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## An Intergalactic Diplomat

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AN INTERGALACTIC DIPLOMAT

By

ARIANNA SANCHEZ, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

December, 2019

AN INTERGALACTIC DIPLOMAT

By

ARIANNA SANCHEZ, Bachelor of Arts

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## **ABSTRACT**

This manuscript tells the story of Princess Luna McGlothen as she travels to the Eighth Galaxy Alliance as part of Earth's first attempt at intergalactic diplomacy. Set in the distant future, Princess Luna is the heir to the throne of the Royal Republic of North America and is trying to prove to her authoritarian mother, and to herself, that she is worthy of her birthright. Across the universe she makes friends and enemies, experiences true betrayal, and realizes that she has what it takes to be a great leader.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER ONE

The air in the teleporter room feels heavier than usual, like it has stolen the power from the computers, equipping the electricity to come alive and suffocate me. For half a second I think maybe this is some weird assassination attempt, but no one else reacts so I focus on slow, even breaths. I almost miss my bodyguard, Mr. Lloyd, instructing me to step onto my pad. His deep voice matches the bass of my heart beating against my ribcage.

“You enjoy your time in space now, Princess Luna,” Dr. Paolo says. He turns knobs and flips switches behind the glass power console, the clicks and clacks echoing off the reflective white walls. The cords in the console begin to pulsate as they transfer energy to the two circular gray pads against the backwall.

I force a smile, tucking my hands into the pockets of my favorite coat, trying to coax some sense of comfort into my nerves. “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ve always dreamed of traveling through the stars.” His voice is wishful and lucid, like he’s forgotten where he is or what he’s supposed to be doing.

“You’ll get that chance. I’m sure of it,” I lie. If he could take my place I’d let him. Doesn’t he know that I never volunteered for this *honorable* and *important* mission, rather I was appointed to it?

I add this trip to the list of things I’ll never forgive Mom for.

Beside me, Mr. Lloyd steps onto his pad and mumbles something into his veiny blue wrist. His shoulders are tense and his eyes are locked on Dr. Paolo. He's always hated using the teleporters.

"We could have just sailed across the Atlantic. It wouldn't have taken *that* long," Mr. Lloyd mutters.

My stomach tumbles at the thought of the open sea. I've only been on a boat once six years ago when I was twelve and Mom was hosting an event down in Miami. It resulted in me losing my breakfast over the side and Mom yanking me off the deck into a small side bathroom to remind me how much I'd regret embarrassing her.

I adjust my messenger bag on my shoulder and push the memory away. "We're already behind schedule, Mr. Lloyd," I whisper back. He grunts.

Dr. Paolo waves as a familiar whirl of the teleporter tickles beneath my boots. The machines scan our bodies and then begins feeding small currents of electricity across and into our skin. I close my eyes and hold my breath. A tickle seeps through my body as my atoms pull apart from each other. In the next heartbeat they snap back together.

When I open my eyes, Dr. Paolo is no longer in front of me. In his place is my half-dressed cousin Harry.

"Good afternoon, Lu," he says, stifling a yawn. "Welcome to Manchester. How's North America?" I scowl at his unbrushed honey hair, untucked dress shirt, sweatpants, and bare feet. If it weren't for his emerald green eyes beneath his half-closed eyelids, I could have mistaken him for a beggar.

“Why do you look like you’ve just rolled out of bed?” I ask as I step off my pad. “Did you forget we’re meeting before we head out? Or that there will be plenty of reporters to watch us head out?”

The idea of facing reporters makes my stomach roll, but Harry rolls his eyes and slouches against the wall. “Don’t worry, I’ll look like the ‘Perfect Prince’ by then.”

I’m about to point out that if I had to wake up extra early to look like a princess then he could at least do the same, but the whirl of the teleporter pad distracts me. Mr. Lloyd heaves my trunk onto his shoulder and Harry quickly instructs one of his servants to assist in taking my belongings to the loading dock so they can be put aboard Spaceship Genesis.

One tries to take the bag from my shoulder, but I wave them away.

“Blair wanted me to tell you to meet her in the Throne Room once you arrived,” Harry adds.

I lift an eyebrow. “Why?”

He shrugs and tilts his head toward the teleporter. “I’m only the greeter.”

“Then maybe you should try at least smiling,” I say. He chuckles and shakes his head.

I’ve only been to the Manchester Palace a few times in my life, but thankfully I remember the way to the throne room without having to bother any servants, which saves me from a history lesson. The first time I came here was when King Leonard died and his son, Prince Rommel took over Western Europe, but I was so young I barely remember anything about the trip. Another time was about four years ago when Blair insisted on

having a Sweet Sixteen birthday party, and then six months ago when King Rommel requested each country send a representative to join the Intergalactic Council, to represent Earth in the Eighth Galaxy Alliance.

Every time, I was told about how the Manchester Palace was built after the Habs Invasion out of bricks recovered from the city before the Raid of Fire. It's the only building in Western Europe that uses materials from before the last century.

Before I met with King Rommel about the Intergalactic Council, Mom told me this was my last chance to prove to her I could be the ruler she eventually leaves our country to.

And that if the spaceship exploded, it won't be much of a loss. Nexus, my younger brother, has already shown more potential than I ever have.

Growing up as heir to the throne of The Republic of North America, Mom always had certain expectations she wanted me to meet, and I've managed to fail at every single one of them. When I tried renegotiating tariffs with The Republic of Central America, we came out with what I thought was fair, but Mom insisted I could have gone higher. I argued that we were Central America's main buyer and that having too high of tariffs could cripple their economy. She told me the economy I should be concerned about was ours and that ended the conversation.

When I tried to curb rebellions in Montreal and New York, I suggested speaking with the leaders of the rebellions to see if we could solve them peacefully. Instead, Mom levelled Montreal and executed everyone who marched down Times Square. I locked myself in my room because I couldn't stomach looking at the death tolls. I tried to

organize relief efforts for the cities, but Mom had the supplies burned and threatened to charge me with treason. I backed down because the only punishment for treason was death. Any time a different Republic tried to interfere, she reminded them of our military arsenal. And to be honest, no one wants to be responsible for the next war.

Mom then remarried and had two other children as a warning. The throne wasn't guaranteed to be mine.

I enter the Great Hall and force myself to swallow my pride. Beneath the golden chandelier is Blair in a floor length lavender dress with cream flowers embroidered along the hem. The sleeves stop at her elbows, showing off an assortment of golden bracelets and bangles. I throw my arms out toward my cousin and plaster the biggest smile on my face that I can. "Blair!"

"Oh, Luna! I'm so glad you're here!" Blair says. She wraps me in a hug that's too tight to be friendly but perfect for backstabbing.

"Glad to be here," I manage not to hiss.

"I'm so excited to see all the different alien races. T'Ork said there's over 1,200 different planets represented at the Alliance. Isn't that mind blowing? I mean, we only have eleven countries and we can barely get anything done," Blair recites. She's probably been practicing that spiel all weekend. "Do you think there will be people with multiple eyes?" She twirls a piece of honey blonde hair around her finger, her natural green eyes boring into my artificial ones.

"I mean, we technically have multiple eyes," I say.

Blair crinkles her nose. “And how are yours doing? You look like it’s about time for another dye job.”

I bite the inside of my lip. Ever since the Habs Empire took over and divided the world into the eleven Republics over a century ago, all royal families had to have green eyes. Brown and blue were left for commoners. If anyone outside the royal family were born with green eyes, they were dyed to a commoner color. Anyone born into the royal family who didn’t have green eyes, like me, also had them dyed accordingly.

Mom likes to remind me that beneath a layer of coloring, my eyes are actually a muddy shade of brown.

“Harry said you wanted to see me,” I say. Outside the golden floor to ceiling windows is a group of photographers snapping pictures. In D.C., we don’t let paparazzi anywhere near the Lincoln Palace, but I doubt Blair would ever want to miss a photoshoot. The press is much more controlled back home. Nothing gets reported that Mom doesn’t want to see reported.

“I did.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder and waves at the window, giving the reporters a perfect smile. I try to match her fluidity, but my arm awkwardly flails around, and my smile feels too tight against my teeth. There has to be some happy medium between Mom’s media restriction and Western Europe’s free-for-all. “You know how there’s going to be thirteen of us representing Earth at the alliance?”

Servants dash in and out of the giant room through the golden archways, their footsteps echoing off the marble flooring, carrying dresses and pants and jewels. I guess the heirs aren’t packed yet.

One servant offers me a cup of coffee and I politely decline it. My mother became queen by poisoning my grandfather, so needless to say I've become wary of drinks I haven't prepared.

"Yes, I was at the same meeting as you," I reply dryly.

Blair purses her light pink lips, a flash of annoyance crossing her face right as a camera flashes. A small flourish of pride swells amidst the stomach ache I always get when talking to Blair.

"Anyways," she huffs. "I'm not saying it will, but if it comes down to it," she places her hand on my shoulder, "I need you to always vote with Harry and I."

"Excuse me?"

She reaches out and plucks a long, inky black hair from my coat and holds it between us. "Here on Earth, the two Asian countries always vote together, so it's safe to assume they'll do the same at the Alliance. The two African countries and the Pacific Republic usually vote with them as well. Your country is always the uh, what is that super old term again?" She snaps three times. "The swing vote?"

My mouth goes dry and I force a nod.

"Right, so I need to make sure it swings in my direction."

I suck in a quick breath through my teeth. "Aren't we supposed to represent a unified Earth? A peaceful one? We should forget about petty alliances and just focus on what's best for our planet."

I rub the back of my arm. It's like I can feel Mom pinching me for saying something stupid.

“Oh, honey,” Blair says. My strand of hair falls to the floor as Blair places her hand on her hip. I watch it fall and study how it stands out against the stark white flooring. Blair opens her mouth to say something else but she’s cut off by a much more curt, almost devious, voice.

I immediately smile and look up.

“Excuse me, Princess, but could you escort me to the Sapphire Room?” Blair spins around to face Prince Vihaan from The Republic of Southern Asian. The tension in my shoulders dissipates as Blair’s stiffens.

I’ve always thought Vihaan would make a good pirate, with his easy-going posture, and the way his ruby red kurta hangs off his tan body like it’s half a size too big. His dark chestnut hair is pulled back in a loose bun today, and if someone told me he stole two emeralds during a voyage to fashion into eyes and popped them into his dark skull, I’d believe them.

The thing about the Arya family is that they sort of just appear and disappear. Always slipping in and out as they pleased. It’s an ability I’m both amazed by and jealous of. I’d give anything to disappear.

“There’s a hundred servants running around that could help you,” Blair snaps.

“But why have a servant help me when it could be a beautiful princess?”

Blair rolls her eyes and I cough into my arm to hide my smile as a storm of camera flashes fill the room. Blair huffs and stomps out of the gold accented room down a dark gray hallway that feels too small and too cramped with all the large portraits of

Blair, Harry, and their parents lining the walls. We stop in front of a set of silver double doors with crystal blue door knobs and Blair throws open the doors.

“Don’t break anything,” she warns before returning to the great hall, probably to try and weasel more votes out of the other royals.

Lush aquamarine carpets, the color of the sea, cover the floor as the navy and periwinkle mosaic light coverings dust the room with every shade of blue I can imagine. I forget to breathe for a few heartbeats as the overwhelming feeling of drowning creeps around my spine and squeezes at my lungs.

I graze the large round table in the middle of the room, mesmerized by the marble finish and the crystal blue veins weaving through the cool metal, afraid that it could shatter beneath my fingers. Silver name plates sit in front of the leather chairs, each letter is hand painted in blue so deep, I swear if I touch it, my finger would sink into it and return dripping wet.

“Act like you’ve been here before,” Vihaan whispers. I jump and straighten up. I was just as taken away when we met in the Emerald Room last time. He takes his seat next to mine and I blush as I sink into my chair, dropping my bag to the ground. Our palace in D.C. doesn’t have anything this grand. It’s modelled after the White House from before the Third War of Independence, unwilling to let go of the past, despite the snide remarks from the other royals.

“Why go old when you could go new?” Blair asked the last time her family visited a few years ago.

“It’s vintage,” I had said with a shrug.

“No, it’s decrepit.”

Only North America has held on to anything significant from before the Habs Invasion. We still have libraries with real, tangible books, and museums that tell the story of the United States of America before and after it was the United States. Some call us dusty and irrelevant, but there’s something about knowing that, for a moment, people governed themselves.

They failed, unable to avoid corruption and greed, but the sentiment is nice.

My curiosity gets the better of me and I reach out and touch my name plate, but instead of my finger disappearing into the ink like I imagined, I knock it backwards into a teal crystal cup. It rocks back and forth before toppling over. I close my eyes as I hear the dainty snap of the glass.

“What did Blair just tell you?” Vihaan hisses. He reaches over and scoops up the broken cup and picks up the shard of glass missing from it. A servant rushes over to us and takes it from him.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

“Don’t worry, dear,” the servant says, with a laugh that sounds too forced. “These things happen.”

“Is this why your mother doesn’t let you out of the palace?” Vihaan laughs. I run my fingers through my hair and shrug.

“I do manage to embarrass her every time I go out.”

He leans back in his chair and pulls out his holoscreen where an article written in Hindi is pulled up. When he catches me peeking, he asks, “How are things on your side of the world? How are your brothers?”

“About the same. Nexus is excited because now that he’s ten he can start attending military trainings, and Solis is really into learning languages. How are your siblings?” I ask.

Vihaan widens his eyes and exhales like he doesn’t know where to start. He’s the youngest of eight. When I asked what made him what to go to space six months ago he laughed and said he didn’t have much of a choice. If anyone was going to die on their way to an asteroid it needed to be the youngest heir.

“Boring, mostly, save Vikaar. He’s too busy *pretending* to be king,” he says, a slight edge to his voice. I forgot that his mom was ill.

“How’s your mom?” I ask. I trace my finger along a crack in the table’s marble.

He swallows and focuses on his holoscreen. “She won’t let anyone into her room except Vikaar. I haven’t seen her in months.”

“I’m sorry,” I say just as Blair returns to the room with Harry and the representatives from the rest of the countries. I sit up straighter and toss my black hair over my shoulder, trying to look as poised as possible. Vihaan switches off his holoscreen and tucks it back into his pocket.

Harry plops down next to me. He wasn’t kidding when he said he’d look like a prince later. He’s combed his hair, changed into a crisp dress shirt that he’s tucked into

pressed slacks. He's even wearing shoes now. Impressive. He and Vihaan shake hands behind my back as Blair sits across from me. Our eyes meet and I look away.

There's one representative from every country except for The Republic of Northern Asia and The Republic of Western Europe. They each have an additional rep due to population counts. Princess Evelyn from The Republic of Central America smiles at me as she sits next to her brother, Prince Marcos of the Republic of South America. I know Evelyn and Marcos the best because I work closest with them. Their father is the King of Central America while their mother rules over South America. It's a strange marriage and an odd situation since technically Evelyn could rule whichever country loses its monarch first since she's older. Mom's convinced that eventually Central and South America will be combined into one country. I think she's wrong and even if they do, I don't see how it'll affect us. Still, she's begun slowly sending more troops toward our southern border. Just in case.

"Evelyn, I have something for you," I say. I open my bag and pull out an old book I found while wandering around the palace's library.

Blair wrinkles her nose. "Ew, I hope you disinfected that thing."

Ignoring Blair, Evelyn takes the book from my hands. "*All Things Magick*," she reads. A smile stretches across her face. "Where did you find this? I've been looking everywhere for Wiccan texts."

"It's one of the perks of having a real library," I say with a shrug, resisting the urge to glance at Blair.

“It’s such an ancient religion I couldn’t find much about it online either,” she continues. “In fact, I only know about it because this old lady told me that she could feel the truth and magick intertwined with my spirit and that I was destined to become Wicca.”

“Why are you encouraging her?” Marcos groans as his sister gently opens the book, her eyes pouring over the text.

Harry leans forward. “Princess Evelyn, please explain to me in as much detail as possible what Wicca is.”

Marcos playfully punches him and Vihaan and I laugh.

The chattering continues until Mr. Lloyd and the other bodyguards start piling into the room. Servants stay outside of the room, thankfully. There’re already too many people in here.

I glance up at him and he rest a hand on my shoulder. “Everything alright, Princess?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I say. I try to relax, but the feeling of drowning begins burning my lungs again.

King Rommel enters and greets each of us before repeating the same mission and expectations he gave us six months ago and sent to our holoscreens every week since. I begin to regret not taking that coffee.

“Before you embark on this historical journey, please remember you represent Earth, a people who have overcome their differences and have made tremendous strides

at working together. You must bring that unity to the Eighth Galaxy Alliance. You must search for solutions that will benefit the entire planet,” he says.

I exchange a glance with Vihaan, thinking about the rebellions in New York and Montreal. We’ve never known peace, but we’ve learned how to fake it.

Once King Rommel finally stops talking we head to Spaceship Genesis. We’re to meet with our allies the Vangariens on their newest home planet of Venus before flying with them through 312 solar systems to get to the Eighth Galaxy Alliance. It would take us over a thousand years to get to the meeting using our current technology, so we’ve worked out a deal with the Vangariens who will get us there in a few days.

The Vangariens made first contact with us about fifty years ago and have been a little more than indifferent toward us since they were hoping to find an advanced species. They’re the ones who invited us to the Alliance, however it seems to be mostly out of pity. For the same reason, they also begun sharing their technology with us. Emperor Vasiliev finally swallowed his pride and took the Vangariens up on their offer, deciding it was time for Earth to spread beyond our atmospheric borders.

We walk down the long corridor to the ship and I can already hear the buzzing of conversation at the end of the hall. I wonder how many reporters are here, how many cameras will be zipping around us.

“I hate that this country doesn’t have stricter paparazzi laws,” I mutter to Mr. Lloyd.

“It is pretty annoying.”

“It makes me feel like some sort of exhibit,” I say. “Like that time we went to the Smithsonian and saw those dinosaur bones and that class of third graders kept pointing and trying to touch them.”

“I remember you tried touching them as well,” Mr. Lloyd chuckles.

“Well, yeah, I was a fourth grader.”

The conversations are louder now and my head starts to spin. Maybe Mr. Lloyd can hear the blood rushing through my ears or my heart pounding against my chest because he places his hand between my shoulder blades.

“Deep breaths, Princess,” he soothes.

The doors open to the runway and a blast of noise knocks the breath out of me. If it wasn't for Mr. Lloyd nudging me forward, I would have scrambled back into the hallway on all fours. We step onto the red carpet covering the concrete and a wave of reporters rush us. The royal guards hold them a few feet away from us, so they toss their marble-sized cameras into the air to get better angles.

I want to swat at the cameras like the pesky flies they are, but I resist. If there's one thing I've been taught, it's how to hide my disgust. I roll my shoulders back and step heel to toe, heel to toe, swinging my arms just loosely enough that I look like I'm used to paparazzi.

Or at least, I hope that's how I look.

Back home, reporters aren't allowed anywhere near D.C. Mom doesn't like anyone snooping around her work. She's not a fan of being photographed. She says it's

because of the irreversible bags or crow's feet hanging around her eyes. I always thought it was because someone might capture her looking over her shoulder one too many times.

We get past the reporters and board the ship. It's nothing too extravagant, but its chrome finish reflects the light in such a way that makes it look like micro diamonds are dusted all over it. Blair poses in the door way of the ship, waving, blowing kisses, jutting her hip out.

"Are you sure this ship is safe?" Mr. Lloyd asks one of the attendants outside our rooms on the Genesis.

"All of the test flights have been successful," the woman says. "And don't forget there's a team of scientists already on Venus learning about the planet and the Vangariens so we know the route forwards and backwards. You'll be safe."

"Don't tell me you're afraid of space, Mr. Lloyd," I tease. He rubs his bald head and smiles down at me.

"I'm only worried for your sake, Miss Luna." Mr. Lloyd has been my bodyguard since I was born. Every memory I have, he's somewhere in it. After Mom killed my grandpa, she pinned the murder on my dad and had him executed the day of her coronation. I was born the next morning. It wasn't hard for her to blame my dad and get away with it since he was from the Royal Republic of Northern Asia and public opinion was already against him. She could have started a war, the murder of a king was enough to win her a few allies, but she made a grand show of "preserving the peace."

Of course, the history books don't mention anything about Mom's role in the assassination. I only know the truth because she would tell the story before I went to sleep as a child, reminding me of the world we lived in.

I move to unpack my trunk, after a quick glance around my small room, and a servant steps in.

"Allow me, your highness," she says, reaching across me.

"No, no, it's fine. I can unpack myself," I say. I hate having strangers touch my stuff. "Thank you, though," I add over my shoulder as she backs out the room.

The Genesis is just a plain science vessel. Everything is painted a shade of off white that hurts my eyes if I stare at one spot too long, and it smells like a hospital. Each room contains a bed and desk that fold out of the walls, a small closet and a plain wooden desk chair. Blair must hate this.

I lay out my purple and pink quilt across the empty mattress and toss my holoscreen onto the desk across from my bed. The room is small, but instead of making me feel trapped, it feels cozy. Perhaps it's because Mr. Lloyd is right next door or because I'm tucked away in a back corner.

"We're about to take off," Vihaan says, poking his head into my room. "Come watch with me."

"Um, okay," I say. Before our meeting six months ago, I only knew *of* Vihaan, I didn't actually know him. He wasn't particularly friendly at the last meeting either. I caught him glaring a few times like my mere presence offended him.

As I follow him down the hall, I wonder what changed. Once we reach a large enough window we lean against the glass. I squint against the sun a watch below us as workers scramble across the pavement, away from the Genesis, like a kicked ant mound. The countdown begins overhead and a voice instructs us to put on our pressure masks. I fumble with mine, but eventually figure out how to tighten it around my head. Vihaan laughs as I grip the handrail, but he does the same as the voice reaches zero.

There's a jolt and I nearly fall backwards. The scene outside the window whooshes by us, the gray concrete dissipating into an stark blackness littered by small white lights. I'm thankful I didn't blink.

"Woah," Vihaan gasps, pulling his mask off. He presses his hand against the window as his mouth hangs open. I never thought I'd see Vihaan impressed by anything. Behind us there's a crash and I jump. Mr. Lloyd barrels out of his room with his t-shirt around his neck and only arm through its sleeve. "What was that?"

"I think my trunk fell," I say, peeking back into my room. Sure enough, there's a pile of dresses, blouses, pants, skirts, underwear, socks, and shoes underneath my large overturned black trunk.

Mr. Lloyd places his hand over his chest and closes his eyes. "I thought we were under attack."

"By who? Aliens?" I wiggle my fingers.

"Don't joke like that, Miss Luna. These aliens may know a fighting technique so advanced not even I could stop them," he says.

"Not even you?" Vihaan chuckles.

“The Vangariens are pacifists, Mr. Lloyd,” I remind him.

“But not all aliens are Vangariens.” He finishes putting his shirt on and stretches.

“I’m going to take a nap. Wake me if there’s any aliens.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Within the first week of our month-long journey to Venus I've learned that:

1. Vihaan is exceptionally good at tossing marshmallows in the air and catching them in his mouth. He's begun to teach me his ways. The first step is to keep my eyes open.
2. Blair has a personal servant to wash her face, another one to wash her hair, and one to wash her feet. I have exactly zero servants.
3. Evelyn is *determined* to become a witch, despite her father's disapproval.
4. And that Harry can sleep for 36 hours straight, wake up, eat a bowl of cereal, then sleep again for another 16 hours. It's a talent of which I'm truly jealous of.

There's also a dramatic gap between the six of us who are under thirty, and the seven reps who are well over forty, the most important one; what denotes a healthy meal and how often one should eat said meal.

"Why do you kids eat so many potatoes?" King Lawrence from the Republic of the Pacific asks. He tosses another empty bag at Vihaan.

"It's interesting," Evelyn tells me after King Lawrence and Vihaan retreat back to their rooms, "to see who came from which country."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

She sets down her cup of tea and waves her heavily inked fingers over it like she's casting a spell of deliciousness. Ever since she's become obsessed with the occult, she's gotten more and more tattoos. Part of me feels like they're not a requirement of magic, but she insists that they are. Usually she hides them beneath gloves and long sleeves and floor length gowns, but on the ship she's been prancing around in shorts and tank tops, letting her art-covered limbs free.

"I think it says a lot about which countries actually believe in what we're doing and which ones don't," she says.

I consider this as I sip my hot cocoa. Emperor Vasiliev never said each country had to send a royal, just a representative, but everyone sent a royal. Most of the other countries have royal courts full of representatives voted on by their citizens. North America did until Grandpa was questioned too many times and he abolished it.

"For example, Vihaan is here because he's the youngest in his family, so if something happens his family line isn't thrown out of whack, which means the South Asian Republic probably doesn't have high hopes for the Alliance," she says.

"I wouldn't say being cautious equates to a lack of faith," I say, trying to sound diplomatic.

"They could have sent Prince Sahil or Prince Kiaan. They're much older than Vihaan and have some real political experience."

I consider this for a moment and she continues.

"The Pacific Republic seems to be all in since King Lawrence is here. Then we have King Rommel who sent exactly one hundred percent of his heirs," she explains.

“King Lawrence doesn’t have an heir to send yet and his wife has to run the country while he’s gone. And while it’s not ideal that Blair and Harry are here, King Rommel doesn’t have anyone else to represent Western Europe,” I say. “Also *your* parents sent exactly one hundred percent of their heirs.”

Evelyn tilts her head and knits her eyebrows together. “My mom is pregnant. With twins.”

I look up. “What? Since when?”

“Since two months ago. Didn’t you get her announcement?”

I shake my head. “Maybe Mom forgot to tell me.”

Evelyn opens her mouth to say something but must decide against it because she just shakes her head.

“Anyways, yeah, my parents will have heirs if anything happens to Marcos and I.” She sounds distracted, but instead of calling her on it, I move on.

“I wonder what will happen if something goes wrong back on Earth? Like, what if King Rommel dies? Who will take over for him when Blair is across the galaxy?”

Evelyn gives me a sly smile. “I guess you haven’t you heard the rumors either, huh?”

I shake my head. “I don’t pay attention to the tabloids.” Mom also doesn’t allow them in the palace.

She picks at her nails and then glances up at me from beneath her thick eyelashes. “King Rommel is going to remarry.”

My brain dies for a second as I try to comprehend what that means. “Wait, what? Who?”

“Yeah, apparently he’s going to propose to a lady from his court that he’s been seeing off the clock,” Evelyn says.

“But he swore he would never remarry,” I protest. King Rommel’s wife died from stomach cancer when I was seven. Cancer is so rare that my mom was sure someone had infected the queen with it but didn’t dare point any fingers. She knew better than to make an enemy out of her brother.

“He also swore that Earth was at its most peaceful time in all its history, but we both know that’s not true.” Her eyes linger on me for a second too long.

“Wait.” I rub the bridge of my nose. “What does him remarrying have to do with Blair and Harry?”

“The woman he’s marrying already has a son who is older than Blair and very high in the Eastern European military, so if something were to happen to King Rommel after the marriage...”

“Then the military guy will be the next king,” I finish.

“But don’t worry,” Evelyn says, her eyes widely faux-innocent. “We’re living in the most peaceful time in Earth’s history.”

I shake my head and clink my mug against hers. “No, we’re living in space.”

“And it’s the worst place ever,” Blair moans as she flops into the kitchen.

I jump, hoping she hadn’t heard our previous conversation. Evelyn, on the other hand, begins shuffling her deck of tarot cards as if Blair doesn’t even exist.

“Why couldn’t they have given us a bigger ship with bigger rooms?” She complained. “I’m suffocating in here.”

“Poor baby,” Evelyn mutters.

Blair shoots her a glare and wrinkles her nose. “Aren’t you afraid that all the ink in your skin may freeze the further out we get into space?”

Evelyn blinks twice. I place a hand over my face.

“What?” Evelyn asks after a beat.

“Ink can freeze, space is cold and you’re covered in ink.” Blair tilts her head. “Do I have to do the math for you?”

“I really hope you will,” Evelyn says.

“The ship is heated, Blair,” I say.

“But space isn’t, Luna.”

Evelyn pushes back her stool and stands, “I’m going to go find my brother.”

Blair looks to me. “I was only trying to help her. She better not come crying to me when she can’t move because her muscles have frozen.”

“I think she’ll be fine,” I say, a Blair-Headache forming behind my eyes. “If she ever gets trapped in space, I think frozen ink will be the least of her worries.”

One of Blair’s servants stumbles into the room and hands her a holoscreen. She whispers something in Blair’s ear and her eyebrows furrow then both of them leave, discussing something in hushed tones. I watch them leave.

“For a small ship,” I say to myself, grabbing an apple from the cupboard. “There sure are a lot of secrets.”

### CHAPTER THREE

The captain of the ship announces overhead that we've landed on Venus and everyone scrambles to look over their appearances one last time before we disembark. Blair is wearing her signature skirt and over-the-knee boots combo that makes her look more like a model on a Paris runway than a politician. When I mentioned that she told me that a princess is a politician with style which caused a pounding to form beneath my temples, so I dropped the subject altogether.

Mr. Lloyd helps me clip my oxygen regulator around my throat, and I feel the tiny pinpricks as the necklace pierces my skin. We need this to breathe not only on Venus but within the Vangarien spacecraft. I clip my translator to my ear, an early gift, so we can understand any language spoken at the Alliance.

"Each royal councilmember may have only one accompanying creature," T'Ork, the Earthen Ambassador, says once he notices our surplus of servants.

"What?" Blair asks. "We have to have all our servants to survive."

T'Ork scratches his head with one of his long claws. The Vangariens remind me of horses who've been dipped in gray paint and forced to stand upright. Except, instead of hooves they have talons that could pierce a human skull with ease. He narrows his eyes, which are ever-changing orbs of pink and gold. "Interesting. Are your life forces connected to one another?"

“Not at all,” Vihaan snickers. He dismisses his two servants and extra bodyguard with a small wave. I only brought Mr. Lloyd so I’m unaffected by this rule, but Blair’s right eye twitches.

“Poor baby will have to wash her own hair,” Evelyn mutters with pout. She and her brother also only brought bodyguards, so I follow them onto the Vangarien spacecraft as Blair freaks out. I feel slightly guilty for leaving Harry alone with his sister’s breakdown, but I get over it pretty quickly.

My new room could fit 7 of my Genesis rooms inside it, and just like my room on the Genesis, it’s empty. Except, it’s completely empty. No bed, desk, dresser, closet, anything. The only thing in the room is a thin pedestal that comes up to my waist.

Curiously, I press my hand to the pedestal and a small shock shoots up my arm and along my spine, tingling beneath my hair, and I pull my hand away.

“Think it and the room becomes it,” a Vangarien instructs. I jump and spin around. I had no idea anyone was in here. She wears a blue wrap dress, which I know means she’s a technician. The color of Vangarien dresses denotes their class. Blue for technology, red for medicine, white for combat, yellow for politics, and so on.

“W-what do you mean?”

“Think it, and the room will chmorangphe to fit the idea in you hemiadnd,” she says.

I fiddle with my ear piece. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch everything you said.”

She looks down at her claws. “Sometimes our words do not translate perfectly.”

“It’s okay. I think I understand.”

Following her instructions, I place my hand back on the pedestal and the same shock slips up and through my body, but this time I don't pull away. I imagine a large bed with ten fluffy pillows and a plush silver comforter, and a bed appears in front of me, matching the image in my head. I gasp.

“That's amazing.”

The Vangarien giggles, which sounds like a series of bubbles popping. “You Earthens are so cute.”

I spend the next hour and a half testing the limits of what Mr. Lloyd has dubbed the “Magistal”. I change one of the walls into a giant window so I can see all the planets, stars, nebulas, comets, and meteors we pass. I upgraded my bed to have even more pillows and even softer blankets with a lounge chair, 12-foot tall bookcase, and my own espresso maker. I painted my room in vibrant blues and pinks and purples with my mind, leaving no inch uncolored.

By the time I finished, I had a full-blown headache, but it was a satisfying one.

The five-day trip from Venus to the Eighth Galaxy Alliance flies by in a storm of everyone trying to discover every new trick and use of the Vangarien technology, while the actual Vangariens ignore us. Some find our amazement amusing, some scoff, but most just watch us as if we're nothing more than excitable children.

Blair, who Harry talked into keeping a servant because they could share a bodyguard, pouted in her room the entire trip. She never even touched her Magistal. Her servant dreamed up the room, trying desperately to make it to Blair's liking.

The Eighth Galaxy Alliance isn't on a planet like I originally suspected. Instead it's on a rather large asteroid. Gardens surround the meeting hall, covered in flowers, trees, and vines in varying colors and shapes. Some grow toward the hazy red sky in shades of lavender and teal, while others dig deep into the dry crust of the asteroid. Dust swirls around us, but instead of burning my lungs, it tickles my skin like a light drizzle on a warm summer's day.

The gravity is different here and I feel myself standing up straight with ease. Princess Lapis from North Africa glides across the silver walkways like a goddess in her green and yellow dhuku. A small, transparent rabbit-like creature greets us and begins chirping away.

"Past the meeting hall is a circular building, that is the cafeteria and recreation center, and the tall square building next to it is the Resting Quarters. Your room keys will be in your seats in the meeting hall," he says, guiding us to the main hall.

Once when I was younger, Mom took me to Rome where the ancient Coliseum had been rebuilt. This meeting area, which Vihaan has dubbed The Pit, reminds me a lot of the Coliseum except about fifty times bigger.

All the seats are enclosed inside clear orbs that double as holoscreens. Each planet has their own pod, and they're big enough to fit double the amount of representatives we brought. They're also soundproof. As soon as I step into ours, the roar of the groups surrounding us is immediately lost.

Our little rabbit creature shows us how to change the layout of the seats and how to edit the view to fit our personal taste. Some of us choose to have just an open view, but

we can have translations, bios, and other useful information pop up on the screens if we want.

As the newest Planet, we're seated at the very top.

"You think if I fell those yellow blobs would catch me?" Vihaan jokes, gazing down over the edge of our sphere. According to the information screen, those yellow blobs are the Tangants from the planet Torrent

"How are we supposed to do this?" Blair asks once Rabbit leaves. Her hair looks flat and lifeless without its usual shine or curl. Her makeup is flawless, however.

Our plan was originally to propose intergalactic trade deals and establish some sort of scientific exchange, but I can't imagine proposing anything in front of all these different walks of life.

"T'Ork already put in a bid for us to have time on the floor," King Lawrence says. "That doesn't guarantee us a spot, but if we get chosen then we can talk up all of our natural resources and begin explaining everything we're willing to trade and what for."

"But who is walking all the way down to the floor?" Marcos asks. "I am getting dizzy looking down there. I can't imagine it is any better looking up."

"There's no way we can just stroll down there and start making demands," I mutter.

"Why not?" Blair says. Her glare is so sharp, for a second I see Mom's face, ready to slap down whatever ignorant idea I have.

I take a deep breath and try to steady myself. “Because there’s over a thousand planets here and we’re the new guys. We have to work our way to the middle,” I say. “We need allies first.”

“Such arrogance,” Princess Xiu from North Asia scoffs. “We couldn’t even get here on our own and you think we have resources any of the planets need?”

“They have a point,” Harry says, giving his sister an apologetic shrug.

King Lawrence pulls up screen that lists all the planets in attendance while displaying a map of where they’re from. “Then let’s figure out who we need to start buttering up.”

I sit in a chair with “Princess Luna of the Republic of Northern America” stitched into it. Tucked into a pocket beneath the arm rest are two cards, one with my name and one with Mr. Lloyd’s. These must be the keys to our rooms at the Resting Quarters. A warmth of pride shoots through my veins as Blair huffs.

Suddenly all the screens shut off and the face of a Gorgen, a large green creature with three elephant-like heads, seven yellow eyes, and the body of an upright cheetah appears in front of us. I jump, Prince Bai from North Asia drops his holoscreen, and Marcos presses a hand to his chest.

“Hello, and welcome to the Eighth Galaxy Alliance.” A few people clap as his gravelly voice is translated and dispersed throughout our pod. I chew on my fingernail and glance around at all the other pods. Some are typing away on screens, some are listening intently to the Gorgen’s speech. I can’t decide which head I’m supposed to look

at. The left and right head both have two eyes, but the one in the middle has three, arranged like a pyramid.

Vihaan sits next to me and sighs. “You ready?”

“About as ready as I can be.”

I tune back in to the Gorgen just as he says, “Without any further hesitation, let us begin.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

I don't know why I thought sitting in a hearing with aliens would be any less boring than they are on Earth, but oh, how I was mistaken.

We break after three hours of listening to planets whose orbs are on the bottom level talk about resources I didn't know existed and debate problems I didn't know could be problems. Who knew star dust exposure can cause the tide levels of some weird liquid to rise? I didn't even know that star dust or extended exposure to it could be dangerous. The only upside is that our chairs are the most comfortable seats in the known universe, and we have an unlimited supply of our favorite snacks. All it takes is a push of a button on the arm of our chairs.

Mr. Lloyd insists on going for a walk to stretch his legs so we wander away from our orb as I chew on a sour gummy worm. There's three other brand new planets to the Alliance this year, which Harry and King Lawrence decided would be the best to hit up and try to create some sort of alliance with.

"Who do you think we should be talking to, Princess Luna?" Vihaan asks, appearing beside me. A step behind him is his bodyguard.

I twirl one of the worms in my hand. "I don't think we should be talking to anyone."

Vihaan gives me a strange look. "Why is that? Do you think they'll come to us?"

“We look like the desperate new kids at school trying to make friends. It’s not cool.”

“And you know a lot about being cool?”

“I know a lot about being uncool. Or rather being so untouchable I might as well been uncool,” I say. My time at public school wasn’t very long and I’m still not sure why Mom enrolled me. I already spoke more languages than everyone in that school combined, had a pretty good grasp on science, math, and history, not to mention my reading level was through the roof. Mom had tutors teaching me since I could hold my own head up, but she still thought I needed to spend a few years in traditional school.

“You’re a princess, that automatically makes you cool,” Vihaan says.

“No, it automatically makes me recognizable. It also holds me to much higher expectations,” I retort. “I mean, I met them, but it was still stressful.”

Vihaan tucks his hands into his pockets. “Ah, the beautiful life of being a royal.”

“Anyway, back to my original point, if we just hang out like I said, act like we belong and we know what we’re doing, then people will start to notice us,” I explain.

“Sounds like a long time,” he says.

I shrug. “Yeah, but these Alliance meetings last six weeks so we have time.”

“Not everyone is as patient as you are.”

“Then perhaps it’s time they learn to be,” I say, stopping to face Vihaan.

“Aw, are you the Vangariens’ newest pets?” A voice that curls like a cat’s purr asks. We both turn to see a blue creature that looks vaguely like a silhouette of a human, jutting its hand out toward us. On the palm of its hand is a gold symbol that looks like a

cross between a crescent moon and a pentagram. It has no facial features, or anything to distinguish itself from the figure next to it.

“Excuse me?” Vihaan’s head cocks to the side. His lips are tugged into a tight smile, but his eyes are fierce. Both of our bodyguards inch closer.

The blue figures laugh, bending backwards, their faces turned toward the ceiling. “The Vangariens always bring a new planet to the Alliance, hoping their good deeds will get them seated closer and closer and closer to the bottom,” the first figure explains.

The second figure has a crisper voice that reminds me of stepping on brown leaves during our yearly photo ops at the pumpkin patch.

A pang of sadness hits me. I won’t get to go to the pumpkin patch this year. I didn’t really enjoy it until Solis was born, but it’s still a tradition, nonetheless.

“They really went out of their way to find the most pitiful planet, didn’t they?”

Vihaan grunts. “They gave us a ride, but we are not their *pets*.”

I blink and the first figure is suddenly right in front of me, its blank face inches away from mine. I yelp and stumble backwards. “What are you?”

“Freegununununus—” My translator beeps twice and informs me that it couldn’t translate whatever was said. “What are you?”

“We’re humans, from Planet Earth,” I say. I smooth my hair down and tap my heel twice. “And yes, the Vangariens were very kind to bring us here.”

“They are only using you,” the second figure says. There’s weird blue aura around them that pulsates slowly. I didn’t notice it at first, but as the second figure speaks, it tilts its head back and forth, causing the aura to shift from side to side.

“And we’re using them,” I say. “It’s how alliances works. You both give a little, both gain a little.”

Vihaan crosses his arms.

“They only brought you here to make themselves look better,” the figures say together. I wonder if they’re actually one being split into two entities. As the second figure tilts his head side to side, the first rocks its hips forwards and backwards. “You’re their little pets. They found you on the edge of the galaxy and brought you in to make you feel important.”

“We’re not their—”

“And why does that matter?” I cut Vihaan off. “I don’t understand why you’re wasting our time.”

Their auras flicker red for a fraction of a second so small, I might have imagined it.

“Doesn’t that change the way you feel about the Vangariens?”

I shake my head. “Why would it? Without them we wouldn’t be here.”

Vihaan glares at me but shifts his gaze to the figures. I’m ready for their retort when a Gorgen appears besides us and scoffs.

“Are you Freguns trying to stir up trouble already? Why are you bothering our newest members?” his right head asks. The middle one stares at Vihaan and I, while the left one looks off, scanning the crowd.

The two figures snap together into one. “Not at all. We were welcoming them.”

“I’m sure they feel welcomed.” The figure nods and then flickers out of existence, leaving Vihaan and I beside the looming Gorgen. “I apologize for them. They’re one of those planets that like to cause riffs. They feed off of war, and anger, and violence, so if it doesn’t happen naturally, they’ll sometimes step in to create some themselves.”

“Good to know. Thank you” Vihaan huffs. “We should be returning to our orb, right Princess Luna?”

“Uh, sure,” I say. To the Gorgen I add, “Thank you for the information. We’re very excited to be here.”

All six of his ears flutter. “We’re always excited to add new planets and races to the Alliance. I’m Yorgen. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

I smile, but Vihaan tugs me toward our orb before I can reply. I swat his hand off my arm. “Why were you so rude to the Gorgen?”

“Why were you defending the Vangariens?”

“I wasn’t defending them, I was stating a fact.”

“You made us look weak.”

“We *are* weak.”

Vihaan stops and whips around, his eyes burning into mine. “We are n—!”

I hold my arm out, gesturing to the cavern of alien races tucked into their bubbles. “Look around us. We can’t compete here. Not now anyways. The Vangariens are literally centuries ahead of us in technology and they’re only seated three rows down from us. Can you imagine what the races closer to the bottom are capable of? Did you not listen to star dust debate?”

“Just because they might be strong does not mean we are weak.”

I sigh. “You’re right.” The door to our bubble dissolves as we step in. King Lawrence paces back and forth, his head jerking up to us from the holoscreen he’s reading on. Behind him, Harry is lounging in his chair, also reading on a holoscreen. “But it does means we’re weaker than them.”

Vihaan opens his mouth but is cut off as King Lawrence storms toward him. Lawrence throws a holoscreen at Vihaan and it explodes against his chest, pixels and light fragments flying in every direction.

“I knew your brother would only be trouble,” King Lawrence shouts. “He’s no better than your father. A snake in a king’s robe. I knew as soon as he got the throne he would be hungry for war.”

Lawrence’s bodyguard wraps one arm around his waist, and hooks the other under his armpit, keeping the royal from lunging at Vihaan, who’s bodyguard lowers into a fighting stance. Vihaan lifts his hand and the bodyguard stops behind him. Mr. Lloyd pulls me backward, but I stand steady.

“What are you talking about?” Vihaan asks as he slowly lowers his hand. “My brother is not king.”

My stomach twists into a painful knot and I look up to Mr. Lloyd. *Oh no...*

Harry clears his throat and stands up. “Even with the Vangarian technology, it still takes about 72 hours for us to receive any news from Earth, and we just got our first update.” He hands his holoscreen to Vihaan and I watch Vihaan eyes scan the screen, a crease forming between his eyebrows and his lips tugging into a straight line.

Over his shoulder I catch bits and pieces of a few sentences. I’m not super fluent in Filipino, but I catch the gist of the message. Queen Adhira Arya —Dead. Prince Vikaar Arya— coronation— new king—

I squint, words and conjugations rolling around in my head as I translate and re-translate the last sentence.

*The Republic of Southern Asia has declared war on The Republic of the Pacific?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

There hasn't been a war in over a century. Not since the Third War of Independence and Habs Invasion. We've seen rebellions, riots, political infighting, but not a full-blown war. Why would Prince— King Vikaar attack the Pacific Republic? They're close allies. At least I thought they were.

King Lawrence wrestles out of his bodyguard's grip as Vihaan passes me the holoscreen. He holds a steady gaze on the king in front of him, but I notice his hand shaking. *The king in front of him.*

There's only one country on Earth right now who does not have their ruler and it's the Republic of the Pacific, because he's here, with us. He's wife, the queen, is pregnant with their heir, and while she's been ruling in her husband's absence, she's also been confined to bedrest. Everyone else is a prince or a princess, even Princess Lapis from Northern Africa, and she's well over sixty.

"What do you even want from the Pacific? What resources do we have that you need to steal?" Lawrence asks, his voice rising.

"You do not have anything that interests us," Vihaan hisses. There's a slight tremble in his voice, like he can't decide what his next words should be. He tucks his hands into the pockets of his black pants and squares his shoulders.

Before he can add anything, our bubble opens and more royals pour in. An alert flashes against the perimeter, drowning us in red and blue light, informing us the next debate will begin shortly.

“Everything okay?” Evelyn asks. Her eyes flicker between the two bodyguards, posed to attack.

King Lawrence laughs bitterly. “Oh, you haven’t heard the news?”

Blair raises her eyebrow and Evelyn shakes her head.

“Then get a load of this,” Lawrence says as he hits the bubble and slides the article onto the walls so everyone can see it.

Vihaan’s jaw clenches, but he doesn’t look down or away or excuse himself from the room or do any of the cowardly things I’d do. Instead, he stands quietly, waiting for the others to read the news, not shrinking beneath every pair of eyes that turns to him. I read more of the article that I didn’t see earlier. Sides are already being taken. North Asia, West Europe, South and North Africa have all sided with South Asia, while South and Central America, East Europe, and Australia are backing up the Pacific Republic.

Only North America hasn’t taken a side.

*The swing vote.*

My heart beats twice, and then the silence explodes into a chorus of arguments and shouts as if the outcome of the war will be decided right here, in this bubble, on this asteroid, millions and millions of miles from home. Mr. Lloyd pulls me backwards and steps in front of me before something too crazy can happen.

“We can’t have another war,” Blair says.

“Did you honestly think peace was going to last forever?” Evelyn snaps.

“But no reason has been stated,” Marcos says. “How can we take sides if we don’t even know why they’re going to war?”

“Are you honestly surprised?” Evelyn asks.

“Old alliances die hard,” Harry answers with a shrug.

I clap my hands over my ears, my stomach flipping and churning as insults fly across our bubble and bodyguards hold back their respective royals. They don’t even know why they’re fighting, but they’re ready to throw down without reason. My legs buckle and I find myself sliding to the floor.

*The swing vote.*

Why hasn’t Mom chosen a side yet? What game is she playing? Is she waiting to see who stands a chance at winning? Is she too busy dealing with our own rebellions to worry about the other countries? How many more rebellions has she had to put down since I left? Is there even a North America left to take a side? You can only stomp people into the ground for so long before they throw the dirt back into your eyes.

I catch myself before I hit the ground and force myself back up. Mr. Lloyd helps steady me. I can’t freak out. Not here and not now. Not with everyone around me.

“You’re okay, Princess,” Mr. Lloyd says. “Just breathe.”

“I’m okay,” I lie. “I’m okay.”

The room feels like its spinning and when I step forward I almost lose my balance, but I focus on standing straight.

“I am not my brother. His doing, is not my own,” Vihaan snaps. “I didn’t even know he was king.”

There’s a break in his voice that snaps the room back into place and stops my bones from swaying.

“Stop blaming Vihaan,” I blurt, much louder than I meant to. King Lawrence snaps his mouth shut and looks at me. Evelyn, Blair, Marcos, and Harry follow while Vihaan turns around. His face is void of any emotion, but I see him bite the inside of his cheek.

“Are you taking South Asia’s side?” Lawrence asks.

I shake my head. “I’m not taking any side.”

“Not that it would make a difference if you did,” Blair mutters.

“There’s nothing we can do about the war here,” I say, ignoring her. “I’m not going to say it doesn’t matter, but,” I shrug. “It doesn’t.”

“His people are slaughtering mine as we speak.” King Lawrence jams a finger into Vihaan’s chest.

“You have no proof of that,” Vihaan sneers knocking his hand away.

“Vihaan didn’t declare the war on your country,” I repeat. “And he is not ordering any slaughters.” I take a deep breath. Vikaar is twice Vihaan’s age. I doubt he shared his plans with his baby brother. “All I’m saying is you can’t blame him for something he hasn’t done.”

“Earth is so far away,” Marcos mumbles, mostly to himself.

“All we can do is our job, which is working *together* to create an alliance with other planets,” Princess Lapis says, a line from one of the many emails King Rommel sent us. I release a shaky breath. At least someone is on my side. “We represent the best Earth has to offer. We will not let this distract us.”

I think back to what Evelyn told me back on the Genesis. King Rommel was remarrying and his new stepson was an important figure in the Eastern European military. I wonder if this war will change any of that since the European countries aren't on the same side.

*The European countries aren't on the same side?* I stare at the article again. Since when did European republics turn against one another? What is *actually* happening back home?

King Lawrence huffs and leaves the bubble, muttering something beneath his breath that I couldn't catch. Princess Xiu from Northern Asia and Prince Viktor from Eastern Europe manage to calm down the other representatives and the air shifts as we all pretend to focus on the debates happening down below. I think they're debating about who can harvest comet radiation from specific region in a solar system near ours, but my thoughts drift toward Mom and I almost grab my holoscreen to send her a message, asking her what her plan is, but if there's one thing I learned, it's never to question her. I've earned enough slaps to know that I should trust her because she knows what she's doing.

But does she? I run my hand through my hair. This is the first war in either of our lifetimes. We've both entered uncharted territory. The other royals are typing away on holoscreens, Vihaan disappears with his bodyguard. I don't blame him.

The other royals begin trickling out as well, tucking their holoscreens under their arms, their servant or bodyguard close behind them, whispering between one another. I assume they're all going to find their rooms in the Resting Quarters. T'Ork told us the Alliance doesn't really stop so we're free to come and go as we please. Soon it's just Harry, Mr. Lloyd, and I sitting in the bubble.

"How long until you think we rip each other apart?" Harry asks.

I unfold my legs from underneath me and stretch. "Here or on Earth?"

Harry squints, like he's focusing on the debate. "Both."

"A week."

He nods and stands up. "You should get some rest. We've been up for a while now."

"I will after this debate. I'm very interested in comets."

Harry chuckles and half-waves as he leaves. Mr. Lloyd snores behind me and I curl back up into my chair, checking one more time for a message from Mom.

Nothing.

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Two hours after Mr. Lloyd woke up from his nap he dragged me to the Resting Quarters, because whether I like it or not, I do need to rest. Our rooms were modelled after our rooms back home on Earth. Once we entered our rooms, our memories were

scanned, and the room shifted to look like the ones we left behind. My giant bed was covered in fluffy white pillows and my soft cranberry comforter, and even sat across from a brick fireplace that warmed me to my core. My dark hardwood desk still wobbled as I picked up the ancient copy of an mid-21<sup>st</sup> century teen novel that laid on it. I sink into my chair and flip through the pages.

They aren't real. They feel synthetic, almost rubber, not soft and worn like my real copy back home. I sigh and cross the room, my feet sinking into the carpet and look out the window. Except, this window didn't overlook a pristine yard, dusted with shades of gray and black beneath a moonlit sky. Instead, it looks into nothing because next door isn't the backyard I used to run through, but rather Mr. Lloyd's room. I guess memories can't be 100% recreated.

Harry was right, we have been up for a while, about 27 hours, and even though my body is ready to succumb to exhaustion, I'm not. I peel off my clothes and find my trunk tucked away beneath my bed. I change into a pair of loose pants and an old t-shirt Mr. Lloyd gave me from when he was younger that no longer fits him. He called it a relic of the past, but whoever's name and face was imprinted on the cloth had long since faded, only the faint outline of a woman, a snake, and two letters, a "R" and a "P."

I crawl into bed and try to quiet the whirlwind in my head. It's only the first day of the Alliance and we're already falling apart. How can I go home and explain to Mom the reason we couldn't become allies with any aliens is because we couldn't even become allies with each other? What will she say?

She'd tell me that there's no excuse. That I should have worked harder, found a way around the war. Failure is failure, no matter the reason for it.

I groan and sit up. What will happen to me if I show back up to the palace without any treaties, without any trade deals, without anything? Will Mom dye my eyes back to brown and send me out to find a commoner family since that's obviously where I belong? Would that be so bad?

A darker voice whispers against the back of my skull, secrets rattling my nerves.  
*Or will she bury you next to Dad?*

I shake the thought out of my head and rub my eyes, smearing the makeup I forgot to wash off. She wouldn't get rid of me. I'm still her daughter.

But Grandpa was still her dad, and he never suspected the poison.

Before I can comprehend where I'm going, I throw the comforter off of me and pull on my shoes, slipping into the hallway and out of the Resting Quarters. I flip on my translator as my sandals crunch against the rocks beneath me. To my right is the meeting hall and to the left is the cafeteria.

I head left.

## CHAPTER SIX

An avalanche of voices and sounds I don't understand roll over me as I cross into the cafeteria. All around me, delegates swarm to and from skinny silver canisters about as tall of my shoulders, receiving silver trays, boxes, or cups, before either leaving or finding a seat at one of the thousands of levitating tables. Through a series of arches against the backwall, I can make out several games and activities. The one on the far right has the biggest crowd, spilling out into the café area.

My stomach clenches and I turn to go back to the Resting Quarters. I shouldn't have left my bed. Why would I even go exploring by myself? Without Mr. Lloyd or—

Someone knocks into my shoulder and I stumble backwards. As I regain my footing, I notice a familiar flash of blonde hair and force myself up straight. Poised. Not like I almost tumbled across the floor.

“Is this where we get food?”

I scowl. “You almost dislocated my shoulder.”

Blair barely glances at me.

“T’Ork said the food in our orb things isn’t nearly as good as the food in,” she pauses and looks around the room. For a split second she looks overwhelmed, but just as quickly composes herself. “In whatever he said. I don’t think it translated because it just sounded like a jumbled mess. Is this it?”

A giant purple slug slinks by us with a tray of what looks like maggots and honey. I restrain a gag and cover my nose. “I think so.”

I follow Blair as she practically glides to the tall silver canister and presses her palm against it.

“I’m still so mad T’Ork wouldn’t let me bring Pierre. He’s the best chef on Earth. He always cooks me the most exquisite meals,” she whines. A screen pops up in front of her, a round robot staring back at her. At least I think it’s a robot.

“What can I make you?” It asks in a bright and squeaky voice. My heart swells at how adorable it is, and I have to resist the urge to coo.

“Do you have like a menu, or what?” Blair asks.

“I can make anything,” the robot chef replies.

“Anything?” Blair raises an eyebrow.

“Anything from any planet in the known universe.”

“Is Earth a ‘known planet?’” I pipe up.

An orange light flickers on and blinks twice before switching off. “Is it in the 313<sup>th</sup> solar system, Princess Luna?” Robo Chef asks.

Blair and I exchange a glance. I wrap my arms around myself. I’m not a fan of being scanned or whatever this machine is doing.

After a moment of hesitation Blair nods. “And the third from our sun.”

“It is a known planet,” the robot confirms.

Blair taps a long pink finger nail against her lip as it curls in a devious smile.

“Hm? I guess I’ll have a cordon bleu, baked, with no cheese, and with a side of roasted

asparagus, garlic mashed potatoes, and a red wine puree. Oh, and a sparkling cranberry water with two squirts of lime.”

Robo Chef nods then turns around, jamming his fingers onto a keyboard behind him. I lean forward to try and get a better view of what exactly he’s doing, but the screen disappears, the canister opens, and a tray with Blair’s order appears. We both jump.

I blink and Blair slowly takes her tray.

“Uh, thanks,” she says, but gets no reply. She steps out of the way as I press my palm to the canister and Robo Chef reappears.

“What can I make you?”

I’m about to order a baked chicken breast with steamed broccoli, when it hits me. Mom isn’t here. I don’t have to eat her diet approved foods.

“Chili cheese fries, please,” I blurt out. “With a Pepsi.”

“Not worried about our figure, are we?” Blair snickers.

“Says the girl who ordered chicken with ham stuffed inside of it,” I snap.

Blair rolls her eyes. “I ordered it without cheese.”

“It’s still chicken with ham inside it.”

“I haven’t had it in like three months,” she huffs.

My meal appears and I grab my tray, following Blair as she tries to decide which table to sit at. Most tables are full, some slammed together so more diplomats can sit together. A weird sense of nostalgia washes through me. Even millions of light years from home, surrounded by aliens I could never dream of existing, a cafeteria is still just that; a cafeteria.

“Don’t let this go to your head, but I’m glad I saw you wandering around because I didn’t want to come here alone,” Blair says.

“The feeling’s mutual.”

Blair groans. “Let’s see if this bald thing won’t mind us sitting here. You’d think in the middle of the night there’d be more tables.”

“I don’t think night and day is a thing here. It’s always dusk-y.”

Blair ignores me and plops down in a gray chair. It dips under her weight but remains levitating.

“It’s cool if we sit here, right?” Blair asks the alien, batting her eyelashes. I cringe at her forwardness. The alien looks up at us and tilts its head. In the middle of its face is an iridescent white orb. It doesn’t have a mouth or a nose, and its skin reminds me of the too-pink-to-be-orange, but too-orange-to-be-pink sky at dawn.

“I don’t mind,” a voice says. No, it says. Maybe she says. The voice sounds feminine enough, but I don’t know how genders work when it comes to aliens. I also don’t know where her voice comes from, and I’m not even sure if I’m actually hearing her with my ears or if it’s just wrapping around my brain, but somehow, I know it’s her.

“Thank you,” I say as I sit down.

“Where are you from?”

There it is again. Her voice that isn’t a voice. It penetrates my brain, burying itself deep inside me. How is my translator even catching it?

“Earth,” Blair answers slowly. Does she hear the weird voice without hearing it? “It’s in the 313<sup>th</sup> solar system.” She twists a lock of her hair between her fingers and squints at the alien.

“I’m Luna and this is Blair.”

The alien nods. In her hands, which only consists of three long fingers, is what looks like bread. As she rolls it back and forth it gets smaller and smaller.

“What about you?” Blair asks in-between bites. A dribble of juice rolls down her chin and she swipes it away with the back of her hand. She catches my eyes and glares at me, daring me to call her on it. I guess etiquette is reserved for Earth.

“I am Muxelle from the planet Coxis. We reside in the 247<sup>th</sup> solar system.” A dark green bracelet that looks like a vine wrapped around her wrist glows and the sleeves on her silver suit grow longer so now they pass her elbows.

“Are you—” I struggle to find the right word, “absorbing that bread?”

“It’s crumble, but yes. It’s how we nourish ourselves,” Muxelle says. The crumble has disappeared now and the white orb in the middle of her face brightens.

“We use mouths.” To prove it, Blair sips her drink.

“Yes, I know. We’ve studied the basic traits and affiliations of all the species who attend the Alliance,” Muxelle says. “It is required to determine which planets to consider for alliances or trade.”

“Sounds hard,” Blair says. “There’s a lot of planets.”

“It is not so hard.”

“How many of these meetings have you attended?” Blair asks.

Muxelle pauses for a moment, tilting her head. “This is only my second meeting. I’m an assistant diplomat.” Her voice grew deeper during the second half of the sentence and I wonder if it was my translator compensating for something.

“Does it get less overwhelming?” I ask.

“It’s not overwhelming,” Blair says, groaning. Under her breath she adds, “You just don’t know how to act around people.”

“You don’t think being surrounded by hundreds of strange creatures is overwhelming?” I hiss.

“At the end of the day they’re just like us back home.”

“Then you should be really worried considering war has broken out at home,” I snap.

Muxelle jumps as Blair slams her cup down.

“And what about it?” Blair says.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Muxelle gather up her things and slip out of her chair. I swear her orb flashed blue, but before I can ask her about it she’s gone.

“Great, now you scared away the alien,” Blair says.

“You started it!”

“Stop acting like a child.” Blair rolls her eyes and picks at her mash potatoes.

“Are you honestly surprised though?” Her tone softens just a touch. “South Asia has been trying to take over the Pacific Republic for years now.”

I didn’t know that, but I act like I did.

“I’m more surprised at how quickly everyone else took sides and it’s erupted into a full on war.” But that’s only half-true. The tension always been there. I felt it. Mom’s talked about it. It was like everyone was sharpening their swords, just waiting for someone to swing first.

“Not everyone has taken sides.” Our green eyes meet and, for the first time in my life, I see a shadow of bags under Blair’s eyes.

“We should probably go get some rest,” I say, standing up with my tray. “We’re going to have a big day tomorrow.”

Blair sighs. “I sure hope we get more news from Earth soon.”

I dump my tray into what I assume is the trash, a knot tightening in my stomach. I can’t imagine what’s happening back on Earth now, what Mom is going through, what she’s planning. Nexus was supposed to begin military training. He’s only ten. My head spins just trying to wrap itself around everything.

“We’ve really gone to war now, haven’t we?” I say more to myself than Blair, but she responds with a nod.

“Yeah, we really have.”

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I bury my face in my hands as Mr. Lloyd takes another large and crunchy bite out of his pickle, reading the latest news from Earth. We’ve gotten a steady stream of updates from most of the countries since I woke up a few hours ago. Some conflicting, most generic.

*Troops from South Asia land on the coast of the Pacific Republic.*

*Western Europe bombs Eastern Europe.*

*Central and South America send medical supplies to Australia and the Pacific.*

*North America remains neutral.*

Those last few words flip over and over in my head.

*North America remains neutral.*

What is Mom's play here? What is she doing? Is she riding it out until there's a clear winner? If so, why aren't all the other countries following suit? Everyone was so quick to join a si—

*CRUNCH!*

"Mr. Lloyd, can you please chew quieter?" I snap, closing my eyes.

Mr. Lloyd jumps then chuckles. "Sorry, Princess."

"What do you think Mom is doing? Why hasn't she joined a side yet?" I ask.

We're alone in our orb for the moment. Vihaan was in here earlier, but he left as soon as King Lawrence showed up, and King Lawrence left about twenty minutes ago to go explore the cafeteria. Blair and Harry are probably still in bed. I haven't seen Evelyn or Marcos yet. I haven't seen most of the delegates, come to think of it. "And where is everyone?"

Mr. Lloyd pops the rest of the pickle in his mouth and crunches. I squeeze my hands together to keep myself from screaming.

"Your mother is doing what she thinks is best for our country," he says after swallowing. "You know she's busy trying to prevent a civil war. She doesn't have time to

worry about the rest of the world,” Mr. Lloyd says. “And I just saw the Princess Karabo and Princess Lapis head to an orb a few rows down.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You think there will be a third civil war?”

He swallows again, like he’s said too much. “I’m just speculating, Princess. I know it isn’t proper.”

“No, please, continue to speculate,” I say. “You know I don’t care about Mom’s stupid rules.”

He doesn’t say anything, instead leans forward, his eyes scanning below us. “Ah, there!” He points to an orb three rows down and two to the left, and sure enough, Karabo, the South African princess, and Lapis, the Northern African princess, are speaking to the aliens that look like slugs. I’ve already forgotten what they were called.

“Looks like they’re actually doing their job,” I mumble, trying to refocus on the time wrap debate happening in the center of the colosseum. “Do you think they’d restore the Constitution?”

Mr. Lloyd furrows his eyebrows. “Who, Princess?”

I wave my hand. “The rebels. The ones in New York and Montreal.” I look up at my bodyguard. “The ones who would start the Civil War.”

“Princess, your mother has everything under control. I didn’t mean to worry you,” he says.

“But if she didn’t, or rather couldn’t stop them, do you think they’d try to recreate the Congress and Presidency?” Even though the North American Republic is known for hanging onto its history, there isn’t a lot of information left from how our country ran

when it was the United States of America. I know the people voted for people to represent their states who then served under a president of the whole country, which was like a king people also voted for. It's weird how the state system worked as well. Most of our citizens just reside within our main cities, with smaller populations living in rural towns, trying to make something of the destroyed land.

"They can't recreate something they almost know nothing about," Mr. Lloyd says which I guess makes sense. History classes begin with the lead up to the Habs Invasion and the creation of the Eleven Royal Republics under the Habs Empire.

"Emperor Vasiliev probably wouldn't let the monarchy go either, huh?" I say, chewing on a hangnail.

"If anything, he'd just put a new family in power," Mr. Lloyd says. He coughs and claps a hand onto my shoulder. "You said the cafeteria can make anything we want it to make?"

I nod and he forces a smile. "I, uh, have a real craving for some chocolate cake. You good here by yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm good." Back home, if Mom heard Mr. Lloyd talking to me about politics she would have him whipped. Its only happened once when I was ten. I didn't understand why Mom insisted on holding back on releasing the year's flu vaccination to Los Angeles and Mr. Lloyd tried to explain to me that the city had refused to pay her increased property taxes. A maid overheard our conversation and told Mom. Thirty lashes for the first offense. Next time he'd be removed from the palace and she didn't have to tell me how for me to keep my mouth shut.

Mr. Lloyd leaves and two seconds later my holoscreen beeps. Another news report. I pick of the screen and tap the red dot in the top corner, opening the latest update.

*The Australian Airforce has engaged in combat with South Asia over the island of Tarawa.*

I drop the holoscreen back into the pocket of my chair just as there's a knock on our orb. I turn to see Muxelle. I give her a small wave as I cross the orb, the door dissolving as I reach it.

“Hey,” I say. “What are you doing here?”

“I was wondering if you could answer some questions I have about your planet,” Muxelle says. “Even in all our research, I’m afraid we’ve barely scratched the surface of what life is like on your planet and I’m very curious.”

“Sure,” I say, stepping out of the orb.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Muxelle leads me down seven rows of orbs to where the rest of Coxis's diplomats are discussing trade deals with a few Martinians. I recognize them from the star dust debates. They're a very small race, about the size of a house cat, with wide eyes and yellow, leather-like skin. They barely even glance our direction as Muxelle sits and pats the seat next to her.

"How many alliances has your planet made outside of your atmosphere?" She asks. She plucks a plum colored square from a tray next to her and begins rolling it between her palms.

"Only one," I admit.

Muxelle nods, the plum square dissolving between her fingers. "You are allies with the Vangariens, no?"

"Yes, but we only contacted them a few years ago." I pause. "Well, they contacted us."

"Your technology is still primitive, no?" Muxelle asks.

I shrug. "Depends on who you ask. It's the most advanced technology we've ever had."

"But compared to that even of the Vangariens—"

"Yes, it primitive," I snap.

"As a ruler do you make technology a top priority?"

“I’m not the ruler of my planet. I’m not even the ruler of my country. My mom is,” I explain. Muxelle nods and leans toward me. “I’m second in line so if anything happens to her I can rule, but for now, she’s in charge.” I don’t mention the fact that Mom is determined to pass the crown over me and give it to my little brother.

I bite my tongue. No. I can prove myself here, prove that I can be a leader. I could rule North America, even if Mom doesn’t like it.

“Are you all family?”

Muxelle’s question snaps me back to the present and I can barely process it in time to answer without my hesitation becoming awkward.

“No, we’re all part of a royal family, but all the royal families aren’t related. The only people I’m related to is Blair and her brother Harry. They’re my cousins,” I explain.

“What are cousins?”

“Their dad is my mom’s brother.”

Muxelle’s eye-light-orb-thing, dims for a second before lighting back up again. “We are all related,” she gestures to the other diplomats who look just like her, but with different colored wraps around their bodies, “but that is because everyone on Caxis is a spawn of the Grand Mistress.”

“Grand Mistress?”

“She creates all of us. She gives us life, jobs, and meaning. Everything we are is traced back to her,” Muxelle says.

“Do you assimilate other cultures until you become the perfect race?” I ask, remembering a ratty old sci-fi novel I read as a kid. I found it tucked away under a sink in the kitchen. My guess was it belonged to one of the servants.

I returned it once I finished reading it. I wonder if anyone missed it. I wonder if it’s still there.

Muxelle tilts her head. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” I wave my question away. “What happens if she dies? Or ceases to exist?”

This time her orb-thing completely darkens and then flashes bright green. Then she says, “The Grand Mistress can never die. No harm will ever come to her.”

She says it like a chant, or a prayer. I almost feel like I’m supposed to repeat it back to her.

“But what if something did?” I press, my curiosity getting the best of me.

“Anything’s possible, right?”

There’s a pause. “Our entire planet would crumble,” she says, her voice quieter.

“She is the source of all life.”

“Oh, wow,” I mumble, trying to imagine something, someone, that powerful on Earth.

“Your planet doesn’t have a life source, does it?” she asks. “Nothing that you’re all connected to?”

“I mean we have the sun. Without it human life would more than likely cease to exist. Some scientists think we could just live underground, but I think that would lead to mass insanity which would end up killing any survivors,” I ramble.

“But nothing that connects you to other humans?”

*Suffering* I think, but I shake my head. “No. We’re not connected.”

“One thing I find fascinating about your planet is how different all of your inhabitants look. No two are exactly the same,” Muxelle says. “We’re all made after the perfect model, the Grand Mistress.”

I open my mouth to point out that our differences are our main point of weakness and that it’s led to countless deaths on Earth, but I’m stopped by Vihaan who knocks on the orb’s door, his bodyguard behind him.

Another Coxian opens the door and Vihaan bows his head in thanks before locking his green eyes on me.

“Princess Luna, I’m so glad I found you. I require your assistance,” he says. His voice is polite and almost charming. The heartbreak prince.

I don’t buy it for a second.

“We can continue our conversation later,” Muxelle tells me, picking up a lime colored square and rolling it between her hands. She leans back against her seat, her posture stiffer than it was a few seconds ago, her orb fixated on Vihaan.

“I look forward to it,” I say. I follow Vihaan outside of the orb and once we’re up a few steps I ask “What did you need help with?”

“I don’t think you should be spending time with anyone from Coxis. In fact, it would be best if we avoided anyone from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System altogether.” He speaks low enough so only I can hear him, glancing at me over his shoulder.

I stop.

“What?”

He exhales and turns around, looking down at me from three steps above me.

“I’ve heard that the planets from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System work together to take advantage of the newer species at the Alliance,” he explains.

“Who is ‘they’?” I ask. “The Freguns?”

“T’Ork, a few Gorgens, those slug creatures.” Vihaan tucks his hands into his pockets and gives me a deadpan glare. “The Freguns are from the 247<sup>th</sup> by the way.”

“So, you’re suddenly best friends with the Gorgens and T’Ork?” I snap. “Weren’t you the one ready to tear apart the Vangariens whenever the Freguns told us we were just a charity case?”

“I trust the Vangariens more than I trust some random aliens,” Vihaan says.

“The Vangariens were just random aliens at one point,” I argue.

Vihaan shakes his head and rubs his eyes. “Why are you so impossible?” he mutters.

“I am *not* impossible.”

He sighs and adds, “Just be careful with them, okay? We don’t need some outside force trying to take advantage of us.” His gaze travels back to the top row of orbs. “We’re quite capable of ruining this chance at intergalactic diplomacy on our own.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. I haven’t really checked in with the other diplomats.

He shrugs and some of the tension fades from my muscles. I expected more of a fight. Unlike Blair, Vihaan’s exhaustion is clearly painted on his face with dark eye circles and frizzy hair, his shoulders slump just forward enough that his usual perfect posture is slightly less perfect.

He must notice me studying him because he immediately straightens back up and clears his throat. “I think we should focus on making allies with the Tygans. They’re allies with the Vangariens and they’re on the edge of the 312<sup>th</sup> Solar System so we can see if we can work a transportation deal with the Vangariens.”

“I haven’t met any of them yet.” We start walking again and I run my fingers through my hair, trying to detangle the knot resting against the back of my neck. As we reach the top of the stairs, the crowd grows larger. The debate just ended so everyone is moving around, trying to nab a chance to speak on the center floor, others stretching their limbs. So many voices ring through my translator.

Quietly, I ask, “Have you heard anything from home?”

“Nothing of interest. Your mother still hasn’t taken a side,” he says, reading my mind.

“I’m not sure if she will at this point,” I admit. “But then again, I can’t guess that woman’s motives if my life depended on it.”

“It is probably the smart move.” He unwraps a lollipop and sticks it in his mouth. Where did that even come from? “Aren’t most of your troops too busy putting down rebellions anyway?”

I toss my hair over my shoulder once the knot is out. “There’s not nearly as many rebellions as Mom makes it out to be. Don’t get me wrong, there’s a lot, but she’s far too,” my stomach churns at the word, “*efficient* at putting them down herself for it really to be a military problem.”

Vihaan raises an eyebrow as we pass our orb. “Really? And you just let her?”

“I, uh,” I swallow, “I can’t really stop her.”

“Why does she want everyone to believe you’re having a rebellion crisis?”

“She exaggerates to avoid having to donate a lot of supplies or goods to the other countries,” I say. “New York and Toronto have had rebellions, but someone could publish an article criticizing a dress she wore one day in Florida and she’d called it a rebellion. And since North America is known for its revolutions, everyone believes her.”

I bite my tongue to keep more from spilling out. Should I be spilling our secrets like this? What if Vihaan sends this information back home? What if we become South Asia’s next target? Would a South Asian invasion really be that bad of a thing?

“That’s disgustingly wicked, but also incredibly smart.”

I hold my arms out as if Vihaan has just won a gameshow. “That’s my mommy!”

He chuckles. “At least yours hasn’t started a war.”

“To be fair, neither has yours,” I say. I bite my tongue again when his smile drops.

“From what my sister tells me—” we stop outside of an orb full of aliens I don’t recognize “—this war has been in the works for over a year now.”

“What?” I don’t know if I’m more confused by the fact that South Asia has been actively planning for a war or that Vihaan has been able to contact his sister. I wonder why Mom hasn’t reached out to me yet.

“I had no idea.” He shrugs. “No one tells the youngest anything, except to have fun in space.”

“And are you having fun?”

He laughs and opens the door to the orb, a sickly-sweet smell pouring out, gripping my throat and squeezing my lungs. “I think we’re about to.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“You are not a good friend,” I groan before retching again into a bucket. Vihaan finishes braiding my hair and twists it into a bun.

“How was I supposed to know Tygan chili would make you sick?” He says. He pats my back and another chunk of meat rips up my throat, catching on my two front teeth before plopping onto the pile of blue vomit. Vihaan gags behind me.

“Did you call Mr. Lloyd?” I ask, tears streaking down my face. I know I must look twice as pathetic as I feel, hunched over a small garbage can beside the coliseum while strange aliens pass by.

“He said he was on his way,” Vihaan says, his voice muffled. I glance up to see he has one hand over his nose and mouth, avoiding looking at me.

“Is this why you wanted to be allies with them? Because they put drugs in all of their food?” I can see that being a selling point for Harry, but Vihaan I thought would be more sensible.

But then again, I’m the one who ate the blue chili from a strange alien bowl knowing that I should never eat food I, or a robot chef, didn’t make.

“What’s going on?” Mr. Lloyd asks. He kneels down next to me, squeezing my shoulder. “What happened, Luna?”

“Vihaan poisoned me,” I croak, relieved to see Mr. Lloyd.

“I did not,” Vihaan says quickly. Him and his bodyguard take a step back as Mr. Lloyd stands up. “She ate Tygan chili and it made her sick.”

“What on God’s green Earth is ‘Tygan chili’?”

I want to answer but another slew of sludge spills out of me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Vihaan cringe.

“It’s this sweet and spicy dish made by the Tygans. We’re trying to set up communications with them, and a sign of respect is to eat any food they offer. T’Ork was with us,” Vihaan explains, talking much faster than I’ve ever heard him talk.

Mr. Lloyd growls as he kneels back down beside me.

“I’m okay,” I’m whimper. “I’m okay.” I wipe my mouth on the back of my sleeve and try to stand up.

“We should go back to the Resting Quarters,” Mr. Lloyd says. “And you should actually *rest*.” He hangs on to my forearms, holding me steady. My knees feel like they could buckle any minute now.

“No, no, I’m fine,” I insist. “Just let me get cleaned up and I can get back to work.”

Mr. Lloyd huffs. “Princess, you need rest.”

I don’t argue with my bodyguard not only because I know it’s a fight I’ll lose, but because I’m not entirely confident I’ll make it back on my own. Vihaan casts me an apologetic look before he returns to the Tygans.

Mr. Lloyd keeps a steady hand on my elbow as we walk back and I focus on putting one foot in front of the other without falling to either side. I try to keep my shoulders squared, spine straight, to grasp onto the last strand of dignity I have.

“You know better than to eat food you haven’t prepared,” Mr. Lloyd scowls.

“I mean, back home, yeah,” I say. “But that’s different. I don’t have any enemies here.”

“Do you think these politicians are any different just because they’re not from Earth?” He snaps. “If anything your guard should be higher here than back home.”

A bubble of anger pops in my mouth before I can swallow it back down. “And how was your cake? Aren’t you supposed to be a step behind me at all times?”

His grip on my elbow tightens. “I thought you were smart enough that I didn’t have to.”

I pull myself out of his grasp, digging my heels into the shiny rocks beneath my boots. “So sorry to disappoint you,” I say, forcing extra venom into my words. “I’m not a perfect little princess.”

“I didn’t say that Luna—”

“You didn’t have to!” I turn and nearly fall, but I catch myself, swiping tears off my cheeks. “Mom tells me enough that I’m an idiot, I don’t need you to remind me of it.”

“Princess—”

“Stop talking,” I shout.

Mr. Lloyd's round face flushes red, but he doesn't say anything. Instead he holds my glare until I finally give in to my exhaustion and the vile aftertaste on my tongue and continue toward the Resting Quarters. Mr. Lloyd follows a step behind me.

Once in my room, I brush my teeth twice before peeling off my clothes and showering. Mr. Lloyd waits outside my door silently until I turn my light out. Then he returns to his room. After brushing my teeth a third time and gargling another cup of mouthwash, my head begins to clear. What did they put into that chili?

Part of me wants to apologize to Mr. Lloyd for being so bratty and acting like, well, Blair. It's not his fault I followed Vihaan and tried alien food, and it's not like I haven't told him a million times before that I don't need him on my heels every second of every day.

But there's an echo inside my head of my mother's words, reminding me that I am a royal and it's Mr. Lloyd's job to keep me safe, even if it means keeping me from making stupid mistakes.

As I lay down I drown that voice out. I will not act like my mother.

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I wake up to a message from Blair. She wants all the royals to meet at the orb in an hour for a meeting. I groan and push myself out of bed. My head is still fuzzy from that chili.

I change into a crisp white tank top and charcoal blazer, matching them with a pair of cranberry pants and white heels. I quickly swipe some blush over my cheekbones,

mascara over my lashes, and apply a quick coat of lipstick. The message didn't say why we're meeting, but I don't want to look like a zombie in front of the rest of the diplomats.

"We have a meeting in the orb," I tell Mr. Lloyd once he answers his door. "Blair sent out the message, so we need to hurry. She'll kill me if I'm the last to show."

Mr. Lloyd nods, but doesn't say anything. He's already dressed and ready to go. My heart twists in my chest as I head to the lift. I want to apologize, but he doesn't seem to be in the mood for talking so I keep my mouth shut.

Thankfully, we're not the last ones to arrive, Evelyn and her brother are, but I feel almost out of place as I take my seat. Since no debates are happening on the main floor below, our orb has shifted. No longer are our chairs facing outward toward the center of the colosseum, but rather they've been gathered around a long rectangular table. Vihaan sits across from me and gives me a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. Behind him, his bodyguard is watching King Lawrence, who is seated at the opposite end of the table.

The only sound is a few whispers between the North Asian diplomats that I can't make out.

Mr. Lloyd leans forward and whispers in my ear. "Do you know what this meeting is about, Princess?"

I lift my shoulder in a half-shrug. "I wish I did."

Evelyn sits next to me, her thick curly hair pinned on top of her head, and Marcos slides into the last empty seat next to Vihaan. They shake hands and Marcos says something that makes Vihaan laugh, but I don't hear it because Blair stands up from the

opposite end of the table and claps her hands twice. At least they're still friendly even though their countries are on opposite sides of the war back home.

"Now that we're finally all here," Blair says, giving a pointed look to Evelyn who is unfazed, "we can get down to business." The light on my holoscreen flashes and I tap it, the agenda for today's meeting, a three bulleted list, appears in front of me.

*Discuss resources*

*Discuss potential trading partners*

*Discuss potential military alliances*

My eyes linger on the word *military* as Blair dives into what new and fascinating resources she's learned about and which groups have access them.

Why are we looking for military alliances? Who is threatening Earth? The only people trying to kill us *are* us.

I feel sick to my stomach again, but this time it's not from the chili.

"There's sellilumin which is four times the strength of steel, but as light as a feather," Blair explains. "This metal is harvested from the mines on Planet Rook in the 298<sup>th</sup> solar system, and they use it to create these amazing flying vehicles and even floating homes when the metal is magnetized. Can you imagine having that on Earth?"

"But what would they want in exchange for this metal?" Princess Lapis asks, not waiting for Blair to open the floor up to questions.

"Is it renewable on their planet, or will there be a limit to how much we can buy?" Princess Xiu chimes in.

I lean back in my chair, my eyes glazing over as Blair answers questions and debates begin. I doodle a picture of a Gorgen on my holoscreen, nodding intermittently and glancing up to Blair so it seems like I'm paying attention enough to take notes.

"Perhaps," Marcos begins, interrupting King Lawrence and Blair's argument, which I have all but tuned out. Mr. Lloyd nudges my shoulder, alerting me to pay attention. I stop doodling and look up. "I move to ask the Rooks for a sample and send it back home to see if it is something our scientists and innovators can even use."

I clear my throat. "I second that motion." Blair exhales and narrows her eyes, so I add, "We don't even know how that metal will react with our atmosphere, our gravity, our solar radiation. Let's not commit to anything we haven't tested."

There. Participation complete. I return to my doodle.

"And since you're already so *friendly* with the Rooks, I don't see why you wouldn't be able to convince them, Princess Blair," Evelyn coos.

"But which country gets to do the testing?" Prince Bai, Princess Xiu's twin brother asks.

"We should probably send them to Emperor Vasiliev's Imperial Scientists in West Europe," Harry says. "I'm sure the Emperor would want to oversee all the tests anyway."

A flash of annoyance crosses Blair's features, but she hides it as soon as it appears beneath a thousand-watt smile. "Then shall we vote?"

There's a few grumbles and some whispers, but it passes with no objections and I start working on a doodle of a Vangarien as King Lawrence begins talking about the

importance of us making at least one solid alliance before returning to Earth. He asks if anyone has found anyone we can open negotiations with yet.

Only Vihaan raises a hand.

“Prince Vihaan,” King Lawrence says through gritted teeth, trying to remain as diplomatic as possible. After all, we’re here as a united Earth.

He waves his hand across the table, opening it up for the young royal. I lock my eyes on Vihaan as he stands, fixing the cuffs of his sleeves that he’s rolled up to his elbows.

His voice is steady and clear as he proposes the Tygans as potential trading partners and military allies. They do have advanced technology, not as advanced as the Vangariens, but still decades beyond anything we have, which is Vihaan’s main selling point. All of our natural resources have either ran out or are about to, so we need to find replacements, and since the Tygans have a similar biological ecosystem their resources may be useful. I shift in my seat at the mention of military allies, but don’t say anything. I also don’t mention the food poisoning I received from the Tygans.

“They’re also one of the Vangariens most trusted allies,” Vihaan continues. “The Vangariens have never steered us wrong before and their kindness is the reason we’re even here, so I believe that any ally of the Vangariens would be a worthwhile ally of ours.”

I resist snorting.

Princess Lapis seconds the idea of opening negotiations with the Tygans and we take a vote. I mull over the decision in my head, weighing our options. I don’t really

mind the Tygans. They were nice enough and cordial, and we can use any help we can get in the technology department, but something about their willingness to promise military help strikes me as suspicious. They spoke at lengths about their weapon capabilities when we met. Maybe they were trying to impress us, but it almost felt more like a warning. Their planet is also pretty far from ours so I don't know how quickly they could get to us in a pinch.

Each Republic only gets one vote so while North Asia and West Europe whisper between themselves, Evelyn casts her vote alongside her brother. Two nays. I raise my eyebrows at how quickly they came to their decision as I flip my answer over and over again in my head. I steal a glance at Vihaan, but he doesn't seem hurt by the nays, nor surprised.

He must have thicker skin than me, because I would feel the slightest tinge of betrayal. And maybe he does, but he certainly hides it well. I make a mental note that I need to work on maintaining a stoic facial expressi—

North Asia, West Europe, and both Africa Republics don't waste any more time voting yay, while King Lawrence, East Europe, and Australia vote nay.

I stiffen as the numbers fall on the scales in my head and everyone looks to me. Behind me, I hear Mr. Lloyd suck in a breath.

11 Republics.

5 for, 5 against.

1 swing vote.

Then it clicks. I realize why everyone could cast their vote so easily. They took the same sides their countries back home have taken. You're either with South Asia or you're against them.

We're either with Vihaan or we're against him.

My eyes meet Vihaan's and I notice a crack in his usual calm demeanor. There's an almost pleading behind his green eyes. I want to vote with him, to show him that I am his friend, but there's something I don't trust about the Tygans, something I can't shake. I could suggest we only negotiate a trade alliance, a yay, but with conditions.

But this isn't about the alliance. How I feel about the Tygans isn't the question here. It's only a byproduct of the real problem. Whose side am I on? It won't matter my reasons, my conditions. The only thing that'll matter is that the Republic of North America has taken a stand beside or against the Republic of South Asia.

Blair clears her throat, annoyed by my hesitation and I open my mouth, but my tongue dries up and I can't form a sound. My stomach twists, almost painfully, and it feels like my lungs have shriveled up into raisins, barely hanging in my chest. What would Mom do?

*Nothing. She's done nothing. She hasn't chosen a side either.*

I search the faces around the table, finding a hint of sympathy with Harry, but expectations within everyone else.

The room tilts and spins and I forget how to breathe as I force myself to say something, anything before the orb crashes on top of me.

"N-North America abstains from the vote," I sputter.

Blair smirks and Princess Lapis rolls her eyes. Vihaan's shoulders slump, defeated, and he sinks into his chair. I look down at my holoscreen as it updates.

"The vote is tied 5-5 then," Princess Xiu says after three heartbeats of silence. "The motion doesn't pass."

Vihaan nods. I want to apologize. To explain how I panicked and how it wasn't because of him or our friendship, but because of I don't know how to feel about the Tygans yet. But I'm afraid he'd see through it.

Mr. Lloyd places a hand on my shoulder and gives me a tight squeeze. I take a deep breath and focus on the pen in my hand, twisting it between my fingers. My heart deflates as voices swirl around my head. I'm not a princess, not really. I can't govern a country if I can't even take a stand on a stupid vote. I blink, thinking of the dyed pigments in my irises and how I was never supposed to have power. If anything, I've just proved I can't wield it. I can't use it to my advantage. Blair would have known what to do then. Mom would have known what to do then.

Someone, I think it's Harry, suggests a recess and when no one objects, I race out of the orb as fast my legs can carry me.

Mr. Lloyd a step behind me.

## CHAPTER NINE

The cup of coffee burns my fingertips, but I don't unwrap my fingers from the mug, instead I embrace the pain, letting it distract me from the tornado of voices, of thoughts, whirling around in my mind.

"I think you did the smart thing, Princess," Mr. Lloyd offers from across the table.

I don't look up from the steam drifting out of my mug. Outside my room I heard a group of people pass by, laughing and talking in a language I don't understand. My communicator lies in the middle of my bed from where I tossed it when I burst into my room.

"I didn't do anything," I mutter.

"You did though."

"I froze."

"You stood by your mother's decision to not take a side."

"But that's not what we were voting on, Mr. Lloyd," I say, bringing my eyes up to meet his. "If anyone else would have suggested that alliance, then they would have thought about their vote, but since it was Vihaan they didn't. And—and I could have swung it in his favor."

"Why didn't you?"

I shrug, looking back to my coffee. "I don't fully trust the Tygans." I shoot Mr. Lloyd a glance. "And not just because they poisoned me."

“What don’t you trust?”

“Their obsession with military alliances and fighting and war and, and—” I lean back and run my hands over my face. As my thoughts settle, I sip my drink, letting the caffeine shake my mind back into a coherent state. “I don’t think we should even put military anything on the table. That’s just trouble waiting to happen.”

I think of the countless treaties back home, the alliances made, the stipulations. A headache forms beneath my right eye just thinking about it. I rub the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, putting my thoughts, my impulses, my instincts, into words. “I think Emperor Vasiliev was right when he said our main concern should be scientific. We should make deals concerning technology, resources, and medicine. Negotiating anything beyond that could put us in a very dangerous situation.”

Mr. Lloyd chuckles, softly. “You don’t think Earth could hold its own in an intergalactic war?”

A small smile finally breaks across my face. “You’re the one afraid of the aliens.”

Mr. Lloyd sips his drink and checks his holoscreen, telling me that we’re supposed to be back at the orb in twenty minutes.

“I just—” I lean forward, spinning my mug. “I just don’t understand why we’re also looking for a tactical advantage. Why can’t we just better ourselves for the simple reason of bettering ourselves? Why does everything have to be war-related? We spend all our time trying to make sure we’ll win the battle or defeat our opponents, when we could spend that same time and energy preventing the fighting in the first. We’d have a lot less

rebellions if we stopped trying to put them down all the time and just fix the problems the rebels are fighting against.”

“Why don’t you say that at the meeting, Luna?” Mr. Lloyd asks.

“They wouldn’t listen to me. I’m not my mother.”

“Exactly,” he says, tapping my wrist. “That’s exactly why they will listen to you. Someone needs to plant the seeds of peace.”

“But what if I can’t make it grow?” I ask. “Don’t you remember the poinsettia I killed last Christmas?”

Mr. Lloyd smiles. “Then you keep trying until it does.”

“Or until I get blown up,” I mutter. Mr. Lloyd chuckles and squeezes my hand.

I finish my coffee and reattach my communicator. “I’m sorry I yelled at you yesterday.”

“I’m sorry I let you get poisoned.”

I shake my head. “No, that is one hundred percent my fault for eating anything blue,” I say with a laugh.

We head back toward the colosseum to find Vihaan leaning against our orb discussing something his bodyguard. It must be something important by the serious look on his face, the lines etched between his eyebrows. My stomach twists and I’m afraid my coffee is about to make a return so I turn away and head the opposite direction.

“W-where are we going, Princess?” Mr. Lloyd asks.

“To the Coxis orb,” I say.

“Who?”

“I met one of their representatives the other night and she was really nice. Maybe we can see if they’d want to be trading partners,” I answer.

“When the other night?” Mr. Lloyd asks, a bit of gruff in his voice.

I let out a nervous laugh and comb my fingers through my hair. “Uh, while you were sleeping.”

“You snuck out while I was sleeping?”

“I wouldn’t call it sneaking out.” I gather my hair and drop it over my left shoulder. “Rather, I went to get a midnight snack with Blair and then met into Muxelle.”

“You got a midnight snack with *Blair*?” His voice is full of suspicion.

I fake offense. “I can’t spend time with my cousin?”

Mr. Lloyd shakes his head and mutters, “I’m never letting you out of my sight again.” Then louder he adds, “You have to be back in that orb in seven minutes, you know that right?”

“This will only take six minutes.”

We stop in front of the Caxis orb and Muxelle sees me and waves. She weaves her way through the other diplomats, opening the orb door.

“Princess Luna, it is so good to see you again,” she says, stepping onto the stairs with me. “I was going to seek you out soon. There is so much more I want to learn about the people of your planet.”

“Then I’m glad I stopped by,” I say. I lift my hand toward Mr. Lloyd. “This is my bodyguard, Stephen Lloyd.”

Mr. Lloyd gives her a curt nod.

“A bodyguard? What is that?” Muxelle asks.

“He keeps me safe, just in case anyone tries to hurt me,” I explain.

Muxelle tilts her head. “Is that a common occurrence? For someone to try and hurt you?”

“Not nearly as common as he’d have you believe,” I say with a laugh, but when Muxelle keeps her head tilted, not returning the laugh, I add, “No, people don’t usually try to hurt me.” Mr. Lloyd grunts.

“Does everyone on your planet have one of these bodyguards?” Muxelle asks.

I shake my head. “No, normally just royals or, like, celebrities.”

“Shall we can continue this conversation inside,” Muxelle suggests, opening the orb door. “I would like to know about what these ‘celebrities’ are.”

I step forward with Mr. Lloyd when Muxelle holds up a hand. Her three fingers are so thin they just drift in the air, like leaves falling during an autumn breeze. “I apologize, but only diplomats are allowed within our orb.”

Mr. Lloyd immediately narrows his eyes. “I go wherever the princess goes.”

“You can stand outside the orb. You will be able to watch her from there,” Muxelle suggests.

I place my hand on Mr. Lloyd’s arm. “I’ll be fine. I’ve already met with her before.”

Mr. Lloyd pulls me to the side, lowering his head to whisper. “I don’t trust this, Luna.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but what if we could create an alliance with Coxis?” I say.

“I don’t want you going in there alone.”

“I’ve already been in there alone,” I hiss. “And like she said, you’ll be able to see me the entire time.”

“But will I be able to get through the bubble’s door?” He counters. I raise my eyebrows.

“Okay, valid point. But what if this is the only chance I have to prove myself?” I whisper. Mr. Lloyd’s face softens. “What if I can bring a trade alliance to the table? What if it passes? Mom might actually be slightly impressed with me.”

Mr. Lloyd seems to mull this over but Muxelle interrupts us.

“Or we could go for a, I believe your word is, stroll,” she suggests. Her eye flickers again. A brief flash of green. I almost ask her why her eye does that, but instead I straighten my back and put on my best diplomat face.

“That would be wonderful. I wanted to stretch my legs anyway.”

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“Your people allowed for the destruction of natural resources and the deaths of millions of your own?” Muxelle asks.

I shrug. “It was a few generations ago, but yeah. It’s one of the reasons why we’ve been trying to find alternatives and reaching out to other lifeforms for aid.”

We wander outside of the meeting hall to a small garden area. Or at least I’m assuming it’s a garden. Large blue and silver hedges line the area, hiding away yellow stone benches that are as soft a pillow to the touch. Lilac trees twist and twirls above us, their limb reaching out to one another, creating a canopy against the pale green sky. I

pluck a silver rose from one of the trees and it blossoms into an emerald daisy in my fingers, a spicy vanilla wafting up from its petals. I pass it to Mr. Lloyd, and the flower shifts again, wrapping itself around his forearm, like a pale blue snake.

My holoscreen buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it. Whatever the other diplomats are voting on, they don't need me. North America can abstain with or without me present.

"Your planet does not seem to work together very well," Muxelle states.

"That's an understatement," I mutter as I help Mr. Lloyd unwrap the flower from his arm. He gives me a warning glance so I clear my throat and add, "We do fight often, but we're striving for peace."

"What do you mean by you fight often? Are you fighting now?" Muxelle asks.

I free Mr. Lloyd from the flower and lay it on one of the benches. "The fourth global war broke out on our planet just a few days ago," I admit.

Muxelle's eye flashes blue again like it did the other day, but before I can ask her what it means, she says, "That sounds horrible. I apologize for your troubles, Princess Luna."

"I appreciate the sentiment, and it is a tragedy, but my country has not become engaged in the war." *Yet.*

"Why is that?"

I avoid her eye. "I'm sure my mother has her reasons."

"Why has your planet gone to war?"

I blow out a breath and put my hands on my hips. I don't know. All I know is South Asia attacked the Pacific, but then the details are blurry. I don't understand all of

the alliances, and I don't know why every other country has decided to throw away our relative peace. Even Vihaan isn't sure why his brother has started the war: a side effect of being the youngest.

In fact, everyone is either ignorant to what this war is about, or they're really good at pretending they don't know. Except for King Lawrence, no one here is the ruling monarch of their country.

"It's... complicated," I answer.

"How so?"

Out the corner of my eye I see a blue wisp flicker, but when I turn I see nothing besides caramel flowers and sultry red bushes. I step back and scan the ground, looking for a sign of the wisp. I look to Mr. Lloyd and he's also glancing around like he saw something. Our eyes lock for a second and a silent message transfers between us.

"Princess Luna, we should to return to the other royals," Mr. Lloyd says. "Your presence must be missed." I know that tone and it's not one I can argue with. My holoscreen buzzes again and this time I pull it out of my pocket and read over my messages.

*Oh, Blair's really mad.*

"He's right," I tell Muxelle. "I apologize for my sudden departure. How about we meet again after the next floor debate?"

Muxelle deflates, but quickly nods. "I am looking forward to it, Princess Luna."

## CHAPTER TEN

“Oh, so now you think you’re good enough to show up and be a part of our planet?” Blair explodes the second I step into the relatively empty orb. “We were *supposed* to discuss military alliances, but since *you* decided that you are somehow above that, everyone else took it upon themselves to start arguing and fighting and we got NOTHING done!”

I open my mouth to explain and to point out that I’m not exactly the peace keeper of the group, but Blair doesn’t give me the chance.

“This was supposed to be *my* moment! I was going to prove that I could be a leader and that I could run international or intergalactic or inter-WHATEVER meetings and I looked like an idiot because I couldn’t get all my members here and I couldn’t control the members I had and— AND!” Tears start to stream down Blair’s face, and Harry, who I just noticed was in the orb stands behind his sister, gently placing his hands on her arms, trying to pull her backwards.

“Blair, calm down, it wasn’t that bad,” he says.

“It was awful!” She screeches. “How could you even *suggest* it wasn’t the worst meeting you’ve ever seen?”

“I think it would have been bad no matter who was leading it,” Harry says. “It’s not your fault.”

“But it *looks* like it was my fault. Now when we get back home everyone is going to tell Dad about how stupid and weak I am.” She turns back to me. “This is all your fault! And what is with you not voting? Huh? Did you forget that I told you to always vote with me?”

“I’m sorry,” I croak. My cheeks are burning, and even though Mr. Lloyd is right behind me, I don’t think even he can protect me from Blair’s fury.

“What?” Blair’s voice drops into a hiss, like a snake slithering up to its prey. “What did you just say?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “I shouldn’t have missed the meeting. I’m sorry for that.”

Blair wipes her eyes. “An apology won’t solve everything.”

“Neither will screaming at me,” I mutter.

Blair crosses her arms across her chest, seething. “How long are you going to be a coward? Like honestly? First you abstain, and then you hide from everyone—”

“I wasn’t hiding,” I snap. I almost mention Muxelle, but I bite back. I suspect that’ll only set her off more.

“You’re pathetic.”

“I’m not sorry for abstaining from the early vote, by the way.” I hold her glare and I add, “And I never agreed to vote with you.”

“What do you think you’re proving here?” Blair asks. “By abstaining the entire time?”

“I’m not trying to prove anyth—”

“Why are you even here if you’re not going to do anything? The rest of us are trying to find ways to make Earth better and you’re just off doing whatever you want. God, I don’t even know why your mom has kept you around.”

I feel the air shoot out of my lungs, but I lock my legs to keep myself from falling over.

“Blair.” Harry grabs her arm and pulls her backwards. “Stop.”

“No.” She yanks her arm free. “Let her answer.” She turns back to me, pacing, cruelty lining her mossy eyes. “Is this how your mom is trying to get rid of you? Did she think ‘Screw any intergalactic alliances, at least I don’t have to deal with brown-eyed kid’?”

“Blair!” Harry snaps.

My hands curl into fists, all sympathy I felt for Blair draining from me. “I am doing things,” I growl. “I’m trying.”

“Oh, you’re trying? Trying to what? Waste our time?” She laughs bitterly, shaking her head. “Even your DNA knows you’re not supposed to be royal. They should have never dyed your eyes. You’re as worthless as your commoner father. Just wait until North America gets invaded—”

My blood boils over and I lunge forward. Mr. Lloyd grabs me by my waist, snapping me back while Harry steps in front of Blair, but that doesn’t stop me from shouting. “I’m working on an alliance right now. That’s where I was!” I wrestle out of

Mr. Lloyd's grip and step closer to Blair. Harry is still between us, but I could reach out and grab a handful of her hair if I'm fast enough.

"And don't you dare act like you have any more right to a throne than I do," I snap. "At least my mother isn't sleeping around someone from another country just so their military brat can take the throne."

Harry's eyes widen as Blair narrows hers. "Excuse me?"

I tilt my head and feign innocence. "Oh, you haven't heard the rumors?"

"What rumors?" Harry demands, his voice cracks.

I look to him and widen my eyes. "The ones about your dad running around with a woman from his court whose son is one of the highest ranked officers in the Eastern European military." I settle my gaze on Blair and don't even try to fight the smirk on my face. "Rumor has it he's gonna marry her, knocking Princess Blair right out of being next in line for the throne."

"Duchess Garber," Harry mutters. He seethes and spins toward his sister. "I told you Dad was getting too close to her."

"He would never marry that vile woman," Blair snaps. "And he certainly wouldn't let Fredrick anywhere near the throne. Especially now. We're not allies. They're on the other side of the war."

"Unless of course the marriage is used as a peace treaty between the two countries," I say, slow and methodical. My holoscreen burns in my hands.

"That's absurd, and you're an idiot for even thinking that," Blair spats.

“Am I?” I hold up my holoscreen where the latest feed from Earth is displayed. “Don’t you have your news alerts turned on? I turned mine on the second I heard about the outbreak of the war?”

Blair’s eyes widen as she spins and commands the orb to display the latest news reel.

“No, no,” Harry mutters as the screen comes to life. “Dad said he would never remarry.”

“Filter news using key words ‘Western Europe’,” Blair demands. The newsfeed changes and Harry covers his mouth as Blair turns the shade of a corpse and clicks the first headline.

*King Rommel McGlothen of Western Europe to marry Duchess Juniper Garber of Eastern Europe to secure peaceful alliance between warring countries.*

Harry sinks to the floor, shaking his head as a wave of guilt crashes into me. I didn’t mean for him to get burned in the crossfire of my fury against Blair. I reach for him but stop myself. Any comfort I show him will just be a weakness, an opportunity for Blair to hit me, so I snap my arms to my side.

“He said he would never remarry,” Harry whispers again.

Blair sways a little and I see a tear fall from her chin. As she turns to face me I shrug, recognizing the same brokenness I’ve felt every day since my mother gave birth to younger brother.

“Looks like I’m not the only one whose parent doesn’t trust them with the throne.”

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I sleep for what feels like months. As I begin to stir I wonder if I can even open my eyes, and if I can I imagine I'll be back home, on Earth, in my bed. I peel my eyes open and I am in my room, and for a second I think I hear Nexus laughing or Solis practicing French down the hall. But then the ceiling flickers and I'm reminded that I'm not on Earth and this isn't my room.

"Luna, are you awake?" There're three knocks on my door before Mr. Lloyd repeats his question.

"Door, open," I say to the air and the room responds.

"How are you feeling?" He asks, sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Okay," I say. I sit up and rub my eyes. "What time is it?"

"You've been asleep for about ten hours, that's all I know," he says. "The time here is weird. I'm not even sure if we've made a full rotation yet."

"Who knows?" I say. "Have the next debates started?"

Mr. Lloyd shakes his head and holds up two fingers. "Two hours."

"I guess I should get dressed. Then we can get food."

"Then apologize to Blair and Harry?" Mr. Lloyd asks.

I freeze in the middle of pulling my sheets off. "Maybe to Harry, but not Blair."

"That was mean, Luna."

"She was mean to me first! You heard what she said about me. About Dad."

There's a lump in my throat as I mention my father. I never met him. He died before I was born. All I know about him I've learned from Mom. Ito Haru was from the Royal

Republic of North Asia and moved to North America to help renovate the Lincoln Palace. He was one of the best architects in the world.

Mom never used the word love, I doubt she knows what it means, but she took a liking to him and they eventually married. He took her name and became a prince. It took a few years before she became pregnant with me. Then she pinned Grandpa's murder on him and had him execution.

I have his eyes.

She never remarried. Nexus and Solis were born via a surrogate using Mom's eggs. She said I gave her enough stretch marks for twenty children.

"Luna," Mr. Lloyd says, recapturing my attention. "Do you remember saying that you didn't understand why Earth was always fighting? Or why were people always storing weapons to use against another?"

I nod, but then roll my eyes. I hate where this is going.

"You used that news article as a weapon. You knew it would hurt your cousins and you didn't stop yourself from wielding it. Peace can only be found when those who are hurting decide not to hurt anyone else."

"Bu—"

He lifts a finger, cutting me off, and adding, "Whether they deserve it or not."

I groan. "I didn't plan on throwing the article in Blair's face, she just— She makes me so angry and I've never been able to stand up against her like that."

"Why can't you stand up for yourself without hurting her?"

“Because,” I begin even though I don’t have a reason. “Because she deserves it. She deserves to be hurt sometimes.”

“Does she?”

I think back to her screaming and how she felt like she lost her chance to prove she could be a leader, to prove she was a worthwhile ruler, and now she’s going to lose her chance at the throne.

I cross my arms over my chest and look away. “No,” I sigh.

“Do you know what your mother would have done in that situation?”

“Knocked her out with a right hook,” I mumble.

Mr. Lloyd chuckles. “Probably.” His face grows serious. “She would have done exactly what you did.”

The thought makes my stomach flip. I shake my head. “No, no, she would’ve done something way worse.” Mr. Lloyd gives me a sympathetic look and a tremor rips through my hands.

“N-no, I’m not like her,” I stammer. “I would never be.”

“Are you going to apologize?” Mr. Lloyd asks.

“I don’t want to.” I fall back against my pillow.

“Your mother wouldn’t want to either.”

I rip my comforter off and jump out of bed, throwing my arms up. “Fine! I’ll apologize to Blair. I’ll be the better person.” I point at Mr. Lloyd. “I won’t be happy about it though.”

He chuckles. “You don’t have to be.”

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I lap the Colosseum and the cafeteria trying to find Blair, but to no avail. As I collapse in my chair, my legs like jelly after walking what has to be over two miles, Muxelle knocks on our orb.

Marcos looks up from the center floor and squints at the alien.

“Who is that?”

“Muxelle,” I answer. I shove myself back onto my feet, stifling a sore complaint, and cross over to the door. As a princess, a daily workout was never on my itinerary.

“What’s a ‘Muxelle?’”

“A Coxian. I was looking into an alliance with her planet.”

Marcos nods. “It’ll be interesting to see that vote,” he says nonchalantly. I pause, my finger hovering over the button to open the door.

“What does that mean?”

He shrugs and turns his attention back to the debate on the main floor, his back to me. “I just saying, it would be a shame if everyone abstained.”

Heat flares up in my cheeks and my stomach twists. I punch the button and as the door opens I step out, biting back my scowl. I feel Mr. Lloyd behind me in an instant as Muxelle’s eye flashes at me.

“Hello, Luna, how are you?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “What’s up?”

She seems to contemplate this for a second before saying, “I believe it is a direction. Unless my translator is failing to properly communicate with me.”

I blink. “I meant, what brings you here?”

“I was hoping to finish our previous conversation,” she says. “I am very fascinated to know more about your culture.”

Out the corner of my eye, a blue foggy silhouette appears and fizzles out of existence the second I turn toward it.

“The floor debate isn’t over yet,” I say, staring at the empty space. “I’m sorry, did you just see a Fregun?”

A strange sound comes from Muxelle, almost like a laugh but way too strained and too high pitched. It hurts my ears and I flinch.

“They love playing tricks on new planets,” she says. “but they are harmless.”

“Are they?” Mr. Lloyd asks. He looks to me. “Didn’t you say that the Gorgen told you they feed off chaos?”

I nod.

Muxelle’s eye flashes again and as I open my mouth to ask her why her face does that she cuts me off.

“The Freguns do feed off negative energy and destruction, but they know better than to bring any type of harm or malice toward any members attending the Alliance.” She clasps her hands behind her back and rocks forward on her toes, adding, “Shall we take a walk?”

A bell chimes, declaring that time is up on the main debate floor and signaling for questions. All I really want is to curl up in my chair and pretend to watch the debate,

maybe nod intermittently to make Marcos think I'm paying attention, but then his abstain comment drifts through my mind.

I'll create an agreement with Coxis no one would dare object to or abstain from.

“Yes, we shall.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Muxelle leans back in her chair as the noise of the cafeteria wraps around me like the scarves mom would always dress me in up until I was eleven; slightly suffocating, a bit too warm, and wholly uncomfortable.

“My people can have the minerals delivered to your planet and collect your planets liquid within two of your rotations,” Muxelle says. “We can have this agreement signed and wrapped up before the next debate starts.”

I hold my hand up. “I would still have to get the trade approved by the rest of the Earthen delegates,” I repeat for the third time. I rub the bridge of my nose. “It sounds like a great deal, but we’re still a team and I can’t go off on my own like that.”

“At the expense of being rumedean,” —I flinch as my translator beeps its failure— “but your fellow delegates do not act like a team, do they?” Her head tilts to the side and while I *do* agree with her, I shake my head.

“Whether they act like a team or not, we still are one and we have to work together.” I try to keep my voice steady and firm, but I’m afraid it came out too fast, too rehearsed.

Back home we have these rocks called Power Gems that we use to power all of our teleporters and hover ships. We received our first batch of Gems from the Vangariens decades ago, but we’re running low, and since they gems aren’t native to Venus, the

Vangariens don't have enough of a surplus to sell us at prices any country on Earth can afford.

Coxis on the other hand has an abundance of the gems since it grows naturally on their planet and they've long moved past using them as a power source. They've even sold the Gems to the Vangariens before, which is how Muxelle knows how quickly they can get them to Earth.

And all they want in exchange is a few hundred gallons of salt water. Neither hydrogen, oxygen, or sodium is available in their galaxy, and they apparently need those ingredients to keep their queen's skin clean and infection free. They normally have to pay a pretty penny for the ingredients, but Earth has trillions of gallons of water that we can't drink or even use.

We'll take their useless gems, they'll take our useless water. It seems like a win-win.

But something about it makes me feel sick. I tell myself it's just the cafeteria, or the Tygan eating chili two tables away, but the bodies that are so dangerously close to me and the voices that seem to echo off the walls and vibrate against my skull. There's also a rancid smell I haven't been able to find the source of. I thought it was the blue-yellow soup a green alien with long red hair was eating, but they left ten minutes ago and the smell has only gotten stronger.

I stand up, feeling the need to run, to escape. "Let me go talk to the others and I'll have a decision for you."

Muxelle takes my hand in hers and I fight the tension in my muscles to pull my hand away. Her skin is cold and sticky, like ant traps the gardener would line the kitchen door with back home.

“Thank you,” she says. “I will await your response.”

I nod and pull away, spinning on my heel and locking my eyes on the exit. Mr. Lloyd is a step behind me and he waits till we’re a good couple of yards away from the table when he says, in a low voice, “Do you believe that all Coxis will want from Earth is salt water, Luna?”

I exhale the breath I didn’t realize I was holding and close my eyes. “No,” I admit. “But I think it’ll be a good way to open trading connections.”

“All the elements they want they can get from the Vangariens, so why don’t they trade with them?” Mr. Lloyd asks.

“They did, but—”

“But something happened that made the Vangariens stop trading with them,” Mr. Lloyd finishes for me. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Princess. I shouldn’t impose with my opinions.”

“No, it’s fine. I already told you I don’t mind.” I stop and check over my shoulder. Muxelle has disappeared. Nothing about her seems distrustful, she’s only been kind to me, but I can’t help but indulge in Mr. Lloyd’s suspicions.

“We should speak with T’Ork,” I say. “See what he has to say about Coxis.” Although I have an idea of what he’ll say because Vihaan already warned me about the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System, a warning passed to him by T’Ork.

A sharp pain of sadness shoots through my chest. I still haven’t seen Vihaan since the botched meeting. I wonder how much he hates me now.

We step outside and the weird sandy atmosphere sticks to my arms like little jell-o pellets. The weather here changes rapidly. I overheard Marcos telling Evelyn it was because the Colosseum works as a giant magnetic-like field that continuously changes the environment to accommodate all the different species which messes with the android’s natural biosphere.

At least, I think that’s what he said. I also trust Marcos’s scientific theories about as far as I can throw him.

“What if it really is that simple?” I say. “What if it is just a simple mineral trade?”

“But why would they need to get it from us? We’re really the closest planet to them with water and salt?” Mr. Lloyd asks.

“Maybe we’re the first ones to trust them,” I say. The gears in my mind start spinning and I whirl around to face Mr. Lloyd. “Maybe no one trust Coxis because they’re from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System, but since every other planet in their galaxy is corrupt, we’re just conditioned to assume they are as well.”

Mr. Lloyd rubs his face and shrugs. “Maybe, Princess, maybe.

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The first royal I find is Blair as she paces back and forth by the entrance to the Colosseum. Her nose is buried in her holoscreen as her eyes dart all over the page. There're fresh tears running down her face and her hair is falling out of a messy bun.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Her head jerks up and she glares at me with such a level of fury I have to pat my stomach to make sure my clothes didn’t catch on fire.

“What’s wrong? Really? ‘What’s wrong?’” She makes air quotes and mocks me in a squeaky voice. “That’s what you’re asking me? As if you have no idea.”

“Is this about your dad—”

“Of course, it’s about my dad!” she shouts. A few other delegates from other planets jump and others stop to watch. I see a slug creature blink twice to its partner, and some red snake creature whip its tail just like a dog does when it gets excited. Two Freguns are amongst the crowd who decided watch Blair’s royal meltdown. The edges of their silhouettes flicker and small little blue wisps dance around their bodies as they lean closer to each other, probably whispering.

“Dad’s going marry that vile woman next week, or in a few days, or I don’t even know!” she cries, throwing her holoscreen to the ground. “I don’t get this stupid time difference and this stupid asteroid is so big I keep getting lost and now it all makes sense why he sent Harry along with my stupid self.”

“Calm down,” I say, resting my hands on her shoulders. “You’re making a scene. Do you really think the other planets will want to work with us if one of our delegates are having a break—”

“I don’t care what they think,” she screams, wrestling out of my grip and glaring at the crowd. “I don’t care if we fail. It’s not like it matters anymore.”

“It does matter,” I say. “You can prove yourself to your dad and—”

“I’ll never be queen so what’s the point?” She shoves me away and Mr. Lloyd catches me, helping me steady myself. She wipes her face and shakes her head. “I’m not like you, Luna. I’m not used to being a failure, to being overlooked. I had a future and now it’s gone.”

My entire body stiffens as she laughs bitterly.

“I should have known this was just a mission for rejects. A way to get rid of us and distract everyone from what was really happening. All the preparation, the interviews, the press, it was just to hide everyone’s real agenda,” she sneers. “It wouldn’t surprise me if your disgusting mother planned it all. That’s why she won’t choose a side. She orchestrated the entire thing. She doesn’t know a thing about loyalty or grace, which has obviously rubbed off on you.”

I ignore the dig and rub my temples. *I won’t be my mother. I won’t be my mother.*

“It doesn’t even matter,” Blair continues. “She’ll get what’s coming to her.”

“What do you mean?”

Blair scoffs and shakes her head. “You really are stupid, aren’t you?”

If Mr. Lloyd wasn't standing right behind me, I would've bitten back. A blue wisp catches my eye. The crowd around us grows bigger and I notice more Freguns gathering around, their blue auras flickering brighter.

*They feed off chaos and destruction.*

"You know that sounds crazy, Blair," I say as calmly as I can. "Where did you even get that information from? Some *GlobeTrotter* article?"

"Why are you even here?" She hisses at me.

"I need to call a meeting." I admit.

She laughs, far too loudly, almost like a cackle. "Oh, now you want to meet?" She practically spits the words at me.

"Yeah, I do I—"

"Because if I recall you skipped our last one and ruined my chances at—"

I'm sorry," I interrupt. "I'm sorry, Blair, really I am."

Blair blinks before snarling at me. "I already told you your apologies are—"

"I'm sorry I ruined your meeting," I repeat. Mr. Lloyd nudges me. I take a deep breath and let the words tumble out of me. "And I'm sorry I used your dad against you. I shouldn't have done that. I knew the news would be hard on you and I was insensitive. I'm sorry."

"What about abstaining and ruining that vote?" Her voice is stronger now as she wipes mascara streaks from her cheeks.

“I’m not apologizing for that. No one took that vote seriously, so why should I have?”

“We did take it seriously,” Blair says.

I shake my head. “No, you didn’t. None of you actually listened to Vihaan or considered the trade deal. You just voted according to your alliances.”

“We take our alliances seriously, something your mother—”

“I’m not my mother,” I snap. “She isn’t here. I am. And I take this whole situation very seriously, which is why we need to stop fighting and stop making decisions based on what’s happening back home.”

Blair crosses her arms but doesn’t say anything. She glances around and her eyes widen as she finally notices all the other diplomats surrounding us. I guess now she cares about what the others think because she grabs my elbow and pulls me along the edge of the colosseum away from any of the prying eyes, ears, or whatever the other aliens would use to eavesdrop on us.

“Do you know what Dad told us after Mom died?” Blair asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“That he’d never remarry,” I say. Blair and Harry’s mom, Queen Carolyn, died when Blair was six while Harry and I were four. We didn’t attend the funeral. Mom made up a riot in Chicago and bombed the city to add credence to her fiction.

Our boots crunch against the gravel and there's a grayish-orange dust cloud beginning to form a cyclone in the distance. I wonder for half a second if it'll reach us and what we'd do if it did.

"That's right. He said he'd never remarry," Blair says. Her voice tugs my eyes away from the dusty tornado. "That Mom was the only woman he could ever love."

"Really?"

She nods and bites her bottom lip, her eyes locked on the ground. "He said no one could replace her wisdom, or her elegance, or her smile." Blair looks up and smiles herself. "He *promised* us that he could never love someone like he loved her." She releases a shaky breath. "I guess he lied."

"He may not love the duchess like he loved your mom," I say. Blair stops and turns to me, puzzled. I clear my throat and continue. "From what I understand, this marriage is to fulfill a peace agreement between the two European countries."

Blair laughs half-heartedly, like she would if a child brought her a toy tea cup to sip out of. "He's been courting her for a while now."

"And the two European countries have been at each other's throats for a while now," I respond.

"I wouldn't say we've been at each other's throats." We begin walking again.

"You don't have to say it in order for it to be true," I mutter. "I mean, have you even spoken to Prince Viktor since we got here?"

Blair shakes her head. "He creeps me out. He's like forty-something and his newest bride is younger than me."

“Exactly. Now, I’m not saying your dad’s intentions are pure at all—” she shoots me a glare and I hold up my hand, “—but I *am* saying that I don’t think it’s for love, meaning he still only loves your mom.”

We stop beside the south entrance, the furthest away from the cafeteria and Blair begins smoothing her hair. “He still promised he would never remarry.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry, Blair.”

She pulls out a mirror and wipes away the excess makeup from her face. “Why do you need to schedule a meeting?”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, almost forgetting why I was headed back to the colosseum. “I think I made us an ally.”

She squints at me. “With who?”

“Coxis. They’re a planet in the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System where the Power Gems grow naturally. And get this: they’re willing to trade us Gems for salt water because sodium, hydrogen, and oxygen aren’t available anywhere in their galaxy,” I explain.

“Aren’t we supposed to avoid the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System?” She closes her mirror.

“I mean, I know the Gorgens said to avoid the Freguns, but the Coxians have been nothing but nice,” I say.

“Luna, nice doesn’t mean trustworthy,” Blair says. “‘Nice’ is easy to fake. Trust me, I know.”

“Blair, your fake nice is still pretty rude,” I say.

To prove my point, she rolls her eyes at me.

“I know that, but the Vangariens used to trade with Coxis. That’s how they got the Gems we’re using now,” I point out.

“*Used to*?” She raises an eyebrow to me.

I dig my hands into my pockets and lift a shoulder, studying the pink horizon. “Muxelle didn’t go into detail as to why the Vangariens no longer trade with Coxis, but—”

“But you still think it’s a good idea?”

“I was on my way to talk to T’Ork when I found you sobbing into your Holoscreen, okay?” I cross my arms. “I’m not completely stupid Blair.”

She holds her hands up. “I’ve never said you were.”

“You literally called me an idiot yesterday and stupid no more than ten minutes ago.”

She waves my comment away. “I just don’t want you to get taken advantage of.”

“I’ve negotiated trade deals before,” I argue.

“Yeah, with Evelyn and Marcos,” she deadpans.

“Will you help me set up the meeting or not?”

Blair checks over her shoulder and fixes her hair, watching the aliens that pass by us. “I mean, yeah, I can see you so obviously need my help.”

“Thank you,” I muse, squeezing her shoulder.

She peels my hand off of her and dusts off her sleeve. “Yeah, yeah, just don’t say I never did anything for you.”

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“The Coxians are not the worst race you could establish relations with from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System,” T’Ork says as we weave in, out, and around clusters of chatting diplomats.

“But they’re not the best?” Blair offers. She takes long strides to keep up with T’Ork, her heels click clacking with authority. I half-jog, half-speed walk to keep up with them, craning my neck to make sure I don’t miss a word of their conversation. Before we found T’Ork, Blair insisted on stopping by her room to fix her make-up.

“We can’t convince the others if we don’t look like we have our shit together,” she said. She covered her mouth as to excuse her curse. When I mentioned that she could have half the credit for establishing the trade deal with Coxis if it got passed, (since she *is* the one organizing the meeting) that familiar sharpness returned to her eyes. A confident and driven grin spread across her face and now she’s ready to fight tooth and nail for Coxis since her trade deal is still pending.

“I do not believe the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System has a ‘best’, Princess McGlothen,” T’Ork replies. “But the Coxians are about as close as you could find.”

“Why did you cut ties with them?” I pipe in, falling in step beside them for two seconds. Luckily, we stop walking and T’Ork seems to ponder my question for a moment.

“I believe they ‘cut ties’ with us,” he says, raising one of his bushy eyebrows. “Unfortunately, that was many years ago. I was merely a Young One and now I work as

the ambassador within only our galaxy, so I do not know why communications were not reopened.”

“Huh,” I grunt. Muxelle certainly didn’t make it seem like that. “Is there anyone here who would have more information?”

“Elder T’Core was beginning his apprenticeship around that time, so perhaps he will be of some use to you,” T’Ork tells us.

“Where is Elder T’Core?” Blair asks.

“He does not leave our orb. Moving brings him much pain,” T’Ork says.

“Can we speak with him?”

“I do not see why not. He enjoys speaking of older times and strives to give any aid to anyone he can,” T’Ork says.

“Thank you,” Blair and I chirp in unison.

“It was my pleasure, princesses.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The first thing I notice about Elder T'Core is that his skin hangs off his bones as if it's one subtle breeze from flying off of him. A large hump protrudes from his back and his left eye is an orb of pink and gold swirls, rather than a dark crater. His gray skin seems even more displaced of color and for half a second I'm afraid that he's dead.

"Elder T'Core?" Blair says.

He jumps to life, his right eye rolling about in its socket until it lands on us.

"Yes, hello, who are you?" He asks. His talons are dull and chipped as he pushes himself into a sitting position.

I clear my throat. "I'm Princess Luna McGlothen and this is Princess Blair McGlothen from Planet Earth. Your people, uh, brought us along with you to this Alliance."

"Right, right, the Earthers," he grumbles. "What can I help you with? Are you wishing to return home early?"

"No sir, that's not it," Blair says.

"What a shame. I would have personally dropped you off if it gave me an excuse to get off this asteroid," he chuckles.

"Not enjoying your time at the Alliance?" Blair asks, slightly teasing the old alien.

He laughs and shakes his head. "I just miss my sleeping quarters." He straightens. "Now what can I help you two with?"

"We were wondering if you could tell us why the Vangariens and the Coxians no longer trade with each other," I explain.

"The Coxians? We have not spoken with them in many, many, rotations," Elder T'Core says, scratching his nose with one of his claws. "Why are you curwondioerusing about them?"

Blair squints and I blink. "I'm sorry, something didn't translate. Can you repeat your question?" She asks.

"Why are you asking about Coxis?" He repeats.

"They've offered to open up relations with Earth, but we've been warned against creating allies with anyone from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System, so we wanted to know why," I say.

He nods, considering this for a moment. "I did not deal directly with Coxis, but my mentor did." He sighs. "We Vangariens are a peaceful people. We do not involve ourselves with war. Coxis had allied themselves with a war-loving race and that race was willing to pay them more for their, oh, what do your people called those rocks?"

"The Power Gems?" I supply.

"Yes, the Power Gems." He continues. "The other race was willing to pay three times as much for the Power Gems, which we could not compete with. This was back when we resided within the 1023<sup>rd</sup> Galaxy, before we moved to the planet your people so

fondly refer to as ‘Venus’. Our old planet did not have the same resources our current one has so we were very limited in what we could and could not trade.”

Blair sinks into a nearby chair and leans forward on her knees, her hands clasped together. Her stare is intent and focused as she listens to Elder T’Core. I try to match her focus, but I feel my attention drift to the edges of the orb, down to the debate floor, and to the neighboring orbs and the delegates in them. Next door a humanoid with four arms and creamy white skin spins around, light pink sparkles wrapping around their wrists.

I tilt my head trying to figure out what it’s doing. Mr. Lloyd nudges my shoulder and I snap my attention back to the Elder.

“— and so we told them we could not, and would not, help them manufacture the weapons. What they could not receive in resources, they wanted in labor, but we could not give them that.”

“That’s when they broke off all relations with you?” Blair finishes.

Elder T’Core nods. “They have not approached us since. They do not seek war, but they assist planets that do, which brought us to the question if they were any better than the war-hungry planets.”

“Who was the race they allied with?” I ask.

“Hm?”

“You said they allied with a planet that was looking for war and that’s who they were going to give the weapons to. What planet was that?” I repeat.

“Another 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System planet, the name escapes me.” Elder T’Core’s eyes spin and Blair raises her eyebrows and shoots me a glance, but before I can react, he shakes his head. “No, I cannot remember the name. I apologize. But I believe they are still allies to this day.”

“Coxis wants to trade us Power Gems for a series of elements on our planet that’s found in a chemical compound we refer to as ‘salt water’,” Blair says. I roll my eyes at her scientist voice. “Those elements are hydrogen, oxygen, and sodium.”

“Why did they say they needed those elements?”

“To cleanse their queen,” I answer. Blair glances up at me before looking back to the Elder and nodding.

Elder T’Core considers this. “Those elements are not uncommon in our galaxy or any of the surrounding galaxies. Your planet does have an awfully high source of them however.”

“Do you think they could be making weapons?” Blair asks.

“Atomic bombs are made out of hydrogen,” I mutter, rubbing my temples.

“I doubt they’d make something so medieval,” Blair scoffs.

“They’re not medieval,” I reply. “They’re still effective.”

“Energy bombs are way more effective,” she argues.

“Oh, trust me, I know,” I say. “Did you forget who my mother is? Energy bombs cost a lot more to make, however.”

“I do not think the Coxians are a source of trouble,” Elder T’Core interrupts. My cheeks burn and I lower my head. Blair also glances away, embarrassed. “However, you

should be aware that anything you give them, they are liable to share with their allies, many of which *are* trouble.”

I nod and Blair stands up. “Thank you so much for the information, Elder T’Core,” she says.

“Anytime, Earthers,” he replies. He leans his head back, his eye flickering from pink and gold, to gray with little white flecks. “Don’t forget, there’s no shame in wanting to go home early.” He chuckles to himself and then goes still.

I tilt my head toward the door and Blair follows. As soon as we step outside and the orb door closes Blair starts typing on her holoscreen.

“Coxis isn’t a violent planet so I see no reason why we shouldn’t ally with them,” she says.

“What?” I sputter. “Did you hear what he said? They sell weapons to other planets who are violent.”

Blair rolls her eyes at me. “And? We’re not allying with *those* planets. Even if we were, what they choose to do with the goods is up to them. We can’t be held accountable for that.”

“We’d be supplying a violent regime that could kill innocent people, yes, we would be accountable for that,” I argue.

“Oh, please, spare me.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Do you feel responsible for the hundreds of civilians that South Asia just killed in Australia? They probably made the bombs they dropped using North American steel,” she says.

“Wait, what happened?” I ask, pulling out my holoscreen.

“Do you even keep up with the reports from Earth?” She says in a squeaky, mocking voice. Then she waves her hand in the air. “Anyway, you shouldn’t, because it isn’t your fault. You didn’t tell South Asia to start a war or to use your metals to create weapons.”

“But—”

“And besides, if Coxis does resell our hydrogen or oxygen or salt, we could always play dumb. As far as we know, all they need it for is keeping their precious queen alive, right? That’s what Muscle told you, isn’t it?”

“Muxelle,” I correct.

“In fact, we could argue that we’re saving lives,” Blair continues.

I shake my head. “Blair, this is—”

“Elder T’Core was also speaking from an experience he had over a century ago. We’re dealing with a whole new generation of Coxians. He also said he thought they were still dealing with those ‘violent planets,’ but maybe they’re not,” she explains.

“I still don’t think we should—”

She hold her hands up and closing her eyes, shaking her head. “Listen to me, Luna. I’ve already scheduled a meeting. Either you’re going to present this alliance or I am. And if it’s me, I’m taking full credit for it.”

I close my mouth, chewing on my bottom lip. She would do it too. I know she would. My one chance to do something, and she’d steal it without a second’s hesitation. But this doesn’t feel right. Something’s off.

“Are you with me, Luna?” Blair asks, stepping closer to me. “Or are you going to keep playing the wildcard?”

I exhale slowly, the knot in my stomach tightening. “I’m with you.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blair ditches me to get food after instructing me to be at our orb in two hours because that's when the meeting will begin and if I'm late she'll kill me. I almost believe that last part.

"Would you like to get some fresh air, Princess?" Mr. Lloyd asks me. I flip my holoscreen over in my hands for the hundredth time. I remember why I never read the news reports. There's never anything good in them.

"Yeah, sure," I answer. We walk outside, but the air isn't really fresh. It's dusty and warm and moves around like little flies in my lungs if I take too deep of a breath.

"What's on your mind?" Mr. Lloyd asks.

"Have you looked at the current estimated death count?"

Mr. Lloyd shakes his head. "No, I haven't."

"Half a million," I choke out, my voice like a whisper. "Mostly in the Asian Republics, Pacific Islands, and the Australian Republic."

There's a beat of silence. Then, "Anything about your mother?"

"She still hasn't made a move," I say. "But now all the other monarchs are calling for her to take a side or pull out of all the treaties she's in."

"Why is that?"

I practically recite the article I just read by the Lincoln Times. "They're accusing her of profiting off of the lives of the dead. Since she's the last neutral country, she can

sell to both sides, and she has been. They don't want her to make money off a war she won't participate in."

I kick a rock and shake my head. "She won't do it. She'll keep feeding until someone gets fed up enough to attack her and then she'll strike. That's her plan. To continue building an arsenal until someone provokes her." I laugh bitterly. "Then she can play the hero."

"It wouldn't be the first time your country has done that."

Both Mr. Lloyd and I spin around so fast, I'm sure we could have started our own dust storm.

"Vihaan," I say, nearly breathless. "What are you doing here?"

He lifts his shoulder in a half shrug. "Trying to understand what this emergency meeting Blair has set up is all about. Any ideas?"

"We're discussing a potential alliance with the Planet Coxis," I say. I stand straight and press my hands into my pockets, trying to sound unwavering and strong. Like I don't have any doubts.

"Coxis? Aren't they that planet from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System?" He asks carefully.

I steel myself. "They are."

"And does Blair know that even the Gorgens have advised us not to get involved with anyone from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System?" There's an edge to his voice that I recognize. Mom used to have a similar one whenever I was younger and she caught me in a lie. So diplomatic it becomes suspicious.

“I suggest you listen to our reasons behind the alliance before you start passing judgement,” I say.

“Our reasons’? You and Blair have teamed up?” He asks, one eyebrow raised. He doesn’t raise his voice and I almost wish he had. It’s so much easier to blow up at each other.

“In a way, yes.”

He barks an awkward laugh. “I can’t say I’m surprised. You voted for her treaty proposal.”

I groan and rub my hands over my face. “I’m sorry I abstained and ruined your vote, Vihaan, but it’s not because I was trying to take a side on the war back on Earth.”

“That’s correct, because you didn’t take a side. That’s how abstaining works.”

“I didn’t take a side because no one took that vote seriously. I didn’t want to be responsible for what could have happened,” I say. “If I voted with you and then the Tygans got us dragged into some intergalactic war in a few years, that would be on me. But if I voted against you and we missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime,” my arms drop to my side, “that’s also on me.”

My voice cracks as I add, “And that’s not something I want to have on my shoulders.”

Vihaan rakes a hand through his hair and looks away. “Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you come back? You could have called for a revote after explaining that.”

Now I look away. Why didn’t I?

“I’ve never been the one to make decisions for my country before. Mom always did that. Even when it was my choice, it was hers.”

Vihaan sighs. “I know what that’s like.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t help you, but I did what I thought was the right thing to do in the moment. I should have explained myself, but I couldn’t.” I take a deep breath. “I panicked.”

“You know, you’re going to have to make decisions eventually,” he says.

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“When you’re queen, you’re going to have to make decisions. Whether they’re good or not. Some things will be your fault. You have to accept that,” he says.

“Mom will never let me be queen,” I say with a light laugh.

“How could she stop you?” he asks.

I look toward the horizon. I’ve thought about this a few times. Entertained the thought of Mom passing and me becoming queen. It’s my birth right after all. But even my daydreams end with Mom hiring someone to kill me if anything happens to her. Or Nexus arranging for some tragic accident to happen so he could take the throne. Mom has been pushing him to accept his future role of king.

“She’d find a way,” I finally say. Vihaan doesn’t seem convinced. It must be easy for him. He has no chance at the throne. He has seven siblings in front of him. Or maybe it’s harder. He has to watch from a powerless position of power.

“Who is presenting this Coxian alliance today?” Vihaan asks.

“I am,” I say, welcoming the topic change.

He stands up straighter and fixes his navy kurta. “It’ll be interesting to see how everyone votes.”

“Marcos made it seem like everyone is going to abstain,” I say with a slight smile.

“That would be funny now, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe for you, but that would be horrifying for me. I probably wouldn’t leave my bed for the rest of the trip,” I admit.

“Where do you think I’ve been?” He laughs.

I point to the colosseum. “I should probably head back. I want to make sure I’m early enough for Blair.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

As we enter the north side of the colosseum, we get three steps in before Muxelle appears, grabbing my wrist and pulling me to the side.

“Princess Luna, I am so glad I found you. Have you convinced your planet yet?” She asks.

Mr. Lloyd stiffens behind me, probably wanting to pull the girl’s hand off my arm, and Vihaan glares at her.

“Not yet,” I say. Her hand falls from my arm. “We’re about to meet. I’ll let you know as soon as possible.”

Her eye flashes. “I will await your news.” And then she turns and disappears into the crowd.

“Why does her face do that flashy thing?” Vihaan asks.

“I don’t know. I keep meaning to ask but I never get the chance.” Behind Vihaan I see a flicker of blue haze into existence beside an empty orb, but it dissipates as soon as I focus on it.

“Vote against the alliance,” I blurt. My eyes lock with Vihaan’s and he looks surprised.

“Excuse me?”

“Vote against the Coxian Alliance. No matter how much Blair or I try to convince you, vote against it,” I say.

He cocks his head gives me a crooked smile. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

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No one is late, and no one skips the meeting, but no one looks happy to be here.

Blair gives me a pointed look and my tongue swells in my mouth.

*She wants me to start the meeting?*

I press my palms against the table and push myself into a standing position, but before I’m fully standing, Blair rolls her eyes and clears her throat.

“Thank you all for coming to this last-minute meeting, I know how busy we all are, but we have a few matters to discuss,” she says, her voice cool and smooth.

I awkwardly settle back into my seat and begin pulling at a loose thread on my pants. I only know of one “matter” to discuss, so I’m not sure where she’s about to take this.

“Issue number one,” she continues, “is the result of our proposal to the Rooks.”

Everyone sits up straighter and I blink twice. I’d forgotten about that.

Blair's smiling, but I can almost see the muscle twitch in her jaw. "They have rejected our proposal to test their material on our planet."

"What is their reasoning?" Princess Lapis asks.

"In the time it would take for Earth to receive the metal, test it, and get word back to us, they could already have made a deal with another planet." Blair takes a deep breath and mutters, "And they have."

"Why are we even wasting time with these aliens?" King Lawrence asks. There're dark bags under his eyes, and he looks like he hasn't shaved in days. Or eaten for that matter. I guess I can't blame him. He's losing a war.

"Pardon?" Blair squints at the king. Her blonde waves fall over her shoulder as she tilts her head to one side.

"We have nothing to offer any of these other races, so why are we even trying to make deals?" He says. "We shouldn't even be here. We should be back home, helping our countries."

"You kids are working too hard," Princess Xiu adds. Vihaan leans forward, his hands tightly clasped. Evelyn and Marcos exchange a glance.

"Us kids?" Evelyn asks. I notice several bullet points on her HoloScreen, some highlighted, others underlined, one crossed out. I wonder if she's made any potential allies or trade deals.

"Yes, you kids," she laughs. "You're all in and out of this orb, trying your best to make alliances and trade deals, but to no avail. Which is great! I love your effort!" She chuckles and nudges her brother. "But when are you going to accept this trip as a failure,

no not a failure—” she holds a hand up to Blair whose cheeks have reddened, “— but a bust?”

“Just because we haven’t secured an alliance yet doesn’t mean it’s a bust,” Vihaan says.

“Why don’t you just enjoy your time away from Earth?” Princess Lapis adds. “As soon as we get home we’re all going to be whisked away to war hearings, and we’re going to be at each other’s throats. Enjoy the company while we can be friends.”

“Except you haven’t voted the way friends would. You voted with your alliances back home,” Marcos blurts out.

“You did the same, son,” King Lawrence shoots back.

“Don’t call me ‘son’,” Marcos growls. His hands curls into fists. Evelyn mutters something, but I’m not sure what language it’s in.

“Are you suggesting we treat this business trip as a vacation?” Vihaan interrupts.

“Why not?” Princess Xiu shrugs.

“Because we were chosen to come here to do a job and if we don’t do that—” I begin.

“We weren’t chosen based off any real merit,” Princess Lapis says. “We’re disposable heirs. We’re just here to make Emperor Vasiliev happy.”

Something about that makes all the air escape from my lungs. My stomach clenches like it’s just been punched.

“Just because you don’t know how to negotiate with non-Earthen beings, doesn’t mean it’s a flaw we all possess,” Evelyn says. Her green eyes have hardened into jade daggers. “And, for the record, we’re not all ‘disposable’ heirs. Some of us,” she flicks a finger between herself, Marcos, me, and Blair, “*will* get their throne so don’t project your second child traumas onto us.”

The empty feeling in my chest is replaced by a warmer sensation. At least Evelyn believes in me. Princess Lapis narrows her eyes and I feel a twinge of shame at Evelyn’s disrespect, but I don’t act on it.

“Whether you believe in this mission or not,” Blair snaps, her voice an octave below a shrill, “you’ve still been given it. If you choose not to seek out alliances, that’s fine, but your input is still necessary when decisions have to be made.”

“Do not speak to us in that tone child,” Princess Lapis warns. “You are not in charge of this delegation.”

Blair glares at the South African princess as Harry shifts in his chair. “I am not a child.”

Mr. Lloyd slides a hand onto my shoulder as I notice all the other bodyguards shift positions. Behind Vihaan’s guard, outside of the orb, I see a Fregun flash into existence, dash forward toward our orb, and then disappear again.

“Did you see that?” I whisper to Mr. Lloyd, squeezing his hand. My heart slams against my chest.

“See what?” Mr. Lloyd whispers back.

“Okay, enough,” King Lawrence says, standing up. “All of you. This fighting is only prolonging the meeting.”

*And feeding the Freguns*, I add in my head.

“Please,” he says to Blair. “Continue with your next issue.”

Blair stands up straight and shakes her head, scanning over her holoscreen.

“There’s been a motion to reopen the debate over the Tygan alliance.”

Vihaan raises an eyebrow. “There has?”

“Yes,” Blair says. “Or rather a revote on account of the abstain vote in the previous meeting.”

“Who wants to reopen it?” King Lawrence asks.

“I do,” Marcos answers. He props his elbows on the table and runs a hand through his curly black hair. “You can call it a social experiment.”

“What kind of ‘social experiment’?” Princess Xiu asks.

“I just want to see how everyone is going to vote the second time,” he says with a shrug.

“Do I have a second to reopen the debate?” Blair asks. Evelyn seconds it.

“Anyone have anything to add to the debate?” Everyone shakes their head, so we vote again.

The numbers line up exactly the same way they did a week ago, leaving me beneath their stares.

“The Republic of North America,” Blair says, “what is your vote?”

I may not have checked the news feeds in a few hours, but I know my mother has remained neutral. She wouldn't hold out this long to just choose a side. She's waiting till there's a clear victory to throw her support behind. She has no real alliances, only calculations. She would abstain from this vote again. Stand by her word and dare someone to question her again.

My eyes lock with Vihaan's and I notice a tinge of hope behind them as he drums his fingers against the desk.

"Yay," I breathe out, turning my attention to Blair.

I am not my mother.

Blair blinks twice. "O-oh okay. The motion passes."

"What?" King Lawrence shouts, shooting out of his chair. He steps towards me, but Mr. Lloyd is there before his shoe can touch the ground. "Why would you side with South Asia? Is that where your alliances lay?"

"No," I answer curtly. My stomach twists so tightly I feel like I might snap in half. I squeeze my hands together to keep them from shaking beneath the table. Clearing my throat, I say, "I believe the Tygans could be useful allies, and if the Vangariens trust them, then I see no reason why we shouldn't."

"Do you need a recess?" Blair asks King Lawrence. He glares at her but then settles back into his chair.

"No, no, I don't want this damn meeting to go on any longer than it has to. Let's get it over with."

“Fine,” Blair says. “Then our final matter of business has to deal with another potential trade. Princess Luna, the floor is yours.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My legs shake and I wipe my palms twice on my pants as I stand up. Public speaking was never my strength, which is why Mom never let me speak during press conferences. I was always there to stand still, look pretty, nod occasionally, and clap whenever she paused for more than two seconds.

I was never supposed to propose legislature or speak about trade deals or alliances. I'd already proven I couldn't handle it.

Or at least, that's what Mom told me.

I swallow the lump in my throat and tuck my hands into my pockets so no one can see them shake. "As you all know, the vast majority of our teleporters and space-ready transportation vessels rely on the Power Gems the Vangariens have ever so generously gave us," I pause. Evelyn nods encouragingly while Princess Lapis looks bored out of her mind. Vihaan and Harry lean forward. "those Power Gems are running low on, well, power—" *I wish I had practiced this. Blair could have at least given me another hour.* "—And the Vangariens themselves are low on supplies. We can't depend on them forever, especially with materials that have become so deeply integrated into our everyday lives. Also, imagine what we as a race are capable of if our scientists had a steady supply of Power Gems to invent and innovate with."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I've been in talks with delegate Muxelle from Planet Caxis which is located in the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System." Marcos looks to Vihaan

who just shrugs. Evelyn's eyes widen, and Princess Lapis shifts in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Their planet requires salt water in order to keep their leader healthy, but salt water doesn't naturally form on their planet. They lack hydrogen, oxygen, and sodium. Their current supply of salt water is dangerously low. Power Gems grow freely on their planet, it's one of their renewable resources. They are willing to trade us Power Gems for a few hundred gallons of salt water, which, as you know, we have an abundance of.”

“Are we the only planet with hydrogen, oxygen, and sodium?” Princess Xiu raises one eyebrow. Her twin brother, Prince Bai, whispers something in her ear. She snickers and he smirks.

“Coxis has gathered a bad rap since it resides within the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System,” I explain. “Most planets won't give them the time of day, let alone establish trading with them.”

“Why don't we get our Power Gems from the Vangariens' supplier?” Harry asks.

I smile. “Coxis *was* the Vangariens' supplier, but they stopped trading years ago.”

“Why?” Marcos asks.

I lock eyes with Blair. “The Vangarien elder doesn't remember the exact reason,” I look back to Marcos, “but assumes Coxis found a closer trading partner.”

I exclude the part where they were giving weapons to a war-hungry planet. Blair almost looks proud.

“Every major race here has told us to avoid anyone from the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System,” Vihaan says. “None of them have gone out of their way to exclude Coxis from that warning, so why should we trust them?”

“The Coxians aren’t a violent people,” Blair pipes up whenever I hesitate. “And while the Gorgens seem trustworthy, we know almost nothing about them, so we don’t know why they distrust the 247<sup>th</sup> Solar System.”

“They—erm, Coxis?” Evelyn stumbles. I nod. “They’ve traded with the Vangariens?” She clarifies.

“Yes,” I say.

“When?”

“It was a while ago. At least a generation or two back,” I admit. Blair slowly closes her eyes before reopening them. That may not have been the smartest thing to add.

Evelyn nods, chewing on her bottom lip. No one else asks any more questions so Blair calls for the vote.

“Republic of the Pacific?”

“Nay.”

“Republic of Australia?”

“Nay.”

“Republic of South Asia?”

There’s a pause as Vihaan slides his eyes between me and King Lawrence. I told him to vote nay, but that would mean voting with the king. He sighs. “Nay.”

“Republic of North Asia?”

Princess Xiu whispers to her brother who nods and she answers, “Yay.”

I blink in surprise. Well, that’s one vote.

“Republic of East Europe?”

“Yay.”

“Republic of West Europe?”

Blair looks to Harry who just gives her an exasperated shrug, almost like it’s not worth whatever argument she’d put up. “You have to answer,” she hisses at him.

“Oh right, uh, yay?”

Blair nods and moves on. “Republic of North Africa?”

“Nay.”

“Republic of South Africa?”

Nay.”

*5 to 3. One more nay and we’re done.*

“Republic of North America?”

“Yay.”

“Republic of Central America?”

“Yay,” Evelyn says.

“Looks like you’re the tie-breaker, Republic of South America,” Blair says.

Marcos slides with a devilish grin and I deflate. “Don’t,” I whisper. He takes his time clearing his throat and then stands. I roll my eyes.

“The Republic of South America,” he begins and everyone groans. He holds his hands up. “Woah, woah, woah, let me finish, jeez,” he chuckles.

“Just tell us your vote, Marcos,” Evelyn snaps.

Marcos glances around the table, soaking up our anticipation. I’m a half-second from throwing my holoscreen at him when he finally says, “The Republic of South America is voting against the proposition.” He gives me an apologetic shrug. “Nay.”

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Blair plops down in her chair once everyone’s left and throws her holoscreen at the orb.

“Ugh, I can’t believe Marcos voted against us. And Vihaan! You even voted for his stupid alliance. I can’t believe the audacity of some people,” she rants. “He even agreed with King Lawrence! Doesn’t he know they’re at *war* with each other?”

“I told Vihaan to vote against us,” I admit.

Blair picks her head up from her hands and slowly turns around. “You did what?” she shrieks.

I hold up my hands. “I told you after talking with the Vangarien Elder that I didn’t think we should go through with the trade deal and you pushed for it anyway.” The words spill out of me.

She shakes her head at me. “But you still wanted the credit for proposing it.”

I shrug. “I wasn’t going to let you take all the glory for it if it did miraculously pass. I did all the work.”

Her fingers curl into a fist and I brace myself to duck because I'm sure the blow is coming, but instead she laughs.

"You actually played me," she says as she picks up her holoscreen. She chuckles. "Maybe you do have what it takes to be a politician."

I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not, but it feels like one, so I accept it anyways.

"I'm going to grab some food then head to bed. Vihaan and I are meeting with the Tygans tomorrow to go over treaty details," I say.

"Do you think he'd mind if I join?" Blair asks. "I need to do something to make my dad think I'm not useless."

"You'd have to ask Vihaan."

She nods. "I will."

"Have you heard anything from your dad?" I ask carefully.

"Just that his wedding is next week," she answers. "He's making sure it happens while Harry and I are here, that way we can't do anything to stop it."

"Would you?"

"Hell yeah, I would," she says. "I've already sent him a billion emails explaining how this is the worst idea ever and he's a horrible father for doing this to us." She tucks a lock of hair behind her hair. "He hasn't responded to any of them. I guess I am a disposable heir."

"You're not disposable, Blair," I say automatically.

She looks away and fixes her blouse. “It doesn’t matter. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“If it makes you feel better, my mother hasn’t sent me anything the entire trip,” I say. Then I add with a bitter laugh, “In fact, if I relied on her for news about Earth I wouldn’t even know I war was happening.”

“She’s smart though,” Blair says. “None of your people are dying.”

“Maybe not on the warfront, but plenty of my people are dying.” The words slip past my lips before I can stop them.

Blair gives me a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

I shake my head. “Never mind. I’m so hungry I’m not making sense anymore.” I force a laugh. “I’m going to go get dinner.”

There’s a moment before Blair nods, like she was debating whether to tell me something or not, but I turn on my heel and leave the orb.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tygans are the closest race to humanity I've seen at the alliance. In fact, if humans were peeled out of jelly mold and dipped in some Easter Bunny pastels, and well, transparent, then they could easily pass for a Tygan. They were even the Vangariens charity case for last year's Alliance meeting. They're not too terribly advanced. They also had to hitch a ride to get here.

I'm beginning to feel like the Vangariens are just match-makers for intergalactic diplomacy. I wonder if that's their ploy to get to the center of the colosseum. The Tygan orb is always filled with a sickly-sweet vapor that causes my head to spin if I inhale too deeply so I try to breathe through my mouth without sounding like a mouth breather. Mr. Lloyd, however, isn't trying to save face. I also avoid every offer of food they shove into my face. I haven't forgotten their forsaken chili.

Larchold, the delegate Vihaan has been working with, spins his holoscreen around so we can read over the conditions of the treaty for the twelfth time. This Tygan is a good half foot taller than the others, but still an inch or two shorter than me. His skin is a transparent light purple that reminds me of the rows of lavender in our garden back home.

I sent Mom a message informing her that I was working on treaty negotiations with an alien race right before I went to bed last night. She hasn't replied.

"This looks satisfactory enough," Vihaan says as he skims over the document. He swipes his hand across it and holds up his own holoscreen. The document flies to his

device and he checks it before standing. “As I told you earlier, our government requires a majority of our delegates to approve of any treaty before we can officially agree to them and sign off.”

Larchold nods. “How long will such approval require?”

Vihaan shrugs and gives the alien a crooked smile. “As long as it takes to track down the other Earthers.” He laughs lightly. “Shouldn’t be more than an hour or so.”

“Ah, well, I anticipate your return,” Larchold replies, picking up an orange slush drink.

We nod and I follow Vihaan on his heels, craving the dusty air of the colosseum. As soon as we step outside the orb I take a deep breath, trying to remove the tacky feeling from my lungs.

“How do they breathe in there?” Mr. Lloyd asks. “I thought I was going to fall out into a strawberry induced coma.” Vihaan’s bodyguard chuckles and I jump. I always forget about him.

Once we’re a few steps away I say, “Why did you lie to him? We’re already voted to create the alliance. And no one said we had to let anyone else in on the treaty making. Hell, do you think anyone cares?”

I think back to how King Lawrence, Princess Xiu, and Princess Lapis were so adamant that we were expected to succeed here. How they’ve considered this a vacation away from Earth’s drama.

“Blair cares,” he says. He told her yesterday that he didn’t think it would be a good idea for her to sit in on the negotiations, but that he’d keep her in the loop. “As does

Marcos and Evelyn. Even Harry's asked about it, although I doubt he'd admit to wanting to be involved."

"You, me, Blair, Harry, Evelyn, and Marcos aren't a majority," I say.

"Eh, the Tygans don't need to know that," he says as the door to our orb opens.

"It's about time," Blair snaps, standing up from her chair. "You were supposed to meet us here an hour ago."

"Luna found another loophole that needed closing in the last two drafts," Vihaan says. He flicks his holoscreen toward the front of the orb and the treaty appears in front of all of us. "We had to fix that."

"Are you a master loophole locator, Luna?" Evelyn purrs as she turns to read over the treaty. She rolls a pretty blue stone between her hands before pressing it against her chest.

"You've met my mother," I reply with a small laugh. "I can't afford to leave anything up to interpretation."

"Right? Then we'd have another New Mexico massacre on our hands," Marcos adds.

"Rebellion," I correct.

He glances at me over his shoulder. "Is that what your country calls it?"

I ignore him and comb back through the treaty for what feels like the hundredth time. Harry shows up a few minutes later with two trays of coffee, his bodyguard trailing him with another tray and a bag.

"Never to late-a for a latte," he says.

I cringe as he hands me a drink. “Never say that again.”

Blair sips her coffee and snatches a brownie out of the bag. “Or just never speak again. Whatever works.”

Harry rolls his eyes at his sister and sinks into his chair. Mr. Lloyd dumps three packets of sugar into his cup and three small creamer containers.

“How’s the negotiations going?” Harry asks.

Vihaan points to the screen as he takes a long drink. It smells like green tea and I force down a gag, crossing the room to sit next to Evelyn.

“This is hopefully the final draft,” Vihaan says. “We’re checking if there’s anything to fix.”

Harry scans the document and the room is quiet save for the occasional sips. Then he breaks the silence.

“We should probably get one of the seniors to look over this.” He runs a hand through his hair. “You know, just in case we’re missing something.”

“We’re perfectly capable at reading treaties,” Blair snaps.

“I’m not saying we’re not, it’s probably just better if we—”

“They don’t even want to be here, so why should we bother?”

“Because they’ve done this longer than we’ve been alive.”

Blair tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Okay and? How many of them have actually ruled a country? None of them. So we’re all at the same level.”

“King Lawrence has ruled a country,” I pipe up.

“And his country is at war right now, so what does that tell us?” Blair says.

“Technically all of our countries are at war,” Marcos says.

“Mine isn’t,” I point out.

“Your country is exactly a role model,” Vihaan says.

I shrug. “Fair point.”

Blair crosses her arms. “We don’t need help. We can do this on our own.”

“Don’t you think creating an alliance with an alien race is a pretty important situation?” Harry asks. “Maybe a bit more important than some petty argument?”

A flash of anger crosses Blair’s face and her coffee cup crinkles as she tightens her grip. I quickly stand up and say, “Maybe Vihaan should make that decision. This is his alliance.”

Blair huffs. “Fine.” She turns to Vihaan who glares at me for making him the center of Blair’s attention. “Vihaan, what do you think we should do?”

He sighs and scratches the back of his neck. “We should ask King Lawrence or at least Princess Lapis. They’re the most experienced delegates on the trip.” He holds a hand up. “I can’t ask though. My country started this war. They’ll never help me.”

“South Africa and South Asia are allies,” Evelyn says.

Marcos shakes his head at his sister. “South Africa switched sides yesterday morning after a North Asian raid on Madagascar.”

“Why did North Asia raid Madagascar?” I ask. I really need to check the newsfeeds more often.

“I don’t know. Dad didn’t send me any details. He’s been,” Marcos hesitates and glances at Vihaan. “He’s been busy.”

It takes me a second to remember which side of the war the other Americas are on. I check my holoscreen for a message from Mom. Nothing.

“I can ask,” Harry volunteers. We all turn to him and he gives us a lopsided smile. He looks more like a private school dropout than a prince. “They don’t have any reason to say no to me.” He flashes us a smile. “I’m oh-so-very charming.”

“You’re helping Vihaan,” Blair says. “That’s enough for them to say no.”

“I can be pretty convincing when I want to be,” he says.

“No, you can’t,” she says.

“I convinced you to ask the other delegates.”

“No, you didn’t!” Blair snaps. “Luna did.”

“Hey, I made the decision,” Vihaan interrupts.

“Only after Luna came up with the idea,” Blair says.

“¡Cállate ya!” Evelyn shouts. “Is this important? Is it?” She looks to Harry. “Go! We don’t have forever.”

He nods and takes a long sip from his cup before tossing it into a trash can and saunters out of the orb.

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Vihaan rubs his hands over his face and mumbles, “I should have told Larchold I’d be back within the day.”

“Even then you would have been underestimating,” I mutter.

It didn't take Harry long to find Princess Lapis and King Lawrence and convince them to look over the treaty, but none of us expected them to take actual hours to comb through it.

"Is this why all those United Republics meeting last so long?" I ask.

"All we needed was a 'yeah, this looks good' or a 'fix this and this'," Vihaan groans.

"I told you not to ask them," Blair mumbles. Evelyn, Marcos, and Harry left an hour ago out of sheer boredom, but Blair has decided to tough it out with Vihaan and I, mostly to remind us that she told us so.

"Maybe we really don't know anything about treaties," Vihaan says. He's laid out on his back in the middle of the floor, his eyes fixed on the ceiling of the orb.

I stretch and listen to my back, shoulders, and elbows crack. I roll the kinks out of my neck and sigh. "Maybe." Even though I do know a thing or two about them. I've sat in enough of my mother's meetings and listened enough of her rants to know this Tygan alliance isn't a bad one.

"You should probably go give Larchold a status update," I say. "It might be bad if he thinks you've blown him off."

He nods and stands. "I need to stretch my legs anyway."

As he turns to leave, King Lawrence and Princess Lapis turn around. I hadn't even noticed their bickering had stopped.

“Besides the archaic and rather casual language,” Princess Lapis begins. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “We couldn’t find anything glaringly wrong with this treaty. Nothing unacceptable.”

“However, I do not think it’s a good idea to share scientific discoveries with these aliens,” King Lawrence adds.

“They’re at least a decade ahead of where we are,” Vihaan says. “If anything, they’ll be sharing with us.”

“Are you sure we should be worried about military alliances?” Princess Lapis asks. My stomach lurches.

“That’s what I was concerned about,” I admit, the words tumbling out before I can catch them. Vihaan looks startled. “Like aren’t we just asking for a war at that point?”

The chances of the Tygans going to intergalactic war is slim to none, just like ours, and even if they did, in the time it would take for Earth to send supplies or troops, the war would most likely have concluded, but there’s still a clause that we are military allies. We’ll be expected to provide aid in a time of war.

“No, no, that’s the most important part of the treaty,” King Lawrence says. “If we’re going to start seriously engaging with this kind of diplomacy, we need to be as prepared as we can be. It’s only natural we’ll begin to form enemies.”

“It’s better to have military allies in the reserves and never need them, than to get pulled into a fight and not have any back up,” Vihaan agrees.

“And they wonder how their countries could have gone to war,” Princess Lapis says to me, jerking her head toward the guys. They both open their mouths to protest but she cuts them off and places her hands on my shoulders. Her green eyes bore into mine and I forget how to breathe for a second.

“Keep that sense of peace in your heart, Princess Luna. It’s a gift not too many of us royals possess anymore.”

I swallow a lump in my throat. “Y-yes ma’am.”

She gives King Lawrence and Vihaan a weary glance before leaving the orb. Neither of them say anything until Vihaan swipes the documents from the orb onto his holoscreen and holds it up to me.

“Ready to go sign a treaty?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When I was younger and full of hope that being a princess meant sparkling ballgowns and spinning across hardwood floors singing, I thought that doing any of the princess-y work would be exciting and fulfilling. I remember reading ancient fairytales in half-destroyed books I found scattered throughout the Library of Congress. I imagined a thrill nothing else could ever replicate.

But as I sign my name beneath Vihaan's, locking Earth into its first intergalactic treaty, all I feel is tired.

Vihaan seems to feel the opposite.

"We should celebrate," he says as we head back to the Resting Quarters.

"Should we?"

"Luna, we just made an alliance with an alien race. That's never happened before," he says, bouncing in front of me.

"What? You make new friends and you forget about your old pals, the Vangariens?" I tease.

He waves my comment away like one would do to a pesky fly. "They don't count. They found us."

"They also helped you find the Tygans."

"But I still found them. There's a difference."

I laugh. "Whatever you say, Vihaan."

“Do you think the robot chef can make sake?” He asks.

“I’m hoping for champagne,” I say. Mr. Lloyd grunts, but I ignore him. There’s no drinking age on an asteroid.

“Uh oh,” Vihaan looks past me and slumps to a stop. “Trouble at nine o’clock.”

“What?” In the time it takes me to figure out what he means, Muxelle appears to my left and I gasp. “Muxelle! I’m so sorry. I completely forgot to come find you an—”

Her eye orb flashes as she says, “Do not worry. Your, cousin? Was that the term?” She shakes her head. “Your Blair told me that you could not convince your fellow humans.”

That’s weird. Blair never mentioned talking to Muxelle.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I really tried,” I lie. “The votes just didn’t fall my way.”

“I do not hold any grudges. We’ll still get the elements we need,” she says. “I came to express my sorrow and offer my condolences.”

“Condolences?” I repeat. I tap on my translator. “I don’t think this thing is working.”

“Luna,” Vihaan says behind me.

“It appears to be functioning correctly.”

“Then why would you be offering condolences?” I ask. “Perhaps we have different definitions of the word.”

“Luna,” Vihaan says again, pulling on my arm.

Muxelle's eye, orb, thing flashes again. This time blue. "No, we have the same definition."

"Luna!" Vihaan finally pulls my attention to him and all the color seems to have drained from his face. He holds up his holoscreen and I take it, re-reading the headline just like I did when the war broke out.

*Earth Under Alien Invasion*

Beneath the headline is a picture of three Freguns standing over five dead human bodies. Bile creeps up my throat and my lungs constrict. There's a ringing in my ears and I barely register Vihaan's shouting or his body guard griping his arms to keep him from attacking Muxelle. I don't think I've ever seen him lose his temper. If Muxelle had a face I'm sure she'd be smirking.

Mr. Lloyd grabs my arm and his lips are moving but I can't hear anything. The dusty world tilts beneath me and I fall backwards. Mr. Lloyd guides me to the ground as the Gorgen's introduction comes flooding back to me.

*The Freguns feed off of war, and anger, and violence.*

"I told you not to trust anyone from the 247<sup>th</sup> Galaxy," Vihaan shouts, but his voice is muffled, like he's yelling through a feather pillow. I try to focus on his face, on his body language, but black spots begin clouding my vision. "Why don't you ever listen?"

"Do something with your royal before I do," Mr. Lloyd says to the other bodyguard. His voice is so far away. But how? His hands on are my shoulders.

“You will not touch him. The fault belongs solely to your royal,” Vihaan’s bodyguard snaps.

“She didn’t orchestrate any attack,” Mr. Lloyd argues.

“But she provided the map to those who did.” Behind the bodyguard, a blue aura beginning to form and I turn to see Muxelle retreating, almost like she doesn’t care about what happens next.

Vihaan continues to yell, more at the air than at me, and the Fregun who materializes moves closer. Mr. Lloyd shrugs off his jacket and Vihaan’s bodyguard crouches slightly, ready for the first blow.

My hands shake but I grab Mr. Lloyd’s arm and pull myself back to my feet. His attention snaps to me and his hands are gentle as he steadies me. I blink several times, forcing the world back into focus.

“Stop fighting,” I rasp.

“Stop fighting?” Vihaan sneers. “You’ve brought intergalactic war to Ea—”

“Stop shouting,” I hiss. “Just stop. You’re only feeding *them*.” I flicker my eyes over to the blue humanoid aura a few feet away from us. I sniff and wipe a few loose tears from my eyes.

Vihaan looks over his shoulder. “They—”

I grab his arm just as he lunges. “No, that’s what they want, Vihaan.” He grunts and rips his arm from me. “Don’t you remember? They feed off of anger and violence. We’re only helping them.”

“Then what are we supposed to do then, Luna?” He asks, turning toward me. His face is only inches from mine and I can feel heat radiating off of him, seeping through my clothes and melting into my skin.

“I-I don’t know,” I stammer. “I just know we can’t fight.”

“You’re an idiot,” he says in a low voice.

I nod and step away from him. “I know.” I take a deep breath, locking eyes with the Fregun who has begun to fade away. “I know.”

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“We call for a ceasefire,” Harry says leaning forward in his chair, his elbows digging into his knees.

“No one would end the war without a clear winner.” Vihaan shakes his head and chugs his third glass of sake.

“I didn’t say we’re calling for the end of the war, no peace treaties have to be signed,” Harry says through gritted teeth. “We just need the fighting to stop long enough for the Freguns to move on to another world.”

“And how long will that take?” Evelyn asks. She flips through several different reports of the attack on Earth. Both European countries are reporting over 100,000 casualties, while the African and Asian Republics are looking at an upwards of 50,000. The Americas haven’t reported any numbers yet.

Mom still hasn’t replied to any of my messages. I pace the length of our orb for the hundredth time. Blair, Harry, Marcos, and Evelyn were already in here watching feeds from Earth when Vihaan and I returned.

No one has mentioned that all of our reports are two days old.

Vihaan shrugs. “Who knows? It’s not like we’ve ever been known for peace.

Anger and violence are almost synonymous with being human.”

“We should talk to the Gorgens,” I say. I stop pacing and turn to Vihaan. “They’ll know how to stop the Freguns.”

“Did you complete the Tygen alliance?” Blair asks. Vihaan and I nod. “Shouldn’t we talk to them also? And the Vangariens? They’re supposed to help us in case of intergalactic warfare.”

“The Tygans don’t have the technology to get to Earth in time to help us and the Vangariens are pacifists,” Vihaan says. “They can’t really help us.”

Blair throws her hands up in the air. “Then why did we waste our time with an alliance?”

“Weren’t you pushing for the Coxian alliance? You know, the planet that sold us out to the Freguns?” Marcos snaps.

“I’m sorry, what have you done since we got here?” Blair whirls around to Marcos. “Please, remind me.”

“Stop fighting,” I plea. “This won’t solve anything.”

“Luna’s right,” Evelyn says before he brother can shoot back. “We need to be proactive.” She turns to me. “You said the Gorgens know how to stop the Freguns?”

I shrug. “I mean, they know everything about everyone. Why wouldn’t they?”

“Do you think they would help us?” Vihaan asks. “They’re the ones who told us to be careful.” He gives me a pointed look.

My shoulders drop. “What do we have to lose?”

The Gorgen Orb is at the very bottom of the colosseum, the closest to the stage. Sweat drips down my back and pools across my upper lip by the time we reach their orb. I reach my hand to knock, but Harry stops me.

“Let me catch my breath first,” he says. “I don’t want them to know how out of shape I am.”

“Same,” Blair seconds. She puts her hands behind her head, taking deep breaths.

Evelyn shakes her head. “You know the orbs are translucent, right?”

“Shut up,” Blair pants. “I’m not trying to—”

“Hello, Earthers, what brings you all the way down here,” Yorgen, the Gorgen who talked to Vihaan and me the first day, opens the door.

No one answers so I clear my throat and choke out, “We, um, have an issue we were hoping you could help us with.”

“Of course, come on in,” he says. We follow him into the orb, and he sits down on a cushion in the middle of the floor. Two other Gorgens sit behind him, their backs to us, speaking in low tones. “What can we assist you with?”

Instead of answering, I just hand him my holoscreen with the news report and the picture of the Freguns standing over the dead humans. The picture is burned into my memory now. I don’t think I’ll ever unsee it.

Yorgen sighs and hands back my holoscreen. “I hate it when they go after first years.”

“Excuse me?” Vihaan uncrosses his arms and tilts his head.

“Is this a common occurrence?” Evelyn asks.

“Unfortunately. The Freguns are a very rare species,” Yorgen says. The orb darkens and the walls change to show several pictures of Freguns. “They cannot be killed or destroyed. They don’t even have a home planet. They just exist.”

“I thought they were from the 247<sup>th</sup> Galaxy,” Marcos says.

“Originally, yes, but that was millennia ago. They’ve evolved a hundred times over. They no longer are bound to a planet. This is why they find other planets to feed off of.” Yorgen rubs his giant hand over his left face. “They look for diplomats who have a sort of tension amongst them, then they start scanning all the transmissions to see if they’re home planet is at war, which I assume yours is?”

We all nod.

“That is why they’re targeting you.”

“We know that,” Vihaan says, irritated. “How can we defeat them?”

“You can’t. No amount of fighting or violence can harm a Fregun. That’s what they live off of,” Yorgen says.

“Do we need to hug them or something?” Evelyn asks. Yorgen gives her a quizzical look. “Like do we fight them with the power of love and friendship or some other hippie shit?”

“You simply have to stop fighting and the Freguns will leave,” Yorgen says.

“Their lifeforce does not last long, so they’d need to find a new host planet as soon as

yours is found useless. Whether that through them destroying it or through this ‘hippie shit’ you speak of.”

“Why do you let the Freguns attend this meeting if they only use it to find victims?” Harry asks.

“Oh, they’re not invited to the Alliance,” Yorgen says. “But we also cannot prevent them from showing up. They are not physical beings and they’re immune to any defenses we’ve created.”

Marcos runs a hand through his hair. “Unbelievable.”

“I wish I could help you more, Earthers. I really do,” Yorgen says, standing up. “But if you solve the war your planet is engrossed in, then you solve the Fregun problem. I hope you come up with a solution quickly.”

We let ourselves out of the Gorgen orb and walk up the first few dozen stairs in silence. Just end the war. That almost sounds more impossible than fighting a race of aliens that can’t be attacked.

“The ceasefire sounds like our best plan of action,” Marcos finally says as he leads us up the stairs.

“Why did the war start?” I ask. “You have to know something about it, Vihaan.”

He pauses on the step in front of me so I stop, causing Blair to slam into my back. “What the hell?” she mutters.

Marcos stops and turns around, exchanging a glance with Vihaan and Evelyn who is bringing up the rear. Vihaan looks at me and then to Blair and Harry. I glance over my shoulder as Blair sucks in a quick breath and Harry nods.

“We can’t really afford to keep secrets anymore,” Harry says quietly.

“What secrets?” I ask. Suddenly I’m walking into my first-grade classroom and all the kids turn to stare at me, a few whispers dance past my ears, and a stray giggle catches my attention. Everyone in here knows something I don’t. I sit in my chair as the teacher, Mrs. Loa, types a series of spelling words on the board, and there’s a squish.

Except I’m not six sitting on a pudding cup with chocolate staining my skirt and tears running down my fat cheeks, I’m on an asteroid several hundred lightyears away from home surrounded by the heirs of the most powerful countries on our planet.

“The war was never about the Pacific Republic,” Vihaan admits. He crosses his arms and avoids eye contact.

“What was it about?” I ask.

He sighs. “It was about invading North America and overthrowing your mother.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Maybe my nervous system has received one too many shocks today, or perhaps I somehow knew deep inside that there was a reason my mother has remained neutral throughout this war.

And it wasn't a peaceful reason.

"Then why declare war on the Pacific Republic and not North America?" I ask.

"King Lawrence didn't want to attack your mother, but we needed their ports to be able to launch a full-scale invasion," Vihaan says carefully.

"Have you known this the entire time?"

He shakes his head. "No, no. I only found out a few days ago. My sister told me."

Some tall alien with a peacock tail pushes past us up the stairs and Harry clears his throat.

"Perhaps we should discuss this in the orb?" I nod but my mind reeling. With Blair and Harry's dad marrying the duchess from East Europe, that'll secure their alliance, but—

"After the wedding," I blurt and grab Blair by her elbow once we reach the top of the stairs, "which side of the war will you be on?"

Blair rolls her shoulders back and shakes out her hair. "I'm flattered you think he'd share that information with me. I'm not next in line for the throne, remember?"

"You currently are."

“I’m on a space rock galaxies away from Western Europe,” Blair says. She gives me a sad smile and shrugs. “I lost the throne the day Dad sent my name to Emperor Vasiliev.”

“Eastern Europe will join the South Asian alliance,” Harry chirps.

“How do *you* know?” Blair sneers.

Harry shoots her a glare. “I overheard Dad mention it at one of his staff meetings before we left.”

“You were eavesdropping?” Blair hisses. “Without me?”

“They plan on using the combined European arsenal to attack North America from the east whenever the Asian countries attack from the west,” Harry continues.

I open my mouth but I can’t make any words come out. Uncle Rommel is going to attack us as well. Mom is his sister. How could he turn on her like that?

Evelyn grasps my shoulders and pulls me toward the orb. “Come on. We don’t need anyone listening.” She looks over her shoulder and scans the crowds of aliens, but no one is paying attention to us. Our world is falling apart and none of the witnesses care to watch.

“Did you know about this?” I ask Evelyn, pulling away from her.

Her eyes are soft as she gives an apologetic frown and I swear I can feel my heart tear in half.

“What were you going to do about me?” I whisper.

“We really don’t have tim—”

“What were you going to do about me?” I repeat, cutting Evelyn off.

She glances upward and blinks. “Whatever we had to.”

I’m silent the rest of the walk back to the orb. As the coms go out to the other diplomats to report back here, I pull my hair back and tie it into a ponytail, then undo it and shake it free, and then tie it again, trying to connect the dots in my head.

“South Asia is going to invade North America,” I state.

Vihaan turns around, his right arm braced beneath his left, and says, “Yes. They will use the Pacific Republic and the Republic of Australia as launching points.”

Evelyn twists a golden ring around her right index finger and swallows before adding, “We’re going through the south. Troops were already on their way to New Mexico and Texas.” Her voice is barely above a whisper which is why it takes me a second longer than it should for her words to register in my brain. At least, that’s the reason I tell myself.

I shake my head in hopes the exhaustion will dissipate. “But you’re fighting *against* South Asia.”

“Are we though?” Marcos asks. He pushes off from the side of the orb, his bangs falling into his brown eyes. “Yes, we’ve declared our alliance with the Royal Republic of the Pacific, but have you heard of us sending any troops or aid?”

“Then why declare the alliance?” I ask, anger bubbling in the pit of my stomach. “Why play these games?”

“So your mother wouldn’t know we were working with South Asia.” Marcos chuckles. “This invasion is over a year in the making, Luna.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

It’s Harry who looks taken aback. He sits up in his chair and squints at me. “What do you mean ‘why’? Your mother is a tyrant.”

“And your father isn’t?” I shoot back. “All the countries are ruled by tyrants. They all have absolute power.”

“When was the last time your mother conferred with any elected officials?” Marcos asks. *She hasn’t. Grandpa got rid of all the elections.*

“Or the last time she allowed a state to make its own laws?” Blair chimes in. *The states haven’t been permitted to make laws since before Grandpa became king.*

“This might be an easier question,” Harry says. We lock eyes and I already know what the question is. There’s a dull ache in my chest, the same one I feel every time I think about its answer. “When was the last time your mother ordered a massacre of your own people?”

I bite my bottom lip and close my eyes. It was the day before I left. A small town in Indiana staged a protest against a new lab being built on the outskirts. The lab would be used for a variety experiments, and they’re notoriously dirty. Plants, animals, even people will sometimes die from the radiation and leaks they cause.

Mom dropped two bombs on the town. All four hundred residents were killed.

I remember when those numbers stopped being just numbers to me. When I was told about the few hundred dead in Seattle, or the few thousand in Dallas as a kid, I brushed the numbers off. Mom knew what was best. She was the queen for a reason. The videos of the destruction, of the dead bodies, of the crying survivors didn’t get to me. The

screams were just a noise. Everyone around me assured me that if people would just love and follow Mom, then everything would be alright. No one would have to die.

But then an orphaned girl showed up on the front steps of the palace one day when I was eleven. She was my age, clutching a blood splatter phone. I still don't know how she got past security, but she was there. Scrapped knees, dirty overalls, matted black hair, and a pale face covered in dust.

I stood across from her, the chapter book I was reading tucked under my arm, in a clean white jumpsuit, my hair still dripping from the bath I'd just gotten out of, and I didn't know what to say.

We stared at each other for seven heartbeats, I know because I counted them. I told myself if she didn't do something by the tenth one, I'd scream. But the palace was safe, so if she could get up those white steps without being tackled, maybe she was meant to be there.

"Do you love your mom?" she asked me. Her voice was raspy, like her vocal chords were being rubbed against sandpaper as she spoke.

"Isn't everyone supposed to love their mom?" I responded.

"I loved mine," she said. She then held out the phone to me and I took it. An audio message was pulled up and I pressed play without even glancing at the girl.

*Alyssa? Alyssa are you there?* An older woman, around Mom's age spoke. She was frantic, scared. I could hear explosions in the background. Someone was screaming. *Alyssa, listen to me, it's Mom. Baby, I just wanted to let you know I love you. Not a day*

*goes by that I'm not proud to be your mother. Please find somewhere safe. I love to the moon and ba—*

The message cut off and when I looked back to the girl to give her the phone back, tears streaked through the dust on her cheeks.

“I hope you love your mom more than anyone ever loved their mom,” the girl told me. Behind me I heard someone shout. I think it was Mr. Lloyd but I don't remember because the girl's final words were echoing in my head. “Because by the time she's done, there will be no moms left to love.”

Then three bullets entered the girl's back and she landed at my feet, her blood squishing between my toes.

I open my eyes and wipe the tears from my cheeks. “I don't know how to stop her.” I choke on a sob and shake my head. Evelyn sits next to me and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “I never have.”

“Have you never heard of a coup, Princess?” Vihaan asks with a tilt of his head.

“She already told me I can't have the throne. That's why she had my brothers.”

“She doesn't have to give it to you. You just take it,” he says.

“How? Do you know the kind of power she holds? The entire military is at her beck and call. She could have me killed,” I snap my fingers, “just like that.”

“That's where we come in,” Vihaan says, gesturing to everyone around us.

“Listen, the original plan was to kill you, your mother, and your brothers and put my brother Sahil on the throne, which was going to be a headache of its own.”

“Wait, pause,” I say, waving my hands in front of my face. “You can’t just glaze over the part where you were going to kill me.”

“I mean, you’ve done nothing to stop your mother in eighteen years. It was safe to assume you were just as bad as her,” Marcos says with a lift of his shoulder.

“But now we know you’re not a psychopath like she is,” Evelyn adds quickly. She glares at her brother.

“Of course, maybe your people would prefer a brand-new ruler,” Marcos says. “I can’t imagine you’re well-liked.”

“I’m not,” I whisper. “They would kill me.”

“Not if you give the power back to the people and impose regulations on yourself and your power.” I jump at the new voice and we all turn to the orb door. Princess Lapis strolls in and sits across from me. I wipe my nose on my sleeve. Blair makes a disgusted face at me.

“People would much rather keep their old demons than invite in a new one,” Princess Lapis says. She adjusts her gele and takes my hand. “There’s also a calm in you that your mother never possessed. That is the type of power your people need, Luna.”

“I can’t just become queen.” Tears begin to spill down my cheeks again and I pull my hand away. “I just caused the first intergalactic war. Hundreds of thousands of people are dying because of me.”

“You did not tell those aliens to attack Earth, did you?” she asks.

“No, but—”

“You cannot blame yourself for their actions.”

“I’m the one who gave them the information they needed to attack Earth,” I argue.

“From what I understand you told the weird little girl without a face about Earth and she told the blue fellas.” Princess Lapis places her fist on her hip. “Or did I get that wrong?”

“No,” I huff. “I told Muxelle and she told the Freguns. But Vihaan and the Gorgens told me not to trust her.”

“Everyone knows you should only trust a South Asian royal about as far as you can toss them,” Princess Lapis says.

“That’s not true at all,” Vihaan says. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“And trust is the most beautiful gift to give, but the most devastating to lose.” She holds my face in her wrinkled hands and I realize she’s seen my grandfather rule North America. She was around when my mother killed him and took the throne. She’s seen the hell my mother has created within our borders from the beginning.

“What do we do?” I ask.

Princess Lapis’s hands drop from my face and she exchanges a glance with everyone around the room.

“There’s only one thing we can do,” Harry says. “We stop the war.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Even with the Vangariens it’ll take us days to get back to Earth,” I say, half-jogging to keep up with Vihaan. “Not to mention all of our communications are delayed by two days.”

He shakes his head. “No, we can send our messages almost instantaneously. It just takes two days for their replies to get back to us.”

“What if the Vangariens won’t agree to taking us back to Earth?” I ask. “The Alliance isn’t over for another week and a half and they won’t be able to get back in time.”

“Elder T’Core already wants to leave early,” Blair reminds me.

“And if they won’t then we find another alien race to take us back,” Vihaan answers over his shoulder.

“But what if—”

“Luna!” Vihaan stops and spins around, grabbing me by shoulders. “Stop. We don’t need a plan C or D until A and B fails.”

“But—”

“No. We’ll figure something out and we’ll get back to Earth.”

“What if there isn’t an Earth to go back to?”

His hands tighten on my shoulders before falling away. “There’s over 11 billion people on Earth, Luna.”

“And what is it they do best? They fight. They attack. If they’ve turned their firepower against the Freguns then they’re only adding to the fuel,” I say.

“Harry and Evelyn are back at the orb explaining to everyone why we have to call for a ceasefire and helping them prepare their messages for back home. Once those are sent and the fighting stops, the Freguns will leave,” Vihaan explains.

“If.”

“What?”

“If the fighting stops.” I shrug. “No one here has the power to actually call for a ceasefire except King Lawrence. There’s nothing to guarantee our monarchs will listen.”

Blair huffs. “Remember, not every country is under a tyrant like yours.”

I stiffen at the accusation but remain silent. It’s still hard for me to view Mom as a tyrant. She fits the description of one, but she’s still Mom. She always did what she thought was best for North America. Or at least, that’s what I’ve always believed.

“I not only sent my message to my brother, but to every member of our senate. If the majority of them call for a ceasefire, they’ll overrule my brother. The same goes for pretty much every other country.”

I nod and Vihaan turns as we continue toward the Vangarien orb. We arrive just as T’Ork exits the bubble.

“T’Ork,” Vihaan calls. The diplomat’s claws clack together as he jumps.

“Oh, Prince Vihaan, Princess Luna, and Princess Blair, how are you?” He says, his tone as pleasant as usual.

“We need a pretty big favor,” Vihaan says.

T'Ork looks between us. "Yes, of course."

"We need to return to Earth immediately." Vihaan stands up straight and tucks his hands behind his back, ready for a polite argument.

"The alliance is not over for another one of your weeks," T'ork replies with a tilt of his head.

"Earth's under attack," I blurt.

T'Ork looks at me. "By who?"

"The Freguns." I swallow a lump in my throat. "The Coxians sold us out."

"Oh goodenessar," T'ork quips, but my translator doesn't dissect his words. "That is quite a problem." He looks behind him at his orb, then checks his holoscreen, and glances up past us.

He sighs. "I have a meeting I must attend, but explain your situation to T'Lark," he gestures to a Vangarien in a dark blue cloak inside the orb, "and he will help you."

We shake his hand. "Thank you so much."

"Of course, of course." T'Ork steps past us then pauses. "If you could mention this to the Gorgens, us aiding you, we would really appreciate it."

"Will it move you a row closer to the middle?" I ask.

T'Ork scratches the back of his head with one of his talons and gives us a small smile. "It might move us two."

"We'll be sure to let them know before we leave," Vihaan promises. T'Ork nods and heads to his meeting as Blair knocks on the Vangarien's orb.

T'Lark opens the door. "Yes, hello, Earthers. Is there something I can assist you with?"

We tell him everything we told T'Ork and he taps his claws together as he listens. His large, horse-like nose twitches twice, almost like a bunny's as he thinks.

"This is something that I will have to discuss with the rest of our congregation," he finally says after a few too many heartbeats of agonizing silence.

"We don't have a lot of time," Vihaan says.

"You have plenty of time," T'Lark says. "Your presence on your planet will not change the outcome of this invasion. If your people follow your advice, we will arrive as the Freguns begin to leave. If your people do not follow your advice, then you will be returning to a planet of bones."

"There's over 11 billion people on Earth—" T'Lark cuts Vihaan off.

"The Freguns have devoured planets thrice the size of yours within the same amount of time." He adjusts his cloak. "Your presence will change nothing."

"It could keep them from re-invading," I say.

"If your people stop fighting, the Freguns will leave and search for a new planet to absorb energy from. They don't just 'hang around' as your people would say." T'Lark turns around and adjusts his robe.

I shake my head. "No, you don't understand, as soon as the Freguns leave the atmosphere our planet will go back to fighting itself. If the Freguns find out they'll just

attack again. With us there we can prevent another war.” *Once I overthrow my mother, that is.*

“If your planet is so prone to violence, why bother even saving it?” T’Lark asks.

“Maybe the Freguns are doing you a favor.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. “How could you say that? Innocent people are dying,” I nearly shout.

“And they weren’t already dying in your war?”

“This is different. These are aliens who are attacking us for no reason.”

“They do have a reason. It allows them to live. What is your war about? Is it to prolong the existence of your people?” T’Lark crosses his arms and a slew of insults fill my mouth. Just as I’m ready to spew them, Vihaan steps in.

“Helping us will move you closer to the center.” He points out the front of the orb toward the main stage. “Your entire congregation doesn’t have to leave. Just enough to fly us back to Earth, and then they can return in time to pick the rest of you up from the Alliance.”

T’Lark seems to consider this. “I must discuss it with everyone else. We will have a decision within two of your, oh what are they called? Hours?”

I nod and Vihaan shakes his hand. “Thank you.”

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Three hours after meeting T’Lark, we’re all packing our bags. According to T’Ork, he’s an outlier when it comes to their collective helpfulness. Since the Vangariens brought an entire crew with them, none of their diplomats have to leave the Alliance and

by their calculations, they'll just have to spend one extra day on the asteroid before the ship returns to take them home. The Gorgens, who Vihaan and I just left speaking to, assured us that it wasn't unusual for groups to spend a few extra days here. In fact, they welcomed it.

They were also pleased to hear how helpful the Vangariens were, which in turn pleased T'Ork. They wished us luck and hoped to see us back for the next Eighth Galaxy Alliance. I'm just hoping we still have a planet to represent.

Everyone has sent their messages home to their monarchs. I went last since Mom isn't in the war, but I had to make sure she understood everything that was happening. I kept it short. She needs to let everyone in the country know that the aliens feed off of violence so the riots had to stop. I also made sure to tell her that she couldn't put down the riots through violence either. It has to stop. It all has to stop.

"You 'bout ready, Princess?" Mr. Lloyd asks from my doorway.

I sit on my trunk and fumble with the clasp. "Almost. I don't how I managed to fit everything in here so neatly the first time."

"You didn't," Mr. Lloyd chuckles. "A servant did that for you."

"Oh yeah," I say. I've almost forgotten what it was like to have someone do literally everything for me. I finally close the clasp and take a deep breath. "There. Done."

Mr. Lloyd reaches down to pick up my trunk, but I stop him.

"Mr. Lloyd?"

"Yes, Princess?"

I braid my fingers together and study my feet. My intestines knot together and my lungs restrict. “You know what I have to do once we get back to Earth, right?”

“I overheard the conversation, yes,” he says softly.

“Are you going to help Mom?” My vision blurs at the edges as tears begin to fill my eyes. I try to blink them away, but they slide down my cheeks instead.

“My job is to keep you safe. It has been since the day you were born,” he answers.

“But your loyalty is to Mom. You swore it to her before I was born.”

He tilts my head up so I’m forced to look at him. “No, I swore my loyalty to the crown, long before your mother became queen.”

“But she has the crown.”

“Just because she wears it, does not mean it belongs to her.”

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Even though we were all assigned to the same rooms we had on our way to the Alliance, everyone spent most of their time in the communications room. So much so that the Vangarien servants moved couches and blankets and pillows into the room. Harry, Prince Bai from North Asia, Vihaan, and Marcos were playing cards when the first transmission from Earth post-call-for-ceasefire came through. I was napping and Blair was having her palm read by Evelyn.

“Who is it from?” Princess Xui asked.

“North Africa,” King Lawrence answers, standing over the control panel. He hasn’t moved from there since we boarded the ship. As soon as we told him we’d need a ceasefire, he refused. He thought it was a trick to leave his country vulnerable while

South Asia delivered a final blow to his people. After an hour of arguing, he agreed to call off the fighting only after South Asia did.

“What does it say?” Vihaan asks.

“Yoo-tey kuu-fan-yee-kah?” King Lawrence stumbles through the message.

“Yote kufanyika,” Princess Lapis corrects. “It means ‘all done’.”

“Is that it?” Vihaan asks. “Two words?”

“My mother says what she needs and nothing more.” Princess Lapis’s mother is over eighty years old and has been ruling for almost seventy years.

A few hours later we got that the message that the South African Republic had agreed to the ceasefire, followed by the Australian Republic, South and Central America, East and West Europe, and North Asia. It would take another day for South Asia to agree, the senate overriding Vihaan’s brother, and finally King Lawrence sent the message to his country to lay down their arms.

It would take about three days without any fighting before the Freguns would pack up and leave and we’re four days away from Earth. Almost everyone has returned to their rooms, the war seemingly over, but I stay by the control panel, curling into the imprint King Lawrence left.

“You should get some rest, Princess,” Mr. Lloyd tells me.

“Mom hasn’t responded,” I say.

“She hasn’t replied to any of your messages since we left,” he says, gently.

“I know,” I say. I press the button to reactivate the scanner, but nothing comes through. “It’s just,” my voice cracks, “this is important.”

“It is. And I’m sure she read your message and called for a pause in the fighting. She probably didn’t think she needed to reply,” Mr. Lloyd says.

“Queen Nesreen replied to Princess Lapis,” I point out. “It was two words, but at least it was an acknowledgement. Mom hasn’t given me anything.” I press the scanner again. Nothing.

Mr. Lloyd drops a hand onto my shoulder. “Come on, Luna. You need to sleep.”

“I need my mother to reply to me,” I say through gritted teeth. I press the scanner again and again and again. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

“Luna—”

“How am I supposed to overthrow her if I can’t even get her to reply to me?” I snap. I swipe a hand over my eyes. I will not cry again. Instead I force a laugh. “This was her way of getting rid of me. She’s probably annoyed that I won’t leave her alone.”

“Or she’s panicking because you’re returning early.”

“Mom has never panicked a day in her life.”

“Maybe not outwardly, but panic and paranoia are two sides of the same coin,” Mr. Lloyd says.

I roll his words around in my head. I’ve never thought of Mom as paranoid, but she does rotate through security guards and advisors at a pretty high rate. Especially since I’ve had the same security guard since birth. She has a new one every month. And now that I think about, I never see them again once they’re dismissed. I don’t know why I would, but they’re not even mentioned in passing.

“Where does Mom’s security guards go once she finds a new one?” I ask.

Mr. Lloyd clears his throat. “I’m not sure. But they don’t go home, that’s for sure.”

“Do you think she kills them?”

“They would be privy to a good amount of information that I’m sure she wouldn’t want to get out.”

I run my hands through my hair and shake it out, trying to jostle my thoughts.

“They have families, don’t they?”

I know Mr. Lloyd doesn’t. He was twenty-two when he was assigned to me and he’s lived next door to me ever since. If he had a significant other, I’d know about them.

“One of the requirements to be a security guard is to not have any attachments,” he says.

*There’s no one to miss them,* I add in my head.

“A month isn’t a long time to become loyal to someone,” I say. A plan starts to unfold in my head. “Truly loyal.”

“What are you thinking, Princess?”

“I think I know how to stop my mom.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Can you detect any ships in the area?” Vihaan asks the Vangarien pilot as we orbit Earth.

“Only Earthen ships en route to your moon,” the pilot answers.

“Could they be cloaked?” I ask.

“If they are, they’re using a technology we have not encountered before.”

“What are the chances of that?” Harry asks. He looks more put together today than he has the entire trip.

All of us do, actually. As Blair said when she burst into my room with her makeup kit and straightener, “When you have a grand, world-saving, entrance to make you have to make sure you look absolutely perfect.”

Then she squinted at the bags under my eyes and unbrushed hair and added, “Don’t worry, by the time I’m done you’ll look like someone who could successfully stage a coup d’état.”

I didn’t realize there was a look for that, but if there is, I look it thanks to Blair. I keep reminding myself not to run my fingers through my hair or else I might mess it up. And I’d rather not feel her wrath.

“The Freguns have a lot of trading partners,” the pilot says. “Many of them are not very forthcoming so I’d estimate about a forty percent chance.”

Vihaan rubs his hands over his face. “Beautiful,” he groans. “Can King Lawrence establish contact with Earth now?”

The pilot nods and we all scurry out of the bridge and down to the communications room, where the other eight diplomats are waiting.

“You’re good,” Vihaan tells King Lawrence who turns on the camera and starts a direct feed to Emperor Vasiliev’s office.

“Have you ever met the Emperor?” I whisper to Vihaan. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. The heels Blair stuck me in are impossibly high and are already killing me.

“No. Have you?”

I shake my head as the emperor’s ancient face fills the screen in front of us.

“King Lawrence, we were beginning to worry about you,” he says. His voice is dry, like it could crumble to dust any moment now. Emperor Vasiliev is two years shy of a century and he definitely looks the part. His skin sags from his bones, almost like he’s melting in Eastern Europe.

“We’ve arrived safely. How is everything on Earth?” King Lawrence asks.

“The enemy left yesterday, just as you predicted.” The emperor sighs. “But not without a price.”

King Lawrence looks at us over his shoulder before turning back to the screen.

“What price?”

“Over a billion of our citizens perished.”

It fills like the wind got knock out of me. Vihaan grabs my arm, but I'm not sure if it's to steady me or himself. Princess Lapis gasps as Evelyn covers her mouth and Marcos closes his eyes. Blair buries her face in Harry's shoulder and he holds her tight.

"Many of our royal families have faced casualties as well," the Emperor adds.

"Who?" Princess Lapis asks.

The Emperor sighs. "I believe these are conversations we should have within our own atmosphere."

"T-the Vangariens are going to begin teleporting us down to the surface," King Lawrence says.

Emperor Vasiliev nods. "Welcome home, diplomats."

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My atoms snap back together, and I open my eyes to see Dr. Paolo smiling back at me. The chilly air of the teleporter room seeps through my blazer, wrapping around my bones, but the warmth of seeing Dr. Paolo staves off a shiver.

"Welcome back, Princess Luna," he says rounding the control panel. He helps me down the stairs from the teleporter pad, and my footsteps feel heavier. There was a lightness to my body back at the Alliance and on the Vangarien ship that seems to disappear. I nearly stumble down the steps because of it.

"Woah, don't quite have your Earth legs back yet, huh?" he says.

"I guess not," I say, forcing a laugh.

"You'll have to tell me about everything," Dr. Paolo says, giddy as a teenage girl.

"All the new alien races you met, the food you ate, all the technology you encountered."

“I promise to tell you everything,” I say. I give his hand a squeeze. I’m relieved to see he is still here. We’ve been gone so long. Mom hasn’t replaced him. “But first I need to get used to being back on Earth.”

“Oh, right, right,” the doctor says. “Take your time, Princess. I can’t imagine what the readjustment must be like.”

“Luna!” A small, but excited voice shouts. Solis, my youngest brother, runs at me and I react in just enough time to catch him in a hug. “You’re back! You’re not gonna believe what happened while you were gone!”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, we were attacked by aliens!” He says.

“No way? Did they get you?” I ask, poking his tummy.

He giggles. “No! I’m here, aren’t I?”

I ruffle his black hair. “You got me there.” Nexus, my other brother, hovers in the doorway. His natural green eyes boring into me. His face is neutral, but I can feel a sort of fury inside him. As long as I’m here, there’s something keeping him from the throne.

Then comes a voice that freezes me in place. “Solis, give your sister a second to get her bearings.”

Nexus presses himself against the doorframe so Mom can step into the room. I slowly stand up, rolling my shoulders back and lifting my chin the way Blair told me to. Mr. Lloyd takes a step closer to me and I’m grateful for his presence.

“Hey Mom,” I say. I stand up straight and lock eyes with her. For the first time, I refuse to shrink under her gaze.

“Hello Luna,” she says. She smiles at me the same way she smiles at the holoscreens before she drops a bomb on a rebelling city. “Welcome home.”

## VITA

After graduating from Pine Tree High School in 2012, Arianna Sanchez entered Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2016, earning her Bachelors of Arts degree in History. She then began her career as an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade U.S. History teacher at McMichael Middle School within the Nacogdoches Independent School District. In August 2017, she returned to Stephen F. Austin State University and received the degree of Master of Arts in English in December of 2019.

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