

Fading Radiance

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Marina's existence revolved around life on the Radiance, a private space shuttle that transported dangerous weapons for the army. Her life is turned upside down when the crew is taken hostage by a band of raiders. Marina discovers the army is a pool of corruption, and contributed to the captivity of the crew. She decides she must rescue her crewmates and stop the army that is bent on her destruction before it's too late. Except for someone, it already is.



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Fading Radiance : Chapter 1

"Chase, shoot them!"

"I'm trying!" Chase shouted, evasively jerking the ship to the right.

The craft shuddered as one of the raiders' lasers struck the side of the ship. Alarms instantly began to sound, as if we hadn't already figured out that something was wrong.

"Marina, go fix whatever was hit!" Captain Halon said.

Another blast rocked the ship. I staggered, but managed to stay on my feet. I stumbled toward the sound of the incessant beeping. It didn't take me long to realize that our engine was damaged, and it wasn't something I would be able to repair anytime soon, let alone mid-battle.

From where I stood in the grey hallway, I could see into the cockpit, where Chase and Halon were still desperately maneuvering the ship out of harm's way. "Captain!" I screamed, and he glanced over his shoulder. "It hit the engine!"

He said something to Chase before sprinting to where I stood. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know exactly what's wrong yet, but we're not going to have power for much longer."

"Can you fix it?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to need at least a few days from the looks of it."

A stream of curse words flowing from his mouth, Captain Halon stormed back to the cockpit. "Keep it together for as long as you can!" He called out to me.

Careful to keep my balance as the ship rocked, I rushed toward the staircase that led to the engine room. Halfway down the stairs, the ship reeled sharply, sending me flying to the ground.

The ship settled, and I bolted toward the engine room. The room was a nightmare of red. So many alarms and lights flashed that I could hardly even comprehend what was happening.

Cotto flew down the stairs. "What's going on?"

"I don't know-that shot damaged almost everything, it looks like."

She glanced back up the stairs. "Chase can pilot us out of here if you can keep the ship together for another ten minutes."

"I don't think I can hold it that long."

Cotto glowered at me. "I didn't pick any amateurs for my crew. You're going to keep the ship moving, Marina."

I sighed. "I'll try."

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She retreated up the steps as the ship listed sideways from another impact.

I could only patch things together for so long. Finally, the engine sputtered and gave out. The room fell into darkness. "No!" I banged on engine. "You piece of crap!"

"Marina!" Halon's voice carried all the way to me. I winced, but there was nothing I could do. The engine was dead, and I wouldn't be able to revive it in the dark, and without the proper tools.

A loud bang echoed through the room. The ship had no power, so the sound could only have come from outside-the raiders. They were going to board our ship. "Marina! Get the power on!"

"I can't!" I wasn't sure if anyone heard me or not. The sound of gunfire ensued only moments later, and I was trapped in the engine room, with no weapon.

The door slammed open, and I caught sight of the silhouette of an unarmored figure-one of the raiders. I dropped to the ground, hoping the darkness would conceal me long enough that I could hide. I wedged my way as far under the massive engine as I could get just as the raider approached.

They circled the engine room a few times, as the gunfire from above slowly subsided. "No one's in the engine room!" The raider reported, though to whom I wasn't sure. The raider trudged back up the stairs, their footsteps like thunder on the deathly quiet ship.

"Where's my pilot? Where's my mechanic? Chase! Marina! Shoot the raiders!" Halon screeched, his voice getting softer, like he was being dragged away. Chase and I must have been the only ones unaccounted for.

One gunshot sounded, but that was all. Chase must've either been shot, or fired and then been captured.

I was too stunned to move. The raiders, in the course of what couldn't have been more than ten minutes, had managed to capture the entire crew, except for me.

A group of raiders descended into the engine room. I held my breath, for fear even my breathing would give me away. "I told you, the engine is too damaged to use."

"We could sell the parts." One raider mused. "Tie this craft to our ship. We'll drag it back to port and sell what we can. Leave Talon on board here; he might be able to get the engine to work. The rest of you dolts get back on the ship. If they sent out a distress call, the army will be here any minute now."

Not long after, they had all exited the engine room and departed in their own ship except for one. They'd left behind one who I assumed was their own mechanic to fix up the engine. "I don't know how this stupid thing works." The raider muttered, poking at the engine.

My heart skipped a beat. This raider might not realize it, but the engine may begin functioning again if their ship transferred power to ours.

As I had feared, a little button began to glow. Even not being able to see it, I knew what it said. *Start engine.*

Chapter 2

I rolled out from under the engine just as it began to start, parts whirring past where I had been hiding. The raider hadn't appeared to notice me, so I took advantage of the opportunity. I jumped to my feet and snuck up behind him. I landed the hardest punch of my life on the back of his head.

There was no way his head hurt more than my fist. "Ow! Crap!" I clutched my hand to my chest. Soundlessly, the raider fell forward.

Shaking out my hand, I crept toward the cockpit. The raiders' ship was towing ours, and somewhere on board, they were keeping the rest of the crew. How was I supposed to get to them?

I could break away from the raiders' ship, but then I'd be leaving the rest of the crew for dead. I couldn't abandon the *Radiance*.

The ships were connected by a long, metal rod that could also function as a tunnel. I could steal a weapon from our cargo hold, sneak onto the raiders' ship, free the crew, and escape. Easy.

I whirled around, coming face to face with the same raider I had only just knocked out. His gun was drawn and aimed at me. But if I'd learned anything in life, it was how to disarm someone.

Slamming his wrist with my own, the gun slipped out of his fingers and clattered to the ground.

I scooped up the gun and sprinted. I didn't want to have to shoot the raider, so that only left me the option of outrunning him. The ship suddenly seemed awfully large. I fought my way to the loading bay, where the raiders had connected the tunnel. The raider wasn't pursuing me.

The tunnel itself was empty, but I wasn't sure how long it would stay that way. The tunnel connected me to the raiders' own cargo bay, littered with metal boxes. Even without glancing at any of the labels, I recognized the cargo as our own. After all, I'd spent hours shoving those heavy crates onto the ship. The least I could do was recall them.

Though I spotted no one, there were voices nearby. My heart was already nearly beating out of my chest, but somehow it managed to pump faster at the sound. I dropped to the floor and crawled to one of the boxes, wedging myself between the ship's wall and the box.

I barely allowed myself to breathe. The voices weren't nearing me, but if the raider they had left onboard the *Radiance* entered the cargo bay, he'd see me instantly. I peeked around the boxes, hoping I'd catch sight of the crew.

To my dismay, most of the cargo bay was obscured by oblong metal boxes. One of the voices came into view—a raider, dressed almost the same as I. An olive green flight suit dotted with grease stains, and a pair of boots that had seen better days.

I stifled a sigh. I couldn't even sabotage their ship long enough to find the crew, because their mechanic would correct anything I managed to disrupt.

Over the intercom, a generic in-flight message sounded, informing the raiders that they would soon be landing. If I was going to do something, I had to do it before the ship landed. Who knew where we would land, anyway? I wasn't the one keeping track of our location in space. That was Chase's job.

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Using both the dim lighting and the excess of stolen cargo to my advantage, I advanced slowly toward the voices. Where there were voices, there were humans. Where there were humans, there might just be a crew.

Apparently, I'd taken too long. The raiders' out-of-date ship hit the ground with a resounding thud. I could hear the *Radiance* bouncing along behind, and winced at the thought of the wreck it had most likely become. A broken ship equated to an angry captain and a lot of extra work for me.

"They're going to pay us a fortune." One of the raiders snickered. "This is the first army-sponsored shipping company cargo we've gotten in months."

"Don't get your hopes too high. That ship was transporting plain old guns, not any lasers or bombs. We're not going to get much for this stuff."

"True enough. The people on this planet are such cheapskates. We could bring them the king and they'd pay us a penny."

"At least pilots are going for a lot nowadays. We'll sell their pilot, the captain, the mechanic, and anyone else who's got a useful skill. There's always someone looking for a crew."

If things weren't bad enough, now I had a time limit. They were going to weed out those of us that could be sold to captains, and once they discovered the mechanic was missing, they would come looking for me.

There was an awful screeching as they disconnected the tunnel, freeing the *Radiance* from the raiders' ship. "Alright, let's dump this cargo and see if we can bag us some more by next week."

A chorus of new voices joined the old, mixed with the sound of sliding metal boxes. The cacophony was almost like action music to me, spurring me on further into the ship. Somehow, feeling like I had an imaginary band cheering me on, I almost felt upbeat. If I rescued the crew in time, we might even make our delivery date.

Chapter 3

The deeper I crept into the ship, the more my confidence faded. Where was everyone? Neither the crew or the raiders were in sight. Hesitantly, I called out, "Captain Halon?"

The reply was a storm of footsteps.

"Oh no," I whispered. I whirled and sprinted back toward the cargo bay. I didn't even care if the raiders saw me or not, as long as they didn't catch me. The raiders' ship was ridiculously repetitive—all of the walls were steel, and nothing distinguished one hallway from another.

Bursting into the cargo bay, I barreled past the raiders in the midst of unloading. They were shouting, but I wasn't comprehending anything. No one was able to stop me. They were too stunned, too unable to believe that someone was escaping.

When I escaped the clutches of the ship, the sunlight blinded me almost instantly. Nitana was one of many planets we visited with a binary star system; in simpler terms, there were two suns. I stumbled toward the broken *Radiance*, shielding myself from view behind a collapsed wing.

I doubled over, gasping for breath. Fear and my sprint had taken their toll on my lungs. I spent my days crammed on a spaceship fixing mechanical problems, not running marathons.

I squished myself against the side of the ship, its edges now jagged from damage. I prayed none of the raiders would notice me. Why was this even happening? We weren't soldiers. The army just didn't have enough ships to transport its more dangerous cargo itself. It didn't mean we were prepared to fight.

A raider came into view, his dark eyes locking with mine. Was today a holiday no one had told me about? Let's Make Marina's Life As Difficult As Possible Day?

I exhaustedly rose to my feet, preparing to run. The raider didn't signal the others, he simply shook his head at me, motioning with his hand discreetly to get down.

I squinted at him curiously. What was he doing. He waved at the ground, now more frantically wanting me to duck. Unsure of what else to do, I took cover behind the crumpled wing.

"I think she went the other way." The raider announced loudly. The sounds of the other raiders faded, obviously believing their fellow criminal. I breathed a small sigh of relief.

The raider approached me when he deemed it was safe, and I began preparing my speech of thanks. Before I could, the words caught in my throat and choked me. I recognized the face. It was the raider I had knocked out on the *Radiance*. He wanted to claim the credit for catching me or something?

I wanted to bolt, but he was already an arm's length away. "I'll shoot you." I said. "You're not taking me on that ship."

"Wasn't planning on it." He smiled cockily. "You're my ticket out of here."

"Your what?"

"The name's Talon."

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"Are you going to try to convince me that you're trying to help me? You just kidnapped my crewmates!"

Talon's eyes darted toward the ship. "I do this for the money, not because I particularly enjoy kidnapping people."

"You might want to give them back." I pointed the gun at him shakily. "Let them go before the other raiders come back."

"I think they've already been transferred to another ship or sold. We've been at port for at least twenty minutes, and the captains here are desperate for workers. Whenever we land they half attack us."

"Which ship and which people?"

He shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I'm trying to get out of here anyway. I just needed a good opportunity to get away. This happens to be the perfect one, if we hurry up."

"We?" I scoffed.

"Do you really want to be sold? You're the mechanic, aren't you? Mechanics, pilots, and captains go for quite a bit of dough. I might be able to help you get your crew back, too."

"And what reason do you have for helping me, after trying to kill me a minute ago?"

"I saved your life, as I recall. Otherwise the raiders would have seen you." He said. "There's a really good coffee shop not far from here. Trust me, the raiders on that ship aren't the brightest bunch. They wouldn't find us."

I hesitated. I couldn't stick around here, but the prospect of being alone was somehow even more terrifying than being caught. "Fine."

Chapter 4

I've been a busy bee. Here's yet another chapter today.

Talon was a talker, and I really didn't mind. I didn't completely trust him, so I wasn't going to share much about myself anyway.

"That's how the ship got its name." He concluded, finishing the longest ship-naming story I'd ever heard. "How did yours get named?"

"That's what it was called when I joined the crew."

"Oh." He replied disappointedly. "Well, here's the coffee shop I was telling you about." It was a cute little thing, tucked between two larger stores. Its walls were a faded brown, and a dusty white-and-green striped awning shaded the area outside the glass door. "It might be a coffee place, but the best thing they sell is hot chocolate."

He ordered two hot chocolates at the counter as I claimed a table in the far corner. It was probably best to stay away from the windows anyway.

Talon returned with two steaming cups of hot chocolate, and handed one to me. I sipped it slowly, almost expecting it to be laced with poison. "So if you didn't want to be a raider, why did you join them in the first place?"

"It pays good money, and I needed some. What about you? What made you want to be a mechanic?"

"It just sort of happened." I mumbled. "Mom was an artist and never home. Dad was a mechanic and only cared about teaching me mechanics. He died of a heart attack when I was pretty young, so I got a job at a mechanics shop to make some money. The *Radiance* stopped in for some repairs, needed a mechanic, and somehow I ended up as part of the crew."

"Why do you care so much about finding your crew, anyway? I'd praise every god I'd ever heard of if someone took mine away."

I picked at the label on my hot chocolate. "I guess it's just a different situation."

We sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, before Talon finally broke it by standing up. "Well, I said I would help you find your crew. We should probably get a head start on that now."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why are you helping me?"

"Maybe I need some good karma."

It wasn't much of a reason to me, but I wouldn't be nitpicky. If I could get some help, I would gladly accept it. "Then where do we start looking?"

"We should probably ask around. The raiders are lazy, and they'll stop searching for you pretty soon. None of them got a good look anyway." He approached an older man reading a newspaper. "Excuse me, sir," He drawled in an unfamiliar accent. The man looked up tiredly. "Did you see that raider ship dock?"

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"What about it?" The old man grumbled.

"Did they happen to sell off a crew?"

"Think they just loaded them onto a different ship." The man concealed his face with the newspaper, shutting Talon out.

Talon turned back to me, a smile crossing his face. "Seeâ€" He trailed off. "I never caught your name."

"Marina."

"Oh, like the Marines?"

"I don't think there was that much thought put into my name. Knowing my parents, it was probably just the first one they heard." I held open the coffee shop door. "So, which ship are they getting transferred to? I really don't want to have to chase a raider ship to another planet."

"I'll show you."

We strode back to the port, where a new ship had docked. It was significantly smaller than both the *Radiance* and the raiders' ship, and it had obviously taken some abuse. "That's the ship."

Soldiers stood guard outside as their crew loaded boxes onto the craft. "Why is the army here? That's a raider ship, isn't it?"

Talon nodded. "Of course, the army always provides security at the port."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Don't they know that they're guarding criminals?"

He snickered. "Of course they know."

"I don't understand." I stated simply. The army paid *us* to move their dangerous weapons, and yet they were defending the raiders, who had stolen our cargo? Didn't they realize that everything being loaded onto the ship belonged to them?

"The army pays the raiders. Everyone knows that."

"The raiders are illegal! The army wouldn't pay them to do anything! They've got rewards posted for anyone who can capture a raider ship and its crew! They're indirectly just hurting themselves."

He appraised me. "You really didn't know that the army pays off the raiders?"

"They must not realize that the raiders are taking down ships like the *Radiance*! Our ship was full of army weapons. We were supposed to drop them at some outpost about a month from here. They wouldn't pay raiders to steal cargo from private companies the army has already hired. Isn't that just a waste of money?" Was he lying to me? There could be no other explanation, I decided.

"The army's smart, Marina. They realized that they can either pay private companies a fortune, or they can pay raiders half that to obtain the ship's cargo and bring it to them." Talon pointed to the ship. "Looks like it's about to take off. Listen, I don't know if your crew is on there or not, but we're going to have to do something about it. Do you want to stay here and look or follow that ship?"

"Obviously we're going to follow the ship!"

Chapter 5

Talon's experience as a raider was definitely a plus. He'd been told where the cargo was headed-Aeriat, the capital of the twenty-planet Haian empire. "There are plenty of unguarded ships around here. We can steal a small one and be there in a few hours."

"No we can't! That's illegal!"

"Come on, Marina, we'll take a small ship. Half of them go unused anyway."

"They don't belong to us! We can't take someone else's ship."

Talon rolled his eyes. "You want to find your crew or not? Because stealing a ship is the only option I see right now, unless you've got a few million dollars lying around to buy one."

"We're going to return it as soon as we rescue the crew." I agreed finally.

"Sure, sure,"

I'd always thought a criminal's profession was tricky. Apparently, I was quite off base. Talon had broken into and rewired the ship in a matter of minutes, and we took off not long after. "This is your captain speaking. We've got about a two hour flight to Aeriat. The weather there is-"

"Shut up." I bumped his arm.

Talon broke out into a grin. "Seriously though, we've got some time to kill."

"Then hello nap time."

"You're going to sleep?"

"Yep." The cockpit was cozy, with two leather pilot chairs. I sunk into the empty one and closed my eyes.

Talon kept talking, but I think even he realized that I wasn't listening. If I was going to have to stage some sort of superhero style rescue, then I deserved some rest.

I must not have slept for long enough, because when Talon poked my shoulder to wake me, I was still exhausted. "Hey, guess what? This is going to be easier than we thought."

"Why?"

Talon held open the ship's metal door. Across from us was a spaceship protected by armed guards-the ship the crew had been transferred to.

"That was pretty lucky." Talon noted.

My heart rose excitedly. "Thank gosh this is almost over. We'll just grab them and go."

"Somehow I don't think things will be that simple. They've unloaded them by now. We've still got to figure out where they were taken to."

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I sighed disappointedly. "Right." Suddenly, Aeriad felt like it was the size of the universe. "Couldn't they be anywhere?"

"That's what makes things tricky."

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him! Die! Die! Die!" A crowd screamed. The shouts were distant but audible.

Talon sighed. "Just follow the sound of the 'die's."

I apologize for the significantly shorter chapter. I wanted to get at least something up tonight, but I'm too busy to make it any longer. Sorry, guys!

Chapter 6

I wasn't really sure what I was expecting to find. Maybe a fight being broken up by police? What I was not prepared to see was a familiar face.

Chase's messy blonde hair was spattered with dirt, and his brown eyes were downcast. A circle of Aeriati citizens surrounded him, still chanting.

"Chase! Chase, over here!" I waved my arms frantically.

He finally looked up at me, and his eyes widened. "Get out of here!"

I started toward him in confusion. What I hadn't seen was the line of armed soldiers positioned across from him. One of the soldiers, obviously the one in charge, stormed toward me to block my path. "What do you think you are doing?"

"You don't understand, I know him,"

"Marina, I mean it! Get out of here!" Chase shouted desperately, but didn't move toward me.

"What's going on?" I wondered aloud, though I wasn't sure who I was asking. "Chase, let's get the rest of the crew and go!"

"Ready!" The soldier who was blocking me yelled.

"Marina! Get out of here! Listen to me for once!" Chase begged.

"Aim!"

"Don't be naïve, Tweety Bird! Don't look!" Chase's voice was on the verge of fury.

It suddenly hit me what was about to happen. My heart stopped beating. "No!"

"Fire!"

The sound of gunfire filled the square. I squeezed my eyes shut, and my hands flew to my ears to cover the sound. I felt a hand on my shoulder, followed by Talon's voice. "We need to get out of here right now."

I forced myself to open my eyes. Chase's crumpled figure was only yards away. My breathing turned ragged. "Ch-Chase," My eyes burned from the tears streaming down my face.

"Marina." Talon tugged on my arm more forcefully. "You can't stay here."

Shaking, I stumbled toward the soldier who blocked me. He'd moved from where he had been standing to join the ranks of soldiers. "What did you do? Why did you do that? Why did you shoot him? You're crazy!" I was bordering on the edge of hysteria. We'd had crew-napping drills. I knew every part of the plan to fight off raiders. But there had never been anything about someone dying. No one was ever supposed to die.

Talon put an arm around my shoulder. "Marina, think for a minute. This is not the place."

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"He used to be a fighter pilot!" I screamed at the soldiers. "He was on your side!"

"He was a criminal. Those who break the law are punished accordingly." One of them stated simply.

Talon abruptly knocked my legs out from under me, scooping me up into his arms. "Put me down!" I screeched. "Put me down! They shot Chase!"

"And they'll shoot you too if you don't stop."

"They might have already shot everyone else, too!" I sobbed into his shoulder. "They could all be dead!"

"They said he committed some sort of crime. He's the only one. The rest of your crew will be fine, Marina."

"They're the only family I've got." I whimpered. "They're the only ones I want."

Chapter 7

Talon finally set me down, and we trudged slowly back to port. "We've got to find the rest of the crew." My voice shook unnaturally.

"Why'd he call you Tweety Bird?" He interrupted.

I blinked in surprise. I didn't think Talon had been listening to anything Chase said. "It's a nickname from when I was younger. I joined the crew at twelve, and Chase thought I had a really high-pitched voice, like Tweety Bird."

"That's kind of cute." Talon wasn't really paying attention to me anymore. His bright green eyes were scanning the crowd. "Well, if the rest of your crew is here, we should try to find them before they get into trouble."

"Like Chase."

He bit his lip, but didn't reply. He pointed toward a few army soldiers. "Stay here. They'll recognize you instantly, but they probably didn't get a good look at me. I'll ask them if they know where the cargo was unloaded to."

He jogged toward the soldiers, leaving me by myself. Somehow, I felt even more alone, even when Talon was nearby. Chase was dead. The rest of the crew might have died too for all I knew. What if I was utterly alone in the world and I didn't even realize it yet?

Talon must've had a way with words, because he was already returning. "They said the cargo was transferred to a couple of different ships, and some of it was sold off here. I know which ships some of the cargo is on, but I don't know if your crew is there."

I sighed tiredly. "I don't know. I'm so afraid of picking wrong."

"If we don't hurry up and choose, then the ships will take off, and we'll have missed an opportunity."

"I guess let's try for a ship. I can't stay here anymore."

Talon took hold of my hand and gently pulled me toward an unfamiliar ship. "There's a crew onboard of this one, so we can't steal it. We'll have to sneak on."

"I don't want to be a stowaway. What if they catch us?" It wasn't really the fear of being caught that I feared. It was quietly hiding, and having to be alone with my thoughts. I didn't want to think.

"It'll be fine. This one doesn't look like it's got any army guards. When the guys loading the ship aren't looking, we can hide inside of one of the boxes. They're big enough," Talon suggested optimistically.

"I guess I can't think of anything better."

The opportunity presented itself almost immediately. All of the crew members assigned to load the ship were already inside for the moment. We hustled over to a box the size of a minivan. "What on earth is in here?"

We slid the lid off, revealing a half-filled box of ammo. "Well that looks uncomfortable." Talon mumbled.

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I jumped, managing to get most of my body over the box, and rolled in. Talon followed a moment later, resealing the lid.

"And now we wait," He whispered.

It only took maybe ten minutes before our box was loaded onto the ship. It sounded like it took the entire crew to push it onboard. The ammo was pretty heavy in itself, but the added weight of Talon and I probably didn't help matters.

We must have been the last box necessary to load. Moments later, my stomach dropped as the ship soared straight up into the atmosphere, breaking into space within seconds.

Talon leaned against one of the walls. "So, it looks like we've got some time, Marina."

"I don't really want to talk." I admitted softly. "I'm stillâ"

"No, don't worry, I get it."

We sat in comfortable silence for what felt like an eternity. I stared at ammo belts beneath us, counting how many were visible to occupy my mind.

"Are you just going to sit here depressed all day?"

I glanced up at Talon uncertainly. "What?"

"I get that someone just died, but you've still got the rest of your crew to save. If they're onboard, wouldn't it make you all feel a little better if you found them? They might not even know about what's happened."

I blew out my breath loudly. "Fine." We gently removed the lid, finding the cargo hold entirely empty.

"The only way we're going to find them is if we split up." Talon said. "I'll go right, you go left, and we'll meet back here as soon as we're done searching."

I nodded. "Got it. If you find them, you're going to drop everything and come tell me, okay?"

"Deal."

Chapter 8

The section of the ship I explored was where the records were kept. Records of who or what was onboard, maybe? In the army of file cabinets, I found the one labeled 'Cargo'.

I yanked it open, pawing through the records. The most recent ones were hastily filled out forms mentioning guns, ammo, and lasers. There was nothing about any prisoners being held on the ship.

My heart sank. Had this all been a wild goose chase?

"Not again!" My breath caught in my throat. I barely even had time to turn before the two descended on me. "How many stowaways are we going to find on this ship? That's three in the last month!" One of them grumbled, his gun aimed at me. "Alright, I think you know the drill. Who are you?"

My lips moved but I couldn't force out a sentence. "I, um, I-" I stuttered incoherently.

"We'll figure out to do later. Just take her to the brig."

One of them jerked his gun toward the direction Talon had gone. "Walk this way."

Unsure of what else to do, I forced myself to move. They even had a prison on this thing.

They brought me to a heavy steel door. One of them fumbled for their keys, and shoved the door open quickly. "Make yourself comfortable-you'll be here for a while."

Tears found their way to freedom, raining down my cheeks. I walked into the cell, where two other bodies were sitting. Two horribly and wonderfully familiar bodies.

"Marina?" Cotto bolted upright. Beside her sat Captain Halon, staring at me in disbelief.

I threw myself into Cotto's arms. "Marina, sweetie, what are you doing here?" She wondered sadly. "We thought you'd gotten away."

"I did, but I came looking for you, and they found me-"

"You should have gone home." Halon interjected.

"What? Why would I go home?"

"You're still a kid, Marina. You should enjoy that, not have to come on a rescue mission." He said sternly.

I shook my head. "I had to come. I don't want to go home. There's nothing there for me."

That was the only thing I had ever hated about the *Radiance*. They weren't supposed to let anyone join the crew until eighteen, but since I'd been brought on at twelve, no one had ever quite thought of me as grown up. "My childhood *is* over. Everything that's happened with Chase, not to mention that I'll turn sixteen in a month."

"What happened to Chase?" Something about the despair in his eyes hinted that he'd already guessed.

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"They shot him." I forced the words out. "I saw it."

"Who? Who shot him?" Cotto demanded.

"The army." My heart ached as I struggled to explain all I'd learned about the army.

"Then I guess there's really only one thing we can do." Halon gave me a faint, knowing smile. "Marina, fix it."

I stared at him. "How am I supposed to fix this?"

"For starters, I know you can get that door open. The locking mechanism is on the inside."

I prodded the lock warily. "I don't know if I can."

"Well I'd be willing to bet you can. After all, I was going to hire two ship mechanics until Cotto found you. What did you say, Cotto? About Marina?"

Cotto grinned reminiscently. "That she's as good as an entire battalion of mechanics."

"That was it. She talked me into just taking you. Give me some credit, because I don't pick slackers. You can get the lock open." Captain Halon could have run for president in any country and won. His skills as an orator were amazing. Halon could motivate me with just a few words to do anything.

I turned to inspect the lock again. "I might be able to. I'd need some time, though. When we get out, there's someone I need to find."

Chapter 9

Another particularly short chapter, but I had to cut it off so I could lead into Chapter 10!

I spent a good hour working on the lock. It was a nice distraction. I'd spent most of my time detailing what had happened so far.

"Marina, did you happen to find anyone else from the crew, besides Chase?"

"He was the only one."

There was something about the questions I'd been asked, along with the long periods of silence inbetween that made me wonder if they knew something that I didn't. Finally, I found the courage to ask, "Are you hiding something from me?"

"This room isn't exactly a palace. There's nothing we could hide." Cotto shrugged.

"I meant something you know."

"Nothing."

The silence dragged on again, until through the tiny crack under the door, I heard footsteps. I flew away from the lock, and discreetly coughed, "Someone's coming,"

The door swung open. A tall man stood there with a plate of food. "I've got-"

Cotto tackled him, Halon and I jerking back in surprise. The force of impact as his head hit the ground knocked him unconscious. Cotto glanced back at us. "Well, I was getting sick of waiting for the lock."

"I guess that works too." I muttered. "Could you guys wait here? There's someone else I need to find."

"You're not getting out of my sight again." Cotto narrowed her eyes.

There really wasn't any arguing with Cotto. I shrugged and pointed down the long metal hallway. "He's in here somewhere."

"Who are we looking for exactly?" Halon asked.

"Black hair, green eyes-you'll know him when you see him. Everyone on this ship seems to be wearing uniforms besides us."

Doors must have been quite in style when the ship was built, because there were more of them than molecules of oxygen. Cotto checked the rooms on the left side of the hallway, while Halon and I checked the ones on the right.

I'd opened too many doors that led to empty storage rooms, but finally we reached what I assumed were the crew's quarters. A plethora of empty bedrooms, each slightly differing from the last. The second to last door in the hallway, I pushed open ever so slightly, as I had every other door.

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My heart stopped cold. It was like a train wreck-I couldn't watch, but I couldn't look away. "What?" Halon whispered urgently.

I couldn't find the words. I couldn't even think or breathe.

"Marina, what?" He hissed, unable to see through the crack. Couldn't the universe just leave me alone? Couldn't it just let me go on my merry way? What had I ever done that made me deserve all of this? Why me?

I slammed the door open, not even caring if any of the enemy crew heard. "Marina, keep the volume down!" Cotto stage whispered. She didn't even know. She couldn't even comprehend what I knew.

My voice hitched in my throat, but I managed to rasp, "Talon?"

Chapter 10

Talon's eyes met mine in a flash. He jumped away from the girl he'd been kissing. "Oh, god, not this again." He muttered irritably.

"Who is-what are you-we're supposed to be on a rescue mission!" I shouted in disbelief. "What are you even doing?"

He glanced back at the girl. "Sorry honey, looks like we're not going to get that extra bonus."

"It's alright sweetie. The army might not have given it to you anyway."

Words were not enough. I couldn't even begin to express the explosion of fury and sadness.

"You're working for the army?"

"They're going to be so mad." Talon glanced around like he was looking for something. "Can't believe they took my gun. Kind of need it right now." He grumbled.

"Talon, I thought you were *helping* me!"

He finally looked at me. "The army pays good money for mechanics. This ship's headed toward one of the army's top trading posts."

"You were going to sell me?" What little pieces of my heart were left shattered.

"Yeah, but now I won't get anything. I was supposed to get you the whole way there without you ever knowing. Aurora," He glanced at the girl again. "Do you have your gun on you? I might as well kill her before we get there, or the army guards will have a fit."

"Of course," Before she'd even finished unsheathing the gun, I'd grabbed Halon's and Cotto's arms and started running. They might have been confused as heck, but they'd both heard Talon's death threat.

The first shot echoed out behind us. I felt the overwhelming urge to stop. To just curl up on the ground and let Talon kill me. It would be so perfect-so absolutely wonderful to escape into Heaven. Even Hell would be a sort of freedom. At least then the pain would be physical. I started to slow, but Halon yanked on my arm. "Oh no you don't!"

"We'll take their emergency escape craft." Cotto suggested, already out of breath. "Saw them on the way in."

Talon's shots had ceased as we desperately rounded corners. He would wait until he knew he could get off an accurate shot.

Cotto expertly led us to the escape craft. They were normally used essentially as space lifeboats in an emergency, but if they would get us away from Talon, I didn't care what their purpose was.

Diving inside the small capsule, Cotto slammed the door shut just as one of Talon's rounds hit the steel pod. "How does this thing detach?" She jammed buttons randomly. Realizing that Cotto wasn't actually as put together as she appeared, Halon and I contributed to the chaos. I wasn't sure what any of the buttons I pressed meant, but apparently, I didn't have to. Someone had hit the right one, and we were jolted backwards as the

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escape craft broke free of the main ship.

There was a collective sigh of relief. The pod really wasn't much to look at. One tiny window let us glimpse the endless expanse of space, and a skinny bench forced us all to cram together. The rest of it was a wall of gadgetry I didn't understand the purpose of.

"Looks like they aren't following us." Cotto observed, peering through the window.

"So, Marina, would you mind explaining what the heck just happened?" There was a ridiculous note of calm in Halon's voice. With Halon, a sweet voice and happy face probably meant he was angry.

"Funny story, really," I laughed nervously. "See, he bought me hot chocolate and said he would help me save you guys."

"Oh, Marina," Cotto sighed dramatically. "You're so naïve. Are you just going to trust every person who promises to help you out? Not everyone is a good person."

"I really thought he was! He-he risked his life! And bought me hot chocolate! He was nice and helped me sneak onto the ship! It wasn't being naïve!" I defended myself out of habit, but I didn't want to protest.

Talon had successfully ripped out my heart and stomped it into the ground. What was left after watching Chase's murder was gone. As if sensing this, Cotto put an arm around me. "It's okay."

I hated those words. I hated how wrong they were. How they sounded so hopeful when there was no hope to be had. "It's not okay, and it never will be. None of this is 'okay'."

"You're right," Halon added. "It's not. But that doesn't change the fact you've got to deal with it. You're probably going to be stabbed in the back another million times before you're even twenty. That's just the way life is. If you let yourself fall apart-if you let your heart break every time something awful happens, then you'll never get anywhere. If you don't look out for yourself, then no one else can or will."

"Well, Halon, if you're done giving Marina her life lesson or whatever, then I could really use some help steering this thing."

Halon threw up his hands. "The *Radiance* didn't have any escape pods. You know as much as me about this thing."

Chapter 11

At some point, they'd figured out how to pilot the ship. "I see a planet in the distance. We'll have to land there." Halon decided.

I'd entirely quit what little effort I'd been putting into keeping myself together. There was only so much a girl could deal with at once, and I'd reached my limit.

Before letting my thoughts move on to analyze Talon, I spent what felt like an eternity thinking of Chase. Besides me, Chase had been the youngest of the crew at twenty four. A former interstellar fighter pilot, he'd gotten an honorable discharge from the army at nineteen after sustaining an injury in combat. He'd never told me why, and I kind of didn't want to know, either.

"Are you still thinking about that boy?" Cotto asked exasperatedly.

"Chase, actually," I mumbled.

Halon laughed unexpectedly. "I don't think Chase ever expected to live this long anyway."

"Why not?" How could Halon think Chase wanted to die?

"Chase didn't live like anyone else, Marina. He wanted to have the most fun that he could and do everything the world could offer. I think he expected to get himself killed a long time ago. In Chase's terms, he probably already considered himself an old man."

"I guess that makes you ancient." Cotto snickered.

"Oh, haha, you're *hilarious* Cotto. You should quit private shipping and become a comedian. I'll tell everyone how privileged I was to know you." Halon's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Maybe I should. Bet it pays better."

"Yeah, getting a 45/350 lay is just awful, isn't it?" Halon rolled his eyes. "How ever do you survive?"

"Because being your first lieutenant is *so* much easier than just sitting around yelling atâ!" Cotto and Halon's joking conversation cut off. Halon had always liked to pick on Chase, and Cotto had barely managed to stop herself from saying his name.

An awkward silence ensued. "We're probably going to be able to land soon." Halon noted. "Wonder what planet that is?"

Out of bored curiosity, I craned my neck to see out the window. I was surprised to recognize the red and blue planet. "That's Baltienna."

"Your home, right?" Cotto recalled.

I nodded. "It's been a long time."

"Well then, you'll get to show us around, right? Maybe I'll finally get to meet your mom. *Hello Ms. Marina's mother, I babysat your daughter for four years. Can I have some free food?*" Cotto giggled, squinting out the

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window.

"I doubt you'll get that lucky. My Mom's never home. She's always off doing her art thing. I don't even know why she has a house."

"It's your house too. Maybe she keeps it for you."

"I don't think she cares." I admitted.

Halon moved to take the controls. "So which way is your hometown?"

"The port at Sieta."

"I think I remember where that is." He jerked the wheel sharply to the right. "This is your captain speaking. We're headed for a turbulent landing." He held up an imaginary walkie talkie.

"You do know how to land this, don't you?"

"I'll figure it out."

Chapter 12

Cotto and I held the button panels for dear life as Halon brought the ship down for a sharp landing. At least we were lucky enough that he recognized where to land. Sieta was popular gambling port, so the giant gaming tower really stuck out, even from high in the atmosphere.

Since we wouldn't be able to call in a landing to the air traffic control tower, we were fortunate enough to find the runway empty.

The pod smashed against the runway with surprising force, jerking me out of my seat.

"We're here," Cotto blew her blonde bangs out of her eyes.

We crawled shakily from the pod. My legs felt like jelly after the harsh landing, but at least they worked.

"I forgot how awful Baltienna is. Ugly and smelly," Halon grumbled as he stumbled out after me.

"Halon! This is Marina's home, don't say that!" Cotto scolded automatically.

"Don't worry about it." I piped up. "It's not that great."

Cotto pursed her lips and glowered at Halon. After a moment, she turned to me. "Looks like we're going to have to abandon the pod here. Marina, why don't you show us around?" She suggested enthusiastically. I got the feeling it wasn't a question.

I reluctantly gave them the grand tour of my loser hometown. Sieta had long ago lost any sign of greenery. Instead it was a dull mix of grey skyscrapers and old houses on the verge of collapse. The only things really worth taking note of were the gaming tower and the pristine state house.

"Where was your mechanics workshop again, Marina?" I wasn't sure if Cotto was just pretending to be interested or actually cared.

"About a block away. I'm not sure they'd ever want to see me again. Maybe we should just skip that."

Cotto shook her head deliberately. "I'm sure they'd love to see you! And I'd like to see that mechanics shop again."

"She's not going to shut up until you show her the stupid mechanics shop." Halon muttered.

"Halon, if I were you, I wouldn't be pissing me off."

Halon rolled his eyes. "Oh, I'm terrified, Cotto. Here, take my lunch money!"

"Just show me the shop, Marina."

I led them to the mechanics shop, spouting off every excuse I could think of as to why we shouldn't go along the way. Cotto wouldn't hear of it, and demanded to know the names of everyone. "Who was your old boss?"

"Some idiot named Motor."

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"Why would you say that? I can understand calling Halon an idiot, but not anyone else."

Halon let out a loud sigh. "That was a low blow."

"I don't think he thought of himself as a boss. He called himself king."

We had made it to the mechanics shop. I trudged inside, keeping my head down and hoping that I'd grown up enough that no one recognized me. Of course, Cotto would never let me get off that easily.

She marched up to one of the mechanics, asking for the boss and if it was still Motor.

The mechanic noticed me. When he lifted his head, I recognized him as one of the loudmouths who used to annoy me. "Look what the cat dragged in." He snickered.

"Motor's probably in the back, Cotto." I tugged on her arm. "But he's probably busy. Let's go,"

"Show me." There was a note of authoritativeness in her voice.

"Cotto, please, I-"

In a somewhat mockingly official voice, she said, "As the first lieutenant of the private dangerous cargo transport ship *Radiance*, I order you to show me where this guy is."

"You trying to scare her?" Halon bumped Cotto's arm.

She ignored him. "Marina, nothing is going to happen. I just want to meet him."

"I don't understand why," I grumbled, leading her tiredly to Motor's office.

The shop hadn't deteriorated much since I'd left. It was still a blackened space piled with spare parts and reeking of gasoline, but its messy state hadn't been worsened like I'd expected.

Motor's office door was cracked open slightly. His head popped up when Cotto excitedly knocked. Catching sight of me, a frightening grin spread across his face. "Marina!"

Chapter 13

"See, Marina, he remembers you!" Cotto beamed.

Motor jumped up from his desk. Though his appearance didn't seem to bother Cotto, I'd always thought he was gross. He was from some alien planet on the edge of the empire. His skin was tinted a sickly green, and his face was a collection of scaly spikes. Instead of regular hands, he had claws.

"Been a long time since this one was around." He squinted at me. "How much did I sell her for again?"

Cotto seemed caught off guard, but Halon wasn't. "We don't encourage slavery, and she didn't belong to you. She chose to join my crew."

"You a spaceship captain?" Motor didn't sound pleased. He wasn't the kind of guy who took criticism well.

"Yes." Halon answered curtly.

Motor paused, as if considering something. "Well, good to have you back." He spread his arms. "I'm a bit busy right now, but why don't you come back later? We could all have a nice dinner and catch up. I know a good place."

"Of course!" Cotto responded instantly.

Halon and I stared at her in disbelief. "Uh, Cotto, I think we've got something planned." Halon cleared his throat.

She shook her head. "Come on, Halon, be polite for once." Cotto nodded at Motor. "Wonderful. What time does this shop close up?"

"Seven thirty. What kind of spaceship have you got?"

Realizing that Cotto and Motor probably wouldn't be shutting up anytime soon, Halon motioned toward the exit. "Hey Cotto, Marina and I are going toâ do stuff." He shrugged, deciding he didn't need an excuse.

I followed Halon from the shop, relieved to find myself back outside. "I guess we might as well hit up that gaming tower."

"I'm not old enough to gamble." I replied without thinking.

Halon snorted. "I didn't know you were going to let an age limit stop you."

"You haven't given me my lay yet, either."

"Well, you got me out of that ship, so I guess I owe you a bit. I'll pay for your first few games. But *don't* lose."

No one tried to check my ID to see if I was actually old enough. Instead, Halon and I were able to walk right in.

As exciting as the title may have sounded, being the head mechanic (although I was the only mechanic) of the transport starship *Radiance* wasn't a thrilling job most of the time, so Halon had long ago taught me how to

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play cards. We played round after round of poker. I wasn't particularly good at it, but Halon had won almost every hand.

At some point, I bothered to look up at the clock. Almost four hours had past, yet it had only felt like minutes. "Captain," I poked his arm. "It's been four hours and Cotto isn't here yet."

"Probably still talking to that alien freak."

"Something doesn't seem right." I bit my lip. "We shouldn't have left her alone with Motor."

Halon set his cards face down and put a hand on my shoulder. "Marina, Cotto could beat up that fat alien any day. He invited us to dinner, after all. You know she went with him. She's probably at some restaurant with him right now, and then she'll show up here in another hour or so looking for us."

"But something isn't right about this." I protested.

He sighed dramatically. "Would it make you feel better if we checked on her?"

"Yes."

Halon shoved his cards toward the dealer. "I'm out, but I'll be back."

We checked the mechanics shop first. As expected, there was no sign of either of them. None of the mechanics working seemed to know where they'd gone, either. "They're not here. What restaurant would he have taken her to?"

"There's only one nice restaurant in this whole port. It's not a long walk from here." I insisted eagerly. Maybe it was pointless worry, but I couldn't stop it nonetheless.

Chapter 14

We'd ended up outside of the decorative patio. Waiters danced around us, mostly humanoid. Halon and I scanned the tables for any sign of Cotto. "I don't see her." I finally decided.

Halon ground his teeth together, glancing around us nervously. "Looks like your bad feeling might have been right. Is Motor a slave dealer?"

I shook my head. "Sometimes on the side he'd get rid of bad mechanics. Mostly he worked on catching spies for the government."

Halon's eyes widened in horror. He stomped his foot, screaming curse words and attracting the attention of everyone around us. "Where did he go to turn them in?" He eventually spit out.

"But-but he wouldn't take Cotto to the government. She doesn't know anything useful." I stammered uncertainly.

"I asked where he would turn in spies, not for your opinion."

"At the courthouse, usually." Halon had already started running. "Wait!" I sprinted to keep up. "He wouldn't take Cotto there! She's got nothing to do with the government!"

Halon didn't answer. He stormed up the courthouse steps, shoving on the heavy oak door. Finding that it was locked, he rammed it with his shoulder until it opened. "I don't think this is a good idea." I began, stumbling after him.

"Wait outside Marina."

"But I-"

His voice grew uncharacteristically loud and agitated. "I said wait outside!" He rushed inside of the courthouse.

I hesitated for a mere second before following. He pounded on the secretary's desk urgently. "Did someone bring a woman in here and accuse her of being a spy at any point in the last few hours?"

The secretary was taken aback by his harshness. "Yes, a few minutes ago. She's on trial in Courtroom A."

Halon ran toward the doors to the courtroom. "Wait! You can't go in there!" The secretary yelled.

Halon didn't notice as I followed.

Cotto was handcuffed and standing before a judge. Her head was bowed, and her shoulders shook.

"Cotto!"

She turned to see Halon.

"Halon, don't interfere with this." Her voice wavered.

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He looked up at the judge. "I don't know what's happening, but she isn't a spy."

The judge peered over his glasses. "Do you know her?"

"Yes, I'm the captain of the army transport cargo ship *Radiance*."

"So you work closely with Ms. Alaine?"

Halon nodded eagerly. "She hasn't done anything."

I had to say something, but I couldn't find the words. Halon was born on Nitana, not Baltienna. The court systems were different-there was no fair trial. If the judge even thought you looked guilty, then you were. Sometimes you didn't even get to speak before you were executed.

"I think they're conspirators." The judge said accusatorily.

"I'll tell you anything you want if you let her go." Halon pleaded.

"Halon! Halon, don't you dare!" Cotto screeched. "Don't tell them anything!"

"I have to! They're going to hurt you."

She glared furiously. "I will *never* forgive you! They can't do anything to me worse than you speaking a word!" Tears streamed down her face. "Don't betray my trust like this."

Cotto was an angel. The gift of the sweetest, happiest girl to ever live. And she was crying.

I couldn't stop myself. I burst the whole way through the door and sprinted toward Cotto. The judge wouldn't let Halon and Cotto talk for much longer.

They both exclaimed at the same time. "Marina!"

Chapter 15

I wouldn't have nearly enough time to free her from her handcuffs, so instead I wrapped my arms around her. "I'm sorry!"

"Marina," She hissed. "Marina, leave."

"You can't leave me out of everything! I'm a part of the crew, too! I deserve to know as much as you do!"

"This really isn't the time for that." She whispered, nudging me with her forearm. "I'll be fine. I promise. But you need to trust me and leave right now, before it's too late." She looked up at Halon. "We're not having this discussion. We're not on the ship, so right now you're not in charge. You're going to take Marina and leave. I'll catch up with you later."

"Cotto, no," Halon's anger had subsided. He sounded almost painfully sad.

She stared at him, her beautiful eyes hard. "Halon, please."

"Alright, this has gone on for long enough." The judge said exhaustedly.

Halon tugged on my arm gently. "Marina, we've got to go."

"You're just going to give up on her like that?" Halon, the bravest captain in the entire universe, was quitting?

"You've got to pick and choose your battles."

"Pick this one!" I screamed.

He jerked on my shoulder more sharply. "Cotto will be alright."

I maneuvered out of Halon's grip. Two court guards were moving towards Cotto to take her to some horrible place. I punched the first one squarely in the jaw. He staggered backwards, cupping his face.

The other was on the defensive. Cotto was yelling something, but I couldn't hear her over the sound of my heartbeat. I landed a lucky kick in the gut on the second guard. Neither of them seemed to be good at coping with pain, and lay moaning where they fell.

I tugged on Cotto's hand. "Go!"

She shook her head firmly. "Get out of here before they come after you."

"You come with me!"

Halon pulled on my shoulders. "Marina, you can't help her."

I rooted myself in place. "Cotto, please come with me! I can rescue you!"

"I love you Marina. Halon. Be safe,"

I clutched her wrist tightly, my eyes stinging with tears. "I can't leave."

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Halon wrapped his arms around me, lifting me off of the ground and separating me and Cotto. I screamed and kicked, desperately pounding against Halon. "Put me down! We can save her!"

He carried me from the courtroom. "Cotto!" I sobbed heartbrokenly, giving up the fight against Halon as the courtroom doors slammed shut.

One of the guards had managed to recover, and jogged alongside us. "Sir, the judge wants to hold you to that deal. If you give us what we need, we'll let her go."

The judge exited the courtroom himself. "Why don't we talk?" He motioned to me. "Does she know anything?"

"No."

"Then she can't come in with us."

Halon let me down. My legs wobbled, but the pain in my chest was far worse. "Marina, I know you don't want anything to happen to Cotto, but you doing something rash won't help her. I'm going to talk to the judge, and they'll let her go. All I need you to do is sit here and wait for me. Got it?" He spoke slowly and thoroughly, like he was talking to a child.

I nodded solemnly. "Yes."

He ruffled my wavy brunette locks. "I'll be back soon, kiddo."

Chapter 16

Halon and the judge disappeared. I found a corner that was mostly out of sight and tucked myself into it. I buried my face in my arms and shut my eyes. I thought I had reached my limit after Talon's betrayal, but somehow, things had gotten worse.

Somehow the worst part was knowing that they had kept a secret from me. Apparently a secret big enough that Halon thought they would torture Cotto for information. How could they even consider keeping something so important from me?

Halon had seemed so confident that he could barter for Cotto's safety, but I hadn't the heart to tell him that his attempts would probably fail. In the corrupt Baltienna court system, it was more likely that the judge would jot down everything Halon could tell him, and then not turn over Cotto as promised.

I wasn't sure how long I wallowed in self pity. A disgustingly familiar voice called my name to rouse me from my depressing thoughts.

"Looks like Tiny got in on a spy ring."

"Don't ever call me Tiny again." I snapped.

Motor acted as if I hadn't spoken. "How'd you become part of something so illegal? Little miss goody two-shoes. But I guess you always were a gullible one, eh, Tiny?"

I wouldn't let him goad me into action. I turned my head so I could see the wall instead of his gross face.

"Sounds like you've become quite the mechanic." Motor continued. "Your spy friend was telling me all about you before we came here. Said they called you Tweety Bird." I felt his clawed hand on top of my head.

"Don't touch me, Motor." My fingers clenched into fists.

"Guess you grew up to be pretty once someone cleaned off all of that grease. Probably could have sold you for a lotâ€" He mused. "Couldn't I, Tweety Bird?"

Halon's fist slammed into the side of Motor's head. "You're *not* allowed to call her Tweety." He growled. Like the coward he was, Motor scrambled away from Halon.

Though it gave me some sense of satisfaction, I was still breaking. Halon sat down beside me. "Did you get Cotto back?"

He shook his head miserably. "I did what she wanted. I didn't tell them anything."

"Can anything else possibly go wrong?"

Halon put his arm around me in a half-hug. "I'm not going to tell you that it's alright. I'm not Cotto. But things will work out, or we'll make them. It's a beautiful world out there, Marina, but it's also repulsive."

"It's worse than that." I sniffled. "It's so much worse. Chase and Talon and now Cotto."

"Show me your house."

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"What?"

"Show me where you live." Halon clarified. "It's still here, isn't it?"

"Why would you want to see it?"

"Is that a no?"

I found the strength to get to my feet. "I can show you."

Somehow I managed to lead him there. Trying to cheer me up, but sounding far too much like Cotto, he commented on almost every aspect of the place.

"So how long have you lived here?"

"Forever."

"Is this you?" He motioned to a photo of me when I was little, holding a wrench up to the camera enthusiastically.

"Can we not talk?" I sighed tiredly. "It's getting late, and I want to go to bed."

"Sure." Halon's voice was soft.

I pointed to our guest bedroom. "You can sleep there, but you'll probably have some company." Before he could ask what company he'd be getting, my mother burst through the door.

Chapter 17

My mother's aging face was smeared with paint. "Oh, Maria!"

"Marina." I corrected halfheartedly.

"Yes, yes, of course. Ah, I wasn't expecting you to be here." Petunia, her fluffy white dog, bounced at Halon's feet.

"That's the company I mentioned." I looked pointedly at Petunia.

She glanced between me and the door awkwardly. "Well, um, I guess we'll have to find somewhere for you to sleep."

"I'll sleep in my room." I answered robotically.

She dropped her eyes to the floor. "See, ah, I didn't think you were ever coming back. So I converted it into a storage closet for my art."

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words would come out. There was nothing left for me to say, or left for me in even my own home. Absolutely nothing. She'd thought I was never coming home again, and when I did, she didn't even seem to care. She was probably even *happy* that I had left.

I pushed past her. "I'm out of here."

"Maria, wait!"

I whirled to face her. "It's Marina!" I screamed. "Marina! You're the one who picked it!"

"Actually it was your dad's idea. I wanted to call you Petunia. She was only a year old when you were born and I thought it would be cute if you shared a name."

"You would have named me after a dog?" I screeched.

Halon tapped my shoulder softly. "Marina, wait outside for me, okay?"

Not having the energy to put up any sort of protest, I stumbled outside and leaned against the stone walls. Through the crack in the door, I could hear them talking.

"I'm sorry about that. Marina's been through a lot lately." Halon sounded so ridiculously composed. "More than I've seen in my twenty seven years."

"Who are you exactly?"

"I probably should have introduced myself. I'm Halon-Marina is the mechanic for my ship."

"And you're old enough to be a captain?" My mother asked doubtfully.

Halon chuckled. "It's a long story. Anyway, about Marina-"

Fading Radiance

My mom let out a sound of pure exasperation. "What's she done now?"

"Done?" I could imagine the puzzled look on Halon's face. "A lot, actually. Saved half of the crew."

"I bet it was her fault in the first place." She grumbled. "Marina! You get in here right now and say sorry for whatever you did! I better not have to pay any money for whatever stupid trick you pulled!"

"She didn't do anything wrong," Halon started to defend me, but paused. "Never mind, I can see why she didn't want to come here." The door banged open a second later. "Marina, let's grab Cotto and move out."

I stared at him. "What?" I had finally been honest with myself. "By now she's most likely dead, Halon."

"No." Halon's eyes were hard, as if unwilling to accept any other fate. "I'll figure something out. This isn't the place we should be right now, though."

"We've got nowhere to go."

Halon shook his head. "I made a killing at that poker table. We can find somewhere to stay."

"Marina," The door squeaked open again to reveal my mother. "Marina, darling, you don't have to get so worked up. It's only a room. You can sleep on the couch with Petunia."

"Let's go," I agreed, leaving her and the dog behind.

Chapter 18

Halon and I spent the night at one of the nicest hotels I'd ever seen. I had an entire room to myself, furnished beautifully. Everything was white, with hints of varying shades of blue. A spattering of chocolate awaited me on my freshly made bed.

I threw myself onto the bed face first. Everything was absolutely silent. So wonderfully quiet. I rolled over to stare up at the ceiling.

For once, my thoughts weren't consumed by Chase or Talon or Cotto. I found myself humming the lyrics to an old song without realizing it. *Wish that I could be your superhero. For you I'd fly through any sky. Hold on tight and pick your head up high. The pain you feel isn't enough to stop you. Keep on fighting until the bitter end. Keep on praying until you're heard. Keep moving on, because under that deep black is a diamond inside of you.*

Alone with no one to hear, I sang. The words weren't just a catchy rock beat that Chase used to blare while he piloted the ship-no, they felt like so much more. I had to keep going. It hurt-it was breaking me inside, but that shouldn't stop me. I needed to pick myself up and keep moving on. There had to be an end. I wasn't sure how I would get there, but there must have been some happy ending awaiting me. That was all I could hope for-that all my struggles would mean something when everything was said and done.

"Keep moving on, because under that deep black is a diamond inside of you."

"I can't teach you how to be whole again, but I can hope until you are." A voice finished the lyrics for me. I sat up slowly, facing my door. The words had come from outside. "Aren't you going to finish the song?"

I made my way to the door, and upon opening found a kid standing in the hall. I blinked in surprise. "Um, hi,"

"Can we finish the song?" The little girl asked, her eyes shining.

"I don't remember all of the lyrics." I hedged, glancing around the hallway. "Shouldn't you be with your mom or dad or something?" I may have left home at a young age, but it certainly wasn't the norm.

"Nope." She popped his lips on the 'p'.

Unsure of what else to do, I pounded on the wall. Halon's room was next door, and sure enough, his door flew open. "Marina, why are you-" He paused, noticing the little girl. "Who is this?"

"I'm not sure. What's your name?"

"Piper. I heard you singing and I like singing." She blinked innocently.

"Where are your parents or whoever is watching you?" Halon asked softly.

"Nobody is anywhere." She shook her head deliberately.

"What do you mean?"

Piper pointed to the sky. "All gone."

Fading Radiance

"Gone where?" A sinking feeling overcame me. I had a pretty good guess at exactly where.

"Sister said there would be fire coming and that I had to leave. They left in the rocket."

"Fire." Halon repeated, staring into the distance, realizing something that I didn't. "I've got some phone calls to make, Marina. Watch her," He motioned to Piper and slammed the door behind him.

I ushered Piper into my room awkwardly. I'd never played the role of babysitter before, and I was quite nervous. What did little kids do? I hadn't interacted with anyone my age or younger for a long time-until Talon, but that didn't matter.

"So, um, Piper, was it? How old are you?"

The little brunette held out her palm. "Five!"

Why would someone leave a five year old alone? Obviously her family knew they were leaving her to some sort of fire.

Watching Piper turned out to be easier than I'd expected. I switched my TV on, and found some colorful children's show. She was ecstatic, grabbing my hand and pointing the screen. "That one is blue! Blue!" Piper's high-pitched voice was so ear piercing that even the onscreen character had to have heard her. Still, it was kind of fun to watch her.

A segment on sea animals came on. They seemed to entrance Piper, although I was sure she didn't understand most of the words.

She spun to face me suddenly. "What's your name?"

"Marina."

Her eyes lit up. "Dolphin!"

It took me a moment to make the connection. "Oh, you mean like marine life? I guess so,"

"You're a dolphin!" She giggled before returning to her show.

I laid back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as Piper danced. It was about the most relaxing night I'd had in what felt like an eternity.

Piper jumped onto the bed. "Job!" Before I could ask exactly what she meant, she clarified, "Your job!"

"I fix stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" She asked enthusiastically. I was a little surprised by her interest. Most kids wanted to be the captain or the pilot, not the mechanic.

"Um, the mechanical stuff on spaceships." How did you simplify complicated mechanics in a way that a five year old would understand?

"I was going on a spaceship when I got big!"

Fading Radiance

I smiled. "So you want to work on a spaceship, huh?"

"They said I have to."

My smile faded instantly. "You *have* to?"

She nodded halfheartedly. "I wanted to be a vet, but they said I have to be on a spaceship. It's okay though, space is cool."

"So you don't want to go to space?"

Piper shook her head. "I have to."

I wouldn't voice my concerns for fear of upsetting Piper, but I had an awful feeling that I knew why she didn't have a choice. Only one kind of person would leave behind a child-not a mother or father, but a slaver.

I wanted to smother her in a hug, but I would only worry her. At least she'd be safe with Halon and I.

Chapter 19

I gave Piper my bed and slept on the surprisingly comfortable couch that had come with the room. Then again, most anywhere felt cozy compared to the metal bunks on the *Radiance*.

Cotto and Chase were the focus of my dreams, but somehow they weren't depressing---actually, they were rather uplifting. The dreams were partially based on dredged up old memories from when I had first joined the crew.

Chase had gone out of his way to befriend me--showing me how to pilot the ship, and even letting me try steering it in empty space once. Without Halon's permission, of course, but that only made it more fun.

Cotto had tried to seem harsh. She'd made a point to yell at everyone, including Halon. It was so out of character that even I'd figured out it wasn't the norm. The other four crew members didn't seem to care much what I did, but Cotto had taken a special interest. I was never quite sure why, equating it to her desire to have another girl on the ship, or maybe just because she realized that a twelve-year-old away from home for the first time could end up being sort of upsetting at times. Either way, she'd given up the tougher facade quickly.

It was a peaceful half-dream half-memory session. I missed the good old days when fights with raiders were rare, and we always won. Actually, they used to be a fun interruption from the boring old day to day mechanic work. I wanted to go back in time--to be twelve or thirteen or fourteen again. I wanted everything to be the way it had been. I desperately wanted my biggest worries in the world not to be death. I wished I could worry again about Chase teasing me, or getting too long of a lay. The trivial childhood problems that suddenly seemed so preferable.

Something rocked the sofa so sharply I bolted upright. Piper sat at the end, and despite how early I knew it must have been, she didn't look the least bit tired. I rubbed my eyes groggily. "Aren't you still sleepy?"

She shook her head enthusiastically. "No. I want to go do something. Let's go do stuff. There's a pool, right?"

"I don't know."

"Can you check?"

I flopped back down onto the sofa and shut my eyes. If Piper was going to be that excitable all day, I needed more sleep. "Wake up, sleepyhead!" Piper shook my leg.

"Go bother Halon." I moaned.

"No, I want to go to the pool!"

I sighed deeply and banged on the wall. "Captain!"

My door flew open a second later, revealing a disheveled Halon, a knife in his hand. His eyes were darting side to side, as if expecting some sort of army to be awaiting him. "There's no one here?"

"No."

His shoulders slumped. "Guess I'm too paranoid."

Fading Radiance

"I took care of her all night. I'm done-she's yours now."

Piper sprinted toward Halon excitedly. "The pool!"

Halon glowered at me. "She's got too much energy for me. You should take her. You at least got sleep last night."

"You didn't sleep?"

He shook his head halfheartedly. "I was waiting. I was so sure they were going to come for us. They've got everyone else-except for Chase, god knows where any of them are."

"No one should be after us. Maybe this is all just a coincidence? The raiders took almost everyone, Chase was killed," We both winced at the words. "And Motor turned in Cotto. It's a bunch of little things, not one big capture or something."

"They want me. If they've gotten any information out of Cotto, they know they want me. I'm surprised they even let me out of there in the first place."

I crossed my arms. "There's too much that no one has told me. I want to know what's going on. Tell me everything that you and Cotto kept secret."

Halon glanced warily at Piper. "It can wait, Marina. Anything I tell you will only make you a target. The army's ruthless-they wouldn't hesitate to kill you if they found out you know something."

"It's better than having everyone else hauled off for reasons I'll never understand."

"I'd rather not argue about it."

I was far from tired; I was revving up with anger. "It's something I need to know! I'm part of the crew too!"

I hated his calm tone. "It's not something you need to know."

"You can't act like I'm a little girl! I need to know what's happening, even if it's dangerous! We're already in danger!"

"Trust me, Marina. This is not the time or place for something I shouldn't tell you anyway. It's for your safety."

"You told Cotto." I spat. I loathed being lied to. Whatever Halon knew was important, and my life depended on knowing, too. "Someone's tried to kill me! It's not exactly like I'm living in candy land over here!"

"Trust me."

"This isn't up for debate! This is too important for you to lie to me about!"

"Marina, don't question me! Sit down, take care of the kid, and if you want to be treated like an adult, act like one!"

I hadn't expected the intensity of frustration in his voice. I stammered something, trying to come up with some sort of witty reply, but could find nothing.

Fading Radiance

Halon's voice returned to a normal volume. "I'm going to find what I can about Cotto. Stay put and don't open the door for anyone but me."

Chapter 20

I usually listened to Halon. On a ship, you listened to the captain no matter what. Unless you were Cotto, of course, who did as she pleased regardless of what Halon said. I was going to take a page out of her book and disobey. It was pretty new for me, so it felt sort of exciting.

"You wanted to go to the pool, right Piper?"

She nodded excitedly. "Yes!"

"Well I'll make you a deal. I need to know something, so we're going to sneak out. If you don't tell Halon anything about what we do today, I'll take you to the pool when we get back."

Her eyes lit up. "Promise?"

"I promise."

I decided that annoying as she was, Piper was pretty cute. She prattled on incessantly about *everything*.

We walked stealthily through the hotel lobby and into the sunny Baltienna streets. As per usual, the city was flooded with people. I took hold of Piper's hand and began to weave through the crowd.

"Where are we going?" She shouted over the din.

"Somewhere I probably shouldn't be taking you."

"Why not?"

"It's not setting much of a good example, but I can't leave you here alone."

She asked a seemingly endless string of questions until we'd finally made it to the warehouse.

Only about a block from Motor's mechanics shop sat the warehouse. Its walls were bleached by the sun, and to any uninformed passerby, it looked like nothing more than an abandoned wreck. Of course, I knew better.

I found my way around back. Piper had become unexpectedly quiet as I knocked at the rusty metal door. "I had a knock, undo the lock." It was the code that let those inside know I wasn't some government spy or someone who had stumbled across the warehouse.

A moment later, the door swung open with a loud groan. Holding it open was a noticeably more matured, but still familiar figure.

His dark eyes glossed over me before it finally registered. "Whoa, Marina!"

"Hi Liam."

"It's been forever since you came around! I had to hire one of Motor's other losers to do our mechanic work. Are you going to stay?" His eyes dropped, and he noticed Piper. "Got yourself a kid?"

Fading Radiance

"No, she's not mine. I'm watching her for someone else. I'm not staying for long either. I just need one thing-that's all."

Liam sighed, visibly disappointed. "Alright then. Well, we could always use you around here again if that spaceship crew thing doesn't work out."

I slipped inside and Liam bolted the door shut behind me. The interior was the same as I remembered it-filled with illegal cargo for sale.

"The place is a bit messier than usual." Liam sounded slightly ashamed. "We just got in a big shipment of engines."

"Illegal ones."

"As always," Liam smirked. He cupped his hands around his lips and shouted, "Hey guys! Marina's here!"

A few new faces glanced over, but most of them I remembered. "Hey, you came back!"

"Here to fix some stuff up?"

I always used to come around the warehouse to help out. Motor was cheapskate who barely paid me, so I was always in need of some extra cash. At some point or another, I'd heard rumors about the warehouse, and had eventually gone to check it out. As it turned out, they needed a mechanic to fix a lot of their stolen ships. Criminals turn out to be nice guys-but mostly, they're rich. I got paid more working at the warehouse in one day than I made working a month for Motor.

Sadly, for appearance's sake, I could never simply quit my job at Motor's. My Mom would have had a heart attack if she knew I was in with the 'bad guys'. Although all things considered, they'd treated me a lot better than my mother ever had.

I smiled, greeting a few of my old friends for a few minutes before they all returned to their work. "So what did you stop in for, Marina? Some spare parts for cheap?"

"Actually I was looking for information."

"What kind of information?"

"Do you have any of the police interrogation records from yesterday?"

Liam shook his head disappointedly. "I've got as early as three months ago, but that isn't of much help, is it?"

"Can I pay you anything to get them for me?"

"Sorry, but no can do. We've got to wait until files are put on low security and we can sneak in to grab some copies. That doesn't happen until about two or three months after the day of record. I can't risk getting caught."

I hesitated. "I'll give you my entire lay."

He raised an eyebrow. "How much you making?"

Fading Radiance

"I don't know yet. We haven't been told the total cost of the operation we were on. I don't make too bad of a lay-I promise. I can pay you the entire thing if you'll get me the file."

Liam shook his head. "I'd consider it for a few million, but they'd execute me on the spot if I got caught. You'd have to be crazy to do it."

"Can I?"

"Can you what?"

"Can I do it? Where do they keep the files?"

Liam seemed caught off guard. "You're kidding, right? Just wait another few months and I'll get them for you."

"I can't wait another few months! I might be dead by then."

Liam's eyes searched mine for a long moment. "What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into?"

"None yet, but that's about to change."

He shook his head deliberately. "No, Marina. They'd shoot you the first chance they got. You wouldn't escape with the files-trust me. You've never even broken in before. Hell, have you done anything illegal in your whole life besides fixing up a few ships for us?"

"Liam, please. Just tell me where they are and what I need to do."

"I can't let you do that. It's suicide. Trust me, just wait it out a few months. You won't be dead. You've got the best security crew in the world-a group of varyingly poor and rich societal rejects who hate the government."

"Tell me how to do it or I'll have to figure it out and take the even bigger risk of being killed."

He sighed dejectedly. "I wish you weren't so impulsive." He paused, as if expecting me to interrupt and take it back. When I didn't, he reluctantly began the explanation. "In the very back of the federal records storage building, there's a vault for new cases. Whatever it is you're looking for is most likely in there. There's going to be guards at every entrance and exit, and maybe in front of the vault, too."

"I got it."

Liam pursed his lips. "You're being stupid Marina."

"I'm really, really good at being stupid."

Chapter 21

After a few more minutes of Liam begging me to stay, I finally left.

"Why do you need to see that stuff?" Piper asked innocently.

"They took away my best friend because she knows important stuff. Whatever she knows is going to be recorded so they don't forget."

Piper nodded thoughtfully. "Don't you know the important stuff?"

"No. I guess no one ever wanted to tell me. That's why I've got to find out." It suddenly occurred to me how stupid I was being. I couldn't bring Piper. She was just a little kid, and I couldn't risk getting her killed too. But where else was I supposed to take her? I couldn't leave her standing in the street waiting for me, and Halon could never know about what I was going to do.

I glanced back at the warehouse. Could I leave her with Liam?

Wanting to keep things short, I got Liam to open the door back up. Before he could speak, I nudged Piper inside. "I need you to watch her for an hour. If I'm not back by then, I'm probably dead, and you need to find a man named Halon Storms. Take Piper to him."

Liam stared at me in disbelief. "Marina, you can't expect me to-"

"Thanks, Liam!"

I turned and ran like the army was after me. He owed me a favor, anyway. He could at least take care of a hyperactive little girl for an hour.

As it turned out, the building was a lot further away than I'd thought. It left me even less time to break in.

It was as heavily guarded as Liam had said. A feeling of despair washed over me. How was I supposed to get past all of them? I wasn't a superhero. I'd never be able to fight my way through.

The least I could do was get inside. They couldn't arrest me for that, right? It was a public building.

I tried to ignore the guard standing beside the ornate wooden door.

"You here for school?" He asked gruffly.

"Uh, yeah. School."

I hadn't been to school since I was twelve. Not that it mattered. I'd already learned most everything I would need in life. I would die a ship mechanic, not some genius scientist.

I pushed the doors open to find a large, empty marble room. The only thing occupying the space was a fat wooden desk and an old woman with glasses sitting behind it. She smiled tiredly. "Can I help you darling?"

Fading Radiance

"Yeah. I'm doing a project for school. It's about crime. I was wondering if I could get a look at some records?"

She frowned uncertainly. "What kind of records?"

"Nothing too important. Just the names of recent criminals."

She hesitated, and held up a finger. "Wait here." She hobbled through a door directly behind her desk. I noticed another door adjacent to the one she'd gone through. It was padlocked—a good sign that I shouldn't be in there. Of course, it was probably exactly where I wanted to be.

"Thanks for your help but my Mom just called. I have to go. I'm leaving now."

Instead of heading toward the door I'd come through, I quickly fiddled with the padlock. I was an expert at picking locks, and they hadn't made it particularly difficult.

Just as the old woman returned to her desk, I unhooked the padlock and slipped through. By the grace of God, no guards were waiting on the other side. I breathed a tiny sigh of relief.

The door had led to a long hallway that veered off in two different directions. As stealthily as possible, I peeked around each of the corners. There were vaults as far as the eye could see in either direction, but only one had a guard posted outside of it. Of course, that was probably my vault.

Would anyone really notice if I knocked out one guy?

I whirled around the corner as quickly as possible. Before the guard had a chance to react, I'd landed a sharp kick on his torso. It brought him to his knees, giving me a chance to whack his temple hard enough that he dropped to the floor—out cold. I sort of pitied the guy, but he'd be alright. A circle of keys hung from his waist.

I managed to rip them off, jamming each one into the vault lock as fast as possible. Eventually I found the right key, and the door opened with an ear-splitting metallic screech.

A file cabinet to my right was labeled *Interrogations*. All I had to do was find Cotto's name in there.

I ripped it open and rifled through as quickly as possible. Someone was already going to know that I had been here. I just had to get in and out fast enough.

Though it couldn't have been more than seconds until I found her file, it felt like an eternity. I yanked it out, skimming over the interrogation.

Investigator Setkaze: How much do you know about Operation Honorable Justice?

Suspect Cotto Macy: Not a damn thing.

Investigator Setkaze: I've got a lot of intelligence on you, Ms. Macy. I've got files on every person you've ever met.

Suspect Cotto Macy: And they'll tell you I don't know anything. I'm the first officer on a cargo ship. That's it.

Investigator Setkaze: I've got a list of your crew right here. Halon Storms, age 27. Chase Fisher, age 22. Devon Derrego, age 25. Daton Guardsboro, age 26. Linden Gates, age 26. Cayrem Shatton, age 27. Marina

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Castlebrook, age 16. And last but not least, Cotto Macy, age 26. So you see, Ms. Macy, I know everything I need to know about you. I know where every person on this list is right now, and I'm able to have all of them killed in a heartbeat.

Suspect Cotto Macy: That's not legal.

Investigator Setkaze: Oh, I assure you, the law is on my side. Which ones should I kill first? Or should I do it one by one until you talk to me?

Suspect Cotto Macy: You wouldn't do that.

Investigator Setkaze: Alright, then let me radio my boss. We'll knock off the captain first.

Suspect Cotto Macy: I'll kill you if you try.

Investigator Setkaze: Just tell me what you know or I'll have them all assassinated.

Suspect Cotto Macy: If I tell you, you won't lay a finger on any of them, right?

Investigator Setkaze: You have my word.

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