

Dark hallway stretches in front of me as far as I can see, which isn't far enough. Blocks of grey-blue loom on either side like gaping jaws waiting to suck me in. I hit my com. "Where did-"

A hand clamps over my mouth and pulls me around a corner. Before I stomp on my assailant's foot and scream, a low whisper-

"Don't you dare." The Saxon. I relax. At least he won't kill me. His arrogance hangs in the air around him like cheap cologne.

"Can you be quiet?" His breath against my neck makes me shiver. I nod and he drops his hand from my mouth, resting it at the base of my neck. His other arm wraps around my chest, threatening to crush my lungs. "It was a trap."

The heat off his chest warms my back. I didn't realize I was cold. "I had it covered." I lie.

He presses a finger to my lips. We barely breathe for the excruciatingly long moment it takes for the sound of boots to disappear down the hall. His hand weighs on my collarbone again. "I'm escorting you back to the hotel." The words tickle my ear.

I spin in his arms. "I'm not going back to the hotel," I hiss, altogether too close to his face shrouded in inky blue darkness.

His grip on my upper arms tightens. "We can't lose both Velorum children today."

"We aren't going to lose Pio." An unintentional amount of desperation leaks into my voice.

I didn't think him capable of comforting anyone, but he cups the sides of my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. "We aren't going to lose Dupioni, and we're not going to lose you." The intense whisper carries such confidence, I almost believe it.

"Shouldn't you be the one getting him out?" My voice rises above a whisper and he shoves a finger to my lips.

"Quiet. I'm escorting you back to the hotel."

"But why? Shouldn't you-"

"Taffeta." He vocalizes my name, but in a very low register. It freezes me, sending something through my chest I don't think I want to feel. I step back, but he grabs me in time for another set of boots to walk past us. I squeeze my eyes shut, cheek pressed against his chest. The smell of arrogance is growing on me. And I've never been one for cheap cologne.

"So we go back to the hotel. Then what?" I mumble into his chest after the footsteps fade out of earshot.

"I make a lot of noise so the others can get Dupioni out."

I step back and look up at him. "I thought you were supposed to be the fearless leader."

He frowns at me. "Everyone in Dyskar wants me dead. I'm the biggest distraction." It makes logical sense. Especially when he says it with so much confidence.

Still. "And you trust the others to keep my brother alive?"

The danger in his expression permeates the blue darkness. "Keep your voice down."

"What happens when they fail? Or when you fail?" I fling my arms and spin around in frustration. "You could get hurt. You could die!"

He grabs me again with his hand over my mouth. "Yes. Occupational hazard." Then so low and close to me it sends electricity down my spine, "Do not raise your voice again."

I'm half tempted to bite his hand, but I shake it off. "Oh really? Why?" I bait him. I tell myself it's to call his bluff. Not because he's attractive and has been touching my lips entirely too much. Some gravity pulls me toward him and my hand rests on his chest.

His heart beats through his jacket just a touch too fast. "Someone will find us."

It's the truth. I was hoping for something more interesting. "You could just kill them," I say it a little louder than necessary.

"Taffeta, if you don't shut-

"Make me."

He shoves me against the wall with a hand at my neck. "Don't tempt me."

Oh the fun we could have. If my brother weren't a captive and our crew wasn't waiting on a distraction to get him out. I lick my lips with every sensual intention and in the softest whisper I can manage, "Exactly what does tempting you look like? Because I certainly don't want to do that."

His hand at my waist lifts me off the ground a bit, keeping me pinned between his solid body and the wall. "You're going to behave yourself." He breathes, entirely too close to my face. "Or we're all going to die."

I jump and wrap my legs around his hips. "Best behavior. Cross my heart." But it's just a touch too loud.

A little growl from the back of his throat flares the little fluttering warmth in my chest into full flame. I'm not aware of either of us moving, but his mouth is on mine and my teeth tug at his lip and he pulls my hair while he squeezes my thigh. And I've never liked the taste of standard-issue mint toothpaste, but mingling with arrogance and danger makes it intoxicating.

I'm happy for a moment. A brief little fleeting moment. I forget about the danger, and my brother, and the rest of the crew. I simply exist, letting the fire burn up my insides because it feels good to want something. To have my own desire.

Footsteps down the hall. The Saxon rips his mouth from mine, but keeps me pinned to the wall until the footsteps pass. I lean in again, but he drops me and steps away.

I straighten my dress. He shakes his head. Those lapis eyes catch the dim light. "That was your best behavior?"

I grin. "I'll show you my best after you save my brother." And I don't doubt he will. If anyone can out-stubborn death, it's Lazrys Saxon.