

Stargazer

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About *Stargazer*

An amnesiac alien and a former slave decide the fate of the last city on Earth.

Ava is an anomaly. She has the appearance of the enemy alien race known as Stargazers, with her lavender hair and eyes, but the human capacity for love and forgiveness. Any other captured Stargazer would have been executed, but not her—defying long held notions of who the invaders of Earth really are. Julius Pallas, the leader of Sanctuary—an outright dictatorship, encased in a dome to keep out Stargazers and the human Resistance—has been absent from the adoration of his pious citizens ever since her capture—as she's being held in a doctor-ridden mega-facility known as the Corporation.

Ava has amnesia—not knowing who she is or where she came from. She rejects that she's a Stargazer, but she isn't entirely human either, with the strength to crush a man's bones. The key to everything lies with Pallas, who orders her torture and imprisonment inside the Corporation. When the two finally meet, Ava will discover her true identity, her connection to him, and why he's been alone for a millennium without her. Now that he thinks he has her back, he'll discover how greatly she's changed, and how her destiny may just ruin his murderous empire.

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Chapter 1

My head was on a metal ring. I thought I was naked, lying on a cold, hard table, but I was covered with a thin, white gown. But for all the warmth it provided, I might as well have been naked. Goosebumps sprang up on my arms. I was shivering. My teeth were chattering. The room was bright with a white light—too bright. Another light—yellow—hovered above my head. It was just out of my line of vision so my eyes didn't hurt from the bright illumination. I didn't understand all the lights. Why?

I heard footsteps. Who could they be? What are they looking for? I wanted to get up and flee, but my body felt like it was paralyzed. I couldn't even move my big toe. I couldn't speak. But I could hear. The footsteps, like boots, were heavy—loud. I could hear heels too—*click-clacking*—like what a woman would wear. And then there were softer-soled shoes that would have barely registered if I hadn't been trying so hard to listen—to understand where I was and what I was doing here.

I could see but nothing from what is above my head... very little to see at my sides too; the bright lights and the white walls were my only clues. It was still a mystery. The room was very large. The ceiling was high.

I heard the footsteps come closer. It sounded like a stampede. I was shivering more and more. It was so cold—so very cold.

“Can she hear us?”

The voice was distant, yet close; it was confusing. But the voice was a woman—however that didn't calm me. She didn't sound warm. She was clinical... unfeeling—dangerous.

“Yes. She's afraid.”

The voice was male—caring. Yes, I was afraid. But why wasn't he helping me? Surely, he could see that I was in pain, cold, shivering, upset, unmovable, and barely covered. I wanted to scream for help, to plead at the top of my lungs, to yell and yell and yell until my voice gave out. I wanted them to cover their ears as if I had personally wounded them. I wanted someone to let me go, for I wasn't worth having, screaming and screaming like a maniac.

“Afraid?”

The woman sounded unsure, confused. Why wouldn't I be afraid? She would too if she couldn't move, freezing, with possibly dozens of people staring at her half-covered body. Who was this woman to doubt my feelings? Was she blind? Could she not recognize fear?

"I'm surprised as well. We didn't expect this."

The man was surprised? And who's "we?" More importantly—who am I? Why was it a shock I wasn't supposed to be afraid? I racked my brain, thinking, thinking, thinking back over how I could have possibly gotten into this painfully bright room with strangers. As I thought, I remembered nothing—absolutely nothing. I didn't even know my name. I began to shiver again, but not from the cold. I was afraid, yes, of the people, of the room, but I was more terrified of not knowing—not knowing who I was.

"She's having a seizure."

The voice was male but unknown. His voice was deep but not frightening. I didn't know if he was a doctor, but my tremors were not the result of a medical condition. I was shivering from absolute terror; the terror of not knowing—anything.

I heard the rapid steps of the heels across the floor—*click-clack—click-clack—click-clack*. No! Not her! I wanted anyone but her! I didn't know her, but she scared me so much.

"Step aside!"

It was the soft-spoken man from earlier. Yes, he was the one I wanted. He would take care of me. The *click-clacking* stopped. I felt a warm hand on my arm. I knew it was him and not her. She would have been ice cold—just like her unfeeling heart. I shifted my eyes to the right. Then I quickly shut them—that was the direction to the yellow hovering light above my head. I wanted to open my eyes again, to see him—yes! I saw the facial outline of a man's features—but the light hurt too much. The light went off. He must have sensed my pain. My eyelids flew up and I beheld the man looking down upon me.

"Don't touch her!" yelled the woman. "She's dangerous!"

I was dangerous? How could I be? I couldn't move, and I had no idea who I was.

"What about a little compassion?"

The young man—tall with brown hair parted to one side, neat, wearing a white lab coat—had looked up and was staring at someone. I shifted my eyes to the left and that was when I saw her. She was in the distance but closer than the others in the room who still seemed to be wary of me. Her hair was platinum blond and she wore a red dress with red heels. She looked so out of

place in that white room. She was wringing her hands together with blood red nails. Her perfume was making me nauseous. It was too... flowery. I had been afraid of her, but as she stood there, looking nervous, she seemed rather weak.

Her fists clenched. "You want me to have...compassion?"

She spat the word out like it was poison on her tongue. Her nostrils flared. Her eyebrows lifted. Now she seemed quite the menace I had thought her to be.

"They're not all bad," said the man softly.

The woman's arms shot down, almost glued to her sides. Her fists were still clenched. Blood was quickly rushing to her fingertips.

"Not all bad?" she repeated, struggling to pronounce each word. She lifted up one hand and pointed to the young man. "We brought you in because you have experience with these"—she waved her hand at me with a disgusted look—"things."

She called me a thing. I wasn't a *thing*. I was a human being. I knew *that* while lying there on that cold table. But I didn't know why I knew I was human if I couldn't remember anything else. I was aware. I believed that I was like the rest of the people in the room. Yes, I was humanoid, but only the young doctor felt like my true kin. He was soft and gentle. His warm hand on my arm sent flames of heat all throughout my body. I reacted to him not only as a friendly companion, but as a female would react to a male. He made me feel safe and I wanted him to embrace me as his own.

From that, I knew I was right to think of myself as human, but what did the others think I was? Especially the "Red Woman" as I dubbed her. What was her purpose? What was her agenda? What would she do if the nice doctor abandoned me and left me alone?

"I've only experimented on the dead. Dr. Hinder was the expert on...live specimens."

I wanted to jerk my arm away from his grasp, but I couldn't move. Who was this man? I thought he was my savior, but he was just as bad as the Red Woman. He experimented on corpses. And this Dr. Hinder, whoever he was, experimented on people while they were still alive. Where was this frightening doctor? Is he nearby? Am I about to be...dissected?

I was surprised at my level of understanding. I could identify, analyze, and extrapolate. I was not totally brain dead as to the world around me. The only malfunction I suffered was my lack of memory. Who was I? After that was answered, everything else would make sense.

The Red Woman placed her hands on her wide hips. “Dr. Hinder is dead. *You* are the primary physician in this facility. He was your mentor. Surely, you learned *something* from him.”

The man looked sympathetically at me. He had blue eyes like sapphires. It was calming like the water in the ocean. I remembered that. I remembered the water—swimming, diving, and the watching the sun set on the horizon. I was very happy, but I wasn’t alone. Someone was there with me, but they were just a shadow in the water. But I was safe with this person; I loved this person. I felt my insides heating up, reacting to the doctor’s eyes, and my lost love. Where was he? Did he know that I was here? What couldn’t I see his face? What was his name?

“I learned *everything* from him,” said the doctor, interrupting my worried thoughts.

I noticed the doctor was defending himself and Dr. Hinder. His voice had a bit of an edge to it. I was glad he was standing up to the Red Woman, even though I was terribly afraid he was going to cut me open and study my organs.

The Red Woman took two steps forward. The *click-clack* of her red heels was like a thunderous boom in my ears. I wanted to cover them, but my hands were plastered to the table. Even the doctor’s warmth didn’t melt the unseen ice covering my body. Only my eyelids could move and my eyes. I was glad for that. I could shut myself off from the world at any time. All I could do was hear and I had a plan for that. I would reminisce about the water—the waves crashing—crashing all around me—drowning out this horrible world I’d been chained to.

“Then *why* is she afraid, Dr. Goode?”

His name was Goode. That gave me hope that he was actually a *good* person—somehow his name and his character had become one.

“I-I don’t know.”

He rubbed his thumb against my skin—away from the observers. I felt like I was on fire. I thought he was trying to soothe me, to make me feel better, but I was overcome with intense affection for this man—a loving affection—as a woman would have for a man.

“Well, let’s cut it open and see.”

The voice came from far away—a man’s voice. He called me an “it.” Could he not see that I was human—female? Why was I being treated like this? What did I ever do to these people?

“I want to get a consult,” said Dr. Goode. “I’m an expert of the body, not the mind.”

I wanted to dispute that. He sensed that I was afraid. He was aware of feelings. He felt for me—or I hoped he did.

The Red Woman chuckled. That was even more frightening than her scowl.

“I know of whom you speak. He’s untrustworthy. I thought this rebelliousness was contained in the Mental Department, but it seems to be affecting Physiology as well.”

She gave Dr. Goode a knowing smirk. I didn’t understand the exchange, but I wanted to jump up and hit her. I didn’t like that she was smiling in any way at Dr. Goode. I felt like he was mine.

Dr. Goode ignored her comment about his conduct.

“If Dr. Valier is such a problem, the Corporation would have seen to his dismissal.”

“Do you find fault with the Corporation’s guidelines?”

“There is not fault. *You* are though, at fault, by your earlier statement. You bemoaned the fact that Dr. Valier was untrustworthy which means you are in disagreement with President Pallas.”

The others in the room gasped.

The Red Woman’s face actually turned red. “I am *not* in disagreement, doctor. I am loyal to the Corporation, unlike some people.”

Her eyes shifted to me. I didn’t understand.

“Dr. Valier is loyal to Pallas, as am I,” said Dr. Goode. “Our last evaluation was three days ago. We passed with flying colors.”

“Others have cheated the system,” she pointed out with a smirk.

“Yes, they have,” he agreed, “but a day didn’t pass before they were found out and duly punished.”

I shivered at the word “punished.” I ran through a list of mental images: belts, whips, chains, chains with spikes at the end, and beatings—clenched fists slamming into vulnerable parts of the body. I shivered again.

Dr. Goode caressed my arm with his thumb. It helped but not by much.

The Red Woman clasped her hand together, as if in prayer, and bowed her head. “Pallas, the Benevolent One.”

Everyone, including Dr. Goode, echoed her devotion. If this Pallas man condoned human experimentation, then I wanted no part of this worship service. Everyone, even Dr. Goode, were

my enemy, although, I desperately wanted him to be on my side, wondering if by staying my dissection, he was good, and not as radical as the others in the room.

“Fine,” said the Red Woman after she was done giving praise. “You can call in Dr. Valier. *But* I will be allowed in on the meeting.”

“That’ll be too many people. We need her calm.”

She took another step forward—*click-clack*. “I am the president’s liaison. I will *not* be excluded.”

I shivered again. I didn’t want her there. Dr. Goode sensed my distress and rubbed his soothing thumb against my skin.

“If Dr. Valier disagrees...” Dr. Goode trailed off.

“He will *not* disagree.”

“You may be the president’s liaison, but he is the president’s nephew. Who do you think comes first: family or the worker?”

The Red Woman gasped. I could tell that being called “worker” was upsetting. She thought of herself as something more—more special to President Pallas. I was upset too. I thought this Dr. Valier would be helpful, would delay my execution, but if he was the president’s nephew, then I couldn’t see how I could trust him. And for that matter, I didn’t see how I could trust Dr. Goode, who wanted me to see him.

“Well, if I’m a worker, then you’re a worker!”

Dr. Goode smiled. It was a nice smile. “I already knew that.”

He seemed to be throwing it back at the Red Woman that she was oblivious to her place in the Corporation. Again, she thought she was special, but she was just another worker bee in the great hive.

The Red Woman narrowed her eyes at Dr. Goode. “Medusa, locate Dr. Loren Valier.”

My eyes shifted, looking for this...Medusa—what a strange name, yet familiar—but no woman appeared. Instead, part of the wall changed near me, from white to black. It was a screen and finally, someone appeared.

“Doctor Loren Valier is located in Quadrant 9—Level 6—Floor 30—Room 310.”

It was a female voice and she did look...human. But there were tubes coming out of her head attached to machines all around her. There was a lot of flashing lights and different colors on the equipment. She seemed mechanical in her movements, as if she and the machines were

one. As I connected her name to the tubes on her head, I was vaguely aware of a woman with the same predicament. Instead the tubes were moving, and at the end they had mouths with fangs—snakes. It was a scary image so I quickly put it out of my mind. I was scared enough.

This Medusa didn't seem scary though. I was actually sad for her, if she were a human, attached to wires, hooked up to machines, spending all day and all night, looking for people.

“And *what* is he doing *there*?”

The Red Woman found Loren Valier's position to be unwelcome. I wondered if Dr. Goode and the others felt the same way.

“I will ascertain,” replied Medusa mechanically.

We all waited as she pushed different buttons with lights flashing all around her, and turning her head at different angles as if she were processing something she didn't understand.

After some very long seconds, Medusa's head became still. “I have the knowledge you seek. Doctor Loren Valier has a direct message for you.”

“Oh?”

“Go to hell.”

Dr. Goode chuckled lightly beside me. I would have laughed too, but I couldn't move my lips. I was however, laughing on the inside. I heard a few chuckles from the others, but it was quickly muted. I didn't know if it was funny what Dr. Valier said or how it was said by the mechanical search engine Medusa.

The Red Woman sighed loudly. This wasn't the first time Dr. Valier had told her off. If he really was the president's nephew then I assumed he got a lot of freeway, and that was why despite her disdain of him and his supposed disloyalty, he was still here... wherever he was. And alive—not dissected like I was sure would happen to me.

“Bring him on visual.”

“Processing,” said Medusa.

Within a few seconds, she disappeared and the screen was black.

“Lights,” commanded the Red Woman.

I thought she meant the room I was in, and I was confused if she wanted more lights on. I couldn't fathom how hurtful that would be to my eyes. But she wasn't talking about my large holding cell. The black screen lit up to show a room, smaller than mine, cozy, like someone's bedroom. The lights she mentioned were the lights to the room. There was a bed in the center of

the room and on it was a man; his chest was bare with a white sheet that was covering the rest of his body; and a woman with only her red hair visible as she lay on her side. I was starting to piece everything together. No wonder he didn't want to be disturbed.

“Outrageous!” The Red Woman yelled. “He’s in bed with some...tramp...only blocks away from the president’s statue!” She held her hands over her heart. “What a sacrilege!”

Dr. Goode chuckled beside me again. Although he demonstrated obedience to President Pallas earlier, it seemed that it was just for show. At least that was what I thought. If he was truly horrified, he would be reacting the same way as the Red Woman. The others were silent. They didn't seem to be judging Dr. Valier for his...actions.

Dr. Valier moaned, grumbled, and then his eyes opened. He looked to his left, and it was like he was looking straight at me.

He smiled and sat up. His white bed sheet was doing a poor job of covering him and it wasn't like he was trying to be indiscreet.

“Madam Secretary, what do I owe this wonderful honor?”

I liked the doctor. He was young like Dr. Goode, but had wild, blond hair that he didn't try to tame.

The Red Woman stepped aside and I came into full view.

“Dr. Goode has requested your consultation on an anomaly.”

She was calling me being afraid, “an anomaly?” I wasn't the one who was strange. This whole place was. This whole situation was.

Dr. Valier furrowed his brow at me but that was all. He didn't seem afraid of me or sickened by me. He was...curious.

He looked away from me and smiled. “Hey, John, how are things over there?”

“Tense,” Dr. Goode answered with a smile.

So, his name was John—John Goode. It sounded like a nice name—of someone who was caring. I didn't know what to make of Loren Valier. He was half-naked like me—except that he seemed to have enjoyed his time better.

“I need your help,” continued John, “if you're not too busy.”

“No, I'm good. I've been asleep for far too long anyway. Besides, the senator's daughter needs to get home.”

The Red Woman gasped. “Oh, my goodness; I can’t believe it! You have Senator Noon’s daughter in...”

Dr. Valier smiled. “In bed—Madam Secretary—so don’t be such a prude. I heard you were wild”—he winked—“back in the day.”

I scanned the Red Woman. She was probably in her forties. Dr. Valier looked young like John not even near twenty. I didn’t know a lot, but I found it odd that two young men—boys even—would be doctors. Of course, I knew very little of this place. Maybe there were a lot of smart people—gifted children. I started to wonder about my childhood—if I were gifted and if I had parents who loved me. But I stopped wondering. It was too sad to not remember anything about my past.

“That’s enough!” The Red Woman stomped her high heel against the buffed white floor. The sound echoed. “Get dressed and come over here at once!”

Dr. Valier quickly rose and his sheet almost fell, but he snatched it up in time. The camera or I’m assuming Medusa, panned up, towards his face. He was very handsome in a wild sort of way, not reserved like John.

He smiled at the whole room. “Don’t start without me.”

The screen went black and I expected Medusa to reappear, but she didn’t, and the wall resumed its bright white feature.

I was scared. Dr. Valier seemed like he could be a nice man, but he’d said: “Don’t start without me.” What did that mean? John said that Dr. Valier was being called in for my mind, not my body.

Terror gripped me.

They weren’t experimenting on my body.

They were experimenting on my mind.

Chapter 2

I tried to struggle, to move, but it was all in vain. Only my eyelids would work and I used them fiercely as I blinked rapidly at John, pleading for him to understand my fear.

He furrowed his brow, staring at me.

“What? What is it?” asked the Red Woman, as her heels *click-clacked* two paces closer.

I could hear the others shuffling forward, taking slow steps, curious, but still afraid of me. I didn't know why they should fear me. Obviously, John didn't, as he held my arm gently with his hand, and with this other, cupped my cheek. It felt so good to be touched in that way—it brought back memories of being embraced by that shadowy figure who I couldn't distinguish. It frustrated me, but not as much as not knowing who I was.

“I don't believe it,” he said.

“What?!” asked the Red Woman, frustrated.

“She's using Morse code.”

I let my mind run wild, remembering what “Morse code” was. When I found the information I was seeking, I couldn't believe it. Morse code was used as a signaling language. If I could speak, I wouldn't need it, but I assumed I had found a way to communicate with John. Although, I didn't know what my rapid eye blinks were saying to him. I stopped, afraid.

“No, please,” he urged with a nice smile. “Talk to me.”

It was nice to hear him say that. He wanted me to communicate with him; he wanted to know about me. Maybe if everyone knew that I wasn't a threat, they wouldn't try to kill me, as I feared they would. This place didn't seem to be a wonderland of dreams and wish fulfillments.

So, I kept blinking, although, I didn't know what I was doing. Basically, I was trying to plead for help.

When I stopped, he looked up at the Red Woman. “She's says she's scared. She's scared of Dr. Valier. She thinks he's going to experiment on her brain like I'm going to experiment on her body.”

John looked back down at me and shook his head. “No, no, my dear, I'm not going to hurt you.”

The Red Woman *click-clacked* closer; her perfume was making me sick.

“Don't talk to it so... nicely! And how do you know Morse code?”

“My dad was a sailor before the war.”

I blinked furiously again.

“What? What is she saying?”

“She wants to know which war.”

Everyone was silent. I shifted my eyes from John to the Red Woman, back and forth, waiting for one of them to explain. I knew the Red Woman was the least likely person to divulge, but I was hoping John would tell me about this war I had no knowledge of.

“She’s tricking you,” said the Red Woman assuredly. “She knows very well *which* war.”

I blinked furiously again, although, I had no idea how to convey in Morse code everything I wanted to say. It was another mystery of who I was.

“Well, she’s a chatterbox. What did she say this time?”

John drew his hand away from my face. I felt so cold. But he kept his hand on my arm, caressing me.

“She doesn’t know anything about a war. She woke up in this room and doesn’t know anything about herself or where she came from.”

“Well, she obviously knows English or can you Dr. Goode speak proficient Stellar unlike the staff in our Linguistics Department?”

“No, she knows English.”

The others gasped.

“Out, out!” The Red Woman fussed at them. “I can’t have you all gasping when every bit of intelligence is let out. Besides, this is a top secret matter now, and you all don’t belong here.”

The others began to shuffle out with their boots and shoes and heels making loud sounds against the floor. I heard a door slide open and then close.

I was afraid with only John and the Red Woman in the room. I wasn’t afraid of John, but with fewer witnesses, I was fearful that she would do something and blame me. Why not? I was after all, the *enemy*. I wondered what Stellar meant. My brain processed the word and the result was “star.” How would I know how to speak “star?” What does that even mean?

The Red Woman *click-clacked* until she was right next to me. I started to tremble again and John rubbed his thumb back and forth over my arm.

“What are you doing?” she asked, eyeing his affection.

“I’m soothing her,” he explained. “She’s scared, remember?”

“If you weren’t personally recommended by Dr. Hinder and the only physician in this whole department that knew the ins and outs of these things, I’d recommend you for exile.”

“Why exile? Why not imprisonment or a public execution? We haven’t had one of those in nearly a week.”

“You speak like they do—the rebels. Of course, it only seems natural given your brother was their top commander.” She smiled wickedly. “He died most painfully, I was told.”

John tightened his grip around my arm and I tried to jerk away, but I couldn’t move, although he wasn’t hurting me. He was mad, furious at her. I didn’t blame him, even though I had no idea what they were talking about.

“I speak like my brother because of the wisdom of our father. He taught us to be kind and loving.”

The Red Woman gripped the side of my table, obviously holding herself back from hitting John.

“You have only one father, Dr. Goode, and his name is President Julius Pallas. And he blessed you by allowing you to live in the Sanctuary instead of seeing your head chopped off at the guillotine. I’ve never understood why. Can you enlighten me?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

“No.”

“Then he doesn’t want you to know.”

“I know everything.”

“No, you don’t.”

She snarled like some wild animal and I thought she was going to hit him, but then the door in the distance slid open. The Red Woman took two steps back, retreating.

“Oh, it’s you. It’s about time you arrived.” She waved at me. “Figure this out.”

Dr. Loren Valier approached with a wary smile. His blond hair was brushed back and he wore casual clothes under a white lab coat. He had an ID tag clipped to the pocket. I looked over at John and noticed his was turned around. I didn’t know if that was by accident or he didn’t want anyone to know who he was.

John gave Dr. Valier a friendly pat on his back.

“Thanks for coming over.”

“No problem, so, when was she brought in?”

“Two days ago,” replied the Red Woman.

I couldn’t believe I’d been here for two days. What were they doing to me for *two* days?
“She was handled nicely,” he remarked with a sensuous smile.

“There was no struggle,” noted the Red Woman. “She was unconscious when the Retrieval Squad found her.”

She went back to calling me “she.” But that didn’t stop my hatred of her.

“How many were captured during the raid?”

“Several,” she replied, deliberately trying to be cryptic. “She was left alone, unprotected.”

“They left her to be captured?”

I scanned Dr. Valier’s eyes. They were green like emeralds and it brought back memories of running through green forests. I was happy as I ran with that shadow again, who had been swimming with me in the vast ocean. Who was he? Why couldn’t I see his face? Did I receive a blow to the head and was imagining someone who didn’t exist? It was possible—my head did ache, but I didn’t know if it was from some injury or the multitude of blinding lights in the large room.

The Red Woman smirked at John. “The enemy was nowhere to be found, but they are a traitorous race like the rebels.”

John turned away from her and said to Dr. Valier, “Loren, she’s incredible. She speaks English.”

Dr. Valier walked around John and approached me, leaning down, unafraid, but not as compassionate.

“I thought she was in restraints. How is she speaking?”

“Morse code,” replied the Red Woman. “Dr. Goode just so happens to be an expert in that too.”

Dr. Valier smiled at John, but said nothing.

“Although,” she continued, “he is an imbecile at reading the mind.”

“And that’s where I come in?” asked Dr. Valier.

“I hope so.”

John laid his free hand on Dr. Valier’s arm. “She’s scared, Loren. She thinks you’re going to experiment on her.”

Dr. Valier noticed John’s other hand on my arm.

“May I?” he asked.

John seemed reluctant to let me go and I didn’t want him to, but eventually, his hand slid away from my arm and suddenly, I felt very cold.

“She’s trembles a lot,” John noted. “She’s scared.”

“And cold,” added Dr. Valier, scanning me from head to toe. “Let’s get her a blanket.” He laid his hand on my arm, but not in the same spot where John had been. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you,” he said softly.

And I believed him. He seemed very trusting or at least I hoped so. I was so confused, so vulnerable to even the gentlest touch. If a snake had wound its body around my arm, I’d love its affection, until its strong muscles cracked and crushed every bone, betraying me—but also snickering at why I had been so gullible to believe anyone could possibly love me.

John rushed off and came back a few seconds later with a blanket—a warm, blue blanket; he gently laid it over my body making me feel instantly better, despite my surroundings and lack of knowledge.

“See?” said Dr. Valier, pointing to my eyes. “I can tell she feels better.”

I blinked to John and he smiled. “She says she does feel better.”

“Well, isn’t that just great,” the Red Woman said sarcastically.

Dr. Valier began caressing my arm like John had but it didn’t feel the same. It wasn’t bad, but I was used to John. He was my original comforter and the only one I could really talk to. I noticed John looking at Dr. Valier’s motions with a furrowed brow. He came closer to me, his hand stretched out, like he wanted to touch me, but didn’t. Dr. Valier stopped caressing me and John resumed his hand on my arm. I felt better.

“A change,” said Dr. Valier with a raised eyebrow.

“What change?” asked John.

“When I touched her, she didn’t seem like she hated it, but when *you* touched her, I noticed a change in her eyes.” He leaned down. “What beautiful eyes you have.”

“All the Stargazers have lavender eyes,” said the Red Woman with dismissal.

I noticed hers was a dark brown. I wasn’t sure, but I thought she was jealous of me. And what was a Stargazer?

“And hair to match,” commented Dr. Valier, as he touched a strand far from my scalp.

I blinked at John in confusion.

He furrowed his brow. “She’s confused by her appearance. She wants to know if there are other humans with lavender eyes and hair.”

The Red Woman came closer. “*You*,” she said, staring at me, “are *not* human.”

I couldn’t help it and began to cry. Tears, never ending tears, were falling from my eyes. I didn’t want to cry, to seem weak, but I was so vulnerable, so confused that I exploded like a waterfall, as if a dam had broken, and I could finally express my depression.

“Damn you!” yelled John. He walked quickly around my table and in front of the Red Woman. “You’re upsetting her.”

He placed his hand on my other arm, rubbing my skin with his thumb. At the same time, Dr. Valier resumed where he had been touching me. It was odd; I had these two handsome young doctors touching me, worrying over me, while the Red Woman was forced in the background, murmuring angrily.

“She is extraordinary,” said Dr. Valier. “She looks like a Stargazer, but acts like a human. You did a scan when she arrived?” he asked John.

It seemed that everyone wanted to forget about the Red Woman, huffing and puffing in the corner of the room. She was fixed in my mind, as was this talk about Stargazers and humans. Why were they talking about me in this way?

“Of course,” replied John. “The Stargazers mimic the human body incredibly well, except that they have inherited differences; the most notable are the lavender eyes and hair.”

“I wonder what their planet looks like,” mused Dr. Valier. “I bet it’s beautiful.”

The *click-clacking* came closer. “I can’t believe you two are gushing over this... thing! You’ve seen female Stargazers. What’s the difference?”

John looked down at me with a warm smile. “She’s special.”

“That’s your professional medical diagnosis?” she asked nastily.

“She may look like them, but she speaks English. How does she know our language and enough of it to speak rapidly as if she’s known it all her life?”

“It’s good you know Morse code, John, but how does she know? Again, she’s a special mystery,” remarked Dr. Valier with a half smile.

“I’ll have to be close to her so I can translate what she’s saying.”

“No, let’s just take off her restraints,” Dr. Valier suggested.

“You will do no such thing!” yelled the Red Woman. “She’s lethal!”

Dr. Valier waved a hand at me. “Look at her. She’s fragile. She’s not a threat.”

“That’s how they *want* you to think! She’s playing both of you! Thank goodness our Dear Leader has *me* as his liaison or else all of the men would have succumbed years ago!”

“What?” Dr. Valier asked with a smirk. “There wasn’t some ruggedly handsome Stargazer who didn’t catch that lazy eye of yours?”

The Red Woman gasped. When I looked at her eyes, I didn’t notice that one kind of drooped but it wasn’t noticeable until someone pointed it out. I guessed she was hoping that would never happen.

“I’m going to Pallas. He needs to know *exactly* what is going on here!”

Dr. Valier waved at the wall. Why don’t you use Medusa? She’s just sitting around, doing nothing.”

I assumed he was joking. Medusa worked nonstop it see med.

“He needs to see me *in person*.”

“Oh, I bet that’ll be a joy.”

She pointed her finger at the pair of doctors. “You will do nothing to *it* until I return. Do you understand?”

John said nothing. Dr. Valier did a lazy salute with two fingers, touching his forehead. She gave them a departing sneer and didn’t look at me, as she *click-clacked* out of the large white room.

“Medusa, sweetheart, are you there?”

The white panel changed to the black screen and she appeared with all the tubes running out of her head and the lights in the background on the machines.

Dr. Valier stood at the foot of my table and addressed the computer.

“My dear, would you be so kind and remove the patient’s restraints?”

Medusa had been turning her head at various angles, but then she came to a halt and stared at Dr. Valier.

“That is against regulations, Dr. Valier.”

“I know, but I would *really* appreciate it. What do you say?”

“The subject is hostile.”

Dr. Valier waved a dismissive hand at Medusa. “Oh, look at her!” He turned to me and smiled. “She’s harmless. I just want to talk to her, or have her talk back.” He turned to John. “We don’t all know Morse code.”

“But what if...”

“What if *what*, John?” asked Dr. Valier, a little bit annoyed.

John looked at me. I could tell he was confused about something. “Maybe we should keep her in restraints.”

I felt hurt. I couldn’t believe that he would want that. After all his affectionate gestures, his verbal battles with the Red Woman, he *still* saw me as the enemy—as someone to controlled and caged. How could I hurt him? He had defined muscles. Surely, *he* could subdue *me*. I couldn’t see my body, but I felt very thin like my bones were easily visible beneath a thin layer of ghost white skin.

“What? Are you afraid of Big Red?”

“No, it’s just that...well...” He was staring at me, so I blinked a plea. He caressed my arm. “I’m sorry,” he continued. “But I’m doing this for you. If security comes in here and that woman finds you free, I don’t know what they’ll do. They might execute you on sight. I can’t bear to see that.”

I understood, but that didn’t mean I wanted to be held down anymore. Dr. Valier felt I should be free, unafraid of the consequences. Why didn’t John? Or did Dr. Valier not care if I lived or died? What if John, by keeping me restrained, was saving my life?

Dr. Valier came back and touched my arm.

“John, I want to talk to her, and I want her to talk to me. I can’t deal with all that blinking and I’m sure she doesn’t find it that great either.” He smiled at me. “Do you?”

I blinked that I’d rather be free and speak. It was risky, given it could mean the end of my life, but what kind of life had I had? I didn’t know who I was. Why did it matter if I died right now? Was someone waiting on me to come back—the shadow who haunted my mind? Was I even being missed?

“She agreed with me, didn’t she?” he asked John.

John sighed. “Yes, but it’s dangerous to free her. What if the wrong person walked in this room and alerted the guards?”

Dr. Valier smiled. "I got this." He turned to Medusa. "Medusa, lock down this room. Only I or Dr. Goode can authorize access inside."

"Upon which protocol are you enacting this decision?" she asked.

Dr. Valier put a finger to his lips, thinking. Then he snapped his fingers, smiling. "Protocol 19-82."

"Affirmative," agreed Medusa, "I am locking room number 630 upon Dr. Loren Valier's orders. Only he or Doctor John Goode may allow access inside."

I didn't hear anything, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw red lights instead of green lights. I assumed the red meant the doors were locked. But I had no clue.

Dr. Valier smiled at John. "See? It's all taken care of."

"Protocol 19-82?" John asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It was the only way Medusa would cooperate."

"How are you going to remove her restraints?"

Dr. Valier smiled and reached into his pants pocket. He pulled out a black cube.

"Wait," said John, tensing. "That's..."

"Rebel hardware," finished Dr. Valier.

John rushed to Dr. Valier and gripped the wrist of the hand that held the cube. "Medusa is aware. Shut your mouth."

Dr. Valier furrowed his brow and jerked his wrist from John's grip. "It'll be fine. Trust me."

"I can't believe you have that. Where did you get it by the way?"

"Ah, curious are we?"

"Of course, I'm curious."

"I'm not telling you where I got it. Now, we don't have a lot of time. Let's see what our little Stargazer has to say. I'd love to hear her alien voice."

As the two of them approached, I felt scared. I didn't know what was going on, but now, I didn't want to be free. I had gotten used to the restraints and everyone, except for Dr. Valier, seemed a little less tense with me confined to this table.

When John approached, I blinked at him again. I had a question about the protocol.

"Oh, Protocol 19-82 states that if a patient and/or subject is indecent as in *naked*, and if the presiding physician deems that any outside person would react in a detrimental way to the care of said patient and/or subject, then it is within the rules to lock down the room."

I blinked again.

He chuckled. He seemed to find me funny a lot.

“No,” he said, “don’t worry. You won’t be naked.” He turned to Dr. Valier. “Am I right?”

Dr. Valier looked up from what he had been doing at the side of my table. Apparently there was a panel there full of buttons.

He smiled. “No, she’ll be fully clothed.”

I watched him take the black cube and with his thumb, slide back one square that came to a rest on the top of the cube, instead of the inconvenience of having to hold onto a separate piece and possibly losing it. The cube revealed an intricate circuit board that Dr. Valier then placed at the side of my table like a magnet.

“Will that work?” asked John, rubbing my arm.

“It’ll work.”

Dr. Valier sounded so confident. I hoped he was right. Now that it looked like I could move, I wanted it very badly. After a few seconds, I felt released. It was a strange feeling. Before, it was as if I was a magnet and I was drawn to the table, but now someone shut down the field, and I was able to shift. I could wiggle my toes, but slowly. It hurt as I did this, as if I’d never moved in my whole life. I tried my fingers next as the two doctors watched me in awe.

I managed to turn my head. My lips began to move, slowly, as I was trying to bring them back to life. I moved my tongue. I took a swallow of saliva, but there was barely any there. I realized that I was tremendously thirsty.

“Water?” asked John.

I managed a nod.

He ran off, out of sight, and then came back with a white paper cup. He carefully placed it against my lips and tilted it, as he lifted my head. The water was the most delicious substance I’d ever tasted. He was too slow, so I lifted my hand and grabbed the cup, greedily drinking it down.

I handed it back to him. “Thank you, John,” I managed to croak out.

John dropped the paper cup, his mouth open in shock.

“Say something else,” urged Dr. Valier.

I turned my head to him. “Thank you, Dr. Valier.”

He smiled. “Please, call me Loren.”

I managed a little smile. “Thank you, Loren.”

“I can’t believe it,” said John. “She sounds just like us.”

“The Stargazers are known to mimic,” stated Loren, “although, they can butcher the hell out of the English language; their alien voices just can’t replicate the nuances.”

I shook my head. They just didn’t understand. “I’m...not...a...Star...gazer.”

“Are you another species?” asked John. “Are you related?”

I shook my head again. “Not alien...*human*.”

Loren ran his fingers through my hair and I closed my eyes. It felt good. I never realized how comforting it could be for someone to just run his fingers through my hair—it worked like a natural sedative.

“I believe her, John. Stargazers don’t react the way she does. They are incredible mimickers, but what I see coming from her is natural.”

“What about the hair and the eyes? Humans aren’t born with that combination of lavender features.”

“Well, if she’s not a Stargazer and she’s not human, then what is she?”

“I’m an anomaly.”

I had been thinking it, but I didn’t mean to say it. The Red Woman was right.

John rubbed my skin gently. “No, you’re just...special, that’s all.”

“Do you have a name?” asked Loren. “What do you remember?”

I laid there, quiet, thinking about his questions. I tried so very hard to remember who I was, but it was like a blank screen.

I shook my head and found the strength to speak at length. “I don’t know who I am, but I remember being in the water, like an ocean, swimming. I liked it. And I was in a forest once or maybe a lot, I don’t know. It was very green and lovely.”

“Were you alone?” asked John.

I was about to say no, to speak of the shadow who trails me, but I didn’t want to betray him, even though I felt that John and Loren would protect me.

“Yes,” I lied with a nod.

John looked at Loren. “From our knowledge, Stargazers don’t like the water or the woods.”

“The earlier ones didn’t, but the later ones learned to adapt,” Loren countered.

“Can I change my eyes and my hair?” I asked John, ignoring their talk of Stargazer qualities. I was *not* a Stargazer. That I knew for sure.

“No,” he replied. “There’s no technology for that, on either side, and even still, the Stargazers see their lavender features as something to be proud of.”

“I’m not a Stargazer. I don’t want to look like this.”

Loren touched my cheek. “You’re beautiful.”

I didn’t like all this attention. I wanted out. I wanted to flee, so I sat up and swung legs off the table, trying to stand. But as soon as my feet landed on the cold floor, I felt dizzy, and almost fell. John was there. He caught me in his arms, and it felt like we were connected. I couldn’t break free of him, as he placed me back on the table. I didn’t realize just how strong he really was.

“No,” I argued, but didn’t try to fight him off. I was too weak.

“Please, stay still. The others won’t be as gentle with you like me and Loren.”

I tried to get up again and John held my shoulders down. He wasn’t hurting me, but there was that connection again like he was a part of me.

“Loren, activate the restraints.”

“No!” I yelled.

“Do it, Loren!”

Loren looked at me, sorrowful, and then touched a few buttons on my table panel, and removed the black cube that he placed carefully in his pocket. I started to feel helpless again as I was restrained, starting at my feet, and then to my head. John removed his hands from my shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s better this way.”

I could no longer speak, but I could move my eyelids.

“What did she say?” asked Loren.

John hesitated and then said, “She hates me.”

Chapter 3

The Red Woman came back. She was accompanied by an armed guard of twelve. I guess I was really dangerous. I was glad that John didn't mention that I had tried to leave. I knew he wouldn't, but there was still that fear that he would break and spill. Loren seemed to be cooler, more in control. I think he had to be relaxed because of the device in his pocket. I didn't know anything about these rebels, apart from the overheard conversations.

The Corporation didn't like them, but most governments didn't like it when their own citizens rebelled against them. That much I knew. If I didn't know who I was and I knew I wasn't a Stargazer, I wondered if I was a rebel, but then I decided I couldn't have been. I was sure they didn't like the Stargazers as much as the Corporation. Was I an outcast? I imagined it as a horrible life, where I could barely get by, but there were the visions of me and that man, swimming in that lovely blue water, and running through that enchanted green forest. We were so happy together.

I wished I could use Medusa to search for him, but she was Corporate controlled. She would only agree to lock the doors when Loren used a protocol. She wouldn't be any help, unless Loren had another cube to override her. The table must have been easy to fool; Medusa, not so much.

The Red Woman spied the paper cup on the floor. She turned to John.

"And what has she said in my absence?"

"She doesn't remember anything."

She smiled. "That's all right. I have...another idea I want to try."

"What are you talking about?" asked Loren, stepping in front of my table, defensively.

"You've had your turns," she said, addressing the two doctors, "but now it's time for a more...invasive approach."

"Invasive?" asked John with wide eyes.

"Don't worry, Dr. Goode, no harm will come to her."

I didn't believe her.

"And how will you find your answers?" asked Loren.

"That is none of your concern." She turned away from the two doctors and addressed the guards. "Prepare for transfer."

I laid there, immobilized and scared, as six men with stomping boots, wearing head to toe in black, armed, approached my table. One of them pushed a few buttons on the panel Loren had been working on. Suddenly, my table went vertical, and I was erect, hovering above the floor. The blue blanket fell on the floor and I was shivering again—from the cold and the fear.

I blinked at John.

“It’s okay,” he said with a smile that didn’t meet his eyes.

“Where are you taking her?!” demanded Loren. “We’re her doctors.”

The Red Woman smiled. She sauntered over, *click-clacking*, as she approached, and slipped her hand into a pocket on her dress. She drew out a piece of paper, folded in thirds, and handed in to Loren. He snatched it up and read it up and down.

“Let me see,” said John and he read it over too.

I blinked at John, pleading for someone to tell me what was going on.

John swallowed, nervous. “It’s a personal decree from President Pallas. You are no longer in our care. You have been reprimanded to Quadrant 13.”

Before I could even blink, he answered my question.

“Quadrant 13 is a lab.”

I tried to shake my head, to tell him, “*No, No, No*,” but I couldn’t move.

“So, you see, gentleman,” said the Red Woman, “our Beneficial One cares a great deal for my opinion”—she turned to Loren—“and even less of his nephew’s. Oh, and you are to report at 0600 hours for clean up detail at Pallas Park.”

“Clean up? I’m a doctor.”

“President Pallas was most displeased as to your...*activities* near his holy place. You are to help the workers clean, even if it takes you all day and all night.” She turned to John. “As for you, Dr. Goode, your services are needed for Miss Haiku Noon, Dr. Valier’s *friend*.”

“What happened to her?!” demanded Loren.

The Red Woman smiled. “Senator Noon doesn’t like his little girl tramping off with men, even if such men are the president’s own blood. As President Pallas would say, ‘Loyalty is more important than family.’” She raised her hands to the ceiling. “Pallas, Beneficial One.”

The guards echoed her words, but not John and Loren. They were on edge, angry, at the Red Woman. Even John, who seemed to be ill-at-ease in upsetting the social order, looked like he was going to rip the Red Woman apart.

She turned to leave, but then looked at John. “Oh, Dr. Goode, you don’t mind a lot of blood, do you? Miss Noon isn’t too pretty at the moment.”

Loren snarled and lunged at the Red Woman, but John held him back, whispering to him, probably telling him she’s not worth it, as the guards advanced to protect the Madam Secretary, pulling their guns out, warning Loren to halt.

John was able to contain him as they both retreated away from the guards and from me. It seemed that I was being abandoned. I didn’t blame them. They tried, but they failed.

“Knock her out,” said the Red Woman to one of the guards. “I don’t want her seeing the facility.”

I tried to move as the burly guard approached me with a syringe—its long silver needle waiting to inject me, but it was useless, and I had to endure watching him, witnessing in slow motion, as he stabbed the needle into my arm. I watched as John and Loren rushed forward, but they were too late, and I didn’t think they would be able to stop the drug from entering my system. It worked fast. The room was spinning. The guards’ faces were a blur, but John and Loren stood out with their blue and green eyes. Soon, they were a blur too, and the only color I could distinguish was red. She seemed to be swirling all around me, taunting me with her power.

And then there was darkness—all black—as I fell into a slumber.

I woke up in another cold room, smaller, and dark gray—metallic. There were machines all around me like the ones I saw with Medusa. I wondered if she was here, but it was just the machines, the blinking lights, and the instruments. There was a table near the one I laid on, still confined. On the metallic table was an array of tools. Some had sharp points; others were blunt. One look mechanized as if it would move on its own. That one had a very sharp point. I ran through my mind all kinds of tools: hammers, pliers, chainsaws, and drills. They were for construction, yet they could easily be used to torture someone.

The room had been semi-dark when I woke, but suddenly, lights starting popping bright above me, on the ceiling, in rows of three, twelve each. The lights were red and it made me anxious as I was laid vertical on the table, hovering above the floor. Then the lights began to change: flashing green, blue, yellow, orange, purple, and then alternating the colors, continually flashing. It hurt my eyes so I closed them. It was the one movement I could control. Beyond my eyelids, I could still see the colors, although dim, flashing, and then suddenly they stopped. I opened my eyes to find I was in complete darkness.

I heard a buzzing sound like a fly, and then all the lights popped on—a bright white. My eyes went wide with horror, but not for the lights. A man was standing just three feet from me and he was smiling. A woman, petite, stood farther in the background, but no less menacing.

“I’m Dr. Jamison,” said the man, who was tall, broad-shouldered, and had a goatee. He motioned to the woman. “And this is Dr. Keller.”

The woman cocked her head to the side, appraising me. I already hated her, but I was prejudiced against women ever since I met the Red Woman.

“We’re specialists,” he continued. Then he walked over to the instruments, softly brushing the silver metal with his fingertips as if they were precious to him. “You see,” he began, still staring at the tools, “a Stargazer’s physiology is different than that of a human’s. You can take more pain.”

“But this one claims to *not* be a Stargazer,” commented Dr. Keller.

“That’s right,” agreed Dr. Jamison. “So it’s a good thing your mouth is immobilized or else you’d be screaming—playing an act—pretending to be human—before we’ve even touched you.”

I am human! I wanted to scream it at him, but I couldn’t. I resorted to blinking, hoping he knew Morse code, but he just smiled at me.

“Sorry, that doesn’t work on me, like Dr. Goode. He always was a sucker for all that seafaring kind of stuff. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s in his blood.”

“Maybe we should drain that rebel infection from his blood,” suggested Dr. Keller with a smile.

I really hated her.

Dr. Jamison shook his head. “No, leave him be. He’s insignificant compared to this fine specimen in front of us.” He advanced towards me and our faces were only inches apart. “I’m actually looking upon a live Stargazer!” He smiled. “Only Dr. Hinder was allowed near the live ones for any length of time. Dr. Goode presided solely over the dead ones. There were a lot of dead ones. You think you have all this advanced technology, but we humans can learn too, and we can fight back. You didn’t think we’d put up a resistance, did you?”

“Careful using that word, Dr. Jamison, or you’ll sound like one of them.”

Dr. Jamison rolled his eyes for only me to see.

“Thank you, Dr. Keller. We’re not the Resistance. No, those are subpar humans who cannot see the vision that is our Dear Leader, Julius Pallas. They fight against us, the Corporation, the Sanctuary that provides for the needs of all.” He furrowed his brow at me. “Do you know of the Resistance? Are the Stargazers in league with them?”

“She won’t talk unless you remove the restraints,” reminded Dr. Keller.

He rolled his eyes at me again. “Thank you, Constance.”

“You’re welcome, Victor.”

Without looking away from me, Victor said, “Medusa, remove the mouth restraint on the anomaly.”

Medusa didn’t appear, but the restraint over my mouth was instantly gone. I sucked in a huge gasp of breath, and then exhaled.

“Feel better?”

I didn’t respond.

He smiled. “Can I see your tongue?”

I looked over at the various instruments, fearing which one would pull my tongue out.

He chuckled, as if I were acting silly. “No, I just wanted to see if it was lavender too.”

“No,” I said firmly.

“I heard you spoke English. I didn’t believe it but here you are. There are some Stargazers that are proficient, and if they hide their eyes behind sunglasses, and they hair in a hat or shawl, then we have no idea the enemy is standing right next to us. That’s why Pallas outlawed dark shades and head-coverings of any kind. It’s a pity. I liked my baseball caps and aviators.”

Dr. Keller stepped forward. “Are you going to talk her to death?”

“Oh, I hope I’m not *that* boring, Constance, but if want to leave, by all means, go ahead.”

“The president decreed that *both* of us would conduct the interrogation,” she reminded him.

Victor finally turned away from me and looked at Dr. Keller. “I’m not disputing that.

Whatever decision our leader makes is absolutely correct. Now, shall we get started?”

Dr. Keller nodded and walked over to the table with all the metal instruments.

“No!” I yelled out, trying to save myself hours of torture.

Victor turned back to me. “It’s not what you think. First, we’re going to do an injection. To humans, it’s painless; to Stargazers, it’s excruciating.” He smiled. “But since you’re human, it should be nothing more than a tickle.”

Dr. Keller approached a metal case and opened it. Inside were syringes full of black liquid. She picked one up, and held it very carefully as she approached me.

“No!” I yelled out again.

“Medusa,” said Dr. Keller, “restrain the subject’s mouth.”

Instantly, I was paralyzed and all I could do was shout inside my head. But my eyes were wide, very wide, pleading with both of the doctors to halt their actions. Dr. Keller didn’t seem to notice my eyes or she didn’t care. Victor furrowed his brow at me, like he was concerned, but didn’t stop Dr. Keller from stabbing the needle in the back of my neck.

It felt like ice was spreading all throughout my mind and then a hot, raging fire. My eyes were wide, hoping they would understand my pain, but then I remembered what Victor had said: “To Stargazers, it’s excruciating.” I knew I wasn’t this alien Stargazer, yet I was in torment. My head felt like it was in a furnace. I quickly shut my eyes, trying to fool them.

“Try the second dose,” said Victor.

My eyes flashed open, feeling betrayed, but I didn’t know why. He never showed any loyalty to me, not like John or Loren, who could only do so much before they were overruled.

Dr. Keller placed the empty syringe on the table, went back to the metal box, and carefully picked up the second syringe. I quickly shut my eyes, trying to overcome the pain of the first dose, the fire in my mind, and also prepare myself for the second round of torture. I didn’t understand this method as an interrogation technique. I could only assume that if I screamed, I would be instantly found to be a Stargazer. But what would happen to me then? Would they continue to torture me? Would they execute me?

I began to wonder if, just *if*, I was as a Stargazer, then who was I in the ranks of the group? Was I important? Would someone try to rescue me? The shadow I saw in my mind, perhaps? Was he human—a rebel, or a citizen of Sanctuary, or a Stargazer? And what had these Stargazers done to have such cruelty afflicted upon them?

I had so many questions, but no one could answer them, at least not these specialist doctors who seemed to be experts in medicinal torture.

I closed my eyes and prepared myself as best I could as Dr. Keller injected the black liquid at the back of my neck. A blizzard blew around my mind, followed by a raging inferno, like hot lava from an exploded volcano. I was screaming inside my head.

“Open your eyes,” commanded Dr. Keller.

I refused her.

“Please, open them,” said Victor, in a soother voice.

I should have refused him too, but for some reason, the soft voice made me compliant. If I was an invading alien, a Stargazer, on this planet Earth, then I was a poor one at that, for these humans easily subdued me by their gentle voices.

I opened my eyes and looked only at Victor. He looked concerned for me, and at that, I began to cry. Never ending tears ran down my face. They let me cry for the longest time. After I had no more tears left, the water dried on my face. It itched. I wanted to wipe it away, but I couldn't move. Victor must have sensed my distress. He walked over to me, reached inside his pocket, and withdrew a white handkerchief.

Gently, he wiped my cheeks, around my chin, and under it, along my neck, where the salt water had fallen in a rush and stuck to my skin like a clear mask.

“Better?” he asked.

I blinked once.

He smiled. “I don't know Morse code, but I assume that was a yes?”

I blinked again.

Without looking away from me, he said, “Dr. Keller, please administer the third dose.”

My eyes went wide with panic. He just smiled at me.

Dr. Keller retrieved the third syringe as before, but Victor halted her approach to my neck.

“What are you doing?” she asked, holding the sharp needle point near my neck, ready to stab me.

“Medusa?” he said.

“Yes?” the female voice replied from a speaker hidden someone in the room.

“Remove the subject's mouth restraint.”

Instantly, my mouth was free, and I knew what he wanted to hear. As Dr. Keller injected me again, I tried in vain to conceal my urges, but it couldn't be contained, and I let out a piercing shrill that blocked out even the loudest sounds of the machines in the room. Dr. Keller dropped the needle on the floor and covered her ears. Victor didn't make any attempt to protect himself. He just stood there, staring at me, while I continued to scream. Finally, he smiled at me again, and I knew my life was at an end. I welcomed it now—anything to end this torture and end

myself—my unknowing self—the mystery of who I was and where I came from. I didn't want to know anymore. I didn't care.

I wanted to die.

Chapter 4

I woke in a smaller room. There was a bright red light in each corner of a low ceiling. I was on a white table, hard and slippery. When I moved to get up, I fell off, and landed on the cold floor. But that didn't bother me. I was excited. I *could* move—not only my mouth or my eyes, but my *whole* body. I carefully stood erect with my feet firmly planted on the floor. It was cold, but I didn't care. I looked down at myself. Someone had changed my clothes. From the thin white gown, I now wore a white sleeveless dress, synched at the waist that ran to my ankles. It was plain, not fashionable, but it suited. I did remember what style was and what clothes coordinated well. I wondered if Stargazers were like humans in this respect. Yes, I did start to believe that I was a Stargazer since the black liquid had almost fried my brain. In the small room I was in, I was still in pain from the poison they injected in me, but it wasn't as great, and the fire was slowly fading to low warmth.

But there was a part of me, small, but existent, that still wouldn't *totally* believe I was an alien. I just couldn't believe it. I didn't know who I was, but I was sure I wasn't a being from another planet. That was science-fiction. This was real life.

There was a buzzing sound and then one wall of my room turned into a black screen. Medusa appeared. I smiled for some ridiculous reason as if she were a long lost friend.

“Prisoner EHAE-01-23-3013-A,” she began mechanically. “Are you coherent to receive a message?”

I didn't understand her address to me, although, I wasn't surprised at being called a “prisoner.” I looked down at the front of my dress. In black lettering was my designation: EHAE-01-23-3013-A. I had no idea what that meant, but I was sure it meant I was to be confined under every possible security measure. I couldn't understand why they would think I was violent. I was so weak. I couldn't harm a fly.

“Am I coherent?”

“Yes, are you aware of your surroundings?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “No, Medusa, I'm not aware.”

“You are in a confinement cell for the Extremely Hostile.”

“I'm in prison?”

“Yes, in a matter of speaking.”

I looked down at my designation. “What does AE stand for?”

“It stands for Alien Entity.”

I was an Extremely Hostile Alien Entity. So, from my session with Doctors Jamison and Keller, I was diagnosed as an alien—as a Stargazer—all because that black liquid in the back of my neck had made me scream. Oh, if only I had suppressed it! But it’d been too much. The pain had been overwhelming. I began to sympathize with the live subjects that Dr. Hinder had worked on. I didn’t know if he used the same torture technique, but I was sure the Stargazers had been under extreme pain. What had they done to deserve that?

“What about the numbers and the last letter?” I asked, trying to distract my mind from horrible images of others in pain.

“The numbers stand for the date you were apprehended: January 23, 3013.”

I sat down on the slippery, cold table. The date seemed wrong but I didn’t know why. It was too... far... into the future.

“The A stands for Anomaly,” she continued, as if anticipating my next query.

I didn’t understand. If I was an alien—a Stargazer—then how was I an anomaly too? Yes, I spoke English, but as they said, Stargazers could mimic human speech. Was I doing a good job of *pretending* to be human?

“Are you ready to receive a message?” she asked, mechanically pushing buttons all around her.

“Who’s it from?”

“Doctor John Goode would like to speak to you.”

I smiled at the mention of his name. “Of course, I’m coherent to speak to him.”

“I will connect you momentarily.”

Medusa pushed a few more buttons and then she was gone, replaced by John. I held up my hand to wave and greet him, but I saw the Red Woman in the background, and I let my hand fall. She was standing against a white wall in a small room, absent any furniture, while John sat before the camera lens.

He smiled at me like he was relieved to see me alive. “How are you?”

I bit my lip, not knowing what to say. I’m better than I thought I would be right now, although, I don’t know what they’re going to do with me.”

“I don’t know either.” He tilted his head, but didn’t look back at the Red Woman. “It’s above my clearance level, I’m afraid.”

The Red Woman smiled as if to say, “You bet it’s above your level.” I hated that she was there. I felt like I couldn’t be myself, but her appearance reminded me of another woman.

“How’s the senator’s daughter, Haiku Noon?”

He grimaced. “She’s...recuperating.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I decided to end it at that. John was clearly disturbed by what he had seen with the redhead.

“How’s Loren?”

“He’s managing.”

“Were they in love?”

Both the Red Woman and John furrowed their brows. I didn’t understand their reaction.

“No,” said John, “they weren’t in love. How do you know of love?”

Now, I furrowed my brow at them. What did that question mean?

“I’m aware of love,” I replied.

“How?” asked the Red Woman, leaning forward, over John.

I clenched my jaw. I didn’t want to respond to her.

“I think we should call Dr. Valier,” suggested John.

The Red Woman rolled her eyes. “No, she can be taken to Isolation. I wanted to have her sent there since she first arrived.”

“Let’s try with Loren first,” said John with an edge to his voice.

“I’ll consult with President Pallas. He has the final word on the anomaly—Medusa, end transmission.”

John and I didn’t have time to say goodbye as the screen went black and then the white wall reappeared. I didn’t understand their confusion. Of course, I knew what love was. I could give the definition but that was scholarly. I knew I loved the shadow who swam with me and ran with me in the forest. I still couldn’t see his face, but I loved him and he loved me. I sensed he was human like how I assumed I was too. Was it possible that a Stargazer, if I am that, and a human, fell in love? If he loved me so much, then how could he allow me to endure one more second in this prison?

I sat and waited, but Loren didn't show. I didn't think he would. He was sympathetic towards me and President Pallas wouldn't allow it. Most likely, someone like Victor or Dr. Keller, or someone even scarier would come into my prison cell and interrogate me on how I could possibly love anyone or anything. After about thirty minutes, a small white panel opened next to me, and out slid a metal tray with a plastic plate of food. I didn't realize I was hungry until my stomach started to growl. I didn't know what I was eating, but it was good. There was some sort of soup in a plastic bowl, but it was cold. There was bread, tough, but I ate it with zeal. A paper cup of water washed everything down. I was still thirsty so I waved the cup around, hoping someone like Medusa was monitoring, and would ask me what I wanted. But no one, not even her, responded to my need for more liquids. I put the empty dishes on the metal tray and watched it recede into the wall.

It was another thirty minutes until I heard a buzzing sound. I watched the white wall, waiting for the black screen to appear or Medusa, but no one showed. I waited a few more seconds and then someone walked right *through* my wall. It was Loren. I was so happy to see a familiar face, especially someone like Loren, who wasn't trying to torture me that I jumped off the table and wrapped my arms around waist and buried my head against his chest.

"You're crushing me," he said in a strained voice.

I laughed, thinking he was joking, but when I released him, he backed away, near my table, and wrapped one arm around his chest, breathing in and out.

"I'm sorry," I said, confused. "I didn't know I would hurt you."

He waved his hand as if he was all right, but I knew he wasn't, as he sat down on the table and didn't speak for a few minutes, grimacing as he turned his body to gauge the level of hurt I had imposed. I stayed against the wall, upset.

"I'm better now," he said with a weak smile. "Really, I am. Come over here and sit with me."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded and smiled. "I'm sure."

I detached myself from the wall and timidly approached, seating myself a good three feet from him.

He chuckled. "Come closer."

I scooted two feet over, and pressed my hands against my knees, so he knew that I wouldn't try to touch him and harm him. His green eyes reminded me of that forest and I looked away from him, desiring to not be in that place again with that mystery shadow who ran with me, all free and happy.

"You know, it's going to be hard for you to convince the others that you're not a Stargazer with that strength you just displayed."

"They're monitoring us?"

I looked around and finally I saw a lens to a camera in a corner of the room.

"They monitor all the prisoners. By the way, how was the food? I had to remind the warden that you hadn't eaten. He didn't seem all that shook up, but I thought it was important, even if cold soup and tough bread is the least appetizing meal in the world...at least to me."

"Oh, thank you; I didn't realize how hungry I was. And the meal was excellent, although, I would like more water."

"I can do that."

He touched a part of the wall and a screen came up. He pushed a few buttons and the screen disappeared. The small panel of the wall opened up again, and on the metal tray was a paper cup. He handed it to me. I took it and drank all the water down.

"Thank you," I said as I gave the cup back him.

"Anything I can do for you." He put the cup back on the tray and it disappeared behind the white paneled wall.

I looked down at my bare feet. "Can I have some shoes?"

"Sure, but they may not be the most stylish. They'll be prison issue."

"That's okay. My feet are just so cold."

"Here, let me see."

I hesitated, confused.

"It's okay," he said with a smile.

I turned to him and lifted up my legs so that my feet were in his lap. He rubbed the palms of his hands together a few times and then placed them gently on my feet.

"You weren't joking. Your feet are like icicles."

I didn't respond as he massaged my feet, slowly, tenderly, until they were not only warm, but hot. My female body responded to his male touch, and I felt a desire for him. But I also felt

like I was betraying the shadow in my mind--the one who I loved. It was difficult for me, besides all the torture, to not feel for Loren and John. I wanted them to betray me—to hit me—to stab me with a needle—so that I would become detached to this place—this place of horror—and find a way out, possibly, and flee, back to that blue ocean or that green forest where someone was waiting for me.

A little too quickly, I removed my feet from his hands. “I’m okay now,” I said, placing my feet back on the cold floor.

He reached over and touched my arm. I jerked away.

“Sorry, I just wanted to see how cold you were. Would you like some coffee? It might help.”

At the word “coffee” I felt euphoric as if he had said a magic word. I remembered this beverage and that I loved it very much.

I smiled. “Yes, I would.”

He went to the panel and touched a button again. After a few minutes, the coffee appeared in a paper cup, and he handed it to me. “Be careful; it’s hot.”

I took it timidly and felt the steam rising from the black liquid as it hit my face. The smell was overwhelmingly tranquil to me. I blew on the liquid, trying to cool it, before I took a tiny sip. It wasn’t that hot and I was able to drink some more down.

“Good?” he asked.

I nodded and smiled. “Very good; I haven’t had coffee in a long time.”

I tensed, feeling like I had made a mistaken slip of the tongue, and gave him, and anyone who was watching and listening, valuable intelligence.

If he was concerned, he didn’t show it, as his face remained soft and at ease. “Stargazers detest hot beverages and food; that’s why I had your soup sent cold.”

I turned to him. “I don’t understand. You had coffee sent here, believing I was a Stargazer.”

He shook his head. “I’m not totally convinced you are a Stargazer. You have the lavender hair and eyes, of course, and the incredible strength of a Stargazer, but your actions are very human, as well as your love of coffee.” He smiled. “I’m a coffee fanatic too; John, not so much.” He chuckled. “Maybe *he*’s a Stargazer in disguise.”

“About love,” I began, eager to discuss the reason Loren was sent here, and why it confounded John and the Red Woman so much, “why should it be confusing that I should know what that emotion is?”

“Stargazers have no concept of love. They’re not tender. They’re not sympathetic. They’re not caring. They mimic well, but if one were to observe them for any length of time, it would become apparent that they are *acting*. It becomes a poor performance by the end.”

“I don’t understand. You had intimate relations with Haiku Noon, yet, you don’t love her?”

Loren blushed, embarrassed. “Yeah, maybe that’s not the correct behavior to have. Before I met you, I wouldn’t have admitted to that, but now...”

I didn’t understand how my arrival could’ve changed his view of casual copulation, but I was glad he was paying attention to me—and not to dissect me like a lab animal.

“I’m sorry she got hurt,” I said tenderly.

“I’m sorry too. It’s best that I refrain from being around the female sex. I wouldn’t want to endanger another innocent girl. But in your case, they sent me in here, without protection. I think they were hoping you’d demonstrate that Stargazer veracity and shred me to pieces.”

I noticed the smile on his face. Obviously, he didn’t think I would do that, but whoever “they” were, wanted to see if I would make good on my Stargazer abilities—if that was what I was. If Stargazers couldn’t love, why could I?

“I didn’t mean to hurt you earlier. I didn’t realize how strong I was.”

“I’m more surprised by the hug. You were hugging me, right?”

I smiled. “Yes, I was happy to see you.”

“See? There’s another bit of confusion. Stargazers don’t show happiness. They never smile.”

“Are they not happy that they’re here, on Earth?”

“Well, I think in the beginning they might have been, but now that the Corporation is hunting them all over the planet, they might be a little bit annoyed.” He winked at me, demonstrating his ability to be comical even with a serious subject.

“Why did they come?”

“No one knows. We assume it was to conquer, but we don’t know their motives, their goals.”

“What about the Resistance?”

I saw him grimace as if I was going to reveal that instance in the large white room when he had that black cube—rebel technology. He didn’t explain to John how he’d acquired it.

“Uh, well, they are outlaws, who defy Sanctuary, and all its ideals.”

He sounded like he was quoting government propaganda.

“Okay,” I said simply, knowing I should end that dangerous topic of conversation. “Were you born in Sanctuary?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod, seeming relieved to be talking about something safe.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

I gasped. “That’s young to be a doctor.”

He smiled. “A long time ago—maybe—but citizens of Sanctuary from birth are given a shot to enhance their intellectual abilities. So, even at age six, I knew more about psychology than a man in his sixties, before the Brain Boosters were administered to all newborns, of course.”

“Why did you choose psychology?”

“I didn’t. It was in the shot. In Sanctuary, in the Corporation, there are many people who are well-versed in the medical field. Every fifth person is some kind of professional physician. There are a lot of overlaps, but usually, you’ll find in an individual who is more knowledgeable, advanced, in their field, thereby becoming the leading expert.”

“Are you the leading expert in psychology?”

“Yes, but sometimes I don’t feel that way, especially with such an anomaly as you.” He winked and smiled. “Of course, a Stargazer’s mind isn’t completely known to us.”

I had visions running through my head of experiments on Stargazer’s brains, as they lay on a cold table, screaming, hoping it would all end and they would die.

“Are you going to probe my mind?” I asked in a soft, scared voice.

“Yes, but not in the way you think. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just going to talk to you.”

“But either way, you’re loyal to the Corporation. You will do what they say.”

He hesitated, and then said, “Yes, I will.”

I didn’t believe him, considering he had access to rebel technology, but I nodded my head as if I understood.

“What about Dr. Jamison and Dr. Keller? Am I going to be injected again?”

“I don’t think so. They got their answer from that experiment.”

“What answer?”

“That you’re a Stargazer.”

“But I’m not—I mean I have certain attributes, but what about the coffee?” I asked, holding it up, but it had gone cold.

He took it from me and laid it down on the table next to him.

“I’m completely dumbfounded.” He threw out his hands, confused. “It’s like you’re half-Stargazer, half-human.”

“Is that possible?”

“I don’t know.”

“If I was a Stargazer, a *full* Stargazer, would I be dead by now?”

He nodded. “You’re officially an anomaly and that’s what’s keeping you alive.”

I looked around at the small, white room—my prison. I didn’t know who I was, but I wasn’t used to such confinement. I used to be free.

“If I have to remain in this cell, I don’t think I want to be alive anymore,” I admitted. Tears started falling down my cheeks. “Can you recommend that? Can you recommend my death?”

He slid closer to me so that our legs were side by side, and then he wrapped his arm around my waist. I reacted to his compassion by leaning against his side, and nestling the top of my head in the crook of his neck. He took my hand and held it, rubbing my skin with his thumb. I thought of John and missed him too.

“I will do everything in my power to see to your well-being.”

I wanted to disagree out loud with his statement. Dr. Loren Valier didn’t really have that much power. The Red Woman did. She had the ear of President Pallas. I wondered about this man, how Sanctuary came to be, how the Corporation got started, when the Stargazers came, and when the Resistance formed. I wanted to know everything, but I also wanted to know nothing, and die.

Chapter 5

There was a buzzing sound and Medusa reappeared. “Doctor Valier, your time with the anomaly is up.”

He sighed and let me go. I felt very cold as he left me. He went to the screen where Medusa was still mechanically moving about and then turned to face me, his face fallen, sad.

“I’ll request for you a pair of shoes.”

“Thank you.”

Medusa disappeared, the screen turned back into the white wall, and then Loren walked through it—out—away from me. I leapt up and advanced to the wall, thinking it was still open somehow, but when I pressed my hands against it, I met a cold resistance. They had either locked access or I wasn’t allowed to leave, but others could enter. I wasn’t fully aware of their technology or of the Resistance, but it seemed very advanced. I wondered at the Stargazer technology. Surely, a race of aliens from another planet would be exceptionally advanced, right?

I sat back down on my cold table, feeling the few spots of warmth where Loren and I had sat previously. I scooted over to where he had sat, desiring to be near him. I didn’t know if I loved him, because I barely knew him, but he made me feel somewhat safe, even though I knew he was limited in influence. I also desired to see John. I felt a strong lure to him as well. He had been comforting, even though back in that large room, he had me put back under restraints. He said he did it to protect me. Back then I thought Loren would have never done that, but now, after leaving me in this prison cell, I knew that he didn’t have a lot of authority when it came to me—the anomaly. He was allowed only so much. I feared for him. He had rebel technology, which was most likely, punishable by death. Even being the president’s nephew couldn’t elicit a stay in my execution. Just by being with Senator’s Noon’s daughter, in that way, close to the president’s statue, was enough for the Red Woman to get him sentenced to clean up detail, although, it seemed to me a light punishment. I had never seen the statue, but I would prefer cleaning the gunk off of that if it meant I never had that horrible black liquid injected in me by Dr. Keller.

I looked over at the half empty coffee cup Loren had placed on my table. The coffee was black too. I picked the cup up, and stared at the pitch black dark liquid inside. It still smelled good, but not as much as before. I took another sip. It was cold and I could taste more of the sugar. I smiled. I didn’t ask for sugar. Loren must have ordered it that way, probably reflecting

his own preference for how he liked his coffee. I remembered his remark about John; about how he didn't like the hot beverage—how he might be a Stargazer—joking, of course. I got the feeling that he was trying to dissuade me from John, to separate us, because maybe, Loren wanted me to give my attention only to him. It was jealousy. Did Loren like me? Did John? Why should they? I was a freak. I was the enemy.

I drank down the rest of the cold coffee and placed the cup on a small table next to my large table—meant to be my bed. Then I lay down and stretched my legs out. But I became cold and pulled them in, mimicking an unborn child in a mother's womb. I didn't remember having a mother or a father, but I knew that every child, even if their parents weren't around, existed, once upon a time, to create them. I was created. Where were my parents? Did I have any siblings? Were they looking for me? Did they even care?

I hugged myself, shivering, trying not to cry. After a little while, at the foot of my table, a white panel opened and out came a metal tray with a blue blanket on it. I smiled, thinking, hoping it was Loren, who urged someone out there to be compassionate to my needs. I snatched up the blanket and let it drown me from head to toe. I began to relax, feeling warm, as my legs stretched, and I closed my eyes, entering a black world of blissful sleep.

If I were a Stargazer, then I had the same bodily needs and requirements as humans, so in the middle of the night or day—I didn't know that time it was—I had to go to a privy.

“Are you there Medusa?” I called out.

The white wall turned black as the screen appeared.

“Yes?” she replied.

I sat up on the table, keeping the blanket around me. It was still so cold in here. Either they were trying to punish me by keeping it cold, or they thought since I could be a Stargazer, that I would prefer the cold, as the aliens preferred cold foods. Well, I wasn't a Stargazer in that respect, and I was freezing.

“I need to go to the restroom.”

“I understand. An attendant will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you.”

Medusa tilted her head to the side. “You are welcome.”

I didn't know what that meant. She could have received information through one of her tubes in her head, or maybe she was just confused that I was being nice to her. There was no point in being rude to her. She hadn't done anything to me. She was compliant like all Corporate workers probably were. John, Loren, and even Victor Jamison to a certain extent, were a bit rebellious.

"Who will be the attendant?"

"That is still being decided."

"Will it be a man?"

"Do you want to request a man?"

"Well, I'm kind of scared of women right now, but I don't want to do what I have to do...around a man."

Even though I was comfortable with John and Loren, I didn't want them to see me go to the restroom.

"I will make a recommendation for you."

"You'd do that for me?"

"I can recommend. Ultimately, your attendant will be whomever the presiding physician deems appropriate."

"And who is my presiding physician?"

"President Pallas."

I gasped. "The president is a doctor?"

"The Beneficial One is everything."

"What's his expertise?"

"He is an expert in everything."

I sighed, realizing Medusa was probably coded to worship Julius Pallas.

"I understand, but if you could help me out, I would appreciate it."

"How may I help you?"

"I want an attendant who is nice."

"Nice?"

"By nice I mean, friendly, warm, compassionate, and someone who doesn't want to torture me."

"I am scanning employee files now."

Medusa tilted her head every which way, pushing buttons—accessing information. Finally, she stopped moving and faced me. “I have located a suitable attendant. Would you like to see her information?”

“Yes, okay.”

The screen split and Medusa was pushed to the left. On the right was a photo of a young female with brown hair in curls, and a nice smile on her face. Her name was Henrietta.

“Is she a doctor?”

“No, she is a slave.”

“Oh, that’s wrong! I can’t have someone forced into helping me!”

Although, given the structure of the Corporation, I wasn’t surprised at them having slaves, but it was still a shock.

“Slaves are vital to Sanctuary,” Medusa told me. “They relish the opportunity to serve.”

I shook my head, unsure. “I don’t know, Medusa.”

“Is she insufficient to your needs?”

“What would she help me do?”

“She would do whatever you required of her.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Are there any alternative attendants?”

She tilted her head some more and then said, “There is one available who is authorized to attend to your needs.”

“Who is it?”

“Doctor Victor Jamison.”

I shook my head vigorously. “That is the *last* person who is going to help me go to the restroom.”

“Am I correct in assuming you would prefer the slave, Henrietta?”

“She’s nice, right?”

“She is required to act in any manner you desire.”

I didn’t want to force a girl to help me to the restroom, but I didn’t want Victor, who acted nice, but kept pumping me full of that black liquid. I should’ve known Pallas wouldn’t have made John or Loren my attendants.

“Okay, can you recommend her?”

“I have already sent the information to President Pallas.”

“Why? Did you know what my decision would be?”

“I recognized your distress when I mentioned Doctor Victor Jamison.”

“Can you... feel?”

“I am a machine. I do not feel.”

“But if I’m a Stargazer, how do I express human emotions?”

“You are the anomaly.”

“Can you figure me out?”

“I cannot.”

“What are you?”

“I am a citizen of Sanctuary, an employee of the Corporation, and the responsive interface to computer queries, provided to ensure a more acceptable appeal to mankind.”

“What are those tubes in your head?”

“They are cables allowing the rapid flow of information.”

“Do they hurt?”

“I feel no pain.”

“Are you an alien?”

“I am a machine with a humanoid appearance.”

“Stargazers look humanoid, don’t they?”

“Yes, except for the distinction of lavender hair and eyes.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. It was soft and full. I wondered what my face looked like.

“Why do Stargazers have such features?”

“It is in their biological makeup.”

“What planet are they from?”

“That information has yet to be determined.”

“Does the Corporation have the ability to travel in space?”

“I am not authorized to answer that question.”

“Okay, does the Corporation have the *knowledge* to travel in space?”

I wondered if I could trick her like Loren did with Protocol 19-82.

“No, they do not. Excuse me, EHAE-01-23-3013-A, but I am being requested elsewhere.

Goodbye.”

“Wait! Is Henrietta coming?”

Medusa was gone and the wall was white again. I waited and waited, desperately needing to use the restroom, when finally the buzzing sound reappeared and someone walked through the wall. To my relief, it was Henrietta, and not Victor.

She held her head down, wearing a dress like me, but it was dark gray. Her full brown curls almost covered her face. I noticed her eyes were dark, possibly brown like her hair.

“What is your command?” she asked in a soft voice.

“I don’t want to command you. I just need to go to the restroom. Can you help me?”

She lifted her head with furrowed brows, confused. “I was told you were different than other Stargazers.”

“Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Yes, but it’s my duty to serve, whether it’s a human or an alien.”

“Have you served aliens before?”

“A year ago, I was confined in a prison cell with one.”

“Why?”

“They wanted to see how the Stargazer would react to me.”

“What happened?”

“We mated.”

“That’s unbelievable!” I sat down on the table, feeling sick. “Did you get pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to the child?”

“At birth, it was taken from me.”

“Did you know if it was a girl or a boy?”

“They didn’t tell me. The fetus was taken to a lab to be studied.”

I felt even sicker.

“Who was the presiding doctor?”

“There were two: Dr. Elliott Hinder and Dr. John Goode.”

I almost vomited. John had been an accomplice in the experimentation on a child! It was too much to bear! I looked at Henrietta. She seemed so calm.

“Are you not upset at losing your child? What they made you go through?”

“I serve the Corporation. How can I serve you?”

“Can you just show me the restroom and I’ll go by myself?”

“That’s not authorized. I have to attend to you.”

“Okay, so, where is it?”

Henrietta approached me, less timid than I would have imagined her to behave. She held out her hand. I took it and there was that same magnetized feeling again, not only to the table I had been confined to in the white room, but also when John held me when I struggled to free myself.

I tried to shake my hand loose, but it was attached to hers like glue.

“We are bonded now,” she explained.

“What does that mean?”

“Everyone I go, you go.”

“But what if I make a run for it?”

“There are guards posted everywhere. If you love as you claim, you wouldn’t endanger my life as well, because I would be caught in the crossfire. Even if my life ended, it wouldn’t matter. I’m just a slave. I serve the Corporation in life and death.”

“Henrietta...”

“What?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t make her see that everything she believed in was wrong.

“Let’s go.”

Instead of us walking through the wall, it slid open like a door. When we walked out, holding hands, I noticed my cell was just one of hundreds upon hundreds, on different levels, spiraling up to the ceiling. I couldn’t see anyone side, but there were guards walking, patrolling. I was on the lowest level and there were more guards here. They were faceless men with hatred in their eyes. A few smiled, looking down at us holding hands. I guessed Henrietta and I were an amusing spectacle. We walked down a long white hallway, passing several closed doors. Finally, we reached the end, and a door labeled *PRIVY*. I felt embarrassed as Henrietta held my hand while I did my business. I noticed a shower in the room as well. I realized I hadn’t had a bath in awhile.

“Henrietta, do I stink?” I asked, nodding towards the shower.

“You could use a bath.”

“Can we become unstuck?”

“I can get in the shower with you.”

“No, no! I want to shower *alone*.”

“It’s not permitted.”

“How am I supposed to clean myself attached to you?”

“I can clean you.”

“Again, no, I want to clean myself. Well, I guess I’ll just have to stink around everyone.”

“The Stargazers don’t care if their smell bothers others.”

“Well, I guess I’m not a Stargazer.”

“But you have other attributes.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I don’t know why.”

“You act human.” She smiled. “You have...personality.” She furrowed her brow. “But more like a rebel than a resident of Sanctuary.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.”

I took another whiff of myself. I really did stink.

“Medusa, are you there?” I called out.

The restroom mirror became a black screen and Medusa appeared.

“Yes?”

“I want to bathe. Can Henrietta and I be unstuck?”

“I will check.”

Medusa tilted her head and pushed buttons as usual. Finally, she said, “You may bathe, but a different attendant is required.”

“Who is it?” I asked, afraid to know.

“Doctor Victor Jamison.”

I grunted. “Why is he my alternative attendant?”

“President Pallas has decreed that if you are to bathe, Doctor Victor Jamison is to be your attendant.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Pallas was trying to humiliate me. He must believe I was human.

“Will Dr. Jamison and I be bonded?”

“If you desire, but no, it is not required.”

“How close will he be to me?”

“You are allowed to bathe while he supervises.”

“What about privacy?”

“It is not authorized.”

“Fine,” I said, angry. “Please see to it that Dr. Jamison supervises my bath.”

As we waited, I said to Henrietta, “Sorry, I’m not pushing you out, but I’m not going to let them think they know me, because they *don’t*.”

The truth was I didn’t know myself. Perhaps before all of this, I did this sort of thing—defied people—rebelled.

“If that is your wish,” said Henrietta.

“You can go back to whatever it was that you were doing.”

“I was in the service of President Pallas.”

“What do you do for him?”

“I read to him.”

I was shocked. “You read to him?”

Henrietta nodded. “He likes poetry.”

“Can’t he read?”

“He likes it when I do.”

I shook my head, confused by this poetry-loving dictator. The door to the privy opened and Victor walked in with a smirk on his face and a pair of white shoes.

“Loren said he would bring them,” I told Victor.

“Well, he was on his way, but I stopped him, told him that you needed me to supervise your bath and it only made sense that I would bring you some shoes.”

I was sure Loren didn’t like that plan at all, but it seemed Victor was above him in superiority.

Victor laid the shoes on the counter and turned to Henrietta. “You may go now.”

Henrietta nodded and her hand easily slipped from mine. Before she left, she turned to me and said, “Goodbye.”

I sensed she was a little sad.

“Bye,” I told her, sad too.

She left and Victor closed the door. A red line appeared to show it was locked. “Well, well, let’s get started.”

I looked at the shower. There was no curtain to block me from his eyes. I turned so that my back was to him. I took off my dress, folded it, and laid it down on the counter, next to my shoes.

I dared to look at my body and noticed it looked human. I took another glance at the bathroom mirror. Before, when I first arrived to the restroom, I had taken a quick glance, and noticed eyes, a nose, lips, and everything else that was deemed human, but now, I really took a hard look.

My eyes were lavender, as they said. It matched my hair. I had lavender eyebrows too. My nose was small and my lips were full and pink. I stuck out my tongue. It was pink.

I turned to Victor, naked, and said, "My tongue is pink, if you wanted to know."

He didn't respond. He just stared at me. I noticed his eyelids were drooped as if he was tired, but his breathing picked up. His chest was heaving. He licked his top lip. I didn't know a lot, but it seemed Victor was very attracted to me. I felt sick. He was *not* the man I wanted to attract. I thought John was nice, but after hearing that he presided over the experimentation of a half-Stargazer, half-human baby, I was sickened by him. I liked Loren, but I didn't want him attending my bath. I'd rather have Victor, who I hated.

I turned from him and stepped into the shower. There was a panel with buttons, but I didn't know which ones to push.

"Medusa, which one starts the shower?"

I only heard her voice. "I can activate it, if you wish."

"Oh, please do."

"At what temperature would you like the water?"

"Ah, I don't know, how about not too cold, not too hot?"

The water gushed out and it was perfect. I moaned out in delight.

"Thank you, Medusa."

"You are welcome. Will you need soap?"

"Yes, please."

"Which scent would you like?"

"What are the options?"

"There are honey, vanilla, strawberry, and rose."

"You mean, rose like the flower?"

"Yes."

"Do you have lavender?"

"Lavender is forbidden."

"I thought so. What about with garments?"

“That is also forbidden.”

“And the color purple?”

“That is allowed.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It is the law.”

“Sounds like a stupid law to me.”

“Are you ready to pick a particular soap?”

“Uh, how about, rose?”

“You might want to close your eyes.”

That wasn't Medusa. I turned to see Victor, still staring at me from the door. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't brooding. He was just staring at me.

“Why?” I asked.

He took a step forward and then stopped, placing his hands in his pants pockets.

“It comes out in a mist.”

I looked at the panel and saw numbers, counting down. When it got to one, I shut my eyes like Victor suggested. The mist came out, smelling of roses, all over my face, my hair and my body. Although I felt like I had just been sneezed on, I did feel cleaner as the soap did its job. The water continued to flow, washing the soap off. Steam was all around me and flowing out to the room. I could see Victor in a haze of white.

“Are you finished?” he asked.

I would've spent hours in that shower, but I didn't want him gawking at me anymore. Apparently, he didn't want to stare at me anymore either.

“Yes,” I replied. “Medusa shut the water off please.”

The water instantly stopped and I took my hair, squeezing out as much water as I could. When the steam dissipated, I saw Victor, standing near me, with a white towel, open for me. I stepped out of the shower and went to take the towel, but he pulled it back.

“Allow me.”

Chapter 6

I turned around as he took the towel and dried my hair, taking his time. Next, he took another towel, and dried off my body. He took his time while he did this too, very careful, gentle. For a man, he was well-reserved. He must find me utterly unattractive. I didn't mind. He wasn't that great to look at either with his receding hairline.

"I'm sorry about the lab before."

I didn't say anything as he helped me put my dress and shoes on.

"I was ordered to inject you."

"Did you have to do it so many times?"

"I'm sorry about that too. I could tell you were in pain, but that would mean you were a Stargazer, and I had to know the truth."

"The pain was horrible. I can still feel it inside my head and the back of my neck hurts."

He swept my hair aside and rubbed his thumb over the spot where Dr. Keller had injected me. I didn't like him touching me, but I really didn't have a choice other than to use my superb strength to crush his bones, but that would definitely mean my death, or at least torture until death. I had wanted to die earlier, but now I wasn't so sure. I had questions and I wanted them answered.

"It's bruised," he murmured. "Would you like to go to the infirmary?"

I turned around and saw the look of concern on his face. "Is that another word for *lab*?"

"No, no one will harm you. We have something that can make your head feel better and heal that bruise."

"You *tortured* me and now you want to help me?"

"I'm sorry. I was just doing my job."

"What is it with everyone around here? You torture me because it's your job. Henrietta is a willing slave. I don't get it. This Sanctuary sounds more like a Hellhole."

"The Sanctuary is everything," he said, indoctrinated.

"Sure it is."

"We have universal health care. Let me take you to the infirmary. We have medicines that are like magic."

He smiled, as if that was supposed to make me feel better.

“Do I have a choice?”

“You can go back to your cell, be in pain, or you can come with me. Don’t worry. I won’t bite you.”

“If I’m so loathsome, why are you even bothering?”

“You’re not loathsome. I think you’re beautiful.” He took one step towards me and I instantly backed away. “I’m sorry. Let’s go to the infirmary. You’ll feel better then.”

I sighed, unsure, but then said, “All right.”

He held out his hand.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“We have to be bonded.”

“No, I’m not doing that.”

“If you don’t, you’ll be knocked out and taken back to your cell. Do you really want to go back there?”

I reluctantly took his hand. He weaved his fingers between mine and squeezed.

“Can everyone bond?”

“Yes.”

“How do you do it?”

“It’s in our DNA.”

“You had something injected in you like the Brain Boosters?”

“No, we were just born with the ability to bond.”

“You attach your hand to someone like glue?”

He took his free hand and pointed to his head. “It’s in our mind too. We decide to bond, to attach to someone, and then our skin does the rest.”

“What about arms? Or legs?”

“Yes, it works the same way.”

“Are you serious?”

He smiled. “Why? Is that weird?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You Stargazers are weird to us.”

“Loren thinks I’m half-Stargazer, half-human.”

“You may be that, but there’s Stargazer in you, no doubt.” He ran his fingers through my half-dried lavender hair. “How do you do that?”

“It’s in my DNA,” I returned with a smile.

He smiled. “Here, let me show you.” He let go of my hand and held my wrist. “You’re strong. Try to pull away.”

I tried and tried, but we were stuck together.

“That’s weird and neat at the same time.”

He smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He held my hand again and we were bonded as we left the privy. All the guards stared at us with amazement.

“Is it unusual for you to be holding hands with a suspected Stargazer?”

“It’s unusual for me to be holding hands with anyone. I’m a bit of a loner.”

“You’re not with Dr. Keller?”

Victor shivered, but he wasn’t cold. “Not that old thing.”

“How old is she?”

“Old.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-eight. Do I look old?”

I stopped to take a look at him. We had been walking down various hallways with guards in black uniform and doctors in white lab coats staring at us. We were in front of a door that read INFIRMARY.

Victor’s dark brown hair was receding a bit, but other than that, his hair was full. His goatee was in need of a trim and a good shave to remove the speckled hairs from along his jaw and under, reaching down his neck. He had dark brown eyes with hints of green.

I shook my head. “No, you don’t look old.”

“How old are you?”

I shook my head again. “I don’t know.”

“You really don’t know anything about yourself, do you?”

I did remember the ocean and the forest and the shadow, but I wasn’t going to tell him that—especially the shadow of a man who was lost to me.

“No, I don’t know anything.”

“Well, Stargazers are different. Perhaps you’re a hundred?” He furrowed his brow at my hair. “Oh, yeah, I see it now.”

“What?”

He pointed at the top of my head. “I already see a gray hair.”

My hand flew to the top of my head, searching. “Where is it?”

He laughed. “I’m just kidding. You really do act human.”

“I am human,” I said softly, unsure, but still defensive of who I still hoped to be.

He didn’t respond. He could’ve disputed me. He could’ve agreed with me. He did nothing but frown and turn to walk inside the infirmary. I followed with no choice because our hands were bonded.

Everyone stared at us. There were a few patients inside. All but one was unconscious. The patient was very much awake and he stared at me with abhorrence. It was a middle-aged man with gray hair. His right arm was badly bruised.

“What happened to him?” I asked Victor.

I seemed to care about the man, even though he didn’t seem to care about me—looking at me as if I were a monster.

“Let’s find out.”

Victor and I walked near the man, who was lying on a narrow hospital bed. The whole room was very clean, sanitary, but mechanical. Machines were all around with their blinking lights, and white lights on the ceiling. I didn’t feel cozy in this place and wondered if the patients felt the same way.

“Get that thing away from me!” the man yelled out, angered at my approach.

“Dr. Jamison,” said a woman in a white lab coat, “what are you thinking bringing that thing in here?!”

She was short with shoulder-length red hair. She didn’t seem like she hated me, looking at me curiously, but she didn’t like that I was here. I didn’t see what harm I could cause, considering Victor was attached to me, but they seemed to know who I was when I didn’t. I was incredibly strong, but I didn’t know why, and I didn’t know how destructive I could really be. I loosened my embrace of Victor’s hand, afraid that I was going to crush his bones with my fingers, but he clasped me tighter to him—holding me to him.

“She’s not a thing,” said Victor defensively. “She’s in need of medical attention, but she was concerned about this patient here,” he said, motioning with his free hand to the wide-eyed man.

“*He* is none of its concern, or yours, Dr. Jamison. We all know what kind of medicine *you* practice, and it’s abhorrent, even to an alien species.”

Victor’s hand tensed with mine. If I were weak, his grip would have hurt me, but I didn’t feel as if I were in any danger.

“Dr. Eyre, you have no idea what medicine I practice.”

Dr. Eyre scanned the room, looking at her colleagues, who had retreated away from the scene. Obviously, they were not going to come to her defense.

“We’ve heard rumors.”

“Do you believe in every rumor you hear? For if I was to believe in a recent one, I’d say *you* were unqualified to work here.”

She gasped. “Me?”

“Did you not last week kill a patient on purpose?”

She gasped again. “I would do no such thing!” She scanned the room. “Who told you such a lie?”

“It doesn’t matter *who* told me, but it isn’t the first time a patient with minor injuries has died on your table. With all our advancement in medical technology, how do *you* manage to allow someone to die?”

“There are always... complications... that I cannot foresee. The machines can only do so much.”

“The machines can do everything, but a skilled manipulator of the program can trick the system, and a suspected rebel as you, can dispose of any evidence—in this case: people.”

“I am no rebel! I was cleared!”

“The five patients who have died under your care were suspected rebels. Did they know about you? Were you afraid of being exposed? Is that why you killed them?”

She threw down some electronic device she had been holding and it shattered onto the floor. “I will not stand for this! I’m going to Avery!”

“You can go to the administrator all you like, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re under suspicion.”

“How would *you* know?”

He smiled. "I have my sources."

"Outrageous!" She stomped off as much as she could with her soft shoes and burst of the room.

Victor turned to me. "Now, let me show you how our technology works."

He was so calm.

"What just happened?"

He walked with me near the man. The patient cringed away, but Victor held up his hand as if there was nothing or no one to be feared. The man still cowered, in disbelief, but didn't move from the bed.

"Dr. Eyre," Victor began, "is a suspected rebel infiltrator. There aren't many, but of course, they can cause damage to the Corporation from within. When the rebels are captured and if injured, we cure them, so that we can interrogate them at full health. We have a method of reading minds, not only with rebels, but with citizens as well, and every employee is subjected to random tests."

I didn't like the sound of that—reading minds.

"Can you read my mind?"

He smiled. "No, the machine isn't calibrated to assess Stargazer anatomy."

"But what if I'm part human?"

"We scanned you when you first arrived. The Separator couldn't get a reading off of your mind. That's why we were convinced you were an alien."

"The Separator is a person or a machine?"

"It's a machine."

"Is it a large machine like the ones in here? And the one Medusa is connected to?"

Victor frowned. "No, it's a very small machine, inserted into the subject's ear."

"You put something in my ear?!"

I tried to pull away from him, but it was impossible with the bond, and as much as I was disgusted, I didn't try to use brute force. I didn't want to be responsible for ripping his hand off.

"I didn't!"

"Oh, and that makes it all right?"

"When you arrived, Dr. Goode presided over you. He administered the probe."

I shivered. I couldn't believe that I had trusted, even liked Dr. Goode. He was such a deceiver.

I touched the side of my head. "Is it still in there?"

"No, it was extracted."

I rubbed my head and ear, as if I was trying to rub the horrid memory away of being probed, even though I didn't remember what they'd done to me.

"What else was done to me?"

Victor shook his head. "This isn't the place for that discussion." He scanned the room, the doctors, with their curious eyes. "Besides, I don't know everything. Dr. Goode would be more informative."

I clenched my jaw. I didn't want to see him ever again, yet I needed to know what he'd done to me.

"Then I want to see him."

"Not right now, first, I need to look at your head."

I shook my head frantically.

"Don't worry." He took his free hand and cupped my cheek. The others in the room gasped. He ignored them. "I won't hurt you. I'm going to make you feel better."

I didn't know why, but I trusted his words. He had a very soothing voice that calmed me. I nodded.

"Good, now, let me show you how we heal." He turned to the dazed man. "What happened?"

He hesitated and Victor gave him a stern look. The man began. "I-I fell on my arm."

Victor shook his head. "No, you didn't. You got into a fight, didn't you?"

The man shook his head wildly. "No, no I didn't. I fell."

"What's wrong with fighting?" I asked.

"It's forbidden," Victor replied, "but we all know there are underground fight clubs, right?"

"No-no there isn't."

Victor leaned in. "Of course, there is because I've been to one. You trick the surveillance system to think that it is in need of maintenance and when it shuts down, you start brawling."

The man shook his head. “No-no, you’re wrong.” He looked around at the others. “I would never be disloyal to the Corporation.” Then he looked at Victor and smiled. “But *you* have by attending these so-called fight clubs. I should report *you*.”

Victor smiled back. “I was under the orders of Pallas.”

The man gasped.

“Oh, yes,” said Victor, “you should be more careful of who you allow into your secret club.”

The man leaned in closer to Victor and whispered, “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fix your arm and send you on your way.”

“You’re not going to report me?”

“No, I’m not. Pallas could have shut you down at any time and ordered your executions, but he has a reason for allowing your brutal entertainment.”

“Why?”

Victor shrugged. “I don’t question our leader. *But* know this: I *could* drum up some kind of false charge, and added with your illicit activities, you will most definitely pay the price.”

“W-what do you want from me?”

“I’ll ask you for a favor in the future and you *will* obey, do you understand?”

He nodded fervently. “Yes, yes, anything!”

“Good, now, let me see your arm.”

The man held it up willingly to be examined. Victor pushed a button at the side of the man’s bed and a hollow cylinder extended and rose up. He took the man’s arm, a little too roughly, and placed it inside the cylinder. Then he pushed some more buttons and there was a blue light that moved back and forth across his arm from inside the cylinder. The light stopped after a few seconds.

The man took out his arm and moved it with ease.

“Better?” asked Victor as he pushed a button and the cylinder moved and went back to its position at the side of the bed.

The man smiled. “Yes, much better.”

“Now, get the hell out of here.”

The man nodded and hurriedly got down from the bed and ran out of the room.

I was greatly distracted by everything. The man and his secret fight club—whatever that was—Victor being a spy for Pallas, and the incredible cylinder.

I asked Victor a safe question. “Did the cylinder heal the man’s broken bone?”

“Yes,” he replied with a smile. “Our technology is incredible, isn’t it?”

I smiled. “Yes, it is.”

“Of course, being a Stargazer, you wouldn’t know anything about suffering from a broken bone, unless you got into a brawl with another Stargazer.”

I shook my head at him. “Why do you call me a Stargazer? Don’t I possess human traits?”

“Yes, you do, but you’re more of a Stargazer than a human, and in our world, if you’re 99% Stargazer and 1% human, you’re still a Stargazer. The majority is superior to the minority. It’s only logical.”

When I didn’t reply, he went to the panel on the side of the bed and pushed a button. A red light from above scanned the bed.

“What did that do?”

“It sanitized the bed. I didn’t want you sitting where that man had sat. He had just come from the underground. It’s dirty down there.”

When he motioned for me to sit on the bed, I did, deciding it wasn’t the time to rebel. The bed was soft and comfortable.

I smiled. “I wish I had this in my cell.”

“Well, I could recommend your stay in the infirmary, but I don’t think that would go over too well.” He smiled weakly. “I have pull, but not *that* much pull.”

“Dr. Eyre was scared of you.”

He furrowed his brow. “Do you think?”

I nodded. “Is she really a rebel?”

“Her readings are inconclusive.”

“What does that mean?”

“When the machine can’t formulate an output—positive for deception and negative for loyalty—it shuts down—inconclusive.”

“If she’s suspected, then why is she still...?”

“Alive? Well, we are well aware that our machines aren’t foolproof. We’re not *that* delusional. But she is allowed to go about her day as usual, but she’s been implanted with a tracking device to monitor her movements.”

“Doesn’t everyone in the Corporation have a tracking device in them?”

He smiled. "You make us seem totalitarian."

I shrugged. "If the shoe fits..."

He furrowed his brow. "I've never heard that expression. Is it Stellar?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It just seemed like the right thing to say after your statement."

"Hmm, well, no, we don't have such devices in our bodies."

"Not that you know of. It seems to me that Pallas can do whatever he wants, being a maniacal warlord."

There were loud gasps all around and the doctors who had been listening in on our conversation, backed away as if they didn't want to be infected with our rebellious statements. There was one doctor, a male, tall and lanky with white hair, who didn't shrink away. He actually took a step closer.

Victor noticed his proximity. "Back off Dr. Sherwood," he warned him. "You're not here to spy on us." He nodded to a waking patient on the other side of the room. "Go tend to that woman over there."

Dr. Sherwood hesitated, but then walked to the woman who looked pregnant. While he checked the machines around her, he would glance every so often at Victor and me.

"What was that about?" I asked Victor.

"Everyone in the Corporation is a spy. It's disloyal to *not* spy on your fellow employee. *Some* like Dr. Sherwood are very...enthusiastic; others not so much."

"But what if someone lies on someone else?"

"The Separator will sort them out."

I shivered, thinking that that thing was inside my head, and John was behind it.

"But let's forget about that," he said softly. "Lie back."

I did as he ordered, staring up at the dim white light above me. I closed my eyes. I could feel Victor's free hand touching my head and the back of my neck. He was very gentle. A machine started to buzz behind me and my eyes flew open.

"Don't worry," he said softly, anticipating my reaction. "I'm going to get rid of the pain in your head."

The machine blocked my eyes from the harsh light, but that didn't make me feel any better about the situation. A green light, pulsing back and forth, ran along a curve of the black machine, as it hovered above my head. I couldn't see Victor.

"What's happening?" I asked, squeezing his hand.

"Don't worry. We're almost done."

Then the green lights stopped and it fanned out, scanning my face.

"What now?"

He didn't answer as the machine retracted. The white light was in my face again. He noticed my distress and shut the light off. I looked into his dark brown eyes.

"Are you in any pain?" he asked, gently touching my temple.

I shook my head. "No, the dull ache is gone."

He smiled. "Good, now let's tend to that bruise. Roll on your side please."

I did as he asked, but since our hands were clasped, he came with me, and his arm was wrapped around my waist. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't nice either. I remembered Loren holding me and that was a more pleasant feeling. Victor was doing everything he could to make up for torturing me, but it just wasn't enough.

Since my back was turned to him, I heard him open a drawer, or something to that effect, and then the drawer closed with a hiss. I heard something snap off and then after a second, his hand was on the back of my neck, rubbing some kind of cool ointment where Dr. Keller had injected me.

He kept rubbing and rubbing, although, I was sure, my neck, giving the advancement of medicine, was perfectly healed.

"Is it gone?" I asked.

"Almost," he murmured.

After a few more seconds, his hand left mine, and I felt relieved. I rolled onto my back and looked at him. He was staring at me, wistfully. Yes, I could gauge that emotion from one male to one female that he was attracted to. He'd stared at me the same way while I'd taken my shower, but he'd been more excited in his reactions, although, he'd tried best to restrain himself, to stand there like a stone guard, watching me as I'd stood before him naked.

He quickly scanned my body with his eyes as I lay on the soft bed. I sat up very quickly.

"I'm better now."

“Are you in a hurry to go back to your cell?” he asked, as if he already knew my answer.

“I don’t want to go back there, but where else am I to go?”

He looked around the room, at the spying eyes.

“C’ mon,” he said and nearly pulled me off of the bed.

Chapter 7

I went with him, without a choice in the matter, as he left the infirmary, but stopped a few feet down, and turned to face a white wall.

“Medusa?” he asked the wall.

The white faded to black and she appeared.

“Yes, Dr. Jamison?”

“I need to talk to the Madam Secretary.”

“I am checking.”

Medusa tilted her head every which way, pushing buttons. When her head became still, she said, “The Madam Secretary is in Quadrant Delta.”

“She’s in Delta? What’s she doing there?”

“I am not authorized to give you that information.”

“What’s Delta?” I asked Victor.

“I don’t know.”

“Then why are you so fearful of her being there?”

“Because *no one* knows what’s in Delta, except for Pallas. It’s off limits to employees. It’s been a great mystery as to what or *who* is in there.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe she’s in there!”

“What is your query, Dr. Jamison?”

He sighed and turned back to Medusa. “I need permission to take the anomaly back to my room.”

I gasped. “You want me to go to your room?”

He turned back to me. “It’s more comfortable. Trust me. I wouldn’t do anything to harm you.” He smiled. “Besides, you could kill me with one blow.”

“Your request is being processed,” said Medusa.

We waited while Medusa pushed what looked like to me, random buttons.

After a few seconds, she stopped and said, “Your request is granted.”

“Really?” asked Vincent, as if he was surprised.

I was surprised too. I thought they wanted me to rot in that cold cell.

“I have a message from the Madam Secretary,” continued Medusa.

“Oh, yeah, what is it?”

Medusa disappeared and the Red Woman appeared on the screen. I couldn’t tell where she was talking from. The background all around her was black.

She smiled at Victor, wearing that same red dress. “Dr. Jamison?”

“Yes, Madam Secretary?”

She looked over at me. “I see you’ve made a new friend.”

He didn’t respond.

“I am allowing you to take the anomaly to your quarters. Of course, Medusa will be monitoring you both and there will be guards posted outside your door.”

“That’s acceptable.”

“Of course, Victor,” she said seductively, “the Corporation expects you to fulfill your duties. You’re not entertaining a guest.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. You are to engage the subject using Pallas’ Principle Number 17.”

Victor furrowed his brow. “Is that necessary?”

“Or she spends a lonely night in her cell.”

“I understand,” he repeated.

“Remember, Medusa will be monitoring you.”

He nodded and the Red Woman faded away. The screen went to black, and then the white wall came back.

“What’s Principle Number 17?” I almost shouted at him.

He hesitated, blushing, and then recited, “Honey is sweet to any tongue.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means that I’m supposed to...seduce...you into revealing the truth.”

“What am I supposed to reveal?”

“Who you are and what your plans are in Sanctuary?”

I shook my head. “I told everyone. I don’t know anything.”

Some guards started to approach and Victor squeezed my hand. “C’mon, let’s go.”

We walked a further ways down with more guards and doctors walking about, staring at us. The Corporation seemed to be full of them. He stopped before a white door that opened and

separated down the middle. We stepped into a metallic box with a panel of buttons on the left side of the split doors.

“We’re in an elevator?” I asked.

He pushed a button on the panel and smiled at me. “Did you think we walked everywhere?”

“No, I’m just...surprised, that’s all.”

We were silent as the elevator moved up, then sideways to the left, then to the right, and finally down. I held onto Victor, scared of all the sudden jolts.

“We’re almost there,” he said softly.

The doors opened and we stepped out into a white hallway of several doors. One of the doors had six guards posted at it. I assumed that to be Victor’s room. We walked slowly towards his door and the guards eyed us like we were the strangest phenomenon they had ever seen. But I guessed I shouldn’t be surprised. They had probably never witnessed such an event. Of course, I knew very little, next to nothing about the Corporation and its employees, so they may have seen this before, but were still shocked by the spectacle.

Victor touched his palm to a black screen next to the door. A blue light scanned his palm and then with a clicking sound, the door swung open. He immediately turned and closed it, blocking the view from the guards.

“I won’t be able to lock it,” he informed me.

We stood in his living room. It was very clean, white, and sparse in objects. I saw a black screen on the wall and waited for Medusa to appear, but she didn’t. There were three black vertical rectangles along another wall.

“Are those windows?” I asked, noting how similar they seemed in their shape, vaguely recollecting clear glass windows looking out onto a complex, but beautiful environment.

He nodded. “They look out on Sanctuary, and if I’m correct my access to them have been denied.”

“You have to have permission to look out your own window?”

“It’s because of you. They don’t want you looking out at Sanctuary.”

“So, if I was captured, where was I?”

“Outside the dome that protects Sanctuary.”

“What’s beyond the dome?”

“The Resistance and Stargazer strongholds are scattered about.”

“Are the Resistance and Stargazers friends?”

“The Stargazers tried to enlist the Resistance as their allies against the Corporation, but the rebels were against any pacts with the aliens. They blame them for Sanctuary.”

I didn't like Sanctuary either, even though my knowledge was only of a few areas, but I wanted to know what Victor would say.

“What fault do they find?”

“They consider Pallas a dictator and Sanctuary, along with the Corporation, as a corrupt and murderous regime.”

I agreed, but said nothing. Victor hesitated, still holding my hand, but then walked ahead, and I had to follow. He showed me the kitchen, very white and clean, as well as the living room. When he took me to his bedroom, he clenched my hand.

“Dr. Keller is a specialist with poisons.”

I got scared, not knowing why he brought her and that subject up.

“At birth, she was given the ability to *secrete* such lethal weapons, to be used in medicinal practices. I was also given a talent. My...saliva...has hypnotic properties.”

“What?”

He turned to me. “If you are to stay here with me, I have to try to gain information from you. I can either”—he made a half smile—“*spit* on you and use it to put you under a trance, or we can...kiss.”

“Kiss?”

“Do you know what kissing is?”

I did and for a split second I remembered the shadow and his face close to mine. Our lips were touching and it felt like the world was gone and only we mattered. I doubted it would be the same for me and Victor.

“I do,” I answered nervously.

He clenched my hand as he moved closer to me, his face inches from mine. I looked down, nervous, knowing this was something I couldn't do, despite practically parading around naked in front of him while I'd showered.

“Please,” he begged me. “Or else they'll take you away.”

“I don't want to be hypnotized.”

He took his free hand and lifted up my chin so that we were eye level. “I don’t think it will work. On humans, yes, but...”

“But I believe there are human qualities in me.”

“And this time, I hope you’re wrong.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to hypnotize you. I want you to be...you.”

“But if I’m in a trance, you’ll succeed, and get information from me.”

“I don’t know if that’s true.” He smiled. “You’re the anomaly, after all.”

“I’m afraid.”

“It’s just one kiss, and then it’ll be over.”

I thought of the shadow and how his kiss had been spectacular. I also thought of Loren and what it would be like to kiss him. I felt my cheeks blush. For John, I quickly cooled, hating him with all my being.

I tilted my head up and closed my eyes, waiting. Suddenly, his hand was free of mine and we were no longer bonded. I opened my eyes, looking down, trying to ascertain the reason for his decision, but soon my head was in his hands, looking into his dark brown eyes, as he held me, firm, but unbound.

Slowly, I watched as his lips descended upon mine, his eyes closing automatically. I closed mine and parted my lips. Very softly he moved his lips against mine, testing, feeling, as if unsure of how he wanted to proceed. I was sure his saliva was fully on my lips, but he kept going, kissing me. He took one hand and held my neck as his other hand held the back of my head. At first, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know the technique of kissing, even though I sensed myself doing it before. However, as his lips melted with mine, I responded by moving methodically, and even caught his lower lip between mine and gently pulled.

He groaned and let me go, his eyelids veiled. He was breathing in and out, trying to catch his breath.

After a few seconds, he said, “You’ve done this before.”

“I don’t remember,” I lied.

He smiled and ran the tip of his forefinger against my lips, outlining them. “You’re the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

If I had any feelings for him, I would've been overwhelmed by his declaration, but I was also concerned by it. How many had he kissed to elicit information? I remembered what Dr. Eyre had said—that she didn't agree with his specialist methods. Just how far has he gone to serve the Corporation?

Despite my concern, I smiled, but gently backed away and turned around so he couldn't see my pained expression.

“How long will it take for me to become hypnotized?”

He went and stood before me, scanning my face, trying to read me. I hoped he couldn't.

“Again, you're the anomaly,” he finally said. “For humans, it's mere seconds. We can try and see if you'd like?”

I nodded. It was better to just get it over with. I was doomed anyway.

“Who are you?”

I thought and thought and thought, but there was nothing.

“I don't know.”

“What's your agenda on planet Earth?”

“I don't know.”

“Hmm... let's try something simpler.” He smiled. “Have you kissed another before?”

“No,” I said automatically.

My mind quickly registered that if I had answered positively, his hypnosis would've worked, and soon, the vision of the shadow man who I loved would come out as desired intelligence. I was not under Victor's spell, yet I didn't know how long that would last. Maybe, if I was human as I thought, but with Stargazer attributes, his hypnotic saliva would just take longer to work. I thought about asking to leave, to go back to my cell, but one, I didn't want to go back there, and two, I didn't want to arouse suspicion.

He smiled, as if relieved. I stood there like stone, unable to think of what to say or how to act. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a buzzing sound. His bedroom mirror turned into a black screen and Medusa appeared.

“Dr. Jamison, we have been monitoring your progress.”

“As in 'we,' I assume you mean the Madam Secretary?”

“And others. It has been decided that since EHAE-01-23-3013-A is not a typical prisoner, she is to be reprimanded to your custody during the night. At 0800 hours you are to bring her back to her cell on Sublevel 001.”

“And what are we supposed to do during the night?”

“You are to monitor the prisoner while she sleeps.”

“What will that do?” I asked Medusa.

“Dr. Loren Valier posits that the anomaly may unintentionally in his words ‘let slip’ vital information through relaxed sleep. He felt that the prison cell was inhibiting her ability to dream because of the regulatory cold temperature.”

“What does temperature have to do with it?” asked Victor. “I thought Stargazers were inclined towards colder climates.”

“Dr. Valier says that the anomaly, as her status suggests, is not quite human, not quite Stargazer. She enjoys coffee, but Dr. Valier requests that she not be allowed to consume that or any other warm beverages as it would delay the onset of sleep, thereby delaying REM development and the dream landscape.”

I approached Medusa. “Loren said all that?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought he was my friend.”

“I am unaware of your friends, anomaly.”

I turned away from her and stared at Victor. He seemed just as uneasy about all of this as me, but I was also angry—angry at Loren for betraying me, just like John had done. Even though Victor had participated in my torture only hours ago, he was right now, the most trustworthy. John and Loren had fooled me. I wouldn’t allow that to happen again. I was tempted to expose Loren, and that rebel cube technology of his, but I decided to keep quiet—keep my options open. Though, if I ever saw John again, I wouldn’t be so quiet. He had experimented on Henrietta’s child, stuck a Separator in my ear when I’d first arrived, and done who knows what else to me. I was desperate to see him, to interrogate *him*, but I had to play the Corporation’s little game right now.

I slowly walked to the bed, laid down, and got under the covers. I kicked off my shoes from underneath and pushed them with my feet on the floor. I hated to admit it, but the bed was extremely soft and plush. It smelled nice too, like honey, but then I realized Victor smelled like

that. I remembered Pallas' Principle Number 17: Honey is sweet to any tongue. For all I knew, that principle was written explicitly for Dr. Victor Jamison—the specialist with hypnotic saliva.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked me.

Medusa disappeared and the mirror was back. I saw my reflection in it. I looked tired. Maybe I really was.

“Yes,” I said as I rolled over on my side. “I'm tired anyway.”

I was afraid that Loren was right—that I would let something “slip” while I was asleep, but I actually desired that to happen. The Corporation wanted to know more about me and so did I. Maybe my dreams would elicit some information. If I ever dreamed before this, I wasn't aware of it. I knew what dreams were, but I couldn't recall any pleasant or disturbing ones from my past—if I even had a past. I was starting to feel like I was born and grown in a lab, and then just dropped on the ground; and the Corporation, instead of my own kind, whoever that was, had either set me out to be captured or tried in vain to rescue me or worse—forgot about me. I was forgotten, all alone, scared, and blank inside, except for a few dim memories of a man and places that I was starting to wonder if they even existed.

Victor went to a panel on the wall and touched a button, shutting off only a fraction of the ceiling light. It was enough for me to see him take off his shirt, revealing a tight white tank top over his muscular chest. He removed the belt from his pants and then his shoes.

“What are you doing?”

He placed his clothes on the seat of a chair. “Don't worry. I'm just getting more comfortable.” He went to a slender leather sofa next to the wall and relaxed, stretching out his legs. “If you need anything, just let me know.”

His voice was soft, gentle, and almost hypnotic. Perhaps it wasn't just his saliva, but his tone of speech that was inducing.

I felt sorry for him. “Why don't you lie down? It's *your* bed.”

He smiled at me. “No, I don't think that would be a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I'm supposed to monitor you. I wouldn't be able to do that if I was lying next to you.”

“You would be distracted?”

“Yes, very.”

“How did you feel when you saw me naked?”

I couldn't see, but I just knew he was blushing. "How did I feel or how did I want to act?"

"Both."

"I felt...overwhelmed...desirous...maybe a little delirious." He smiled. "Now, my actions...well, I guess I wanted to *act* as any man would around a beautiful woman who was naked."

I remembered Loren in bed with Haiku Noon, now recuperating from being assaulted by her own father. I felt sorry for her, even though I didn't know her. I wondered if Loren did that a lot—sleeping with well-known girls—or sleeping with any girl. He seemed a bit looser than John, but as I now knew, they were both deceitful and only served the interests of the Corporation. I knew Victor did too, but I found myself willing to concede to him. Perhaps his hypnotism worked on me after all. I was still strong though. I felt I could resist, but I was weak, despite my innate strength. I didn't know who I was and *that* made me inferior to the rest.

"Have you ever...*acted*...with another woman before?"

"I was married once."

That was a shock. I sat up in bed. "Where is she? What happened?"

He hesitated and I was afraid he was going to stay silent, but then he began to speak. "When every employee in the Corporation turns twenty-five, if they haven't secured a partner by then, then one is chosen."

"Why?"

"It's population requirements. We don't want the Stargazers or the Resistance to outnumber us."

"And at twenty-five, you got married?"

He nodded. "Yes, her name was Miranda." He smiled. "She was well-suited to me. The Corporation picks mates that way to ensure a long lasting relationship."

"Did you love her?"

"Not at first, but after a while, I did."

"Why aren't you with her now?"

"She died while giving birth. The child died too."

I gasped and tears came to my eyes. "But with all the machines, the advancement, they couldn't save them?"

He shook his head. "No, they couldn't be saved."

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“They’re not going to make you remarry?”

“I’ve been presented with suitable partners, but I’ve refused them all.”

“It’s because you’re still in love with her, right?”

He nodded. “We were only together a short time, but yes, I still love her. I can’t move on to another woman, well, I can’t quickly fall in love again... maybe later... if things are different.”

I didn’t understand what he was trying to say, but I let it go. I knew they were monitoring us. I didn’t want him to stay anything to get himself in trouble.

I sat back against the pillows and headboard. “You know, you’re very different from how I first met you.”

“When I was torturing you?”

He didn’t smile. The question wasn’t meant as a jest. But he was telling the truth. Dr. Keller had administered the poison, but only on *his* orders. Although, I was sure, if he wasn’t there, she would’ve done it anyway.

“Yes, when you were torturing me.”

He sighed. “I wish I could go back in time and prevent that from happening to you. How do you feel about me? Do you hate me?”

“I want to hate you. I *should* hate you, but I don’t. I’ve already forgiven you.”

“Forgiven? That’s not a Stargazer reaction, but sometimes, it doesn’t seem to be a human reaction either.”

“I have only been around just a few of you, but from what I can tell, most are deceptive, like John and Loren. I thought they were my friends, but they were always in the service of the Corporation.”

“We all serve the Corporation.”

He recited the official doctrine, but there was no fervor in his voice. He said it lazily. It seemed not too long ago that John and Loren were like that as well—not absolute devotees—but after their actions, especially Loren’s and his theory of my dreams revealing the truth, I had to conjecture that their heart and soul were bound to Pallas and his status as a deity.

“Are you going to stay awake all night?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Yes.”

“How can you do that?”

“I can manage. It seems that before you arrived, I’ve been asleep for far too long.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you have awakened something in me.”

“What?”

“It’s like I have a purpose now or a desire to be better than who I am.”

I smiled. “Not a torturer?”

He smiled back. “Not a torturer—more of a... what’s the opposite of torturer?”

“Oh, well, how about... rescuer?”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s it! I want to be a rescuer!”

“Who do you want to rescue?”

“Who do you think?”

“I can’t be rescued. If you try, you’ll be deemed a traitor. I’m sure with Medusa monitoring and the Red Woman listening, you’re guilty as charged.”

He laughed. “The Red Woman—that’s what you call her?”

I laughed too. “I didn’t know her name when I first woke up, so I named her that.”

“Well, it fits.”

“Aren’t you scared of her and of Pallas?”

“We’re all scared of Pallas. The Red Woman didn’t get particularly frightening until you showed up. I think she fears you.”

“Why?”

“Think about it—you’re basically the enemy—yes, you are an anomaly, but look at the freedom you’ve been given. You don’t know this, but any Stargazer captured alive is treated very, very harshly. Pallas is the only one, the *only* one who can be allowing you to have such liberties. Look at us—talking—here—in my room. We’re not bonded. You could overpower me, get up and flee—knockout the guards and escape. You probably wouldn’t make it far, but you’d do a lot of damage along the way.”

“Why am I being treated so differently?”

“I don’t know, but the whole Corporation is aware of you, and your lack of ill treatment. Everyone’s whispering—whispering as to what the answer could be.”

“Wouldn’t Pallas want to silence these whisperers?”

“There are too many of them. He wouldn’t have any citizens left to run Sanctuary.”

“So he’s weak without you?”

“Yes, I would say he is.”

“You know, you’re probably labeled a traitor right now,” I said, staring at the bedroom mirror, knowing Medusa wasn’t in sight, but in hearing range, as well as anyone else listening in.

“I was labeled a traitor when I stopped Dr. Kessler from injecting all five syringes into you. I was directed to administer *every one*. I thought another doctor would take my place, continue the experiment, but it was halted.”

“Why did you stop?”

“You were in pain.”

“But I remember you smiling at me.”

“That was poor judgment on my part, sorry, but I just wanted to make you feel better. It had been a long time since I had to console someone and I didn’t quite get the expression right.”

I chuckled. “That’s an understatement.”

“You haven’t changed your mind? I’m still forgiven, right?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “You’re forgiven.”

“Good, now go to sleep.”

“What if I dream and you hear something that makes you hate me?”

“I could never hate you, despite official doctrine to do so.”

I realized that Victor and I were both pawns in Pallas’s game. I just didn’t know what it was. Why would the president allow so much when I was the enemy? Never mind my agenda. What was his agenda? And how much did he trust the Red Woman? Were they bound? If one of them fell, would the other follow?

Chapter 8

If I'd dreamt anything, I didn't remember. I wanted to ask Victor if I did, but he wasn't lying on the narrow sofa. But I wasn't lying on his soft bed either. Somehow, by someone, I had been moved from his room back to my prison cell.

It was smaller than I remembered, cramped. I felt claustrophobic. A tray of water, cold soup, and black bread was next to the cold table I had been lying on. The dress with my designation was still on me; my shoes were on the floor. Someone had placed a blue blanket on me that was bunched up at my feet. I shivered and wrapped it around me as I approached the white wall.

"Medusa, are you there?"

The wall faded to a black screen and she appeared.

"Yes?"

"Where's Victor?"

"Dr. Victor Jamison has been transferred."

"W-what do you mean?"

"His services were needed elsewhere."

"Where is he?"

"That information is classified."

"But he's still alive?"

"Yes, I am monitoring his heart rate as we speak."

"Why are you monitoring his heart?"

"I monitor everyone's health."

"Why?"

"I act as a first responder in matters of medical attention to ensure a rapid rate of survival."

"I thought the machines were supposed to be magic."

"Magic does not exist. The machines are exceptional in their quality, but if a person is unable to reach the infirmary or a medical unit within a prescribed amount of time, considering their condition, it could mean a debilitating illness or his or her death."

I thought about Victor's widow, Miranda and her child.

"What's the population of Sanctuary?"

"There are one billion, three hundred million, six-hundred-seventy-eight thousand residents."

My eyes went wide, shocked at so many. The dome must be enormous in size.

“What’s the infant mortality rate?”

“It is less than one percent.”

“What would cause a mother and her child to die?”

“There are many factors. Shall I bring a list of possible causes in view?”

“No, thanks, that’s all right. Is Henrietta around?”

“She is occupied with President Pallas.”

“I need to go to the privy.”

“Will you wait for Henrietta or do you want another attendant?”

“How long will she be?”

“I will inquire.” Medusa tilted her head all around, pushed buttons, and then continued, “If she leaves now, she can be to you in three minutes.”

“Three minutes? Is President Pallas so near to me?”

“I am unauthorized to verify the proximity between your two locations, however, as you may be unaware, travel between quadrants is rapid.”

“The elevators, right?”

“That is correct. Would you like Henrietta to be your attendant?”

“Yes, please, and also send for Dr. John Goode and Dr. Loren Valier. Can we meet somewhere other than my cell? It’s very small.”

“I will process your need for Henrietta. I am calling Dr. John Goode and Dr. Loren Valier. I am sending your request for a large meeting area to the Madam Secretary.”

Medusa did her usual actions and I sat back down on my table and started to eat. I wanted warm soup and soft bread, but I would take whatever they gave me. I was starving.

“Henrietta’s time of arrival is now ten seconds. Dr. John Goode and Dr. Loren Valier have accepted your request for a meeting. The Madam Secretary has allowed for you to access Room 1201—Floor 12—Level 10, of Quadrant Echo.”

“Where’s Echo?”

“You are in Quadrant Echo.”

“How far is that from Delta?”

“I am unauthorized to give you that information.”

I sighed. “Well, I guess as far as companions go, you’re not that bad, Medusa.”

“Thank you for your compliment. As far as anomalies go, you are not that bad, either.”

I smiled. “Medusa, I didn’t know you had the ability to joke.”

“I cannot joke.”

“You know what, Medusa? I think you don’t know everything about yourself, just as I don’t know everything about myself. I dare say you’re an anomaly too.”

“You are incorrect. I am a quantifiable and qualitative machine. Henrietta is outside your cell.”

“Let her in.”

Henrietta stepped through with a smile on her face. “It’s good to see you again.”

I smiled back. “It’s good to see you too. How are you?”

“I’m well. How are you?”

“I miss Victor. Do you know where he is?”

“He’s been transferred.”

“And if you knew, you couldn’t tell me, right?”

“I don’t know. I’m not privy to such information.”

“Speaking of privy, I have to go.”

I held out my hand for her. She clasped my hand and we bonded, walking out of my cell as the door opened, and down the hall to the restroom I had been in before.

After I was done, I asked, “So what if I want to take a shower?”

“President Pallas has allowed you to shower with freedom, but only if the door to the privy is sealed.”

“Why couldn’t he do that first time instead of Victor staring at me naked?”

“I don’t question the president’s decisions.”

“Well, you’re incredibly loyal, but I don’t think others are.”

“There are traitors in the Corporation.”

“Has Victor been branded a traitor?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know what. How about I take a shower and we’ll talk. You can tell me what you *do* know.”

Henrietta turned to the door. “Medusa, seal this room.”

The green light turned red along the frame of the door. Henrietta separated her hand from mine and went to sit on the lid of the toilet. She didn't watch me as I undressed, but when I stepped into the shower, she pushed a button on the wall. A dark tinted glass rose up and sealed me in with only my head and shoulders in view.

"Thanks," I said. "I wish I had known that when Victor was here."

Even though I didn't like that he had watched me bathe, I still missed him. I hoped he was only transferred and not *transferred*, as in the ground—dead. I sighed and looked at the panel in front of me. I found the water button and adjusted the temperature. I stood there, letting the warm water soothe my tired bones.

"So, Henrietta, are you married?"

"Slaves aren't allowed to marry."

I should have known that would be the case, but I still didn't like it.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"I love President Pallas."

"Yes, I'm sure *everyone* loves him, but I mean really love."

"I love *him*."

I peeked above the glass at her face. She was looking at me, sad.

"Oh, I didn't know. So, what is ole Julius like?"

I hoped to gain information from her by being informal.

She smiled. "He's very handsome."

It worked. "Ah, how old is he?"

"He's thirty."

"Are you sure? That seems very young for a president."

I didn't know why I thought that way, but I did. I didn't know that much about presidential age requirements. Everyone who was here and young were really smart, but did that qualify them to be doctors or the leader of over a billion people?

"He says he's thirty, and I believe him."

"How long have you been in his service?"

"Five years."

"How old are you?"

"I turned twenty-five yesterday."

“Oh, why didn’t you tell me? We could’ve celebrated.”

“Celebrated what?”

“Well, your birthday, of course.”

“Birthdays are not celebrated in Sanctuary.”

“Well, that’s not right.”

“President Pallas has decreed it.”

“That doesn’t make it right. Do you have a cafeteria nearby?”

“Yes.”

“Do they serve cake?”

“We are only allowed one sweet a day, and it must fit into our required caloric allowance of 1,400 for females, and 1,800 for males.”

I shook my head under the waterfall. I didn’t know what it was like outside the dome with the Stargazers and the Rebels, but I think I’d prefer to be out there.

“So, you can’t have any cake?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t eat anything for the rest of the day.”

I shook my head again, wondering who could live in such a place, and pressed the button for the honey soap. I closed my eyes, waiting for the mist, thinking of Victor, and how he smelled of the same scent. After, I let the water rinse the soap off and shut everything off. I pressed the button on the wall to lower the glass and stepped out. Henrietta handed me a towel, looking at my body, but not scanning me as Victor had done.

I wrapped my hair in one towel and dried my body off with another. I looked at my dress.

“Can I get something else to wear?”

“It is standard issue prison wear. You can have a cleaner one, if you’d like.”

I nodded, accepting anything that covered me up. Henrietta took my dress and deposited inside a white chute. I wondered if I could shimmy down it, but I was afraid I’d get stuck and most likely, there was something there to stop people from doing that—like rotating blades or jets of fire. She pressed a button on the wall and within a few seconds, a panel opened, and a metal tray slid out with new prison attire on it. I dressed and then towel-dried my hair as I glanced occasionally at my face in the mirror.

“You’re very pretty,” said Henrietta.

“Oh, thanks. You’re pretty too.”

She lowered her head. "I don't think so. If I was, Pallas would want to kiss me."

"So, as a slave, you really just read to him?"

She nodded. "I tried to kiss him, but he pushed me away."

"What was his reason?"

"He didn't give one and I didn't ask."

"He's thirty, right? Does he have a wife?"

"No, but there have been several partners picked out for him. All the ladies of the Corporation are eager to marry the president."

"Why hasn't he chosen? The Madam Secretary seems *perfect* for him."

"She's too old. Only females between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five are chosen to be his potential wife."

Henrietta was age appropriate, but she was also in servitude.

"How did you become a slave?"

"I was born one. At birth, I was given an injection called Obedience."

"And that makes you do whatever anyone wants."

"I serve the Corporation."

"Why don't they inject this Obedience in everyone? Including the Stargazers and the Resistance?"

"It is only effective at the newborn stage. After that the body rejects it."

"So the others who are obedient do so because they serve the Corporation, and others merely *act* obedient."

"There are traitors in the Corporation."

I didn't feel like talking to her anymore. She was nice, but indoctrinated. We clasped hands as we headed into the elevator, traveling to the meeting room where I was anxious to see John and Loren. Everyone continued to stare at the pair of us, but it was more subdued now, as if they had either gotten used to me or to two girls holding hands.

In the room, which was white and clean and sparse like Victor's apartment, John and Loren were waiting for me. There was a white table in the center of the room and they both stood up to greet me. John was smiling. That smile would soon fade. Loren looked uneasy.

"I got you some coffee," he said, showing me the paper cup on the table.

I was tempted to throw it in his face, but I sat down without a word on the other side of the table with Henrietta.

“Can we separate?” I asked her.

“Medusa, lock this room down,” she requested.

The door sealed and Henrietta let go of my hand. I reached forward and grabbed the coffee cup. Loren and John sat. They were wearing casual blue-green and gray clothes, absent their lab coats.

“It’s so good to see you,” said John with a smile. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” added Loren.

I held onto the coffee, trying to hold back my anger.

I motioned to Henrietta. “Do you know her, John?”

He looked at her and nodded. “She attends to Pallas.”

“And she also had a child last year that you experimented on.”

“What?” he asked with wide-eyes. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Medusa, are you there?” I called out.

A white panel of the wall changed to a black screen and she appeared.

“Yes?”

“When Henrietta was *forced* to mate with an incarcerated Stargazer and this produced a child, what happened to said child?”

“It was taken to a lab in Quadrant 13.”

“Is this the same Quadrant that Drs. Jamison and Keller tortured me with poison?”

“It is the same Quadrant but a different lab.”

“And what did Drs. Hinder and Goode do to the infant?”

“Please, don’t do this!” begged John.

“Quiet!” I admonished him with a snarl.

He backed away, scared. Loren’s face was pale, nervous. Henrietta looked at Medusa with curiosity, nothing more—no feeling of a mother who had lost her child.

“Dr. Elliott Hinder administered a growth hormone to the fetus. Dr. John Goode objected but was overruled. The fetus grew rapidly and became unstable. As an adult, half-Stargazer, half-human, it was considered ‘wild,’ and could not communicate either in Stellar or English. It had several deformities which Dr. Elliot Hinder contributed to the cross of the DNA, but Dr. John

Goode contributed to the accelerated growth hormone. Again, Dr. John Goode was overruled. When it became apparent that the ‘mutant,’ as it was called was unstable, it was determined to terminate the subject.”

“What do you mean by ‘unstable’?”

“The subject was aggressive.”

“Who terminated him?”

“Dr. John Goode presided over the subject’s death. Would you like to see the footage?”

I shivered. “No, I don’t. Thank you, Medusa, that’s all for now.”

She disappeared and I looked at John. Tears were forming in his eyes. I wanted to cry too, but I remembered what he did to me when I first arrived.

“Did you put a Separator in my head?”

He stood up quickly, as if he wanted to flee from me, but only walked a few paces to a black rectangle on the wall—a window I was forbidden to see out of.

Finally, he turned to me and said softly, “It is standard procedure.”

“What damage did it do to my brain?”

“None, *none*, it merely *separates* sections of the brain—completely harmless. I had it performed on me.”

I was shocked. “You did?”

“When I was ordered to do it, I wanted to know if it was indeed harmless. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

He looked at me with such sorrowful blue eyes like the deep ocean I swam in once upon a time.

I sighed. “I forgive you.” I didn’t know why I was so weak in that respect, but I was.

He rushed back to the table, but stayed on the other side, still cautious. “You do?”

I nodded. “Yes, and even though Henrietta can’t or *won’t* show any kind of emotion for the pain of losing her child, I forgive you for that too. You’re a better man than that Dr. Hinder. How did he die?”

“It was by drowning.”

“You have water nearby?”

“Yes, this is Sanctuary. Citizens are allowed to swim in the pools and other sources of water, but Dr. Hinder went too far. He was pulled under the water and was found the next day on the shore, dead.”

“Isn’t Medusa a first responder? Why didn’t she alert someone?”

“Dr. Hinder received special permission to go *outside* the boundaries of Medusa’s surveillance.”

“So, there are boundaries within Sanctuary? Medusa isn’t all-seeing?”

He just nodded.

Loren reached his hand across the table. His blond hair was unkempt. He looked very handsome and I was tempted to touch him, but I remembered his betrayal.

My hand slipped away from his. “You recommended I sleep in Victor’s bed to have him spy on me while I dreamed?”

He hesitated, but then replied, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Believe me I did it for your own good. It had been on the agenda to monitor your sleep, hoping you would talk, reveal something, but in all the locations you had been, you barely slept, and when you did, you never spoke a word. I thought that if you were comfortable in a warm bed, sleep, REM, and dreams would come more easily to you.”

“You wanted them to find out about me? About whatever secrets I held?”

“They were going to do a more...*extreme* procedure. I thought this was the more acceptable method.”

“What ‘extreme’ procedure?”

“It was suggested to use electric shocks.”

I had a vision of electricity buzzing, snapping, and popping inside my head. I shivered.

“You see?” said Loren, recognizing my discomfort. “I spared you that. They were going to hook you up to machines while you were asleep and shock your brain, inducing REM and hopefully dreams to stimulate your mind, possessing your mouth to utter every secret they were eager to hear.”

I didn’t know what to say. I took a sip of black coffee. It was cold, but I continued to drink until I had finished every last drop. Everyone stared at me. I still didn’t know what to say. I had jumped to the wrong conclusions about John and Loren. John tried to stop the experimentation

upon the half-Stargazer, half-human baby, but Dr. Hinder proceeded. In the end, he was too much of a coward to end the life he had created. Yes, the baby was created by Henrietta and the Stargazer, but it was full of potential, good potential, and a life of knowledge and opportunity, but all that was snuffed out by Dr. Hinder and his desire to exploit the child to assess the adult. Did he know what the side effects would be? Did he even care? John had tried to intervene but in vain.

I looked up at John. "How did you kill Henrietta's child?"

"It was painless," he assured me. "A guard was brought in to kill him, but I objected. Guard weapons use a pulse of reverberating sound waves to disorient the victim, and then once the victim is down, another pulse, this time, a piercing sound, targeted to the ear drum is fired, causing not only pain, but an overcharge of frequency to the victim's brain, where he or she can't cope, eventually causing an explosion inside the head." John took a breath in and out, and then continued. "I couldn't see him go through that. He was already in pain from the extreme growth. I gave him an overdose of morphine and he died peacefully."

So many violent images ran through my mind. I cried as I saw each flash. The guard with his uncaring face, pointing his large gun on the full grown child, stunning him, and then going in for the final kill, knowing full well that his mind would literally explode; a life ended before it had even begun. John had killed the man-child, yes, but he did it the most humane way possible.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"I would do it again, too, even though I was almost transferred."

"What does it mean to be transferred? Victor was transferred, but no one will tell me where?"

John and Loren exchanged a look. I feared John's answer.

"No one really knows *exactly* what being transferred means because anyone who's been transferred was never seen again."

Even though I felt no deep love for Victor, my heart ached for him.

"Is he dead?"

"We don't know," replied Loren.

"Can you find out?"

"We tried," he said, looking at John. "We asked Medusa, but of course, she wouldn't divulge." He nodded towards Henrietta with a sort of sneer. "I bet she knows."

“I don’t,” Henrietta said, defending herself. “President Pallas doesn’t tell me everything.”

“Aren’t you his *slave*?” Loren asked.

“Not in *that* manner.”

“She reads poetry to him,” I informed Loren.

Both he and John furrowed their brows at me, but said nothing. They thought it was strange just as I did that the Benevolent One, who acts more like the Supreme Dictator would enjoy poetry. Although, I wasn’t sure what *kind* of poetry it was.

“Henrietta,” I began, “what does he like you to read to him?”

“He enjoys ancient writings such as Emily Dickenson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Alfred Tennyson.”

These names struck a chord with me, especially Poe.

“Does he like ‘The Raven’?”

She nodded. “Yes, it’s his favorite.”

I closed my eyes and thought of the shadow. “Once upon a midnight dreary...” I finished the rest of the first stanza and when I opened my eyes, all were staring at me.

Loren leaned in close. “I didn’t know ancient Earth poems were familiar to Stargazers.”

“I don’t think I am a Stargazer...but I’m not entirely human, am I?”

John had his finger on his lip, thinking. “Well,” he began, “the Stargazers may have access to our archives.”

“It’s possible, of course,” agreed Loren, “but we didn’t know the aliens were interested in poetry.”

“Poetry defines a culture,” John conjectured. “And as in any fictional story, the author interjects his or her time period into the writing. It reflects history and the Stargazers would want to know all about human history.”

“But do they *appreciate* the arts? Would they find Monet beautiful and Picasso strange?”

John laughed. “I think *you* do.”

Loren laughed too. “You’re right on that, although, I shouldn’t judge. In Sanctuary, there’s no art to speak of—only the statues and posters of our Dear Leader.”

I sat there, silent, listening to them speak. They were so casual, so divulging. I was wondering when the guards were going to enter or the Red Woman, hauling us all off to the prison cells; or for Loren and John, being transferred to parts unknown, never to be seen again. I

feared for Victor. I wanted to know where he was, even if he was dead. I wanted to see his headstone and lay flowers against it—to mourn his passing.

“What’s wrong?” Loren asked me, the first to notice my melancholy.

“Victor was a good friend to me, despite allowing Dr. Keller to inject that horrific poison into my body. But I forgave him. He’s sorry for what he’d done. I need to find him. I need to make sure he’s okay...and if he’s dead, I’d like to see his grave...to say goodbye.”

“There are no graves in Sanctuary,” Henrietta said. “Everyone is burned.”

“Where are the ashes? Is there a crematorium?”

“No, no that’s not how it works,” said Loren, sad. He stood up and approached the wall, running his fingertips down the white paint. “Everything is recycled in Sanctuary—*everything*.”

“What do you mean?”

He placed his palm against the wall. “Human remains are burned and then added to the mortar when constructing a new building. This wall was made out of dead people.”

“Why?” I asked, almost breathless.

“We don’t mourn in Sanctuary,” said John, unable to meet my eyes. “It’s forbidden. Pallas believes that as a society we must move on past death in order to reach Utopia, and that everyone has a purpose in this grand future—even the dead—as they are encased in the very buildings we occupy.”

I looked around the room, imagining faces pushing against the white paint, their mouths open, screaming to be put at rest—to have some dignity.

I felt sick. The room started to spin. I would have fallen on the floor if Loren hadn’t caught me. We embraced as he held me to him. I couldn’t pull away; he had bonded to me.

Chapter 9

When I had some sense back, I asked, “You’re not afraid I’ll hurt you?”

He smiled. “I can take it.”

“Maybe I should bring her to the infirmary?” said John. “Check her out.”

I looked over at John. I could tell he didn’t like Loren holding me and was trying to separate us. With everything going on, my imprisonment, my amnesia, and the fact that Victor could be dead, I wasn’t in the mood to rejoice at having two guys who desired me. Besides, I had another reason for wanting to see Loren.

“Loren?” I began, “can we walk back to my cell, alone?”

Loren smiled and said, “Sure.”

“That has to be cleared,” spoke up Henrietta. “I’m her attendant.”

John stepped forward. “She’s right, Loren.”

I could tell that John would rather have Henrietta bonded to me than Loren.

Loren sighed. “Medusa, I’m requesting permission to take...” He trailed off and looked at me. “You need a name. We can’t keep calling you ‘Stargazer,’ or ‘Anomaly,’ or ‘Alien.’”

“Ava,” John whispered. “I’ve been thinking about that for some time,” he continued in a louder voice. He smiled at me. “I think it suits you well.”

“Ava?” I asked, confused.

“Ava from *Lavandula* or Lavender,” replied John with a smile.

Loren smiled too. “That’s a great name. Medusa, I’m requesting permission to take the anomaly, now known as ‘Ava,’ back to her cell.”

A white panel on the wall changed to a black screen and she appeared. I was growing fond of Medusa, despite that fact that she was spying on me and everyone else.

“I am sending your request to the Madam Secretary.”

“Is she still in Quadrant Delta?” I asked.

“No, she is in her quarters.”

“Is that within the same building as President Pallas?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve grown closer,” said Henrietta, with notable sadness. “He talks to her now more than me.”

“It used to not be that way,” added John. “Pallas made all the decisions. If you asked to speak to him, he would appear on screen. No one has seen him since *you* arrived.”

“Do you think if I asked to see him, he would refuse me?”

John shrugged. “I don’t know. You could try.”

“No, I don’t think so. For as strong as I am, I fear him. I fear his face.”

“He’s a handsome man,” said Henrietta, wistfully.

I shook my head. “It has nothing to do with appearance. I dread seeing the face of the man who is responsible for this world.”

I expected a rebuttal from Henrietta, but she stayed silent. I hoped she had come to the realization that her servitude to Pallas was wrong. I assumed John and Loren stayed silent so they wouldn’t be labeled as “traitors.”

Medusa stopped tilting her head every which way to reply. “The Madam Secretary has granted your request to take ‘Ava’ back to her cell. President Pallas was informed of the new designation and has agreed to her name. He has decreed for her to be called ‘Ava’ from now on. Also, she is to receive clothes more fitting to her desires. She is still to be reprimanded to Quadrant Echo, Sublevel 001. She can dine in the cafeteria with the other inmates, as long as she is with Henrietta, who is now no longer a slave to President Pallas, having been made the personal attendant to ‘Ava’.”

“President Pallas no longer wants me?” asked Henrietta with tears in her eyes.

“He no longer has any use for you. You are to sleep in Ava’s cell which has been modified to accommodate two inmates.”

“But-but who will read poetry to him?”

“I can check for you.”

She shook her head, wiping the tears from her eyes. I felt so sorry for her, but I was glad she was to be rid of that man. Although, I wondered why he no longer wanted her, and why she had been assigned to me.

“No, don’t check,” she urged. “I don’t want to know.”

“Bet it’s the Madam Secretary,” whispered Loren.

John approached Henrietta. “Why don’t we go to the gardens? The roses are in bloom.”

I didn’t know there were gardens around, but I was sure I wouldn’t be able to see them. I would have loved to see roses, to smell roses, to pick roses, careful that a thorn didn’t prick my

skin, but that wasn't a prisoner privilege, I assumed. I had been given more leeway, but rose-picking would probably be denied. I reminded myself to ask later though. I hoped John would take Henrietta there and console her. I didn't know how she was going to cope with being in a locked cell with me. I knew she couldn't hurt me, but she would be a poor roommate, crying over her separation from her handsome president.

Henrietta hesitated, sniffing, and then said weakly, "Okay."

I looked at John and mouthed, "Thank you."

He nodded in reply and smiled, but his eyes swept to Loren, holding me close. He didn't like that.

"Loren, can we unbind?" I asked.

"We have to hold hands at least."

He separated from me and clasped only my hand that he gave a gentle squeeze to, weaving his fingers with mine. John left with Henrietta first, guiding her by her elbow. Before they turned to leave, he glanced back at me and Loren, standing behind them.

"Can I come see you later?"

I nodded. "Of course you can."

He smiled at me, but gave Loren a look that said, "She's not yours."

I didn't want to be anybody's, but I wasn't going to push them away when I needed their help. Loren merely smiled at John, as if he had already won.

We walked to the elevator and waited for the doors to open.

"Loren, can Medusa hear us talking right now?"

"She has the ability to monitor every part of Sanctuary—audio and visual."

"But when I first met you with John, you were... free with your choice of words. Do you know what I mean?"

He swallowed and looked around nervously. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"We weren't being monitored then?"

"I'm sure I was."

"Why aren't you in trouble?"

The doors opened and Loren pulled me inside the metal box. On the panel, instead of pushing a button, he slyly removed the black cube from his pocket, and attached it like a magnet to a black screen located above the buttons. There was a hissing sound and then it stopped.

“We can speak freely now,” he said as he removed the cube. “But only for seven minutes.”

“What did you just do?”

“It’s rebel tech. It messes with Medusa, sending feedback to her audio input. She gets confused, unable to process every aspect of Sanctuary. Video and audio capabilities are affected. Right now, she’s scrambling around, trying to find the source of the malfunction. She’s distracted and can’t hear us, although video is still available, albeit fuzzy and out of focus. When I removed your restraints back in the Examining Room, I had already sent Medusa what’s called a ‘reverberation’—an influx of code, echoing back and forth, diluting her senses, and making her work harder to monitor any speech or movement within that quadrant. In concentrated doses, I could override her system and manipulate her. In a massive dose, I could destroy her.”

“Who are you?”

He looked at his watch. “We have three minutes.” He turned to me. “I’m a spy for the Resistance.”

“It’s amazing you haven’t been discovered.”

“I’m scared to death, actually.”

I clenched his hand. “I wanted to be alone with you for a reason.”

He smiled. “Oh, what is it?”

“Could you use your rebel tech to find Victor?”

He furrowed his brow. “Do you have feelings for him?”

“He’s my friend, just like you and John are...and Henrietta.”

“You’ve grown quite attached to us, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. In a way, if I were to leave...escape...I’d want you all to come with me. I’d miss you all.”

He looked at his watch, noting how much time we had left. I estimated less than a minute. “I would go with you, you know? I would go anywhere with you.”

He swept his lips upon mine and kissed me in an eager, passionate rush. I found myself wrapping my free arm around his waist, binding him to me, kissing him back with absolute desire. His kiss was different from Victor’s. With him, I expected to be found out by his hypnotic saliva. I wasn’t *feeling* the love. With Loren, I poured out my soul, whether it was human or Stargazer or both, as my lips danced around his.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

I wanted to say it too, feeling the same as him, but there was a buzzing sound, and then a popping sound. Loren gently pushed me away from him, but held onto my hand as the elevator stopped. I didn't even realize we had been moving and our seven minutes were up. I felt like I had betrayed the shadow in my mind—the one who I thought I loved—by loving Loren. But who was the shadow? Where was he? Obviously, he didn't love me as I thought he did, for I was here, and he was swimming oceans, or running through forests without me, or perhaps, with someone else; he'd already forgotten about me, since I was in the clutches of the Corporation—my death imminent.

We walked casually back to Sublevel 001 and to my cell. The door slid open and I noticed the room had changed. It was larger with two beds, separated by a few feet. It was actually beds and not tables. There were blankets and pillows on each. An adjoining room was the bathroom. I wasn't happy about that. Being able to go to the one down the hall with Henrietta was my chance to leave my prison cell. I didn't know if Pallas was helping me or punishing me. A new set of clothes were laid out on a white chest of drawers. There were dresses, skirts, pants, and tops in colors of blue, green, yellow, orange, red, black, white, and gray. Lavender wasn't included; not even purple which was confusingly allowed. I remembered my colors and knew that by mixing red and blue, purple was created, and with a little white, lavender bloomed. I assumed Pallas would make sure such mixing of dyes on garments was prohibited. The same type of shoes was on the floor, next to my bed. There were all white and I noticed everyone wore white shoes because they were doctors. The guards wore black boots and the women like the Madam Secretary, wore heels if they chose to. I think she was the only one who wore stiletto's, announcing her arrival with a resounding boom against the floor.

The room sealed, indicated by a red line from the top to the bottom of the door frame. Loren and I separated, but he stayed close to me. I sat on my new bed, sinking into the soft mattress. Next I kicked off my shoes and put on the new ones which had a cushioned sole and cupped my feet well with laces on top.

When I laced them up, Loren said, "You know how to do that?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, I don't think before I speak. I look at you with your beautiful lavender hair and think of a Stargazer and Stargazers don't have shoes like us."

"What do they wear?"

“It’s a black shoe that conforms to their foot like a second skin.”

I looked at my white shoes. “I like mine better.”

“Me too, so do you want to change?” Loren picked up a white shirt and a pair of green pants. He handed them to me. “I think you’d look good in these.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

The thought of being naked in front of Loren was more nerve-racking than when I was with Victor. I was glad the privy was so close. I gathered up the clothes and headed there, shutting the door. It was lined in green, so I knew it wasn’t locked and Loren could enter if he wanted. I didn’t believe he would do that. He cared about me and loved me. It was strange to hear him say those words. I remembered the shadow in my mind. His mouth was moving and I believed he was saying the same thing, but I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want him to be saying those words to me. If he loved me and left me, I couldn’t handle it. Besides, I no longer wanted him, whoever he was. I wanted to be with Loren. I wanted him to use his rebel tech and get me out of here, along with John, Victor, and Henrietta.

I didn’t know the other prisoners in Quadrant Echo. They could be harmless or they could be dangerous. I was sure I’d find out who exactly they were at meal time. Pallas had allowed me to dine with them in the cafeteria. I was excited but also dreading that encounter. How would they react when they saw me? Who were they? Was I incarcerated with rebels, Stargazers, or both?

I looked at my clothes as a distraction. Whereas the prison dress was loose and unstylish, these clothes weren’t. They fit me well, but didn’t show off too much of my body. Instead of my previous designation EHAE-01-23-3013-A, I had black lettering that simply stated “AVA.” I didn’t understand Pallas’ decision. It was like I was a guest and a prisoner at the same time. I would rather he choose one, so I could deduce his thought process. He was the most confusing person in the whole of Sanctuary.

When I walked out, Loren whistled. “You look stunning, Ava.”

I felt my cheeks blush. “Thank you.”

He patted a spot next to him on my bed. “Come sit with me.”

I did and he wrapped his arm around my waist. “You know, John’s in love with you too.”

I held my head down and stared at my new shoes. “I don’t understand why. I’m not even human. How can you love someone who isn’t...defined?”

He lifted my chin with his hand. I looked into his emerald eyes like the color of my pants. It was a mesmerizing color, not warm like John's sapphire eyes, but exhilarating like being awakened.

"I love you for *who* you are."

"Who am I?"

He smiled and kissed my cheek. "You're warm, compassionate, and forgiving... oh, and extremely beautiful."

"Just like you," I informed him with a smile.

"You think I'm beautiful?"

I reached up and ran my fingers through his blond hair. It was soft and silky and as I tenderly brushed his locks, scents of vanilla escaped into the air.

"Yes, I do."

He closed his eyes as I caressed him. "My mom used to do that," he murmured.

"Where is she? Where's your father?"

He opened his eyes, took my hand, and kissed it. "They're dead."

"I'm sorry. Was it an illness that the machines couldn't cure?"

He swallowed, nervous. "No, they were executed."

I gasped. "Why?"

"I was young at the time. I only know what happened from the Corporation's records. They were found guilty of treason—of being rebel spies."

"Did they protest their innocence?"

"No, they admitted to it."

"Were they pressured to lie?"

"I don't know. They could've been spies, but I guess I'll never really know. My Uncle Julius has raised me ever since." He smiled. "In a way, he's always been my father."

"Do you love him?"

Loren hesitated and then said, "As much as I shouldn't, I do."

"Was he nice to you?"

"The times that he was around, yes, he was very... fatherly, but I became mostly attached to my attendant, an old woman, now deceased, named Tabitha. She was like a mother to me, very nurturing, but she didn't like my uncle, and would warn me against him."

“Was she executed too?”

“The official records state a heart attack but who knows?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand how you could still love him.”

“I don’t understand it either. I can’t help it. He can be *very* nice...*very* charming. Sometimes, you find yourself explaining away what he’s done, or believing that he really does have Sanctuary’s best interests at heart.” He looked up at the ceiling, scanning. “I’m sure he or someone heard every bit of that.”

I grabbed his arm, holding him to me. “He wouldn’t harm you, would he?”

“He had my parents executed—his own brother and sister-in-law—so I wouldn’t be excluded from the Beneficial One’s *justice*.”

“Why do you take the risk? Why are you here with me?”

“I love you, Ava. I think about you all the time. I don’t want to leave you, but I know I have to. I wish *I* could be your attendant.”

“Maybe I can request you.”

He shook his head. “You’d be denied.”

I laid my head against his shoulder. “Oh, Loren, why are these things happening? Why does the world have to be this way?”

He caressed my back with gentle strokes of his hand. “I don’t know, my love.”

There was a buzzing sound and then the white wall in front of us turned into a black screen. Medusa appeared.

“Dr. Loren Valier, you are requested in Room 630, Floor A2, Level B, Quadrant Echo.”

“That’s the Examining Room. Who made the request?”

“The Madam Secretary needs your assistance with a new arrival.”

Loren jumped off my bed. “What new arrival?”

“A Stargazer has been apprehended.”

I jumped off too. Part of me feared this Stargazer; the other part desperately wanted to see him...or her.

“Will Dr. Goode assist?” asked Loren.

“No, you will be assisted by Dr. Constance Keller.”

He grunted. “Why is she going to be there? She has nothing to do with psychiatry.”

“It is President Pallas’ choice.”

“What about John?”

“He is currently occupied with Henrietta in the rose garden. When asked if he would like to assist, he stated that he was unavailable, citing Protocol 01-25.”

“What’s Protocol 01-25?” I asked her.

“To ensure maximum competence in the field of a doctor’s discipline, he or she, if feeling tired, sick, or generally unable to perform to a level of acceptability, is allowed to take twenty-four hours to recuperate.”

Loren shook his hand and mumbled, “Yeah, right.”

“What?” I asked him.

“He wants to separate us—make me see the new arrival while he gets to come here and talk to you.”

“I don’t know about that, but he *can* see me, if he wants. I’m not your property.”

“No, no,” he began, shaking his head, “that’s not what I meant.” He held me to him; close, but not bonded. “He’s in love with you too and I just get...jealous. How do you feel? Do you love me?”

I blushed and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

He smiled and kissed me softly on my lips.

“Henrietta and Dr. John Goode are three minutes on approach to you,” Medusa stated.

I turned to her. “Medusa, were you warning us?”

She tilted her head side to side, as if she were shaking it. “I do not understand your question.”

“You say you’re a machine, but I think you’re human too.”

“Your statement is illogical.”

“I think you’re on to something, Ava,” said Loren, giving me a quick kiss before the door slid open.

I was surprised, thinking they would walk through since I was still supposed to be a dangerous prisoner, however, armed guards were pointing guns at me as John and Henrietta entered the room. I remembered John’s description of the weapons. I knew the first shot would stun me—disorient me. The second would explode my brain. I wondered if they *did* work on me, being an anomaly. I was sure they worked on the Stargazers. They wouldn’t have them equipped if they didn’t work against all—human, rebel, Stargazer—subjects.

John glanced down at me and Loren holding hands. Then he turned to Loren. “I hear you’re going to assist with Dr. Keller on a new arrival—a Stargazer.”

“Yes,” said Loren, squeezing my hand. “I would’ve thought you’d want to be the first one there.”

John shook his head. “Her body isn’t damaged. There’s no need for me.”

“Her?” I asked curiously.

“That’s as far as I know,” replied John. “Loren can fill you in after he’s done with his examination.”

I turned to Loren, scared. “What are you going to do to her?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, taking the back of knuckles and brushing my cheek gently. “I’m not going to harm her.”

“But Dr. Keller will be there. She deals with poisons.”

“I won’t let the Stargazer come to any harm, all right?”

I nodded, but I knew I couldn’t believe him. If he was overruled, there was nothing he could do. It was just like Dr. Hinder and John. John had to stand back and watch as that man tortured the innocent child into becoming an adult too soon, only to let John clean up his mess.

Loren kissed me on my cheek and whispered in my ear, “I love you. I’ll come back soon.”

I didn’t say the words back, nervous of John standing so close. I didn’t want to upset him. I didn’t love him, but I cared for him very deeply. I don’t know why my affections for Loren were stronger. It was mystery, as was my own self.

I watched Loren leave. The guards had their guns targeted at me until the door shut and sealed. Medusa was gone.

“Hey,” I said stupidly to Henrietta and John.

Henrietta ignored me—too busy staring at her new home in disbelief. She saw my bed had been disturbed, so she took the other bed. She had a bouquet of roses in her hand and sat, just inhaling them. Then she pressed a button on the wall and after a few seconds, a white panel opened, revealing a white vase. She placed the roses in them and set the vase on a white table beside her bed.

I knew she was severely depressed. “The roses are beautiful.”

She ignored me again and sat there, silently crying.

“It’s probably best to leave her alone right now,” John suggested in a whisper.

“Okay,” I agreed and went to sit on my own bed.

John walked to me with his arm hidden behind his back.

“What are you hiding?” I asked, nervous.

He revealed his hand and the rose in it. He smiled, blushing, as he handed it to me.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, inhaling its wonderful scent. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to, and I knew you’d probably be curious as to what a rose looks like.”

“I already knew about roses.”

He furrowed his brow. “How can you?” He sat down next to me, on the same spot Loren had occupied. “There are only grown in Sanctuary.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I just know about them.”

“I remembered what you said when I first met you. You spoke of an ocean and a forest.”

“Yes,” I said, feeling nervous.

“Both natural features are beyond the dome of Sanctuary, but *both* are controlled by the Resistance.”

“Aren’t there oceans and forests in Sanctuary?”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t be in them for a minute until Medusa found you, and a Retrieval Squad was sent out.”

“I don’t know. I think sometimes that I imagined being in the water and around all those trees. Why can’t I remember who I am? Where are my parents?” I turned to him and appraised his sapphire eyes. His brown hair was parted, neatly to one side. He looked so collected compared to Loren, who let a lot of stray blond hairs go out on their own. “What about your parents and your brother? I remember the Red Woman saying that he was a rebel.”

He smiled. “You named the Madam Secretary the *Red Woman*?”

“Victor said it fits.”

John nodded. “I agree.” Then he furrowed his brow and held his head down, wringing his hands. I caught one of them and held it to mine. He looked up and gave me a weak smile. “Well, my brother was a commander in the Resistance. I was only a young child at the time and I didn’t know anything about their goals, purpose...but I knew I was my brother’s biggest fan.” He smiled wide. “We used to go to the forest and he taught me how to track footprints—human and animal. He taught me how to hunt.”

“Where were your parents?”

“My mom died of an infection. She cut herself and we only had limited medical supplies, nothing like here at the Corporation. My dad died six months later of unknown causes; I believe it was from a broken heart. He taught my brother everything, who then taught me. I remember my dad only briefly, but the most vivid memories are when he would take us out sailing.” He winked at me. “That’s when I learned Morse code.”

“If your brother was captured and executed, why were you allowed to survive?”

He smiled weakly again. “Pallas offered me a long life and he would dismiss any and all charges of being a rebel if I joined the Corporation and lived in Sanctuary.”

“Why did you accept?”

“I had no father; no mother; no brother. I was all alone. The Resistance couldn’t take care of me. No one wanted me. At the time, and maybe it still is now, many rebels only looked out for themselves. They banded together when needed, to set a trap, ambush a Retrieval Squad, or steal supplies from Stargazer transports, but they sought isolation from one another. It’s amazing they’re still a threat to Sanctuary, but when they attack, they go big, and don’t care who or how many casualties there are.”

“Where do they strike?”

“Outside the dome, destroying weak points, but Medusa sends tech teams and Retrieval Squads within seconds, and the rebels are either killed or taken prisoner. Some manage to infiltrate and blend in with citizens of Sanctuary, spying and sabotaging from within. That’s why there are random mental readings to determine friend from foe.”

“Can someone cheat?”

“It’s been known to happen, but they are found out within hours.”

“And let me guess: they’re executed?”

He sighed and nodded. “That they are.”

“Have you heard from Dr. Eyre? Victor said she was a rebel spy.”

“I heard about her. Her readings were inconsistent. That doesn’t mean she’s a spy, but it’s enough to warrant her incarceration. She’s probably here, somewhere, locked up.”

“Oh, that’s awful.” I shook my head. “How can you live in such a place? Why didn’t you just stay in the woods and be free?”

“I was alone, scared. Julius Pallas can be *very* persuasive. He said I would never have any need ever again and that I could become someone great and appreciated like a doctor. But the *real* reason I switched sides as it were, was because of Loren.”

“Loren?”

He nodded. “Loren and I are the same age. We met and got along well. I had just lost my brother and he became a replacement.”

“I had no idea! I thought you two were just good friends.”

“We were. I mean we are.”

I knew how John felt about me. He loved me like Loren did. I didn’t want to be responsible for making them hate each other. Their bond was important than with me. I was a freak—an anomaly—someone who didn’t know her place in the world. For all I knew, one of those Stargazer transports he mentioned would come and collect me and all this kissing and holding hands would have been for nothing. Would I go back to my home planet? Where was it? How did I end up here, on Earth? And why do I feel like I belong *here* despite my appearance?

I looked over at Henrietta. I guess we were so boring, we put her to sleep, or else she cried herself to sleep. It could’ve been both. Her roses were full and red, smelling lovely. I held onto the one John had given me. As I twirled it in my hand, a thorn I didn’t see pricked my skin.

“Ow.” I raised my finger in the air to ascertain the damage. A small amount of blood had begun to drip. “I guess I should be more careful.”

“Here,” John said, taking my hand. “Let’s wash it.”

I laid the flower on the bed and followed him into the privy. He turned on the water and guided my finger under the faucet. The water mixed with the blood, and pink swirls chased each other down the drain. He spent an extra long time, massaging my finger, cleaning it.

“John...”

“What?”

“I think it’s better now.”

“Not yet,” he said. “We’ll have to heal it.”

“Am I going to the infirmary?” I asked, seeking to get out of my cramped quarters. I needed to breathe!

“No, there’s some right here,” he replied, as he opened the bathroom mirror like a panel, and retrieved a small metal container shaped like a rectangle.

He slid off the lid with his thumb and then used the tip of his forefinger to take a dip inside the contents that were the color of honey.

“What’s that?”

“Ointment for your wound--it’ll stop the bleeding and prevent infection.”

He put the container down and took the honey-colored cream, rubbing it over the tip of my finger. Again, he rubbed longer than what was needed.

Gently, I removed my finger from his hold. “Thanks, I feel better now.”

I grabbed the container and put the lid back on and inside the cabinet behind the mirror. I caught my reflection in the mirror and stared at my face, wondering who I was. John stood behind me. He pulled my hair back from my face. He laid his hands firmly on my shoulders and then down my back, until he reached my waist, where he hesitated, gently holding me at the sides, moving closer and closer to my stomach, desiring to cross his arms fully around me. I had to admit it: his arms around me felt good. I knew I loved Loren, but John was also sweet and caring and handsome. I didn’t love him, but I felt that if Loren were to suddenly leave, and John occupied my time, I would fall in love with him too. I wondered if I was fickle or the Stargazers were or was it because I was an anomaly. Or was fickleness a purely human trait?

John held me close to him as he stared at me in the mirror. “You’re so beautiful. I see why Loren loves you.”

I turned around, disgusting with my looks, and looked into his sapphire eyes. “Has Loren told you he loves me?”

“No, but I know. Just as he knows I love you.”

I lowered my head, placing it against his chest. He smelt different than honey or vanilla or rose. I inhaled. “What scent did you bathe with?”

He crossed his arms behind my back and held me tight. “It’s called ‘ocean.’ Why?”

“I’ve never smelt it before. It’s nice. You’re like a mixture of salt and sand, baking under an afternoon sun.”

I felt his hands caressing my back. I knew I was in dangerous territory. I should back away, tell him that I love only Loren, but I couldn’t resist him. His smell brought back memories of me and the shadow, swimming carefree.

“Ava,” he whispered against my hair.

His lips were searching, brushing my face, getting closer and closer to my lips. My head was still down, but he used his own to push mine up, guiding me to him, telling me to kiss him, that he wanted me, and loved me, and that I should be with him. I lifted my face and his lips met mine. I felt like I was drowning as we kissed. I wanted to stop, knowing I loved Loren, and I wanted to only kiss him, but John had me in his power, and I couldn't escape.

Someone coughed nearby. We pulled apart, gasping for air.

"Henrietta?" I said, shocked and embarrassed. Her eyes were still puffy from crying.

"I need to use the privy."

"Oh, of course," I said, feeling more embarrassed, as John and I exchanged places with her.

She shut the door and John and I sat back down on my bed. John leaned in, his eyes closed, desiring to continue the kiss. I gently pushed him away.

"I'm sorry John, but we can't do that anymore."

"Is it Loren? Do you love him?"

I couldn't look at him. "Yes, I do."

"Can you love me too?"

I turned back to him. "Oh, yes, John I could love you. You're so easily to love." I grasped his warm hand. "But I feel...an attachment to Loren that I can't explain."

He lowered his head. "I thought *we* had a connection."

"We do, on some level, but right now, I'm in love with Loren."

He looked at me; his sapphire eyes twinkling. "So, in the future, maybe your feelings could change?"

I shrugged. "It's possible. Nothing is definite. But you shouldn't wait for me, John. Loren shouldn't become too attached to me as well. I could die at any moment."

He kissed my hand and then kept it pressed against his rapidly beating heart. "No, neither of us would allow that."

"You can't stop Pallas. He's the ruler; the Overlord."

John furrowed his brow. "What made you say Overlord?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"The term is used by the Stargazers. The Linguistics Department translates Medusa's interceptions of Stellar beyond the dome, which is infrequent, but when it is picked up, the

Corporation wastes no time in collecting and analyzing the intelligence. In the last three months, the term ‘Overlord,’ has been used a total of one-hundred-sixty-three times.”

“What else has been said?”

He shrugged. “The experts in the Linguistics Department can’t figure out Stellar. They only know certain words and phrases from the Stargazers that have been captured in the past. Most Stargazers remain silent, so interrogating them, even with our advanced methods, doesn’t yield results. They were hoping you would be different—that *you* could translate the transmissions.”

“I know just as much Stellar as you.”

“We know that now. The new arrival, the Stargazer, well they’re hoping for a chance to finally break the linguistic barrier.”

“Is that why Loren was called in?”

“They’re going to want him to crack the Stargazer’s mind.”

I shivered. “He wouldn’t do that, would he?”

“There’s only so much Loren can resist. In the end, if it means his life or that of the Stargazer, he’ll serve the Corporation.”

“If you were in his place, would you?”

He hesitated and then said, “Yes, I probably would.”

Chapter 10

I separated from him. “How can you say that? How can you be so cruel to her when you declare your love for me?”

“I’m sorry, Ava, I didn’t mean for it to sound that way, but...you’re different.”

I faced away from him. “And what if they determine I’m *full* Stargazer? What then? Are you going to experiment on me, while all the time telling me you’re sorry and that you really love me?”

He touched my arm, but I jerked away from him. “I’m sorry Ava, but I just can’t *rebel* against the Corporation.”

I turned back to him with a scowl. “You can’t be brave like your brother, right?”

His face screwed up in anger and he shot off from the bed. He went to leave, but turned back and faced me with a calmer expression. “You should be with Loren, Ava. He accepts you. He’d die for you. I know that. I can’t say I’d act the same way, although, I do love you very much.”

“I love you too.”

I meant it but only as one friend to another. I knew that Loren was the only one for me. John knew it too, nodded, and then exited my room, just as Henrietta was walking out of the bathroom.

“I decided to stay longer in there—give you two some privacy.”

“Oh, thanks, I guess. What do you think of Loren and John? Which one should I be with?”

She sat down next to me and stared at the white wall ahead. “I don’t think you should be with anyone until you find out *who* you are.”

I didn’t expect that answer, hoping she’d say ‘Loren,’ but I had to admit, she was right. I stayed silent, watching the wall with her. Soon it changed to a black screen and Medusa appeared.

“Dinner is being served in the cafeteria if you would like to eat.”

“Oh, thanks Medusa. Is it your job to remind us of meal times?”

“Yes. President Pallas has directed me to keep you healthy. All female Sanctuary residents are allowed 1,400 calories a day, but *you* are allowed a generous 2,000.”

I looked at Henrietta. She looked shocked too.

“What about exercise?” Henrietta asked. “She will need to burn off the excess calories to maintain an ideal weight.”

“Ava is allowed 2,000, but she does not have to *consume* 2,000. Exercise is allowed but only within Quadrant Echo, where she can travel the length of the premises with a proper attendant.”

I smiled at Henrietta. “That means you.”

She smiled back. “I don’t mind. I’m sorry for crying earlier. I felt like my whole world had been turned upside down when Pallas sent me away to live with you, but now... I’m better. I see that our arraignment will be beneficial.”

“What do you mean by *beneficial*?”

“I’ll have a friend for the first time in my life.”

I smiled, hoping that her life was finally going to move forward now.

“Yes, you will. As long as I’m here, and alive, I’ll be your friend.”

She bit her lip. “If you’re allowed more calories, can you get a sweet, and I can share it with you?”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. She was wearing a drab gray shirt and pants. I was tempted to suggest she wear mine with all the different colors, but I didn’t know if she’d accept. She was still a slave and had limitations imposed upon her. I hoped that being around me, and the unexpected freedoms I was given, she’d soon share my belongings. She was already sharing my prison cell, after all.

“I know of something better. You can finally have that birthday cake you missed!”

“Oh, that’s too many calories!”

I turned to Medusa. “Is there a provision for eating too many calories?”

The beautiful but machine-built computer replied, “You will have to increase your exercise. I will be monitoring your progress. Once you have burned off the excess calories, you may conclude your routine.”

“Thanks, Medusa.”

She disappeared from the screen and the wall went back to white. The door opened and two guards were ready, their guns targeted on me.

I sighed, but there was nothing I could do. I knew I had superior strength but speed was another mystery. Could I outrun them? And how far would I get before my brains exploded in my head?

I didn't need to hold Henrietta's hand, but I did as I pulled her out of the room and into the hall of Sublevel 001.

"C'mon," I said happily. "Let's have some cake!"

Henrietta led the way to the cafeteria that was above the Sublevel. Guards lined the hall outside the doors and many more were within.

I wasn't nervous with Henrietta by my side but that changed when everyone looked at me. None were Stargazers or at least none of them had lavender hair. They were all human. I recognized Dr. Eyre with her short red hair. She looked away from me, spooning something thick and beige in her mouth, while she sat by herself at a long table, filled with other inmates. She had on the same dress I had worn with her designation that I couldn't make out. The others I assumed to be rebels, but as I hadn't met every employee of the Corporation, there could have been some mixed in with the group, which I estimated to be around one hundred. There could have been more, given the size of Quadrant Echo and the numerous prison cells.

The cafeteria was white and clean—like the infirmary. There were machines and flashing lights around. I didn't see a server or anything like a food bar.

"Where do we sit?" I asked Henrietta.

"Let's go somewhere vacant," she suggested and led me to a long table with two unoccupied chairs on the end.

The others stared at me; some looked curious; others looked angry. No one paid any attention to Henrietta.

"How do we get our food?"

Henrietta traced her finger along the white table and a panel appeared with buttons.

"We order from here and the food materializes."

"It materializes? No one cooks it?"

"No, it's made by a computer."

I chuckled. "No wonder the bread is stale."

"They give all the prisoners sub par rations, as they do slaves."

"And you're okay with that?"

She hesitated and then said, "It's not ideal, but at least we're fed. The Corporation takes good care of us. No one ever starves."

I looked around at everyone. No one was overweight, but thin—too thin. Even if they wanted to revolt, they seemed too weak to accomplish the task. With my strength, I could be the only one to subdue the guards, but that was a risk I wasn't willing to take—not yet anyway.

The prisoners continued to stare at me, occasionally looking at Henrietta, wondering why she was so casual and calm around me. I was, after all, the *enemy*. But they were too.

I needed a distraction. Food seemed best. I looked down at the panel on the table. I pushed a button and a menu came up. It had a list of food and beverages with exact calories. It also made suggestions of meal combinations to reach specified caloric intake for the day.

I saw that my name “Ava,” was on the screen, telling me I was allowed 2,000 calories.

“How does it know me?” I asked Henrietta.

“It recognized your fingerprint scan when you touched the panel.”

“Oh, so Medusa knows everything that I touch?”

“That's right. It helps her track us.”

“Or it helps Pallas,” I muttered.

I was careful to keep my disdain of that man quiet. I knew Henrietta still thought the world of him, despite making her a slave and then kicking her out. I was having a hard time believing he was thirty. He wasn't that much older than Henrietta, Loren, John, and Vincent, yet they revered him like a wise, old man. How did he build Sanctuary, the Corporation, in such a short time? Did he inherit everything?

I wanted to deluge Henrietta with those questions, but I assumed she didn't know much, so I continued with my order. I selected roast beef, a baked potato with lots of butter, green beans, iced tea, and two pieces of chocolate cake.

“You have exceeded your daily requirements,” Medusa's voice echoed from the panel.

“I don't care,” was my response. “I'll work it off.”

“That is acceptable. Enjoy your meal, Ava.”

Within seconds, there was a buzzing sound, and then as if by magic, my meal appeared right in front of me.

“That's incredible,” I said to Henrietta.

“That's the greatness of the Corporation,” she reminded me with a smile.

I ignored her devotion and looked around the room. No one had a good as meal as mine.

They looked jealous. Some looked like they were going to approach us, but they hesitated.

“Hurry up and order,” I instructed Henrietta. “I don’t like the look of this crowd.”

Henrietta scanned the scene, and then shrugged at me as if she didn’t know what I was talking about. But she selected her meal: a bowl of soup and water. I quickly hit the cancel button on the panel.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

I shoved the piece of chocolate cake to her. “You’re going to eat *that*, and you’re going to get the same meal I have.” I smiled at her. “I can’t walk off these calories in Quadrant Echo by myself, now can I?”

She smiled back. “Okay.”

She ordered the same and within seconds, her meal appeared, but not before a warning from Medusa that she needed to burn off her excess calories.

“Eat your cake first, with me,” I told her.

“Oh, but that’s not proper meal etiquette.”

“It’s your birthday. Go wild!”

“But it’s not my birthday.”

I sighed. “Just eat the cake first.”

She hesitated, and then picked up a silver fork and went to separate a section, but I remembered something—a song—very deep in the back of my mind.

“Stop, wait!”

She halted the fork in the air. Everyone stared at us.

“What is it?”

“I know a song. You can’t eat that until I sing you a song.”

“Is this a Stargazer custom?”

“No, I don’t think so.” I closed my eyes, trying to remember the lyrics. When I opened my eyes, Henrietta was furrowing her brow at me, confused. I opened my mouth and began to sing, “Happy birthday to you—happy birthday to you—happy birthday, dear Henrietta, happy birthday to you!”

I smiled, feeling joyous inside, happy for Henrietta, but she just stared at me with a look of confusion. I glanced at everyone else. They had the same look.

I turned back to Henrietta. “Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

She hesitated, but then nodded, and dug in. I did the same. We both ate very quickly, enjoying our meal, not slowing down to savor the taste. The chocolate cake was by far, the best part.

I smiled at Henrietta. "You have icing on your face."

She smiled, giddy with sugar overload. "Do I?"

She went to clean it, but missed the spot entirely. I took a napkin. "Here, let me," I said as I wiped the black smudge from the side of her mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two guards advance, and then stand still. They must have thought I was going to hurt Henrietta. I was surprised at their actions; I didn't think a slave's life was worth their effort, but perhaps it was an opportunity to shoot me and prove to everyone that I was indeed, dangerous.

"You really are different, aren't you?"

I turned to see Dr. Eyre, standing cautiously near me. I looked at her prison outfit. Her designation was NTRS-01-24-3013. She took a seat at my table, several feet away. Her once brilliant red hair was now dull and thin. Being in prison didn't suit her well.

"I don't know," I replied. "Am I?"

"The Stargazers wouldn't dare be so tender to humans." She shrugged. "And why should they? We haven't been very welcoming."

"Don't group your Corporate demons with us, *doctor*," said a gruff voice near us.

I turned to place the face with the voice. It was short man with long brown hair, unkempt. He wore a white shirt and pants with his designation as EHRI-09-24-3010-L.

I deduced the "EH" to be Extremely Hostile. The "RI" I could only conclude to be Rebel Intruder or Infiltrator. The date was when he was apprehended, three years earlier than me. As for the "L" I had no idea what that letter meant.

He saw me eyeing his shirt. He gave me a wicked smile. "Trying to figure me out, alien?"

I didn't like being called an "alien," but I let it pass. I lifted my head, trying to show bravery, as if he didn't upset me.

"What does the 'L' stand for?"

He looked down at his shirt as if he needed to remember. Then he looked up at me and smiled. "I was a lieutenant in a rebel faction."

"Were any others caught with you?"

He nodded to a girl and boy across from him. They both had blond hair, unkempt, eyeing me curiously. They didn't seem threatening like the short man.

"These two privates were captured too. That's how we got caught." He turned to them with a sneer. "These no good bunch of kids couldn't bypass the security measures in time."

"We did," said the boy, defending himself. "My sister and I got through, but *you* tripped the secondary security net in a rush to enter the dome."

The man shot off his seat, furious. The guards did nothing—yet.

He pointed a threatening finger at the boy, who now looked extremely scared. His sister clutched onto his arm, fearful as well.

"We had that sector under surveillance for months! *You* knew what to do! *You* failed!"

The sister, even though scared, stood up and pointed back at him. "Don't blame Rainn! *You* were the one in charge!"

"Sunny," said Rainn softly to his sister. "Sit down, please. I can handle this."

"Like you handled it back then?!" shouted the man.

It all happened so fast. The man lunged forward, knocking Sunny out the way, as he grabbed Rainn's shirt, and pulled him forward, his fist reared, ready to slam it against the boy's face. I shot off my seat, not thinking of the repercussions, and rushed to the next table. I heard shouts behind me, maybe Henrietta, maybe Dr. Eyre, I didn't know, and I didn't care. I had to stop that man from hitting Rainn.

My only thought was to stop his fist from reaching the boy's face. So I held up my hand and blocked the blow. The man's fist slammed into my hand. I heard bones breaking and the loud cry of someone in awful pain. I thought the boy had really been hurt, but when I looked at him, he was already backing away, unhurt, with his sister, retreating away from me. I looked down at the man I had stopped, his knees to the floor, holding his broken hand in the air, screaming in pain. His eyes were wide, staring at me, with his mouth open, screaming and cursing at me for what I had done—vowing revenge. His hand was nothing more than a crumpled and broken mess.

I looked up in time to see the barrel of a gun pointed in my direction. Out of instinct to protect myself, I advanced forward. He pulled the trigger once and a massive sound wave shot straight to my ear drum, sending a shrilling ring inside my head. The ringing bounced back and forth, causing me pain, making me delirious. I clamped my hand to my ears, as if that would

make it all go away, but the screeching sound only got louder as I felt my legs go weak, and my knees crashed to the floor.

Someone stabbed me in my arm. With my eyes half-closed from the pain in my head, I turned to see a guard holding a now empty syringe in his hand. I felt sleepy and realized he had administered a sedative. I was glad for it as I drifted off into the cozy world of black and the pain in my head was nothing more than a dim memory.

Chapter 11

I woke in my room to find Henrietta, John, and Loren watching me.

“Finally,” said Loren, as he covered me with his body, giving me a hug.

John held my hand tightly. Henrietta remained seated at the edge of my bed with a little smile.

I felt embarrassed and immediately sat up, resting against the white headboard. Loren let me go but stayed close with his arm around my waist as if I were going to get up and leave. The sedative had worn off, but I still felt a little dizzy and weak.

“How badly did I hurt that man?”

John shook his head. “His hand is broken, that’s all.”

I didn’t understand his casualness. “But I hurt him.”

“He deserved it. He was threatening a kid.”

“Still,” I began, “if I wasn’t in complete control, I could have ripped his arm off.”

“But you didn’t,” said Loren, cupping my cheek. “You’re not dangerous. You just did what anyone else around here wanted to do. Thaddeus Ridge had it coming to him. He treated everyone, even his fellow rebels, as dogs.”

I noticed John’s distress at Loren touching my cheek. I gently removed Loren’s hand and placed it back at my waist as not to hurt his feelings.

“Why are you all here? Why didn’t I get into trouble?”

“It was just a rebel,” said John, slyly rubbing his thumb against the flesh of my hand.

I remembered why I was still angry at him. He served the Corporation, even though he knew they committed horrible acts. He was grateful to Pallas for giving him a life he wouldn’t have received out there in the wild with the Resistance. I wanted to hate him, but I couldn’t. But I also didn’t want to receive his affections. Gently, I removed my hand from his. He furrowed his brow, confused, but then nodded and stood, placing his hands in his pockets.

I looked at Loren. He was smiling at me, gorgeous, with his wild blond hair and emerald eyes. I didn’t realize how much I missed him until now. I was also afraid for him. He was a rebel spy and it was only a matter of time before he was found out. Everyone in the Corporation was supposed to spy on the other. John could easily turn Loren in. He knew his friend had rebel tech. It would only be too easy to sign Loren’s death warrant and then he could have me. But it

wouldn't work that way. John would fail, for if he did that, I would never, could never, love him after that betrayal. For if he was to betray his friend of almost two decades, why should I be any different?

Loren was wearing his white lab coat. I remembered he went to see the captured Stargazer.

"What's she like?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"The Stargazer you went to assist on with Dr. Keller."

"She's not like you at all. She's very... feisty. She speaks only in Stellar whenever she *does* speak. As you know, we are still unfamiliar with the language. Medusa has been able to translate some, but still, it's not enough to gain any worthy intelligence."

"Did she mention *Overlord*?"

Loren furrowed his brow. "Yes, that was the *only* word we were able to translate. How did you know about that?"

"I told her about the intercepted transmissions," said John. "I wasn't going to until she likened Pallas to an Overlord."

Henrietta stood up. "President Pallas seemed anxious about this Overlord. He would never talk to me about important Sanctuary matters, but often he confided in me his fears about this Overlord."

I sat up more erect, curious. "Does he have any knowledge about this Overlord? Why does he fear this person?"

She shook her head. "I asked him. He said it was none of my concern."

Of course he would say that to his slave, but just the fact that he had *confided* in her, only briefly, was enough to suggest this Overlord was his weak spot.

"So, Pallas has an Achilles heel."

They all furrowed their brows at me.

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"You don't know the story of Achilles?"

He shook his head. "Was he a doctor?"

I chuckled. "It's Greek myth. He was strong and a good fighter, but there was a spot on his ankle that was unprotected. After all his victories, it was that spot when attacked that caused his

death.” I looked at all three of my companions with their confused faces. “You’ve never heard of this?”

They all shook their heads simultaneously.

I pointed to the white wall where Medusa would appear if called. “What about Medusa? She’s from Greek myth—the monster with snakes for hair.”

“There’s nothing in Sanctuary archives of... Greek myth,” said Loren. “Is this perhaps, Stargazer history?”

I grunted, frustrated. Loren removed his hold of me, scared perhaps that I was going to harm him.

“It’s not Stargazer history! It’s Earth history! It’s *human* history! It’s *my* history!”

I grabbed my head, even though it didn’t hurt, and held it firmly, as if all my frustration was going to burst out, and I needed to contain the explosion from destroying the whole quadrant.

Loren cautiously rose from my bed and stepped away.

“Ava...”

“What is it now?!”

He took another step back, nervous. I hated to make him feel that way, but I was frustrated with everyone and everything here.

“I spent several hours with the captured Stargazer. While restrained, Dr. Keller placed a Separator in her head, but it yielded no results.”

I looked at John with narrow eyes. “Just like me, right John?”

He simply nodded, unable to speak.

I turned back to Loren. “Did Dr. Keller put that poison at the back of her neck too?”

I felt sorry for the Stargazer, whoever she was.

Loren nodded. “It was procedure. Victor...”

I stood up, propelled by his name. “Was Victor there?”

Loren nodded again. “He was sent in to interact with the Stargazer.”

I looked at Henrietta, remembering how she was forced to mate with a Stargazer and have her child killed as a result of the Corporation’s nasty business of experimentation and seemingly inherit hatred of anything different from the bliss of Sanctuary.

I turned back to Loren. “What do you mean *interact*?”

“Her restraints were removed. It wasn’t so much experimentation than...an execution.”

I sat back down, dizzy, in disbelief, and upset at what he was going to say next.

He continued. “Victor wasn’t merely transferred. He was being held in solitary confinement, in the dark, without food and only water to drink once a day.”

“Why?”

“He was being punished for his feelings for you. The Corporation saw him as a threat—he was hatching an escape plan—he was going to break out of the dome with you.”

I shook my head, still confused. “But you and John—you both love me—Medusa has heard you—the Red Woman—Pallas has assuredly heard you—seen us kiss. Why aren’t you two in solitary confinement?”

Loren shot John an angry look. “You kissed her?”

John smirked. “She enjoyed it.”

Loren looked at me, as if I had betrayed him. I wasn’t in the mood for this. I stood back up.

“What happened to Victor?”

Loren was silent, fuming.

“What happened?” I said, making my voice into a low growl.

Loren sighed, defeated. “He was starving. He was told that if he could subdue the Stargazer, knock her out, or do any sort of damage, he would not only eat, but be allowed back into the Corporation.” He halted and then continued, “He was no match for the Stargazer. She snapped his neck before he could lay a finger on her.”

I sat back down and started to cry. “I didn’t want anyone to die because of me.”

I felt an arm around my shoulders and went to shrug it off, thinking it was John or Loren, but it was Henrietta. I accepted her embrace. She said nothing and just held me. That made me feel better than if she had begun a long trail of meaningless words to comfort me.

“When you’re feeling better,” Loren began softly, “you’re needed in the Examining Room.”

I looked up at him, wiping my tears. “Needed?”

He gave a crooked smile. “It’s *required*, actually—by Madam Secretary’s orders.”

“And what am I supposed to do? Communicate with the Stargazer? I don’t even speak Stellar. I’ve told you all again and again that I’m *not* one of them.”

“But you’re not one of us, either,” said John softly, as he stood behind me.

I turned to face him, snarling. “Why do you even love me if I’m such a freak?”

“You’re not a freak. I love you for *who* you are. Remember our conversation earlier?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I remember when you basically told me you’d serve the interests of the Corporation above me.”

“I never said that.”

“You implied it and I’m sure if I were to shove that Separator in your head, I’d find out how deep your loyalty truly lies, and how quick you’d be to sell me out.”

“Leave, now,” demanded Loren, advancing towards his friend.

John advanced too; his face was determined. “I’m *not* leaving.”

I stood up and went to the door. “No, you two stay here. I’ve got a Stargazer to meet.”

Medusa opened it for me, and two guards had their weapons on me, ready. I recalled being shot earlier and did everything I could to show them I wasn’t a threat. I didn’t want to go through that again. I kept my arms to my sides and heard the door shut behind me, locking in Henrietta, John, and Loren. They could either stay there or leave, but I didn’t want any of them near me right now. I was desperate to meet this Stargazer—desperate to find out *who* I really was. Would she be the key? Could I communicate with her? And if I could, did I really want to know the truth?

The room was exactly as I had remembered. It was white, bright, and cold. The Stargazer wasn’t restrained to the table like I had been. She didn’t wear a gown either. Instead, her clothes were all black from neck to toes. It molded to her body like a glove. Her hair was like mine, except darker, more purple, and fashioned in a Mohawk style. Her eyes were darker too. I wondered at our differences. Why was she darker than me?

As I looked more like a girl, she looked like a woman—curvaceous and voluptuous. We were several feet apart. She took slow and methodically steps toward me, unsure. But she didn’t behave in a threatening manner. I actually felt quite safe around her, despite that fact that she was strong like me, and most undoubtedly unmerciful towards those weaker than her—as evidenced by Victor’s death. At least it had been quick, if that mattered.

We were five feet apart when she started to speak. The language was, I assumed, Stellar, for I didn’t understand a word of it.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t speak Stellar.”

Her eyes went wide and she took a step back, as if frightened of me. It was an unusual reaction. What did she think of me? She took a timid step forward and spoke in Stellar again. A

few of the words I recognized from her earlier speech, but I couldn't translate what she was trying to tell me.

"Do you speak English?" I asked her.

She tilted her head like Medusa. Then she flexed her pink lips in and out like a kissing motion.

"English," she repeated.

At first, I was shocked, but then I remembered that Stargazers were supposed to be great mimickers.

I nodded. "That's right. I speak only English. I can't communicate with you any other way."

She tilted her head around, processing my language. She didn't say anymore, instead, advancing towards me until we were a foot apart. We were the same height, but I felt myself tremble a bit at her sudden closeness. I knew my strength, but what if she was stronger?

She scanned my shirt. Her mouth moved again; her lips trying to produce words.

"Ava," she said.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes, that's my name...I think. What's your name?"

She stared at me, longer this time, scanning every feature of my face. Then her eyes went wide and she shook her head.

"No, Ava."

"No what?"

She reached her hand out towards me. I was nervous. What did she want? She flexed her fingers back and forth, motioning for me to accept her hand. I hesitated, but then decided that if she wanted to harm me, she would have already done so. Her hand was covered in a black glove that she removed before taking my hand. As we touched, I almost pulled my hand back; hers was ice cold. She furrowed her brow at mine in a similar reaction, noting how warm my hand was.

I recollected all the bonding I had done, especially the hand-holding with Henrietta and Victor. Did this Stargazer want to do something similar? I stood there, waiting, my heart racing, wondering what was going to happen, as she pressed her palm against mine. We held our hands up in the air, as if we were signaling a halt to each other.

It took some time, but eventually my warm hand became ice cold like hers. I began to shiver, but held onto her, our fingers interlaced, desperate for answers, in whatever form they came. Her head tilted around as if she were listening for something, and then her eyes closed. I

watched her in awe, until suddenly she clasped my hand in a tight grip. I thought my bones were going to break, but if she was exerting all her strength, it was too little to harm me. She let go of me and then fell to one knee, as if bowing before me.

“What are you doing?”

She looked up at me and said something in Stellar, quiet and calm. I shook my head at her, frustrated that we couldn't communicate, frustrated that if I was a Stargazer, why didn't I know how to speak Stellar. Why couldn't *someone* tell me who I was?

The door opened and several guards with their weapons pointed at us began to advance. I went to protect the unknown Stargazer but surprisingly, she sprang up and interjected herself between me and the guns. The Red Woman followed behind the guards in her trademark red dress, *click-clacking* her red heels across the white tiled floor. She didn't seem scared but more nervous, uneasy. It didn't seem like she was in control at all, lacking in confidence; her steps were a little wobbly.

The Stargazer held her ground in front of me, protecting me. I didn't understand why. One of the guards was in the front. He pulled the trigger and I grabbed the Stargazer, trying to pull her down to the ground, hoping to save her from suffering the horrible pain and disorientation, but she lunged forward after the man with lightning fast speed; she grabbed his gun, crumpled it in her hand as if it were a ball of paper, and then slammed both her hands into his chest, sending him flying back across the room, and through the wall. She took out three more guards in this fashion before she was subdued by several blasts from their weapons. It took a lot to bring her down, but she eventually fell, her eyes wide, red blood running from her nose, as her brain had exploded from within her skull. I tried to reach out to her, to hold her, but the rest of the guards blocked me with their weapons targeting my head.

I didn't know if I could be as fast as the Stargazer. I didn't know if I could incapacitate even one guard before another shot me twice, ending my life for good.

“Stop!” yelled the Red Woman. She approached, nervously, and stood several feet from me. “Calm down,” she said softly.

“Calm down!” I looked at her with absolute disbelief. “They murdered her!”

“She was a threat.”

“*You're* the threat! She was trying to protect me from *you!*”

She took another step forward, a bit more confident. “And just *who* are you?”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Medusa was able to translate some interesting words from the Stargazer. Yes, we know a little bit more about you.”

“What? What’d she say?”

“You’re—”

“Madam Secretary?” Medusa appeared on screen.

The Red Woman turned to her. “Yes?” she asked, annoyed that she was interrupted.

“President Pallas wants to see Ava, immediately.”

I gasped and so did the Red Woman. I was finally going to meet the great Julius Pallas. What was the meaning of this? Why now? What had the Stargazer said to elicit such an unexpected meeting?

“Is that... wise?” asked the Red Woman.

“President Pallas wants you to escort her to Quadrant Delta with two armed guards.”

I remembered Quadrant Delta was a place of mystery—a place the Red Woman had been to. But it wasn’t the president’s quarters. So what was there and why was I being summoned to that location?

The Red Woman was in a state of shock. “Only two guards? Why can’t she be restrained or sedated?”

“It is President Pallas’s wish that she be conscious and mobile. He said if you disagreed with his order, you were to be terminated—immediately.”

In an abrupt change of scenery, most of the guards, except for two, who still had their weapons on me, turned theirs towards the Red Woman. Her eyes went wide with disbelief.

“I-I understand. I will comply.”

“Thank you, Madam Secretary.” Medusa turned to me. “Hello, Ava.”

“Hi, Medusa,” I greeted back, shocked.

“President Pallas is most anxious to see you.”

“Why?”

“You will soon find out. Goodbye.”

Medusa disappeared and the room was eerily silent, except for a low humming noise. That silence was broken by the arrival of doctors in white lab coats, two of them being John and

Loren. A table was brought in and the dead Stargazer was securely restrained to it, even though she could no longer be a threat—dead.

John and Loren wanted to walk to me, but were prevented by the guards. Despite being angry with them, I wanted to go to them too. I found myself desiring to forgive them, and I didn't know why I felt that way. I should be clenching my fists, threatening them, watching their eyes go wide and their mouths stretching in pain as I crushed their bones.

Victor said that forgiveness was a human trait, but often forgotten. Did the Stargazers possess forgiveness? Was it more acute in their physiology or was I the exception? Is that why I was the anomaly? If I was such a freak, the Stargazer would have shunned me, or worse, destroyed me. Why did she bow? Why did she try to protect me? And what did the Red Woman know? What did Medusa hear? And why was Pallas, after all this time, so eager to meet me in the mysterious Quadrant Delta of all places?

The doctors exited the room with the dead Stargazer, but John and Loren remained. They looked at me warily, as if I would turn violent like the woman before me. Yet they loved me enough to stay out of concern for my well-being. I wanted to go to them; I wanted them both to hold me; I wanted to believe I was human and I wanted them to believe that as well.

The guards were between us, but it seemed there was always going to be something or someone between us. I wasn't part of their world. My appearance was too distracting. I could change my hair and my eyes, but I couldn't change who I was: a Stargazer, a human, an anomaly, a lost girl--a lost, scared little girl, who despite having more freedoms than other prisoners, still felt like a caged bird, never being allowed to fully spread her lavender wings.

"Ava," Loren whispered, his hand reaching out for me.

I shook my head.

"Ava has an appointment with the president," stated the Red Woman, approaching them, *click-clacking* with a resounding echo. "Go see to the deceased Stargazer. I'm sure you'll discover something unique about her." She turned to me with a wicked smile. "I already have."

John and Loren stood their ground, not wanting to leave, but the Red Woman snapped her fingers and two guards roughly pushed them towards the door, and out of the room. More guards left until there were only two, as President Pallas had ordered.

"Well," began the Red Woman, brushing the blonde curls from her face, "you're finally going to meet the Beneficial One. Be on your best behavior. He doesn't tolerate insolence."

I smiled at her. “If he’s been monitoring, he knows I’m not exactly the most modest prisoner.”

“Oh, he’s been monitoring your *every* move since you arrived. I’ve never seen him take such an *interest* in an alien before. I admit it vexes me.”

“Is it because all his attention has been on me and not you?”

She scoffed loudly. “As if an *alien*—a *freak* alien at that could possibly consume his thoughts.”

“Well, we’re going to Quadrant Delta. What’s in there? And why do I get to see it when you were so...blessed earlier?”

She looked around at the guards. “That place is very...unique. It’s not for *anyone* to gaze upon.”

I smiled. “Well, I guess I’m not just *anyone*, now am I?”

Her lazy eye quivered, as if she were going to explode in anger. “I agree. You are definitely *someone*. The question is: what will Pallas do with you now?”

“Am I a threat to him?”

“You’ve been a threat to him since you first arrived.”

“Is that why you hate me?”

“I hate you because you’re the enemy.”

“What have I ever done to you?”

“You existed! Now, no more discussion—we can’t keep our Dear Leader waiting. And I’m most anxious to see what he’ll do with you now.”

She turned quickly, *click-clacking* across the floor. One of the guards motioned for me to proceed, which I did—glad to be out of that room that brought back such painful memories, and eager to meet Pallas. I felt in this moment, everything would be revealed. I was ready. Even if I were to die after learning the truth, I had to know before I took my last breath.

Chapter 12

We traveled in an elevator to Quadrant Delta. It took some time and I figured Echo and Delta were very far apart. Whatever Delta was, Pallas didn't want it near anyone. When the doors opened, it wasn't out into a hallway as I had imagined. There was a narrow passageway, barely wide enough for one person. The Red Woman went first, then me, and finally the two guards. Another guard, faceless with a black visor over his features, was standing in front of a white door at the end.

"Well, what are you standing there for?" she asked him. "Let us pass."

"Only the anomaly is allowed inside," he replied in a mechanical voice.

The Red Woman gasped. "No, he wouldn't allow himself to be alone with her... without *me*."

The faceless guard nodded to the two behind me.

"Madam Secretary," said one. "Come with us."

She turned around, staring not at them, but at me. Her face was as red as her dress. "This is outrageous!"

I was glad to be rid of her, but nervous as to being alone with Pallas. She protested, cursing, as the two guards grabbed her and hauled her away. I was alone with the faceless and mechanical guard. He turned and pushed a button on the wall and the white door slid open.

"You may proceed," he said.

As I walked past him, I noticed that he was actually a machine—an android. I was fascinated by him, desiring to know more, but he shut the door in my face, and I was forced to turn around and examine the room I was in, finally discovering Quadrant Delta.

Everything was black. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear water rushing, and birds chirping.

"Hello?"

My voice echoed. The room seemed very large. I waited and waited, but nothing happened. I decided to take a few more steps until I was no longer in the dark, but greeted with blinding light. I thought I was in another Examining Room, but it wasn't a light bulb that shined down upon me. It was the sun. I was standing on a sandy shore with a wide blue ocean before me. White fluffy clouds spread across the blue sky. And the sun, a big, orange sphere, greeted me. I

saw something in the distance. I took my hands and cupped them around my eyes, blocking out the sun. Beyond was trees—a vast forest—an explosion of green everywhere.

Firm, but gentle hands rested on my shoulders. “Does this look familiar?” asked a deep voice.

I panicked, scared, and went to flee from his embrace, but he held me rooted to the sandy shore. He was so strong.

“Are you Pallas?”

“I am for the people of Sanctuary. But that’s not my real name—as ‘Ava’ is not your real name...princess.”

“Why did you call me that?”

As we communicated, I felt like I knew him, knew his voice, but I wasn’t sure of who he was.

“Remember,” he said softly. He placed his warm hand over my eyes and then removed it.

The sun moved its position in the sky. It was heading west, falling towards the horizon. Two people were swimming out in the vast ocean. They were far away, but I could see them as if they were right in front of me. It was me with my long lavender hair, smiling, laughing, and having fun, as I swam in the water, playfully being chased by a man with shoulder-length black hair. He finally caught me or I let him catch me, I didn’t know, and as we held each other, twirling around in the blue water, I saw his face. He was no longer the shadow of my mind who I had been plagued with seeing ever since my arrival and awakening in the Corporation. He was the man I loved.

I watched us swim, reaching the other side of the shore, and then I took off running, daring him to catch me, as we coursed through the thick, green forest, laughing as we went. We disappeared and only the waves crashing in the ocean could be heard and the birds twittering in the forest.

“I’ve missed you, my love.”

His grip on me loosened and I turned quickly to see the man behind me. It was him—the black-haired man from my vision—the shadow of my mind. All reason vanished as I pulled him to me, embracing him with all my superior strength. He gently grabbed my face and planted his soft lips against mine, kissing me long and deep. It was like I was on fire, burning, melting away

my cold interior. Any questions I had vanished as we melted with each other. It took him to pull away for me to catch my breath.

We stared at each other, savoring one another. I saw his eyes—pitch black, just like his hair. He wore black pants and a black long-sleeved shirt with a few buttons loosened, exposing a patch of black chest hair. He was barefoot; his toes barely visible beneath the sand. But who was he? And who was I?

“I don’t remember being here,” I said, looking out at the ocean.

He brushed his knuckles against my cheek. “It was a long time ago. We arrived here in the year 2013. Of course, it wasn’t *here* exactly, but in an actual ocean and an actual forest on Earth.” He swept his hand at the ocean. “This isn’t real. I built it to remember you.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I could never let you go.”

I grabbed his hand, holding it to my chest, over my rapidly beating heart. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“You’re a Stargazer. I’m not. We are both from the same planet, but of different races. I am immortal—a slave to the Stargazers. You, on the other hand, are royalty—a princess. We fell in love. It was greeted with absolute horror by your father, the Overlord. So, we escaped—stole a ship—and traveled in space—trying to find a suitable place to live. We came upon here, Earth, and settled. We were accepted. No one tried to imprison us or study us. They thought we were just like them—human. We learned their language very quickly and integrated into society.” He smiled at me affectionately. “We were very happy, just the two of us, with no one to denounce our love.”

“What happened?” I asked, in total shock of everything he was telling me, but at the same time, relieved to know the truth.

He held me close as if I was going to run away. “We were found by a member of the royal guard. I tried to lead him away from you, but I failed, and when I came back, you were gone. I assumed you were already in space, heading back to our planet. I spent the next 500 years as a hermit, depressed, cursing my fate as an immortal. I wanted to die if I couldn’t be with you.”

“But I was found, here, on this planet.”

“Five hundred years ago, the Stargazers began their attack of planet Earth. They were led by a new Overlord who sought to colonize and extract the planet’s resources. Their home world was no longer capable of supporting life; their sun was slowly dying. I stayed away, knowing they

would be looking for me, thinking I had kidnapped you to this planet instead of you willingly joining me because you loved me. Even as an immortal, they could still find ways to punish me. But when I happened across a Stargazer patrol, they knew nothing of me and what I had done. They thought I was a lost slave, having disembarked from the arrival ship, still orbiting Earth. I was admitted into the service of the Overlord, who quickly subdued Earth. I bided my time, waiting, and then with the help of humans, I crushed as many Stargazers as I could. I was...ruthless in my vengeance—my desire to inflict harm upon the ones who didn't want us to be together. I built Sanctuary—the dome—and the Corporation. I invited all the humans to be a part of this society, but there were many who resisted me. I've been dealing with them and the Stargazers ever since.”

I pulled away from him. “Look at what you've done! This place is a dictatorship!”

He furrowed his brow at me, shocked. “I had to restore order.”

“Not at the expense of people's freedoms—of their lives.”

Unexpectedly, he chuckled, wagging his finger at me. “You know, you were like this all those years ago. You became *too* human, living beside them, even for that short time.”

“What happened to me? Where did I go? It's been a 1,000 years.”

“The guard who found you—he took you back to his ship—orbiting Earth—and placed you in containment—you were essentially asleep for 1,000 years. I found this out recently, with the Stargazer who died before you.”

“Who was she? How did she recognize me?”

“She is born and bred to serve royal blood. She knew you were special. She's a member of the royal guard—that's why I'm concerned—she's guard to the Overlord.”

“You're afraid of him.”

“You should be too. I defeated the last one, but he had a small army. I'm afraid this one will come better prepared.”

I grabbed my head. It was starting to hurt. He approached me, but I backed away, my shoes finding resistance in the sand.

“If I was asleep for 1,000 years up in space how was I discovered on Earth?”

“The guard who held you didn't get far. His ship malfunctioned somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy. He died as his body was ejected into space. Thankfully, the ship regained some control and locked you in. It took 1,000 years, but you slowly came back to Earth, back to

me. The ship plunged through the atmosphere and you landed in a containment pod. The rebels came across you first and took you with them to their camp. It was being monitored by Medusa. A Retrieval Squad went to capture the rebels.” He gave a crooked smile. “It was all a big shock when you arrived, wearing camouflage like the rebels, but with that gorgeous lavender hair of yours.”

“They dressed me?”

He smiled. “You were naked in the containment pod.”

I felt my knees get weak and I crashed onto the sand. He held me up, and for some reason I let him, despite my disdain for his actions over the course of 500 years. I still loved him.

“What’s your name?”

He laughed as he held me in his arms. “It’s extremely long in Stellar, but you can call me Julius.”

“What’s my name?”

“It’s actually quite similar to ‘Ava’. It’s Avalora.” He smiled. “It sounds better in Stellar.”

“So, John was close.”

“Yes, Dr. John Goode.” Julius narrowed his eyes at me. “I was most displeased when you kissed him...and Loren for that matter.”

“You-you’re supposed to be Loren’s uncle, but that’s not true, is it?”

“No, it isn’t. I pretend to be.”

“Why?”

“Would you believe I desired a child? Loren’s parents were traitors and had to die, but he was all alone. I pitied him as I did John. Loren needed someone other than me to spend time with. I was overseeing a city, after all.”

“But I felt so close to Loren. I fell in love with him. How could that be if I loved you?”

“When Loren was ten years old, he was in the rose garden, studying bugs.” He smiled, reminiscing. “Well, he happened across a snake—a venomous snake. I thought all had been removed from the dome, but I guess it’d slithered on in, like the spy that it was. Loren was bit and he died instantly. I knew I was the only one who could save him. I injected him with my blood, which has healing and rejuvenation properties. It took several hours, but Loren was reborn.” He looked at me curiously. “I assume you’re attracted to Loren because my blood was coursing through his veins. You were drawn to him. Although, why did you kiss John?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I found him...comforting.”

“Well, now that you know who I am, only *I* will be comforting you from now on.”

He leaned in to give me another kiss, but I pulled away, fighting the urge to give into him.

“What?” He advanced towards me in all his dark beauty.

I held up my hands in a halt motion. “You had me tortured! You had me confined! You knew all along I was a Stargazer. You made me suffer all this time!”

“I had to be sure. You could have been a clone, a spy sent to lure me out, sent from the Overlord.”

“What about this supposed Sanctuary? You have people executed! What about Victor? You sent him to that Stargazer to die!”

His eyes seemed to turn even blacker. “I have to maintain order!”

“What about Henrietta? How can you condone slavery when you used to be one?”

“Slaves are essential to the Corporation. There must be servitude for Utopia to exist!”

“You accuse *me* of acting too human. I forgive like the humans, but *you* forsake compassion by adhering to a philosophy that is morally wrong!”

He clenched his jaw, silent. Then he closed his eyes, inhaled and exhaled. “I’m going to excuse what you said. You’ve been asleep for far too long. You’re confused.” He allowed himself to smile. “Now that you know the truth, you’ll stay with me, in my quarters, and then all this nonsense you’ve been throwing at me will vanish. We’ll be happy again. You’ll be my partner in Sanctuary. They will look upon you as my queen.”

“Do you hear yourself? You’re delusional! *I’m* the enemy! How can you tell a society to hate me, and then love me?”

“It’s simple. I’ll decree it.”

“What about the rebels? Will they be pardoned like the Stargazers?”

“If they abide by my laws, yes, they will.”

“Were you always like this? Back on our home planet and before I was taken away?”

He advanced towards me and I kept on walking backwards until the water from the ocean lapped my feet and lower legs.

He noticed my distress and stopped. “You may not remember, but I do. I was a slave! I served! My fate was sealed forever in that life. You—*you* were the only one who saw how horrible that was to society. You accepted me for *who* I was.”

“Who were you?”

He smiled. “I was wild when I was around you. I subdued myself in front of your family, but when we were alone, we danced as equals. We swam in the purple waters near twinkling forests that were alive with lights all day and all night. We loved each other under the twin moons—”

“Stop, Julius! Just stop, will you?”

“I loved you like no other could!” he continued with passion. “I still love you. I can give you more than John or Loren or any other miserable human on this planet!”

“How can you talk of love when you act so cruelly, with such barbarity? When will *I* displease you? When will *I* be executed as a traitor?”

I felt an incredible surge of strength, building up from inside, in my chest, as an immeasurable amount of hatred filled me from top to bottom. I narrowed my eyes at Julius. He must have sensed something that I didn’t know about because he looked scared—very scared.

“Ava, please calm down!”

I trembled as my whole body convulsed and with one loud scream, my fury was unleashed, my lavender hair whipping wildly around my face, as the sand was thrown up in the air with a great propelling speed. The water around my legs churned and I could hear the ocean loud and chaotic as it rose up in a towering tsunami, slamming down upon the forest in the distance, felling every tree and silencing the songbirds.

Julius advanced towards me, despite my rampage. “My love, don’t do this! Please!”

I was beyond reason at that point. I didn’t care who stood before me. I was out for total destruction, no matter who got in the way. The door to the room slid open and the android advanced towards me. The light from the hall momentarily brought me back to where I was—the Corporation. I had to get out. I had to! I ran forward, meeting the android head on. We crashed into each other. I heard metal cracking, hoses hissing, and sparks flying as we brawled down the length of the narrow passage way, until we both crashed through the wall, shattering like glass.

We fell. He went faster than me because of his weight. I was like a feather, slowly descending upon a green plain below. I was outside the Corporation. I was aware of the dome, of Sanctuary, before me. It was a white pearl city, beautiful, despite its flaws. The android crashed onto the grass; sparks flew out from its severed remains. It twitched and popped, lying there helpless.

Soon, I knew I would join it. I thought of Victor, Henrietta, John, Loren, and all the others trapped inside this dome, along with the rebels outside, and the Stargazers, trying to find a place in this world.

But mostly I thought of Julius. My rage inside Quadrant Delta had brought back all the memories of my home world. It was a beautiful place, full of wonder, but it was dark with its acceptance of servitude. I remembered being appalled at the idea of a slave race—immortally bound to serve. Julius was my personal slave. I wanted to give him his freedom, but he wanted to serve me, not only as his princess, but as his true love. He adored me and I adored him. I gave up everything that I knew to be with him, travel across the galaxy, to places unknown, to people who were alien—all to be with my one and only love. If I had never been torn from him, he would have stayed that wild, but gentle soul. Now, he was a monster and I was ashamed for still ardently loving him. He and I were bound.

I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable. It was very bright out until a dark shadow blocked my view of the sun. I opened my eyes to witness a large black ship hovering near the clouds. I knew it instantly—it was a mother ship—the vessel of the Overlord. So, he had finally arrived. Sanctuary would be destroyed. I found myself glad to be dying with my friends and even with those who didn't accept me for being different. We would all be at peace now, even Julius.

My last thoughts were of him and the man he used to be as a cold force stilled my beating heart. I thought I was dead. I wanted to be dead, but I opened my eyes, and found myself looking upon several beings, all with lavender hair. I was lying on a black table in a black room with dim lavender light above my eyes. The Stargazers before me were all young and looked at me with curiosity and fear, which I couldn't understand.

A male Stargazer approached, older, with dark purple hair, long to his shoulders. He went to one knee before me. He barked Stellar at the others. I understood what he said.

He told them to bow to their new Overlord.

Chapter 13

The Stargazer vessel was mine. It was all black with dim lavender lights. The Stargazers found it difficult to survive in a bright environment. Our home planet was like a shroud compared to Earth. I told them they would get used to light after some time—I did. They only spoke Stellar to me at first, and I only spoke English to them. After a few days or weeks—no one kept me apprised of the time—everyone aboard the vessel, *Calumny*, conversed in English. The Stargazers were exceptional at quickly learning a new language. Some favored French; others Spanish, having studied Earth archives. I told them that English was only spoken in Sanctuary, and that it what they will learn. They obeyed me without question. I was their ruler—their Overlord. Some gave me inquisitive looks, but no one dared defied their master. Yes, I was their master, even though technically they weren't my slaves. I would not allow slavery aboard my ship. All the slaves, immortal and dark-haired like Julius, were free and equals to the Stargazers. I overheard grumbles as to this radical decree, but none dared say anything to my face.

The man I had met when I was first transported aboard the *Calumny* was the head of my royal guard. His name was really long in Stellar. I shortened it to “Jax.” He didn't like that, but he got used to it. My Viceroy—or ruler in my absence—was a female I nicknamed “Willa.” She actually liked the name. Her heart, though, was broken, and her mind was filled with vengeance to seek justice for the death of her sister—the royal guard with the Mohawk hair who had died protecting me. Willa had Mohawk hair too. It was a family trait, I learned and not deliberate. I told Willa she would receive her vengeance only on my timetable. She was satisfied that I was at least entertaining the idea of attacking Sanctuary because for the time I had been aboard the *Calumny*—an apt name for her designs to be sure—I had been resisting my war council's urge to strike the dome.

“Your father would not have hesitated,” Jax told me after the exhaustive meeting adjourned in the dark war room near the center of the ship.

It took me some time to adjust to all the blackness. They put me in an all black suit, conformed to my body. I accepted it only because they had no other clothes for me to wear. I refused to wear the amethyst crown, though. It was heavy, and I was against any sort of adornment. I even refused to wear the family ring, gold and silver braided, with an amethyst jewel. It was my mother's, and even though I greatly missed her, the ring was not mine to wear.

We were not on our home world of Prominence—as close as a translation I could make to English.

“I am not my father,” I reminded Jax with a stern look, as I sat uneasily on my black throne.

It was hard and cold. The whole ship was cold. I tolerated it for the Stargazers, but when I slept, I had the ship’s computer raise the temperature in my room. The computer, who was nothing like Medusa, was constantly confused as to my requests. It had no human interface or Stargazer features for that matter. It was just a glowing lavender orb that I placed my hands on and we telepathically communicated. It was actually simpler than Medusa, but not satisfying. I thought often of her, and would laugh, sometimes aloud, at her motions, acting mechanical and sometimes human.

“There were many, oh Overlord, who greatly disagreed with your ascension to the throne. They felt you abandoned your home, your family, and your destiny, to run away with a slave.”

Jax never held back with me. He was never disobedient, but he told me truths when others would have lied to my face, thinking they were pleasing me.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I did.”

He adjusted his upper body. The twin swords against his back were heavy and he was the oldest guard member—almost 234 years old. Even though in Prominence years, I was a mere sixteen-year-old, I was technically, well over a thousand.

We lived long, but we weren’t immortal like the once slave race, known crudely as the Dirtwalkers, for they would never ascend so high and mighty as the Stargazers. Upon my release of their bondage, they were no longer called Dirtwalkers, but they weren’t Stargazers either. I called them the “Immortalis.” There was one Immortal, Cory—I named him—who reminded me a lot of Julius, but with shorter black hair. I later discovered they were related, cousins. He wasn’t wild like Julius had been on Prominence, but very shy, and despite being free, still followed me around, desiring to be of service.

I tolerated him because I felt sorry for him. He still wanted to be a slave and didn’t know how to handle being free. When I gave orders it was as the Overlord, not as a master. I never made him do anything that was obscene or dangerous to his health. After a while, he became more relaxed in my presence, and would often joke with me in Stellar. I laughed, remembering the funny tales back from our home planet—stories that humans of Earth were incapable of

understanding. We both mourned for our planet—destroyed not through war, but of a dying star. When would that happen to Earth?

Cory stood by my side now, as Jax uneasily relayed the recent intelligence.

“We were almost through the dome, but it quickly solidified, repairing the damage.”

When I’d awoken aboard the vessel, after thinking I’d fallen to my death from Quadrant Delta, the *Calumny* had been able to penetrate the dome, enough to transport me aboard, before Medusa quickly put a halt to their plans of attack.

They had been trying to break through the dome again, but not to attack. I’d specifically forbidden any assault until I could get a coded message to Loren, hoping his rebel tech could decipher it—if he was even still alive...

I worried about John and Henrietta. I also worried about the many of innocent citizens, the billions of people, who were under Julius’s thrall. They didn’t deserve to die. As we orbited in space above Earth, I looked down upon the dome as often as I could from a large clear screen that was the floor of my chambers. In the event of a mutiny or some sort of malfunction of the ship, my room ejected as an escape pod and landed on the nearest habitable planet. I was tempted many times to tell the computer to eject me, so that I could come back to the dome and see my friends again. It was a stupid, foolish idea, but I didn’t think logically like a Stargazer. I had too many human characteristics embedded in my soul.

I thought always of Julius, even in my dreams. At times he was angry with me, cursing at me; and at other times, he was smiling at me, kissing me, and holding me under the twin moons of Prominence. Even when he yelled at me, I still loved him. I loved John and Loren too, but Julius was a part of me from across the universe. We had been bound across space and time and that was a feeling that couldn’t be easily undone, despite how horrible he had become.

When I told Jax and Willa of Julius and what sort of brutal empire he had created, Jax, being antagonistic towards the *Immortalis* didn’t seem surprised. Willa was angry, but I believed this was more directed in the execution of her sister, which Julius was responsible for, even if he didn’t pull the trigger.

“Those slaves were always trouble,” Jax had said, despite Cory being with me.

Cory paid no attention to Jax. He viewed the elder royal guard as a man with one foot in the grave, who babbled about history as if it were currently happening, and forgetting simple events such as recent conversations about supplies or atmospheric conditions of the ship.

“It’s who the man becomes, not who he was born to be,” I had reminded him.

Jax had merely bowed. “Yes, my Overlord.”

Willa never said much, but she was lethal with swords and had superior strength and speed. She was anxious to show me her abilities, lobbying to be head of the royal guard, replacing Jax. It was suggested to me by Cory that Jax should be Viceroy instead. He would govern the ship while I, Cory, and Willa, transported to the planet.

I had been thinking about rallying the Resistance to our cause, and using their technology, as well as our own, to break down the dome once and for all. But I didn’t want an all out war upon Sanctuary. I just wanted a way in, so I could get Julius to step down—peacefully—and then with me, an interim ruler, I could dismantle his cruel city and free everyone from his mental persuasion. I knew I would encounter resistance—most notably from the Red Woman—if she was still alive. Julius had threatened her before, but I was sure the Madam Secretary begged and pleaded and probably did more to show her loyalty to him.

I found myself jealous at the thought of any woman seducing Julius. I felt like he was still mine—my immortal love. When we’d first landed on Earth, I told him of my concerns: that I would die before him. What would he do then? He assured me that if I were to die, he would as well through a spiritual process known as “Deliverance,” when his soul, through his will, is released and delivered up into that starry realm above the layers of black space, where he would be forever intertwined with me. It was sort of like Heaven. We had no Hell. No one was tortured because of their sins. They just merely died, placed in the ground, and never entered that starry realm.

If Julius were to freely give up his immortality, I wondered if he would go to that heavenly place, so high above us all. Or would he rot away in the ground, punished for his multitude of sins, as worms ate at him? I shuddered at the thought. He was still my Julius. I hated that I loved him. I wondered if he felt that same way now that I was elevated above his encased kingdom, threatening his power.

In the last day, white cannons had been seen turned towards the sky, targeting the *Calumny*. We had no intelligence as to their design or effectiveness. The projectiles could fall flat or destroy us. We didn’t know if the dome was needed to open for the weapon’s transit, or if it could merely pass *through* like John and Loren and Henrietta could pass through the wall of my former cell.

That was why I had to get *inside* the dome. I had to reach Loren. He was in league with the rebel spies. And I had to form an alliance with the Resistance, scattered along the waters and woods. My only encounter with a real rebel had been with Thaddeus Ridge. I'd broken the bones in his hand. I doubt he would be much of an ally. Rainn and Sunny—the two siblings—would probably help me, but could they convince the other imprisoned rebels, and rebel spies within the Corporation, and in Sanctuary, to follow me—an alien, a Stargazer—who had a massive ship positioned over their home?

The *Calumny* had advanced weapons. If the dome were to fail, we could pulverize the city. Of course, I had my own internal weapon. My anger set it off. When I had exploded in Quadrant Delta, I only ruined his digital program. If the android hadn't intervened, and I was drawn back to where I was, and *who* I was, I would have destroyed not only the quadrant, but perhaps all of Sanctuary as well.

I had a rare ability. As far as I knew, it was an unknown possession to those on Prominence. The Stargazers and the Dirtwalkers had never seen anything like me. But I was trouble, despite being the Overlord's daughter—the princess. I was to be adored, but I was also feared. Everyone took pains to keep me calm. No one tried to upset me. My parents doted over me—perhaps a little too much. I'd felt like I could do anything. I was spoiled, actually, so when I wanted my way, I wanted my way! When I wanted Julius, despite him being a slave, I was furious at being denied my wish. I was so furious I erupted in uncontrolled rage and shattered the glass of the throne room. Despite the damage I caused, I was still denied my wish to marry Julius. Yes, we were going to get married. We were in love. My father, the Overlord, said it was unthinkable for a slave to marry a princess. We were from two different worlds—two different bloods—two different races. Our children would be half breeds, who were considered even lower than a Dirtwalker.

I was ashamed to be a Stargazer, ashamed at my father's allowance of such a philosophy. I wanted to be far away from Prominence, from its hypocrisy of freedom for all, but not the dark-haired ones, who weren't given a chance at opportunity or to prove their value to society other than serving. They were a smart and industrious people—greatly relied on by the Stargazers. I found that we Stargazers were the weak ones, whereas the Immortalis were actually, the stronger ones.

Julius and I ran away because being apart was more terrifying than even death. We stole a small, transport ship—one of my royal barges that I used to travel the planet at my leisure. Julius knew how to work the controls. He had always been my navigator. We sailed away, out of the atmosphere of Prominence, and among the stars, among the planets, so varied and wild and beautiful across the universe, finding a planet, of green and blue, as our new home. We landed in a thick forest and hid the vessel from sight. We noticed how different our clothes were from the Earthlings, and so we snuck up on a family, camping, and stole some clothes. I felt bad for doing that, but we had no choice. We had to blend in.

Julius with his black hair was easily accepted. As we traveled, people *did* stare at my lavender hair and eyes, but when I told them I was born that way, they were more fascinated than afraid. I even saw other girls with my same hair color, but it was dyed, of course. We were greeted with warmth and love by the people of Earth. We were happy, until that dark night, a thousand years ago, when, out enjoying a walk, holding hands, we were obstructed by a Stargazer—a scout and guard—sent to find us, possibly leaving the planet right after us, in pursuit. I didn't recognize the man wielding a sword in his hand, threatening us. Of course, I didn't pay attention to a lot of the members of my father's court. I was too obsessed with Julius.

The guard went for me first, but Julius tackled him to the ground—yelling at me to run. So, I did. I ran and ran until I couldn't run anymore, my breath giving out. I was in the middle of the forest; it was dark and cold. I was scared. I called out Julius's name, but he didn't respond. I circled back, trying to find him, hoping he was trying to find me, but before I could make it back, I was struck from behind and when I woke up, it was in the confines of the Corporation with no idea of who I was or how I had gotten there.

That day in Quadrant Delta, Julius filled me in, telling me that I was taken aboard the guard's ship and that it malfunctioned in the nearest galaxy—Andromeda. How I survived, I didn't know, but instead of continuing my journey—adrift, asleep, cold, naked—I sailed back to Earth, and back to Julius.

Why didn't he help me the day I was brought in? Why didn't he show any kind of love towards me as he did a thousand years ago? He said he thought I was a clone—a spy—sent to lure him out. Stargazers had the technology to clone, but it was never really successful; maybe Julius was hoping it never would be. But how could he treat me so harshly? How could he allow Victor and Dr. Keller to poison me, knowing full well who I could possibly be? Why did he sign

Victor's death warrant? What possessed him to take care of Loren and John, as if they were the two sons he never had? And why did he only make Henrietta read him poetry, when she would've done so much more?

I presented these questions to Cory, one night, after we had eaten. He stayed with me in my quarters, sleeping on a narrow cot beside my large bed. He loved me, more than a subject should love a ruler, but I couldn't return his love. I had loved so much and lost so much. I couldn't do that anymore.

"Julius," he began, used to the name of his cousin, "always talked of rising above his status. He didn't accept servitude as some of the others. He always argued with me. I accepted my place. I was glad to serve the Stargazers. I wasn't beaten or starved or without a home. I *lived* in the royal palace! It was a great honor. Julius couldn't see that. He wanted to marry you and be Overlord. That was his ambition—his dream."

I scanned Cory's face. He had the similar hair and eyes, all black, but he was tan, not pale like Julius. He was younger and smiled more. He seemed innocent. Julius never was innocent. He never talked of being Overlord, but I knew he wanted to be someone, someday. He wanted to be above everyone. He wanted to be the one giving orders, not accepting them. I found no fault with him and his views on Prominence. I adored him, in every way imaginable. On Earth, he didn't speak of his ambitions. I didn't know if they were still there, just repressed, but while we were traveling the forests, swimming the oceans, and talking with humans as if we were them, Julius was happy and content. He let me make the decisions. He followed my lead. I was always in charge. I always got what I want, just like back at home.

I was never angry or upset. I never exploded with destruction because I had no cause to. Julius was my serenity. And as long as I was happy, he was happy, and had no need for subjugating others. He accepted the humans, but he didn't entirely love them—not like me. I found their language and habits fascinating. I wore blue jeans and sneakers with delight instead of a need to be covered, considering nudity wasn't entirely accepted when one walked about the planet.

Despite Julius giving me anything I wanted, I learned from the humans what real love was like, and compassion, and forgiveness. I saw hypocrisy and hatred and jealousy as on my own planet, but I also saw the capacity to search one's soul, and remedy their faults. Humans were always trying to be better, to advance, and overcome. It took awhile, and maybe they didn't get

there, or it wasn't exactly what they wanted, but they *tried*, and that was what endeared that weak race of beings to my alien heart.

Julius loved only me with all his heart. He was nothing without me. But forced apart, him living alone for 500 years, and then taking over the world in the next 500, imposing rules and customs on a people, forcing them to love him, to worship him, or else it was death for them, was a future I didn't envision for my Julius. Never, in a million years, would I have believed he would turn out to be such a monster.

"If we had been together," I told Cory, "if we were never separated, I believe Julius would've never done the things he's done."

Cory shifted on his bed, propping his head up on his hand, staring at me. He always stared at me.

"I think he would have. He kept many things from you. He loved you too much to let you see how dark his heart truly was."

I had been on my side too, looking at him, but then I lay on my back and stared up at the black ceiling of my quarters.

"Can I comfort you?" he asked.

"How would you do that?"

I knew the answer before he said it.

"I'll make love to you."

I sighed. "Cory, you're no longer a slave."

"I wouldn't be doing it as a slave. I'd be doing it because I love you."

"And if I wasn't your Overlord? If I was another woman, sad and lonely, would you try to comfort her too?"

"No, I only want to comfort *you*."

I rolled over and looked at his young and handsome face. "I'm sorry, Cory, but that can never be.

He face fell. "Don't you love me?"

"I love you but not in that way."

"Do you love Julius in that way?"

"I'll always love Julius in that way. I can't be rid of him. It's like I can feel him now, here, next to me."

“Does he comfort you?”

“No, he makes me uneasy...afraid.”

“Then will him away.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t. Despite the fear he instills in me, I don’t want to let him go. I see now what John and Loren and Henrietta, and all the others who love him, why they act the way they do. Many see his dark heart, but they cling to him, like he’s their lifeboat. Like me, they wouldn’t know what to do without him.”

“Sometimes it’s best to float away. Only then, can you find where you’re meant to be.”

I smiled. “Or I could drown and die.”

He smiled back. “But there will always be someone there, ready to save you.”

“What if I’m the only one left in the world?”

“We’re never alone. We just think we are.”

I reached my hand out for Cory. “Just hold my hand—that’s all I want from you tonight.”

He clasped my hand and held me tight. We remained like that, holding onto one another, comforting each other innocently, as we drifted off to sleep. When I woke late, I found Cory still holding my hand, but he had crawled into my bed, and had lain beside me.

His eyes were open. “Don’t punish me,” he begged. “I just wanted to be near you.”

I gently slid my hand from his and got out of bed. “You won’t be punished, but don’t do it again, *and* don’t make me forbid you from my quarters or my council. I still like talking to you and you’re a very good friend.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Overlord.”

I had urged him to call me “Ava,” but Jax had stomped his foot against the ship’s floor, telling me that it was “absolutely disrespectful” for Cory or anyone, including him, to call me by my informal name. I decided that it wasn’t worth injuring Jax over, so I told Cory to only call me “Overlord,” as did everyone else.

“Overlord,” began Willa as she bowed before me while I ate my breakfast, “there is activity near the dome—humans.”

“Is it rebels?”

“They all look the same to me.”

I smiled. “And we all look the same to them.”

She lifted her head. “How can they be so blind? We look nothing alike.”

I appraised her wild, purple Mohawk style of hair. “I agree. We don’t look a thing alike, but they don’t distinguish so carefully, noticing our similar hair and eyes, and then grouping us as equal in appearance. Don’t fault them on that. Or they’d fault us on appraising them in a similar manner.”

“But-but they *do* look alike.”

I laughed. “You haven’t spent much time around them. Trust me, there are differences.”

“How so?” she asked, standing up.

“Well, in the dome, for instance, there is a very handsome man named John with the loveliest blue eyes you’ve ever seen, and then there’s Loren, also handsome, with green eyes that leave you mesmerized.”

She furrowed her brow at me. “Humans can leave you...mesmerized?”

“That they can, Willa.”

She bowed again. “It is as you say, esteemed Overlord.”

“You will get to find out soon. I want you, me, and Cory to transport to the planet and talk with these...mesmerizing humans.”

She gasped and then seemed to remember her place. “It is as you wish esteemed Overlord, but...Jax”—she said his name strangely—“is the head of your guard.”

“Not anymore. He is my Viceroy. *You* are the head of my royal guard. Are two swords enough or would you want more?”

She smiled. It was unusual. Willa wasn’t one to smile, and not since learning of her sister’s death. I was glad to see her happy about something, but I wish it wasn’t something as lethal as knives. Of course, who was I to talk? I was basically a walking nuclear bomb.

“Two swords are sufficient, but...I will see how many more will suit me.”

“Good girl,” I said with a nod and a smile.

“Good girl?” she repeated, confused.

“It’s a complement Willa. Now, when you’re done accessorizing, will you ready my transport?”

She bowed low. “I would be honored.”

She left the room and I sighed, sitting back against my chair. The food on the ship wasn’t as good as Earth food and I was more anxious to see what the Rebels had to eat, than trying to convince them to help me break through the dome.

I wasn't sure if they would help. No, I was definitely sure they wouldn't help. Why should they? They blame the Stargazers for the brutality of Julius and his Sanctuary. Without us, they assume, Pallas would never have built the dome and terrorized the people. I would have to argue that their logic was flawed. Even without the Stargazers, any man or woman could have engineered a dictatorship. If they knew their human history, it would be a reasonable argument. But I wasn't sure what they knew or how many there were. Scattered, taking shots here and there at the dome—they were mostly ineffective when it came to a complete overthrow of Julius. But I wouldn't exclude them. My father taught me that everyone had a purpose. He was mainly referring to the slaves, but I meant the rebels. They weren't slaves, but they weren't free either—not really, being hunted down by Retrieval Squads, being imprisoned, executed for wanting a different life than what Julius was offering.

I didn't see the rebels as a threat to me or any Stargazer. We could crush their faces with a mere slap of our hand. But I didn't want to threaten them into following me. I wanted them to *want* to follow me.

How was I supposed to do that? How was I supposed to get a bunch of disgruntled, ragtag wilderness hermits, *with* explosives, to concede to my leadership? *If* they were still a ragtag group—we had no intelligence on them. We didn't even know the names of the commanders. I wanted to communicate with Sunny and Rainn, hoping they would give me *something* before I wandered in the wilderness of unknown, but Medusa's defensives were on hyper alert, stronger than ever, keeping us out.

Jax didn't like me going down to the planet, but since I was Overlord, there wasn't much he could do about it. Cory drove the small transport vessel as Willa and I sat in two large black chairs behind him. The ship rocketed to the planet faster than a speeding bullet, as lavender lights blinked from the machines all around me. There were no seatbelts. We were attached to the seats by a force field that acted like glue. I wondered if this was where Julius got the idea for how to restrain subjects to tables.

But what I didn't understand is how the humans bonded. Victor said it was in their DNA—they were born that way. How? Humans back in 2013 didn't bond like that. Was it evolution? Or did Julius lie and tell them that when he really injected them all with some sort of adhesive chemical—a bond to keep his subjects in line, and together? Was only Sanctuary affected or did the rebels have the same ability? I was about to find out. *If* I got close enough to a rebel...

Chapter 14

“I am not questioning you, Overlord,” said Willa as we landed, “but are you *sure* about this?”

I smiled. “Yes, I’m quite sure.”

“The area for ten miles is deserted,” said Cory, as he punched different buttons on a black panel in front of him.

I was released from my seat and I stepped forward to assess the outside from the view screen. I could see the trees, brown and green, with the grass, and a few flowers. It looked peaceful, but dead—so dead—without a single person inhabiting the land. A vision of a tumbleweed passed through my mind. I chuckled aloud.

“What’s funny?” asked Willa, standing behind me, straining to look out the window of the ship.

I stepped aside for her to see. “Do you know what tumbleweed is?”

“No, I don’t.”

I sighed. “Well, then, I can’t really explain.” I turned to Cory. He was standing up, ready to go. I halted him. “No, Cory, I need you to stay here, guard the vessel.”

“But I want to come with you.”

“I know, but if the rebels find this ship, they’ll raid it. I know they can’t harm you, but I don’t want to see you captured either.” I touched his cheek. “You’re very nice and compassionate and I don’t want them abusing you, okay?”

He caught my hand and kissed it. “I will do as you say, Overlord.”

Gently, I removed my hand. “Willa and I will be in contact. Advise us of any change, *any* change, understood?”

“Perhaps of these tumbleweeds you spoke of,” said Willa with a serious look.

I couldn’t help laughing. “No, those are okay, if you even knew what they were. I’m talking about people...anyone...doing *anything*.”

“I understand,” said Cory.

“And if this goes south, we’re going to need the ship ready, so when we flee, we’ll take off and head back to the *Calumny*.”

“Goes south?” repeated Cory and Willa in unison, confused.

I shook my head. “If things go *badly*, you need to be prepared.”

“How bad is *bad*?” asked Cory.

“Oh, if you see me and Willa, screaming, running faster than hell back to these coordinates.”

Cory nodded. “I will keep a lookout for screaming and hell running.”

I just smiled and patted him on the back. “Be safe, Cory.”

Willa and I left the ship, and I made sure Cory locked the door. Willa was uneasy about being out in the open, in the wild. I loved it. The sun on my face was soothing and warm. I turned to see Willa and saw her perspiring in her black, skin-tight outfit.

“I should have advised you to wear looser clothes.”

I remembered to do that, wearing my white shirt with “AVA” on it, and my green pants and white shoes Loren had given me. Sand and ocean water had been clung to it, but it was washed clean aboard the *Calumny*.

“I am the head of the royal guard. I can wear nothing else.”

“You’ll start to feel different after we’ve been out here an hour or so.”

“Is that how long it’ll take to find these humans?”

“Maybe longer; I don’t know. There’s nothing for ten miles, so either we wait here until someone comes, or we go to them.”

She looked in the distance, to the east, towards the clear dome. I looked too, but I couldn’t see the city, only the sunlight reflecting off the glass. I desired to go near it—to be close to Henrietta, John, Loren, and yes, Julius. But I dared not. I had to head west—to seek out the rebels. There would be no Stargazers around—the ones that had been scattered about the planet were transported to *Calumny* soon after I’d come aboard, but they hadn’t been able tell us much about the rebels, desiring to be apart from them. They’d only come in contact to fight over resources or when the rebels ambushed their small vessels. Before the Stargazers had boarded the mother ship, they’d set the self-destruct on their ships, leaving only charred wreckage for any rebel passerby.

Willa looked at the ship. “Can we fly overhead?”

“No, I don’t want to frighten the rebels. They don’t have ships, so we don’t arrive in ships—equal footing. I want to gain their trust.”

Willa furrowed her brow, not liking my plan, but then she nodded. “It is as you command, esteemed Overlord.”

“Just call me ‘Ava’ while we’re on land, okay?”

“But that is disrespectful.”

“The rebels don’t know what an Overlord is and they don’t care. *We’re* encroaching on their land and that’s it. Now, they know we’re Stargazers.” I twirled a lavender curl around my fingers. “*But* we’re going to show them that we come in peace—that we can be friends—that we’re better together than apart—and that *together* we can end Julius for good.”

Her cheeks blushed at the mention of Julius. But it wasn’t affection; it was anger. She removed a small knife from her belt. “I will carve out his black heart.”

I held up my hand. “No, you won’t.”

“But-but you said I’d have my vengeance.”

“There will be justice. He will stand trial for his crimes. And he will be imprisoned for the rest of his immortal life. Remember that? He can’t die.”

She shook her head. “If he wills it so, he can! If he practices Deliverance, he’ll depart, forever! And he won’t go to that starry realm! He won’t!”

She was talking rapidly in Stellar, upset, finding it hard to communicate her feelings in an alien language such as English.

I advanced and placed my hand on her shoulder. She was taller than me so I had to reach up high. The anger from her face had subsided. Now, she cried.

“You’re not the only one he’s hurt, Willa. Others demand justice as well. As Overlord, only I can administer his punishment.”

She nodded, agreeing, but I assumed, not liking. “Will you imprison him?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, Willa. Who will watch over him when we’re gone? Cody? Will he be Julius’ warden for the rest of his life?”

“Then how will you make him lose his immortality?”

I knew the answer, but I couldn’t say it, not to Willa, and especially not to Cody. I had been thinking about it for a while. Julius said that he would die when I died. It was simple. For there to be justice and Julius to depart, I had to depart as well. Would he join me in that starry realm or would he rot away in the ground?

“Let’s not speak of this right now,” I told her, changing the moody subject. “Let’s find help.”

“Will the humans help us?”

“All we can do is ask, Willa.”

“And if they don’t?”

“We’re on our own, but as long as we have purpose and fortitude, we will prevail. This is our time to make a difference. We can’t pass it up and move on to another planet. This is our home now, and we’re going to save it.”

Willa bowed. “I will follow you anywhere, esteemed Overlord.”

I smiled. “Ava.”

She nodded. “I will follow you anywhere, Ava.”

And she did follow me. She followed me for miles and miles, under crowded trees, through thick brush, past poisonous plants, and over gopher holes in the ground. The land around us was wild and I loved it. It wasn’t white and clean like Sanctuary or dark and cold like the *Calumny*. It was untamed and I didn’t know if we were going to be ambushed at any second. I was afraid for Willa. I didn’t want her to get hurt, although, I knew she could handle herself. She wielded those blades like they extended from her own arms and even without them, she was strong and quick—a valued warrior and trusted protector. I was strong too, but I didn’t want to fight, not when I wanted to win people to my side.

The forest cleared and we stood alongside a blue river, coursing from left to right, not knowing when it began or ended.

“Are you thirsty, Ava?”

I nodded. “Very; let’s drink.”

We sat on our knees and bent over, cupping our hands to scoop up the water. As we poured it in our mouths, it tasted warm, but refreshing. I went to take another sip, but Willa was on her feet, her blades zinging to life. I turned abruptly too and saw five men and two women—rebels—staring at us. Each one had a rifle, pointed in our direction.

“The alien’s got swords,” said one, a tall man with long brown hair in a ponytail.

His rifle was a bit lowered, like he didn’t really want to shoot or threaten us, but was still cautious. He stood beside a short man, stocky and bald, who seemed to be leader of the little ragtag group.

“Swords are no match for these,” said the bald man, smiling. “We’ll blow them swords to pieces.”

“But what if they’re stronger than regular swords?” asked a woman, average height with a deep scar running down the side of her face.

“Yeah, they’re aliens, after all,” agreed another man, hiding in the back of the group.

I held my hands up in a gesture of peace. “We’re not here to harm you.” I looked over at Willa, sneering, her swords poised to attack. She could have easily subdued all of them by now. I was glad she was stable. “Willa, put those away.”

“She speaks English,” said the man with the ponytail.

“They mimic,” retorted the bald man. He spit on the ground to show his dislike and held on tighter to his rifle. “That’s what they do—trick you.”

“We’re not tricking you. My name is Ava and I escaped from Sanctuary, from the Corporation.”

The group’s focus was on Willa, except for the man with the ponytail. His rifle was completely lowered, looking at me curiously. I wished he was the leader and not the bald man. I felt that at any moment he would shoot us. We weren’t immortal. We would die. We were strong and fast though, and perhaps, we’d survive just a little bit longer, enough for Cory to come and get us, and take us back to the ship where we would be quickly healed. But I’d told him to wait. That we’d come to him. I had a way to communicate with a button on my shirt. All I had to do was press it and I could talk to him, but not now—not yet. I thought I could still manage the situation without bloodshed—on both sides.

“No one escapes from that place,” disagreed the bald man. “You know what I think?” He cocked the hammer. “I think you two were *let out*...yeah, let out by that monster Pallas...sent here to kill us.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “If you wanted you dead, you’d be dead by now,” I said in a low, threatening voice.

Why couldn’t he see that we were harmless? I looked at Willa. Well, it wasn’t helping that she still had her swords out.

“Willa! Put those away!”

She would never disobey me, so she slowly lifted her arms and slid the swords into their scabbards against her back. But as a caution, casual-like, she gripped the handle of the small knife at her belt. In one swift, quick move, she could throw it at a curve, slicing the bald man’s neck, while puncturing the heart of the woman with the scar beside him.

Willa wouldn't needlessly kill, but if she thought my life was in danger, she'd throw them like they were rag dolls, just like her sister did, but this time through the forest, right smack dab against the clear glass of the dome—for Julius to see and know that we were coming for him.

The man with the ponytail stepped forward, his gun hanging loosely by his side, unafraid. He was five feet away from me. Willa went to lunge forward, but I held up my hand, telling her to stay back. All the others kept their rifles pointed at us.

The man looked at my shirt. He smiled. "Ava?"

I smiled back. "That's my name."

"We heard some chatter about you."

"Shut up!" barked the bald man.

"You were treated differently," the ponytail man went on.

I nodded. "They didn't know what to make of me. I looked like a Stargazer, but I acted like a human. I had no memory of who I was. But I *was* tortured and imprisoned in Quadrant Echo. I met two kids, privates, named Rainn and Sunny." I swallowed, nervous. "I also met another one, Thaddeus Ridge."

"I hate that SOB!" said the bald man. "He's nothing but trouble!"

I smiled. "Well, would you be glad to know I broke every bone in his hand?"

"Why?" asked the ponytail man.

"He was threatening Sunny and Rainn."

"You care about us humans?"

I nodded. "I do. I have friends in the dome: John Goode, Loren Valier, and Henrietta." I paused and then said, "I had another one too—Victor Jamison." I turned to Willa. She didn't know that her own sister killed my friend. I turned back to the rebels. "I want your help."

The bald man spat on the ground again. "You want *our* help?! You got a big ole ship just hovering out there in space and you need *our* help?"

"It's advanced, but we can't penetrate the dome. Pallas has strengthened the defenses."

"He's got Medusa working overtime," said the ponytail man.

"Shut up!" barked the bald man again.

Willa growled at him. I didn't like him either.

"They're just trying to help," defended the man.

"Aliens don't *help*! They've never *helped*! The only good alien is a dead alien."

And he made good on his word. He pointed the barrel of his rifle square at me and pulled the trigger. The bullet never even hit me. Willa, with lightning fast reflexes, drew her swords again, and in a cross motion, sliced the bullet in half. Shavings fell onto the ground. As an extra bonus, she slammed her sword down the middle of his rifle, and it fell in halves from his hands. The rest, despite having guns, backed way, nervous. The bald man started trembling. It was almost comical.

I turned to Willa. "All right, it's over. Put them away now."

She was growling but did as I asked.

The man with the ponytail chuckled. "It's about time Marcus got put in his place." He turned to me and smiled, extending his right hand. As I touched him, I noticed an absence of bonding and felt that the rebels didn't have such abilities in their DNA. Julius had engineered that too. "Hi, I'm Selwyn and I'd be glad to form an alliance."

I found out by talking with the scarred woman, named Gina, that everyone had wanted Marcus, the bald one out, and Selwyn as their leader.

"He's more level-headed," Gina had told me while we waited by the river.

Selwyn, with the rest of the humans, were gone, out looking for other rebels to bring them back to me, where we could collaborate and form a plan. It seemed to be working out. Selwyn was enthusiastic, but I didn't know how the rest of the Resistance would feel. Gina didn't like me, and she really didn't like Willa, who kept a low growl all the time, but Gina didn't run away from me, and we even shared a meal—a can of beans. Willa refused, saying she wasn't hungry. I wasn't hungry either, but I ate the beans, hoping that by sharing a meal, Gina would feel like humans and Stargazers could get along, and then she'd tell the other rebels of her experience. But it was Selwyn I relied on. Everyone liked him, but it wasn't for his skill at using a rifle. He didn't keep a tight grip on it, and when he went to kill a rabbit for us to eat, the bullet jammed, and Gina had to fix his gun.

"He's a sweet boy," said Gina, as she sat back against a large rock along the river.

Willa was standing guard, looking out as if we were about to be attacked. I sat with Gina, showing her that humans were acceptable to Stargazers and that I didn't mind sharing the same space.

“Boy?” I asked.

Gina nodded. “Well, I guess he’s a boy to me. He’s nineteen, but I’m”—she smiled—“I’m older.”

“He looks older than nineteen.”

“It’s the rough life out here. It makes you grow up fast.”

“Do you know the Goode family? A boy named John?”

She nodded her head. “Yeah, we know all about John or is it *Doctor* Goode?”

I nodded. “He’s a doctor—physiology. He examined me when I first arrived.”

She grimaced. “What was that like?”

“I don’t know. I was unconscious. I know that he stuck a Separator in my head.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s inserted in the ear, and apparently it tries to find out all your secrets.”

“What did they discover?”

“Nothing; it didn’t work on me.”

She raised her finger. “See? That’s why we rebels will do *anything* to take down the Corporation. They’re cruel. And if any of us are captured, we kill ourselves.”

Willa turned to Gina, interested. “How?” she asked.

Gina furrowed her brow at Willa, unsure of how to converse with the less-than-friendly alien.

“It’s all right,” I told Gina.

Gina nodded. “Well, you see that?” She opened her mouth. There was a blue square attached to the inside of her cheek. “That’s poison. Thaddeus Ridge and his boys raided a large Stargazer vessel about two years back. They had all this neat stuff... anyway one of the group, a man named York—I don’t think that was his *real* name—he was a sort of a scientist—well, he went through all the equipment and found these blue squares. He was able to translate enough of the Stellar to realize they were like cyanide.”

“Where’s he now?”

Gina’s face fell. “He died. It *was* poison, but when he went to attach it to the inside of his cheek, he had mistakenly translated something wrong, and ended up killing himself. You see, the square”—she showed me and Willa again—“is supposed to be attached to another protective clear square.”

“And he didn’t have this square?”

“He didn’t know that’s what it did. You see, if you just put the blue square in your mouth, well, you die because you’ve activated it with your saliva or any other sort of liquid. The clear square contains the poison on the blue square until you activate it.”

“How do you do that?”

“You remove it from your cheek and crack it with your teeth.”

Willa took a step forward. “If this knowledge is available, then someone died, experimenting, correct?”

Gina nodded, sad. “Another man—kind of a scientist—friend to York—named Cal—he figured it out, and knew that there was only one way to test his theory.” She shook her head. “That was a sad two days—burying two men like that—men who were smart—men who were needed.”

“Did they have any family?” I asked, sad too.

“If they did, we didn’t know. No one talks much of what they’ve lost—or who they’ve lost. It’s too sad to think about. We just try to survive, day by day, until...”

“Until?” Willa asked, cocking her head to one side, intrigued.

Gina sighed. “Until the day comes that we don’t have to survive anymore—the day when we’re either dead or everything is normal again, and we can live life in luxury.”

“Luxury?” asked Willa, confused. “Shouldn’t you be grateful to be free?”

“Yeah, that’s good too, but we all want to be wealthy.” She pointed in the direction of the dome. “We want grand homes and more food than we can eat. We want the good life. It’s been far too long, sitting on the hard ground, shivering in the freezing rain, your stomach growling, aching for just a bit of food. That’s a rough life. We all know we don’t deserve that—that we deserve a better one.” She shrugged. “Why not? Why can’t we have what they have?” she asked, nodding towards the dome.

“I don’t know what it’s like in Sanctuary,” I began, “but in the Corporation, you do have nice beds and food, but everything is watched...controlled...you’re spied upon.”

Gina shook her head. “We won’t tolerate that. We want to be free. We don’t want anyone telling us what to do or where to go. Even if that Pallas pardoned us, and let us into the dome, he’d still be a leader—or hell, another man or woman who was a leader—they’d have to impose

order, right? They'd have to rule over a population. Well, we rebels don't want any ruler. We want to rule ourselves—do what we want.”

Willa shook her head. Her purple Mohawk glistened under the sun. “A society must have a ruler.” She pointed to me. “She is our Overlord. Without her, we would be nothing.”

Gina turned to me. “Overlord?”

I blushed. “It's like a ruler—a king. I was a princess back on my planet, but now, here, I'm the Overlord.”

“Who do you rule over?”

I looked up. “Well, just those aboard the ship.”

Gina casually stood up, but I could tell she was nervous about something. “So, uh, this plan you got for us rebels? What happens after we break through the dome? What happens if Pallas is killed? Are *you* going to declare yourself ruler?”

Willa held her head up, proud. “Princess Avalora is the only just ruler this planet can have.”

Gina clenched her rifle.

I stood up slowly, as not to seem threatening. “I'm not doing this to take over the planet,” I assured her. “I just want everyone to be free.”

“And for humans and aliens to live together in peace, right?”

That wasn't Gina. I turned to see Selwyn in front of a wooded area with a group of twenty rebels—men, women, and some children—all armed—and all looking very suspicious of me and Willa.

But Selwyn had a smile on his face. “I have no problem with that,” he continued.

Marcus was nearby, but unarmed. He spat on the ground. “There's no way we can live together. They'd kills us all—just like Pallas.”

“Didn't I tell you to shut up?” said Selwyn. “I'm the commander now.”

Marcus grunted. “Hmph! Being led by a kid!”

“My father was the commander before he died so that means *I'm* the commander.”

“This isn't a blood succession,” said Marcus. “The commander is who is *best* to lead.”

I would rather have Selwyn as the leader. He was level-headed but experienced? I didn't know anything about him.

“Selwyn?”

He turned to me and smiled. “Yes?”

I pointed down river. “Do you mind if we take a walk?”

He smiled wider. “Sure, okay.”

I turned to Willa. “Stay here.”

“But—”

I held my hand up. “That’s an order, Willa. I’ll be safe.” I waved at the group of unwary humans. “You can all talk, get to know each other.”

Willa furrowed her brow. “Know each other?”

Gina advanced. “Yeah, sure, why not?” She shrugged. “We’d love to hear some stories about your planet and we could tell you some stories about ours.”

I was surprised at her abrupt change in acceptance. Perhaps she felt more at ease with other armed rebels around.

Marcus grunted and opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by another man in the group. “We got some food. We could share and sit around a camp fire and talk.”

I smiled. “Yeah, just like the old days.”

Everyone looked at me with confusion. “Never mind. C’mon Selwyn.”

I didn’t know if he was happy to leave the group or happy to come with me, but I welcomed his enthusiasm and lack of desire to kill me anyway.

We walked slowly along the river. I noticed my reflection in the blue water. He peered over to look too.

“You’re very beautiful. Willa is... well, she’s scary, if I’m being honest. But don’t tell her I said that. I don’t want her angry.”

I laughed. “Trust me. She’ll take being called ‘scary’ as a compliment.”

We were silent again, walking. I took the time to appraise his appearance. Now that I studied him, I noticed he was young, handsome, with freckles all his face from being out in the sun. His ponytail had come undone and now his dark brown hair fell loosely just above his shoulders.

He winked. “Are you checking me out?”

I blushed, embarrassed. “I guess I was.”

He chuckled. “Wow, I can’t believe it. The alien Overlord thinks I’m handsome.”

“I didn’t say *handsome*.”

He smiled. “Oh, I think I did hear that, along with rugged—yes, ruggedly handsome.”

I laughed. “Selwyn, I think you’re too sweet to be a commander.”

His smile faded. “I can shoot.”

I could see that I had upset him. “I’m not saying you can’t.” Even though I was sure Gina was a more proficient shot. “I was just making the comment that you’re very...”

“Sweet?”

“Yes, sweet.”

“I don’t have to be sweet. I can be mean, you know.”

“I don’t want you to be different than who you are.”

He stopped and looked out at the river, slowly moving. He sighed. “That’s just it. I’m not sweet. I was born mean. My dad always beat me for getting into trouble—for picking fights with people—for stealing. I just *act* sweet.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I’ve seen you—you’ve never been mean.”

He smiled. “You’ve only known me for two seconds, darling. Stick around a little longer, and you’ll see the monster come out.”

I shuddered, thinking of Julius, and wondering why Selwyn was acting this way, for yes, I believed he was *acting* mean. He didn’t want to seem weak. He wanted me to name him as my loyal rebel commander. He wanted to be in charge—lead. Gina had said that none of them wanted a leader; well, if Selwyn got his way, he’d be the very person they feared. The question was: would he *act* mean to secure order—or would he be himself—*sweet*—and risk losing order?

“All right,” I said. “Let’s see how mean you can be.”

He furrowed his brow at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Be mean to me.”

“But...”

“But what? Say something mean—do something mean. Show me who you truly are. Show me that you’re the right man for me—for my plan—to infiltrate the dome and bring down Pallas.”

He clenched his rifle.

“No guns. Just words and fists.”

He loosened the grip on his rifle. “You mean you want me to hit you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, hit me.”

I was confident he couldn’t hurt me, but I wanted to see just how *far* Selwyn would go—if he was indeed a monster as he claimed.

He backed away, shaking his head. “No, I can’t do it. I can’t hit a woman.”

“But I’m not a woman—I’m an alien. I’m the invader. I’m the reason you’ve been out here, living in the wild, while the rest of humanity gets to sleep in warm beds and eat cake.”

“They eat cake?”

I nodded. “Sure, they do!” I didn’t mention the caloric requirements. “They’re living the good life, oh, but not when they’re being tried for treason, and then their heads gets chopped off. Pallas would never be in power, would never do those things—if *I*, as an alien Stargazer had never come to this planet. What about your dad? What’d he die for? Did he die for you to stand there and fantasize about kissing an alien while your fellow humans live under a murderous regime?”

“Kiss you?”

I chuckled. “So, out of that grand speech, that’s the only part you remember?”

He blushed. “I didn’t know Stargazers could read minds.”

“We can’t. That’s the Corporation.”

“But how did you know I wanted to kiss you?”

“I didn’t. I was just guessing. Why do you want to kiss me?”

“You’re just so...beautiful.”

“Aren’t there beautiful humans you’d like to kiss?”

He thought for a few seconds and then said, “No. I look at those girls and women as my family. I don’t want to do anything with them.”

“And you don’t want to do anything with me, either. Trust me.”

“Why? Do you...bite?”

I laughed. “No, I’m not that rough.”

“But you’re strong.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m very strong. I could kill you in an instant, do you know that?”

“Then why do you need me to help you get past the dome? Can’t you just...break it down?”

“I’m not that strong...but maybe I *could* do something.”

“What?”

“Well, I am very powerful. When I get mad, I can basically self-destruct, and take this whole planet with me.”

He smiled. “Well it’s a good thing I wasn’t mean to you.”

“You were never going to be mean to me, Selwyn. Don’t *act* different because that’s what you feel others want you to be. Be yourself.”

“But if I’m myself, then I’m weak, right?” He nodded to the group in the distance behind us. “What about Marcus? He’s a SOB, but no one called him ‘weak.’”

“Well, ever since I came, and you stood up, he’s not so powerful, now is he?”

He smiled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. We make a good team...Ava.”

“Think you can convince the rest of your friends to team up with me? Take down the dome? End Pallas’s reign of terror?”

“I’ll talk some sense into them. And if they still won’t help, then the hell with them. You and me—we’ll do this on our own.”

“I’d rather like to have everyone involved. I want this to be a group effort—for humans to reclaim their freedom.”

“But we’re weak compared to you Stargazers.”

“We’re weak too. We can’t even take out those cannons pointed at our ship from Sanctuary with the dome being up.”

He slung his rifle against his back and smiled. “We can help you there. I know a kid—young with an attitude—but he says he can get us past the dome.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “The punk wouldn’t tell me. He said he’d tell *you* though.”

“Why me?”

“He says someone on the inside told him to trust you.”

I immediately thought of Loren. He was the rebel spy. “Did he mention who?”

Selwyn shook his head. “Nope. So, you want to go talk to him”—he smiled—“or do you want to be alone a little while longer?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “C’mon, Selwyn. We’ve got a planet to free.”

“And then we can kiss?”

Chapter 15

I marched back to the group and he had to run to keep up. Gina was the only one willing to stand near Willa. I think she was really starting to feel comfortable around us. I wondered if it had something to do with tough females—taking care of themselves. All the others weren't necessarily afraid, but they weren't welcoming either. Someone had started a fire and they had already eaten—empty cans were in a pile next to some empty bowls.

"I was worried," said Willa advancing towards me.

She looked me over, making sure I was okay. She narrowed her eyes at Selwyn, trying to figure him out.

"I'm fine," I told her.

I turned to Selwyn. "Where's this boy?"

He nodded in the distance. "He's about a mile that way. He doesn't like to be around people—spends his time tinkering with Stargazer equipment—taking it apart—putting it back together again."

"All right; let's go see him."

Willa started to walk next to me. "Not this time, Willa. I don't want to frighten the boy."

"What boy?"

"I don't know, but Selwyn said he's communicating with someone inside the dome. Maybe he can help us get through and deactivate the cannons."

Willa glanced around at everyone. They weren't scared of her, but they weren't going to be her friend either. Gina stood near me, as did a few others. I wore their clothes and also I was unarmed. Selwyn was right beside me; his arm grazed mine several times. They were so used to me; I didn't understand it. I had similar hair and eyes as Willa, but I was the more acceptable alien to them. Also, I didn't have a bunch of sharp weapons on me, so that could've helped their confidence in being near me. Yet, they didn't have to be there. Was Selwyn such a commanding presence? Did he order them to cooperate? Or did the rebels, out of curiosity and necessity, break down their suspicious barriers, and give me a chance?

I didn't know what to make of them or this whole situation, but I viewed it as a positive. Maybe, soon, we would be through the dome, and the nightmare of Julius's regime would be over. It all seemed so simple in my head. I hoped it would be.

"A boy knows this?" asked Willa.

“He’s smart,” said Gina. She smiled. “Too smart for his own good.”

“Stay here and...get to know each other. Selwyn and I won’t be long. We’ll come back with the boy.”

“He likes his hole in the ground,” said Selwyn. “I don’t know if he’d come or not.”

I smiled. “I’ll just have to convince him.”

Back on Prominence, I had a cousin, young, who was almost like my little brother. I knew how to communicate with children. I hoped the human would be just as easy. Children were children, right?

“So, is there a...Mr. Overlord?”

Selwyn and I barely got on the trail to the boy when he started talking.

“What do you mean? Am I married?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m asking.”

I sighed. “No, I’m not married.”

“Are you in love with anyone?”

I hesitated. I loved so many: John, Loren...Julius...especially Julius. I could never tell Selwyn I loved the man responsible for all that evil.

“I didn’t think rebels were so chatty about others love lives.”

“We’re not.” He smiled. “It’s just me...or well, it’s just when I met you. I want to know all about you.”

“Why?”

“You’re fascinating.”

“I’m a Stargazer. I’m just like Willa and you’re not fawning over her.”

“Oh, Willa’s a whole different breed.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Well, what I meant was that she’s like the girl who’s wild and it seems like you’d have fun being with her, but then it would get to be too much, and you’re practically running away from her.”

“But not me?”

“No, you’re that nice, kind, stable sort of person; you’re always going to act rationally; there’s no fear when it comes to following you.”

I stopped abruptly. The dirt from the path kicked up and landed on my white shoes, turning them dusty brown.

“How can you be so trusting towards me?”

Selwyn shrugged. “It’s by your actions. People can talk and talk and talk, but it’s their actions that reveal who they truly are.”

“If you mean by my actions, then having not crushed your skull would qualify as acting rationally, right?”

We both laughed.

“Yeah,” said Selwyn, “that’s one way, but it’s something else.” He reached out and took a stray strand of lavender hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. He let his fingertip trail the length of my jaw before letting go. “There’s something about you, Ava. I have an overwhelming desire to trust you.”

“Well, it must be just you and Gina and maybe one or two others, then, because with Marcus and the rest, well, I think they’d sell me out to Pallas, if it meant their freedom.”

Selwyn shook his head. “No, you’re wrong on that. Rebels don’t sell out anybody—Marcus wouldn’t even do that. He’s a massive SOB, but no, he wouldn’t betray his kind for Pallas. A smile from that monster is just the preface to an execution.”

“But will they follow me?”

“They will if I tell them to.”

“Why? Because you’re the commander? After your father?”

“No. It’s because Loren Valier told them to.”

“So, the boy has been in contact with him?”

“Yeah, but Loren’s been in contact with all of us for quite some time. He sends us daily intelligence. We knew a little about you—not *exactly* who you were—but about a special Stargazer being captured.” He smiled. “He said you were the greatest person to ever enter his life.”

I blushed. “He said that?”

Selwyn nodded. “He’s completely in love with you—he didn’t say it—but I knew it—never seen him smile so much.”

I gasped. “You could see him?”

“Yeah, the kid’s got this screen—crudely made from Stargazer equipment—that allows us to communicate and see each other.”

“Let’s hurry. I need to see Loren.”

We advanced into a light run and finally reached the kid’s hideout. Selwyn was right. It was a hold in the ground. Actually, it was more like a bunker—one of those hollowed out places in the ground people built a really long time ago when there was the threat of war or some natural disaster.

Selwyn swept back a rug that was made to look like a pile of leaves with his foot and knocked three times on the door with the butt of his rifle.

“Open up, Zeke, it’s me.”

“Me who?” asked a young voice.

“You know who it is. I got someone special for you to meet.”

“Who?”

“A pretty girl.”

“What use I got for a pretty girl?”

“Just open up! I don’t have time for your nonsense!”

There was a few seconds of silence before I heard a grinding noise and then the door to his underground bunker opened. A little boy, dirty, with choppy blond hair looked up at me.

“She’s pretty. All right, come on down.”

I went down the stairs first, followed by Selwyn. The bunker was nice and cool. Zeke had lanterns lit to provide light but it wasn’t much. I noticed Stargazer equipment, opened and gutted. There was a small screen against the wall that piqued my interest.

“Can you contact Loren?”

Zeke shook his head as he sat down on a wobbly chair and propped his feet up on a table.

“Can’t see anyone--Medusa’s sending out a signal to block visual transmission from the dome to my receiver.”

“What about audio?”

“That’s not great either. There’s been these series of beeps coming out of the dome. I don’t know what Medusa’s saying but it’s nonsense to me.”

“Did you record them?”

Zeke nodded. "Of course; I got nothing better to do." He pushed a few buttons on a large black machine made up of Stargazer and human-engineered equipment. "Don't get too excited. It's just beeps."

The beeps started and instantly I knew what they were.

"That's Morse code!" I grinned at Selwyn. "That's Morse code!"

"What's that?" asked Zeke.

"It's ancient Earth communication," said Selwyn. "Former Commander Goode and his daddy knew about it. And that doctor son of his."

I nodded, excited. "That's John! But oh, I wonder what happened to Loren?!"

I suddenly became nauseous, thinking Loren had been executed for being a rebel spy, but from the beeps, John didn't mention that. Maybe he was alive or maybe John was sparing me the pain of knowing Loren had died.

"There's no telling with Pallas," said Selwyn, in response to Loren's fate. "So, what's John saying?"

The beeps had stopped. I told Zeke to play it again and I closed my eyes, letting each word sink in. When the recording stopped, I said, "This is going to be difficult."

"How?" asked Selwyn.

"Pallas has a quadrant, Alpha, where he's built an android army. Even if we make it through the dome, we'll have to contend with a superior force."

"Robots?" said Selwyn. "Hell, that man's been busy."

"They're tough," I said. "I only battled one. I'm strong but it was strong too."

"What happened?"

"Well, I basically crushed his armor, his circuits—his everything... what really finished him off was the fall from the top of Quadrant Delta. He crashed on the ground. I would have too if I wasn't teleported aboard the ship in space."

"Why can't we do that?" asked Zeke. "Why can't the Stargazers just teleport us inside?"

I sighed. "We could but Medusa's defensives are superior to our technology. That's why I was hoping *you* could help us."

"I know how to manipulate Medusa, but I can't do nothing without someone on the inside helping me. Someone has to be in Central Command, at the terminal--that's where Medusa is."

"Who's allowed access to Medusa?"

Zeke counted on his fingers. He only raised one. “Pallas; she would only allow Pallas in... not even the Madam Secretary.”

I sat down on another wobbly chair and sighed. “Loren said he *could* manipulate Medusa. He’s done it before, but I don’t think from Central Command.” I turned to Zeke. “Can you do something out here? Tap into Medusa, confuse her, make her admit Loren or John or someone on our side?”

Zeke shook his head. “It has to be by someone on the inside first. There’s not a damn thing I can do until then.”

“What about those beeps?” Selwyn lightly touched my shoulder. “Can you *beep* back at John? Tell him we need him or Loren to get into Central Command?”

I looked at the gutted Stargazer equipment. “I could put something together.” I turned to Zeke. “You can still transmit inside the dome, right?”

He smiled. “Oh, I can transmit and Medusa can pick it right up.”

“So, how would I pinpoint a location? I need John or Loren to hear me—not the whole of Sanctuary.”

Zeke sighed. “I *could* try something—something I’ve never tried before.”

“What is it?”

“Turn myself in.”

My eyes went wide.

“What?” Selwyn asked for me.

Zeke held up his hand, telling us to calm down. “Look, I’ve been thinking about it. I go to the dome—hold up my hands—tell Medusa I want to turn myself in—she sends out a Retrieval Squad—bam!—I’m in the dome.” He got up abruptly and picked up a black vest. “I made this. I got some neat materials while scavenging a Stargazer vessel awhile back. I was able to mold the garment to a sort of electrical charge.”

“What good is that going to do?” asked Selwyn.

Zeke put it around his chest. He was so thin, malnourished. “Well, I get captured, right, and the moment I get through the dome, I set it off—the pulses shock Medusa—she’s stunned.”

“And what then?” I asked.

“Well, she’ll fix herself as soon as she can, but until then, she’s working overtime, confused, and unaware of everything.”

“And that’s when Loren or John can use his rebel tech and infiltrate Central Command,” I surmised.

Zeke nodded. “You got it! They shut down Medusa—the dome falls—the cannons are deactivated—and it’s party time!”

It sounded like a good plan, except for the android army, and the guards with their weapons that turned people’s brains to mush.

“What about this vest?” I asked. “Will it hurt you?”

“Well...it was designed for Stargazer anatomy. I mean, all those electrical volts *could* kill me, but...”

“Wait, wait!” I jumped up. “There’s no way you’re going to do that! You’re not going to risk your life!”

“You’re going to go, aren’t you?” asked Selwyn in a soft voice.

“It’s the best option.”

He shook his head. “We’ll find another way.”

“No, time is running out. It has to be me—now.”

“But what about John and Loren? What if...what if they’re dead? Who’s going to shut down Medusa?”

I sighed. It was a very real possibility John and Loren *were* dead. I turned to Zeke. “Can you shut Medusa down?”

“Sure—if I can get into Central Command.”

“They’d have to capture you both, then,” Selwyn realized.

I didn’t like it. Zeke could be crushed by an android by the time he made it to Medusa, and if Julius was smart, he’d have a whole legion of androids protecting her.

“There has to be another way.”

“No, this is it!” said Zeke. “I’m going. I’m tired of sitting around here and doing nothing. I want to be a hero.”

“You’ll end up dying, you little fool!” Selwyn barked.

“If I get the dome down, so what? Why should my death be more tragic than anyone else’s?” He turned to me with pleading, young eyes. “Please! Let me do it! Let me come with you!”

Selwyn pulled me aside. “Ava, please! He’s just a kid.”

I sighed. "I know Selwyn...but he can put an end to all of this. He can save the world."

"You don't know that. A million things could go wrong."

"They could or everything could go right. It's time, Selwyn. It's time to stand up for what's right, even if that means dying for the cause."

Selwyn stepped away from me, frustrated. "If this goes south, there won't be any scrap of us left once Pallas sees to our end."

"That was always a possibility. He's never going to let you live in peace. Would you rather die, knowing you did *something* or live, looking over your shoulder, wondering, waiting when the axe is going to drop on you?"

"She's right," said Zeke.

"I know she's right, dammit!"

I took a chance and gave Selwyn a lingering kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

He caught my hand and squeezed. "When we make it out of this, when we're free, I want a *real* kiss."

"You'll get it."

The three of us walked silently back to the others. I had the black vest over my white shirt. Willa narrowed her eyes, always suspicious.

"Let's get back to Cory," I told her, halting any questions she was about to ask. Willa nodded and stayed silent. I turned to Selwyn. "Inform everyone of the plan."

"I want to come with you."

I shook my head. "You're their commander. You need to stay here—*command* them."

Gina approached. "The rest of the Resistance is on their way." She nodded to a newcomer in the group—a young girl with a bandaged hand.

"Good," I said with a nod. I turned to Selwyn. "You're going to have a lot of people depending on you. *Lead* them. Let them know what they're fighting for. Give them courage. This is their time. Make it an event to be remembered."

"I can't wait!"

He rushed forward, grabbed me, and kissed me roughly. I caught Willa's hand before she snapped Selwyn's neck.

"It's okay," I told her. "It's okay."

Selwyn smiled. "Even if she had killed me, it was worth it."

“Ugh!” moaned Zeke. “Are we going to save the world or are we going to kiss?”

“Don’t make me choose,” said Selwyn with a wicked grin.

I sighed and said, “C’mon Zeke. C’mon Willa. Let’s get going.”

The three of us made it to the Stargazer ship as Cory was opening the door. He rushed out and fell to my feet. “I was so worried! You have been away for so long.” He grabbed my hand and kissed it.

“What is it with men going crazy over women?” asked Zeke, shaking his head.

“I don’t understand either,” agreed Willa. “There are far more important tasks to accomplish.”

I motioned for Cory to stand up. “Go back in the ship with Willa.”

“I’m to stay back, again?” she said, trying to contain her fury.

“Yes. You and Cory will communicate with *Calumny*. Zeke and I are going to the dome. Once we’re past, Zeke is going to take out Medusa in Central Command. I want you to express to Jax that when the cannons go down, that is *not* a sign for attack. Sanctuary will be left unharmed. The Resistance will move in and take over.”

“Can they be trusted with such a mission?”

“You bet your alien ass,” said Zeke, proud.

Willa furrowed her brow, confused by his remark. I ignored his rudeness. I needed his help and besides, being out in the wild, I’d probably be crude too.

“The Resistance needs to be involved,” I told her. “They’re humans and this is their planet.”

“What about us? Are we to help them and then move on?”

“I don’t know what’s out there. I want to us to stay here. That’s why I don’t want to exclude the humans. We’re on *their* land. When all this is over, it’s up to them whether or not we stay. And I hope by what I’m about to do, I can endear them to us.”

“Well, you know Selwyn’s in love with you,” said Zeke.

And others, I wanted to say—John and Loren. I hoped they were alive, but I also feared their torture, their imprisonment in Quadrant Echo. After we had taken over Sanctuary, I’d have to locate them immediately. And Henrietta; I worried about her allegiance to Julius. How many others in Sanctuary were devoted to him? Would we have to fight them too?

“Cory, Willa, get inside the ship,” I ordered, distracting myself from what may or may not come. “Zeke and I are headed to the dome.”

Willa hesitated, but then bowed, and entered the ship. Cory kissed me again on my hand and then entered behind Willa.

“I don’t get it,” said Zeke, as we were walking in the direction of the dome. “Why do all these guys go crazy over you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been told I’m beautiful.”

He looked at me as we walked. “You’re pretty, I grant that, but you’ve got them under some kind of spell or something.”

I chuckled. “Me? A spell? I’m not doing anything.”

“Well, there’s something special about you.”

I halted.

“What?” he asked, as he stopped next to me.

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it!”

“That’s what?” he groaned.

“I am special!”

“Well, someone’s full of herself.”

“No, I *am*. I have this ability.”

“What kind of ability?”

“Well, when I get mad, I can get *very* destructive.”

“How so?”

“It’s just this power I have. The wind blows wild; trees uproot; water rises to scaling heights; I can cause storms too and earthquakes.”

“Wow! I’d like to see that.”

“But it’s dangerous. I could kill people.”

“Can you bring down the dome?”

“Probably but I don’t know the repercussions.”

“Well, why don’t we go through with our plan, and then when I’m making a run for Central Command, you explode in a rage, knocking out all those androids and guards, and then I’m home free!”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, Zeke. If I don’t stop in time, I could destroy the whole planet.”

He clenched my hand. “I trust you, Ava. You can do it.”

I almost started to cry. “Thanks, Zeke.”

We walked on in silence. I wasn’t entirely convinced I could stop my destructive force in time though. Back with Julius, in Quadrant Delta, I would have taken down the whole tower—the whole planet—if that android hadn’t distracted me. I was filled with so much rage, learning who Julius really was—the acts he had committed—his lack of remorse.

But as I thought about it, I felt more confident that I could do it. I wasn’t off guard. I wasn’t a lost girl who needed answers. I knew everything. I was the Overlord now. I had a battleship in space under my command, and with Selwyn, a human Resistance as my allies. I had little Zeke, who barely knew me, willing to die to bring down the dome. I was in amazement at this planet, at Earth, and at myself. I was such a brat back on Prominence. Now, I’m the catalyst for change—the bringer of freedom to an alien race. It was all so bizarre, but at the same time, expected. As if this was my destiny.

We finally made it to the dome. I felt the vest, knowing it was there, but still making sure I had everything prepared.

“Remember,” said Zeke, “don’t activate it until we’re almost *through* the dome. Before, after—won’t work. You’ve got to mess up her circuits that pulsate through the dome glass.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

I was supposed to merely swipe my hand against the vest. With my Stargazer DNA that activated the electrical current, pulsating out, connecting to Medusa’s circuits, interwoven in the glass dome, and then she was supposed to suffer from a freeze. That was when she was vulnerable and Zeke could make his way to Central Command. Once that happened, I had to deal with the guards and the androids and any indoctrinated humans in Sanctuary who wanted to stop me from hurting their beloved Pallas.

I turned to Zeke. “Do you have that poison in your mouth like Gina?”

He opened his mouth and showed me. “Yeah, it’s something we all did. We don’t want to be tortured.”

I patted him lightly on his back. “Hopefully, neither of that will happen.”

“It really is beautiful,” he said, nodding to the glittering white city of Sanctuary.

I nodded. “It is.”

All the buildings were white and clean. I could see all the windows; some black, closed, and others clear, opened. I wondered if anyone was looking out at us, but the city was far too large to

notice me and Zeke. There were lively trees and grass, making it look like a paradise. Posters and statues of Julius were everywhere. I couldn't help gazing upon him, admiring his beauty. He smiled in some; frowned in others. He was gorgeous in either pose.

I was afraid of what was to come. Julius couldn't be killed. I could only imprison him. But how long would that last? Who would look after him when I was dead and gone? It had been in my mind for a while—killing myself or letting myself be killed—hoping Julius, if he still loved me, would give up his immortality and join me in the afterlife—or at least depart this world, staying in the ground all alone with no chance at redemption. I didn't know what was in store for him; I had already forgiven him, but it wasn't my forgiveness that would save his soul. I wasn't that powerful.

As if on cue, the android army began marching towards us. They were joined by humans—the Retrieval Squad—with their weapons, fixed on us.

“Are you okay?” I asked Zeke, worried about him.

He nodded. “I can do this. You trust me, right?”

I smiled. “I do. Do you trust me not to kill everyone on the planet?”

He smiled back. “I do.”

I nodded towards a large white sphere in the center of the city. “Is that Central Command?”

“Yeah, it's easy to get to. All I have to do is take that red-bricked path, and it's a straight shot. You take care of the bad guys and I'll run like hell.”

As the androids and humans marched towards us, my view was blocked by a flickering on the dome. A large black screen appeared on the glass.

“It is good to see you again, Ava,” said Medusa.

“It's good to see you too.”

I really had missed her, but I had to keep my emotions in check. I had a mission and that involved killing Medusa.

“Do you wish to enter Sanctuary?”

“I do.”

“And your companion?”

“Him too, so can you call off the army headed towards us?”

“Do you come in peace?”

“Yes; we're turning ourselves in.”

“I will notify President Pallas.”

I watched her tilt her head around like usual. “Medusa, where is John and Loren? And Henrietta?”

She stopped moving. “Dr. John Goode, Dr. Loren Valier, and Henrietta are imprisoned in Quadrant Echo.”

I almost fainted. “But...they’re okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you monitoring their health?”

“Yes.”

“Are they hurt?”

“They are not as well as they should be.”

“What does that mean?”

“They are malnourished.”

“Are they on a food strike?”

“No, they have been given fewer rations than the other inmates. Dr. John Goode is feeling the effects the most. He is weak and can barely walk.”

It had to be now. I had to put an end to this.

“Let us through the dome, Medusa.”

“President Pallas has granted your request. He is most anxious to see you, Ava. You will be escorted to his quarters. Your companion will be taken to the Examining Room.”

“Like hell,” Zeke muttered.

I patted him on the back, telling him to shut up. “We agree,” I told Medusa. “Let us in.”

Medusa began pushing buttons. I heard a buzzing sound and then it stopped.

“You may proceed.”

I nodded and turned to Zeke. “Ready?”

He nodded. “Ready.”

He went first, walking straight through the glass dome, and got into position so that when he ran along the red-bricked path, he was in between two Retrieval Squad units, made up of twenty men each, leading straight to the Command Center in the middle of the dome.

I could see his legs twitching, anxious. He truly was brave.

I entered next, slowly, watching, as I did what I was supposed to do. As I passed through the dome, I slid my hand against my vest, as if I was merely adjusting it. I didn't see anything, but I heard the success of my task. There was a loud buzzing noise, too loud that made my ears hurt. The androids weren't affected. They must be independent from Medusa. That was risky on Julius's part, but I assumed he wanted freedom from Medusa's control. The humans on the other hand held their hands up to their ears in pain. I almost laughed at the irony.

I looked over at Zeke. He held his hand clamped to his right ear.

I panicked. "Zeke, are you okay?"

"Yeah," he yelled back. "I'm deaf in my left ear, so it's not that bad!"

"Can you make it?"

But he didn't answer me, taking off, swerving around the human guards, who could do nothing but watch him fly past. The androids were the problem. Already a dozen of them, walking quickly, advanced to intercept Zeke. I went into action. I wasn't mad, but I was frustrated, and I hoped that would release my power. I struggled and struggled, but I didn't erupt. I wasn't mad enough. So instead I shrugged off the black vest and ran towards the androids. In swift and precise movements, I managed to crush all twelve of them. Their black metal frames were a crumpled mess upon the red-bricked path.

The loud buzzing stopped. I halted, fearing Medusa was back in control. I looked for Zeke, but I couldn't find him. Some of the guards drew their guns, targeting me, but still a showing signs of dizziness, swaying. The rest of the androids drew similar weapons from their body. I was outmatched and outgunned. I thought about letting them kill me, hoping that in my death, Julius would give up his own life too, but I wasn't ready. I needed to give Zeke time to take down the dome. I needed to see Henrietta, John, and Loren again. I had to fight back.

Thinking of my friends in prison, starving, it made me furious. I was furious at Julius for everything he had done, but I was more furious at myself, for loving him when I should hate him. I felt the familiar surge of energy within my core. It had begun. The wind blew fierce. The ground cracked and opened at my feet. I knew I had to control it, so I made the effort to target the threat before me. With the androids, I opened up a chasm in the ground, sending them down into the earth. With the humans, I conjured up lightning and rain, sending bolts, shocking their weapons, causing them to explode. They threw them down in horror. They were defenseless now, but were they still a threat? The men with no protection quickly scampered away like

frightened mice. As they ran, others, citizens of Sanctuary, ran with them, ran away from me—the destructive alien. I expected more of a fight. I was glad it hadn't come to that and glad that I had been able to quiet the rage inside me, bringing my destruction to a halt.

I heard a loud noise like a boom. I thought it was an explosion, but I didn't see any fire or smoke. I heard yelling. I turned to the glass dome but it was gone. I could smell and feel the air of the wild world where rebels lived. It was hot and consuming compared to the air of Sanctuary, which was clean and crisp. I preferred the former; that meant a chance; a chance at freedom.

Zeke had done it. Selwyn caught up with me, bringing thousands of rebels behind him. He embraced me in a hug.

“You did it!”

I gently pushed him away. “See to Zeke. He's in Central Command.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have to go find my friends.”

I looked all around, trying to figure out which one was Quadrant Echo. While I scanned the area, I noticed the large white cannons that had been targeting my ship in space were now slumped down—deactivated. I was glad Zeke had succeeded, but I felt sorry for Medusa. She had never done anything to harm me. She was just a programmed machine—like the programmed people of Sanctuary. I had warned Selwyn to order his people *not* to harm the citizens. They could defend but not summarily execute. I wanted everyone, including the doctors, even the Red Woman, pardoned. The only offender would be Julius Pallas—my Julius—my love.

Without Medusa, without a map, I was lost. Where was Quadrant Echo? I found the narrow walkway where the android and I had fallen from. Quadrant Delta was the largest facility and the tallest. Inside was where Julius had engineered the ocean and the forest, bringing me back to a time long ago on Earth when we were carefree and happy. I destroyed it all when I escaped. I wondered if he had it rebuilt.

Medusa said he wanted to see me in his quarters, but where were his quarters? Henrietta would know. But I had to find Quadrant Echo first. Everywhere, chaos ensued, as rebels and citizens ran around, screaming, confused.

I caught a woman by her arm. She was young with strawberry blond hair. “Miss? Do you know where Quadrant Echo is?”

She screamed at me and tried to pull away. I held my grip on her but not enough to hurt. Normally, I would've let her go, but this wasn't normal times.

"Please!" I begged. "Where is Quadrant Echo?"

She was trembling and I thought she was going to faint, but she lifted her hand and pointed to a white building across from Quadrant Delta. It stood apart from the rest of the buildings and was the only one with the least amount of windows.

I let her go. "Thanks," I yelled at her as I ran away. She ran away too; glad to be rid of me.

Guards rushed out of the building, their weapons targeted on me. I heard gun shots but it came from behind.

"I'll clear them for you!" yelled Selwyn.

I turned to see him and Gina, along with other rebels, firing their rifles at the guards.

"Be careful!" I yelled. "They can kill you in two shots!"

He smiled. "All I need is one shot!"

I dodged guards and had to throw a few out of my way as I advanced into Quadrant Echo, with Selwyn and his rebels finishing off the rest. I expected the prison alarms to be going off, but then I remembered Medusa was dead. Not trusting the elevator, I took the emergency stairs down to Sublevel 001, where I used to be, hoping that was where John, Loren, and Henrietta were.

With Medusa shut down, I didn't know if the door to their cells were locked or not, but I assumed they were because I didn't see any prisoners running around, trying to find a way out. It was deadly quiet on Sublevel 001, and above, at the hundreds of other cells that lined the floors.

I went to my old cell, and with all my strength, beat down the door. Even with Medusa shut down, the doors were still secure. I assumed it to be a secondary security measure in case Medusa was ever manipulated. Quadrant Echo had gone on lock down.

"Henrietta!"

I couldn't believe she was there. I ran to her, holding her thin, frail frame in my arms.

"Ava?" she said weakly. "What's going on? Pallas said that you left us."

"He said that?"

"He said that you were aboard the ship—that you had abandoned us. I think he wanted us to believe that you didn't care about us, but I didn't believe him." She smiled weakly. "I didn't believe him, Ava."

“You were right. I would never leave you. And I really need you right now. Where’s Pallas’s quarters?”

“He’s in Quadrant 1. Why?”

“He’s there right now. I have to go to him. I have to end this.”

“I’ll show you.”

“Wait, where’s John and Loren?”

“They’re a floor above, in cells 101 and 102.”

We rushed up and again, I broke through the doors with my fists. I went to John, while Henrietta helped Loren out.

“Ava?” John said weakly. He was thin and his hair was brittle, falling out. He lay on the cold, hard table—trying to move—to get to me. “He said you left us.”

I went to him and held his hand. He was so cold. “I would never leave you. I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you too.”

“Now, c’mon and get up. The dome is down. The rebels are inside.”

“Is it over?” he asked, wrapping his arm around my waist, trying to stand up.

“Soon,” I said. “I have to see Pallas. Henrietta is going to guide me there.”

“What about me?”

“You and Loren make it outside. Go find Zeke, Selwyn, or Gina. They’re good people. They’ll help you out.”

“Ava?” someone said weakly.

I turned to see Loren, walking to me with Henrietta by his side. He was a bit stronger than John, advancing towards me. Even with John wrapped around me, Loren gave me a tight hug, and then kissed my lips. His blond hair was wilder than usual.

“I thought—”

“I know,” I stopped him. “I was aboard my vessel for some time, but I rallied the Resistance, and now we’re inside the dome. Medusa is...not going to be a problem.” I smiled weakly, still in mourning. “Zeke shut her down.”

Loren smiled. “That little rascal; he’s got an attitude, but he’s smart as hell.”

John held me tighter.

“I got your message,” I told him, “the Morse code—warning me about the androids.”

John smiled. “Good. I wasn’t sure if I was doing it right. Loren taught me before... before he got hauled away. Are the androids out there?”

“I took care of a lot of them. I’m sure the rebels will do the rest. They weren’t tied to Medusa, so they’re a bit more of a nuisance.”

“That’s what I feared,” said Loren. “That’s why I wanted John to warn you.”

“It’s good that you did. Zeke and I were prepared before we entered the dome.”

“How did you do it?” asked Henrietta.

I sighed. “I’ll tell you all later. Right now, I have to get to Pallas.” I gently pushed John away. “Loren, hold onto him. Make it outside to the rebels.”

“But what about the other prisoners?” Henrietta asked.

“Maybe we’re safer in here,” said John, sounding stronger. “It’s quiet in here. Everyone’s outside, attacking—chaos.”

He was right. “Okay, stay here, in Henrietta’s cell. About the other prisoners, well, they can stay a little longer until the situation is under control.”

“What situation?” Loren asked.

“Pallas,” I said. “I have to deal with him.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

I shook my head. “No. He can’t be killed. He’s immortal.”

They all looked at me, confused. I sighed. “It’s a long story, but basically, he can only die if he wants to die. I’m going to ensure that.”

“How?” asked John.

“I don’t know yet,” I lied. “I just need to find him before the rebels.”

“I’ll take you. Let’s go,” urged Henrietta, holding out her hand for me.

I smiled. “You want to bond?”

She smiled back. “We might lose each other in the crowd.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I took her hand. We were held together like glue. Before leaving, I turned to John and Loren. If I was going to go through with my plan, then I’d never see them again. “Take care of each other until help arrives, okay?”

Loren nodded. “I’ll look after him.” He bonded to John so that he wouldn’t fall. He was still weak. “Be careful, Ava. Come back to us.”

I just smiled and let Henrietta guide me out. There was absolute panic outside. People were running, screaming, and there was gunfire. I didn't have time to process the scene as Henrietta ran, pulling me along on a red-bricked path. We passed several white buildings until she halted before Quadrant 1.

"This is it," she said, breathless.

"Where is he?"

"At the very top; the whole building is his, but his quarters are up there."

She pointed to the apex that was nothing but windows. They were clear, open; I wondered if he was looking out at me, longing for me.

I turned to Henrietta. "Thanks and now get back to John and Loren."

"I could come with you."

I shook my head. "No, I need to do this alone. Now, please go!"

Henrietta nodded and took off. I hoped she'd be safe on her way back. I could've had her wait below, but I feared she would come after me, and I didn't want her to see me with Julius. I didn't take the elevator, instead using the stairs. I ran up and up to the very top where the final door led out to a narrow passageway and then a large white door at the end. I was nervous, trembling, but I took a breath in and out, and approached the door. There was no knob, only the panel to the right to scan my hand. I thought about knocking, but didn't know if he could hear me. There were several explosions going off outside. For some reason, I don't know why, I put my hand to the panel. A blue light scanned it. There was a clicking noise and the door opened.

Chapter 16

Cautiously, I entered, looking for him, but I only found a large room filled with white furniture. To my surprise, there were lavender pillows on the sofas and a lavender rug beneath a white polished table. I walked to the next room and that was where I found him, lying on his bed; the sheets were lavender.

He turned to me. He had been crying.

Holding a clear glass of some liquid, he said in slurred speech, “Well, well—look who came back.”

He was drunk. I tried to remain emotionless.

“You knew I would. Why did you lie to John, Loren, and Henrietta?”

He smiled. “I’m a liar. I lied to you. I never loved you—never! I’ve always hated you—you worthless brat!”

I took a step forward. “Well,” I began, teasing him, “I loved you, very much. In fact, I’ll always love you.”

He dropped the glass on the lavender carpet. “Oh, Ava, my love, come here! Come to me!”

He opened his arms for me and I came to him, allowing him to hold me while we lay on the bed. He wore the same clothes I’d seen him in before—a black shirt, but unbuttoned all the way down, showing his muscular chest, with black pants; no shoes.

We just lay there, looking at each other. I went to open my mouth, to speak, but he silenced me with his lips, kissing me softly, then wild, deep, passionate. I rolled on top of him, straddling his waist, running my fingers through his black hair. He moaned and turned, bringing me beneath him, as he freed my lips, trailing the tip of his tongue down my neck. I gasped, relishing the sensation, remembering the times we’d been like this on our home planet.

“Let’s just stay here, like this, forever,” he said against my neck. Then he pulled back and looked into my eyes. “Avalora, please, help me! Call off the Overlord. Save me!”

I sighed. “Oh, Julius,” I said, caressing his cheek. He was so warm. “I *am* the Overlord.”

His face went still and then he smiled, bursting into laughter. He rolled on his back, bringing me with him to lie on his chest. He hugged me tight. “Oh, Ava! *You*, the Overlord!

It’s...it’s...well, I don’t know what it is.” He looked at me. “It’s a good thing, right? I feared the

Overlord's arrival... that he was going to freeze me and put me in that containment pod like that scout did with you... but now that I know it's *you*, well, this changes things."

I pushed away from him and sat up. "No, it doesn't, Julius." I got up and stood away from him. I had forgotten about the containment pod. I didn't have to die. And he didn't have to give up his immortality, dying too. But was that the right decision? Freezing him? What if in the future, someone freed him? Would he go back to his reign of terror?

He sat up but made no move towards me. "What do you mean, my love?"

I sighed. "There are so many out there who want your head on a platter. Do you have any idea how much you're hated?"

He shot off the bed. "I don't care!" He advanced towards me and tightened his hands around my arms—his fingers digging into my flesh. It didn't hurt. "I only care about what you think!"

"You know how much I love you, but that doesn't mean you're pardoned!"

"Ava..." He held me to him, caressing my back. "Ava, my love, *please*, you know me! You know me! I served you on Prominence. I did everything for you." He pulled away from me but still held on. "Wasn't I loyal? Wasn't I good to you?"

I remembered my conversation with Cory on the ship. "You were loyal because you loved me, but you hated serving. You hated being a slave. That's why you've done *everything*—the dome—Sanctuary—the Corporation. You have to be in charge. You have to be above everyone else. What about me? I'm *your* Overlord. *You serve me.*"

He smiled. "I've always served you, my love." He began kissing me, trailing his lips down my neck. "Would you like me to comfort you like I did before?"

I didn't resist as he guided me towards the bed, my heart pounding in my chest. He got down on his knees and looked up at me. "You'll always be my sweet princess."

I felt hot all over and found myself succumbing to his touch as he ran his hands up my legs. There was another explosion outside and I was reminded of where we were and who I was.

"NO!"

I shifted away from him. He looked at me with horror and then stood.

"Ava, my love... don't you know that I love you? I would do anything for you—*anything!*"

"Julius—"

The bedroom door burst open and there she was, the Red Woman, looking haggard and unkempt, barefoot. So that was why I didn't hear her approach.

“YOU!” she yelled at me, snarling. “YOU!” she said again, shaking, trembling.

It all happened so fast. She pulled out a gun and aimed it at me. The first shot went off and I was down on the floor, disoriented. I managed to look up and see her fighting with Julius. He snatched the gun easily from her and pulled the trigger, killing her instantly. She fell to the floor with her eyes open, staring at me, accusing me still—but for what, I didn’t know. Perhaps ruining her life or ruining her ill-conceived chances with Julius.

“Ava,” he said, dropping the gun and falling to the floor next to me. “Ava, are you all right?”

I nodded, unable to speak. He picked me up and carried me to the bed. It was soft and I felt like going to sleep, so tired—so very tired of everything. I was jolted back to reality when the black button on my shirt—the communication device to the ship—gave me a slight shock. I slapped the button.

“Yes?” I asked, exhausted.

“What’s your location, Overlord?”

It was Jax. This was it. It was now or never. Julius had been holding my hand and caressing my cheek. I gently pushed him aside and got off the bed. Julius remained sitting while I stood away.

“I’m in Quadrant 1. How are things in the dome?”

“It’s complete chaos. Overlord, will you permit us to teleport to the surface? We could bring back order.”

Julius grunted and opened his mouth to speak, but I rushed to him, and silenced him with my hand. He smiled and kissed my palm. Then he embraced me and began kissing me lightly through my shirt. I almost melted on the floor. This was what he’d done back on our planet. When we’d been in public, at my father’s court in the royal palace, he couldn’t help kissing me through my gowns, sneaking them in, whenever he could.

I sighed, holding him to me, running my fingers through his black, shiny hair. I loved his hair.

“Jax,” I croaked out, “send only a small team down. I don’t want the humans to panic. Have the leader find Selwyn. He’s the rebel commander. Tell him that I approved of Stargazer interference.”

“It’s not *interference* to restore order, my Overlord.”

“Insolent bastard,” whispered Julius. “You should have his head removed.”

I clamped my hand over his mouth again, silencing him, and again, he kissed me.

“Are you questioning my orders, Jax?”

“No, my Overlord. I will prepare a team immediately.”

“Jax, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Prepare a containment pod.”

Julius didn’t look up at me, but he clasped me tighter to him. If I were human, I’d be in pain.

“A containment pod?” asked Jax.

“It’s for Julius.”

“Have you apprehended him?”

I smiled, despite my sadness. “In a manner of speaking.”

Julius shook his head against my stomach. “No, Ava, please!” he pleaded.

“Shall I send down some guards? I could come as well.”

“No, you’re needed as Viceroy. And no guards will be necessary. He won’t put up a fight.

Prepare to transport us back to the ship.”

“I could send him straight to the pod, Overlord. It would be safer.”

“Do as I command.”

“Yes, my Overlord.”

I sighed, feeling so exhausted.

Julius looked up at me. “Why did you do that? Why didn’t you want me to go straight into cryogenic sleep?”

“I want to say goodbye to you...before”—I sighed—“before I never see you again.”

He stood up and held me. His eyes were so black, so sad. “Will you come and visit me, everyday?”

“You know I will.” I held him tight. “You don’t have to do this, you know? You could give up your immortality.”

He shook his head. “I’d do that if I was confident I’d go to that starry realm. After all the things I’ve done, I know where I’ll be: in the ground. That’d be fine, if you were with me, but you’re so good, so forgiving—you’ll be above me while I rot away.”

I started to cry. “You don’t know that. You could get there, among the stars, and when it’s my turn, I’ll join you, and we’ll be together, until the end of time.”

“No, my love; my heart is black; my redemption is gone; there’s no hope for me.”

I said nothing, crying, holding him to me, as we were teleported back to the ship.

After a few months, Sanctuary was normal. Humans and Stargazers cooperated to rebuild society. There was a new government, elected by the people. A human president was chosen with a Stargazer vice-president. The cabinet was a mixture of Stargazers, former dome residents, and ex-rebels.

I spent my days on the surface with Henrietta, John, Loren, Selwyn, Zeke, and Gina. It took some time for everyone to acclimate, but they finally found their place in the world. Medusa was reprogrammed with the help of Zeke. She kept vigil over everyone, but not as before—not as a spy. I spoke to her often, when I wanted someone emotionless to converse with. I was lonely and depressed. The *Calumny* was all but deserted on my orders. Only Willa and Cody remained with me. Jax had a place in the new government which he took to immediately.

I remembered Victor and even though he was burned, his remains unfound, I had a marker made for him, as well as markers for the thousands of people who died and never were given a chance to be memorialized. A large cemetery was built, outside what used to be the dome. There were so many markers that after a few days, I stopped going. I needed to be reminded of the tragedy, but I couldn’t bear any more tears.

My nights were spent with Julius. I watched him with his eyes closed, asleep, in that containment pod. He was isolated in a small black room, as his container stood erect against the wall.

It was a year later, the anniversary when Sanctuary had been freed, that I stood in that cold black room, watching him sleep. I dismissed Willa and Cody, telling them I wanted to be alone. I stood there the whole day, staring at him, desiring to be with him. He was my whole life even though I had people like John and Loren and Selwyn who would love me and *not* try to rule with an iron fist. Anyone of them would be good for me. But it was always Julius—forever.

Celebrations were kicking off on the surface. There were fireworks. I had been invited to join them, but I’d made an excuse that I was needed on the ship. While the festivities went on

into the night, I wrote a letter to Willa and Cody, telling them goodbye, and making Willa the new Overlord.

Then I sealed the room. It was the sturdiest room on the ship. It could withstand a nuclear blast. I deactivated Julius's pod and clothed him in a black robe so he wouldn't be cold. It took some time, but he finally opened his eyes.

"Ava," he whispered.

"It's time," I told him.

He nodded, understanding. Perhaps he always knew it, but I had only figured it out weeks ago. I was linked with the computer on the ship, trying to understand who I was, and where I got my powers from. I learned that I died when I was small and my parents brought me to a sacred place in Prominence, at the center of the planet where ancient spirits existed. They brought me back to life, but with a terrible curse, for life could not be returned, unless something was taken away. My petulant attitude was my undoing. I was imbued with destruction. I could never live a normal life because I was capable of chaos. And in that chaos, if I channeled it against myself, I would die.

"I'll go first," he said. "And then you follow me."

I nodded, holding him to me, while we sat on our knees. He embraced me and kissed me on my lips. It was sweet. It was our last kiss.

"I love you, Avalora."

He said it in Stellar. It sounded so much more beautiful.

"I love you," I repeated back in our language.

He sighed and closed his eyes, beginning the process of Deliverance. I watched as his soul, dark and misty, separated from his body. It evaporated and I didn't know where he went. I laid his dead body on the floor of the room, and then I stretched out next to him, resting my head against his chest. I closed my eyes and started to cry, trembling, building up the destructive energy inside me. I harnessed it, bringing all its chaos down upon us. The wind gushed and whistled around the room like we were in a massive cyclone. I felt the floor tremble and groan as if it were going to fall out from under us.

And then I was surrounded by darkness, sprinkled with bright, twinkling lights.

I was all alone in that starry realm.

About the Author

[Melanie Matthews](#) is the author of *Coldhearted*, *Burning Hearts*, and *The Rebel Prince*.