting some fucking klak. Did our engineer get up there yet?”

“Oh, thank god.” Sebastian sounded like he’d collapsed in relief.

“Did you authorize an engineer to take off tonight?”

“I don’t authorize nothing.” Leon pulled out his vowels in a more exaggerated version of Garrett’s rural accent. “But I was told by my boss, who was told by his boss, to be here tonight and make sure one of our mechanics got up to you.”

“Can you identify this engineer?”

“Yeah, I got it here somewhere.” Leon paused and counted to two. “Carey Hartle, should be.”

“Thank you, Yuni Facility, that’s all.”

“Send him back soon as you can.” Leon kept speaking to keep up the bit, but now that the stress was sliding back out of him, he noticed his chest was splattered with blood, his face was a little wet, and his hands were shaking. “I can’t leave ’til he lands.”

The smugglers didn’t bother to reply, but Sebastian’s came back heavy with relief. “Alright, they’re letting me through.”

“Let’s hope that was the hard part.” Leon wiped the splash of blood and gore off his face and pushed the klah’eel under

the only desk big enough to hide him so that Leon wouldn't stumble over him later. That gunshot would have been audible throughout half the facility, and Leon had a bad feeling it wouldn't be the first.

“Unfortunately, I think that was probably the easy part.”

“I thought you were an optimist.” Leon grabbed the guns from the two dispatched guards, checked the ammo, and stuck them into his extra holsters.

“I am,” Sebastian said with an audible smile. “That was the easy bit, and it's only going to get more fun from here.”

“Whatever you say. Are you almost to the ship?”

“Yeah, docking now.”

The internal communications panel crackled. “This is sector five. Did anyone else hear that gunshot?”

“This is sector one. Negative, I didn't hear anything.”

“Sector six. It was definitely a gunshot. I think from control room.”

“Sector four. Don't be so jumpy. It was not—”

“Oh shut up, Tallow.”

“You shut—”

Leon pressed into the call. “This is the control room. Affirmative on the gunshot, it was a misfire. No alarm.”

Quiet for a moment, then, “Control room, identify yourself.”

Leon dove for the first guard he killed, rifled around in his pockets, came up with an ID card, then rushed back to the console. “Junior Ken, six-seven-one-zero-five.”

“Affirmative, Ken.”

And then the console went quiet.

Sebastian spoke in his ear again. “They did not buy that.”

“No, they did not.” Leon went to the nearest desk and flipped it onto its side without a care for the crash it made

“You need to get out of there.” Sebastian’s tone took on a bossy quality.

Leon scowled. “Worry about yourself.”

“I can worry about two things at once—Hello there!” Sebastian’s voice suddenly chirped in a friendly way before falling back into a serious whisper a moment later. “I’m on the ship. I’m in. I don’t need you in the factory. Now, get out of there.”

Leon flipped over the next desk and turned its heavy metal top toward the door. “If they get in here, they can call up to the Barzen and sound the alarm.”

“They won’t think to do that. They won’t even check the communications panel.”

“They will if they’re smart.” Leon flipped the last desk and shoved them all into the best trench he could manage. He crouched between them, shielded on either side from the two doors. If he was really lucky, maybe a few of them would shoot over his head and hit each other instead.

“They’re not smart,” Sebastian spat.

Leon checked his bullets. Four guns, all of them loaded, and plenty of spare ammo. If he couldn’t defend this position for at least an hour with all that, then Farlon hadn’t trained him. “Let’s not risk it.”

“I don’t want to risk *you*.”

Leon’s heart throbbed at the desperate note in Sebastian’s voice. He sighed and checked all his guns again, even though he’d already done it twice. He rubbed his thumb over the gun barrel and thought of rubbing it over the ridge of Sebastian’s cheek and the sweet, vulnerable look that always came into Sebastian’s eyes when he did. “If I can risk you, you can risk me.”

“Leon—”

“Showtime, Sebastian.”

The door to Leon’s left crashed open, and Leon fired off three rounds without pausing to identify the newcomer. He

ducked back down behind the desks and tuned in to the chorus of swearing and the overlapping crackle of the communications panel.

The guards of the factory had no doubts about the incident now.

“Intruder! In the control room!”

“Definitely armed!”

Leon pressed his back against a desk. Two in the hallway with the open door. He hadn't hit either. One door still closed. For now.

Sebastian croaked and gurgled in his ear. Then Leon heard a rustling, a pop, and a new voice, deeper this time. “Alright, I'm in one of the security guards.”

“That was fast.” Leon waited for the current volley of bullets to finish banging against the desk at his back, then popped up and fired three controlled shots through the door. One of the guards spun as he caught a shot in the shoulder.

“Well, things sound a little urgent on your end.”

“Don't worry about me.”

“Stop saying that!” Sebastian started breathing harder, and Leon fired a few more wild shots over his barricade before discarding his empty gun and grabbing another. “Alright, I know where the bridge is.”

Leon had a perfect view as the door on the other side of the room opened, and without wasting a second, he raised the gun in his hand and fired a round right into the head of the guard there.

“Shit, nope. Okay, I'm almost to the—” Sebastian went quiet.

A low whine came through the earpiece, just barely audible over the ricochet of bullets off his barricade.

“Is that an alarm?” Leon spun around to face the door that now had three guards in it and fired off two shots that found their mark in the leg and hip of one man and another that went

wide. But he'd miscounted their ammo, and one of the guard's last shots tore through the shirt of his left arm.

"No," Sebastian snapped back. "Maybe."

"Sebastian..." Leon growled as he ripped the fabric over his left bicep to see the damage. Just a scratch, a perfectly clean, shallow line of blood. He couldn't even feel it through the adrenaline.

"It's an alarm, but it's fine." Sebastian's confidence still had the power to make Leon feel certain even while crouched behind a pair of buckling desks with enemies on either side of him. "It's not high alert. They don't know who I am or who I'm in, and they won't have time to realize."

Leon started reloading a gun but abandoned it and threw himself down on the ground as another guard appeared at the second door with a barrel trained on him. Bullets pinged off the bottom of the desk he'd just been pressed against. He gritted his teeth and tried to drag the desk closer to him to block off the man's angle, but it was too damn heavy from this position.

Sebastian's voice rang in his ear, full of authority and bravado. "Alright, everyone, I need you out of this room! Now, now, now, let's go! To the security office. My colleague is right behind me. He'll protect you."

Leon held his breath during a lull in the hail of bullets. He worried he'd be shot if he poked his head up, and he worried if he'd be advanced on if he didn't. No good options.

Sebastian continued. "Because if you don't go, sir, then I will shoot you right now, and you'll still like it more than what will happen to you if you're here when that intruder arrives! Now, get going!"

Leon heard the tone of an order being given by one of the guards in the crowded hall, and even though he couldn't understand the words, he had a bad feeling about what it had been. He steeled himself, waited a beat, then hopped to his feet and pulled his gun. He had only a moment to savor the triumph of seeing the terror on a man's face as he tried to

make it across the room to Leon before Leon stopped him in his tracks with a spray of bullets. Then Leon dropped back onto his stomach.

“I’m in!” Sebastian shouted at him with a mixture of triumph, panic, and urgency. “I’ve taken the bridge. I’ve lowered the security barricades. I’m fucking in. Now, *get out!*”

Leon was no longer in any position to argue. The question now was whether or not he was in any position to get out. Too many of them clogged the hallways, and they’d proven too well-trained for him to simply kill or scare them off. He couldn’t make it to either door without showing his back to the other and getting gunned down in the middle of the room.

They had him well and truly pinned down, and he racked his mind for how to lie to Sebastian that he had any hope at all of making it out of this.

Then hope dropped over one of the desks and into his trench.

The grenade bounced barely a finger’s breadth off the ground when it hit next to his head. Its counter beeped down wildly, but not near as wildly as if the idiot who had thrown it had cooked it long enough.

With a vicious grin of triumph, Leon grabbed the grenade and lobbed it back to the least crowded door. The second it exploded—ripping the air with a deafening boom so loud Leon felt nearly blind with the shock of it—he launched himself over the barricade and tore toward the door.

He raced through the chaos and the smoke, still certain he’d feel bullets thud into his spine at any second. He cleared the door and jumped over the bodies that may or may not still have been moving. He sprinted down the hallway without a thought of defending his back. He’d never make it out of another firefight if he got caught again.

“Leon—”

“Going!” Leon spat with all the air he could spare. He threw himself down a flight of stairs and rolled to his feet at the bottom. This side of the building was a mirror image of the

other, thank god, and he burst out onto the tarmac without once getting himself turned around.

No one met him outside, and he pumped his arms and legs as fast as they would go back to the hole in the fence. Shots rang out behind him, and a few sprays of debris flared up on the ground in front of him, but the bullets landed wildly and inaccurately, as though shot from far away.

He looked up just before he got to the fence and saw a series of lights beside the moon, moving south and away from it. "I can see you."

"Yeah, this fucker is mine now," Sebastian growled. "Are you out yet?"

"I'm out." Leon grunted as he wrenched himself through the hole in the fence, ripping up his clothes and his skin but very much alive and very much out. He leaped back into his land cruiser, flipped it on, and as it rose back up into the sky, only then did he look back the way he'd come to see lights on in the building and not a soul chasing after him on the tarmac.

"Fuck yeah!" Sebastian's whoop echoed around the room he was in and back through the earpiece to Leon.

A chastisement for early celebration appeared on Leon's lips, but then he laughed it away, Sebastian's enthusiasm infecting him. "Impossible."

"If you'd thought it was impossible, you wouldn't have come after me." Sebastian had piloted the ship out fully from behind the moon, and it shone over Southern Tava like a line of particularly bright stars.

"It was *because* I thought it was impossible that I came after you." Leon slowed his ship so he could watch the line of Sebastian's freighter slowly cross the sky. "Have you sent word to the Qesh?"

"Yeah, I just flipped on a looping broadcast and beamed it out to them. I don't want them shooting me out of the sky or thinking I'm stealing this stuff."

"You are stealing it." Leon snorted, leaning back and staring up at the line of lights. He had nowhere to be but

Ralscoln and nothing he could do but hope for and will Sebastian's success. And listen to the self-satisfied patter of his voice.

"Yeah, but I'm not stealing it for me, and I'm not using it, so I'm not *stealing* stealing it."

"What would you call it then?"

"I would call it... Hold on." The wit dropped out of Sebastian's voice.

Leon sat back up. "What is it?"

No reply.

"Sebastian, what is it?"

"Hold on. I thought... Oh no. Oh no-no-no—"

The line of lights Leon had been following with his eyes bloomed into red and orange moments before the sounds of an explosion and the screech of an alarm slammed into his ears.

"Sebastian!"

"Shit, Leon, we—"

Static and interference garbled Sebastian's words

"—fired upon! The—"

More static.

"—orbital guns! The Klah'Eel are firing their orbital guns!"

Leon slammed the throttle and started rocketing back to Ralscoln. He turned the cruiser's communications to the first Resistance channel. "Martha! Mar—"

"We see it!" Martha responded near instantly. "We see it. What's happening?"

"The Klah'Eel are firing! Tell them to stop firing!" Leon looked back up at the sky, where the lights of the Barzen had turned into a fireball that grew larger and larger. "Sebastian, get out of there!"

“I didn’t think they would!” Sebastian gasped at him. “I didn’t think they would actually try to bring down the ship. I thought they’d have too much to lose. I thought they’d never risk it. I didn’t think they—”

“I don’t care!” Leon roared at him. “Get. Out. Now!”

“I’m going!”

Leon watched the burning ship careening into the atmosphere with such a feeling of impotent rage and desperation he thought he might explode along with it. From this close, he could see the new blooms of explosions as more rockets slammed into its side.

How could he have let this happen? How could he have let Sebastian slip through his fingers again?

How, how, how?

His stomach rolled, and his heart ached, and his chest tightened too much to breathe. He hit the cruiser’s communications panel. “Martha!”

“They’re not responding to hails!” Martha shouted back at him, and he could hear the din of more shouting voices in the background.

Leon looked up at the ship as a fresh volley hit it. The fires blurred in his vision, and he dashed the liquid from his eyes. “Sebastian, please.”

“I’m going. I’m going. I’m almost to the escape pods.” Sebastian’s frantic voice in his ear was still strong. “I’m going to make it. I’m going to be fine, Leon. I’m—”

An inferno burst out of the ship when a rocket hit something that combusted spectacularly. Leon had to shield his eyes from the blinding light and the fierce interference that followed through all his communications and sent his ears ringing.

“Sebastian!”

Leon screamed, but nothing came from his earpiece except for crackles and fizzes and screeches as the great ship fell out of the sky.

Chapter Fifteen

SEBASTIAN WRINKLED HIS NOSE.

He rolled his head to the side and batted at it, but his pillow had a strange smell too.

The scent was oddly organic. And salty. Weird, considering Ralscoln was a landlocked city. They didn't have any fields or forests within smelling distance and certainly no oceans.

He rubbed his face and found a crustiness on his eyelashes and eyebrows. With another wrinkly frown, he opened his eyes.

He was not in Ralscoln.

Or at least, not in any part of Ralscoln he'd ever been in before. He sat up from the tangle of light blankets he'd been wrapped in and looked around the little...room? Dwelling? Tent?

The walls looked like cloth—once riotously colored and now faded and smudged—held up by mismatched wooden and metal poles and beams. It had barely enough room on its old, rusted metal floor for the mattress that Sebastian sat on. He couldn't see any lights, but plenty of sunlight filtered through holes and gaps in the fabric.

Despite the flimsiness of the shelter, Sebastian didn't feel even the hint of a chill. On the contrary, the muggy air made his clothes stick to his body—

He snapped his eyes down to himself. He didn't recognize this body. The last body he'd inhabited had been...

A guard of the Barzen.

The last thing he remembered was slamming the eject button on a Barzen escape pod. Then a huge explosion and then....nothing.

He threw the blankets off, tripped over them in his dash to the cloth door, slammed hard into the metal ground, and finally clawed to his feet and out of the tent.

His bare feet hit mud, squelching between his toes as he stopped and stared.

In front of him, stretching off to either side, ran a canal.

Mud eddied through the water along its edges, but its center shimmered a bright, beautiful blue. More tents and semi-permanent structures lined the banks, and ramshackle bridges leaped over the water here and there to connect them. People of every species—but overwhelmingly human—pushed barges along the canal, crossed the bridges, and toiled through the muddy roads on either bank. Screeching sea birds flew overhead in the deep blue sky.

Sebastian knew this place, and it was definitely *not* Ralscoln.

“Sebastian! What are you doing out here?”

Sebastian spun around to see Maxwell coming toward him with a basket of medical supplies, mud splattered all over the bottom of his pants, and a chastising frown on his face. Sebastian just shook his head and put his hands on his hips. “Better question: What the hell am I doing in Carta? What are *you* doing in Carta? And where's—”

“Let's get your shoes on first, at least.” Maxwell grabbed his shoulder and steered him back into the tent.

“Maxwell.” Sebastian turned as soon as they were in the tent. “Where's—”

“Hess, I know.” Maxwell pushed him down onto a stool Sebastian hadn't even seen and knelt at his feet. “He's fine.”

Relief hit Sebastian so hard he nearly fell off, but Maxwell grabbed his shoulder again to steady him. Once he was stable, Maxwell pulled out a dirty rag and started wiping the mud off his feet.

Leon was fine. Leon was fine, and Sebastian was in Carta and not burning in the rubble of the Barzen.

“How did I get here?” Sebastian asked as Maxwell pulled some shoes out from somewhere. “How did *you* get here? How long was I out?”

Maxwell sighed and nudged one of Sebastian’s feet into a shoe and then the other. “How about one question at a time?”

Sebastian scrubbed his face. He wanted to know everything, and he wanted to know everything now. “How did I get here? The last thing I remember is trying to get off the Barzen.”

“You did get off the Barzen.” Maxwell pulled his hand gently away from his face and then held his chin still as he shined a penlight in his right eye. “But your pod was still too close when the Barzen’s fuel line blew. Your body suffered immense trauma, and most of your hooks got ripped from your brain stem.”

Sebastian twitched and tightened his barbs and claws into place, fear shivering through him. “Wouldn’t that have killed me?”

Maxwell shook his head and moved the penlight to Sebastian’s other eye. “I said most of your hooks, not all of them. And your body wasn’t dead. You went into a sort of stasis to conserve energy. I’ve heard of other worm-like species that display that behavior, but I didn’t know torvar did it.”

Sebastian bit his lip and let Maxwell pull him to his feet. The idea that he had been floating helpless, deaf, and blind did not comfort him, nor did the idea of time disappearing from him in the blink of an eye. “How long was I in stasis?”

“Counting from when the Barzen crashed to just now?” Maxwell passed him a new shirt. “About five days.”

“Five days?” Sebastian dropped the shirt back to the ground in shock. “I lost *five days*, Maxwell?”

Maxwell grimaced and picked the shirt back up off the floor. He pushed it into Sebastian’s limp hand. “Yes.”

Sebastian finally pulled the shirt on in a daze. Five days. Five days he’d been gone. Five days since innumerable tons of gas had crashed with a fiery explosion onto his home, and he’d been nowhere to help. He swallowed down all the guilt and fear and swirl of emotions that choked up his throat.

“Come on.” Maxwell put a gentle hand on his shoulder and nudged him back into the sunlight. “Let’s find Hess.”

Another irrational spike of fear stabbed Sebastian’s heart, and he grabbed at Maxwell’s hand. “You said he’s fine. He’s fine, right?”

“Yes, Sebastian, he’s fine.” Maxwell squeezed his shoulder. “Normally, he’d have been in that tent with you, but he lets himself get dragged away to important meetings now and again.”

“He’s been staying with me?” Sebastian felt a stupid smile start to pull at his lips, and he looked down the canal to hide it. His emotions seesawed wildly—joy and pleasure at the thought of Leon, fear and confusion at what he remembered, and incongruous peace from the lovely weather and bustling refugee settlement.

“Of course he’s been staying with you.” Maxwell sighed and took Sebastian’s wrist to pull him in the opposite direction along one of the muddy roads on the banks. “And you don’t have to hide how happy that makes you.”

Sebastian blushed hard but still let himself grin at Maxwell, too happy to care. He licked his lips in preparation to savor the words. “I love him, Maxwell.”

But Maxwell didn’t mirror his happiness back at him. Instead, he frowned a little, and a shadow came into his eyes. “I hope that works out for you.”

Sebastian looked away and let all the many strange sights of a long-term Carta refugee camp draw his gaze. “I think it

will.”

Maxwell’s misgivings didn’t have anything to do with Leon. Sebastian knew that. He wished he knew what they did have to do with, or better yet, that Maxwell could put whatever it was behind him. But in the years that Sebastian had known him, it had never seemed likely.

They took a turn away from the canal, and the ground firmed up under their feet as they climbed a small incline.

“You didn’t tell me how I got here,” Sebastian suddenly remembered, pulling his attention away from the beauty of a purple tent against the blue sky. “Just why I’m not dead.”

Maxwell blinked a few times, as though Sebastian had pulled him out of a reverie, but then he smiled at him with his normal sweetness. “Right.” They stepped out of a narrow alley and into a more open street, and Maxwell pointed down to the other side of it. “You have someone over there to thank for it, actually.”

Sebastian followed his finger to see a group of about five people constructing another tent-like dwelling on the far end of the road. A human woman stood back, pointing and giving orders. A large human man and a klah’eel man strained under a metal beam, lifting it into a notch at the top of a vertical pole. As soon as it settled into place, another human man began securing it with a drill while another woman pulled a bright yellow tarp over the whole thing.

Sebastian immediately recognized the two men that stepped out from under the beam: Garrett Twal and Captain Mal’ik. One of the women was a Resistance soldier, and the other Sebastian knew he didn’t recognize. The man drilling the beam into place looked oddly familiar, but Sebastian couldn’t place him.

Garrett saw them and started coming over, and Sebastian’s spine went up. He readied himself for some verbal sparring, but Garrett only glanced at him with a tight expression before focusing on Maxwell. “I was just going to come look for you.”

“Do you need something?” Maxwell stepped out in front of Sebastian—probably to cut him off from saying something nasty.

“Little Becca keeps trying to take off her splint.” Garrett crossed his muscular arms over his broad chest. “I told her she had to ask you first.”

“She does.” Maxwell chuckled, and Garrett smiled, and Sebastian wrinkled his nose and raised an eyebrow at the whole exchange.

“Will you come now?” Garrett cocked his head to point down an alleyway. “I’m afraid she’ll start trying to take it off while her mom’s gone.”

“Of course.” Maxwell started to follow Garrett toward the alley.

Sebastian stepped forward. “Hey!” He planted his hands on his hips and scowled at Garrett before looking back at Maxwell. “You were taking me to Hess.”

“Right.” Maxwell shot him an apologetic look. “Oliver can take you.”

“Oliver?” Sebastian frowned. “Where’s Oli—”

His jaw dropped, and he spun around as he suddenly realized why the man with the drill looked so familiar.

Oliver fucking Turner stood next to the tent he’d just helped raise, wearing ratty clothes, with dirt under his fingernails and mud on his face, holding a heavy-duty drill in his hand while he spoke to Mal’ik.

Sebastian let Maxwell and Garrett go as he strode over to Oliver and Mal’ik. “What the fuck have I missed here?”

Oliver turned with a sheepish smile. “Honestly? Quite a bit.”

“We’re glad to see you out and about, Sebastian.” Mal’ik nodded at him, and his rumbling voice soothed something in Sebastian’s chest. The man really meant it. And even Oliver’s smile looked genuine.

Sebastian sighed. “It’s a new development. I just woke up a few minutes ago.”

Mal’ik raised his eyebrows. “You must have a lot of questions.”

Oliver chuckled. “Starting with ‘where’s Leon Hess,’ I imagine.”

Sebastian blushed. How widespread was the knowledge of their relationship? Assuming that’s what it was. Assuming they still had one. Sebastian pressed his lips together. Of course they still had one. Leon didn’t camp out next to his bedside to break up with him as soon as he woke up, surely.

“Come on.” Oliver passed his drill to Mal’ik and beckoned Sebastian to follow him. “I’ll take you.”

Sebastian waved a goodbye to Mal’ik and then turned and followed Oliver up a path that wound and snaked through tents and crooked buildings.

“So, normalcy looks good on you, Turner.” Sebastian picked at one of Oliver’s dirty sleeves as they walked. “You’re like a real person now.”

Oliver scowled lightly and brushed Sebastian’s hand off him. “Yes, the humidity and the mud have done wonders for my complexion.”

“Are you the person Maxwell said I had to thank for getting me to Carta?” Sebastian planted a boot in a puddle as he walked and delighted in the splash it made toward Oliver.

Oliver, shockingly, didn’t even try to dodge the dirty water. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“So you *did* do something.” Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“You weren’t the only person stuck in an escape pod up there.” Oliver’s face pinched and lost some of its new color. “Some were from the Barzen, but some were from the Tava evacuation. And the Resistance wasn’t the only group sifting through the wreckage.”

“I can imagine,” Sebastian grimaced. Authorities from Carta and Lewis station would have been there quickly—and those weren’t people Sebastian would have wanted to be picked up by. Then there would have been Klah’Eel and Qeshian rescue ships, scavengers, and a whole host of even more unsavory types ready to pick through the rubble floating in Tava’s orbit.

“Joan and I took a ship up every day searching for stranded citizens, resistance members, maybe a Turner mercenary or two to hold as a hostage,” Oliver continued. “We finally found you by tracking your earpiece. Hess’s was still paired to it.”

Sebastian reached up to his ear as though the fancy military hardware would still be there. “My earpiece?”

“That’s right.” Oliver nodded. “It was mostly fried, but it still sent out enough of a signal to track if we knew what we were looking for.”

Sebastian let out a shaky breath. “Thank you for looking.”

It would have been so easy not to. They would have had so much to do and no reason to believe him still alive. It would have been easy to give him up as lost until he withered away and decayed in a brain-dead body he couldn’t access.

“Hey.” Oliver put a hand on his shoulder, and they both froze. Sebastian glanced at him, then down at where Oliver touched him, and then back up at Oliver’s face. Oliver blushed, and the rigidity in his arm gave away just how uncomfortable he was with the show of affection, but he lifted his chin and pushed through. “I’m glad we found you.”

“Yeah, I, uh—” Sebastian swallowed and smiled at Oliver as the other man blushed harder and dropped his hand. “I am too.”

“So anyway, that’s how we found you and brought you to Carta.” Oliver turned, and they kept walking. “I’m pretty sure Hess still keeps your old earpiece in his pocket.”

“Wait, what?” Sebastian snorted.

Oliver shot a smile at him over his shoulder. “Front pocket on his right side, I’d swear it.”

Sebastian ducked his head. That would be absurdly sentimental. Leon wouldn't. Would he?

After a short walk, they crested a small hill, and the area in front of them opened into a haphazard courtyard. A huge pavilion sprawled across it. Most of the pavilion's cloth sides had been rolled up to expose its many inhabitants to the open air and the barely there hint of a breeze.

"There's your man." Oliver nudged him and nodded to somewhere in the middle of the pavilion.

In a half second, Sebastian saw him.

Leon leaned over a table, his strong arms braced against it and his face serious as he listened intently to a huge klah'eel beside him. He looked the same as he had ever looked, and Sebastian's heart swelled into his throat.

The rest of the world fell away as he moved forward as fast as he could without breaking into a run. When Sebastian got halfway to the tent, Leon looked up, and his serious expression fell away into shock and then unmistakable joy. He skirted the table and left the klah'eel looking after him mid-sentence.

"Sebastian." Leon opened his arms as soon as he got near, and Sebastian threw himself into them without a care for how he looked. He didn't give a fuck if he looked needy or pathetic or smitten. He just needed to feel Leon's solidity wrap around him.

"Leon. Thank god." Sebastian buried his face into Leon's shoulder and crinkled his damp shirt in his fists. He inhaled deeply, pulling in the scent he hadn't even realized he'd memorized. "How did you get off the planet?"

"There was time to evacuate, and we had the ships on hand." Leon wrapped a hand around the back of Sebastian's neck and held him close. He pressed a kiss to the side of Sebastian's head. "Most of the Resistance got out. Everyone at headquarters, most of the regional bases. Martha, Jason. Some of the civilians..."

“My family.” Sebastian shoved Leon back to look up at him. “My parents—”

The strange, older klah'eel appeared at Leon's shoulder with a deep chuckle. “Your parents are very well. Your father is vying for the presidency as we speak.”

Sebastian's hands dropped from Leon's chest down to his own sides. “What?”

“And your mother is running an excellent campaign for him.” A human man came up to meet them with a roguish smile that made his weathered face look young. “Though it does seem a bit early considering that a constitution still needs to be written.” He held out his hand. “I'm Zyk.”

Sebastian's spine shot straight up, and warning bells went off in his mind. Only his good upbringing had him smoothly shaking the man's hand.

“I see you've heard of me.” Zyk laughed and nodded his head toward the klah'eel. “And probably Ha'ral here too.”

“Your reputations precede you.” Sebastian forced a grin and glanced at Leon to see him looking very relaxed in the presence of the infamous leaders of the Carta Cartel.

“Come on.” Zyk slipped an arm through Sebastian's elbow and led him back to the pavilion in a move so casual Sebastian found himself following without a hitch. “Let's get you all caught up, and then you can run off with your handsome leader.”

Sebastian's eyebrows shot up. Even the Carta Cartel founder knew about him and Leon?

“He really is handsome, by the way, and he's been worried sick about you.” Zyk tipped his head toward Sebastian and spoke quietly enough to keep Leon and Ha'ral from hearing. “He's been reminding me of Ha'ral, actually. It's been adorable.”

Sebastian schooled his expression to a strict neutral when Zyk glanced over his shoulder at the klah'eel that followed them with an unmistakable look of fondness. It had never once occurred to Sebastian that the two men who had founded the

Carta Cartel over two decades ago could be partners in more ways than one.

“He worries about everything.” Sebastian shrugged a shoulder, grabbing onto whatever confidence and nonchalance he could fake. “And I think you may have me confused with someone else. My parents—”

“Are William and Alice Ralsdi.” Zyk gave him a sidelong smile with a glint in his eyes. “Yes, we know about them and the family secret. Don’t worry, we haven’t used it to intimidate them yet, and we don’t currently plan to.”

That did nothing to convince Sebastian not to worry, but he had a feeling they had greater concerns for the moment. “What’s this about the presidency? Presidency of what?”

“Of Southern Tava.” Leon stepped forward and took Sebastian’s hand. He led him away from Zyk and to the table he’d been standing at. A large map stretched across it with the Southern Tava continent delineated in thick, official lines.

A lump formed in Sebastian’s throat. He squeezed Leon’s hand as he looked down at the map and at Ralscoln marked with a star. “The country?”

Leon squeezed his hand back and shook it a bit as though to make the realization real. “The country.”

“I don’t understand.” Sebastian shook his head slowly, frowning at the map and then back up at Leon, Zyk, and Ha’ral. “Did we...win?”

Leon’s eyes went dark at that, and Zyk and Ha’ral exchanged glances.

Sebastian looked between them all and then put a hand on his hip. “I know I’ve been out for five days, but we did *not* seem to be winning last I was conscious.”

“Win is not the word I would use,” Ha’ral finally said tactfully.

Leon shook his head, his face grim but determined. “We won more than we could have hoped for.”

Sebastian let out a frustrated growl. “What does that even mean? What happened?”

“The Klah’Eel shot down the Barzen right over Ralscoln and the Southern Tava heartland.” Zyk crossed his arms and spoke clearly and frankly, as though the words were mildly interesting but couldn’t touch him. “They poisoned it all.”

Sebastian’s blood chilled. “What?” He looked to Leon to see a shadow over his face. “What?”

Leon nodded grimly and didn’t say anything. Sebastian’s ears rushed with blood, and the sunlight seemed to dim around him. Poisoned? With the fear gas? All of Ralscoln and the heartland of his home?

Zyk continued, the only one of them who didn’t seem too horrified by the news to articulate it. “To the other species states, that was the last straw. The Klah’Eel have been under pressure since the original invasion to solve the refugee crisis *they* caused. But with that move, they made it ten times worse.”

“Emissary Serihk decided they’d fucked it all up enough,” Leon finally spoke up. “He pushed for the full liberation of Southern Tava from any species state. Said it was the only way to stop the bloody battles over it.”

Sebastian’s mouth fell open, and he mentally rearranged his opinion of the Qeshian Emissary. “The Qesh made the Klah’Eel surrender to us?”

“The Qesh and the Humans both. Plus, they were facing some internal pressure.” Ha’ral shrugged. “They never should have invaded in the first place.”

“And that’s it?” Sebastian ran his hands through his hair and blew a breath out as he stared back down at the map. The sunlight started to shine again, and his horror gave way. “Southern Tava”—he looked up at Leon—“*we* are independent again? We rule ourselves?”

Leon chuckled and pointed a finger between the two of them. “Well, *we* are still wanted terrorists, which is why we’re here hiding out with the cartel. But the Resistance is in talks

with the newly forming government to get us pardoned. Given our good cause and a desire to wipe the slate clean, that's looking likely."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "You mean the government that might have my family at the head of it?"

"That's the one," Zyk chirped. "The same one that rules a continent that's currently an uninhabitable wasteland."

"For now." Leon shot him a sharp look.

Zyk raised his hands apologetically. "For now."

"And so what are we doing about that?" Sebastian stepped forward. Eager anticipation fizzed in his chest. He'd fought for years just to keep up the idea of this country. He'd never even conceived of a world in which he might actually get to *serve* it.

Leon met his eyes with a grin that mirrored Sebastian's own eagerness back at him. "Plenty."

Without another delay, Leon launched into an overview of the rescue and reconnaissance organization that the Resistance had morphed into alongside the cartel. Plenty of people in Carta still thought of themselves as from Southern Tava, so there was no shortage of hands willing to work to get it back.

And the cartel had grown powerful off the influx of refugees: their needs, their labor, and their drive. With the winds changing, they weren't going to sacrifice the chance to get their fingers into the pie now.

The qeshian scientist that had been slated to duplicate the gas was now devising studies to figure out what the long-term effects of the gas on Southern Tava ecology could be and how it might be cleaned up. Operations were being planned to safely evacuate more civilians still trapped on the surface and to gather intelligence, though none had yet been deployed.

Sebastian was about to insist on being on the first ship down, seeing as his torvar physiology gave him an advantage, when Zyk put a hand on his shoulder. "Your excitement is inspiring, but if I have to listen to your stomach rumble one more time, I'm going to lose it."

Sebastian deflated and glanced down at his belly. “Right. Haven’t eaten in days.”

“Exactly.” Zyk pushed both Sebastian and Leon toward the open wall of the pavilion. “And I really thought your reunion would be a lot more romantic and a lot less business-oriented, so why don’t you two give it a rest.”

Sebastian laughed and glanced at Leon to see a touch of color high on his cheeks, which just made him laugh harder.

Leon scowled at him and turned back toward one of the tent alleys. “Come on then.”

Sebastian snickered and chased after him. “That wasn’t romantic.”

As soon as they stepped around a corner, Leon spun around and pressed him against a wooden pole. He captured his lips in a hungry lunge, crushing him back against the pole and kissing him with bruising intensity. His rough hands took Sebastian’s face and angled his head this way and that and devoured him whole.

Sebastian moaned and let himself be swept away, but all too soon, Leon broke the kiss and nipped at his lips. “Was that romantic?”

Sebastian tried to lean in for more kisses instead of words, but Leon just took his hand and pulled him back down the alley. Sebastian pouted. “I don’t know. I need you to do it again so I can be sure.”

Leon smirked. “I thought you needed food.”

“I need that after.”

“Food first.” Leon shook his head with a smile, then squeezed his hand. “And then I want to talk to you about something.”

Sebastian’s heart spasmed in his chest. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I said food first.”

“Yeah, but we’re not at food yet, so we might as well talk.”

“We’re at food now.” Leon ducked into an empty doorway, and as soon as Sebastian followed him, a cacophony of scents hit his nose.

His mouth watered instantly. “Oh, I’ve missed Carta.”

Leon glanced over his shoulder at him as they took their places in line. The low-slung building had evidently been turned into a Resistance mess hall, except with food a thousand times more fragrant. “You’ve been here before?”

“A couple times before I joined the Resistance.” Sebastian eagerly held out his bowl for the thick stew the portly man on the other side of the counter dished out, and the portly man smiled at his eagerness. “Those were to the capital city though—Isum. It’s very different there.”

“I haven’t been yet.” Leon grabbed a piece of the flatbread at the end of the table, then shoved two into Sebastian’s bowl. Sebastian raised an eyebrow at him—it wasn’t like he was malnourished—but didn’t argue.

“You should probably wait until your name is cleared before you start going where the authorities are,” Sebastian said as he followed Leon back outside, both cradling their warm bowls. The refugee camps that spilled for miles and miles out from around the cities of Carta had been all but given up to gangs, cartels, and vigilantes, but the cities themselves had an extremely vigilant and aggressive police force.

“Yeah, that was my thinking,” Leon chuckled and took a bite of his bread as he walked. He seemed to know where he was going, so Sebastian just kept following.

“Out here is prettier anyway.” Sebastian followed suit and munched on his bread as he walked. As soon as he took the first bite, his stomach roared its hunger, and he spoke through his mouthfuls. “You have all the water.”

“Exactly.” Leon led him up a quick flight of stairs on the side of a building and stopped at the top. Stepping aside, he turned and smiled at Sebastian with a strangely proud look in his eyes.

Sebastian cocked his head and followed Leon up to the roof of the low building, then stilled when he realized what Leon was so eager to show him.

The setting sun blazed before them and reflected off the numerous canals surrounding the camp's flat islands like so many rivers of fire. In the distance, past the scattering of islands, the sea stretched out toward the sun and melted into the orange and pink of the sky.

"Is it this beautiful everywhere in Carta?" Leon asked quietly, and Sebastian glanced at him to see him riveted to the scene.

Sebastian's heart melted in his chest. Had Leon ever before let himself stop to appreciate something lovely?

"Everywhere I've seen." Sebastian nodded and swayed closer to stand close enough for their thighs to touch. He thought he felt an earpiece-shaped lump in Leon's pocket but didn't ask about it. He shoveled more delicious food in his mouth as they watched the sun dip lower and lower toward the horizon. "Had you never been here?"

"No." Leon shook his head. "I'd never been off Tava."

"Really?" Sebastian's eyebrows shot up.

"Nope. Never had any reason to."

"And there were too many more important things to do, I imagine." Sebastian rolled his eyes as he remembered their conversation in the tunnels when Sebastian had been in Leon's head.

"Yes, there were, actually." Leon laughed that beautiful, open laugh that he never did enough of, and Sebastian gazed at him, blind to the sunset.

They stood in silence as the sky morphed from reds, to oranges, and to pinks. Leon seemed to have forgotten his food, and as Sebastian got down to his last quarter, he eyed the full bowl. He used his last scrap of bread just as the sun finally slipped under the horizon. Leon glanced at him, huffed a laugh, then passed him his bowl.

“Yes! Thank you.” Sebastian took it and dunked Leon’s leftover half a crust of bread into the still-warm stew. “So you wanted to talk about something? Is it that busted earpiece you keep in your pocket?”

Leon’s shoulders hunched up, and the tops of his ears turned red. “How did you know about that?”

“Little birdie told me.” Sebastian grinned so hard his cheeks hurt. He dug an elbow into Leon’s ribs. “See, now *that’s* romantic.”

Leon scoffed and knocked Sebastian’s elbow away with his own. “Shut up.”

“Okay, so not the earpiece.” Sebastian shoved the last piece of bread into his mouth.

“Not the earpiece.” Leon finally turned away from the remnants of the sunset and faced Sebastian. He pulled his shoulders back, and Sebastian raised an eyebrow. That was what Leon did when he prepared for something unpleasant.

“What is it then?”

“I need you to know that I wasn’t going to shoot down the Barzen.”

Sebastian stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth.

He licked his lips and carefully placed the spoon back before he could drop it.

He hadn’t had any time to think about that conversation in their makeshift headquarters in the old hospital. The one that had finally driven Sebastian away from Leon.

He took a deep breath and met Leon’s eyes. “You were when I left you.”

“Yes.” Leon nodded with the firmness of a leader accepting responsibility. “But I changed my mind.”

“You came after me.” Sebastian bit his lip. He remembered his criticism of Oliver Turner, and it twisted like a knife in his chest. He remembered saying that a person didn’t get points

just because they put one person above all others. He still believed that. “I appreciate that you chose me, but—”

“I didn’t *just* choose you.” Leon grabbed his shoulder. “I listened to you, I believed you, and I realized you were right. I chose the people of Kaston and the people of Southern Tava. *And you.*”

Sebastian took a deep, careful breath. “Really?”

Leon tightened his grip on his shoulder. “I changed my orders before I found out that you’d gone off on your own.”

Sebastian’s knees weakened, and he locked them to keep himself up. “You did?”

“I did.” Leon nodded. “I swear.”

“Thank you.” Sebastian took Leon’s hand off his shoulder and threaded their fingers together. He brought it to his lips and kissed his knuckles. Tears stung at his eyes, and he blinked them away. His man was *good*. *Leon* was good. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Leon took the bowl out of Sebastian’s hands and set it aside. He cupped Sebastian’s face and pulled him close. “But Sebastian?”

“Yeah?” Sebastian’s eyes fluttered closed, and he wrapped his arms around Leon’s waist. He breathed in the smell of him, mixed with the spices of Carta cooking and the salt of the sea.

“I don’t want to put you second anymore.”

Sebastian’s eyes flew open again, and his lips parted. He stared up into Leon’s intense, serious gaze. Leon rubbed a thumb over his lower lip.

“I don’t want to have anything more important. I don’t want to have anything that you can’t distract me from. And I don’t want to ever, *ever*”—Leon’s upper lip lifted in the hint of a snarl—“have to say that you come second to anything, ever again.”

Sebastian’s breath caught. He clutched at the fabric around Leon’s waist and twisted it in his hands. “What—” He swallowed around his dry tongue. His heart pounded so

hopefully in his chest that it hurt. “What exactly are you saying, Leon?”

Leon petted his thumbs over Sebastian’s cheekbone. “I’m saying, that if you’ll let me, I’d like to put you first in my life.”

“Because you love me?” Sebastian let out a delighted, bubbling laugh, and Leon’s eyes widened but then started to shine with the same absurd giddiness.

“Because I love you, Sebastian,” Leon growled. “And I want to fucking do it properly.”

Leon captured his mouth aggressively, and Sebastian melted against him, his blood singing in his veins. Leon loved him. Leon loved him, and he loved Leon, and the sunset was gorgeous, and Southern Tava was free, and goddammit, Sebastian thought he might cry as Leon crowded him up against a wall and slid a thigh between his legs.

“I fucking love you, Leon.”

“I love you, too, Sebastian.” Leon put their foreheads together and brushed his nose against his.

Sebastian nuzzled him back. “Does this mean you’ll stop arguing with me?”

Leon threw his head back and barked a laugh. “What?”

“At the war table.” Sebastian reached his hand down to Leon’s hardening length. “Does this mean I get everything I want?”

“There is no more war table,” Leon reminded him, and his breath hitched as Sebastian squeezed him.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “The search-and-rescue table, then. If you’re putting me first, does that mean my decisions take precedence?”

“Absolutely not.” Leon chuckled and rolled his hips into Sebastian’s palm, and Sebastian bit back a moan at the feel of him.

“Then—” Sebastian caught his breath again. “Then I don’t understand the benefit of this arrangement.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Leon dropped his head to nose into the hollow behind Sebastian’s ear. He popped the button on Sebastian’s pants and reached a big, calloused hand down to his straining length. “I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Sebastian let out a happy moan as he dropped his head back against the wall and clutched Leon closer to him. He definitely fucking could.

I HOPE you enjoyed The Alien Infiltrator! Stayed tuned for the story of Maxwell and Garrett and in the meantime enjoy [The Alien Refugee — the story of Zyk and Ha’ral](#).



About the Author

Eryn Ivers writes sci-fi and fantasy erotic romances about flawed men who have hot sex, feel too many things, and eventually live happily ever after.

She lives on the coast of California with her ridiculously lawful-good husband and chaotic-neutral cat.

Find her at erynivers.com, or sign up for her [mailing list](#) where you can receive free short stories, cover reveals, and book recommendations.

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