

The Bright Garden

by

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The Bright Garden

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## ABSTRACT

Calli Hayford lives on Kipos, a recently colonized planet far from Earth. Amongst the jungles and ravenous animals that threaten the various settlements across the planet's surface, Calli is dealing with something much more dire: her sick mother, who is slowly dying from an unknown sickness. With funds scarce, Calli decides to do the impossible: to locate auracite, a rare mineral native to Kipos, in the hopes that it will provide her with the money to afford a cure. She leaves home with her friend, the sly and scruffy Sera, and encounters a whole new world outside of her own, one that will force her to answer questions she never knew she needed to answer: how far is she willing to go for someone she loves?

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## Prologue

Diana Hayford remembers Autumn. A metaphorical death, and the promise of an eventual rebirth. It hangs there in her memory like a stubborn strand on a piece of clothing, refusing to be ripped out when tugged. She experienced one Autumn on Earth that she could remember, and that had been years ago, when she was a child. Now, she wakes up - every day for the past twenty years - someplace new. Someplace that isn't Earth, and thinking of Autumn.

When she does wake up, she stands up from the bed with a quick start, stomping through the bundle of clothes she's forgotten to wash. Again. She nearly storms from the small gray room she calls her own, and walks into the kitchen, if one could call it that. There's everything she needs - a stove, oven, sink - but, like everything else that the corporation provided her, it never felt complete.

Calli, her daughter, sits at the table with a nearly empty bowl and spoon that clinks the dish as she drops it in for another bite of cereal.

"Morning," she says.

Diana rubs her eyes. "I was gonna make breakfast."

"I'm gonna be late for school."

Diana looks at the digital clock on the wall, reads 7:34 AM, and she sighs.

"Sorry, baby."

Calli just sips the milk from the bowl as she upends it. She puts it and the spoon in the sink and goes for her backpack, which sits on the floor by the door.

Diana is always surprised at how much Calli looks like her father, like the two of them are always inhabiting the same space at once. She often sees bits and pieces of William through Calli's green eyes. Sometimes she just wants to ask her what she thinks of her father.

Diana already knows what she would say.

"Today's the field trip, isn't it?" Diana's words stop Calli before she can exit the mechanical sliding door. If anything, Diana wants to talk to her thirteen-year-old daughter. Just to talk.

"Yeah," Calli says indifferently, then tries to head out the door, but Diana cuts her off with more questions.

"You have everything?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"Gas mask?"

Even though she could clearly see it, Diana watches as Calli shows off the gray, composite plastic gas mask that is hooked to the loop in her pants.

"Got that too."

"Okay," Diana says, finally giving her daughter some respite. Before she could say "Have a nice day, honey," Calli is out the door.

She sighs. She wants to chalk it up to underserved teenage aggression, reminding herself that she was like that once upon a time.

But Diana grew up on Earth, and subsequently on large colony ships bound for distant planets. Calli was born on Kipos, a new planet where opportunity was growing thin day by day.

She wonders if her daughter will have a chance in the world.

She shakes her head, as if to come out of her own thoughts. Make that future for her, she thinks as she makes herself breakfast - a measly bagel with cream cheese spread on it and a cup of coffee. She gulps the food down as fast as she can to the point of giving herself hiccups. A shower and a quick change of clothes later, and she's ready for work. Diana wears the same gray and yellow jumpsuits that all engineers at the shield generator must wear. She - and, in fact, most of her coworkers - would agree that it's an ugly thing. Her warm, bronzed skin and dark shoulder-length hair would be often being hidden behind computer screens anyway, and it wasn't as if she had to speak with customers or deal with nosy visitors.

All she has is the work, and that's how she likes it.

The Silsparrow Exploratory company gave every affordable housing to every member on its work force, which usually amounted to a two-bedroom complete with most necessities. The homes themselves, from the outside, look like warped, domed igloos made from concrete and metal, each one sporting a different number. Diana steps out of the sliding door and locks it behind her, heading out onto the dirt road that snakes in front of her house, which was numbered "07" on the side.

Installation 4B-1. Or, as most people call it, Belhall. It's Diana's home, and she walks down its streets with an air of familiarity. Since the day is beginning for most people, she sees that many are doing the same as her: leaving their homes and heading off for work. It's the same sight every day, like a movie on repeat: the workers do their job, they go to bed, they do it all over again the next day. It certainly hadn't been something



she expected when her parents took her onboard the giant colony ships, back when she was a child.

*Colonization is redundancy*, she thinks as she walks, turning her attention to the blue sky. Find and establish land, then make it so boring that everyone wants to find more. The circle of human expansion.

She heads to work, to the shield generator, and gets to it. Fix the emitters, they tell her. They're acting on a delay, they say. She grabs her toolbox.

Mere hours later, something gets her to look up from her welding mask. A group of kids, all of them following a security guard.

*That's right*, Diana thinks. *Calli's class is doing a field trip today.*

Suddenly, the alarms go off, ringing and blaring. She knows this sound.

"Sickstorm's approaching!" someone yells. "Masks on."

Reflexively, Diana reaches for her belt and finds her mask. She puts it on, then looks at the group of kids. Each of them place their masks on. The generator isn't a sealed facility, so the storm could potentially get inside.

She sees Calli.

She doesn't have her mask on.

Diana runs from her station, calling her daughter's name. When she reaches her, Calli looks scared, frightened.

"Mom--" she starts.

"Your mask, where is it?"

"I..."

A voice comes over the comm, rising over the din of voices crying out for help.

"The storm will hit in ten seconds."

Diana makes a choice.

She rips off her mask and tries to put it on Calli's head.

"Take mine," she says as she puts it on her daughter's head.

"What?" Calli starts, her voice muffled under the mask. "But Mom! You're--"

"Shhh, dear," she says as she hugs her. "Shhh."

The purple storm enters the room, and overtakes everything. Diana closes her eyes and breathes in the toxic air.

Calli Hayford smells the astringent scents of the hospital and nearly fights off a wave of nausea. She had been coming here for the past two years, and still she wasn't used to the stench.

*I hate it here*, she thinks as she stares out the plexiglass window into the quarantined room. She herself stands in a sealed off area of the hospital while is about a mile away from Belhall, her home. Even though the doctors have containment under control, she was forced, as she always was every time she visits, to don a bulky gray respirator and a white plastic suit that covers every inch of her cool sepia skin to keep disease from spreading.

On the other side of the window is a room with a patient inside - a woman - hooked up to various machines and intravenous tubes. Another doctor is inside the room and checks some of the instruments, writing down things on a clipboard. Calli thinks for a moment what could be written, why it would be important.

*She's dying*, she thinks. *My Mom is dying in there and all you can do is tests and make observations.*

"You haven't moved."

Calli turns to see another person, another doctor, wearing the same plastic outfit and mask as her, approach. The name tag reads Felix Octavo. She knows it well.

Calli regards him for a moment before turning her attention back inside the room.

"I feel like I'll miss something if I'm not here," she says, her voice sounding robotic through the respirator's speaker. "Like... I don't know. Like one day she'll get better, and I won't be the first thing she'll see."

Octavo sidles up next to her and looks in to the room. She had become quite familiar with the good doctor over the last year and a half. Even though he had many patients suffering from the sickstorm virus, he always made time to try to comfort the family waiting on the wings.

"Would that be so bad?" he says, his voice echoing that same crisp robotic sound. "She'd be alive."

Calli shrugs. "I want her to be better."

"Diana has shown resilience during her time here. She's a fighter, all right. She's broken fevers and survived through the worst of it, but she still has a long way to go. Some patients die under less circumstances."

Calli likes Octavo. Not for his bluntness, but for his honesty. He could lie to her, tell her everything will be okay in syrupy, sugary words that other doctors feed their patients. But not with her. She appreciates that.

"Has there been any progress?" She asks him this every day, and every day he gives the same answer.

He sighs. "None at the moment."

Calli nods. She reads the nearby digital wall clock and sees that it's time for her to go. She touches the glass with a gloved hand, a gesture that she repeats like a mantra. Her mother doesn't respond. She doesn't move. She just breathes, and fights off the sickness that attacks her body.

After the incident a year and half ago, everyone in Belhall had been screened for the virus. While most had heard the alarms early and had worn their gas masks, others were unlucky, and were instead caught in the middle of the sickstorm and breathed in its infectious fumes. Many of them are in the same situations that Diana is in: dying, and horribly. Some are already gone.

They blame her mother for it.

Not at first. After the sickstorm had passed and many of the soldiers had given them the all clear, the cleanup began. Almost everything was sterilized, right down to the very crops having to be burned right down to the stalk. That had been good food wasted, scattered ashes and molecules just like the storm that had preceded it. Then, news had hit that the reason that the shield had fallen was because of faulty breakers and batteries. Not Diana's fault, but she had overseen many of those systems.

They damned her name, told her - right as the medics carried her away on a stretcher and into the quarantine hospital - that she should be the one to die first.

"Please," Calli says, coming back to herself. Octavo looks at her through the mask. "You have to find something."

He nods. "We'll do our best." That's all he's ever told her, now that she thinks about it. We'll do our best. She feels as though they could do more, but then again, she isn't a doctor. She can't tell them how to do their job. All she can do is stand by and watch. She waves goodbye to her mother.

It's all she can do.

Before she can leave the quarantine hospital, a few security guards, each of them dressed in similar hazmat uniforms, usher her into a small chamber-like room. The doors

hiss shut, blocking out any outside air - and infection. The smooth-as-chocolate male computer voice fills her ears.

"Beginning sterilization," it says. "Hold still, please."

She's done this before, and so she holds still for a moment while thin white lasers shoot out from many indents in the wall, piercing her clothing. The lasers are meant to burn away any bacteria while not harming the person being shot at. She feels as though hundreds of little cameras are taking photos of her at once. She stands on a disc-like platform in the middle of the chamber, which begins to rotate slowly. The lasers flash and seem to hit every inch of her clothing, including the gas mask itself. After about a minute, the lasers stop flashing and the floor stops spinning. The computer voice tells her that she's clean. A door swings open and she steps out.

The hospital had taken great pains to keep the sickstorm virus from spreading. Silsparrow itself had thrown a lot of money into the establishment. Calli had heard of many of these hospitals amongst the colonies, but she had never imagined - nor wanted to - what they would be like.

*Funny how life works like that*, she thinks as she takes off the suit and mask, changes into her street clothes she had stored in a locker, and deposits the mask and suit into a trash receptacle before heading for the exit. She had done this so many times. More times than she would like.

Calli exits the hospital and is hit with an immediate blast of humidity. That was one thing she disliked about the air conditioning in the hospital: it made her forget that she was used to the odd heat that came from the jungles of Kipos, leaving her sweating mere minutes after walking out the door.

A small transport awaits her outside of the hospital. Painted a bright red and with the black insignia of Silsparrow Corporation (which was, unimaginatively, a sparrow in flight with the company's name written along its wingspan), these vehicles - called rovers, by most - are rugged transports with large wheels meant to tackle the wild terrain of the jungle. They had been military vehicles retrofitted for civilian use.

*Glorified buses*, she thinks as she approaches the soldier sneaking a cigarillo by the vehicle.

"What time do you depart?" she asks him. She hands him a company-issued pass that allows her access to the vehicle. He doesn't even pull out his datapad to verify her identity. She knows that he's seen her around. This isn't the first time he's driven her back to Belhall.

"Twenty minutes," he says, lowering the cigarillo to the side and tapping away the ashes. "Fifteen if I don't see anybody else trying to get on." He's wearing the navy blue and gray uniform of the Silsparrow security forces, but he's rolled up the sleeves and is wearing a ball cap instead of his helmet.

She nods to him, then stands off to the side of the vehicle to sit on a large rock. She waits. Waits long enough to think, and that's something she knows she shouldn't be doing. She thinks, then she starts to worry. When she worries, she starts getting sloppy. She can't do her work properly, and she knows that Gabriel is just looking for one wrong move from her to kick her ass to the curb and fire her.

All part of being the daughter of the person who was blamed for the shield failing, she thinks.

Her datapad buzzes, chimes with the cute dings that tells her she's received a message. She pulls out the device - a small tablet covered in a rugged casing - and taps the screen. It lights up and tells her that Sera has messaged her.

"Fuck," she says under her breath. She's totally forgotten about tonight. About what they're going to do. She touches the little letter icon and checks out the message:

*Meet at my place around six. Wear black. Put on your best game face. And don't fuck this up.*

Calli types back a reply, a simple, "Okay" and sighs.

While Silsparrow offered medical benefits for its workers (*Who would work for an asshole company that sends you to another planet that doesn't offer medical?* she thinks), things had been different once her mother had been infected with the sickstorm virus.

They told her that they would pay Diana's bills... for now. Once she turned eighteen, those bills would start going right to Calli.

Calli had about three months before she was eighteen, and then... well, her financial future was going to look very different after those three months.

What she had planned to do with Sera - what they had planned to do tonight - would help buffer that cost, if only a bit.

That didn't mean Calli had to like it.

That didn't mean it had to be legal.

#



High above the atmosphere of Kipos, Aresh Devi found that he couldn't wait any longer or he'd die of boredom. He kicks his feet up onto the cockpit panel, and Rilo Dentyn swats them back down.

"Don't do that," the sweaty man says. "Just cleaned that."

They were in a mid-sized space cruiser, a Bull-class "trashier" which, Aresh found funny enough, Rilo called *The Silver Lining*.

"They give you an ETA yet on those codes?" Aresh says, staring out at the large Goliath cruiser - called the *Austin* and owned by Silsparrow - that hung mere miles away from Rilo's ship. It hadn't locked its targeting laser onto the Lining - yet - but Aresh knows that, if they do, they'd all be gone in an instant. He knows that every Goliath cruiser is armed with hundreds of salvos of torpedoes and gun batteries, but all it would take would be one well-placed shot from the rail cannon - Aresh figures its loaded with a tungsten round - to take them all out and turn them into dust.

"No," Rilo says, picking his nose. "Probably won't for another minute or so."

"We've already waited five minutes," Aresh says.

"Quite worrying. They'll work. I've done this run before."

Aresh hates the idea of smuggling himself and his crew onto Kipos's surface. He shouldn't have to do this. He fought on its soil - nearly died on it, too - so he figures that he should at least be entitled to some sort of homecoming. Would a free pass be so much to ask for?

But returning would raise questions, questions he didn't want to answer.

The Silsparrow ship gleams as it hangs there in space, Kipos's bright sun just behind it. At one point, Aresh had called Silsparrow his home. His army.

*My comrades*, he thinks over the din of the blinking lights and beeps coming from Rilo's display.

The large man presses a few buttons and smiles. He pulls down the small microphone from his headset, saying "Thank you, *Austin*. Will comply."

Aresh looks at him.

"We're in." Rilo smiles, giving Aresh a flash of yellow teeth. "I'll worry about flying her in. You'd better head back and strap in."

"The codes worked?" Aresh says as he stands up.

"Told you they would."

Aresh heads towards the back of the cockpit and exits the round doorway, which leads into a short hallway - the galley. Three others stand in the room, all of them shooting Aresh a look as he walks in.

"Please tell me we're not about to get shot down," Rian says, her sarcastic demeanor putting a smile on his face. It's what Aresh likes about her, other than the fact that she's one of the toughest people he's ever met. She's a tall, muscular woman who, if the stories were true, was no stranger to a battlefield.

"Not yet," he replies, heading over to one of the chairs that juts out from the wall along the side of the hallway. "But we are landing."

"Holy shit," John replies, sitting next to Aresh and strapping himself in. "Can't believe this guy actually worked." He's a tall, wiry man, his frame more fit for long distance running rather than soldiering.

"I can't believe it either, but we haven't landed yet. They could recheck the ship's ID and decide that we'd look better as floating microscopic matter."

The youngest of them all, Tai, a teenager in age only, sits in the chair next to Rian on the other side of the room, facing directly at Aresh. "About damn time," he says.

Sometimes, Aresh forgets that Tai is eighteen. He forgets that John was once a deserter from the army, a man who, ten years ago, Aresh would have labeled as a coward. He still isn't sure what Rian's deal is, but he was told by many that she was "really, really good at what she does". So, he recruited her. He recruited all of them. Because they were desperate, and because he wanted to help them.

And him, a former Silsparrow war vet who just wants to go home to his husband and newborn son, finding himself going back to the planet he thought he'd never see - nor want to see - again.

As they strap themselves into the chairs, the material of the seats turn to gel, as do the straps. The smuggler ship *The Silver Lining* begins its descent into Kipos's atmosphere, and Aresh begins to count in his head.

The counting helps him take his mind off moments when he feels as though he's going to die.

He would either come back home a rich man, or not come home at all.

#

He stops counting when he gets to fifty. The beeping from the front cockpit forces Aresh to open his eyes, to see what might be happening. All he can see is Tai and Rian sitting across from him, their faces a blur as the ship begins to shake almost violently.

I hate entry, he thinks. By now, the Lining would be entering the atmosphere, the front of the hull catching a bit of fire from the speed of its descent.

The intercom buzzes with static.

"Everything's good," Rilo says, his tone wavering with every syllable. "Just some... turbulence."

Aresh tries to say something, but then, the shaking stops, leaving the ship smoothly flying downward.

"Stay strapped until we land," Rilo says. Aresh is glad that he doesn't rub it in that he's gotten them onto the planet.

*Not yet, anyway,* he thinks as he starts to calm down.

Getting onto Kipos was not an easy task. Not these days, anyway. After the war between Silsparrow and its rival company Rothchilde Expanse, the planet fully belonged to Silsparrow, giving them rights to who and what can come onto the surface.

Aresh wouldn't be allowed. His dishonorable discharge was evidence to that. If the security forces found him anywhere on the planet, he'd be shipped right off to jail, barring of course that they were feeling generous. He didn't want to think of the alternative. He had a family to go back home to. Lucas, his husband, would be waking up with their son Edward right about now, back on the colony on Everis. That's home. Not Kipos.

Kipos hadn't been his home for many years.

The ship straightened out, and the buzz from the intercom came back on.

"They've given me landing coordinates. Should be ten or so more minutes."

"Where are we landing?" Aresh asks. He'll need to make a plan depending on where they go. "Wildecree?"

"Nope," Rilo says. "Sorry. I tried, but they wouldn't budge. We're landing in the neighboring colony. Belhall, I think it's called."

"Well, at least we're close," Aresh says.

"How close is close?" Rian asks. He can tell that she's anxious, the way she moves around in her chair. "Because I'd like to get this thing started as soon as possible."

"Belhall isn't all that far from the intended target," John adds, his deep voice echoing in the hallway. "Not from what I remember, anyway. We're a couple miles off, at best."

"There's no windows in here," Tai says, his gaze darting from one end of the ship to the next.

"Trust me," John says, "it's all trees and dirt. That's about it."

Aresh knows what John intentionally left out.

*Don't forget the psycho marauders, hiding in the bushes, he thinks. Or the runners. Don't forget those.*

Of course, he told all of them what to expect before they even left for this little expedition. He told them that they might not make it back alive, that this ore - this auracite - there was a reason it was hard to come by, either because whatever pockets of the mineral were left were rare, or because Silsparrow kept it a well-kept secret that the stuff even exists.

"Coming up on the landing zone," Rilo says. "Best get into position."

Aresh nods and unhooks himself from the chair. The others do the same, following into the back of the ship. The room they enter is a sort of barracks with small cubby holes with beds in them. They don't say a word as they begin to unhook the panels that line the cylindrical room. Rilo told them what to do.

Aresh found the man sitting in a back-end bar on Everis months back, two crappy beers and a shot of tequila into the night. Found wouldn't have been the right term, not in Aresh's mind. Sought seemed more appropriate for him. The bar itself wasn't anything that Aresh found appealing: you see one shitty pad on the Everis colony, the insides of it looking like a metal cave with neon green and purple lights, you've seen them all. He knew about the old smuggler's jobs in the past (Rilo had certainly bragged as much). He started the night by buying him more shots, sharing one of them with him.

"Not doing anything for you," Rilo said, a burp punctuating the sentence.

"I can pay," Aresh said, already reaching for the datapad.

"Not interested." Another shot.

Aresh tapped in the amount and showed him the screen. "How's this? It's an easy job, even for your standards. I'm being a bit generous."

Rilo's eyes hung onto the screen for a moment, then he wiped his mouth.

"Where am I taking you?" he said.

The panels come off with an audible snap, and there's small inserts with a padded floor where a person could lay down and hide.

"How the hell am I supposed to fit in there?" Rian says. She looks around the hole she's created. "Gotta have to suck in my stomach."

"You could stay up front," Tai says as he slides in with no issues. "Soldier'd probably arrest you when they find you, though."

"Chatter, people," Aresh says, hurrying them along. "Let's get in there and get this over with. No sounds when they board. Keep it quiet."

They all get into the small notches, Aresh having to lay on his side and bend his knees.

This must be what a bird in an egg feels like, he thinks as he grabs for the panel and does his best to attach his back to the wall. As he does, the small notch is covered in darkness, and he couldn't see his feet that touched the wall.

"Everybody good?" he calls out, unsure if the panel dampens his voice to those outside.

The three of them give him an affirmative.

"Alright," Aresh says. "Silence from here on out."

The ship cruises through the air. Aresh can feel it from inside the wall. He wonders how close he is to the outside. The wall itself had to be a couple of inches thick of metal, but, strangely enough, he thinks he can feel the Kipos winds gently kiss his skin.

*I should have never come back here,* he thinks. There's too many memories, too many haunted nights where he would wake up almost screaming.

But he knew that he didn't have much of a choice. Not then, and certainly not now.

The ship decelerates and begins to land. Once the ship sets down, Rilo's footsteps can be heard heading into the hallway.

"Be back as soon as I can," he says, then he walks away.

Silence.

Aresh counts the seconds, the minutes. Nearly five minutes later, two sets of footsteps echo across the floor of the ship.

"Junker my ass," says a voice, a male one manipulated and robotic behind its mask.

*Silsparrow guards*, Aresh thinks.

"It looks legit to me," says the other voice, this one female. "Can't all be smugglers, can they."

"Keep checking."

There's a small slit of light that extends out from a little crack in the panel. Two shadows, each one a combat boot that Aresh once wore himself, cover the light. One of them is right in front of him.

"You find something?" the woman asks.

Silence.

He grips the pistol he's got in a holster on his hip, hoping that he wouldn't have to use it. He didn't want to kill these people. He was one of them, once. In a strange way, they were comrades.

*Stop it*, he thinks, tightening his grip. *You aren't with them anymore. They aren't comrades.*

"Nah," says the male. "Dirty ship. Walls are covered in dust."

"Back is clear. So's the cockpit."

"Engine room?"

"Lead the way."

The two sets of footsteps begin to walk away, each footfall an echo into Aresh's past, back when he himself wore the uniform.



Before a memory can spring to life in his mind, Aresh realizes that he had already pulled the pistol from its holster.

*I had been ready to kill, he thinks, holstering it. Welcome home, Aresh Devi.*

The rover passes through the gateway at the shield generator and drops Calli off. Her arrival is met with a small group of people who want to hitch a ride with the rover out of Belhall, so she has to push and shove her way past them.

They're just trying to get out of here, she thinks as she watches them pile in. The Silsparrow driver sighs and rubs his eyes, like he had been hoping that he wasn't going to get this many passengers. She can't blame them, really. She had told herself - many times, actually - that when her mother was better, they'd take the next ship out of Belhall, out of Kipos. They'd leave this place, this awful place, and find a home amongst one of the other colonies. The ones that didn't have problems.

The ones where her and her mother could live.

As Calli walks along the dusty ground, she sees several ships at the landing pads. New ones, ones she's never seen before. She used to study different ships models in her spare time - snubfighters and interceptors, transport ships and large destroyers - but, these days, all she felt was a longing when she looked at those ships. A longing to leave.

One of the ships, she notices, is an old junker. Green and gray, with dents and scratches along the side like pockmarks on a face.

"The Silver Lining," she reads, the lettering on the ship a faded black.

"Looks like a piece of shit."

Calli turns her head quickly. At first, Sera's short blond hair catches her eye, but it's the way she's standing - hands on hips, a sneer on her face - that tell her who she's speaking with.

Sera Hesk.

Calli's friend. And secret black marketeer.

Sera herself is Calli's age, though Calli always felt that Sera was a bit wiser beyond her seventeen years. They had been friends for a long time, their friendship growing stronger once Diana fell ill with the sickstorm virus.

That day a year and a half ago had been a toll on everybody, Calli thinks. She says to Sera: "Hey, if it gets somebody off the planet, who cares how it looks?"

Sera points to the vehicle. "You wanna be seen riding in that thing? It needs, like, bigger guns or something. Maybe a bigger engine? The one it's got now is just... lame. Who drives around with a Rothstein Hyper these days? Those things are outdated."

Calli gives Sera a friendly shove, who returns it right back.

"See you got my message," she says.

"I did get your message." They both begin to walk toward the town proper, away from the landing pads. Here, in the Square, are a few meager places where people can get food and supplies. A few merchants set up small tables with bits of trinkets and junk, though Calli swears she spots a golden pocket watch at one vendor's stand. Few people buy from them, but it doesn't stop anybody from trying to sell, trying to make a living.

"Thought I was supposed to meet you later," Calli says. "It's a little after one."

"I knew where you'd be," Sera says, she herself eying the various baubles, listening to the people trying to get them to come over and spend their money. "Thought I'd meet you. See if you were doing okay."

"You didn't have to do that."

"But I did. You know, I see how people look at you."

As if to prove her point, Sera nods toward a group of kids, some of them their age, who stare at Calli. They stare daggers and needles into her, their gazes filled with venom and disdain.

"They blame you too," Sera adds.

"I don't care about me. It was an accident. It was all over the news. They can't blame Mom."

"And yet they do. See, the thing about people is that they want someone to blame. They want someone to pay for their misfortunes. Some of those kids? Their parents are in quarantine, just like your mom. Something like that, they can't blame on an accident, or on chance. They should blame it on someone, preferable somebody breathing. Makes it easier for them to take out their frustrations. They may not say it to your face, but they resent you. They know you had nothing to do with it. Hell, they might even believe that your mom had nothing to do with it. But you were there. In that sickstorm. You both were. And they want someone to hold accountable."

Calli stares back at the group of kids, not giving them the satisfaction of lowering her eyes. Don't look down, she thinks. Don't let them see you look down.

"Well, that's why we're going to fix it, right? Put all of this to rights," Calli says.

Sera snorts. "That's quite the noble thing to say. You're going to make me seem like I'm a dealer with morals."

"We're dealers with morals."

"Right, right. We're. Us. A duo. One and one. It's still your first time tonight, so you need to do exactly as I say."

"We've been over everything a million times." Calli rubs her eyes.

"It'll be a million and one," Sera says. They walk by a fruit stand, its cases filled to the brim with bright colored produce, each one grown on Kipos's surface. Blue apples, red oranges, a large, green, pear-shaped fruit people called a koro-plum all stood at attention like little soldiers waiting to be bought. The man behind the counter was looking at his datapad, and, in his distraction, Sera's hand moves quick and picks up one of the apples. Calli watched her do it, and said nothing.

"See, the most important thing about stealing - or lying, for that matter - is that you have to make the right moves, say the right things, or it all falls apart. Do it well enough, and you can fool just about anybody." Sera bites down on the apple when they're far enough away from the stand, the audible crunch signaling to Calli that she hasn't eaten anything since early this morning.

"You want a bite?" Sera says, as if she's read Calli's mind. Calli reaches for the apple, but Sera pulls it away, out of her reach. "Y'see? I fooled you. You trusted me."

"Why are you my friend again?" Calli says, sighing.

"This is how you play a mark, how you get them to give you more than what you bargained for. You hold a stick with a carrot in front of their head and watch as they reach for it. Convincing them the carrot is even real to begin with is the hard part."

This lesson was starting to weigh heavily on Calli.

"I'm assuming you're going to tell me what it is you're talking about?"

Sera bites down again, the blue of the apple looking like a fat, plump sapphire.

"I'll show you."

#

Calli presses her thumb to the reader at her front door, and the door slides open. Home had become an empty place since Diana had gone into quarantine, but Calli had made the most of it. Since Silsparrow had enough to deal with all around the colony, they gave her a pass to live there by herself, assuming she could keep a job. Her job in the machine shop was nothing special, but it gave Calli time to think. And it was a paycheck, so she didn't have much room to complain.

Sera walks into the living room, where they have repurposed it as a planning area.

"Got it all figured out here," Sera says as she walks past the table with a map of the jungle outside of Belhall. To Calli, it just looks like nothing but green and blue and brown.

"You still haven't told me what we're selling." She sat on the faded white couch, noticing the dust on the windows and, well, pretty much everywhere else. Since Sera had moved in with her, there wasn't much cleaning going on. They're roommates, and they figure that they can do what they wanted. Cleaning wasn't one of them.

Sera comes out from the kitchen, carrying a warmed up plastic container of three-day old pasta, the kind Calli had snuck out of the refrigerator at work. It hadn't been hers, but, whoever it belonged to, didn't need it more than they did.

*We aren't poor*, she reminds herself as she watches Sera eat at the probably lukewarm pasta, which was covered in a garlic butter sauce. *We're like everyone else on this planet: struggling.*

Between bites, Sera says: "I'm goffa thow you in ah minuhe."

"Will you... never mind." Calli lays out on the couch, letting her eyes shut for just a moment. She's tired. Been up for almost an entire day. When she looks in a mirror, her

eyes continued to grow redder from the lack of sleep. It hasn't been easy in the last few years, but Calli expected as much.

*It's much worse for Mom, she thinks.*

Sera, now barefoot, walks into the room, every footfall slamming down hard onto the carpet. For as long as Calli has known her, Sera always had flat feet. It was one thing that Calli found annoying about the girl.

The device is a clunky thing. Sera sets it down on the table, right on top of the map. Calli eyes it for a moment before sitting up to get a better look. It's spherical, but it has multiple nodes in it that can connect to different ports in things like a computer or a ship, or...

A weapon.

"This is a gun mod," Calli says, not taking her eyes off the thing. "You built a gun mod."

Sera looks proud of herself. She folds her arms. "A thank you works in this situation."

Calli shakes her head. "I'm not thanking you. What the hell are you thinking?" She grabs the sphere. It's no bigger than the apple that Sera stole from the market. "A gun mod? If Silsparrow finds us with this thing..."

Sera grabs it from Calli's hand. "They won't find out about it."

"How do you know that?"

"Because we're getting rid of it tonight?"

"That's what we're selling?" Calli's voice sounds exasperated. Her exhaustion is starting to show. "You have to be joking."

"How'd you even know it was a gun mod?" Sera investigates her own handiwork, as if maybe some sort of flaw gave it away.

"I've seen some of the soldiers use them before. Remember Billy? The one from school. Hear he's a corporal now. I watched him place one of those things in his rifle last week. Not sure what it did, but he put it in anyway."

"See? People need these things."

"He's dead, Sera. Happened a few days ago. Got tore up by runners."

She's quiet for a moment. "I didn't hear about that."

"Because you were here, in my basement you call a laboratory, making this... junk."

Now she holds the device to her chest, like it's a puppy that needs nurturing. "I like to think of it as art."

"It's meant to kill people, Sera!"

"It's defensive."

"How are those two things different?"

Sera shrugs.

"What does that thing even do?" Calli hated even asking her.

"It... well, it's for beam weapons, really. It acts as a prism and scatters the light. So instead of a focused beam, you get three beams that sort of... scatter."

"So, you made a thing that turns a gun into a laser shotgun." She can't even believe she's saying those words. "The fuck, Sera! How'd you even make this thing?"

"I... studied up. I guess. Read a lot of specs on this stuff."

"None of that - or this - can be legal."



"Relax," Sera says, raising her arms as if to comfort Calli. "The morons buying this won't even know what to do with it."

Calli didn't want to ask her. "Who's the buyer?"

Sera hesitates. "Look, you're my friend, but I think-"

"Who. Is. The. Buyer, Sera?"

"It's... it's Mathis."

Calli feels the pit in her stomach grow larger, like there isn't anything at all in there. "Mathis Barnes?"

"Yeah."

"And you agreed to this."

"Yes."

Calli grabs Sera by the shoulders. "And when were you gonna tell me that you've gone completely mad? Before or after Mathis gets his hands on a goddamned gun mod. You know how crazy he is!"

Sera frees herself, holding tight to the mod like it's made of glass. "I know that. But he's got money. All that cash and a dad who looks away when he spends it. Mathis will pay."

"Did you even ask what he plans on doing with that?"

"I'd be a poor seller if I asked too many questions."

"I can't believe you're doing this."

Sera raises an eyebrow. "We. I thought this was a 'we' thing."

"Well, right now I'm distinguishing what this 'we' thing is. Clearly, we aren't great at communicating what we're doing. That's you. You set up all these deals, and without

telling me, either. There is no 'we'. Not in my mind. There's you, and then there's me who gets a share." Calli sits back down and rubs her forehead. "I'm just... just tired, is all."

Sera sets the device on the table and sits next to her. "What happened?"

"Mom's not doing any better," Calli says. "It's... Octavo is saying she has a year, at best." She pulls out her datapad and thumbs through her messages. "Then there's this. Got it the other day."

Sera takes the device from her hands and looks. When she finishes, she looks back to Calli.

"No shit," she says, her face in genuine shock. It was hard to surprise Sera - Calli has known that since they met back in school. "That's the monthly payment?"

Calli nods. "That's what I'm going to have to pay in a few months. When I'm eighteen."

Days after the sickstorm hit Belhall, when the doctors had finished screening Calli to see if she had any traces of the sickstorm virus in her (they were adamant that she had contracted something, but surprised when they found nothing), there had been a lot of talk about where she would end up. She had only been fifteen, but there was no other place - save for a ship off the planet - for her. When Calli refused to leave her mother, and since Silsparrow was too busy with decontaminating the colony to allow any ship to leave, they allowed her to room with other kids her age who had parents that had been affected by the storm, and they would be checked up on every week by Silsparrow employees.

They told her that the medical bills wouldn't be covered once she turned eighteen.

They told her that Diana was on her own.

She had argued with them at the time, that her father, William Hayford, a Silsparrow soldier who died during the civil war years ago, left behind a savings account with her name on it, should she need it. They told her that money wouldn't do her any good, that it was Silsparrow's property.

"I just," Calli says, coming out of the reverie, "I just need this to go right. Without problems. With the money in hand."

"It will. You just gotta trust me." Sera paces about the room. "Mathis is going to pay a lot for this. It'll be a nice chunk of change and, split between us, it could pay off a few months of medical bills."

"There needs to be something, Sera. Something I can do that isn't just a temporary fix. That's all this is, really. A band-aid. A kiss on a scraped knee."

"We'll think of something. For now, we need to do this deal. Make the money. This is all we've got."

Calli nods. "Okay," she says. "What do you want me to do?"

#

Captain Garret Nevaire peeks out the window in his office again. He's bored. Unnaturally bored. The men under his command have assured him that he should take a day off, that he needs a break.

If only Command thought the same.

The Silsparrow ship *Hierarch* high above Kipos's atmosphere was always watching, always keeping an eye on the planet and its various colonies, one that he himself had overseen. Belhall wasn't a bad colony to be in command of, but Silsparrow

Command seemed to treat him like a babysitter: the parents get to go out on the town while he was stuck at home with the kids. All seven thousand or so of them.

"Did you hear me, sir?"

Nevaire turns back and realizes that he's lounging in his chair.

*I'm getting sloppy*, he thinks. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he says to the young woman sitting across his desk. "Lost myself for a moment. Can you repeat that?"

Lieutenant Valorie Ende clears her throat before speaking. She's a young woman - somewhere in her twenties, Nevaire thinks - who has her dark hair wound up in a bun. All business. "I said that the recent testing results are in from the shield generators. Not sure if you heard about them or not."

He shakes his head and rubs his aging temples, right at the edge of his graying, regulation haircut. He's in his fifties, but, even though he's trained every day on this godforsaken planet, he feels a hint of exhaustion in his bones. He feels time starting to infiltrate his body.

"I hadn't," he says. "I usually leave that stuff to the techs. There a problem?"

"Yes and no," Ende says, handing him a datapad which shows him a digital readout of the shield specs. All gibberish to him. "What they've found is that the power output that we're currently receiving is below the recommended standard. It wouldn't be as powerful if, say, a strong sickstorm suddenly rolled in."

"So it wouldn't hold," he says, starting at the data but not actually retaining any of its information.

"It would hold, but only if the storm lasted a few minutes. The power couplings, batteries... all that stuff is starting to get old. We'll need replacements. Power stations, too."

"Command say anything about this?"

"They don't know yet, sir."

He tapped his fingers on his desk, the audible clacking sounding annoying the second he did so. "We're still in trouble from the last storm. Do you think they'd give us the financial support?"

Ende sighs. "Honestly, sir, I don't think they will. What with money getting spread out to the other colonies as it is, I highly doubt they're going to help us out, at least for now. Maybe later down the line, but..."

Nevaire agrees with her. Each colony, when Kipos was first colonized, was supposed to be in a prime, strategic position on the planet, supposedly to give easy access to resources: water and good, farmable land. Belhall is a farmland, a farming town, and even though they never produced enough crops than, say, some of the other colonies, Belhall was still a place that Command considered to be important.

That was until the sickstorms.

Since then, Nevaire's bosses had given him issues, problems with getting more men for patrol (he lost a few to runner attacks almost every month), more resources for the workers. Hell, he had to nearly beg to get the quarantine hospital up and running. He always found himself to be a loyal, proud soldier, but he knew that Command was essentially giving him the finger for over a year and a half.

He wonders how much longer he can take it.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he says. "Is there anything else?"

"Actually, sir, there is. We received word about the medical ships."

If she didn't before, Ende had his attention now. He leaned forward at his desk, as if he needed to hear her better.

"What's wrong?"

"They've been delayed. Again."

Nevaire scoffs, then stands up out of his chair. "Damn. That's the third time this year. What's the excuse now?"

"Things seemed to be going okay. The ships were moving according to schedule. But when they came out of sublight near the Verin colonies, one of the engines just shut down. No word yet as to why. They need to find out the problem."

He sighs. The Verin colonies, while essential to the expansion of human colonization, is a shit planet with shit resources, barely usable by anyone. Water and minerals. That's it. At least, that's what Nevaire had read and heard about from secondhand accounts. So there couldn't be any way that the incoming medical ships - ships with experimental medicines - would be in Belhall in time.

"How far back are they predicting?"

"A few months, sir."

"Did anything happen to the cargo?"

She shakes her head. "Not that I've heard, no." The ship itself carries a potential cure for the sickstorm virus. The labs on Kipos are barebones, at best, and research alone had always been dedicated to things like flora, wildlife, and ecology.

Nevaire figured, when the virus started to spread years ago, that something like this would happen.

"That's good," he says. "We'll need that when it gets here. Though, I'm predicting that the people won't be happy. They never are."

"What do you suggest we do?" Ende says.

He shrugs. "We tell them the truth. No hiding behind it. We keep an eye on them. If they get restless... well, I'd rather it not come to that, but we'd have to be ready for protests. Maybe even riots."

He asks her if there's anything else. Ende tells him no, and leaves his office. Nevaire stands up and stares out the window again. He's got a good view of the colony itself (being on the top floor of the security building has its rewards, if only that one reward was a nice sunset every now and again).

This place is fucked, he thinks. His people are sick. Dying. The ground here hasn't been the same since the sickstorm hit, and crop production is low.

He needs something to alleviate the pain. The pressure. He thinks of it like a toothache: first, the pain is bearable. You can live with it. Then it gets too much, and before long you're begging for the pain to end.

He wonders who will be the one to alleviate it: him and his forces, or the people he swore to protect.

Mara Winters situates herself deep in the high grass. Bushes of giant leaves cover her frame, and in the darkness of Kipos's purple moon, she couldn't have been seen, even with high-optic binoculars with thermal imaging.

She lies in wait. As do several others. They're armed, but not as armed as she would like. Assault rifles, grenades, a few explosive charges. Farid has himself a mini-slugthrower strapped to his back and Kait is carrying one of those fancy sound grenades they picked up in a raid last week.

She doesn't think they're ready, but it's too late for that.

"See anything?" Mara asks.

Crouched next to her is Wilson, wearing the same dark fatigues as her. He's a large man, with shoulders so broad a transport ship could land on them. He's looking out with the binoculars.

"Patrols," he says. "Nothing out of the ordinary, really."

Ahead, Mara stares at the communication facility run by Silsparrow, the large satellite dish serving as a comms array for Silsparrow forces in the area. The large symbol of a sparrow adorns almost every surface of the walls.

Whenever she sees that symbol, Mara feels a sense of nostalgia.

She presses a finger to the comm in her ear, finding the small button and hitting it twice. "Everyone in position?" Their comms had been encrypted and couldn't be picked up, even by the people who work in the building ahead of them. At least, that's what Wilson told her. He had been the one who fixed them to be that way.



"Yes, ma'am," come the replies.

"Standby," she says. To Wilson: "Just as we planned."

"Right. Snipers are along those treelines." He points to a ridge that overlooks the comms facility. She can't see them, but she knows that her best sharpshooters are aiming their rifles at some of the Silsparrow guards right now, waiting for the moment to pull the trigger.

*In due time, friends*, she thinks. "How are exits?"

"Established," Wilson says, finally taking his eyes away from the binoculars.

"We're a go when you give the word."

She had planned this raid for weeks. Scouts had often returned with patrol routes, access points, weapons, other targets. The comms station is important to her plan. To *their* plan.

Everything she did up to this point had been for her people.

She had run it by Wilson, her second-in-command, and he believed it was a good idea. But now...

"Are we doing the right thing?" she asks him. The purple glow of the moon covers her pale skin in an almost ethereal light, but one that's covered in dark military clothing and armed with guns. Her dark red hair is in a tight bun, and she has to stop herself from touching it.

"This mission? I believe so, yes." Wilson grabs his sidearm and pulls back the action, checking the slide, and racks a bullet inside. "That message has to get out, out into the galaxy. Getting second thoughts?"

She shakes her head. He's right, of course. She's always been good about locking up any doubt inside her mind, to keep it buried with any other emotion she's had to suppress over the last ten or so years. The Silsparrow military taught her well enough. But these days, with security tightening planet-wide, she sometimes feels it creep back in.

Like right now, of all times.

There come quiet footsteps that rustle through the bushes. Wilson raises his sidearm, with Sera following suit a half-second later.

"Zeta," the bushes whisper.

"Rae," Wilson says back, and the two put away their weapons. A code to identify allies in the battlefield, one that Mara herself had come up with.

Two figures emerge next to her, both covered in the same military-style clothing. Farid and Kait, their young eyes beaming with excitement.

They're kids, Mara thinks. She has to remind herself that every once in awhile. The people that come to her, that look for a new purpose in life, often come to her very young. She hates it, but she has to use every soldier she gets her hands on.

Even if they look no older than sixteen.

"Charges are set," Farid says between breathes.

"And nobody saw you, right?" Mara looks between him and Kait. Farid looks to Kait.

"They'd have alarms going off by now if they had," Kait says.

Mara sighs. "Okay." She turns to Wilson. "Turn them on. We're a go."

Wilson nods, then pulls out a small datapad with one hand, while the other reaches up to his comm. "All teams. Charges are set and we are going hot. Radios will be

down for ninety seconds. You all know your jobs. Good luck." With that, he taps the datapad screen and inputs a code into the touchpad.

The screening charges that Farid and Kait had placed weren't explosives, but rather short term jamming devices, ones that didn't leave harmful aftereffects, like electromagnetic pulses so often did. These charges (which, Mara notes, were also found during a Silsparrow raid) were for short term use if the user wanted to recover and use electronic equipment.

The datapad in Wilson's hand starts to fizzle and short out, the screen going black.

"Charges are live," he says. Mara grabs her rifle, then nods at Farid and Kait.

"You're with us," she says. The two nod, then unsling their weapons.

Wilson leads the way, crouching low in the bushes with his rifle raised. Mara follows behind, keeping close to him, her eyes hard on her sights. The comms facility starts to get larger the closer they get to it. Mara notices that some of the soldiers are starting to yell at each other.

*They've figured out something's wrong*, she thinks. "We need to go now," she says to Wilson. He nods, then leads them over to a short ridge that would provide them with cover.

The plan was to start opening fire once the charges went off and electronic devices went dark. Then, a second team of guerrillas would sneak in on the other side of the facility. Around that time, the snipers would open up, taking out any targets that Mara and her team happen to miss.

She hopes it plays out that way.

When they reach the ridge, which is mostly a clump of high ground that looks down on the facility at a slight angle, Mara checks her weapon one last time. "On my go," she says to them.

She peeks out from cover and aims the rifle. With electronics down, they'd have to rely on their sights rather than holographic sights and aiming regulators.

They'll be sloppy, she thinks as she aims at the first soldier she sees, a grunt checking his wrist display, probably wondering why it isn't working. Silsparrow soldiers relied on much of their technology. Too much, Mara thinks. She squeezes the trigger, letting a burst of shots fly out. They strike their target, and the soldier goes down. Immediately, the rest of them begin firing at well, the staccato of bullet shell casings hitting the dirt filling her ears.

A retort of gunshots shoot up dirt near their position, and Mara gets down into cover.

"They've found us," Farid says, expending a shell from his rifle.

Kait pops her head out for a second before coming back down to safety. "Spotted three firing on us. Probably more soon."

"Not much longer," Wilson says.

At that moment, loud shots echo into the air, one after another. Mara counts six shots within five seconds.

Kait looks back up. "They're in cover," she says before leaning up to fire back. "Snipers did their job."

"How much longer before the charges fry?" Mara asks.

"About thirty seconds," Wilson says.

They had to get in there, and they had to do it now. If the electronics went back up, then the comms station could call out for help, and if they waited too long after that, well...

"I see Team Two," Farid says.

Mara looks up from her position and sees a thin green light flashing in the darkness on the other side of the facility. It blinks three times in succession, then stops, then repeats the sequence. She knows from that signal that four other fighters are moving in on the other side of the facility. She hopes they aren't encountering much resistance.

"They're in," she says, standing up. "Time to go."

Farid and Wilson provide cover fire while Mara and Kait stand up and start to sprint towards the facility. Two more soldiers go down, giving the two women enough time to reach the facility walls. Mara pulls out a small device from the pack on her belt, and, using the adhesive side, sticks it to a metal door leading into the small facility itself.

"Charge set," she says, then the two of them back away from the door, using each other as cover. The device emits a beam from its sides, which form a large rectangular shape along the door. A loud hum sounds out, and a laser in the shape of the door shoots out, cutting the door in that shape. Kait approaches the door as it falls open, pops a sound grenade inside, then backs away.

At first, Mara hears a muted pop. The sound grenade distorts sound waves in an affected area, causing those affected to have a loud, unbearable ringing in their ears. Kait peers into the cut hole, then brings her gun around and fires off a burst or two.

Wilson and Farid reach the door by the time that Kait steps inside.

"Go," Mara says, bringing up the rear. "We don't have much time."

By now, the charges had to have worn off. Anybody inside could call out for aid using the comms system or a radio. They'd have a Silsparrow gunship on them if they didn't hurry.

When Mara steps through the door entrance in after Farid, she nearly trips over a dead soldier at the entrance. Inside is a hallway, littered with two other personnel that Kait had killed. The hallway itself leads to a staircase going up, and Wilson has already got alongside it. Kait hands him a sound grenade, and he tosses one up the stairs. The muted pop sounds out again, and the group heads up.

Mara climbs the steps and finds Farid cornering a screaming soldier before shooting him in the face.

He's a kid, she thinks, but shakes away the thought. He's a soldier. Not a kid.

The room she's entered is a communications center, filled with computer screens where comms officers and engineers would monitor outbound and inbound communications with Silsparrow personnel, and could send out alerts to other stations if needed. The room is lined with glass, so Mara takes a look outside. She sees more Silsparrow soldier's dead, probably from the snipers. Team Two, she can't see, but that's because they were supposed to be on the other side of the building.

They're fine, she thinks. Just a bit late.

She hated losing soldiers, though she knows it's a part of war. An eventuality. Something to be expected. Now, though... now that she leads these people, it's something different. She knows their names, their faces. Their families.

"Clear," Kait calls out.

Mara nods. "Good. Farid, see if you can find Team Two." They would need them for the next step.

"No need."

Up the steps come three more of her soldiers, dressed in similar garb and carrying similar weapons. Leading them is Veri, her face streaked in a dark grease.

"Seemed to be more of them on the other side," she says. She nods to one of her soldiers, an older man named Garret. "Get things set up."

Garret pulls off his pack and pulls out a small large datapad, which he hooks up to the nearest terminal.

Mara checks the systems. Everything seems to be working. The charges' effect had worn off.

"Think they got a call out?" Mara asks.

Veri shakes her head. "Not a chance, ma'am. We hit them quick."

"Let's hope so." She reaches for her comm. "Sniper teams," she says. "Continue to provide cover for us. Make sure you leave no one standing before retreating."

"Copy that, ma'am," the sniper team leader says.

Garret starts to press the screen of his device, then moves over to the terminal and presses a few buttons there. Mara isn't very well-versed in coding. If it isn't a weapon, she doesn't very much understand it. It's been a simple life, but one that has kept her alive this long.

"In," Garret says, looking at Veri. "The recording is ready for broadcast."

Veri looks to Mara.

"Send it," Mara says, and Garret nods, pressing his device one last time.

The upload process takes a minute, and Mara takes this opportunity to take a breath, to take stock.

She notices that Veri's team had five people. They only came back with three.

*So there's two down*, she thinks. They'd have to return for the bodies when they were done here.

"It's okay," Wilson says. She isn't sure how he snuck up on her like that, but the words are soothing. Even for Wilson. "Those people knew what they were getting themselves into."

"I know," she says quietly. "It's just..."

Before she can finish, Garret makes a sound, almost like a yip. "Message is broadcasting. It's live."

"Good. Everyone, begin a full retreat." Mara starts for the steps before she suddenly feels the eyes of her comrades on her. She turns around. "What is it?"

"Don't you want to hear it?" Veri asks. "This message is going to change everything, isn't it? Don't you just want to take a moment and, I don't know, revel in it?"

"We have comrades out there we need to bring home," she replies. "I know what the message says. I recorded it. It's out of our hands now. We need to leave."

The room of people gather their things and follow Mara out of the facility.

*Everything hinges on this moment*, she thinks as she leads them out. *This is the beginning of everything.*

The satellite dish sways back and forth, dancing to a prerecorded tune in the night under the moon.

#



By the time that Rilo comes back for them, Aresh knows that the sun has gone down. He hadn't dared to move from the smuggling hole on the other side of the panel of the *Silver Lining*, and neither had his comrades, apparently.

Still caked in darkness, he hears voices and the scuffle of feet.

"I should shoot you right now, asshole," Rian says. He hears her suck in mouthfuls of breath. Then, the panel in front of him moves and light flushes into his eyes as it's removed. The light blinds him for a moment, but he manages to make out Rian offering him a hand. She helps him up, her strength seeming to have no effect on his slightly pudgy weight. Rilo is standing next to her, looking please with himself.

"It's almost midnight," Aresh says, heading to another panel to help John out. "You think you could've came and got us earlier?"

"Wanted to be sure," Rilo says, and he shrugs. "Silsparrow is bein' pretty thorough. Almost called me out for not being a junker."

With John out, who had probably sweat his weight out in that smuggler hole, Aresh finds that Rian has Tai out as well. She pats dust off of his shoulder.

"Looking good, kid," she says.

They grab their packs from another hidden hole that Rilo showed them and checked them to make sure that everything was still there. Tai pulls out a metallic orb from his bag, no bigger than a plump grapefruit.

"That's a fancy ball," John says as he straps his bag on his back.

Tai replaces the device. "Oh, it's fancy. Made it myself."

Aresh puts a hand on his shoulder. "That's really neat. But I need you make sure that you're focused on this mission, okay? We're here for a reason, and that's not to test out some nice new toys."

Tai's eyes go down for a moment. "Gotcha," he says.

*The kid's an odd one*, Aresh thinks. He had picked him up on Everin. Aresh still had some sources out there in the freelancing field, and there were rumors going around about this kid. A tech genius, really. He hadn't found out that Tai was only eighteen until after he found him.

It didn't take him much convincing, really. The promise of fame and fortune was all it took. Part of Aresh felt awful that he was bringing a kid to this place, to this planet. But he didn't have much of a choice. He couldn't bring too many people with him, for fear of drawing attention, but he needed experts.

*Well*, he thinks. *Time to find out if I made the right choice.*

Rilo leads them to the front, back up to the cockpit, where a small side room leads to the ramp off the ship. Rilo has the ship running, if only on electronic power. Some sort of music is playing in the background, some kind of sad guitar with a man singing the blues.

"Reminds me of home," Rilo remarks as they follow him.

The sudden fizzle of the music startles Aresh, but only for a moment. Had to be a bad connection. Kipos was known for having spotty satellite coverage.

A blank tone suddenly replaces the music, one that might make anyone crazy if they listened to it long enough. It's a whining noise, one that Aresh finds annoying the moment he hears it.

The tone stops.

"Hello, Kipos," says a voice on the other end of the radio. It's a woman's voice. It sounds wise. Hardened.

To Aresh, it simply sounds familiar.

"This is Mara Carasmus Winters, former captain in the Silsparrow Army's infamous Hidden Division, now a leader of the free people of Kipos. I've come to you with a message, one that will entice those looking to make money."

"What the hell?" Rilo walks up to his console and starts to fiddle with the device, probably trying to fix the signal.

"Don't touch that!" Aresh reaches forward and stops Rilo's hand. Rilo simply looks at him, the glare telling Aresh How dare you. Instead, he hits a button which brings up a small computer screen. Aresh feels the rest of the group crowding behind him. The screen brings up a video, this one of a serious-looking woman dressed in military fatigues.

The message continues: "The civil war between Silsparrow's own people occurred not some eleven years ago. Most of you on the planet are still feeling some of its aftereffects. Some would tell you that it was about angry employees, seeking this planet for themselves, to establish their own world, free from control of any Earthen assets. Part of that was true."

The woman pulls out something from off camera, then presents it. The rock in her hand is large, around the size of a misshapen brick. The rock itself is gray and black, but veins of glowing gold and yellow snake around it in every crevice and crack, as if something more valuable lie underneath it.

Aresh knows what it is the moment he sees it.

"This is what the other part of the civil war was for. This is auracite ore," the woman says. "Unrefined. This place? Kipos? It's full of this stuff. Probably right under your very feet. But," she says, "you've probably never heard of it. Silsparrow has been mining the stuff for years now, and word has never reached the public." She looks as though she wants to say something else, her mouth trying to get out words. She stops herself before speaking again. "Whatever the case, auracite ore is rare, and lucrative. Mining corporations would pay millions for chunks of auracite no bigger than the one I hold in my hand." She moves the stone away and places it off camera. "Its applications seem to be associated with starship travel. This ore, when processed correctly, can potentially make ships achieve space flight that's faster than sublight.

"Silsparrow will try to take down my message. Let them. You have heard me. You, who are desperate to get away from Silsparrow control, to gain the monetary support that you so desperately need for you. For your family. Leave your homes. Go northward, towards the Everin Arm. Join up with the free people of Kipos, and find your fortune. We'll be waiting." Mara's hard, gray eyes stare into the camera. Aresh knows those eyes. "This is Mara Winters. Out."

The feed cuts. Nobody moves. Nobody even breathes.

Aresh turns to his friends. This had been their chance, and they had a head start for the search for auracite.

Not anymore. They were running out of time.

Aresh sighs. "This is not good."

#

"You have to see this."

Calli is staring at the computer screen on her coffee table, watching as the older woman with the dark red hair show off the strange looking hunk of rock.

"Whatever the case," the woman says, "auracite ore is rare, and lucrative. Mining corporations would pay millions for chunks of auracite no bigger than the one I hold in my hand."

Sera steps away from making final tweaks to the weapon mod in the other room and walks over to watch with her.

"What's going on?"

Calli explains it to her, that this message has been running for the last hour. She's surprised that Silsparrow hasn't cut the feed yet.

"You think its genuine?" Sera asks.

Calli shrugs. "I don't know. I've checked the feeds online. Nobody has seen anything like that ore before. News outlets are already saying that they're sending ships to the planet to do some studies."

Sera whistles. "That sounds like a lot of money for a tiny thing like that."

A lot of money, Calli thinks. Enough to...

There it is. A spark in her head, like a match lighting and exploding into life. It's an idea, one that she takes only a second to consider, but one that fills her with hope.

"We have to get a hold of that stuff," she says, staring at the woman on the screen. By now, the message has looped again from the beginning.

Sera looks at her. "Say what now?"

Calli points to the screen when the woman pulls out the rock - the auracite. "That. We need to get that."

"For what?"

It almost offends her that her friend can't figure this out. Sometimes, she feels as though she's speaking to a child. "The money! You heard her. People will pay big for this stuff, and it isn't even a lot! You know how many medical bills I could pay for Mom? I'd get her on the list for the cure. Maybe I could even get her to the top."

"No," Sera says, shaking her head. "No no no no hell no a thousand times no."

"You seriously want to do this smuggling and black market thing until we have enough money?"

"Yeah. Behind the walls of a shield generator. In an environment that we know. You heard her. The deposits are in the Eviryn Arm, Calli. The Arm. You know what they say about the Arm."

Calli can't argue with her there. The Eviryn Arm, for the most part, is mostly unregulated land. Once owned by Silsparrow, it was taken - and surprisingly held - by those that rebelled. The raiders. The Free People of Kipos. People call it Bandit Land for good reason.

If you go there, you're looking to get robbed or get killed.

"You're a black marketer," Calli says. "You'll fit right in." The joke was to lighten her up a bit, maybe to smooth Sera over to make her easier to convince, but Sera's face didn't show the slightest smirk.

"I'm serious, Calli. This idea? This crazy crusade that you want to do? It's dangerous. It's suicidal."

"Crusade? This is for my mother." She didn't mean for the words to come out as venomous as they had. "She isn't something that I can just win over, here. I'm trying to save her life."

"You won't do that if you're dead," Sera says. "Or, at least, captured by raiders. I don't even know which is worse."

"This is a shot." Calli walks around the table to face Sera. "It's not ideal. It isn't guaranteed. But I'm not in an ideal situation. These medical ships? They're coming in months. I appreciate what you're doing for me," she says. Though, in the back of her mind, part of her wants to tell Sera that she's never felt comfortable with her "profession". "But I have to do this. I have to. I'll go alone, if I have to."

At that, Sera seethes. "You're crazy and you have a death wish. This is a lovely combination. How are you going to reach the Arm alone? That's, like, a week's walking distance."

"I'll figure something out," Calli says. "Hitch a ride to one of the other colonies, maybe. Wildecrest is the closest, isn't it?"

Sera rubs her eyes, sighs. "I can't believe I'm doing this." She walks past Calli, into the other room. Her room.

"What are you-"

"Shut up for, like, a second, please."

Calli doesn't dare enter. For as long as they've been friends, there was always this sense of ownership with Sera: don't touch her stuff, never enter her room. Calli had always been respectful enough to honor her friends wishes, but now... now she was generally curious.

Calli watches as ten minutes go by before Sera comes out, carrying two large backpacks and a small, black case. The backpacks, Calli figures, are full of clothes and food. The case, though...

"So," Calli says, "you want to do this with me?"

"I'd be a horrible business partner if I let one of my coworkers get themselves killed out there when they could be working with me," she says, handing Calli the bag. She lays the case on the table, popping the two latches and opening it.

Inside are two pistols and two clips for each. The weapons themselves are nestled in a felt-like material that keeps them from moving. Calli blinks, making sure she's actually seeing what she's seeing.

"If we're going out there," she says, picking up one of the weapons, "we're going to need these."

Calli watches as Sera examines one of the pistols.

"A gun," she says, her mouth almost slack-jawed. "We're bringing guns."

"You can't expect us not to carry guns, can you? There are goddamn runners and raiders out there. We need something, even if they're these dinky things."

"I've never used one before." Calli looks at the second weapon in the case, the one that she assumes is for her. "Why do you have these?"

Sera looks at her, confused. "Uh, black marketer? I trade weird, illegal things with weird people?"

Calli nods. "Duh." As Sera hands her a gun and clip, Calli grips it between her thumb and index finger. "Uhm," she says, "what? I don't really know where to put this."



Sera takes them from her hands, giving her a disgruntled look. "I'll just hang on to this for now. Might be good that way, anyway. If we want to get out of here tonight, we might have to go through security checks."

"Wait," Calli says. "Tonight? As in, like, right now?"

Sera nods slowly. "Yes, Calli. Please tell me after all that bluster you're not changing your mind now."

"No, it's just..." she stammers. She can't leave now, can she? She wants to leave, wants to find this auracite. But she hasn't prepared yet.

She hasn't said goodbye to Mom.

Sera puts her hands on her shoulders. "Look. A lot of people got that message. We won't be the only people out there looking for this auracite. We'll need a head start if we want to get there first. We don't have time to say goodbye. What we need to make time for is to find help."

She was right, of course. Sera's usually right about most things. For every time that Calli had a problem, Sera almost always had some way out of it.

"What about your deal?" Calli says, nodding towards the weapon mod, still sitting idly on the table. "Aren't you going to get in trouble if you don't go through with it?"

Sera smiles. "Grab the bag," she says as she grabs her own and slings it over her back. "The deals on the way. Two birds, and all that."

#

"Somebody give me a fucking sitrep."

Nevaire strides - no, he charges - into the command center, his ears red from anger. The room is full of technicians and communication officers, each of them staring wildly at their computer screens.

The message of former captain Mara Winters was a startling one when it first came on. Nevaire thought he saw a ghost when her face filled his vision. He remembers her, though mostly from seeing her on the news, about her victories during the civil war - The terrorist strikes, Nevaire corrects himself. She had been a former hero, once upon a time.

Now, he thinks, you're one of them. A raider. To the people in the room: "Did you hear me? I asked for a sitrep. Gimme something, people."

"Sir," one of the techs - a skinny kid too tiny for his uniform - says, "we're still trying to trace its origin. But the message is being broadcast from Silsparrow frequencies. It's just a matter of pinpointing the exact location."

"Hurry it up," he says. If anything, he wants to avoid having this message spread more than it already has. He already sent Lieutenant Ende to bump up security in case any of the civilians got any bright ideas about leaving. "I want this thing found and I want it shut down now."

"Incoming message from the Hierarchy," says another tech, this one a young, dark-skinned woman. "It's Commander Dannowitz."

Fuck. He wanted to avoid this. "I'll take it in my office."

Nevaire inadvertently walks slowly to the office, trying to buy himself some time to say the right things to the commander.

Yes, sir. We're already on it, sir.

No, sir. We haven't figured it out yet. I've got my best men on it, sir.

If anything, Nevaire is sick and tired of saying sir all the time. He had gotten used to other people calling him that, but it's something he wishes he didn't have to do any longer.

By the time he reaches his office and turns on the screen on the wall, he's already forgotten his lines.

Commander Anthony Dannowitz, an old relic by Nevaire's standards, stares at him with old, Doberman eyes and jowls that Nevaire swears are in a constant, perpetual scowl. It's like he was born that way.

"What the fuck is going on down there, Captain?" Dannowitz says. Behind his clean, pressed Silsparrow-blue uniform is the bridge to the Hierarchy. Nevaire swears that it's always busy, as there's a flurry of techs and personnel who bound back and forth doing God's knows what.

Before Nevaire can put a word in, Dannowitz opens his mouth: "That was Mara, wasn't it? It's been so long."

"It was, sir," Nevaire says. "Although lots of people are trying to do face recognition, but at least I think it is."

"She died," Dannowitz says. "She's supposed to be dead, isn't she?"

"That isn't the case anymore, it seems."

"We need to shut that broadcast down. I've spoken with some of the other colony leaders, and even they can't pinpoint it."

And you think I can? He nearly says. "Would it really matter at this point, sir? The broadcast has pinged off of other satellites. I wouldn't be surprised if the message would hit Earth a few hours from now."

The commander scowls. "The less people know about the auracite, the better. We can't afford to have a goddamned rush of people coming to this planet, all of them looking for the stuff. Not without reinforcements."

Auracite. Nevaire knows about it, or at least has heard rumors about it. They never told grunts anything, and by the time he reached the rank of captain, that information didn't much matter anymore.

Not, it seems, this was a different story.

"I've asked that our mining facilities go on high alert. We need to contain this, Garret."

Nevaire *hates* it when he gets called by his first name.

"Yes, sir," he says, nearly through his teeth.

"Make sure Belhall doesn't go into full-on riots. Those people will want a piece of that auracite. Don't. Let. Them. Leave."

The feed is cut, and Dannowitz is gone.

"God fucking damn it," Nevaire says, rubbing his forehead.

The comm in his ear buzzes slightly, letting him know that somebody is hailing him. The vibration always felt odd to him, like he had a bee constantly buzzing around his ear canal.

"This is Nevaire," he says.

"Captain," Lieutenant Ende says. "We have a problem."

"What is it?" Nevaire leaves his office and starts back towards the command center. He's worried, and he can hear it in his voice.

"People are starting to get anxious," Ende says. He can hear people shouting in the background. "They want to know what's going on."

Nevaire curses silently. "I'll be out there in a minute." He cuts the comm before she can protest. I'll handle this myself, he thinks.

Part of Calli wishes she had more time. More time to make sure the house was in good order (for what reason, though, she can't tell; it's something Mom would want, she thinks). More time to say goodbye, to tell her mother she loves her.

"I'm going to save the both of us," she'd say. "I'm going to get you help."

But Sera had been right. There wasn't any time. Calli sees evidence of this as soon as she locks her house behind her. Scores of people, some who Calli would never imagine getting out of bed past this hour, walk or run down the street, some of them carrying packs much like theirs.

"C'mon," Sera says, grabbing Calli's hand. "This way."

Sera leads her to the back of the housing units, through her neighbor's backyards. The identical homes make the short journey maze-like, and Calli wonders what would happen if they got lost weaving their way through various properties.

"Where are we supposed to meet this guy?"

"Back of the square," Sera says. "I just really hope he's gonna show up."

When they exit the residential area and come to the town square, Calli sees people crowding around one of the exits to the shield generator, which is blocked off by a couple large Silsparrow rovers and security officers. A woman with a megaphone tells the people to go back to their homes, that this auracite business is a hoax. People shout back at her, telling her to move out of the way or get moved out of the way. Most of these people look ready to leave town.

They had the same idea we did, Calli thinks.

A man with short graying hair - Calli recognizes him as the Silsparrow captain - stands on top of the rover next to the woman. She hands him the megaphone.

"This is Garret Nevaire, captain of the Belhall colony." To Calli, his voice sounds annoyed, like he doesn't want to be there doing his job. "We cannot allow anybody to leave at this time. It's too dangerous out there. You have no idea what you're getting yourselves into."

"You can't get in our way," a man yells. It's the only thing that Calli can make out amongst the din of voices.

There's more incoherent yelling. Sera pulls on her arm.

"Let's go," she says, and Calli nods.

They weave through the crowd of people, trying desperately to keep their heads down so as not to draw attention. The pack wears her down a bit - she's carrying a couple pounds worth of clothes, food, and water. She tried protesting to Sera that they didn't have any camping equipment, but Sera told her she had that covered.

They manage to break through the crowd on the other side of the square, reaching some of the closed-up restaurants. Sera leads Calli in a small alleyway between two buildings. The alley is too dark for Calli to see ahead of her, so she grabs onto Sera's shoulders and lets her guide the way. By the time they reach the other side, moonlight and a single light post show them the rest of the way to the back of one of the closed restaurants...

Where Calli comes face-to-face with the barrel of a pistol.

"Hey, ladies," comes a female voice on the other side of the gun. Calli is too stunned to look away from the barrel. When she finally looks up, she sees a tall woman

with a shaved head aiming her gun at her. Behind her is a man - a head shorter than the woman. He looks as shocked as Calli does. Calli and Sera raise their arms.

"Rian," the man says, approaching her. "The hell are you doing?"

"Could be looters," the woman says, not taking her eyes off Calli or Sera. "Could be they're coming for our stuff."

Two more people come from around the corner of the building, a tall, dark-skinned man and a young man who looks a bit older than Calli. The young man dashes forward.

"Hold up," he says, standing next to Rian. "Wait wait wait. They're with me."

Rian raises an eyebrow.

"What do you mean, they're with you?" the shorter man says. His tan skin looks like a bright violet in the moonlight.

"I kinda made a deal with one of them," the young man says. "Or, at least, I think it was one of them. I thought I spoke with one of you?" he says to Calli.

Sera clears her throat, her hands still raised. "It was me," she says. Calli hears a faint quiver in her voice. "You spoke with me."

"You're Jewel?" he asks.

Sera nods.

Jewel? The hell is that?

The young man smiles. "Cool."

"Guess that makes you... Hammer?"

"Yep," he says. "Call me Tai." He turns to the woman, this Rian. "Can you please put that down?"



She hesitates for a moment, like she doesn't want to believe what Sera's said.

The shorter man approaches him.

"Seriously, Tai," he says, "what is this?"

"I have a deal with them. A trade."

"For what?"

"Just some tech. It's no big deal."

"Now? You wanna do this now?"

Tai shrugs. "We were gonna do this tonight, but things kinda got pushed ahead of schedule. Thanks to that message that went out. It'll only take a second."

The man sighs. "Fine. We're stuck here until we figure out a plan anyway. Do your thing."

"Wait," Rian says. "I want names. Since you know some of ours now."

"Sera, Sera says quickly enough. Calli got the feeling she didn't much like having a gun in her face. "Sera Hesk."

Rian looks to Calli. "And you?"

"Callissandra Hayford," she says. "Just Calli."

The shorter man turns around, his eyebrow raised. "Hayford?" he says. "Did you say Hayford?" He approaches her, though he does so hesitantly.

She feels threatened. Why would he be interested in her last name?"

"Yeah," she says.

The man sighs. He rubs his temples a moment. "William's daughter?"

She steps back. How did...

"Name's Aresh Devi," he says offering a hand. "Fought with your dad during the war a few years ago."

She looks at the hand he gives her. It's calloused and rough, like he's worked all his life. Like he's been through a lot. Not sure what to do, she takes it.

"Pleased to meet you," she says. She hadn't met anybody who knew her father. She herself didn't know him, except that he fought and died many years ago as a Silsparrow soldier. Her mother had talked about him a lot. She wishes she had met him.

Aresh nods at her, then looks back at Tai. "Do your deal and send them on their way."

"Wait." Sera steps forward. "I... we want to ask you something. A favor really." Sera hesitates for a moment. It's like the words are stuck in her throat.

Calli looks at Aresh. "You're going for the auracite, right?"

He looks at Rian, then back at her. "You don't know that."

"I can see your gear. You've got food. Camping supplies. You're prepared to head out, aren't you. And don't tell me you aren't because there's a bunch of people on the other side of this building that want to do exactly what you're doing."

Aresh sighs. "I guess we are."

"Aresh," Rian protests.

"We want to come with you," Calli says.

Rian scoffs. "Oh, fuck no, you aren't."

"Kinda have to agree with that, Calli," Aresh says. "I've already got one kid on this little team. I can't take two more with me. I don't babysit. This trip won't exactly be safe."

"We know that," Sera interjects, as if she finally found her voice. "We wanna go anyway."

"The man said no," Rian says. "So, y'know, you can leave now."

"Look," Calli says, "Sera and I can handle ourselves. We have our own stuff. You won't even know we're there."

"It's not that simple," Aresh says. "We're going into a not-so-safe place. The Arm isn't like the colonies. I can't have tag-alongs get in our way. No offense. I'm sorry." He nods towards Rian, then to Tai. "Hurry it up. We need to go yesterday." He starts to walk away.

Her chances are going with him.

"It's for my mom," she blurts out. She hadn't meant to, but it just... happened. She didn't want anybody's pity. Aresh turns toward her. "She has the sickstorm virus. She got it saving me." She tells him what happened, about that day a year and a half ago. About the rise in medical bills, and about the ships sent to Kipos that could have a cure. "I can't afford it with what I have now," she says, pleading now. "She'll... she'll die, if she doesn't get the cure. A lot of people will. I just want to help her, you know?"

Aresh looks to Rian, who shakes her head.

"Don't believe it," she says.

Sera steps forward, about to say something, when Calli puts an arm in front of her. Not now, her face says.

"That true?" Aresh says, walking towards her.

Calli nods.

"You know, during the war, your father never left a man behind. It was this odd obsession he had, one that almost got us killed more than once. We always thought that he'd be the death of us for sending us out to help someone else. Usually he led those missions himself." Aresh sighs. Sometimes, when Calli reminisces about a time when Diana isn't hooked up to countless machines, dying of an incurable virus, she thinks of good times. Of dinner, just the two of them, for instance. Calli notices that she gets this look on her face every time she remembers. Aresh has the same look, right now.

"Okay," he says, finally looking at her.

"You're joking," Rian says, rubbing her eyes.

Calli looks to Sera, but before they can say anything, Aresh interjects.

"Wait," he says, a stern look on his face. "You follow my orders. You help where you can. Do you have weapons?"

They both nod.

"Good. You're going to need them."

"What are you expecting we'll find?" Calli asks.

Aresh's dark eyes look old, like they've seen too much. "I'm hoping we'll find nothing but auracite. But the universe has a nice way of fucking up your plans." He turns around, then grabs his pack. "Be ready in five. We're gonna sneak out of Belhall."

#

Right now, Aresh thinks that he's an idiot.

Way he sees it? He just recruited two more kids - kids! - into his little band of misfits. Rian isn't happy. That's something he knows for a fact. He can feel her eyes boring into the back of his head, probably trying to figure out a way to beat him upside

the face with a stick. He might extend his chin if she tries, give her a free shot. This wasn't his intention.

*Their lives are on your hands*, he thinks as he peers around the corner of the restaurant. On the other side of the alley, the massive crowd of people try to push and shove their way to the front of the line, where a group of Silsparrow soldiers in riot gear stand in front of the generator gate that leads outside of Belhall.

"Any ideas?" Rian asks him. He can hear the drip of venom in her voice.

"Gotta wait for John to get back," he tells her. He turns around, sees the two young girls standing with Tai, then calls them over. "You've got four gates here, right?" he asks. "Out of the colony, I mean."

The girl who called herself Calli - *She does kind of look like William...* - nods. "That's it," she says. "In this section, anyway. You head to the southern part of town and you'll find more."

Those had to all be guarded by soldiers as well. If Silsparrow was stopping people here, you could bet they were stopping people everywhere else.

"You wouldn't happen to know of another way around, would you?"

Calli bites her lower lip. "Maybe," she says, "but it isn't an ideal route out."

"What do you mean?"

Before she can answer, Aresh hears footsteps coming down the alleyway, and he spots John walking towards them.

"Nothing," he says. "No way around the group there." He had been in the crowd asking questions about what was going on. "I overheard one of the soldiers saying that

they have rovers on standby outside the wall. Those things are slow, but they can still chase somebody down if they need to."

Aresh wasn't too worried about that. The jungle would provide them with enough cover to get out... assuming they *got* out.

"We'll have to work with it," he says. He turns back toward Calli. "You were saying?"

Calli looks at Sera. "You know what I'm talking about, right? The pipes?"

"You want to climb *that*?" Sera says.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Uh," Rian says, stepping between the two girls, "what the hell are you talking about?"

Calli, clearly uncomfortable having Rian standing anywhere close to her, clears her throat. "There's a pipe that runs the length of the wall, going top to bottom. I think it's a drainage pipe for when it rains. We could climb it and get over to the other side. There's another pipe about the same size that leads over the wall, and that's where we climb down. It'll take us right outside the city."

"And why does Sera here think that's a bad idea?" Rian says.

"It's thin. Rail thin. Too much stress from us pulling ourselves all over it and we could rip it out. A fall like that would - at best - break out legs or - at worst - cause the guards to come running after us."

"We can't get inside the generator itself?" Aresh asks.

"Not unless you want to run into the guards," Sera adds.

Aresh thinks for a moment. "It's the best chance we've got, right? No other way out of here?"

Calli shakes her head.

"I guess that's what we're doing," Aresh says, feeling stupid for saying those words out loud. "John."

John walks over, making sure to quickly look over his shoulder.

"Guards. How many we talking?"

"I spotted about a dozen by the gate. A couple more amongst the crowd."

"Okay. Assuming they keep their attention at the gates, we might be able to climb over the wall without anybody spotting us. Maybe."

Rian sighs. "Let's do this, I guess."

With everybody in agreement, Aresh follows Calli and Sera. The two girls lead them out of the alleyway from the restaurant and back into the crowd of people shouting at the soldiers. With everybody wearing packs full of supplies, they look just like everybody else. Some of the lights that the guards set up paint the scene with a white glow. They keep together, weaving around the crowd of people and avoiding some of the guards that are in the crowd itself, telling them all to go home.

They're almost approached by one of the guards - Aresh catches the eye of a woman wearing the uniform - but she suddenly turns her attention to another and they manage to avoid her scrutiny.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Rian asks him. She's close enough for him to hear, but she still has to yell over the sounds of the crowd. "I don't think you want to be responsible for what these kids might have to go through."

"No," he says. "No, I'm not sure. I'm the farthest thing from sure."

"Then why take them on?"

He looks at Calli as she leads them.

She looks so much like him...

"We need to get out of here. They can show us the way. We'll dump them at the gate. I don't want to have dead kids on my hands."

"What about Tai?"

Aresh sees Tai ahead of them, walking with Calli and Sera. "He's... different. We need him for the ship."

Rian looks as though she wants to say something, but she keeps quiet.

This is for the right reasons. I'm doing the right thing.

The crowd starts to thin out as they reach the end of the yelling mob. Aresh hears the captain - this Nevaire - telling the people to go home, to leave, that this "rumor" about auracite isn't real, but rather a poor attempt at recruitment by raiders and bandits.

Unfortunately, it was all true.

Mara... what are you thinking?

John brings up the rear, making sure that nobody is following them. As they head down another alley, John nods at Aresh, giving him the okay to move. The wall looms over them, about fifty meters high. The closer they get, the louder the hum from the shield generators. It sounds as though a swarm of bees is flying nearby, buzzing a song that Aresh doesn't understand. The thin tint of white light at the emitters tells him that the generator is on.



Calli and Sera lead them, following the wall as they walk on cut grass close to the market. The sounds of the crowd start to die out the farther they go.

"Here it is," Sera says.

Just as they had mentioned, there's a pipe that stretches across the length of the wall.

"It's... a little thin," Rian says.

"It'll hold," Sera says. "It has to."

"We sure we wanna do this?" John asks. "We'll be in the open. If somebody sees us, we could have guards swarming on us in seconds."

Aresh nods. "Then we move fast, space ourselves out to minimize anybody seeing us."

With everyone in agreement, Calli agrees to go first. Aresh puts a hand on her shoulder. "You don't have to do this," he says, quiet enough so that only she hears it.

The young woman shakes her head. "Yes, I do." Making sure that her pack is secured, she grips the pipe and, using her feet to support her, climbs up hand over hand. She's quick as she moves.

"She's done this before," Rian comments.

After a short minute, Sera steps up and follows after Calli. When she gets far enough, Rian volunteers to go next.

"Just wanna make sure they don't accidentally trip an alarm or something," she says, then starts her climb. For a moment, she looks as though she can't get a good grip on things, but eventually she climbs just as well as the others.

"Alright," Aresh says, looking at Tai. "You're next."

The young man nods, then steps up to the pipe.

He gets a few feet into the air when Aresh hears shouts.

"Shit," John says.

Around the pipe are a few small buildings that had closed up shop for the night: a communications post made for civilian use and mechanical repair shop. Aresh and John run along the side of the building, standing near the corner and peeking out.

Two Silsparrow soldiers, wielding riot guns and encased in full riot gear, shine their helmet flashlights over the area, the black visor covering their faces making them look like faceless monsters.

Aresh looks from them to Tai, who isn't moving. He's stopped twenty or so meters into the air.

If they look up...

The guards don't look too concerned, but rather alert.

"See anything?" one of them asks, his mechanical voice filling the empty air.

The other one scans the area, his helmet light nearly passing Aresh and John's position. Aresh looks over at John, who has his hand gripped on the pistol he has in his waistband. John gives him a nod.

It can't come to that. Not while we're still in the colony.

"Probably some kids," the farther one says.

"No," the closer one replies. "That civilian said she saw a group of them. Kids know not to-"

Before he can finish, he looks up. He sees Tai.

He raises his rifle.

"Hey," he calls out. His partner follows suit. "Get down from there!"

"He's trying to go over the wall," the other one yells.

Aresh is running. He isn't sure when he started, but he's barreling towards them. John is behind him, running at high speed. They both grab the soldiers from behind, putting them in headlocks, each of them dropping their weapons. The guards struggle to get out, but Aresh squeezes. Harder. Harder.

The soldier goes limp in his arms, knocked out. John does the same to his guard and lies him flat on the ground.

"Tai, go," he calls out, and the young man resumes his climb. "Disassemble the weapons." He grabs the fallen riot gun and begins to strip it. "Don't want them shooting at us when they wake up."

They both turn the fallen weapons to parts and throw them in different directions. They then go for the pipe and begin to climb, John going first.

No going back. Aresh grabs the pipe and begins the slow climb up.

#

Calli had done this before, once upon a time when she was thirteen. She and Sera were in the habit of exploring the colony, as she was never allowed to leave its walls due to "security measures". At least, that's what her mother told her.

Sera found the pipe, yelling and yipping for Calli to follow her. Once they were at the base of the shield wall, it then became a matter of who climbed first. Calli volunteered. Heights didn't bother her, but she was curious as to what lied over the wall. She made it halfway before heading back down, finding the climb itself too exhausting to

climb. She never did get to see what lied over the wall, not until the quarantine center went up, and at that point she didn't care for the jungle outside.

Now, she feels as though she should let go. Her arms burn, the muscles starting to feel like rubber. She uses her legs to hold herself up, which gives her some respite from using her whole upper body. She can't look down, but she knows the rest of them are right behind her.

Keep moving keep moving oh God keep moving.

She imagines that she has nearly twenty meters to go, which makes it easier as she goes along.

The lip of the wall is a handhold away. She reaches up.

Her hand slips as she grips it. The momentum comes back at her and she starts to slide down the pipe just a bit before hugging it tight.

"Shit shit shit," she says.

"You okay?" she hears Sera call out, who isn't that far behind her.

"I got it," she says, trying to stay quiet. Stealth. Stay stealthy.

She supports herself again and reaches up, this time finding purchase on the lip. She pulls herself up enough so she can grab it with both hands. Her arms burn, but she manages to get herself over the side. The top of the wall where the emitters are has a walkway - Calli thinks it's actually called a rampart - that goes around the length of the wall, allowing engineers to reach the emitters and fix them in case of something breaking down.

She turns around and lies down on her stomach, looking down the pipe. She can see all of Belhall now.

Looks... different. Like I own all of this. Like I... like could fix it.

"Hey," she hears Sera call out. Calli looks down and sees her friend outstretching a hand.

"Sorry," she says and she grabs hold and, using the railing for support, pulls Sera up. Once Sera's up, she looks over to see Rian following close behind. Calli lowers her hand to help her, but Rian shakes her head.

"I got it," she says, then pulls herself up as she reaches the top of the wall.

Tai follows shortly afterward, his breath coming in short bursts as he sits down on the rampart.

"Guards," he says, panting, "found us."

"Shit," Rian says, then looks over the wall. "There's Aresh and John. Did they take care of them?"

"Don't know."

Rian looks to Calli. "Where's the way down?"

Calli moves to the other side of the generator wall - a short distance considering that the rampart is only the length of one person with their arms outstretched - then looks over.

The vast jungle is dark, almost pitch black, in the night, like it's a gaping maw into some abyss that Calli knows she must venture into. She looks for the pipe, but...

"I can't see it," she says.

Rian stands next to her and looks down.

"I thought you said it was here."

"I did think it was here."

Rian scoffs. "Goddamn kids." Calli thinks that was supposed to be a mutter.

"Where do we go from here?"

This time, Sera stands next to Rian and looks around.

At that moment, a hand extends over the side of the wall. Tai approaches it and reaches to grab the hand and begins pulling. John comes up with him, panting as Tai helps him up.

"I hope we're moving in the next few seconds," he says, trying to catch his breath.

"Sparrows will be on us soon."

"There's no way down," Rian blurts out.

"What?"

"The girl can't find it."

Calli peers over the edge one more time, looking along the wall and finding nothing but smooth metal. No pipes or handholds in sight.

Aresh comes climbing over the ledge a second later. Rian (Calli thinks that she doesn't like her very much) tells her what's going on.

"Well, we need to think of something," Aresh says. "The second those guards wake up, they're going to call for help. We need to be in the jungle by then."

"The ropes," Tai says, already taking his pack off to rummage through it.

"No," Aresh says, waving the idea away. "We need those for the downed ship."

"I can't think of a better idea right now," he says, but he still stops what he's doing.

Calli looks up from the ledge around the ramparts. The emitters hum nearby, next to one of them...

"That," she calls out, pointing to a yellow cargo crane attached to the outside of the wall. After the sickstorm a year and a half ago, there was to be a complete overhaul on the emitters. Belhall received three brand new ones, which could only be attached after being lifted by the crane.

It stands twenty-five meters tall, its cord and hook dangling in the night air.

"No fucking way," Rian says, shaking her head. "That's ridiculous."

"I'm sorry, Calli," Aresh says, "but that's too risky. I can't send any of my people - let alone you and Sera - to use that thing."

"No," Calli says, walking towards it. "It's automated. If we can get it to work, we can put ourselves in the crates that the emitters came in. They installed them not too long ago, so the crates should still be lying around."

Tai smiles. "I can probably hack it." He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a small device that looks like a wide datapad attached to a glove. "I can definitely hack that."

"Calli," Sera says, looking at the crane with a skeptical arch in her eyebrow, "are you sure you wanna do that? We can find another way."

"No time," John says. He's peering over the side of the ledge. Calli looks over too, seeing several Silsparrow guards down below, congregating on the men that Aresh and John had knocked out. "We need to do something now. They've found us."

Aresh sighs. "Goddammit. We'll do it. Lead the way."

"That proves it," Rian says, walking towards the crane. "I'm working with maniacs."

Aresh follows her, saying to Calli, "She'll get used to you."

They head toward the crane, the large piece of industrial equipment looming over them like a statue. John helps Tai pop off the service hatch, marked with the Silsparrow sign, alongside it. A touchscreen greets him, then powers up when he touches the screen. He slips on the glove, the wide datapad on his wrist facing him as he moves his hand palm-up. He begins to alternate touching the screens on his wrist and inside the crane.

"What's he doing?" Sera asks.

"Kids a weird genius with this stuff," John says. He leans in so only Sera and Calli can hear him. "Rumor is that a few banks on Everis got robbed a while back. Got hacked into, and lots of money went missing. Nobody found the people responsible. And Aresh found him on Everis."

Calli looks at Tai, who continues to work with an odd efficiency, one that reminds her of a computer on caffeine.

"You think he did it?" Sera asks.

"I'm not pointing fingers, but I'm not ruling him out."

After nearly a minute, the crane jerks, the grating noises of the moving parts coming to life as Tai cracks the codes. Rian finds three crates nearby, each of them made out of metal and painted dark blue. They remove the foam inserts that kept the emitters from moving around during shipment.

"We can fit two in each if we squeeze," Aresh says. "John, Rian, in you go."

"Why do I have to go first?" Rian complains, but Aresh gives her a look, and she gets in on one end of the crate. John mimics her, and Aresh and Calli put the containers lid on top, where a large metal hole for the hook on the crane can fit.

"Okay, crate set," Aresh says. "Lift 'em up, Tai."



The young man begins tapping the screen on his wrist, presumably not needing the computer inside the crane anymore. After a jerky start, the crane moves, then droops low. The cord and the hook hover over the crate and Aresh guides it into the hole, securing it with clamps. Aresh gives Tai a thumbs up.

The crane lifts the crate into the air, and Calli watches as the crane spins over the side of the wall, then begins to lower. She doesn't need to wonder what it'll be like inside one of those things; she'll be next. It feels as though the crane takes forever to reach the bottom, but eventually, Tai presses his screen.

"Clamp detached. Bringing it up."

The line begins to raise, slowly taking its time.

"This thing go any faster?" Sera asks.

Calli watches as Aresh gets another crate ready.

"Get in," he says. "Both of you."

"What about you two?" Calli looks around. "I don't see another crate around."

"We'll find our own way down. I used to live here, remember?" He pops off the lid and motions for her to do as he says.

"You'd better be down there fast," she says, then looks at Tai. "Both of you."

The young man keeps his attention on his datapad, but he nods.

Sera steps into the crate first.

"Think we'd ever be doing this?" she asks.

Calli steps in the other end, laying herself semi-flat so the lid won't hit her head.

"Of course. Been dreaming of this day."

Sera laughs. "Yeah. Me too."

Aresh lifts the lid and places it on top. The click of the clamps echo inside the crate, and everything goes dark.

"Say goodbye to home for awhile," Sera says, her voice sounding like its coming out the other end of a cardboard tube.

"Yeah," Calli says.

Goodbye for now, Mom.

#

"Alright," Aresh says as he attaches the hook into the crate. "Lift 'em up."

Tai taps furiously on his datapad, and the crane moves, taking the crate with it. As it begins to descend, Aresh takes a look around.

No other crates. And no ladders down.

He gets a good look at the ring-shaped shield wall, checking every possible angle.

Four or five dark figures are running along the ramparts, running towards them.

"Hurry it up, Tai," Aresh says, pulling out the pistol from his pack. He loads a clip into it and readies it. He didn't want it to come to this, but...

The line goes slack.

"The crate is down," Tai says.

"Good. Now don't bring it up." He reaches back into his pack and pulls out two sets of gloves used for the climbing ropes they brought with them.

"What?" Tai says.

"We're climbing down." Aresh tosses him a pair of gloves.

Tai barely manages to catch them, his face a contortion of confusion. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. No other way."

The line itself isn't that far away from the railing. Just a short hop and...

"You're joking."

"Tai, we haven't known each other for a long time, so I'm going to forgive you for saying that." Aresh walks up to the railing and steps over it, his feet right on the edge. He stares down into the darkness of the jungle. He can see a few lights down below. The others. He looks back to Tai. "You first, buddy."

"No," he says. "No no no no hell no."

"We don't have much of a choice right now, do we? You said it yourself."

"Yeah but-"

"Look," Aresh says, pointing to the figures approaching them from around the ring. "Those guys are probably going to shoot us if they find us. So why don't we leave so they, y'know, don't do that?"

Tai looks at the figures, then back at Aresh. He groans.

"I'm so dead," he says, putting on the gloves.

Aresh smiles. "Not yet you're not." Tai approaches the railing and, hesitantly, swings his legs over to the other side. "Hand under hand. Slide, if you have to. Use your legs to support you."

Tai nods.

"You can do this, kid."

"Shut up." Tai hops from the ledge, reaching out and finding the rope in his hands. The rope swings a bit, but he manages to stop himself.

"Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck," he mutters.

Aresh looks behind him. The figures are getting closer. Tai moves lower and lower, slowly at first, but he starts to move faster as he gets used to it. Aresh waits for the kid to get close to the bottom before he jumps as well. He grabs the rope and begins to descend. The gloves prevent the rope from burning his hands.

He reaches the bottom, seeing everyone crowding around it.

"Move," Aresh says. "Into the jungle."

Rian comes up next to him. "What's happening?"

The first shots fly right by his ears, the pops from Silsparrow rifles cracking in the air.

"Move!" he yells again, and this time the lot of them bound for the trees, into the dark of the jungle.

For a minute there, Nevaire thought that everything was going to be in his favor. Maybe it wouldn't be clean getting the protestors ("prospectors", one of the soldiers called them) to calm down and go back to their homes, but he figured it would get done.

They're pushing past the midnight hour, and still they persist.

Nevaire is back in the command center, leaving the protestors to some of his lieutenants. Ende is out there, no doubt barricading in front of a gate and telling all the people to go home.

He wants a drink. Another one, actually. He's already down three or four glasses of brandy. And it isn't even good brandy. It's that synthetic shit from one of the other colonies. Heranim Post, maybe? Either way, it isn't smooth going down his gullet. It's hard, and fights its way down his throat and into his stomach. It barely warms him up.

"Uh, sir?" a tech asks.

He doesn't much care now that people see him drink. He figures that he deserves a little something before the eventual call from Dannowitz tells him that he's a failure in every sense of the word.

"What. Now," he says, not even looking up.

"Uh," the tech starts, his voice sounding just as tired as Nevaire's, "Sergeant Gray says that a few of the protestors got out, sir. He's asking for permission to pursue."

Nevaire laughs. "Good for them. They'll die out there." He finally looks up to see the tech staring at him. "No. Tell Sergeant Gray to bring his people back and report to Ende. Whoever gets out is already dead, so there's no point going after them."

The tech nods hesitantly, then walks away.

Fuck 'em. Runner's will take them anyway.

He realizes that he isn't doing his job right now. He's supposed to protect the people he's been assigned to, not leave them to die. Right now, he doesn't much care. He picks up the half empty bottle of brandy and takes it into his office. He hears over his comm that there's a call from Dannowitz waiting for him, but he just simply takes the earbud out and leaves it on his desk. He sits down, then sighs.

"This is bullshit," he says, to himself moreso than anyone, then he pours himself another drink. He sits like this for a good half an hour.

Short end of the stick. All my life here, on this fucking planet, I've had the short end of the stick.

He thinks back to a time during the war. He was just a grunt back then, really. A well-trained grunt, but a grunt nonetheless. The company he was with traveled some of the nastiest areas in the jungle, going from settlement to settlement, checking to see if they needed aid of some kind. That was their mission. To protect.

He remembers when he and his fellow soldiers reached a small camp. From what his CO could tell, it wasn't anything important. It wasn't a target they needed to hit, a target that Command wanted them to take or to destroy.

Nevaire remembers seeing them from his binoculars. It was a small group of rebels, each of them wearing ramshackle military gear. Some of it looked like Silsparrow armor, the sparrow symbol crossed out with a painted red x. There had only been a few of them, no more than four. His CO ordered his squad to take them prisoner. They had, and had done so without so much of a fight. It was easy work, capturing some of the rebels.

The way that his CO had told ordered him to capture them disturbed him. "Now," his CO said to the men under his command, "we have ourselves a greenie here." The men laughed, and so did Nevaire. He knew they were talking about him. The prisoners, each of them lying on their side with their hands tied behind their backs, stared up in both fear and anger.

"Private Nevaire," his CO said, "you've never killed someone before, have you?"

The question took him by surprise. "No, sir, I haven't."

"Would you like to learn how?"

The realization hit him then, and still haunted him now.

"What... on them?" he said, looking at the prisoners.

"There's nobody else around." The other soldiers laughed when his CO said that.

"These other guys are trained killers. You're just trained. How's about we change that?"

He remembers saying no, that it was wrong. His CO argued that there was no point in bringing back just four rebels. They weren't worth the time. Nevaire refused again.

"That's too bad," his CO said, waving his fingers. The other men, the ones that Nevaire served alongside, raised their rifles.

At him.

"Shoot 'em, or we shoot you, then shoot them anyway. Simple plan, son."

His CO even handed him his own gun, a pearl-handled revolver. A rare weapon to be found anywhere, Nevaire's admiration for the weapon disappeared when he looked down at the prisoners.

It had been a simple order, one that Nevaire found himself carrying out.

He rubs his eyes. That was a long time ago. He picks up the earbud and puts it back into his ear. He counts himself lucky that the world didn't go to complete shit in the few moments he had been away. He calls for Ende to meet him in his office. Minutes later, she walks in, decked out in complete riot gear, and holding her riot helmet in the crook of her arm.

"Sir," she says as Nevaire tells her to sit down. "Things aren't calming down, but they aren't progressing, either. I think people will start to head home soon enough."

"That's good."

"We have heard reports of others making it out of the colony. Some even climbed the wall."

Nevaire laughs. "Clever bastards."

Ende arches an eyebrow. "Sir?" She looks to the near empty bottle of brandy. "You're drinking."

"Can I ask you something, Lieutenant? And I don't want any of that 'sir yes sir' bullshit. I wanna talk as people."

She nods. "Yes, s-," she starts. "Sure."

"Where's your family at these days?" he asks.

He thinks that she finds the question odd, but she answers him quickly enough. "I've got two mothers and a younger brother on Europa, back in the Sol System."

"Ah," he says. "Earth's front yard."

She smiles. "You could say that."

"Why did you take this job, then? We're a quite a ways from Europa."



She laughs a little. "I took it for that cushy 'see the galaxy' bullshit. Probably the reason why most people do this."

He nods, understanding. There was a time when he thought just like her. He grew up on a hydroponic ship bound for the Rinata colonies. Growing up in a metal shell... it took a toll on him, and he left as soon as he could, as soon as the call for recruitment from Silsparrow found him.

The weight isn't worth it. Not anymore.

"Lieutenant," he asks, not sure how this is going to sound to her, "do the men and women under my command respect me?"

"I don't follow," she says, then adds "sir," presumably since they had changed the subject.

"Do they follow Admiral Dannowitz. He's technically in control of this sector's troops. Of everything connected with Silsparrow, really. Speak freely."

"Honestly, I don't think they've ever met Dannowitz. I don't think the man has come down to the planet itself. Most everyone here? They'll follow you anywhere."

"Dannowitz is killing us here," he says, pulling out a second glass from his desk. He pours her some brandy, then pushes the glass towards her. "That broadcast from a few hours ago? It's going to change things. Look outside and you'll see it. The admiral doesn't see it, but I do."

She takes the glass and downs its contents in one loud gulp. "I've noticed. Have they verified its validity?"

"Does it matter at this point? The people believe it's real. We've kept them on this shitty planet with no real way off. All they do is work. All we do is work. And we don't

have anything to show for it. We haven't tamed this planet. We like to think that we can do that to any piece of rock we come across, but not this one. Civil war, sickstorms, those runners... Kipos isn't a planet for humans, and the colonists are starting to recognize that. This auracite stuff? It's their ticket off this planet."

Ende nods, her eyes gleaming. "What do you suggest we do?"

He refills both of their glasses, and raises his in the air to toast.

"Fuck Silsparrow. Fuck Kipos. Fuck the colonists." He finds himself a little surprised that she drinks to that. "Lieutenant Ende, how would you like to become stupid rich?"

#

Mara sits on the dirt-covered ground, next to a large, swaying tree. The various fires that she and her comrades - her soldiers - built looked like open lanterns in a dark night. Clouds covered the moon, so barely anything could be seen. Their attack on the communications station took more out of her than she previously thought. It's been awhile since she's been out on an actual assignment. Mostly, she took to managing the camps, making sure security was set up, supplies were well-stocked, and governing the various captains on their own special assignments.

She knew there was talk of making her an actual leader, but she doesn't want that.

"You okay?"

Wilson sits down next to her, laying down his gun on the ground.

"How's the perimeter?" she asks, ignoring his question.

He sniffs. "No sign of the Sparrows. Or runners. There are a few places that look like their nests, but nothing's been in them for a while. Sparrows must've cleaned the place up when they took over this area.

Nature always returns to its roots. "Good," she says. She opens her canteen and gulps down cool water. "That's good."

"We did good."

She wipes her mouth. "We did."

"I'm thinking that the Sparrows shut down the broadcast by now. You think it got very far?"

"Garret did his job. Even if they shut down the signal, there had to be other ships in the area that received the message. No doubt they'll send that around as well. Earth will probably be seeing it come morning." Kipos was an incredible distance away from Earth, and communications took time to reach the Blue Land. News didn't spread fast these days, but it still spread.

"Good," Wilson says. "Should be seeing people coming out here in no time."

That's the plan, one that she, Wilson, and various others prepped for the last few months. Get people to leave the colonies. Come and find them. Join up with them. It didn't matter if Silsparrow came after them. Her people weren't tied down to staying in one spot. They would move if they had to, keep mobile. They know this jungle better than anybody else. She trained them to be that way. Even children born into the camps are taught, at a very young age, that their home is Kipos, not just the jungle that surround them.

As it should be.

"When the people come, they'll have to be conditioned."

She nods. "That'll happen, in due time."

"What if they don't take to it?"

"We'll do what we can for them. If they die from it... well, then there won't be much we can do for them, can we?"

"What if they refuse it?"

She sighs. "That's their choice."

"That's not what I'm asking."

She looks at him, and he stares back, his dark eyes devoid of emotion.

"They'll join us or they won't. If they won't, they're no use to anybody."

Seeming to be satisfied, Wilson doesn't say anything else. He just stares at the fire. Fast footsteps interrupt the silence.

"Mara," comes a voice behind her. She turns to see Farid, his rifle at the ready.

"We've got an intruder. One of the Sparrows from the comm station."

"I thought we got them all," Wilson says.

"He's injured, but he's alive. Bullet in his leg."

"Let's go," Mara says, and they grab their gear and follow Farid to the far corner of their makeshift camp. They come to a stream, where several soldiers have a man on his knees. He wears the Sparrow uniform, and his helmet is off, his hands tied behind his back. Kait stands behind the man, her rifle pointed at the back of his head. The man's face cringes, and Mara sees that his left knee, presumably the one where he got shot at, leans at an odd angle to take the weight off of it.

The man groans in pain.

"Ma'am," Kait says, not taking her gun off of the soldier, "we found him crawling towards us."

"Did you injure him?" Mara asks.

"No. He was like that when we found him."

Mara steps forward, the soldiers surrounding the intruder parting ways. She crouches down to meet the man eye-to-eye.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Private Patrick Reed, part of the--."

"I didn't ask for all that, but thanks anyway, Reed."

She can tell he's lost a significant amount of blood. Under the bright lights of her soldier's flashlights, she can see that he's pale.

"Fix him up," she says, not taking her eyes away from his. At first, her people hesitate, no doubt wondering why she wants them to give medical assistance to an enemy. "It's okay," she says after a moment, more to them than to him.

Someone steps forward and does what she can for the leg. The bullet had gone clean through. Even though Silsparrow suits were state-of-the-art battlesuits that were supposed to clot up wounds to prevent blood loss, the area near his leg had been torn up so much that the suit couldn't clot all of it.

"Do you want something for the pain?" her medic asks him. He shakes his head.

"Thank you," she says to the medic. "Now, Reed. I'm not going to interrogate you. I don't want to know anything from you." He stares at her, now angry. And maybe just a little bit frightened. He must know about me. "What I am going to do is let you go."

At that, her soldiers look at her.

"Ma'am-" Wilson starts, but she raises a hand.

"I'm going to lead him out. Nobody is to follow, understand?" It takes a moment, but everyone nods. "I'll be back soon. Help him up."

Once Reed is standing, she grabs him by the arm and begins to lead him out. She knows that they'll whisper behind her back. It doesn't matter. She's led them through everything. They would spare her this moment.

She walks behind Reed, allowing him to go ahead. She carries a flashlight, but it isn't turned on.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks her.

Finally, he speaks. "Doing what?"

"This. Letting me go."

She almost answers. Instead, she keeps quiet.

"I know you," he says. "I wasn't on Kipos during the civil war. Got brought in two years ago on guard rotation."

"And how's that working for you?" she asks.

"You were a hero once. To Silsparrow. To this planet."

"I never signed up for that job."

"Yeah, well, you were one anyway. Now you're helping these... raiders? Why?"

"You don't do this whole prisoner thing well, do you?"

He scoffs. "I know you haven't killed me yet, even though you could. I just want to know why."

She tugs gently on his arm, getting him to stop, then she moves in front of him so he can see her.

"Why?"

She kicks out, connecting with the wound in his leg. It isn't hard enough to break bone, but it does the job. Reed cries out, then falls to the ground, his pain sounding muffled through his gritted teeth.

She crouches down onto her haunches. "I was something to Silsparrow. A symbol. I'm something to these people, too. A symbol. That's all I am, no different than that sparrow on your uniform."

If Reed could answer, he doesn't. He just moans.

"Symbols are nice. They keep people motivated, keep them believing in something that's bigger than them." She leans in close now, right near his face. "You ask me why I do what I do. I'll tell you: your symbol died during the war. She died in fire and bullets and sickstorms. She died with all the other good men and women that Silsparrow abandoned."

Reed grunts, unsure of what she's saying. She backs away from him allowing him to get up onto his knees. The bandage where his wound is has started to bleed again.

"You want to go back to your people? Go." She pulls out her knife and cuts the ropes holding his hands together. She knows he wants to try something, but his leg would give him a disadvantage if he tried to fight her. "Go back to them. But you tell them that these people aren't going to back down. Even I can't get them to do that if I tried. They won't back down because Kipos doesn't belong to anybody, except that it belongs to everybody. You tell Silsparrow that, if you can make it back to them. Or you could join us. See the future that Kipos deserves to have. It's up to you. I won't stop you."

Reed stands his ground, but it's Mara that turns first.

He doesn't return to the camp. Mara thinks it a shame. He looked like he was a good soldier, like she had been at one time.

Wilson asks her what happened.

"He made a choice," she says, returning to her spot at the fire, "and I granted it to him."

"He could reach his people."

"Let him," she says. "They already know we're out here."

Wilson - reluctantly - sits down next to her. She knows he doesn't agree with all of her actions, but he doesn't say a word about it.

In the middle of the night, Mara wakes up to a screech that cries out into the darkness. It's followed up by several more screeches, each of them far enough away so that whatever's behind them doesn't pose a threat to Mara and her group.

Wilson looks at her.

"See? He made his choice, and Kipos rejected him."

She lays her head on her pack and drifts off to sleep. She's greeted with dreams of fire and bullets and sickstorms.



Calli wakes up, unsure as to why she's staring at canopies of trees instead of her light blue ceiling. They had traveled a ways into the night, long enough so that her feet hurt. Aresh told them they should be safe for the night, and built a small camp.

The sun punctures the canopies like spears. A bird calls, its warbled and guttural screech an odd alarm for her to wake up to.

She feels a light kick to her side. It isn't hard enough to hurt, but it gets her to sit up. Rian stands over her.

"Time to go," she says, her pack already on her back.

The smells of the jungle, of trees and humidity and leaves and the bright-colored fruits that hung from them, feel invigorating to her. Like her lungs feel brand new with every inhalation. She's sweating, or has been. The jungle heat is already gnawing at her skin. She sits up, seeing the smoke from a hastily made fire that Aresh is putting out.

"What time is it?" she asks. Aresh looks at his watch.

"Still morning. We've got a lot of daylight to cover." He stands up and puts on his pack.

Calli does the same, rolling up the padded mat she uses for a bed. Sera walks over to her, already ready to leave.

"When did you get up?" Calli asks.

"With everyone else."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

She smiles a mischievous grin. "Didn't want to wake you. You looked so comfortable in the shade."

Tai and John bid her good morning, and Sera hands her a small, wrapped package.

"Protein cookie," she says, pulling out a similar bag and opening it. "Tai handed me these. They're not bad."

Calli opens her bag and pulls out a square cookie. It looks no different from a regular chocolate chip cookie, though she notices that this one has little pecans in it. She takes a bite, then nearly spits it out.

"This is gross," she says as she tries hard to swallow. "Like, I think the dirt might taste better than this."

Sera shrugs. "Fine," she says with her mouth full, "more for me."

Once their things are ready, Aresh tells them to move out.

"We're heading north," he says more to Calli and Sera than Tai, Rian, or John. "There's the skeleton of a downed Silsparrow warship left over from the war there. We don't have access to any long-range scanners, but that ship does. If we can somehow get the power back on, we can use those scanners."

"And what will that do?" Sera asks.

He reaches into a small pouch that hangs from his belt and pulls out a small, plastic container. "Those scanners were mainly used to detect enemy ships. Or enemy combatants, if it was scanning the surface. It can also be used to detect certain materials, if you have a sample of that material for the ship to process." He pops the lid off of the

circular container, upending it into his hand. A stone, no bigger than Calli's thumb, falls into his hand. It gives off a small, yellowish glow that seems to appear golden.

"That's... auracite?" Sera asks, her gaze just as transfixed as Calli's. "It looks like that stuff the lady was showing everybody in that message."

"A very small sample of it, yes," Aresh says. "We'll put this into one of the scanners on the ship, which will scan the planet, looking only for auracite. We'll be able to see where we should go next. At least, that's what Tai tells me."

Tai, who is standing nearby, nods. "It'll work. I'll make it work."

Aresh looks back at them and shrugs. "We'll get a sense of where we should go next, then head out from there."

Rian steps forward, and Calli realizes that she'd been gone for the last couple of minutes. "Perimeter is clear. No pursuit from Silsparrow."

Aresh hums. "Odd. I would've thought they'd come after us after escaping."

"Maybe they had too many other people to deal with at the gates. Didn't want to take away any resources that could be better used elsewhere instead of sending them after a small group."

"Maybe. Okay," he says, loud enough so everyone to hear. "Time to go. The ship is a long way from here."

They pack up and leave, the endless jungle in front of them.

It feels odd to her, seeing the shield generator wall behind her. That's her home, the only place she's ever known.

And she's walking away from it.

From Mom.

Why is it so hard, to walk away? She feels herself being pulled back to it, to run back home, over the wall, and hitch a ride to the quarantine center to see Diana, to see her mother, and tell her that she won't leave her, that she'll stay by her side for as long as possible. To stay.

It won't help. She tells herself this over and over. That won't save her. The auracite can, and you need to find it.

The group doesn't say much as they make their way through the jungle. Rian takes point. Calli wonders what she was before she came to this planet. Nobody told her much about Rian, but then again, she doesn't know much about any of them. Save for Aresh, really.

The daughter of William Hayford. That's who she is to him. It isn't something she regards as disrespectful - surely nobody knows her worth more than she does - but it was an odd thing to say to her. She finds herself... wanting to know. To ask him. To pick his brain. Aresh follows close behind Rian. Would he respond to her? Did he even want to talk about it? She's never known her father. He died when she was too young to remember much of anything. There were photos of him in the house, back before Diana got sick. The pictures showed a warm smile, his features strong. He had short, auburn hair, which complimented his light skin tone. In the picture, he wore his Silsparrow uniform while holding a baby Calli in his arms. He looked... happy.

From what Diana told her, William Hayford was a loyal man, loyal to his friends, his comrades, and his family. The one thing Calli remembers about the picture itself is his eyes.

Emerald green. I have his eyes.

Feeling odd about asking Aresh this, she approaches him with another question. He looks down at her.

"What's on your mind?" he says, pulling out his canteen for a sip of water.

"That... sample you carry with you," she says, her words sounding odd even for her.

He arches an eyebrow, drawing out the word, "Yeahhhh?"

"It's auracite, right?"

"It is, indeed."

"So... that means you knew about this stuff before the, y'know, broadcast went up."

He nods, understanding. "Ah," he says, "you're right. I did."

"Why is that? I mean, how come we're only now hearing about it? If this planet had auracite to begin with, why didn't anybody know about it?"

"I can't answer the why. I don't know the answer to that one. I can answer the who, though. Silsparrow."

She isn't surprised by this. Not really, anyway. There's still so much she doesn't know about this planet, and the same applies to people who lived on it, once upon a time.

"They just... knew about it. It was here. Even back then, they were fighting over this stuff."

"Is that what the civil war was about?"

"It was about a lot of things. Individual rights, who this planet belongs to. I wouldn't be surprised if auracite fit somewhere in there."

Back in Belhall, the average child born on Kipos went to school until they were sixteen, when they were old enough to work. Even though it had been a couple of years since the civil war had ended, the only time Calli ever heard about it was from disgruntled people or her mother. It was never taught in class, and she knew that the war was on everyone's mind. Any questions to her teachers were deflected, or the subject was immediately changed, chalking it up to being "too soon" to even mention the war in passing. At the time, she agreed. Her father was gone. She didn't care about who started the war. Just why.

"What did the Homeland think about it?" She hardly ever thinks about Earth. Even though humanity was born there, suffered there, she never thinks about it as her home.

"Earth? They started an investigation, though they didn't learn much. It was Silsparrow's word against the rebels'. They didn't even have humanitarians come here. There were a lot of video interviews with various soldiers and people living here, but from Earth was ever here to find out why. Kipos is too far out for anybody to really give a damn, though they sure want us to behave once we actually get control of this place."

She nods. That much is true. Kipos, if anything, is a planet that was supposed to be another frontier planet, a launching point from which humanity could go further into the universe. Always further. Yet, with the war, the untamed wildlife... Kipos is still a dangerous place, and so far, Silsparrow has yet to show any progress in its promise to make Kipos a place where humanity can thrive and go further. This isn't unheard of in colonization; there are plenty of planets where the issues barring human settlement are becoming more trouble than they're worth.

"What does this stuff even do?" she asks. "The auracite. That Sera woman mentioned it had something to do with fuel on the broadcast."

Calli sees him tense up, the muscles in his face tightening for a moment. "That I don't know. Like I said, I was nothing but a grunt. They didn't give me answers. Only orders."

She wants to ask him about her father. Really wants to. The notion of knowing him more... it's an odd thing to have that part of her, the part that's curious, that desires answers, to be right in front of her. Her mother was always vague about him, saying that "your father was a brave man", or "everything he did he did for you". But she never knew what that meant. Now... Aresh walks next to her. To Calli, he's a wellspring of information, to find the truth.

She doesn't ask him.

She doesn't know why, but she... doesn't want to know. It's as if finding out the truth will change her perception of her father, the one that her mother put into her head long ago. She doesn't ask him. She buries the idea down for the next two days that they travel through the jungle. The nights are warm and the days humid. They spot a number of Kipos's wildlife in the open, most of them unnamed due to Silsparrow simply giving some of these creatures numbered designations. A deer-like creature with tusks and pink skin nibbles at high grass, then bounds off into the jungle when it sees them. A few birds, each of them scaly and colorful, whoosh by as they squack.

Each night, John, Rian, and Aresh take turns keeping watch. Sera volunteers one night.

"Just give me a rifle and I'll do it," she says. Calli sits nearby on her mat by the fire, nibbling at a banana-flavored protein cookie and watching her friend demand to find something to do.

John laughs at her, swinging his gun over his shoulder like a toy soldier. "Don't think so. I'd like to live to see morning, thank you very much," and he walks off into the darkness.

Sera huffs. "Hey, I'm very much awake, thank you very much... and focused." Her voice echoes into the jungle.

"This is too strange," Calli says as Sera sits down on her own mat. "Us. Out here."

"Never thought we'd leave, huh," Sera replies. She pulls out her own food - a package of sealed crackers - and starts munching on them. "You really had faith in us, didn't you."

"I figured we'd leave one day just... not so soon. I thought we'd have, I don't know, time?"

"I get what you mean."

"I just... I just wanna say thanks. Y'know, for pushing me out the door."

Sera smiles, then tosses a cracker into the air and catches it in her mouth. "You're welcome. You can reward me with a bigger cut of your findings when we actually get our hands on some auracite."

#

By the time morning hits and they've already walked for an hour, Aresh sees the fallen ship.



"There," he says, pointing past the trees at the long, black metal structure. "That's the Venerous."

The ship itself lies in two giant pieces, the front of it bigger than the back. It sits on a steep, the front of it jutting out into the sky. If too much weight was put on one side...

"Ah," John says as he walks up to Aresh. "I remember you."

"That ship familiar?" Rian asks. Behind her, Tai, Sera, and Calli bring up the rear, laughing at some joke that Aresh didn't hear.

"I served on it," John says. "Well, sort of. I was a Silsparrow marine, and I was part of the ground forces." The ship itself was a warship, not as large as a dreadnaught, but it was still big enough to pose a threat to any enemy installations. From what Aresh can remember, warships often stayed in the air and rarely broke orbit, acting as mobile headquarters and launching points for assaults.

"I was on the ground when this thing went down," John adds.

"How long as this thing sat here?" Sera asks. Now, all of them stare in odd wonderment at the graveyard of a ship.

"It went down eleven years ago, during the war. Shot out of the sky by a point defense cannon that the rebels took over. I was on the ground with my unit, trying to prevent that." He sighs. "Lotta people died that day."

"Why is it still here?" Rian asks. "Wouldn't Silsparrow want to salvage what they can from this?"

"I think they've already recovered what they could from it: the ship's Black Box, any supplies they could find. I think they're too busy dealing with the colonies to clean up a dead ship."

"You're sure we can get the power running?" Aresh takes another look.

John nods. "We'll need to jumpstart a few systems, but yeah. I think we can."

"Okay." Aresh turns to everyone. "If we can get the power running, we can get map data on potential auracite sites." He takes another look at the ship, noticing its tilt. "Thing is, it looks as though it could fall if too much weight is put on one side. I can't imagine we rank high in the weight category - it is a large ship, after all - but I want to be sure. So all of us can't head to the front of the ship, where the map room is. We'll have to split up when we get there." He looks at Tai. "Tai is definitely going to the front. He's the only who can hack into the system and get what we need."

"I know where the power generators are," John adds. "I can get 'em turned on."

"That's one and one," Aresh says. He looks at Rian. "Go with Tai. I don't want him by himself."

"I guess I can do that," she says, and she gently punches him on the shoulder.

"I'll go with John, and you two," he says to Sera and Calli, "get to pick which team you want to be on."

Calli looks between the two made up groups, like this is the most important decision of her life.

"Really not a hard choice here," Rian says.

"I think I'd like to see the front of the ship," Calli says. "I'll go with Rian and Tai."

"Then I guess I'm sticking with you guys," Sera says, nodding towards Aresh.

"Let's turn on the lights."

"Sounds good," Aresh says. They turn around and start to head towards the ship. They arrive in front of it close to midday, and they break for lunch. Aresh stares at the ship, looking at the it's gaping middle. Scorch marks are everywhere. Some of the ground is still black.

"When the ship went down," John tells them, "it started a fire in this jungle. Silsparrow forces managed to contain it. Looks like things are starting to come back to it." They turn at this and spot a pink and orange raccoon-like creature scurry off into the tall grass.

Aresh notices vines and plants sticking off of various points outside of the ship.

Nature reclaims everything. I wonder how long it'll take for Kipos to reclaim the colonies.

After their break, Aresh hands off various ropes and climbing gear to Rian.

"Just in case," he tells her, and she nods. "Should be enough rope there for you to rappel down from the front of the ship."

"Been awhile since I've rappelled down anything," she says, stuffing the ropes in her pack. She looks at Calli. "You follow my lead, kid. No fighting my orders. Just do it and I'll get you out of here alive."

Aresh steps in, if only to dissuade Rian's words. "Thing will go smoothly. Just listen to Rian. If you - any of you - feel as though the ship might tilt, get out of there, but do it slowly. You don't want to upset it. Just take everything slowly."

Calli nods. Tai stands up.

"What's our goal?"

Aresh pulls out a small datapad and taps the screen. He sets the pad up for projection mode, then sets it down on a flat surface. A second later, a hologram of a fully-formed, brand new warship - identical to what the Venerous looked like before it crashed - appears, coming from the pad itself. Various points of light create the white, three-dimensional image. He manipulates the image, grabbing the ship in his hands like it's a toy to keep it from spinning. He then pinches his fingers near the front of the ship, and the hologram zooms in on that spot.

"This area here," he says, pointing to a thin point jutting out slightly from the front of the ship, "is the Combat Information Center, or the CIC. It's where they would perform firing solutions and flight patterns during combat. It's also where they have the map data. If I remember my ship models correctly, they have it in the center of the room."

"Why the center?" Tai asks.

"It's easier for whoever was in command to relay information. He or she could call out orders, and everyone in the room would hear them. What you need to do is get that map projector turned on and set it so that it tracks specific details. In this case," he says, pulling out the small case, "it's auracite." He hands the case to Tai, who pockets it immediately. "Once you put in the data for the auracite, be sure you set it up so it scans anything and everything for miles. It should automatically find anything after you do that. And again, this all assumes that John can get the power running again."

Tai nods. "Got it."

Aresh looks to Calli. "Are you sure you want to do this? You can go with John, Sera, and I if you want. It'll be less dangerous."

Calli smiles. "Are you kidding? Back in Belhall, I'm a mechanic. This thing? It's my jam."

#

After they prepare, Calli goes with Rian and Tai.

"Keep together," Aresh tells them. She's starting to realize when he turns into soldier mode. He seems to furrow his brow whenever he's giving orders. She wonders if her father was the same way. Aresh looks to Calli. "Follow Rian and you'll do fine."

She nods, if only to show him that she understands and knows that.

"Good luck," Sera says. She reaches out and gives Calli a fist bump. "I'll see you on the other side."

"Don't say that," Calli says, smiling.

"Had to. Sorry."

Aresh, Sera, and John head towards the back of the ship, in the other torn half, which rests comfortably on the ground. Calli looks into the back of the front end of the ship, but sees nothing but darkness. Rian hands her a flashlight.

"I've got a spare," she says. "Keep close to me. I don't want you getting lost in there, because I'm not wasting time going to look for you."

Calli sighs, but Tai laughs. When Rian isn't within earshot, Tai stands next to her.

"Don't worry," he says. "It took her awhile for her to warm up to me."

"Thanks, I think."

They walk together towards the back of the ship. The cracked opening looks like a gaping cave. Calli turns on the flashlight as she steps inside, her footsteps echoing on the metal surface.

"Whoa," she says. Cracks from the ceiling let in sunlight, so she can see most of the room. It's a large area, where lockers and tables lie in heaps and messes. Various mechanical things, like tires and engines and tools, are scattered across the floor.

"Must be a workshop," Rian says, moving her beam around. "Which means that the CIC is this way." She waves her beam forward, toward a small door at the end of the room. The whole floor sits at an angle, so they have to walk up in order to get to the door. "Don't move too quickly," Rian adds as they reach the door. "I don't want to disturb this ship."

"Kinda freaked out as it is," Tai says.

Rian smirks. "Ah, come on. Can't get scared now. We aren't even there yet."

They each go through the doorway and come into a thin hallway.

"Silsparrow ships often kept these hallways tiny." She taps the railings that extend the length of the hallway. "When this ship is in orbit, when the artificial gravity is turned off, people would just float down these hallways, using the railings as a launching point.

Calli imagines people floating down the hallway, almost as if they're swimming in midair. The hallway is completely dark, but Calli manages to find her way with the flashlight. When the hallway ends, it branches off into two other hallways. Rian stops at the crossroad.

"Flip a coin?" she says, flashing her beam to the two signs above the hallway entrances. One reads BARRACKS, the other MESS. "Sleep or food?"

"I think either will do," Tai adds. "The only way to go is forward, right?"

Rian nods, then heads down the hallway marked MESS.

Calli follows behind. The only sound she can hear is their echoing footsteps. At the end of the hallway, they enter another room that isn't as large as the workshop.

Various tables are bolted onto the floor, and Calli sees a kitchen in the back.

"Anybody hungry?" Rian says, then chuckles.

As they pass by various tables, Calli tries to get a good look around.

So this is a warship, she thinks. She doesn't notice the table leg that has broken away from the rest of the table, and she catches her foot on it, tripping. Her hand extends out and it lands on the table, preventing her from falling to the floor.

That was close.

As she looks up, she comes face to face with a skull.

She doesn't scream or yelp, but she does come back up fast.

"Guys," she says, and Tai and Rian look back at her. She shines her light on the skeleton. "Look."

"Well, shit," Rian says, examining the body. "Poor guy didn't get to finish dinner." She laughs at that. "We might find a few more of these here. Just try not to freak out when we do."

Calli looks at the man's uniform. He wears a blue jumpsuit, which is covered in dirt and what looks like old grease.

A mechanic.

"That's," Tai says, looking for the right word, "unsettling."

"No doubt," Calli answers.

"If we hurry up," Rian says, her voice loud in the echoing room, "maybe we won't look like that poor bastard."

Calli and Tai follow her and through another door on the other end of the mess hall. She finds herself thinking about the ship, about what it had been before it crashed.

Did Dad serve on something like this? Did he used to call this place home? What would Mom think if she saw me here now?

She shakes her head, trying to get the thoughts out. No use thinking about that now.

The hallway goes farther than the previous one, but Rian stops at a sliding door.

"An elevator," she says. "Definitely not working." She presses the button to call the elevator, though Calli thinks its only out of curiosity rather than figuring if it would actually work. "The CIC should be above us."

"Think there's stairs?" Tai asks.

"I'd imagine so," Rian says, then she continues down the hall. "These ships were designed to have multiple entrances and exits for almost every room. Engineering, command, mess. All of it."

"You ever serve on something like this?" Calli asks.

"Nah," Rian replies. "I was a grunt, like Aresh. Boots on the ground, and all that. Came in on a behemoth-class. These warship-class ships are for the leathernecks only."

This hallway leads them to a set of stairs, ones that layer on top of one another.

"See? Told you," Rian adds, and she begins to climb the stairs. Calli and Tai follow close behind, listening as metal creaks with every step they take.



"Careful," Rian adds in a lowered voice, as if her speaking would agitate the ship. They climb for what feels like three or four flights of stairs, each step seeming to creak louder and louder. Rain holds her hand up, signaling them to stop. "Okay, hold on," she says. She looks up, shining her flashlight. Calli looks up with the beam, and sees that the flight above them has a large gap in it. Some of the steps were missing, broken off.

"Must've come off in the crash," Tai says. "It's a short gap, though."

"Yeah," Rian says, "but I don't like the looks of it. Some of those steps are rusty."

"What should we do, then?" Calli asks.

Rian continues to stare at the missing steps above her, as if she's trying to find an answer. "You two go first. You're both lighter than me." They climb the next flight and stop at the missing stairs. "Tai, you go first."

The young man nods, then steps up to the edge of the steps. He makes a short leap, then lands on a step.

"Holy shit," Tai says after gaining his balance with the help of the railing. "That's kinda weak," he says. He climbs a few more steps to get away from the weaker ones. "Be careful. Try to land light on your feet."

Calli nods.

"Gimme your pack," Rian says. "It'll make you lighter when you jump."

Calli does as she's told, then steps up to the gap. She looks down slightly, but all she can see is darkness below her. "You sure about this?" she asks Rian.

Rian shrugs. "You wanted to come with us. You're more than welcome to head back, if you'd like. Tai and I will keep going, though."

Calli sighs. Of course, she doesn't want to head back. If anything, she wants very much to avoid the dead in the mess hall.

"Fine," she says, stepping forward. "I guess I got this."

"You'd better," Rian says, grabbing onto her pack to make it easier for her to jump. "I don't want to have to carry a kid with a broken leg."

Calli looks at the step in front of her. She can tell it's loose. The crash and rust make it appear loose, ready to drop the second she grabs onto it. Tai stands on the other side with one hand extended, the other on the railing.

"I'll catch you," he says.

Fuck it.

Calli jumps, the hop feeling more like a leap. Instead of landing on the rickety step, she lands on the one above it, the one that Tai stands on.

"Nice," he says, smiling. "Okay, Rian. Your turn."

As soon as she takes a step back, ready to make the jump, everything starts to shake, creak, and moan.

"What the hell is that?" Tai asks, looking around.

"Climb!" Rian calls out. "It's falling! Get your asses up."

Calli does so, and she can hear Tai behind her. They climb the rest of the stairs and hit the landing before the ones they just climbed break off and fall down. The gap is too large for Rian to jump. Calli can tell that she knows it.

"Well, shit," Rian says. She picks up Calli's pack, takes one to two good swings, then throws it toward her. Calli misses the pack, but it lands right behind her. "Keep going," Rian says, turning around. "I'll find my own way."

"What about the rest of the stairs?" Calli asks. Her voice echoes throughout the stairwell.

"If you move fast enough, you won't have to worry about the falling stairs, now do you?"

Rian's footsteps start to fade away, leaving Calli and Tai alone.

"CIC should be a few flights above us," he says, standing up.

Calli follows his lead, now more aware of the stairs than she had been earlier. She treats each step like she's walking in a room full of mines, and that any step could trigger the explosion. Though she climbs the stairs faster than she had earlier, each footfall lands with a tiptoe.

They reach the top of the staircase, coming to a pair of double doors marked CIC in big white lettering.

"Found it," she says.

Tai takes off his pack and begins to rummage through it, pulling out the datapad-glove combination he used days ago back in Belhall.

"What is that thing?" she asks. "Never seen anything like it."

He slips the glove on and makes sure it's in a comfortable position. "Traditional datapad. Long model. I made the glove part myself. It's my own hardware. Build the processors, the motherboards. Don't have a name for it, but I made the thing."

Calli regards the device. "Neat."

He taps the screen a few times and it lights up green. "Should be able to get a signal. Hopefully." He taps it a few more times. "Yes," he says. "Aresh. This is Tai. Aresh, you reading me?"

The signal comes in as static at first. Calli sees the screen warble and fizzle, as if it were a signal given form. Tai touches the screen once more.

"Hey, kid," Aresh says, his voice coming in clear despite the static. "Rian just showed up and told me what happened. Is Calli okay?"

Instead of answering, Tai looks to her.

"I-I'm good," she says, leaning in to Tai's wrist. She feels odd doing so.

"Glad to hear it. How's things on your end?"

Tai looks from his screen to the double doors. "Well, we've made it to the CIC, though we have some doors blocking our way. I could slice into them, but I need the power on to do so."

"Not a problem," Aresh answers. "Almost done over here."

The radio goes into static again, like it's being handed off to somebody.

"Calli," Sera's voice shouts out, "are you okay?"

"Sera," Calli says, this time grabbing Tai's wrist. She thinks that getting closer to the radio will help Sera hear her better. "Yes, I'm fine. Almost fell a few flights back there."

"That's good to hear," Sera says. "John gave me some tools to help him with the electricity."

"Uh," Calli says, looking at Tai. He shrugs. "Is that a good idea? You've never worked with anything like that before."

"Shows what you know," Sera says, indignant. "I happen to be very good with this...eh...stuff. I made that weapon mod for Tai, right? Gotta trust me on this."

Calli sighs. "Fine. Just, y'know, be careful. I don't want to have come this way only to find out you've fried yourself on a generator."

The radio goes in an out again. "Tai," Aresh's voice says. "We'll get the electricity on. Just hang tight."

They don't wait long. Nearly a minute later, lights flicker to life above them, raining down bright fluorescents. Calli shields her eyes for a moment. When she opens them, she watches as Tai opens up a small box next to the door along the wall, where a series of buttons and wires are on display. He takes out a small device and inserts it into a slot in the box, then he goes back to the screen on his wrist.

"You're," she starts, not sure what to say, "you're really good with this stuff."

Tai chuckles. "You get a lot of free time on Everis, especially when you're my age."

"What do you mean?"

He taps the screen a few more times, then curses. "Wrong entry point," he says, then he pulls out the device and inserts it into a different slot. "Where I grew up, on Everis, lot of people sort of just told you to grow up really fast. I had my Dad with me, but he was too busy all day working at the shipyards. He was a foreman there. You'd think they'd make a bunch of money because all they do all day is tell people what to do." He taps furiously at the screen, and Calli is reminded of a professional piano player.

"That's not the case on Everis."

She doesn't want to ask him what he means when he says his day was a foreman.

"It isn't a large colony. Few jobs to take. Brother worked as a janitor at the same shipyard. It's mainly a place for people to exist, but not a place for people to live. When

we set out to build these colonies, humanity's goal was to keep the human race living on. They forgot the part where people can actually have the resources to live."

She watches in silence as he works. In a way, she agrees with him. People in Belhall - hell, any of the surrounding colonies, even - they were always under some sort of watchful eye, whether it be their actual bosses or Silsparrow. It's as if they had wanted to make sure that this colony, this new planet that they were living on, went and thrived exactly as they wanted it to.

"I had to learn how to do things on my own," Tai continues, not taking his eyes off of the screen. There's a light click noise that comes from the box, and the doors slide open. He smiles. "And I got really good at it, if I say so myself."

"Nice work," Calli says, picking up her pack.

Tai taps the screen again. "Aresh, we're in."

"Good," Aresh's voice comes over the radio. "Find the map terminal. Should be around the center."

The room itself is circular in fashion, with many chairs that look too uncomfortable to actually sit on that descend in levels, the last level being the center, where Calli assumes the admirals and the commanders would stand and give orders. In front of each chair is a terminal. She imagines what each one might've done. In the center of the room is a large, clear table.

She forgets for a moment that there are bodies everywhere.

"Oh my God," she says, covering her mouth as the smell hits her. Each of the corpses, spread out on the floor, in the chairs, on the steps, wears the dark blue uniform

of Silsparrow. Each corpse is skeletal in nature. She's never seen a skeleton up close. Only in class. "Oh my God."

"That's..." Tai starts, "not good."

"What?" Aresh says, seemingly still on the other end. "What do you see?"

"You said a rescue team had been dispatched here to pick these guys up?" Tai says, looking around.

"Should have been." This time it's John who answers. "I was part of that team. We couldn't get everybody, though. Some of the fires were too strong, and we didn't have any sort of equipment to get rid of them."

"I think we found everyone else," Calli adds before covering her mouth again.

"Oh," John says. "Sorry you have to see that."

The radio changes hands. "If you hurry, you can get out of there and not have to see those things again," Aresh says. "Do you see the map terminal?"

They look around, unsure which computer it could have been. They climb down each level, reaching the main floor. Tai checks each individual computer. Some of them are cracked and destroyed, while others simply have a layer of dust and ash over them. Calli takes a look at the clear table in the center. A body lies face down on the table, half of his or her body slumped on the floor. She steps away from the skeleton.

It won't come to life. It won't come to life.

"Think I got it," Tai says. She turns to see him shoving a skeleton out of its chair, only to take its place a second later.

"Dude," she calls out. "What the fuck?"

He shrugs. "I had to use this. He wasn't using it."

She rubs her eyes. "We're going to hell. Probably at sublight speed."

"Relax," he says, tapping the screen of the computer. She walks around him to look over his shoulder. The computer boots up and they're greeted with a reboot screen. "We'll be fine."

Tai takes turns going from the computer to the datapad on his wrist. "Go to the map."

She looks around. "What map?"

"The table thing in the center," he gestures with his arm.

As soon as she steps up to it, the table begins to lower into the floor, taking the body with it. The table disappears, showing only the flat surface of the floor. The body is still in the center. "Ew," she says.

"Watch this," Tai says. He taps the screen, and Calli gasps.

The entire floor fills with light for a moment. It's almost blinding, and she finds herself covering her eyes again. When the light starts to disappear from her closed eyes, she opens them, then backs up.

"Whoa," she says.

The entire floor shows blue and white map data. She can see land masses, lakes, and little dots that could only be colonies.

"Welcome to a real life war map," Tai says, a laugh in his voice.

"This is fucking cool."

"Right? I can almost view the entire planet from here. Hold on." He presses another button, and there's a sudden whir. "Let's get a better view."



In front of her, on the other side of the room without chairs, are panels that being to open, and daylight beings to pour into them. The entire room had been a command center, so it only made sense to block off any exterior windows from things like enemy fire. The metal shield retracts, and a large window shield, cracked and scratched in a few places but otherwise intact, shows Calli everything.

Since the ship crash landed on a hill, it also was able to see the canopies from below the hill. The canopies were level with her eyesight, and she could see above the trees ahead of her.

"This is a decent view," she says, walking towards the window to look out.

"Very nice indeed," Tai agrees. He taps a few more buttons on his screen. "Okay. I'm entering the auracite sample now."

Calli turns away from the window and watches as Tai pulls out the small container. He places the bit of auracite into another container next to the terminal he sits at, then he presses a few more buttons on his wrist datapad.

The map in the center floor beings to shows a number of data on it. Numbers scroll past so fast that Calli hardly has time to read them. The map then begins to move. She steps back, feeling as though she could move with it. A small shape in the center of the map - which looks very much like a cross hair - stops on a point of the map. Calli can't very well tell where that is. There's not markers around it, nothing that she can identify it to.

"What is that?" she asks. A pair of numbers appear next to it, which could only be coordinates.

"Let me zoom out," Tai says. The map begins to zoom back, the picture of the map starting to gain some distance. She starts to see some points near the edges.

"There's Wildecrest," she says. "Oh! There's Belhall." She sees the small point. I wonder how Mom's doing...

The cross hair doesn't move from its location, and a few small, light blue circles appear close to it.

"And those are..."

Tai sighs. "Auracite deposits."

She arches an eyebrow. "And why are we supposed to be upset about that? I mean, I'm counting like ten different spots there."

"This map can't say exactly how much auracite is actually in each of those deposits. It just scans for anything matching the signature of the sample I put into the computer. Could be a whole mine full, or it could be a tiny deposit buried deep underground. If you didn't notice when we left Belhall, we didn't come bearing mining equipment."

She scoffs. "Then how did you hope to get this stuff out?"

He shrugs. "Hope there's a mine and pray that there's still some auracite left in it."

She steps back for a moment. She's unsure at what she's hearing. "You... hope there's a mine here that we can just, I don't know, snatch up the auracite if nobody's looking?"

"Hey," he says, raising a finger, "if we're really lucky, there won't be anybody there for us to snatch from."

"Oh my God," she says, putting her hands to her head and sitting on the floor.

"You all have no idea what you're doing, do you."

"It isn't a full proof plan," Tai says. He stands out of the computer chair, his voice raising. "It's what we had to work with. You think Silsparrow was just going to let us come in with a bunch of digging equipment - which, by the way we cannot carry in these flimsy packs of ours - and just walk out with it?"

"I kinda expected something like that, yeah."

"Aresh is desperate," he says, looking at the coordinates that the cross hair is pointing to. "We're all desperate." Tai looks back at her. "You know what that's like, right?"

The strange thing is, she does. She thinks of Diana, lying back in the hospital. She thinks of how she'd do anything at this point, anything to get her out of there, get her cured, and get her off of godforsaken Kipos.

"I just," she starts, "I just thought you had the answers. You all kinda just... fell into our laps when Sera and I found you. Maybe I just thought that you had it all together."

He looks up at her. "We still do. I mean, we've made it this far, right?"

Calli feels like she should tell him that he's wrong, that no, they don't have it together, and even if they did, their luck couldn't last like this forever.

"We have the map data," Tai says, heading back to the computer. He touches the screen on his wrist a few times, then shuts off the map. The glowing floor shuts off, and the table ascends from the floor back to its original position. Tai takes out the auracite

sample and returns it to his container. When he looks up, Calli sees his face sour. "What is that?"

She turns toward the giant glass shield. Two ropes hung near the center of the glass, swaying in the wind.

"What the..."

Two bodies place their feet on the glass, jump off from it, and use the ropes to swing back toward the glass. Gunshots ring out. The glass cracks. The force from two feet kick out suddenly shatter the glass, and the two people land inside the room, each of them wearing an odd assortment of combat clothing and pieces of armor. They both aim rifles at her.

"Everybody down!" one of them yells out.

Calli doesn't move for a moment. She's suddenly aware of the gun she has stashed in the waistband of her pants. She thinks about grabbing it...

"There were two," one of them says, her voice muffled by her odd mask. Calli is reminded of the riot helmets that the Silsparrow guards used back in Belhall, but this one has a red x painted across the sparrow sigil on the side of the helmet.

"I got this one," the other guard says, looking to Calli. "Get the other one."

The woman nods, then bounds off. Calli turns for a moment and watches as she climbs the levels and heads for the door.

Where did Tai go?

"Hey," the man says, "I told you not to fucking move."

Calli turns back toward him and raises her arms.

"The hell are you doing here?"

She doesn't answer. What voice she has gets stuck in her throat. She can physically feel it there, like the words are trying to get out.

"I asked you a question," he says.

More gunfire sounds out, coming from the back of the ship. For a moment, the man in front of her looks away from her and towards the back of the room where his partner went.

Calli charges forward, leaning forward and making herself a small target. Before her shoulder connects with the man's stomach, she thrusts her foot forward so it sits behind his. When she connects with his midsection, the man trips on her foot and falls to the ground, his rifle flying off. As he hits the ground, Calli pulls out the pistol from her waistband. The man looks up at her, holding a hand out.

"Wait," he says, nearly yelling. "Don't."

"Don't get up," she says. She hears herself, then. There's a lack of confidence there. Turn off the safety. Make him think you're serious. She clicks off the safety and takes a step back. The man slowly gets his feet underneath him.

"I'm going to stand up," he says. "Please do not shoot me."

"I said-"

"I'm just standing up," he says. "That's all I'm doing."

She takes another step back, but he does what she feared he'd do: he charges her, the same way she had done before.

She squeezes the trigger, and his large mass falls on her. She falls back as well, her own gun releasing from her hands.

"No no no," she calls out, trying to push him off. He'll kill you. He'll do it.

To her surprise, he slides off of her easily. As she pushes him away, she feels hot fluid on her hands.

"Oh God," she says, finally realizing what happened.

"Calli!"

She turns around, looking up at the door her and Tai had come through. Tai stands at the top, holding the rifle of the woman who had chased after him.

She stands up as he descends the steps to meet her, his face one of shock and worry.

"Calli," he starts.

She looks down at her shirt, then at the man she shot. The bullet hit him right in the chest, slightly off center.

He's dead.

"Oh God," she repeats, then she falls to her knees. "I killed him. Oh God."

"Calli, it's-"

She puts her hands to her face, only to take them away as she feels the blood on them transfer to her face. She wipes it away on the sleeves of her shirt.

"Shit shit shit." She feels hot tears stream down from her face. "I fucking killed him."

Tai kneels next to her and grabs her by the shoulders.

"We need to go," he says, and he shakes her slightly. "C'mon. We need to find the others."

As he pulls her to her feet, Calli still whispers to herself.

"Oh God oh God. He came at me, and..."

"There could be more," he says, grabbing her pack and leading her up the ascending levels and out the door they came through.

*I killed him*, she thinks as she leaves the room. *I killed him*.

Aresh sprints. He heard the gunshots go off. One, two, then shortly after, a third shot. They echoed throughout parts of the ship. To him, they sounded like muffled clangs, but he knew what a gunshot was.

He knew Calli and Tai were in trouble.

John and Sera follow him.

"Can't you call them on the radio?" Sera asks for the third time.

"Something's wrong," Aresh says as he pumps his legs down another cramped hallway. Most ships were designed this way to prevent people from being flung around in gravity-laden environments, but in this case it was a godsend that these hallways only went one way: straight. "I can't raise him."

Rian leads the way, retracing her steps to get to the area where she left them.

Aresh can see the worry on her face.

She left them alone, but it wasn't her fault.

Aresh figures that she'd be the last person who would ever blame themselves for comrades getting into trouble, but there she is, leading them as quickly as she can.

"Almost there," she says. "Powers working, so the elevator should be on now."

"Good," Aresh says. "Better ready your weapons. We're aren't sure what's up there."

Like two dead teenagers, maybe.



Each of them - even, surprisingly, Sera - pull out pistols from either their pants or from their packs. Sera's hand shakes as she holds her weapon. Aresh reaches over and holds the gun steady.

"You can stay back, if you want to," he says.

"No," she says, gripping the pistol tighter. "I'm going."

"Just don't accidentally shoot us in the back," Rian says as they reach the elevator. She presses the call button and they wait, the mere seconds feeling like eons as they wait. Aresh notices that there's aren't anymore gunshots being fired off.

Rian raises her gun as the elevator beeps, signaling that the car has arrived.

The doors open, and they're greeted by the pistols of both Tai and Calli.

"Oh my God," Sera says, moving into the elevator to greet her friend. "You're covered in blood." Sera hugs her. Calli herself looks... different.

"What happened?"

Tai leaves Sera and Calli and steps close enough for Aresh to hear.

"Raiders, I think. I didn't get a decent look at them, but they attacked us. I took out one and... so did she."

Aresh looks back at Calli. That face. The one of a new killer. He's surprised to find that Tai doesn't have that same look.

"Are you okay?" he says, then, "Nobody injured."

Tai shakes his head. "We're good." He shrugs off something, as if he was carrying something on his shoulders. Before Aresh could ask, Tai speaks up. "Got the coordinates," he says, tapping his wristpad. "The closest deposit is almost a day and a half away from here."

The fact that Tai reminds Aresh so much of himself scares him. Really scares him. He's like a good little soldier. He's completing his mission, no matter what the cost.

"You were attacked by raiders?" John asks.

"Can't be certain, but they sure looked like raiders," Tai says.

"Do you think there could be more?"

Rian turns and aims her pistol down the empty hallway. "I'd rather not stick around and find out. We got what we came for, right?"

"Wait." Sera's voice almost squeaked, her call laced with worry. "Can we give her a minute?" She holds on to Calli's arm like she's a human crutch, but Calli gently moves her hand away.

"I'm fine," she says. "Shaken up."

Aresh lowers his head a little to meet her at eye level. "Are you sure?"

She nods. "I'm good."

She isn't good. "Okay," he says instead. "We gotta move. Rian-"

"I'm on it," she says, taking point again.

With Aresh in the rear, they move in a hurried pace throughout the skeleton of Venerous. He checks over his shoulder every few seconds.

Paranoia's getting to you, old man. What would Lucas say to you right now?

Aresh and his husband often clashed about that. There were times when Aresh had been paranoid about the smallest things. About what hospital Edward would be born in, about what name they would give him. In the beginning, when they had actually decided that they wanted to raise children, Aresh even argued at who would be the mother.

"It's paranoia," Lucas had said in the one of their arguments. "It's getting to you."

"Nothing yet," John calls out. Aresh realizes he's fallen behind, but only for a short distance.

Pay attention.

They pass through the mess hall. With the electricity on, they can see the various tables and skeletons of Silsparrow personnel lying around.

A graveyard...

When Aresh leaves behind the room and they enter the workshop, the large scar that was the Venerous's wound opens to them. The bright sun illuminates their path, and they reach green grass.

"We should get far away from here," Aresh says as they rendezvous next to a wispy tree outside the ship. "Not sure if they had squad with them or something." He pulls out his own datapad, then plugs in the coordinates that Tai gave him into a topical map of the whole planet. As soon as the numbers are punched in, the map begins to zoom in closer and closer to its intended target, stopping in a remote area in the jungle. Aresh fiddles with the map some more, determining their own location relative to their target's. "Auracite is north from here," he says. "A little far north. We'd better get moving then."

"Aresh," Rian says. Her voice is quiet, worrisome. The woman jerks her head in the direction of Calli, whose eyes seem to be in a much farther place than here.

Damn it. "Okay," he says. "Scratch that. We'll get a safe distance from here and set up camp for the day. I think we all deserve a tiny rest, yeah?"

Rian nods in approval, almost as if to say he's making the right move. The group readies their things and begins to walk north.

Nobody says much for the hour that they walk. Even Aresh notices this, and he has always been used to the quiet march. Used to do this all the time, when we didn't want to be found. William was always good at keeping us from opening our mouths when we knew we shouldn't.

The silence coming from Calli is just as disconcerting. She's killed someone. Remember your first kill? You couldn't eat for a whole day. He remembers that silence, that quiet that comes with deep thoughts, the image of death replaying repeatedly in his head like a broken vidfeed. He tries to think of something to say; he's never been one for anything close to having comforting words. And she's a kid. So far, his son Edward was two years old. He's not experienced enough to say anything to his son. He's not experienced enough to talk to a kid who isn't his own.

They don't set up a fire for their camp at night. Rian tells them not to. "In case there were more raiders back there," she says. Instead, they turn on their flashlights onto the low-light setting in case they need to see. So they eat cold rations. Aresh chews on a piece of dried meat and a handful of nuts, taking careful sips from his canteen. Nobody says anything while they rest, save for the occasional mutter.

Calli sits with her barely-eaten protein cookie, then stands up to walk off.

"I have to pee," she says before she leaves.

Aresh stands up. He knows someone ready to vomit when he sees them, but Rian holds up a hand.

"I'll take care of her," she says.

"Should I go with you?" Sera asks, but Rian shakes her head.

"Maybe not now, kid. Later."

Sera nods, understanding. Rian turns toward Aresh, almost as if she's saying Trust me.

"Okay," he finally says, and Rian goes after her, stepping over the rocks and fallen logs that made up their meager camp.

"So how far out are we?" John asks rather eagerly.

"Coordinates said a day and a half away," Tai says between bites of a strip of dried meat. "So not that far."

"Any chance that other people know where that could be?" Sera asks.

Tai shrugs. "Map didn't show if anybody else was moving towards that location, but I don't think many people thought to look inside the Venerous to find the coordinates."

"I don't get why she did that," John adds. "That Mara woman."

"Don't you know her?" Sera asks, her mouth full with a protein cookie.

"Not personally. Only through reputation. But it doesn't make sense to me, letting everyone in broadcast range know where the auracite is."

Tai shrugs. "Share the wealth?"

"Maybe she's crazy," Sera says, and Tai nods.

Or she's got something planned. Like she always did, way back when. Aresh listens to them speak, but doesn't jump into the conversation.

Mara Winters was already a tough veteran by the time that Aresh met her, back when he first arrived on Kipos. The other soldiers talked about her like she was some sort of living legend, how she "survived this battle" or "destroyed that installation". Most of her work could have been tracked back to the frontier colonies just outside of the Solar

System, some of the first colonies that humanity settled on way back when. Back when anybody was still learning how to do anything. Silsparrow trained their soldiers hard before sending them out into the field, but nothing ever prepares anyone for actual combat.

Luckily for Aresh, he had Mara Winters and William Hayford, who taught him everything he needed to know.

"You hear that?"

John stands up, scanning the jungle. It's growing dark, the sky a royal purple, so the thick of trees and brush form shapes and shadows that obscure view.

"What is it?" Aresh asks, already reaching for his rifle.

Suddenly, lights flash on all around them, blinding them. Like heat to the eyes. Aresh closes his for a moment, having to use his hand to block out the rest.

"Drop your weapons," comes a voice from the jungle. Male. Deep. The staccato of cocking rifles ends his request like a period.

"Do as he says," Aresh says, and he slowly begins to put his gun down, his eyes still closed. He dares to open them for a moment, and sees that a number of industrial lights that have been placed around their meager camp.

How did they get to us without me hearing? And where is Rian and Calli?

A few soldiers come in front of the lights and approach them, their rifles raised.

"Who are you?" they ask.

Aresh manages to get a good look at one of them. Standing tall and wearing a menagerie of different pieces of combat armor, the soldier holds a rifle with a broken sight, one that has been replaced by duct tape.

Raiders.

Before he can answer, another sound breaks the silence of the jungle. A shriek, loud and guttural, cracks into the air like thunder before lightning.

The soldier in front of Aresh turns his head, then looks back at Aresh.

"Screw them," he says, then turns away. "We've got runners! Fall back to point one!"

And just like that, the soldiers are gone.

Aresh picks up his rifle again. He feels the eyes of Tai, Sera, and John on him.

"What do we do?" Tai asks.

Aresh walks over to the now abandoned lights and spins them around towards the darkness of the jungle. He instructs John and Tai to do the same.

"We're standing here," Aresh says, readying his gun, aiming it into the jungle, waiting to see the glow of yellow eyes and flashing teeth. "Runners are quick, and they can see in the dark, but don't do so well in complete darkness or bright light. Hit them with these lights, then drop them when they're blinded."

He looks around him. Rian and Calli still weren't back. He didn't want to assume the worst, but...

He steps away from his light for a moment, approaching Sera. The young woman stands by her light, trying to stare into the darkness.

"You okay?" he asks her.

"Not really," she says. "Never seen a runner before."

Aresh helps her adjust the light so it fits her height. "You've gotta be quick about shining the light on them, but choose your shots. You don't have a lot of ammo in that

thing, so only go for head shots. I'll be nearby, so I can take out any that you miss." When he sees that she hasn't responded, he adds, "Okay?"

She nods. "I wish Calli were here."

#

Calli pukes. Her stomach betrays her, and hot bile rushes up into her throat and out her mouth, a slight burning sensation in the back of her throat. She uses a tree to keep herself standing.

"Sorry, tree," she says when she's finished, leaving her mouth tasting like an odd combination of rubber and motor oil. "I got vomit on you."

She hurls again and this time tears escape her eyes.

Oh, god. I've killed someone. I really did.

The man in front of her, a bullet in his stomach. Her bullet. That was her bullet. She pulled the trigger on him and killed him. He's dead. He had a mother once, didn't he? All people had mothers and one point or another. She took a life. Snatched it from him.

In self-defense, in self-defense. Even though she's told herself this so many times, the image still plays in her head.

You killed him you killed him you killed him.

"Hey."

Calli slowly turns around, hoping that if she took the time, the sudden movement wouldn't cause her to vomit again. Rian hops over a series of roots on the ground and comes up to her, a rifle slung across her back. Rian cocks her head, looking behind Calli.

"Ah," she says. "A 'first kill ejection'. Nice."

Calli wipes her mouth. "What?"



"I remember the first time that I had to kill someone." Rian walks around the tree, looking it up and down like she's studying it. "It was a long time ago. Back during the war." She continues to walk circles around the tree and, by association, Calli as well. Calli tries to cover the puke by kicking up dirt on it. "Y'see, I'm going to tell you the secret to killing and killing well."

"I don't... I don't think this is the pep talk that I need," Calli says.

"The secret is this: never do it."

"Well, I didn't expect that."

Rian stops in front of Calli, her face suddenly serious. In this short time she's known her, this is the first time Calli has seen her look genuinely sincere.

"It was self-defense," Rian says. "That man? That raider? He was going to kill you. He was probably an established killer already. He probably wouldn't have had a problem doing it, too. Out here in the frontier... you live a different life out here than you do inside the walls of a colony. Gotta do things that you don't wanna do to keep living. Killing... it just becomes something you just do, just as simple as eating or breathing. It's all to survive. The sad thing? The pathetic and disappointing truth to all of this? It get easier. To kill, I mean. Every time you do it, it gets a little bit easier."

"I-" Calli starts, but Rian shakes her head.

"No talking. I'm teaching you something here." She steps away from Calli for a moment, staring out into the fading sunlight. It coats the world in a burning orange and blue color, going into a royal purple color. "What you did? You had to do it. Otherwise, it'd be you lying up there in that ship, decaying." She turns her head slightly, not really looking at Calli. "It isn't your fault."

Calli tries to think of something to say, but her mind just replays that moment, over and over. The hot blood that coats her as soon as the bullet enters his chest. The sudden feeling that there's one less person sharing the air. The absence of life.

A shriek fills the empty air. It echoes into the jungle.

Before Calli can react, there's a rustle in nearby grass, grass tall enough to reach Calli's neck. Something jumps out. A shadow. Something that starts off being as tall as Calli's stomach, but, as it extends its legs to stand tall, it reaches nearly two meters.

Calli remembers seeing pictures of these creatures back home, though it had been a three-dimensional rendering rather than the actual thing. "Covered in nothing but fur and muscle," the description following the rendering said, "the 'runner', as most people call them is a bipedal pack predator native to Kipos. Some scientists believed that they originated in the colder regions of the planet, hence the fur. Very similar to prehistoric raptors from Earth, the runner can run at high speeds and use a combination of its razor-sharp claws, as well as its dagger-like teeth to hunt prey. While they often travel as a pack, sometimes the occasional runner will hunt on its own." Since the feed on the creature could be edited by anyone, a small addendum had been added: "If encountered in the wild, lay down and die."

The runner stands tall. Its brown and black fur extends around its body, ending only at its stomach, where a hard, reptile-like belly greets her as it rears its head back to let out another screech. Calli steps back and trips over a root, nearly falling into the small pile of vomit she had tried to cover up earlier. The runner's plumage is a deep brown-and-yellow, and each of its hooked claws look to be an inch long. And sharp. Very sharp.

Its mouth snaps at her, the hundreds of sharp teeth covered in spittle. It growls, rearing its head back, ready to strike.

Two gunshots ring out, striking the runner in the side. The creature falls on its side, turning to look at its new enemy. Rian steps towards it with her rifle, firing shot after shot into the creature. The runner shrieks with every bullet, and when Rian gets close enough, she fires two more rounds into its head. The runner, now dead, lets out one last breath.

"Holy shit," Calli says, still watching the runner for anymore movement. Rian steps over it and kicks it once in the stomach. When it doesn't move, she steps away and reloads her rifle.

"C'mon," she says. "We need to get back to the others. There could be more of them."

Calli stands up and grabs her backpack.

"You're gonna need that gun again," Rian says as they start to head back to camp.

Calli takes the gun back out from the waistband in her pants. The one you killed a man with. It feels... heavier to her. Bulkier. It feels as though she's picking it up for the first time.

"Hey," Rian says, and they stop walking. "We need to go, but I can't have you freaking out on me here." Calli looks away from the weapon. "Can you hold it together?"

For a moment, Calli wants to tell her no. No, she would tell her. No I cannot. My mother is dying and I'm miles away from her, about to be the dinner to giant raptor-dogs. I've killed a man, so I can't in any good conscious think I'm going to die a good person.

Instead, she just nods.

"Good," Rian says, and they head back towards camp, picking up the pace as they hear more shrieks.

At one point in her life, Mara once considered home to be wherever she just so happened to be. A lifetime of being on battlefields across this newfound universe makes her feel that she doesn't belong anywhere and everywhere at the same time. Home was nothing, and it certainly wasn't reminiscent of the colony ship she lived on when she was a little girl. Those were metal walls that surrounded her, while outside those walls was the universe. The colony ships had been heading out to find new worlds to colonize, but it often took years to get to their destination. Mara herself remembers that, when they made planetfall on what had now been known as the planet Everis, she told herself she would never call a ship home ever again.

She joined up with various companies at the age of sixteen. She had always looked a bit older for her age, and with some simple data manipulation, she managed to fool everyone into thinking that she was an adult making a rational decision. First, there was the U.N. military, who were setting up security stations and checkpoints on various planets. Then, came Rothchilde Industries, which Mara had joined with after quitting the U.N. for stationing her on ship security. Rothchilde needed security forces as they tamed the wilds on the planet Dannen, and at twenty, Mara had already been a well-trained grunt. Dannen itself had been a testament to human colonization: no matter how many of the bug-like monsters that she and her comrades killed, more sprung up out of the ground. But they had done it. They made areas of the planet safe for colonization.

There had been a dark period after Rothchild for her. With her work finished she... didn't quite know what to do with herself. There was no war, no battles that she had been assigned to.

Nothing to fight for.

So, when a criminal presence started to form up on Dannen in the form of drug runners who created drugs made from the blood of the very bug creatures she had killed, she asked around. Piracy, especially space piracy, had started cropping up now that almost anybody with enough money could own their own freighter. After shaking down a number of people on Dannen, Mara had found herself joining up with a group of pirates. And that was when she broke one of her own rules, if only temporary. She had called a ship home. The Ruby Star, a once decommissioned Rothchilde attack carrier that had been retrofitted with several customizations, became her home. Under the command of their captain, a woman simply named Faith, they would attack and raid various shipping lanes. Their favorite targets were often mining ships, those carrying precious minerals and materials, or the equipment to mine them, selling them to various individuals or companies. They ripped people off. They stole from them. They killed them. And Mara had been okay with that. She had never considered herself a bad person. It's just that... pirating was something to do. Something that allowed her to hold a gun in her hand and use it to fight for something.

After various run-ins with military police, Mara went into hiding for some years and laying low. The pirates - and, by association, the Ruby Star - were no more, and so Mara kept herself busy by working as a bartender on a backwater planet that had already established itself as a working colony.

That was, until, Silsparrow came calling. Ads went up, looking for capable people looking for adventure. A new planet had been found, one that was an almost exact copy of Earth in terms of atmosphere and vegetation, and Silsparrow needed security.

Mara joined up with them, taking the next ship out. They handed her a uniform and a gun, and she followed their orders.

That all changed eleven years ago.

Mara looks at a digital map on a cracked computer screen. Inside her personal office, which consisted of rusty walls and debris that had been configured in a desk, a bed, and a door, Mara checks to see how far her message really got. In the past few days, she and her people had been keeping their eyes glued to various news screens, finding that even Earth heard her message.

"With this new knowledge of auracite and its worth," a news article from Earth read, "many people, desperate to find some sort of riches out there in the universe, have left their homes and have boarded ships bound for the faraway Kipos."

This is good. The more that came here, the more that would discover the truth about this place, how it was worth fighting for. You're doing this for the greater good.

Her door slides open. Since the power to it had broken long ago, anyone coming in and out had to slide it open by hand.

"Knocking, Farid," Mara says, not even looking up from the computer screen.

Farid sighs. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Permission to enter?"

"Granted." He's a young man, one that Mara can forgive for not always following military protocol, one that she herself was trying to instill in anybody that was following her and her goals.

"Wilson wants to see you," Farid says. "Says its important."

"I'm just finishing up here." She closes out of all of her articles and shuts off the datapad. "Walk with me."

Farid nods and steps out of the room, following her into the hallway. Their home is a former Silsparrow base, one that had been converted into a sort of home for her people. Many of the offices of commanding officers were now small rooms for people, as do the barracks. Here, families are starting to crop up. Kids sometimes run through the halls, and even though she finds it odd seeing children around a military base, she still can't help but smile.

We aren't raiders. She's told herself this over and over again. We're survivors.

"Any word from our scouts?" she asks Farid, who follows close behind.

"We're seeing large amounts of people leaving some of the colonies and heading this way, but not all. Wildecrest has almost locked itself down completely. Nobody is getting in or out of that place."

"Not for much longer, I'd imagine."

"Tom's Town seems to almost be completely empty."

Mara laughs. "Can't say I expected that."

"Some of the others are in a bit of a quagmire right now. Places like Belhall and Cyril are trying to lock themselves down, but the Silsparrow presence is starting to buckle. I hear that the leadership in Belhall has all but disappeared, and its just small amounts of forces that are holding people back and keeping them from leaving."

"They're trying to keep the peace. I can respect that."



"In any case," Farid continues, still not able to keep pace with her, "there are groups of people heading this way. If they don't run into trouble, they should start running into our scouts out in the wilds."

And be brought to us. To join us.

"Thank you, Farid."

He nods.

When she started this new colony, this ragtag group of expatriates, ex-Silsparrow soldiers, and angry colonists, she wanted to get rid of ranks. No captains, no commanders, no privates or sergeants. Everyone was assigned responsibilities that they could handle, but no one person was more important than everyone else. Sure, people like Farid follow people like Mara, but that's simply because of respect. Not rank.

A place of true equality.

They leave the command center and come out into the open, where the sun starts to set. Once, there had been a meager shield wall constructed around the perimeter of the base. Now, the shield no longer worked, but still served as a lookout post for Mara and her soldiers. The place is a true fortress.

The base grounds are full of small tents or lean-to's, each of them holding a small family. Some children run about, chasing after balls or little mechanical toy drones that fly about. Others walk the grounds, either as some form of exercise or just to visit others. While the community is small, Mara believes that they're making it work. A few of her soldiers patrol the area, though some of them take joy in running into the children. Things are simple here, she thinks. Outside of the base walls are a few farms that they have set

up, ones that are protected by soldiers from runners or other vermin. Their other supplies come from attacking Silsparrow supply caches.

It's simple, but it's bloody.

Farid leads her to a tent near the entrance to the base. It's an open tent, where a few terminals and tables are set up for her people to meet up and plan before heading out for hunts or patrols.

Wilson stands among them, checking various terminals and map data. When he sees her coming, he says something to one of the terminal operators, then approaches her.

"Thank you, Farid," he says.

Farid nods, then leaves, his duty finished.

"What's this about?" Mara says, following Wilson to one of the terminals.

"Well, it's two things." He points to the screen, which shows a digital map of the area. "One, we've been seeing a large group of runners lately, some of them close to the colonies."

"With the rush of people leaving and Silsparrow security in chaos, it's hard to imagine if the runners weren't taking advantage of this."

"They'll probably start attacking those that are heading this way."

She shakes her head. "It's unfortunate, but there's not much we can do for them. We don't have enough patrols to help them all."

That, and they need to find us, she doesn't say. They need to prove that they can survive long enough to reach us.

"I've got patrols out there now," Wilson adds. "I can have them try killing any runners they run into."

She sighs. "I know what you're trying to do, Wilson."

"If we just help them a little-"

"It's unfortunate, I know. But I won't sacrifice my people by having them go against these monsters. Remember our rules for runners."

Wilson hesitates, then nods. "Kill or run, but do not do both."

"That's right. While I think our people capable, I won't throw them away needlessly to protect those coming for us. You need to give the people from the colonies a little more credit. If you recall, you were one of them once, and look at you now."

Wilson stares back at the computer, ignoring that statement. "The other thing is this: we have a sickstorm heading this way. It's a little weak, since it's already been through numerous areas, but it'll still hit us."

"How long before it reaches here?"

Wilson looks at the terminal operator, who shrugs.

"I'd say by sometime tomorrow," the operator says.

"Okay. Make sure things are prepared. Divy up the gas masks. Make sure every child has one before anybody else. The virus hits them harder."

Wilson nods. "Will do."

"Is there anything else that you need? I need to check up on our incoming patrols."

"No," he says, then turns back to the screen.

She turns to head away, but stops.

"Mara."

She turns to see Wilson heading towards her.

"Can I talk with you a moment?" he says.

"About what?"

"This broadcast."

She sighs. He had expressed his concerns before, but she thought that put behind them. "Farid assures me that people are heading this way. This whole thing? It'll work."

"It's... not that."

He leads her away from the tent, into a corner near the base shield wall, where no one can hear them. A few of the terminal operators look at them, curious as to what he could be asking her.

"Okay," she says. "We're well enough away from everyone. What is it?"

"It's... uhm. I don't know how to say this."

"Wilson."

"I know, I know." He rubs his forehead, the creases filling with a sheen of sweat.

"It's just... my brother. I got word from him the other day."

"I didn't know you had a brother, Wilson."

He nods. "It's been a long time since we've spoken to each other. He looks well. Got himself a husband and everything. He seems happy." There's a small smile there, but it quickly disappears into a hard frown. She doesn't speak, instead letting him say what he needs to say. "He's coming. Here. To Kipos."

She raises an eyebrow. "Did he see the message?"

He nods. "He did. Which is why he sent me a message to tell me that he's on his way."

"Well," she says, drawing the word out. "I don't understand, Wilson. Why is this an issue?"

"He... he isn't coming to join up with the prospectors. He isn't coming to look for auracite."

At that, she understands.

"He's joining up with Silsparrow," she says.

He nods. "Yeah. Says that the illustrious Mara Winters is a killer and a murderer. He's joining up with Silsparrow to fight the raider threat."

"Does he know? About you?"

Wilson shakes his head. "No. He thinks I'm still a colonist here. Says he's joining to make the planet a safe place for his brother. I don't... I don't know what to do."

She puts an arm on his shoulder. "War is a hard thing, Wilson. You know that better than most here."

"What do you suggest?"

She lets go of him. Stares him hard in the eyes. For a moment, she turns into the soldier, no longer the leader, the one that knows about survival and fighting. Not the one to offer advice.

"You know what I would suggest."

He nods. "I was afraid of that."

"Say it. Say what I would do if I were in your shoes."

He's hesitant. She can see that. It can't be easy, but it's something that she tries to instill into everyone who isn't sure of their own abilities.

"Brother or no, he's still Silsparrow, trying to undo what it is we're trying to accomplish here." He sighs, as if he doesn't want to say the next words. "If he comes here, I treat him like an enemy."

"And what do you do?"

"I kill him."

She nods. "Don't ever forget that, Wilson. What we're doing here... it's beautiful. You have to believe that."

"I do."

She pats him on the back. "You're a true freedom fighter," she says, and walks away.

There are days when she doesn't believe in her own goals. And then, she remembers.

For you, William. You always had the right answers.

#

Light flares into her vision and for a moment, Calli is blinded. The searing white light forces her to look away. Then she hears her name.

"Calli?" It's Sera.

The light disappears, and Calli looks back to see John, Sera, Tai, and Aresh huddled around each other, each of them holding their weapons.

"What's all this?" Rian asks as they approach.

"Raiders ambushed us," Aresh answers as he readies his light to stare out into the darkness. "They left as soon as the runners started showing up."

"Ah. Ran into one of them."

Aresh turns. "Are you both okay?"

Calli nods. "I'm good. Rian got it."

"As usual," John adds.

Aresh tells them about the lights and how to use them, how she should blind the runner before firing at it.

"You think you can handle that? They're going to be coming at us soon."

She thinks about the gun she carries, about how it's missing one bullet.

"I can," she finally says.

Aresh nods. "Good. You and Sera take that light. We'll pare off, one who uses the light, the other who shoots."

Sera takes hold of the handles on the light and points them into the darkness.

"You okay to do this?" she asks her friend.

"I'm... better. I can do this." Calli pulls out the pistol again, feeling its weight. She aims into the now lit-up jungle.

For a minute, everything is quiet. Nothing, save for the small chirps of bugs and the sound of tweeting birds, could be heard. Sera moves the light in a small area, moving from left to right slowly.

"Maybe they're gone?" Sera says.

Just then, the shriek fills the air, this one louder than what Calli had heard earlier. Movement in the grass causes her to aim in that direction just as the runner hops out and charges them. As Sera shines the light on it, the runner looks away, but continues to run. Calli takes aim.

Breathe and squeeze.

She fires off a shot. Then another. The first one hits the runner in the chest, while the other hits it square in the snout. The creature falls over, dead.

"I... got one," Calli says.

"She got one!" Sera yells.

"Nice," Rian says, then the crack of her rifle sounds out. "So did I."

"Call out if you're short on ammo," Aresh says as he aims his rifle into the lit up darkness that Tai is helping him with. "But choose your shots." Aresh fires out volley of gunfire, nailing another runner dead.

"Shit," John yells. "These things are quick."

Sera aims her light at another, and Calli fires off three shots, dropping it to the ground. She tries to think.

Okay, I fired one back on the Venerous, then five here. That leaves-

Another pops out, its hunting cry just as loud and shrieking as its friends. Calli takes a shot, but it goes wide. Then another. The slug slams into the runners left leg, but it keeps coming, as if it could just shrug off the damage. She fires off another two shots, this time hitting it in the stomach. As she goes to fire a third round, her heart sinks as she hears the clicking noise of an empty gun.

"Uh... I'm out!" Calli yells.

"Grab mine!" Sera says, still holding her light on the injured runner, who now tries to walk towards its prey. Calli reaches over to her friend, finding the gun in her pack. She ejects the clip and checks the ammo, then slides it back in and pulls back the action.



The injured runner leaps into the air, Calli looking up as it passes over her head. The beast lands in the circle that they've formed, each of her friends' backs turned towards the beast.

"Look out!" she calls out.

The beast spins, whipping its tail towards them. John and Rian take the hit and fall over, their light toppling over, broken.

As the runner tries to lean over to snap at its fallen prey, Aresh turns around and fires off a burst of bullets, killing the beast. It topples over, nearly landing on Rian.

"You okay?" Aresh says.

"Good," John says, coughing as he gets up.

"Lovely," Rian answers.

Aresh fires another volley of shots as Tai lights up another runner. Calli watches as John helps Rian up, then she turns back toward Sera.

Sera has her light on a human figure. He stands there, right in her light, aiming a rifle at them.

"Tell your friends to lay down their guns," the man says. Like the raiders inside the Venerous, he wears an odd menagerie of armor. "You're surrounded."

"But the runners-" Sera calls out.

The man fires his rifle into the air, stopping everyone from what they're doing.

"Fucking drop them," the man says. "I won't say it again."

By this point, Aresh and the rest have already seen the other soldiers who seem to appear out of the jungle, as if they had always been there the whole time.

Aresh sighs. "Do it," he says.

Rian grunts as she lays her weapon down. "Fuck you," she says to the approaching raiders on her side.

As Calli places Sera's gun on the ground, the raiders approach them, their rifles still raised. Another comes out of the jungle, this one aiming at Sera. Sera steps away from the light, raising her hands.

"We were just attacked by runners," Aresh says. "We got lost from our people. We're colonists."

"The fuck you are," the one raiders says. "Names."

"What?"

"Gimme your fucking name," the one talking to Aresh says.

Calli watches as Aresh looks around, then shrugs. "Aresh Devi."

"John."

"Sera Hesk."

"Fuck you," Rian says. The soldier next to her takes his rifle, then hits her in the stomach with the butt of it. She doubles over, groaning in pain.

"Rian," she says, coughing. "Just Rian."

The raider and his men turn to Calli. "You, girl. Name."

"Calli," she says, her voice shaking. "Calli Hayford."

The leader of this group looks to his left, at one of the other raiders.

"Everybody on their knees," he says. "Hands behind your back."

"Wait a minute," Aresh says, but his words are cut short as another raider hits him with his rifle.

"On your goddamn knees."

Aresh grunts, but he does what he's told.

They're going to kill us.

Calli watches them all, seeing how the raiders are standing. She can hardly tell because of the darkness, but she can see them. The murder in their eyes. The way they hold their weapons.

The leader of this group picks up a small radio, then talks into it.

"Base, this is Scout Team Seven." For a moment, there's silence. "Copy. I've got a few... colonists out here. Need a background check on them." There's a pause, then the leader lists off all of their names. She stops at Aresh's name, then looks at him. "You're sure?" the leader says. "Okay. The only one left is Calli Hayford." Then, there's another pause. The woman looks up at her. "Copy that. We're on our way back, Base. Seven out." The woman puts away the radio, then begins to ruffle in her pack, pulling out several black bags. "It's your lucky night," she says, heading to Calli first. "You're not Silsparrow, and Mara would like to see you."

Aresh turns his head. "Mara? Mara Winters?"

But before she could hear more of what he has to say, the woman puts a bag over Calli's face. The world goes dark.

#

For the fifth or sixth time in one night, Nevaire feels as though he's being watched. He and four others sit around a small fire, each of them ready to turn in for the night. Lieutenant Ende - Carol, she told him to call her - sits to his left, and next to her sits Tim, a bulk of a man, Sixes, a woman who Ende highly recommended for something like this, and Den, a woman who Nevaire specifically sought out.

When he left the command center back at Belhall, he left a recorded message for Dannowitz. He was certain his people - who were no longer his people - would find it and send it to him.

"This is Captain Weyland Nevaire," the video message said. "And this is for Admiral Dannowitz aboard the Hierarchy." That's when he raised both of his hands in a middle finger. "Fuck you."

He left the recording in a thumb drive on his desk, then left the command center, gathering up Ende and her recommended soldiers as they headed out towards the shield. He told them he was simply going out on a patrol, telling them he hadn't been in the field in a while, and was just simply looking for a little action.

They hadn't intended on going back.

"You hear that?" Sixes asks, her eyes darting back and forth as she stares out into the jungle. "Sounded like something was moving."

"Chill the fuck out," Tim says. He lays back on the ground, his hands behind his head and his eyes closed. "This shit's the lullaby of nature."

"Nature that could rip your head off," Den adds. "Don't think there's anything out there to worry about, though."

"Tell that to me when all of us are runner meat." Sixes pulls her legs closer and nods off, no longer worried.

Nevaire looks at Ende - Carol - and nods. "Any luck so far?"

Ende fiddles with a datapad, and has been for the past hour or so. She smacks it with her hand, then shakes her head. "None right now, sir." She stops for a moment.

"Weyland. Sorry. Still getting used to that."

"It's fine... Carol."

She smiles at him, then looks back at the datapad. "After a mile out from Belhall, this thing's been acting up."

"They must've shut our the locator in that thing remotely," he says, tossing a small twig into the warm fire. "They probably found my message by now."

"Think they'll come after us?"

Nevaire shakes his head. "No. The amount of people who still want out of Belhall is getting too extreme for a small force to handle. They'll need every man and woman with a gun to man the gates. Otherwise, those people will break through. If I know Dannowitz - and, unfortunately, I do - he won't want anybody else going rogue. They'll probably come after us after some time, but that won't be for a while. By then, we'll have our share of auracite and get a ship off this planet."

"It feels odd," Ende says, finally putting the datapad down. "I don't feel like a traitor, but I know that I betrayed someone."

"Silsparrow is a company. A thing. A living thing, maybe, but it isn't like a person. You didn't betray anybody. Least that's the way I see it."

"You really believe that?"

He nods after a moment. "Yeah, I really do. If anything, they betrayed us. The civil war years ago, this planet, the lack of resources for us. It's all just... I don't know, shit. It's shit. And we're in the middle of it. I like to think that we earned whatever share we get from this little venture."

Tim sighs. "Not to be an asshole or anything. I mean, you both were my commanding officers not too long ago, but can you two shut the fuck up? Respectfully, sirs. We're trying to sleep."

Nevaire picks up a small pebble and tosses it at Tim. The rock landed on his chest, and Tim extends a middle finger at Nevaire. Ende chuckles.

This is how it should be. Comrades, not betters. I'm not better than any of these people, and Silsparrow certainly isn't better than any one person.

Nevaire rummages through his pack and picks up a small protein. He cracks it open and takes a big bite.

The crunch is so loud that it could've been mistaken for the loud gunshot that cracks into the night.

Everyone reaches for their weapons. They raided the armory before they left, grabbing anything that they wanted, but only enough for them to carry. Tim goes for a shotgun, while the rest of them grab for rifles. The noise starts to rustle through the grass.

"Come out slowly!" Den yells, her rifle raised. For a moment, the noise stops, and silence permeates the area.

Then, the shadow comes out. A woman - young, by the looks of her - steps out into the firelight, her arms raised.

"Don't shoot," she says. "Please."

"Who are you?" Nevaire says. "Get on your knees." The young woman does so, slowly getting down.

"My name..." she says. "It's Casey."

"What are you doing out here, Casey?"

Both Ende and Den circle around her and look out into the darkness, maybe to see if anybody's with her.

"I'm..." she starts, but she stops. "Fuck."

"Raider," Tim says. "Look at her armor."

Nevaire gets a good look at her mismatched clothing. It looks as though she scrounged together various pieces of metal and Silsparrow clothing and called it body armor.

"You're a raider," Nevaire says.

"That's what you call us," she says nervously. "We see ourselves as freedom fighters."

"Yeah, yeah," Tim says, putting the shotgun to her head. "Whatever."

"Wait," Nevaire says, holding up a hand. Even though they had forsaken holding rank over one another, Tim still stops, as if Nevaire still has some sort of say over his orders. He steps toward Casey, then kneels onto his haunches. "What are you doing out here? Do you have any friends out there?"

She shakes her head. He thinks he sees a tear going down her face. "I was with someone, but he... he's dead."

"What happened?"

"I'm part of a patrol squad. So was Sean. We were patrolling around the Venerous. Y'know, that ship's skeleton a few miles away."

"Yeah," Nevaire says. "I know it."

"Saw some people were snooping around inside of it. Not sure what it was they were looking for, but orders stated that we were to bring any colonists back home. So, we

engaged them. We saw two: guy and a girl. I went after the guy, but he got the upper hand on me. Managed to get out of the ship with my life. I went back in after they left, looking for Sean, but..." She looks away from Nevaire. "He was already dead. Shot through the heart."

"I'm sorry," Nevaire says. "It's not easy losing a comrade."

Casey sniffs. "Yeah."

"Let me ask you something. Be honest. I've got a man with an itchy trigger finger here, and I don't think you're ready to have your head emptied at this time."

Casey stiffens, but she nods.

"Do you work with a Mara Winters?"

For a moment, Casey doesn't say a thing. She cringes, as if she's trying to get a word out.

"Brain matter time," Tim says as he cocks the shotgun.

"Wait!" Casey calls out. "Wait wait wait. Give me a second."

"No more seconds for you, girly."

"Yes!" she says, her voice nearly a scream. "Yes. I do. She's our leader."

Nevaire nods at Tim, who backs away, but keeps his gun on her.

"What are we going to do with her?" Ende asks.

Nevaire leans in close. Casey looks away from him, as if his eyes were that of the ancient Gorgon's and she would turn to stone just by looking at him.

"You're going to tell me where Mara Winters is. You're going to tell me now."



Calli goes in and out of consciousness. The bob and weave of the movements of the person who is carrying her over his shoulder make her feel as though she's being rocked to sleep. The bag is still over her head, so she can't see a thing. Her hands and feet are tied. All she can hear is her breathing and the crunch of twigs underneath her captor's boots.

The woman who captured them - Calli still doesn't know her name - presumably leads the group. Calli can hear her voice every now and again, calling out orders and telling them where to go. At one point, one of the raiders suggests leaving them all behind.

"Too much weight," one of them says. "We're just gonna shoot 'em anyway."

With her sight taken from her, all Calli can think about right now is her mother. She thinks about the reason she's out here.

Mom's going to die anyway. You've failed. Just give up now.

They have moments of stopping and going. A few times, they ask her if she has to use the bathroom. She says yes, and a female guard accompanies her.

"Are you watching?" Calli asks when she's alone with the woman. Why she felt the need to be embarrassed about taking a piss when captured is beyond her.

"Shut up and go already," the woman says, daggers in her voice.

When they return, Calli is pulled over someone's shoulders again, and they head off. They go like this for hours. Calli can't tell what time it is when they stop again, but they seem to set up camp. Calli can feel the heat of a fire.

Where are my friends? I can't hear any of them.

Someone kneels next to her.

"I'm going to lift your bag so I can feed you," someone, a man, says. "Don't fidget around too much."

She allows him to lift it, but he only lifts it to her nose. Fresh air pours into her lungs as she breathes deeply. The man begins to feed her bites of a ration, something akin to macaroni and cheese. It doesn't taste very good, and it's lukewarm at best, but she eats it regardless, thankful that it isn't another protein cookie. The man gives her water from a canteen.

"You good?" he asks her.

She nods, but before she can say anything else, he stands up and begins to walk away, leaving her sitting close to the fire.

The next morning - at least she thinks it's morning - they head off again. Same routine: she's slumped over someone's shoulders and they walk for hours. Calli's stomach is bruised; she can tell without even looking. Everything, from her sternum down to her hips is numb from hanging all day long.

This must end.

"Runner!" someone calls out.

The fear that Calli had during their run-in with those monsters returns, crawling up like a bug in her heart.

Oh god oh god oh god.

"Three of 'em!" someone else calls.

"Fuck," the woman, the leader, yells. "After them!"

For some reason, there's a bit of relief that washes over her. It couldn't have been those bipedal monsters from before. But then, that meant that three people were escaping? Who? She hopes one of them is Sera. If anything, she wants her best friend to get away, to get out of here and away from danger.

"Don't you fucking move," someone says to her. All of this is hard for her to process, mostly because of the bag over her face.

"It's the leader!" someone yells. There's a sudden gunshot, and someone cries out. "Fuck! They got one of our guns!"

There's yelling, and people running. She can hear their footsteps, pounding the ground, guns cocking. It feels like hours before she can feel the presence of someone approaching. The footsteps break nuts fallen from a nearby tree, the audible crunch getting closer and closer. Whoever it is, they kneel next to Calli. Her heart quickens.

"Some of your friends got a way." It's the woman who leads this group of raiders. Calli didn't catch her name. "It doesn't matter. They'll be dead, whether we catch them or if runners catch them. Mara wants you anyway." She stands up, then grabs Calli by the shoulders, lifting her with such ease that Calli feels like she could fall over when the woman lets go of her. She takes off the bag, and she's greeted with the bright sun and the sweaty face of the leader.

"Don't think you'll be needing this anytime soon." The woman reaches into her bag. "You will need this, though." The woman places the mask over Calli's head, adjusting the mask so it fits her snugly.

It's a gas mask.

"What's happening?" Calli asks, though she already knows the answer.

"It's a sickstorm. Heading this way in about..." She checks the watch at her wrist.  
"Five or so minutes. Sit or stand, it's up to you, but don't move either way."

Calli sits, then watches the woman as she stands guard over Calli. She looks at the other soldiers, these raiders.

They aren't wearing masks.

Calli looks back up at the woman.

"I know what you're thinking," the woman says, not even giving Calli a glance.  
"Where's our masks? Funny thing about the frontier, kid, is that you gotta adapt in it or get fucked in it." She turns, then smiles at Calli. "We choose to adapt."

#

For a moment, Aresh feels eleven years younger. Bullets punctuate the ground where he runs, kicking up dirt in tiny explosions. They spray his calves, and he feels the heat of sweat on his brow. The jungle is a blur to him, and he bounds through it like a lightning bolt navigating the sky. Behind him, three raiders chase him, each of them taking turns dropping to one knee to take a steady shot at him. He uses the trees to his advantage, weaving in and out of them.

Rian and Tai are in front of him, keeping up in pace but starting to slow from exhaustion. They've been running for what feels like hours, though it was minutes ago when they managed to escape.

John. Sera. Calli. They left them behind. The raiders had them separated, far enough away so that they couldn't find them. We will come back for you. I promise.

Rian spins, raising the rifle she stole from the raiders and fires off a burst. Aresh doesn't turn to see if she hit her target, but instead gets behind a tree before he too aims and fires. At this point, his targets are far off blurs, weaving and dodging like them.

I've only got one clip. He takes careful, precise shots. Can't waste ammo. He manages to tag one of them, watching as the raider falls. That should slow them down, if they want to help their comrade.

Aresh turns again to run. He follows Rian and Tai, who have ran on ahead.

"Keep going," he yells, dodging into the high brush. There were many occasions a long time ago when he felt like this, though he was in much better shape back then.

He was dumber, too. In situations like this, it would've been William or Mara who stayed behind, pulling up the rear and taking on whatever they had been facing. Most times, it was rebels, their enemies, those who threatened the Silsparrow colonization efforts.

Goddammit. There he goes again, thinking about his soldierly duty. He thought he did good work as a soldier. He helped people. Kept them safe. It was the mission he didn't believe in, at least not anymore. Protecting Silsparrow's interests... it hadn't been worth what they had to do.

What he was forced to do.

"Cover!" Rian calls out.

Aresh nods, then turns back towards the enemy and fires again. His targets drop behind cover, and Rian runs along the tree line for a flanking shot. She hits the side of a large tree, its dark green and blue leaves snaking in and around it. He can't tell if the

enemy has seen her yet, so he fires off two more shots just to make sure. He goes to fire a third but...

Click.

"Shit," he says, then gets back behind cover. Tai is nearby, holding a large pack he stole from the camp. "Anything in there I can use?" he asks.

Tai shakes his head. "It's most of our stuff, but not our weapons."

"Damn."

He peeks out a little from behind the tree, but retreats the second he sees a raider's head peek out from cover. The resulting assault peppers the thick tree with bullets, and Aresh leans in so close to the bark that he thinks he could become one with it. He peeks out again, only to retreat back as a bullet whizzes past his head.

Trapped.

Tai fires a few shots from his pistol, if anything to provide some covering fire. Aresh swings out from cover and fires another burst, hitting and watching one raider go down. He can't tell how many are left, or if that was even a kill shot.

He waits behind the tree for a minute. Or what feels like a minute. Could've been an hour for all he knows.

He looks to Tai. He crouches like a crab behind a fallen tree trunk, not moving a muscle. He never wanted to drag Tai into this, but...

"Clear."

The voice sounds distant, but when Aresh peeks out from the tree, he sees Rian walking towards them, her rifle slung over her shoulder. She tosses Aresh something, and he catches it. A fresh clip. He slaps it into his rifle.

"Nice work," he says. "Anymore coming?"

"I didn't see any."

"We have to go back for the others."

"That's not going to happen."

"I won't abandon John and the girls."

"There's a hell of a lot more of them than there are us. Lot more guns."

"Then we sneak in."

Rian shakes her head. "Chances are bad enough as it is. We can't rush in there."

"Uh," Tai says, his gaze to the woods. "Guys?"

Aresh turns his head.

Four shadows, which had been shadows in the trees before but now took the shape of people, aimed their rifles at the three of them. Each of them wore black.

Spec ops, maybe. Should've seen them. Aresh slowly lowers his weapon. He figures they would've asked him that anyway.

Tai follows his lead. Rian, however, takes her time putting her rifle to the ground, the scowl on her face seeming to be scarier than her gun.

"Very good," one of the soldiers say, "Captain Devy."

One of the soldiers lowers his weapon and takes off his balaclava, revealing an older man with graying, dark hair. He's tall and a bit thin, but Aresh guesses that he's as strong as he is lithe.

"I'm glad you know me," Aresh says, his hands still raised. "Do I know you?"

"Don't think so," the man says. He signals his soldiers and they lower their rifles. They, in turn, lower their hands. "My name is Weyland Nevaire. Former Captain of the Silsparrow Guard outfit in Belhall."

Aresh searches his memory for the name, but everything comes up empty. He can't place it. He looks at Rian, but she doesn't seem to share his level of confusion. Just anger.

"How can we help you," Aresh says, "Captain."

"I believe you're looking for Mara Winters, yes? Seems as though you were running from her people."

Aresh turns to the site of their battle. Much of the grass and bushes are too high, but he does spot one dead raider amongst it all.

"They captured us. Wanted to take us to her."

"Do you know why?"

"Guess is as good as mine."

Nevaire nods.

"They took them," Tai says. "They took some of us."

"There were others with you?" Nevaire's eyebrow raises. His voice sounds like whiskey and cigars. "How many?"

"Just three more," Aresh adds, hoping that Tai will stay back on this one. He knows how to handle people like Nevaire. He can't be sure if the man is here to help them or... "A man, and two teenagers. Female."

"Teenagers?"

Aresh shakes his head. "It's a long story."



Nevaire hums. "Do you know where they were taking you?"

Aresh tells him what happened, how they've travelled the last day with a bag over his head.

"I see," Nevaire finally says. "Why are you out here?"

At that, Aresh gets quiet.

"I'd ask you the same, former captain."

Nevaire smirks. "I'd imagine it's the same reason anybody with a gun and a wish is out here. The auracite, no?"

Aresh nods, if slowly. "That the reason you're former now?"

That smirk returns, and Nevaire nods. "I think we can help each other, Mr. Devy. Are any of you good at tracking?"

Mara stands along the ramparts of the wall. Of her fortress. If she accomplishes her goal, this would be the capital of their new world. She figures they'd need to come up with a fancy name for it, but she likes simple things. Home. That'd be a nice name. It's a name deserving of this place. Amongst the trees, the nature. Everything in it. Around it. The people would come. She'd see it. They would come, and come in droves. They may get resistance, especially from Silsparrow. But she's ready for that. Ready for a day when people would take them seriously. Maybe they could set up their own government, become a major player in what was soon becoming a galactic collective. If the people of Earth sought to govern their own Milky Way Galaxy, why not this one?

If that was the case, she was going to make sure that Kipos was the new Earth, but a better Earth. One that will not be tampered with. Held hostage under the duress of the filth created by its people. Made to stand and watch as its citizens war and squabble over idealistic lies. No. This place would be different. United. Truly united.

She feels the sun on her face, on her skin. She's glad she went with the tank top today. With the sun and the wind kissing her, she thinks that she can feel the future. It will be like this hundreds of years from now. This place will be perfect. Calm.

Her radio buzzes, and she comes back into herself. No more of the peace-seeking Mara Winters. Now she's back to militaristic leader Mara Winters. How easy it is for her to fall into those roles. It's as if she's an actress. It's so easy.

"Yeah," she says into the comm.

It buzzes again, but comes in clear as Farid begins to speak.

"It's Veri," he says. "She's returned with some of the settlers. She's passed the final checkpoint."

"Was she followed?"

"Negative. She had to leave a few behind."

Mara made a point to memorize the names of all of her soldiers. She would never be like those in the Silsparrow military. Nobody would ever be filed down to a simple identification number and rank. That's not how she operates. Everyone had a name. And she would remember those who were lost to the cause.

To unity.

Mara begins to walk along the ramparts and down the steps leading inside the wall. "How many did she pick up?"

"Looks like three," Farid says. "Don't know much more than that."

"Very good. Meet me down at the entrance. Bring others with you."

"Yes, ma'am."

She steps into the main courtyard. The people who have been set up in some of the tents and shacks watch as soldiers - her soldiers - pour into the area with weapons ready. Mara stares at the lot of them, watching as they peek out at the commotion. She doesn't blame them. This is an odd occurrence, even for them. Most of the visitors they get at this place are other members of her group or those from Bandit Town.

Her footsteps clack against the stone ground, echoing into the yard. There isn't much noise, save for the shuffling of feet and whispers of what's happening. Mara sees Veri and her people. Behind her, she sees the prisoners, each of them with bags over their faces and their hands tied behind their back.

Mara steps up to Veri, who salutes.

"Nice work," she says.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Were they any trouble?"

Veri gives the prisoners a side glance. "Not these three, specifically. The others... well, the fuckers got away."

She puts a hand on Veri's shoulder and gives it a slight squeeze. "We will mourn them. I can promise you that."

Veri nods slightly. Mara thinks she can see that her eyes are a bit glossy, but she lets go and looks at the prisoners.

"Take those off."

Two men take off each of the bags, and the three prisoners quickly shut their eyes as light pours into them.

Probably been in that bag the whole time.

"Welcome Home," Mara says, crossing her arms, getting a good look at them. A tall, dark skinned man steps forward, putting the two girls, one with sandy blonde hair and another with a golden brown skin tone behind him. "I trust my people treated you well?"

They don't say anything.

"My name is Mara Winters. No doubt you saw my message. Tell me, where exactly are you from? I'm curious as to how far my message actually got."

Again, they say nothing. The tall man glares at her. Were he armed, he'd no doubt want to pull the trigger on her right this moment.

"They didn't have idents on them?" she says to Veri.

"No. Other than some supplies, trinkets, and weapons, they weren't carrying anything."

"I'd like to see those, if I could."

Veri nods, then turns to one of her soldiers, who hands her a small pack. Mara takes the pack and begins to rummage through it.

"You'd be surprised to know what you can learn about a person by what they're carrying," she says. "Lots of stories with things. It's-"

She stops.

She remembers the feeling of the old pocket watch in her hands. He told her it had been a gift. From his father, which came from his mother, which came from her father. It didn't work anymore. It had just been a hunk of metal and gears, the silver watch always in his pocket. She held it once, near on eleven years ago, back when...

And now it's here again. In her hands.

"Who's is this?" she says, her eyes not leaving the trinket. When nobody answers, she repeats. "I want to know."

"It's mine," the tall man says.

She scowls at him. "Nice try." Mara looks past him at the two young girls. "It's yours. One of yours, anyway. I'd like to know. You're not in trouble."

The seconds go by. Nobody moves.

"She asked one of you to answer," Veri says.

"Thank you, Veri. That will be all."

Veri looks at her, though Mara is still staring at the watch. She can see in her periphery as Veri nods at her soldiers.

"Dismissed," she says. The soldiers back off, eying their captured prisoners as they step away. Mara can tell they're worried, worried they'll do something.

As if she wouldn't be able to stop them if they did.

She eyes them, glares at them. None of them look back at her, as if averting their gaze will make her go away. She feels like a clawhawk, circling her prey in the hot sun, ready to dive down and take what's hers.

For her, its answers.

"I won't ask again."

The three of them continue their silence, either their words caught in their throat or their resolve is hard as stone. Mara has patience for neither.

Before she can voice her concern, the young woman with the golden brown skin clears her throat.

"It's mine," she says, her voice quiet. "It's mine."

Mara looks at the watch. She studies it, stares at the tiny scratches that cover its face. She clicks it open and sees that its still running, the gears moving and marching to a silent drum.

"What's your name?" she asks. "And how did you get this?"

The young girl looks to her friends, who stare back at her with apprehensive eyes. She trusts them, and they trust her, it seems.

The young woman clears her throat. "Calli," she says. "Calli Hayford."

And there it is. "I see."

She gets the names of the others with her, then orders Veri to approach.

"Take off their cuffs."

At that, Veri stops.

"What?"

"They aren't a threat here."

"They killed two of our own."

Mara raises an eyebrow. "Is this true?"

The tall one, John, nods. "We did. They attacked us. In the Venerous."

"In self-defense, Veri. They were doing no different than any one of us would do."

"But-"

"This isn't a debate, Veri. It's an order."

The woman scoffs, but she does as she's told. She's young. Prone to this kind of behavior. She doesn't realize that I know what it is that I'm doing.

Her three new prisoners rub their wrists, as if the cuffs had scraped them raw.

"You have free reign of this facility," Mara says, spreading her arms like a grand gesture. "We have food and water and beds for you. Feel free to use them as you see fit. You will not be allowed to leave the grounds, however. If any of you attempt to escape, my people can fire upon you."

"Are we prisoners?" the tall man says.

"In a way, yes."

"Why are you holding us? We did nothing to you," the other girl says.

"There are questions that I have for you, ones that I feel you will answer in due time. I'm assuming most of you came from the colonies, correct?"

The two young women nod, if hesitantly.

"Silsparrow will tell you that we are just savages and terrorists. We're trying to survive, just like they are."

"But you do kill people," the tall man says.

At that, Mara looks at Veri, who bristles at the comment.

"Again, we do what we can to survive out here. Kipos is not a forgiving place, and its one that cares not if you live or die. You'll do well to remember that. I've uncuffed you, so I hope that has done something to show you that I am not your warden."

"But," Calli says, "aren't we just in a larger cell?"

Mara smiles. "You are smart, aren't you." She turns and begins walking towards the command center. "Welcome Home."

#

With the breaking of a new day, Nevaire feels rather revitalized. If anything, he feels like a new man, pristine and new as though he had just been born. The dew on the leaves and bushes around him shine as he checks his surroundings.

"Get them up," he tells Cairn.

Their three new teammates - Aresh, Tai, and Rian - each stand and march with them, if only with any sort of hesitation. Their deal still stands: help them find Mara and her stash of auracite and, if possible, kill her. That was only right. The woman was a danger to people of Kipos. It might not be his duty anymore to protect the people who live on this godforsaken planet, but he sure as hell wouldn't want to live in her shadow if



he had to, and he sure as hell wasn't going to subject anybody else to that sort of fate. What happened to this place after he was long gone with his riches was beyond his care. It didn't matter. Silsparrow would probably be looking for him before long. He'd be long gone, on some other planet, far away from their reach.

Their three new comrades - he hesitates to say prisoners - get up and moving. He hands each of them a pistol.

"Trust is hard to come by," he says as he hands them the weapons. "It also starts from both sides here. I'm trusting you to not shoot me and my friends here in the back. I'm also trusting that you'll need us if you want to save your friends."

"All bets are off once their safe," Rian says as she holsters the weapon.

"Fair enough."

"I second that," Cairn adds.

"What are we even doing out here?" Aresh says. His voice is tired, like he's all but given up already. "Mara's people went to the northeast. That's where the auracite is."

Tai nods. "That's what we got from the coordinates." He taps the little computer on his wrist. "We're going northwest."

"Got some things we need to do this way beforehand," Nevaire says. "You don't go rushing into enemy territory without a plan. You should know this better than anybody, Aresh."

Aresh shakes his head.

"Might be nice to know what the fuck is going on, though," Rian adds.

"I thought we said you do as we say and everybody gets what they want." Ende appears from the treeline, back from scouting. "That was the deal."

"I like to know what I'm getting myself into first before I go diving in front of a bunch of bullets."

Nevaire steps between the two. "It shouldn't come to that. Not if you all do as I say."

"So what do you say," Aresh says, "boss?"

Nevaire grins. "There's a rather large settlement not too far away from here. About a day's walk, really. You know of it, right?"

Aresh rubs his eyes. "Bandit Town."

"Yep. Bandit Town."

Tai looks to Aresh with a cocked eyebrow. "What's Bandit Town?"

He rubs his eyes. "Frontier town on the outskirts of the jungle. I'd call it lawless, but there is a small Silsparrow presence there."

"That's being polite," Nevaire says. "You'll see when we get there, kid. It's an all-too different experience than these other colonies."

"What's there that's so important?" Rian asks. "And how is this going to help us get our people back?"

He notices that she doesn't use the word friend. It's an odd thing. Knowing who Rian is - and her reputation - she doesn't have very many friends. Probably never has.

He sighs. "I've got people there. Ones who might help us."

"Might," Rian says.

"Yeah. Might. Could be they help us get this auracite, could be they help you get your people out of there. Either way, Mara's head ends up on a pike and we all go home happy in one way or another."

"I don't like the sound of these friends," Aresh says. "Nothing but bad has come out of that place."

"You got a better idea?" Cairn asks. "Could just send you in there with a pistol and see how you do, though I think that'd be a waste of a firearm."

Nevaire holds up a hand, silencing Cairn. "You don't know who the fuck you're talking to, Cairn."

"A washed up relic is all I see."

Aresh grins. "You aren't that far from the truth."

"In any case, we're going there. That's final."

Aresh stands up, putting on his pack. "This better be worth it."

Nevaire mirrors him. Would it be worth it? By now, Dannowitz has to know about his betrayal. He wasn't sure how Bandit Town would take that. They weren't the paragons of justice that Silsparrow made all of their forces out to be. Bandit Town was... different. An anomaly. A back alley pond of thugs wearing the navy sparrow. But nobody did anything about it. It was the worst kept secret on the planet, but it was something that had been necessary. Out there were the explorers, the scavengers. Those that were hired out by Silsparrow to charter the land. Radar equipment would do most of the work, which were often fired from probes. But those could only get a fraction of the area, not the smaller pockets that could only be navigated by humans. They were given modest pay and the promise of benefits (which were probably still being 'processed' at this point), as well as the promise of adventure.

That promise often led to runner attacks.

It wasn't until the appearance of sickstorms that stopped people from venturing out too far. Most people stayed in the settlements and let drones do the cartographing for them. Bandit Town started as a small supply station, a rest stop of sorts for those explorers who needed to resupply, a bite to eat, and a bed to sleep on. After the sickstorms started showing up, and nobody wanted to venture out too far, it grew into a small town. Silsparrow was sent to guard it, but were never given any real oversight.

It's the town that was never supposed to exist, Nevaire thinks as they head out. Lawless, ruthless, and uncaring.

And they were headed right for it.

#

The food is tempting. Calli and Sera stand in the small motor pool that's been modified to be a sort of jury-rigged mess hall. A few people stand behind a counter, brewing and cooking various dishes. Calli sees steamed corn, boiled garafruit slathered in a garlic sauce. There's a man grilling something nearby, but Calli can't quite place the scent. A small cooler filled with water bottles lie nearby, the icy liquid looking as tantalizing as the food.

It's all too much.

"Wow," Sera says, her mouth open. She closes it before she can start drooling.

"This. Is. Awesome."

Calli looks around the room, and the two take a seat at one of the various picnic tables that have been set up. As soon as they do, one of the cooks, a woman, comes out from behind the counter.

"This place runs buffet-style, so you know. Just get up and get what you want."

The cook heads back behind the counter to continue her work.

"This is pretty great," Calli says, feeling her stomach grumble.

What goes unsaid hangs in the air around them. Calli feels it, and she knows that Sera does too. Should they even partake in this food? Aren't they supposed to be prisoners here? She thinks that taking the food is some sort of betrayal, to John and to Aresh and the rest. To her mother.

Mom.

In all the insanity, in all the chaos, she almost forgot why she was here. In this moment. Right here and now. Mara had something that they wanted. Mara had told them that they'd have a meeting of some sort about the auracite "when the time was right". Calli didn't have much of a say in the matter. It just happened. She isn't sure where John went. He just sort of... walked off. Maybe to speak with Mara again? Maybe to have them find Aresh and the rest? Where even were they?

Where they even alive?

Days ago, she sat in her room and wondered if she was ever going to leave Belhall. If her mother was ever going to get better. The thought of that incident, so long ago, plays again and again in her head the second she remembers.

"Put this on," Diana told her as she slipped the mask over Calli's face. "You'll be safe. I'm here."

Calli remembers the embrace, remembers how her mother held her tightly in that raging storm. Calli inhaled, smelling the plastic mask, wondering - if innocently - if her mother smelled the same thing.

That hadn't been the case, and it still isn't. Her mother lies in a bed in a Belhall quarantine zone, and here she is, in the middle of nowhere, running from runners and... she hesitates to call them raiders now. She hasn't seen them do much raiding. To her, Mara's group feels more like nomads, wandering the jungle and scrounging up what they can to survive. She reaches into her pocket and picks up the pocket watch. What had Mara seen in this watch? It was her fathers, or at least that's what her mother told her. Calli holds the item in her hand. Feels the weight of it. She touches the gold plating and presses the button, opening it. She isn't sure if the time is correct, but it's a marvel that the thing still works. What had Mara seen in this watch?

The sound of a plate slamming on the picnic table forces her to come back to reality. Sera sits across from her, a tray filled with various foods and a water bottle in front of her.

"I can't help it," Sera says. "Protein cookies can go fuck themselves. I'm eating real food for the first time in a few days."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Calli asks.

"No," Sera replies as she uses a knife to cut into the steamed garafruit, a large, purple fruit the size of a baseball. "But I'm hungry. And this smells amazing. So I'm gonna eat it all. You should consider doing the same."

At first, she doesn't allow the wondrous smells coming from the tray to entice her. They try to, but she holds her ground.

Can't take their food. Don't know who these people are.

She doesn't believe that they would capture them, give them free reign of Home, only to poison them later. At least, she hopes that isn't the case. Either way, Sera bites into her food, and Calli feels as though it can't hurt.

"Fine," she says, standing up from the table. "You win, stomach."

She grabs herself a tray and walks down the line, grabbing food that she's never seen before. Next to the garafruit is a long, banana-like fruit that has a orange-green color to it. She picks it up and feels the heat coming off of it. Whether it was steamed or boiled, she isn't sure, but she piles it onto the tray next to the various other fruits and vegetables she picks up. She has corn, which seems to be the only thing next to the garafruit that looks somewhat familiar. She grabs a water bottle and sits back down, all while incurring the stares of the cooks and some of the other people eating in the room.

We don't belong here. She sits down and unrolls the napkin with a fork and knife inside. She feels as though their eyes are drills, trying to bore their way into the back of her head to see what's inside. I don't want to belong here.

They eat in relative silence. Calli watches Sera, who keeps keeps her sole focus on the food in front of her.

Don't look around don't look around don't look around.

Footsteps approach. They seem hard to hear in the loud kitchen, but Calli can almost feel them. She knows she's being watched, so why not follow as well. She turns her head to see a young man approach her table and sit next to her.

He's a tall young man, probably in his twenties, if Calli had to guess. Handsome, with copper skin and dark, short hair, he sits down quietly and stares at her.

"Can we help you?" Sera asks. Calli wonders if she knows how to speak anymore. Whatever words she had hoped to say to him feel trapped in her throat, as if in a cage without a key.

"I've come to say hello to the newcomers," he says without any hint of pleasure. As if this meeting was their choice, and as if this is all just an annoyance for him. "My name is Farid."

"We saw you in the yard," Sera says, putting down her silverware. "You're one of Mara's people."

"We are not Mara's people," he says, though not with venom. "We follow her, but she allows us to be our own people. Here, we are free."

"Well, I'll be."

"Unlike the colonies."

"We did just fine there, thank you very much."

Calli feels uncomfortable, like this Farid could pounce at any second. For all intents and purposes, they were surrounded by people who wanted them gone.

"How does it feel to come from a place where your every move is monitored?"

Sera slaps her hand on the table. "Look, pal. You came to us. Not sure why you're so intent on picking a fight here, but we did nothing to you. Look at us. We're goddamn teenagers. It isn't our fault we were born behind a wall. And if you can't see all that well, you're living behind a wall, too."

"At least I can leave whenever I want. To enjoy this place."

"Again, you might need some glasses. We left too."

Farid scoffs, then looks to Calli. "What do you have to say about all of this?"



Calli shrugs. "Not too much, right now."

"Your words are lost to you? Have the sparrows taken those away as well?"

"She's eating, buddy," Sera says, the conflict appearing in her voice. "And so am I. It'd be nice if we could enjoy that in peace."

"Yes. Please. Enjoy the food that we harvest here."

Sera grins. "Yes, I think we will. Last I checked, your leader gave us a free pass here. And she said nothing about limiting our access to food."

Calli looks at him. "Please. Leave us alone. It's a been a hard few days."

"I'm sure it has. Killing our people. Must've been very hard for you."

Calli stands up from the table, pushing her tray forward.

"I'm not hungry," she says, then heads for the door out, the eyes of everyone on her.

On her way out, she hears Sera say "Asshole."

The kitchen leads to the various barrack rooms, some of which are full of bunk beds and lockers. To her, Home keeps getting bigger and bigger the more she looks into it. Some people are in these rooms, either sleeping or otherwise just lounging about. The ones who are awake stare at her, much like those in the kitchen. Feeling the need to not be seen right now, she finds the nearest door and heads through it, thinking this might lead to yet another barracks. Instead, it takes her into the yard, where she and the rest had come in. She stares at the large gates that had welcomed them underneath their black masks.

The auracite is out there. My friends are out there. And I'm stuck in here.

"Excuse me."

Calli looks for the voice behind her, but all that's there is the door she went through. Looking up, she spies a staircase that leads to the ramparts of the large wall surrounding Home. And with it, the voice that called out to her.

Mara Winters stands halfway up the staircase, her military fatigues looking sweaty in the hot sun.

"Calli, right?" Mara says.

Calli nods, though she didn't will herself to do it. "Yeah."

"Can we talk for a moment?" Mara begins to climb the steps.

There's no gun to her head. She doesn't have to go to her. However, she feels compelled to do so. Mara was the one that gave them free reign to Home, after all. They were given access to the kitchens and to a bed, even if that bed was in one of the tents outside the compound proper. She follows Mara up the stairs and onto the ramparts, watching as Mara's dark red hair flows freely as the wind picks up the higher they go. As she reaches the rampart and looks down over the railing to the jungle outside, Calli is reminded of home. Of Belhall. And her mother.

"Is this place to your liking?" Mara asks, not even looking at Calli. Her tone is friendly, but Calli can't be sure.

"I'm," she says, searching for the right word, "adjusting."

"That's good," Mara says.

"May I ask where John went off to?"

"Right now, he is in our comms room. He's trying to get out a call to your compatriots who went missing. He's hoping to get them to come here."

Despite knowing nothing about Mara, Calli finds truth in her words. She can believe her. She does believe her.

"Why?" she asks.

Mara arches an eyebrow. "Why what?"

"Why do you want them to come here? Days ago, you sent out a message, telling people to come out and find the auracite." She tries to find the words. The right ones. She doesn't want to insult her captor. "You have it, don't you."

Mara doesn't say anything, confirming her words.

"Why call people to come here?"

Mara stares out, out into the horizon, above the canopies of the trees and into the skies. Whatever she's staring at, Calli can't seem to find it, despite trying hard to see.

"This place is special," Mara starts. "Kipos. The planet. It's... a new beginning for us."

"Us?"

"Humanity. People. A few hundred years ago, we did the impossible: we left Earth. Left it to rot, to shove our mess under the rug, so to speak, and strike it out on our own to find a new home. We found more than one. And so we started colonization anew. We had conquered Earth. It's only human nature that we conquered other worlds as well."

Calli listens to her, but stares out into the vastness of the jungle with Mara.

"Kipos is different from those places. At least in the eyes of many. It's very much like Earth, reminiscent of when it was young. I mean, look at the runners. Reptilian predators that aren't unlike those that once walked Earth. This planet is an infant, in need of responsible people to take care of it."

"I don't understand." Calli watches the wind catch the trees in its grasp, moving it and manipulating it.

"When the transport ships left our solar system to find new worlds, they did so carrying a flag. An ideology. Those flags bore the symbol of money on them. Corporations and companies were the faces behind this new frontier, their goal not that of expansion and to carry on the human race. But to own and to take."

"You're talking about Silsparrow."

Mara nods. "Silsparrow and others like them. Rothchilde Expansion. Yar-Olenski Conglomerate. They're all the same, really. No different from one another, except with different names. It wasn't the flags of nations that led the charge for expansion. It was them, each of their giant ships scouring the universe to see who could own the most worlds. Everis. Athena. Humanity does not own them, like Earth is. We came into that. Earth was our birthright."

Calli stares up at her now, transfixed on her words. Calli herself never knew much about Earth. She hadn't been born there. But the way most people spoke about it back in Belhall, it was home. A former home.

"Then, Silsparrow came to Kipos. Founded it. Planted the navy sparrow on its earth to claim it. I... was part of that. I helped hold the flag up."

"You were part of Silsparrow once?"

She nods, though slowly, as if she doesn't want to say the words. "Yes. A long time ago."

The pocket watch.

Calli pulls out the device. "Then... when you saw this..."

Mara finally acknowledges her. "Yes," she says, offering out her hand. Calli gives her the watch, and Mara taps it open. "This once belonged to William Hayford. That was your father, correct?"

Calli gulps, then nods. "He was. I don't... I don't remember him, though. He died when I was little."

"Your father was a good man."

"You knew him well?"

Mara sighs. "He led my unit. He seemed like a competent leader when I first met him. Calm under pressure, and all that."

"You mean during the civil war," Calli says, trying to follow her. Her mother once answered any questions Calli had about her father, but she's never felt as though she's had the full story. But now...

"That was an awful time. You know much about it?"

Calli nods. "Only what they told us in the news or in school."

Shortly after Silsparrow had arrived on the planet nearly forty years ago, they began to set up what would later be the colonies that Calli grew up in. Not only that, but multiple exploration parties would go out and conduct surveys on the planet, testing the soil, the air, the water, testing everything for information. For abnormalities. For the most part, Kipos seemed to be a perfect Earth-like planet. Calli remembers hearing about a time that people called Kipos "New Earth". Shortly after the colonies had been established, Silsparrow began bringing in the first transport ships filled with colonists and settlers, a young Diana and William among them.

For a time, everything had gone by the book. Kipos hadn't been the first planet that Silsparrow had colonized, so they knew what they were doing. Set up the colonies, establish a food and water supply. From there, it would simply take a few years to establish towns, followed then by cities, until the planet itself became exactly what people had been calling it: a New Earth. And Silsparrow would be at the center of it all.

However, there were those who didn't want that. Not that they didn't want humanity to thrive. Far from that. There were people - the colonists, the settlers, even some from Silsparrow itself - that sought something different from Kipos. Something that they couldn't get anywhere else.

"Rebirth," Mara says, still looking out into the horizon. "Renewal. Freedom. Those are the pillars on which we build our foundation on, on Kipos."

Calli blinks. "But I thought you were part of Silsparrow."

"I was. For a time."

As soon as Silsparrow gained a foothold onto the surface of Kipos, there were those that had a different vision for the planet, one that drastically conflicted with Silsparrow's vision of a conglomerate-controlled planet, one that was owned by a committee rather than the people. There were reports of movements from the settlers and colonists, ones that left the colonies in huge droves, to move out into the uncharted areas of Kipos, their goal to expand and grow bigger than Silsparrow. As soon as the company got wind of this, they attempted to round them up, sending out soldiers and law enforcement to bring its people back. After all, everyone on Kipos was considered an employee of Silsparrow, and Kipos was considered private property.

Rumors were never sure who fired the first shot, which side the first corpse fell on. But there were violent altercations between the rogue colonists and Silsparrow forces. By that point, the colonists had grown into a rather large, if scattered, fighting force. Many officers from Silsparrow even switched sides, thinking that Kipos was a chance for a true new Earth.

"I, along with your father, Aresh, and others, were part of a unit whose job was to hit rogue installations, whether it was here in the jungle, or north towards the pole. It didn't matter where they sent us, really. None of it felt right to any of us, what we were doing. William used to say that it was an unfortunate quandary they had gotten themselves into. The colonists, I mean."

"My father... people call him a hero."

Mara nods. The wind picks up, pushing her hair aside. Calli sees the hard lines in her face, the ones forged in stress and fire and battle. "He was a hero. It's unfortunate you never were able to meet him."

"Yeah." Calli sighs. "What else can you tell me?"

Mara shrugs. "All of us in the unit were close, especially William, Aresh, and myself. We went through a lot. We saw a lot. More than I think for at least three lifetimes."

The "uprising" - Silsparrow refused to call it a war - lasted much longer than anybody thought it would. As Silsparrow called in reinforcements, there were many sympathizers in the other colonies that hitched rides with Silsparrow transport ships, pretending to sign up for the army, then switching sides as soon as they made planetfall. Silsparrow refused to back down. As they continued to expand to other places on the

planet, so too did the rogue colonists gain in strength. They focused on guerilla hit-and-run tactics, making them a bother to the Silsparrow military. They hired out roving mercenary bands and smugglers to deliver to them supplies and weapons. Because Silsparrow's focus had been dealing with the colonists, their security around the planet had its holes, allowing most to pass through without so much as an ID check.

"Your father," Mara continues, "was a great leader. He didn't start as our unit's leader. He earned that, through bullets and blood. There wasn't a single soldier that wouldn't follow him to the end."

Calli holds back the one question she wishes to know: How did he die? When her mother received the letter saying that he died long ago, it had mentioned that he died in the heat of battle. And that had been it. Six words: died in the heat of battle. The questions had been there, but at the time, all they consisted of was "why", and never "how". She had her chance now. All she needed to do was ask...

The comm attached to Mara's belt beeps. She reaches for the device and puts it close to her mouth.

"Go ahead," she says, her voice commanding and icy as it had been when Calli met her.

Calli can't hear what's being said on the other side. The volume is quiet enough for only Mara to hear. Mara's expression doesn't change.

"Got it," she says. "Get the kids masks." She looks to Calli. "And get some extra for our new guests. The rest... you know what to do with them." She returns the device to her belt, then looks to Calli, whose face has transformed into that of confusion and wonder. "We need to get down to the yard." She starts for the steps, and Calli follows.



"What's going on?" she asks.

"Sickstorm headed this way. It'll be here in twenty minutes."

A sickstorm. She remembers the haze, the smell of plastic.

The voice of her mother.

It's okay. It's going to be okay. You're safe.

She feels a chill down her back as that memory returns. Her skin prickles, her skin feeling suddenly hot.

"What are we going to do?" she asks as they reach the final step.

"Get the children and the sick to the lower levels of the base. It's sealed down there, so the storm can't get in."

"What about everyone else?"

"They need to stay up top and make sure our equipment doesn't get damaged in the storm."

"Do you have enough masks?"

Calli thinks she spies a slight smile on her face, though she can't seem to think why.

"We have enough. You're welcome to one, if you'd rather not stay below."

Why wouldn't she rather be in a sealed room away from the storm?

"My friends will get masks?"

"Of course."

The yard itself is anxious with Mara's people running about, throwing tarps over the tents where some of the tracking equipment is. There are shouts, even whistles, but no

sirens, much like there were in Belhall whenever there had been a sickstorm threat. Many of the children and some of the elderly are moved inside the base.

Somebody hands Mara a mask, and she hands it to Calli.

"Where's yours?" she asks, putting hers on.

Mara doesn't answer.

Calli looks around her. Many of the soldiers here - Mara's followers - aren't carrying masks with them. In fact, she doesn't remember seeing any masks on the raiders she and Tai killed back on the Venerous, or masks with those that captured her, Sera, and John.

At that, John and Sera find her.

"You okay?" John asks, his mask tightly around his face.

"I'm good," Calli replies.

Sera puts an arm on her shoulder. "Are you okay?" she asks.

She's a good friend. Sera knows how hard this is for Calli. Just the very word - sickstorm - brought up memories of that day, long ago.

It was my fault.

"I'm fine," Calli says. "Promise."

"C'mon," John says. "We should get inside the base." He and Sera turn towards the command center.

For a moment, Calli hesitates. She's... curious. Why don't they have masks here? What could be going on?

She turns towards Mara, who directs her people. Many of the settlers go about grabbing crates and equipment to take inside. Two settlers on the wall cover the anti-air

turrets, in case the storm transforms into a tornado. There were incidents where that had occurred, but they had been so very rare that nobody ever gave it a thought.

Calli walks up to Mara, who at first doesn't notice her. When she turns around, Calli stares up at her through the glass shield of her mask.

"Why don't you have masks?" she asks.

Mara stares down at her. "Head up to the command center with your friends and watch. You'll see."

Calli stares at her for a moment, trying to make out her words. Her body takes a step back, either because she's following Mara's orders or it knows that danger is quickly approaching.

"Calli," Sera yells, and Calli goes over to join them.

"Go upstairs," she tells Sera and John. "We need to see this."

John, nearing the door that leads down, stops. "What?"

"See what?" Sera repeats.

But Calli doesn't answer them. Her curiosity leads her to take the stairs, toward the main command center. The door automatically slides open as she approaches, meaning that the room wouldn't be sealed once the storm hits. There are several people inside the room, working on terminals or other devices, who all stare as Calli steps inside. None of them are wearing masks either.

What is going on?

Nobody says anything to her, or Sera and John as they follow her inside.

"What is going on here?" John says as he looks around the room.

"They don't have masks," Sera says quietly.

The people continue their work. "Two minutes until the storm hits," someone at a terminal says.

Calli looks out of the windows. The command center rises higher than the wall, so she has a better view of the area than she did with Mara on the ramparts. In the distance, she sees it. The purple haze of the storm, rolling and churning with the wind, approaches the base like a transport ship at full thrust. She watches as trees sway and bend, some of them nearly falling over as the cloud barrels through them.

"One minute."

"Look," Sera says, then points down.

Calli follows her finger. Down in the yard, Mara stands at the front of a column of people - her people. Each of them stand at attention, as if they're about to conduct a military drill.

None of them have masks either.

"What the hell," John says. "Are they crazy? They'll get sick!"

Before Calli can add to that, she watches Mara as she directs them. As they finish, as each of Mara's people stand at attention, she looks up at the command center.

Right at Calli.

It's hard for her to tell, but Calli thinks she sees a smile on her face just as the cloud envelopes them in purple miasma.

The storm hit hard, and without much warning. One of Nevaire's men - Ende, he called her - spotted the storm on her scope. They quickly put on their masks before it hit, but not before finding shelter. They found a large, overturned tree, whose roots made a great wall for the oncoming winds of the sickstorm. They huddled up behind it as the foggy mist overcame them.

Nobody says anything as the winds whip around them. To Aresh, this is an all too familiar scene. He remembers sitting in similar spots with Mara, with William, with the rest of their unit as the storms way back when whirled. He laughs to himself.

"What's so funny?" Cairn says, his voice sounding synthetic behind the mask.

"Thinking of old times," Aresh says.

"Storms dying down," Ende says, staring at her datapad. In response, the wind begins to recoil, to settle down, like a roaring runner on its last leg. Nevaire stands up, peeking out from behind the stump.

"Let's go now, while we still have daylight," he says, picking up his pack. "Bandit Town shouldn't be too much farther ahead."

Aresh looks to Rian, who shrugs.

Just keep following his orders, her eyes seem to say behind the mask. We'll escape when we have the chance.

Aresh stands, then helps Tai put on his own pack.

"This your first sickstorm?" he asks. The young man positions himself so he won't fall over, as if the winds threaten to shove him to the ground.

"Yeah," he says. "You didn't mention the purple color."

Aresh nods. "Nobody is quite sure where that comes from. Like the sickstorm themselves, it seems to be a phenomenon that only this planet has."

The rest of Nevaire's crew strays behind, if only to make sure their new recruits don't run off. Nevaire leads them. He checks the device Ende gave him, which contains a GPS map of their location. The screen fizzles in and out.

"Storm is screwing with the satellite coverage," he says. "May have to navigate blind."

"We really shouldn't do that," Aresh says. "This place is hard enough navigating in clear weather."

"Not sure we'll have a choice," Nevaire replies, finally putting away his device, the screen blank. "Screen just shorted out. Too much interference."

"I thought you knew your way to this place," Tai says.

"Why don't you use your little wrist computer?" Cairn says, his tone confrontational. "Make yourself useful for a change."

Tai glares at him. "It needs charged. We've kinda been out in the wilderness for the last few days. Not a lot of opportunities to find electricity."

"Well," Ende says, shouldering her rifle, "what's the order?"

Nobody says anything for a moment. Nevaire looks as though he's thinking, trying to figure out their next move. They need to get to Bandit Town - or, rather, Nevaire needs them to get to Bandit Town - but they couldn't navigate the jungle like this.

Rian sighs, then trudges ahead. "I know where it's at," she says, moving past Nevaire. "Follow me."

Nevaire looks to Aresh. "I didn't know your friend came from Bandit Town."

Aresh shrugs. "Neither did I." Each of them follow Rian's lead.

Hours later, and after the sickstorm had died down completely, they began to see less jungle and more dirt. Trees gave way to rocky landscapes, the trees sturdier and taller than the ones in the jungle. The temperature decreased, the humidity all but disappearing in favor of a more temperate, cooler air.

Aresh looks around him. At the nature, at it all. This is what he missed about Kipos, about this place. He had been born inside transport ships and lived amongst the colonies, but this... this nature. It feels naturalist, like he belongs in a place like this. Sometimes, he'd think about moving Lucas and Edward from their home colony on Everis in favor of a more secluded home, away from the ship yards or from the factories, away from the star ports and the manufacturing conglomerates. Away from the people. The air feels crisper going into his lungs, like it's brand new. The cool air touches his skin, and he feels goosebumps go down his arms.

He remembers this place. He and his unit - his comrades - spent most of the war here, in these rocky areas. This is where he spent most of his nights under the stars, under Kipos's moon. This is where they fought. Where they died.

Where it all ended.

Aresh keeps up with Rian. Another thought pushes its way into his head, mostly about her: how does she know how to get to Bandit Town? Sure, he doesn't know much about her. When he put out the call for people to join him on Kipos to search for riches, he never expected Rian to join up with him. She had a reputation, after all. A story behind her exploits, and it was one that was like his own. He remembers her name being passed

around from camp to camp, from soldier to soldier back during his days in Silsparrow. How a single woman held off an assault of rogue forces. How one woman took base after base. It had been hyperbolic, course. Most soldiers on guard duty at some of the camps and installations had nothing better to do than pass around rumor and stories. But Aresh knows that there are truths to every story, no matter how exaggerated. He's been a part of a few himself, ones that he knows are far-fetched.

Aresh thinks on this as he walks, as he follows Nevaire and Rian. The world - his world - was a much different place eleven years ago. The war was something that should never have happened, but it did, and many people paid for it. Aresh included.

"Can I ask how you know where this place is at?" Nevaire says, stepping over a fallen log, then nearly tripping over a large boulder imbedded into the ground. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've been there before. There's only two types of people who come from there."

"Yeah?" Rian says, not turning to look at him. "And what kinds of people are those?"

Nevaire scoffs. "Murderers and thieves. Which one are you?"

Rian doesn't respond. She just keeps on walking.

Hour later, they arrive at an outcropping, a hill that overlooks a grassy valley. Several stagfells dart across the high grass, running for cover as the newfound invaders walk across their land.

"Could go for some of that meat," Cairn mutters.

"Those antlers are sharper than you think," Rian says. "More like spears, really."

Cairn sniffs. "That's why we shoot them."



"And that's why they travel in packs. When one goes down, the whole herd converges on the threat. Just so you know."

"How much farther?" Ende yells out. She's in the back of the group, so her voice doesn't carry as far.

"Just over this hill," Rian says. "There's a few things you need to know about this place."

As she speaks, she stops at the bottom of the hill, then turns to face the group.

"What?" Nevaire says.

"You can't go in."

"That was obvious," Nevaire says. "My face is probably plastered on every site on every datapad."

"No," Rian says, "I mean the whole lot of you. You Silsparrow folk."

Tai looks to Aresh. He mouths What is she doing?

Aresh shakes his head. I don't know.

"Absolutely not," Cairn adds. "One of us needs to go with you. I don't want any of you running off."

"You handed us guns and let me lead you for miles. If we wanted to run, we would've done it by now."

At that, Aresh agreed. From her reputation as a fighter, he knew that Rian could handle the three former Silsparrow soldiers easily, even if they were armed.

"Gotta agree with my friend here," Nevaire says. "You're supposed to help us, but I know you want us three dead."

"I also want to rescue my friends," Rian says. "And I can't do it with just three of us."

Aresh looks to Tai. A small smile spreads across his face.

"Then why don't you want us to come with you?" Nevaire says.

Rian scoffs. "It's rather simple. You're Silsparrow. Through and through."

"Not anymore, we're not," Cairn says.

"Sure you are. You walk like a sparrow, you talk like a sparrow. People of Bandit Town? They don't like sparrows."

"You were a sparrow once, if I recall," Nevaire adds.

"Kinda hypocritical, don't you think," Ende pipes.

"Difference is I shed my feathers a long time ago. The fact of the matter is that those people will see you for what you are, and that is a corporate stooley. They won't believe you if you say you defected. Doesn't matter. They know me. And I can vouch for my friends." She nods at Aresh. "I can't vouch for the rest of you."

Nevaire approaches her, his gaze conflicting. Aresh thinks that he's going to do something, to make some sort of move to restrain her. His hand reflexively moves for his pistol.

"Okay," Nevaire says. "You've made your point. But somebody is going with you. I don't want you doing anything you aren't supposed to."

"Mara and her people have my friends," Rian retorts. "As I said, I want them back, and we'll need your help to do it."

"If it's all the same," Nevaire says, "Ende will go with you. Not a negotiation."

Rian stares at him for a moment. Aresh looks at her eyes, her hard gray eyes. He watches them to see what she'll do next.

"Fine," she says, now turning her attention to Ende. "But you follow my orders, okay? I called this place home once. I know how to navigate it."

Ende scoffs. "Aye aye."

As they turn to leave, Nevaire calls out to them. He touches Tai on the shoulder. "We're keeping the boy, though," he says. "As insurance. Nothing personal, but I don't trust any of you."

"Hold up," Aresh says. Tai looks between Aresh and his newfound captor. "No. That's not gonna happen."

Cairn laughs. "It's gonna happen, or none of you are leaving at all."

Before Aresh can add to that, Rian raises a hand to him. "It's okay," she says. Then, to Nevaire: "If there's one scratch on him when we get back, none of you are making it out of this jungle."

Nevaire smiles. "I wouldn't doubt that. Good luck, Rian. I hope you get us a force worth something."

#

The storm lasts for at least ten minutes. Calli watches from the safety of the command center, though she notices tendrils of purple haze that enters the room through the cracks under the door. The personnel inside the room, those who are monitoring the storm, don't seem to mind that toxic vapor is entering their lungs.

What is happening?

She's lost sight of Mara and the group of people she had down below. The wind whips about, shrouding them in the storm.

"She exposed them all," Sera says, her hands on the glass. "They're all infected. Why would she do that?"

"Nothing here seems right," John says. "Mara is a madwoman."

Calli couldn't agree more, but she continued to stare down into the yard. The minutes pass by, and the storm begins to let up.

"Storm strength at three percent," one of the engineers says.

Calli looks down into the yard, just as the purple winds start to dissipate. Down below, Mara stands straight up, her arms outstretched. The people lined up in rows and columns do something similar, though some of them have fallen to the ground. As the air begins to clear, and the thin veil of soupy, toxic sickstorm disappears, Mara orders the ones standing to help the fallen. Calli watches as she takes out her comm and says something.

One of the engineers calls her name. "Calli," she says, putting her ear to a headset. "Mara wishes to speak with you. Down below."

"Is it safe to go down there?" John asks.

"Residue from the storm is still out there. It'd be best to keep your mask on."

Calli looks to Sera. "What could she want?"

"I dunno," Sera says, "but it can't be good after a show like that. Is she insane?"

"Ever since we got here, I've been wondering the same thing," John adds.

"It can't be that simple," Calli says. "She had to have them down there for a reason. She wouldn't just inoculate herself and her followers on a whim, would she?"

"I... I don't know," Sera says. "Ask her."

Calli nods.

"Be careful, though," John says.

"Yeah," Sera says. "Remember: you have a job to do."

Calli leaves the command center and descends the steps into the yard. People mill about, tearing the tarps off of equipment and tents, taking out instruments to gauge the level of sickstorm residue. It would take a few rainstorms to wash it all away, but Calli notices that some people have brought out large disinfectant sprayers, much like the ones back in Belhall to wash away the virus-induced residue.

Mara stands in the center of it all, directing her people to various jobs.

"Keep your mask on," she says to Calli as she approaches. "We aren't sure how much of this stuff is still in the air right now."

"Why did you do that?" Calli asks. "You... you had to have ingested the air. You're all sick now! And you did that to your own people?"

Instead of answering, Mara says "Follow me. I'll tell you." She heads for one of the rooms leading down into the base, where Calli remembers seeing the children and elderly head down. She wonders how sealed tight the base actually is, if those down below were still given gas masks in case of leaks.

"We have lived with these sickstorms for years," Mara says as she opens the door. Calli follows her inside. Small light bulbs hang from the ceiling, giving meager light to the otherwise dark metal corridor. "Ever since they started appearing, we had to find some way to live amongst it. We don't have the luxury of shield walls. We had to raid

supply convoys and smuggle in gas masks for a long time. It's hard to find filters out here in the jungle."

Mara turns down a corridor, then down a descending shaft. Calli keeps close. She feels as though she could get lost in the large structure. She sees the scratched out symbols of sparrows on some of the walls. Some are even painted over with giant red x's.

"The thing about virus's is," Mara continues, "is that there's usually a cure."

Calli's footsteps echo as they enter a large workshop-like room. Metal tables and equipment are placed around the room. It's rather messy, but Calli navigates it easily. Mara stops in front of a table and turns around.

"There is a cure for the sickness," Calli says. It's the one I'm trying to pay for. "They figured one out years ago."

"Yes, but who controls that cure?"

Silsparrow. She sighs. "I guess that is a problem for you."

"Of course it is," Mara says. "There was no way that my people could survive out here. Certainly not with just gas masks. Eventually, the filters run out. The gas masks become useless. Silsparrow catches wind of our raids and takes different routes, or sets traps for us. We had to find some other way."

She pulls out a small glass vial, one that had been sitting on the table. Inside the vial is a silvery dust with a tinge of yellow speckles.

"Do you know what this is?" Mara asks. Calli doesn't answer. She picks up another object from the table, this one a bit more familiar.

It's a chunk of auracite.

The mineral glows faintly yellow in Mara's hand. This is the second time Calli has come within reach of the auracite. All she needed to do was take it...

"This vial contains shavings of auracite ore. We sprinkle it in the food."

That took her aback. "You what?"

"We feed my people bits of auracite ore. We start off in small amounts, small enough for no one to really notice. It doesn't change the taste of the food. It's easily digestible."

"But why?"

Mara sets the stone and the vial down. "Nothing on this planet is what it seems," she says with a grin. "The auracite emits some sort of counteracting agent in the body, and when that agent encounters the sickstorm virus, it attacks it, and only it, but only if the body has built up a resistance. It isn't unlike antibodies that swim in your bloodstream."

"You built up a resistance."

Mara nods. "It took years. A few died from ingesting too much. It can cause a violent cancer in the body if the doses aren't measured correctly. A little bit each time."

Calli found a small metal stool in front of a lathe and sat on it. "And that eventually made you immune to the virus?"

Mara nods.

"How come nobody else knows of this?"

"Well, in my experience, it's because we're some of the only people who have tried it. We have a few doctors here who have been monitoring everyone's progress, making sure that everyone's auracite intake is correct."

Calli raises an eyebrow. "But you think you know the real reason."

Again, she nods. "Silsparrow found the cure years ago, selling it as a medicine. And that's the same medicine you're searching for, no?"

At this, Calli nods. "Yes."

"When I figured out I was immune, I shared this knowledge with my people freely. I didn't make them pay for it. And in return, they gave me their loyalty. Since then, we've been feeding people bits of auracite to help them counteract with the sickstorm. You see, we can live in it. Few else on this planet can. And that's the advantage we have over Silsparrow. That's why they will not be able to take this planet, because they haven't mastered it."

"I still don't understand. How is it that the auracite counteracts the virus? It's an ore."

Mara's eyes turn sad, and seem to have a thousand-yard stare. "Well, that's the big mystery, isn't it?"

Before Calli can ask her what she means, Mara stands up and heads for the exit. She stops at the door. "You can take your mask off," she says. "The air is nice up here."

Calli takes off the mask as she leaves, breathing in the stale air of the workshop.

She wonders if she could do something similar with her mother. Give her bits of auracite ore rather than the cure. Would it be too late? Was she too far gone? Mara said that it took her years to build up an immunity, but she never said it was a cure. Calli shakes her head. There's no point in wondering about it.

Now, she wants to ask Mara something.

And if she's refused, then she'll have to take it herself.



#

The smell of spices and shit and piss fill the air as they reach Bandit Town.

"Holy crap," Ende says, waving her hand in front of her face.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" Rian asks as they approach the wall. "Never smelled detritus before?"

The wall that surrounds Bandit Town mirrors the ones that surround every colony on the planet. However, with the lax Silsparrow contingent, the wall itself is covered in moss and graffiti. The shield itself had long since been broken. Some of the metal panels were missing, taken off and probably sold as scrap. Steam rises high from many of the housing pods that line the streets, as many were small shops for food or bathhouses.

The guards don't even bother to stop them as they pass through the gate inside. They take one look at Rian and simply nod at her.

"Well," Aresh says, "I knew you were popular. I didn't realize you were this popular."

"This place never forgets," Rian says, and she leaves it at that.

This place - the bazaar, Rian calls it - runs rampant with people. People gawking for whatever food is presented in front of them, merchants yelling out prices for gas masks and gas mask filters. Some sit up against housing pods, loitering or otherwise homeless. There are some Silsparrow guards about, but they lounge around just as much as everyone else does. Aresh thinks they're more like a gang than actual sentries.

"So where are we headed?" Tai asks, his inquisitive eyes examining every inch of this new settlement.

"I'm curious as well," Ende adds. Aresh can see that she's uncomfortable, that she doesn't belong in a place like this.

To Aresh, much like Everis, this place is home.

"Got some friends I need to pay a visit to first," Rian says.

"Friends?" Ende asks. "Here?"

"You have to make friends here," Rian says, "otherwise you end up in a ditch with a knife in your gut."

He hears the audible gulp that comes from Ende's throat. She does not belong here.

Several people accost them, mostly those trying to sell something to them.

"Cheap filters," a man in a large coat says. "Got 'em in bulk. Some are used but they'll last you hours."

Aresh waves him off, and the man grumbles. They pass by a group of Silsparrow soldiers, some of them wearing bits and pieces of their standard armor rather than the whole thing.

Bandit Town was built long ago during the war. Seeing that it's too far out from some of the other colonies, it was often hit by roving bands of rogue colonists and, in some cases, Silsparrow soldiers who just needed to vent some steam. The place grew into a sort of scavenger town, one that prides itself on bending, breaking, or otherwise just plain ignoring the rules. Silsparrow Command hadn't considered cleaning up the place, instead thinking of it as a frontier town that could survive on its own. This is good for both Command as well as the Silsparrow soldiers that are stationed here: Command doesn't need to clean the place up, and the soldiers can essentially do whatever they want.

That's the feeling that Aresh feels crawling down his back. Danger. Uncertainty.

They come to a large, three story building in the center of the settlement. Here, more Silsparrow soldiers "patrol", and more of the settlers stay away from it.

"A Silsparrow command center?" Ende asks. Aresh notices the sparrow insignia alongside the concrete walls, some of them fading away.

"It's a little different than that," Rian says. She turns to the lot of them. "It's important that you follow my directions. This place... it isn't safe, and these people can smell fear."

"Who?" Ende asks.

"I'm a little curious to that myself," Aresh adds. He doesn't want to pry into Rian's business. Her past is her own, and he has no reason as to why he should try to get her to reveal that. But this is a different circumstance. Calli's, Sera's, and John's lives are on the line.

"Look," Rian says, her voice low. "I was stationed here. Long ago, back when I was with the sparrows. I got into some bad shit. Some bad, weird shit. It's why these people know me."

"You're not answering the question," Ende says, her tone confrontational.

"I don't need to," Rian says, glaring at her. "You're lucky I don't tell them all you're a sparrow yourself."

"Look around you. There's sparrows everywhere." She nods at some of the patrolling guards.

"Trust me," Rian says, turning back towards the building, "these aren't sparrows."

She heads towards the entrance, which once had doors to, but now it looks as though the doors were ripped off, and now a gray tarp acts as the door. She swipes it aside and enters. Aresh allows Ende to enter in next, then he follows.

The pungent smell of vomit and whiskey hits his nose in an instant. The room, which could've been a lobby at one point or another, now has circular tables made out of metal and random, mismatched stools as chairs. The counter in the back is the busiest, where a man and a woman help their customers.

It's a bar. They've turned this place into a bar.

"Want a drink?" Rian asks as she heads for the counter. She manages to push past a few of the customers and gets one of the bartender's attention.

Aresh shrugs at Ende. "Guess we're taking a seat."

They find an empty booth and sit down. The chairs themselves look charred and burnt, like they were pulled out of some sort of wreckage. Where these from the Venerous? As Aresh ponders this, he looks at Ende.

"Y'know," he says, peering down at the scratches (and the one bullet hole) on the table, "you should really keep your eyes forward."

"Why's that?" she asks.

"Because they're all thinking of ways to steal whatever you got."

He didn't need to look around the room to see that they were being watched. Every eye, from the bar to the surrounding walls, were on them. Over the din of laughter and noise, he thinks he can hear whispers, whispers about them.

"Do you trust her? Rian?" Ende asks, turning her eyes to Aresh.

He nods. "I do."

"Where the hell did you find her, anyway? She doesn't exactly seem like the friendly, team-up type."

"Well," he says, "you're right about that. I remember hearing about her during the war, about some of her exploits." And exploits they had been.

She has a nickname, one that isn't well known, but one that was passed around in some of the foxholes during the war years ago.

The Butcher of Tinker Town.

He doesn't reveal this name to Ende.

"I talked to some people," Aresh continues. "Called in some favors, all of them asking the whereabouts of Rian."

"Why her?"

"I know you're young. You weren't part of the war eleven years ago, were you?"

Ende shakes her head. "I was just a teenager back then."

"A lot of people lost a lot. On both sides. As much as Silsparrow likes to say that they treat their employees well, they did a shitty job treating us veterans with any modicum of respect."

"How?" Ende asks. "I mean, wouldn't news of that get out? Somebody would say something."

Aresh smirks. "This place - Kipos - is too far out for anybody to really do anything. Any news that gets to the other colonies is weeks old, too long to really make a difference on the individual level." He sighs. "Plus, we were usually too busy dealing with sickstorms and runners to really complain about fair treatment."

"What did they do?"

"Cut our pay. Our benefits. If we didn't stay with the army, we were given low-paying jobs. I always found it odd how they hired us onto the planet, but they made us pay for the privilege to live here. But I didn't experience that first hand until after the war."

"And then you got off."

He nods. "I got off. Managed to smuggle myself out. Travelled around for a bit." His mind goes to Lucas, to Edward. "I got married. We have a son."

"So why come back here? You left all that behind to return to the place you hate?"

It's for them. He doesn't say this to her, but he thinks it. Before he can answer, Rian sits down in the booth next to Aresh, carrying three drinks in her hand. The two look like normal beers, while Rian's drink looks... green.

"What's that?" Aresh asks before he takes a swig. He hasn't had beer in a long time. It goes down smooth. The beer on Kipos is made from local ingredients, since getting beer from offworld is such a hassling, long process. The beer here ferments differently, as the hops grown on the planet react differently than the ones found on Earth.

Rian just sits there, her arms crossed. "This is a signal," she says, not even looking at the drink. "You order a Treason's Special, that's a code. We'll have company shortly."

"You sure do know a lot about this place," Ende says.

"Yeah," Rian replies, looking around the low-lit room. "I invented the Treason's Special."

Before long, three men approach their table. The two men at the sides look like Silsparrow soldiers, if only because they wear the insignia on their mismatched armor plates. The man in the center, a tall, dark-skinned man with snaking tattoos that cover his face and bald head, stands next to the table, his hands in the pockets of his heavy leather coat.

"Rian Satros," the man says, his voice deep and guttural. "We all thought you were dead."

"Almost was a few times before," she replies. "Too bad for a lot of people."

The man smiles, then eyes Aresh and Ende. "And you've brought friends to my little city."

She points to the both of them. "Aresh Devi and... what was your first name again?"

Ende's face freezes up. Aresh can tell she's nervous.

"Marie," she says, not taking her eyes away from the tall man and his guards.

"That's right," Rian says. "Marie Ende."

"Wonderful," says the man. "You may call me Talon. Bandit Town is my town." His happy facial features slowly descend, his entire tone shifting. "Now what the fuck do you want?"

Rian smirks. "There any way we can take this somewhere a bit quieter? I know you have an office up there. I wonder if you got rid of any of the furniture."

Talon frowns. "We can talk here. I can hear you just fine."

"See," Rian says, "I've got some business I'd like to discuss with you. Private business."

"Then leave your friends here."

"The business concerns them as well."

"Then no deal," Talon says. "Get the fuck out of my bar and my town."

As he turns, Rian laughs. Talon's eyes fall on her.

Aresh watches this all happen. Before, Rian had barely spoken to anyone. If anything, she's an enigma to everyone around her. Now, she seemed like the center of the world, like she has control over the entire situation.

"What is so funny?" Talon asks, his patience seeming to wear thin.

"I thought you took favors seriously," Rian says. She sips the drink, then sighs.

"This is a favor, now. I thought this was a business visit."

"You're making it very difficult for it to be a business visit."

Talon folds his arms. "So you're calling in your favor now?"

She nods. "I'm calling it in."

Talon looks at her, then between the other two. Aresh watches the two guards, wondering if something's going to happen. He could reach for the pistol in the waistband of his pants. It would be one quick motion...

Talon groans. "Fine," he says, turning away, "follow me."

Rian looks at Aresh. "And that, my friend, is how you do it."

Aresh stands from the table, following Rian and Ende towards the back of the room towards the counter. Again, every eye in the room seems to be on them, but the gaze is different. It's dissuaded from being confrontational to being curious.

He doesn't know who this Talon is, but people fear him. That much Aresh can figure out.



A door behind the counter leads them to ascending stairs. At the top, they are led into another room, this one appearing to be a sort of office, mixed in with a penthouse.

Or, at least, the Kipos version of a penthouse.

Large, glass windows cover one side of the wall. The entire town could be seen through here. All around them is furniture, but damaged, burned, shot up furniture. Aresh isn't surprised to see it all. When a leader takes power, it's only a matter of time before they get all the best stuff. Chairs and couches surround a circular table, not unlike the ones in the bar. In one corner of the room sits a desk, and behind that a bookcase. The bookcase is filled with various forms of firearms and weaponry. Aresh spots an age-old revolver, a knife-knuckle combo, and a large rifle with a very big scope.

"Take a seat," Talon says, gesturing to the center of the room. "Let's get this over with."

He dismisses the two Silsparrow bodyguards and sends them on their way. Talon heads over to the old desk, reaches behind it, and pulls out a bottle of amber liquid and four mismatched glasses.

"Used to be you had to bribe the right employees to get this kind of whiskey," he says, plopping down on one of the chairs at the table. He unscrews the cap on the bottle and begins to pour. "Now all you need to do is ask for it. If you're me, anyway."

He passes around the four glasses. Aresh sniffs the liquid, then recoils. It's been a long time since he's had whiskey.

Too long.

"Drink," Talon says, looking at Aresh. He must've seen his apprehension. "It's rude if you don't. I don't waste this on just anybody."

Aresh knocks the drink back, feels the cool heat tickle his throat, then warms his chest. He grimaces at the taste.

The sound of glasses clinking on the table seems to echo in the room. Talon sighs in contentment, then pours himself another drink.

"So," he says, "Rian. You need a favor."

Rian pushes her glass forward, and Talon refills it.

"That I do."

"I'm wondering why you came ol' Talon. Pretty sure a lot of people in this town owe you favors."

"Yes," Rian says. She knocks back the drink. "But I like to think we're friends, Talon. I wanted to give you the first opportunity to take it."

"Friends?" Talon scoffs. "Yeah, we're good friends. You left me this shithole to contend with."

Aresh watches patiently, the two of them like opponents in a boxing ring swinging practice punches. He wonders when they'll fight for real.

"What?" Rian says. She gestures to the window, and to the town outside it. "This place isn't so bad. You're the boss around here, right? Nobody bothers you, be they Silsparrow or raider."

"Things have changed since you left," Talon says. "I haven't seen any raiders in my camp for a while now. It's getting some people nervous. My guards, in particular, are getting nervous that there's an attack coming."

"What do you think that could mean?" Aresh asks.

Rian shoots him a look, one that says Just keep quiet. Talon, however, doesn't seem to mind.

He shrugs. "You saw the video feed, right? The Crimson Witch is making moves, outing this auracite business."

The Crimson Witch. Mara's nome de gaire during the war. Aresh seems to remember her hating that name.

"I hear rumors that people are beginning to come from all over to get their hands on it, though this is the first time that I've heard of it."

"That's why we're here," Rian says. "For the auracite."

Talon laughs. "The auracite? That's why you're out here? For money?" He laughs again. "It makes sense actually, considering the company you're now keeping."

Aresh raises an eyebrow.

Talon looks at him. "Come now. You don't think I'd recognize the great Aresh Devi? You are a modest man, if you thought that."

"I..." Aresh starts, but he finds he can't finish his thought.

"You and the Crimson Witch were heroes not long ago, no? My men, the ones that fought long ago, once talked a great deal about you two. And William Hayford.

Will.

"We were different people back then."

Talon leans forward. "Can I tell you a secret? We carry many identities throughout our life. We like to think that when we take up another, the old identity dies. It doesn't. It's there with you. Whatever you are now, there's a part of you that will be the war hero. The one who lives on the battlefield."

We aren't heroes. In his mind, the three of them were far from it. He, Mara, and William were... just soldiers. Just people doing their job. They fought, watched their friends die, watched others die. It isn't something that Aresh likes to think of as heroic. War isn't something that romanticism can make better. There will always be heroes in war, but most of those heroes end up dead.

Like William.

"I think it evidence enough, since you're here in front of me now." He turns to Ende, who sits quietly, watching the conversation with intense eyes. "Speaking of identities, who might you be?"

"I thought I told you my name," Ende says.

"No," Talon replies. "Who are you?"

She doesn't respond.

Talon smirks. "You are Silsparrow, are you not? I can tell by your eyes. They're disciplined. Hard." He turns to Rian. "I didn't know you were back with them."

Rian shakes her head. "I'm not. And neither is she. Well, anymore, anyway."

Talon shakes his head. "Actually, I don't think I'd like to know details. Part of the reason I've survived this long in this position is that I've learned when not to ask."

"And what position is that?" Ende asks.

"Ah," Talon replies, "the little sparrow finds her voice! I'm the mayor of Bandit Town."

"Hard to believe that a place like this would have any sort of government."

He smiles. "This isn't a government, little sparrow. This is a frontier town, and frontier towns have no leadership. They have people like me who run the show and tell people what to do. If they don't do it, they don't like in a frontier town anymore."

"So, you're a thug."

He shrugs. "I've been called worse, I suppose. That is a fair assessment." He looks to Rian. "I inherited the job. From her."

Aresh and Ende share the same glance as they look at Rian.

"You were the mayor here?" Ende asks.

She shrugs. "That was a long time ago. After the war, I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself. I made some... interesting decisions."

"And interesting it was," Talon adds. "Those were some good years."

"As much as I love shooting the shit with you, Talon," Rian says, "we really need to talk about that favor."

"Of course, What is this favor?"

"You like money, right?"

"I very much do love money."

"And you know about the auracite?"

He smirks. "Don't tell me that you believe in all of that bullshit that the Witch was spouting off. You aren't the prospecting type."

Aresh leans forward in his chair. "It's real. Trust me." Already, he knows that was a dumb thing to say.

Talon frowns. "Trust you? I've just met you, friend. And I don't care what your reputation is. I don't trust newcomers."

Frustrated, Aresh reaches into his pocket and pulls out the small metal container. He places it on the table.

"Open it," he says. "You want proof, right?" He folds his arms, waiting for Talon to make a move. To do something.

The mayor of Bandit Town looks at him incredulously, then scoffs, like he can't believe he's about to entertain the idea that auracite exists. He picks up the tiny container and opens it, then upends it. The piece of auracite, the same one that Tai used to find the location of auracite on the Venerous, falls into Talon's palm. It glows a faint yellow in between the cracks of the black ore.

"This," he says, staring at the piece inquisitively, "is what all the commotion is about? This little bit of rock?"

"That little bit of rock is worth a lot of money." Aresh knows this. He took that tiny sliver from his time on Kipos during the war. Once he figured out it was valuable, a friend of his determined its value. "Around one hundred thousand, depending on your preference of currency."

Talon laughs. "One hundred thousand? For this? I could crush this in my hands."

"I'd advise against that," Rian says. "Give the piece back to my friend here."

Talon grins, then does as he's told. He puts the sliver back in the container and hands it back to Aresh. "I see your bossiness hasn't changed a bit." He leans back in his chair now, bringing his arms behind his head. "So. You want help finding this auracite that the Witch has hidden?"

"That's part of it," Aresh says. "Mara captured a few of our friends. We're planning on rescuing them, but, as you can see, there's only three of us."

He doesn't bother mentioning Nevaire, Cairn, and Tai outside the town's walls. Better to keep that hidden until he agrees.

"Then your friends are most likely gone," Talon says. "Maybe not dead, but surely Mara has found some way to recruit them to her little cause."

What cause? In all the years that Aresh knew her, she never seemed like the ambitious type. She was a soldier. Through and through. She did everything by the book, and followed her orders to the letter. He's wondered this ever since she broadcasted her message out to the world, to the galaxies at large.

What could she want?

"In any case, it's too risky," Talon continues. "Mara and her people know the lay of the land better than anybody on this planet. Even the sparrows have had a hard time figuring out where they operate." He looks to Ende and gives her a toothy grin. "Isn't that right, little sparrow?"

Ende frowns. "Unfortunately, he's right. Silsparrow has all but given itself over to its colonies. Many of us... many of them don't know the outlying areas. It's been harder for them to get good readouts and telemetry with the raiders using hit-and-run tactics against them."

"Exactly," Talon says. "You wouldn't go exploring into runner territory, knowing full well that the creatures know their home like the back of their claw."

"Look," Rian says. "There's a lot of money riding in on this. We managed to get a scan of the areas ahead a few days back. There are pockets of auracite everywhere, and I don't mean just that tiny bit you saw. I'm talking stones. Auracite the size of boulders."

Talon rubs his unshaven chin, then clicks his tongue. "I do like shiny, large things. And money."

"That's right," Rian adds. "Mara and her people are probably just sitting on all of it right now. If she made that call to arms, she would have access to the auracite, right?"

Talon nods, seemingly understanding. "So she would know where all the deposits are at."

"Absolutely."

Talon smiles. "I like this," he says. "It's a rather shitty plan, and I'm betting that a lot of people are going to die. But what the hell!" He stands up, extending his arms.

"Nobody lives forever, right?" He extends a hand out to Rian. "Let's go treasure hunting, yeah?"



"Calli, Sera," John says. "I think we need to get out of here."

Calli met up with the two shortly after leaving the workshop in the base. She found them back in the motor pool mess hall, sitting in the farthest corner.

Farid is nowhere to be seen. This is good.

"What do you mean?" Sera asks, her voice a close whisper. Each of them have a tray of food in front of them, but nobody is eating, save for Sera's people.

"It isn't safe here," he says, his voice quiet as well. "You saw what happened down in the yard. They're immune to the sickstorms."

Calli nods. "I don't like it either."

"Could be that we accidentally get exposed to the stuff," John adds. "Besides, we've been here too long. We need to find Aresh and the others."

"How do you propose we do that?" Sera asks. She looks around the room, probably to see if anybody's watching. "It isn't as though they'll just let us go."

"That's just it," John says. "They haven't said why they're holding us yet. But they aren't keeping us locked up, so there's also a reason we're free to roam the base."

Because of me, Calli thinks. Because of who my father was to Mara.

"I don't know what they want to do with us," John continues, "but I don't want to be around when they figure that out."

Calli can't seem to understand any of this. Why would Mara intentionally call for prospectors to venture out to find auracite? What was the goal for it all? Why, if she wanted people to find the ore, did she intend on capturing them?

Why?

She asks as much to her friends.

They look as confused as she.

"It doesn't make sense," Sera says, her eyes darting around the room in case anybody's listening.

"We need to leave," John adds, his voice also a whisper. "Let me figure something out. I'm gonna try to get you two out of here."

They leave the table, if only to get them far enough away from each other so nobody would figure out what was happening.

"What do you think he's gonna do?" Sera asks as they leave the cafeteria. They walk into a corridor and follow it to the yard.

"No idea," Calli says as she shuts the heavy door behind her. "I'm worried about the others."

They climb the stairs up to the ramparts. Calli breathes in the clear air. From this height, it's crisp and cool. The morning sun sits lazily in the sky.

"Me too," Sera says, leaning on the railing and looking down. She sighs, then slumps her shoulders. "How is it we ended up here?"

Calli considers her question for a moment. Days ago, she and Sera were working to make enough money to live, let alone set some aside for Diana's cure. Now, they're here.

"It's been... odd these last few days. It's like nothing I've ever thought would happen to me. To us."

"Yeah," Sera says, her voice low. "I know we said we'd leave Belhall one day but..."

"Not like this," Calli answers for her. "I know what you mean."

"Runners," Sera says, laughing. "We ran into runners and survived."

Calli smiles. We have done amazing things, haven't we? They scaled up the Belhall wall, scaled down it, explored a ship-

Killed a man.

Calli tries to shake the feeling from her, from her mind, her stomach. But all she can hear now is the gunshot. It exploded from her gun, sailing through the air and killing that man.

Self-defense, self-defense, it was self-defense.

"How do you think the others are doing?" Sera asks, and Calli manages to shove the memory away. It'll come back. She knows this.

Something like that - like killing - it doesn't go away. Ever.

"I don't know," she says. "We've barely known these people for a few days."

"Rian's with them," Sera answers for her. "They'll be okay."

"I guess so."

Sera leans up from the railing, standing straight up. She continues to look out into the distance, as if there's something out there that Calli can't see. She tries to follow her line of sight, but instead sees nothing but trees.

"Can I ask you something?" Sera says. Her voice sounds... uncomfortable, as if this conversation is hard for her.

Calli arches an eyebrow. "Of course," she says. "What is it?"

Sera opens her mouth for a moment. Calli expects the words to come pouring out, but her mouth closes again. "It's just," Sera says after a moment, "your mom."

Ah. "Yeah?"

"And your dad."

"What about them?" She realizes that her tone sounded confrontational. "Sorry."

Sera shakes her head, the apology accepted.

"This is probably difficult for you. But Aresh, Mara... these people know your father, maybe your mother too."

Calli does find it a bit odd, now that she thinks about it. Almost everywhere she's gone since leaving Belhall, she's run into someone that's heard of William or Diana Hayford.

The Hayford name lives strong on Kipos, she thinks to herself, thinking it a bleak joke. Look where that got me.

"How... are you taking it?" Sera asks.

The question sounds odd to her, as if it has an impossible answer. How do I feel about it? She hasn't taken much time to reflect on it since leaving. They'd been too busy running from carnivorous reptiles and rummaging through old, stripped out warships.

"I... don't know." Calli's words sound stupid to her. She should have some sort of idea or clue as to how she feels. She wishes, in that moment, that she had control over her own thoughts. But she doesn't. There should be a million different thoughts crisscrossing throughout the neurons in her brain, but all her mind seems to be on is the moment.

The moment. Feeling. Seeing. All her life, she's been hiding behind a giant wall, trapped in a place she's never quite thought of as home. Even when she was young, she's always felt that.

And she took those feelings out on her mother.

She still remembers that day. Eating breakfast, leaving for school. She remembers seeing the clear sky, thinking that everything - everything - would never change. That same sky. The same wall. The same thing on the same planet. Every day.

Then it did.

You're safe. You're going to be okay.

Her mother's words echo in her ears, and Calli hears them as clear as that day a year and a half ago. The old Calli was dead. She died in that sickstorm. The bitterness was gone, filled only with regret. And purpose.

I need to save Mom.

And the only way to do that was with auracite.

"Calli," Sera says, her voice seeming to intrude on Calli's thoughts. The voice is so intrusive that it breaks Calli's reverie, and she remembers where she is.

Far from home.

And no closer to curing her mother as she had been when she left.

"We need to get auracite," Calli says. "We have to."

Sera nods. "I know. I really hope John is working on that."

Footsteps echo up the stairs. Calli turns around to see Mara, her gait a cautious one as she approaches.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she says, her voice seeming to never drop its authority, even in genuine concern.

When neither Calli or Sera say anything, Mara continues.

"Calli, can I speak to you a moment? It's... private."

At first, Calli wants to refuse. What you can say to me you can say to Sera. But Sera puts a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay," Sera says. "I'll be around."

Calli nods at her. "Okay."

After Sera begins her descent down the stairs, Mara takes her place. The comfort that Calli had when Sera stood next to her was gone now, replaced with an odd sense of wonder and dread.

What could she want?

"Do you know why I sent that signal? The one revealing auracite?"

Calli looks up at her, then shakes her head. "No."

"Care to take a guess?"

When Calli doesn't speak, Mara laughs to herself.

"There was a reason that my people captured you, a reason why I sent out the call for people to leave their homes and search out the auracite." Her smiles fades, her tone... lowering. Calli sees it. "Now that I think on it, I wonder if I was being selfish."

Her words ponder Calli. The way she says them... if feels as though Calli isn't part of the conversation anymore. Like Mara has begun to speak inwardly, reflecting on all that she's done.

She turns to Calli. "We're fighting a war out here," she says. "A war not unlike the one that we fought eleven years ago. The sides may not have changed, but the players have. I sent out that signal to find new players. To bring them here, into the wilds of Kipos. Let them see for themselves what it is we fight for."

Calli herself leans on the railing. "And what is it you fight for?"

Mara's eyes lower. "Freedom. Many of the people here fought in that war a long time ago, and now, even some of their children have devoted themselves to the effort. They all want the same thing."

"Then why not just leave this place?" Calli asks. "Get off Kipos and tell your story. Let the other colonies and worlds know what Silsparrow has done to you."

She shakes her head. "That is an option, but it's not one that we-" She stops, looking down into the yard where her people do their daily routine. "It's not one that they want. They want Kipos to be their home. They don't want their home to be owned by Silsparrow, or anybody for that matter."

"Why?" She tries to wrap her head around it. "I mean, they're building homes. Infrastructure. Setting up farms and water purifiers. They can make this place a home."

She shakes her head. "It's much more complicated than that. Yes, we'd have all of those things. But they wouldn't truly be ours, would it. All would be covered with the navy sparrow."

Would that be so bad? Calli isn't - or hasn't been - the biggest fan of Silsparrow, but what they're doing couldn't be that bad.

Could it?

"When humanity sent out their first ships to find new homes, we were given another chance. To find roots, build homes. Become human. We can't do that if we can't call this place our own."

Calli tries to think of something to say, something she can add to the conversation. But the words fail her.

"I don't expect you to understand. To a lot of people, I'm sure we look like a bunch of radicalized terrorists. I'll admit that our practices haven't been the safest for innocent people, but... we don't have a choice. It's for the greater good of this place. Look around you."

Calli does so, though she doesn't quite see what it is that's there to look at. There's the tops of the trees, the far off mountains. The sky.

"This place is a genesis."

"It's a deathtrap." The words escape her lips before she can stop herself from saying them. She turns her eyes to Mara. A reflex, really, to see her expression. It doesn't change.

"That's fair," Mara says. "This place has done you wrong. I understand that. I too didn't understand it's significance when I was in the army. I would never say that I was happy when I landed here. It seemed like another frontier planet, one that was just like all the others." She smiles. "That will change. With time."

"I wanted to ask you something," Calli says, tired of this talk. "We'd like to leave. My friends and me. We'd like to go. We came out here for auracite, but now..."



Now, she thinks for a moment. Does she turn back? Her friends are still out there, still trying to survive in a place that could kill them. Her mother still lies in a hospital bed. Dying.

But there's nothing she can do here. Nothing that Mara is offering her. Things that she had asked for in her message... it's a lie. A lie to get people to join her cause. Calli wants no part of this, no part of war.

She's done enough killing for one lifetime.

"Now you feel like you've wasted a trip," Mara says. Calli is surprised that there's no bitterness in her voice, no disappointment. "I understand." She faces Calli again, her features stern and tight. "I'm sorry at what you had to go through before you got here. It must've been hard. For someone as young as you. You may leave, if you wish."

"Thank you," Calli says. She can hear the relief in her own voice.

"I only ask one thing from you," Mara says after a moment.

There's always a catch. Part of her expects this. It was inevitable that Mara would ask her something, anything for taking her in. Charity on Kipos doesn't come free. It rarely comes at all.

"What?" Calli asks, her voice wary. She wonders if she should've asked at all, if she should've just walked away.

"Come with me. There's something I'd like to show you." Sera begins to walk away, as if she thinks that Calli is simply going to follow her.

"And if I refuse?"

Mara stops, but doesn't turn around at first. "I'll order your friends put into lockdown." Her voice sounds... different. Far away. As if a different, colder Mara just

took the place of the one Calli was just talking to. "They don't move an inch without my say so."

At first, Calli tries to say something. To come up with something to change her mind, something to change everything.

Instead, she says "Where are we going?"

Mara leads her along.

#

Nevaire doesn't like this setup. Not one bit.

Rian brought them to their "crew" shortly before sunset. Before then, he, Cairn, and the kid were sitting on their asses, doing nothing that would get them any closer to Mara or the auracite.

He felt like he was wasting his time.

Now, he feels as though he's wasting his life.

"You didn't tell me he was involved," Nevaire says to Rian as they all stand in Talon's office.

Mikhail "Talon" Ken. Wanted for multiple charges, including smuggling, theft, bribery, and countless others that Neviare remembers seeing in the databases back at the Belhall headquarters.

"And you didn't tell me that he was involved," Talon says, a finger pointing between both Rian and Nevaire.

"Seems we've both been gripped," Nevaire says.

"Seems so."

Rian stands between the two and she pushes them back slightly. "Children, that's not how we say hello to one another."

"I think I'm starting to regret this deal," Talon says to himself, rubbing his now sweaty forehead.

"Same here, buddy," Nevaire says. To Rian, he says "We don't need him. We can do this ourselves."

The others are in the room, but the room has divided itself: Aresh, Talon, Rian, and Tai on one side, while he, Ende, and Cairn stand on the other. Their weapons were taken from them at the door to the office, so it wasn't like they could really do anything at this point.

But Talon hadn't killed them yet. So that was something.

"He is a sparrow," Talon says, his voice accusatory.

"Former," Cairn corrects, edging toward to stand in front of Nevaire. Nevaire gingerly pushes him aside.

"We aren't with them anymore," he says.

"I can't trust that," Talon replies.

"But you can trust me," Rian interjects. "Right?"

"That was before you brought sparrows to me!"

"Talon," she says, putting a hand on his shoulder. "If you remember correctly, I was a sparrow once. A pretty damn good one." Quietly, she says "People really like to remind me of that. But that all changed, didn't it? We did good work, didn't we?"

Nevaire watches, folding his arms across his chest. It wasn't that he cares what sort of work that Talon and Rian did in the past, but he was curious.

"It's too convenient," Talon says. "You say they defected recently? Give me proof."

Rian shakes her head. "I can't prove that. And I don't think anybody's going to break into Silsparrow systems to see that."

Tai clears his throat. "Actually," he says, pressing the screen of his newly charged wrist computer, "I just did."

Nevaire raises an eyebrow. Talon walks over to the kid and looks over his shoulder.

"See?" Tai says, raising his wrist higher.

Talon squints his eyes for a moment, then pulls out a small pair of glasses and puts them on.

He smiles.

"Well, now," he says, his voice menacingly low. Aresh copies him.

"Uh, Tai," he says.

"Yeah, boss," the kid says.

"You just brought up their profiles."

Kid must've found Ende and Cairn, too.

"Yeah?" Tai says.

"It says 'wanted' on them."

"And?"

Aresh sighs. "I don't think showing a crime lord the bounties on the heads of the people in the room with him is a good idea."

Tai looks at him. "I don't understand."

Nevaire really wishes he had his gun on him right now.

"What we have here is a standoff," Talon says, his grin wide across his face. "You three..." He points to Nevaire, Cairn, and Ende. "...are wanted. And by the looks of it," he says, stepping over Tai's shoulder again to get a look at the screen, "you're worth quite a bit of money. What did you do, may I ask, to royally fuck the sparrows?"

Nevaire frowns. "We left." Talon waits for him to finish. "We just... up and left our posts. Left everything."

Ende nods in agreement. Cairn simply stands by, watching Talon like a clawhawk.

"We left because we weren't getting what was ours," Nevaire continues. "It all went to Silsparrow." To fucking Dannowitz. "My people weren't getting paid for thankless goddamn work. We all hate this fucking planet. I'm sick and tired of seeing jungle every day I wake up. I could get you a long list of complaints, if you'd like."

Talon smiles as he listens, his arms folded. He leans against the couch. "Fascinating," he says. "Truly, truly fascinating." He turns to Rian. "You really found yourself quite the crew, eh?"

She shrugs. "We didn't exactly 'find' them."

"So," Nevaire says, hoping to speed things along, "are we doing this?" He still isn't sure exactly what 'this' is. He doesn't know what kind of deal that Rian proposed... or what she agreed to give them in return.

If she fucked him over...

Talon thinks about it for a moment. He puts his finger to his lips like he's some genius deep in thought. Nevaire's annoyed enough as it is, but this just makes him more frustrated.

"Are we," he repeats, his voice forcing its way through gritting teeth, "doing this?"

The grin never leaves Talon's face.

"I like this deal," he says. "There's a certain flair for danger in it." He steps towards the window, towards the setting sun. "Yes. We shall do this. You'll forgive me if I don't shake your hand, Captain. I'm quite afraid you'll rip it off."

#

Calli is led outside of the base. She follows Mara for over an hour through the jungle. Swats away another bug - one the size of your average pebble - from her neck. The ruby-colored thing falls to the ground, dead.

Mara says nothing to her the whole trip. She led her outside of the base - past both Sera and John. Calli told them "I'll be back," but even she doesn't know if that's true.

She misses home.

She remembers hating Belhall. Hating everything about it. The housing pods. The food. The wall. The people.

The day her mother sacrificed herself so Calli wouldn't inhale the sickstorm fumes was the day that she actually started giving a damn.

And it was the day she actually started to take stock of everything. Where she was in life. Who she was.

Right now, she isn't sure who she is.

She hasn't had time to think of that since Mara's broadcast. Since then, her mind's been on overdrive, with one thing in its source: the yellow-black ore that was the center of Mara's message. The auracite. That's the goal, isn't it? To find the auracite and trade it for the cure. How many more days would it take for the cure to reach Belhall? Would she even make it in time? She was in the middle of nowhere, really.

Would her mother survive this?

Would I?

The trees surround her. Heat assaults her, though she can feel the beginnings of cool air kissing her skin.

"Where are we going?" she asks. She's asked this several times during the journey. Mara hasn't answered. She just keeps walking.

I could run, she thinks. I know my way back. I could just...

"We're here."

Calli's eyes flit up. Mara stands ahead, looking down a small pit in front of her. Calli slowly approaches, making sure she's heard as she stands next to Mara.

"What is it?" she asks.

Cut into the ground is a small, metal hatch, covered in vine and leaf. The hatch is rusted, its edges and hinges brown and red rather than steel and gray.

"It's a memory," Mara says quietly. She steps onto the hatch and kneels on top of it, brushing aside dirt and stone. "One that we never hoped would come true."

Calli realizes that she's talking to herself. Again. This time, however, she isn't sure as to what she's talking about.

"What do you mean?" She's tired of riddles now, tired of waiting. Of wasting her time.

"This," Mara says, climbing out from the hatch hole, "is something that I... that myself and your father, found."

Calli looks down at the hatch. "You found this? On the planet?"

"It was an old Silsparrow supply post. Meant only for emergencies. It was well hidden when we found it, long ago."

"What were you doing out here?"

Mara sighs. "Running. Hiding. The war did a lot of things to many people. Including us."

"Was Aresh with you?"

Mara smirks. "No. No, he was... separated from us for a time. It was just William and I here. We had no food, no water or shelter. This place... it was a godsend." She kneels onto her haunches. "At least, we thought it was. For days we stayed here, deep in that hatch. It was all we could do. The sickstorms... that's when they started appearing. They were raging, swelling. It was the only shelter we could find."

Calli shakes her head. "Why did you bring me here? If this is just a supply cache-"

"Over the years, it's become more than that. It's something... different." Mara rises, slowly at first. "I want you to go in there."

It takes her a moment to process what Mara asks. "You want me to what?"



"You asked me what it would take for you to get what you want," Mara says, her tone serious. No longer is she the leader who took them in, fed them, gave them a place to stay.

Now, she's someone different.

"This is what it'll take," Mara says. "If you come out of there, I'll give you and your friends enough supplies and auracite. We'll even help you find your other friends."

"If I come out of there? What do you mean by that?" It's a stupid question, really. She thinks it over in her head. It'll be dangerous.

"Yes," Mara says rather coldly.

"What's down there?"

At first, she hesitates. It's as if she's trying to figure out the right words to tell her.

"It's as I said." She steps aside, showing Calli the entire shaft. "A memory. Maybe even a future, should things not go the way they should in the war against Silsparrow."

A future? Is she insane? Calli thinks that she could be. It's an odd request, if anything. She wonders what could be down there. She thinks of the runners. She thinks of their teeth, and how they would tear her apart in a second.

"You'll need this," Mara says. She reaches in her holster and pulls out her pistol, offering Calli the weapon by the handle.

No.

No, not that.

The gunshot. It rings in her ears just as it did a few days ago. It echoes into her brain, pinging and ricocheting around.

"I can't take that," she says, although it doesn't feel as though they're her words.

"You have to," Mara says. "Or you'll die." When Calli doesn't move, Mara insists. "There are things I've learned about Kipos over the years, things that have kept me alive." She extends the weapon again. "Your father said the same thing."

Calli looks at her with pleading eyes. Don't make me take that. The weapon looks heavy in Mara's hands. Impossible to hold. A destructive force captured in a small container. Her hands shake, the sweat already forming on her fingertips. She reaches out, knowing full well that this is a mistake. Her hands find the handle, find the trigger guard. She finds it strange how fitting the weapon feels in her hand. It feels... comfortable.

"What did my father say?" she asks, looking at the metal weapon in her hand.

"I'll tell you if you return," Mara says.

"Why are you doing this?"

Mara lowers herself down into the small pit and unlocks the hatch.

"Kipos is a planet for humankind. A new type of humankind. I'm just making sure that the right people make it on this place." Before she opens the hatch, she looks to Calli. "You may want to use your gas mask."

As Calli puts on the device, Mara opens the hatch, and a rush of air blasts Calli's skin. It's warm to the touch.

"Survival is a test. And this is yours, Calli Hayford. Inside this bunker is a chunk of auracite. If you can get it, you get to keep it. That bit alone should be enough to pay for a cure."

Mara starts to walk away, saying "I'll return in an hour. Whether it's to retrieve your corpse or you is up to you."

Before Calli can say anything else, Mara disappears into the trees. Gone, completely. All Calli hears now is the call of birds and the crunch of sticks. The jungle lives, and it lives around her. She considers the hole of the hatch, seeing nothing but darkness.

Auracite. It's here.

She hesitates for a moment. She told herself she'd do anything for this, right? Anything at all. She needed the strength, and she needed to find it now. It doesn't matter how she feels. Her mother is dying and needs her. That's what she tells herself, anyway. It doesn't matter.

She steps up to the hatch, seeing a ladder leading into the darkness. The gas mask has a small light attached near the top. She turns it on, and the light shows that the floor inside the hatch is only a few meters down. She climbs down the ladder, slowly.

At first, she hears nothing but dull wind. Sometimes, when sickstorms would hit Belhall, the surrounding areas outside the shield wall would have residue from the diseased wind. It would give off a dull sound, like moaning wind. That's what she hears now. It touches her skin, at first feeling cool, but suddenly feeling warm. Inside her mask, the air is stale and hard to breath in. Around her is concrete in a circular fashion. A corridor leading down is in front of her, tubular in shape. There's nothing but darkness down there.

At first, she doesn't tell her legs to move. They just do. It's an odd sensation for her, one that she finds to be scary. I'm doing this I'm doing this I can't believe I'm doing this.

Her footsteps echo on the concrete ground. They echo off of the pipes that run the length of the ceiling, heading deeper and deeper inside the bunker. Calli keeps moving, the gun in her hand. She clicks off the safety, knowing full well she'll have to use it at one point.

She hopes she doesn't have to.

She reaches the bottom of the corridor, where it continues straight. Her flashlight gives her a good look into the corridor. Debris, things such as computers and chairs, tables and tools, have been tossed about the corridor as if a tornado bumbled its way through here.

Nobody knows about this place. She remembers Mara's words. So then, that would also mean that nobody would find her if she didn't come out.

There's a room to her right. She pokes her head inside and sees beds, not unlike the ones found in a hospital. Gurneys, the length of the average human body, have either been left untouched or thrown onto the floor. Medical tools are on the floor, and Calli avoids stepping on them as she passes the room.

What is this place? She stops to wonder for a moment, though the pounding in her heart tells her to keep moving. Get the auracite now, wonder about this place later.

The hallway ends at a wall, telling her to continue either left or right. A sign at the end reads LEFT: SURGERY, RIGHT: RESEARCH.

Research? Next to the sign is the symbol of the navy sparrow. Silsparrow. This is their facility? What could they be researching here?

She decides to go right, heading down the new corridor. At the end is a sliding door. With the power out, it doesn't budge, but there is a small crack in it. Calli peeks

through the crack, but the darkness on the other side doesn't allow her to see anything. She holsters the pistol and grabs the door with both hands, pulling them apart. At first, the doors don't budge, resisting her every time she tries and tries again. As she pulls, she notices a small device along the side of the door, reminiscent of a card reader.

This place was secure. They kept it locked. It only made sense. A research facility would need precautions like this.

But what were they researching?

The doors creak open, and Calli manages to squeeze herself through. The old doors stay in place, and she feels relieved knowing that she has an escape route. She pulls out the pistol again and scans the room.

The light from her mask shows her a room filled with technology. Old technology. She sees old computers that hadn't been used for ten years. They sure look it, too. The dust on every screen has to be centimeters thick. Just to test it, she wipes her fingers on the screen. She rubs the dust between her fingers.

What went on here?

A noise, the clanging of metal-on-concrete, sounds out, and Calli nearly drops to the floor. She whips her head around, the flashlight from the mask looking like a cone of vision. The pistol is in her hand, though she doesn't recall pulling it from her waistband. It's just there. She holds it up, aiming in the direction of the noise. She stays like this for minutes, though to her it feels like hours. All she hears now is her own breathing, her own fear.

It's so loud.

Finally, she moves, if only to lower the weapon. Sweat starts to form on her forehead, and she wipes it away with her sleeve.

That's the only way forward. She sees the next corridor, the one where the sound came from. I have to keep moving.

After finally getting her bearings, she raises her weapon again and begins to enter the corridor. To her, the sound could've come from anywhere, so she aims her weapon wildly, erratically. The corridor she enters is darker than the last one, and leads further down. Her fear manifests in her throat, threatening to come out and choke her. She swallows it down, keeping it where it belongs.

Make this quick, make this quick.

She follows the corridor down, keeping her aim straight. No noises come from below, but anything could be down there. As she reaches the bottom and looks about the room, she notices that it looks like the one she came from: nothing but computers and large machines and dust. The machines look tubular in nature, as if something like a ball could fit inside of it, like they're large beakers for scientific tests.

Computer screens along the wall are cracked. Probably used to show data, she thinks. Other than the machinery, nothing seems to be in the room.

And then she sees it.

On a desk in the far corner of the room is a glass container. The soft yellow glow gave it away. Inside the container is a chunk of auracite no bigger than Calli's fist.

How did Mara know this was down here?

Slowly, cautiously, she approaches the desk, taking extra care not to disturb anything. After all, she doesn't want anything else to know that she's here. She takes hold

of the container, examining it. It's as though the glass hasn't been disturbed in however long it's been there. Despite the fear in the back of her mind, Calli manages to smile.

She's found it. The one thing she's been searching for glows in her hands.

Auracite.

Something screeches, piercing her sudden joy. Calli turns around, at first seeing nothing. The screech returns, but this time, it's gurgled, as if whatever is making the noise is... dying.

On the floor, underneath one of the desks is a large lump.

The lump moves. At first, slowly. Calli can hear it slathering, hearing it grumble as it tries to get to its feet. She shines the light onto it, but desks and devices block her view, so she can only see parts of it.

She sees purple, blotched skin.

No, not skin. The material looks too rough, too mottled to be skin.

It looks more like scales.

Calli begins to move toward the corridor from which she came from. She puts the container in the pack that Mara gave her and begins to climb the corridor up, just as the lump gets to its feet. A diseased, coughing screech cries out again.

Then, there's a second.

Then a third.

Calli runs, reaching the semi-closed door she forced open. She manages to squeeze herself through. Suddenly, she feels the pack snap from its strap, falling behind the door. The screeches get louder, and she hears moving feet.

Large, scraping claws against the concrete floor.

She reaches over to the other side of the door, trying to grab the pack. She does, and pulls it back through the door.

When she turns back around, she comes face to face with a runner.

She doesn't hesitate, bringing the pistol up and firing into the creature's neck as it, almost drunkenly, tries to snap at her. She pulls the trigger three times before it falls backwards onto the floor. As it twitches and finally dies, she gets a good look at the creature bathing in its own blood. Bits of purple stone seem to be growing out of it in spots, almost as if the creature has boils. The stones, almost crystalline in design appear... yellow.

Almost like auracite.

Deciding not to stick around long enough to run into more, Calli grips the pistol and the pack with all she has, then runs for the corridor leading to the hatch. As she reaches the ladder, she climbs up it and pushes on the hatch.

It doesn't budge.

She bangs on it with the butt of her pistol.

"Hey," she calls out, hoping to God that Mara is on the other side. "Hey, open up!"

Clang clang clang.

Between the beats, she hears more screeching, the screams of the runners piercing the darkness.

The hatch opens and a hand reaches in. Calli, now blinded by flashlights, reaches for the hand and feels something pulling her up. As she is pulled out from the hatch and



lands on the grassy ground, the hatch behind her closes with a loud clang. She hears the snap of the locks as she pulls off her mask.

Mara stands on top of the hatch, a pistol in her hands. She looks to Calli, her serious face asking if she completed her mission.

Slowly, Calli hands her the pack. Mara takes it and looks inside. She nods.

"Well done," she says, handing the pack back to her. "You've earned it."

"Why are there runners down there?" she asks.

"For a long time," Mara begins, "we didn't know how to deal with them, other than shooting them. We set up traps, and this was one of them. We had no use for the facility itself, so we used it to trap any runners that fell inside."

"They," Calli says, trying to find her words, "they had auracite growing on them."

Mara nods. She starts to walk away. "I'm heading back towards the base. You need a meal and rest."

Before Calli can ask her anymore about the auracite-ridden runners, Mara says, "You've got blood on you."

Calli looks down at her formally gray shirt.

It was covered in red.

The path back to Home is a quiet one. Calli doesn't say anything. Mara doesn't mind. She's in her own mind now.

She's ready. She can do this. Your daughter, William... she's a survivor, like you.

The thoughts cross her mind as she walks. She needs everybody she can in this fight. Silsparrow... their reach is too large, too long in the galaxy for them to fight back and stand a chance. If anything, she wants to make it so everyone on the planet will reject them, will fight them. She needs soldiers, believers in the cause. Those that are willing to fight and die, but also those who would be willing to reject everything they've ever believed in in favor of a new belief: Kipos, and what it could mean for humanity. No long would they be ruled by any one collective of people. They would be their own masters now.

Mara knows that Calli still has a long way to go. Every now and again, she turns her head to look at the girl and sees the discomfort, the uneasiness of taking lives. It didn't matter that it was a runner. To some, all life was precious, and that means that Mara still has a lot to teach her.

She doesn't like to use the word 'break', in this case. But if that's what she has to do, she'll do it.

Mara wonders why Calli, though. Why is she trying so hard with Calli? William's voice rings in her ears, as clearly as they had years ago.

"This place is special," he said after they had taken the Silsparrow base, what would later become Home. "I want to make sure my daughter and wife can live in a place

like this, and not have to live under Silsparrow. I don't want them to have an ID number, a specific job that they must have. They will be free."

At the time, at the beginnings of rebellion, one always has a sense of patriotism and pride, a swelling in the stomach and the mind that comes with thoughts of being a small part of something so much bigger than yourself. Mara had that, a long time ago.

Now, time had eroded that sense. The mission was still there. The hope. But the romanticism, that pride... it was all but gone. Replaced instead with a cynicism that she wants to shake, that she wants to replace. They had been so young long ago. But a lot had changed.

Much was gone, missing. Forever lost.

The comm at her belt buzzes, vibrating ever so slightly to get her attention. She brings the device up to her lips and answers.

"Yes," she says dryly.

"Hey," says Winston, his voice deep and serious. "We have a problem."

She turns towards Calli. "Stay there for a moment," she says, then begins to walk a little bit ahead. When she sees that Calli doesn't follow, she pulls the comm close to her mouth. "Okay," she continues, this time quietly, "go ahead."

"One of the people you brought in? The taller man - John, I think his name is - he got a call out to his friends."

"Why is this a problem?"

Winston sighs. "He told them to attack this place."

That took her aback. Her face breeds confusion, though Winston can't see that.

"Why would he do that?"

"He still thinks that he and his friends are prisoners."

"And did the call go out?"

"It looks as though his friends got the message. I don't know what's going to happen next."

Mara sighs. "Okay."

"What should we do about him?"

"What about the girl? Sera?"

"That's another thing. We've lost her."

Christ. "Okay, keep John locked up. I'll deal with him when we get back. Find the girl. I'll be back shortly."

"Yes, ma'am." The comm clicks off, and Mara returns it back to her belt. Those goddamn traitors. She gave them a home, a place to live. It was only fair that they keep them held there for a little while, until they could trust them. And now they had gone and betrayed her? For a moment, she doesn't feel at all surprised. They weren't too keen on staying there anyway. She turns back towards Calli.

"Is something wrong?" the girl asks.

Part of Mara wants to tell Calli, but she still isn't sure how the girl would take it. After all, the people she came in with are her friends.

"Nothing," Mara says, and she leaves it at that. "C'mon. It'll be night soon."

#

The way Mara said "nothing" worries Calli. Something is definitely wrong here. Cautiously, she follows Mara, keeping pace with her, but also making sure that she leaves

her enough space. Nothing about the woman was quite right. If anything, Calli is warier of her now than she had been before.

She tries again. "What's happened?"

There is no answer, save but the quickening of Mara's steps. Calli almost has to start running to keep up with her.

"Answer me!"

Finally, Mara stops. Calli, surprised at the sudden jerk, stops as well, looking up into Mara's angry eyes.

"You'll soon learn not to question orders," she says coldly. "We have a problem back at Home. That's all I can tell you right now."

The rest of the trip is rather quiet, save for Calli's footsteps breaking any twigs she happens to step on. Just as the sun falls and the sky turns dark, the familiar walls of Home appear, and they reach the front gate by the time the moon begins to show. A few guards meet Mara at the gate and speak with her low enough so that Calli can't hear.

Something's wrong. She knows this. Where's John and Sera?

Mara turns after speaking with her people. "Come with me," she says to Calli. Before Calli can even say anything, Mara is already bounding off for the door into the base. Calli runs to catch up with her.

As they enter the base, Mara begins speaking.

"I want to let you know now," she starts, her stride unflinching, "that while I understand the stress of our mission, I do not take traitors lightly."

Traitors? "What are you talking about?"

"What I've built up - what we've built up - is something that's going to change things forever. I can't have people ruining that. I say this because I want you to understand it. I want you to understand what I must do."

At the end of the hallway is another door. Mara stands next to it and gestures to Calli.

"Head inside," she says. "I want you to see this for yourself."

Calli hesitates, edging closely to the door with caution. She taps the button alongside the door to open it, and it slides open.

The room is small. If anything, it was meant as a small supply closet. Inside are two of Mara's guards - one of them Calli notices is Farid, smiling that dastardly smile of his. There's a third man in the room, sitting on his knees and bowing his head low.

As he slowly raises it, Calli gasps.

John stares up at her, his face beaten and bloody. One of his eyes is already starting swell purple, and his nose looks broken in a few places. His lips are cracked, the blood emanating from them already starting to congeal.

"What?" Calli says. It's all she thinks to say in this situation. "What happened?"

"He tried to call for help," Farid says, looking down at the handcuffed John. He punches John in the side of the head, and John falls to the ground. "We managed to catch the bastard, but not before he got a call out."

"We'll need to shore up our defenses," Mara says without emotion. It's as if she's gone completely cold.

Calli goes over to John. Farid raises a pistol at her.

"Step away from him," he yells out, but Mara raises a hand.

"Let her," she says. Farid nods, then puts his pistol away. He doesn't take his eyes off Calli.

Calli gets down on her knees and cups John's face in her hands. "Jesus," she says, the tears already welling inside her eyes. "What the hell have they done to you?"

John coughs. Blood oozes from his mouth, and he spits it off to the side, the globule of saliva and blood forming in the corner.

"I called them," he says, his voice weak. "Aresh. Rian. They're coming." A hint of a smile crosses his face, telling her everything was going to be okay."

Calli lets him go gently, allowing his head to rest on the floor. She stands up, staring wildly at Farid.

"You fucking asshole," she says. "How could you do this?"

Farid just smiles.

"He did as I would've ordered," Mara says. Her voice doesn't sound as if it's her own. Calli can't even tell who this person is anymore, because it certainly isn't the Mara she met a few days ago.

"Let him go," Calli says.

"With all due respect," Farid says, ignoring Calli altogether, "why is the girl even here?"

Mara says nothing, does nothing for a moment. A moment that feels like forever. Calli turns back towards John.

"He needs a medic."

"He doesn't need a thing," Farid says.

"Calli," Mara says. At that, Calli feels the pistol sliding out from her waistband. Mara steps in front of her with her pistol in her hand. "I don't think you should have this anymore."

It wasn't as if she was going to use it anyway. But she wishes she had it, now more than ever.

"This is a new beginning," Mara says, ejecting the weapons magazine. Satisfied with the bullet count, she replaces the magazine and slides back the action. "For you. For me. For Kipos. What we hope to accomplish," she says, aiming the weapon at the downed John, "will change everything."

"NO," Calli cries out just as Mara pulls the trigger. Calli's eyes shut, hard. So hard it hurts her, and tears burst through them. She doesn't open them for a moment, even as hands guide her out of the room.

"Take care of this," Mara says, and the door shuts behind her. It's only then that Calli opens her eyes. Mara tries to get her to move, but she won't. Instead, she falls to her knees.

Mara sighs. "I had to do that," she says, kneeling next to her.

Calli can smell the death on her. On herself. "No you didn't."

Mara nods. "I did. I'm a leader. I have to show strength."

"You didn't have to kill him."

"Maybe not." At those words, Calli's eyes sting even more. "But what he did? That was an offense that warranted death. Even had I not, I would've had one of my people do it."



"But why?!" Calli nearly screams, allowing her emotion to take over her voice. Her words come out cracked. "Why did you have to kill him?"

"There's another reason I had to," Mara says. "And you are part of that reason, Calli."

Her heart sinks, far lower than it already has. It falls deep into her stomach, churning it around like a sickstorm. Calli throws up, right there on the floor. Mara doesn't seem to bat an eye.

"You need to see that this world is a violent one. That's the problem with humanity. No matter how many worlds we conquer, how many we settle, there will always be killing. It's part of human nature. It doesn't matter how many times we deny it. We were meant to fight and kill each other."

Calli wipes away the bile from her mouth. "So," she says, breathing heavily, "we can just throw human decency out the window. Is that right?"

Mara scoffs. "Right now, human decency doesn't exist. We have to be hard out here, we have to be merciless. Otherwise, Silsparrow will never leave us alone."

Calli shakes her head. "It didn't have to be that way."

"Yes, unfortunately, it does." She stands over Calli, seemingly taller than Calli first notices. "Where is your friend?"

Sera. "I don't know. I was with you, remember."

"So, her escape wasn't part of your plan?"

"What plan?" Calli nearly screams. "What escape?"

"Sera is gone," Mara adds. "Disappeared. We think John helped her."

"Then what the fuck do you need me for," Calli says, her head lowering.

Mara, instead, says nothing in return. Instead, she walks away, leaving Calli to herself.

#

Aresh ducks down low into the high grass of the jungle. Before, there were six of them. Now, nine of them creep through the brush. Talon brought with him two of his best trackers and fighters, a tall, broad woman named Ahz and a short, stocky man named Tank. Talon's people had come back with information, information as to where Mara was, or at least could be. They set out, hoping to reach the base by the next day or so.

He wonders if Calli and the rest are dead.

Someone taps his shoulder.

"Hey," Tai says, crawling up next to him. "You okay?"

Aresh nods, slower than he wants to. "Yeah. I'm good. Why?"

"I don't know," he says, shaking his head. "You've been... quiet the last couple of hours."

Aresh shrugs. "Just, ah, worried is all. Couple kids and my friend are out there. I don't know how they're doing."

In front of them, past a mess of trees and brush, is Talon and Tank. They're staring out with very expensive, but very effective binoculars, and they need scouts, so Aresh and Tai volunteered. The rest of the group was behind, waiting for their report.

"I get that," Tai says. "I'm sure they're okay."

If this wasn't Mara, kid, I wouldn't believe you. He reminisces for a moment, hanging on her name like a memory. He remembers their time together, back in the army,

back when they didn't have names or stories to tell. Mara, William, and Aresh. A trio that would live in infamy.

In Aresh's case, he also lived in regret.

He remembers the last time he ever saw her.

In fact, it's the last time he saw William, as well.

Their orders had been simple. Well, simple enough.

Eleven years ago, Aresh stopped in a similar spot that he was at now, though there was a ramshackle rogue colonist base in front of them.

"Relax."

The voice came from behind him, but he didn't move at first.

"I'm fine," Aresh said, leaning on the stock of his rifle. "Just nervous, is all."

William Hayford laid down next to him, looking at the fortification almost a hundred and fifty meters in front of them.

"You've never been nervous before," William said.

He was right, of course. Aresh was a soldier, a man dedicated to the cause. Battle was inevitable, fighting was part of the job. He already had been a part of many skirmishes in the months since he'd been on Kipos, and many of them where he and his group nearly failed, nearly died. He took everything in stride. He was getting his rest, his belly was full, despite it resisting the rations that Silsparrow gave them.

So why was he nervous?

"Mara isn't back yet," William said, readjusting his sights. "I'm worried about her."

"I think you and I both know she's fine," Aresh replies. Talking calmed his nerves, if only for a little. "Pretty sure she's already completed the mission."

William scoffed. "I wouldn't be surprised."

This had been their tenth mission together. Silsparrow was pushing the rebels back, pushing them far back into the far corners of the jungle, and even to parts beyond that. They were being trapped. There were rumors of a peace treaty of sorts, a "put down your weapons and you'll be arrested" sort. The fighting continued, however, and it appears the rebels were fighting harder than they had ever before.

William seemed to sense Aresh's uneasiness. "I've got a kid, you know," he said. "Little girl. She'd be three now."

Aresh found himself smiling a little. "You miss her?"

William nodded, though Aresh didn't see it. "Yeah," he said, after a moment. "And my wife."

"We've all got somebody, don't we."

"Yeah."

They stayed there for a moment, scanning the area, trying to think of something to say next, something to add to the conversation, to fill the silence before the battle. The other troops, clad in the navy uniform of the Silsparrow Army, were spread out in a similar position to Aresh and William. Aresh himself wore the dark blue uniform, though he also wore a gray neck scarf along with it. He adjusted it, then took it off. The jungle heat was starting to get to him.

"Sir," one of the soldiers whispered, a woman. "Lieutenant Winters is back."

"Great," William said, getting up. "Looks like Mara did it."

Aresh followed him back to an area in the jungle where they could stand without getting spotted by the enemy. Mara and two other soldiers stood behind a tree. Mara removed her helmet, the black visor covering her face.

"We couldn't find a way inside," Mara said. "That isn't the front door, anyway."

"Damn," Aresh said.

"Intel's got nothing on this place," William said. "They only told us to take it out."

"It's locked up tight," Mara added. "Something important must be here."

"Why couldn't they just call for an air strike?" Aresh asked.

Mara shrugged.

"Maybe they want something intact?" he adds.

"In any case," William said, "we need to do our job. I'm open to any ideas."

Nobody spoke, at least for a moment.

"We have to think of something."

"Front door seems to be the only idea I've got," Aresh said. He didn't like that idea. If they charged the front gate, they'd be in the kill zone. Most likely, the colonists had the place locked down and fortified, so even getting in there was going to take considerable effort.

And lives.

"Can't we call for reinforcements?" Mara asked. "Let's get ourselves a bigger group, maybe get some armor in here to knock it down."

William shook his head. "No," he said, "no, we can't do that. We have to do this soon. And by soon, Command means now."

"I really hope they want us to take prisoners," Aresh said, at first guessing. But by the look on William's face, he knew the answer.

It had been a slaughter.

Aresh went in with the rest of the troops while Mara and William flanked the base. The colonists barely put up a resistance: they weren't well armed, and they weren't well-trained.

Command never told them to take prisoners.

So they didn't.

It was shortly after that that William and Mara were reassigned on another mission, and Aresh was sent to another unit for guard duty.

It was shortly after that that he heard William and Mara were dead.

But, of course, now, that's a lie. One that he once believed. Now, he isn't sure what to believe, save for what's in front of him.

Talon waves them over, and Tai and Aresh meet up with him and Tank.

"Okay," Talon says, handing Aresh the binoculars, "see that ahead? They call that place Home. In a way, it is a home, but it's a heavily fortified home."

He looks through the device and sees that Talon's right. High walls form a protective barrier around the base. If anything, it reminds Aresh of a turtle shell, one that protects everything inside.

"How do we get in?" Aresh finds himself asking, though he already knows the answer.

"We don't," Tank says. "At least not through the front door. Place is guarded tight, with sentries on the ramparts," he says, pointing to the top of the wall, "and on the

ground. I didn't spot anything resembling turrets or security systems, but that's only for the outside. There's no telling what's inside. Or how many are there."

Aresh grumbles. "Shit. We don't have enough intel."

"Has Rian had any luck?" Talon asks.

Aresh shakes his head. "So far, no. I haven't heard a thing."

Talon snorts. "She's with that Nevaire fellow. I don't trust him. Or his Silsparrow birds. They send shivers down my spine."

"I'm in the same boat as you," Aresh adds. "But right now, we have to trust him. We don't have a choice. They want the same thing as us, so it's only beneficial for the both of us."

Talon smirks. "I understand you are an older gentleman. One of experienced years. But you are naive for a man of your age."

Aresh cocks an eyebrow. "Oh?" he says. "How so?"

"That man will get you to trust him. So much so that you'll protect each other. You may even believe that he's on your side. For a while, anyway."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm saying," Talon says, his voice getting deeper, "is that when he sees it fit, he'll betray you. He and his lackeys. They'll betray you, leave you for dead, leave your friends for dead - that includes Junior here," he says, nodding towards Tai, who grunts. "And then, when that's all said and done, he'll get the auracite. Not you. He's just using you."

"I get that."

"Do you?"

"Well," Aresh says, "what about you? I'm pretty sure you aren't in this for my sake. Or the sake of my friends."

"True," Talon says, smiling, "you aren't wrong. Though I've never lied to you. I never said that I wouldn't betray you. I like to let the people I'm working with know up front what kind of man I am."

Aresh doesn't say anything. He knows what Talon is: a con, a gambler, a cheat. But he can't judge him. He's as much a cheat as Talon is.

"So you see," Talon continues, as if Aresh's lapse in thought didn't get through his head that he doesn't want to speak more on the subject, "Nevaire and his friends will betray you at the most opportune moment for them. Just watch and see it happen."

Aresh hands the binoculars back to Tank, who chuckles at his boss's words.

"That won't happen," Aresh says.

Talon shrugs. "Maybe it won't, maybe it will. Just watch your back."

I always do.

"We should get back," Aresh says. "We need to figure out a plan."

"Lead the way," Talon says, following him back in the jungle, "Captain."



Mara fires off three shots, each of her bullets hitting their targets. The stationary targets - broken rover parts like a wheel and metal siding - each take a bullet in the span of two seconds.

There were five targets.

She prided herself in being a good shot, but she's extra good today.

She's in a good mood.

Though you would never see it on her face.

She removes the ear protectors and pulls off the protective eye wear. Then, she unloads her pistol and sets the weapon and the near empty clip on the counter in front of her.

She breathes.

I'm doing the right thing.

I'm doing the right thing.

I'm doing the...

Am I?

There it is, she thinks. The doubt. The snake that eats itself, over and over into infinity.

She sometimes feels this way after giving an order. Always has, ever since Silsparrow gave her a leadership role back during the war. She had lives in her hands back then, though most of the weight was on William's. Not hers.

Now... well, it's something much different.

She has lives to take care of. She has a cause to uphold. A world to change.

A weapon to unleash.

As she exhales, the door warning sound beeps, signaling that somebody is coming in. Wilson pops his head in, then walks to her at attention. He salutes, and Mara nods.

"The girls are in their quarters," he says, relaxing. She always believed that this army, these people that she commands, don't need to salute her like that. To her, she's an equal. One of them. A freedom fighter. Though she leads them, she should be treated equally, just like everyone else.

That's the world she wants Kipos to become.

"Good," Mara says. She picks the weapon and the clip back up, loads it, and slides it into the holster at her hip. "I think I want to take them to the mines tomorrow."

Something catches in Wilson's throat. "I'm sorry," he says, "what?"

Mara leaves the shooting range, and he follows her. It's been a long day, and the first signs of night start to pour over the base. The moon hangs high, this time hidden behind a mass of dark clouds. The purple sheen, as well as the cool winds, kiss her hot skin.

She's exhausted.

"You heard me," she says to Wilson as they come out into the open, right into the base Yard. She walks to the center and crosses her arms. "I think it's time we show them, give them what they want, and let them go on their way."

"Ma'am," Wilson starts, but he stops himself. They're on a first name basis, and she's always tried to instill in him that he has to call her by her first name. "Mara," he continues, "I really don't think that's a good idea."

"And why not?"

Looking as though he's searching for an answer, Mara interrupts him.

"They're just kids, Wilson."

"Who could tell Silsparrow where we're at."

"They're going to find us eventually," she retorts. "By the time they do, we'll already be ready."

He shakes his head. "The new recruits aren't ready yet."

"They will be," she says, this time a little stronger. "They're going through the training. They'll be combat ready by then."

"You presume too much," he says with venom, "ma'am."

She smiles. "I'm glad you're here to fight me, Wilson."

That relaxes him a little. "Someone has to."

"Why else is it a bad idea?"

He sighs. "I think you've grown attached to Calli. Because of your... connection with her father."

She nods. Of course, she's already encountered this idea in her head. She's already known that, yes, there is an attachment there, one that's been brought on by the fact that William was her father.

"You know me," she says, "I don't let things like that get in the way of the mission."

"That's why I find it a bit odd that you're letting her go," Wilson adds. "Because you are letting something get in the way of the mission."

"Two teenagers aren't a threat."

"But what they could do could be a threat."

"They have no love for Silsparrow."

He scoffs. "You just killed one of their friends. I don't think they have any love for us either."

He's right. Of course he's right. The death of John was not something that she wanted to do. Frankly, it was something that she still thinks about. The man was unarmed and in cuffs. He didn't present a real threat to them.

But he could've. Had he gotten loose.

At the time, she felt she had to get rid of a potential problem.

Now, she feels as though she's created a new one.

"We should let them decide." The words fall out of her like drool. She isn't sure why she said that, but she did. And it felt... good to say it. It's been on her mind since she found out about Calli.

"What?" Wilson says, as if he didn't hear her.

"We take them to the mines," she starts, "show them the lab, show them what we're working on. Then, we let them decide what they want to do. If they want to leave with their auracite, we give them some and send them off. Otherwise, we find a place for them here. With us."

"You can't be serious," Wilson says.

"I am."

He scoffs. "You've let this go far into your head. You can't trust them. They have friends out there, and one of them you know! They'll want revenge, and they'll come after us."

"If that's their choice," Mara says, "then it's their choice. But I at least want to give it to them. If they go back to their friends and they decide to retaliate, then so bet it. We won't give them any quarter."

"You can't risk people's lives like that," Wilson says, gritting his teeth. "Not needlessly."

She steps close to him, so close that she can smell his breath.

He's been drinking.

"I can and I will," she says. "You should be so lucky that you'd never receive this burden. I've led us through so much over the years that I know when to run and when to fight. Do you?" He doesn't say anything. He barely even looks her in the eye. "I hope not. We're in the final stages, Wilson. The final. Stages. These kids - these teenagers - could be the next generation of people who make Kipos great. We only need to push them in the right direction." She begins to walk away from him. She's done with him, done with his unprofessionalism. Because she's known him for so long, she'll only give him a reprimand. But next time he screws up...

"What if they push back?" she hears him ask. He's loud enough so that any patrolling guards would have heard him.

She turns her head, though she starts to regret it as she does. She shouldn't respond to that, shouldn't have to justify herself. She's led armies before, led people to victory and to their death.

The burden lives in her. With her. Always.

"Then you'd better hope that we push harder," she responds. She walks away, heading for the command center.

She has work to do.

#

They gave her and Sera a room together. Two cots are in two corners of the generously large room. It has its own bathroom, a desk, and furniture, though everything seems to look as though it was pulled from a burning building.

Calli hasn't slept in a nice bed in days. The mattress is a little hard, but it beats the cold ground in the jungle. At least she doesn't have any rocks sticking in her back.

Sera is fast asleep, knocked out the second her head hit the pillow. Calli watches her friend sleep soundly, hidden beneath warm, but thin covers.

We need to get out of here.

The thought sleeps in her brain, like a worm working its way inward. It stays there, feeding off of the time they spend in Home.

They killed John.

And all Calli did was watch it happen. Right in front of her.

And she did nothing.

Sera took it hard at first. She screamed, cried, punched Farid as he escorted them to this room. The young man came after her, but Mara stopped him and instead escorted them herself to their rooms. She assigned a guard to the door. Whether that was to keep Farid out or to keep them in, Calli isn't sure.

Mara cried herself hoarse, to the point that she tired herself out. Calli was tired, but her wandering mind kept her awake.

How could we get out? What about the auracite? What we came here to do? What about Aresh and the others? Are they even alive?

Will they even make it out alive?

The words pour into her head, the thoughts pounding at the inside of her skull, making them like pudding. She tries to close her eyes - she's tried several times, in fact, none of which have helped her fall asleep. She turns over to the other side of the bed, trying to find a good place to sleep.

The auracite.

She turns again, this time trying to find a cooler side of the bed.

Mom's dying.

She flips the pillow over, this time getting a fresh, cool side.

Aresh and Tai and Rian and Sera and-

She opens her eyes. She can hear the shuffling of feet on the other side of her door. There are words spoken, whispers that she can't hear, but ones that she knows are there. They don't hide from her, rather, they come to meet her head on. She leans up from the bed, trying very hard to listen and find out what's going on. Would they move her? Did they find Aresh and the others? What's going on?

The door slides open. The rusty door creaks as it moves, and Sera stirs from her sleep. Her hazy eyes look at Calli, then toward the door.

Farid is there. He has a black eye on his right eye from where Sera punched him. Behind him is the man Wilson. Calli hasn't spoken to him yet, but she's seen him around.

"What?" Sera asks, the grogginess already filling her voice. Calli can see the tear streaks on her cheek.

She cried herself to sleep...

"Get up," Farid says. "We're taking you to a different room."

"For what?" Calli says. "This one is fine."

"Mara's orders," Wilson adds. "Get up."

The two men leave the room to give them some time to get dressed and gather their things. Something in the pit of Calli's stomach awakens. It's like... something isn't right. Something doesn't quite fit. Mara herself led them to this room, didn't she? Then why would they move them now? Calli doesn't bother to make the bed. She figures that someone else can do it.

"You okay?" she whispers to Sera, who still seems like she's barely awake. Sera puts on a different shirt, the same one she wore the day they left Belhall. Sera nods.

"I'm okay," she says. "Getting real sick and tired of this not-sleeping bullshit. Why are they moving us?"

"I'm not sure they are," Calli says. She turns toward her own things to put on her pants... and to find her gun. She grabs the backpack and begins to rummage through it, but-

The weapon isn't there.

"Shit," she says. She feels Sera's eyes behind her, and she turns toward her. "My gun," she starts. "It's gone."

"Did you leave it somewhere?" Sera says at first, though Calli can tell that her friend believes differently.

"I had it with me when we came in."

There's a loud knock on the door. Calli startles, and she slightly jumps at the noise.



"You got about two more minutes before we drag you out," Farid said from behind the door. "And I'm not opposed to that course of action."

Calli looks to Sera. "They aren't moving us," Calli whispers. After what they did to John, she figures it was only a matter of time. But Mara had been the one to pull the trigger. In fact, Mara had been the one to do mostly anything at this base. She was the judge as well as the executioner. She would be here to escort them if...

"We need to get out of here," Calli says, packing up her things.

"Where?" Sera says as she looks around. "There's no windows. There's no other way out."

"Shit," Calli says as she looks around the room for something. Anything she can use as a weapon. Against two highly trained men with weapons, she wonders how much good it'll do.

She has to try. Something in her bones tells her to try.

"Why would they do this?" Sera asks as Calli looks around the room.

"Maybe we aren't worth our welcome." The fact that they want to keep things quiet gives Calli a hint: they're going against Mara. She wonders why, but doesn't think too much on it.

Right now, she's concerned about her and her friend, and getting out alive.

She finds a pen on the desk. Two of them.

"Fuck yeah," she says, removing the caps. "Sera, come here."

Sera does so, and Calli hands her the pen. "We need to use these to get away," she says. "You gotta stab-"

"I know where this goes," Sera says as she grips the newfound weapon. "Right into the fucking jugular."

It scares her a little that Calli was going to say the exact same thing. Sera's always been a bit rambunctious, but Calli wonders if that's some sort of defense mechanism for the situation they're in now.

She could use some of that tenacity right now.

There's a few more knocks.

"One minute," Farid says, this time with more venom in his voice.

Shit shit shit shit.

"You ready?" Sera says, loud enough so that Farid can hear.

Calli shakes her head. "Yeah," she says just as loud. She grips the pen hard, but hides it under her hand by showing the top of it. The sharp point rides against her wrist as she approaches the door. She looks back to Sera, searching her eyes to find some other way to do this, some way that doesn't involve what she's about to do.

Be a survivor, she tells herself. Survive.

The door slides open, and Farid stands there, his face angry. "Follow Wilson," he says, and he moves aside. Wilson stands behind him, and motions for them to follow him. Sera and Calli take one look at each other before moving forward. With Farid behind them, they can't make any moves, can't do anything to Wilson without Farid seeing.

"What's this about?" Sera asks. Calli almost wonders why she's even talking to them, but again, it has to be a defense mechanism.

"Just moving you to a different room," Farid says as he walks behind them. He isn't holding a weapon, though Calli sees the pistol at his hip. Wilson is armed as well.

"Mara wants you moved."

"In the middle of the night," Sera says, already exposing the flaw in this already known mishap.

"I don't make the orders," Farid replies.

"Cool," Sera says. "Glad everything runs smoothly around here."

Calli almost tells her to shut up, to keep quiet and not provoke them. Farid huffs. As they follow Wilson down the empty hallway, they take a right turn down a corridor. As they do, Wilson stops.

"Who are you?" he says, though Calli can't see who he's talking to. As soon as he's distracted, she looks to see Sera whip around and shove the pen deep inside Farid's neck. The young man cries out and reaches for his pistol, but Sera tackles him to the ground, shoving the pen in deeper. Calli turns back towards Wilson, who hears the cries of his comrade. Calli moves to jab the pen at him, but his hand grips her wrist and stops her.

"Fuck you," he says, trying to drag her towards him. She punches with her left hand and cracks him in the jaw, but he doesn't seem to react to it.

Then, she drops the pen. Her only weapon.

Only to grab it with the other hand that she has underneath. She stabs at Wilson again, this time catching him in the eye. He cries out, letting her go.

"Fuck you," he screams again, crying out. Blood drips from his face like red tears. Somebody is on him now, tackling him to the ground and covering his mouth. The figure

pulls out a knife from a strap attached to her boot and stabs down, silencing Wilson. Calli turns around to see that Farid has stopped struggling, and Sera gets off of him. She has his gun in her hand. Her breathing is heavy.

"He's down," she says, huffing. "Got him."

Before Calli can ask how her friend is, she turns toward the figure who saved her. Rian turns around.

"Come on," she says as she pulls out her weapon. "We don't have time to hide the bodies."

"Rian," Calli says in a yell-whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"No time," she says. "We need to move. Where's John?"

They turn the corridor and see Tai there as well. He smiles.

"John," Sera starts. "They killed him."

There's a small jolt in Rian's demeanor. It's small enough for Calli to notice. A twitch.

"Damn," she says. "Fuck fuck fuck."

Tai looks as though he's going to ask. He doesn't.

Rain shakes her head. "We need to leave. Now."

"Follow me," Tai says, and Calli, Sera, and Tai follow him down a few more corridors that lead to the yard.

It's here that Calli hears gunshots.

As they open the door to the outside, chaos seems to be running rampant. Many of Mara's people are scrambling with weapons, running for defensive positions towards the

front gate. There's yelling, and an explosion rocks the rampart. Calli instinctively ducks her head, but only a little.

"We need to move," Rian says. She raises a rifle and leads the way around the yard towards the corner. Nobody has seen them yet, but as soon as they reach the corner, somebody shouts.

"Who are they?" one yells.

"They aren't one of us!" another answers.

"Open fire!"

Bullets pepper their position, but the metal staircase gives them good enough cover.

"Go!" Rain says, firing back. "I'm giving you cover. Follow Tai out. I'm right behind you."

"You'd better be," Tai says, and he raises his own pistol as he moves aside a large slab of rock, one that Calli didn't notice before. The other side of the rock reveals a crack large enough for them to fit through.

The explosions of bullets rock her ears as they whiz by her and strike the wall behind her. She ducks low, trying to make herself less of a target. Rian pops out from cover and lets out a burst from her assault rifle. One falls, while another takes cover behind a poorly made barricade. Rian fires off two more shots at the barricade, and the occupant behind it screams out. Calli turns back around to see that Sera and Tai have already gone through the hole.

"Come on!" she yells out to Rian. "Let's go!"

Rian comes back into cover and reloads. She shakes her head. "Get in there first," she yells over the din of gunfire.

"You'd better be behind me!"

"Wouldn't disappoint you, kid."

Calli heads inside the crack, which leads to a passage inside the base itself. Mara had mentioned that the place needed to be repaired in a few places, but Calli didn't know it was this bad.

She's thankful for that.

The passage is empty, though Tai and Sera are taking cover behind a wall just in case. Calli stands next to them, then stares at the passage she just came through, waiting for Rian. The explosions rock the wall she leans against, and she wonders what's happening. She says as much to Tai.

"Rian got us some friends," he says as he stares down the hallway, his weapon pointed down it. "They had some neat toys."

"Well thank fuck for them," Sera says.

A second that feels like hours passes, and still, Rian doesn't come through.

"Where is she?" Calli asks.

Tai shakes his head. "We have to go," he says. "We can't stay here."

"But what about Rian?" Sera asks. It's clear that she won't leave without the woman, and Calli finds herself agreeing.

Leave no one left behind.

"She told me-"

"To get the fuck out if I didn't come back."

The voice comes from the passage, and Rian peeks out from it before coming out fully. The assault rifle is gone, but a pistol is in her hands.

"I thought I told you that."

Tai sighs. "It sounded a little dramatic. I wasn't sure if you actually wanted me to follow it."

Rian shrugs. "We need to go. Now."

Tai leads the way, bobbing and weaving down the corridor. Calli hasn't seen this side of the base before, but it looks like any other part of it. As they turn the corner, gunshots ring out.

"Shit," Rian says, bringing herself against the wall. She pops out from cover and lets off a few shots. "You'd better get moving, Tai. Take them to the place we agreed on. I've gotta find Aresh and Nevaire."

At first, Calli wants to ask about Aresh. Was he okay? Did he need help? But instead she asks, "Nevaire? Weyland Nevaire is here?"

"Long story, kid," Rian says. "We can save that for another time, yeah?" Again, she leans out from cover to fire more shots. The resulting cries of a soldier tells Calli that she found her target. "If we aren't back there in an hour, Tai, you've gotta get them out of there. Head back to Bandit Town."

"But-"

"Do not fucking but me." Rian's hard voice sends chills through Calli. "Get out of here."

Tai sighs. "Fine. Follow me."

Calli doesn't move for a moment. No, she thinks. I can't lose any more people. But Rian looks at her with strange eyes, ones that say that she knows what she's doing.

That she wants to stay and help.

That she chose this.

"Get going," Rian says just after reloading her weapon. If Calli didn't know any better, she'd say that the weapon was just an extension of Rian's arm.

Calli goes.

She goes fast.

#

Tank takes a bullet in the arm. His scream fill Aresh's head, and voices from ten years ago fill the empty parts of his brain. After awhile, he figures, they all sound the same.

"Fuck," Tank calls out as he ducks down behind the hill overlooking the base. Cairn next to him laughs.

"Can't take your medicine?" he says, aiming his assault rifle and peppering the base down below. Some of the guards along the ramparts are firing along their position, but they're so entrenched that it's nigh impossible for someone to hit them. Save for Tank, apparently.

"Fuck you, sparrow," Tank says, clutching his arm.

Aresh ignores them. He's here to do a job, to save his friends. It was a miracle that Talon even agreed to do this. He seemed against it at first, saying that storming the base was suicide. But Rian told him something, something about a debt needing paid, and he groaned.



"Fine," he said. "But we do this my way."

And so far, it was working.

Aresh gets down behind cover as his comm buzzes. He picks up the device.

"Rian?" he calls out. The communicator he has is directly identical to hers, and can only talk to hers. "What's happening?"

"Got the girls," she says over the sound of gunshots. "But... Aresh, John's dead."

Aresh tries to feel something in this moment. HE tries to feel something that will take him out of this moment to feel for the man, his comrade.

But he can't.

He can't feel anything, save for the battle that's all around him.

"Damn," he says, if only to say something. "Where are they now?"

"Tai's with them," Rian replies. "He's taking them out now."

"Good. Nevaire should be waiting for them."

"Will he?"

It's a question he himself thought about before they even conducted this little rescue mission. The idea was that Nevaire and Ende would meet the kids where they were supposed to come out, but...

He still can't trust Nevaire. Not yet.

"You have to catch up with them," he tells Rian. "I don't want them alone with Nevaire."

He feels Cairn's eyes on him as he says Nevaire's name. If Cairn wants to say something, he doesn't, and instead continues to fire his rifle.

"I'm going as quickly as I can," Rian says. More gunshots fill the comm noise.

"But these guys are making it a bit difficult."

"Be careful."

"Will do." The comm buzzes out, and Aresh leans out from cover to fire again.

#

Nevaire isn't where he's supposed to be.

Neither is Ende.

They're supposed to meet at the other end of the base, where security is the weakest. Where the kid is supposed to come out with Rian and the Belhall girls. But they aren't where they're supposed to be.

They have another job to do. One they didn't explain to Talon or Aresh or anybody else.

"Cairn hasn't spotted her yet," Ende says as she listens in on her comm. "They're getting resistance."

"No doubt," Nevaire says as he peers into the scope of his rifle. They're actually on the other side of where they're supposed to be at, watching the part of the base where parked rovers lie in wait. Many guards wait by them, ready and waiting for their commanders to tell them to move out. Rovers worked well in the jungle when there was an actual road to follow, so they weren't used as combat vehicles.

Ende tried to get close to the vehicles to hotwire them, but too many guards got too close. The safest way to do this was to shoot on site.

Their target is Mara.

As if on cue, the back door of the base slides open, and four or five soldiers slip out, aiming their weapons in every which direction.

This is it.

He tightens his grip on the weapon, as if that would make his weapon aim straighter. His breath slows, his heart quickens. This is it. The hunt. His prey, about to put herself in the scope of his and Ende's rifles.

He fires, but the shot goes wide. Mara gets inside the armored rover quickly and the vehicle rides off.

"Damn," Nevaire says.

"We should follow them," Ende says, and she heads off to follow the tracks.

Nevaire does the same.

*I'm going to kill you, he thinks. I'm going to find you.*

They ran until they couldn't.

Calli tries to find air. The jungle in the morning around her is cool, so it comes in easily into her lungs, but she struggles because it isn't enough.

Tai and Sera are the same way.

They ran until the morning came, the Kipos sun blinding them through the canopies of the trees.

"Think any of them followed?" Sera asks. She too is struggling to breathe.

"I don't think so," Tai says. "We were supposed to meet up with Nevaire."

"You're going to have to tell me," Calli says, gasping for a moment before continuing, "how it is you two got involved."

"Long story."

Sera sat down, clearly feeling safe enough to do so. "What do we do now? We don't have any food or water, do we?"

Tai took off his backpack and passed around the water bottle within it. "This is all I've got."

Calli sipped the cool water, making sure to leave some for her friends. This was all they had, and they had to make it last.

She hands it back to Tai. "What do you think-"

"She's fine," he interrupts. She was going to say Rian. He lowers his head, almost as if he's wondering if he even believes his own words. Calli wants to believe them too, but...

"What do we do now?" Sera asks after catching her breath. "We can't stay here. We don't have any food or shelter."

"I suppose we could meet back at the rendezvous point," Tai says. "See if anybody managed to get there okay."

Calli looks at Sera, who looks back at her.

This is my fault. Deep down, she knows this. It's my fault. Mara knew my father, wanted to take me in. And now, John is dead. My friends are fighting for me right now, and we're stuck in the wilderness with no real way to go.

"I'm so sorry," she says aloud.

"For what?" Sera asks.

"I got you into this. I got us all into this. You wouldn't have followed me into this damn place if I hadn't wanted to leave. We'd still be in Belhall. We wouldn't have met Mara, and she wouldn't have captured us. And she wouldn't..." She stops herself before she can say anything else.

"Calli," Sera says, stepping towards her friend. "We chose this. All of us." She looks to Tai, who nods. "This is what we wanted to do. We knew that something could happen to us. We signed up for that going in."

"But-"

"What happened so far was awful," Sera continues. "I agree with that. But you have to look at it from our point of view: we made the choice, Calli. Nobody made it for us."

Tai nods. "Yeah. Gotta agree with her. Aresh found me on Everis and offered me a job. Nobody made me join him. I wasn't forced to come here."

She tries to think of something to say, something to tell them to get them to see how she feels.

Then, she realizes that there's no point in it, no point in telling them. They know how she feels, and they know how they feel.

What matters is getting out of there. Alive.

She tells them as much.

"That's better," Sera says, smiling. "Thought we lost you to some existential rant there for a moment."

"Maybe try again later," Calli says. "I may have something for you."

They decide that waiting around isn't going to do them any good. They walk towards the rendezvous point. The jungle is quiet, though as the morning begins to show its face, birds and wildlife begin to announce their presence. Calli sees several clawhawks take off into the air, and smaller yellow birds follow after them. A few strange bugs buzz in her ear. She swats them away when they get too close.

"This is a strange planet," Tai says.

"How so?" Sera asks. "Would've thought that most people know what a terrestrial planet looks like."

"It's not that," Tai answers. "Though, I can't say that, before all this, I've never seen a jungle with my eyes before. It's... the whole thing. Silsparrow and the whole fight for the planet. I've never heard of anybody fighting for an entire planet before."

"Back Home," Calli says, "they used to fight for countries and land. It was only inevitable that we'd be fighting for an entire planet eventually."

"I suppose," he says, "though I'd never thought that I'd be a part of that fight, if only from a different perspective."

"Gotta agree with you there," Sera says, trailing behind them. "I thought I'd be selling illegal stuff until I was old and gray... off this planet and in a giant mansion," she says with a smile.

"You've been dreaming of that mansion since you were six years old," Calli says.

Sera shrugs. "Gotta have goals, right?"

"I just," Tai continues, "I just hope that the others are okay."

Calli looks up at him, sees the general concern on his face. "Me too."

"I came in with them, joined with them when Aresh found me. I wasn't in the best of places, and he helped me out of it. Gave me an opportunity to better my life."

"You mean with the auracite?" Sera asks.

Tai nods. "Yeah. I don't quiet remember a time when I wasn't running from something. Mostly law enforcement, but you get the idea. It's because of my brain."

Calli raises an eyebrow. "Your brain?"

He taps his forehead. "I'm very smart."

"I think everybody knew that," Sera quips. "Cat isn't exactly out of the bag on that one."

"It's... people used me," he continues. "They used me for what I knew, what I could build." He raises his arm to the datapad on his wrist. "My family, too. They used me. Used to hack into financial records. Altered them. Changed them around. Made it so my family had money. At first, I was proud to do it. I was helping to provide for my family, in a way that not very many people could. And I was smart about it, too. Covered

my tracks, made sure that nobody every found anything. I was an only child, so it was easy to hide from the authorities, at least in a digital sense. My mother and father... they were jobless. Everis isn't exactly a beacon of job opportunity right now. For a while, we were happy. But my parents... they told people. Bragged, maybe. I don't really know. They let everyone know how smart their son was, how great he was with technology." He sighs. "There was a man who showed up at our door one day. There's always a man, I guess, in these types of situations. He wore a suit, but he wasn't police or federal government. He wasn't any of those things. He asked - more like told, really - if I could help him and the people he represented with something. Something that was going to involve my hacking. My parents... they were all too ready to let me help them, if only because they would be promised a cut of the profits. And I blindly went with them, because my parents told me that I would be helping them by helping this organization."

Calli listens intently. She almost trips on a root listening.

"Turns out," Tai continues, "that these people were part of a sort of mafia on Everis. Always thought those people were just a remnant of Earth, but I suppose that organized crime is just a part of humanity. The man took me to meet some of his people, and they told me what I needed to do, which was like what I was doing with my family - hack into financial records and alter them - but do it to a rival, and make sure that they cannot escape financial ruin." He sighs. "I did it. I did it and liked it. I've always loved technology and its uses. I didn't care much who I was using it against."

Calli stares up into the sky, sees the rising of the sun. The warmth... it feels good on her skin. Like a warm blanket curled around her on a cold day. "What happened then?"



Tai shrugs. "I helped them. I had no real choice, but it wasn't like I told them no, either. I knew what they were when they found me. I knew I really couldn't say no."

"How did Aresh find you?" Sera asks. She's trailing behind them, her gaze leaning over her shoulder every now and again to check to see if anybody is following them. "I mean, you had to run into him at some point, right?"

"That's when Aresh found me, actually. I was in a bar. I look a bit older than I actually am, if you hadn't noticed," he says (Calli hadn't), "so I managed to fake an ID to get inside. I was stressed out. I needed a drink. Or something, really. Anything. He knew exactly who I was the second he saw me. Offered me a drink. He knew I was too young, too. Didn't much care."

"Wait," Sera says. "He knew you were a brilliant hacker?"

He shrugs. "He told me later he did his research. He has connections from his army days, and somehow they heard about me. Not sure how, though." They pass under a leaning tree branch. "He came up to me and offered me a job. I accepted."

"Just like that," Calli says. "He offers to take you to another planet and you just... agree?"

"Just like that. I know it sounds weird, but I wanted to get away from Everis for a little while. From my parents. From it all."

"That," Calli starts, trying to find her voice, "doesn't sound so weird."

Tai smiles.

There's a sudden roar that manages to cut through the foliage and pierce their eardrums. It's a sort of shrieking noise, one that forces Calli to cover her ears.

Oh fuck...

"Oh no," Sera says. She too has her ears covered. She reaches down and pulls out her pistol. "Those are runners."

Tai looks around. Another shriek fills the air. Calli grips her own weapon.

"We need to move," she says, and they do.

#

The bullets stopped firing near minutes after they ambushed the base. There was no sign of Mara - or Nevaire and Ende, for that matter - so the remainder of the people left behind was a skeleton crew.

That's what Aresh thought, minutes ago, as Mara's people laid down their weapons and put their hands behind their heads.

Now, he's looking inside the bunker.

He can't remember a time when this sight didn't make him sick.

People. Men, women, children, huddled in the lower sections of the base. Crept together. Families. Civilians. *They're trying to hid away. They don't want any part of this fight.*

He saw a lot of this during the war. Sometimes, whenever they'd capture a colonist group, they'd find more colonists roving with them. Trying to get away from Silsparrow, trying to get away from everything. He did what was expected of him back then: he processed them, sent them to a Silsparrow refugee camp. They would be questioned. Some would go to jail. And every time he did that, they would look at him.

*Why?* Their faces would say. *Why are you doing this?*

That's how they look at him now. Children hide in their parent's arms. Men and women stand tall, as if they're ready to accept whatever it is these strangers have come to do with them.

None of them look like they're ready to fight.

Talon appears next to Aresh.

"Anybody who shot at us is above in the yard," he says before looking at the people. "Shit. Didn't know they had these down here."

"What can you give these people?" Aresh says. He doesn't look at Talon. He keeps his eyes on the civilians.

Talon scoffs. "What, you mean like aid? Talon ain't no humanitarian group."

"You're going to abandon them?"

"I'm not going to take care of them, if that's what you're asking me to do."

Aresh looks at him now. He doesn't even try to hide the fury on his face. He feels like a shunned and angry god, ready to deliver his wrath onto Talon's fleshy face.

"You're going to help these people any way you can."

Talon's smirk disappears. "Did you hear me, cholo? I said no."

"You are," Aresh says. "You're going to give them food, shelter, and water."

"And what-"

"Or I let Rian know that the deal's off with you. That you will go back on your word."

The color fades from Talon's face. It runs off like rain water.

"That wasn't what we agreed on."

"Doesn't matter. To me, anyway."

"There's no honor in you."

"It comes and goes."

Talon waves him off. "Fine. I'll do it, you fucking saint. I'll get some of my guys down here and escort them back to Bandit Town. Think I can set them up in some housing."

"And feed them."

"Yeah, yeah," Talon says, and he heads off in a direction, seemingly to do what he was just told. Aresh sees a younger man, maybe a teenager, sitting by himself in a corner. His arms are wrapped around his legs, and he looks... cold.

Aresh sighs. *It shouldn't be like this.* He leaves the room, leaving the door open behind him. They aren't prisoners, but they aren't his responsibility. To them, he was one of the people who just put them out of a home.

*I'm no better than Silsparrow.*

He runs into Rian in the hallway, her face downcast.

"Talon says he'll take care of the people down below."

She nods.

"It'll give us an opening to allow us to search for the kids."

She nods.

"What's wrong?"

"Aresh," she starts. "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I... I found John. In one of the prisoner cells."

*Oh no.* Instead of telling him what he already knows, he asks her to take him to him. She does, and Aresh opens the sliding door.

The body lies there, facedown, on the concrete floor. The blood looks as though it's been cleaned up, but that doesn't make the sight any worse.

This was his friend.

A brother.

And he's lying face down, like he didn't even deserve to die with any sense of dignity. Aresh lowers his head.

"I'm sorry," Rian says again, standing behind him.

*Mara... you've changed.*

"We need to get out there," he says. "The kids are gone. So is Nevaire. I can't rely on Talon. Don't trust him, so it may just be us."

She nods.

"But first," he continues, "we're going to bury John. He deserves as much."

Rian nods, and helps him carry the body outside into the yard and outside the compound itself. They find a patch of flat land and begin digging. Neither of them speak as they start, an unspoken silence between the two, and between allies.

*Mara... you've changed.*

#

The roars come louder this time. Closer. It's almost as if she can feel their breath down her neck already. Calli remembers the hatch, the bunker. She remembers seeing the beasts attack her, try to eat her even in the state they were in. They leech into her

memory. She feels the dank air of the bunker all over her, even though they're in the daylight and running in the open air.

"Move it!" Sera calls out, and Calli moves a bit faster. The skies turn gray. She isn't sure when this happened exactly, but the sun disappeared and now the skies reflected that. Gone was the cool heat. She feels a few drops of rain on her face as she runs, trying to catch up with Sera and Tai.

Tai stops for a moment and looks down at the datapad on his wrist.

"The hell are you doing?" Sera nearly screams at him. She stops for a moment. "We need to go."

"I know, I know," he says, furiously tapping at his wrist. "I'm pulling up a map here. I can see where they are."

"How?" Calli asks as she catches up with them. She turns her gaze behind them, her fingers gripping tightly on her weapon.

"Does it matter?" Sera yells.

"Thermal imaging."

"Great. We can see if any of them have the flu."

"It's so I can see where their locations are," Tai adds.

"How far?" Calli asks. She peers over her shoulder to look at the datapad.

"Two hundred meters, I'd guess," he says. "Pretty close."

The rain starts to hit harder. Calli looks up for a moment. She feels the drops on her face.

"This is good," she says, turning towards them.

"Which part?" Sera asks. Before she can go on, Calli raises her hand.

"The rain. It'll cover our scent from the runners?"

Sera eyes bug out, like she can't believe what she's hearing. "What do you mean? How do you know this?"

"Learned it from Mara," Calli says. "Tai, any chance your datapad can find any land lower than where we're at? We have a better chance of hiding our scent the lower we go."

Tai taps his screen for a moment. "I guess so," he says. After a moment, he nods. "Yep. I know where to go."

"Then let's do that."

The three of them move quickly, as fast as the rain starts to fall. Calli is drenched by this point, her clothes sopping. Her grip on the pistol doesn't waver, however. In fact, she grips it tighter. Tai leads the three of them to a small hill that drops off from where they were. The face of the hill is just a short drop down, where the mud has already begun to form.

"Down there good enough for you?" Tai asks.

"I hope so," Calli says as she carefully climbs down the hill, using various trees and roots sticking out of the ground to keep herself from falling.

"This should be good," Sera mutters, then follows after her.

"What we need is a cave or something." Calli reaches the bottom, then turns to her friends.

"I don't think my computer can find that," Tai replies. He nearly falls, but Sera grabs his arm, keeps him balanced.

They hop over a fallen log. Calli looks behind her, sees nothing. But she knows they're out there, running for them. The jungle around her seems to close in. Reality bleeds in with her fear. She feels it creeping into her head. She feels it creeping into her friends. Sera's eyes are wide. Tai... he has no real emotion on his face. She figures that he's more interested in surviving than showing it on his face. They run, but she feels as though she's going nowhere, that she's running in place. Every footfall feels like futility, feels like failure. It's almost as if she can feel the creatures already breathing down her neck.

It's done. Just lay down. Take the gun and end it. Let them feed on you. Give your friends some chance at escape.

The thoughts creep into her like bad dreams.

*This was fucked from the beginning. You never had a chance.* As easily as she's able to admit this, though... she can't say goodbye. To her mother. To her friends.

To herself.

"Up ahead," Tai yells out. Calli looks up, her eyes focused. A hill leading down greets her. She doesn't even look down. She jumps.

#

Mara sits in the backseat of the rover, feeling the bumps of the rocky road shake her body. There's no window in the back, so she keeps her eyes on the forward windshield, at the back heads of her loyal soldiers.

*Wilson. Farid... gone.* Her compound is gone, taken. The people there... she once promised them salvation, a freedom that they would never be offered anywhere else.

And here she was, running away.



"How much farther?" she asks. It's a question she doesn't need to ask. She knows how much farther they are, but the silence in the rover... it's too much.

Her driver - a woman named Trish - clears her throat. "Not much farther, ma'am. We'll pass the final checkpoint in a few minutes."

The rover rocks in agreement.

*I'm running again.* The thoughts creep into her mind. They make a home there, right there in the corner. *I'm running with nowhere to go. I've always been running, even long ago.* William's face appears in her mind, taking a seat next to her thoughts. *The gang's all here, I suppose. What would you have done, William?* She isn't sure she can answer that right now. She just lets the rover take her.

Calli.

Now she shows up in her mind, sitting there right next to her father. In Mara's head, she isn't even looking at her father, who sits there stoically staring at Mara. Even in her mind, the two never meet. It's an odd thing, that. How Mara knows so much about Will Hayford, and then running into his daughter nearly eleven years after his death.

His death.

*His death.*

She lets her head wander, in what seems like forever. She culls out all of the noise, what she sees, everything that distracts her.

Eleven years ago, she was a loyal soldier. That's what people told her she was, anyway. Men and women in important uniforms with important titles would tell her to kill people or to go do this or steal that and she would do it. And she was good at it. She still is.

They put her with a several teams over the years. Sometimes they'd move people around and some of them got killed. But then they put her with Aresh and William and others, but those two... they stood out to her. Not because they lived the longest. But because they cared. They cared about people, and not just their own. Not just Silsparrow's people. That was more than she could say. To her, whoever they told her to shoot at, she did without hesitation.

Then she met Will Hayford and Aresh Devi.

At first, they didn't take to each other. Not really. They were fellow soldiers, but not friends. She remembers specifically a time during the waning days of the conflict, nearly eleven years ago. They were assigned to take a rebel colonist hideout dug into the mountains. Nobody wanted to bombard the thing from orbit; it didn't make much sense to bomb the planet Silsparrow was trying hard to colonize. Mara, William, and Aresh were dug in outside the entrance to the hideout, a cave hidden in brush and jungle. Bullets spewed past them, and they like hard targets dug in behind ridge lines and trees, soaking up the fire.

It was a simple matter of flanking. Aresh moved off to the right, using the trees for cover, while Mara and Will fired back. The rest of the unit was dead, caught in an ambush of jerry-rigged mines that were designed to fire shrapnel into one's midsection. Aresh got a line of sight and fired, taking down the few colonists firing outside.

"We need to get in there," Will said, checking his remaining ammo count. "Mara, take point."

She did. Now, it was less about following orders and more about following each other. They were a tight unit, the three of them, ready and willing to die for one another

should the need arise. They'd been through so much, it was hard to think of Will or Aresh as anybody but family.

They entered the cave, with Mara shining her gun's flashlight on every visible surface. The face of the rock has been roughly cut into, seemingly years before.

"Cutting tools," she said, her voice echoing off the walls. "Probably the ones stolen from a depot."

"This looks recent," Aresh added, taking up the rear. "Couldn't have been that long ago."

"Probably means that people know about this place," Will says. "We'd better hurry up and clear it out."

They move as one, following the cave and checking corners for any sign of enemy movement. They follow the tunnel, trying not to trip over the bits of hard rock that jut out from the ground.

"They clearly didn't do a good job with the cutting," Mara said.

"Must've been in a hurry," Aresh says.

"Yeah, but for what?"

The tunnel leads them to an open room, the stone looking more natural than the manmade tunnel. Mara crouched low at the entrance to the room, aiming her rifle and shutting off the flashlight.

Will, however, stands up and begins to walk inside, his weapon raised high. Mara, unsure of what to do, follows close behind him with Aresh at her back.

There was a manmade structure, a wall made out of metal and plastisteel, with an old looking hatch that acted as a door. Nobody stood in front of it.

Will grabbed the handle, then nodded to Mara. She raised her weapon as he opened it and...

At first, her trigger finger twitched. She thought she'd find enemy guns trained on them, ready to tear them apart with a single burst of fire. She figured that if they were going to go down, they'd take as many with them. The world would forget about her, about what she did in that silly, pointless civil war.

Maybe that was a good thing.

Instead, they found people inside with their hands raised high. A sign of defeat. They wouldn't fight. The room itself looked new and clean, like it had been built recently. Computers and scanning equipment and tables and tools laid about like unused toys. Each of the people standing around it wore clean, crisp clothing, the kind worn by...

"Scientists?" Aresh said as he looked inside the room.

"Everybody on your knees," Will called out, and the people did so. They looked scared. They didn't want to die. Technically, they were still the enemy. But Mara didn't think any of them had ever learned how to fire a gun, let alone have the guts to use it against them.

Will walked over to the nearest person, an older man in his fifties, whose eyes stared blankly ahead as he interlocked his fingers behind his head. Will lowered his weapon and got down on the haunches of his knees.

"You mind telling me what this place is?" he asked the man, who continued to stare forward. "I'm very curious."

Mara would never forget what the man had said, even to this day.

"We're here, ma'am," her driver says, and Mara finds herself back in reality.

They sat under a stone alcove for what felt like years. The rain falls hard, making little movements of the earth as it pelts dirt and grass and stone. A stream runs slowly in front of them, taking the newly added rain with it to God knows where.

Calli thinks that the stream doesn't end, that it runs forever and would never run out. She imagines what she would find at the end of it, but then shakes the thought out of her head.

*No time for that.*

Sera has her back against the stone alcove. She holds her knees to her chest, staring at nothing. Tai sits next to her, his eyes closed for a moment. He told them it would be a short nap.

They hadn't found a cave like Tai's datapad told them. Instead, they found this alcove, and figured it would work just as well to keep their scent away from the runners. The rain helps with that too.

They aren't sure what they'll do when the rain ends.

They aren't even sure where they are.

Calli sighs. Their packs were lost in the chaos of the jungle. They have no food or clean water. They have their guns, and Calli finds comfort in that.

Odd that she'd find comfort in a weapon.

They don't say anything for minutes. Calli keeps to herself, counting the amount of shiny rocks she can find at the streams edge. A bright turquoise one sits next to a

ruddy brown one that's shaped like a bulging crescent moon. Next to that is a slim black one that looks like night, and next to that is...

*What's the point?*

The question that's been in her heart since the beginning of this suicide mission finally reaches its way up her spine, through her brain stem, and fights its way into her mind.

*What's the point?*

Since the beginning, she's been through more than most people. She's watched her mother die slowly in front of her. Watched a man slowly bleed out because of her. She watched as John's brains were scattered across the wall.

She continues to watch the stream.

What *was* the point of it? She tried, didn't she? She tried to save her mother, tried her hardest to help her, to get her the money she needs for a cure. She's a seventeen-year-old girl. What had she expected of herself? That she'd be able to do it? To succeed? She isn't a survivalist. She isn't a soldier. She's a child, and one that thought too much of herself to leave her dying mother on some foolish quest to delay the inevitable.

Her mother was going to die.

It wasn't any fault of her own.

But she was stupid in thinking that she could save her.

She's surprised that the tears don't come with this revelation. Not a revelation, really. A realization of the truth that was there since the beginning. It's been there, gnawing at her like a gnat on meat. Her mind tells her this, tells her that the truth is out.

You can go home now. Go home defeated, with nothing on your hands except the blood of those you failed... and killed.

At this point, she doesn't think she'll even make it home. At this point, the only good she's done is become a meal for bloodthirsty creatures.

"I feel sick," she says, not meaning to say it out loud.

"I feel hungry," Sera adds. "Haven't had anything since the other day."

Tai's eyes flutter open and he turns his wrist over to continue with his datapad. He smacks the screen once and sighs. "Thing's running out of juice."

Again, there's silence between them. Nothing but Tai's useless tapping on the device.

"I swear," he says, smacking the device again, "I thought I saw... wait a minute." He peers closer at the screen, as if it would make his viewing of it better. "I didn't see that before."

"What?" Sera asks, leaning in close to see.

Calli doesn't even turn around as her friends talk. She just keeps her eyes forward.

"That," Tai says, pointing. "That little indentation there."

"What is that?"

"Could be a cave."

"Could be?"

"It is one."

"You said this was a cave too."

"Well, I'm not right every time."

"So it's a cave," Sera says, moving back to her position against the alcove wall. "We'd be away from the runners, but that doesn't help our case getting out of this situation."

"One step at a time," Tai adds. "I'm sure that Aresh and Rian and John are coming after us."

"John's dead." She finds it odd how easily she's able to say the words. She didn't even give it a second thought. They flowed out of her, like the stream. "He's gone."

"Oh," Tai says. For a second, he stares at the stream too, then goes back to his device.

Calli isn't even sure if Aresh or Rian are alive, either. Nobody knows that they're out here. Nobody except them. And that's only two people to find three kids running around in a jungle that wants to kill them.

She knows that her father would never have thought like this. Deep down, she knows this. But deep down, she knows that she isn't her father. Not even close to him. She doesn't even think she's her mother.

*I'm Calli, she thinks. I'm a failure.*

They sit like that for a good twenty more minutes. Calli finds herself counting the droplets that fall over the lip of the alcove and onto the stones in front of her.

*One, two, three...*

By the time the next set of screeches pierce the sound of the rain, she counted fifty-seven drops.

"They're back," Tai says. "I thought we lost them."

"They don't give up easily," Sera says, grabbing for her pistol.



*Fifty-eight, fifty-nine...*

"We'd better get out of here," Tai pleads. "Head for that cave. It's not far from here."

*Sixty-one, sixty-two...*

"We can make it if we book it," Sera says.

"And we can take a shortcut if we just hop down on the other side of the stream."

"Good plan?"

"Good plan."

*Sixty-seven, sixty-eight.*

"Calli?"

She hears her name being called, but it doesn't even phase her that someone is trying to talk to her.

"Calli."

She slowly turns her head, seeing the hand that Sera has placed there.

"You okay?"

She tries her hardest to nod. *Yes, I'm okay. No, not really.*

"We need to go now," Sera adds, then hands her the pistol that sits next to Calli.

"Okay," she says, then stands up. Her bones creak and grind as the joints move and conjoin. It's a struggle to stand. It's a struggle to function.

And yet she moves.

The trio cross the stream over to the other side, where there's another hill. Tai jumps down first.

His foot slides on mud, and he trips, his momentum carrying him down the hill at an alarming rate. When he finally reaches the ground, he rolls onto his back and groans.

"Tai," Sera yells, then slowly slides down the hill after him. Calli follows her.

*One bad thing after another.*

"Ow ow ow ow," Tai says, holding his ankle. "I turned it. Pretty bad. Shit."

"Lemme see," Sera says. She rolls his pants up at the ankle and slightly touches it. Tai yells out. "Sorry! Sorry. Damn." She looks at Calli. "I don't think he'll be able to walk right now."

Calli nods. "We'll have to carry him." At this point, it isn't her that's talking. She feels as though she's outside of her own body and an imposter -- someone who thinks she knows what she's doing -- has taken over.

"I'll do it," Sera says. "You okay with that, Tai?"

He just nods, still cringing at his hurt ankle.

After they get him on his feet, Sera puts her arm around his waist to hold him up. Calli grabs his pistol and hands it to him.

"You can still shoot," she tells him, and he nods.

"Cave's that way," he says, looking at his wrist.

Calli turns to look up at the ridge they just jumped from.

Nothing.

But she feels as if they're being watched. She aims her weapon around, scanning for any threat. Nothing. The jungle is quiet, save for the pitter patter of rain. No birds call out. No leaves shake. Nothing.

Nothing.

Tai sort of walk-hops his way forward, and Sera holds him up.

"You're kinda heavy," she tells him.

"Thank you?" he manages to say.

Again, Calli feels like she isn't in control of her own body. Like she's doing this on instinct rather than actual willpower. Her mind is focused, razor sharp. The only thing she really feels is the rain on her dark skin.

"How far is this place?" she asks.

"Less than a mile," Tai says.

So not far, then. They walk for what feels like hours, though Calli knows it's only been about ten minutes. The next screech comes, followed by a second one.

Calli turns...

Only to see a runner heading straight for them.

"Hey!" she yells out, though she meant to tell them that they're here. She fires off a few rounds and nails the creature in the chest. It falls a few feet away from her, crying out before it finally dies.

"Damn," Sera says. "Tai, I'm going to put you down here, okay? Just for a second."

Tai nods. "Yeah, I'm good." After she lays him against a tall tree, he holds his own weapon out, aiming at anything that moves.

The blood screams of the runners seem like they're all around them, though Calli can tell it's just the echo.

"Another one!" Sera yells. Calli turns toward her direction and sees another monstrosity heading right for them. This one leaps into the air and lands right in front of Sera.

Sera falls back, but fires her gun at the thing as she does. The runner takes it in the chest, and screeches as the pain sets in. Tai fires off another shot, this one connecting with the creature's throat. It falls back, choking on its own blood.

"There anymore?" Sera yells as she stands back up. She rushes over to Tai to help him to his feet.

Calli scans the environment. It's hard to see through the rain, as mist has started to set in. Wisps of the stuff begin to rise and cloud far off objects. She can't tell where they'd be coming from.

They were going to die.

"C'mon!" Tai yells as Sera begins to carry him off. "We have an opening."

Calli follows them, making sure to check over her shoulder every once and awhile. The screeches stop, but that could be because they're being hunted. Runners are natural predators, so it would only make sense that the creatures would start to use different tactics.

Sera carries him for a little longer before stopping.

"I need a second," Tai says. He sets his bad foot on the ground to test it, but brings it back up, hissing. "Ow."

"How much farther?" Calli asks.

"Not much," Tai says, checking his map again. "Just beyond that field."

And it is a field. There, encased in a circle of trees like it's a hidden place, is a swath of land that has only a few trees within it. It's wide and open, and Calli can see the sky clearly.

"It's on the other side of that?" she asks.

"That's what the map is telling me," Tai says.

"We'd be left wide open," Sera adds.

"We don't really have a choice," Calli says.

But she knows that if they do run out there, blindly like a couple of morons, they'd be run down and chewed on in mere seconds. The very fact that they've used the jungle for cover at this point is miracle. Take that away, and they're easy targets.

The trees themselves are low to the ground, spaced out equally amongst one another like breadcrumbs.

In the distance, she can hear the warble of a scaled bird, high above them.

"I have an idea," she says more to herself than to her friends. "I have an idea."

Sera and Tai look to her, as if she's either lost it or gone mad. Either works for her.

"Tai, does your datapad make any loud noises?"

He arches an eyebrow. "I can certainly program it to. Why?"

"The runners," he continues, "they're highly sensitive to sound. It helps them hunt for prey in the jungle. They can easily distinguish where a sound is coming from and rush towards it. Once they get hooked on a distinctive sound, they rush towards it, thinking it may be food. If we can confuse them with a loud sound, we can drown out our own movements in the jungle."

He nods. "Makes sense. You wanna use it as a distraction."

"It'll mean sacrificing your invention."

He takes his arm off of Sera and reaches for the wristband. He takes it off and begins to tap the screen. "No matter. I can make another one when I get home."

*What a strange kid.*

He hands her the device with a smile. "Just tap the screen and it'll give off a really annoying noise for a whole minute."

"Perfect," she says, taking the datapad. A big green button is on the screen. "So what we're going to do is set this somewhere, activate the noise, and make a run for it for the cave."

"Sounds like a plan," Sera says.

"I like it," Tai adds.

"Yeah? It's kinda dumb." Calli knows it for a fact.

"Our choices are kinda slim," Sera says, smiling. "Worth a shot."

She smiles. "Okay," she says. She takes the device and runs it down a few feet in the "ring" of trees surrounding the field and places it at the base of a tree.

*Better to have them search for it when they get here.*

She turns her head, looking at both Sera and Tai, who stand at the edge of the ring, ready to run.

"Ready?" Calli calls out.

"Yeah," Tai says.

Calli takes a breath.

She presses the button.

The sound is loud, like a blaring siren.

She yells "go", but her voice is drowned out by the annoying whine of the siren.

Sera and Tai take off. Tai tries his best to run, but his foot doesn't allow him to move all that fast. Sera looks as though she's about to try to pick him up. Calli takes off to catch up to them, her weapon drawn. She looks all around her, checking to see if there's anything moving towards them. The open field feels like it stretches out forever, that they'll never reach the other side of it.

*We can. We will.*

They pass the first tree. A second tree is up ahead, a large fallen log laid up against it. All they have to do is pass that tree and...

She doesn't see the first runner as it lands in front of them. Sera and Tai step back as the creature rears back and lets out a loud shriek. Sera pulls out her pistol, but the runner quickly spins, its tail whipping at them. Sera and Tai go flying in different direction. Tai slams against the log against the tree. Sera lands right next to Calli, who brings up her weapon now that her friends are out of the way. She fires, taking no real thought as to how many bullets she has left. At first, the creature looks as though it's been hit by a rock -- annoyed, undeterred. A second set of gunshots cry out from Sera's pistol, and the creature hits the ground, dead.

"You okay?" Calli says to Sera as she helps her up.

"Yeah, I'm good," she says back. "Tai-"

They rush over to him, his back still to the tree. He's groaning, and Calli can see why.

He's holding a sharp, thick stick to his stomach.

It takes Calli a second to realize that the stick is *through* him.

"Oh God," Sera says, going up to him. "Tai..."

He screams as she touches him.

"Don't..." he says, his voice cracked. Blood starts to spill from his mouth. "It hurts."

"Shit," Sera says. Her voice too is starting to go. She stammers, trying to find the right words for her to use. Calli watches as her friend tries to process this information, tries to figure out what to do. Then, she looks to Calli. Her face tells her everything.

*What do we do?*

She looks at Tai, gripping the sharp stake like it's a knife in his belly. She looks at the log and sees other spear-tipped, cut off branches all over it. He was lucky more than one didn't get him.

She realizes that she's just staring. Again, there's that out-of-body experience. The real Calli is floating next to this one, crying for Tai.

This Calli just stands there.

"Calli!" Sera yells.

The out-of-body Calli and the imposter Calli merge, and she crouches down low.

"We can't pull him out," she says. "We do that, he'll bleed out. We don't have any medical supplies to help him."

"Then what do we do?"

Calli searches for the words, the words other than "leave him". But they're there, right there on her lips. She almost says them at first.

Tai groans, then coughs. Blood-spit forms on the grass in front of him.



"You need to go," he says. "I'm not gonna do you much good anymore."

"Fuck no. We aren't leaving you." Sera's voice is hard, like a shell. She's trying to bottle up the emotion at the source, pinch it off and shut it down. "That's not an option."

"It is an option," Tai says. "And you're gonna take it. Or you'll die."

"But-"

Tai's eyes shut hard as another wave of pain hits him. "Dammit," he says. "This sucks."

Again, Sera looks to Calli.

Calli shakes her head.

"You need to go," he says. "I've made my decision. There's no point in you sticking around."

Calli leans down low, right down in front of Tai. She grips the stake both at the end of it and where it begins to protrude from Tai's stomach. She pulls both ends hard, snapping the rest of the stake off. With it shorter, he'd be able to get out.

"We aren't going to leave you," she says.

But before she can touch him, he holds a hand up.

"I've made my decision," he says again.

Calli stops, her hands ready to help. She puts them down. There's no point now, is there?

"Tai," Sera says, her voice disappointed.

"You need to go," he says, closing his eyes. "Just... just give me my gun, okay? That's all I want. May be able to buy you some time to get to the cave."

Sera looks as though she wants to say something, but she doesn't. The words don't come out.

Calli picks up the pistol that he dropped during the fight. She ejects the magazine and checks his ammo. She slaps in a fresh magazine and hands it back to him.

"You're topped off," she says, her own voice sounding like it's going to break.

*How much more of this can I handle?*

He smiles at her as he takes the weapon, then coughs again. "This place is kinda nice, when you really think about it," he says. "I mean really. Minus all the psychos and the predators. There's a reason they call this place a garden."

Calli knows he's trying to lighten the mood, but all that does is form tears in her eyes.

He takes in a few breaths. "Seriously," he says, "you'd better get a move on before they come back. You keep running straight ahead, you'll hit the cave in no time. Lie low. Find a way to get to our friends."

"We'll come back for you," Calli says. "I promise you that."

"I know you will," he says, taking in more breaths, each one giving him a pained look on his face. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

Sera stands up, her nose sniffing. She tries to say something, but nothing comes out.

"Go," he says. "Before they come back."

Calli can't turn. She can't turn around.

*Every person... every person I care about is either dead or dying. This has to stop.*

"Okay," she says. She touches Sera on the shoulder, to get her to move, if anything. Sera does so, and turns around, her head hung low.

"Be careful," Tai says, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

*To him, he's already dead.*

She nods at him. "You too," she says.

She walks away.

From him.

From a lot of things.

The rain stops, and the jungle is silent.

#

"Fuck."

Nevaire kicks a small rock so that it falls into the nearest puddle.

"Fuck."

Ende stands next to him, low to the ground, staring at the mud-soaked ground.

"No doubt about it," she says, looking up and down the road. "They're in that mountain."

Ahead of them, miles off, is the piercing peak of a large mountain. Nevaire remembers seeing the tip of it from the top of the wall back in Belhall, but he had never been this close to it before. Nor had he ever thought he'd ever have to go to it.

*Things change. Especially lately.*

They had been tracking the rovers that left the compound for the last few hours, following the tracks left in the dirt. The road itself led to this mountain, and Nevaire curses himself.

"There's going to be a lot of them in there," he says, kicking another rock. "A whole, big hornet's nest. Kick that thing, and we're dead."

"We need our own hornets," Ende suggests.

"Ah," he says, waving her off. "That ship's sailed. Could've enlisted that Talon guy to help us, but since we left our job to make sure those kids were safe, I don't think Aresh is going to let us near the guy."

"Then what do you suppose we do?"

He rubs his eyes. He needs a cup of coffee. Or a drink. A strong one. A really strong one.

He shrugs. He's fresh all out of ideas. Ones he'd rather take, anyway.

There is one idea, but it's one he doesn't even want to entertain.

"You're sure they're in the mountain," he says to her again.

She smirks playfully at him. "I'm sure. Tracks lead up to the front of it. There's a cave entrance not too far off from it."

"Hardened underground, I bet."

"Makes you wonder where they got it."

He nods. He *does* wonder how they got it. A mountain, underground base? How did Mara get the resources for that? And how was she able to get it so quickly?

*Just call him.*

Nevaire groans.

"What's wrong?" Ende says.

He looks back at her. "Sorry, kid," he says, and he pulls out a datapad, switching it to video view. He taps the screen a few times and sighs. "I've got a message for Admiral Dannowitz. Tell him I caught him that fish he was looking for."

Her legs... they just don't feel anymore.

Not because she and Sera have been walking for what feels like hours looking for this cave. Not because they left Tai to die.

It's because she's tired. Just so very tired.

The jungle has heated up since the rain stopped. Muggy heat chokes the air, and her lungs. She feels sweaty everywhere. She realizes that she needs the equivalent of seven showers. She's also hungry. Hungrier than she's ever been.

For food.

For relief.

For this to all be over.

Sera hasn't spoken since they left. Not a word. Which Calli finds odd. She's always been the talkative one, at least back home she was.

Things are changing.

"Can't be much farther," Calli says. She's been talking more herself. It's odd, this role reversal. There's a slight wind that dances through the trees and cools Calli's skin.

She thinks of sleeping in her own bed.

She thinks of all of this being over.

Her legs slog, feeling heavier and heavier with each step. Moving and moving, it's all she can do.

It's all anyone can do.

She swats away a bug and continues to shut down her mind.

*Step step step.*

*You left him.*

*Step step step.*

*Everyone you care about...*

*Step step step.*

*Gone or on their way out.*

"Damn it," Calli says, frustrated. "Where is this thing?"

Sera stands behind her and looks up, not saying a word.

"It's a cave. Should be easy to find, right?"

Again, there's nothing from Sera. Her eyes, now dark and heavy, move around like slugs on pavement. She's trying to help, Calli can tell that. But she isn't all there.

*Is anyone anymore?*

"We'd better find this quick," Calli says, continuing to walk. "There hasn't been a sickstorm in a good while. Could be we get another one real soon."

Sera just continues to look at her. Her nose flares.

"Why don't you feel anything?"

The words come out odd. Calli never thought those words could be put in that combination, let alone come out of her friend's mouth.

"What?" is all she says.

"We left him to die."

"But the cave--"

"Fuck the cave! I want to talk about what we did!"

"We can talk about that later."

"No," Sera says, her voice raising. "We're going to talk about it now."

"Sera," Calli groans, "we have no idea where we are. We could have more runners on us at any time. Can we please just move on?"

"Why don't you want to talk about it? It just happened."

"We can talk about it later."

"No," she says. She stops, right there in the mud, her boots covered in the stuff.

"No, we're going to talk about it now."

"What is there to talk about?" Calli says, spreading her arms. "It happened. It's over."

"That was Tai out there! Our friend!"

"I know that, Sera. I do. But he's gone now."

"Don't you even feel bad?"

What kind of question is that? "I do, it's just..."

Sera scoffs, then rubs her forehead. Calli crosses her arms. She suddenly feels vulnerable, as if her feelings and emotions are out there, on the ground, scattered like puzzle pieces. She isn't sure how to put them back together, what form they should take, or if she'd get the final product wrong.

She isn't sure what to feel.

"We've changed," Sera finally says, quietly. Moreso to herself than to Calli, she figures. "We've changed a lot."

"We'll come back for him," Calli says, but Sera waves her off.

"It's already too late."

"You don't know that."



"No!" Her eyes now find Calli's. They're hard, full of fire. "No. I do know that. We live on Kipos, Calli. This planet is eating us alive, one by one. This is not the life we were promised."

*We were promised a garden, one that would be our home.*

"But we have to keep going," Calli says. "If we don't, then Tai will have died for nothing."

"He didn't have to die in the first place," Sera retorts. "He didn't. Neither did John. We don't even know if Aresh and Rian are alive either."

"No, we don't." Calli shrugs. "We don't know anything right now. Except we know where there's a cave, where there's shelter. That's something we know, and it's something that Tai gave to us before he died. So we should go there. Cool our heads. Figure out what we need to do next. I'm going there, Sera. I want you to come with me."

Sera rubs her eyes, but keeps her hands there for a moment. She inhales slowly, and during the exhale, Calli swears she hears her speak under her breath.

"It's not fair it's not fair it's not fair."

*It isn't. I know that all too well.*

Calli starts walking, hoping that the movement will get Sera to move. The gambit pays off, and she can hear Sera's footsteps behind her. Each footfall sounds like defeat, however. They drag, stomp, an earthquake packed into her feet. She doesn't look at her friend. Calli just keeps walking.

They find the cave by high noon, against the rock face of a large mountain. Calli tries to look up it and sees the top.

"Wow," she says aloud, though she didn't mean to.

Sera's managed to keep up. She doesn't say anything to Calli as she stops at the cave entrance. The entrance itself isn't very tall. It's covered by bushes and foliage, so they almost missed it, but Calli was looking for it.

"After you," Calli says, and Sera crouches low to get inside. They both pull out flashlights from their pocket and light them up.

Darkness falls around them. The moisture from the ground has an odd smell, one of stone and wetness. Some droplets of water kiss her head and give her a tiny respite from the humidity.

"There's water here," Calli says, and her voice echoes off of the walls of the cave. "Maybe it's drinkable?"

"Doubt it," Sera says, her voice cold and tired.

Calli ignores the jab and keeps crouch-walking. Eventually, the cave opens up a bit and they're able to stand. After everything they've been through, they don't question the idea of exploring the cave. It's odd, and Calli thinks about it for a moment and considers bringing it up to Sera, but she puts it aside. She feels as though her friend isn't up for talking at the moment.

"The flashlights show stalactite ceilings and an almost smooth floor. The walls themselves are almost circular, almost as if...

"Was this place carved out?" Calli asks. "I don't know much about caves, but aren't they supposed to be, I don't know, a little more... cave-y?"

Sera doesn't look at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, this place looks too perfect for a cave. Like this place was carved out. Maybe by a drill or something."

"How?" Sera says. "That entrance was too small for drills to come through here. I don't think that's the case."

She had her there. "Weird," Calli says. She shines her flashlight on the smooth walls and admires how smooth they actually are. They almost look like glass. She looks to see what she can find on the other side and-

"Whoa," she says out loud.

The wall is... *glowing*.

She shines her light over more parts of the wall, and more parts of it start to glow a yellowish color.

Almost like gold.

"Sera," Calli says. Her words--her very heart--is in her throat now. "This cave... it's auracite."

Sera quickly walks up next to her and stares at the wall. Her mouth slowly opens.

"Could I be wrong?" Calli asks. Despite everything, she can't get rid of the smile on her face.

"It's possible," Sera says. "I can't really say for sure. It *looks like* auracite. Very similar to that stuff that Aresh was carrying with him."

Calli begins to laugh. She doesn't mean to, but she does. Tears form at the edges of her eyes.

*We've found it. We've found it. We've found it.*

"We've found it!" she says aloud this time. Again, her voice echoes off of the wall, booming and bouncing off of every surface. She waves the light around each part of

the wall, and the auracite within begins to glow faintly. She covers every inch until the large swath of cave wall is glowing gold.

*A garden.*

Even Sera smiles, though faintly. "We've found it," she says. "How do we get it out?"

Calli, still smiling, stops moving around so much. She hadn't thought of that, but regardless, it was still something to be happy about. They'd *found* it. Here, in front of them, was the answer to their problems. The money that would get Calli's mother her cure. The money that would get the three of them a ticket off of Kipos and somewhere where they could actually make a life for themselves. A life they call their own.

*A different life.*

"We'll figure that out," Calli says, not truly believing her own words. She wishes Aresh was here. Rian, too. They'd know what to do.

*They'd figure this out.*

Calli touches the wall, feeling its smoothness. She detects some warmth there, but she figures that's just her imagination. She imagines that inside the rock is a radiant heat that has the potential to burn that could spread to the entire jungle.

"Well," Sera says, stepping away from the wall, "we'd better make this our shelter. Could be we'll be here awhile."

Calli nods and follows her. They decide that the area closest to the entrance to the cave would be ideal. Quicker to get in and out and search for food and water. But Sera sits cross-legged on the cold stone ground.

"I don't feel hungry or thirsty right now," she says. "We should wait awhile before going out. Make sure that the runners pass us by."

Calli nods. "Good idea." She explores the cave a bit more, but doesn't go very far because the cool air is starting to make her shiver. She heads back to the entrance to find Sera still sitting cross-legged, her head in her hands.

"Hey," Calli says as she approaches.

Sera doesn't move. "Hey."

Calli sits down next to her. "This cave's bigger than we expected."

"Mhmm."

"I imagine that somebody could live here."

"Yep."

Calli sighs. "Are you just going to sit there and make sounds forever? Because that's what it sounds like you're doing." Sera glares at her, her eyes suddenly poison. Calli shakes her head. "I'm sorry. Shouldn't have said that."

"Yeah."

They sit in silence for a while. Minutes. Maybe an hour. Calli isn't too sure. Outside, the light begins to start to fade. The sun had been out for a while, and although the humidity outside was almost overwhelming, inside the cave was cool and comfortable, though Calli had to turn her back a few times to make sure that they weren't the only things breathing in the cave. She'd heard stories of gross, winged creatures that lived in caves like this one.

It's odd, though. Calli doesn't feel uncomfortable because of the cold air, or the idea of things living in the cave with them.

It's everything.

Everything that's happened to them.

For some reason, it's rushing to her. She's reminded of swimming in the lake with Mom all those years ago. Back before Silsparrow actually owned it, it was fair game for everyone to use. People would swim in it all the time. Calli and her mother went there a few times, before the war was actually a war.

Her mother--more beautiful than Calli can remember--held Calli as she took her out into the water. The sun was warm, but not too hot, leaving her skin comfortable to be in. The wind was calm and kissable. Everything, perfect.

Calli was dunked under the water that day. The first time. And like a child, she giggled. She had fun. She was with her mother. It was perfect.

She's getting dunked again, but she isn't laughing.

More cool air from inside the cave kisses her arms, causing her to break out in goosebumps.

"We're gonna need to make a fire or something," she says.

Sera nods. "Yeah. Probably should go out and find wood soon. I want to rest first."

Calli stares at the ground for a moment, staring at the rock, at what was underneath it. There's auracite under their feet as well. She smiles. They're sitting on so much money, so much opportunity.

She can't wait to show this to Aresh and Rian.

"Did you ever think," Sera says after a moment, "that we'd ever be here? Like, really think about it? In this situation. Right here and now."

Calli shrugs. "No. Not really."

"I have," Sera says. Her eyes are open, but Calli suspects she isn't really there right now. "I've always thought about this place. Kipos, I mean. We were born here, you and me. Our parents were born here, but our grandparents... they were from somewhere else, weren't they. They found this place and called it a garden."

Calli nods. The colony ships arrived on Kipos many years before to set up the colonies, and a new home for humanity. They called it Kipos. A garden.

A home.

"What a big fucking lie," Sera says, and she pulls her legs close to her chest and buries her face into her knees. "It was all one big lie."

Calli watches her friend fall apart. It's like watching an old piece of metal rust before her eyes. Eventually, the shine goes away, leaving it brittle and dirty and broken.

"It doesn't have to be that way," Calli finds herself saying. "It doesn't."

Sera doesn't say anything. She just keeps her head down.

"I'm serious. We were born here. You were right about that. We were told from a young age that this was our home, our planet. I grew up on stories of my father, of people like my father who braved the unknown to find new frontiers so people could live. Earth is so far away now, but we've found other places to live. It's bad here. You're right. It's always been bad, really. But... it doesn't have to be."

Now Sera raises her head, then shakes it. "I don't believe that."

"Why not?"

"Because we're in a goddamn cave. Our friends are either dead or dying. Your Mom..."

Calli's features go hard. Sera hasn't said anything about her mother for a long time now. She waits for her friend to go there. To say the words.

"Say it," Calli says. "Go ahead. Say. It."

*Say that she's dying. That she has no chance.*

*Make everything we've done out to be like it was for nothing.*

Sera puts her head back in her knees. She's hiding. "Forget it."

Calli decides to forget it.

"I came with you," Sera says, "because I had nothing for me in Belhall." Her words come out in pieces. One by one, they spill out. "Nothing but you."

Calli looks at her, but doesn't speak.

"Belhall was a home, but it wasn't the one for me. I knew that. I didn't belong there. It took more from me than it gave." She shakes her head. "My parents. They always talked up leaving Kipos one day. Talked about it all the time to me. And stupid me, I'd always just smile and go along with it. Like it could actually happen. It was good. When they died, Kipos started to look increasingly like the place I'd grow old on. I didn't want that. I was thirteen at the time and there were already too many ghosts following me around."

Calli never once knew Sera to talk about her feelings like this, much less talk about how she felt when her parents died. She's never known this Sera. This one is different.

"But you were there," she continues. "Weren't you. You helped get out of something I thought I wouldn't get out of, like all I ever did was fall to the floor and you were always there to just pick me up and dust me off. How do you do that?"



Calli is silent for a moment. She doesn't know how to respond. "I guess," she says, "I guess it's because I care about you. Always did."

Sera doesn't smile. "And that's why I came with you. That's why I'm sitting here next to you, talking about this shit. Trying to help your Mom live so you don't ever have to worry about falling."

"I've fallen a few times myself, Sera."

She shrugs. "Yeah."

"We're going to be okay."

"Yeah."

Calli has another word in her throat--another attempt to console--when she hears...

"Footsteps?" Sera says, turning her head towards the back of the cave.

Before any of them can do anything, four figures with assault rifles appear from the shadows. They're all wearing powder blue jumpsuits, and most of them are wearing mismatched riot gear with the Silsparrow sigil painted over with a red X. Before they can even wonder where they came from, the silence of the cave is broken.

"Don't move," comes a hard voice. A woman's.

The woman they know as Kait comes out from the shadows, her pistol raised and aimed right at Calli's forehead.

"Get up," she says. "I'm taking you to Mara."

#

They follow the tracks until sundown, but Aresh has a feeling of where Mara is. It's there, deep in the back of his mind, a place he never thought he'd ever try to remember again.

*The mountain.*

It's the only explanation, at least the one that seems to make sense to him.

*That's where... everything changed.*

"Tracks end here," Rian says. She's crouched down, looking at the ruts that Mara's rover made in the ground. They disappeared along the grass, where mud and rain covered them. "Think I can find 'em again, though."

"I think I know where they are," Aresh says, running it through his brain again. "I'm sure of it."

Rian stands up straight, giving him a look that says *Where?*

He points. "See that mountain? Years ago, back during the war, there was a hidden compound inside of it. We found some... horrible things inside of it."

Again, her stare asks questions, but she doesn't ask them. Courtesy, Aresh supposes. Most people don't like talking about traumatic instances, and Rian is probably one of them, he figures. From one traumatized person to another, talking about it certainly can help people. Silence can help just as much sometimes.

"Well," she says, sighing, "what do you want to do?"

He thinks for a moment. He considers his options. If that's where they were headed, then that's where they need to go.

But...

"Then let's go," Rian says, following the trail.

Aresh follows alongside her, taking a sip from his nearly empty canteen. He'd need a refill soon. The mountain isn't all that far away, but if he and she wanted to continue long after that...

He remembers being thirsty back then, too. Nearly eleven years ago.

He's never told anyone this, save for the officers that rescued him. Not even Lucas. God, he would *never* tell Lucas this. Definitely not the man he loved.

Aresh, Mara, and William were inside the mountain. Not very deep, but deep enough to find that the structure inside of it had been cut out by drills and mining lasers. There was the entrance to a facility here, built into the rock walls of the mountain. White walls, complete with no distinguishing features, greeted them when they found it.

So did rebel colonists with guns.

They came pouring out of the entrance, their weapons firing. Aresh fell back into the tunnel, watching as Mara and William found cover behind part of the rock.

"Shit," he said to himself. He popped from cover and let out a burst of fire, but found himself retreating to safety. Bits of rock chipped away from the gunfire and peppered his face. He looked back over to Mara and William, but only William stood behind the rock, popping out and firing back. The rebels were shouting orders, but their aim was off.

*These aren't soldiers.* Sometimes he would forget that. *These are farmers and miners and engineers. Not killers.*

Their aim went wild in some spots, there had been some sharpshooters in the bunch. Some of the shots almost pegged William.

But where was Mara?

Aresh peeked out to get a good look before gunfire sent him back. He caught a glimpse of fire red hair and a blazing rifle. He leaned out again, sure of what he saw.

Mara had crouched low behind a set of stalactites and flanked the attackers while William gave her covering fire. Now at an opportune position, she ripped into them, killing at least four before more retreated inside.

"Mara, wait," William called out, but she already ran inside. He looked at Aresh. "We can't leave her," he said.

"Agreed," Aresh answered, and they warily approached the facility. Aresh pulled out his comms and tried to turn it on. He got nothing but static. "Damn. Place must be shielded. I could get outside and give HQ a call, get backup."

"I don't know what's happening inside here," William said. "We're going after Mara without backup."

Aresh agreed. *Leave no one behind.* It was a saying that they taught you in boot camp. It was certainly one that he prescribed to, a sort of mantra that he carried with him into every firefight. He knew that William and Mara carried it with them as well (Mara took longer to prescribe to that ideology, but that was Mara).

He followed William as he stepped through the entrance. Inside were clean, pristine white walls. The sweet smell of sterilization and lab equipment competed with the smell of blood and gunfire. Three more bodies of rebel colonists lie on the floor, dead.

*Mara does good work.*

She always had. Aresh figured that she always would. She was a born warrior, through and through. Though, even warriors can fall.

He wasn't a warrior. Never considered himself to be one. But he wasn't going to allow himself to do nothing while two of them risked their lives.

The hallway they entered came to a small, airtight door, which was forced open. The control panel next to it had been shot.

William went in first. Aresh followed.

They entered a room they wish they hadn't.

It was large, about three levels high. The ground floor was full of computers, glass rooms, desks, machines, and the like. Aresh could see the second floor had the same, and he assumed that it was also the same on the third floor.

Mara stood in front of them, her eyes scanning the large room.

"It's a lab," Aresh thought but ended up saying. "In a mountain?"

Bodies and shell casings lie all over the floor. Mara had done her job.

"What is this?" William said, but nobody had an answer.

William fell at the sound of the first gunshot. As he fell, Mara turned her gun to the second floor, where a combatant aimed her rifle. Mara fired, killing the colonist. More sprang out from every corner, screaming out and yelling for them to put down their weapons. William crawled behind a desk, and Aresh took cover in the hallway. Mara herself stood in the center still, her weapon raised, but not firing.

William drags his wounded leg back behind the desk with him, leaving behind a small trail of blood. The suit, Aresh knew, would seal up the wound quick. Still nobody is firing. Mara lowers her weapon and raises her arms.

She knows she's beaten.

"Go," William said. Aresh looks between him and Mara. "Go and call backup. We'll be okay."

Aresh shook his head. He wasn't going to leave them.

*No one left behind.*

*No one left behind.*

*No one left behind.*

"That's an order," William mouthed.

Aresh thought they were past that. They were past orders and the chain of command. They'd been through too much, too much for them to see themselves as soldiers anymore, but family. Orders and all of that formality was just a show they put on for the grunts, for the commanders.

He wanted to say no. Wanted to say "fuck that" and wade into the open and shoot. Get Mara her gun back. Have her take out every fucking soul in the goddamn facility. Get everyone out of this damned place.

But he didn't. He nodded. Said *I'll come back for you* in his mind. And he left the facility. Ran outside and called for backup as his comms came back online.

Silsparrow answered immediately. Homed in on his position. They sent a team to pick him up and take him away. He didn't even get to say his peace, tell them to help his friends in that mountain. Instead, they just grabbed him and shoved him in the back of a gunship. Later, they told him that the facility was a rebel colonist base that had once been a Silsparrow weather research facility. Everyone was killed inside in the resulting firefight with Silsparrow marines, who detonated charges along key points of the mountain to get inside.

They told him that both William and Mara were killed in the resulting firefight trying to escape together. An explosion took them out, making their bodies unidentified. It was dental records that confirmed this. They told Aresh that.

And now Mara was alive.

He had questions for her. He was looking forward to this.

Aresh realizes how far he and Rian have walked as he comes back into himself.

Rian has stopped. She's been following the tracks of the kids, and Aresh followed.

"What's wrong?" he says, trying to see what she can.

Ahead of them is the body of a runner.

"Shit," he says, then draws his weapon. He looks to the wilderness around him, trying to see if there are others, more alive runners around.

"We're safe," Rian says quietly. "This one's been dead for quite some time."

"What happened?"

She checks the carcass. "Bullet in the throat. Nice shot."

"Think the kids did this?"

"Only one way to find out," she says, then starts running, following the trail of blood and runners that the kids left behind. They find another one dead, then another.

Another.

They come to an open area of jungle, where, in the middle of a small field are a few trees.

They approach the nearest one, where a log has fallen on its side and...

Aresh sees him.

He sees Tai.

Rian doesn't say anything at first as she approaches the body. He's slumped over the log, his stomach pierced by a branch. His pistol and an empty clip lie nearby. Shell casings are littered around his body.

Tai is dead.

His body, lying soaked in rain and blood, lies still. His eyes, closed. His face...

Aresh's heart drops. Falls to the ground. Falls into pieces right next to the shell casings. The boy is dead. Gone. He made a promise to Tai. To himself.

*No one left behind.*

And now, both Tai and John were dead. Two people under Aresh's watch that were gone. He feels his legs buckle, but somehow he continues to stand. His whole body feels numb. He allowed a child to die. A kid. Didn't matter if he made the decision to come here. *He was just a kid.* He hadn't experienced life yet.

And it's all his fault.

He was the one who found the kid on Everis. He was the one who sought him out for his skills, his abilities. He convinced Tai to come along, promising him riches and adventure.

And now he was dead.

Rian just stands there, her calm face on Tai's broken body. Her eyes aren't moving, but Aresh can see them for what they are.

Rian is distraught.

She's bound to fall apart too. Right with Aresh. He's so ready for it, to just drop to his knees and give up. Go home. Go back to Lucas and to Edward and never let them go. Tell them that he loves them and that he didn't mean to leave, but he had to. For them.

He made a choice.

And it was the wrong one.

It got people killed. He never thought he'd get anyone killed ever again.



"We should bury him," Rian says after a moment. "Wouldn't want the runners to come back and...yeah. We should."

"Yeah." Aresh's voice sounds hollow in his own ears. Like it's not his own.

Rian opens up her pack and finds a small shovel that's often used to dig trenches. She starts digging, right there in the ground next to Tai's body. Aresh doesn't have one of those shovels, so instead he helps her dig by moving dirt around. The hole takes an hour to dig. Aresh's hands are covered in dirt and some of his own blood. His hand has nicks and scrapes all over it.

*I deserve so much more.*

They wrench Tai free from the log and gently lay his body in the ground. As they do so, the sun begins to set, leaving the sky a sad purple. The dirt falls on Tai's body, until he's nothing more than a mound.

Rian wipes her dirty hands on her pants, then stands up straight, looking down at what they had done.

Aresh does the same, though his mind is elsewhere.

*I did this. I'm at fault.*

If Rian could read his mind, he's sure that she'd agree.

They don't bother to put bags over their heads this time.

Cool air kisses their skin as they're forcefully moved further into the cave.

Hurried voices, shallow breathes, and flashlights guide them. With every flash of light, the walls glow gold, the cave itself a wonder to witness were it not for the gun that's in Calli's back. Sera's behind her, trying to keep up.

*Mara's here? In this cave?*

The soldiers snake their way through the tunnel, not stopping for a second, their pace undeterred. Calli nearly trips a few times on the notched and uneven ground. Her hands aren't bound, but the one called Kait told her that, if she moved an inch in the direction she didn't want her to go, she'd get a hole in her head.

Calli isn't thinking much. She concentrates on her movements, now more so after almost falling. She wonders if she'll forget to walk in the next few minutes, and they'll shoot her for not moving. All the while, a thought burrows its way into her subconscious. She buries it down there. She doesn't want to think too much. Her mind is in total survival mode right now.

The question resurfaces.

*Mara's here.*

It comes out as a statement in her mind. How deep does this cave go?

As if to answer her, the tunnel grows wider and wider, until she can see a large, open cavernous room. It's almost as if the entire mountain is hollowed out, though Calli

knows she's only seeing a small part of it right now. There are more soldiers now, each of them watching as the two prisoners are brought into their home.

*This isn't like Home. Not at all.* All the aspects of what Home was are not here. It doesn't look comforting. It doesn't look inviting.

It looks like a fortress.

In front of them, white walls built into the mountain wall act as an entrance. They look smooth, but sterile. Calli is reminded of the quarantine hospital back in Belhall. It's too clean, too whitewashed. She doesn't think about why there's some sort of facility inside the mountain. No, she doesn't think much right now. Only their survival.

"Wait here," Kait says. Calli stops. Sera stands next to her and turns her attention towards her. Sera's blue eyes are wide, scanning. Calli sees fear in them, but a fear that's been placed in a brave girl.

She doesn't want to know what Sera sees in her.

Kait walks up the short ramp and through the sliding doors into the sterile facility. Moments later, she comes out with Mara in tow.

"Right here," Kait says, then stops at the top of the ramp while Mara descends and walks up to the two girls, stopping in front of the two of them. Mara eyes them both.

Calli feels as if she's a household item being inspected.

Her eyes fall on Calli.

"You're missing one," she says. "Where is he?"

*Tai. How did she know?*

Neither of them say it. It's an odd feeling. Calli knows that if she says it, his death will become real. She experienced it. She was there when he told them to go. But saying it...

"He's dead."

Calli looks at Sera. Her friend's eyes are hard, a far cry from what they were earlier in the cave. Sera's lip quivers a little, but she keeps herself from breaking.

*She's stronger than me.*

Instead of pressing further, Mara simply nods. "I understand. I'm sorry for your loss." She turns and begins to head back up the ramp.

"That's it?" Sera asks, stepping forward a bit. The soldiers around them edge forward--giving Sera visual cue that she shouldn't take another step--but otherwise let her speak. "That's all you can say? Your goddamned planet did this to him!"

Mara stops halfway up the ramp, but doesn't turn. It's like she's taking all of this in, letting it soak her skin with Sera's accusations.

"Yeah," Sera continues. "*Your* planet. You want this fucking rock? You can have it. It hasn't done anything good for anybody."

Now Mara turns, her features hard as stone. "You're right," she says. "You're absolutely right. It hasn't done anything good for anybody. Not really. Maybe it's given a home for some for a time, but homes are not permanent. You saw that when Home was invaded."

Sera scoffs. "And where were you when that was going on?" she asks. "You had people you swore to protect. And now you're here? What do you think happened to them?"

Mara lowers her head. "Necessary sacrifices. I can always start a new Home."

"Yeah. With your weird sickstorm-immune mutants."

At this, Mara smiles. "There's nothing wrong with humanity evolving to make itself better and stronger. You wouldn't be here if we didn't grow legs and arms and crawl out of the waters of an ancient Earth."

"We shouldn't be here on Kipos," Sera continues. "This place is fucked! Monsters took my friends." She looks at Mara, as if to say *You killed John*. "The damn air is taking my friend's Mom."

Calli feels her heart drop a bit, further into her chest. She wonders how Mom is doing.

"And you aren't helping!"

Mara nods. "I know your frustration. I know it well."

"You don't know anything."

Calli feels herself leave her body again. She should intervene, should stop Sera from making Mara angry. But the thing is, deep down, she knows she's right. So she doesn't say anything.

"Maybe you're right," Mara says, turning around and heading for the ramp again. "But I do know one thing. You're angry, and you want answers. I have answers. Ones that will change everything." She turns at the top of the ramp and nods at Kait. "Let them through."

"But-" Kait starts, but Mara holds up a hand.

"Please. Humor me."

Kait turns her eyes back on the two of them. "Follow her," she says softly. "But if you do anything I don't like, even she won't stop me from putting a bullet through each of you." She stands behind them and gestures them to move. Kait leans in, close enough to whisper. "Don't think I've forgotten about what you did to Farid."

Calli's spine rescinds, chills. Kait will kill them. She knows this. When Mara isn't looking, or when Mara is done with them. They're going to die here, in this mountain.

*I'm sorry, Mom.*

Calli walks side-by-side with Sera up the ramp and through the sliding door into the facility. They're led into a large, multi-story room full of computers and lab equipment.

*It's like the hatch in the jungle*, she thinks as she takes in the room. Many people, faces she recognizes from Home, work at stations and machines. Somewhere, a turbine whirs. Holographic displays show data and maps, just like the one on the *Venerous*. Various pieces of equipment, ones that Calli's never seen before, lie on tables, ready to be used. They stop at the beginning of the room. Calli takes all of it in.

Before she can ask what this place is, Mara begins to speak. "The first settlers who found Kipos called this planet a garden. A garden world, one that would become the next Earth, with abundant resources for us to take advantage of. Many people thought of it as a fresh start, a new planet for us to use, but also take care of. We would learn from the mistakes we made on Earth. Kipos wouldn't be like that." She smiles. "I think, for a time, it was. I don't doubt that for a second. We have fresh, grown food. Clear water. Clean air. All of it reminds us of a young Earth, one that coexisted with its human inhabitants."

She sighs now, her smile fading.

"But even that was bound to end eventually." She walks again, meandering through the mishmash of computers and bodies manning them. A shove from Kait gets Calli and Sera moving. Many people that Mara passes through salute her, and she nods back. "People are still people, no matter how far away they are in the universe. They're plagued with the same base wants and needs. Greed. Power. Hunger for both. That's humanity. It's something that we've known for a very long time, and naive is the person that thinks that that will ever change."

She continues to speak like all of this isn't going on around her. Calli simply listens. There's nothing else for her to do. She doesn't want to get shoved by Kait again if she speaks up.

"Kipos was supposed to be different. It took me a long time to see that. I was part of Silsparrow, the ones that want to slap their logo on the front of the planet. They aren't the only ones. There are other companies out there, sending out expeditions and colonists out to any rock that could potentially be a home--or a production planet--for its own needs. I didn't realize it, until it was too late."

She turns for a moment to look at Calli, then simply shakes her head. What does she mean by that? Why did...?

Calli doesn't think too long, because Mara is moving again. They leave the large, open room and come to a maintenance elevator, large enough for her, Sera, Mara, Kait, and two other soldiers to enter. The elevator grinds along the track at first, but then begins to descend.

*This place is old... older than I thought.*

Nobody says a word in the elevator. Calli looks to Sera, looks to her for anything, any emotion.

All she sees is anger. Hatred. It's etched onto Sera's face like she's a sculptor put it there intentionally, hoping that this angry art would stand the test of time, and therefore make others feel anger.

The anger is for Sera. Calli can sense that. Though Sera herself was directly responsible for Tai's death, Calli understands well enough that Sera blames Mara.

There has to be someone to blame. Always.

The elevator shakes as it stops. Calli isn't sure how far down they've gone, but when the door opens, they're met by a hallway. The walls along the hallway are made of glass. Behind the glass walls are white, sterile rooms like above, but now the occupants inside are all wearing hazmat uniforms, not unlike the ones Calli had to wear in the quarantine hospital. Breather masks cover their faces, and they look emotionless as they work with test tubes and computers.

*What...*

"Earth was a planet we had an interesting relationship with," Mara says, as if she didn't stop talking in the first place. "We harnessed its resources, used it up. We controlled Earth. That certainly blew back in our faces, but for a time we used it to progress from vulnerable cavemen to exploring the universe. We're still vulnerable. Still dying from our own stupid mistakes, our curiosity..." She looks to Calli. "Our hearts."

They walk down the hallway and Calli watches as the ghost people work. She can't see directly what it is they're working on, but it looks important. Important enough for them to hide in an underground shelter.



Mara continues. "Kipos was supposed to be perfect, but people know no bounds when it comes to ruining things. Take the sickstorms, for instance."

Calli's confused. "Wait," she says, expecting Kait to shush her. When she doesn't, she continues. "The sickstorms are an anomaly in the atmosphere. They haven't been able to determine where they actually come from, only how to combat its effects."

"That's what they told you," Mara says, not looking at her as she leads them through a pair of sliding doors. This new area looks to Calli like a hospital wing. They pass rooms of empty beds and cafeterias and supply closets and...

One of the rooms is full. Inside, on the other side of the glass, Calli can see three beds, each one filled with a person. One of the people wearing the quarantine suits is inside, holding a datapad up. It looks like he's recording information.

"You both saw us back at Home," Mara says, looking in. "We are immune to the effects of sickstorms. We've beaten their weapon. They can't harm us with it anymore."

Calli looks inside the room. The people on the beds have lesions on their faces. They cough into their hands, and purple blood falls from their lips.

"What's happening to them?" She's never seen this stage of the sickstorm virus in anybody. *Will Mom be like this eventually?*

"They're assimilating," Mara says. "Fighting through the virus. We've exposed them to high amounts of auracite, which simulates the virus. If they live, they will be immune."

Calli looks at Sera, who has the same bewildered expression.

"What did you say?" Calli asks.

This time, Mara glances at her, as if she remembers she has guests. "The auracite. We use it to simulate the sickstorm virus, thereby making my people immune. We feed it to them, when they're young. We shave off small pieces of the rock and feed it to them. Their immune systems start to change... mutate." The word comes off her tongue, drips to the floor like acid.

*Mutate?*

"We do this when they're young. We've only had a few generations to try this on, but we seem to have found the perfect amount of auracite to expose them to change them."

Sera clears her throat. "I thought auracite was used primarily as fuel."

"It is," Mara says sharply, "if you synthesize it right. Synthesize it differently, and you get something very different."

She turns towards the two of them.

"The sickstorms... I bet you've wondered why they occur on this planet, wonder why they happen to this place. You've probably wondered why it kills people." The two of them don't move. Just listen. "Years ago, before any settlers actually set foot on Kipos, Silsparrow arrived, along with a secondary shadow company dedicated to research and development. They found pockets of auracite in the asteroids near the planet and traced the asteroids directory to Kipos. Long ago, Kipos was pelted by some of these asteroids, each of them containing large amounts of auracite ore inside of them. And yet, the auracite did nothing. It just sat there, on this planet. Dormant.

"When Silsparrow and the company found that the ore was on the planet itself, they began to mine it. Again, this was before any settlers had actually set foot on Kipos."

"That's not true," Calli says, though, for some reason, she doesn't believe her own words. "Colonists who were part of Silsparrow found it."

"That's what they told you in school," Mara continues undeterred. "They discovered that they could use auracite for many applications. It's distinct radiation signature made it exceptionally good as a fuel for long-range sublight engines. They'd go faster and farther with less fuel." She lowers her head a little. "But they found another application for it, one that you might be all too well familiarized with."

Calli waits for her to say it.

*Just say it just say it just say it.*

"I think you know," Mara says. "The sickstorms."

And there it is. Though, she has no real reason to believe her.

"They made the sickstorms, using auracite as a chemical compound and releasing it into the weather."

"I don't believe you," she says.

"I suspect you don't. Doesn't make it any less true."

"Why in the hell would they make the sickstorms? If it was a biological weapon it'd mean--"

"That they intentionally used it against people? Yeah. I know. Back on Earth, it's a war crime to use bio weapons in war, but out here, Earth is too far away to really notice."

Calli shakes her head, moving her eyes back into the room. "I don't get it."

"War really is awful, and sometimes, people will do anything to win."

"The fighting was really that bad?" Sera asks.

"More than you know."

There's silence for a moment. "I still don't get something," Calli asks.

Mara slightly tilts her head.

"Why did they really make this stuff? It doesn't really make sense to use it on a garden world like this one. Kipos is supposed to be like another Earth, so why go and ruin that by screwing up the weather?"

"That... wasn't entirely Silsparrow's fault," Mara says, lowering her head.

"And now the atmosphere is totally fucked up because of it?"

Calli can't really tell, but there's a slight smile on Mara's lips.

"Follow me," Mara says, then continues down the hallway. Sera and Calli follow her until they reach a small cafeteria room. Sera offers them a seat at an empty table.

Calli can't smell anything. No food is being made.

*It's like they're dug in here and know something's coming.*

"You hungry? Thirsty? I can have someone bring you something."

They tell her just water, and one of Mara's people brings them a pitcher and two glasses of ice cold water. Calli and Sera make an almost telekinetic pact not to eat anything from them, no matter how hungry they got.

"There are things that I must attend to," Mara says after a moment. "You will stay here. I'd like to talk to you when I'm finished." She nods slightly to Kait, who takes up position by the door. They have a babysitter now. Mara leaves the room. The lights flicker above them, and Calli sits in silence with her water, mulling over the information.

#

"And you're sure?"

Mara has the comm so close to her ear that she fears she could lose it in there. Did she hear him right? Is he sure? Maybe it's a glitch, a bad piece of intel.

*How did they find us? It's too early.*

"Absolutely, ma'am," comes the voice on the other end, a young male voice. A tech, working in the communications deck a few floors above them. "We have word that Silsparrow is launching teams to this location. ETA unknown."

"If they launched within the hour, they'll be on us very soon." She walks down the hallway as if it owed her money. Not exactly running, but certainly not taking a stroll.

"Inform the squad leaders. Tell them to get ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mara cuts the comm and calls in a different frequency. This one takes a moment to answer.

"Pick up pick up pick-"

"Yes, ma'am," comes an older female voice.

"Are we ready?" Mara asks. "Is it ready?"

The woman sighs. "Almost. Our last launch took its toll on the machine. We've been loading it up with the compound, but the dispensers are going to need replacing."

"We don't have time for that," Mara says, reaching the elevator and tapping the button for the fifth floor. "The sparrows are on their way."

There's silence on the other end. "Now?"

"Yes. Now. So get it ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mara shuts off the comm and places it in her pocket. As the elevator ascends, she's reminded of the smell of this place: old. Beaten. But the smell of blood... now that has stayed with her for a very long time. Even after the blood was cleaned and the bodies moved.

Even after all of that.

She remembers being surrounded.

Guns from every direction pointed at her from every floor. She was in such a battle rage that she wasn't thinking when she waded out into the middle of the fight. She heard William go down, but she didn't even look to see if he was okay.

She didn't even look.

She dropped her rifle, letting it clack onto the metal ground, and she raised her hands. She turned her head. Aresh was gone. Will was behind cover, a table with a computer on it. There was a small trail of blood nearby.

"Our guns are down," Mara called out, to whoever would listen. "We surrender."

And surrender they did. A few of the rebel colonists approached her, hit her with the backs of their rifles, let her feel the pain of their comrades' deaths. When they told them their names, they were immediately thrown into cells. The great Mara Winters and William Hayford would make great bargaining chips. At least that's what they were told. She suspected later that no bargaining had actually taken place. They stayed in those cells for a few days. They were fed moderately. William's leg was patched up. They were placed in cells across from one another, but the strong glass windows prevented any sound from getting out. All they could do was see one another. They tried communication in various ways: using light reflected off of William's watch as a sort of Morse code, for

one, until Will got his watch taken away. Mara tried tapping on the glass to the same effect, and that seemed to work.

She would tap out simple questions.

"You okay?" she would ask.

"Fine."

"We will be okay."

"I know. Aresh went for help."

She smiled at that. She liked Aresh. He was still young, but he was brave and did what he had to in a fight. The three of them... they'd been through a lot. Been through more than any group of soldiers should. That's why, being separated like this, being separated from her squad... it hurt, really. She didn't think it'd hurt that much. Ever. Before, she had gone from unit to unit, being moved around and sent to different squads. She stopped making friends with people, only because they'd usually die out there in the wilderness anyway. But not Aresh and Will. No, they were made from different stuff, stuff that made her a survivor. They did what they had to for themselves, but they gave a little bit more for each other. They had an interesting relationship, one that most would envy in the military.

But now... now she wasn't sure if they'd make it out alive, even if Aresh was bringing help.

Time passed slowly. She tried counting minutes, tried to peek at the guard who brought her food's watch to see what time it was. Maybe she could guess the day if she saw the time. It didn't matter. Not really, anyway.

William did okay. They patched up his leg and stopped the bleeding. But he refused any pain medication they offered him. He wasn't going to take from them. Really, they were a pair of upstanding prisoners.

They were never spoken to, or at least they were never told why they were being held or for how long. Mara didn't press them. Didn't bother them. She took their food and water, sleep when she could. She even shit in front of them. It didn't matter. She knew how to be a prisoner of war. She had nothing to hide from them. Sometimes she would wake up in the middle of the night to find Will sitting on the floor at the edge of his mattress, holding his leg.

"How is it?" she would tap on the wall.

"Hurts like hell," he'd tap back.

They came for them.

One day, they came for them.

First, it was the lights. They flickered off suddenly. Mara had been awake, sitting on her mattress, thinking, when she fell into darkness.

She looked around for a moment, her mind digesting the information.

When she realized what was going on, she ran over to the wall.

"We are being rescued," she tapped. She couldn't see Will on the other side, nor would she be able to hear his taps. She realized that he wouldn't be able to hear hers too.

For a moment, there was nothing. No sound. Not even in her cell.

Standing at the window of her cell was a man wearing a full-body Silsparrow battlesuit. He wore a complex mask over his face, one that doubled as both protective



gear as well as an optical aid thanks to the complex goggle system that covered his eyes. Mara had worn the type before.

*Black-ops.*

She knew the type seen any of them before--you weren't supposed to--but she knew who they were.

They were here to rescue them.

The soldier stared into her cell for another moment. He examined her, like she was some kind of rat going through a mutation. Like she didn't matter. He turned and saw Will sitting on his bed, just as confused and worried as Mara was.

Then, he walked away.

Mara watched him go. She did nothing to stop him, could do nothing to stop him. He couldn't hear her even if she called for him to come back. Will edged toward the window and began to tap on it.

"What was that about?"

She shook her head.

Minutes later, the cell doors unlocked. She heard the loud click and clank of the metal locks, and she moved toward the door, unsure of who could be on the other side. She approached the door slowly, edging herself against the wall in case someone with a gun was on the other side. It slid open, and Mara took a moment to peek out from inside the cell. There was nothing. Nobody on the other side of it, save for the dead cell guard who brought them food, a bullet in his head.

*When did he die?* She figured it had been the black ops soldier, but she hadn't known how long he had been like that. She exited the room and found his rifle on the

ground. She picked it up, checked its mag--it was full--and proceeded over to Will's cell, which was also open. Will hobbled out of the cell, his leg not fully healed yet.

"Let's go," Mara said, handing him the pistol that the guard also had on him. They moved down the hallway, up a few flights of stairs. They found more bodies of more rebel colonists on the ground, each of them with bullets in them.

"They made quick work of them," Will said. "Those black ops guys are hardcore."

Mara silently agreed. They climbed the stairs and went through another sliding door. They were back in the large, three-story room where they had entered. Mara wasn't sure how long ago that had been, but the place had transformed from a research lab to a warzone. Bullet holes in every known surface. Blood in streaks across the floor. A few poor souls were still alive, coughing and--

Coughing?

That's when Mara smelled it. Ozone and decay. Her eyes saw purple fog as it approached her, passing over her like a foul-smelling mist.

Will began to cough as he inhaled the air. "What the fuck is this?"

Mara pressed forward, stifling the cough in her throat, in her lungs. She felt burning there, like she was breathing in ash and fire. Her eyes began to water.

As she came out into the main hall where the dead and dying colonists lay, she was met by a squad of six soldiers, all wearing the same black uniform: the black ops soldiers. Each of them wore gas masks. In front of them was a thin man, a rail of a man. His perfectly slick-back hair and bronze skin greeted them, though he too wore a gas mask like the rest of them. He wore a crisp, dark navy uniform that had no signifiers or symbols.

He was someone who didn't want to be recognized.

The man tilted his head slightly.

"Well," he said, his gas mask muffling his voice. "This is interesting. Didn't think you'd come out of your little holes."

Mara approached them, still coughing. She lowered her weapon, but something told her to keep it at the ready.

Her instincts never failed her before.

In between her convulsions, she said, "You Silsparrow?"

Behind her, Will stepped--more or less hopped--over to her.

"Captain?" the slick man said. Mara's head raised, thinking that he was speaking to her. "Take them, but take them alive."

Before she could raise her rifle, one of the soldiers lifted a pistol and fired off two rounds, one into each of them. At first, she thought she was dead as she fell to the ground, smacking her face off of the hard, linoleum floor. Will fell behind her, seemingly dead.

Before everything faded to black, he raised her head, only to see a small pellet with a needle sticking out in her check.

She'd been tranquilized.

#

He didn't have to wait very long for backup to arrive.

Nevaire leaned against a tree, taking a sip from his canteen. He really wanted a cigarillo right about now. He just wanted to suck on smoke, let it swim in his lungs for a bit, then let it out. The exhale was always the sweetest moment. Letting everything just

spill out of you, he thinks. That would certainly calm him down. Instead, he can't stop his foot from tapping.

"Now you're making *me* nervous." Ende sat with her back against the same tree, unloading and reloading her pistol.

"Sorry," Nevaire said, standing up straight and stretching his legs. "Old habit. Really need a smoke right now."

Ende smiles, then reaches into her pack, which sits right next to her. "Should've said so sooner." She pulls out an old, crumpled up pack of cigarettes. These are an old kind, imported from Earth. They hardly made this shit anymore.

"I don't smoke cigarettes," he says. He wonders where she got those, but decides against it. It didn't really matter now.

"C'mon," she says, popping out a single cigarette and placing it in her mouth. "I don't smoke alone."

He shrugs. "Fine. Just one." He takes the cigarette from her hand, letting his fingers gingerly brush up against hers. If they made it out of this--somehow--he'd maybe try to date her. Take her somewhere nice. Somewhere off of Kipos.

She hands him the lighter. Cool smoke enters his lungs as he sucks in the air. It feels good. *Damn* good to be smoking again. He hadn't in the last few days, and his insides itched for one.

"These are nice," he says after a moment.

"Nice is a good word," Ende says, exhaling. "I can't say that I've ever felt as though I've had nice in the last few days. Or ever, in this place."

"Takes a toll on you, doesn't it."

She nods. "Yeah. More so than I think most people believe."

He understands. All too well, really.

"This place," she continues, "it sounds stupid but...I kinda always thought that this place was supposed to be a symbol of hope. Y'know? New world, new opportunity. New view of the universe. I don't know. I guess, when I came here, I expected a little too much from it."

Nevaire nods. "Try living in the belly of a ship for most of your childhood. Any place with open air is heaven, even if that open air sometimes gets tainted." He takes a drag. "But I understand. Silsparrow fucked it up. Even if they hadn't, it's only inevitable that somebody would've. That's what humanity is designed for. Fucking it up."

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Ende asks, tapping her cigarette and letting the ashes fall. "You wouldn't have joined the military if you hadn't."

He smirks. "Guess you can call it an occupational hazard. It's a philosophy I guess I've been building throughout my career. Never stay in this business longer than you have to. Changes your outlook on everything."

"I've been in it long enough to understand that. But I still think people have a chance. In everything."

He laughs. "You're starting to sound like these rebels."

"Am I?" She smiles. "Maybe they got it right."

There's a moment of silence. "What were you going to do with your share when we get it?" He liked to assume that they would get it. "Galaxy keeps getting bigger."

"Go home."

"Really?"

She nods. "Sick and tired of running around, seeking adventure. That's not the life for me. Kinda tired of holding a gun."

He looks at her, glances at her as she says it. "They get heavier. The more you use 'em, I mean."

"Yeah," she says.

"I know that all too well."

She turns her gaze to the jungle in front of them. "What did you do?" she asks.

"Huh?"

She turns to him now. "What did you do that made you so...so cynical."

He smiles. "What do you mean? I'm the happiest guy I know."

"I'm serious." Her face is stern, hard. He looks into her tired, red eyes and see that, yes, she is serious. *Very* serious.

Maybe it's the cigarette smoke creeping into his body. Maybe it's the stress he feels in his pores, or it could be exhaustion of the jungle, the humidity that makes him sweat. He tells her.

He tells her everything. Everything that he can think of. The war, mostly. What it did to him. What it turned him into, the man before her.

"I killed people," he says, dropping the lit cigarette onto the ground and crushing it under his boot. He wants another one. "A lot of people. Mostly people who didn't deserve it, but I was ordered to. And I was the good little soldier, with my gun and my can-do attitude. I never expected my first foray onto a new world--in truth, my first world--would involve me killing people who just wanted to live their lives like they wanted to. I didn't question it. Not at first."

"Why did it take you so long to defect?" she says.

He laughs. *Defect*. He hadn't even thought of the word until now. "I guess I thought that this was the only life for me. Like...it was a punishment. To keep doing what I had been doing for years. Punch in the time clock and go to work. I thought I didn't have a choice."

She nods. "Well," she says, "you made one. You left."

He shrugs. "I guess I got so fed up with everything that I made a quick decision. I haven't had much time to think on it, but, yeah, I was a little hasty."

"I think it was inevitable."

"Yeah? Maybe that's true. Truth is, I would always see those people back in Belhall. They'd just...bust their asses, and all Silsparrow ever did was hammer them down like they were a broken nail. I guess I...I don't know. Maybe I saw myself in them, but that sounds so dramatic."

"I don't think so. They were like you. Living the life they didn't want to live. The thing that I'm wondering is if you've forgiven yourself yet."

His eyebrow goes up. "For what?"

"For everything you've done."

The words fall in his ears like she was pouring molasses into them. They hang in his brain, the viscosity making him think. What he'd done? Had he done that? Forgiven himself? He isn't sure.

Before he can ask, he hears rustling in the bushes. A twig snaps. Something scraps off of a rock. He turns his head, only to find a gun barrel on the other end.

Three of them, actually. Soldiers in dark camouflage greet him by shoving their weapons in his face.

"Captain Nevaire," says the closet one, a female. "Orders are to take you in."

*Silsparrow special forces*. Commandoes, only to be used in the most dire of situations. They probably came from the Hierarchy, Nevaire thinks. Dannowitz isn't playing around.

"Afternoon," Nevaire says. He doesn't move a muscle, but Ende slowly starts to edge for the pistol at her belt. He glances at her and shakes his head. Her hand moves away. "How can I help you fine people today?"

"As I said," the woman says, her helmet hiding her face, "we're to take you in. Dannowitz's orders."

"Sure," he replies, "but I'm the one who gave Dannowitz the location here. That wasn't the deal."

"There is no *deal*," the soldier says. "The admiral wants you. Both of you." The soldier turns her head towards Ende, whose venomous glare confronts her.

"You don't know where to find Mara," he says.

"We certainly do."

"I didn't give you that information."

"And yet we have it."

He grumbles. This wasn't how it's supposed to go. Dannowitz gave him--*gave him*--his word that nothing would happen to them.

"I give you Mara Winters," he says, "and you want to barter?"

"I'm not bartering," she says. "I'm ordering. You have no say in this."



"How many people do you have with you?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Not enough, then," he says. "You're going to need me, okay? Both of us. You wanna storm that mountain? Great. I'm all for that. But you have no idea what they've got going on in there."

"Do you?"

He nods. "I do." It's a simple lie, but one that might save him. Save them both. "Didn't give that to Dannowitz. I knew he'd pull this kinda shit, so I kept it to myself."

The soldier looks like she doesn't know what to do. Then again, he can't very much tell what's happening beneath her helmet. She's not so much stunned as she is unsure, probably weighting what he said versus what she probably knows.

He hopes she doesn't know how to get in.

"I imagine that they're dug in," he says, trying to break the silence to convince her. "That's a mountain. Not sure what could be inside. You don't have visual scans on it, do you?"

She lowers her rifle. In response, so do the rest of her soldiers. "No," she says. "Something was blocking it. Scanners wouldn't work over it."

He smiles, but only a little. Wouldn't want to make her too suspicious. "Exactly," he says. "Which is why you need me."

"Do I need to both of you?" She looks down at Ende, who has now decided to stand up.

"Well," he says, "let's just say we're a packaged deal. You let the both of us come with you, then I show you where to go."

"You were a glorified cop before all this," the soldier says.

"I was a soldier too."

"And you?" she says, looking to Ende.

"I can handle myself." Ende's smirk is wide across her face, making her seem eerily frightening.

"This isn't what I thought would happen," the woman says, "but alright. We'll do it."

Nevaire's heart sinks away from his throat and back into his chest where it belongs.

She approaches him. "I'm Captain Black. You follow my orders. You try to run away, we will shoot you. You try to do anything that isn't what I say, we will shoot you. If this is a trap, we will shoot you a lot. Am I clear?"

"How good of a shot are your men?" Ende asks.

"We don't miss," Black says, "ma'am."

They buried him quickly.

Aresh and Rian didn't say anything once the final clump of dirt was placed on Tai's makeshift grave. They made it deep, further than six feet. They didn't want runners digging them up, nor did they want any of the loose dirt to be washed away, exposing him to the elements.

Aresh is tired.

Tired of all of this. Tired of walking. He has blisters on his feet. He feels them with every step. They ache. His eyes hurt to see. Everything...just aches and pains.

He wonders how much more Rian has in her. For all he knows, she's a machine, one that never stops. She, opposite of him, doesn't look tired. In fact, she looks energized. She's moving faster, her moves more deliberate. She appears focused, her eyes never leaving the trail of Calli and Mara in front of them.

"These are very fresh," she says, peering down at a slight dent in the mud. He can hardly tell that it's even a footprint.

"Like how fresh we talking," he replies.

"We're talking hours apart."

Great. They were so close now.

They didn't say anything after they buried Tai. They just...did it. Once they were done, they both took a moment of silence. *The boy deserved more.* Aresh truly believed that. Tai was...probably the best of them. John, too. But Tai...he was a boy. A kid. One that Aresh picked up for his stupid little quest.

He knew that Lucas, were he here right now, would tell him that it wasn't his fault, that he isn't to blame. His husband would whisper it in his ear, right before they went to bed.

God. He misses his husband. And their child. He's been gone for months now. The last communication he had with Lucas was days ago. He had no idea what was going on. Edward was bigger now. Growing. It's only been months but...

*Would he even recognize his own father?*

Of course, it was a silly question to ask. He was a baby. They would have many years for them to bond and grow together.

But, at least right now, Aresh isn't sure if any of them are getting off Kipos alive.

*Damn you, Mara,* he thinks as they trudge through the jungle. *Damn you and your stupid crusade.* He knows that he's putting the blame on the wrong person. He chose to come here. He did. And he dragged all kinds of people with him.

"I'm sorry," he says. He didn't mean to, not really. He only thought it, but it was almost as if his mouth was already moving as he thought it.

Rian doesn't react. She just keeps walking. "It's okay," she says after a moment. "It wasn't your fault."

"No," he says, waving her off, thought she couldn't see the gesture. "I know that. I...yeah, I know that. I'm just sorry I brought everyone into this. This is just...I don't know, shit. It's shit. And we're in the middle of it because of me."

"Aresh," she says, stepping over a fallen log, "you need to chill the fuck out."

He smirks. "You think so?"

"Yeah," she says. "Drink a beer. Get laid. Do something except worry about things that aren't in your control."

"You're starting to sound like my husband."

"He's a smart man," she says. "You should probably listen to him. That's one of the tenants of marriage, isn't it? 'Listen to the smarter spouse'?"

He laughs. "Sorta."

"We knew what we were signing up for when we did," she continues. "Even Sera and Calli. Maybe they didn't quite know we'd be dealing with psycho rebels and runners, but they knew it was going to be dangerous. You can't be at fault for that."

"But John..."

"Yeah," she says. "He was a soldier. Not a lot of them live very long."

He looks at the back of her head as if she was standing right in front of him. "You really think that?"

"Don't need to think that," she replies. "I know it."

They say nothing for another ten minutes before Rian stops. Just stops, right in her tracks.

"Think I might've found them," she says, pointing to a rock formation.

Aresh looks to where she points, but doesn't see anything interesting.

"What do you-"

*Wait. There.*

He sees the group of bushes with the hole behind it in the rock wall.

"A cave?"

"A little rare in this area," Rian says.

He didn't know this was here eleven years ago. He wonders if he could've saved Will and Mara way back when. Maybe then this wouldn't have happened.

"You coming?" she asks, and he realizes that she's already started off for the cave entrance. He follows her and helps her push aside the bushes as she crawls inside. Aresh gets on his hands and knees and follows her inside.

"Well, fuck," she says as he stands up.

"What?"

She grabs her flashlight and turns it on.

Gold. That's what Aresh sees. A brilliant light of gold and white as the cave wall--the auracite--glows with life.

"Holy shit," he says. "They found this?"

"Looks like it," Rian says, then nods downward.

There, on the cave floor, is Calli's pocketwatch.

"That's hers," Rian says as Aresh bends over to pick it up.

The gold medallion-like watch glows along with the auracite in the wall. He remembers this, almost too well. He and Mara and Will had one, one for each of them. Aresh had the silver watch, Mara the bronze. Will was reluctant to take the gold one--said he didn't deserve the gold. But they made him take it, said it was for the leader, the one who led them to victory every time.

"Yeah," Aresh finally answers. "Yeah, it's hers. They were here."

"And now they're not, it looks like."

Aresh pulls his own flashlight out and turns it on, this time peering down the darkness of the cave. "Let's go deeper," he says. "Maybe they're somewhere back here."

Aresh follows his own flashlight beam, sticking close to the cave wall and examining it as he walks. The gold flashes at him at moments, subdues at others. Even if they were able to find each other safe and sound, there's no way they'd be able to get the auracite out of the wall without mining equipment. Aresh hopes to avoid that. He didn't want to go raiding Silsparrow mining camps for a giant drill.

"Aresh," Rian says in a hushed tone. He tears his eyes away from the wall for a moment and follows after her. She's hunched over on the ground, her eyes peering at the floor.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"There were more people in here," she says. She leans in closer to the ground. "A lot of people."

"What are you saying?"

"That the girls had company."

"Mara?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure. All I know is that all of those footprints--fresh ones, mind you--lead through the back of this cave.

*Another entrance.*

"We should follow it," she says, then pulls out her gun and shuts off her flashlight. Aresh does the same and follows close behind.

Suddenly, flashes of his life appear in front of him. He's down a similar corridor, but this time he follows Will. Now he's wearing a navy blue Silsparrow uniform. He shakes his head. Deja vu, and all that. Everything he remembers about that day... it's all

vague and blurry, at least in his mind. He remembers Will and Mara... being dead. Which is why it was such a surprise to see her on the broadcast. Maybe, if she's alive, then...

"Get down," Rian whispers. She crouches down on one leg. Aresh stays behind her, his pistol aiming down the tunnel.

He hears... voices? Lots of voices. Men and women. Rian edges herself forward, so quiet that even Aresh can't hear her while standing over her. She peeks around the corner of the tunnel, keeping her back to it in case she needs to bolt back into the shadows. She peers around, then comes back.

"Silsparrow," she mouths. Aresh understands.

*Shit.*

He himself peeks around the corner. Then, he sees it.

The facility.

The one that he was told was destroyed.

The one that Mara and Will died in...

*It's still here?*

How? How was this possible? He was told that it was destroyed, that it was a rebel colonist base. Did Mara rebuild it? No, she couldn't have. It looks exactly like the one that Aresh ran into years ago. Exactly. Right down to the color: sterile white. He knew that Silsparrow was prone to lying about its exploits, but... why would they lie about this? A research facility in the mountains? What would they use it for?

And why wasn't it destroyed all those years ago?



He sees multiple Silsparrow soldiers as they investigate the area outside the facility. Some of Mara's people lie dead on the floor. Aresh hadn't even heard them come in.

*Must be special forces.*

The soldiers peer around the room, checking for other threats. Two of the soldiers don't appear like the rest. Aresh recognizes one as Nevaire, the guard captain from Belhall. *What's he doing here?* He doesn't recognize the blonde woman that stands next to him. They, along with a masked soldier that Aresh doesn't recognize, speak to one another, though he can't hear what they say. They stand around the room a bit casually, as if they have everything under control.

"What are they doing?" Rian whispers.

"Looks like they're gonna raid this place."

"We need to get in there."

"We can't right now."

"I know."

He's itching to get inside, to beat them first and get Sera and Calli out of there. At least, he assumes that they're inside the facility. The Silsparrow soldiers and Nevaire speak for another moment, then they go back into soldier mode. They head up the small ramp to the sliding door into the facility. One of the soldiers seems to hotwire the door and open it. The soldiers pour inside, Nevaire alongside them. Aresh finds all of this odd. After they're gone, he and Rian ease up.

"How'd they find this place?" he asks.

"Doesn't matter at this point," Rian says, heading out of the tunnel and into the large room with the door. "We need to get inside after them."

"You're right."

They give it another moment or two before ascending the ramp. They don't want to accidentally run into the guards right when they come in. At the door, which is still stuck wide open, they stop.

"You ready for this?" he asks Rian. She nods. Of course. It had been a stupid question to ask her. Of course she was ready. Of course she was ready to get inside and kill as many people as she could to get to Calli and Sera. In fact, Aresh is counting on that fact.

He, though... he isn't ready. He isn't ready to find what may lie inside. Years ago, he had found this place alongside Will and Mara. Years ago, they both died inside of it. And now Mara was alive, alive and leading a group similar to the ones she fought years ago. He isn't ready to find the answers to his growing cavalcade of questions. He isn't sure he's ready for any of it.

Aresh realized a long time ago that, most of the time, his feelings didn't matter. The army took that out of him long ago. Yet, he seemed to find it when he got out of the military, when he married Lucas. His feelings *did* matter, military or no. All of it mattered.

What he was about to do? He was going to make sure that it mattered.

Rian entered the facility, pistol drawn. Aresh follows behind, keeping his senses--and his trigger finger--sharp.

#

She knew something was wrong the second she felt her body chill.

Mara stands on the main floor of the command center. Much like the one at Home, this room is filled with sensors, radar, and eyes on every entrance into the facility, not that there are that many to begin with.

She watches as a group of Silsparrow special forces enter the facility.

"Get our people ready," she says, and a tech relays the information into her headset.

Alarms begin to sound, red lights flashing along the walls. Intruders, she thinks. This is it.

This is everything she's every worked for. Now. Now is the time. They've found them. There's no questioning that. Even if they were to repel this force, their location has been compromised. They'd have to abandon the mountain. This place would be bombed to hell, and everyone inside would die.

Mara doesn't intend on running anymore.

"I'm heading to production," she says to the room of techs. "Keep me posted on the situation."

"Aye, ma'am," someone says.

She exits the room and heads down the metal hallway. It's only a matter of time before they reach her, before they reach the device. She might as well use it before they do.

The device...

She remembers waking up in a tube. Time was nothing to her anymore. She didn't know how long she'd been out. She didn't know where she was, only that glass

surrounded her, and that they had filled the tube with water. A breathing apparatus covered her mouth and eyes, giving her stale air to breath. She wore a tight-fitting, light blue jumpsuit, not her army fatigues. Through the glass and mask, she could barely see anything. Any images outside of the tube were warped, strange. Any sound coming in was gone, muffled. She couldn't hear through the water. The only thing she knew was that men in black suits carrying guns were outside her tube, and that they were in a metal room. After what felt like hours of searching her own mind, she realized that she was in the interior of a ship. She wasn't sure what kind at the time. To her left was another tube, this one occupied as well. Because of the breathing mask, she couldn't tell who it was, but they were dressed in the same odd jumpsuit as well, floating in the tube like a science experiment.

No.

They were the experiments.

As she moved her head, she felt an odd tugging sensation, almost as if she was leashed to the tube. She felt the back of her neck, only to bring her hand back and recoil in horror. Something was back there. Connected to a tube. Were they injecting her with something. She gently touched the thing, trying very hard not to bother it. It moved slightly, but even that caused a sensation of pain.

Suddenly, she heard hollow tapping. In front of her, a man--she later realized it had been the same well-dressed man that she and Will ran into on their way out of the facility--was tapping on the tube. When he got her attention, he began to wag his finger at her, as if she were a child doing something wrong. He touched something alongside the tube.

In her mask was a slight warble of static, then, a voice.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," he said, holding the button down as he spoke.

"The pain would be quite awful if that thing came out."

"Fuck you," she said, but she realized after a moment that she didn't have a microphone in her mask. He couldn't hear her.

"I'm surprised your survived," he continued. "But then again, you are the famous Mara Winters. I guess I should have expected as much. The other one, thought...I don't think he'll make it."

Confused, she looked around, then saw, to her left, that there was another tube with another person inside of it.

*Is that Will?* She watched as he floated in the tube, either unconscious or dead, she wasn't sure. He hung there in the water, bubbles from his own breathing mask heading toward the surface. She saw the tube in the back of his neck.

*What are they doing to us?*

She stayed in the tube for days, maybe. Whenever she felt hungry, the tube would suddenly shake, and then she wouldn't be hungry anymore. It was giving her nutrients, proteins, the things she needed to survive. Water, too. Even though she lived in it, the fact that her mask would sometimes fill with water allowed her to drink. She wasn't sure if she was drinking fresh water or the water inside her own tank, but she drank it anyway. She needed to survive. That was the most important part.

The man would continue to come to her tube, mostly to just stare at her, like she was a question that needed answering. Other times, he'd speak to her, tell her that what was happening to her would save lives. That's all she ever heard: it would save lives.

She always felt sick in that tube. Her body hardly moved. She hardly willed it to. Mara would always look over at Will, to see how he was doing. He barely moved as well, but she was relieved whenever he did.

There was a day when the water began to drain. She heard the sound of flushing, of draining water. She fell along with it, touching the floor as the water left the tube. With the water gone, she felt herself go heavy. She hadn't moved in a long time. The breathing apparatus on her head felt like it weighed a ton, and she let herself lower her head to touch the glass. It was exhausting.

She turned her head slightly to the side.

Will wasn't there. His tube was empty.

Just then, the tube began to ascend. Mara backed away from the glass as it did. The quick movement tired her out. As it raised higher, she tried pulling at the mask, but couldn't get it off.

Just then, hands grabbed her head.

"I got it," a voice said. She tried swatting the voice away, but she was too weak to do anything. The mask came off her. She sucked in sweet air, letting it go into her lungs. She coughed. Looking at the floor, she found that she coughed blood.

"Come on," the voice said, and it pulled her up to her feet. Her eyesight blurry, she looked at the massive blob that held her up.

"Will?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "We're getting out of here. Watch you don't trip on the bodies."

Though she couldn't see them, she could make out several masses on the floor, each of them unmoving.

"What did you do?" she asked as he helped her walk, his arm around her waist.

"They let me out for a moment, thinking I was too weak to do anything to them. I saved my strength and acted. Killed who I could. More should be here soon, so we need to get out of here."

She hoped that the well-dressed man was one of them. "What," she found herself asking, "what happened to us?"

He didn't respond for a moment. "I have no idea."

He carried her a short distance before setting her down. "I need a minute," he said, catching his breath. As he took his hand away from her, Mara felt something slick on her fingers. She rubbed her middle finger and her thumb to feel the texture.

"You're bleeding," she said.

"One of them managed to tag me," he replied. "First my leg, now my midsection."

"We need to stop the bleeding."

"We can do that later." He picked her back up. "I'm good now."

They walked a few more feet before hearing the alerts over the intercom.

"We don't have much time," he said, and he picked up the pace.

"What do you think they did?" she asked again. Her eyesight was starting to clear. The blood in her muscles began to warm and she managed to stand on her own feet. Will let her go, but they continued to keep walking down the metal corridor.

"After the gas... I don't know. I don't know what we were hit with. Maybe they wanted to see the effects?"

"Is that why I'm coughing up blood?"

"I think it's getting better," he said. "I watched your tube from inside mine. Sometimes, they'd have to empty it to refill it with fresh water to clean out the blood. I think you're getting better, though."

They turned left at the corridor and came to a low-ceilinged hallway. Along the walls were small entrances, each covered by a circular hatch.

"Escape pods?" Mara asked.

"It's our only option."

Will presses a button on the wall, and the hatch slides open. Inside is a small room with three chairs lined up against each side of the wall. Intricate harnesses are on each chair. There wasn't a window. There were only screens that gave telemetry data and a view outside the pod via a camera. The screen was black, but Mara knew that if they left, it would be sprinkled with stars.

Will helped her inside and into a chair. She put the harness on herself--she had often trained how to do this in case of orbital strikes. Will pressed a button inside the pod and shut the door. He pressed another set of buttons and the screens came to life.

"Twenty seconds to launch," he said, and he strapped himself in the chair across from Mara. Those twenty seconds took forever.

Mara shook her head, shook away the dizziness. "What happened to us?" she said again, if only to take her mind off of everything that was happening.

"I don't know," Will said. As he breathed, he cringed. His wound...he was bleeding out. "Can't be good, though. We have to tell someone, let someone know that we were--" He coughs, and blood splatters. He had the good sense to turn his head, so the blood flies onto the screens.



Just then, the pod launched. Mara felt herself move with the pod, but the straps kept her secure. The screens blinked to life, showing their trajectory and speed. The main camera came online, showing them an empty universe.

Many thoughts went through her head.

*They're going to catch up to us. This thing can only go so far.*

*They'll shoot us down. One torpedo and this thing is done for.*

*Will is going to die. He's lost too much blood.*

*I don't know what they did to me. I don't know why they did it.*

She found that each of these thoughts coexisted in her head in one moment. She closed her eyes, trying hard to keep the shaking of the pod from giving her a headache, but even that was to no avail.

She blacked out. She didn't know for how long. When she awoke, Will, too had passed out. Or rather...

Will bled out. Right there on the floor of the escape pod. Mara didn't react. She was too tired for that, too tired to feel. She blacked out again.

By the time that a passing mining ship spotted them on their radar and picked them up, Will had been dead for almost three hours. The miners, who were heading to Kipos to mine the auracite, asked her who she was and what she was doing on an unmarked escape pod.

She kept her secret hidden for the remainder of the trip. She told them that her ship was also heading for Kipos, but that an argument with another crew member caused her and Will to escape. They ate her lie up, and took her back to the planet she escaped

from. Once she made landfall, she managed to sneak off of the ship, past the Silsparrow security.

She left Will behind.

His body was taken back to his family's.

The autopsy had been falsified, and he was made out to be a hero. Silsparrow spun a story, one where he saved people from a potential attack. He was a hero, but a different hero to Mara. The rebel colonists soon surrendered afterwards. Some ran off into the wilderness, laying low and even hiding in plain sight in places like Bandit Town. Most were sent to prison, shipped off from Kipos and, essentially never heard from again.

Things would be different this time.

The people would see.

These thoughts--all of the thoughts of victory, of what needed to be done--flow through Mara's mind as she enters the room, where the child of William Hayford stands.

Just as she had left mere minutes ago, now Mara stood in the doorway.

Calli rose from the chair, the wrapper of the protein cookie that Kait had reluctantly given her falling to the floor.

At first, Mara didn't say anything. She just looked into the room, as if it were the last place she wanted to be in. Or rather, as if it were the best possible place to be in right now. Sera crunched on her cookie as well. It had been a long time since either of them had eaten. She stops mid-chew as Mara says, "Let's go." Her voice is stern, commanding. She's back to being the leader.

"Ma'am," Kait says. She's standing by the door, her rifle in her hands. "I heard the alarms. Are we-"

"You're coming with me as well," Mara says to her. "We're launching."

At first, Kait's expression grows excited, but then, it subsides, morphing back into the serious soldier that she had been before.

"Of course," she says.

"The kids are coming with us," Mara adds.

Kait looks as though she wants to protest, but she keeps her mouth closed. She nods at Calli and Sera. "Let's move," she says.

Calli doesn't move, at first. In fact, she doesn't want to move. She doesn't want to be here anymore, but she's sick of taking orders, of being told where she should go and what she should do. But the severity in Mara's eyes... There's coldness there, but Calli even thinks that she sees something else.

*Fear.*

Calli and Sera follow them out.

"What's going on?" Calli asks.

"Silsparrow," Mara replies as they walk quickly down the hallway. "They've found this place."

"Where are we going?"

"To the command center."

Calli has a million and one questions, each of them seemingly more important than the next. As she opens her mouth to ask the first one, bullets whiz by her head. Reflexively, she ducks down and throws herself sideways into the doorway of the men's restroom. The others do the same, with Sera hiding behind Kait in the women's restroom across from Calli. Kait leans out from cover and fires off a burst before returning, bullets nailing the spot she had been in. A second later, Mara jumps into the restroom with Calli, her pistol drawn.

"We need to go," Mara yells to Kait. She leans out and fires a few shots. Calli backs away as the bangs get louder and louder.

*Shooting the man in the Venerous...shooting the runners in the underground lab...watching as John is killed...*

"I'll give you cover," Kait says after reloading. "You all need to move."

"Are you sure?" Mara says back. It's as if she isn't in control anymore, Calli notices. As if the people she leads *want* to die for her.

"Go," Kait says again. She eyes Calli, as if to say *You watch out for her.*

Mara moves first, exploding out from the safety of cover and down the hall. Sera follows after her, then, Calli. She feels the whirl of bullets fly by as they run, each one nearly hitting her. Kait fires back, stopping the scores of projectiles that head their way for only a moment. They turn right at the end of the hall and keep running, Calli close behind Mara.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

Mara doesn't respond for a moment, then stops at a sliding door with a keypad. She punches in a few numbers with incredible speed, and the door slides open.

"We're going to do it," is all Mara can say.

Confused, Calli and Sera follow her through the door.

Inside the room is, like the rest of the facility, covered by computers and machinery for every square inch. In the center of the room is a large machine that looks like a turbine standing up, the top of it touching the ceiling. The top is connected to a large tube that leads up, though Calli can't see to where.

Each of the people standing by the computers look up as soon as Mara walks in. Some of them carry guns, but lower them when they see Mara and go back to work.

"Silsparrow will be here any minute," she says, loud enough for the entire room to hear it. "We need to launch. How are we?"

One of the people at the computers looks up. "Machine's warmed up," he says. "Inserting solution now."

"Be ready in ten minutes," says another.

"We need to move faster," Mara yells.

Calli and Sera look at one another, their confusion obvious.

"This," Mara says, nodding towards the giant machine in the center, "is our salvation."

"What is it?" Sera asks.

"A machine that releases particles into the atmosphere to manipulate certain weather patterns. Mostly used for getting dry areas to have rain, or to stop rain in areas that don't need as much. It's a prototype, but it certainly gets the job done."

"Why do you..." Calli starts, but she stops herself before finishing.

She knows why they have this.

She has to know.

After everything... everything that's happened.

"This machine," Calli says, horrified. Her tongue feels like it could swell and burst in her mouth. She could swallow it. She *wants* to swallow it. Anything to make it so that what she says next won't be true.

"This machine creates sickstorms," she says, the word finally out. She looks at the monstrous thing. All of her troubles--her mother's sacrifice, her dying--it's all because of this? "I'm right, aren't I."

Sera looks at her. "You're serious?" Then, she eyes Mara. "That isn't true, is it?"

Mara hasn't been looking at them. She stares at the machine as it begins to spin up. It takes a moment for it to reach its maximum spin, but, even at that speed, it's quiet enough for them to speak and be heard.

"It's true," she says, finally turning toward them. "The sickstorms. The virus that it causes. It's all because of this." She turns back toward the machine. "I don't think they ever gave it a name. We call it the Generator."

"They?" Sera asks. "Who's they?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mara says, the venom in her voice made clear. "Silsparrow. They made this. Long ago, they created the idea for this machine to be used as a sort of biological weapon."

Calli looks at the machine. She never felt before as if she could ever harbor an emotional hatred toward a mechanical object like she is now. But she feels it, that hatred. Hatred for the machine. Hatred for Silsparrow, assuming Mara was telling the truth.

And hatred for Mara. More so than ever before.

"Why would they make this?" Calli finds herself asking, though, to her, she really doesn't care why.

"Auracite was discovered in asteroids not far from Kipos. The miners there thought they struck gold, but they found something a little more precious than a pretty mineral: fuel. Silsparrow bought all the auracite they could for a cheap price. Nobody knew the importance of the stuff yet. Silsparrow worked with another company to create the fuel. They synthesized it. Made it usable in even the smallest freight haulers in the system. They'd help the ships go farther faster in space. All for the idea of colonization."

Mara rubs her eyes. It's as if she's told this story to people a million times and is sick of her own voice.

"They found another use for it as well, but they didn't tell anybody about that. Didn't release it to the news. And why would they? It was a cash cow, a way for them to make a fortune on the side. Bio weapons. That was what they made. All but illegal under UN National Law, but out here? Out here on the frontier? There are no laws. Not on Kipos, not on Everis, not anywhere in this system. We are the lawless. And so they made

their horror weapon. Created it in secret. Made it in the most remote parts of space. Black sites, and all that. It's easy to hide out here if you go far enough. Nobody really ventures past the Elvira Arm these days. So they hid in secret, created this weapon. Decided it would best be applied as a gaseous weapon, though other types were considered. They wanted to use it for ship-to-ship combat. Mostly for pirates. Nobody really cares what happens to pirates out here. Instead of boarding a ship and risking the lives of good marines, they'd drop a small team onto the ship's hull, get them inside to life support, and launch this shit into the air filters. Anybody without a gas mask was dead on the spot. It used to be more powerful, way back in the day."

"How'd it get back here?" Calli asks. "How'd it get back on Kipos?"

"There was a patriot," Mara continues, crossing her arms. "A patriot who was sympathetic to the pleas of the people on Kipos. Thought that this was a world for the people, not for the sparrow. And so he stole it. He worked for Silsparrow, you see. Worked on that black site and saw what kinds of experiments they did. Did you know that they used to experiment with random haulers? They wanted human testing, and so they found them. Snatched them up right out from anybody's noses. Again, there's no rules in space. It's the Wild West reborn. This patriot...nobody is really sure of his or her name. They stole something. Evidence, plans, I don't know. Point is, they found it and took it to Kipos years ago. Before you were born, even. That's why Silsparrow tightened its grip on this place. They wanted to expose the traitor and kill them before they could do anything with any plans. They knew they were on Kipos, somewhere. Then, years ago, rebel colonists started showing up. Men and women who were sick and tired of being under a boot their entire lives. They left the colonies and went into the wilderness.



The group was growing, and growing large. But they didn't have the tools to win against Silsparrow. They had the firepower and the numbers to beat back anybody who raised a hand against them. It was nigh impossible. I might even say it still is."

Those that work for Mara turn their heads a moment, almost as if they knew this when they signed on to help her. Calli notices them, then turns her attention back to the machine.

"They didn't have a choice. They needed to make a statement, a stand. They needed to save Kipos from Silsparrow. And so they build the virus."

"They built this?" Sera says, motioning toward the giant turbine. "How is it that nobody noticed?"

"The rebels from years ago didn't build this," Mara replies. "Silsparrow did." She looks at Calli. "You remember the hatch, back near Home? What lied underneath it?"

*Experiments. The dead. Her own innocence.*

"Yeah," she replies.

"That's where the sickstorms were born. Underground. They had a machine similar to this one," Mara says, "but they were working with limited materials and limited personnel. They couldn't perfect the formula that Silsparrow had. That's why these storms appear to be purple. A little ironic that something so deadly looks so pretty. Silsparrow found the lab and killed them all, but instead of destroying the evidence, they took it and created their own lab: the one you stand in now. They figured they would continue the research. If anything, they could always blame the colonists on it, in case word were to get out. As a precaution, the group assigned to this mountain facility was a special forces black ops group, meant to study the virus, the sickstorm, and its applications. They were

to have no contact with the outside world. None whatsoever. But they didn't anticipate that the rebels would find it. And they did. Killed everyone inside. An eye for an eye, I suppose. The colonists reacquired the sickstorm virus, and it was convenient for them that the mountain facility sat right next door to an underground cave system filled entirely with the virus's fuel: the auracite. It was a perfect system, one that they took advantage of throughout the war. A lot of good men in my unit died from the stuff. Years later, when I was with Aresh and your father, we found this place. On accident, really. We found it, but we had no idea what it was we were looking at. Nobody in Silsparrow was ever allowed to know what was going on with the stuff. So we didn't know what we had found. Aresh managed to escape, but Will and I..." She stops for a moment. "We found it. Toppled the entrance to his place. Silsparrow thought it destroyed. We told them as much. So they never thought to look into it. I came back here years later. Started up the revolution once more. We began to test the sickstorms to see how they'd be for our own use."

The anger that's been building up in Calli, the one that has been building for almost a year and a half, explodes.

"You did this?!" she screams. Her voice screeches out, over the loud noise of the large turbine. "This is all your fault?!"

Mara stares at her. "I do not regret what we've done here. We--"

"You were the ones who sent this shit out? The sickstorms? You've killed my mother!"

"I don't think you'll forgive me, but you must understand--"

"I don't need to understand shit," she yells. "Not a single fucking thing. Here's what I need to understand: for years, you've been sending out the sickstorms as a test? A test for what?"

"To become immune to it," Mara says. "If we are to live on this planet, we must adjust. It's evolution. I'm sure they taught you that in class, did they not?"

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Calli says.

At that, many of the scientists working at the computers look up. Some of them grab for pistols, but Mara holds up her hand. "That's understandable. But we don't have time for that. Silsparrow is on their way here, and they're going to kill us. You included. No witnesses. That's what they want here."

"So what are you going to do?" Sera asks. She stands close to Calli, as if she's going to hold her back in case Calli jumps.

The anger makes her want to jump. To jump at Mara's throat and tear it out with her teeth. She's seen enough runners to know how to do that.

"We're going to launch one more sickstorm," she says. "Take them all out."

"What are you hoping to accomplish with that?" Calli asks, the anger leveling out. "It's suicide."

"It'll prove a point."

"You're banking too much on people seeing you as a symbol."

"They have before," Mara adds. "They will so again."

Mara reaches into her back pocket and pulls out a small chip, almost the size of a small coin.

"Here it is," she says. "All of it. The information about sickstorms, the formula. How our scientists made it. Most importantly, it shows where it came from. It reveals that Silsparrow is the one who created it."

She approaches Calli and hands her the chip.

"Make sure this gets into the right hands," she says. "For what it's worth, I am sorry for what happened to your mother. I think...I think your father would've been proud of the woman you've become."

Calli takes the chip. "You mean a killer."

Mara nods. "I suppose that isn't the life you wanted." She smiles. "I saw myself in you, if that's any consolation."

It isn't.

"But you both need to leave. Now. Get out of here. Go home. Live your lives. But you must change this world. Change it with what you hold in your hand."

Calli takes another look at the small device. She feels as though she could break it were she to press it between her fingers hard enough. It's a small, silvery device, with markers that denote a microchip-like pattern, a garden of pathways of information. She places it snug in the pocket of her pants.

"Where do we go?" Calli says.

"We have a rover parked in a garage nearby. It'll take you out the back of the mountain. You need to stick the roads and drive far away, as far as you can. You'll have to ditch the vehicle before long, however. It'd be a waste if Silsparrow caught you in a rebel vehicle."

"Why are you doing this?" Calli asks. "Letting us go, I mean."

"Because you need to do what I could not," she turns back toward the device.

"You need to go. Now."

Calli and Sera head for the back of the room. A door at the end of it slides open, leading them into an empty hallway. Calli looks back into the room--at Mara, at the Generator. Mara nods at her, then turns around with pistol in hand as the door they had come in explodes open. Calli and Sera run, and they don't look back.

#

Nevaire remembers why he always hated being a soldier: the room clearing. He knew all the motions, knew the procedure, but that didn't make it any less annoying. He enters the room with Ende's soldiers, and the world erupts into gunshots.

He dives behind cover--a flipped over table--and begins firing. Whoever was supposed to guard this room didn't take into account that these people weren't trained how to deal with a group of professionals. They fall, one by one to their weapons. Two of their own people fall, leaving only four of their soldiers left. Others are clearing the rest of the facility, with reinforcements soon on their way.

For some reason, Dannowitz didn't want there to be a whole thing about this. Was some secret here?

The gunshots stop just as soon as they had begun.

Nevaire peeks out from cover, his rifle still hot. Terrin calls clear. Ende stands up straight and heads for the large machine in the center of the room with Terrin. He stands up and follows them, lowering his weapon as he sees her.

Mara Winters. In the flesh. She has a gunshot in her gun, the blood starting to pool right there at her feet.

"Too late," Mara says. "Problem's already been solved."

Terrin leans down on one leg. "Give me the data and I'll make it quick."

*Make it quick? What happened to prisoners? And what data?*

Nevaire's thoughts run rampant, but they're interrupted when Mara begins laughing.

"Like I said," she says, "too late."

Terrin looks up, toward the door in the back. "Two of you," she calls out, "with me. Rest of you--and that means you, Nevaire and Ende--keep an eye on her." With that, Terrin stands up and she and two other soldiers sprint toward the door. It slides open, and they're gone.

Nevaire looks confused. He glances over at Ende, who still seems to be wary of something that's happening. He looks back at Mara, who's holding her stomach. The blood pours out in spurts. She won't live long.

"Sorry," Nevaire says. "For all of this, really."

Mara groans. "Me too."

"Look, I don't know what it is you got going on here and frankly I'd rather not know. I'm just here to make some money. Now, if you tell me where you've got some processed auracite lying around--and I know you have it--let me know and I'll get you out of here."

Mara begins laughing. Laughing! Nevaire stands up, his frown hurting his face.

"The fuck is so funny?"

She coughs up blood, but despite that, she's still able to laugh.

He sees the detonator in her hand. She hid it underneath her legs.

"You're really an idiot, aren't you?"

The next moment, his world erupts into fire.

Calli feels the explosion just as it happens. The entire hallway shakes. Lights flicker. Her ears start to ring. The hallway goes dark as the lights go out.

"The hell was that?" Sera yells. Alarms blare. Different alarms from before. Emergency lights flash on. They're dim, so Calli isn't able to see the entire hallway.

Another light source comes from behind her.

A crashing sound causes her to turn around. Behind her, the ceiling in the hallway begins to collapse. Burning debris and girders fall onto the ground, most of it on fire. The fire lights up the surrounding area.

"We need to leave!" Calli calls out, and they turn to run. She tries to focus on the directions that Mara gave her.

*Hit the end of the hall. Take a left. Then a right. Then a--*

Behind her, explosions in the form of gunshots pepper the wall behind her and Sera. They run, sprint down the hallway until they make the left. She doesn't even turn around. Before she can move forward, however, the ceiling above her breaks.

"Move!" Sera shouts before jumping towards her.

Calli's world goes black.

#

Then she awakes to fire.

All around her, the contents of the fallen ceiling are around her, and aflame. Smoke starts to rise in the small pocket where Calli lies. It stings her eyes, hampers her



breathing. Pain escalates all around her, but she finds that she can move freely. She shakes her head.

"Sera," she says, her voice hoarse. It's hard for her to breathe here. The fire around her seeks to consume everything. She can't find Sera.

"Sera!"

Behind her, more of the ceiling begins to collapse. Girders and metal fall close by.

"Over here!" a voice calls out. Calli gets to her knees. She tries to see past the smoke, tries to see past the screen that covers her eyes.

There, on the ground in front of her, is Sera. Facedown. One of her legs is trapped beneath a large girder.

"Help!" Calli yells. The three figures behind her begin to get closer and closer, their figures becoming more solid as they approach.

She tries to grab for Sera, reaches down. Her arms hurt. Her whole body hurts.

*Everything hurts.*

As the figures get closer, she sees what they are.

Silsparrow.

The soldiers approach her, though she thinks they can't see her through the smoke. Calli lays back down on the ground where she awoke, just like Aresh taught her.

*Lay still. Don't move. Aim true.*

She pulls out the pistol that Sera gave her. Pulls back the action.

The figures get closer, and she can see their helmets with the sign of the sparrow. They'll kill her and Sera the first chance they get. She fires wildly, even though she's prepared. She fires until the gun clicks empty.

The two figures fall. They don't move anymore.

Calli tosses the gun aside. It's useless to her now. She stands back up and grabs for Sera. She tries to lift her.

"We're leaving," she says, trying to get her up. Sera barely moves. Calli's strength is all but gone. "We need to leave," she repeats. "Come on, Sera. Let's go!" Sera barely budes. The fallen girder holds her in place. Calli places Sera on the floor again and shakes her.

"Wake up," she says. "Wake up!" She shakes her harder, but nothing happens. Sera doesn't move. "C'mon," she says. Tears begin to form in her eyes. Calli stands up and moves toward the fallen girder. She grabs it from the bottom with both hands. The metal is hot to the touch, but not hot enough to burn yet. Calli lifts. She lifts hard. Nothing moves. Nothing budes. She tries again, this time pulling as hard as she possibly could. The girder barely lifts off of the floor. Her hands slip, and Calli falls backwards onto her butt.

The tears...they continue to fall.

"I can't lift it," she says, to herself, to Sera. "I can't lift it, Sera. I can't save you."

Sera doesn't respond. She doesn't move. Calli continues to watch her friend, as if saying something will bring her back.

*Sera's dead.*

*Sera's dead.*

*She's dead.*

*She died saving me.*

*I'm the reason for this. She didn't have to follow me, but she did anyway. This is my fault.*

*I wish I were dead.*

As if to answer her call, another figure begins to come through the smoke. It has a rifle, and that rifle is aimed right at Calli.

"Where's the chip?" the woman asks, her black mask hiding her face. "Where is it?"

Calli sniffs. She rubs her nose on her arm and coughs as the smoke enters her lungs.

*This is it. She coughs again. She feels woozy. This is the end.*

Just before it all ends, gunshots ring out amongst the din of noise. Calli watches as the woman's chest explodes tiny holes of blood. Calli's eyes flutter shut, as if everything is no more.

#

Even though the hallway is so loud that he can't hear much of anything, Aresh hears the sound of bullet casings hitting the metal floor. Rian's weapon is smoking. The Silsparrow black ops soldier falls to the ground, dead, and immediately Rian is running. She almost jumps into the fire. Aresh follows after her.

"They're here," Rian says. "Kids are here!"

Aresh steps over a fallen girder next to Rian and sees Calli sitting on the floor.

Next to Aresh's feet is Sera. She isn't moving.

"She's trapped," Calli screams. "You have to get her out of there!"

"Help me," Rian says, and she grabs the girder. Aresh mimics her and grabs the large hunk of metal.

"Pull her out as soon as we get this thing up," he yells to Calli, who stands up. The smoke is irritating his eyes. His lungs are already starting to reject the smoke that's going inside of it. He pulls as hard as he can. The girder starts to move. He uses his legs to push it up, and the girder rises off of the floor. Calli leans down and grabs her friend, then drags her out of the reach of the girder. As soon as Sera's clear, Aresh and Rian lower the metal. He grabs Sera, along with Rian's help, and pulls her out of the debris on the other side.

"Do you know a way out of here?" he asks Calli. He pulls Sera over his shoulder.

"This way," she says, then starts to run down the hall. He notices a small limp in her stride. Rian catches up to her and takes the lead, and Aresh follows close behind. He hopes, with everything in him, that Sera isn't dead. He doesn't need another child's death on his conscious.

Around them, the fire spreads. There's more explosions, more gunfire. It reminds him too much of years ago. Flashes in his head start to crop back up, but he shakes them away. No time for that. A few of Mara's people pass them by. Rian aims her weapon at them, but they simply wave her off and keep running past them, their own weapons at the ready.

"They aren't paying any attention to us," Aresh says.

"We aren't the threat," Rian replies, and she keeps moving forward.

They enter a doorway with a broken sliding door and come into a large garage room. Here, a number of rovers wait patiently for a driver.

"Get the kids in there," Rain says, taking cover behind one of the rovers. "I'll cover you."

Aresh follows Calli to the nearest vehicle, a large, six-wheeled one. Armor plating covers it, and the Silsparrow logo is covered in a giant red X. Aresh taps the button near the hatch and it lowers down slowly, the whir of the machinery making a loud whining sound.

"Here, set her down," Aresh says, getting Calli to help move Sera. They set Sera down on the cushioned bench along the wall of the vehicle, making sure to keep her bad leg up. The vehicle is cramped, but it'll get them where they need to go, which was anywhere but here.

"We're set," Aresh calls out, and Rian joins them shortly.

"I'm driving," she says, and she gets to the front. Aresh shuts the hatch behind him. Rian activates the rover, pressing a button which opens the front gates in front of them. The doors creak open. It's as if they haven't been open in years.

*I had no idea this place existed,* Aresh thinks as he sees the jungle from outside the front window.

"Hang on," Rian says, and she guns it. At first, the rover lurches forward, but eventually it gets up to a good speed and shoots out of the mountain facility. Aresh turns back toward Sera.

"Is she going to be okay?" Calli asks. He can see tear streaks down her cheeks.

"Hold on," Aresh says, moving past Calli to check Sera's pulse. There's a beat there, but it's faint. He leans in, presses his ear to her mouth. He feels her breath. It's shallow. "There should be a kit on the wall," he says.

Calli turns her head quickly, searching for what he's looking for. Along the wall, magnetically set in, is a first aid kit. She pulls it off the wall and hands it to him. He immediately opens the flaps and opens it. Inside, other than the normal stuff is a small breathing mask. He takes it out and wraps it over Sera's head. He turns to Calli.

"Squeeze this thing every few seconds. Don't go crazy with it." He moves aside to let her do her job. He himself moves back to check on her leg.

Sera's left leg is shredded. It's a bloody, pulpy mess. Her pants are torn where the girder landed on her, and burn marks cover her skin. He doesn't want to touch it.

*Shit*, he thinks.

"We're going to need to give her pain killers," he says, rummaging through the kit again. He finds three of them. Maybe they'd be enough, maybe they wouldn't. He rips off the cap of the first syringe with his teeth and injects it into her leg. She's young, so he doesn't give her the full dose. At least, in this, they'd be able to ration the uses. "She's going to be in a lot of pain."

"Will she walk?" Calli asks as she squeezes.

That is something Aresh isn't sure of. He isn't a medic, nor is he a surgeon. But he's seen people have to get amputations with lesser wounds. Kipos doesn't have state-of-the-art hospitals, no real surgery equipment. And if it did have such a facility, where would they find it in the jungle?

They'd have to find a place fast.

"She'll be okay," is all he tells her. She nods at him. He isn't sure that she believes him. He tells her to keep pumping, at least until she opens her eyes, and heads up towards Rian.

"Where we going?" he asks.

"Where do you want to go? Or rather, where is there to go?" She keeps looking at the rearview cameras in the rover. She's making sure they aren't followed.

"Talon's is the best option I can think of," he says.

"He won't let us in, even if I threaten him."

"We don't really have a choice, do we?"

There's a sudden beeping on the screen. The rearview camera switches to a map of the general area. The warnings blare, and in white text on the bottom of the screen reads SICKSTORM INCOMING.

"Fuck," Rian says.

"Why 'fuck'?" Calli asks. She turns her head and sees the screen. "Oh," she says. "Fuck."

"There should be masks somewhere around here," Rian says, training her eyes back to the jungle road. She weaves around trees and follows the path as best she can, but she ramps up speed. "I could try to outrun it."

"You can't," Aresh says, turning and trying to search the rover. "We're too close."

"It's Mara," Calli says. "She's done it. She's launched another one."

Before Aresh can question her, he reaches up into one of the upper compartments and opens it. Inside is a metal box.

"Found 'em," he says as he pulls it from the compartment and opens it up. He counts the masks.

*Shit.*

There's only three masks.

He turns around and hands two to Calli. "Here's one for you. Get one on Sera. Make sure it's tight." She takes the masks and gets to work. Aresh sighs. He takes the final mask up to Rian.

"Here," he says to her.

"Where's yours?"

He thinks about lying to her, telling her that his is nearby. She would be paying attention to the road anyway. But he doesn't.

"This is the last one," he says, his tone lowering.

She smiles. "And you're giving it to me?"

"Rian, this vehicle isn't sealed. We're in a fast van, not a tank. The sickstorm will get in here and infect anybody without a mask. And that person's going to be me."

She turns her attention back to the road. "Not gonna happen," she says.

"Please," he says, offering the mask again. "Take it."

"It's yours," she says. "You've got a kid and a husband to go back home to. I'm luckily bereft of such things."

"Rian--"

"Fucking put it on, Aresh," she says. "Storm's almost here."

He looks at the screen, watching as the storm begins its wide-swatch across the map.

It was going to engulf them in mere moments.

He sighs.

"I'm sorry." He puts on the mask.



The wave of purple poison covers the rover. Like a blast of wind, it hits the vehicle, causing Rain to realign her steering. He feels a slight tingle over his skin as the wispy air begins to creep in the interior.

Rain reaches onto the console and presses the screen a few times. Now it shows a comms band, the wavy line giving off a static noise.

"It's okay," she says, "but call Talon and tell him that we're going to need some fucking help."

They traveled for a few hours before Talon's people stopped them. The man had been standing atop his own small squad of rovers, his hands in the pockets of his trenchcoat. His soldiers were standing by, not aiming their weapons at them, but not lowering them either.

"You seem to get yourself into all sorts of trouble, don't you, Queen?" He laughed.

They loaded up Sera into a rover with a small medical bay in the back. Calli rode with her. Aresh went with Talon in another rover, while Rian was loaded onto her own separate rover, one that was quarantined off from the outside world.

When they arrived at Bandit Town, they took Rian to a safe area, one that was well away from the people of the town. They took Calli, Sera, and Aresh to the medical center.

Days passed.

Sera's leg had to go. There was no way they'd be able to save it, for the damage that had been done to it had been too much. She would have to walk with crutches or a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Rian was stable, though the effects of the sickstorm were starting to set in. She was given medicines to hold the disease at bay, but they still had to hold her in a quarantine center. She wasn't coughing up blood yet, but she would soon.

Calli stands by Sera's bedside, watching as her friend looks at her own leg. She awoke to find her leg gone a few days ago. She didn't take it well.

"Do you need anything?" Calli asks.

Sera doesn't say anything, but she does shake her head.

"No water?"

"No."

She opens her mouth to say something else, but Aresh walks into the room with Talon.

"Aresh tells me you have something that I may find lucrative," he says.

"The word I used was 'opportunistic'," Aresh replies, crossing his arms.

"Whatever."

Calli steps away from Sera's bed and walks to Talon. "What I'm about to give you will need to go into the right hands. Somebody, anybody with the know how to do what's right."

"And make us a lot of money," Talon smiles.

"That too," Aresh says. "Go ahead."

"I might be a gangster, but I have my moments of good will."

Calli sighs. She reaches into her pocket and produces the chip. She tells him what it is.

"That's...interesting," Talon says, holding the chip in his fingers. "Word of this gets out, lots of heads go on the chopping block."

"Which is why it needs to get out," Aresh says. "Silsparrow needs to pay for what they've done."

"This chip," he says, weighing it in his hand as if it were a small pebble, "will change everything."

"I know," Calli says.

"Are you sure you want to give it to me? I can get you a good price--I know some information brokers who would pay lots of money for something like this. But..." He rubs his forehead. "Once I do, there's no going back."

Calli lowers her head. Everything that had happened--everything that she had to do, everything that Sera and Rian and Aresh went through--she couldn't pass it up. Her mother...she was counting on Calli. Calli was counting on Calli. She couldn't throw everything away at this moment, no matter how life-changing it could be. She had to worry about herself and her friends. They sacrificed so much. Now wasn't the time to back away.

She agrees, and Talon gets to work.

#

Calli checks the screen of the datapad again and smiles.

*More than enough. Definitely more than enough.*

The money that Talon got her and the rest of them was generous. He found a buyer within minutes. "Secrets of a potential bioweapon in the hands of a corrupt megacorporation is always gonna put a smile on somebody's face," he said, "and a lot of money in my pocket."

The cut was split evenly amongst them, with a small cut for Talon for his work. Talon also managed to work in an order of the sickstorm cure for Rian as well.

"I'm pissed that I have to stick around on this planet a bit longer to get it," she said behind the glass wall of her hospital room, "but at least I'm getting it."

Aresh had been there as well, leaning against the glass and looking in.

"I'm going to stay with her," he told Calli. Talon had promised them transportation back to Belhall. He had a few rovers lying around that weren't a total mess and at least looked legit. "Just until she gets better. Nobody knows that we were involved on the raid on the mountain. Nobody's looking for us. You, however."

She nodded. "I know."

"You should go home. Go see your Mom. Get her that cure, and give her my regards. Tell her a friend of Will's says hey."

Calli smiled. "I will."

"Do me another favor," he said. His smile disappeared. "Get off this planet. Leave, and never come back. This place...it isn't the garden we thought it'd be. You should go. Find a place for your and your mother and Sera to live in peace."

Rian put a single fist into the air, and Calli mirrored her.

"See ya, kid," she said.

"Goodbye, Calli," Aresh said. He offered his hand to her. She took it. "Your father would be proud."

They helped Sera into the back of the rover, her new crutches at her side as she sat on the bench. Her spirits were a little bit higher in the past few days, but Calli knew that, deep down, she was never going to be the same again.

"I really want to sleep in my own bed again," Sera said, sighing and leaning against the cushion on the bench. "Forever, if possible."

"What are you going to do with your share?" Calli asked as they set off.

"Leave," she said, then looked up, "with you, if that's okay."

Calli nodded. "Where my Mom and I go, I want you there with me."

Sera smiled. "Also, I hear people can get cybernetic legs in some parts..."

Calli laughed. "We'll be sure to find a planet that specializes in those sorts of things."

"Deal."

The ride feels slow, but maybe that's because of Calli's anxiousness. She told the drivers to take them to the Belhall Quarantine Center, rather than Belhall itself. The first thing she wanted to see was her mother's face.

After some time, they arrive.

Calli hops out of the back of the vehicle. The midday sun rises high above her. The air is clean and calm. The Center greets her like an old friend. She turns around to see the drivers helping Sera out of the back. She waves Calli off.

"I'll be in," she says as they pick her up. "Go! Go see her!"

Calli whispers a silent thank you and heads inside, nearly dashing past the sign-in desk. She fills out all the necessary paperwork.

"Haven't been here in a while? Used to see you in here almost every day," the guard at the desk says, eyeing her suspiciously. He runs her ID through the system, but it comes up clean. He humphs. "No issues here. You're free to go."

*Talon's fake ID's worked.* She follows the guard who leads her into the changing room and hands her the quarantine suit. She remembers how to do this. She puts on the equipment and is led into the ward, where all the sick patients are.

She's shaking.

She tries to stop it, but then lets it continue. She should be happy at this moment. She lets it take her. She's already crying, her smile hidden behind the glass of her mask.

When they reach the room, the guard leaves her alone.

Diana lays in bed. The machines beep and whir as she lays flat. She wears a breathing mask on her face. For a moment, Diana looks confused. Who could that be at her window?

Tears fall from Calli's eyes. She giggles, then presses her hands up against the glass.

Diana leans up from her bed. It strains her, tires her. Calli can see that.

She smiles.

"Baby," she says, ripping off the mask and moving her legs off of the bed. She looks pale, no different from when Calli left.

"I'm sorry," Calli says. "I'm so sorry I left."

Diana stands. She wobbles a bit, but finds her balance, using the bed to hold her up.

"My daughter," she says. Slowly, step by step, she walks toward the window.

Tears in her eyes, a smile on her face, Diana sees her daughter again. She raises her own hand, pressing it against the glass where Calli's is.

They both cry. For themselves. For one another.

They don't say anything.

They don't have to.

## Epilogue

Donnel Yerren was trapped.

His lab coat was smeared with blood, all of it not his own. The soldiers in black uniforms entered the building with no warning and began shooting everyone. First, David went down. Then Karen, then Dylan and Pietro. All of them, shot down and murdered. The soldiers wore face masks, blank as their expressions probably were.

Donnel had been in the restroom at the time, washing his hands and ready to return to his research, when he heard the first gunshots. He carefully left the men's room and ran down the hallways, using his badge to open the sliding door. He locked it from the inside. In case of an emergency, the rooms with experiments inside them could be sealed in case of a spill or a break.

Or, in Donnel's case, of a purge.

He knows who these soldiers are. They wear no insignia. They aren't part of any organization that makes itself public. He turns around in the room and finds the experiment is still inside its tube.

*This, he thinks as he approaches it, the dark liquid hiding the thing child inside of it. They're after this. I wonder why?*

He walks over to the computer terminal and presses the screen. He had maybe a few minutes when they got to this door before they entered it and killed him. The computers on this station were dubbed classified, but they were still able to see newswires and hear radio chatter from the outside.



Donnel turned on the newsfeed, staring at an abundance of information and news headlines that all related to him somehow.

*Silsparrow bioweapon revealed.*

*Used on innocents?*

*Silsparrow CEO to speak on this matter today.*

*Evidence found that Silsparrow used deadly virus on its own people.*

*Ah.* So the sickstorm project got leaked. *So that's what all this fuss is about.* He finds himself chuckling. Maybe he's gone crazy, or maybe the irony is just too funny for him to not laugh.

The sickstorm project...that had been an interesting one.

*But it birthed something so much more interesting.* He turns his head, looks at the tube. Inside was a light, a burning light in an otherwise dark universe. It was going to change things, when it was old enough.

*When the child is old enough, everything will change.*

He doesn't turn around as the door slide open. He merely steps aside so the soldiers' bullets wouldn't damage the specimen in the tube.

END