



Obsidian

Ember Book 2

Tess Williams

OBSIDIAN
Ember Series Part 2
Tess Williams

First Edition

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Prologue

Cold. Dry. Dead.

That's all I can think, the only thought I can hold.

I'm dead. This is right... that's what I said I'd do...

A noise sounds; unfamiliar, mechanic...

No. That's not true. Not dead. The Gaeln said that I wouldn't die.

Cold. Dry. Not dead.

The noise got loud, a humming then a vibration.

I brought my hands up to my ears--only just then aware of them. Aware of the ground beneath me. *Hard*, very hard. I opened my eyes. I was looking down. I was on my knees. The ground was wrong. Rock... maybe. But grey and smooth, and... unnatural.

I coughed a breath. It felt like the first I'd ever taken.

The noise. I remembered my hands on my ears. I removed them and lurched my head up. What I saw was a dark, towering, world of stone.

Thousand-story blocks that stabbed up into the sky. Lights that clicked and flickered in unnatural hues I'd never seen before. And in front of me--the cause of the droning noise. A metal shape that didn't touch the ground.

For a moment it froze like a pitch black shadow against the lights all around... then in a shock of sound that sent me jolting back. Flames sputtered behind it, in orange and white, and the entire hunk of metal went rising up towards the rock tops.

I stood, legs shaking, staring up after where it had gone. But it and the noise had left beyond sight. Now all there was left was the life in the towers around me.

A glittering world of black, moving, stone.

And all I could force from my lips was a hiss when I spoke out.

"Where am I?"

CHAPTER 1: FERA

“Oh!” I gasped, hands jolting to my heart. “My goodness gracious, Jack. I can’t believe you just did that again.”

The boy--Jack Gallin--smiled back pleasantly. We were in a large room, quite lively with people, each working at their respective desks. Like I was. Like Jack was *supposed* to be. The walls were gray; windows were scarce. This was new base of operations for us and I wasn’t adjusting well.

“I can’t help myself,” said Jack, hopping over to his chair at the opposite end of my desk. “It’s too funny to hear what you’ll say next.”

I eyed him, picking up the papers he’d dropped off for me. They were reports; ones that I was responsible for filing. I had a feeling that I already knew what they would contain.

At the moment... for five months now... I worked at a place called D-Roe. As far as I knew we handled little more than local crime busts, inside work, and personal protection... but the sheer number of employees told a different story. There were sixty-eight in our office alone; most worked out in the field. I didn’t know much about the whole thing to be honest. I’d joined for one reason and one reason only. Since entering this world I’d been contacted by the Gaeln only once... and that one time they’d instructed me to come here. I’d agreed because... well, because there hadn’t really been another option for me. Here at D-Roe my job was simple: read and log crime reports. No thinking, no adding, just cataloging.

“I mean ‘goodness gracious’?” mimicked Jack. “Who says that?”

Jack was and had been my desk partner since joining D-Roe. He was eighteen, same as me. He had light, ambiguously shaded, hair, and an odd arrangement of facial features; he was very thin, and he always wore the same clothes. He was funny, never too deep, and the cause of ninety-nine percent of all my procrastinating. I was convinced that if not for him, I would be out of the gutter position by now.

He laughed, throwing his hand out loosely. “No, no. Wait... ‘blast it’. That’s my favorite. I love it when you say that. Or curses. *Curses!*”

“Jack, really--is there a point to this?” I half whispered, leaning in towards him. My eyes scanned the room of active workers. “We’re in enough trouble this week as it is...” I caught sight of the window; it was still light outside, probably close to three. That meant three more hours for me.

“Alright. I’ll be good,” he replied.

I smiled, then took a knife and sliced open the envelope. No surprise at the contents.

Insufficient photographs of two nameless boys. Insufficient because they were orphans, streets urchins, whatever you’d like to call them. The whole idea I could still barely grasp. But here, on this massive metropolis, with hundreds of thousands of people all living in a ninety-mile radius, there were a lot of kids that got lost in the mix.

The problem lately--the problem with these two--was unexplainable disappearances. If not for the fact that some of the boys had already been being tagged for surveillance, we probably never would have noticed. The first kids that had vanished were known to do illegal transport work for some not-too-pleasant characters. We’d started checking with them to no avail. *And now these two made what?...Sixteen?...Sixteen now.*

I sighed, then spread out the papers for filing.

“Same deal?” Jack asked across from me. I nodded and he sighed too.

Having had some...experience with the issue, Jack wasn’t a fan. But like me, he was scarcely permitted to work on the case.

“How old this time?” he asked.

“No way to know for sure,” I noted--unnecessarily--we *never* knew for sure, “but I’d guess around nine or ten by the faces.”

“And that makes--”

“Sixteen.” I finished.

“You’d think they’d want all the help they could get,” drawled Jack sharply.

I continued to work. “Well, it’s becoming a higher priority case. Maybe they’ll sign you on.”

“Right,” scoffed Jack. “And lose all my valuable assistance with paper-pushing?... No one can staple like I can baby!” He snapped a stapler at me, already back to grinning. I knew inside he was more upset than that.

“Well *I* think that if Tyson, or any of those fuddy-duddy higher-ups had half a brain, they’d have you heading up the project.”

He spread his arms. “Well, thank you.”

I barely got out a “you’re welcome” when another file dropped onto the desk.

“Make sure these get in today, Gallin.”

I stiffened at the voice. *Oh dear*. Sure enough, I looked up just in time to catch Tyson walking away.

Tyson.

Six-foot-two, chestnut hair, silver-blue eyes, age twenty-nine, head of our department, and one fatal characteristic. The characteristic that set my heart off double-speed. The characteristic that cracked my voice and blurred my focus. The characteristic that blew my composed, contented, feigned, little world to pieces.

One characteristic, that’s all it took. Tyson reminded me of Jaden.

“Do you think he heard you?” asked Jack, with a humored smirk back in Tyson’s direction.

My eyes blinked and I tried to still the papers shaking in my hands. “Ah...” *breathe, Evelyn, breathe* “...I don’t know.”

Days were always harder when I heard Tyson’s voice. Tonight would be a difficult one.

I winced up at Jack so I didn’t seem unduly affected, then we both went back to working.

#

The next three hours passed too slowly. I was close to the last one out, as usual, despite Jack’s extra work. I guess I was a little bit of a perfectionist when it came to cataloging. I hit the switch on my desk lamp with a sigh and headed out the door.

Our office was hidden on a nondescript level of a large, business skyscraper. Like everything on Fera, the structure was connected with a dozen others by lifted metal causeways encased on the sides with glass and the tops with full ceilings. Out on the wider intersections everything was open--just the sky to envelop them.

I peered down through the glass window as I walked the hall--my usual habit. You wouldn’t hit the literal bottom of Fera for at least half-a-mile if you jumped, but the surplus of tiered decks made seeing the full descent a rarity. The sound of the automatic door brought my head up; I walked through without hesitation to the main intersection deck outside. The bustle of people never failed to amaze me. That and the cold.

Dear, goodness. I hugged my slight green sweater around my body and just kept moving.

Out here the sky was a dim blue, only parted by the taller tips of the silver skyscrapers and passing ships. It was almost always like this on my way home from work, though if I was lucky the clouds would also glow a brilliant pink. Still, the fluorescent white and blue lights that lined almost every building, platform, and causeway, were brilliant enough.

A gust flew by me and I tightened my sweater again. I wished I could close my eyes as I walked sometimes, but there were too many people here. That was alright though... by the time I got home it would be less busy.

My apartment--a thirty minute trek from D-Roe--was in the not so brilliant part of town. Not terrible, just... a single girl with an indeterminate job couldn't afford to live in the ritz--or the upper city as it would be called in Fera. My place was down a few decks, not quite to the mid-low level. Here the sky was less visible, and the metal coverings were less sparkly. A few cheap shops flickered colorful lights across the walkways; including BQ's which Jack and I sometimes went to. He'd offered to go tonight, but...no--not tonight.

I entered the cove that preceded my apartment elevator, waving to Old Bill, the landlord, as I passed. He usually stopped me to complain about the less consistent tenants, but today he seemed to be too occupied with a new cleaning contraption. The last one he'd shown me was astounding: a metal disk you set in the middle of the room that--once triggered--would sanitize the whole area with a single bright flash. Needless to say after seeing that, I'd really never pitied his complaints about cleaning any longer.

I took the stairs in two's tonight. I was on the second floor of the tenement, five doors down the hall that wrapped around in a circle.

Absently, I typed in the code that would release my door lock, waited for the lag, then stepped in. The metal wall closed behind me and I sank to the floor.

Oh... My eyes closed and my head fell back, papers dropping forgotten to the floor. You see, outside I could pretend that all of this was normal. That flying ships, and mile-high buildings, and fluorescent lights, and transports, electricity and planets--that all of these things weren't in any way unusual. I'd grown up here after all. Evelyn Avest, daughter of Cal and Ryanna Avest, who'd died when I was twelve. Lived with my--now off-world--aunt up until six months ago. Received a full education on the middle levels, but had otherwise no distinguishing accomplishments to boast of.

That was me. That's the I.D. the Gaeln had given when I'd gotten here... at least in a roundabout way. In actuality the Gaeln, who I consistently had trouble not despising, hadn't appeared to me once. When I'd first woken up on Fera, six months ago, all I'd had to go off of were two slips of paper in my pocket. The first had been a note telling me to go to D-Roe's address, inform them that I was referred here by a company called Lange Inc., and acquire a job. The second paper had been a coded I.D. slip, which had informed me of my "past" here on Fera. I still didn't know now why D-Roe had accepted me and I still didn't know what Lange Inc. was. But my new employers had set me up with a place to stay; I had started work, and shortly thereafter I'd met Jack.

All I'd been able to do at that point had been to trust that what I was doing at D-Roe mattered... just like the Gaeln had promised.

But now... normally at this point at night, I wouldn't have let myself fall to the floor. I wouldn't have let myself think about the past. I would have taken a shower, done some work, eaten dinner, and gone to sleep.

Like I'd said: not tonight.

I drug myself off the ground, leaving the papers where they were. I slipped my feet from my boots, and manually flicked off all the annoyingly automatic lights. I closed the shades and brought my blanket over to the couch; sunk down in, all bundled; then held out my hand in the almost pitch darkness.

Every sign of Fera was gone except for the low hum that couldn't be escaped.

I did this on my bad days--maybe once a week, twice lately. It was stupid because it always felt worse the next day.

Don't do it, Evelyn, I thought, just once, before giving in to the rushing memories.

I thought about my life long before, in Tiver; when I was never contented. I thought about that morning by the lake with Sylvanus, and my journey to the Meoden dimension. Of Thoran jumping in with his flaming green sword. And of sweet Cornelius, fainting in the woods.

I thought of Ikovos... how brazen he'd been from the start--how thoroughly awkward *I* had been. I thought of the cold walk through the night, and the towering lodge; the impossibly long, once mysterious, hall that had led to the small study of glowing books. Then the fire, too bright to be normal, burning on its own, mesmerizing me with its elegant movements. Then the boy... leaning against the wall with a smirk on his face...

I wouldn't get farther than this. I never did. All I could see was his face, mind darting through all the moments I'd had with him... up until that night in the library... when he'd wrapped his hand under mine and...

There.

The violet flame lit above my palm. Deep, more blue than before, more dim, but otherwise the same. I lifted it to my eyes with an unstable smile. I concentrated solely on it, on the way it removed the built-up chill from Fera that I could never get rid of. It would flicker wildly, threatening to go out until I thought of Jaden again. His incredulous brow lifts, his unhinderable confidence, the clear tone of his voice, the way he had looked when he kissed me... because I had to remind myself that this perfect, magical, boy, that would have made every second of the rest of my life something rather like paradise, had actually wanted me too. Loved me too.

Yes--then the flame steadied.

I smiled, but the empty holes were already beginning to stab at my stomach, in my chest. I laid on my side, set my hand out, carefully, and pretended for as long as I could that I was back in the study. Just overly tired, having a strange sort of nightmare. And in the morning I'd see Jaden and everything would be fine.

Yeah... just a dream that he would assure me was very silly... just a silly dream.

CHAPTER 2: COLD

“Blast it! Tanis!”

That was my first thought when I woke up the next morning. Because I had gone to bed, once again, without feeding the little guy. Usually, when I did that, he’d wake me up some time past midnight; he hadn’t last night. I jumped up quickly.

“He must be so hungry that he can’t even move. He’s probably *dead!* Nothing more than a pile of fluff and bones and--”

A squeak interrupted my panic attack. And there was Tanis--over on the island counter, perched at the top of a ripped bag of dried fruit and nuts.

I sighed. “Oh good--you’re live.” I walked over, holding my hand out until he crawled to my shoulder. Then I started cleaning up the mess.

Somehow--and I really didn’t have a clue why--Tanis had hitched a ride here with me. Maybe because he’d been on my shoulder. Maybe because he’d touched the book. Sometimes I even wondered if the Gaeln had sent him to me from the very beginning... though this thought usually dispersed as soon as he started chewing holes through the furniture. But over the past six months we’d become quite kindred. Only he shared my feelings for Fera; often reacting in line. The first time we’d seen a spaceship for example, we’d both widened our eyes, dropped our jaws, and frozen in place for a good ten minutes.

Yes, despite my neglect with feeding, he was without doubt my best friend in all of Fera.

“I guess this is what I get for forgetting you last night,” I said, zipping up the last of the strewn bags.

He squeaked a confirmation and I cocked my head to him.

“I’m sorry... it wasn’t a good day, Tanis.”

He squeaked again as I walked into the bathroom. My apartment was small--one room that held a counter area and an island. Past that was my couch, a single bed, and some tall windows. Everything was metal.

“I don’t know, just the usual,” I replied, flicking on the switch. I turned around and set Tanis on the ground by the door. “If you’d like to go with me today, I wouldn’t mind,” I proposed hopefully.

He paused with what I took momentarily as a no, but then chirped an agreeance and skittered out so that I could take my shower. With a contented smile, I turned around.

The girl in the mirror didn’t look like me; she never did. Not... that I meant that literally of course; I still had the same pale skin and caramel hair. I wasn’t more than a year older, and I’d experienced no lucky last minute growth spurts. My clothes, I supposed, altered me. I was wearing the same clothes I’d had on yesterday: a tight, long-sleeved, turquoise shirt with random slits here and there, and black, narrow-legged pants. Every piece had some sort of patch or stripe of color added to it; zippers, netting. For Fera it was modest to the point of mentionable dullness; for me it was extravagant.

Still, this wasn’t what made me look different to myself either. No. The difference was in my eyes.

Cold, resolute.... empty.

I was in and out of the shower in minutes. The water in my apartment was only sufficiently hot if I got up at five a.m. to shower. By now it must have been close to seven.

I slipped on my black pants from yesterday and opted for a neon orange tank-top (all the clothes were too elastic-y and *so tight* here). Then I exited the bathroom to check the window.

And there was Fera... or rather my poor view of it. From here you could see neither down or up completely, though I wasn’t so low as to not be able to spot bits of sky showing through. There was an expanse of clouds today, but it was sunny as well; I’d probably make do with my lighter jacket.

Hunter green and neon orange go together, right?

Before leaving the apartment, I grabbed Tanis, a bag of nuts, and the abandoned papers from last night. Seeing them there on the floor like that gave me a slight stab of pain, but I was determined not to lose it today. Maybe if I could make myself do better on the after-days, I would be able to think about him more.

Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. No gender specific pronouns, Evelyn.

“Miss Avest,” Old Bill greeted as I reached the lobby. It was a spacious room on the bottom floor with dispersed seating areas; each surrounded a small fountain and patch of vegetation. In Fera plants weren’t food, they were sculptures--expensive ones at that. The ones in the lobby for instance were no more than two feet in height, but probably had cost Old Bill a bundle.

“Well, weren’t you just in quite a rush last night,” continued Bill. “I tried to stop you, but you just kept walking.”

I frowned, tucking some hair back into my loose bun. “Oh. I’m sorry, Mr. Kinst, I must not have heard you. I wasn’t feeling well.” I smiled. “Am I late on a payment, or?...”

He shook a greasy hand. “You’re the only one who isn’t, Miss Avest. No, it’s the Schawims. You won’t believe it, but they’re refusing to pay full lease again.” He scoffed incredulously. “They say that the lights are too fickle and the water too cold. Can you believe?”

“That does seem un--”

“And Josh Kibalt is acting worse--trashing the place with his parties, then making me do all the repairs.”

Kibalt parties... they *were* quite lively. On a Kibalt party night, I was always assured to get absolutely no sleep. “I’m sure that--”

“Oh, never mind all that, they’re hardly you’re trouble. What I had to tell you is that a man was looking for you... yesterday morning. I told him I could take a message, but he wouldn’t have it. He--”

“For *me*?” I interrupted, shocked.

Old Bill bobbed his scarcely grayed head. “Yes--that’s what I just said. He wanted your apartment number, but I make it a policy not to give those out.”

“What did he look like?” I asked, moving forward with a step *too* intense, and voice *too* strained, heart beating *too* quickly. Old Bill looked downright stunned; no surprise considering I normally had all the lifelikeness of a dead fish.

“Ah... it was hard to tell. He had a rather hefty jacket on... spoke strange. He was very old too.”

My chest fell with a pang. *Oh God, Evelyn, you’re such an idiot.* Tears glossed my eyes; I wanted to rub away all evidence of them. *This is what you get for last night. When will you just give up?*

Everything stalled; I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I forced myself to speak. “Okay, well, I’ll um...” Old Bill waited skeptically as I tried to hold it together “...go ahead and give out my room number next time.”

Before waiting for a response I spun around and headed for the door, down the elevator, onto the street. All the while my tears were getting worse, and my breaths were deepening to sobs.

Ugh! This isn’t fair! I can’t do this. I just can’t do this!

I wrapped my arms around me. I had to pull it together. I moved to an out-of-sight ledge behind the building and dropped down to my knees. *What do they want from me? I can’t...* The tears started again. I just let my head fall, sobbing.

I couldn’t keep doing this. Doubting that the Gaeln could be so terrible as to never let me see him again. Hoping, actually believing, that I’d see him somewhere, that they’d let me go back, or that he’d find me. It was killing me.

He’s not coming, Evelyn. You are never going to see the lodge, or the Masters, or Ikovos, or Jaden ever again!

Another gasp gave out in my chest, but it was almost forced--like I'd only expected it was coming and didn't really need to. No, me, myself... I just felt a cold. A still, dead, cold, colder than I had thus far. There was nothing but the lingering wet on my face and the ground beneath my hands. The flow of tears had stopped; my chest had steadied.

I blinked, then stood up firmly. The weight on my legs felt different, and the city ahead... I had a deep sense that something inside of me had just shifted. Or... stopped.

Tanis wriggled inside my shirt. He was undoubtedly asleep or he would have yelled at me for crying.

Doesn't matter now, I thought. I'm done.

I wiped a single arm across my face, then started off into the silver streets.

#

"Here's another one for you guys," said Seela.

Seela--a D-Roe agent that was *rarely* at the office due to her almost continual undercover work--threw another file between Jack and I. It landed on the space bridging our two desks. We both looked at it, then he held out his hands as usual. "Rock, paper, scis--"

"I got it," I interrupted dully, already reaching for the file. I set it on my pile of cases to go through, then continued with the one I was working on: yesterday's neglected homework.

"Okay," drawled Jack, going back to work.

It didn't last long.

"Well, I at least want to know what it's about," he added, snatching up the folder. He slit open the seal; I still didn't look up. "Hmm," he let out finally.

I stapled the stack I was working on and he sighed.

"Not interested?"

"It's from Seela, Jack. It's about the boys." I lifted my eyes as I said it, confident of the guess.

He narrowed at me. "*Maybe*," he asserted. "But there's something different about this one."

I lasted one whole minute before caving.

"We have a name," he announced.

My brows drew together. "A real name?"

"Yeah--one Nykon P. Blotts. Son of Rich and Shara Blotts. Both deceased." He was still perusing, but I grabbed the folder from his hands. "He's a known street runner," Jack continued. "Specializes in moving contraband, fast."

"Which is why we have his name," I followed.

"Bingo."

I looked over the file. Nykon was twelve--older than most. And we had clear photo.

"I knew I could get you interested," bragged Jack.

I eyed him. "And Seela had *nothing* to do with it?"

"Oh no," he corrected. "I'm sure she slumped her way to a healthy portion." His eyes slid over to her. She was leaning in the doorway of Tyson's office. Red shirt, latex pants. Yeah, Seela was good at getting things a certain way.

"That's not fair," I defended. "If a guy were doing the same thing, you would all praise him for it... And at least she's doing *something*." I held the folder up as I said it, self-dissatisfaction only too obvious.

Jack's mouth tipped, and he spun back to me. "I like the work you do--and the way you do it--better."

I smiled with a wrinkled nose, but didn't quite believe him. *I sorted things; Seela brought in information that could actually help these boys.*

Before going back to work, my eyes caught the last known "address" for Nykon P. Blotts. It stood out because it was only a few miles from my apartment. Just two levels down.

#

For the rest of the day I couldn't keep my mind off of Nykon. Maybe because as of this morning there was an empty place to fill inside of it. In another out-of-character move, I rearranged my desk from its default composition--something I had neglected to do thus far. I moved my black stapler thingy to the right... put my fanciest sheets of paper in the drawer beside the highlighters... set out my colorful pad of neon post-its, and switched my desk-light to a preferred violet hue. I even went so far as to leave a bag of food in the office fridge.

By the time I was heading out--Tanis in tow--I'd made up my mind to drop by Nykon's last known location. So what if I wasn't allowed, I was done messing around. *If I get fired, I get fired.*

My steps were brisker as I walked along the platforms; and the wind didn't feel as cold to me. A diminishing number of ships and unseemly lights alluded to a more depraved section of Fera as I took the elevator past my apartment and down two city levels. A flashing purple sign with foreign lettering was the first thing that I saw at the door's opening. Though I'd never been in one, I knew what it was. Gambling den. Where people could get wasted or try to luck out of their financial woes. The illicit dealings that happened in the backs of those dens was where the real money was made. Unfortunately it was enough money to keep the authorities--and companies like D-Roe--out.

I studied the cityscape warily, stepping out of the elevator and pulling out the directions I'd written down. It was barely dusk, but there were already plenty of people out looking for a good time. Luckily I wasn't worth a second look in my outfit.

The noises of Fera dulled my senses as I rounded a couple corners. The music in Fera... wasn't music. It was a thumping drone of synthetic mixes. It wasn't all bad of course; *some* of it was tolerable. It just--

My internal thoughts were interrupted--even as I was looking for the proper door--when a boy bumped into me.

"Sorry, miss."

I grabbed his sleeve. "Woah, slow down there," I said. He'd probably just filched me. *Filched?... that's what it was called right?...*

He stopped, hesitantly, and turned around. He was very small. I felt a lurch of sorrow at his sunken in cheeks and paled out eyes... but kept on mission.

"What?" was all he said. Passerby's eyed me pensively, likely prepared to disapprove should I offer money or food.

"I'm looking for someone," I explained. "A boy. He used to live around here."

"I wouldn't know about that...," he said firmly.

I knelt down. "He's not in trouble; I'm trying to help him. His name is Nykon. He was only a little older than you."

The boy's eyes--which had begun to wander--shot back to me at Nykon's name. They calmed over. "If you know what's good for you, you'll forget that name, lady." He said that, then he started to turn around.

"I-I'll pay you," I called out, but reproached myself instantly. Bribes were a *big* no-no at D-Roe--every field-agent constantly affirmed this fact--supposedly they never rendered the desired results.

Ugh, I suck at this.

Still... the boy *did* stop. His head turned back towards me and his eyes flashed with a cunning unnatural for someone so young.

“Twenty up front,” he stated. “Twenty when I get you back.”

“I--”

“This is a moving train, lady.” He held out a hand.

I noticed for the first time now that he had very nice shoes--slick, rubber, good for running--and wasn't so sure that he had needed my most severe pitias.

Not allowing for indecision, I pulled out a twenty and passed it to him. He started walking forward without a word; I followed.

The dim glow of sky was sinking. He led me through a series of streets that I knew I would *never* be able to find my way out of. The area was definitely degenerating; more-frequent clubs and smoke-leaking bars told me that much.

I was in awe at the tenacity of the boy--the way he pushed past the street-walkers, laced the roads through hovering cars, jumped over the scattered pot holes--he couldn't have been older than eight.

He stopped at a dark, seriously foreboding alley. He smirked back at me wickedly before heading in.

Of course it's a dark alley, I thought to myself, *it's always a dark alley. You know, you can bash clichés all you want, but they've become a cliché for a good reason.*

“I got a girl here needs to talk to Pattison,” said my escort.

Pattison. I didn't know why the name echoed in my head as he said it. We moved deeper and I noticed we were passing a fair number of boys. *This may not have been the smartest thing I've ever done,* I thought. *Though not entirely out of character.*

Tanis squeaked as if in utter agreement. He'd crawled up onto my shoulder, and--of course--he was giving me a disapproving look.

“I'm sorry, Tanis. I--”

The boy's gaze flicked back to me, dubious at first; but when he caught sight of Tanis on my shoulder his features lifted--and softened. For a moment he actually looked like a little kid.

“Sep,” came a voice from the shadows. “How many times have I told you not to bring people here?” It was a rough voice, but high.

Just as my escort was straightening tall, a boy stepped forward, face lit with the strobing red of a sign high above. He wasn't young--not that young--fifteen I'd guess.

“I'm sorry, Pat,” said Sep. “She gave me twenty bucks... and she just wants information.”

“Just information,” Pattison tested. Tanis croaked. “Information leads to raids on our alleys, and halts on our dealings, Sep.” Pattison put a hand out. “Give me the money.”

The small boy sighed and did so.

I drew my chest up high. “Hey, that's his, he--”

“It's *ours*, Miss...?”

“Avest.” I answered coolly.

My voice shuddered though. I didn't know if I was afraid--they were just kids after all--but the arrangement was all so ominous. I remembered too late that giving out my real name was another definite no-no.

“It's *ours*, Miss Avest,” Pattison repeated. “And rest assured we watch after our own.” His eyes laced down as he fingered the bill in his hands. Sep seemed fine; he just kept looking at Tanis. “Now, what sort of information are you after?” Pattison asked.

“She wants to know what happened to Nykon.”

A soft murmur broke out amongst the boys in the alley; but Pattison was obviously quip enough not to show any reaction. "You'll have to be more specific, Miss Avest. A *lot* happened to Nykon down here."

Something turned in my stomach, but I had to stay on point. "I'm assuming I wouldn't be able to talk to him myself...?"

He shook his head slightly. "No."

"Well... just to make sure... this is Nykon P. Blotts, right? Age 12?"

"You really think I'm going to confirm that?" Pattison mused, sinking back into a chair near the wall of the alley. His pose was loose, unworried, as if I was fly too close to his ear and nothing more. I tightened my jaw.

"I have a photo here." I pulled it out and leaned down towards Pattison. He seemed hesitant for a moment; considering. Something twisted in his eyes as he studied it, then he held it back to me, features hard.

"I don't like how much you know, Miss Avest," he started. "But I can't do much about that. It does make me wonder why you're talking to us...."

I looked into the darkness. There were clefts and chairs to rest on, mounds of boxes, a good number of boys that couldn't have been much older than Pattison. I didn't have a good answer to his question. "Well, I was looking for Nykon's last known address," I said. "When I ran into Sep."

The small boy beside me lifted one corner of his mouth. I couldn't tell whether he was thrilled that I'd mentioned him, or entertained that I'd gone with him to begin with.

"You followed the first street urchin you ran into, and now you're flashing around Nykon's photo?" *Pattison's face was definitely entertained.*

"No... yes." I sighed. *I lose at being a super-agent... forever.*

"You are one lucky girl," said Pattison, head shaking.

I checked around the alley. A pounding beat had started in a nearby club.

"How is that?" I asked. My voice was skeptical.

Pattison snorted. "Because if you'd shown this photo or asked these questions to anyone else, you would have gotten a laser through the chest... or worse. I suggest that once you leave here, you don't repeat the process."

I swallowed. I was even more nervous now... scared of the boy, the situation. He was right; this was stupid. What if I had hurt Nykon by doing this? What if these boys worked for the kidnappers?

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to go out alone at night?" he jeered.

The words stopped me solid--reminded me of a world that I didn't want to remember--reminded me that I didn't care too much if I died in this one.

"I can handle myself," I assured him.

"Is that so?" He appeared more intent. I wasn't just a fly, maybe a slightly more intriguing insect. His head cocked. "How old are you even? What could you possibly be getting for this?" He jumped up, not angry, but intense. He fingered my sweater. "Not the nicest, I'll admit--and I question the color combination--but you must have money."

"I'm not here for money," I repeated. "I'm here to help Nykon." Fresh determination coursed through me; and I was more and more certain this boy knew something.

"Nykon doesn't need your help," he feigned--brilliantly. I would have bought it if I didn't already know it wasn't true.

My eyes slipped to Sep and back. "Because he has *you*," I led on.

"*Exactly.*"

I heard a little triumphant tune in my ear as realization hit Pattison's face. Now I knew what he would have denied if I'd asked; what I needed to know before *I* could tell *him* anything that I knew.

They were friends.

Pattison swore an oath; I was afraid that his next action would be to kick me out. Instead he just laughed.

“Well, you’re a tricky one, aren’t you?”

I waited, breaths now visible from my lips. Pattison sighed.

“I’m assuming you already know that Nykon’s been kidnapped...?”

I nodded.

“Then you want to know who did it?”

I kept still, eyes focused in on Pattison. I nodded again.

He let his head fall back, releasing a puff of air into the sky that looked more like smoke than precipitation. Maybe because it was him. When he turned back down he was baring teeth. “The same ones who’ve taken all the boys, I assume.”

My heart caught. “Then you know about the disappearances?”

“Look around,” he said, arms spread, gesturing to the pack in the shadows around him. “We’d have to be idiots not to know. We’re on the menu.”

His expression was apathetic, but I instantly wanted to tell him that I was sorry. That it shouldn’t be happening to them... I had no doubt he would only laugh.

“Will you tell me everything then?” I asked carefully, taking a step closer.

He shook, almost cowering against my approach. For the first time it actually seemed like I was older. “No... I don’t have any way of knowing that you’re not working for them.”

My stomach sickened at the idea. I thought he might have been able to tell by my expression, because just as disgust crossed my face, hope crossed his.

There was a moment of silence.

“I’ll tell you what won’t matter even if you are...”

It was almost a question--to which I nodded. He took a breath.

“The ages vary. Always boys. None of them are connected in any way--no similar employers, no similar routes. The locations that they’re taken from constantly change... though...” I waited patiently. He looked like he was considering whether he should say this next part. “The docks. South side. Happens most often there.”

I nodded again, slower this time, acknowledging his generosity in telling me.

“How long has it been happening?” I asked.

“We noticed the problem two months ago... But we figured out that it’s been happening for much longer, in too small of a degree to catch. Maybe half a year ago.”

Half a year... that’s much longer than D-Roe has it marked for. Heck, that’s longer than I’ve even been here.

“Is it a certain group that’s being attacked?” I checked. “I mean...” I looked around obviously.

“No, it’s not just us,” said Pattison, moving to me, moving close. “All of the factions have been hit.”

“Is it--”

His head was shaking. “Time for you to go, Miss Avest.”

My eyes flicked to the obvious group forming behind him. They were filling dark crates with some sort of metal-piece. The shimmer of an energy pistol in the hands of one sent a shiver through me. I turned back to Pattison.

“Take her back, Sep,” he said, nodding down to the boy.

Before Sep responded, Pattison let his eyes linger on me. Like he was searching my face for something. My answering expression must have been very inferior.

His gaze slid to Tanis on my shoulder, he smirked then turned around with a snort, hand lifting. “Don’t forget to stay off the streets at night.”

I found my eyes longing to follow him as he took the head of the group of boys, but Sep was quick. Already past me and through into the street. I chased after, glancing back only once at the red alley.

I realized on my walk how much colder it had gotten. The sun was definitely down--long gone. In all my months on Fera I’d never been down this far this late. My mind was almost too focused to follow the small boy properly. I was thinking about Pattison, about the new information, about what I would do with it. I’d come up with no good options by the time Sep stopped me in the exact spot I’d found him. The violet sign was within sight.

“Here,” said Sep with finality.

I swung back to him. “Thank you,” I said, then I remembered his second twenty. “Oh, right.” I reached inside my bag and handed it to him.

He let his palm stay open, bill sitting atop unclaimed. I couldn’t help but notice the continual shift of his gaze to Tanis.

“What’s that?” he asked, nodding casually.

I smiled, and looked to my own shoulder. “Um...” Tanis--aptly pleased at the attention--did a couple acrobatic flips “...I don’t really know to be honest. But his name is Tanis.”

“Tanis?” checked the boy, brow lifting.

I nodded and his look turned even more skeptical. He fingered the bill in his hand carefully.

“I’ll, uh... I’ll make a trade for him if you like.” His eyes glowed. “We can forget the twenty.”

Just like the first night with the spaceship, Tanis and I responded in identical horror. Tanis halted his flipping to skitter beneath my hair. I had a similar urge, but thought that running from the kid might scare him, so I just shook my head.

“No, that’s alright... we’re ah... we’re close.”

Tanis squeaked from my hair.

Sep sighed. “Whatever.” Then pocketed the twenty. He seemed that he was about to turn around, but looked up at me instead. “Were you lying about all that stuff in there? Are you really going to help?” His voice was skeptic, testing, but also... hopeful.

I swallowed. “I’m going to try.”

He studied me, nodded, then started off, spinning around with a cunning brow lift. “You better.” Then he was gone.

A smile held on my face as I watched him saunter away. Tanis squeaked as if in reprimand.

“Oh Tanis, I wouldn’t have let him take you.”

He gave another chirp, less defiant. I spun around and started walking. My body was buzzing, almost high with adrenaline. This new information, a chance at actually helping...

But it was more than that. I felt a thrill, a rush, at the experience... at something actually happening. The drone of the club music and throng of people seemed to fit for once.

When Tanis and I got home, the first thing I did was write down the name of the docks and the few other tips that Pattison had given me. Then I put one of these weird things that Jack had told me to get in the oven. It was like a disc of bread with cheese on it; he’d called it a pizza. I took a shower while that was cooking. I braided my hair. I picked up clothes to actually wash. Then Tanis and me went over to the bed with the pizza and a bowl of nuts, reading an old, neglected, magazine.

It was the first night in weeks that I didn’t cry myself to sleep.

The next morning I was out the door completely on top of my game. I'd woken up early enough to get everything in order at my apartment. Tanis's cage was cleaned; he was still there. All the housework was done. My clothes were in the dryer. My hair was brushed--though I was stuck with the same outfit as yesterday being that I washed the rest.

Today was Thursday, which Jack and I reserved as early breakfast day. We stood in the long line at the counter, surrounded by the crowded noise of people, the clanging metal, the passing cars, the ever-present breeze.

"Jack, I have to tell you something," I said, lifting my face to his boldly.

He leached his gaze from the icing-crust, colored cookie through the glass, and considered me. "That looks good, huh?"

I narrowed. "Did you hear me?"

"Ooo, you're feisty," he said, brows lifting with a smirk. "That means it's something good."

More than he expects I'm sure, I thought. We moved up along the line.

"You have to promise not to say anything about it to D-Roe."

"Something *really* good," was his only response. But then he shrugged loosely. "Do I ever?"

My mind quickly scanned through all of the times he'd disobeyed a rule without telling.

"No," I said. "You don't. But this is more intense..." I didn't wait for him to react. "I went to look for Nykon last night."

His already-high brows lifted.

The rest came out in a rush.

"His address was really close to my apartment, so I couldn't help checking it out. When I went, I ran into this kid--Sep. He took me to some other boys. A gang or something, I don't know. They knew about the disappearances; knew about Nykon. They didn't trust me enough to share much, but I found out a common kidnapping location. They--"

"Hey, lady," yelled the man next to Jack, behind us in line. "Move it." He threw an arm towards the register ahead.

I mumbled a sorry and ran up. Jack's voice was relaxed behind me. "Take a chill pill, dude. She was telling a story." It made me smile.

"Um..." I started; the woman at the register waited impatiently for my decision. I was too distracted by Jack and I's conversation to even grumble over the absence of coffee. The worst thing about Fera may very well have been the lack of coffee. "I'll just take a soda and a... an apple."

She punched it in and nodded. Before I could give her any money, Jack was up beside me.

"I got hers... I have a feeling she'll be out of a job in the near future." He grinned. The woman shrugged indifferently. I glowered at him, but he was already to ordering. "Fizz-pop, and a cookie. That big one--with the sprinkles... and the pink dots."

She punched into the slick machine dully. "Got it."

"Course you do," he smiled. Ever the charmer. Then he was back focused on me, off to the side while we waited for our drinks.

"I can't believe it," he said laughing. But I wasn't in the mood to join him.

"What? What part?"

"The whole thing. You disobeying. You're so hoity-toity."

I scoffed. "What? I break the rules with you all the time!" *Is he insane?*

“Sure you do,” he said eyes rolling. “So where was it? This hot spot.”

“The south docks... Pattison, the older boy, he just said it happens most often there.”

Jack considered. A ship flew by the platform, sending a rush of air past us. “Do you trust this, this Pattison?... How can you know he’s a reliable source?”

Good question--but I did.

“Believe me, he is. It wasn’t easy getting them to tell me...”

Jack skewered his eyes--done with the two-sentence serious. “You bribed him, didn’t you?”

My eyes widened guiltily. “No.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” he noted dully, then looked to check our drinks.

“So what am I going to do, Jack?” I interrupted before he could drag out the disapproval thing.

“Ah... call me next time?”

My set look let him know that I had something else in mind. His lips turned down.

“What else do you expect to do, Evelyn? D-Roe would kill you if they knew you did this.” He chuckled. “I can just see Seela’s face. No way. No--way.”

“What good was it if I don’t tell anyone?”

“It...” His shoulders lifted. “Look, you know I’m all for going against the bosses, but not if it means you losing your job. I’d be dead bored.”

“We wouldn’t have to worry about that,” I argued. “I’m the one with the file remember. I can just put it in with everything else. The only one who could notice is--”

“Seela.” he finished for me.

“Right, and she’s barely ever at the meetings these days.” As I said the words, I realized that I’d made the decision before ever telling Jack. I was going to send in that information. If I did nothing else, I was going to try--like I’d told Sep.

“I don’t like it,” reaffirmed Jack, just as they set our drinks out on the bar.

I went to grab them, then passed his over with a smile. “You don’t have to like it.... You just have to keep it quiet.”

He took his blue drink grudgingly. “And have an extra room made up at my apartment when they fire you.”

“That too,” I shot back, feet already taking in the path towards D-Roe.

CHAPTER 3: RISK

Despite my urgency in getting there, once I was at work I didn't put the file in. I did all of my piled up cases first... and everything new that had come in. I *re-re-arranged* my desk... I cleaned out the office fridge. I'd never been so productive since the day I'd started here.

It was close to five when Jack whispered to me from above. "If one were planning on doing anything debatably illicit, they might want to do it before the building locks down."

My head shot up from my nervous study of an unnecessarily organized file in time to see Jack walking towards the door. He wasn't the only one. Almost everyone else in the office was gone; three were clicking off their lamps.

Curse it.

My eyes hit the drawer on my right. Inside was the file with the added information.

Here's hoping Seela isn't here tomorrow, I thought once, before sliding open the drawer, grabbing the paper, flicking off my desk-light, shrugging on my coat, and walking across the large room towards Tyson's office. *This really was stupid to save*, I told myself. *I could have just made Jack bring it in if I'd done it earlier.* The cases all went in a holder on Tyson's desk.

I guess it doesn't matter since the office is probably...

"No. I need them by the morning. I won't be able to send out on the weekend."

...empty.

That was Tyson's voice. His *phone* voice--where you couldn't really tell whether he was talking business or asking his girlfriend if she wanted him to pick something up on the way home from work.

My feet froze. *Oh great, Evelyn. Great. Great. Great.* That's what I *thought*... but what I *felt*... There was an absence. A noticeable absence. I was hearing Tyson's voice, but I didn't feel a crumbling pain, no stings... in actuality it seemed like I was feeling *less*.

I listened distantly to the stream of words from the room, wondering at the spectacle that was my own mind, then I stepped forward.

The room was light compared to the outer office at the moment. *Not usually like this.* To the left was a long stretch of space that held the meeting table. All along the wall, on the upper half, were windows. To the right was Tyson's space: The strangely-wood desk. The crate *on* the strangely wood desk for files. The cush office chair. Tyson *in* the cush office chair.

My head dropped.

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine. Whatever you like. We just need to make sure the fit's right."

I stepped forward slowly. He hadn't seen me; or at least hadn't looked at me. He was facing the windowed wall, gazing out while he snaked a pen around his fingers.

"It's just a big case," he continued. "And once we commit to someone there's no going back."

Nice, sounds like a business call, I thought, letting my mind run over that instead of me as I moved closer. I was almost to the box now.

He sighed, suddenly exasperated. "Can you leave your cheap insecurities out of this for five seconds? *You're* not the problem; I just need a fresh face."

Okay, never mind. Definitely his girlfriend. ...And he's a douche.

I dropped the file in, a little less panicked, then spun around for the door. As I was hitting the outer room I heard him once more, loudly.

"I'll decide when something comes. It's my call, my--..." The rest droned out. My head shook.

Well, that wasn't too terrible. I actually felt a confidence at my bravery, and at my lack of affectedness--superior even. When I reached the familiar streets outside of D-Roe, I felt like I could take them on. Like I knew them, couldn't be tripped up by them. I stopped inside a store near my apartment to grab something different for dinner. The only thing I had at home was dried fruit and nuts. All I *ever* ate in Fera--apart from the pizza last night--was fruit and nuts. Because nothing else really looked like food. It was all too colorful, too shiny, too... *pretty* to be natural. But today I wanted some, for whatever reason.

I ended up with another pizza, a container of breakfast treats that were covered on the top with icing, named pop-tarts, and a blue box of something very odd, but intriguing aptly named Macaroni and Cheese.

I waved to Old Bill at the entrance of the apartment; he was again startled by my vigor. A few people passed me in the hall, couples mostly, that's who lived here. My room was dark when I first got in... must have been something wrong with the lights.

"Maybe the Schawims weren't so ridiculous after all," I mused, setting down the bags. Then I went to the manual switch.

"No, it wasn't them," said a voice, "it was me."

My body jumped. *I* jumped--a good five feet back. Unfortunately "back," in this case, was closer to the voice. I caught myself again and spun the other way. The figure was standing behind the door I'd entered.

"Well, settle down there jumpy--I'll turn 'em back on if you like...." I heard a scoff. "Didn't know you were that afraid of the dark."

My heart beat high and hot in my chest. Maybe because the voice sounded so familiar. The flash of white light coming on confirmed it.

In front of me. Right now. Was a man--an old man--with a full, covering, brown robe, a silver beard falling down past his chest, a wide chagrined expression, and a wizard's hat pointed up stiffly. I knew who it was of course; I knew it was just one of the faces that I'd been wishing, longing, *dying* to see for months now--for what felt like a lifetime.

Hope shot up inside me like a geyser; but I just as quickly bottled it.

I wasn't an idiot. This man was one thing, but not everything. Not what I wanted most; or what would satisfy. Did the Gaeln think I was stupid enough not to know that seeing him meant nothing? That they still intended to torture me? Or maybe they just didn't care.

"Adzamaruha," I whispered, eyes hesitant.

"Ah, so it was indeed the dark," he said, cheerily. "Because you don't look like you're afraid now...."

I didn't argue; I just stayed very still.

"No matter. A fine improvement I say. You were much too skitter-ish before." He stepped forward, shrugging off the robe, revealing a silky under-cloak.

My head was numb with blurs of magic and memories, fighting between reality and practicality. Hadn't I just been feeling like I had some sort of handle on things?

"I daresay I have much to explain to you." He flung his robe over my island counter. "First though, I am curious--did you run back?"

"What?" I asked. It was a weak, throaty sound.

"When I told you to hurry, told you they were coming... did you run?"

The pain of the memory burned in my chest. "Of course I did."

"And the Gaeln. The flowy-mibobbers--you spoke with them?"

What are you doing here? How are you here? Is there anyone with you? These questions kept repeating so loudly that I could barely think straight.

Flowy, flowy... I stood and felt faint. I almost fell back to the floor.

“Evangeline, are you quite alright?” The old man rushed towards me, stopping short to stand with his hands on his hips. “Well, good grief. You scarcely even look like you’ve been eating. I should have expected to find out as much, but when you take one on as an apprentice, there’s little to be done but believe the best of them.”

My hands found the edge of the couch; I lifted myself up onto it. Adzamaruha wasted no time in sitting beside me.

“I would gladly have been here to see that you were well, but it’s taken me this long simply to find you. Then again, they do get their way in these cases, so I probably wasn’t meant to.”

“The Gaeln,” I said, trying to grasp his words.

“Yes, yes, the Gaeln. So you did talk to them then?”

I looked up, his face was bright, undaunted. “Yes.”

“And they promised to defeat the Meoden?”

“Yes.” This came out weakly.

“What about your friends? How did they fare?”

I had to keep blinking, to fit the unabashed wizard into my space-like apartment. “You don’t know?”

He paused, then his head shook. And here something gave out in my chest. Maybe the last of what I was holding on to. He *was* alone. This was it. But I hadn’t expected... *He doesn’t even know if their okay. For all I know they’re...*

“I can’t scarcely be expected to have an idea of it,” he said. “I left that world sometime before you, I imagine. And once you leave, there’s no going back.”

“How did you?” I asked mechanically; my tone was blank. Before he could go into a long explanation, I rephrased the question. “I mean, can anyone come here?”

He scoffed, folding up his arms. “Hardly! To think anyone but me could travel worlds.” His eyes rolled. “Well and the Gaeln of course, but I’m the only human.... Unless they choose to *send* someone as in your place,” he considered out loud.

His arms spread. I was just staring at some arbitrary point on my floor tile.

“Anyways--none of this is why I came to find you. I am wanting to see if you would like a job.”

I stood up, moving my eyes past him to my bags. His voice sounded empty to me.

“Part time, nothing too complex,” he continued. I put the pizza into the oven, and unloaded the rest of my items. “I’m doing quite a lot since arriving and--”

“I can’t,” I interrupted, straightening up. “I would like to.” I moved closer to him. “I do enjoy your company. But--” *the very last thing I want is a constant reminder of my old world. “But” I have a life here that I am trying to accept. “But” I promised Sep that I would try* “--I just can’t. Too busy.” I smiled.

“Oh....” he let out, mouth agape. It lifted suddenly. “Well, I suppose I could get the dock boy down the street to do it. Not many customers to be worried of yet.”

I was grateful for his easy release. Now I realized I just wanted him to be gone.

“You have a shop then?” I asked, moving over to my dryer.

“Yes, yes.”

I shoveled out clothes, waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t my head spun to look at him. “What type of--”

“Oh, no, no, no,” he waved. “I can’t answer. This area is hardly secure.”

His gaze moved around suspiciously. He was going to make it so easy to treat this whole night as a hallucination.

“But I wouldn’t mind a visit,” he continued. “I’m sure you could find something useful.”

I nodded, turning back to my laundry. It was doubtful that would happen.

“Umm... well,” I heard behind me, then a loud clap. “That would be more or less all I had to say. Would you please tell that ridiculously paranoid man downstairs to let me up freely in the future?”

I turned around. Adzamaruha was standing.

“I will no doubt need to be in contact when things...” he flung the robe over his body “...Well, you’ll know.”

Before I could contemplate this, he was gone--hand running over my lock, emitting a pink spark that somehow opened the door. It shut firmly behind him. After that I didn’t think about his presence; I knew if I waited until tomorrow instead I would be more stable. I folded my clothes, ate my pizza, and went to bed--with only thoughts of Fera and how I could help the boys tomorrow running through my mind.

#

“You look tired,” said Jack as I sat down at my desk.

I was late for work for the very first time ever. My eyes kept shifting around like I was about to be put into lock-up.

“I had a weird night,” I answered him. He looked nice this morning. Black t-shirt, black pants. Pretty much as slick as it got for Jack.

“Bad weird, or...?”

“Umm...” *Jeez, why did I even tell him that? I usually keep quiet with Jack about home life.* “Just a visit from an old relative.” I shrugged.

“Ah,” he empathized. “Well, you also look nice if that helps.”

I was wearing my favorite, most comfortable, shirt. A periwinkle blue tank-top made of super-thin stretchy material. With that I had some regular pants.

“Laundry day,” I said, smiling. Again--unusually informative of me. I tapped a pen nervously on my leg, then I looked at Jack. “Okay--is she here or not?”

“Not here,” he said.

I sighed.

“But it’s not all good news,” he continued.

“Why? What? Did someone else notice?” My eyes shot towards Tyson’s office.

Jack didn’t answer right away; which was scary in and of itself. “Well--”

“Oh good, you’re here,” said Julie. She was one of the slightly-higher-than-regular-level employees--a little too snooty for her own good--and she was talking to me.

“We’re starting in five minutes. I’ll unlock the cooler for you so you can make sure that you have everything. Everyone eats on Fridays.”

“What?” I managed.

She froze. “Gallin didn’t tell you?”

“She just got here,” defended Jack.

Julie threw a hand in the air. “Should’ve known. Doesn’t matter. Follow me.”

As she turned around and started walking, my eyes shot to Jack. He was wincing.

“Come on, Miss Avest,” called Julie.

I started up after her rather brisk pace across the office, but gestured for Jack to follow.

“What’s happening?” I whispered.

“Ah... Seela wasn’t the only one not here.”

I shook my head, not understanding.

“Chrissa’s off today. Sick with some sort of flu...”

Chrissa was Tyson's personal secretary. I still wasn't getting it and we were almost to the door of the meeting room. "Jack, I need a real explanation here. We're out of time."

He checked ahead, then back. "Right. Okay. Ah... usually Jeff takes over for Chrissa when she's not here, but Jeff's still on his honeymoon off-world. That forced them to find a replacement, which our ever-so-prudent Julie chose alphabetically. Avest being what it is with the "a" and all... you came up."

My eyes widened. Julie was through the door. I froze before the frame, making some sort of defiant squeaky noise. "I have to be Tyson's secretary?"

"No," said Jack, expression glummer now than a wince. "It's Friday."

Friday. Friday. Friday means... My gaze fell on the long table in the next room. Board meeting. I looked to Jack, head shaking quickly back and forth.

"It's no big deal," he encouraged. "Just serve 'em their food and keep quiet."

"Avest," yelled Julie from the next room.

"I—"

"You'll do great," Jack whispered in my ear. Then he was gone back towards the desks.

"Avest!" repeated Julie.

With a jump, I entered the room. The coarse woman was over by a cabinet past the long desk.

"Good heavens, child. I don't have all day."

"Sorry," I managed, rushing towards her.

"Alright, here are the drinks, first two shelves. Then we have salads, energy bars, bagels." It didn't help that I hardly knew what any of these things were. "On top of that..." she continued, moving towards the other side of the room "...you'll be passing out cases as the subjects come up. I've made copies of everything, and don't worry, I'll give you a cue when to start the next stack." She pointed to a divider on the top of a desk that was set against the window. In it was what looked like a dozen folders.

"Drinks, food, files... just be prepared to follow orders and you'll be fine." She was over by the door now; she spread her hand out, fingers splayed. "Five minutes."

Then she left me alone in the office.

"Oh my," I whispered. I put a balled fist up to my mouth, then I studied around the room. "Right. I can do this." With that I walked over to the cabinet, and tried to get a handle on the contents.

#

Five hours later, the meeting was still in full swing. I was aware from the beginning that it would be this long; sometimes meetings went past three on Fridays, especially lately with the high number of cases. All in all I was holding up well, though. After I'd gotten all the food and drinks, it was pretty smooth sailing. And no one seemed impatient with my lack of aptitude--except maybe Julie.

All I had left to do now was refill drinks and be ready to pass files when commanded. I was pretty good with that, considering that I'd logged half of them myself. I had a chair over by the cabinet, but opted to stand beside it instead so that I would have a full view of the table should anyone need anything. There were seven people there; I knew all of their names from filing. Two women, including Julie. Four men. And then Tyson at the head.

Tyson... would have been easier to take if not for my guest last night. It was fine as long as I didn't stare too long, or listen too hard. But the contrast from before; I still felt numbly lifeless.

We'd moved through nine cases so far, and the announcement of the last was the first thing to shake me up.

"Alright, so on to the big stuff," announced Tyson. Julie nodded to me at almost the same second.

“Great,” said Cunter, “because I don’t have half an idea what’s going on with this case right now.”

I began to pass the papers discreetly; each was a struggle to release. What if they noticed? I knew I’d put it in right, but wouldn’t Seela have told them directly if it was something this important? And what about when she did hear? She’d have to eventually. I really hadn’t thought this through....

“Don’t you know that’s how it works with these,” drawled Katie, the younger woman on the board. Everyone was studying the slips now, fairly quiet.

I couldn’t help but look and Tyson’s face--my job was on the line at this point after all. He was grazing the paper over distantly with a look, uninvolved--then again he always looked like that, so it wasn’t much of a sign.

“It would be nice if Seela could show up for one of these meetings,” noted Katie, looking up from her folder. “I’d like to get a first-hand account of her sources.”

Cunter lifted a hand to me, gesturing to his cup. I shot up to get the pitcher.

“To be honest,” started Tyson’s, fingers flipping to another page, “I don’t think we’ll be on this much longer. A large division might be taking over. I just wanted to let you all look over the new information...”

I poured the water into Cunter’s cup, but my eyes were still on Tyson. His brows had narrowed, just slightly, and he was turning back and forth between two pages. My heart beat off-kilter.

“I’m rather surprised she got a name,” noted Katie. “It might be wise to wait on further action, until we see what else she can learn.”

There was a pause as the group continued scanning the pages.

“Problem is she’s already too high risk. I’ll be pulling her soon.”

I went back by the window.

“Well, I think it’s about time for that,” noted James, another man in the group. “I hate what’s going on as much as the next guy, but I think we’ve reached a point where we can realize that there’s not much to be done.”

“How can you say that?” asked Katie.

“By us.” James finished.

“He might be right,” agreed Cunter. “Not that we should drop it completely... but it’s just gotten too big for us. The kidnappings have branched out to what--the Vraliene now? We should pass it on to a larger department.”

“What department?” countered Katie. “We’re the most efficient on Fera.”

“Most efficient, but not the biggest.”

“These boys deserve the best.”

“Of course, I agree. It’s just....”

Silence spread through the room. I was just as thoughtful; I’d not heard so much about our department since I started here.

“Who logged this file, Julie?” Tyson asked suddenly, taking advantage of the break in debate.

I swallowed, grip tightening on the pitcher.

Julie looked down to her own pamphlet. “Ah...” Everyone waited disinterestedly. Mr. Mocturne called me over for a refill. “That would be either Jack Gallin or Evelyn Avest.”

No one seemed to react. The pitcher shook slightly in my hands.

Tyson narrowed. “Gallin’s the boy from...”

“Venare,” finished Julie.

“And the other?”

The older woman’s eyes flicked to me. “She’s young too, only been with us five months.”

Okay, Evelyn, remember what Jack said. Just keep quiet.

“You have no way of knowing which did it?” asked Tyson.

“Well, you could ask yourself. That’s her there.” Julie pointed to me mid-pour. All of them looked. Tyson’s study may have been the strangest, because I was fairly certain he’d never looked me in the face before... not that that lasted long--it was soon moving down my body, to my hands holding the shaky jug.

I straightened up. “Yes. I did it,” I answered surely. I wasn’t about to get Jack in trouble. “Seela left it two days ago--I put it in last night.”

“Right,” said Tyson, already turning to the others. “Well, at this point all we can really do is wait. The information is being acted on, and like I said, a larger division may be taking over.”

“Sorry Katie,” he added with a dry smirk.

I moved back towards the cabinet, setting the pitcher inside it. Maybe I was over-reacting before; Tyson didn’t seem that interested.

“So we pretty much just let Seela keep doing what she’s doing?” asked a male voice humoredly.

“That’s the plan,” answered Tyson, tone light. A few of them laughed.

“Are we done then?” asked Katie. “It didn’t seem like we went over much.”

Julie flipped through the stacks. Tyson answered.

“You’re right, and I may be calling a weekend meet depending on how things develop.... But for now, I think you’re all free to go.”

A sigh went through the room, not the slightest of which was mine. I kept my back turned as I heard everyone shuffling behind me: grabbing papers, lifting bags, a few conversations. I tried to grab the cups as quickly as possible, not letting my eyes rest in any one place. Julie handed me a key when I passed her and Tyson talking. She told me to lock up the food and give it back when I was done.

It took me fifteen minutes to clean, and a lack of noise told me I was the only person left in the room. I was probably close to the only person left in the whole office--Friday was a half-day. *Maybe I could try to see Pattison again tonight*, I considered. Though I didn’t know how well he’d take to another visit, let alone giving me more information. And there was the small issue of not knowing how in space to find Pattison. *I suppose my usefulness has dried up for the time being.*

I locked the cabinet and turned around.

“Very thorough,” said Tyson. He was leaning against the long desk closest to me.

I didn’t jump at the surprise. I lifted slowly, and nodded.

His arms were crossed; his pose was casual. I walked past him, hopeful at an escape.

“That’s not all I had to say, Miss Avest.”

Guess not. My fingers tightened around the keys.

“But while you’re over there you can get the door.”

I wanted to let out a breath, to release how unprepared I was for this situation. But I had gotten myself into this--and doing something that I’d thought was right...

I closed the door as he instructed, then walked back over with my chin raised just a fraction.

“Would you like to...” he gestured to a chair beside and below him, expression unreadable.

“I’m fine,” I said; my arms were hugged around my waste awkwardly. Not that it made much of a difference--if he was anything like... the other boy, as I’d thought from the beginning, there would be nothing to keep me from utter inferiority.

“So,” he started. “You’ve been here a while.”

“Not that long,” I answered.

“Half a year’s long enough to know you’re way around the place.”

I lifted one shoulder loosely, my nervousness only too obvious. I wasn’t meeting his gaze too often.

“What made you decide to join?”

I wonder how he'd respond if I told him that a note told me to do it?...

"Does that--" I swallowed. "Does that matter?"

"You mean if I'm going to fire you anyways?" His mouth curved up to a smirk, but it was more scary than friendly. He didn't wait for an answer. "Yes. To me it does."

I took breath. The fraction of a second that I met his gaze was too long, but I held it. "To help people, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"No. I'm sure." I *was* sure. That's what I was doing here; that was all I had left to do.

He nodded to the file on the table. "You want to tell me what you put in there, or should I?"

Blast it all. "Seela had already told you."

"Everything that happens goes through me..." his eyes hit me in full force. "How did you get it?"

I considered whether or not I should tell, though not for very long. I couldn't really get in more trouble than I was. "From a ga-- a boy on the lower levels... I saw that Nykon used to live near my apartment, and went there to look into it."

He was waiting for me to finish; a ship flew by the screen of window behind him.

"There was a young man there, who had known Nykon before he vanished, he told me that the south side docks got the worst of it." I tried to keep my chin up.

"Just like that." he tested.

After bribery and inept coercion. "Pretty much."

"What made you believe him?" There was a note of curiosity with this question. I knew my answer would be unsatisfactory.

"He believed me." The image of the faces of those boys flashed through my head; sending a rush of confidence at my decision through me. "And I still think the information is right."

His brows narrowed, scrutinizing me if I wasn't mistaken. What was he looking for? I'd been here for months, and he didn't even know my name. What qualm could he have over firing me that would be worth his time now?...

I bit my lip.

"Don't worry, kid. You're new," he sighed, straightening up. "So I'll let you off with a warning. Don't let it happen again."

The words came as a shock. As soon as he'd asked Julie about the logger, I was sure my job was toast.

"And stay out of the meetings." He took the keys from my wound fingers as he said it, then turned around.

I was so overcome with glee by this final assertion--good news on top of more good news--that I let out a wistful sigh. "Well, if I'm *absolutely forbidden*."

I thought it was low, but he turned around, and I didn't have time to hide the sarcasm from my face. One of his brows was arched.

"Well, you're a piece, aren't you?"

"I don't know what that means." I almost clamped my hand over my mouth then and there--now it seemed I was *trying* to lose my job.

He crossed his arms. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," I answered, a little less brave at the way he was eyeing me. His perusal continued, not lewd, more scrutinizing like before; it reminded me of his douchiness last night though--he seemed to keep responding as if I wasn't in the room.

"I changed my mind," he said suddenly, without looking up. "There are repercussions."

"What?"

He ignored me, heading back towards his desk. I followed... as he seemed to expect I would. A blast pistol came flying towards my chest, I barely managed to catch it. It felt awkward in my grip.

“You know how to use that?”

“What?”

He ignored me again, lacing through a pile of files.

I looked down at the weapon. I *did* know--technically. I'd had to train when I'd started here. It had been mostly a safety course, though, and I hadn't been the greatest. This gun was small, slick, black.

“Well enough,” I got out, barely, before he interrupted me again.

“Ever done reconnaissance?”

“What?” I gasped out a third time now. Before he could get impatient, I amended. “No. Nothing like that. I've never done anything out of the office.”

“Good--I like a fresh eye.” He handed me a file; it wasn't thick. “There's an address in there, lower city, multiple photographs included. You're going to go there and watch the entrance--every night this weekend, next week--on until I tell you differently.”

My eyes were wide.

“This isn't that severe, Miss Avest. Just simple surveillance.” He leaned back into his chair, fingering a pen. It was hard not to calm at his nonchalance.

“Bu-- Why now? Why when I--” He wasn't going to answer these sorts of questions. “I don't have a car.”

“Julie will set you up with that. All the other information you need is in the file.”

Everything but the necessary driving skills. I doubted that telling him this would go over, and... well, I wanted to do this. I thought of a loop-hole.

“Can Jack come with me? Er... Mr. Gallin?”

“Are you guys a thing?”

Huh? “No,” I answered quickly.

“Fine then. Just make sure to log it in with Julie.”

His tone sounded final, but I felt anything but prepared. “Umm...”

“You have a transmitter?”

“Yes,” I answered. They were mandatory at D-Roe.

“Then you'll hear from me on that if I have any questions.” This was definitely final. No sign of interest left on his face.

I looked down at the gun, at the file, took a gulp, then went for the door. Once I was in the outer office I paused, struggling at first to believe all that had just happened. The items in my hands remained though. I tried to guess at what I should be feeling--scared? relieved? anxious? But I didn't feel any of those; I didn't know what I felt.

So I shook my head, opened the folder, pocketed the gun, and started reading over this, my first assignment.

CHAPTER 4: LIGHTNING

Over the following weekend, I did just as Tyson said.

The first night I read up on the case--sketchy information at best, but enough to know it was related to the kidnappings, however distant. To my amazement the location for surveillance was a ware-port at the south side docks. It didn't make sense at first because, even if Tyson had believed my report, he couldn't have put together a job from it so quickly. That was when I'd realized that *my* information had never been new news to him. If he hadn't been sure of it already, he would have been compelled to correct the file when the board was present. He hadn't then, so he must have known even before. Maybe that was the reason he hadn't fired me: because I'd been right.

When I'd told Jack he'd been only too happy to come along, especially once he knew it involved the boys... *especially* once he'd found out he'd get to drive the speeder. It was a silver, slick little thing--just enough space for two, with a backseat that could carry luggage. The wheels were wide, and rimmed with blue--though they seemed unwarranted to me since it flew a good foot off the ground.

That was what I was sitting in now. Tuesday night. Around eleven o'clock. We'd be here until three at least. The building ahead of us was large and non-descript. We stayed parked on a sidewalk down from its entrance; the area around wasn't crowded with people--not at this time of night at least--but there were plenty of other ships to keep ours unnoticed. The surrounding area was shady, *very* shady. But since we were near a platform edge, the star-filled sky to our right made it seem like something set apart. When my eyes weren't on the single-door entrance I was watching that.

"Seems like a dead night," drawled Jack from the driver's seat.

"Hasn't it always been?" I pointed out. I was wearing a long-sleeved silver sweater, but had neglected my coat. I was cold.

"On Sunday we got those photos."

Two men walking in with a load of boxes--one had come back out for a smoke. Photographs were more or less our only directive. That was how recon worked, I supposed.

"For all the good they did," I said, eyes still on the building's doorway. When we'd turned in the pictures on Monday, the two men had been identified as regular for-hire muscle--albeit convicted for-hire muscle.

"It confirmed that something's going on in this place," proposed Jack.

I hugged my arms around me. "Tyson wouldn't have us here if he didn't already know that."

"I still don't know why he has us here now."

"Good point." I shivered.

"You cold?"

"A bit." My shoulders shrugged. We kept the back window open a crack so that the music from a nearby club came in; made the extended silence more bearable.

Jack reached for something from his bag in the back.

"You gotta try this then," he started. "It'll heat you right up."

"Something weird?" I complained, eyeing the packet in his hands. "You know I don't like that stuff."

"Yeah, it makes me wonder what you eat." He dumped the contents in a cup and clicked it to the car's water dispenser. "If you're gonna be all macho-super-agent you have to at least try this."

I sighed, scrutinizing a man walking down the street. "I'm not a macho-super-agent, I--"

He shoved the cup at me. It was brown liquid, hot.

"Just try it," he said.

I took a hesitant sip; amidst it my eyes widened and the sip turned to a gulp.

“Oh my goodness, it’s coffee.” I took another large swig; it was wonderful, the taste, the smell. “Someone told me there was no coffee here, oh, Jack, thank you for--”

His expression stopped me.

“What’s coffee?” He pointed to the cup. “That’s crimto.”

One of my brows went up, then my eyes moved down to the cup. *That was brilliant, Evelyn.*

“Crimto?” I repeated.

He nodded. “Coffee?” His tone mimicked mine.

“Ah...”

“What do you mean ‘someone told you there was none *here*’?... I thought you’ve always lived of Fera.”

“I have,” I said, too quickly. “I meant to say crimto, I...”

The man moving on the walkway ahead drew our attention. He was getting too close to the building, *our* building. He stopped in front of it.

“Camera time,” I whispered--a little too pleased at the interruption. Jack seemed to drop the coffee thing at that; his attention span wasn’t very extensive.

But I knew....

Being around Jack this often was making me sloppy. The last thing I could afford to do was have people thinking that I thought I was from another world. *I didn’t even want to remember it.*

I took a sip of my crimto as Jack snapped away. It felt bitter in my mouth all the sudden, too many memories....

#

“He’s a killer, Jack. We need to be more careful.”

“You worry too much.”

I took a breath, head shaking. It was Thursday, we’d gotten the results back from the photos we’d taken on Tuesday this morning. The man... the one who’d walked into our building... he was bad. The killing part of his resume was the easiest thing for me to mention.

“*You* don’t worry enough.”

“That may be true...,” Jack allowed, a grin on his face. It fell to a frown when he looked out the speeder. “I’m worried about this weather.”

My eyes moved to the window on my right; my star-dotted sky was being invaded--pitch black marked the clouds too dark to actually see.

“Don’t like the rain?” I asked distantly, gaze still on the sky.

“No. Not in the least.” He took a drink of something. “You?”

I paused--not *unable* to answer, just not driven to. “Don’t think I care either way....”

“Want some more crimto?” he asked, passing me a cup.

“No thanks.” I looked back at him. “Got anything else?”

His lips pursed; my eyes turned to the building as he shuffled through his bag--the streets were so empty tonight.

“Nope. Unless you want Rintar?...”

Rintar. Green. I didn’t think I could drink something green. “I’m good.”

He straightened in his seat.

An hour or so later Jack was still asleep. He’d been like that for a while, now I was starting to wish that I could join him. I’d been fine every other night, but the lack of sleep was beginning to pile--plus I was cold. My

mind had nothing to do but rest on this new guy, Kinkade. All the facts I'd heard that I didn't want to have... all the things he would do to these stolen kids without a second thought.

"Jack," I said, unable to stand the silence.

He moaned. I pressed my lips.

"Jack, I need to get out for a minute--get a drink or something. Can you watch the door for me?"

He yawned; it took longer than I would have liked for him to wake fully.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "Sorry. That is what I'm here for."

I smiled, then popped out of the car. My breath was like a cloud in front of me--thankfully I had my green sweater tonight.

I made it to the sidewalk before the window rolled down behind me. "Get me a snack, will ya?"

I nodded; a strike of thunder sounded in the same moment. My sky was all black now.

"Hurry," said Jack. "Don't want to get stuck out in that."

I nodded again, about to turn around, when a thought hit me.

"Wait, Jack?"

"What?" He yawned.

"Aren't you going to tell me that I shouldn't walk out here by myself?" It was definitely dark.

His eyes looped around. "Why?"

I stared for a moment, then a smile stretched across my face. "I love you sometimes, Jack."

He shrugged. "Hard not to."

As I marched towards the shop, I thought about my makeshift partner. I really didn't know what I *would* do without him. *It would be hard....* The lightning flashed again; my pace increased. *Like this job. I'd be so chicken by myself. It's not really safe is it.... I suppose that's why Tyson gave me the pistol.*

The weapon suddenly felt very heavy on my hip. I ignored this, getting in and out of the shop quickly--just a liquor store. Everyone in it gave me the creeps, all looking me over strangely. By the time I was marching back my legs were darting... the sound of the window made me jump.

"You just got a call," said Jack from inside the warm vehicle. "Tyson. He didn't approve of you not having your transmitter on you for the record."

I passed Jack his drink through the window, heart still beating too fast. "Okay, well let me get inside then you can tell me what it's about."

"Better not. You'll just be heading back out."

My brows arched.

"You just got another job; I'm taking over here tonight. Tyson wants you to meet him on the platform near your apartment."

"My apartment?"

"Yeah."

"Right *now*?"

He nodded. "You're going to be... well, he said he'd fill you in on the details, but you should be dressed to go out. Clubbing specifically."

"Clubbing?"

Jack shrugged. The lightning lit the black space ahead--I looked over to the building, back down at him.

"How long do I have?"

"Half an hour."

"Great."

"You can walk from here, right?"

I checked behind me and nodded. “You want this?”

“Surely,” he said, taking my drink. “Be safe.”

“You too,” I said, pulling up my hood.

“Have fun,” I heard him whisper comically as I started off. The idea of him being there alone tonight didn’t help my nerves.

#

“You have a note, Miss Avest.” Old Bill greeted me when I got to my apartment.

I didn’t have time to chat. I went through the pleasantries as quickly as possible, got the small slip, and went for my room.

Inside, I tried to ignore the guilt I felt at Tanis’s instantaneous leap to my shoulder. I’d not been around a lot thanks to the new assignment. I started digging through my clothes right away, racking my brain at what on earth would be ‘club-appropriate.’ I ended up in a long shimmery white shirt--sleeves cut into an ornate arrangement at the top--and my tight black pants. For shoes I had nothing but the boots. Forget make-up, I didn’t even own any. My hair was forgotten. I punched my code into the door.

“Darn it, the note.”

I didn’t have a lot of time--it took me twenty minutes just to get here. I opened the paper left on my island. It read:

Dear Evangeline, Don’t go anywhere tonight. --AZ

“Oh fabulous,” I moaned.

I thought about it for no more than two seconds, then crumpled the note--discarding it on the floor--and rushed out the door.

#

“You’re late.”

“You didn’t give me much warning.”

I could hear Tyson’s voice through the window of a ridiculously sleek speeder parked under the cove of my apartment. Couldn’t see *him*--too dark. The back door clicked open; I got in and the vehicle sped off immediately.

Tyson was in the seat next to me, not a problem since the back was large enough for five. Lights and buttons adorned everything, a black glass screen was between us and the front; I didn’t have time to examine further.

“How’s Gallin?” asked Tyson.

“Fine.” His words sounded more like a courtesy than interest; I guessed we had a ways to go.

“Good. Let me tell you what we’ll be doing. Then... we can deal with the other stuff.”

Other stuff?

“You realize by now that you’re working on the kidnapping case,” he checked. His face was too dark to read, but I could see a bit of what he was wearing--black, nicely lined, pants. Suit over-jacket with a t-shirt underneath.

“Of course, it’s in the file.”

“You’d be surprised how many people don’t read those.”

I didn't know what to say to this.

"That man you photographed--two days ago--"

"Kinkade." A shutter ran down my back at my own naming.

"Yeah," said Tyson. "His presence is the best lead we have on the case; he was off-world up until a week ago. Since it seems you've read up on him you'll know he has a history with human trafficking. If here's here he has a hand in the disappearances."

"You think he's running it?"

"No, not nearly. But it's a start. Especially since we know where to find him."

I felt a lurch of daunting.

"A club. Adalance. He's got plenty of friends there; an uncle in management."

"That's where we're going." I guessed.

"Where we almost are. Lose the pants."

"What?" I wondered if he could see my incredulous expression.

"You want to help--don't argue with me."

I swallowed, and looked down. I supposed it wasn't so bad. My shirt was long enough to act as a dress--albeit a short one.

"When we get in there, follow my lead. Don't stay beside me the entire time though. If you see Kinkade come find me--you can always call."

I nodded, pulling the last leg over my shoe.

"Those are all you have?" He pointed to the boots.

"Umm..."

"Socks?"

"Yeah."

"Wear those," he said tersely. I would never understand the fashions of this place.

When I'd pulled both off, he passed me a small tube.

"Put that on," he said.

Lipstick... of course.

"There's a mirror above you."

I flipped the cover; a light turned on in unison. It wasn't difficult in the smooth vehicle, despite my lack of ability. The color was a rich crimson.

"We can't use our real names obviously. Just call me boss when necessary."

Boss... appropriate I suppose.

"You'll go by Eve."

The lipstick froze in my hands.

Nothing, this entire night, made my stomach twist like that had. Eve... my name, the name he'd called me, coming from the tone so similar... but I would keep hearing it, and there were things more important here.

"Alright," I said firmly, clipping the cap shut.

Tyson looked me over once, judging again, I could see his face now with the light on. He was good at looking the part: dangerous, aloof, dark... It made me shrink at the night ahead.

"Let your hair down, and you're good," he said, the door clicked open at the same moment. We had stopped.

He started through his side, and I did the same from mine. I barely caught site of the dark, crowd-filled streets, and flashing, stair-proceeded, entrance before he was beside me. I couldn't help wondering, as his eyes grazed me over again, if he did this very often.

A swell built up in my throat. "Tyson?"

"Boss," he whispered, lips to my ear. His tone wasn't reproachful.

"Why am I here?..."

He didn't answer; he just put on a smirk, latching my arm and pulling me towards the club entrance.

#

I'd been in the pounding club for an hour now. I hadn't seen Tyson in the last half of it. The place was packed, loud; like nowhere I'd ever been before. You came in on a low floor, cool smoke lifted from below (anyone's guess what it reminded me of) and deep blue shown everywhere else. It *looked* like ice; it was definitely cold. Except on the middle floor where bodies shifted in dance--neon colors twisting in and out. Long arms, bare legs.

The music matched the scene--droning, high-pitched, then deep. I stepped around the perimeter of the floor, watchful but not overly so. Two faces I compared against all the rest. Tyson and Kinkade. Tyson and Kinkade. Kinkade would be obvious--he was a big man; muscular; dark, cropped hair. Tyson I needed to spot, just since I hadn't seen him in too long.

One of the faces looked back at me this time--in the middle of the crowd. At least I thought at first... at second glance I could see that it was too dark to tell; the man wore a gray jacket, thick, with a hood. His face was too shrouded, eerie. Not Tyson though, and not Kinkade. I moved on.

You're just unsettled, Evelyn. Too exposed. My feet were socked, my *legs were* bare: pale, white in the blue light, naked up to above the knee.

There was a bar along the length of wall below the second level; colored tubes ran above it. I started to head towards this--just another place to check. That was when a hand gripped my arm.

"Hey honey," said the voice, spinning me around. It was a thin man, middle-sized. He nodded over to the foot of the steps. My body was shaking. "Your boyfriend wants you."

I caught sight of Tyson standing where he nodded--talking to another man with blond hair. Tyson looked over just as I did.

"Oh, right," I smiled back at the one who had my wrist. "Sorry, you scared me."

"I'm sure," he said, eyes on my pulsing neck. He pulled me to the steps.

When I got there, Tyson took my hand, leaning in towards my ear. "Kinkade's up here. It's not going to be safe. Stay quiet."

My breath drew; I managed to turn it into a laugh. The man ahead was already moving up the steps. Each one was silver metal, a railing ran beside us. When we got to the top, I didn't have to search around to find Kinkade. He was directly ahead of us, in the midst of a group of men; six maybe. One had blue hair and wicked eyes. Not as wicked as Kinkade's. Kinkade's were terrible, unnatural. Red on the outside, turning yellow along the pupil. I didn't notice that we had walked so close for all my staring at them.

"Interested in product then?" asked a charismatic voice--it drew my eyes over to an older man standing in the midst of the group. Our escort was now at his side; any discussion had stopped.

"Yes," was Tyson's simple answer. Calm, unfettered. I stood beside and behind him.

"As Ceraph should have informed you--" his hand gestured to the man from the steps "--we've unfortunately nothing available."

Kinkade and the others paid little attention; a couple glances at most.

"He did inform me. I pushed the issue."

“Really?” the older man lifted a long thin stick--smoke came from the end, the tip went to his mouth. “You have an offer that would make me reconsider?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m always open to new opportunities.” He took another suck from the pole.

The drone continued below us; the vibrating was beginning to make me feel sick. Kinkade moved into the circle, looking Tyson over through red eyes. They hit me next, causing me a full shudder.

“Fine, but not in front of the girl,” said the older man. “She can wait there.” His head nodded to a ledge. Tyson released my arm, directing me over. I obeyed, wondering again why I was present.

I reached the railing, resting my arms on it; below the whole club could be seen. I tried to catch the words behind me to no avail. The music was too loud. My heart was beating furiously--this whole night was moving too fast; like a dream--I tried to still it as my eyes wandered the crowds. There was no reason for this now--Kinkade was behind me. I could feel his eyes on my back, whether he was looking or not. My chest rushed again. Then I caught sight of the hooded man below, staring at me from the crowd, from the shadows--I was sure of it this time.

“You can go back,” said a voice, finger tapping at my shoulder. I spun to see Kinkade, expression unthreatening. He was pointing to Tyson, who was now on his transmitter, off to the side. *How long had I been staring down?*

“Thank you,” I said, then I moved over without a glance back.

Tyson’s call finished quickly; nothing official I was sure, not here.

“Don’t look back while I talk.”

I nodded quickly.

“There are four men over there--five with Kinkade. I’m about to go with three of them, the other two will be leaving soon.”

My pulse sped up.

“You need to follow them when they do. Stay thirty feet behind; see where they go. Then take a cab back to your place.”

I didn’t like this; I didn’t like him going with them.

“Boss, I don’t think it’s safe for you to--”

“Switch cars twice on the way, not straight home.” His eyes shifted. “I’ll contact you tomorrow.... Don’t watch me go.”

Then he was gone, moving past me. I couldn’t have felt more exposed... but I had more to do. I took three careful steps before the two men passed me--from there it was easy. Down the stairs, out the door.

The crash of thunder was unexpected; I had forgotten about it. The rain was pouring in sheets, leaving the streets less crowded. This only worsened as I followed them. I walked five or six blocks, I couldn’t tell. The streets got darker, and darker, the neon flashes disappearing. It was freezing in my socks and dress--I wished I had a dark coat, it was getting hard to follow.

All form of awnings ended, and the rain made it difficult to see. I hit a street corner and checked all ways down the sidewalk. I thought I saw them, but realized that was back the way I had come. And the figures were headed *towards* me. No. Not figures, just figure. One--in a grey coat.

I tore my eyes from it, feet moving instinctively. I’d lost any sight of the other men now; I could scarcely see the area I was walking into--it just kept getting darker--my steps kept getting faster. Another flash of lightning and a crack of noise too loud sent me ducking to my left.

There was something about thunder, when it got that close, that filled my body with a hiss of panic.

The wall I'd braced to had a locked down door; abandoned--*all* these buildings looked abandoned. There was a broken window though. I looked back at the pouring sky. So what if it was black in there? I crawled through the space.

The inside felt empty, obviously. I wished it didn't. I wished I hadn't lost sight of the two men. Tyson was going to kill me. Somehow this thought calmed me, the thought that that tomorrow I would be back in the office getting yelled at. Probably the silence helped too--somehow the rain was infinitely softer in here. The thunder was still loud. I pulled the gun from the strap on my thigh, and held it pointed at the window for a good five minutes.

You were probably just imagining it, Evelyn. You're paranoid. Relax.

I lowered the gun, and moved my feet carefully towards other parts of the room. My eyes were adjusting. Most of the space was separated by half walls--demolished--a couple doors were visible. I moved towards the closest of these. If I was stuck here till I got the nerve to go out again, it might be a while. The next room was much the same; smaller. I followed it through a couple more, the sound of thunder got quieter. A long hall stretched ahead of me now; I started down it, but my foot caught on something.

"Darn it," I cursed. Whatever it was had been sharp; had me on my knees. I picked the gun up and shook my head. "I'm going to kill myself single-handedly if I stay here alone."

A crash of metal brought me to my feet. It came from the larger room, which I imagined was on my left now. I forced my back to the wall. My hair was soaked, and my white dress, my legs--they dripped water to my stinging foot. *Bleeding, great.*

Another noise. I held the gun up tightly with both hands, next to my face. *Alright, Evelyn. Stop being a chicken. You have a gun--just shoot first.*

I stepped forward slowly, then found the opening I knew would lead to the main room. I peeked my head around first, pistol ready.

Nothing. I moved through, checking around in a circle. Nothing everywhere. No sounds but the thunder. It was lighter in the hallway--harder to see now that my eyes weren't adjusted. *Maybe the storm had just dislodged something...*

No! A figure moved near the window I'd come through, ten feet away. I lifted my pistol to it.

"Don't move!" I yelled, "I swear to God I'll shoot. Don't you *dare* move!" My voice sounded foreign--too strong, *very* brave. My hold on the gun was tight and steady.

A flash of lightning lit the room--enough to show that it was the man in the gray sweater. I almost pulled the trigger in that same second, but something stopped me. The hood was down this time, and the shape was silhouetted...

My vision began to clear again, and a slow tremble went through my body, starting in my chest. I couldn't think anymore, couldn't move. The gun started to shake in my hand, then it fell to the ground with a low gasp. "Jaden."

No sooner had I said it, than the boy was rushing up to me. His arms hit me first, wrapping, just the way it felt that day on the mountain. Only this was nothing like that! A sob gave out in my chest. This was a trick, a trick, some sort of trick.

"Don't cry, I can't stand it."

Oh no, that was his voice. I sobbed again, but this time it kept on to tears. His arms tightened around me, till I was cradled into his chest. Any question of believing or not believing was null and void--I wasn't strong enough not to. I just kept crying.

I didn't know how long it lasted.

"Where *were* you?" I sobbed out. It was irrational; I knew the answer.

His hands finally left my back to move to my face. They were rough, just like before. He didn't answer me, he kissed my cheek first, where the tears were, then my lips. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. I kissed back, but started crying amidst it.

I buried my head back down, hiding, inhaling the scent that I knew so well, that was mine, feeling the strong arms that were mine, the warm breath that was mine. Mine, mine, mine. I squeezed tighter.

"Shh. Shh, baby, it's okay. I'm not leaving again. I'll never leave again." His voice was low and gaspy, like the mountain before I'd left it. *When I'd left him, left him like that. Why did I leave him.*

"Jaden, I'm sorry," I started shaking heavier, talking through inhales. "I'm so sorry I... left you... I never... it wasn't--"

He stopped my apologizing, lips to my cheek again. Softer than the first time.

"Stop it. Don't. I don't care.... I don't care."

His voice made me cry again. How long was I going to? How long had I already?

I drew my head back, slowly. His arms didn't release in the slightest, but I could see him now. I could see the wonderful, perfect, *flawless*, face that I'd been aching to see for so long. The falling hair, the hard jaw, and the deep, dark, eyes that were just inches away – molten.

"You're really here."

"Yeah," he whispered, expression more strained than I'd ever seen it.

I kissed his neck immediately, quickly, unable to bear the gaze. "I'm sorry."

I felt his breath on my hair, the first exultant sound. "Be sorry--doesn't matter.... I'll take care of you."

He picked me up suddenly; I wasn't expecting it, but it felt so wonderful, so perfect. I just hugged my arms around him as he moved. The storm was still raging on outside, I saw. I had forgotten where I even was till now.

He brought me to an empty space in another room--where we were free from the sound of rain and crashing thunder. I hugged beside him, both of us propped against the wall as a rest. There was no way I was sleeping, though it felt like it would be the best rest of my life if I did.

"We're not talking," I mumbled, as he started rubbing my head. I felt... shy actually.

"You're the question girl," he said softly. He seemed contented like this... there was an edge to his tone though. "I thought by now you would have--"

"Ikovos!" I shouted, jolting up, head reared. "The Masters, the boys... Did it work? Did the Gaeln?--"

"They came," he said, calming me. "The Meoden are gone."

The Meoden. I'd been afraid of them once... they'd been the danger. But now they felt so silly, so impossible in this world. I sighed a breath of relief all the same.

"How did you get here?" I asked. He took my arm now, tracing that instead of my face.

"Portal," he smirked. "A lot like the normal ones actually."

"That easy?" I asked him. It was still hard for me to watch his face; I stared down at his hand on my arm instead. Faintly visible in the light.

When he didn't answer as expected I turned to look back up--just in time to catch the pain twisting there, before he smiled down.

"For what I got, most definitely."

Liar. "Did the Gaeln help you?" I asked, trying hard not to spit out the word. Was I more angry with them now? Or did I no longer care?

"Ah... not by choice." His voice sounded amused, but hesitant.

I waited.

"It was their portal--their base," he started. "We weren't exactly *invited* in."

“I hope you broke something,” I blurted out--before I could take it back. I checked his face with a hand to my mouth.

“You don’t like them?” he asked, surprised.

My head shook back and forth under his still potent watching.

He froze there for a moment, then his head fell back, eyes up. “Gods, I love you.”

This gave me an uncontrollable shudder. He had to have felt it with his fingers.

“Because I don’t like the Gaeln?”

He turned down. “So many reasons.” Then his lips were back on mine again--so quick I didn’t know what was happening right away. It was more ardent this time, like in our world.

We might have to set rules for this.... Right now I didn’t care. I rested my head back into his neck and sighed.

“Don’t you have any questions?” I asked eventually.

He stroked my arm.

“I’m not the questioning type...”

I smiled--alright with this.

“But if I was...,” he trailed on, “I imagine I’d want to know what you were doing in that club. With those men. In this dress.” He flicked the edge of the shimmering material above my knee. I had completely forgotten what I was wearing, let alone what I’d been doing before...

I thought nervously for a moment; in a flash it was replaced with fury.

“What the heck, Jaden!”

“What?” he asked, confused.

My head twisted to him.

“You were there. You were there and you didn’t tell me!”

He narrowed at my incredulous tone. “I came directly after--”

“After’s not good enough. Why would you wait?...” My eyes widened in slow horror. “How long have you *been here?*”

His head shook quickly. “Not more than a month.”

I widened my features even further.

“It wasn’t easy to find you,” he clarified. “The club was the first-- ...I didn’t see you till tonight.”

My chest settled at this. I couldn’t have born him waiting a month, not when I’d wanted him so badly.

“Still,” I mumbled weakly.

“*Still*, you were surrounded by a pack of men at every turn. Men with guns--*you* had a gun.” His head shook, as I wondered how he’d caught that. “I had no way of knowing you were you. You didn’t exactly... *act* like yourself. Not till you said my name...” He stopped. “*I* knew when you did.”

I took all this in, feeling suddenly self-conscious. What did I look like now? to him? My hair was soaked, my skin too. And the small dress so different from anything I’d ever worn. No shoes--just socks. And the club.

“I was working,” I explained. “It’s not usually like that, but...”

“You work here?” he breathed.

“Yeah.”

“How long has it been for you?”

I gulped at the memory of the past five months, but the fact that I could see his face made it easier. Part of me just wanted to forget everything but this room--and him.

“Six months almost.”

He swallowed; it occurred to me then that for him it could have been different.

“And you’ve been safe?” He lifted his hand to my cheek. “The Gaeln... the Gaeln have watched out for you...?”

“They got me my job,” I smiled quickly. He didn’t need to worry, or know my past troubles. “And I have a place to stay.”

His eyes scanned around the room; the thunder was still raging outside. “Do you want to go there now? I wasn’t even thinking--I could--”

“No,” I said, head shaking. “I just want to stay here with you.” I ducked in again, wrapping my arms around his waist with a blissful moan. “I’m not going to let go till I am absolutely positive that you’re real.”

He chuckled, unexpected, sudden. “Works for me.”

I smiled and he resumed tracing my skin, shoulders now. I didn’t know how long it was... again. All I knew was that I was completely contented, almost numb with pleasure. I knew there were a million questions that I wanted desperately to ask him, but I couldn’t grasp at them. I didn’t even care. I cared about his arms, his heartbeat, the sound of his breaths. The rhythm sent me into an otherworldly sleep. No question that everything--all of this--was absolutely, positively, undeniably, real. And I would never have to leave him again.