

# VAN TERRA

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*For Laika.*  
*Yes, the dog.*

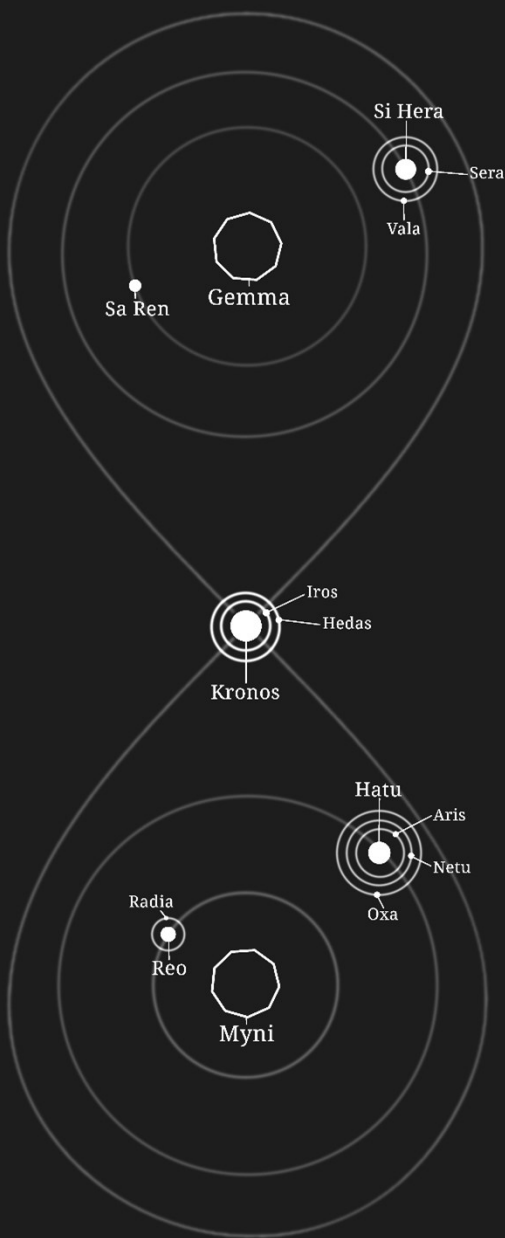
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# The Janus System





# Chapter One

## Fall From Good Graces

The long, shining white halls of the Governor's Palace didn't offer many places to hide. Grace pressed herself against a wall near an intersection, as close to the gold-laced marble as she could manage. Her wings prevented her from resting completely flat against it, but they folded up tight enough under her jacket for her to largely ignore their presence. Across the hall, a massive window offered a glimpse of the countless skyscrapers sprawled across the city-planet's surface. Above them stretched a dark sky barely touched by the morning light of the closest sun.

It felt wrong to be sneaking around her home like this. Though, even after four years of shelter here, it was hard to feel completely at home in the palace. She rarely saw the governor, the very man who'd taken her in. Her tutors and guards were swapped out every season. And security kept her as far as possible from the prying eyes of the public, from the reporters snooping around for news on the hero that had saved their governor's life.

Grace's personal staff were the source of her current predicament, actually. Her math tutor had failed to show up to her room for the morning's lesson, and she had received no answer when she tried calling the palace secretaries. She'd exited her rooms to find her usual guards missing from their post by her door.

In fact, this entire section of the palace seemed deserted. Grace couldn't help but assume something was seriously wrong, but no

emergency alarms had gone off. There wasn't so much as a distant shout or footsteps.

She took a deep breath and forced herself around the corner. Another quiet hallway greeted her. She began to walk, resisting the urge to call out.

Most doors were closed, but an open one at her right led into a conference room. Grace paused. The room was empty of people, but a smartsphere sat on the table, projecting a holoscreen into the air. A news broadcast played quietly.

"—scene of the robbery. Several shots were fired, but no injuries have been reported."

Grace found herself staring at a photo of the infamous Van Terra, standing atop a convenience store roof, holding a blaster aimed toward the security camera the image had come from. The villain's black coat billowed in the wind around her. Her ponytail of long, black hair whipped about similarly.

Grace shuddered. There were a lot of villains stalking Kronos' streets, but Van Terra seemed the most interested in making people afraid of her.

"Hey, Grace."

Grace whirled around and found herself facing a semi-familiar face. Pale skin, lighter than Grace's light brown. Straight blonde hair pulled back in a short ponytail. And a simple black and white suit that was standard for a diplomat. The material had a glossiness that was exaggerated by the lights above.

An ambassador. One of many that came in and out of the palace. This woman was human, like Grace. And if she remembered correctly, the woman actually had been born on Earth. In Earth years, she looked to be in her late forties, far older than Grace's nineteen.

"Uh, hi?" Despite the woman's non-threatening appearance, Grace found herself taking instinctive steps backward. She racked her brain for the woman's name. "It's...Callisto, right?"

"Kara Callisto," the woman confirmed with a warm smile.

And then, behind her, at the other end of the hall, was a far more familiar face: one of Grace's bodyguards that had actually been kept in her rotation for more than a few seasons. A tall, bald, and bulky man with skin so pale it was practically white. His irises glittered like opals. He was a member of the Starr family, distantly related to the governor.

What was his name again? Coron? Caro? He never spoke to Grace, only followed silently like a shadow. She opened her mouth to call out to him. Maybe he knew what was going on.

Blindingly fast, the bodyguard drew a gun and took aim. Kara's instincts were much faster than Grace's, and the next thing Grace knew, she was being yanked sideways. The bullet missed her by inches, striking a wall somewhere behind her with a loud crack.

A flash of light warned of another shot. This time, the weapon that fired was the one in Kara's hand, a blaster with the same silver-white metal casing that most standard blasters had. Its yellow beam of energy pierced the bodyguard's chest, and he collapsed.

Grace was too stunned to make any sound, though her mouth hung open and her chest squeezed with the urge to scream. Dark blood pooled on the marble floor beneath the guard.

Kara grabbed Grace's arm. "Time to run."

Grace didn't protest as she was dragged around the corner into the next hallway, though she had a million questions, starting with *What on Kronos is happening?* and *Oh god, am I going to die?*

Instead of asking any of those, she went with, "Why did my bodyguard try to kill me?" Her voice trembled so badly that it would be a miracle if Kara understood her.

"Long story," Kara replied.

"Why are you helping me?"

"Longer story."

Grace didn't try saying anything else until Kara led her into a storage closet.

"Take a moment to catch your breath," Kara told her as she set to work removing a ventilation grate from the wall.



Grace rested a hand on a shelf of cleaning supplies and realized how badly she was shaking. Hoping to distract herself from her shock, she asked, “Why did he use a gun and not a blaster? I’ve never seen a gun on anyone in the palace.”

“It would divert suspicion from the staff when news got out,” Kara replied as she leaned the grate against the wall. She reached into the bag at her side. “Everyone on Starr’s security team uses blasters. With a gun as the murder weapon, they could blame gangs. It would also give them an excuse to increase police patrols.”

Grace’s brow furrowed. Kara removed a large metal hook and fastened it to the top of the vent shaft.

“Wait,” she said, a new wave of fear snaking its way in. “Wait, wait, where are we going?”

“I’m getting you somewhere safe.”

“But—I live here—I—”

“Grace,” Kara said, her voice sympathetic but firm. “Do you realize what’s happening?”

“My bodyguard tried to kill me.”

“The *governor* tried to kill you.” Kara glanced up at Grace.

Grace’s heart stopped in her chest. “But—but he took me in. He let me stay here, gave me tutors—”

“I’m sorry, Grace, it’s complicated.” Kara removed a coil of rope from the bag and began tying it to the hook. Once it was secure, she rose to her feet. “I promise I’ll explain more when we’re out of here.”

After that, Kara explained how they would be taking the rope down the shaft to the bottom of the palace, where they’d be able to exit and drop into the city below.

Ordinarily, a height like this wouldn’t bother Grace, but she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about how if she slipped, she wouldn’t be able to get her wings out in such a tight space. There was no point in taking off her jacket to free them.

Kara hooked them to the rope via belts, and they went in, Kara first. The elaborate hooks on the belts were set up in a way that

allowed the two to drop in a freefall at a pace just slow enough to prevent injury when they stopped at the bottom.

Despite claiming she'd wait until they were safe to elaborate on what was happening, Kara did offer Grace one more tidbit of information on the way down, explaining why the section of the palace around Grace's room had been so empty.

"Things have been rearranged over the past few months to empty that entire floor without raising suspicion. No one knows that everyone else has been rerouted or scheduled elsewhere. It would have been chalked up to an unfortunate accident."

Grace tried to focus on the facts Kara was laying out, hoping to distract herself from her growing nausea. All that trouble just to kill her. She was grateful to be rescued, but... "Why were you watching me in the first place?"

"When you first made the news, we matched your name and face to a girl who was abducted from Puerto Rico—that's a place on Earth. Though, there's a bit of a...timeline issue with that. But we can sort it out later."

At the bottom of the shaft, Kara blew open the grate leading outside with her blaster. The two descended farther on the ropes, into the air beneath the palace. Four steel pillars held the palace in the air far above Kronos' tallest skyscraper, and one of those four stood only a few feet away, offering a small amount of cover.

"We have to get to the subtrains," Kara said. "We'll take them to my safehouse, and I'll call for pick up."

"Pick up?" Where were they going afterward? Were they...leaving Kronos?

More pressing than that question was the mention of the subsurface trains. Grace had never been on the subtrains. In fact, since being taken by the governor, she hadn't even been to the city's lower streets. But she'd heard about the subtrains, about how they were full of criminals, thieves, muggers waiting to harass people on their way to work. About how gang members hung out down there, trading weapons and guns...

Kara glanced up briefly before she went back to fiddling with the section of rope still coiled at the end of the line. “You look scared. Well, more than you already did.”

“I haven’t heard great things about the subtrains.”

Kara lifted an eyebrow. “They’re not as bad as the people up here make them out to be,” she said. “And, well, Starr could solve the problems that do exist if he’d direct more funds to public transportation.” With another glance up, she added, “You have nothing to worry about as long as you’re with me.”

Kara let out the last of the rope, and the two dropped onto the roof of the skyscraper below. Kara broke the lock on a service door leading inside. From there, they used a few different elevators to get down to street level. It was apparently common for a single elevator to only cover either the upper, middle, or lower districts, with maintenance and private elevators being the exception.

Once they were done with elevators, Kara led an anxious Grace down a set of stairs into a dim underground. Crowds pressed in on them from all sides. Grace lifted the hood of her jacket to hide her face.

Would anyone really recognize her, even if they did get a good look? She’d been fifteen four years ago. Her face had changed since her rescue of Governor Starr hit the news. Sure, photos of her did get out every time she left the palace, rare as those occasions were. But she wasn’t *interesting*.

They navigated a maze of wide corridors and train platforms. When they stepped onto one of the trains, Grace noted that it was headed north. Her next thought was that that information didn’t help her at all. She was familiar with Kronos’ geography in relation to the upper districts, but the planet’s surface was an entirely different beast.

As the train pulled out of the station, Grace racked her brain for questions she could ask Kara. Kara might not want to share her entire story until they got to their destination—wherever that was—but maybe Grace could at least get a few more pieces of the puzzle.

“So, you work with a group of people, then?” Grace asked. “Is it like the Interstar Council?”

“A bit. We’re not a government, though, so we can act where the council can’t.” A bitterness crept into those last few words. Grace got the impression that Kara wasn’t the council’s biggest fan.

“And we’re going to your...base?”

“We’re going to one of our ships,” Kara answered. “I doubt we’ll go directly to our base, after that. It’s...pretty far from Kronos.”

Grace glanced around the crowd, heart skipping whenever she noticed someone looking even slightly in her direction. Logically, she knew it was unlikely anyone was actually focused on her, but it was hard not to assume otherwise.

The train jerked to an abrupt stop, sending Grace stumbling forward. Her already-racing heart skipped another beat as the neon green tunnel lights flickered outside the train windows. Murmurs spread through the crowd of passengers.

A hand grabbed Grace’s arm to steady her. “You okay?” Kara asked.

“Yeah.” Grace adjusted the hood of her blue jacket to better hide her face. “What’s happening? Does this have to do with us?”

Kara didn’t respond. The tunnel lights flickered twice more before going out entirely. The train’s interior followed.

“What do we do?” Grace pressed.

“It’s going to be fine.” Kara sounded more like she was trying to reassure herself than Grace. Her grip on Grace’s arm tightened.

The subtrain intercom clicked on. “Callisto,” a deep voice said. “Kronos police have you surrounded. We know you’ve kidnapped Grace Alvarez. Turn yourself in now and we’ll spare your life.”

“Why are they saying you kidnapped me?” Grace whispered as loud as she dared.

“You’re proof of Starr’s secret lab experiments,” Kara replied. “If I can get you to Earth, we can persuade the Interstar Council to help us stop him.”

Grace's blood went cold. That was right. She'd escaped from a lab. It was easy to forget, when her memories of all but those last few steps out the door were gone. Wiped on purpose, according to the scientist who'd helped her. He hadn't made it out.

The first part of Kara's sentence finally wriggled its way into the forefront of Grace's thoughts. "Wait, *Starr's* lab?"

A thud came from the back of the train car. Its metal doors let out a terrible screech as they were forced open. Flashlight beams passed over the crowd, offering brief glimpses of the other passengers, a blend of aliens from all over the Kronos system and beyond. Light illuminated skin in every color, scales and fur, antennae, animalistic ears and eyes, and a handful of people who looked as human as Grace and Kara. Or, nearly as human, in some cases.

Regardless of what planet they were from, everyone in the train looked somewhere between confused and scared.

"Grace," Kara whispered. "If something happens to me, you have to keep going. Get off Kronos, get out of the Janus system, get to Earth."

"Earth?" Grace's chest constricted. Breathing now felt like an impossible task. How was she supposed to get anywhere near the Solar System?

"You need to find other people from Earthguard," Kara continued. "The Kronosian government has been experimenting on abductees, and we need you as proof to get the council to act." Her head turned, and she gave Grace a smile that was probably meant to be reassuring. "I'm sorry I couldn't get you farther. I knew from the start this mission would probably be my last. But we expected Starr to get rid of you soon, and I had to take the chance to save you."

A flashlight beam blinded Grace. "Found them!" a Kronosian police officer shouted. Grace squinted as his silhouette raised a blaster.

"Get ready to run," Kara whispered. Without waiting for a response from Grace, she lifted her arms and stepped forward. The simple black and white clothes she'd worn to disguise herself as a

diplomat were stained with blood and grime. Stray pieces of blonde hair had fallen from her ragged ponytail. "I surrender."

A blaster's blue laser struck her chest.

Kara's body dropped to the floor of the train.

"She was turning herself in!" Grace shrieked. She barely heard her own voice over the shouting that followed Kara's collapse.

An officer's order rang out above the chaos. "Grab Alvarez!" Hands tightened around Grace's arms. Someone yanked back her hood, and her long waves of dark brown hair fell free around her face.

Grace struggled in vain against her captors. More beams of light landed on her. She looked desperately to the shadows in hopes that one of the passengers would step forward to help, but deep down she knew there was no chance. Even if someone wanted to step in, they were no match for the Kronosian officers. No match for the blasters.

The officer who'd shot Kara stepped forward. "Stun her."

Cold metal touched Grace's neck. Lights flashed in her vision, followed by darkness. The next thing she knew, she was being pulled out of the back of a hovering police cruiser, too disoriented to resist as officers led her across a skywalk and into a lobby.

Bright lights reflected off white walls and tiled floor. Grace attempted to shield her eyes and found that handcuffs had been placed on her wrists. Her jacket had been taken, too, leaving her in a long-sleeved white shirt, dark blue pants, and white boots.

Her identity would be obvious to everyone in the station. Even folded up as tightly as possible, she couldn't hide her wings without her jacket. They rested flat against the back of her shirt, emerging from the same two slits that had been cut in all of her tops.

The officers led her to a sleek black desk. A receptionist with purple, velvety skin typed away on a holographic keyboard with clawed fingers. When she opened her mouth to ask the man at her right a question, she revealed dozens of tiny, sharp teeth.

Grace didn't hear the question, but she recognized the man: Bruce Wright, the Sky District's cyborg chief of police. Pale blue skin,

buzzed dark hair, one violet eye, and one silver cybernetic orb to replace the eye he'd lost. "Keep filling it out," he told the receptionist.

"What's going on?" Grace asked, finally finding her voice. It came out hoarse. "Why am I being arrested? I was kidnapped!" She winced inwardly at the guilt that came with blaming Kara, but if she wanted to fulfill the woman's dying wish, she had to keep herself out of prison.

"You can drop the act," Bruce said. "Governor Starr himself told me you went with Callisto willingly, which makes you an accessory to the damage she did during your escape." He laughed. "She was a good spy, but Starr caught on and planted bugs. He heard every word you two exchanged on your way out of the palace."

Grace's heart sank into her stomach. No, no, no, there had to be a way out of this. She drew in a shaky breath. "What are you going to tell the public?"

"You mean the people who think you're a hero because you saved Starr's life, what, a starcycle ago?" Bruce shrugged. "We'll think of something."

More than a starcycle and a half, actually. But Grace's brain was wired to put long stretches of time into Earth years, though she could make the conversions to Kronos time pretty easily.

A younger officer burst through the front doors of the station and sprinted toward Bruce. When she reached him, she skidded to an abrupt halt and whispered something to the chief between ragged breaths. Her pale pink skin had flushed bright red in her cheeks.

Bruce's eyes went wide. "You're joking."

The officer shook her head.

"Guard her," Bruce ordered, nodding toward Grace. "I'll be right back to sign the intake paperwork."

His departure left Grace with nothing to do but watch the receptionist type. Her eyes stung, but she refused to let Bruce see her cry. He'd probably laugh at her. What made her feel even more pathetic was the desperate hope she clung too that Starr would step in

and fix all this. Take her back to the Governor's Palace. Another part of her thought it all might be a dream.

The station doors opened again. Shuffling papers and footsteps around the lobby quieted. The officers standing around Grace turned their heads, and she slowly followed their stunned gazes.

It had taken no less than fifteen officers to bring the girl in. The sound of her heeled boots clicking against tile broke the silence, and despite being handcuffed and chained to her captors, she wore a wicked grin.

She was human, like Grace.

Despite being a criminal, she carried herself as if she were a celebrity, flashing smiles and winking at anyone who looked her way. Which was everyone. Her expensive suit, black overcoat, and long black hair pulled in a high ponytail made her look even more out of place. It all looked sharp against her light skin. The gleam in her brown eyes suggested was fully aware of that fact.

Bruce walked at the front of the entourage, wearing a smile as wide as the prisoner's. "I can't believe this," he said when he reached the desk. "My two biggest targets, arrested on the same day."

The receptionist's large, triangular ears twitched. Almost under her breath, she asked, "Since when has Grace Alvarez been a high-profile criminal?"

"What was that?"

"Nothing, sir."

Bruce tapped the side of his head. His left eye—the cybernetic one—lit up and projected a holoscreen into the air. "You're taller than I expected," he said to his latest arrest. "Now, let's get this over with. Name?"

The girl smiled. "You know my name."

"It's protocol."

"All right." The girl leaned against the desk, earning a nervous glance from the receptionist. "I'm Jasper Van Terra, the most dangerous villain on Kronos."



Bruce responded with a cold laugh. He tapped a box on his screen. "That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

"You said yourself that I was your biggest target." Jasper raised an eyebrow.

"Sure, your ridiculous stunts have made you a nuisance, and the governor has a higher reward by your name than most. But you're far from the most dangerous villain out there." Bruce typed something into the box. "Age?"

"Sixty-eight. I've aged well."

"Stop trying to be funny."

"You're no fun. Seventeen. Earth years, that is. You can translate that into starcycles yourself." Jasper tipped her head and surveyed the crowd around the desk. She was younger than Grace had expected.

Grace and Jasper's eyes met for the briefest of moments, and it was enough to make Grace's heart rate spike. The woman she'd heard terrifying stories about for nearly a starcycle—stories of robberies and explosions and ransoming of upper-district elites—was younger than her?

"Reason for arrest." Bruce frowned as new data scrolled across his screen. "You tried to rob a Kappa-Omega? Aren't convenience stores beneath you?"

Jasper shrugged. "I wanted a Nova Cora."

"Unbelievable." Bruce waved his hand, and the screen disappeared. He nodded to the receptionist. "I'll be back to sign off." To the rest of the officers, he barked an order to follow him.

One of the officers grabbed Grace's arm, and she was escorted along with the rest of the group away from the station lobby. They walked down a well-lit hallway into a starkly contrasted black elevator, where Bruce pressed a button marked 'B1.' A screen above the panel prompted him to enter a code.

Grace frowned at the size of the panel. "Why does the station have so many floors?" she asked, internally cringing at how hoarse her voice came out.

Bruce smirked. "This isn't all part of the station. But our storage is down in the basement." With a chuckle, he added, "Including prisoner storage."

"Yikes," Jasper muttered.

The elevator ride was silent after that. It was a quick ride, for such a far drop from an upper district into the building's basement. The dim lights that greeted them in the cell block were dramatically overpowered by the glow of neon signs outside, their red light seeping in through window wells. It was much colder down here than the lobby had been. Grace considered asking for her jacket back but doubted Bruce would return it.

Bruce stopped in front of a cell and produced a key. "Enjoy your brief stay, Van Terra," he said as he opened the door. "You'll be shipped off to the Shark Tank in the next couple hours."

Jasper stepped into the cell, apparently unfazed by the news that her next destination was the most secure prison on the planet.

"What are you waiting for, Alvarez?" Bruce asked. "Get in there."

"What?" Grace yelped. She shot him an alarmed glance. "With her?"

"Don't worry, she'll be chained to the wall." Bruce gestured for two officers to move in and secure Jasper.

Seeing no other choice, Grace entered the cell while the officers checked the locks on Jasper's chains. She scrambled to the wall opposite Jasper and put her back to it.

"I assume Van Terra's been searched?" Bruce asked.

"Of course," an officer replied. "We ran her through the X-rays and metal detector thrice to make sure we got everything. There is the issue of the modifications—"

"I know about that," Bruce interrupted with a dismissive wave of his hand. He waited for the officers to step out, then closed the door and locked it. "She should be fine in here for an hour or so, but triple the guards around the cell block. She's not getting away from us."

Bruce led the officers away. The thick metal door between the cells and the elevator slammed shut, leaving Grace alone with Jasper Van Terra.

Grace attempted to fold her arms, only to realize she was still in handcuffs. She sighed and leaned back into the wall, keeping her eyes on the ceiling and silently hoping Jasper wouldn't talk to her.

"It's a real surprise seeing you here," Jasper said. "I never thought I'd get to meet you."

"What? Me?" Grace lowered her gaze. Jasper looked even more villainous in the red light. And the way she towered over Grace was more than a little intimidating. She was leaner than Grace, but Grace had no doubt there was plenty of muscle hiding under those black clothes.

"Yes, you, Angel."

"Angel?" Grace repeated. Was that supposed to be an insult? A nickname?

"Can I see them?" Jasper asked.

Grace didn't have to ask what she was referring to. With a slight shrug, she turned around. The wings had been designed to fold tight enough to hide under a jacket, but stretched out, they spanned the entire cell. Whatever metal the feathers were made of was a striking white.

Without her memories of the lab, it was impossible to be certain the extent of the modifications done to Grace's body. There had to be interfacing between her muscles and the wing's cybernetics, of course. But to move the wings and hold her body straight while she flew, she assumed there had to be changes to the rest of her musculature as well.

"Wow. The feathers look so real." Chains clinked as Jasper took a few steps forward. "You don't remember who gave them to you?"

"I don't remember anything before Governor Starr took me in," Grace replied. She folded her wings back up and turned around to face Jasper again.

"Right. After you saved his life." Jasper's tone turned bitter.

Grace shrugged. It apparently hadn't meant much to him, given the morning's events.

A frown abruptly crossed Jasper's face. "Can you hear that?" she whispered.

Grace stilled. The cell block was quiet, but after a moment, she detected Bruce's voice carrying through the door down the hall, barely audible. What was he still doing down here?

"He's getting impatient," Bruce said. "Too many people have their eyes on Alvarez."

"What are we going to do?" a second man asked.

"I'm going to go check the cameras. I have a feeling they're going to malfunction for a few minutes. Enough time for someone to get shot with this."

"Plassite gun," Jasper whispered. The intent look in her dark eyes suggested she was seeing something that Grace couldn't. "It could slip through the metal detector, and even X-rays if you're careful enough. How did he get his hands on—?"

"Sir?" the other officer sounded hesitant.

"It's simple," Bruce told him. "Shoot Alvarez, frame Van Terra, and get the governor off our backs. We never had this conversation."

Grace pressed a hand over her mouth to restrain a cry of alarm. Footsteps moved away from the cell block door and faded into the distance.

"Wow," Jasper said. "Starr really wants you dead."

"I don't know why." Grace's hand dropped. Her voice cracked. "I didn't do anything!"

"I believe that," Jasper muttered. "I actually have a theory. But we have more important things to worry about right now."

"Like the fact I'm going to die?"

Jasper didn't respond to that. Instead, she held up her hand and counted down on her fingers. "Three, two, one."

The cell block lights went out.

Grace blinked in surprise. "What's happening?"

“Look, Angel,” Jasper said. Her pale skin shone completely red now that there were no hallway lights to drown out the neon. “I don’t usually do favors. But I would like to know why the governor suddenly wants you dead after housing you for four years. So, if you want, I’ll bust you out of here.”

“And then what?” Was escaping an upper district police station even possible?

“We don’t have all day. I have to get what I came here for and get out.” Jasper laughed. “You didn’t think I got arrested for fun, did you?”

What other choice did Grace have? Stay here and die? “Okay,” she said. “I’ll come with you.”

## Chapter Two

### Damned If You Do, Dead If You Don't

Footsteps approached the cell before Grace had a chance to ask how Jasper intended on getting out of the station. Grace instinctively backed away from the bars, fearing it was her death approaching, while Jasper appeared unconcerned. Grace couldn't say she found that reassuring.

A young woman stopped in front of the cell and began fiddling with the lock. It was difficult to discern much of her appearance in the soft glow, but she appeared to be wearing a police officer's uniform.

"Got the key?" Jasper asked. "And my comm device?"

"Obviously," the probably-not-an-officer muttered as she drew a key from her pocket.

Grace watched her unlock the cell with wide eyes. "Who is that?" she asked Jasper. "What's happening?"

"Shh." Jasper gestured to their rescuer. "This is Holly. Stay quiet until we get out of the building, all right? And move fast. My hacker can't keep the station's power out forever."

Holly unlocked Jasper's chains next, and then the two were hurrying out of the cell. Grace rushed to follow them down the hall.

Even though the world darkened with every step away from the windows, Jasper led the way with ease. How could she see so well? She was surprisingly quiet, too, considering her dramatic entrance earlier.

“Big group of guards at the end of the hall,” Jasper whispered. “On the other side of that door. Thea, you on comms?”

In the silence that followed, Grace became painfully aware of the sound of her own breathing.

“Excellent,” Jasper said. “And your heat scanning drone is working?”

They stopped in front of what must have been the door. Grace narrowly avoided bumping into Jasper.

Jasper continued in a hushed tone. “Quite a few guards between us and evidence storage. And they’ll all have flashlights. Holly?”

“Ready,” Holly replied. She pulled something out of her pocket. Grace could just make out the silhouette of a small sphere passing from her hand to Jasper’s.

After that, Holly took out another key and set to work on the locked door in front of them. It opened with a faint creak. Jasper grabbed Grace’s arm and pulled her forward into the darkness beyond. There was a click, followed by the sound of the sphere rolling across the floor. Hissing filled the air. Flashlight beams swung toward the three.

The light never reached them. Thick, black fog filled the air just in time to mask the three from view. “Smoke bomb,” Jasper whispered, sounding smug.

“Stop showing off,” Holly hissed.

“I’m just following the plan!”

“And narrating for your new friend.”

The three slipped past the confused officers. The officers’ quiet chatter helped hide Holly and Jasper’s exchange, along with Grace’s footsteps and heavy breathing. Jasper guided her and Holly through the basement labyrinth, and Holly occasionally dropped more smoke bombs from her pockets to keep them hidden.

A few minutes of walking brought them around a corner to a seemingly empty hallway. Jasper released Grace’s arm. A moment

later there was a thud, a grunt, and the sound of a body hitting the ground. Grace winced.

Holly turned on a flashlight and pointed it at the door in front of Jasper. Jasper drew two pins from her hair and set to work picking the lock. It clicked a minute later, and she eased the door open. She entered, followed by Holly, then—after an anxious glance at the unconscious guard on the floor—Grace.

Neon pink light flooded the evidence room through the blinds. Metal lockers took up most of the wall space. Jasper trailed a finger across them as she circled the room. When she found the locker she was looking for, she picked that lock, too.

“Before you ask what we’re here for, this was all taken from my team during our last job,” Jasper said to Grace as she opened the locker door. “We barely got away.” She pulled out a data drive, black leather gloves, a miniature drone, a smartsphere model that looked a few starcycles old, and some cords. They all went into various pockets inside her coat. The last item, a silver cylinder about half an inch in diameter, stayed in her hand.

“Seen one of these before?” Jasper pointed the device at the ground.

Grace shook her head. “What is it?”

“Laser.” Jasper pressed a button on the cylinder’s side. A thin red beam struck the concrete floor with a hiss. Grace stepped back as Jasper guided the laser in a rough circle.

“How much longer, Thea?” Holly asked, a hand pressed to her ear. It was light enough now that Grace could see her sharp—and human—features: her green eyes, strong jaw, pale skin, and long braid of crimson red hair. The color looked oddly natural on her, despite being unnaturally vibrant for human hair. A black bag hung at her side. The dark blue officer’s uniform she wore was slightly too large. Of course, it was probably stolen.

Jasper finished the circle. The section of concrete she’d cut away fell into the dark and crashed into whatever was beneath the



station. She gestured to the gaping hole. “Tunnels. Sewer pipes, maintenance access, abandoned train routes, et cetera.”

Grace leaned forward to peer into the darkness. “Wait, we’re just going to—?”

Jasper jumped into the hole and disappeared. With an annoyed sigh, Holly followed.

The room’s lights came on, wiping away the pink glow with blinding white. Grace glanced at the door. With the cameras presumably back online as well, she didn’t have long before she was found. She wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and sat down next to the hole. How far down was the drop? Her legs swung over the edge. Shouting came from the other side of the door.

Grace pushed herself into the unknown.

She hit cold concrete. The landing was awkward and left her legs aching, but she’d managed to avoid serious injury.

Jasper laughed. “You’re doing great, Angel.” Grace couldn’t tell if that was meant to be sarcastic.

Holly turned in a circle, illuminating the tunnel they’d dropped into with her flashlight. Fading yellow letters marked dark walls. Train tracks rusted beneath them. Trash littered the ground.

“Which way?” Holly asked.

Instead of answering, Jasper slid off her heeled boots and held out a hand. Holly pulled a pair of black combat boots from the bag at her side and tossed them Jasper’s way.

Once the boots were on, Jasper crouched next to a metal cover in the ground. She must have been stronger than she looked, because she lifted the circular cover without any apparent effort. “Down the ladder. Quick.” She glanced at the gaping hole above them. “Officers are about to come down.”

Holly went down first. Grace followed with shaky hands. The metal rungs were slick, and she lost her grip near the bottom. Her arms waved wildly as she dropped the last few feet to the ground. Holly raised an eyebrow, not making any moves to help.

Jasper pulled the cover shut, dropped from the top of the ladder, and somehow managed a graceful landing. She set off down the new, narrower tunnel they'd entered with a quick stride.

Grace jogged to catch up on Jasper's right. "Where are we going now?"

Jasper pulled on the gloves she'd taken from the evidence locker. "Now's not the best time for a lengthy explanation."

"So, I'm just supposed to follow you blindly?" Grace asked.

"You're welcome to leave," Jasper replied with a shrug. "You're not my prisoner."

*Seriously?* Grace had been somewhat under the impression that this was a polite kidnapping. "Where would I go?" she asked.

"Jasper, she's not our problem," Holly cut in as she fell into pace at Jasper's left. "She'll only slow us down."

"She has connections to Starr," Jasper countered.

"Exactly. She could be a spy!"

"Why would I be a spy for the man who tried to kill me?" Grace asked.

"The attempt on your life could have been staged." Holly rolled her eyes. "Duh."

"No, I really think Starr wants her dead," Jasper said. "And if Starr wants her dead, then she won't last more than a few hours on her own. He has eyes all over Kronos."

"Why would he have her killed? Why now?"

"We could theorize—and I do have theories—but that's not important right now." Jasper glanced at Holly with a raised eyebrow.

Holly huffed. "Okay, fine. But what's in it for us?"

"Information on Starr."

"I barely knew him." Grace tipped her head back to examine the pipes running overhead. It didn't do much to combat the stinging in her eyes, but she was able to keep tears from surfacing. "He gave me a room at the Governor's Palace, but I didn't see him much after I saved his life."

“I think you’re more valuable than you realize.” Jasper stopped and looked at Grace. Grace’s head lowered to meet her gaze.

Despite the reputation, infamous villain Jasper Van Terra wasn’t going to hurt her—at least, not yet—but Grace had to mask the spike of fear Jasper’s intense gaze sent through her. Grace swallowed. “That still doesn’t answer my question. Where are you taking me?”

“A quick detour, then back to my place.” Jasper rested a hand on her hip. “If you’re with me, that is.”

“I don’t know what I should do.”

“I’m going to give you some advice I got from the side of a skybus one time: *trust your gut*. I mean, it was an ad for probiotics, but it’s pretty profound if you ask me.”

Grace stared. Jasper had to be messing with her.

“I’m the only person keeping you alive right now, and I’ll do whatever it takes,” Jasper continued. “But you need to do everything I say. Got it?”

One other person had been willing to fight for Grace’s life, but Kara Callisto was dead now. The least Grace could do was keep herself alive until she found some way to carry out Kara’s last request. *Get off Kronos, get out of the Janus system, get to Earth.*

“Okay,” Grace said. “I’ll follow you.” For now. As soon as she had a chance to escape Kronos, she would take it.

Jasper grinned. “This is going to be fun.”

## Chapter Three

### Bringing Good Vibes to a Gunfight

By the time the three came across an intersection in the tunnels, Grace's hands had finally stopped shaking. She still didn't feel anything remotely resembling calm, but her heart wasn't on the verge of exploding anymore, either.

Jasper nodded toward a smaller tunnel branching off the one they'd been walking through. "Get in position," she told Holly. "Make sure the others are ready."

A ladder waited on the opposite wall. While Holly disappeared into the darkness behind them, Jasper and Grace climbed the ladder, passed through a manhole cover, and emerged in an alleyway.

"Whoa," Grace breathed as she scrambled onto concrete. The buildings around them stretched into the upper districts, some for nearly a mile, leaving only thin slivers of the pale red sky peeking through overhead. "It's sunrise already?" All in all, she hadn't felt like they'd spent much time in the police station or the tunnels, but maybe all of the adrenaline coursing through her had warped her perception of time.

Jasper straightened up and adjusted her coat. "Yep. Follow me."

Grace was too nervous to annoy Jasper with more questions, so she trailed her silently through a maze of alleys. Her gaze darted in every direction as they walked. Dumpsters around them overflowed with garbage, and small rodents scurried into the shadows beneath as

the two passed. Puddles of liquid that probably weren't water reflected neon signs and flashing billboards.

It was wildly different from the upper districts Grace had spent the past few years living in.

They finally stopped in front of a dented door in the side of a sleek black building. "You gonna ask what we're doing?" Jasper asked as she picked the lock.

"I wasn't sure you'd want to tell me," Grace replied.

"Well, we're going up."

"How?"

"Out of service elevator. My technopath—the aforementioned hacker—got it running with her—" Jasper spared a hand to make a wavy motion. "—techy mind powers." The door opened with a click. "We're going all the way to the top, so we'll have time to talk."

"About what?" Grace followed Jasper into the building.

"You, obviously." Lights flickered on, and a short walk down a hall brought Jasper and Grace to an elevator waiting with open doors. "Can you think of anything that would lead to Starr turning on you now?"

The elevator's silver—and slightly rusted—doors closed and reflected Grace's ragged reflection back at her. "It probably has to do with Kara Callisto," she answered, wiping at a dark smudge on her chin with her thumb.

"Thea, take us to the roof," Jasper said into her ear comm. The elevator jerked up. "Kara who?"

"She showed up at the palace a few pentasols ago and said she was an ambassador from Earth," Grace explained. "And then—well, a couple of hours ago, my math tutor didn't show up to my rooms for our usual lesson."

One of Jasper's eyebrows shot up. "That early?"

"My lessons have always started pretty early." Grace shrugged. "I'm always done by early afternoon, though."

"And that leaves you plenty of free time to...?"

“If I’m not invited to any events—” These days, that was usually one of Starr’s public speeches or rallies. It had been a long time since Grace got to go to a party where people were allowed to mingle with her. “—I usually watch TV or read. I eat dinner in one of the dining halls and chat with palace staff.” A bit awkwardly, Grace shrugged again. “My life hasn’t exactly been exciting, until this morning.”

“Right.” Jasper rose onto her tiptoes and lifted a portion of the elevator ceiling. She pulled a black duffel bag off the roof. “And what happened when your tutor didn’t show up?”

“I went looking for him and realized the halls around my room were completely deserted,” Grace recounted. “Kara found me in time to save me from one of my bodyguards. He shot at me, Kara hit him with her blaster, and we ran. She didn’t have time to explain much before police found us and killed her.” Her chest tightened at that last bit. At the memory that resurfaced with the words.

“What *was* Kara able to tell you?” The bag dropped to the ground. Jasper knelt, unzipped it, and drew out a small knife.

Grace had to think for a moment to find the useful bits of information among frantic memories of her time with Kara. “She said she’s from a group called Earthguard, and that I match the profile of a girl abducted from Earth.”

Jasper pulled out bigger and bigger daggers from the bag and stashed them in various pockets. “‘Bout time someone did something,” she muttered. Louder, she asked, “So, you are from Earth, then?”

“I guess.” Grace’s brow furrowed. “Kara also said something about an issue with the timeline that she would explain later.”

“Timeline issue? What’s that supposed to mean?” Jasper asked. A wider variety of weapons and devices came out of the bag. A gun, a smartsphere, a tablet...

“No idea.” Grace swallowed. “And I guess I’ll never know, now that she’s dead.” Remembering Jasper’s earlier question, she added, “Anyway, Earthguard also wanted me because they can use me as

evidence that Starr has secret labs. They might be able to use me to make the Interstar Council take action.”

Grace hesitated a moment before continuing. “I’m not sure how useful I’ll be without any memory of all that, but I guess my wings are evidence enough, if they can prove they were made in Starr’s labs.” She turned a little so that she could glance at her folded wings in the elevator door’s reflection.

“Kara’s arrival must have scared Starr, then. He realized he’d run out of time to deal with you quietly.” Jasper stood, leaving the empty bag on the floor of the elevator.

Grace looked Jasper up and down quickly, impressed by how much stuff had gone into the coat’s pockets without any obvious bulk. Just a few slight bulges here and there. “Kara made it sound like Starr’s been abducting a lot of humans for these secret experiments,” Grace noted.

“Not just humans,” Jasper replied. “And it’s been happening since before Starr was born. Syrus Starr, I mean.” Jasper’s expression darkened.

Right. Syrus, the current governor, was one of many in the Starr family that had held the title of governor.

“Did Kara mention how long Earthguard’s been investigating the abductions?” Jasper asked. “Or how long they’ve even been around?”

Grace shook her head. “Nope. Sorry.”

The elevator let out a terrible creak as it slowed. Grace flinched. It had been out of service for a reason. What if it broke down? What if they got stuck? Or dropped all the way to the ground? What if—?

“You good, Angel? You look nervous.” Jasper drew a knife with a hot pink handle from one of her pockets and inspected the blade. She was too smart to use a dangerous elevator, right?

Maybe Grace’s fears were irrational, but she needed to distract herself from all the ways her mind was telling her she could die in the

next five minutes. “You gave Bruce Wright your age in Earth years. Are you from Earth, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Seeing Van Terra in the news, Grace had always assumed she was one of the many humans whose ancestors had been recruited to come to Kronos for work-related reasons. Travel between star systems was ridiculously expensive. “Why’d you come here?”

The elevator stopped. “Sorry, no time for my backstory now,” Jasper said as the doors opened. She returned the knife to her pocket.

The two stepped out of the elevator and onto the roof of a skyscraper. This was the view of the city Grace was used to. Rooftops, streams of flying vehicles, and glimpses of the planet’s ocean in the distance. The sky had lightened to a faint pink, but the sun Gemma rose in the east, rapidly turning it blue.

Kronos was on the far side of Gemma now, and the Janus System’s other sun, Myni, wouldn’t be visible in the sky for another season. Kronos’ two moons were up, though, faintly visible on the horizon. Hedas reflected a gray-green light, while the larger Iros had an iridescent sheen to it.

The rest of the Janus System’s planets orbited one star or the other. Kronos was the only one to move in a figure-eight around both. That entire figure-eight was a starcycle—roughly two and a half Earth years.

“Well, looks like we’re running with the theory that your wings were made in Starr’s secret lab.” Jasper’s gaze swept over the city.

“Starr’s secret lab,” Grace repeated, the phrase still sounding utterly unbelievable to her. “And where is that, exactly?”

“Underground. The place is called Sky Labs, ironically. The Starrs obviously didn’t want their name attached to their experiments.” Jasper pointed to a door on the other side of the roof. “We’re going in there.”

The door opened before either of them could move. Eight people emerged. The group was made up of various species from



around the star system, but they all wore the same black pants, black combat boots, and red shirts.

“Are they with us?” Grace asked.

“Absolutely not. I don’t do the whole matchy-matchy thing.” Jasper lowered her voice. “Do you not know who these people are?”

“Am I supposed to?” Grace asked as the eight formed a loose circle around them.

“They’re Red Blades.”

“What are Red Blades?”

Jasper groaned. “You don’t have a clue, do you? Okay, keep quiet and I’ll handle this.” She flashed a smile. One of her hands slid into a pocket. “Hello there! What brings you all to this...rooftop?”

A man whose skin was covered in dark green scales stepped forward and held up his empty hands, a cold smile on his serpentine face. Grace’s eyes quickly went to the tattoo on his wrist: a knife dripping with blood.

“I could ask you the same thing, Van Terra,” the man said. His hands dropped to his sides. “But I already know you’re here to rob the jewelry store a few floors down.”

Grace shot Jasper an incredulous look. “You’re what?”

“What did you think we came up here to do? Enjoy the sunrise?” Jasper’s focus shifted back to the man. “Don’t tell me you’re here to stop me. You’ve done far worse than robbery.”

“We’re not here for you, despite the reward on your head.” The man nodded at Grace. “We’re here for her.”

“Me?” Grace yelled.

“Too bad,” Jasper said. “She’s mine.”

“We’re not letting you leave with her.” The man flexed one of his hands. His associates inched forward, their own hands moving to guns at their sides. Along with the weapons, Grace spotted more bloody knife tattoos. Were they part of one of the lower district gangs? The name ‘Red Blades’ did sound familiar, the more she rolled it around in her head.

Jasper drew a dagger.

“Bringing a knife to a gunfight?” The serpentine man laughed as he drew his gun from his side holster. “Idiot.”

Jasper’s head tipped to the side. “Angel, you may want to get down.”

The other Red Blades lifted their guns. Heart pounding, Grace dropped to the ground.

Jasper moved with speed and grace that bordered on inhuman, deflecting every bullet with the dagger’s blade as if it were a shield. With her other hand, she drew a second dagger. The gunfire continued and she danced in a circle around Grace, throwing bullets to the ground. Grace remained crouched, frozen, with her hands over her ears.

The gunfire finally stopped.

“Guns run out of bullets.” Jasper smirked. “And I’m Van Terra. Idiot.”

She lunged forward and stabbed the closest man in the chest. Grace flinched.

A woman to Grace’s right, with the pale green skin and pointed ears of a West Kronosian, drew a dagger of her own and darted forward. Grace tried to scramble away but wound up staggering backwards and falling.

The woman was halfway to Grace when Jasper sent a knife flying into her shoulder. Clutching her arm, the Red Blade cried out and dropped to her knees. Another Blade, a blue-furred man, swung at Jasper with a pocketknife. Jasper laughed and knocked it aside.

Grace dropped her gaze to the ground beneath her and focused on getting back up. Her legs had turned to jelly, her hands had gone numb, and every frantic breath brought her closer to passing out. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think about anything besides the clinking of metal on metal. The tang of blood in the air.

The rooftop fell quiet. A hand grabbed Grace’s shoulder. She yelped and looked up.

“Whoa, it’s okay, it’s me,” Jasper said. “Take a deep breath. If you pass out, I’m not carrying you.”

Grace risked a glance around the roof. They were the only two left standing. “Are they dead?” she asked, avoiding looking at any particular body for more than a second.

“Not yet. But some of them might get back up if we stick around too long, so...” Jasper jutted a thumb at the door.

Grace climbed to her feet, took a shaky step, and then another. “Okay. I’m okay.” As they started across the roof, she asked, “What are your daggers made of?”

“A galaxium alloy,” Jasper answered. “It’s tough stuff, but even the best knives break after enough bullets.” She lifted an eyebrow. “So, you really haven’t heard of the Red Blades?”

“I guess they do sound familiar.”

“They’re the biggest gang on the planet.” Jasper reached the door first and opened it. A light flickered on automatically to illuminate the staircase on the other side.

Grace had heard about gangs operating in the lower districts, but... “I didn’t think there were any gangs up here.”

“That’s what the government wants you to think.” Jasper laughed. “Seriously, though. The gangs—some of them, anyway—bring the elite families drugs and other illegal imports. In exchange, they get a degree of protection from the law.” After a pause, she added, “Though, you are right that they don’t usually make themselves *visible* up here. Today was a rare exception. You were enough of a target to make them come up.”

Grace was too focused on not tripping down the steep roof-access staircase to fully grasp everything Jasper said. “Why does the biggest gang on Kronos want me dead?” she asked, still processing the new information.

“Because they work for Starr, obviously.”

“What?” Despite her best efforts, Grace stumbled at the next landing. Her legs were still shaky from the confrontation on the roof. Her hands weren’t any better, she noticed as she caught her balance.

“The Red Blades do all of Starr’s dirty work for him,” Jasper explained. “The governor has his own personal army, and the public

has no idea. And that's on top of the upper district police forces that are more loyal to him than they are the law."

Grace glanced at her as they started down the next flight of stairs. "How do you know all of this? And about the lab experiments?"

"I have my ways." Jasper hopped over the last three steps.

"And I'm—" Grace swallowed. "How sure are we that the lab I escaped was one of Starr's?"

"It explains why Starr's so determined to get his hands on you again," Jasper answered with a slight shrug. "And the Sky Labs experiments mostly revolve around cyborg enhancements."

Grace frowned. "I'm not a cyborg."

"Yeah, you are. That's what your wings are. Cybernetic."

"Right. I guess I never thought about it like that." Grace paused a moment before starting down the next flight of steps after Jasper. "But a lot of people in the city are cyborgs. They aren't all experiments."

"Sure, they have basic replacements for missing limbs. If they're rich enough, with the right connections, they might have a computer chip in their brain or an illegal weapon implant." Jasper waved a hand as she leapt down to the next landing. "But Sky Labs tech is next level and has been for decades. Nothing like those wings exists anywhere else."

Jasper exited the stairwell and led Grace into a hallway bathed in the warm glow of dimmed lights. "Now," she said. "This is where it gets serious."

Grace stared at her. "And the gunfight on the roof wasn't?"

Jasper shrugged.