

LUCE

A Novel

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CHAPTER 1

His fingers gently plucked the strings of the guitar as he sang. His eyelashes closed and opened slowly against the transparent skin beneath his eyes. It was his voice, soft and tentative at first, yet growing in strength as he swept over the crests of the melody, that held her physically in place, immobile. Her chest ached, watching him that way. It was his sound and his alone, as familiar to her as her own mind. An extension of herself, clearly visible in another.

Grant's hair fell across his eyes as the song ended. He glanced up at her, that same enigmatic smile on his face. "Where are you, babe?"

"I'm right here," Calista answered, her voice breathy and strained. "I'm listening."

He pressed his lips together for a beat and then placed his guitar on the cushion next to him, crossing the small space toward her. She couldn't breathe as he sat next to her on the couch, his arm sliding behind her back to rest on her outer thigh opposite him.

"But you're not, babe, and that's the problem." She felt the soft scruff in his voice, that intimate closeness that comes only from speaking so honestly it catches in your throat like dry roast beef. "I miss you. I need you. You're my home."

Calista breathed his clean scent. His lips grazed the soft skin just below her ear and something stirred within her. She turned to meet his eyes.

But instead of Grant's sharp green eyes, Rita's cruel butterscotch ones glared back at her.

Calista sat up straight in bed, gasping as the faded colors of the nightmare slid silently off the canvas of her mind. She clutched the sweaty sheets to her chest, her eyes unfocused and watery.

It was the ninety-fourth dream about Grant she'd had since he left. She knew the number, because she had one for each night that he'd been away. Ninety-four dreams since she found the letter hidden in her locket. Ninety-four dreams since the car crash that had most certainly killed both Rita and Coco. Every day, she looked for some kind of communication from him. It was for nothing.

Calista pushed the bedding back and shoved her damp reddish-brown hair off the nape of her neck, her soft, racer-backed sleeping shirt riding up her slender back. She could practically hear the sick, sucking noise of an empty drain as the memory of him swirled away. It had been months, and yet the nauseating, wretched pain she felt when remembering him never abated.

Calista stood and walked to the window of her room in the mountain lodge. Below, the twinkling of tiny lights dotted the mountain in the pre-dawn light, the silhouette of the peaks rising into the sky a looming backdrop in the landscape. The snow had ceased its falling after she'd been here for a month or so, and now the slopes were green and lush. She spent her days hiking and her evenings perusing historical Luce mission reports. And writing music in her weathered journal. Her fingers already itched to write something about the dream she'd just left.

She squatted to spin the dial of the small safe below the window. After the final number, the lock clicked and the door swung open to reveal the small piece of plastic Calista had found in her locket after the explosion at Grant's house. She picked it up, running her fingers over the smooth surface. It looked almost identical to a pinky fingernail—small, nearly transparent, and flat.

The fact that it was the key to Dynam—the technology that would deliver efficient, free energy to the world—was marvelous. A pit of anger took root in Calista's stomach when she thought of the lock inside which the small transparent key fit. She'd been

forced to hand over the flash drive to Bellicise. But, it would not reveal its secrets without the key in her hand. Frowning, she placed it back inside the safe and spun the lock once more.

At first, the course of action she'd taken in coming to the lodge with Mia had seemed rash, but it had also seemed to be her only choice. With Bellicise watching Luce Headquarters like ravenous hyenas waiting for a scrap of road kill, Calista felt trapped. And she needed the solitude that the days in the mountains offered. Solitude to retract into herself like a turtle and heal.

As she read more about Luce, she realized they had nothing to hide, the way Bellicise had. And so she traveled with Mia to the lodge in the mountains.

Charles and Delores visited every few weeks to check on her and Mia. They spent the majority of their time working with contacts in Denver in order to prepare for the battle they felt sure was imminent. Calista thought maybe they were simply unsure how to protect her once Bellicise discovered her whereabouts. They were hunting her. They knew what she possessed.

She turned from the window toward the bathroom and the shower.

This is the day. The day I'm inducted as a member of Luce. The day I meet the rest of Luce and discover the plan Charles has created.

The early morning hike to the ceremony site was gorgeous, the mountain slopes covered in wild grasses and lush wildflowers as the two climbed in elevation.

"Explain to me again why the ceremony is always out in the middle of nowhere?" Calista asked Mia while hitching her hiking pack up on her back. "And why are we camping?"

Mia giggled, her cloud of black hair restrained with a tie against the warm, gentle breeze caressing the trail. "It might seem pretty unlikely now, but I guess old Delores was a big outdoors buff in her day. She really believes that nature brings people together. She claims that one night spent around a campfire in the mountains creates a strong team." Mia's hiking boot slipped a bit on a rock still wet from the morning dew as she walked behind Calista. "But if you ask me, I think she just likes to see us all unwind."

"I'm excited to see everyone in their element, too," Calista said, turning her head back toward Mia. "I can't wait to meet the other members of Luce. Especially after reading their mission reports over the past few months."

"They're all looking forward to meeting you, too. And personally, I'm stoked to see them. It's been weird going from living at Luce Headquarters and seeing them every day to living up here in the lodge, just the two of us." Mia gave her companion a sidelong look. "Not that I don't enjoy spending time with you, of course."

"Tell me about it. I'd barely gotten used to Bellicise, and now my life is upended again." Calista took a small sip from her water bottle. "And not knowing where Grant is, or what he's doing, is driving me crazy."

"Are you at least sleeping a little better?"

"Not really. I had another dream last night. I thought they might get better, but no luck."

"You poor thing." Mia clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Well, I think we are all ready for whatever step Luce is going to take next. Charles and Delores have been pretty closed-mouth about how they are going to deal with Bellicise while still protecting you. Whatever they have to tell us about their plans, it will be big."



The purple lupine and vibrant cobalt-blue larkspur clung thickly about their ankles as the pair moved. A vast valley basin opened wide below as the two women walked through a narrow pass. Calista caught her breath. Although she'd been on this trail many times since moving to live at the lodge, it never ceased to impress. The mountain peaks soared at impossible heights in the distance, the tops still capped in snow. The high altitude in the basin below the two still provided enough oxygen for living things to flourish brilliantly. A single doe stood, frozen, next to a slowly meandering creek in the middle of the valley. It paused for the smallest instant before turning to dash toward a grove of aspen trees at the base of a cliff.

The pair descended the rise to the valley below, walking single file.

They selected a campsite near enough the creek that they would be able to hear its gentle rushing song once night fell. They worked together to set up the two tents they carried with them and gathered tinder for the campfire. As they finished rolling out their sleeping bags in the midday heat of one of the tents, they heard the clamoring of other members of Luce descending into the valley. Calista's head popped out of the green canvas door to watch them coming.

There were two of them. A girl led the way, clutching the straps of her pack firmly. She was tall and beautiful, her dark brown hair hanging straight to the center of her back. A few orange feathers hung from some strands of her hair and a burgundy beanie hat perched on her head like a bird. She picked her footing cautiously in her ankle-high hiking boots, clearly planning each step through the rocks as she descended the most treacherous part of the trail.

Behind her tromped a gangly man hiking in his shirtsleeves. His dirty-blond hair stood in an unruly mess, swirling around the top of his head. He had on gray skinny jeans, red Chuck Taylor shoes – not equipped for the climb – and a white t-shirt that had an "I," a heart shape, and a pitcher of beer on it. His pierced lip sat in the middle of a face full of scruffy stubble. His knees bent outward as he walked, and Calista couldn't tell if he was duck-footed or if he was simply cushioning the blow of each step as it hit the ground.

Mia squealed and rushed across the meadow. "You guys! It's been so long!" She threw her arms enthusiastically around the girl. "Julia! I missed you so much!"

Julia's olive-skinned cheeks bloomed into a lovely smile dotted with a dimple over Mia's shoulder. Her eyes closed for just a moment, and Calista realized the friendship between the girls was strong enough to withstand most anything.

"Hey! Whadda 'bout me?" the man said, stepping forward and opening his long arms for a hug. Mia giggled good-naturedly and stepped into his arms. He bent to accommodate her tiny frame, wrapping her tightly in his arms and lifting her off the ground.

"Alex!" she squealed. "Oomph! Let me down!" She giggled maniacally.

Calista was unable to keep from smiling at the spectacle. "I'm Julia. It's great to finally meet you, Calista." Julia extended a hand toward Calista.

"Likewise," Calista said, grasping Julia's hand. "How was the hike?"

"Great! I love hiking up here. I don't make it up to the mountains enough."

"Hey! Didja know I play music, too?" Alex interrupted, tugging on Calista's arm like a child. "I mean, I heard you write lyrics. I write, but just melodies, really," he continued, neglecting the formal introductions.

"Mia mentioned you play guitar," Calista said, struggling not to laugh. "It's great to meet you, Alex. I've heard a lot about you." She stretched to shake his hand.

"Whoa. Put that thing away!" Without warning, Alex took a step toward Calista and pulled her into his arms. He smelled like hops. Calista giggled. "I'm a hugger. Deal with it." He stepped back and winked at her.

“The others will be here soon. We should probably set up lunch,” Mia said, beaming. She led the way to the campsite, and together, the four set up a camp stove and unpacked provisions.

More members of Luce made their way into the valley as the day progressed. Unlike Bellicise, Luce was a small, tight-knit clan of only eleven people—twelve, including Calista. Some of the members appeared to be accustomed to the outdoors. Others looked supremely out of place. But as the day wore on, every member of the team assisted in setting up the campsite, gathering firewood, and planning meals for the next two days. Calista was impressed at the way they all worked together. They were like a school of fish—each person was self-guided and independent, but still swimming in the same direction and changing course as necessary.

Just before nightfall, Delores and Charles slowly made their way down the hill. Delores strangled a cane in her plump fingers, gingerly creeping down the slope. Charles followed close behind, hands hovering awkwardly in the air, ready to catch the old woman if she fell. Alex bounded across the meadow to meet them, holding out a gangly arm for Delores to grasp as she crossed the rest of the distance to the campsite.

She raised her gray eyebrows, the wrinkles in her forehead bunching like a shar-pei as she took in the preparations. “Well, now, look at this! All of these bright young faces. I should have known you would be delayed by the old lady of the group.”

Alex led her gently to a camp chair placed near the unlit fire pit. She sunk slowly into the canvas and sighed with relief.

“Come on, Delores. You’re not that much older than the rest of us.” Charles removed the awkward Colorado Rockies ball cap perched on his crown and rubbed his bald head briefly before replacing it.

“As long as I can hike up here, I’ll never be old,” Delores said to him before turning to smile at Calista.

“Calista, dear, have you met everyone?”

Calista took a step forward and spoke up so Delores’ aged ears could hear her words. “Yes. Thanks, Delores. Everyone has been very hospitable.”

“Good. I hope you’re looking forward to this evening. It will be an important night for all of us.”

A few hours later, the members of Luce hunched on logs around the flickering flames of the campfire while the creek bubbled and gurgled along beside them. Other than the sounds of a few forks scraping the remnants of dinner from tin plates, all was silent.

Night was descending on the camp, the last purple of the sunset deepening rapidly into blackness. The air was fresh and clear, and breathing it was like taking a drink of crisp, cold water.

Calista looked at the faces around the circle. Since she’d read their mission reports over the past few months in the lodge, the names were easy to remember. In fact, the members of Luce seemed so familiar to her she felt as though she’d grown up knowing them.

Alice’s reading glasses perched on the end of her round nose as she turned to dig into a sack of supplies, no doubt looking for marshmallows to roast. Unfortunately, Pat, her husband, clutched the bag just below his potbelly. His eyes sparkled as he winked at Mindy, who sat next to her. Except for the red suit and the beard, he looked just like Santa Claus.



"I know I packed those marshmallows," Alice said. Her brown, bowl-shaped head of bushy hair tickled her chin and she rubbed it out of the way.

"You checked them off on your packing list," Pat agreed with her, hiding a smile and making a face at Mindy. Mindy flung her Rapunzel-golden hair over her shoulder and tapped Rob on the hand. He smiled at Pat.

Alice looked up. "What?" She suddenly noticed the marshmallows Pat hid and grabbed them. "Pat! Will you ever stop being such a nuisance!" she cried, her voice shrill. She pushed him on the shoulder and he rocked to the side.

"Gotta keep you on your toes, wifey."

Mindy and Rob laughed. Calista noticed the sharp contrast between Mindy's ditzy titter and Rob's almost-soundless chuckle. Rob hadn't spoken a word the entire day except to greet Calista when he first arrived. His main purpose in life appeared to be remaining as unobtrusive as possible. His athletic frame barely moved as he sat on the log. He reminded her of a cheetah—motionless until it was ready to strike with sleek grace.

Mindy, on the other hand, hardly stopped talking. In fact, she seemed to be uncomfortable with silence. She shifted back and forth, turning to members of the group throughout dinner. Her doe eyes flashed from person to person with a deep and innocent curiosity, but Calista suspected she was far more clever than she let on.

"Toss me one of those," Dan said from his position crouched uncomfortably on a log nearby. He seemed used to sitting on objects ill-prepared to support his bulk. His round face lit up in a smile, and he ticked his tongue against the back of his teeth as a sort of punctuation. "I'm wasting away over here."

"Oh, Dan," Jenny said, swatting his arm. She released a melodic giggle and smoothed her pink-flowered blouse. "Just so everyone knows—I have bug spray and additional pairs of socks in case you forgot some."

"Give it a rest, woman," Alex said. "You already cooked us dinner and gave us snacks all day. Let someone else be the 1950s housewife for a while!" Jenny simply smiled.

Delores wiped the remaining spaghetti sauce from her plate with a roll. "You know, Charles, my great-uncle George once told me that this valley used to be home to the most magnificent buck you'd ever seen."

"Here we go with the stories about her relatives," Julia whispered furtively from her place on the log next to Calista. The light caught one of her orange feathers as it swung down near her cheek. "Delores is awesome, but if you haven't noticed, she tends to go off on tangents."

"I've noticed," Calista whispered with a grin.

"Yeah, but what you don't know is what a rad lady she is." Alex leaned into Calista's other ear. "Did you know she hiked five of the Seven Summits?"

"What's that?" Calista wondered aloud.

"The Seven Summits," Julia contributed, keeping her voice low. "It's the tallest mountain on each of the seven continents. Only a few hundred people have climbed all of them. Five of the seven is pretty amazing."

"Wow," Calista breathed.

"Now, you kids over there, stop your whispering," Delores interrupted sternly, leaning forward in her camp chair and wagging a finger at the trio. "We've come to an important part of the evening, and you all have to pay attention."

"Sorry, Delores. My fault," Alex volunteered as he pulled gently on one of his earrings. Jenny smiled kindly at Calista and nodded, as though Calista's feelings may have been hurt from the gentle chiding.

“It’s okay, dear. Now, the purpose of our trip is the formal induction of Calista into Luce. Calista, you may have noticed, we do things a bit differently than Bellicise. There’s no stage. There are no masks or concealed identities. We aren’t waiting to see if you’ll fall on your face.” A snigger danced across the circle.

“We want to get to know you, and help you know each of us. We’re going to be a team, and we have to act like one.” The flickering firelight deepened the creases of Delores’ weathered face.

“Yes, ma’am,” Calista returned with a gentle nod of her reddish-brown head.

“Now,” Charles took over, “the induction into Luce consists of two parts. First, a promise by you to adhere to Luce’s values and customs. Most of them you already know, having been an unofficial member for a few months now. And second, an exercise in trust and loyalty.” Calista nodded once more, silently. A hot flutter of nervousness clutched the spaghetti in her stomach.

“Alice, could you talk Calista through the Four Principles?” Delores asked. “You do such a nice job of explaining things like this.”

“Of course.” Alice turned her brown helmet of hair toward Calista and enunciated her words in her teacherly way. “Luce is founded upon Four Principles. These principles help guide our actions as an organization. Without them, we would be subject to the changeable whims of individuals, rather than one cohesive moral compass.”

Alice paused a moment, looking across the fire into Calista’s eyes. The circle sat soundlessly.

“That makes sense,” Calista said after a pause, unsure what she was expected to say.

Alice examined her for another moment in a silence imbued with expectation. She stood, walking slowly around the outside of the circle of log seats. “The Four Principles are as follows: The first is Commitment. If you decide to become a member of Luce, you’re in it for the long haul. This means that even when Grant resurfaces, you must be committed to staying with Luce. We need you, Calista. We don’t give up on our team members, and we’ll never give up on you, no matter what your path in life may be.”

“What if I decide I don’t want to do this kind of work anymore?” Calista asked, frowning deeply.

“You won’t have to,” Alice answered. “Your life is your own, regardless of whether you’re doing missions or not. But we would ask you to continue to join us in meetings. We’ll be your family. And we value every family members’ opinion, regardless of whether they are an active member of Luce or not.”

“Bellicise said the same thing...” Suspicion gathered in Calista’s chest.

“That’s true,” Mia answered softly. “But they also controlled you. Luce isn’t like that.”

“Okay.” Calista twisted the ends of her hair contemplatively. Based on her last few months with Luce, she knew this was true. Though Delores and Charles had strongly encouraged her to move to the lodge, they had never forced her, and it was clear that she could leave if she wished. “What else?”

Alice continued, clasping her hands behind her back. Her pacing steps persisted in their circling of the fire. “The second principle is Reciprocity. Some of us call this one the Golden Rule, because that’s essentially what it is. It’s the basic knowledge that whatever energy you send out into the universe will come back to you. Therefore, it’s important to treat others the way you’d like to be treated. When I say that, I’m not just talking about members of Luce. I’m talking about civilians, as well.”



“Notice she didn’t say you can never lie,” Dan chimed in, his deep voice grumbling forth from the bulk looming in the shadows. His eyes flashed, and Calista couldn’t tell if there was a dark story hidden behind the sentiment or not.

“Great point, Dan.” Alice put one arm behind her back and a finger of her other hand tapped out a few beats in the air. She looked like a kindergarten teacher. “As you already know, Calista, part of this business is lying to get the information we need. You’ll be tasked with toeing the line between necessary, harmless lies and the lies that could severely hurt people.”

“I’ve had quite a bit of practice with lies,” Calista said grudgingly, rolling her eyes. Alex patted her knee familiarly. She glanced at him for an instant and the smell of hops rolled over her again.

“The third principle,” continued Alice, “is Selflessness. In essence, the whole of society is more important than you as an individual. If given a choice between your own life and the betterment of society, you must choose society. You must be prepared for martyrdom.”

Pat nodded encouragement across the circle, his chubby, ruddy cheeks serious for once.

“Done,” Calista said, shrugging.

“Excellent. The final principle is Vulnerability. There are no secrets between members of Luce. There is only complete trust and total honesty.” Silence enveloped the circle again.

“It can get pretty embarrassing,” Julia muttered, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“Yes, it can,” Alice confirmed as she stuck her hands on her hips. “But it is imperative.”

Jenny’s round face leaned in toward the fire, her full bosom moving as she heaved a great sigh. “This one is pretty serious, Calista. It doesn’t sound like it, but it is the hardest principle to adhere to of all of them. Everything you think and feel, whether it be a desire to leave Luce, or some unexpected dark urge, must be disclosed publicly to the entire group.”

Calista couldn’t imagine someone as sweet as Jenny ever having a dark urge or negative thought.

“For example, I’m obligated to tell everyone I think you’re a stone-cold fox,” Alex said, his hands in the air as though he were under arrest. Laughter echoed through the valley.

“Okay,” Calista said, smiling. “I think you all know I’ve become fairly outspoken in the past few months anyway.”

“True,” said Charles with a wink.

Delores placed her hand on Charles’ shoulder and used him as a prop to get to her feet. She looked at each face in the circle. Each person nodded, one after another. Alex flashed a thumbs-up.

“Please stand, Calista,” Delores commanded.

Calista’s mind flashed to another induction—one with a great hall alight with fire and concealing masks. The memory of the podium and crowd before her assaulted her. She could almost feel Alan Stone’s malicious presence beside her.

Bellicise killed Rae—my best friend. They killed my parents. They shot me. They tried to eliminate Grant. How can I be sure Luce won’t take even more from me?

She bit her lip, reminding herself to be strong. For Grant. She needed Luce. It was the only way she could find Grant. Though they were smaller than Bellicise, they would be able to find him. She stood, her feet anchored to the ground with fortitude.

“Come here, my dear.” Delores beckoned. Calista walked through the dirt around the fire pit to Delores’ side, the fire warm on one side of her body while the other side hung in the chill. “Before I ask you to agree to the Four Principles, my dear, I want to know what you’re thinking. What are your concerns?”

Calista took a deep breath. “Grant,” she said and swallowed hard, her heart pounding as she looked at each member of the circle in turn. The single word held all the meaning it needed to. But she continued regardless.

“Grant is, and always will be, my only concern. You all know that the only real reason I’m joining Luce is that I want him back. I NEED him to be safe. I can’t live without him. And I know that you are the only people who can help me achieve that goal.”

“Well, we want that, too, dear. Not only because Grant holds the key to Dynam, but also because he’s a target for Bellicise.” Delores patted Calista’s arm reassuringly.

Calista’s eyes traveled from Delores’ hand on her sleeve to her eyes. She searched their depths for a moment and saw the kindness living there. “But how do I know for sure? How can I be certain your intentions are pure?”

“The short answer, my dear, is that you can’t.” The firelight flickered and shadows drifted across Delores’ face. “I can sit here all night and ask you to trust us. I can assure you we have your best interests at heart. And while that is the truth, that isn’t what is going to convince you. You’re a smart girl, Calista. Your intuition is straight and true. You already know that your joining Luce is the only hope any of us have. For Grant, for Dynam—even for the world. We need you just as much as you need us.”

Calista searched the fire lit faces again before turning back to Delores. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly and she nodded once. Delores smiled once more.

“If you agree to the Four Principles—Commitment, Reciprocity, Selflessness, and Vulnerability—repeat after me.”

Calista’s hands balled into fists, the gentle night breeze lifting up a few strands of her hair.

“I, Calista Vance...”

“I, Calista Vance...” Calista stuck her chin out with pride.

“...solemnly swear to abide by the Four Principles of Luce...”

“...solemnly swear to abide by the Four Principles of Luce...”

“...and serve my brothers and sisters in the organization with honor, integrity, and truth.”

“...and serve my brothers and sisters in the organization with honor, integrity, and truth.”

The circle exploded with applause. Alex let out a long wolf-whistle and stood, clapping with exaggerated strokes of his arms. The members of Luce turned to one another, diverging into their own private conversations. Jenny opened a package of marshmallows and began passing out the makings for s’mores to the crew.

“Wait. That’s it?” Calista asked, her azure eyes wide and surprised.

Delores smiled silently and sank into her chair once more.

Charles stepped around Delores’ legs to hug Calista. He looked up at her, his over-large teeth shining. “Well, you’ve still got the exercise in trust and loyalty tomorrow, but assuming you don’t fail that, you’re officially a member of Luce.”

The fire let out a great crack and a spark drifted into the night sky.



Coco

Josh hummed the little tune under his breath again and gave me a sly smile. I wanted to yank on that obnoxious red hair to get him back for trying to make me laugh—especially because it was working. I was all but holding my breath to avoid a giggle. He never seemed to understand that some of us actually paid attention in meetings in the Parcel 8 parlor.

It started in physical therapy. After I broke my ankle in the car accident, Josh supported me through therapy. I mean, at first I think he only went because Rita asked him to check up on me. His job was to make sure I didn't say anything stupid about Bellicise. The painkillers they had me on, you know. She thought I might start spouting off about missions, or Firebrands, and our cover would be blown.

On the first day, we waited for the doctor in the white room. The lights seemed too bright. I wanted to go back to bed. My head swam around the room.

I hadn't realized I was singing until Josh's roar of laughter almost blasted me out of the chair. It was that song, "Centerfold." You know, the one from the 80s?

I don't remember much from that visit, but what I do remember, Josh won't let me forget. Whenever I'm focused or serious, he starts singing it:

"Naa, na, na na, na na. Na na, na, na na, na, na, na."

It's exasperating.

But apparently, it was funny enough to give Josh a reason to help me through the rest of therapy, which I appreciated. He helped with the exercises they wanted me to do at home. He drove me to the PT office. He even offered to go on walks and hikes to help strengthen my leg. Firebrands stand up for each other that way, I guess.

But that day in the Parcel 8 parlor, I noticed Rita's hands clasped more tightly than usual as she gave us our missions, and resolved to focus on keeping a straight face. And ignoring Josh. I snuck a slender finger under the edge of my mask covering my face in preparation for Assembly to scratch an itch.

We all miss Calista. I think that includes Rita.

She explained the misinformation Luce fed Calista to make her leave Bellicise. She loves Grant. That is certain. And love makes people do crazy things. It made her believe Bellicise is evil in some way.

I got into a bit of trouble for pulling Rita's gun away when we were chasing the Luce car. She reminded me that the visual angle I had sitting beside her was terrible—she was aiming for the tire to try to stop them so we could recover Calista, of course. I felt like an idiot afterward. But Rita was good about it.

And, as Rita explained, our new goal is to try to get Calista back—to rescue her from Luce's clutches.

"Coco?" Rita asked me. She clicked her gold-spangled fingernails together a few times.

"Yes. Sorry, I spaced out for a moment."

"Yes, I see that." She smiled, her lips pressed tight together. "I just finished giving Derek his mission and wondered if you are ready for yours."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry."

Josh grinned at me, his head partially upside down as he munched on Doritos in amusement. Derek rolled his eyes behind his plain satin black mask, but a kindness in them let me know he wasn't upset.

"No problem," she replied. "Well, you will be happy to learn that since your ankle is fully healed, you will now spend all of your time on finding Calista."

"Wow." I struggled to find the correct response. Not coming up with anything, I nervously tucked blonde strands behind my ears.

"I thought people had been on this for a couple of months now. How can I do a better job than they can?"

"You know Calista personally," Rita purred. "You have been with her since she first joined Bellicise. You may be able to think of places she may be, or ways to reach her others have not."

I still couldn't think of anything to say. Josh gave me an encouraging smile, his cheeks puffed out with Doritos. A small orange smear marred the corner of his mouth.

I smiled.

"Of course."

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