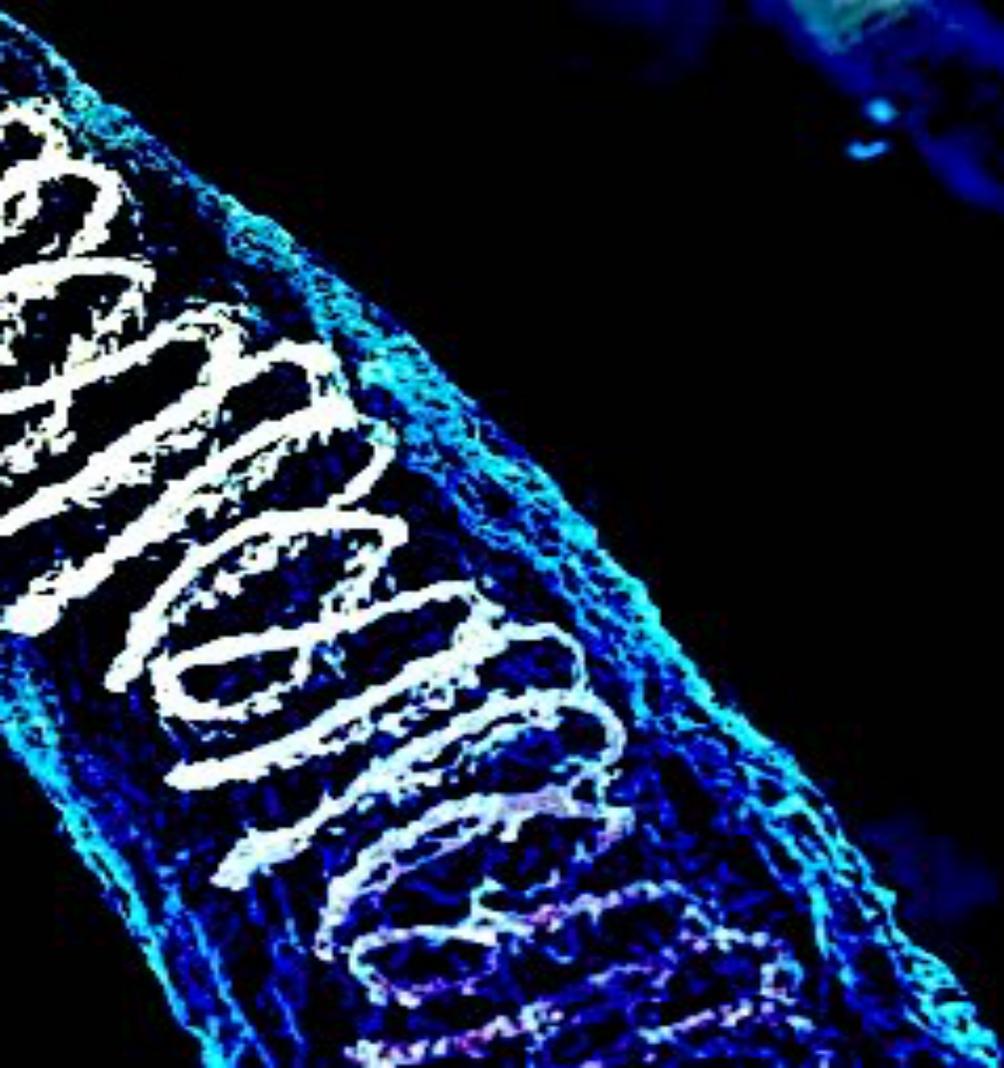


Hollow Ryan

XXXV



XXY

Hollow Ryan

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For
Sophia and Connie

Hollow. For so long, it was the only way to describe the feeling in my chest. The only way to explain what felt like an absence of half my heart, my mind, my body, and my soul. All of my life, I was plagued by the feeling of missing something so important, I could not possibly go on without it.

Without him.

Now I did not have to.

Eighteen years they kept us apart. Putting an entire ocean between us in fear of what we could do together. Apart, our accomplishments were no small feat. Together, we were a threat too great to risk.

But they failed.

We were together. Whole for the first time since we were born. My heart beat as everyone else's did and my soul reached out to his, knowing that we were one in the same.

And no one could take that away from us.

1

January 1, 2340
Valor Prestige Hospital
Valor, America

“Scalpel,” the cold voice instructed, her long fingers uncurled for the instrument. The thin, shiny metal was placed into her hand, feeling no heavier than a stylus.

Never taking her eyes from the distended stomach, once the weight of the scalpel settled into her palm, she got to work. True to her nature, the monitors on the wall behind the patient’s head did not receive an ounce of her attention. Nurses were prepped and ready on either side of her as she made the necessary incision all down the stomach. As soon as the flesh was parted, they were able to see the two infants huddled against one another, their tiny legs curled up to their chests. Bathed in the surgical lights, the cameras ringing the circular bulbs captured the image in perfect clarity.

Without pause, each nurse reached inside and grasped a tiny human being in their arms. They were technically born at the same time, without even a second difference. As soon as the gloved hands touched their tiny, thin bodies, a voracious scream erupted from both infants simultaneously.

On either side, more nurses and interns were removing the afterbirth and cutting off the umbilical cords. As soon as they were finished, the infants were carried to either side of the room to begin the process of registering them. The doctor did not care to watch. Other doctors would care for the babies. Her patient was their mother.

Just as she was suturing up the stomach of the surprisingly calm

mother, the nurse to her left spoke up with obvious hesitation. "Doctor Carson? Her chart said that the infants were monozygotic male..."

"Yes. Lucky they weren't siamese, too. They did not split until the twelfth day after fertilization." Doctor Carson had not even taken her eyes from her work. "Why do you ask?"

There was a silence so long that the doctor was nearly finished with her sutures before the nurse answered, "Because this one is female."

The room grew silent and still. Even the babies were no longer piercing the air with their voices.

"Impossible," stated the nurse on the right side of the room. "This one is male."

Until now, the mother had been lying still and silent on the table. Now, she pushed herself up onto her elbows and her blue eyes shot from one child to another, though she couldn't see the very telling difference. Yet, displayed on the screens above each child, the truth was available for all to see. It was then that she made the very necessary decision.

"Catalogue them. Quickly. Something must be different about them."

It was the command needed and the medical team quickly set about doing their work. In practiced moves, they had measured the weight and length of each child, finding that the boy was two centimeters longer. Digital scanners were presented and prints of their feet and hands were taken. The results of which were entered immediately into the Citizens of Earth Database.

Then came the most telling of tests. Though young, a tiny vial of blood was drawn from each child. Like their prints, their DNA was automatically entered into the Database. That is when the entire room stilled once more.

"That is not possible!" Doctor Carson gasped, the first to speak in the long silence.

In the octagonal room, eight screens were available to look at. Two, on the wall behind the patient's head, were strictly used to monitor the procedure. Only cameras ringing the lights could project on those screens.

Two more screens existed on either side of the room and two more were presented on the wall the doctor normally had her back to. Each one presented the same data. The *exact* same data.

"Their DNA is an exact genetic match," whispered the nurse holding the twin boy.

"That is not possible!" the doctor exclaimed. In her mind she was flipping through a medical book describing unusual twinning. "Only eight known cases have ever presented themselves in cross-gender monozygotic twins. All of them would have been Klinefelter Syndrome males except that the female took the extra X chromosome, leaving each of them perfectly normal."

"Is that not the case here?" demanded the mother.

"No. And yes," the doctor nearly whispered. Her eyes could not be torn from the screens as she studied the DNA results. "Obviously the sperm carried the XXY chromosome. However, if the twins split the genetic material and ended up with two different genders, then they would have at least one different karyotype. Your twins ... do not."

"Their DNA would not be an exact match if even a karyotype was off," announced one of the interns.

"How is that possible, then?" growled the patient. Again her eyes darted between her children who were kept an entire room apart.

"I ... I'm not sure. But it is ... so fascinating."

Doctor Carson was not aware of the steel forming in her patient's eyes as she said the words with a breath of longing. Nothing was more formidable than a mother trying to protect her young. A mother with as much power as Leader Lucia Balere was even more dangerous to come up against.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to the doctor and she whirled away from the screens and pointed at two interns. "I want to see their chromosomes on these front screens." Pointing at two nurses, she ordered, "Full body scans of each of them. Locate their hearts." Turning at last to one more nurse, she said with a wide smile, "Pull up their prints on those screens."

Everyone looked at her questioningly, but with orders given they were quick to act. Lucia Balere, however, sat up and stared about her with narrowed eyes. The situation suddenly seemed ominous.

"Stop." Though her voice was quiet, every person in the room froze in place. Including the two nurses carrying her children towards the door. Satisfied, Leader Balere looked to her doctor with a commanding air.

"What is it you think you know?"

Biting her bottom lip, Carson's eyes darted around her frozen staff and lingered on the fascinating twins. At last, her hazel eyes reached their mother's heavy gaze and she explained, "If I am right, they are Mirror Twins, as well as ... what they are. If my beliefs are correct, one

twin's heart will be on the right side of their chest. Meaning that their other organs will also mirror the normal one's."

"You don't need a full-body scan to know that for certain. Just listen to their heartbeats."

"But, Leader Balere!"

"No. There is already too much documentation I cannot take back. Listen to their heartbeats. That is all you are permitted."

For a moment, rebellion flared in the austere doctor's eyes. With a malignant look from Leader Balere, however, the rebellion died faster than a blown out flame. Looking to the nurses holding the twins, she nodded towards the Leader, indicating that they were to fall to heel.

Immediately, they retreated to their sides of the room and took out stethoscopes that had not been used in years. With such harmless scans, they were unneeded technology. But, due to the Leader's instructions, they could no longer document their findings on the twins.

Even as the nurses were performing their jobs, Lucia looked to the doctor who had slowly become an ally throughout her pregnancy. "So tell me, why do you think they have the same DNA?"

Carson bit her lip and she glanced at the woman who was meant to bring up the chromosomes. From the corner of her eye, she saw Lucia nod her consent. Immediately, the genetic material was displayed on the screens. Just as if she was in a classroom, Doctor Carson turned and pointed out what Lucia did not notice.

"XXY. That is the chromosome that your twins share. No differences. This should mean that you have two sons with Klinefelter Syndrome. Obviously, that's not correct. I wonder, however, that if they are genetic mirrors, if that includes the chromosome. If they are true mirrors, it stands to reason that, perhaps they each suppressed a single part of their chromosome. Though I do not know how that is even possible."

"Doctor Carson? The girl ... her heart is on the right side of her chest."

While Leader Balere was staring at her daughter, Carson turned immediately to the other nurse she had instructed earlier. "The prints! Quickly!"

In seconds, the prints were pulled up on screen. Per Doctor Carson's instructions, the girl's prints were flipped and placed right atop her twins. It was true: they were mirror images. Every line of his right hand matched her left exactly. Silence descended upon the room as everyone studied the screens, absorbing the proof of such

impossibilities.

"Put the girl up for adoption. My son's heartbeat is on the left, correct?" Lucia finally stated. As one, the medical staff turned to her with the same shocked expressions.

"Leader Balere, I don't think you understand the magnitude--"

"I understand perfectly and my children will not spend their lives as lab rats. I have a reputation for doing whatever is necessary when the situation calls for it. This is necessary."

"But, Leader Balere, your children are a genetic breakthrough--"

"And I don't care." Lucia Balere captured the eyes of every person in that room with her own sharp irises. What she was about to do must be done. "You've all heard stories of twins. Fairy tales from long ago of telepathy and powers between them. With what you know of my children, do you deny that the chances of them being in danger are great?"

No one said a word. They knew it was true.

"I will not put them at risk if the situation can be avoided. My son is the most normal of the two. He shall stay with me. My daughter, however, will have to be placed through an adoption agency. For their own safety, they must never meet. They must be kept separated at all costs. For their own good."

"Give us the room," Doctor Carson suddenly ordered. The nurses looked around cautiously, unsure as to the validity of the order.

"Leave us," Leader Balere confirmed. Settling the infants in their clear containers on either side of the room, each nurse quickly exited the octagonal birthing chamber.

As soon as they were gone, Carson rounded on her patient. "You cannot give her to someone who does not know of her condition. A stranger will not know how to react to her. There are a million other factors to the survival of both of them and you cannot separate them without expecting consequences. If you are set in doing this, I cannot stop you. But I implore you to give her to no one ignorant of who and what she is."

Lucia listened carefully to the physician's words, hands folded across her recently-covered stomach. "Then why don't you take her?"

Expecting resistance, Doctor Carson already had her mouth open to deliver another onslaught of objection, only to be brought up short. Staring wide-eyed at the woman who led her country, she could not believe what she was offering. "You ... you are not serious?"

"I'm not? As my brother oft informs me, I was never one for jests.

You know all there is to know about her, thus far. Can you deny that your salary would not be fit enough to raise a child? Also, you possess a husband of means." The offer hung in the air, poised on the edge of a blade. Lucia could almost see the decision tipping in one direction and then the other.

Doctor Carson licked her lips nervously, unsure what to say. At last, however, she answered as her conscience dictated. "I cannot say that being under my care would do your daughter any good..."

"You mean: it is too dangerous for you to keep her and you know it. Not only that, but you cannot expect to raise her without turning her exactly into the lab rat I expressly forbid her to be. You must face this, Sina," Lucia whispered to the woman who oft held her life in her hands. "Ignorance is her best defense."

At last, Doctor Carson sighed and bowed her head in acceptance. The choice had been decided at last.

One child was to stay.

One child was to be sent away.

For the first time since their conception, they would be separated.

And if all went according to plan, they would never be reunited.

2

*September 6, 2357
Genesis North Public School
Genesis, America*

The story was as old as time. A fairytale from her childhood that she seemed to recall in the oddest of moments. With the sunlight streaming in through the darkened windows of the school, it defied reason as much as the characters from the story. The light was as bright as the hope that rested in them. Just as the windows were as dark as the shadow of their fate.

The story of Adam and Eve begins with the dust. For that is from which Adam was created. God fashioned the element of earth and took the breath of life from air, breathing it into his creation. The man absorbed these gifts and life was given unto him. Rising from the dust, God did not wish for his creation to live in such barren lands. And so he called upon the earth to create a beautiful garden that was called Eden.

In giving a home to his new creation of man, God also chose to make Eden a safe haven for all the treasures of the universe. Including planting the immortal Tree of Life at its center. Acting as its guard, there also stood the Tree of Knowledge; a dangerous tree meant to hinder those who did not know of its potency.

Man, who was given the name of Adam, was warned against eating of either fruit. For both had punishments as well as rewards. Trusting in God, Adam agreed to never eat of the fruit.

Days passed as Adam did as God asked, tending the garden of Eden and naming the creatures he came upon. Yet, in many ways, the wondrous

creatures could not sate his desire for a companion. He wanted someone of equal status to stand at his side and help to name the animals and work amongst the plants.

Unwilling to have Adam be lonely in such paradise, God placed Adam in a sleep. While Adam was unaware, God took from his side his rib. Thus was woman created. Taken from the side of her companion only for the purpose of placing a companion at his side.

Ari stopped there as she always did. Her thoughts lingered on the last line, the words drifting through her mind like a dream. So often did she recite them that they felt more a part of her soul than any words had a right to. And she would never know why.

Taken from the side of her companion only for the purpose of placing a companion at his side.

The word *companion* continued to reverberate through her mind and a tightness formed in her chest. At its center, the hollowness throbbed, keeping in time with her defective heartbeat. It pulsed with its own life in the space of time where another beat should have been and somehow made it nearly impossible to breathe. Like that emptiness was pushing against her lungs, making it difficult to inflate them. Pain blossomed beneath her ribs and a hand crept to the right side of her chest while she tried her best to suppress the tears that built in her eyes.

So lost in that agonizing hollowness was she, Ari didn't even realize where she was anymore.

"Earth to Ari. C'mon. Elevator's here," Eila said at her side.

Ari shook her head and released a heavy exhale. The tightness vanished and the tears were pushed back with a relentless determination. She'd been through this often enough—if her whole life counted—that it was almost easy to dispel of the hollowness once she was loosed from its grip. Silently, she filed into the Senior elevator that would take them straight to Floor 19 without a single stop along the way.

Much like everything else in their school, their destination was so automatic that there weren't even buttons inside the elevator to make any other floor an option. The same was true of the Junior elevator that stopped on Floor 16 and every other assigned elevator.

Just as the doors were closing, a guy just passing through the front doors broke into a sprint. "Hold the Senior!" he yelled, using the slang term for the elevator.

Ari's fingers twitched, torn between making him wait five minutes and actually doing something nice for a change. She didn't have either option. Easy-going and generous, it took no thought whatsoever for Eila to throw out an arm and force the doors to ease back into their wide-open position. Practically stumbling into the elevator, carried too far from the force of his momentum, Nick sighed and a wide grin spread across his face.

"Thanks, munchkin," Nick said to Eila even as his breathing evened out.

"No problem," Eila murmured in a barely audible voice. She ducked her head and stared at the mirrored doors of the elevator. Though, every couple of seconds, Ari caught her stealing glances at Nick. And that was all it took.

Ari had just opened her mouth to say something to him when she felt Eila's nails dig into her arm. Opening her mouth indignantly, she turned to see Eila's reflection glaring at her knowingly. Letting her own expression slip into a glower, Ari snatched her arm out of the smaller girl's grip.

Just then, a soft ding announced the arrival of the elevator on the nineteenth floor and Eila and Ari quickly exited the elevator before being run over by everyone behind them. Nick, too, made a hurried retreat, heading in the opposite direction of the two girls. Ari's narrowed eyes followed him while her lips pursed into a clear sign of malcontent.

"I don't know why you allow him to call you names," she muttered to her friend.

Eila sighed and grabbed Ari's arm before turning her towards her locker. "You do too know why."

"Have you ever thought that speaking up in your own defense might be a more respectable way to get his attention?"

"What's the point in getting his attention when I'm not the person whose attention he wants?" Eila remarked. The hurt was hidden well beneath her casual voice, but Ari knew her well enough to know it was there.

"Don't start," Ari warned, a finger raised menacingly in the air. "You have to quit thinking that."

Eila sighed, "It's okay, Ari. I'm not blind or delusional, okay. I know Nick likes you and not me. I'm okay with you guys ... you know...."

"Except that you *are* delusional. Nick does not like me and I *certainly* have no feelings for him. Never have. Never will. And nothing would

make me happier than seeing my best friend with the guy of her dreams. Even though he's a complete moron and you are undeniably incredible."

A small smile teased Eila's lips until it broke across her face and she ducked her head out of Ari's vision. "Either you're a really good liar, or you're the most unnatural girl on the planet."

Ari snorted. "I'm taller than any girl you've ever met. My hair will never grow past my shoulders. And you're the only person to know where my heart truly is. You tell me: liar or unnatural?" Even as she said it, her left hand reached up to feel the beat in the right side of her chest.

Eila's caramel eyes glanced up to meet Ari's almost black irises and her smile lost its amusement and became tender. At last, she said, "You seriously do need a haircut. You look weird with longer hair."

Ari's left side of her mouth pulled up into a smile, her right side barely twitching at the same time. It was one of many oddities Ari could call her own. But it was also the least abnormal.

"C'mon, I'm starving. And I can smell the blueberry muffins from here," Ari remarked, indicating the kiosk at the end of the hall. Laughing, Eila nodded and the two girls hurried to the end of the hall before the chimes told them to get to class.

The kiosk was still setting up, meaning that their coffee wasn't yet completely brewed. Those waiting for it formed a thick pack along the walls, making Ari glad that she didn't care for coffee. Eila, however, would rather risk being late to class than forego the kiosk's signature blend. Which meant Ari would probably be late, too.

It was as they were standing in line that the panic enveloped Ari. She was running a hand through her hair, irritated at the slowly moving kiosk patrons, when a chunk of brown locks fell out into her hands. Her eyes grew so wide, her sockets looked like black holes. In an instant, however, she darted out of the line and ran to the nearest women's bathroom.

"Dammit," she growled as she slammed a stall door closed behind her. Another lock of her shoulder-length mane fell to the floor beside her and she glared at it in reproach.

That her hair was forever short was well-known. What was not common knowledge, however, was that Ari had never cut her hair in her entire life. No sharp instrument or laser had ever come near the brown follicles. It just so happened that about once every two months, when her hair reached her shoulders, it would suddenly fall away.

What would be left was a boy-cut that looked surprisingly good on her. But never before had she dealt with it at school.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Ari cursed under her breath as the locks continued to fall away from her skull. She ran her hands through her hair to hurry along the process, but it rarely seemed to help.

After what felt like half an hour, that was actually more like five minutes, the hair ceased falling around her shoulders. Moving with the speed of sound, Ari tore off her vest and ripped her shirt over her head in order to shake all of the hair onto the floor. Unable to adequately clean off her shirt, however, she began to curse like a truck driver.

Suddenly, the first bell chimed throughout the school and Ari knew she had no choice. Grabbing her plaid vest, she buttoned it up over her bare chest, leaving her skinny arms exposed. Dressed like this, it was obvious how thin and scrawny she was as well as how absolutely flat-chested she appeared to be. But she had no choice.

Striding from the bathroom, she caught only a glimpse of the short, thick hair that had the bangs cut at an angle across her forehead. Just as it always was.

Ignoring the rush of students on their way to class, Ari stopped at her locker to throw her shirt inside and grab the tablet that the school had issued her. Then she made her way back to Eila, her hand rubbing self-consciously at the back of her neck. Even as she found her place against the wall with her best friend, she was aware of people staring at her. More odd than that, no one said a word.

"Oh, wow, Ari." Eila's voice was filled with a sudden awe.

Ari couldn't meet her gaze and the spot on the back of her neck was turning red from where she continued to rub it. "I ... couldn't deal with the length anymore." In no way could Ari Keir ever be seen as a convincing liar.

"You look just like him," Eila whispered, seeming not to hear what her best friend just said.

Ari's eyes snapped up at that, though, and confusion flooded her dark irises. "Who? What are you talking about?"

"Cai Balere," said a familiar voice. Turning, Ari didn't even have to look up to catch Nick's gray eyes. Holding out his tablet to her, he continued, "For the first time in his life, the son of the Supreme Commander has been photographed by the media. At his own request. He's announcing that his eighteenth birthday will be spent in Valor."

Nick needn't have said a word; Ari's eyes were already pouring over his tablet, absorbing every word. They made no difference until

she came to his birthday. Her blood turned to ice as her eyes locked on the date *January 1, 2358*.

Snatching the tablet from Nick's hands, she scrolled to the top of the article. There rested the image of the most elusive man in history. The Commander's protected, secreted son. Cai Balere.

He had the same haircut. The same eyes. Lips. Nose. Ears. Ari's eyes began to water even as the chasm inside of her pretended closure for the first time in all her existence.

And on the right side of her chest a faint echo seemed to complete the faltering beat.

3

September 6, 2357
Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland

"How dare you?" his mother snarled at him. Cai sat there quietly, suppressing the rage that was scratching just beneath the surface. "After all I have done to protect you? Keep you safe? And this is how you repay me?"

"Cut the boy some slack—"

"You stay out of this!" Lucia snapped at her brother. "It was probably your idiotic idea to begin with!"

Cai's jaw strained against his skin but it was the only show of movement. It was something unique about him, that when he was at his most vicious, he sat perfectly still. Not a twitch or shift of his features. He barely even blinked when he was filled with such rage.

"How could you do this, Cai? You know what this means—"

"Do I?" he finally asked in a low, quiet voice. "Do I really, *Commander*? How could I *possibly* know what this means when it hasn't been drilled into my head for the past eighteen years?"

"Do not take that tone of voice with me. Don't you even dare it."

"Or what?" Cai hissed, getting to his feet. Leaning on his fists, every knuckle was white with rage.

Lucia glared across the table at her son, wishing for all she was worth that he was within striking distance. The Commander had no qualms with sharp discipline when the situation called for it. But Cai was too old for spankings, now, and a sharp smack across the face just might remind him what respect his mother had earned.

"I will have Dana kill the article. Then we will make amends with the publishers," she stated coolly.

"Now, Lucia—" Val began in a cajoling voice.

"You will not!" Cai yelled across the room, ignoring his uncle as much as his mother was.

"I will!" she screamed back. "You are *not* having your birthday party in a foreign country. Especially not in America. And in no way shall this be a public event."

"It's *my* birthday. I have every right to celebrate it how I choose."

"No. It is the day that *I* gave birth to you. *We* will celebrate how *I* choose. End of discussion." With that, Lucia turned on her heel and headed for the door of the large chamber.

Turning his head, Cai spoke just loud enough for her to hear him in the echoing chamber. "Just because you walk out doesn't mean the decision has been made. I will do what I want, Mother. And not even you can stop me."

Val straightened in his chair, knowing the full-tilt assault that could be launched in response to that statement. Lucia, too, halted in her tracks. Her back was ramrod straight and her blue eyes glared ahead at the doors she really ought to be exiting out of. Instead, she turned slowly in place to eye her son up and down.

In the past month, she had grown to despise looking at him. Not because his narrow face and dark eyes were anything less than handsome. Not because his semi-full lips were identical to his father's or because he had his grandmother's ears. Nor was it because he stood five inches taller than herself, reaching his full height at six foot. No, the reason Lucia hated to look at her son was because she was forced to realize every time that he was *not* a little boy anymore. Cai had grown up.

Walking slowly, Lucia was careful to keep the extraordinarily long dining table between them as she faced off with her son once more. In as calm a voice as she could manage, she explained, "Cai, I have spent the last eighteen years doing whatever is necessary in regard to your wellbeing. It is why you have grown up unmolested by the media and your face has never been splashed across the tabloids. I've done my best to keep you from any type of exposure. Which is why no one has ever threatened your safety. You have had a good life and as normal a one as I could make it.

"But what you did today was to throw it all back in my face. It is disgraceful and I've done nothing to earn it. I would like to kill the

article. But if you are set in having a celebration in a land you barely know, with people you've never met, and put your life at risk for the sake of proving you are your own man, then I cannot stop you. Do as you will, but expect nothing from me in this venture." Lucia did not turn back this time and kept walking right out the door.

A long, heavy silence descended upon the room and Cai sank slowly and unsteadily back into his chair. Chills seemed to run up his spine and the hair on the back of his neck stood straight up. His mother was not one for giving in, but, when she did, it was not with grace. Nor was it without the guilt she was capable of draping him in.

The remark about giving birth to him had been especially low. He knew better than anyone what she had been saying in the shadows of those words. And the guilt riddled his body even more as he thought of the one who had not survived.

A hollow void seemed to fill his chest as Cai thought of him. The twin brother that shared everything with him from the moment they were conceived. Every inhale and exhale. Every sound of their mother's heartbeat. Growing with him. Evolving with him. But he did not live with him.

Cai could only go back so far in his memories, but the ache in his chest was eternal. It pressed against his lungs and pain lanced through his chest. The erratic heartbeat was screaming in rage, desperate to fill the void where another beat should have been. Battering at his insides, the hollowness took on the acuteness of agony and suddenly Cai could take it no longer.

Shooting to his feet, Cai strode in quick, long steps towards the door. His forgotten uncle watched with furrowed brows. "Cai?" he called, confusion lacing through the air.

Without turning back, the seventeen year old ordered, "Release the article." To himself, he added, "It's what my brother would have wanted."

"How angry was she?" Amaris asked, draping a cloth around her best friend's neck whilst the stylist was retrieving the scissors.

"You know the tales of dragons breathing fire? Something akin to that," Cai remarked in a dry voice. It had only been minutes since he faced off with his mother, but, as usual, Amaris had a way of making the worst things seem like a pebble in his shoe.

"You did the right thing, Cai. It's your eighteenth birthday. The day you officially become a man. She needs to start seeing you as one. This

will prove it to her once and for all: you are in charge of your own life.”

“My mother? Never. When I am thirty and have twins of my own, she still won’t see it.”

Amaris paused in surprise, her wide brown eyes locked on his face. “What did you just say?”

An unfamiliar heat spread through Cai’s skin and he refused to look at her. “What?”

“You know what! Are you thinking about him again? Did she bring him up? Is that what this whole party thing is about? You have to stop doing this to yourself, Cai. You lived. That means your life is—”

“Stop. I know, Ris. I know. Everything that you’re about to say, I’ve heard a thousand times before. It just doesn’t change anything, okay.”

Pressing her lips together, Amaris knew better than to say any more. Cai was sensitive about his twin. Always had been. Ris was his best friend and as close as a person could get to him. But it still wouldn’t be anywhere as close to the ghost of the brother that lived in his subconscious. Until the day that Cai died, his brother would forever be a part of every decision he ever made.

“So, how do we want it? The same as usual?” Gia, the stylist, asked as she walked back into the room.

“The usual,” Cai confirmed, staring studiously into the mirror.

After a few minutes of the Gia running her hands through Cai’s thick hair, Amaris asked casually, “So, Valor? There a plane ticket in it for me?”

The figure in the mirror smiled, only the right side of his lips pulling upwards. “Reserved First Class. Right next to me. Just like always,” he promised.

“Sweet. I wonder what the food will be like. My dad’s private jet had the best chef ever.”

Cai shook his head; or would have if the stylist hadn’t formed a vice-grip on his hair at the last minute. “Going to America for the first time in your life, and the only thing you’re wondering about is plane food?”

“Well ... duh!”

“You’re hopeless.”

“I am not. I’m ... content. We’re going on an adventure. What could be better than that?”

“Just as long as you realize my mother may decapitate me for going through with this,” Cai warned.

"I'll hold the basket to catch your head," Ris confirmed.

"You are all set, Mister Balere," Gia informed him. The haircut had taken less than five minutes.

"Thank you, Gia," Cai replied in a considerate tone. Even as Gia retrieved a broom, he stood up and shook off the stray follicles. Turning to his friend, he said, "I'm going to go take a shower. Make yourself at home."

Amaris smiled. "Don't I always?" She didn't wait for a reply before disappearing out of the large bathroom and heading straight for the media room.

Cai shook his head slightly and went into his room to retrieve clean clothing while Gia swept up his cut hair. He was just passing the tinted windows when movement caught his eye. Nearly black eyes locked onto those reflecting back at him and a sealant seemed to pour over the chasm in his chest. A temporary fix, but one that helped to relieve the persistent ache.

Staring at the man in that mirror, he could almost pretend that a faint beat slipped into the space needed by his defective heartbeat.

4

September 7, 2357

Residence of Eila Maible

Genesis, America

“Son of a—!” Ari cursed as someone bumped her left hand, causing her drink to slosh over the side of the cup. Setting it down on a table, she flicked the liquid from her hand. In an instant, she could feel the fluid becoming a sticky mess all over her palm and wrist. Abandoning the drink entirely, she wove through the crowded penthouse to the nearest bathroom.

Ari never was a fan of parties. The antics and dancing with people shoving each other and the cacophony of different music being blared in each and every room. Even if the walls were soundproofed beforehand, that much noise was bound to create a drumming pollution throughout the residence. Soon enough, they’d have Peace Officers knocking on the door and asking that the premises be vacated.

Disgust rushed up Ari’s esophagus and lingered in the back of her mouth when she walked into the dimly-lit bathroom to find two separate couples making out. Two people sat on the edge of the spa tub while two more were pressed against the vanity. Their tongues were jammed so far down each other’s throat, she had to wonder how they could even breathe.

Beyond irritated, Ari rubbed a finger along the silver band on her right ring finger. Since she stayed at Eila’s so often, her key was programmed for certain things in Eila’s house as well as her own. Now, it took the lights from dim to blinding in .03 seconds.

“What the hell?” exclaimed the guy on the edge of the tub. Everyone

throughout the room threw hands up to shield their eyes.

“Bathrooms are meant to be occupied by one person at a time. Right now, that’s me.” The left side of Ari’s mouth was lifted in a fake, sarcastic smile and all four people glared at her as they exited the bathroom. As soon as the door was shut, Ari touched the ring again and the door became impenetrable.

Taking a deep breath, Ari held it all the while she washed her hands. Her mind was racing, as it had been for the past thirty-eight hours. The only image to ever be released of Cai Balere, and she had to learn that he looked almost exactly like her. Not only that, but their birthday was the exact same day. Though she knew it was probably just coincidence, she couldn’t help but think that there was something ... not right about the situation.

From the time she saw his picture yesterday morning, Cai Balere had not left her mind. She couldn’t refocus her mind on anything else. It even got to the point where she was using her school-issued tablet to research him.

Even as she rubbed her hands raw under the hot water, Ari was going over every detail of Cai’s life that was actually common knowledge. Regretfully, it wasn’t much. Yet, it was also just enough.

Cai Balere was born in the early morning hours of January 1, 2340. The same as Ari. His birth was a C-section at Valor Prestige Hospital. Ari was born at Valor Prestige. And it just so happened that Lucia Balere had been carrying twins.

There was just one problem with Ari’s half-cocked, wild-eyed idea. Lucia Balere gave birth to twin *boys*. One of which survived only fifteen minutes after birth. Whatever theory Ari had already concocted for herself, it was obviously wrong.

Exhaling at last, Ari ordered the hot water to turn off and she dried her red hands gingerly on a hand towel. Even that took several minutes as her dark eyes were locked on the person in the mirror. Unconsciously, Ari brought a hand up to run slowly through her hair. Cai had had a similar hairstyle in the picture, though it was a bit overgrown. The photo, itself, was from three weeks ago. Meaning that, by the time Ari’s hair reached her shoulders, Cai would be in serious need of a haircut.

Stop! Stop it right now! Ari suddenly ordered herself.

Glaring into the mirror, she tried to force herself into believing she was wrong. There was no relation between them. How could there be? Yes, he’d had a twin. But his twin had died minutes after birth. That

had nothing to do with Ari. It was impossible. Ari was an only child who was put up for adoption the very day she was born. No link existed between herself and Cai Balere.

“ARI OPEN UP!” Eila screamed just outside the bathroom door, pounding on it for good measure. The music had to be deafening out there.

Ari sighed again, for the first time reproachful that her key was entered into the penthouse’s controls. Since she didn’t technically live there, but she was able to control certain elements of the house, her location was always monitored. And it could always be used by a member of the household to track her down. It’s why she always lost at games of hide-n-seek with Eila.

Knowing that Eila would just override her key if she didn’t comply, Ari barely brushed the ring on her right hand and the door leapt wide open, allowing the music to blast inside and cause Ari’s eardrums to thrum. Waiting outside the bathroom was an anxious-looking Eila. It didn’t take Ari a single guess to know what that look meant. Nick was here.

Ari could not handle this right now. She knew it the moment Eila bit into her bottom lip, her eyes wide and pleading. Hell, she knew it the moment she spilled her drink. All while she was washing her hands. Even before she showed up and realized there was another party underway. It was too much and she couldn’t deal with it. Not now.

“It’s about time!” Eila exclaimed, having to shout even louder as a powerful guitar riff blasted out of the walls that were displaying the music video at three different angles.

Ari walked right past her. And though she’d desperately wanted to spend the night in Eila’s guest room, with all that was happening, she just couldn’t deal with it. All she wanted was to be alone.

“Nick is here and I need your help. Do I look okay? What do I say if he talks to me?”

The hollowness choked Ari’s throat, making it impossible to respond. They had reached the door before Ari finally gained her voice. All the while, Eila was berating her for not listening whilst simultaneously fretting over some stupid guy. It was no wonder that, when she finally was able to face her friend, her patience had vanished.

“Eila! He’s just a guy! Not some magical god sent to make your fantasies come true, okay?” she snapped.

For a moment, all Ari could see was the unfathomable hurt in Eila’s

eyes. But the spunky young woman pushed it back and raised her chin. Her eyes became cold as she met her friend's unwavering gaze.

"Sorry. Just thought you would act like my best friend for a little while. I mean, I know it's not really your thing, but..."

Ari felt the sting keenly. Which is why she couldn't stop herself from shooting back, "And I'm sorry that, when I'm going through something, my best friend would rather throw a party than help me with my issues."

Shaking her head, Ari didn't even pause to see Eila's expression before she exited the penthouse. And in the lengthy corridor, the sudden silence rushed at her from all sides. At last, she was alone. But it didn't feel at all how she wanted it to.

September 7, 2357

Rooftop of Genesis NW Building 5

Genesis, America

Like many buildings in the Northwest Quadrant of Genesis, the Bus Stops were on the roof. Only the shabbier parts of town used the earth-bound vehicles that couldn't hover more than a yard off the ground. That discordant part of town was actually Ari's destination. Every time Ari left Eila's, she felt as if she was sinking into a mire. From drifting effortlessly down from a mountain top, hitting solid ground, and then slowly being trapped by the muck and refuse that was where she was now located. And, to think, it only took an hour-long bus ride to make it so.

Feeling about as low as she could go, Ari crossed her arms tightly over her chest as she walked quickly to the waiting booth. Only if someone was inside would the bus appear. No point in wasting the energy to go to every rooftop all over the Northwest Quadrant when no one was there.

A slight breeze blew across the rooftop, causing goosebumps to blossom on her skin. It had been a warm, bright day but was soon turning into a chilly night. One of few ways to tell that winter would be arriving well and early this year. Something Ari was not at all looking forward to, despite the fact that it announced the impending arrival of her eighteenth birthday.

Moving from her chest, she wrapped her arms tightly across her bare midriff. She'd worn another vest to Eila's party but it was much shorter and would barely cover her chest if she actually had breasts. As

it was, the black leather covered her only as far down as her ribs. And the tight pants she wore hugged her hips in a way that was provocative. Too provocative, for Ari's taste; but it was Eila's party and she had allowed herself to be dressed for the occasion. Now, with the breeze nipping at her bare flesh, she regretted it.

Suddenly, the scent of rain made Ari stop in her tracks. The cleanliness of it tickled her nose, drawing on a memory as old as time. Ari's eyes drifted shut and her shoulders hunched in on herself. She was trying to catch the memory. It was as elusive as it was old. Something from so long ago, she couldn't possibly remember it.

But she did.

Ice water hit her face. One drop and then another. It was starting off slow but promised a real downpour later. Ari's hand was held by an adult. A severe looking woman. Distaste etched her features. She was glad to be rid of the whiny child. The girl who cried about how hollow she felt. That little girl who could not sleep without someone in the bed beside her. Oh yes, it was good that Ari was to be gone from them. And Ari knew exactly how this woman felt. After all, Ari's own parents did not want her. How could the people at the orphanage?

Ari gasped in the sweet air, tasting the hint of cool moisture on her tongue. Her eyes were still half-lidded as she strode to the edge of the roof, her face lifted to catch as much of the breeze on her face as possible. Chills and goosebumps were forgotten in the face of what the rain promised. What it had always promised...

Ari did not understand, at first, when she saw the couple standing beside a parked car. She had seen them only a day or two ago—was it three?—wandering the orphanage. They were looking at all the kids. Youngest ones, mostly. Not big girls like Ari. Just the babies. Wanted one to raise as their own. Just like everyone else who came into the orphanage.

From the time she was just little herself, Ari learned that she wasn't pleasant. Not as far as adoptable kids went. She didn't smile at the adults. She cried too often and whined about the ache in her chest. And she had horrible nightmares about being ripped in half. The orphanage adults said her imagination and temperament were what denied her a chance at a family. By that time, she decided she no longer cared. At least ... that's what she told them.

So why was she out here? Why was she being led through the icy

November rain to the couple's car? What did they want with her? And why were warm, salty teardrops running down her face?

The rain was as close as Ari could come to home. It was the only thing to save her in her ever darkening hours. From that day that she walked slowly and warily through the November rain to the Keirs' vehicle. It was the first time she had been in a vehicle—other than the meandering bus that took the orphans to their doctor appointments—and her new father topped it out at twenty feet. She knew, now, that it was an old junk car. But at that time, it was the most amazing thing in her world. And the nearly-five year old Ari had rolled down her window and hung her head out into the raining atmosphere. Her face was red by the time they reached her new home, the stinging drops had slashed wildly across her face and she had loved every moment of it.

She loved the scent now. It was getting stronger and the breeze had found its way into becoming a full wind. It pulled on the ends of her hair, teasing the short locks up and twisting them around as best as it could. The left side of Ari's mouth pulled up into a big smile and her eyes closed as she leaned ever further into the wind. Closer. Soon the rain would be slashing through the sky, driving home with icy emphasis. And she would welcome it as she always had.

It was the only way she knew when the nightmare was over.

Hot, salty moisture coated her cheeks, her narrow face twisted in terror. There was no way they could have survived. The blaze had been so sudden. So fierce. It tore through their small apartment before engulfing the upper half of the building. Ari was still coughing on the smoke, even through her weeping.

The Peace Officers called her lucky. Ari was the first to smell the smoke. She was the one to call the Emergency Response Technicians. And it was that same nine year old girl who went back to her bedroom and climbed out onto the fire escape. Just as her father had taught her, she climbed all the way down and crossed the street. Not once did she turn back or try to warn everyone else in the building.

Nor did she save anyone's life but her own. It took hours, but the flames ate away the entire top portion of the building ... and weakened the rest enough to where it collapsed. No one survived. Except for Ari Keir who stood across the street and welcomed the rain as it fell heavily on the ashes of what was once her life. Her home.

It didn't stop raining for six days. By the time it ended, Ari's parents were

cremated and she was shipped out of Partisan to go live with her father's reckless younger sister in Genesis. Only when it stopped raining was Ari able to put it behind her.

"Steady," a low, masculine voice said behind her. "Easy now. Why don't you come down off that ledge, hmm?"

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September 7, 2357
Rooftop of Genesis NW Building 5
Genesis, America

Ari had no idea where she was standing until the voice behind her said again, "Come on, now. It's too far a drop and that wind will take you over any minute now."

Her eyes opened slowly, seeing first the buildings ahead of her and to the sides. Lights were dotted all throughout each building surrounding her, just a few bright spots along a black face. Much like she knew this building looked to those looking out their own windows or examining their surroundings from other rooftops. Below her was thirty-five stories and between each one, patrols were zooming and buses were leapfrogging from rooftop to rooftop.

The wind tugged on her again and Ari realized that the stranger was right: if it got strong enough, it wouldn't take much to carry the teenager towards the pavement. Slowly, she bent her legs and eased down until she was sitting on the ledge of the roof, her long legs dangling over the side. Only then did Ari look back to the man who thought her suicidal.

Immediately, Ari's eyes were captured by his sharp blue gaze. Lights from the rooftop were equally as caught and gave his irises an eerie cast. Like the reflection off animal eyes when a light is shined in them. Slowly, the tiny hairs on the back of Ari's neck begin to stand straight up.

When she was 'safely' seated on the ledge, the young man released a small breath of relief. Ari watched his lips as he did so, noting that they

were thinner than her own. Her eyes traveled along his face, noting the straight nose and high cheekbones. His hair, she realized, was darker than hers and was cut in a much shorter style; the tips were drawn forward over his forehead, instead of styled to the left like Ari's bangs.

Letting her eyes drift from his face—which even Ari could not deny was handsome—those dark irises took stock of his body. From what she could tell, he was 187 centimeters, a full ten above Ari's 177. A white t-shirt covered his upper body but was oddly tucked into the old blue jeans he wore. It made it much easier to study the lithe, muscular body he sported. Just as with his eyes, the way he held himself, with his legs spread apart and knees slightly bent, reminded her of an animal. A predator.

Unavoidably, Ari began to wonder about him. His upbringing. What made him so ... tense? Alert to trouble?

Ari didn't feel an ounce of shame for studying him. He was doing the same to her. From the moment she turned her head, his piercing blue eyes were scouring her face, like he was searching for something. They trailed down her thin frame, grazing the bare flesh of her back. Once they took stock of her body, his eyes shot back to her face.

Ari knew that the hair would catch him most off-guard. Though her face was narrow and thin, she knew her features were too feminine for the haircut her body forced upon her. Her semi-full lips, especially, were a decently attractive feature. Or so Eila kept telling her.

Yet, the stranger did not even glance at her hair. As soon as he realized she was watching him, those luminous eyes captured hers yet again. His voice flew through the still night air, slicing through that calm before the storm. "What do you think you are doing?" There was only the slightest edge in his tone. Not enough to rile her, but enough to make her back straighten in reproach.

"Enjoying the sights," she responded. To prove her point, she turned her head again and looked out at the city that was quickly falling to sleep. Only the teenagers would remain awake after midnight. And most of the Northwest teens were a few stories below this night.

"You sure about that? I could've sworn..." He took a few steps closer to her and Ari shot a glance at him from the corner of her eye.

"That I was suicidal? Not quite yet."

"I was rather hoping you would say 'never' but I guess I can work with 'yet'," he remarked in a dry voice. Before Ari had time to respond, he'd leapt up on the ledge as well, swinging his legs over the side in a practiced maneuver.

Tilting her chin up, Ari still watched him from the corner of her eye. She had to be wary of him. He gave off the *edge*. That lithe, predator gracefulness was like a calling card. Any public place he walked into would be vacated as soon as he stepped inside the door. Sitting alone with him on the edge of a thirty-five story building was like brushing past death's kiss: a very narrow escape.

For a long time, they both sat there in silence. The wind picked up until it was whistling between the buildings and throwing back even the ends of the guy's short black hair. Every two seconds, for every pound of her miscalculating heart, Ari glanced his way. Though he hadn't moved since settling into his position, neither had he relaxed around her. Both of them remained in their positions, as taut as piano wire but pretending the casualness of stargazers.

At long last, the thunderclouds moved in over the city and the first icy drop fell from their darkened womb. Ari leaned her upper body back, her head tilted up to catch as much of the rain on her skin as possible. It was purifying, the rain. Nothing in the world could wash her clean like it could. Chemical showers had nothing on nature's own assured form of cleanliness. And, if she was lucky, the scent of the rain would cling to her skin for another day. But only if she got thoroughly soaked.

"I think it's time we got off the roof," the mystery man finally said.

Ari opened her dark eyes, watching with longing as the clouds continued to open up. A wall of rain was coming up from the south and her eyes hungered for the sheet to pound on her skin until it turned red from the sting. But she could not be on the ledge when that sheet hit. To stay was to say that she was suicidal. Which had never actually crossed her mind.

Swinging her legs back around, as effortless as the man beside her, Ari dropped back onto the roof but moved no further. Yet again, she turned to face the oncoming assault, her arms spread wide in welcome. No sound came from behind her, but the steady roar of the oncoming storm approached with a constant pounding, just as if a herd of horses were running as fast as possible across the Great Plains.

"Are you insane?" Again, there was only the slightest edge to his words and Ari's lips twisted into a grimace.

"Possibly." Ari shrugged her shoulders and expected to hear his retreating footsteps. Instead, she got a sigh.

"What are you doing?" Exasperation was starting to cling to each word.

"What does it look like?"

"It looks as if you want to get struck by lightning," he snapped.

The left side of Ari's mouth twitched. "I'm enjoying the weather," she stated proudly. Even as the smile fully formed on her face, she looked over her left shoulder at him. "I don't need a babysitter."

"You need a psychiatrist!"

"So do you. I'm not asking you to stay," Ari retorted.

"The very fact that you're up here requires me to stay."

Again, Ari felt the prickling of the hairs on the back of her neck. So, she was right. The *edge* defined him as much as his sense of duty. Whoever this man was, he was one of the few undesirables in the city. Only certain people were capable of making such a list. All of whom retained the *edge* of a hired killer about them.

Powerful and enigmatic, these creatures were. But as the days flowed into one another, they were seen as the threat their very natures defined them as. That did not change their core beliefs, however, and duty, honor, and justice survived in the very air they breathed. And that was exactly the bond holding the mystery man here with her. His very nature refused to let him leave.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Ari had to call, the pounding was coming ever closer and the wind had reached a whipping speed that allowed it to scream.

"One of what?" The man called back, though he stood only six feet away.

"One of *them*. A soldier!" He couldn't hear the automatic distaste in her voice through the screeching wind, but it was most certainly there. No profession was looked down upon more than the one that relied on violence and opposed peace at every turn. And that's exactly what soldiers seemed to do. After all, it was his kind who had destroyed the coasts of the former United States with their nuclear war. How could anyone choose such a life?

"We have to get off the roof!" the man yelled again, the words whipping from his mouth as the sudden storm grew in effortless ferocity.

As the words left his lips, the sky flashed brightly and Ari tilted her head to see the long fingers of lightning beginning to descend from the clouds. Momentarily blinding her, Ari shook her head even as the thunder rumbled over the city. Sudden storms like this were not at all common. But when they arrived, they could prove to be deadly. If one was stupid enough to stay out in them, anyway.

Then, like a bucket being upended over her head, Ari gasped as the sheet of water engulfed her. Pounding, stinging rain lashed at her skin, feeling like whips against her back. It was a slanted rain and hit her with all of the viciousness it was capable of. So sudden and forceful was it, Ari couldn't even move.

The man was not so paralyzed. Lunging for her, he met the sharp rain head-on in order to grasp her wrist. As soon as his hold on her was secure, he turned with a lightness a man his size should not have on the wet roof. Pulling hard, he dragged Ari a few steps before she could come to herself. And, suddenly, they were both charging for the stairs that would take them back into the building.

Weaving between the vehicles, the man kept his back hunched and Ari followed his example. Lightning flashed across the sky once more and being the tallest, wettest thing on the roof was not a good idea. But being on the move during a storm wasn't all that brilliant, either.

Ari screamed as another arc of light flew from the sky, shooting thousands of bolts of electricity through the parked vehicle they had just passed. And suddenly, a forest of lightning was striking down on vehicles all over the rooftop, trying to taste human flesh. Every few feet, another metal car was being electrocuted and it was in this hellfire of a storm that she was forced to travel with a man she had never met before.

Mystery Man didn't even pause. He pulled even harder on her arm, making her think her shoulder would pop out of place, and crouched even lower. Following behind him, Ari could feel an electric charge all throughout her skin and her eyes were as wide as they could go. Her heart was pounding so fast and hard, it was as if it was making up for not working right in the first place.

At last, the soldier yanked open the door to the dimly-lit stairwell. Without pausing for a second, the guy shoved Ari inside and bolted in after her. The heavy steel door slammed shut and Ari was forced to cover her ears as the sound echoed off the metal stairs. They were safe. Finally.

Both of them stood just behind that door, their chests rising and falling with labored breaths. Ari's lungs felt like they were going to explode from the panic that had gripped her. It didn't help that she could still feel all of the tiny hairs of her body still standing on end from the close proximity of the lightning. Even rubbing her hands over her arms was doing no good to the chilled, wet skin.

"Next time I tell you to get off the roof," the soldier croaked against

the other wall, "just do it."

Ari nodded slowly, still gasping in mouthfuls of air. "I think," she expelled, "I'll do that."

Minutes passed before their breathing had finally evened out and Ari sank to the floor, her shaky legs unwilling to support her body weight a minute longer.

"Get up. We have to get downstairs. That monster is still raging just the other side of this door. And the emergency generators have kicked on in the building. The elevators won't be moving and we've got to warn people that it isn't safe out there. Someone's going to have a lot of house guests tonight."

Ari stared up at him through narrowed eyes. "Who are you?"

"Jace Naois."

"Ari Keir."

6

*September 8, 2357
Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

A fire crackled in the otherwise silent room. Cai had been staring at it for hours. Ever since he woke up at five thirty—his heart racing so fast it was almost impossible to tell it was defective—he hadn't been able to fall back to sleep. The fire didn't actually help, since the orange flashes dancing along the wall reminded him too easily of the dream he'd had. Lightning striking across a single rooftop, searching for him alone...

Another shiver crawled up Cai's spine that he ruthlessly suppressed. Shaking his head, he glanced at the windows on the east side of the room. False dawn hadn't even arrived yet. Nor would it appear for another hour. Yet, in only a few more minutes, his house would be filled with early-morning activity. Especially with the press conference being held at ten.

Cai sighed, mentally reliving the conversation he had *tried* to have with his mother yesterday afternoon. It had not gone as well as he had hoped. But he knew what he was getting into before he even got the picture taken.

"Mother?" Cai called from the study door.

Lucia's head was bent over the desk, her lips pursed as she quickly read through a manifesto. Whether from actually ignoring him, or just being caught in her work, she did not spare even a glance for her son. Which was fine, since Cai received many bad habits from her; including walking into a room without permission or care whether he was wanted there or not.

When he'd reached the chairs sitting in front of her desk, Cai had casually thrown himself into one, a long leg hanging over the arm. Instantly, Lucia was aware of him. Her blue eyes narrowed into a spiteful glower.

"Sit up straight. I will not have you ruining perfectly good furniture," she lectured.

Grinning, Cai stood up and moved to the much more comfortable loveseat to the side. This was where his mother often lounged, herself, while enjoying one of the many books that adorned the shelves. But Cai did not throw his leg up on this bit of furniture. Indeed, his purpose here was to discuss something with the Commander, not his mother. And that required much more composure.

"I'm rather busy, Cai."

Taking the hint, he launched into his proposal, "I want to make it a charity event."

Lucia said nothing for a whole minute. Cai's confusion grew by the second, but the niggling suspicion that she was punishing him was not about to dissipate. At last, he elaborated.

"My birthday party should be a charity event, I think. Every person who wishes to enter must make a charitable donation. We put a limit on it and make sure that not just anyone can enter. And the twelve highest contributors can have a private dinner with me just before the party is to begin."

Again, Lucia bustled about her desk, flipping through papers and shifting screens on the glass top. After another two minutes had passed, Cai finally snapped, "Well?"

She didn't even lift her head or raise her eyes. "Well, what?"

"What do you think? About the charity idea?"

Lucia shrugged. "Does it matter what I think? This has been your venture from the start. Don't let my opinion influence you."

Cai didn't even bother after that. He stood up off the couch and walked out of the room, his back stiff with anger.

They hadn't spoken since then. And he definitely couldn't count on her being at the press conference this morning. She had meant it when she said she would contribute nothing to this venture. His safety was her number one priority—the world be damned—and she couldn't be party to the destruction of the security blanket she had smothered him with. But it was time and she had to accept that.

Cai sat before the dying fire for at least another hour, pondering the overprotectiveness his mother had made an art. At last, when dawn began to break through the Geneva buildings, and glide gently over

the manicured lawn of the Supreme Commander's estate, Cai finally rose to his feet and stretched the entirety of his lanky body. Then he went into the bathroom to prepare for the very long day he was sure he was going to have.

Cai rubbed the back of his neck until a red mark appeared. Though he'd watched enough of his mother's speeches to know what to expect, he had never before been in the public eye. To fly this solo was almost more than he could handle. Almost.

To say he wasn't born for this would be a lie. All of his life, Cai had been nothing less than a born leader. In school and even outside of it, he was what most of his friends aspired to be. Or, at least, the person they most envied.

Despite being born to a life of luxury, Cai was anything but spoiled. For every privilege he was given, his mother made sure he earned at least three on top of it. And, often times, his lessons were often disguised as privileges. (Sports more than anything.) In such a way, Cai had become the most honest, trustworthy, justified, and honorable individual any of his friends and their parents had ever met.

It also made him fiercely independent. Something that did not sit well with the constant hiding he'd been forced to do. So, when his time to shine was finally upon him, Cai would make the most of every moment.

"Well, this is odd," Amaris commented, appearing silently at his shoulder.

Joining him in staring out the window, they watched as frantic servants rushed about, putting the finishing touches on the garden. It was down there that Cai would give his speech in the over-large white tent, giving each member of the press the chance to study him like hungry vultures. At the same time, everyone who showed would be treated more to a garden party than to a traditional press conference. One way to prove without a doubt: he was not his mother. She was a viper who struck and left one to their fate. Cai was a cobra; charming the unsuspecting with his graceful dance, before striking with deadly accuracy. And still, once it was over, he would continue the dance as though nothing else existed.

"What?" Cai questioned, as if he didn't already know.

Ris cast a sidelong glance at him, her lips quirking into a tiny smile. "For once we'll be able to join the party, instead of hiding in the media room playing video games all day."

A small chuckle escaped him. "Not only are we able to join it, we're actually hosting it."

He didn't see the sudden crestfallen look that flickered across Amaris's face. And she pulled over a casual facade mere seconds before his dark eyes flickered to her once more. "What time is it?" she asked.

Cai glanced at the wall, willing the particles in the pane to project the exact time, digitally. "Nine thirty-two. They'll be arriving any minute."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than they watched as servants escorted in the first journalists to arrive. A fidgety photographer followed on their heels, his camera snapping away at everything that he saw. With a smile on each of their lips, Cai and Ris glanced at each other knowingly. 'Media Circus' was not even going to be a viable description once this was over.

Cai was unlike what anyone had expected and he knew it. Instead of hanging back until the very moment of his speech, he and Ris had let themselves out into the gardens shortly after the first guests had arrived. After introducing himself and Ris to the astonished reporters, he was forced to fend off questions with a laugh.

"Come, now. Surely there'll be time for questions after the 'conference.'" Cai's one-sided smirk and eye roll seemed just the expression needed to emphasize that this was more casual than formal. Even more shocking to them was when he followed up with, "Are you all set? Everyone have a drink? There are some excellent appetizers on that table just there."

Oh yes, he was doing everything he could to distance himself from the image of the social recluse he was sure they thought of him as. But it also helped immensely having Amaris at his side. She was the daughter of a politician, too, and knew just as well as Cai what needed to be done here.

For twenty minutes, they played host and hostess to the arriving, and unsuspecting, reporters, photographers, and even just some curious diplomats. So well did they play their parts that, by the time Cai stepped up to the podium, everyone felt like a personal acquaintance instead of the media leeches they actually were. And, on Cai's personal request, Ris stood by his side, smiling like the dotting girlfriend she was not.

"Welcome, everyone. Thank you for coming today. As you now

know, I am the infamous Cai Balere, the secreted son of Supreme Commander Lucia Balere." A chuckle rolled through the crowd even as Cai shot a surreptitious glance at the window he knew she was watching from.

"Well, as you can see, I am officially out of hiding. And though my mother would love to be here to do the unveiling of her greatest mystery herself, duty has called. However, she leaves you all with her own gratitude for your presence here today." Whatever their differences, Cai would not throw his mother under the bus. Not when she had an entire planet to rule.

At last, Cai cleared his throat and looked upon them all with a slightly less amiable expression. "The reason you all are here is more than just your own personal curiosity, but also the curiosity of your respective readers. I know this because it was my express desire to ignite such curiosity with the article released only two days ago. Thus, I shall help you all slake some of that thirst for knowledge here and now.

"Before I answer your questions, however, I must first beg off your patience just a little while longer. For I have yet another announcement to be made."

A rumble of surprised murmurs traveled through the expansive crowd. Cai let them ponder for a moment, the right side of his mouth pulled up into a knowing smirk. Beside him, Ris was trying her hardest to contain her excitement, but it didn't stop her from sharing a devious look with him. Which the constantly clicking cameras were sure to capture. As the duo had expected.

"This announcement is akin to the previously released article," Cai said into the microphone, indicating to the muttering crowd that he was ready to continue. Almost instantly, an anticipatory silence fell over them, causing Cai's smile to widen.

"You are already well aware that, after much discussion and deliberation, I have decided that, though I would love to celebrate in every city in every country on my eighteenth birthday, I have chosen to host a party in the city in which I was born. Valor, America will be where I welcome the New Year and my reaching of adulthood, though it will be hours after you all shall see me as such.

"Yet, as previously pointed out to me, I do not know many people in that city and I know very little of the city itself. This is why I propose a new way to issue invitations and, hopefully, induce some new friendships." Cai paused intentionally, his eyes meeting with just about

everyone sitting before him.

“A party will be held on the evening of December 31, 2357 and continue into the early morning hours of January 1, 2358 in the ballroom of the Grand Victory Hotel in Valor, America. The party is, I regret to inform you, invitation only. And the only way to receive an invitation is to make a donation to the Housing of Foster Youth Organization. There is a five thousand credit limit, I’m afraid.”

Another round of curious murmurs erupted through the crowd, held at bay no longer. Cai let them have their minute. Actually, he thoroughly enjoyed surprising them. What young man, in his right mind, would choose not to spend their birthday with their friends in the place they’ve grown up, but in a city where he was basically hosting a charity function? Of course, one look at Cai’s mother and the question would have been answered for them.

“And lastly,” Cai began, causing another dead silence, “the twelve most generous individuals will be invited to have a private dinner with me two hours prior to the start of the party.”

7

September 8, 2357
Genesis NW Building 5
Genesis, America

It was unearthly quiet when the storm finally broke at four thirty. The power wouldn't be back on for another twenty minutes, probably. So only narrow blue strips of light running along the tops and bottoms of the walls illuminated Eila's penthouse. They barely helped Ari navigate around the mounds of sleeping teenagers on the floor and all over the furniture.

To say things had not gone well once Jace and Ari barged into the party was an understatement without equal expression. The power had just flickered off, automatically deadening the wall projections and killing the elevators. When the back-up generators kicked in only seconds later, the blue strips came on and the plumbing, heating, and cooling agents alone received power. It was the only way to accurately conserve energy in the huge building. Therefore, the party was officially dead.

When Jace and Ari explained that the party-goers couldn't leave, however, things got volatile. Fast. No one wanted to believe their fancy sports cars were fried up on the roof and they certainly weren't going to take the word of a scrawny girl. If Jace hadn't been there—the *edge* apparent to everyone—Ari wasn't sure how many lives would have been lost in the skies that night.

As it was, Eila called down to Building Security right away to let them know that a party had been disrupted by the storm and that there were extra guests staying the night. Some were allowed to seek

proper beds in other apartments, thanks to friendly neighbors and even a number of friends. Others, however, chose to continue a quieter version of the night in Eila's penthouse. Neither Ari nor Eila could care less, so long as they were all safe.

Even more unexpected than the storm, however, was Eila's reaction to learning that Ari had been on the roof. Eila had always been easy to forgive, no matter what Ari said to her out of anger. But this was the fastest turn-around Eila had ever had and Ari soon found herself calming her friend down, rather than needing to be calmed down herself.

When, at last, everyone was sufficiently at ease, Ari realized that Jace had disappeared. But for the next four hours, she knew exactly where to find him.

Now, as the last of the lightning rolled off far into the distance, Ari picked her way through the apartment to the refrigerator. Retrieving two bottles of water, she slipped out into the eerily silent hallway. She was sure Jace would like to know that his vigil was finally over.

"Mind if I sit down?" Ari murmured, holding out a water bottle to the figure slumped against the wall.

Jace glanced up with blue eyes that held only a little of the night's exhaustion in their clear depths. Taking the bottle silently, he nodded his head in invitation and Ari sunk to the floor beside him. Ironically, after the incident on the roof, the *edge* that clung to him no longer seemed to bother her. She knew its intent, now, and could almost pretend that it was the magnification of a different quality.

As if on cue, both of them cracked open the water bottles and put the opening to their lips. A few trickles slid down their throats before they simultaneously lowered them, recapping them silently. Only once the bottles rested on either side of them did Jace turn his head in order to study her. Ari pretended not to notice.

"The storm is over," he finally stated.

Ari nodded but chose not to say anything. Even whispering was too loud for the building. Only the tiniest hum of the generators could be heard in the walls, vibrating against their backs. She could just imagine how loud it would seem in the stairwell behind the steel door to Jace's left.

He'd kept watch all night at that door, making sure no stupid kid decided to risk the drive home during the storm. Proving, once again, that his duty lived in his very bones. And it was something Ari

couldn't help but find a grudging admiration for, despite his profession.

Five minutes or an hour could have passed in that eerie silence. Neither of them could tell which it was. Nor did they care. Somehow, it was just nicer to sit with someone in the silence. To not worry about coming up with small talk or how to respond to a difficult question. There was a certain amount of shelter in the silence.

At last, however, the overhead lights began to slowly flicker on all down the corridor and the blue lines became dim until they eventually died out. It was the trigger Ari honestly was not looking forward to. Judging by the sigh that escaped Jace, the same was true of him.

A minute more passed and Jace stretched out his legs before him before easing himself to his feet. His arms pulled up and over his head, making the popping in his shoulders audible to Ari. Letting the limbs fall to his sides, Jace rolled his shoulders back and then suddenly looked down at Ari. As silently as they had been since she sat beside him, Jace held out a hand to her.

Ari hesitated for only a second, but it was long enough. A flash of what looked like hurt and irritation struck in Jace's clear blue eyes and it instantly decided her. Taking the proffered hand in a strong grip, Ari pulled herself to her feet. When next she looked into his eyes, they were guarded by a cinderblock wall. She couldn't tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"You didn't sleep at all last night," Jace murmured as he studied her face. It almost bothered Ari that he didn't even ask. He always just knew.

"Nor did you," she remarked with a casual shrug.

"I was keeping watch."

"I wasn't tired."

His eyes studied her with a sharpness she met with her own bland expression. It was true, however, that sleep had not taunted her all night. In fact, she seemed rather keyed up. Even now, the thought of going to bed was too much for her anxious heart. The thrum in her chest was surprising only because it usually denoted excitement. Something she was clearly devoid of at this moment in time.

"You aren't now, either."

Ari's lips twisted into a grimace. "Would you please stop that?"

Perplexed, Jace raised a single eyebrow at her. "Stop what?"

"Knowing everything. Ask a question once in a while," she grumbled.

Without realizing what she had done, Ari was mildly surprised when the corners of Jace's mouth curled up into a small, amused smile. His eyes began to glimmer with barely-suppressed mirth and his tongue ran over his lips before the grin grew wider. Ari could only stare as he revealed a confident, charming smile that made even Nick's signature smirk look cheap.

"Okay then. Am I right?"

Ari's eyes narrowed in an instant before she scoffed, "As if you don't already know."

His responding chuckle was lower than she thought it would be, seeming to seep right through her skin and settle into her bones. She didn't know whether it was the laugh or the *edge* that caused the goosebumps to rise along her skin, but they were most definitely there. Either way, it made her not want to be around him for another second.

Without saying a word, Ari turned and strode quickly down the corridor. Though he had saved her life, she offered him no true goodbye. That was just the way of it, as far as she was concerned.

Yet, when she finally couldn't help herself, Ari glanced over her shoulder ... only to find Jace had disappeared.

September 8, 2357

Bus 17

Genesis, America

Alone at last, Ari mentally sighed as she dropped into a seat in the middle of the bus. Her head leaned back against the headrest and her eyes drifted closed almost instantly.

As much as Ari loved Eila, she actually couldn't wait to go home for a change. From the moment all their classmates had gone, Ari had to duck and dodge a barrage of questions from her inquisitive best friend. And if it wasn't questions she was avoiding, it was a series of apologies she was forced to fight off. By the time Ari was finally able to make her escape, a headache had traveled from the base of her skull and was beating on drums in her temples. Not that her sleepless night helped much with that.

Though sleeping on the bus was tempting, there was no guarantee that she would wake up in time for her stop. So, regretfully, Ari peeled her eyes open and stifled a yawn as the bus lifted off of Genesis NW Building 5 and began its drive east where she would switch to Bus 68 just on the edge of Genesis NW. Too soon, she knew, they would be in

the North Quadrant and she would be forced to switch buses there. Twice, actually, in the North Quadrant and once in the Northeast Quadrant. It was going to be a *long* ride.

September 8, 2357

Bus 68

Genesis, America

Ari wasn't certain of a lot of things. But what she was certain of was usually rooted in deep-seeded truth and grew like it basked in the nutrients of spring all year round.

For instance, she knew for a fact that the bus on N Genesis Building 37 would always be late. She knew that Eila would have a new crush in exactly two months' time. And Ari knew absolutely that her guardian, Clara, would lose her key before the warranty was up. Just as she certain that she would never see Jace Naois again.

Or so she thought.

"Genesis North Building 28," called the driver, a hunch-backed old man with a grumbly voice.

Ari stifled a yawn, turning away from the front. Again, her eyes shifted to stare out the window. Suddenly, her breath caught in her throat.

Narrowing in recognition, her gaze refused to look away as Jace waited to get on the bus. He was last in the line, but it was clear that no one in front wanted him at their backs. His *edge* was as strong as ever, it appeared. Of course, he bore their unease with more grace than Ari could possibly understand.

When he moved from sight, Ari's eyes shot to the front of the bus, sitting up straighter in her chair as she did so. Most used their credit cards to pay, identifying them as occasional riders. However, the minute Jace got on the bus, he put his thumb on the scanner. He had an account just like Ari, and so a year-long contract allowed him to ride the bus with only his fingerprint as a pass.

The reaction resembled magnets when Jace raised his eyes and found Ari's in an instant. He didn't smile. Nor did she. Barely, as though they were the only two in the vehicle, Jace bowed his head in acknowledgment. Ari returned the standard Genesis greeting. And even though she desired nothing more than to look away, Ari's eyes stayed locked on his as he walked with a strange stealth to his steps. At last, however, he reached her seat and turned easily to sit in the chair

beside her.

For a few minutes, no one said a word. The *edge* emanating from Jace seemed to create a three foot perimeter around him in every direction. Ari, alone, seemed to be able to withstand it, though she still felt a bit of discomfort. Not enough to deny Jace the right to sit beside her, however. After all, he did save her life.

At last, when all of the passengers were seated, the bus rose into the air above Building 28. On average, there were six more stops between this building and Building 37, where Ari would be forced to wait until her other bus arrived. In that time, she could talk as much to Jace as she liked. Or not at all.

"I have to say, I never thought I would see you again," Jace admitted not thirty seconds off the rooftop.

"Same," Ari answered, her voice a little edgy due to their present location. Talking on the bus was almost anathema to her and she wasn't exactly sure how to handle a conversation in public.

"So, where you headed?" Jace didn't seem to have the same dilemma.

"Home."

He nodded in response to her terse answer. "Same."

Ari looked at him askance. "Where do soldiers live?"

Jace's blue eyes met hers and a glimmer shone in their clear depths. "I never said I was a soldier."

"You didn't have to," Ari countered immediately. Almost, it seemed, she was able to forget where they were.

Quirking into a little smile, Jace's lips gave away everything. "East. And that's all you need to know."

"I've been as far east as the edge of the city. You must be some ways beyond."

Shaking his head, Jace remarked sardonically, "And now it is you who doesn't ask any questions."

Ari's smile tugged at her lips unwillingly. "What were you doing on that rooftop? Before the storm?" She surprised even herself with the sudden, random questioning.

In an instant, a cinderblock wall slammed over Jace's eyes and Ari felt surprise and adrenaline shoot through her veins. So sudden and unexpected was the shift, that even her heart stuttered and the unfamiliar taste of panic coated her tongue momentarily. Never, in her entire life, would Ari be able to forget how dangerous Jace was. Even something as insignificant as the shift in his eyes was enough to make

her body seriously take into consideration her 'fight or flight' options.

When Jace did finally answer, his voice was cautious. "I was going to wait for the bus. Until I saw some scrawny girl standing on the ledge."

Looking away as quickly as she was able, Ari muttered, "What were you doing in the building? You weren't there for the party."

Again, his voice came reluctantly several minutes later. "My parents just moved into the building."

Ari's eyes grew wide, her lashes enhancing the black holes that were her sockets. "Your parents just moved there? One of the priciest buildings in all of Genesis? And *you're a soldier?*" Her incredulous inquiry seemed to darken Jace's features and she instantly bit her bottom lip.

Clear eyes scrutinized her behind their wall, watching every twitch in her fingers and blink of her eyes. Like crystalline drills boring into her skin, his gaze dug deeper and deeper. Exposing her and lashing at her even more than what that pounding rain had been capable of. Just as if she were a book passage to be memorized, Jace captured her image and interpreted whatever he saw there in his own mind. Ari felt violated.

"How old are you?" Jace asked at last.

Intimidated as she was—though she'd admit it to no one—Ari murmured, "Seventeen."

"You haven't taken the aptitude test."

Ari shook her head in answer.

"What do you think will happen once you have?" His voice was low. Smooth. Enticing. And dangerous.

Brows furrowing in slight confusion, Ari was hesitant to answer. "If it's something I wish to pursue, I will study it in college. If not, I'll study something else."

Jace's eyes were hard and cold as they shot straight through her pupils. "If your aptitude is as a soldier, you don't get a choice."

8

September 8, 2357

Rooftop of Genesis N Building 37

Genesis, America

“Genesis North Building 37,” the driver called as the heavily laden bus drifted to a stop only a foot above the roof.

Ari’s eyes shot to the window, a stone of disappointment dropping into her stomach. Intimidating as he was, that didn’t mean her curiosity would allow her to stay away. Not after the cryptic remark he had just left her with.

Turning back towards him, Ari was surprised to find that Jace had not yet looked away. Cold as ice, his eyes continued to trace her features. Scrutinizing her with an intensity Ari had never witnessed before. What was it that he could possibly see in her?

When he looked at her like that, it was nigh impossible for Ari to speak. Her entire mouth had gone dry and her lips didn’t even want to part. Eyes as wide and dark as a doe’s, Ari stared back in a way that she hoped would mask the unease that she felt. Once more, she could not feel anything but violated under his unyielding gaze.

“This is my stop,” Ari muttered when she was at last able to recover her voice.

“Mine, too.” With the same fluidity with which he had sat down, Jace was on his feet and striding for the front of the bus. All around, a perimeter was left for him because no one else dared be that close to a trained killer.

Scrambling to her feet, Ari had to stretch her long legs in order to fall into the gap provided him. She was the only one who dared to be

close to him and she was quite willing to use that to her advantage. Especially since she wasn't entirely done with him.

Somehow, without him sitting there staring at her, a new surge of courage pulsed through her veins. So it was not entirely unexpected when she demanded, "What does that mean?" as soon as her foot hit the roof.

Jace barely looked over his shoulder at her before he kept walking. Ari followed only a couple of feet behind him. For each long step of hers, he had an equally long, fluid gait of his own. At last, however, they were on the far side of the roof, a decent distance from the bus stop itself.

"What does that mean, Jace? That you don't get a choice if your aptitude is soldier?" Ari demanded yet again when he'd finally stopped.

She was grateful that he wouldn't look at her. Instead, he leaned against the waist-high ledge and his piercing gaze scoured the city streets below. Sitting on the ledge, her back to the open air, Ari watched him with her head tilted. However long it took, she would wait. Her curiosity had been triggered and now an answer had become a necessity.

Luckily for her, an answer was not something Jace was adverse to giving.

"It means: nobody *wants* to be a soldier. No one wants to become the boogeyman in all of the children's stories. And that's what we are. What *I* am." Jace's chest pushed outward as he took a deep breath. After holding it for a second, his entire being seemed to deflate as he let it out, his head hanging down between his shoulders.

"I always thought soldiers chose their own fate. That their sense of duty compelled them to..." Ari's voice was so small, it barely seemed to carry the distance to where Jace stood.

A sharp, sarcastic laugh bit out from between his teeth and his eyes raised to meet hers. They were as hard as gems and just as cold. Even Ari's ruthless control could not stop the shiver that scurried up her spine.

"Duty and honor and pride all come later. When you take that damn test and they tell you that your highest aptitude is as a soldier, you're nothing but a frightened kid, recalling all of the stories and rumors used to terrorize you as a child. No. Not a sane person in this world would choose to be a soldier."

Jace took another deep breath before continuing in a less bitter tone.

“When a soldier result is available, you no longer get a choice. The fact of the matter is: no one wants to be a soldier, but we must have soldiers. Our very natures demand that we have leaders versed in the art of war. Everlasting peace is the greatest fallacy forced upon the human race. We soldiers have our eyes wide open. And we can use them to aim a gun.”

The *edge* was so strong, it was all Ari could do not to run from him as far and as fast as she could go. It blasted out of him like an aura, daring anyone to come near him. Showing anyone and anything that came inside that radius that he was the most deadly creature they would face that day. And he knew it to his very core.

Refusing to take note of her discomfort, Jace continued, “We need soldiers but no one is willing to face mass dislike in order to claim the title. No matter how strong their duty. No. Anyone with an aptitude for one thing and passion for another can study whatever they want in whichever school they desire. But anyone whose result is ‘soldier’ is shipped off to bootcamp the very next day.” His cold blue eyes looked up into hers once more. “It doesn’t matter what their last name is. Who their parents are. Or whether or not they can actually physically do what is needed. If you’re marked, you’re trapped. Just like that.”

Ari felt stiff. As if the knowledge was meant for her personally. Like, somehow, Jace could see into her mind and was warning her that, of all things, this was her future. Here was her warning, plain as day: when she took the test at the end of her Senior year, she could very well be standing in ranks right alongside him. At last, she shook her head with angry vehemence.

“That’s not right.”

“That’s life.”

Ari had to swallow a lump in her throat before she asked cautiously, “How long have you been a soldier?”

“Five years, four months.”

It was good that she was sitting down. A weight had dropped into her stomach as soon as the words left his mouth. Mentally, she was already doing the math on how long it would have taken him to get any form of degree in any field of work he wanted. Instead, he spent months in boot camp and was armed with a gun upon initiation into a brotherhood of blood. For five years, he did whatever it was soldiers did, instead of doing as he wished or making a difference in the world. Ari could literally see the absolute waste of his life. And the possible waste of hers.

“Can you ever stop?” The words fell from her lips in a barely-audible whisper.

“Stop what?”

Clearing her throat, she spoke just a little louder. “Stop being a soldier. Can you stop?”

Jace raised his head to look at her before suddenly whipping around. Looking quickly to her left, Ari’s mouth fell open as the bus settled into place. She leapt off the ledge in the same instant that Jace whipped around. In the same step, they took off like a shot, each one sprinting around parked vehicles, their feet barely touching down on the rooftop.

Jace reached the bus first, just before it was ready to lift off. Instead of just pressing his thumb to the scanner, however, he shoved his back against the doors as they were getting ready to close. This time, Ari didn’t hesitate as she threw her hand up to catch his. At the same time that Ari leapt off the roof, Jace pulled her the three feet into the air before she nearly fell over him to get into the bus. Only when she was safely inside and had her thumb on the scanner did Jace release the abused door, allowing it to close behind him.

After they had both registered their existence on the bus, they moved silently towards the only seats available in the back. Ari kept her lips pressed together as they received miffed looks from just about every passenger. She was sure the driver was glaring at them in the mirror. When they finally sat down, however, it took only a glance before their control vanished entirely.

Ari clapped a hand over her mouth to smother the laughter, but it did no good. Jace didn’t bother with that much as his deep chuckle drifted through the vehicle. People turned in their seats to glower at them, but that only made them laugh harder. Once more, however, that heavy chuckle seeped into Ari’s skin, making a home in her very flesh. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her skin was coated in goosebumps. Yet, it could not keep her from laughing with him and neither did it push her away as it had before.

Eventually they sobered up but continued to shoot sly grins at one another for the rest of the ride. When they switched buses for the second time in the North Quadrant, Ari was surprised when Jace boarded the same one as her. From that stop, he could have headed south to Genesis Central and caught a military vehicle heading east from there. Instead, he stayed by her side until they were in the Northeast Quadrant. Ari had to switch buses one last time, climbing

aboard the vehicle closest to the ground, before she would finally reach home. Yet again, Jace was at her side.

It didn't occur to her until the bus lowered itself to stopping height on the corner a block from her apartment building that now he knew where she lived. Alarm shot through her system, causing the hair on her neck to stand straight up, and Ari did her best to ignore it.

Slowly, the bus emptied of people and still she and Jace sat there. Ari's teeth were pressed into her bottom lip as she stared at him. This time, he deserved a real goodbye. She just didn't know how to give one.

Jace saved her from saying anything at all. As she stood up to leave, he grasped lightly at the sweatshirt she had borrowed from Eila. Turning to look at him, Ari's dark eyes were ensnared by his blue irises in an instant.

"The answer to your question ... is no."

Then Jace let her go.

9

September 8, 2357

*Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

"One million and six hundred hits. And it hasn't been a full twenty-four hours yet," Amaris informed him, a glimmer of awe in her voice as she monitored the searches for his name. "That's double what you reached two days ago."

"Are you going to play or are you going to surf the internet?" Cai sighed. When he'd reached the million mark, he'd been excited. Anything more than that but below two million wasn't of interest anymore. Except to Ris.

"Play by yourself. You do it all the time anyway," she retorted, giving him a devious smirk over the computer screen.

Cai rolled his eyes at her attempt at a dirty joke. Even so, he slid the the controls over the tips of his fingers before pulling the glasses over his eyes. Just before he could start, however, Amaris leapt over the back of the couch and hurried to attach her own game controls.

"So what am I beating you in tonight?" she questioned as the glasses slid into place.

"New game. It's called *Devil's Cry*."

"Really? What's it about?"

Cai rolled his eyes at her. "The case is sitting right there."

He didn't see the face Ris made at him even as she removed the glasses in order to read the description aloud. "'Sammael has risen and his armies of the damned swarm the earth in a deadly plague. Legions fall upon the unsuspecting, slaughtering and maiming innocents. The

earth is blackened from the ash of funeral pyres and a hateful blaze sweeps across the land. There is no way to escape the shadow. Only four Archangels sent to Earth can hope to defeat this shadow's wrath. Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel must ban together to force Sammael and his army back to the depths from whence they came. If they are not consumed by the shadow themselves."

"Eh. Doesn't sound *too* bad," Cai offered.

Ris shrugged as she replaced her glasses. "At least it isn't another WWII game. If I find another one of those, I might scream."

"You and me both," Cai grumbled as the console began to read the chip. "Here we go."

"Oh shit! It's two in the morning, Cai!" Amaris exclaimed as they removed the glasses. In neon green digits, a clock appeared where the game had vanished on the otherwise empty wall.

"And we're not even an eighth of the way through. Must be a kick-ass game," he remarked casually.

"Not funny," Ris shot back, an unimpressive glower on her face.

"Wasn't trying to be," Cai mumbled through a wide yawn. Automatically, Ris yawned as well, though covering hers in the jacket she wore.

"I have ... to call my mom," she said around yet another yawn.

"Send a text. I think she's figured out by now that you're not coming home tonight."

"If *she's* even at home," Ris muttered under her breath.

Cai just shook his head even as Ris ran a thumb over the locket around her neck. While she audibly dictated the message to be sent to her mother's key, Cai leaned his head back on the couch and let his eyes drift shut. Already, his mind was playing leap-frog through everything that happened only yesterday.

His 'conference' would be the most talked about gathering in the entire media world, he was certain. Jealousy would abound amongst reporters and photographers who had turned down the assignment, certain that it would be another to-the-point speech like any his mother had given. Cai Balere had successfully cemented his hold in the public eye.

As had Amaris, though she wouldn't dare look up her own hits. Cai had whenever he knew her to be distracted. So far she only had half as many hits as him. But it was still way more than ever before.

One celebrity gossip blog had already plastered the images of them

standing side-by-side all over the place. And that single picture of their shared smile was certainly worth more than one thousand words, according to gossip-columnists. Just thinking about it caused his lips to pull up into their lopsided smile.

Cai couldn't imagine anyone else who would willingly play such a role with him. Most girls would demand something from him. Ris didn't. She never had. From the moment he baled her out of trouble in the second grade, they'd been an impenetrable duo. Inseparable and devious. Cloak and Dagger through and through. Amaris was the sister he'd never had.

Though it wasn't how they were now portraying her in the media. It had to be just as weird for her, to be considered his girlfriend, but it was the best political strategy he could come up with. After all, they knew everything about each other and were always together. With how often they would be seen together, it only made sense to spin the story the way it would naturally go, anyway. Besides that, it would keep the vultures off his back for being indefinitely single. Which, if it was known he'd never had a significant other, would be more bad than good publicity. But with everyone believing him and Ris had been a couple for ages, it would lighten the already heavy load.

"Earth to Cai! You gonna fall asleep right there?" Ris questioned, shaking his shoulder. Giving a tired moan, he barely lifted his hand in a 'go away' gesture, making her laugh. "C'mon Sleeping Beauty. Or else I'll sleep in *your* bed."

Cai's eyes snapped wide open. "Like hell!"

Ris giggled again. "Knew it. Come on. Only a few more hours and then we get to go back to school. Yay." Her voice was coated in heavy sarcasm and Cai smirked knowingly.

"Alright," he eventually sighed. Pushing himself off the couch, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they left the media room.

Coming to the guest room first, Ris weaseled out from under his arm and Cai pretended like he was going to fall over. Which, actually, wasn't that far from the truth. He was kind-of used to being suddenly exhausted every few days, but that didn't mean he liked it. Or that he ever learned his lesson and went to bed early.

"Haha," Ris remarked dryly as she eased open the door to 'her' room.

Cai chuckled, "Goodnight, Ris."

"G'night," she said through a yawn. Blinking slowly, she eased into the bedroom.

Before she could close the door, however, Cai murmured, "Thank you, Ris. For everything."

Softly, her face transformed and an odd gleam entered her eyes as she studied him. An unobtrusive smile pulled gently on her lips and the expression on her face could only truly be described as compassionate. "You're welcome, Cai. For everything."

September 9, 2357

Geneva United Academy

Geneva, Switzerland

"Two million, three hundred, and sixty-seven hits in the search engine and it's still not even a full twenty-four hours!" Callum exclaimed, pounding on Cai's back in his excitement.

His crooked smile seemed fixed in place. So many people were commenting on his sudden worldwide popularity and even congratulating him for it. It was something to be proud of, the first two dozen times. The two hundredth time, however, it was starting to get irritating.

Yet it still wasn't as bad as the comments Ris was getting. "I knew you guys were dating! How come you never told us?"

Somehow, the question was never directed at him. Nor was it asked by anyone but girls. Which could truly have been the problem, considering Ris didn't actually like other girls. At all. Ever.

What marked her as incredibly selfless, however, was when she just smiled and said, "Don't believe everything you read. Or hear, for that matter." Then she winked, causing Cai's eyes to widen considerably.

"What was that?" he muttered when they were given a modicum of breathing room.

Ris shot him a sharp look. "This was your idea, remember? Either play the cards *you dealt*, or fold right now."

Cai nodded. She was right. This was his game and he called the shots. If he wanted to sell the idea to the media, he had to be prepared to sell it to the rest of his school. There was no room for error if he wanted everyone to see only what he wanted them to see. Even as the decision fully formed, a charming smile pulled at his lips.

"Much better," Ris approved. "But you seriously have to commit to this, Cai. We can get around most stuff by saying we don't do PDAs. Other stuff, though..."

"We're going to have to sell like our lives depend on it," he finished

for her.

“Yeah. We are. Can you even handle that, commitment-phobe?”

For a moment, Cai didn't answer. Suddenly, he turned in place and grabbed Amaris around the waist. Lifting the small girl off her feet, he swung her around as fast as he could. The minute he started, she shrieked but it soon disintegrated into laughter. Only when he became too dizzy to see straight did he at last set her feet on the floor. Like a couple of drunk teenagers, they staggered across the hallway until they were able to grasp a substantial object.

Ris was still trying to catch her breath when Cai leaned down to whisper, “If it were anyone else: not a chance. But with you: I can definitely handle it.”

Amaris ducked her head, hiding her face from him. A worm of doubt traveled through Cai's mind, wondering if she was going to back out. Not that he could blame her. If she didn't really want to keep this charade up, that was a choice he couldn't fault her for. But it was also true what he had said: he couldn't pull off something like this without her help. No one else could do it.

“You are such a kiss-ass,” Ris finally muttered, looking up at him with a mock glare.

Cai chuckled in relief. The barest blush showed through her tan skin and he knew that she was just embarrassed. Amaris was not like other girls, and she didn't necessarily appreciate sentimentality. Much like Cai, she'd never really had a significant other, either. So selling this would be just as hard on her as it was on him. But when she committed to something, nothing would stand in her way.

Right on time, a long chime sounded throughout the school and the duo sighed in unison.

“Come on. Let's get to class,” Cai suggested, placing a hand on the small of her back, instead of around her shoulders as he normally did. Though it felt a little weird, he also had to admit that it also felt ... right. So, maybe, this wouldn't be as hard as he thought.

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September 15, 2357

Rooftop of Genesis NW Building 5

Genesis, America

The back of her neck was scarlet, she had rubbed it so many times. Touching it now was like smacking a sunburn, so Ari forced her hand to continue gripping the ledge that she sat on. She'd really never noticed before, but it was actually quite peaceful on the roof. Occasionally someone would park their car or even leave. Twice, actually, the bus stopped and swapped out passengers. But all of that was far enough removed from Ari that she felt comfortable with her legs hanging off the thirty-five story building.

And everything was far enough removed for her to drift back to last Monday. The day she'd become the most desperate person alive.

Confusion filled her as she stepped off the Senior. There was a pronounced buzz in the air on Floor 19 and Ari had only been able to catch snippets of conversation. Two words were floating through the air as if they were divine prayers. Cai. Balere. A name Ari would forever be unable to rid from her mind. It made her need to find Eila grow to unparalleled lengths.

Surprisingly, she found her best friend right beside Ari's locker, looking decidedly impatient. Before she even had time to ask, Eila shoved her tablet at her. Ari knew better than to ask, taking the proffered computer and looking at the screen.

Her heart picked up the pace even while the void pretended to be covered. It was always the same reaction when she saw his picture. Like her very soul recognized him. Unreasonable as it was, it was also a feeling she was

incapable of shaking.

"Read!" Eila demanded impatiently, seeming to have no time at all for Ari's body to adjust.

Shifting her eyes from the photo was akin to a form of torture, but Ari did as her friend demanded. Never in her life had she been so dumbstruck as when she was reading that article. Even the day she was finally adopted could not compare to the pure, unadulterated shock she experienced in that moment. And nothing in the world could compare to the importance placed upon that single announcement.

"I have to go," Ari whispered to herself. Raising her eyes to meet Eila's, she insisted yet again, "Eila, I have to go!"

She was already nodding. "I know. I'll talk to my parents as soon as I get home. If I can—and I make no promises!—I'll try to get us a place in the top twelve. Believe me, Ari, I know how important this is to you."

True to her word, Eila had pulled on every string in her parent-manipulation manual. First she had played on their affections for their loving daughter. That only got her the five thousand credit admission. When she had succeeded in securing at least her own position, she had brought up the fact that it was Ari's birthday as well as Cai's. What could be better than allowing her friend to celebrate her birthday at the biggest, most charitable birthday party of the year? Somehow, that speech had inspired them to pay for Ari as well.

However, the part that proved the most difficult, by far, had been Eila's long, drawn-out debate over being in the top-twelve donators. Looking at the site provided specifically for the Housing of Foster Youth Organization/Cai Balere Alliance, hundreds of people were already doing their best to stake their claim at a top spot. Much like an auction, the numbers rose by the hour.

It was a demeaning waste of time and credits, according to Mrs. Maible. As far as she was concerned, paying for Eila and Ari to go in the first place was generosity enough. To embarrass the Maible name by asking for more than what was already socially acceptable was anathema.

Mr. Maible, on the other hand, had always been a quiet, orderly man who did his job well enough to provide his family with the best of everything. Indeed, he even had gone to great lengths to welcome Ari beneath his vast wings. To be able to give anything to his family that they so desired was his own form of pride. And his vanity allowed for him to exploit this fact in any way possible.

Yet, it was only for Eila that he was willing to add himself to the bidding. He would add only as much as necessary, keeping her in the lowest spot right up until the day before, if that was what it took. For Ari, however, he agreed with his wife. It was enough that she was going and he was being even more generous since he had to provide travel and rooms for the two young women. Though her heart sunk into her feet, Ari knew better than to oppose the decision.

Even after six days, it was still all Ari could think about, however. Just the fact that Cai had created this great charity scheme, in itself, was a marvel. What teenage boy, in his right mind, would do such a thing? And why, of all charities to join forces with, was he picking the one that touched so closely to her own heart? The one organization that had been so instrumental in keeping her alive until her parents had adopted her. Why was Cai drawn to them? More importantly: what was the point? Of the charity?

There had to be a reason. She was sure of that. No one would do something like this without having some hidden motive. Monetarily, obviously he was getting nothing. All of the internet research she'd done in the past week had instantly dismissed the thought that he knew anyone who had ever been in foster care, so there was no personal connection. Politically, however, it was a fantastic call. And if he wished to follow in his mother's footsteps, it was the smartest move he could have pulled. But even that seemed to only loosely fit.

Cai did this on purpose. He did it for a reason. There was a hidden agenda that no one else could see. Of that, Ari was absolutely sure. Though she had no idea why.

Come on, Ari. Think. You know him better than this!

Suddenly, her dark eyes flew wide, surprised by the thought. Not only because it was utterly impossible—after all, she had never met him or even laid eyes on him before. But also because it felt absolutely true.

Her mind was still swirling when a voice called, "Waiting for someone?"

Whipping around as much as the ledge allowed, Ari's eyes barely focused as she watched Jace's stealthy approach. She didn't respond as he effortlessly positioned himself on the ledge as he had the first night they'd met, exactly a week ago. He was closer than last week, however, and the *edge* seemed terribly ominous in her position. Barely, she restrained the shiver before it could give away her unease.

"No," she finally answered when he'd gotten comfortable. Well, as

comfortable as possible when they both sat ramrod straight on the edge of an apartment building.

"Then why are you here?" Yet again an edge lingered in his voice. Disapproval. Ari heard it often enough from Clara to know to the absolute degree how badly she'd screwed up.

"You've got to have a little more faith in me," Ari sighed. "I swear I'm not suicidal. Okay?"

"It would be easier to believe if this wasn't where I always found you," Jace sighed. Only then did Ari glance over at him. Weariness was lined into his face and it even turned his eyes a duller, grayer shade.

"You only found me here one other time. And this is only the second time—ever—that I've decided to hang out on a ledge." Her voice was torn between sarcasm and annoyance. Frankly, Ari was surprised annoyance hadn't won.

"What're you doing here, Ari?" Jace asked again.

Ari's lips pursed and she was ready to tell him that it was none of his business. But that wouldn't make him leave. Of course, she wasn't sure if anything *could*.

"Thinking," she finally muttered.

"What about?" His voice was so heavy, Ari knew he did not actually want to have this conversation.

"I'm not suicidal, Jace. I promise," she replied. "I've got too much to live for."

"Good." He said no more, preferring to sit in silence and stare out at the gradually darkening city. It was that time of day where dusk was just beginning. People were just turning on lights close to the bottom of the apartment buildings while those at the top could not justify it with the day so bright yet.

After a few moments, something seemed to shift in Ari's mind and it was as if she was watching herself from outside her body. Turning to Jace, a mischievous gleam entered her eyes. "What if I was?"

Tired though he was, Jace's eyes were sharp and alert as his head whipped around. The smile on Ari's face was ominous and she could almost see him calculating possible responses in his head.

"I mean it," she continued. "What if I just decided to...?" As she spoke, she twisted around and let her legs dangle off the rooftop as she locked her elbows. Nothing but her scrawny upper body was keeping her on that ledge, and it didn't even faze her.

"ARI!" Jace yelled, reaching for her left hand.

How ironic that it would be *his* sudden shift that would cause her

strong arm to collapse. The *edge* was like a battering ram that made her crumble beneath its full force. And as her elbow lost its hold, a terrified scream ripped out of her throat! With scrambling fingertips, she managed to barely catch the ledge. Her heart crashing against her ribcage as the very imminence of her death registered in her racing pulse. Almost, she was able to resist the urge to look down. Almost.

Thirty-five stories below her was a cracked stretch of pavement that hadn't seen real road repairs in fifty years. Sinkholes were barely patched over only for the sake of looking decent in this part of town, but someone dropping from such a height could easily find themselves crashing through one of those patches. Every limb in her body would be shattered and she would only be lucky if she snapped her neck on impact. And as the wind tugged relentlessly at her frail form, the tears sprang to her eyes.

It was only two seconds after her slip for her to scream, "JACE! HELP ME!"

"I've got you!" he assured her, reaching over the ledge and grasping her wrists.

Bracing himself against the ledge, his feet firmly planted on the roof, Jace pulled as hard as he could while Ari tried to scabble up the side of the building with her feet. Slowly, inch by inch, Ari rose higher. She was just able to place her elbows back on the ledge when Jace suddenly stopped pulling.

Panic struck her hard in the heart and she raised her eyes hesitantly. Sweat glistened on her skin while every tiny hair on her body was standing at attention. When her eyes finally met Jace's clear blue gaze, the wall had disappeared and she could see into the very depths of his soul. It was black. Malice and anger roamed in the dark, seeking ways to satisfy his vicious desires. They were the eyes of a killer.

"Wake up, Ari," Jace whispered. Suddenly, he let her go!

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September 15, 2357

Bus 68

Genesis, America

Ari jolted awake, a tight fist squeezing her heart. Her frantic lungs released a gasp as her eyes flew wide. A hostile *edge* was washing over her, making it that much harder to breathe. Every inch of her body was covered in goosebumps and the hair on the back of her neck was sticking straight up, just like in her dream. Terrified tremors shot along her nerves, causing her whole body to shake.

“Ari, wake up. I think you missed your stop,” a smooth voice said beside her.

Another jolt shot through her and she twisted to press her back against the window. As much distance as the seats allowed, she put between herself and Jace. The dream still leapt out at her and the *edge* wrapped around her in diabolical tendrils. And as soon as her eyes locked on his, her heart constricted painfully.

That wall in his eyes was more impenetrable than ever before. Ari could almost see each block being set into place. Steel bindings acted as the skeleton they formed themselves around and, at last, a thick metal sheet rose up and covered the entire structure. From the moment she withdrew from him in fright, those eyes had become a mirror that reflected only her own feelings back at her. Jace would reveal nothing.

Seconds passed and Ari still could not calm down. It was as if the air itself was choking her. The atmosphere that clung to him was deadly in nature. Suffocating and poisonous. Ari was incapable of surviving in the fumes.

When a full minute had passed, Jace said in a hard voice, "Well, now that you're awake..." Turning in his chair, he rose to his feet and walked up the aisle of the moving vehicle before choosing an empty space in the center of the bus.

A gasp escaped her and she began to draw in great breaths in order to soothe her oxygen-deprived lungs. Yet, it still wasn't enough to ease the pounding of her heart. It felt as if the insides of her ribs would be bruised by the time the organ finally fell into its normal rhythm. In a useless effort, Ari pressed her palm over the right side of her chest, hoping to convince her body that all was well now. There was no ledge. No fall. And certainly no Jace.

It would take the rest of the bus ride to convince herself of that.

September 15, 2357

Rooftop of Genesis N Building 37

Genesis, America

Ari was cautious as she approached him, and a new-found fear kept at least six feet between her and the edge of the building. Jace did not look at her, though she was sure he knew she'd followed. Instead, he stood as he had a week ago, with his fists leaning on the ledge and his eyes examining the expansive view before him. When at last Ari came to a stop, she opened her mouth but no words came out.

"It's called a panic attack," Jace said in a calm, carrying voice.

Ari swallowed hard and once more tried to respond. Yet again, no words were forthcoming.

"You'd be surprised how often it happens around us. Soldiers. Like it's something in the air that can't be avoided." The tone had changed. Become mocking and bitter.

"I ... I didn't..."

"Does it matter? You did."

Ari bit her lip. The moment she regained her voice, she couldn't even get the words out. She hadn't meant to react that way. It had just happened.

"I'm sorry, Jace," she finally whispered.

"You can't control a reaction like that." The words were right, but the tone still blamed her.

"No. I mean ... I can. It ... it wasn't you."

Jace barked a hard, sarcastic laugh.

"It wasn't!" Ari explained. "I was having a nightmare when you

woke me up. My reaction ... wasn't exactly because of you."

"There's no point in lying to me," Jace sighed.

Somehow, it struck her harder when she realized that he was actually used to this. He was used to everyone freaking out around him. Just because of a profession he did not choose, he was ostracized. And it stung even more because, if everyone knew the truth about her, she would be in the same position.

"I'm not lying," Ari snapped. "You were definitely a part of it, but it wasn't entirely because of the *edge*, okay. It was because ... I was dreaming of you. That's why I freaked out."

She wanted to bite her tongue out! It was bad enough that he had caused her to have a panic attack. But did she have to tell him that it was his dream-self that did it, and not his actual killer's *edge*?

Slowly, Jace's back straightened and he turned to face her. Ari couldn't meet his eyes, but felt as if they left a trail of heat on her skin wherever he looked. They searched her face for any sign of deceit and she made sure to keep her features perfectly still. Yet, Jace didn't say a word until Ari's curiosity got the best of her and she raised her eyes to his.

"You were dreaming of me?" Never had his voice been so perfectly empty. So devoid of emotion.

"Yes," she answered with whatever courage remained to her.

"What about?"

Her tongue passed over her lips quickly and she looked away. As her gaze landed on the ledge, she shivered and quickly turned her view elsewhere. Crossing her arms tightly over her chest, Ari hung her head and spoke to the rooftop.

"I was sitting on the ledge where we first met. You came up to talk to me, thinking I was suicidal. I ... I goaded you. And when you moved towards me ... I slipped." She stopped there, letting the silence lengthen between them.

Finally Jace asked, "What else?"

Quickly, her eyes darted to his before shooting away again. "What makes you think there's more?"

Jace turned and took two long strides towards her, causing Ari to catch her breath. When he was a foot away, the *edge* engulfed her and another shiver ran up her spine. This time, Ari kept her eyes on her black sneakers, refusing to raise them. She didn't want to see the disgust and disappointment in his hard eyes. Or worse: the wall that was sure to be there.

"Because when you woke up, you were afraid of *me*," he answered quietly.

Ari's throat was as dry as the desert outside the ruins of Phoenix, Arizona. No amount of coaxing could produce saliva and even breathing became a scratchy process. At the same time, however, her palms became slick with nervous sweat and she raised her right hand to rub the back of her neck, keeping her left thumb hooked through a belt loop on her black cargo pants.

Hesitant though she was to answer, not answering was absolutely inconceivable. Drawing a deep breath into her recently agonized lungs, she prepared to explain in full. "You ... caught me. In the dream. But ... but when you had pulled me up so far, you told me to wake up and then you let me fall." The words came out in a rush and Ari looked everywhere but at Jace.

It was a while before he spoke. When he did, however, his tone had just an edge of skepticism. "I saved you ... then killed you?"

Ari could feel that her face was red and she gave a jerky nod. "Yes. In my dream."

For a moment, Jace said nothing. He just stood there, watching her as she stared at the ground. She didn't know how long they stood like that, but she was almost certain that it was too long.

"We missed the bus," Jace finally commented and Ari felt as if a fist squeezed her heart.

Whipping around, she was indeed in time to see the bus gain a twenty foot altitude above the roof and zoom off to its next location. A disappointed groan exited her throat and Ari let her head fall into her hands. Twice in one day. It could not be a good thing.

"This is just freaking terrific," she muttered darkly.

"It'll be back in an hour."

That did not help her mood. Already she'd missed her stop at Eila's, had a nightmare starring Jace, pissed Jace off, and now even missed the bus that would take her home, where she was clearly safe from angering anyone else. Not only that, but she was also stuck on the roof of a building she'd never actually stepped foot inside of, with a guy who saved her life a week ago and whom she hadn't seen since. In no possible way was Ari having a good day.

She was still turning in place, her eyes scouring the skies, glaring at the buses whizzing by above her head.

"It's no use," Jace informed her. "Unless you're going to steal a car, you're going to have to wait an hour."

Ari glowered at him quickly before refocusing her scowl on the soaring vehicles. She didn't respond to his remark and instead crossed her arms over her chest and paced back to the bus stop booth. Though she knew he followed slowly, she didn't look back.

Upon entering the booth, the entire structure lit up. A screen appeared on the clear side that showed a map of the city and a color-coded route for each bus. Hers, marked neon yellow, was a few buildings over, indicating that it would be a while before it completed its circuitous route and made it back to Genesis N Building 37. Even so, a computer-generated female voice asked her for her destination. Even as Ari gave it, the routes she needed to get home blazed brightly on the screen and the voice informed her that she would need these buses. Ari rolled her eyes and waited until the voice informed her that her first bus would not arrive for another fifty-six minutes.

With an exhausted sigh, she sank down onto the bench and leaned her head back against the wall. She was still in that position when Jace appeared in front of the booth, leaning against the wall. He wasn't far enough inside to activate the directional computers, so Ari wasn't forced to endure listening to the mechanical female's voice again. Jace, too, was silent for several moments as they waited. But not for long.

"Why?"

Confused, Ari's brows pinched together as she briefly opened her eyes and met his steady gaze. "Why what?"

Shrugging slightly, Jace replied, "Why would I save you only to let you fall?"

Her eyes shot away, staring out the thick glass and across the rooftop. Feeling a bit chilled, she crossed her arms over her chest, rubbing her shoulders absentmindedly. "I don't know," she muttered. "It was just a dream."

"It was more than that," he insisted. "It's your subconscious making me out to be first a savior and then a murderer. Why?"

Ari's frail shoulders lifted in a shrug and her dark eyes scanned the ground beneath her feet. "I don't know. I mean, you did save me once so I can definitely see how that came into play." Each word was more reluctant than the last.

"And the part about letting you fall?" His voice was even more quiet.

"I think ... that may have just been your way of waking me up. I'm serious," she added when she saw the disbelieving look on Jace's face. "You were trying to wake me up and, since I was already dreaming

about you, I think things just kind of melded.”

“Really?” he asked in a skeptical voice, his eyebrows raised doubtfully. “Then why the panic attack?”

Ari opened her mouth to reply but the words instantly got caught in her throat. Swallowing hard, she couldn’t look him in the eye as she muttered, “The *edge*. Combined with the dream, the *edge* made me freak.”

Jace said nothing in response and Ari was too much of a coward to look at him. Silence lengthened between them like a rubber-band. Stretching itself out as long as it could before the strain caused it to snap back. And snap it did.

“Are you going to say anything?” Ari growled when she could take it no longer.

Jace’s eyes were made of cinderblocks as he raised them from the ground to meet her own. “What do you want me to say?”

Ari gritted her teeth, her dark brown eyes becoming black as obsidian. Absorbing even the light that shined on them, they were the very definition of a black hole as her irises bored into his own, attempting in vain to drill through the blue walls. Of themselves, those walls were a menace. Blocking out even the most obvious things and twisting the vision to fit his own world view of things. They angered Ari more than they should, but it was too late to think about that now.

“It was just a stupid dream, Jace. I don’t know why you are so set on holding it against me. It’s not like I could control it, alright?”

“I’m not holding anything against you,” he answered calmly. But behind the stoney blockade, he could be lying for all that she knew.

“Oh really?” she sneered. “That’s why you haven’t spoken two words to me in the past ten minutes?”

“It’s only been five,” he announced, rolling his eyes at her exaggeration. “And the reason I haven’t said anything is because I don’t know what to say.” The tone had changed, carrying a bit of exasperation in each breath.

“Well, you could try letting me off the hook.” Sarcasm wrapped itself snugly around each syllable.

“Why does it matter if I do or don’t? We’re strangers, Ari. So I saved your life once. That doesn’t mean you aren’t entitled to be afraid of me.”

The words seemed to strike her, settling into her body and turning her bones the consistency of rubber. She felt weak all of a sudden and her eyes were as wide as they could go, shocked beyond

comprehension. Her voice had fled like the coward it was, and it was two whole minutes before she could find the quiet little thing. At last, however, she answered in as strong a tone as she could manage.

“It matters because I’m a freak, too. It matters because I’ve seen that fear in people’s eyes when they looked at me. Unnatural. Unreliable. Indecent. Strange. I have been in that position and it is against my very nature to do the same to another person as what was done to me. And I’m sorry for doing that to you, Jace. You didn’t deserve it. And I certainly didn’t mean it.” Her throat was closing and she could feel the moisture building in her dark eyes. Blinking it away quickly, Ari cleared her throat and attempted to speak in a more casual tone.

“And you’re right: I have a right to be afraid of you. Because you are literally the most dangerous person I have ever met. But I also can’t imagine you without the *edge*. It’s a part of you.”

This time, it was Jace who was at a loss for words. When they finally did come, they were only a whisper. “I forgive you, Ari.”

12

September 15, 2357

Emerald Park Community Center

Geneva, Switzerland

Cai rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his shoulders to work out the muscle tension. The basketball game was nearing an end and they were all taking a water break. Even as he put the water bottle to his lips, his eyes slid over the luscious landscaping of the Emerald Park Community. A place where every house looked the same and every vibrant green lawn was cut to the same height. Trees grew in abundance here, standing tall and majestic as they cast shade over metal rooftops. It was a quiet, peaceful place to live. And Amaris hated being trapped within its gated borders.

Courtesy of the Home Owners Association, the Community Center held a gym, indoor and outdoor pool, and a basketball court. Outside the center there was another basketball court, where Cai and his friends played until winter, and a tennis and volleyball court where Ris practiced almost daily. And all throughout the community were bicycle and jogging paths for the very active members of the Emerald Park elite.

The community in itself was a modern miracle. Most of the Earth's human populations had moved into cities, taking up apartment buildings and penthouses that stretched into the sky. Back in the late 2100s, everyone had deemed that human overpopulation was reducing the natural resources at an unforgivable rate. So it was decreed that as many natural areas as could be abandoned, would be. When the United Nations took control of the Western Hemisphere in 2173, the

Population Limitation Act was passed and yearly birth control injections were administered to everyone who had reached puberty. Unless a married couple obtained a license, no children could be conceived.

Of course, it was why the Housing of Foster Youth Organization meant so much to him. The children in those homes, seven times out of ten, were legitimate orphans. Many had one or both parents die, and without others willing to take them in, they were thrown into a system. There were a number of them, however, born to unclean individuals who simply hadn't bothered to have their birth control renewed. Cai knew that monthly inspections were done by Peace Officers in the more dismal districts in order to clean up the filth but also to rescue the children from such inadequate living conditions.

"Cai, you playing or not?"

"Yeah," he called back to Callum, setting the water bottle on the bench.

Cai had taken no more than three steps when it happened. In an instant, his heart was flying in his chest, thrashing so violently it felt as if it would bruise his ribs. Tremors began to rock through his body and his breathing came in short, desperate gasps. Every tiny hair on his body stood up and goosebumps sprang up all over his skin. Feeling desperate, Cai's eyes searched wide and pleading for anyone to help him, though the words never left his lips.

Suddenly, it was as if his lungs seized up. No oxygen pushed through his body and Cai's mouth fell open in silent desperation. A tremendous panic washed over him and sweat made his hands and forehead slick. Like a fish on dry land, Cai did his best to draw in as much air as possible while his chest felt as if it would implode at any second. And, on top of it all, his body felt weak and his bones no longer had a stable consistency that could support him. Even as he finally was able to gasp in a painful breath of fresh air, his legs collapsed beneath him.

"CAI!" Amaris screamed, sprinting across the court before falling to her knees beside him. "Cai! What's going on? What's happening? Are you hurt?"

Frantic gasps began to become more frequent and incredibly deep. His chest expanded to its max before deflating for half of a second. Cai kept his head bowed and his eyes closed. Concentrating only on his breathing, he didn't even notice that his knees were scraped up or that tiny rocks were digging into the palms of his hands. Breathe in.

Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. It was all he was capable of in that moment.

Ris wasted no time. One hand held his shoulder, feeling each shuddering breath, while the other sprang to the oval locket around her neck. "Call Doctor Carson," she ordered the key. Cai immediately began to shake his head, but it was too late.

Just as suddenly as the attack had sprung on him, it had vanished. His breathing became much easier and he raised his head to look Ris in the eye. Her features were set as she waited for Doctor Carson to answer her own key. Shaking his head, Cai silently begged her to hang up. It was bad enough that he had a doctor's appointment in a week. The last thing he needed was for Sina to poke and prod at him eight days early. But that was something Ris couldn't care less about. Her friend was in trouble and she would do anything needed to keep him safe and healthy.

"Hello?" came the voice on the other end.

"Doctor Carson? This is Amaris Pacquita—Cai's friend. Something weird just happened and I really think you should take a look at Cai. He seems fine now, but he really wasn't a second ago," she continued.

"Where are you?" Carson demanded, all business.

"We'll be back at his house in twenty minutes if you can meet us there," Ris answered. Cai glared at her.

"Perfect. I will see you shortly." The line went dead.

"You didn't need to do that," Cai grumbled as he got to his feet, brushing the dirt off of his stinging knees.

"Cai, you couldn't *breathe*! What if that happens again, huh? She needs to know and you need to get looked at. No excuses. Grab your stuff, I'm taking you home." Ris didn't wait for an argument before turning and starting the short walk back to her house. Cai rolled his eyes and apologized to his other friends before following afterwards.

Though there was a constant scowl on his face, no one truly knew of the rage that burned below the surface. The rage and hate and disgust that were a constant flow in his veins. Doctor Sina Carson. She was Cai's doctor from the moment he was born and even moved to Switzerland when Lucia Balere became the Supreme Commander of the United Nations. Never had he been without the woman in his life. And never had he been anything but disgusted with her. After all, what kind of doctor was she if she couldn't save his brother?

September 15, 2357

*Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

“Cai? What happened?”

Cai rolled his eyes. Of all the times for him and his mother to be passing through the foyer at the same time... “Nothing,” he muttered.

Ris was even less helpful than usual. “Something happened, Commander. I called Doctor Carson and she’s supposed to meet us here.”

“Doctor Carson?” Alarm caused Lucia’s eyes to widen considerably as she looked her son over. “What happened?” There wasn’t an ounce of leniency in the demanding voice, now.

“I ... I’m not sure,” Amaris muttered, watching Cai’s angry features warily. “He ... couldn’t breathe. And he was shaking, all over. I’ve never seen him so pale and shaken.” Her voice grew louder and could no longer hide the worry in her tone.

“Sounds like a panic attack,” a voice announced behind them. Cai and Ris whipped around in an instant to see Sina removing her gloves as a servant waited to take her coat.

“A what?” Cai growled in a hard tone. Sina was not at all bothered by his animosity.

“They are quite rare, these days. In the time of the ancients, they were actually fairly common. Now, they only seem to occur when a soldier is nearby. The fact that they are trained killers is what often forces the body to become overly alarmed in their presence. Did you come into contact with one today, Cai?”

His upper lip curled disgustedly. “No. I was playing basketball. It happened during a water break. No trigger. And I didn’t start panicking until I couldn’t breathe,” he sneered.

“Hmm,” Sina remarked, passing off her coat to the servant. “If you don’t mind, Commander, I would like to examine your son in a private room.”

Lucia opened her mouth to reply, but Cai’s sharp voice lashed out, “No. I didn’t call you and I don’t want you here. Regardless of what either Amaris or my mother thinks, I don’t need you to tell me I’m fine. I know that. Sorry to have wasted your time, *Doctor*. I will see you at my appointment next week.”

Without pausing for thought, Cai turned on his heel and took six long strides to the stairs. Taking those two at a time, he reached the second story quickly before disappearing into the depths of the house.

All the while, his insides were roiling and he was breathing hard in anger.

To be anywhere near that woman had always been a trial. From the moment he learned that it was she who had presided over their birth, his disgust for her was set in stone. After all, it was she to ignore his brother in favor of suturing up his mother, even though there had been others available for that. And the one time Cai had asked her about that, her only response had been to proclaim that their mother was her patient; not the twins.

"Cai! Cai!" Ris called, leaping up the stairs behind him. No matter where he vanished to in the massive house, Ris would always find him.

Letting a tortured sigh escape him, he stopped in place and waited for the smaller being to catch up. When she did, he made it very clear. "I don't want to talk about it."

"That was very rude," Ris stated at the same time. Ignoring his wishes, she continued, "And what if you're seriously hurt? What if it isn't some ridiculous panic attack? You have a heart defect, Cai. As much as you'd like to think that doesn't change anything, it does! What if something is actually wrong inside your chest? Are you really just going to say 'to hell with it' when something serious could be happening?"

"Yes."

"That is stupid!" she snapped.

"I don't care," he replied, shrugging his shoulders casually.

Amaris stopped, her hands balling into fists at her sides. Cai had taken a few more steps before looking back at her. There was absolutely no curiosity in his eyes. He truly did not care at this point. And that's what made the tears pool in the caramel eyes of his best friend.

"That's a problem," she whispered through a tight throat.

Cai said nothing, looking away to stare at the wall. A tiny modicum of guilt was beginning to sprout in his chest and he did his best to stamp it out before he would cave to her desires.

"You do care, Cai. Just ... not about anyone who cares about you," Ris stated. "I know you miss him. Everyone knows. And that's because you don't ever let us forget that he is the most important thing in your life!" Her voice was gaining volume and heat, causing the new ache in Cai's chest to grow accordingly. "But you know what, Cai? He's dead. *He left you!* Just like you're trying to leave me! The difference is: you

didn't even *know* him. And I know *everything* about you."

She knew what she was doing. Every word was pierced and barbed, ready to stab as deeply and painfully as possible. They twisted inside of him, tearing tiny pieces of tissue from his organs. Word after word struck him before burrowing inside like a parasite, eating muscle and fat, ravaging every part of his body. Oh yes, Ris knew *exactly* what effect they would have on him.

Equal parts pain and rage erupted in Cai's chest. Instantly, his blood began to boil, his veins unable to contain the molten fury as it raced through every cell of his body. His lungs labored around his anger; short bursts of air moved in and out of his flared nostrils. Eyes darker than night became a moving maelstrom, dragging everything into black depths that allowed for no escape. And the adrenaline that coursed through his body demanded action!

In two long strides, Cai was standing right in front of her. Large hands encircled her upper arms in tight grips and his eyes bored into her own, absorbing the fear that resided there and throwing only fury back into her pupils. "Don't you dare!" Cai hissed, his lips curling over his teeth like a wild animal. "Don't you dare say another word about him!"

Despite the fact that bruises were forming on her arms, Ris bit back. "It's true, Cai. He's not here for you. *I am!* Just as I've *always* been. Damn it! Think about what it would do to *me!* Just this once, Cai, think about *me!*"

For a moment, Cai's grip on her arms tightened and her mouth fell open but no sound was uttered. Then, as if a button was being pushed, everything stopped. Cai's hands dropped to his side and he turned his back to her.

At last, he whispered, "Alright."

13

September 17, 2357

Residence of Eila Maible

Genesis, America

“So when’s your doctor’s appointment?” Eila asked, tossing a piece of popcorn into the air so she could try—and fail—to catch it in her mouth.

“Monday at ten,” Ari answered, making a face that Eila didn’t see. The popcorn had bounced off her left cheek and had disappeared in the blankets the two girls had piled over top of them. Rolling her eyes, Ari helped her friend find the missing kernel.

“Lucky,” Eila finally answered, “I always have to miss a Friday afternoon.”

Ari shrugged. After a few minutes had passed, however, she remarked, “Not always.”

With her eyebrows pinching together, it took a minute before Eila remembered. “That’s right!” she exclaimed. “Wow, I completely forgot that was a weekday.”

“Tuesday, October 16, 2350. Clara was so *thrilled* to be in a waiting room for a pediatrician. She kept checking her hair to make sure she wasn’t going prematurely gray, remember?” Ari snickered.

“‘I’m too young to be dealing with this!’” Eila mimicked through her giggles.

Ari laughed with her. “Oh man, your mom just about flipped her lid when she heard Clara muttering that I should’ve been sent back to the orphanage.”

“Oh I know! She yanked on my arm so hard, I thought for sure she

pulled my shoulder out of place.”

Rolling her eyes, Ari retorted, “Of course, just because she told you to stay away from me, you came up and planted yourself right in my field of vision. And you wonder why your mom doesn’t like me; it’s all your fault.”

“She likes you,” Eila retorted, shoving Ari’s arm. “And it wasn’t like ‘planting’ myself in your way actually did any good. You have got to be the most stubborn person I have ever met.”

A crooked smile pulled at Ari’s lips. “I know. And you have to be the most persistent person I’ve ever met. I can’t believe you would sit there and basically talk to a wall for fifteen minutes straight. That has to be a personal record.”

“Well, you finally cracked,” Eila retorted, making a face and throwing a few pieces of popcorn at Ari’s head.

“Hey! Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

“Who says I can’t finish it, huh?” Another few pieces of the salty snack sailed through the air.

Retaliation was automatic as Ari grabbed a buttery handful of the popcorn and tossed it at Eila. Her friend gave a half-screaming laugh before using a throw pillow as a shield. Ari did not allow for surrender and snatched the bowl from her friend’s lax hands. Clutching it to her chest, she continued to pelt Eila whenever her eyes appeared above or around her makeshift cover.

“Ari, watch the movie!” Eila suddenly ordered, tossing the pillow at her. Chuckling to herself, Ari set the nearly empty bowl on the coffee table, deflecting the cushion with her right arm.

Despite the fact that the movie they were watching was made to illicit horrified gasps, the two girls watched it with small smiles on their faces. Sometimes they even burst out in random laughter, causing one or the other to join in the fit. After another twenty minutes, however, the movie had ended at the two girls giggled as they attempted to retrieve every last kernel of popped corn from the cushions of the couch.

Still amused with themselves, the two girls headed for the kitchen, finally ready to fully clean up after themselves. Though the kitchen was of average size to Eila, Ari was always slightly overawed by the room that could hold both her bedroom *and* the bathroom of the apartment she lived in with Clara. And it cost more than three stories of the building she lived in.

Warm, terra-cotta floors were met with rich wooden cupboards that

were crowned with emerald green marble tops. Small, smooth, gray tiles made up a backsplash with a design resting above the stove. Beyond the counters, the walls were a burnt orange color that had gold flecks that set the room afire when sunlight entered the tall, narrow windows resting on the west side of the building. As per Mrs. Maible's instructions, the setting was very warm and inviting.

While Ari disposed of the popcorn, Eila put away the clean dishes the washer had been holding longer than normal. Soon afterward, she was adding their many snack bowls and dirty glasses. And while her friend was distracted, Ari casually removed the small box from her pocket and laid it unobtrusively on the counter. Not that the vibrant red bow wouldn't be a dead giveaway.

"So, are you spending the night or not?" Eila questioned through a yawn.

"I don't know. You know how your parents feel about me staying on school nights."

"Since when has that ever stopped you?"

Ari refused to look at her, letting her dark eyes travel along the marble countertops instead. "Since the price for Cai's party rose to ten grand per person," she mumbled.

It had been a hard blow to take, but the necessity of the Monday announcement could not be overlooked. Three thousand people from all over the world had already submitted their donations and had earned an invitation to his party. If the price wasn't dramatically increased, then by the time his birthday rolled around, he would be drowning in a sea of people. More than likely, he would still have three thousand people at his party, but hopefully that would be the height of the guest list.

Eila refused to comment, instead sinking her teeth anxiously into her bottom lip. In an instant, Ari could feel her heart sink into her stomach. If Eila was worried, there was almost no hope. Unless, by some miracle, her silver tongue could convince her mother—the true hammer to her father's anvil—Ari could kiss her one and only chance goodbye. And when Eila looked away, Ari could feel tears pricking at her eyes, threatening to reveal their existence.

The hollowness throbbed in her chest cavity, emphasizing as much as it could just how helpless she truly was. Without Eila, she would never again have the opportunity to meet the one person her peace of mind rested upon. If she could only look him in the eyes, or stand in his presence, she was certain that everything that she should know

would come to light. By some miracle, everything she ever wanted to know would be revealed if she just looked Cai Balere in the eyes. One moment and that was all she needed. But that moment rested solely on the shoulders of her best friend.

“What’s this?” Eila asked, snapping Ari out of her reverie. She looked up in time to see Eila slide the red ribbon off the plain white box, lifting its lid as cautiously as possible. In itself, the act stole a small smile from Ari’s lips.

“Happy birthday,” Ari murmured even as the lid was entirely removed.

Eila’s eyes shot to her own and a broad smile, her irises gleaming with unsuppressed happiness. Too much, by Ari’s reckoning. “Buds! Thank you. Exactly what I needed,” Eila exclaimed, stepping up to Ari and wrapping her arms around the too-tall girl and squeezing for all she was worth. Ari hugged her back just as tightly, though slightly confused.

“I’ve already downloaded about fifty new songs into them. Took me all afternoon, too, since you wouldn’t leave the room for five freaking seconds,” she explained, rolling her eyes in the process. Ari didn’t own a computer of her own and her key had only limited data. Just like the six other pairs of Buds Eila had already maxed out. Therefore, using Eila’s home computer was a necessity, since the school-assigned tablets were closely monitored and blocked any downloads.

“I thought you forgot,” Eila finally admitted, her words muffled by Ari’s thin shoulder.

“What?” Ari demanded, pulling from the embrace so she would be able to see Eila’s face. “How on Earth could I possibly forget my best friend’s birthday?”

Eila refused to look at her. Instead, she shrugged and muttered, “You’ve had a lot on your mind. Thought my birthday just sort-of slipped it. Of course, it didn’t help when you went *all day* without saying ‘happy birthday’ to me.”

Ari’s lips pulled up into her crooked smile. “That was the point, genius.” Pulling on Eila’s shoulders, she pulled her back into a tight hug. Though it was insane to believe Ari could forget, it was just that type of insanity that made her love Eila. Someone *had* to be insane to be her friend; might as well embrace it.

“So, what time’s the party?”

Again, Eila pulled away from the hug, her eyes darting to Ari’s eyes quickly before shooting away again. Slowly, she returned to the

counter where she pulled the manilla-colored Buds from the box, placing one perfectly inside her ear. Even as she pretended to be interested fully in the Buds, she announced, "There isn't going to be one."

Brows furrowed, Ari studied her friend first in confusion that shifted quickly to suspicion. Eila was one who loved parties and socializing. Today she was officially eighteen. Which meant this weekend should have been the biggest blow-out since her Sweet 16. For her to cancel a party, something dramatic must've happened.

"Why? What could be more important than this party?"

At last, Eila's eyes locked on hers. "Cai Balere," she answered simply. "You know my parents set aside ten thousand credits for my eighteenth? Well, instead of throwing another useless party, I'm using it to get us where we need to be. You need to meet Cai. Face to face. Even if he isn't what you think or expect, this has to be done. And I'm going to help you do it."

Ari's throat closed and no words could pass the lump that existed there. Something warm and tender seemed to snake around her heart, constricting as tightly as it could. New tears threatened in her eyes and she had to blink hurriedly to stop the overflow that was about to occur.

Never, in all of her life, had Ari felt so important to another human being. No one had ever shown such generosity to her, without even wondering what could be in it for them. Such loyalty and compassion were not common in her world, with the people that she knew. And even Eila, who had always been eager to share with Ari, only did so as long as it didn't interfere with her own plans. But for her to give up her *eighteenth* birthday party for the sake of Ari *possibly* solving a universal mystery... It was more than Ari could ever have expected and a million times more than what she had ever dared to hope for.

"Thank you, Eila." The words had to be forced past the lump, but when they broke free, so too did the dam holding back her tears.

Clear drops rolled in steady succession down her warmed face while she ignored them. Instead, she strode across the kitchen to where her friend stood and wrapped her arms tightly around her. No words were able to fully say everything she wished to express, but actions spoke louder than any words could.

Several minutes passed as the two girls clung to each other. Each was full of gratitude and pride and joy. Things that were rare for one and fleeting for the other now flooded their veins and caused their hearts to warm. Of any person in the world, in the silence they knew

that they could rely on no other like they were able to rely on each other.

14

September 23, 2357

Genesis Mercy Hospital

Genesis, America

Ari puffed out her cheeks and then blew the air upwards over her face as she waited. She felt like a little kid again as she lightly kicked her heels in the air, counting the seconds between the departure of the nurse and the arrival of her doctor. Irritated, she paused her legs for a moment and shifted uncomfortably on the bed-like piece of furniture, setting the covering paper to crackling loudly.

There were few things worse than her yearly physical, as far as Ari was concerned. It was the greatest reminder of all just how much of a freak she really was. With every organ in her body in a reversed position of normal human anatomy, these visits were the only documented proof in the world that she was like no one else on Earth. And she hated that it was so necessary.

Taking another deep breath, Ari held it in her cheeks once more before letting it slowly slip from between her lips. Her eyes traveled around the room, touching on a poster of *normal* human anatomy before shooting away to study the vials of drugs that were standard for every person on the planet.

Ari almost snorted when she saw the pale blue liquid of birth control. For so long she hadn't needed it—she didn't get her first period until she was sixteen—and at her last exam it was stated that she possibly never would have a need for it. With as much as there was wrong with her, it was doubtful she was even fertile. At some point in her life—when she really stopped to think about it—she knew she

would never be able to decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Hello, Ari."

Her dark eyes shot immediately to the door, finding there the woman who had always conducted her exams from the time she was born. Doctor Lita had been an intern at the time of her birth, so she knew from the very beginning that there were terrible things wrong with her. According to Lita, Ari had become her number one patient from that moment on. And she proved that by transferring wherever Ari moved. From Valor, where she was born, to Partisan where she spent her childhood. Now, she was a stable doctor at Genesis Mercy. Ari knew, however, that wherever she went, Lita would follow.

"Hello," Ari replied.

Lita smiled compassionately at her and her blue eyes gleamed knowingly. "Your hair is longer than last I saw it."

Automatically, Ari's hand ran through her hair. It was shaggy around her ears, now. By the end of the month it would touch her jawline. Then it would begin a slow descent down her neck before barely passing her shoulders. When that happened, it would once more fall in a chestnut rain around her body.

"Yeah," was all she could think of to say, lowering her hand slowly to her side.

"So, Ari, how've you been?" Lita asked as she moved slowly towards her. As was typical, she picked up the scanner and placed Ari's right hand atop it, capturing the print to confirm that it was she Lita was examining.

"Healthy as a horse. Well, a three-legged one," she tried to joke. Her voice was strained, however. As it always was during her exam.

Lita smiled despite the lame attempt. "Other than that? School? Home? How's Eila?"

Ari shrugged. "Boring. Sucks. Fine."

Chuckling, Lita put away the scanner and grabbed the ear-thermometer. Ari couldn't help but think that, after centuries of medical triumphs, no one had ever created another way to take somebody's temperature without sticking something in them. Nothing was said for a moment as Lita recorded the temperature for her file.

"Anything new? This is your Senior year. No big plans?"

Ari couldn't stop her right hand as it raised unconsciously to the back of her neck. "Nothing, really. Just another year."

Despite the friendliness and the consistency with which Lita was known for, there had always been something about her that made Ari

keep careful control of her tongue. It was as if she knew to her core that Doctor Lita was not the person she always portrayed herself to be. There was more to her than that. And unless Ari knew she could be trusted, she said as little as possible.

The doctor seemed to sense this, as she usually did. So it didn't surprise Ari at all when her next action was to pull out an ancient stethoscope. Before putting the instrument to Ari's chest, she asked casually, "How's your heart? Anything happen to cause it stress?"

Ari opened her mouth to tell her that it was completely fine. But she stopped herself. Though she dared not trust Lita with her personal information, somehow the most important facts always fell into this woman's hands. To some degree, Ari had to trust her. It was because of her that no one—not even other doctors—knew what she was. Because of her, Ari's deformities were kept Top Secret. Which meant, if she asked a simple question about her health, Ari had an absolute duty to answer her.

"It's fine," she stated reluctantly. "But I had a panic attack a week ago."

For a moment, nothing in the entire room moved. Ari had stiffened the moment the words left her lips. Doctor Lita, however, froze in the same exact position: her head bent over her tablet, blonde hair falling around her shoulders to hide her face. So still was it, now, that even the data no longer appeared in Ari's file.

Yet, only a minute and a half had passed before Lita raised her head, surprise written in her features. "A panic attack? Are you sure that's what it was? How do you know? Really, Ari, you should have contacted me."

"I don't know if it was or wasn't. But I couldn't breathe and my heart was racing. It felt like my lungs just stopped working. I was told it was a panic attack by ... the guy who caused it. He said ... it was common ... around soldiers."

Once more, everything paused in the office. The weight of Ari's admission seemed to settle around the room, sinking into her bones as well as into every medical instrument resting there. Even Lita's shoulders bowed as the news washed over her and her blue eyes stayed glued to the tablet that was no longer recording, once more. Twice in a single half an hour, Ari had caused the room to freeze over. This could be worse than she thought.

"To be quite honest," Lita murmured into the silence, "I never thought you one to succumb to the *edge*."

A surprised laugh escaped Ari's lips and she replied sarcastically, "Before then, Doc, neither did I."

Slowly, Lita nodded before raising her eyes to meet Ari's once more. "Anything else I should know?"

Ari shook her head, though the hollowness lingered in the back of her mind. Physically, she was as fine as she always was. Lita didn't need to know anything else. But mentally...

Though there wasn't an actual gaping hole in her chest, Ari could feel the edges of it flaring angrily as they were torn by the force of the black hole that sucked everything that was vital to her inside of it, letting it disappear in a constant ache. When it was at the forefront of her mind, the agony would become real. The pain would force her to gasp for air and her panic attack would be but a fragment the intensity of the hollowness.

Shoving back the thoughts, Ari tried to keep her mind focused on the present. Her physical was the most important thing in the world every single year. She couldn't afford to have even a fraction of a misread in her body. Every year, this exam was the difference between her living a normal life or Clara shipping her off to some hospice.

Slowly, taking longer than normal, Lita moved around her with a scanner. In a low voice she would comment about the strength of Ari's bones, her lack of body fat, and her wiry muscles. Then came her lungs, which she had to keep fierce control over in order for them to fully cooperate with the tests. Afterwards, Lita studied each individual organ in Ari's body, making sure that each one was working correctly and normally. Lastly came her heart.

As much as she wanted to, Ari wished she could control the faltering pulse. Place another beat in the gap before each of hers. It would be just like that day she first saw Cai's picture. When the chasm in her chest pretended closure and her heart had an echo that allowed her to feel normal, if only for a little while. Just thinking about it was almost enough for her to imagine, once more, that she was not defective.

"Ari!" Lita squeaked, her voice reaching such a pitch that such was all that it could produce.

Dark eyes snapped open and bored into Lita's pale blue irises. There was surprise written in the tiny lines there. Surprise, confusion, and even a bit of awe. "What?" Ari demanded, her body tensing for the answer.

The doctor did not answer, merely pressing the stethoscope to the

right side of her chest once more, listening intently. Her lips began to turn down at the corners, giving her a disgruntled look when she narrowed her eyes in concentration. At last, however, she let out a long, weary sigh.

"I'm sorry. I ... I thought I heard another beat. From your heart. But it appears I was mistaken."

Ari's blood ran cold. Goosebumps rose up all along her flesh and she could feel the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up. In an instant, her black eyes were boring into Lita's, searching for more than confirmation. She wanted to find in her any form of hope. Anything that would give rise to the belief that Ari, the most unnatural person in the world, could finally gain a tiny form of normality. But what she sought did not exist there.

September 23, 2357

Genesis NE Building 89

Genesis, America

Ari ran her thumb over the ring automatically, causing the front doors of the building to spring open and allow her entrance. Equally as instinctive, her eyes scanned the small room that existed between the two sets of doors. No one lurked in the corners, yet. The dim lighting was made worse by the flickering of a bulb, marking the end of its ten year lifespan. And on the floor, right where she knew it would be, sat a thin silver bracelet.

Clara's key.

Sighing, Ari picked up the accessory and shoved it in her pocket. Clara would either spend the night at someone else's place once she got off work, or Ari would answer the obnoxiously loud buzzer at four in the morning. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Building 89 was in one of the poorest sections of the NE Quadrant. It rested on the very eastern edge of the city. From the roof of the twenty-story building, it was easy for Ari to see the dilapidated chain-link fence that served as the only deterrent for the wild dogs in the region. She remembered, when she had first moved in with Clara, daydreaming about climbing that fence and disappearing into the wilderness beyond. After all, the only two people who had ever wanted her were gone. What was left for her?

Shaking the thoughts from her mind, Ari headed for the stairwell and began the lengthy climb up twelve stories to her apartment. When

she had first moved in, it was a very long, agonizing climb and she had constantly wondered when they would fix the elevator. Seven years later, she knew better than to think that they would ever waste money on fixing it. So it was that she sprinted up the first six flights with ease, and slowed her pace only for the next six.

When she entered the apartment, Ari continued to do things as if she were on autopilot. Making a few sandwiches for dinner, she ate out of necessity instead of appetite. With eyes that were too far away to focus, she tried to figure out what the figures on her calculus homework meant, but her mind wasn't in it. And after taking a few minutes to straighten up the shabby apartment, she slunk into the hole that was her bedroom and dimmed all the lights.

Running her thumb over the ring once again, a familiar scene lit up the blank wall directly across from her tiny bed. Curling into as small of a ball as she was capable of, Ari watched the home movie with eyes that glowed in the soft lighting. Unconsciously, her hand rubbed over the spot where her yearly shots had been injected, thinking about her mother as she did so.

A woman with pale skin and curly brown hair laughed as a sprinkler swung back around to shower her in clear, crystalline water. Even the camera could not escape the spray and rainbow drops shimmered on the lens until Ari's dad wiped them away. Ari, only six at the time, ran into the sprinklers carelessly. Tessa, her mom, turned with a grace Ari had always been jealous of and scooped the young child into her arms, swinging her around until they were both dizzy. The left side of Ari's mouth pulled up into a happy smile as she watched the familiar antics.

It had always been a great secret, to Ari. That she was glad her parents' license application had been denied. If it hadn't, they would have had a child of their own. With her dad's brown skin and her mother's curly hair, probably. Instead of going to the orphanage and picking the most unruly child in the place. After a few years with her parents, she sort-of imagined that they were glad for it, too.

Not that it mattered anymore.

As the tears rolled slowly and silently over her face, Ari closed her eyes to the sight of her once happy family. Even as the tears dropped onto her pillow, she brushed the ring on her right hand and the room became black as pitch. Lying like that, she let the black hole win. Again. Allowed it to pull her down into its endless depths and tear through her in torrential waves. There was nothing else to worry

about, now. She could let go. For just one more night.

15

October 1, 2357

*Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

Cai's gaze traveled over the cool water, watching as the lingering waterfowl took possession of the bread crumbs he had thrown to them not five minutes earlier. It wasn't often that he fed them when he was out here, but he liked having the company today. At least they couldn't ask him what was wrong or why he was lost in thought. They simply accepted his offerings and provided some glimmer of a distraction for his overworked mind.

Today, especially, his thoughts were feverish. They jumped around inside of his skull, clashing with each other and sparking tense friction in his brain. Both confusing and strange, each one rotated around his imagination. Taunting his subconscious with people he'd never met and daring to offer them up as memories. It was enough to drive any man to insanity.

"There you are," said a voice approaching behind him. Cai turned uninterestedly and watched his uncle over his right shoulder.

Val Balere was a man of average height, standing at one hundred and eighty centimeters. He had a stocky build that had been common in the Balere men for generations, except for Cai. A rounded face sat atop a thick neck that had a strangely pastel-colored tie wrapped around it. Noticing the inspection, Val's large hands reached up to further adjust the yellow and green striped adornment. It was a nervous gesture and Cai felt his curiosity slowly ease to life, though he shut it down in an instant. As the only male role model in his life, Cai

felt a specific duty to leave his uncle to his secrets. Just as Val often left Cai to his own.

It was a strange relationship that the pair shared, but it was more natural than either of them had ever anticipated. Especially since they had never before seen one another until Cai's mother was appointed the new Supreme Commander of the United Nations when he was eight. His uncle, following decidedly into the family business of politics, had already lived in Geneva for thirteen years prior to Lucia's promotion. So it was that the meeting between the only two surviving Balere men had happened at a much later date and under much more strained circumstances than expected.

Yet, it was Val who enrolled Cai into a very secure private school. It was also Val who selected tutors to teach the young boy the three predominant languages that encompassed Switzerland: German, Italian, and French. And it was Val who, above all others, slowly introduced Cai to his new life. A life that, despite its secrecy, Cai had come to love.

"Here I am," Cai confirmed. Fully recalled to his task, he threw a few more pieces of stale bread out into the water. They weren't even allowed to get soggy before the geese were gobbling them up.

"Amaris called the house." Val's bushy eyebrows were raised and Cai knew it was in response to the fact that it was necessary. But Cai had completely forgotten the ignored call coming into his key. "She'll be here in ten minutes, she said. Something about you two having a 'date.'" His uncle didn't even try to disguise the question.

"Press thing," Cai sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He didn't need to see the dark circles under his eyes to know that they were there.

"Are you exhausted *again*?" Val demanded in disbelief. Not that it should have been a surprise.

"Every four days. Like clockwork," Cai responded.

"Didn't you just have a doctor's appointment? Can't they give you something for that?"

"I did. And she did. A shot of stimulants. Something about waking up certain cells that produce something or other that'll wake me up. Whatever it is, it lasted a week. Then I had a major crash and ended up missing a day of school. Just like every year."

Damn doctor can't even get the simplest of things right, he thought bitterly.

"I don't know what it is," Cai continued. "It's like constant jet-lag.

I'm fine for three days. Totally wired, actually. Like I don't need sleep. As if my body's getting energy from another source. But on the fourth day, I'm completely spent. Did you know I can sleep a full twenty-four hours if you let me? I've done it before."

His uncle shook his head, amazed by what he was saying. "Kid, you've got problems."

Cai barked a sarcastic laugh. "Understatement of the century."

It was quiet for a minute and Cai took the silence for what it was: the opportunity for his uncle to gather his thoughts before asking. If Cai's thoughts would stop bouncing around like Mexican Jumping Beans, he would have done the same. As it was, he spent the intervening solace tossing bits of bread out into the water for the birds to fight over.

"So what're you doing out here today, Cai?" Val asked in a carefully casual tone.

"Thinking. Well, trying to think," Cai amended his terse response.

"About what, now? Every time I come over these days, you're pondering something out here by the pond."

Cai shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head in an indication that he didn't wish to discuss it. Normally, that would have been enough for his uncle. Just like a closing grunt was usually enough for Cai. But not this time.

"C'mon, kid. You haven't seen me in a few weeks. And something is obviously on your mind. Who can you talk to if not me?" Val raised his eyebrows and plastered his signature smile across his face. Cai knew he meant it to be endearing, but it just came off as fake.

Cai sighed and ran a hand through his hair, aggravated at both his myriad of jumbled thoughts and his uncle's persistence in learning them. Even so, if he kept it bottled up any longer, he would explode. And maybe saying some of it out loud would unravel just a few of the knots.

"Just dreams again," Cai finally muttered, throwing the last of the bread into the frenzy of waterfowl.

Val remained silent for a moment, probably bringing to mind every other time they'd had a similar conversation. And just as Cai was expecting, he asked gently, "What about?"

Cai snorted through his nose before suddenly pushing both hands through his hair. "The home movies again. With the woman and the little girl in the sprinklers. Then with them and a man in an apartment for the girl's birthday. More of them in a park or on a roof. Over and

over again. Like ... like memories instead of dreams. It's like I can actually remember all of that happening even as I'm watching the movies play. How insane is that?"

Letting the air rush out of his lungs, Cai's hands fell back down and grasped his knees tightly. This had happened before. Nothing new about it. So why did it continue to bother him like an itch he couldn't scratch? Years had passed since these particular dreams began to haunt him and no amount of sleep studies or experimental therapy could find an answer in the images that seeped into his skull most nights. Nor was the conversation he was about to have with his uncle going to deviate from any time in the past.

"Well, do you think it possible you saw these people before? Maybe even back in Valor?"

"And when would I have had space to see anyone in Valor? Mother wouldn't dare allow it, remember?"

Val nodded his head in a commiserating way. Not that he was truly capable of relating. Unlike Cai's overbearing mother, Val and Lucia's parents had presented them to the world as early and as often as possible. Lucia, especially, had been paraded about as the future Leader of America. A position she would eventually earn, despite those who scoffed at the boasts of a biased father. And Val had retained the position as valued council to every political leader to be elected from the moment he turned eighteen. No, Val could not know at all what it was to be Cai.

"That's true," his uncle conceded. "But you must have seen them somewhere and something must have happened that makes you continue to dream about them."

Cai sighed and shrugged his shoulders in a 'maybe' gesture. Even so, he knew it was false. Never had he seen that family with his own two eyes. And something deep inside assured him that it would be impossible to see them even now. But for the sake of putting the conversation to rest, he was willing to pretend agreement with his uncle. As usual.

"Well, it was just a dream, right?"

Cai took a moment to answer but finally he sighed, "Yeah. Just a dream."

Except that it wasn't. At least, it didn't feel like *his* dream. Though he'd seen the same scenes often enough to recall them perfectly, he wasn't lying when he said it felt as if he'd lived them. And last night, when he was watching these people, he could feel his eyes begin to

drift shut. But he was already asleep. Then, suddenly, he'd jolted awake, his entire body lurching like it would if he dreamed he was falling ... or if he was falling asleep too quickly.

It was in that moment, before his eyes could adjust to his room, that they landed on a familiar wall displaying the home videos. Then his eyes trailed down to a pair of hands too delicate to be his. The thumb brushed silently over a silver ring, similar to his own, on the right ring finger. Only when the other room was blanketed in blackness did Cai fully snap awake.

Yes, it was just a dream. But it wasn't Cai's dream. Not really.

Val gave his nephew that commiserating look again as he rose to his feet. Clapping a hand on his nephew's shoulders, he encouraged, "Take care of yourself, okay? Learn to go to bed at a decent hour, too."

A reluctant smile pulled at Cai's lips and he nodded. Saying no more, Val traveled back across the expansive lawn up to the main house. From there, Cai knew, he would stop in the kitchen and grab a pastry before disappearing for yet another week. It was always surprising how close they truly were when they didn't actually spend more than twenty minutes with each other most weeks.

After a few minutes more had passed, Cai pushed himself to his feet, an exhale of resolve leaving his body. Turning, he left the pond and the birds behind as he retreated to the house. He couldn't stay out there forever. Especially when he had a date to get ready for.

October 1, 2357

Enchanted Garden Restaurant

Geneva, Switzerland

"How many do you count?" Ris inquired, leaning across the table slightly. The right side of Cai's mouth pulled up into a mischievous smirk as his eyes scanned the restaurant.

It was hard to see much of anything, at first. As the name suggested, the *Enchanted Garden* was filled with large green plants that exuded beauty and bounty throughout the bright establishment. Rare orchids flourished in personal alcoves while tropical fronds waved at guests around corners and beside doors. A large fountain at the center of the main dining room shot sparkling water a fair distance into the air. The glass dome that served as the roof let in enough sunlight, not only to keep the plants alive and well, but to make a constant rainbow appear in the mists of the fountain. The name of *Enchanted Garden* had never

once been alluded to as an exaggeration.

Leaning across the table as well, Cai lowered his voice to a murmur. "Four, by my count."

An equally daring gleam burned in her caramel irises as she announced, "Six."

"Where?" he demanded, his eyes darting around the room quickly.

"Parking lot, genius. They're a bit obvious when they take pictures of the car's license plate." Ris rolled her eyes at the amateur sleuthing of the reporters and photographers.

Sitting slowly back in his chair, Cai took the opportunity to glance out the entire glass wall to where the parking lot was clearly visible. Sure enough, two men stood outside, pretending to have a disagreement. Too late. Cai had already seen them staring with avid interest.

Shaking his head, Cai chuckled as he turned back to Ris. "You win," he admitted. The bet had not been made five minutes before they entered the restaurant. The one who spotted the most reporters and photographers won. He should have known better than to bet with Ris.

"And?" Amaris raised a single eyebrow expectantly.

Narrowing his eyes, he muttered playfully, "Fine. Give me your card."

Grinning triumphantly, Amaris handed over the tiny credit card. Taking it from her, Cai pulled out his own credit card and flipped hers over. A digital strip existed on the back, appearing metallic silver with rainbow flecks trapped inside. Placing this strip directly under the matching strip of his own credit card, Cai muttered, "Transfer fifty." In an instant, the credits went from his card to hers, the amounts displayed briefly in neon green numerals on the clear cards before fading entirely.

Taking the credit card back, Ris smiled even more smugly than before. "Thank you very much."

"Con artist," he pretended to retort with a sour expression. Ris just rolled her eyes.

Their food was delivered then and they set about devouring the small portions, all the while laughing and talking like it was as normal as ever. But it was never anywhere close.

"This is weird, isn't it?" Amaris asked quietly when their plates had been cleared. She was leaning back in her chair and studying the rapidly darkening restaurant, her eyes glowing from the lamplight that

slowly began to illuminate the walls.

"The date or being out in public together?" Cai asked, a tiny smile flirting with his lips.

"Both."

A small laugh escaped him even as he nodded agreement. Eyes that had been weary only hours earlier now excitedly devoured the scene around him. Businessmen debating in corners. Small families wearing exasperated expressions in booths as they tried to control rowdy children. Even couples who were so deeply engrossed with each other that nothing in the world existed. Everything Cai had never seen before because his mother had banned him from making public appearances. And everything Amaris chose to pass on in favor of playing video games with her best friend instead.

Reaching his hand across the table, Cai's fingers gripped hers lightly. "Yeah. It's weird. But it's also the best date I've ever had. Thanks, Ris."

Amaris beamed at him from across the table, allowing her fingers to tighten around his own. "Best date ever," she agreed.

16

October 11, 2357

Bus 93

Genesis, America

Ari sighed as she slipped the tablet back into the messenger bag she only rarely used. The trip to Central Genesis had gone even worse than she had imagined. Although, she had to admit, she should have expected nothing less.

Truly it hadn't deviated from Ari's expectations right away. Clara was late, as usual. After fifteen minutes had passed over the time limit, Ari had observed that the junky old car that Clara owned was parked on the nearly-empty road in front of the office building. (It couldn't top higher than twelve feet on a good day.) Which was pretty much normal every three months.

Except, this time, Clara wasn't just fifteen minutes late. She was *thirty* minutes late. And it wasn't because she wasn't in the building, but because she was flirting with some guy in the elevator and then went back to his office for the next ten minutes. Ari literally had to track her down, thankful that her social worker was used to them being late. At the time, Ari didn't realize that her case had been transferred. Again.

The minute Ari and Clara stood before the pinched-nosed, beady-eyed troll of a woman, Ari knew they were in for it. As far as guardians were concerned, Clara rested so far below the belt of acceptability that the government would offer up a free hysterectomy if there was ever a chance of her breeding. And Ari was no angel as far as the system was concerned and she was often considered a walking safety hazard just

because of her natural independence. From there, the meeting went from simply awful to undeniably atrocious.

When it was all over, Ari would've been hard-pressed to find a less qualified social worker to handle her particular case. She didn't know what the woman was doing in her spare time, but hallucinogenic seemed likely after the lectures she foisted upon them. Ari had been certain that the entire three floors of the Genesis Social Services had learned by now that what they had to say really didn't matter and she would do what she had to in order to survive. With or without their help.

In fact, it was probably *because* of the safety lecture she'd received from Ms. Michin that she declined the offer of a ride home with Clara. Instead, she chose the less familiar bus routes to get her back to where she belonged. Besides that, she never had any intentions on heading home right away, anyway.

Ari didn't get to the Center except every three months. And their public library was the only one in the city that had a wireless set up that overrode any and all prior connections. Including making it possible for Ari to search the internet on her school-provided tablet without her searches being directly uplinked to her school.

After three hours of sating her curiosity, she was finally sitting on the second bus in a series of vehicles that would eventually get her back to Genesis NE Building 89. As soon as she was settled in the chairs of the bus, she placed her one fractured Bud in her ear and turned the volume up as high as it could go. Closing her eyes, she let her mind just pause for a while as the lyrics swept her away.

So caught up was she that Ari didn't realize that the vehicle was swiftly emptied on its third stop. Her lips still silently mouthed the words even as a small group of men began to board the otherwise empty bus. Only when the first two neared her did Ari's eyes snap open.

The *edge* had a high potency as it rolled off of each tall, straight-backed soldier that entered the confined space with her. It sent chills up her spine and she tried to hide the goosebumps their presence caused. Rubbing nervously at the back of her neck, the tiny hairs refused to lie flat against her skin. Ducking her head as they began to pass her, Ari focused solely on breathing through the smothering atmosphere. Every time her lungs drew in more air, it felt as if she was getting less and less oxygen.

Suck it up, Ari. Learn to deal with it, she scolded herself. Then, in only

a mental whisper, she added, *You might have an edge of your own one day.*

The thought caused a violent shiver to rock through her body just as a soldier took a seat behind her. They were spread throughout the bus. Two at the back, two in the center, and two at the front. Always somewhat diagonal from one another, so as to leave no space fully unprotected, even though Ari was the only other person on the bus with them—besides the driver.

Just as Ari was drawing in another shuddering breath, a voice from behind her said, “You can still get off. There is still time.”

In an instant, Ari whipped around in her seat. Her dark eyes were met with mirthful blue irises and she could clearly see the grin on his face. Unwillingly, her lips pulled up into her one-sided smile, a gleam sparking in her own eyes. And just like the day they met, she slowly began to take in Jace’s nearly unrecognizable appearance.

The last time she had seen Jace, nearly a month ago, he had sported a five o’clock shadow across his face and he’d been dressed in old, comfortable civilian clothes. Black hair had grown out just long enough for her to realize that it had a hint of natural brown highlights. And his eyes had been dull and weary with a week’s worth of experiences weighing on his mind.

This was not the same man. Those cerulean eyes were clear, bright and alert. Darting away from her for only a second, they kept up their constant vigil of the vehicle, somehow making Ari feel both trapped and safe at the same time.

Not only had his eyes seemed to awaken, but his body had transformed with his station and purpose. His black hair was cropped as short as could be, with a thicker patch on his crown and nearly shaved on the sides. Which was just barely discernible beneath the black beret he wore.

Equally capable of vanishing was the facial hair Ari had become accustomed to. With its disappearance, she knew now that he was actually a bit younger than she’d given him credit for. Instead of twenty-five, his softer features made him appear closer to twenty even though Ari already knew he was twenty-two. Yet, despite his age, no one could command as much respect when wearing the uniform he had donned that day.

It wasn’t the formal, navy blue uniform that most soldiers wore to banquets and fundraisers. Nor was it the short-sleeved uniform worn by those working at Central Command. Jace was neither a high-

ranking official nor a computer genius stuffed into cramped rooms to do nothing but stare at screens all day. Instead, he wore the most intimidating uniform of them all: the uniform that was worn by soldiers in the field. The battle uniform.

The black fabric was loose enough that it made his chest appear much larger. Ari knew it was just because of the built-in bulletproof padding, but it didn't halt the feeling of *big* when she looked at him. Each sleeve was tight at the wrist, just as his pants were slim enough to disappear into the standard black boots. Making up the most important part of the uniform, the United Nations crest was patched onto his right shoulder and embroidered into his cap. And Ari knew that the Military Arms symbol was patched on his left shoulder.

"Time's up," Jace remarked with a smirk as the bus lifted off of the roof.

Ari returned his cocky smile with one of her own. "Didn't feel like waiting an hour."

Though on the surface, they both seemed perfectly fine with the banter, Ari's dark eyes kept up a constant search of Jace's features. After their last encounter, she wasn't sure whether or not they would ever speak again. Yes, he'd forgiven her. No, he was not her friend. Yet, that didn't mean he hadn't made a sharp impression. Ari could only hope that she'd at least left him with an equally injurious perception.

It seemed likely when she realized his blue eyes were growing darker and a certain depth was added to them every time he looked at her. Finally, he asked in a low voice, "How've you been, Ari?"

The lighter mood seeped out of Ari as well and she murmured back, "Same as usual, I guess. And you?"

A faint smile pulled on his lips but a sharpness appeared in his eyes. "I guess?" he inquired. "What does that mean?"

Shaking her head, Ari glanced at him only long enough to further her denial by shrugging her shoulders. Every bit of motion was used to express that she didn't know and she didn't want to talk about it. Neither signal seemed to register with Jace. Or he was ignoring her.

Either way, he raised his eyebrows further and gave her that same irritating stare he had used on her at the bus stop. The stare that required an answer and ordered there be absolutely no excuses. It was the same look that had made her confess everything to him then, and it was working a similar magic now.

With a sigh, Ari rubbed the back of her neck in order to actually work out a small cramp forming. Her left leg, too, felt stiff and tingled

almost painfully when she moved it. "Move up a seat, would you? I'm tired of sitting like this," she grumbled as she eased herself around.

A full second hadn't passed before Jace slipped around into the chair beside hers. Thankful that she was used to the increased potency of the *edge* times six, Ari felt almost comfortable in his presence. Almost ... but not quite.

Of course, it also didn't help that five extra sets of eyes were now locked on the two of them. Before, they had politely been pretending not to realize they were talking. Now, they were most certainly intent on eavesdropping.

"So what does that mean?" Jace asked in a low enough voice that only the soldier closest to them would hear.

"It means that, other than the normal stuff that can screw with my life, pretty much everything is the same as usual."

"What's screwing with your life?"

Ari shot him an irritated look. "What does it matter to you? We *are* strangers, after all," she retorted, shooting his words back at him.

Guilt flared briefly in Jace's blue eyes before he looked away. As he thought of a reply, his lips curled into a tiny smile. Glancing back at Ari, he casually replied, "Because I'm a freak, too. And us freaks have to stick together."

Ari couldn't help it, she had to laugh at that comment. A laugh that was quickly smothered as the separate *edges* seemed to condense around her like a fog or a dust storm. Their surprise at her laughter had turned into a choking hazard and Ari was finding it difficult to breathe. Swallowing hard, her left hand raised to her heart instinctively and she could feel the pulse racing in her chest.

"Ari? Are you okay?" Jace asked, his voice raised with his worry.

After a few forced breaths, she managed to choke out, "I'm ... fine. Just ... the *edge*." Quickly, her eyes swept over each of the soldiers, silently informing Jace that it wasn't him doing this to her.

Suddenly, Jace grabbed her chin and forced her face to turn towards him. Ari's breath caught when she realized that their noses were only inches apart and that his blue eyes were large and luminous in her vision.

"Look here," Jace instructed, indicating his eyes. Ari thought it ironic, since she didn't have the willpower to look anywhere else. "Breathe when I do. As deeply as I do. You'll adjust in a minute," he informed her.

Ari's eyes stayed locked on his, but when she heard him inhale, she

did so, too. Just as long as he inhaled, so did she. And when he let it out, she released the carbon dioxide just as slowly. For several moments, the process repeated until the next breath was all that Ari could think about. Her entire focus was so thoroughly diverted that even her body could no longer become agitated by the six separate *edges* that were pressed in around her.

Finally, Jace released her chin and smiled slightly. "Better?"

Taking the deepest breath yet, Ari exhaled through a relieved smile. "Much. Thank you."

Shrugging slightly, he replied, "Happens to all of us at some point. I remember getting off the bus for boot camp and nearly blacked out, the strength of the *edge* was so potent." And, just as if he could see the soldier nearest him open his mouth to deliver a snarky response, Jace jabbed a thumb over his shoulder in exactly his direction. "Hal actually threw up inside the first fifty seconds. Drill Instructors labeled him 'Fifty' and had him repeat his story loud and clear whenever a commanding officer asked about it."

"Hey!" the soldier named Hal protested, making Ari's giggles turn to a smothered laugh. "At least I ain't like CJ. Cried from the moment we boarded the bus to the moment the Drill Instructors got hold of him."

The heavier-set guy at the very front of the bus turned in his seat to give Hal a sharp glare. Between them, a soldier with a particularly large nose and ears began to laugh, making a loud snorting noise when oxygen became hard to grasp. CJ's sharp eyes turned their glower onto him and he snapped, "What're you laughing at, Dumbo?"

Ari didn't understand the reference but she continued to hold a hand over her mouth just the same. Beside her, Jace laughed without care and his rich voice pooled into the air around them. It was so unexpected, this sudden round of insults and tattling that Ari could almost believe that these men weren't trained killers. That their job wasn't to keep civilian violence at a minimum by using violence themselves. The famed order and stoicism of soldiers worldwide had dissolved with this group of young men.

All of which halted in an instant as the driver announced, "Genesis East Building 107."

Ari's laughter stopped in the same breath as Jace's and they glanced at one another knowingly. This would be the latest last time they saw one another and neither could determine when their paths would cross in the future. Yet, Ari was okay with that, because it seemed obvious to

her that they *would* see each other again. It was inevitable.

Just as she saw the same knowledge flare in Jace's blue eyes, each of the soldiers shot to their feet. Jace was no exception and he turned his face forward like the rest of them and disappeared with the same precision with which they boarded. Taking another deep breath, Ari followed silently afterward. And just as her feet found the rooftop, she watched as Jace and his friends boarded a deeply black bus with the United Nations insignia emblazoned on the side. The Military Arms sigil was painted at the rear of the bus and the Fallen crest was painted near the front. Silently, without paying attention to any who saw, Ari placed her fist over her heart in salute.

17

October 20, 2357

Residence of Eila Maible

Genesis, America

"Ugh! This assignment is so stupid," Eila grumbled, letting her head fall down onto the bedspread.

Ari's lips twitched in slight amusement and she knew better than to comment. Instead, she continued to write on a scrap piece of paper. Her scratchy handwriting continued to pour her thoughts onto the page in a half-assed poem that she knew she'd never show to anyone else. Of everything that Ari had to be protective of, this was her most closely guarded secret only because she viewed it as her most embarrassing. Poetry was something she didn't even remotely enjoy *reading*. To *write* it was something she would never admit to if it cost her an arm and a leg.

Not that her feelings about it ever gave Eila pause.

"What're you scribbling at over there?" It was the only notice Ari had, and it wasn't enough. Eila had learned long ago that Ari had quick reflexes, so she learned to move first, question later. Before there was time to react, the sheet of paper was torn out of her hand, the pen leaving a black line slashed down to the end.

"Eila!" Ari snapped, twisting around hastily. Her features were set in a mixture between mortification and anger. An expression Eila didn't see as she turned away from her friend and began to read the poem aloud. Even as she spoke, Ari could see the words printed behind her tightly shut eyelids.

* * *

“Soldiers thrive on violence,
 thirst for blood,
 command the deaths of everyone.

But that's not true.
 Just lies you're fed.
 Without one of them, I'd be dead.

Honor and courage and victory, too.
 These are their lives.
 Their true virtues.

Above the pain and beyond the sorrow,
 a soldier ensures there's always a tomorrow.
 Despite the fear and terror they spread,
 for your life, a soldier would give his instead.”

Eila's voice had started off strong but began to waver with each added line. At the end, it trailed off uncertainly, leaving an ominous silence to fill the room. For a long time, she stared at the paper, rereading every line silently. And all the while, Ari stood behind her with her right hand running through her hair in frustration before rubbing her neck nervously. Finally, however, Eila turned around to stare at her with wide, shocked eyes. In a flash, Ari's left hand shot out and snatched the paper back.

“What is *that*?” Eila demanded. Even her voice was stunned by the contents of the poem.

“Nothing,” Ari said, quickly folding up the paper and shoving it into her back pocket.

“Don't give me that crap! Why are you writing about soldiers, Ari? And what was that part about being dead without one?” Worry flared brightly in Eila's wide brown eyes and Ari couldn't find it in her to stare into them for too long.

“It's nothing, Eila. Really. Just something I've been thinking about lately,” she mumbled in a placating tone. It didn't work.

“Ari Keir, you have five seconds to tell me the truth. One... Two... Three...”

“When has that ever worked on me?”

“Four...”

“Seriously, Eila? I'm not a toddler, okay. There's nothing to tell.”

Eila's lips had just begun to form the word 'five' when Ari suddenly snapped, "Fine! If it's really that important to you, I'll tell you."

Eila's lips didn't even bother to form her normally smug smile, that's how worried she was. Ari glowered at her insolently as she crossed her arms tightly over her chest. Mimicking her pose, Eila raised an eyebrow expectantly. Successfully worn down, Ari sighed dramatically.

"It was the night of the party," Ari grumbled. "You know that guy that came down here with me to keep everyone from trying to drive home? Well, before he saved their asses, he saved mine. I was on the roof when the lightning started. I'd have been fried if it wasn't for Jace."

Eila's position didn't shift, but her eyes grew wider as Ari finished explaining. For a moment, she didn't say a word. Twenty seconds later, however, she remarked casually, "That doesn't explain the poem. Why would you write that, Ari? Why would you even *think* that?"

Back stiffening at her tone, Ari couldn't help herself when she snapped, "Because it's *true*. Every last word."

"And you know this because...?"

"I know *Jace*," Ari scoffed.

"You met him once," Eila retorted.

"I've seen him three times since then. I've spent *hours* with him, Eila. I think I know by now what it means to be a soldier. At least more than you do. And why are you freaking out, anyway? It's just a stupid poem."

"Why am *I* freaking out? You're writing poems about the *virtues* of being a soldier, Ari. There *are* no virtues to that life. How can you even believe—"

"Because I might be one!"

Eila's mouth fell open in shock and her wide brown eyes pooled with appalled tears. As Ari stood there, breathing through her nose to try and calm herself, Eila stared in horror at her best friend. Not a word was spoken between them for three whole minutes. Finally, however, Eila found her voice.

"You ... can't. You can't, Ari. How could you choose that life? How can you give up everything for a life of disgrace and shame?" Her voice rose ever higher until it cut off in a half-strangled screech.

"I may not have a choice," Ari announced coolly. Eila shook her head and opened her mouth to argue further, and Ari quickly spoke over her. "When we take the aptitude test, if my highest aptitude is as

a soldier, I'm gone. Just like that. I won't get a choice, Eila. Just like Jace and his friends didn't. Not one of them does. Maybe I won't either."

Swallowing hard, Eila kept her gaze averted. "Why do you think you'll get that? What makes you think that's the highest aptitude you'll have?"

Ari opened her mouth to answer ... only to find she didn't have one. There wasn't a single shred of evidence in all of Ari's schooling to even suggest that the highest aptitude she would have was as a soldier. But there was also no other aptitude she was more suited to. Nothing fit her and she didn't fit in anywhere else.

"I don't know," she finally said in a low tone. "But it feels like it's what I'm supposed to be. More than anything."

October 20, 2357

En Route to Genesis NE Building 89

Genesis, America

Ari's one Bud blasted old metal songs so loudly that it made her eardrum tremble under the assault. It was actually a really good thing that she only had one Bud, or else both ears would probably lose all of their abilities before she turned twenty-five. Some days, though, she wished it was just that easy to keep from hearing everyone else's bullshit for a while.

Even with one Bud blasting at top volume, it still didn't shut out the chatter of the people two seats ahead of her or the annoying popping noises a teenage girl was making with her bubblegum. Nor did it shut out the voice of the driver as he announced their arrival at Genesis North Building 28.

Just as Ari's hand reached up in a vain effort to coax a little more music from the device, she caught a glimpse of a familiar being waiting in line to board the bus. Unconsciously, a small smile pulled on Ari's lips and she withdrew the Bud from her ear and shut it off. Noticing that the vehicle was a little more crowded than usual, Ari took the added measure of throwing her long legs up on the seat beside her.

Even had she not noticed him, Ari would have been able to tell the moment Jace got on the bus. As if a wave of unease swept through the vehicle, everyone pulled away from the center aisle. Ari, alone, didn't even flinch as the *edge* drifted through the air, preceding his own arrival. Even so, Jace matched the *edge* for intimidation as he boarded

the bus. His height was accentuated in the narrow space, and those sharp blue eyes examined every single face. Somehow, the scrutiny of his surroundings made Ari smile a bit. It was nice having someone even more paranoid than herself around.

Everyone who boarded before Jace quickly found a seat at the front of the bus. It really bothered them to have him at their backs; an instinctual response that even Ari was not immune to. At least, not yet. With them out of the way, Ari lowered her legs back to the floor and she looked back out the window as Jace approached. She was the only ally he had on that bus, and he knew it well.

"You seem in a good mood today," Jace remarked quietly as he sank into the chair beside her.

Ari's smile was even more sarcastic as she glanced askance at him and answered, "Actually, I'm in a shitty mood today. But you don't look so bright-eyed, either."

An equally forced smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "Observant," he remarked before letting out a heavy sigh.

"Feel like talking about it?" Jace shook his head and Ari nodded decisively. "Good. Neither do I." Taking the Bud from her pocket, she quickly put it back in her ear.

Together, they sat in relative silence until the moment they reached Genesis North Building 37. Ari had to admit, there was something incredibly nice in just sitting in silence with Jace. It was something she was used to and she never felt the need to make conversation with him. There was nothing even remotely awkward about it. Which was decidedly a blessing to both of them.

When the bus reached hovering height over Building 37, Ari slipped into the space afforded Jace as they quickly exited. As was usual for them, they retreated to the other side of the rooftop and sat on the ledge—facing the bus stop this time. Ari had gotten over her fear by the next day after her panic attack; one couldn't live in Genesis and be afraid of heights. Not with every mode of transportation being airborne except in the slums.

As they settled into a comfortable position on the ledge, Ari watched as people clamored into the booth, pressing on routes and speaking to the automated voice that would direct them. Many of them had the harried expressions of occasional riders. Those that were registered like she was didn't bother with the booth. They paced around outside, talking with one another or even sitting on the hoods of cars in the parking spaces. None ventured as far from the stop as she and Jace

did.

“So, anything new in your life?” Jace asked in a voice that seemed molded into the perfect polite tone. His question wasn’t genuine. Merely a reason to strike up conversation.

“Not since the last time you saw me. At least, nothing worth mentioning,” she answered casually.

Jace glanced at her from the corner of his eye and a shadow of a grin flirted with his lips. “It’s kind-of ironic, isn’t it? That we suddenly run into each other all the time now since that night?”

Ari dipped her head in slight agreement. “No kidding. And it’s not like I wouldn’t have noticed you before. So it’s literally been *since that night*.” Even as she said it, the *edge* seemed to sink just a centimeter more into her skin and a chill seemed to flood her veins. Rubbing her left hand absentmindedly over her upper arm, she added, “Though it’s not that sudden. After all, it seems like we get on the same bus an awful lot.”

The grin became a tad bit more pronounced as Jace suddenly remarked, “If it weren’t for public transportation, we’d never have met.”

An equally tiny smirk pulled at Ari’s lips. “You’re right. Neither of us would’ve been on the roof without the need for it.”

Another silence fell between them, since nothing more could really be said to that. And when the bus arrived, they strolled casually between the parked cars and arrived at the stop just as it lowered to boarding height. Sitting near the back of the bus, Ari resumed listening to her music while Jace stared out of the window and watched as the North Quadrant sailed by below them.

When the bus landed on Genesis N Building 55, Ari removed the Bud and prepared to say goodbye to Jace. The bus to the Northeast Quadrant would arrive in only a few minutes and it was likely that she wouldn’t see him for a while. Wasn’t that always the way of it?

It surprised her more than he would ever know when they stepped off the bus and he suddenly asked, “Mind if I tag along to your stop?”

Whipping around, Ari’s eyes grew wide as saucers as they locked on his blue irises. “Why?” she demanded in a shocked tone.

Unintentionally, the *edge* forced it’s way into her body and a panic erupted inside her heart. Like a toxin, it raced through her blood and threw her reactions into overdrive. Erupting in goosebumps, her skin lost all form of heat. With her throat closing sporadically, it became difficult to draw in each breath. It was even harder for her to do so

unnoticed, since she didn't want Jace to realize her body was having a meltdown due to his request.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to notice. As soon as the question was out of her mouth, he turned his head away to stare off into the distance. His face was averted so long that Ari had just enough time to recover from the sudden battering and was able to look at him almost calmly when his eyes returned to her.

"I just ... don't want to go back yet," Jace admitted. Looking away once more, one of his hands rubbed over his short hair, lightly pulling on it unconsciously, as if he was wondering how long it was now.

Just like that, her fear of him sank back into the depths of her being. Though a part of her would *always* be afraid of Jace, it felt like the greater part of her self would never find a reason to fear. Slowly, as with most things in Ari's life, he was becoming her friend. Even if they didn't see one another often, it was often enough for her.

"Sure. Just as long as you stay on the bus," Ari said through a somewhat-forced smile. Jace's smile was less forced and he nodded quickly in acquiescence before they loaded onto Bus 112.

As was usual by now, they sat beside one another in companionable silence. A silence that was continuously threatened by Ari's growing curiosity. What he had said had offered just the tiniest of glimpses into the life of a soldier. Just a shred of a life that might be Ari's in another seven months' time. Ari could see nothing but bleakness if Jace would rather sit in silence beside a near-stranger for another hour, instead of returning to the land outside of the city. Yet, despite her curiosity, she knew that Jace would rather not answer her questions. So, stubborn as she was, Ari kept a firm hold on her tongue all throughout their travels.

It was almost with a sense of impending-deprivation that Ari watched out the window as her last bus lowered to a foot above the dilapidated street corner in front of Genesis NE Building 87. Slowly, Ari turned her eyes to Jace. He had the same not-ready-yet expression on his face that Ari had. Somehow, it was easy for them to be together like this. And when they had to separate and go on about their lives, it was almost like starting a countdown until they'd see one another again.

Jace stood up and moved into the aisle so that Ari could pass him to the door. This was it: the moment for the goodbye. But no words came to mind and, even if they had, Ari wasn't willing to say them anyway. Smirking just slightly at Jace, she bowed her head in traditional

Genesis acknowledgment. Smiling a little as well, Jace returned the gesture.

Ari was in no hurry as she made her way to the front of the bus—a small bubble forming around her like the one that accompanied Jace—and stepped out onto the lonely street. With a steady stride, she turned towards the corner and crossed the empty street. When she had reached the far side, she couldn't help but turn around and watch as the ancient bus lifted to its maximum three feet and prepared to depart. Even though she couldn't see him, Ari knew that he was watching her and she raised a hand in a half-assed wave.

It was in that moment of distraction that the vile *edge* crashed over her. Whirling in surprise, Ari didn't even have time to scream before a blade was buried in her side.

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October 20, 2357

Residence of the Supreme Commander

Geneva, Switzerland

"How many more do we have to go through?" Ris groaned as she slumped over on the couch, colliding with Cai's shoulder.

"At least three hundred," he replied with a tired sigh of his own.

"No use in whining about it. This is our punishment," Val stated, using the household controller to switch the person displayed on the wall. At the same time, he let out a bored exhale of his own before he began reading aloud everything there was to know about the man pictured there.

Cai didn't bother to pay attention. After sitting in front of the screen all day, he was sick and tired of reviewing everyone who would attend his birthday party. That it was a punishment was never in question from the moment his mother told them they needed to review the guest list for security purposes. Once she'd heard about the dates Cai and Ris had been going on, she'd gone into an uproar. Val had gotten sucked in as soon as she realized he'd known about it and hadn't informed her. Now they were all forced to read all of the background checks of every potential guest.

"Cai, we've been here *all day*. When do you think she'll let us quit for the night?" Ris whimpered.

"Ever hear of 'eternal damnation'? There's your answer."

Amaris made a face and Val chuckled at the two teenagers. "The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we're free to go," he reminded them for the fiftieth time that day.

“Alright,” Cai grumbled, “who’s next?”

Picking up the control, Val switched it to the image of a young woman with a fuller figure, pale skin, and light brown hair. “Eila Maible. Recently turned eighteen. Wow. She’s been in the running for your twelfth seat from the beginning. Says here that her father is the Programming and Coding Director for CompCorp’s Genesis office. And her mother is a famous architect that designed many of the structural plans throughout America. Girl must be truly loved by her parents to keep her in the top.”

Cai shrugged. It was no different than every other teenager that had appeared on the list. Their parents had money and they were willing to spend it so long as someone in the family was at the famous Cai Balere’s birthday party. And when Val announced that Eila’s parents were paying the way of someone else, it didn’t surprise him. Waving a hand, Cai indicated that his uncle could change to this new person.

Cai had just enough time to lock eyes with the onyx irises of the picture before a piercing *agony* erupted along his entire left side! His mouth fell open in a silent scream as he doubled over. Hands pressed to his side, panic coated his tongue as he felt the warm liquid seeping through his torn shirt. Prying open his tightly-shut eyes, he looked hesitantly towards the source of the burning pain.

“Cai? What is it?” Ris asked from his other side even as Cai was realizing that there was a bleeding wound in his side.

“Cai? Holy shit! Is that blood?” Val asked, as he finally looked away from the girl in the photo. “Amaris, call Emergency Services! NOW!”

Pulling Cai’s bloody hands away from his side, Val pulled up his shirt to see. “This looks like a fucking stab wound!” Val exclaimed before letting the shirt fall back into place. Tearing off his own shirt, Val folded it up and pushed it against his nephew’s side, causing him to release an agonized groan. “We’ve got to keep pressure on it, Cai. It looks like this is deep. We have to stop the bleeding. Ris, run and get the first aid kit. There should be a package of sealant or some clotting formula. Go! Hurry! You’re going to be alright, Cai. You’re going to be okay.”

The only response Cai could give was another half-strangled cry of pain. The edges of the parted flesh burned just as if an iron poker had been shoved into the gaping wound. Fire flared throughout his body, shooting up the emptying veins to his deformed heart. For every racing heartbeat, Cai could feel even more blood spilling from his side, already drenching his uncle’s shirt. If help didn’t arrive soon, Cai

would surely pass out from the blood loss.

Suddenly, it was as if an entire army descended upon the room. Numerous security guards poured in from the exits and a medical team raced into the room and to Cai's side. They wasted no time and injected a serum right into Cai's neck. Cai wasn't able to count to two before his body slumped against the couch. He was blissfully unaware of the pain from that moment on.

October 21, 2357

Geneva National Hospital
Geneva, Switzerland

"What happened, Val?" Cai didn't bother opening his eyes as he heard his mother's volatile hiss.

"I told you, *I don't know!*" It sounded like a conversation they'd been having for as long as he'd been unconscious.

"My son—my only child!—is lying in a hospital bed with a *stab wound* in his side, and you don't know how that could *possibly* have happened? You and Amaris were the only ones there with him!"

Cai didn't see the hardening steel in his uncle's eyes as Val and Lucia glared at one another. But he had to restrain himself from movement when his uncle snarled, "Is he, Lucia? Is he your *only* child?"

Trying his best to remain calm—the monitor would surely document if his heart began to race—he listened as hard as he could for what he knew would come. His mother's anger was of the violent sort and he had the perverse pleasure of hearing a sharp slap land upon his uncle's face. Cai, above anyone, knew he deserved that.

"He is now," Lucia growled.

Cai was mildly surprised when Val shot back, "I saw the girl! And she looks just like him."

Confusion twisted his mind and Cai had to wonder if the sedatives had also made him imagine things. But he could feel no trace of the drug remaining in his system. Which meant that he had to feign sleep as long as possible for the conversation to continue.

Not that it did him any good. As soon as the words were out of his uncle's mouth, footsteps receded from the end of his bed. Thankfully, they did not go any further than the door, allowing him to keep the grimace off of his face.

"What girl? What are you talking about?" Lucia demanded. Was the

hesitation in her tone just his imagination?

"Ari Keir." Val said her name as if triumphant. A feeling Lucia smothered.

"That name means nothing to me. Who is she? And what on earth are you going on about?" Exasperation coated every word and Cai could almost sense his uncle's hesitation when his mother was clearly telling the truth.

"I swear, Lucia, she looks just like him. Alike enough to be his ... *twin*." The last word came out in a nearly-silent whisper, but with how hard he was listening, there was no hope of Cai not overhearing.

"You know what happened to his twin," his mother growled dangerously. "And I will not have you spouting off this ridiculous idea that some girl in a foreign country could even be related to him. Put your wild imagination to bed, Val, or I shall see to it that you don't even dream again. Now get out."

Unable to take it no longer, Cai opened his eyes to tiny slits as he heard the door open. Lucia was glaring in silent fury at her brother, her expression absolutely livid. Though Cai couldn't see Val's face, he was sure there was a defeated expression writ in his features, but his eyes held nothing but resentment. After a few tense moments, Val finally strode out of the room, not an ounce of dignity in his step. And the moment his mother closed the door, his eyes snapped shut and he tried to feign sleep once again.

Yet, in the darkness behind his eyelids, he could not help but wonder...

Cai hadn't seen much of her face in the moments before he was stabbed. He remembered almost nothing at all about her, in fact. The only thing he truly noticed, however, was enough to raise goosebumps along his skin. Her eyes were exactly like his own. So dark that the pupils nearly disappeared inside of them. But where Cai's eyes were filled with sly intent more often than not, Ari's had been filled with a steely determination. As if the photograph itself was an ordeal she could not escape from and so had to suffer through with little dignity.

Even as the thoughts lulled him into a state of semi-consciousness, Cai couldn't help but feel as if he recognized those dark eyes from somewhere else. From another picture perhaps... Or a video of some kind... And as he fell into the depths of sleep, it was with the home movies he had never experienced playing in his mind.

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The knife sank to the hilt in her side and Ari could do no more than stare in horror into the muddy brown eyes of her attacker. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream even as the blade was pulled free. All around her, people were screaming and running around in panic. But it was all muted. Nothing could infringe on her dimmed consciousness.

Everything was dimmed in comparison to the pain.

Like flames erupting along her flesh, the sliced skin flared to life. As though her blood was boiling on its way out, every breath was a new lesson in torture. Every faltering heartbeat pushed more of her blood out of the wound and it felt as if acid was being poured over the tender flesh. So excruciating was this wound, Ari couldn't even breathe.

Slowly, as if the world around her were half-way paused, she sank to the cracked and broken sidewalk. Her blood already soaked the pavement beneath her knees. Was already staining her black pants. Already staining her hands as they pressed in vain against her side. Before she even had time to react, it was already over.

As soon as she began to fall, her attacker turned to run. Ari watched his retreat with eyes that were already suffering from blurry vision. Yet, clear as a lightning strike, she watched the bullet fly through the air with deadly accuracy. And before her head hit the ground, Ari watched as the air bloomed with his blood.

October 21, 2357
Soldiers' Camp
America

* * *

Ari's mouth fell open as the second round of gunshots exploded into the air. Her breathing, already ragged from the dream and the wound in her side, became absolutely alarming as shots continued to be fired into the air. Gasping in mouthfuls of oxygen, she quickly curled onto her left side as her heart continued to pound furiously in her chest. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. And it was agony, the wound burning beneath the bandage in her side. Murder was almost preferable.

After a few moments, Ari realized it wasn't just the shots and her side that made it hard to breathe. The *edge* pressed in from all sides and her body began to tremble violently. Rolling back onto her back, her head lolled to the right. Opening her eyes to slits, she noticed for the first time that she was facing the dark brown canvas of a tent wall. The lumpy mattress beneath her was no more than a cot. And the beeps of the heart monitor proved that the technology here was nigh ancient.

I'm outside the city.

The shock of that revelation sent another strong tremor through her body and she had to grit her teeth against the accompanying pain that lanced through her side. Closing her eyelids tightly, she tried to control her breathing like Jace had shown her. But the thought of him caused her breath to hitch again and her head snapped to the left so that she could examine the rest of her surroundings.

The tent she was in was not a primeval form of hospital, despite the equipment hooked to her. Rather, it was a barbaric living quarters for a single person. Only one cot was available and it was in Ari's current possession. A simple writing desk sat against one tent wall, a small solar lantern lighting up the slightly dim area. On the floor beside the desk was a small wooden chest that she assumed held personal items.

Sitting atop the meager dresser was a young woman with black hair pulled back in a tight bun, her eyes glued to the tablet in her hand. She hadn't even noticed Ari's awakened state.

Jace did.

Ari's eyes shot to the corner on the left side of her head to find Jace sitting in a folding chair, staring at her intently. His blue eyes were narrowed and his lips were pressed into a thin line. Both of his forearms rested on his knees as he leaned almost too far forward in his seat. There was a distance in his eyes that Ari had never seen before and it caused a tremor of its own to work its way through her body.

Without taking his eyes from hers, Jace ordered in a cold tone, "Corporal, inform the Captain that Ms. Keir is awake."

The woman with the dark hair raised her eyes to see for herself

before expelling, "Finally." Leaping to her feet, she shot Jace a hasty salute before exiting the tent.

Ari watched her go with narrowed eyes, wondering why it was overdue for her to awaken. How long had she been unconscious? Pressing her teeth into her bottom lip, she had the sudden urge to rub the back of her neck. Something she couldn't really manage at that moment.

Returning her gaze to Jace, Ari cleared her throat and his eyes sharpened in an instant.

"Don't speak. When the Captain gets here you'll be doing enough talking. And you're still weak." The last was an afterthought, but no less cold than every other word.

"Jace? What happened? Where are we?" Confusion poured from her eyes and she tried in vain to understand his tone and attitude towards her.

"Do you honestly not remember?" he demanded, his eyes blazing.

"Not much," Ari growled. Though confusion was predominant, her irritation was flaring to the surface.

Leaning forward, Jace's eyes bored into hers. In a slow, intense voice he said, "Someone tried to kill you."

Ari could feel the blood drain from her face. The way he had said it confirmed her own suspicions. Though random acts of violence were not that uncommon in her neighborhood, murder was hardly a daily occurrence. Somehow, he knew that she was not the victim of a mugging; Ari was the target of a hit. A very real murder-for-hire job.

"Why? Why me?"

"I think you know."

That explained his antagonism. Jace had discovered something about her. Something even he believed was enough to get her killed.

Glancing at the heart monitor, she watched the steady pulse of her defective heart. After a moment, however, confusion furrowed her brow and she looked down to her chest. With a shaking hand, she silently trailed her fingertips over the two wireless transmitters attached to either side of her chest. Her stomach knotted when she realized there were only the two—one for each lung.

Her eyes shot to his in an instant, naked fear writ upon her face. Jace's jaw clenched and he slowly raised a hand to his chest. Tapping twice on the left side, his eyes challenged Ari to utter a word. She couldn't.

He knows.

"There's much you haven't been telling me, Ari Keir."

Cold terror flooded her veins while her eyes brimmed with panic-filled tears. The pain in her side could not compare to the effects of having such a secret on display. For the whole world to know...

It took several seconds for Ari to grasp what Jace had done. Though her heart was clearly racing in her chest, the monitor maintained a steady, even beat. Strong. Healthy. Normal. Because of Jace, no one else would know.

Hesitating several more seconds, Ari at last opened her mouth to reply. Only for her mouth to immediately snap shut as a group of three soldiers entered the tent. Without even a last bid for oxygen, her lungs emptied in a rush and refused to work any further as the *edge* seized her in a tight grip. Even as her eyes widened to their fullest extent, the heart monitor flashed with an increase in rate and speed.

"Captain," Jace stated as he gave a very proper salute. When the salute was returned, his eyes narrowed only slightly on the Captain's companions. "Sir, my patient is still very weak..."

Looking at the two individuals standing at his shoulder, the Captain nodded slightly to each. After returning Jace's salute, both men strode out of the tent, each looking particularly glad that he did not have to stay. When the Captain's attention was then returned to Ari, she found that his *edge* made breathing no less possible than when there were four soldiers surrounding her.

"Ms. Keir, I am Captain Ramson. It is my pleasure to offer you the protection and benefits of this encampment and we offer whatever aid we might be able to give you in getting yourself healed."

Ari could barely keep her eyes from shooting to Jace. From his expression earlier, she knew that something odd had happened as far as her healing went. It usually did. Just like the time her arm broke all of a sudden and was just as quickly set before her parents could even get her to the hospital. Or when she sliced her leg open on cut glass and found that the flesh had settled back together without a hint of a stitch. No. She had no reason to doubt the quality and rapidity of her healing side.

"Thank you very much for your help," Ari croaked, her throat dry from lack of moisture. A fact that Jace quickly remedied by handing her a glass of water.

In that time, the Captain had taken Jace's empty chair and placed it close to her bedside. His expression was kindly, but the set of his jaw hinted at many questions his patience was urging him not to throw at

her all at once. It was a consideration Ari was most grateful for.

"Ms. Keir, I'm sorry that I have to intrude on your time at this moment. But the sooner we have your account of things, the sooner we can pinpoint our manhunt for your attacker. Is there anything at all that you can tell me?"

Ari's eyes widened and they shot to Jace instantly. "You shot my attacker. You killed him. I saw it."

Clearing his throat, Jace answered, "There were two individuals. Though I did succeed in neutralizing the immediate threat, his companion escaped me. Since seeing to your wounds was my primary concern, I did not give chase."

Her stomach twisted violently and she fought off the urge to vomit. The image of the bullet impacting the skull of the man who had tried to kill her was one that would never leave her mind. Yet, neither was the satisfaction in knowing that he was dead. Just as there was now the fear that there would be another attempt.

"I'm sorry, Captain Ramson. I really don't know anything. As far as I know, I was the unlucky victim of a mugging."

The Captain's mouth set in a thin line and his eyes looked grieved at her response. She didn't understand why until he remarked, "There is no need for you to lie, Ms. Keir. Any information at all is needed to get men like these off the street. And any informant is looked on favorably by the justice system."

As if her eyes could go no wider, no such shock could compare to hers at realizing what his implications suggested. "I haven't done anything illegal!" she exclaimed the minute she could find her voice. "Jace, tell him. I've never been in trouble in my life. And I don't know why anyone would want to kill me. You have to believe me!"

In an instant, Jace stepped forward and eased her back onto her pillows. "Calm down, Ari. Just calm down. I believe you." And the look in his eyes proved that he did. It was enough for the moment and Ari leaned back and tried to breathe deeply.

After a moment, Jace stepped back to his place and Ari turned a narrow-eyed glare on his commanding officer. "I don't know why anyone would want to kill me, Captain. And if I could help you in finding the survivor, I would. As it is, my life was almost ended and I'm in too traumatized a state for you to insinuate that I'm a criminal. If it isn't too much trouble, I'd like to return to the city."

Jace's features hardened in an instant and Ari could almost see the word 'no' forming on his lips. He prevented himself from speaking,

however, as his superior stated more gently, "I'm afraid that is an impossibility at this moment, Ms. Keir. Until Sergeant Naois can give his consent to you leaving your bed, I must insist on you remaining in his care."

Ari's eyes shot to Jace and a new fear cropped up in her chest. Left to Jace, she knew that her secrets would remain secrets no longer. And her suspicions would come to light with a most hostile audience.

"Then I must insist on my doctor being informed. I have a medical condition in which only she knows the particulars. If I can't go to her, then you should bring her to me."

"I'm sure Sergeant Naois can take care of you just as well as your attending physician," the Captain began.

"No," Ari stated in a hard tone. "I insist on Doctor Lita coming to see me or I *will* seek her out myself. With the severity of my injuries, I need to make her aware of them *now*."

Something sparked in the Captain's eyes and he glanced askance at a very stiff Jace. "Doctor Lita, did you say? Do you mean Doctor Lita *Naois*, by chance?"

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October 21, 2357

Camp Emergence Hospital
Camp Emergence, America

Bed rest was too literal for Ari. Despite the fact that there was a very newly healed wound in her side, it didn't stop her from getting out of her bed and taking baby steps to the window of the second floor hospital room she was placed in. Her irritation was higher than average already when the convoy had brought her and *Sergeant Naois* from the soldiers' immediate encampment outside the city. Now that she was in a clearly older hospital with fairly outdated equipment, her mood was not much better. Apparently 'medical condition' meant little to the soldiers of Camp Emergence and they thought whatever was at their disposal could easily account for any complications.

When they'd arrived at the hospital, Jace had admitted her with both him and *his mother* as the attending physicians. There had been a general disruption in allowing a civilian doctor on the premises, but a smart remark of Ari's about returning to the city put a stop to that immediately. She was instantly assured that, despite the technology available in the city, they knew more about treating stab wounds than any other doctor in the world. She took that to mean: she had no choice and she wasn't going anywhere.

Perched on the very edge of the narrow windowsill, Ari stared off into space with her jaw clenched so tightly that it was eventually starting to hurt. Ignoring the pain, she kept in the same exact position of stubborn stiffness. Unique to her, she always believed, was the ability to be completely lethal and completely still at the same time.

When she was at her most furious, she never twitched a muscle. Marble was more relenting in comparison.

Ari was still in the same position when the door opened and two distinct sets of footsteps entered. One was the loud, heavy sound of a pair of army boots. The other was lighter and squeaked slightly on the laminate floor, naming them as standard sneakers.

The Naois doctors had arrived.

As the sneakers moved further into the room, Ari heard the boots come to a sudden stop right inside the door. She didn't even bother to turn her head when she heard his voice growl, "Bed rest means you stay in bed, Ari."

Her muscles were coiled tightly and she had to resist the urge to lunge at him. Or rather, resist the urge to bolt out of the door he still held wide open. She'd never make it in her condition, for one. Not to mention, she was certain the ability to outrun Jace was slim to nil. Even if she made it out into the corridor, he'd snatch her back in no time and have her physically strapped into her bed.

"Ari? How are you feeling? Would you like to tell me what happened?"

Slowly, Ari's head turned away from the window. Her gaze settled balefully on Lita's blue eyes. There was so much she would have liked to say to her right then, but time and constant contemplation had nullified any remark she could give. If she threw baseless accusations at her doctor, it would be only thrusting her spite for Jace off onto her. Besides that, she needed her.

Yet, Ari couldn't stop herself from sneering, with a pointed look at Jace, "A panic attack."

When her attention returned to her doctor, Lita's own eyes had widened considerably and a look shot back and forth between her son and her patient. The hint was all she needed to put two and two together. And understanding dawned in her eyes a moment later when she realized the animosity between them was much more complex than she had imagined.

After a moment had passed, with Jace still glaring at Ari and Ari still ignoring Jace, Lita finally sighed, "Well, well. It really is a small world."

Jace's jaw strained and he took the opportunity to order in a commanding voice, "Ari, get back in bed. Your wound—"

"Is just fine," she snapped back. "There's no internal bleeding—you checked it yourself. I'm all sewn up—better than you yourself could

do. And my *real* doctor is here now. I'm fine. I'm alive. And I'm ready to go home." Turning to Doctor Lita, she then demanded, "How soon can you get me discharged?"

Jace took five large steps across the room, stopping where he was barely looming over her. "I am your doctor here. And you may go when I discharge you. My mother is here in a *consulting* position. Now, if you ever have any hopes of leaving here again, you get your ass back in that bed!"

In an instant, Ari was on her feet. Her black eyes glared into Jace's as she spat, "You can't keep me here. That's kidnapping. If my physician says that I can be discharged, who are you to stop me?"

"I *am* your physician. And if you attempt to do anything to jeopardize your health, I *will* sedate you."

"It's against the law for you to hold me here against my will, *Doctor*. Even if I was on my death bed and wanted to be discharged, you couldn't keep me here. It's the *law*."

"You forget where you are. Base laws are very different from civilian ones."

"But I'm not a soldier. Base laws hold no restrictions on me. If you are holding me against my will, who in their right mind would side with you? I can go above your head, Jace."

His eyes narrowed menacingly at the blatant threat. "And my commanding officers will all defer to my medical opinion. As they have always done."

"Not when I have a physician who has been caring for me since birth available to me back in the city." Ari's expression was almost too smug as she indicated his mother.

It proved as no leverage whatsoever. "After wounds like yours, she won't allow you to be moved any more than I will. You're outnumbered, Ari. And severely weakened. Now give up and get back in the damn bed."

"No. I want to go back to the city."

"Ari, there are people trying to kill you in the city," Jace sighed in exasperation.

"So."

"So." Jace's voice was inflectionless, though his features clearly displayed his astonishment. It was quickly melted away by his own anger. "So? Damn it, Ari! You could be killed back there!"

"What makes you think I care?" she yelled back with equal ferocity.

Jace's features turned cold and unyielding. His lips pursed like he

tasted something sour. Only a second after the words left her lips, however, he snatched up the ancient remote for the fifty year old television set and slammed his thumb on the power button. "That's why," he snarled as the news headlines were broadcast over a three by four foot section of the wall.

Ari was too stunned to respond. And a faint, false murmur entered the space between her heartbeats as the bold headlines traveled across the screen.

Cai Balere Hospitalized With Suspected Stab Wound

21

October 27, 2357

Geneva National Hospital

Geneva, Switzerland

Cai exhaled irritably as the news once more announced that, after a week laid up in the hospital, the Supreme Commander's son was finally to be discharged. After listening to a bit more of fruitless suspicions, he shut off the wall projection in disgust. For a week straight, cameras and reporters had been camped outside of the hospital. From the moment the medics rushed him in, he was not given a moment's peace. It was even harder on his mother.

The day after Cai was admitted, his mother had stood before the hospital with an ashen face. In the least composed voice and manner Cai had ever seen, she explained the situation as best she could. That Cai had suffered pain in his side and was rushed to the hospital. Nothing alarming. No danger. Healing well. All the usual commentary one would expect. If she hadn't looked like she was about to faint, the people might have believed her.

Only a day later, Cai was witness to another story completely. Apparently, one of the medics who had first arrived at his house had tipped off the reporters that it looked very much like a stab wound that had appeared in his side. It was a single, clean puncture that traveled roughly five inches into his body. From that point on, his anger with the attention had grown beyond any amount of composure and he found that they were lucky he couldn't leave his hospital room for a week.

Taking deep breaths to calm himself, Cai checked the outdated wall

clock to find that Ris was late. Again. Irritation caused his lips to twist and he wondered what could possibly be keeping her. Though she wasn't exactly known for her punctuality, today of all days she should have been on time. He wanted real clothes.

Just as he finished the thought, the door burst open with an equally irritated Amaris striding into the room with a small bag in her hands. "I swear, if your mom hires another bodyguard, I'm going to scream. I had to go through *three* security scans before I got here and I don't think you're even going to want to wear your boxers. A lot of hands have touched them recently." A delicate shudder ran up her spine as she held out the bag to him.

"Thanks for the heads up," Cai grumbled in disgust, taking out the garment she spoke of and tossing them directly into the trash. Grabbing the rest of his clothes, he headed immediately for the bathroom while Ris took up a seat on the end of the hospital bed.

"Have you been watching this lately?" she called as she turned the wall screen back on. "And I didn't think reporters could get any more pathetic. Hey, did you see me burst into tears the other day? I swear they replayed it every fifteen minutes on all the stations."

"How could I not see it? You burst into my room, jumped on my bed, and changed it to the station not twenty seconds after it happened."

"Well, it was a good piece of showmanship. And it took me way longer than twenty seconds to get from the barricade to your room," she said. Cai smirked as she rolled her eyes. "Hey, who are you going to choose anyway?"

"For what?" He knew exactly for what.

"Who you're going to lean on as you walk out of here? On one hand, it'll be good for your mother to appear very maternal. But on the other hand, I'm the natural choice, as the best friend and pretend girlfriend."

That earned a laugh out of him before he was able to answer, "Neither. I'm more than perfectly healed and can walk upright all by myself. Sorry, Ris, I'm flying solo."

Amaris snorted. "You'll be lucky if you can go to the bathroom 'solo' from here on out. Cai, there are at least six bodyguards waiting out there. And I don't think you'll be able to talk your mom down from this one. Oh, and she's going to try and cancel the birthday party. Again. Just a heads up."

Letting out a sigh, Cai began to rub the back of his neck. "Yeah, I

saw her hinting at that on the news. I guess she hasn't realized yet that I inherited all of her stubbornness."

"I wouldn't count on *that*. Your mom is anything but ignorant. Just means you'll have some heavy opposition." Suddenly, Amaris's features changed from wry to compassionate. In a tender tone, she continued, "She's really worried about you, Cai. We all are. I mean if *that* can happen in a seemingly empty room—with only me and your uncle there—what else could happen to you? And where?"

Cai's jaw set and he shook his head slightly. "Don't start, Ris. You know why I'm doing this."

"I know, I know! I just ... I'm just saying that I can understand her reasoning. That's all."

Waving a hand, he cut off his friend. It as already bad enough that he had to contend with the fact that things like this *could* happen to him in seemingly empty rooms. They were asking too much for him to put his life on hold because of it. If it could happen at all hours, wherever he was at, then why not enjoy every unpredictable moment to the last? Hadn't he earned that?

"Can we just go now? Please? The sooner I'm out of here the happier I'll be."

Ris smiled gently. "Yeah. Let's get out of here. I've got a few people you're going to be very unhappy to meet," she added with a sarcastic twist. And as soon as she opened the doors, Cai was assailed with two hulking masses saluting him tightly and refusing to meet his eyes.

It took Cai the better part of an hour to escape the hospital. Each of his bodyguards—men whose names could easily be interchanged for all the personality they held together—was determined to repeat at least three times that his mother wished for him to remain there until she came for him. They were equally determined not to allow him to ride home in Ris's vehicle and instead sent for an armored car—as if Amaris's parents would let her drive a vehicle without top safety specs. When he finally put a stamp on all of those interferences, he then had to learn from the nurses that, because he was still a minor, he could not discharge himself. That was about the point where he snapped.

"Fine! If that's how it's going to be, then here's what's going to happen: when my mother shows up, she can sign all your paperwork, direct my bodyguards wherever she thinks I can't escape them, and, in the meantime, Ris and I are going home. Any questions? Good. Let's go."

After grabbing Amaris's wrist and hauling her down the hall a ways, Cai didn't even make it to the adjoining corridor before he was assailed by his doctor. A clipboard was being waved in front of his face and a pen thrust into his hands. With a one-sided smirk, Cai winked at Ris before signing his name to the discharge papers. Once he was done, he tossed back the pen and grabbed Amaris's arm again and dragged her towards the outer doors.

"Quick question: are we going to make a quiet exit or a dramatic one?"

Cai's devilish smirk was answer enough and Ris quickly laced her fingers through his just before they made their way out of the front doors of the hospital. Turning to look at each other, Cai smiled as widely as possible whilst Amaris absolutely beamed at them. The lights of cameras flashed in succession and they laughingly had to block the flashes with their free hands as they made their way to the front of the pack.

Despite everything his mother had desired him *not* to do, Cai and Amaris strode proudly towards the reporters and stopped when they considered themselves a safe distance away. Again, the teenagers looked at one another for a photo opportunity before Cai squeezed his friend's hand and turned back to the eager audience.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm happy to see you all here today." Politics was about lying best and lying first, as far as Cai was concerned. And he was a damn good liar.

All at once, a steady roar answered him. Questions were shot out rapid-fire with barely a breath between. Picking out the few that he would answer, Cai and Ris just waited silently as the cacophony continued. Eventually, the reporters took note of the teenagers' tiny, amused smiles and raised eyebrows. Finally, the noises died down and they waited.

"Thank you for your patience," Cai said without a hint of the sarcasm that he felt. "Now, as you are all well-aware, I have been a guest of Geneva National Hospital for the past week. I was admitted due to a sharp pain in my side. Given my mother's legendary maternal instincts, I'm sure you can all deduce the reason I have not been discharged until now. And even now, I've been forced to needlessly harass all the lovely people here just so I can sneak out prior to her arrival."

His eyes glowed as a laugh rippled through the crowd. This was his arena, he knew. To make these people like him was a gift he had honed

and worked at for many years—without the pleasure of seeing its results ... until now. That laugh told him just what he most wished to hear: that they believed themselves in on his secret. Unconsciously, they were allying themselves with him. And he knew better than to let loose his hold on them. After all, the media could make or break any politician.

“I would just like to the opportunity to assure you all that I am alive and well and not in the least bit of pain—though that could have something to do with the meds. And while I would love to stand here and answer all of your questions, I’m sure someone has already informed my mother that I have defied her will and a private army is now on its way to escort me home. Therefore, I must make my escape with the limited time available. Incidentally, I highly recommend you all do the same. Thank you for your concern.”

With a bow of the head to all of the reporters, he gave them one last photo op of him and Ris looking at one another while standing so close that any right angle could make it appear as if they were about to kiss. Then they both laughed and spun around into the parking lot where her car was waiting. Between their disappearance and those of the reporters, the parking lot was nearly deserted by the time Supreme Commander Balere arrived to take her son home.

October 27, 2357

Pacquita Summer House

Marseille, France

Cai and Ris laughed at the top of their lungs as the car entered into the uppermost part of the sky and they let loose all the power the engine could hold. Blasting through the sky, it was never their intention to return home. Not to the estate where Cai would be kept under lockdown for days and years at a time. Nor to the mansion that was similar to all the rest in a community where boredom and oppression was the order of the day.

Pushing her car to the limit, the pair had left behind Switzerland in little under five minutes. Half an hour later, they landed on the roof of her mother’s Marseille summer house. Since her mother couldn’t actually stand France—the house was a wedding present from Mrs. Pacquita’s father—there was no risk of the two teenagers being disturbed for a very long time. Very few people knew of the property, which made it exclusively their own hang-out when it was absolutely

necessary for Cai to escape his mother.

“Give me five minutes and I’ll meet you in the pool,” Ris said with a smile as she darted into the house and slid down the metal railing to the third story.

Cai didn’t even have time to remind her that swimming was out of the question. His wound was still open—to allow for drainage and granulation—and soaking it at any time was not to be done. Even showering within the first twenty-four hours after discharge was prohibited.

With a roll of his eyes, Cai descended the staircase and headed to ‘his’ room. After kicking the door closed absentmindedly, Cai went immediately to the dresser. In the top drawer, he found what he was looking for. Brushing his thumb over his key, Cai locked the bedroom door and proceeded to change into clean boxers. And since he did his own laundry here, he knew that foreign hands hadn’t touched them. It was a blessing he never thought he’d have to be thankful for.

When he finally made it down to the pool, Ris was already in the water. He smiled a little as he sat in one of the chairs, looking around at the glass walls and actually being glad that it was indoors. Upon seeing him, Ris immediately surfaced, giving him a quizzical look.

“No swimming trunks? Oh man! I’m so sorry, Cai! I completely forgot.” In an instant, Ris was climbing out of the pool and heading for her towel. “Damn. If I had thought of it before, we could’ve just gone and played video games or something.”

“Relax, Ris. No harm done.”

Amaris didn’t look relaxed, however, and she sank into the chair across from him. Cai smiled slightly at her until he realized she wasn’t capable of returning it. Her eyes, usually filled with mirth and mischief, were now filled with sadness and regret. It caused his own facade to drop. Reaching across the open space, he took her hand in his.

They hadn’t talked about it. For the past week, they talked about everyone else and anything else. Yet, that day would be branded into each of their minds forever. Neither of them talked about it because they didn’t need to. Didn’t want to.

“Cai...”

Ris’s eyes shone with so much emotion that Cai could barely meet them. It felt like an invasion of her thoughts. But one she seemed to want as she leaned forward and wrapped her other hand around his. A few seconds passed as she opened her mouth to say more. Then he

saw her hesitate and her eyes lowered. When they raised to his again, most of the emotions were safely hidden.

“Cai ... I am so happy that you’re okay. I ... I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He didn’t respond. There was no need. Instead, he pulled on Ris’s hand until she came to sit beside him. Tucking the smaller being under his right arm, he hugged her tightly and ignored her crying. More than anyone, he knew that’s what she needed. What he needed.

22

October 30, 2357

Camp Emergence Hospital

Camp Emergence, America

Ari had seen the same interview of Cai Balere exiting the hospital at least sixty times in the three days since he'd been released and she was still confined to her hospital room. She'd analyzed the way he and Amaris Pacquita approached the camera. Noticed with a wry smile how they looked at one another in a way that suggested they were posing. Had held her breath as he described the supposed pain in his side that she knew wasn't the whole story—she believed the attending medic one hundred percent, all things considered.

As often as she'd seen the footage, it was no wonder that Ari was coming down with cabin fever. More often than not, nurses would enter her room to find her pacing back and forth like a caged animal. And whenever Jace appeared, she bared her teeth just like one.

From the day she'd faced off with Jace only to have him reveal what had happened to Cai Balere, she and the Naois doctors hadn't exactly been on even footing. Convinced as she was that Cai was her brother, the stabbing only confirmed it. Which meant that the only person who could absolutely corroborate it was her life-long doctor. The woman who'd been there for her birth and had caused her husband and son to restart their lives every time Ari was taken someplace else. But Doctor Lita Naois would not speak to her; neither to confirm nor deny Ari's accusations. The next day, her name was removed from the doctors attending to her.

That left Jace.

To say that things between them were strained was quite the understatement. Though she'd been forced to agree that, after only a few days, she was in no real position to leave, that didn't mean that she'd stop demanding to be allowed back into the city. Now, however, Jace knew the reason for her desperation. Everything now depended on Cai Balere. Even her recovery.

Immediately after the replay was finished, Ari shut off the screen and got up out of her bed. Even though the muscles in her side still protested with constant stiffness, she ignored them in favor of continued motion. And just as she was settling into her normal rhythm, Jace walked in.

Stopping where she was, Ari crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him expectantly. This was the day where he was supposed to let her go. Even the other doctors she'd asked agreed that there was no logical reason to keep her beyond a week. If he wasn't standing in front of her with discharge papers, she didn't want to see him.

The expression on his face was not hopeful. His mouth was pressed into a thin line that she thought was meant to look compassionate. Yet, his eyes glowed with a small bit of triumph that immediately set her blood on fire.

Clearing his throat, he announced, "I've spoken to the Captain. We've decided that it would be safer if you stayed here, Ari. With your other attacker still on the loose, we'd rather not have you in harm's way in the city."

"You can't do that! I have school and plans and friends. You can't just decide—without consulting me—what's going to be done. This is my life on the line and I'm not as fearful as any of you. I'm not staying here any second longer than I have to Jace." She was frozen in her fury, but her eyes blazed with deadly promise.

"We're just trying to protect you, Ari."

"I can take care of myself."

"The stab wound says differently. And remember that you're not the only one affected," he added in a lower tone.

That was always the point of contention in which she never had a response. How could she dare to put herself in harm's way when equal harm could be done to another? For several long minutes she debated the necessity of going back versus the punishment in staying.

To Ari, the choice was obvious. She hadn't seen Eila in almost a week and a half—video chatting excluded. Her school work was piling up—and her teachers weren't even informed as to why she was absent.

And Clara might not even be living in the apartment anymore, since Ari wasn't there. Which meant all of her personal items might be at the mercy of their merciless landlord. Everything waited for her back in the city. Including her guarantee to see Cai Balere at the end of December. No matter that her life was tied to another's, it couldn't justify her staying at Camp Emergence. Yet, she also could not leave without some guarantee that she would be okay once she was back in the city. For Cai's sake.

Raising her eyes to meet his, she said, "So teach me."

Jace's eyebrows rose instantly. "Excuse me?"

"If you want me to stay, then teach me how to defend myself. You've got until December."

His eyes narrowed as he studied her. "And if your training takes longer?"

"You have until December."

Ari could see the temptation in his features, but in the end he sighed in regret. "I wish I could. But I'm not an instructor—not that you'd listen to me anyway—and they won't supply you with the gear or the skills unless you test for soldier aptitude. As much as I would like to, there's enough red tape on this place as it is to admit an untested—possibly unsuitable—recruit into bootcamp."

"So test me."

Jace's eyes widened and he took two long strides further into the room, putting himself face to face with the scrawny teenager. His gaze danced between her irises, studying them for any sign of hesitation or any hint of a jest. Ari was completely serious, causing him to take a step back.

"You can't make the rules, then, Ari. Once you are tested—once you are a recruit—there is no deadline on your training. None that you would like. And there is no going back to your old life. If you become part of this life, even your brother could not help you."

"Okay, then in what situation could I make the rules and still learn to protect myself? Do you see one, Jace? I don't. Either you train me in moderate self-defense—just so I can protect myself—or you let me go home and take the risks on my own."

Jace was silent for several minutes. At last, he sighed, "I'll talk to the Captain."

Turning on his heel, Jace strode out of the room, leaving a very anxious Ari at his back. Her hand found the back of her neck in an instant. Forcing herself to the edge of her bed, Ari sat down slowly as

she continued to stare at the door.

It was a monumental decision and it'd taken no thought at all to fall from her lips. Not that she would have chosen otherwise. If she was going to go back to a large city where an attempted murderer was hiding, she had to know how to protect herself. More importantly, she had to protect Cai by protecting herself. So long as she could accomplish that, she could handle staying at Camp Emergence until December. But only if they agreed.

With her hand clasped against the back of her neck, Ari rose again to her feet and fell back into her usual rhythm. Taking a deep breath, she let it out in a slow exhale as she pondered over the ultimatum she'd just left Jace with. She knew it wasn't really fair, but she was out of options and ... he cared. For some unfathomable reason, Jace actually cared about what happened to her, and she was willing to exploit that. For Cai, she was willing to do just about anything.

An hour later, she'd finally returned to her bed. Only a moment afterwards, Jace and the Captain entered the room. Ari leapt to her feet in an instant and nearly stood at attention. Captain Ramson merely raised an eyebrow.

Not one for meaningless civilities, the Captain said immediately, "Well, Ms. Keir, I've heard of a startling proposal recently. Care to explain?"

Meeting his dark brown eyes with her own, she answered confidently, "I wish to learn how to defend myself. Since *my doctor* wishes me to remain on base until I am fully healed, I can see no better use for my time."

Captain Ramson hid his surprise well, all things considered. After all, Ari was pretty sure he'd never heard anything like it before. An underage civilian asking to learn soldier techniques? Unbelievable.

"You're sure of this?"

"One hundred percent. If my life is in danger, I'd at least like to minimize the chances of anyone succeeding in taking it."

For several long moments, the Captain scrutinized her. At last, however, he shook his head. "At this time, Ms. Keir, I cannot permit you to be trained as a soldier without the required aptitude."

"So test me."

"Ari," Jace said in a warning tone. Which she ignored.

"Test me," she repeated without a hint of hesitation.

"You'll be cementing your future to this life, Ari. Is that really what you want?" he hissed.

Captain Ramson stunned them both when he announced, "Who said it had to be on the record?"

Ari was the first to shake off her surprise. When she did, she looked at the Captain with eyes wide and hopeful. "So you'll train me?"

"Sir, you can't be serious," Jace demanded in a hard tone. His expression could have been chiseled from ice.

"I am indeed, Sergeant. Ms. Keir has an ambition I've never seen before. I'm curious to see how she directs it." Turning back to Ari, he said, "You're not actually allowed to take the test yet. So even if I give it to you now, it wouldn't be official until someone from your school presides over it. Yet, the law prohibits me from training anyone without the aptitude for a career as a soldier. The way I figure it, your aptitude won't be far different six months from now."

"How long does training take?" was Ari's next question.

The Captain smiled wryly. "Yes. Sergeant Naois explained that December was your deadline. Why is that, might I ask?"

Ari's jaw tightened before she answered stiffly, "I have a meeting at the end of December that I absolutely cannot miss."

"I see," he answered with a smirk. After a moment, he continued in a more business-like tone, "Well, typically, it takes a class of new recruits eight weeks to be properly trained. As you have no one to train with, however, the speed of your training will depend entirely upon yourself."

Finally, a small, triumphant smile pulled at the left side of her lips. "I'll be done by December. When can I expect my test?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Ari. You have to have the aptitude first," Jace muttered.

The look she leveled on him was cold and forbidding. "I have it. You know I do."

For a long time, they stared one another down. Ari was imposing and determined. Jace forlorn and weary. Neither willing to see the position harbored in the other person's perspective.

Captain Ramson chuckled slightly, redirecting Ari's attention. "Ms. Keir, I feel the need to explain something to you before you decide to go through with this. Though the test we administer may not be considered real, everything else most certainly will be. Including showing the proper respect for those of superior rank."

Ari's eyes darted from the Captain to Jace and back again. "He's not going to be training me, is he?"

Again, a chuckle escaped him. "No. Sergeant Naois is here when

he's not stationed at the city limits. Drill Instructor Rodgers will be responsible for your training."

Nodding decisively to herself, Ari replied, "Then I can handle that."

Jace, fuming quietly at the conversation where all of his concerns were blatantly ignored, finally said in an empty tone, "I'll talk with Lieutenant Marcus. We'll schedule the test as soon as tomorrow, with your permission, Sir."

The Captain nodded and Jace turned on his heel to leave the room. He spared only the barest shake of the head for Ari which seemed to say, *'You don't know what you're doing.'* Her only response was to raise her chin higher and roll her shoulders further back.

With a tiny smile, Captain Ramson looked again at Ari. "For your sake, Ms. Keir, I hope you have no aptitude in medicine. Relations between senior officials and subordinates are far from encouraged."

For a moment, Ari didn't understand. And by the time she did get the hint, the Captain had already gone.

23

October 31, 2357

Camp Emergence Administration Building A

Camp Emergence, America

“Aptitude A: soldier.”

Ari let out the breath she’d been holding in a slow exhale. A tremor shot through her body that she ruthlessly controlled as the verdict seeped into her skin. Though she’d known exactly what she would get, it still wasn’t easy having it confirmed. One of her trembling hands found the back of her neck and she ducked her head away from Jace’s penetrating stare. Try as she might to convince him that this was inevitable, he was never going to be okay with what just happened.

Of course, that meant she did not notice the look of utter surprise that passed over the faces of all those watching. Unfamiliar as she was with the habits of anyone else, Ari hadn’t even noticed the slight tremor in the voice of the administrator. Were she aware of anything but the impact made upon herself, she’d have taken a greater notice of the pause which followed. But she wasn’t and she didn’t.

“Aptitude B: politician. Aptitude C: security. Aptitude D: peace officer.”

Surprised, Ari’s head shot up to look at the administrator incredulously, “What? Seriously?”

Taking no heed of her tone, the administrator rattled off in a depressing monotone all the characteristics that made Ari a candidate for all of the jobs listed. At last, Ari heard enough and began waving her hand in front of her to cut the woman off.

“Okay, okay. I got it. The only one that matters is the first one,

anyway. Right Captain?" As her eyes swiveled to the people awaiting the results, she was a bit disconcerted with Jace's knowing smirk.

"Not exactly," Captain Ramson began.

Unable to stop himself, Jace answered with a smirk, "My first aptitude was in medicine. My second was soldier. Now I work both jobs."

Ari's eyes had narrowed into a glower the moment he jumped in there. It faded once his words registered in her mind. "Second?"

Jace, too, sobered before he nodded. Clearing his throat, he glanced askance at the Captain before remarking, "As far as I know, Ari, no one has gotten soldier as their *first* aptitude."

"So what does that mean?" she demanded. Her eyes shot back and forth from Jace to Captain Ramson, searching for an answer they were unwilling to give. Or didn't have.

"It changes nothing," the Captain stated in a rough voice. "You have the aptitude. As agreed: you will be trained. And, if enough time is available, you might be early integrated into your future job."

A stone dropped in her stomach. "Which job is that?"

Captain Ramson forced his lips into a tight smile. "The one you are most suited to: Military Police."

Ari took a moment to absorb that before asking in a carefully casual tone, "So when do we start?"

"As soon as Drill Instructor Rodgers can discuss with your physician the schedule from here on out."

Eyes wide in horror, Ari snapped her head around to look at Jace. He didn't even appear smug as he said, "Expect a lot of tablet learning to begin with."

Her eyes narrowed into a glare; the reminder of the tablet adding to her ire, as well. "You know, I still have school work to do as well."

Now Jace did smile. "I guess we'll really know how much you want this then, won't we?"

October 31, 2357

Female Barracks Building C

Camp Emergence, America

"And this is your room. For now, you'll be alone. Come June, though..." Private Dens informed Ari as they entered room 303.

"Thanks," Ari muttered as she strode awkwardly into the empty room with the two sets of bunk-beds. She had no belongings with her

and so just stood looking about her with her hands jammed into her pockets. It was hard for her even to look at the chipper, smiling Private Dens who had acted as her guide from the moment she left the administration building.

"This is really weird, isn't it?" Private Dens asked after a moment.

"Yup."

"At least I had a whole class to help take the heat."

This caused Ari to raise an eyebrow but she said nothing in surprise. Judging by the weakness of the *edge* that emanated from Private Dens, Ari was pretty sure the only reason she passed with that class was because no one who had soldier aptitude could escape them. For her sake, Ari hoped she was always safely behind a computer or something off to the sidelines. She didn't have enough in her to charge head-first into a situation.

And you do?

Ari turned her face away from the Private as she pretend to examine her austere surroundings once more. What she was really doing, however, was hiding the feeling of having her heart squeezed inside of her chest. Especially when she knew—without a shadow of a doubt—that the answer was irrevocably: *yes*.

"Forget it, I'm just going to ask: what the hell are you doing here?"

A tiny smile tugged at Ari's lips and she turned back to the Private with raised brows. Casually, she lifted the right side of her shirt so the blonde guide could see the bandage taped to her side. "Learning to defend myself so something like this doesn't happen again."

"Holy—! What happened?"

"Mugging gone bad. Doesn't help that I'm probably broker than the mugger was." Despite the fact that it was a blatant lie, it was as close to the truth as she could get. Sadly.

"Was?"

"Yeah. Jace shot him." Though her voice was inflectionless, a shiver still ran up Ari's spine as she remembered the blossoming of blood upon impact.

"Jace? You mean Sergeant Naois?"

"Uh ... yeah. I guess I should get used to calling him that..."

"Only if you want to avoid scrubbing the bathroom with a toothbrush," said a voice in the doorway, causing both women to jump a little in surprise.

Turning on her heel, Private Dens stood at attention without looking directly at the Sergeant. She didn't see the smirk that Jace directed at

her. Nor did she notice the raised eyebrow he gave to Ari. Sullenly, the teenager mimicked the Private until Jace seemed satisfied.

"Relax, Private. Ms. Keir." Together, they relaxed, with very different expressions for Jace. "Private Dens, can you excuse us?"

"Of course, Sergeant," Private Dens stated loud and clear before snapping to attention again. A moment later, she turned again on her heel and strode determinately out of the room.

"What're you doing here? I thought this was a women-only location," Ari demanded as soon as her guide left.

Jace grinned. "I'm a doctor, remember? I can go anywhere—at any time—I feel I need to be. Besides that, men have access to this building between ten and twenty."

"Excuse me?"

"Ten hundred hours and twenty hundred hours. Military time."

"Oh. The same goes for the men's barracks, I take it? Which means I can harass you in your room during those hours?" she responded sarcastically.

"You're more than welcome," he chuckled.

Irritated beyond all patience, Ari growled, "Why are you here, Jace?"

The half-assed mirth fell from his face in an instant. "I could say the same." Ari opened her mouth to retort, but he held up a hand to forestall her. "Ari, another week on base and I could have sent you home with no issues. So why go through all of this? The test? Training? What is the point?"

Her haughty response fell away even as her eyes found the floor. As if the words were being dragged out of her, Ari said, "There's no point in delaying a future you know is inevitable."

"Is that what you think? That this is all inevitable?" he asked quietly.

"You said it yourself: when your aptitude is soldier, you don't get a choice. At least what I'm doing now guarantees me the choice. I decided to take the test. I made the choice to train. No one can take that away from me, Jace. No one."

Jace sighed and brought a hand up to cover his eyes. "Of all the people for this to happen to, why the hell did it have to be you?"

Raising an eyebrow, a smirk pulled at her lips. "Why do you say that? Because of my heart defect?"

"Because you're my friend. My friend and my patient and now my subordinate. Do you not realize how screwed up that is?"

A softening of her eyes was the only real indication of how much

Ari felt the comment. With a sigh, she turned towards one of the beds and sat on the edge, her right hand rubbing absentmindedly at the back of her neck. "Yeah. It is screwed up. Almost as screwed up as getting stabbed in the side and having your soldier friend—who just so happened to stick around longer than normal—shoot your attacker in the back of the head. Do you realize how hard it is to be mad at you—when you seriously deserve it—while knowing that I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for you? You saved my life, Jace. And I ... I just can't get over that."

Silently, Jace crossed the room to sit on the bed opposite to her. Raking a hand through his hair, it was obvious that he didn't know how to respond. A fact which Ari was grateful for. The entire situation was a chaotic, jumbled mess and the last thing they needed to do was talk it to death. So they sat there. Saying nothing. For at least an hour. Right up until some internal clock of Jace's was triggered and he leapt to his feet in an instant.

Startled, Ari looked up at him in surprise. He gave her the tiniest half-smile and mumbled, "Lunch time. C'mon."

Ari shrugged, taking a last look about her empty room, and got to her feet. Keeping in step with Jace, they exited Building C of the female barracks before jogging across the dusty, scraggly ground towards the cafeteria. Just as they reached the mess hall, Jace stopped and put a hand lightly on her arm.

"Remember, Ari, in there, I'm Sergeant Naois."

"And I'm Private Keir?"

Jace shook his head. "Nothing's official yet, so you'll get no uniform or formal title. You're going to be Ms. Keir until you earn your stripes the legit way."

Ari sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. "This is going to be a real pain, you know. Trying to remember all the things I can and cannot do as both a 'trainee' and a 'guest'."

Again, Jace grinned. "Hey, you signed up for this, remember? See you inside. Oh, and after lunch you and I are heading into the city to retrieve some of your belongings. A stop in the Northwest buildings probably wouldn't hurt anything..."

October 31, 2357

Residence of Eila Maible

Genesis, America

* * *

"I'll leave you to it," Jace remarked quietly as they reached Eila's front door. Ari's lips gave the barest quirk as she nodded to him. "Remember, I'm only one floor away."

"I know. And ... thanks for this. Didn't think Captain Ramson would agree if I asked."

"He wouldn't. But I'm your doctor. And your bodyguard, in this particular case. You're safe with me."

A gleam entered her eyes when she looked at him and a real smile pulled up the left side of her mouth. "Yeah. I know. Oh, and Jace? Give me fifteen minutes. Not a second more."

He raised his eyebrows at her and she explained, "If I stay longer than that, there's a possibility of me being talked out of this. Eila knows how to manipulate me, and this is something she'll never understand. I can't take that risk."

Jace hesitated, just as she knew he would. Because this was something he'd never understand, either. However, her decision was made and he knew better—by now—than to argue with her. With a decided nod, he answered, "I'll be back in fifteen."

When he had gone back to the elevator, Ari turned and knocked on Eila's front door. It was just a show of politeness, however, as she had the door programmed into her key. Somehow, though, it didn't feel right to just walk in and scare the crap out of her friend. Not when she was about to deliver news that would likely cause Eila to have a premature stroke.

"ARI!" Eila yelled as she threw the door wide open. Lunging at her friend, she wrapped her arms around Ari's shoulders—mindful enough to avoid her wounded side.

"Good to see you too, Eila," Ari chuckled before she was released.

"Oh my god, Ari! How are you? What's going on? What are you doing here? When are you coming home?"

"Slow down," Ari laughed as her friend pulled her into the apartment. "There's a lot I have to tell you and not much time to do it in, so please just relax."

"Not much time? And you want me to *relax*?"

"Eila, I'm serious," Ari sighed.

Sinking into a chair by the electric fireplace, Eila's warm brown eyes were filled with wariness. "I know. And that's what scares me. What's going on, Ari?"

Taking a deep breath, she let it all out in a single exhale. "I took the aptitude test. I rank soldier as number one. They're going to enter me

into early training. Just until December. Then I'll be back. Jace and I are going now to pick up my stuff from Clara's."

Eila was clearly floored. Silence fell between the friends that lasted quite a few minutes before any syllable passed her lips. Ari was too cautious to say anything more until Eila had finally reacted. She didn't want to actually risk her friend's mental stability.

"That's not possible. It's not *legal*. You can't take the test before a predetermined time with the appropriate officials administering it. There's no way." Leave it to Eila to cling to that one inconsequential fact.

"Technically, the whole thing is off the books. It's illegal for them to train someone without the aptitude. I asked them to test me ... because I knew I had it. *I* asked for this, Eila. It was my decision to train. My choice to jumpstart my future. And, this way, I at least call some of the shots. Like coming home in December."

"Why?" she demanded, cutting overtop anything else Ari had to say. "Why would you choose this, Ari? And why now?"

Taking in another deep breath, Ari lifted her shirt just as she had done with Private Dens. This time, however, she removed one side of the bandage so that Eila would have no choice but to set eyes on the gruesome wound itself. Just as she predicted, Eila's eyes widened in horror and her mouth fell open. Ari didn't give her a chance to comment.

"This is why I've been absent this past week. Why I can't come back to the city just yet. I have to learn how to protect myself, Eila. And I'll do whatever it takes."

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October 31, 2357

Residence of the Supreme Commander

Geneva, Switzerland

Cai sat in the darkened room a few seats back from where his side had spontaneously begun to bleed. Unconsciously, his fingers spun the ring on his right hand as he stared at the being on the screen. Dark eyes bored into his own even as he traced every line of her face, the sweep of her hair across her forehead, and the angled jaw that jutted out in defiance. There was a hardness in her that he did not possess, making the features appear sharper; more intense. Yet, it couldn't actually be doubted that the features were the same. That the eyes were identical. That she was the mirror image of himself.

Hours he spent staring at the photograph of Ari Keir in the darkened room with no one the wiser. He sat there and wondered who she was. What was her life like? Did she know about him—that they looked alike? Would she jump to the same ridiculous conclusion that he had? Other questions were harder to spend time on, however. Cai couldn't ask himself more than once who her parents were or if she had any siblings. It was impossible for him to consciously ask where she was born. And he couldn't even admit to himself that just looking at this picture was enough to cause his heart to constrict in longing. As if the missing piece of it was only a photograph away.

The existence of Ari Keir was a disruption in his life he'd never counted on. It was a knowledge that thrummed deep in his soul. That there was someone in the world that looked exactly like him... He'd had a twin... A twin he always believed to be dead. Of all the

questions to be asked, he could never finish that thought with the most important one: had he been lied to all these years?

Suddenly, the door behind him pushed open and a quick press on his key was enough to blacken the screen. Craning his head around, Cai watched with narrowed eyes as a petite creature entered into the room. Amaris closed the door behind her, plunging them into a world of blackness. It didn't stop her from taking thirteen precise steps to where Cai was located.

Shuffling to the seat beside him, Ris sat down and made herself comfortable before saying in a low voice, "Go ahead and bring her picture back up. I want to see it again, now that you're here for a direct comparison."

Cai couldn't even find it in himself to be surprised. With a sigh, he threw his hands up on the back of the chair in front of him again and pressed his key. The dim image of Ari Keir lit the room and he couldn't stop himself from locking eyes with the picture once more.

For a few seconds, nothing was said. As subtly as possible, Ris kept glancing at Cai even as she turned again to look at the girl on the screen. Cai ignored her, knowing that soon enough she would take matters into her own hands. She didn't, though, and finally Cai did it for her—just as he'd done for himself hours earlier.

The image of Ari moved to the right side of the wall even as a picture of Cai emerged on the left. In an instant, he was unsettled. To see them side by side was like taking two pieces of glass and having his reflection refracted onto a flat surface on the other side with the help of some light. Of course, the eeriest part of it all was to see the smile that graced their lips. Cai smiled with the right side of his mouth. Ari with the left. Placed as they were, the images traced from her face a half smile that traveled the distance to his own face.

"That is so creepy," Ris finally muttered to herself.

"Try being the one in the picture."

"It gets creepier, you know."

At this, Cai turned to look at his friend expectantly. In the same moment, he made his own image vanish off the screen. Amaris took that opportunity to make Ari's confidential file light up the right side of the wall. As she did so, she informed him, "I researched her while you were in the hospital. It was too much of a coincidence for me, so I had to find out myself."

Looking back at the projections, Cai's eyes narrowed in immediately onto the birth date. It was his. Somehow he was already prepared for

that.

"Born first of January in the year 2340 at Valor Prestige Hospital. Time of birth not given." Ris said the words printed on the screen as if she'd memorized them. "Prints are blocked. DNA is unavailable. Parents and license irretrievable. Cai, she's just as hard to find information on as you are. The only other thing we know for sure is that she was entered into the Foster Youth Organization not twenty minutes after *you* were born."

Cai nodded, though he didn't look at his friend. He was busy reading all of the same information she had gathered together for him. In his chest, his heart clenched in fits and he monitored his breathing carefully. This being, whom he had no idea existed, was now a part of his life.

As if he were drinking in this other life, he poured over her records. For every question answered, new ones arose in their place. He learned that she was supposedly sent to Partisan because a foster home there specialized in infants, but he didn't understand why there wasn't one available in Valor. Since infants were adopted almost immediately, he also couldn't see why she would be passed over until she was almost five. Why did the Keirs take her? Out of hundreds of other kids, why did they choose Ari?

Curious beyond even his own comprehension, Cai quickly opened another window on the screen, just above Amaris's careful notes. Throwing the name Keir into the search engine, he came up with four hits. Adam and Tessa Keir, their adopted daughter Ari, and Adam's younger sister, Clara Keir. Beside the names of each individual was a database picture that was placed on their credit cards every year. Adam's and Tessa's were long outdated, but he recognized them in an instant.

"They're the family from my dreams," he murmured in awe.

"What?" Ris asked, leaning forward so that she was somewhat in his peripheral vision.

Cai glanced at her for only a moment before pointing at the screen. "The dreams! The ones that are more like home movies? That's them, Ris! They're the people whom I've never seen before in my life but I dream about all the time."

Amaris sat closer, her eyes narrowing on the screen to study Adam and Tessa Keir. Using her own key, she quickly pulled up both of their documents. At first, their birth information showed up in two separate files. When it came to their marriage, everything basically was a

duplicate into the second file. Scanning it quickly, she muttered aloud about them being denied for a breeding license before entering into preliminary exams for the Foster Youth Organization. They were given clearance for the care of a child ranging between four and eight, due to their ages and income.

“So that’s how they found Ari,” Cai sighed, leaning back a little as Ris continued to scroll.

After a few minutes, she gasped, “Oh my god, Cai! Look!”

She didn’t have to say a word. The minute the headline from a news article crossed the screen, he shot forward. Cai’s mouth fell open as the deadly building fire was described. His heart flew into his throat when it was mentioned that only nine year old Ari Keir survived the blaze. Her parents were not as fortunate.

Which explained the move to Genesis with Clara. He knew it was better than going back into the foster system until she aged out, but he knew how hard it was for Ari to live with Clara. Or rather, how hard it was to have Clara living with her. A tiny smile pulled at his lips, now that the entire world was starting to make sense.

Silence stretched between Cai and Amaris for several minutes. Letting Ari’s image regain sole focus on the screen, he returned to his new hobby of staring at her. Wondering about her. He even felt like he knew her. And somehow, he could almost believe that she knew him just as well.

After almost a full ten minutes had passed, his own picture sprung up on the left side again so that he was forced to notice the similarities between himself and Ari. Glancing awkwardly at Ris—the perpetrator of this sudden attack—he couldn’t help but pause and study her features. She was steeling herself against something; her jaw was tight and she was working to erase any emotion from her face. Once, her eyes flickered to his and then back to the screen. Taking the hint, Cai returned his attention to the two beings projected side by side.

Clearing her throat, Amaris said quietly, “Cai? I don’t want to be the one to say this, but—”

“My twin’s not dead.”

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November 28, 2357

Obstacle Course Training Field

Camp Emergence, America

“Good. Now why don’t we call it a day?” Rodgers suggested.

Ari shook her head, taking long, deep breaths. “I want to run it again.”

“Keir, you’re shaking. Push yourself too much and your body will betray you. You’ve already run it three times today. Time for a rest.”

Careful to keep the stubbornness out of her expression, she said, “I have to push myself now. When I go back, there’s no obstacle course waiting for me. Better that my body betray me now before I’m forced to betray it later. May I please run the course again?”

Rodgers pursed her lips thoughtfully before sighing, “Take off the extra gear. If you’re going to do this again, you’re not going weight-heavy.”

Repressing a smile, Ari nodded and quickly stripped off the heavy camouflage coat. After emptying her pockets and removing the utility belt, she took up her place and waited. When the shrill whistle sounded, she pushed back on her left foot and shot forward towards the tires.

With ease, Ari quickly passed through them and immediately launched herself at the parallel bars. Without the extra weight, it was almost without effort that she let her legs hang and her hands carried her along. Dropping at the end, a smirk found its way onto her face as she sprung up onto the balance logs. Other than running, they were what she was best at. Even in army boots.

Next came one of her least favorite things, however. The weaving logs were a triangle of boards or logs set up with a person-sized gap between them. Starting from the bottom, she had to weave her way over and under each of the pieces until she reached the top. Then she had to continue the process down the other side. It was exhausting.

Immediately following this was a channel dug into the ground with a barbed-wire ceiling. Throwing herself forward, Ari dug her elbows into the soft dirt and sand mixture and crawled towards the opening at the other end.

Here she was met with one of the two banes of bootcamp: the wall. Stumbling towards it, Ari gritted her teeth and took hold of the thick rope that was more than half the cause of the newly-formed callouses on her palms. Remembering *these* instructions perfectly, she began the lengthy climb. Her boots shuffled slowly up the wall while her arms trembled as she carried her weight hand over hand.

Finally reaching the top, Ari was forced to pause. Straddling the wall, she let her head fall back and her eyes closed. Upper-body strength had never been her forte.

Just as she was preparing to make her way down, she glanced back at her instructor, fully expecting an 'I told you so' look. Instead, she found Rodgers and Jace in the middle of a conversation. Unable to help it, Ari glared ineffectually at the young soldier doctor.

After watching them a few seconds more, Ari continued on down the wall. She was sure one or the other would tell her what was said, anyway. Not that it took much imagination to guess. Jace had been present during most of her training, in the beginning. He constantly fretted over her wound—which had healed perfectly. Though he'd gotten better as time progressed, he still occasionally showed up to check on her. Usually it didn't bother her. Of course, normally she was present when he made his appearance. She wasn't exactly a fan of him having a one-on-one with her instructor.

To stop dwelling on it was impossible, despite how much she wished to remain focused on the obstacle course. With her mind so distracted, she was a lot slower than ever before. And yet, she was before her worst enemy sooner than she expected.

The transfer ropes consisted of two free-hanging ropes attached to a suspended beam. A large metal ring was drilled into the beam between them. Of course, the goal was for Ari to climb to the top of one rope, grasp the ring and swing over to the other rope in order to descend. It had taken her nearly all month to master this part of the course.

Knowing better than to hesitate, Ari charged forward and threw herself at the rope, grasping as high as possible. Gripping with her feet as she was taught, she started off strong. Her arms trembled in duress, but she continued to push herself until she made it to the top. That's when her right arm gave out.

A guttural cry escaped her as her weak arm fell back down by her side. The strain in her left arm made it feel as if acid flooded her veins. For one second, she clung on for dear life. Then, with the same ruthless determination that got her entered into the military in the first place, Ari brought her right hand back up and gripped the rope as tightly as possible. With more mental curses than she thought she knew, Ari took a deep breath and prepared for the challenge of grasping the ring before swinging over to the other rope.

Having just enough grit to manage it, Ari swung herself closer and let her left hand thrust out. For four whole seconds, she had a tight grip on the icy handle. The burning sensation was too much for her already weakened fingers, however, and each second produced another slip. Before she had time to do more than inhale, Ari's hand let go and she fell to the ground, landing hard on her right side. She had just enough breath left to let out the tiniest moan as she laid there.

When she heard the two pairs of boots pounding towards her, she knew she'd been down too long. Pushing herself to her feet, Ari was careful not to hint at the injuries to both arms—her left arm screaming as if she'd torn a muscle and her right shoulder pulsating with a forming bruise. Shaking them both out a little, the teenager sighed and prepared to try again. No pain, no gain, after all.

Ari's left hand had just grabbed the first rope again when Drill Instructor Rodgers and Jace reached her. In the same instant, Jace's hand clamped down over her own. "Enough, Ari."

"I can do this," she growled, trying to shake his hand off. It was bad enough that he watched her fall. To treat her like a frail child was out of the question.

"You've done enough. Your body can't take anymore," he urged.

"I *will* finish this. I have to."

"No you don't. Now stop. It's time for some rest."

"Let me go, Jace."

"No."

"Damn it! I'm not a child, okay? Stop treating me like one."

His jaw set in an instant and Ari glared into his eyes as they turned cold and hard. In a tone equally as biting, he answered, "I'll stop

treating you like a child when you stop behaving like one. You need to take care of yourself. Now cease and desist, Keir. That's an order."

Ari's mouth dropped indignantly and she took a step away from him. It felt as if she'd been slapped. Despite everything they'd ever said to one another, he'd never called her by her last name or issued any orders. (And there had been enough times in the past month to warrant it.) Shaking her head, Ari shut her mouth with a click and turned on her heel before stalking off. If she had stayed any longer, she'd have hit him.

Storming into her barracks room, Ari almost didn't keep herself from slamming the door. With long, angry steps, she crossed the tiny room and was back at the door in a matter of seconds. The ferocity continued to build inside of her, keeping pace with each stride. And despite her body's very real exhaustion, Ari was incapable of relaxing, so filled was she with indignant pride.

She could have finished. Falling wasn't an unnatural occurrence in bootcamp and it wasn't the first time the transfer ropes had tossed her on her ass. But to be dressed down in such a manner—before her instructor—for no reason other than to sate his irrational worry was enough to make her blood boil. Things happened to soldiers that happened to no one else. As a soldier in training, she had to be prepared for that. Even if it meant pushing her body to its absolute limit in order to do so.

Ari had just made it back to the door for the fifth time when a knock resounded on the other side. Ignoring it, she continued her pacing back to the wall. When she turned around, she found Drill Instructor Rodgers standing in the doorway. Cursing mentally at herself, Ari snapped to attention.

"At ease, Keir." Throwing her left leg out to the side, Ari clasped her hands behind her back and stared straight ahead. Rodgers rolled her eyes. "Relax. I'm not exactly here in an official capacity. Though I should be," she added with a sharpness in her tone that Ari mentally cringed at.

Taking a deep breath, Rodgers let go of a sigh as she moved further into the room and closed the door behind her. "Take a seat, Keir. It's time you and I had a talk."

Even as her eyes narrowed suspiciously, Ari couldn't deny the order in her tone and she eased herself onto the very edge of her bed—ready to leap up at a moment's notice. Rodgers didn't seem to be paying attention as she moved to the bed across from her and sat down.

Removing her Instructor's cap, she pinched the bridge of her nose while closing her slanted eyes. Half a minute passed before she raised her gaze to meet Ari's.

"If any other recruit pulled what you did out there, I'd have them running til their feet bled. I'd have them doing pushups until they puked. They would climb ropes until their hands were torn open. But you, Keir..."

"What about me?" Ari asked in a stiff tone. "Why not do any of that to me?"

"Because it wouldn't bother you!" Rodgers snapped. "What good is a punishment if you don't think of it as one? There's nothing I can do to you, Keir, that you wouldn't put yourself through."

Ari let her gaze drop to the floor and her jaw tightened. She could feel Rodgers staring at her but she didn't dare raise her eyes. There was only one thing left that Rodgers had to say, and she didn't want to hear it.

"You're not giving me an option here, Keir. You already know what I have to do. And it's something I actually should have done yesterday."

"Please don't say it," Ari muttered to the floor.

"You're on leave. I'm sorry, Keir, but you left me no choice. That last run could've torn a muscle or landed you with a fracture and we'd be right back in this position. And how you spoke and behaved to Sergeant Naois was inexcusable."

There was no point arguing. It wouldn't change anything. So Ari sat there with her head hanging so low that even her peripheral vision showed only floorboards. She was still sitting like that when Rodgers got up and left a few minutes later. And she stayed like that until Dens showed up to drag her to dinner. Not that she had an appetite.

26

November 28, 2357

Mess Hall

Camp Emergence, America

“Well, everyone, it’s another Thanksgiving here in America. As is tradition, I’d like to open the mic and ask anyone who is thankful for anything in particular to just come up here and share with us,” Captain Ramson announced at the head of the room.

No one appeared to be forthcoming, so he continued, “Also as tradition demands, I’ll go first.” The Captain continued to discuss the things he was thankful for in the past year whilst the soldiers methodically helped themselves to the monstrous feast prepared for them.

Though Ari’d been certain that any food would taste like ash only ten minutes ago, her mouth was already watering as she helped herself to a heaping scoop of mashed potatoes and gravy, a large chunk of the perfectly cooked turkey, and a number of other delectables that littered the table she sat at. It had been a whole month since she’d been treated to real food, much less excellently cooked meals. And after pushing her body so hard for so long, the opportunity to gorge herself was not going unclaimed.

It was while she was in the middle of her second helping that a voice speaking into the mic caused her to pause. Turning in her seat, she watched Jace nervously clear his throat before scanning the room. His eyes landed on hers for a second before flickering away.

“I have a lot to be grateful for this year. First of all, my promotion to Sergeant—though I know a couple Drill Instructors who probably

thought I was still better off scrubbing toilets." A chuckle ran through the side of the room that was paying attention and Ari's eyes flew across the space and landed on Jace's friends who she had really seen only the once on the bus. "Secondly, I'm grateful that I passed my final medical exams and fully earned the right to call myself Doctor Naois. I'm even more grateful that I just so happened to be in the right place at the right time to use all that I've learned to help save a life. I know now that this is truly what I was born for, despite whatever qualms I've ever had about my future. And, lastly, I am thankful for all of my friends. Old and new." He was staring at Ari when he finished. The only way she could respond to that was a bow of the head and the tiniest smile she could manage.

When she turned back to her plate, she found she couldn't eat much more. Her stomach was fit to bursting, despite how many calories she'd burned off earlier. Yet, she knew better than to waste the food and forced it one bite after another into her mouth. If she puked half of it up later, at least it wouldn't be because she was forced into it by Rodgers.

Having cleared her plate, Ari left the Mess Hall and stepped out into the bitter November chill. Fog fell from her lips as she strode through the night towards the kennels where the MP K-9s were kept. Almost every evening she could be found watching the litter that had been born just a few days ago. Of course, only five minutes later, that is where Jace found her.

For several minutes, he said nothing. Together, they stood and watched the puppies curled up in a bundle of fur beside their mother. It was peaceful enough, but from the moment he walked in, Ari knew that it wouldn't last. How could it?

"Captain Ramson gave me a long weekend to spend with my family," Jace said at last. Ari didn't even glance at him. "Which means I'm escorting you back to Genesis. We leave tomorrow morning at eight." It was good that he paused when he did because Ari leapt to her feet and turned a heated glare on him.

"It's not December yet. I have two days still."

"And you're on leave," he stated coldly. "You couldn't use them even if you were here."

"Not that you would let me if I could," she snapped back. "For crying out loud, Jace! Even before all of this started, you've been on my back for no reason. Why is it so hard for you to accept that I can do this?"

"That's not hard to accept, Ari. Especially when you seem born for it. What *is* hard to grasp is why you're driving yourself into the ground to accomplish things we've long been past doubting. We all know you can do this. Why keep pushing yourself into an early grave?"

"Because I'm not sure I'll be able to when it counts!" Ari whirled away from him then, willing the tears to stay trapped behind her eyelids. Taking a deep breath, she forced the words from her throat. "My life isn't the only one on the line. If I'm going to protect us both, I have to be sure that I *can*. My training has never had anything to do with anyone else's expectations."

Turning to face him again, there was now a burning in her eyes that she couldn't conceal. "I relive that moment every time I wake up, Jace. That one time when I was helpless and frail and in need of saving. Every single day, I have to remember just how close I came to dying. And then to learn, on top of that, that I was affecting Cai? All this training. All this pushing myself. It's not meant to impress anyone. It's to make sure I'm never in that position again where I can get us *killed*."

When she was finished, Jace swallowed hard and adjusted his gaze to stare above her head. His jaw strained as his teeth ground together. She knew him well enough to know that he was choosing his words. Working up to his response. The question was: did she have the patience to listen?

Just as she was turning away from him, her head shaking in irritation, Jace reached out and touched his fingertips to her bicep. "I understand your motives, Ari. Truly I do," he said in a low tone. "But you'll be no good to either of you if you can't walk straight without trembling. If you can't grip a fork without your entire arm shaking. All of this is up to you, yes. But what makes you think even this doesn't affect him? Push yourself too far and you'll end up causing damage to yourself. It's your responsibility to know when enough is enough, Ari. Only you can make that call."

The look she shot over her shoulder was baleful. "Obviously not. It's been made for me."

Jace's expression hardened. "Well, if you're not going to take care of yourself, someone else has to look out for you."

"Yeah," Ari scoffed, "and somehow it always ends up being you. Did it ever occur to you, Jace, that I *am* looking out for myself, and that I don't require you to hold my hand?"

Shaking his head, Jace let his words bite as he replied, "Actually, I'm kind-of wondering how you made it this far without me. You're

reckless and impulsive, impatient and pigheaded, and you have no regard for your own limits. So far, it's a miracle."

"That's because I don't believe in the limits you seem to have set for me! Just because you don't think I *should* be able to do something doesn't mean that I *can't!*"

"Is that what you really think? That I'm imposing some imaginary boundaries on you because I'm afraid of you falling on your ass a dozen times in a row? No. What I'm afraid of is that you're going to strain the muscles in your side so much that they become inflamed. I'm afraid of your body not getting enough rest after tearing all those muscles in your arms. I saw you push yourself to the point where you were shaking so much you couldn't hold a utensil. Those aren't some ridiculous limits, Ari. They're your body's warning system. And if you're going to ignore them, I damn well won't!"

"Why not?" she yelled.

All around, the K-9 German Shepherds roused themselves from slumber and growled at the intruders. Even as Jace and Ari glared at one another, the dogs picked up a defensive bark that rose to a crescendo. They ignored them for several minutes, each ready with a series of retorts ready to let fly given half a chance.

In the end, however, Jace took a step closer to her and dropped his voice so that it somehow traveled beneath the barking. Without taking his eyes from hers, he said, "I'm not going to apologize for caring, Ari. And I'm not going to stop. Even—and especially—when it pisses you off. Because if I can intervene when you're doing something stupid, I won't hesitate. We leave at eight." Turning on his heel, Jace strode out of the kennel, leaving Ari to the mercy of the dogs.

27

November 28, 2357

*Residence of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

“This is still weird,” Amaris commented as she entered the gym in the basement of the grand house. Usually it was used only by the bodyguards and security forces that patrolled the estate like a tiny army. For the past month, however, it was where Cai was located almost every time she came to visit.

“It’s been a month. You’d think you’d be over it by now,” Cai chuckled in a breathless tone. Then he sank lower to the floor as he finished up another set of push-ups.

“Cai, look in a mirror every now and again. I’m not over it.” With a smirk, Ris crossed the room to take a seat on one of the benches before using her key to pull up a playlist on the wall. “What are we in the mood for today?”

“Metal. Definitely Metal,” Cai grunted as he sprang to his feet and grabbed his towel.

Dabbing at his sweat-coated face, he did his best to hide the fact that he was taking his friend’s advice and glancing at himself in the full-length mirror. Rolling back his shoulders, he was pleased with the gentle ache in them and the definition that was appearing. His arms, too, were gaining lines and ridges that hadn’t been there a few weeks ago. Of course, he was more impressed that his chest was gaining some muscle whilst his abs were now hard enough that he could feel them without flexing.

Since he had always been on the scrawny side of skinny, Cai hadn’t

ever had much hopes of an extraordinary amount of muscle mass. Though, now that he was pushing himself to work on it, he found that it suited his thin frame. He'd never be buff, certainly, but there was enough to him now that he couldn't say he felt like a twig anymore. The thought brought a wide smile to his face.

"Would you like some lipstick over there? A little primping while you're checking yourself out?" Ris offered from across the room. Her eyes were trained on the tablet in her hand, but the grin on her face caused Cai to duck his head and move away from the mirror.

"Admit it," he said as he took a seat across from her, "even you think I'm hot now." Raising a water bottle to his lips, he kept a close eye on his friend's features. Just in case he had to duck for cover.

Amaris didn't even bat an eyelash as she continued to surf on her tablet. "Cai, I've always thought you were hot. It's why we're friends. I don't hang out with ugly people."

Lowering the bottle, he couldn't halt a chuckle. Though it was shallow and petty, it was Ris to the core. She'd always had an eye for beauty and she especially was fond of the human form of it. Despite never able to label herself as more than 'adequate' or 'pretty' she was certain to surround herself with friends and acquaintances who looked far grander than their actual personalities allowed for.

On those points, however, Cai was far from able to agree with her. Though he was on good terms with almost everyone, their appearance did not matter much to him. Of course, when she began to degrade herself, there could be a war of words like none other. Amaris was beautiful and she was the only one who didn't see it.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. And here I thought I had done something to be proud of," he remarked with a grin.

Ris raised her eyes for a moment and looked over his shirtless torso slowly. With a shrug, she returned to her tablet. "You should be proud. You're working hard and it's seriously paying off. And though it does add to your sexiness, I still say that your face pretty much set the groundwork."

Shaking his head, Cai stood up and moved over to the pull-up bars. They were always the hardest for him, but that was what determined him to succeed with them. When he could do any number of them in steady succession, he'd consider himself in peak physical condition.

Just as he was almost done with his third, Cai released a grunt as his left arm slipped from the bar. Only a minute later, a half-smothered cry escaped him as he fell back onto the floor. In an instant, Ris was at his

side, her hands lightly touching his shoulder as he let loose a string of curse words he'd learned from his new bodyguards.

"Cai! Cai, what happened? Are you okay?" Ris demanded in a panic.

The two bodyguards Cai had allowed into the room stepped forward, appearing to think through the ramifications of calling his doctor or, worse, his mother. Throwing up his left hand, Cai waved them all away, shooting Ris a knowing look as he did so. After letting another moment pass, he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

"I'm fine. Just strained myself a bit on that last one. Nothing a little ice won't fix." With a pointed look at both his guards, he nodded his head towards the door. "Why don't you guys run and get a drink. Just bring me the ice on your way back." It was a clear dismissal and they each glanced at one another nervously. Technically, they worked for the mother. But if they wanted to keep their jobs, they had to placate the son. In another minute, Cai and Ris were alone.

"Damn her," Cai growled, holding his right arm tight. "I think she must've torn something."

Ris sighed as he leaned back, a hard glare trained on the floor. "I really don't like this. Who could have possibly guessed that she could affect you so much?"

"Me. After this," he replied dryly, indicating the pale scar running across his left side. "I just want to know what the hell she's doing that's causing us so much pain lately. We've never been this abused before."

"About that," Ris sighed as she reached for her tablet once more. "It's nearly impossible to find anything out about her—she's kept quite the international secret, I must say—but I came across something yesterday I thought you might like to read."

Cai eagerly took the tablet from her and let the tiny report fill his eyes. It was a military report filed by a Sergeant Jace Naois describing a stabbing of a civilian. Of the two attackers, the principal subject was neutralized by a clean shot to the head. The other escaped on foot in the Northeastern slums of Genesis whilst Sergeant Naois attended to the victim—a seventeen year old female by the name of Ari Keir. The report went on to describe how Sergeant Naois had thought it best to have Ms. Keir flown out of the vicinity and taken back to the soldiers' camp just outside of Genesis. From there she was transported to the base hospital in Camp Emergence.

With his eyes alight with this new information, Cai exited that

report and opened the other one that Ris had marked. This one was from a Captain Ramson. It reported the existence of a civilian on base for medical refuge. As advised by medical personnel, the victim—Ari Keir—would be held in Camp Emergence Hospital from anywhere between a week and a month. The report was dated October twenty-first.

“She never left the base.” The words left Cai’s lips with a sly grin. One he was sure Ris didn’t understand when he handed the tablet back to her. As the grin grew even more, he explained, “Ari’s been training with them. That’s why my exhaustion levels are so weird anymore and why I felt the need to start working out. It also explains the strange bruises and sudden injuries.”

Amaris let him get that far before she held up a hand and began shaking her head. “No. No! They wouldn’t let an outsider train to become a *soldier*. And there could be a hundred reasons for her not to leave the base. The second attacker chief amongst them, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. But what else would she do on a base for a month? C’mon, Ris. Even you would get bored enough to try *something*. And if there is a second attacker still out there ... wouldn’t that be the greatest incentive of all to learn how to defend herself? I know I would if my life were threatened and I was already stuck on a military base.”

Amaris lowered her eyes and glared again at the floor. For several moments they sat in silence. In that time, Ris’s expression slowly relaxed until she was able to sigh and raise her eyes to his again. There was a wariness in their brown depths before she asked what he had been wondering himself, “Do you think she even suspects?”

Taking a deep breath, Cai let it out slowly before turning a sharp gaze on his friend. “When you were keeping track of how many hits I had in the search engines right after the picture was released, didn’t you say there was a spike in Genesis? That it had the highest number of searches?”

Dawning entered Ris’s eyes and she immediately returned her attention to the tablet. After a few seconds had passed, her wide eyes met Cai’s yet again. “Most of the hits originated from tablets issued to the senior class of Genesis North Public School. And one tablet, in particular, generated over one hundred and fifty of the hits.”

He expected nothing less. Shaking his head slightly, Cai smiled again. “No, I don’t think Ari suspects anything. I think she *knows*.”

Amaris took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds. With a

whoosh, she let it out through her lips. "This makes no sense. Why would they separate you? I mean, what purpose would that serve? And who made that decision? Your mother? The doctors? And why lie about it? What motive is there for all of this?"

Cai shrugged. "I have no idea. Though I'm starting to wonder if incidents like *this* have something to do with it," he grumbled, indicating his stab wound once more.

Ris began to chew on her lower lip, her eyes staring through the equipment and part of Cai's shoulder. When she spoke, it was in a whisper. "Does *she* know about her?"

He was tempted to give a smartass response, but his own brows furrowed at the question. Was his mother aware that she had a daughter on the other side of the world? At the hospital, she hadn't even known who Ari was; didn't even recognize the name. Of course, how could she not be aware? Prenatal exams would have told her everything there was to know about her children. So why had she lied to him—and the whole world—about a deceased son? Was there something about Ari that he didn't know? Did his mother authorize the secret removal of her female child? Why?

A chill crawled up Cai's spine as he thought of his mother's most accurate reputation: she would do whatever was necessary; no matter the cost. Leaving Ari to the care of others and then lying about it afterwards... It was exactly what Lucia Balere was capable of.

28

November 29, 2357
Residence of Eila Maible
Genesis, America

It was almost ten thirty by the time Ari was standing in front of Eila's door. As punctual as she was, it was still half an hour from the base to the soldiers' camp where Jace had to report in. Another thirty minutes brought them into the city where an hour and a half long bus route was spent in chilly silence until they made it to the Northwest sector. They'd parted ways in the elevator, each eager to escape the presence of one another and be welcomed back by people who actually liked them.

Ari just barely knocked on the door before she pressed her thumb to her key and unlocked her second home. Since it was too early for Eila to be awake—and her parents were undoubtedly at work already—Ari felt no compunctions on going to the guest room and dropping her duffel bag on the floor in front of the dresser. Without even thinking about it, she turned in an instant and threw herself down on the bed face first. She fell asleep with her boots hanging off the edge of the bed.

Twenty minutes later, Ari leapt to her feet with shocking alacrity after a surprising kick landed against the side of her foot. Snapping to attention, it didn't even dawn on her where she was or what exactly Rodgers was going to do to her for oversleeping. When everything snapped into focus, however, she sagged where she stood and raised a hand to the back of her neck.

"Oh. Just you," she grumbled at the smirking Eila who was leaning against the wall in her pajamas and fuzzy blue robe.

“What did they do to you there? I’ve never seen you so jumpy. And you weren’t exactly relaxed *before*.”

A slight chuckle fell from her lips as she turned and sat down on the bed again. In the slowest motions she’d ever performed, Ari grabbed her right foot and began to unlace her boot. “The first time I overslept, Rodgers marched into the barracks and literally yanked the mattress out from under me. A couple of days later, she had a bucket of ice water. Then there were the fifty pushups I had to do while singing the anthem. After a while, I kind-of got to the point where I was afraid to sleep.”

Eila was looking at her appreciatively as the second boot hit the floor. Running both hands through her hair really quick, Ari fell back onto the bed with a groan. In an instant, she was back on her feet. With practiced motions, she straightened the little mess she’d made on the bed before placing her boots at the end of it. Opening up her duffel bag, she immediately went about hanging her clothes up in the closet and arranging items in the empty dresser. Only six minutes had passed before she was standing in front of Eila again.

Her best friend was staring at her with wide eyes before she stepped forward and wrapped her arms comfortingly around Ari. Hugging her back seemed foreign at first. For a month she’d gone without any real hint of compassion and to have it given so freely was a new discovery for her. At the same time: it was Eila. Wrapping her arms around her friend, she squeezed with all the strength in her, until Eila laughingly pushed her away.

“Jeez, they went all-out with you didn’t they?”

Ari shrugged before glancing at her arm. Flexing casually, she noticed yet again the muscle that had appeared beneath her pale skin. It almost seemed unnatural, to have the grooves and lines defined there. To feel how each cell of her arm seemed to tighten and harden on command. And to know that it *was* hard was even more difficult to comprehend. She’d gone from weak to strong, and her body was eager to show the difference.

She shrugged. “They just injected a little muscle into me.”

A brightening entered Eila’s eyes as she studied her friend. “That’s not all they injected you with.” When Ari’s brows contracted, she added with a wry smile, “You’ve got a baby *edge*, Ari.”

If anything in the world could make her stiffen, it was the pairing of the word ‘baby’ with something known to be as sinister as the *edge*. Her lips twisted and she remarked in a dry tone, “Thanks. Because I

was so looking forward to having the weakest *edge* known to man.”

Eila’s eyebrows lifted instantly and her weight shifted from one foot to the other, throwing her right hip out to the side. “Yeah, because having the *edge* of a trained *killer* is something to brag about. I thought you’d just be glad to know that it won’t be as noticeable when we go back to school on Monday.”

“School,” Ari groaned. “I forgot about that.”

“How can you forget about *that*?”

“It’s surprisingly easy when you’ve got two minutes to do twenty push-ups. Or, you know, you’re puking your guts out after a five-mile hike with fifty extra pounds on your back right after eating a huge breakfast.”

Her friend’s brown eyes widened in horror before she shook the expression from her face. “I don’t know how you survived,” she eventually muttered.

Ari snorted through her nose. “I don’t know how I’m going to survive Monday.” In a lower tone, she said, “You don’t know what it’s like, Eila. To be out there. Working and training for the life you’re going to lead. To be treated with the respect you’ve earned and to know that those you stand beside will always be there for you, even if they’re relative strangers. I can’t even describe what it’s like to be out there ... and then coming back into this world where you’re seen as just a kid. It’s like breathing fresh air from a mountaintop and then being smothered with a thermal blanket.”

For several moments, Eila offered up no reply. It brought a sardonic smile to Ari’s face as she realized how impossible it was for Eila to even imagine such a thing. She’d never wanted for much in life, and she was always treated like her parents’ ‘little girl’. To have any real respect given to her by an authority figure wasn’t something she would be even remotely familiar with. So how could Ari expect her to know what it was like outside of the city before being shoved back in a box so tiny she could barely breathe?

“Well, I’m starving. Time for breakfast,” Eila finally said before turning on her heel and heading for the kitchen.

Ari’s eyebrows pinched together as she followed her friend. “But it’s almost noon.”

This earned her a forlorn sigh. “Why do I think our late mornings no longer exist?”

December 1, 2357

Genesis North Public School
Genesis, America

Ari felt as if she was wading through a vat of hot oil as she entered the school. Every step was torturous and the inane chatter taking place around her almost made her bang her head against a wall. It had been so long since she'd been forced to cram into the Senior with her fellow students that it truly was like being smothered. Their heavy breath weighed her down and the cloud of perfume that entered with a group of four girls was absolutely nauseating. As soon as the elevator stopped on Floor 19, Ari shot out of there in search of some fresh air.

"You know, I've always known you were fast. Yet, somehow I didn't think I could blink and you'd be gone," Eila remarked as she reached Ari's locker.

"Sorry. Just ... hard to breathe for a minute there." She illustrated her statement by taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly.

Eila dropped her voice to a whisper, "This is really bothering you, isn't it?"

Ari could only nod.

She truly couldn't expect Eila to understand. After all, she'd never been outside everyday for hours at a time—rain or shine. It wasn't like she'd ever breathed more than city air, filled with the smell of too many people living too close for too long. Ari had been *outside*. Where she could feel the wind in her face, sunshine on her skin, and could actually see tiny droplets of water hit the flat ground for miles around. A place where vegetation provided such clean and plentiful oxygen, that being in Genesis was akin to breathing toxic fumes.

Letting her eyes drag across the metallic gray walls and pass over the insipid teenagers she couldn't stand *before*, Ari couldn't help but surprise herself when she thought in a forlorn voice, *I want to go home*.

No sooner had the thought been shaken away than the light on Eila's private tablet began to flash green. Her lips curled into a slight smile and she immediately passed the object to Ari. The moment she saw Jace's face beneath the slightly darkened screen that said Video Call Incoming, a smile pulled up the left side of her face.

Before she could accept it, Eila laughed, "Give it back when you're finished. I'm going to get some coffee."

More eager than even she could have imagined, Ari hit the 'Accept' button and watched as a smaller portion of the screen showed her own face as Jace was seeing it. He only blinked in surprise when Ari

exclaimed, "A friendly face!"

A chuckle sounded through the speaker before Jace was able to compose himself. "And here I didn't think you'd actually answer the call. How're things going?"

Trying to smother her excitement at talking to him, she managed a very impressive pleading expression. "Tell Rodgers I will run until my boot soles disappear; I will climb ropes until you can see bone through my palms; I will do push-ups until I look like a *gorilla* if she takes me back right now."

Jace failed to contain his laughter and even Ari couldn't hide her grin anymore. It was bad enough being at school. Nothing could have been worse than being entirely abandoned. Especially after how she and Jace had left things. He hadn't even come to say goodbye to her when he headed home yesterday, despite her staying all weekend only a floor away.

"Well," he finally replied, "if it makes you feel better, Rodgers would take you back without half as much work. She's been wandering around here like a wraith all weekend, I'm told."

"Does that mean I can hop on a bus?" she asked hopefully.

Shaking his head, Jace's blue eyes narrowed slightly through the screen. "It's not that bad, is it?" Her expression became apathetic. His tone shifted as he asked, "How are you, Ari?"

Taking a deep breath that puffed out her cheeks, she let it out slowly even as she leaned back against her locker. Again, her eyes rose up from the tablet to graze over the milling crowds of students and the polished glass of the walls. Without looking at him, she muttered, "I don't belong here anymore."

"You're seventeen and you haven't graduated yet. You belong there, Ari."

Her head began shaking automatically. "I don't know how I'm going to last that long, Jace. Being here is stifling."

His voice became stern. "You are going to last that long because you have no other choice, Keir."

This earned a tiny smile. "Thanks," she muttered at the tablet, returning her attention to him.

Jace nodded his head in acknowledgment but said nothing else. For a moment, they just stared at one another in silence, the barest of grins pulling up one side of their mouths. Then the chime sounded throughout the school and Ari released a sigh.

"Let the torture commence," she grumbled.

"You can do this, Ari. Just give it some time."

Rolling her eyes, she made a disgruntled face that earned another grin from him. "I'll see you, Jace. Gotta go."

"Yeah. Me, too. See you soon, Keir." Ari just barely got in a smile before he disconnected.

29

December 20, 2357
Residence of Ari Keir
Genesis, America

Ari had just finished packing her vacation bag when Clara stumbled into her bedroom. The teenager didn't even look at her, though she hiccuped loud enough to be heard through the paper-thin walls two apartments over. Propping herself up in the doorway, Clara's half-lidded gaze studied her charge with an expression that almost bordered on curiosity.

"Going to Eila's again?" Her tone was almost suspicious.

"Where else would I be going on a weekend?" She wasn't going to bother telling Clara that she wasn't returning anytime soon. The immature adult had survived a whole month without her. A couple weeks during the holidays wasn't much for her to wonder about.

From the corner of her eye, Ari could see Clara shrug. "Just wondering if you were gonna lie to me again, is all."

Ari was more annoyed than affronted. When Clara was this buzzed, outrageous accusations were usually thrown around. She knew when to shrug off her guardian's attitude.

Having not responded to the statement, Clara's face paled in drunken fury. Her next words were bit at the ends, one after the other. "Tell your boyfriend I don't appreciate him skulking across the street all the time. Makes the neighbors nervous. And even though you've got that minor *edge* now, why don't you stay away from those who are legitimately dangerous? I'm sure my brother wouldn't approve."

With dark eyes wide, Ari turned to her aunt after the first sentence

and barely heard the rest. After a moment, she shook her head and began to focus. "Is he still there now, Clara? Can you show him to me?" she demanded in the next instant, striding across the room and wrapping her hand around the tan woman's upper arm in a tight grip.

"Ow! Of course he's still there. He's waiting on you, isn't he?" she grumbled.

Without releasing her, Ari dragged her out into the living room and to one of the two windows available in the apartment. With a simple brush of her key, she ordered the glass to magnify—giving her at least a view of the tops of people's heads. "Where? Who is he? Show me."

Clara wrenched her arm free, her features twisted in even a pretty scowl. "Don't play stupid with me, Ari!"

Her jaw clenched as her eyes scoured the individuals passing below them on the street. There were too many for her to notice any individual, much less rightly guess which one had apparently been following her. Turning from the window, Ari stepped toe-to-toe with Clara and took her shoulders in a gentler grip.

"Clara, please? This is important. I need to know who's been here. Do you know what he looks like? Why he's there?"

Bowing her head a little, Clara began shaking her head. Ari cursed inwardly as the alcohol continued to flood Clara's system, making her act like a young teenager instead of a thirty-seven year old adult. Without persuasion, she would get nothing out of her.

As if she were spitting venom, she threw out the only words that would get Clara's attention. "Is he cute?"

On cue, Clara's head rose and her eyes locked on Ari's. There was still suspicion glittering in her dark eyes, however, and so she answered, "You would know. He's been following you everywhere."

Ari's blood froze and her breathing hitched. "Well, I don't know. And I've never noticed. Maybe all he wanted from me was an introduction to you. Guys can be shy, too, you know." The words came out breathless and without conviction. Almost as if she were rambling. She actually couldn't believe it when her words seemed to work.

"You think?"

Ari nodded. "I don't see how he can be interested in me." A chill ran up her spine as soon as the lie left her lips. "What do you say? Point him out to me and I'll see what I can do about him?"

Clara looked quite pleased with herself. Throwing back her shoulders, the other woman glided to the window—looking graceful despite the early afternoon cocktails. Leaning against one side of the

window, she did everything she could to appear attractive and unconcerned. It was actually the best response Ari could hope for as she hovered over her guardian's shoulder, keeping out of sight of whoever might be watching.

Stretching out a hand, Clara then began to examine her manicured nails as she began to describe him to Ari. "Across the street, between the red brick building and that boarded up shack. I used to think you two spent your weekends in there, you know..."

"I get the picture," Ari muttered with a roll of her eyes. Only Clara would think of two people getting it on in an old apartment building filled with homeless people and no electricity or running water. Of course, knowing Clara, she'd probably done it at one time or another.

"Which one is he?" she pressed a moment later, seeing three guys standing near the buildings Clara described. Nearly all three wore patched-up coats with grime clinging to each fiber. One was gesturing animatedly at a barrel at the other end, probably discussing lighting it up to keep warm. The other two were nodding as if they were just as interested. From twelve stories up, Ari wasn't exactly capable of making out a lot of details, however, and so relied on Clara's more direct knowledge of the man.

"The blonde one. He's kind-of short compared to the men I usually date," she mused. "But he's got such chiseled features. And I never turn down a man with tattoos or scars. He's got this one scar that goes from his right eyebrow all the way down to his jaw."

That was enough for Ari. Whirling away from the window, she triggered a call to Jace. Even as she waited on him to answer, her body began to tremble.

As soon as Clara had mentioned the scar, Ari knew exactly who she was talking about. Only, she didn't know him as some homeless guy camped out across the street from her. She knew him as a gentleman in a three piece suit taking the bus into North Genesis almost every morning. The same bus that took her most of the way to school.

"Answer, damn you!" Ari breathed, perching on the edge of a dining chair so that her shaking legs didn't cause her to collapse.

"Well, good afternoon to you, too," Jace remarked dryly as his voice came through her key.

"He's here!" Ari thought she would yell the words when she heard his voice, but all that came out was a tiny squeak.

"What? Who's there? Ari?" Jace's voice had changed, as well. It was hard, now. Determined. Deadly.

"The s-second attacker. He's been following me, Jace. And he's camped out in front of my house right now."

"We'll be right there." The line went dead.

Somehow, that was all she needed. Lowering her head into her hands, Ari could feel her body's trembling begin to subside, one limb after another. Counting backwards from ten in her mind, it didn't take her too much longer before she was on her feet. Jace was coming. Back up was on its way. And she needed to make sure that her spy wouldn't be going anywhere.

"What's going on, Ari?" Clara demanded, having heard her call.

Even as she glanced at her, an idea formed in her mind that was both awful and brilliant. It would be putting Clara at risk. Yet, it would also bring her attacker that much closer.

Immediately, she shook her head. In her mind, she could hear one of Rodgers' incessant lectures on what it meant to be a soldier. *'We protect the innocent. No matter the cost to ourselves, we always put ourselves between them and harm. No exceptions. Even if they really don't deserve it.'*

Clenching her jaw, Ari stepped forward and took Clara's shoulders between her hands once again. "Go to work, Clara. Go to work, or a friend's, or even just the other side of town. Please?"

When her guardian demanded to know why, another string of curses against the evil of alcohol roared through her mind. At the same time, she tried to smile at her guardian. "How can I ask someone if they like you if you're around?" The words tasted like bile on the way out. But they got the job done.

"Call me later with the details," she said with a smile as she walked out of the apartment.

It seemed almost surreal—too normal—when Ari had to call out, "Clara! Your key!" And it seemed even more disturbing that, even now, Clara would giggle as she came back into the apartment and grabbed the watch—her newest in a long string of keys in the past year—off the counter before noticeably affixing it to her wrist. Once she'd done so, she grabbed her purse and left for the rest of the afternoon.

As soon as she had gone—Ari watched her board the bus from the window—the teenager sprinted down all twelve flights of stairs and took up a position at one of the windows in the front room of the apartment building. Keeping back far enough to see and not be seen, she didn't leave her position for a good half an hour. Nor did he. Standing there, huddled at a burn barrel with those who were truly homeless, the man's eyes never left their building. Never left her

apartment, Ari was certain.

When her half an hour marker had just passed, she felt more than seen the difference. Like a sixth sense, she could pick up the tiniest shift in the atmosphere that announced the arrival of her back-up team. The first genuine smile in twenty-four hours pulled up the left side of her lips.

Her eyes never left the blond man even when she heard the buzzer from the back door. Brushing her thumb over her key, the door unlocked, giving them access to the building. As soon as it clicked, Jace threw open the door and stalked through the building until he found the stairs. He changed direction as soon as he saw Ari at the window.

"The guy with the blond hair?"

"That's him," she confirmed.

Rodgers closed the door and stationed herself at another window. "We're taking him alive."

"Good. I have a few questions for him."

"You're not the only one," Jace grumbled, his cold blue eyes never blinking as he stared at the man hunched over the burn barrel.

For several moments, the three of them watched his movements carefully. It was in that time that Ari noticed the change. His shifting. Rolling his shoulders. Padding his pockets. None of which he had done earlier.

"He knows you're here."

Jace cursed under his breath and looked at Rodgers. She already had her key to her lips, murmuring quick, decisive commands. Ari could barely breathe as she watched her attacker. Somehow, it felt wrong standing there. Like she should be doing something. Confronting him. Demanding answers. Beating the shit out of him for trying to kill her last month.

"Relax, Ari," Jace murmured beside her.

Shooting him a look, she returned her gaze to their prey. "I'm relaxed."

"They why am I sensing an *edge*?"

She rolled her eyes thinking of her 'minor' and 'baby' *edge* that she was constantly told wasn't as strong as a real soldier's. Though she couldn't see why, since she was trained exactly as they were. Firearms, in particular, had taken up quite a lot of time. If that kind of training didn't label her as a trained killer, nothing would.

"Maybe because you guys trained me," she snarled softly.

Jace shook his head. "You normally don't have much of one. But

when you're pissed... Well, it gets hard for even me to handle."

Ari opened her mouth to question, but let it snap closed as soon as the scene outside the window shifted. A curse flew from her lips as the blond man whirled around to face two shadows slipping down the alley from behind him. They were dressed as homeless, but the *edge* was impossible not to detect. As if in slow motion, Ari watched the man raise an object that had been hidden inside of his coat.

Whoever was down that alley had impeccable aim. Before Ari had time to yell; before Rodgers could give a no-kill order; before the gun was even raised to chest level, a bullet split the air and Ari watched, stunned, as a burst of red liquid shot out of the back of the man's right hand. His gun fell to the ground and his arm disappeared from her sight as he cradled it to his chest. A moment later, he turned around and sank slowly to his knees beside the burn barrel—which had been deserted the moment the two soldiers began to make their way up the alley.

"NO!" Ari roared only a second later when the man pulled something from inside of his coat with a trembling hand.

Even as Rodgers was yelling into her com to stop him, the pill had already made its way down his throat. It worked faster than she could have thought possible. The two soldiers had just gotten him to his feet when they all watched him slump in their grips. Ari felt as if she'd had the breath knocked out of her.

It took almost an hour for the soldiers to work everything out. In all that time, Ari sat on the staircase and stared off into space. Eila called three times. All of which were ignored.

To most of those who glanced at her, they might not realize the rage that was boiling deep inside of her. Burning her from the inside out and begging for some volatile release. She had been so close to some reasoning. An answer to a question that shouldn't have been in need of an answer: Why would someone want to kill her? And who would hire someone to do it? As far as she knew, there was only one reason to go after her: if someone knew they would be going after Cai as well. Since she and Cai had never even known, how could anyone guess such a thing?

Of course, if they shared medical records, no one would need to guess.

"Jace!" Ari yelled, leaping to her feet. The soldier with the medical degree turned away from his cursory inspection of the body. She didn't give him time to say anything as she grabbed his arm. "I need to talk to

your mom. You need to take me to her right now.”

“Why?”

Her eyes cut to the body that was zipped back into its black bag. “Because there’s only one reason to send two hit men after one scrawny teenager. And only someone who was there at my birth knows that reason. Isn’t it possible that, if one person was there, she might know who else could possibly be involved?”

“Rodgers, I’m taking one of the vehicles into the Northwest. I’ll report in later,” Sergeant Naois barked before turning back to Ari.

“You better go get a change of clothes. You’re not coming back here tonight.”

It was the only order Ari didn’t argue.

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December 20, 2357

Residence of the Supreme Commander

Geneva, Switzerland

"You're obsessing again," Ris sighed from where she lounged across three of the five couch cushions.

Even though they were in the media room with the menu for a video game whiling away on the wall, Cai's head was bent over his tablet, staring at a very familiar picture. Or rather, a series of pictures, since he'd taken it unto himself to go as far back as the ID photos would allow. Somehow, it seemed easier watching Ari grow up as he had. From a thin whip of a kid to a lanky teenager, they mirrored one another almost exactly.

"Can you blame me? In a week and half, I'm going to be face to face with her. My twin. Someone I didn't even know was alive while I've been mourning someone who never existed."

"End of explanation I've heard half a dozen times already?"

Cai rolled his eyes. "Alright, alright. So what do you want to do?"

Her eyebrows raised slightly as she looked at her friend with a wary expression. "The truth?"

Again, he rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

Sitting up slowly, Ris's brown eyes kept up a steady flirtation with his own. Removing her teeth from her bottom lip, she finally said, "Cai, what I really want is just one day with my best friend. No Ari Keir. No Lucia Balere. Not even a party in Valor. Can I please just have that?"

In a few, quiet words, she had successfully made him feel like an ass.

"Of course you can, Ris," he muttered. For extra protection, he added on a small, endearing smile. "You've earned that much, putting up with me for as long as you have."

It confused him when an almost sad smile pulled at her lips before she said, "If I ever figure out why... Well, I wouldn't put up with you half as much if I knew the answer to that."

Trying to lighten her up, Cai beamed at her. "You love me and you know it."

A wry smile twisted her lips and she raised her brows a little. "More than you know, and way more than you deserve."

Cai didn't have more than a few seconds to ponder that statement before Amaris leapt to her feet and pulled on his hand. "C'mon. Grab your coat. I've got an idea." The smile that lit up her whole face was sly while her eyes sparkled with mischief. It made Cai feel like a kid again and he followed her without question.

December 20, 2357

Bastion Park Ice Rink

Geneva, Switzerland

"Have you ever actually skated before?"

"Come on, Cai, where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm taking that as a no."

"So we'll fall on our asses a couple of times," she said with a shrug.

Shaking his head, Cai could no longer hide his lopsided smile. Ris was nothing if not adventurous. And this was so in tune with her character that he couldn't find it in him to deny her this. Even if it meant falling half a dozen times.

"You enjoy making me do things, don't you?" he pretended to grumble as they rented some skates.

Ris flashed him a grin as she laced up her right foot. With the glow of the holiday lights shedding a white radiance on everything, her soft brown eyes sparkled with more than her own joy. So often, Cai had to wonder how it was possible to have such a great person in his life. Then he could do nothing but be grateful and indulge her every whim.

Once they were fully laced up, they both lingered right in front of the ice. Amaris bit her lip and Cai watched her with a wry expression on his face. He almost laughed by how long it was taking her to work herself up to going out on the ice. Though her ideas were often adventurous, her execution of them took more preparation than she

was willing to admit.

Surprising them both, Cai suddenly grabbed Ris's left hand and inched out onto the ice, pulling her with him. A squeak escaped his friend, causing him to laugh. Which, in turn, caused him to wobble unsteadily on the thin blades. Just as he was about to fall, Amaris caught his other hand and they stood there gripping each other's forearms as they tried to balance.

"Okay, this could be harder than I thought," she admitted when it seemed that the immediate danger had passed.

"We can do this. It can't be that hard," Cai grumbled. Whether it was meant to reassure her or himself, even he couldn't tell. Of course, it didn't help when six year olds were gliding past them with ease.

After a moment of the teenagers studying their fellow skaters, Ris released Cai's one hand while lacing her fingers between those of his right. Slowly, she slid her skate a few inches forward and let the other follow at a snail's pace. With a crooked smile, Cai followed her lead. For about two feet. Then he tripped and they both went down.

"Ow," Ris groaned beside him.

"This is going to be a long evening," Cai muttered in the same disgruntled tone. Yet, the moment they glanced at one another, they burst into a fit of laughter before picking themselves back up.

In the space of an hour, Cai had fallen eight times. Ris had only fallen four—twice being Cai's fault. To say that he was not exactly graceful in skates was an understatement. And she wasn't about to let him forget it.

The last time Cai fell, he ended up just lying on the ice for a moment. Ris, comfortable now, skated up to him and stopped near his head, a wide grin on her face. "Having fun yet?" she questioned.

"I think I'm going to stay down here for a while. I'm just starting to get comfortable," he remarked in a dry tone.

Amaris laughed and it was a little louder than it should have been were it natural. Cai's face blanked in an instant and his eyes shot towards the pavilion where a crowd had formed to watch the skaters. Most of them were parents watching as their young children took to the ice with their partners. Others, however, were focused too intently on their section of the ice. Letting his head fall back, his face arranged itself into a wry expression.

"How many?"

"Four. Just photographers, as far as I can tell. But bloggers can blend better when they're only people-watching," she said as she reached a

hand down for his.

Grasping her wrist, Cai pulled himself to his feet before lacing his fingers between Ris's once more. Her eyebrows raised in way that warned him he'd better not fall again. That was the whole reason she quit holding his hand in the first place. After flashing her an apologetic smile, they made their way slowly back into the crowd of skaters and fell in behind a middle-aged man and his young son. For a while, they were able to glide around with little hassle.

When they reached the guard rail in front of the pavilion, Cai suggested that they take a break. Like many of the other skaters, Ris put her back to the railing and leaned against the wooden beams. With a smirk, Cai placed himself in front of her and grasped the beam on either side of her shoulders. Ris's eyebrows rose even as a similar smile pulled at her lips.

Leaning his forehead against her own, Cai murmured, "One day with just your best friend, and you wanted to go somewhere public."

"To be fair, it took them a while to get here. They missed some of your better wipeouts."

Cai chuckled as he pulled his forehead from hers. "I'm glad for that. And I'm glad you chose this. We don't get out often enough."

"Well, you have six hulking statues that follow you everywhere now. Alone time is a little scarce."

Rubbing a gloved hand on the back of his neck, Cai sighed, "It shouldn't be. Especially when it comes to me and you. Nothing should interfere with that." As he said it, he absentmindedly tucked her hair behind her ear. When he met her eyes again, he thought he caught a hint of water in them before they shot away.

"You're right. It shouldn't. But life doesn't care what we think. Now come on; the park closes in an hour and you're not nearly proficient enough in this," she added.

Obediently, Cai dropped his arm and began to turn so that he and Ris could fall back in with the crowd. Just as she was about to glide forward, however, the tip of her skate hit Cai's and they both began to fall. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around his friend. His back hit hard but the breath wasn't knocked out of him until Amaris landed on top of him.

Cai's eyes snapped open to search Amaris's features, making sure she was alright. For a second, they just stared at one another in shock. Then, like a dam bursting, they both began to laugh. Several seconds passed as they both laid there on the ice, their bodies shaking with

expressed mirth.

To Cai, it was simply a beautiful moment for how natural it was. It wasn't planned. Nothing was pretended or plotted. Instead, fate had done what he dared not. So there he was, lying on his back with his beautiful best friend lying on top of him, and a group of photographers clicking away wildly as he and Ris continued to find the whole situation amusing.

Eventually, the laughter died. Yet, Ris still wasn't getting up. Probably because Cai still wasn't letting go. For whatever reason, his hands remained on the small of her back, refusing outright to relinquish their hold.

At last, however, Ris raised her eyes to his in a question. Cai almost couldn't hold back the regretful sigh as his hands slid slowly off of her. Moving with all the speed his aching muscles would allow, Cai levered himself to his feet as soon as Amaris was up.

They didn't bother to skate anymore afterwards. With the knowing silence that came with being friends for most of their lives, they headed for the benches where they traded in the skates for their shoes. Then, as they were heading for the car, Ris surprised him by wrapping an arm around his back as they walked. A smile pulled up the right side of Cai's lips as he draped his right arm over her shoulders, hugging her into his side.

For the rest of the night, the duo hardly said more than three sentences to one another. Probably because Cai was so lost in thought that anything he said out loud would sound like complete gibberish. What was worse: Amaris could decode his gibberish and learn what he was thinking. And he wasn't sure she would be at all favorable to those thoughts.

Especially since the only one he really couldn't shake was: why couldn't he hold her like that all the time?

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December 20, 2357

Residence of Doctor Lita Naois

Genesis, America

Ari stalked through the halls only a step behind Jace. Mentally, she was cursing herself for not taking the time to interrogate Doctor Lita back when she was trapped in the base hospital for a week. How could she have been so stupid? Of course this woman would have known that she and Cai were connected. Worse than that, she was almost positive that Lita knew each time that she and Cai matched up medically. The sting of betrayal lanced through her entire being and her temper had finally found someone to land on.

"Calm down, Ari," Jace muttered as they made a left.

"Kinda hard to do when you've been lied to all your life," she growled back.

"And it will be kind of hard for my mother to speak if your *edge* is choking her."

"Good. At this point, I'd like to choke her with my bare hands," the teenager snarled softly.

Faster than she thought possible, Jace whirled around and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her against the nearest wall. His eyes were hard and as cold as ice. "Stop it. Right now. That is still my mother in there and she's done nothing to earn your fury."

"She lied to me! About my *brother!* That deserves more than just *my* fury."

"That doesn't make her any less my mother and I will not have you attacking her needlessly. When we walk in there, you are going to do

your best to control that monstrous *edge* of yours and you are going to *shut up*. Is that clear?"

"Like hell I will," she spat back at him.

"Damn it, Ari! Do you want answers or not?"

"I'm going to *get* answers." Her voice was a deadly promise.

"Not like that. Go ahead and charge in there with that temper and see just how far you get. I swear she'll throw so much bureaucratic bullshit in your face that you won't have time to blink between all the red tape. So go right ahead." Letting go of her shoulders, Jace stepped back and held up his right arm to indicate that she should proceed.

Ari knew better and instead leaned against the wall and seethed. That Jace was right, she didn't actually doubt. After all, she'd already had this conversation with Lita before. All she got out of that was an excuse about confidentiality and patient rights. The same words that should have been used to protect Ari, but weren't. Now, even Cai would not be protected by them. His twin had a right to know.

With her lips pressed tightly together, she motioned for Jace to lead the way again. He rolled his eyes even as he turned to continue along the corridor. Of course, she thought she heard him mutter, "I should have brought the sedatives."

When they reached the apartment belonging to Doctors Terry and Lita Naois, Ari positioned herself on one side of the door even as Jace knocked. It took only a few moments for his mother to open the door. As soon as she saw Ari's face, she sighed. Stepping back from the door, she silently ushered them inside. Passing Ari, Jace shot her a warning look.

"Your father is at the office, so we have plenty of time to talk before he returns. Though how much will be said depends entirely on what you came to ask me." Her voice was the least hospitable that Ari had ever heard it.

"He doesn't know?" Jace asked, his voice filled with mild surprise.

"Not the full details. He's well aware that I have a patient that requires my full attention at all times. Though we've had our rough patches concerning some of our moves—he was most definitely opposed to moving to Partisan—things have worked out as I intended. And he asks no questions because he knows I cannot answer. Just as you should be aware of."

Ari's mouth was open and ready to deliver a scalding retort when Jace shot her a pointed look. Turning to his mother, he said, "Cannot or will not? There are things we need to know, Mother. This has gotten ...

complicated. More than you ever could have imagined.”

“I’m not so sure, Jace,” Lita replied wryly as she headed for the wet bar. “I have a pretty good imagination.”

“And a heavy conscience, judging by the way you’re knocking those back,” he added in a hard tone of his own as a shot of some amber liquid flew down her throat.

“Son, you deal with people who grit and bear it at your job. I deal with people who whine and complain. This is therapy.”

Ari was shocked at how they spoke to one another. Never in her life had she imagined Doctor Lita behaving like this in private. Neither had Jace, apparently, and so she assumed that this behavior was not normal. Lita was steeling herself against their questions. She was hiding something. And if she was left to exchange words with just her son, they’d never get anything out of her. They knew each other too well.

“Why are you trying to kill us?” Ari demanded in the short pause that followed her words.

Lita looked appalled as her eyes danced between her son and her patient. “I would never! I’ve never done anything to cause either of you harm. As if I could do that to my own son!”

“Ari,” Jace snapped.

She ignored him. “Not me and *Jace*. Me and Cai. Why do you want us dead?”

Lita’s blue eyes hardened into sapphires as she glared at Ari. “Never in my life have I done anything to jeopardize yours. I couldn’t care more about what happened to you if you were my own daughter, Ari Keir. And I certainly would never wish any ill-will on Cai Balere. Though what he means to you, I have no idea.”

“You were there when I was born. You know exactly what he means to me,” she snarled softly. “And if it wasn’t you, then it was someone else who was there that day. Someone knows about us and someone knows that he and I can affect one another. Which is why two men were sent to kill me: to get to him. If it wasn’t you, *Doctor*, then it was someone you know.”

“No one would touch you,” Lita hissed. “They all know the consequences of searching for you. Your information is so classified that even mentioning this to you could land me in prison!”

“Well, someone attacked her,” Jace said. “Someone attacked her and put Cai in the hospital. Even if they were only after Ari at that time, now they know who she is and what can happen. Only a being who

was aware from the beginning what would happen would bother to send hit men after the least protected of the twins. Mother, someone wants them dead. You took an oath as a doctor to help shield your patients from harm, and to do no harm yourself. Help us.”

“That’s right. I took an oath to shield and protect her. Until my dying day. Part of that protection means keeping the truth to myself. Whatever you two might believe, you shall hear nothing of the truth from my lips. Ignorance is her greatest security.”

“Well, I’m not ignorant anymore. And someone knows it. If you’re not going to help me, you may as well have killed us yourself.”

Lita turned her back on her guests and whispered, “So be it. I cannot help you. No one can help you, now.”

Like a lion ready to pounce, Ari could feel the muscles in her coil for a spring. The fury that erupted out of her battered at everything in the apartment and all she wanted to do was leap across the coffee table and wrap her hands around Lita’s throat. Just as she was preparing to lunge, however, Jace wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her towards the door.

“No, Ari! She’s not worth it.”

“Because of her, my brother is going to end up dead!” she screamed.

“Because of *you*, no one is going to hurt him,” he insisted as he pulled open the heavy front door. An inarticulate cry of rage and hatred exploded out of Ari’s mouth as he shoved her out into the hallway. Just before he closed it behind him, however, she watched him glance back over his shoulder. In a low voice, he said to his mother, “You have no idea what you’ve just done.”

December 20, 2357

Rooftop of Genesis NW Building 5

Genesis, America

Ari had spent an hour pacing the rooftop before finally taking up a place on the ledge where Jace had first discovered her. For the first ten minutes, he’d been reporting in. The following twenty minutes were spent in him trying to obtain leave for the night, and the rest of the hour was spent in requesting permission to keep the military vehicle with him. It was hard going, but eventually the Captain gave in because of the ordeal suffered earlier in the day. Once that was over, he joined Ari with a sigh that seemed to be dragged from his soul.

For another ten minutes, they didn’t speak. Each was lost in their

own thoughts and lamentations. And neither was actually able to believe what had been said only a few floors below them. Nor could they imagine how it would affect their situation now.

"That went well," Jace eventually muttered. Unlike Ari, he couldn't let silences trail off into eternity.

"You should have let me strangle her," Ari countered.

"Then you would be locked up and we wouldn't be able to go to Valor next week."

"We?"

"Just because the guys trying to kill you are dead now doesn't mean someone won't be waiting to finish the job on the other end. I'm not letting you go alone. Trained or not," he added with a meaningful look.

"You don't have to babysit me, Jace." Her voice wasn't at all indignant or argumentative. It was tired and resigned. *She* was tired and resigned.

"Keir, it's not babysitting. It's having your back. Are you ever going to learn the difference?" he sighed.

A tiny, wry smile pulled at her lips. "Not likely. But thank you."

"You're welcome. Now let's get inside before we freeze to death and save your attackers the trouble."

Ari snorted. "If I were about to freeze to death, they'd get Cai a nice hot shower, heated blankets, and boiling soup. I'd survive, even if you wouldn't."

"Thanks for that sentiment," Jace stated dryly.

"You're welcome." Her heart wasn't totally in the tease, but it was at least better than the fighting that plagued them earlier. In the morning, they still didn't know how things were going to work out. As far as Ari was concerned, she'd had enough for one day. It could wait.

As they descended the stairs into the building, another thought came to mind and Ari looked back at Jace as she reached the top floor. "What did you mean, earlier? When you said that I didn't have much of an *edge* unless I was angry?"

"No one ever told you? Your *edge* is dull. Really dull, compared to most of us. Until you get pissed. Then it's the strongest I've ever felt."

Ari's brows pinched together across her forehead as she pondered that. "Why? I really can't be *that* screwed up."

Jace chuckled and she shot him a glare. "Yes, you can. Actually, though, I think it's because of Cai. He's so much a part of you that his own 'innocence' dulls the *edge*. When you're angry, though, it hits

everyone hard and strong because it's obvious that you can follow through with it. That you're trained to live up to it. And when you're angry enough to test it, that's when it gets suffocating."

"Hmm," Ari said just as they reached Eila's door. Jace slumped against the wall and Ari's eyes narrowed. "Where are you going to stay tonight, Jace? You were given leave, right?"

He shrugged. "I've got a few friends in the city who'll let me crash on their couches. I just want to make sure that you're staying here."

Blanking her face of emotion, Ari unlocked the front door and nodded her head to him. "Come on. I'll introduce you to Eila. Properly," she added, remembering that they'd been video chatting while she was in the hospital.

"Ari..."

"You're not Sergeant Naois here, Jace. Now come on."

When Ari entered the apartment, he followed.

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December 28, 2357

Residence of Eila Maible

Genesis, America

“Eila! The car is going to be here in one hour. If you’re not ready by then...” Ari let the threat hang as she stalked to the front door of the apartment. She stopped in her tracks when she found Mr. Maible had already crossed the house and was welcoming the soldier inside.

“Ah, Sergeant Naois. Pleasure to see you. And very prompt, I might add.” Ari suppressed a shiver when she heard the tiny, birdlike man give a nasal chuckle. She couldn’t actually remember the last time she heard Eila’s father laugh, and she was kind of glad for it.

Jace chuckled a little as well as he was ushered into the apartment. “It’s good to see you, Sir. Is Mrs. Maible at home? I brought that article she inquired about.”

Leaning against the doorjamb, Ari rolled her eyes. Disturbing was not a strong enough word to describe the treatment showered on Jace by the Maibles. Though she would never have believed it a month ago, even Mrs. Maible hung on every word that came out of his mouth, and Mr. Maible treated no other being with as much respect as Jace. Eila, of course, could not be blamed for falling for his charms—Ari had to give him that: he was certainly very charming when he wished to be. For her parents to fall beneath the same spell, however, went beyond all Ari’s prior knowledge of them.

Of course, Ari’s respect would have vanished entirely if they hadn’t at least exuded some suspicion in those first few days of their acquaintance. Just thinking about the day Ari was left to their

guardianship by her bodyguard was enough to make her smile. There had been so much disdain written on the faces of Eila's parents that Ari's own *edge* had flared with her irritation. Yet, somehow, Jace had turned on a side of his personality that she'd never before seen and had fully been embraced into the good graces of every Maible family member. Having prestigious doctor parents living a floor away didn't harm his image; and they were ecstatic when he revealed he'd just earned his own medical degree. What had been Ari's impromptu meet-and-greet with Eila became every day spent in boring discussion with the Maible patriarch. It defied reason.

Mr. Maible was just about to lead Jace into the sitting room when Jace was finally able to catch Ari's eye. "Are you almost ready?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I've been ready since six. Eila woke up ten minutes ago. She still has to pack." Her voice was tight as each word dripped with repressed impatience.

Jace's lips gave a compassionate tug. "She'll be ready in time. You know her."

"Yes, I do."

"Settle down, Keir. I didn't mean it like that."

Ari turned her head so that she didn't have to look at him. It wasn't really his fault that the Maibles liked him better. He was charismatic and charming. She was awkward and isolated. That didn't mean he had to rub it in her face.

"I know. I'm just anxious." Her voice had dropped into a whisper before her eyes shot again to the wall clock displayed in the hallway.

"Relax. You'll see him soon." Ari's eyes shot to his but she had no time to wonder why his voice had been carefully empty before Mrs. Maible called to him from the living room. With an apologetic shrug, he continued to follow the voice of his host and Ari retreated to her friend's bedroom.

Fresh out of the shower, Eila stood over her bed where four different outfits were arranged. With her thumbnail held between her teeth, her light brown eyes grazed over each option and real conflict warred in her eyes. Though Ari had never been one to be influenced by fashion, Eila could hardly be compared to her in that respect.

"There you are. I need help," her friend implored her as she entered the room.

Without a moment's hesitation, Ari went around to the other side of the bed, closed her eyes and scanned her hand overtop of where the outfits lay. Letting her hand drop, her eyes opened to find a frilly

turquoise top and a black skirt beneath her long fingers. "There you go."

Eila's withering expression didn't faze her. Nor did the muttered, "Thanks. Wish I'd thought of that."

"You should have. Now get dressed. Jace is here, so your parents are occupied. Therefore I can yell at you about your procrastination all I want. What all are you taking with you?"

Even as she spoke, Ari was moving around the room. She'd grabbed Eila's suitcase and had already packed half a drawer of her undergarments. Turning a lock on the antique jewelry box that held all of her friend's accessories, Ari casually placed it in the bottom of the suitcase—knowing that it would take Eila forever to decide, when she wouldn't like anything once they got there anyway. While Eila dressed, Ari grabbed the other three outfits off the bed and threw them into the suitcase before going to her friend's closet.

"What else, Eila? You always pack double when you're going away. Now what else?"

"Jeez, you're in a mood today. Calm down, would you? There's a method to my madness."

"A method that will make us twenty minutes late. C'mon, Eila. The train leaves at nine. And if we miss it, I will wring your neck."

"Wow. Okay, settle down before you actually choke me with that thing," Eila muttered, indicating the increased *edge* in the room.

"Sorry. You know what, I'll be on the roof. Just ... come up when you're ready."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Ari nodded and left the bedroom. Picking up her own duffel bag from the guest bedroom, she threw it over her shoulder and headed back to the living room. Ignoring Jace, she said a hurried goodbye and thank you to the Maibles, and was surprised when they seemed to truly care that she was heading up early. Of course, that could've just been because Jace jumped on it the second the words were out of her mouth.

"I'm fine. Just impatient. It's starting to bother Eila, so I'm just going to wait on the roof. But thank you again. For everything. This ... it's a dream come true for me. Thank you." Whirling away, she took the five long strides to the door and was out into the hallway before anyone could respond to her words.

She had just reached the stairwell when Jace's voice called out to her. Shaking her head, Ari let her hand fall from the handle in defeat

before she turned to look at him. In steps as long as her own, he made his way towards her, his eyes alight with concern and curiosity.

"Are you okay?" he asked as soon as he was close enough to be heard.

Ari pressed her teeth into her bottom lip and looked around at the empty corridor. Her eyes trailed over the walls, brushed across the ceiling and landed on the floor. In the back of her mind, she knew that she was out of it. But she couldn't imagine why.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just... I don't know, Jace. Now that it's almost here, I'm almost panicking. It's a lot to think about and I feel like my head is going to explode. I think I need to be alone for a while, okay?" Her voice dropped at the end and she turned pleading eyes on her friend.

To her surprise, Jace nodded. "Eila and I will be up as soon as she's ready." Turning on his heel, Jace strode back to the Maibles' apartment and disappeared through the door.

Ari felt a measure of gratitude as she returned to climbing the stairs. She barely noticed the tiny smile flirting with her lips.

December 28, 2357

Valor Shuttle

America

Ari wasn't sure if it was the motion of the underground train, the tunnel lights that whipped by at varying intervals, or simply the crash after a full thirty-six hours of non-stop excitement. Either way, the lanky teenager tried again to grow comfortable in her straight backed chair after yawning for the eighth time in the past twenty minutes. Unaware of what she was actually doing, she snuggled further down in her seat before her head leaned to the left and her eyes began to close. She was jarred almost instantly.

"Ari, this worked when we were nine. Sleeping on my shoulder *now*, not so much. Lean on Jace if you're that tired," Eila grumbled as she swiped a finger across her tablet to turn the page of the novel she was reading.

Bleary-eyed and irritable, Ari stuck her tongue out at her friend before trying in vain to get comfortable in her seat once more. As her chin was just about to touch her chest, her head jerked up and a pout found its way onto her lips. Twisting about, she tried to rest her head against the back of the seat, but it was so unforgivably straight that there was nothing to support her skull. After a few more tries, she was

frustrated and tired enough that tears pricked beneath her eyelids. There was nothing worse than being subjected to the purest exhaustion, and being unable to get comfortable.

“Ari, would you just lean on my shoulder already? You’re driving me crazy,” Jace hissed.

Slowly, her eyelids peeled open and she couldn’t even get a clear image of him, her eyesight was so compromised. Her mind was so sluggish, she couldn’t even keep up a pretense of a debate. Before she had done more than blink, Ari shifted positions and rested her head on Jace’s shoulder. As soon as her mind became assured that he wasn’t going to move, her consciousness shut down for the rest of the four hour ride to Valor.

When she woke, it was to an image being sent to her key and Jace’s. It was a picture of Ari sleeping on his shoulder while he fell asleep with his head leaning on hers. Eila was grinning slyly at them both just as the train emerged from the tunnel right beside Mount Rushmore.

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December 28, 2357

Residence of the Supreme Commander

Geneva, Switzerland

"This is your last chance, Cai. Cancel the party. Please?"

"No." His answer was immediate and stern. "Even if I wished to, I couldn't. You know that as well as I."

"Why is this so important to you?" Lucia growled at her son.

Cai's jaw strained as his teeth clenched together. Of all the questions for her to ask, she always seemed to find the one he could not answer. At least, not honestly.

"I've made a commitment, Mother. And it was you who taught me to always follow through."

"I also taught you to do what you deem necessary in all things. If your life is in danger, Cai, you have the absolute responsibility to remain where you are safe."

"I'm not safe anywhere!" Both hands raised to his face as if he could wipe away the irate expression like stage makeup. In a calmer tone, he continued a moment later, "We both know that anything can happen to me. Anywhere. Anytime. Do you really want me to put my life on hold because of a maybe?"

Lucia didn't look him in the eyes. What she wanted to say and what she believed were far separate on this issue. Cai knew that. For so many years, she was the sole being to instruct his views on honor and dignity, justice and mercy, pride and humility. Though she was a ruthless woman with a glitch in her empathy coding, she had a keen sight for what people needed and how to balance that with their

wants. And she knew better than to lie to her son when she raised him to be just like her: stubborn to the core and always doing what was believed to be right.

Releasing a tiny sigh, Lucia shook her head. "I would not have you controlled by anything or anyone. Yet, everything should be taken into consideration when making decisions of this magnitude. I accept your stance on the subject, Cai. And I relent to your choice, despite my well-noted disagreement."

A relieved smile pulled at his lips that his mother pretended not to see. Defeat was not something she could handle with any modicum of grace. Especially not where her son was concerned. After a moment, Lucia waved a hand in dismissal. Cai didn't budge.

"I wish you would come," he said in a small voice.

Lucia flashed him a sardonic smile, then. "No, you don't. Just be grateful that I have no desire to be there. Enjoy yourself, Cai. And I hope you get all that you wish to out of this experience." The last was said in such quiet tenderness, Cai almost couldn't believe the words were his mother's. In an instant, her expression shifted and she was waving him away again.

Turning on his heel, Cai strode for the door, releasing the relieved breath once the doors were closed behind him. There had been no reason to press the issue. Especially when she was right. Already, he had enough to deal with once he arrived in Valor. To have her there would have destroyed everything he was working towards. It would ruin the most important meeting of his life.

December 28, 2357

*Private Jet of the Supreme Commander
Geneva, Switzerland*

Rubbing the back of his neck, Cai did his best to ignore the nerves that assaulted him as he boarded the jet. Though he'd been feeling them in minor disturbances all week, now they were a bombardment of questions that swarmed the back of his mind. It made it harder than he expected to leave Geneva. Though he was going back to the land of his birth, Geneva was home. His mother was right: America might as well be a foreign country to him.

"Cai? Everything okay?" Amaris asked from the top of the stairs.

Shaking his head, Cai fixed a smile on his face. "Yeah. Fine. Just ... it's weird to be leaving."

Ris's eyes raised from his and she took a last look across the horizon to where Geneva sat in a huddle of glass and steel skyscrapers, each one acting like a mirror when the sun's rays beat down on them. Unlike Cai, her face didn't show an ounce of the hesitation he felt. Instead, it hardened in a way that meant she would be glad to have it behind her. A way that said she was ready to move on and see other places. Of the two of them, she was the real adventurer.

Taking the steps two at a time, Cai was standing in front of her before she had time to move. Rolling her eyes, Ris whipped around and headed back into the luxuries of the jet. After throwing one last glance over his shoulder, Cai followed.

For the first twenty minutes of the flight, Cai was lost in his own thoughts, staring out the window until the last possible glimpse of Geneva could be had. Though he'd been all over Europe and never felt a sense of hesitation at leaving behind his home, it was only now occurring to him how truly outside of it all he would be. There would be an entire ocean between him and everything he'd come to know. Everything that made him safe.

It was this that caused his jaw to tighten. Yes, he was safe where he was. Protected to the point of suffocation. And he couldn't even leave that wholly behind, as his six bodyguards encompassed half the people aboard the plane. A simple reminder of all that he was protected from—especially the truth—was enough to make him glad to leave Geneva and its schemes behind him. He was off to create his own.

"So what'd your mom say?" Amaris's voice was so unexpected in the quiet atmosphere that Cai actually jumped in surprise.

"About?" he asked, wide-eyed and confused.

"About you going through with this. I *know* she didn't give up without one last push, so what's the story?"

Once he understood, he cast a knowing look in her direction. "If you already know, why do I have to repeat it?"

"Because the relationship between you and your mom is the only dose of drama I can handle without losing it. Mostly because your mother terrifies me. And it's an eight hour flight. Spill."

Smiling to himself, Cai rolled his eyes before explaining what exactly happened in the past hour before takeoff. As expected, a slew of facial expressions crossed his best friend's face, though none could match her shock when he admitted to inviting his mother along. Suddenly, Ris launched from her seat across the aisle and sprang into

the seat beside him.

In a voice so low that he could barely hear her, she asked, "Why would you do that, Cai? With everything we have planned, how could you ask her to be a part of that?"

Despite her words, Cai couldn't help but smile when the word 'we' left her mouth. It was a reminder that he needed: that he wasn't alone in all of this. He had Ris there to help him through it all.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I guess ... I just wanted to see if she would bend. Just this once. For me. I wanted to know where I truly stood with her. And it's exactly where I thought." Without even thinking about it, he grabbed Amaris's right hand and began drawing on her palm with his finger as he spoke.

"Don't say things like that. She loves you, Cai. More than any mother I've ever seen. Yes, she's a bit of a control freak. No, she really doesn't know how to let you have your own life. But, more than anything, she loves you. Just because she doesn't show it too well..."

"That's not it, Ris. I know she loves me. I know that I'm her number one priority—even before the entire world. But I also learned that my influence over her isn't exactly what I hoped it was. Even for me, she'll never bend. And, I suppose," he added, dropping his voice, "I was wondering if seeing Ari would make her break. If it was her doing that my twin be kept from me, would she even react to seeing us reunited? How would she try to justify it?"

"The way she justifies everything: it was necessary," Amaris said with a bite. Though her words were sarcastic, a weary chuckle escaped him anyway.

"You know what's weird? In a way, I can actually understand it. Suppose they learned early on that Ari and I were stigmatic. Would my mother, knowing that only one of us had to be hurt in order to harm the other one, choose to keep us both? As much as she protected me, could you imagine how much worse it would have been if we'd been together? And all it would take is one lapse in security to get to both of us through only one. In some ways, I really can't fault her reasoning."

Ris snorted. "Well, I can. You don't just give away a child. Especially when you don't know where that child would end up. If she really knew you were stigmatic, do you think she'd send Ari away, knowing that if she ended up in an abusive home, you'd feel equal consequences? No. Your mother had other reasons for separating you. I just want to know what they are. There's more to this than we're seeing."

“Mr. Balere? Miss Pacquita? Anything to drink?”

Both teenagers jumped when the attendant spoke. Cai knew his face had to look just as alarmed as Ris’s, but he couldn’t change it to a more fitting one to save his life. The fear that someone may have overheard any one of a hundred conversations they’d had about Ari was enough to fill him with minor panic. At last, however, he was able to shake his head and Amaris gave a tiny negative response. The attendant drifted away as silently as he had materialized.

Neither Amaris or Cai spoke after that. For some reason, she moved back to her original seat and removed the tablet from her travel bag. Instead of even bothering with anything remotely productive, Cai turned his eyes to the window and felt a strange sense of weightlessness as he watched fluffy white clouds drift alongside the aircraft.

His mind was lost to him. It had traveled across various distances and now rested in the land of his birth. In its depths, it questioned the welcome he would receive. His right in being there. The reception he could expect of its people. And he wondered if his sister might be one of those holding their breath as he safely stepped off the aircraft.

A strange nuance lingered around the word ‘sister’ and Cai swallowed through a dry throat. She would be there. Almost all of his guests would arrive early. He’d already checked the hotel reservations and knew that the Maibles were paying for a suite in the Grand Victory Hotel—the one in which he would be staying. In his chest, his heart throbbed with an echoing beat that was not his own. Yes, she would be there. They would be together at last.

Cai drifted off to sleep with the thoughts acting as a comforting shield against everything else that plagued his mind. In this one fact, he could be assured. For this short time, he could be content with that.

December 28, 2357

Valor International Airport

Valor, America

“Cai. Cai! Wake up. You have *got* to see this,” Amaris said just above his ear, one hand shaking his shoulder relentlessly.

It seemed to take an hour for him to inch his eyelids back over his eyes. As soon as he did, he didn’t have time to look at anything else, since Ris grabbed his chin and jerked his face towards the windows. At first, he had no idea what he was looking at. Then the blurriness

retreated and he was able to make out a forest of neon colored signs and tiny shadows writhing away beneath the cold December sunshine. Of course, it wasn't until he noticed that the crowd was growing closer and more defined that he realized they were on their final descent.

"Aw crap! How come you didn't wake me up earlier? Now I'm going to look half-asleep and possibly high when we get off," he complained to his friend while rubbing his eyes.

"Oh relax. I've seen you come out of a sixteen hour slumber, remember? It's unnatural how perfectly composed you are when you wake up. And you've only been asleep like six hours."

"Exactly. I'm more tired now than I am after sixteen hours."

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. When we land, you can take a few minutes to pretty yourself up and then we'll approach the American mob." Her voice was mostly cavalier, right up until the end. When he heard it crack a little, Cai raised an eyebrow at her.

Right up until that moment, he had no idea how this trip might affect her. It didn't occur to him til right then that Ris might be experiencing any number of massive nerves. She was an ocean away from home, after all.

"Are you okay? I mean, this has to be pretty strange. At least I was born here and sort of knew what to expect," he muttered, dropping his voice even as Amaris eased back into the seat beside him.

"Yeah. I mean, it is strange. Really strange. Sorry, I've just never seen myself as a celebrity, and though this is all for you, it's really kind-of freaking me out knowing that I'm in a foreign country with a whole lot of people I don't know just waiting for this jet to land. How are you not freaking out, Cai?"

He couldn't help it; he laughed. "Just because I'm not showing it, doesn't mean I'm not feeling it. We've been together long enough that you should know that."

The look she shot him was a mixture of irritation and slight amusement. "Careful there. You might start believing the rumors we started."

When she looked away, she didn't see his face slip into a thoughtful expression. She never noticed that his throat had closed and breathing was suddenly difficult. And he really couldn't decide which was worse: that he really wasn't able to believe those rumors, or the fact that she felt the need to remind him that that's all they were.

Within a few moments, the jet had lowered to a moderate hovering height where it held steady as the ground crew cleared the crowd far

back enough and the cars were pulled right up to the aircraft in anticipation of escorting the prominent guests to their hotel.

Cai felt his nerves jump rapidly and pitch at terrifying depths as he stared out at the window at the crowds gathered there. Many of the colored posters held his own name, but he was gratified yet concerned by the amount that held Amaris's. Of course, nothing could beat the posters of the infinity symbol with 'Cai + Ris' scrawled overtop.

Taking the few moments allotted, Cai went into the bathroom and tried to make himself as presentable as possible after an eight hour flight that he slept through the majority of. When he exited, it was to find Ris waiting on him with a different shirt and a jacket pulled out of his bag. With a no-nonsense order to change, she then twisted past him into the bathroom with a garment bag of her own. Cai didn't even bother to argue.

As soon as she emerged, his ability to control his facial expression failed him entirely. Instead of the skinny jeans and sweatshirt she'd been curled up in the entire trip, now she wore a dress with a frilly, white blouse portion but with a professional styled skirt that ended just above her knees. The division between top and bottom was made by a wide belt that Cai barely noticed, considering he was busy taking in the full image. It was one of the few times that Ris wore anything that actually accentuated her feminine assets.

Cai didn't dare let on how much it bothered him when Ris reached for her long black coat and slid it on over her bare arms. Suppressing a sigh, he reached for his own coat and put it on. All the while, he had to grin as Amaris complained about the temperature reading outside. Once or twice, he caught the words, "They better have the heat turned up..." At last, the teenagers seemed as prepared as possible for the event about to take place.

Holding out an arm to Ris, he was gratified by a smile as she placed her arm through his. Unable to help himself, Cai leaned down far enough for his forehead to barely rest on Ris's. "Ready for this?"

Her responding smile was bright and full of sarcasm. "Not even a little. Let's go."

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*December 31, 2357
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America*

Before she knew what was happening, Eila crossed the room in front of her and turned off the projection, just as Cai was mid-word. "Hey! I was watching that."

"I know," was Eila's sardonic reply. "You've only been watching it for the past three days. Enough already."

Ari narrowed her eyes, sticking her tongue out at her friend. "This is as close as I can get to him, for now."

"That's my point," she said gently. "You can't get near him. Between the added hotel security and his bodyguards, you're not going to get within fifteen feet. Which means you might as well put him out of your mind for three blasted hours and come shopping with me. Valor is fashion paradise!"

"So you go shopping and I'll finish watching the interview," Ari grumbled, trying to snatch the remote from her hand.

"Nope. You've watched the same interview so many times that you have it memorized. No more. We are getting out of this hotel. We are going sight-seeing and shopping and checking out restaurants and cafes and anything else I deem fitting. Why? Because this is really unhealthy and I'm not staying cooped up in here any longer when there's a whole new city outside of these walls."

"You've been here at least eight times. It's hardly new to you."

"But it is to *you*, Ari. And you want to waste this once-in-your-lifetime experience cooped up in a hotel room watching the same

interview on repeat. Could you please stop obsessing for a few hours and return to the land of the living?"

Ari couldn't look at her. Mostly because she was right. Ever since Cai's jet landed at the airport, she was all attention. The interview she'd been watching continuously was actually the only one he gave since entering the city, and that was immediately after he got off the jet. In the cold December wind, he and Amaris Pacquita had stood in defiance of the weather and delivered a few of their plans and shared some of their excitement with the crowd. Truthfully, there was nothing to hold her there. And she really could repeat back almost all of it. So why is it she couldn't tear herself from the screen?

Because looking at a video of him worked just as well as a picture, and she could almost imagine a faint addition to the heartbeat in her chest.

"Fine," Ari sighed. "We'll do this your way. Just ... don't make me regret it."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Eila ran into the common room portion of the suite her parents had upgraded them to and retrieved her wallet. Ari followed slowly and was waiting at the door by the time her friend finished primping. A moment following, she bounded to the door and dragged Ari out into Valor. And she had to admit, it was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

Of the six American cities, Ari knew statistically that Valor was the largest. Built in the shadows of the last remaining monument of the old United States, Mount Rushmore, it had grown in size and number as survivors of WWII flocked to its safe obscurity. Here is where the Americans rebuilt. With the aid of the United Nations, Valor rose from a war torn country and reached for the sky.

Even as Eila drove off into the sky above the city, Ari was amazed at how many flocked the streets below. Unlike in Genesis, the streets here were all cobblestoned or smooth pavement. The ground, as well as the sky, was accessible to the citizens here. More than that, it was just as desirable to be at ground level as it was to be sailing through the air. It was both incredible and strange, knowing as she did, that walking the lonely streets of Genesis was an option only for the poor.

Just as breathtaking, skyscrapers rose ever higher in the sky. At least sixty stories could be seen on some of the moderately sized buildings. Eila even drove past the eighty-storied tower that was the Valor branch of CompCorp, the company her father worked for and whose Genesis office he was a very prominent member of. Just seeing the sheer size of

the parent office, Ari was given a whole new perspective on just how big a world she lived in. Somehow, she realized that Mr. Maible was not one of the richest men in America, despite being one of the richest in Genesis. Which meant that, compared to a lot of the treasured children of the Valor wealth, he had put quite a lot of credits on the line so that his daughter would be able to claim that twelfth seat at the dinner tonight. Ari had a whole new appreciation for the generosity of a doting parent.

Eila had been exactly right: this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To have missed this would have been unforgivable. Even taking into consideration the endless shopping that encompassed the rest of the morning and most of the early afternoon.

By the time they returned to the hotel, Ari was simply relieved that Eila had enough time to still get ready for the dinner. And though she tried her hardest to brush the matter off, there was enough of a wound there that she couldn't help but feel jealous that Eila was allowed to be the one place Ari most desired. Of course, jealousy could not be sustained against a being such as Eila Maible.

"Ari? Could you hang these up for me? I'll be right back," she said quickly, leaving Ari in her room. Rolling her eyes, Ari had time to hang up all of the garment bags as well as lock away some of the newest accessories in the jewelry box before her friend returned.

"Perfect," Eila said as soon as she returned. In her hands was another garment bag that Ari had not seen before. "Now, go take a quick shower. We don't have a lot of time so move at the speed of light, would you?"

"What is this about? What's going on?"

"I'll tell you after you've indulged me. Please, Ari?"

"Fine. But I want a full explanation when I get back." Stalking off, she went to do as she was told.

The moment she returned, Ari demanded the promised explanation. As expected, she didn't get it. Instead, Eila unzipped the garment bag and removed a long black dress that was clearly not the right size for the shorter girl. In an instant, Ari backed up until she hit a wall.

"Eila, no. We don't have time for this. The dinner is in less than an hour. You have to get ready." As much as she wished her voice was more assertive, the words came out with a panicked coating.

It was a creeping smile. The kind that slowly curled up the corners before inching across the face in a slow spread. Were it not for the gleam of tenderness in her eyes, Ari would have described it as a

purely evil expression.

"I'm not going to the dinner, Ari. You are."

"No! Eila, no! It's impossible. The security..."

"It's all taken care of," she promised in a low tone.

Ari shook her head violently. "That's not possible. There are scans and checks and bodyguards. It's not possible to mistake me for you. And they'll never let me in. No matter who I resemble."

"Relax. I've taken care of it. I'll go as far as the dining room with you, but the actual dinner is all for you."

"How? How could you possibly manage something like that?"

A tiny laugh escaped Eila and a mischievous gleam entered her eyes. "What do you think I've been doing the past couple of days? Security guards are very susceptible to being flirted with by a pretty girl. Especially when her family's rich. I dropped the hint that I'd rather not go to the dinner, but I had a friend whose birthday was the same day as the Supreme Commander's son... It really wasn't hard. So, I go up with you and authenticate myself. He'll let you in. Simple as that."

The crushing weight of emotion settled around her shoulders and Ari quickly staggered to the padded bench that rested at the end of Eila's bed. There was so much conflict inside of her that her stomach was performing full somersaults. Part of her was in unparalleled awe of Eila. Who else in the world would do something like that for someone? Have an opportunity that could hardly be thought of again in a thousand years, and pass it off to someone like her? Was there anyone in the world to equal her for generosity?

Of course, another part of her was whirling with anger at what her friend had done. After all, if she could do it, so could someone else. Any person who had even a hint of malice towards Cai could call upon the same tactics in order to gain entry to a private event. It would be the perfect opportunity to cause him grievous harm. Though Eila's intentions were obviously pure, the thought that it was so easy and possible made her stomach clench painfully.

"You shouldn't have done that, Eila. It was wrong." Her voice was so low, she almost wondered if Eila had actually heard her.

"Maybe. But it would have been worse if I went to that dinner and you didn't. This is it, Ari. You're going to meet your twin. Now, stop wasting time. We're on the clock here and I have a lot left to do with you."

Ari could only nod.

December 31, 2357
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America

"Alright, now you may look," Eila announced. There was a bright gleam in her eyes that made Ari wary as she turned towards the full-length mirror.

"Oh wow..." The glossy pink lips in the mirror parted in surprise and the statuesque woman glided even closer to herself.

Ari's eyes traced every inch of the woman in the mirror that was supposedly her. From the incredibly dark eyes framed by long lashes and the lids covered in a smokey gray down to the two inch stilettos she didn't need. Her high cheekbones were accentuated by the mineral blush Eila had applied, even while her lips shined. Thin, teardrop earrings sparkled where they hung down beside her jaw, a garnet stone set in each of them. Around her neck was the only thing keeping the dress in place, other than its incredibly comfortable fit. As a halter-top gown, it gave her a plunging neckline that was unneeded and a bare back down to her waist. Having a snug fit half way down her thigh, a sheer fabric fell from the waist down to the floor, leaving her legs remarkably bare. It also didn't help conceal her when a slit ran through the sheer fabric over her left leg. Possibly the most accomplished part of the ensemble, however, was the sleek behavior of her hair, which did not look at all out of place.

"So?" Eila demanded, bouncing on her toes. "What do you think?"

"I... I think it doesn't even look like me." Her fingers stretched out to the glass, making sure that this was not an illusion of some sort.

"Of course you look like yourself. The version I always knew lurked within, anyway."

"I feel like a doll," Ari muttered, throwing a faux reproachful look over her shoulder.

"But you look like a woman. A sexy, powerful, hell-hath-no-fury woman. Which means my work here is complete and in desperate need of some validation. Come on, let's go show you off." As she spoke, Eila took hold of Ari's wrist—mindful of the garnet-adorned bracelet—and pulled her towards the door.

"What are we doing?" There was a sudden plummet of her stomach into her feet as they entered the main living area of the suite and Ari was sure that she didn't want to know. Sure enough, a cringe traveled through her as Eila called out Jace's name.

"Yeah?" Jace called, stepping into the doorway without looking up. He was changing into his dress uniform for the party later that evening—all public appearances with high-ranking officials present demanded it—and was busy with the cuff of his left sleeve.

"We need a man's opinion."

Ari could hear Jace snort clear across the room, his attention unwavering from the troublesome buttons. "Eila, as a man, I know better than to think my opinion is needed by any woman. It will never satisfy her as much as her own."

Feeling her back stiffen, Ari announced, "Well, I'm not *any* woman. And your opinion will satisfy me."

Jace's eyes shot to hers as the button was finally conquered. In an instant, his entire expression shifted. His lips parted and his eyes widened so far that the last time she saw that expression, he thought she was suicidal and they were caught in a lightning storm. Though the fear and determination filling them that day were not at all what whirled away in them now.

The way he was looking at her was foreign. Unnerving. She could barely keep herself from raising a hand to the back of her neck, that was how unsettling his gaze was. And just like when they had first met, it was a thorough study he made of her. From her crown to toe, his eyes trailed. By the time they returned to her irises, a faint blush was staining her pale features.

In a voice as stunned as his appearance, Jace murmured, "You look beautiful, Ari. Gorgeous."

Even if she had a way to respond to that, she didn't have the time. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jace shook his head just

enough to collect his thoughts before he turned and reentered his own room. The door shut behind him with a strong sense of finality.

Bewildered, Ari turned to look at Eila. Instead of finding an equally confused cohort, however, she found a highly amused best friend. The smaller girl was standing with her laced fingers hovering in front of her mouth while her teeth were pressed into her bottom lip. Neither of which could discourage the silent laughter causing the girl's body to shake.

"What was that about? Eila?"

"Don't worry about it, Ari. We have his opinion, and that's all I wanted. Now, come on. Before you're late." Though she could hardly speak through her giggles at first, Eila was all business at the end. Grabbing a small clutch off the table by the door, she threw Ari's wallet into it before grabbing her own small purse and heading out the door.

Ari followed at a slower pace, getting used to the restricting tightness of the dress as well as the strange feeling of the stilettos on her feet. Pausing in the doorway, however, she couldn't help but take a last look at Jace's bedroom door. Never before had an object looked more forbidding than the one that separated them at that moment. It wouldn't even allow for a whispered 'thank you' to reach him.

Taking a deep breath, Ari twisted sharply and closed the door behind her. She would have plenty of time to deal with Jace. Right now, she had something infinitely more important to face. Her twin.

That one tiny reminder was enough to push everything else from her mind. As she followed Eila into the elevator, she watched the numbers rise with a growing feeling of butterflies fluttering away in her stomach. For several long seconds, she watched the numbers of the six floors above them flash by on the digital readout above the doors. By the time the elevator stopped, a hand was clasped firmly on the back of her neck, while the other held the clutch tightly to her stomach.

It wasn't until they were standing in the hallway that the nerves became crippling. Wide as could be, Ari's eyes traveled up and down the corridor, immediately taking stock of the six security guards that lined the walls. Two of whom were standing beside the door and passing people through into the dining room. Perhaps the only shred of comfort was the fact that others apparently felt the need to escort the lucky individuals upstairs and they were systematically shucked off to the side where they waited with anticipatory smiles and motions of good luck to their friends. They stood in the place where she would be standing otherwise. The place Eila would take for her, just for this one

chance. One moment to rectify an eighteen year long mistake.

Turning to her friend, Ari hissed, "Eila, I don't think I can do this." Her dark eyes were black holes filled with fear and trepidation.

If their situations had been reversed, Ari was pretty sure she'd have told her to snap out of it and that this was her only chance and she'd better not blow it. Which made Eila a far greater person for the compassion that entered her eyes. Placing her hands on Ari's shoulders, Eila's soft brown eyes bored into her friend's and the meaning in them was clear.

"I know this is difficult for you, Ari. It's hard for me, and I'm just a bystander. But this is your decision. I can't make it for you. If you're not ready for this, I can accept that. However, I've never seen you back down from something you've truly wanted before. Especially not something this monumental. It'd be a shame to see you start now."

Despite the fact that the butterflies had a dance-off at the word 'monumental', Ari couldn't help but smile. "You're an incredible person, you know that?"

"I've been so informed a time or two," she responded, letting her hands drop. "Now, let's get you through security. Before the cute one over there forgets our arrangement or grows a conscience."

Bracing herself, Ari gave a jerky nod before allowing herself to be led to the doors. Just as one of the guards approached them, the one Eila was eying jumped to their rescue. "I've got this one, Dee," he announced before holding out a flat scanner the size of a man's palm.

Shooting Ari a look, Eila raised her palm to the scanner at the same time that Ari did so. With her hand hovering over top of her friend's, the scanner registered the real guest's prints while making it appear that Ari was the one to remove her hand. The hardest part to fake was the eye scan that came afterwards. They had to praise their own luck that no one was paying attention to them.

Just when they thought they were cleared, however, the guard took hold of Ari's wrist in a tight grip. Panic and anger erupted inside of her and she had to physically resist the urge to break his wrist on the spot. As it was, her furious expression was enough to cause him to step back. Or maybe it was the *edge* that caused him and everyone else to shy away from her.

"I-I just wanted a DNA sample. For security reasons," the guard muttered.

His eyes were wide and fear laced through the irises. Ari could see that he was finally realizing how wrong he was in allowing this. If she

was really set on killing Cai, it would be all his fault that she got so close. Yet, since none of the other guests were obliged to give DNA, she had to assume that this was his way of covering his own ass. Ironically, she couldn't help but agree with that principle. After all, if she really did attempt something, he would have her DNA on hand so that she could be easily found.

With a chilly expression, Ari attempted to smother her indignation and opened her mouth. With hesitant movements, the guard produced a cotton swab which he rubbed against the inside of her cheek. Placing it in a clear container, he then stepped back and motioned her into the room while detaining Eila.

As soon as he let her go, Ari strode to the door with her head high. She didn't look back until she reached the door. Where her expression was carefully neutral, however, Eila's was not. A wide smile broke across her small, round face and her eyes sparked with excitement. Again, a pang of regret shot through Ari's chest. But it wasn't enough to keep her from this moment. Now that she was here, nothing could force her to turn back. Allowing a smile to curl up the left side of her mouth, Ari turned to enter the dining room.

The moment the door closed behind her, everyone rose to their feet, causing her to look around in alarm. It took her several seconds to realize that they were all adhering to the Valor custom that dictated a being stand when someone entered a room. Embarrassed, Ari quickly bowed her head in Genesis tradition and skirted the edge of the private dining room to the empty chair with a gold nameplate marking it as Eila's place. She flipped it down as soon as she was seated.

Several minutes of silence followed her entrance, since she was last of the twelve donors. Each one shifted slightly in their seats and the more outgoing were making small talk at the far end. Ari barely looked up, knowing as she did that she did not belong here. Though it wasn't likely, she wasn't going to make it easy for anyone else to realize it, too.

At precisely eight o'clock, the doors opened again. Leaping to her feet like all those around her, Ari could not have been more grateful for her height. Seeing above all of the women and even some of the men, she looked down the lengthy table for the last man who was to enter. Cai Balere.

The moment Ari laid eyes on him, her heart stopped. Just a quick squeeze and it ceased to beat. A sharp pain shot through her chest and Ari's hand shot to her heart, a gasp flying from her mouth.

No one noticed. All eyes were locked on the six foot tall, dark

haired, dashing young man that just walked into the room. And everyone's mouths dropped the minute he stepped foot into the room and clutched at his chest with long fingers curled into claws. Almost as a single entity, the guests at the table and the bodyguards at his back took concerned steps towards him. All except Ari, who was too busy trying to refocus her world.

From the moment she realized that Cai clutched his chest at the exact same time as her, everything had gone blurry and she suddenly felt dizzy. Clutching at the back of her chair, her sudden amazement allowed for her heart to start pumping once more and the missing beat was nigh undetectable with the speed it was now racing at. And, again at the same time, Cai straightened and waved away all those concerned for him. The right side of his mouth pulled up in a reassuring smile, but his dark eyes scanned the entire room with a hint of suspicion.

Then it happened. His dark eyes landed on her identical irises and the air in the room seemed to deaden. More sudden and powerful than two speeding trains slamming into one another, the hollowness was thrown from her body and replaced with a pounding awareness she had never felt before. A knowledge so deep and true ripped through her, setting fire to the blood in her veins and sparking along every nerve. Those eyes, so like her own, belonged to this man. To Cai Balere. Only son of the Supreme Commander of the United Nations.

And her twin brother.

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For several long minutes, Cai couldn't tear his eyes away from hers. The surprise attack forced on him by her presence was enough to affect everyone in the room. Yet, he couldn't find it in himself to care. He was whole. For the first time in his life, he knew what a normal human being felt like. His heart was practically singing, it was beating so fast.

The force of his tunnel vision could not be exaggerated when it came to her. There was something so instinctive and natural about this moment, that it was almost possible to believe that they were the only two people in the entire universe. And, in a way, they were.

They were twins.

Amaris, of course, was the one to bring him back to reality. Not a moment too soon, it would seem, as others were beginning to shift their gazes between the siblings. Surprised as he was to have her here—though it didn't take him a full second to realize what must have happened—he couldn't have too much pressure put upon them. The last thing he needed was for this to spread before he was ready for it. Though, now that they were in the same room together, it seemed rather unlikely.

"My apologies, Ladies and Gentlemen," half of his brain said as his upper body made a slight bow. "But you've all simply taken me by surprise. You see, I've just reviewed the latest numbers with our co-conspirators at the Housing of Foster Youth Organization—the founder of which is Mr. Andre Desmond hiding in that corner over

there—and have found that, between our twelve distinguished guests, we have managed to raise *300,000 credits!* Truly, your generosity stuns me and I am most pleased to meet every person in this room.” He carefully kept his eyes from Ari as he spoke.

Sticking carefully to the game plan he and Ris had conducted, they each started with one side of the long table and began shaking hands with each individual whilst learning names and forming tenuous contacts with each. Having started with the left side, Cai was able to keep most of the attention on himself and away from Ari. Were it not offensive to those seated on the right, he would have preferred not to travel along that side, since it would put him in direct contact with his sister. Now was not the time for a reunion such as that. But he had no choice.

Even as his heart beat out a clashing rhythm, Cai determined that it would be best for them both if their contact was as brief as possible. The less people saw them together, the more they would believe their eyes to be deceiving them. He could only hope.

In mere moments, Cai found himself standing before his mirror image. Even her hair—angled over the left side of her face—was cut in the opposite direction of his own. Despite the makeup and her obvious femininity, he knew that it was impossible not to see the resemblance. Which was why—though it killed him to do so—he took her hand in his for a quick shake and dropped his voice that only she could hear.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” The reprimand was foiled by the smile he could not control. How could he say something he didn’t mean? Technically, she was not supposed to be in that room. But how could she belong anywhere other than at his side?

In a quick glimpse, Ari’s eyes shot to the nameplate she had set face-down. When her eyes traveled to meet his again, there was a ghost of tears in them. From the smile on her lips, he knew them to be tears of gratitude. Ones she would never shed.

“There’s nowhere else I would rather be,” was her timely response.

With an effort that caused his heart to twist, Cai smiled and released her hand before moving on to greet her neighbor. When he had at last made his rounds, Cai traveled again to the head of the table where an empty chair awaited him. Amaris was already in place on his right hand side and the smile on her face was of the sort Cai had never seen before. It showed exactly his own elation in that moment. Without thinking about it, he placed his hand on the table and squeezed her fingers when she responded to the gesture. This was turning out to be

the best night of his life.

It was harder than he had foreseen to enter into the numerous conversations people were willing to have with him. Perhaps the real issue was in the fact that no one seemed willing to converse with anyone else. They all wanted to talk to him and their neighbors were being readily ignored. Since he had already put himself on an informal footing with each of them, he could hardly have expected a silent, polite dinner like many of the ones his mother had held reign over. Of course, that was also why he was enjoying himself so much.

Despite being pulled in fifteen different directions, Cai laughed and charmed as well as he was able. With Ris playing buffer every few people, it helped to circulate the many topics of discussion and even introduced a few modes of healthy debate amongst the philanthropists. There did come one point in the evening, however, when one guest directed a question at him that he felt himself floundering to explain.

“Mr. Balere, what was your reasoning for getting involved with the Housing of Foster Youth Organization? Why them and not another institution?”

In an instant, Ari’s head shot up and pivoted in his direction. Her eyes burned with curiosity and he could see that the question struck close to her heart. *Their* heart. And though Cai was forced to tear his eyes from hers a second later, his answer was meant for her and no other.

“It isn’t common, what I’ve done with this occasion. To turn a birthday party into a charity event,” he began slowly. “It was an innovative idea and deserved to be shared with an organization that would be best served by the notion. How could any foundation be more worthy than one which is responsible for the lives of children? Though it isn’t popularly thought of, I’ve studied the conditions which force the government to intercede on a child’s behalf. I’ve looked at the numbers and the statistics and I realized ... I had no idea what was actually happening out there. Because I’ve never seen it. That was when I contacted Mr. Desmond. Through him, I received a more intimate education about the lives and experiences some of these children are forced to endure. Thus, I got my first real insight into the Housing of Foster Youth Organization. And when it came time to seriously think about how I wished to celebrate my eighteenth birthday, I knew I wanted to do so in such a way as to benefit them. So, you see, this charity is actually very personal for me. As is this

organization.”

When he had finished speaking, all eyes were focused on him. Except for Ari. Glancing askance at her, he found her head bowed with a pensive expression on her face. It was provoking enough that he almost asked her about it. Almost.

Fortunately, there was but a short lull following his words before one or another person caught up the idea of expressing the types of charities they found to be the most noble—with highest praise being directed at Mr. Desmond, of course. Through it all, Cai felt himself growing far more weary of their company than he should have. After all, it wasn't their fault his mind was preoccupied with other matters. Just their fault for not wanting to end the dinner, even though there was the promise of a party following only an hour later.

Once more, he owed Amaris for her tactician mind that zeroed in on the moment that was precisely appropriate to announce, “With such good food and conversation, it's hard to imagine an even more memorable night awaits us.”

The woman seated beside her immediately argued against anything being more memorable than their dinner. To which Cai rejoined with the fact that his eighteenth birthday party would be just as memorable, certainly. Nobody was willing to argue with that—though he knew some might have wished to. Yet, the comment served its purpose and people were laying down cutlery and indicating that their dessert plates could be cleared away.

With as much fanfare as could be expected, Cai finally stood up from the chair and bid a good evening to everyone—with added intentions of seeing them all again at the party. Then he and Ris stationed themselves at the door and shook hands with everyone as they filed past. It was obvious to him, at least, that Ari would attempt to be the last out of the door. Unfortunately, the same concept seemed to have occurred to half the guests. In the end, she was standing in front of Ris before Cai realized it.

Even as he was bidding the guest ahead of her farewell, he heard Ris mutter in a low voice, “It was a pleasure to meet you. And we hope to see you again very soon.” Cai's eyes shot to their hands just in time to see the note slip from one set of fingers to the other. The smile on his face could grow no wider.

When Ari finally stood before him, Cai couldn't say a word. Of all the things he wanted to tell her, ask her, or just whisper, he knew he was not at liberty to do so. And to know that she would be walking out

of that room at any minute, left a weight on his heart that he was not prepared for. It was as if, just by thinking about it, he could feel the fissure where his wholeness would crack and the hollowness would reclaim its place as soon as she was out of sight. Cai almost reached out and grabbed her just to keep it from happening.

Instead, he controlled himself enough to hold out his left hand for her to shake. The gesture caught her by pleasant surprise, he could tell. It had been a strange find for him, indeed, when he learned that his twin was left-handed. Which made it all the more important that he showcase the fact that he had noticed. That he was paying attention to her. Privately, if not publicly.

Tongue-tied as he was, Cai really couldn't expect Ari to be any different. Yet, he still found himself disappointed when her hand slipped from his and she left the room without saying a word. For several seconds, all he could do was look after her. A sharp elbow in his side reminded him of the task at hand, however, and he hastily said goodbye to the rest of his guests.

By the time Amaris and Cai were able to retreat to their suite, he felt physically drained. His mind behaved as if it resided in a fog and his limbs trembled with unwarranted fatigue. After a while, the only thing he could think to relate it to was shock. The kind that came from seeing and touching a being who had not only never existed in his eyes before, but who was suddenly just as precious to him as his very own heartbeat. Because she was a part of him.

After sitting on the arm of the couch for five whole minutes, he raised his head to look at Ris and asked in a stunned voice, "Did that just happen?"

"You mean: did your twin really just crash the charity dinner using her friend's identity? Yes. Yes, she did."

"You sound impressed," Cai chuckled.

"Don't act like you're not. Admit it, neither you nor I would have done it," Ris said as she removed the diamond studs from her ears.

"No. We wouldn't." Bringing his hands up to his face, Cai's fingers dove into his hair as he let out a deep sigh. "I still can't believe it. She was *there*. Right in front of me. And, for the first time in my life, I felt like a whole person. Not just half of one. You have no idea what that's like for me, Ris. I can't even describe it."

Abandoning the mirror, Amaris strode towards the general living area and came to a stop right in front of Cai. Placing a hand on each of his shoulders, she leaned so close that their foreheads were almost

touching. "You're right. I have no idea. But I saw how you looked at her tonight. I can pretty well imagine what this means to you. Having her here. And that's why I asked her to meet you in the dining room at twelve thirty. You both might have to share your birthday with half the world, but you deserve just a few minutes alone. To celebrate it how you should. With each other."

Cai couldn't stop himself. His hands reached out automatically and he surprised his friend by pulling her into a tight embrace. Even as she was still settling into the hug, he muttered into her shoulder, "You're the most incredible person in the world, Amaris. And I am so lucky to have you."

In a joking tone, Ris said, "More than you know."

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When Ari entered the room, she barely made it to the nearest chair before her trembling legs gave out. Her breathing was coming in gasps as she tried to laugh and smile at the same time. Burying her face in her hands, she sat there while her body shook uncontrollably.

“Ari? What happened? Are you okay?” Eila demanded, rushing towards her.

Raising her head, there were tears in her eyes as she reached out a hand to her friend. Without any thoughts of controlling herself, Ari gasped, “He knew me! Eila, he knew who I was. As soon as he walked into the room, we reacted the same way. Cai knows I’m his twin. I don’t know how or when he figured it out, but he knows and I’m meeting him at twelve thirty and just...” Scrubbing away the tears, Ari was about to apologize for ruining the makeup when Eila’s arms wrapped around her in a tight embrace.

“I am so happy for you, Ari! This is better than I could have imagined,” her fair friend sighed.

When Ari was released, her eyes traveled across the room to where Jace stood by the couch. His hands were behind his back and he looked impeccable and imposing in his military uniform. Were there no smile on his face, she would have thought him intimidating. In that moment, however, he was just her friend.

“Congratulations, Ari. I’m happy for you,” he said in a voice barely loud enough to reach her.

Unable to say anything coherent, Ari simply nodded her head to him in acceptance.

Eila was not so afflicted with speechlessness. "It wouldn't hurt to show it," she announced before returning her attention to her friend. Pulling on her hand, she wouldn't rest until Ari rose to her feet. "Come on, I know you're excited, but we've only got an hour before the party really starts."

"What more can be done, Eila? I look ... fantastic. You made sure of that."

Turning to her with an incredulous expression writ upon her face, Eila didn't bother to respond. Instead, she dragged Ari to the middle of the room and ordered her to stand still.

Then she did something Ari forgot was in style: she removed part of the dress. The sheer layer that extended from her waist down to her ankles was suddenly gone and Ari looked at her bare legs in astonishment. She didn't even have time to notice that Eila had set the long skirt to the side and picked up a black sequined belt off the end table. Despite her protests, the belt was fastened in place and Ari stared at the large flower on the left side with a look of disgruntlement. Of course, she supposed she was just lucky that Eila hadn't torn the earrings from her ears and instead offered the trade almost as if she had a choice. She didn't, and soon the garnet teardrops were replaced by dazzling hoops that she thought would be out of place with her short hair. Which, of course, was rectified when Eila mussed her hair enough so that it looked more natural.

"Are you finished yet?" Ari grumbled.

"As soon as you change shoes, we can go," Eila said in a patronizing tone.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself. This is the last time I let you play dress-up with me."

"Don't be like that. The results speak for themselves. Don't they, Jace?"

"Oh no," he said, shaking his head. "You are not bringing me into this."

"Thanks for the back-up. You act as if you haven't been raving about her all the while she's been gone."

Ari's eyes shot to Jace's face. For a moment, he looked surprised by the words that had left Eila's mouth. Then, catching her eye, he shook his head as if he didn't know how to cure her of her exhaustive ability to exaggerate. It was a feeling Ari could easily empathize with.

“Alright. Finished. Now we may go,” Eila announced.

Together, the trio exited the suite and crowded into the next available elevator. The closer they came to the ballroom, the harder it was for Ari to breathe. Even though she’d just met Cai, it was still a surreal experience knowing that each step brought her closer to him. Fear and longing pulsed through her and all she wanted was to be alone with him. Five minutes in absolute solitude and she would never ask for another thing in the world.

Were it not for the promise she had from Amaris Pacquita, she wasn’t sure she could have waited any longer. But Cai had responsibilities and she had to respect that. At least until twelve thirty.

At last, the elevator came to a stop and the three young adults disembarked. As with the private dinner, a queue existed outside of the ballroom doors and guests were packing the corridor, though the party didn’t technically start for another thirty minutes. Feeling more confident now than she had before—her own identity would be used this time—Ari hurriedly joined one line. Eila took her place at Ari’s side even as Jace took up a place behind them. In an instant, newcomers chose the other lines, rather than stand so close to a soldier.

The moment Ari realized this, she dropped back from Eila’s side and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Sergeant. Her expression was haughty as she looked around at all others who chose to avoid him. At the same time, her features flushed an angry red. She knew as well as they did that, had Jace not worn his uniform, he would be seen as a member of the private sector branch of security. Like the guards who ushered them through the doors, he would be treated with reverence and respect, despite each having a strong and vicious *edge*. But because he wore his uniform with necessary pride, he was shunned.

Before she had given a cursory glare to all the newcomers, Jace nudged her with his elbow. “Calm down, Keir. Don’t want to scare off all the guests, do you? Don’t answer that,” he added with a sly grin.

Ari’s own grin couldn’t be helped and they proceeded toward the door silently. At the same time, her *edge* diminished in strength, since even her righteous anger couldn’t hold a candle to her euphoria. Of course, she and Eila were immediately surprised when each of the guards bowed their heads to Jace as he passed them. Which brought one more question to Ari’s mind.

“You said you couldn’t stop,” she whispered.

“Stop what?”

“Being a soldier. You said you couldn’t stop. So how are these men

here? They were all soldiers once.”

Jace looked at her, raising his eyebrows knowingly. “What makes you think they’ve stopped?”

Opening her mouth, she shut it just as quickly after catching the gleam in his eyes. “Once you’re a soldier, you can’t stop being one,” she said instead. “Changing careers doesn’t change what you really are.”

Bowing his head slightly, he answered, “Precisely.”

“So, can you change careers?”

His features lost the small smile and his eyes scanned across every man in a black suit who lined the walls. “Only if you want to enter the private sector. Not many other places hire people like us, Keir.”

Despite the answer he gave, Ari grinned widely when he included her in that assessment. There had been enough separation between her and the others at Camp Emergence, it was nice hearing him admit what she had always known. That she was one of them. For better or for worse.

Relieved of her own thoughts by the approaching of a guard, Ari calmly did as he instructed when it came to the scans that confirmed her identity and her legitimacy in being there. Of course, she noticed the moment he bowed his head over Jace’s hand even as the Sergeant confirmed his identity. A smile flirted with her lips as the trio were ushered inside.

Again, a bubble of space formed around them as they swiftly moved away from the entrance doors. It gave Ari the extra space to study the glass enclosure that was the ballroom. With a mouth hung open, she spun in place as she stared around at the seemingly exposed room. The walls and ceiling appeared to be a single pane of glass, so smooth and flawless was their design. Only the most minimal of beams set in a simplistic scroll pattern along some portions of the walls and holding the curving pane in place could at all disillusion the guests.

Crossing the room that was at least fifty yards wide, Ari came to a stop at the glass wall opposite of the elevators. Eila and Jace were at her side as she gazed past the vibrant reflections out at Valor. Cars whizzed past at speeds that caused them to become blurs of headlights and taillights. Skyscrapers reached into the sky, each floor bright with the purest white light, leaving a luminous glow around the entire city that acted as a shield against the penetrating darkness. It was like nothing she had ever seen before, despite living in a city her entire life.

“That’s why the parking levels are on the ground here,” Jace

explained in a low voice.

“So we can have views like this,” Eila finished.

Ari glanced between her friends before she turned in place and followed the glass curve up to the ceiling. More scrollwork existed to secure the glass to the rest of the building but also to provide places for the grand chandeliers to drop down over the guests. Gold-tinted bulbs were responsible for the gilded lighting that fell upon the guests, giving the room a candlelit atmosphere. Clearly the room usually saw more prestigious events than an eighteen year old birthday party. She couldn't help but think that the band set up on the musician's balcony looked out of place in such an environment. Of course, anyone not wearing fully formal attire would look out of place in such a setting.

“I can't believe this is really happening,” Ari muttered to herself.

“Hey, you already met him. The hard part is over,” Eila said with a smug smile.

“I wish it felt like it,” Ari sighed, letting her eyes trail over the guests as they milled about in the giant ballroom.

As she people-watched, Ari once again felt a sense of pride in her twin's knowledge of people. His ease in creating the right atmosphere for him, whilst remaining thoughtful of those who would be joining him. Of course, nothing could compare to his sense of humor when he had the staff set up a long table in the corner of the room furthest from the dance area and music and placed a sign in the middle of it proclaiming: *Reserved For Shop Talk*. It almost made her laugh aloud when almost every middle-aged man in the room gravitated towards it.

Surrounding this corner, a number of round tables and chairs were placed for others to sit out of the way of the dance area—though not many were placed in front of the window where Ari lingered. Part of her wondered if he might not have preferred a more modern scheme. However, anything else would have looked truly ridiculous in such a grand room and he could only do so much as the son of the Supreme Commander while setting himself up to have a respectable political career. A typical birthday party was far out of his reach. But he knew that going into this, so she really couldn't be surprised at how it was all turning out.

By the time the three of them had found seats at a table nearest to the window, almost every guest was processed and milling about in the large room. Some had found seats—though the ones closest to Cai's reserved table had long since been filled. Others were pacing the

dance area or staring out at the city. Strangely, it felt like the calm before the storm. Everyone was at their most languorous and even the band hadn't picked up a single instrument yet. They were all waiting.

At last, one of the infamous bodyguards entered the chamber and did a quick surveillance of the room. Once her eyes landed on him, Ari felt herself attempt to sit straighter in her chair. She didn't notice the way her teeth sunk into her bottom lip nervously as her eyes locked on the door. Not a moment was spared for a single blink.

When Cai and Amaris entered the room, Ari could feel her heart give a faint, faltering beat before it gained in strength. Despite being an entire room away from him, Ari could still feel the wholeness envelope her as soon as her eyes landed on him. At the same time that a hand unconsciously held itself over the right side of her chest, the smile that split her features was the widest she had ever managed and a deep gleam shone in the dark depths of her eyes. Where he was, she belonged. It was a truth known deep in her bones. In her soul.

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“Breathe, Ari,” a low chuckle reminded her.

Shaking her head slightly, Ari rolled her eyes at Jace’s quip. Nonetheless, the smile was still fixed in place and her eyes watched her brother’s entrance with the steadiness of a hawk. The feeling of wholeness pulsed inside of her and seemed to grow with each step he took. Oh yes, she belonged nowhere else.

Cai didn’t search the room for her. He didn’t even glance her way. But he felt her in the same way, Ari was sure. Just the way his smile broadened and the way he straightened was enough for her to know that this was a mutual occurrence. It was one more thing that they shared.

Of course, it also didn’t hurt that, as soon as they walked through the door, Amaris searched the room with a sharp, narrow gaze before her eyes found Ari. In an instant, her features transformed into a placid expression before she returned her attention to Cai. Smiling to herself, Ari looked away, only to find Jace gazing at her questioningly. For a moment, they stared at each other with the same expectant expression. Then, as expected, her eyes shot back to Cai.

Just in time for him to head to the open dance floor with a live microphone in his left hand while Amaris kept her fingers interlaced with those of his right hand. Together, like a private team that needed no other members, they faced the gathered benefactors and party guests with wide, welcoming smiles. Ari repressed the urge to rub the

back of her neck as Cai began to speak.

“Good evening,” he said into the microphone, letting a large smile spread across his face. “Thank you for being here. I know you have all paid a great price for the opportunity to share this night with me. My gratitude could not be any higher. Nor could we attempt to convey the amount of awe now held in the hearts of all who are associated with the Housing of Foster Youth Organization. *I am in awe of all of you.*

“This night has been marked by many as the most anticipated night of the year. For many, it could be because a new year is literally only a few hours away. For others, it could have been the thought of a party that may have brought out such enthusiasm. But for us, here, today, this evening meant proving, beyond all doubt, the absolute limits of human generosity when called to action. This evening is about bringing together humanitarians and individuals who saw a chance to do something beautiful and succeeded in extraordinary ways. Thank you.

“Because of every person in this room, the HFYO now has 14,105,000 credits at their disposal. This means that there are thousands of kids out there, right now, praising your names because that means they have a chance. A chance to be welcomed into society. The opportunity to learn and grow and be as privileged as any other child in the world. Because of you, they have a future they can look to with bright eyes and excited spirits. Please, give yourselves a round of applause.”

Ari thought she would burst with pride at her brother’s words, and simultaneously whither in shame because she wasn’t really a part of them. Still, she clapped more enthusiastically than most. It was not for those who were forced to donate in order to receive an invite, however. Instead, she applauded to Cai, for his genius, and for Eila, the truly generous soul. As a former foster child, she had little patience and certainly found little to admire in those who were bribed into being benefactors. But who wouldn’t feel their heart warm after Cai’s words?

“Now, normally at a function, this is when I would give over the microphone to Mr. Desmond—the founder of this prestigious organization—so that he might express his own gratitude. However, this is not a function. It is a birthday party. It is the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. So instead of pouring forth our continued and undying—sometimes even embarrassing—professions of gratitude, I vote that we lay them aside. Tonight, we celebrate the goodness of humanity and all the years that we have left to prove it.”

As if on cue—which she wouldn't doubt—the band struck up a loud, upbeat melody that had Cai grinning from ear to ear. Unconsciously, Ari mirrored his expression. It changed to outright laughter when Cai caught Amaris completely by surprise in a quick spin as soon as he relinquished the microphone.

Of course, her mirth soon gave way to awe as she watched the young couple proceed out onto the dance floor. Oblivious to everyone else, Cai and Amaris laughed and they danced together as if there weren't over a thousand people watching them. But they didn't seem to care. Somehow, that made it all the more beautiful.

For several long, awkward moments, the couple was left out on the dance floor by themselves. Almost everyone else was too involved in watching them to make a move. Especially Ari. Nothing in the world could induce her to walk out onto that floor. Not even to relieve her brother.

On her right, Jace's chair suddenly shifted back and he rose to his feet. In an instant, Ari was staring up at him with wide, bewildered eyes. If he so much as thought...

Crossing around behind another empty chair, Jace stopped beside Eila and held out a hand. It took her all of three seconds to put her hand in his and rise to her feet beside him. Ari's mouth fell open as she watched her two friends walk out onto the dance floor in order to shift *some* of the attention from her brother. *If that's what they were doing.* After watching the way they moved together, she had to sit back in her chair and ponder.

Where she had felt elation and pride in the fearless way that Cai danced with Amaris, she didn't feel anything close to it while watching Eila and Jace. Instead, an uncomfortable sensation formed in her stomach as she watched them glide over the gleaming ballroom floor. Watching them closely, she tried to pick out each expression and the tiny nuances behind their body language. It was getting harder every passing moment, however, as more people joined them on the dance floor and worked to obscure her view.

Yet, there was no denying the wide smile on Eila's face. No question of the amusement gleaming in Jace's eyes. There was especially no doubting how comfortable they seemed with one another. Not once was there a sense of awkwardness when he placed a hand on her side and she never hesitated in her contact with him. It was just as if there were no *edge* to intimidate her or any boundaries that would prohibit this moment. The sinking feeling in Ari's stomach would have been

enough to keep her seated even if she could will herself to stand.

Almost before she had time to miss them, the first song had ended and Eila and Jace returned to her, large smiles covering their faces. Trying to hide her discomfort, Ari smiled back and asked meaningless questions about their dance. She was met with raised eyebrows from both of them and a sort of smugness from Eila that she didn't understand. Jace was silent as he took his seat again, but his eyes looked at everyone in the room but her.

Giving up the pretense of paying attention, Ari lapsed back into her own thoughts and let her eyes search the crowd for Cai. Natural as breathing, a tender expression crept across her features as she watched him dancing with his girlfriend. Unlike Eila and Jace, they'd never left the dance floor. Nor, did it appear, had they any intentions of doing so anytime soon.

Only a few minutes later, Eila bounded to her feet. "I love this song. Ari, come dance with me," she demanded. Gripping tightly to her friend's wrist, she pulled until Ari could no longer resist.

Ari opened her mouth to provide an excuse, and closed it again in the same moment. She wouldn't win. Not against Eila. And the grin this received from the Irish pixie proved that she knew it.

Hauling on her hand again, Eila succeeded in dragging Ari to her feet. Jace chuckled at their expressions before leaning back in his chair. "I guess I'll just sit this one out, then."

In an instant, Eila whirled around. "Why? There's plenty of me to go around."

Even Ari couldn't help but laugh at that. Still laughing, Jace rose to his feet. Of course, he knew not to argue with her either. When a spoiled brat wanted something, they typically got it. Especially lovable ones like Eila. Together, the trio made their way slowly out onto the dance floor.

Ari had never felt more awkward in her life. Whatever natural grace she'd possessed during training had long since vanished. With Eila as a friend, however, she wasn't left to her own devices for long. Embodying all the energy of a young child, Eila took Ari's hands in her own and spun around until they were both dizzy and breathless from laughter. It was Jace who had to catch and steady them both before they could run into anyone else.

It was just the moment of carelessness that Ari needed. A moment of pure childishness in a room filled with uptight delegates. (Could the party-goers be called anything else when their entire purpose was just

to be in Cai's presence?) As expected, they'd all stared and wondered, but eventually went back to their own business. If not for that brief moment of having everyone's eyes on them, Ari would have lived in fear of just such attention all night long. The danger was now past.

She supposed Jace was more surprised than any to know that she could have a good time. Already, he underestimated the power of a childhood friend's influence. Eila had been throwing parties once a month for two straight years. Ari wasn't hiding out on the roof through all of them; or even most of them.

What surprised Ari more than anything was her ability to stop searching the room for Cai. He was in good hands—since Amaris had yet to leave his side—and she would get her alone time at half past midnight. Until then, she could—would—let him enjoy himself, too. Of course, the decision was mostly spurred by the one quick glance she had of him. The right side of his mouth had pulled up into an encouraging smile and he'd tipped his head in approval. That was enough. It had to be.

Ari, Eila, and Jace were still on the dance floor when the announcement came that it was ten minutes to midnight. The band would play one more song and then the evening would progress as planned. None of which meant anything to Ari ... until Eila gave a flimsy excuse about needing a drink and dashed away just as the slow song began to play.

For one very long second, she met Jace's clear blue eyes and wondered how she was going to get out of this. Then he held out his hand in a silent question. As in many instances of her life, Ari didn't think before she acted. Placing her hand in his, Ari tried to suppress the shiver when Jace pulled her close. She had to fight off another tremor when his right hand gripped her waist in a hold that was neither tight nor loose.

It's just a dance. One innocent dance, she told herself. Of course, there wasn't much about Jace that could be deemed 'innocent'. Even the way his eyes bored into hers seemed like a violation of some sort. It was the type of scrutiny she couldn't handle for more than a few seconds before her eyes darted away over his shoulder. But it was also the kind of gaze that required her to look back.

By the time the song came to an end, Ari was surprised to find that her eyes had not left Jace's for a whole minute and a half. She was even more surprised to find that what space there had been between them at the beginning was severely diminished by the end. And as the last note

fell around them, she blushed scarlet and took two hasty steps back, not daring to meet his eyes like that again. Even as she whirled away, Ari felt that she now knew what it was like for a mouse caught in the eyes of a snake: mesmerized and frightened all in the same quick breath.

When Ari returned to her table, Eila was already seated in her chair. A feline could not match her expression for smugness. Which actually set Ari's teeth on edge and the look she shot her friend was both a warning and a promise.

Ari had been seated for a few minutes before she realized that Jace had no intention of joining them. A quick survey of the room found him standing beside the window a few feet away. His back was to the room, but she got the sense that his awareness had not diminished.

Another quick second is all she had to spare for him, however, as the lights suddenly began to dim. Feeling uneasy, Ari rose to her feet and began to weave through the tables towards where Jace stood. Then the door to the ballroom opened and a warm glow burst over the nearby guests. Ari didn't bother to crane her neck for a view of the cake as her heart began to slow to a more normal rhythm. By the time she reached Jace's side, she felt silly for having even a moment of paranoia.

Wearing a tender smile, Ari watched as Cai followed the cake's progress to the edge of the dance floor. Suddenly, a burst of light flooded the rest of the ballroom as the wall displayed two images on either side of the doors. The scene to the right was a closeup display of the large ball—similar to one in old New York—that would be dropped out in Valor. From the window, one could take in the entire scene, but it wouldn't have nearly the same effect. On the left was a clock, displaying the last precious moments that were left of the year 2357.

If the gesture wasn't one she'd become used to in her month at Camp Emergence, Ari might never have noticed it. As focused as she was on Cai watching the clock and preparing to blow out the candles of the three-tiered cake, it was odd that she'd seen it at all. But the moment she saw the bodyguard bring his hand to his waist and unlatch his gun, her heart stopped.

No. Not like this, she thought, and even her mental voice was stunned.

A moment to absorb the scene was all she needed. It was a moment she didn't have. The bodyguard drew the pistol. Her moment was gone.

“JACE!” she screamed even as he lunged.

A shot rang out.

Searing pain flashed across Ari’s left arm and a vicious cry ripped itself from her throat. It wasn’t pain that flew from her lips, however, but fury. *Cai had just been shot!*

Surging forward, Ari leapt towards the cart where the demolished birthday cake had been. Crouched on the floor opposite the struggling bodyguard and Jace, Cai held a hand over the graze on his right arm and looked around with wide eyes. They couldn’t possibly get more shocked when Ari threw herself down on the floor beside him.

“Cai, come with me! We have to get out of here!”

There was a brief flash of emotion in his dark eyes before he asked, “What about everyone else?”

Ari’s jaw set and she shot a murderous glare over her shoulder where another shot rang out. Turning back to her twin, she snarled, “They’re trying to kill *us*. Not them. Come with me.”

When she held out her hand, Cai took it.

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*January 1, 2358
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America*

A smile pulled up Cai's lips as he watched the ball drop on one side of the wall. At the same time, a loud chime sounded through the room as the projection of the clock struck midnight. They were officially eighteen.

His eyes shot immediately to Ris's before they flitted away to find Ari. She should share this moment with him. Somehow.

Suddenly, a scream ripped through the air amidst all the cheers. Whirling toward the sound, Cai had just enough time to see a man collide with one of his bodyguards. Then a loud blast erupted from the gun he hadn't noticed. On instinct, he ducked.

Not fast enough.

The bullet missed its mark, but ripped through the sleeve of his jacket and sliced through his arm like butter. Letting out a cry of pain and surprise, Cai dropped to his knees and tried to use the wheeled cart as a shield for his body. With wide eyes, he watched as chaos erupted and people ran screaming from the room. All the while, his heart beat frantically in his chest as he searched the mass of people for the only two he really cared about. A fist tightened around his heart when he couldn't find Amaris.

Suddenly, a figure flung themselves at him. Before he had time to react, Ari threw herself onto her knees beside him. A trail of blood was covering her left arm where a slash had ripped through the skin. His mouth fell open the instant he saw it, knowing that the bullet that had

grazed him was the cause for her wound. But why the left arm and not the right?

“Cai, come with me! We have to get out of here!” she shouted, her dark eyes wide with fear but whirling with fury. Even the air around her seemed to disappear from the force of her rage. A sharp, smothering *edge* emanated from her, sending a chill through his blood.

Despite that, Cai was ready to accept her offer of escape in an instant. Of course he had to go with her. *They* had to go with her. Where was Ris?

“What about everyone else?” he demanded.

Another shot rang out from the other side of the room and Cai cringed. Ari didn’t flinch. Instead, she turned her head and he watched as her features hardened. When she returned his gaze, there was no doubt of the murderous intent lurking in their black depths.

As if the words were venom, she spat, “They’re trying to kill *us*. Not them. Come with me.”

Ari held out her hand, then. A simple gesture that had all its own consequences. Effects he didn’t have the time to consider. It didn’t take him a full second to clasp her hand in his own.

Moving like a single entity, they both threw a last look over their shoulders before leaping to their feet and making a mad dash for the staff entrance. Cai could feel his own surge of gratitude when he saw a few waiters standing by the entrance and ushering people through, a few at a time. Loud and clear in his mind was the desire that Amaris had already taken this escape route. And deep in his gut was the knowledge that she would have waited for him.

Unable to help himself, Cai slowed and tried to look back over his shoulder where a massive crowd was formed at the main doors. Then another shot rang out and Ari crashed into his midsection, carrying him to the ground where he landed hard. The air flew from his lungs even as she rolled off of him and onto her stomach, facing the direction they had come from. Cai rolled with her and watched as his bodyguard struggled with the man in the soldier’s uniform. It seemed like an even contest, but one Cai had no desire to see the results of.

Taking Ari’s hand in his, Cai eased himself into a low crouch. A moment later, his sister leapt to her feet, taking him with her. Again, they were in perfect step with one another until they reached the door of the staff entrance. Pulling Ari to a stop, he stepped close to the servant holding the door.

“How many have gone through?” he shouted above the screams.

"I'm not sure. Maybe forty. Most are locked up in that mess in front of the main doors," the man answered, his wide eyes darting across the room, never landing on Cai for more than a second.

"Cai, come on. We have to get out of here," Ari hissed, pulling on his arm.

When he looked at her, he could feel the longing just to run with her. But there was another longing just as strong. And a fear that ran deeper than the instinct for self-preservation.

"Amaris is still in here."

"She will find a way out."

"You can't be sure of that," he snapped.

"She probably got out already," Ari insisted, her tone hitting a pleading note. "Let's go, Cai."

"Not without Amaris."

In a flash, the pleading was gone and Ari's eyes were filled with steel. "You're not the only one missing someone because of this." The words were low and sharp, somehow carrying to his ears despite the screams. "I'm not risking them for nothing, Cai. We need to get out of here and we need to get out now. Amaris would understand."

She was right. Of course she was. Ris would understand completely and even willingly kick his ass if he hung around any longer. The problem was that he *couldn't* understand. How could he leave, knowing she was somewhere in this disaster, frightened and alone? He'd brought her here. This was all his fault. There was no way he could leave her alone in a situation like this.

"I can't leave without her," he answered in the same tone.

"Are you willing to kill us for her?"

Cai couldn't look her in the eye. Because there was more than himself to consider. If asked if he would risk himself for her, the answer was obvious. But Ari was a part of him. Any harm brought on himself would hurt her, too. And she didn't know Ris enough to want to risk her life for her. Didn't he have a responsibility to take that into account?

Before he could come to a decision, two more shots rang out and everyone dropped into a low crouch, including Cai and Ari. Through a small break in the crowd, Cai caught sight of the soldier standing overtop his bodyguard. A pool of blood was spreading rapidly around the fallen man's head. Around him, a ring of bodyguards had formed, each one with a hand on the gun at their sides. Slowly, the soldier held the gun out and away from him before slowly setting it down on the

ground. Cai's stomach lurched and he quickly looked away.

A second later, Ari grabbed his arm in a tight grip and steered him towards the opening. He was in too much shock to argue. The adrenaline of their near-escape had seemed to vanish the moment he saw the blood. Relief had poured in, cold as ice, to numb him. So much so that he didn't even know where his sister led him, only knew that he was powerless to stop her.

When they entered the staff entrance, there was an immediate flight of stairs. It was steep and narrow with only the blue strips of light running along the tops of the walls. He had to keep all of his focus on the stairs in order not to topple the both of them. Ahead of and behind him, more survivors were struggling down the stairs. Ari seemed sure of herself, and that was somehow enough for him.

The burst of light at the bottom of the stairs would have been overwhelming if Cai hadn't been staring at it around the heads of everyone ahead of him. As they reached the hallway, Ari's head whipped around, her eyes searching for something. Cai mimicked her, though his eyes sought only one person.

"Perfect," Ari hissed, grabbing Cai's hand and dragging him to a plain wooden door. A plaque on the wall beside the door informed him that they were a floor below the ballroom. It also informed him a second before she opened the door that they were about to head down more stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"Our suite. We've got to change and get ready to go. It's not safe here."

"You're not serious," Cai scoffed as he followed her down the metal staircase, wincing each time Ari's heels hit the steps.

"Of course I am. Jace isn't that much taller than you, his clothes should fit you just fine."

"I have clothes in my own room."

"And bodyguards and hotel security swarming it like a hive of bees, no doubt. Best if we avoid your suite."

"Those are *my* bodyguards, Ari. Meant to keep me *safe*."

Cai had to jump back a step when she whirled around suddenly. Her eyes were black holes of fury. The *edge* he'd almost become used to flared defiantly and he had to hold his breath while his lungs screamed in protest. "And it was *your* bodyguard who drew a gun. *Your* bodyguard who shot us. If one is corrupt, how much do you think it would take to corrupt the others? I'm not taking that chance, Cai. Now come on."

"And what about Ris? I have to find her," Cai demanded, refusing to follow his sister.

"I told you we would find her and we will. But first, we have to take care of ourselves. We're no good to her dead."

Cai felt himself bite the inside of his cheek—a habit he hadn't had since childhood—and he slowly began to follow his sister. In a voice that felt far too loud in the empty stairwell, he asked, "Do you really think there's someone else? Someone who will try again?"

"Yes," she answered in a clipped tone. "They sent two for me, the first time. Jace shot one. The other took his own life when we were about to take him. We figured they were trying to use me to get to you. When those two failed, there was always a possibility that something would happen here, but I didn't think it likely. This is one of the few times I'm glad Jace is as paranoid as he is."

For a few flights, Cai said nothing. There had been a strain in her voice that left him speechless. A strain that reminded him that this wasn't her first crisis. That there had been instances he wasn't familiar with. It also seemed clear, now, how she had remained so calm. Because she'd been in a place of terror more often than he ever had. And she'd survived.

When they reached the eighth floor beneath the ballroom, Ari threw herself through the plain brown door and quickly looked around. People were flowing from the elevators, scared and frightened. Cai felt his stomach sink as he realized the reason they were all traumatized was because of him. It was all because of him.

Before he could hesitate, Ari grabbed his arm and hauled him out into the hallway. With both of their long legs moving in sync, they soon came to a stop beside a door. Jamming her thumb onto the scanner, Ari seemed to vibrate with her impatience. When the click of the lock came, she threw open the door and shoved Cai inside.

The minute he entered, Cai thought his legs would buckle. In the center of the room, Ris paced back and forth, her fingers raking through her hair and tears shining on her face. His heart hammered in his chest and he quickly threw himself onto one of the chairs beside the door. He'd never been so relieved in his entire life.

"Ari!" another voice called out, leaping off the couch and hurrying toward her friend.

In the same instant, Amaris snapped her head up and looked at Cai with wide eyes. For a moment, they could only stare at one another. A second later, she launched herself across the room and Cai stood up

Hollow Ryan

just fast enough for her body to crash into his. He vowed then and there to never let her out of arm's reach again. Never.

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January 1, 2358
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America

Ari returned Eila's hug for only a moment. She was shaking so much that she couldn't stand to be in the same place for more than two seconds. Thankfully, Eila understood and stepped away as soon as she was satisfied.

"Get changed," she ordered. "Anything that doesn't fit in your pockets isn't coming with us, so don't bother trying to pack a bag." Not stopping to see their expressions, Ari crossed the suite to her own bedroom. And as soon as the door closed behind her, she leaned back and let her trembling legs ease her to the floor.

Adrenaline coursed through her body like a herd of wild horses stampeding through her veins. The fear was greater. It was a tidal wave that drowned out everything else. Now that the gunfire had stopped and they were mostly all together, her body couldn't help but feel it. Tears of relief and terror pricked at the back of her eyes and she pressed the heels of her hands to her face in order to hold them back.

She couldn't cry. Not now. There was too much to do and she needed to keep her wits about her. No time existed for a break down. Especially knowing what danger awaited them if they didn't leave soon.

Fighting back with all of the iron determination she possessed, Ari quickly removed the strappy stilettos Eila had forced on her earlier in the evening. Kicking them to the side, she struggled to free her body from the skin-tight dress. As fast as she could, she dragged on her

favorite cargo pants and long-sleeved shirt with a hood attached. A vest hugged her body tightly, despite the many pockets it supported. Pockets that were quickly filled with the necessary survival items that she normally kept in her duffel bag. Something she would have to thank Rodgers for whenever she saw her again.

Shrugging into a coat, Ari exited the room to find that everyone else was already ready. Without saying a word—or even really looking at them—she nodded once in approval before crossing the suite to Jace’s room. A small shiver worked its way up her spine as she entered the disrupted space. It was clear that Jace had not been the last person in here. Cai’s hasty actions were strewn all across the room. Surprisingly, it made it that much easier to be in his room.

Grabbing his medical bag off the dresser, Ari quickly raided it for gauze patches and medical tape and stuffed them into her coat pockets. When they got somewhere safe, she’d have to patch up her brother. As an added precaution, she took the one tube of antiseptic that resided in the bag and she desperately hoped that Jace wouldn’t have a need for it. Just as she was about to turn away—her thoughts whirling with escape routes and evasion tactics—Ari whipped back around to leave one clue for Jace. A clue only he would see as one.

Taking a deep breath, she walked back out into the middle of the suite to find everyone staring at her. For a moment, a lump was lodged in her throat and she couldn’t find the words to speak. The urge to rub the back of her neck itched at her palm as she glanced between three pairs of trusting eyes. And all she could think was, *This wasn’t supposed to be me.*

But it had to be her. Because Jace wasn’t here. And she was all they had left.

“Eila...” Ari could feel her heart quiver in her chest as she locked eyes with her friend. There was a very real danger in all of this. Not just to herself or Cai, but to their companions as well.

“Don’t you say it, Ari Keir,” Eila growled, her eyes narrowing into slits. “If you can handle this, so can I.”

“But you don’t have to,” she whispered between her teeth.

“Yes, I do. For you.” A small smile pulled up the left side of her lips in a parody of Ari’s typical smirk.

“Thanks,” Ari sighed before turning her attention to Cai’s girlfriend. “The same offer applies to you. If you don’t want to come with us, you don’t have to.”

“She’s coming,” Cai said quickly. Amaris just nodded her head

quickly, both of their arms tightening around one another.

Ari nodded. "Then let's go."

January 1, 2358

Grand Victory Hotel Parking Lot

Valor, America

"How are you going to steal a car?" Cai whispered in his sister's ear.

"It's not as hard as you might think, actually," Ari muttered. Already, her eyes were scanning the various vehicles in the parking lot, trying to scope out the ones belonging to teenagers. The signs were subtle—smears on the glass, damaged undercarriages from hasty parking, and grimy solar chargers—but they were there. Of course, it was taking a lot longer to pick it all out at night while trying to hide between vehicles and avoid the security cameras.

Even as her eyes slid off of a scarlet Hum-S22—a sleek sports-car with a low ceiling and narrow front end that was built to withstand a hurricane—Eila shifted behind her. Putting a hand on Ari's shoulder, she pointed towards the valet entrance to the hotel. All eyes swiveled to the door that was being pushed open by a young man no older than Jace. The light shined off of a silver flask in his hand before he concealed it beneath the red vest that marked his employment.

Putting her ear to Ari's lips, Eila whispered quickly, "I've got this." Ari didn't have time to do more than hiss her name before Eila emerged from their hiding space and began to walk in a staggering line towards the valet.

At about the halfway point, she stumbled and ended up throwing herself against a car to keep from hitting the ground. Ari, Cai, and Amaris all clapped their hands to their ears as the obnoxious alarm began to sound. With a giggle and fabricated hiccup, Eila threw herself away from the one car ... only to land against its neighbor.

The valet, recovering from this initial shock, immediately ran over to where Eila was standing between the two tyrannical vehicles. Grabbing her arm just above the elbow, he quickly moved her out of the standard alarm proximity. Once her presence was no longer felt within range of the cars, they quieted themselves down.

Just in time for Ari to overhear, "Oh, thank you. I swear, I am such a dope when it comes to electronics. And cars especially! Look at this, I can't even find my own car in a parking lot. Brand new, and I've lost it in plain sight." Eila affected a snuffle just then, looking away from the

man. "I doubt it'll even remember my prints, at this point. Oh, this is hopeless! My friends and I just want to get out of here and get to someplace safe... And here we are, stranded because of my own stupidity."

"What is she doing?" Amaris hissed, her eyes narrowed into a glare as they shot between Eila and Ari.

Feeling her jaw tense, Ari just shook her head. The plan was already in action. Only one thing remained to do: watch it play out. She just hoped that Eila could pull it off.

"What kind of car is it?"

"You can't ask me that!" Eila exclaimed, throwing her hands up violently and shuffling to the side like she would fall. The valet's hands shot out quickly to catch her and she hiccuped again. "Sorry. I know that it's a white ASL."

"Brand?" he asked hopefully.

Eila shrugged. With a forlorn sigh, she announced, "I'm sorry for doing this to you. My friends and I will just catch a bus or something."

Glancing around, he looked anywhere but at Eila. "PT is down for the night. What with the shooting going on upstairs, the entire city has been put on lockdown. You're actually not supposed to be leaving until you've been questioned and released by the authorities."

Ari stiffened where she was, feeling the vicious urge to run up and knock him unconscious and hope he couldn't describe Eila when he came to. She held her ground, however, when her friend noticeably intervened. Putting her hand lightly on the guy's bicep, she urged him to look into her wide eyes.

"We've already been through the screenings. Haven't you? I thought that might be why you were out here too."

"Uh ... yeah. Yes. I've been through the checks. They said I could go home, but couldn't exactly leave the city." Ari could just see his conscious thoughts being sapped away by those light brown irises. He was as malleable as putty while Eila looked at him like that.

"I wish I could get home. My dad is going to be so worried." Before he could ask, Eila threw out a random building number in some part of the city that Ari had never been. Wherever it was seemed to impress her new friend, however, judging by how quickly his eyebrows shot into his hairline.

At last, some form of light entered their dark tunnel. Hunching his shoulders in an unconscious effort to buffer himself against rejection, the shaggy-haired guy stuttered, "Well, I, uh, I can maybe give you a

ride. If you want. Jus' to get you home safe, an' all."

Like a vice, Eila's grip on his arm tightened and she threw herself another two inches closer to him. "Would you?" she gasped, elation pooling in her eyes. "That would be fantastic! Let me go and get my friends. Stay *right here*. I don't trust myself to find you out here."

"What about your car?" he called after Eila had already turned away.

Letting her chin rest on her shoulder for a minute, she smiled widely. "I'll be by to pick it up tomorrow. I'm sure daylight will help my eyesight much better." Then she was weaving between vehicles again, stumbling every now and then to keep up her charade.

The minute she was within arm's reach, Ari grasped her upper arm and shook her roughly. "Don't you *ever* do anything like that *ever* again! You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Triumphant as she was, Ari knew that her words were wasted. "You have your skills. I have mine. Now let's go before my particular talents are shrugged off, shall we?" Without saying another word, the shorter being sauntered off.

Ari followed without question, but she noticed the hesitation that assailed Cai and Amaris. With a serious expression leveled on each of them, she motioned after Eila with a jerk of her chin. This was the plan. Their only chance. And they had already wasted enough time. There was no longer time for hesitation.

Much like his sister, Cai suddenly set his jaw before taking up one of his girlfriend's hands. Pulling lightly on her wrist, he followed after Eila with a determined walk. Ari followed in the same step and attitude.

A few minutes later, they were all crowded into a small sedan, with the valet—whose name was Todd—glancing back at them nervously every few minutes. Eila, seated beside him, tried to distract him as much as was possible, but Ari's *edge* proved to be a great disruption. By the time the vehicle parked, no one was more relieved to see them go than Todd was. It didn't even seem to bother him that the only thing he knew about Eila was to call her Em.

He was the first in a whole string of escorts Eila, and even Amaris, would coerce that night. Each one allowed the group to travel steadily westward, in the opposite direction of both home and knowledge. And just before dawn broke, Ari managed to find a route out of the city. They spent the sunrise in the shade of Mount Rushmore.

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January 1, 2358

Mount Rushmore National Memorial
America

“Okay, I hate to be the first to say it, but we’ve been walking for three hours and my feet are killing me,” Amaris announced, leaning against a tree trunk and holding her right foot off the ground.

Cai stopped at her side, his eyes shooting between her—rare—sheepish expression and the back of Ari’s head from where she stopped much further ahead. Silence replaced the steady sounds of their feet crunching dead leaves as the day took with it the last layer of light snow. It took none of the bitter cold, however, and the only noise floating into the air was the sounds of their labored breaths.

Staring at Ari’s stiffened back and the determined set of her shoulder blades, Cai could practically see the wheels in her mind turning. Ever since the shooting stopped, she’d been on a very clear mission. And it had worked. She’d done her job. They were far, *far* away from the hotel and relatively safe. So what was the harm in stopping to rest? Yet, that same panicked nature was still settled on the idea that they had not gotten far *enough* away and must keep moving. At last, the struggle was decided when her head turned slightly to the left and her eye rested on Eila.

“Fifteen minutes. Use it wisely,” she added, finally taking her gaze all the way back to Cai.

A spell was broken. The continuous, weary, grudging march had paused and they went from being tin soldiers to people again in an instant. Cai immediately turned to Ris, who sank to the ground with a

relieved sigh. He crouched by her side as she yanked off the shoes that were a size too small and began rubbing her feet.

Meanwhile, Ari seemed to be in silent communion with Eila. Their eyes had locked from a yard away and questions were followed by wordless answers. As soon as she was satisfied, Ari made to sit down. She didn't make it all the way down before she leapt to her feet again. Even Ris couldn't take her eyes from the restless teen as she paced in a small circle. Cai was expecting it when she announced that she was going to do a quick scout around.

When she was gone, Cai turned his attention back to his best friend. "How are you doing?"

Ris barked a sarcastic laugh. "Well, I've watched my best friend get shot at. Had to dive under a table to avoid being trampled. Was dragged out of the room by some girl I don't know, claiming that she was there to help. Been forced to leave every tiny thing I knew in this blasted country. And, oh yeah, been forced to run from the very people hired to protect you. I'm doing just freaking fantastic!" Her bravado coated her words thickly, but he could see the cracks in her eyes. She was barely holding herself together. One more push and she just might lose it. And it was all his fault.

"I'm sorry, Ris. I shouldn't have made you do this," he muttered, unable to look her in the eyes.

"You didn't make me do anything, Cai. Look at me. I mean it," she growled when his eyes flickered to hers. "I wouldn't have stayed. Even if you'd asked me to. I'm not leaving you. Ever."

A small smile pulled at his lips that he tried to mask in a weary exhale. Looking again through the trees, he tried to find some sign of his sister. "How much longer do you think she'll make us travel before she realizes no one's coming after us?"

Silence answered him and when he looked at Amaris, a wry expression had twisted her lips. "I'm not sure. Why don't you ask her? She is your sister, after all."

For a minute, the words rolled around inside of his mind. They seemed strange, when she said it like that. Despite throwing the phrase around for months, it seemed different now that there was an opportunity. Now that he was face to face with the reality.

While he sat there pondering, Ari's little friend seemed to find it a perfect time to slip up to them. Eila settled herself to the ground some distance from Amaris, but facing both of them, like the third corner of a triangle. Ris politely turned her head to include her while Cai offered

her a distracted nod, his eyes scouring the trees once more.

Eila wasn't one to slog through social graces, however, and her light brown eyes locked on his as soon as they got the chance. In a tone full of imperious demanding, she announced, "Go talk to her. She's too anxious to sit still and too wild to hold a conversation like most normal people. The only person who can calm her right now is also the one making her like this. You've got to clean up your own mess, Cai."

His head jerked back in surprise. And he wasn't even sure what startled him the most. The words. The tone. The being who said them. Or the incredible familiarity she used when speaking to him. Just as if she had known him all his life, instead of meeting him shortly after midnight.

Cai wasn't given long to ponder it, however, as Eila silently raised her eyebrows and pointed with her chin to something he could not yet see. There was no leniency in those eyes and he found himself both amused and impressed with Ari's friend. Much like Ris, she seemed used to getting her own way and expected nothing different. She also used this particular gift to help rather than harm her friend, and Cai felt a fondness for her taking root in his chest.

Casting a similarly wry smile on Ris, he asked, "You gonna be alright for a few minutes?"

Her eyes darted to the being on her left before she shrugged at him. "I'll be fine. For a bit. Go talk to your sister."

Cai hesitated for a minute before pushing himself to his feet and turning towards where Eila had indicated. He moved slowly, his mind whirling. Before, when he had anticipated the meeting at twelve thirty, his mind was full of excitement and questions and anticipation. Now, however, after all that happened, he couldn't imagine where to start. What to say. All of the questions he'd had about her life and childhood now seemed insignificant compared to the most daunting: why was someone trying to kill them?

He found her easy enough. She was leaning against a tall pine, looking back the way they had come. Her right hand was clasped firmly on the back of her neck, and her eyes were far away. She looked troubled. And nervous.

Before he could even open his mouth, her head turned and her eyes met his. For a moment, he was lost in them. The same onyx irises that seemed to go on forever. If eyes were the windows to the soul, then theirs was at the end of a very long tunnel.

Pressing his lips together, Cai studied her as he would a strange and

unique animal. Her long frame held barely enough on her to make her substantial. Neither her coat or baggy pants could hide that fact. And the way she held herself was aloof. Distant and flighty. Yes, there was a wildness in her. One that gave rise to her incredible paranoia and potent soldier's *edge*.

Even though it pushed at him now, that tiny feeling of discomfort that pushed him further away with her growing alarm, Cai couldn't help but see past it. Know more than it wanted to share. Because she was his twin. A part of him from the moment of conception. It was there, in her eyes. The way her left hand had crept to her chest. That stubborn set of the jaw which he was particularly known for. And the instinctive step towards him, as if she couldn't keep herself from his side any longer.

Making a snap decision, Cai stepped forward suddenly and held out his left hand to his sister. For a moment, she just stared at it, seemingly unaware of his intentions. He just waited. A second later, her hand was clasped in his own.

"My name is Cai Balere. It's a pleasure to meet you."

A tiny, reluctant smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Ari Keir."

For a moment, an awkward silence threatened and Cai said quickly, "I'm your twin."

"Yes, I know," Ari responded. For a moment, she said nothing. Then she cocked her head to the left and her eyes narrowed in curiosity. "When did you figure it out? How?"

Cai pressed his lips together as he moved a little closer. Once his back was to a tree near hers, he sank to the ground and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Staring up at the sky, he let the words fall without even looking at her.

"I think you knew before I did. Or at least suspected. I had no clue you existed until me, Ris and my uncle, Val, were going through the list of guests attending the party. The minute your picture came up, I felt a burning in my side and that's when I realized I was bleeding."

He lowered his eyes, then, to meet hers. Ari's eyes were wide and her lips were parted in an expression of surprise. Even as he watched, her left hand stretched across her stomach and came to rest on her right side. Confusion hit him, then, once he realized that her wound was opposite of his. The right side. Not the left. Now that he thought about it, it was the same with her arm.

"What's wrong with you, Ari?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to kick his own ass. Especially when her head

jerked back and her lip curled in disdain. Scrambling up onto his knees, he rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and pointed to the bandage she had put on his arm a few hours ago. "Why is this on your other arm? Why is my stab wound on the left and yours on the right?"

In an instant, he watched her relax back against the tree. For a minute, she said nothing. Then she hit him with, "My heart is on the right. Not the left. And it skips a beat. Because I don't own all of it." When she looked over and saw his own shocked expression, a slight grin pulled at her lips. "My organs are all on the opposite sides of my body. Don't know why, but that's just how I developed."

For a minute, Cai didn't know how to respond. He could never have imagined something like that. Yet, with this new information, he gleaned just a tiny piece of the reason his mother separated them. And it made him sick. It was one thing for her son to have a heart condition. Quite another for her daughter to be so completely malformed. If it wasn't normal, it couldn't be around a politician.

Cai kept that to himself. She didn't need to know. What good would it do her? It was difficult enough to wrap his mind around, and he was *raised* by Lucia Balere. He couldn't imagine how Ari would take it, knowing that her own development is what cost her her family.

That was when it clicked. Somehow, he'd been seeing Ari as something *other*. The words 'sister' and 'twin' were used without care, because they were obvious facts. Until it registered that they had the same mother, the same uncle, the same father—whoever the donor was—it hadn't crossed his mind that they were truly *family*.

A smile broke across his face and he couldn't help but inch closer to her. Ari's eyes narrowed suspiciously and Cai almost laughed as he approached her. Instead, he stopped when he deemed he was close enough and held his hand out, palm up towards her. He felt like a giddy little kid awaiting a present. And that's exactly what she felt like to him. A gift he was meant to cherish. To take care of. Protect.

After a silent moment, Ari placed her hand over top of his, the long fingers stretching to his wrist. Cai closed his eyes and felt the hollowness in his chest vanish. And a new beat found its way into his heart.

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January 1, 2358

*Mount Rushmore National Memorial
America*

For a few minutes, Cai sat there holding his sister's hand. His twin. And his heart pretended it was normal all the while they were touching. It was as close to a blissful feeling as he could get right then.

"Our fifteen minutes are up," Ari finally said in a quiet voice. Her own reluctance swept past the reminder, even though she opened her eyes to look at him knowingly.

"Where are we going?"

Ari's eyes lowered and she slowly shook her head. "I don't know. Away. That's all I can do. Get us as far from Valor and people as I can."

"That's not a plan, Ari." Cai spoke gently, leaving any trace of criticism out of his voice, though a voice in the back of his mind scoffed at the idea of trudging around in the woods with no real direction.

"I know," she growled anyway. "I know it's not a plan, but it's the best I can do. What else is there, Cai? We've got people at our backs trying to kill us. People steps ahead of us trying to kill us. And besides Amaris, Eila, and Jace, we can't trust anyone. Where can we go? What can we do that will keep us safe?"

Cai didn't answer right away. He'd been wondering all of the same things. Yet, there was one question nagging at him more than any others. A question, he knew, they would need to find the answer to. Sooner rather than later.

"Why? What reason would anyone have for wanting us dead?"

Ari shrugged. "I can't be sure, but I'm not sure it's 'us' they want dead. Just you. You are the Supreme Commander's son. Anything happens to you, and it'll destroy her."

"Then why go after you?"

"Because I affect you. It's the only logical reason to send someone after the least protected twin. And, the way I figure it, the only people capable of knowing what you and I are to one another are those who were there when we were born. Who have access to our medical records and are able to record what happens to one twin that also happens to another. If someone knows those things, it would be easiest to take me out and fulfill their true objective: killing you."

"Why not finish the job, then? What happened that day, Ari?" he sighed in frustration. Guessing was one thing, but he needed all of the answers for this mess.

In quick sentences that were clearly void of detail, she told him everything. The stabbing. Her attacker being shot. Jace taking her to the encampment before she was transferred to the base hospital. Then training. A whole month of devoting herself to protecting herself and Cai. Finally, she told him about the second attacker stalking her and his subsequent suicide when he'd been compromised.

For some reason, that part didn't sit well with Cai. Something seemed off about a man not taking a second chance on his target and choosing to stalk her instead. Unless he had orders not to touch her. If he had orders to let her live until Cai's birthday. A shiver worked its way up his spine as Cai was forced to realize what almost certainly would have happened last night.

"A public execution. That's what they wanted once they failed with you. But the question still remains: why?"

"I don't know," Ari admitted. "It's just always seemed obvious to me that it's a way to get to your mother. After all, you haven't made any enemies yet, and, other than Clara, no one notices me enough to dislike me."

"I'm not sure. There are better ways to deal with my mother than killing her most prized possession. Killing us is an act of war. Not a negotiating tactic. And with how my mother can be ... it's the worst mistake any being could make."

"Well, then, I'm not sure. All I know is: someone is after us, and I will do whatever I can to make sure they don't get us."

Cai raised his eyes to meet his twin's. They were full of a steely determination that he didn't share. At least, not for the same reason.

"We need answers, Ari. We need answers *now*."

He knew why she was shaking her head before she even said, "And getting to those answers will get us killed. All of our leads are dried up. Jace and I already tried. No one is going to help us, Cai. For some reason, they can't."

In an instant, he was on full alert. "What do you mean you already tried? What leads? How do you know they can't? Ari, tell me!"

"Tell us," said a voice just behind him. He didn't take his eyes from his twin as Ris came to kneel beside him. Likewise, Eila sank to the ground beside Ari, her eyebrows raised in expectation.

With her lips pressed together in a tight line, Ari looked around at each of them. With a defeated sigh, her eyes found their way to his again. In clipped words, she told him about her doctor, Lita Naois. How she'd been there from the moment of Ari's birth all the way up until she was stabbed. In a voice that grew tighter as she continued, Ari explained Jace's involvement and then she moved quickly onto the confrontation of her doctor. As she said before, it was a dead end. Of course, what surprised him most was to learn that it was illegal for the doctor to research them. And that any who would dare to touch him or Ari was facing a certain death sentence.

So, who would be that stupid?

"This is ... unbelievable," Ris sighed.

"I know," he agreed.

"So what now?" she demanded. "I mean, it's not like we can hang out in the forest forever."

"It's not like we can return to Valor, either," Eila reminded them. "They've probably got our pictures plastered everywhere so that everyone knows to look for us."

Cai looked at Amaris and they had a bit of a silent conversation of their own. After all, no one could do damage control quite like a politician. And his mother wasn't in her position for nothing.

"No one knows we're missing," Ris told them without taking her eyes from Cai's. "It would cause a panic. Chaos. Something not to be tolerated by any means within a civilized nation. The Supreme Commander will have it spread around that Cai and I were safely removed from the situation and that an investigation will be launched as to the events that transpired. Neither you nor Ari will be mentioned. Because she doesn't want anyone else to know you exist. She never wanted for Cai to know, so she won't tell anyone herself."

Ris didn't tell them what else they were thinking. That Jace,

innocent as he may be, was very likely going to be used as a scapegoat. Depending on how he played his cards, he could either walk out of this with an honorable service medal, or shackles and a public execution. Without Cai to intervene with his mother, there was a very real chance that the soldier would never survive.

"And Jace? What will she say about him?" Ari asked in a small voice that failed at sounding casual.

Cai winced when he realized how closely their minds moved. Somehow, it was answer enough for her. And she didn't say a word. Simply got to her feet and walked a little further into the trees in the direction they came from.

It wasn't enough for Eila. Her head whipped back and forth between them before her wide eyes settled fully on him. "What about Jace? What's going to happen with him?" she demanded.

He couldn't look at her as he said, "Either my mother will commend him for saving my life and send him on his way, or she will detain him further until I've been found. The longer it takes, the much more likely it is that he'll be used as a scapegoat. It's a position he won't survive. I'm sorry."

For a minute, absolute silence reigned. Cai didn't dare look at Ari or Eila. He knew they had some kind of connection with the soldier and he knew how badly this would hurt them.

"We have to help him," Eila finally announced. Glancing at her, Cai could see that she considered this as a certainty.

"No."

Cai's eyes shot to his sister, wide with surprise. Not one of them expected that. Especially not coming from Ari.

"We can't afford it. Any rescue attempt will likely end in all of our deaths. Including Jace's. We can't risk it. No, Eila!" she snapped when her friend opened her mouth to speak. "Jace would kick our asses for even thinking about it. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is. I wish it wasn't..."

She turned to look back towards Valor once more. Then, she squared her shoulders and turned determinately in the other direction. Ari had made her decision and no one could change it.

Without waiting for them, she began to walk further west. As they quickly made to catch up, she informed them of their destination. "Zenith is closest to us, so we'll head there. You're right. We can't stay in the forest forever."

Amaris halted mid-step at Cai's side. "That's over four hundred

kilometers from here!”

“And Exodus is over six hundred. Between here and Zenith, there are very small towns, if any. It’s the only known piece of civilization this far west. From there, we can head back east. If we’re as invisible as you believe.”

“Then what?” Cai asked.

Ari looked askance at him. “We get answers. Wherever we can find them.”

They traveled many more hours with only a few breaks between all day. By the time they decided to find places to sleep, all of their feet ached and they were bone-tired. As soon as Ari made the final announcement, Amaris and Cai sank to the ground right where they were standing. Eila, bringing up the rear, didn’t make it much further before her trembling legs let her down. Even Ari, as relentless as she had been, eased herself to the ground beside a tree and let her head lean back.

Cai didn’t bother getting more comfortable than he was. Exhaustion had done its job fully and he was certain he could fall asleep wherever he landed. Ris hadn’t even taken that long. Curled up in the now dirty coat that Eila had loaned her, she was fast asleep and a light snore escaped her lips.

“Someone ... needs to ... keep watch,” Ari said between yawns. Without opening her eyes, she continued, “We’ll try two hour intervals. I can’t stay awake any longer than that. Who should be next?”

“Me,” Eila muttered even as she began drifting off.

“No. I’ll be next. Besides, I think Ari and I should sleep at the same time as often as possible. Ris will be last,” Cai added.

Ari nodded and Eila shrugged. It was good enough for them, so Cai weaseled his way up to a tree and did his best to fall asleep. When Ari got to her feet and walked past him, he was aware of each movement. As she settled to the ground on her knees, he imagined he could feel the damp soil through her pants. And he knew the minute she began to let things run through her mind in an effort to keep her awake. Cai never imagined how well her distractions would work on him.

For five minutes, he tried to shut himself down. Not be aware of his sister and the workings of her mind. Just relax and fall into an exhausted slumber. And nothing worked.

Finally, Cai pushed himself up and made his way to Ari. Her

eyebrows rose in surprise as she watched his approach. Though she was easily as exhausted as himself, he was surprised by how vigilant she was. When he sat down beside her, she turned her eyes away and began to examine the rapidly darkening forest once more.

"You should get some sleep," she finally whispered. A small smile pulled at her lips as she added, "For both of us."

"Apparently, I can't sleep when you're awake."

For a moment, Ari only looked at him, her eyebrows raised in surprise. At last, she remarked, "Well, that explains a lot."

Cai smirked before letting go with a wide yawn. Ari's own was timed just as precisely. Shaking off her weariness, her eyes returned to scanning the trees. Searching for any sign of danger. Any subtle clue that someone or something was about to do them harm.

For a moment, he wondered at her vigilance and her dedication to keeping them safe. He wondered even more at the level of paranoia she displayed. Even the way she was sitting made her seem as if she would leap up without a second of hesitation. How had she become so ... feral?

As he studied her, Cai was suddenly sure that she wouldn't mind the use of that word to describe her. What with her being constantly on edge and consistently ready to attack and defend, she reminded him of their mother. There was nothing in her to suggest softness or gentility. And there was nothing she wasn't willing to do for those under her protection.

Suddenly, an aching need to know more about her rose up inside of him. Despite memorizing her files word for word, he was painfully aware that he knew nothing about this girl. The twin with whom he'd been separated from for his entire life. Now, she was before him and the only words they'd been able to speak concerned those who wanted them dead.

Without thinking of the consequences of his words, Cai whispered, "What happened to you, Ari?"

He wished he could recall the words the minute she looked at him. It was the same affronted look he'd gotten when he asked what was wrong with her earlier. Fortunately, the look of offense melted into a perplexed expression. Finally, she looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Cai assured her. "I was just wondering... I mean, we've been separated all this time. What has your life been like?"

In an instant, Ari's features became impassive and her eyes again

scoured the trees. For the longest time, Cai thought she wouldn't answer. When he was just about to give up any hope of a reply, her voice drifted through the night, "Hollow."

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January 2, 2358

*Mount Rushmore National Memorial
America*

As soon as the word left her lips, Ari felt deflated. It was the beginning of a flood. Words she never thought to say aloud suddenly poured from her in torrents.

Soon enough, she'd described the miserable years of her early childhood. The four spent crying in agony at the emptiness within her at the orphanage. Which is why she was to be without parents until almost five years old. Then came the astonishment she still felt at having been chosen by the Keirs. How she had wondered what she had done to convince them that she was worth their time and love.

When it came to her parents, Ari knew her voice had grown soft, and as she neared the age of nine, it was but a whisper. Which abandoned her entirely when Cai asked about the fire. As soon as the question was in the air, Ari felt her back become ramrod straight and she couldn't look at her brother. The horror of the memory was still fresh. It always would be.

In a voice as devoid of emotion as a steel beam, she announced, "It began on the floor below us. That's what the firefighters said. The smoke rising is what woke me. I could smell it as it came up through the floor. When I realized what was happening, I got out of bed and went to our living room window which led out onto the fire escape. I took that down and crossed the street, just as I was told. For most of the night, I remained on that corner in the pouring rain, waiting for my parents to come get me or the fire to die out. Neither happened that

night.”

A short pause followed her explanation and she waited for the inevitable. The question that had plagued her for half of her life. Already, her mind had transformed his voice into the insipid accusation, ‘Why didn’t you wake anyone?’ And as she waited for the words to come, she seethed in silent fury and guilt.

Cai never asked.

Instead, he squeezed her hand a little and whispered, “I’m sorry, Ari.”

And just like that, the last of her dam wall crumbled and a voice too small to be hers said, “I should have woken them. I should have made sure they got out with me.”

His arm moved to her shoulder blades, rubbing across in a half-assed comforting gesture. “It wasn’t your fault, Ari. You were doing what they told you to. There’s no point beating yourself up over it.”

“Except that it was. Because I didn’t think about them. As soon as I woke, I knew I had to get out. That I had to survive. Never once did I think about my parents. Not until I was safely on the other side of the street. Up until that moment, it was all about me. Never anyone else.”

Cai didn’t reply. Really, there was nothing that he could say that she hadn’t already heard. The same condolences and the gentle suggestions that it wasn’t her fault. Instead, her twin remained silent at her side for several long minutes. Suddenly, he asked, “So what happened next?”

The question surprised Ari enough that she actually told him. About the rain and the funerals. Her Aunt Clara and the move to Genesis. And then she told him about meeting Eila, and her voice grew warm with appreciation. For longer than her two hours of watch, Ari brought him right up until the moment that they had met. And the events that changed everything.

For most of it, Cai merely watched her. Once in a while, he would lean away from her or rub his left hand over the back of his neck. Every time she saw that, Ari smiled. And when she noticed that Cai smiled with only the right side of his mouth, she could feel the pulse of him throughout her entire body. The hollowness had vanished in his presence, and this new wholeness made her absolutely blissful.

“I think it’s my turn to keep watch,” he whispered with a sly smirk.

Automatically, Ari’s hand went to the watch she had in her vest pocket. Silently she nodded as she traded places with her brother—so as to give him the direct line of sight. She had just finished strapping

the watch into place when she decided to ask about his life.

“What was it like for you? Before you knew about me?”

For a moment, Cai was silent, preferring to stare out into the trees instead of meeting her eyes. At last, his lips twisted a little as he muttered, “Caged.”

Ari leaned forward, intrigued by their differences. Cai noticed the movement and a small smile pulled at his lips. Then he let out a sigh before continuing.

“My mother ... she’s a paranoid woman. She always suspects the worst in people. I know it’s because she’s seen the worst that we’re capable of, but somehow that doesn’t excuse how much she sheltered me. And now I know why she did it. Which pisses me off like nothing else.” Cai shook his head to clear his thoughts before his eyes scanned the trees.

“Anyway, I’ve been pretty much under lock and key every day of my life. If she didn’t work so much, I’m sure I’d have been home schooled. As it was, I only entered public school when we were in Geneva for about a year. And this place would make a prison compound proud with all of its security. Your identity has to be confirmed at three separate stations before you can even enter the building, that’s how tight it is.” Cai sighed again and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Is that where you met Amaris?” Ari couldn’t help but ask. She was perhaps most curious at his ability to develop a relationship, while she had remained asexual for much of her life.

Cai’s lips twitched into a smile. “Yeah,” he answered slowly, looking at the sleeping girl instead of Ari. Not that she minded. The look on his face seemed peaceful and full of a private bliss. It was one of the few things that Ari did not share with him.

“How?”

His smile grew and his eyes crinkled in amusement. “We were in elementary school. I was new there, so of course I didn’t know that she was the local troublemaker. For her, I was fresh meat. She always went after the new kids and bullied them into submission. Like an alpha wolf making sure all newcomers knew their place. Anyway, the teachers had been watching her carefully since I was now in the class. My mother would have unleashed her full fury if any of them knew what happened that day.

“As it was, Amaris came after me with a particular vengeance. Whenever eyes weren’t on us, she pulled some trick or other. I think it

pissed her off when I didn't respond. I'd never had any siblings, so the attention to me was more a curiosity rather than an irritation. I just thought that's how all other kids behaved with each other. I was wrong.

"During recess, one of the teachers noticed that Ris was attempting to torment me. I didn't even think about it before I spun a mouthful of lies. I know, now, that our teacher knew that they were lies, but she let me get away with it. Either because of who my mother is, or because she somehow sensed what Ris and I would someday be to one another."

By the time he finished speaking, Ari had a ridiculous little wistful smile on her face. "How long have you guys been together?" she asked quietly.

That's when Cai's gaze returned to her, and his eyes were wide in surprise. "We're not together. Never have been," he announced.

"What? But the news and the articles...?"

"It was a set up. I ... I've never had a girlfriend. When I decided to 'go public' I didn't want the reporters latching onto that fact and making it a big deal. So Ris agreed to pretend to be my girlfriend. She's my best friend and we're together all the time anyway—"

"And you love her, so it was only natural that you ask her," Ari added.

Cai's jaw set and he answered only with, "She's my best friend."

"Not in the way Eila is to me. Relax, Cai. I won't say anything to her, if that's what you want. I'm just surprised by all of this. My own interest in people is non-existent, so it's weird knowing that you're different from me in that regard."

Cai's jaw softened and he rubbed the back of his neck again before answering, "I'm not any different. There's a reason I've never had a girlfriend before. The idea of it just never appealed to me. Ris knows that. Lately, though... Well, emotional attraction is different from sexual attraction."

"And your feelings for her have grown throughout the years?"

"Yes," he sighed.

Ari pondered that for a moment, trying to separate the thoughts of sex and emotion as they related to relationships. Growing up, she had sort of assumed that they were mutually inclusive to the idea. That there really couldn't be a separation of the two. What Cai was suggesting, though... Well, it made one investment more substantial than another. And it was all very odd and confusing.

Just as she was about to ask him more, the air seemed to shift around her. The hair on the back of her neck rose up and her ears caught just the faintest sound of rustling some forty feet off. Rising up onto the balls of her feet, Ari's eyes scanned the dark forest fruitlessly.

Cai, oblivious to the threat, opened his mouth to continue the conversation and Ari quickly put a finger to her lips. Rising a little further, she motioned for her twin to stay where he was as she eased forward as quietly as possible. And from inside her vest, she produced the k-bar that had been her unofficial graduation from bootcamp gift.

Another of the barest footsteps caused her heartbeat to throb wildly in her ears. If it were an animal, she was certain, it would not be trying so hard to hide itself from them. Big cats were much quieter, and bears just didn't care. Wolves were coordinated attackers that moved in packs. Yet, none of these were as dangerous as a team of highly trained soldiers intent on killing them.

Something vicious came alive in her then. The thought of being surrounded—of having her friends in danger—was enough for everything civilized in her to snap. Nothing now existed in Ari but a cornered animal ready to defend her own at any cost. Which meant nothing in the world was as dangerous as she was now.

Staying low to the forest floor, Ari continued in the direction from which the sounds had come. All the while, she kept her mind still as she listened for more signs of intruders. So far, only one being had betrayed their presence. That didn't mean there was only one. Yet, if she could manage to take them one at a time...

Around twenty feet from where her brother sat, Ari finally caught sight of a dark shape moving through the trees. It was definitely a man, and he was absolutely searching for them. Gripping the knife tighter in her left hand, Ari prepared to attack in order to defend.

Then he said, "Easy now. Why don't you put the knife back in your pocket, hmm?"

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Cai could tell the instant something changed for Ari. Not a moment after she'd opened her mouth to say something more, her lips pressed tightly together and her eyes shot off into the trees. She wasn't scouring the dark for the source of some imagined noise. Instead, her eyes narrowed in on the stretch of woods between them and Valor. There was definitely someone or something out there.

Ice seemed to coat his veins while his heart tried to beat out of his chest. After a moment of hearing nothing, Cai was about to ask her what was going on when she hastily put a finger to her lips. Slowly, he closed his mouth and continued to watch his twin creep away on the balls of her feet. If he weren't so close to her, he would swear that she was completely silent in her movements.

Even while he kept absolutely still in fear of what might be coming, Ari moved further away from him. Perhaps what made his mind go absolutely still was what she pulled from her vest. Dark as it was, there was no mistaking the wicked blade that she held tight in her left hand. By the set of her shoulders and the cautious moves she used to stalk whatever she'd heard, Cai was very sure that she would have no problem using it.

Then a voice came out of the dark. "Easy now. Why don't you put the knife back in your pocket, hmm?"

Cai was more than a little shocked when Ari sprang to her feet. "Jace," she said in a voice that was barely audible.

"Ari, put the knife away. Please?" continued the voice as a dark mass suddenly became visible to Cai.

"You're alone?" Ari demanded in a suddenly hard voice. The fist gripping the k-bar only tightened. "You weren't followed?"

"I'm alone, and you know better."

Slowly, Ari returned the blade to her pocket as she stood and waited. Because of how dark it was, Cai could see almost nothing as the man silently approached his sister. When he was finally somewhat visible, Cai could make out the small smirk on his face. It was wiped away the moment he stopped in front of Ari.

Unable to see the expression on his sister's face, Cai was immediately alarmed when Jace's features fell and he leaned closer. Dropping his voice, he asked, "Ari? You okay?"

Ari quickly averted her face and nodded without look at him. "Fine. Just ... glad you're not dead."

Jace gave a relieved chuckle. "Me too. Where are the others?"

"Eila and Amaris are sleeping."

A small silence extended between them before Jace asked in a voice that seemed significant. "And Cai?"

Instead of answering, Ari turned her head in his direction. Before anymore could be said, Cai quickly rose to his feet, waiting to be introduced to the man they owed their lives to. Numerous times, now.

Leading Jace, Ari strode straight for her brother. Placing herself on his left, she turned to Jace and smiled. It was one of the few truly happy smiles that Cai had been witness to. Judging by the look on Jace's face, he'd found them to be even more rare.

"Jace, this is Cai. My twin," she announced proudly.

A smile spread slowly across Jace's face as he watched her before he switched his attention to Cai. The soldier held out a hand and Cai took it in his own for a strong handshake. "Sergeant Jace Naois. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Likewise. And ... thank you. For saving all of us."

For some reason, when he met the soldier's eyes, Cai felt tense. As if the man were assessing every aspect of his soul while their gazes held. The fact that Jace's ever-present soldier's *edge* was stifling him didn't help matters.

"You're welcome," Jace answered as he released Cai's hand.

For a few moments, the three of them stood there in awkward silence. Cai felt almost as if he were intruding on the reunion between his sister and her friend. At the same time, he felt as if Jace were the

intruder, taking time away from the bonding that he and Ari had been trying to accomplish. In the end, however, another severe yawn traveled through him and then Ari. That was enough to decide Jace.

"How long have you been awake?" he demanded of Ari.

"I'm not even sure anymore," she answered.

Even Cai's sluggish mind didn't want to try to count up the hours. It was easily mounting up on a full forty-eight. After all, being shot at wasn't exactly conducive to a good night's rest. And with panic-filled adrenaline driving them on all throughout the day, this was the first they'd come to a complete halt.

"Damn it, Ari," Jace hissed. "How long will you need to sleep tomorrow?"

"We'll sleep as long as we're allowed to and no longer. When you decide it's time to march, wake us."

Jace's eyes shot between Ari and Cai and he nodded. Then Ari's eyes narrowed. "You haven't been to sleep either."

The soldier shrugged as if forty-eight hours were insignificant to him. "Get some rest, I'll keep watch."

"No," Ari hissed. "Eila's ready for her shift. Amaris will be after her. You need sleep, too."

For a moment, they just stared at one another. Her features were set in the same stubborn expression she'd been giving everyone else all day. Unlike Cai's tolerance for it, however, Jace looked equally exasperated. To the point where he was going to argue her suggestion. In the end, however, he just shook his head and dropped the bag he'd brought beside a nearby tree.

"I'll wake Eila. There are blankets in the bag. They're not much, but they're better than nothing."

"Thank you," Ari whispered as he headed towards their friend. Cai watched as Ari immediately went to the bag and began to pull out blankets.

As he went to help his sister, he heard Jace whispering Eila's name. From the corner of his eye, Cai watched Jace shake her shoulder a little. At first, Eila groaned and shrugged him off. Then something seemed to click, because her entire body stiffened.

"JACE!" she screamed as she launched herself at him. Her arms locked in a vice-like grip around his neck and her momentum carried him backwards.

Even Cai had to grin as Jace began to laugh. The soldier's arms wrapped easily around her waist in a hug as she buried her face into

his shoulder. The way they clung to each other, it was all too easy to imagine the extent of their familiarity.

Shaking his head, Cai turned again to help his sister, only to find that Ari's eyes were locked on her friends. Instead of smiling with relief or even laughing at their antics, she sat with a straight face and a strained jaw. It was an expression to describe everything he needed to know about Ari's relationship to Jace. And she wasn't as immune to attraction as she thought she was.

When Ris finally shook him awake, Cai felt that he could sleep at least twenty more hours before being ready to face anything else. Yet, his sister was a hard taskmistress. And if she was up and moving around, so was he.

As things slowly came into focus for him, the first thing he heard was a whispered argument. Levering himself up, he saw Jace standing toe-to-toe with Ari, his arms crossed over his chest and his head shaking stubbornly. Likewise, Ari had her hands on her hips and was explaining their decision to head west ... in a voice that was both mocking and disrespectful. All the while, Eila rolled up blankets and smiled slyly to herself while Ris sat beside him, watching with unveiled interest.

"They'll catch us before we're another day west. The Seekers are in the air right now checking the lands south. And I'm willing to guarantee they've called in all of the others and we'll have three of them over our heads within six hours."

"Well we can't just turn around and head back to Valor, Jace. West is the only option we have," Ari hissed.

"Except that they'll move on from Valor once they realize you're no longer in the city. That's the time to slip back in."

At this, even Cai had to concede the soldier had a point. And it sounded a lot more plausible than traveling four hundred kilometers through the wilderness with very little supplies to a city even more foreign to him than this country. It was about time for him to step in.

"How long do you think it'll be before they figure we're clear of the city?" Cai asked as he rose to his feet.

Jace barely glanced at him before returning his glare to Ari. "A few days. The facial recognition software is going through every camera in Valor, but it will take time. However, the ones of you leaving the city have to be obvious, so your mother won't waste precious time or resources searching where she knows you're not. Obviously there will

still be searches and patrols, but they won't be doing the heavy work like the Seekers and ground forces will."

"It's too dangerous for us in Valor. You know this," Ari growled.

"Only if they know you're there," Jace countered. "Besides, her resources are limited. She's floating around the story that a private team smuggled Cai and Amaris out amidst the confusion. Given that she's publicly admitted to their safety, she can't very well make it public that she's searching for you. Right now, she's supposedly searching for the accomplices of the assassin. That makes her options very limited."

"Good," Ari said, "then that means we should be able to head west with little interference."

Jace pinched the bridge of his nose and let loose a deep breath. Speaking through his teeth, he said, "Outside of the city, she can use the Seekers and whatever other methods she finds necessary. And you know how accurate those Seekers are in pin-pointing even the slightest change in degree in a living thing. You can't outrun them, Ari. None of us can. Only in Valor will Lucia have her hands bound because the people there are watching her. All the time. We have to go back."

Before Ari could shoot back another retort, Cai cleared his throat to regain their attention. "I think Sergeant Naois is right, Ari. We don't have the means to be out in these woods for that long. Especially not in the middle of winter. Heading back to Valor ... well, it's the only real choice we have."

For a moment, Ari's glare shot back and forth between her brother and the soldier. Fiery words were on the tip of her tongue and Cai waited anxiously for the battle to follow. Then she looked at him one last time and seemed to deflate. Her hands fell to her sides and her expression softened. "Fine," was all she said.

When she turned away, Cai smiled slightly at the soldier, glad that the argument was over. But Jace didn't smile back. Instead, he stared after Ari with an unreadable expression before turning the same look on Cai. There was no gratitude or relief in his features. Only a calculated examination of what had just occurred. It was a look that made a shiver run up his spine.

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The small group had only been walking for roughly two hours before the first major gust of wind forewarned them. It burst through the trees, from the canopy tops to their snow-covered roots. White powder shot up into the air and blasted towards them with a single purpose.

“Drop! Now!” Jace shouted, suiting action to words.

In the same instant, Ari shoved Eila to the ground and began shoveling snow overtop of her. “It’s a Seeker. It’s looking for body temperature readings and anything out of the ordinary. Cover yourselves in snow. Now!”

Just as she was doing for Eila, Cai dragged Ris to the ground and began packing the white fluff all around her. That is, until Ari practically tackled him to begin the same ministrations. Only afterwards did she attempt to burrow into the ground and cover herself in her own white blanket. Jace was the only one left to help her, though she didn’t seem to need it. Like a snake slithering through the foliage, Ari laid flat on her stomach and wriggled her way through the snow, taking care to sufficiently coat her face and hands. Her back was what she had the most trouble covering, but Jace seemed to appear out of a snow mound and get her covered at the very end of their three minute warning.

Lying with his face pressed into the snow, Cai had more trouble seeing than they did. Every time he opened his eyes, white powder dropped off of his lashes. It was just the kind of thing that made him

sick. Because this snow wasn't sticking well enough and another gust of wind like that would likely blow them all bare. And despite the fact that these men were working on behalf of his mother, and that he should want to go home to her, a nagging suspicion lingered in his mind to remind him that every person was a suspect. Anyone could want them dead.

Another blast came through the trees just then and he had the misfortune of having his eyes open at the time, making it seem as if someone had turned on a blow dryer directly in front of them. That's when he saw it. An incredible aircraft made for low-altitude hovering with a glossy black exterior and an underbelly coated with scanners. And his heart sunk.

Though Ari had proclaimed their main usage to be thermal detection, he knew what those scanners were capable of. Each one was like a miniature satellite camera. They could capture a name scrawled in tiny handwriting on the underside of a bridge, if that's what was required of them. To be hovering over them at such a low altitude—barely skimming the treetops—there was no way to miss the footprints or makeshift camp only a few hours back. No way to hide the fact that five people were buried in the snow in a desperate bid to mask themselves from such advanced technology. In short, they were doomed.

"Ari," Cai hissed, receiving an immediate shushing noise in return. Trying to smother his panic, Cai's eyes followed the magnificent Seeker. That's when he noticed the United Nations Security Administration seal on the side. There were no country of origin tags. Which meant this beast was specifically under his mother's authority.

"Ari," he tried again, earning a glare from Jace. "Ari, it saw us. We have to get out of here."

"Shut up," the soldier growled at him while his eyes never left the Seeker.

Feeling the pit opening in his stomach, Cai turned his head just slightly to catch the aircraft as it silently moved off further west. For several moments, they all watched as it drifted just a little further way. When the others felt as if they were finally able to breathe, however, Cai stayed frozen in his terror. Because he knew what they were yet willing to deny.

Then the Seeker turned around.

"Shit!" Jace snapped, springing to his feet. Ari, too, bounded to her feet and stared with wide eyes as the Seeker began to retrace its steps.

The other three scrambled to their feet a moment later, with a disapproving look from his twin.

"Stay still," she hissed.

"No," Cai snapped. "I've been trying to tell you. That thing is an image-capturing machine. A mobile satellite. It spotted us probably a kilometer away. We've got to get out of here." As he spoke, Cai was backing away into the trees, trying his hardest to find out the type of range available to the machine.

Jace's jaw clenched tightly as his eyes shot between each of them. Finally, he ordered, "Ari, lay low. I'm going to draw it off. When it's safe, you get them out of here." Even as he said it, he drew another firearm from his ankle holster and held it out to her.

Cai could see by the widening of her eyes that Ari was not at all game for this plan. Almost as if he were in her mind, he could see the thoughts on her face: she'd already left Jace once and he'd nearly died for it. But there was no time to decide and she snatched the gun from his hand and tucked it into her waistband.

"Get back down by the trees," she ordered. Ris and Cai both lowered themselves to the ground behind a wide pine. Eila, however, took a step towards Jace.

"They'll become suspicious if there's not at least two of us. I'll go with Jace."

"No," the soldiers growled in unison.

"Stop me," she said with a suggestive smile. Then she turned on her heel and bolted into the trees, heading north. Jace was off like a shot after her.

"Damn her!" Ari snapped before rounding on them. Finding them where she'd instructed, however, she had no choice but to sink to the ground beside them and wait it out.

Cai strained to see around the tree to where the other two had disappeared, but with Amaris on one side and Ari on the other, he had nothing to look at but the Seeker that was rapidly gaining on them. With every moment it glided nearer, he could feel his blood turning to ice. And when it paused right overtop of them, he knew that they were done for. Jace and Eila's distraction hadn't worked. But what terrified him most was that he didn't know what would happen now.

"Run," Ari breathed as her eyes remained locked on the stationary Seeker. When neither of them moved, she turned to shove his arm. "Cai, RUN!"

Just like that, all three of them were on their feet and bounding into

the woods in the opposite direction from where Jace and Eila had gone. Holding himself back from a full-on sprint, Cai made sure to keep pace with Ris, who was shorter and slower in comparison. Ari kept behind them, though her frustration and fear was like a living force, spurring them on into the unknown woods, just for the chance of escaping those that followed.

But there was no escape.

Before Cai had even lost sight of the giant Seeker, he could hear the tell-tale whir through the trees to the east. The sounds of great military machines whipping through the trees, stalking them like a lion would a gazelle. And just when the dull roar of their mighty engines was at its peak, Cai glanced to his left and felt himself pitching forward into the snow-laden ground.

Ari twisted behind him, coming face to face with a sleek black vehicle that was built specifically for ground pursuits. Narrow on the sides with a bulbous front end, Cai could imagine no more than three people were able to fit in the extraordinary machine. Like a mirror, the entire front reflected back their faces and he knew that it was the same type of tracking camera that the Seeker was equipped with. Which meant, for the very split second that it went from facing them to broadside, it was cataloguing every single detail of their faces.

In the quarter of a second that it took the vehicle to rotate, Ari had drawn her firearm. And as soon as the door on the side of the machine slid to the side, she released two deadly shots.

Cai's panicked eyes followed the man's body as it slumped out of the hovering craft. A lethal shot had hit his head while his brother had pierced the heart. Both wounds turned the snow crimson where he landed and Cai almost couldn't tear his eyes away.

"CAI RUN!" Amaris screamed as another man appeared in the opening, this time his gun already sending a barrage of bullets out into the forest.

Scrambling to his feet, Cai bolted to the nearest tree where Amaris was hiding. Then his eyes swiveled back to find his twin. Ari had run the opposite direction, back towards where the Seeker was still stationed. And as the bullets kept flying, she threw herself behind a tree to wait it out. They were all effectively pinned down.

Cai's eyes shot between Ari's tree and the man in the vehicle. His gaze was trained on where she had vanished, and so was his gun. He'd stopped shooting rapidly and was now just waiting for the moment that Ari would appear. Knowing his sister, Cai knew that she wasn't

stupid enough to comply with those wishes. Which meant they were stuck in a stalemate until the soldier's back-up arrived. And if that happened, they were done-for.

Turning to Ris, Cai gulped and mouthed the words, 'I'm sorry' to her. Before she could grasp its meaning, or his arm, Cai stepped from behind the tree. "Over here!" he shouted and the uniformed soldier swung his weapon in Cai's direction.

The shots were fired within seconds of each other. Frozen in place, Cai watched with panicked eyes as the soldier's head cocked to the right and a cloud of blood burst from his skull ... even as his finger contracted around the trigger.

Throwing himself to the side, the bullet raced through the air before cutting a path through Cai's left side, grazing a few ribs in the process. Letting loose an inarticulate cry, he scrambled back behind his tree with help from Ris. From a few meters away, he could hear Ari cussing up a storm and he almost had the urge to laugh. They were so alike ... but oh so different.

"Cai, Amaris, come here. Quickly," Ari called in a low voice.

Sucking in a breath between his teeth, Cai hoisted himself to his feet and followed Ris out into the opening where the vehicle still hovered. A shiver ran up his spine when he saw Ari digging through the dead men's pockets. Their guns were already tucked into the pockets of her cargo pants. With a suddenly vicious grin, Ari held up a pair of card-keys.

"Get in. We're going after Jace and Eila."

They needed no further motivation. They quickly followed after Ari and she helped them into the craft one at a time. Just as Cai had suspected, there was room enough only for three.

Shaped much like a child's drawing of a dragonfly, the front, bulbous portion of the vehicle held the controls whilst the rest of the body was so narrow that no seats were provided. On the left wall of the craft was a series of weapon controls—small missiles seemed to be stored in the belly of the beast and would be shot from the bottom revolver-style—and a loaded gun rack. And instead of seats, Cai and Ris were forced to stand on the narrow walkway, holding tight to the leather grips in the ceiling.

"Are you sure you can drive this thing?" Amaris called over the humming engine.

"No. But its system is similar to the Predator I was trained on. All the same, hold on tight," Ari remarked.

Then the craft spun around and they were speeding through the trees in order to find their missing comrades.

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After briefly acquainting herself with the system controls, Ari put the thing into full gear and sped through the trees. With its tiny size and excellent maneuverability skills, it swam through the trees like a fish in a coral reef. All the while, Ari kept trying to coax more speed and agility out of it. As if lives depended on it.

Only a few moments later, the Seeker was looming above them. Way above. During their skirmish, the great black beast had risen ever higher into the sky so as to keep an eye on both sets of fugitives. Somehow, it made the rage in her heighten to an unforgivable amount.

"Hang on tight," she called back, raising their dark vehicle out of the trees. They'd already seen her kill two men. Someone was already aware of what she'd done. So where could be the harm in doing this?

When she was of a reasonable altitude, she set the controls on hold. Their vehicle would remain stationary at that altitude until it was manually shut off. Which would be just enough time...

"Which of you can drive?" Ari asked as she clamored out of the command chair.

"Not me," Cai said, shaking his head as if the idea was unbelievable.

"I-I can," Amaris murmured, looking between Ari and the control panel.

"Good. I need you to sit there. Now, when I tell you, you're going to flick this switch and then ease this lever down. It'll take us back into the trees and we're going to continue north, in the direction of Eila and

Jace. Understand? As soon as you get comfortable with it, you can up the speed.”

“Okay, but what are we doing right now?”

Ari gave them both a stern expression. “I’m going to do something neither of you probably want to be a witness to. I suggest you close your eyes.” All four lids snapped shut in an instant and Ari turned to the weapons panel. Without another word, she located the two strongest missiles in the hold. Named Desmons after their creator, the short capsules could travel six hundred meters and never lose altitude. They were incredibly potent and had a short blast radius. Which is why they were preferred for smaller-grade combat. Like this.

She looked again at the hovering Seeker. Saw once more the emblazoned UNSA seal on its side. And smiled in grim satisfaction when she released the missiles.

Ari didn’t wait to see them strike, but instead ordered Amaris into cover as soon as possible. With a daring plunge, the vehicle flew down into the forest’s depths and became level with the ground once more. Shock waves blasted through the air above them as the vehicle traveled just beneath the struck Seeker. Amaris’s head tilted in that direction as though to get a better look, but Ari was glad to see that her eyes never actually left the speeding trees. Then, they were face to face with two more vehicles just like the one they were driving.

Hesitating just long enough to realize that Eila and Jace were being held at gun-point, Ari did the only thing she could think of. She dropped the dual machine guns on their rotating axis and opened fire. The first vehicle never stood a chance, and soon she had hit the fuel compartment as it attempted to run away.

Just as her attention was drawn to the other vehicle, however, she found Eila waving at her to stop and the gunfire ceased in an instant. After directing Amaris to set the machine down, she watched as Jace dragged the pilot of the other craft out into the open, a gun directing his movements. The breath she was holding released in a long exhale.

Twisting around, Ari quickly slid the door open and she leapt from the vehicle. Covering the distance in a hasty sprint, her arms were soon wrapped around Eila’s shoulders in a tight grip. And all the while she clung to the smaller girl, Ari berated her.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* think of doing something so stupid again. You could have been killed, or captured. Tortured. Damn it, Eila, you could have *died!*” The tears came unbidden, and Ari hid her face against her friend’s neck. All the while, the Irish pixie made shushing noises and

rubbed her back comfortingly.

"Relax, Ari. I'm okay. Nothing bad happened to me, alright."

"No. Not alright," she growled, lifting her head to glare at her friend. "You could have died. Just the strain could have killed you. Don't you understand that?"

"But I *didn't*. Ari, I'm fine. If that didn't kill me, I think it's safe to say that I'm going to live just as long as anyone else."

"What are we talking about? What's going on?" Cai asked as he appeared at Ari's shoulder.

"Nothing," Eila shot out hastily before Ari had time to explain.

Ari shot her another glare before wiping the remnants of her worry from her eyes. When she looked around her once more, it was to find Jace staring at her with an unreadable expression. Being a doctor, she had a feeling he'd caught onto their conversation better than the others. By the set of his features, however, he was blatantly sending the message that now was neither the time nor the place for their conversation.

Nodding just slightly to him, as if she understood the mental commands he was sending, Ari turned to her twin. "Cai, come with me. We have to see if there were any survivors in the other vehicle."

Together, they approached the wreckage that was still smoldering not too far away. Even as they approached, Ari knew no one had survived. With the two machine guns peppering the sides at an unforgivable rate and in such close patterns, it came as no surprise when she saw the blood leaking out from the damaged sliding door. And when Cai helped her to shove it open, she had to take a deep breath as they were met with sightless blue eyes.

For a moment, Ari felt nothing. She took in the two masculine bodies, the blood, and the damage as if it were all related to someone else. As if she were outside of it all. Her gaze slid over the machine in search of a threat, first and foremost. Finding none, her eyes slid back to the body that had greeted them.

Spent bullets littered the floor of the craft; most of them coated in the blood that still oozed from the bodies. The men, themselves, were torn apart by the machine guns' vengeance. While the man in the back mostly had his torso peppered through, the face of the driver was unrecognizable for the damage it had sustained—from bullet and glass alike. When she had opened fire, she'd done more than take down a machine.

She had killed two men.

Ari had opened fire on an unsuspecting craft without giving them any warning or chance of survival. Two men had died for it here. But how many had been aboard the Seeker? Were there any survivors there? How many dead? How many men and women had lost their lives because of her? How many had she killed?

Unaware of the shaking until now, Ari collapsed against the side of the crashed vehicle as her legs attempted to give out. The blue eyes stared back accusingly, causing her to choke on her own sob. She couldn't tear her eyes away as the reality crashed over her. Not even to look at the black cloud to the south and wonder how many were dragging themselves from the debris of the Seeker's final moments.

"Ari?" Cai asked, approaching her quickly. When he saw her body convulsing in half-formed sobs, he threw his arms around her in a tight hold.

"Leave me alone!" she snarled, shoving him away from her.

Cai stepped back and Ari immediately sank to her knees. Wrapping her arms across her chest, she folded over on herself and attempted to control the hysterical sobs. The faces of the two men were plastered against her eyelids and the unknown horror of what she'd done before mounted up in a feverish frenzy. And it was all her fault. All of those lives... The destruction...

Suddenly, a single gunshot split the air, causing her head to snap up. Trembling like a leaf, Ari forced herself to her feet and she haphazardly lunged around the side of the decimated vehicle, back towards the group. She staggered right into Jace's waiting arms.

They wrapped around her in a tight embrace that was restrictive and unyielding. Even as Ari tried to push him away, he held even tighter to her. Any demands she would have made were incapable of escape, as she was still sobbing more than speaking. Her fear and her anguish were disrupting everything about her, and her heart pounded so loudly that she could barely hear above it.

Jace ignored her protests and squirming and lifted her up into his arms. His arms formed as tight a hold as before, leaving escape impossible. Not that she was sure she could manage it. She could still feel the trembling of shock shooting through her entire body. Weak and unstable. And a murderer.

With her head against his chest, it still seemed amazing that Ari could hear Jace's voice over the pounding beat of her heart. Sergeant that he was, it didn't surprise her as she heard the orders he attached to the others. And as the tears traveled unchallenged down her cheeks,

she couldn't find her voice enough to argue with anything he said.

"Amaris, you can drive one of these? Good. You'll take Cai and Eila in one. I'll take Ari in the other."

He stopped speaking for a moment and Ari thought she could make out Eila's voice saying, "I should stay with Ari."

"No," Jace answered. "I'm sorry, Eila. But this is something she'll need time alone for. Give her that, please?"

Nothing more was said and Ari didn't open her eyes to see the others' reactions. Not that she'd be able to see beyond the specters that would continue to haunt her. For now, at least, she could wallow in her grief and her guilt. She would let Jace be the leader and make all of the decisions she was incapable of making. He could be their savior, and she could be the murderer. For as long as it took.

Jace took her to one of the small vehicles and laid her down on the narrow strip in the back. She didn't even try to stand. It wasn't worth it. So she just rolled over, bringing her knees as close to her chest as she could manage. A moment later, Jace took his place in the driver's seat and they were leaving the scene of disaster far behind them.

January 2, 2358

Stalker A

America

Ari was okay with being depressed. For hours, it suited her just to lie on the floor of the vehicle and drown in her own misery. The images kept exchanging places in her mind. Bullets and blood. Glass and bone. Blue eyes and tattered clothes. She was okay with seeing the images hour after hour and knowing fully the horror that she had caused. It was just as well to wonder if they had families and other lives depending on theirs. To know fully all of the damage she had wrought, simply by being upset and in a position of power.

Eventually, the lesson emerged and the tears stopped. She could not undo the past. But she could damn well make sure it never happened again.

Allowing herself to wallow just a bit longer, Ari finally sat up about three hours into the drive. Jace showed no signs of having noticed, but she was sure it was a ruse. Leaning against the door, she watched the back of his head for a while and comforted herself with the fact that he was there. That she wasn't responsible for his death, too.

"Where are the others?" she croaked in a voice gone dry from

disuse.

"Right behind us. Amaris is driving the other Stalker."

"That's what these things are called?"

"Yes."

A silence threatened, looming over her like a cougar ready to pounce. She couldn't let that happen. If she didn't get it out now, it would never be said. The result would be a festering wound left to throb inside of her for the rest of her life.

"I killed them," she whispered in a voice barely audible over the humming engine.

"Yes," Jace forced out through his teeth.

"They didn't do anything to me. And I killed them."

"No," he growled. "You were attacked and felt the need to defend yourself and those under your protection. You had every right, Ari."

"With the first two, maybe," she snapped back. "But the Seeker? The two men in the Stalker? They did nothing to me."

Jace's head shook from side to side. Then he reached up to the headset he wore and clicked on the microphone. "Stalker A to Stalker B. Taking landing measures. Follow appropriately."

Through the speaker, Ari could hear Amaris answer an appropriate code in the affirmative. Then she felt the Stalker beginning to set down. And as soon as the engine was cut, Jace twisted around in his chair and grabbed hold of both her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Ari. I'm sorry that this had to be your first. That this had to happen at all. I am truly, terribly sorry for the burden you must now carry for the rest of your life. But I'm not sorry that you did it. Any of it."

Ari shook her head and lowered her eyes. In response, Jace grabbed her chin and guided her face until it was within a few inches of his own. When her eyes finally rose to meet his, he let go of her.

"What would have happened, Ari, if you didn't destroy the Seeker? If you hadn't opened fire on the Stalker? Where would we all be right now?"

"In custody. The Seeker would have called in reinforcements to take care of me and Cai. The other Stalkers already had you and Eila." Her voice was thick as she answered and she quickly wiped a sleeve over her eyes.

"Exactly. Even had I found a way to escape from two Stalkers with Eila, there would still have been a Seeker monitoring all of our movements. Cai was right about that much, at least: that was no

ordinary Seeker. We wouldn't have stood a chance.

"When you destroyed that Seeker, Ari, you took a lot of lives. But you did it for the sake of keeping us safe. You did it to save the life of the Supreme Commander's son. No one can blame you for that."

"I can."

Jace nodded slowly to himself before his eyes lit with shrewd knowledge. "But would you change it?"

Ari knew the answer as soon as the question left his lips. "No. I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because they were a threat. Because our lives were in danger. Because they were trying to kill us. And if I hadn't killed them, none of us would probably be alive right now."

"Exactly."

Ari closed her eyes and saw the faces all over again. In a voice that was wretched and broken, she asked, "Will they ever go away? Will I ever stop seeing them?"

This time, she didn't fight as Jace wrapped his arms around her. His silence was all the answer she needed and the tears came again. Less intense than before, but no less meaningful.

Yes, she had taken many lives. No, she did not regret a single one. Her family was threatened, and she'd protected them. There was nothing for her to feel sorry over. And she would never suffer like this again.

January 2, 2358
Mid-West
America

An hour had already passed since they landed and Ari and Jace had yet to leave their Stalker. Cai wasn't sure why that bothered him so much, but he couldn't keep himself from glancing at the vehicle every few minutes. It certainly didn't help that the outer glass was completely opaque, making it impossible to see inside and know what was going on. Then again, maybe he didn't want to know.

"Cai, relax. I'm sure she'll be fine," Ris cut through his thoughts.

Shaking his head slowly, he turned to try and smile at his best friend. As if this were all perfectly normal. But it wasn't, and he couldn't do as she asked. After all, she hadn't seen Ari like that. She couldn't understand what was happening to her right now. Then again, neither could he.

"At least she has him," he forced out, though the thought was less welcome than it should have been.

"Yes it is," Eila replied as she returned to the camp with an armful of firewood. "So what are you two doing?"

Cai and Ris exchanged a glance. "What do you mean?"

Eila gave them Ari's one-sided smirk. "Are you going to help set up camp or what? There has to be emergency supplies in these things. We might as well find out what kind of goodies we have to work with."

Ris turned to him and shrugged. Then she turned back to the Stalker and climbed up onto the narrow platform. Beneath the weapons controls, she found another sliding panel that revealed an emergency

medical kit. If it weren't for the fact that Jace had treated Ari's wounds forty minutes ago, he would have snatched at it and doctored up his own aching side.

Besides the med kit, a fireproof blanket was found alongside some packaged food. Towards the rear of the vehicle, where it tapered into the pointed tail, another compartment was found containing two life preservers that doubled as parachutes, just in case the vehicle ran into any vicious storms or was destroyed over water. They also found a collapsible tent that Amaris was eager to get her hands on.

"This is all I need for a good night's sleep," she announced as she took her loot and scrambled out of the Stalker.

Cai chuckled as he followed. Even Eila smiled at the declaration. With a conspiratorial smirk, he stage-whispered to Eila, "This from the girl who needed exactly six pillows to sleep in a queen sized bed."

"You mean when I actually make it to bed. Most of the time we crash on the couch," Ris shot back.

"We play a lot of video games," he explained when Eila shot him a suggestive look.

Amaris glanced over her shoulder at him, but her expression was unreadable. And her reply was like a slap to the face.

"Yes. When we're not playing politics."

Cai forced a smile. "Well, you can't beat a game with that many complexities. Where's the challenge, otherwise?" That earned a half-assed smirk from her.

From the corner of his eye, Cai could see Eila shooting looks back and forth between them. Then she stepped up to Ris and held out her hand for the tent. "Can't be that difficult to set up a tent, right? Especially an emergency one..." He had to keep from laughing as they both looked at the small package like it was going to bite them.

Just as they were about to unzip the canvas bag, the door to the other Stalker slid open and Jace hopped out. All eyes zeroed in on Ari as she stepped out of the vehicle. Her hand immediately found its way to the back of her neck.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Eila—always Eila—stepped away from Ris and hurried to throw her arms around her best friend. They didn't say anything. Just held each other for a few minutes more. But the one movement was enough to break the spell.

"Here, let me help. Then I'll set up the other one," Jace said as he approached Amaris. She seemed pleased with the distraction as she held the tent out to him and aided him in setting up the primitive

shelter.

Cai didn't bother helping. Instead, he stood there and stared at his twin, unsure of what to do. Go to her? Hug her? Simple enough for a brother ... if they actually knew one another. But the urge to comfort her was strong and he couldn't help drifting through the snow to stand beside her.

In the blink of an eye, Ari released Eila, stepped to the side and then proceeded to throw her arms around his neck. Almost as if she knew he needed it more than she probably did. Because he had to be sure she was okay.

They didn't stand like that for long, as neither one was exactly used to physical attention. When they broke apart, however, there was only enough space between them so that they could thoroughly examine one another. As a sort of after-thought, Ari stepped close again to look at the wound that mirrored her own. Cai smiled at her when she saw that it had been treated as hers had, just without the physical proof of alcohol or bandages. She tried to smile back.

This time he didn't hesitate as he wrapped his arms around her once more. This time, she needed it more than he did. Because she wasn't okay, and he might be able to help. Somehow.

A minute later, she stepped back and turned to look at Jace. "We need food. Someone has to go hunting."

"I will," he said without looking at her while Ris unloaded the second tent.

"I'm coming with you."

"You are staying here. You're tired and you've pushed yourself too far. I need you to get some rest if we're going to make it to Zenith tomorrow."

Cai's eyes whipped around to study Jace, as did everyone else's. The soldier must have sensed the questions hanging heavy in the air, but he didn't raise his eyes to them until he finished his task. When he did answer them, he was speaking only to Ari. As he'd been doing pretty much from the moment he returned.

"I brought us further west. Outside of the major cities, the Seekers must be tight and more Stalkers are probably scouring the forests as if someone kicked a hornet's nest. We won't make it near Valor and we're certainly not going to make it to Genesis in these things without being spotted and stopped."

"Agreed. But Zenith has its own problems for us to encounter," Ari replied.

"But they're far less formidable. If you drive the one Stalker and I drive the other, we'll know how to respond if we get radioed by their security. They'll know what's going on in the other cities, but they won't have forces like the others do. If we're lucky, they won't even have a Seeker at their disposal at the moment. Which means we can go in, gather supplies, and sneak a more consumer-friendly ride back to Genesis."

"Why Genesis?" Amaris asked.

"Because that's where our families are. And while they're all probably being held and questioned, there are ways for certain individuals to skate around the perimeter and make sure they're alright."

"That's where our answers are, too," Cai said, meeting the sergeant's sharp gaze with a hard look of his own. He would not forget that it was this man's mother who was the key to the threats to Cai and Ari. No matter how much Jace would disapprove, they had to speak with Doctor Lita Naois. And this time she wouldn't be allowed to turn her nose away from them.

As they were staring one another down, Eila suddenly rounded on Ari. "If you even *think* of ditching me when we get there, I will douse you in so much femininity you will have pink silk and pearls spilling out your ears. Every single dress I've ever wanted to see you in. Every 'gaudy' piece of jewelry. And makeup! Lots and lots of makeup."

Unable to help himself, Cai turned his eyes to see that Eila was standing toe-to-toe with his twin, glaring up at her and a pointed finger shoved in her face. Ari's eyebrows were raised and a small smile was curving the corner of her lips that she was failing to dispel. Though the threat clearly amused her, there was still worry rolling off of her in waves.

Cai had just opened his mouth to ask when Jace stepped into the scene. His teeth clicked shut and he watched with the same carefully blank facade as his twin when the soldier gently touched Eila's elbow. Jace leaned close to whisper something in her ear. Eila sighed, lowered her hand, and nodded before turning and walking out of their little camp with him. Neither Cai nor Ari took their eyes away before they disappeared from view.

When his eyes did snap back, it was to find Amaris standing with her hip cocked to the side and her arms crossed over her chest. Her eyes said it all. They were accusing as well as monitoring his reactions. It was a look he'd seen very few times, but they had always involved

his twin. It was the look that said, *'You don't even know her, and yet you'll do anything for her.'*

She was right. He would. Because he and Ari were one in the same, and whatever happened to one of them would always affect the other. Of that, he was absolutely certain.

Ris saw that. Saw it and hated it with all of her being. Rage flashed in her brown eyes and she spun on her heel, heading for the opposite side of the camp from Jace and Eila. Cai hesitated just long enough to glance at Ari. Her confused expression met his, but then she jerked her head after his best friend. He needed no more encouragement than to bound into the trees after her.

"Ris! Wait up. Come on. Talk to me," he pleaded as he fell into step behind her. Getting too close was asking for a beating he wasn't about to take.

"Cai, I've been trying to talk to you our whole damn lives. If you haven't listened before, why should I believe you'll start now," she said as she tramped through the trees, sounding like she was stepping on every snapping branch she could.

"I have listened, Ris! Damn it, you know I listen to you. I sure as hell don't listen to anybody else," he countered, finally coming to a stop. He knew her, too. And if he stopped chasing, she'd stop running.

Amaris came to a halt not a second after she stopped hearing him behind her. Cai waited as she took a deep breath and released it. Turning slowly, her furious caramel eyes bored into his, both of her hands fisted at her sides.

"Repeat it. Any tiny bit of it that I've tried to tell you over and over again. Go ahead," she dared.

He took a cautious step forward. "You think that I don't care about anyone else but my twin. You're so sure that everything I do will be about Ari. That I would do anything for her. And you're right. Because she's a part of me."

Ris threw up her hands and turned away just as he was close enough to grab her. Clamping his hands around her upper arms, he twisted her back to face him. Then he smiled.

"But it's not because I'm living for her. It's not what we always thought it was, Ris. I don't have to try so damn hard to live for someone else anymore. That hole in my chest I've been carrying around doesn't exist anymore. And I'm not afraid.

"That's because of *you*. I have you here, with me and her and them, and I am *happy*. Despite being hunted and shot at, I have this

experience and I have you *and* Ari. You're a part of me, Ris. A whole lifetime of you is stored somewhere in that hole, patching it up as best you can.

"I know you think that I'm going to change, and you're right there. But I hope it's for the better. And I hope you're there to help me be better. Please? Don't walk away from me."

She stared up at him, her lighter eyes dashing between each of his dark orbs. Then she raised a hand and placed it on the left side of his chest. His heart picked up a beat at her touch, but he swallowed the emotions as he waited her out.

Suddenly, her fingers fisted in his thick coat and she was glaring up at him again. "That's *your* heart beneath my hand, Cai Balere. Not half of it. All of it. You and Ari may share a lot, but you're not the same person. And I can't have you thinking that, or it will kill me. Understand?"

He nodded and her lips tightened into a thin line. "Say it," she demanded. "Say that you know it. Tell me that you're thinking about something other than her. And if you can't say it, then I walk. I'd rather die out here, alone, than go back there and watch you turn into *half* a person. I won't do it. I can't."

Somehow, Cai had to stop her ranting. So he did the only thing he could think of. Pulling her closer, he placed his lips against hers in a hasty kiss that was far too timid. It didn't stay that way. The moment Ris figured out what was happening, both hands were fisted in his coat and she was throwing herself into their first kiss. Almost as if she'd been waiting for it as long as he had.

A minute later, they broke apart and watched as their breath flew into the icy air, grins wide on both of their faces. Then he leaned his forehead against hers and whispered, "I'm thinking of *you*, Ris."

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January 2, 2358
Mid-West
America

Cai didn't know how long he and Amaris stayed out in the woods, away from the group. One kiss was liable to cause more issues that needed resolving than not. As it was, when they stepped apart and stared at one another for a long moment, he knew that it was one of those times where he would have no choice but to sit down and talk about it. Instead, Ris grabbed his coat again and pulled him into another breathless kiss.

They didn't talk about it. No need. Being friends for so long certainly had its advantages. What wasn't said in words was expressed in every desperate meeting of their lips. The way their hands clung to one another. In the looks they shared when they paused for breath. There was nothing he could say that hadn't already been conveyed, so they said nothing at all.

When they finally emerged from their own reality, it was to realize that the temperature was dropping rapidly and everything around them was growing darker. With a grin, Cai held his hand out to his friend and they began walking back to their makeshift camp. And as soon as they emerged from the trees, Eila and Ari looked at them with knowing expressions.

Neither Ris nor Cai said anything to validate the hand-holding as they approached the small fire the girls were sitting beside. With the way Ari and Eila were grinning, not much explanation seemed to be needed anyway. Though there was one set of scrupulous eyes

missing...

"Jace went hunting. I'm charged with babysitting Ari," Eila informed him as his eyes did a quick sweep of the campground.

Ari's smile was bitter as she announced, "He thinks it's too early for me to kill an innocent animal after taking human lives. Or he's just afraid I've gone a little bloodthirsty."

Cai snorted as he and Ris sat beside the fire, completing a small circle. "Which one is the reason you agreed to stay?"

"The first one. But we're not telling him that."

"So what did he want to talk to you about, Eila? Before we ... left," Ris asked.

Cai thought it admirable that they managed to avoid exchanging a glance before Eila replied, "Nothing in particular. Just set me my task and asked me to keep an eye on Ari." Just as he was about to call her on the lie, he caught Ari's subtle shake of the head.

For a moment, an awkward silence threatened. Though he'd learned a lot about Ari in the past day, it still wasn't enough. Which also meant he probably hadn't shared enough of himself with her. Plus there was Eila and Amaris to consider. It was a circle of strangers and no one knew how to lessen that fact.

As if she were reading his mind, Ris sighed, "I feel like we need to have a sharing hour just to figure out who everyone is."

"And what we are to each other," Eila responded as if her mind were running on the same track.

"And what we've all been through since this started," Ari added.

"And how we figured it all out," Cai finished.

They all gave each other tiny, knowing smiles. Then the real discussions began. It started with how they met, where their friendships started, and their school years. For himself, Cai didn't have much to say, but the level of overprotectiveness which his mother forced on him seemed to be a point of mild fascination to his sister. He was just as awed at the level of freedom she retained once she moved to Genesis. His mother would freak if he suggested going around an entire city on public transportation by himself. And after an hour or so, the conversation finally circled back to how they learned about one another.

"Funny, all it took was a picture and you both were hot on the scent," Eila said as she added more wood to the fire.

"Hmph. Obsessed couldn't begin to describe it," Ris told her.

"Ari, too. Wouldn't know relaxation if it bit her on the ass."

"Sorry, being stabbed sort of does away with my ability to calm down," Ari snorted.

"It was before then and you know it. Even Jace couldn't put a dent in that one."

Cai could barely believe it himself when he asked, "So what is the deal with Jace?"

In an instant, Ari's gaze had dropped to the flames and she started to poke at the logs with a stick. "What do you mean?" she asked in a voice that sounded almost casual.

"Nothing. Just that he's always there when you need him. Must be nice." Ris dug an elbow into his side and he cringed at how forced his voice sounded.

Ari didn't seem to notice. Still staring into the fire, she shrugged. "Yeah. Weird coincidence sometimes. Though the lightning storm definitely took the cake. They blow up so fast around here, and you never know if it's just going to be high winds or lashing rain. Lightning is the deadliest and I heard there were eight crashes that night in the North quadrant. Would have been more if Jace hadn't stood guard in front of the door making sure no one could leave."

"He's been given 'hero' status since then," Eila assured them with a grin, and a knowing look for Ari. "Especially since it was mostly my party guests he saved. There were certain to be at least a few idiots who tried to drive home regardless of the storm."

"No, that night he earned me calling him out on being a soldier. Hero status didn't come in until he shot the man trying to kill me. And now he's earned it double over after saving Cai."

"Saving me saved you. I really don't think he was considering me the victim there," Cai said with a smirk. Though Jace had a tendency to irritate, it was actually really amusing watching Ari's reaction whenever they said his name. Which helped to clear the air a little, since Eila was staring avidly at her friend with the most conspiratorial smile he'd ever seen.

Ari didn't notice; she was busy shooting Cai a glare. At the same time, a hand unconsciously went to the wound they'd received that night. Cai's actions mimicked hers before he could stop himself.

"We hang out together much more often, and he won't be able to stop himself from thinking of both of us as victims. Despite me having been trained, the stab wound already set my place in his mind."

"It did not," scoffed a voice at the edge of the camp. "And so far, Cai's been grazed twice and you've been stabbed once. He holds the

most points for victim status in my book.”

Cai barely controlled the scowl as the four of them turned to follow Jace’s path back into the firelight. A leather bundle was swinging at his side and Cai felt the urge to vomit as he realized that it was made of fresh rabbit hides. In an instant, Ari was on her feet.

They moved in a way that was almost synchronized. Jace handed the bundle to Ari and she dropped to the ground beside the fire while he went and cut a long branch from an overhanging tree. Everyone averted their gaze when Ari peeled back the hides to showcase two bloody carcasses. Which caused both soldiers to chuckle a bit.

“How about I tell you guys when it’s done?” Ari said as she removed her K-bar from her pocket.

“Sounds good,” Ris said, leaping to her feet, still holding tight to Cai’s hand.

Torn between wanting to do something useful but also hold in the meager contents of his stomach, Cai followed Ris. Eila was already digging around in one of the tents, pulling blankets from Jace’s bag. Handing a few to Cai and Ris, they agreed to set up the beds in each tent. They had just finished spreading out the last blanket when Eila clambered into the tent with them.

“What are you—?”

“Sh! You can’t expect me to play third wheel to the two of them, and it’ll look suspicious if I stay in my own tent with nothing to do. Oh don’t give me that look, you guys will have all night to cuddle up and kiss on each other. Jace certainly won’t switch off shifts, so this is the only chance he’ll have to make a move.”

“And you hiding in here whispering away to the two of us isn’t suspicious at all?” Ris hissed back.

“Come up with a different topic and I won’t have to keep my voice down.”

“You’re really pulling for the two of them, aren’t you?” Cai asked in his own low voice.

“Of course. Have you not seen the way they look at each other? It’s bound to happen eventually.”

“Eila, he’s like six years older than her.”

“Five. And she isn’t a minor anymore, as of yesterday. Which means there’s nothing at all wrong with her finally getting a boyfriend.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want one,” he suggested, Ari’s own admission ringing in his ears. At the same time, he remembered the jealousy in her face when Jace had woken Eila.

Ris and Eila were both giving him a disbelieving look. "Cai, we've known her all of two days, and even I know that they're into one another."

"Should have seen him before I sent Ari to that dinner. I thought his jaw would hit the floor," Eila snickered to her.

"You know we have bigger things to worry about than Ari's relationship status, right?" he tried again.

Eila scoffed. "Yes, because the two of you weren't having a melodrama of your own a couple of hours ago. I get it. Everyone is out to kill you. So you should deny yourselves the small pleasures of life and just trudge on with nothing but the seriousness which the situation demands, is that it? Well, news flash, Ari has been dealing with this for months. She signed herself up for bootcamp just so she could protect you. And even though those two like to fight like cats and dogs, it's their own little version of courtship. Despite my charming personality and the wonder which she feels in finally finding you, that man out there is the best shot for our girl to be happy. Accept it already."

Cai couldn't stop the words. "Well what if I don't like him?"

"Brother for a few months. Sister for years. My opinion trumps yours, and you can just deal with that too."

Before he could shoot back another retort, Ris burst into laughter. Cai looked at her for a minute, and then started laughing himself. Eila, apparently willing to find it just as amusing, started to giggle alongside of them. And that is what Ari interrupted when she announced that it was time for dinner.

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January 2, 2358
Mid-West
America

Ari attempted to sleep for at least an hour after it was decided that they should all get some sleep. Beside her, Eila was already deep in dreamland, and she knew Cai and Amaris were curled up nice and close in the other tent. Which left her and Jace wide awake. At least he had a job to do to occupy him.

One more failed attempt and she was on her feet and slipping out of the tent into the cold January night. The fire was burning low—no more than a bed of hot coals—since no one had need of it. Jace had taken up a position outside of its light and warmth so that his eyes would be automatically adjusted to the night in the forest. If anyone were to attempt sneaking up on them, he would know.

Crossing the space as silently as possible, Ari wrapped her blanket tighter around her as she sat beside him. “Can’t sleep,” she answered just as he opened his mouth to ask.

Jace raised an eyebrow at her before his eyes flickered to the other tent. “Doesn’t that usually mean...”

Ari shook her head. “Not always. After all, we were in completely separate time zones most of our lives. Besides, even if it did, do you think he’d move?”

A smile pulled at his lips. “Well I know I wouldn’t, given a similar position.”

Before she could stop herself, her eyes shot to the tent where Eila slept soundly. “I can take a watch, you know. You should get some

rest.”

One look at her face and he shook his head. “I told you earlier, Keir, I need you fully functional tomorrow. Go back to bed.” As a point, he shifted his right arm against her shoulder and pointed with his chin.

Crinkling her nose up at him, Ari shoved back just as lightly. “If I could, I would. But that time-out in the Stalker let my mind mellow to the point where sleep seems impossible without full-on exhaustion,” she explained in a low whisper.

“You don’t know if you don’t try.”

“I’ve *been* trying,” she hissed. “And don’t talk to me about needing sleep when you’ll be flying the other Stalker tomorrow, but you won’t let anyone else take a watch tonight. You’ve had only a few hours of sleep, same as me and Cai.”

Jace grinned at her, pushing again with his shoulder. “You haven’t been trained for it like I have.”

Ari snorted. “I went through bootcamp too, you know. And had a brother living across an ocean for most of our lives, leaving me with the most erratic sleeping pattern imaginable.”

“You were given the crash-course in bootcamp. Despite what you think, you’ve a lot left to learn. And now that you and Cai are in closer quarters, your sleeping pattern is likely shot since you’ll both be trying to sleep at the same time now.”

Ari screwed her nose up at him again. “It’s not dead yet and I’ll probably be good for another day now.”

“I call bullshit. Seriously Ari, go back to bed. Please?”

Rolling her eyes, Ari laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. “There. Will this shut you up?”

Jace couldn’t help the laugh that rolled through him. “Only if you manage to go to sleep.”

“Stop laughing and I might have a decent chance at it,” she muttered around a yawn.

He stopped in an instant, going perfectly still so that he wouldn’t jostle her. True to her word, Ari attempted to fall asleep one more time. And either it was the heat from his body being so close to hers, or the fact that she felt comfortable leaning on his shoulder, but it seemed like she’d actually get some form of rest out of that moment.

Just as her thoughts were spiraling down to the point where she wouldn’t be forced to think about anything else, they suddenly latched onto the open blue eyes of the man she’d murdered and she jerked upright. Her heart was hammering in her chest as her eyes

automatically searched the night, afraid that some phantom would be looming over her. Beside her, Jace didn't move except to take her hand in his, fingers lacing together in a tight, comforting grip.

"Relax, Ari. It's just us out here."

Clenching her teeth together, Ari nodded. After she lowered her head back down to his shoulder, she didn't dare close her eyes. Instead, they darted through the trees, alert and wary for any more alarms. Before this was over, her nerves were going to be shot, she knew.

"Close your eyes. Think about something else," Jace suggested, his lips brushing the top of her head.

"I can't."

"Try."

"Would if I could. And even if it works, I'm just going to start freaking out about something else. What are we going to do, Jace?"

"Stop worrying, for starters. We're safe for now. Alive and healthy, all of us. That's enough to think about for right now."

"And tomorrow? Will we all be safe, healthy, and alive then?"

"We'll find out tomorrow. There's nothing we can do about it right now, Keir, so there's no point in worrying about it."

"You saying it doesn't stop me from doing it," she grumbled.

Jace smiled. "Even if it's an order?"

Ari's lips tugged into a small grin at that. "Since when do I follow *your* orders?"

A low chuckle rumbled through him and Ari's smile grew a little more. If they could just keep talking like this, maybe her waking nightmares would go away. It was worth a shot.

"Honestly, I think the only person whose orders you follow without question are Eila's."

"Eh, Rodgers found me biddable enough," she said with a shrug. Again he chuckled.

"So it's just me you rail against?"

"No. You're just one of the many I ignore."

"Thanks," he muttered in a faux reproachful voice.

"At least I take your instructions under advisement," she teased, turning her head a little to get a better look at his face.

Though it was dark, she could just make out the smile on his face. It was the kind of expression to make her feel warm inside. There was very little mirth in it, but there was a lot of something else. Something she couldn't quite identify but which made her look away without

trying.

"That supposed to make me feel better?"

"Little bit."

Jace's laughter rolled through him silently, shaking his shoulders a bit. Then it was all shut down with one deep breath and a long, low exhale. Ari could feel his face turn so that his lips were buried in her short hair once more. Against the top of her head he whispered, "You need to sleep now. I need my right hand coherent tomorrow. Especially when I'm not."

Ari didn't move, but closed her eyes with her head still placed on his shoulder. She doubted he could understand that she was more comfortable here—sitting up against a tree with her head on his shoulder—than she'd been curled up beneath the blankets with Eila. Maybe it was him.

"Ari," Jace said in a warning tone.

"Sh. I'm trying to sleep," she muttered back before she yawned again.

He shifted his shoulder beneath her head. "Go back to bed."

"No," she grumbled back, unable to halt the grin.

A brief moment of silence passed before he said, "Fine."

An instant later, her head snapped up as he lifted his arm. Just as she opened her mouth to protest, the same arm wrapped around behind her shoulders and dragged her against him. Shutting her mouth, Ari didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable as she curled into his side. With her head resting against his chest, she felt like his heartbeat and steady breathing might be the only lullaby she needed to get through the rest of the night.

The visions wouldn't go away, however. Even when she tried to shove them back down, they were replaced only by the fears that continued to swarm around their little band. Everything was falling apart. There was nowhere safe for them to go. And even the answers they might uncover seemed like they would get them only into more trouble. Was it even worth it? Couldn't they just find a way to disappear and never face anyone ever again? Even if it was just her and Cai, that would be enough. Once the thought entered her mind, she shook her head, knowing it was false.

"Talk to me," she croaked, knowing that something had to distract her. Somehow.

"What about?"

"I don't know. Anything. Just ... distract me. Please?"

Jace was silent for a minute before he asked hesitantly, "Anything?"

"I don't care, Jace. Just talk to me."

"Okay... I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"For taking care of Cai and the girls. For getting them out of there and not waiting for me. Don't look at me like that, Ari. I really am proud of you. If you'd waited, chances are you and Cai would have been snuck out in body bags and I would never know what happened to you. You did what you were supposed to do and I'm grateful."

"I left you behind. How are you okay with that?"

Again his lips came to rest on the top of her head before he murmured, "Because I can take care of myself. They've only got you. And you did the right thing. I mean that, Ari."

"Thanks. For everything," she sighed, closing her eyes and not seeing the specters of those she killed.

Instead she saw Cai and Amaris at the dinner. Eila in her party dress, beaming at her as she forced Ari to change shoes and earrings. Jace, dressed in his impeccable military uniform. She didn't see the lives she took, but the ones she saved. And that was worth everything she had to do right up until this moment.

A few moments of silence passed and she was already half asleep. That's when he asked, "Are you sleeping now?"

"Almost there," she replied in a voice barely above a whisper. Something she wouldn't remember come morning.

"Good," he whispered back. Then he was shifting position just slightly and Ari felt a little miffed at being jostled, though not enough to where she opened her eyes.

"What's that?" she asked as Jace placed an object into her right hand and she opened one eye.

"Happy Birthday, Keir."

Opening her other eye, Ari almost felt wide awake when she saw the dog tag. Just like his, it had her name engraved on one side and the United Nations Military seal on the flip side. Then her head jerked back so that she could stare at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"You'll get the other tag when you're official. But I figured there was no harm in giving you this one now."

Her eyes traveled from his to the tag in her hand and then back to his at least three times. Then, before she could stop herself, she twisted around and threw her arms around his neck. Despite all the wondering and questions roaming through her head, Ari didn't ask him a thing.

When she felt his arms go around her, there was literally nothing more that she wanted than to stay in that moment forever.

“Thank you, Jace. It’s perfect,” she whispered when she finally let go.

He didn’t say anything as he took the tag from her hand and draped it over her head. Then he smiled and gently pulled her back into his side. “You’re welcome. Now go to sleep.”

Ari almost snorted as she curled back into his side, feeling his arm fall over her back. Still, this time she did as he asked without question. Her eyes closed even as she kept a hand wrapped tightly around the dog tag that marked her as something close to the animal he was. Something so different from the rest of society that they couldn’t even bear to be around them for long. It was a reminder more than anything that, lethal as she was, she was a protector. Official or not, it was her job to take care of other people. And it was a duty she couldn’t be more proud of.

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Mid-West
America

When Cai woke, it was with a lazy smile as his eyes fell upon the woman beside him. Though he had been restless most of the night, his arms had never released their hold on Amaris. Even in that moment, he debated closing his eyes and pretending that there was no need to move. If not for the demands of the body, he was certain to get away with it.

As it was, Cai stifled a yawn and attempted to slip away. Ris caught hold of his hand before he could ease the blanket off of him. In her too-tired-to-be-coherent voice, she grumbled something he roughly translated as, "Time to up?"

Unable to help himself, he chuckled and kissed her temple. "Yes, it's time to *up*," he teased.

The only reply he earned himself was her burrowing further into the blankets as she released his arm. He left her alone. She could have as much sleep as he could buy her, no matter what the soldier said.

Cai paid little attention to anything as he left his tent and stumbled towards the trees. After dealing with his personal business, he reentered camp with the fervent hope that he would never have to spend another night outside in his life. There was nothing charming or exhilarating about camping, and anyone who said otherwise was out of their minds.

As he paused by his tent, he caught movement from the corner of his eye. In the early morning light, it wasn't easy to make out anything

at a distance. But his eyes locked on Jace's ... above Ari's head. It was her stirring that caught his eye and he watched as his sister stretched her legs alongside the soldier's before raising her head.

She didn't even notice Cai. Instead, she slowly pushed herself up while keeping one arm on Jace's stomach. Only then did the soldier avert his attention as Ari turned her head and smiled at him.

It was as if Cai didn't exist. As much as he hated it, the moment Jace looked at Ari, he could see what the girls had known. When Jace looked at Ari, nothing else mattered. Even when he raised his eyebrows at her in a silent question and she replied by shrugging a shoulder. No one else mattered. And Cai hated it.

Shoving back into the tent, he threw the blanket back overtop of him and curled up behind Amaris once more. He held her warm body to his and tried his hardest to make her the only thing that existed. Except that he couldn't get the image of his sister curled up against the soldier out of his mind.

He knew he was being ridiculous. Jace and Ari had a history. She deserved to be happy. But damn if he did *not* like Jace. There was something about him that sat wrong with him and he couldn't help but assure himself that Ari deserved better. She deserved someone else. Someone who wasn't a soldier.

An hour later, Ris woke up and Cai knew that meant that it was the start of another day. With thoughts already soured by what he had witnessed earlier, he couldn't help but wonder if they were actually going to survive it. Shaking it off as best he could, he emerged from the tent to find that Eila already had hers broken down and was in the process of packing it away.

"About time the two of you stirred," she quipped. Ris stuck out her tongue at Ari's friend while Cai's eyes invariably sought out his sister. She was with Jace. Again.

"Be careful, Keir," Jace warned as he passed off the pistol with a noticeable silencer attached.

Ari nodded and turned towards the trees. For a moment, Jace did nothing but stand there staring after her. Then he sighed and turned back to the fire where Cai and the girls had taken a seat.

"Where's Ari going?" Eila asked as she poked at the embers.

"Hunting." His voice bore no inflection, which was odd in itself. As far as Cai was concerned, anyway.

"Really? Why? We have enough of the rabbit you brought us yesterday to make a meal of," Ris said, her brows pulling together in

confusion.

Jace didn't look at any of them as he said, "So she can make sure she can still shoot something if we need her to."

A heavy weight seemed to settle on all of them and Cai was suddenly very aware of Jace's *edge*. Ignoring their discomfort, the soldier added, "It's better that Ari take care of this now. Before we come to a crucial moment and she freezes."

Cai suppressed a shiver. Was Ari even ready for this? And who was he to say that she should do this now? The whole reason she didn't go hunting last night was because she wasn't prepared to kill an innocent creature yet. He felt his jaw set as the thoughts seethed in his mind.

Eila, ever the patchworker, broke into the silence following that statement. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" Jace asked, placing more wood on the fire.

"Call her by her last name one minute and then switch to her first name a second later."

Jace leaned forward in an effort to keep his face averted from Eila, but Cai could see the smile that appeared unwillingly on his face. The soldier attempted to school his expression, but failed miserably. So he answered without looking at Ari's best friend.

"Ari has grown up a lot in a short amount of time." Jace's eyes flickered to Cai's and he felt his back stiffen. "She's undergone a lot in the past few months in order to make sure she can handle what is going on. There's a lot more to her now than there was only four months ago.

"When on base, everyone referred to her as 'Keir'. I never did. Because, though she was a part of that world, she was still part of another life outside those walls. And I needed her to remember that.

"It's the same reason I call her 'Keir' now. To remind her of what she went through. What she has learned. And the life that's waiting for her when this is all over. Ari has a home and a family on base. Even if she doesn't think so right now."

Jace had his eyes locked on Cai's the entire time he was speaking. He knew why. Because this was his reminder that Ari was a separate entity from himself. That she had a life of her own that he was not a part of. Cai barely kept from smiling smugly at the soldier. Despite how separate their lives *could* be, there was never an option of his not being a part of her life. That fact that it pissed off Jace was just icing on the cake.

"Was that a good idea?" Cai challenged. "Letting her go off hunting

this morning? I thought you wanted us to keep moving. Wanted to reach Zenith by this afternoon?"

Jace's eyebrows rose as he met Cai's cool expression. "If you think I 'let' Ari do anything, you don't know her at all. Good idea or not, she needed to do this. The only thing I didn't do was stand in her way. We agreed that she has an hour. At the end of which, she comes back and we head out. So it's best if we break everything down now and get ready." With that, Jace got to his feet and turned toward Eila's pile.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Eila smacked Cai's arm with the back of her hand. "What was that for?" she hissed.

"What? I just thought we were supposed to be running, that's all. You know, what with people trying to kill us every time we turn around."

"You thought you could get under his skin by being a jackass," she snapped back.

Cai turned to Amaris for help, only to find that she was in the process of folding up their blankets and pointedly ignoring them. With a sour expression, he turned back to face Eila. "Look, he's the one jerking us around everywhere, alright. First we're heading west, then we're going to sneak back into Valor, now we're heading to Zenith in military vehicles that I am sure are reported stolen. Tell me that doesn't sound fishy to you."

"It sounds like shit is hitting the fan and splattering all over us. Our plans have to keep changing because they're not giving us a choice. Wonderful as solar energy is, those batteries take forever to charge. Meaning the Stalkers won't run long enough to get us anywhere but Zenith. And we're lucky we got hold of those. You're the one that noticed what that Seeker was capable of. Do you think anyone watching that footage wouldn't realize we were headed back towards Valor? Obviously we couldn't go there after the Seeker found us. Everything we're doing is in response to what's being done to us. You want to help? Get us on the offense instead of the defense. Maybe then we'll all have a shot of coming out of this alive."

With that, Eila shot to her feet and went to help Ris in dismantling the tent. Taking a deep breath, Cai let it out slowly as his head fell into his hands. She was right, of course. Everything they were doing was in direct response to what's been done to them. Eila also had another point: if they were to get through this, they had to stop being on the defensive. But what would transform them from sitting ducks to something a little more lethal?

He was still pondering it half an hour later. Since the Stalkers were packed and ready to go, the other three had come to join him by the dead fire pit once more. Each was lost in their own thoughts, and Cai's seemed to chase each other around a dozen times before he came back with the same flimsy idea.

At last, unable to take his own mental voice a minute longer, he sighed, "What are we going to do when we get to Zenith? How do you think they will react to us?"

Jace sighed. "If we're lucky, they will mistake us as a team there to help in the search."

"And if we're not?" Cai asked.

"The protocol to land will come over the coms. The Stalkers are almost drained on their battery, so running is out of the question. We'll have to follow orders to keep from getting shot down, or worse. Once on the ground, we will be ordered to remain within the vehicles. Then we will be surrounded by troops. We will all be taken into custody. From there ... I expect both you and Ari will receive a bullet to the back of the head, and the rest of us will follow for knowing about you two."

It felt as if Cai had been punched in the stomach. The way he said the words in such a calm, inflectionless tone let Cai know that he wasn't lying. Nothing he said was to upset them, but to warn them. Jace was telling them the truth, no matter how they wished he wasn't.

"So how were you planning to get us in?" Because Jace wouldn't risk Ari like that. Not without a plan.

"There will be checkpoints going in and out of the city. They'll be crawling with soldiers. My plan, simple as it may be, was to land the Stalkers far enough away from one of these checkpoints, then walk right in wearing my uniform and demanding the use of a vehicle. From there, I would take us into Zenith where we could refresh ourselves before taking a train back to Genesis."

Cai nodded as he absorbed Jace's idea. Yet, he couldn't help but see the flaws. The risk. It was too great for him, but he also knew there were ways he could help it along. All he would need was a microphone.

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Mid-West
America

"That is the most insane idea I've ever heard," Eila scoffed.

"Which is why it will work," Ris said with a sly smile growing on her face. Cai smiled back in thanks.

"What do you think?" he asked, turning the question back unto the soldier.

For a moment, Jace was silent, his brows tugging together as he pondered the strange option. "Can you do it? With such limited resources?"

Cai looked to Amaris and watched her nod. "All I have to do is patch one of the Stalkers through to a central command feed. Since they're on the lookout for us, it should just be a matter of finding the right feed. Then I can send the broadcast along with false coordinates."

"What broadcast and false coordinates to where?" demanded a voice behind them. Whipping around, Cai caught hold of his sister's steely gaze even before he noticed the dead raccoon gripped in her fist.

"Cai has an idea that can help us enter Zenith easier. Though it requires ... a lack of morality," Jace explained.

"Which is?" she asked in a clipped tone.

Taking a breath, Cai announced, "I want to broadcast a terrorist attack to take place in Valor. I want to threaten my mother's life."

Ari's jaw dropped the second he was finished speaking. "Are you insane?" she finally whispered.

Cai shook his head. Then he shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. The

point is, though, that it will lessen Zenith's security. After the attack on me, it won't be hard for the public to believe that a terrorist organization has targeted my mother, too. If Ris can set the signal up to route off of a local Valor feed, then they will think the threat comes from inside Valor. Every extra source of security will flock to the city. There will also be mass panic as every individual tries to flee. It will be chaos incarnate, and will require every available military personnel to keep under control."

"You think they will stop looking for us?"

"No. But I know they will be shorthanded. My mother has announced my safety. When it comes to a threat against her own life, it doesn't matter what orders she gives. The military will converge around her as protocol demands. It'll be the one chance we need to slip into Zenith under cover as backup. Otherwise, we'll be dead, and you know it."

After a minute of thinking about the proposal, Ari looked between him and Ris. "And just how did you plan on doing this?"

Cai looked to Ris then, too. "The easiest would be a voice-over recording. Make it seem like this information was garnered through clandestine affairs. We'd record two people discussing the threat and we would send that down the lines until it looks like it's coming from someplace in Valor. Then I would ship it out to local authorities and military personnel. Next, I would send it to the media. There's no one you can count on more to turn a molehill into a mountain. Before the threat can even be verified as legitimate, every train in Valor will be packed to the hilt as people flee the city. There will be chaos."

At last, Ari let loose a long sigh and glanced at Jace. "You're right. This requires absolutely no morality. But do you see another way?"

Jace shook his head. "It will buy us the time we need. I think we should do it."

"And when they trace back the voices to two of ours? What then?"

"Then they'll think we somehow made it into Valor. Which means they will monitor all transportation leaving the city from that point on. I have no doubt that the military will believe it is a ruse within seconds after it is gifted to them. It is the chaos derived from panicked people, however, that will recall the military to Valor. This is our one shot, Keir. We have to take it."

Taking another deep breath, Ari nodded. "Then it will be me and Jace to record the threat."

"What? Why?" Eila demanded.

"Because he can speak several different languages, and I'm learning a couple in my free time. Besides that, if they trigger on Jace's voice, they will think he's in Valor since no one knows he came to meet us. And if I'm the invisible woman, it should be harder for them to trace my voice. Meaning I will be the one making the threat itself."

For a moment, it looked as if more discussion was to be had. Then Jace locked eyes with everyone and shook his head to silence any protest. "If we are going to do this, it needs to be done now. We don't know how far behind us they are, but we've stayed too long here already."

As one, they all nodded. Then they set to work. When Amaris was ready, Jace and Ari leaned over the control panel where a microphone was located. In a language Cai didn't understand, they spoke in sharp words, Ari's voice raised with heat and passion while Jace's seemed on edge. Even though he didn't know the words, Cai knew that Jace's character was attempting to quiet Ari's. His sister responded by raising her voice even louder. A minute later, they ended the conversation.

"Well, that was believable," Ris complimented even as she was playing the recording back and manipulated it to sound less staged. There wasn't much she could do with the Stalker's technology, but it was enough.

Ari chuckled a little. "I almost switched back to English six times. Other times, I had to rearrange whole sentences because I forgot a word."

"You did good," Jace told her. The left side of Ari's lips pulled up into a smile, making Cai redirect his attention to Ris.

"Send it to the media first. Start the panic before they can try to control the flow of information. Let the military scramble to get their hands on it after the panic has begun," Cai murmured as his girlfriend's fingers flew over the control.

"Some breathing room, if you please," she remarked with a wicked grin. "I've got this."

Shrugging his shoulders, Cai hopped out of the Stalker. "It'll take her only a few more minutes to send it through. Then we can take off and at least get to an open field or something where we can charge the batteries a bit."

"Sounds like a plan," Jace remarked, his eyes scanning the sky.

"What are you thinking?" Ari murmured.

"I'm thinking what's left of Colorado isn't too far from Zenith. And no one will follow us there."

"Colorado?" Cai asked, the name triggering some long ago lesson in the back of his mind.

"It was one of the fifty states in the USA. It's where most of their nuclear weapons were made. After the coasts were destroyed in WWIII, they wiped out most of Colorado, just to be sure," Ari explained. "Much of it is still radioactive, and no one has tried to go in and restore any of it. Near its old borders, it's safe enough. Too far in, however..."

"I get it," Cai muttered. "How far in do we have to get before you're sure no one will come in after us?"

"We'd have to go in much further than I'm willing to take us," Jace admitted. "We want to be as close to Zenith as possible, but if we can set these down and charge them some, I wouldn't be opposed to it. Especially while we wait for the terrorist threat to spread. For that, I'd like to be someplace that would give anyone a bit of pause before coming after us."

Cai nodded, knowing that the soldier was right. After what they had been through, radiation hardly seemed like an issue. Especially with how many years had passed. As long as they didn't get too close to an old crater, there would be little chance of disease.

"I'm done," Ris announced as she hopped out of her Stalker.

As one, they all moved to their designated vehicles. Except Ari and Jace. Eila was set to ride with Jace and she climbed into her Stalker without a problem, since there was still room for Jace to get by and into the front. Ris and Cai, however, only realized what had happened when they had to stand outside of their Stalker for a few minutes.

Irritated, Cai tried not to glare at the pair of soldiers while they waited. Granted, he knew they were probably just discussing where they were going and how long it would take them to get there—somehow they had taken charge of the group and most decisions were made between them, without input from anyone else—but it still annoyed him that they picked now of all moments to get in a private word with one another.

Cai's chin was jerked to the side almost before he felt Ris's hand on his face. When his eyes locked on hers, there was a slow burn in her caramel irises. Before he could apologize for his obvious obsessing, she growled, "Get over it. They're allowed to like each other. Even if you don't."

"I know," he sighed, a hand reaching for the back of his neck.

"Do you?" she demanded. "Because it seems like to me that you

can't think of anything else. Our lives are in danger, Cai. Yours, Ari's, Eila's, Jace's, and mine. We're all risking a whole hell of a lot here, and it would be nice if we could just trust each other, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Yeah," he added in a louder tone when the first word came out too petulant. Then he sighed. "It's just ... something about him seems off to me. Not because he's into Ari—though that's irritating enough. I just... Ris, how did he find us so quickly? Why didn't anyone else? And how did he get out of my mother's grasp? He never told us any of that when he showed up, and Ari's too glad he's here to ask him. It just doesn't feel right, you know?"

The grim look in her eyes faded to curiosity. Because he was right. Ever since Jace returned, they had been on the move so much, no one had time to stop and think. Or ask questions. Like: what happened while he was in custody, or how did he gain his freedom? What had he traded so that he could come after them?

Just when he thought Ris would agree with them, her eyes widened a little and she turned to look past him. Cai glanced to his right and found Ari approaching. Forcing the right side of his mouth up into a small smile, he waited for his sister to get into position. Once they were all settled, Cai looked to his girlfriend in the dim light and saw her give a subtle nod.

Ris agreed. Something was odd about Jace. And it gave Cai a bad feeling.

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Former State of Colorado

America

Ari and Jace each kept their Stalkers on the minimum speed to allow for greater distance. Though they were all wound tight and eager to get as far from their pursuers as possible, they knew that the Stalkers couldn't go much further without a full charge. If they wanted to make it to where they needed to go, they had to baby the batteries a bit.

It didn't take them long to leave the forest behind them, which added to her discomfort. At least the trees offered valuable cover. Out in the open they were exposed and vulnerable. Keeping to the minimum speed then proved difficult.

Yet, it gave her a moment to glance behind her into the body of the Stalker. A slight grin pulled at her lips when she found Cai and Amaris sitting on the floor with their backs to one another. Cai's eyes were closed as if in sleep and Ari hoped it wasn't just a facade. The way she figured it, if his sleeping energized her from across an ocean, it could only help if he slept while she drove. Last thing they needed was for both of them to crap out at the same time.

Almost an hour later, Jace's voice came through the radio, "Stalker One to Stalker Two, we've just crossed the old boundary. Another thirty minutes and we'll set the Stalkers down. Copy?"

"Copy," Ari replied before radio silence ensued once more.

They wouldn't dare say too much over the coms. Too great a risk that someone was able to latch onto their systems. After seeing what Amaris could do, Ari was kind of surprised that they hadn't been

found out already. She wasn't alone in her worry.

Before they had left, Jace had pulled her aside. They barely had to speak, their thoughts were running so tight on the same track. Then he voiced it.

"If a teenager with no prior training can do that..."

"Then there's no telling what has already been done to the Stalkers. For all we know, they could have hooked into the feeds and been listening to everything we've said since we acquired them."

"Exactly," he had sighed. "Be careful, Keir. We're dealing with something far bigger than we originally anticipated. The sooner we get rid of these things, the better."

"Agreed," she'd muttered. Then her eyes had met his again and she sighed. "Radio silence until we land? Then we get to cover while those things charge?"

"Yes." His eyes narrowed on hers. "I mean it, Ari. Take care of yourself. If we get blindsided, you do what you had to in Valor: you get yourself and Cai out of here. Got it?"

Her lips twitched into a small grin. "If there's one thing you never have to worry about, Sergeant, it's my self-preservation instincts."

"I do have to be worried about your hero tendencies," he grumbled. His eyes darted between the two Stalkers before flickering over Eila.

"You wouldn't be here without them," she argued with a weary smile.

"No, you wouldn't be here without mine," Jace remarked with a grin of his own. Then he sighed. "I'll see you when we land."

Ari had nodded before backing up a few steps and turning away.

Rolling her shoulders back to release some of the tension, she glanced back once more at her sleeping passengers. A tender smile pulled at her lips as she saw how relaxed Cai's features were. He looked so innocent like that. Of course, he was innocent. Kept safe and secure all of his life while being pampered and coddled. His mother had done him a disservice in that way, but Ari kind of envied him that. What would it have been like if she had been kept safe and coddled, too?

Shaking her head, Ari returned her eyes to the sky. There was no point wondering, she knew, or losing herself in a pointless daydream. She had a life of her own, and it was different from anyone else's. Especially her twin's. But it was because of the life that Ari had led that allowed them to escape with their lives. Maybe it was because of the life Cai had led that they would get answers to their questions. They

were two of a kind, and now they were together. Where they always should have been.

Before she realized it, Jace was dropping into a landing position and Ari followed suit. Behind her, she could hear the other two stirring as she touched down in the open field beside the other Stalker. Looking to her left, she knew that this was a good spot, as there was a forest where they could hide. For a few hours, at least, they could rest and try to relax.

When they had all disembarked, Ari grabbed most of the gear from her Stalker and started towards the woods. Over her shoulder, she called to Cai and Amaris, "Grab what you can. If the Stalker is discovered, it won't be with usable supplies in it. Whatever we need or can use, grab it and make for the tree line." She didn't keep an eye on them to see if they were following her orders, but kept going. A minute later, a heavily laden Eila dropped into step beside her.

"And you thought this was going to be a strain on me," she teased as she practically skipped along.

Ari shook her head. Ignoring her friend's statement, she asked, "How was your ride?"

"Quiet. Is Jace *always* that focused?"

Her mouth twisted into a frown before she could help herself. "Only when he's worried," she sighed. "And there's plenty to be worried about."

"So true," Eila exhaled. "How was it in the other Stalker? Did you have to keep breaking up a make-out party?"

"No. I think they both managed to sleep the whole way. So much the better if they did. I could use a nap myself."

Ari caught Eila's side-long glance at the same time the shorter girl tried to halt her grin. "I would say so," she remarked, "seeing as you spent all night with Jace. Did you guys get any sleep?"

"I did," Ari answered as if she didn't hear the obvious implication. At the same time, she was glad that her arms were full so that she couldn't reach up to touch the tag he had given her. Eila would never shut up if she knew about it.

As they continued toward the trees, Ari couldn't help the distracted smile that pulled at her lips. The tag was tucked down in her shirt where the metal felt warm as her body heated it. It's weight was a reassurance she hadn't realized she needed. Not that she was a soldier or that she belonged to this life, but that Jace accepted that. He had accepted the inevitable, and he was proud of her for following through

on what she was trained for.

When she was far enough into the trees to see the Stalkers, but not to where Jace could see her, she stopped. "Set the equipment down here, I'm going to go help Jace," she told the others before setting out at a lope.

By the time she had made it back to the machines, Jace had both Stalkers programmed to charge and was pulling the last of the supplies out of his and Eila's. As he turned toward her, Ari's eyebrows crept up her forehead.

"You look exhausted," she murmured as she grabbed the bag of blankets from him.

He flashed her a weary smile that he couldn't hold for more than a few seconds. "Think it's time to teach the others how to drive. If we'd had to go any further..."

Ari nodded. "Well, you can sleep while the Stalkers are charging."

Jace nodded before he gave her one of his studying looks. "No offense, Ari, but you don't look like you can last much longer, either."

She grinned. "You're not the only one who has earned a nap. Let Eila be in charge for a little while. She has the personality for it."

He chuckled. "That she does. Though I think Amaris could give her a run for her money if she wanted to."

"This is *Eila* we're talking about," she reminded him.

"Fair enough," he conceded.

"How long do you think we'll have?" she asked, glancing back at the black machines that looked far too conspicuous in the open field.

"Depends on how long we want them to charge for. I say at least three hours. It'll be more than enough to get us to Zenith, and long enough for the military vehicles there to head back to Valor."

Ari nodded as they stepped beneath the trees. When they made it back to the others, they were surprised to find both tents set up and a small fire pit being created. Both Jace and Ari leapt forward before anyone could strike a match.

"No fires," Ari hissed.

"We don't know how contaminated the soil is here," Jace announced. "We don't know what chemicals the wood might release while it's burning."

"And it's a bright day. The last thing we need is for anyone to see smoke rising into the sky. Now, Jace says we have about three hours to let the Stalkers charge and for the ruse to take effect. We can deal with blankets in that time frame," Ari continued.

"Sorry," Amaris muttered, "we were just trying to help."

"We know," Jace sighed. "And we're grateful. But it's best if we don't get too comfortable here. Why are the tents set up?"

"One for you, one for Ari," Cai answered in a voice devoid of emotion. "You both need your sleep. Might as well be as comfortable as you can be."

Ari refused to look at Jace as she thanked her brother. Though she would have been far more comfortable in the open, and next to Jace, she had to show her brother that she valued his attempt. She also would have liked it more if Jace had been more grateful for the attempt, instead of just nodding to the others.

"Eila, you get first watch, okay? You see or hear anything weird, you wake us," Jace said as Ari handed him a couple of blankets.

Eila gave him a smart salute that caused both soldiers to grin. "Three hours," Ari reminded her, "no longer. I don't care how much sleep you think we need."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ari rolled her eyes, "And this goes without saying, but nobody eat anything you find here. Don't even let it touch your skin if you can manage it. Jace is right: we don't know anything about this place."

"Yes, Mom," Amaris grumbled.

Ari shot her a look, only to find her grinning at Cai. Ignoring it, she took her blanket and crawled into her tent. Unlike the last time she had tried to sleep in one of these, she passed out almost as soon as her body stretched out.

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Without a fire, Cai didn't know what to do with himself. At least a fire gave them a place to gather around, set up a distinct location for them to be. Instead, he had paced around their small encampment a couple of times, his eyes trained on the Stalkers in the distance. All the while, his mind assured him that their plan had worked. It had to work.

"Calm down," Ris murmured, intercepting his path after about fifteen minutes.

"Sorry," he sighed. "Just ... worried." He barely kept his eyes from glancing at Jace's tent.

"I know," she said in a soothing tone. "All of us are. I mean, in about five hours, we'll be right outside of Zenith. A place none of us has ever been before, and all of us with a very clear desire not to be detained. We're facing some major risks here, Cai, and I'm terrified."

Seeing the fear written on her face, Cai felt a little piece of his heart break. The last thing he wanted was for Ris to be caught up in all of this. But she was. Because of him.

Reaching for her, Cai placed a gentle kiss on her forehead before holding her close to him. If it was the last thing he did, he would get her out of this. She didn't deserve to be scared for her life. None of them did. His grip on her tightened as his own meltdown threatened. The last thing she needed was for him to break down while she was digesting this.

"I'm not gonna lie, Ris, we're in a really screwed up situation. And

I'm sorry I pulled you into this. But I honestly don't think I would have made it this far without you."

"I know," she sighed, pulling away to meet his gaze. Forcing a smile, she muttered, "Did you think I was going to let you run off with a bunch of strangers?"

"Nah. You love me too much," he responded, earning him the genuine grin he'd been hoping for.

"More than you know."

"And way more than I deserve," he answered before leaning in to kiss her.

After a few minutes, they pulled apart and Amaris shot him a mock glare. When he raised his brows in a question, she rolled her eyes. "Just thinking that we wasted so much time. We could have been doing that for years if you had opened yourself up to the idea of actually liking me as more than a friend."

Cai gave her an apologetic shrug as he dragged her back to where their fire was supposed to be. "Sorry, but you know how weird I am. I've never liked any girl other than you."

"I know. I'm still kind of impressed you've made that much progress. I was setting up my whole life as an unrequited love story, to be honest. I was going to be famous."

"Oh? Was this for a novel or a movie deal?"

"Both. I'm not dumb," she answered with a giggle. He smiled as he heard it, glad that she could still laugh at this point.

"You could have gone for a television series," Eila remarked. Their eyes shot to where she leaned against a tree, staring out at the Stalkers.

Cai and Ris exchanged glances. There was something in Eila's tone that hadn't been there before. Something that made the levity drift away. As they stared at one another, there was the obvious question of who was going to talk to her. Cai was losing.

"Eila, are you okay?" Cai asked as Ris walked away.

"Yeah. Fine."

"I may have only known you for about three days, but I can tell when you're lying. Just thought you should know," he said, causing her to turn a little. She rolled her eyes.

"I am fine, Cai. At least, just as much as the rest of us," she added with a sigh.

"Ah," he said, moving to stand close to her, his shoulder leaning on a tree beside hers. "So you're worrying too, then."

The smile she shot him was more than a little ironic. "Of course. For

so many reasons. Honestly, whether we live or die through all of this seems like the easiest thing to deal with. I mean, those are the only two choices. Everything else, though..."

Cai raised his eyebrows, leaning towards her a little to try and coax an answer. "Everything else has more options?"

"Yeah. More mystery. I know it must seem stupid right now, worrying about our futures and everything, but I can't help but wonder, you know? Where will we all be when this is all over? Will you go back to Geneva with Amaris? Is Ari going to go back to the base with Jace? And what about me? What am I going to do?"

Under the onslaught, Cai leaned further back against his tree until he was openly staring at her. When she finished enough to take a breath, he muttered, "You really do worry about everything."

Eila barked a sarcastic laugh. "You have no idea. What do you think will happen, if we all make it through this?"

Cai's brows pinched together as he thought it over. "Honestly, I have no idea. I mean, what you said seems more likely to happen. But I was kind of hoping that Ari would stay with me. Either here or in Geneva, I'm not really sure. I haven't thought about it. Though I definitely don't think it's okay for us to be separated again. Too much happens when we can't be near each other."

He was surprised when Eila nodded. "Yeah, I worry about that, too. I mean, you've been this missing piece to her for so long, I wonder if Ari will ever give you up. Maybe that's what they've been worried about all along: that Ari would break our carefully constructed system because of you. Or vice versa. Look how it's been broken already."

Eila didn't realize what she'd just said, and Cai knew it. She was musing aloud amidst her melancholy, and she had pulled from the magician's hat one of the elusive motives behind all of this. Someone didn't want Ari and Cai together, and they were willing to kill them to keep them apart. Was it because their very existence would somehow destroy the system in which they lived? Was that even possible?

Shaking his head, he tried not to let his epiphany show. He wanted time to mull that over before discussing it with anyone. So, instead he said, "You worry more about Ari than you do anyone else, don't you?"

Eila's smile was more genuine as she answered, "Of course. Someone has to. You see what she gets herself into."

A memory slid through his mind and he smirked a little at her. "Really? Because I somehow don't think it was Ari's idea for you two to swap places at that dinner."

"She told you about that?"

Cai nodded. "The first night we were out here."

"Do you blame me, though? She needed it."

"No, I don't blame you. Just wondering why you did it."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"That dinner would have been decided by knife fight if it wasn't an online auction, and you know it. So after your parents paid all that money, why weren't you the one to come? Not a lot of people would have done what you did, Eila, and you know that."

"You're right," she sighed. "But most people don't have the motivation that I do."

"Which is?"

Taking a deep breath, Eila let it out in a sigh. Turning towards him, she let her eyes travel between his. "You think I sacrifice for Ari. I don't. You think I give too freely to her. It's not possible. You think all I've done for her stems from how much I love her. You're wrong. I don't do these things because I love her. I do them because I am jealous of her."

Cai's head jerked back in surprise and he couldn't close his mouth. "Excuse me?"

"It's true. I am green with envy over Ari. As a result, I will do anything in my power to make her unequivocally happy. Because she deserves it."

"Why?"

"Why am I jealous or why will I make sure she's happy because of it?"

"Both," he exclaimed, still stunned at her announcement.

A slight grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Well I thought it would be obvious why I'm jealous of her. She's clever, determined, independent, and takes no one's shit. Ari knows what she wants and she goes for it. The exact opposite of me. I'm a good girl. I do everything my parents want, I'm constantly supervised, and I let myself get pushed into things I have zero interest in. Ari doesn't do that. She fights tooth and nail and still doesn't allow things to influence her if she doesn't want them to. I have every right to envy her.

"That doesn't mean, however, that I'm pathetic enough to want to destroy the thing I could never be. I love Ari too much to allow my jealousy to damage us. She would never do it to me. And after all she's been through, Ari deserves whatever little bit of happiness she comes across. So I try to make those bits bigger every chance I get.

"She's my sister, Cai. She may be your twin, but she's been my sister for years. This is how sisters feel about each other. Which is why sacrificing something like a dinner with someone who—no offense—is way more important to her than to me isn't a sacrifice at all."

By the time she finished speaking, Cai had learned to close his mouth again. After nodding along to what she was saying, he met her gaze again and gave her a smile. "Eila Maible, you have got to be one of the coolest people I have ever met."

Shaking her head, Eila tried to hide the grin. "You're always in that mode, aren't you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're always trying to cheer everybody up."

Cai's hand crept to the back of his neck. "I wouldn't say that."

"You did it with Amaris. You're doing it with me. The only person you hold a grudge against is Jace, but I bet if he was bummed about something, you'd still try to make him feel better. It's a good quality, Cai. I'm not making fun of you. Just growing a bit envious of you, too."

"Eila, who do you think I learned it from?"

She grinned again. "Point taken." Then her eyes moved around to study the Stalkers while he turned to find Amaris curled up against a tree with a blanket wrapped around her.

"Hey, I think I'm going to try and take a nap, too. It'll be easier on Ari if we sleep at the same time, I think. You okay to keep watch?"

"It's only two and a half more hours for me to be alone with my thoughts. How bad can it be?"

He shot her a commiserating smile before heading to the bag of blankets. Grabbing one for himself, he went to the tree Ris was leaning against. "Mind if I join you?" he muttered. Without opening her eyes, she patted the ground beside her.

"How's Eila?"

"Better. Just worried like the rest of us."

"I can't wait until today is over with," she sighed.

"You and me both. At this point, the waiting seems toxic."

Ris nodded as she leaned her head on his shoulder. Resting his cheek against the top of her head, Cai closed his eyes and was grateful when his mind started drifting. A little sleep and both he and Ari would be good as new. He hoped.

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Cai's eyes snapped open as Ari's voice reached a piercing pitch. In an instant, he and Ris had scrambled to their feet, staring at the face off taking place in front of them. They weren't confused for long, however.

"This is not happening, Jace. I won't allow it," Ari snarled as she stood toe-to-toe with the soldier.

"The decision has been made, Ari." His voice was hard and unrelenting.

"Then unmake it," she snapped again, her voice reaching the same fevered pitch that had awoken them.

"No."

"Do you realize what you're doing? What risk you'll be taking? Damn it, Jace, I'm not going to let you take my best friend on a fucking test run!"

"It was Eila's idea," he snapped back.

"And you should have said no from the start," Ari yelled again. "This isn't an option. I'm not going to let you both leave us again. Either we all go together, or we don't go at all."

"Ari—" Eila murmured.

His twin's hand shot up in a halting gesture and Eila's eyes dropped to the ground. Ari's glare never left Jace's hard gaze. "Not an option. It's all or none of us, Sergeant."

Jace didn't twitch a muscle as he said, "Then I'll go alone."

Cai didn't see it coming. Apparently, neither did Jace. The minute

the words were out of his mouth, Ari cocked back her left fist and threw all her weight into the punch that struck the soldier across the face.

As one, Cai, Ris, and Eila all surged forward, eager to put some distance between them. Before they could get close, however, Ari turned on her heel and stormed off into the trees. Cai stared after her for a minute, debating whether or not to follow her, or pick his own fight with the soldier. One glance at Jace's stony expression and he was decided.

"What the hell was that all about?" he demanded.

Jace's cold blue eyes met his and Cai was disgusted by the lack of remorse in them. A feeling that grew when Jace answered, "I'm taking one of the Stalkers into Zenith ahead of you. I need to make sure it's safe enough for you to follow."

"No," Ris murmured beside him, her eyes growing wide.

At the same time, Cai's eyes narrowed into slits as he glared at the soldier. "Ari's right: it's not an option."

"It wasn't a question," Jace replied.

"I'm going with him," Eila added, taking a step forward to stand beside him.

"No, you are not," Ris snarled.

"He's not going anywhere without us," Cai added.

"Do you have a better plan, Cai?" Eila demanded. "We've talked it over, and this is the safest course. Jace isn't a target like you are, and I can be the reason he's going to Zenith. How they react to him will help us determine how they will react to you. And if their first instinct is to shoot first—"

"Then Ari loses the two people she loves the most in one fell swoop. While the three of us are sitting out here in a toxic state, *hoping* to get a sign that the two of you are okay. This is one of the stupidest ideas I've ever heard of, and it is not an option."

"As I said: it wasn't a question. This is happening, with or without your agreement."

Rage coursed through Cai's veins and he stepped forward to take up the position Ari had previously been in. "You don't think we can stop you? Do you think we won't even try? You're risking your life and Eila's by doing that. And you risk ours by abandoning us. Can you really do that to Ari? Knowing how much she needs you?"

Jace's eyes flashed as he leaned closer. "You can't stop me, so don't even try. I have assessed every risk to this situation, as has Eila. If this

is the only way I can be sure you all will be safe, then so be it. And *that's* what I'm doing to Ari."

Cai felt his temperature spike as the fury boiled through his blood. His body shook as he suppressed the urge to strike at Jace himself. The fact that he could justify leaving them didn't really astound him. But the fact that he was willing to sacrifice himself and Eila on a whim had him seeing red.

"Ris, go check the reports. See what the chances of interference are. Take Eila with you," he suggested in a quiet tone.

At his side, Amaris nodded once before turning her glare on Eila. He didn't blame her. If this was Eila's idea, then she was just as much to blame as Jace. Much like Ari, however, he couldn't find it in himself to be too upset with her. Not when Jace made such an available target.

When the girls were gone, he returned his glare to the soldier's eyes, glad that he'd become used to the lethal *edge* that was pooling around Jace. "You son of a bitch," Cai snarled softly. "Do you realize what this is doing to her? What it *will* do to her? Do you even care?"

"Do you realize what could happen to her? To you? Amaris? Eila? You're naive in thinking any one of us will survive this if we keep going the way we are. Zenith is our biggest problem, and Eila and I have come up with a solution. One that spares *you*. Be pissed all you want, but my goal here is to keep you and Ari alive. I'll do that any way that I see fit. With or without your approval."

"And how do you expect us to go on if you get yourselves killed? We have no clue what we're doing, but we're all resigned to following your lead. What do you think will happen if Ari loses you and Eila at once? Do you really think her own life is going to matter all that much to her?"

A hard, bitter laugh forced its way through Jace's teeth. "No. Ari's life has never meant much to her. She's too busy trying to preserve yours."

"That's not true," Cai scoffed.

"It is. I've spent *months* now, trying to protect Ari from herself. She has no sense of self-preservation and the only reason she hasn't walked into the lion's jaws several times is because she learned of you. If there wasn't the stigmata twin thing between you two, she would have walked into an assassin's bullet months ago. Don't tell me it isn't true when I was there with her. You weren't."

"That doesn't mean she wasn't trying to protect herself."

"The hell it doesn't. The only thing Ari cared about was getting back

to the city so that she didn't miss your stupid party. If it weren't for you, she never would have taken the test. Never would have trained. Hell, Cai, if it weren't for you, she never would have been stabbed in the first place!"

Cai's head drew back, feeling as if the air was knocked out of his lungs. Though he'd always felt some friction with the soldier, he had never thought it was because of this. Jace blamed him for everything that happened to Ari. He probably blamed Cai for Ari being the one given up, too. For her having to grow up alone and without her family. Jace blamed him for something he couldn't have controlled, but his very existence had put Ari's in jeopardy. Something Jace would never forgive him for.

After taking a deep breath, Jace continued in a cutting tone, "Everything Ari has done up until this point has been for you. And she will keep doing things for you. The fact that you don't realize that yet proves how much you don't know her."

"I know her better than you think," Cai snarled softly.

"Not well enough."

"That's not our fault."

A grim smile pulled at the soldier's lips. "Nothing is, right? You can't be blamed for your mother's decisions. But you can be blamed if Ari disappears because of you. I *do* know her, Cai. And I will not sit back and watch her become half a person. Take care that you don't allow that to happen."

"Maybe you don't know her as well as you think," he grumbled. At the same time, his mind was reeling with the words Ris had shouted at him the day before.

The smile on Jace's face twisted into a bitter, sad expression. "Some days, I wish I didn't. It wouldn't be nearly as frustrating watching what is happening now. Take care of her, Cai. In the same way she takes care of you."

Cai was shocked when Jace turned and started toward the Stalkers. Before Cai could follow, Ari stepped out from behind a tree, blocking Jace's path. He had never seen her so livid. Her eyes never left Jace's, but her body remained still as her own fury stiffened her muscles. For one brief moment, Cai thought about escaping. He didn't have a chance.

"How dare you?" Ari hissed.

"Ari—"

"If you're going to make a case for your stupid plan, then do it,

damn it. But don't lead the conversation to the side and try to manipulate my brother. And don't you dare try to make your leaving seem like a noble act."

"Even when it is?" Jace countered.

"Especially when it is," she snapped back. "I'm not okay with you going, Jace. And I'm especially not okay with you taking Eila. There's no guarantee that your plan will be any safer. And maybe you're right. Maybe I have no sense of self-preservation. But if you're going, and Eila's going, then I am going. You have my back, and I have yours."

"This is not about you having my back, Keir," Jace growled. "It's you they want. You and Cai. If you think I'm going to let you anywhere near Zenith without getting the lay of the land, you're out of your mind."

"And you're a jackass!" she shouted. "We have nowhere else to go, Jace. Nowhere. What happens if they do shoot first, huh? I lose you and Eila all at once, and still have no options of where to go or what to do. Zenith is our last chance. Our supplies are low, the Stalkers' batteries are draining, and we're being hunted all over the damn country. This is it, Jace. This is it. Whether you want us to or not, we're going with you."

"Damn it, Ari," he sighed, though half of it sounded like a growl. "We could all die doing this."

"Or we could make it through and be on a train home tonight. You're the one that suggested I stop worrying about what might happen. This is happening, Jace. We're out of options. So we're all going. Right now. Accept it, and let's move."

There was the slightest shift in the atmosphere, but Cai felt as if a spell had been broken. As they continued to look at one another, he saw it all again. Jace was right; he did know Ari. But Ari knew him, too. The threads of their acceptance and respect were tangible in the air between them, and Cai witnessed how they all stitched together with a single look.

"Let's move," Jace said at last. Without looking at either of them again, he moved past Ari, but he let his shoulder brush against hers as he passed.

Ari waited until he was out of earshot before turning to Cai. "I'm sorry about all of that. Jace is overprotective. He'll do whatever he thinks he has to in order to keep us safe. Even if it is a stupid decision." With a shrug, Ari turned to follow the soldier.

Before Cai fell into step behind her, he heard the same words from

Amaris and Jace. They were more than half of a person, it was true. Yet, when they were apart, he didn't feel that way. Only when they were together did he lose the hole in his chest. When he had told Eila he hoped Ari would be with him, it wasn't the whole truth; Cai was planning on it.

If they survived this, he was never going to lose his twin again. Especially to someone like Jace.

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Ari knew her movements were stiff, but she was still too angry to force more than a necessary reaction out of them. Especially when her eyes darted to the other Stalker. It had taken some doing, and a lot of ordering, but she had managed to put Cai on the same Stalker as Jace. This way she could be sure he would take no unnecessary risks. With her brother, and herself, tied to his fate, he wasn't stupid enough to play the hero.

Once more, Ari shook her head to try and clear the thoughts. It didn't help. Every time, they circled back around to Jace's stupidity and Eila's idiocy. The fact that they thought that this would help was beyond ridiculous. What was worse was she knew why they were doing it.

It was the same as when Jace tried to lead the Seeker away and Eila had followed him. Ari couldn't leave Cai and Amaris alone, but they could. Cai and Ari would always affect each other. So long as they were both safe, it didn't matter. Jace had said that Ari had no self-preservation, but neither did he or Eila. And they were both being hypocrites when it came to her safety.

Yet again, Ari tossed her head a little to clear the thoughts. A glance at the navigation controls caused her to catch her breath. They were closer to Zenith than she thought. It was time to focus.

"Keep quiet, both of you. It's about to start," Ari warned.

A few minutes later, they all released a collective breath as the city began to rise out of the deserted landscape. Between hills, the

buildings rose into view. Tall and dark, the towers loomed over their approach as the winter sunshine was absorbed into their black, solar surfaces. As she studied each of the spires that were still kilometers off, Ari realized just how intimidating Zenith was. As well it should be, since it was the most self-reliant of America's six cities. Zenith had no need of the rest of the world, which is why the rest of the world liked to pretend it didn't exist.

"Stalker One to Stalker Two, we are on direct approach to the security checkpoint at the southern entrance into the city, copy?"

"Stalker Two copies Stalker One," Ari said into the microphone. She was hoping her nerves were well hidden in that transmission, because the last thing she needed was for Jace or Cai to realize that she was scared to death. These could very well be the last moments she had with her people, and that thought terrified her.

Even if they caught it, however, there was nothing they could say about it. They were too close to Zenith to be able to speak freely. And the closer they got, the greater the ability to pick up on their transmissions was.

Too soon, a sharp, female voice came over a channel-wide broadcast. "Incoming Stalkers, state your name and the purpose behind your arrival here."

Jace answered, "Sergeant Naois of Camp Emergence. My team and I were sent to secure valuable items within Zenith."

"Under whose authority do you claim to proceed, Sergeant?" demanded the voice. For almost a moment, Ari could swear that it sounded familiar.

"I am under direct orders of the Supreme Commander of the United Nations."

Ari was stunned. When they had talked about approaching Zenith, this had never come up. Invoking the name of the Supreme Commander would automatically make her involved. They would notify her of his claim before they would allow them entrance to the city. What was he thinking?

Before Ari could even attempt to calm her racing heart, the voice sounded back, "You are all clear to land your craft, Sergeant. Transportation will be ready to take you into the city. Your landing location has been marked and you are urged to proceed."

"Copy," Jace said, turning his Stalker to the area that had been marked out. In a daze, Ari followed him. By the time they shut down the Stalkers, she felt sick to her stomach. Something about this was not

right.

"That seemed too easy," Amaris murmured behind her.

Ari couldn't help but nod. "Agreed."

A moment later, a massive black vehicle came to rest on the ground beside them. The United Nations and Military Crests were emblazoned on each side of it, reminding Ari of that day so long ago when she had saluted a similar vehicle as Jace and his friends headed back to Camp Emergence. And this time, six soldiers removed themselves from the vehicle rather than boarding it, causing her stomach to clench painfully.

Before she had time to think on it more, Jace exited his Stalker, a hand motioning for Cai to stay inside. Fear and fury flared inside of her in an instant as he went to face the black uniformed soldiers standing at the ready. Throwing off her safety belts, Ari hit the button to open the door.

"Stay here," she hissed to Eila and Amaris before she launched herself out of the vehicle.

Jace glanced her way for a single moment before flickering back to their 'escort.' If she didn't know him better, she wouldn't have been able to tell that he was seething inside. His face remained expressionless as she came to a halt slightly behind him. Then she was facing off with the other soldiers as much as he was. And her *edge* was winning.

One being detached from the group and Ari was irritated that the black helmets they wore prevented her from seeing their face. Yet, there was also a familiarity in the way the person walked. But it couldn't be...

"Sergeant Naois," said the woman from the coms before she saluted smartly.

Jace almost smiled, Ari knew, because he knew who it was as well. "Instructor Rodgers," he answered with a salute of his own.

Rodgers removed her head gear before she turned to Ari. She fought the grin as much as she could, even as Rodgers said, "Lookin' good, Keir."

"What are our orders?" Jace asked.

Rodgers looked again at him, this time raising a single eyebrow. "I thought you were giving them," she answered. Jace's jaw strained before she continued, "According to a missive sent out by the office of the Supreme Commander of the United Nations, Sergeant Naois and his *team* were to be given special authority, and any aid desired by

them was to be given expressly and without question. Want to tell me what you did to earn that perk?"

Instead of answering, Jace turned back to look at his Stalker and let loose a shrill whistle. Ari repeated the process with an added jerk of her head to let Eila and Amaris know that they could approach now. Then her eyes turned to track her brother's progress.

Once he was close enough for Rodgers to get a glimpse at his face, Jace announced, "I saved the Supreme Commander's son."

"We're going to need a few more outfits like yours, Instructor," Ari added when Cai came to a halt on her right side. Behind them, Eila and Amaris took up positions on either side. Not that Rodgers noticed, she was sure.

After a few seconds, she asked, "Who all know about this?"

"Too many people, at this point," Jace answered, his eyes traveling over them for a bit. "Which is why we need to get them to safety right away."

Rodgers' eyes snapped back to his and she nodded. "Of course. Load up. I'll get my men to take care of the Stalkers."

They all nodded as one before moving towards the vehicle. Rodgers shouted orders to those that had hopped out of the vehicle. Some converged on the Stalkers, while a couple of others climbed in the front cab of their vehicle. Rodgers, alone, climbed into the back with them. And Ari waited just long enough to get them in the air before her rage roared out of her.

"What the hell were you thinking, invoking the Supreme Commander like that? What happened, Jace? When I was doing my damndest to get us out of Valor, what deal were you striking?"

She was so furious, her entire body could not move. Every joint and muscle was locked into place. It even made it difficult for her to breathe as she sat motionless, her eyes fixed on the one man she thought she could always count on. Was it possible that she was wrong?

"Calm down, Ari," he murmured.

Cai opened his mouth in that second and Ari clamped a hand around his shoulder to stop him. In the same instant she spat, "No, I will not calm down. What aren't you telling me, Jace? What do I have to be afraid of, now?"

"Nothing!" he urged, his blue eyes becoming wide and imploring. "You can trust me, Keir. If you would just listen, I'll explain everything."

“And if I listen, how can I be sure what I hear is the truth?”

Already her mind was reevaluating everything he had ever said to her. Done for her. The bus rides, the rescues, the training, everything that had been between her and Jace ... and it had the potential to be a lie. He could have planned to meet her. Could have been under orders to keep an eye on her. Was she an assignment all along? Did he find a way into her life because he was ordered to?

As the questions and doubt whirled away in her mind, Jace seemed to see it. “Whoa, Ari. Calm down. Just listen.” Without giving her more time to overthink, he told them what happened when he was detained in Valor.

“After I was detained, I was interrogated. When they couldn’t find you four, I was the only clue they had. And I lied. I told them that a threat had been reported and me and my team had been stationed at the party to keep an eye on things and protect Cai if the need arose. I led them to believe that Cai and Amaris were taken to a safe location by people who knew what they were doing, all under the orders of the Supreme Commander.

“Then Lucia Balere arrived and summoned me to the penthouse Cai had been staying in. She verified my lie before ordering her bodyguards out and putting us in a virtual darkroom. That’s when we talked about you and Cai. The reason she has given me the right and privilege to use her name and title is because she believes I will bring you to her.”

“Won’t you?” Cai snarled. “What are you now, her personal bounty hunter? You came along for the ride just to trick us into following you into her waiting arms?”

“No,” Jace sighed. “I told her that she had to make it safe for you before I took you anywhere near her. We made a deal: she gives me the person trying to kill you, and I deliver you to her.”

“You son of a bitch,” Eila hissed from beside Ari. “How could you barter them like that?”

“Because it was the only way I could get out and get back to you. Besides that, we both lied. As hard as she tries, I know she’ll never find the person responsible. And she knows I would never lead you into a situation I consider dangerous.”

All at once, everyone had something to say to Jace. Amaris and Cai called him every foul thing they could think of, while Eila attacked his character and worth as a man. Through it all, Ari and Rodgers remained stoic. Rodgers because she was stunned. Ari because she

knew what this meant to her, and she wanted the exact opposite to be true.

“Stop.” It was a quiet little word that Ari put no emphasis behind, but it caused all of her companions to fall silent at once. Their eyes turned to her, but her gaze never left Jace’s. Through all of their abuse, his eyes had never left hers.

Taking a deep breath, Ari released it in a slow exhale. “You’re right, Jace. You won’t lead us into a situation you consider dangerous. I know this because you are no longer going to be leading us. When we get into Zenith, we’re going our separate ways. Your deal with the Supreme Commander makes you a liability, not an asset. Cai and I need to figure things out from here. Without you.”

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January 3, 2358
High Tower Hotel
Zenith, America

Cai tried not to be triumphant with Ari's decision. He tried to keep his happiness under wraps. This was hurting his sister, and he knew that. But he also knew that Jace had been playing them from the start. The fact that Ari's eyes were now wide open was all he could be grateful for, now.

Not that she was willing to talk about it to anyone. Even though Zenith had its own military bases outside of the city, Ari had insisted that they be taken to someplace inside of the city. Someplace away from where Jace was supposed to be, he knew.

Rodgers—Ari's drill instructor from Camp Emergence, as it turned out—had left Jace at a compound just inside of the city. She'd taken them the rest of the way to the High Tower Hotel near the city's center. And from the moment she got them rooms, Cai, Ris, and Eila had been forced to hang out in one of the rooms while Rodgers and Ari met in the other. It was a short conversation, they knew, because the door had slammed violently as the instructor had left. Whether it was Rodgers or Ari to slam the door was up for debate. Yet, Ari never came back to talk to them, and not even Eila dared to intrude on her afterwards.

"This freaking sucks," Ris muttered when the clock clicked over once more to prove that they had been there for three hours without seeing Ari. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Sitting on the edge of one of the two beds, Cai shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"We sleep," Eila answered as she pulled back the covers of one of the beds.

Ris, who had been lying back on one of the beds, propped herself up to give Eila an indignant look. "That's it? Sleeping is your idea of a master plan?"

"No," Eila snapped back. "Sleep is what we'll need when Ari's brain fires off a plan of her own. And since it's the first time we've all seen a bed in days, I suggest it's an opportunity we all take. Ari's going to need us coherent when she figures out our next move."

"That's my point though. Shouldn't *we* be figuring out what our next move is? I mean, we've been following her lead and Jace's lead, and look where it's gotten us. We're chasing our own freaking tails here."

"And what do you think we should do?" Eila countered. "It's not you or me they're after. It's Ari and Cai. Making the decision up to Ari and Cai."

"Exactly!" Ris exclaimed, shooting straight up in the bed. "Ari *and* Cai are supposed to be making this decision. But we're all sitting here waiting on *Ari* to come up with a plan. For *Ari* to decide what the next course of action is. Where is Cai's input in any of this? Now she won't even talk to him because she knows he was right about Jace all along."

"That's not why," Cai muttered at the same time Eila snarled, "He wasn't right about Jace!"

"Whatever lets you sleep at night, Eila," Ris mocked, neither one having heard him. "If you're so naive as to believe this wasn't all some big plan, that's on you. At least Jace isn't dragging the rest of us down with him."

With every word, Cai could feel his victory becoming more and more hollow. Though he disliked Jace more than anyone, he knew that Ari didn't. He suspected part of Ari may have even loved the soldier. The fact that he turned out to be an asshole should not have been something to rub in her face. Which meant it wasn't something to be rubbed in his, either.

"Stop it, both of you," Cai snapped just as Eila was readying her reply. "None of this is doing us any good. We're all angry and confused and tired. Eila's right. We need to get some rest, enjoy having a safe place to sleep for a night, and then figure out what is going on in the morning. Ari and I still need answers. That much I can believe Jace on: my mother won't find who is doing this to us. So we have to. Let's just get some sleep."

Both girls glared at each other for a moment longer before Eila snapped, "Fine," and climbed into the second bed. Ris rolled her eyes before getting up and stalking into the bathroom. Releasing a sigh, Cai pulled his shirt over his head and kicked off his boots before climbing beneath the blankets. Just before his mind fully shut down, Amaris climbed into the bed beside him and curled into his back. It was the most comfortable he had been in a long time.

January 4, 2358

High Tower Hotel

Zenith, America

Cai jerked awake as a hand clamped down over his mouth. His eyes shot wide, but in the dark he could see nothing. As he reached up to pull the hand away, he heard his sister's voice whisper, "Hush. Don't wake them. Meet you outside." With that, Ari slipped out of the room as silently as she had entered.

Struggling to understand what had just happened, Cai gently eased out of his girlfriend's arms before rising from the bed. In that short time, his eyes had begun to adjust and the light from the clock illuminated the two beds just enough for him to see the faces of both girls. They looked peaceful and untroubled in their sleep. Like nothing could hurt them in that moment.

Cai felt his throat close and he glanced at the door. If he went out there, he knew exactly what was going to happen. When he left this room, he knew what he was leaving behind. And he knew what consequences awaited him if he went through with this.

Shaking his head, Cai grabbed his shirt off the floor and pulled it back over his head. Grabbing up his boots, he left the room without a backwards glance. No good would come of that.

As soon as he was out of the room, he had to squint his eyes against the lights of the hallway. After easing the door closed so that it made no noise, he pulled his boots on and began to tie them. When he was done, he straightened to find Ari holding out a thick, black coat to him. Taking it from her, he asked, "Where are we going?"

"For a walk," she replied before turning and heading toward the elevators.

Cai was more than a little confused when she pressed the button to go up, only to keep him from entering when the doors opened. Ari leaned in for a moment, pressed a button, and ducked back out as the

elevator waited to close. An instant later, she turned around and took hold of his arm before dragging him to the stairs. When she started to go down, he jerked his arm out of hers.

“Ari, where are we going? What are we doing?” he hissed in the empty stairwell.

When she looked up at him, he understood what Eila had meant. Her brain had struck on a plan and now she was following through with it. Regardless of the cost or consequences. Or opinions of her companions.

Instead of answering him, Ari’s eyes shot back to the door behind him. “Not here,” she whispered before turning and continuing down the stairs.

Cai and Ari both knew that he had no choice but to follow her. So he let loose a sigh and trailed down three flights of stairs with her before they left the stairwell on another floor. This time, when they got to the elevators, Ari pressed the down button and practically shoved Cai inside when it arrived. The moment the doors closed, she started talking.

“We have three options, the way I see it. When we get off this elevator, you and I could hop on the next train to Genesis and try to track down Lita Naois. Or you can go back to your mother, while I return to Genesis and try to find a lead. Or ... you and I get off of this elevator and go back to Valor. Tonight. Together. And we confront your mother. Get our answers from her.” Ari turned her head to lock eyes with him, and he saw the resignation in them. “The choice is yours, brother.”

In that moment, Cai knew why Ari or Jace had been allowed to lead. Why he had stood back with Eila and Ris and allowed them to make the decisions. From the moment he left that hotel room, he knew he was making the decision to leave behind Eila and Amaris. Of all the options he was being given, he knew that one was the safest, because it was undisputed that wherever Ari took him next, it would be too dangerous to bring them. He had made that decision and he didn’t want to make another one. Not as equally difficult as that one had been. Cai, for all of his political agenda, was not made to make hard decisions. Despite what his mother had tried to put into his head.

“I ... I can’t, Ari. You choose. I can’t.”

Ari gave a slow, jerky nod before saying, “For now, we’ll walk. And we’ll talk. By the time we get to the train station, maybe you’ll have decided. Or maybe not. But it is our decision, Cai. This is our lives.

And if we can't figure it out, I don't see how anyone else can."

Unable to meet her gaze, Cai nodded. A moment later, the elevator doors opened and he found that they were in a kind of strange lobby area that was utterly deserted. Before he had time to figure out what was going on, Ari strode across the room to the glass doors. Cai followed as she pushed the doors open and they entered onto the cold, snowy streets of Zenith.

"Why did we come this way?" he asked as he pulled on the pair of gloves he found in the pockets of the coat she'd given him.

"To throw off our scent. I asked Rodgers to take care of Eila and Amaris. No one will know they're here, and she'll take them to a safe location in the morning. That's why I sent the elevator to the main lobby when we left our rooms. If either of them wake up, they'll try to find us. I can't let them succeed."

Cai's shoulders slumped as it all began to hit him. The enormity of what he'd done. What they were doing. Abandoning the last two people on the planet who actually cared about them. The only two who would do anything for them, without a single question asked. And they were walking away from them without a word.

"God, Ari, what are we doing?" he gasped, his eyes raised to plead with hers.

They harbored none of the remorse his did. Instead, there was a coldness in them that he knew was a partner to her soldier's *edge*. It was the kind of expression that came with having made harder decisions, and having been through harder ordeals. To her, this was something that had to be done, and there were no other options.

"We're saving their lives, Cai. By leaving them, we are saving them. Let's just hope we can save ourselves so that they have a chance to hate us later."

January 4, 2358
Zenith, America

They walked for a while in silence, Ari sometimes consulting a small map she seemed to have downloaded on a device he knew Rodgers must have given her—his eyes automatically dropped to where his key had been for years; now his finger was empty of the band since they'd all left their keys back in Valor so they couldn't be tracked. When she pocketed the gadget and forced him to make a left turn, he had finally had enough of the silence. And he had a decision to make.

"What do we know about us, Ari? I mean, what do we really know about what we are? How we were made? Why they want to kill us?"

Ari shrugged. "Not a lot. Not enough. I mean, we're obviously twins, and I was born with a type of mirror syndrome. But why? What would make my body form in the exact opposite way of how it was supposed to?"

"And why are we stigmatic? I thought that only happened in identical twins," Cai muttered.

"We have heart defects, too. The *same* heart defects."

Cai glanced askance at his twin, finding her doing the same. The thought was there, in both of their minds. They were of separate genders, meaning that it was impossible for them to be identical. And yet, everything about them was the same. To the point it absolutely ruled out them being fraternal.

"There's more wrong with you than I thought," Cai muttered, throwing a smile on his face so that she would realize he was joking.

Ari's shoulder bumped his playfully. "Maybe it's you, this time."

“Maybe. Though you have to admit, we would make the perfect lab rats.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Cai came to a halt. The answer was so obvious, he was amazed it had taken him so long to figure it out. Pressing his fist to his forehead, he cursed his own stupidity.

“Cai? What is it? What’s wrong?” Ari demanded, her eyes scouring the empty streets for a potential threat while her *edge* grew extra teeth.

Dropping his fist, Cai grabbed Ari’s hand in his and captured her eyes with his own. “Of course we’re the perfect lab rats, Ari. We were *created* in a lab,” he almost whispered.

Ari’s chin raised as her eyebrows pinched together. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about my mother. Before she switched to politics, she majored in genetics. She got out of it long before we were conceived, but I think she must have been working on us in secret.”

“Why would she do that, Cai? It makes no sense,” Ari sighed.

“It makes perfect sense, because genetic modification of a human embryo has been illegal for decades. Ever since the breeding ban came into effect. Experimenting on humans in any form is illegal, for the most part. If my mother was trying to determine what would happen to a human being on a genetic level, it’s no stretch that she would experiment on her own child. It would be the only one she had full access to for the rest of its life, and so she could monitor its progress daily.

“But she didn’t count on two of us. And she certainly didn’t count on you. I’ll bet anything that that’s the reason you were sent away. Because you could be used as evidence of her tampering.”

“And it’s why she tried to kill me,” Ari said in a quiet tone, pulling her hands from his.

Cai’s head jerked back in surprise. “What? No. I didn’t mean—”

“But she would have. If what you’re saying is true, Cai, then she would have every reason to want me dead. The minute your picture was released, she must have known that someone, somewhere would realize that they looked exactly like you. Someone would realize that they were your twin. And they would come looking for you. If they found you, what then? Cai, think about it. If she sent me away to protect her lie, who is to say she wouldn’t kill me to do the same?”

In an instant, his stomach clenched. Not because of what she was suggesting, but because he knew why it was untrue. Was his mother

incapable of having someone killed to protect herself? No. Would she have someone killed if she thought it was necessary? Yes. Could she even eliminate a child she gave up at birth, whose name she didn't even know? Cai believed she could. What she could not do, however, was hurt Cai. And hurting Ari would hurt Cai. Something his mother would never risk.

"Because she loves me too damn much." His jaw set and his eyes bored into Ari's as he tried to make her see that what he said was true. "I'm sorry, Ari, but it's true. Anyone can tell you. My mother loves me so much that she would never do anything to put us in harm's way. Which is why I do believe she will try to find the person responsible for trying to kill me. I don't think she'll succeed—she doesn't know where to start—but I think she won't stop until they are found. Ari, as expendable as you are to *her*, she would never put me in a position to get hurt. I'm sorry, but she's just not capable of that."

Ari's eyes closed and her head bowed as she stepped further away from him. He could see her gathering breath for what she would say next, and a foreboding entered his stomach as she looked up at him one more time.

"When did she realize we were stigmatic, Cai? Before or after we were stabbed?"

His mouth opened to ask her why it mattered. Then his mind jumped onto her train of thought. Cai closed his mouth with a soft exhale.

"She wouldn't have a reason to know until afterward," he answered in just as quiet a voice. "She didn't even know your name when I got stabbed, though."

"But someone did. Someone knew where to find me. My name, my birthdate, and all of my medical information. Someone was keeping tabs on me through Doctor Lita. And it wouldn't be hard for the Supreme Commander to look at that someone and order them to kill your twin."

Cai felt that sick feeling roar through his stomach one more time. "And I know who that someone is," he muttered. "Son of a bitch. Ari, we need to get to that train station *now*."

Setting off in a trot the way she'd been leading them, Cai felt a new pulse of adrenaline sweeping through his body. It all made perfect sense now. Why Ari was taken away from him, why his picture was never released and his identity kept secret, why someone had tried to kill *Ari*, not him. He was even pretty sure about why he would become

the target after the failed assassination of his sister. Oh yes, Cai knew exactly where to go to find answers.

“Cai? What’s going on?” Ari demanded as she fell into step beside him.

“You’re right. My mother may have tried to kill you. And maybe that’s why your second assassin never tried again: because she learned that killing you would kill me. But I doubt my mom was alone in her lab when we were being created. And there’s only one woman she would trust with the knowledge of what we are. The same woman she would trust to make sure her secrets were never revealed.”

As they skidded to a halt a few blocks from the station entrance, Cai turned to look fully at Ari. “My mother could kill you, the child she never met. But she could never harm me. Yet, she wasn’t the only one who could be exposed by our existence. And if my mother was making sure no one harmed you, that left the window open so that someone could get to me. We were wrong, Ari. Someone wasn’t after you because they knew it would get to me. Someone was after me because they failed at killing you.”

“Who, Cai? Tell me who,” Ari snarled, her *edge* thick enough to choke on.

“Doctor Carson.”

January 4, 2358

Central Valor Train Station

Valor, America

After the months of knowing about his sister and wondering what all could have happened to force them to this state, Cai no longer had to question. He had answers. Maybe not good ones, and maybe not the ones he wanted to hear. But they were the answers that made sense. And now, he was returning to Valor with his sister for the sole purpose of getting confirmation. Given what he’d been through, his mother was no longer going to deny him this.

As the train pulled into the Valor station, Cai glanced over to see his sister pulling the black helmet over her head. She paused for a moment, her dark eyes promising that this would work, though they both had no clue how things would turn out. He had tried to talk her into getting off a stop early and making it back to the hotel on her own, but she had argued that she wouldn’t be able to get near the Supreme Commander without him. Even so, he knew how dangerous it would

be for them to return here, and anything could happen to one or the other as they made their way to the hotel. Of course, they were incapable of protecting each other, when it came down to it. Not that they wouldn't try.

The moment the doors opened in the station, they were met with a wall of soldiers in black uniforms. Around them, people grew weak in the knees as the combined *edges* pushed out away from the men to envelope the passengers. Without pausing, Ari grabbed Cai's upper arm and escorted him out onto the platform. All around them, passengers were being scanned, identified, and filtered through the soldiers. Stepping around a woman who had paused to vomit, Ari approached the soldier closest to them.

Cai had never prayed harder for something to work than he did in the moment Ari leaned forward and said, "My team-leader, Sergeant Naois, sent me to escort Mr. Balere to his mother. Is there transport available at this time?"

Because of the mask, Cai couldn't be sure of the soldier's reaction. Yet, the triumphant set of Ari's shoulders as she straightened to her full height gave him some hope. A moment later, the soldier held out his palm scanner. Ari stepped aside and motioned to Cai. Stepping up to the device, Cai placed his right hand on the scanner while looking through the deep tint to the soldier's eyes underneath. It took only a second for the scan to confirm his identity. And a few seconds only saw the soldier on his coms, demanding the closest transport that was available.

Ten minutes after they arrived at the train station, Ari and Cai were loaded into a black vehicle like the one Rodgers had picked them up in. This time, instead of heading for safety, they were entering the lion's den.

January 4, 2358
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America

From the distance between the Central Valor Station and the Grand Victory Hotel, Ari knew she and Cai could have walked it in fifteen minutes. With the security on any mode of transportation into and out of Valor, however, there was no possible way for them not to be caught. It was easiest to go in with no concealment or diversionary tactics. Which meant she also had to prepare herself to be scanned and checked out by the black-uniformed guards several times. She was glad Rodgers had been telling the truth.

Once they had left Jace at the compound and Rodgers took them to the hotel in Zenith, Ari had finally remembered to ask her instructor why she was there. As it turned out, Captain Ramson had scattered anyone who had known Ari at Camp Emergence. The moment he realized that Jace was involved, he had guessed that Ari was as well. Soldiers took care of their own. So he made sure there was someone in each city who was on the lookout for Jace or Ari. According to Rodgers, he also had her upload a file that would allow the machines to recognize her as a soldier. It was illegal and falsified information, to be sure, but they were willing to take that chance. For her.

Of course, Ari hadn't been allowed to bask in that feeling of support before Rodgers dug into her about what happened with Jace. Since she wasn't sure what had happened, it left them both on edge and irritable. When Ari suggested that he may have been keeping tabs on her as part of an assignment, however, Rodgers lost it. The last sight she had of

her instructor involved a slamming door. She blamed Jace for that, too.

As the vehicle came to a stop outside of the Grand Victory Hotel, Ari did her best to shake Jace from her mind. He wasn't here, now. Wasn't with them anymore. Which left her and Cai; as it should have been from the beginning.

Turning to Cai, Ari wished again that they had been gifted with twin telepathy instead of a stigmata syndrome. It would have been much easier, then, to ask him if he was ready for this. Of course, even then they had no choice in the matter, so his answer would have made no difference. Ari took in a deep breath and they both left the relative safety of the vehicle and strode into the hotel, four guards boxing them in as they went.

The moment they walked in the doors, they were met with a heavy security detail. Once more, Cai and Ari were forced to have their hands scanned. Yet again, she was relieved to find that her name meant nothing to them, while Cai's identity forced them to jump all over themselves as they made sure to deliver him safely to the elevator. Even then, a small contingent of guards rode with them all the way to the floor where the penthouses were.

Ari's eyes watched the numbers rise inside of the elevator, and she could feel her nerves keeping time as they bypassed floor after floor after floor. Several times, she had to resist the urge to rub the back of her neck. At one point, she almost removed her helmet before she remembered why she was authorized to keep it in place when no one else typically was. There was a big reveal they were building up to, after all. Though the thought of it made her heart race.

Beside her, Cai casually brushed his shoulder against hers. If they were alone, she knew he would have taken her hand or wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder. Even though it would have been weird at first, she would have been grateful for the effort. As it was, this slight contact was the most they could allow anyone to see: an accidental brushing of shoulders.

Ari held back the urge to sigh as the elevator came to a stop. In an instant, the doors seemed to spring open and the guards in the elevator were replaced by men in uniform placed all along the corridor. With so many people about, Ari couldn't help but wonder if their terrorism ruse was counter intuitive. If Jace had just told them right away that he had the authority of the Supreme Commander, wouldn't that have been easier than sending all of that security to Valor? Then again, it was Cai's personal security that had tried to kill him. So perhaps it was

for the best to get as many men with guns away from them as possible. Of course, at this point it really didn't matter.

"Mr. Balere, the Supreme Commander is expecting you," announced one of the uniformed men that greeted them.

Again, Ari refrained from exchanging a glance with her brother. Instead, Cai nodded his head and gestured for the man to lead the way. Once they reached the penthouse, they were once more subjected to fingerprint scans as a group of no less than twelve men let their *edges* languish over them. Ari was more than a little spiteful as she allowed her irritation to rise. If what Jace had said was true, even a little bit of her attitude could go a long way in that area.

For one moment, Ari thought she was prepared for that door to open. But then it did. Nothing compared to the fear that coursed through her in that moment. Not the time she got stabbed, or when Cai was shot at. Even when she saw the guns being pointed at Eila and Jace. That door opening meant she had to face something now that she had never put into a conscious thought.

Ari was about to meet her mother. And she knew, deep down, that this woman had tried to kill her when it was no longer safe for her to have just disappeared. How was she supposed to react?

"Ari?" Cai questioned as he lingered in the doorway. Quiet as his voice was, it caused every eye to turn to her. Keeping her eyes on him, Ari nodded once before following him through the door.

Both of them paused just inside the doorway, their surprise giving way to unease. While the corridors, elevators, and lobby were all packed with security, inside the penthouse, there were no uniformed people to be found. Not only that, but all of the main lights had been switched off and only a few lamps remained lit. The penthouse had become a virtual darkroom; transmissions were barred entrance and exit, keeping whatever was said, and done, between the occupants. They both stood motionless for so long that the moment they spotted movement, they jumped.

Lucia Balere glided into the room from a hallway to the left. Ari's eyes locked on her as soon as she came into view, noticing that she was a few centimeters shy of Ari's 178, though she appeared taller in her heels. Looking at this woman, it was apparent in an instant where Ari and Cai received their thin frames from, along with the sharp features of their faces. Yet, her eyes were unlike theirs, in shape or color. When Ari met the eyes of the woman who gave birth to her, it was like water meeting oil.

The Supreme Commander of the United Nations stopped in the middle of the room, her icy blue eyes piercing through the visor of Ari's helmet. Silence stretched between the three of them, as none knew what to say. There was no doubt in Ari's mind that this woman knew who she was, or what she had done. Yet, there was Cai to consider.

A thought Lucia must have had as well, for her gaze at last slid from her daughter's to land on the uncovered face of her son. In that moment, Ari knew exactly what Cai had meant. Lucia's lips parted and her eyes began a frantic search of Cai's entire body, searching for harm or damage done to him. When her gaze returned to his face, those blue eyes were wide and imploring. Shifting her feet, it appeared that she would run to him at any moment. Cai's expression forbade it.

The moment she was aware of that, she was Lucia Balere no longer. Her shoulders rolled back as she stood calm and forbidding in the center of the room. What emotion had been visible on her face a moment ago smoothed itself away as she folded her hands in front of her in a patient gesture. In one visible second, the woman had transformed from worried mother to Supreme Commander, and nothing in the world could have convinced Ari more fully that it was her hand that forced the knife into her side.

"Mother," Cai said in greeting, his voice seeming to come out louder than necessary.

"Cai. You are well?" The mask slipped long enough for the worry to bleed through.

"I'm not dead, so I guess I'm doing okay," he remarked.

Her eyes flickered to Ari and back. "And Amaris?"

"She's safe, for now. Do I have your word that she'll stay that way?" Ari had never heard Cai's voice become that cold.

"Of course, Cai. Nothing will happen to her, you have my word."

For one endless moment, Cai stared his mother down. "I wish I could believe you. But with what she knows, how can I trust you to uphold your end of the bargain? You sent assassins after my sister, and her only crime was existing."

Lucia's blue eyes widened for a moment as they shot between Ari and Cai. They could practically see the thoughts racing through her mind as she continued to study her children. All of a sudden, it stopped. The thoughts and the looks came to a halt as her eyes returned to their normal size. Locked on Ari's visor, Lucia nodded slowly.

“Remove your helmet, Ari Keir. It is time we met face to face.”

With slow, deliberate movements, Ari raised her hands to the helmet and pulled it from her head. Her hands didn't shake; her heart didn't race; her blood didn't pound through her veins. Instead, a shallow regret traveled through her body as she came to realize that she was uninterested in anything having to do with Lucia Balere. In her conscious thoughts, Ari had never been able to acknowledge this woman as her mother. While it had bothered her only moments ago, now she could only find comfort in the declaration as the helmet took away the last defense between her and the predator's gaze.

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When Cai first decided to have his eighteenth birthday in Valor, it had seemed like the greatest idea in the world. It would satisfy his urge to defy his mother; it would create a sensational media frenzy over his ‘society debut;’ and he would get to begin his adulthood separated from the world his mother had created. Nothing could have better suited his needs.

In all of that planning, however, Cai had never expected this. He had never expected to find out about his long lost twin sister. He didn’t think it was possible that someone could be trying to kill them. Nor would he have ever believed that his own bodyguard would try to assassinate him when he wasn’t eighteen for longer than a few seconds. And after four days of dodging bullets and running for his life, Cai could never have imagined that he would find himself in the same room, confronted with the very person he had tried so hard to escape. All because she had made a mistake when she made Ari and Cai.

Instead of looking at his mother, Cai turned his attention to Ari as she removed the helmet. He was surprised by the look on her face. Ari wasn’t nervous or apprehensive about meeting their mother; not anymore. When she lowered the helmet to her side, Cai saw that Ari was detached. Though every portion of her body screamed her determination, it was in her face that she no longer cared about the woman that gave birth to them. She was here for answers and nothing

else.

For a long moment, Lucia and Ari stared each other down. Had the circumstances been better, Cai would have found their predatory gazes amusing. Now, he could only hope that Ari had it in her to stand up to Lucia Balere. Of course, the only person Cai had ever seen Ari buckle beneath was Eila.

"You believe that I had a hand in your attempted murder?" Lucia asked at last, her tone holding a deceptive lilt.

"I hold no doubt that you were behind the initial attempt," Ari answered. "Though Cai seems convinced that you wouldn't have tried again. He believes you love him too much."

"I do." The answer was quick and simple, but Cai could feel the sincerity in those two words. Of anything in his life, his mother's love for him had never been in question. Never a doubt. If it was a choice between losing Cai and letting the world burn, he knew that his mother would pour the oil and strike the match.

"I believe you," Ari answered.

A wry smile twisted his mother's lips. "With the same certainty that you believe I tried to kill you."

"Didn't you?"

"I did."

Cai's eyes closed and his shoulders hunched against *those* two words. Though he had always known in some way what his mother was capable of, he hadn't wanted to know that she was responsible for that. She had tried to kill his twin because it threatened her perfectly constructed lie. Yet, he wasn't even surprised by the admission.

"We need answers, Mom," he sighed, opening his eyes to meet her icy gaze.

"Is that not enough of an answer for you?" That same lilting quality tinged her voice again.

"No," Ari said. Cai's eyes shot to his sister, but she ignored him. "I want to know why. I have a right to know why."

Lucia's eyes sharpened on his twin's and Cai almost groaned. He could have warned her what was coming, but it was too late now. His mother was already preparing the lecture.

"No. You do not have that right. It is not your right to know the innermost workings of my mind, to discern my motives for actions you could have never begun to comprehend before they happened. Even if those actions involved you or were directed at you, that gives you no right over me. It is your right to *question* and wonder, but you

have no right to demand or *expect* me to reveal myself to you.”

Where Cai had stepped back from a similar onslaught years ago, Ari instead stepped forward and shot back, “I did not ask for you to reveal yourself; I have no desire to know you. I demanded only the answer of which I *do* have a right. It is an answer that *you* do not have the right to keep from me. Why try to kill me? It did not matter to you eighteen years ago that I might be allowed to live out my life elsewhere; so why does it matter now? What makes you think you have the right to revoke my life? To take it from me when you never even intended to give it to me?”

“Murder is never about another’s rights, Ari. I was never under the assumption that I had the *right* to end your life; only that it must be done in order to protect what I had worked so hard for. Ordering your death was an act of desperation, nothing more. While I’m not proud of it, I won’t deny what I have done.”

“Just why you’ve done it,” Ari countered, her gaze as impossibly cold as their mother’s.

“You misunderstand her,” Cai remarked. “She’s not proud of her desperation. She doesn’t regret trying to have you killed.”

“That’s not true,” Lucia said, her voice dropping in tone.

Cai couldn’t halt the disgusted sneer he threw at his mother. “You regret that killing her would have killed me. If you had succeeded in killing her without any effect on me, you wouldn’t bat an eye. I know you, Mother. Far better than I would like to.”

A silence stretched between them for several seconds before her head bowed. Speaking to her hands, she announced, “You’re right. I regret only that it harmed you, not that Ari could have died. Yet, it is you who misunderstand this. You are operating under the assumption that I have never loved my daughter. That I did not love her with the same vehemence and fierceness with which I love you, Cai. And you’re wrong.

“When one egg was implanted, it came with the promise of one life that was guaranteed to be extraordinary to me. One life. But then the egg split and I had the joy of realizing there would be two of you. I was having twins. Sons, I knew, since you were identical. And for nine months, I fell in love with both of you in ways you could never imagine.

“I was so in love that my heart broke the moment they announced that your twin was a girl. That her organs were on opposite sides of her body. That, despite her gender, your DNA was undoubtedly the

same. My heart broke the moment I was forced to tell them to give her up. To take her away from me without me ever getting the chance to hold her or see her face. And the minute they carried her out of the room, I grieved her.

“Both of you assume that I am cold and callous enough to kill my own child. You are wrong. The daughter that I had died that day, and part of my soul died with her. This girl standing in front of me now ... she’s not my child. She is a girl who shares my son’s DNA and harbors a secret that could destroy us all. I do not see my daughter standing beside you, Cai. I see a threat to our existence; one I can do nothing about without affecting you.”

Without giving Ari the chance to respond, Cai asked in a low tone, “Why is she a threat, Mom? What happened to make her so different? Why couldn’t we keep her?”

“It wasn’t safe for her to be with us, Cai. Nor was it safe for us. If it was found out that I had a daughter with the same DNA as my son, I would have lost you both. You came out perfectly normal. The only proof that existed that you might not be was her, so she had to go.”

“Why, Mom? Just tell me what is so different about us. What did you do to us before we were born?”

For the first time in several minutes, Lucia’s eyes lost their sheen of remembrance. Her blue eyes sharpened on her son before they swiveled to spear Ari in place. Cai knew what she was feeling; he could feel it too. The sensation of standing on a precipice, waiting to see if the wind would throw them over.

The silence stretched onward, but neither Cai nor Ari dared to say a word. He knew that his mother needed time to come to her decision. She would weigh the pros and cons of telling them, while simultaneously constructing an argument to convince them that her actions were the result of the only viable answers. Worst of all, he knew she had the ability to convince him that what she did, she did with the best of intentions. Her life’s motto had been that she would do whatever was necessary. And Cai knew moments ahead of time that this conversation would land on that single word.

When Lucia at last decided to speak, it was with the sudden twist of her neck before her eyes locked onto her son’s. Cai jerked a little in surprise, having become used to the stasis of the room. Yet, when his mom looked at him like that, he felt like all of the answers to every question he had ever asked was right there on her face, and he had only to read the features there to know the truth of everything.

“You have Klinefelter Syndrome. Also known as XXY syndrome. It is a genetic defect that occurs when a male karyotype is saddled with an extra X chromosome. This means that you have 47 chromosomes to the standard 46. It is a common condition that presents in roughly one in one thousand males and does not often produce symptoms. And yet, I was curious.

“Before I transferred into the political arena, I was working in a limited field of chromosome engineering. When I say limited, I mean that our work was restricted to only certain types of species. None of them human. Despite the importance of our research and our findings, it was strictly forbidden for us to use human tissue to test our theories. It halted advancement and had all of us chasing our tails for zero tangible results for years. And it is what prompted me to follow my father and brother into politics.

“Legally, I fought tooth and nail to relieve the restrictions on my fellow researchers. At every turn I was opposed. Therefore, only one thing remained for me to do: I had to prove to them that our research would be the miracle so many could use. If it was possible to manipulate the chromosomes so as to avoid defects, did we not have the duty to our fellow man to do just that?

“I applied for a child-bearing license and was the only single woman in a decade to be granted one. Once I knew it was an option, I took out several of my own eggs and started experimenting on them in secret. First, I granted them all an extra X chromosome after inseminating them. Afterwards, I injected them all with a genetic modifier—a suppressant, I called it—that would negate the effects of the extra X. There were failures, of course. Until there wasn’t.

“When I was sure that both the chromosomes and the modifier were holding, I had the egg implanted. Imagine my shock when we soon found that the egg had split and I was carrying twins. And for nine months, I loved my sons as any mother would; and I triumphed over them as the proof I needed to show the world that what we were doing was not dangerous or harmful, and that it was necessary.

“Of course, when I gave birth to a daughter, all of that changed.

“As soon as they told me that your twin was a girl, I *thought* I knew what had happened. You see, it wasn’t unknown for there to be male/female Klinefelter twins. In those cases, the female would take the extra X unto herself and the male would carry the normal XY arrangement. The DNA would therefore be different.

“That didn’t happen in this case, however. When the egg separated,

the second child developed as a mirror twin. It happens when the split occurs later than expected. Usually, when this happens it's just the simple things like dominant hands being different or facial expressions being opposite. With your sister, however, all of her internal organs underwent *situs inversus totalis*. She was opposite to you in every way.

"That's when I realized what must have happened. The suppressant I administered to the egg was not the type that would show up in DNA or chromosome testing. It was merely a chemical made to react with the chromosomes. In this case, it worked as it was meant to: it suppressed the extra X chromosome. In your twin, however, the suppressant was mirrored as everything else was. It suppressed the Y chromosome.

"It's why you have a sister. Not a brother."

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Cai released a small sigh. It was more than he expected. More than he'd wanted to know. Though, he supposed, it wasn't too far off of what he'd guessed. He knew something had to have been done in order for him and Ari to turn out like they did, but he had never imagined this. A genetic defect coupled with a suppressing chemical, all for no reason.

"Why bother?" he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "With the way the system works, an egg is screened thoroughly for defects before it's allowed to make it past the first trimester. The reason you never got anywhere with gene manipulation is because it isn't needed. The Office of Human Population has rigorous screening processes and eggs that prove defective don't make it past a week after the diagnosis. When we have such strict laws in place on population and breeding, there's no need to fix what's wrong. We just scrap the bad and start again."

"And you're okay with that?"

Cai raised his head to his mother, but she was staring in surprise at Ari. When he turned his head, it was to find a stubborn expression on his twin's features. Unable to understand, Cai shrugged his shoulders a bit.

Ari's entire body straightened and her features became as imperious as any look Lucia Balere was able to conjure. "Eila has hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. In most cases, it's an inherited genetic condition that

could cause sudden cardiac death at any time. For her, it wasn't inherited. Her chromosomes were defective, but no one found it before the second trimester began. It was up to her parents, then, whether or not they were going to terminate. They chose not to, though her name went on a list of people permanently banned from having children. If she didn't die young, that is.

"Eila and I met in the waiting room of a pediatric heart specialist. Of course, I had Doctor Lita as a permanent physician. She didn't.

"If it were possible that we could find ways to fix diseases on a cellular level, shouldn't we be allowed? Where is the harm in trying? Why is that not a need? Because it's easier to throw something away and start again over fixing what you have in the first place?"

Cai had no argument for that. Not when Eila was involved. It also explained why Ari was so worried about her friend being on the run with them. That kind of strain could have killed her in an instant.

With that thought in mind, his glare turned back to his mother. "You tried to kill Ari, but it was only the once. Someone else tried to publicly assassinate me. Have you found them yet?"

Lucia sighed, her head shaking from side to side. "No. I can't find a place to start. There's no reason anyone should want you dead."

Cai and Ari snorted in the same instant. "You can't see the trail? I guess I can't blame you; it took us a couple of months. Though, we began on the wrong path, too."

"What are you talking about, Cai?"

"We thought someone was trying to kill me to get to Cai," Ari answered. "Now we think that Cai was only targeted because the mission to kill me had failed."

"Impossible," Lucia said, waving a dismissive hand in the air. "They would have to know about your condition."

"And there's only one woman who would know about both me and Ari, isn't there?" Cai interjected. "One person who knows that every time one of us got a bruise, a cut, a scrape, or broke a bone, the other did, too. After all, it was Doctor Carson you left in charge of our medical care, wasn't it?"

Lucia's face froze while her mouth was open to deliver a reply. After a moment, her jaw snapped shut and her piercing gaze shot between Ari and Cai. "What are you suggesting, exactly?"

"I think you had help in that lab. Someone was there with you when you made us. And she stayed with you all the way up until now. Which means she would have just as much to lose if Ari and I ever

found one another. If the lies all came crashing down at once. I think Doctor Carson was just as threatened by Ari, and was willing to see us both dead before the truth came to light."

"Sina wouldn't be stupid enough to target my child," she breathed in a low, silken tone. "Not when I had ordered that the girl was not to be harmed."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Ari answered in the same cold tone. "What was she more afraid of, Commander? You? Or having the rest of her life ruined by an eighteen year old experiment?"

As Ari had done earlier, their mother drew herself up to her full height and a wicked, evil grin created a shadow on her lips. "Do you forget what I am capable of so easily? If Sina Carson did not fear me enough before, she will now." Reaching for the watch on her wrist, the main lights flicked on in an instant before she sent out a message to her security. "Doctor Carson is requested at once. Send her to the penthouse." An instant later, they were in a darkroom once more.

"You're going to kill her, aren't you?" Cai whispered.

"If she did this, I will rip out her throat with my bare hands," she answered.

"There's no one else it could be," he reminded her.

"There is always someone else who it could be. The question is whether or not there was. In this case, I believe you. Doctor Carson is the only person who has had your medical records since your birth. For necessity's sake, I've also allowed her to assign and direct care of your twin's medical needs. No other could have known about your stigmatic episodes. Even I was unaware."

Silence descended as they each waited for the doctor's arrival. For much of it, Cai kept his eyes on his mother. They had gone far past the point where he could ever trust her again, so keeping an eye on her seemed a necessity in itself. Of course, when his glances showed him that Ari was pondering more and more, he started to feel worried. Sure enough...

"If she's the only person who knows about us, why was it so necessary, then, to keep me and Cai separated?"

For the first time, Lucia looked at her daughter with something akin to sympathy. "I know it might be hard to understand--"

"I understand that you think I'm a threat to everything you have. What I don't understand is how you can think that when no one really knows how different Cai and I are, except for our doctors and our friends. Would it have been so difficult to keep our secret if we were

living under the same roof?"

"Ari, have you ever seen yourself and Cai side by side? In pictures or in a mirror? When I look at you, I see his mirror image. Anyone who looks at the two of you together would know in an instant that you are more than just twins. You're halves of a whole.

"Anyone looking at you two will ask questions. The kinds of questions that no one could answer without revealing what you are to one another. And if someone took the time to seek the answers, more than just my world would come crumbling down. My entire life would come to an end."

Ari shook her head. "They wouldn't execute you for turning your children into experiments."

"No," Lucia answered in a quiet voice, "they wouldn't. They do, however, destroy experiments they find to be unlawfully created. Even the human ones."

Ari and Cai's eyes shot to one another, locking like magnets. Panic and defiance were written in his sister's gaze and he couldn't help but mirror her fear and indignation. Unsure whether or not he was talking to Ari or himself, Cai said, "They wouldn't do that, now. It's been eighteen years. We're known members of society now."

"No," his mother sighed again, "they wouldn't do that to you. Not after you became a public figure. That would not stop them from trying to go after Ari, Doctor Carson, and myself. Which is why I chose to eliminate Ari; because that would have been her fate all along if it was proven who you two are to one another.

"I gave my daughter up because I knew how dangerous it was for her to remain with us. Instead of having a child grow up in the arms of another, I would be forced to hear about your termination from behind prison walls. It was not a life I could condone for any of us. Ari's ignorance was her best defense. And now it's gone."

Cai and Ari both opened their mouths to question further, but a knock on the door silenced all three of them. The twins waited with bated breath as Lucia pressed another button on her watch, letting the main lights come back on while opening the door for their intruder. And as soon as Doctor Carson walked into the room, Cai felt his lips curl into a disgusted sneer.

The second she was in the room far enough, the door slammed shut and they were plunged into a darkroom once again. Doctor Carson's gaze went from Lucia to Cai before landing at last on Ari. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise and she took a step towards his twin.

Cai had never felt so protective in his entire life. Though he and Ari had gravitated to opposite sides of the room, he took several long strides and put himself between Carson and his sister. He could feel his adrenaline spike as he towered over the woman who was partially responsible for their creation, and who had tried to kill them mere days ago.

"So much as look at her again, and I will kill you," Cai hissed.

Doctor Carson stared up at him, her eyebrows raised in surprise at his demeanor. A brief second later, her eyes widened and she took an unconscious step back from him. "Before this day, Cai Balere, I would have said your soul was far too gentle for that. It would appear you have undergone some changes that would prove me wrong."

"You have no idea."

Instead of answering, Doctor Carson turned towards his mother. "Lucia. I was summoned."

"For good reason. Sina, why didn't you tell me Cai and Ari were stigmatic when I ordered you to send a hit man after her?"

Three sets of eyes rested upon the doctor and only those belonging to his mother weren't brimming with hostility. Instead, a cool, calculating gaze studied Doctor Carson. It was in that calculation that Lucia could prove to be the most lethal, however. Furies and passions died, as Cai well knew. When she was in a state of composed calculation, however, it was likely someone was going to die.

A mere breath of time passed, however, before the doctor said, "I did not think it relevant."

"You didn't think that I might like to know that I would be losing my son if the girl was killed?"

"No," she answered without a touch of reserve or a hint of remorse.

"My son could have died, Sina."

"As he should have, Lucia."

Cai choked on that reply and his mother's gaze hardened into sapphire gems. Before more could be asked of her, she pressed on. "You saw a threat that you deemed must be eliminated, and I concurred. The fact that I knew there would be collateral damage did not change my assessment of the situation. I hadn't thought that it would cloud yours."

"He is my son."

"He is just as defective. His life threatens all we have done just as much as hers does. The added advantage to this case was that the elimination of one would bring about the same ends for the other. I

made a choice; just as you did.”

“I amended my decision.”

“Based upon personal feelings that you allowed to cloud your judgment and distort your purpose. The twins were proven failures. You’d have done better in euthanizing them at once and dissecting all of the information you could. Instead, you grew attached and your work suffered for it. I was doing you a favor.”

The stillness in the room was amplified by how little the three of them moved upon hearing her words. None of them blinked or looked away. Instead, a cloud of vicious animosity rose out of each of them as it converged on the doctor. It was as if they all possessed an *edge* that promised vengeance.

In that moment, Cai became certain that Doctor Sina Carson would not leave that room alive. And he didn’t care.

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At this point, Ari was more astonished at the fact that anything could surprise her anymore than at what the doctor had said. It was as she and Cai had determined, and she found it ironic that they had come to the answer in just a few short minutes of being alone together. As much as she regretted leaving Eila and Amaris behind, it was needed. This moment of triumph and heartache and rage was for her and Cai alone.

And oh was there rage.

It had been on a slow simmer since the beginning of the meeting with Lucia Balere, but it had been rising to a crescendo ever since. Though the blame for this rested solely on Cai's mother, she also knew that she couldn't fault her for wanting to do more with her research than let it go to waste. Experimenting on her own children, however, was not something Ari could forgive. Especially since it brought them all to this moment.

If Ari had ever wondered whether there was a real 'murder gene,' she felt she had only to look at herself, Cai, and Lucia Balere to know that it was real. Though they might not have realized it, but each of them also pulsed with a defined *edge*, though Lucia's was decidedly more potent. Ari didn't want to know why.

"Just what favor did you think you were doing for me, Sina?"

"You could have never ordered the boy's death yourself. And without his death, the girl would still be alive. The moment they

learned of each other, it was only a matter of time before our lives went up in flames. I did the only thing I could.”

“Say the words,” Lucia almost whispered, her voice low and silky. “Tell me what you did.”

Ari tensed. She knew what was coming. She knew what intent lurked behind those words. What she didn’t know was if she was capable of stopping it. If she was even going to try. Could she stand by and watch a woman be murdered? Would she?

“I manipulated a man so that he would kill your son. He failed. But I won’t,” Sina announced.

It wasn’t like in the movies, where everything dropped into slow motion. Instead, Ari didn’t have time to react as Doctor Carson spun on her heel, raising a syringe she’d had concealed in her coat. Cai was standing too close, and he didn’t move fast enough, either. The needle stabbed into her brother’s shoulder and the liquid was slammed into his body.

Ari leapt forward in the same instant that Cai staggered back. He clamped a hand over his left shoulder as he stared at his doctor in shock. An instant later, Ari felt the searing pain in her right shoulder. As Cai stumbled back another step, Ari found that her vision was beginning to blur and her head felt like it was going to burst. Cai fell onto his back at the same time that Ari dropped to her knees. Her skin felt clammy while her left arm began to spasm.

Then her heart began to race and she was so focused on the sound of her pulse in her ears that she almost mistook the first shot for her erratic heartbeat. Lifting her head, Ari heard two more quick bursts of gunfire, and felt her face and neck get hit with the warm flecks of blood splatter. With her vision almost entirely clouded, she could just make out the silhouette of Sina Carson collapsing to the floor.

Ari wasn’t far behind her as she sagged to the floor on her stomach. Beside her, she could hear Cai’s shallow breathing as his throat took on a rasp she knew couldn’t be good. Unwilling to keep her eyes open—more lights had turned on and it was piercing her skull so that some pain nerves shrieked in protest—her right hand fumbled along the floor, searching for her brother. Her fingers buried themselves in his sweater just before she lost consciousness.

January 10, 2358

Valor Prestige Hospital

Valor, America

* * *

The first thing Ari heard was her pulse on a machine. Erratic, steady, and missing a beat. How it should have sounded months ago when she'd been in Jace's tent after getting stabbed. Instead, the fool had put the sensor on his own chest, making sure no one else knew. Well, they would know now. Especially since Cai wasn't there to provide the extra beat.

Cai!

Ari's eyes snapped open and she attempted to push herself up. Not a full second later, Doctor Lita Naois strode through the open door and went directly to the machines. She pressed one button before turning and pushing on Ari's shoulders to get her to lay back.

"Where's Cai?" Ari demanded as she struggled against the hold.

"In the room next door," she answered before giving another shove that made Ari collapse onto her back. Ari rebounded as if the mattress were a trampoline, but Lita caught her before she could launch herself off of the bed. "Ari Keir, settle down right now or you're not going to see him for another six hours."

"I have to see Cai. It's urgent. I have to know that he's okay."

"Ari, you're sitting up, talking, and trying your damndest to fly out of this room. I think that's more than a slight indication of how Cai is feeling. Now sit back and relax for a few minutes. Get your bearings. Ask your questions."

The last was said in such a strong hinting tone that Ari forgot that she was supposed to have more of those. That she was supposed to care about what happened to her, where they were, or why Doctor Lita was in attendance. But she didn't. Not when the most important question remained unanswered. And until she saw her twin with her own eyes, everything else was a lie.

Part of her suspected that her doctor could see that in her expression. Since she wasn't trying very hard to hide it, she wouldn't be surprised. So it made absolute sense that Lita began speaking as if she were answering the questions anyway.

"Doctor Carson injected a cocktail of venom, if you can believe it, into Cai's shoulder. It was a mixture she had cooked up in recent days, thank god, because there was enough of it left in her lab to allow us to engineer an anti-venom. Of course, that took us a few days, so we were forced to put you and Cai in a state of stasis so that we could get it right.

"Obviously you had to be brought to the hospital to accomplish

that. And since I am the only person familiar with your medical records—which means Cai’s—I was called up from Genesis. We delivered the anti-venom two nights ago and yesterday we started bringing you out of stasis. The fact that you’re this energetic now is very hopeful.”

“We?” Ari croaked through her dry throat.

Doctor Lita poured her a cup of water and handed it over, no longer helpful when it came to her questions. Which was fine, Ari decided. There was only one other doctor familiar with her and Cai’s identities and conditions. And no matter how they felt about him, he wouldn’t say no to helping them. It was all part of who he was as a soldier. He was duty-bound to help them.

Ari’s eyes traveled away from her doctor as she studied the generic hospital room. Then her eyes landed on the board that the nurses used to keep tabs on her. Skipping over the medical jargon, her eyes narrowed in on the date.

“How long have we been here?”

“Six days.”

“It took you six days to raid her lab and make an anti-venom?” she scoffed.

“No. It took four days to raid her lab and create an anti-venom that worked. And one day following administration, we brought you out of stasis. This last day is entirely because you needed the sleep.”

“You are a lot less bitchy than the last time I saw you,” Ari grumbled.

The laugh was immediate and carried a hint of relief in it. “Well, you weren’t exactly a ray of sunshine the last time I saw you, either.”

“I had a good excuse. Someone was trying to kill me.”

For a moment, as Lita’s familiar blue eyes scraped along hers, Ari saw the shadow of fear in them. When her doctor didn’t offer up a response, she didn’t push for one. It made sense, now. Lita was worried for her own life, too. After all, if Ari and Cai were dead, there was no need of their doctor.

A silence fell between them, causing Lita to begin taking notes on her vitals. Meanwhile, Ari stared at her knees as she tried to remember everything that had happened a week ago. She also thought of that elusive ‘we’ that Lita had let loose.

The questions building inside of her now were the kind that her doctor couldn’t answer. Knowing that Jace was somewhere nearby brought with it other reminders. Suddenly, she was desperate for word

of Eila or Amaris. Yet, she wasn't sure if she could make herself ask Jace. And if he didn't know the answers, she felt herself capable of throttling him with her bare hands.

"Lucia Balere?" she eventually murmured. "Where is she?"

Lita refused to look at her as she announced, "Sitting at Cai's bedside for the most part. Says she's not leaving him alone when the last time he was in the hospital, he up and walked out without even waiting for her to sign the discharge papers."

Ari nodded, though she wasn't surprised. Though her memory was a little fuzzy, the three gunshots resounded in her head. There was no denying what Lucia had done, or why she had done it. The woman was never going to see justice for what she'd done to Ari and Cai. Yet, she had kept her promise to Jace. She'd finally gotten the person responsible for the assassination attempts. Yet, Ari wasn't sure it was enough.

Facing the facts, Ari knew how bad this was going to be. How hard. After all, they'd been brought to a hospital together, despite only one of them being injured. Lucia had been right in the fact that Ari had never seen herself and Cai side by side, but she knew how it would have looked when they were brought here. How many people knew now? How many would be paid off? Which others would talk about it anyway? As long as she and Cai were together, there was a risk. They may have found the perpetrator this time, but what if it happened again? Or worse, what if the government got involved and wanted to exterminate them? There were those who would stand with Cai, but they needed only to get to Ari to see that the deed was done.

The thoughts were whirling away in her mind when a light knock sounded on the door. Since it was still wide open, Ari's head snapped up and locked on the figure in the doorway. Her throat became parched for a whole new reason in that moment and tears pricked at her eyes. Whether from joy or guilt, she couldn't be certain. Probably both.

"Eila," she breathed as her friend crossed the threshold.

Lita and Eila exchanged a quick glance before the doctor finished with her notes and exited the room ... closing the door behind her. Once the doctor was gone, Eila took several steps towards the bed, a smile on her face. To anyone who didn't know her well enough, she would have seemed normal. But Ari saw the hesitation in her movements and the wariness in her eyes.

When Ari had left her in Zenith, she had known that she was doing

something that could hurt them. That would hurt them. Yet, she had chosen to remain naive about it; Eila always understood why she did things, and this time would be no different. In that moment, she realized how wrong she was. How much her betrayal had fractured their friendship. Because Eila was looking at her now how Ari had looked at Jace: like she didn't know how to trust her anymore.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, knowing there was nothing else she could say.

Eila paused beside her bed, her eyes dropping to the twisted blankets Ari had tried to escape from. She didn't say that she understood. Didn't tell Ari that it was okay. Instead, she looked as if she were fighting back tears and Ari held very still. As a rule, Eila didn't cry. For her to break that now meant her emotions were in utter turmoil and she couldn't control them any longer.

An instant later, Eila's hand lifted and the back of it slapped against Ari's exposed upper arm. Ari yelped at the same time that Eila growled, "Damn you, Ari Keir. It was supposed to be all or none of us."

Just like that, a flicker of irritation formed inside of her and she snapped back, "Back when you wanted to run off with Jace and abandon the rest of us. But he broke us in the end, anyway. Didn't he?"

"If you would have tried to understand—"

"Understand what? That you two were willing to leave us behind? Stuck in limbo while you went and risked your lives, just because you weren't stigmatically connected to us?"

"He knew we weren't going to be hurt, you idiot! We wanted to go ahead so he could use the Supreme Commander's name to get past the guards. To set things up for you and Cai and Ris to arrive. He was *trying* to avoid all of this," she snapped, holding her arms out wide in a display of the hospital room.

Ari shook her head, the anger still flickering in her chest. "He told you what he planned to do?"

Eila released an aggravated sigh. "Of course he told me, Ari. Jace and I are a team. Like you and Cai. Speaking of, I'm not here to argue with you about Jace. I'm here to argue with you about you abandoning us."

On instinct, Ari opened her mouth to explain. Then she closed it, knowing that there was nothing to explain. Eila would never find her excuses valid enough. So, instead, Ari said the only thing she believed straight to her core—and she knew Eila did, too.

“It was supposed to be just us. From the beginning, it had to end with just me and Cai. No one else.”

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January 10, 2358
Valor Prestige Hospital
Valor, America

As soon as Cai realized where he was, he pretended to be asleep. His mother was still sitting in that chair beside his bed, holding his hand. After a mental review of everything that happened, he didn't feel up to fighting with her anymore. Not now, at least. Though it took every ounce of self-control he had not to rip his hand out of hers.

Outside of his room, the pacing started up again. By sight, he had no clue who was out there, but considering the stinging on his right bicep, he could guess. And the minute his mother left, the war would truly be begun. Cai almost smiled at the irony: hiding behind his mommy so he wouldn't get hurt.

Yet, when his mother's key began its obnoxious tone, he couldn't help but be grateful. At first, she silenced it. When it began again, she cursed under her breath and checked it. After it began going for a third time in the past five minutes, she exhaled angrily and got to her feet. Cai listened as her steps led out of the room. Not two seconds later, another pair of shoes darted into the room and closed the door.

"Open your eyes. I know you're faking," Amaris snapped as she approached the right side of his bed.

Cai opened his eyes to slits. Just in time to see Ris cock back a fist and slam it into his right shoulder. Groaning, Cai tried to push himself away from her, but the blows just kept coming. With dedications.

"That is for leaving me behind. That is for not telling me where you were going. That is for *almost dying!* And that is for making me care so

damn much about you, Cai Balere!"

The last punch was a kidney shot and Cai groaned in pain as his back arched away from her. Having rolled onto his left side, he found that the spots where he'd been hit hurt far more than the ache in his shoulder where the needle had stabbed into him. Of course, nothing terrified him more than when he could feel Amaris climbing onto the bed behind him.

With a forceful pull, Ris rolled him onto his back before she threw one leg over his stomach. Before he could react, she had his face trapped between her hands and her mouth was pressed against his in a frantic kiss. And when she released him, she slammed her fist down on his left shoulder where the needle had gone in.

"Ris!"

"Shut up, it's not like you had surgery," she snapped before taking his face in her hands again. Leaning over him, she pressed her forehead against his and let loose a long exhale. "Six days, Cai Balere. You owe me six bloody days of torment and worry."

Feeling as if the worst had past, Cai raised his hands to put on her hips. With her eyes closed, he was grateful for the smile that spread across her face. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You should be," she grumbled. Then she kissed him again.

She was still kissing him a few minutes later when the door opened and his mother's voice rang out in a sharp reprimand, "Amaris Pacquita! Get off of him right this instant!"

Though Cai was willing to ignore her, Ris snapped her head up with a gasp before leaping clear of the hospital bed. Her face was beet red and she wouldn't raise her eyes from the floor. She looked so chagrined and self-conscious that Cai couldn't help the laugh that burst from him.

A second later, Ris was at his side, delivering a silencing smack to his arm. Cai only laughed harder, until tears were building in his eyes and he was gasping for breath. He didn't stop until his mother asked Ris for a private moment. Then he was alone with his mother and nothing seemed funny anymore.

"She doesn't know what you did," he said while his mother returned to her seat. The coldness in his voice kept her from reaching for his hand again.

"No one besides you and Ari."

Cai nodded once. "I'll tell her later."

His mother's eyes sharpened on his features and she opened her

mouth to give the order. Cai met her gaze with a bland expression, practically daring her to give the command anyway. Lucia closed her mouth, pressing her lips together in a tight line, and Cai looked back at the ceiling.

"Ari will tell Eila, as well. Maybe others. Probably not, though. Since you're so sure this could get us killed. Of course, I'm sure she and I could work out a deal. Eighteen years and we're both probably sterile anyway—one of those Klinefelter symptoms, right?—so we're not worth much to deal with. Besides, apparently people who back us into a corner wind up dead." Each word came out with a careful, casual quality designed to make his mother think about everything he was saying. Because he was blackmailing her, and he wanted her to know it.

"Did you send the Seeker after us, Mother, or was that Doctor Carson as well? Were you so sure your bounty hunter would be able to bring us back that you found no need to send backup teams? Because, of course, you know that they tried to kill us, too, don't you?"

Lucia was no longer looking at him, but had her eyes trained on the linoleum floor. "I sent them, but I didn't give them orders to kill you."

"Didn't you?"

"You are my son!"

"And you'd already given me up for dead! You knew Jace would never bring us back to you. Not when he knew that the threat came out of your office. Hell, he might have known that it was you we had to be afraid of. The minute you realized I was with Ari, out in the wilderness, you made the same decision about me that you made the day you gave Ari up. I was already dead, and you were just making it official. Don't lie to me, Mom. Don't you dare lie to me now."

"You are my son," she said quietly.

"Not anymore," he answered, ignoring the tears he saw rolling down her face.

"Cai ... please?" she choked as she brought her hands up to hide her face.

His voice was chiseled from ice. "For your sake, I won't tell Ari. You'd never leave this hospital alive. But I want you to go. And I don't want you to come back."

"What are you going to do?" she almost whispered.

"I'm eighteen. I'm going to do whatever the hell I want."

His mother nodded once. After a few more seconds, she managed to compose herself and stood up. Staring down at her son, she met his

eyes for the last time.

"I love you, Cai. More than anything in the world," she announced.

Cai granted her mercy in that moment. "I love you too, Mom. But I can't forgive you, and I won't forget. Goodbye."

Lucia Balere nodded once before turning on her heel and leaving the room. When he was sure she was gone, Cai leaned his head back and released a long exhale. It was done. For now. Though he would have to find a way to keep her in check. For all he knew, he just became dead to her, leaving him on the same hit list as Ari.

He'd meant what he said, though. For her sake, he would keep this secret from his twin. Only because he didn't want to visit his twin in prison. Or suffer through her execution for murder. Everything before this moment had been done in self-defense and Lucia Balere would make sure no evidence existed to prove there was a crime in the first place. But if Ari killed the Supreme Commander, then it would all be over.

When he opened his eyes, he found Ris lingering in the doorway, a small smile pulling at her lips. Seeing that his eyes were open, she asked, "She gone for a bit?"

Cai smiled even as he felt a chunk of his heart fall away. Then he nodded. "Yeah. She's gone."

The grin on her face widened and she bounded into the room. "Good. Here, put this on," she ordered, handing him an old headset. He raised his eyebrows in question, but she scowled at him until he did as she ordered.

Rolling his eyes, he settled the headpiece on and turned on the mic as well as the receiver. And the first thing he heard was Ari's voice saying, "Eila, I don't know how to work this thing."

Cai's eyes widened as he looked to Ris. Her grin couldn't be any more smug as she backed out of the room. As soon as the door was closed, Cai exclaimed into the microphone, "Ari!"

"Cai?" she demanded, and he could almost imagine how she would react.

"Yeah. I'm here," he answered as he heard a commotion on the other end. She was probably trying to escape.

"What's going on?"

"Ris and Eila hooked us up. So we wouldn't piss off the docs, probably."

"Are you okay? I feel like I'm going to have half a dozen bruises by tomorrow."

Cai couldn't help the chuckle. "Ris got to me as soon as she could. Sorry about that."

Ari laughed a little. "I doubt she is. They both know it was my idea, so..."

"Yeah. Are you alone right now?"

"Yeah. Eila left as soon as she figured she could trust me with this thing."

Cai nodded to himself before he sighed. "Are you okay, Ari?"

"I'm fine," she replied, sounding bewildered. "Why?"

A weary, mirthless chuckle escaped him then. "Why? I don't know. Maybe because we've been stabbed, shot, and poisoned recently. On top of that, we learned my mother wanted to use us to play God. Oh and we abandoned our best friends in a city we'd never been to before. Can't imagine why you wouldn't be okay after all of that."

Silence greeted him. For several long moments, there was only the faint sound of Ari breathing into the mic to let him know that she was still there. Then she said, "Because I have you. I'm not half a person anymore. That's why I'm okay."

Cai felt something catch in his throat and for a second, he couldn't speak. At last, he was able to choke out, "Ari..."

"We can't stay together, Cai." The words came in a rush and were backed by a determination in her voice that he knew all too well at this point. It was the same tone she used to tell him they had to leave Ris and Eila behind. The same one that told Jace he couldn't stay with them anymore.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Cai could feel the hole in his chest gaping wide open. "I know," he whispered. "I know."

"We're not safe together."

"And we can't protect each other. I know, Ari. You don't have to explain it to me."

She didn't. He'd been thinking it ever since his mother had said it. Besides the chance that the government would someday decide to eliminate them, he had to look at the big picture. For years, everyone had known that he had a dead twin brother. And any explanation given for Ari's existence was going to cause more problems than solutions. Especially since their first theory was still valid: in order to get to one twin, all someone had to do was kill the other. With how his life was going to be in the next few months, it was far too dangerous to admit Ari into that.

As he thought it through, her voice murmured, "No, I don't. Great

minds think alike, right?"

"The *same* minds think alike. You are my other half, Ari. But neither of us are half a person. We'd be doing each other a disservice if that's all we became."

"I know."

Cai smiled with her. And for one moment, an extra beat slipped into his pulse. For only a second. Then it was gone.

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*January 10, 2358
Valor Prestige Hospital
Valor, America*

An hour passed after Cai and Ari had finished speaking before Amaris poked her head back into his room. Her eyes went from him to the headset on the table before she slipped into the room.

"You okay?" she asked as she sat at the end of his bed.

"Yeah. I think I am."

"Now you're scaring me," she remarked in her dry voice.

"Well, there are still a few leftover things to deal with. But it kinda feels like it's all over now, you know? No more running or attempted murder. We are never going camping again. And I'm going to learn to fly Stalkers and I'm going to get my own vehicle, because I'll be damned if I ever let myself be in a position where I feel trapped and helpless ever again. I'm not the leader that Jace or Ari are, and I want to be, Ris. I want to be."

"What did you and Ari talk about?" she asked, laughing a little.

Cai took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We talked about how we're more than half a person. How we're both going to go back to school and take our finals and go on with our lives. In the summer, she'll go back to Camp Emergence. And I ... I have no clue what I'm going to do, Ris. But I can't go home."

"Hey, settle down, alright? We'll work things out. If all else fails, we'll move into the house in Marseille. What's my mom going to do, kick us out?"

Cai laughed a little and opened his mouth to reply. That's when a

knock came on the door and it eased open. Ris twisted to see who was standing there before her eyes shot back to Cai. They were wide and imploring, which made him feel tense and irritable. Sure enough, when she got off the bed and headed for the door, Cai was confronted with Jace.

The soldier quickly held up a hand to keep Ris from leaving before saying to Cai, "I'm just here to check your vitals. I'll be out of your hair in a minute."

No one was more surprised than Cai when Jace approached the machines and the first thing he asked was, "Have you spoken to Ari yet?"

Jace stiffened beside him, writing numbers and notes on the tablet he'd brought with him. "No."

"Then why are you here?"

"They needed doctors who knew of yours and Ari's condition. My mother has been handling Ari's case and I've been handling yours." He'd gone back to recording notes and wasn't even looking at Cai.

Rolling his eyes, Cai glanced at Ris who was sitting in the chair. He knew that Ris and Eila hadn't shown up themselves. Not when Jace was coming to the rescue.

"What happened after Ari and I left?" he asked his girlfriend.

It was her turn to raise her eyebrows. "I could ask the same of you."

"I'll tell you later. Promise," he added when it looked like she might fight him some more.

Nodding once—and shooting a quick glance at Jace—she said, "I woke up about ten minutes after you left. When I realized you weren't in the bathroom, I used the other key to get into Ari's room. Since neither of you were there and the clothes Rodgers had gotten for her were gone, I knew you'd left. I woke Eila up and we both headed to the lobby. After a brief but fruitless search, we called Rodgers. Imagine our surprise when she said that we should go back to bed and there would be a transport for us first thing in the morning."

Her body was tensing as she relived the story and Cai silently apologized to Ari, because it looked like they would get a few more bruises before this tale was over.

"Of course, we argued with her about it. You should have seen Eila. I'd never have thought she had a temper, but that Irish blood was burning when she was talking to Rodgers. She told her that we were going to the train station and that if she wanted to be of any use, send the transport and a search team there.

"By the time we got there, however, you were long gone. The problem for us was that we didn't know where you went. Genesis seemed the most likely, since that was where we were discussing going next. And just before we boarded a train to Genesis, who should show up but Jace.

"Again: I have never seen Eila so incensed. It was quite the scene to witness. The three of us standing in a crowded train station and her tearing up one side of him and down the other. And he just stood there, silent and stoic, taking that lashing like it was the whole reason he was there."

As she spoke, the soldier quickly typed in the last of his notes before turning on his heel and striding out of the room. Cai watched him with narrowed eyes. He would never like Jace, he knew, but there was more to all of this than they were aware of. And if he cared about Ari at all, then Cai would have to learn to let him take care of her. Because, no matter how much she might deny it—or prove them wrong—Ari needed someone to look out for her.

"So what'd he say to get Eila off his back?"

"I know where they are."

Cai rolled his eyes. "And you believed him and hopped on a train to where?"

"We believed him because he showed us your coordinates. Jace gave Ari one of her military tags for her birthday, I guess. Well, all of those tags are chipped. He knew right where she was."

"That son of a bitch," Cai whispered. "And I bet Ari never knew that."

"Actually, I guess it's common knowledge for anyone who has gone through bootcamp. So if Ari didn't leave the tag behind, it meant that she wanted him to be able to find her."

Cai sighed, letting that knowledge sink in. "Makes sense," he said at last. "If Ari and I didn't make it through this, then at least someone would be able to find us."

"Or someone could come to the rescue just in time," she muttered sourly.

"*Did* you make it just in time?"

"No, but that's beside the point."

Cai chuckled. "Alright, so you all followed us to Valor. What then?"

"Jace used every ounce of special privilege your mom had given him to get us through the city, the hotel, and then up to your floor. Since you guys were already two hours ahead of us, all was said and

done by then, for the most part. Your mom had just shot Doctor Carson. Two times in the head and one in the heart. I can't believe she was the one behind all of this shit," Ris sighed.

In an instant, his throat grew dry. Taking a deep breath, he released it slowly before saying, "She wasn't. Not all of it."

Ris raised her eyebrows at him for a moment and that was all the encouragement he needed. Starting at the beginning, he told her about how his mom had created him and Ari. What she had planned to do with them if they were successes, and how she'd had to separate them when they proved to be failures. Then, when he released that first picture, how it had all hit the fan and Ari had been marked for death. And who had marked her. Between the party and the Seeker, he could see her face growing pale, but he couldn't stop. Not until the story was told in full. When it was finished, he and Ris took deep breaths at the same time.

"Holy shit, Cai," she whispered.

"I know."

"You really are homeless now."

"Yup."

"Want to move to France?"

"Yes, actually, I do. Think your mom will let us?"

"You know, before all of this, I wouldn't have had a doubt. Now I'm dreading the moment my parents walk through those doors. Do you realize the living hell you will be putting me through?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "You'll be eighteen in May."

"Like that will help? But I'll see what I can do," she sighed. Then, as if she were unable to help herself, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

When she pulled away, it was only to put a few inches between them. That close, her eyes were wide and glorious. Cai couldn't help the smile tugging at his lips. "I do love you, you know."

A slow grin spread across her face. "After all I've put up with because of you, you'd better."

"After all I put you through, I'm amazed you still love me," he murmured.

She let loose a wry laugh. "Cai, I've been in love with you for years. It would take a lot more than a few near-death experiences for me to stop."

"Glad to hear it," he muttered before dragging her lips back to his.

After a few minutes, Ris pulled away and settled herself on the bed

beside him. She spent a few minutes staring off into space, which was fine since Cai was doing the same. They were absorbing. After everything that happened, any space of time that allowed them to do that was needed.

"What do we do now, Cai?" Ris whispered almost ten minutes later. "Honestly? How are we just supposed to go on with our lives as if the last few weeks didn't happen?"

"I don't know. But we have to."

"How can you say that? You're giving up your sister."

"I know," he murmured, picking at the blanket. "I know I am. No more seeing her every day. I can talk to her maybe a couple of times a month. We'll be lucky if we're able to arrange a meeting once a year. And in all that time, I'm going to have to live with that hole in my chest, just as if the past few weeks meant nothing. Like it all meant nothing."

"I'm sorry, Cai. I didn't mean to make you think of it like that." Amaris stretched out in the bed alongside him, resting her head on his chest with an arm thrown across his stomach.

"It's alright. We'll figure it out. At least we're alive to be able to figure it out," he sighed.

Ris had just opened her mouth to reply when the tone on her key sounded. Checking the pendant, Cai watched as her face paled. Even after all they'd been through, he knew that meant only one thing.

"Your parents?"

"They just landed."

"I am so sorry."

"You should be."

"You know you love me."

Amaris met his eyes with a fierce glare. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

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January 10, 2358

Valor Prestige Hospital

Valor, America

It was almost midnight when the door to her room opened. In an instant, Ari dimmed the tablet and waited as the doctor entered the room. The door was eased into place so that the light from the hall could illuminate most of the room, without shining on her bed directly. Which would have been considerate if Ari wasn't curled up in the chair on the other side of the room.

The left side of her mouth pulled up into an expectant grin when the figure turned around and found the bed empty. It was just like old times when she heard him sigh, "Damn it, Ari, get back in the bed."

Turning the tablet back on, she was careful to keep her eyes averted as she answered, "All of my sensors are in place. I'm not dead yet. The monitors can tell you that."

For a moment, Jace continued to stare at her while she scrolled through the news. Instead of replying or making more demands, however, he turned and headed to the monitors. Nothing was said as he recorded her nighttime numbers and current activity levels. When he did speak, it was as her doctor. Nothing more.

"Have you slept at all, yet?"

"I've been asleep for six days. I am far from tired."

He quickly tapped that into his notes.

"Where's your mom?"

"Sleeping. Like I expected you to be," he added in a mutter she was sure she wasn't meant to hear.

“So you’ll only brave entering my room when I’m unconscious?” she retorted, raising her eyes to study his face.

His eyes met hers and she could see by the set of his jaw that he was going to say something. More than likely, it was going to be an excuse, and she smiled in daring as she waited. That’s when his jaw set and he told her the truth.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Ari. Not now. For one whole day, I would like to know that you’re alive and healthy and okay. And the only way I figure I’ll ever get that whole day is by staying out of your way. So, please, just let me have that much.”

Ari listened to the weary desperation in his voice with a pleasure she didn’t bother to hide. After what he did, and how he made her feel, he deserved to squirm a little. And yet, that one day didn’t sound so bad.

“What time?” she asked, causing his eyes to widen in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

Fighting a grin, she repeated, “What time will you be back here to fight with me?”

Jace was far less successful at controlling his own smile. It pulled up one side of his face and he had to turn away from her for a second before answering. “About eleven. Give us time to really fuel up before we get going.”

Ari nodded once and returned her attention to the tablet. “See you at eleven.”

Shaking his head, Jace headed for the door. And just before he left the room, he said, “Try and get some sleep, Keir.”

Ari ignored him.

January 11, 2358

Valor Prestige Hospital

Valor, America

The four of them laughed as Cai once more failed to catch a grape in his mouth. Amaris, on the other hand, flicked one off a fingernail and snapped her teeth around it in less than three seconds. Cai shook his head in mock shame.

“This is ridiculous. I have excellent hand-eye coordination. I should not be failing this miserably.”

“Excellent has never surpassed perfect, honey,” his girlfriend preened.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," he pretended to grumble.

Ari laughed a little before trying it herself. Unlike her brother, she had no problem catching it and she sunk her teeth into the grape while grinning at him.

"It's all well and good when you two are the ones throwing and catching," Eila reprimanded, "but Cai has caught over half of the ones I have thrown at him."

"Fair enough," Ris replied. "Hit me with your best shot, Eila."

While Eila was in the process of lobbing grapes at Amaris, Jace appeared in the doorway to Ari's room. One glance at the clock and she had to smile. Punctual as usual.

Of course, Eila was the second to notice and when her aim faltered, everyone else was soon made aware. The smiles faded and the laughter died in an instant. Cai tried to keep his thoughts off of his face, but Ari knew that he would never trust Jace. Amaris and Eila, on the other hand, directed more encouraging smiles his way. They, at least, seemed to have made their peace with him. The only question was: could Ari do the same?

"Can Jace and I have a few minutes?" she asked her friends.

"You mean a few hours?" Eila muttered beside her as she got off of the bed.

"Yeah, sure," Amaris said as she stood up and moved to grab at the handles of Cai's wheelchair. "We'll go see how the parents are doing. You said they were headed to the cafeteria, Eila?"

She nodded. "All but Clara. Think she still might be flirting with the nurse she met on the way up here."

Their voices sounded only a little strained as they filed past Jace on their way out of the room. As soon as they were gone, Jace closed the door and turned to face her. All sense of camaraderie was gone, now, and they stared at each other with impassive expressions.

"I'm sorry," Jace said after a minute. At the same time, Ari demanded, "Were you spying on me the whole time?"

Jace's head jerked back and his eyes widened as he stared at her. "Is that what you think?"

Ari snorted. "I don't know what to think."

He took a step towards the bed. "Ari, this is *me*. You know me."

"Do I? You're the son of the doctor assigned to me from birth. You show up in my life the day after Cai releases his picture. Whenever I'm in trouble or having a bad day, you're right there. Say what you want, but I really can't afford to believe in coincidence anymore."

"And what if what I say is the truth? Will you believe me?"

"I don't know how I can, Jace. You lied to me."

"I did not lie to you! You're just pissed I didn't tell you what happened. But you never asked. You didn't even *care*."

"I did care!" she yelled back. "Of course I cared! Until you showed up in those woods, I was *terrified* that they'd kill you. But I couldn't think about that, because I had to get us to safety. You said it yourself that you were proud of me for that. And when you came back, I didn't have to think about it anymore. Everything could go back to the way it should be: with all of us together."

"But I did have to think about it, right? Because you made a deal with the devil and didn't bother to tell me about it. You are just as bad as they are. Trying to make decisions for us and manipulate us into doing what you want. Well, you got your wish. When we leave this hospital, who knows if I'm ever going to see my brother again."

Ari didn't know when she had leapt out of the bed. Nor when she started to cry. Yet, she was standing in the middle of the room with only a few feet between her and Jace as the first salty drops traveled over her lips.

Jace's eyes widened in surprise and he took a step closer. "What? What do you mean, Ari, about not seeing him again?"

Angry at herself and at him, Ari scrubbed the tears away with the backs of her hands. "What do you care? You didn't want us together anyway. Nobody did."

"That's not true," Jace said, dropping his voice into a low, soothing tone.

Ari stepped back. "The hell it's not. I think the only person besides me and Cai that wanted to find a way was Eila. You and Amaris were along for the journey, but you didn't really expect different results. At least, you weren't hoping for them."

"Would you stop telling me what I think, please," he growled. "I want you to be happy, Ari. I want you to have your brother in your life. I want you to have everything you want. The only thing I couldn't stand was watching you mold your life around Cai Balere. If you were half as loyal to yourself as you are to Cai, you would realize that you don't need him."

"He's my *twin*, Jace! He's the only family I have left."

"But he's not your only family, Ari! Don't you see that? Don't you realize yet that you are just as important as he is? That, for some of us, you're the important one. Not him. Do you think Rodgers or Ramson

or Eila or I care that he's the Supreme Commander's son? For one second, do you think we did all of this just to save his skin?"

"I don't know! I don't know."

"What don't you know, Ari? That you're our family?"

"I don't know why we're arguing about this!"

"We're arguing about this because I don't want you to walk away from me!"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I'm in love with you."

Jace didn't scream it. Didn't snap or spit it at her like their sniping insisted he do. Instead, when he said it, he let it go on one of the exasperated sighs that suggested that she should have figured it out by now.

If it had been any other set of words, Ari could have fought back. She could have screamed and yelled and cried for another hour if need be. When it came to her and Jace, there was never a lack of words. Until now.

Not a minute after he said that, Jace groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Ari, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"What?" she asked, an almost hysterical little laugh in her voice. "That you love me? Or you didn't mean to tell me?"

His eyes snapped open to hers and she was speared in place by his scowl. "I don't just love you, Ari Keir. I'm *in love* with you. Which, believe me, is a hell of a lot more frustrating. And no, I didn't mean to tell you. I didn't think you were ready to hear it, and I wasn't sure I was ready to say it. And I certainly didn't mean to tell you like this."

Ari shook her head, a sarcastic chuckle working its way out of her mouth. "You still don't get it."

"What? What don't I get?"

"That it's not up to you, Jace. If I'm ready to hear it or not, that's my decision. How I handle things is up to me. I don't need—no, I won't *allow* you to keep things from me because you don't know how I'll take them. There have been too many lies and secrets and manipulations in my life. All of them coming from people who should have been looking out for me, including you. You don't want me walking away? Then be worth me standing here for. You think I make my world revolve around Cai? Then allow me to prove that, this time, it's revolving around me.

"No more secrets. No more omissions. No more lies or manipulations. You want me, Jace? Then be worthy of me. Because I

deserve more than your patronizing bullshit. Stop trying to protect me; I don't need it. Have my back, Jace. That's all I want. Just have my back!"

"I have had your back from the beginning!" he yelled. "From the very beginning, I have had your back, and I'm waiting for you to have mine!"

Ari's lips parted and her eyes grew wide. The oxygen rushed out of her lungs as her chest tightened around the accusation. An accusation she couldn't even remember how to deny.

Even as she was stunned into motionlessness, Jace's frustrations caused him to pace. And rant. With each word, Ari could feel the sting hitting her like the piercing rain on the roof when they first met.

"God, Ari, do you have any idea what it's like to love you? It's worrying. All the time; for every reason in the book. You're reckless and impulsive. Stubborn, pigheaded, and heedless of what anyone else thinks or says. You're so damn suspicious of everyone's intentions that you don't stop to examine your own. You don't know how to show respect. You are so damn certain that you are the equal of everyone, that the one time you meet someone who is exactly your equal, you make more of him than he's worth.

"I care about you, Ari. I care so much about you that shit like this—having to see you in a hospital gown—damn near kills me. Some days I just want to lock you in a glass box and tell you that you can't come out until you learn to stop hurting yourself. But you can't. And even if you could, you wouldn't.

"So what do I do? I try to protect you. I check in on you and irritate you. I try to help you by giving suggestions and you ignore me. So I resort to giving you orders and you defy me anyway. Every time I ask something of you, I get a battle. Not a conversation or even the tiniest hint of respect that says you trust me enough to know what I'm doing. No, with you it's always a war. And I feel like you cast me as the villain just as often as you let me play the hero. And all the while I'm just the medic; trailing after you and hoping there's enough left for me to patch up when it's all over.

"What have I done, Ari? What have I done to deserve all of this?"

When Ari found the words, they came out low and wooden. A reflex response, but one that meant everything.

"You loved me. When I didn't ask you to."

Jace let loose a sarcastic chuckle as he stood shaking his head. "Is that such a crime?"

"It's the sentence." The tears started leaking then. One after the other slid from her eyes and rolled down her face in a silent testament. "Loving me is a death sentence."

And the only person she had chosen to love her was the same one that would die with her. Cai was her family. Jace, and even Eila, were temporary. How long before they decided she wasn't worth it? Or worse, how long before they left her for good? Everyone who loved her left. It was the way things were. But when Cai's time was up, it would be because Ari's was too. And *that* she could handle.

She didn't realize how close Jace had come until his arms wrapped around her, pulling her against him so that she could press her face into the crook of his neck and sob. He didn't say anything; just held her. At the same time, she clung to him. If he left her now, she knew it would all be over. That it would all be some horrible, evil cosmic justice at work. If Jace chose that moment to step back and walk out that door, Ari knew that some part of her wouldn't survive it. Not after he said the words and made it real.

Not when she was in love with him.

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*January 14, 2358
Grand Victory Hotel
Valor, America*

"So, you and Jace, huh?" Cai asked as he packed.

"Yeah, I guess," Ari replied in a slow, wary tone.

Cai chuckled. "Why do you sound so confused when you say that?"

"Because I'm still confused by it," she muttered, tossing a rolled up pair of socks at him.

Raising his eyes to meet hers, the right side of his lips pulled up into an encouraging grin. "But you're happy, right?"

"About me and Jace? Sure. About you and me? Not a chance."

"Come on, Ari. We agreed not to talk about it until we have to talk about it."

"Cai, you're packing. If now isn't the time for us to talk about it, I don't think there is a time for it."

Abandoning his chore, Cai turned and sat on the bed beside her. Without saying a word, Ari turned her left hand so her palm was up. An open invitation that he took, lacing his fingers through hers as he released a heavy sigh.

"I don't want to lose this," he murmured.

"It feels like all of the pieces have finally been set in place, and now it's all being dislodged again."

"I wish I could take you away with me. You'd like Switzerland. And Germany, and France, and Italy." Ari shoved her shoulder against his and he stopped talking.

"I have a place here. With people who apparently break laws for me.

It's you who's adrift. Maybe you should just stay here."

"And leave Ris to her own devices? I'd be visiting her in prison inside a week."

They smiled sadly at each other as they tried to keep up some semblance of levity. Then Ari's eyes dropped to their hands. "So I'll see you again next year, right?"

"Yeah. Just, not on our birthday. I am never coming back here on our birthday."

Ari gave a wry chuckle. "Agreed. I think we can deal with not being together on that day."

"We'll work things out, Ari. We'll talk as often as we can."

"It won't be the same," she mumbled. "I don't know how to go back to half a working heart and a hole in my chest."

Releasing a sigh, Cai let go of her hand so he could wrap an arm around her shoulders. "Me either. Of course, after what we've been through, I don't even know how I'm supposed to go back to school. It all seems so—"

"Distant? Insignificant?"

"Yeah."

Ari nodded. "I felt like that when I left Camp Emergence. School seemed like the most terrifying experience after bootcamp," she laughed, though Cai could hear the tears threatening. After a minute, she started sniffing a bit and her right hand shot under her eyes for a bit. Her voice was full of forced curiosity when she asked, "So what do you think you'll do with your life when all of this is over?"

"I think I'm going to go into communications and technology. For a while, anyway. Then I think I'm going to follow the family line into politics."

Ari turned to look at him, her nose crinkling at the thought. "Is that why you're going back to your mom's?"

Cai sighed, knowing that she would never understand it. Not that he blamed her. Her parents had been far simpler in comparison to the woman she was actually born from. Far more worthy, at the least.

Of course, it was impossible for him to divulge the truth about their mother to her, but she'd been more amenable to the arrangement when he made it clear that he did not condone what Lucia had done to her. To them. While he could live in the same house as his mother, Cai knew that it was for appearances only. Something Ari still had trouble understanding.

"Yes. That's why I'm going back. I've worked too hard to just cast it

all aside now. Say what you will of my mother, but when it comes to politics, she knows what she's doing."

"And you're okay with becoming just like her?"

"No! God, no. I don't want to be like her at all, Ari. I want to be like you."

Her head jerked back and her eyebrows rose halfway up her forehead. "Me? Why in the world would you want to be like me?"

"Why wouldn't I? Ari, you're so forthright and honest that people know they can trust what you say, because you'll mean it. You know what's right and what's wrong and you stand behind your principles. And if you trust someone enough, you're even receptive to criticism," he added, nudging her slightly. Ari rolled her eyes and shoved back at him.

"Ari? Do you remember what it was like after the party? How terrified and confused I was, and how decisive and confident you were? Through it all, you presented this calm face and did what you knew had to be done when you led us out of that hotel and through the woods. And even when you had no clue what we were doing, we followed you because we knew that you could get things done for us.

"That's the person that I want to be, Ari. I want to be someone others can look to for strength and wisdom, even when I'm pulling everything out of my ass at the last second. I want people to look at me and see someone who tries his hardest to make this world a better place. Because of you, Ari, I finally know who I want to be."

It was easy to see that Ari didn't believe him. Of course, she didn't have a good sense of her own worth—which was about the only thing he and Jace had agreed on in the past week. Like Jace had mentioned to him, Ari felt herself equal to everyone around her, but never superior. He'd even joked how she wouldn't be a good superior officer if she didn't get over it. A joke Ari had rolled her eyes at and nothing more.

Cai could see it happening, though. Of the two of them, he'd gotten all of the ambition and none of the humility. Ari would be content in any place in the military, so long as she was doing something she felt she excelled at, and no one else bothered her. Yet, Cai wanted to change the world, and he wanted the credit for it. What a pair they made.

"So what about you? What happens when you go back to Genesis?" Cai asked as he stood up and went back to the task at hand.

"Well, Clara actually seems excited to have me back. Which is good,

because the Maibles are less likely to enjoy my visits after I dragged Eila all over the country. Of course, maybe they'll stop treating Jace like he walks on water after all of this."

"And after you finish with school?"

"I'll take the aptitude test and be officially inducted into Camp Emergence. After going through the legitimate bootcamp, I'll probably be slated to work with the K9 units."

Cai smiled a little. "Look at us, making plans for the future. And only a week ago, we weren't sure we had one of those."

"I'm still not certain how long ours will last."

"Well, just try not to get sent out on any field assignments with a high mortality rate."

"And don't piss off anyone so badly that they hire people to kill you."

Cai snorted. "With the bodyguards your boyfriend assigned to me? There's no need to worry about any of that."

He was still a little irritated by that. Not that he doubted the necessity of bodyguards, but the fact that Jace, Cai, and Ari had spent the better part of two days interviewing several different ex-military men had been less than encouraging. What was probably worse was that he knew each of them reported to Jace; he held their loyalty above all others. Of course, that could have had to do with the threat he issued to each of them—that he thought Ari and Cai wouldn't find out about. For Ari, it had been a fact to shrug off. But she wasn't the one going to have six fully grown men ready to tattle on her at a moment's notice.

At the same time, Cai couldn't deny their skill set was impressive. Jace had dug deep to find the men he'd scraped out of hiding, and each of them were as skilled in covert operations as they were direct combat. There were even three medical degrees between them. The sergeant had definitely hit the meaning of 'better safe than sorry' when it came to them.

While his thoughts were far away, so were Ari's. Which is why he was a little surprised when she remarked, "Do you even remember what it was like before you knew about me? Because it seems like everything before I knew about you was just a bit insignificant."

Keeping his gaze averted, Cai shrugged. "Yes and no. I remember everything clearly from the day I decided to have the party in Valor. Before that, not much else was important or exciting enough to remember in detail."

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Knowing who it was, and why she was there, Cai called for Ris to enter. When she popped her head in, she didn't look excited or energetic. Instead, her mood was somber as she announced, "Everything's set. We should go soon. Are you ready?"

Cai's eyes shot back to Ari's for a minute, lingering as he took note of his steady heartbeat. Looking at his twin, he knew he wasn't ready. How could he be? His whole life he spent in trying to live as his mythical brother would want him to; to make up for the fact that Cai had lived and he didn't. Now, he knew the truth of everything, and leaving behind his real, live sister was almost more than he could bear. And the moment he walked away from her, that feeling of being whole would disappear, and he would be left with the hollowness once again.

"Yeah," he heard himself say. "I'm ready." Cai closed the suitcase after making sure everything was inside. Behind him, he heard the bedroom door close as Ris left him to make his final goodbyes.

"I'm not," Ari admitted as she stood up off the bed. Then her eyes met his and he saw that same fierce determination that had gotten them through everything. "But you have to go. And you have to go now, before I can think of a reason to make you stay."

Cai nodded once before taking a step around the corner of the bed. Ari was in his arms in an instant. With his eyes squeezed shut, Cai whispered, "I love you, Ari. I'm glad you're my sister."

"I love you, Cai, and I couldn't have asked for a better brother," she whispered back before stepping out of his reach.

For one lingering moment, they continued to stare at one another. Then Cai released a breath and turned towards the door. He left the room without looking back. Instead, he kept his gaze ahead and reminded them that he would see her again in a year and they would video chat every week between then.

Cai didn't want to look into the past anymore. There was no Ari there. Now, they each had a future that they were both a part of. And that was worth everything.

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June 16, 2358

Recruit Center Courtyard

Camp Emergence, America

When the doors of the bus opened, Ari almost breathed a sigh of relief when she felt several hundred *edges* press in around her. Having chosen a seat at the front, it was no surprise that she was the first—and only—one to bound down the steps and out into the courtyard. A grin spread across her face as she took in the familiar sight. It was like coming home.

Behind her, the class of new recruits that she was a part of slowly filtered off the bus. It would take each of them time to acclimate, she knew, but once they were used to so many *edges*, nothing would bother them again. As she waited, Ari stepped up to the long white line that was laid out for them and looked around her for familiar faces. She nodded her head to the two soldiers standing on either side of the bus, and they ignored her as if she were any other recruit.

Jace wouldn't be there, she knew, because they were trying to maintain some level of professionalism around the base. Not that anyone was ignorant of what happened between them. Especially since, after his promotion to Sergeant First Class, he put in a request to retain a separate living space for himself, outside of the male barracks. When it came through, Ari was at his new place almost every weekend. Something she would miss now that she was an official recruit.

As her eyes swung back to look out at the Recruit Center, she was forced to hold back another grin as she saw Instructor Rodgers

emerging from the building. On instinct alone, Ari snapped to attention. She was the only one as the kids behind her continued to mumbled amongst themselves. The moment the two men standing beside the bus saw Rodgers, however, it was on.

The time allotted for acclimation was over as the instructors started in on the new recruits. They put themselves in the kids' faces, shouting and calling them names as they ordered them onto the white line. Chaos sounded around her, and even Ari was a little surprised at the cacophony surrounding that moment. Of course, her training hadn't been anything near standard fare.

As her classmates found their places, Ari didn't relax her stance. One of her first lessons was to learn how to stand at attention for hours. A lesson she was sure she would repeat soon. Of course, she had more hope for the men and women who stood beside her when they tried to emulate her stance as Rodgers came to a halt in front of them.

While the other instructors were giving heavy-handed instructions to those who didn't know how to stand at attention properly, Rodgers studied her new crop of recruits. Her eyes glided over each of them in a seemingly casual rake before moving on to the next unfortunate soul. When her eyes met Ari's, it was with the same dispassionate disdain with which she showered upon everyone else. It was Ari's first warning that there would be no special treatment from her.

"Life isn't fair." Rodgers' voice rang out over the courtyard, silencing everyone in it. Her eyes roved over them again. "It's what most of you are thinking right now, and you'd be right. Life is not fair. Why else would fifty young people such as yourselves be standing before me today? How could a computer process hundreds of answers and come to the conclusion that a single one of you was worthy to stand before me today?"

Adding a note of indignation to her tone, Rodgers demanded, "How could a machine comb through thousands of meaningless black dots to determine that any one of you has what it takes to be a soldier? Is a computer qualified to understand what kind of person should be standing before me today? Do you think it can make that decision; or are you so sure that a mistake has been made?"

"I am. I have no doubt that the computer sent you to me as part of some grand cosmic joke. It has set me the challenge of turning puny, weak, ignorant, cowardly children into strong, determined, clever, dutiful soldiers. Personally, I don't think you have what it takes. But I

haven't turned down a challenge yet. So far, I have a one hundred percent success rate over the computer's zero. I'm not about to weaken my standing because of you measly little maggots.

"Starting now, you are going to learn the meaning of the words: perseverance, duty, honor, obedience, determination, and dedication. You are also going to experience what it means to hate, because that is my goal. By the end of today, you will hate me. Of that, I have no doubts."

Rodgers held out a hand towards one of the instructors that had been in their faces. "Instructor Stamos will release you all to your barracks..."

Ari waited as some members of her class broke rank and were almost able to turn around for their duffle bags. In an instant, Instructor Stamos was on them. "Were you dismissed? Did the Instructor give you any indication that your lazy asses could move? Back in formation, ladies. And learn to love it there," he shouted in everyone's face as he moved down the line. Just as they planned.

When everyone was again standing at attention, Rodgers scoffed, "Worse than infants. What did they saddle me with, a bunch of newborn maggots? Well it's time to grow up, Newborns. Now listen when I talk." Silence followed her words and she let it linger before proceeding. "Instructor Stamos will release you to your barracks after you've all been to the barber. Once you arrive at your barracks, you may not leave them except by leave of your commanding officer. Rest assured, I am granting you the opportunity to prove your worth. All of you will stand at attention for no less than three hours. Should you shift your feet, roll your shoulders, or do more than breathe and blink, your time will restart. If a whisper so much as thinks of passing your lips, your time will restart. Until your time has been completed without blemish, you will not leave this spot. Oh, and the barber closes at sixteen hundred hours."

With that, Instructor Rodgers left them to the mercy of Instructor Stamos. And if Ari wasn't sure that there had been special instructions regarding her, he made things clear when she was an hour into her stance and he tripped her. An impressive feat, actually, considering how close she and her classmates were standing and how little room he had to move between them.

"Private Keir, it seems you've fallen out of formation. Get your ass up and start again. Three more hours until you're off this line." Turning away to pace along the group once more, he added, "Anyone

who doesn't get a haircut doesn't get to sleep tonight. You little shits want to be out here in the dark, that's fine by me. I could do this shit all night long."

For the most part, he did. Ari wasn't the only one who fell prey to his aggressive maneuvers. Yet, several others were simply incapable of standing still. When they had started at nine hundred hours, many were still standing there past seventeen hundred. And when Ari was rammed off balance by a stray shoulder for the sixth time, she began to believe the declaration Rodgers made about hating her before the day was out.

June 20, 2358

*Obstacle Course Training Field
Camp Emergence, America*

Four days passed before she could snatch a moment to see Jace. Though she'd had to go five days without him before, she found it much more difficult to keep away from him when he was just across the base. Yet, at the rate Rodgers was pushing her—specifically, because they'd decided to use her as the class punching bag—she collapsed as soon as she hit her bed. And with how hot the summer was turning out to be, she barely had to straighten her blankets in the mornings.

From the moment the recruits arrived, everything had been about teaching them to follow orders. Every little detail that a sergeant announced was to be performed explicitly by the private. For Ari, there had been several contradictory orders and more punishment details than any other recruit. After four days, however, Rodgers had finally given her a thirty minute reprieve just before lights out, and she was sure that had more to do with Jace than it did her.

"You're late," a soft voice said as he stood up from the picnic table, a shadow detaching from a sea of blackness.

"I'm exhausted. You're lucky I was able to make it. I feel like a zombie."

Jace chuckled as his hands found her hips and pulled her against him. Ari couldn't fight the smile as he leaned his forehead against hers. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, drawing in the sterile scent that he brought with him from the hospital. Unable to help herself, Ari pressed closer to him, eager to feel every solid bit of him before she was deprived again for another week, probably.

"How long do we have?" he asked, sensing her motives.

"Thirty minutes."

"That's hardly enough time to catch up."

"Be glad that I already talked to Cai and Eila this week, or else you and me time would be non-existent."

"I'm well aware," he answered in a dry voice as they sat down on top of the picnic table. "How are they, anyway?"

"Well, Cai got his aptitude results back, and they were the exact opposites of mine, if you can believe it," she remarked, thinking back to her last conversation with her brother. His results had come in at game developer, public servant, politician, and speech writer. Ari's, far different from her first test, had held aptitudes as a soldier, covert asset, bodyguard, or canine handler. The last one being the only one Jace approved of, since base canines were trained to defend their handlers at all cost.

"I can believe it," he answered without a hint of skepticism. To him, this was just more proof that they were separate individuals.

"Anyway, he and Amaris are going to be enrolled in the university in Marseille. They're going to live in her mom's house there, though it sounds like there are several restrictions in place. I guess there was even a 'no getting married while you're still in school' clause," she chuckled.

"That is not a bad clause to have. How has Ris been, anyway?"

Ari shrugged. "I don't talk to her all that much. Kind of how you and Cai don't talk."

Jace shook his head, not willing to get into that argument again. Since they had less than half an hour left, Ari let it go. In fact, she was willing to let all of it go. She didn't know how many days she wouldn't be able to see him again.

As if he was reading her mind, Jace snaked a hand around her waist and dragged her up against him. Smiling, Ari leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Has it been as bad as I think?"

"Worse."

"I'm sorry. I wondered how Rodgers would react to you being here in an official capacity."

"Well, now you know. The worst part is: I can't even be mad at her for it. I mean, I can, but I understand her reasoning. I went through all of this before, so I'm already a step ahead of the game. If she doesn't keep a heel pressed into my back the whole time, it might mess with the other recruits. Besides that, she has higher expectations for me. So I

have to keep up.”

For a moment, Jace didn't respond. Only when Ari turned to find him grinning at her did she get a reaction. "It is just me, isn't it? I am the only person on this base whose orders you can't follow."

Pretending to think about it, she nodded. "Yup, just you." Ari suppressed a shriek as Jace's fingers dug into her sides. With a violent twist, she found herself on her back atop the table, scrambling to the edge as she tried to kick him away.

Jace abandoned his assault, only to grab her hips and drag her back towards him. Ari's grin was as wide as it could go as his clear blue eyes gazed into hers. It was a knowing gaze. The kind that made people believe in seeing straight through to the soul. For a moment, she was sure she saw his, with all of its knowledge of the past, present, and future. And she was more than gratified to find herself in that last category.

Ari had wasted enough time. Without another word, she raised herself up on one elbow and reached up to pull his face to hers. Their kiss was fierce and frantic, filled with energy and passion as she tried to cram everything she felt for him into the few minutes they had left together. Above her, Jace shifted position so that he was almost lying overtop of her, his upper body pinning her to the table. After several minutes, that went by far too quickly, Jace pulled away from the kiss while they both tried to catch their breath.

It was in that instant that Ari found the same soul-searching gaze piercing into her being. The left side of her mouth twitched up into a tender smile and she found herself stroking one side of Jace's face, her fingertips trailing over the stubble along his jaw. His own lips were pulled into a contented expression as he watched her.

"I'm in love with you," Ari whispered. It was the first time she'd said the words. Not that he needed them.

A flash of triumph lit up his face as his smile widened. Turning his head so that he could kiss her palm, he murmured against the skin, "I know."

July 6, 2359

Grand Victory Hotel

Valor, America

Ari pushed open the doors to the ballroom, shivering a little as the emptiness gave it a whole new atmosphere. Of course, the last time she stood here, the atmosphere wasn't all that welcoming or pleasant. The evening light filtered in from the curving glass of the exterior wall; in a few hours, the chandeliers would turn on and she would see her own reflection staring back at her, instead of the vehicles passing by. She hoped she wouldn't be there for that.

Curious, Ari crossed the room to the last position she held, before turning and surveying the room. The emptiness of the ballroom was hard to take in. Especially when her mind so willingly provided the tables and chairs, the people, the band and the cake being rolled in. Those moments had seemed so perfect. Back when she thought she would get to snatch a half hour with her brother while the party was in full swing. Before she realized that she would get four uninterrupted days with him, at the cost of running for their lives. Every decision that made them who they were began with the events that occurred in that room.

She was still lost in thought when the door opened. Her lips quirked into a smile as her twin entered and quickly shut the door behind him. Taking long, quick strides across the room, they met in the middle and threw their arms around one another. For several long minutes, they clung to one another.

At last, Cai released her and they both took a step back. Smiling, Ari remarked, "Really? You didn't think renting out the ballroom would be anything close to conspicuous?"

Cai shrugged, unable to suppress his own grin. "I'm the Supreme Commander's son. What are they really going to say?"

Ari shook her head as a hand raised to the back of her neck. "How is your mom?" *Is she still under control?*

He gave her a knowing look. "Quiet, for the most part. A lot less active than she used to be." *She hasn't tried killing anyone else, that I'm aware of.*

Her lips twitched again as she decoded his answers. It had been unbelievable how natural their code had developed over all of the video messages. Since one or the other of them always seemed to be around a group of people, it was a security measure that no one else

was privy to.

"And Amaris? How is she doing?"

"Excellent. She was first in her class for computer engineering. Which is much more than I can say for myself. This summer she's interning at the Geneva headquarters for Independent Technology."

"CompCorp's biggest competitor? Eila won't like that," Ari chuckled. "And what about you? Any ambitious internships waiting for you?"

"Not this year. This summer is all about playing catch-up. For the first time in my life, I can do things that my mother never allowed before. Ari, I can go *sightseeing* like any normal tourist. I can take my girlfriend out on dates and watch movies when they actually arrive in theaters instead of months later when they're released digitally. I have been to three concerts in the past *week*."

Ari chuckled. "Must be nice to get months off at a time."

Cai narrowed his eyes at her. "You chose this, remember?"

"Yes, I do. And I wouldn't change a thing."

"How is that going, anyway?"

"Well, I made it through my MP courses a few weeks ago. So I am an official member of the Camp Emergence Military Police Force. And starting next Monday, I will be introduced to my new partner."

"You get a partner? And how will Jace feel about that?"

"Well, for one, he's just glad I didn't go into anything that would have me deployed. For two, he'll feel like a proud parent, since my partner is going to have four legs and fur and coming home to live with us."

"So you moved in with him then?"

"Last month."

"A month ago? I can't believe it's been so long since we last talked."

Ari shrugged. "You're the one who said if we didn't cool it for a while, we wouldn't have anything to say to each other in person."

"True," he answered with a grin. "So how's Eila? Haven't heard from her in a while."

"Well, she's been running her ass off, from what I understand. After her classes ended, she hooked up with a designer out of Madrid who was passing through Valor and liked some of her designs. She's been tagging after him for the past few weeks. Yesterday they were in Greece for a photo-shoot, but they'll be back in Madrid the day after tomorrow. I guess there's a big fashion show at the end of the month that she's completely stressed over."

Cai shook his head with a chuckle. "And what were her aptitudes again?"

Ari raised her eyes to the ceiling as she thought it through. "Counselor, business associate, politician, and litigator."

"And she chose to go into fashion design?"

"Yes she did."

"Well, if she can't make it there, no one can."

"My thoughts exactly," Ari chuckled.

"And Jace?"

"Jace is good. Busy, like the rest of us. You know, before all of this, I had no idea how much free time he had, until he didn't have it anymore. Ever since his parents moved to Italy, he's taken on a decent number of their former patients. There aren't very many cardio doctors of their caliber, and a lot of people are willing to risk his *edge* in order to get quality care. How are his parents, anyway? You talk to them more than Jace or I do."

"Not true. Terry gets calls from Jace all the time. They're just not about anything personal. And Lita's doing good. She likes having a lab of her own, and I know she won't abuse it like my mother and Doctor Carson did."

"So, we're all ... good."

"Why did you just say it like that?" he asked with a laugh in his voice.

Ari shrugged, turning again to look over the empty room. "I think I'm amazed by it. I mean, look at what happened the last time we were in this room, Cai. Our lives were in danger, our friends had targets drawn on their backs, and even Jace's family was at risk. All because we had the nerve to exist.

"Despite it all, we managed to make it out alive. We went on with our lives. The threats are no longer existent. There's a peace now that hasn't existed since the moment we learned of one another. We're all ... good."

For a moment, Cai just stared at her, a little smile pulling up one side of his lips. At last, he nodded. "You're right. We're all good. And that's amazing."

Ari smiled back at him and he wrapped an arm around her. Then he suggested, "Let's take a picture."

Nodding, Ari held her position while Cai took the picture. It was the first time Ari had ever seen herself and Cai side by side. The first time she saw herself as everyone else did.

Hollow Ryan

Two halves of a whole; who owed more to each other than becoming half of a person.

Bonus Content

Race

(Read after Chapter 24: Missing Piece)

“Alright, Keir. You’re done for the day. Pack it on in,” Rodgers said, nodding her head in the direction of the barracks.

Ari glanced over her shoulder at the course, knowing that she had enough in her to do it over again. Rodgers, taking note of the look in her eyes, shook her head. Not in a strict denial, but more of in a defeated resignation. Turning away from her pupil, she muttered, “It’s your free time. Waste it how you want.”

A wide grin had just broken across her face when she turned around and found Sergeant Naois standing right in front of her. Snapping to attention, Ari waited until he spoke. Of course, the grin evaporated into a thin line as his eyes gleamed with mirth at her hasty response to his presence.

“Relax, Ari. You off duty?”

Doing as he suggested, Ari let her body loosen and she glanced again at the course. “Yeah. Rodgers just left me to my own devices.”

Following her gaze, Jace’s eyebrows rose. “And you want to run the course again?” he asked incredulously.

Ari nodded. “I ran it earlier this morning before Rodgers tormented me with tablet learning and lectures. Now I’m looking to do it again.”

Jace chuckled. “You’re the only person I know who would do that twice in a day.”

“I’m the only person you know who signed up for this. I want to do all I can, Jace. Whatever can be taught, I want to learn it,” she added in a lower tone.

They’d already turned so that they were heading directly for the obstacle course. When they reached the edge of it, Ari shrugged off her

heavy coat to reveal the lighter jacket underneath. It was a warmer winter than usual in that area, but the wind still had a vicious bite. Not that she would really notice once she got going. Ari had just moved into position to begin when she suddenly remembered that Jace was with her.

“Did you need me for anything? I didn’t even think to ask.”

With a wry grin, Jace shook his head. “No. Just checking up on you. Nothing unusual there.”

Even Ari had to grin in response to that. “No, not at all.”

Returning her attention to the course, Jace surprised her further by asking, “Want some company?”

“What?”

“On the course? It’s been a while since I’ve run it. I could use the exercise.” His eyes were bright with the idea but Ari saw the mischief lurking there. In response, a wide smile stretched up the one side of her face.

“Can you keep up?” she taunted.

Jace chuckled as he shrugged off his own heavy coat and set it on the table where Rodgers was usually perched. “As if you could,” he countered.

“Is that a challenge, Sergeant Naois?” Ari demanded with her hands on her hips.

“Maybe it is.”

“You’re on!”

*

When Ari came to a skidding stop beside the table, Jace was just straightening to full height. She shot him a look even as she continued to brace her palms against her knees and gasped in deep breaths. Her right side was aflame—a byproduct of the run, rather than the stab wound. Though she kept a hand off of it just so he wouldn’t overreact.

“Not bad for an old man, huh?” Jace remarked once she’d caught her breath.

“You’re only twenty-two,” Ari scoffed.

Jace rubbed a hand over his chin where a five o’clock shadow was appearing, a grin forming on his lips. “Doesn’t always feel that way.”

Ari was about to throw out a sarcastic retort when she realized that it wasn’t very often that she felt seventeen. Either physically or mentally, there was enough of a disconnect between her and others of

her age to know that their experiences were farther apart than normal.

"Well, you certainly don't run like an old man," she responded a minute later.

"Thanks," he said with a smirk before turning and sitting atop the old wooden table. "That was fun. We should do it again sometime."

Ari snorted once before joining him on the table. "Sure, right after Rodgers is done drilling me into the ground and you finish tending wounds or playing guard outside of Genesis. I'm surprised you've found as much time as you have in coming to check up on me."

"You're my patient, remember? Meaning I can be on duty at the hospital and still take a stroll around to where you are and check in."

"I'm not your patient anymore. My side doesn't even hurt."

"And yet you favor it while running. You're afraid to tear it open again."

"Well, if I'm afraid of that, it has to be because someone put it into my head that strenuous exercise might just make that happen," she shot back.

"It's about time you learn a little caution," he returned as he fished his canteen from his coat pocket. Turning to her own winter gear, Ari did the same and took a long pull of the precious water.

"I am as cautious as the next person," she retorted as she lowered the canteen.

"Well, the next person wasn't stabbed in the side. So you need to exercise a bit more caution than that, don't you think?"

"And just what do you think I'm training for?" she scoffed.

"Honestly, I have no idea," he answered as he pulled his coat back on.

"I could explain it a hundred times and you would still have no idea."

"It's possible," he agreed.

Ari rolled her eyes and looked out over the course again. Looking at it with the frozen coating of winter, she couldn't help but wonder what the summer would do to it. Would it be easier or harder to run it in the heat versus the cold? Would she get tired faster? Or would she have more energy? And what would it be like if she were part of a class? How many would fall behind her? Which ones would beat her?

"I used to hate you," Jace announced, tearing her out of her thoughts.

"What? Why?"

He cast a sidelong look at her, a half-smile on his face. "Not you,

personally. But when I was younger, I was always upset about the one patient my mom deemed more important than her own son."

"She did not."

"Ari, I was four and a half when you were born. That was the first time we moved. Granted, at that age, it was an adventure for me. But then I grew up in Partisan and had friends and a good school for quite a while. When I was fourteen, however, I was up and moved again. All because of you. We had to follow wherever you went. After a time, that grates on a guy's nerves. Yet, I didn't have any say in it. Hell, my dad didn't have any say in it. You were the priority and we were second best. So, yeah, I hated you."

A hand reached up and began rubbing at the back of her neck as she avoided his gaze. "What changed?"

Jace shrugged. "I started interning at my parents' office. My dad is a cardiothoracic specialist who primarily treats children."

Ari felt her chest contract as she thought of the waiting room where she first met Eila. She'd been waiting on Doctor Lita, but Eila had been waiting on her partner. He was the sixth doctor she'd seen in the past three years about her hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Now it all made sense, of course.

"Anyway, I grew close to a couple of his patients and I began to understand what it meant to them to have a doctor they could rely on. Someone who knew all of the difficulties they were experiencing and could be there for them. I'm not sure what happened, but it changed me. And I knew my dad was one of the best doctors in his field, but my mom... She's phenomenal, so I guess that means something that she was assigned to you. And if what we suspect is true..."

Ari nodded as he spoke. Turning to look at him, she asked, "So you don't hate me anymore?"

Jace shook his head. "Nah. Though, after having met you and seen the kind of patient you are, I pity my mother."

"Hey! I'm not that bad."

"You couldn't even stay in the damn bed."

"You shouldn't have held me hostage."

"Are we really going to have this argument again?"

"You started it," she retorted, shoving a shoulder against his playfully.

"And I'm finishing it." His shoulder shoved against hers. Then he got to his feet and tossed her coat at her. "Come on, it's almost time for dinner."

Ari glanced at the coat in her hand before grinning at him. Her eyes darted to the course and back to him before she asked, "Want to go again?"

Jace rolled his eyes at her. Then he shrugged out of his coat.

Training

(Read after Chapter 25: Order)

November 28, 2357

*Obstacle Course Training Field
Camp Emergence, America*

Jace didn't approach Rodgers until Ari was already well into the course. When he did, he came to stand at her side without even really looking at her. Instead, they both continued to watch the scrawny teenager work her way through the weaving logs. The look on her face caused Jace to smile as he thought of how much cursing was going on in her head right then.

"How's she doing?"

"You know how she's doing. She's exhausted and she's lagging. By the time she gets to the ropes, she'll make it half way up and her entire body will start shaking. I'll have her puking by the time she's done with this tonight."

"How many rounds today?"

"This is her fourth in fifteen hours. She's a glutton for punishment."

"Fourth?" he demanded, turning to the Instructor with a severe expression on his face.

"Her insistence, not mine. She knows her deadline is soon. Keir isn't letting up on herself these next few days. And she's bouncing back and forth on her deadline. Not everything is as smooth as she wants it to be, yet, and so she's thinking of waiting until mid-December before going back to Genesis."

"What's pushing for her return?"

"School, apparently. She's further behind in that than in anything."

Keir pulls it out of her ass, sometimes, when she needs to. But if she hopes to graduate with any form of decency, she has to get in a lot more work and effort. I just hope she doesn't go soft once she's away from here."

"She won't," Jace muttered, returning his eyes to the figure just disappearing beneath the length of barbed wire. "How much weight does she have on her?"

"Relax, Sergeant. She started with full packs this morning but I've been diminishing her all day. She's carrying only her own body right now."

"Then I'm glad there's not much to it. Three square meals a day and she's still skinny as a rail," he chuckled.

"I wouldn't count on it, Sergeant. Keir's gained a lot of muscle these past few weeks. You saw her in her first week? Couldn't do a push-up to save her life. Now she can rack out twenty of them in two minutes. Her biggest asset are those legs of hers, though. Fastest recruit I've ever seen. She'd have smoked any one of us in training."

"They should be. She's lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment building for eight years without a working elevator. Send her up some stairs and find out how fast she really is."

Rodgers looked at him askance, a tiny smile on her lips. "Yeah. She told me." Jace didn't respond so she continued after a moment with, "She does a lot of this better than we ever did. Keir is the only person I've ever seen who works so hard at this."

"She's the only one who's ever *chosen* this. And she has the greatest motivation of all."

"And what is that?"

Jace didn't even look at Rodgers as he replied woodenly, "The need to protect someone she loves." With that, he turned and walked away.

Capture

(Read after Chapter 40: Skills)

January 1, 2358

Grand Victory Hotel

Valor, America

Jace ran his tongue along the cut inside of his cheek. Blood flowed freely from the gash, and he spit it onto the boots of the man that had just hit him. Another blow struck the right side of his face.

“Where is the Supreme Commander’s son?” the brute demanded again.

Spitting again, Jace answered calmly, “In a secure location, guarded by my team. As I’ve explained a dozen times.”

“Who are you working for?” the other demanded, his knuckles cracking ominously beside Jace’s left ear.

“The United Nations and the Supreme Commander. The same people you work for.”

“You said something about a team. Why are they here? What do they want with the Commander’s son?” This came from a tall, slim man with a thick Swedish accent and icy blue eyes. In this scenario, he was playing the pleasant, coercive comrade versus the vicious brutes with a mean streak. In other words, he was the talker and they were the muscle.

“To keep him safe. Which is exactly what we’re doing. We’re here because we were ordered to be. A threat was suspected and we were sent to nullify it and keep Mr. Balere safe. So far, we’re two for two.” The lie had come so easily and simply. It was the perfect cover. And his only hope at making it out of this situation alive.

“Who sent you?”

“I’m not at liberty to disclose that information. Neither are you, so don’t ask any questions to which you already know the answers,” Jace warned. The intent in the man’s eyes was clear, but as long as Jace could continue sidestepping the invocation of the Supreme Commander’s name, he would be safe from at least a dozen violations. Not that the thirty slapped on him for the lies would disappear, but he was willing to take his chances.

Suddenly, the tall Swede stood up, his chair scraping along the cement floor of the basement. Jace followed him with his eyes but braced for another blow. Yet, the man didn’t give the signal and instead strode around Jace towards the door. When he stopped to talk quietly to someone, Jace didn’t bother turning around. They would keep well out of sight. It was in their training.

Instead, he closed his eyes briefly and strained to hear past the sounds of scuffing boots and creaking chairs. The voices were low and urgent ... and spoken in Swedish. A language he had no hope of understanding, since it wasn’t on the list of requirements for his station. His eyes opened slowly in a weary show of defeat.

Suddenly, a voice said in English, “Bring him.”

Jace’s shoulders were wrenched back in the next instant, his restrained arms gripped tightly in iron hands. A moment later, the chains binding his wrist manacles and ankle straps loosened as the guards separated them. His feet were soon completely free. Though his hands were still firmly bound behind his back, even this small release felt like a form of victory.

Of course, there was only one reason the bodyguards were ordered to take Jace upstairs. And that reason caused his throat to grow dry and his heart rate to increase.

He was about to meet Ari’s mother. The Supreme Commander of the United Nations. Lucia Balere.

The woman who would decide whether he ever saw her twins again, or if she would force Ari to carry on by herself ... again.

Jace did his best to control the thoughts racing through his mind as he watched the service elevator numbers continue the torturous climb. When he reached the floor where Cai’s room was located, he couldn’t halt the heavy sigh. The guards eyed him suspiciously as they led him to the penthouse door. Their grips tightened on his upper arms as the two men at the door stared them all down. After an extensive search of Jace and his escort, including an immediate ID check on all four, they

sent through a request. Finally, the door was opened from the inside.

Marched through the opening, Jace was taken to the middle of the expansive living area before being placed roughly into a chair. Rolling his shoulders a bit, his eyes surveyed the room with a spark of interest. There were guards everywhere. Four stood beside each window in the living room, two more stood at the entrance to the kitchen area, while another pair guarded the semi-open dining space. Another kept tabs on a narrow corridor that Jace was certain led to bedrooms and bathrooms. Undoubtedly, there were even more guards down there. In total—including the three accompanying him—he would guess at fifteen or sixteen armed soldiers inside the penthouse.

Before Jace could make too many more observations, he stiffened in his chair as every black-suited being around him snapped to attention. His eyes shot to the hallway and watched as the most intimidating woman in the world strode into the room. The similarities between her and Ari were uncanny.

The Supreme Commander was a fairly tall woman, easily standing at one hundred and seventy-two centimeters without the heels. Her face was constructed of narrow features that she had passed onto both her children. High cheekbones, semi-full lips, and a thin body she had bequeathed to the twins. Their eyes, however, were nothing like Lucia Balere's. In shape and color, the Supreme Commander's were as different as could be. Narrow with cold, blue irises, they bored into Jace in a way that seemed to see right through him. Just as if she knew exactly what part he played in all of this. And how to use it.

"Release him," she ordered after having looked at him no longer than five seconds.

His guards hesitated. "Commander, this man—"

"Saved my son's life when one of your coworkers attempted to assassinate him. Release Sergeant Naois and then dismiss yourself from my presence."

Her cold eyes watched them silently as Jace was dragged to his feet and the manacles binding his wrists were removed. A moment later, he was shoved back into his seat. He heard the retreating steps of one of the guards and listened as the door opened and closed behind him.

"You are dismissed as well. All of you," she added to the men at her back and surrounding her throughout the room.

As one, they waged a silent protest. Even Jace couldn't understand the utter stupidity she was showcasing. It was the same recklessness for her own life that she had passed to Ari. And the kind that caused

him to rise slowly to his feet and hold his hands out to his side.

"Commander, even I must protest your guards leaving you at this time. An assassination was attempted on your son tonight. Every precaution must be taken to ensure your safety."

Lucia cast him a small, wry smile. "And I trust you with my life as I have trusted you with his. Leave us," she commanded yet again. This time, no one argued and her guards slowly filed out the door, one roughly shoving Jace back down into his chair before exiting. When they were alone, Lucia Balere strode slowly towards him while a hand ran along the back of a couch. Reaching the end, her eyes raised to his and he could see the heartache there.

"My son was in this room not a full twelve hours ago. Where is he now?"

Jace wanted to lie to her. Say that he was safe and secure. That she didn't need to worry and that he had everything under control. Yet, all he said was, "I don't know."

Her eyes shot towards the ceiling and he noticed she was holding back tears. "He *is* alive."

Though it wasn't a question, Jace still answered, "Yes. We made sure of that."

"Who is he with? How can you be so sure?"

"Because he's with my team. And they won't let *anything* happen to him."

"I need names, Sergeant. This is my son we're talking about."

"And I can't give you those. It's safer for them both if no one knows who is helping them." The slip was intentional, meaning both Ari and Cai. By the tightening of her eyes, Lucia knew it.

For a moment, they merely stared at one another. Her eyes, again, pierced through his and seemed to scour his soul. Debating how much he knew against how much she would reveal. Suddenly, her hand reached for the key around her wrist. The watch glowed for a moment before the room suddenly went dark.

Jace knew what had happened and remained seated while the Supreme Commander turned on a lamp beside one of the couches. The entire penthouse was a darkroom now. Any bugs placed inside would no longer be able to send transmissions and their keys would neither send nor receive messages or calls. As far as technology went, they were adrift.

"Let's be plain with one another, Sergeant Naois. I easily could have vouched worry for Amaris Pacquita, but we both know to whom you

were referring. And I hardly call two teenaged girls a team. They're in danger, Sergeant. I need to know where they are."

In an instant, Jace was suspicious. He would not be the first to say Ari's name. Would not reveal how much he knew to this woman who looked more like a hunting predator than a worried mother. There was a piece to this puzzle that he was missing, and until he saw the full picture, Jace was determined to keep his mouth firmly shut.

Lucia's eyes narrowed as she sensed his resolve. Shaking her head, she stood up and began to pace the room. Slowly. Thoughtfully. Not at all frantically, as he would have expected. Finally, she came to a stop before him and looked down with undisguised disdain.

"I'm going to make this simple, Sergeant. You will help me bring my children home or you will die. Choose."

Jace remained silent. There was no safe way to answer that question, given the options. Therefore, he said nothing.

After a minute, Lucia turned away with an angry exhale. Speaking with her back to him, she snarled, "You can't understand what I am asking. You're not a parent. So you don't know what it's like to have your children in harm's way and being unable to protect them."

"No. I only know what it's like to have my friends and comrades in danger and not know how to protect them. Even from those who claim to love them."

"I do love him!" Lucia snarled like a wild animal.

Jace's jaw clenched. "I believe you. Just like I believe you don't care about his twin at all. Tell me, why did you let her go? Why give her up?"

Her features stilled and her eyes shot away to the other side of the room. "That is none of your concern, Sergeant. The only thing you need to know is that, without my children safely by my side, you will die."

"If I was certain they would be safe at your side, there wouldn't be a choice."

"I will do whatever is necessary to take care of my son."

"And your daughter?" he snapped.

"Will receive the greatest protection I have always given: her obscurity. Despite what you may think, Sergeant, her anonymity has always been her greatest asset."

"That I can very well believe. If only she were as well hidden as you claim. Someone knew where to find her, and they ordered others to end her life. You find their murderer, then I'll bring them to you. Until

then, you won't ever see them again."

At last, Lucia drew up a chair close to his own and sat across from him. "As we speak, I have a highly trusted group of people doing everything in their power to locate my children. I have an even smaller, more private team seeking their attempted murderers. We will find the threat. Then I will destroy them. Is that promise enough for you, Sergeant?"

She meant every word. Jace could see the determination and the fury in her cold blue eyes. Though she didn't even know Ari, he was suddenly certain that anyone who even touched Cai was risking a death sentence. Which is why he finally began to nod his head in agreement.

"You give me the threat, I will give you your children," he promised.

The smile that crept across her face was absolutely feral. "Deal."

Asked

(Read after Chapter 64: Family)

January 11, 2358

Valor Prestige Hospital

Valor, America

"I don't believe that," Jace murmured against the top of Ari's head. "I don't believe that loving you is a death sentence."

She didn't answer, instead holding him tighter and burrowing her head further into his shoulder. Jace let his eyes close for a few seconds, allowing himself to be comforted by the embrace. At the same time, he stamped down the hope that said the way she was clinging to him might mean something. He knew Ari, and he knew that she didn't know how she felt about anything. Just because he told her how he felt didn't mean he expected anything from her.

"The people who love you aren't just going to decide to up and die tomorrow, Ari. We're a little more resilient than that. We have to be, or else we wouldn't be capable of loving you."

That lit a fuse as she shoved against him. He didn't relax his hold on her, however, and she didn't fight her way free. There existed an inch of space between their chests, however, and her head was no longer buried in his shoulder as she muttered, "If I'm really that difficult to be around, then why are you still here?"

"Because I can't stand the thought of walking away from you. And if you weren't difficult to be around, I never would have fallen for you."

It was still hard to say 'love' to her. Not because he wasn't sure, but because he'd been telling the truth when he told her that he wasn't sure he was ready to say it. When he was speaking in the plural form,

it was easier. There was a whole base full of people that adored Ari, and she would never let herself believe it. On a more personal level, however, Jace was having a harder time admitting to it.

Most of his problem, he knew, was because he felt like he shouldn't be allowed to love her. There was a five year age gap between them. She was his mother's lifetime patient, and his temporary one. And after what they'd been through together, it almost seemed like Ari wasn't given a chance. Ari deserved the opportunity to go out and meet other people and decide who she wanted to love her. Because she was right: he loved her without being asked.

Shaking her head from side to side, Ari pushed on his chest, and this time she meant it. Jace let his arms drop and he took a step back, giving her the room she needed, because this was far from over.

"Maybe I don't want you to love me," she growled as her arms crossed over her chest.

Jace felt a surge through his system the minute he realized she was lying. Ari had never been convincing when it came time to lie, which made it all the easier for him to pick up on her tells. Standing there hugging herself with her eyes unable to raise higher than his chest, Jace knew that she was full of it.

Keeping the smile off of his face was more difficult than he anticipated when he remarked, "Maybe I didn't want to love you."

"Then why?" she snapped in frustration.

This time, he didn't bother to hide the smile. "I don't know." She threw up her hands then and he caught hold of her wrists as they fell back towards her sides. Even as she tried to jerk them out of his grip, he said, "I don't regret it, Ari. I don't regret being in love with you."

"You *just said*—"

"That you're a pain in the ass, yes. Because you are. Have no doubt about that, you *are* a pain in the ass. That doesn't mean you're unlovable."

"Why not? Why wouldn't you regret falling in love with someone who drives you freaking crazy?"

"Because love is crazy, Ari. It makes no sense. Ever. And did you stop to think that maybe the reason you drive me crazy is because I'm in love with you?" Jace watched as her eyebrows pinched together in the classic 'Ari is confused' expression. Smiling to himself, he sighed, "If I didn't care as much as I do about you, Ari, nothing you do would bother me. You could be as reckless and impulsive and stubborn as you want, and it wouldn't faze me. But I do care, and that means you

endangering yourself puts me on edge.”

“What have I done? Honestly, Jace? What have I done to endanger myself? Why the hell are you so worried about what I do?”

Jace felt his chin raise at that. “Do I need to make a list?” he remarked. “Okay, let’s start with you standing on a ledge of a thirty story building while a lightning storm was rolling in. Or how about wanting to go back into the city knowing that your attempted murderer had an accomplice. Maybe I should remind you of Cai’s birthday party, where you attempted to take a bullet for your brother. Or after that, even, when you drew fire from one of the Stalkers until Cai provided a distraction—injuring you both in the process. Ari, you got pissed and shot down a Seeker. Not that I’m complaining about any of that, but it goes to show that you are too impulsive for your own good sometimes.”

He could see her fueling up all of her counterarguments. Each excuse would come with a good reason for the events that took place, and Ari would stand by her statements until the day she died. She was a woman who didn’t know how to give up or give in.

Before she could launch any of them, however, Jace cut in, “You have given me plenty of reason to worry about you, Ari. And if I have to see you in a hospital gown again, I just might lose it.”

“This one wasn’t my fault.”

“You would never admit it if it was.” Bowing his head a little, Jace released a sigh. “What do you want me to say, Ari? What do you want to know so we can get over this already?”

Shaking her head, Ari crossed her arms over her chest and took another step back. “You expect me to get over this? This is not the fight I signed up for.”

A mirthless chuckle escaped him. “No. It’s not the one I had planned, either.”

After a minute of silence, Ari’s dark eyes raised to his and he felt as if he was looking into an abyss. Her voice was soft and confused as she asked, “When?”

He knew what she meant and it was his turn to look away. Forcing the words out through a suddenly dry throat, he said, “I’m not sure. I don’t know if it happened when you got stabbed, or when you ordered me to test you, or that day we raced through the obstacle course. It could have been when we fell asleep on the train. I don’t know when it happened, Ari. I just know when I became aware of it.”

“When?” she asked again, this time with a bit of challenge in her

voice.

A smile pulled at his lips and he took a slow, measured step towards her. Instead of stepping back, Ari leaned forward a little, so that they were only a few inches away from each other. Her dark eyes bored into his, the challenge written along every inch of her body.

"I told Eila that I wasn't fool enough to think that a man's opinion would satisfy a woman more than her own. And you said that my opinion would satisfy you. I knew right then that I was in trouble."

"That was twelve days ago."

"It was."

"You knew you were in love with me for twelve days and you didn't tell me."

"You realized you loved me twenty minutes ago, but you haven't said it either. We're a lot alike, Keir. And we freak out over things like this. I wasn't kidding about not being ready to have said it. If I could take it back, I would."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "You would?"

"Ari, we have spent the past hour going at each other because of that slip. We don't even know how to get back to our original argument."

"No, I remember how to get back to that. But I no longer think it's worth it. Or justified. Not since that slip."

"And why is that?" he sighed.

"Because now I know where you stand. Where you've been standing, even when I was too blind to notice. You were right: you have had my back from the very beginning. Now I want to have yours."

Jace shook his head, a hand running through his hair. "I can't ask you for that. It isn't right," he grumbled.

"But you did ask me for that."

"In the heat of the moment, yes. As a friend, I want you to have my back. But this... What you're saying... Ari, you just turned eighteen years old. You have years ahead of you. Time to decide who you want in your life and who you want to spend it with."

"Are you seriously trying to talk me out of having feelings for you?" she scoffed, a laugh lingering in her voice.

"I don't know," he grumbled. "Maybe."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't ask you to. Because when I told you I was in love with you, it wasn't to illicit a reaction. Or to try and pressure you into

having feelings for me. I told you so I could explain what you mean to me. There were no expectations on my end."

"Of course there weren't," she remarked in a dry tone, rolling her eyes. Before he could ask, she looked him in the eye and asked, "Why do you always have to be so damn noble?"

There was so much he wanted to say right then. And as he opened his mouth to say them, he shook his head and looked back at her. Without a thought, Jace reached out to hold the tag hanging around her neck. Smiling, he asked, "Would you love me if I wasn't?"

Ari tried to twist her features into a scowl, but he could see the smile tugging on the corner of her lips. "Probably not," she sighed, trying her hardest not to seem invested.

Jace had to laugh, because it was the same thing he was trying to do. As he did so, he grabbed one of Ari's wrists and pulled her against him. When her arms wrapped around his back, her fingers grabbing hold of his shirt, he released a breath. Turning his head just a bit, he placed a kiss on Ari's temple.

It was too soon for anything else, he knew. But he also knew they would get there. That they both wanted to get there. And no matter what he made himself say, or even what he sometimes thought, Jace knew he could never be that noble. If it came down to it, he'd fight for Ari. Of course, part of him felt as if he already had. And he'd won.

Leaning his head against hers, Jace let himself just hold her. For as long as she would stand there with him, he would hold her and not let go. It wasn't an option.

Author's Note

XXY took me three years to complete. It wasn't all at once, but in sporadic clumps where I could churn out five or six chapters before going on another month-long hiatus. (Mostly because Ari didn't want to talk to me.) Yet, in that time, I never lost sight of who they were as people, what moments of their lives were necessary, or what answers would be revealed in the end. I couldn't be more grateful for that.

This story was created out of one thing that I wanted to exist: twins with identical DNA and different genders. I wanted it to be science fiction, but I didn't want it to be all about the science of it. So I researched what I could, and added what I needed to. While stigmatic twins aren't a thing outside of fiction, I was pleased to find that Mirror Twins were a real thing. As far as monozygotic eggs producing differing genders, that was also a real thing. There have been cases where an egg with Klinefelter Syndrome has split and given the resulting twins different genders and karyotypes. It was quite a learning experience and I spent a lot of time on the internet delving further into different aspects of twins. So not everything found in XXY is totally fictional.

While this book is quite long enough on its own, I always felt like I could have done more with it. That there should be more between Cai and Amaris. Or Ari and Jace. Even a broader sense of Eila's life. Of course, I also majorly skimmed on the world building in this. And they were all things I'd noted, tagged, and pegged for redesign when I got around to editing this book.

The thing of it is, though, I won't be editing this book. At the time that I finished this, I thought I would one day publish it. After working out all of its problem areas. Then I realized, I loved it as it was and I

didn't want to try to rework it. At all. Period. The effort required would likely do more damage than it would aid anything.

So there you have it. This book is available in its current format because I want to share it with others. That's the long and short of it.

Please, please enjoy it.