

Stolen By Raze

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Chapter One

Knee-deep in inventory, Raze silently counted the weapons neatly suspended on the wall of the gear room. Though he relished his position as the head of the Special Response Units in this sector, he loathed all the paperwork and reports that went with it. One look at the messages clogging his inbox every morning, and Raze couldn't help but think back to the easier days before his many promotions. He reminded himself that the slower pace and safer environment here in orbit above the planet Calyx were his reward for his many years of valiant service.

"You got a minute?" Cipher, the SRU Alpha team's chief engineer and explosives expert, popped his head through the open door and held out his tablet. "I need some signatures for the equipment requisitions."

Raze made a face and held out his hand. "Is it that time of year already? I better start working on my arm wrestling skills because I'm going to have to take Vicious to the table to get every penny we need out of his budget."

"Sorry, boss." Cipher handed over the tablet and gestured to the digital display of the duty board mounted on the nearest wall. "I've got transport for the Grab escort duty squared away for tomorrow morning. Zeph is taking us down to the surface."

Surprised by that bit of information, Raze glanced up from the screen he had been scrolling down. "He's been cleared to fly?"

"Only transport missions but yeah. He's ready to get back into the combat duty rotation but the admiral hasn't signed off on his release yet."

"The guy took a direct hit and made a crash landing that he barely survived. There's no rush."

"He's hurting. Emotionally," the brilliant engineer clarified. "He's the one who shot down Terror. He's the one who couldn't stay in the air long enough to defend and save him. I'm sure he feels guilty for Terror's capture."

And death. Raze didn't dare speak the words they had all accepted as truth. A man like Terror wouldn't have lasted long in Splinter captivity. Once it became clear that he couldn't be broken, they would slit his throat and dump his body in an unmarked grave. Regardless of all the trouble the man had caused, Terror had been loved by many and viewed as the best of their kind, a warrior unlike any other.

"It's better for Zeph to get back in the pilot's seat where he belongs." Cipher walked over to the screen and tapped in the flight plan information that would automatically sync to the Alpha squad's communication devices. When he was done, he accessed the secret interface that allowed a soldier with his clearance to sift through all the information

the ship's many servers possessed. "Did you get the invite for the big sit-down in the war room later this week?"

"Yes." Raze slashed his stylus across the bottom of the tablet screen and tapped it for the next page. "Did you see the invite list?"

"I did." Cipher's voice tightened. "Thrash and Rampage, huh?"

Raze hummed and continued signing in the necessary spots. The two land corps soldiers were famous among the Harcos ranks for waging a counter-insurgency campaign on one of the planets the Splinter faction had tried to colonize. The two soldiers had been given one year to try to rein in the violence or else the war council was fully prepared to destroy the entire planet. Miraculously, the pair had succeeded against all odds. Seven years later, that ratty shithole was an emerging trade partner and one of the safest planets in the Alliance network.

"You think we're going to try to colonize Calyx?"

He met Cipher's questioning stare. "You're the genius. You tell me."

The specialist turned back to the screens and started typing in a passcode. "I think it would be in our long-term interests to put more than just a base down there. Calyx has no standing army and almost no infrastructure. If we don't colonize them, the Splinters will."

"Better us than them," Raze agreed.

"But it won't be easy," his friend replied. "Not with that place already overrun by terrorists. I've seen some of the latest intel on the western villages like the places where Vicious' mate came from," he said. "The Splinters have a major stronghold there and are operating openly."

"Sure, but you remember what it was like in Blue Shores. Think of how relaxed and easy it was there during Venom's short honeymoon. There's a reason we're putting our base nearby that seaside community."

"It's a strange planet," Cipher remarked, still tapping away at the touchscreen. "The divisions among the people down there are so disparate. The City wants to be a metropolis but it's being held back such restrictive laws. The rural areas are frighteningly backwards with their bans on all medicine and technology and their treatment of women. Then you have places like Blue Shores which is basically a slice of the colonies on Calyx."

"From what I've read about their home planet – about this Earth of theirs – it's always been that way. They aren't like us. They don't share a central heritage or bloodline." He shrugged. "You've seen how different the women look. Dark hair, pale hair, red hair, blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, pale skin, dark skin –"

Decked out in his gear, Venom appeared in the doorway. "I'm taking the beta squad out now."

After losing an entire team during the blitz attack by the Splinters nearly three months earlier, Venom had taken over as the *Valiant's* beta squad leader. Raze missed

working alongside his best friend every day but acknowledged that it was wisest choice for their unit.

"Don't take it easy on the new guys over on the *Arctis*. I want their asses dragging when you're done with this forty-eight hour scenario. Break them – and then build them back up, Ven. They have to make all the wrong decisions now, with the safety net of training to catch them. It's the only to give them the confidence they need to operate independently in the field."

"Gee, Raze, remind me not to send you to the next recruitment breakfast. We'll never get any new applications with your sunny face greeting them at the door."

He scowled at his friend and tossed a stylus at him. Venom ducked and caught the shiny stick before it smacked his head. "We're doing the Grab escort tomorrow so you'll be the backup team up here if we get a hot call."

"And we'll be three hours out by normal transport and one by dart if you need us on the ground," Venom said, his tone concerned.

"It's a simple Grab escort, Ven. We've got this."

"Simple my ass," Venom replied with a grunt. "There is nothing simple about the powder keg waiting to blow down there."

"Orion is sending extra guard ships with us. He hopes the show of air force will be a deterrent to any sort of nonsense the locals might want to kick our way."

"Let's hope he's right."

"Have you heard from Dizzy yet?" Even though Venom had never given him a reason to doubt his mission priorities, Raze needed to know that his friend wasn't pining over his wife who had taken a quick trip to Safe Harbor while on the training exercise.

"Earlier," Venom said and smiled. "She and Jack landed safely and are already at his new home in the Harcos embassy compound."

"You think her old man is going to like it there?"

Venom shrugged. "He doesn't have much of a choice. After the way shit went down in The City, he's a marked man. Working for us and living within the safety of one our compounds is best option for him. It was that or stay here on the *Valiant* or one of the destroyer or guard ships."

"And General Thorn?"

His best friend made a face. "It's still very complicated for Dizzy. She loves Jack because he's the only father she ever knew, but she's open and curious about forming a better relationship with Thorn. They're on good terms. She's actually meeting her stepmother for the first time while at the embassy."

"Is that a good idea?"

"I trust Dizzy's judgment. She's spoken briefly with Thorn's mate. I don't foresee any issues between them."

"What about Thorn and Jack?"

"They're like a pair of Sendarian growlers in a bag."

He laughed at the image of those scrawny, yowling cats that roamed the planet where they had survived the infamous siege. "No love lost, huh?"

"None." Venom glanced at Cipher's back, almost as if debating whether he wanted to say something in front of the man. "Hey, uh, when I get back, I need to chat with you about some scheduling conflicts on the horizon."

Raze's brow furrowed until it finally dawned on him what Venom was trying to tell him. The glint in his friend's eyes couldn't be mistaken. Since saving Dizzy from the terrorists who had kidnapped her, Venom had been trying his hardest to start a family with his pretty blonde mate. Apparently the newlyweds had succeeded in their mission.

Despite the joy he felt at his best friend's stroke of luck, Raze couldn't deny the dagger of envy that stabbed at his gut. To earn the right to a wife and the chance to father children was the greatest honor among their kind. It was something only the strongest, bravest warriors ever earned the right to try—and the one task he had utterly failed, in more ways than one. There would be no second mate for him and never a child of his own blood.

Venom rubbed the back of his neck and offered a lopsided smile. "So...yeah."

Certain Venom wanted to keep his happy news quiet for a while, he grinned at him and held back the heartfelt congratulations he wanted to offer. Later, in private, he would make sure Venom knew just how happy he was for him and Dizzy. "We'll get together sometime next week if that's all right?"

"Works for me." Venom turned to the screen Cipher was studying. "What are you looking at?"

"Just the list of the men cleared for the Grab tomorrow," Cipher said. "Boss, didn't you have a run-in with Swift at the officers' club?"

The mention of the asshole pilot who had taken a single-tail whip to one of the poppies, the high-end pleasure women hired to entertain unmated officers, riled him. Shooting out of his chair, he strode toward Cipher. "Orion let that bastard onto the Grab roster?"

"He's right here." Cipher tapped the name halfway down the short list. "Looks like they bumped a land corps sergeant to give him a space."

Swearing under his breath, Raze wondered what the hell the admiral was thinking. Swift was a loose fucking cannon and dangerous. As the chief negotiator of the SRU, Raze easily read people and he'd seen enough in Swift's cold stare that night at the club to understand the man was incapable of showing love or affection to a bride. He was the sort of Harcos male who wanted a subservient and collared slave, not a wife to love and pamper and certainly not a partner.

"This is fucking bullshit."

"Easy." Venom squeezed his shoulder. "It's out of our hands. The lists are split equally between land and sky corps and the spots are assigned by seniority and valor points."

Unless the admiral had a paper trail to point to, he couldn't just ax the guy from the list for being an asshole."

"This isn't going to end well," Raze predicted. "I give it a week before Risk or someone else from the medical team has to step in and take his bride."

"Maybe," Venom said uneasily. "Until then, we have to rely on the systems in place to keep her safe." The communications device strapped to his wrist beeped. "I've got to run." He clapped Raze's back. "We'll talk later, yeah?"

"Yes."

Venom hesitated in the doorway. "Don't let Swift get to you, okay? Just let it go. We'll sort it out later."

Raze rolled his eyes. "I'm not a teenager, Ven. I know how to handle myself."

"Uh-huh," his friend said, unconvinced. "You seem to forget how many bar fights I've had to back you up on over the years."

"I'm too old for that shit. I'm not about to brawl on the departure decks with a pilot just because he's the biggest son of a bitch I've ever met."

Venom glanced at Cipher. "If he gets into trouble down there..."

The explosives expert held up his hand. "I've got his back."

Raze wanted to be annoyed with his teammates for being so mothering but he acknowledged that he was incredibly lucky to have such loyal friends. After losing an entire unit of their highly trained SRU brethren, the men had closed ranks and come together to form an even more cohesive group. Even the new guys who had been added into the mix weren't seen as mere replacements but as brothers-in-arms.

Cipher closed down the private access windows he'd opened. "I'll watch Swift. If he breaks one rule, I'll alert the monitors."

Raze had a feeling Cipher would be keeping a very close eye on the pilot. The genius engineer had never made his disdain for the Grab ritual a secret. Despite his numerous valor points earned by risking his life on missions with SRU and even the Shadow Force on occasion, Cipher refused to use them. Raze hated the idea of Cipher continuing his lonely existence but he was the last man in the universe who had any business lecturing another man on his personal life.

After the shambles of his first marriage, Raze had sworn off mating ever again. Seeing the way Dizzy made Venom so happy had tempted him greatly, but all it took was one peek at his medical records and the shameful secret buried within them for him to abandon those fanciful thoughts. Wives and mate-bonds were for other men.

"Raze."

He stiffened at the low, raspy sound of Torment's voice and turned toward the doorway Venom had recently vacated. The Shadow Force interrogator loomed there, his very presence ominous and foreboding. Nothing good ever came from a run-in with the man capable of breaking even the hardest terrorists.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a curious Cipher, he asked, "What's up, Torment?"

"We have a problem down on Calyx, and I need your team to make a side trip tonight." Torment glanced around and took a step forward, lowering his voice even more. "This would be strictly off the books, and you'll probably get your hands slapped when it's done."

Raze narrowed his eyes. "This isn't a sanctioned mission?"

"Savage, that paper-pushing asshole they sent to take Terror's place, refuses to expend resources on native assets in trouble. He's a tight-fisted jerkoff who seems to think they're all easily replaced and not worth risking our men to protect."

It was the first time Raze had ever seen Torment lose that mask of icy indifference. Clearly losing Terror had rattled the normally cool and collected operator. Even so, he couldn't disagree with Savage, the man the war council had sent to head up Shadow Force in this sector. "Your assets know the risks they're taking when they sign onto work with you."

"Not these two," Torment countered. "Strictly speaking, they aren't assets, but you and your team owes one of them a debt of honor."

Raze frowned. "And who the hell would that be?"

"Hopper."

He blinked. "The pink-haired woman who gave us the tunnel intel and helped us locate and recover the fuel rods?"

Torment nodded. "Her."

"And the other one?"

The interrogator hesitated. "It's Dizzy's best friend Ella. General Thorn made it clear to me before he set off on his flagship that I was to do everything within my power to keep his daughter safe and happy. Dizzy considers Ella her sister and that's good enough for me. She's family – and we protect our families."

The mere mention of Ella's name sent heat rolling through his stomach. The white-hot sensation streaked into his chest and gripped him by the balls. He swallowed hard and tried to muster some control over his body. *She's too good for you. You can't have her.*

Even as he tried to convince himself to let it go, Ella's smiling face flashed before his eyes. His heart fluttered wildly as her silly belly laugh echoed in his ears. He remembered following her out to the beach that first night of their stay at the Blue Shores luxury resort where Venom and Dizzy spent their short honeymoon. He had been worried about the locals bothering the famous muse so he'd shadowed her out to the water's edge and watched her enjoy a night swim.

When she had emerged from the warm ocean, her soft, wet skin awash in the silvery glow of her planet's three moons, he had lost the ability to breathe. In all his life, he'd never been affected by any woman like that – not even his former mate who had been a devastatingly beautiful pureblooded Harcos female. His unwanted reaction to Ella had

unsettled him. He didn't need that sort of complication in his life. He couldn't have her and there was no use dwelling on the what-ifs.

Raze kept his face an emotionless canvas. "Is this retaliation for helping us?"

"No, we've received word from our man inside the secret police that there's a raid planned tonight on a fundraising party that Ella is hosting for the shelter she's trying to build."

There wasn't much that surprised him these days but this one did. "They're going to raid a fundraiser?"

"It's not about the fundraiser. It's about the guest list," Torment explained. "With the upcoming elections, the far right party is attempting to control the message. The people likely to help fund Ella's shelter are the same people that party wants silenced."

"The pirate radio stations have been very rowdy lately," Cipher interjected. "After Dizzy opened my eyes to their existence, I've kept an ear on them. They don't sugarcoat the truth."

"No, they don't," Torment agreed. "That woman, the Mouth from the South as they call her, she's a huge pain in both parties' asses. She tells it like it is and isn't afraid to expose both sides of the political debate as hypocrites and crooks. Now that the Red Feather is hosting these illicit paper parties —"

"What?" Raze asked, confused.

"They get together and drop thousands of flyers filled with real information, not government propaganda, all around the villages and The City," Torment clarified. "They're making people ask questions — the wrong questions as far as the establishment is concerned — and they're all at risk of being rounded up and put away."

"Put away where?"

Torment hesitated. "We've confirmed the existence of massive work camps in the mountain regions of the planet. Our ground-penetrating radar also confirms the mass graves Dankirk and other assets had reported as unverified but strongly believed rumors."

Aghast, Raze clenched his jaw. "What the hell is going on down there?"

"It's a young civilization trying to work through the growing pains," Torment said rather blithely. "To be perfectly blunt, I don't much care what they do down there as long as it doesn't impact our mission. The fact is — we need the progressive, pro-Harcos party to win and women like Ella and Hopper and this mouthy pirate radio DJ are the keys to that victory."

Raze hadn't always had the kindest thoughts toward the people on Calyx but it didn't sit well with him that his own government simply viewed them as expendable game pieces to be moved around an invisible board in whatever way benefited the Harcos most. "What's the mission look like?"

"We'll let the raid occur so we don't raise any suspicions about our informant. Then we intercept in route to their central processing station for criminals. We have to time it just right, Raze."

"Or?"

"Or we risk being exposed or missing the women altogether," Torment said. "If Ella and Hopper make it to the work camps, we'll never see them again. Of course, they may simply pull over and slaughter them before dumping them in one of those graves. Either way, we need to watch closely."

A painful squeezing sensation gripped Raze's chest. He refused to even consider that Ella or Hopper might be killed. "We'll need all the intel we can get – and I want clearance from Vicious for our part in this. He'll agree with you about honoring our debt to Hopper and protecting Ella because of what she means to Dizzy. Even with clearance, I'll stipulate that this is a strictly volunteer mission."

"With the chance to rescue Ella?" Torment snorted. "After the stampede she caused on the arrivals deck before Venom's wedding, I don't think you'll have a problem getting volunteers for this one. Once she's up here, there's no going back for her – and the men will know that. They'll all want a chance to be her hero and the chance for something more."

An invisible fist twisted Raze's stomach. A surge of jealousy forced him to clench his jaws and squelch the growl that threatened to escape his throat. One word blared in his brain. *Mine*.

But she wasn't his and could never be his.

Raze glanced at Cipher. "Pull the terrain specs and any other intel we'll need for mission planning."

"On it, boss." Cipher left the room with a determined step.

Looking at Torment, Raze said, "Get clearance and find us a combat pilot. We'll need to be in Calyx airspace by nightfall."

"I've already got one in mind."

Thinking of his earlier conversation with Cipher, he asked, "Zephyr?"

Torment's expression hardened. "No."

"Oh." The man's clipped reply told Raze everything he needed to know.

"I've already asked Swift and he's agreed."

Now it was Raze's turn to look pissed. "I don't like him."

"I don't either but he's a skilled pilot. There's a very short list for missions like these and three of the men I would ask are unavailable. Zeph hasn't been cleared. Blaze is away on the training exercise at the *Arctis*, and Hazard is still stuck on long-range transports. So it's Swift or no one."

Raze didn't like it but he grudgingly admitted the man was an extremely capable pilot. "Fine."

"I'd like to come with you."

"We're happy to have you." Raze wouldn't turn down the offer of another highly-skilled operative. The more the merrier in situations like this.

After Torment left, Raze made some quick notes about his inventory progress before heading for their mission prep room. Already, the men of the Alpha team were gathering to plan their stealth assault. His gaze flicked around the room, pausing on each man and silently appraising them. Guilt shook him as he realized what he was doing but he couldn't stop himself. He mentally catalogued each man on his team and wondered which one might gain Ella's affection.

Annoyed by his moment of weakness, Raze silently berated himself. The men of SRU were good men who deserved the same chance at happiness he had once squandered. If there was a possibility one of them might be Ella's hero, so be it.

Pushing down his improper feelings toward the sweet, gentle muse, Raze entered the room and took charge of the meeting. There was no use dwelling on things that could never be. With the secret shame that had ruined his first marriage, Raze was nobody's hero.

Chapter Two

Her hand held high, Ella deftly avoided a collision with a dancing couple *and* managed not to spill any of her drink. Thrilled by her show of skill, she gave a little fist pump. *Score!*

The ingredients for the yummy cocktail had cost her a pretty penny, and she hated the idea of missing out on even one tiny drop of the boozy goodness sloshing around in her cup. With the upcoming election, the vice squads were cracking down hard around The City and intercepting nearly all the alcohol shipments. The continuing blockade of her backwards little planet Calyx by the Harcos, those ruthlessly powerful sky warriors hovering above the mesosphere in their massive warships, meant illegal moonshine smuggled in from the outlying villages was quickly becoming a profitable sideline.

A wise investment in one of the stills out near Harper's Well had started to pay returns. Ella had never been happier to dabble in some illicit earning, especially now that her fledgling shelter for homeless girls had lost a handful of benefactors. She'd been able to get her hands on enough moonshine and wine to keep the mixing booth fully stocked and busy for this fundraising party at Subterranean, the underground hotspot her friend claimed as her own.

Weaving her way through the throng of pulsing bodies packed into the abandoned subway tunnel, Ella tried not to focus on the flashes of electric green and yellow light that lit up the teeming dance floor in the cavernous spot. She took a sip of her drink and relished the sweet, bright bite of the alcohol. She didn't often indulge, but a girl's twenty-fourth birthday was a good enough reason. Swatting away the tiny voice that insisted she was simply trying to forget about the best friend she missed more than anything and the profound loneliness of her empty apartment, Ella gulped down more of her drink and kept moving forward.

Standing atop a stack of crates, Hopper, the hostess of the night's festivities, used a handheld amplifier to introduce the next band over the raucous noise of the crowd. Her wildly-streaked hair thrashed around her head as she danced to the music in that awkward yet so outrageously adorable way of hers. For someone who had survived such a miserably bleak childhood, Hopper had somehow managed to hold onto the youthful optimism and zest for life that so many street kids had lost somewhere along the way.

Tonight, she sported bright pink and sunrise orange splashes of color adorning her blonde hair. The very public act of defiance could get her snapped up by the government goons trolling The City, but Hopper showed no fear. Her undisputed place among the street people as one of their beloved leaders and her knowledge of the abandoned tunnels beneath the crumbling metropolis where even the secret police didn't dare venture provided her with the sort of protection that couldn't be bought.

Ella both marveled at and envied Hopper's youthful innocence. Her own childhood on the streets had been harder and harsher than the one Hopper had survived, mostly due to the consequences of bad choices. Unlike Hopper who still clung to the idea that

people were basically good and that love wasn't a fantastic myth, Ella accepted the reality of the world they inhabited. Love was for suckers, and most people were assholes.

When Ella pushed her way through a wall of bodies, a rough male hand snatched hers and dragged her forcefully to the right. Gasping, Ella gripped her drink tighter as some of the precious liquid inside sloshed onto her skin. She tried to kick out at the assailant she couldn't see clearly. Her kick was neatly blocked and an arm slipped around her waist, hauling her tightly to a male chest. Lips brushed her ear, and Ella stiffened.

"Calm down, wildcat! It's me."

The familiar rasp of her old friend Dankirk's voice slowed her racing heart, but the rude touch pissed her right off. Throwing back her elbow, she whacked him right in the gut. A satisfying grunt met her ears, and he loosened his hold on her but didn't let go of her fingers. She let him lead her out of the crowd and into one of the alcoves near the entrance of a crumbling tunnel. Farther back, she could hear the muffled sounds of a young couple engaged in rather amorous activities. Danny glanced back at the couple and then tugged her along to a different spot where they wouldn't have to listen to all that huffing and puffing and groaning.

Glaring, Ella shook off his grip. "Is there a reason you're skulking around this party like some slave-snatching creeper?"

"Well, hello to you too, little sister." Ever the protector, Danny slid into a shielding position, putting his body between hers and the crowd. His mouth slanted with a grin. "You think I'd miss my favorite girl's birthday?"

She snorted. "Oh, I guess I've moved up a spot since Naya got her fairytale ending with Mr. Big and Scary up there?"

Danny's gaze flicked upward, as if looking toward space where their friend Naya now lived with her sky warrior husband Menace. She didn't miss the flash of regret and pain that crossed his normally unreadable face. His unrequited love for the dark-haired, dark-skinned beauty was no secret to anyone in their once tight-knit group of homeless kids. The glimpse of pain vanished a second later, and he gave a careless shrug. "I'm happy for her. Besides, it's one less member of our family that I have to swoop in to save. She's got a strong man to keep her safe."

Ella licked the trail of spilled alcohol from her wrist and the back of her hand. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The Red Feather fixer smirked. "Not gonna waste a drop, huh?"

His country boy drawl reminded her of easier, simpler times like the summer their pack of orphaned friends—their hobbled together family—had camped in the forest. Those five weeks of pure bliss were some of the happiest memories of her life. Plenty of food, lots of clean water and no threat of being kidnapped or worse? It had seemed like their very own version of heaven. But all good things came to an end...

"I paid a lot for this."

"So I heard." His mouth settled into a grim line. "Moonshine, Ella? Really?"

"It's good money."

"You already make good money as a muse."

"The thing about money is that you can never have enough of it."

"I wouldn't know about that." He actually turned his empty pockets inside out. "I seem to do just fine without it."

She rolled her eyes. "Then I guess I'll cross you off my list of possible donors."

He snorted. "I don't think you'll have any trouble meeting your fundraising goals after this shindig. Of course, you're risking twelve months in one of the work camps up north for simply attending this party. I shudder to think what they'd give the woman who organized it."

Playing coy, she asked, "Have you met her? I'd love to tell her thanks for the fabulous night."

"It's not a game, Ella. Those work camps —"

"That don't exist," she cut in with a look.

"That the *government* says don't exist," he retorted. "They're as real as I am — and they're worse than fucking hell, Ella."

Not wanting to talk about the rumored work camps, she sipped her drink and ran her appraising gaze over the political dissident's frame. "I figured you'd be too busy trying to ensure the upcoming elections are fair to come out for some fun."

"This isn't about fun, sweet pea." Danny reached under the lapel of the thin, faded jacket he wore everywhere and retrieved a rolled up magazine. Without letting her get a look at it, her friend whacked the top of her head.

"Ow!" She yelped and rubbed her stinging scalp. "What the hell, Danny?"

He rolled his eyes and flipped open the magazine. "Spare me the melodrama, Ella. Now what is this?"

Her gaze fell to the two-page spread. Although her stomach lurched at the sight of herself so scantily clad and posed provocatively, she feigned nonchalance. "It's a picture."

"Of you," Danny said and slapped the glossy photo. "In your fucking underwear!"

Taken aback by his outburst, she snatched the magazine away from him and smacked him with it. "It's lingerie — and it's classy."

"It's illegal, Elladee!" Stepping closer, her adopted big brother hissed angrily. "They will arrest you for this!"

"Now you're being melodramatic. The censors know all about this magazine and the pictures inside it. They turn a blind eye to it."

"They *did*," he countered. "It's changing out there. Whatever progress The City has made in the last eight years is coming to an end with this new election."

"The vote is four months away, Danny. It's too soon to know which side will win."

"The ultra-conservative wing is going to win this one, Ella. That's a fact."

"And you know that, how?"

"The war is coming." Danny shook his head and glanced out over the dancing crowd. "No, that's not true. The war is already here."

She heard the exhaustion in his voice and ached for him. What had started as simple political dissidence with the secret group called the Red Feather had morphed into something much more dangerous for Danny. He was known as a fixer because there was seemingly no situation he couldn't fix for the right price. Now that he was an asset for the Shadow Force – the silent, secret soldiers of the Harcos – his life had no doubt grown very complicated.

"All this?" He gestured around him with a waving finger. "It's all gone if the Splinters gain more of a foothold in the villages surrounding us. Harper's Well and Willow's Tears are teeming with those terrorist assholes. Only Blue Shores and Connor's Run have kept them out, but they've always been communities that wanted nothing to do with The City or the government here anyway. The last thing they want is a new overlord."

Ella thought of the recent spate of violence on their planet and the brazen Splinter attacks launched against the Harcos military contingent deployed to their corner of the galaxy. The two factions of the Harcos race had been locked in a deadly civil war for decades, but the war had settled into a deadlocked period that neither side seemed able to break free from and win.

For some unknown reason, the Splinters had picked her planet as their latest base of operations. She suspected the way her people shunned most technology and scientific advances and were nearly totally closed-off from the outside world had appealed to them. They were a populace unable to defend themselves and easily conquered.

A horrific bombing four years earlier had forced her planet to seek help from the sky warriors, and treaties were quickly signed. In exchange for military aid, her people provided the Harcos with food, natural products like minerals and gases – and women.

"Why is the war already here?" She feared the answer but needed to know.

"You forget the way Naya was nearly killed in that warehouse over the guns and the food shipments? Or how about that mess that nearly got Dizzy, Hopper and Jack Lane killed down here in the tunnels?" Danny made a face. "That's just a taste of the nightmare that awaits us if the Splinters aren't stopped."

"But how?" Ella glanced at the revelers who seemed totally oblivious to the precarious situation unraveling around them. "Danny, people are just trying to survive out there. They don't give a shit about the war between the Harcos and the Splinter faction. That's *them*, not *us*."

"It is us, Ella." Danny rubbed the back of his neck. "They'll find a way to make it about us."

She didn't know if he meant the Splinter terrorists or the Harcos sky warriors. Either way, she figured their people were screwed. Hating to see him so stressed, she reached out and rubbed his arm. "Hey, why don't you have a drink and stay a while? I'll even spring for that awful beer you love so much."

For a moment, he looked as if he might agree. "I can't, Ella. I need to get to a safe house for the night and get some sleep. It's going to be a busy couple of days for me."

"Why?"

He tapped his watch. "It's the start of a new quarter tomorrow morning—and you know what that means."

She groaned. "Ugh. Another Grab! Where?"

"The Mill."

"How many got pulled this time?"

"A dozen, I think. We only had two women trade lottery numbers and ask for help getting to the colonies. From what I've heard, the rest of the girls wanted to be taken."

Ella considered the sky warriors she had met while attending her best friend Dizzy's wedding to the frighteningly huge sniper Venom. Although the alien males were terrifyingly large and gruff, she had been surprised by the sweetness Venom's friends and colleagues had shown her. They had all been extremely respectful and kind toward her. Not a one of them had tried to cross *that* line. The same could not be said for men of her own kind.

"Maybe word is finally getting out about how good it is up there," she reasoned aloud. "If I was facing a life slaving away in the fields or trying to scrape by here in The City while working myself into an early grave in one of the factories, the chance of being taken away from all this to a place where men treat you like something precious might sound awfully tempting."

"Don't forget about the collars and the leashes and the whips and the chains —"

She held up her hand. "You have spent enough time up there with Naya and Dizzy to know that's not strictly true. Yes, some of those men are assholes but take a look around you, Danny. The ones here are just as bad."

His expression softened toward her. Was he thinking of the way she'd been mistreated, used and abused over the years? If he was, he didn't bring it up, and she was grateful for that. They were memories she wanted to keep buried — forever.

Tugging the magazine free from her grasp, he tucked it back inside his jacket. "Don't do this again, Ella. It's too dangerous."

"I needed the money, Danny."

"There are better ways to raise it."

"Yes," she conceded, "but I needed it fast. I had benefactors bailing on me and construction bills that had to be paid. We'll get through this rough patch with the fundraisers I have planned and the legit photo shoots and fashion campaigns I have booked. I need to know the doors of the shelter will be open by late fall, before the first freeze." Her throat tightened as she thought of the young women who hadn't survived the prior winter. "I can't lose any more of my girls."

Danny trailed his finger down her cheek and playfully poked one of her dimples. "There's that warrior mama again."

"Someone has to look out for them, Danny." She put her hand against his chest and rubbed a circle over his heart. "We're not all lucky enough to have a big brother take us under his wing and protect us."

He looked slightly abashed and gave another one of those careless shrugs. "I did what anyone would do when faced with finding a six-year-old kid digging through garbage cans for her breakfast."

"No, you did so much more," she murmured gratefully. "You taught me how to survive and fend for myself."

"Sometimes I worry you may have taken my advice to use that pretty face of yours to your advantage too literally," he said in a voice colored by regret.

She swallowed hard as the implications of his words hit her. He wasn't trying to be cruel—the man didn't have a cruel bone in his body—but he hurt her nonetheless. "What else was I supposed to do, Danny?"

His jaw visibly tensed. "I don't know. I never wanted *that* for you. Never."

Pushing down the pain that threatened to overwhelm her, Ella lifted her chin. After Harkin, the only man she had ever loved, bailed on her and she lost the one thing in the world she had wanted so badly, she had done whatever it took to get off the streets.

"I made my choices, and I can live with them. I'm doing all this to get that shelter for young girls and boys built because I want to spare them those hard decisions." She hesitated as a ball of emotion clogged her throat. "I'll never have children of my own, Danny. Those street kids who come to me for help? They're my children. They're the ones who matter to me."

"You won't be much help to them if the censors lock you up in one of their work camps."

"I won't end up in a work camp."

"I hope you're right, Elladee. I won't always be around to get you out of trouble." He seemed to waver and opened his mouth twice before finally speaking. "I heard Harkin is back on the planet."

The mention of her one-time closest friend and lover caused her knees to wobble. "What? Why?"

"I have my suspicions."

"And they are?"

"He's joined the Splinters. I have a feeling he's one of their native assets now."

"No." Despite everything that had gone down between them, Ella refused to believe Harkin would do something so terrible.

"Like I said, it's just a feeling. Hopefully I'm wrong."

"How do you know he's back?"

"I ran into another friend of ours." He shot her a pointed look. "One who likes to keep a very close eye on you."

He didn't have to elucidate. Ella knew exactly who he meant and glanced around nervously. Was George here? Was he skulking in the shadows and waiting for the perfect chance to snatch her away to his dungeon of horrors?

Hugging her close, Danny brushed a tender kiss to her temple. "Be safe, kiddo."

"Always." She held onto him for a few more seconds, refusing to let go of him just yet. With the risks he took to make life better on their planet, Ella never knew when—or if—she might see him again.

When they parted, she stared at Danny's back, watching the man who had been the only constant in her life until he disappeared into the dancing crowd. The urge to run after him, to beg him to stay and give up his dangerous work, was so strong, but she remained rooted to the spot, fully aware that Danny had long ago made peace with the idea that he might die at any moment.

The image of Danny vanishing before her eyes forced Ella to remember the other times she had been left behind by the people she loved. Her mother, Harkin, Naya, Dizzy—they had been but four in a long line of people who had walked out of her life as easily as they had slipped into it.

That wasn't quite fair, she acknowledged privately. Naya had left The City to start anew in Connor's Run, to build a life for herself as a business owner and escape the hellish landscape of the slums and streets where they had spent most of their teenage years. Poor Dizzy had been forced into a Grab to escape a loan shark and a tangled web of deceit her parents had woven. And her mother? Well—Ella really didn't want to think about that.

The squawk of the amplifier cutting across the crowd made Ella wince. She put a hand to her ear and downed the last of her drink.

"Remember to drop your change in the jars, folks!" Across the subterranean space, Hopper took the time to point out the men and women walking around with donation jars. "Every penny counts—and we need every single one to get this shelter open by the winter. So line up at the mixing booth, buy a drink or two, drop your extra change in a jar and dance your asses off!"

Ella smiled at the raucous whoops and applause that erupted. A moment later, the band started another song and Hopper shocked the crowd by diving into them. Gasping, Ella watched her wild friend body surf along the outstretched hands, her petite body easily floating on the palms held up to support her.

At the edge of the dance floor, a taller guy lowered Hopper to the ground. He looped his arms around her waist and tried to steal a kiss, but she skillfully turned her head and tapped her cheek. Laughing, the guy pecked Hopper's cheek and let her go. Like a lot of girls who had grown up on the streets, Hopper had drawn the line when it came to men and intimacy. She wasn't going to get herself in any sort of trouble.

Like the one that got me...

"Did Danny already bail?" Hopper rose on tiptoes to search for him. "I didn't even get to say hi."

Ella rubbed her pouting friend's arm. "Sorry, honey. He had some place to be."

"Doesn't he always?" Shrugging Hopper turned back toward her and smiled. "So what birthday is this? Are we calling it twenty-four?"

Because Ella had been so young when she was abandoned by her mother, she hadn't known quite how old she was. They had assumed she was six and that seemed close enough. "It's been eighteen years since Danny found me so yes."

"And fourteen since you found me," Hopper replied, her gaze turning wistful.

Ella remembered the evening she had come across the scrawny, blonde-haired little girl crying and stuffed in a crate in some filthy alley. Hopper had been so very young, maybe three or four. She had hardly been able to speak at all and they had assumed she was deaf or mute for weeks until she finally started to use her words. Later, Ella had understood that poor baby Hopper had survived some sort of traumatic ordeal that had stripped her of her ability to communicate. What that ordeal was Hopper had never said, and Ella didn't dare push.

"God, we've come a long way since the days of scrounging through garbage and sleeping on cardboard."

Had they? Sometimes Ella wondered if she would ever achieve what she really wanted. Dizzy and Naya had found their happily ever afters but Ella's always seemed just out of reach. In truth, she'd stopped hoping for something that seemed to fantastically impossible. After all the ways she had been screwed over in the past, she figured she was probably better off on her own anyway. She could count on herself. The same couldn't be said for most men.

"Hey, are you going to see Dizzy again sometime soon?"

"Um...I might get to see her in a few weeks. I'm on the list for the next family and friends visit but I may get bumped because I was allowed to come aboard the *Valiant* for her wedding. Why? Did you want to go with me?"

"Me? Up there?" Hopper scrunched up her nose. "Heck no. I'm strictly on the ground sort of gal. No, I wanted to ask about that sky warrior who was hurt trying to recover the fuel rods from the tunnels. Danny said that Pierce was recovering well, but I don't believe it. That poor bastard fell so hard."

"Well, they have medical technology up there that is amazing. I told you about the soldier I met with the mechanical leg, right?"

"Mayhem?"

"Yes. That thing is *amazing*. I could not believe the way it responded and reacted exactly like a real flesh-and-blood limb. You should have seen him running on the beach. It was impressive."

Hopper's mouth lifted with a sly smile. "Uh-huh. Sounds like you thought Mayhem was impressive."

Ella didn't deny it. "He's gorgeous—but much too dangerous for me. They're all way too dangerous."

"Sure," Hopper agreed, "but they're also extremely capable and protective." She actually hugged herself, though Ella wondered if her friend even realized she was making the comforting gesture. "I envy Dizzy. It must be the most wonderful feeling in the world to have a partner she can count on to protect and love her."

Like Hopper, Ella had no idea what that must feel like. She'd be a bald-faced liar if she said she didn't sometimes yearn for a partner to share the burden but it wasn't in the cards for her. "Yes, she's very happy."

"You know, you're sort of in an ideal position, Ells. You get to go up there to visit your best friend who just happens to be surrounded by dozens of eligible officers looking for wives to coddle and pamper. You don't have to take the risk of being picked in the lottery and Grabbed."

"I have zero intention of ever letting that happen. I'll buy a clean lottery number or make a run for the colonies before I ever go through that." Thinking of the life she had worked so hard to build, Ella added, "There's no way I could live up there. My life is here. My career, my friends, my shelter, my girls—I belong here."

"You can't do it alone forever, Ells. At some point, you need someone to lean on. We all do." Before she could argue with Hopper, her friend kept talking. "You have the chance to go after the pick of the litter, you know? Choose the one you want. Surely one of them interested you?"

Ella swallowed nervously. "Interested me? Sure." She hesitated. "I liked Venom's best friend Raze. He was...kind."

"Kind?" Hopper fished for more information.

She tried to find the words to describe their brief interactions during Dizzy's wedding. Her heartbeat ticked up a notch as she remembered the way he'd shielded her from the rush of men who had descended on the arrivals deck of the *Valiant* for her autograph. He had curved that big, brawny arm of his around her shoulders, dragging her tight to his hard, hot body and preventing the mad descent of horny soldiers and airmen from trampling her as they waved paper advertisements in front of her and begged for autographs. Even now, all these weeks later, she could still smell him. He wore a comforting blend of scents, something a little earthen and bright and reminiscent of her favorite summer in the forest.

"He was nice to me without any sort of ulterior motive. He was...different. It was nice to speak to a man and spend time with him without worrying that he just wanted to get me on my back or use me for my connections." Feeling embarrassed but certain she could trust Hopper not to laugh at her, she admitted, "I think he liked *me*. The real me."

"Of course he did. I love the real you. Why wouldn't everyone else?" Wagging her pale eyebrows, Hopper asked, "So do you think he might be the name we put at the top of your list?"

"What's all this *we* business, Hops? And I'm not making a list! Look—I'm not the type of woman that a man like that would want."

Hopper's smile faded. "Why would you say something like that, Ells?"

Annoyance flared deep inside her. "Because it's the truth, Hops. Men like that? Men like Raze and Venom and Menace? They don't want a girl like me. I'm not bright, shiny or new." She brushed her hand against the front of her belly and the scar she took great pains to hide. "I'm broken and dirty and smudged."

"Ella, don't say –"

Shouts near one of the tunnel entrances interrupted Hopper. Before Ella could even process what was happening, a series of blasts ricocheted off the walls and echoed so loudly in the cavernous interior of the abandoned subway that her stomach actually pitched. *What in the hell?*

Covering her ears, she tried to make sense of the chaos but it was impossible. A strange smoke filled the air, rapidly spreading across the crowd. The acrid stink of it made Ella cough and wheeze. Her eyes burned so badly and tears streamed down her face. Choking for air, Ella grabbed Hopper's hand and rushed into the stampeding crowd. Every fiber of her being demanded that she find clean air. Now.

But the swirling mass of panicked partygoers was impossible to escape. Hopper jerked hard on Ella's hand and dragged her in a different direction. Trusting her friend's knowledge of the tunnel systems, she kept close and tried not to breathe in too much of the tainted air. Her stinging eyes flooded her cheeks and she rubbed at them in a desperate attempt to clear away the agonizingly painful sensation.

"No!" Hopper screamed but Ella couldn't see what had happened. Her friend was jerked away.

Ella frantically snatched at the air but came up empty. "Hops!"

A cruel hand gripped the back of Ella's neck. She gasped with pain as it drove her down to her knees. A heavy piece of cloth – a hood – covered her head. Terrified by the sensation, she reached up to rip it free, but her hands were grabbed and dragged behind her back where they were quickly secured. Her ankles were soon locked into a similar position.

Lifted like a hogtied animal, Ella was carried out of the tunnel. She felt the difference in temperature on her bare legs as the cool night breeze touched her skin. Not long after, she was tossed like a piece of garbage into some sort of vehicle, probably one of the criminal transport trucks commonly seen around the capitol. She hit another body – a back, maybe – and tried to roll into a better position. Another person slammed into her, crushing her ankles against her legs in the most awkward and painful way.

Trying not to freak out, Ella closed her eyes tightly and concentrated solely on her breathing. She dragged slow, calmed breaths into her lungs and wiggled her shoulders and hips until she found the most comfortable position. When she had regained some control, Ella listened for any signs that Hopper was nearby but she didn't hear anything. Fearing for her friend, she prayed Hopper had managed to escape.

The truck bumped along the road for a long time. Dread settled into the pit of her stomach. Suddenly, Danny's warning seemed prescient. Was she being carted away to

one of the camps that everyone whispered about but no one had seen? Would she be thrown into jail? Held for weeks? Months?

Stomach pitching violently, Ella refused to cry. It wasn't going to help her situation at all. No, she had to think. Whatever it took, she would get out of this.

Just as she started to struggle breathing, the truck screeched to an unexpected stop. Ella's body rolled sideways and she finally managed to drag a full breath into her smashed lungs. Legs cramping and shoulders aching, she wondered why the vehicle had halted so unexpected. Shouting, angry voices filled her in very quickly.

"Find her. I want Elladee Brandt."

Recognizing that nasal male voice, she swallowed hard. It belonged to a man she hadn't seen in nearly three years – and a man who could make her life very painful.

Hands snatched her out of the cargo area of the oversized vehicle. She was roughly handed down to another man and then another. Someone cut the ties binding her ankles and Ella's legs dropped to the ground. Woozy, she tottered on her feet but a tightly gripping hand kept her from falling. The hood was lifted but lowered again so fast that she didn't have time to clear her vision.

Eyes still burning and throat irritated, Ella didn't put up a fight as she was dragged away from the noisy truck to a different vehicle. This one had a quieter engine and an air conditioned interior. She didn't have to see it to know this was the sort of expensive, exclusive contraption only someone very wealthy or very highly positioned in the government could afford.

Thrust onto a seat, Ella winced as her poor shackled wrists were pressed together and into the small of her back. She didn't dare move to adjust her position. Afraid to even breathe now, she waited for *him* to speak.

"Well, well, well, pet, look at the mess we've made tonight." George Cant, the head of the secret police, cupped her nape and applied just enough pressure to remind her what those brutal hands of his could do. His voice and touch spurred memories – agonizingly painful memories she had scorched and buried and refused to even think about again – that made her gut twist. "I thought for sure Dankirk would convince you toe the line but I see that even his control over you has faded."

Certain he didn't want her to speak yet, she gulped down her fear and wondered what would happen now.

"They're waiting for me to decide what I'm going to do with you. It's up to me, you see, whether you disappear up north or..."

She realized he was waiting for her to say something. Voice groggy and thick, she asked weakly, "Or what?"

"Or whether I have them lock you up in jail until after the election and negotiate your release in exchange for a public apology for your indecency."

His shocking act of generosity stunned and terrified her. Unable to see him because of the hood and her watering eyes, she asked, "Why?"

His fingers drew worryingly gentle marks on her neck. "I suppose I still have a soft spot for you, sweetness. You always were my very favorite girl. If I could have kept you..."

She thanked the stars he hadn't. While letting the much older man help her off the streets had been a devilish bargain she had been only too willing to make in her desperate state, she had soon learned how dearly such an agreement cost—physically and emotionally. To be the teenaged mistress of a powerful man with a true sadistic streak had been a shocking experience and one she'd sworn to never relive.

Only now something told her that she was about to break that vow she'd made to herself after finally extricating herself from George's clutches.

"The real question is what should I do with that pink-haired freak you call a friend."

The tone of his voice sent chills racing down her spine. Stomach flip-flopping, Ella bit back the sob of horror that threatened to escape her throat. George was in one of his bargaining moods, and she had a very good and very frightening idea of what he would ask of her.

But she couldn't abandon Hopper to the cruel fate that awaited her.

Gulping down her fear, she asked bravely, "Tell me what you want...Sir."

"Oh, hearing you call me that, sweetness." He exhaled a pent-up sigh. "What that does to me!" The fingers on the back of her neck bit into her skin. "It won't be easy, Ella. I warn you now. This will be even worse than the night I let you leave me."

Of that, Ella had no doubt. She felt that old familiar numbness throbbing from her core and spreading slowly through her body. She had survived so much in her life. She could survive whatever agonizing tortures George had planned for her.

Because there was no other choice. If she had only one night left on this planet, she had to save Hopper.

Cold and dead inside, Ella found her voice again. "I'm all yours, Sir."