



## *A note from Megan Shepherd*

Dear readers,

All the books in The Cage series are told from a variety of perspectives: Cora, our main protagonist, and also from Lucky, Leon, Mali, Nok, and Rolf. Through all of this, I always felt as though one perspective was missing: Cassian's.

Because he belongs to a non-human, super-intelligent race, his motives are often difficult to interpret. We are left wondering if he is their abductor, their savior, or something else entirely. While I love this sense of mystery regarding Cassian, I also wanted to dive deeper into his character and include some “behind the scenes” sections showing what he was up to while Cora and her friends were trying to navigate the enclosure's dangerous puzzles.

In *The Cage*, we learn what it is about Cassian that enchants Cora, and in this novella we get to see what it is about Cora—from the first moment he saw her on Earth—that draws Cassian to her, too. Enjoy!



# THE CARETAKER

*A CAGE novella*

## **10 DAYS BEFORE:**

Her name was Sarah Davenport.

Alone in the shuttle's main deck, Cassian scrolled through the contents of the digital file projected on the view screen. Age: 16. Birthplace: Cincinnati, Ohio. Current location: 39.1031° N, 84.5120° W. Intelligence per human IQ: 132. Unique talents: Plays a musical instrument called the trombone.

He read the rest of the information in a perfunctory manner—nothing unusual in the data; it was a standard reconnaissance mission. The Stock Algorithm had gathered the information in its attempt to find an ideal Girl-2 candidate for the latest enclosure. His task, as Caretaker, was



straight-forward: verify the Algorithm's findings, monitor the candidate to ensure she was a suitable match for Boy-2, and then liberate her from Earth.

A solo mission. Simple.

He pressed a few keys on the ship's command desk, booting up the holo-simulation remote monitoring program that would connect the shuttle to Earth, five hundred thousand miles away. The wall opposite the view screen flickered to life. What had once been plain gray paneling was now a holographic replica of the coordinates he had entered into the ship's computer: Cincinnati, Ohio. More specifically, an exact recreation of the inside of an American high school. He vaguely recognized the metal boxes lining the walls as a type of storage container he had read about: lockers. And those colorful illustrations on the walls: posters. Teenage humans filled the hallways, dressed in bright colors, yelling at one another in shockingly loud voices. Not at all like the stoic calm of the cloaked Kindred.

Controlled. Logical. Predictable. That was the Kindred way.

And yet, despite his emotional cloak, Cassian felt himself breaking his mask-like composure to smile. Displaying happiness while cloaked was practically unheard of among his kind, but there was something about humans' wild, unbridled enthusiasm that had always enchanted him.

A girl strode down the hall, and his face returned to a mask. Time to work. Curled red hair, pale skin, freckles. It



was Sarah Davenport. She wore a blue skirt and a scarf with a flowered pattern. Unlike the other students, she did not smile or laugh or yell. She approached a tall boy and grabbed him by the shoulder, shoving him against a locker.

“Aiden Pierce, if you call Emilee chubby one more time I’m going to tell Coach Roberts about that night last month in the back of the football bus. The bottle of tequila. Don’t believe me? I took photos, you bastard. Look.”

The boy’s face blanched at the images on the phone in her hand.

Cassian observed and dutifully typed notes in the shuttle’s log with the same perfunctory manner as before: *The Girl-2 candidate demonstrates high moral development and cleverness. Will be well matched with Boy-2, who I will proceed to observe for the final time now.*

He hit a few more keys and Sarah Davenport and the American high school disappeared. The holo-wall flickered again and a library appeared, dingy hardback books lining tall shelves, a boy with dark hair seated in front of a rudimentary computer. Cassian glanced at his notes for the Algorithm’s selection for Boy-2. Name: Luciano Flores. Age: 18. Birthplace: Nieva, Colombia. Current location: 48.1920° N, 114.3168° W. Intelligence per human IQ: 120. Unique talents: Affinity for working with animals.

Cassian had watched this boy before. Truth be told, he had watched many of them—the humans—going about their daily lives, and not just when it was required of him. What



did humans call it? A pastime. He was the only soldier on the reconnaissance shuttle, so no other Kindred knew that he sometimes sat in the control chair, leaning forward with elbows resting on his knees, studying the laughter between two sisters, or the gentle touch of a mother waking her baby, or the elegance of a human swimming in the sea. It wasn't expressly forbidden to watch humans on the holo-wall outside of work parameters, but if discovered, they would severely question his motives.

*Don't get too close*, that was the rule. And he had already broken his cloak once today, to smile.

Unacceptable.

He finished taking his final notes on Luciano Flores. In half a rotation, he would liberate the boy along with the rest of the candidates and transport them to the aggregate station. He stood, finger poised over the shut-down button, but a face caught his eye at the last moment.

He paused.

In the projection, Luciano Flores was scrolling through pictures on the computer. The same face, over and over. A girl about his own age, long blond hair, pale skin. In some photos she was smiling brightly, cheeks full and flushed, but in other photos she wore a drab orange jumpsuit, her hair limp and dry. It wasn't the girl's face that caught Cassian's attention—he saw so many human faces every day—but rather the way Boy-2 was focused on her. Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, unsettlingly similar to Cassian's own



pose. And the boy's feelings—such an overwhelming mess of guilt and desire, shame and anger.

Cassian cocked his head. He hadn't known it was possible to experience such a vast span of emotions at the same time. What would make someone feel so many different things all at once? What was it about this girl?

Before he knew what he was doing, his hands were moving again over the controls. On Luciano Flores' computer, there was a caption beneath the girl's photograph. It gave her name and her location: Cora Mason, Bay Pines Juvenile Detention Center. Just enough information for him to feed to the Stock Algorithm to gather her profile, which appeared on the control desk. Name: Cora Mason. Age: 16. Birthplace: Richmond, Virginia. Current location: 39.0276° N, 83.9197° W. Intelligence per human IQ: 126. Unique talents: Gifted at vocals and song construction.

And then, with a flicker, she was there.

Gone was the library with its tall, light-filled windows. Just steps away on the other side of the ship's deck—and yet, in actuality, far away on Earth—was the girl from the photographs. She sat on a plain metal cot in a bare cinderblock room. The orange jumpsuit was folded by her side. She wore white underclothes. Her hair, long and tangled, curtained the sides of her face. One hand was absently reaching for her neck, which was bare now, in a gesture some humans made to clutch a familiar necklace. In her other hand, she held a deck of cards.



Cassian watched her shuffling the deck, shuffling and shuffling again. He was alone, and he was not so deeply cloaked that he felt nothing. Deep down, beneath the emotional cloak, was a spark of pity for her barbaric conditions, and curiosity about her connection to Boy-2, and interest in the card game. Such mild feelings were nothing out of the ordinary. He often felt curiosity about the human subjects he studied.

But then she looked at him.

He went rigid. A flush of voyeuristic guilt flooded him before he remembered that, of course, she could not see him. This happened, sometimes—humans glanced by chance in the general direction where he stood, but it was never *him* they were looking at, rather a friend or a bird or more often than not, television. And then another wave of guilt made him realize that what he felt now was more than just mild curiosity. He drew in a deep breath, centering himself, refocusing on submerging all unacceptably strong feelings.

Logic above all.

But when he looked at the girl, there was still something unsettling about her gaze. Whatever she was looking at troubled her. He hit a few keys to rotate the projection to show what she was regarding.

There was only a plain cinderblock wall.

Cassian felt an odd sensation in the pit of his stomach. He turned back to the projection of the girl. Cora Mason. Her eyes seemed to meet his as if she saw him with perfect clarity. Her eyelids narrowed and she tilted her head, lips



parting. An expression of confusion. Could she—could she see him?

Impossible.

His pulse elevated. He clenched his jaw, frustrated. He should be stronger than his feelings. He should be in control. There was something wrong about all of this—about the girl and about the way he was feeling. She couldn't possibly see him. The reconnaissance technology worked through light-refracting sensors beamed from Earth to the ship, utterly undetectable to the human eye.

And yet still she looked right at him. The cards slipped from her hands, spilling onto the floor. She stood uncertainly and began to approach where he stood. Cassian watched in riveted confusion. She reached out a hand in his direction. Anxious warmth spread throughout his chest beneath his stiff uniform. He balled his fists, slowing his breathing, steadying his heartbeat, regulating his temperature, bringing his reactions back to the ideal degree of emotion—thoroughly undetectable.

She couldn't see him. That was impossible.

But...perhaps she could sense him.

A second before the girl's holographic hand would have reached where he stood, he slammed his fist down over the controls, and it all disappeared. A plain wall again.

He sat in the chair, breathing hard.

Had she truly sensed him?

He leaned forward, tenting his hands. This could change everything. This could be the human he had been looking for,





secretly, for the last hundred rotations—a human with potential for perceptive abilities.

He swallowed hard, shaken in a way that he shouldn't be able to feel while cloaked. He glanced back at the controls, tempted. Part of him wanted to watch her again. See what else she might do. Have her look at him—reach out for him—in that way that no one else ever had.

He let out a tight breath.

Somehow, he already knew it would not be Sarah Davenport he was going to take.

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For the next rotation, he watched the girl in the cinderblock room. Studied her. Memorized her. She never looked at him again, never seemed to see or sense him as she had the first time. When he peered into her thoughts, he knew that she had dismissed that instance as a fleeing moment of déjà vu, or as a lingering dream, and she had put it far out of her mind and gone on with her days in detention. But he hadn't forgotten.

Not at all.

He readied the shuttle to orbit Earth for the liberation mission and booted up his notes in the ship's computer. *Sarah Davenport*, he crossed out. He typed in a new name. *Girl-2: Cora Mason*.



## **DAY 1:**

Her processing had been quick.

No one ever closely questioned the wards Cassian brought back from Earth—no one had any reason to—so no one knew that Cora Mason was supposed to have been Sarah Davenport. The other Kindred soldiers merely nodded to him as he passed, carrying her unconscious body in his arms, laying her gently on the floor of her enclosure. This was the sixth capture, and the last. The Council would be pleased—unless they learned what he was truly planning.

A spark of fear ignited in him, deep down. He touched her hair—the color of the white around the sun—and the fear diminished.

They wouldn't learn his plan.

He'd make certain of it.

He pressed the device on his wrist and materialized in the darkened viewing room attached to her enclosure. Usually, other Kindred would be with him to observe the wards' introductions. They would stand in this same room, a line of identically dressed men and women, watching through the tinted window on the wall, tapping observations on the subject's behavior and physical response into the keypads at their waist. But today he had requested a solo viewing. He didn't want any other Kindred crowding the room, sucking up all the oxygen, sharing in this moment.

Besides, he was afraid they might sense these powerful



new feelings he was struggling to hide. Curiosity. Fear. Guilt. And if the Council probed his mind and read that this girl had potential perceptive abilities, they would remove her for experimentation—or worse. Fortunately he'd always been exceptionally good at blocking his thoughts from the mind-reading abilities of other Kindred. Not even the Councilmembers could hide their thoughts as well as he could.

The window flickered, stealing his attention as images filled the blackness. This was his favorite part: the first glimpse of the world behind the window. Light bathed his face in colors that didn't belong in his world: warm, sandy orange and a blue so bright that it stung his eyes. He knew this was a desert, because he'd studied everything about it. The climate, the heat, the precise geometric curve of sand against sky. Still, the sight beyond the window was as foreign to him as the colors, as the very ideas of sky and sand and sun.

And *she* was foreign, too. No matter how long he had watched her, so much about her was still a mystery.

"Cora." He spoke her name very quietly, to himself, testing out the feel of it in his mouth.

She lay unconscious in the sand, as he had left her. One of her arms was thrown over her forehead in the same graceful arc as the curve of the dune. She woke groggily, scrambling to her knees in the sand, disoriented and alone. From her angle, she couldn't see the viewing room.

Couldn't see *him*.



On the other side of the window, her panic grew. Her screams filtered through the speakers surrounding the viewing screen. He pressed a button to switch them off. Silence replaced them, but he still heard her screams in his own head.

“Cora,” he whispered again, bolder this time.

He studied her terror with a steady pulse, and a calm breath, and only the slightest flexing of his palm in the stiff glove—all emotion thoroughly undetectable.

Almost.

## **DAY 12:**

Five human wards stood lined against the cold medical room wall. They had only been in the enclosure for one rotation, and fear and wariness were still sharp in their eyes. Cassian called their names one at a time, watching silently as they stepped forward and undressed for the medical officer, Serassi, to perform her routine health examinations.

“Boy-1.” The twitchy, pale European came forward.

“Girl-1.” The tall one with a pink streak in her hair.

“Boy-2.” Tan and dark hair and dark flashing eyes.

And then.

“Cora.”

His voice echoed in the tight quarters of the medical room. The human wards went stiff. So did Serassi, and



Cassian quickly realized his mistake. He had used a name instead of 'Girl-2'. Cora. A word he had whispered to himself in the privacy of his solitary chamber, deep within his own head where not even the Council could probe. But he hadn't been alone this time.

He'd made a mistake.

The Kindred never made mistakes.

Serassi eyed him evenly until he deepened his voice, flattening even the slightest trace of emotion, though he couldn't stop his hands from flexing anxiously at his side.

"Girl-2."

Cora met his eyes, and for a second he had the overwhelming sense that she could see into his head, past the mistake, straight into his plans for her that went far beyond an enclosure and five other humans.

He turned his back, in part so she wouldn't feel ashamed to take off her clothes in front of him, but in part to shake the feeling of her watching eyes. Anyway, neither he nor Serassi had interest in the naked human form. It wasn't so different from how Kindred looked undressed. It was a far more intimate experience to look into their minds. Cora's, of course, fascinated him the most. The memories she kept there. The secrets she had never told anyone about, like that night her father drove a car off a bridge. And the fact that she was far more curious about the Kindred than she let on.

And of course, the potential she didn't even know she had. He could feel it when he cast his thoughts into her mind, ever since that first time he had watched her in her detention



cell. Her potential thrummed there, a seed buried deeply in soil, waiting for the warm spring sun to wake it.

That was his job. His secret one. And he wouldn't make a mistake when it came to that. He couldn't afford to. The future of her species hinged on it.

After the examinations, he made his way back to his quarters, unsurprised to find Serassi waiting for him outside his door. He didn't need to probe her mind to know she was about to reprimand him. She jerked her head toward the opposite door and they entered a viewing chamber where a tinted window showed the five wards back in their environment, in the artificial diner, arguing.

"You made a mistake," Serassi stated, motioning to the wards on the other side of the glass. "You called one of them by her name. There are labels in place for a reason." No anger showed on Serassi's face. Unlike him, Serassi had never struggled to cloak her emotions.

"It will not happen again," he said.

"By protocol I am obligated to report this to the Council. They will not be pleased. The only reason you were granted your current position was because Fian interceded on your behalf."

"I proved myself long before Fian interceded."

"Proved yourself capable of being more than a star-sweeper, maybe," Serassi said tightly. "But there are still those who have their doubts about you. Particularly when it comes to your interest in the humans' well being. There are rumors that you get too attached. You become more



concerned with the human subjects' welfare than with regulations." She glanced toward the viewing screen. Beyond it, the wards were arguing about the new Girl-3, Mali, the stringy-haired, skeletal girl who had grown up among the Kindred, whom Cassian considered the closest thing he had to the human concept of friend. He calmed his own mind so he could probe into theirs. Boy-3, the tattooed one who had tried to fight Cassian the first day, was masking his fear with a show of anger. Boy-1, the red-haired one with fingers that never stopped twitching, was repeating series of numbers in his head to calm himself. Cora was staring at the panel, her mind quiet, as if she knew he was looking at her.

*Cora.* He'd erred again. He really must endeavor to call her 'Girl-2', even in his head.

At his side, Serassi moved closer to the window, head cocked. "I must admit, there is something fascinating about them. So reckless. Mali is telling them everything they wish to know and yet they still do not trust her."

Through the window, Cora had turned and was staring in his direction with those eyes that were a shade of blue he'd never seen before. He straightened, glancing out of the corner of his eye at Serassi. Did she also sense the girl's potential abilities? Cora approached the window with cautious steps, moving her face close to the glass, trying to see within. From the other side, Cassian knew, it appeared as a standard window in the candy store facade, but Cora seemed to somehow suspect he and Serassi were there on



the other side. Was it a lucky guess? Intuition? Or something more? She held out a hesitant hand and pressed it against the glass, one finger at a time. Cassian's hand flinched with an urge to match that motion from the other side, finger for finger, palm for palm.

Serassi glanced at his flexing hand. "It is not your job to be curious about them," she said, low and warning. "Only to keep them alive."

On the other side of the window, the human with the pink streak in her hair, Girl-1, started to cry. Cora turned to the girl and wrapped her arms around her tight.

"She never should have been placed here," Serassi continued, then dropped her voice even lower. "I looked into her files after she attempted to escape the enclosure on her first day. You did a fair job hiding your actions, but not good enough. I know what you did, bringing her here instead of the Stock Algorithm's true selection. You should hope no one else learns of it. The Council is watching you carefully."

Through the window, Cora whispered soothing words to the crying girl that Cassian could just make out through the speakers. Words like *home* and *soon* and *not forever*. For a moment, his heart tightened. They were such naïve creatures.

"I will not report this incident," Serassi said, "but this is the last time I cover for you." She stepped closer. "Do not make another mistake."





## DAY 21:

Nearly two rotations had passed since he'd liberated Cora and the others from Earth and brought them to the enclosure. Twenty-one human days—the deadline he had given them. Twenty-one days to adhere to Rule Three, the procreation requirement, or face permanent removal.

The deadline had come.

Cora hadn't obeyed.

Cassian cursed to himself as he strode down the hallway to his quarters. He could still feel the heat of the simulated jungle. Just moments ago, he had confronted Cora about the deadline, and she had accosted him about the bone she'd found buried in the jungle dirt. The bone he'd put there, hoping she would find. The bone that he knew would drive the final wedge between her and the other wards. And now his plan was working—the other wards had pushed her away. She was isolated. Panicked. Exactly where he wanted her. Her potential abilities were there, deep in her mind, but they were buried under the distractions of friendship, of comfort, of trust, of love. All of those things would need to be stripped away to expose her latent abilities.

Her mind *had* to break.

Only then would she evolve.

But he hadn't known, when all of this had started, that



she would suffer this much. Or that he would care so deeply that he was the one causing her pain.

The doors to his quarters closed behind him. Alone at last. He dropped his formal posture and began the process to uncloak. It began with a deep breath, releasing each tense muscles from head to toe, shedding his stoic cloak like a snakeskin, letting go of the stiffness in his neck, rolling his head and flexing his hands, and finally, dissolving the black inner eyelids. When he looked at his reflection in the viewing window, his eyes were rimmed in a cloudy white. In the reflection, his skin didn't look bronze, just shadowy. He almost looked human.

Then he let out a curse and started pulling at the knots on the side of his uniform.

Why did Cora have to look at him with such cold eyes? Why did she always have to resist him? *Get away from me*, she had said in the jungle, brandishing that bone. *You're a liar. We aren't safe here at all. If you don't kill us, then we'll end up killing each other.*

She didn't understand what risks he was taking for her. He wasn't her enemy. He was the only chance she—all of them—had. And now it was him experiencing a torturous mess of feelings.

He paced to the cabinet where he kept a bottle of alcohol, traced the unlocking pattern, pulled out the bottle and took a long drink before sinking into the single chair. He rested his head in his hands.



No. Her eyes weren't always cold. They were filled with warmth whenever she looked at anyone but him.

He set down the bottle. A single book sat on the table next to him—dented and worn, an artifact from Earth he had smuggled from the archives. The rest of his quarters were precisely regimented: his few belongings stowed away in locked wall cases, only the molded table, a single chair, and his sleeping pallet in the next room. He picked up the book. *Peter Pan and Wendy*. He'd made a mistake by leaving it out—just as he'd made a mistake in telling Cora the truth: that all the previous human cohorts had murdered each other.

But he was tired of always trying to do everything correctly. Sometimes he wanted to make mistakes. It meant he was thinking for himself, not obeying the Stock Algorithm.

He sighed, rolling his head back again. The truth was, he couldn't stand to watch her another minute through those black windows. It was the deadline. Like it or not, she would have to sleep with Lucky. Let Lucky touch her, breathe in the scent of her hair, press his lips to hers. Unless she chose one of the other boys. Probably not Rolf, but maybe Leon. Cassian grit his teeth. There was something about that hulking human with black marks all over his face that was seriously irritating. Maybe it was how Cora had showed him, a criminal, more kindness than she ever had Cassian.

He took another drink from the bottle. It was absurd of him to care. Why did it matter which boy she chose?



He closed his eyes. He knew his curiosity about her was wrong. She was an addiction that he did not want to have, cloaked or uncloaked. He was hardly the first Kindred to become entranced by humanity—the menageries existed entirely because of his kind’s fascination with them—yet it wasn’t just human houses or music or clothing that captivated him; it wasn’t even humans in general.

It was her.

His door slid open and he jerked upright, sloshing the alcohol on his unknotted uniform. He was on his feet in a second.

Fian stood in the doorway, and for a second he felt relief to see one of the few faces he could trust. “Fian—”

But then warning flashed in Fian’s eyes, and a second shadow darkened the doorway. The head delegate of the Intelligence Council.

“Arrowal.” Cassian regained his formal position the best he could, considering the spilled alcohol on his clothes. In his head, he cursed. Then he cursed again because Arrowal, cloaked, could read what he had just thought. Quickly, he cloaked himself to match the others’ status. Eyes blackened. Posture stiff. Mind shielded.

“You are supposed to be on duty.” Arrowal’s mechanical black eyes took in Cassian’s rumpled uniform with just the appropriate degree of cool disdain.

“Tessela is fulfilling my duties at the moment.”

“And you chose to spend your off-duty time alone in



your quarters, intoxicating yourself?"

Behind Arrowal's back, Fian gave him another long warning look.

Cassian looked at the bottle in his hand. "We are permitted our indulgences, within reason." Cloaked, his voice came out even and mechanical.

Arrowal only smirked. Cassian was acutely aware of the fact that he was an outlier among his people. His exceptional strength and mental abilities granted him a certain degree of respect, but it hadn't always been this way. There had been a time when Cassian was on the lowest rung of society, barely more powerful than the human wards he cared for. Raised in the communal grow-houses, he spent his first generation being told his small size and below-average attention span made him suitable for nothing but a star-sweeper. But he had worked hard to overcome the small stature of his youth, and now he was a physical and mental rival even for Arrowal himself.

Cassian looked between them. "Why have you come?"

"You and I know perfectly well that Girl-2 has no intention of procreating by the end of the adjustment period," Arrowal replied. "It is time for you to remove her." Cassian clenched his jaw. "She has until sunrise. She could still comply."

Arrowal studied him closely. If Cassian didn't know better, he would swear there was an underlying trace of irritation in the Councilmember's face, deep beneath the



emotional cloak.

*Why does Arrowal care if Cora stays or is removed?*

*What is she to him?*

*Does he suspect her abilities?*

Fortunately, cloaked, they could not read such traitorous thoughts in his head.

Arrowal did not look pleased. "I expect you to remove her promptly at sunrise if she does not. The Stock Algorithm will select a new match for Boy-2 out of the pool of captive humans; don't waste any time replacing her."

"I understand."

Arrowal turned to leave, but Fian remained behind, waiting stiffly until they were alone.

"If you must remove her," Fian said, a trace of hidden meaning in his voice, "there is an opening in a menagerie on level six. The Harem. They go through girls so fast there they're always looking for new ones. She would be very popular."

Cassian gave a stiff nod. He understood what Fian was trying to tell him: if Cora was removed, the Harem would be her fate. It wasn't until the doors shut that Cassian uncloaked again and let anger flood him, building and building until he slammed his fist against the door. He grit his teeth and started to reknit his stiff uniform. He stashed the alcohol back in the compartment. Like Arrowal said, it was pathetic to sit alone in a room and drink.

And yet wasn't it also pathetic to avoid the truth?



He could tell himself he was spending so much time with Cora because of her latent abilities, but the mission was only half of it now. The truth was, he'd take any excuse he could just to be near her.

## **DAY 22:**

*Shit*, he thought. That was what humans said when things went wrong, wasn't it? And things were definitely going wrong.

As he strode down the hall, he managed to cloak himself well enough that anyone who saw him would think he was merely in a hurry, but inside, his body was on fire with emotions.

He had kissed her. His chin had tilted toward hers. His lips had parted. "I want to know what it feels like," he'd whispered.

And he had known how wrong it was. He knew she had wanted to escape, but he never imagined she would actually succeed. He had been working on a new plan of his own ever since Fian had warned her that she would be put in the Harem.

But then she had done the impossible—she'd found the exit.

"If you cared for me," she had said, "you'd help me



escape.” And she had touched him, touched his arm, set fire to every cell in his body despite the endless ocean around them. “Caring about someone means you would sacrifice your own happiness for theirs.”

He hadn’t been able to control himself.

He’d pressed his lips to hers.

The memory of the kiss nearly made him stumble, and he took a deep breath and concentrated on walking down the hall. He tried not to think about how soft her lips had been. How her fingers had tightened around his arm. How she’d let out a small sound of surprise, and then how she’d kissed him back.

His face warmed at the memory. Painful and pleasurable all at once, like a hunger he wanted to go on forever. In that instant, he had known he could never stand stiffly by a viewing window and watch her be with anyone else, human or otherwise.

He reached a door and tapped in a quick code, then entered another hallway, the one that led to the Council’s control center.

Now what could he do? Her mind had been on the verge of breaking, but this escape attempt ruined everything. She had reconciled with Lucky and Mali. She had fresh hope. Her perceptive abilities would never come to fruition now.

He flexed his fist, walking faster, until a door opened to his left and he nearly collided with a figure that was emerging.





“Serassi.” He fought to keep his voice steady, his breathing regular.

“Cassian.” She pulled him to the side of the hallway, keeping her voice low. “Have you lost all logic?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been watching you. Just now, in the enclosure, I saw you standing in the ocean with Girl-2. It is expressly forbidden to uncloak your emotions around a human research subject, especially to hold one like that, to kiss one like that...” Her jaw tensed. “I cannot hide this mistake as I have your previous ones. I must inform the Council.”

He grabbed her arm. “Give me a little time. You don’t understand what is happening.”

She threw his hand off of her arm and started down the hall at a brisk walk. Cassian ran after her, giving up the pretense of remaining cloaked.

“The humans are smarter than we give them credit for,” he said. “They might even be intelligent. Cora figured out the failsafe exit. She’s trying to leave as we speak now.”

Serassi spun on him. “That’s impossible—humans can’t detect perceptive technology.”

“I saw it with my own eyes. She can. Which means, if humans are becoming intelligent, we can’t ignore it. They should be entitled to rights the same as the other intelligent species. If the Council learns of it, she won’t be safe. Arrowal will tear her apart to figure out how she did it. I can’t let that happen.”



Serassi's head turned toward the hallway, where the door to the Council's control center emitted a golden-colored light between the seams. "Even if she gets past the failsafe exit," Serassi said, "she cannot navigate the station. She'll be found."

"Mali is with them. She knows the station and could show them the way. They have a chance."

For a moment, Serassi looked as though she might relent. But then she looked away from him. "I am sorry. This is one mistake too many, Cassian."

Cassian clenched his jaw. *Shit*. A thousand shits. He had promised Cora he would handle the Kindred, and he knew how much promises meant to her kind. He quieted his mind, searching for hers, but she was too far away and he was still too clouded with his own emotions. Had she already reached the beach? Was she already in the water?

"Serassi, wait."

She was headed for the Council doors, he had to stop her—

And then an idea occurred to him.

It was a dark, unsavory idea. An idea that sickened him to even consider. He had tried to break Cora's mind with the puzzles, but it hadn't worked. Neither had isolating her from the others. But perhaps, just perhaps, a betrayal would do it.

He swallowed. "I'll tell the Council myself."

Serassi frowned at his sudden change of heart. "You are certain?"



No. No. No.

But there was no other way.

“Yes.”

Serassi stepped back, allowing him access to the door. He approached it slowly, knowing what would happen. The moment he reported Cora’s escape attempt, guards would intercept her and the others. They would bring her to his office, where she would learn the truth about him. Where he would reveal the reason he had captured her, caged her, and pushed her to the breaking point.

Would she forgive him?

No.

But it didn’t matter. His desires didn’t matter. As much as he might crave it, he didn’t need her forgiveness to enact the next stage of his plan. He didn’t need for her to look at him with that same warmth that she shed on Lucky, and Leon, and Nok. He only needed her to suffer so strongly that her mind would break. Then, she would start to evolve into what he sought.

“Caring about someone means you would sacrifice your own happiness for theirs,” she had said. And she would never understand this, but that was what he was doing with this betrayal.

She’d never love him now. He was throwing away his chance for happiness so that she could excel. She would hate him, but they would change the world together.

He knocked on the Council’s door.