

WITHIN
ASH AND
STARDUST
CHANI LYNN FEENER

Swoon READS

SWOON READS

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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FOR VICKY AND WHITNEY

CHAPTER 1

Delaney?”

Warm fingers brushed lightly against her elbow, and she pulled her gaze away from the unconscious Zane. When she did, she instantly felt guilty for not having paid better attention to the man at her side.

Ruckus was a mess, his brown hair, typically styled back, was mussed so that strands fell in front of his tired eyes. The yellow of his irises—rimmed in a dark forest green—was usually a bright, sunshiny color, but now was dull, like unpolished gold. His shoulders were hunched, and he was still in the tattered and dust-covered uniform he'd been forced to wear for the past few weeks.

The dirty uniform *Trystan* had forced him to wear.

Delaney took a deliberate step away from the bed, moving into Ruckus's arms when he lifted them to receive her. She'd been so distracted, she hadn't considered what he must be going through.

“I'm sorry,” she mumbled against his chest, tightening her hold on him as she did. “About Pettus.”

“We found the bodies half-buried in snow before we found you,” Ruckus said, dropping his chin down on the top of her head. “Every time we uncovered another, I feared . . .”

“I'm fine.”

They hadn't really had the chance to talk, not privately. Last night she'd been too worried over the Zane, and seeming to sense that, Ruckus had respectfully remained silent at her side. But it was morning now, proof in the beams of sunlight spilling in through the room's single window. It was deceptive, that sun, making the landscape outside seem more like a winter wonderland than the frozen death trap it could so quickly become.

Less than forty-eight hours ago, Delaney had almost died out there.

Trystan had as well. And he'd yet to wake up.

Her eyes shifted back toward him, watching the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest.

"Did he—" Ruckus tentatively began, but she knew where he was going with his question, and stopped him with a swift shake of her head.

"No. Pettus died saving me from Olena. Trystan didn't touch him." She lifted a hand to cup the side of his face. "How are you doing?"

He hesitated, then glanced at the door. "Can we walk for a bit? I need to get moving. Standing still so long . . ."

Right, she hadn't thought of that. Being an Ander—a Vakar commander—meant he was used to constantly being in charge, always in motion, assuring things ran smoothly. Even when they'd been on Earth, he'd had a need to fill his days with activities.

She took his hand, linking their fingers, but couldn't get herself to move farther away from Trystan.

Seeing her hesitation, Ruckus sighed.

"I owe him my life," she tried explaining. "I would never have made it out there without him."

"You don't owe him anything." Ruckus glanced the Zane's way, his expression unreadable. "Even if you did, there's nothing you can do here but wait."

“I know.” It still didn’t mean she could ignore the tiny voice in her head telling her not to go. Right now they were safe, but experience on Xenith had taught her that could change quickly, and she wasn’t willing to leave Trystan alone, just in case.

Ruckus, realizing that she wasn’t going to be moved, shook his head in clear frustration. “Tell me about what happened.”

“Pettus took a zee for me, and then he snapped Olena’s neck. In that order. He was pretty badass, actually.” Her voice caught at the end and she swallowed, refusing to break down right now. She and Pettus had been friends, but not like he and Ruckus had been.

Ruckus didn’t seem to notice her slip anyway. His eyes were glazed over and he was staring straight ahead, clearly seeing something that wasn’t really there. “I’m going to miss him.”

“Me too.” She pulled Ruckus closer, resting her head on his shoulder. Outside the door, she could see one of the two king’s guardsmen who’d been stationed there.

Not to keep her and Ruckus in, they’d been quick to reassure, but just as a precaution should they need assistance. Under any other circumstances, Delaney probably would have found that funny. Now, though, with the words Sworn Sanzie had told her last night still ringing in her ears, laughter was the last thing she was capable of.

According to the Sworn, Trystan had ordered that if anything should happen to him, Delaney be put in charge. She’d been a bit skeptical at first, eyeing any of the Kints who came within ten feet of her or Ruckus. But not a single one of them had stepped out of line. In fact, they’d done exactly what Sanzie had said they would, following her orders whenever she’d given them.

Though, considering she’d only asked for a hot cup of squa, and to stay at Trystan’s bedside, that wasn’t really saying much.

“I’ll have to mourn for him later,” Ruckus said quietly, pulling her from her thoughts. “I didn’t get a chance to last night.”

Delaney pulled back enough to see his face. “Is there a traditional way to do that?”

He nodded. “During the war, losing friends was common. We developed a way to honor them, and their sacrifice. Pettus deserves that. He deserved a lot of things he’ll never get now, but this I can give him.”

“I’d like to be there, when you do”—she circled her free hand in the air—“whatever it is you’re going to do.”

“Of course.” He smiled down at her sadly. “He would have wanted you there.”

“Hey.” She placed her free hand on his waist. “We’re going to get Gibus back. I’m not going to let you lose another friend.”

He started at that, began to shake his head, but suddenly one of the machines next to Trystan’s bed started beeping loudly.

Before Delaney could even process what was happening, the door burst open and the doctor rushed in. Forced to step aside to give the older man room, she watched as he began typing away at the machine, checking the Zane in between each press of a button.

“What’s going on?” Even after all the doctor’s assurances that he’d be fine, part of her still feared the worse, and seeing all the flashing lights suddenly flickering across the monitors wasn’t helping.

As if in response, Trystan groaned on the bed, all eyes darting to him, watching as he slowly blinked. He winced at the harsh overhead lighting, shifting.

“Zane.” The doctor abandoned the machines, holding his palms out to Trystan. “You should remain lying down. Let me run some tests before you risk overexerting yourself.”

Trystan ignored the suggestion, grumbling something as he sat up. While Delaney couldn’t make out what he was saying, it was clear he was irritated. He was already in the process of yanking wires off his arms and chest, flinging the bits away from him in frustration. When he went to swing a leg over the side of the bed, the doctor waved his hands and tried desperately to get him to settle back down.

“Please, you’ve only just woken after being in a coma for over twenty-four hours. Zane, you must rest!” The doctor set pleading eyes on Delaney, inadvertently drawing Trystan’s attention her way as well.

The strangled sound he emitted was so shocking, her spine actually stiffened. He was out of the bed, standing close enough that their chests practically touched, faster than she could blink.

She heard someone shift behind her, knew without having to look that it was Ruckus about to step forward and stop this. She lifted a hand to ward him off before he could. As terrifying as the hulking mass of alien in front of her was, it was obvious by the slightly glazed look in his cornflower-blue and crimson-rimmed eyes that he wasn’t one hundred percent aware of what he was doing yet.

Trystan didn’t seem to notice anyone else anyway, lifting his hands to delve into her hair. He was gentle, sliding his palms back to cradle the base of her skull and tip her head up. His gaze roamed over her face, probably noting the dark circles under her eyes and the cracks in her bottom lip that still hadn’t completely healed. He looked five times worse than she did, but she didn’t bother pointing that out.

“You’re all right.” His words were breathy, and she reached up to touch his wrists, comforting him even as she eased his hands away.

“Let’s sit down.” She guided him back toward the bed, urging him onto it.

He allowed it, perching on the edge, but was clearly ready to spring up again at any moment. When she went to pull back, his hands tightened on hers, and his grip didn’t ease until she’d seated herself next to him.

“The doctor is going to make sure you’re okay,” she told him, motioning with her chin for the doctor to round the bed. “You were asleep for a long time. Do you remember—”

“You almost froze to death,” he interrupted.

“Actually, thanks to you, she avoided that. You’re the one who came dangerously close to dying.” Sanzie appeared in the doorway, the relief on her face palpable. She’d been gone the past couple of hours, checking Inkwell’s security precautions to make sure the Rex hadn’t messed with anything vital during his stay.

Trystan went to rise, a dangerous glint entering his eyes as he let out a low growl. He paused when Delaney tugged him back, but he didn’t try to sit up again.

Sanzie blinked, surprised by his reaction. She turned to Delaney questioningly.

“I think he’s still waking up,” she said. Then she addressed Trystan in a softer tone: “We’re safe right now; calm down. I’m going to need you to focus on getting back to yourself, okay?”

He cocked his head and stared at her like she’d just said something cryptic. “You need me?”

“Yes.” Not what she meant, but sure. “There’s a situation, and I can’t solve it without you. So take a breath and give yourself a moment to recollect, because I refuse to believe someone as hardheaded as you would allow brain damage to occur after spending just one night out in—”

“It was very cold,” he cut her off quietly, but the look in his eyes had intensified.

She sighed. “True. How are you now? Cold, still? I could have them bring you some squa?”

The corner of his mouth tipped up, and he gave a slight shake of his head. “I just need another moment.”

Delaney curled her fingers at the doctor, who’d only made it half-way around the bed before Trystan’s outburst had stopped him. Once he was close, she stood, moving away a few steps to allow him easier access to the Zane.

“Let the doctor check you out,” she told him, crossing her arms even as Trystan scowled when the older man reached to take his arm.

They made it silently through a good three minutes before Sanzie let out a sharp breath, drawing their attention her way.

“There’s a ship approaching the West Gate,” she informed them.

“We still have time.” Delaney frowned. “The Rex gave Trystan until tonight.”

“Maybe he grew impatient?” Ruckus suggested. He was watching her with an odd look in his eyes, but she didn’t have time to decipher it.

“Check it out”—she nodded toward Sanzie, stopping her just as she was about to follow the order—“*carefully*.”

“Of course, Lissa.” Sanzie bowed her head and disappeared into the hallway.

“He wouldn’t bother coming on his own,” Trystan said over the doctor’s shoulder. “It’s another, no doubt. Possibly a high-standing officer. He must have been waiting on Olena to call in, confirm the deed was done.”

“You mean that Delaney was dead,” Ruckus growled, and the Zane glared at him.

“Obviously.”

“Well . . .” She did not have time for the two of them to go at each other’s throats. “I’m alive, and Olena is the one who’s dead, so we’ve got a serious problem.”

“I’m failing to find fault with her death,” Trystan said, though it was clear he was merely being flip, and didn’t mean it. He wasn’t stupid. While it meant she was out of their way and could no longer do harm, having a dead Lissa on their hands complicated matters in other ways.

“He’s clear.” The doctor pulled back and addressed Delaney. “But he needs to stay hydrated, and I wouldn’t recommend any sudden movements for at least the next twenty-four hours.”

“I am sitting right here,” Trystan stated, glancing between the two of them. “Do not speak of me as if I am not.”

“Apologies, Zane.” He bowed to Trystan and fled the room without another word.

Delaney rolled her eyes, but before she could point out how rude the Zane had just been, Ruckus beat her to the punch.

“Clearly someone is feeling better,” he drawled, shaking his head disapprovingly.

Sanzie came running around the corner, slightly out of breath. “We have a problem.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Delaney rubbed at her temple, trying to stave off an oncoming headache.

“It’s Rue Rantan,” Sanzie said. “He’s landed and he’s already entering the manor. I have Tellers stalling, but he’s demanded to see the Zane, in his study, within the next ten minutes.”

“Or?” Ruckus asked, ignoring the Sworn’s glare.

Delaney glanced between the two of them. She still didn’t know anything about their shared past, other than the fact that there apparently was one. Seeing how annoyed Sanzie got anytime Ruckus spoke to her was puzzling.

“He’s threatened to go to the Rex and inform him there’s been a complication,” Sanzie told them.

“So we stop him before he gets the chance.”

“No.” Trystan ground his teeth as he stood, giving away he wasn’t feeling as well as his facial expression might have suggested. “As much as I’d like to put a zee through his brain, the Rue’s disappearance would only cause us more issues. He’s one of my father’s most trusted advisers. We’ll need to keep him alive and, ideally, under the assumption all is well here. Having him report back to the Rex in the positive will buy us more time.”

“For?” Ruckus didn’t sound convinced.

“Whatever our next move is.”

“Can you do it?” Delaney asked, continuing once Trystan was looking at her. “You’ll have to convince him that everything worked

out. That Olena isn't a Popsicle out in the snow right now, and that you haven't sworn vengeance on dear ol' Dad."

He flashed her a grin, the same one that always sent a shiver of dread down her spine. "You aren't the only good actor here, Lissa. I've been managing my father's men since childhood."

"You'll need an explanation," Ruckus joined in, "a reason why the Rex hasn't heard from either you or Olena."

"I can handle this, Ander." Trystan ran his fingers down the soft material of his shirt and scowled. "But not in this. Medical wear will certainly give us away. Sworn," he said, addressing Sanzie, "go ensure the Rue stays put. Don't let him leave the study, for any reason. I'm going to change and get there as quickly as possible."

"You two"—he turned to Delaney and Ruckus—"stay here. It's imperative he and the Tellers that he no doubt brought with him don't see you."

"What if they do a sweep?" The Rex was the suspicious sort, Delaney knew. It was very possible he'd ordered his men to look through the manor, find visual proof of Olena.

Trystan paused, thought it over, and then said, "I have an idea. But you aren't going to like it."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm letting you talk me into this," Ruckus said at her side as they descended the stone stairwell. "This could be a ploy, Delaney."

She couldn't blame him for thinking it; hell, only three days ago, she probably would have assumed the same. Now? Things were different. She wasn't ready to pick apart just *how* different, but they were.

"Do have any better ideas?" she asked. "I'm all ears if you do."

"Sure," he said. "You and I get on a ship and get out of here."

"And leave Vakar to its fate? Gibus?" She reached out and linked

their fingers as they came to the bottom and turned down the hall. “You wouldn’t be able to live with yourself, and you know it.”

Delaney certainly wouldn’t be able to. Another change. After seeing firsthand what the Rex was capable of, after everything he’d done to her personally, and to the people she cared about, how could she in good conscience walk away? Wasn’t going to happen. Especially when he’d made it so abundantly clear that Earth was on the line, more so than any of them had imagined.

They came to the end of the hall, where the last row of cells was. To his credit, Ruckus didn’t hesitate in the doorway, though she felt his fingers tighten around hers as they approached the cell he’d spent the past few weeks in.

A Teller, who’d been introduced as Ezran, was leading them, and he was already tapping away at a clear control panel on the wall. The second the door swung open, he sent Delaney an apologetic look.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him, even though he hadn’t said anything out loud.

This was Trystan’s plan: Place them in cells in case the Rex’s men came looking. They’d expect to find Ruckus down here still—because why would the Zane let him out?—but Delaney . . . She was an added complication.

Shocker.

The cell next to the one Ruckus was to enter opened, and she took a deep breath. Apparently, there was a program that enabled the cells to appear empty from the outside, even if there was an occupant. He’d still be able to see her from within his own cell, through the connecting wall. It was new technology, created by the Zane on a whim in case safe houses—like the one she’d hidden inside in Vakar that time the bombs had gone off—were compromised. He didn’t believe his father knew about it yet.

They had to hope that was the case, or she’d be an easy target,

already jailed and everything. The only comfort was the fact that she still wore the fritz bracelet she'd taken from Sanzie the day before.

"Last chance to change your mind," Ruckus said as they stood before their cells.

"Trystan won't leave us in here," she assured him. "He needs us. And we need him."

It looked like he still wanted to argue that fact, but instead he pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers.

The spark in the center of her chest was immediate, and she sighed against him, linking her arms around his neck to keep him near when he would have moved away. She didn't care about Ezran standing less than ten feet from them, no doubt watching.

Still, the kiss didn't last long, and eventually she had to release him and step back.

"I've wanted to do that since I saw you standing outside that cave," he told her, a sad half smile playing at his slightly puffed lips.

Before she could say anything in response, he stepped away and entered his old cell. He watched as she got into motion, moving into the one next to his, then twirled a finger at Ezran, signaling he should close them up.

The Teller hesitated, briefly glancing Delaney's way. It wasn't until she smiled encouragingly that he followed the command, hitting the button on the wall panel that would seal them in, with no way out until someone hit it again.

Delaney exhaled a shaky breath, ignoring the tiny inkling of doubt that pooled in her gut. Sanzie had told her she was in charge while Trystan was out of commission, but he was back now. What did that mean for her?

What if, after handling Rue Rantan, Trystan decided he wanted to try dealing with the rest on his own? She didn't think he'd leave her locked in here, but she couldn't say the same about Ruckus. And

there was no way she was going to allow him to stay in a cell. Not again.

She glanced over at the Ander, saw that he was watching her closely, probably following all of her thoughts just by reading her expression. He knew her that well. It was why, when she'd agreed to Trystan's plan, he'd only put up a minimal struggle even though he hated the idea.

Ruckus was right—this was a risk—and the only reason he was willingly going along with it was because he trusted her. And she was doing it because she trusted Trystan.

She just hoped her trust wasn't misplaced.

CHAPTER 2

Trystan tried not to wince as he adjusted the buttons on his shirt, held his spine straight and his shoulders back, despite the lingering ache there. He really needed information about what had happened during the time he'd been unconscious, but it would have to wait. Right now they were all in danger if he couldn't pull this off.

Not that he doubted his abilities to do so. What he'd said to Delaney back there had been accurate: he'd been manipulating his father's horde for years.

He took one glance in the mirror while changing and had to quickly look away. His hair was in disarray, his skin sallow, and it was painfully obvious he needed a long, hot shower. Still, he could work with that.

Before he left his rooms, he noticed the "gift" from their Unveiling on the side of his dresser. The gold knife was small but sharp, the handle molded into a detailed depiction of a blaxa creature—similar-looking to an Earth lizard. It'd been the only item from the ceremony Trystan hadn't taken with him, and someone must have delivered it during his absence.

For no real reason at all, he took the small weapon with him, tucking it into his boot and out of sight. He could feel the press of

metal against the side of his leg while he moved, making his way toward where the Rue waited.

A row of Tellers he didn't recognize lined the hallway outside his study. He didn't bother sparing them a glance, though it irked him that they were here. Of course his father would never send the Rue alone, and Trystan had expected him to bring along reinforcements, but . . . Silently, he counted at least a dozen, grinding his teeth in irritation as he did.

Trystan's men, those loyal to him, were stationed around the castle, with orders that should any of these Tellers branch off, they were to follow at a safe distance. Trying to stop them would be the same as admitting there was something to hide. Hopefully, if it came to that, Delaney and the Ander would already be safely confined in the dungeons.

Trystan paused outside the study doors, letting himself linger on the thought of the two of them down there. Together. Alone. Usually, he'd turn from that line of thinking. Given his current situation, however, an added level of anger was just what he needed.

He shoved the doors open with enough force that they clattered inward against the walls. He was already walking through as his eyes sought out the Rue, and it turned out he hadn't needed to bother imagining Delaney in Ruckus's arms after all. Seeing the smug look on Rantan's face was more than enough to get his blood boiling.

Because this was a show, and he had to cover the fact that his body felt like a lead weight trying to pull him down to the floor, he walked right up to the Rue and did the one thing he'd always wanted to do. He grabbed him by the throat and hoisted him up off the ground.

Rantan's eyes bugged out of his head, and he struggled, clawing at Trystan's wrists. The tips of his military-issue boots—laughable, considering he'd never once served in the army—scraped against the navy carpet.

It would be so easy not to stop, to squeeze until he crushed the Rue's windpipe. But, despite the way he currently felt, he had more control over himself than that.

Unfortunately.

With one final clench of his fingers, he tossed the Rue against the wall, watching with a sick sense of pleasure as his skull cracked back against the white stone. His body crumpled to the floor, though it wasn't long before he attempted getting to his feet.

Trystan casually moved over to one of the chairs positioned at the side of the study, barely paying attention as the Rue tried again and again to regain his footing, only to fall back down in a heap.

Rantan was trying too hard, moving too quickly, knowledge Trystan now had firsthand experience with.

Even though it'd been less than an hour ago, it was hard to recall much of waking up. He'd done it, had seen the doctor and the wires hooked up to his body, and he'd panicked. His only thought had been of Delaney, and not even coherently. The most he'd been able to manage was her name, over and over again.

That moment he'd seen her standing there, whole, alive, that was the best second of his entire life. He didn't want to dwell on that. Especially not here, in front of his father's puppet. He focused instead on the fact that he was alive as well, that they'd both made it out of that cave to see another day.

That his father was the reason they had been there at all.

That this man currently crawling around on all fours was in league with him.

Trystan's gaze darkened, and then, amazingly enough, the Rue's survival instincts must have finally kicked in, for he stilled, the fear in his eyes apparent.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, Rantan"—even Trystan was surprised by how casual his voice sounded—"but I'm in a mood today. You see," he said as he uncurled his hand on one of the armrests,

tapped his fingers against the smooth white leather, "I lost something really important to me."

There was tension from the doorway, where he'd spotted two Tellers loyal to his father, but he wasn't worried about them. Sanzie was there as well, and he trusted her to keep his back safe.

"I wonder . . ." Trystan leaned forward, not much, certainly not enough to matter, what with the Rue all the way across the room, but still he flinched. "Do you know about that? Hmm? Do you know what my father has taken from me, Rantan?"

"I . . ."

Trystan clucked his tongue and sat back. "That's not a good response, certainly not one appropriate for your Zane."

Mention of his title had the opposite of his desired effect. Suddenly Rantan seemed to recall himself, and whose orders had brought him here. He pushed back onto his knees, though he didn't try to stand again. His glare was haughty, though it didn't do a decent job of masking his lingering fear.

"I've come under the order and protection of Rex Hortan," he said, his voice only wavering slightly at the end. "I am to report back that—"

"My betrothed is dead?" Trystan cut him off, and the other man blanched. "So you're admitting you came in here knowing what I'd lost? Knowing who was responsible?" He tsked. "I knew you were a fool, Rantan, but this is another level entirely."

"The Rex—"

"Isn't here," Trystan stated. "Which is a shame, though I imagine that was on purpose. You see, unlike you, my father doesn't have a death wish."

The Rue pulled back. "Threatening the Rex is treason!"

"So is threatening the Zane."

"I never—"

"Didn't you?"

Every time Trystan interrupted, the Rue's cheeks grew a little pinker. For a man who loved the sound of his own voice, not having an audience was probably excruciating. And humiliating. Trystan didn't care which he felt more, so long as he felt them both.

"You threaten me every time you're in my presence, Rantan," Trystan continued. "Every time you come around, breathing my air, huffing about my father. Telling me how badly you want to run off and inform him about my behavior. I've had enough. And not just of your veiled threats. Of you entirely."

"These guards are under strict orders to protect me," the Rue said, lifting his chin toward where the Tellers still stood sentry by the doors. "And they're bearing witness right now. Making note of everything you say to me, Zane. Kill me, and—"

"Kill you?" Trystan chuckled darkly. "Oh no, you misunderstand. I'm not going to murder you, Rantan. If I were, I wouldn't have dropped you like the pile of trash you are. At least"—he lifted a single shoulder in a bored half shrug—"not before I'd wrung the last breath out of you."

The Rue was clearly confused, on edge, and he waited, but when it became apparent Trystan wasn't going to say anything else, he frowned.

"Where is Lissa Olena? I've been ordered to return with visual confirmation that both you and she are well."

"*Well* is a fickle term," Trystan pointed out. "Do I look *well* to you, Rue?"

He stuck his chin in the air and huffed out, "You do not."

"Take my word for it: Olena doesn't look much better."

"Where is she, Zane?"

"Alive," he bit out, "but injured. My father grossly underestimated Delaney, and vastly overestimated Olena. She may have killed my Lissa, but Olena didn't make it out unscathed. I'll have you brought to her, if you insist, though I should mention she's

currently undergoing surgery, and any interruption could result in her untimely demise.”

Trystan had already ordered a surgical room set up, just in case. There was even a team of doctors within it, making as much noise as possible, so that it would be believable that an intense surgery was being done should anyone happen by the sealed doors.

“Actually”—he stood with a flourish—“now that I’m thinking about it, you’re right: you *should* see her.”

Rantan eyed him suspiciously, and for a moment Trystan feared he was about to call his bluff.

“My men should already be searching the castle,” the Rue ended up saying. “They’ll know if there’s a medical team working. If this is a poorly veiled lie, they’ll find out, Zane.”

“With any luck,” Trystan said, and retook his seat, “they’ll be as incompetent as you and open the door themselves.”

“The Rex wants Lissa Olena alive.”

“So I gathered.”

The Rue ran his gaze over Trystan, not bothering to cover his distaste now that he’d been told his life wasn’t in danger. “You look this bad over one human? She was a means to an end. Now that she’s gone—”

“My father has nothing with which to control me,” Trystan declared. He stood a second time, adjusting his jacket in a clear show that he was done with this conversation. “Tell him he can expect me when I’m good and ready.”

“You’ve been ordered to return with me,” the Rue said. “Tonight.”

“And I’m defying that order.” He angled his head at Sanzie. “My Sworn will stay with you until your men return, confirming what I’ve told you about Olena. There are things I need to clear up here, before I even consider going to Carnage, least of which is ensuring *his Lissa* is in well enough condition to travel.”

“We aren’t finished here, Zane,” Rantan called when he gripped the door handle, but Trystan merely grunted.

“Let my father know not to worry; I haven’t forgotten where my loyalties lie.” He turned and caught the Rue’s gaze one last time. “I’ll see him soon. Just not tonight.”

Not wanting to give the other man even a second to argue further, Trystan yanked the door open.

Just as a Teller on the outside was moving to knock. The Teller stumbled a bit on his feet, straightening and composing himself as quickly as possible. Without sparing Trystan so much as a glance, he lifted his gaze to the Rue.

“There’s a problem in the dungeons,” he stated.

Trystan could practically feel the gloating look Rantan aimed at his back. He shared a brief knowing exchange with Sanzie and let out a heavy sigh. “Damn.”

He swung at the unsuspecting Teller, rendering him unconscious with a single punch. Before the Rue could activate the fritz on his wrist, Trystan had his open and aimed at the center of his chest.

“I blame the Ander,” he said to Sanzie with a shake of his head. Whatever had happened to tip them off, surely it hadn’t been Delaney’s fault.

Then he fired his weapon.

“I HATE THAT we’re back here.” Ruckus drew Delaney’s attention from the doorway, where she’d been staring for the past ten minutes. He didn’t like the way she was worrying her bottom lip, or how she stiffened every time a noise echoed down the stone hall.

Didn’t like the thought that her reactions had less to do with fear of them getting caught, and more to do with worry for the Zane.

Not for the first time, he found himself wondering what had

happened between the two of them this past month. The words were on the tip of his tongue before he thought better of asking and contained himself, and his misplaced jealousies. In reality, it didn't matter. Whatever had taken place between her and Trystan, whatever he'd said or done to earn her trust, it was set.

The only thing Ruckus could control—and therefore the only thing he should be focusing on—was where he and Delaney went from here. Which, if he had his way, would be off this planet and back to Earth.

A thread of guilt wormed its way through his gut, and he tried to quell it. Yes, this was his planet, and he didn't want to see it destroyed by the greedy Kint. But he also didn't want to see Delaney hurt by it, and staying . . . No good could come of that.

Already she was changed. He saw it in the way she stood, noted it in the way she glanced at Sanzie and Trystan. At all the Kint Tellers they'd passed since yesterday morning when they'd found her half frozen in the snow. The cilla suit had kept her alive, but there'd still been damage. She'd hardly noticed, too caught up in her fear for the Zane to see how stiffly she moved, how often she shivered.

"We won't be in these cells for long," she said then, misinterpreting his statement.

"No . . ." He waited for her to finally turn away from the door and look at him. "I meant *here*. You and me, so close to each other and yet . . ."

"How are your hands?" she asked after a moment.

He glanced down at them absently. He'd damaged them banging on the electric wall of this very cell when the Rex had ordered for Delaney to be taken away. They'd healed enough over the past few days that he could hold her hand with his own, but there were still raw patches along his fingers and the bases of his palms.

The initial pain had been nothing at the time, easily ignored. It

was the panic that had overridden him, debilitated him. The thought that she was going to be killed, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

That he was trapped. Useless.

That he'd failed her.

"It should have been me," he whispered, needing to look away as soon as he spoke. "Instead it was the Zane. He was there for you when I couldn't be."

"Ruckus." She moved closer to the wall that separated their cells.

"Don't get me wrong," he went on, "I'm grateful that he was. He's the reason you're here, after all. But that doesn't change the fact that I wish it'd been me. What if it happens again? What if next time he's just as unable to help you as I am? What then, Delaney?"

"Then I figure out a way to help myself," she said confidently.

"What if you can't?" Now that they were on the subject, there was no point in backtracking. "This, what you're suggesting we attempt to do, is dangerous. In all likelihood, the kind of danger we can't get away from."

She inspected him. "You're angry with me."

"No." He shook his head, then closed his eyes and took a breath. "Yes. In a way I guess I am."

"Because I want to do this?"

"Because you're so willing to put yourself at risk," he clarified. "Delaney, Olena was *going* to kill you. I thought for sure when they dragged you from this room that it was going to be the last time I ever saw you."

They'd never bothered hiding things from each other before, so he let some of the inward fear shine through in his eyes. Let her see how terrified he actually was, hoping that she'd understand where he was coming from. What he was actually trying to say. He knew getting her to change her mind at this point was out of the question—she

was too stubborn. But convincing her not to take any unnecessary risks? That he could do.

“I never want to feel that way again,” he told her. “Please, don’t make me.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up reassuringly, and in that one move, he knew she’d picked up on his underlying meaning.

“I won’t be stupid if you won’t be stupid,” she promised.

He grunted, unable to hold back his own smile. “That’ll have to do.”

“Can I help you?” Ezran called, a bit louder than necessary, from where he stood in the entryway. It was a signal for them to be quiet. Apparently the Zane’s paranoia was going to work in their favor; the Rex had men searching the castle.

Ezran stepped into the room a second later. At his back were three other Tellers dressed in Kint blues, silvers, and whites. With his head held high, he led them toward Ruckus’s cell, swinging out an arm when he was close enough, as if presenting him.

“The Ander,” he said as the other three took Ruckus in. “Did the Rex give instructions on what was to be done with him from here?”

“No,” one of them, a tall boy at least three years younger than Ruckus informed Ezran. “Only that we should check to make sure he was still in place. We’ve been ordered to leave him here and let Lissa Olena decide what’s to be done next.”

At the sound of her name, Ruckus’s jaw involuntarily clenched. For a split second he saw red before he was able to get ahold of himself. Being short-tempered had been a flaw of his since birth. It was one of the major reasons his father had insisted he join the army at such a young age. Then, the hope had been to teach him control. It’d done that, and then some.

In less time than it took the others to blink, he’d successfully schooled his features back into a blank mask. There was no point in

showing fear here, or bothering to attempt conversation. They'd seen him; now they'd leave.

Only, they didn't.

The one standing closest to Delaney's cell frowned and stepped toward it.

Ruckus shifted on his feet, which was the wrong thing to do because the others took notice, despite how small the move had been. It was stupid to be twitchy—he'd been trained to be better than that—but it'd been less than two days since he'd gotten her back, and the thought of losing her again made him lose his cool.

"What is it?" one of the other Tellers asked the one now moving even closer to Delaney's cell.

"I thought I heard voices before we came in," he explained, eyeing Ruckus suspiciously.

Ezran glanced between them and snorted. "He talks to himself sometimes. He's been down here awhile. As you can clearly see, there's no one else here."

"Then why is the barrier up?" the Teller asked. When he didn't receive an immediate response, he added, "The *electrical* one? None of the other unused cells are activated. Why is this one?"

Because the shielding technology was built into the same electrical force field that kept prisoners in. Ruckus inwardly cursed. They should have activated the other cells, to be safe. It was such a minor mistake, and something he should have caught himself.

"It's an empty cell," Ezran said, instead of answering. "You can see that for yourselves, right now."

Delaney, who'd been standing as still as a ghost, merely took the weight off one ankle to rest it on the other then. But it was enough.

The Teller who'd been staring at the cell so closely sucked in a breath and activated his fritz. He aimed it at Ezran and growled, "Open it up."

“Excuse me?” Whoever had trained Ezran, Ruckus was impressed.

“I heard something. Almost like there’s someone in there,” the Teller said.

“Someone invisible?” the younger-looking one asked, not bothering to cover the smirk spreading across his face.

“I’m telling you, there’s someone in there,” he insisted.

“It’s empty,” the other argued, but when all that earned him was a glare, he waved Ezran on. “Just open it up so we can be done with this already.”

“It won’t open,” Ezran gave it one last attempt. “That’s why it’s activated. We’ve been having problems with—”

“Forget about it.” The quiet Teller who hadn’t spoken up to this point walked over to the wall panel and hit the control pad before Ruckus could think of a way to stop him. A soft beep sounded, and then the pale blue screen that acted as both the cell door and front wall panel flickered and disappeared.

Leaving an exposed Delaney.

“Damn.” Delaney lifted her arm and fired off her already activated fritz. She’d hit two of them between the eyes before they could react.

The third, Ezran took out with an elbow to the side, and then a twist of an arm around his neck. When the body dropped, the Teller’s eyes widened and he stared down at it, clearly shocked by what he’d just done.

“Get me out of here,” Ruckus ordered Ezran, another twist of desperate anger filling him up.

Delaney stepped from her cell and placed her hands on her hips, staring down at the dead Tellers. “Trystan is going to be so pissed.”

CHAPTER 3

Delaney circled Rue Rantan for the fifth time. After taking out the Tellers downstairs, she and Ruckus had waited a few minutes before heading back up. Ezran had come with them and was now guarding the door, looking a little sick to his stomach.

She supposed that made sense, considering he'd just helped kill fellow soldiers. Though he was loyal to Trystan and had been told what to expect, there was a difference between imagining something and actually acting on it. Her gaze swept over to where the Zane perched against the edge of a large desk.

"Was this really necessary?" Ruckus asked, sweeping a hand through his dark hair as he glowered down at the Rue's unmoving body.

"I seem to recall," Trystan said, "your suggestion was that we do this in the first place."

"Yeah," he snapped, "and you corrected that logic by pointing out we needed him alive."

"This is only the second conversation you two have had today, and I'm already tempted to split you up like misbehaving children." Delaney sighed, rubbing at her temples.

Trystan gave her a dark, warning look, which she ignored.

Ruckus's expression wasn't any better.

So she'd bruised some egos? Seemed like the least of their worries at the moment, and it wasn't like either of them were being much help, constantly at each other's throats. Trying not to acknowledge one over the other, she circled the Rue's body one last time and then came to a stop between them.

"What do we do now?" she asked. "We can't exactly leave the Rex hanging."

"You mentioned my father gave me until tonight?" Trystan didn't seem happy about this prospect. "I could go now. I'd make it there in time. It'll be easy enough to explain that my anger got the best of me, and the Rue was the unfortunate recipient."

"And when you arrive without Olena?" Ruckus crossed his arms.

Trystan thought it over, then shrugged. "I'll have to come up with something on the way."

"Nope." Delaney shook her head. "That's out. Next idea?"

He frowned. "Delaney—"

"Great," she interrupted, "I do have one. Thanks for calling on me, Trystan. Ruckus and I already talked about getting to the Basilissa. She needs to know what happened to her daughter, that she no longer has to follow the Rex. With any luck, she'll help us stop him, and more immediately, come up with a way to rescue Gibus."

Delaney had been thinking more on it throughout the day. It still made the most sense. So far, the only people who knew Olena was dead were in this building, and all loyal to Trystan and her. So long as they kept it that way, they should be able to get back to Vakar in time to inform the Basilissa and get her to turn on the Rex.

"And how do you suggest we explain the circumstances surrounding Olena's death, hmm?" Trystan questioned, clearly not on board.

That could get tricky. Pettus had only been doing what he needed to in order to protect Delaney, but would Tilda see it that way?

“It’s a risk we’re going to have to take,” she said. “We need Vakar’s help, and the only way to get it is by convincing Tilda. Being their Lissa doesn’t mean anything if their Basilissa isn’t with us.”

“She could denounce you,” Ruckus told her. “Once she discovers you had a hand in her daughter’s murder. That you were there.”

Delaney blinked at him. “Are you siding with Trystan all of a sudden? Because I thought we’d already agreed on this. This makes the most sense.” When neither of them reacted, she straightened to her full height—which was wholly unimpressive in their company—and stated, “Either help me figure out how to make this work, or get out of my way.”

Neither one of them seemed very pleased by her edict, but they both sighed and clearly started thinking of solutions.

Trystan was the first to speak. “Traveling through Vakar right now is too risky. At least in any Kint ship. Too easily spotted, and once my father gets word where we are, and that Delaney survived, we’ll have an even bigger problem on our hands.”

“So we convince your father you have a legitimate reason for going,” she said. “Make it so when you do show up at the palace in Vakar, and he undoubtedly gets word, you’re exactly where he expected you to be anyway.”

He cocked his head at her. “It isn’t a terrible idea. However, I’m also not comfortable leaving Inkwel unprotected.”

“You don’t think anything is going to happen to Dom or the others, do you?” The citizens of Inkwel lived in town far enough from the palace grounds that Delaney hadn’t visited yet, but she knew Dominan’s house was close.

“It would be rash for my father to attack his own people, but we also don’t know how the Basilissa will react once this news is delivered. I’d rather leave behind a way for civilians to safely flee if need be, and my personal ship is the fastest in the kingdom. What about the Ander’s?”

“We can call Fawna and see how fast she can get here.” Delaney motioned to Sanzie, who stepped forward and handed over a clear device, called a shing, which worked similarly to a cell phone or a computer. She held it out to Ruckus.

Ruckus shared a brief look with the Sworn over Delaney’s shoulder, but before Delaney could question it, he took the shing, tapping away at the screen and moving off to the corner of the room. It began to emit a low beeping sound, and a second later his voice could be heard giving orders.

“You’ve got blood on your shirt,” Trystan said quietly, and Delaney glanced down at the tiny red splatters dotting her chest.

“Yeah?” She flicked the folded fabric around her neck. “Well, your collar is crooked.”

She couldn’t hold back the laughter when he immediately reached to check.

“We’re in luck,” Ruckus said, walking back over to them. “Fawna was already close by. She’ll be here in under an hour.”

“Which doesn’t leave us much time to plan,” Sanzie pointed out as she took back her device. “We can’t all make it into Vakar, and the Rex is still a problem. If he doesn’t hear from someone soon, he’ll grow even more suspicious.”

“She’s right.” Trystan settled more comfortably against the desk, stretching out his legs and crossing them at the ankles.

He’d changed into his traditional outfit, long blue sleeves on a high-collared shirt that zipped up the front. White pants tucked into black boots, and there wasn’t a single crease anywhere to be seen, like he’d taken the time to iron everything just before putting it on.

Delaney would have rolled her eyes at how impeccable he needed everything to be, especially at a time like this, but there were more important things to deal with than his weird quirks. “Is there someone here who he trusts?”

Trystan gave her a look, and she grunted.

Right. The Rex didn't trust anyone, not even his own son. Though, all things considered, that was sort of understandable.

"Who would he listen to the most, then?"

"Me," Trystan said, and she was already shaking her head when Ruckus came up with another suggestion.

"What if you video conference him? Give him a reason why you're refusing to return tonight, come up with some excuse to head to Vakar instead."

"You were attempting to manipulate the Rue into believing you were rebelling due to mourning," Sanzie recalled, turning to the Zane. "Perhaps you can use the same line of logic on the Rex?"

Trystan paused, thought it over, and ultimately discarded the idea. "He'd know Delaney's death would affect me; I did a poor job shielding that fact from him when I got back from Kilma, but the life of a human wouldn't be enough to warrant my disobedience in his eyes. If I push too hard, he'll only send more Tellers to retrieve me."

"What about Olena?" Delaney shrugged when they all looked at her. "It's not like we can leave her out there in the snow forever, and Tilda deserves the chance to say good-bye to her daughter in person."

"I could tell my father I'm delivering your body to her; he'll agree to that," Trystan surmised, "so long as I explain that it's an attempt to keep our peace treaty intact. You are her Uprisen heir, after all, and now he thinks you're dead."

"So you tell the Rex you're bringing Delaney's body to Tilda, but in reality, we'll be bringing her Olena's." Ruckus hummed to himself in thought. "We might also be able to persuade the Basilissa not to take Olena's death out on us by doing this. She'd be grateful for the return of her daughter."

"How do you explain to your dad where Olena will be during all of this?" Delaney asked. "Are we sticking with the injured-while-murdering-me story?"

"It seems to be the best angle we have," Trystan agreed. "Besides,

more of a reason for me to go to Vakar. The Basilissa should be told of Olena's injuries in person. That's what I'll tell my father. It'll be impossible for him to find fault in that."

"All right, that's something then." Delaney wanted to ask the Zane if he was sure about talking to the Rex, but knew better than to do so in front of an audience. "What about when we get to the Vakar palace? I assume there are still a ton of Kint Tellers guarding the place. With this plan, you might be expected, but not us."

"It's impossible to know how many of them are loyal to my father, and how many will side with me," Trystan told them. "I'm not sure who was left there. I'd need a list of names before I could even begin to guess how much support we'd have."

"I've got friends," Ruckus said confidently. "Ones who can get us through the palace unseen."

The Zane tilted his head. "Are you referring to the ones who helped sneak you in the first time?"

Bringing up his failed rescue attempt probably wasn't a good idea. For a second there, they'd actually been having a civilized conversation. Now the Ander's eyes flashed with anger and he took a pointed step forward.

Delaney placed a palm on his chest, stilling him.

He took a deep breath. "You never found the people who helped get me into the palace."

"No," Trystan admitted. "I didn't. But I can't promise they haven't been discovered since. Obviously, there's a lot my father has kept from me. Hell, for all we know, this is yet another elaborate trap."

"That can't be true." That would suggest the Rex had wanted them to kill Olena, and Delaney highly doubted that. She'd seen the way he'd looked at the old Lissa, like she was the goose that laid the golden egg. He'd needed her alive. He would not be pleased to find out she no longer was.

"Olena was too important to him," Ruckus said, practically read-

ing her mind. “He confessed that was the plan all along: to use her to gain control of Vakar.”

“He told me that as well.” Trystan sighed. “He only pretended to accept Delaney as a change of plan. He wanted to create unease among the people, manipulate them into believing having Olena on the throne was still better than allowing a human to take it.” He held her gaze. “It wouldn’t have worked in the long run.”

“Comforting,” Delaney drawled. “What do you know about the rest of his plan? Anything?”

It was a bit uncomfortable to realize that she hoped he didn’t, even though that would leave them in the dark on what to expect next. The thought that he could be involved with his dad’s scheming bothered her.

“I know he wants Earth,” Trystan said.

“We all know that,” Ruckus put in. “How about you give us a how? What does he intend to do with Vakar?”

“Going off what I’d been told, he wants to merge them. But he never intended to leave political control in Vakar hands. He would run things himself, from the sidelines.”

“Using you as a figurehead.” Surprisingly, Ruckus’s words didn’t sound mocking.

“I would have aided him in getting what he wanted,” Trystan admitted, “yes. But only to an extent. I’d hoped that I could persuade him to alter his goals. To allow Earth to continue on as is, rather than taking complete control.”

“But you don’t know details?” Ruckus read between the lines. “He didn’t confide in you.”

Trystan’s jaw clenched. “He did not.”

“Tilda might know more,” Delaney said. Either way, it wasn’t like they were going to find out more here. “How long before your father loses his patience again and sends someone else?”

“For all we know, he already has.” Trystan straightened from the

desk, adjusting his shirt, and then toed Rantan's body with a grunt. "It's unclear how soon after his arrival he was supposed to call in. I should get to a com device soon, get this conference call over with before we're really out of time."

"There's still the matter of how we plan on stopping the Rex at all," Ruckus pointed out. "Say Tilda agrees to help us, turns against him . . . Then what?"

"We'll start by taking the Vakar palace back," Trystan said. "Then Tilda can get word out to her people that she's no longer under my father's thumb."

"You mean your thumb?"

"Your people far outnumber Tilda's," Delaney reminded, drawing attention her way before they could start arguing again. "If she announces she's no longer going to do what he says, the Rex will declare war—you know, that thing we've gone through all of this to avoid?"

"We'll just have to hope she knows more about my father's plans and can help us before it comes to that." Trystan smoothed a hand over his hair, a nervous tick of his that gave him away.

"*Hope* isn't really a lot to go on right now." She didn't like feeling so many steps behind. "We need to find a way to get your father off that throne. Take away his crown, and we take away his army at the same time."

"I know that." Trystan sighed again. "But I don't know how yet, Delaney. We need more information, and right now Tilda is the only person I can think of who might have some. Who knows what my father's told her since taking Olena hostage?"

"You should call him." Ruckus motioned toward Rantan. "We've lost the luxury of time to figure things out further."

Trystan looked like he was going to argue, probably just because the Ander was the one telling him what to do, but he ended up grit-

ting his teeth instead. “You two wait here, in case we’re wrong and Rantan wasn’t the only one already sent our way.”

Sanzie went with him, leaving Delaney and Ruckus alone in the office. With Rantan’s body.

“This is fun.” Delaney scowled down at the Rue’s lifeless form and then went to the desk, turning so she didn’t have to look at him anymore.

“As long as Trystan can convince the Rex to let him make the trip to Vakar, it should be okay,” Ruckus said, trying to reassure her. He was obviously able to tell she was still feeling antsy over this partial plan of theirs.

“And Tilda?” she asked. “How do we convince her not to shoot Trystan the second she realizes it’s Olena in that body bag and not me?”

“She’s smart. She knows that’ll ensure war.”

“She’ll be standing over her daughter’s corpse. I don’t think she’ll be thinking clearly enough to consider killing the Zane—who had a hand in Olena’s death—a bad idea.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Aren’t you the one who used to tell me to always be prepared for everything?” she shot over her shoulder. If Trystan got hurt carrying out this plan, it’d partially be her fault for suggesting it in the first place.

Ruckus licked his lips and then moved closer, resting a hand on the narrow of her back. Leaning in, he brushed his knuckles against her wrist, where she had both palms flat against the desk.

“We’ll have to take a stealthier route, past the East Mountains, in order to avoid detection on our way to Vakar,” he told her. “That’s plenty of time for us to convince the Zane not to stand anywhere near the Basilissa when we reveal that Olena’s dead. He’ll see the logic in being cautious.”

She shivered before she could help herself, her mind already going back to the other day and the traumatic experience she'd had. The cave Trystan had gotten them into had saved their lives, but she could still recall the frozen feeling, the burning and the numbness that had followed.

All those times she'd been pretending to be Olena, coming so close to death in the forms of bombs and zees, and yet, it was the hypothermia that really stuck with her. That particular fear had sunk in its claws, deeply enough she could feel it wiggling in the back of her mind at even the mere idea of having to travel near or around another mountain.

"Hey." Concern thickened his voice, and Ruckus angled his body so that she was propped comfortably against his warmth. The hand already on her back began rubbing soothing circles on her spine, while his other reached out to steady her hip. "We're in the midst of our spring season. Winter's already passed for Vakar."

Delaney dropped her head against his shoulder and let out a humorless chuckle. "How'd you know that's what I was panicking about?"

"Lucky guess." He shrugged, but when she glanced up and caught him staring down at her, he added, "I know you, Delaney." His brow furrowed, an almost bemused look passing over his features, and when he spoke again, his voice was no more than a whisper.

"Have you forgotten that?" he asked. "Have you forgotten us?"

"What?" She twisted in his hold and took his head between her hands. "Of course not."

He didn't appear convinced.

"*Of course not,*" she repeated, sending the words through their fittings this time. Speaking telepathically had always seemed more intimate to her. During their time on Earth, the two of them had spoken that way often, even when alone.

And she realized with a start that they hadn't done so once since he'd found her in that cave.

"I'm sorry," she said. "For being so distracted."

"No." He shook his head. "No, I'm the one being ridiculous. It's just . . ." He trailed off, and before she could press him on it, he chuckled. "Never mind. It's me being insecure."

"Insecure?"

"Poor choice of words." He smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

She didn't believe him.

CHAPTER 4

Trystan tried not to twitch at his father's perusal, knew that the other man's gaze kept coming back to the splotches beneath his son's eyes and the single strand of blond hair that refused to stay in place. Trystan did his best to act like he didn't care about these obvious flaws, keeping his shoulders stiff and his expression blank.

He had no idea if the Rex was buying it.

"I'm not sure telling Tilda in person that her daughter was injured is wise." His father tapped his fingers against the surface of his desk. "We've gained her loyalty by ensuring Olena wouldn't be harmed, after all."

"She deserves to know the truth," Trystan repeated, for what might have been the tenth time since the call had started over fifteen minutes ago. "And Delaney—"

"Right," he cut him off, "the newly deceased Miss Grace. That's what this is really about, isn't it?"

"She was Tilda's heir."

"She was human." The Rex paused, then canted his head. "Where is Rue Rantan?"

Trystan held his gaze unflinchingly, not bothering to answer. It was fairly obvious, seeing as how there was only one reason Rantan

would miss an opportunity to make the Zane look bad in front of the Rex.

His father sighed, but it was impossible to tell if it was out of annoyance at having lost a valued member of his council, or just at his son in general.

“If you didn’t want him dead,” Trystan finally said, “then you shouldn’t have sent him.”

“I had hoped you’d have better control of your actions,” the Rex replied. “But, yes, of course your misplaced feelings for the human getting the best of you was a possibility I’d considered.”

Trystan caught the disgust from showing on his face just in time. He’d hated the Rue, who’d been all but a waste of space since he’d first joined the council. But the man had been loyal to the Rex, if nothing else. Seeing how little his father appreciated that fact made his insides twist.

“I don’t want Lissa Olena anywhere near Vakar without me present,” his father said. “It’s too risky, especially now that Delaney is dead. It’ll put Tilda on edge, perhaps even give her foolish notions of rebellion.”

“She’s still in critical condition in any case,” Trystan told him. “I’d hoped to leave Olena here, so she could continue getting medical attention. I’ll allow her to conference call with her mother once I make it to Vakar, so that the Basilissa has proof her daughter is all right. I think it best we keep all of this to ourselves as well.”

The Rex lifted a brow, a silent indication for him to go on.

“I’ll tell Tilda I’m arriving with information, and show her Delaney’s body once I’m there. If we inform her of her Uprisen heir’s death without me present, I fear she might have the same rebellious reaction you hope to avoid.”

Making sure his father didn’t tell Tilda anything ahead of time also meant they’d have a better chance of controlling the story.

“All right,” the Rex said, waving a hand. “Take Miss Grace’s body

to Tilda as a show of good faith, and tell her about Olena's injuries. But I want a full update, and to be notified as soon as Lissa Olena is out of surgery. Is that understood?"

"Of course, Father." Trystan bowed his head, keeping his gaze low to avoid eye contact.

"You have until tomorrow night to get to Carnage," the Rex continued. "If you aren't back by then, I'll be forced to send more men to retrieve you. Like a child."

"Once I've completed my business with Tilda, I'll board a ship immediately." The very thought of going back to that place made him want to vomit all over the sleek marble floor. But at least he'd know beforehand that Delaney was safe.

So long as they could convince Tilda not to do anything rash.

DELANEY ADJUSTED THE zipper on her coat, then tugged at the ends of her gloves to make sure they were secure. She fidgeted, doing pretty much anything and everything she could think of to distract herself from the awkwardness of her current situation.

At her left, Trystan stood statue still, eyes trained straight ahead on the slowly closing ship doors. He hadn't spoken since the call with his father, other than to mention that he'd bought himself until tomorrow night, as planned. Whether or not the Rex was actually going to let him get away with that was still to be seen, but what choice did they have but to try?

On her right, Ruckus had his arms crossed over his chest, and was glaring. He wasn't doing it at anything in particular, which was why it was so obvious that his angered look was really meant for the Zane.

Shocker.

Fawna had arrived with Ruckus's ship less than twenty minutes

ago, and they'd had to wait to check airspace to make sure she hadn't been followed before boarding.

Delaney had yet to even see the pilot, though Ruckus had met with her already in order to ensure everything was going as planned and they were safe. Apparently, Fawna had been hiding close by ever since they'd been captured in the Vakar palace. She was so good at staying hidden, she'd trailed the Kint ships all the way from there to Inkwell without once being detected.

Finally the doors clicked into place, and sealed with a low hissing sound.

"Lissa." Sanzie turned to her, angling her body between the awkward little group and the doorway. "Would you like to get a refreshment from—"

"An entire galaxy of yes!" She was halfway to the Sworn, eager to get away from the uncomfortable situation, when she had a thought. Coming to an abrupt stop, she inhaled deeply, and then spun around to address the guys. "Don't kill each other, okay? In fact, let's just make that a general rule from here on out, so that I don't have to worry about it happening later on down the line."

Trystan's expression suddenly matched Ruckus's. "You can't be serious."

She held his gaze. "Deadly so."

"If you recall, we've already had this discussion, Lissa."

At the mention of their original deal to keep the Ander safe, her eyes narrowed. They'd made that agreement before Trystan's father had thrown a wrench in everything. He couldn't seriously think their previous understanding still applied, could he?

"What are you complaining about?" Ruckus asked him tersely, saving Delaney from having to come up with a response. "I have more reason to want you dead than the other way around."

"That is far from true, and you know it." Trystan turned and

shared a cryptic look with Ruckus over his shoulder. For a split second it actually seemed like the two of them were on the same page about something.

It freaked Delaney out too much to want to stick around and decipher what exactly that was, so instead she took a pointed step back. “Guys.”

“Yes, all right.” Trystan grunted. “But I still don’t like it.”

“Join the club.” Ruckus pushed past him, bumping his shoulder pointedly against the Zane’s to jostle him.

“Nope.” Delaney signaled to Sanzie to proceed, giving the other two her back. “Not staying for this.”

When the Sworn had led her halfway down the hall and she still didn’t hear the sounds of zee fire or punches being thrown, some of the tension in her shoulders eased.

“They fight like children,” Sanzie said as she broke the quiet, irritated. “It is a disgrace to their stations.”

Delaney blinked at the Sworn as they took another corner, for a moment unsure how to respond. “Haven’t they always been like that?”

Even as she asked, she knew that wasn’t the case. They’d always disliked each other, sure; that’d been apparent when she’d been pretending to be Olena. But there’d still been a level of feigned respect between them, if only to keep up appearances.

“Wux is still an Ander, and therefore he must follow the Zane’s commands,” Sanzie told her. When Delaney laughed, Sanzie sent her a confused sideways glance.

“Ruckus was Trystan’s prisoner for weeks,” she reminded Sanzie, finding it a bit strange she even had to. “There’s no way he’s going to do what he says now that he’s free. And he shouldn’t be expected to, all things considered.”

“He’s not Vakar royalty; therefore, he must fall in line when in the presence of the Zane.”

“I’m thinking the dynamics from before no longer apply,” Delaney stated. “Does this have anything to do with you and Ruckus, about your past?”

Delaney still didn’t have any of the details, only that the two of them had once served together in the Vakar army until Sanzie had gotten into an accident. The Sworn had been abandoned by her squad and, weirdly, rescued by the Zane. She’d worked for him ever since. That left a lot of questions up in the air, but Delaney hadn’t had the time to press for answers.

“How close were you two, anyway?” It dawned on her that Sanzie had been leading the way since they’d left the hangar. And that this was Ruckus’s ship. “How do you know where you’re going?”

“These particular crafts are all built the same.” She shrugged.

Delaney halted, suddenly not finding any humor in this. “I’ve been on both Vakar and Kint ships before, Sanzie. I know that’s not true.”

“Different models,” she insisted, but it was obvious Delaney didn’t believe her. “All right, yes, I’ve been on this vessel. I used to know Fawna, too. It was a long time ago; this should be the way to the kitchen area, though.”

Sanzie started forward, leaving Delaney no choice but to follow after.

“Eventually you’re going to have to tell me the whole story,” she said at the Sworn’s back, noticing the way her spine stiffened at her comment. She tried to ignore the quick flash of jealousy and suspicion that rushed through her. With the future as up in the air as it was, the past shouldn’t matter to her.

“There’s not much to tell,” Sanzie assured her. “When I worked for Vakar, we sometimes went on missions together. The Ander’s ship is one of the fastest and most secure on the planet. Not all of them can successfully operate within, and outside of, Xenith’s atmosphere.”

This was the same craft that Fawna had used to travel to Earth,

and they were currently flying on the planet the same way an airplane would. Delaney didn't know much about rocket science, but she was aware a fighter jet couldn't do the same things a rocket could.

"Here we are, Lissa." Sanzie stepped through an opening in the wall and entered the tiny kitchen area on the ship. She motioned toward a large black box-shaped device tucked into the corner that had always reminded Delaney of a vending machine. "Shall I make you some squa?"

They were still in Inkwell, and it was chilly on the ship despite the fact that Fawna had turned the heat on as soon as she'd docked next to the palace. Up until that point, she'd apparently kept all heating systems off to avoid being detected by Kint.

"Funny story . . ." Delaney moved into the room and over to the device, sending a smile over her shoulder to ease the bite of her words. "I've actually been on this ship before, too."

There was a smaller rectangle in the center of the device, about the same size as a laptop screen. Until Delaney pressed her finger to it, it was black, but then it lit up a pale yellow. Words she didn't know began to appear, separated by an outline of tiny circles. She'd memorized what most of them would give her while on her trip back to Earth, though she didn't recall ever having tried squa here.

Before she could overanalyze, she tapped one of the buttons near the bottom—the drink she'd been obsessed with herself—and watched as a row of white lights lit up around the outside of the entire device.

A small compartment slid open around her knees, exposing a panel of glass, and a whizzing sound filled the silence. A second later a cup was pushed forward, a light pink liquid sloshing around, close to spilling over the rim. It was almost exactly like a coffee machine back on Earth, and the first time she'd tried it, Delaney had expected scalding, stale liquid to meet her tongue.

Instead it had tasted like rich, hot strawberry milk and roasted cashews.

“What would you like?” Delaney asked as she reached down to remove her cup. She set it on the counter at the right, and then turned back expectantly.

“I’m fine, Lissa.”

She thought about pushing, then decided against it. The screen had a small arrow at the bottom right, and she tapped it so that the items offered would change. Then she selected the one she knew Ruckus would prefer, and waited for that cup to fill.

“What did you guys end up doing with the bodies?” Olena wasn’t the only one they’d brought with them. She tried not to picture the way Pettus had looked, lying in her arms on the ground. His skin had already begun turning an ashy gray, and he’d been cool to the touch in a matter of moments. There’d been a lot of blood, but Delaney couldn’t remember now if she’d gotten any on herself.

“They’re in the lower deck,” Sanzie told her tentatively, “and out of sight for now. Once we’ve presented the Basilissa with her daughter, I assume the Ander will have your friend cremated.”

“So you don’t bury the dead?”

“We do not.” She’d taken up a soldier’s stance as soon as they’d gotten to the device, her arms crossed behind her back, her feet squared. It was the flash of interest in her eyes that ruined the stiff appearance now. “I read somewhere that it’s something your people do, though. You put them underground?”

“Does that seem strange to you?”

“I guess I just don’t understand,” she admitted. “Is there a reason?”

“Different ones for different cultures.” The machine made the same sounds, indicating her order was done, and she removed the cup she’d gotten for Ruckus. “We have many cultures on my planet. You guys just have the two here, right?”

“We have Kint and we have Vakar,” Sanzie confirmed.

“What about belief systems?” When the other girl frowned, Delaney elaborated. “Religions?” More confusion. “Why do you cremate your dead?”

“Bodies take up space.”

“Ruckus mentioned there was a ceremony,” she said. “A way to honor the dead?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “we have that.”

Delaney wanted to ask more, but the drink in her hand was at risk of getting cold. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything, Lissa.”

Her quick agreement made Delaney feel slightly guilty about what she was going to ask next. Not enough not to do it, though. Part of her wanted to note the Sworn’s reaction, try to see if she could figure out how deeply this dislike she had for the Ander went.

“Bring this to Ruckus, please.” She held up the cup, lifting a brow when Sanzie merely stared at it. “Come on.” She shook the cup, careful not to spill its contents. “I’m not trying to make you friends. You can tell him it’s from me, even.”

“Perhaps—”

“We’re on the Ander’s ship, Sanzie.” It was easy enough to figure out what she’d been about to say. “I’m perfectly safe here. I’ll be fine alone.”

“And the Zane?”

“Oh,” Delaney rolled her eyes, laying it on thick, “there’s no way those two are still in the same room together. You get this to Ruckus, I’ll make sure the Zane doesn’t die of thirst.”

It was probably the least funny thing she could have said, and they both sobered instantly. But it wasn’t long before the sad look in Sanzie’s eyes morphed into something knowing. Almost as if the Sworn were thinking about how messed up Delaney had been when they’d brought Trystan’s body back. How she hadn’t been able to leave his side . . .

“He saved my life,” she said, by way of explanation. “I owed him. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Of course, Lissa.” Sanzie took the cup still being held aloft and then nodded her chin at the device. “Seventh icon, three rows down. That’s the symbol for squa, in case you weren’t aware.”

Delaney nodded, sort of wondering how this had turned on her so quickly.

“If there’s nothing else, Lissa?” Sanzie waited for Delaney to shake her head, and then the Sworn took a deep breath and openly scowled. “Then I guess I’ll be taking this to the Ander now.”

DELANEY AMBLED DOWN the corridors, not really knowing where she might find the Zane. They had some time before they’d enter Vakar territory, which meant she could afford to search for him.

Deciding to be productive while she did, Delaney began to think of all the ways to deliver the news of Olena’s death. There was no good way to tell someone their child was dead, even one as awful as Olena had been, and she dreaded having to do so almost as much as she did having to go back to the palace at all.

While she hadn’t had to worry about Kints as much there, at least in the sense that during her initial stay Vakar had still been under its own rule, she hadn’t exactly been safe. Actually, she’d been safer in Inkwell, with Trystan, than anywhere else so far.

Delaney turned the corner and paused. Somehow, she’d managed to find him just by wandering aimlessly.

The door to one of the supply rooms was open, giving her the perfect view of the Zane as his finger slid across a shing screen. He had an assortment of items set out on one of the shelves before him, and kept pausing to physically check them, picking an item up, setting it back down, only to repeat the process on another.

It sort of looked like he was doing inventory, which was a little

funny, considering that was the type of job someone should be doing for him. He seemed pretty focused, movements easy and confident. The same way he handled everything.

There was no logical reason for her to be nervous, and yet . . . The last time they'd been alone had been in the cave, and not only did she not want to think about that, she also didn't want to talk about it.

She took a step back the way she'd come, decidedly chickening out. The Zane could get his own damn drink in any case.

Unfortunately, her movement caught his attention and he glanced up before she could duck around the corner. When he noticed the two cups she was holding, the corner of his mouth tipped up.

With no other options left, she headed toward the room, already in the process of handing him the squa.

He set the shing down and took the cup, quirking a brow. "Aren't you going to sip it in front of me first?"

"Funny." She grunted, settling against the doorframe. He'd made a habit of taking the first sip of all her drinks back in Inkwell, to show her that none of them had been poisoned. To get her to trust him. "What are you doing in here?"

"Keeping busy mostly," he admitted.

"What? Not enough excitement going on for you?" It'd been meant as a joke, but she knew the second his mood changed. Straightening, she retreated a step back into the hall.

"We should talk," he said, not attempting to follow her.

"Sure"—she motioned to her left—"later. I've got to go say hi to Fawna."

"Delaney."

"All right." If he wanted to talk so badly, she'd do it, but they wouldn't be discussing what she figured he hoped they would. "I need to know we're on the same team here."

“Of course.” He took a step toward her, stopping when she held up a hand.

“I mean all of us. History leads me to believe you’re not exactly willing to play nice with Ruckus.”

“Nor he with me,” he reminded her.

“Yes,” she said, sighing, “I know. I’ve had this conversation with him, too, believe me. This is a weird situation, but we need one another.”

“Did you purposefully come find me alone so that we might speak about him behind his back? So you could ask me if I intend to . . . what? Shoot him while you aren’t looking?”

She didn’t respond.

The next step he took forward was stiff. “Because you’re right, and there are other things for us to focus on at the moment, I’ll soothe your fears by promising not to kill the Ander. But I should also remind you, Delaney, that we had a deal. The past few days change nothing.”

She bristled, but forced herself not to crack in front of him. Before his father revealed his deception, she’d agreed to cooperate with Trystan in exchange for her friends’ freedom and safety. But now Gibus had been kidnapped and Pettus was dead. Truthfully, things had gotten complicated, and she didn’t know how she felt about anything anymore. Except the Rex. That was crystal clear.

“I’d say a lot has changed, actually,” she said. Then, without giving him the chance to counter, she started down the hall.

He didn’t try to stop her, and she made it through the rest of the ship without bumping into anyone else. It wasn’t long before she spotted the familiar path leading to the cockpit.

The mechanical whirs and beeps flooded out the open doors as she approached, heading up a slight ramp to get there. Inside, the room was all curved walls and ceiling, with different computer setups

lining the way to the front, where the main controls were located. There were two seats there, and the one on the left was currently occupied by a tall blond woman.

Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and at Delaney's approach, she tilted her head, scanning her with fuchsia eyes rimmed in dark blue.

Fawna never dressed in Teller uniforms, opting instead to keep a more casual appearance. This made sense, considering the woman wasn't technically a member of the army, but a freelancer. She got to use Ruckus's ship in return for taking his jobs above any others. The two were good friends anyway, so the arrangement was more for show than anything.

"It's nice to have you back," Fawna said, smile stretching wide when Delaney dropped down into the empty leather seat next to her. "I hear we've got some rotten cargo. Need me to stop anywhere, drop it off?"

"If you're referring to the Zane"—Delaney leaned forward to peer out the large glass screen before her—"then no. He stays, actually."

"Hmm." Fawna clucked her tongue. "Gotten used to having him around, huh? Can't really blame you. All that muscle . . . and the hair . . . that smoky way he talks . . ."

Delaney stared at her, completely forgetting about the frozen scenery they were speeding past outside.

"Close your mouth, Lissa," she teased. "I've got eyes, you know. And just because I like the sound of his voice, doesn't mean I have to like the things he says with it. I don't. He's sort of got a reputation for being a bastard."

"I can't really argue with you there."