

A  
SOLDIER  
AND  
A  
LIAR

CAITLIN LOCHNER

*Swoon* READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK  
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*Dedicated to my sunshine, who raised me to love stories and has always inspired me to be a better person. I love you more, Mom. And this time I win, because it's in print, and therefore I have the final word. So HA.*

# 1 LAI

SOMEHOW, SNEAKING BACK into prison is always harder than sneaking out of it.

The reasonable part of me knows it's because everyone's asleep when I sneak out at night, and that by the time I return in the early morning, the dreary gray building is already starting to wake. But the cynical part of me thinks it has more to do with how the guards would be only too happy to get rid of me and all too reluctant to take me back in.

Past the distant glass cover of the dome that separates the city from the Outside, the sky is already a weak gray, steadily infecting the clouds with shades of orange-pink. It feels like the whole sector is watching as I pick my way through the trees surrounding the single walled-in block of a building that is the prison.

Running a hand through my hair, I tangle the long brown strands into something resembling bedhead as I assess potential entrances. The barred windows are a no-go. I can usually sneak in through the

warden's office, but she's probably at her desk by now. Which leaves the main entrance.

I hold back a sigh. Why do I have to do something so troublesome this early in the morning without any sleep?

I again ignore the reasonable part of me that says it's my own fault.

From the shadows of the trees, I scan the wall's perimeter, but no one seems to be around. I can't hear anyone's thoughts, either, which is a good sign.

I run to the wall and pause, back pressed against it, listening again for anyone's thoughts. The secretary is at his desk. On top of that, I'll have to be careful to stay out of sight of the security cameras. I know where all of them are—it's avoiding them that'll be the tricky part. Especially the one right by the entrance.

With the wall's cameras' blind spots in mind, I carefully scale the wall and drop down to the other side. No alarms sound.

Beyond that, there's no cover, so I sprint to the entrance. I have to be fast for the next part, before anyone comes in or out and sees me.

I grip the small infrared laser in my pocket and concentrate on the secretary behind the front desk. His thoughts are scattered, trying to remember all the things he has to do today. **Report yesterday's prisoner checkups to the warden, arrange visiting time with Martin, call the District Committee to set up the monthly review meeting . . .**

This part is a gamble. My gift allows me to hear others' thoughts and pass along my own—usually when I want to communicate in secret—but when I put my thoughts in another person's head, it's obvious they're not his or her own. However, the secretary is

preoccupied, and he doesn't know to suspect that anyone might try to break into his mind, so I'm betting I can disguise my message as one of his own thoughts.

*Don't forget, need to deliver yesterday's prisoner checkups to the warden before she gets in.*

I feel the sudden surge of panic in the man's thoughts as he realizes the warden is already in for the day. I can't see the secretary, but I can easily imagine him shuffling through the papers on his desk, searching for the documents he doesn't actually need to deliver right now. His thoughts recede as he heads for the warden's office, never once pausing to question the made-up deadline I put in his head. If he didn't have so much to do, maybe he would've noticed it wasn't his own thought.

Honestly. Sometimes Etioles don't even think to suspect things that are obviously strange. A Nyte never would've fallen for a trick like that so easily.

When the secretary is safely gone and I can't hear anyone else nearby, I remove the infrared laser from my pocket. I need to be precise and fast before anyone comes.

There's a single security camera hanging over the front desk that's pointed toward the entrance. After all this time, I know the position of it well. I crack the front door—hopefully slightly enough that no one watching the surveillance feed will notice—and carefully aim the laser at the camera lens.

There's no surefire way to know if I hit my mark. If my aim is even slightly off, they'll be able to see my face.

But from around the corner, I hear the thoughts of an approaching guard. I need to go.

I open the door just wide enough to slip through, careful not to make a sound as I shut it behind me.

Keep the laser steady on its mark. Get out of here before the guard comes.

Closer, closer.

I'm almost there.

The guard's almost here.

*Hurry.*

In the same instant the guard is about to round the corner into the front hall, I leave the camera's range. I shut off the laser and bolt into the next hall as quickly and noiselessly as I can. I don't stop moving—careful to skirt the remaining cameras—until the guard's thoughts are far behind me.

Once I'm far enough away, I stop to catch my breath. No more staying out past dawn again. This is way too much of a hassle.

When my breathing is back to normal, I make for the hall that'll lead to my floor.

My worn shoes pad silently over white-and-black-patterned tiles, passing wards upon wards of other prisoners. Well, I say prisoners, but this place is hardly a top-security facility. Most of the people here have only committed light crimes.

Their thoughts drift toward me, two dozen voices crowding in my head, and it takes more effort than usual to block them out. It's always harder when I'm tired.

I stick to the shadows and corners and focus all my attention on my surroundings, but I don't see anyone else.

Some security. Then again, what normal person is going to break *into* prison?

Then I turn a corner and run straight into one of the guards.

We both stumble back. How did I not hear him coming? Did I accidentally block his thoughts out along with all the others?

I scan the hall for an escape route, but there isn't one. There's nowhere to go, and even if there was, I've already been identified.

"Cathwell," the guard says, eyebrows slanting down over small, too-narrow eyes. I think his name is Jacobs. **What's the demon doing wandering around?** His bald head shines like a light bulb in a hall already oversaturated with what can only be described as interrogation lights. He rubs his pudgy arm where we collided.

The thoughts I had been working so hard to keep out of my head before rush in with my panic. They press against the insides of my skull, blocking out everything else, even my own thoughts, until I fight them down and reach for my usual calm. When I've finally got everything back under control, I blink and find the guard is watching me with a mixture of expectancy and annoyance.

"Sorry, did you say something?"

"I *said*, what are you doing out of your room?" Exasperation coats his words, but this isn't an unusual exchange. Everyone in the prison knows me as being perpetually distracted. They just don't know why.

"Oh. Walking."

"You're not supposed to leave your room without an escort."

"You're here now. Will you be my escort?" The more I speak, the more my initial dread lessens somewhat. I can do this. I've been doing it for two and a half years. This is the same as any other day. If I can just get him to think I was so out of it that I wasn't intentionally



breaking the rules, everything will be fine. I am, after all, the resident eccentric.

Jacobs shakes his head. His eyebrows are dangerously close to merging with his eyes. "Listen here, freak. The only reason we allow you any amount of freedom is because you're an ex-soldier. If you want to keep that freedom, you're going to have to follow our rules."

I tilt my head. "Soldier rules? Salute. Fight."

"Not soldier rules. Prison rules."

"Yes."

He clicks his tongue. "Who's your primary guard? I'll need to tell him you went out after I've taken you back."

My mind scrambles. If my guard finds out I was gone, and then the warden, I'll be put under watch. I might not be allowed to leave my room anymore, ex-soldier or not. Sneaking out to the Order will be nearly impossible.

No choice, then.

I put a hand to my chin and squint, pretending to think. "Omar Khan?"

He freezes. "What?"

"My primary guard," I say. "Was that his name?"

I know perfectly well it's not. That my primary guard is a withered old man named Hallows who seems more suited to be a physician than a guard. But after two and a half years of constantly overhearing everyone's thoughts, I'm well aware that Khan is a good friend of this man, and, should push come to shove, he'll protect his buddy. Someone who allowed a prisoner to wander out of her room and alone in the prison is sure to get in serious trouble. Especially when that prisoner is an ex-soldier and a Nyte.

Jacobs searches my face with doubt and barely discernible distress. **If I tell anyone she went out on her own, it's just going to come back on Omar. Punishments for letting an assigned prisoner escape are harsh.** "Are you certain that's your primary guard?" he asks.

"Maybe?" If I say it as a question, it's not technically a lie.

**She's never done anything like this before, has she? Isn't her record clean? Maybe if I let her off the hook just this once . . .**

He glares at me and thinks and continues to glare at me and think. Finally, he says, "Look, you can't be going out on your own. Since this is the first time and you've got a good track record, I'll let it slide just this once and escort you back to your room. But if I ever catch you sneaking around again, you can say goodbye to all of your privileges."

I have to hold back a sigh of relief. I lower my eyes and try to appear as remorseful as possible when I say, "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

We're not far from my room, so the walk is short. And with a guard escorting me, I no longer have to worry about being seen. Only a little farther and I'll be able to relax.

It feels like a miracle when Jacobs drops me off at my room without further incident. He goes on his way, intending to reprimand Khan for letting his ward out, and I slip in a thought that *no, it wasn't really his fault, it was just an accident, it might be better not to mention it.*

I don't know if he buys the thought like the secretary did, but it'd be better if he didn't bring up my little escapade with anyone. Especially since I don't want him finding out Khan isn't really in charge of me.

With the door firmly shut behind me and locked from the

outside, I let the exhaustion I'd been holding back until now sweep over me. Finally made it.

Right. I'll make some quick notes about the intelligence directives I need to send out, maybe review the supplies count from last night's meeting, and then—

Someone knocks on my door. The sound suffocates in the dead air.

My heart jumps up my throat. Did Jacobs come back? Did he tell someone after all? Am I going to be put under watch?

The door opens. It's my actual primary guard, Hallows.

He doesn't *look* angry, but I'm too exhausted from the long night out and the break-in and dealing with Jacobs to be able to concentrate enough on his thoughts to know for sure. I'll need to recharge before I can focus in on individual thoughts again.

"Good morning, Miss Cathwell," Hallows says. "How are you feeling today?"

I guess I should count myself lucky that the guard assigned to look after me actually respects that I was once a soldier. He doesn't treat me like a prisoner, but rather like a patient.

Not that it means I'm going to act any differently toward him. I stare at him blankly.

A long pause later, he shakes his head. "Well, maybe you'll feel better after meeting with your visitor."

My head snaps up. Who would come to see me? I haven't had a visitor since I entered this prison two and a half years ago.

Curious now, I let Hallows lead me back into the hallway. I wish I could focus enough to read his thoughts and find out who came—I'm not exactly fond of surprises.

The hallway is bathed in sunlight and patterned by the sun-dappled shadows from the trees surrounding the prison. Long black lines cast by the bars on the windows form a sharp contrast against the indistinct shades. The smell of mold wanders the corridors.

We walk down a maze of identical hallways and staircases until we reach one of the rooms off the lobby. It's a small, circular space with two couches facing each other across a coffee table. The wall paintings are obnoxiously bright colors, reds and oranges and yellows with shades of neon green.

Sitting on one of the couches is a tan, square-faced man in his early forties. He stands, smiling, as we enter. His black hair has more streaks of gray in it than the last time I saw him, but he still has that same strict, straight-backed stance and upward tilt of his chin. "First Lieutenant Cathwell. It's been some time."

My heart thuds up my throat. I throw a salute while trying to rearrange whatever expression is on my face into something neutral. "General Austin."

"Why don't you have a seat, Miss Cathwell?" my guard says.

I sit down on the couch across from Austin and the general says, "Thank you for escorting her." When the guard remains standing by the table, Austin adds, "I can take it from here."

"But, sir, I need to stay to monitor—"

"That will not be necessary."

The general's tone leaves no room for argument, and after a few tense seconds, the guard leaves.

As soon as the door closes, I straighten my back and try to smooth the wrinkles out of my prison uniform. I even try to fix my hair.

Austin doesn't bother trying to hide his amusement at the shift. His eyes soften. "It's good to see you again, Lai. It really has been too long."

Despite the fact that I'm a Nyte and he's an Etiole, despite all the trouble I've put him through these past many years, his expression is as kind as what I imagine a real father's to be like.

It takes more effort than I would've expected to hide how happy I am. "You're telling me. What are you doing here? And where's Noah?"

"That's it?" Austin asks. "No 'Good to see you, how've you been?' No saying how much you missed me?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"And Noah isn't *always* with me."

"Yeah, okay."

"Fine, fine. He left for Sector Two a few days ago on a mission from the High Council. He likely won't be back for some time."

"Are you sure you'll be able to manage without your second shadow around?"

Austin cracks a small smile. "Well, the office is already looking a bit messier without him to keep things organized."

"A bit. Right." Austin's version of "a bit messier" is pretty much equivalent to a freak tornado running through someone's office. For his own sake, I hope his assistant returns from his mission soon. "So? If you're here after all this time, something must have happened."

His smile remains, but something about his expression changes. It tempers my happiness at seeing him again. "Well, I hadn't planned on cutting straight to business, but if that's what you prefer." His eyes hold mine. "I want you to come back."

Silence stretches between us.

“Come back?” I repeat.

He sighs and leans against the couch as his gaze drifts to the window. “Last week, a group of civilians transporting supplies to another sector was attacked and killed by a group of rebels. It’s the first time they’ve killed nonmilitary personnel. The High Council has decided to act.” He waits for me to say something. When I don’t, he says, “If we don’t destroy the rebel Nytes’ organization soon, this may well turn into an open war. Before they get any stronger, we have to stop them.” His hands fold together. “As I recall, you’re quite the officer.”

I shake my head. “You can’t be serious.”

“I assisted you in leaving the military over two years ago. Don’t you think it’s time you returned to help?”

“If the military wasn’t so hell-bent on keeping Nytes in its service, I wouldn’t have needed your help in the first place,” I say. The only way for a Nyte to leave military service is by dishonorable discharge or death. The latter didn’t really fit in with my plans. “But yeah, thanks for helping convince everyone I committed a crime so I could be put in prison. I really appreciate it.”

“Regardless of how or why it happened, the fact of the matter is that Sector Eight is in a precarious situation right now.”

I level a solid look at him. “You know why I wanted to leave the military.”

He is, as ever, unfazed. “I do. I am aware that the military doesn’t treat the gifted as it should. But I also know we both wish to see an end to the rebels who want to kill all ungifted. Wouldn’t it be worth putting aside our differences for this? Besides, you must be going crazy being stuck in here, so far removed from everything.”

I resist the urge to bite my lip. Austin isn't aware of the fact that I sneak out of this prison all the time, nor does he know about the existence of the Order. I'm not exactly stuck here. But it's true that being on the inside of the military, the very heart of information on the rebels and the sector in general, would be incredibly beneficial. It'd be a big help to the Order in particular. Especially with my gift.

"Why ask me to come back now?" I say to buy time. "The rebels have been around and threatening to kill all the ungifted for over two years."

Now that I've had some time to recharge, I could read his mind to find out, but Austin is one of only two people whom I swore never to use my gift on. Albeit, at the time, I swore to him and Noah more out of necessity than out of any respect of privacy. It was one of the conditions for Austin adopting me off the streets.

He hesitates, which makes me worried. "It was the High Council's wish to both create an elite team to deal with the rebels and to make Nytes more accepted within the military by allowing them the chance to prove how capable they are. Therefore, they have decided to make a team consisting entirely of Nytes. If you choose to return, you will join this team."

I can tell from his tone that he thinks about as highly of that plan as I do.

Nytes have the ability to attain high military ranking through an initial entrance test, so long as they're at least thirteen years old and willing to admit what they are. Most Nytes prefer to lie low in normal society if they can, but the military is a good route for those of us who have nowhere else to go. And the higher your rank, the better the benefits. But a side effect is being hated by the ungifted within the

military. Well, more than usual. The fact that Nytes are physically stronger than Etioles, faster to heal, gifted with unique powers, and able to survive Outside the domed sectors without safety equipment doesn't help. A team of only Nytes? That will separate us further.

"That idea sounds about as great as being dropped in a pit with a pack of starving Ferals," I say.

Austin sighs. "The rebels don't want compromise. They're Nytes whose only goal is to completely wipe out the ungifted, and so we must fight back with the intention of destroying them. You know as well as I do that the Council needs more firepower in order to do that. Only Nytes can face Nytes head-on and expect to win."

"I'm surprised the Council didn't think of this brilliant idea sooner."

He taps a single finger against the table, which for him is the same as rolling his eyes. "They've only had twenty years of Nytes being around, Lai."

"More likely people are afraid of what would happen if we banded together." I try to say it lightly, but I falter over the truth of it.

Austin keeps his mild smile, succeeding where I failed. He's waiting.

I need more time. "If I *were* to come back," I say slowly, "I wouldn't want to be constantly responsible for a bunch of stuff like before. I want some time to myself."

Austin shrugs. "You'll only be responsible for the gifted team and normal duty shifts. As long as it doesn't get in the way of your work, you're free to do what you please."

Austin's always been like that. So long as you're capable, he'll let you do pretty much whatever else you care to.



He clasps his hands around his knee. "Then your answer?"

"You won't even give me some time to think this over?"

"I'm afraid the rebels won't wait. The military can't afford to, either."

I blow overlong bangs out of my face in response. I haven't cut or brushed my hair in a long time. After all, physical appearance is important to crafting others' perception of you. The disheveled look helps in convincing people I'm a little off, which generally keeps them at a distance, but it gets annoying.

It's one of many things I'm sick of at the prison. The guards are another major one. Plus, the chance to take down the rebels before they do any more serious damage is rather enticing. I could also gather more information from within the military. I've reached the extent of what I can do while in this place.

But at the same time, I don't *want* to go back to the military. I took such careful measures to leave it in the first place, and then even more so to create the routes and routine that allow me to consistently sneak out to the Order. If I go back, I'll have more responsibilities. Sneaking out will be harder. I won't be able to recruit Nytes wrongfully imprisoned here for the Order. I don't know if I'll be able to support the Order like I have been anymore.

Luke would have said yes. If he'd thought it meant bringing Nytes and Etioles closer together, he would have said yes to anything. But I'm not Luke, and he isn't here anymore. I do things my own way.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

Austin's expression adopts a mildly interested quality, which is

his equivalent of wiping all thoughts and emotions from his face. I hate it when he does that. “Might I ask why?”

“You might.”

“Then consider it asked.”

I can’t meet his eyes. “I understand your side of the matter. I know it would help in the military’s effort to prevent a full-on war if I returned. And believe me, I want to stop the rebels. But I can’t work together with people who treat me as less than human. That’s why I left in the first place.”

“I see,” Austin says. “Even though our end goals are the same, you feel you can’t fight for that with us or advocate for better treatment from within the military?”

“That’s not what I said. And even if it was, our end goals are not the same. Yours ends with putting down the rebels. Mine ends when there’s peace between the gifted and ungifted.”

“I would think my goal goes hand in hand with yours.”

“That doesn’t make them the same.” I know full well what the military wants. They seek an end to the rebel Nyte threat, but that’s where our similarities end. They have no interest in peace between the gifted and ungifted—the entire purpose of the Order.

Austin does not sigh. He does not shake his head. But I get the feeling he wants to. “Lai, you could do so much good from within the military. I admire your ideals, but you can’t do anything in this prison. You have the chance to save innocent lives. *That* is the basis of what you want, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer.

He stands. “I will come back in four days. Please reconsider your answer before then.”

“Didn’t you say the military couldn’t afford to wait? I already gave you my answer.”

“I have made the executive decision that the military can afford to wait four days.” He walks to the door without looking back. But he pauses with his hand on the doorknob. “Four days, Lai. Within that time, please consider what it is you really want to do.”

## 2 JAY

"YOU WANT *ME* to talk to Lieutenant Cathwell?" I ask. The low thrum of the air-conditioning is suddenly much louder than it was a few heartbeats ago.

General Austin sits across from me at his desk. His chin rests on threaded fingers. I can hardly see him over the disorganized heaps of papers and documents prepared to topple from his desk. The bookshelves lining the walls of his office have long since thrown up their contents onto the floor. I'm not certain how he can bear the mess.

"That is correct."

"Why me?" I have no idea what the general is thinking. I press my glasses farther up my nose nervously. "Why choose me instead of someone the lieutenant knew while she served at Central?" She didn't even answer in the affirmative to Austin. Why would she listen to what a stranger has to say?

Austin's smile merely widens. Even without using my gift to sense his emotions, I can't help but feel that the greater my distress becomes, the more his amusement grows.

“If you’re trying to convince her to rejoin the military, I truly don’t think I’m the best person to send.” Knowing me, I’d likely say the exact opposite of what would convince her to return. What if I ruined everything and merely ended up convincing her it really would be best to remain in prison? No. Everything about this is a horrible idea.

“Don’t worry about things like that,” Austin says with a vague wave of his hand. He sends a sheet of paper flying with the motion. “Don’t think about convincing her to come back and fight. Just talk to her.”

Now I’m even more lost. “What’s the point in that?”

“Lieutenant Cathwell is stubborn. If you try to talk her into returning, she’ll dig in her heels and never leave that place.”

“So you want me to just . . . talk to her.”

“Exactly.”

I wait for him to lay out a detailed, thoughtfully crafted plan. However, he merely looks at me expectantly. When I reach out with my gift, I sense that he’s calm, unhurried. He’s not worried at all—meanwhile, I’m struggling to decipher what exactly it is he’s asking of me.

“That’s it?” I ask.

“That’s it.”

This is absolutely a bad idea. My gut turns at the mental image of me awkwardly trying to convince a girl I’ve never met that, despite what she wants, it would be in her best interests to return and fight. What if she turns me away before I even have the chance to say anything?

“So?” Austin asks. “Will you go? I was rather relying on you for this, Major Kitahara.”

I straighten in my seat. I still think it’s an awful idea. However, if it’s something Austin is requesting of me, it must be something he thinks I can accomplish successfully. He’s relying on me. “Yes, sir. You can count on me.”

I set out shortly after my discussion with the general. Various images of me failing to convince the lieutenant reel through my head, and I have to remind myself that thinking of failure merely hurts my chances of success. It will be okay. It’s just a talk.

Early afternoon light blankets the streets outside Central Headquarters. I can barely catch faint strains of music playing from somewhere in the distance. A little farther on and it disappears entirely, to be replaced by the living thrum of chatter, of laughter that pulls back and forth, of shouts that ripple through the air. The sounds of the sector pulse and throb like an undercurrent.

This time of day, the sector is as lively as it gets. People stand on their balconies and hail their neighbors. They call to one another, gather in the doorways of cramped apartment buildings and restaurants and on the overhead walkways that connect most of the buildings, many of them with long lines of stalls of their own. Bycs—lithe, sleek hovering machinery with an elliptical base to stand on and a thick T-stem of a handle—zoom past. Some of the riders race each other as passersby jokingly shake their fists at them. They twist and turn through the empty spaces created by the many levels of walkways and the narrow gaps between connected buildings.

How strange it is that even though the military is abuzz with the rebels' recent attack, watching these people, you'd never suspect we're on the edge of a war. When I let my gift spread out around me, taking in everyone's emotions and presences, shades of warm yellows and oranges dance through the three-dimensional grid in my head.

Perhaps it's better this way. Better that people be happy than in a state of fear and panic.

I press my way through the throng of people, trying to keep my head down, but I don't stay a part of the crowd for long. In my decorated military uniform, at the age of eighteen, I stand out like a three-headed Feral. There are very few teenage officers, and to be one means only one thing.

The air, so lively with sound just heartbeats before, chills to near silence as whispers pass through the crowd. *Demon. Monster. Heathen.* The bright colors I'd sensed previously now fade to dulled grays and blues. Suddenly, it feels as though every eye in a mile's radius is trained on me.

Focus. Don't look around. Don't pay them any attention. Just keep moving.

At least I don't have to push my way through anymore. People make way as I pass, and I let quick steps lead me forward.

Something strikes my back—something small with the hardness of a stone—but I continue walking. If I don't go looking for trouble, nothing will start. The last thing I need is for a scene to break out on my way to attempt a task I'm already sure to fail.

No, wait, I went through this already—I'm *not* going to fail. And I'm certainly not about to be stopped here.

The cool attention follows me all the way to the prison where

Lieutenant Cathwell is being held, but it lessens in intensity once I'm farther from the city center. It's almost a blessing when I step through the prison's front doors.

The secretary is shuffling through papers on his desk and doesn't look up right away when I approach. "Hello, good morning—oh wait, it's afternoon now, isn't it? Where does the time go?" He laughs, and at the same time, he looks up at me. The laugh dies, leaving only abrupt silence in its wake. His presence turns from a busily bright orange to a subdued shade of blue. "Welcome. How may I help you?"

Don't react. Don't let it get to you. "I'm Major Jay Kitahara," I say. "I've come to visit Lieutenant Lorelai Cathwell. I believe General Austin sent word ahead of my arrival?" Not with command. Not too softly.

The secretary glances at a note taped to his monitor. "Yes, he did. But when he said a major was coming, I didn't expect . . ." He eyes me once more and doesn't say anything for an extended period of time. He's clearly trying to make me uncomfortable, but I'm not, nor will I be. I've been through this more times than he has. I'm a patient person.

Finally, he presses a button on a small intercom and says, "Ms. Garcia, if you could come escort our visitor to Miss Cathwell's room?"

A crackle. Then a response in the affirmative.

"Visitors typically meet with prisoners in one of the meeting rooms, but they're both currently occupied," the secretary says. "You're going to have to meet in Cathwell's room." Then he turns his back on me and starts sorting papers.

It's an awkward wait until the guard comes, but I've had worse. The real problem is the stillness around me fueling my unease over



this visit. Now that I'm not moving or focused on ignoring everyone around me, there's nothing to distract me from the single thought that keeps pounding through my head.

This is a bad idea.

I'm unable to prevent this thought from repeating interminably as the guard eventually arrives and leads me to Lieutenant Cathwell's room. The halls we pass through are dampeningly quiet and overly bright.

The guard halts in front of a door marked LORELAI CATHWELL far too soon. All the way here, between ignoring the crackling atmosphere around me and making sure I'd been going the right way, I'd been deliberating over what to say. Not something to convince her to come back, but something to merely talk about, like Austin said.

I couldn't think of anything. The only things I know about her are the basics that were written in her file—and even those are sparse. She's seventeen, only a year younger than I am. Raised as an apprentice in the military since she was nine, before eventually taking the Nytes' ranking entrance test and becoming an official soldier. Not originally from Sector Eight, but Sector Four farther west. Her gift is so confidential that only General Austin, who knows the gift of every Nyte in the military, is aware of what it is.

Her list of achievements is impressively long, however, especially during the near war we had with Sector Nine a few years back. Unlike me, she's led teams into battle. She has true experience. I can understand why Austin would want her to return.

Yet I highly doubt she'll want to talk about any of that.

As always when I get anxious, I let my gift spread out in full around me. The 3-D map within my head expands as I take in my

surroundings. The guard in front of me, whose presence beats an erratic indigo born of nervousness from being around me. The floors of people whose presences take on an assortment of shapes and pound a multitude of colored emotions. The neutral presence on the other side of this door.

The guard knocks. When no answer greets her, she says, “Miss Cathwell?”

Silence.

The guard glances at me prior to frowning and opening the door.

The room is strangely quiet. And there’s scarcely anything in it. The only furniture is a bed and dark upright piano, both of which are nailed down. My eyes catch on the piano. It’s nothing grand, but given the setting, I’m surprised to see one at all. Sheet music lies scattered around it—on the bench, the floor, everywhere save where the music is actually supposed to be propped up. Yet despite the messiness, a sudden longing ignites in my chest.

The lieutenant is sitting in the middle of the floor. Her legs are crossed as she huddles over a notebook, sheaves of paper spread around her in a half circle. She appears as though she just rolled out of bed. Her long brown hair is a blind bird’s nest, her simple white prisoner’s uniform beyond wrinkled. She looks almost deathly pale under the too-bright lights.

“Miss Cathwell?” the guard says.

The girl’s head snaps up as her scribbling comes to an abrupt halt. She stares.

Then she begins gathering her notes together protectively. She drops several in the process.

“You’ve got a visitor today, Miss Cathwell,” the guard says

politely. Austin told me previously that the guards here are supposed to treat Lieutenant Cathwell with a certain amount of respect. After all, though the details of her crime are known only to those higher up, it's common knowledge that her misconduct was minor and didn't hurt anyone. Compared to that, her nearly six years of distinguished service to the sector hold more weight. I'm glad this guard appears to respect that. "Two people in only two days. Isn't that nice?"

Cathwell's eyes lock on to my uniform and badges. I suddenly wish I had forgone the formal attire after all. It would have saved me a lot of trouble, in many ways.

She holds her notes a little closer. "I don't want to talk to anyone from the military."

The guard tsk-tsks. "Now that's no way to treat a guest who's come all this way to see you. Why don't you greet him properly?"

"The black butterflies get the same treatment when they visit me, and I never get any complaints from them," Cathwell retorts.

I frown. Black butterflies? What is she talking about? I didn't sense her lie, either, which means she believes in whatever she just said.

Cathwell stands, but rather than approaching us, she glides to her bed and unceremoniously drops her armload of papers atop it. She keeps her back to us as she sorts the sheets into messy piles.

She obviously doesn't want to talk to me. Even though I know it's likely only because I'm from the military, I wonder if she's already decided she doesn't like me.

"Lieutenant Cathwell." My voice is steady. "It's an honor to meet you. I'm Major Jay Kitahara."

"Former."

“What?”

“*Former* Lieutenant Cathwell. I’m not in the military anymore.”

Not once while she speaks does she look at me.

I glance at the scattering of notes she left on the floor, already at a loss as to what I should do. I bend down to gather the few remaining sheets, but when I glance at their contents, all I see is messily written gibberish. Why was she so protective of them? What was she even trying to write to begin with?

I don’t linger over it, but cross the short distance to Cathwell to return the papers.

Her eyes are focused elsewhere as she accepts them.

“Miss Cathwell, this is no way to treat a guest,” the guard says. The politeness has left her voice. The nervous indigo her presence had emitted earlier melds into an irritated pink.

Cathwell’s eyes narrow. Her presence pulses a brief, irritated pink to match the guard’s.

She dislikes the guard being here. In the same heartbeat I think it, her dark blue eyes finally meet mine. I’m unable to read her expression.

“Um, excuse me,” I say to the guard.

She appears surprised at being addressed, but hides it swiftly. “Yes, sir?”

“Could you give Lieu—Miss Cathwell and me a few moments alone?” I ask. “I’d like to speak with her privately.”

“I’m afraid that is not allowed. We keep careful watch over our wards here, Major.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise.” I make my tone as peaceful as possible. “I merely thought Miss Cathwell might feel more at ease

with less people present. I would get you immediately if I thought anything was wrong.”

The guard eyes me suspiciously. I think she’s going to refuse me. Instead, she says, “You have ten minutes. I’ll be right outside this door. As soon as anything seems wrong, you tell me right away or you’ll be held liable for whatever happens.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

The guard watches us so intently she’s nearly glaring as she takes her leave.

I return my attention to Cathwell. Her eyes are following something through the air. Or they would be, if anything was there. She’s frowning, but she holds out her hand, forefinger extended, to whatever she imagines she sees. After a few heartbeats and with an unfathomable expression, she lowers her hand once more.

I don’t want to ask what just happened. I’d heard the lieutenant can be distracted and eccentric, and now doesn’t seem the time to inquire about it.

I choose my words with care this time. “I hope I didn’t interrupt any of your plans for the day.”

“Do you mean the tests or the sleeping or the being ordered around by guards?” She’s returned to not looking at me as she speaks. She’s already put all her notes in their respective piles, and with no desk in sight, I wonder where she’ll store them.

“Um, all of it?”

“Then don’t worry. I won’t be missing much.” Perhaps I’m imagining it, but she sounds bitter. Her neutral-toned presence offers me no clues.

I wonder what it must be like for her, to have been holed up in this place for so long. I nearly ask how long it's been since she last went into town. Last heard the music of skilled street performers. Last tasted the dried fruits or cooked meats from Market. Last spoke with someone other than Austin who wasn't a guard or another prisoner.

That's too personal, however, and I don't want to make her uneasy or dislike me even more than she already does. So instead, I say, "Nice, uh, weather today, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know. Outside time isn't for another hour." She waves a hand around her windowless walls, apparently having decided to store her stacks of paper under the bed, because she relocates them with her free hand.

"Why in the world would you choose to stay in a place that dictates when you can and can't go *outside*?" I ask before I can think better of it.

Her eyes flick to me. She doesn't look away this time.

I think she's going to snap at me, but she says quite steadily, "Why in the world would you choose to risk your life in the military for a bunch of Etioles who have only ever looked down on you? For people who would rather see you dead than alive?"

My voice is equally level when I answer her. "No one has the right to kill other people. I believe in protecting all lives, gifted or not."

She laughs, but it's a harsh sound. "Do you think if you just work hard enough, fight hard enough, that you can make things right? That all will be well and the gifted and ungifted will learn to live together peacefully? They will never accept you, *Major*."

I flinch. From her tone, from her words.

Suddenly, I'm fourteen again, standing outside my father's door as he speaks to our maid. Random details are frustratingly clear. The low thrum of the washing machine in the next room over. The rough grains of wood in the floorboards, every speck standing out. The smell of apple-scented candles and lavender. The scratchy wall beneath my palms. And then my father's voice, every syllable pulling a taut string in my chest. *It's his fault she's dead.*

"You don't know that," I say.

"But you do. You've known it for a long time."

"You're wrong. You've just given up."

"Me?" She smiles with closed lips. "And why would you say that?"

"Why else would you stay in this prison?" I wouldn't normally speak so harshly, but the memories of my father are still surging beneath my skin and everything in me is screaming to prove her wrong. "You have the chance to live freely, but instead, you'd rather spend your life wasting away in this place, where those Etioles you appear to hate so much decide everything you do. You gave up your free will."

Her hands clench into fists at her sides. Before, even if she was irritated, she put on a calm front. Now she's furious and letting it show. But even so, her voice grows lower and quieter rather than louder. "You don't know anything."

"Really?" I raise my hands, taking in the whole room, my blood still pounding. "I know I would never let someone keep me in a cage. I know I would choose freedom and fighting for what's right over holding up alone in this place. I know I would at least *try*." There's a tiny

voice in my head that tells me I need to stop, that I've already gone too far, but I ignore it. "Just what are you doing here? What can you accomplish inside a prison? You're merely afraid to come back, choosing the easy way out by hiding here."

I'm breathing hard by the time I've finished. I feel so frustrated, so—so *unsatisfied*. As though no matter how much I might say, it wouldn't be enough. I would still feel this gnawing emptiness inside my chest. Suffocating.

And yet, even so, I know what I said was wrong. She's a veteran soldier who's likely had her own share of difficulties. She didn't deserve to hear any of that. I was upset and unfairly took it out on her.

Cathwell is breathing hard, too. The cold fury is gone from her expression and her presence, replaced with something else, something I'm unable to identify. "Get out."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"I said *get out*. Now."

Guilt presses down on my chest. How could I have said all those things? I want to try apologizing to her again, but she's already turned her back on me. The lines of her shoulders are straight and stiff. Unyielding. She's not going to say anything more to me.

"I understand," I say quietly. "It was an honor to meet you. I hope you will consider General Austin's request." The words fall lame and awkward to land straight into silence.

My heart pounds with the knowledge that I failed as I open the door and inform the guard that we've finished.

I barely notice where we're going as I trail after her. How could I have said such awful things to someone who has her own past and



problems she's likely struggling with? I think of her notes written in nonsense and the way her eyes followed nothing through the air, hand extended to something imagined.

I was arrogant. I didn't even *consider* her position, and yet I spouted all my unasked-for ideals at her. I told someone I know nothing about that she's taking the easy way out.

Austin was wrong. He never should have relied on me.

# 3 LAI

EVEN AFTER MAJOR Kitahara has left, his insistent words remain.  
*Just what are you doing here?*

What *am* I doing? I originally came here to escape the things I didn't want to face, and to be better able to help the Order. In the military, I was under constant scrutiny as a Nyte and a highly ranked officer. There were too many eyes, too many responsibilities. Here, I can focus solely on the Order. No one even thinks to suspect me of anything.

But as my guard escorts me outside to stretch my legs and see the sun, I think how nice it would be to step out into the daylight anytime I liked without someone keeping watch over me. As I write coded notes for the Order back in my room, detailing what supplies are drastically needed and hints of rebel movements that were reported at the last meeting, I think of how much more information I could get from inside the military. Not only on the rebels, but on what the military and Council are up to as well. The Council has been anti-Nyte for as long as Nytes have been around. There's no telling what they'll do.

And considering they're in control of the entire sector, military included, they need watching.

Could I really keep up with both work in the military and with the Order? How often would I be able to sneak out? How much more difficult would it be? This place might be a prison, but it's hardly secure. Central is leagues away in comparison. As a soldier, I could always just walk out the front door, but how long until someone noticed my long and frequent absences and started asking questions?

These thoughts spin through my head all that day and the next as I drag myself through the usual routines. Stuck inside my head with nowhere to go and no one to talk to. Even playing the piano Austin fought to get for me, usually such a source of happiness and peace, can't break me from my indecision.

Entering this prison was never the wrong choice. After I came here, I was able to sneak out and spend my nights helping build the Order up to what it is now. All our members who now have a place to call home, all our established information networks—they're in place because I was able to completely devote my time to the Order. But I'm not necessary for recruiting and information gathering anymore. We have enough members now that others are assigned to those tasks.

What good am I doing here? I could be doing more. I could be doing *better*.

Despite the fact I already told Austin no, and even kicked out the messenger he'd sent, I can't stop thinking about going back to the military. Familiarity. Freedom. Control. But also more responsibility. Bad memories. Expectations.

By the end of the day, I've thought of the same things so many

times over that I feel like I've just been walking in circles for the past day and a half. My head hurts, and I'm still no closer to an actual decision.

*Come on, Lai, I tell myself. You're better than this.*

That evening, as I'm practicing my usual strengthening exercises in my room, I catch sight of a dark smudge out of the corner of my eye. A black butterfly. The second in only two days.

My heart rate picks up.

I watch as it flutters purposefully toward me, the edges of its wings hazy and indistinct. Unnatural.

"Can't you just go away already?" I mutter. But verbally and mentally wishing the things away has never worked before, so I hold out my finger for the messenger to land on. As soon as it comes in contact with my skin, it starts to disintegrate like so much dust in a gust of wind. Words as fuzzy as the shadow creature's form sound in the back of my head. *We're moving, Lai. Are you ready?*

The echoes of the words continue ringing in my head even after their deliverer is gone. This is the fourth butterfly in the past week. It's been a long time since I received so many so close together.

Ellis must be trying to get to me. She knows I'll take so many messengers as a bad sign—and with good reason. Ellis isn't the kind of person to make empty threats.

What does that mean? Are the rebels actually about to make good on their promise to start a war with the ungifted? Are they planning to do something huge—soon?

Calm down. What if that's just what Ellis wants me to think? What if she's trying to push me into reckless action?

Uncertainty fills me. Is this a warning or a trap?

And just like that, I'm sick of it all. Sick of my uncertainty, so strange and foreign a thing to me, sick of everyone pulling strings I'm miles away from being able to see.

There's nothing I can accomplish in this prison anymore. The time in which it was useful to be here has come and gone. Complacency, easy routine, a false sense of achievement in being here—all of it an excuse to avoid taking the first huge, risky steps necessary to counter the rebels.

That stupid major was right about me. I'm just hiding here.

If there's anything I hate more than my own weaknesses, it's other people guessing them correctly. And I am not the sort of person to prove others correct about me when it comes to being weak.

I'm going to go back to the military. And I'm going to gain everything I can from that.

I close my eyes. My gift allows me to exchange thoughts with people, but it's harder the farther away the person I'm trying to communicate with is. However, the more trust I have with someone, the farther away I can contact them from.

It's easy to imagine the road I always take to the Order, the bustling main street that eventually goes into the upper-class district before petering out into side alleys that lead to storehouses. *Fiona? Are you there? And is Trist with you?*

Silence. Then, faintly, **We're here. What's wrong?**

*Can we meet tonight?*

**All three of us? You know that's risky.**

*I know. But it's important.*

More silence.

If it was possible to sigh inside one's head, I imagine that's what Fiona just did. **Understood. The usual place?**

*See you there.*

After sneaking out of the prison some hours later, I pause at the edge of the trees walling the solitary building off from the rest of the city and grab a tattered pack out from the hollow beneath some tree roots. A worn pair of pants, a black shirt, and my green field jacket greet me. I quickly change into them before stuffing my prison uniform inside and stowing the bag back in its place. When the coast is clear, I step out onto the nearest street.

About a fifteen-minute walk later, the streets have gone from deserted to crowded. It takes some effort to mute all the voices shouting in my head to mere background noise. It's easier when I can do something with my hands to anchor my attention outside of me, and harder when there are more people around—and the streets around Central Headquarters are always busy. Yet despite my effort, some stray thoughts still leak through.

**Don't forget to pick up bread for the—**

**Man, this girl is always such a riot—**

**I bet I can beat him now with my new byc—**

Quiet. Quiet. Block it all out.

Red-bricked buildings pile one on top of another, fighting for space. Above them, I can barely see the shine of the dome that caps the sector past all the walkways and added-on floors. There are no trees. The cobblestone roads are haphazard, the only central point being a couple streets down, where Market is set up in a huge open square and vendors man their stalls each day.

I walk in the opposite direction. I pass by several well-trafficked shrines whose thin silver ribbons wave in the wind. The Etioles worship all sorts of gods, none of whose names I know or ever care to learn. Gods for love and loyalty and wrath, gods for air and fire and mountains. When Nytes first began appearing about twenty years ago, the Etioles lost it. First they were ridiculous enough to praise us as being the gods' messengers. Then a plague affecting only children struck right around the same time Nytes were discovered—an incurable sickness that persists even now, though the mortality rate has lowered. So the priests decided that, actually, we went against the gods, that we were demons sent to wreak havoc in the world.

I have never met a Nyte who believed in the gods.

As such, we all have our own theories on how Nytes came to be. Some say leftover radiation from the nuclear war that nearly destroyed humanity hundreds of years ago—the same radiation that created Ferals, the creatures that roam Outside—somehow leaked into the sector. Nytes primarily come from Sector Eight, after all. Much to the other sectors' Councils' frustration. It makes staging and winning a war against our sector to gain resources much harder for them, fortified as our military is with its gifted soldiers. And the Nytes who *were* born in other sectors have a habit of moving to this one, looking for a place to belong. Not that such a place exists here.

Some say the plague was the cause of Nytes. The timing was too much of a coincidence. With the kids it struck, it either killed them or turned them superhuman. Personally, that's what I believe.

Not that it much matters. We're here now, and figuring out the cause isn't going to fix anything.

The atmosphere changes as I move away from Central

Headquarters. The quaint shops and restaurants and cozy homes fitted into their respective high-rise buildings are gradually replaced by blocky concrete skyscrapers and apartments. The first four or five floors are solidly made. Past that, they're hastily constructed, sometimes of brick, sometimes of cement blocks or even wood. The platforms that connect them look precarious at best. But as the population within the sector continues to grow, new residences have to be built quickly to accommodate it.

The "usual place" is a used bookstore located in one of the tall, narrow buildings in the south of Central's fringes. It's where the Order first used to meet, back when it was still just nine of us and the small space could hold us all. The street it's on is nearly deserted, but warm golden light pools out from the windows of the shop.

A small bell rattles when I open the door, and an older man briefly looks at me over the tops of his glasses before returning to his book. "Welcome. They're waiting for you in the back room."

"Thank you, Mr. Clemente."

I have to walk sideways at some points to make it through the mazelike stacks of books, but eventually I'm able to slip through a small door and into a room just big enough to comfortably fit a table and four chairs.

In the past, we used to take out the furniture and sit in a tight circle. Our laughs would reverberate around the room and echo back at us and we'd be so close I could feel the warmth of my friends sitting all around me. The sudden nostalgia of it is like a punch to the chest.

Now, there is no laughter. Fiona and Trist sit in two of the chairs. They had obviously been deep in conversation, but they fall silent when I enter the room.



My spirits pick up at the sight of them—solid, real, *here*. Not everyone is gone. I haven't lost everything yet.

"You're late," Fiona says flatly, killing my small joy. As usual. Her eyes narrow a fraction as she flicks back a loose strand of short, wavy black hair. Her golden-brown hands clasp together in front of her. She's only a year older than I am, but she likes to act so much older and more experienced.

Trist stands, all height and broad shoulders and muscles pulling at taut, midnight-black skin, but his wide smile is disarming as ever. Even though he actually *is* about five years older than me, he doesn't flaunt it. "I am glad to see you well. When Fiona said you called an urgent meeting with us, I worried."

"I'm sorry," I say, ignoring Fiona's earlier remark as I give Trist a quick hug and sit next to him. Just being near his warm, solid presence helps anchor me. "I thought it would be better to talk about this in person."

I tell them about General Austin's offer, omit Kitahara's visit, report on Ellis's increased number of messengers, and finish by saying that I've decided to go back to the military.

"The military wants to use the all-Nyte team as a quick but effective strike against the rebels," I say. "It sounds suspicious to me, but I really think we can use this as a chance to gain more info from within the military—and keep an eye on them at the same time."

After a pause, Trist is the first to speak. "There will be more danger for you, yes? You will be fighting on the front lines."

"I can handle myself," I say. "Who knows, I might even be able to save a few soldiers along the way."

"Your arrogance is showing," Fiona remarks.

“Was it hidden before? My bad.”

She throws a scowl at me while Trist hides a smile.

“When are you going to start taking things seriously?” Fiona asks. “The rebels are a serious threat, and you’d do well to start treating them as such.”

“When have I ever treated this as anything but serious?” I snap.

“Friends, friends,” Trist says. “Focus. There is much to discuss.” His hands are raised in peace, both the words and gesture incredibly familiar. Even after five years of knowing each other, Fiona and I can’t hold a conversation for ten seconds without getting under each other’s skin. Not that either of us really try not to. If it weren’t for Trist, we probably would’ve ripped each other’s throats out a long time ago.

“It’s true this plan is dangerous, but I think it’s well worth the risks,” I say with a final, grudging glare at Fiona.

She returns the look in kind. “Well, having an eye on the military certainly wouldn’t hurt.”

I get the feeling we’re both thinking of Luke. I could focus in on her thoughts and confirm it, but it’s rare that I ever pry that way with her or Trist anymore. Strange though our friendship may be, we are still friends. I guess.

Trist, with his way of noticing everything, instantly picks up on Fiona’s gloom. “If the military starts being suspicious, we will be able to know beforehand,” he says. “But let us not worry about that now.”

“Trist is right,” I say. “Let’s focus on the more immediate future.” I tap a single finger against the tabletop, thinking. “I’m not going to be able to do as much for the Order after this.”

Fiona and Trist share a glance. They communicate silently back and forth, calculating, weighing options. I can read the looks as easily

as if I were reading their thoughts. They're ones we've all shared countless times.

Finally, they turn back to me. "We can divide your work among us and the captains," Fiona says. "Save for the things only you can do."

"Of which there happen to be quite a few," I say.

"Are you trying to make this work or aren't you?" Fiona asks.

"All I'm saying is there's a lot I do for the Order."

"It's not just you. That's why we *have* the captains and the rest of us. You think the Order depends on you alone to run? Don't be so conceited."

"Friends," Trist says.

"You think the Order would just continue to run perfectly smooth without me and my gift?" I ask. "How do you think it even got this far to begin with?"

"You act as if the rest of us haven't done anything all this time. You seriously think everything's been down to you?"

"I'm just saying I've done a lot to build—"

"FRIENDS," Trist rumbles. Fiona and I both freeze. Trist never raises his voice unless he thinks things are really getting out of hand. With a last glare at each other, we both reluctantly sit down. I hadn't even realized either of us had stood up.

Trist takes a deep breath before he speaks again. "Plans must be made. Details must be decided. We do not have time for your disagreements. Now. The divisions of jobs?"

Guilt sparks in my chest. Trist is just trying to get things done, and meanwhile, Fiona and I are having a go at each other. Again. How many times has he had to put up with this same thing? His levels of patience are unfathomable.

Fiona and I share a conciliatory glance—a temporary truce, but a truce all the same—and I say, “I’m not going to be able to pull Nytes from my prison anymore, so we’re going to be losing potential members there.”

One of the reasons I’d requested going to this specific prison was its high number of incarcerated Nytes. Their crimes ranged from insulting an Etiole to being in the wrong place at the wrong time—light things, unproven charges that didn’t warrant being thrown in a more severe prison. I’d seek them out, see what kind of person they were, and if I deemed them fit, I’d offer them a place in the Order to go to once they were released.

Although, there haven’t been many Nytes coming in recently. Lately they’re being put in more high-security facilities even for minor crimes. Tensions with the rebels have been scaring the Etioles into trying to incapacitate Nytes in any way possible—anything to stop us from joining the rebels.

“We will find other ways,” Trist says. “Can you still meet with our backers?”

I shake my head. “There’s too much I need to prioritize over that. Peter and Paul are good at talking with people. Could they go in my place?”

We go through each of my usual tasks, prioritize assignments, and rationalize what I can feasibly continue to do from within the military. Fiona pulls out a small notebook to write everything down. And we talk, too, about how to minimize putting the Order at risk of discovery. It’s been hard work keeping our organization secret over the past few years, and I don’t intend to be the one to blow that. The answer we reach is not one I like, but the only rational one.

“You’re going to have to choose your visits to the Order carefully from now on,” Fiona says. “Only after you’ve discovered important information that can’t be relayed telepathically. That is, unless something big happens.”

“Understood,” I grumble. Going back to the military really is going to be a pain. “I’ll report back to base at Regail Hall after our first mission has been completed, then choose my timing carefully from there on out.”

“I have been thinking on this, but could you make a power crystal for the Order to use when you are in absence?” Trist asks. “It could be very useful for the scouts.”

It was something I had been considering, too. Power crystals are physical manifestations of a Nyte’s gift that can be given to others to use. So long as there is physical contact with the crystal and the user chooses to, the power of the Nyte who made it can be accessed—with limits. Nytes can make any number of power crystals, with any limits or specifications on their gift, but only the specific person they made the crystal for can use it. And the Nyte in question must be alive and currently in control of his or her gift.

People in the Order exchange power crystals as they see fit. When Gabriel, one of the Order’s original nine members, left, he gave each of us a power crystal with his ability to cancel out other Nytes’ gifts. A power crystal I have found exceedingly useful. I also have Syon’s crystal, which creates energy, and Fiona’s crystal for illusions—the last of which I use only sparingly. I hate having to rely on Fiona any more than absolutely necessary.

However, my particular gift comes with problems. For one, it’s dangerous. There are few people in the Order I’d trust with it, and

even then, I'd worry. For another, my gift isn't easily controlled. It wasn't until I was nearly seven or eight that I was finally able to regulate it, to hear only the thoughts of the people I wanted to instead of everyone around me, to shut it off when I chose, to block out the cacophonies that had previously threatened to burst my skull. And even now, I still struggle sometimes.

"No," I say. "I don't think that's within my limits."

Neither Fiona nor Trist ask more. I've told them before of my difficulties with my gift, and even if I hadn't, we don't generally question each other's judgments. Not on something like this.

Fiona gives a small nod to herself and flicks her journal shut with a quick, precise *snap*. "That should be all the major things taken care of. You should head back before it gets too much later."

"Or earlier," I muse.

"Do you always have to—"

"It will be lonely without you in Regail Hall, Lai," Trist says. He hugs me, more tightly than before, and I know he's thinking of the danger of fighting on the front lines against the rebels. He always has been a worrier.

"Don't worry, Trist, I'll be back before you know it," I say as I hug him back. I try not to think of when the next time I'll be able to see him will be. Even just being near him cheers me up. Going back to the military might be a bigger blow than I originally thought.

"Are you sure you're not getting in over your head?" Fiona asks. I'm about to quip another comeback at her when I realize she's being serious. "The work you do is indispensable. The Order needs you. *We* need you."

"I never thought the day would come when I'd hear you say that," I say. "Did the words hurt on the way out?"

"Cathwell."

I hate it when she calls me out. My eyes trail to the table as my feet kick back and forth against the chair legs. "I'm going to be in a position to access information from within the military. Their intel will be the Order's intel. I know it's dangerous to fight the rebels on the front lines, but I have no intention of dying, nor of losing an advantageous chance like this." At her silence, I add, "I'll be careful. I promise. I always am."

She snorts and crosses her arms, which is how I know she's done being serious. "Since when have you *ever* been careful?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, a knot inside my stomach that I hadn't even known was there loosening. "Besides, I'm tougher than a four-fanged flying Feral."

"As if I need reminding of that. Just try not to get yourself killed or exposed." She keeps her arms crossed and her gaze focused past my shoulder, but despite how we constantly rub each other the wrong way and pick at each other over everything, I know she's just as worried as Trist. She's a terrible actress.

We might not get along, but we'd die for each other in a heartbeat if we deemed it necessary. And no amount of bickering can get between that or our mutual desire for the Order to succeed.

"Yeah, yeah," I say as I stand up. "Just try not to miss me too much."

As I turn to head for the door, I catch Fiona mutter, "Yeah, *that'll* be hard."