

PROLOGUE

Delaney?!” Ruckus gripped the phone tighter in his hand. Fear was threatening to cloud his judgment, and he forced himself to still in the center of the living room. Inhale slowly until he stopped seeing black spots.

There’d been an odd note in Delaney’s tone when she’d picked up a few minutes ago, a hint that something was already wrong before he’d told her about the Basileus’s murder. Considering her plan had been to spend the day at the beach with her best friend, Mariana, there was no reason he could see for her to be nervous.

She’d been in the process of saying his name, which meant something had to have happened. There were any number of things that could mean—most of them bad—but until he got more information, he couldn’t panic. Panicking meant making mistakes, and he couldn’t afford any, no matter what was going on.

Ruckus hung up and dialed again, setting the phone on speaker and aside while it rang, retrieving the clear device he’d left on the kitchen counter. He cursed when Delaney’s voicemail started.

Ended the call.

Tried again.

The forgotten device in his other hand made a beeping sound suddenly, a row of tiny yellow lights flickering at the top. He drew his

attention away from the phone long enough to tap the center button. A second later Fawna's face filled the palm-sized screen, the concern in her eyes apparent.

"We might have a problem."

"Something's happened to Delaney," he said, that tightening feeling in his chest getting worse when her phone went to voicemail yet again.

"There's a Kint ship," Fawna told him, momentarily glancing away to use the control panel in her own craft. He couldn't see it from the small screen, but the sound of her clicking keys gave it away. "I don't know how long it's been here. It was doing a very good job cloaking its presence. Could be they arrived before me."

His stomach bottomed out and he gripped the edge of the counter to keep himself from visibly swaying.

He and Fawna had only just ended their conversation moments before he'd phoned Delaney to fill her in. Because Xenith and Earth were in different galaxies, communications were limited to a certain range. Fawna had come all the way to tell him about the political unrest in Vakar, which meant she was still directly outside Earth's orbit.

And apparently she wasn't alone.

"Whose ship?" Ruckus asked, though he was already rushing down the hall toward the Mariana's bedroom, where he'd last seen the car keys. He'd drive down to the beach and find out what was going on.

Because he was being paranoid, and there was no possible way what he feared was happening really was. No possible—

"I believe it's the Zane's," Fawna confirmed, basically shattering any remaining hope he had left. "Wait." She paused then added, "It looks like a smaller craft is about to board. Ruckus . . . it's coming from Earth."

Without stopping, he swiveled on his heel, adjusting his course of trajectory. He snatched the phone off the counter just in case, and quickly checked to make sure his fritz was turned on as he headed toward the front door.

“Come get me,” he ordered, holding the screen up so Fawna could see the moment he got outside. “Now.”

“We don’t know she’s been taken . . . ,” Fawna began, though he could tell she was already preparing to do as he’d said. The console before her began to whirl, and a digital voice announced preparations to approach the planet.

“She’s on that ship,” he stated, moving past the driveway and around to the back of the apartment building. There was more space in the yard. “Just get here.”

He disconnected the device before she could respond, shoving it into his back pocket so he could try dialing Delaney one last time, already knowing it was useless. There was only one reason for the Zane’s personal ship to be hovering outside of Earth.

Ruckus struggled against the mixture of anger and terror that warred within him, trying to keep his mind clear enough to run the calculations. If they’d just taken her, Delaney wasn’t too far ahead. He could board Fawna’s ship and be close behind, arrive shortly after.

And then?

The sound of an engine roared above him and he tipped his head back in time to see the smaller craft drop its camouflage, seemingly appearing out of thin air. A small hatch at the bottom opened, and a metal bar dropped down into his already waiting hand.

And then he’d do whatever he had to do to get Delaney back safely.

CHAPTER 1

She felt like she was dying.

She felt like she was dying. Delaney came to with a piercing pain, like an ice pick was being lodged in her brain. For a moment she stayed still, waiting for the spinning sensation to dissipate and her muscles to stop quivering.

The solid surface cradled her body awkwardly, causing her to wince when she shifted. The feeling was oddly familiar, and her mind struggled to comprehend what was going on. She'd yet to open her eyes, and inhaled slowly before reaching out blindly to feel her surroundings.

She stretched her arm over her head and met with a solid, cool surface. It was clearly metallic, and beneath it she could feel a steady thrum. Her eyes snapped open, but she had to wait for the black spots to clear before she could make out the familiar walls.

She was on a spaceship. Again.

"You have got to be kidding." She pressed both hands to her forehead and tried to recall how she'd gotten here.

The first time she'd been abducted by aliens and dragged unconscious onto a spaceship, she'd been completely terrified. Now, while there was a steady seed of panic at the center of her chest, it was manageable. Staying calm was always the best course of action when it came to dealing with Xenith.

It'd been a couple of months since her first encounter with the Vakar and the Kints, when she'd been mistaken for an alien princess and ripped from her home world. On Xenith, she'd managed to evade assassination and form a couple of strong bonds with members of the royal staff. Whatever was going on here, she could count on her friends. Though it would have been nice to have gotten a heads-up this time around.

"Why does this keep happening to me?" she groaned.

"That's an interesting question."

Delaney bolted upright and turned toward the voice so fast, she got whiplash. Instinctively she tucked herself against the corner of the wall, gripping the edge of the cot hard enough that her knuckles turned white.

Suddenly it hit her: the beach, Mariana, seeing *him* in the reflection of the car window.

"Trystan," she said breathlessly, instantly recalling how easy it was for him to make someone feel off-center. He hadn't done anything yet, and her heart was already pounding.

Delaney tried—and failed—not to be so obvious, but her gaze trailed over him, noting subtle differences and similarities before she could stop herself.

His blond hair was still perfectly styled, but there were hints of dark circles beneath his eyes. He was leaning back in a white chair, the only other piece of furniture aside from the cot. When she'd spotted him on Earth, he'd been dressed like a human, but now he was wearing his traditional outfit. The sleeveless blue shirt with the inch-high collar brought back memories of being constantly on edge, of pretending.

There was a band wrapped around his right wrist and her eyes locked on to it, recognizing the weapon as one that most soldiers—or *Tellers*, to use their word—carried. All he had to do was wave his middle finger over the bottom of it to turn the band into a gun.

Delaney had one as well, and because it looked so harmless, she'd

kept it on her. It'd been a slight comfort, knowing that she'd had a means of protecting herself even when there'd been no cause for alarm. She barely resisted the urge to glance down at her own wrist, knowing already that there was no way he'd left her armed.

She should have turned and run the other way when she'd realized who he was back on the street. Or shot him.

He was watching her through those eerie eyes of his, cornflower blue with a ring of crimson around the outside of the iris. All aliens from Xenith had two-toned eyes, but his were by far the creepiest she'd ever encountered.

A long silence stretched between them before he took the initiative, dropping his leg so both feet were flat on the ground. He rested his elbows on his thighs.

"Hello, Lissa," he purred, but he didn't smile. His expression remained blank in that intense way only he could pull off. He had the best poker face she'd ever seen, and after posing as an alien princess for a month, she thought herself a good judge of such things.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to pull her shoulders back, straightening her spine to appear more offended than afraid. There was only one reason she could think of to explain why she was here: He still thought she was Olena.

An alien device that somehow affected brain waves had been behind her initial kidnapping. The Vakar princess—or Lissa, as they called it—Olena Ond had used it on Delaney as part of her plan to escape an arranged marriage to Trystan. Because of that device, Delaney had been forced to pretend to be Olena, spending weeks undercover on the planet Xenith among the Vakar people until the real Lissa was found.

Once Olena had been discovered and they'd been able to swap places, another device had been used to reverse the effects of the first. Ruckus had finally been able to see the real her, and she'd gone back to her life. Which meant it had worked.

So what was wrong now? Was there a chance the correctional device's effect had worn off? And even if it had, how had Trystan found her? Why?

"Care to explain what's going on right now?" she asked, latching on to the thread of anger she felt. She'd done everything that the Vakar had asked of her, with the agreement that, once finished, she'd be left alone. The dream had been to never see Trystan again, let alone be kidnapped by him.

Did Ruckus know where she was? They'd been talking on the phone when Trystan had knocked her unconscious. As a trained commander, Ruckus should have been able to figure out what had happened.

He'd find her, she trusted that.

"I'm curious," Trystan finally spoke, completely ignoring her question, "how you thought you could get away from this? You had to know you were already in too deep."

Great, what the hell had Olena done now? Delaney let her head drop back against the wall with a resounding clank. The two times she'd met Olena she'd disliked her almost as much as everyone else seemed to. During her stay with the Vakar, she hadn't heard a single good thing about her.

"This is a mistake," she mumbled.

"The only mistake," he sneered, finally letting some of his true feelings slip through, "was letting you fly away on that ship."

It wasn't hard to catch his anger now. She had to tread lightly. There were about a million different ways this could go, and not many boded well for her. If he'd been anyone else, pretending she was Olena again would more than likely be a good thing. Unfortunately, Trystan's hatred for his betrothed was well-known, and if he thought she'd run again . . .

That had to be it. Olena had run again, and without Ruckus there to hunt her down, Trystan had gone after her himself. It didn't really

explain why he'd bother, considering he'd hated the idea of being betrothed to the Lissa, but Delaney couldn't think up any other reason for him being on Earth.

Except, what had Ruckus said on the phone before she'd been injected with whatever sleep agent Trystan had used? Something about the Basileus being dead? If Olena's dad, the Vakar king, was dead, that changed everything.

Didn't it?

"Okay"—she held out both hands, opting to try negotiation—"clearly we need to work a few things out—"

"I've already worked everything out for us," he remarked.

Frustrated, she ran a hand through her hair. When his gaze homed in on the motion, his mask wavered, but she couldn't make out what he was feeling.

"Why do you keep staring at me like that?!"

She'd never been able to read him very well; he had more facets than anyone she'd ever met. It was that very thing that always put everyone around him on edge. As the Kint prince, or Zane, it was a good thing.

For him.

For everyone else, it seriously blew.

"Your hair." It was little more than a whisper.

"It's longer." She reached up and fiddled with a strand. In the five weeks since she'd last been to Xenith, her hair had grown to a little past her shoulders.

"It's red."

For a split second the world tipped on its axis. She hadn't misheard him. He could see her, the real her, which meant the device hadn't malfunctioned and she didn't look like Olena at all.

Momentarily forgetting her earlier plan to remain calm, she scrambled up from the cot, searching the small area. Her initial perusal of

the room had been accurate, however; there was nothing aside from the chair where he sat and the cot currently pressed to the backs of her knees.

Frantically, she groped her back pocket, letting out a relieved sound when she felt the heavy press of her cell phone. She almost dropped it in her haste to get it out, fumbling a little before activating the camera app.

The face staring back at her from the small screen was unequivocally her own. Her bright red hair was mussed around her face, and a bit of color stained her otherwise pale cheeks—color she'd gotten from spending the day at the beach with Mariana. Between the hair and the vibrant green of her eyes, there wasn't a single similarity she shared with Olena. No physical reason anyone, let alone someone who'd known the Lissa for years, would have to mix them up.

The relief she'd been feeling at seeing herself began to fade as the reality of her situation came into focus. She frowned, a new wave of suspicion rising.

"This isn't right," she said, even though she knew that Trystan wasn't the type to make mistakes. She forced herself to lift her gaze to his. "How about we turn this ship around, and you can drop me off in the nearest heavily populated city? Doesn't even have to be where you found me."

He eyed her for a moment, that blank mask back in place, before slowly easing to his feet to stand over her with his six-five height.

"You're smarter than that," he stated. "I didn't travel all the way to that primitive planet for just anyone, and I certainly didn't go for Olena or Ruckus. There was no mistake. I took who I meant to take, Delaney."

"You know who I am." She was too unnerved to be embarrassed by the way her voice shook. Obviously he did; proof of that had literally just been staring back at her in the mirror. Still, she'd hoped . . . she didn't know what. Just that there was another explanation. *Any* other explanation.

"For a while now, yes."

“I don’t understand.”

“You had me fooled for a long time.” He took a step closer. “It was suspicious, but I truly believed that her time on Earth had changed her. That perhaps I had misjudged Olena. It’s too bad she wasn’t as good at playing herself as you were.”

“I did what I had to do to protect my people,” she said. “You would have done the same.”

“It’s all I ever do,” he agreed.

“Then you understand why I did it.” She wasn’t stupid enough to allow herself to feel hope a second time. He wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble if he didn’t intend to enact revenge. Trystan wasn’t the type of guy you pissed off and lived to tell the tale.

“I understand why you lied to me, yes.” He was close now, less than a foot away, and he paused there for a deceiving moment. Baiting people was his specialty. He knew all the right buttons to press, the right things to say, the right spaces to crowd. “I never once lied to you.”

That, unfortunately, was true. He’d taken great pleasure in telling her how much he hated Olena, and telling her often. It was still a bit of a shocker that he was supposedly loved by his people, where Olena was disliked at best. He was just as big a jerk as she was, spoiled and pompous and entitled.

“Why bother with all this?” Delaney waved a hand to indicate the ship, unable to hold back the anger this time. “Why not just kill me on Earth? Too easy?”

He quirked a brow, the corner of his mouth just barely turning up. “Are you asking if I intend to torture you?”

“Did you murder the Basileus?” she blurted, admitting to herself that she was being a coward for doing so. Fact of the matter was, she didn’t think she was ready to find out what she was doing here. If he did plan on making an example of her for lying. He had to be feeling like a fool for believing she was Olena, and it wouldn’t matter to him that that hadn’t been her intention.

“I happened to be there,” he said, not really answering the question at all. “The Basilissa narrowly escaped the same fate, and her daughter’s life still hangs in the balance.”

It was hard to breathe, even harder to think coherently, with him so near.

“Of course we were going to retaliate once we discovered the truth, Delaney,” he continued. “My father has his limits, and being manipulated the way that he was crossed a line. Peace was over the second you stepped foot on that ship with the Ander.”

So the Rex, the king of the Kints, had ordered an attack on Vakar, even after everything she had gone through to prevent it. Guilt and frustration assaulted her, and she struggled to maintain an even tone when she spoke.

“How does killing Magnus Ond and taking his family hostage help you?”

She hadn’t exactly been fond of the Basileus, but he hadn’t deserved to die, either. Everything he’d done, he’d done for the same reasons that Delaney herself had. He’d been trying to protect his people.

“The Kints have taken temporary control—” he began, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

“No, I’m not asking how it helps the Kints, Trystan.” She licked her lips, bracing herself. “I’m asking how it helps *you*?” Because there was no good reason for her to be here if there wasn’t some hidden agenda that benefited him specifically.

“*I’ve* taken temporary control of Vakar,” he said, not even bothering to hide the partial smirk now. “It took some convincing, but my father, who wanted to destroy the entire Ond family outright, saw my reasoning. We don’t need to annihilate the Vakar when we can add them to our forces instead. Soon the control I hold over them will be official and permanent. All I have to do is marry the Uprisen heir to the Vakar throne.”

It was the ease with which he said it that had her hackles rising. He'd always spoken about his and Olena's joining with derision. Just now there'd been something else in his tone.

"The Basilissa would do anything to spare her daughter's life." He eased even closer, sliding his arms against the wall to trap her head between them. "Including agree to all my terms. Amazing, really, that there was even a single person alive who cared enough about Olena to make sacrifices for her. And Tilda made many sacrifices, not just for herself."

Delaney gulped. "That's how you found out my name."

She waited, but he didn't elaborate. Maybe he wouldn't lie, but he certainly didn't have a problem withholding.

"The Uprising is an extremely traditional ceremony," he said. "It has determined the next in line for both the Vakar and Kint thrones almost since the beginning of our civilization. The law clearly states that only someone Uprisen can succeed the previous ruler."

Delaney still wasn't following, until he lifted her right arm, pinning it next to her head. When he motioned with his chin, she glanced over and her breath caught.

The dime-sized tattoo, a small, glittery green V on her forearm at the curve of her elbow, winked back at her in the overhead lights. She may have looked like Olena to everyone during the actual ceremony, but it had been Delaney's body going through the process. She'd been the one branded.

She'd always intended to get rid of it, cover it up, but she'd been so distracted acclimating to life with Ruckus, she'd put it off.

"No." The word shot out before she even realized she'd spoken.

"Yes." There was no room for argument in his eyes, but of course she did anyway.

"I'm not from Xenith. And I went through the ceremony for Olena, *as Olena!* The oath—"

“Did not require you to speak a name,” he interrupted. “Yours or hers.” He was right about that, too. “*You* said the oath. *You* were the one Uprisen. As for the fact that you’re from Earth, in your speech you proclaimed yourself a member of the Vakar people, and a citizen of Xenith.”

“This is insane,” she said. “Do the ceremony again! Uprise Olena. She’s the one who’s supposed to take the throne. She’s the Vakar Lissa!”

“Yet you are the Uprisen heir. Vakar takes that very seriously. Their people value tradition above all else. Not even their Basilissa can go around breaking customs easily,” he said, putting his face dangerously close to hers.

“You can’t do this,” she whispered, forcing away the tears that threatened to choke her.

“I’m not the one who did this,” he declared. “You took the oath. I had no part in that.”

The air stuttered out of her lungs. Delaney had gone through with that ceremony only to protect her cover; no one could honestly expect her to have taken that oath seriously. Could they?

The hold on her anger snapped, and it must have surprised him just as much as it did her, because when she shoved him, he actually moved away. The renewed space between them helped her push through the fog of fear.

“You’re going to turn this ship around,” she hissed, “and take me back. Now.”

“Am I?” There was a dark note to his voice, which she ignored.

“Yes, you are.” Her hands fisted at her sides, and his eyes trailed down to them, his expression tightening with annoyance. The fact that he so clearly saw her as a non-threat pissed her off even more.

“I knew you were arrogant,” she snapped, “but I didn’t take you for a kidnapper. You can’t just expect people to agree to do whatever you say. The world doesn’t work like that, Trystan!”

He lifted a brow, and she let out a frustrated growl before she could stop it. She'd be damned before she rolled over and went along with his asinine plans.

"My world doesn't work that way," she corrected. "I am sick of you aliens and your complexes, thinking you can just swoop in whenever you like and uproot people's lives. *My life!* You have no right to—"

"I don't need rights. You are not the one who gives orders here, Delaney." He said her name like it was an accusation. In a lot of ways, it was.

"I'm not doing this," she stressed.

"You should have thought of that before you allowed your friends to convince you to take part in a traditional ceremony. Especially one you knew so little about."

"There has to be a way around that," she murmured. "If you want someone to replace Olena, fine, but that's not me."

"I'm hardly the only one who wants another option," he said. "The Tars went through a lot of trouble to attempt to achieve that goal themselves, if you recall."

When Delaney had been to Xenith last, a rogue group known as the Tars had repeatedly attacked her. Their hope had been to kill Olena, claiming that she would not only make a terrible partner for Trystan, but also a horrible ruler.

"An entire organization dedicated itself to keeping her off the throne," Trystan continued, watching her closely. "It can't be too surprising that people are more willing to stick to tradition and choose the Uprisen girl over the Lissa they hate."

Delaney couldn't immediately come up with an argument for that logic, but she was certain she would eventually. She had to.

"I'm curious—did you ever meet her?" The look on her face must have been answer enough. "Interesting. How many times?"

"Twice," she replied. "Technically."

He made an accusatory sound in the back of his throat, but when he spoke, he sounded conversational. “Once is usually enough, but of course you’d have to be different. Difficult.”

“I’m assuming there’s a point?”

“You left me with Olena Ond.” A hint of anger sparked in his eyes. “That is the point.”

CHAPTER 2

Delaney waited, expecting more, and when he didn't continue, she crossed her arms. "Seriously? So this is about your ego? I bruised it by not wanting to stick around on a foreign planet, and that somehow justifies you punishing me?"

"This isn't a punishment," he objected. "It's about doing what's best for my people. Now, would you like me to tell you what to expect, or would you prefer to go into this blind?"

She opened her mouth to argue further, but his expression darkened. Yelling at him was getting her nowhere. Her only real option was to stall and trust that Ruckus was on his way. He'd have a plan.

"I'm not agreeing to any of this," she said, but waved a hand, indicating he could continue.

"Xenith is in a higher state of unrest since you left," he said. "While we're in Vakar, it's crucial you do exactly what I tell you. Their Basilissa has already announced you as her successor, but you'll be expected to make a public appearance, accept the position in person."

"And the Vakar are just going along with this? Because of a mark on my arm?" She highly doubted it.

"There's slight resistance," he confirmed, "which is to be expected. But nothing I can't handle. You needn't worry about that."

“Trystan.” She took a breath, already regretting what she was about to say, but she had no other moves. “Please.”

“Don’t beg, Delaney. It’s unbecoming.”

Punching him momentarily came to mind before she tamped down that suicidal notion.

He smoothed the hem of his shirt and reached back to tap a panel on the wall. “I meant it earlier. I never lied to you before, Delaney,” he said evenly. “I’m not going to start now. It might not be in the way that you initially thought, but you are going to pay with your life.”

The door opened and a woman dressed in Kint colors stepped into view. Her hands were clasped before her, a fritz bracelet on each wrist. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail that made up one single massive curl, and she kept her gaze locked on Trystan.

“This is Teller Sanzie. She’ll be keeping an eye on you when I’m not around to do so,” he said, not sparing the soldier so much as a glance. “If you need anything, there’s an intercom on the door panel that connects to the hall where she’ll be standing guard.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lissa Delaney.” Sanzie bowed her head. Delaney flinched at the title.

“We’ll be arriving in a few hours,” Trystan said. “Try not to cause any trouble.”

He left before she could even think about how to respond.

DELANEY’S EMOTIONS WERE all over the place; one second she was angry, the next scared or sad. During her first kidnapping, she’d had Ruckus to soothe her. He’d been the tether that had grounded her through all the new crazy alien experiences.

But now she was alone.

The only friends she had on Xenith were Vakar, and she doubted Trystan would allow one of them near her. He was too smart for that;

he would predict that someone close to Ruckus would attempt to make contact. And she knew they would, too. Ruckus was as well loved as the Zane; they just happened to garner the favor of different people.

The Teller, Sanzie, brought her food a couple of hours ago, but Delaney had barely touched it. Her legs were aching from all the pacing by the time the door opened again.

Trystan motioned to her from out in the hall and, when she didn't budge, let out an annoyed sigh.

"We're on planet," he declared. "There's nowhere you could go even if you somehow managed to get past me and the five dozen guards stationed around the hangar. That's not even counting those covering the castle grounds. Think this through."

She was trapped on a ship that was now parked on Xenith. It was either stay in this room as long as she could, or get all this over with. With Trystan's patience running thin, she didn't know how plausible staying was, which really only left her one choice.

"Where are we exactly?" she asked as she moved toward him.

"The Vakar palace." He'd hinted to as much earlier while talking about the Basilissa, but Delaney wanted to be sure.

There was a small relief at being somewhere she was at least partially familiar with.

"Act like you want to be here when we exit the ship," Trystan said, warning her in a low voice so that the guards they passed as they moved through the halls couldn't overhear.

"Like hell."

"Don't do it for me, Delaney," he said. "I told you, there are still some who don't like the idea of you on the throne. Any sign of weakness will only prompt them to attack sooner. I would like to avoid a bloody battle on your first day back, wouldn't you?"

Honestly? Not really. But she wasn't too keen on getting caught in the cross fire, and she remembered all too well how good the soldiers of this world were. If it hadn't been for Ruckus—and, she was loathe

to admit, Trystan—she would have been killed. It sucked, but for now she'd need him to help protect her.

Using him to keep herself safe until there was an opening for escape was as good a plan as any at this point.

They came to a stop at the side of the ship, and he made a motion before the door sensor. When it whooshed open, it exposed the hangar and the sixty or so Tellers who were waiting for them.

“Five dozen strong, huh?” She bobbed her head, slipping into that good, old-fashioned security blanket called humor. “You must be so proud.”

Without a word he stepped out, not bothering to wait and see if she followed, which of course she did.

All the Tellers were dressed in Kint colors, navy blue with silver trimmings. There were three times as many Tellers in the castle than when she'd been there before, but that didn't surprise her. Trystan had taken Vakar by force and twisted the law to suit his own needs. Even with the queen backing his story, there were people here who would rebel against him. It wasn't just Delaney who had to worry about being attacked.

“You know,” she said, casually waving a hand, “this seems like a lot of hassle. Convincing me to go along with your plan, which isn't going to happen. You're not really the type who enjoys trivial arguments.”

He lifted a single golden brow as they passed under the arch that would lead them into the castle proper. The hallway was white, and lined with even more Tellers. At the end, the color scheme changed to match Vakar tradition, with fake-wood-paneled walls that were really metal, and deep forest-green carpeting and curtains.

“You believe your freedom to be trivial, do you?” he asked, obviously finding the possibility amusing.

Her eyes narrowed. “Of course not. But you do.”

They traveled up a familiar flight of stairs, and across another section of the castle toward a room Delaney had only visited twice during

her last visit. There was a set of Kint guards flanking the office, both men bowing their heads low at their approach.

Trystan didn't bother knocking, swinging the door open and stepping through without hesitation.

A fire roared in the hearth to the right, the orange and purple flames flickering wildly. The sweet smell of burning wood—more sugary here than it would have smelled on Earth—tickled Delaney's nose as she entered.

The Basilissa came into view then, seated behind the large desk positioned in the center of the room. She stood and held her chin up, her hands clasped before her. Her normally warm eyes, the color of baked cookies surrounded by a rim of violet, went cold when she set them on Trystan.

Her hair was long, past her elbows, and so blond that it appeared as though she'd been standing in the sun for days. Her dress was formal, a deep forest green made of silk and sheer material that didn't leave much to the imagination.

"You swore to give me news of my daughter." When Tilda spoke, her lyrical voice was firm, far harsher than Delaney remembered it.

"That's why I'm here," he replied. All of a sudden Trystan cocked his head, looking to the ceiling.

Delaney knew that look. She and Ruckus still spoke telepathically all the time, especially during Mariana's lengthy stories about her most recent crush.

Everyone of importance on Xenith went through a process called a fitting, where a tiny computer-type device was inserted at the base of their skull. It worked a lot like a radio, giving off and receiving frequencies. To communicate with another person who'd been fitted, their specific frequency had to have been imprinted onto the receiver's device. Sort of like a password to access the brain.

Clearly, the message Trystan was receiving was a lengthy one, because he remained silent for so long, Delaney began to grow antsy.

He finally shook his head and took a deliberate step back. "Something has come up, if you'll excuse me for a moment." He held Delaney's gaze. "I won't be long."

She gave him a mock salute. "Got it."

He clenched his jaw, clearly wanting to say something, but changed his mind. Without another word he spun on his heel and exited the way they'd come.

She waited until he was gone before turning back to the Basilissa.

Tilda gave her a once-over. "Shorts and a T-shirt. That's not really the look of a Lissa, Miss Grace."

"Probably because I'm not a Lissa," she snapped.

Tilda glanced away, guilt flashing over her perfect features. There was a single couch positioned in front of the fire and she motioned to it, waiting for Delaney to come around and take a seat before following suit. They kept a good foot of empty space between them.

"For what it's worth," Tilda began in a low voice, "I regret your being here. Again. You did my family a great service, protected us and our daughter, and this is not the way you should be repaid."

"From the sounds of it, neither of us was given much of a choice in my being here."

Tilda nodded then hesitated, biting down on her lower lip and wringing her hands in her lap. Finally she eased herself closer, dropping her voice to a mere whisper despite the fact that they were alone.

"Do what he says," she urged.

"We don't really know each other," Delaney said, "but I think you know me well enough to know that's not going to happen."

"I'm not saying don't fight," she replied. "I'm telling you to pick your battles. Whether we like it or not, you are going to be the next ruler of Vakar. So much has been asked of you already, but I fear I must insist on asking more." Tilda shifted again so that their shoulders bumped, the smell of sweet wildflowers drifting off her lithe body. "Take care of my people, Delaney. Please."

If it hadn't been clear before that the Basilissa had completely given up, it was now. Pushing down the twinge of annoyance she felt, Delaney covered Tilda's clasped hands with one of her own.

"Fine. Whatever. But this whole thing is semantics," she said. "Trystan is only using me to legally get the crown. Once he's got it, there won't be any need for me, and I certainly won't have any real say in the goings-on here. I'm sorry, but if I was what you were relying on, you bet on the wrong horse."

Tilda frowned for a second, obviously trying to recall what a horse was before it hit her. "You weren't here to see the lengths he's gone to in order to make this happen." She grabbed on to Delaney's hand, shaking slightly. "Initially he planned on killing me as well, and Olena. With us out of the way, he could have taken Vakar."

"He's avoiding resistance," Delaney pointed out. "Say what you will about him, but he cares about his people, too. He thinks he can save lives this way."

"That's—"

The door opened and Tilda pulled back, quickly tucking herself into the other side of the couch.

Trystan stopped, his hand still on the knob, glancing suspiciously between the two of them.

"What?" Delaney flashed a fabricated grin, putting maximum effort into the illusion of not giving a shit. "Expected to see flames, didn't you?"

In retrospect, lighting a fire wouldn't have been an entirely awful idea. It would have forced the guards at the door to come put it out, and the two of them might have been able to slip away. Of course, there would have then been the hundreds of other guards patrolling the castle to deal with.

Half-baked schemes were nice for passing the time but awful for reality.

Besides, it didn't seem like Tilda would go for something like that

anyway. She wasn't exactly chained up in a dungeon right now. Seemed more like she was free to go about her business as usual, so long as she kept Kint guards around.

Trystan's expression tightened but he didn't respond, turning to glare at the Basilissa instead. "I'm giving you five minutes."

Tilda stood, folding her hands in front of her, probably to hide the shaking that Delaney had caught. There was a single screen attached to the opposite wall, and she turned toward it, waiting.

Trystan removed a square device from his back pocket and hit a few buttons.

The screen flickered then filled with the image of a pale, exhausted-looking girl. Her inky black hair was limp around her face, and there were dirt smears under her eyes. The wall at her back was dark gray, and there was nothing to indicate where she was.

"Olena." Tilda inhaled sharply, scanning her daughter. The image only showed an inch or so past her shoulders, so there wasn't much to see.

Delaney was staring herself. She'd known Olena had been taken captive, but the girl before her looked nothing like the Lissa she recalled. It appeared as though she hadn't slept in days.

"This is how you take care of royal prisoners?" Tilda snapped, voicing Delaney's thoughts. She glared at Trystan.

"Mother." Olena's voice shook through the screen.

"It's going to be okay," Tilda said, starting forward, only to stop abruptly when Trystan shook his head.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," he warned.

"I have done everything you've asked." She jabbed a finger at the screen. "And this is how you treat her?!"

"As you can clearly see," he said, "I'm standing right here, nowhere near where your daughter is currently being kept."

"You are not innocent in this, Zane Trystan," she snarled.

“I’m not claiming to be,” he stated. “Merely pointing out that once she was delivered to Carnage, she became my father’s concern. Not mine. Keep doing as you’re told, and I’ll try to petition for better treatment.”

“Mother,” Olena repeated. She was scowling, and seemed impatient as ever. “Mother, I want to come home.”

“You will,” Tilda assured her, clearly ignoring Trystan’s suggestion about promises. “Soon. Just do as they tell you, and we’ll put an end to this.”

Olena glanced over the Basilissa’s shoulder, spotting Delaney for the first time. She frowned, then leaned closer to the camera as if to get a better view.

“What is *she* doing there?” Her words were rushed, forced past her lips in a breathy burst. “Why is she there? This is her fault. It is. Trystan—” Frantically, she searched her side of the screen, but from where he stood she couldn’t see him. “She’s the one who tricked you! She made you look like a fool!”

“Olena.” Tilda’s voice was pleading, but her daughter either didn’t pick up on it or didn’t care.

“She should be in this hellhole, not me! This is what she deserves,” she insisted. “I did us both a favor, Trystan, but she . . . she deceived you. She’s the one who messed with your head!”

Something caught Olena’s attention behind the camera where she was and she steeled herself indignantly. When she spoke next, it was obvious she was addressing whoever was there with her.

“Put her here!” She pointed a finger at Delaney through the screen. “She’s the one who should be locked up! I can—”

The screen went black, the only sound now the crackling of the fire at their backs and a slight hum coming from the device on the wall. Trystan hadn’t touched the smaller one in his hand, so he hadn’t been the one to end the connection.

“What. The. Hell.” Delaney stared at Trystan, her shock no doubt painted across her face.

Tilda dropped back down onto the couch.

“Agreed,” Trystan said, catching her gaze and holding it. “I didn’t expect her to so quickly place all the blame on you. That was a miscalculation on my part.”

“Seriously?” Delaney’s mouth dropped open. “She’s being tortured.”

“Hardly,” he grunted. “She’s merely being kept in a room without a four-poster bed and silk sheets. I assure you, no one’s laid a hand on her. She’s being dramatic.”

“You just got done telling Tilda you aren’t there,” she pointed out, “so how can you possibly know that for certain?”

“Fine.” Trystan glowered. “As far as I know, orders were not to harm her. And besides, whatever is being done, did you miss the part where she offered you up in her stead? Trust me, she wouldn’t lose an ounce of sleep if you were the one being held in that room. *That’s* who you left me with.” He set a heated glare on the Basilissa. “That’s who my father and Magnus Ond attempted to tie me to.”

“What did you do to the Basileus?” Delaney demanded.

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly.

“I assume *you* murdered him,” she continued, pressing her luck and not caring. He hadn’t wanted to tell her on the ship, but she wanted answers. “Did you try to blow him up, too?”

If he was affected by her reference to his attempt on her own life, he didn’t show it.

“What did you do? She’s giving up everything.” She glanced momentarily at Tilda, frowning. “So it had to be horrible. Whatever you did, it had to have been bad enough to get her to relent within a few weeks’ time.”

“He was executed privately,” Trystan finally revealed, his words cutting across the room, “and quickly, under my father’s orders. I happened to be present, but no, I didn’t do the actual slaying.”

Delaney opened her mouth but was swiftly cut off.

“They’re ready for us in the ceremony room,” he said, giving Tilda his attention. “I trust what you just saw hasn’t dismayed you from continuing as planned?”

Silently, Tilda stood and regally glided toward the door.

CHAPTER 3

Where are we going?” Delaney asked a few minutes later.

Five Tellers had fallen into step at their backs, herding in the Basilissa so that she was trapped between them. Not that she looked like she was even considering running.

Reaching a point where the hallway branched off in two directions, Trystan stopped and faced Tilda, blatantly ignoring Delaney’s question.

“The Tellers will take you to the main room while I prepare Delaney for the ceremony. Once this is finished, you’ll get to see your daughter again. I might not be there to watch you myself”—he took a threatening step closer, his Tellers doing the same to cage Tilda in even more—“but remember the agreement.”

“I’ve given my word,” she stated tersely. Trystan flicked his fingers to the left, indicating the corridor, and five Tellers began moving in that direction, forcing Tilda into motion. She glared over her shoulder at Trystan for a moment before gliding smoothly forward.

Without waiting for them to reach the end of the hall, Trystan turned and led Delaney down the original path.

Questions burned the back of her throat, but she was afraid to ask them. The answers would no doubt be even more terrifying than the unknown, and she wasn’t sure she was prepared to hear them just yet.

She was putting on a brave front because she had to—it was the only way she knew to get through this—but on the inside she was shaking.

Trystan pulled a clear square device from his back pocket and hit a button. A door at the end of the hall emitted a sharp click before it opened on its own.

The room beyond was large, and decorated in various shades of green and gold. There was a main sitting area, with three other rooms branching off. A wall of windows to her left showcased a darkening turquoise sky, and there was a small circular table next to it.

“This isn’t Olena’s room.” That was where Delaney had spent most of her time before, and she’d sort of assumed that was where she’d be sleeping now.

“No, because you aren’t Olena. I had this room converted.”

“I don’t see anything special here,” she said.

“The changes aren’t visible. I recalled the way you were constantly slipping out of your room the last time you were here. That’s how we met in the library, wasn’t it? I doubt you were meant to be there.”

No, she definitely hadn’t been. Ruckus had left Pettus on the door, and she’d given the poor guy the slip.

Trystan motioned toward the electrical panel to the right of the door. “This emits a force field, preventing anyone with human DNA from exiting the room without first typing a passcode. It also prevents anyone without specific DNA from entering. You’ll be much safer here. No one can get in aside from Sanzie and me.”

She crossed her arms, glaring. “What if there’s a fire? Or the building starts to collapse?”

“Trust that I’ll come retrieve you,” he said absently, moving toward the bedroom. The motion-censored lights flicked on to bathe him in a warm glow, and standing there beneath it, he could easily be mistaken for Adonis.

Or Lucifer.

She heard the slide of the zipper on his shirt before she registered what he was doing, and her cheeks stained red.

“I had your clothes brought here,” he told her, removing his shirt completely and tossing it carelessly onto the olive-green bedspread.

“Olena’s clothes,” she said, regretting that her tone lacked the firmness it should have had. His half-naked state was putting her on edge, and when he reached for the top of his pants, she took a step in retreat.

“*Your* clothes. I had new ones made for you.”

Trystan had gotten her a new wardrobe? That was . . . unsettling.

He turned around, his bare chest suddenly in view. He was just as fit as Ruckus, with well-defined muscles he clearly used. His torso was a little longer, tapering down to narrow hips. There was only one thing wrong with the perfect image: a small scar the size of a nickel right beneath his right pectoral.

“That’s where I took the zee,” Trystan said, realizing what she was staring at. “For you.”

He’d saved her life that day. She wasn’t complaining about that, but she didn’t want to feel like she owed him something. He’d just uprooted her from her home, on purpose. Surely he couldn’t imagine that was a fair trade for what he’d done during the Uprising.

“I thought with your advancements in medicine you could avoid scars?”

“It took too long to get me to the medical wing,” he said with a shrug, continuing to unfasten his pants.

Delaney spun around. She moved closer to the window, pretending to take interest in the darkening sky.

All it did, however, was let a sadness sweep over her, a feeling she’d been fighting against since waking up on the ship. Thoughts of Ruckus assaulted her, and she caught her breath and counted to ten in a poor attempt to regain control. If she let him in now, she’d never recover, and she needed to stay on her toes with Trystan so near.

“Okay.” Delaney took a deep breath, noticing from the corner of her eye that Trystan was busy putting on a different pair of pants. “So, how’d you get the Vakar to get along with the Kints in this place?”

“I asked them nicely,” he said sarcastically. Then: “The same way I get your government to consistently do what I say. Threats. Kint tech is better than Vakar, as it is Earth’s. Our advanced technology is the only thing keeping your increased numbers from standing a chance against us. If we chose to invade, you’d hold your ground for a while, but ultimately our weapons would cut down legions of your Tellers, whereas you’d only manage to take out a few of ours.”

“Soldiers,” she corrected, still not risking a full glance in his direction. “We call them soldiers.”

“Same thing.”

She jumped when the sound of his voice came from directly behind her, and she spun around to face him. It was at least a relief to find he was fully clothed again.

“People will be watching, Delaney,” he reminded. “You can’t tremble in fear every time I’m near. This ceremony is important.”

“It’s not fear, asshole.” She stepped around him so she had more space. “I’m pissed off.”

“Understood.” He canted his head. “But that changes nothing. This ceremony—”

“All your stupid alien ceremonies are important,” she snapped.

“This would be so much easier if you just listened and did what you were told.” His mouth thinned. “There’s no speech, but you must clearly agree to everything the Illust asks. Simple, even more so than the last ceremony you took part in.”

“Oh?” She crossed her arms and glared pointedly at the spot where his scar was hidden by his shirt. “You mean the one where you got shot?”

“You don’t need to make excuses to look at my chest.” He gave her that half smirk, the one that reminded her of a snake trying to beguile a mouse.

“Nice try,” she drawled, feeling her cheeks heat despite her flippant tone.

Trystan sighed, losing some of that hard edge. “I’ve already taken a zee for you once. I protected you then; I’ll do so again.”

“Or maybe you’ve realized the error of your ways.” Even as she said it, she knew she didn’t believe it. Her eyes trailed back down to the scar. They hadn’t gotten him medical help soon enough to prevent it from forming, and that was also because he’d been trying to keep her safe. Even after he’d been shot, he’d refused to move until Ruckus had confirmed the threat was over. He’d settled himself over Delaney like a shield, already prepared to take more bullets for her.

“I wouldn’t need protecting if you hadn’t brought me here,” she pointed out before he could say anything. “You do know that, right?”

“Of course,” he replied softly.

“If anything happens to me during this ceremony, Trystan—”

“Nothing will.”

She blew out a breath, crossing her arms protectively. “This doesn’t mean I’m conceding.”

No, all it meant was that she knew how to pick her battles. Ruckus needed more time to get here, and even though taking part in the last ceremony had clearly been a massive mistake, she couldn’t see a way out of this one.

The blue of Trystan’s eyes darkened, but he merely motioned at her. “You need to change. You can’t very well attend this wearing *that*.”

“You are such a snob.”

“I’ve laid out what you’re to wear.” He motioned toward the bedroom, ignoring her comment. “I trust you can manage yourself?”

“How do you think these clothes got on?” It was the wrong thing to say, made even more obvious by the way his body tightened. She moved past him and made her way toward the bedroom, silently cursing herself.

“Delaney,” he said, stopping her right before she made it to the open door.

She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, so she kept staring straight ahead. Unfortunately that was where the king-sized bed was.

“If you don’t come out within ten minutes, I’m coming in.”

“I hate you.” She slammed the bedroom door behind her. It didn’t take long to figure out there was no lock, and she cursed, giving him the finger through the wood. Sure, he couldn’t see the small act of defiance, but it made her feel better.

Until she spotted the dress he’d hung over the floor-length mirror. She was tempted to tear the thing to shreds, but then what?

She pulled the flimsy material off the mirror. After dropping it onto the bed, she made quick work of her shirt and shorts. Stepping into the dress, she turned to check out her reflection.

When Trystan had said he’d gotten her new clothes, she’d hoped they’d be a bit less revealing than Olena’s or Tilda’s. Of course that’d been wishful thinking on her part. The dress was gold and made of thousands of tiny beads. The neckline was low, a sharp V that dipped so far down, it exposed the space between her breasts. The straps were about an inch thick. The front only went halfway down her thighs, while the material in the back touched behind her knees. It was surprisingly heavy, and when she reached for the zipper in the back, she cursed again.

She could only get it an inch of the way up on her own, which meant—

As if reading her mind, Trystan chose that moment to knock. He entered without waiting, easing the door open in a purposefully taunting manner. When he spotted her, something unnerving flashed in his blue-and-crimson eyes, and her gaze immediately shifted to the only exit.

He shut the door and came forward, covering the hand she had on

the zipper with his own. She let go and he slowly slid the zipper up, catching her gaze in the mirror, holding it unblinkingly. He stepped back and went to the nightstand once it was done, and she let out a shaky breath.

He wasn't away nearly long enough, coming back a second later holding three pieces of gold jewelry. A golden band was attached to her left bicep, a twist of three different circles crisscrossing together. The second piece was similar, though smaller, this one covering her right wrist.

The last was a necklace, and she watched as he secured it around her neck. There were three Xs, one gold, one silver, and one bronze, two side by side, with the third directly below them in a weird upside-down pyramid shape. At the center of each X was a small gem the size of a water droplet. The one in the center was bloodred, with a sapphire to its right and an emerald to its left.

He ran the pad of his finger over the red gem, staring at it in the mirror before raising his eyes to meet hers.

"Don't screw this up, Delaney," he said by her ear. "People will get hurt if you do."

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she kept her mouth shut. He seemed satisfied to take her silence as agreement, and moved away again.

"The ruby signifies Earth," he said. "Red and bronze. Those are your colors. You may be taking the Vakar throne, but you're still an Earthling. You have a claim on that planet."

She did not like the sound of that, but in typical fashion, he changed the subject before she could dive deeper.

"You'll go through a similar process to the one you did when you received this." He lightly cupped her elbow, turning it so that the glittering V tattoo was staring up at her.

Then he presented her with his opposite arm, where there was a glittering capital K imprinted into his skin, an X just beneath that. Be-

tween the left arm and leg of the last letter there was a small blue gem, similar to the one on the necklace.

“It might sting a little,” he confessed. “I suggest you don’t let that show. We value strength.”

She nodded, and he dropped their arms.

Getting the first tattoo hadn’t been so bad; she could certainly stand up there unflinching and do it again. Part of her felt sickened by the idea that she’d be even more tied to this place, but if everything he’d told her was true, so long as she had the original mark, getting more wouldn’t matter.

He was standing by the edge of the bed now, and waved a hand at it. “Sit down. The shoes are on the side.”

The second she got her hand on a fritz, she was really going to enjoy shooting his bossy self.

Delaney sat and reached over the edge, frowning as she picked up one of the shoes. It was a high heel with at least eight long straps attached to the top. She picked at one, tried to figure out what to do with it, and then shook her head.

“Yeah”—she waved it at him—“I’m thinking not. How does this thing even work?” Why did all their fashion have to be so overly complex?

Trystan caught her eye and hesitated. When she tilted her head in silent question, he seemed to resolve himself of something.

She sucked in a breath when he dropped to his knees in front of her, and was even more shocked when he plucked the shoe from her hand.

He avoided eye contact as he slipped her foot into it and began adjusting the straps with immense concentration.

Her foot now resting on his thigh, she watched as he twisted the alternating straps of navy and forest green all the way up to the bottom of her knee. The base of the shoe was the same shade of gold as her dress. The second shoe went on the same way.

Once finished, Trystan moved, grabbing a shirt from another drawer. His pants were a blinding white tucked into shiny black boots. The shirt was similar in style to the traditional one he'd been wearing before, only now the front was navy blue and the back was green. Gold trim crossed over the tops of his shoulders, separating the two colors, and in the front where it zipped, another gold stripe folded over to conceal the metal.

A pair of black fingerless gloves were the final touch, and after he had the straps secured, he paused before her.

She was grateful for the silence during that time. Her heart was racing and her skin felt too tight. The nervousness she was feeling had escalated to the point of near terror. The only other alien ceremony she'd had to do she'd had days to prepare for.

This time? She didn't even know what the hell it was for.

She watched him, fear getting the best of her, blocking out anything clever she may have otherwise been able to pull off. The fact that they'd just changed in the same room together had her skin buzzing uncomfortably. It was too intimate, too familiar.

"Would you like an atteta to help with your makeup?" he asked her softly. "I have one waiting in the hall."

Her previous experience with maids hadn't gone all that well, a fact he was aware of. Was he asking her in an attempt to be . . . thoughtful? Somehow that made all of this worse.

"Trystan, this ceremony . . . It's not . . ." Crap. Now she was turning into a blubbing idiot. She took a deep breath and was about to try again, but he stopped her.

"It's not our binding ceremony," he said. "No. It's a Positioning."

"A what now?" She frowned.

"It is when a person in a position of high authority publicly backs a legitimate successor. Tilda already announced that you'll be taking her position weeks ago. Tonight is about you officially agreeing to do so, in front of the people."

It really was a lot like last time. All she had to do was stand up there and make promises to them she had no intention of keeping. Awesome.

“Afterward,” he continued, “we can go over the steps that need to be taken before our binding ceremony. That process takes two months.”

“So, two months from today . . .”

The corner of his mouth turned up. “*Will* be our binding ceremony. Yes. Which you will not be wearing gold to, I can assure you.”

He spoke about it like it was set in stone. Like he didn’t expect her to fight it. Or maybe he just didn’t expect her fighting to make a difference. And, really, why should he? She was a lone human on a planet surrounded by odd customs and strange languages and people.

“I can handle my makeup on my own,” she finally answered. “The color scheme seems obvious.” She stood and went to the bathroom door, pausing with her hand on the silver handle.

Delaney left and was relieved to find that the bathroom did have a lock. She clicked it and turned to the sink. It was a single marble slab set against the wall, with a mirror on top. Just like in Olena’s room, when she waved her hand underneath the lip, a drawer sprang open. She stepped back to give it space to slide all the way out, exposing rows of different-colored products.

The rebellious part of her wanted to select some of the pinks or purples just to spite him, but she refrained. She’d been here long enough the first time to know the basics, and was able to apply the Vakar equivalent of gold eye shadow. She lined her bottom lid with a deep blue liner, and dabbed a bit of emerald green at the outer and inner corners of her top eyelids.

She took a moment to inspect herself, weirdly pleased with what she saw. Her red hair really popped against the metallic color, the hints of blue and green making her eyes appear larger. Hopefully looking like she belonged would help her sell it.

Aside from the passing comment he’d made about her hair, Trystan

had yet to say anything about her outer appearance. In fact, it was a bit weird how easily he seemed to fall back into their banter, one moment insulting her, the next being sweet. Or, at least as sweet as she suspected he was capable of being.

A light rap on the door told her she'd been in there too long, and she gave herself one last long look, not really seeing herself. She could do this.

Trystan was standing directly outside, arms crossed over his broad chest. He took in her makeup and nodded. As if she needed his approval before he'd allow anyone else to see her.

She rolled her eyes and pushed past him. "I should have punched that bitch Olena when I had the chance."

CHAPTER 4

There were so many people, way more than she'd expected. More than had been at Olena's—aka her—Uprising. It made sense when she took the time to think about it, with both Vakar and Kint now in attendance.

She could tell them apart in the crowd now, the missing Vakar Tellers from before mingling with the Kints, their green uniforms singling them out among what had once been their enemy.

The room was the same massive ballroom, large enough to fit two football fields at least, with a golden balcony stretched against three of the walls. The final wall held floor-to-ceiling windows.

Tilda was already standing on the stage, looking out over the masses. When Delaney and Trystan appeared at the back of the dais, Tilda met his gaze with a hard one of her own.

Delaney wasn't quite sure what to do; she remained still until Trystan motioned her forward. He stepped down to join the Tellers at the front, leaving Delaney and the Basilissa together for the crowd to see. Trystan remained close enough that he could react if she tried anything, but far enough to make an obvious statement.

An older man moved before her, the same one who'd conducted her Uprising. His hair was short and chestnut brown. A few gray hairs could be made out, but he didn't appear much older than forty. There

were crinkles at the corners of his hazel-and-green-rimmed eyes, and a distinct look of pity on his face.

“Lissa Delaney Grace”—the older man indicated she should step forward—“during your Uprising you swore an oath to accept the responsibilities and sacrifices that come with being Vakar royalty. Do you recall such an oath?”

The crowd’s eyes were like lasers burrowing into her, making a thin sheen of sweat break out over her skin. She was completely unprepared for this, had no clue what she was doing, and they were all watching like she did.

In her panic she turned to the only person she could, given her horrible circumstances, catching Trystan’s gaze pleadingly. He bobbed his head once.

“Yes,” she stated in a firm voice, hoping that was what he’d meant. He’d told her to agree to whatever the Illust said, and this man conducting the ceremony must be him.

The older guy—who she really needed to learn the name of—nodded at her approvingly.

Then she spotted a familiar face in the crowd and almost ran off the stage.

Pettus pressed a finger frantically to his lips. He was dressed in his Teller uniform, blending in with the rest of the crowd. It was good knowing he was safe; he’d helped her get off Xenith the last time. Seeing him was a lot like seeing an old childhood friend you thought you never would again.

Had Ruckus sent him? Ruckus wasn’t there; if he had been, he would have contacted her through her fitting so . . . just Pettus, then.

She tried not to stare at him, afraid she’d tip Trystan off if she did.

“And are you now prepared to uphold your vow”—the Illust drew her attention back his way—“to protect and defend your people, no matter the cost? To rule them with honor, respect, and their best interests in mind?”

“Yes.” If that was all she had to say, this might not be as bad as she’d feared.

He held up his right hand for hers, the familiar metal device clutched in his left.

She placed her right arm in the Illust’s grasp, the device positioned at the tip of her green *V* tattoo, and then he pressed down. The burning sensation it brought wasn’t so bad, and she barely had to clench her jaw to fight back the pain. It was quick, and the cool air stung when the device was removed, exposing the now raw flesh beneath.

Below the *V* was another brand, this one of an *X* about the same size. Before she could be glad it was over, he brought the device back, angling it slightly. This time there was a slight prick, and she bit her tongue to keep from outwardly flinching. A small green gem was added between the right arms of the letter. He pressed it again lower, inserting a small red gem between the bottom legs.

She braced for a fourth time, momentarily caught off guard when he turned to hand the device off to a nearby Teller. It was easy enough to guess that the final mark, the blue circle that would symbolize Kint, would be added after or during her binding ceremony to Trystan.

The one she never intended to happen.

“It is done,” the man’s voice boomed out once more, and he bowed to her. “Allow me to present Delaney Grace of Earth, the Lissa of Vakar and heir to the throne.”

The crowd burst into cheers. She stared out at them, shocked by their reaction and more confused than she’d ever been. Back home, no way would an alien swooping in and claiming their crown be considered a good thing. She could see it now, a Kint soldier showing up at the White House, saying they were taking over.

Yeah. Right.

She searched for Pettus, but the mass had shifted, and try as she might, she couldn’t spot him anywhere. She doubted he was here on anything other than reconnaissance, as badly as she wished otherwise.

But she had to trust there was a plan. Her friends wouldn't just leave her here like this.

Ruckus wouldn't leave her.

The feeling of being alone returned, and her chest ached right along with the fresh marks on her arm.

Then Trystan was there, easing her toward the single golden throne positioned at the stage's center. She sat without fuss, still too dazed to consider fighting him. He stood tall at her side, more like a sentry than her betrothed. Tilda stepped up to Delaney's other side, resting a hand firmly on her shoulder.

"They're going to greet you," Tilda informed her from the corner of her mouth. "All you have to do is nod and smile. All right?"

Delaney gritted her teeth and nodded.

Tilda motioned for the first line to move forward, keeping her hand on Delaney the entire time. Every once in a while, a person would step forward and her grip would tighten. There were a few faces that contained curiosity, but they moved on quickly, probably not wanting to risk the Zane's wrath.

After a while reality started weighing on her. Holding herself together earlier had been easier due to adrenaline, which she could feel seeping out of her with every passing second. Curling into a ball and sleeping for a week was starting to sound like the best plan ever.

She was about to lean over and demand Trystan put an end to this—or rather, ask him politely considering all the people currently eyeing her every move—when a commotion in line disrupted her train of thought.

A large Teller was shoving his way unapologetically through. He was burly, with sandy hair, and twice the height of most of those around him. His uniform was distinctly Vakar, the forest-green jacket decorated in numerous gold pieces shaped like octagons. Delaney assumed that, like on Earth, the medals signified station, but she'd never bothered to ask before.

It took her a moment to recognize him as the general she'd met in Tilda's hospital room after the shooting at the Uprising. If she recalled correctly, at the time he'd been polite, cordial even. That was not the vibe he was currently giving off.

"Fendus," Tilda said. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Forgive me, Basilissa." Fendus stopped at the foot of the dais. His eyes were hard, and Delaney noted that his right hand was twitching. "But this is a travesty."

"Excuse me?" Tilda's mouth thinned.

"You are making a mockery of our laws and traditions by announcing this human as our next ruler." He jabbed a stubby thumb toward Delaney.

Part of her was actually a bit relieved by his statement. For one, his anger made a hell of a lot more sense than the acceptance the rest of the room had shown thus far. For two, it stirred back that dying ember of hope. Maybe this wasn't set in stone after all.

Both Vakar and Kint began to whisper among themselves. A few took steps back; others began nodding in agreement.

"It is exactly because of tradition that I'm doing so. She was the one Uprisen; she is the new heir. That's been our way for centuries," Tilda announced, addressing the entire room with how she threw her voice, despite the fact that she kept her gaze locked on Fendus. "My decision was final when I gave it two weeks ago. If you'd had a problem with it then—"

"You refused to hear me out," he interrupted with a growl. "You've refused to hear any of us! This is a disgrace! Not just to Vakar, but to Kint as well! To all the people of Xenith!"

The sounds of agreement increased, voices rising in the crowd. Bodies shifted closer, at first moving slowly, then with more determination, forcing themselves forward so that they swarmed the edge of the dais.

"He's right!" one of the Vakar Tellers cried out, with others quickly joining in.

The mass surged closer, a ring of loyal Tellers, surprisingly a mix of Kint and Vakar, keeping them at bay. They held the crowd off, aiming their weapons at the most vocal of the bunch.

It wasn't everyone; a good many people hung back, shaking their heads. Delaney searched for Pettus again but still couldn't find him.

One of the angry Vakar leaped forward, almost making it through the barrier of Tellers. Acting on instinct, Delaney's hand shot out, grabbing Trystan's arm tightly. She felt him shifting closer, his hand settling down over hers, but she didn't risk tearing her gaze away from the swarming threat.

Fendus was still at the forefront, but he seemed just as caught off guard as Delaney. Before she could read too much into that, he looked to Tilda. A second later his expression firmed, and his voice rose over the rest once more.

"We will not let this stand! To place a human child on one of *our* thrones—"

A loud popping sound went off, silencing the room. No one moved. A slightly salty smell filled the air, mixed with a hint of burnt rubber.

Delaney didn't immediately understand what had happened. She was about to seek out Trystan's gaze when a small trickle of red coming from Fendus's mouth caught her eye.

It was so subtle at first, she thought she might be seeing things, but then the trail of blood dripped lower. He coughed, the sudden movement breaking the spell over the room as everyone turned to stare at him in shock. Fendus lifted a fist to his chest, and Delaney realized there was a fresh wound there.

His body tumbled to the ground with a loud crash. No one approached, though many watched, still in shock, as he bled out on the floor.

Her first instinct was to blame Trystan. After all, she'd seen him shoot many a person in the past. But when she glanced at him, it was

to find his hand still over hers, the other empty at his side. His expression was blank. Like nothing had even happened.

She turned toward Tilda next, and couldn't help the short gasp that escaped her when she did. She hadn't even noticed the metal armband on the Basilissa's wrist. It certainly hadn't been there earlier when Trystan had left the two of them alone.

Tilda lowered her arm, keeping the weapon activated so that it was visible to all. Her left hand, amazingly, was still resting on Delaney's shoulder.

"Illust Victus," Tilda called, and the older gentleman who'd led the ceremony stepped forward, his shoulders stiff.

"Basilissa?" He angled his head down in a bow.

"It seems my people need a reminder of the law," she stated. "Is a member of the royal family allowed to be questioned in an open function?"

"No, Basilissa."

"Or in front of esteemed guests?" She held a hand out toward Trystan, obviously indicating the immense Kint presence currently in the room.

Even though everyone here knew the truth, that the Kints weren't guests so much as they were taking over, the Vakar Tellers in attendance all straightened their spines as if being scolded for real misconduct.

Delaney couldn't help her burst of shock; the Basilissa had always seemed the meeker of the regents. She'd assumed Magnus had completely run the show and Tilda had merely been along for the ride. It was becoming clear, however, that the Basilissa could certainly hold her own.

Though, murdering one of your top councilors in cold blood . . . Kind of scary, and not in the good way.

"Some of you obviously believe that Zane Trystan's arrival indicates

I no longer have a say in the governing of my own lands. I assure you, this is not the case. The decision to make Delaney Grace heir was mine, and mine alone, and it will be treated as such from here on out. Those of you who do not heed this warning will suffer the same fate as Fendus Rynd. I don't care how high a position you hold, or how long our supposed friendship has stretched. Any more attempts to undermine my authority will be considered treason. Am I understood?"

The resounding agreement was so loud, the room shook.

DELANEY BARELY REGISTERED that they were moving, didn't realize they were entering the room from earlier until she was already standing in the center of the sitting area.

She paced in circles, moving easily in her anger despite the heeled shoes, ignoring the way the heavy material of her dress tugged every time she turned too quickly. She felt sick to her stomach.

Trystan was the one who wanted this. And yet Tilda was going along with it to protect her daughter. She'd willingly just killed one of her own to do it. How was that right?

If anything, tonight merely proved that this wasn't going to be all sunshine and rainbows like both Trystan and Tilda suspected. Of course there was going to be outrage. How could they expect anything less?

Delaney stilled. They wouldn't. At least, Trystan wouldn't. He was too smart to leave it to chance. It'd literally only been the three of them up on that stage, the nearest guards a good ten or so feet away.

She braced herself before she turned to him. "You set it up, didn't you?"

His expression remained blank, which only stoked the anger rising in her chest.

"How much of it?" she asked. "Did you just arm her? Give Tilda the gun in case, hoping that something would happen and she would

have to use it?" She paused and shook her head. "No. No, you wouldn't do that. You'd have a plan. You knew Fendus was going to make a scene. How? Your spies find out for you?"

His continued stoicism was answer enough.

"You put him up to it." The realization brought a fresh wave of fear, and she struggled to bury it. "Did he know he was going to die?"

"I'm not sure," he finally replied, cool and casual. "That wasn't part of the original plan. He volunteered to help stir up the crowd so that Tilda could reprimand him in front of them all. It should have been enough. Why they chose to take it further, I can only speculate."

"You honestly expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth." Finally a note of anger entered his tone.

Delaney wasn't sure why, but she believed him. Which meant Tilda had decided to kill one of her oldest friends on her own.

"You're monsters," she growled. "You're all monsters!"

He stepped toward her.

"You're sick!" she snapped at him. "You're all disgusting and I want no part in this!" Her hand was at her arm, nails already digging into her flesh to claw out the two tiny gems.

He was on her so fast, she didn't have time to blink, let alone get out of the way. Snatching her hands, he twisted their bodies, bringing her up against the cool surface of the window. Holding her was as easy for him as she imagined holding a mall mannequin would be, but that didn't stop her wild attempts to free herself.

"Let me go!" She twisted against him, not caring that she was turning her arms at painful angles.

"You're going to hurt yourself," he scoffed. "Stop it. Right now."

"I'm *going* to hurt you!" she promised. "You don't even care that he's dead, do you? It doesn't matter to you."

They'd just witnessed a murder, and he was as calm as ever.

"My plan will go accordingly no matter who lives or dies." His expression tightened to the point that it was painful to look at. "I promise

you that, Delaney. We will be ruling Xenith. Together. Since the moment I decided I was going to bind you to me, your life became the only life that I cared about and I will not apologize for that. Ever.”

She felt the blood drain from her body, muscles suddenly going lax. That was too much. Hearing him say stuff like that sucked the last bit of energy right out of her.

It terrified her.

He caught her, cradling her as if she hadn't just been all but threatening to kill him. Moving to the bedroom, he placed her on the bed with more tenderness than she expected. Then he sat next to her, combing his fingers through her hair.

“I've finally done it,” he said quietly.

She couldn't muster enough energy to speak, but the question was clear in her eyes.

“I've finally frightened you to the point you've lost the ability to use your tongue as a weapon.”

She managed a half grunt, forcing emotion she didn't feel. “Never gonna happen.”

He smiled at her, then got up and went back to the main room. She heard the sound of clinking glass, and when he came back, he was holding two glasses, similar to champagne flutes, filled with dark gold liquor. Trystan held one out to her, waiting patiently for her to push herself into a sitting position.

She was exhausted and needed the backboard of the bed to help hold her up. Taking the flute from him, she watched cautiously. He was so mercurial, there was no way for her to ever know which version of him she was going to get.

“To the soon-to-be new Basilissa.” He raised the glass and then sipped. When she didn't immediately follow suit, he quirked a brow. “It's bergozy.”

She recognized the teasing lilt in his tone. Was he trying to reminisce?

Done with the power plays, at least for tonight, she purposefully set the glass down on the end table and turned back to him.

“That was not what you promised me.” She was pleased to find her voice didn’t quaver nearly as much as she’d feared it would.

He glanced away, but not before she saw a flash of regret in his eyes. When he looked back, however, there was nothing but anger, making her feel like maybe she’d been mistaken. His fingers flexed around the delicate glass; it was a wonder he didn’t shatter it.

“The rest of them joining in,” she said, “that wasn’t part of the plan either.”

“No,” he conceded. “It was not.” He sighed and leaned forward, setting his drink down next to hers. She didn’t like being this close to him when he was so furious. “Trystan, don’t do anything rash.”

He stilled, his perch on the edge of the bed instantly less casual. “I don’t do anything without carefully thinking it through, Delaney. Remember that.”

She bristled but said nothing.

His eyes momentarily glazed over and he angled his head, indicating he was getting a call through his fitting. Whoever it was with, their conversation didn’t last long. He got to his feet and paused, seeming to struggle with what to say next.

“Stay here,” he told her. “Sleep. Teller Sanzie will be at the door. You can trust her.”

“Coming from you, that’s not exactly a glowing recommendation.” She just couldn’t help herself.

Trystan clenched his jaw. Without another word, he spun on his heel and left, and Delaney heard the main door in the other room slamming shut. Then there was nothing but quiet.