

Chapter 1

Nate bounced his leg impatiently, watching the ship's window. Isabelle had thrown all their sensor information onto a heads-up display on the ship's window, but all it showed was that they weren't getting there fast enough.

"The Voor could have done this in half the time." He grumbled. By the time they got there, Rivero could be in two pieces.

He sighed. "What idiot has a trial on Palluar of all places?"

"It wasn't glassed back when they made the trial, Nate." Ana giggled, her voice muffled as she spoke into his chest. She was curled up on his body, her fingers running gently through his hair.

Lunar, meanwhile, was giving him a scalp massage, her firm hands kneading the top of his head.

"Mmm, feels good." He moaned.

"If you like, my Kyrios, I can apply a similar technique to your penis." Lunar said simply.

"That's...quite alright, thank you Lunar."

"As you wish." She smiled.

Ana giggled. "That's right. Nate wants to save himself for his hot date. Talia must be almost ready."

"It's not like that." Nate complained. He'd promised Talia a proper date and while he couldn't exactly deliver on a real date, being shipbound and hurtling towards planet Palluar, he could at least give her a nice candlelit dinner.

That was, if he was allowed to. Talia had insisted on cooking, leaving him with nothing to do but worry about Rivero and stare at the space outside. He'd already done his firearms training with Ana. He'd already oiled up Cora's hidden forearm blades. He'd already sparred with Lunar.

"Nate?" Talia's nervous voice rang from the intercom. "Dinner's ready."

The girls oohed in unison. "Good luck, Nate." Ana kissed his cheek. "I hope you get lucky," She teased.

"You should compliment her breasts, Kyrios." Lunar told him. "I understand women like that."

"Thank you." He said dryly.

At the entrance to the kitchen, Nate stood still, stunned.

Talia, fidgeting anxiously, was dressed to kill in a red satin dress, bare leg showing through the slit up to her thigh. She tossed her long shiny black hair behind her, drawing

attention to her cleavage, her breasts almost spilling from the V cut into her dress.

She smiled at him and immediately he wanted to kiss her red lipstick from her lips, stain her mouth with his fevered passion.

“You look stunning.” He said honestly.

She blushed demurely. “Cora helped me get ready.”

“Isn’t she so beautiful?” Cora squeaked from the side and then darted past Nate, stopping only to kiss him on the cheek. “Good luck!”

Dinner was laid on a table set for two, two trident candles lighting up the white table cloth. And on the plate, a thick and juicy steak, fries and vegetables.

“Cora said you can’t go wrong with steak.” Talia stretched her arms in front of her sheepishly. “And I’m not much of a cook, so…”

“It looks delicious.” Nate strode forward. “But first,” He took her in his arms, dipped her back a little, and kissed her. He devoured her ruby red lips, admiring the deep classic lipstick that so complimented her pale skin and black hair. It made her into a sultry witch.

And then he broke off, leaving her breathless, her tentative hands on his chest. “Mmm,” She said, her eyes closed. “I thought the kiss came at the end of the first date.”

“Well, we’ve never been traditional.”

“You mean watching you take Ana up her behind while she pretends not to love it isn’t normal?” Talia said in mock shock, as Nate pulled her chair out and sat her down.

“You don’t have to say it like that!” Ana shouted from outside of the kitchen — from the shadows, it looked like all of his girls were lying down in the hallway, listening to every word.

Nate shook his head. “Want me to shut the door?”

“No, it’s okay.” Talia said ruefully. “I’d rather they stayed in case I’m not the most sparkling conversationalist.”

“I don’t think we’ll have any trouble there, sweetheart. You’ve had an amazing life — one in a billion, to become a meka pilot, number one designation, no less.”

“But I want to hear about you, this time.” She insisted eagerly. “How did you go from Captain Clancy to all this?”

“I wish I knew.” He snorted. “One day I was just trying to stay alive, the next I knew I had Isabelle in my brain and Ana by my side. The best thing to ever happen to me.”

“Aww,” Isabelle and Ana cooed together.

“Is it weird, having an AI in your brain?” Talia looked around nervously, as if Isabelle might appear out of the walls and conk her on the head. “I know Izzy is cool, but ___”

“You get used to it.” Nate shrugged. “I’d be dead without her. It’s weird to be like, thinking something depraved about one of the girls, hear Isabelle giggling, and then have that same fantasy be fulfilled like ten minutes later because Izzy’s told Ana. And now Ana’s in my head too…”

“You feel like you don’t have any privacy?” Talia frowned. The hallway had fallen silent.

Nate waved her away. “It’s not a bad thing. I can still have my own thoughts and I

can't exactly complain when I have my every fantasy fulfilled."

"Every?" Talia sipped on her wine, eyebrow arched.

He looked her over very obviously. "Well, not *every*."

She bit her lip. "And then all the other girls?"

"Just...circumstances, really. Cora was in a bad place when we found her and she needed our help. And I think Ana got in her head a little bit. Ana's a virus, she's contagious—"

"Hey!" Ana cried.

"But Cora saw how happy she was and wanted that for herself. She's had a really hard life and she deserves this, to be loved and be healthy and beautiful..." Nate trailed off when he heard Cora sniffing.

"And Lunar?" Talia asked delicately.

"Circumstances, again. Lunar and I were in a cave, in a blizzard, naked and afraid. And she—"

"Surrendered to our Kyrios and his erotic might, taken and dominated, forever owned, a slave to his pleasure." Lunar interrupted breathily.

"She convinced herself that to be victorious in a Judge task, she had to bond herself to me." Nate amended. "This is a great steak, by the way. Thank you." He stretched his hand across the table to take hers.

"You're welcome. So Ana seems to really want you to take on more lovers—"

"I think she gets off on it." Nate said truthfully.

"It's so weird." Talia sighed. "Like, you live your whole life thinking that married monogamy is the dream, see it in every holomovie and book. Get your career sorted, find a nice man, pop out some babies for the cause of the Federation, get a nice place somewhere."

"And then?" Nate prompted, amused.

"And then I get into the real world and the happiest women I know are kneeling down, worshipping the biggest cock I've ever seen, and then *thanking* you for the pleasure." Talia complained. "They spend their whole days *glowing*, laughing, teasing each other. Ana's biggest complaint is that her mouth hurts from smiling so much."

Isabelle chimed in. "In fairness, logic dictates that her mouth hurts from stretching to fit in Nate's enormous member."

"Thank you, Izzy." Nate grimaced. "I'm not sure our situation is representative of the real world, Talia. I'm sure there is a great man out there who'll want you and you only."

"That's the problem," Talia stammered. She looked askance at the doorway to the hallway, where the girl's shadows hovered. "I want the girls, too. They're so beautiful and sexy and just...impossibly kind."

"Really?" Nate's eyes went wide. He hadn't thought of that.

"Really. I've only ever been with girlfriends that are so competitive, and out to get you. Meka camp and the holoshow, they were so exhausting because the available spots were so few and the prizes so big. It made us all horrible to each other. But here..." Talia covered her face with her hands. "Holding Ana while she rode you, being held by you

while the girls pleased you, I feel part of something. I have *real* girlfriends. Like I'm in a family." She said with amazement.

"And you always will, sweetheart." Nate promised. "It's not contingent on anything with me, or us, you know?"

Her lips pursed down suddenly. "Speaking of family, I need to send mine a message. But it's been so long, a message might not cut it...do you think we could stop by on Sapeza?"

"Is that where they are?"

She nodded.

Nate grimaced. "I'm really worried about Rivero, Talia. I've got a bad feeling about her all alone on a toxic planet, in the Dead Space no less."

Her eyes shined. "I know, I don't want to drag you away from your friends or your mission. I just know my family are really worried about me."

He felt his stomach twisting. "We'll go straight after we find Rivero. And I'm sure after the briefing report we sent, the command will have notified your parents. You can send a holomessage, if you want—"

"It's fine." Talia said hastily. "I don't want to make trouble." Her hands fidgeted on her lap. "I'm really grateful for everything you've done for me."

"It's no trouble, beautiful. I want you to feel like one of us."

"No," Talia abruptly pressed her napkin to her mouth. "I've never been a girl to do things by half. We — all of us — we could be friends. I could pretend like we're a family, like I was one of the girls. But," She tossed her glorious black hair behind her. "We both know there's something you expect from all your crew." She shifted her chair back and then dipped onto the floor, on her hands and knees, crawling sultrily towards him.

"Talia, you don't need to—whoa—"

Her fingers worked at his zip. She fished his cock out, marveling as it hardened. "All this, just for me. Just my mouth today, okay? I'm not ready for more. Not yet." She smirked naughtily, and then raised her voice. "You can watch but this is all mine." She called out.

The other girls came running in, faces joyful and excited.

"It's happening!" Cora cheered.

"You have made a wise choice, new sister." Lunar smiled softly.

Ana draped herself over Nate's back, wanting to see his view as the teenage meka hottie stroked his shaft gently, her sharp emerald eyes trailing across every vein of his huge member.

"It's so hot." She murmured.

"Like touching lava, right?" Cora sat on the floor beside her, wrapping her arms around Nate's parted leg affectionately. She wanted to have the best view.

Lunar settled around the other leg. "Nate has excellent blood flow."

"Both hands, sweetie." Ana advised.

Talia flushed, jerking his shaft up and down slowly, getting used to it, all the way

from the base of his shaft to his engorged head.

“That’s good.” Nate sighed with pleasure.

“Yeah?” Talia nibbled on her lip.

“I’ve wanted you to suck my dick since the moment I saw you on the Destiny.” He admitted.

“You have?”

“My boys and I saw you bending over to pop open your meka cockpit, before we dropped onto Duzuno. Feels like a lifetime ago.”

“Aww,” Talia smirked up at him, her ruby red lips rubbing together. “You’ve been waiting such a long time.”

“You know what they say. The waiting only makes the finding sweeter.”

She smiled at that. “Speaking of sweet,” She took his mushroom head in her mouth, engulfing the tip of his cock. Her tongue swirled as her mouth stretched around his girth.

“Guhh,” She said around his head and then popped off, saliva strings connecting from lips to cock. “Fuck, this thing is ridiculous.” Talia complained.

“Don’t worry, Nate makes it work. Use his precum, it’s an incredible lubricant.” Ana tipped, caressing Nate’s chest as she nuzzled his neck and shoulder.

Talia picked up the pace of her stroking, and sure enough, Nate’s voluminous precum began to lance out, coating her hands and drizzling down his shaft. She tried again, enveloping his cock between her red lips. She choked, swallowing, trying to take anything past his engorged head.

Nate groaned.

“He loves it when we choke and swallow.” Cora giggled.

“It makes it so tight for him.” Lunar noted.

“Our throats become perfect milking machines for him, don’t they?” Ana said sultrily.

“Hel—glurk—help—” Talia said from the back of her throat, cock entering her throat.

Cora rolled her eyes but dutifully took a handful of the meka pilot’s thick black hair and used it as a handlehold. Talia was forced ever lower, her sparkling green eyes bulging, dribble pouring from her lips.

“You were the same, once.” Ana admonished.

“As was Ana.” Isabelle noted, kicking her legs as she sat primly on the table, her smile bittersweet.

Talia grimaced around his cock. She didn’t want to be a novice, not when the other girls were so experienced. She wanted to make this memorable for Nate.

And the more Nate enjoyed it, the easier it got, his cock spurting creamy precum. Tasty precum, she thought, purring with contentment as she gulped it down. It was like gurgling over an ice cream dispenser.

A hot dispenser, fleshy and warm and dominating, lubricating her throat. Talia squirmed as she felt her thighs wetten — she’d foregone panties, so as not to ruin the shape of the dress, but now she thought she might drip onto the floor.

Nate growled, wanting more. “Talia, I need, I mean, can I—”

“Nate wants to know if he can use your face like a fuckhole.” Ana translated. “He’s wanted you for so long and he’s too worked up for a nice gentle blowjob, sorry.”

Talia lifted her head, popping Nate’s cock out. She looked at his feral eyes, her lips forming an ‘O’. “I, yes, of course, if that’s what you want.”

“I won’t be gentle.” Nate warned.

“Treat me like the other girls.” She trembled. The other girls helped out — Cora pulled her dress straps down so her pale handful of breasts were visible. Lunar slipped her hand under Talia’s bottom, her fingers rubbing at her clit.

“You got it.” He took over from Cora’s gentle grip, roughly forcing Talia’s head down. He shoved her head all the way down, simultaneously arching his cock up. Deep into her throat, thrusting past all resistance.

Talia gagged but Nate’s mind was clouded with lust.

“Oh, fuck yeah, suck my cock.” He gasped.

“Does it feel good to have the number one meka slut choking on your cock, Master?” Ana teased, nibbling on his earlobe. “Are you going to make her your personal whore like you did with us?”

“Yes!” Nate grunted, pushing Talia down until she’d swallowed all of his rock hard member.

“You can see his cock in her neck!” Cora exclaimed. Sure enough, his shaft was bulging in Talia’s long pale neck.

“Gurrrk!” Talia sounded as her lipstick left a mark on his skin. She could only keep her lips wide as Nate rolled his hips, pumping her throat back and forth. His balls splayed out over her face when he was fully embedded, heavy and hot, reminding her of the load she’d be taking.

“You are doing well, sister.” Lunar praised her. “Let him take his pleasure in you.”

“Keep your eyes on him.” Ana urged.

Talia hardly had a choice in the matter, but she still tried to swallow and milk his cock, trying to use her tongue, keeping her eyes on Nate like Ana asked.

“Are you okay?” Cora worried.

“Ye-GLURK—” Talia spat out. She winked at Nate, letting him know he could continue. And continue he did, fucking her throat, her eyes happy even as tears ran down her face, her sultry makeup ruined.

Talia was focused on breathing and swallowing the endless cocktail, her throat bathed in a never-ending stream of warm goo, hosed down by delicious cream. And this was only his pre-cum, she told herself. She sucked and licked and swallowed, delighting in having his tasty cock all to herself, his masculine musk, his hot rod warming her, the obscene sounds hotter than any porn she’d ever watched, the sounds of her own gurgling, the slap of his balls on her face.

This was what the other girls had. This was what she wanted. His dominance.

It was degrading.

It was wonderful. His swollen sweaty balls rubbed against her face as he held her head, balls deep, and with a roar, he came.

“Swallow, yes, *fuck*,” Nate moaned incomprehensibly.

“Fill her stomach, make her yours, make her swallow all your cum.” Ana encouraged.

“Swallow like a good girl.” Cora whispered to Talia.

“Talia, my Talia,” Nate groaned. He came with a growl, huge spurts of cum unloading into Talia’s throat.

Talia trembled as she orgasmed, feeling his hot creamy spunk begin filling her belly. Endless ropes as Nate trembled, rolling his hips with each rope, his unrelenting hold pressing her lips to his groin. Talia thought she was going to drown, even though she was swallowing as fast as she could, eager for every drop of his delicious magic cum.

Finally, he was finished, his hold on her hair releasing, and Talia withdrew for a much-needed desperate gasp of air.

“Rookie mistake.” Ana giggled. And sure enough, there was one last rope to go, Nate’s final shot blasting out over her face, painting her face with thick jizz, dripping from her eyelashes and her nose, coating her lips.

“Mmm, good girl. Thank you, Talia.” Nate sighed in relief as Ana’s hand took over to gently work his last few dribbles out, over Talia’s gobsmacked face.

Talia gulped, dizzy and stunned, looking down at her full belly, straining against her pooled dress. Cora and Lunar attacked her with their tongues, getting their own taste of Nate’s seed, and soon she was laughing at the dual sensations.

She was giddy, cum-drunk, holding Nate’s cock in her hand. “Can you believe I took that?” Talia squealed, failing to wrap her hands around the girth.

“The first time of thousands.” Ana teased.

“That was lovely, sweetheart, thank you.” Nate said luxuriously, stroking her hair. “Time to clean me now.” He ordered.

Talia bit her lip at his authority, looking up at him through lidded eyes. “Yes, sir.” She sucked on the seed matting his groin, hoovering it up as his shaft rested on her face.

“Feels good, doesn’t it, Nate?” Ana murmured into his ear, hands roaming over his chest. “Another obedient slut that loves you more than life itself. Another girl to seed and breed.”

He let himself recline into her embrace, as the other three cleaned him eagerly. “It feels amazing.” He admitted.

“And just think,” Ana kissed his cheek. “Imagine what’s to come.”

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Nate stumbled out of bed in the middle of the night, carefully extracting himself from the mass of limbs. The girls grumbled sleepily but let him go. He cast a fond glance at the bed’s newest addition, Natalia — her body was processing the big load he’d given her. Though she wasn’t ready to take his cock, she’d been an eager helping hand as he drove into Cora and Lunar both, helping him switching between the sandwiched two. Ana, ever the Princess, gave out orders while she rode Lunar’s face roughly, squirming her thick bottom onto the Mediator’s mouth and groping her own tits for Nate’s pleasure.

What a life he led, he thought, heading for the bathroom.

“Nate,” Isabelle chimed gently, lighting up the floor panel lighting to guide his way. “We picked up a message from a Fed buoy on our way.”

“Hmm?” Nate said blearily. “Okay, play it.”

While he urinated, Nate had the uncomfortable sensation of having General Kanu’s grim face watch him. The General was in a small bedroom, lit only by the harsh desk light.

“Nate, play this message where only you can hear it. This is for your eyes and ears only. Not even your girls.” He paused. Kanu checked his own surroundings to ensure he was alone.

Nate frowned. That sounded serious. Isabelle shut the bathroom door behind him.

Kanu sighed. “We received a holomessage from your TRYSTA designation, the briefing report you and Antonova sent. But it had been screwed up, deliberately encoded with eight different protocols, to garble the message. Someone here, someone high in the Fed chain, they really didn’t want your comms coming through to us.” He sighed. “More rats in the system.”

The General pinched the bridge of his nose. “Encoding it into gibberish sent it to the filter, giving them an excuse to delete it automatically. Thankfully, I have a...little work on the side, working only with our most trusted, operating outside of direct Federation purview, and we picked the message up with our backdoors into the system.”

Nate frowned. A secret intelligence op outside of Federation hierarchy? That must be who The Lady worked for. He wondered who else was one of their numbers.

“After we decoded it, we ran it up the line. And this is where it gets real dirty.” Kanu checked the door behind him again. “The ship you said the meka pilot was on, Antonova. The Burning Light? It disappeared three months ago on a recon op in Dead Space.”

Nate frowned. That didn’t make sense — the bodies were fresh and the pirates had only just boarded.

Kanu leaned forward. “But Dead Space far, *far* away from the co-ordinates you gave me, Nate. Like, on the Lunari side. We sent a ship to find it and they came back saying they’d found small debris consistent with bug blasts, but we never found any crew, any identifying ship parts.”

“That’s not possible.” Nate muttered to himself. Natalia was on it, about to be raped and murdered, like the rest of her crew.

“And Antonova? She wasn’t on it. She was meant to be on *The Last Thing You Ever See*, boarding from the Newton garage after repairs. But she never showed up. I spoke to her CO and she said she put an AWOL alert in the system, but we can’t find it.”

Nate’s stomach fell, the hair on the back of his neck standing up.

Kanu’s eyes burned through him, even though the man couldn’t see him. “Think carefully. Did you see any of her meka sisters being killed? The dead crew, did you check the bodies carefully? We went to the co-ordinates you mentioned. Scrubbed clean. The ship towed away, nothing there.”

The General swallowed. “I just pray this message gets to you in time. We think she

may have been turned, Nate. Pirates or bugs or someone else entirely. We sent law enforcement to do a wellness check on her family — the house is empty, but all their clothes, their bags, they're still there.”

Kanu reached out to end the message, frowning, the lines on his forehead set deeply into his skin. “Tread carefully, Nate. Something is very wrong here.”

And then he was gone, leaving Nate alone in the dim light of the bathroom, feeling cold and very confused. Who was Talia and what game was she playing?

Should he have seen it coming? A ship in the middle of space, along their trajectory, with the very person he wanted to find, one he'd sent a message to only days before.

A princess for the hero to rescue.

But what did she want?

All she'd asked for was to bring him to Sapeza. For what?

And for whom?

He walked slowly back to bed. Talia's eyelids fluttered when he carefully laid his head back on the pillow. “You okay, Nate?” She said sleepily.

“Yeah.” He said quietly. “Drank too much wine.”

“Mmmkay,” She cuddled up to him once more, arm around his chest.

Nate stared up at the ceiling, his throat dry. He didn't want to believe it, but all the oddities were piling up.

Her grip tightened — but now it felt like a parasite, a leech he couldn't shake off.

Easy, Nate. Isabelle said gently. *Play it smart. Keep playing dumb, see what she reveals. Get Ana to bring her guard down in the morning.*

I trusted her, Isabelle. Nate thought, clenching his fist. *And she's what, on her knees, making me dinner, just to bring her into her trap?*

Focus on what we know, not on the maybes. If she's been turned, or if she's been threatened, find out what they have on her. If you're feeling like you're in a pincer, maybe she is too. Use that.

Nate exhaled a long breath. *Thanks, Izzy.*

He closed his eyes, smiling when he felt the softest touch on his forehead, Isabelle's tweak to his nerves to he could feel the kiss she'd placed.

One day, it'll be a real kiss. Isabelle teased. *Dream about that.*

I can't wait. He answered. But his cool forehead couldn't assuage the cannonballs in his mind, bouncing around, endless thoughts and questions, rage and fear and sadness mixing with one another.

Sleep didn't come easy.

###

Planet Palluar — in the Dead Space. Even from afar, it showed tell tale signs of its history. A planet destroyed by a decade of Federation weapon testing, plasma bombardment destroying all ecology, the surface impact obliterated. The heat and the

radiation so intense that the soil of the planet, the very geology itself, was moltenized, mineralized, looking like glass itself.

Isabelle had told them that it wasn't glass, but to Nate, it was near enough indistinguishable.

Ana had been furious when he woke and he'd told her what he'd learned about Talia, through their mind connection. She'd wanted to tie Talia up and shoot pieces off her until she admitted to the truth, but Nate convinced her to wait. Whatever trap she was trying to set up, he wanted to see who stood behind her, and if Talia was a victim or a perpetrator.

Ana had settled for her own type of revenge — for Nate's morning blowjob, she'd taken a rough hold of Talia's hair and forced the girl up and down his cock at a frantic pace, the young pilot's face turning blue, eyes watering, makeup running down her face as she gurgled and choked. Talia had basically passed out by the time Nate finally filled her tummy, which was useful since it let him and his girls have a private conversation while she napped in their bed.

Cora and Lunar had been no more pleased but with his urging, the three girls had agreed to watch over Talia and interrogate her gently.

Those answers would have to wait, though, since Palluar arrived.

And with it, hidden dangers.

"Radiation levels are high, but the air itself is poisoned. The atmosphere is highly toxic. You'll need to make sure you keep exosuits on and your helmets on at all times." Isabelle instructed, as they delved into the atmosphere.

Cora had taken command, swooping the ship down, through black clouds and into the glass planet below. They flew on, over mountains of black crystallized glass, acid rain dropping onto them and cascading down, rain drops on a window. Occasionally, the black glass rocks would turn green, or even a smeared white, a hint of the ecology of the past.

It was oddly beautiful, when the TRYSTA dove lower and turned its lights to full beam, to watch the lights reflect off a planet made into mirrors. Mountains turned into glass lakes, valleys of crystals. But the beauty turned somber when they flew over abandoned cities, a reminder that the Federation used this as weapons testing only when the planet had been ravaged and broken, what few people it had left evacuated.

It wasn't even the bugs that had killed them — not every planet had a governor worth their salt, and not every planet got the attention of the Federation. Some were left to die, their economies dead, the young fleeing by the shipload, until at that was left was ruin and remnants of a hopeful colony.

Skyscrapers, or what was left of them, towers with only their chassis remaining, rebar and tottering foundations, held up only by the crystallized base that formed on the topsoil, like fossils frozen in time.

They watched in silence, until finally their ship's sensor pinged, picking up another ship. A small runner, Federation built, settled in a mountain range of green and purple glass hues. It had to be Rivero.

Cora brought them down right next to it, the mountain itself screeching as they settled

on it. It felt like they were landing on a house of cards. The sound of a woman shrieking — only Isabelle assured them it was just the glass, reverberating and echoing.

When the ramp descended, they stepped off hesitantly. All of them.

Do we need to give her a gun? Ana scowled as Talia walked ahead.

If she was going to kill me, she'd have done it by now. Nate countered. *And we might need every gun hand we can get, if Rivero is in trouble.*

Rivero's ship was empty with no trace of her. But her footsteps were easy to find, imprints in the layers of dust on the glass itself, leading down the mountain.

Cora shimmied her foot on the ground, trying to peer through the glass below, but all was dark.

"The Voor leader said the Mulvaken lives underground, in the mines and cave tunnels." Ana reminded them.

"Down we go." Nate led the way slowly. The mountain was creaking, *moving*. And the shrieks...not all of them could be the glass, surely?

Had something survived, down here?

They slid down the mountain, their suit shoes unable to gain traction. Rocky rubble had become tiny glass minerals, dazzling like baubles, but no more easy to walk on.

Down and down, until they were no longer on the mountain but enveloped by it, the light dissipating behind the high peaks.

And finally, a hole in the mountain, a cave that shined with a glass archway.

"All that glitters..." Cora muttered.

"Come on." Nate ordered. "She went this way."

The cave was bright, unexpectedly, the rocks glowing with the light of a stream that ran through it.

"You think that's drinkable?" Talia said sarcastically. The liquid was a thick oozing luminescent green.

Nobody laughed, but Nate was thankful for the stream. It lit the cave, the stalagmites and stalactites, sharp crystal spikes above and below. The cave was vast, but as the stream dipped underground at its end, so did the light, leaving ominous shadows ahead.

Shadows that moved.

"Contact!" Nate yelled. The shadow shifted forth — it was a giant bear, only instead of brown fur, each follicle gleamed with a crystal. It stood up on two legs, eyes feral, paws extending with claws. It roared, revealing tusk-like fangs glowing the same green of the river.

It smacked back down onto the cave floor, charging forward on all four legs. They opened fire, but their shots merely bounced off, reflecting off its crystal plating, laser blasts ricocheting around the cave.

Lunar stepped in front, snapping her sword off her back.

But the cave shook and the river hissed. The green stream darkened for a moment, and their light was gone.

Nate's heartbeat raced, stomach hard, firing his rifle if only to grant them some light. But his fire found nothing. Something vast stretched out in front of them, something

foul, a smell of the dead, and then retreated.

The bear squealed.

The river turned green, alight once more as something massive retreated back into it, and Nate had just a glance of a — what was it? A leviathan, a snake, a fish, red flesh behind crystal scales, little tentacles of luminescent light between each scale, like antennae.

The water settled. The bear was gone — except for its hind legs, which flopped to the ground, pouring blood. And the trail of organs that led to the river.

“What the fuck was that?” Cora snapped.

“By Vashayna.” Ana muttered.

“Nate, our guns did *nothing*.” Talia said, looking down at her rifle.

Lunar just stiffened, walking ahead.

“Lunar?” Nate took a deep breath.

She didn’t reply, stepping forward to take something off a sharp stalagmite. A piece of black fabric.

She showed it to them, her jaw set.

Nate took it slowly. It was Rivero’s eyemask, the fabric she wrapped around her eyes at all times, to hide her glowing red eyes, to keep her blood-hunger in check.

It shined with green river liquid.

It was wet with red blood.

And it gleamed with glass shards — not the murky shadowy crystallized glass of the planet, but glass shards from her helmet.

Nate growled. “We have to find her.”

“Nate,” Isabelle chimed from his armguard. “If her helmet is broken, in this atmosphere, if she’s breathing it...you don’t just need to find her.

“You need to find her *fast*.”