

@DLarson



STAR-CROSSED

written by mikotyzini

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Chapter 1

“Please state your identification number.”

The instruction emanated from the pedestal to Blake’s left, the only landmark to be spoken of in the circular room with screens covering every wall.

“Badge one-six-five-eight.”

As she spoke, the numbers appeared on the screens in front of her, illuminating the room in the process. The intelligence system accepted the number, took a facial scan, and matched both to her record before displaying the details for her to see.

“Welcome, Lieutenant,” the voice greeted her. “You’ll be connected to the meeting shortly.”

Once her badge disappeared and the room fell silent, she took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and tried not to show her nerves. But she had every reason to be nervous. Her commanding officers had deemed her uniquely suited for this mission, and it was an important one. After months of rigorous training and knowledge tests, the time had finally arrived. All she needed was Command’s final blessing, and she would be on her way.

She was ready - she knew it. The only question was...would they see it too? As the screens flickered to life, she took a deep breath and prepared herself for that answer.

Along the bottom of each panel appeared a name, location, and title - all generals, the highest-ranking members of the Intergalactic Space Alliance. Their images appeared above their names moments later, comprising an assortment of races from across the galaxy.

And they were all looking at her.

“Lieutenant,” one of them began, drawing her attention to the right. “We’ve been informed that you’ve completed your training and are ready to embark upon your mission.”

“Yes, sir.” She spoke clearly and nodded crisply, which she hoped impressed upon them that she was truly ready.

“And you’re prepared to accept this assignment?” another voice asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Blake replied, nodding to the woman on her left. “I’m ready and willing to accept this mission.”

“Please re-state the objective.”

“Infiltrate the terrorist group known as the Blackguards,” she said in one breath. “Become one of them, gain their trust, and learn how they operate. Ultimately, collect enough evidence to bring their leaders to justice and enough knowledge to prevent rival groups from emerging.”

Those goals had been hammered into her head over the last few months, making them easy to recite on a moment’s notice. But, as her trainers constantly reminded her, the hardest part wouldn’t be remembering what she was there for.

“Good,” one of the generals murmured with a tilt of his chin. “We need to know what they’re doing and why.”

“Their actions are disrupting the system,” another added. “Diplomats don’t feel safe traveling alone. Many request entire armadas to accompany them, destroying their freedom of movement and stirring unease within governments.”

“Without repercussions, their actions grow more brazen...”

“Lieutenant,” someone said, calling Blake’s gaze to the left. “We expect you to uphold ISA’s standards of integrity, but it’s paramount that you gain their trust. Do whatever it takes to maintain your cover until you’re confident that your mission is complete - do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered with a firm nod. She knew what he meant, and she knew what was expected of her. These missions weren’t taken lightly, and the crimes she might witness or be forced to participate in could go against the fabric of her moral being. All for the greater good, all to save lives.

“It’s a fine line to walk…” someone mused.

“Your mission comes first,” another added. “No matter what, you mustn’t lose sight of your goal.”

“By learning what’s made them successful, we can prevent future groups from following their example –”

“And make our planets safer.”

“Most importantly,” one of the leaders said while meeting Blake’s gaze. “Taking down the Blackguards will serve as notice to the rest of the system. Their behavior can’t and *won’t* be tolerated by planets aligned under ISA order.”

With each subsequent comment, Blake nodded. She agreed with all of it. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be here. She wouldn’t have volunteered to risk her life for this goal.

“Are we in agreement?” someone to the far right finally asked, and Blake held her breath in the moment of stillness that followed.

“Yes,” the general at the very end of the line said.

“Yes,” the woman to his right added. The word quickly moved through the entire line of commanders, each of them approving the mission one last time.

“All in agreement,” the giant man in front of Blake said before meeting her gaze with a stern one of his own. “We’re counting on you, Lieutenant. Good luck.”

“I won’t let you down.”

After giving a half bow to the men and women tasked with keeping ISA’s many planets safe, she turned and left the room behind. How she felt right now was impossible to describe, but she kept her head held high while walking into the hall and nodding to the Alliance agent waiting to meet with Command next.

They agreed. Her training was over. Her first mission had just begun. Her success or failure would have a profound impact on the future of ISA, its allied planets, and every living being she’d sworn to protect.

She couldn’t fail.

Only steps from the room, a shadow appeared by her elbow and fell into step by her side.

“Are you ready?” Sun asked while they headed towards her room.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

From what she’d been told, no amount of training could prepare her for what came next. She would be thrown into a world where she would either adapt or die. Where she would be forced to play her role to perfection or die. Where *any* mistake could result in death - if not hers, then someone else’s.

“I can’t believe you’re going undercover...”

“Someone had to do it.”

“And they picked the best.”

Blake wouldn’t call herself the best, but she shook her head and didn’t argue. What made her perfect for this mission wasn’t her skill - it was her anonymity. Her lack of experience meant few records of her involvement with the Alliance, and even fewer publicly available ones. That limited past was easily erased and replaced by something much more sordid.

Now, her greatest challenge would be living up to the history created for her. Physically, she could accomplish everything on her list of known crimes. Mentally...she would learn on the fly.

“Man...things were so easy in training, weren’t they?” After following Blake into her room, Sun hopped up onto what used to be her bunk, which would be reassigned to another agent later today. “All we had to do was run faster, do push-ups faster, puke on our shoes faster...”

“Speak for yourself.” Most of her belongings had already been sealed for long-term storage, leaving her with only a small travel bag to sling over her shoulder before smiling at Sun. “I never threw up.”

“Right, right. How could I forget? You only remind me *all* the time.”

“Because you bring up puking all the time.” Hearing that statement out loud, she shook her head and left the room before she dwelled too much on the familiarity being left behind. “Why is that?”

“It’s my schtick!”

“What?” She gave him a curious look before nodding to a pair of officers passing by. She nudged Sun so he did the same, preventing him from committing yet another breach of conduct.

“My schtick!” he said after sending the officers a quick salute. “You know -

some guys have sports. Some have intelligence or whatever. I have throwing up and devilishly-good looks.”

When he swept a hand through his perpetually-windswept hair, she laughed and lightly shoved his shoulder.

“No wonder you’re eternally single.”

“Hey! You know we haven’t had *any* time for relationships. Other than the... short variety...”

Between training and being immediately thrown into active duty, he was right. The Alliance recruitment process didn’t leave time for pursuing anything outside of serving one of the largest policing bodies in the universe. Few were accepted, even fewer made it through basic training. The ones who did were the most skilled and most dedicated to ISA’s mission – keeping the peace and protecting the Alliance at all costs.

“And you *really* won’t have time for a relationship now,” Sun added with a chuckle. “I mean, maybe you’ll have time, but the pickings will be...slim.”

Even though Blake rolled her eyes, she was grateful for his banter. It distracted her from the reality that soon she would leave the planet that had been her home for the last couple of years. Not only was she losing that sense of familiarity and comfort, but she had no idea when she would return, if ever. And...she would be on her own.

While she had always been more of a loner, she had grown accustomed to having Alliance agents beside her at all times. Most of them she could live without, but Sun...

“What’d Command say?” he asked, drawing her away from that thought as they walked through a more-crowded area of base.

“Typical stuff. ‘Do your best,’ ‘don’t fail,’ ‘try not to die.’”

“That last one’s pretty important,” he mused before looking around the towering atrium serving as the hub of this ISA command center. “Where’re we going?”

“To pick up my gear from the lab.” Heading that direction, she nodded to two more officers and smiled when Sun did the same without prompting.

“You’ll have to behave yourself while I’m gone.” When he scoffed at the response, she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “What?”

“I’m the one who has to behave?” he said before shaking his head. “Please. I’ll get in *less* trouble without you here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We both know you have a bit of a problem with authority...”

“I do not.” When his brow rose, she sighed and shook her head. “I only have an issue when they’re wrong.”

“Our supervisors must be wrong a lot...”

“They are.” When he laughed at the blunt response, she smiled. “You know it’s true. I don’t know how some of them keep their jobs.”

“Eh...at least they’ve forgiven you. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have given you this mission.”

“That, or this is my punishment and we just don’t realize it.”

“Could be!” he replied with another laugh. “But that would suck...”

“It would.”

Opening the door to the technology lab, she motioned Sun in first before walking into the small, cluttered room. For an institution tasked with protecting dozens of planets and the space between, ISA’s tech department was always a mess. Somehow, they made it work, but a little organization wouldn’t hurt.

“Hey Joren,” she greeted their resident expert, a Microre from Vyria-2 with a propensity for accidentally shocking people when he got excited.

“Lieutenant.” Pushing away whatever he’d been working on, he stood and shook her hand - thankfully, no shock involved this time. “You’re off?”

“Just got final approval,” she replied while he and Sun exchanged handshakes, which Sun flinched away from. “I’m picking up whatever they’re sending with me.”

“Ah, your package of goodies. I got them right here. Somewhere...”

While Joren rummaged around the disorganized space, Blake glanced at Sun and held back a smile when he inconspicuously shook his hand. Apparently, shaking Joren’s hand first had been the right decision; the last thing she needed was for her fingers to tingle for the rest of the day.

“Ah.” Finally finding what he was searching for, Joren pulled a small box from one of the shelves and set it on the counter. Blake’s name was written

across the top, and he quickly scanned his badge to unlock and remove the lid.

“Alright, we set you up with a standard kit,” he explained while removing the first item from the box. “Standard comm – pre-loaded with some messages between you and your ‘ex-colleagues’ and equipped with an emergency beacon should the shit hit the fan. Should be pretty unhackable.”

“*Should* be?” Accepting the small, silver device that fit easily within the palm of her hand, she clicked it on and off before slipping it into her pocket.

“You never know,” he replied with a shrug. “If someone got their hands on it, they might be able to break it. But I don’t think so.”

“Reassuring,” she mumbled before motioning for him to carry on.

“Camera.” Next, he held up a thin device that looked like an enlarged hairpin. Definitely easy to conceal. “And some empty drives for you,” he added while spreading a few microdrives on the counter. “Or mostly empty. I threw a few docs and photos on them to make ‘em look real.”

“Any *you-know-whats* on there?” Sun asked, and Blake rolled her eyes while accepting the camera and drives.

“If I find pictures of naked women on these, I’m bringing the entire Blackguard back here to kick your asses.”

When both of them laughed at the threat, she narrowed her eyes. She wouldn’t put it past either of them to pull a prank like that, which meant she needed to check those photos sooner rather than later.

“Best part,” Joren continued while removing a phaser from the box and handing it to her. “Untagged but works like a dream.”

After giving the weapon a quick once-over, she nodded and stuck it in the holster at her side.

“And?” she prodded, only to sigh when Joren gave her a blank look. “Come on – I’m not leaving without a blade.”

As soon as he smiled, she realized he was only pretending to send her off without her favorite form of protection.

“Got a nice one for ya,” he said while pulling a combat knife from the box and sliding it across the counter to her.

Picking it up, she held it in the palm of her hand to get a feel for the weight. A good knife, based on her personal preferences, distributed the weight equally

from tip to heel. And this was a good knife.

“Oh.” Spotting symbols along the bottom of the hilt, she flipped it over to take a better look. “Nilivian too. Perfect.”

“Is it?” Joren asked while Sun chuckled and poke her in the side.

“Showing off your language skills again,” he teased.

“You could’ve learned too.”

“Please. I’m not smart enough for that.”

Rather than argue the obvious, she shrugged and smiled when he laughed. Satisfied with her means of protection, she spun the knife in her hand before slipping it into the sheath Joren set on the counter. She would have preferred to bring her own, but Command insisted that everything she took with her be new, down to her knife.

“Last but not least.”

When Joren set a series of cards on the table, Blake scooped them up and flipped through them one-by-one. Recalling her training, she read the names and made sure each means of identification matched her aliases. Once she confirmed that the cards checked out, she slipped them into her pocket with a nod.

“How many credits do I have?”

“Little over seventy thousand. So don’t go crazy, but that should be plenty to do whatever you need to do.”

With another nod, she stored the number away in case she needed it. She didn’t plan any big purchases, but seventy thousand credits meant she didn’t need to worry about money. The value also matched what someone with her history should have accumulated by now.

“Is that it?” she asked, and Joren showed her the now-empty box. “Alright,” she said before giving him a small smile. “Thanks, Joren.”

“Anytime. Good luck out there!”

Accepting the encouragement with a small wave, she headed back into the hall with Sun on her heels.

“If you need anything else, I’m sure they can get it to you,” he said while following her away from the lab.

“Don’t think I’ll need anything else.”

With her gear in hand, her time on base was officially over. Her next destination took her far from this world...and far from Sun. As they neared the ship port and his pace slowed, she realized that the inevitable conversation had finally arrived. After avoiding the topic for months now, they had to say goodbye.

“Will you be alright?” she asked, glancing his way.

“Me?” he replied before giving a forced scoff. “Of course. I’m an Alliance lieutenant! I’m fine at all times, really.”

Reaching the doors leading to the giant concrete pad used by the ships taking off and landing at base, she turned around and waited for him to lose the false bravado. He always did, eventually, because he knew it didn’t work with her.

“I’ll be fine...” he added a little less assuredly. “Just...don’t turn on me, ok?”

“Sun...”

“You know it happens.”

“I know, but that won’t be me.” If that was his biggest worry, it wouldn’t come to pass. No matter what the Blackguards subjected her to, she wouldn’t lose sight of who she was and who she wanted to be. “Hey,” she added, lightly tapping his shoulder. “You’re my closest friend, ok? No matter what.”

He was still worried - whether about the possibility of her switching sides or for her general wellbeing, she wasn’t sure - but eventually nodded and attempted a feeble smile.

“Don’t do anything stupid, ok?”

“You act like I’ll be out there looking for trouble.”

“I know you won’t, but...you know trouble finds you.”

As her training partner for the past few years, he knew her better than most. And his worry did nothing to ease her budding nerves.

“And I can take care of myself,” she assured him and, when he reluctantly accepted the words, she pulled him into a hug.

Where she was headed, she wouldn’t have a source of friendship or comfort like him. She would miss that the most, but as long as she remained focused on her mission...she would make it through. She didn’t have another option.

“I’ll be careful,” she added while moving away and patting his shoulders. “But if I need help, I know you’ll warp in with the cavalry.”

“You know it,” he replied with a smile that disappeared when the doors slid open to admit several pilots. “Guess you should get going...” he mumbled, running a hand through his hair and taking a small step away.

“I should...”

“Ok, then uh, I’m...I’m just gonna watch from here.”

When he cleared his throat and motioned towards the door, Blake gave him one last hug - whether more for herself or him, she wasn’t sure.

“I’ll miss you too,” she said before pulling away. Spotting the tears in his eyes, which made her feel like crying too, she squeezed his shoulders and backed away. “I’ll message when I can.”

With a wave and wavering smile, she turned around and walked outside. Hearing the doors close behind her, she looked up at the sky, took a deep breath, and kept walking.

Whether or not she was ready didn’t matter anymore; the time had come. The Blackguards had terrorized the solar system for a long time, but their recent increase in violence had pushed them from constant nuisance to a legitimate threat. They were no longer ‘one of’ the many mercenary groups traveling amongst the stars - they were *the* mercenary group. They were consolidating power. They were wiping out or demanding allegiance from rival groups. If there was a war amongst the stars, they were winning.

Their growing wealth and power demanded a response. Tracking them down and wiping them out was a possibility, but ISA wanted to know how they had survived - and thrived - for so long. Plenty of gangs, pirates, and mercenaries traveled the not-so-friendly universe. What made the Blackguards different? Blake’s job was to find out.

“Lieutenant,” one of the port officers greeted her before motioning to his left. “This one’s for you.”

The small ship was nothing special but, most importantly, unmarked. The vibrant blue and white of the Intergalactic Space Alliance was nowhere to be found. Instead, the dull metal exterior suggested better days had long since passed; hopefully, not an allegory for her life.

“Thank you.”

When he lowered the entrance ramp for her, she gave him an appreciative

nod and headed aboard.

“Good luck,” he added as the ramp closed behind her, sealing her into the ship alone.

From here on out, the only person she could rely on was herself. Alliance would try to help if needed, but there was no guarantee they could reach her fast enough. It was just her, her training, this ship, and the bag of supplies she brought with her.

After storing her belongings in one of the cargo containers, she moved to the front of the ship and sat in the pilot’s seat. Once there, she powered up the engines and ran through her mental checklist prior to takeoff. The familiarity of the process calmed her, but her hands fumbled with the controls as her nerves grew. It wasn’t long before the engine hummed and the thrusters reached the edge of liftoff, but she took a deep breath before radioing the control tower.

“This is officer one-six-five-eight,” she said while double-checking the ship’s status. “Requesting permission to launch.”

“Officer one-six-five-eight,” a voice replied to her. “You’re clear for launch. Good luck.”

With permission granted, she began the launch sequence and leaned back in her seat when the thrusters sprang to life.

“Let’s go find some bad guys...” she mumbled as the rockets roared to life. The next second, the ship lifted off and shot towards the atmosphere.

Chapter 2

Tracking down a mercenary group wasn't as easy as it sounded, which was one of the biggest issues the Alliance had dealt with over the past few months. They had few names, even fewer pictures, and a general list of places the Blackguards *might* be. Other than that, they relied upon limited informants stationed on non-ISA planets to notify them of any sightings.

That minimal intelligence brought Blake to the planet of Konus, which was about as unruly as planets came. The rule of law here was set by whoever had the biggest weapons or most hired goons.

After leaving her ship at one of the many ports available to anyone willing to pay the landing fee, she walked into the city with as much certainty as she could muster. Her training had taken her across the system, and she'd visited more planets than she had ever imagined, but those locations were always Alliance-occupied.

It didn't take long to experience her first bout of culture shock, as she passed a noisy bar right as two young men barreled through the door with their hands locked around each other's throats. Instinct told her to step in and break up the fight, especially when one of the men threw the other to the ground and began raining blows upon him. When none of the bystanders so much as blinked, however, she realized that she shouldn't get involved. Instead, she hurried away and didn't look back - not even when a phaser rang out right before the commotion ceased.

Her backstory demanded a thick skin and penchant for law-breaking - how could she be that person if she disagreed with needless violence? Especially when needless violence was ingrained in who the Blackguards were. She

needed to fit in or, at the very least, not stand out.

Fortunately, the attire Command sent her off with was appropriately discreet for the humid air of Konus. While meandering along the busy port streets, she blended into the crowd and kept her eyes peeled for anyone interesting.

Supposedly, several Blackguards were spotted here yesterday. If they were here yesterday, hopefully they were still here today – although they were known to appear and disappear within a short period of time. If she couldn't make contact with them before they left, she risked waiting an indeterminate amount of time for ISA to track them down again.

Considering she didn't have a location, her current task was to walk around and hope she spotted someone who looked like a Blackguard. On a planet where nearly every inhabitant had a criminal record, that was about as easy as finding a cloaked ship in another galaxy. Without time for a thorough canvas of the entire city, she focused her search around the most popular gathering places. If she was lucky, she would run into someone sporting the signature deep-black suits the galaxy had come to fear.

Her first destination was an outdoor marketplace selling everything from fresh vegetables to power cores. With the number of weapons on display, both for sale and carried by the customers and shopkeepers alike, it looked nothing like the trading centers she was accustomed to. Besides the clearly-illegal wares for sale, the square brimmed with tense energy that lifted her level of alertness to an even higher level. With her ears keeping a sharp lookout for any change in the atmosphere, she moved amongst the rough-and-tumble crowd with certainty she didn't feel but tried to fake.

She needed to get used to being surrounded by criminals and ne'er-do-wells who might turn on her at any second. That's what the next few weeks, months, or years could be like, depending on how long Command wanted her to remain undercover. If she gathered enough information in a relatively short time, hopefully they could quickly bring the Blackguards to justice and she could move on to another assignment.

But that was a concern for the future. Right now, she needed to *find* the Blackguards. With that as her primary objective, she moved through the crowd and searched for anyone who looked interesting.

Everyone looked interesting, and not in a good way. From the giant Cregion with a scar running across his neck, to the group of Yoters speaking in low voices while their devilish eyes flitted about, to the personal drones hovering above the crowd...it felt like everyone had an ulterior motive for being here. She supposed that she was the same, but she wasn't the same as them.

When a flash of black caught her eye, she locked onto a man wearing a suit that looked close to but not quite what she was looking for. Regardless, she altered her path and moved closer to double-check.

Currently haggling with the owner of a stall selling spare parts, the man appeared more haggard and rundown than she would expect for the infamous Blackguards. Once close enough, she confirmed that he was just another down-on-his-luck vagabond who happened to wear black armor.

So as not to raise suspicion, she stood beside him and looked over the variety of mechanical parts spread across the table. Some looked used, some looked broken, and she questioned whether they could fix anything. But it wasn't her place to judge the authenticity of what was for sale. After spending what she deemed an appropriate amount of time checking out the wares, she turned to leave - only for a hand to shoot out and grab her wrist.

"You smell like a cop," the man said, his grip tightening while his large nose sniffed the air.

"Let go," she replied calmly, but he jerked her a step closer.

"What's a cop doing in a place like this, huh? Who're you lookin' for?"

The interaction was drawing attention from passersby, which was the opposite of what she needed.

"Listen," she said, lowering her voice to a near whisper. "I don't know what you're talking about, but if you don't let go of me, I'll have to hurt you."

Subtly trying to twist her wrist free, she grimaced when he clamped down even harder and gave a wicked smile. The next second, he yanked her forward and raised his other hand to swing at her. Quickly reacting to the attack, she ducked under his arm, spun, and landed an elbow in his ribs. The blow knocked the air from his lungs and loosened his grasp just enough for her to pull her arm free.

Her instinct was to skirt away from the confrontation and call it a day, but

he roared in anger while turning on her. It was too late to realize that she'd stumbled upon a Groliv, known for their quickness to anger and aggression, as he pulled his phaser and aimed at her. Recognizing the heightened threat, she threw herself to the side as the weapon went off and hit the dirt beside her. The onlookers, who'd been happy to watch when it was just a fistfight, raised their voices and rushed away now that weapons were involved.

Blake, meanwhile, rolled to her feet, pulled her own phaser from her belt, and aimed it at the man, prepared to hit his leg or arm or somewhere non-lethal but hurtful enough to stop him. Before she got a shot off, however, someone shoved through the crowd and grabbed his arm - hard. Hard enough that he howled in pain while his fingers loosened and his weapon fell harmlessly to the ground.

With the immediate danger neutralized, Blake turned towards her savior and froze when she spotted the deep, dangerous black suit.

"Easy there, buddy," the girl said while the fingers of her metal arm tightened around his wrist. Letting out another cry of pain and dropping to his knees, he suddenly looked unwilling to follow his anger any further. And Blake could imagine why not, with his arm probably on the verge of breaking under the metal-aided grasp.

"There we go..." the girl murmured before releasing him. As soon as he was free, he sat on the ground and cradled his arm to his chest rather than retaliate. The way he glanced at the girl's armor suggested that he already knew better than to fight back, and he decided to live to see another day.

"Try to be nicer next time." When it became obvious he wouldn't respond, the girl turned to Blake with the reddest eyes she'd ever seen. "Watch yourself out here."

Without another word, she turned and walked through the crowd, which quickly returned to normal now that the danger had passed.

"Wait!" Blake called out before hurrying after her, but the girl didn't pause. And Blake tried to follow, but it was impossible to keep up when the crowd didn't move out of her way like it did for a member of the Blackguards. By the time she made it to the other end of the market, the girl was nowhere to be seen.

“Shit.”

Giving up with a sigh, she stood at the edge of the street and waited for her adrenaline to die down. On the plus side, the Blackguards were still here, which meant she still had a chance of connecting with one and talking her way onto the crew. Unfortunately, she just missed a golden opportunity to do so. Although presenting herself as a skilled mercenary after being saved from a confrontation wasn't the most convincing argument...

With another sigh, she put that moment behind her and moved further into the city, this time keeping a greater distance from passerby lest she give herself away again. Lowering her nose towards her shoulder and sniffing, she shook her head and kept walking. She had no idea how she smelled like a cop, but hopefully that faded over time. The man had rattled her though, and she would be even more cautious going forward.

This planet wasn't like the ones under Alliance control. There was no one to call for help; there was no police force at all, as far as she knew. It was every person for themselves, which meant the inevitable gangs and overlords emerged to fight for supremacy. As a freelancer, she was in a precarious position.

Traveling alone offered flexibility and freedom but lacked the protection of belonging to a group. With the universe growing more dangerous by the day, forgoing the benefits of companionship was less and less of a wise decision. That was one of the reasons she joined ISA - to make the universe a safer place, but also as protection for herself.

Making the universe safer started with taking people like the Blackguards out of it, which she would gladly do. As soon as she found them again...

Hopefully, her next destination yielded better results - a bar catering to mercenaries looking for a drink and their next job. Supposedly a mercenary herself, she brushed past the loiterers outside the door without hesitation. Walking into the room beyond, she paused and waited for her eyes to adjust to the low light.

As expected from any establishment serving such distinguished clientele, the atmosphere was energetic, teetering on the edge of something sinister. Just like the marketplace, they were one mistake or raised voice away from an

altercation, hopefully not involving her this time. But her decision to come here paid immediate dividends, as her gaze locked onto a woman sitting at the center bar. She wouldn't forget that all-black armor anytime soon, and her pulse crept higher as another opportunity presented itself.

This time, it was a woman with short brunette hair, a patch covering her left eye, and a cloak obscuring the entirety of her left arm. At the moment, she was speaking to the man in dark robes sitting beside her. From his serious expression, the conversation appeared business in nature. From her sweet smile, however, the opposite seemed true.

Keeping an eye on the conversation, Blake maneuvered through the crowd without any particular destination in mind. That's when the man said something, and the woman - with that smile still in place - grabbed him by the back of the head and slammed his face into the countertop. He didn't make a sound while collapsing unconscious to the floor, but his guards leapt to their feet and drew their weapons. Yet the woman didn't even flinch at the guns aimed at her head - she wore that same smirk the entire time.

"I wouldn't do that..." she warned in an almost-pitying tone. Following the flippant wave of her hand, the armed men noticed the other Blackguards in the room - and there were a lot of them.

Tensing at what could turn into a massacre, Blake quickly pinpointed the nearest exit. Her need for one disappeared, however, when the first group of guards lowered their weapons. Rather than die avenging their leader, they lifted him off the floor and dragged him out of the building.

Some of the other patrons, probably not wanting to stick around now that the Blackguards had loudly announced their presence, quietly snuck out right after. The brunette, meanwhile, sat down and picked up her drink as if nothing had happened. The rest of the Blackguards also went back to what they'd been doing - the majority of them drinking or fraternizing with the bartenders at the edges of the room.

After witnessing what the woman was capable of, Blake didn't necessarily want to attempt a conversation. But, after a deep breath, she moved through the crowd and calmly took the seat recently vacated by the robed man. The other Blackguards didn't stop her, which seemed like a good sign, but she was

very aware of their existence should this go sideways.

“Must’ve been a bad date,” she commented while the woman took another sip of her drink. The glass returned to the bar with a soft clink, and she turned towards Blake with a cold glare.

“You have three seconds to tell me what you want.”

The threat went unspoken, but Blake heeded it. Apparently, this woman wasn’t a fan of chitchat.

“I’m looking for the Blackguards.”

For a second, the woman just stared at her. Then that smirk returned.

“What could someone like *you* possibly want with the Blackguards?”

Blake didn’t know what ‘someone like her’ meant but didn’t dig into it right now.

“Simple. I want to join.”

That amber eye flashed with something along the lines of amusement or pity as the woman picked up her glass and took another sip.

“Sweetie, believe me, you’re not what we’re looking for. Unless you’re willing to provide *other services* to the crew.”

While the woman smirked at the suggestion, Blake frowned and shook her head. If that was her only option for joining, Command would have to figure something else out. But she wouldn’t give up just yet, not when she found exactly who she’d been searching for. All she had to do was convince this...unfriendly...woman to let her prove her worth.

“I’ve been traveling solo for years now,” she added unprompted. “Picking up contracts and running weapons. Looking for something bigger.”

When the woman scoffed, Blake realized she wasn’t making any inroads there. Command warned her that joining would be difficult, but how hard could it be to convince a group of criminals to let in another criminal?

“I can prove myself -”

“And how would you do that?” Again, the woman used a sweet voice and smile that belied something much more menacing. “I could’ve killed you five times already without you even reacting. So, again, you’re not what we’re looking for.”

“I’m willing to start at the bottom.” Blake knew she was close to pushing her

luck, but she couldn't bow to intimidation. She needed to show fearlessness and determination. "I'll do whatever's asked of me -"

"Then leave."

When the woman stuck a knife in the counter to mark her words, Blake quickly realized it was *her* knife. Stunned as to how she lost it without noticing, she grabbed it and tried to think of a way to recover. Before she said anything, however, the energy in the bar shifted towards the entrance.

The new arrivals had quieted that section of the room, and it was several seconds before Blake realized the Blackguards were the ones who suddenly stilled. When the two new members cut easily through the crowd, headed over to where she and the woman sat, the desire to speak left her.

The man was tall, slender, and wore a jet-black trench coat over his armor. His posture and demeanor alone suggested he held a high rank, but the scar covering nearly half of his face gave away his identity - Adam Taurus, the man wanted for numerous murders across the universe. Beside him stood a familiar face - the blonde girl with the metal arm who helped Blake earlier. Her red eyes surveyed the room before locking onto Blake, but she did nothing more than frown while walking over.

"Let's go," Adam directed towards the woman at the bar without sparing Blake so much as a glance. It took everything in her power not to remove him from existence right then and there, but her mission wasn't to kill him. She had to convince him that she could be useful, and she needed to do it fast.

"Are you in charge?" she asked, earning a withering look that would turn less determined villains away.

"Who's asking?" he snapped back at her.

"She wants to join." With a roll of her eyes, the woman who Blake had no luck impressing stood and walked over to Adam's side. "She's stolen a few guns, and now she's ready for the *big leagues*."

"I've stolen more than a 'few guns,'" Blake countered with an edge of indignation in her tone. "I got Thion rockets to the Kirsh's during their uprising. And swiped Vahiri bombs for the new Banerth government."

Finally, she had their attention.

"And that's just running guns," she hurried on. "I prefer to work more..."

hands on.”

“Assassin?” the blonde asked, and Blake pursed her lips.

“I’ll do what needs to be done,” she hedged. No matter what, she *had* to convince them to let her join. “I’ve heard you’re the best, and I want to be part of the best. Just give me a chance to prove myself, and I will. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll move on.”

The two women deferred to Adam while he stared at Blake with a harsh, unreadable expression. She needed him to agree. If he didn’t...

“We’re not taking new members.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he’d already turned to walk away. The blonde moved to follow, and the brunette smirked before doing the same. In that instant, Blake realized her mission was over before it even started.

“Fine. *Cavas*,” she muttered after them.

When Adam froze at the term, she tensed and readied for a confrontation as he spun back to her.

“You speak Dorian?”

Confused by the sudden curiosity, she glanced at the other two girls before turning back to him.

“Yes...why?”

Rather than answer, he gave her a more thorough inspection before letting his gaze linger on the two feline ears atop her head. Despite her effort to keep them still, they twitched under his intense scrutiny.

“Faunus?” he finally asked. This time, she hesitantly nodded. She couldn’t see where this was going, but at least it was going somewhere.

“Can you read Valerian?”

“The ancient language?” she clarified and, once he nodded, she did too. “I can.”

Her parents taught her as many languages as possible, beginning with the most widely used. The only one she chose for herself was Valerian - a written language so obscure and impractical she used it as a secret code for writing in her diary.

After looking at her for a few more seconds, Adam nodded. “You’ll have to prove it,” he added before walking away. The blonde stared at her for a second

longer before following, and the brunette openly sneered the decision before doing the same.

Even though the instruction wasn't explicit, Blake hurried after the trio of Blackguards and noticed that many of the other members did the same...only the others kept a greater distance than she did. But she worried about losing them again, so she followed as close as she felt comfortable with while leaving the bar and continuing through the uneven streets of the city.

Not knowing where they were headed, she kept a firm grasp on her surroundings in case she had to leave in a rush. For all she knew, they were leading her back to their ship to kill her. But why go through the effort when they could have killed her at the bar without anyone batting an eye? And what did reading Valerian have to do with this?

She would find out soon, as the crowded buildings and businesses gave way to bigger plots of land housing all kinds of ships. While passing one of the landing pads, she watched a small passenger vessel drop from the atmosphere and set down in a roar of reverse thrusters. The area was busier than the smaller port where she left her ship, and busier meant louder. The sounds of ships coming and going was practically all she could hear, which set her on edge for fear of missing an attack.

But the three people walking ahead of her seemed to have little interest in her, other than the blonde glancing her way one or two times. The lack of attention gave her ample ability to look around and, as they turned into a hanger housing a single, giant cruiser, to stare. After hearing the stories, reading the intel, and poring over pictures, she couldn't believe she was actually here. In the shadow of the Inferno - the notorious ship used by the Blackguards for their crime spree across the universe.

It was bigger than expected, large enough for dozens to live on board for any amount of time. Some of the crew were already there, carrying crates up the ramp to the cargo hold, while others trickled back from their excursions around the city. Everyone gave a respectful nod or wide berth to the three people Blake followed - three people who deserved a jail cell for the rest of their lives.

Everyone here deserved a jail cell, and she would make sure they got what

they deserved. But first, she walked into the cargo hold and tried not to let her nerves show.

“Wait here.”

Doing as instructed, she stopped in the middle of the cavernous space while Adam continued further into the ship. The two other Blackguards stayed with her, serving as the most intimidating set of chaperones she’d ever had. When it became obvious they had nothing to say to her, she glanced around the hold instead.

Interestingly enough, nothing suggested the *Inferno* was anything other than a regular carrier. Metal crates of various shapes and sizes were neatly stacked along the walls and on racks, with a clear methodology and organization that was surprising for a group of criminals.

That was a misconception she needed to rid herself of quickly. The Blackguards weren’t just any criminal organization; they were *the* criminal organization. They’d turned crime and violence into an art form, and that level of cohesiveness demanded process and order. If she thought she would find stacks of illegal weapons and pallets freely advertising illicit drugs, she couldn’t have been more wrong. Even the crew members, who she might’ve expected to scream ‘criminal’ in their appearance, seemed ordinary outside of their outfits. Some of them openly carried weapons, but those were obviously guards tasked with monitoring the ship.

Just because everything looked orderly didn’t mean it was. And just because everyone looked civilian didn’t mean they were.

As soon as Adam returned to the cargo hold, Blake stood taller and pretended that her nerves weren’t multiplying in her chest. Even the way he walked was intimidating, but eventually he stopped and tossed an old book at her.

“Read it,” he said after she caught it and turned it around in her hands. When she looked at the cover, which was covered in Valerian runes, her brow furrowed.

“Read it,” he repeated more forcefully, so she opened the book to a page marked with a strip of cloth.

Suddenly, she understood why they couldn’t just use a translating program, if a program even existed for such an old language. As good as some of those

could be, they were useless when working with script as old and faded as what was in front of her. Even with her eyes, which were better than most, she struggled to pick out the shapes.

From the postures of the people standing across from her, however, this was a test she couldn't fail. So, even though she hadn't read Valerian in years, she focused on the page and hoped the knowledge came back quickly.

She started with the most common words first - those she remembered and were relatively easy to spot. The author wrote each in a slightly smaller script to diminish their significance, but knowing where the 'ands, buts, and ors' were wasn't good enough.

"Legend says," she began slowly, translating several words ahead so she didn't falter. "That...ten maps were drawn and given to various...influential families for guarding, or safekeeping. Each was sworn to protect the maps and...moved them around the galaxy."

The bottom of the page featured a drawing that looked like a galaxy, but not any type of galaxy map she'd ever seen.

"It says this is the Ekbar Galaxy," she added, reading the legend before checking their reactions. She thought she read it correctly, but had she missed something? Mistranslated anything? Or just not read as fast as they wanted?

After a few seconds of judgment, the blonde turned towards Adam.

"Well, that would've saved us two months."

Blake didn't let on how relieved the comment made her, but she straightened her shoulders and acted as if she knew she was right all along. Of course she was right; she was the best out-of-practice Valerian translator to ever set foot on this ship. Now she just hoped Adam felt the same, as he gave her a more discerning look than any of the others he'd given her so far.

"IDs," he finally said, and she willingly pulled out her ID cards only for the brunette to snatch them from her hand.

"Get your stuff," Adam added, much to the brunette's obvious distaste. "We'll run your story while you're gone. If everything checks out, you're in. If anything doesn't, you're dead."

With anyone else, Blake probably would have laughed at how casually the death threat was made. But she'd graduated from laughing matters the

moment she landed on this god-forsaken planet.

So she didn't laugh; she nodded and left the hanger without a word. Feeling eyes upon her, she kept her posture straight and her stride confident even though that was the opposite of how she felt.

But buried underneath that anxiety was a thread of adrenaline she focused on instead of her nerves. She just met three of the most dangerous criminals on the planet - she walked right onto their ship - and lived to tell the tale. Now, all she could do was hope Alliance did a good enough job matching her story with records of her new identity. If they missed something...this would be a quick undercover mission.

Chapter 3

After making it back to the ship ISA lent her for the flight to Konus, Blake packed her belongings as fast as possible. She didn't have much besides a few changes of clothes and the other items provided by ISA, but she made doubly sure not to leave anything behind. The most important piece of the collection was her communication device, which was her only means of contacting Command during her mission.

Before sliding the device into her pocket, she turned it on and sent what could be her last stress-free message for quite some time. Upon noticing her trembling hands, however, she took a deep breath to calm herself before typing on the small screen.

'Made contact. If background checks out, I'm in. Will message when possible.'

After rereading the brief message and deciding that was all she had to say for now, she sent the update to Command. Even though they monitored the line of communication closely, they wouldn't respond for security reasons; if she needed a response, she would have to request one.

Having no need for an answer right now, she deleted the message, slipped the device into her pocket, and left the ship behind. Someone from ISA would pick it up eventually, but that was the least of her concerns as she slung her bag over one shoulder and headed back to the hanger housing the Inferno.

Night had fallen over the city, casting an additional layer of danger over every dark corner and cloaked stranger she passed. Fortunately, the trek was nerve-fraying but uneventful. She used 'fortunately' lightly, however, as what came next slowed her pace and heightened her budding anxiety.

Maybe the ship would be gone. Maybe they figured out she was an Alliance agent and left. That would actually be a little relieving, but it would also mean she failed - and she was too prideful to back down so easily.

This might be a challenge, but it was *her* challenge. Command entrusted her with this mission, and the last thing she wanted to do was fail. So when she turned the corner and found the Inferno still sitting in front of her, she kept her head held high and her strides purposeful. Even though she was worried, she refused to let it show. She didn't even glance at the hustle and bustle in the hanger, knowing that any appearance of nerves might give her away.

These people didn't scare her. They might be accomplished criminals, and she was severely outnumbered, but they didn't scare her. They *couldn't* scare her. If all went as planned, she would be living amongst them for the foreseeable future. Blending in required her to be one of them.

Catching sight of motion to her right, she turned and quickly realized that goal might be harder than expected.

"Going somewhere?" the gargantuan of a man asked while stepping into her path. The words weren't unfriendly, but his tone and the way his hand inched towards his weapon suggested otherwise. The aggressive posture gave away his hope of proving his worth by making these her last few seconds alive.

"I'm joining," she replied with as much swagger as she could muster while keeping careful tabs on his phaser.

"Didn't hear of any grunts coming aboard."

"Guess the good news hasn't spread yet."

She added a confident smile with the boast but, from his set jaw and unflinching posture, he wasn't buying what she had to say.

"Ask Adam," she added with a gesture towards the ship, though Adam was nowhere in sight. "Or the...other two."

The response did her no favors, and she realized too late that learning the names of her future bosses might be important in making her way aboard. When he pulled out his weapon and aimed it at her, she decided that her failure to do so was a critical mistake.

"They already ran my IDs," she added while edging backward. "They need me to translate for them..."

Trailing off, she read his eyes for signs of attack. If he so much as twitched his trigger finger, she would have to take him down. She didn't want to do that, but she also wasn't going out without a fight.

"Brenci!" someone called out and, much to Blake's relief, the man moved his finger away from the trigger while turning towards his name. When she also turned towards the ship, she found that the two women from earlier had reappeared. The blonde waved her over and, just like that, the danger passed.

"Lucky..." Brenci grumbled while holstering his weapon and returning to his post.

With yet another unfortunate encounter over, Blake took a deep breath and continued towards the ship. The brunette scowled at her approach, but that didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. Neither she nor the blonde made any motion suggesting they would attack though, which Blake took as a good sign.

Regardless, she put her life in their murderous hands without knowing what information they found or how they interpreted it. What if they didn't approve of something Alliance made up for her? Would they shoot her as soon as she was close enough? Would she have the chance to defend herself or would it be over too fast?

Her phaser and knife were within easy reach, but she was outnumbered fifty to one. The best she could hope for was erasing the two leaders in front of her. Actually, the best she could hope for was that they believed the made-up history and let her join without issue.

When the brunette suddenly grabbed something from her side, Blake hardly had time to flinch before her ID cards hit her squarely in the chest. She managed to get her hands underneath them and caught them before they fell to the ground, but that did nothing to slow her now-racing heart or erase the smirk from the brunette's lips. They said they would kill her, and that reaction proved just how much she believed them.

"So?" she asked when no one said anything, hoping to put that moment behind her as quickly as possible. The way the blonde stared at her made her uneasy, but she did everything in her power not to fidget under the intense gaze. The red eyes in particular were disconcerting, projecting malice or evil

intent.

“You spent a long time on Ibrion,” the blonde finally said. “Any reason?”

Recognizing the knowledge test, Blake quickly recalled the made-up past she knew better than her own.

“It’s warm there,” she answered, shrugging for good measure. “I like warm places.”

When the blonde frowned and crossed her arms, showing off her intimidating metal arm and the flattering muscles of her real arm in the process, Blake decided to take a more direct approach.

“And I was working with a partner who got nabbed stealing some phasers. ISA flagged my identities, so I figured I’d build another one and wait it out instead of running through their blockade.”

“What about Tyria? Same thing happen there?”

As soon as Blake heard the planet’s name, she tilted her head.

“I’ve never been to Tyria.”

“Then where’d you do your time?”

“Nowhere.” She managed a quick laugh and shake of her head at that question. “Because I’ve never been caught.”

“Yet,” the blonde added with a roll of her eyes. Apparently, she wasn’t fond of boasting. “Which is surprising considering your record.”

“I told you - I’m good at what I do.”

“We’ll be the judge of that.” The casual dismissal was vaguely annoying to Blake, but the blonde thought nothing of it. Instead, she waved her hand and added, “Alright, guess you are who you say you are. That doesn’t mean we’ll just let you in.”

“But I thought -” One glare of those red eyes silenced Blake’s retort, and she shook her head before asking through a slightly-clenched jaw, “Then what else do I need to do?”

“Pass the cop test.”

“The cop test?”

Even though she scoffed at the term, her sense of foreboding doubled. She’d been warned this could happen, but she couldn’t back out now - not without risking her life in the process.

“The cop test,” the blonde repeated before pulling a phaser from her suit. After making a show of looking over the weapon, she handed it to Blake and motioned towards the brunette. “Shoot her.”

The brunette scowled at the order, but Blake took the weapon and tried to focus over the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

“Isn’t she important?”

“Not anymore. Do it.”

Sending the blonde one more glance for confirmation, to which the blonde nodded, Blake didn’t hesitate. She *couldn’t* hesitate, even though the last thing she wanted to do was murder someone in cold blood. Even if this woman deserved it.

A cop would hesitate. Anyone with morals would hesitate. A criminal would not. So she accepted the instruction, turned towards the scowling woman, and shrugged.

“No hard feelings,” she said before raising the weapon, aiming, and squeezing the trigger.

She prepared herself for the quick spooling noise before a bolt of energy would leave the barrel, and the aftermath that would follow. Instead, nothing happened. No sound, no illumination, nothing.

“Give me that.”

After snatching the weapon from Blake’s hand, the brunette threw it at the blonde with far more force than necessary.

“Next time you be the bitch,” she snarled, not noticing the way the blonde smirked while putting the dummy phaser away. She returned to glaring at Blake instead, though her glare was even fiercer than before. Apparently, ‘no hard feelings’ wasn’t a phrase she understood...

But Blake was relieved it had been a trick. Even though she was certain that either of these two deserved the swift and immediate end, she didn’t want to take a life so indiscriminately. At least, the Alliance version of her didn’t want to, but that was the version of her she had to leave behind.

“Do I pass?” she asked in a confident voice that earned another annoyed look from the blonde.

“Don’t get cocky. You might’ve passed, but now you’re a grunt. *Anyone* asks

you to do something, you do it. You don't complain, you don't ask questions - you get your ass moving. Got it?"

"Got it."

While nodding, Blake mentally marked the blonde as second-in-command. That explained why the brunette openly disliked her yet did nothing about it.

"Good." After giving Blake another once-over, the blonde squared her shoulders and nodded. "If you step so much as a toe out of line, you're leaving through the garbage chute."

Blake had already expected as much, so nodded again.

"Understood." Abruptly realizing she was falling back upon her training with the short, regimented answers, she loosened her posture and motioned towards the ship. "When're we leaving?"

"Now." Holding Blake's gaze, the blonde searched for something - surprise, maybe? - before finally turning towards the brunette. "Cinder, be a dear and escort our newest guest to her room."

With those parting words, she flashed Blake another look before striding into the cargo hold with the confidence and certainty of someone who truly belonged. She barked a few orders at the Blackguards just inside, who went about their tasks with far more urgency while she disappeared into the ship.

"I'll escort my foot up your ass..." Cinder muttered under her breath once the blonde disappeared from view, probably unaware that Blake could overhear.

That mattered very little, however, as the rest of the crew sprang to life. The guards stationed on the periphery of the landing pad - including one of her new least favorite people, Brenci - left their posts and hurried aboard. Others carried in the few remaining crates, strapped down supplies, and conducted safety checks in preparation for takeoff.

With no role to play in the elaborate process, Blake was left alone with Cinder, who quickly regained her smirk and swagger upon the blonde's exit.

"Guess who's in charge of your initiation, grunt."

Cinder looked far too happy about the prospect of fresh meat, which tempted Blake to give a sarcastic response. Ultimately, she thought better of testing those waters so soon. There would be a time and place for overstepping, but before takeoff definitely wasn't that time.

“Looking forward to it,” she said instead, which only annoyed Cinder further. Fortunately, she didn’t respond by throwing Blake off the ship. She didn’t respond at all, actually. Instead, she turned around and strode into the cargo hold without a word.

Recognizing a not-invitation when she saw one, Blake followed Cinder into the Inferno – this time, knowing she wouldn’t be leaving for the foreseeable future. The permanence of the situation sank in as she walked through the towering cargo hold, and her nerves announced themselves so loudly that she tightly clenched her fists in an effort to calm herself.

She trained for this. She had the skills for this. She passed their tests. Now, all she had to do was be the person ISA created – smart, confident on the verge of cocky, and ambitious. Easier said than done when surrounded by some of the universe’s most notorious criminals.

Following Cinder into the belly of the ship, she kept her head on a swivel and tried to memorize as many landmarks as possible. Realistically, she would have plenty of time to familiarize herself with her new surroundings later, but the faster she acquainted herself, the faster she figured out the secrets of the ship and its crew.

“Who’s the blonde?” she asked while passing through halls bustling with activity. She knew Cinder didn’t want to talk, but she also refused to let Cinder walk all over her. A certain amount of respect and deference was entitled to Cinder’s rank, but not at the price of her new image.

“Looks like you two are close,” she added after several seconds of silence, and Cinder finally scoffed.

“Yang can get eaten by a Raspirger for all I care.” While Blake filed away the name, Cinder shot her another glare. “Go after her if you want, but Adam doesn’t like it when people mess with his things.”

When Blake wrinkled her nose at the implication, Cinder gave a dry laugh and continued through the labyrinth of hallways in better spirits. Deciding not to push her luck more than she already had, Blake kept her mouth shut and followed.

Every detail she learned built a hierarchy that could be used to determine who had access to what information. Beyond that, she would learn which

crew members could be played against each other, or simply which were less homicidal than the others. Her success depended not on making friends - she could never truly be friends with criminals, anyway - but on making allies who put her in the least compromising situations possible.

“Pretty sure this is the worst room on the ship.” Stopping beside a closed door, Cinder pressed the button to open it and revealed a tiny cabin with a narrow bed, miniscule desk, and even smaller bathroom just beyond. “It’s got your name written all over it.”

What Cinder intended as an insult was actually cause for relief. Sharing a room with a potential murderer hadn’t exactly thrilled Blake, so she would gladly accept the individual space no matter how small.

“Guess I’ve seen worse...” she muttered under her breath regardless, knowing that she should feel insulted by the perceived slight. When she stepped towards the doorway, however, Cinder stuck out an arm to stop her.

“Hand it over.”

When Cinder motioned towards the bag slung over Blake’s shoulder, she suppressed a sigh. The last thing she wanted to do was hand her belongings to someone who clearly didn’t like her, but declining wasn’t an option. So she shrugged off the bag and handed it over...only for Cinder to open it up and dump the contents onto the floor. Watching the commotion, several passing crew members jeered or snickered while Cinder used her foot to sort through Blake’s possessions.

“Travel light, do you.”

“I try not to let my baggage weigh me down.”

The response made Cinder scowl, suggesting she had far too much ‘baggage’ of her own. But she said nothing and, after several seconds of kicking Blake’s things around, motioned for Blake to hand over her phaser.

“Grunts aren’t allowed weapons,” was the explanation provided. A strange rule for a ship filled with criminals, but Blake didn’t complain while handing over the weapon. When she reached for her knife next, however, Cinder stopped her.

“Keep it. You can’t do anything with it anyway.”

Scowling at the insult, she had half a mind to prove Cinder wrong right then

and there. She had the highest knife mastery in her training class. She was arguably *more* dangerous with a knife in her hands than a phaser. But she let Cinder underestimate her, especially when it meant keeping her only means of protection.

“Alright.”

Done searching, though she hadn’t done a very thorough investigation, Cinder kicked Blake’s belongings into the room. Blake scowled at the blatant instigation but, knowing that a response would only make this worse, said nothing.

“Stay here until we need you for something.” After one last look at Blake’s empty bag, Cinder tossed it into the room and smirked. “Welcome to the Blackguards, grunt.”

When Cinder spun around, the cloak over her shoulder billowed out and, for a brief second, gave a glimpse of a jet-black, unnatural arm underneath. The sinewy muscles and long claws looked like they belonged on a monster, not a person, and Blake suddenly understood why the crew members gave her such a wide berth as she passed.

Not even an hour into this adventure, Blake knew who her least favorite person would be. Even Brenci, who pulled a phaser on her after no provocation, didn’t come close to matching the viciousness underlying Cinder’s tone and demeanor.

Having been told to stay put, she walked into the tiny room and shut the door behind her. A brief look around her temporary living arrangement was enough for her to sigh, step over her belongings, and sit on the bed. Now that she was in enemy territory, she missed home more than ever. She wanted the comfort of her own bed and an entire base staffed with Alliance officers dedicated to their duty. She wanted the freedom to contact her friends and family without worrying about the communications being intercepted and turned against her.

But she did it. She was in. And, as she felt the ship’s thrusters firing in the distance, she knew she was in for the long haul. There was no backing out now. Not that she could back out without risking her life.

Now that she was here, she had to do everything in her power to earn their

trust. From first impressions, Cinder probably wouldn't be her best friend anytime soon. Adam seemed myopically focused on his goal - as long as she was useful, he would use her. Yang was harder to read, but the anger in her eyes was enough to keep Blake away. There must be others on the ship with the information she needed. All she had to do was become one of them then figure out what they knew.

Feeling the ship lift off and accelerate into the atmosphere, she realized how exhausted she was. Even though her mind was racing, even though she had no idea where they were going or what would happen when they got there, she should try to rest whenever she could.

Laying down, only to flinch when an unfamiliar noise rumbled deep in the ship, she knew that her sleep would be restless at best.

Chapter 4

Feeling something cold and hard press to her forehead, Blake jarred awake and froze when she found herself staring down the barrel of a phaser. Somehow, she didn't move a muscle, even as her adrenaline shot through the roof and her body tensed in preparation of battle.

"Wake up, grunt. Initiation time."

Recognizing Cinder's voice, she scowled and resisted the urge to strangle the woman right then and there. As if Cinder's presence alone was enough to set her on edge, the Blackguard commander had somehow slipped into the room without waking her up. Which meant she would sleep much more lightly from here on out...

"Well don't just lay there," Cinder sneered, finally removing the weapon from Blake's forehead. "Get the fuck up."

Biting back a sarcastic remark, Blake rolled out of bed and quickly put on her shoes. Falling asleep in her regular clothes turned out to be prescient, though she hadn't anticipated such a rude awakening. She should have known better...

Hearing an exasperated sigh, she shot Cinder a glare but kept her mouth shut. Anything she said right now was guaranteed not to be nice. And, while she didn't *think* Cinder could shoot her for no reason, she wasn't positive about that. She also wouldn't put it past Cinder to make up an excuse and shoot her anyway.

"Do you need something?" she asked through clenched teeth once Cinder put the weapon away.

"Just a moment of your precious time."

Though Cinder's smile looked sweet and cordial, it masked malice unlike

anything Blake had seen before. The dueling emotions scared her, quite honestly, which was why she jerked away when Cinder reached towards her side. The reaction was a mistake, as evidenced by the simmering glare it earned her.

“Leave that here.”

The second time Cinder reached forward, Blake forced herself to remain motionless and let Cinder grab the knife from her side. Once it was in her hands, Cinder chucked it into the wall on the other side of the room. The blade nicked Blake in the process, but she didn't give Cinder the satisfaction of a reaction. Even as a trickle of blood ran down her ear, she maintained a stony expression and didn't touch the cut.

Evidently that wasn't the response Cinder wanted, as she scoffed and stalked out of the room with a curt “Come on.” Before following, Blake glanced over her shoulder and found the knife lodged perfectly in the wall. Not an amateur move, and even more reason to fear the woman walking in front of her.

She had no idea where they were headed or why, but it couldn't be good. Being woken in the middle of the night and dragged out of bed hardly preceded anything favorable, as the first few weeks of Alliance training had taught her.

The hallways were empty at the moment, but any notion that the crew was sleeping disappeared when Cinder led her into a large, cavernous room filled with members of the Blackguard. The room was probably used for recreation during normal times, but the tables and chairs had been stacked together and pushed aside. Now, the space served as an open area with a metal floor and dozens of Blackguards. From their excited chatter and the hungry gleam in their eyes, this was a planned event.

Cinder's presence quickly drew their attention, and they made room for their leader to walk to the center of the room. Whispers followed Blake as she trailed behind, with many of the crew hypothesizing on her history and fighting prowess along with more...sordid...matters.

“Wait here,” Cinder ordered before moving to the edge of the room.

Blake did as told, but her nerves grew as she looked around what could only be described as an arena hemmed in by Blackguards. When a young man was shoved into the circle across from her, she realized that's exactly what it was.

“Listen up, grunts.”

Cinder didn't need to raise her voice to get the crew to quiet, as everyone hushed in a show of considerable respect – or fear.

“You thought it was that easy, didn't you? That we'd let you in without a test?”

The onlookers jeered at the comment, and Blake's apprehension edged higher.

“We'll let you in all right,” Cinder continued, her smile implying genuine happiness at what was to come. “But we're only taking one of you.”

Blake's heart sank at the words as she looked at the young man across from her, who looked hardly out of his teens regardless of the thin stubble on his chin. She should have known it wouldn't be so easy. She should have expected that a ruthless group like the Blackguards wouldn't hesitate in resorting to violence. Now he stood in the way of her mission...and Command said that the mission was more important than anything.

Would she take one life to save millions? Now that she was here, she didn't have a choice – it was his life or hers.

“Ready grunts?” Cinder asked while the onlookers whistled and clapped for the impending fight. The young man straightened to his full height, nearly a full foot taller than Blake, and squared his shoulders before lifting his fists. He had a definite height and weight advantage, but speed and quickness were on her side. The question then became which of them was better trained – hopefully, her.

Raising her fists, she fixed her eyes on her opponent and tried to think of a way out of this. Based on the crowd's excitement, they wanted to be entertained. Maybe if she refused to give them that entertainment, they would give up and go to bed.

“Go.”

As soon as Cinder uttered the word, the young man burst forward with fists flying. It took only three swings for Blake to determine that he had real fighting experience, and only a few more to understand that he was taking the challenge seriously.

Ducking under his arm and skirting to the side, she did her best to stay out of

his reach. The circle of Blackguards didn't give her much room to operate in, but she used it to the best of her ability while he pursued her every movement.

"Come on!" he roared after she dodged a few more attacks and again moved away.

Her strategy was working in at least one regard - he was losing his calm and taking more risks trying to win. Unfortunately, their spectators didn't sound remotely close to calling it a night. And, based on his growing aggression, it wouldn't be long before he launched himself at her with vigor she couldn't fend off. She needed to convince him to slow down and back off.

The next time he lunged towards her, she grabbed his arm, yanked him off balance, and brought her knee up into his chest. The crowd roared at the first legitimate impact, which sent her adrenaline even higher as she leapt away from his counterattack.

Any hope of him taking the blow as a warning disappeared when he rushed her again. She deflected his fist, but when she tried to move away he stuck out his foot, tripped her up, and sent her stumbling forward. The brief lack of balance was all it took for him to grab her arm and send a fist hurtling towards her head.

She managed to duck the first blow, but there was nothing she could do about the follow-up landing squarely in her side. A gasp left her lips from the force of it while sharp pain radiated through her abdomen, but there was no chance to recover. Another fist was already on the way, and she raised her hands to protect her head but reacted too slowly to his leg flying towards her shoulder.

Cheers erupted as the resulting crack of shin on shoulder knocked her to the floor in another burst of pain. No sooner had her knee connected with metal, however, did a pair of strong hands jerk her back to her feet.

"Get up," Brenci growled before shoving her forward. "I've got a hundred credits on you."

Her shoulder and side pulsed with agony, yet she had no choice but to continue. If she didn't defend herself, he would kill her. If she didn't want to die, she had to kill him.

Maybe her next best option was knocking him unconscious - even criminals

had to have some sort of code against killing someone who was rendered unconscious. The only issue was that she wasn't sure if she could knock him unconscious without seriously hurting him.

And that was before Cinder casually tossed a knife on the floor in between them.

As soon as Blake heard the sound of metal hitting metal, she lunged forward to grab it. Her opponent did the same, but his strategy was to lower his shoulder and barrel right into her. With his size advantage, his shoulder connected with her chest and knocked her backward to the floor. By the time she scrambled to her feet, he'd grabbed the knife and was already swinging it towards her.

Jumping back when the blade sliced through the air in front of her, she retreated even further when he kept coming at her. She couldn't block anymore, not without being severely cut in the process, so she had to find a way around.

When she took another step back, a set of hands shoved her forward.

"Get back in there!" someone yelled in her ear, but she didn't dare turn away from her opponent.

Having reached the edge of the ring, she moved sideways while he kept pace with her. From the glint in his eyes, he knew he had her exactly where he wanted her. With no room to back away, she had to go through him to find more space. And going through him was guaranteed to result in a serious injury for her.

She had to disarm him. Either of them might be gravely injured in the process, but at this point...it was him or her. Even the onlookers sensed the importance of her next move, as their raucous cheers quieted in preparation for what came next.

Focusing solely upon the movement of the knife, she tracked its progress across his body before he jabbed towards her stomach. He projected the attack, but she barely slipped out of the way before spinning around and making an attempt to take it from him. She'd only managed to grab his wrist when a metal hand reached out of the crowd and wrapped around the end of the blade.

While Blake backed away in surprise, her opponent didn't release the knife fast enough. Instead, he held on, and Yang jerked him forward while bringing

her knee up and landing it right between his legs. He instantly yelped and dropped to his knees in agony, and Yang crushed the knife in her hand before throwing it on the floor.

“What the *fuck* is going on here?”

For as boisterous as the room once was, it was deathly silent as Yang glared around the circle of Blackguards. After several tense seconds passed and no one dared a response, she jabbed a finger towards the exit and issued a terse, “Get back to your rooms.”

All-too-willing to escape a reprimand, the crew dispersed with nothing but whispered comments on their way out the door. Any notion Blake had about following disappeared with just one glare from Yang, however. Instead, she stayed put and watched the room empty until the only ones left were her, Yang, Cinder, and the young man who had yet to regain his feet.

As soon as the spectators were gone, Yang stalked over to Cinder, not the least bit afraid or intimidated by the woman.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Just having a bit of fun -”

“Bullshit. If you want to have fun, go fuck one of the pilots. Do *not* mess with her -” Yang jabbed a finger towards Blake with the word, which only made Cinder’s scowl deepen. “Unless you can suddenly read Valerian. Because that’s the only way I’m not tearing you apart limb-by-limb, got it?”

From Cinder’s sour expression, she had a lot to say to that. Rather than respond at all, however, she shot Blake a dirty look - as if this was somehow Blake’s fault - and stalked out of the room. The lack of response only pissed Yang off more, as she made a disgruntled noise and crushed the mangled knife under her heel.

“You,” she directed to the young man finally pushing himself back to his feet. “What’s your name?”

“Cutler...ma’am.”

“Cutler, are you stupid?”

“Um -”

“Say yes,” Yang snapped, and he nodded without a second thought.

“Y-yes.”

“Figures. If I ever catch you doing something so *shit-faced* stupid again, you’re dead. Understand?”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” he stammered, his wide eyes suggesting he hadn’t expected nor wanted to face Yang’s wrath today.

“Good. Now get out of my sight.”

Still hunched over, he nodded and hurried out of the room. With his exit, Blake was the only one remaining.

“Thank you,” she said without thinking about it, but Yang turned towards her and scowled.

“What about you? Are *you* stupid?”

From the way Yang asked, Blake knew she was supposed to say yes. Her instinct was to say yes and avoid as much of the scolding as possible, but that’s exactly what a grunt would do.

“No.”

As soon as the word left her lips, Yang’s scowl deepened.

“Well you sure as hell act like it,” Yang shot back. “Do something like this again, and you’re out with tomorrow’s trash.”

With that, she spun on her heel and stalked out of the room, but Blake waited only a second before rushing after her.

“You told me to do what I’m told,” she pointed out while following Yang into the hall. “She told me to kill him -”

“Killing another grunt won’t impress anyone,” Yang interrupted without so much as a glance Blake’s way. “Killing an entire ship of grunts won’t impress anyone, so don’t bother. You want to impress someone? Kill Cinder. *That* would be impressive.”

Clenching her jaw, Blake let Yang believe that’s what she was trying to do, even though what she was only trying to stay alive. Coming off as an overly-ambitious mercenary was far better than earning a reputation as an overly-obedient grunt.

“If that’s what I need to do...”

“That’s *not* what you need to do.” Finally stopping, Yang spun towards Blake with a fierce red glare. “You’re here for *one* reason - because you’re *somewhat* useful. If you want to be a Blackguard, you earn it through loyalty,

not by killing other members.” Tirade over, Yang waved a hand towards the wall of the ship and stalked away with a grumbled, “Only Adam gets to do that.”

“If only Adam gets to do that, how will you toss me out with tomorrow’s trash?”

The sarcastic remark slipped out, and Blake wanted to take it back the moment Yang froze and slowly turned around. She nearly apologized, even though that wasn’t a mercenary-like thing to do, but instead said nothing while Yang stared her down.

“You’re dumber than you think you are.”

With that last insult, Yang turned around and walked away, leaving Blake to bite back annoyance in her wake.

But Blake was relieved to be free of Yang’s imposing presence, so she didn’t attempt to follow. Instead, she watched Yang exchange a few words with one of the Blackguards at the end of the hall, who nodded and walked over.

“She doesn’t think you can make it back to your room, so I’m supposed to take you there.”

Catching one last red gaze before Yang turned the corner and disappeared, Blake looked at the man standing in front of her and scoffed. Before responding, however, she glanced around and realized that she *didn’t* know how to get back to her room.

“I’m guessing you’re going to escort me whether I do or not,” she responded instead of admitting one way or the other. When he nodded, she sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Besides,” he added while a sneer crept onto his lips. “Wouldn’t want a pretty thing like you wandering around alone late at night.”

When he reached out to touch her hair, she grabbed his hand, twisted his arm behind his back, and shoved him into the nearest wall.

“I hope, for your sake, it’s not you that I run into at night.” When he didn’t immediately answer, she pulled his arm tighter and heard a soft protest slip from his lips. “Right?” she prodded and, this time, he nodded. Only then did she release his arm and motion for him to lead the way to her room.

Without another word, he headed in the opposite direction at a brisk walk.

While Blake followed, she internally breathed a sigh of relief. One less person to worry about, as he would think twice before trying anything with her again. She wished the same could be said for Cinder, who'd proven to be dangerous and volatile in alarming ways.

Determined not to need an escort again, she paid sharp attention to every turn they took and felt a small measure of success when she identified the hallway leading to her doorway.

"Nice meeting you," she told her guide with a fake smile, but he took off without giving her a second glance. Hopeful that the night might finally be over, she let herself into her room and felt her adrenaline finally begin to wear off.

As her adrenaline disappeared, however, pain took its place. Her shoulder, in particular, throbbed from where Cutler kicked her, as did the spot in her chest where he leveled his shoulder, and her hip where she hit the unyielding metal floor. Injured most of all was her pride, as she considered herself a far better fighter than what she just showed. But training against the disciplined members of ISA ill-prepared her to fight someone schooled through a much harder life.

While not the ideal way to begin this foray in the Blackguards, the injuries were minor and should heal quickly. Overall, the night served as a wake-up call. Not only was she in enemy territory, but her status as 'one of them' wouldn't be enough to protect her from the rest of the crew. It especially wouldn't protect her from Cinder - something she'd learned all too quickly... and painfully.

Crossing the room, she pulled her knife out of the wall and looked it over before slipping it back into its sheath. That reminded her about her ear, so she went into the bathroom and took stock of the damage. The cut was small, and the bleeding had stopped on its own, but not before dripping down her neck and leaving a dried mess in its place.

After running her hand under the faucet, she gently cleaned off the blood before washing her hands and splashing water on her face. Once done, she returned to the room and gingerly laid down on the bed, which was just big enough for one person. When she closed her eyes and her mind immediately

replayed the events of the night, however, she sighed.

Now that her thoughts were racing and her body aching, she doubted that she could go back to sleep. But she had to try. After only a few hours on board the Inferno, she knew that she needed rest if she wanted any hope of making it through whatever was in store for her next.

Chapter 5

Blake didn't remember falling asleep, but she nearly jumped out of bed when two knocks hit her door the next morning. With her heart now racing, she looked around the small room and confirmed that last night wasn't a bad dream. She really was on the Inferno, living and sleeping amongst a group of criminals. She was nearly killed last night, and considered killing a young man to save herself. And no, this wouldn't end anytime soon.

“Yo grunt!” someone called out with two more impatient knocks. “Wake up!”

Standing up confirmed that last night was very real, as her side and shoulder were stiff and bruised, but she ignored the ache and hurried to the door. Once it slid open, she discovered yet another stranger waiting for her.

“They want you at the command deck,” the young girl said, giving Blake a slow, judgmental look. After coming to an unspoken determination, she scoffed and walked away without bothering to explain who ‘they’ were or where the command deck was.

But Blake didn't want to be late on her first morning, so she changed and left her room in a hurry. She didn't close the door, however, without first taking a long look at where she left her belongings. Cinder had already revealed that she could get into the rooms at any time, which meant Blake needed to know if someone went through her things and what they might have taken.

After memorizing where everything was, she closed the door and followed her intuition towards the command deck. On any other ship, she would ask for directions. On this ship...she didn't want to show any sign of weakness, even if that meant acting like she knew where she was going even though she didn't.

If the Inferno's layout was similar to other cruisers of this size, the command deck should be front and center. Piecing together what she already knew combined with markers painted on the corners of each hall, she headed in the general direction and kept a careful eye on where she was going.

Unlike last night, the hallways were far from empty. Now that a new day had begun, Blackguards of all genders, nationalities, shapes, and sizes roamed around. Some moved with purpose suggesting they had somewhere to be. Others meandered or stopped to chat with colleagues who also appeared to be off duty. The only thing they all had in common was giving her a second or third glance when she passed by.

Doing her best to avoid eye contact, she still noted the curious, amused, or disdainful looks. Some of them would be more welcoming of her presence than others, and she would like to know who belonged to which group sooner rather than later. While her backstory was that of a loner, she needed to make 'friends' in order to fit in. But first, she needed to find the command deck.

Taking a chance, she ducked into one of the lifts and discovered a well-organized numbering system on the wall. After reading the entire list to familiarize herself, she pushed the button for the command station and felt the lift move several levels higher in the ship. Once it stopped and the doors opened, she stepped into the hall and followed the flow of foot traffic towards what must be the bridge. Soon finding herself standing in the doorway of the large, bustling room, she paused.

The command deck was exactly what she would expect from a ship this size, but the atmosphere took her by surprise. She had assumed that, since the Blackguards were criminals, their processes would be chaotic and disordered. The bridge proved her wrong.

Not only was everything neat and clean, but it was running with order and crispness reminiscent of her Alliance training. The crew members each had an assigned job, which they carried out at a variety of workstations along the periphery of the room. Conversations, if there were any, were quiet and direct rather than loud or boisterous. Those who needed to cross the room walked quickly but didn't run, and everything hummed with the precision of an ISA cruiser.

The view through the front window was nothing but space, giving no indication of where they were or where they were headed. It was the center of the room that caught and held her attention - the large, circular table that alternately acted as a desk, hologram, and everything in between. Around that table stood the three people she was quickly recognizing as the leaders of the Blackguards, and that suspicion was only further solidified when one of the crew members approached them with an aura of reticence and respect reserved for those in charge.

“Yes,” Cinder said after hearing the message, sending the young man scurrying back to his post to complete the task assigned to him. It was at that moment that Cinder caught sight of Blake, and her expression lightened with what could only be described as dark amusement.

“Look who it is.” When Cinder nodded in Blake’s direction, Adam and Yang turned towards her as well. “Sleep well?”

“Like a baby,” Blake lied. Leaving the doorway behind, she walked onto the command deck with no sign of favoring her bruised side or rubbing her sleep-deprived eyes. If Cinder wanted to see weakness, she would have to look elsewhere.

“Let’s see if you feel the same tonight.”

“Save it,” Yang cut in with a glare sent Cinder’s way and a scowl reserved for Blake. “We need you to read this,” she added while shoving a piece of paper across the table. “So read it.”

The on-demand translations were already getting old, but were also the only reason Adam let Blake onto the ship. So, rather than sigh at the task, she picked up the page and skimmed through it.

“All of it?”

“Is that a problem?”

The neutral stare Yang leveled Blake with was intimidating, but she managed a scoff and shake of her head.

“No, but it’s a list of random words. Or random names.”

The moment Adam and Yang exchanged a glance, Blake realized the answer meant far more to them than to her.

“Read the names,” Cinder ordered right before jabbing Blake’s bruised side.

Clenching her jaw at the flash of pain, Blake somehow held her tongue and exhaled rather than swear out loud. She would never believe that Cinder hadn't done that on purpose, but the pain and annoyance didn't prevent her mind from latching onto something more important - Cinder just gave away that the page held a list of names. Which meant...they were searching for someone?

When Adam's permanent scowl deepened, Blake realized she was two seconds away from being reprimanded or worse. With Cinder standing nearby to deliver the 'or worse,' she began deciphering the names one-by-one. The document was so old that some of the runes had rubbed off or become nearly illegible, but she pieced together or guessed the ones she couldn't read.

"Chegwin," she read aloud before moving to the next name. "Herle, Klemmow, Myghal..."

Looking up to check her progress, she found red eyes staring impassively back at her. Apparently, they were interested in something she hadn't stumbled across yet.

"Penketh, Riol, Rudheck, Spargo, Treherne, and...Ungust."

Reaching the end of the list, she lowered the paper to the table and watched Adam and Yang exchange another look. Cinder also seemed to mull something over, but Blake didn't dare ask what. She knew better than to ask questions right now; it was way too early for that.

"Write them down."

When Yang tossed a pen across the table, Blake picked it up and looked around.

"Where?" she asked, only for Cinder to scoff.

"Where do you think?"

Cinder shoved the page back to Blake, who frowned down at it.

"But this is hundreds of years old..."

"Who cares?"

Adam's low, venomous drawl made the hairs on the back of Blake's neck stand on end, as if they sensed impending danger.

"Right," she mumbled while grabbing the ancient document and writing each name beside the corresponding runes. Desecrating something so old made her feel horrible, but what other choice did she have? The only thing she

could do was silently apologize to the author while doing as told.

“Write down all the languages you know, too.” When Blake looked up at Yang, she merely nodded towards the page and added a quick, “So we know.”

Blake could complete the end of that sentence without help – so they knew what they could use her for. Writing this second list at the bottom of the page almost made her wish that her parents hadn’t been so determined to highlight her Faunus heritage. As if her ears weren’t enough, her linguistic skills were over the top. She’d found it useful until this moment, when her ability transferred into the hands of evil. But her mission...

“Here you go.”

Setting the pen on top of the paper, she slid both across the table to Yang, but it was Adam who snatched the page and gave it a quick once-over. Satisfied, or at least not upset, by what he found, he nodded and held it out to one of the crew members standing by. The man stepped forward at the silent summon and accepted the page.

“You know what to do,” Adam directed in a low tone. “Every one of them. I want answers in two hours.”

When the man nodded and hurried to the other side of the room, Adam turned around and moved closer to Yang. With growing curiosity, Blake watched him set his hand on Yang’s metal shoulder before slowly trailing his fingers down her arm. The way he looked at her made Blake’s skin crawl, but Yang made no motion to move away.

“I might have news for you,” he said, finally removing his hand. “Find me later.”

With no further explanation, he left the bridge behind. The mood of the room lightened upon his exit, but Yang and Cinder’s presence prevented the crew from relaxing too much. Now that Adam was gone, however, Cinder crossed her arms and scoffed.

“Jump right back on his dick, why don’t you.”

“I’d rather eat a live grenade,” Yang shot back, but Cinder just rolled her eyes. Unfortunately, her gaze landed on Blake then, and a smile appeared.

“Maybe I should show you around.”

The moment Cinder moved towards Blake, Yang walked around the table

and stepped between them.

“You’ve done enough. Go check the status on our new cargo.”

For a second, Cinder looked like she wanted to argue. Since Yang outranked her, however, she scowled and stalked out of the room instead. After watching her go, Yang glanced at Blake out of the corner of her eye.

“I’m guessing you haven’t eaten yet.”

“Waiting for someone to tell me to.”

Blake regretted the sarcastic response the moment Yang sighed. It was either a sigh of annoyance or...it was most likely a sigh of annoyance. But when Blake had been nothing but bossed around so far, what else should she say? Waiting for someone to tell her a good time to eat seemed like a probable situation.

“You probably don’t even know where the cafeteria is.”

“I’m sure I can find it,” she replied, but Yang sighed again and shook her head.

“No, it’s fine - I haven’t eaten either. We’ll swing by and grab something, then I’ll show you some of the ship - sound good?”

That sounded like the best offer Blake had received since stepping aboard, so no way was she declining.

“That sounds good,” she answered, and Yang nodded before motioning out of the room.

“You found the command deck alright,” she commented as they left the bridge behind.

“Front and center of every ship.”

“Intuitive.”

The response sounded sarcastic, possibly a dig at her smart-ass comment from last night, but Blake kept her mouth shut and followed Yang to the lifts.

“Things are pretty well-marked,” Yang said, waving towards the directory on the wall. “There are basically five different sections - the bridge, living areas, cargo, engineering, and the hangers.”

While Yang spoke, she pushed the button for one of the lower levels and sent the lift dropping into the ship.

“You don’t have any reason to be in engineering,” she added, sounding

almost bored by the explanation. “And you saw cargo on the way in. The hangers are right off of cargo – can’t miss them. You’ll spend most of your time here in the living quarters.”

When the lift doors opened, Yang walked out and motioned towards the halls Blake meandered through that morning.

“Cafeteria’s down here.”

After pointing at a marker on the wall, Yang led them in that direction. Two long hallways later, they walked into a room that Blake immediately recognized.

“Look familiar?”

Noticing the sidelong glance Yang sent her, Blake scanned the room and gave a simple nod rather than a full response. Now that the tables and chairs were back in place, the room looked more like a traditional recreation area than a fighting arena. Blackguards sat at various tables playing cards or other games to pass the time, while others lounged near the video screen in the corner.

“Most people hang out here when they’re not on shifts,” Yang explained while leading Blake towards a door at the far end of the room. Through that doorway was yet another large room, this one filled with more tables and crew members eating their meals.

Her stomach growled at the smell of food, and she couldn’t remember the last time she ate. Having been so nervous about finding and joining the Blackguards, she might have skipped one or several meals.

“Kitchen staff comes up with a rotating menu.” Leading them over to the line for food, Yang pointed to a menu written on the wall. “Mostly depends on what planet we were at last. If you don’t like what’s on the menu, you better suck up to the kitchen staff or bribe them to make you something else.”

“That’s alright. I’m not a picky eater.”

“Wouldn’t care if you were.”

While Blake scoffed at the casual dismissal, Yang motioned to the Etovian behind the counter that she needed two of whatever was for breakfast. Once he set two containers on the counter, she grabbed both and handed one to Blake.

Noticing the curious look she received from the man, Blake accepted breakfast with a soft “thank you” before following Yang away from the kitchen. It hadn’t occurred to her until right then, but it might be unusual for someone like Yang to show around the lowest-ranking member of the crew. Cinder had also offered, but Blake had legitimate reasons to believe that would have ended in more injuries for her.

Diving deeper into the observation, she gave Yang a more thoughtful look. Intimidation must be Yang’s middle name - from her arm, to her eyes, to her posture. And her status as one of the Blackguard’s leading members meant she must have been party to some serious crimes.

Maybe she was bored, and that’s why she offered to show Blake around. Or maybe this was some sort of test.

“Everyone has an assigned job,” Yang carried on after taking a bite of breakfast, which was pretty good, in Blake’s opinion. “Cooks, cleaners, squad, maintenance, engineers - everyone has a primary task and sometimes a secondary, depending on how often they’re needed.”

“What about me?”

“When you’re not translating, find someone to help with. The cooks, the cleaners, I don’t care - just pitch in however you can.”

Nodding and taking another bite to eat, Blake was grateful for what sounded like a fair amount of flexibility. Unless they needed her to translate an entire library...in which case she would ask Alliance to remove her from this mission as soon as possible.

“Sick bay,” Yang pointed out as they passed a closed door with a red cross on it. “Guessing you’ll be here often.”

“Why? Will I be visiting you?”

When Yang stopped walking, Blake silently cursed her propensity to respond with sarcasm whenever she felt insulted. Her commanding officers chewed her out about it, and she always gave them a ‘yes sir’ or ‘yes ma’am’ before doing it again. A verbal lashing was expected and appropriate, which was why she was surprised when Yang only scoffed.

“You’ve been here eight hours and already gotten the shit kicked out of you - I expect you here before long.”

“We’ll agree to disagree,” Blake replied, only to again be surprised when Yang shook her head and resumed walking.

“You love pushing your luck, don’t you...”

Blake couldn’t say she loved it, but she was known for it. When she felt like something was wrong or that her way was better, she pushed the boundaries as far as possible. That was part of the reason she landed this mission, so she couldn’t say it never got her anywhere.

“Just do me a favor and stay away from Cinder,” Yang added. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her hate someone so fast. You must’ve found a way to really piss her off.”

“A natural talent,” Blake replied with a roll of her eyes.

“I’m almost jealous,” Yang said, a hint of something close to amusement in her tone. “I had to earn her hatred, but you just walk in and have it.” Pausing for a second, she gave Blake a more thoughtful look. “Wonder why that is...”

With that red gaze trained upon her, Blake suddenly had a good idea of why Cinder hated her, and why everyone on this ship would hate her. Cinder couldn’t possibly know who Blake was – if she did, Blake would be dead already – but maybe she *sensed* it somehow...

Whatever it was, Blake hoped that no one figured it out.

“My devastatingly good looks?” she joked, using a line right out of Sun’s repertoire. Surprisingly, it worked; Yang scoffed and let the subject go.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” she even muttered. “She’s a petty bitch.”

The response solidified what Blake suspected – the two commanders hated each other. Maybe their mutual dislike could be used to her advantage. If she aligned against Cinder, maybe Yang would view her more favorably.

“You can say that again,” she agreed, and noted Yang’s satisfied nod. That, to her, felt like progress. If nothing else, it was an interaction with *someone* on this ship that didn’t result in her being threatened.

“Guess I should show you the supplies.”

Stopping by another door, Yang put her hand on the panel and waited for it to open. Once it did, she motioned Blake after her, but Blake nearly didn’t follow. The smell alone made her want to stay in the hall, but she had no legitimate reason to do so. Instead, she took a deep breath, slowed her breathing, and

walked into a room filled with more drugs than she'd ever seen in one place.

"The panel logs entry and exit," Yang explained with the same casual demeanor she'd used to explain the lunch menu. "Only rule is that it's for off duty *only*. If we catch you lit up on duty, you'll be dead or wishing you were dead - got it?"

While Yang waited for a response, Blake gave the room one last glance and nodded. The Inferno had everything an addict could dream of and more. If this was what the crew had access to, how much was stored to be sold or traded for weapons?

"You don't look excited."

"What?"

"Most people treat this place like a candy store," Yang elaborated with a dismissive wave before walking out of the room. Blake didn't hesitate to follow. "You're not into it?"

Without knowing what response Yang wanted, that was a dangerous question for Blake to answer. What would impress Yang more, or dampen any lingering suspicions? What helped Blake fit in, and what won her favor in the eyes of one of her new leaders?

"Depends on my mood," she replied as cagily as possible. "Not recently though. Slows me down."

If that was the right answer, she had no way of knowing; Yang just shrugged and walked away.

"Suit yourself," she said before a quick, "Oh, speaking of that." Suddenly moving with more purpose, she led them into the next hallway and to another closed door. "You need a suit."

Once the door opened, Blake peered into the room and found rows upon rows of armored suits hanging on racks.

"You stick out like a sore thumb," Yang added, and Blake couldn't agree more. Most of the crew wore their armor wherever they went, which made her one of the few wearing civilian clothes on board. If she wanted to fit in, she needed to lose her status as an outsider by any means necessary...even if that meant donning the infamous jet-black armor.

"These are extras," Yang explained while Blake lightly touched the nearest

uniform. “Find one that fits and wear it. Just keep in mind that it won’t make you invincible – take a knee to the ribs, they’ll still break.”

“Ok, thank you.”

The gratitude slipped out, as Blake felt that she had a great deal to thank Yang for between yesterday and today. From Yang’s scowl, however, she didn’t feel the same.

“What’re you thanking me for?” she asked, and Blake quickly switched tactics.

“For the opportunity.”

When Blake motioned towards the room filled with armor, Yang scoffed and shook her head.

“You have no idea what you got yourself into.”

Before Blake could ask what that meant, Yang glanced at her watch and clenched her jaw.

“And that’s all I’ve got time for, grunt. Explore more at your own risk.”

Without another word, she left Blake standing alone amidst the Blackguard uniforms. Her footsteps faded down the hall as she went to address more important responsibilities, but Blake frowned at the abrupt departure.

Left to her own devices, she looked around the room and decided to pick out a suit as Yang suggested. It took only a few seconds of searching to discover that the room was just as organized as the rest of the ship. The pants were hung by size, and the corresponding tops were neatly-folded and resting just underneath.

After finding a set that looked around her size, she gave them a long look before slipping them over her clothes. Hardened plates covered the front of her shins, knees, thighs, chest, and back, but the rest of the uniform was made of a flexible material that offered plenty of mobility.

Running her hands down the sides, she found plenty of concealed pockets perfect for hiding knives or other weapons. Whereas Yang’s suit had been modified to accommodate her prosthetic arm, the stock version had two full sleeves with thicker material along the forearms and elbows, offering added protection without being as heavy or restrictive as the armor plating.

Finding a small button near her left wrist, Blake pushed it and felt the two

halves fuse together and mold to her shape. Raising her arms in front of her, she stared at the deep black armor that would immediately identify her as one of them. A member of the Blackguard. A criminal.

Dropping her hands to her sides and shaking her head, she reminded herself that this was all part of her mission. She *had* to become one of them. With this armor, she was one step closer to succeeding in that goal.

With no escort and no immediate responsibility, she decided that now was a good time to explore on her own. Leaving the room of armor behind, she picked a random direction and headed off in search of anything interesting. Now that the day was underway, most of the crew were too preoccupied with their tasks to give her much more than a glance or short glare when she passed them by.

Compared to this morning, however, she was more at ease walking through the halls by herself. As Yang put it, she no longer stuck out ‘like a sore thumb.’ She blended in. She didn’t belong yet, but her outfit made her less of an outsider.

Reaching the end of another hallway, she read the markings on the corner and spotted something that caught her interest. After setting off in that direction, it wasn’t long before she reached a door with a small glass window in it. A quick glance confirmed her destination, and she was pleasantly surprised when she set her hand on the palm scanner and it flashed green.

Walking into the armory, which was at least five times as big as the one on ISA’s base, she looked around in disbelief.

“Damn,” she summarized out loud, catching the attention of the only other person in the room - a young boy with pale blue skin, no hair to speak of, and grease smudges all over his arms and hands.

“Please don’t touch anything. I just got it back in order.”

Raising her hands, she made sure not to touch anything while moving further into the room. With every step she took, however, her surprise grew. The Inferno’s armory easily surpassed the best weapon stores of the Alliance. Any weapon she could imagine hung on the wall or sat in racks, each freshly cleaned and ready for duty. There were even some she’d never seen before, large and small contraptions whose purposes weren’t clear from appearance alone.

“These aren’t the ones we move, right?” she asked, taking a closer look at a drawer filled with knives she could drool over.

“Naw. Those stay in cargo.”

Filing that information away, she turned towards the long table in the center of the room currently covered in weapons, spare parts, and grease.

“Are you the only one taking care of them?”

“Yup! Can’t do much else, so they make me polish the weapons.”

If his situation saddened him at all, his smile made it impossible to tell. That, and his blown-out pupils were either hereditary or...drug related.

“Want help?” she offered regardless of his current mental state. Compared to how the rest of the crew had reacted to her so far, he seemed non-threatening and, above all else, accepting of her presence. That alone was worth her time cleaning phasers.

“You’re the one they’re talking about?” he asked instead, another smile just barely held at bay. “The grunt?”

“That would be me. But I can help.”

Part of every Alliance officer’s training was an extensive course on maintaining their weapons. The last thing Command wanted was to replace broken phasers all the time, so they harped on proper maintenance techniques. But just because *she* knew she was capable didn’t mean this young weaponsmith did.

After considering her for several long seconds, he slid a phaser across the table.

“Take that apart.”

Finally, a test she didn’t mind passing.

Setting down the remainder of her breakfast, she grabbed the weapon and did as instructed. It practically fell apart in her hands and, as she laid out the components on the table, he laughed – a cheerful, delighted sound that confirmed his young age.

“It took me *forever* to learn how to do that.” Unashamed of the admission, he motioned towards a burn mark on the wall. “That one almost got me. Pretty sure they stuck me in here to see if I’d hurt myself.”

That didn’t sound like a laughing matter, but Blake still smiled at his

apparent happiness. Having passed his test, however, she pointed towards a stack of rifles in a bin by the door.

“Do those need tuning?”

“Yeah, wanna grab one?”

Needing no further encouragement, she picked up one of the weapons, set it on the table across from him, and began dismantling it so it could be cleaned.

“I’m Ret, by the way.”

When he set a container of cleaning oil in front of her, she smiled.

“Blake,” she replied, and he chuckled – either at her name or the introduction – before going back to work.

Taking the initiative to do the same, she focused on the weapon and quickly discovered that the methodical work was a relief. For these few minutes, her brain rested and her hands did the work. If she zoned out, it almost felt like she was back at base with Sun, the two of them racing to see who could clean their weapons the fastest.

The happy mirage disappeared when Cinder walked into the room.

“What’re you doing here?” she snapped as soon as she saw Blake. When Blake raised her grease-covered hands – all the answer that was needed – Cinder scowled and shoved her weapon into Blake’s chest. “If I find a speck of dirt on it, it’s your ass to pay.”

When Cinder stalked out of the room, Blake rolled her eyes and set the weapon on the table to be worked on next.

“We can probably figure out how to make that blow the next time she uses it.”

Surprised by the comment, Blake looked across the table while Ret nodded towards where Cinder just stood.

“Then we’ll have two commanders missing arms,” he added and, once she laughed, grinned and went back to work.

She quickly did the same but decided he was alright. Still a Blackguard. Still a criminal. But at least one person on this ship hadn’t immediately threatened to kill her. That seemed like a step in the right direction.

Chapter 6

As it turned out, life with the Blackguards was similar to life on any other ship. There were stark differences in the crew and Blake's comfort amongst them, of course, but everything else functioned like she was used to. Everyone had a job and a schedule to follow. Everyone had a group of friends they stuck close to and different hobbies to enjoy in their free time. The open drug use was something she might never get used to, but besides that...she could be on board an Alliance cruiser.

The similarities were unsettling, but she didn't dwell on those while focusing on her ultimate objective. She couldn't tell Command that the Blackguards were successful by using similar policies and discipline honed by ISA, albeit with more violence attached. She needed an answer. She needed to find something *different*. Seeing as how no one was offering to explain the finest details of how this ship operated, however, she embraced her free time as an opportunity to observe.

Fortunately, the negative attention directed her way had dissipated with her donning of the Blackguard uniform. It wasn't comfortable to wear all of the time, but she *looked* like one of them now. Eventually, she would have to act like them too. As much as she wanted to hide in her room or spend the entire day cleaning weapons, she also had to be more social. Making 'friends' would help her blend in.

The need to make friends led to her sitting in the rec room catching up on the news while Ret and a few crew members gambled nearby. From the fragments of conversation floating her way, this was a regular activity of theirs, which didn't surprise her in the slightest. Drinking, drugs, and gambling went hand-

in-hand with the mercenary crowd.

“That’s bullshit!”

Heavy fists slammed on a table as a chair screeched across the floor, and she looked up to find a towering man glowering down at one of the other gamblers. The subject of his ire – a young woman with red eyes and green hair cut at a sharp angle – smirked up at him.

“You lost fair and square.”

“You *cheated!*” he roared back, growing angrier the longer she smiled at him. “You little bitch –”

The moment he made a motion to reach over and grab her, one of the other players stood up and stopped him.

“Calm down,” the young man with spiky grey hair said while raising a hand. “Go take a walk. Cool off.”

“Of course you’re on her side,” he shot back. But, seeing as how it was two versus one, he took the advice and stalked away from the game. Still fuming, he flipped over an empty table as he passed before slamming his fist into the doorframe on the way out.

Once his fury emptied from the room, Blake shook her head and pretended to resume reading. What she really did, however, was make a mental note not to press his buttons. Obviously, he had some anger issues lurking close to the surface...

“Hey, new girl.”

Seeing as how she was the only other person nearby, and the newest person on the ship, she looked up and found the green-haired girl watching her.

“You want in?”

Having witnessed the end of the previous game, she had no desire to join. Declining, however, wasn’t an option. She needed to fit in, and this was one way to do it. So she put away her reading and stood up.

“Sure.” Even though her adrenaline crept up, she shrugged while walking over and taking the recently-vacated chair between Ret and the young man with grey hair. “What’s the buy-in?”

“A hundred credits.”

A glance at the chips on the table revealed that to be a lie, but she didn’t

complain. Instead, she pulled out her card and added that amount to the pot. To her, this wasn't about winning. This was about keeping up appearances, joining the ranks of her fellow crewmates, and proving that she wasn't intimidated by any of them.

"We're playing thirteens," the girl explained while shuffling the deck. Blake nodded and watched the cards, which were nearly impossible to keep track of with the girl moving her hands so quickly.

As part of her training, Blake learned the most popular games played by raiders, mercenaries, and pirates across the universe. Some of them she liked. Some of them she was good at. In thirteens, however, Sun beat her every time. Thankfully, she didn't have to win - holding her own was good enough.

That small wish would be difficult when the girl was cheating. Those who didn't pay attention wouldn't notice, and some who paid attention might still not notice because her hands moved with such incredible speed and fluidity. But Blake was looking for the ruse, and she found it before too long.

Every card was dealt with speed...and a slightly lifted corner. Even if it was only a glimpse, the girl knew who had face cards and who didn't, which was the key to winning thirteens.

"So new girl," she said while passing out the cards. "Have a name?"

"No. 'New girl' is fine."

When Ret snickered at the response, Blake smiled and picked up her cards. After spending the better part of an hour cleaning phasers together, it was nice to see that he hadn't lost his joviality.

"Guess you don't get a name until you prove yourself, anyway," the green-haired girl replied with a huff. "Until then, you're pretty much the ship bitch."

"Good thing I don't plan on taking long to prove myself."

Pushing several chips to the center of the table, Blake locked eyes with the girl and read open skepticism in red eyes.

"Doubt it. We've got a pool going on how long you last. If you get yourself killed in a couple weeks, you'll win me a lot of money."

"I'll keep that in mind."

When the young man to her right shifted in his seat, Blake gave him a closer look. His grey eyes and hair were a stark contrast to the solid black of his

uniform, but the way he moved drew her attention. While subtle enough to pass off as discomfort or habit, she had to assume the worst based on the end of the previous game. Most likely, he was signaling the cards he intended to play.

Apparently, these two were swindling the crew with this little scam. Everyone probably knew about it by now, or had learned about it the hard way, leaving only the stupidest, cockiest, or newest to fall for it. Ret, however, didn't seem in on the ruse, which implied much more about his intelligence than Blake had picked up on yesterday.

She tapped out of that round before she lost more money and confirmed her suspicions when the cards were flipped over.

"I'm Emerald," the girl said while collecting her winnings. "Pilot."

Sleight-of-hand from a pilot...go figure.

"New girl," Blake replied and hid a smile when Ret giggled again.

"I heard you already met Ret." Emerald pointed to the boy and rolled her eyes. "He's loaded as dice right now. And this asshole's Mercury."

Mercury scowled while shuffling the cards for the next hand, which Blake watched with interest. He didn't look at what he was doing, yet the cards didn't stray from his fingertips until he dealt them with ease.

"Do you know when we'll get to do something?" Blake asked in the meantime, realizing this was the perfect opportunity for banter. "Kind of boring just sitting around."

The three of them laughed at that, suggesting that she'd missed something.

"Bored already? You've been here like three minutes."

"I expected more...action," Blake replied with a shrug, but Mercury scoffed.

"Didn't you feel us dock?" Emerald asked with a raised brow. "Don't tell me you can't fight *and* can't feel a ship dock."

Blake thought she felt a dock earlier, but her unfamiliarity with the Inferno convinced her it was something else. Over time, she would learn every bump, rattle, and hiss like the back of her hand, but everything was foreign to her right now.

"Guessing they're bringing back work?" she asked, glancing at her cards and forcing a neutral expression. How had she been dealt so many horrible

cards at once?

“That’s usually how it goes.” Emerald shoved a pile of chips to the center of the table and caught Blake’s gaze with a challenging one of her own. “I hope you don’t crumble at the first sign of trouble. We’ve had enough girls around here giving us bad names as it is.”

Mercury huffed his agreement at that comment but added nothing more.

“But there’s Cinder and Yang,” Blake pointed out while folding yet another hand. At this rate, they would have her buy-in after just a few rounds; she had to keep them talking while she could.

“They’re different.” After dropping her cards on the table, Emerald collected yet another stack of winnings. She was chattier than the other two, which made her the perfect person to string along a conversation with. “Yang’s been around longer, which is why she’s in charge.”

“That’s why Cinder hates her so much,” Ret added while passing the cards to Blake for her turn to shuffle and deal.

“She hates Yang because Yang outranks her?” Blake guessed, but Emerald gave a dry laugh.

“No, she hates Yang because Adam’s got such a hard-on for her.”

Blake must have made a face at the comment because Emerald nodded.

“He does. She’s smart though - she won’t give it to him, which only makes him want her more.” After a brief pause, she shook her head at her two companions. “Men.”

The explanation lined up with what Blake witnessed yesterday, but that couldn’t be all there was to it. From the limited interactions she’d observed, Adam’s behavior towards Yang wasn’t typical lust or want - those emotions were too simple. What he exhibited was closer to...possession. Like Cinder said, Adam considered Yang to belong to him in some way.

“Don’t piss off Yang though,” Mercury advised while tapping out of the hand Blake dealt him, possibly the only round she had a chance of winning. “I’ve seen what she can do with that arm, and it ain’t pretty.”

“I heard she’s ripped out a guy’s throat.” When Ret extended one hand and made a grasping motion in the air, Blake gave him a disbelieving look. “Tore it right out, easy as crushing a grape.”

“That’s not the only thing I’ve heard she’s ripped right off...”

Folding her hand as well, Emerald gave the two boys pointed looks, and they grimaced.

Those stories didn’t mesh with the version of Yang that Blake had interacted with so far, but maybe she caught Yang on good days. Besides, in a group like the Blackguards, no one reached Yang’s rank without being particularly ruthless. Her red eyes gave Blake even more reason to believe the worst, but time would tell how correct these stories were.

“So Cinder wants Yang’s place...” she mused while Ret dealt the next hand.

“Adam should give it to her, too.” As soon as Mercury made the comment, irritation flashed through Emerald’s eyes. “What?” he added with a shrug. “He should. She’s a cold, ruthless bitch, and she’s smarter than Yang.”

“Adam can float her tomorrow, for all I care,” Emerald snapped before glowering at her cards. A sullen atmosphere fell over the table then, and Blake looked between the two of them before turning to Ret for an explanation.

“Hell hath no fury...” was all he said before dissolving into more giggles. From his dilated pupils and the trembles in his hands, ‘loaded as dice’ was an apt description for his current state. How he worked like that was a mystery, but she didn’t question him while returning her attention to her cards.

“Word of advice?” Emerald offered unprompted. “You’re on your own out here. No one’s going to be your friend.” After a pause, she looked at Ret. “Here that, Ret? *No one* will be your friend.”

Emerald’s glare implied she was serious, but Ret just chuckled and leaned towards Blake.

“She saved my life. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

“That was an *accident*,” Emerald huffed. “And I’ve regretted it ever since.”

“I wouldn’t call it an ‘accident...’”

“Shut up, Mercury.”

Mercury chuckled but fell silent, and Blake lost yet another round while wondering what their story was. Ret was young enough to raise serious concerns about whether he should be hanging around such a rough crowd, but he didn’t seem perturbed by the environment. That could be the drugs talking though...

“Oh shit. Incoming.” Emerald’s eyes flashed over Blake’s left shoulder before moving to Ret. “Ret, don’t you dare –” she warned as the boy’s pale blue skin darkened.

“I can’t help it...”

“She’ll notice,” Mercury warned but sat back and smiled as Ret’s skin became an even darker shade of blue.

Curiosity getting the best of her, Blake turned around and spotted Yang striding towards them. The frown tugging at her lips and her imposing presence were enough to set off alarms in Blake’s mind, reacting to what she perceived as a threat. As soon as their gazes met, however, she realized that Yang was there for her – and that added a host of emotions she didn’t have time to interpret before Yang motioned for her to get up.

“Grunt,” was all Yang said before heading back the way she came. Heeding the silent order, Blake quickly cashed out of the game and followed, but glanced back at the table when she heard a sigh of relief.

“Shit...” Ret exhaled while his skin lightened, and Mercury shook his head at whatever crisis had been narrowly averted.

“Watch the arm,” Emerald whispered with a smirk pulling at her lips, and Blake nodded at the advice before hurrying after Yang, who had already left the rec room behind.

“Looks like you’re making friends,” she commented as soon as Blake caught up, but didn’t bother looking over while leading them to the lifts.

“Don’t know if you’d call them friends.”

When Yang’s response was a soft scoff, Blake kept quiet and took a closer look at Yang’s prosthetic arm. The more she studied it, the more its metallic silver sheen looked unnatural under the hall lights. The uniqueness of the color was fitting for someone as...unique...as Yang. The scratches and gashes in the metal were also fitting for someone like Yang, as she must be involved in combat more often than not. Overall, the arm looked absurdly strong and dangerous. Certainly strong enough to –

“Got a problem?”

Caught staring, Blake met Yang’s gaze and quickly turned away.

“Not a problem. I was just curious about your arm.”

“It’s an arm. What’s there to be curious about.”

The response didn’t invite questions, so Blake kept them to herself. If the rumors were true, she would see that arm in action sooner rather than later. Hopefully, Yang’s wrath wouldn’t be focused on her at the time...

“What do you need me for?” she asked after they walked into an empty lift and Yang pushed the button for the bridge.

“You speak Dorian, right?”

“Enough for a simple conversation.”

“Good enough.”

Understanding that was all the information she would get, Blake shut up and followed the rest of the way in silence. Out of everyone she’d met so far, Yang was the hardest to get a read on. On the one hand, she was second-in-command – she was dangerous, snappy, and not to be trusted. On the other hand, she’d already helped Blake several times, but her motivations for doing so were unclear.

Time would tell what type of person Yang was, as it always did. For now, Blake would keep her head down and do her job – for ISA and the Blackguards.

When they walked into the command center, she realized that would be easier said than done. Adam and Cinder were already there. So was a man she’d never seen before, who’d been beaten to the point of unrecognizable.

“Meet Jori Penketh.” Walking over to the man, Yang gave him a hard pat on the back. “He’s being...difficult.”

“*You’re monsters!*” he shouted back at her. “*All of you! Monsters! Murderers!*”

He spit the last word at Cinder, who didn’t so much as blink at the charges. Adam and Yang showed just as little reaction, other than Yang making a gesture as if to say ‘see?’

“*You’re Dorian?*” Blake asked in his native tongue, capturing his attention in an instant.

“*You speak it?*”

When she made a so-so gesture with one hand, Adam stepped forward.

“Tell him that he either tells us where the maps are, or we kill him and the rest of his family.”

The situation dumped over her head like a bucket of ice water, and her heart

was already racing by the time she looked at Adam to confirm the request wasn't a joke. She shouldn't have even bothered, because Adam immediately frowned and gestured towards the man.

"Tell him."

Slowly drawing in a deep breath, she nodded and turned back to the man.

"They want to know where the maps are."

Even though she had no idea what these maps were, she didn't need to elaborate - his eyes widened at the word. Whatever Adam was searching for, this man already knew of it.

"You have to tell us where they are," she continued more forcefully. *"Or they'll kill the rest of your family."*

Even if he didn't believe that she would follow through on such a threat, the fear in his eyes showed that he knew the rest of the room would.

"Please," he begged instead of answering. *"My family has nothing to do with this. I've only heard stories - rumors! - nothing more. I don't know anything else - you have to tell them! I don't know. I don't know..."*

When his lip quivered with the onset of tears, Blake looked at Adam.

"He says he's only heard rumors..."

"I want to know what those rumors are."

Blake wanted no part of this. She wanted absolutely no part of this. She would quit the mission right now if that was an option. Instead, she turned back to the man and took another deep breath. Her hands had started to shake from adrenaline and fear, so she grasped the edge of the table and hoped no one noticed.

"Tell me what you know."

"Only what everyone else does." His voice urged her to believe him, but his fidgeting gave away the lie - and that made her hate this even more. *"The mines were sealed for a reason - only the worthy can open them. That's why we don't look. We leave it as it was meant to be - lost to the universe."*

His words filled her with foreboding - not for the secret he held, but that he continued to guard it as his situation grew increasingly dire.

"He says not to look for it." Her heart threatened to beat out of her chest right now, but she did everything in her power to hold a neutral expression.

This shouldn't bother her. As a mercenary, this shouldn't bother her. "That only the 'worthy' can open the mines."

She didn't expect anything to sway Adam's determination, and those words of warning had no effect. If anything, he looked even more resolute.

"Make him tell us where the maps are," he reiterated in a threatening growl, and Blake glanced at Cinder and Yang - who showed hardly any emotion at all - before turning back to her task.

"*You have to tell them where the maps are,*" she pressed, trying to sound forceful even though she wanted to plead with him to save himself. "*Nothing you say will stop them - tell them so that your family can live.*"

"*Don't you understand? The mines aren't meant for us. They aren't meant for our time. There's no safety once that power falls into the wrong hands.*"

"*That's a problem for the future. Your problem is right here, right now.*"

Blake nodded towards the command deck filled with Blackguards and felt a flicker of relief when he looked around. He understood his situation. He understood that his life hung in the balance.

"Grunt -" Yang said, but Blake silenced her with a look while the man considered his options, which landed somewhere between grim and bleak. The moment he let his shoulders slouch, she knew he'd caved.

"*My family doesn't have them anymore...*" he answered in a low, broken tone. "*They were entrusted to another family many generations ago...*"

"*Which family?*"

Squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his fists, he tilted his head towards the ceiling and sighed.

"*The Riols were next in line...*" he whispered before opening his eyes and meeting Blake's gaze. "*But even if you have the maps and find the entrance, you still need a key. Only the worthy have a key.*"

That was the information Adam wanted, and she should feel successful for obtaining it. Instead, she opened her mouth and tried to ignore the vice tightening around her heart.

"The maps went to the Riols, they were next in line." Saying the name aloud reminded her of where she'd heard it before - from the list of names they had her translate - and filled her with horror for the unsuspecting family. "But he

says you'll need a key -"

"Again with the key," Yang muttered.

"We'll figure it out," Adam replied, and stared at Blake for several seconds before turning towards one of the nearby Blackguards. "Find them," he ordered, and the man nodded before hurrying to do as directed. Adam then caught the attention of one of the pilots and said, "Release the ship and put it in view."

The crew rushed to do as told, and the Inferno smoothly turned until another ship floated into view just outside the windows. Jori, whose right eye was now swollen shut, looked at it with a sad smile on his lips. He might have betrayed his people and surrendered a centuries-old secret, but he saved his family.

"Fire at will."

As soon as Adam gave the order, Blake spun towards him and opened her mouth to protest. But it was already too late. Beams shot from the Inferno and struck the other craft over and over again, and it quickly crumpled before their eyes - destroyed and lost to the void of space.

"No!!" Jori screamed, lurching forward only to be grabbed by Cinder and shoved back to the table. "No!!" Tears streaming down his cheeks, he struggled to free himself before giving up and turning on Blake. "*You said they would live!*" he shouted at her before choking up with sorrow. "*You said they would go free!*"

"Cinder," Adam said, and Cinder smiled.

"My pleasure."

Motioning for two of the guards to help, Cinder released her hold of the man and walked out of the room. The Blackguards dragged the sobbing man after her, to a fate that had been unavoidable all along. Blake understood that now, but the knowledge did nothing to ease the clamp around her heart and throat.

His last thought would be that she lied to him. That *she* did this to him, even though she had no more control over this than he did. Did that absolve her from guilt?

"Finally, a decent lead," Adam muttered, as if that was the only item of importance in that interaction.

When he set a hand on Yang's shoulder, Blake glowered his way. She would

like nothing more than to kill him right now. For making her a liar. For making her participate in an innocent man's execution.

"Yes, congratulations." Noticing Blake's gaze, Yang shrugged off Adam's hand and turned towards her. "What're you staring at, grunt? That's all we needed you for."

"Right."

Taking that as her cue to leave, Blake stormed off the bridge and returned to the lift. As soon as the doors closed, sealing her in temporary silence, she closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm her aching heart.

It didn't help. If anything, closing her eyes only reminded her of the look in Jori's eyes - a look of betrayal and anguish unlike anything she'd ever seen.

She would never forget that look, but she would make sure that these lives, which were so callously snuffed out, wouldn't be forgotten. She would make sure these people hadn't died in vain.

As soon as she walked into her cabin, she shut the door and sat on the bed. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't cry for fear of someone noticing. Instead, she sat there and focused on her breathing. Focused on her heart rate. Focused on what she could control - her mission.

The Blackguards were searching for something. Something that sounded like it came out of a piece of lore. That explained their need for a good translator, someone who could communicate across planets in their hunt for information. They must not know where these 'mines' are, which explained their need for maps that might or might not be in the possession of the Riol family.

Finally standing up, she grabbed her communication device and started a message to Command. She had to send a warning. Even though she didn't know what planet the Riols were from, maybe ISA could find them and warn them. If it was a possibility, she had to take it. She had to give another family the chance that hadn't been granted to the Penkeths.

Once the message was sent, she cleared all traces of it from the device, laid down on her bed, and sighed. Coming into this mission, she knew she would have little to no control over what happened. She knew people would die. She knew crimes would be committed right in front of her. She knew that she

CHAPTER 6

might have to kill someone just to stay alive.

She'd accepted the necessary evils because she believed that she was doing the right thing. But accepting them and living through them were two different things entirely.

Chapter 7

Blake couldn't get the man's cries out of her head. Not even a morning spent observing the power dynamics of the crew - which was cliquy, to say the least - distracted her from the horrible moment when Adam made her a liar. The sorrow over pointlessly-wasted lives ate at her heart, but also made her more determined than ever to bring the Blackguards to justice.

So, after meeting more crewmates who would surely stab her in the back at the first opportunity, she spent the afternoon exploring the Inferno. Yang had shown her the highlights of the living areas, but the less-frequented sections of the ship still needed to be investigated. Copious amounts of drugs and smuggled weapons had to be stored somewhere, and she wanted to find them.

That mission led her to the cargo hold - the most probable storage facility for items the Blackguards planned to sell. Since no one had expressly forbidden her from visiting the hold, she felt reasonably assured that she could plead ignorance if caught. Of course, that assumption depended on who caught her...

Resolving not to be spotted at all, she snuck into the cargo hold and realized that her wish was nothing more than a pipe dream. Where she'd expected a giant, empty room filled with crates and boxes, she found a giant, *busy* room filled with crates, boxes, and Blackguards. Apparently, the meticulous organization she'd noted on her first pass-through was the result of the crew putting in hours upon hours of shuffling boxes around.

Blake's presence was immediately noticed by a woman standing near the door but, when no warning was issued, she figured that she was allowed to be here. So she acted like she belonged while strolling further into the room and taking a good look around.

Again, the neatness amazed her. Every rack served a defined purpose, and every shelf on every rack was labeled, as was every box and crate. Without opening anything, she knew exactly what was inside. Drugs, guns, items she'd never heard of - everything a criminal group could ever want or need was stored here, ready to be exchanged for the right amount of credits.

Ultimately, she needed to know how the Blackguards acquired the contraband and what they planned to do with it, but that information would come in time. She should take pictures for Command first...but the last thing she wanted was to be caught with a drive full of suspicious photos, especially if Cinder stopped by for a surprise inspection.

Reconnaissance first. Pictures when she knew that she could get them out of her possession as fast as possible.

"Need help?" she asked one of the Blackguards, who hardly glanced at her before shaking his head and shoving a large, open container across the room. Upon reaching the far wall, he used a crowbar to pry the lid off one of the boxes and began removing packages of what looked like pulse grenades. Those packages were carefully stored in the open container - five in total - before he dragged his work to another section of the room.

He must be filling a buyer's order. *Who* the buyer was, Blake wanted to know. If she could find a list of everyone purchasing drugs or weapons through the Blackguards, ISA could orchestrate a comprehensive program to remove even more criminals from the system. If such a list existed, it should be here somewhere...

Doing her best not to draw attention, she walked over to the computer panel she'd passed on the way in. It probably tracked inventory in the hold, but it might also have a list of open and closed orders. Assuming the orders weren't encrypted, maybe she could download them.

One glance at the screen confirmed it wouldn't be that easy. Before she could dream about downloading anything, she would have to figure out a way to unlock the system. Considering her status as -

"Grunt."

Jumping at the word, which she already associated as her name, she stepped away from the computer and turned towards the door. Cinder's glare sent a

shiver of worry down her spine, and she immediately started working on an excuse for why she was in the cargo hold checking out the inventory system.

“You’re coming with us today.”

No further explanation was given before Cinder turned and walked out of the room, prompting Blake to follow her into the hall.

“Wasn’t my decision, of course,” she added with an annoyed scoff. “Adam thinks you’ll be ‘helpful.’”

If Adam thought Blake could be helpful, that was a good thing – that meant she wouldn’t find herself on the receiving end of a phaser blast or floating through space anytime soon. But the comment also filled her with trepidation. After witnessing only a fraction of what Adam was capable of, she didn’t *want* to be useful for any of his plans.

Whether she wanted any part of this or not, she said nothing and followed Cinder. Before long, they turned into a large room that served as one of the Inferno’s docking bays. Through the windows, a small passenger ship approached for boarding, drawn in by the Inferno’s graviton beams. Waiting for the connection to complete were several Blackguards carrying rifles – Yang included.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked, scowling as soon as she caught sight of Blake.

“Adam wants her to come along.” Even though Cinder shrugged, she looked pleased to have information that Yang didn’t. “Said he’d rather do this onsite than drag people back and forth.”

The comment sent Blake’s thoughts reeling back to the interrogation from a few days ago, but she did everything in her power not to let those emotions show while Yang looked her up and down.

“Why not bring her later? With Adam.”

Blake actually shook her head at the suggestion, wanting to avoid as much time with Adam as possible. Fortunately, Cinder and her were on the same page for once.

“She’s supposedly capable,” Cinder replied in a dismissive tone that Blake couldn’t even find issue with at the moment. “Shouldn’t she be able to help?”

The look Yang sent Blake suggested she wanted a reason to say ‘no.’ Instead,

she grabbed another rifle off of a rack filled with them.

“You’ll need this,” she said while pressing it into Blake’s hands. “I’m assuming you know how to use it?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Anyone aims at us, shoot them. Anyone aims at you, decide what you want to do - got it?”

Even though Blake nodded, she questioned whether or not she would do as instructed. If someone was about to shoot Cinder, would she jump to the rescue? If any Blackguards were around, she might have to. Otherwise, one of them might notice her hesitation to save one of their commanders, and she didn’t have to guess what would happen then.

Feeling a jolt run through the floor, she looked at the docking bay and found the window filled with the exterior of the other ship.

“Take a look at who’s coming,” Yang instructed while they waited for the airlock to pressurize. “These are the people you *aren’t* shooting. Everyone else is fair game.”

Clutching the weapon to her chest, Blake silently swore not to use it unless absolutely necessary. She didn’t know who was on the other side of this door, but she wouldn’t risk hurting a civilian.

When the airlock opened and two Blackguards rushed forward with a torch, she realized that the other vessel didn’t want them on board. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t stop them, as the torch quickly cut through the hull and opened up the airlock beyond.

“Let’s go.”

The Blackguard squad members entered the airlock first, with Yang and Cinder bringing up the rear. Blake followed the commanders into the small space between ships and watched one of the men unlock the airlock door. While he overrode the control panel, her sense of dread grew overwhelming.

As soon as the door slid open, the first line of Blackguards rushed through with weapons drawn. The second line was close behind but pushed even further into the still, lifeless room beyond. Their swift, controlled movements made the hairs on the back of Blake’s neck stand on end, being so reminiscent of Alliance sweep training that only their black uniforms set them apart.

In no time at all, the forward squad signaled that it was safe for the rest of them to move in. Yang and Cinder confidently walked into the room, but Blake couldn't fake even half of their certainty while trailing behind.

She sent a warning to Command. Command would find and warn the Riols of the danger they were in. But had that happened?

Now, she feared it was too late. The Blackguards found them first. Hopefully, she was wrong, but why else would they bring her aboard a civilian ship? They must expect the need for more on-the-spot translation.

"Alright, you know the drill." Yang's tone was quiet but certain as she addressed them, and the Blackguards heeded her instruction in kind. "Check every room and bring anyone you find to the bridge. *Do not* kill anyone - we need them alive."

The Blackguards nodded at the order before splitting into their predetermined squads. Each squad then chose a doorway leading off of the room and moved into position to breach and clear.

"Why don't you take the grunt?" Cinder suggested, her smirk implying that saddling Yang with Blake's presence was the ultimate form of payback. "If we're lucky, maybe you'll get each other killed," she added before joining one of the groups with only two members.

"You -" Yang motioned to one of the men before pointing at Cinder. "Go with Cinder. She needs the extra help. The grunt and I will be just fine."

With a nod and no complaint, the man hurried over to Cinder, who rolled her eyes but didn't bother sending him away. Yang then gestured to Blake and moved to the door nearest to them.

"You ready?"

Raising the rifle in her hands, Blake swallowed and nodded. She had no idea what awaited them on the other side of this door, but she prayed it was empty hallways and even emptier rooms.

"On three," Yang said to the rest of the room. Everyone stilled, and Blake's muscles unwittingly coiled in preparation of a firefight. "One...two...three."

In unison, the doors opened and Blackguards flooded the passageways in search of the ship's passengers and crew. There was no immediate phaser fire, which Blake took as a good sign but didn't have the opportunity to dwell on it

as she hurried into the hallway behind Yang.

“One room at a time,” Yang whispered while moving swiftly away from the docking bay. “You check that side of the hall,” she added with a gesture to the right. “Find anything, call for help. Move fast, and try not to get shot.”

Trying not to think about anything other than her training, Blake grasped her phaser tightly, rushed over to the first door, and tilted her ear towards it. For the first few seconds, she only heard the beating of her heart. After taking two deep breaths – she didn’t have time for more – she forced herself to calm down and listened for sounds of life.

As soon as she was reasonably confident that the room was empty, she took a step back, opened the door, and lifted her weapon in rapid succession. Greeted by a storage closet holding a variety of linens, she quickly scanned the room before backing into the hall and closing the door. Yang had already moved to the next room, emphasizing the need for speed as Blake rushed to the next door and listened again.

The ship couldn’t be empty. There must be passengers on board, and possibly armed guards. They would shoot her on sight if she wasn’t careful. But she also had to be fast or Yang would leave her in this hall by herself.

At the next door, she spent half as much time listening before opening it and finding a small cabin beyond. From the covers on the bed and folded clothes on the drawers, it was being lived in. The children’s toys on the desk tripled her sense of urgency as she scanned the rest of the room, including kneeling on the floor to check underneath the bed.

Empty, but if there were kids here somewhere...

A phaser blast tore her attention away from the toys and had her flying out of the room in no time. Her adrenaline spiked even higher when she didn’t see Yang, but her ears pinpointed Yang’s voice nearby. Without a second thought for what she was doing or what might be happening, she sprinted towards the sound.

The moment she flew around the corner and spotted Yang poking her head into an open room, a wave of relief rolled through her.

“ – understand?” Yang whispered, replacing Blake’s relief with full-fledged confusion. When Yang spotted Blake rushing over to help, however, she

stepped out of the doorway and shoved it closed.

“This one’s clear,” she said before motioning Blake to a door across the hall. “Check the others.”

“But –”

“*Check the others.*”

Heeding the stern order, Blake backed away and raced to the next room. After sneaking one last look over her shoulder, she shook her head and refocused on the mission at hand. But she was positive she heard Yang talking to someone...

There was no time to analyze the situation, as she had another room to clear. No sooner had she pressed her ear to the door did she jump at the sound of phaser fire in the distance, coupled with shouts of fear and pain. The commotion died quickly, but her heart kept its elevated pace as she concentrated on the room in front of her.

People were on board, and some of them were fighting back.

Straining her ears, she listened for signs of life in the room in front of her. Movement, whispers, breathing – anything implying she might need to fight. Hearing nothing, she stepped back, readied her weapon, and pressed the door release. While the door slid open, she raised the rifle and stepped through just like ISA taught her – eyes scanning every inch of the bedroom as it was revealed to her.

After the initial sweep revealed nothing, she stepped inside and checked every location she couldn’t see from the doorway, beginning with the closest before moving towards the far wall. Under the desk, behind the sofa, under the bed – all empty, just like the room itself.

Satisfied that no one was here, she turned around and froze when she found Yang watching her from the doorway. The intent look in Yang’s red eyes made her worry she just behaved too much like an Alliance agent, but that worry settled when Yang said nothing and hurried to the next room.

Anyone could learn how to clear a room, Blake assured herself while closing the door and moving on. That didn’t make her an ISA agent; that made her a skilled mercenary who’d cleared out ships like this before. At least, that’s what she told herself while rushing through rooms in the same methodical fashion.

As much as she wanted to match Yang's breakneck pace, any mistake or lapse in judgment would have more lethal repercussions than forcing Yang to slow down or wait before moving into the next hall. Still, she hurried, and worried that her inexperience with live sweeps was showing. But a mistake during the Academy resulted in a painful shock and lingering numbness. A mistake here resulted in death - she couldn't afford to mess up.

"Empty?" Yang asked as soon as Blake walked out of yet another abandoned cabin. Once she nodded, Yang did the same and motioned to the end of the hall. "We're near the lifts," she added while moving that way. "Let's get to the bridge."

Any relief in not finding anyone in the living quarters evaporated as Blake followed Yang into one of the lifts and watched her push the button for the top floor. While they hadn't found anyone, the other groups must have. Yang ordered everyone to be brought to the bridge, but what happened next - and what would Blake's role be in it?

Yang raised her rifle as soon as the lift doors opened and, upon finding the hallway empty, led the way to the bridge with quick, cautious steps. Blake followed with the same stiff motions, prepared for an ambush at any second, but relaxed when Yang lowered her weapon and walked through the open doorway.

There was nothing to feel at ease about, as Blake saw the situation on the bridge and wished for a hundred more rooms to clear. Instead, she would have to live with the sight in front of her - the bloodied and bruised crew members and passengers standing under the watch of the Blackguards. One man stood separate from the rest of the group - he must be who the Blackguards were searching for.

"Took you long enough," Cinder sneered. "Thought we'd have to pick up your bodies on the way out."

"Didn't find anyone," Yang said rather than respond to Cinder, and Blake could swear that relief flashed through their hostage's eyes. "Message Adam."

While one of the Blackguards spoke a few muffled words into a comm device, Blake glanced at Yang for direction. Yang, however, didn't acknowledge the look. Her attention was reserved for the Blackguards, who she silently counted

before nodding and striding over to the tall man who appeared to be in charge.

“Austor Riol?” she asked, but he glared down at her rather than answer.

The name confirmed what was quickly turning into Blake’s worst nightmare. Despite her warning, ISA hadn’t reached the Riols in time. Or maybe they found the wrong families. Regardless of what happened, she was here, now. And, when she caught movement out of the corner of her eye, she confirmed that Adam was here too.

His presence added tension to the already-tense room, and he strode onto the bridge as if he owned the place. Even though the ship had been cleared, he arrived with more Blackguards by his side – apparently, unwilling to risk his life on the short trip from the Inferno. The cowardice rankled Blake, but she watched with growing concern as he observed the room and locked on to Austor.

“Any relatives?” he asked, but Yang shook her head.

“Not that we found.”

“Interesting.”

If Adam actually found that answer interesting, he didn’t show it as he waved a hand towards the men and women rounded up by the other Blackguards.

“Kill them.”

The captives had hardly digested the words before the Blackguards raised their weapons and put single shots through the back of their heads. Flinching at the sound, Blake turned away and blew a breath through her lips as their bodies crumpled to the floor. Deep inside, she screamed at the callous disregard for life. She cried for the innocent people who in no way deserved to die. And she bit back boiling anger at Adam.

Adam deserved to die, and she wanted to be the one to pull that trigger.

As if somehow hearing her murderous thoughts, he scowled at her.

“Tell him we’re looking for the maps.”

“I can understand you perfectly,” Austor replied before Blake said a word. “But I have nothing to tell you.”

No longer needing Blake’s help, Adam moved intimidatingly towards the man.

“We know you have them.”

“Even if I knew what you were talking about, I would die before telling you anything.”

When Austor straightened his shoulders he nearly matched Adam’s height, but that was the only similarity between them. His hands shook. His pupils were wide with fear. And Blake seriously questioned his ability to resist the forms of coercion Adam had at his disposal.

“That can be arranged.”

When Adam nodded to Yang, she grabbed Austor’s arm, twisted it behind his back, and shoved him into the table. He cried out in pain - or fear, possibly both - while she held him so tightly that he couldn’t hope to move.

“This is the last time I ask nicely.” Taking a phaser from the hands of the nearest Blackguard, Adam held it to Austor’s temple. “Where are they?”

Heart racing, Blake watched in silent horror while Austor looked up at Adam. Short of shooting Adam right then, she could do nothing to help, and that feeling of helplessness shook her to her core. All of her training, all of her skill, and she could do nothing. Nothing that could save his life.

“I don’t have any maps.”

“Wrong answer.”

Adam pointed the phaser towards the floor and fired, making Austor cry out in pain before slumping against the table. He would have fallen had Yang not held onto him, and she easily kept him on his feet while he uttered curses in his native tongue.

“Let’s try that again.”

When Adam again pressed the weapon to Austor’s head, Blake eased her finger towards the trigger of her weapon and considered her options. But there were too many Blackguards. Even if she caught Adam and a couple others by surprise, she would be gunned down shortly after.

Her orders were to complete her mission no matter what.

No matter what.

“Sir.” One of the Blackguards tapped the ship’s controls after getting Adam’s attention. “They sent out a mayday. ISA’s on the way.”

“Then we’ll have to do this faster.”

When Adam pointed the phaser towards Austor’s leg, Blake nearly leapt

forward to stop him.

“We don’t need him,” Cinder interrupted before the shot fired. Returning from her stroll around the bridge, she dropped a file on the table in front of Auster and Adam. “He’s been snatching up storage facilities. Guessing they’re at one of these.”

While Adam frowned and looked over the file, Cinder smirked at Yang.

“Brains beat brawn, once again.”

Yang scowled at the insult while Adam grabbed the file and held it up for Auster to see. As soon as he did, everyone on the bridge knew - from the expression of horror and sadness on Auster’s face - that it held their answer.

“It will take more than some runes and walls to keep me out,” Adam growled before shooting Auster in the head. His body slumped onto the table as Yang released her grip and quickly gave Adam an annoyed look.

“Was that really necessary?” she asked, but Adam didn’t respond while walking out of the room.

“Let’s go.”

The Blackguards swiftly responded to Adam’s order, turning and escorting him back to the Inferno. Cinder wasn’t far behind, though she reserved one last smug look for Yang before departing. And Yang frowned around the room - at the carnage left in their wake - before shaking her head and following.

“Come on, grunt,” she mumbled on the way past.

Blake followed but didn’t say a word while they made their way off of the ship. There was nothing she could say. Not as they walked through lifeless halls that were now even more lifeless than before. Not as they made it back to the Inferno and she watched the squads disperse as if nothing just happened. All in a day’s work, they must think. All in a day’s work.

Rather than follow them, she lingered at the airlock door and watched the Inferno detach and leave the other ship behind. Then she held her breath and waited, worried that Adam would destroy it like the last one. And, with it, snuff out any hope of survivors.

When the ship eventually disappeared, lost in the void of space, she exhaled.

It was only then that she realized Yang had stood beside her that entire time, staring out the window just like she had. And when Yang caught her gaze, the

two of them shared a look for just a second - a look of relief.

The moment disappeared so quickly, Blake couldn't be sure that she'd seen it at all. And there was no time to think about it before Yang frowned down at her.

"You're very...methodical."

"I prefer 'thorough,'" Blake replied, hoping Yang bought that answer rather than think of her as well-trained.

"Either way..." Yang mused before sending another glance towards the window. "Good job today," she finally said before walking away.

Watching Yang disappear through the docking bay doors, Blake wondered how anything she just did could be considered a good job. She stood idly by while Adam murdered more innocent people? She watched him use the information she provided to get one step closer to whatever he was searching for?

With an unbearable gnawing in the pit of her stomach, she returned to her cabin rather than attempt being social. As soon as the door shut behind her, she grabbed her comm device, sat on her bed, and started a message to Command. If her suspicions were correct...she had to send a message right away.

'Mission critical - Riol passenger ship - survivors? Respond.'

Once the message was sent, she stared at the screen and waited for details to emerge. Branding it as mission critical might be an overstep according to Command, but she had to know if there were survivors. And she had to know as soon as possible.

If Alliance was already on the way, a rescue ship would arrive soon. They would signal the passenger ship and request permission to dock. If no response was received, they would manually dock and send small tactical teams through the ship - similar to what the Blackguards did, only with the intent of saving as many lives as possible.

Rather than dwell on what she just witnessed, Blake imagined being part of those tactical teams and sweeping through the ship. Every room checked. No stone left unturned. If her impossible wish came true - if there were somehow survivors - ISA would find them.

As soon as a message arrived, her heart leapt into her throat.

'Three survivors - a mother and two daughters.'

Dropping the device on the bed beside her, she put her head in her hands and couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. The entire situation was horrible - something she wished with all her being to undo - but it wasn't a total loss. There were survivors.

And it was Yang who saved them.

Blake knew that without a doubt now, because it was the only answer that made sense. Yang found them hiding in that room and, instead of dragging them to their deaths, told them to hide. Adam would have killed them without batting an eye, and Yang knew that, so she saved them.

The biggest question was...why? Why would she tell them to hide when that went against the order *she* issued? Could Blake have an ally, or was this a freak incident that meant nothing in the grander scheme of things?

One thing was certain - she needed to learn more about Yang. Maybe the Blackguard commander wasn't quite what she seemed.

Chapter 8

Blake understood the true difficulty of going undercover now. Besides pretending to be a criminal while living amongst real criminals, she was cut off from the community she'd fostered within ISA. She was in the middle of deep space by herself. She couldn't call her parents and tell them that she loved them. She couldn't talk to Sun and roll her eyes at his stupid jokes.

She'd always considered herself a loner, but apparently that wasn't entirely correct. *This* was what it felt like to be alone.

"All those sighs are making me sleepy."

Remembering that she wasn't the only person in the room, she looked up and gave a quick smile.

"Sorry," she told Ret before returning to cleaning the phaser in front of her.

Regardless of how menial the work was, she enjoyed it. The mindlessness of disassembling a weapon, cleaning the individual parts, and putting it back together reminded her of her early days in training while also being something different entirely. The commanding officers put her under so much time pressure then that she never grasped how relaxing the process was until now...

"Want one?"

When Ret offered her a small square package holding an extra-strength stimulant, she shook her head and watched him shrug before opening it for himself.

"You like those?" she asked while he grabbed the small disc and popped it into his mouth.

"They make me happy. And, you know, keep me from remembering."

"From remembering what?"

“Life.” Though a smile never left his lips, and he shrugged for good measure, Blake’s desire to pry left her. “But with these,” he added as he held up the empty wrapper. “I don’t have to. Pretty cool, right?”

‘Cool’ was the last word Blake would use, but as long as they kept him happy – which they most assuredly did – she couldn’t say anything about it. They affected his ability to be a contributing crew member, but everyone seemed fine with shoving him in the armory to polish weapons. Still, his near-constant usage was worrisome. From what she knew about stimulants, there were some serious and potentially permanent side effects if used too much or too often.

Drugs or not, he was a decent person. Definitely her favorite amongst the crew, which was why she preferred spending time here rather than anywhere else.

Hearing a quick beep followed by the door sliding open, she turned and froze when she caught Yang’s gaze. In that one glance, she remembered the last time they saw each other – breaking onto the passenger ship, searching room-by-room, all those wasted lives on the bridge...and that flicker of solidarity when it all came to an end.

“What’re you doing?”

If there had been a moment between them, it was impossible to tell from Yang’s tone.

“What does it look like?” Blake replied, raising her grease-covered arms while Yang walked further into the room.

“Playing with oil.”

Ret huffed at the response but said nothing, leaving Blake to scoff at the implication. Before she thought of something clever to say, however, Yang turned away from her.

“Can you look at this for me?” she asked while setting her phaser on the workbench and shoving it towards Ret. “Keeps overheating after like five shots. As fun as it is to hold a stick of lava, I’d rather not burn off my fingers.”

“Why don’t you hold it in your other hand?” he joked but, from his horrified expression, immediately regretted it. Fortunately for him, Yang only scoffed.

“Just because I have a metal arm doesn’t mean I want to use shitty guns.” After a brief pause, she added, “If you can’t get it to work, give it to Cinder.”

When Ret snuck a knowing look Blake's way, she huffed in amusement and unintentionally brought Yang's gaze her way.

"If you're not busy, I have something to show you."

"Oh. Sure, ok."

When Ret tossed a rag across the table, Blake caught it and cleaned off her hands. Recognizing this as one of the opportunities she always searched for, she took her time and made sure to remove every bit of grease and polish she found. Sun called it pushing her luck; she thought of it as testing her boundaries. How patient would Yang be? Where was the line she shouldn't cross, and what happened if she did?

She reached that line when Yang made a disgruntled noise and spun around.

"Forget it."

"Wait -" After tossing the rag on the table and smiling at Ret, she rushed after Yang. "You don't want me to get grease everywhere, do you?"

"I don't mind getting a little dirty."

When Yang shrugged, Blake sent her a look and wondered whether she expected a response. But her annoyance had faded quickly, which was a good sign. Those were the ISA officers that put up with the most and let Blake get away with the most. Those were also the officers with the best senses of humor, but she wouldn't take the comparison that far yet.

"Surprised that's where you decided to help," Yang added as they left the armory behind.

"Why? Don't think I can handle a weapon?"

"You don't look the part."

Blake scoffed at the response, which would be insulting even if her fictional record wasn't that of a skilled mercenary.

"Didn't realize there were look requirements for knowing how to take apart a phaser."

Half-expecting Yang to come back with a retort, she was pleasantly surprised when nothing of the sort happened. Instead, Yang glanced her way and fell silent.

She had yet to figure Yang out, and that interaction provided no additional clarity. Cinder was evil, Adam was psychotic, Yang was...what was she? Stern,

unyielding, and intimidating came to mind, but she had more variance in those emotions than Adam and Cinder combined. That variance made her seem like a *normal* person, with a range of emotions that differed based on external and internal stimuli.

A normal person could be reasoned with. Bartered with. Even persuaded to change their mind.

“What do you want to show me?” Blake asked when she realized Yang wouldn’t start another conversation on her own.

“Training center.” Leading them onto a lift and pushing the button for one of the lower floors, Yang crossed her arms and waited for the machine to take them to their destination. “Have you been down here?” she asked once they arrived.

“Briefly, yes.”

By this point, Blake had explored as much of the ship as possible. The living areas she knew well. Outside of that, she had decent knowledge of where everything was even if she hadn’t found the opportunity to snoop inside yet.

“Well this is the training center,” Yang explained while pressing her palm to a panel outside one of the rooms Blake hadn’t explored yet. Once the doors slid open, they walked into a sprawling training area that sent Blake back to her days at the Academy.

Several nearby Blackguards were running an exercise that looked like a modified version of the duck-and-cover drill she hated. A firing range took up the right side of the room, where several more Blackguards participated in what looked like timed target practices. There were combat dummies, an entire suite of gym equipment, and what looked like fake rooms set up for practice maneuvers.

“I didn’t show you before because I didn’t think you’d be useful.”

Blake glared at Yang for the insult, but Yang just shrugged off the look.

“If you want to go on missions with us, you have to be trained like us. That starts here.”

When Yang nodded to the room, Blake turned and soaked in the atmosphere. Like everything else about the Blackguards, it was more disciplined and regimented than she would have imagined. But, by now, she wasn’t even

surprised.

“Adam and I are in charge of training,” Yang explained with a nod towards the man, who was observing a drill on the far side of the room. “You have to pass a skills test to be assigned a squad, but with enough practice...maybe you can do it.”

Though Blake scoffed at the gentle insult, she looked around the room and struggled to come up with an answer. After only one mission outside of the Inferno, she never wanted to go on another. She'd been lucky to escape without harming anyone, but how long would that luck continue? How long before she was forced to take someone's life to save her own?

On the other hand, she recognized what Yang was offering - the chance to prove herself. She would no longer be 'just' the translator. She would be assigned to a squad. She would train with them, eat meals with them, and spend her free time with them. She would be one of them.

“It's your call,” Yang added when Blake didn't immediately respond. But she knew what she had to say, even though she didn't want to. In which case, was it really her decision at all?

She'd just opened her mouth to answer when Adam spotted them. Even across the room, his intense, angry stare made her heart speed up.

“Great...” Yang muttered under her breath when he stepped away from the drill and walked towards them. Blake probably wasn't meant to overhear the comment, but Yang likely didn't understand the sensitivity of her ears. For that, she was grateful because, in a single word, she learned that Yang was just as thrilled about the incoming conversation as she was.

“What's she doing here?” he asked with a curt nod at Blake.

“Showing her the ropes. Seeing if she wants to join the squads.”

The way Adam looked at Blake made her want to fidget, but she forced herself to remain as still and impassive as possible.

“No,” he concluded, and Yang sighed.

“Why not?”

“Once we find the mines, throw her into training. Until then, she stays here until needed.”

Yang shook her head but didn't argue, and Blake didn't have the will to argue

either. With Adam laying down the law, she wasn't sure if she was relieved or annoyed that another decision had been torn from her grasp.

"Fine," Yang snapped before motioning with her hand. "Do you need something?"

"Yes." Before saying anything more, Adam scowled at Blake. "Leave."

Blake needed no further encouragement to turn around and walk out of the training room. Her ears, however, remained focused on the conversation she just left behind.

"We're leaving for Yudrao tomorrow," Adam said well before she was out of hearing distance.

"You said we'd check Vestea first."

"Change of plans. The Gilerths want to meet earlier."

"But we're *right* here," Yang pressed and, even from outside the door, Blake heard the beseeching edge in her voice. "We can't leave yet. You said -"

"I said we're leaving." Adam's decision was final, but there was a long stretch of silence before he spoke again. "This is more important. We'll look for her later."

The comment caught Blake's attention, and she scooted closer to the door to ensure she heard Yang's response.

"You promised -"

"And we'll come back - *after* this is finished."

Another long pause followed, and Blake had just taken another step towards the door when it flew open and Yang stalked out. She didn't notice or acknowledge Blake as she stormed away, with everything about her posture and footsteps broadcasting how angry she was.

Against her better judgment, Blake hurried after her.

Adam's comments and Yang's reaction suggested that this was a bigger deal than she understood. She'd never seen Yang so close to arguing with Adam, especially not with members of the crew within earshot, which meant she *really* wanted to know more. As she trailed Yang through the corridors at a fast walk, that feeling only expanded.

If she had to guess, Yang was headed back to her room in the officer's quarters. That was one hallway Blake hadn't found the gall to sneak around in

yet, mostly because she had no excuse for being there and didn't want to be caught anywhere near Cinder's personal space. That thought alone gave her reason to worry, but not enough to sway her from this quest.

The moment she turned the corner and a hand grabbed her arm, she felt differently.

"What the hell are you doing?" Yang demanded while spinning Blake around and shoving her into the wall. "Are you *looking* for trouble?"

"No, I just -" When she tried to step away from the wall but Yang didn't move, she sighed and leaned back so as not to get too close. "You seemed upset, so I just thought I'd...see if you were ok."

In the history of ridiculous things to say, that was probably at the top. As a leader of the Blackguards, Yang wouldn't admit being upset even if she was, *especially* not to someone with Blake's meager status. And for the longest time, she just stared. Her red eyes made her look so angry, it was impossible to tell if there were other emotions mixed in there. Frustration? Confusion? Scorn?

"You have a death wish," she finally spit out.

"A simple 'I'm fine' would suffice," Blake retorted as annoyance flared in her chest. Again, she tried to leave, but Yang didn't move out of the way - which only made her more annoyed. "Sorry I bothered."

When she put her hand on Yang's shoulder, prepared to push her out of the way, Yang grabbed her arm and held tight. Not painfully tight, but tight enough for her to realize that was another mistake.

But Yang didn't say anything. She didn't do anything. She just held Blake's arm and gave her another unreadable expression that could be pure anger or merely curiosity and confusion.

The expression disappeared when Blake's ear turned towards sounds nearby. Footsteps accompanied by voices, and Cinder's walk was recognizable from the gait alone. Yang heard their approaching company seconds later, and quickly dropped Blake's arm before motioning to a nearby door.

"In here," she whispered while pressing her hand to the keypad and waving Blake through.

Even though Blake had no idea where Yang was leading her, she ducked into the room without hesitation. Yang was right on her heels, and she hardly made

it three steps inside before turning around and watching the door shut behind them. And, with the door shut, the sound of voices and footsteps disappeared.

In the sudden absence of noise, Blake's heart pounded in her ears while she stared at Yang. It wasn't a question of *if* but *how much* trouble she would be in if Cinder caught her in the hall, especially if Yang bailed and left her to fend for herself.

One less confrontation with Cinder was a good thing. And, as Blake's adrenaline faded away, she realized that she was standing in someone's room. It was at least ten times the size of her tiny cabin and, from the mementos placed about, looked well-lived in.

"Welcome to my room," Yang muttered while brushing past Blake and sitting on her bed with a sigh. The way she tilted her head back and closed her eyes stirred a strange feeling in Blake's chest - part confliction, part confusion, and part something else.

Sitting like that, Yang didn't look like a fearsome Blackguard leader commanding the respect of an entire crew. Sitting like that, she just looked... tired.

"Are you looking for someone?" Blake asked, but regretted it the instant Yang's eyes snapped open.

"That's none of your business."

Not the answer she was hoping for, and she wanted to test her boundaries again but also didn't want to get thrown out so soon. So she kept her mouth shut, nodded, and looked around instead. Spotting a pile of folded clothes on top of a dresser, she realized that she'd never seen Yang wear anything other than a Blackguard uniform. In her downtime, did she wear normal clothes?

The stack of books on the desk threw Blake for an even more unexpected loop, as she was abruptly confronted by the human side of Yang - the person who wasn't all brawn and scarlet eyes. The person who read in her free time, if she ever had any.

Hearing Yang sigh and stand up, Blake ceased her analysis and watched Yang instead.

"Guess you're hanging around," she mumbled, her posture and tone more relaxed than Blake had ever seen. "Can you fight?"

When Yang motioned towards the mat on the floor between the desk and the bed, Blake frowned.

“Yes...”

“Then you can spar with me.”

Yang held up her fists after the comment, but Blake quickly shook her head.

“I don’t want to fight you.”

“It’s how I blow off steam,” Yang said. “It’s either this, or that -” she added with a gesture towards her bed. “Your call.”

Blake scoffed but, when Yang shrugged as if it wasn’t a joke, frowned instead.

“Well you don’t have to be an ass about it...” she grumbled while moving over to the mat.

When Yang smiled at the response, Blake briefly stared. It was the first time she’d seen Yang truly smile, and it changed everything about her. Her eyes sparkled, her expression softened, and she looked like someone who, at one point in time, had been exceptionally happy.

The expression disappeared quickly though, leaving the battle-hardened criminal in its place.

“Come on then,” Yang prodded her. “I’ll even let you take the first swing.”

Raising her hands and setting her feet, Blake ignored the taunting and focused on Yang’s posture. While much better with a knife in her hands, she could hold her own in a fistfight. But she was wary of Yang’s metal arm, which would hurt like hell if she didn’t block or dodge it.

“Do you always spar in your room?” she asked while slowly stepping to the right for a better angle.

The moment Yang’s lips twitched with a smile, Blake unleashed her first attack. She thought she was fast enough to land the blow, but Yang surprised her with a seamless dropback followed by an even faster counterattack. A fist hurtled past her cheek, and barely missed contact as she scrambled out of the way and tried to compose herself.

That was her first mistake, as Yang’s next attack matched the speed and intensity of the first, and landed right in her side. The burst of pain sent adrenaline racing through her veins, and she suddenly realized that this was a real fight; Yang would actually hit her if she wasn’t good enough.

Moving to the edge of the mat, she tried to slow her breathing and ignore the pain in her side. The amusement in Yang's eyes suggested the momentary pause was only giving her time to process what just happened - a luxury that wouldn't be granted again.

She needed to forget the structured fights at the Academy. There weren't any rules here. There weren't any norms of combat. Yang would use whatever means necessary to win, and Blake needed to do the same.

"You afraid of hitting me or something?" Yang teased.

"More like afraid of bruising your ego," Blake mumbled, only to feel another strange mix of emotions when Yang smiled again.

"If you kick my ass, it's my fault for asking for it."

"And my problem if you get pissed."

To Blake, that was pointing out the obvious, but Yang lowered her fists and tilted her head.

"You think I'll retaliate?"

"I've seen people retaliate for less."

"Well, I won't," Yang replied with a firm shake of her head.

Surprisingly, Blake believed her. Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe that was her hope for an ally. Or maybe she just wanted to see if she *could* kick Yang's ass.

"Up to you."

Yang raised her fists, but the way she shrugged suggested Blake could walk away if she wanted to. Except she didn't want to. Instead, she resumed her fighting stance, noted the glint of happiness in Yang's eyes, and launched another attack.

This time, she feinted with her left hand before following up with her right, but Yang reacted with seamless fluidity that must have been learned over the course of many, many fights. While brushing Blake's hand aside, she swung with her right and nearly connected with Blake's cheek.

The blow would have landed had Blake not spun out of the way and kicked the back of Yang's knee. Knocked off balance, Yang caught the edge of her desk to steady herself before whirling around with another fist leading the way. Blake ducked underneath and lunged forward, wrapping both arms around Yang's

waist and shoving her into the desk. It wasn't a legal move, by any means, or even one she'd been taught - all she knew was that it was an opening, and she had to take any openings she found.

It worked - temporarily. When Yang's back hit the desk, a breath of air was forced from her lungs. That brief moment gave Blake just enough time to give Yang another shove before backing away and landing a hook squarely on her jaw. The resulting crack surprised them both, enough so that Blake fell flat-footed while Yang raised a hand to her jaw and worked it around.

"Alright," she said, rolling her shoulders and resuming a ready stance. "You asked for it now."

The next second, she unleashed a flurry of blows that immediately put Blake on the defensive.

Apparently, Yang had been holding back. Now that she wasn't, she sent Blake scrambling for a way out of the barrage of fists hurtling towards her. After blocking one with her arm - a painful experience, to put it lightly - she grimaced and backed further away from the metal sledgehammer swinging at her.

Yang had skill and *power*, and she wasn't afraid to use it. Blake might be quicker, but that hardly mattered when she was being backed into a corner.

After miraculously dodging two more attacks, she found herself caught out of position while a metal rocket flew towards her head. Right before it connected, however, Yang opened her fist and smacked Blake's cheek open-handed.

The force was still enough to send Blake reeling backward, and Yang quickly closed the gap between them. Her intent was clear - forcing Blake to the other side of the room - but there was nothing Blake could do to stop it while focusing on the fists hurtling towards her. If she found another opening - no matter how small -

After a fist flew by her head, she grabbed ahold and twisted with all her might. Using Yang's momentum against her, Blake flipped her onto the bed before swiftly following and pinning Yang's arms by her sides.

Blake immediately realized what a precarious situation she put herself in, straddling Yang's hips and possessing not even a fraction of the strength she

needed to hold Yang's metal arm in place. Yang noticed too, and smirked up at her.

"Thought you declined this option."

Though Blake was in no position to call this any sort of victory, she scoffed.

"You don't want me on top, believe me."

"Maybe I do."

Before Blake could respond, Yang bucked her hips and flipped their positions. Now, she had Blake's hands pinned above her head, putting her in an even more vulnerable position than before.

"Or maybe I like being on top," Yang added with a sly smile.

Even though Blake struggled to free herself, it didn't take long to understand that there was physically no way for her to get out of Yang's grasp. Remarkably, she wasn't afraid - not like she would be if Cinder or Adam had her in the same position. Somehow, she knew Yang wouldn't hurt her. How she knew that, she didn't know. Maybe it was intuition after seeing Yang save those people. Maybe it was the look in Yang's eyes - still red, but lighter than before.

"Concede?" Yang asked with a raised brow and an amused smile threatening to lift her lips. After struggling for a few more seconds, Blake gave up and sighed.

"Concede."

Yang immediately released Blake's arms and stood up, then extended a hand and helped Blake to her feet. As soon as Blake was standing, she flinched and gingerly touched her side. She had a stitch where Yang's fist landed, and her cheek stung where Yang whacked it, but other than that she was none the worse for wear.

"You ok?"

"I've been worse." After touching her cheek, which was warm and probably red, Blake looked at Yang. "You?"

"Please," Yang scoffed. "You barely touched me."

"Guess that's from hitting your chin on the door then," Blake said while motioning to the red mark on Yang's jaw.

"I'm clumsy like that."

When Yang smiled at the lie, Blake chuckled and shook her head. It amazed

her how different this felt, and how different Yang was right now. Was it the comfort of her room? Was it Blake's presence? Was it *that* relaxing to randomly spar in the afternoon? Whatever caused the change in mood, Blake wanted to know, and she wanted it to happen again.

"So...up for another round?"

When Yang looked pointedly at the bed and winked, Blake shook her head.

"I've been told to keep my hands off. Don't want Adam floating me."

She knew it was the wrong thing to say the instant Yang's expression clouded.

"Adam doesn't own me," Yang snapped before turning away. For a second, Blake considered leaving rather than risk Yang's anger, but something told her not to go.

"I'm sorry," she apologized instead, and actually meant it. "It's just what I've heard..."

"Don't believe everything you hear," Yang countered.

"That seems to be the theme around here."

While Blake watched, curious about what the response might be, Yang sighed and let her shoulders drop. Again, her anger or annoyance disappeared quickly.

"I don't belong to anyone," she repeated, though there was much less defiance in her tone than before. And her eyes, which Blake could read better with every new emotion Yang showed her, reflected something closer to uncertainty.

"Ok."

Blake raised her hands to show that she didn't want to argue, but Yang sighed again before clenching her jaw.

"You should get back to your room."

Just like that, Blake knew that this interaction was over. Yang's no-nonsense tone had returned, and she brushed past Blake on the way to the door. Before opening it, however, she paused and met Blake's gaze.

"Thanks for the fight. But don't follow me again."

In two sentences, Yang showed her conflicting personalities but gave Blake no opportunity to question it. Instead, she opened the door, poked her head into the hall, and motioned that it was safe to go.

Not wasting the opportunity, Blake hurried out of the room without a word, but didn't round the next corner without glancing over her shoulder first. When she found Yang still standing in the doorway, watching her go, uncertainty and confusion flitted through her chest.

She hadn't expected anything that just happened, but now...now, she didn't know how she felt. She'd suspected Yang was different from the rest of the crew, and that interaction all but confirmed it. There was another side to her, but it took the perfect set of circumstances for that other, softer personality to come out.

Rushing back to her room, Blake sighed and shook her head. This mission wasn't turning out at all like expected...

Chapter 9

“Again?!”

Wearing an innocent smile, Emerald raised her hand as if there was nothing she could do to help.

“Sorry, new guy. The cards just aren’t falling your way today. Wanna buy back in?”

While Cutler grumbled and added more credits to the pot, Emerald shot a pleased smirk Blake’s way. Blake shook her head at the silent gloating and even chuckled when Cutler bought back in and Emerald gave him another winning grin.

From what Blake had witnessed more than a few times already, Emerald possessed an enviable ability to manipulate the crew. Something about her smile or the way she talked put others at ease, which then made them willing participants in her schemes. The person most affected by her magnetism, however, was the person she had no interest in being around.

“Why don’t you do that shit in your room?” she snapped as Ret opened another stim wrapper and popped the small disc in his mouth. When he just smiled and shrugged, she scowled and flipped a card into his face.

“Maybe now we know how Cinder felt about us...” Mercury mused when Ret yelped and swatted the card away.

“Please. We’re actually useful. He literally turns blue when he *thinks* about lying.”

“It’s funny,” Mercury replied with a smile that Ret naively copied. “You should ask if he thinks about you while -”

“Shut up or I’ll make you.”

While Mercury chuckled at Emerald's response, Blake shook her head and returned her partial attention to reading. Even though Mercury and Emerald bickered as if they hated each other, they hardly spent any time apart. Ret seemed to be a new addition to their small group, which earned Emerald's near-constant vitriol. No matter what she said, however, Ret stuck around - possibly because he had nowhere else to go.

That theme appeared often amongst the crew. Most of them didn't have family - the Blackguards *were* their family. The Inferno gave them a place to call home and, in return, they willingly followed Adam's orders. Apart from the squad members hand-selected by Adam, who were needlessly violent and lived on aggression, most of the crew was tolerable from a distance.

Being confined on the ship helped. Within the narrow corridors, their criminal tendencies were restricted to stealing from each other, doing drugs, and getting into the occasional fight. Blake didn't want to know what they were like when free of Adam's iron rule, but she would find out sooner rather than later. For now, she was content to play cards with Emerald whenever the fourth seat was empty and let them swindle her out of Alliance's money.

Ret was easygoing enough, but his willful naivety made him seem even more out of place in this mess than she was. Emerald was less easy to get along with, but she'd proven herself to be a valuable source of information. As one of the pilots, she knew where they were headed or where they just were, unintentionally allowing Blake to update ISA on her location.

Overall, life amongst the crew wasn't as bad as expected. There were no more initiations...after the first one, at least. No one randomly picked fights with her in the hall. Besides being called 'grunt' and earning some jeers now and then, the novelty of her arrival had worn off. The crew members had their jobs to worry about, and Adam kept them busy.

At the moment, however, they were more restless than usual - Blake included. The ship hadn't moved in days while Adam, Yang, Cinder, and several squads of soldiers shuttled to the surface of Dumia for some unknown reason. Everyone else was told to stay here and wait, which they did with increasing boredom.

By now, Blake almost wished that they'd taken her with them, but after the

first few excursions...she was content to stay behind. If anything, the wait allowed her to explore without stumbling into Adam or Cinder. Or Yang.

Not that she worried about stumbling into Yang; she actually sought Yang out whenever possible. Ever since the day they sparred, she'd tried to find another moment alone together. Instead, the opposite happened - they shared nothing more than cursory glances while passing in the halls or in the cafeteria. At least, Blake gave a cursory glance. Yang usually noted whoever Blake happened to be with before passing by with a hard glare, if she looked at Blake at all.

As the lowest-ranking member of the Blackguards, Blake understood that she didn't serve much purpose beyond translating old documents whenever Adam demanded it. Still, she searched for a reason to interact with Yang more often. Should she ask Yang to train her for the squads even though Adam expressly denied it? That would result in them spending more time together, but Yang might only see it as the opportunity to mold Blake into the perfect soldier.

Drawn from her thoughts by a subtle rocking motion that could easily be written off as imagination, she looked up and noticed that everyone else's attention had perked up as well. The rising anticipation in the rec room confirmed her suspicion that a shuttle just docked, marking the return of their leaders from their unnamed mission.

Noticing almost everyone's gazes trained on one of the rec room doors, she shifted in her seat so she could watch the doorway too. If someone were to walk straight from the shuttle bay to the living area, passing through the rec room would be the fastest, most direct path. When her ears picked up swiftly-approaching bootsteps, however, a kernel of worry appeared in her chest.

As soon as the first Blackguards rushed through the doorway, she and the rest of the room jumped to their feet.

"Move!" one of the soldiers hollered while hurrying through, supporting someone with a nasty gash and blood dripping down their head.

"Get Senara to the med room now," Cinder added in a clear, unphased tone as she walked after the men. Someone immediately ran out of the room to

fetch the doctor; everyone else rushed to help the rest of the wounded to the medical center.

Blake, however, sought out Yang.

"I told you not to do that!" Yang shouted at Adam as they entered the room. The way she clutched her arm gave Blake even more reason to worry, as did the trail of blood covering her metal fingers.

"It worked -"

"How can you call that working? You almost got us killed!"

"They caved, and we got what we needed." When Adam stepped closer, Yang backed away and shook her head.

"Stay the hell away from me."

Adam's deep scowl voiced his anger at the remark, but he said nothing while Yang stormed out of the room. Instead, he clenched his jaw, and his fists, before heading after Cinder and the other Blackguards. The rest of the crew stood frozen in their wake, but Blake waited for only a second before racing after Yang.

Yang said not to follow her again, but that was before some unexpected and potentially-deadly battle broke out on the surface. Besides, she was hurt - the blood smeared across the keypad outside her room confirmed it. She probably wouldn't open the door, but that didn't stop Blake from pressing the summon button. In the off chance Yang answered...

The door slid open a second later, and Yang stood there glowering at her.

"What did I say about following me?" she snapped, still clutching her arm. Something had torn through her armor, leaving a freely-bleeding gash behind. Bright-red blood now covered her silver hand, streaked down to her elbow, and dripped on the floor as they spoke.

"I have some medical training," Blake replied, motioning towards the wound. "I can help."

"Does it look like I need help?"

Yang's glare, tone, and furious red eyes were meant to be intimidating - they were, but Blake refused to back down. Not when Yang actually needed help.

"How're you going to clean and bandage that with one hand?" Blake pointed

out, to which Yang clenched her jaw before walking away without a word. Taking the lack of response as permission to enter, Blake stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

“Med kit’s under the desk.”

Yang waved in the general direction before sitting on the edge of her bed. Fortunately, the stark white box wasn’t hard to find, and Blake quickly brought it over to Yang.

“Wait a second,” she said as Yang struggled to remove her armor. “Let me help.”

Again, Yang grumbled at the suggestion of help, but Blake rolled her eyes and swatted Yang’s hand away. Grabbing one side of the Blackguard armor, she helped Yang slip her metal arm out before being as gentle as possible removing the other sleeve. No matter how careful she was, it slid across the gash, and Yang sucked in a breath before letting it out in a quiet expletive.

Underneath the armor, she wore a yellow long sleeve shirt fitting for the frigid temperatures of the ship, but one sleeve was torn and soaked in blood from the cut down.

“What happened?”

Now that Blake could see the wound, she knew it hadn’t been made by a blade or phaser.

“Adam’s a fucking moron, that’s what happened,” Yang muttered and, when Blake touched the fabric near the gash, jerked away.

“Fucking hell,” she hissed.

“You need to take this off.” Blake motioned towards Yang’s shirt, which obscured the wound enough to make cleaning and bandaging impossible. “Or let me cut off the sleeve.”

“Fine, whatever.”

That wasn’t an answer, so Blake chose the least-invasive route and grabbed the scissors from the first aid kit. With those in hand, she carefully cut a slit from Yang’s wrist all the way to her shoulder. From there, she cut around Yang’s arm until the sleeve fell away, then tossed the blood-soaked fabric and scissors aside.

The laceration was still bleeding, but not as much as Yang’s armor and

blood-soaked hand suggested. Regardless, Blake pressed a piece of gauze to it, noting Yang's flinch and subsequent noise of discontent, and counted to ten before pulling it away. Finding it a little too red for her liking, she grabbed another piece and repeated the process - this time counting to thirty instead of ten.

"Better," she mumbled before tossing the second piece of gauze on top of the first one. The bleeding was slowing fast, and she only needed a third round of compression before feeling comfortable cleaning the wound. For that, she pulled out the bottle of antiseptic, popped off the cap, and held the scrap of Yang's shirt near her elbow to soak up the excess fluid.

"This might sting," she warned before tipping the bottle forward. It hardly touched the wound before Yang jerked away.

"Fucking - *fuck!* Just wrap it up or something!"

"Then you'll get an infection and lose your *other* arm," Blake pointed out before grabbing Yang's wrist and trying to pull her arm closer. "Stop being such a damn baby about it," Blake added when Yang fought against her. "Unless this is supposed to impress me? Do you think this is impressive?"

While Blake waited for an answer, Yang stared for several seconds before her eyes lightened and laughter slipped through her lips. The sound was so happy and amused, Blake couldn't help but smile while pulling Yang's arm over.

"Now hold still."

Yang tensed when Blake brought the bottle closer, and flinched when a stream of antiseptic poured over the wound but didn't pull away. Instead, she gritted her teeth and made a low growling sound that had Blake fighting away a smile.

Once convinced that the cut was clean - possibly using more antiseptic than necessary just to make doubly sure - she set the bottle aside and dabbed everything dry with a clean piece of gauze. Now that the bleeding had stopped, she opened a cleaning wipe and gently rubbed away the trails of dried blood on Yang's arm. After all of that was done, she grabbed a small stack of gauze and pressed it to the freshly-cleaned wound.

"Hold," she ordered, and waited for Yang to do as instructed before finding

a roll of bandages in the medkit. Once she found it, she wrapped it around Yang's arm several times before tearing the end and fixing it in place.

"There."

Tossing the roll back into the box, she stepped away and sighed. That sequence of events was more stressful than she anticipated today would be, but she was relieved that Yang would be fine. The cut wasn't *too* deep, and as long as it didn't get infected...

"So...are you impressed?"

Surprised laughter slipped through Blake's lips, but she shook her head.

"That you can take antiseptic for a flesh wound? Yes, very impressed."

Looking at her freshly-bandaged arm, Yang nodded.

"Thought so."

Yang's adrenaline must be wearing off by now, as she seemed much more subdued and...tired. That should work in Blake's advantage, and she hopefully wouldn't be yelled at for helping.

"Come on," she said, motioning for Yang to stand up. "Let's get you a new shirt."

"You don't like this look?" Yang muttered but did as told.

"I'll admit the one-sleeve look is interesting," Blake teased while grabbing the scissors from the bedspread. "Any emotional attachment to it?"

"Besides the fact that you're about to cut it off me? No."

Chuckling at the response, which sounded like that 'other' version of Yang slipping through, Blake picked up the hem of the shirt and cut it so that it slipped off of Yang's metal arm. As soon as the fabric fell free, she noticed the scars. Knife wounds, phaser burns, bite marks...it looked like there wasn't a weapon or creature that Yang hadn't met.

Some were recent. Some were fully healed. Each had a story Blake wanted to know but didn't dare to ask for. Instead, she dropped the shredded shirt on the floor and searched for another one.

"Where do you keep your shirts?"

"Second cabinet."

Opening the specified cabinet, Blake browsed the shirts before selecting one with buttons - that would be easier to put on without Yang moving her arm

much. When she pulled it out, however, Yang scoffed.

“What?” Blake asked, looking over the shirt to see if she missed something.

“I haven’t worn that in years.”

Rolling her eyes at the response, she undid the buttons and held up one sleeve for Yang to slip her injured arm through. Her metal arm was next, then Blake pulled the sides together and started working on the buttons.

Feeling Yang watching her, she kept her eyes focused on her hands. Of course, just past her hands was Yang’s toned stomach, with the lines of her abs clear as day. Above that, her ribs. Above that, her bra and the soft, silky outline of her breasts -

“You know, usually you’d be working the other way around.” When Blake looked up and met Yang’s gaze, Yang motioned towards her shirt. “Normally, you’d be undoing those.”

Finally understanding the implication, Blake blushed and shook her head.

“You’re not that lucky today,” she muttered while fastening the last button and stepping away. “There. Good as new.”

“‘Good as new’ meaning my arm hurts like hell.”

“Pretty sure there’s plenty of drugs around here to ease the pain.”

“I’m not touching that shit,” Yang grumbled before sitting on her bed and dragging the medkit over to her. After rummaging around inside, she pulled out a packet of pain relievers and shook them. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

Before Blake asked if Yang needed help, Yang tore the package open with her teeth and dumped the pills in her mouth. Next, she grabbed a bottle of water from the nightstand, popped the cap with one hand, and downed the pills in one big gulp.

“What?” she asked while recapping the bottle and setting it aside. “Surprised I can do things with one arm?”

“No,” Blake replied on instinct but, when Yang raised her brow, decided to test those boundaries yet again. “How’d it happen?”

“Skive accident. Flipped it and got my arm stuck. Docs had no choice.”

“Oh.”

“What? Expected something dramatic and depressing?”

When Blake shrugged, having no idea what she expected to hear, Yang

scoffed.

“Ok, how about I was trapped there for hours, with my sister crying right outside because she can’t get to me. When help finally showed up, they cut my arm off right there just to get me out. At least, that’s what I’m told, but I wouldn’t know since I blacked out right around then. Woke up in the hospital a few days later.”

Shocked by the added detail, Blake couldn’t even think of a response - and Yang knew it.

“Sometimes we only want the short story...” she said before sighing and looking at her metal fingers, which still had spots of blood dried on them.

Blake hadn’t expected an answer at all, and certainly not one so...traumatic. But the story gave her another question to ask, which she nearly did before realizing she already knew the answer.

“That’s who you’re looking for.” When Yang’s eyes snapped to hers, she nodded. “Your sister. You’re looking for her. She’s...missing?”

For the longest time, Yang stared and said nothing, as if trying to figure out the path Blake used to arrive at that answer. Eventually, either after giving up or deciding that she didn’t care, she shook her head.

“You know, maybe you *are* smart, but you’re too smart for your own good.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment -”

“Don’t,” Yang cut her off. “It’ll get you killed.”

Blake opened her mouth to defend herself only to scoff and say nothing. She didn’t see how being smart would get her killed. In fact, she believed the opposite - doing something stupid or foolish would undoubtedly get her killed. But what did she know? Yang had more experience in this world than she did, so she didn’t argue. She remained quiet, but that silence only made Yang sigh and shake her head.

“Sorry...” she muttered before scooting back on her bed and leaning against the wall. With her posture deflated and her aura defeated, she hardly resembled the harsh commander the rest of the Blackguards knew. She looked exhausted through-and-through. Her civilian shirt only added to the appearance that she was just a regular girl who happened to have a metal arm and somehow found herself in a bad situation amongst a group of bad people.

And she apologized - something Blake would never have expected. So, rather than leave, she sat down in the desk chair and waited to see if Yang had more to say. Or waited for Yang to throw her out, whichever it might be.

But Yang leaned her head against the wall, closed her eyes, and stayed that way for such a long time that Blake thought she might have fallen asleep. Then she spoke.

“We got separated when a group of Zitovian raiders destroyed Patch...” she explained quietly. “I haven’t seen her since. Adam said he’d help me find her. Said he knows someone who can track her down.”

“What’s her name?”

“Why?” Yang asked, opening her eyes to show her heightened suspicion.

“I might’ve heard it during my travels?” Blake fudged. “Unlikely, but...you never know. Stranger things have happened.”

For a moment, it looked like Yang didn’t want to believe the response. But her defenses were too low - the result of her injury, her exhaustion, or both - to question the words for anything other than what they were.

“Her name’s Ruby,” she sighed. “Ruby Rose...” Pulling a datapad off the nightstand, she handed it over for Blake to see.

The first thing Blake noticed was that the young girl in the photograph looked nothing like Yang. Her hair was short and dark. Her eyes astonishingly silver. Her smile wide and bright, almost on the verge of laughter. She looked unbelievably happy, sweet, and endearing, which made her the polar opposite of the girl sitting across from Blake right now.

“She has pretty eyes,” Blake commented while handing the picture back to Yang, who huffed and turned it around to look at.

“You try to get with my sister, you have to go through me.” After returning it to the nightstand, Yang leaned back and sighed again. “And you can’t even beat me hand-to-hand so...”

“I didn’t want to hurt your ego,” Blake teased, and Yang scoffed.

“Please. A rabid Chaiter just bit me, and I could still take you.”

“Alright then.”

Leaving her seat, Blake raised her fists and motioned for Yang to get up. Surprise flickered through Yang’s eyes at the challenge, but quickly faded to

amusement.

“I’ll save you the embarrassment,” she replied with a wave and a smile pulling at her lips.

“How generous of you.”

Returning to her seat with an unquestionable smile of her own, Blake let a brief moment of silence settle over them. Their banter felt so easy and comfortable, it reminded her of how she felt with Sun. But Yang was a...pretty...version of Sun. From her red eyes to her gorgeous hair and tall stature, she had all of the striking features to make any man or woman want her. And in these private moments, when she was content and relaxed, Blake couldn’t help being drawn into the depths of emotions she offered. When her gaze flitted towards the door, however, Blake realized that this particular moment was over.

“You should probably go. Who knows if someone decides to check on me.”

“Right.” Even though Blake had a reason to be here – helping with Yang’s injury – she didn’t have the energy to face that possible confrontation. Instead, she stood up and pointed towards Yang’s bandaged arm. “You need to change those every so often.”

“Good thing I have you to help me with that.”

Yang’s small smile filled Blake with an indescribable feeling, but she hurried out of the room rather than stick around and dwell on it. All she knew was that Yang was complex and different, so much so that she felt compelled to learn more. Not only for her mission, but for herself.

The halls were emptier than normal as she left the officers’ quarters behind, probably with the rest of the crew cleaning up Adam’s mess or gossiping about what happened. With no interest in either, she went straight back to her cabin and grabbed her communications device.

Because this request felt personal, she didn’t send it to Command – she sent it to Sun. He wouldn’t be able to respond, but she knew he would take any request from her just as seriously as she would take one from him. In case ISA was monitoring every message she sent, she kept it as lackadaisical and informal as possible.

Hey Sun,

Sorry I haven't messaged in so long, but I'm doing well. Not much going on, which is a good thing. I have a favor to ask – can you find anything about a Ruby Rose from Patch? A friend is looking for her.

Can't wait to hear what type of trouble you've been getting into.

Love,

Blake

Once the message was on its way, she sat on her bed and stared at the device in her hands. Why did she bother asking him to look? It wasn't as if she cared whether or not Yang found her sister.

Except that she did.

All it took was one photo to understand that Ruby and the Blackguards could never coexist. And all it took was seeing Yang look at that photo so lovingly to know which of the two she would pick.

If Blake found Ruby...Yang would leave the Blackguards. If she was grateful for the help, she might give ISA more information than they'd ever dreamed about. Flipping a witness like that would be an immeasurable success, both for ISA and for Blake.

Yang would have her sister back, a family would be reunited, and ISA would have enough knowledge to take down the Blackguards and prevent groups like them from gaining a foothold in the galaxy. This mission couldn't possibly have a better outcome, which made Yang and Ruby integral to Blake's success.

And that smile...that smile made Blake believe there was something to Yang that no one would ever suspect.

Chapter 10

Yang was serious about having Blake change the bandages.

She hadn't realized that she signed up as a permanent aide by helping once, but she didn't complain. One-on-one time with a Blackguard leader was an invaluable opportunity to gain knowledge. Plus, Yang presented herself as the least psychotic of the 'big three,' as the crew referred to the triumvirate of Adam, Yang, and Cinder. Three-headed monster, more like.

But Yang was more agreeable in private. At least, she had been so far, and Blake hoped that continued today.

Whether or not she had a legitimate reason for being in the officers' hallway, she quickly pressed the call button near Yang's door and breathed a sigh of relief when it opened soon after. Just seeing Yang sent a flurry of emotions through her chest - many of which she didn't understand - but she didn't need to understand them right now, not when Yang motioned her inside.

"Took you long enough," was Yang's greeting as she sat on the edge of her bed. The medkit was already open and nearby, confirming the purpose of their meeting. "Pretty sure I could've died five times waiting for you to show up," she added, though a hint of humor shone in her red eyes.

"Pretty sure you could die of exaggeration any second now," Blake replied with an eyeroll, but she couldn't help smiling when Yang chuckled.

Yang liked banter, as Blake had already figured out. Her wit was as sharp as the tone she used to keep the soldiers in line, and she was more than capable of catching Blake off guard, but Blake enjoyed the challenge nonetheless.

"I was hoping you could change this for me," Yang finally said, gesturing towards her injured arm.

“Sure. I can *help* you with that.”

Blake emphasized the word after Yang blatantly avoided it. But Yang avoided it even further by deftly undoing the buttons of her shirt and shrugging it off.

She *had* to know how distracting she was without a shirt on. Her scars imparted a vague sense of danger, but the rest of her was soft, toned, and beautiful. If this was how she won arguments, then...well played, but Blake refused to let Yang's inherent beauty distract her. Instead, she grabbed a pair of scissors and carefully cut the bandages off of Yang's arm.

“Look at that...” she murmured after lifting away the gauze. The wound was still red, but not angry red like the day before. Based on the lack of blood on the gauze, it was already starting to heal.

“Is it infected? Is that why you look happy?”

Rolling her eyes, Blake discarded the old bandages and found clean ones to redress the wound.

“Sadly, no. It's healing just fine.”

“You must be smiling at my lack of a shirt then.”

Silently cursing the heat in her cheeks, Blake fumbled with the gauze before finally separating a single piece and pressing it to the wound. She felt Yang watching her, probably with a great deal of amusement, but she merely nodded for Yang to hold the gauze in place.

“Apparently, that Chaiter didn't take a bite out of your ego...” she mused while she worked, wrapping the bandages tight but not uncomfortably so. Once confident it would stay put no matter what workout Yang put it through, Blake tore off the end, fastened it in place, and smoothed out the edges.

“You're gentle for a merc.”

“Oh.” Pulling her hands away, Blake fought the edge of panic entering her mind. Her training harped upon compassion when treating civilians...but Yang was the furthest thing from a civilian. “Well you've proven you're a baby about this,” she shot back. “I don't want to hurt your delicate skin.”

“I'm not saying it's a bad thing,” Yang replied with a soft smile that eased Blake's concern. “It's just...different.”

In an instant, Blake's worry returned. Yang might not think so, but ‘different’ was a bad thing. ‘Different’ meant Blake didn't fit in. ‘Different’

meant her behavior or attitude didn't mesh with the crew. 'Different' meant that, sooner or later, someone would suspect that she wasn't who she claimed to be.

It might not be an issue with Yang, but the rest of the Blackguards wouldn't be so forgiving. Not that Yang was forgiving - that would be a stupid assumption to make.

"That's probably because you're used to the other riff-raff of the crew," Blake replied with fake bravado. "That's not me."

"No...it's not."

Blake's brow rose at the agreement, but Yang closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall rather than elaborate. The posture seemed like her way of decompressing or recharging, and she looked so serene that Blake didn't want to detract from the moment. Instead, she wondered if anyone else got to see Yang like this. Was this something she did regardless of who she was with, or was this something reserved only for those who were...different... like Blake?

When Yang eventually lifted her head and opened her eyes, Blake forgot everything she'd been thinking about and stared.

"...what?" Yang asked upon catching the look.

"Your...eyes..."

Blake couldn't think of anything else to say, so instead stared in wonder at the unexpected transformation. Yang's eyes, which had been a steady shade of scarlet since the day they met, were now a light, cheery lilac that didn't fit the image Blake had built up in her mind.

"Oh."

Yang rubbed her eyes and re-opened them, but Blake shook her head when nothing changed. Yang's eyes were still bright, happy purple. There was only one explanation for such a trait...

"You're not human."

The realization was still seeping through Blake's mind when Yang scoffed and shook her head.

"Never said I was." Sensing Blake's shock, she smiled, creating such a stark contrast to her typical self that Blake's surprise grew. "How many humans

you know with red eyes?”

“A few, actually...they had that procedure to change them.”

All criminals, of course. They thought it made them look fearsome, which was partially correct. But for Yang’s eyes to change color on their own -

“Human dad, Anima mom,” Yang explained, and Blake nodded while even more realizations fell into place.

Animas were notoriously magnetic, making them great leaders but, alternatively, all-consuming muses. If Yang was half, that explained why Blake felt so irresistibly drawn to her. But...there were many more reasons why she felt so captivated. Yang’s story, the dichotomy in her words and actions - *who* was she, really? Blake wanted all of those answers, and that had nothing to do with physical attraction.

“You’re doing that thing again.”

Blinking out of her thoughts, Blake returned her attention to Yang.

“What?”

“You’re psychoanalyzing me,” Yang elaborated while gesturing to her head. “People won’t like that.”

“But you don’t mind,” Blake pointed out, only for Yang to scoff.

“What makes you think that?”

When Blake waved towards Yang’s eyes, which were still a happy shade of purple, Yang sighed and leaned against the wall.

“Don’t read into things you don’t understand.”

The answer sounded straightforward, and Blake would admit that she didn’t understand, but that wouldn’t stop her from reading into it.

Yang thought Blake was different, but she, herself, was different. Blake couldn’t put her finger on exactly how, but she couldn’t get past this *feeling* that kept bothering her...

“If you’re looking to get frisky, you can just say so.”

Scoffing was her natural response to the proposition, but then she wondered how much was solicitation and how much was self-defense. Fortunately, she knew just the way to find out.

“Ok,” she replied with a shrug. “Let’s do it.”

The moment Yang’s brow rose, Blake had her answer. But Yang quickly

realized the information she just gave away and tried to correct the mistake.

“I mean, I’m already halfway there.” After gesturing towards her lack of shirt, she leaned forward, hooked a finger into the collar of Blake’s armor, and pulled her closer. “And I’ve been *dying* to know what you’re like...”

For a split second, Blake wondered the same. When she realized that she was leaning forward, however, she brushed Yang’s hand off and backed away.

“You’ll have to keep wondering.”

With anyone else, Blake would worry about the repercussions of such a flat-out denial, but Yang just smiled and leaned against the wall. The instant a chime rang through the room, however, the atmosphere changed.

“Shit.” Yang quickly slid off the bed and grabbed a shirt but hardly had her arms through the sleeves when the chime rang a second time. “Fucking impatient bastard...” she mumbled on the way to answer.

Those three words gave Blake cause for concern, and that concern skyrocketed when the door opened and Adam walked in. His eyes immediately locked onto her, and his scowl deepened.

“What’re you doing here?”

“What do you think she’s doing here?” Yang snapped before Blake responded. “She’s making sure I can still use both my arms after *someone* nearly got one chewed off.”

His scowl didn’t change, but Blake practically felt his dislike for her grow. Fortunately, he didn’t acknowledge her any further. “We’re here,” was all he said before turning around and walking out of the room. “Be at the lift in ten minutes.”

For several seconds after the door closed, Yang just stood there, jaw clenched and fingers curled into tight fists. It wasn’t long, however, before she sighed, went over to the wardrobe, and pulled on her armor.

Once she looked every bit like the Blackguard commander feared and respected by the crew, she walked over and stood in front of Blake. Her scarlet eyes might be unreadable to many people, but Blake was learning to decipher those emotions piece by piece. Right now? Disappointment, anger, and reticence.

“Are you ready?” she asked quietly and, once Blake nodded, led them out of

the room.

From badgering Emerald for information, Blake knew that they were heading to Lurus but didn't know why. Considering she was part of the mission, they must need some sort of translation done in real-time. What scared her was that she didn't know the situation or how many lives might be affected by it.

"Do I get to know what's going on?" she asked, matching Yang's quick stride through the halls.

"Adam thinks he found the Riol's storage facility," Yang answered in a voice not much louder than a whisper. "They need you to confirm the maps."

"They' do? What about you?"

"I need you to keep your head down and do what you're told. This won't be easy."

When Blake followed Yang into the shuttle bay and saw the crowd of Blackguards already armed and ready, she took a deep breath to calm her burgeoning nerves. At least now she had *some* idea of what was about to happen, but the amount of firepower wielded by the men and women around her implied an explosive battle would soon be underway.

"Everyone ready?" Yang called out while moving to the front of the group. When the Blackguards muttered their agreements, she motioned them onto three separate shuttles awaiting launch, and they shuffled on board. Before Blake asked what shuttle she should ride on, Yang pushed a rifle into her hands and led her by the elbow to the first one.

"Sit here."

Yang pointed to a seat at the rear of the ship, and Blake obediently took it while Yang sat across the aisle from her. Adam was already sitting near the front of the shuttle, a position Blake made sure to note while Blackguards filled the remaining seats and the pilots powered up the engines. The ramps locked into place as soon as everyone was on board and, before long, the shuttle bay doors opened.

In well-practiced unison, the shuttles launched out of the Inferno with a burst of acceleration followed by the unmistakable lull of space. The pilot set their destination with a smooth rotation of the vehicle and, when Blake

glanced towards the cockpit, the planet of Lurus filled the view in front of them.

Navigating to the surface was a quiet, tense affair, during which Blake watched Yang's demeanor change in a matter of minutes. Her eyes steeled, her hands curled into fists, her expression grew distant and detached, as if the mental preparation for this mission required her to lock away every bit of the person she'd been just moments earlier.

'Stop,' she finally mouthed to Blake, so Blake looked around the cabin rather than continue her 'psychoanalysis.'

The shuttle carried three squads of four members each, plus her, Yang, and Adam. One of those groups, whose members had a small gold patch on their armor, was Adam's personal unit. She didn't know how they earned that unenviable distinction, but she probably didn't want to know either.

No one said a word as the shuttle hit the upper atmosphere with a strong jolt followed by the roar of air passing over the ship. The tense mood did nothing to ease Blake's growing fear that more innocent lives would soon be lost.

Even though a high-powered, high-capacity rifle lay across her lap, she'd never felt so powerless. The best she could hope for keeping her participation to a minimum. Beyond that...she just had to keep herself alive.

By the time the shuttle touched down on Lurus, her heart hammered in her ears and her throat felt parched beyond words. The ramp lowered soon after, revealing a large facility built in the midst of a vast, unfriendly ocean. Every few seconds, towering waves rose out of the sea and crashed against the building, sending a spray of water overtop. The constant overspray likely made it impossible to spot this location using traditional methods...which was why getting the exact coordinates from the Riols was so important.

"Listen up," Yang said while standing at the exit of the shuttle, the rest of the Blackguards standing in front of her. "The facility is heavily-guarded. We're going in weapons-free - clear the place out, then search for the artifacts section. Clear?"

Once the Blackguards voiced their agreement, Yang stepped aside and waved them out. Without hesitation, they set off at a jog and were quickly joined by the squads from the other two shuttles, forming a deadly group of black

headed towards the unsuspecting building.

Taking a deep breath, Blake moved to follow only for Yang to hold out an arm and stop her.

“You’re staying here.”

“But –”

“You’re not ready.”

The look in Yang’s eyes said that arguing wasn’t an option, so Blake nodded and watched Yang jog off the ship without her. Between fighting through a facility protected by unknown defenses and waiting here with Adam, she couldn’t say which made her feel safer. But she knew which option kept her hands the cleanest and, for that, was grateful that Yang made the decision for her.

Fortunately, Adam wasn’t in a talkative mood. In fact, he didn’t utter a word while standing at the top of the ramp, watching the Blackguards disappear into the building.

Blake thought she could see flashes of phaser fire through the windows, but that could be a trick her mind and the crashing waves were playing on her. Still, her anxiety grew with every second they waited, and her attention turned to one of the sole remaining Blackguards listening to the device in his hand.

What if resistance was more than expected? What if they couldn’t capture the facility?

Shaking her head, she reminded herself that failing this mission wouldn’t be a horrible thing. She didn’t know what Adam was looking for, but she didn’t have to – whatever it was, she didn’t want him to find it. If that meant the Blackguards were beaten away from this place with a force ten times stronger than their own, then so be it.

The thought made her worry about Yang, but Yang could take care of herself. She would recognize a losing situation and get herself to safety as fast as possible. That was Blake’s hope at least, but anything could go wrong during a mission like this.

When a wave of discontent rolled through her, Blake clutched her weapon to her chest and frowned. As much as she wanted no part in hurting innocent people, waiting here was a strange version of torture. She wanted to do

something but, at the same time, wanted to do nothing at all.

“Adam, we’re clear.”

Just like that, her apprehension returned.

But now wasn’t the time to show it, as she followed the remaining Blackguards out of the shuttle without hesitation. She jogged towards the building while the waves roared in her ears and ocean spray covered her head-to-toe in seawater. Undeterred, she wiped her eyes, kept a firm grip on her weapon, and pressed onward.

The building wasn’t far, and its entrance lay propped open already. The lights were on but, other than that, the facility was quiet and lifeless. That was proven especially true when Blake spotted the motionless bodies of several security guards in the lobby, but she kept her gaze trained forward rather than dwell on yet more death.

Two Blackguards stood beside one of the hallways branching off of the lobby, and they motioned Blake’s group their way while remaining at their post. That doorway led into a wide hallway with glass-walled rooms on either side and, even though the building was supposedly clear, the squad accompanying Adam moved with extreme caution. Picking up on that feeling, she kept her ears on high alert while glancing into the rooms they passed.

Apparently, the building served as storage – an archive of some kind, or a personal vault for influential families with a lot of history to hide. Whatever its purpose, she wished that the architects hadn’t insisted on windows every few feet. The security guards, who were reptilian in appearance, probably loved the feeling of being one with the ocean, but she flinched every time a wave hit the glass. What looked like ceaseless motion set her on edge, and she couldn’t imagine fighting through this maze, reacting to each and every flicker of movement.

She distracted herself by watching Adam’s squad move through the hall, double-checking each room. She had been trained to clear rooms in a similar fashion, but they moved with such focus and fluidity that she was grateful she only had to follow their lead.

At the end of the hall were two more Blackguards, who motioned down an adjoining hallway with more empty rooms and more evidence of a battle. The

bodies of the outmatched security crew were paid no mind as the Blackguards searched for something only they knew. It wasn't long, however, before Blake heard voices up ahead, and they soon joined the rest of the group.

Room after room occupied by Blackguards...all of them opening every drawer they could get their hands on. Yang was working with one of the squads in one room while Cinder worked in another - everyone quickly searching for the fabled maps Adam was after.

"In here." Reaching the first empty room in the hall, Adam walked over to the first cabinet and opened it. "We're looking for Valerian," was all he said, scanning the documents inside before opening another drawer.

Left with those vague instructions, Blake moved over to the next cabinet and opened the top drawer. It was stuffed with papers, many of which she couldn't read. There must be a filing method of some kind, but with no directory and no understanding of what she was looking for, she could search by language only.

"Ten minutes," someone said, which spurred her faster. With so many rooms and cabinets to go through, ten minutes wasn't long. And, now that they were here, it was hard to believe Adam would leave without finding whatever he was after.

Blake scanned the files so fast that she hardly understood what she saw before moving on. Valerian's distinctive runes should stand out, or so she hoped as she closed another useless drawer. She'd already reached the end of the first row of cabinets and, upon finding a storage closet tucked into the corner of the room, decided to make sure it contained nothing of interest.

As soon as she set her hand on the handle and heard movement inside, she realized her mistake.

She let go and tried to back away but the door flew open and hit her hard in the chest, shoving her aside. Before losing her balance, she caught herself on the counter and spun around as one of the security guards leapt from the locker and raised his weapon.

Someone shouted a warning, and time seemed to slow while she reached for her phaser and raised it into a ready position. But the guard already had his weapon ready - and aimed at Adam. He was going to shoot Adam.

A split second of indecision prevented her from pulling the trigger, but a phaser fired anyway, and the man crumpled to the ground while his weapon clattered across the floor. Surprised and confused, she turned around and found that one of the other Blackguards had beaten her to the punch. They were standing several feet away and actually had a better angle and position to take the shot.

When she saw the look in Adam's eyes, however, she knew that positioning didn't matter. Without a word, he stalked across the room, wrapped his hand around her throat, and shoved her against the wall.

"What was that?"

"I - tried to -" was all she got out before he raised his arm, lifting her feet right off the floor and choking away her ability to speak.

Panic coursed through her veins when he didn't let go and her oxygen quickly depleted. Grasping ahold of his hands, she tried to alleviate the pressure on her windpipe, but he responded by pushing even harder. Black spots appeared in her vision; she was seconds from blacking out. She had to fight him, kick him, something...

"Adam!"

Hearing footsteps race into the room, she looked over Adam's shoulder and saw Yang grab his arm and pull just enough for Blake to take a tiny breath and stave away unconsciousness.

"For fuck's sake - let her go. We found something."

Just like that, the pressure disappeared, and Blake dropped to all fours on the floor, gasping for air. Without looking up, she heard Adam storm out of the room and shout "Who checked that room?" at the Blackguards in the hall. She didn't hear the answer, but multiple shots were fired while she tried to catch her breath.

Her body trembled while she sucked in big gasps of air, and she had no concept of how long she was on her hands and knees like that. All she knew was that, eventually, her breathing slowed enough for her mind to function again. Even then, she waited a few more seconds before gingerly pushing herself back to her feet.

Once she was standing, Yang gave her a long, unreadable look before turning

around and striding out of the room. Taking the silent instruction, Blake followed - first stepping over the security guard before moving around the unfortunate Blackguard slumped in the hall. Her neck burned like a raging fire now, but she ignored the pain while walking into another archive room.

One of the walls had been torn open, and a large book lay open on the table in the center of the room. Adam and Cinder were looking over the book and, even though Blake wanted to be nowhere near Adam at the moment, Yang gave her a small push over to them.

“It was hidden behind the wall,” Yang explained before smirking at Cinder. “How’s that for brawn?”

Cinder responded with a scowl, but Adam ignored them while meeting Blake’s gaze.

“Read it.”

After what just happened, she had no desire to help him in any way, shape, or form. But she also understood that he was probably a half-second away from deciding to find a new translator. So, rather than resist, she spun the book towards her and took a closer look.

The markings on the pages had nearly faded to the point of being invisible but were clearly maps of some unknown constellation. As if the frail pages weren’t enough to imply a large passage of time since their authoring, the words were written in a style of Valerian that Blake had never seen before.

“These must be thousands of years old...” she whispered, gently brushing her fingers across the page while searching for a title.

Since the title was thicker and bolder, it withstood the test of time far better than the thin lines within the main portion of the map. Even so, it took several seconds to make out the letters, and even then she wasn’t positive she understood what they meant.

“Valerian steel?” she read aloud before looking up to gauge the response of the room. When Cinder smirked and Adam looked the closest thing to pleased that Blake had ever seen him, she knew that she was right - but had no idea what it meant.

“Pack it up,” Adam ordered, and one of the Blackguards pushed Blake out of the way in order to seal the book in a waterproof case. That case went into

another case, and one of the squad members slung his rifle over his shoulder to carry the maps instead.

“Two minutes until ISA gets here,” Cinder said after looking at her watch. “Let’s go.”

The Blackguards weren’t the least bit frazzled by ISA’s impending presence. Instead, they moved with purpose and determination while packing up and heading back the way they came.

Feeling eyes upon her, Blake turned around and caught Yang’s gaze. The glance broke Yang out of whatever trance she’d been in, and she offered nothing more than a quiet “get moving, grunt,” before passing by.

Blake’s other option was to stay behind and get picked up by ISA which, after what just happened, didn’t sound like such a bad idea. But, no matter how much she wanted to get away from the Blackguards – especially Adam and Cinder – she couldn’t give up. So, rather than slip away, she hurried after Yang and made it back to the shuttle in no time.

Somewhere in the distance, Alliance pods were dropping down and troops storming off, but they were already too late. The Blackguard shuttles were already headed back to the Inferno.

Nonplussed by the brush with authority, Adam casually tapped the case while they headed back to orbit. Sensing Blake’s gaze, he motioned towards the maps.

“You’re going to translate these. Every single word.”

Unwilling to talk, she merely nodded before turning away and subtly touching her neck. If she hadn’t been wary of him before, she certainly was now. His anger simmered so close to the surface, it took hardly any provocation for it to boil over. Her hesitation had only been a split second, and she was lucky he hadn’t killed her.

Feeling eyes upon her, she looked up and locked gazes with Yang. If they were in private right now, maybe Yang would have something to say. Since they weren’t, she just stared at Blake for several long seconds before clenching her jaw and staring at her hands.

As expected, and as Emerald had warned. Blake was on her own out here; nothing made that more apparent than when the shuttles returned to the

Inferno, the ramps lowered, and Yang stormed off without a second glance.

Blake was the last one to leave and, after looking around the Inferno's shuttle bay, closed her eyes and sighed. Her neck hurt, her heart hurt, and, for the first time, she questioned her purpose for being here. How many crimes did she have to witness before Command decided it was time to wipe the Blackguards from the cosmos?

It was clear they were evil. It was clear they had to be stopped. If Command had already drawn that conclusion, why the focus on surveillance rather than eradication? Because, from what she had already witnessed, it was clear that the Blackguards needed to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Chapter 11

To say that her neck hurt was an understatement, but Blake refused to let anyone know how much it bothered her. Even as she spoke less - partly to ease the pain, partly because she was in no mood to talk - she went about her day like normal and ignored the looks she earned from everyone she passed.

She wasn't in a good mood, to put it lightly, and right now the only thing she was grateful for was that the cafeteria served soup for dinner. If not for that random stroke of luck, it would have taken five times as long to force down the meal, and she didn't want to sit in the cafeteria any longer than necessary. She just wanted to eat and go back to her room.

"Cinder's such a bitch." Setting her tray on the table, Emerald dropped into the seat across from Blake and jabbed a spoon into her bowl. "Just chewed me out because 'we're using too much fuel.' Like I have any fucking control over that."

"We're using too much fuel because one of the thrusters needs to be replaced," Mercury mumbled before taking a bite to eat.

"See? How's that my problem? That's *your* problem."

"Don't tell her that..."

When Ret chuckled, Blake managed a small smile. Their banter eased some of the sour mood she'd carried all day and assured her that she wasn't the only one Cinder hated - or who hated her in return.

"Ok, but why aren't we asking the important question?" Emerald said before smirking at Blake. "Like *what* happened to your neck?"

Just like that, Blake's sour mood returned, and her gaze unwittingly flitted to Adam, who was speaking to a group of Blackguards on the far side of the

room.

“Nothing,” she grumbled even though she knew Emerald wouldn’t drop the topic so easily.

“Seriously, it looks like you put your neck in one of those vices they have in engineering.” Emerald smacked Mercury’s arm at the comparison, and he nodded, but she wasn’t done yet. “Or was it some sort of, like, asphyxiation play?”

When Ret snorted and Mercury let a smile sneak onto his lips, Blake rolled her eyes and took another sip of soup. Any response would be turned into an admission or denial, so she might as well just finish her meal and let Emerald have her fun.

“Question is...who wants to fuck a grunt?” Emerald mused to herself, only to glare at Ren when he averted his gaze and turned a deeper shade of blue. “Seriously, Ret? You’re such a boy sometimes.”

Even though he shrugged off the conversation, he refused to look anywhere near Blake. Which was fine with her, as she already knew what her answer to any type of solicitation would be.

“If you want a girl, I’ll get you a girl. And it won’t be her.” Emerald nodded at Blake with a certain amount of disdain, but Blake ignored the implied insult. Ret, however, gave Emerald that look of hopeless devotion he always had for her, which made her sit back and scowl.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

The venom was too little, too late, as she’d already unleashed the loyal blue puppy who loved nothing more than following her around.

“I don’t want a girl,” he claimed. “But will you teach me to fly?”

“Of course not. What do I look like, your fucking mentor?”

“Yes,” Mercury coughed into one hand, earning an icy glare from Emerald. Before they launched into another round of who hated who more, however, Blake pushed her chair back and stood from ‘their’ table in the cafeteria.

“Leaving early?” Emerald immediately asked.

“I need to work on something.”

“Oh really?” As usual, the hint of gossip piqued her interest. “Like what?”

“It’s...complicated.”

“Please. I can fly a Class 6 cruiser through an asteroid belt with my eyes closed - you think I can’t handle ‘complicated?’”

Ret beamed at Emerald’s humble assessment of her flying skills, but he *always* smiled. At anything. For whatever reason, he found life unceasingly amusing even though his had been much less so.

“I don’t think I can say yet,” Blake hedged rather than provide details.

When she spotted Yang walking through the cafeteria, on a path that would lead right past the table, she knew that avoiding the truth was the right decision. The last thing she needed was for Emerald to comment on Valerian steel right in front of Yang - that would only get Blake in more trouble. Instead, she fell silent and turned towards Yang with a polite smile, only for Yang to ram right into her shoulder while walking past.

“Wow. Good morning to you too,” Blake grumbled under her breath while rubbing her shoulder. She thought she kept her voice low enough to go unheard, but Yang spun around and scowled.

“What did you say?”

The nearby Blackguards quieted at the tone, and even Adam glanced their way at the impending reprimand, which grew more imminent when Yang stepped up to Blake and frowned down at her.

“I said good morning,” she repeated slowly, keeping her tone neutral while biting back annoyance and frustration. Those emotions only grew when a blood-red gaze flitted to her neck and Yang’s scowl deepened.

“Don’t you have a job to do?” Yang snapped before spinning around and striding away without waiting for an answer.

“Guess I do...” Blake mumbled. Everyone was staring at her now, and Emerald raised a hand to her neck before pointing after Yang and smirking. Rolling her eyes at the unspoken tease, she left the cafeteria - and Emerald’s laughter - behind.

Those maps wouldn’t translate themselves, and apparently she was being timed. No one cared that the ink was so faded that half of the letters were indistinguishable - Adam wanted completed versions yesterday.

The lack of consideration bothered her, but what bothered her even more was how Yang had treated her ever since returning from Lurus. Yang

couldn't behave in public like she did in the privacy of her room - that was understandable - but she'd been going out of the way to be harsher than usual.

When Blake turned the corner and saw the object of her annoyance leaning against the wall by her room, her frustration only grew.

"Making sure I do my homework?" she quipped while brushing past.

"I'm sorry -"

"Save it."

In no mood to talk, Blake walked into her room and shut the door behind her, but Yang stuck her hand in the gap and pushed it back open. When she stepped through the doorway, making it clear she wasn't leaving anytime soon, Blake gave an exasperated sigh.

"What do you want? I'm working, see?"

She motioned towards the map copies spread across the desk and her feeble attempts at translation, but those drew Yang's gaze for only a second.

"I wanted to make sure you're ok."

Blake sighed again, then shook her head in confusion.

"What?"

"Your neck -" Yang nodded towards the bruising, which had caught everyone's attention, before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "It looks like it hurts."

"Why do you care?"

"Because," Yang began, only to shake her head and fall silent.

"'Because.' Great." Annoyed by the lack of response, Blake turned away only for Yang to catch her arm and stop her.

"Blake, wait."

When Blake froze at the words, Yang sensed the shift in mood and immediately dropped her arm.

"What?"

"That's the first time you've ever used my name." Yang's eyes widened at the realization, but Blake frowned and tried to untangle the emotions threading through her chest. "I didn't think you even remembered it."

"Of course I did. It's not often I have to save someone twice on the same day I meet them."

Looking increasingly uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation, Yang cleared her throat, shuffled her feet, and got them back on track.

“Look, I’m just...sorry about...that -” she nodded towards Blake’s neck before staring at her hands. “I’ll try not to let it happen again.”

Unsure of how else to respond, Blake gave a soft “ok” and watched Yang’s demeanor with increasing curiosity. As much as she wanted to stay annoyed, Yang was making it difficult. Everything about her persona was apologetic, as if the bruises on Blake’s neck were her fault. As if she was the one who put her hand around Blake’s throat and tried to squeeze the life right out of her.

That wasn’t Yang. Even though it could be. Even though, in some ways, it *should* be - it wasn’t. And that knowledge melted away Blake’s annoyance and left her with only a sense of comfort that Yang was still the same person in private as she’d been on days past. Mostly the same, at least, though she lacked some of her customary confidence and bravado. That became especially apparent when she blew a breath through her lips and ran a hand through her hair before meeting Blake’s gaze.

“Um, but I had something to tell you.”

“Ok...” Sensing Yang’s reluctance to continue the previous line of conversation, Blake nodded for her to change the subject. “I’m listening.”

“You ever been to Drideter?”

“The notoriously-dangerous cesspit of evil?”

“That’s the place.”

“Yes.” In actuality, Blake had never been there, but she had heard about it and imagined every criminal worth their rank had visited at some point. “Why?”

“Because we’re stopping there in a couple days. Quick dropoff, but we’ll have the day free.” Though still relatively subdued, Yang managed a quick smile at the news. “Just wanted you to know. Something to look forward to, right?”

“I guess...”

It sounded like good news, but Blake didn’t know why Yang sought her out to tell her. Was it a reason to check up on her? An excuse to talk to her? Possibly both?

“No one else knows yet,” Yang added while shifting between her feet. “And we don’t get many rest days, so it’s the type of info that can...win some favor, you know?”

Suddenly understanding what Yang was saying, Blake felt her mood lighten and a smile threaten to appear.

“Are you trying to make me popular?”

“No, I just - I told you, so do whatever you want with it.”

When Yang made an aggravated motion with one hand and stepped towards the door, Blake reached out and stopped her. She wasn’t mad anymore. In fact, she felt pretty special to have been personally delivered such good news.

“Thank you.”

She meant it, and she didn’t drop her arm from Yang’s until Yang turned around and made it clear that she would stay.

“You’re welcome.” The words sounded so foreign - to both of them, most likely - that Yang quickly brushed past the moment. “It’s good to stop and let the crew blow off some steam. I’m sure you’re feeling it too.”

Their recent travels had left Blake feeling cooped up, so she wouldn’t decline the chance to slip away for a day. Plus, it presented an opportunity to set up a meeting with ISA and brief them on what she’d learned so far.

“But if you want to blow off some steam before then, I know somewhere we could go.”

When Yang winked, having regained her signature swagger, Blake scoffed and flipped the tables right back at her.

“What’s wrong with here?”

She motioned towards her bed, but Yang looked at it and laughed.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this room is *tiny*.”

Not one to lose her side of banter, Blake upped the ante by stepping into Yang’s personal space.

“I think it’s...intimate...” she purred, staring into Yang’s eyes and feeling her skin tingle from their proximity. The way Yang looked her up and down only amplified the feeling, and she suddenly yearned to move even closer.

“I mean...I’m willing to give it a shot if you are...”

The instant Yang set her hand on Blake’s hip, they crossed a line Blake hadn’t

even seen coming. Now, she couldn't help but imagine what that would be like. Which version of Yang would show up - the firm, disciplined Blackguard commander? Or the softer, inexplicably-sweeter side of her?

What did Blake have to give up to find out, and what might she gain in the process?

With Yang's hand on her hip, and Yang's gaze dipping to her lips every few seconds, she considered her options. Fraternization was forbidden except in cases of life and death...but this entire mission was one long tightrope act between life and death.

Before she made up her mind, a soft bump shuddered through the floor under her feet. Yang turned towards the docking bay almost immediately, her brow knit together at what could only be another ship docking with the Inferno.

"That was quick..." she muttered before taking a deep breath and looking at Blake. "Listen, we're about to have company. Wait here until they get their stuff and leave."

"But I can help -"

"No." Sensing Blake's impending argument, Yang shook her head to end it before it even started. "Stay here until they leave."

With no other instruction or explanation, Yang hurried out of the room and closed the door behind her. Left to scoff in Yang's wake, Blake stared at the door and tried to figure out what to make of their most recent interaction.

From disdain to concern to casual dismissal in just a few minutes, Yang kept Blake wondering which version of her was real. Not only that, but why would she offer Blake some pieces of information while preventing her from learning others? If she wanted to learn how the Blackguards operated, she had to do more than translate old maps and 'stay in her room.' Besides, as much fun as struggling through page after page of Valerian was, she needed a break - and Yang just provided one.

So, rather than stay put, Blake left her room and headed towards the cargo hold. If their visitors were picking something up, as Yang suggested, that was where the meeting would be. It was the only location with enough drugs and weapons to make any group happy, so long as they had the credits to pay.

She wouldn't get involved; she just wanted to see what was going on. Who were these visitors? What were they here for? And what type of relationship did they have with the Blackguards?

Upon reaching the door to the cargo hold, she peeked through the window and spotted a group of strangers and Blackguards standing inside. With the meeting location confirmed, she looked around before taking a lift to the upper level of the cargo hold and peering through the glass of a secondary entrance.

The upper perimeter of the room featured a balcony serving as extra storage and easier access to the inventory stacked far above the main floor. After scanning as much of the walkway as she could, and finding it empty, she took a deep breath and put her hand on the manual handle of the door. Before turning it, however, she hesitated.

Yang told her to stay in her room, and she was blatantly disobeying that order. If she got caught, there would be no pleading ignorance or misunderstanding. But...she felt reasonably assured that her only punishment would be a firm scolding. Assuming Adam or Cinder didn't take offense to her presence, of course. It was a gamble but, ultimately, a gamble she was willing to make.

Rather than use the keypad, which was almost guaranteed to draw attention, she turned the manual override and slid the door open by hand. She only opened it far enough for her to slip through before quietly closing it behind her. When no one immediately yelled at her to leave, she crouched low and snuck behind a nearby stack of cargo containers.

Through the small gap between the boxes, she could make out enough of the room to determine that the meeting was either a drug or weapons sale. The buyers looked like a group of mercenaries, and they were armed to the teeth. The Blackguards had responded in kind, and Adam's personal squad stood right behind him, with weapons at attention, while he spoke to the buying group's leader - a slender man with eyes that flitted towards every bit of motion he detected.

The tension in the room felt like a pot approaching boil, with everyone standing so stiffly that any sudden movement might cause them to open fire. Suddenly, Blake wished she had more than just her knife with her, but the Blackguards must know what they were doing. This couldn't be their first

time dealing with these people, so they must know how to work together. Or at least how to exchange goods without erupting into a firefight.

“Everything’s here.”

Adam waved towards a large container sitting by his side, and Yang popped off the cover with one hand. From her position at the top of the cargo hold, Blake could see that rifles filled half of the container while carefully-stacked explosives took up the other. One of the buyer’s men, however, walked over and inspected the contents before returning to his leader and nodding.

“Looks good,” he confirmed through a thick, unrecognizable accent, and Cinder took the silent instruction to bring over a device that their payment could be completed on.

While the man entered account information, Blake crept towards the edge of her cover to get a better look at the visitors. If she could figure out who they were, she could add them to a list of known affiliates of the Blackguards.

As soon as she peeked around the container, however, a strange shimmer caught her eye. Momentarily forgetting about the transaction taking place below her, she squinted at the other side of the balcony and tried to figure out what it was.

Appearing as if from nowhere, the barrel of a rifle tapped against the railing. The tiny sound caused a flicker that illuminated a figure she’d never seen before, and she abruptly understood what was happening.

“Watch out!”

The words hardly left her lips before she sprang from her hiding spot, grabbed her knife, and hurled it towards the surprised sniper. The blade lodged in the man’s shoulder just as a shot rang out from the other side of the room - then all hell broke loose.

Shouts and phaser fire filled the air while everyone suddenly scrambled for cover. With the groups below focused on each other, Blake sprinted towards the first sniper and ducked when a blast of super-heated air snapped past her ear. There was a second shooter somewhere, but she ignored them while launching herself at the first.

She collided into the man shoulder-first, and the two of them crashed to the catwalk before tumbling apart. While he struggled to right himself, she lunged

for the rifle he dropped during the fall and, as soon as she had it, searched for the shooter across the room. Another shot burned past her elbow, making her flinch before aiming the weapon and squeezing the trigger.

Before she even knew if she hit her target, the first man pulled the knife from his shoulder and rushed her with it. He slashed the blade towards her, but she knocked it aside with the rifle before slamming the butt of the weapon into his face. The resulting crack preceded him collapsing to the ground, and she immediately turned her attention to the battle occurring underfoot.

Her gaze locked onto Yang, who grabbed an attacker with both hands and threw him headfirst into a nearby storage container. As he fell unmoving to the floor, she spun around, caught Blake's gaze and, in that split second, didn't notice the man rushing her from behind.

This time, Blake didn't hesitate; she raised the rifle and fired. The shot skimmed over Yang's shoulder and hit her attacker in the arm, but he hardly cried out in pain before Yang spun around, tore the weapon from his hands, and leveled him with a left hook.

As abruptly as it started, the battle just as quickly ended. Soon, the only sounds to be heard were groans of pain interspersed with phaser shots as the victors dispatched those enemies left alive. In the midst of the carnage, Adam walked over to the rival group's leader, who clutched at the multiple phaser wounds he'd sustained, and kicked him to the floor.

"Thought you'd double-cross me?" Adam growled before pressing his boot down on the man's neck. The man began struggling immediately, clawing at Adam's leg trying to free himself, but there was no surviving the malice in Adam's eyes.

It wasn't long before his arms fell lifeless to the floor, and only then did Adam meet Blake's gaze. He looked angry - he always looked angry - but he didn't say or do anything; he just stared at her for several long seconds before turning away. Considering he nearly killed her the other day and today she possibly saved his life, the response seemed appropriate.

"Cinder, gather the rest of the squads and clear out their ship. Decide what you want to do with anyone found alive."

The order must have been music to Cinder's ears, and she actually smiled

while motioning the uninjured Blackguards after her. Meanwhile, Adam put several annoyed phaser blasts through the leader's head before stalking out of the cargo hold.

All the while, Yang frowned at Blake.

"Get down here."

Sensing her reprimand on the horizon, Blake found the nearest ladder and climbed down from the catwalk. As soon as her feet touched the ground, Yang grabbed her by the arm.

"Come with me."

Without another word, Yang marched Blake out of the cargo hold and through the halls of the ship. She didn't say anything, and she didn't let go until reaching Blake's cabin and pushing her inside. The door hardly closed before Yang spun her around and shoved her into it.

"What did I tell you to do?" Yang asked, her voice loud and angry while she boxed Blake into the small space by the door.

"Stay in my cabin –"

"Stay in your *fucking* cabin. And what did you do?"

While Yang waited for an answer, still glowering in anger, annoyance spurred in Blake's chest.

"I don't know, saved your life, maybe?" she shot back. "How about a thank you?"

The answer didn't make Yang any happier, and she stepped right into Blake's space to force her back against the door.

"That's *not* what I told you to do. I told you to *stay. Here.*" Yang jabbed her finger into Blake's shoulder with the last two words, but Blake swatted Yang's hand away and scowled.

"If I had, you could've been shot."

"That's *my* problem – not yours. Focus on keeping *yourself* alive."

"I can take care of myself."

"*Apparently,*" Yang snapped and gave Blake a long, hard stare before sighing and hanging her head. "I'm trying to *help* you..." she mumbled towards the ground. "You're making it difficult."

The admission erased Blake's annoyance, and she suddenly felt guilty for

disobeying Yang's order. She saw it as testing her boundaries and fulfilling her duty of learning what the Blackguards were up to. She knew it was risky, but she also had confidence in her ability to protect herself. She never considered how it looked to anyone else because, as far as she was aware, no one else cared about her wellbeing.

Having lost the will to argue, she remained quiet instead. Noticing a new singe mark on Yang's shoulder, she cautiously reached up and touched it. Yang shied away from the contact, but not enough that Blake's hand fell away.

"Looks like I got you a bit..." she mused while touching the streak of black running across Yang's metal shoulder.

"I'll survive."

When Yang still didn't move, Blake took the opportunity to slide her fingers across the nearby scratches and cracks in Yang's arm. The metal was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, and somehow even the scratches felt smooth under her fingertips. There was also a coolness radiating from it that seemed almost unnatural, but was probably aided by the temperature of the ship.

The silver sheen and immaculate craftsmanship made it one of the most incredible things she'd ever seen. She wanted to know where Yang had it crafted and when, but she didn't dare ask while Yang let her closer than ever before.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, touching Yang's fingers and watching them gently curl around her hand. "I just wanted to know what was going on."

"You know what they say about curiosity..."

Blake smiled at the whispered response, which she'd heard as words of caution more than once before. When she slid her hand across Yang's palm and Yang grasped onto her fingers, her smile grew.

"It's gotten me into some exciting situations," she admitted, and felt her heart jump when Yang finally smiled.

"I'll bet it has..."

When Yang shifted, Blake withdrew her hand for fear that she had overstepped her bounds. But Yang didn't scold her, and that was somehow even more confusing. Sensing the right mood, however, she decided now was the time to apologize for her insubordination.

“But I *am* sorry that I didn’t listen to you.”

She knew it was the right thing to say when it erased Yang’s remaining tension and, for a split second, lightened the redness of her eyes.

“You could have been killed.”

“You could have been too,” Blake pointed out, but Yang just gave a sad smile and shook her head.

“That wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

That response puzzled Blake more than anything else. Yang was a leading member of the Blackguards. The Blackguards weren’t supposed to contemplate their crimes and judge themselves unworthy of life; they were vicious, unremorseful, heartless beings who did whatever they could to stay alive and further their personal gains.

That wasn’t Yang, and that wasn’t what Blake expected. But Yang took the lack of response as agreement and glanced at the floor before meeting Blake’s gaze, eyes red as normal.

“You’re ok though? Didn’t get hurt?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Blake wished she could have that moment back and say... something...but she moved on instead. “How’s your arm?” She gently touched the area of Yang’s cut, which hopefully hadn’t split open over the course of the past few battles.

“Itches like hell, but that’s just the scab talking. Guess I’ll make a full recovery, after all.”

“Good.”

Surprisingly, Blake was genuinely glad to hear that Yang was healing. Even more surprisingly, she was disappointed when Yang stepped back and motioned her away from the door. The loss of warmth was immediately noticeable, but she hid her disappointment and did as instructed.

“You should get some rest,” Yang mumbled while taking Blake’s place by the door, but she stopped just short of opening it. “And Blake?”

Again, Yang used her name and, again, it sent a strange feeling through her veins. Yang, however, paused and mulled over what she wanted to say before eventually nodding.

“Thank you.” Before Blake responded to the gratitude, Yang walked into

the hall. “But don’t do it again,” she added before closing the door behind her, leaving Blake to fight back a smile in her wake.

If that was supposed to feel like a rebuke or reprimand, it didn’t. It felt like Yang continuing to play what seemed more and more like a role. Blake knew a thing or two about pretending to be someone she wasn’t. Hopefully, she was playing her part as expertly as Yang was, if that was indeed what was going on.

Only time would tell. But, as a massive adrenaline crash headed her way, she decided to send a quick message to Command before laying down and passing out. Since the Blackguards would stop at Drideter in a couple of days, she could set up a meeting with ISA. It would be a good opportunity to finally take and hand off some pictures of the Inferno as well as the rest of the information she’d collected.

After firing off a quick message, she dropped the device on the bed beside her and laid down with a sigh. Sleep would come soon but, before then, her mind went over the events of the day.

Yang had revealed her harsh attitude to be a farce. She admitted trying to keep Blake safe. She let Blake disobey yet another order. She allowed Blake closer than anyone else on the ship. And each of those realizations only made Blake want to know more about the Blackguard commander who was much more than met the eye.

She still believed that Yang was the key, but maybe there was more to it than that. And maybe she didn’t understand what else it might be, but she was too tired to figure it out right now.

Chapter 12

Every map was different, and Blake couldn't figure out why. Not only that, but she couldn't even venture a guess as to where any of them pointed. Even if her knowledge of the constellations was above average, the waypoints she managed to translate didn't ring any bells. The formation of the stars didn't even look familiar.

If the maps were as old as they looked, the locations could have changed by now. Stars could have been destroyed while new ones were discovered. If that was the case, how could they be used as anything other than a snapshot of what once was?

The maps themselves served as no use to her, but the words written in the legends proved an even greater mystery. Mentions of a 'key' were made on every page, as if serving a warning to those without that integral item. There was also a lengthy tirade about how only the 'worthy' were allowed at this mythical location but, other than that, the only thing she got from hours of poring over the pages was a headache.

Deciding that she deserved a break from the monotony, she headed to the rec room and, upon finding 'her' seat open, sat at the table with Emerald, Mercury, and Ret.

"You look like crap."

"Thanks," she grumbled while picking up the cards dealt to her. "You look great too."

While Emerald rolled her eyes at the response, Mercury huffed with amusement. But his gaze quickly locked onto the other side of the room, and his posture stiffened as he leaned across the table and whispered, "Incoming."

As Cinder walked across the room, Emerald only glanced that way before scowling at the cards in her hands. “Whatever,” was all she said before flipping one onto the table and motioning for Mercury to play.

“Guess we’re nobodies now...” he muttered while selecting a card and doing the same.

Cinder, meanwhile, glowered at Blake before leaving the room behind. Fortunately, Blake had already turned in the first two maps, which seemed to have bought her a reprieve. It probably wouldn’t last long though, which meant more late nights and early mornings brushing up on her Valerian.

“Well I know Cinder didn’t tell you.” Rolling her eyes at the comment, Blake played one of her cards and prodded Ret to go next. “I’m going to find out, you know,” Emerald added undeterred.

“Relax, Em,” Mercury cut in. “So she learned something before you. You’re still gossip queen.”

The response pacified Emerald enough for her to pick up her cards, but she immediately set them back down in a huff.

“I’ve stored favors with every person on this ship – how the hell did you find out before me?”

“Luck?” Blake suggested, and smiled when Emerald glared. That glare disappeared, however, when Ret poked her shoulder and motioned for her to keep the round going. Though it looked like she would rather stay on this topic until she found an answer, she gave it up with a roll of her eyes and played her next card.

While Mercury considered his options next, Ret nudged Blake’s shoulder and offered her one of the stims he always had on him. When she waved him off, he opened it up and took it himself.

“You’re cutting it close,” Mercury warned from across the table, and even Emerald looked vaguely troubled by the continued drug use.

“Cinder will tear you apart if she spots you loaded on shift.”

“It’ll wear off by then.”

Ret didn’t look at all worried about the possible repercussions, but his friends exchanged concerned glances.

“Maybe you should be more like new girl,” Emerald suddenly said, and Blake

immediately knew where the conversation was headed. “New girl’s clean as a whistle.”

The look Emerald sent Blake dared her to disagree, so she shrugged when Ret looked at her.

“Don’t need it. It only holds me back.”

She didn’t think her opinion mattered but, after spinning the disk between his fingers, Ret sighed and put it away. Emerald and Mercury relaxed at that small success, and the card game continued as normal.

The last thing Blake wanted to be was someone’s sobriety program, but she would help if she could. It also gave her an ironclad excuse for turning down any offers made to her – she was helping Ret, and she couldn’t help Ret by lighting up herself. Plus, she would be lying if she said she wasn’t worried about his habit. If the drugs themselves didn’t kill him, Adam or Cinder certainly would.

“When does she stop being new girl?” Ret asked, tossing another card on the table.

“When there’s a new new girl,” Emerald replied with a dismissive wave. “Who knows when that’ll be. Don’t particularly care.”

The response was flippant, but Blake had learned to ignore the jabs. They happened often enough that she expected them more often than not. At the end of the day, they were just insults, and she could deal with insults far better than she could deal with assaults.

After her first night on the Inferno, she had feared that this would be a constant fight for survival – an endless battle to prove herself to people far crueler than herself. Some of the crew still tested her, but she’d learned who they were and avoided them as much as possible. Adam and Cinder were harder to avoid, but she tried to keep her head down whenever they were nearby. Then there was Yang...

On cue, Yang strode into the room and immediately captured Blake’s attention. From her golden hair, metal arm, and vivid red eyes, she was a symbol of power and strength. She was to be feared...but it was growing harder to fear her these days. She could be cold and harsh, but she was also fair and reasonable.

When Adam stalked in after Yang, Blake averted her gaze and watched the interaction out of the corner of her eye. Adam was someone to be feared. His quick trigger to violence and propensity to fly off the handle made him unpredictable, and unpredictable in this type of environment was a deadly thing.

At the moment, however, Yang was the angry one.

“It’s a waste of time -”

“I don’t care,” Yang spit back at him, tearing her arm from his grasp when he tried to physically stop her. “Give me thirty fucking minutes to check it out.”

If anyone else spoke to Adam like that, those might be the last words they ever said. When Yang did it, he clenched his jaw and looked like he wanted to hit her. Noticing the room’s attention upon them, however, he said “Thirty minutes,” before stalking away. As soon as he disappeared, Yang’s gaze fell upon Blake.

“Grunt - with me.”

Tossing her cards on the table, Blake scrambled to her feet and hurried after Yang. She had no idea where they were going or why, but she didn’t care. Adam clearly didn’t want it to happen, which meant she was on board with ensuring that it did. Plus, she wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to spend time with Yang in private.

“What do you need?” she asked upon falling into step by Yang’s side.

“Company.”

Blake tilted her head at the response, but Yang added nothing to it. Instead, she silently led them into the shuttle bay - Blake’s first clue that they were leaving the ship - and grabbed a phaser off of the rack filled with them. After strapping the weapon across her back, she grabbed a second one and pressed it into Blake’s hands. Before Blake could ask what it was for, Yang jogged up the ramp of one of the shuttles parked in the bay.

Giving up on the idea of getting more explanation right now, Blake followed Yang into the shuttle and joined her in the cockpit. This particular vehicle was built for short excursions or moving between ships, making it spacious for just the two of them but still easily maneuverable. And, from the way Yang’s

hands raced over the controls, she knew exactly how to fly it.

“Am I going to need this?”

When Blake motioned with the weapon in her hands, Yang barely even glanced over.

“I hope not, but you never know.”

That answered nothing except suggesting they were headed somewhere potentially dangerous. But the Inferno itself was dangerous, so that wasn't much of a change.

“Hold on.”

Once the shuttle bay door opened, revealing nothing but empty space beyond, Yang fired up the thrusters and went through a preflight checklist while Blake silently did the same. When all systems were operational, Yang carefully piloted them out of the Inferno.

For a few brief moments, the shuttle drifted into the expanse of black dotted by millions of stars and planets - a view Blake never grew tired of, no matter how many times she saw it. After they moved far enough away, Yang turned the shuttle so that the Inferno took up most of their view. Unlike space, which was a miracle to be marveled at, the Inferno was built to be feared. Blake felt that way the first time she laid eyes upon it, and her opinion hadn't changed since.

Fortunately, the Inferno wasn't in their field of view for long, as Yang directed the shuttle underneath it. As soon as they made it to the other side, Blake spotted their destination - a passenger ship floating nearby. From the burn marks across the hull and the lack of lights, it had been attacked and left as scrap to the void of space.

“Raiders probably got it,” Yang explained while piloting the shuttle closer. “We'll check it out and see if it has anything useful. Most likely not, but you never know.”

The answer explained why Adam viewed the excursion as a waste of time, but Blake understood Yang's insistence as soon as they were close enough to make out the markings on the ship.

It was Zitovian. By itself, that held little significance. But when Yang believed that a group of Zitovian raiders had some connection to her sister, she would

follow any possible lead.

That dedication to her family was either admirable or stupid. Considering they were leaving one of the most notorious ships in the universe, by themselves, to 'check out' a destroyed hull that merely bore the right markings, Blake leaned towards the latter. Still, she was willing to help. She didn't know how much help was needed on a lifeless husk of a spacecraft, but she could at least provide what Yang originally asked for - company - and a second set of eyes in this search for clues.

Her willingness did little to temper her nerves, however, which grew the closer they drew to the ship. Up close, the destruction appeared contained to the rear of the craft, and the docking bay was damaged but not enough to make it unusable. Another small craft had been destroyed in whatever attack happened here, and its parts now floated listlessly around the space. After carefully navigating through the debris, Yang set the shuttle down in the only open space large enough to fit.

"We need helmets," Yang muttered. After tapping one of the meters, she headed into the back of the shuttle. Even though the lack of gravity in the docking bay confirmed that the ship's outer seal was broken, Blake glanced at the oxygen readout before following.

"This should fit."

When Yang tossed a helmet over to her, Blake caught it and tried it on. The black mask automatically sealed with her armor, creating a spacesuit capable of withstanding their short trek to the door and back. Yang handed her a thruster pack next, which she slipped around her shoulders before buckling into place.

"You good?"

Yang's voice sounded as if she was right beside Blake, confirming that microphones had been installed in the helmets. A useful feature, especially in situations like these, and Blake nodded before motioning for Yang to lead the way.

"Take one," Yang instructed first, pointing at a box of flashlights before lowering the shuttle's ramp. Gravity instantly disappeared, but Yang hardly paused before swinging herself out of the ship. After grabbing a flashlight and

attaching it to her suit, Blake did the same.

“We’ll try that door.”

Yang pointed at a door in the front left of the room and, after making sure Blake understood their objective, pressed her feet to the side of the shuttle, coiled her legs, and propelled herself forward without the use of her boosters.

While Yang sailed towards the door, Blake grabbed the same handhold, lifted her feet up to the ship, and replicated what Yang just did. Launching herself off the side of the shuttle, she focused on her destination and kept an eye out for any debris that might drift into her path. Fortunately, the path remained clear, and she floated seamlessly over to the door and Yang.

“I think the inner seal’s intact,” Yang said, running her hands across the surface of the airlock door while Blake grabbed onto a handhold to keep herself in place. “If we can find the override, we can pull it open.”

“Should be bottom left.” Blake pointed her flashlight at the corner of the door, where the override handle hid, and Yang glanced at it before giving her a surprised look. “It’s standard on these ships,” she added with a shrug.

If Yang wondered how Blake acquired that specific knowledge, she didn’t ask while twisting the handle, pushing the door open, and waving Blake through. Yang quickly followed into the airlock and, as soon as she pulled the door closed, gravity returned like a great weight pressing down on their shoulders.

“Damn, this is a nice ship. They must’ve built a backup battery into the airlock system to keep it afloat.” After leaving the airlock, Yang removed her helmet and took a deep breath. “Life support’s gone though. Oxygen will run out eventually.”

Standing in what was basically a much smaller version of the Inferno’s ready room, Blake removed her helmet and sniffed the thin, stale air. Enough oxygen was left to sustain them for the duration of their visit, but she would start to worry if they were stuck here for a significant amount of time. Fortunately, from the speed Yang was moving, they wouldn’t be here long.

“Before we go any further...” Yang said from the doorway leading into the rest of the craft. “Prepare yourself. Whatever happened here, chances are it wasn’t pretty.”

Nodding at the forewarning, Blake mentally steeled herself for what was to

come. Following Yang's lead, she set her helmet by the door and paused when she noticed a shelf of spacesuits nearby. The small, child-sized one latched like a clamp around her heart, and it took a great deal of effort to ignore that feeling and follow Yang further into the ship.

As the universe devolved into chaos, morals went right along with it. That was why Blake's mission was so important. That was why she had to succeed. The group who did this - a group probably similar to the Blackguards - had to be stopped. They had to learn that such disregard for life wouldn't be accepted. Before she could imagine locking them in cells for the rest of their lives, however, she had to witness the remnants of their crimes.

"What're we looking for?" she whispered while they walked through the ship, their flashlights bouncing around the halls as they went. Even though they were the only ones around, it didn't feel right to speak any louder than a whisper. Out of respect for the dead or because the atmosphere suggested that she shouldn't.

"No idea," Yang replied in an equally quiet tone. "We should get the captain's logs and see if they mention anything. Otherwise...look for a sign that says 'Ruby Rose was here.'"

The instruction wasn't serious, but Blake fell silent and kept her eyes peeled anyway. The dejection in Yang's voice gave away her expectation for the outcome of this mission, and that made Blake feel worse than before. She didn't have siblings of her own, but Sun was like a brother to her - what if he disappeared? What would she sacrifice to find him?

...maybe Yang's dedication wasn't so dumb after all. And Blake still wanted to help if she could. That desire made her a willing participant in this moment, as they walked through a ship that had once been full of life. From the dark marks splattered on the walls and smeared across the floor, these travelers had been ill-prepared for those happy times to end.

As she stepped around the first body laying in the hall, she shook her head and tried to still her hammering heart. Space travel had brought them together - infinite planets sharing knowledge and resources - but also fostered a sense of lawlessness amongst the stars. Out here, in the midst of vast emptiness, there was always a bigger ship. There was always a deadlier enemy. And help

was hardly ever nearby.

That was what made ISA so important. By creating a network of cooperative planets, the space between them became safer. ISA created a *chance* of being saved in a situation like this. Because this ship, these people, had no chance.

“They didn’t even fight back...” Yang whispered as they passed a man and woman who’d been gunned down in each other’s arms. While Yang shook her head and continued towards the front of the ship, Blake held her light on the couple for a second longer before following.

“Who did this?” she asked once she returned to Yang’s side.

“The Blackguards aren’t the only ones who don’t care about innocent lives,” Yang replied in an almost-resentful tone. “There are plenty of others who wouldn’t hesitate to do this.”

“That’s...”

‘Awful’ almost slipped out, but Blake held her tongue and shook her head instead. Yang might agree with her, but she didn’t want to put that thought out in the open only to regret it later. Because Yang *was* a Blackguard. She *was* one of these people.

That was becoming harder to believe, but Blake didn’t dwell on it while they crept through dark, quiet halls. It wasn’t long before they reached the bridge, where pried-open doors greeted them.

“Guess they wanted something in here...”

No sooner had they stepped through the doorway did a blast of phaser fire hit the ceiling above them. On instinct, Blake ducked and searched for the source of the attack, but Yang immediately vaulted over a computer station and snatched the weapon away from someone. It was crushed in her hand and tossed across the room by the time Blake got her light on their attacker.

Then they both froze.

It wasn’t an attacker; it was a little boy, no more than six or seven years old with short, wavy blonde hair and two delicate little horns on his forehead. Now on the verge of tears, he scooted underneath a table to get away from Yang.

“*Please don’t hurt me,*” he begged as the tears began to fall. “*I won’t tell anyone you were here, I promise!*”

Without moving her light, Blake held her breath and waited for Yang's response. He just shot at them, but he was only a kid...and obviously only doing what he'd been told.

Fortunately, Yang didn't look mad – she looked shocked. And, after glancing at Blake, she hurried to the front of the bridge without a word. Relieved by the lack of anger, Blake rushed over to the little boy, knelt in front of him, and held up her hands to show that she meant no harm.

"It's ok..." she said softly in Zitovian, the language he just used to speak to them. *"We're not going to hurt you..."*

When he seemed to understand her – and believe her – she prayed that she hadn't lied once again. After what happened with Jori, and Auster, she couldn't bear the guilt of another life lost because of her. Especially not a child...

"Shit," Yang muttered after trying one of the ship's computers. "There's no fuel," she said before rushing over to another, which also remained stubbornly blank. "No power. Nothing – it's all gone."

When Yang slammed her fist on the computer in frustration, the little boy slid further underneath the counter.

"It's ok," Blake reassured him as more tears welled in his eyes. *"Please don't be scared. We're just trying to see if the ship works –"*

"Can you talk to him?" Returning to Blake, Yang motioned towards the boy. "You can speak to him? Ask him if there's a radio or something."

"Do you know if there's a radio on board?" Blake asked. *"Or anything we can use to communicate?"* she elaborated, but he bit his lip and shook his head.

"Fuck."

Yang checked the computer again, as if something magically changed in the past few seconds. After staring at the blank screen for a long time, she gave it another angry tap before pacing in front of it.

"We can't send out a distress beacon. We can't power anything up. We can't fix life support. We can't do anything." Abruptly coming to a stop, she closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and sighed. "We have to leave him."

"What?" Yang tried to resume pacing, but Blake stood up and grabbed her arm. "We can't leave him here alone. He'll die."

"If we take him with us, he'll die," Yang countered. "I don't know what

version of Adam you've met," she added, her gaze flitting to the bruises on Blake's neck. "But he's not great with people - period."

"There's probably a back-up radio somewhere," Blake pressed. "We just need to find it -"

"We have to be back in ten minutes." Yang didn't elaborate on what would happen if they weren't back in time, she just let the words hang in the air before shaking her head. "We have to leave him."

"No."

"Blake," Yang sighed. "Another ship could find him and get him somewhere safe."

"And if that doesn't happen?"

Yang didn't answer, but Blake saw the uncertainty in scarlet eyes, and that made her even less willing to back down. She wasn't about to have this on her conscience; she had enough there as it was.

"Listen," she continued when Yang didn't respond. "We'll be at Drideter tomorrow. We can take him with us, hide him on the shuttle, then smuggle him off and get him to someone who can help."

"You realize what happens if we get caught? We all die - very painful deaths. If we leave him, he has a *chance*. If we take him, he doesn't."

Realizing that Yang was serious, that she actually believed there was no other option, Blake took a step back and shook her head.

"Then I'm staying."

For a second, Yang just stared. Then she clenched her jaw and balled her fingers into fists.

"You don't get to make that call - I make the decisions here."

"And your decision is *wrong*," Blake shot back. "Or will you really leave a child to die?"

Yang froze at the question and, for a split second, Blake worried that she would say yes. That she would rather save herself than risk her life for someone too young to hope of helping themselves. But then her expression changed. Briefly, she looked horrified, then ashamed, before settling upon anxious determination.

"Ok." She didn't sound certain, but she still nodded. "Fine. But you have to

tell him that he either stays quiet or dies.”

“I’m not saying that to a child,” Blake scolded her before kneeling down to speak to the little boy. “*Can you tell me your name?*” she asked first, and felt her heart crack when she noticed his hands shaking with fear.

“Z-Zimon.”

“*Hi Zimon, I’m Blake,*” she replied with a small smile before motioning to Yang. “*And that’s Yang. We want to help you get home, but this ship is broken. We have another ship we can use, but you have to come with us.*”

When he sniffled and sent an apprehensive glance towards Yang, Blake scooted closer and shook her head.

“*She’s ok. She’s loud, but she won’t hurt you.*”

For a second, Blake thought he might insist on staying here, making this rescue mission that much more difficult. Fortunately, he gave Yang another long look before wiping some of the tears from his bright blue eyes and crawling out from under the table. Once he pushed himself to his feet, Blake realized that he must be younger than she initially thought, possibly even as young as four or five.

“We should go.”

Without looking at Yang, who shifted impatiently nearby, Blake smiled at Zimon and used the most patient tone she could muster.

“*We need to leave now, ok?*”

“Ok,” he whispered before raising his arms towards her. It took Blake a second to understand what he was asking of her, but as soon as she figured it out she didn’t hesitate to pick him up. He wasn’t too heavy, thankfully, and she could easily carry him back to the airlock while relying on Yang to light the way.

“Alright.” After shifting him to her side, she looked up at him and nodded. “Ready?”

“*I can’t leave Zam Zam...*”

When he pointed at a stuffed animal laying nearby, whose long, velvety ears had seen cleaner days, she picked it up and handed it to him.

“*Can’t forget him,*” she agreed before nodding to Yang.

Gone was any notion of searching for evidence of Ruby, and Yang simply gave

her a long, hard look before hurrying back the way they came. Remembering the gauntlet of horror between them and the shuttle, she clutched Zimon closer as soon as they stepped off of the bridge.

“Don’t look, ok Zimon?” she whispered, and he buried his face in her shoulder while they rushed to the airlock.

Up ahead, Yang took long, purposeful strides and kept her flashlight trained forward at all times, almost as if ignoring the fact that they were bringing company back with them. But Blake couldn’t ignore it, not with Zam Zam’s soft fur brushing against her chin while Zimon clung to the stuffed animal and her at the same time.

Her heart raced from the implications of what they were about to do, knowing this wasn’t pushing boundaries but outright ripping up the line. Yang wasn’t exaggerating when she said that they would meet painful ends if caught, and Blake doubted she could even fathom the depths of agony at Adam’s disposal.

“Goodbye Mima...goodbye Papa...” Zimon whispered as they passed the couple who’d died in each other’s arms. And, at that moment, Blake decided that she didn’t care if this ended horribly. She couldn’t leave him behind; she wouldn’t be able to live with the guilt.

Reaching the airlock first, Yang put on her helmet before pulling out the child-sized suit and offering it to Blake. After setting Zimon down, Blake took the suit and held it up to him. It looked like it fit, so she helped him step into it before sealing it up and handing him the helmet.

“It’s not far,” she said when she saw the fear in his eyes. *“Why don’t you let Yang hold onto Zam Zam?”* she added while motioning for the stuffed animal. *“And you hold onto me?”*

Again, he agreed, although somewhat reluctantly as he handed his toy to Yang. For a second, Yang just stared at the stuffed animal with nothing more than a stitched X for a nose. Then she finally took it, gave Blake an unamused look, and walked into the airlock.

Undeterred by Yang’s reticence, Blake held Zimon’s hand and followed. Once the three of them stood inside, Yang opened the outer door, and a great suction of air rushed past them before gravity disappeared.

“Do you need help?”

Gently floating while holding onto one of the airlock handles, Yang couldn't hide the apprehension in her eyes or the tenseness in her posture. With Zimon clinging to her, Blake wrapped her arm around him for additional security and shook her head. Taking that response at face value, Yang kicked off the wall and drifted back to the shuttle. After waiting for Yang to make it safely, Blake moved closer to the door and prepared to do the same.

“*Hold on, ok?*” she told Zimon before bunching her legs and propelling them away from the wall.

Carrying another person made the action much less fluid, but they still floated easily across the docking bay before she grabbed the shuttle door and pulled them inside. Already ready and waiting, Yang wasted no time bringing up the ramp and sealing off the cabin. Gravity and oxygen hardly returned before she pulled off her helmet and handed the stuffed animal back to Zimon.

“This is a really bad idea...” she muttered while rushing to the cockpit and firing up the engines.

Blake would never agree with that, but she started to question her decision as they left the destroyed ship behind. They just put their lives in the hands of a child, who could raise all kinds of commotion if he didn't stay quiet. But how could she explain the importance of being quiet without scaring him?

Knowing that she had to think of something fast, she left the cockpit and sat with Zimon in the back. With his feet pulled up on the seat, he hugged Zam Zam to his chest and watched her struggle to find the words to say.

“*When we get there...*” she finally began. “*We need you to stay on the shuttle – just for one night.*” When he frowned, she scrambled for an explanation that a child would understand. “*Because...it's the captain's birthday,*” she said as soon as the thought occurred to her. “*And we don't want to steal his attention, so we need you to hide until his celebration is over.*”

Fortunately, Zimon understood the importance of birthdays, and responded with a slow, thoughtful nod.

“*I can hide,*” he whispered before adding an even softer, “*...will there be cake?*”

Realizing that the poor boy must be famished, Blake glanced at Yang before smiling. She had no idea if the Inferno had any cake on board, but she would

find out. If not cake, there were other desserts that a child should like.

“There will be lots of food, but you have to eat on the shuttle, ok?”

“Shit. Adam’s waiting.”

Foreboding returning in full, Blake motioned for Zimon to wait and headed up to the cockpit. Once there, she found that Adam was indeed waiting for them to return.

“What an ass,” Yang mumbled while putting the shuttle into its docking protocol. “Guess we’re gonna die early.”

Ignoring the comment, Blake turned around and smiled at Zimon.

“The birthday boy is about to come on board,” she explained with as much levity as she could muster. *“Can you hide and be really, really quiet until he leaves?”*

With nothing more than a little nod, Zimon hopped down from his seat and slipped behind one of the cargo boxes stacked at the rear of the shuttle. When he dropped down to the floor, the only way to see him would be by searching behind the crate.

“Good job, Zimon,” Blake called out when she couldn’t see him anymore. *“Just stay there, ok?”*

No response, but when the shuttle landed with a jolt, her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest. Seconds later, the ramp began to lower, and Yang gave her a meaningful look before walking towards it. The instruction was clear - meet Adam outside versus letting him walk onto the ship. With her ears straining for the slightest sound from behind the cargo boxes, Blake followed Yang down the ramp while Adam stalked over to them.

“Find anything?”

“No. Nothing.”

When Adam looked satisfied with the result, Blake frowned. Apparently, he was enough of an ass that he would rather be right than for Yang to find a clue about her sister’s whereabouts. But that wasn’t surprising at all.

“Good,” he added for further measure. “Come with me. I want to hear your strategy for the Galaras.”

It was only then that he turned towards Blake and, when he frowned, she worried that he also heard the tiniest shuffling sound from behind them.

“Are you done with the maps yet?” he asked instead, and she nearly sighed in relief while shaking her head.

“No -”

“Then get working.”

His glare made it obvious that she had no say in the matter, so she haltingly nodded before stepping away from the shuttle. If she left, someone needed to stay with Zimon...

“Before she does that -” Yang held out an arm to bar Blake from leaving. “I want her to clean the shuttle.”

Sensing Adam’s amusement at the needless punishment, Blake scoffed and turned towards Yang.

“Why?”

“Because *I told you to*,” Yang snapped before shoving Blake towards the ramp. “Stay here and clean every inch. Keep cleaning until I come back and tell you it’s good enough.”

The ploy worked, and Adam smirked at Blake’s plight before heading towards the door of the shuttle bay. As soon as he was out of earshot, Blake leaned close to Yang and lowered her voice.

“Can you bring back food?” she whispered, and Yang gave her another unamused look. “And a piece of cake, or some dessert?”

Rather than respond, Yang sighed and walked after Adam. After catching up to him by the door, the two of them left the shuttle bay behind, and Blake waited only a second before hurrying onto the ship and closing the ramp behind her. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she probably just lost several of her lives, but she sighed and turned towards the cargo boxes.

“*You can come out now*,” she said, and smiled when Zimon slipped out from behind the boxes with his stuffed animal in tow.

“*Did I do good?*”

“Yes.” Sitting down on one side of the shuttle, she nodded. “*You did very good. You might have to do it again though, ok? I’ll tell you when.*”

“Ok.” After climbing up on the seat beside her, Zimon held his stuffed animal up for her to see. “*Did you know Zam Zam has special powers?*”

“*Does he really?*” Hearing a voice outside the shuttle, her heart jumped into

her throat only to climb back down when she realized it was just someone heading to dinner. “*Why don’t you tell me about him?*” she whispered, doing her best to maintain a light tone while her heart kept racing.

What was she thinking? Bringing a child onto the Inferno...in the history of bad ideas, that had to be at the very top. But she couldn’t just leave him there...

Yang could have left her there. Yang could have left both of them there, but she hadn’t. As scary as it was to think, Blake had to face the fact that Yang hadn’t made the choice of a cold-blooded killer. She made the choice of a good Samaritan, even though it put her life in danger. Was it possible for someone to be a criminal but also not?

If they made it out of this alive, Blake might have to admit that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ didn’t apply to Yang as cleanly as she hoped...and that lack of clarity continued to confuse her.

Chapter 13

Between listening to Zimon babble about his stuffed animal and getting him to talk a little bit about what happened on the ship, Blake tried not to let him pick up on her heightened anxiety. With every person who neared the shuttle, however, her heart jumped only to settle down once the sound faded through the doorway at the other end of the room.

Most of the Blackguards should be at dinner by now, so hopefully the danger had passed. After eating, they would separate for their evening adventures, which involved drinking and gambling...not working in the hangers. And, eventually, Yang should return.

Blake didn't know why she felt like Yang's presence made the situation safer. It wouldn't - it would be just as dangerous as before but with Yang involved. They would still live or die based on how well Zimon cooperated, and Yang could easily change her mind and throw Blake to the wolves.

It might be a possibility, but she didn't believe it...and she wanted Yang to return as soon as possible. The irony of that desire didn't escape her, considering she was the one determined to save Zimon and now she wanted Yang to hold her hand through it. But with Yang's knowledge of the Blackguards... somehow, she felt that if Yang came back, they had a better chance of making it to Drideter.

Hearing new footsteps walk into the hanger, she focused her ears and quickly confirmed that they didn't belong to Yang - the steps were too light. So, like all the times before, she silently begged whoever it was to pass by the shuttle. When the steps headed straight towards her instead, she gave up wishing and motioned Zimon back to his hiding place.

“I need you to hide again, ok?” she whispered, getting only a nod from him before rushing over to the bucket of cleaning supplies she had found in the shuttle’s storage closet. Her heart was already racing yet found an even faster pace when the person just outside keyed in the code to lower the ramp. Whoever it was, they were coming on board.

With just enough time to get a rag and spray bottle in her hands, Blake pretended to take a break from cleaning and turned to greet the new arrival. The moment she saw Emerald, however, her anxiety reached an all-time high.

“What’re you doing here?”

Walking into the shuttle, Emerald gave Blake a look that said she didn’t belong.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she countered, glancing towards Zimon’s hiding spot when Emerald rolled her eyes.

“I’m a pilot. I keep the shuttles working.”

“I’m a grunt,” Blake replied before motioning with the cleaning supplies in her hands. “I keep the shuttles clean, apparently.”

After looking between Blake’s hands and the bucket of supplies on the floor, Emerald scoffed and headed towards the cockpit. She made it only a few steps, however, before pausing.

“What’s that?”

When Emerald pointed at Zam Zam, who innocently sat on one of the seats, Blake silently cursed herself and scrambled for a plausible explanation.

“Found it on that wrecked ship and thought it was interesting, so brought it back.”

It was a horrible answer. Blake knew that much when Emerald gave her a look that was equal parts disdain and amusement.

“What are you, twelve?”

Blake accepted the insult with a shrug, so Emerald scoffed at the stuffed animal before walking to the cockpit. While she did that, Blake grabbed Zam Zam and stuffed him under one of the seats. Out of sight, out of mind, hopefully. The last thing she wanted was for Emerald to take him just to annoy her.

With Emerald in the pilot’s seat reading the different panels, Blake glanced

towards Zimon's hiding spot one more time. She couldn't see him, but hopefully he could stay quiet for however long it took Emerald to check the ship. In the meantime, she sprayed the cleaner on one of the seats and wiped it with the rag in her other hand.

"You missed dinner," Emerald said while starting the engines and checking the screens.

"I had cleaning to do."

"Ret was disappointed. I'll have to find him a new girl to pine over."

"Wouldn't bother me."

When Emerald huffed and made a few adjustments at the controls, Blake tried to clean while splitting her attention between Emerald at the front of the ship and Zimon at the back. After finishing the first seat, she sprayed cleaner on the next one and froze when a tiny sneeze cut through the silence.

As soon as Emerald spun around, Blake wiped her nose and shook her head.

"Sorry," she muttered and breathed a small sigh of relief when Emerald turned away from her. Then Zimon sneezed again.

This time, Emerald gave Blake a more skeptical look, and Blake's control over the situation slipped from her grasp.

"I think I'm allergic to this."

Pretending to read the label on the bottle, she held her breath and prayed that the suspicion in Emerald's eyes disappeared. She nearly sighed out loud when Emerald finally shook her head and turned around.

"Deal with it, new girl," she muttered before powering up the thrusters. Blake thought she heard another little sneeze then, but it was drowned out by the sound of the shuttle.

Since using the spray was a bad idea, she tossed it back into the bucket and picked up a canister of wipes instead. They were probably meant for the handrails and cockpit, but she would plead ignorance if reprimanded.

"Emerald."

Recognizing the voice, Blake briefly closed her eyes and wondered what deity she angered. Emerald, meanwhile, turned off the thrusters and swore under her breath as Cinder strode onto the shuttle. Cinder's sharp gaze immediately locked onto Blake, and her lips turned down with a scowl.

“What’re you doing here?” she snapped, so Blake raised the wipes as an answer. “Why aren’t you working on the maps?”

“Yang told me to clean the shuttle –”

“And Adam told you to translate the maps.”

“Then he decided he wanted me to clean the shuttle more.”

The response put Blake on thin ice, but she was also telling the truth. Cinder seemed to know it too, as she glared for several seconds before brushing past. There was no time to relax, however, as Zimon poked his head up from behind the crate to see what was going on. Blake quickly motioned for him to duck back down, which he did, but now her heart was really racing.

“Are you done yet?” Cinder asked upon reaching the cockpit. “We need you to take over flight. Davies got sick.”

“Oh *now* you need me for something?”

Hearing the condescending tone, Blake stared at the seat she was cleaning and pretended that she wasn’t listening, especially when Cinder glanced her way.

“I don’t *need* you for anything,” Cinder replied in a dangerously-low voice. “If you don’t want to do your job, we’ll find someone who will.”

“You’re going to replace me? What’s Adam got to say about losing his best pilot?”

“Don’t worry. Adam gave me full discretion to deal with you and Mercury.”

While the veiled threat hung in the air, Blake slowly wiped the same spot over and over again rather than move and risk attracting their ire. It had been obvious for quite some time that Emerald disliked Cinder, but talking back like that was asking for something worse than a scolding.

“Great. So you can use us to get his attention, then drop us, but still boss us around?”

“That’s exactly right.”

When Cinder took a step closer to Emerald, Blake briefly worried that she might attack. Instead, she leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper that Blake still heard clear as day.

“Don’t forget...you’re just a penniless thief who somehow learned how to fly. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you’re anything more.”

With a smirk in place, Cinder sauntered off the ship while Emerald glared daggers into her back. The unmistakable fury in Emerald's red eyes voiced how angry that interaction made her, and now Blake better understood why she hated Cinder so much.

But the sudden silence made Blake worry that Zimon might leave his hiding spot, so she cleared her throat just to make some noise. Emerald leveled that glare upon her then, but the anger had already become something much more... calculated.

"You know what I hate more than anything?" Emerald said, her tone slow and purposeful as she held Blake's gaze. "Being underestimated."

"I understand the feeling," Blake replied, and Emerald gave her a thoughtful expression, as if seeing her as more than the 'new girl' for the first time, before turning off the ship and standing up.

"Well, I'm done. Have fun cleaning."

Emerald threw a wave over her shoulder as she walked off the shuttle, and Blake listened to her footsteps leave the hanger before sighing in relief. As soon as she was certain that both Emerald and Cinder were gone, she closed the ramp and turned towards the crates in the back.

"Zimon? You can come out now."

He obediently poked his head up and, upon her nod, slipped out from behind the crates. While he walked over, she grabbed Zam Zam from underneath the seat and handed the stuffed toy to him.

"He probably missed you," she said, doing her best not to come across as scolding. *"You'll take him with you next time?"*

Zimon nodded and hugged his stuffed toy to his chest, and she barely managed a smile before hearing more footsteps.

"Like right now," she whispered while ushering him back to the crates. This time, she made sure the stuffed animal went with him before returning to the bucket of cleaning supplies. Her pulse was racing already, and she really didn't want to do this again, especially not when two heavy knocks hit the exterior of the shuttle.

"Grunt, open up."

Yang's voice took a needle to the balloon of anxiety in her chest, and she

quickly lowered the ramp.

“Where have you been?” she asked while Yang hurried inside carrying a large black bag that looked like something to carry weapons in. The canvas material was rugged and strong, but she set it down gently while Blake closed the ramp behind her.

“Got caught up with Adam,” she explained before looking around. “Where is he?”

Blake motioned towards the crates, but Zimon didn’t make a sound.

“He’s scared of me,” Yang concluded with a frown.

“He’s not,” Blake argued as soon as she heard the dejection in Yang’s tone. “But Emerald and Cinder just paid us a visit, so he’s used to hiding now.”

The answer seemed to mollify Yang, but she still sent another glance Zimon’s way before shaking her head and kneeling beside the bag. “I brought some stuff,” she explained while opening it. The first container she removed was filled with food from dinner, followed by a second with snacks, and a third with desserts.

“You can give this to him...” she muttered while setting each container on the floor beside her.

Rather than pick anything up, however, Blake said, “*Zimon, do you want something to eat?*” and he immediately popped out of his hiding spot and practically skipped over to them.

“*Yang brought food for you,*” she explained, smiling when he showed no hesitation kneeling by Yang’s side.

“*This is all for me?*” he asked, his eyes shining with excitement while he looked up at her. Because she couldn’t understand him, however, Blake stepped in to answer.

“*It is,*” she replied as he opened the first container and made a sound of delight. But, before taking anything for himself, he offered the box to Yang.

“*Do you want some?*”

Sensing the question, Yang glanced at Blake for interpretation.

“He wants to know if you want some.”

“Oh. No, I’m fine. I already ate, but she’s probably hungry.”

When Yang pointed at Blake, Zimon turned and offered the box.

“I’m fine,” she told him before looking at Yang. “I’m fine,” she reiterated. Even though she should be hungry, the nerves in her stomach left no room for anything else. Fortunately, Zimon’s own hunger caught up to him, and he sat on the floor in the middle of the shuttle to eat.

With her adrenaline winding down, she sat near him and leaned against the rows of seats on one side of the ship. After a few seconds of silence broken only by the happy noises he made, Yang moved over and sat beside her – close, but not close enough that they might accidentally touch.

“Did you find out anything about him?” Yang asked, watching the little boy finish off a dinner roll before moving on to a tray of rice.

“He’s from Zitovia. His mom and dad were on the ship; they hid him in an air vent as soon as the attack happened. He thinks that was a week ago.”

“Damn...” Yang breathed out before shaking her head. “Does he have any relatives?”

“Aunts and uncles back on Zitovia.”

“Then he has a family to go home to.” “

“He does.”

“That’s good.”

Yang didn’t need to elaborate in order for Blake to understand her relief. What if Zimon had no living relatives? What would they do then? Fortunately, that wasn’t an issue. All they had to worry about was getting him off of the Inferno without alerting anyone to his presence.

“*This is good,*” he suddenly said, and Blake smiled when he lifted the tray of rice for them to see. “*Are you sure you don’t want some?*”

This time, he scooted over and offered a spoonful of rice to Yang, who waved it away.

“I’m good.”

Zimon understood the denial but sat down in front of Yang as he stuck the spoon in his mouth. His gaze remained on Yang’s arm while he chewed thoughtfully and, as soon as he finished that bite, he turned towards Blake.

“*Her arm’s metal!*”

He pointed towards Yang’s arm with the comment, and Yang shifted under the attention.

"It is," Blake replied. *"It makes her very strong."*

"That's cool. Can I have one too?"

"Maybe one day." Satisfied with the response, Zimon smiled and returned to eating. "He thinks your arm is cool," Blake explained.

"At least he doesn't think it's scary..." Yang muttered before lapsing into silence. Even so, she moved her arm in a way that suggested she wanted to hide it.

"You probably look like a superhero to him."

Blake hoped the idea would erase some of Yang's discomfort, but Yang merely gave a weak smile and didn't respond. In near silence, they watched Zimon finish the rice before finding the desserts and making another delighted noise while picking up a small piece of cake.

Midway through that slice, his gusto slowed down. When he paused and a yawn slipped out, Blake realized that his exhaustion had finally surpassed his hunger.

"Are you sleepy?" she asked, and he nodded while returning the nearly-finished piece of cake to the container.

"He's tired?" Yang asked when he yawned again and rubbed his eyes.

"Yeah, he's probably exhausted..."

"I brought some blankets and stuff. Figured we could make a little bed on the seats."

Blake gave Yang a surprised look for the thoughtfulness, but Yang was already pushing herself to her feet and grabbing a blanket from the bag.

"You want to sleep here?" she asked Zimon, pointing to a row of seats and holding up the blanket so that he could understand. After scrambling to his feet, he nodded and touched the blanket in her hands.

"Ok, you take that one."

Surrendering the first blanket to him, Yang pulled the bag closer and grabbed another thick cover from inside. Sensing an opportunity to help, Blake hurried over and picked up the other end of the blanket so that they could lay it across the seats. They repeated that process with another blanket before Yang pulled out a pillow and set it at one end of the makeshift bed.

"Alright little guy, up here."

Zimon needed no explanation to crawl onto the bed and pull the last blanket up with him. When he struggled to maneuver it with one hand but refused to drop Zam Zam from the other, Blake picked up the edges and helped tuck him in.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling first at her before grinning at Yang.

“Goodnight, kiddo,” Yang said before retreating to the other side of the ship.

“Goodnight, Zimon,” Blake added. “We’ll be right here if you need us.”

After he nodded and burrowed into his nest of blankets, Blake sat next to Yang and watched her lean her head back, close her eyes, and sigh. This time, Blake understood the feeling perfectly.

“Thank you,” she whispered, but Yang didn’t open her eyes.

“Don’t thank me yet. We could still die horrible deaths.”

“Right...”

After a few seconds of silence passed, Yang cracked open an eye and looked at her.

“Remember when I called you stupid, and you said that you’re smart, then I thought maybe you were right?”

“Yes...”

“I changed my mind. You are stupid.”

Blake actually laughed at the playful insult, and Yang’s lips curled with a smile.

“I’m starting to agree with you,” she added, which only made that smile grow.

For as often as she stepped out of line or followed her heart rather than her orders, this was probably the most dangerous situation she’d gotten herself into. Not only had she put her life at risk, but also Yang’s, and also a sweet little boy’s. The ‘smart’ thing would have been protecting herself, leaving Zimon, and hoping ISA found him in time. So yes, maybe she wasn’t very smart.

“At least you see it too...” Yang added before shifting in her seat and sighing. “If you want to go back and sleep, feel free. I’ll stay here.”

Though Blake appreciated the offer, she shook her head. “I won’t be able to

sleep anyway,” she added. “I can stay and you can go back.”

“I won’t lie and say I haven’t thought about it. Then when you get found out, I plead ignorance and one of us makes it out of this alive.” After a brief pause to consider that option, Yang chuckled. “Isn’t it more romantic this way? If we die, we’ll die together.”

“Oh, yes. Horribly romantic. Emphasis on ‘horrible.’”

“Thought so.”

When Yang laughed at their predicament, Blake smiled. Maybe they would die together, but at least they tried. At least they hadn’t turned their back on someone who needed their help. Of course, she might feel differently with her demise left up to Cinder or Adam’s imagination, but she hoped that future wouldn’t come to pass.

As the lights in the hanger shut off for the night, leaving only the dim emergency lighting to see by, her confidence in making it to tomorrow rose. Even Yang seemed to feel the same, as she sighed and relaxed even further. Across the ship, Zimon was already fast asleep, and his deep, steady breathing added to Blake’s growing relief.

“So...what got you into this?” Yang asked a few minutes later and waved a hand towards the ship when Blake looked at her.

“Well...I was playing cards, then you told me to come with you...”

Knowing where Blake was headed, Yang shook her head and chuckled again. “Not this, like this moment. This as in...the Blackguards? Being a mercenary? Crime, in general?”

“Oh.”

Even though Blake had the perfect answer – one that had been carefully crafted for her – she sat back and sighed. She didn’t want to use it, but what else could she do – tell the truth?

“I grew up on Ulia during the civil wars,” she recited from memory. “My parents died in the fighting, and I didn’t have any other relatives, so I talked my way onto a ship and...I’ve been doing whatever I can to survive ever since.”

“Sorry about your parents.”

“It’s fine.” Blake shook off Yang’s apology, which made her feel guilty that her parents were still alive and well. “It happens, right? The universe is a

dangerous place.”

“You can say that again...”

With Yang staring at her hands, Blake ventured to ask a question of her own.

“What about you?”

For a second, she thought Yang wouldn't answer. Because why would she? She didn't owe Blake anything, especially now. Then she clasped her hands together and sighed.

“My mom split shortly after I was born...she's probably dead now. Adoptive mom died when I was seven, and my dad right after I finished school. It was just me and Ruby for a long time, and then I lost her too.”

For a long time, Blake didn't know how to respond. What could she say to someone who'd lost so much? ‘I'm sorry’ didn't feel remotely good enough. Because she wasn't just sorry – she felt deeply sympathetic that Yang had to live through that and still lived with it to this day.

“So...how did you end up with the Blackguards?” she asked instead, sensing that Yang wanted to drop the subject entirely.

“I made it to Villes, where I ran into Adam. Nearly put his head through a wall, but he said he would help me. That he *could* help me. I just had to join and help him in return.” Thinking about the memory, Yang clenched her fists and shook her head. “Looking back on it, I wish I chose differently, but I was so...desperate.”

That word was almost impossible for Blake to comprehend, because Yang was anything but desperate. Powerful, strong, determined – she seemed capable of anything, so imagining her in such dire straits...

“Water under the bridge,” she added with a soft scoff. “Can't fix the past. Can only move forward.”

Just like that, the Blackguard version of her returned. Blake, however, refused to let go of what she just heard or how she felt when Yang explained her past. There was a real person beneath that armor; a deeply-scarred person, but a real person all the same.

“When you and Ruby got separated, did you think about going to someone for help? Like, I don't know...” Blake shrugged and tried to sound nonchalant even though she felt the opposite. “Like ISA? Or a group like that?”

With a harsh laugh, Yang leaned against the wall.

“I did go to ISA.”

“What did they say?”

“They said they had bigger problems than helping me find my sister.”

The response made Blake frown. Yang had no reason to lie, but that didn't mesh with how Blake viewed the Alliance. They were supposed to help as many people as possible. Sure, there were a lot of people who needed help – galaxies filled with people – but they could at least attempt a search.

“No wonder you don't like them...”

“I don't care about them one way or the other, so long as they're not trying to shoot me. They did what they had to do, and I did the same.”

“That's the best we can do, right?” Blake asked and, once Yang made a quiet noise of agreement, they drifted into silence once again.

More than anything, Blake wished she could go back in time and find Yang before Adam did. She wished that she was the one Yang came to for help, because she would have tried to help – that was her duty as an Alliance officer. But she was probably just beginning her training at the time, and Yang was probably on the other side of the galaxy. If it was possible – if they met earlier – what type of person would Yang be now?

Sighing away the thought, Blake focused on Zimon instead. Watching him sleep made her eyes heavy, but her mind was too wired to sleep.

Just then, she thought she heard something in the hanger, and held her breath while turning an ear to listen. After a few seconds passed and she heard nothing else, she relaxed and resumed breathing.

“You have really good hearing, right?”

“What makes you say that?” she asked, disconcerted by the observation until Yang chuckled and waved towards her ears.

“You have four ears. Either your hearing is really good, or your genetics are way too into accessories.”

“Oh.” Relaxing at the response, Blake smiled and decided not to deny it. “No one else seems to notice,” she said instead.

“Pretty sure they're too busy writing you off since you're 'only' the translator.”

“What about you?” Blake asked, and Yang responded by giving her a long, thoughtful look.

“I know better by now.”

The answer, combined with the way Yang looked at her, sent a wave of heat through her veins, and she looked at her hands while struggling to get those emotions under control. But she *liked* the idea that Yang didn't underestimate her the way everyone else did. It made her feel like Yang saw her. Not who she truly was - her Alliance background and purpose for being here - but who she was as a person underneath her supposed mercenary exterior. In a universe filled with ever-present dangers, being seen was a disarming and alluring thing...yet she didn't mind that Yang was the one seeing her.

When Zimon shifted in his sleep, she willingly latched onto the change of subject rather than dwell on her feelings any longer.

“How're we getting him off the ship?” she whispered with a nod across the room.

“I'm thinking we use that.”

When Yang pointed to the bag on the floor, Blake gave her a disbelieving look.

“You're serious?”

“Unless you've got a better idea. It's breathable, big enough, and I can carry it like a bag of weapons. You just have to convince him to stay quiet.”

As much as Blake abhorred the idea of carrying a child in a bag made for weapons, Yang's points were valid enough that she gave up without more argument.

“I think I can do that...”

“You've done a good job of keeping him quiet so far.” As soon as Blake looked over, Yang realized she just offered a compliment. “I mean,” she began, only to sigh and shake her head. “Nevermind. Too tired for that.”

The feeling was mutual, so Blake willingly accepted the subtle praise and the silence that came after it. The more time they spent together, the more she wondered what Yang would be like away from this lifestyle. Even as a Blackguard, she could be remarkably relatable, so what would happen if she was freed from Adam's clutches?

CHAPTER 13

Blake wanted to know, and had a feeling she would like the result.

“Well, if we survive...” she whispered to the not-so-imposing Blackguard by her side. “It will be quite the story, right?”

When Yang chuckled, offering yet another glimpse of the person she could be, Blake’s heart skipped a beat.

“I thought I had enough stories by now, but sure. Why not add one more?”

Chapter 14

The first thing Blake noticed after waking up was how stiff she was. Every muscle and joint protested the slightest movement while her mind sluggishly started up. Whatever her head leaned against didn't help the achiness, as it was hard as a rock underneath her ear. As soon as she opened her eyes and saw the shuttle, however, she jerked awake.

"Easy there," Yang whispered from beside her. "He's still sleeping."

While Blake's heart climbed back down from her throat, she realized that she was leaning into Yang's side, and had been sleeping with her head on Yang's shoulder. A blanket had been laid over her at some point during the night, leaving her far warmer than she should be after spending a night aboard the shuttle.

"How long was I out?" she asked, rubbing her eyes before scooting a respectful distance away. Her side protested the loss of Yang's warmth, but her cheeks were more than happy to generate some of that heat on their own.

"Couple hours."

"Sorry..."

The last thing she remembered was thinking that they could lay down on the seats and sleep too, but apparently she passed out before voicing that suggestion.

"Don't be. At least one of us got some sleep."

"You didn't sleep at all?"

Once Blake moved a little further away, Yang stretched her arms, yawned, and shook her head.

"Didn't want to risk it, but I'll be fine." After waving away Blake's concern,

Yang glanced towards the front of the shuttle. “I think we’ll land soon, so you should probably get out of here and get ready to leave.”

“But -”

“People need to see you,” Yang added before Blake argued. “I’ll stay with him. Just make sure most of the crew’s cleared out before you come back.”

“Ok...”

When Blake glanced at Zimon, still asleep in his bundle of blankets, Yang gave her a tired smile.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Blake still didn’t want to leave, but she understood Yang’s reasoning. If she went missing for too long, people might start wondering where she went. Those were questions she didn’t want to answer, so she snuck off of the shuttle and hurried to the living quarters.

It didn’t take long to realize that today would be different from every other day she’d experienced on the *Inferno*. Electric energy ran through the halls – the crew rejoicing that they finally had a day to do what *they* wanted to do. Any fragment of restraint had disappeared. Voices were loud, boisterous, and excited to find out what kinds of trouble they could get into during a single day.

Heeding Yang’s advice, Blake followed a path that led her past as many people as possible. First, she stopped by the rec room, then loitered in the cafeteria and picked up something to eat. Since her stomach was a mess of nerves, she carried breakfast back to her room, where she collected a few things to take off the ship with her.

Fortunately, she had taken some photos of the *Inferno* yesterday before going on her unexpected adventure with Yang. While not as many as she would have liked, there were more than enough for Command to get an idea of what the Blackguards were up to. After hiding that memory chip in her suit, she grabbed her IDs, combat knife, and breakfast before hurrying back into the hall.

Rather than take the most direct route to the cargo bay, she wove a winding path through the mostly-empty halls before ending up in the massive room leading outside. The ramp had already been lowered, and it looked like most

of the Blackguards had disembarked except for the unlucky few tasked with guarding the ship.

Just seeing dry land made her want to run down the ramp and feel the concrete under her feet. After spending so long in space, a day on the ground would be a welcome change. Of course, she couldn't relax until they got Zimon off the ship. Fortunately, relief was in sight.

"New girl!"

"Dammit..." she muttered before turning around. Walking towards her, looking bored and disinterested as ever, were Emerald and Mercury. Ret, on the other hand, looked overjoyed by the day off. That, or he was overjoyed to spend time with his two favorite people in the universe.

"What're you up to today?" Emerald asked as they neared her.

"Trying to meet a friend. Maybe do some shopping. What about you?"

"Emerald's teaching me how to fly!"

"Ret's *paying me* to take him to a flight sim," Emerald corrected him with a glare. "This isn't some charity shit. And if you load up," she added while snatching the stim from his hand. "I'll kick your ass."

Mercury chuckled at their love-hate relationship, which earned him a glare of his own.

"You headed out?" Ret asked, and Blake nodded before widening her eyes and patting her pocket.

"But I forgot my card. I'll see you guys later."

Worried that Ret would invite her along, she didn't wait for a response before rushing back into the Inferno. Now that most of the crew was gone, she and Yang shouldn't run into anyone on the way out. At least, that was her hope; the only way to find out was to give it a shot.

Not that they had much of a choice at this point. Zimon was already on the Inferno, and they had to do everything in their power to get him safely off of it. Fortunately, Blake found the shuttle bay empty, so wasted no time rushing over and knocking on the ramp.

"Yang."

Straining her ears to hear anyone else nearby, Blake also heard footsteps cross the floor of the shuttle before the ramp lowered. As soon as it touched

the ground, she hurried on board and prompted it to close behind her. Making it back to safety was a breath of relief, though she hardly allowed herself to celebrate while watching Yang walk back to Zimon, who held up his arms and grinned.

“*Again?*” he asked with excitement only a child could muster under the circumstances, and Yang somehow forced a sigh while lowering her arm.

“One more time,” she muttered as he wrapped his hands around her metal forearm.

Once he had a good hold, she curled her arm forward and lifted him right off the floor in the process. He giggled as he rose higher and higher in the air, until Yang had her arm at a right angle and gently lowered him back down.

“You’re pretty light, you know,” she commented before repeating the process. Again, he giggled, and she smiled while setting him down and offering a high-five. “Maybe I can keep you as part of my workout,” she teased, pinching his side and making him squirm away with a little squeal. “I bet you’d bench press nicely.”

“I’m sure that’s what he’s always wanted to be – gym equipment.”

After smiling at Yang, Blake offered her breakfast to Zimon, but he shook his head and grabbed his stuffed animal instead.

“He, uh, already ate and stuff,” Yang explained with a nod towards the containers from the night before. “Is everyone gone?”

“Mostly. Only a few stragglers and the guards out front.”

“Got it.” After a quick look around, Yang took a deep breath and let it out in a long exhale. “Ok. Think you can get him in the bag?”

Realizing that this was it – time to leave their relatively-safe hiding spot behind – Blake took a deep breath of her own before kneeling in front of Zimon and smiling up at him.

“*Good morning, Zimon. Did you sleep well?*”

“*Yes! It was warm.*” He was quick to smile as he gestured towards his makeshift bed. “*Then Yang let me eat cake for breakfast!*”

“*She did? That was nice of her...*” After sending Yang an amused look, Blake turned back to him. “*We have to leave the ship now, but we thought it’d be fun to play a game at the same time.*”

“What kind of game?”

“Do you see that bag over there?” When Blake pointed at the bag, Zimon nodded. *“How long do you think you can lay in there and be super, super quiet?”* After giving the bag a contemplative look, he beamed.

“A long time!”

“Yeah?” He was excited now, which filled Blake with relief. *“Then that’s what we’ll do. You can talk when we open it back up, ok? But not before.”*

“Ok!”

With the zeal only a child could have for such a request, Zimon skipped over to the bag and stepped inside. He then sat down in the middle, set Zam Zam on his lap, and pulled the two sides overtop of him. His little giggle filled the air as he laid down and disappeared underneath the black canvas, and Yang shared a look with Blake before reaching down and zipping it up. Even though there should be plenty of breathability through the zipper and fabric, she left it a little undone before grabbing the strap and pulling it over her shoulder.

Hearing another small giggle, she actually smiled before stopping herself and shaking her head. She then gave Blake another look - this one more concerned than the first - and it was safe to say they were both questioning their chances of survival. As cute as the sound was, it would instantly get them caught.

“You need to be quiet now, ok Zimon?”

After listening for a response and receiving none, Blake nodded to Yang.

“Just need to get off the ship...” Yang muttered before pushing the button to open the ramp. Once it was lowered, she set a brisk pace towards the cargo bay, and Blake stuck close to her side.

“Put those ears to use?”

“Of course,” Blake said before falling silent and listening for signs of life. Thankfully, it sounded like most of the crew had already left for the day, and it wasn’t until they approached the cargo hold that she heard voices.

This would be their biggest test. If they could walk through the hold without being stopped or raising suspicion, they should make it off the ship intact.

“Here goes nothing,” Yang whispered. The moment she walked through the doorway, however, she sighed.

Most of the crew had left – except Cinder, who was speaking to one of the guards until she spotted them.

“Should I leave?” Blake whispered when Cinder ended her conversation and turned towards them.

“No. Just stay with me.”

Blake did as instructed, but her pulse rose as they drew closer to Cinder. The ship’s ramp wasn’t far – they were nearly there – but Cinder stepped in front of them before they could leave.

“Look who decided to grace us with her presence,” she sneered, but Yang just scowled and tried to walk around. When Cinder moved in the way, forcing the confrontation, Yang gritted her teeth and squared her shoulders.

“Move.”

“I’d like to see you make me.”

“I’d love to, but I have better things to do.”

When Yang shrugged her free shoulder, Cinder shot a smirk Blake’s way.

“From the looks of her, you really don’t.”

Blake scowled at the insult, but she didn’t care what Cinder thought of her. What she cared about was ending this conversation as fast as possible so they could get Zimon out of here. Fortunately, Yang felt the same.

“You’d be surprised. She’s quite flexible.”

Seeing as how Cinder wanted to hear nothing positive about Blake, the response was perfect. Her smirk morphed into a deep scowl, and she immediately ended the interaction.

“Get a fucking room,” she snapped while shoving past Yang. But she bumped the bag in the process, and Zimon made a tiny noise of surprise.

When Cinder spun towards them, eyes narrowed, Yang chuckled and shifted the bag on her shoulder.

“A fucking room sounds great. Maybe we’ll recommission yours.”

Now thoroughly annoyed by the conversation, Cinder flipped them off and stalked back into the ship without another word. After watching her go, Yang shared a look with Blake and, unwilling to waste more time than that, they hurried off the ship together.

Neither of them said a word as they left the Inferno’s landing pad – a

remarkable spot on a clifftop hundreds of feet above a crystal bay expanding in the distance. Under different circumstances, Blake might stop and marvel at the beauty. Today, she dismissed the view and followed Yang along unfamiliar streets bustling with wayward travelers.

Having no idea where they were going, she stuck to Yang's side as if her life depended upon it. Theoretically, it did. She'd never been to Drideter before, so she didn't know the local customs or what areas she should avoid. Trusting that Yang knew where she was going, Blake searched for flashes of black armor or a rage-filled man with a scar running across his face.

Only when the Inferno was no longer in view did Yang slow down and sigh. The soft sound cued Blake to release the tension in her shoulders, hoping they had reached some semblance of safety for now.

"Hold on a second."

Motioning Blake after her, Yang ducked into a small alcove bordering the main street.

"Tired?" Blake guessed, but Yang gave her a nearly insulted look.

"Are you kidding me? He's lighter than any bag of weapons I've ever carried." When Blake's brow rose at the comment, Yang waved her hand. "Can you ask him if he's alright?"

For a second, Blake stared at Yang and considered pointing out the difference a day made. Deciding not to push her luck, she leaned closer to the bag and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"*Are you doing ok in there?*" she asked before listening for an answer. Several seconds of silence passed - long enough for worry to appear in her chest - before the bag shifted. Realizing what was going on, she smiled. "*You can talk now.*"

"*It's fun when it swings high!*" Zimon's muffled voice finally replied. When Blake laughed at the response, Yang looked at her with equal parts concern and curiosity.

"*Just checking. You can be quiet again now.*" When Zimon didn't reply, Blake smiled and motioned for them to continue their walk.

"He likes when you swing the bag," she explained to Yang as they returned to the street. Yang snorted with laughter at the response but quickly composed

herself and shook her head.

“Can’t believe I ever wanted kids...” she muttered instead, but Blake noticed her lower the bag so that it swung more with every step. Not enough to be conspicuous, but more than enough for someone to enjoy the swinging motion from inside.

“Did you really?” Blake asked, happy for the distraction.

“Yeah. Then I realized I’d be a horrible mom.”

Looking over, she frowned when she realized that Yang was serious.

“I don’t think that’s true,” she offered, but Yang stopped walking and gestured towards herself.

“Look at me, Blake.”

When Blake did as instructed, she saw all of the ‘issues’ Yang would point out. The blood-red eyes, the dangerous black suit, the metal arm covered in battle scars...but there was so much more to her than that. She could be kind, courageous, and determined to do the right thing. She wanted Blake to see all of the bad, but that was becoming harder and harder to do. If circumstances were different...she would be a great mom.

“I am,” Blake said simply, and Yang blinked in surprise before opening her mouth to respond. When no words came out, she shook her head and kept walking instead.

Understanding that the conversation was over, Blake put it out of her mind and observed their unfamiliar surroundings instead. Drideter wasn’t giving her the ‘cesspool of evil’ vibe yet, but that could be due to the direction Yang led them in - away from the busy areas that were bound to draw trouble - or it could be their matching Blackguard uniforms keeping trouble at bay. Regardless of the reason, Blake still kept her ears on high alert as they entered a quiet neighborhood.

“Where are we going?” she asked when her curiosity got the better of her. If they were searching for a pilot to get Zimon to Zitovia, the spaceports seemed like a better place to start.

“I know a lady,” Yang answered, still gently swinging the bag while she walked. “She’s...different...but willing to take on some...unusual requests.”

“Can we trust her?”

“I think so.”

That wasn't the most confidence-inspiring answer, but Blake was at Yang's mercy in this situation. She could request that ISA send someone to escort Zimon home, but she couldn't do that with Yang so intricately involved. Yang probably wouldn't hand Zimon over without knowing who he ended up with, and ISA couldn't create a plausible backstory and identity under such short time constraints. So Yang's contact it was, and Blake could only hope that Yang had good judgment.

Unsure of how far their destination was, Blake spent the time marveling at Drideter's architecture. No two planets were the same, and Drideter didn't break from that mold. The lush greenery and humid air made it feel like they were walking through a jungle, which made sense considering the planet was nothing but trees. The edge of the city, where the Inferno had landed, sat on a cliff towering above a vast bay that stretched nearly as far as the eye could see. The wood-lined streets and elevated, wooden homes only added to the sensation that the entire city sat amongst the trees, high above the forest floor.

After several more minutes of climbing, Blake decided to break the silence.

“What's Valerian steel?”

She wouldn't dare ask anyone else, but Yang was...an ally, of sorts. Considering they'd risked their lives for the young boy traveling by Yang's side, she was the one person who Blake somewhat trusted...though trust was a fleeting thing.

“It's a legend.”

When Yang didn't elaborate, Blake didn't pry. Several seconds later, however, Yang sighed.

“It's an ancient metal, supposedly better than anything else in the universe – stronger, sharper, lighter. Adam thinks he can find the old mines.”

“What would he do with a bunch of metal?”

“What do you think?” Yang asked, giving Blake a look. “Make weapons. Sell them. Get mega rich.”

That sounded like a partial plan, or the beginnings of a plan, but Yang motioned towards a small home before Blake asked what Adam would do

with the money. Rather than risk more questions, she followed Yang up the steps to a wooden house that looked the same as the last few dozen they had passed.

The decorative numbers on the door and the cheerful flowers planted outside were a far cry from a clandestine meeting in a rough-and-tumble bar, so she had no idea what to expect when Yang knocked.

Footsteps approached the door then paused, probably as the person inside checked to see who stood outside. A few seconds later, the door opened to reveal a short, elderly woman with greying hair and eyes magnified by enormous glasses.

"I had a feeling trouble was about to knock on my door," were the first words out of her mouth, and Yang sighed.

"We'll make it worth your while."

"You always know just what to say," the woman replied, backing away and waving Yang through. When Blake moved to follow, however, an arm shot out to stop her.

"And who are you?"

"New grunt," Yang answered before Blake could, and the woman returned her gaze to Blake with even more curiosity.

"A grunt, you say..." she mused before giving Blake one of the most alarmingly-analytical looks she'd ever received.

Her mind immediately conjured up the memory of the man in the marketplace - the one who somehow knew she was an Alliance agent by how she smelled - and she suddenly worried that this woman might do the same. Instead, the woman leaned close and lowered her voice.

"Has she made it worth *your* while?" she whispered, her eyes dashing Yang's way before she tilted her head. "Or have you not realized yet?"

Blake's brow rose at the remark, which felt very personal while also making no sense. If she hadn't realized something, how could this stranger know before her?

"Maria," Yang interrupted in an exasperated tone, and the woman finally motioned Blake inside with a delighted laugh.

"You're such wonderful company, commander. Always so...at odds."

Maria's tone was light and playful, but Blake couldn't shake the feeling that much more was going on than she understood. She didn't sense any malice though, so...that was good.

But what did Maria mean about Blake realizing something? Or Yang making it worth her while?

"Listen, we just want to know if you can help." Yang sounded agitated, and Blake understood why, especially if Maria's words hit as close to home for Yang as they did for her. "We're trying to get someone home."

"Where are you trying to get to?" Maria asked Blake, who shook her head. "Not her."

After taking a deep breath and sharing a look with Blake, Yang carefully set the bag on the floor and unzipped it. As soon as it opened, Zimon sat up and beamed at them.

"Did I do good?"

"You did very good," Blake assured him before looking at Maria to gauge her reaction. And Maria stared at Zimon for a long, long time before turning to Yang.

"Always so at odds..." she repeated, only for Yang to sigh again.

"We found him on a raided ship. Parents are dead, but he has family on Zitovia."

"Found him...and saved him," Maria pointed out before crouching in front of Zimon. "Oh dear child...you've had quite the experience, haven't you? And to think...saved by one of the most *fearsome* members of the Blackguard..."

When she shot Yang an amused look, Yang frowned and crossed her arms.

"Can you take him or not?"

"Of course I can," the woman chided Yang, who dropped her arms and rolled her eyes. "But first," she said before giving Zimon another smile. "I'll have to create an identity for you." She playfully tapped his nose as she spoke, which made him giggle. "Then I'll have to hire a pilot willing to fly that far, and secure a ship, and *none* of it will be cheap."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand credits."

"Ten," Yang replied, and held up her hand when Maria opened her mouth

to argue. “We *both* know you’ll play hero and get more out of his family, so don’t even bother.”

From the way Maria chuckled but didn’t argue, what Yang said must be true.

“I do love playing hero,” she mused while offering Zimon a small candy from the bowl on her table. “And I’ll come up with a great story for how I found you.”

“Just get him home, please.”

“Please?” Maria turned and narrowed her eyes at Yang. “Don’t think I’ve heard you say please before...”

“There are a lot of things you’ve never heard me say before,” Yang replied through clenched teeth.

“Well since you asked nicely...” After looking at Zimon for a little longer, long enough that he gave an uncertain smile, Maria nodded. “Yes, I’ll take him home.”

The agreement filled Blake with relief, and she watched with a much lighter mind as Yang pulled out her card and sent the credits to Maria’s account.

“The second half when you send proof he’s home,” Yang stipulated, but Maria waved off the concern.

“It shouldn’t be difficult. It might even be a joy to have such a pure soul around.”

After giving Zimon another intent look, Maria nodded as if she liked what she found.

“Alright, then he’s all yours.” Upon reaching down to zip up the bag, Yang paused and pulled out Zam Zam. “Can’t forget this,” she said while handing the stuffed animal to Zimon. “Keep ahold of this guy, ok?”

When Zimon took the toy and hugged it to his chest, Yang looked at Blake and gestured towards him. “You wanna explain?”

Realizing that it was time to go, Blake nodded and knelt in front of Zimon. Regardless of the tremendous loss and trials he’d been through, he smiled at her - innocence and hope still shining in his eyes. One more trial lay ahead, but she had confidence that he would see it through with that smile still in place.

“*This is Maria,*” she explained as gently as possible. “*She’s going to get you*

home, so you need to do everything she asks of you. You can do that for us, right?"

Biting his lip, Zimon glanced at Maria before turning back to Blake.

"But...why can't I stay with you and Yang?"

He motioned towards Yang and, as soon as his eyes shimmered with tears, Blake's throat tightened with emotion.

"Yang and I have another mission to finish," she tried to explain. "And it's very dangerous, so it's safer for Maria to take you home. We would do it if we could, I promise, but...you understand, right?"

Though his frown suggested he didn't want to agree, eventually, he nodded.

"I understand..." he whispered, clutching Zam Zam tightly and sniffing once. "Will I see you again?"

"Of course." Even though Blake knew it was probably a lie, she didn't hesitate to give it. "One day, we'll see each other again. Will you be good in the meantime?"

"I will," he replied with a nod and a small, wavering smile. He then held his arms out, and she didn't hesitate to pull him into a hug. Closing her eyes and breathing out another sigh, she tried to ignore the vice around her heart while coming to terms with the fact that they would never see each other again. For someone so small, his impact on her would last for the rest of her life.

After pulling away, she smiled, patted his shoulders, and stood up. She then turned to Yang, who looked down at Zimon and held out her hand.

"Be good, little guy," she said while he grabbed onto her arm so she could lift him off the ground. When his feet dangled in the air, he giggled, and she smiled before gently setting him back down.

"Thank you," Yang told Maria before giving Zimon one last look and leaving the house behind. Feeling the lump in her throat grow, Blake forced a smile and quick wave before doing the same. Once outside, she silently followed Yang away from Maria's home and sorted through her turbulent emotions.

Right now, she felt a mixture of relief and heartbreak, along with a healthy dose of happiness that Zimon was on his way home. Maria seemed to genuinely care, in a strange way. If anything, her desire to reap the recognition of reuniting a lost child with his family made Blake confident that Zimon was in...decent hands.

She wished that she could take him home, but she had another mission to

finish first. Still, she did her best to ensure he made it home safe and sound. Actually, *they* did their best to get him home safe and sound.

Glancing to her left, she found Yang's mouth set in a frown while they walked back to the city. Saying that Yang looked upset might be a leap, but...she looked upset. Of course, as seemed to be the case with her, she quickly shook off those emotions in favor of her normal demeanor.

"Now that we've potentially survived," she said once Maria's house fell far behind them. "What're you going to do for the rest of the day?"

Right now, Blake felt like crying, but she fought off the feeling in favor of returning to her 'real' life.

"I'm going to find out if an old friend still lives here. But I haven't seen him in a while, so he could've moved on by now. Who knows."

"He isn't one of *those* friends, is he?"

When Yang made a motion with her hands, Blake wrinkled her nose. She had no idea who ISA sent to meet her, but it didn't matter - she would never consider *that* with any of them.

"No way." She shook her head but frowned when Yang looked relieved. "Why? Would you care if he was?"

"I'd have to kill him."

Yang made the joke with such a deadpan expression, Blake couldn't help but laugh.

"If he's still here, I'd like to keep him alive," she replied before glancing around. If she had her directions right, the rendezvous point was in the opposite direction. "It's that way, actually" she offered before turning back to Yang. "What're you going to do?"

"Meet a few people. Follow more leads."

Yang didn't have to elaborate for Blake to understand what her mission was. Sometimes, it felt like Ruby was the only thing that kept her going, and Blake worried what would happen if she ever reached the end of that road...especially if it didn't end happily. Fortunately, that wasn't a worry for now, as Yang glanced at her hands and shuffled her feet.

"Um, want to meet me at the market later? I can point out some interesting places or...something..."

The invitation immediately brought back Maria's words - about Yang making this worth her while - but Blake pushed the thought from her mind and smiled.

"Sure. That sounds nice."

"Great, then I'll...see you in a few hours? At the south end of the market?"

Blake nodded but, even though it felt like the time to leave, Yang's obvious concern held her in place. So she didn't move and, after a few seconds of waiting, Yang took a breath and voiced her worries.

"Just...keep your wits about you. You're a Blackguard now, and you never know who might have an issue with that."

The concern felt legitimate, and the advice was good, so Blake nodded again.

"I'll be careful," she added and, with that assurance, Yang finally nodded and backed away. Their gazes remained locked for a few more seconds before she finally turned and headed towards the crowds near the edge of the city.

Blake watched Yang walk away, with her black armor and intimidating arm sticking out like a sore thumb, before glancing around and setting off for her own destination. Part of her wished she hadn't lied about being here before because then she could have asked Yang for directions. Another part of her, a much bigger part, felt like she had already asked Yang for too much.

Yang risked her life to save Zimon. If that wasn't enough to make this 'worth it,' then what was?

Chapter 15

Nothing quite described the freedom of walking amongst a crowd of strangers on a foreign planet that Blake would probably never visit again. After spending such a long time in such close quarters with the Blackguards, she finally felt like she could let her guard down. Completely relaxing was out of the question - especially in a city where nearly everyone was involved in some type of illicit trade - but, for a few blissful hours, she was anonymous rather than the 'new girl' or 'grunt.'

Unfortunately, anonymity only went so far while wearing the trademark Blackguard armor. She would love to blend in as just another space-weary traveler; instead, she stood out as a potential threat to the people she passed. With Yang's warning still front of mind, she kept a firm grasp of her surroundings in case someone had an issue with the criminals she represented. So far, however, everyone kept a safe distance.

A sense of power emerged from the glances sent her way, but she tried not to let it go to her head. While intoxicating, their reactions stemmed from fear, and using her training to scare or intimidate others was something she'd sworn not to do.

To the best of her ability, she ignored the looks and maintained a lackadaisical pace along unfamiliar streets. Her rendezvous time had passed a little while ago, but rushing through the city would draw too much attention. So she meandered her way through the crowds and picked up the pace only when she made it to a residential area with fewer pedestrians around.

Command's message specified a time and address but nothing else. Though a commonly-used precaution against intercepted communications, the lack

of detail left her in the dark as she hurried along tired, worn-out streets.

Compared to Maria's neighborhood, which was strong and new, this section of the Drideter had been left to wither away. The homes were rotting, weather-faded, and in dire need of repairs, but she doubted the residents had the means to accomplish such a project. At least, the residents who still lived here probably couldn't afford the upkeep, but their numbers appeared to have dwindled over time.

With so few people around, this was the perfect place for a meeting. Movement and voices filtered from within a few of the houses, but most seemed either temporarily or permanently empty.

Just when she thought the disrepair couldn't get worse, she turned onto a street that looked wholly abandoned. Thick patches of weeds grew between the wooden planks underfoot, piles of dead leaves collected in the gutters, and the houses - if one could call such meager structures that - would probably collapse upon the next stiff breeze.

Midway along this derelict road, she reached her destination - a shabby, beaten-down building with a nearly illegible number carved in the doorframe. After glancing around to make sure the street was still devoid of life, she walked to the front door and hesitantly tried the handle.

Locked.

Confirming one more time that this was the right address, she took a deep breath and knocked twice. A shuffling sound in the room beyond sent her hand towards her blade, and she stepped back when footsteps approached.

Moments later, the door unlocked and opened a fraction of an inch. But that was it. Whoever was inside retreated without making themselves known, and Blake struggled to hear anything besides the breeze rustling leaves on the street and her suddenly-elevated heartbeat.

Caution winning out, she slowly pushed the door open with her non-weapon hand while keeping her other on the handle of her blade. Sunlight streaked the dusty room beyond, slipping through cracks in the boarded-up windows, and dead leaves covered the floor - such a thick pile of them that she had to pick up her feet to avoid making a ruckus.

"Badge one-six-five-eight," she whispered while taking another step

forward. “Identify.”

When a laugh filled the room, she spun towards the familiar sound and – the moment she spotted Sun hiding behind the door – leapt into his arms for a hug.

“Sun!” After briefly pulling away to confirm it was him, she hugged him again. “How the hell did you get them to send you?”

“Kissed a whole lot of ass. You miss me?”

“You have no idea.”

While he hugged her, she closed her eyes and savored every bit of familiarity about him. After spending the past few weeks surrounded by people who might try to kill her at any second, the company of someone she trusted more than anyone in the universe was an indescribable relief.

“Have long you been here?” she asked, finally pulling away to give him a good look. He looked happy, healthy, and every bit like the boy who tried and failed to hit on her during their first day of training.

“Just a couple hours.”

Waving off her concern, he led her over to the only pieces of furniture in the house – a small table and accompanying chairs that had already been cleared of leaves. Various Alliance devices sat on the table, but what captured her immediate attention was the *food*.

“Brought some of your favorites.”

“You’re my favorite.” Grabbing one of the tuna rolls and taking a bite, she confirmed it was even better than she remembered. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed these...”

“Probably not as much as you’ve missed me.”

“Right now, it’s hard to decide.”

Sun laughed at the response, and Blake devoured the first roll before starting another. Up until this moment, she had forgotten that she skipped her last few meals in favor of worrying about Zimon. Now that Zimon would soon be on his way home with Maria, her ravenous appetite reared its head.

“Are they not feeding you or something?”

“They are, but typical space food. Nothing good.”

“Then I should’ve brought more.”

“This is more than enough,” Blake assured him before reaching for the salmon spread – her second favorite thing in the universe. After grabbing a fork and eating the first few bites straight from the tin, she noticed him staring at her.

“What? I’m hungry.”

“It’s not that.” He shook his head, but his gaze returned to her with a growing level of concern. “What happened to your neck?”

“Oh.” Wishing she had a way to hide the bruising, she cleared her throat and shrugged instead. “It’s nothing.”

The bruising was better but still looked like exactly what it was. The last thing she wanted to do, however, was make Sun worry about something beyond his control. And she didn’t want to remember the look in Adam’s eyes as he strangled her to within an inch of her life...all because she hesitated for a split second too long in taking a stranger’s life?

To a psychopath, that was more than enough of a reason.

“Are you ok?”

Realizing that her desire to not worry him was destined for failure, she nodded and forced an assured smile.

“I’m fine, Sun. It’s a hard life, but nothing I can’t handle.”

He looked like he had a lot to say to that, so she focused on the food rather than hold his gaze. She wished that she could explain what it was like – the ever-present fear, worry, and loneliness – but she couldn’t possibly put those feelings into words in what little time they had.

“They’re pretty horrible, huh?” he said after a few seconds of silence, but she looked up and shook her head.

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Come on, Blake,” he replied with a scoff. “They’re criminals.”

That argument used to be good enough for her. Today, she bit her lip and thought about Yang. Yang was a criminal – Blake had watched her do things that fell squarely outside of the law – but...she was different. She saved those people on the Riol’s ship. She risked her life for Zimon. She *listened* to Blake. How could Sun understand that when he hadn’t witnessed it for himself?

“They are,” Blake agreed. “And *most* of them are horrible, but some of them

aren't there because they want to be..."

The longer she spoke, the more worried his expression grew, so she gave up and shook her head.

"But you're right - they're all bad."

She couldn't expect him to understand the complexities of the Blackguards. Without talking to them, spending time with them, *living* with them, how could he? It wasn't as simple as branding them all evil; they had their own reasons for joining. Some had a penchant for violence and crime, but others were...different. At least, *one* of them was different.

One day, when they had all the time in the world, she would try to explain. Until then, she had to accept that her firsthand experience gave her insight not learned through the Academy. Still, she couldn't think of Yang as 'horrible' no matter the circumstances.

"Alright," Sun acquiesced after letting her finish a second tuna roll. "They only let me come out here if you gave me the dirt."

"Right." Brushing off her hands, she pulled out the memory file she hid in her suit prior to leaving the ship. "Pictures of the Inferno," she explained while sliding it to Sun. "Lots of drugs, but they're mostly dealing in weapons and munitions - high grade, too. You should see the stuff they save for themselves."

"That good?"

"It makes ISA's armory look pedestrian."

He scoffed at the claim, but the pictures would prove her right.

"And that's just their regular business," she added. "But they're up to something else."

"The diplomats?" he asked, and she nodded.

"The people they went after were targeted for their knowledge." Picking up the memory drive, she plugged it into his computer and opened the first photos of the maps. "That led to these."

"Old, crinkled papers?"

"Maps," she explained. "Stolen from the Riol family's archives on Lurus."

"Lurus? Wait - Blake, were you there?" When Sun gave her an incredulous look, she pointedly turned away. "Holy shit," he breathed out, but she rushed

on.

“They only brought me in...after,” she explained as if she needed to justify her presence at such a crime scene. “They’re having me translate the maps, which supposedly lead to Valerian steel mines.”

“What’s Valerian steel?”

“I’m hoping Command can find out. The only thing I know is that it’s some legendary metal Adam wants to use to create new weapons. I don’t know if it’s real or not, but if it is, we don’t want him getting his hands on it.”

“Got it,” Sun replied with a nod. “Drugs, weapons, even better weapons. Sounds like standard bad-guy stuff.”

“Mostly, but these maps are almost...mythological. And Adam’s not the type to believe in that stuff, so I’m worried he actually found something.”

From everything Blake had transcribed so far, she couldn’t understand how Adam hoped to find something so obscure. Even if he knew the entrance to the mines, he needed a key to enter. At least, that was her assumption considering the ‘key’ references on each and every map.

Being so late to this mystery, she didn’t even know if the maps meant one key, multiple keys, or an allegorical ‘key.’ All she’d gathered was that the Valerians locked the mines in a way that prevented anyone other than the frequently-referenced ‘worthy’ from entering. Of course, the information was probably thousands of years old - a lot had changed in the past thousand years.

“But he hasn’t found it yet, right?”

“Right.” Coming out of her thoughts, she nodded and pushed that concern from her mind. “But the sooner Command can make sense of it, the better.”

“I’ll mark it as extra, uber important,” Sun joked before taking one last look at the screen. “And what about, you know, how they work and stuff?”

When he waved a hand, Blake sat forward to recount what she’d learned so far.

“It’s bizarre, Sun. A lot of how they’re trained is similar to how we were.”

“Really?” He scrunched up his nose at the thought - even more so when she nodded. “But they’re just a group of criminals.”

“An *organized* group of criminals,” she stressed. “And disciplined. They

have a training center just like ISA does. They run similar drills, use similar commands...you can't even join one of the squads unless you passed their training. They're taking already-dangerous people and teaching them how to be even more dangerous."

Sitting back in his seat, Sun mulled over the information before shaking his head.

"Well, we kinda figured that, right?"

"Yes, but seeing it in action is..." Trailing off and thinking back over her time with the Blackguards, she sighed. "It's terrifying. I don't even want to think of what they could do if they keep growing unchecked."

"That's why we're going to take them out."

Sun's certainty was reassuring, and Blake smiled while imagining that goal coming to fruition. Adam and Cinder would spend the rest of their lives in a maximum-security prison cell. The rest of the Blackguards could join them, although life sentences for the entire crew were unlikely. Especially for people like Ret, whose only crime was making the ill-advised decision to join.

Then there was Yang...

"So are you gonna join the squads?" Sun asked, pulling Blake's mind away from that topic.

"Not yet. Yang asked if I wanted to, but Adam won't let me. Pretty sure he's worried I'll die before finishing the maps."

"They realize you're like...one of the top knife fighters in our class, don't they?"

"I really hope they don't," she replied with a laugh. "And it's fine. I'm happy figuring out the crew for now."

"You'd pass their training so easy though."

While Sun waved off the claim as indisputable fact, Blake wasn't so certain. She might have been one of the best fighters in their class, but she hadn't stood a chance against Yang. Considering Yang and Adam were in charge of training...it might be harder than imagined.

"I'm not so sure..." she mused, replaying the memory of her spar with Yang in Yang's room. If given another chance, she would do better...she hoped.

Thinking about Yang, however, reminded her of a personal request she made

quite some time ago.

“Ruby Rose...”

As soon as she said the name aloud, hesitation bloomed in her chest. Even though she still strongly believed that Yang was an integral part of this mission, her interest in the answer felt personal now, and that scared her. Still...she had to know.

“Have you found anything?”

The moment he gave her that look - the one that preceded bad news - she wished she never asked.

“Nothing yet...” When her expression fell, he hurried to add, “But I’m still trying. It’s just...the universe is big, you know?”

“I know.” Swallowing her disappointment, she forced a smile instead. “Thanks for looking though.”

“No problem,” he said before giving her a thoughtful look. “Why’re you looking for her?”

“I think she could be helpful.” Sensing he had questions that she couldn’t answer without getting into the topic of Yang, she shook her head. “It’s just a hunch.”

“Want me to put out a bulletin?”

In the midst of shaking her head, she paused and considered the offer. Alliance bulletins were normally useless. With countless planets in the universe, they only worked if the person being searched for stumbled onto a planet under Alliance dominion. Even then, that person had to miraculously spot the bulletin *and* self report to ISA - something not everyone was willing to do. Effectively, it was a shot in the dark, but why not give it a shot?

“Sure.”

“Want to add a message?”

When Sun prepared to note down the message, Blake tried to think of something that would convince Ruby to respond. Something that unquestionably linked the bulletin to Yang...

“How about ‘I don’t drive skives anymore.’”

“Aren’t skives those super-fast metal things people race dunes with?”

“Yup.”

“When have you driven one of those??”

“I haven’t.”

Again, Sun had more questions, but he chuckled and kept them to himself.

“Ok,” he said while copying the cryptic message down. “Anything else?”

Blake didn’t think she had more to ask until she remembered a young Zitovian hidden on the other side of the city. If she couldn’t take Zimon home herself, the least she could do was have ISA follow up and ensure he made it there safely.

“Actually, yes. Can you do me a favor?”

“Lots of favors these days,” he replied with a grin. “Almost like you don’t have access to ISA resources anymore.”

“It sucks sometimes,” she admitted before getting to the crux of her request. “But there’s a little boy named Zimon who will be leaving Drideter soon with a woman named Maria. I’m sure they’ll use aliases, but can you try to put a tag on him and make sure he makes it to Zitovia?”

“Uh, sure. But...a kid?”

“It’s a long story...” she sighed and, fortunately, he accepted the response with an easy smile.

“We’ll have to go through everything over a few drinks when you get back.”

“That sounds like a good idea. You’re buying.”

“Pretty sure I can scrounge up enough credits for that...” he joked before glancing towards the door. “When’re you taking off?”

With the reminder that she couldn’t sit here and talk forever, she looked at the time and sighed.

“In a couple hours...” Remembering that she also made plans that she shouldn’t bail on, she sighed a second time and met his gaze. “I wish I’d known you were here...I’m supposed to meet someone before heading back.”

“Don’t worry about it.” If she was worried, the feeling disappeared with his easy smile and wave. “I’m just happy I got to see you, even a minute would’ve been worth it.” When she raised her brow at that response, he laughed. “Ok, ok. I *did* suck up a lot to get here, so I needed at least a few minutes to make it worth it.”

“Glad to see you’re learning how to play the game.”

“Not just play, Blake – I’m the *master*. You’d be so proud of me – I finally figured out what I got the smile for.”

When he flashed a bright, charming smile, she laughed and shook her head. Once she quieted down, however, silence hardly settled over the room before he spoke again.

“Any idea where you’re headed next?”

“Honestly, no idea. Someone mentioned Ursa Nebular, but I usually don’t know until we’re already there – why?”

“I’m getting Command to transfer me around,” he replied with a grin. “Trying to stay close in case you need me.”

The kindness wasn’t lost on her, especially after spending so long cooped up with people who couldn’t exactly be called nice. His inherent goodness was the breath of relief she needed and, even though the last thing she wanted to do was leave, she stood and reached for a hug.

“Not to be rude,” she said while wrapping her arms around him. “But I hope I don’t need you.”

“I hope you don’t either, but you know how much I like to be the calvary.”

Smiling at the response, which was so like him, she tightened her arms and wished she didn’t have to let go. But she had a job to do, and she was determined to see it through.

“It was so good to see you,” she whispered while steeling herself to leave.

“It was good to see you too.” After hanging on for a few more seconds, Sun pulled away and smiled. “And good to see you haven’t changed.”

The comment put a dent in her smile, but she hoped he didn’t notice as he patted her shoulders and moved away. In many ways, she felt the same – same morals, same values, same goals. But in other, more subtle ways...living as a Blackguard didn’t come without some measure of sacrifice. She couldn’t put a word to it yet, but she knew that she had changed, whether Sun wanted her to or not. The real question was...had she changed for better or worse?

“I’ll head out first?” she asked while gesturing towards the door. When he nodded, she backed towards it and smiled one last time. “Take care of yourself, ok?”

“Same to you,” he said with a nod and much sadder smile.

Feeling her throat constrict, she quickly opened the door and slipped outside. Greeted by the unfamiliar landscape – a sharp contrast to the familiarity and comfort of her closest friend – she sighed and briefly considered staying. Would the Blackguards even look for her if she didn't show up at the Inferno tonight? Or would they assume she joined another ship or suffered some unfortunate fate at the hands of another traveler?

Yang would look for her.

She was so certain of that, she gave up the idea of staying and walked away from the small, dilapidated house. Leaving Sun behind etched another crack upon her heart, but they both knew she had a mission to complete. Once she'd gathered enough information and Command recalled her, the two of them could spend time together like they used to.

That time wasn't now. And, after Yang took such a big risk for Blake's sake, repaying that kindness with desertion would be wrong. Besides, she *wanted* to see Yang again, even though Yang was inextricably tied to the Blackguards.

That connection caused a great deal of conflicting emotions, but Blake pushed past them while heading towards Drideter's bay. From their walk earlier in the day, she knew exactly how to get to the marketplace, which bustled with activity as the sun set.

Darkness would arrive soon, but that hardly deterred the travelers stopping by for the night or on a mission to get off the planet as soon as possible. The organized chaos brought back memories from her first foray into such lawless territories, which had nearly ended badly. This time, she knew she didn't smell like a cop.

And this time, she learned what it felt like to be here as a Blackguard. While moving towards the south end of the square, keeping a lookout for Yang, she noticed how passersby took one look at her armor and slid out of the way. Others glanced at her out of the corners of their eyes before turning away or trying to remain unnoticed. And some actually turned around and walked away rather than cross her path.

Again, a sense of power and pride tickled at the edge of her mind, growing stronger with every step. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to fear her, but it was too easy to convince herself that their reactions were a show

of *respect*, not fear. After spending so long treated as someone with no skills outside of her knack for languages, respect felt all too welcome.

Now she understood why the Blackguards joined, and why they stayed. For vagabonds searching out status and purpose in a galaxy with very little, the sense of importance must be addictive. To Blake, however, it was yet another lesson in the danger of such criminal groups, especially those allowed to fester uncontrolled.

The more prominent the Blackguards became, the more people would want to join, and the more soldiers Adam had to do his bidding. She couldn't let that happen, so she couldn't leave with Sun. She couldn't run home. Instead, she searched for a dash of radiant blonde hair.

The closer she drew to the south end of the plaza, the more her anticipation grew. After what happened with Zimon, she wondered where her and Yang's relationship stood. How would Yang treat her now that they'd done something against the Blackguard way? To Blake, it felt like they'd ascended to a new level of closeness, but she needed Yang to confirm if that was true.

The thought disappeared when she passed a dark alcove and someone suddenly grabbed her and pulled her into it. Instinct immediately took over, and she landed an elbow in her attacker's stomach before struggling to break free. When an arm locked around her wrist, she swung with her other but missed and ended up with both hands caught and pinned to her sides. Without use of her arms, she stomped her heel down on her attacker's foot.

"Ouch! Damn, you're feisty."

The moment she recognized Yang's voice, she froze. And, when Yang released her, she spun around and glared.

"You deserved that."

"I probably did."

Not at all bothered that she just got elbowed in the side and had her foot stomped on, Yang smiled. And, just like that, Blake's annoyance evaporated. Instead, a pleasant surprise returned when Yang's smile became almost nervous and shy.

"I was kinda worried you wouldn't make it," Yang admitted, unleashing the first butterflies in Blake's chest.

“Sorry. I got caught up, but...I’m here now.”

Blake motioned towards the dark alcove near the market, which she hadn’t noticed in the shadows cast by the setting sun – a mistake on her part. Disappointment in herself would have to wait, however, as Yang gave another timid smile.

“I’m glad you are.”

In just a few words, Yang implied more than Blake could have imagined, and she suddenly felt anxious for whatever would happen next. Based on Yang’s expression, she felt the same anxiety or nerves, but she put on a smile while gesturing towards the marketplace.

“Want to take a walk with me?”

Chapter 16

Faced with Yang's sincere, hopeful smile, Blake realized that if she hadn't wanted to be here, she would have spent the rest of her time on Drideter with Sun. She would have made up an excuse for not showing up and risked the repercussions, which would only range from minimal to mild.

She *wanted* to be here. She wanted to spend time with the version of Yang that few, if any, ever saw. So when Yang asked if she wanted to go on a walk, the answer was easy. The answer was "Of course," as she motioned for Yang to lead the way away from the alcove.

"Did you find anything?" she asked while following Yang to the sidewalk bordering one end of the open-air marketplace. When Yang sighed and hung her head, however, she wished she hadn't brought it up.

"No...just more dead ends."

Yang looked so disheartened by the lack of progress, Blake wanted to reach out and console her. Realizing how that might look, however, she kept her hands to herself and wished she had good news to offer. Instead, she could only hope that Sun found something - any sighting of Ruby would prove that she was still alive and out there, somewhere.

"It's nice to be on solid ground," Blake added, sensing that Yang didn't want to dwell on the subject any longer.

"Definitely. Always makes me wish I didn't spend so much time holed up in a tin can."

The ease with which Yang expressed that desire made Blake pause. That comment could be interpreted as a wish to leave the life of a mercenary behind - a wish to leave the Blackguards behind - but Yang brushed past it without

realization.

“I’m guessing you’ve been to the market before. It’s pretty much mandatory to stop and buy something.”

When Yang waved towards the sprawling marketplace, which could be seen in totality from this angle, Blake filed the comment away.

“Sure, but...it’s been so long since I’ve been here, you might as well pretend I’ve never been.”

Yang chuckled at the response, which made Blake feel relieved and guilty at the same time.

“Alright then, welcome to the market.”

With that introduction, Yang bowed and extended one arm towards the marketplace - nothing more than a wide street with small businesses lining each side. Each vendor occupied a stall crafted of wood, likely from the forests nearby, and featured such a wide variety of merchandise that no traveler should leave disappointed.

“There’s some great food at the other end,” Yang added as she led them onto the crowded street. “Might be worth picking some up if you’re as sick of the cafeteria food as I am.”

“Enticing...” Blake mused while glancing at every stall they passed.

“Are you talking about me or the food?”

When Blake spotted Yang’s grin, her cheeks warmed.

“The food,” she replied with a forced eyeroll.

If Yang was going to make cavalier statements like that, Blake needed to be ready to counter. Even though the comments flustered her, she refused to be the only one suffering a blush at the thought of just how enticing Yang was.

“If you’re suggesting that you’re for sale,” she added. “I’m interested in hearing the price.”

The comeback was too late to be potent, but Yang still laughed as they made their way down the street. As usual, Yang’s laughter put a smile on Blake’s lips and left her fantasizing about what *being* with Yang would be like. What if they were just two regular people shopping rather than two Blackguards avoided by everyone in their path? If that were the case, would Blake consider the possibility even more than she was right now?

Without much thought, she knew that she would. Why wouldn't she? Yang was witty, smart, beautiful, and secretly compassionate. There were some dark parts to her - mysteries, secrets, and regrets tied to her past - but Blake refused to write her off as a lost cause. Her past shaped her. Her present constrained her. Yet, through it all, Blake just wanted to know her better.

"Not sure you could afford someone like me," Yang teased before walking closer to one of the stalls. "Need anything? Neck guard, perhaps?"

When Yang pointed at a piece of curved metal that could fit around someone's neck, Blake shook her head and tried not to smile.

"You're on pretty thin ice," she warned, but Yang just laughed.

"That's my favorite place to be."

Spotting the lightness in red eyes, Blake smiled and turned away before Yang became any the wiser. They were in public, but Yang's eyes were changing. Whether due to the location, distance from the Blackguards, or her presence, she didn't know. She didn't care either, so long as she was the one who got to enjoy this moment.

Yang was more open and relaxed than she had ever been, and their shared experience with Zimon must have something to do with it. Maybe Blake had proven herself trustworthy enough to hear Yang's thoughts. Or maybe Yang realized that Blake wouldn't do anything with that information. What could she possibly do...tell Adam, who already nearly killed her? Or Cinder, who *wanted* to kill her?

"Oh, these guys sell some of the best weapons I've ever seen," Yang said before leading them to a stall with several weapons on display. "If you have the credits, check these out. Although I don't know what they speak, so I'm pretty sure they rip me off most of the time."

When Yang nodded to the two men tending the table, they gave her a respectful nod in return.

"I wouldn't call it *'ripping off,'*" one of them mumbled in Cadanese.

"*More like righting a few wrongs,*" the other said with a chuckle. "*They deserve it, anyway.*"

"*You probably don't want her to know that,*" Blake interrupted them. Their eyes instantly widened in horror, then they started sputtering.

“W-we’re kidding!” the first stammered. “We wouldn’t rip you off!”

“It’s ok.” After smiling to assure them that she wasn’t upset, she gestured towards the weapons on display. “These are beautiful, by the way.”

“Would you like one? Any one you want – on us.” One of the men waved his arm over the selection and nodded for her to take her pick. While the weapons looked well-crafted and high-quality, she shook her head.

“Thank you, but that’s unnecessary,” she added before walking away. Seconds later, Yang fell into step beside her.

“That’s amazing.”

“Not really.” Blake shook her head, but Yang stubbornly nodded. “It’s really not,” Blake insisted. “It’s innate – all it took was my parents deciding to foster it.”

“So? You still had to learn all those languages, and you have to remember them and keep them straight.”

“Eh.” Feeling her cheeks warm, Blake shrugged away the compliment. “It helps when large portions of the universe speak variations of a few dozen languages. I can speak Cadanese because it’s similar to Candan, which is popular in...some parts of the galaxy.”

She stopped just short of pointing out that Candan was popular on Alliance planets. As a supposed mercenary, she should be avoiding ISA planets as much as possible, not visiting and learning their languages.

“It’s still cool.” Fortunately, Blake’s near mistake went unnoticed as Yang moved on. “I wish I had an ability like that.”

“Don’t you?”

When Blake motioned towards Yang’s eyes, Yang scoffed.

“Sure, my eyes turn red. That *definitely* helps me communicate with people across the galaxy.”

“But you’re Anima.”

“And?” Yang asked, giving Blake a curious look as they neared the end of the marketplace.

“And that means you’re...” Struggling for the right word, Blake settled upon a simple, “Magnetic.”

“‘Magnetic,’ huh...guess that’s what makes this so easy to connect.”

When Yang lifted her prosthetic arm and grinned, Blake rolled her eyes and continued towards the next stall.

“You know what I mean.”

“It means you’re attracted to me?”

Blake didn’t dare look at Yang right now, even though she felt Yang watching her for an answer.

“It means *everyone* is,” she replied without making eye contact. She expected Yang to tease her about the workaround answer, which was honest without being forthcoming. Instead, they walked for several seconds in silence before Yang spoke again.

“So...favorite weapon?”

Opting for a subject change, Yang waved towards another stall advertising an assortment of knives and pistols.

“Depends on what I need it for. In most cases, I’ll pick a blade over anything.”

“So you’re good with your hands?”

Sensing that Yang’s playful side had returned, Blake smirked and said, “No, I’m *great* with my hands.”

The response worked, and Yang laughed.

“What do you think about this then?”

After motioning Blake out of the main walkway, Yang pulled out her knife and handed it over. Accepting it by the handle, Blake gave it a quick inspection and nodded.

“This is nice.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Wow.”

Yang didn’t seem in a rush to have it back, so Blake spun the knife in her hand before balancing it across her palm. The blade she’d left behind was nice, but this one felt like it was made for her – the perfect size and balance. “Where’d you get it?” she asked with every intention of finding one for herself.

“Some jarhead on Icarus decided to pick a fight. He lost, I kept the knife.” Yang shrugged off the memory before smiling. “Why don’t you take it?”

Caught off guard by the offer, Blake nearly dropped the knife on the ground.

“What?”

“Why don’t you take it?” Yang repeated, but Blake shook her head and tried to return the blade.

“I couldn’t...”

“Sure you can. Or – how about we trade?” Yang reached over and, after pausing to request permission, pulled the knife from Blake’s side. “It’s not sentimental, is it?” she asked while looking over the blade gifted by ISA at the start of Blake’s mission.

“No, it’s not.”

It meant nothing to Blake at all; it was merely a tool provided as a means of protection. But that didn’t explain the strange emotion brewing in her chest when Yang slipped the blade into a sheath near her thigh.

“Then you don’t mind trading, right?”

In terms of quality, Blake was getting the better end of the bargain, but it felt like accepting a gift. A gift. From a Blackguard leader. Not just any Blackguard leader – Yang. And Yang extended the offer in a way that made her feel...special.

Leaving those thoughts alone for now, she gave her new knife another look before slipping it away.

“Thank you.”

The gratitude sounded strange out loud, and Yang turned away upon hearing it, but Blake would swear a bit of red dusted Yang’s cheeks. Determined not to fall into the same embarrassment, however, Blake cleared her throat and wondered what the other shoppers would think if they were watching the interaction.

“Why do you carry two?” she asked, noticing that Yang carried blades on both her left and right side.

“You never know when you’ll need a second one.” Shrugging off the strategy, which was sound, Yang motioned towards the nearby vendors. “Here’s the food I told you about. Want anything?”

Looking over several popular booths covered in a variety of delicacies she’d never seen before, Blake sniffed the air and heard her stomach grumble. Even though she just ate the tuna rolls Sun brought her, apparently she was still

hungry.

“I wouldn’t even know what to get...”

“How about I get my favorite and we share?”

Again, Yang’s expression requested permission and, when Blake didn’t protest, she smiled and walked over to one of the stalls. Like everyone else currently waiting, she got in line, but the owner of the stall immediately came over to take her order. Another benefit of being a Blackguard - no waiting in line.

“Two.” Yang held up two fingers before pointing at one of the selections. The owner quickly wrapped the items - oversized pastries filled with some type of reddish meat - in brown paper and handed them over while Yang tapped her card on a charge center to pay. “Thank you,” she added as she accepted the baked goods, but the man had already swept off to help the next customer. Undeterred, she returned to Blake and offered one of the pastries.

“Don’t ask what it is,” she added when Blake accepted it with a curious look. “All I know is that it’s really good.”

When Yang showed no hesitation in taking a bite, Blake did the same. The burst of flavor instantly lit up her taste buds, and a happy “mm” slipped out as she took another bite. The flakiness of the crust combined perfectly with the smooth richness of the filling and, even though she had no idea what it was, it was damn tasty.

“These are amazing.”

“Right? I could eat about forty of these.”

As if to prove that claim, Yang took another big bite, and Blake smiled before doing the same. Tuna rolls had been her favorite for years now, but this was an incredibly close second. It was so delicious, she wondered if it was worth returning to Drideter for in the future.

For now, she was content to savor every bite as they continued their walk. But by the time they reached the end of the market, where the stalls ended with the same abruptness with which they started, their delicious treats were no more.

“I can show you the clifftop,” Yang said while brushing off her hands. “If you want. It’s on the way back to the ship.”

Considering Blake had nowhere else to be, she shrugged and said, "Sure," before following Yang away from the marketplace. Torches lined the well-trodden path, and muffled voices - lots of them - grew louder with each step.

The clifftop turned out to be self-explanatory - a string of establishments overlooking Drideter's bay, each with a balcony extending almost irresponsibly-far over the water.

When a pair of Blackguards stumbled out of the bar in front of them, Blake stepped away from Yang so it wouldn't be obvious that they were walking together. As soon as the crew members passed, too drunk to even notice, she caught the look Yang gave her and realized that was the wrong thing to do.

"Sorry, I just thought..." she tried to explain while motioning between them. "I thought it would make you look bad...to be seen with me."

"I don't care what they think." When a ruffian shouted a string of nonsense before hurrying across the street, Yang gave him a wary look before meeting Blake's gaze. "I'd only worry about two people, but Adam's holed up at this creepy resort on the other side of the city, and Cinder doesn't leave the ship when he's gone."

The certainty in Yang's response erased Blake's worry about bumping into the two people who scared her more than she would like to admit.

"Why does Cinder stay on the ship?" she asked as Yang led them to the edge of the street. "To make sure no one tries something?"

"No, because she likes to pretend it's hers."

"She's a little desperate to be evil, isn't she?" Blake mused, and Yang smiled.

"You can say that again. Ever since she showed up with her sidekicks, she's been determined to give Adam a run for his money in the 'needlessly-cruel' department."

"Sidekicks?" Blake asked while following Yang onto an overlook between two raucous bars.

"I don't know their names...I just call them Green and Grey."

Blake mouthed the words to herself before figuring out the two people with matching hair colors. "They joined with her?" she asked.

"Yup, but she dropped them the instant Adam deemed them not psycho enough."

“Oh...”

“You should’ve heard the names she called them,” Yang continued with a soft chuckle. “My favorite was ‘Worthless One’ and ‘Worthless Two.’”

That knowledge made Emerald’s disdain for Cinder more understandable. If the three of them joined the Blackguards together only for Cinder to advance in the ranks and leave her ‘friends’ behind, Blake would be upset too. Even if there wasn’t much honor amongst mercenaries, there was an expectation of repaying favors.

“You know...” Yang added while leaning against the railing at the end of the balcony. “I’ve never had anyone to talk to about Adam and Cinder.” Stilling at the admission, Blake watched Yang frown before tacking on a simple, “It’s different.”

The first time Yang called Blake different, it struck fear in her heart. This time, she felt nothing of the sort. From Yang’s expression and posture, she didn’t mean ‘different’ in a bad, possibly life-threatening way. It actually felt as if she *liked* the difference but couldn’t find the resolve to admit as much.

“I think we feel the same way about them,” Blake offered. “We might all be on the same side, but we don’t have to like each other.”

“Ain’t that the truth...”

Chuckling at the bit of honesty, Yang looked away from the water crashing against the shore beneath them and suddenly froze. With Yang’s gaze fixated on the balcony to their left, Blake spun that direction and prepared herself for anything. Cinder standing right there staring at them? A rival group raising their weapons to fire?

When she found nothing but a stuffed animal decorating the bar’s outdoor shelving, sadness tugged at her heart.

“He’ll be ok, right?” Yang asked softly. “I mean, I don’t think Maria speaks Zitovian, and I don’t want him to get...lonely.”

Of all the worries Blake had about Zimon traveling across the universe with a stranger whose interest in getting him home revolved around temporary fame and fortune, that thought never occurred to her. Would he be lonely? Potentially. Did that matter in the grander scheme of his safety and long-term wellbeing? To Yang, apparently, it was worth considering.

“He has Zam Zam, remember?” she pointed out, but Yang sighed and drooped her head.

“Zam Zam doesn’t talk...”

“That we know of.” When the joke fell flat, Blake touched Yang’s elbow to draw her gaze. “It should only take a couple days to arrange a transport, then a couple days of travel. If he gets lonely, it will only be for a little while. Then he’ll be surrounded by family again.”

Hopefully, the response made Yang feel better. Hopefully, she could see the loneliness as temporary rather than an enduring condition or, at the very least, as an acceptable tradeoff for getting Zimon home. Fortunately, she managed a small smile and nod before turning back to the water, but several seconds passed before she spoke again.

“I wanted to thank you...for yesterday. Sometimes...it’s easy to lose your way.” Closing her eyes, she sighed and shook her head. “I have a lot of regrets. Thank you for saving me from another one.”

While Yang stared at her hands, Blake wished that Sun could see this moment. Because this wasn’t a criminal – this was someone who lived with remorse. This was someone who tried to be good in the midst of so much bad.

“You’re welcome.” Without a thought, Blake set her hand on Yang’s shoulder, only to pull away when Yang turned towards her. “I mean, I should be the one thanking you. I couldn’t have saved him by myself.”

And if Yang hadn’t agreed to help...in all likelihood, both Blake and Zimon would be drifting alone in space somewhere.

“Guess we make a good team,” Yang finally replied, and her eyes – through still red – sparkled as she gestured Blake away from the overlook.

As they rejoined the revelers and opportunists alike, it felt like something else had just changed between them. As if, with yet another acknowledgment of how they bucked orders and helped each other, they grew even closer than before.

Yang was the key. If she left the Blackguards and testified against Adam, ISA would have all the information they could ever dream of. The Blackguards, and groups like them, would struggle to operate in any territory under ISA domain, and that promise of safety would convince more planets to join.

Yang was the key, and she would leave if she found Ruby. But maybe...maybe she would also leave on her own.

"I still think you should join the squads," she commented while they followed a meandering path along streets that grew rowdier with the onset of night. "It'd be nice to know I have someone watching my back."

"And you want me watching your back?"

As soon as Blake asked the question, she knew she set herself up for a tease.

"You're right," Yang replied with a grin. "I'll be the one watching yours."

When she playfully looked at Blake's back - more specifically, the area right below Blake's back - Blake swatted her shoulder and she laughed.

"You have a great ass."

"You're on *wafer*-thin ice." Blake held up her fingers to illustrate but couldn't prevent her cheeks from flushing once more. "You want to make a new enemy?" she added, though she had no intention of ever considering Yang an enemy.

"I'm just complimenting your *assets*."

While Yang laughed at her joke, Blake actually found herself laughing too. Unfortunately, that feeling disappeared when a group of tall men in dark green armor stepped on the street in front of them, and Yang stuck an arm in front of Blake.

"Speaking of enemies," was all she said before grabbing Blake's hand and dragging her off the street.

"What's going on?" she asked, only for Yang to shush her and lead her into the nearest building.

While Blake's eyes and ears adjusted to the loud music and dark interior, Yang hurried her past the crowded bar, around the dance floor, and between booths and tables occupied by a collection of races and ethnicities.

At the back corner of the room was a door with 'storage' written on it in several different languages. After a quick look to ensure no one was paying attention, Yang opened the door with a twist of her wrist and pulled Blake inside. The door shut right behind them, and Blake suddenly found herself standing in a closet filled with random odds and ends.

"Don't think he saw us."

When Blake turned around, she caught Yang's tiny breath of relief. The singular lightbulb above their heads provided just enough light to see by and, as she watched, the redness of Yang's eyes faded to a gorgeous lilac. The transformation sent a jolt of excitement through her every single time, and she couldn't help feeling inexplicably drawn to the person standing in front of her.

"Why are we hiding?" she asked, hoping to satisfy her curiosity while disguising the fact that she was staring.

"I might've gotten in a fight with one of those guys last year...and he probably remembers. At least, he should. How many sexy blondes with metal arms running around here?"

The response explained their current predicament, but Blake wasted no time shaking her head and saying, "I haven't seen any."

As expected, Yang laughed, and Blake smiled in turn.

"You are *brutal*," Yang said with a bright smile. "But I still like you. Must be a masochist..."

When Blake froze at the admission, Yang's eyes widened.

"I-I mean..." After struggling for something to say and coming up empty-handed, Yang shook her head and met Blake's gaze. "That was probably pretty obvious, wasn't it?"

Obvious? No, it wasn't obvious until Yang said it aloud. Now, it was obvious, and became even more so when she stepped closer and set a hand on Blake's side.

Blake knew what was coming next, and she had plenty of time to back away - Yang made sure of that. Instead, she tilted her chin up when Yang leaned in for a kiss.

As soon as their lips touched, a powerful wave of excitement rushed through Blake's veins. Just like Yang's lilac eyes, her lips were soft and her touch was tentative. The feeling contrasted with the unyielding metal of her fingers clutching Blake's waist and, when it felt like she would move away after just one fleeting kiss, Blake was the one who pressed closer.

Blake was the one who turned that first kiss into another, learning more through Yang's lips than she'd uncovered through all of their conversations.

Hesitancy, tenderness, desire, longing - Yang poured so much of herself into that impossibly gentle touch that Blake couldn't help wanting more.

So she didn't back away. She sought out more contact, and felt Yang's confidence grow as their lips moved together. Their hips pressed together. And she ran her hands up Yang's sides before stopping at her shoulders - metal under one hand, soft skin under the other.

Yang was contrast. She was contradiction. She was conflict. Yet Blake wanted more and more of her.

It wasn't until Yang pressed Blake's back against the wall that Blake understood that they were doing, and her sense of duty returned in one swift blow. Finding her hands on Yang's shoulders, she gave a slight push to break the kiss. Confusion filled Yang's eyes when their lips parted, but concern quickly followed.

"I'm sorry," were the first words out of her mouth, and Blake tried to respond but no words appeared. Not with Yang standing so close, still pressing her against the wall in a way that made her want to continue.

But Yang backed up as if she suddenly couldn't get far enough away.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I thought...it felt like the right time -"

"Yang -"

"But I shouldn't have," Yang rushed on. "I just -" Clenching one fist, she sighed as her eyes darkened. "This isn't how I normally operate..." she muttered before turning away and running a hand through her hair.

"Yang," Blake tried again, even though she didn't know what to say. That was a horrible mistake on her part - one that couldn't happen again - but she didn't want Yang beating herself up over something they *both* wanted.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Blake settled upon. "You...read the situation right. It's just...relationships can get...messy."

Most assuredly for the two of them.

"Then...you wanted to kiss me?"

"I...did, yes."

When Yang smiled and her eyes lightened ever so slightly, Blake felt impossibly better. As if making Yang happy was the key to her own happiness.

"Then...do you still want to kiss me?"

She *shouldn't*, but she did. She really, really did. The way Yang stepped closer said she hoped as much - Blake only needed to say it.

"Get the *fuck* out of my way!" someone suddenly shouted before something hit the wall with enough force to rattle it. The commotion ended whatever moment Blake and Yang had been sharing, and they turned towards the door with varying degrees of concern.

"That doesn't sound good..." Yang murmured before grabbing the handle.

"Wait." Blake reached over and stopped Yang before she opened it. "We should wait for it to blow over," she suggested, but Yang frowned.

"I'd rather know what we're up against," she explained as the voices outside grew louder, but, surprisingly, she waited for Blake's reluctant nod before opening the door a fraction of an inch. No sooner had she peeked out did she shut it, grab Blake's hand, and drag her away.

"Yup, we're getting out of here *now*."

"But -"

Blake was about to point out that the door was the only exit, then Yang put her fist through the side of the building. Dropping Blake's hand for only a moment, she pulled the wall apart and created a hole large enough for them to sneak into the alleyway beside the bar.

"Go," Yang urged her, and she slipped through the opening without complaint. Yang was right on her heels, and grabbed her hand before taking off at a run. So many questions flitted through her head, but she didn't question Yang's decision - she picked up the pace to match Yang's long strides.

"Ever met the Drideans?" Yang asked while they sprinted away from the bar, drawing curious glances from everyone they passed.

"Can't say - I have," Blake got out between elevated breaths.

Seconds later, she heard it - phaser fire followed by the unmistakable sound of panic. Chaos spilled onto the streets as the fighting escalated, and shouts filled the air as passerby suddenly found themselves in the midst of battle. Fortunately, Blake and Yang were already blocks away, and Blake suddenly found herself grateful that Yang hadn't agreed to wait out the confrontation in their hiding place.

"Are those grenades?" Blake asked when explosions shook the ground

beneath their feet. Only then did Yang slow her pace, falling into a jog now that they'd put enough distance between themselves and danger.

"Yeah." Scarlet eyes on high alert, Yang looked over her shoulder and scanned the backdrop before finally slowing to a walk. "They've had a huge turf war going on here for a while," she explained while the fighting continued. "I heard it was bad, but I didn't think it was *that* bad..."

When Yang turned around one more time, Blake realized that they were still holding hands. Noticing the same just a second later, Yang dropped Blake's hand as if it had burned her.

"Sorry..."

Flashing a small smile at the unnecessary apology, Blake stuck her hand in her pocket. The distant fighting kept her adrenaline at a low boil rather than the raging tempest it had been. A turf war was nothing she wanted to get involved in even if she had the capability to help, which she didn't. In fact, this planet seemed determined to teach her exactly how unprepared she was for life outside of ISA territory.

But with Yang by her side, she felt impossibly...safe. Yang had better street smarts, which made her an invaluable companion. Her rank in the Blackguards offered some measure of protection from Adam. And she'd already done enough for Blake to feel indebted or, at the very least, incredibly grateful.

Sensing that she was only searching for an excuse for what happened, Blake kept her eyes forward and tried not to look at Yang. Looking at Yang would only remind her how badly she wanted that second kiss, and she *couldn't* want that second kiss.

Maybe if they made it out of the Blackguards...things could be different. There was too much else to worry about right now, and that feeling only compounded as they approached the Inferno.

Some commotion might be expected as the crew returned and prepared to take off, but not like this. Everyone was running towards the edge of the landing pad, where the cliff edge dropped to the bay below and a large crowd had already grown.

"That's not good..." Yang muttered while altering her path and heading that way. Blake was quick to follow, and her anxiety crept up when she felt the

excitement of the crowd. Whatever was happening, they were happy about it, and their happiness scared her.

“What’s going on?” Yang asked once close enough, and the Blackguards parted to let her through. Blake stayed as close as possible while they moved to the front of the group. The moment she spotted Cinder, however, her heart thudded against her chest.

“Look what I found,” Cinder said with the delight of someone who just discovered a present on their doorstep. “One of ISA’s finest.”

Chapter 17

“Shit...” Yang sighed, sounding in disbelief at her horrible luck. Blake, on the other hand, struggled to breathe while staring at a scene ripped straight out of her nightmares.

There was Sun - on his knees with his hands chained behind his back, sporting a bloody lip and dark welt under one eye. And there was Cinder - who had never looked happier - standing above him with a menacing glint in her eyes. Surrounding them, the rest of the Blackguards waited for Sun's fate to play out like a grotesque version of entertainment only they could enjoy.

“Caught him sneaking around,” Cinder explained with an annoyed kick to Sun's thigh. In his current position, he had no choice but to take the blow with a flinch of pain. From the look of him, he'd already taken several such hits without the ability to fight back - not that fighting back was an option with a crowd of twenty-something Blackguards around.

“How do you know he's ISA?” Yang asked only for Cinder to throw something her way.

While Yang caught it and turned it over in her hand, Blake didn't even bother looking. She already knew it was Sun's badge - he loved the damn thing so much that he insisted on carrying it everywhere.

“Landing on this revolting planet turned out better than expected.” Leaning down, Cinder smiled sweetly while Sun scowled at her. “You know what we do to cops, pretty boy?”

When she brought her arm out from under her cloak - the monstrous black shape enough to strike fear in anyone's heart - and grabbed Sun by the cheeks, Blake held her tongue and resisted the urge to tackle Cinder away from him.

This was bad. This was really, really bad. She had to get Sun out of here before Cinder killed him. But how could she, the cop-hating mercenary, justify letting him go after he was caught snooping around? If anything, she should be one of the first clamoring to get rid of him.

From Yang's grim expression, she wouldn't be any help. And as more Blackguards joined the crowd, returning from their free day and not about to miss the show, the situation grew more dire. From a survival standpoint... there was no chance of survival. Blake couldn't fight this many people on her own; she needed another option.

"Oh, this should be fun."

Hearing the familiar voice, she turned and watched as Emerald, then Ret, pushed to the front of the group. The smirk on Emerald's lips sent a chill through Blake's veins, but she couldn't even say anything in Sun's defense without ruining her cover.

"How long will he last?" Emerald whispered Mercury's way. "Two minutes? Maybe three?"

"Cinder looks thrilled so...thirty seconds until he's crying for his mom."

When Emerald chuckled, Blake watched with growing horror while Cinder stalked around her prize. If what Mercury said was true, Blake had to get Sun out of here as soon as possible. But how?

"What're you doing all the way out here?" Cinder asked. "Nearest Alliance planet is lightyears away."

"On vacation," Sun replied with a smile, which Cinder responded to with a sweet one of her own before slapping him across the face.

"Does it look like I'm in the mood for jokes? Tell us why you're here."

"The friendly locals," he said, only to earn another hard slap. While Cinder stood over him, silently daring him to talk back again, he shook his head and spit blood on the ground before looking up at her. As soon as Blake saw the look in his eyes, she knew what he was going to do. But when she stepped forward to stop him, Yang grabbed her by the wrist and held her back.

"Heard there were some pretty ladies out here. Didn't realize they'd be half-dead already."

When Sun nodded towards Cinder's arm, crossing a line no living Blackguard

dared approach, the crowd grew unnervingly quiet. They all knew not to mention Cinder's arm - not to talk about it, not to joke about it, and definitely not to stare at it - without risking immediate and deadly repercussions.

It was the worst thing he could have said. And, after glaring down at him for several seconds, fury rolling off of her in waves, Cinder wrapped her 'half-dead' hand around his throat and dragged him to his feet.

"I think you'll find *half* dead preferable to *fully* dead," she said in a calm, smooth voice while tightening her grip around his throat. When he began struggling for breath, making small gasping sounds while hopelessly trying to get out of Cinder's grasp, a wicked smile appeared on her lips.

"Don't be stupid," Blake blurted out, drawing Cinder's attention. "Just toss him over and let him swim home. We don't need that type of heat."

Fortunately, if 'fortunate' existed in this situation, Cinder released her hold on Sun and turned to glare at Blake. Yang also gave her a look that was part mystification and part concern, but she held her ground.

"You think ISA cares about him?" Cinder retorted while kicking Sun in the back of the legs, forcing him back to his knees. "He's a *grunt*," she sneered. "Just like you. ISA won't bat an eye if he dies. They'll just find another dumb, self-righteous tool to replace him."

Hearing the Blackguards mutter their agreement, Blake frowned but didn't respond. It wasn't true. She knew it wasn't true. Alliance agents were part of a greater purpose, yes, but they *all* mattered. They mourned the loss of their own like anyone else would. They weren't cogs - they weren't tools - they were all necessary if they hoped to reach the lofty goal of protecting the universe.

"But you're right..." Cinder mused, giving Sun a more thoughtful expression. "He might be a grunt, but we could use him to send a message..."

"We could write a note on him!" Ret offered, and Emerald immediately rolled her eyes.

"Sure. Let's grab a marker and sign our names while we're at it."

"No, I, um..." Searching for an answer evil enough to appease the blood-thirsty crowd, Ret patted his side and hesitantly pulled out his knife. "With these?"

The suggestion failed to come off as anything remotely evil, so Emerald sighed and shook her head.

“Emerald, please shut up the village idiot.”

Everyone in Emerald’s vicinity heard her jaw snap shut at the statement, and she glared daggers at Cinder before spinning on her heel and stalking away with a flippant “Come on, Ret.”

After a brief, confused look, Ret - then Mercury - followed Emerald into the Inferno. With an expression of distaste, Cinder watched the three disappear into the ship before scoffing and returning her attention to Sun.

“What do you think about carving a message?” she asked in a menacing tone Ret could never hope to duplicate, and the crowd voiced their approval with jeers and claps. “Or how about...” Pulling out her blade, she knelt down and held it to Sun’s neck. “How about I take you apart and send several messages, hmm?”

Meeting Cinder’s gaze with a hard one of his own, Sun didn’t so much as flinch when a dot of red appeared at the tip of the blade. His lack of response only egged her on, and that spot of blood soon became a thin red line.

“Come on, Cinder,” Yang suddenly spoke up. “Just get it over with already - I’ve had orgasms faster than this.”

While the crowd laughed, Blake worried the provocation would make Cinder do something even worse. Fortunately, she stood and spun towards Yang with a fierce glower.

“Did I ask for your input?”

“No,” Yang replied with a shrug. “But you got it. We’re leaving in twenty minutes and haven’t packed up yet. *Get a move on.*”

Understanding that Yang was pulling rank on her, Cinder scowled. Meanwhile, Blake’s fear spiked to as-yet-unreached levels. And, just when she thought this couldn’t get any worse, it did. In the distance, she spotted Adam heading back to the ship, flanked by his usual guards while walking down the lighted staircase she and Yang used just moments ago.

If she was going to do something, she had to do it now. Adam wouldn’t toy with Sun. Adam would shoot him and be done with it.

“How about I just do it?” she asked and, before anyone questioned her,

grabbed the phaser from the man standing beside her and leveled it at Sun. His eyes widened as he stared at her, but she took a deep breath and gripped the weapon tightly.

Her hands shook and her heart pounded in her ears, but she knew that she had to do this. If she didn't, he was dead. But if she picked the perfect spot, he could survive. Assuming she didn't miss and hit him somewhere lethal, and assuming he got help fast enough...

Holding his gaze, she silently begged him to forgive her. She never wanted to hurt anyone, especially him, and she would never do this if she had another choice. Hopefully, he understood that.

"Hell no."

Right when Blake set her finger on the trigger, Yang snatched the weapon from her hands.

"Grunts don't get the honor of killing cops, sorry." Before Blake could protest, Yang handed the phaser back to its owner and gave Cinder a patronizing smile. "Looks like you can't decide, so I'll take care of this for you."

Stepping forward to cheers from the crowd, Yang smiled while cracking her knuckles and rolling her shoulders. The Blackguards were excited, but Blake felt nothing but horror while watching Yang walk over, draw her arm back, and throw her fist into Sun's jaw. A resounding crack ripped through the air as his head whipped to the side from the force of the blow, and the Blackguards immediately voiced their loud approval.

Blake had to do something, but *what could she do?* They were surrounded, they were outnumbered, they were far from help, and they were alone. That horrible realization sank in as she watched Yang pull Sun to his feet before hitting him again. The blow knocked him to one knee, and he only just managed to regain his feet when Yang hit him again.

The crowd cheered every blow, their bloodlust showing as they finally got what they wanted. But the sound of metal connecting with flesh made Blake bite her tongue to keep from screaming at Yang to stop. To leave him alone. To let him go.

Yang was too strong, and Sun was defenseless. He couldn't survive many more hits like that, yet he kept getting back to his feet, slower and slower each

time.

“Just stay down, you idiot!” Blake yelled when Yang knocked him to the ground yet again. Red eyes instantly locked onto her, but she didn’t look away from Sun. And when he met her gaze, with one of his eyes nearly swollen shut, she silently begged him to listen. To stay down and hope for mercy.

Instead, she watched in terror as he clenched his teeth and pushed himself back to his feet.

“We got a live one, huh,” Yang mused, much to the crowd’s amusement, before shoving Sun backward. He stumbled before catching his balance, and glanced over his shoulder when he sensed the ledge growing nearer. Over that ledge was a hundred-foot fall to the water below – a survivable distance assuming he didn’t hit any rocks on the way down.

The idea sparked in his eyes at the same moment it popped into Blake’s head, but he had no time to act on it. The next second, Blake spotted the flash of metal in Yang’s hand, and heard a strangled cry come from her throat when the knife sank into Sun’s side.

Blake stepped forward, wanting to rush to his aid, but Yang grabbed his shoulder and shoved the knife even deeper. The Blackguards shouted their approval, growing even louder as Yang walked Sun the last few steps backward, still with the knife in his side, and gave him one big push off the ledge.

Sun’s eyes, filled with surprise and disbelief, briefly met Blake’s before disappearing forever – the last she would ever see of him.

The Blackguards whistled and cheered his demise, but Blake couldn’t pretend to share their excitement. She couldn’t do anything. She couldn’t feel anything. She just stood there, with her heart pounding in her ears, while Yang remained at the edge of the cliff and looked down into the water.

This was what it felt like to be heartbroken. Sun...her best friend...the person she trusted more than anyone...

Killed by the person she *thought* she could trust.

“That was my fucking kill,” Cinder snapped before spinning on one heel and stalking into the Inferno. The rest of the crowd exchanged excited replays of what just happened until Adam made it to the landing pad and leveled them with a glare.

“Get those shipments on board now.”

The cargo workers needed no further prompting to race off to do their job, but Adam still scowled at them before addressing the rest of the crew. “If we don’t take off in fifteen minutes, I’m replacing all of you.”

With that threat issued, the ‘entertainment’ finally ended and the crew rushed off to carry out their tasks. Adam walked into the ship shortly after, but Blake didn’t move. Her feet remained frozen to the ground, her heart beating painfully while watching Yang calmly put away her knife.

Everyone else left, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t do anything. It was already too late. It happened too fast, and she was powerless to stop it. Even if she’d thrown herself in the way, what good would it have done? The two of them would have died together, and the people responsible might never be brought to justice.

Yang might never be brought to justice.

When Yang finally turned around and caught Blake’s gaze, her expression grew serious, and she closed the gap between them with long, purposeful strides.

“Time to go.”

Grabbing Blake’s arm, Yang pulled her towards the ship while the rest of the Blackguards packed up and prepared to leave. But feeling Yang’s hand around her wrist knocked her out of her shock, and anger surged through her veins.

Yang just killed her best friend. Murdered him. He did nothing but get caught snooping around, probably because he wanted to see her off before heading home. Being an Alliance officer was his only offense, and that was the furthest thing from a crime.

“Let go of me.”

When Blake tried to pull her arm free, Yang’s grip tightened to the point of being painful.

“*Yang.*”

She heard the anger in her voice but did nothing to hide it - why would she when she *was* angry? She was so angry that she didn’t want to be anywhere near Yang right now, or ever again. But Yang refused to let go, instead dragging her through the halls of the ship without so much as looking at her.

“*Let go,*” she tried again with a firm pull of her hand, but she had no hope of freeing herself from Yang’s grasp. She didn’t want to make a scene in the middle of the hall, but she was about to do it anyway – be it by screaming or breaking down in tears. She was about to lose control of her emotions and the *last thing* she wanted was to be around Yang right now.

“Yang, I’m not joking. *Let go.*”

Seeing Yang’s room just up ahead, Blake dug in her heels and tried to pull the opposite direction, but it was no use. From the way Yang dragged her along anyway, her resistance made no impact.

In the distance, she heard the Inferno’s engines warming up in preparation for liftoff, and she wanted to run off the ship and check on Sun. Give up the mission, leave the Blackguards, hope he was somehow alive...instead, Yang pulled her into the room and shut the door behind her.

“What’s the matter with you?” Yang asked as soon as the door closed.

“What’s the matter with me?” Feeling Yang’s grip loosen, Blake tore her arm free and shoved Yang away from her. “What’s the matter with *you*? You killed him!”

“He was Alliance –”

“He was only snooping around!” Blake countered as tears stung her eyes. “You could’ve just let him go. Scared him off. *Something.*”

“That’s not how things work around here –”

“Do you think I care about how things work here?” she shouted back. She didn’t understand how Yang was so calm about this, how she kept her emotions under control after so callously taking someone’s life. That was someone’s son. Someone’s *friend*.

“You need to calm down.” When Yang reached out and Blake jerked her arm away, she frowned. “You know what happens if someone sees you cry over a cop?”

Blake didn’t care. She didn’t care if someone saw. She didn’t care if they tried to kill her. She should have done something. She should have done *anything*. Anything other than just stand frozen in fear and watch him die.

“You *killed* him...” she whispered. Her heart hurt so much right now. Not only because Sun was dead, but because Yang was the one who did it. Without

a flinch. Without hesitation.

“He was Alliance,” Yang repeated, which only made Blake more upset. “We kill Alliance on sight. Who knows what he saw or what he planned on reporting –”

“*I don’t care* about any of that! You *murdered* him.”

Blake spit the word with every bit of fire she felt in her veins, and Yang’s red eyes immediately clouded with an unreadable emotion.

“You offered to shoot him,” Yang pointed out, but Blake shook her head and didn’t respond.

What could she say – that she planned to hit him somewhere nonlethal? Somewhere that gave him a chance to survive if he found help in time? Her intent had always been to save him, not watch him beaten to within an inch of his life before stabbed and left for dead. If he survived the fall...if he had enough strength to swim to shore...he would still bleed out before anyone found him.

“Why are you pissed that I killed a cop?”

“Because you didn’t have to –”

“Yes, I *did*,” Yang interrupted, raising one hand and scoffing. “How do you not get that? There are rules, and if you don’t follow them, you die. Do you not get that?”

“I get it –”

“Then why do you care so much about some fucking cop?”

“I care that you killed him for no reason!” Blake yelled as her anger took over. “You didn’t even *try* to save him!”

“*I can’t save everyone!*” Yang shouted back before stepping away and taking a deep breath. “Listen – you don’t understand –”

“I understand perfectly.”

After what happened with Zimon, Blake thought Yang was different, but that was a mistake. Yang wasn’t different. She was the same as everyone else on this wretched ship.

“I understand that you don’t give a shit about innocent lives,” Blake snapped. “I understand that you *pretend* like you’re different, but you’re not. You’re just like Adam and Cinder – that’s the only reason you’re still here.”

The words were harsh, but she didn't care. She didn't care about the hurt that flashed through Yang's eyes, and she didn't care that Yang looked taken aback when faced with the truth.

Tense silence followed, and a myriad of emotions crossed Yang's face before she clenched her jaw and pulled out her knife – the same knife she just used to stab Sun. Expression unreadable, she curled her metal fingers around the handle and stalked over to Blake.

Sensing danger, Blake backed into the door and flinched when Yang slammed the blade into her side. With red eyes staring into hers, she felt immediate betrayal...and sadness...followed by confusion when the attack didn't hurt more than from the impact alone.

Looking down, she realized that she was unharmed – the knife hadn't even broken skin. When she looked up and met Yang's gaze, baffled at what happened, Yang held up the knife and pressed the blade into the palm of her hand. The metal disappeared as it touched her skin, folding it on itself without leaving a mark.

Suddenly understanding what Yang was saying, tears sprang into Blake's eyes.

Sun wasn't dead. Yang hadn't stabbed him. She pretended to. Then she tossed him into the bay in hope that he could get away on his own.

She saved him.

"*Never compare me to them again,*" Yang whispered before reaching over Blake's shoulder and opening the door. Clearly, she wanted Blake to leave, but Blake reached back and closed the door before pulling her into a kiss.

Yang tensed when their lips touched, but Blake quickly pulled away to meet her eyes, which were filled with red-hued surprise.

"You didn't kill him," Blake whispered.

Hearing the words aloud lifted her heart, and she couldn't even describe the relief she felt right now – both for Sun, who lived to fight another day, and for Yang, who proved once again to be the person Blake hoped her to be.

"As far as you know, I did."

From that response, and the look in Yang's eyes, Blake understood how conflicted she was. How scared she was. How hurt she was.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Blake said without shying away from those fiery eyes. “I promise.”

Before Yang could respond, Blake kissed her again. And again, her surprise showed in the way her muscles tensed, but that feeling melted away when Blake pressed closer and kissed her even harder.

Blake had never experienced a rush of gratitude like this, and the only way she could think to express it was through her lips. She had failed to save Sun, but Yang hadn’t – and Yang had no reason to. For all she knew, he was just another cop. Just another stranger. She saved him anyway.

Breaking the kiss, Blake kept her hands on Yang’s shoulders and stared deep into scarlet eyes.

“You’re nothing like them,” she said, knowing deep in her heart that those words were true. And, as Yang’s eyes searched hers, she realized how much Yang feared the opposite, and how much it must have hurt to hear Blake claim as much.

“You’re not.” Reaching up to touch Yang’s cheek, Blake felt her desire unleash when Yang leaned into her hand. “And that’s why I like you...” she added before their lips collided for another kiss.

She had held herself back for fear that Yang was like the rest of them, but she wasn’t. She had learned how to survive, but she still had her morals, her civility, and did her best not to sacrifice them. And the way she made Blake feel...was difficult to explain and impossible to contain.

So she didn’t try to contain it any longer. Even with her back against the wall, she welcomed Yang into her space and savored the feeling of their bodies melding into one. Their lips moved with lust and greed that only amplified the overwhelming desire in the room, and the kiss deepened just as seamlessly as it started.

Of all the times she’d wondered which version of Yang would show up to a moment like this, now she had her answer. Soft, tender, unsure...yet hungry for more intimacy, more touching, more everything – this was the version of Yang hidden beneath the black armor. This was the version of Yang begging to reach the light in all this darkness.

This was the real Yang, and Blake desperately wanted to know even more

about her...starting with this moment.

Chapter 18

As sleep faded away and consciousness slowly returned, Blake opened her eyes and found herself in an unfamiliar room. Her adrenaline instantly flared, and she would have jumped right out of bed had she not forced herself to remain calm and figure out where she was before taking any drastic actions.

Once she convinced herself to stay still, she probed the environment while memories of yesterday came back in waves. Yang ‘stabbing’ Sun, only to save him in the process. Blake being overcome by gratitude for the impossibly-gentle girl who somehow found herself in one of the hardest, most vicious groups in the galaxy. And then...what came next.

It felt like there could be no more secrets between them after what happened, but that only made Blake’s secret loom larger. She couldn’t tell Yang who she was. Doing so would risk her mission, her life, and this - whatever this was.

Quietly turning onto her side, she opened one eye and found Yang still fast asleep. Emboldened by the lack of oversight, she opened her other eye and allowed her gaze to roam freely over the ‘fearsome’ Blackguard commander at rest.

Her cheeks warmed at the sight of Yang’s scars, having kissed each and every one last night. Her eyes then moved over Yang’s softest features before meeting the cold, hard metal extending nearly to her collarbone. Her prosthetic arm served as intimidation and, in many cases, a weapon. But last night...she proved that even the hardest parts of her could be remarkably soft.

It was that tender side of Yang, which Blake almost exclusively associated with the lilac eyes she was more and more drawn to, that made her imagine what this moment might be like if they were waking up anywhere but the

Inferno.

What if Yang wasn't one of the leaders of a criminal group? What if Blake wasn't an undercover agent sent to figure out their secrets and, ultimately, bring them to justice? What if they were just two people who met by chance and happened to like each other? What if there were no obstacles to them being together? What if Blake could just lie here and relish how peaceful Yang looked while she slept? What would that be like?

Unfortunately, Blake couldn't whisk them to another world to find out, and daydreaming about it would do her no good. What happened, happened. Now she needed to move forward and figure out how it affected her mission.

But first, she had to leave before Yang woke up. She couldn't fool herself anymore - if Yang woke up and trained those lilac eyes on her, she would stay. She would stay and pretend that they *did* live in an easier universe, one where they weren't on opposing sides of the galactic divide between good and evil.

Fortunately, Yang was still fast asleep. Seeing as how she probably hadn't slept at all over the past couple of nights, she could use the catch-up, and Blake would use her slumber as an opportunity to slip out unnoticed.

First sliding out of bed, Blake held her breath and waited. When Yang didn't so much as rustle, she sighed and picked up her discarded clothing from the floor. Having lost the warmth of the covers and Yang's proximity, she shivered while pulling on her clothes as fast as possible. Once decent, she added her armor on top, glancing Yang's way every few seconds to make sure she wasn't being too loud.

Apparently, Yang was a deep sleeper. She didn't so much as stir while Blake got dressed and hurried over to the door. With her hand on the latch, however, she realized that she might never experience this again. So she paused, turned around, and soaked in as much of the moment as possible.

Yang looked so peaceful, Blake wanted to crawl back into bed and sleep the day away. She wanted to savor the warmth that their bodies shared. She wanted to be there when Yang woke up and watch red or lilac eyes blink awake. More than anything, she wanted to know what Yang thought of her now. After last night, were those feelings still there? Or had the chase been satisfied by its conclusion?

Shaking away those thoughts, Blake opened the door and made sure the hall was empty before slipping out of the room. After closing the door as quietly as she opened it, she sighed and hurried away from the officers' quarters. The last thing she wanted was for someone to catch her sneaking out of Yang's room early in the morning. Fortunately, the halls were empty, and she made it to the crew's quarters without meeting a single soul.

The crew's quarters were much more lively, but that didn't bother her in the slightest. Her presence here wouldn't provoke questions about what she was doing...or who.

Sighing yet again, she searched for a distraction - any distraction would do. Anything to keep her mind off of Yang. As luck had it, just such a distraction appeared in the form of Ret slinking out of the room that most of the crew affectionately called 'the happy place.'

"Ret..."

As soon as he heard her voice, he cringed and turned around.

"Please don't tell Em," were the first words out of his mouth, but Blake shook her head.

"I don't have to tell her. She'll know as soon as she sees you."

All Blake had to do was wave at him for his skin to grow a darker shade of blue, emphasizing her point.

"I was going to hide in my room until it wore off..." he admitted. When she shook her head and walked past the room filled with drugs, he fell into step by her side. "I was!" he insisted, though his skin gave him away again. "And I'll try to be better. It's just...hard."

"You know how bad that stuff is for you." She nodded towards his hands, which trembled uncontrollably from stim overexposure. "Pilots need steady hands."

It was a low blow, but she knew how much he looked up to Emerald. If he wanted to be a pilot, he had to get his habit under control, which meant that, one day, he had to face his past.

"I can still fly like this! Probably not very good...but I still could."

With Ret offering excuses, Blake realized what a chore this must be for Emerald to put up with. He was young and not exceptionally bright, or he was

bright but the constant haze of drugs dumbed him down. Honestly, she was surprised Emerald hadn't floated him herself by now.

"You realize she's worried about you," Blake pointed out while leading him towards the rec room. "If she wasn't, she wouldn't care if you took ten of those." After tapping the empty wrapper in his hands, she set her hand on his shoulder and met his eyes. "I know you don't want to remember, but at some point...we all have to move on, and I don't think this is the best way to do it."

When he frowned but remained silent, she hoped that he was seriously considering his decisions. Of course, his ability to reach an epiphany was hampered at the moment, so she wasn't surprised when he grinned.

"Did you know I can fly now?"

"Like a bird?" she asked, understanding that their prior conversation was over.

"Like a ship!" he corrected her. "Em said she'd teach me more next time we stop. I just have to pay her again, but that's no big deal. I've been winning a lot at cards recently."

"Have you?"

Blake glanced at him to check the lie, but his skin maintained a steadfast shade of light blue.

"Guess I've been lucky!"

Having seen him play, she knew he would have to be the luckiest person in the universe to win more than a couple of random hands off of Emerald and Mercury. If he was winning often, then they must have finally decided to take pity on him...suggesting Emerald didn't hate him half as much as she claimed.

"Then you might be our future pilot," Blake said before pointing towards his hands. "As long as you get those shakes under control."

When he curled his fingers into fists, they shook like a new recruit on their first day of live training - not exactly confidence inspiring.

"Keep working on it, Ret. I believe in you." After offering a smile of encouragement, she walked over to the rec room door, peeked inside, and found Mercury lounging at one of the tables. "Why don't you hang out with Mercury?" she asked with a nod his way. "I'm sure Emerald will be here soon."

“You want to hang too?” Ret immediately offered, but she shook her head.

“I have some work to do, but maybe later.”

“Maybe you can help me clean some phasers too? They’re, uh, piling up.”

When he swept a hand across his smooth head, shaking even more in the process, she knew exactly how the weapons had piled up.

“Sure,” she agreed anyway. “I will if I can.”

“Thanks, Blake. I mean, new girl.”

With a parting grin that made the name slip seem intentional, he ducked into the rec room and headed over to Mercury.

Glad that someone else could babysit him for a while, Blake shook her head and walked to her room. With everything that had happened over the past couple of days - Zimon, Drideter, Sun, Yang - her work on the ship had ground to a standstill. Most concerningly, her work on the maps hadn’t progressed as much as she would have liked.

Knowing that Adam would want them finished soon, she needed to redouble her efforts. As soon as she entered her cabin, however, her thoughts returned to Yang. She had no idea how her room reminded her of Yang, especially when their interactions here had lasted mere seconds, yet it did.

Trying to keep her mind from wandering too far, she went to her bag and fished out her lifeline to Command. Knowing what Yang did yesterday, she no longer felt that pit of anguish in her stomach over what happened to Sun. Still...she needed to confirm he made it back to base alright. To do that, she sent a brief status request and specified that she wanted a response as soon as possible.

Seeing as how ‘as soon as possible’ could be an hour or two, she nearly put the device away before it buzzed in her hand. As soon as she read the response - a simple ‘reported back’ - she sat at her desk and smiled at one of the best messages she had ever received.

Sun survived. He made it back to ISA, which meant he would be just fine... thanks to Yang.

Yang’s name threatened to unleash the emotions swirling in Blake’s chest, so she shook her head and pulled over the maps she had left to transcribe. It took several minutes of staring at the faded runes before her notes made sense,

and several more minutes before she felt comfortable enough to continue.

Fortunately, her ability to read Valerian came back with more clarity after every subsequent map, and finishing one map made the next that much easier. She had created a dictionary, of sorts, of the most frequently used words. Once she found those and copied the translation over, she struggled through the remaining runes as best she could.

Progress was steady, even though she had no idea what purpose the words and values held. Several of the legends referenced a forge of some kind, but all of them mentioned a key. What she couldn't figure out was what type of key or where to find it.

Fortunately, that task hadn't been left up to her, because she clearly lacked vital information in determining exactly how these mines operated. Unfortunately, once she settled into a rhythm of matching words to near-invisible lines on the page, her mind drifted to Yang.

Anything physical between them had to stop, but she didn't know if she could help herself. In an environment where everyone seemed out to get her, being around someone she...trusted...was such a relief.

After what happened yesterday, she had no reason not to trust Yang anymore. Even if the situation seemed dire, she had to trust that Yang would do her best to protect her morals and, in many instances, to protect Blake.

That knowledge only made the situation worse. Because how would Blake repay those favors? How would she repay the person who saved not only her life but her best friend's life as well?

By testifying.

She would sit across from Yang, in front of a judge, and detail every illegal activity she witnessed. And, no matter how much she stressed the good, she would be forced to recount the bad as well.

The thought soured her stomach and convinced her more than ever that Yang had to turn on the Blackguards. If she agreed to testify, ISA would offer amnesty or a reduced sentence. If that happened, then maybe...maybe they could still see each other in some way. Maybe there were lives for both of them after this.

Reaching the bottom of another map, Blake sighed and made sure she'd

transcribed every mark before moving on. Missing a single rune would be a small mistake, but she didn't want to know what harm might befall her due to such a 'harmless' error.

Once confident everything was complete, she continued to the next map and wondered if last night could also be considered a harmless mistake. Her emotions had been running at an all-time high, what with thinking that Sun was dead, that Yang killed him, then learning that Yang actually saved his life. After such emotional whiplash, of course she responded...impulsively.

But that didn't explain their kiss in the bar.

While writing 'key' for what felt like the hundredth time, she realized that she could make as many excuses as she wanted. No matter what justification she came up with, the truth was simple - last night happened because she wanted it to. Yang hadn't forced her. Yang hadn't even solicited it - Blake was the one leading that charge.

Yang's sharp edges and soft interior drew her in, and last night proved that Yang's hardness was only skin deep. As soon as that armor came off, she was one of the most tender, sensitive people Blake had ever met - a personality more fitting for an untarnished soul who'd never experienced the evils of the universe rather than a Blackguard captain who'd experienced god-knows-what.

The door buzzer ended that thought, and she willingly accepted the distraction as she went to answer. When the door opened and revealed Yang standing outside, however, she realized that she might have been better off pretending not to be there.

"Um...yes?"

Glancing into the hall as if that might explain why Yang was there, Blake saw nothing other than a few random crew members nearby.

"Hey, can I come in?"

Backing out of the way, Blake waved Yang through the doorway and hesitated before pushing the button to close the door behind her.

"Surprised you asked," Blake said while Yang stood in the middle of the room. "Most people just let themselves in," she elaborated when sent an inquisitive glance. "Usually to wake me up in the middle of the night and force

me to fight a stranger, but that's to be expected."

"Ah shoot - that's right."

Motioning Blake out of the way, Yang returned to the door and tapped the door panel. After a few button presses, a control screen popped up, and she set her hand on the scanner before backing away.

"She shouldn't be able to get in here anymore," she explained when Blake gave her a curious look. "I locked out everyone below me, which includes her so..."

From the way Yang trailed off and looked away, she wanted to play it off as nothing even though it wasn't.

"Well now I can sleep with both eyes closed," was all Blake said before letting it go. "Did you need something?"

That was the only reason Yang would seek her out - if the Blackguards needed something. At least, that was what Blake told herself while standing in front of the desk, crossing her arms to make sure she kept them to herself.

"Adam wants an update."

When Yang nodded at the maps, Blake sighed. The mere mention of Adam destroyed any semblance of butterflies in her chest, but that was probably a good thing.

"I just finished one, but there are a few left. I don't know if you noticed, but they're hardly readable."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Yang's eyes lightened with the offer, and her sincerity made Blake uncross her arms and wish they were standing closer.

"I wish..." she mused, unable to turn away from Yang's gaze. "But unless you can go back in time and bring me new copies..."

"Sorry, all out of time travel potions," Yang replied with a smile that grew when Blake chuckled.

"Then I'll just have to keep working."

"Ok. Just...know that, after our drop at Drideter, he's turned his full attention back to this."

Without Yang going into more detail, Blake understood what was being said - her time to translate in the peace of her room was nearing its end. If she

didn't hurry, she would be finishing the work with a phaser to her head.

"Got it. It shouldn't take long - there's only a few left."

"Good."

Yang nodded but didn't move towards the door. Instead, she stood there long enough that Blake realized their conversation wasn't over - and there was only one other subject she could imagine Yang wanting to discuss.

"So..." Yang began before clearing her throat. "You, uh, slipped out early."

"Sorry, I didn't want to make things..." When Yang stepped closer, Blake unwittingly paused before adding a quiet, "Awkward."

"Why would it be awkward? We're both adults."

"Yes, but you're..."

Faced with a swell of uncertainty, she motioned at Yang and let her fill in the blank.

"In charge of you?" Yang asked. Although not quite what Blake was going for, she nodded. "But you've already proven that I'm not," Yang pointed out. "If I was, you'd listen when I tell you what to do."

"I listen sometimes. When appropriate..."

"And when do you find something appropriate?"

When Yang took another step forward, Blake's grasp on self-control began slipping away.

"When it's something I want to do..."

The softness in her tone was unintentional and driven entirely by Yang's proximity. And the moment Yang set her hands on Blake's hips, she knew there was no way she would resist. Not with lilac eyes trained upon her. Not with the strangely captivating sensation of soft and hard on each of her sides.

She didn't know who initiated, but the next second their lips collided in a kiss that picked up where they left off last night. The desire and longing in Yang's touch spoke to her in exactly the right way, setting a fire loose in her chest that burned hotter when Yang pressed closer.

For someone so adept at pushing people away, Yang wasted no opportunity to feel every bit of Blake that she could get her hands on. Whether touch-starved or just greedy, Blake didn't know and didn't care. What mattered was that Yang clearly wanted her, and *enjoyed* wanting her.

The feeling was mutual.

When Yang pressed closer, backing Blake into the edge of the desk, that didn't slow them in the slightest. Their kisses only grew more fervent as Yang reached down and effortlessly lifted Blake onto the desk. Not one to be outdone, Blake wrapped her legs around Yang's to keep her close, even though there was no threat of her leaving. Not with her hands gripping Blake's sides as if she never wanted to let go.

"Is this something you want to do?" Yang slipped in between kisses before trailing more down Blake's jaw and landing upon her neck. If Yang expected an answer, the soft moan that slipped through Blake's lips should be more than enough.

If this wasn't something Blake wanted to do, she would push Yang away. She wouldn't pull Yang closer and tilt her head in hope that Yang kept kissing her neck. She wouldn't have her hands underneath Yang's armor searching for as much soft, warm skin as she could find.

She wanted nothing more than to lose herself to Yang right now, and surrendered every bit of control when Yang's hands began to wander. From her hips, up her thighs, across her stomach, before crawling up her ribcage – her skin burned with desire wherever Yang's hand was, and tingled with anticipation wherever it might go next.

Then Yang lightly bit down on her neck, right at her pulse point, and she dropped her head back and moaned. The sound encouraged Yang to try again, harder this time, with louder results. With yet another weakness uncovered, Yang smiled against Blake's neck before moving lower and biting down yet again.

"Fuck..." Blake breathed out, pressing her hand to the desk to steady herself while Yang sent desire racing through her veins.

She was ready for a repeat of last night, but then her hand slipped on a stack of papers and everything she'd been working on fell to the floor. The resulting ruckus was enough to make Yang pull away to survey the mess while Blake's cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

"Didn't realize you wanted to get those involved," Yang joked, gently wiping her thumb across Blake's neck before returning her hands to Blake's sides.

“But if you’re into it, I’m all for it.”

“More like I don’t want them anywhere near me while doing...*that*.”

While Yang grinned at the admission that that was where they were headed, Blake released Yang’s legs and motioned that she’d like to get down. When Yang obediently stepped out of the way, Blake wasted no time collecting the papers while also collecting her breath.

Her heartbeat didn’t slow a bit when Yang knelt beside her to help, but they still had the papers gathered and neatly stacked on the desk in no time. Fortunately, her bout of clumsiness had ended what was quickly headed down the same path as last night, although she wasn’t sure if she was relieved or disappointed by the result.

“Thank you,” she told Yang, opting to put that moment behind them.

“No problem.”

After a brief smile, Yang opened her mouth to say something only to close it and shake her head.

“What is it?” Blake asked even though she knew it could be something she didn’t want to answer.

“It’s nothing, really...” It was clearly *something*, but Yang only continued when Blake motioned for her to spit it out. “Ok, I wanted to ask you for something.”

Considering what just happened, Blake raised a brow at the question. “Is this when your kinks come out?” she asked, and Yang actually cracked a smile in return.

“Seems like the time, right?”

“You’re into weapon polish,” Blake teased. “Knew it.”

“I *do* like how it smells...” Trailing off with another soft laugh, Yang searched for the words before eventually spitting it out. “I was just wondering if... maybe...we could hug?”

Surprised by the request, Blake’s first response was to scoff, but she quickly changed tactics when she realized Yang was both serious and embarrassed.

“Really?”

“Nevermind -” Yang tried to turn away, but Blake caught her by the arm.

“I didn’t say no,” Blake pointed out while turning Yang back to her. “I’m

just...surprised.”

The response did nothing to ease Yang’s shame, so Blake shook her head, reached over, and pulled Yang into a hug. As soon as her arms wrapped around Yang’s shoulders and their bodies melded together, however, she understood why this felt like such a big request.

Sex was for pleasure, but a hug was for...comfort. That might be why, out of everything that had happened between them, this felt the most intimate. The most disarming. Blake had never thought about it before, but hugging someone – and allowing a hug in return – was vulnerable, in a way.

When Yang sighed, wrapped her arms around Blake’s waist, and rested her chin on Blake’s shoulder, Blake realized how nice it was. Yang was soft, warm, and very, very...fragile. Those qualities contrasted with the unyielding metal of her arm, but when they were together like this, it was easy to forget that even existed.

“Last person I hugged was my sister,” Yang whispered before pulling away, her eyes as purple as Blake had ever seen them. This vision of her was so soft that Blake realized she would do anything to protect her. To save her.

It was the cardinal sin of going undercover; Blake’s training had harped upon it repeatedly. No matter what was said, no matter what happened, these people couldn’t be saved.

But she didn’t agree with that anymore. Some of them couldn’t be saved, that was true. But Yang...Yang had a goodness in her that begged for redemption, if only someone gave her the chance. Blake wanted to give her that chance. And, as with almost interaction they’d had so far, she knew Yang wouldn’t let her down.

“You don’t have to answer...” Blake began carefully, knowing that she was about to step dangerously close to a line Yang might not be ready to cross. “But...have you ever thought about leaving?”

When Yang didn’t immediately pick up on what Blake was asking, she motioned towards the wall of the ship.

“The Blackguards?” Yang clarified before sighing and shaking her head. “All the time, but I don’t have the resources to look for Ruby by myself. Besides, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because Adam’s made it pretty clear – if I leave, he’ll track me down and kill me.” After a brief pause, Yang met Blake’s gaze with a sad one of her own. “If I can find Ruby, then maybe...things can change. At least, that’s what I used to think. Who knows if that’s true anymore...”

The responses on the tip of Blake’s tongue encouraged Yang to consider it further, but she swallowed those words and offered a simple smile and nod instead.

“Does that mean you want to leave?” Yang suddenly asked.

“No.” Blake quickly shook her head for good measure. “I was just...curious.”

Fortunately, Yang didn’t dig too deeply into why Blake asked such a question. Instead, she nodded and met Blake’s gaze.

“Good. Adam won’t let you leave either – not until you give him those maps, so...please don’t try before then.” Yang’s eyes suggested that she had much more to say than that, but she also refused to put those thoughts into the open right now. “I should let you get back to work,” she said instead.

“You can stay, if you want.” When Blake motioned towards the bed – the only other place to sit beside the desk – Yang looked that way and considered the offer.

“I...shouldn’t,” she eventually said, much to Blake’s disappointment.

“Oh...ok.”

“Not that I don’t want to,” Yang added. “But I just...I shouldn’t.”

Without elaboration, Blake understood the reason, even if it was still disappointing. Yang shouldn’t be caught spending all day with her – by Adam or anyone else. That would lead to rumors, and rumors could lead to something much worse.

“But I’ll come back later?” Yang asked with a hopeful look. “Later tonight, maybe?”

“You’ll come back here?” Blake asked before a disbelieving glance around her room. “To my tiny cabin?”

“I’ve been told it’s...intimate...”

When Yang stepped closer and smiled, her lilac eyes seemed to smile with her. And, in that moment, Blake would have agreed to just about anything

Yang wanted.

But when Yang could have asked for anything, she didn't ask for much. Leaning forward, she pressed a soft, gentle kiss to Blake's cheek before opening the door.

"I'll see you later," she said before stepping into the hall and closing the door behind her.

Left in a suddenly-empty room, Blake stared at the door while her cheek tingled where Yang's lips just touched. Even though the feelings swirling in her chest weren't conducive to working in any way, shape, or form, she would have to try.

But she already knew that if Yang showed up at her door tonight - *when* Yang showed up at her door tonight - she would let her in. No matter how she tried to talk herself out of it, no matter how she tried to resist it, she couldn't. So she might as well not even try.

If she made it through the rest of these maps, maybe she could even consider it a reward...

Chapter 19

When Blake opened her eyes the next morning, she recognized the walls of her cramped cabin - what she didn't recognize was the warmth keeping the normally-chilly air at bay. As soon as she tried to move, however, she understood why she was so blissfully warm.

Yang was still here. In Blake's bed. Hugging her close while softly exhaling across the back of her neck.

Waking up in Yang's arms wasn't how Blake expected this morning to begin, but she should have known better. Last night, while still desirous and wantful, had a little less fire and a little more...feelings. Even though those feelings never made it into words, she felt them in the way Yang kissed her, touched her, and looked at her.

In every interaction, Yang treated her like she was...special. In that sense, of course she woke up in Yang's arms while the two of them squeezed onto her made-for-one bed.

Fraternizing with the enemy was strictly forbidden, but breaking a rule wasn't enough to deter her. With Command on the other side of the galaxy, she would do whatever it took to survive, and thrive, in this cruel environment. If Yang was a part of that equation...then so be it.

Pushing any thought of ISA from her mind, Blake focused on Yang instead. With Yang's prosthetic arm wrapped over her, and Yang still fast asleep, she ran her fingers across the metal plating and searched out as many scratches as she could find. With every scrape and gash, she wondered about the circumstances leading to its existence. She might not like the answer, but she still wanted to know. Now, more than ever, she was confident that Yang had a

reason for everything she did – survival or finding Ruby.

After sliding her hand across the back of Yang's and along each of Yang's fingers, she moved up and started retracing from the beginning. No matter how many times she felt Yang's arm, the coolness and smoothness of the metal surprised her. It was such a unique sensation that she wanted nothing more than to run her fingers over it time and time again.

Feeling Yang shift on the bed behind her, she pulled her hand away and froze. She assumed that Yang didn't have any sense of touch through the metal, but what if she was wrong? She'd never heard of a technology that could impart feeling through prosthetics, but Yang's arm wasn't a typical prosthetic. For all she knew, it *did* have some type of sensory capability, and here she was stroking it as if no one would ever know.

Fortunately, Yang's breathing soon returned to a deep, steady rhythm, and Blake's worry faded away. Rather than exercise added caution, however, she returned her hand to Yang's arm and continued her exploration.

What would this morning feel like if they were somewhere else? Away from the Inferno and the Blackguards...how would it feel to wake up like this? After years of claiming that she didn't have time for a serious relationship, would Yang be the one who convinced her otherwise?

When Yang let out a deep sigh, Blake's neck tingled and unmistakable yearning swept through her veins. She should have already had enough, but she wanted Yang still.

Fortunately for that unquenchable desire, Yang was waking up, and several more sighs tickled Blake's neck before she shifted and briefly pulled Blake closer. The next second, she woke with a jolt followed by several seconds of stiffness.

Knowing that Yang must be experiencing the same disorientation Blake felt yesterday morning, she remained still and waited for the moment to pass. A few seconds was all it took for Yang to relax into the covers, pull Blake into a tighter hug, and nuzzle into her hair. The sweet gesture had Blake's heart fluttering in no time, and she set her hands over Yang's while enjoying their newfound closeness.

“Good morning...”

“Good morning,” she whispered in return, worried that anything louder might scare Yang away.

“So...you were right.”

“I like the sound of that,” Blake replied, smiling while Yang nuzzled closer.

“It is intimate,” Yang admitted, her soft, smooth voice making Blake’s heart flutter again. “And a little challenging, but I love a challenge.”

“You rose to that challenge and then some.”

When Yang laughed – the sound incredibly light and uplifting – Blake was grateful that Yang couldn’t see her reddening cheeks. Embarrassed nonetheless, she stared at Yang’s arm and wished her blush away. Yang, meanwhile, propped herself up and watched Blake trail her fingers back and forth across her arm.

“Enjoying yourself?” she eventually asked, a smile so evident in her tone that Blake didn’t need to turn around to see it.

“Very much so,” she admitted, noting that Yang made no attempt to move away.

“Ruby made it for me. She always had a way with metal.”

“She must be one hell of an engineer...” Blake mused while tracing her fingers along one of the cracks near Yang’s wrist. When she moved further down, Yang’s fingers intertwined with hers, and she abruptly realized that this wasn’t some random piece of equipment – this was a part of Yang, just like every other part of her.

“It’s amazing.” Blake savored that moment of intimacy for as long as she could rationalize it before letting go. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You’re a lot less creepy about it than Adam,” Yang remarked with a chuckle, but the mention of his name made Blake stiffen while something close to anger or jealousy seeped into her veins. Acting upon that emotion, she returned her hand to Yang’s and felt relief when Yang intertwined their fingers once more.

“The two of you never...you know...”

When Yang scoffed, Blake immediately felt relieved.

“I’d rather chuck myself out the garbage chute,” Yang elaborated and, after a few seconds of silence, added, “Plus, I’ve never gotten that feeling from him.”

“Really?”

“Really. I know everyone else does, but it’s...different. There’s plenty of times when we’ve been alone, but he never makes a move. I don’t know how to explain it...”

Still holding hands, Yang wrapped her arms around Blake and pulled them closer together. Considering neither of them were wearing clothing at the moment, the proximity made Blake’s blush return.

“It’s weird,” Yang continued unaware. “And creepy, and makes me want to punch him in the face, but at least he’s not hitting on me. Beggars can’t be choosers, right?”

From how the crew spoke about it, Yang *belonged* to Adam in a romantic or sexual way. Considering her Anima heritage, that assumption made sense. If she didn’t see it that way, however, Blake had no choice but to believe her. But if he wasn’t romantically interested in her, why did he treat her so possessively?

Determined not to think about him right now, Blake spun around in Yang’s arms and wrapped Yang in a hug. Her cheeks flared from that short glimpse of soft, smooth skin, but she quickly snuggled against Yang’s collarbone and took a deep breath to calm herself. With her ear pressed just above Yang’s chest, she heard and felt Yang’s heart beating strongly, filling her with comfort and a fair amount of excitement.

“How long have you been in?” she eventually asked, feeling that she could ask anything by now.

“The Blackguards?” Yang asked, and sighed when Blake nodded against her. “It feels so long...but I think it’s been...a couple years? Two and a half, maybe?” Sighing again, she rested her chin on the top of Blake’s head and held her close. “Long enough for me to question everything about myself...”

Rather than respond, Blake listened to Yang’s heartbeat and left the door open for more to be said.

“You know what my worst fear is...” Yang whispered before long. “That Ruby won’t even recognize me. Or worse - she’ll see what a monster I am and want nothing to do with me.”

“She won’t do that.” Pulling away from the embrace, Blake looked into

melancholy red eyes and shook her head. “She won’t. She’ll understand that you did what you had to do to survive. And she won’t think you’re a monster, because you aren’t one.”

In a universe filled with danger, they did whatever they could to survive. Being stuck in a bad situation didn’t make someone a bad person – Blake understood that now. While Adam and Cinder and some of the other Blackguards were undeniably evil, writing off the entire group was unfair to the tragedies that brought them together.

Adam was a monster. He had the power and means to change his ways yet willingly sought violence with every breath. Cinder was a monster. She relished the pain and misery of others, and coveted any opportunity to be the deliverer of such angst.

“You’re nothing like them.” Touching Yang’s cheek, Blake knew that she could never say it enough. And Yang could never hear it enough, as she leaned into the touch and sighed while her eyes lightened.

“What about you?” she asked, but Blake blinked at the question.

“What about me?”

“You were so gung ho about joining,” Yang reminded her. “But sometimes you act like you don’t even want to be here.”

The most worrisome part about that observation was wondering if anyone else picked up on her reluctance to be as evil as they wanted her to be. Still, Yang wanted an honest answer, as evidenced by her hopeful gaze. Unfortunately, Blake couldn’t be as honest as she wanted to be.

“The Blackguards have prestige and power,” she answered with a shrug. “I thought joining would boost my credibility.”

“Then what changed?”

Without trying, Yang backed Blake into a corner. How could she answer without sounding hypocritical? And the truth – that she never belonged to begin with – was out of the question.

“Haven’t you ever wanted something only to get it and realize it’s not what you expected?”

When Yang’s gaze lingered on Blake for a little too long, another blush began to grow.

“I thought it would be a stepping stone to something greater,” she added, breaking away from that look. “Maybe it will be, but I know crazy when I see it – and Adam and Cinder are crazy. I’m not risking my life by throwing in with them.”

“Then...would you ever consider leaving it all behind? Being a mercenary... crime, in general?”

Yang was asking all the right questions, and each one fostered the spark of hope in Blake’s chest.

“I already have,” she replied, noting the relief in Yang’s eyes. “I’ve just... never had a good reason.”

She hoped that Yang interpreted the answer as she intended it – that she would leave for Yang, because Yang was a good enough reason to leave any life behind.

“I hope you find one. You deserve a better life than this.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can just tell. You’re different.”

Again with that word, which Blake interpreted as ‘special’ rather than anything else. She wanted Yang to explain further, to detail the ways she was ‘different,’ but she let the opportunity pass by just like the last time.

“Guess I should let you get to work, huh...” Yang mused shortly after, not dwelling on the compliment for long. But her tone suggested that she didn’t want to go, as did the way her hand ran over Blake’s arm and her eyes roved... elsewhere.

“Oh.” That look was distracting, but Blake shook her head and refocused. “I actually had news for you, but you were a little...overzealous...”

“I was overzealous?” Yang replied before laughing. “Ok, I’ll take that. What news?”

“I finished the maps.”

Yang’s eyes widened at the response before flitting to the desk and back to Blake.

“Really?”

“Finished right before you showed up,” Blake said with a nod. “So...you’re the first one to know.”

She'd been too exhausted to tell anyone else. Although that exhaustion had disappeared the instant Yang stepped into her room...

"Wow. Can't believe you finished them...and fast, too."

"It didn't *feel* fast, believe me."

When Blake rolled her eyes, Yang smiled.

"I feel like I should reward you or something..."

For a split second, Blake considered turning down the offer. But after accepting every other overture so far, what was the point in saying no now?

The opportunity disappeared when a wave of energy rumbled through the walls, rocking the ship and making them both sit straight up in bed.

"What was that?" Blake asked while Yang looked around, her eyes red and alert.

"Nothing good."

As soon as Yang jumped out of bed, Blake followed.

"We're not supposed to have visitors," Yang explained while throwing on her clothes and finding her armor. Seconds later, an alarm tore through the air, making them briefly freeze before moving even faster.

"What're the chances you'll stay here?"

"Less than zero," Blake replied while slipping her knife into her pocket, hearing Yang swear under her breath as she hurried to the door.

"Then stay close," was all she said before rushing out of the room with Blake on her heels.

The alarm was even louder in the hall, where it combined with flashing emergency lights and Blackguards yelling and sprinting every which way.

"Hey!" Yang shouted at a young man racing down the hall. "What the hell's going on?"

"We just got droned!" he shouted back, hardly slowing his pace. "Adam wants all squads activated now!"

"Alliance?" Yang asked while the man carried on his mission and Blake's blood ran cold. Why would Alliance drone the ship if they knew she was here?

"Shit, we need to clear them out."

When Yang took off running, Blake was right behind her. Phaser blasts sounded nearby, followed by shouts and cries of pain. Underneath the sounds

of battle, however, was a droning noise that grew louder by the second.

Flying around a corner, she nearly crashed into Yang's back when Yang slid to a stop. She hardly righted herself when she saw it - the blue and black attack drone hovering just in front of them. With multiple phasers built into a reinforced metal hull and sensors that could detect heartbeats and radiant body heat, it wasn't something to be trifled with.

And it had already spotted them.

"Surrender or face lethal consequences," it ordered them - the only warning it would give.

"Um, hell no."

Grabbing Blake's hand, Yang dragged her out of the way as the drone opened fire. Phaser blasts hit the floor where they just stood, but they were sprinting down the next hallway by the time the device switched into pursuit mode.

"We have five minutes to get rid of these things before shock troops arrive," Yang explained while tearing down the corridor, though Blake didn't need the explanation. She knew the procedure well because she'd been trained for it, and the last thing she wanted was a fight with Alliance officers on this ship.

"I can turn them off," she blurted out. "If you can hold them still, I can turn them off."

Yang shot her a glance but didn't question the disclosure as they sprinted down the hall with a drone on their heels. Over her pounding heartbeat, she heard more drones, more gunfire, and more cries of pain in the distance. No matter what, she had to keep ISA off the ship. She couldn't watch her fellow agents die just because Command made the mistake of droning the Inferno.

"Get ready," Yang said as she led them around another corner, only to groan when they saw the hallway up ahead. "Shit. The kid."

Ret stood in the middle of the hall, looking completely overwhelmed while holding a phaser in one shaking hand. And they just led a maniacal shooting device right to him.

Yang recognized the dilemma at the same time Blake did, and responded by sliding to a stop and turning back the way they came. Blake hardly had time to react before Yang sprinted to the corner and, the instant the drone flew past the wall, leveled it with her right hand. The force of the blow sent it

crashing into the wall, and Blake pulled out her knife while Yang followed up with another powerful punch.

“Hold it!” Blake yelled over the frantic whirring of its motors.

As soon as Yang grabbed the drone by one of its phasers and dragged it closer to the floor, it started firing in all directions, leaving red-hot burns everywhere. While it struggled to free itself from Yang’s grasp, Blake slid underneath, flipped her blade in her hand, and jabbed it into the tiny, cleverly-concealed slot on the bottom of the device. A counterclockwise twist cut power to the rotors, and the device instantly fell silent.

“Damn, you weren’t kidding,” Yang breathed out while dropping the disabled drone to the floor. With no time for more than that, Blake stood and rushed over to Ret.

“Ret, stay here,” she ordered while opening the door to the nearest room and pushing him inside.

“But I can help!”

“No. Stay here.” In no mood for an argument, she took the phaser from his hands and handed it to Yang, who quickly holstered it. “Stay,” she ordered him one more time before nodding to Yang.

With nothing more than that nod, the two of them raced away in search of more drones. Depending on the size of the ship waiting to breach the Inferno, there could be as few as five to as many as thirty drones on board. Blake hoped for five, but there was too much commotion going on for it to be that low of a number.

“Left,” she said when she heard buzzing nearby.

Yang turned left at the next fork in the hall only to spring back when shots whipped past. The drone appeared a second later, and Blake threw herself behind a stack of containers as it opened fire. Yang crouched behind a set of lockers on the other side of the hall and met Blake’s gaze, but she only stayed there for a second before moving forward.

Blake had no idea what Yang was going to do, but she stood to support and flinched when a near-miss burned across her shoulder. Yang, however, ripped off one of the locker doors and used it as a shield to rush the drone straight on. Once close enough, she lowered the makeshift shield and smashed it into

the drone with so much power that the locker door bent in on itself while the drone crashed into the wall.

Wasting no time, Blake raced over to help. Yang grabbed the drone and tore off one of the phasers, then did her best to hold it steady while Blake ducked underneath and disabled it. The whirring stopped, only to be replaced by a loud clanging in the vents running between the walls. When the sound quickly disappeared above them, Yang glanced at the wall then at Blake.

“We need to get to the bridge,” she said, and Blake followed without question.

Incapacitating the captain or preventing a jump would be ISA’s priority. As long as the drones secured the bridge, the Inferno was stuck. And as long as the Inferno was stuck, Alliance had an easy way on board.

Making it to the lifts, they rushed inside and caught their breath on the short trip to the command center. When the doors opened, Yang held out an arm to keep Blake from rushing out. Instead, she peeked around the corner and raised two fingers.

Two drones were stationed outside the bridge. Those would watch each direction in the hallway while several more kept tabs on the navigation crew.

‘Bum rush?’ Yang mouthed, but didn’t even give Blake time to ask what that meant before sprinting out of the lift and directly at the drones. Quickly understanding the strategy, which was suicidal, Blake tore after her as the drones opened fire.

They were too late, as Yang had already reached them and knocked one into the wall before grabbing the other and dragging it to the floor. Knowing they only had a fraction of a second to work, Blake slid underneath the device and jabbed a few times before getting her blade in the right spot and twisting.

One down. But no time to celebrate, as the first drone righted itself and spun towards them. Yang put her fist through its hull with a loud crunch of metal on metal, but it reacted with such wild movements that it became impossible for Blake to get underneath.

“Hold it still!” she yelled, ducking out of the way as one of the rotors passed dangerously close to her cheek.

“I’m - trying -”

Spotting an opening, Blake dove forward and stuck her knife into the drone. Before she could disable it though, it jerked to the side, ripping the blade right out of her hands and sending it skittering across the hall.

“Any - day now,” Yang huffed as Blake raced to collect the knife and the drone fought to get airborne.

As soon as Blake got her hand on the knife, she dove back under the drone, jabbed the blade into the bottom of it, and twisted. The rotors fell silent as the drone dropped to the floor, and Yang wasted no time sprinting to the doorway of the bridge.

Just inside - four more drones, which immediately turned their way.

“Shit.”

Yang shoved Blake out of the way as phaser fire covered the floor where they just stood, but that moment caused just enough of a distraction for the other Blackguards to fight back. Chaos immediately erupted in the room, and Yang wasted no time joining.

“Jump!” Adam shouted while Blake raced after Yang, running on pure adrenaline now.

One of the pilots tried to make it to the navigation system only to be taken down by a wayward phaser shot. Those who were unarmed cowered behind desks and terminals while the drones and Adam’s guards exchanged volleys of superheated air.

“Jump!” Adam roared again, but no one attempted to reach the Inferno’s controls this time. They were too busy fighting for their lives.

“Blake!”

Turning towards Yang’s voice, Blake found that Yang had grabbed another drone. That drone then dove to the side, sending her crashing into one of the desks with it, but she refused to let go. Meanwhile, the other Blackguards tried to corral the rest of them.

So much was going on - so many people shouting and shooting and calling for help - but Blake fell back on her training. One thing at a time. She couldn’t control everything, but she could do one thing at a time. And first, she would help Yang.

Racing over, she stopped and ducked backward when the drone flew towards

her head. Still wielding her knife in one hand, she projected its path and leapt that way before it even got there. One stab upward, twist sideways, and it fell silent.

The lifeless device hadn't even hit the floor before Yang ran towards the next. Blake stayed right on her heels but let her choose the path of attack. When Yang planted her foot on one of the chairs and launched herself at the drone from behind, Blake slid underneath the desk and met them as they crashed to the floor. While it struggled to take off, one of the other Blackguards threw himself on top of it to keep it down.

"Flip it!" Yang shouted while pulling the drone sideways. The blades whirred with new life, and it nearly got out of their grip while Blake searched for the right spot. But, upon finding it, she had it turned off a second later.

Hearing just one left, she leapt to her feet, turned around, and found it right in her face. There was the briefest of pauses as it scanned her, but she wasted no time flipping the knife in her hand and throwing it into the space where the rotors attached to the shell. The blade hardly left her hand before she sprinted after it, and the drone finally fired, but she ducked the shot before popping back up, tearing out her knife, and stabbing it into the bottom of the drone. The next second, it fell lifeless to the floor.

In the sudden silence that followed, she looked up and found Adam staring at her. But that look only lasted a second before he turned back to the room and shouted, "Jump!"

Now that the coast was clear, the pilots scrambled back to their stations to see out the order. A second later, the Inferno jumped, and everyone on the bridge let out an audible sigh of relief. Another few minutes and they would have had an even worse battle on their hands, but they somehow avoided that fate - today.

"How did you know that?" When Blake looked over, Yang motioned to the scrapped drone at their feet. "How'd you know how to turn them off?"

"Not my first rodeo."

While Yang took the response at face value, Adam didn't so much as blink. The look in his eyes made Blake squirm, and she couldn't escape the feeling that she just gave something away.

The drone made only a split-second hesitation, but he saw it. Would he convince himself that it was just his mind playing tricks on him? Or would he think that it paused because it matched Blake's facial scan in its database?

Thankfully, he turned away after not too long.

"I want to know how they found us. And clean this junk up," he demanded while kicking one of the drones. "Cinder," he added with a jerk of his head before disappearing from the bridge, and Cinder strode after him without a word.

While several crew members rushed over to start the cleanup, Yang motioned for Blake to follow her and hurried out of the room.

"Let them deal with that," she explained after they stepped into a lift. "Pretty sure we did enough heavy lifting for now."

"Right."

Watching the numbers on the wall while the lift lowered away from the bridge, Blake replayed that moment again in her head. The drone. The pause. The look in Adam's eyes.

"Come on."

Once the doors opened, Yang nudged Blake's shoulder and walked into the hall. Without much thought, Blake followed. It was only when she walked into Yang's room and heard the door close behind her that she realized how familiar this place was. Not only familiar but...comforting. Here, she felt like she could be the closest thing to herself.

Right now, she needed a place to worry. So, while Yang sat down and pulled off her armor, she paced the length of the room and did just that. Her heart and mind were still racing, and not from fighting off the drones. This wasn't adrenaline - it was fear.

She could explain it as a misunderstanding during the heat of battle, but she doubted Adam would believe anything she said over his interpretation. Then what could she say? The drone must have malfunctioned? Overheated its phaser? Suffered temporary targeting difficulties?

"Are you ok?"

Pulled from her thoughts, she turned towards Yang, who looked concerned by her silence.

“Yes,” she lied. “I’m just...”

Shaken was a good word. Worried. Scared.

“You know what cures the jitters?”

The moment Yang stood up and held out her arms, Blake laughed.

“You *do* have a kink, don’t you?”

“A big one, yeah.”

When Yang wrapped her in a warm, gentle hug, she sighed and returned the embrace. After only a few seconds, her heartbeat slowed, her adrenaline dissipated, and her worry about what Adam had or hadn’t seen faded to the background.

“Are you ok?” Yang whispered while running her hand up and down Blake’s back. “You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“No...I’m fine.”

“Good.”

The longer Yang ran her hand across Blake’s back, the better she felt, as if the warmth of Yang’s palm kept the stress away. She teased Yang for the ‘kink,’ but she would gladly stand here for hours and hours on end.

“So...” Yang added after enough silence had passed. “I know I wanted you to stay in your room...but that was really hot.”

Laughing at the compliment, Blake leaned back and lowered her arms to Yang’s waist.

“Thanks, I guess?”

“I’m serious. Who taught you how to fight like that?”

The very people who unleashed the drones on the ship...

“Picked up bits and pieces throughout my travels, and my dad taught me some when I was little. Blades are a big thing on Menagerie.”

Realizing that she just deviated from her cover story, she held her breath and waited for Yang’s reaction. Thankfully, Yang just chuckled and gently clutched her sides.

“Well I’m really grateful to your dad right now.” Meeting Blake’s gaze, Yang gave a hesitant smile before adding a soft, “For more reasons than one.”

When Blake’s heart cartwheeled in her chest, she scolded herself and tried to control her emotions. But that was hard when Yang was like this – this

different person who she wanted to see more and more of.

“So...in the interest of *really* bringing out my kinks...”

When Yang trailed off and stepped away, Blake frowned in confusion and sadness at the loss of Yang’s touch. Yang wasn’t gone for long, however, as she grabbed Blake’s old ISA knife off of the desk and extended it with a grin. Blake, however, stared at the weapon before giving Yang an incredulous look.

“I hope you’re not asking me to hurt you, because you haven’t pissed me off that much yet.”

“Noted.” After a light laugh, Yang waved the knife. “I want to see you use this.”

“And how will you defend yourself?”

“Easy.”

When Yang raised her metal arm and grinned, Blake rolled her eyes and grabbed the blade. After re-familiarizing herself with the weight and balance, she spun it around to a proper grip. That was when she noticed how Yang was staring at her.

“Not gonna lie,” Yang said while raising her fists. “I’m hoping this ends up in my bed again.”

“If you’re lucky.”

Blake spun the blade again and, as soon as she heard Yang’s joyful laugh, smiled.

“You know, ever since you showed up, I’ve felt the luckiest I have in a long time.”

Blake’s heart fluttered at the comment, and she briefly considered dwelling on it - maybe even asking Yang to elaborate. Recognizing that now wasn’t the time, however, she smiled and raised the knife.

“You’re going to need it,” she teased, springing forward the moment Yang looked ready.

Chapter 20

Something startled Blake awake, but she hardly started searching for the cause before hearing a soft giggle behind her.

“Sorry...” Yang whispered not long after. “Didn’t mean to tickle you.”

Though relaxing at the response, Blake felt her heart speed up once she realized that she’d woken in Yang’s bed yet again. In Yang’s bed, in Yang’s room, without clothes...and she was happy to be there.

“You’re up early,” she mumbled, rubbing the sleep from her eyes

“You’re up late, actually.”

“Really?” After craning her neck to look at Yang, who looked radiant as ever when she smiled, Blake settled back into the sheets. “Then why am I so tired...”

“I can think of a few reasons...”

When Yang chuckled, Blake closed her eyes and savored the uplifting sound. Unfortunately, not even Yang’s laughter could make her forget the reason why she wanted to go right back to sleep.

“You sleep ok?” Wrapping her arms around Blake, Yang pulled them closer together. “It looked like you were having nightmares. Your ears were moving like crazy.”

Blake *had* been having nightmares. And with anyone else, she would lie. With Yang, she sighed and said, “Yes.”

“Were drones chasing you like they were in my dreams?”

The drones were an easy answer but, again, Blake wanted to be more honest than that.

“Drones, yes, but also...Adam.”

After briefly stilling at the name, Yang pulled Blake closer.

“I’ve had those before.”

“You have?”

“Yeah. He usually shoots me for no reason.” When Yang shuddered at the thought, Blake felt moderately better. Or, at least, less weak for dreaming about him choking her to within an inch of her life time and time again. “And he’s going to be in a horrible mood today,” Yang added. “So maybe your subconscious picked up on it.”

“Because of the drones?”

“Yeah. He’ll be out for blood trying to figure out how they got on board.”

“Why do you think ISA did that?”

“If I had to guess...because I just tossed one of their officers off a cliff.”

While Yang chuckled at the thought, Blake frowned. That seemed very retaliatory, especially when Sun survived. There had to be another reason... some information they wanted...

But that also didn’t make sense. If they wanted information, why not ask her to find it? She was already on board. Why risk her cover and wellbeing by forcing her to fight the drones and potentially shock troops?

“And I think Adam might have pissed someone off on Drideter,” Yang added. “Not positive, but I overheard one of his guards talking about a firefight. So much for a ‘refill only’ stop...”

The casual disclosure illuminated how intimately intertwined Blake was with a top source of Blackguard information. Not only was Yang one of the leading commanders, but she was...honest. At least, she was honest with Blake.

Even though Blake was acutely aware of how far outside the rules this relationship was, that wasn’t enough to convince her to stop. She was still doing her job. She was still figuring out how the Blackguards operated. She was still transcribing the maps and keeping photos of the finished products for herself. Being with Yang didn’t prevent her from doing any of that.

If anything, Yang *helped* - just like Blake thought she would. Her knowledge of the Blackguards, as well as her proximity to Adam, was invaluable. She knew intricate details of what happened around the Inferno, and she shared that knowledge willingly.

“You fall asleep?” Yang whispered a few seconds later and, for a brief moment, Blake considered pretending to be sleeping to see what Yang would do. Thinking better of it, she spun around in Yang’s arms instead. As soon as their eyes met, Yang smiled, and Blake used every bit of willpower she possessed to keep her gaze above Yang’s collarbone.

“It’s already late,” she pointed out, as if Yang needed telling. “If I fall asleep, people will probably start looking for me.”

“And they’ll *never* find you here.”

The tilt in Yang’s lips implied she was joking, but Blake was finding it hard and harder to focus while warm fingers trailed down her side.

“I...should still get back to my room...” she mumbled while goosebumps rose along her arms.

“Right,” Yang agreed only to lean forward and press a kiss to Blake’s lips. With such a sweet and gentle touch, she proved that she knew how to make Blake crave more, and crave more in a big way.

Not content to let Yang pull away, Blake pursued those soft lips and felt them just barely holding a smile at bay. That was all the permission Yang needed to press forward and climb on top of Blake, keeping their lips locked all the while. Feeling Yang’s warm skin against hers while their kisses grew more passionate, Blake knew exactly where this was headed – and fast.

Yet, somehow, she found the resolve to break the kiss.

“Now I should *really* get back to my room...” she said, and Yang gave an understanding nod.

“Right, absolutely.”

Another kiss started immediately after, as if they both knew the first break was only temporary. Yang’s hand was roaming now, and Blake’s body heated up with what could only be anticipation.

“Yang...” she whined against Yang’s lips, realizing this wouldn’t stop without Yang’s help.

“You know...” Yang murmured while trailing her fingers down Blake’s chest, tickling her ribs in the process. “*Technically*, I’m your commander. If I tell you to stay here, that’s kind of what you have to do.”

“That’s...a good point...”

When Yang's lips again met hers, Blake considered saying nothing else for the next hour or so. Unfortunately, the more time that passed, the more her and Yang's absence would be noted. Besides, she still had a nagging worry she needed to address.

"But I have to get those maps to Adam..."

Finally, Yang sighed and collapsed onto the bed beside Blake.

"You're right...we already have to deal with his 'moodiness' today. We shouldn't make it even worse."

"Now I'm *really* looking forward to seeing him..." Blake muttered while rolling out of bed. Conscious of Yang's gaze, she quickly grabbed her clothes and started getting dressed.

"You never know. Maybe having all the maps will put him in a good mood." When Blake glanced over her shoulder in disbelief, Yang laughed. "You're right. He doesn't have a 'good' mood. Just various shades of pissed off."

Shaking her head at the accurate description, Blake grabbed her armor and got caught looking when Yang finally slipped out of bed.

"Like what you see?"

Too embarrassed to respond, Blake focused on her armor while Yang got dressed. Even though Yang could be shockingly immodest sometimes, Blake knew it was a ruse just like her hardened, confident commander personality. It masked her insecurities and let her live a lie...yet it *still* made Blake blush like a schoolgirl.

"I'll be thrilled if I never see a Valerian rune again," she muttered to break the silence, and only turned towards Yang when she was fully clothed.

"Guess I'm not getting that tattoo then..."

When Yang stepped in front of Blake and smiled, Blake was struck by how different she looked with something as simple as a change of clothes, a smile, and lilac eyes. Not too long ago, Blake couldn't have imagined being this close to someone like Yang. Today, however, she didn't hesitate to reach up and set her hands on Yang's shoulders. When Yang stepped into the touch and rested her hands on Blake's hips in return, Blake understood the meaning of intimacy.

The hardness of Yang's right shoulder contrasted with the softness of her

left, and Blake gently squeezed her hands to test the difference before sliding down Yang's arms. She felt Yang's bicep in one arm while the other was hard as rock. She felt the soft skin of Yang's elbow followed by the almost fragileness of her wrist - each of those tender places replicated with solid metal on the opposite side. Finally, she reached Yang's hands - warm and calloused compared to cold and smooth.

Sensing the intentness with which Yang watched her, Blake didn't look up while focusing upon Yang's hands. After hearing the stories and rumors, she could imagine the horrible things these hands could do. But, as she intertwined her fingers with Yang's, she also couldn't imagine it at all.

For as much as Yang had a coldness and hardness to her, those facets were just as real as her arm. They didn't belong. They were bolted on like last-minute additions rather than pieces of who she was. They were a part of her, but that didn't mean they always would be.

She was the key to so much more than information. She was the answer to whether a bad person could be good, or whether a good person could be bad. And when she smiled, when her eyes sparkled with hope and belief that Adam hadn't taken away from her, Blake realized how misguided she'd been all along.

Dropping her hands to her sides, she smiled and tried to think of an explanation for what she just did. As it turned out, she didn't need to say anything - Yang just smiled and reached forward to hold her hands.

"Listen..." Yang added in a softer voice, with a softer expression to match. "When you give Adam the maps, make it sound like you're still needed, ok?"

"Because I'm expendable otherwise?"

"I don't want to give him a reason to think so..." Yang trailed off and, after looking thoughtful for a few seconds, shook her head. "I don't know what happens once he has them all, and that scares me a bit."

The admission alarmed Blake but, at the same time, she was grateful that Yang voiced it out loud. At least she wasn't the only one afraid of what Adam might do.

"I guess we'll have to deal with it when it comes, right?"

"Right."

After sharing a look for a while longer, somehow communicating the rest of their worries without words, Yang blew a breath through her lips and grabbed her armor.

“If you’re headed to the bridge, I’ll swing by the cafeteria and meet you there. I don’t want to give people the wrong idea if we keep showing up at the same time.”

“Ah...”

“Not that I don’t want to,” Yang quickly added. “I don’t mind, and I’m pretty sure most of the crew knows we’re sleeping together, but I don’t want Adam finding out it’s more than just sex.”

“Oh.” As soon as the comment sunk in, Blake gave Yang a curious look. “Is it?”

With her armor midway over her head, Yang froze. And the longer she remained like that, the more Blake’s anticipation grew. They hadn’t discussed anything remotely close to this subject, too busy surviving to discuss specifics, but now she wanted to know Yang’s answer.

“I mean...” Trailing off, Yang pulled her Blackguard uniform into place and straightened her posture. She might even look imposing if not for the blush on her cheeks and the shyness in her eyes. “Y-yeah...I’d like to think so...”

Yang looked more uncomfortable with each passing second, but Blake savored that moment for as long as she could before smiling.

“I’d like to think so too.”

She shouldn’t have admitted that, but it was how she felt - and Yang’s smile made it worth it.

“Yeah?” Yang looked so happy, Blake had no option but to nod. “Ok, then... it is more than...just *that*.”

As Yang’s bashfulness returned, a laugh slipped through Blake’s lips, and Yang quickly shook her head.

“I’ll, uh...see you in a little bit,” she continued as she regained some of her composure. “Try not to piss him off until I get there?”

“I’ll do my best.”

After leaning in and stealing one last kiss, Blake smiled at the mystified expression on Yang’s face before sneaking out of the room. Once the door

closed behind her, she smiled to herself before hurrying away from the officers' corridor.

Sometimes, this situation felt too surreal to be true. But, despite grappling with the guilt of hiding her identity from Yang and worrying about her duty to ISA, she was...happy.

She was still smiling like a fool when she made it back to her room, but her joviality evaporated when she thought about the interaction to come. On the desk were the last three maps, fully transcribed and ready to be turned in. After giving them one more glance to make sure she hadn't missed anything, she gathered them up, took a deep breath, and headed to the bridge.

Yang didn't know what happened next, and neither did she. For all she knew, her time on the Inferno ended the moment she handed these over. Without her skill as a translator, what other use could they have for her? She had the ability necessary to join the squads but, after the look Adam gave her yesterday, wasn't sure they trusted her enough for that. She needed a reason for them to keep her - she needed to remain vital to their mission.

By the time she walked onto the bridge, she still had no idea how to prove her importance. Not only that, but the phaser burns in the walls reminded her all too well of yesterday. When she found Adam and Cinder poring over a hologram on the table, her worry only worsened.

Yang's absence put her on edge, but Yang couldn't always be around to help. If Blake was going to complete her mission, she had to deal with Adam and Cinder on her own sometimes. Still, she missed the subtle protection Yang offered. Or, at the very least, Yang's ability to be a calm, rational person.

Adam and Cinder noticed her before she announced herself, and Cinder cleared the hologram before she got a good look at it. While suspicious, what worried her most was the way Adam looked at her as if annoyed that she dared exist in his presence. Maybe it was only her imagination. Maybe he always looked at her like this, but she was just hyper-aware of it today.

"I finished them," she said before setting the last few pages on the table. Faking nonchalance, she didn't even watch Cinder grab the maps and load them into the computer system. Instead, she glanced around the bridge as if it was more curious to her than what Cinder was doing.

A blue and yellow planet took up nearly the entire view outside the Inferno, but she couldn't name it from those details alone. She hadn't known they were heading to another planet so soon, but she also hadn't had the opportunity to pry Emerald for information recently.

"I don't know what we'll find when we get there," she added while Cinder combined the new digital scans with the others. "This could be a map to another map. Or the entrance could be covered in more runes. I have no idea."

She honestly didn't, but she hoped they *also* had no idea what they were getting into, and what they might or might not need her for.

"Run the analysis," Adam said once the scans were ready. With Blake and a great majority of the bridge watching, the hologram table created layer upon layer of details from the old maps. Those were then laid on top of each other and rotated, then rotated again, and again. The computer was searching for something - a specific pattern only it knew.

The maps, which meant next to nothing when considered separately, eventually locked together in an image that looked like an intricate star. In that form, the runes - Blake's translation - suddenly made sense. It was a full constellation, exact coordinates, and a complete warning telling anyone other than the chosen guardians to stay away.

"They thought they were clever..." Adam mused after the computer highlighted their next destination - an unnamed planet labeled TS72 in the Boller system. "Chart a path," he ordered the bridge while the planet hung in the air before them.

The pilots hurried about their new task, but confusion sparked in Blake's mind.

Why had they let her see that?

"Good work," Adam told her, though the words lacked a single drop of praise. "Now that we have a location, it won't be long before we have all the Valerian steel we could dream of."

"That's great."

Blake forced an impassive expression, but her skin tingled when Cinder walked around the table and looked at the hologram from beside her.

Something was wrong. The room was too tense.

The moment she tried to slide away from Cinder, someone grabbed her arm. Her instinct was to pull away, but she hardly moved before a foot kicked the back of her knee and buckled her leg. The loss of balance was enough of an opening for Cinder to twist her arm behind her back and slam her against the table.

She struggled against Cinder's grasp until she saw a flash of silver. Then she froze and watched Cinder bring the blade closer to her throat.

"What the hell are you doing?" she got out, somehow sounding angry even though she was terrified.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you, *Lieutenant*?"

"What're you talking about?" she scoffed, even though the word made her blood run cold.

"Don't bother," Cinder replied, twisting Blake's arm even further, making her wince in pain. "Don't you recognize where we are?" She nodded towards the planet through the glass, but Blake still didn't recognize it.

"Gautov." As soon as Cinder said the name, Blake's concern doubled. "ISA offloaded some of their data here, and they were kind enough to let me take a look. Turns out, you're in their system -"

"We're *all* in their system."

"- as an *employee*," Cinder concluded with an air of finality. "And your first assignment was a big one, wasn't it? Infiltrate the Blackguards and figure out how to take them down."

When Cinder tsked the statement, Blake searched for a way out of it.

"You're lying."

That was the only thing she could think of - the only way to cast doubt over the truth. And that was when her ISA badge replaced the hologram of planet TS72.

"Are we?"

Feeling every eye upon her, she stared at her badge and struggled to find words to say.

"Let her go."

Adam's low, calm voice scared her even more, and she didn't even want to look at him after Cinder did as instructed. Her immediate thought was to make

a run for it, but where could she go?

She didn't have time for more thought than that before jumping backward when Adam swung at her. Instantly on the defensive, she backed as far away as possible, dodging more blows in the process, and tried to decide whether or not to respond. Attacking Adam meant death, but her cover was already blown -

"Come on," he goaded her. "Try it."

Taking the bait, she launched a counterattack and felt her surprise grow when he immediately switched to the defensive. He was strong enough to overpower her with brute force, but he let her try to attack.

It only took a few more seconds to realize that something was wrong. Without much effort on his part, he parried or dodged every blow, almost as if he knew what she would do before she did it. No sooner had she made the realization did he grab her arm and pin it behind her back.

"I should have known," he said, twisting her arm until she cried out in pain. "The stench of loyalty. The misguided belief that you're always right."

When he released her, she hardly felt the relief in her shoulder before throwing an elbow towards him. He didn't bat an eye while ducking and landing a hook right to her temple. The blow sent her staggering into the table, where she caught herself and shook her head in hopes of clearing her vision. Sensing his approach, she threw a wild punch at him only to feel a hand lock around her wrist. Before she could react, he jerked her off balance and brought his knee up into her chest.

Her lungs emptied as her ribs cracked, and she fell to her knees while tears of pain stung her eyes. Her ears were ringing. She could hardly breathe. Her head pounded. And she knew this wouldn't be the last of it.

"I thought it was a coincidence," Adam continued, circling her while she struggled to regain her breath. "But I knew it the moment I saw you fight. You don't know what it's like to fight for survival because you weren't trained to survive. You were trained to march into the fire because those are your *orders*. Because the *greater good* demands it, and you heed the call, like any good drone."

Gritting her teeth, she set her hands on the floor and pushed herself back to

her feet. The effort made her head swim, but she blinked the feeling away and stared at Adam. Every alarm bell she had was ringing fiercely right now, but there was nothing she could do.

“State your identification number,” he snarled at her, and she frowned. The way he said that...

“State your identification number,” he repeated before grabbing her by the collar and jerking her forward. “State it.”

Everyone on the bridge waited for her response. She would have expected all of them to be disgusted or livid. Some were, but some were simply surprised. Others looked uncomfortable. Then there was Emerald, who glared daggers her way.

If this was the end, she wasn't going out as a Blackguard.

“Badge one-six-five-eight,” she replied in a clear voice, and Adam released her with a menacing smirk.

“Badge three-seven-one-four.”

Blake's eyes widened at the response, and she stared in disbelief while Adam straightened his posture, rolled back his shoulders, moved his heels together, and gave a stiff salute.

“*Captain Taurus.*”

It was a lie - it had to be.

But he had no reason to lie.

“You're Alliance?” she asked anyway, only for her disbelief to grow when he nodded.

“They sent me to figure out how criminal organizations worked, and you know what I realized?” He paused and waited for her to respond, only to raise his hand and point at the planet outside the window. “ISA has it wrong.”

He made the statement with such certainty, Blake frowned, but he wasn't done yet.

“Every planet that joins is guaranteed a seat at the table. How many is it up to now? Twenty-two? Twenty-three?”

“Twenty-five,” she whispered, still too shell shocked to fully grasp the situation.

“Twenty-five planets. Twenty-five leaders to be appeased. Twenty-five

voices, all arguing for themselves. And every additional planet drags the system further into stalemates and deadlock. Decisions can't be made quickly, opportunities can't be seized upon before they slip away."

"They had the right idea - bring together the planets - but failed in the execution. Now they sit on their hands and argue while the rest of the system wonders when this fabled 'protector of all' will appear."

Pausing, Adam flipped the holoscreen back to Planet TS72.

"Once we control the mines," he said, speaking to the screen rather than to her. "Our numbers and power will grow, and we'll wipe the Alliance from the system. In its place? Order, discipline, and prosperity, under the direction of one voice - and that voice will be mine."

When he turned towards her, she saw the manic determination in his eyes, and she knew he meant to see this plan through to the end.

"You can't be serious..." When she shook her head, she winced and gingerly touched her side. "Even if you have this metal, ISA has *planets* of resources to draw upon -"

"And what happens when planets start leaving the Alliance?"

The idea of a planet leaving the Alliance seemed unfathomable, but so did finding an ancient metal supposedly stronger than anything else in existence. If Adam had his way...if he destroyed ISA...one of the only hopes for a united galaxy went with it.

What he proposed was essentially declaring war on the universe.

Hearing footsteps, Blake turned towards the doorway and watched Yang walk onto the bridge. The moment Yang saw the scene in front of her, however, she froze, then set her mouth in a scowl.

"What's going on?" she asked while walking over. The closer she got, the more worried her eyes became. She could tell Blake was hurt and reached out as if to help her.

"She's a proud member of the Intergalactic Space Alliance," Cinder said, and Yang backed away as if Blake just burned her.

"What?" After giving Blake a second glance, Yang looked at Adam and Cinder. "No, she's not. She's a merc - we checked her records."

"The records are fake." Cinder looked so delighted to be the one delivering

this news, she smiled as if she and Yang were best friends. “How does it feel to know you slept with one of ISA’s drones?”

“ISA?” Yang repeated before looking at Blake. Her red eyes were at first filled with disbelief, then shock, then...betrayal.

Blake shook her head but stopped short of lying. As stupid as it was, she didn’t want to lie to Yang. But she didn’t have to. Cinder returned Blake’s badge to the screen, and Yang stared at it for several long seconds before closing off her emotions.

“Then what do we do with her?”

Blake instantly recognized the tone – Yang had fallen back into her Black-guard mode, and that scared her more than anything.

“What we always do with Alliance – and it’s my turn to off a cop.”

When Cinder drew her phaser and pointed it at Blake, Yang shoved it away.

“Don’t be stupid. We might need her.”

“For what?”

“For what?” Yang repeated before scoffing. “For the *same thing* she’s been doing this entire time.” After giving Cinder an incredulous look, she turned to Adam. “We’re *this* close. What if we get there and need her to read a fucking doorway or something stupid like that?”

“She’ll just lie,” Cinder argued.

“No, she won’t.” Yang looked at Blake for a long time, her red eyes dark and unreadable. “Because she’s scared,” she concluded, and Blake couldn’t even hope to argue. “If she gives us the wrong information, then you get to do whatever you want to her – and make it as long and drawn out as possible.”

The thought of being left to Cinder’s wishes made Blake’s stomach turn. Yang wouldn’t let that happen, would she? She would grant a quicker death than that?

While the two commanders argued their cases, Adam deliberated Blake’s fate. Eventually, his mouth twitched upward with that awful, terrifying smirk.

“Keep her alive, for now,” he concluded. “She could be useful. If she misbehaves, we’ll...have a little fun with her.”

Jaw clenched tightly, Yang gave Blake one last look before nodding and stalking out of the room. Blake’s heart dropped while Yang walked away, and

fell even further when Cinder laughed.

“I think you hurt her feelings.”

She did. She knew she did. But she was Alliance, and Yang was a wanted criminal. Even if that didn't matter...even if, for some reason, Yang wanted to help...what could she do without getting them both killed?

Instead, Blake was forced to stare at Yang's back while her only source of light in this dark, brutal world left her side.

“Alright, grab her.”

Two men stepped forward at Cinder's orders and grabbed Blake's arms, quickly immobilizing her to the point where she couldn't hope to move. Only then did Cinder walk forward and throw an elbow into her already-broken ribs, making her cry out in pain while sending her back to her knees in no time.

Yang froze at the sound, but she didn't turn around. She doubled her pace out of the room instead, leaving Blake struggling to breathe while her eyes swam with tears.

Her last glimpse of Yang was lost when Cinder knelt in front of her and smiled.

“You know...I never liked you.”

“The feeling's...mutual...” Blake got out through clenched teeth.

Cinder huffed at the response before standing and motioning the guards to follow. They pulled Blake to her feet - her ribs screaming in agony at the swift action - before marching her off the bridge. Adam's eyes bored into her back as they left, but it was the betrayal in Yang's that haunted her more.

What hadn't been clear until this moment was just how much she relied on Yang's protection. Without it...she was about to learn what it meant to be alone.

And it was guaranteed to hurt.

Chapter 21

If she didn't breathe, it didn't hurt as much.

At least, that's what Blake told herself while sitting on a thin mattress in a tiny room that was nothing more than a single jail cell bordered by a small lounge for a guard. He kept his phaser in his lap the entire time, which seemed superfluous considering he was on the other side of a thick wall of security glass and she was in no shape to fight anyone.

Her head was still pounding, and she was fairly certain she had several broken ribs to go along with a swollen eye and possible concussion. That would explain why each inhale felt like breathing in shards of glass, and why each exhale brought tears to her eyes.

If she had anything to be grateful for, it was that Cinder quickly grew bored of beating her. Apparently, Cinder preferred to operate without pesky stipulations such as keeping someone alive. At least, that's what Blake assumed from the way she'd held a long, serrated blade in her hands and sighed as if missing out on something wonderful.

Keeping Blake alive was probably the only reason Cinder let her keep the Blackguard armor on, but that only made the amount of inflicted pain that much more impressive. Apparently, Cinder knew every weakness in the armored suits and exploited each with ruthless precision. Before leaving the room, possibly to figure out the most painful-yet-nonlethal torture techniques available, she promised there was more to come. Blake believed her completely.

The end seemed obvious and near, and Blake couldn't even bring herself to hope for the best. They would reach Planet TS72, Adam would find a way into

the mines, and then, the moment he had his hands on that precious metal, he would kill her. That fate felt so unavoidable that she couldn't even convince herself to be angry that Command never told her about Adam's past. Maybe anger would come later, but right now...her thoughts dwelled on her long list of regrets.

Atop that list was that she couldn't say goodbye to Sun. Hopefully, he wouldn't be disappointed in her...though she didn't want him to be sad either. They knew their jobs were dangerous, and that going undercover was even more so. They knew any day could be their last. They knew nothing was guaranteed. Yet overconfidence lulled them into the false belief that they would always have another day - another shot - another opportunity to fix a bad situation.

Facing reality, she understood how naïve she'd been. Her training had made her the perfect soldier but imparted none of the wisdom to succeed in an environment where the safety was always off. No instructors stood by to bail her out of trouble, and the only reason she'd survived so long was because of Yang's intervention and guidance.

Now, Yang was gone, and Blake didn't blame her for walking away. She had to protect herself, meaning she had to renounce any support of the proven Alliance officer. No other option kept them both alive and, honestly, Blake preferred to go out knowing Yang still had a chance.

Still, her heart ached...

Hearing the door open, she turned and winced when a stab of pain shot through her chest. Doing her best not to let it show, she clenched her jaw and watched Emerald walk into the room. Emerald, however, didn't even look over as she gestured the guard to his feet.

"Cashing in that favor you owe me," she explained while he stood up.

"I'm not allowed to leave..."

"You said it could be anything - give me two minutes." When he didn't budge, she shoved him towards the door. "What do you think I'm gonna do - help her escape? Just let me talk to her for a second."

After sending a look towards Blake, who watched impassively from the bed, the guard grumbled something about "stupid favors..." before stepping into

the hall and closing the door behind him.

With the two of them left alone, Blake struggled to her feet and worried she might need to protect herself. She remembered the look Emerald gave her on the bridge – it said everything she needed to know about their once-tenuous friendship.

Maybe Emerald had come to voice her displeasure with having been lied to, though she didn't appear more armed than usual. If anything, she looked like she wanted to get out of the room as fast as possible.

"Got yourself into a load of shit, didn't you?" she said first, eyes still glaring daggers.

"You could say that."

Blake wanted to ask why Emerald was here, but Emerald beat her to it.

"Ret swiped this from medical and begged me to give it to you." From one of her pockets, Emerald pulled something small and set it in the box used to pass food into the cell. "I swear, that kid's one dumb decision away from a hole in the head."

"That's why he's lucky to have you around," Blake said but didn't move towards the box until Emerald pulled away.

"Please." Emerald scoffed and sent Blake an annoyed look. "You don't save someone's life and then *keep* saving them. That's not how this works."

Emerald always said that, but her actions suggested otherwise. She understood that too, that was why she sighed and shook her head rather than keep arguing.

"Listen, he wanted me to give it to you, so I did."

Finally reaching into the box, Blake picked up a small red pill and looked at Emerald for clarification.

"I don't know what they're going to do to you, but Cinder looks excited about it. So, if you want to tap out –"

Emerald nodded to the pill between Blake's fingertips and, finally understanding what it was, Blake gave it another look. She wished she could say it wasn't an option, but she also had no idea what Cinder was capable of once left to her own devices.

"Thank you..."

“Don’t thank me.” When the guard tapped on the door, Emerald glanced that way before giving Blake another annoyed look. “You’re a fucking cop. I don’t care what happens to you.”

“Right...”

While Blake hid the pill in the palm of her hand, Emerald strode out of the room as soon as the guard opened the door.

“Thanks,” she told him with a pat on the shoulder before disappearing into the hall. Then the door closed again, and Blake returned to her cot and gingerly sat down.

She suddenly felt like crying, both over the situation and for the small bit of kindness. If there was one person who, like Yang, didn’t deserve to be lumped in with the rest of the Blackguards, it was Ret. His young age made him even more naïve than her, but his enduring sweetness impacted everyone around him – Emerald included.

Slipping the pill into her pocket, Blake leaned against the wall and flinched when her ribs protested. She had another option now, but she didn’t know if she had the courage to use it. What would it take for her to decide that ‘tapping out’ was the preferable way to go? She didn’t want to find out, but Cinder would return eventually. Until then...she could spend her remaining time ruminating on her regrets and trying to figure out what went wrong.

She should have abandoned the mission on Drideter and escorted Zimon home. Or she should have never accepted the assignment to begin with.

But...what about Yang?

If Blake hadn’t taken this assignment, they never would have met. And, if they never met, she wouldn’t have learned how complicated such simple words like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ could be. She wouldn’t have experienced the conflict and uncertainty that came with survival. Would she want to spend her entire life thinking she was right when she was actually wrong?

Sighing again, she leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. Her heart grew heavy at the thought of never meeting Yang, so she knew that wasn’t what she wanted. What she wanted, more than anything, was to transport the two of them to that world that didn’t exist – the one where they could be themselves and not worry about the forces intent on tearing them

apart.

Even with her eyes closed, she couldn't imagine what such a world would look like, let alone what it would feel like to live in. This life was all she'd ever known and, apparently, was all she would ever know.

Hearing another set of footsteps approaching the door, she forced her eyes open only to quickly straighten up when Yang opened the door. Regardless of the pain, she was back on her feet by the time Yang walked into the room.

Her heart clenched just seeing Yang, but that didn't bother her as much as the tears in her eyes did. Even though this was her fault, she wanted Yang to comfort her and assure her that everything would be fine.

But turning to a Blackguard commander for emotional support and a pat on the back was hardly appropriate. Yang didn't look remotely willing to play that role right now, anyway.

"Hey man," she greeted the guard without acknowledging Blake. "How's it going?"

"Nothing's happening. She's just sitting there."

When he nodded at Blake, Yang finally met her gaze. For one drawn-out second, Yang read Blake's eyes and looked unsure of what to do next. Blake, on the other hand, knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted Yang to move closer, and her heart sighed in relief when Yang obliged.

Now that they were only a foot apart, with nothing but a wall of glass between them, Blake's tears renewed. What she wouldn't give for a hug right now...or any bit of intimacy that confirmed their feelings were still there..

Instead, Yang's fingers curled into loose fists as she glanced at the guard out of the corner of her eye. That was all it took for Blake to understand this was a potentially risky subject - one she should answer carefully for Yang's benefit.

Of course Blake would do that. Even if Yang hated her...even if Yang denounced everything that happened between them...she would protect Yang's secrets.

"Bet you're surprised to see me," Yang began, and Blake gave a single nod in response.

From the way Yang had stormed off the bridge, betrayed by the one secret

Blake hadn't been able to share, Blake thought they would never see each other again.

"Well...surprise." Again, Yang's gaze flitted to the guard, who did his best to feign disinterest in the conversation. "I just want to know...is it true?"

The question made Blake feel better and worse at the same time. Better because Yang still believed her. Worse because...Yang still believed her.

"It is."

There was no point in lying anymore. She didn't want to lie to Yang anyway.

"It is," Yang repeated with a small nod, as if she'd expected that answer. In her red eyes, however, conflict swirled. She'd expected the answer, yet she hadn't wanted it to be true. Or maybe she wanted it to be true, but she hated that Blake kept such a big secret from her. Either way, she took several moments to compose her thoughts before meeting Blake's gaze again.

"Then I have one question..." she began, her eyes locked onto Blake's with no indication of moving away. "...was any of it real?"

The question hurt more than Blake would have expected, and she let out a pained exhale before attempting an answer.

"It's expressly forbidden..." she explained in a soft voice. "I would be fired immediately if anyone found out, so...yes, it was real. All of it."

Without going into too much detail, she willed Yang to believe her. What happened between them was never supposed to happen and never allowed to happen, yet it had. Surprisingly, she didn't regret it.

"But...why me?" Yang whispered. Feeling the pinpricks of tears in her eyes, Blake blinked them away and attempted a small smile.

"Because you're...different...and that's a wonderful thing."

It was as honest of an answer as she could give, and she hoped Yang could tell. Yang, however, was impossible to read. After giving Blake a long look, she nodded and turned away.

The conversation was over, and that broke Blake's heart like nothing else could. She didn't want those to be the last words they shared. She didn't want that to be the last look they shared. But she had no choice in the matter; the decision was entirely in Yang's hands, and Yang walked over to the guard.

"Do you know who has next shift?"

“Uh...let me check.”

The instant he turned around to search for the schedule, Yang lunged forward and clamped her arm around his neck. Caught off guard, he tried to reach over his shoulder and grab her. When that didn't work, he pulled at her metal arm to free himself, to no avail.

“Sorry,” she whispered and, when his struggles eventually ceased, lowered him to the ground.

“What are you doing??” Blake asked, but Yang was already unlocking the cell and beckoning her out.

“What does it look like? I'm getting you out of here.”

Stunned by the change of events, Blake didn't move until Yang grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door.

“Wait here.”

Briefly dropping Blake's hand, Yang grabbed the unconscious guard by one arm and dragged him into the cell. As soon as he was locked inside, she pulled Blake into the hall and, after a quick look in each direction, set their pace at a fast walk. Blake had no idea where they were going, but she didn't protest or struggle - she was too dazed to do anything but go where Yang led her.

Why had Yang done that? She just turned against her own crew. She just freed Blake. Now both of their lives were in danger. Both of them could die.

Thankfully, the halls were mostly deserted at this time of night, but Blake heard footsteps of nearby patrols every few corridors. Yang's quick movements kept her heart racing, suggesting that being caught now resulted in an immediate rather than a delayed death. So, regardless of the pain she was in, she matched Yang's pace and kept her footsteps as quiet as possible. It wasn't long before Yang veered to the edge of the hall and pulled Blake into a hardly-used supply room.

“I'm sorry -” Blake said as soon as the door shut behind them, but Yang shook her head and hurried further into the room.

“I always figured you weren't who you said you were.” After shuffling a couple of boxes around, she grabbed one and set it in front of Blake. “Alliance though...that's a bit different from just hyping up your street cred.”

Even though Blake had a lot to say to that, and a lot of apologizing she

wanted to do, Yang opened the box to reveal her belongings.

“I grabbed your stuff,” Yang explained before motioning for Blake to take it. She didn’t need to stress the urgency of their situation, and Blake reached down as fast as she could but flinched when her ribs screamed at her to stop.

The gesture didn’t go unnoticed by Yang, who immediately stopped what she was doing and lifted Blake’s shirt and armor to see the damage. Blake hadn’t looked yet, too afraid of what it might look like, but the pained whine that slipped through Yang’s lips didn’t sound like a positive sign.

“Fucking hell...” Yang breathed out before dropping Blake’s shirt and pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s not your fault,” Blake replied, but Yang was moving quickly again - this time picking up the items from the box and handing them over one-by-one.

“Yes, it is,” she said while she worked, her hands impossibly gentle regardless of the circumstances. “I knew I should’ve just killed him right then and there.”

“That wouldn’t have helped either of us,” Blake pointed out, but Yang sighed.

“I know...but I’m still sorry, and I’m still getting you out of here.”

As soon as the box was empty, Yang stood, grabbed Blake’s hand, and hurried towards the door.

“Come with me.”

Yang froze with her hand on the handle and, when she turned around, her eyes were filled with disbelief.

“Come with me,” Blake repeated, this time with more urgency. “I don’t want to leave you here.”

“Blake...”

“*Please*. Please come with me. ISA can use you as a witness - they’ll protect you, and I’ll help you find Ruby.”

Command hadn’t approved it, but they would have to deal with it. Flipping a commander as a witness was better than Blake’s testimony alone. Plus, Yang’s intimate knowledge of the Blackguards made her more valuable than any of Blake’s observations.

When Yang bit her lip, however, Blake realized that she was scared. Scared

of what Adam might do to her. Scared of what ISA might do to her. Scared of what might happen to her chances of finding Ruby.

“I’m not leaving without you.” Slipping her hand from Yang’s grasp, Blake stepped away and shook her head. “You don’t deserve to live like this. You don’t *have* to live like this. I’ll help you – I promise.”

Silently, she begged Yang to agree. She couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Yang here alone. Even with the promise, however, Yang thought about her decision long and hard before saying a soft “ok” and extending her hand. After looking at the metal fingers, which no longer scared her in the slightest, Blake met Yang’s gaze and received a small nod.

“Ok,” Yang repeated, managing a fleeting smile when Blake stepped forward and took her hand. “Use your ears, please...” she then whispered before opening the door, peeking outside, and nodding that the coast was clear.

Understanding that her above-average hearing was their greatest asset right now, Blake kept her ears on high alert for any nearby Blackguards. Everything was quiet, but it was only a matter of time before the relief guard showed up at the cell and discovered what happened. They had to get off the ship before then, or else they would have a manhunt after them.

“We’ll use the escape pods,” Yang explained as they wound through the less-traveled areas of the ship. They had to go pretty far out of the way to avoid the living areas, but Blake agreed with the decision even as they risked a lift ride down to the proper floor. Voices and footsteps came from all around them, but none close enough to cause alarm.

“Almost there...” Yang muttered before breaking into a jog. They had only the hallway between the docking bay and escape pod port to go, but the long corridor had little cover and no means of a quick exit.

They made it only halfway when Blake heard voices growing nearer, so she squeezed Yang’s hand and pointed up ahead. When she searched for somewhere to hide, however, she found nothing.

“Docking bay?” she asked, and was fully prepared to sprint back to the docking bay doors when Yang grabbed her hand and turned her around.

Before Blake understood what was happening, Yang drew her into a deep, passionate kiss right as the two crew members walked into the hall. Their

voices trailed off at the sight – seeing only Yang’s back as she positioned herself between them and Blake – but they quickly turned around and hurried away. They knew better than to stop and stare, but they left with a bit of gossip and guesses as to Blake’s identity.

Once their voices faded, Yang broke away and met Blake’s gaze for one heart-stopping moment. In that look, Yang laid her emotions out for anyone to see, but they were for Blake only. And, in that one look, Blake realized she felt the same. That what happened between them – the way they felt about each other – was impossibly strong and real.

But that moment passed quickly, as Yang pulled Blake down the hall with renewed determination. Seconds later, they reached a corridor lined with escape pods and Yang led them over to the first one.

“In here.”

When Yang opened the door and motioned through, Blake hurried into the pod and heard the door shut right behind her. Spinning around and finding Yang on the other side, she rushed back and tried the handle.

It was locked.

“Yang –”

“I’m sorry,” Yang said while backing away from the door. “This is the only way.”

“No, Yang – don’t do this.”

Blake pulled at the handle even harder, as if that would somehow work when it was locked from the other side.

“Please,” she begged as her desperation grew. She knew what Yang was going to do, and she couldn’t let it happen. “Please don’t do this.”

There were tears in her eyes now, which only multiplied when she saw them reflected in Yang’s.

“Yang, you can’t,” she whispered after trying the handle one last time. “Please, please don’t do this...”

The only thing her pleading did was increase the glint in Yang’s eyes as she gave a wavering smile and touched her fingers to the glass.

“You have to make it out of here. You have to stop him. Stop us.”

“We can stop him.”

“No.” Sniffing once, Yang shook her head and took another step away. “As soon as this launches, they’ll know what happened, and every gun on this ship will track you down. I need to make sure those guns don’t work.”

“But they’ll know you did it!”

“I know.” Holding her hand above the keypad on the other side of the door, Yang gave Blake one last smile – a sad smile that said she knew exactly what she was about to do and what the repercussions would be.

“But Ruby...”

“Ruby’s probably already dead,” Yang said, her eyes flashing with agony before she stared at the floor. After collecting herself, she sniffed again, clenched her fist, and looked up. “Even if she wasn’t, what would she want with a sister like me?”

Yang raised her prosthetic hand as if that answered the question, as if anyone should look at her and run the other way, but Blake shook her head. She knew Yang thought that the arm covered in scars made her a monster just like Cinder, just like Adam – but that wasn’t true. It had never been true and never would be true.

“I can’t save everyone...” Yang said, her voice slow and assured as she held Blake’s gaze. “But I can save you.”

The instant Yang set her hand down, the escape pod ejected from the ship with enough force to send Blake tumbling away from the door. As soon as she scrambled to her feet, she rushed back to the glass.

“No,” she whispered at what she saw. The Inferno was already miles away and fading quickly as the pod hurtled towards the planet below. “No!”

She slammed her hand against the glass as tears streamed down her cheeks, but there was nothing she could do. Absolutely nothing. The only thing she could do was stand there and watch the ship, and Yang, slipped further and further from her grasp.

Sniffing away more tears, she pulled her communication device from her pocket and switched on the emergency beacon. It was the last resort no one wanted to use, but...she needed to use it.

“This is Lieutenant Belladonna,” she spoke into the radio, wiping her hand across her eyes while the Inferno grew smaller and smaller. “My cover’s been

blown. Requesting immediate assistance on Gautov. I'm in an escape pod headed towards the surface; the Blackguards are probably right behind me."

Releasing the record button, she dropped her hand to her side and stared at the Inferno. When several seconds passed and no response came through, she lifted the device and tried again.

"This is Lieutenant Belladonna," she repeated in as calm of a voice as she could manage while crying. "My cover's been blown...requesting assistance on Gautov..."

When the Inferno became nothing more than a dot in her field of view, her heart clenched in agony, and she briefly closed her eyes before speaking into the device one last time.

"Is anyone listening?"

Still no response, but she hoped ISA heard the call for help and just couldn't reply. There wasn't time for her to figure out why, however, as the pod hit the outer atmosphere with a jolt that sent her scrambling for a handhold. The rattles and shudders grew more violent by the second and, with one last look towards the stars, she was forced to leave the window behind.

Strapping herself into the seat at the front of the pod did nothing to ease her pain. If anything, it only increased with every bump as her ribs protested louder and louder. That pain, however, couldn't even compare to the anguish in her heart.

The pod hadn't been shot down, which meant Yang did it - she kept the guns from firing. She got Blake off the Inferno. She saved Blake's life.

Now, Blake could only imagine how Yang did it...and what would happen to her when Adam found out.

Chapter 22

As the escape pod crashed through the trees, viciously shaking everything and *everyone* inside, Blake gripped her seat with both hands and gritted her teeth against the pain. Every bump felt like someone stabbing her in the chest while simultaneously hitting her head with a hammer, and that was before the pod hit the ground with a jolt that slammed her against the seat restraints.

The jarring stop put stars in her eyes and made her suddenly feel like throwing up. Worried she might do just that, she closed her eyes and took small, shallow breaths while wishing the screaming of her ribs and the throbbing in her head away. Her ribs must be broken, and she probably had a concussion, but she couldn't rest yet. She wasn't safe yet.

Once the pain retreated ever so slightly, she opened her eyes and looked around. The pod's emergency lights had kicked on, bathing the interior in a low red glow. A beeping noise came from somewhere, making her wince with each high-pitched warning. Outside, the world was so dark that she could only determine that it was night time.

Careful not to move too fast, she slowly looked around the cabin and found a light flashing with every beep. Probably an emergency beacon of some sort, so she released her white-knuckled grip on the seat and gingerly leaned forward to switch it off.

When the noise mercifully stopped, she sighed and unclipped herself from the seat. The Inferno might have logged her location already, but she could hope that they weren't paying attention and missed it. In the more probable scenario where they *hadn't* missed it, she needed to put as much distance between herself and the escape pod as possible.

Adam couldn't let her return to ISA with the location of the mines, meaning the squads or the entire Inferno could be right on her heels. So, even though she wanted to wait here and hope ISA found her first, she couldn't risk it.

Grabbing the nearest handhold, she pulled herself to her feet and closed her eyes when a wave of vertigo crashed over her. The nausea was already slowing her down, but she waited for the feeling to pass before taking a small breath, opening her eyes, and moving towards the exit.

Since the pod had lodged into the ground at an angle, she had to pull herself up an incline to reach the exit. The level of effort was just within her current physical limits, but she took her time and slowly made it to the window that had separated her from Yang moments prior. Looking through the glass now, she saw nothing but the vague outlines of trees amongst so much darkness.

From what she'd seen on the way down, the planet of Gautov was covered in forests that would make Drideter jealous. Save for some sporadic clearings, the trees were so impenetrably thick that overhead surveillance would have an impossible time mapping the surface underneath. The perfect spot for hiding a data center...unless the person looking for it already knew where it was.

If ISA built a database here, hopefully they stationed troops on a nearby star. After what Blake just went through, however, she couldn't rely on hopes anymore.

Peering into the darkness, she searched for movement, but the reflection of the interior lights in the glass made it impossible to see anything; she had to risk it. Pulling the release for the door latch, which had switched into emergency mode after the pod landed, she heard the lock slide out of place. Now that it was unlocked, she had to push the door up enough that it fell away from the pod. Easier said than done when the floor was slanted at an angle.

Holding onto the handle to keep herself in place, she jammed her toes into two small footholds and tested her weight on them. When they didn't budge, she repositioned herself to balance on her feet and put her shoulder to the door. From there, she could use her legs to push up and her shoulder to force the door free.

First, she took a breath to prepare herself. Then she ignored the protest of her ribs and shoved upward with all her might. The effort tilted the door just

enough that gravity did the rest, and it fell to the ground with a heavy clunk.

Loud flutters and rustles followed the noise, making her quickly duck into the pod and wait for the sounds to stop. Without vision, she strained her ears to pick out as many details as possible. Winged creatures of some kind? Or just a coincidental gust of wind moving through the treetops?

Whatever it was, it settled into silence before too long - silence broken only by small breezes moving through the trees above. Hoping that the coast was clear, she lifted herself back up and peeked out of the pod. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness after several seconds, but nowhere near enough for her to make out many details of the world around her. Tree trunks and overgrown shrubs took up most of her view, but beyond her immediate perimeter was nothing but a wall of black.

ISA would find her faster if she wasn't surrounded by such dense cover, so she had to get to one of those clearings. But first, she had to get down.

After pulling herself up and sitting on the edge of the pod, she made sure her landing was clear before hopping down. A gasp slipped through her lips as soon as she hit the ground, the pain dropping her to one knee before she gritted her teeth and pushed herself back to her feet. Her injuries protested every movement - loudly - but she couldn't give in to them just yet. She did, however, remain slightly hunched over to ease the strain on her ribs while venturing into the wilderness.

Based on the number of broken branches littering the forest floor, the pod must have made a horrible ruckus on the way down. The obstacles threatened to trip her with every step, but she did her best to avoid or climb over them while also keeping her eyes and ears peeled for danger. The trees made an eerie creaking sound above her, but her main concern right now was wildlife. She didn't know what creatures lurked in the darkness, waiting for her to walk into their path. She didn't know what sentient beings lived nearby, if they were friendly, or if she would even sense their presence.

Several minutes later, she realized her greatest concern was actually her stamina, as she hadn't made it far before leaning against a tree trunk to catch her breath. Her head throbbed and her mind felt slower than usual, but her ribs would be her undoing. Breathing was challenging, especially when she

exerted herself. Moving quickly was impossible without crippling pain. If she stumbled into a situation where she had to run...she didn't like her odds.

It didn't take a survival expert to deduce that she wasn't making it out of this without help. Her only source of help, unfortunately, had yet to respond.

Deciding to rest a little longer, she pulled out her communication device and radioed Command again.

"This is Lieutenant Belladonna," she whispered, though even that was too loud in the wilderness. "I've reached the surface and am heading..." After searching for a reference point and finding nothing but trees, she shook her head and winced. "I'm heading...downhill away from the pod. I hope there's a clearing nearby...I'll try to find one and radio again."

After waiting several seconds for a response, and several more seconds to rest, she sighed and put the device away. Hopefully, ISA was receiving her messages. Hopefully, she found a clearing or settlement soon. Hopefully, she didn't get eaten by a rocknook or chaiter or another rabid beast before then.

Hopefully, Yang was ok.

Blake's heart clenched at that thought while she pushed away from the tree and continued her trek through the thick vegetation. Even though she wanted to sit down and cry, she couldn't. She couldn't stop, she couldn't grieve, she couldn't *think* about Yang right now, because doing so would only get her killed.

Her sole focus right now had to be survival. Otherwise...everything Yang did was for naught, and she refused to let Yang's sacrifice be in vain.

Hearing a rumble up above, she looked up but couldn't see anything through the canopy. Using her ears instead, she picked out what sounded like a large shuttle flying overhead. Its speed suggested it was searching for something and, without being able to confirm who it belonged to, she had to assume the worst.

Gritting her teeth through the pain, she doubled her pace with hardly a thought of where she was headed except forward. Picking her way through the forest grew easier as the broken branches dwindled, letting her gain more certainty with every step. Unfortunately, she had no idea how far she had to go. For all she knew, it could be days before she stumbled across a usable

landmark.

That fear disappeared the instant she heard voices. Freezing in her tracks, she used her ears to search for the direction of the sound - up ahead and to her left.

Whoever it was, their swift approach left little time for her to find a place to hide. Using the tree foliage seemed like the best option, but she couldn't possibly climb in her condition. Opting for the second-best option, she ducked behind a nearby bush and stayed as motionless as possible. They should pass nearby and, assuming they didn't hear her thundering heart, shouldn't notice her.

As the voices grew louder, she picked out two distinct speakers using a language she didn't recognize. From their hushed conversation, they sounded like locals, so they probably weren't searching for her. More likely, they were checking on the pod that just dropped from the sky.

When they drew closer, she realized that they were actually above her, moving amongst the trees as easily as she would walk on land. She wanted to peek from behind her cover and see who or what they were, but she didn't dare. The return of that fluttering, rustling sound only further convinced her to stay put, and she slowed her breathing as much as possible while listening to them pass overhead.

The voices continued by without issue, but she waited until she couldn't hear them anymore before hurrying onward. If the locals had already reached her, a settlement must be nearby. While that gave her a small amount of hope, now she knew that she couldn't communicate with them unless they spoke another language. In a remote location like this...the chances of that were slim to none.

Still, she pressed on in hopes of making it out of the trees. The longer she remained beneath the blanket of leaves, the more oppressive the forest felt. The wind moving through the treetops didn't help, as it made a living, breathing sound unlike anything she'd ever heard. But whenever she looked up, she found nothing but darkness.

Darkness should symbolize nothing, but she couldn't escape the feeling that something or someone was watching her. Had the sources of those voices

actually spotted her when they passed overhead? Were they following her?

The forest was playing tricks on her. That was the only answer she could think of while making her way around tree trunks as large around as vehicles. Undeterred, she continued her slow, sloping path and focused on what was right in front of her rather than what was overhead. Every so often, her ears picked up that rustling sound - her mind convinced her more and more that it was wings - but the noises disappeared just as quickly as they appeared.

Fortunately, getting out of there finally felt like a possibility when the forest began to thin. At first, she thought it was only her imagination, but then the trees grew sparser and, with the lack of canopy above, starlight filtered down to her.

Increased vision alone was enough to ease her fear, but she held onto a great deal of apprehension while sneaking towards the edge of the forest. Now that she could see more than ten feet in front of her, she spotted a small settlement in the clearing up ahead. The wooden buildings were nothing extraordinary, but they were evidence of life. As were the torches placed around the periphery of the clearing.

Rather than rush over, she crouched by a tree at the edge of the forest and came up with a plan. Not knowing who these people were or how to communicate with them was concerning, but she didn't need to interact with them right away. The better plan would be to stay hidden and wait for ISA to arrive. The settlement would serve as a guidepost, not a lifeline. At least, not yet.

Before she communicated her new position to Command, however, her ears turned towards a snap in the forest behind her. Spinning around, she searched the blackness for movement only to hear a loud whooshing noise from above.

She just barely caught sight of the large, black shape flying overtop of her before a humanoid shape landed on the forest floor in front of her.

"Serghood nek!" he immediately shouted while jabbing at her with a spear-like weapon.

Quickly drawing her phaser and backing towards the clearing, she watched in awe as more black shapes swooped out of the forest with speed and grace she couldn't even fathom. In the dim light, they looked like giant bats with

huge, leathery wings that rustled as they swept through the trees. Each one dove towards the ground and dropped off its rider before disappearing into the night with nothing more than a soft flutter.

“Shit...” she muttered while counting the figures – eight in front of her. “I don’t mean you any harm,” she called out to them as they fanned out into a semicircle that forced her further into the clearing.

“Serghood nek!” the one in front repeated.

Spotting movement out of the corner of her eye, she risked a glance over her shoulder and saw more armed citizens rushing from the settlement. They would surround her in no time, but she had nowhere to run, especially when the guards in front of her lowered their spears and all but dared her to try to escape. The new arrivals repeated the phrase amongst themselves, and she gathered from their tones and expressions that it was a bad thing.

“I don’t know what you mean...” she said slowly, taking another cautious step back that they followed.

“Serghood nek,” another said while pointing at her. More specifically, at her armor.

“I’m not a Blackguard,” she quickly said, though her outfit suggested otherwise. “I’m not a...serghood nek,” she repeated, shaking her head before spinning towards the man creeping closer to her. Her phaser convinced him to back off, but this situation was getting worse.

“I’m not one of them.”

She was wearing the armor though – that was all they knew. And, in the absence of the ability to communicate, she couldn’t explain the circumstances leading her here. Of all the languages she knew...it figured she didn’t know the one that would save her life.

“*I’m not a Blackguard,*” she tried in Rivorian, a widely-used language, to no effect. “*I’m not a Blackguard,*” she attempted in Candan with the same result.

“Nav tarra ko?” someone asked the man standing in front, who must be in charge. He then stared at Blake long and hard, and she felt the judgment coming from him. She was dressed like a Blackguard, and she was armed; she would probably make the same decision if she was in his shoes.

“Parvvo kan.”

She didn't need to speak the language to understand the verdict. The spears lowered and crept closer, and she pointed her weapon towards the nearest wielder while searching for a way out of the encroaching crowd.

"Stay back," she commanded the one she had her weapon trained on. They glanced towards the person on their other side, who crept forward and drew her aim next. "Stay back!" she repeated, raising her voice in hopes the threat kept them at bay.

"Sey vo nok..." someone whispered, and she spun towards them only to feel the others move closer.

She didn't want to shoot anyone, but she had to protect herself. And with every step they took, they cut off her option of a violence-free escape.

"I don't want to hurt you..." she added in a calm, steady voice while her heart pounded in her ears.

Even if they didn't understand her words, hopefully they could interpret her tone. And, to make her intention clearer, she removed her finger from the trigger and slowly lowered the weapon. When one of the men reacted by moving two steps closer, she snapped the weapon back into place and aimed at him.

"Ok, not friendly..." she muttered while recalculating her options. One versus fifteen - not great odds, especially when they had her surrounded. If she took out the leader first, maybe the rest would panic. Or maybe they would react with anger.

Killing someone was the last thing she wanted to do, but it didn't look like she had another option. She had to make it out of this. She had to get back to ISA...and stop the Blackguards.

"Last chance." Tightly clutching the phaser, she turned towards the person closest to her and took aim at their head. "Back - off."

"Parvvo kan!" the leader shouted, and her muscles tensed in anticipation.

But, before they rushed her, a cracking sound shattered the air. The noise was quickly followed by another, and another, and the group started speaking in fast, worried voices.

They searched for the source just like she did but, as soon as they saw a flare shot through the canopy of the trees, started running. Soft clicks of their

tongues brought the bat-like creatures flying over to gather their riders and whisk them off into the night, leaving Blake to face this new horror alone.

She heard it now - another disturbance in the forest. She had no idea who or what it was, but the reactions of the locals didn't bode well.

Armed with just a phaser, she raised it towards the treeline and waited for whatever came next. She could run, but she couldn't outrun whoever was racing through the trees towards her. She could hear them now...their long, strong strides marking well-trained soldiers.

The Blackguards. They found her.

Even the locals knew who it was, and were smart enough to scatter before getting caught in Adam's wrath. Left behind, she had no choice but to stand and fight. She would fight - she always would - but the end felt nearer than it ever had.

With the phaser shaking in her hands, she waited for the soldiers to reach her. As soon as they broke through the trees, however, she dropped her arms to her sides and felt any desire to fight leave her. Their weapons were drawn and ready, yet hers hit the ground as they rushed towards her. One of them sprinted ahead of the group, pulled off their helmet and tossed it aside.

The moment she saw Sun, tears welled in her eyes.

"Blake, thank god -"

By the time he got the words out, she was already throwing her arms around his neck.

"It's ok," he said while returning the hug, which hurt her ribs like hell but she didn't care. "We got you. You're safe now. You're safe."

Even though she heard his words, she found it hard to believe them.

She was safe. She survived, somehow. ISA found her. They would take her home.

But Sun's reassurances only reminded her that she was safe because someone else was not. That her survival hinged on someone else's sacrifice. That she shouldn't be here - that she *wouldn't* be here - if Yang hadn't given up everything for her.

The thought was too much for her to bear right now. Everything felt like too much for her to bear right now. So, while the rest of the Alliance squad

secured the perimeter and prepared for extraction, she buried her face in Sun's shoulder and cried.

Chapter 23

“Please state your identification.”

“Badge one-six-five-eight,” Blake replied in one long sigh. The numbers appeared on the screen in front of her before the system matched them with her facial scan and displayed her badge.

“Welcome, Lieutenant. You’ll be connected to the meeting shortly.”

When her badge disappeared and the screens in the room sprang to life, she did her best to stand at attention like she’d been taught in the Academy. Her ribs made it impossible to stand perfectly straight without causing herself pain, but she still did her best. Always at attention, especially for commanding officers. Always on her best behavior, especially for commanding officers.

They had offered her time to heal before scheduling this meeting, but she refused. She didn’t care if her ribs were broken – she had a bone to pick with them.

‘Them’ meaning the twenty-five representatives of the twenty-five planets comprising the Intergalactic Space Alliance. The men and women tasked with making decisions affecting millions of lives. The men and women who issued Blake’s orders *without* having her best interests at heart.

“Welcome back, Lieutenant,” one of the generals said as the rest of the room murmured soft greetings. “It sounds like your mission didn’t go as planned, but we were told that you have an update for us.”

“I do.” Just seeing their faces reminded Blake of her frustration, but she took a deep breath before speaking. She couldn’t lose her cool so quickly.

“First,” she began, locking gazes with the man in front of her. “Why wasn’t I told that Adam Taurus used to be an ISA officer?”

That was one of the few questions she couldn't get out of her head, and the only one that made her angry rather than heartbreakingly sad. So she focused on it, stewed on it, and now she wanted an answer.

"The information wasn't pertinent to your mission."

That one sentence - that one piece of bureaucratic bullshit - unleashed the boiling anger she'd held back the past few days.

"How is that not pertinent??" she demanded, sweeping her gaze across the collection of leaders surrounding her. "He *recognized my fighting style*," she elaborated when the room remained silent. "My cover was blown because you didn't tell me -"

"Adam Taurus' history with ISA had nothing to do with this mission," someone interrupted.

"I deserved to know!" she shouted back as her frustration flared to life. "Do you have any idea what you've done? Because of you, my cover was blown. Because of you, he identified me. Because of *you*, I almost *died*, and someone else probably *did* die saving my life. How the *hell* is that not important?!"

"You're out of line, Lieutenant."

Hearing the scolding tone, she clenched her jaw and fell silent. Internally, her mind recoiled at their response and their cavalier use of her life. Foolishly, she'd expected an apology for some clerical oversight resulting in the information never making it to her. Instead, they thought it wasn't her place to know. Even though she was the one risking her life while they sat behind their screens and played games with everyone else's lives.

"Tell us what their goal is," someone prodded her after she stood in silence for too long. "What are they searching for?"

She didn't want to tell them anything, but she didn't have a choice.

Again, she didn't have a choice. And...what she hadn't realized until now was that she had just as little power in this room as she did with the Blackguards. She was powerless, and her life mattered just as little. She was their pawn, their grunt, and they expected her to behave as such. With the Blackguards, she obeyed or faced death. With ISA, she obeyed or faced prison.

She was *so tired* of following orders...

"They're looking for Valerian steel," she answered through clenched teeth,

knowing she wasn't leaving without giving them an answer.

"Valerian steel?" one of the commanders muttered. "It's nothing more than a legend."

"They found the location of the mines," Blake elaborated. "Adam thinks he can open them and, once he does, start making weapons unlike anything we've seen before. He'll use those to make the Blackguards stronger - bigger - then he'll take down the Alliance and create a new force with him in charge."

Murmurs swept the room at that potential future, but no one jumped to their feet or pounded their fists on the table like she thought they would. No one expressed any outrage at all.

"The Valerians went to great efforts hiding their fabled mines."

The voice drew Blake's full attention, and she turned towards an elderly woman from Suna.

"They feared what would happen if such a powerful material fell into the wrong hands. They set their entire civilization back to the dark ages rather than risk destruction of the universe - it was the ultimate act of self-sacrifice."

Even though Blake had never seen an ounce of Valerian steel, she wholeheartedly agreed. The rest of the room, however, twittered with amusement.

"A likely story," someone replied. "An excuse for losing the war. They *would* have won had they not protected us from this *great* evil."

"Sounds like a child's lie," someone else added with a chuckle.

"Or a wise commander's," another offered. "If you have a thousand soldiers, say you have ten thousand - see who attacks you still."

"I showed you the maps," Blake interjected. "Those maps are real and lead to something -"

"An elaborate ruse, perhaps..."

"Adam needs to be stopped," Blake added more forcefully. "If Valerian steel is real and he gets his hands on it, he'll destroy ISA. Everything we've worked for, everything we've built is in danger - not to mention the innocent lives that will be lost in the bloodshed. We have to stop them *now* before they become something *worse* than just a mercenary group."

"If they can open the mines."

"Are you not listening??" Hearing the frustration in her voice, she paused

and took a deep breath before continuing. “They already have the location –”

“Aren’t these mines guarded by some all-powerful being?” someone asked, and a couple of the other generals chuckled. The casual dismissal only made Blake more frustrated, but she bit her tongue and shook her head.

They weren’t taking this seriously. And if they didn’t take this seriously, Adam would have all the Valerian weapons in the universe at his disposal before ISA decided to act.

“But Valerian steel *could* be dangerous...” someone finally mused, and Blake immediately latched onto the shred of hope. “Maybe we should send a recon ship to check the location. If, by chance, the mines are actually there, we can set up a quarantine and ensure it remains undisturbed.”

“A recon ship?” Blake repeated in dismay before shaking her head at the horrible idea.

“The metal doesn’t matter. The most important thing is bringing the Blackguard leaders to justice,” a woman from Losyria interrupted. “Adam Taurus, Cinder Fall, Yang Xiao Long – capturing the three of them will send a strong message to the rest of the galaxy.”

The rest of the room murmured their agreement, but Blake shook her head.

“Yang isn’t like Adam or Cinder. She’s only there because she needed Adam’s help.”

“Is she or isn’t she a criminal?” the woman asked in return. “If she didn’t want to be there, she could leave.”

“That’s not an option. Adam would kill her.” Sensing the disbelief of everyone around her, Blake raised her hands before letting them drop to her sides. “She’ll testify against them,” she added. “But we need to bring her in – her life’s in danger.”

Hearing someone laugh, Blake frowned at the man from Meccov.

“I imagine as a leading Blackguard, her life is always in danger.”

“She’s *not* like them,” Blake reiterated while several others joined his laughter. She hated that they were lumping Yang in with Adam and Cinder. Yang *wasn’t* like them. She might have broken the law, but she *wasn’t* a criminal.

“She *saved* my life,” Blake added. “I watched her save others across the

galaxy too. Just because she's learned how to survive doesn't mean she's like them - you just need to give her a chance and she'll help us. She can help us take down the rest of them, but we need to get her off that ship -"

"We'll take your words under advisement, Lieutenant," the man in front of her interrupted. Understanding the conversation was over, she clenched her jaw and fell silent. "For now, get your rest and write up your report. Once we have that, we'll decide what to do with the Blackguards."

She opened her mouth to argue that they didn't have time for that - they needed to act *now*. Faced with the man's vaguely bored, vaguely amused expression, however, she realized that arguing was pointless.

"Thank you," she clipped before spinning on her heel and storming out of the room. Someone fell into step by her side before the door even closed behind her, but she didn't bother slowing down and even turning to acknowledge Sun.

She was mad. Beyond mad - she was livid. Livid, sad, scared, and extremely, extremely worried about Yang. ISA branding Yang as a criminal didn't matter if she was already dead. And if she was already dead...

This wasn't supposed to happen. The mission was never supposed to be easy, but it wasn't supposed to be this hard either. Infiltrate the Blackguards, learn their systems and their hierarchy, bring them to justice.

This wasn't what Blake signed up for. Gone was her certainty in arresting every single one of them. Gone was her belief that the suit they wore branded them as the worst kinds of criminals.

Yang wasn't a bad person. She was a good person who'd done some bad things, all in the name of finding her sister.

But Command didn't care about that. They didn't care who Yang was or what motivated her to join the Blackguards. They didn't care that she saved people who would have died without her interference. All they cared about was fixing *their* mistake without anyone finding out. *They* created a monster, and now they didn't want to take responsibility.

The worst part was that they just proved Adam right. ISA lacked a true leader and, without one, lacked a direction. Command had grown too large. Each planet had their own objectives, values, and way of handling conflict. Bringing them all together...giving them all a voice...was the *right* thing to do. But, at a

certain point, someone needed to take charge and make a decision, especially in matters of urgency.

They didn't consider this matter urgent so would do nothing. They would wait for Blake to write a report detailing everything she'd witnessed throughout her time with the Blackguards. They would add that report to a stack of them and get around to reading the entire thing eventually. Then, who knows how many days or weeks or months from now, they would meet again and make a decision - whichever decision made them look best.

"Blake?" Sun finally asked after several minutes in silence.

"Not now, Sun..." she said while heading back to her room.

Though he fell silent at the request, he didn't leave her side. He'd hardly left her side since they returned from Gautov. He'd waited outside the medical center while they patched up her injuries. He'd followed her from meeting to meeting while ISA reintegrated her into the Alliance way of life. He'd accompanied her to every meal. He'd even managed to get himself stationed in the room next to hers.

Even though his own injuries had yet to heal, he was far more worried about her. Fortunately, his injuries were minor enough that she didn't need to worry about him in return. Considering how bad it could have been, he got off easy - a few stitches for the gash on his cheek, some balm to bring down the swelling of his split lip, and lingering red marks around his neck that would heal with time.

If she had anything to be grateful for, it was that he would make a full recovery. She was also grateful for his company, which was why she left the door open after walking into her room. While he closed it behind him and settled into his spot perched upon her desk, she sat on the bed and stared at her hands.

Her emotions were in disarray, and that meeting hadn't helped. Never before had she felt like such a cog in a machine. Command wanted her feedback and observations but had no use for her recommendations. They brushed aside her worries and ignored her concerns. They used her information to push forward their own agendas. From their plush seats in their golden castles, they would never understand what it was like to fight for their lives or be trapped in a

horrible situation. She hadn't understood either...not until she walked onto the Inferno.

When Sun's comm softly buzzed from across the room, she didn't even look up while he read the message.

"Hey, maybe this will cheer you up." When she finally raised her gaze, he handed the device to her. "That little boy you asked me to track?" he explained while she stared at the screen. "He just made it home - safe and sound."

On any other day, she would be elated by the news. Today, however, tears stung at her eyes while she looked at the picture of Zimon hugging a young woman who looked just like him.

Whoever sent the photograph didn't go into much detail in their message, which simply said 'reunited with family - saved from renegades by freelance pilot.' Apparently, that was the story Maria used...and Blake could just barely make her out in the background, soaking in the attention from the rest of the family.

At least that chapter had a happy conclusion. Zimon might have lost his parents, but he made it back to his family. He had a bright future ahead of him, especially if his resiliency helped him heal like she expected it to. She just wished she could share the good news with Yang...

"That's great..." she whispered. After handing the device back to Sun, she put her head in her hands and fought the urge to cry. It felt like she'd been on the verge of tears ever since she got back. She probably had been...since Yang never left her thoughts.

When Sun sat beside her and gently wrapped an arm around her shoulders, those tears grew more pressing.

"If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here to listen. I'm not gonna like... judge you or anything..."

His acceptance of her, and anything she might have done while with the Blackguards, made her feel better and worse at the same time. In the flurry of activity following her return to Alliance domain, she hadn't said a word about her relationship with Yang. She couldn't - not without risking immediate termination and losing access to the only agency with the power and resources to possibly bring closure.

Over the last couple of days, she had learned what it was like to feel powerless and need someone else for help. Right now, she could honestly say that she would do anything to convince Command to find the Blackguards and Yang. But they wouldn't listen to her, and they didn't care about her personal heartaches.

Now, she understood why Yang made the decisions that she did. If Blake was alone right now, she would *have* to join a group to have any hope of finding Yang again. There would be no other option. As a sole person in this vast, dangerous universe, she was nothing.

"Whenever you're ready," Sun added after several minutes of silence. "I mean, if you want to. You don't *have* to or anything..."

He was willing to leave it at that, but...he was her best friend. He deserved to know what was bothering her. And, more importantly, she needed to tell someone. To hear the words out loud and confirm that what she felt was real.

"If I tell you something..." she began softly, clutching her hands in her lap. "Will you keep it a secret?"

"Of course."

"Even if it would get you fired?"

Frowning at the question, he leaned away and gave her a long, searching look.

"Blake...we've been friends for years now. You're the only reason I made it through basic training, so if you're asking me where my loyalties lie..." After pausing to think about it, he scoffed and shook his head. "It's not even a question. I'd quit right now if you asked me to."

The sweet response assured her that he wouldn't flip out, but she still took a deep breath before voicing this secret. Part of her was embarrassed. Part of her wanted to keep it to herself. But the biggest part of her was just...too heartbroken to deal with this alone.

"What's the cardinal rule of going undercover?" she finally asked.

"Don't get caught." He chuckled at the joke but grew more serious when she gave him a look. "Uh...don't hook up," he tried again. "Or no - don't fall in love. But you'd *never*...do...that..."

Reading her expression, he trailed off and looked briefly shocked, then

confused, before settling upon muted surprise.

“Oh.”

“I know it’s stupid,” she replied, more than willing to talk now that it was out in the open. “And I know I shouldn’t have – I know that. But she’s...kind-hearted, and gentle, and just...doing whatever she can to survive. I connected with her more than with anyone I’ve ever met before, but now...” Feeling her lip quiver, she paused and took a deep breath. “But now, I don’t know what happened to her...I don’t know if she’s alive or dead...and that hurts...so much...”

The explanation probably didn’t make much sense, but it was all she could get out before her voice broke with the onset of tears. Fortunately, Sun didn’t bombard her with questions. Instead, he just nodded, as if she somehow made sense even though she couldn’t have, and asked a soft, “Which one?”

“The one who ‘stabbed’ you...” she answered before burying her face in her hands to hide her tears. She heard him sigh at the answer before gently patting her back.

“She saved my life.”

“She saved mine too...” Blake whispered before they fell silent and ruminated on those memories.

Sun wouldn’t have made it off Drideter without Yang’s intervention. Blake wouldn’t have made it off the Inferno without her help either. And what did Yang get for saving their lives? Left to Adam and Cinder’s fury.

Having witnessed the atrocities Adam was capable of, Blake didn’t hold much hope that Yang was still alive. If he thought Yang betrayed him, he would kill her. And she most certainly betrayed him...for Blake.

The worst part was that there was no way of knowing. Blake might spend the rest of her life not knowing, which, to her, sounded like a fate worse than death. If she went by the knots in her stomach and the fist clenched around her heart...then Yang was already gone. Yang sacrificed her life even though this was Blake’s fault.

That hurt the most. It was Blake’s fault, but Yang saved her anyway.

Not long ago, Blake wouldn’t have made the same decision – she *couldn’t* have when obedience to the greater good had been drilled into her veins. But

Yang just showed her that there was always another way. There was always a choice. There was always the opportunity to save a life, but sometimes... sometimes those opportunities involved sacrifices. In this case, the ultimate sacrifice.

If Yang, the Blackguard commander who Blake was once determined to put in prison, could make such a sacrifice...then so could she.

“I’m going to find her.”

As soon as the words left her lips, she knew that’s what she had to do. She couldn’t live with herself otherwise.

“I’m going to find her,” she repeated, clenching her fists and standing up. “If she’s still alive, I’m finding her, and I’m going to save her.”

“Blake...”

“No, Sun.” Before he tried to talk her out of it, she shook her head. “I don’t care how stupid or dangerous it is. I don’t care what Command thinks – they don’t care what happens to me anyway.”

Feeling the sting of tears in her eyes, she paused and took a deep breath.

“I care that she saved my life,” she said while meeting his gaze. “I care that, even though I put her in that situation, she didn’t hesitate to save me. Or you. Or Zimon. *That’s* what I care about – not what the talking heads say.”

When she motioned in the general direction of Command’s meeting room, Sun stood up and slowly shook his head.

“I wasn’t going to tell you not to go...I was going to ask how I can help.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking,” he stated plainly. Sensing her reticence, he set his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “How important is she to you?”

Just thinking about Yang made Blake’s heart clench, which was more than enough of an answer. It might not make sense for her to care so deeply about someone she once viewed as irredeemable, but she couldn’t deny that she did.

“Very,” she whispered without shying away from his gaze, and he nodded in return.

“Then we’re going to save her. We *both* owe her that much.”

The conviction in his words and his eyes made her feel like crying again –

this time out of relief rather than sadness. Because she wasn't alone. She had an ally. She had help. And she knew exactly what she had to do.

Command just proved that their agenda didn't account for her wellbeing, so she was done with them. She was taking back control. She wouldn't be someone else's pawn - her life was *hers* to live, and hers to give.

From here on out, she made her own orders. If that got her into trouble, as it so often did, then at least she knew her motivation and objectives were pure. But if she was putting herself in harm's way, it would be for something or someone that she believed in. Then at least she knew she was following her heart, not the whims of some distant authority figure.

Besides...she'd been trained to be a force of nature - why should she stand idly by while evil ran amok? Why wouldn't she take matters into her own hands and fight for someone she cared about? Yang had done it for her...and she could do the same for Yang.

"Where do we start?" Sun eventually asked, drawing Blake's gaze as a semblance of a plan began to form.

"First...we're going to need a ship."

Chapter 24

Blake had never been so impatient in her life. Sitting on the table in the doctor's office, she fought the urge to end the appointment of her own volition and walk out of the room. Only the threat of a mandatory hold kept her sitting there, her knee jittering while the slow-moving doctor pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squinted at the reading on the thermometer.

"Temperature's good," he finally announced before returning to the desk and adding the information to her record. "Now let's check those cuts."

Stifling a sigh, she obediently raised her arms. The cuts from Cinder's bit of 'fun' had been bandaged by now and ranged from minor to moderate in severity. Only a few required stitches and all of them should heal soon.

"Good, good, good..." he muttered while methodically checking each and every one. "Is it true what they say?" he added while looking over her stitches. "That one of them has an arm made of metal?"

The attempt at conversation put a dent in her forced smile, but she recovered with a slight nod.

"I've heard quite the stories," he mused before continuing his work, oblivious to the fact that she was now on the verge of bolting from the room. "Crushing bones to dust, tearing apart the hulls of ships..."

"Don't believe everything you hear," she finally quipped, but he just chuckled and shook his head as if *he* somehow knew better than she did.

"These are healing nicely," he surmised, which she could have told him without wasting her time. "Now your ribs - what would you rate the pain on a scale of one to ten?"

"A three."

His brow rose at the quick response, but she didn't back away from it.

"Really?" he asked anyway. "That low already? You must heal remarkably fast."

"Been that way my whole life," she lied before losing her last shred of patience and hopping off the table. "Is that all you need?"

"Just about." This time, she did sigh when he walked over to the cabinets and started opening and closing several drawers. "You'll probably still want these," he explained after finding several packages of pills and handing them over. "They should help with the remaining discomfort."

Considering her ribs were actually more of a seven on the pain scale, she gladly accepted the pain relievers before backing towards the door. "Anything else?" she asked with her hand already on the handle. As soon as he shook his head, she forced a smile and quick, "Thank you," before hurrying into the hall.

Now that that was finally over -

"Lieutenant."

As soon as she spotted the stripes on the man's uniform, she squared her shoulders and put on an attentive expression.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Command scheduled you for another debriefing - tomorrow morning at eight."

"Another? But I haven't even finished my report yet."

"Apparently, they have more to discuss with you before you do."

"But...why?"

"It's not our place to ask why."

Noting his stern look, she straightened her shoulders again and gave a crisp nod.

"Yes, Sir. I'll be there."

Satisfied with that response, he nodded and went about his day. Blake, however, watched him go before clenching her jaw and hurrying to her room.

These were supposed to be her allies, yet she still wore a mask. She couldn't say what she wanted, she couldn't be who she wanted, because she didn't fit in. Her ideologies clashed with Command, and they'd already proven that her

opinion meant little to them. She was nothing more than a disposable pawn in their games. Meanwhile, they hemmed and hawed and failed to make a decision about the Blackguards in a reasonable amount of time.

Adam was right, but she still didn't agree with him. Command might be slow, inefficient, and lack decisiveness, but the Alliance was better than nothing - and light years better than accepting any future with Adam in charge.

But ISA's issues didn't pertain to her any longer. Sun had convinced her to attend her check-up to keep up appearances and give them more time to prepare, but now she was done. Command's wishes weren't her wishes any longer; she had her own goal, and that was finding Yang.

Spotting Sun loitering near the entrance to the living quarters, she nodded at him before continuing into the hall. He quickly ended his conversation with another officer and rushed after her, catching up just as she walked into her room. Determined not to waste more time, she grabbed her bag off of the chair and finished packing her meager belongings.

"What'd he say?" Sun asked while she stuffed a change of clothes into the mostly-empty bag.

"Clean bill of health."

"Liar. Your ribs are still broken."

"I'm not waiting, Sun." Frustration finally breaking free, she zipped the bag shut and turned towards him. "Command scheduled me for *another* debrief tomorrow. They're dragging their feet, and by the time they *might* decide to act, it could be too late."

"You realize if you don't show up, you're in a lot of trouble. Like 'no longer in the Alliance' type of trouble."

Willfully skipping a meeting with Command was punishable by immediate termination - she knew that. But they couldn't afford to wait. *Yang* couldn't wait. If her life was in danger now, she couldn't afford for Blake to sit back and wait for bureaucracy to play its part.

"I don't care," Blake said with a shake of her head. "If they're not going to do anything, I will."

"You mean *we* will." Motioning between them, Sun smiled. "Because I got us a ship, and I'm guessing we're leaving now."

That was the best news she'd heard all day, but she still gave him an incredulous look.

"How'd you get a ship so fast?"

"I told you - I've been kissing some serious ass while you were gone. Only problem - there's no way they'll let you leave when you're supposed to meet Command tomorrow."

"We'll worry about that later. Right now, I need to get my stuff back."

Before he asked what stuff, she left her temporary living quarters and headed to the evidence room. ISA, in their infinite wisdom, confiscated everything she brought back with her and locked it away for future analysis. But if she was returning to the Inferno, she needed her armor; it was the only hope she had of blending in.

"When will the ship be ready?" she asked as they approached the room holding anything ISA considered important, potentially deadly, or potentially valuable.

"Whenever we want. It's in the hangar ready to go."

Knowing that they were only minutes away from leaving this base behind, she picked up the pace and quickly made it to the door leading into evidence.

"It's locked," Sun said while she tried the handle and confirmed his words. "We'll have to convince Tina to open it. What do you think - I distract her, you grab your stuff?"

"I'm not waiting for Tina."

Pulling out the crappy replacement knife ISA had given her, she made sure the hallway was empty before jamming it into the lock.

"What - Blake! That's *totally* against the rules -"

"Does it look like I care," she mumbled while working the blade behind the panel until she felt the tug of a wire. With a little more shimmying around, the knife cut through the wire, the lock lost power, and the door opened.

ISA taught them how to jam locks for clearing ships. Had they never considered that the knowledge could be used against them too?

"I'll stand watch," Sun said while she slipped into the room. Her eyes adjusted to the light after a few seconds, and a few more when the automatic sensors turned on the overhead lamps.

The evidence room, like always, was a mess. Even though several employees were tasked with keeping it organized, their methods of organization involved stacking boxes wherever there was room. While not a fatal flaw, it was yet another area where the Blackguards were more efficient.

Rushing to the leftmost shelving unit, she scanned the labels as fast as possible. The last thing Command wanted were officers stealing the drugs or money stored here, so getting caught without permission was a quick way to end up in a cell for a week. But she had no interest in either of those things; she just wanted her armor back.

Spotting a box with her name on it, she pulled off the lid and confirmed it was hers. The jet black uniform sent a tremble of fear and nostalgia through her veins, and she ran her fingers across the heavy material before pulling it from the box and stuffing it in her bag. Her gaze immediately returned to the flash of metal in the bottom of the box, and she sighed in relief as she pulled out the knife Yang had given her.

It was still the most beautiful blade she'd ever seen. Today, it filled her with longing as she swapped it with ISA's crappy replacement. Having that small piece of Yang back at her side provided some measure of comfort, and she felt ready now. She had her uniform, she had her blade - she was ready to go.

Slinging her bag over one shoulder, she was halfway to the door when she heard someone in the hall.

"Wukong," a voice said as footsteps approached the open door. "What're you doing here?"

Knowing she didn't have much time, Blake looked left and right before diving behind the biggest stack of boxes she could find.

"Standing guard, Sir," Sun replied. "The lock broke, so I'm watching the door while someone gets Tina."

"The lock just...broke?"

"You know how cheap these things are," Sun replied with an easy laugh. "Pretty sure they'd all fail if more than three people take a hot shower at once."

While the officer chuckled at the joke, Blake held her breath and hoped he didn't walk into the room to make sure it was empty. Just a cursory glance would do. Just take a quick glance and move on.

“Well...” A short silence followed, where she imagined the man checking the room for obvious signs of tampering. “Good work. I’ll make sure Tina gets here immediately.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Blake breathed a sigh of relief when footsteps moved away from the doorway and leapt to her feet as soon as they reached the end of the hall.

“Good job,” she whispered to Sun as she rushed out of the room and immediately headed towards the hanger.

“Wait –” After catching up to her, Sun glanced over his shoulder. “You’re just leaving the door unlocked?”

“You heard him – Tina will be there soon.”

Blake had more pressing concerns than some unattended drugs and weapons – mainly, getting off this planet as soon as possible. But getting her uniform back was easy; now came the hard part.

Her steps slowed as they approached the double doors leading to the hangar, and her nerves were quick to appear. While the evidence room was almost childishly simple to gain access to, the hangar would be a different story.

Much of that difficulty arose from her impending meeting with Command. That meeting tied her badge to this base until Command released her, essentially prohibiting her from entering a spacecraft. Mission Control would prevent any ship from launching if she was on board, so she had to be on board without actually being on board...

“Let’s go to the supply room,” Sun suggested. Walking through the hangar doors, he took an immediate left and led her into one of the many small rooms housing spare parts and maintenance equipment.

“Alright.” As soon as the door closed behind him, he set his hands on his hips. “How do we get you across the room without the cameras picking you up?”

“I can hide in something –” was all she got out before his eyes lit up and he backed towards the door.

“Wait here.”

The next second, he was gone, and she was left to pace while awaiting his return.

Ever since they made this decision, leaving the base was all she'd thought about. Now that the moment was finally here, her nerves and restlessness returned in full. With this final act of defiance, she was effectively submitting her resignation - and she didn't care. She wouldn't sit on the sidelines of her life any longer.

If Yang was still alive, she needed Blake to be more than an order-taker. She needed Blake to be someone who scoffed at hierarchy and followed their heart. She needed Blake to be more like her - the 'fearsome' Blackguard who willingly threw her life away for someone she cared about.

When the door reopened, Blake pushed those thoughts aside and watched Sun lug a cargo crate into the room.

"Here we go," he said, setting down the crate with a big smile. "Am I a genius or what?"

"You're going to carry that, and me, across the hangar?"

When Blake gave him a disbelieving look, he laughed.

"Of course not. That's why it has wheels!"

Lifting the handle, he pointed to a set of wheels at the bottom that would allow him to pull rather than carry the large box.

"That's more believable."

After shrugging off her bag and setting it in the container, she hopped inside. The hard plastic was uncomfortable, but the box was large enough for her to fit without scrunching up too much. Her ribs still protested the curled position, but she ignored the growing pain in favor of getting this over with as fast as possible.

"Ready?" Sun asked, waiting for her nod before picking up the lid. "Can't believe you thought I'd carry you all the way across the hangar..." he muttered in the process. "Like...*who* could do that?"

When she gave him a look, his smile disappeared.

"But that's not fair! She has a *metal* arm."

Rolling her eyes at the whine, she ducked down and motioned for him to snap the lid shut.

"When this is over, I'm hitting the gym so hard..." he grumbled while doing just that. Moments later, Blake felt the container tilt upward, and they were

on their way.

The door opened and closed, then she listened to the sound of wheels rolling across the ground combined with the general noises of a busy hangar. A ship landed in the distance, maintenance workers shouted directions to each other, and a loudspeaker called out names or information every few minutes. Meanwhile, Sun whistled a tune and maintained a slow, leisurely pace that would grate on her patience if she weren't trapped in the container.

"Halfway there," he whispered under his breath a few minutes later, knowing that she could hear him when no one else could. No sooner had he given the update, however, did he sigh.

"Shit. Incoming."

Training her ears towards the sounds outside the box, she heard footsteps striding purposefully towards them. With her current position, however, she could do nothing other than remain silent and hope Sun talked them out of this.

"Wukong." The commanding tone suggested that the speaker was superior, and potentially far superior, to them. "What's this about you going on a mission already?"

"Admiral Minear said I could join up with the forces on Bemia," Sun answered in an easygoing tone. "She said they could use an extra hand with the rebellion."

"I thought Command wanted you keeping an eye on Lieutenant Belladonna."

Frowning at the comment, Blake listened more carefully to Sun's response.

"They did, Sir, but they spoke to her yesterday and decided it was unnecessary."

"They're not concerned about her loyalties?"

"No, Sir."

"Well...good. That's one less thing to worry about." Blake's frown deepened at that, but the man brushed past the topic. "What's with the crate?"

Her concern ratcheted up at the question, but Sun laughed it off.

"You don't pack some food when you leave?"

"No, I don't."

Maybe Blake's ears were playing tricks on her, but it sounded like the officer

was suspicious. Sun, however, managed another chuckle.

“I recommend it! Nothing like chowing down on a few tuna rolls while away from home. Helps beat the space blues.”

“Right...well, good luck out there. I heard that rebellion’s getting out of hand.”

“Nothing a dashing Wukong can’t handle, Sir!”

From inside the crate, Blake rolled her eyes and practically felt the officer do the same before his footsteps started walking away. “Don’t get cocky, kid,” he added as he left, an end to the conversation and permission for Sun to sigh in relief.

“About what he said...” Sun immediately whispered while lifting the crate and continuing to the ship at a faster pace. “Command asked me to keep an eye on you because they were worried you turned. I would’ve done it anyway because I was worried about you, but sorry I didn’t tell you...”

The answer explained a few things but made her more annoyed at Command than anything else. He could have said something sooner, but she also hadn’t given him much opportunity to do so while grappling with what to do about Yang. Besides, he was helping her now, and that was all she could ask for.

When the incline of the container steepened and the wheels rolled over metal instead of concrete, she realized that they made it. After dragging the crate into the ship, Sun set it down and patted the top.

“I’ll get us in the air,” he explained before hurrying to the cockpit.

Knowing that she had to stay put for now, she shifted in an attempt to get more comfortable and winced when her ribs objected. Blowing a long, slow breath through her lips, she focused on the sounds of Sun flipping switches and turning dials in preparation for launch. The ship sprang to life with a growing whir of energy not long after, increasing her anticipation right along with it.

Backing out never crossed her mind. Not even for a second.

“Mission Control,” he spoke into the radio shortly thereafter. “This is Captain Wukong requesting permission to launch.”

Blake’s brow shot up at the title before her ears picked up mission control’s response.

“Roger, Captain. You’re cleared for launch. Happy hunting.”

“Alright,” Sun muttered before starting the launch sequence. “Here goes nothing.”

The thrusters fired up with a roar of power, joined by the bells and reminders approaching launch and, before she knew it, they were rocketing away from the base. Unable to see what was happening, she focused on the feeling of the ship lifting off the ground before blasting away from the landing pad. The engines thundered in her ears while propelling them higher and higher, then kicked into an even higher gear when they reached the upper atmosphere.

Shudders rippled through the ship, growing louder and stronger by the second. Just when it felt like everything might rattle into pieces, there came a jolt followed by near silence - the sound of leaving a planet behind.

“We made it,” Sun breathed out, sounding just as dismayed as she felt.

With no more concerns about cameras spotting her, she pushed the lid off of the container and hopped out. After a quick stretch of her cramped limbs, she walked to the front of the ship and sat in the co-pilot’s chair.

When Sun gave her a hesitant smile, she realized he was worried that she was upset about his little secret. That hardly mattered to her though, especially with ISA now falling behind them.

“*Captain?*” she asked instead, and he immediately burst out laughing.

“Bet you didn’t know you were supposed to be saluting me now,” he teased.

“But...how?”

“Pretty sure because I got tossed off a cliff by a Blackguard commander. Sounds legit, right?”

Too stunned to respond, she merely shook her head.

“I’m supposed to get my new bars next week,” he added. “But, considering I just smuggled someone off planet, I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“Sorry...”

“Naw, don’t worry about it.” He smiled and waved off her concern. “What rank do you think they’d give you if they knew you slept with her?”

“Dishonorable discharge, most likely.”

“I dunno about that,” he replied with a laugh. “Just show them a picture - I think they’ll understand.”

He chuckled at the idea but, fortunately, let the subject drop and focused on the flight checks rather than pursue it any further.

Blake didn't want to think about her relationship with Yang right now - she just wanted to *save* Yang, if that was even an option. But their relationship clouded everything. It was the only thing driving her, because if she stopped and considered that Yang was already dead...

"Should only take a day," Sun said after charting their route to Planet TS72. "Any grand plans for when we get there?"

Staring out the window at the dark, infinite void speckled with stars, she shook her head.

"No, not yet."

"Well...you have some time to think of one."

He glanced at her again, but she pulled out her knife and focused on it rather than meet his gaze. At the moment, her plan began and ended with figuring out if Yang was still alive. Beyond that...get Yang out of there somehow, fly away, and never look back. If Yang wasn't alive...that's what the knife was for.

"Did you know I've always wanted to get court-martialed?"

When Sun set the ship on autopilot and leaned back in his seat, Blake shook her head and clenched her left hand to keep it from shaking.

"Why would you want that?"

"I dunno...it sounds like fun! Didn't think I'd get to cross it off so soon, but also didn't think I'd nearly die so soon."

While he chuckled and propped his feet up on the console, she spun the knife in her hand and found herself grateful for his presence. Regardless of the shitstorm they were flying into, his carefree attitude never changed. That's what made him the best squadmate in training, and that's what made him worthy of the rank of captain. He understood the risks of the situation but didn't get too stressed or uptight about it, and refused to let her get too stressed or uptight about it too.

The time for stress would come soon, and she needed to be ready. She would be ready.

Chapter 25

“There it is.”

The words hardly left Sun’s mouth before Blake sat forward and stared at the planet in front of them. Whatever exhaustion she previously felt disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced by a spark of adrenaline.

Planet TS72 didn’t look like much, but she knew the secret it held. Now, her biggest hope was that its secret still eluded Adam, that the Blackguards were still here trying to find it, and that Yang was still with them.

“Not picking up any ships...” Sun mused while cautiously navigating closer to the planet. “Wouldn’t they be in orbit?”

“Should be.” Standing up and leaning towards the glass, she searched the space above TS72 as if her eyes could spot the Inferno when their scanning equipment could not. “Unless...” she mused when she saw nothing.

If Adam knew he was close...that he’d found the mines and the source of his future power...why would he only take the shuttles? Even though Blake escaped and knew exactly where he was headed, he didn’t fear her or ISA in the slightest. He wanted to get his hands on that metal as fast as possible, even if that meant landing the entire damn ship to do so.

“They landed.”

The more she thought through the situation, the more she assured she was in that answer. Adam wanted to load up as much Valerian steel as the Inferno could hold, which meant he needed the entire crew with him.

“Want me to scan the surface?”

“Topography only,” she replied. “If they’re paying attention, we want them to think it’s a probe passing by, not a ship.”

“You got it.” After tapping several controls, Sun leaned back when a map of the planet’s surface popped onto the screen in front of them. “How will you know where they are?”

“I’ll just know...” she mumbled while studying the mountains and valleys on the screen. She didn’t know *how* she would know until she saw it - a sequence of mountains sharing an uncanny resemblance to the star pattern the maps had created.

“There.” As soon as she pointed out the location, her adrenaline ratcheted up another level. “Land out of scanning range - I’ll make the final approach on foot.”

That plan was an argument in the making, but Sun said nothing while picking their landing spot and navigating to the surface. As soon as the turbulence of the upper atmosphere fell behind them, Blake went to the back of the ship to prepare.

Picking up her Blackguard armor, the most crucial piece of equipment for her future chances of survival, she took a deep breath and slipped it on. The familiarity of the uniform stirred a strange set of emotions in her, everything from comfort to nostalgia to fear, but she did her best to focus on the mission at hand rather than dive into painful memories. This suit was the closest thing to camouflage that she had, and could very well mean the difference between life and death if someone spotted her running around on board.

Even though she’d nearly died the first time around, she was returning to the Inferno.

When the ship touched down and Sun shut off the engines, she realized that her time had come. Either she found Yang alive, or she found Adam and ended his existence - those were the only two acceptable outcomes.

“Lookin’ good,” Sun joked while she stored a phaser in her holster and slipped Yang’s knife into a sheath on her thigh. Running through a mental checklist, she looked around and made sure she had everything. Only then did she nod.

“Ok, I’m ready. You remember the plan?”

“Stay here and wait for you to bring her back, or wait for your signal that you need help, or wait for your signal to pick you up.”

“Exactly.” Blake held up the small beacon she would carry with her before slipping it into another pocket. “I’ll move as fast as possible, but it could take a while to search the whole ship.”

“So be patient,” he replied with a knowing nod. “Got it. I’ll do my best.”

Satisfied with his response, she nodded and briefly considered a hug before deciding better of it. She didn’t trust herself to get emotional right now, which meant she just needed to leave. The moment she reached for the door release and flinched, however, he jumped to his feet and rushed over.

“I should come with you.”

“Sun...”

“Your ribs are still broken. It’d be better if I’m there to help.”

“We went over this...” When she looked at him, she understood how worried he was. But they already decided on their plan, and there were good reasons why it had to be this way. “You need to stay here and be the cavalry,” she told him one more time. “If we’re both caught, who’s going to save us?”

“I could find her and *you* could be the cavalry.”

“You know I’m the sneaky one. Plus, I know the layout of the ship, and good luck fitting into this.”

She motioned towards her suit and attempted a smile, but he sighed rather than accept the joke.

“I guess being the cavalry isn’t so bad...I’ve always wanted to save some damsels in distress.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Patting his arm and offering one last smile, she pulled the door release and hurried outside before focusing too much on their goodbye. Faced with the strange, foreign planet before her, she hardly got her bearings before setting off in the direction of the Inferno.

For someplace supposedly hiding an invaluable resource, TS72 was...plain. There were some rocky mountains, sporadic trees, sporadic rocks, and even more sporadic grass, but that was about it. The gently-sloping dirt ground made for easy walking, and she used that to her advantage as she rushed towards the mountain formation looming in the distance.

Every time the wind kicked up, she covered her eyes to prevent the fine,

loose dirt from blowing into them, but had little other trouble crossing on foot. The terrain was perfect for a land speeder if she had one. Fortunately, the group of strange, individual mountains grew closer with each step.

About a mile away, she began to worry. There was still no sign of the Blackguards, but they should be here. At least, that was what her intuition told her, but what if her intuition was wrong? What if the mines were actually on the opposite side of the planet, and she just wasted all this time thinking she was right?

That was the last thing she wanted to happen, and she was on the verge of signaling Sun to pick her up when she spotted something in the distance. A few steps further, and her heart jumped at what she saw.

There, tucked into the shadow of the mountains, lurking like a giant black beast, was the Inferno. Adam brought the entire crew just like she suspected.

Her pace immediately quickened, and she stuck closer to the cover of whatever trees she could find while continuing her approach. With every passing second, more details became distinguishable; it wasn't much longer before she crouched behind a boulder and surveyed the scene in front of her.

With the cargo hold open, sneaking on board might be easier than expected. Two guards were stationed at the top of the ramp but, based on their relaxed postures, considered their job to be more of a rest break than a serious endeavor. On a desolate planet with no civilization to be found, the last thing they expected was an uninvited visitor. Other guards walked along a torch-lined path leading into the mountains nearby, but their rifles leaned against their shoulders and their expressions suggested more interest in conversation than scouting for threats.

Their lax security worked to Blake's advantage, as she waited for their eyes to turn away before sneaking behind a tree closer to the ship. After a quick check to make sure they were still looking elsewhere, she sprinted over to the empty boxes stacked just outside the cargo hold. Getting past the guards at the top of the ramp would be more difficult, as she needed to walk right past them without being caught.

Before Blake summoned the courage to walk right past them, Cinder stormed back from wherever she'd been within the range of mountains.

“You two,” she snapped while pointing to the two men. “Get those boxes out there now.”

Suddenly much more attentive, they rushed to do as instructed – grabbing one large box apiece and carrying them along the path Cinder had just returned from. Cinder, meanwhile, strode into the ship without another word.

The guards left the ramp unattended, and Blake wasted no time sprinting into the cargo hold. Having no interest in following Cinder through the main entrance though, she clambered up the nearest ladder and let herself into the ship using one of the doorways at the end of the catwalk instead.

Suddenly finding herself standing in the halls of the Inferno, familiarity and even a vague sense of longing seeped in with her overarching urgency. Even though she hadn’t been away for long...it felt very much like coming home.

Shoving that feeling aside, she hurried down the hall and kept her ears on high alert for sounds of life. Unlike the last few hours she’d spent on board, sneaking away in the dead of night, the ship was awash with noise and motion.

Judging by the path set up outside, some of the crew had been moved off the ship to help Adam with something. The rest were still on board and, from the sounds of it, treating the temporary lull like a vacation. Their light-hearted mood worked in Blake’s favor, as it meant they were most likely drunk or quickly getting drunk in the rec room. So long as she stayed away from the living quarters, she shouldn’t spot many stragglers.

At least, that was her hope as she went to check Yang’s room first.

Maybe, just maybe, Yang avoided getting caught. Or maybe she’d talked herself out of trouble.

That hope vanished when Blake peeked into the officers’ corridor and found Yang’s door open. After a pause to listen for signs of life, she rushed to the doorway and discovered that the room had been utterly trashed. Every drawer had been opened and emptied onto the floor. Every article of clothing had been pulled from the closet and carelessly cast aside.

The disarray confirmed her worst fears. Now, she couldn’t find Yang fast enough.

Leaving the room, she nearly made it to the end of the hall when her ears picked up a voice. Almost immediately recognizing Cinder’s drawl, she spun

around and raced in the opposite direction.

With Yang's room empty, panic began to set in. For some stupid reason, she expected it to be that easy. She expected Yang to be waiting for her - just sitting in her room waiting for Blake to show up so they could sneak off the ship together this time.

That couldn't happen because Yang got caught helping an ISA agent escape, and they either killed her or were holding her somewhere. If they were holding her somewhere...maybe it was the same holding cell where they put Blake.

As soon as she turned the next corner and saw two Blackguards moving towards her, she spun around and walked the other way. "Shit," she muttered under her breath while hoping they hadn't recognized her. They didn't shout or raise an alarm, but she kept a better focus on her ears while replanning her route.

Several hallways and a nerve-wracking lift ride later, she stood outside the room to the holding cell, but she didn't even need to look inside to know it was empty.

Yang wasn't here. But if she wasn't here or her room, where was she? She couldn't be dead. She couldn't be. She had to be here somewhere.

Blake's heart hurt even more now, but she refused to give up hope. She wouldn't believe that Yang was gone until every single room on the Inferno had been checked. Until then...Yang was here somewhere. And she needed Blake to find her as soon as possible.

But without a clue as to where to go, Blake indiscriminately rushed through the halls and checked every room she passed. If she heard voices inside, she moved on. If she didn't, she opened the door and peeked inside.

As the empty rooms mounted, her desperation grew. Time was of the essence, and she was wasting too much of it having no idea where to look.

After checking one of the storage rooms - again, empty - she'd nearly backed into the hall when she heard footsteps behind her. Stepping into the room instead, she quietly closed the door and searched for a hiding spot. A locker filled with linens would have to do, and she scrunched herself into the small space before closing the door and holding her breath.

By now, she knew better than to wish for the footsteps to continue down the

hall, but was still disappointed when the door opened and they moved into the room instead. As the person opened and closed several drawers, possibly searching for something, Blake silently pulled out her knife and prepared to attack.

From the way the sounds moved about the room, they would make it to her hiding spot before long, and her adrenaline raced with anticipation as that moment neared. She wouldn't hurt them if she didn't have to, but she couldn't let them warn the rest of the Blackguards either.

The instant someone touched the handle of the locker, she shoved the other side of the door and sprang from her hiding spot.

She had the knife pressed to Ret's throat before he realized what was happening, but he made no attempt to struggle or call for help. Instead, he stared at her with wide eyes while she tried to figure out what to do - whether to knock him out or trust that he wouldn't alert the rest of the ship.

He was just a kid, and she didn't want to hurt him, so she chose not to.

Removing the blade and stepping away, she watched for any indication he might attack. He started hopping up and down instead.

"You came back!" he said so loudly that she shushed him, so he continued in a whisper. "I knew you'd come back. I told Em you would. She called me stupid, but I was right!"

"Ret," Blake said, again motioning for him to settle down. "Do you know where Yang is? Is she still here? Is she alive?"

When his excitement disappeared, it felt like a knife lodged in her heart.

"I think so..." he said and, just like that, her hope returned, albeit at a smaller capacity than before. "Em told me to stay away from Lower B deck, so I think that's where she is - but wait!" He reached out and stopped her as soon as she turned to leave. "I can help!"

"No." Even though he looked disappointed, Blake shook her head to emphasize that answer. "You stay here. Or go find Emerald and don't leave her side - got it?"

He wanted to argue - that much was evident from his hurt puppy dog look and the darkening of his skin - but he eventually nodded.

"Ok...but be careful. Adam was really, *really* mad. Em made me hide for a

few days because he was going berserk on everyone.”

Blake could hardly imagine that firestorm, and she didn't have time to.

“Thank you,” she whispered with a smile and, before convincing herself out of it, hugged him before hurrying out of the room.

Armed with a destination, she headed towards Lower B deck at a near sprint. Mentally, she went through the list of rooms she remembered on that level – various training rooms and storage closets. Had they repurposed one of the training rooms to hold Yang? After another nerve-frying lift ride, she was about to find out.

The hall was lifeless, and the rooms sounded the same. Having expected guards stationed wherever Yang was, the lack of security dampened Blake's spirits. Still, she pressed on. After checking the first room and finding nothing, she took a deep breath and checked the second. Another empty room, and despair tugged at her heart.

When she slid the third door open an inch, she heard breathing. Without a second thought, she shoved it the rest of the way open and felt her heart jump in her chest when she suddenly found herself standing in front of Yang.

Yang was alive. She was still alive.

But she'd been hell.

The Blackguards had chained her up by her arms and left her there. Her eyes were closed, and her head drooped forward, but the bruises darkening her skin were clear as day. The deep, red gash on her cheek looked angry and inflamed. Burn marks marred her armor. And some type of electric collar had been locked around her neck.

“Yang...”

Happiness...relief...longing...all of those emotions swirled in Blake's chest as she rushed over to the Blackguard leader who hadn't left her thoughts ever since the moment they saw each other last. She'd hoped and prayed for the chance to see Yang again, and now that she had....she had to get Yang out of here as fast as possible.

“Yang,” she whispered while gently touching Yang's cheek. The moment she did, Yang jerked away as if Blake just slapped her. Wild red eyes searched for the source of the perceived attack before landing on Blake and staying.

“...Blake?”

“What did they do to you?” Blake whispered before moving around Yang’s side, searching for a way to release her. The chains were thick and metal – she would need a bolt cutter to get through those. But that collar...

The instant Blake touched it a jolt of electricity shot through her hand, making her yelp and jump away.

“Shit, sorry,” she said while shaking her stinging hand. She knew what it was now – a shock collar – and she really, really didn’t want to imagine what Cinder did with it.

“Blake,” Yang repeated, her tone more urgent as her senses returned to her. “What’re you doing here? You can’t be here.”

“What does it look like?” Blake wanted to remove the collar *right now* but also didn’t want to risk shocking Yang again. It would have to stay for now – but how could she get Yang down?

“You need to leave.”

“Not without you.”

“Blake, you need to *leave*.”

“Not without you,” she replied more emphatically. She finally found a lock near the end of the chains, but she needed a key to undo it.

“They’ll kill you. Blake, they’ll kill you – please, please just leave.”

Ignoring the pleas, she tried fitting the tip of her blade in the lock, but it was too big. Giving up that idea, she hurried to the back of the room and found a variety of metal tools laying on the table. They all looked like torture devices, but she ignored that thought and grabbed the first thin piece of metal she found.

“You can’t be here...”

“I came back for you.” Fitting the piece of metal into the lock, she searched for the pins – much easier to do when her hands weren’t shaking from adrenaline. “And I’m not leaving without you,” she added as the first pin slid into place. Only four more. If she moved fast enough –

She heard the footsteps too late, and had no time to do anything but freeze when the door opened and Cinder walked inside.

For a split second, the two of them just stared at each other. Then Blake

dropped the lock and drew her phaser, but Cinder already had hers pointed at Yang.

“Well,” Cinder said as a smirk crept onto her lips. “I wasn’t expecting to find you here, *Lieutenant*.”

“Surprise.”

Taking several steps away from Yang, Blake hoped Cinder would aim at her instead and present an opportunity to shoot. But Cinder didn’t flinch. Instead, her smirk grew as three more Blackguards walked into the room and drew their weapons.

Four against one, and with Yang still chained up...

“Didn’t want to miss all the fun,” Blake added and, with her heart racing, lifted her finger away from the trigger and held her hands in the air.

The squad rushed forward and took her weapon, which she surrendered without a fight. They took her knife too, and checked for other weapons before backing away and leveling their weapons at her. One of them handed her knife to Cinder, who took the blade and looked it over.

“This is nice,” she said before keeping it for herself. “Who’s giving you nice things?”

Before Blake could respond, Cinder spun around and leveled an elbow her right in the ribs. The resulting spike of pain sent her crumbling to the floor, struggling for breath while white spots flashed in her vision.

“Still tender, are they?” Cinder said with a tsk, walking away while Blake clutched her stomach and fought back tears.

“Adam will be thrilled you’re back,” Cinder added while two of the guards grabbed Blake’s arms and dragged her to her feet. “He was...disappointed... that you didn’t get what you deserved the first time.”

“Him and me both,” Blake said through gritted teeth, but Cinder just rolled her eyes. Another squad of Blackguards arrived then, their presence suggesting they were about to move Yang somewhere.

“What I’m most concerned about,” Cinder continued, her eyes flashing with malice. “Is that we have a traitor on board.”

When another Blackguard marched Ret inside, a pit opened in Blake’s stomach.

She told him to stay put. She told him to find Emerald. Why did he follow her? Why was he so determined to help?

“He led you here.”

“He didn’t,” Blake lied, but Cinder just smiled – and Cinder’s happiness was far more terrifying than her anger.

“Why don’t we just ask him?”

Dread growing, Blake met Ret’s gaze and subtly shook her head.

“Did you help her?” Cinder asked him, still with that smile set in place.

Blake’s heart dropped when Ret’s skin began to deepen. Silently, she pleaded him to stop it. To control it somehow. To do *anything* but suggest he was guilty. Instead, he smiled at her while his skin gave away what he’d done.

“Em said I could be a good pilot someday,” he whispered instead, raising one steady hand while Cinder put her phaser to his head.

“He didn’t do it!” Blake screamed as the weapon went off, ringing through the air as his body fell to the floor. She immediately lunged at Cinder, fueled by enough fury that she broke free of her captors only to find the red-hot phaser pointed to her forehead.

She froze, and Cinder smiled while the Blackguards grabbed her by the arms and pulled her away.

“I’m going to kill you,” she seethed, meaning it more than anything she’d meant in her life, but Cinder only found the threat amusing.

“Of course you are.” Putting the weapon away, Cinder looked around the room before motioning to the door. “Bring them both.”

Under Cinder’s watchful gaze, the guards unlocked the chain from the ceiling, and Yang immediately collapsed to the floor. Once they dragged her to her feet, she lifted her head and caught Blake’s eyes; she didn’t have to say anything for Blake to know what she was thinking.

She wished Blake hadn’t come back for her. She wished that she could die alone, but Blake wasn’t going to let that happen. Either they made it out of this together, or they died here together. Realistically, it would probably be the latter.

“Let’s go,” Cinder said once the guards had control of Yang. The man behind Blake shoved her towards the door. Taking the hint, she spared one last glance

for Ret, feeling a sharp pain in her heart for such an innocent life lost, before walking out of the room.

He helped her. She wished she could have helped him in return, but she'd failed him. Just like she'd failed Yang. And ISA. And herself.

News of her intrusion must have already spread throughout the ship, as a group of Blackguards loitered in the hall waiting for the result of the showdown. Amongst them...Emerald and Mercury.

Emerald only looked at Blake before realization dawned in her eyes, followed by a flicker of pain, and finally anger. After sending a scathing look Cinder's way, she spun on her heel and stormed away without a word. Mercury glanced into the room and, upon confirming that Ret was gone, shook his head and followed.

They probably blamed Blake, and they should, but she had no time to worry about them right now. Not when the man behind her gave her another push forward, and she was forced to follow Cinder off of the Inferno. She had no idea where they were headed or why, but if she were to guess...Adam had found a way into the mines.

Chapter 26

While Blake's footsteps clunked down the metal ramp leading off of the Inferno, her heart remained heavy. Nearby Blackguards stopped what they were doing and stared at her, but she paid them no mind. She didn't care if they were shocked or thrilled that she came back only to be caught again. She didn't care what amusement or vindication they found in her impending death.

She couldn't get Ret's last smile out of her thoughts, and with it, a burning fury towards Cinder and Adam. Their needless violence created unnecessary victims - and for what? To make themselves feel more powerful?

"Get a move on," Cinder snapped, and the guard behind Blake promptly shoved her forward. After catching her balance, she turned around and glared at the man, who glared right back before shoving her again.

"Move," he ordered, making her grit her teeth while doing as told.

If it wasn't one versus one hundred, she might do something reckless. It would get her killed, but she was accepting death more and more with every step. That unavoidable fate tempted her to launch herself at Cinder right now, but she held herself in check. If she was going to die, she would take Adam or Cinder with her - preferably both. Ret's death wouldn't be in vain.

"I'm sorry..." Yang whispered as they were led away from the ship, but Blake shook her head. She knew Yang blamed herself for what just happened, but it wasn't her fault. If it was anyone's fault, it was Blake's. She shouldn't have let Ret find her. She shouldn't have told him who she was looking for. Or she should have knocked him unconscious so he couldn't make such a foolish decision on his own.

It was too late for that now. The only thing she could do was make his murderer pay.

“He was a good kid...” Yang muttered towards the ground before falling silent.

Blake couldn't even respond to that, not with the lump of emotion in her throat. Instead, she clenched her fists and glared daggers at Cinder's back while the woman sauntered up ahead. Ret never fit in with the Blackguards, but all he wanted was somewhere to belong. He wanted a family to replace the one he lost. He might have found it too, if only Cinder weren't involved.

Feeling Yang's glance, Blake kept her eyes trained forward and fought back tears. Now wasn't the time for mourning. Although...if walking to her death wasn't the time for mourning, when was?

Rather than dwell on the pain in her heart, however, she focused on the path leading between the mountains, which turned out not to be mountains at all. The structures had the size and shape of mountains but, upon closer inspection, were actually intricate piles of rock. From small pebbles to massive boulders, each piece fit together perfectly and, somehow, had remained this way for who knew how many years.

The formations must have been created for a reason. As Blake had seen on the topography scan, their placement created the unique star-shaped symbol just like the maps had when laid on top of each other. There must be another purpose...but it could take years for a trained professional to figure that out, and even longer for someone like herself to understand the mysteries of this place. All she knew was that someone put a great deal of thought into this location, and what could the Blackguards - as intruders - possibly understand about this foreign land?

Hearing someone's foot scuff on the ground, Blake turned and instinctively reached out when Yang stumbled forward. Blake's escort instantly sprang to motion and pulled her back, but one of the other Blackguards steadied Yang before she fell. Yang gave the man a grateful smile and nod for the help, but he quickly let go of her arm and backed away.

More Blackguards flanked Yang on all sides but kept a respectful distance, probably worried about what she could do if she got her hands on them. She

wasn't in any condition to fight though, not with her visible wounds and a clear limp in her gait. From the way she favored her left leg and her side, she must be in an incredible amount of pain but was struggling not to let it show.

"Are you ok?" Blake whispered as they made it past the first set of mountains only to find another ring further in.

"I'd say that I'll survive, but...I'm not sure of that." After another few steps, Yang met Blake's gaze with a sad one of her own. "I didn't want you to die with me."

"I thought you said it was romantic," Blake pointed out, but Yang held her gaze for several long seconds before turning away with a sigh.

"What do I know about romance..."

Honestly, what did either of them know about romance? Considering their relationship had been destined to be a tragedy from the start...very little. But that didn't change how Blake felt or make her regret her decisions in the slightest.

Even if their relationship was destined to be a tragedy, the time she spent with Yang had opened her eyes in ways she couldn't have imagined. No longer was she naïve to the complexities of simple words like good and evil, and no longer was she a pawn marching forward to someone else's orders. But that didn't matter anymore, and was the last thing on her mind when they passed the next set of mountains and approached the center of the formation.

In the middle of the rock creations rose a spire almost impossible to describe. Equal parts natural formation and man-made monolith, it combined giant slabs of rock with shimmering metal that glinted in the low light. It overlooked the nearby mountains yet blended into the landscape, as if hiding and standing out at the same time. A ship passing overhead was bound to miss it, but someone walking the planet's surface would never forget it.

"Holy shit..." Yang breathed out as they walked closer. The response mirrored Blake's, as she stared in awe at the structure looming before them.

In typical Blackguard fashion, explosives had been used to demolish one side of the mountain and reveal a hollow within. As their group grew closer, however, Blake realized that the explosives hadn't damaged the metal. Instead, veins of the indestructible material hung in the air even after the rock had

crumbled and fallen to the wayside.

Blackguards were still carting debris away from the rough opening, but the pathway was clear. Cinder walked through without hesitation, but Blake took one last look at the metal before following into the heart of the structure. As soon as she stepped inside, her awe doubled.

The room was cavernous, built right into the mountain of rock with a ceiling towering far above their heads. Threads of metal running through the walls and ceiling provided a sense of fortitude she wouldn't expect with several tons of rock sitting above her, but she got the distinct feeling that the metal skeleton would never give in to the weight of rocks it held.

It wasn't until she passed three stone columns inscribed with Valerian runes that sadness washed over her. This place was a remnant of a long-lost civilization that could still be here had they not sacrificed their way of life. Standing here, surrounded by evidence of their intelligence and riches, she couldn't imagine how difficult that decision must have been.

The Valerians went through the trouble of hiding this place because they didn't want anyone to find it. Because they deemed it too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands. Because they would rather sacrifice themselves than be responsible for the death and destruction this place could cause.

Now Adam was here, and Blake felt horrible for helping him. That feeling only grew when she saw the wall at the far end of the atrium, made entirely of the same metal holding the mountain upright. The shimmering silver wall looked almost liquid, but its smooth surface had survived the test of time without blemish. It looked like it belonged within the mountain but logic told her that couldn't be true; someone built it to block them from whatever lay beyond.

Explosives wouldn't work anymore, although Adam probably considered that route. Using explosives inside the chamber would bring the entire mountain of rock down on their heads and bury the other artifacts in the room - most notably, a large, interconnected piece of rock that looked like some type of forge. A fire already blazed in the contraption, either lit by the Blackguards or powered by whatever magic coursed through this place.

They weren't supposed to be here - Blake felt that indisputable fact with

every breath she took. It wasn't meant for them. They weren't one of 'the worthy,' as the maps warned. They weren't even Valerian.

That wouldn't stop Adam, who stood watch while Blackguards hauled boxes of equipment around the room. Just seeing him renewed Blake's anger, and her glower returned when he turned towards them.

"Look who I found."

Cinder sounded so pleased with herself, Blake nearly rolled her eyes. Instead, Adam caught her gaze, and a fresh wave of anger, fear, and hatred rolled through her.

"Alone, I'm guessing," he replied with a smirk she wanted to wipe right off his face. "What happened - ISA didn't believe you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"I don't need to - you being here says enough." When she scowled at the remark, he glanced at Cinder and the rest of his crew. "But I'm sure ISA will be here in a few months, so let's get a move on."

The Blackguards chuckled while Adam motioned for Blake and Yang's escorts to take them closer to the wall of metal.

"Look familiar?" he asked from ahead of them.

When he gestured towards the wall, Blake gave it a closer look. The only noticeable mark on the surface was an indentation in the outline of an ornate key - the key referenced on the maps and throughout the legends. Other than that, it was the most pristine piece of metal she'd ever seen.

Stepping closer, she raised her hand to feel the unnatural chill rising off of the surface. Her brow furrowed when a sense of familiarity wove through her, but she didn't understand the reason until she touched her fingers to the cool, smooth metal and spotted Yang in her field of vision.

Suddenly, she understood, and spun towards Yang as worry raced through her.

"Ah, you catch on fast."

Adam's reply confirmed Blake's fear, and she watched with growing concern as he walked over to Yang. Opening glaring at him, Yang didn't even flinch when two burly guards pulled her arms tight behind her back.

"I know you'd be important." Reaching out, Adam set his hand on Yang's

shoulder and trailed his fingers down her arm. "I just didn't know how."

"Stay - *the hell* - away from her," Blake snarled, though she was in no position to help. Just seeing him so close to Yang raised her hackles, and her adrenaline surged in preparation of rushing to Yang's aid. Adam, however, ignored the threat and kept his focus on Yang.

"I thought I had to keep you alive," he added before tapping her shoulder. "Turns out, I only needed this."

It all made sense now. His possessiveness of her. The way he kept her close. The reason he granted her liberties he gave no one else. *He* needed *her*, not the other way around.

Yang was the key. This entire time - she was the key. It was right there, in her arm, a metal forgotten by the universe, somehow blessed upon her. It made her strong, but it also made her vulnerable.

And, from the confusion in her eyes, she'd had no idea.

"Everyone thought you had to *find* a key," Adam continued while walking over the giant forge. Blake didn't want to follow but a shove in the back prompted her that way.

"Find the key," he scoffed before shoving something towards them. Blake's eyes widened when she saw what it was - a mold in the shape of a key fitting the pattern in the wall.

"Just like destiny - you make your own."

After moving the mold to the end of the forge, Adam walked over to Yang and nodded to the guards, who shoved her to her knees. Blake immediately struggled against the man holding her, and strained even harder when Adam put his hand underneath Yang's chin and forced her to meet his gaze.

She promptly spit in his face.

"Bitch!" he snarled, wiping his eyes before slapping her across the face. Livid now, he waved another guard forward to turn Yang's head away this time.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he sneered before working his fingers underneath the edge of metal connecting Yang's arm to her shoulder. From her pained expression, that wasn't how it was supposed to detach, but Adam didn't care. Once he had a good handhold, he set his feet and pulled.

A low moan slipped through Yang's lips as she struggled to free herself, but with three Blackguards using their full leverage to hold her down, she had no chance. And Blake could do nothing to help. Even though she fought against the man holding her arms, she couldn't break free. Instead, she watched Adam abort his first attempt and resituate his hand for a better grip. Then he wrenched backward as hard as he could, and Yang cried out in pain as her metal arm tore free.

When Adam stepped away holding his prize, the guard holding Yang's head released her, and the silence settling over the room confirmed what Blake currently felt. None of them had seen Yang without her arm before, and something about the soft, useless stump was...demoralizing. And for Yang, who kept her eyes trained on the ground while her chest heaved with emotions, it must be humiliating.

Standing above her, Adam clutched the lifeless piece of metal and glared at her.

"Pathetic," he spit out.

In one fluid motion, Yang leapt to her feet and lunged at him. She already had him by the collar before the guards pulled her off of him, and he stumbled backwards as soon as she was forced to let go.

One of the guards grabbed her arm only to earn an elbow to the face. Another got a knee between the legs that sent him crashing to the ground with a yelp of pain.

"Get ahold of her!" Adam shouted while three more sprinted over to help.

Taking advantage of the temporary chaos, Blake stomped on her guard's foot and broke free of his grasp. Rushing over to help, she grabbed the first Blackguard she got her hands on, turned him by his shoulder and punched him in the face.

That was as far as she got before strong arms wrapped around her waist, lifted her feet off the ground, and threw her away from the fray. She hit the ground and rolled back to her feet, but didn't get much further before someone else kicked her in the side. The resulting pain put sparks of white in her vision, and her arms were pinned behind her before she could even catch her breath.

In the midst of the fray, Cinder sighed and pulled a small device from within

her suit. As soon as she pressed the button, loud, crackling electricity filled the air, and Yang collapsed to the ground in a fit of convulsions.

“Honestly,” Cinder said with a shake of her head. After holding the button for several more seconds, she finally let go, and the sound of static stopped. The Blackguards rushed forward to subdue Yang, which seemed unnecessary now that the energy had been zapped right out of her. Still, one of them grabbed her arm and pinned it behind her back while another got her in a chokehold while she was on her knees.

Once Yang was no longer a threat, Cinder walked over, pulled her black as death arm from beneath her cloak, and hit Yang hard across the face. Yang’s head whipped to the side from the force of the blow, and it took several seconds before she spit blood on the ground and laughed.

“Finally found the courage to do that, huh?”

When Cinder scowled and drew her phaser, Yang laughed again.

“Coward...”

“I’ll show you who’s the coward.”

Cinder pressed the barrel to Yang’s forehead, but Yang didn’t even blink.

“Cinder.”

When Adam shook his head, Yang smiled, and Cinder scowled before reluctantly putting the weapon away.

“Let them watch,” he added before walking to the head of the forge. Now that the danger had passed, he’d regained his swagger and wasted no time holding Yang’s arm above the fire.

“Wish I’d known I only needed this,” he said before dropping Yang’s arm into the flames. “Although you proved quite useful at times...”

The subtle compliment deepened Cinder’s scowl, but Blake couldn’t tear her eyes away from the fire, which flared as if welcoming home an old friend. Before their eyes, Yang’s arm started losing its shape, then its hardness. It grew soft, then even softer, before folding in on itself.

The fingers were the first to liquefy. The wrist quickly followed, and Blake watched in surprise as two different colors emerged. One a dark, dirty steel that fell through the flames and disappeared. The other a light, liquid silver that flowed into the lines of the forge and slid towards the mold at the end.

That liquid silver must be what Adam was after – Valerian steel.

The amount in Yang's arm wasn't much, but just enough. Once every drop had been collected, Adam carefully rotated the mold over to a large vat of water, which hissed and sent billows of steam into the air the instant the mold touched it.

While the hissing continued, Blake's internal timers started ringing. She'd been gone for a long time now, and Sun would be getting antsy for her return. The question was...what could he do to get them out of this?

Glancing around the atrium, Blake counted the Blackguards – fifteen in this room alone, all heavily armed. Plus Adam and Cinder, who weren't to be trifled with. If Sun was the greatest Alliance agent to have ever lived, he couldn't battle his way through this.

Blake wouldn't signal for help. She couldn't let him charge in here guns blazing – doing so was a death sentence. If she and Yang weren't making it out of this, he had to. That meant he had to stay on the ship as long as possible. If it was already over by the time he decided to check, hopefully he would just confirm their deaths and leave. He would know that's what Blake wanted him to do. He would understand that's why she didn't call for help. Hopefully, he would just leave...

Once the hissing fell silent, Adam waited a few more minutes before pulling the mold out of the water and tapping the side. A newly-minted key fell into his hand, and he smiled while holding it up for everyone to see. The Blackguards clapped or whistled, but Blake shared a look with Yang while foreboding swelled in her chest.

“All that searching, for this.”

Taking the key over to the wall, Adam fit it into the indentation and paused. For a brief moment, he surveyed his victory – just a key turn away from him – before turning the lock.

As soon as the key pivoted, a perfect line appeared in the wall, running from floor-to-ceiling. When he turned the key even further, the line expanded enough for him to grab the edge and push it open.

Blake couldn't make out much of the room beyond, but it was already lit, as if opening the door prompted the mountain to welcome back its

rightful owner. Adam had no right to the warm welcome, but he smirked while standing on the cusp of his greatest heist. Before walking through the entryway, however, he turned towards Blake and Yang.

“Bring them,” he instructed the guards. “They deserve to see the end.”

After two Blackguards dragged Yang to her feet, she exchanged a worried glance with Blake. That was all they had time for before they were prodded through the doorway leading into the fabled Valerian steel mines.

Blake didn't know what to expect on the other side, but she couldn't escape the feeling that Adam was right. In one way or another, this was the end.

Chapter 27

The next room in the Valerian mine was colder and smaller than the first, with a ceiling that felt right above their heads rather than towering above. Columns interspersed the space, running from floor to ceiling in sizes both large and small. And every conceivable surface - from the walls to the ceiling to the pillars - was made entirely of smooth, shimmering Valerian steel.

The Blackguards strode into the room as if stacks of the precious metal would be waiting for them. Instead, there was nothing but the chill in the air and an eerie quiet broken only by soft murmurs of surprise or confusion. When Blake saw the wall in front of them, however, she laughed.

"It's never that easy, is it," she told Adam while he stalked over and set his hand on it.

This new foe lacked a conveniently-placed keyhole or a doorway of any kind. Instead, pristine runes ran across the surface - a message from those who belonged here to those who didn't.

"You're *exactly* who the Valerians wanted to keep out," Blake added as something akin to vindication sparked in her chest, along with gratitude for the race who thought of everything. "You're the reason they did so much to seal this place away. They knew monsters like you would show up, and they made sure you'd fail."

Because that's what this was - a failure. There was no forge here. There was no key mold. There wasn't even a keyhole.

There was no moving forward. They weren't the worthy ones chosen by the Valerians, so this was as far as they would get - by design.

That conclusion must have become evident to Adam as well, because he

slammed his fist against the wall before squaring his shoulders and stalking over to Blake. As soon as he reached her, he grabbed her arm and dragged her over to the wall standing between him and his precious prize.

“Read it.”

After trying and failing to free her arm from his grasp, which tightened painfully around her wrist, she scoffed at him.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because if you don’t, you get to watch her die – slowly.”

Adam motioned to Cinder, who smiled and pulled out the device linked to the collar around Yang’s neck.

“Blake, don’t do it.”

Yang hardly shook her head before Cinder pushed the button and the sound of electricity filled the air. Instantly, Yang’s eyes rolled back and she dropped to the ground, her body spasming uncontrollably while a low, pained noise came from the back of Blake’s throat.

“Read it.”

One, two, three seconds passed before Cinder released the button and Yang grew motionless. She was still breathing – Blake could see her breathing – but it was several long seconds before she moved. Even then, her motions were labored and sluggish as she tried to push herself off the ground.

“Blake...” was all she got out, meeting Blake’s gaze with pained red eyes.

Without words, Blake understood what Yang was trying to say – that they were dead anyway. Adam wouldn’t let them walk out of here alive. Either they died now, with the mines still intact, or they helped Adam break in and died after.

“*Read it,*” Adam repeated with a rough shake of Blake’s arm, but she didn’t respond. Instead, tears sprung into her eyes while she looked at Yang and shook her head.

Electricity crackled through the air, and Yang instantly fell into another fit of convulsions. Her head knocked repeatedly against the metal ground, her limbs twitched and spasmed unnaturally, and Cinder held the button even longer.

Four...five...six seconds until the sound disappeared. This time, Yang laid

still for much longer before rolling onto her side, struggling to breathe. Agony was evident in every inch of her, making Blake wonder how much more of that she could physically take. Deathly silence filled the room as many of the Blackguards refused to look anywhere near their fallen commander. Their eyes and postures gave away their discomfort, while Cinder's hungry gaze expressed her desire to finish the job.

"Cinder -"

"Stop!" Blake shouted before Cinder moved. Her tears burned more urgently now, but she waited for Yang to meet her gaze before shaking her head in apology. She knew what Yang wanted her to do, she knew what she *should* do, but she couldn't watch Yang die like that. If she did what Adam said and translated the runes...maybe it would buy them some time.

"Just...stop," she whispered before turning to Adam. "I'll do it."

When he nodded and released her, she moved closer to the wall and resisted the urge to rub her tender wrist. Instead, she blinked away tears and focused on her newest, and possibly last, task.

After a few seconds orienting herself, she discovered it would be the easiest translation yet. Unlike the maps, which had faded to the point of illegible, these runes looked like they'd been carved yesterday. Even though the person leaving the message had the entire wall at their disposal, they'd decided to squish the words together using small, neat letters that read much like the textbooks Blake used to learn the language in the first place.

Placing her fingers on the first symbol, she briefly closed her eyes and apologized to the Valerians for what she was about to do. They wanted to save the universe - a goal she once shared with them. But now...she just wanted another few minutes to try to make it out of here alive.

"To those who wish to enter..." she read aloud, moving her hand across the top line before sliding down to the next. "If you...lack the key..." Moving to the bottom line, she read the last few runes - then read them again - and laughed.

"Go to hell," she said while pointing to each rune in turn. "Or purgatory," she added before turning back to Adam. "You need something else to get through."

From his stunned expression, he hadn't expected this challenge, and that made her irrationally happy. For as smart as he thought he was, the Valerians were smarter. If someone collected all of the maps. If someone figured out how to read them. If someone found the mine. If someone already had a piece of Valerian steel. If someone made it through all of those trials, it *still* wasn't enough.

This place was built for those meant to be here. Everyone else could do as the message said - go to hell.

"You're lying."

"I'm not." Blake waved towards the wall to prove her point. "You can see just as well as I can - there's no keyhole. If there's a way through, they didn't leave instructions for it."

He didn't want to believe her, that much was evident from the look in his eyes, but she was telling the truth. Somehow, he sensed that honesty, and shoved her away from the wall in order to look at it himself. While he searched for another way through, she hurried over to Yang and knelt by her side.

"Are you ok?" she whispered, touching Yang's cheek before searching for visible injuries.

"I think so..." Yang murmured in return. She leaned into Blake's touch, but it looked like that movement alone was nearly too much to bear. For as strong as she was, she'd reached her limit...she couldn't take much more of this punishment.

"Just try to rest," Blake whispered, gently stroking Yang's hair as her eyes slid shut. While Yang regained whatever energy she could, Blake scoured the room for any hope of escape.

Blackguards crowded the space, muttering softly amongst themselves while waiting for orders. Cinder glowered from nearby, looking more than ready to finish what she started. And Adam stared at the wall for several more minutes before slamming his fist against it and turning around.

"There has to be another entrance somewhere - find it. I don't care if you have to blow up every one of those mountains in the process."

While the Blackguards rushed off to do as told, a spark of hope flickered in Blake's chest. With fewer people in the room, maybe they could fight their

way out. Assuming Yang could walk. And assuming Blake could take out Adam and Cinder, who remained behind.

That hope disappeared when Cinder stalked over them.

“Why don’t you stay here.” Grabbing Yang by the arm, Cinder roughly dragged her to the side and chained her to one of the metal columns in the room. “Let’s see you break through that,” Cinder added with a smirk before walking away.

Anyone looking at Yang right now could see that she wasn’t in any condition to attempt an escape. Yet Cinder locked her to the column while leaving Blake unchained and unsupervised.

It had never been more obvious that they weren’t afraid of her in the slightest. Without a weapon, they considered her less of a threat than an injured Yang with only one arm. They continued to underestimate her.

Or maybe she continued to overestimate herself. Because what had she accomplished so far? Besides having her identity blown, forcing Yang to save her life, getting Ret killed – what had she accomplished besides hurting the people she cared about?

Yang needed Blake to get them out of this alive. After all those times she’d saved Blake’s life, putting her life at risk in the process, *she* needed *Blake’s* help. And what had Blake managed to do?

She *almost* got Yang off of the Inferno. She *almost* saved Yang’s life.

“I’m sorry...” Running her hand across Yang’s cheek, seeing and feeling how broken the once-strong Blackguard was – because of her – Blake sniffled and blinked away the tears building in her eyes. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s not your fault...”

As much as Blake wished Yang’s words were true, they weren’t. She deserved the blame. She deserved the guilt. She was the one who jumped at the opportunity to take down the Blackguards. She was the one who thought that being an Alliance agent granted her moral superiority. She was the one who wholeheartedly believed that the choice between good and evil was easy – that everyone could choose to be good if they wanted to.

Her naivety came with consequences. She didn’t mind personally paying the price, but Yang didn’t deserve to die with her – *because* of her. Unfortunately,

it was too late to fix her mistakes. Now, all she could do was to watch Adam and Cinder discuss the last obstacle standing in their path, and wait for them to decide when her time was up.

“Hey,” Yang whispered before long, her soft voice drawing Blake’s gaze back to her. “Remember when I told you how I lost my arm?”

“Yes...”

“I lied.” When Blake’s brow furrowed, Yang looked up at her with a sad, wavering smile. “Ruby wasn’t the one crying...I was.”

After pausing to let the explanation sink in, Yang drew in a long, shaky breath before letting it out in one quick exhale.

“I was so scared of dying then, but...I’m not anymore.”

In Yang’s red eyes, Blake saw such calm, unfiltered acceptance that her tears immediately renewed. This wasn’t the time for Yang to accept death. This wasn’t the time for her to give up. She had to keep fighting. She had to hold on to that survivor’s spirit for a little longer, long enough for the two of them to find a way out of this.

“We’re not going to die here,” Blake said, even though she knew it wasn’t true. Yang knew it was a lie too, as she reached up and gently wiped a tear from Blake’s cheek.

“It’s ok though.” Yang’s reassurance prompted another tear to fall, and more threatened to spill over. “I’m just...really glad I met you. You reminded me what it was like...to trust someone...and care for someone other than myself.”

Was that what this moment boiled down to? Their final goodbyes...with death on the not-so-distant horizon? Their last chance to admit how they felt about one another...what they meant to one another?

“I’m really glad I met you too...”

Mustering a weak smile, Blake intertwined her fingers with Yang’s and kissed the top of Yang’s hand. When Yang managed a small smile and leaned into her side, she sighed and stared at the wall across from them.

Centuries must have passed since the last Valerian carved those words, leaving behind a place of wonder, sorrow, and sacrifice. This cold, metal room might mark the end of Blake and Yang’s story – just as it had for the

Valerians - but they could take some solace knowing that Adam couldn't find a way inside.

"Does it really say go to hell?" Yang whispered after a few seconds of silence, and Blake nodded.

"It does."

When Yang made a soft noise of amusement, Blake smiled at the runes delivering that message and rested her head on Yang's shoulder. Yang's warmth burned brightly against the chill of the room, and Blake sighed while savoring as much of the feeling as possible. In doing so, her eyes unfocused on the words across from her - then refocused when she noticed something she hadn't seen before.

There was another keyhole, concealed in the runes themselves. While unnoticeable from up close, she could see it from afar - the same star pattern that led them here. The key would be no larger than a pendant, but it fit where the corners of the runes touched from one line down to the next.

While Adam searched for the answer that was right in front of him, Blake suppressed a smile. The Valerians were clever. They made the situation look impossible - insurmountable - but it wasn't. All someone needed was what the legends said all along - the key.

If only Blake and Yang's situation was similar...if only a simple key would get themselves out of this mess...

Or maybe a distraction.

Sitting taller, Blake looked more intently around the room, which she might have wrongly assumed to be her final resting place.

Maybe insurmountable odds weren't so insurmountable. Maybe up close, the situation looked dire. Maybe in this room, their death was already written. But if she took a step back and looked at every possible angle, what did she see?

The Blackguards still treated Yang with the respect she'd earned through years of being their leader. She was the one who trained them. She was the one who led them through countless battles. She was the one who saved their lives just as she'd saved Blake's. For that, she'd earned their loyalty, and that loyalty didn't die so easily.

The Blackguards followed Cinder and Adam out of fear, but if the two of them were out of the picture...

The most Blake could hope for was hesitation. If they hesitated, Yang had a chance of making them stand down. If Adam and Cinder were gone, they needed a new leader...and that leader would be Yang.

Surviving that battle might be next to impossible, but what other option was there? It was a risk Blake was willing to take. More importantly, it was a sacrifice she was willing to make.

"Blake..." Yang whispered, growing more alert as a plan solidified in Blake's mind. "I know what you're thinking. Don't do it."

Tearing her gaze away from Adam and Cinder, she gave Yang a small smile.

"You know I'm not good at following orders..."

Before Yang protested, Blake stood up and glanced into the main atrium while pretending to stretch her legs. Most of the Blackguards were distracted by their search for another entrance to the mines; it would take them a few seconds to figure out what was happening and rush to help. Now the only question was...what kind of distraction could she cause?

That question wasn't answered by her, but by a loud, low rumble in the distance followed by shouts from the Blackguards outside.

"What was that?" Cinder asked and, the instant she turned towards the sound, Blake struck.

Grabbing Cinder by the wrist, Blake jerked her forward while landing a hook to her eye. The resulting blow knocked her off balance with a cry of pain, but she reached for her phaser while steadying herself.

Cinder was fast, but Blake had the element of surprise. As soon as the weapon left the holster, she kicked Cinder's hand and sent the phaser skittering across the ground. Knowing she only had seconds before Adam arrived to help, she barreled into Cinder with her shoulder lowered, sending the woman into one of the metal columns with a crack and whoosh of air leaving her lungs. In the momentary stun that followed, Blake stole the knife from Cinder's side and plunged it into her thigh.

When Cinder screamed, reaching for her leg while the blood began to flow, Blake tore the blade free and dove to the side right as Adam's fist hurtled past

her head. She hadn't thought much further than this, but she didn't have time to as Adam drew his phaser and aimed at her. He didn't realize where he stood though, and Yang wasted no time kicking his legs out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor.

That was all the time Blake needed, as she scrambled to her feet and rushed him with her knife ready. After quickly regaining his own feet, he raised an arm to block the blade as she slashed towards his neck, then followed up with a menacing kick that sent her skittering out of the way.

Her adrenaline was pumping, her heart racing, but this time she had nothing to lose. And, with nothing to lose, she had no reason to be afraid of him anymore. So when he expected her to pause and regroup, like they'd both been trained, she charged him instead.

In the brief second he was caught off guard, she switched the knife between her hands and stabbed towards his shoulder. He grabbed her wrist and smirked, completely unaware that she'd already dropped the blade from her hand.

Tracking its fall, she brought her knee up at the perfect time, connected with the handle, and drove it into his leg. A breath of air instantly left his lungs - a brief opportunity she used to pull her arm free, spin, and land a full-force kick right onto the hilt, driving the knife deeper into his leg while he howled in pain.

Blood seeped through his armor as he stumbled backward and touched the handle, but she didn't give him a chance to recover. Leaping towards him, she landed a fist in his side before grabbing the blade and tearing it out of him. Drops of red sprayed across the ground as he clutched his leg and staggered to the side. In that moment of weakness, she spun the knife in her hand and prepared another attack - only to spot movement out of the corner of her eye.

With one hand pressed to the wound in her thigh, Cinder hobbled towards the phaser on the ground nearby. Recognizing the more immediate threat, Blake turned away from Adam, took a steadying breath, drew her arm back, and hurled the knife across the room.

The blade buried into the soft skin of Cinder's neck and sent her to the ground with a muffled cry of pain, clutching her neck as the blood seeped between her fingers.

“Blake!”

Before Blake could react to Yang’s warning, Adam got his arm around her neck and yanked her backward. His arm instantly cut off her airway and kept tightening, lifting her feet off the ground while depriving her of oxygen.

“I should’ve...finished this the first time...” he hissed while pulling tighter. She clawed at his arm and face and tried to kick at him – anything to free herself – but his hold never loosened, and her mind began screaming for air.

Desperation growing, Blake’s gaze landed upon Yang, who was powerless to help. Anger and horror filled her red eyes, but it was the stillness to them that caught Blake’s attention even as her mind panicked.

When Yang’s gaze pointedly dropped towards Adam’s hip, Blake lowered her hand and touched the top of something hard and metal.

His knife. It was right there. If he lowered her just an inch...she could reach it.

With what consciousness she had left, she slowed her struggles. Her brain screamed at her to keep fighting, but she loosened her limbs and clawed less fervently at his arm. She gave up, and when he sensed that she was about to go under, he lowered her to the ground so he could finish the job.

Dropping her arm to her side, she stretched her fingers as far as she could while fighting the darkening of her vision and mind. Just a little further and she could grab it. Just a little further.

The instant she felt cold metal under her fingertips, she pulled the knife from its sheath and slammed it back into his leg. While he roared in pain, his grip loosened just enough for her to take a deep breath, tear out the blade, and stab him again. And again.

On the fourth blow, he finally let go and she dropped to the ground, uncontrollably coughing while also trying to draw in deep breaths. She had to get up – the fight wasn’t over. She had to prepare for his counterattack, but she could hardly think.

“Blake, get up.” Hearing the panic in Yang’s voice, she knew she didn’t have much time, but everything was hazy and slow as she gasped for air. “Blake, get up. *Please* get up.”

She had to get up. She knew she had to get up. She felt Adam’s presence

behind her, heard him trying to regain his feet, and knew that if she didn't end this, he would.

She would end this.

With the bloody knife still clutched in one hand, she rushed her body back into action. Pushing herself to her feet and turning around, finding Adam on the ground behind her, clutching his leg while blood gushed through his fingers.

The loathing in his eyes matched the loathing she felt for him. And she knew, if the situations were reversed, he would show no mercy. So she tightened her grip around the knife, kept a close eye on his hands, and stepped towards him.

No sooner had she taken that step did she hear the unmistakable clinking of metal bouncing across the floor. Before she caught a glimpse of whatever it was, an explosion tore through the small room, knocking her to the ground and sending the knife sliding away from her.

Disoriented and confused, she pushed herself to her hands and knees and tried to figure out what just happened. Her ears were ringing. Her vision was swimming. Then the smell of knockout gas stung her nose.

Dark figures rushed into the room - too many and too fast for her to count. Spotting Yang not far away, she tried to crawl towards her. Unconsciousness pulled at her mind, making her movements sluggish, but she had to get there. She had to protect Yang.

But she was too slow. One of the figures made it to Yang first. They knelt by Yang's side, they touched her shoulder.

Blake could do nothing. The last thing she heard was Yang's voice.

A soft, surprised, "Ruby?"

Chapter 28

Consciousness returned to Blake with such a slow, deliberate softness that at first she thought she'd only been dreaming. When she opened her eyes and saw an unfamiliar white ceiling above her, however, her adrenaline returned in a flash.

Instinct told her to get out of there - wherever 'there' was - but trying to move revealed that her wrist was handcuffed to the railing of the bed. The physical restraint only amplified her budding panic, as she gave several forceful tugs at the cuffs before groaning from the effort.

Her ribs hurt like hell, along with every other muscle in her body. Her neck burned, but when she raised her free hand to touch the sensitive skin, she discovered that her cuts had been cleaned and bandaged. A cooling ointment had also been put on her neck - probably the only reason it didn't hurt as much as the first time.

Someone had looked over her wounds and patched her up but, considering she had no idea where she was or how she got here, she wasn't about to wait around for them to come back. She had to find Yang.

Looking around the room, which appeared to be a standard clinic room, she found nothing useful within reach. Quickly giving up the idea of picking the lock, she grabbed the metal chain connecting the ends of the cuffs and pulled towards her to see which would give first - the cuffs or the bed railing. When the railing, which was nothing more than a thin metal bar, creaked towards her, she had her answer.

If she could break the railing away from the bed, the other end of the cuffs would slide free.

So she pushed, then pulled, then pushed, then pulled, feeling the railing bend a little further each time. As her efforts weakened the metal, she fell into a quick rhythm and used her ears to search for life outside the room.

There were voices – several people talking nearby – and footsteps, and all the sounds of a ship in flight. After passing out at the entrance of the Valerian mines, she must have been moved onto this ship and taken back to orbit. The thought of being trapped in space, again, set her even more on edge, and she pulled harder at the railing keeping her here.

She was close to freedom, maybe only a minute away, when footsteps approached the room. Those footsteps were followed by a few muffled words before the door opened.

For a split second, she thought her worst fear would come true – that Adam or Cinder would be standing in the doorway, leering at her before finishing what they started. Instead, it was a girl around her age with long, white hair and icy-blue eyes.

For a moment, they just stared at each other. Then the young woman looked at the bed railing and shook her head.

“Well, you’re feisty, aren’t you?”

“Who are you?” Blake asked as soon as the girl stepped into the room. “Where am I? Where’s Yang?”

“My name is Weiss Schnee. You’re on the Star Dust, my personal ship. And Yang’s fine. The doctor already saw her and patched her up. She’ll make a full recovery.”

Hearing that Yang would be fine was a breath of relief that disappeared when Blake realized she had no reason to believe the words of a stranger.

“I want to see her.” She had to. She couldn’t believe it otherwise. “I want to see her right now.”

When she pulled the railing towards her one more time, bringing it that much closer to snapping off, the girl raised a hand to stop her.

“I’d advise against that, Lieutenant. I understand that you’re confused and... impatient...but there will be repercussions if you do something hasty.”

Stunned by the response, Blake released the railing and leaned away from it.

“How do you know who I am?”

“That’s...a long story,” Weiss replied with a shake of her head. “In the interest of calming your nerves, would you like to see Yang first?”

“Yes.”

That was the *only* thing Blake wanted right now.

“Ok.” When Weiss motioned one hand, the guard who’d been standing just outside walked into the room. “We’ll undo the cuffs now, but please don’t do anything rash. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I won’t,” Blake promised before watching the young man unlock the cuffs. His quick step away from her made her feel bad, so she slowly moved her hand to her side to avoid startling him.

She didn’t want to hurt anyone, but she also didn’t know who these people were. If, by chance, they were friendly, she would do what they asked. If they weren’t, she needed them to show her where Yang was before she did anything.

“Do you think you can walk?” Weiss asked, and Blake nodded before sliding off of the bed. Even though her muscles ached horribly, she was well enough to walk on her own - a blessing should she need to fight again.

“Please follow me,” Weiss added before stepping into the hall and motioning Blake after her. Two more guards joined them as soon as they left the room, and the one from earlier brought up the rear while Blake walked beside Weiss.

The difference between this ship and the Inferno was night and day. Whereas the Inferno was built for battle and inhabited by a rough, grizzled crew, the Star Dust was built for extravagance. From appearance alone, no expense had been spared in its construction, and the source of that wealth probably hadn’t come in the form of crates filled with drugs and weapons. Whoever Weiss was, she had money - *real* money. This was made all the more evident by the white-armored guards patrolling the halls.

“Who are you again?”

“Weiss Schnee,” she repeated before sending Blake a concerned glance. “The doctor said you could have a concussion - are you feeling well?”

“I’m fine. I’m just...”

Confused was the best answer, but Blake shook her head and kept that to herself. The last thing she remembered was the gas grenade in the mine. If these were the people behind that grenade, she had to keep her wits about her.

“Where are we going?” she asked instead, making note of every turn in case she had to navigate on her own.

“The bridge. Yang woke up a little while ago – they’ll meet us there.”

Weiss answered with such calm confidence, Blake wanted to believe every word. That feeling only grew when they stepped into a lift and rode to the top of the ship. In the cramped quarters, the guards watched her every move, so she did her best not to move at all. The last thing she wanted was to sneeze and send them scrambling for their phasers.

As soon as the lift opened and the bridge appeared, she forgot all about them and started running.

Weiss was telling the truth. Yang was there, sitting near one of the hologram panels in the center of the bridge. She caught sight of Blake the moment they were in the same room, but had hardly pushed herself to her feet before Blake crashed into her for a hug.

“Thank god...” Blake mumbled while holding Yang close. “Are you ok?”

Before Yang could respond, Blake pulled away and looked her up and down for injuries. Her prosthetic arm was still missing, but where it once connected was much less inflamed than yesterday. The gash on her cheek had been cleaned and stitched up, as had the cuts along her arm.

Knowing those surface wounds couldn’t be the extent of the damage, Blake pulled up Yang’s shirt and found more bandages underneath.

“Hey now,” Yang laughed while gently swatting Blake’s hand away. “We’re in public.”

“Now you’re modest?” Blake replied before hugging Yang again, then pulling her into a kiss.

The moment their lips met, Blake’s heart awakened and her mind hummed with relief. After believing she’d never experience this again, she wanted to relish every second of it. The softness of Yang’s skin, the hesitancy of her touch that grew bolder as the kiss continued, the warmth of her aura that washed over Blake like a ray of sunshine...

Regardless of where they were, Blake was content to lose herself in this moment and forget everything that had happened. Yang, however, broke away from the kiss when someone cleared their throat. After glancing to the side,

she smiled and turned back to Blake with clear, happy lilac eyes.

“I need to introduce you to someone special,” she said before motioning towards a young girl Blake hadn’t noticed until then. “Blake, this is my sister, Ruby.”

When Blake gave Yang a stunned look, she beamed and nodded. She’d never looked happier, and that filled Blake’s heart with joy as she turned towards the young brunette standing nearby. Though not as young as in the photograph Yang shared, Ruby had the same silver eyes and easy smile that Blake remembered above all else. In person, she was even more to behold, with her radiant and infectious energy shining through in droves.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Blake said once she remembered her manners, hastily extending her hand only for Ruby to giggle while shaking it.

“It’s nice to meet you too. I’ve heard a *lot* about you.”

“You...have?”

“On the walk over here! ‘Where’s Blake? When can I see Blake? Is Blake ok? I want to see her.’” This time, Ruby laughed and shook her head at Yang. “She’s here, see? Safe and sound, just like I promised.”

“I believed you.” Still smiling, Yang reached over and pulled Ruby into a giant hug. “I still can’t believe it’s you though.”

“It is,” Ruby replied before sighing and wrapping both arms around Yang’s shoulders.

The two of them looked content to stay like that for a while, so Blake stepped back and smiled. Her suspicion and uncertainty from moments earlier had disappeared. Even though she didn’t know who these people were, it didn’t matter anymore. If Ruby held any sway on this ship, and it appeared that she did, then they were finally safe. At least, they were safe for now.

“I have someone for you to meet too.” Finally pulling away from the hug, Ruby waved Weiss over to her. “This is Weiss,” she explained while Weiss straightened her shoulders and gave Yang a nod. “She helped me find you.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Weiss added while extending her hand, but Yang just stared at the gesture before meeting Weiss’ gaze.

“You’ve been taking care of her?”

“Oh, well -” Glancing at Ruby, Weiss looked at a loss for how to respond.

“I’d say that...we’ve been taking care of each other.”

When Weiss nodded at the answer, satisfied with how it sounded, Yang finally reached for her hand. Instead of shaking hands, however, she pulled Weiss into a hug, which surprised Weiss just as much as Blake.

“Thank you,” Yang whispered, and Weiss quickly relaxed before softly patting Yang’s back.

“The pleasure was all mine, believe me.”

As they separated and shared a smile, Blake looked around the bridge and realized that someone was missing.

“Wait...where’s Sun?”

“I assume you mean the blonde-haired boy you were traveling with,” Weiss replied. “He should be here soon. I heard he was being...difficult.”

In one word, Blake’s concern returned.

“He doesn’t mean any harm.” Looking between Weiss and Ruby, she silently begged them to believe her while also imagining what kind of trouble Sun might be getting into. “If you just let me talk to him, I can calm him down.”

“That’s not the type of difficult I meant.”

When Weiss nodded over Blake’s shoulder, Blake spun around only to feel relief rush through her veins. The sling around Sun’s arm suggested he’d sustained some injuries during the fray, but he was walking just fine. And talking just fine.

“But what does *that* do?” he asked the young woman escorting him onto the bridge, pointing at a random piece of machinery nearby.

“It reduces cooldown time,” she answered with a heavy sigh. “And no, I don’t know how. You’ll have to talk to an engineer for that.”

“Do you have an engineer around?”

When the young woman sighed again, Blake couldn’t help but laugh. She’d never been so happy to see him, and to see him behaving just like normal.

“Sun,” she called out. The moment he saw her, he grinned.

“There you are.” Grin still in place, he walked over and pulled her into a hug. “They kept saying I could see you later,” he explained while stepping away.

“So I told them I’d keep asking questions until I did.”

“I’m sure they were thrilled about that.”

“Never underestimate the power of sheer annoyance,” he replied before leaning closer and lowering his voice. “Plus, I think this one likes me.”

When he winked and motioned off to his left, Blake rolled her eyes and playfully shoved his shoulder. He had more to say than that, but as soon as his gaze fell upon Yang, he closed his mouth and fell silent. Picking up on the sudden quiet, Yang cleared her throat and shuffled her feet, looking at a loss for what to say to the boy she once threw off of a cliff.

“Sun.” Determined to smooth the introduction, Blake grabbed his elbow and led him closer. “This is Yang. Yang, this is Sun - my closest and most annoying friend.”

Sun laughed at the introduction, but Yang’s brow rose in surprise.

“And most handsome friend,” he added. When he extended his hand, however, Yang just looked at it before sending him a questioning look, as if unsure that he actually wanted to shake hands with her.

“Don’t worry - I’m unarmed.”

Blake cringed at the joke, which was in poor taste considering what Yang just went through, but Yang blinked. After a few seconds, however, a smile crept onto her lips, and she reached out to shake his hand.

“Best friend, huh?” she asked before sending a look Blake’s way. “No wonder she was so upset I tossed you off that cliff.”

“No way.” Releasing Yang’s hand, Sun turned towards Blake with wide eyes. “You were upset over *me*?”

“No,” Blake scoffed, but Yang moved closer to her side and smiled.

“Very.”

“I wish I got to see that. Blake Belladonna...crying over me.”

“I didn’t cry.”

“There were *definitely* tears,” Yang added, and Blake sighed.

If she was capable of feeling anything other than relief and happiness right now, she might be annoyed. Instead, she couldn’t believe this was happening. Yang was here. Sun was here. *Ruby* was here. But...

“Where are Adam and Cinder?”

“In holding cells,” Weiss replied with a nonchalant wave.

“Don’t worry,” Ruby added when Blake opened her mouth to voice her

concerns. “He’ll be lucky if he ever walks again, and she’s still kinda fighting for her life. They’re in no shape to do *anything* for a long time.”

The news was relieving, in a way, but Blake couldn’t escape some disappointment that they were still alive at all. At least they were locked away for now, and she would take Ruby’s word that they were in no shape to attempt an escape anytime soon.

“And the rest of the Blackguards?” she asked.

“They split. Ship took off right when we got there.”

“You’re kidding,” Yang said, but Ruby shook her head.

“They even left a bunch of the crew behind. We rounded up some *pissed off* people - they’re in holding too.”

“Damn...” Yang breathed out. Blake felt equally stunned...until she connected the dots.

Ret was the tipping point. Emerald finally had enough of being underestimated, and she struck while Adam and Cinder were preoccupied.

Somehow, Blake wasn’t upset by that unexpected news. Even though some of the Blackguards slipped away, they were fragmented and leaderless. It would take time for them to regroup and become anything near as dangerous as they once were, if that was even Emerald’s plan. Besides, Blake couldn’t wait for Adam to hear that his crew stole his ship and deserted him.

“So...now that we’re all together...can someone explain what happened?”

When Yang looked at Weiss then Ruby, for answers, the two of them shared a look. Then Ruby sighed and motioned for Yang to sit on one of the benches along the back half of the bridge.

“I’ve been looking for you since the attack,” Ruby explained, sitting beside Yang and reaching out to hold her hand. “I ended up stuck on Atlas. Thought I’d be stuck there forever, but then I met Weiss, and she offered to help me look for you. We’ve been traveling the universe ever since.”

“Seriously?” Yang whispered, and Ruby nodded before continuing.

“It wasn’t hard to pick up sightings of you; the hard part was figuring out which ones were real. We chased clues everywhere - Diacrite, Mebbillon, Nothao - but they were dead ends. Just...someone leaving fake bread crumbs to string us along.”

Ruby sighed at the memory and turned to Weiss, who offered a small smile and gently squeezed Ruby's shoulder. From that interaction alone, Blake could practically feel the disappointment they'd experienced while chasing Yang across the galaxy.

"Someone was spreading fake information about me?" Yang asked, her soft tone suggesting she didn't want to believe it was true. When Ruby nodded, however, she clenched her jaw and stood up.

"The hold's three levels down, yeah?" she asked, but Blake grabbed her arm to keep her from going anywhere. "That bastard," she muttered instead while reluctantly sitting back down. "If I ever see him again, I'm tearing him apart with my bare...hand." After motioning with her good arm, she sighed and let her shoulders droop. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault." Ruby shook her head and patted Yang's arm. "We eventually figured out that someone was leading us on, we just couldn't figure out who."

"Then...how did you find me?"

"Sheer luck," Ruby replied with a relieved smile and glance at Weiss. "We were on Icion and saw that ISA had a bulletin out for me. Almost wrote it off as a trap, then I saw the message, and I knew. I knew only you would write about a skive."

"But...I didn't put out any bulletin..." When Yang looked at Sun, he stared at the floor and refused to make eye contact, so she turned to Blake next. "You did that?"

"Um, yes," Blake admitted before hurrying to explain. "I was only trying to help. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but -"

Any worry she had about Yang being upset disappeared when Yang stood up and hugged her.

"Thank you," Yang whispered in her ear before kissing her temple and pulling away. "You have no idea what that means to me..."

"And me," Ruby added, smiling when Blake turned her way. "I knew that message had to be from Yang somehow, so I called. ISA said the person who entered the bulletin was off base, so...we tracked him down."

When she gestured at Sun, he grinned.

“Imagine my surprise when this huge ship shows up out of nowhere and all these commandos come sprinting at me. But I charmed them into helping.”

“He told us what you went to do,” Weiss explained with a nod towards Blake. “We figured we had the firepower to get both of you out of there. So...”

Trailing off, she waved one hand as if to say ‘and here we are.’

Having heard the full story, Blake had no idea how to respond. If Weiss and Ruby hadn’t shown up when they did, Blake and Yang faced the very real possibility of fighting their way through the remaining Blackguards. Instead, they’d been saved by something as simple as putting out an Alliance bulletin weeks ago.

“Wow...” Yang said, clearly drawing the same conclusions.

“Wow is right,” Ruby agreed, fiddling with her necklace while her knee bounced up and down. “I don’t even know how it all worked out - I’m just glad it did. Although it looked like you had things handled.”

She nodded at Blake with the compliment, but Blake was too distracted by the pendant on her necklace to come up with a humble response.

“Thank you...and that’s...that’s an interesting necklace.”

“Oh. Thanks. It was my mom’s.”

When Ruby held it up for Blake to see, shock and dismay rushed through every inch of her mind.

Suddenly, she understood. Ruby’s affinity for metal. Her influence in crafting Yang’s arm. Her silver eyes. And the star-shaped, liquid-silver pendant hanging around her neck.

“It’s...very pretty.”

Too stunned to say more than that, Blake simply watched Ruby smile down at the key before slipping it underneath her shirt. Did she have any idea what it was? Did she know its purpose? Did she know *her* purpose? Or was it simply an heirloom from her mother?

This wasn’t the time for those questions. This was the time for reunions - most importantly, between Yang and her sister.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Yang whispered before biting her lip when it quivered. “I’m...I’m really sorry...” she choked out as her emotions grew. “I...I was trying to find you, and - Adam - he said he’d help, but so much

happened..."

Seeing Yang so close to tears tugged at Blake's heart, and she set her hand on Yang's back while Ruby shook her head.

"It's ok, Yang."

"But -"

"I know who you are, Yang," Ruby interrupted with a small smile. "Whatever you had to do, I don't care. I'm just happy to have you back."

When Ruby threw her arms around Yang's neck for another hug, it took several seconds before Yang relaxed into the embrace. Once she did, however, Blake's heart warmed.

Now she understood why Yang wanted a hug so badly - Ruby gave them frequently and freely. It was a simple gesture of love and, in Ruby's case, that love was unconditional.

It was exactly what Yang needed.

"Ma'am?" Looking woefully apologetic for interrupting, a member of the crew extended a small video screen to Weiss. "This just came in."

When Weiss frowned at whatever she read on the screen, Blake's worry returned.

"We have a bit of a problem." Looking up, she first met Ruby's gaze before turning towards Yang. "ISA just put a massive bounty on you - ten million credits. Another ten for Cinder, and twenty-five for Adam."

"Damn," Sun breathed out while Blake closed her eyes and shook her head.

Of course Command finally decided to act, and of course they acted through bounties. What more did she expect? They were the leaders of the largest police force in the galaxy, tasked with protecting dozens of planets, and their ultimate solution was to put out a price on someone's head.

"I guess that rules out 'riding peacefully into the sunset...'" Yang sighed.

"Not necessarily." After handing the screen to Ruby, Weiss motioned towards the space through the window before them. "ISA's reach is fairly limited beyond its member planets, and plenty still reside far outside of their domain."

"But ten mil?" Sun said. "Every bounty hunter in existence will go after that."

“We can turn in the other two,” Ruby suggested. “Then say Yang died in the fight.”

“They’ll ask for proof of death,” Weiss pointed out.

“Say we don’t have any. She fell in a furnace or something. Nothing left.”

“That could work...” Weiss mused, nodding along with the idea. “Then ISA cancels the bounty, and we only need to create a new identity and get her to the other side of the universe.”

“Right! We just have to hope they believe us and cancel the bounty.”

“And that someone doesn’t try to find her anyway,” Sun added, to which Ruby nodded.

“So we turn in the other two, come up with a convincing lie, and beat it out of there.”

“But what if someone spots her or...” Weiss’ gaze slid to the other crew members in the room before clearing her throat. “Or slips up?”

“Then we just beat it out of there.”

“Guys.” When Yang cut into the conversation, everyone turned her way, and Blake immediately recognized the look in her eyes.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do,” she said, carefully choosing her words. “I really do, but...” After a long pause, she sighed and shook her head. “I’m so tired of running...”

That was all she needed to say, and the rest of them understood what would happen next. Ruby and Weiss shared a glance at the change in plans, but Blake didn’t turn away from Yang.

“If you’re sure,” she said, clutching Yang’s hand and holding her gaze. “Because you know I would...”

“I know,” Yang replied before Blake started listing everything she would do for her. “And I’m sure. I don’t want to run anymore. I just...want to face the music and move on...”

In the silence that followed, Blake had no idea what to say or do, or even what she *wanted* to say or do. The thought of surrendering Yang to ISA scared her, especially when their futures felt so inescapably connected, but spending the rest of their lives looking over their shoulders didn’t sound great either.

She wanted a third option, one that let them put the past behind them sooner

rather than later. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of one. Judging by the expressions of those around her, no one else had a solution either.

"Perran?" Weiss eventually called out, and one of the pilots spun around in his chair.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

Before saying anything more, she glanced at Ruby, who nodded, and gave Yang one last look. If Yang felt any uncertainty, she didn't show it through her nod, and Weiss didn't question the decision any more than Ruby did.

"Chart a course to the nearest Alliance planet, and get me in contact with whoever's in charge there."

"Yes, Ma'am."

While the crew hurried to fulfill their orders, Blake snuck her hand into Yang's and squeezed. The last thing she wanted to do was put Yang's life in the hands of Command, but this was Yang's decision, and Yang's alone.

"You know I'll be right there with you, right?" Blake whispered, and Yang smiled.

"I wouldn't want it any other way."

Blake's heart fluttered at the response, and she let out a shaky exhale before attempting a smile in return. She didn't know what came next, but she would support Yang through whatever it may be. If there was a light at the end of this tunnel, they would reach it. It might just be further away than she hoped...

Chapter 29

“I should’ve died.”

Deathly quiet filled the council room after the words, and Sun shifted in his seat before continuing.

“I knew it was stupid to sneak around, but I just wanted...” After glancing Blake’s way, he sighed and shook his head. “I just wanted to see the ship take off. But I got caught and...I should’ve died.”

“Can you elaborate?” the overseer asked, directing the flow of testimony as he had over the past few days.

“Cinder Fall was going to kill me.”

Sun’s answer was so blunt and certain that the spectators in the room murmured amongst themselves before the overseer raised his hand for quiet.

“How can you be sure about that?”

“Because she said she was going to. And...” After briefly trailing off, Sun shook his head and refocused. “I could see it in her eyes and hear it in her voice - she *wanted* to kill me, and nothing would stop her.”

From his tone and posture, he believed the words, and he believed that his brush with death had been real. That somber, poignant silence laid over the room for several seconds before the overseer prodded him forward.

“What happened next?”

“Yang showed up,” Sun explained, settling into the rest of his story. “And she took over. She roughed me up a bit - gave me a couple good hits - then pulled a knife.” Thinking back on that moment, which Blake remembered like yesterday, he shook his head and chuckled. “I thought I was a goner. Here was this badass girl with a knife about to send me to my maker, but...she didn’t.”

“She didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Sun repeated before smiling at Yang, who sat at the front of the room next to the representative tasked with her defense. “Because the knife wasn’t real.”

He paused to let that information sink in, but the onlookers seemed just as slow to grasp it as Blake had been. A fake knife? What criminal carried a fake knife...?

“It *looked* real, but it wasn’t,” Sun hurried on, his words spilling out faster now. “It was like the ones you give kids so they don’t hurt themselves - the kind that collapses into the handle. She nailed me in the side with it, but I didn’t even understand what happened before she grabbed my shoulder and shoved me off the cliff. The water was a good hundred feet below, but I landed without a scratch, swam to shore, and got the hell out of there.”

“You were unharmed?” the overseer asked.

“I was a little roughed up, but nothing serious. Ended up with a few bruises and an awesome story to tell.”

“Then, in your opinion, Miss Xiao Long saved your life?”

“That’s not my opinion,” Sun replied plainly. “That’s a fact. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for her. I owe her my life.”

While Sun beamed at Yang with the statement, Yang shifted in her seat when faced with such open gratitude. She believed that he saved her life just as much as she saved his, which might be true. But she was the one on trial today, and she was the one who needed his testimony.

“Thank you, Mr. Wukong. That will be all.”

“No problem.”

With his time on the stand finished, Sun hopped out of his seat and headed towards the exit. Before he left the room, Blake caught his gaze and mouthed a sincere ‘thank you.’ Even though he was going through his own drama with ISA right now, he’d insisted on testifying on Yang’s behalf. For that, and many other reasons, Blake would forever be grateful.

“We’ll take a short break now,” the overseer said once Sun left the room. “And reconvene at two.”

After a long morning filled with testimonies from across the universe, many

of the onlookers gladly stood and stretched their legs. Blake, however, watched Yang, who kept her gaze on the overseer while he jotted notes from Sun's story.

"We're going to grab lunch," Weiss spoke up from beside her. "Would you like anything?"

"No, thank you."

When Blake shook her head and mustered a fleeting smile, Weiss nodded and moved towards the end of their row of seats. Before following, Ruby smiled and gently touched Blake's shoulder - a subtle sign of support that meant more than Ruby likely knew.

Ever since arriving on Icion, Blake had been a bundle of anxiety. Being separated from Yang, who'd been immediately taken into ISA custody, didn't help. Neither did the constant speculation about the outcome of this trial, which could fall anywhere between wonderful to crushingly horrible. The only consolation was that they would have an answer soon. Once the overseer made a decision, they would know their immediate future, and they could plan from there.

Only when the ISA agent supervising Yang prompted her to her feet did she stand and meet Blake's gaze. They shared a smile, as they often did, before she followed the man into the hall for a break of her own. Once the door shut behind her, however, Blake put her head in her hands and sighed.

Even though the trial had been taxing in ways she couldn't have imagined, they still had much to be grateful for. Their injuries were almost fully healed. Ruby was safe and sound. They had the full support of Weiss, an Atlesian princess with considerable wealth and influence. Adam and Cinder were locked in maximum security cells awaiting trials of their own. Most importantly, they had each other.

Yang's future hung in the balance but, regardless of that uncertainty, she didn't falter from this path. Privately, she admitted that this was the hardest thing she'd ever done - facing the people she'd wronged and admitting her guilt - but she was determined to see it through. Her resolve was evident in her eyes, which never approached the shade of scarlet that used to be such a large part of who she was. Repentance and remorse were her overarching emotions now, and were on display for everyone to see.

That open vulnerability was probably the reason why she hadn't wanted Blake and Ruby to attend the trial. That, or she didn't want them hearing the stories of what she did during her darkest days as a Blackguard. But they refused to stay away and, fortunately, she had no way of making them leave.

Some of the testimonies were surprising. Some were filled with hyperbole. Some might very well be true. Regardless of what was said or learned, Blake never lost sight of who Yang was - a desperate soul trapped in a bad situation, forced to partake in crimes beyond her control, with a penchant for saving as many lives as possible.

While Yang's mistakes were on display, it felt unfair that Blake's remained in obscurity. She also messed up. Her actions resulted in the deaths of others - with Ret, most of all, at the top of her mind. Yet the law gave her a pass because it had been her job to be in those situations.

That didn't erase her guilt, and she believed she should face some sort of judgment too. She probably would someday, but it would be silent whereas Yang's played out for the universe to see.

When word of the trial spread, stories and testimonies poured in from across the galaxy. Most were overwhelmingly positive, giving Blake hope that maybe...just maybe...the overseer would grant leniency. Until then, she sat in the front row of the council room, as close to Yang as possible, and waited for the trial to end.

With only one speaker left, it wouldn't be long before a decision was made. The impending conclusion added to Blake's unwillingness to leave the room, but that unwillingness turned into nerves when Weiss and Ruby returned. They retook their seats beside her as the rest of the spectators gradually ambled into the room with more energy than before. When Yang was led back into the room, Blake realized that this was it. One more speaker, and they would know.

Picking up on Blake's emotions, Yang offered a small smile. Without words, her eyes said everything - that she hoped for a good outcome like Blake did, but was still prepared for the worst.

When the door to the overseer's office opened and he walked back into the room, voices quieted in anticipation of what was to come.

"Is our last speaker ready?" he asked one of the attendants, who nodded

and hurried to bring in the last guest. Blake's nerves returned as the trial resumed, but along with those nerves was a budding sense of restlessness and discontent.

Due to her relationship with Yang and her...complicated...history with ISA, it was decided that she wouldn't testify. Doing so, Yang's representative informed her, would add too much complexity to an already complex situation. They didn't want to get bogged down in details about her undercover mission, which she wasn't free to discuss, or get lost in drawn-out discussions of what criminal activities she participated in, which diminished her credibility. Her credibility already took a hit when she resigned as soon as they returned from Planet TS72, causing legitimate concern that anything she said would be written off as biased at best, untruthful at worst.

Ultimately, she wouldn't do anything to risk Yang's case...even if that meant she wasn't a part of it. Instead, she sat forward and watched the last speaker walk to the front of the room.

Yang's representative had saved the most distinguished testimony for last, which became all the more apparent by how the room quieted as the well-dressed, middle-aged woman sat down and straightened her posture. Several of her personal guards stood nearby - a well-deserved security measure considering she represented the planet of Lemia, a position bestowed upon her after the death of her husband. When she had arrived on Icion last week, it only took a name for Blake to understand her connection to Yang, and to understand how close they'd come to meeting before.

"Ms. Riol," the overseer greeted her with a warm smile. "Thank you for traveling all this way."

"Please call me S'opheia," she replied in a confident, smooth voice. "And you're welcome. I thought it was important to be here in person."

"I understand you'd like to add a testimony regarding Miss Xiao Long."

"On her behalf," the woman corrected before taking a deep breath and meeting Yang's gaze. "Because she saved my life, and the lives of my two little girls."

Blake remembered the ship. She remembered the phaser shot, hearing Yang talking to someone, and Yang making her walk away without ever seeing

who was inside the room. She remembered the last moments of S'opheia's husband, Austor, who refused to bend to Adam's will.

"We were traveling home when the Blackguards attacked," S'opheia explained, her voice quiet as the room collectively leaned forward to listen. "We'd heard the stories, but the trip wasn't long - we thought it would be safe."

Her lip briefly quivered at the memory, but she took a deep breath and continued.

"My husband told us to hide. That he would get rid of them...but I knew we didn't have the manpower to fight back. Still, I took my daughters and hid in one of the rooms while they boarded. It felt like we were there forever, but it must've only been a few minutes before someone opened the door, and I tried to shoot, but I missed."

After a short pause, she made eye contact with the overseer.

"I shot first," she reiterated to him before sending Yang a wavering smile. "But she didn't shoot back - she wasn't even angry. Instead, she told us to stay put - and leave the door unlocked - until the ship undocked. I don't know why I listened, but I did, and...they didn't check the rooms again."

After taking a deep breath and briefly staring at her hands, she cleared her throat and looked up.

"She was our guardian angel, that day. She saved us. And I know she would've saved my husband too, if she could have."

Yang worked her jaw back and forth at the comment, and Blake knew exactly what she was thinking. She wished that she could have saved Austor, too. She wished that she could have saved all of them.

"Then, in your opinion, what should her judgment be?"

The question caught Blake's full attention, as it hadn't been posed to any of the other speakers over the course of the trial. S'opheia's position must have prompted it, meaning her answer held more weight than anyone might know.

"When the ship docked..." she began, again looking at her hands before raising her gaze. "I knew I would do anything to keep my family alive. Anything." She paused for a second to let that statement sink in before continuing. "I can't imagine being trapped in that situation. And I can't imagine being in that moment - feeling that terror - and risking my life for a

stranger.”

Meeting Yang’s gaze, she gave a tearful smile.

“You showed your true character that day, Miss Xiao Long, and I’ll never forget it.” Once Yang managed a fleeting smile in return, S’ophea turned towards the overseer. “I think those moments should weigh more heavily than the others. Because she’s here, now, accepting her mistakes. This is someone who deserves a second chance, and we should grant her one.”

Blake agreed with the words wholeheartedly, and watched with growing hope as S’ophea exited the stand and walked over to Yang. Yang hastily stood and extended her hand, but S’ophea clasped both of hers around Yang’s before leaning forward and lowering her voice to a whisper.

“My greatest hope is that you forgive yourself,” she whispered before pulling away and meeting Yang’s gaze. “Because I’ve already forgiven you.”

With a small smile and gentle touch of Yang’s shoulder, she left the front of the room and rejoined her guards at her seat near the exit. Yang, meanwhile, remained standing for several seconds longer, looking at a loss for what to say or do in response.

As a Blackguard, she was to be feared. Yet the people who traveled all this way...the people she’d saved...treated her like a hero. For someone used to being the villain, the reversal would take some getting used to, if she ever did at all.

Eventually, Yang turned around and met Blake’s gaze, her eyes showing her confliction. The look made Blake want nothing more than to go over and console her, to assure her that she deserved the praise, but the overseer chose that moment to clear his throat and gather the items in front of him.

“Now that the testimonies are over, I’ll go over what I’ve heard and determine Miss Xiao Long’s possible punishment. We’ll return shortly.”

With no additional clarity, not even a hint of what he was thinking, he left the room through the doorway leading to his office. The counsel room quickly filled with soft conversations as everyone guessed what Yang’s fate might be. Paying those theories no mind, Blake kept her eyes on Yang, who sent her another small smile before being led out of the room.

That smile made Blake’s heart ache even more. The worst part about this,

besides the uncertainty of the outcome, was not being able to support Yang as fully as she wanted. She still did her best, and she would always do her best, she just wished she could do more...

“He can’t give her life,” Weiss commented from beside her. “Not with how many lives she’s saved.”

“Yeah, but...if he does?”

“We’re prepared for that.”

Weiss spoke with such absolute certainty, Ruby looked relieved. Still, Weiss waited several seconds before glancing Blake’s way.

“Blake, you’re ready? If need be.”

Staring at the doorway Yang had just walked through, Blake nodded but said nothing. She didn’t want to consider that possibility, but she was thankful that Weiss thought of everything. Yang might be willing to accept whatever her fate held, but they weren’t. If ISA tried to put her away for life, she would be off the planet before the announcement reached Command.

But that was the worst case scenario. It was the best case scenario that Blake clung to – the hope that Yang walked out of here under her own volition.

The chances of that happening seemed slim, but that didn’t stop Blake from wishing. What she wanted more than anything was for them to be together. To put their pasts behind them and move on, heal, and figure out what their future held in store.

Blake didn’t know how long she sat there, staring at that door while her knee jittered up and down, but eventually the overseer returned to the room. As soon as he did, her heart sped up in anticipation of the decision to come, and threatened to seize with worry when Yang was led back into the room and stood before the man tasked with determining her fate. Even though she stood straight and tall, Blake read the concern in her posture.

That same concern must be written all over Blake at the moment, but there was nothing more they could do. They’d exhausted all of their options, called in every favor, and done everything in their power to swing this in Yang’s favor. So, when Ruby reached over to hold her hand, she willingly accepted the gesture, took a deep breath, and waited for the verdict.

“Miss Xiao Long,” the man began, meeting Yang’s gaze and Yang’s alone.

“The testimony on your behalf has been overwhelming, and your actions bringing the Blackguards to justice are steps in the right direction.”

The moment he paused, Blake’s heart fell.

“But the crimes you’ve committed can’t be so easily undone. Grand theft, assault and battery, possession and distribution of illegal substances and firearms, manslaughter – I understand your participation could be labeled involuntary, but those charges alone warrant never setting foot outside a reformatory again.”

Weiss stiffened at the words and reached over to hold Ruby’s other hand, and Blake’s adrenaline rose while the man sighed and shook his head.

All Yang wanted was to stop running...but if ISA wouldn’t grant that wish, she wasn’t spending the rest of her life behind bars.

“Regardless,” he continued. “You’ve agreed to testify against Adam Taurus and Cinder Fall, and provided ISA with invaluable information regarding the Blackguards and other criminal organizations. Most importantly, I can’t help agreeing with many of the people here today – you deserve a second chance.”

“Therefore, I’m sentencing you to four years at the ISA reformatory here on Icion. If you exhibit exemplary behavior, which it seems you should be capable of, early release will be possible in twelve months.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Yang replied with a nod, and the man nodded in return before gathering his belongings and motioning the recorders forward. With the trial officially over, the rest of the room discussed the outcome and prepared to leave, but Blake hurried over to the small railing separating her from Yang.

“It’s ok,” are the first words out of Yang’s mouth before Ruby reached across and hugged her.

“It’s ok,” she repeated once Ruby let go and backed away. “I’ve done some bad things. I...need to atone for them somehow...”

When Yang looked down at her hand, Blake put a finger under her chin and lifted her gaze.

“You’ve already done more than enough,” Blake said before kissing Yang’s cheek and wrapping her in a hug.

Feeling Yang pull her close, Blake closed her eyes and sighed. This wasn’t

the result she wanted, but they did everything they could. At least it wasn't life in prison, which had been a very real possibility this entire time.

"I pulled all the strings I could..." Weiss added with a sigh. "But I understand their position. They can't let you off without punishment. The message that would send..."

"I get it," Yang agreed. "And it's actually not that bad. I expected...worse."
 "Then you'll accept it?"

As soon as Weiss asked the question, Yang sensed the intent behind it.

"Don't even think about it. I can deal with four years, but..." Suddenly unsure, Yang glanced at her hand before meeting Blake's eyes. "Are you ok with that?"

Recognizing the decision being given to her, Blake shook her head and reached up to touch Yang's cheek.

"I'll wait for you forever," she promised, feeling her heart beat loudly when Yang leaned into the touch. "I only want you to be happy."

"I want you to be happy -"

"And I can wait four years."

With Yang's eyes searching for the truth in that response, Blake smiled and ran her fingers through Yang's hair. After what they went through...and with how she still felt about Yang...she knew there would be no one else. So, if Yang accepted the result of the trial, then so would she.

"Plus, if you're good, it'll only be a year!"

"You're right," Yang said before smiling at Ruby, who found the silver lining once again. "And I plan on being really good."

"Yang!"

Hearing her name, Yang turned and broke into the brightest smile when she spotted Zimon racing over to her. Zimon's uncle was right behind him but, rather than follow the young boy all the way to Yang, stopped by Blake's side.

"Thank you for making the trip," Blake told the man, who nodded.

"He insisted. Said it was only fair."

Clearing his throat to get their attention, Zimon gave his uncle an impatient look before beaming up at Yang.

"Thank you," he said, his accent heavy but his words clear. "For saving

me.”

At a loss for how to respond, Yang just stared down at the young boy. But Zimon wasn't finished yet. After motioning Yang closer, he lifted up his stuffed animal and touched its nose to hers.

“Zam Zam say thank you too.”

“You're welcome...” Yang finally whispered. And, before she moved away, Zimon threw his arms around her neck for a hug. The action surprised her, as evidenced by the brief moment she froze, but she soon relaxed and returned the embrace.

“*And thank you for letting me eat cake for breakfast!*” he added in his native language after letting go. “*They don't let me do that anymore.*”

When Zimon pouted at his uncle, his uncle chuckled and shook his head. Zimon quickly forgot about the injustice, however, when his gaze landed upon Blake.

“*Thank you too!*”

When he raised both arms for a hug, with Zam Zam still clutched in one hand, Blake smiled and knelt down to accept his embrace.

“*You're welcome, Zimon.*”

Once she let go, he stepped backward, held onto his uncle's hand, and sent them a bright, innocent smile.

“*I'll see you soon!*” he said with such confidence that Blake couldn't help believing it was true. With one last grin and a wave, he left the room with his uncle - walking out of their lives for now, but apparently not for good.

As soon as the Zitovians left the counsel room behind, Yang cleared her throat, then cleared her throat again, before laughing.

“I swore I wouldn't cry,” she got out before staring at the floor and taking a deep breath. Once her emotions were under control, she met Blake's gaze. “Best thing you ever convinced me to do.”

“So far,” Blake joked, smiling when Yang laughed.

“Well my options will be pretty limited for a while...” she added with a glance towards the ISA agent standing nearby.

“But not forever,” Ruby was quick to chip in. “Plus, it won't feel like long. Especially not when I visit you every day.”

“Every day?”

“Every day,” Ruby confirmed with a nod. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re out. I’m staying right here.”

The news was a clear relief to Yang, who smiled and set her hand on Ruby’s shoulder. They were accepting the decision more by the minute, just like Blake was. Yang would be spending the next year, at least, in an ISA reformatory. Possibly four years, depending on whether ISA considered her behavior worthy of an early release or not.

Blake didn’t expect Yang to get into trouble, but Yang wouldn’t be the only person in the reformatory. She would be surrounded by criminals, many of whom might take issue with her status as a former leader of the Blackguard. And she was missing her arm, seriously hindering her ability to protect herself...

“You’re worried.”

Blinking out of those thoughts, Blake gave Yang a curious look.

“Your ears do this thing when you’re worried,” Yang explained while motioning at Blake’s ears.

Blake had no idea that her ears gave away her concern but, seeing as how Yang already pointed it out, there was no use denying it.

“I can’t protect you in there...”

“But I can take care of myself,” Yang reassured her. “Even without the arm, I promise. Besides, it’s not like you can come with me.”

The response sparked an idea in Blake’s mind, which Yang quickly picked up.

“Oh no you don’t. If you try to follow me in there, we’re done.”

“It’s only a year...”

“Nuh uh. You’re staying out here.” Yang pointed at the floor by Blake’s feet before her expression softened. “I don’t want to worry about you too...” she whispered.

Blake gave up that idea with a sigh. It was a foolish one anyway. What was she going to do...commit a crime and ask for a year in the same facility?

Sensing someone walk up beside her, she glanced over and spotted Sun.

“Hey, Sun...thanks for coming back.”

“Actually, I’m on duty.”

Confused by the comment, Blake gave him a closer look, noting his change in uniform as he puffed out his chest.

“My reassignment just came through!” he announced. “You’re now looking at dashing reform officer Sun.”

“...what?”

“Yup! ISA wanted to demote me, but I called in a few favors to land my next gig - security officer at Icion’s reformatory. They gave me a *big* first assignment too - transporting a super dangerous ex-Blackguard to her temporary abode.”

Shocked, confused, and...shocked...Blake stared at him for several seconds before scoffing and throwing her arms around his neck for a hug. She hadn’t asked him to do that - she hadn’t even *thought* to do that - yet he willingly made another sacrifice for her benefit.

“But you love being an officer...” she said before pulling away and searching his eyes for regret.

“Naw. It’s not as much fun without you anyway.”

The way he grinned and waved off her concern, willingly letting go of his career as one of ISA’s finest, made her feel like crying...in a *good* way.

“Thank you,” she whispered before smiling at Yang.

“Looks like I don’t have to go with you, after all,” she said while hugging Yang one last time, memorizing as much of this feeling as possible. Before letting go, she pressed a kiss to Yang’s lips and looked deep into lilac eyes that still made her heart flutter in her chest.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“I can’t wait,” Yang whispered before stealing one more kiss and moving away. After hugging Ruby, then Weiss, she took a deep breath and managed a wavering smile.

“Thanks, you guys,” she said while backing away from them. Her eyes glistened with tears as their separation loomed, but those tears never fell. Instead, she smiled when Sun hopped the railing and motioned her towards the exit of the room.

“You’ll take it easy on me, right?” he asked while they headed that way.

“It’s kind of my first day.”

When Yang laughed, either at the irony of the situation or the idea of her putting up a fight, Blake’s heart warmed. This wasn’t what she wanted, but knowing that Sun could look out for Yang made her feel much better. The next few years would be difficult, and she already felt an ache in her chest, but it could also be...good.

Before leaving the room, Yang turned and met Blake’s gaze one last time. Her eyes were soft, lilac, and filled with something Blake had never seen before. Something that she, herself, felt now more than ever.

The worst was over. The past was behind them. And, for the first time in a very long time, they felt...hope.

Chapter 30

How long had it been since Blake felt so excited and nervous at the same time? The last time she remembered anything remotely similar was her graduation from the Academy - the day she became an ISA officer. The ceremony included a graduating class in the hundreds along with their families and friends. They were presented as a group and hailed as the future of security across the system.

Today was even better than that day. And, even though it had only just begun, she knew she would treasure its memory for the rest of her life.

“Look who’s here,” the receptionist greeted her as soon as she walked through the doors. “Bright and early too.”

“Wasn’t going to be a minute late,” she replied before nodding past the lobby. “Is she ready?”

“See for yourself.”

When the woman waved towards the security checkpoint, Blake headed that way with growing anticipation. The security process was tedious, as usual, but today she emptied her pockets and passed through the scanner without complaint.

“We’ll miss seeing you around every day,” the security guard told her while handing over a visitor’s badge.

“But I won’t miss being here,” she teased in return, much to his amusement.

Even though she accepted the badge, she didn’t bother putting it on while walking to the door at the end of the hall. The guards standing there knew her well by now, having pried her for details of her time with the Blackguards many times. After glancing at each other, they smiled, opened the door, and motioned her inside.

“Congratulations,” one of them murmured as she grinned at them and hurried into the room beyond.

Every day for the past twelve months, she’d followed the same routine. Through the lobby, through security, into the large, open visitation room. The benches, chairs, and vending machines were the same. The armed guards stationed at every exit were the same. The low drone of inmates speaking to their friends and family members was the same. Everything was the same. But today...everything was about to change.

Rather than sitting alone while waiting for Blake to join her, Yang was perched on top of one of the tables chatting with another inmate. But today, she was no longer one of them. That was made all the more apparent by her casual attire, which replaced the soft orange, brown, or green jumpsuits the reformatory alternated between.

The moment Yang caught sight of Blake, she broke into one of those bright, warm smiles that melted Blake’s heart each time. Then she stood up, glanced at the nearby guard, who gave her a subtle nod and even subtler smile, and walked over without supervision.

She was free.

Seconds later, Blake threw her arms around Yang’s neck while Yang’s arm wrapped around her waist. She’d promised herself that she wouldn’t get too emotional, but tears stung her eyes while she burrowed her face in Yang’s shoulder and ran her fingers through Yang’s hair.

“Hey there,” Yang whispered, prompting Blake to lean away and look into cheerful lilac eyes.

“Hey there,” she replied before running her fingers around Yang’s ear and pulling her into a kiss.

After suffering through months and months of little-to-no intimacy, she couldn’t wait any longer. She had to feel Yang’s lips, as soft, warm, and gentle as ever, and confirm what she’d suspected for quite some time now - that this forced separation had only brought them closer than ever.

When whistles and cheers reached their ears, Yang pulled away and laughed when she saw the blush heating Blake’s cheeks.

“Wanna get outta here?” she asked while extending her hand.

“Pretty sure that’s your best idea yet.”

Accepting Yang’s hand, Blake smiled and turned back the way she just came. She probably wouldn’t stop smiling anytime soon, and that untouchable happiness only grew when they reached the exit and the guards calmly opened the doors for them to leave.

Before leaving the visitation room, however, Yang took a deep breath, turned around, and waved to the people she was leaving behind. Many of them clapped, whistled, or cheered for her release – the show of friendship and camaraderie putting a smile on her lips as she stepped through the doorway.

To Blake, walking out of the reformatory was the same as walking out of any building, except today it didn’t make her heart ache while leaving Yang behind. To Yang...well, she’d never left the building at all, outside of using the fenced recreational area in back.

“Congratulations,” Blake whispered, squeezing Yang’s hand and smiling up at her.

“I can’t believe it’s actually happening.”

Yang’s wide eyes said as much, and she looked in all directions before being waved down by the receptionist.

“Don’t forget your things.”

The woman handed over a bag filled with the few belongings Yang had accumulated, and Yang smiled while accepting it.

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” the woman replied with a smile and wave. “Now get outta here.”

More than ready to heed the advice, Yang grinned at Blake before pulling her out the doors leading to the large parking lot outside. Icion’s capital loomed in the distance, but the immediate vicinity consisted of low-rises, forests, and plenty of open space. Blake had yet to get used to the trees with flaming-red leaves, which always reminded her of Yang. Today, however, Yang’s eyes were bright and lilac.

“So nice to be outside,” she sighed before turning towards Blake. “Even nicer to be out here with you.”

Feeling the kiss coming, Blake eagerly tilted her chin up to accept it.

The sidewalk in front of the reformatory might be the furthest thing from romantic, but that didn't matter to either of them. After months of supervised interactions and no privacy to speak of, they could finally do what they wanted, when they wanted.

When Yang's hand trailed down Blake's side and a corresponding fire lit in her chest, she ended the kiss and backed away with a growing blush. Maybe they couldn't do *whatever* they wanted, especially with plenty of cameras and people around to see them.

"Hold that thought?"

"I've been holding it for a year," Yang replied with a wink. "I think I can manage a little longer."

"It won't be long, promise."

Once Yang nodded, Blake stared for a few seconds before turning away to escape the butterflies in her chest. After waiting so long for this moment, she couldn't escape how surreal it felt. Yang was free. She'd served her time, stayed on her best behavior, and earned an early release.

Now, Blake wished she could teleport them home. Unfortunately, they would have to get home the long way.

"That's our transport."

Nodding towards the vehicle waiting for them, she pulled Yang that way. She didn't want to rush, but she also didn't want to dawdle at the reformatory when they had far better places to be...and better things to do.

"Too bad Sun's not working today..." Yang mused while getting into the vehicle. After ducking in right after, Blake nodded to the driver and sat beside Yang with a scoff.

"Like you haven't seen enough of him already."

"You're cute when you're jealous."

"He's only gotten to spend eight hours a day with you for the past six months - why would I be jealous?"

Any hope Blake had of maintaining the surly pretense melted the instant Yang laughed and leaned into her side.

"You realize we didn't spend all that time together, right? Besides, there was...competition...for his attention." When Blake raised one brow, Yang

nodded. “Seriously. It’s the perfect job for him – hundreds of girls clamoring for his attention. And he’s a pro at getting them to do what he wants without being...you know...creepy.”

Sun did seem to enjoy his new job, and he’d provided plenty of updates to Blake over the past year. More importantly, she’d counted on him for details that Yang left out.

“That reminds me...” Blake mused while the transport slid onto the main road and left the reformatory behind. “Now that we’re never going back, you can tell me which ones tried to sleep with you.”

Yang laughed at the ongoing joke that Blake only took half-seriously. The sound was like music to her ears.

“Uh, no one.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously!”

“Are you lying?”

Blake squinted her eyes as if she could see through the lie, but Yang laughed again and slid closer to her side.

“I’m serious,” Yang said while setting her hand on Blake’s thigh. “And I don’t blame them for staying away – they’re all scared of you.”

This time, it was Blake’s turn to laugh.

“Why would they be scared of me?”

“Why *wouldn’t* they be? I told them all about how you took down Cinder *and* Adam single-handedly.”

“That’s not entirely true...”

“Adam’s limping around a tiny jail cell for the rest of his life,” Yang pointed out. “And Cinder’s never talking again, which the entire universe should be celebrating as far as I’m concerned.”

“Let’s not talk about them today,” Blake said, pressing a finger to Yang’s lips to keep that topic away from their perfect day. Adam and Cinder were spending the rest of their lives in maximum security cells – that was all that mattered to her right now.

“You want me to talk about how gorgeous you are instead?”

From the question, the look in Yang’s eyes, and the way she ran her hand

up and down Blake's thigh, Blake wished that they were alone right now. Unfortunately, they would have to wait until they got home - and a little longer still.

"I hope you don't mind...but some people wanted to see you. Just a small get together, and they swore not to stay long."

"As long as it's not your parents, I think I'll survive." When Blake remained playfully silent, Yang sat forward and looked her in the eyes. "It's not your parents, right? You can't let me meet your parents right now - I have months of prison to wash off!"

"Not them," Blake finally admitted, smiling at Yang's visible relief. "But you'll have to meet them eventually; I've told them a lot about you. Also...Sun might have told them how you 'stabbed' him and threw him off a cliff." When Yang grimaced at the story, Blake patted her knee. "Sorry. I left him alone for two seconds and that's what he brought up."

"They're going to hate me..." Yang groaned. When she put her head in her hand though, Blake laughed and gently lifted her chin.

"How can they hate the person who saved my life?" she asked, and Yang finally smiled - the expression cheerful enough to lift Blake's heart to new highs.

"Can you keep reminding them of that?"

"I plan on it."

When Yang settled back into her side, Blake smiled and glanced at the changing scenery outside. The red forests dwindled to nothing more than smatterings of red trees, and more and more buildings sprang up in between.

Since she went straight from her parent's house to ISA to the Blackguards, she'd never had an apartment of her own. Thankfully, Ruby and Weiss were more than willing to help her find and decorate a space while waiting for Yang's release. Their combined efforts had resulted in a comfortable apartment that she hoped Yang would be happy to call home. Or, at least, home for as long as they decided to stay on Icion.

"It's right there."

Blake pointed to the apartment building up ahead, and Yang shifted her attention outside the window.

“I just got really nervous...”

“You have nothing to be nervous about,” Blake assured her, squeezing her leg as the transport slid to a stop in front of a tall building in one of the ‘new’ neighborhoods.

“That’s what you say now...” Yang whispered while accepting Blake’s hand and getting out of the vehicle.

It didn’t escape Blake’s amusement that Yang – one of the strongest, most courageous people she’d ever met – was nervous about seeing the same people she’d seen religiously over the past twelve months. Or maybe something else caused her nerves. The idea of having a new home? Or having a new home with Blake?

“If this is too fast, you’d tell me, right?”

Yang’s look of disbelief made her feel better in no time.

“You think I’m nervous about being here with you?” When Blake shrugged, Yang shook her head. “No way. I’m worried that...I don’t know, that I’ve forgotten how to be a normal person.”

“Hate to break it to you,” Blake said while pulling Yang into the lift and pressing the button for the fourth floor. “But you’ve never been normal.”

“Because I’m different?”

That word, which once scared her, now meant more to her than she could ever describe.

“You are different,” she agreed, tugging Yang into the hall. “And that’s a wonderful thing.”

Yang’s smile assured her that they were ready for this next step in their relationship, and she wasted no time leading them to the door of their new apartment. Stopping just outside, she couldn’t help but smile while watching Yang look over the door, the doorframe, the keypad, and every other detail she could find. Once she’d committed everything to memory, her gaze landed on Blake, and a smile pulled at her lips.

“Is this it?”

“It is. Are you ready?”

Considering the question seriously, Yang stared at the door for several long seconds before taking a deep breath and nodding.

“Yes. More than ready.”

Smiling at the response, Blake opened the door and motioned Yang inside. As soon as she stepped through the doorway and saw the room beyond, she froze.

“Welcome home!” Ruby shouted while popping up from behind the sofa.

“Ruby...” Weiss softly scolded her while standing up. “We were supposed to wait for her to pass the table, remember?”

“Oh, crap. I got too excited.”

“But welcome home!” Sun added before pointing at the ‘welcome home’ banner hanging over the living room. “I hung that, by the way.”

“Yes, ‘you’ did,” Weiss replied with a roll of her eyes.

“You guys...”

Still holding Blake’s hand, as if she wanted physical support entering this new chapter of her life, Yang took several more steps into the apartment before stopping. Looking at the decorations, and the furniture, and everything she’d only seen in pictures before, her eyes filled with emotion.

“Thank you...” she whispered while Ruby rushed over for a hug.

“It’s not every day my sister gets out of prison!”

“But it’s hopefully the *last* time your sister gets out of prison,” Yang replied with a laugh before her gaze landed on the cake sitting on the table. “Is that... a cake with prison bars on it?”

“So when you cut it, it’s like breaking out of prison!” Sun explained. “Me ‘n the guys thought of it - isn’t it cool?”

After exchanging a look with Blake, who’d felt too indebted to deny Sun’s one request, Yang laughed.

“‘Cool’ is one way of putting it...”

“You should try it now!” Ruby suggested, even going so far as to hand Yang a cake knife.

“Yes, please cut it now so Ruby can have some. She’s been drooling over it for hours.”

Shushing Weiss, who smiled and shook her head, Ruby backed away and motioned for Yang to cut the cake. Yang, meanwhile, looked at the knife in her hand with a strange, almost unreadable expression. It took a few more seconds

before Blake realized that any type of weapon, including metal silverware, had been strictly off limits to Yang for quite some time.

“Let me help you,” she offered. Instead of taking the knife, however, she wrapped her hand around Yang’s and gently guided it into place before making the first cut in the cake. “How big of a piece do you want?” she asked while they cut the first row.

“Uh...probably like...a decent piece...”

Shaking her head at the unspoken request for an extra large piece, she glanced at Sun. “And you?”

“A huge one!” he answered, and she rolled her eyes while Yang chuckled in her ear. Together, they cut several pieces before Yang set the knife aside, and Blake handed out slices of cake to the two people most eager to eat.

“How does getting out of prison taste?” Yang joked while Ruby took a big bite.

“Mm! Tastes great!”

“Good.” Chuckling at Ruby’s happiness, Yang reached down and found Blake’s hand to hold once again.

“But the more important question...” Sticking her fork in the cake, Ruby met Yang’s gaze and smiled. “How does it feel?”

The room quieted at the question, and all eyes focused on Yang while she thought of her answer. After giving up her freedom for a year, how did it feel to suddenly be back in the real world? There was bound to be some shocks and growing pains, as she just proved, but where was she, mentally?

The moment she smiled, Blake’s heart filled with joy.

“I feel great, actually.”

“Yeah?” Ruby was excited now too, which made Yang’s smile grow.

“Yeah! It’s awesome to be here with you guys and not have to deal with the guards and rules anymore – no offense, Sun. But...it wasn’t so bad in there anyway. It was actually kind of nice.”

“How so?” Weiss gently prodded while Ruby nodded and moved closer to her side.

“Because...I was running from everything for so long, trying not to think about anything other than staying alive and finding you.” After nodding

towards Ruby, Yang paused and frowned while sorting through her feelings. “Sure, it was prison, but for the first time, I got to stop and think. And kind of...I don’t know, come to terms with some stuff.”

When Blake set a hand on Yang’s shoulder, Yang looked over and smiled. Her change in demeanor and outlook on life had been noticeable with every visit, and Blake couldn’t wait to see how the next few months or years of their lives added to that progress. The biggest change, in Blake’s mind, was a gradual shift from guilt and regret to thankfulness and determination to make a positive impact in the future. Yang wore her mistakes on her sleeve, but she wouldn’t let them define the rest of her life.

“Now I just need to figure out what to do next,” she added before chuckling. “Guess I need to get a job or something. Although I don’t even know what I’d do...”

After exchanging a smile with Ruby and Weiss, Blake turned back to Yang and squeezed her shoulder.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that for a while.”

“No way. I’m not letting you do all the work while I’m some kind of, like, deadbeat ex-criminal girlfriend. I want to help.”

“And you can, but you don’t have to do that by working.”

“You probably don’t need to work at all,” Weiss pointed out while Ruby grinned.

“Yeah, cuz you’re actually, like, super loaded.”

When Sun laughed and Ruby giggled, Yang looked around the room in confusion.

“Uh...what’re you talking about?”

“You have plenty of money,” Blake explained. “Because ISA paid you thirty-five million credits for turning in Adam and Cinder.”

There was a long pause as Yang stared at them, then her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

“Are you...kidding me?” she asked, looking around the room while the four of them laughed.

“We’re not.”

“I already set up an account for you,” Blake added, beyond pleased that they

managed to keep this secret from Yang for so long. “The money’s there now, and you can do whatever you want with it.”

“I...wow. Ok...first, pay you back -”

When Yang pointed at Weiss, Weiss scoffed and waved her hand.

“Please. I don’t need your money, and that’s not why I helped.”

Weiss’ gaze slid to Ruby with the statement, and a small, nearly imperceptible smile lifted her lips. Unfortunately for her, *nearly* imperceptible wasn’t the same as imperceptible, and spending a year in prison hadn’t made Yang blind. She was still rather astute, actually, as her brow briefly furrowed before she caught on and scoffed.

Weiss’ attention snapped away from Ruby at the sound, but she’d already made her feelings abundantly clear.

“Oh, I see,” Yang said, giving Weiss a far more searching look. “Well we can discuss *that* later...since I don’t think thirty-five mil is enough.”

After pursing her lips and looking at Ruby, who gave a bright, unassuming smile in return, Weiss nodded.

“I’m open to negotiation.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Yang replied before chuckling and squeezing Blake’s hand. “But alright, if we don’t have to repay the princess, then I guess...we’ll have to decide what we want to do.” After a few seconds of thought, she nodded at Ruby’s necklace. “Mom left us a bit of a mystery. What do you think about figuring it out?”

“I want to.” Pulling out her necklace, with the star pendant still hanging upon it, Ruby ran her finger across the precious metal before letting it drop back into place. “She always said it was important, but what am I supposed to do with it? Hang on to it forever? Give it to someone else?”

“If anything, at least we know that you have a potential target around your neck,” Weiss commented while moving closer to Ruby’s side, a subtle motion that said more than met the eye. “I can’t believe we traipsed around the galaxy with you wearing a priceless artifact for everyone to see.”

“But it turned out fine!”

“I suppose...” Weiss muttered, but she lost her surly demeanor the moment Ruby giggled. Blake, however, suffered a sudden burst of worry when her

mind returned to Planet TS72.

“You won’t open the mines, will you?”

“No way,” Yang said while Ruby shook her head. “At least, not until we know what we’re dealing with. Maybe Ruby’s *supposed* to open them...”

“Like to save the universe from impending doom!” Ruby joked, and Weiss actually broke out a smile.

“Sounds like quite the adventure - when do we leave?”

“Can I come??”

“Sun!” Blake said in surprise, but he shrugged and gave her an innocent expression.

“What? I missed the first one. No way you’re leaving me out again!”

“The more the merrier,” Ruby agreed while Yang laughed and wrapped her arm around Blake’s shoulders. Sun, meanwhile, pumped his fist to celebrate being invited wherever life took them next.

Before any of that happened, however, they needed to settle into their new lives first. And part of the settling process could start now, as Blake met Ruby’s gaze and nodded that it was time. Immediately breaking into a big smile, Ruby rushed into the kitchen and retrieved the box she brought over early this morning.

“But first...” she said before holding it out to Yang. “We have something for you.”

When Yang gave each of them a look, Blake nodded for her to open the box. After removing her arm from around Blake’s shoulders, she lifted the lid and froze as soon as she saw what rested inside.

“Ruby worked her magic on it,” Blake explained while Yang continued to stare.

The prosthetic arm resting in the box was nowhere near as intimidating as the original, but that was by design. Understanding that Yang was doing everything in her power to leave that life and image behind, Ruby and Blake had decided a few changes were in order. Now, sections of bright yellow offset some of the implied strength while black accents added a bit of flair - ‘because she is a badass’ as Ruby put it. It looked sleeker than the first, and gone were the scratches, phaser burns, and evidence of battle.

“It’s almost as strong!” Ruby said after several seconds of silence. “It just... looks different.”

“We thought you’d like a fresh start...” Blake added, suddenly worried that their gift wasn’t such a great idea. When Yang looked up with tears in her eyes, however, that worry disappeared.

“Thank you,” she whispered before pulling Blake into a hug and kissing her temple. Backing away, she lifted the prosthetic from the box and beamed. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed having two hands...”

“Let me help you!” Ruby offered, and Yang willingly handed over the arm so Ruby could fix it into place. Once it was attached, Yang rolled her shoulders, lifted her new hand, and watched the fingers move in turn. Apparently, she liked what she saw, as she grinned and gave Ruby a big hug.

“Thank you,” she said before releasing Ruby and hugging Weiss. “And you - thank you for your help.” Next, she hugged Sun, lifting his feet right off the floor in the process. “And you - thanks for being such a great friend.”

“No problem,” he chuckled after she set him down. “That reminds me... I need to work out more.” When he lifted his arms and flexed his muscles, which weren’t puny by any means, Yang laughed and gave him a playful pat on the shoulder with her new hand.

“Maybe one day you’ll be as strong as me.”

“One day soon.”

“Like tonight in your dreams?”

While they teased each other, Weiss shook her head and reached for Ruby’s hand. As soon as she realized what she was doing, however, she backed away and cleared her throat. “We’ll leave you two alone now,” she said before motioning Ruby after her. “But we’ll see you soon.”

“Oh, right - definitely! Like tomorrow morning?” After glancing between Yang and Blake, Ruby laughed. “Or maybe tomorrow afternoon, so you can sleep in.”

“Blake’s the one who’ll probably need the rest...” Weiss muttered under her breath, but threw on an innocent smile when Blake looked her way.

“You can always hang out, if you want?” Yang offered, but they shook their heads and opened the door.

“We’ll have plenty of time for that later.”

“Like tomorrow!” Ruby added before sending Sun a meaningful look.

“Oh! Right. I have things to do too!”

While he hurried after them, Blake caught Yang’s gaze and rolled her eyes. They could be a *little* more obvious about their intentions, but she wasn’t about to complain.

“Alright, see you later then!” Yang called out, smiling as their guests quickly bid goodbye and closed the door behind them. Blake listened to their cheerful voices move down in the hall but was quickly distracted when Yang narrowed her eyes at the door.

“What is it?”

“Weiss Schnee...” Yang mused before turning towards Blake. “Is she screwing my sister?”

“Well...” When Yang’s brow rose, Blake laughed and didn’t bother trying to lie. “Yes, she most definitely is.”

“Seriously?? How could you not tell me?”

“I wasn’t telling you anything that risked you spending more time in there,” she replied with a point in the general direction of the reformatory.

“I hate to break it to you...” When Yang set her hand on Blake’s waist and looked at her with those beautiful lilac eyes, Blake’s skin tingled with excitement. “But you missed your golden opportunity – because nothing would’ve made me risk getting back to you as soon as possible. *Including* some Atlesian princess getting down and dirty with my little sister.”

“In that case...I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.” As Yang’s new hand settled on Blake’s waist, creating that hard and soft contrast she’d missed so much, she smiled. “But they’re definitely together and have been for a while – they’ve been waiting to tell you.”

Even though Yang blew a breath through her lips and shook her head, she didn’t look too upset by the news. If anything, she looked rather amused by the unexpected change in Ruby’s relationship status.

“I’ve seen you *every* day for a year – how did you keep that a secret?”

“I’m a trained undercover agent, remember?” Blake playfully boasted in return. “That included learning how to lie.”

“You slept with a Blackguard while undercover.”

“No, I slept with you. And you were never one of them.”

When Yang opened her mouth but found no words, Blake smiled at having won that light-hearted argument. If she had to, she would remind Yang every day for the rest of their lives that wearing the armor didn't make someone a Blackguard.

“Well,” Yang finally said, giving up the argument with a smile. “Fortunately for Weiss, I have more important things to dwell upon.” Taking Blake's hand, Yang raised it to her lips and kissed Blake's fingers. “Like you.”

This was the moment Blake had waited for, and she intertwined her fingers with Yang's as an inevitable smile appeared on her lips.

“I'm so glad it's finally over...” she sighed, moving closer when Yang wrapped an arm around her waist.

“You and me both...oh. Before I forget...I made something for you.”

Much to Blake's consternation, Yang backed away from the embrace and searched her pockets. After finding what looked like nothing more than a small piece of paper, she offered it to Blake, who gave it a curious glance before taking it. No sooner had she unfolded it did her surprise grow, and her heart started beating incredibly fast.

Written on the slip were Valerian runes -

“On second thought -” Before Blake even started reading, Yang grabbed the paper and crumpled it in her hand. Once done, she cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. “Um, have I told you about the time I bent a sword around this guy's hands to use as handcuffs?”

“Yes, you have.” Blake reached for the paper but Yang moved it out of reach, so Blake sent her a serious look. “Multiple times, actually. Now give me that.”

When Yang finally relented, Blake snatched the paper out of her hand, uncrumpled it, and read the runes in full.

You saved my life.

You saved my soul.

For that and so much more, I love you.

The words, and the thought behind them, made Blake's heart sing. Once upon a time, she wished to never see a Valerian rune again. She wanted to

put the lost language far from her mind, dreams, and nightmares. But the Valerians brought her and Yang together - saved them both, really - and for that, she could be nothing but grateful and overwhelmingly in love with the person standing in front of her.

Still holding the paper, which she would treasure forever, she wrapped her arms around Yang's neck and smiled.

"Yang..." she began slowly, knowing she might have to reiterate this multiple times over the coming years but not minding in the slightest. "You don't always have to be the strongest and toughest anymore. You can be sensitive - I love when you are."

The response worked, as a smile slowly eased onto Yang's lips.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I didn't fall for you because you can wrap a sword into handcuffs with your bare hands, as impressive as that is." Once Yang chuckled, Blake smiled. "I fell for you because you're sweet, and kind, and do adorable things like learn how to write Valerian."

"You really know how to make someone *want* to do super cheesy things."

"Good. Please do, because I love them. And...I love you. More than I ever thought possible."

The moment Yang's expression lit up, Blake couldn't help noticing the irony in who Yang pretended to be and who she truly was. Inside the heart of that stern, regimented, closed-off Blackguard was a soft, gentle soul who just wanted to be loved. And Blake loved her, so much that it was overwhelming at times, such as moments like this.

"It's way harder than I thought," Yang added while Blake ducked her gaze and struggled to reel in her blossoming adoration. "I thought I could master it in like a few months, but...I'm really impressed you can read it at all. More impressed than I already was, at least. You're amazing, you know that?"

The adoration wasn't going away. Instead, it grew with every second Yang rambled about anything crossing her mind. The realization that this was actually happening took hold of Blake's thoughts and refused to let go, and she suddenly felt like crying, laughing, singing, and dancing all at once. Instead, she pulled Yang close and buried her face in the crook of Yang's neck.

Sensing the moment, Yang stopped talking and wrapped her arms around Blake in return. Then she sighed, a long, deep sigh that sounded like it had been held in for quite some time, and tears sprang into Blake's eyes.

"You give the best hugs," Yang whispered. "Don't tell Ruby."

Hearing the happiness in Yang's voice, Blake laughed - one of the best feelings in the world outside of the hard-yet-soft sensation that came with Yang's hugs.

"I love you," she said again, because it felt so good to say those words aloud.

"I love you too," Yang replied, proving that it was even better to hear those words in return. When she hugged Blake closer, Blake understood that they might spend an hour like this before doing anything else, and that was fine with her.

In this moment, they shared their vulnerabilities. They shared their worries, concerns, and hopes for the future. It was just a hug...but to them, it meant much more than that.

"So..." Yang whispered before too long. "What do you think about saving the universe with me?"

Laughing at the question, Blake leaned back and confirmed that Yang was serious.

"You know I'll follow you anywhere," she answered, curling her fingers around Yang's ear before pulling her into a kiss. The moment their lips touched, butterflies fluttered in her chest and unmistakable happiness tingled through her veins.

This was that other world she'd dreamed about - the one that couldn't exist. It existed. Through a great deal of trial and effort on their part, they found it. Now, they were free to be themselves, and be together, without repercussions. They would no longer be treated as pawns. Their voices wouldn't fall on deaf ears. Their lives would belong to each other, and no one else.

What would they do next? That choice was theirs, and theirs alone.

But apparently they had a universe to save.

