



BRIDES  
OF  
THODOS

DECEIVED BY THE  
ALIEN  
DEVIL

BRIDES OF THE VINDUTHI BOOK 5

AVA YORK

DECEIVED BY WITH THE ALIEN  
DEVIL

BRIDES OF THE VINDUTHI: BOOK FIVE

AVA YORK

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## PAYTON

Tessi walked towards me as I sent Table 4's empty bottles and glasses to the kitchen. What did I do wrong this time? I ran through things as quickly as I could, but nothing came to mind.

Still, she had that look in her eyes...

"Payton, get to Table 3," she snapped.

Then again, Tessi always had that look in her eyes. It was part of what made her so good at running the casino floor of the Fallen Star. That, and the fact that she was fairly tall with a strong figure and piercing eyes that threatened anyone who dared stand against her.

And the Vinduthi markings dancing down her cheek that proclaimed her Alkard's mate didn't hurt.

"Table 3?" I repeated. "But I'm scheduled for Table 7 next."

"I'll get someone else for it. Right now, there's a Mondian on a winning streak, and I need someone to keep him playing."

I rolled my eyes. That kind of evening again. "You sure he's into humans?"

"I'm sure he's into you," she said. "He watched you while you were at the next table closely enough. So get going."

I nodded. "All right, but he better keep his hands to himself."

She snorted, her lips curling into a half-smile. "His eyes are more than enough to keep him distracted so that he loses some of his credits."

Before I could say anything else, she spun on her heel and disappeared back among the crowd on the casino floor. This was going to be a long evening.

It wasn't hard to spot the sentient Tessi was talking about. It was never

hard to spot a Mondian. In addition to being big, often bigger than the Vinduthi, they have bright red scaly skin and enormous heads with bony ridges.

They looked a little like huge lizards and even more like dragons. My mother had a story file about dragons when I was a kid, and if you took one of them, got rid of the tail, and made them walk on two legs, it would be a Mondian.

Of course, if you were blind, you'd still have a pretty easy time finding that one because he laughed up a storm. I grabbed my tray, a bottle of champagne in a bottle holder, and some glasses and headed over.

There were three others at the table with him, two Fanaith and a Nazok. You didn't see too many Nazoks around the Fallen Star, and when you did, they usually didn't have much money to gamble with.

I saw from the careful way the one at the table hoarded his tiny pile that he was no exception.

I leaned over in between the Mondian and one of the Fanaith and set the bottle on the table. "Did somebody order champagne?"

The Mondian looked down at me and boomed out his loud laugh. "Can't say I did, but I guess that's just how lucky I am!"

He patted me on the back twice, and I did my best to keep my expression from going sour. I'd gotten into enough trouble with Tessi this week.

If I messed this up too, she might think about selling my contract to someone else, and I knew as well as anyone did that being a bottle girl was far from the worst of what a young, pretty girl with a contract could end up doing.

Some jerk in a suit had to read them all off to me when I signed.

It seemed like it went on for hours, but it was all pretty simple, really. Whoever owned your contract owned you. And you better be a good girl for them.

So, I smiled back. "Look but don't touch, please!"

"Whatever you say," the Mondian said. "Anything for my little good luck charm!"

"A new card?" the dealer said to the Mondian. He started, then quickly looked at the Fanaith and the Nazok on his left, trying to figure out what they picked. The Nazok passed while the Fanaith drew.

"Deal me!" he said. I couldn't help seeing his hand as he glanced at the card. 20. Good place to stop. Then again, it wouldn't be too hard for one of

the other players to be closer. Meanwhile, the dealer showed 15, with one card hidden.

It might have been the right choice, but even so, he should have thought about it a little. Apparently, I was already doing my job.

No one expected the girls, especially us human ones, to know anything about the games. Humans were supposed to spend all their time ogling things and being amazed by all the technology we didn't understand. We weren't supposed to understand a round of Halcian 24. That was an advantage we had.

"Pass," the second Fanaith said.

The dealer nodded and turned over the hidden card. A 4. Just 19 showing. The lowest possible stop. "Does anyone challenge?"

The table turned over their hands. The Nazok only had a 16. The first Fanaith went over, and the second was at 18.

The Mondian was slow with his last card. He tilted it up towards himself, paused, then finally let it fall.

7.

Over.

"Maybe I was wrong," the Mondian said. "Maybe you're not such a good luck charm after all. Or maybe, I just didn't rub you right..."

With that, he slapped me square on the butt.

Before I could stop myself, I hit him square on the muzzle with the serving plate. It made a loud *smack* sound.

Talk about bad luck.

Because the look of sheer surprise on his face made me laugh.

Mistake number two.

I was still laughing when I saw Tessi barreling down at me.

Uh oh.

"Let's talk in private," she said, then turned towards the angry Mondian. "I'm very sorry, sir. We'll deal with her."

I hurried quickly after her, as she walked off the floor and down one of the employee-only halls. "I'd like to point out that was just a reflex. Totally out of my control. I was just startled, and if you want-"

"I don't care about that," Tessi said, stopping in front of an office door. "This is about something much more important."

"More important than hitting a customer?"

"Today's your lucky day," she said, gesturing me closer. "You're going



to prison.”

Wait, what?

I walked into Tessi’s office, which was small but well organized. I sat down in front of the desk, and she took her seat behind.

Before talking, she glanced quickly under the table, then felt around the edge. She was checking for listening devices, I realized.

Just what did I get myself involved in?

“Have you heard of Deathgate prison?” she asked finally.

I shook my head. “Doesn’t sound like a nice place.”

“It isn’t. It’s an asteroid prison. For dangerous criminals. The most secure one there is. And we’re sending you there.”

My gut turned cold, my brain freezing.

“What?”

“You’ve probably heard about Havek. The technical expert for some of the family’s less... public business interests.”

I certainly did. Almost everyone had heard about Havek. He was one of the big names in the Vinduthi syndicate. The hacker who could build anything and break anything.

But I didn’t expect Tessi to just admit that the casino was affiliated with the Vinduthi crime family. Sure, everyone knew that, but I never heard anyone say it aloud before.

“I’ve seen him a couple of times here,” I admitted cautiously. I remembered one of the girls telling me a story about how the family once managed to get an enforcement officer from the Federation arrested by his own men. Havek played a big part, forging arrest warrants and getting them to the enforcers as if they came from the officer.

“You heard about the Shadow massacre?” Tessi asked, and I shuddered.

I didn’t think anyone on Thodos hadn’t heard about it.

I had to admit, I wasn’t a general fan of that clan of Maeux.

Their scion was known for causing trouble, feeling up girls, walking out on tabs, and letting his syndicate’s muscle ‘clean things up’ for him.

He was trash.

Yet it still didn’t sit right that someone had snuck into the T’zarti compound and slaughtered the entire family, from the matriarch down to the smallest hatchling.

“You’re not saying...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“Of course Havek didn’t do it,” Tessi snapped. “He was set up by one of

the other families. We're going to get him out."

"You want me to organize a prison break?" I said, too stunned to make sense of any of this.

Tessi rolled her eyes. "Of course not. Your only job is to be a point of contact. Havek's being watched too closely to get anything outside the prison. But no one knows who you are."

"And no one watches humans," I finished. It was something I heard many times before.

"Exactly," said Tessi. "You'll have to stay in the dormitories assigned for advocates until the job is done. It's not going to be a vacation."

"This sounds dangerous," I said.

"It's our only option." She sighed softly. "The only other humans in the Family are like me." She gestured to the sigils down her face. "Not exactly discrete. You'll have to be careful. If they figure out you're working with Havek, they'll have you killed, and if they don't, there's a solid chance you get killed anyway. That's why I want you to have a choice. You can say no."

"Well, then I say no," I answered quickly. "I'm not going to some prison to save a stranger."

"Before you make a decision, you should hear the rest of the deal," Tessi continued as if I didn't say anything. "If you do this successfully, and you live to tell the tale, Alkard is prepared to release you from your contract."

I stared at her, almost unable to absorb the words.

"Are you serious?" I said, finally. "That's a real promise? Like, you could put that in writing?"

She lifted a tablet off her desk. "It already is."

I took the device and ran my eyes over it greedily. No catches. It was just what she said. A release form.

"And this could work, right?" I asked, looking up. "This isn't some one-in-a-million suicide mission. This is actually the way you plan to rescue Havek?"

"At the moment, we have limited influence inside Deathgate prison," Tessi said. "But anything we can do to ensure your safety and the success of your mission, we will. He's part of the family. We want him back."

I looked down at the contract, then back up at Tessi. On the one hand, a life of being a bottle girl in a casino, working until I was old to pay off a debt and then scraping by somehow or another, was straightforward. Simple.

But also, a lot of men would grope me and leer at me when I walked by.

And the tips would only get worse with every passing year. I knew that.

On the other, a spy mission. An impossible escape from an asteroid prison for a tech genius I only knew from stories. And if I survived it, then freedom. Real freedom, in the stars, in the prime of my life.

Which would I pick? Safety? Or dignity?

“You can pick whichever you want,” Tessi repeated. “But I’m going to need a decision soon. And don’t try changing your mind. Just because you’re the first girl I’m picking doesn’t mean there aren’t plenty who could do it just as well.”

Well. It was good to know I wasn’t anything special.

But then why did she pick me?

“I’ll do it,” I said, handing the tablet back to her. “Whatever you need me to do, I’ll do it.”

I didn’t exactly think the whole thing through. I just opened my mouth and let the first words that happened to reach it come out.

It was decided.

I was going to be a spy.

## HAVE K

The key was to make an impression. In prison, the impression one makes on others quickly becomes their reputation. And reputation is everything. It's the only thing that distinguishes one prisoner from the other.

One of the two guards accompanying me noticed I was scanning the hallway and chuckled. "Looking for a computer? I've got some bad news for you. Prisoners don't get to play with toys around here."

As for the guards, their goal was to stay in charge. They knew that there were more prisoners than there were of them, and that meant they could never slip up, even for a moment.

Which was why the Alliance scoured for the dregs of the galaxy to take this job.

Rapists and murderers all, the only reason they were the guards instead of the prisoners was that they'd made a deal.

Keep order here, in return for a 'respectable' life.

"Just getting used to the place," I said, doing my best to keep up a steady pace despite the shackles on my hands and feet.

In truth, there wasn't much to get used to. We walked down a long, straight hallway punctuated with doors that opened and closed behind us. The walls were perfectly smooth sheets of synthetic material, all colored a dull gray. The doors were heavy metal, without bars, and they could only be opened by whoever was watching through the cameras that hung from the ceilings. I counted three doors so far and assumed we had to be close to the last one.

Apparently, the guard didn't like my attitude because I got a sharp jab in the back of the ribs for that one. "You'll have plenty of time for that, space

dust.” The way he spat the last words told me it was something they call the prisoners here. “What were the charges again? Robbery and mass murder, wasn’t it?”

“That’s what I was convicted of, yes,” I answered. Another jab in the ribs. I was going to need a while to learn how to sound humble. It was something I haven’t had to do for a while now.

We stopped in front of the last door. When it opened, it revealed a new, even heavier door barely a few steps in front. An airlock.

“Go ahead,” said the guard, apparently the talkative one out of the two. “When you’re ready.”

“You’re not gonna show me to my cell?” I said, slightly surprised.

“You’ll have to find a cell for yourself,” the other guard said. “We don’t bother with little details like that. As long as you’re on this barren piece of rock, our job is done.”

It made sense. No need to keep too close a watch when you’re this far away from anyone. The doors weren’t what I needed to worry about if I wanted to escape. The real problem was the vacuum of space that waited outside those bars.

I nodded and stepped forward into the airlock. The doors slid shut behind me, and a few seconds later, the door in front of me opened to reveal Deathgate prison.

The whole thing was one enormous, square room, all the same gray material. In one corner, a desk where a single guard sat, watching the prisoners. Large, metal cafeteria tables took up about half the space, with the rest of it filled with people talking in tight groups or milling around, seemingly aimlessly.

Along every wall were all the cell doors, mostly open but a few closed. There were two floors, with the second story of cells accessed by a catwalk running along them. Metal stairs led up to those cells on either side.

Prisoners looked at me. Some of them leaned closer into their groups and whispered about me.

Right now, I didn’t know anything about how things operated at this prison. If it was anything like other prisons, the prisoners would have far more rules for how you were supposed to act than the guards.

Time to get someone to tell me what those rules were.

I walked over to the emptiest of the rows of cafeteria tables and sat down. There wasn’t much risk in that, I decided. It would be nice to have a few

moments to myself.

Unsurprisingly, I didn't get them. Already, a very large and well-muscled Dargun approached me with about a dozen others following him, clearly his goons. Like most of his species, the leader was short and stocky, with pointed ears, two large fangs that stuck up out of their mouth and a grayish skin color.

"May I help you?" I asked as he took a stance that was very obviously meant to be threatening.

"Yes, you can," said Dargun. "In fact, you're going to be doing a lot of that while you're here."

"Is that so?"

He leaned closer. "The name's Trovok. And you don't know how things work in Deathgate, do you?"

"Let me guess," I answered, meeting his gaze as coolly as I could manage. "You're about to explain to me that something something something and in conclusion, if I want a chance at living, I have to join your little crew and do whatever it is you say, huh?"

"That's about right," he answered. "Only you missed one thing. I'm doing you a favor here. I'm giving you a way to be part of the Vipers. It's the most powerful gang in this dump, and if you don't have us for protection, it won't be just me and my boys you have to worry about."

Ah. So it was all the usual fun and games. I could work with that.

"I'll make another guess. If I agree to do whatever you want, whichever of these nice fellows you've got following you gets promoted to a full time member and can recruit their own goons?"

"That's the way things run here, space dust," said Trovok. "I did my time for a senior Viper. Waded through twelve pieces of fresh meat before I even got started. Only way to climb a ladder is to start at the bottom."

"And what happens if I say no?"

"Me and my friends teach you a lesson."

I nodded. "And what happens if I beat up you and all of your guys?"

He looked surprised for a second and then started laughing, turning to his crew to get their reassurance.

Which meant he wasn't looking at my arms. That was his last mistake.

I whipped my right arm around the back of his neck and slammed his head into the table before he even knew I attacked. Just as I hoped, the rest of the crew was startled enough that I was able to get to my feet before any of them thought about attacking me.

One fighter can't beat twelve, if those twelve are coordinated, competent or even just dedicated. Fortunately, however, most random groups of twelve people, especially ones who have been bullied into service by someone they don't care for, are none of those things.

By the time I even grabbed the one closest to me, four or five of the crew had retreated, and the rest were unsure what to do.

I swung him into three more of his friends, then threw a hard punch at the one to my left. The ones left were fighting now, but they were intimidated and disorganized. Easy pickings.

The real question for me was what the guard would do. Would he jump in to stop things, or would he wait for backup? Or was fighting just allowed here? Let the prisoners take care of beating each other down for once?

They were meant to keep order however they wanted. But would they give in to their more sadistic desires, or had the easy life here made them complacent, ready to let the prisoners keep order themselves?

No matter what the answer was, I needed the information. Information would be my key to getting out of this place.

A punch from one of the gang I hadn't looked at narrowly sailed past my face. This wasn't a time to think about things like that. I grabbed the outstretched arm and yanked him onto the ground, dodging another attack.

A few more punches and one well-placed knee in the face and it was all over. Four were on the ground. The others retreated.

Not bad for a first impression.

As I stood there, drinking in the looks from the other prisoners, the airlock door slid open and five guards stood there. They watched me carefully, but didn't do anything as I walked further away into the crowd to look for another place to sit.

So the other guards would come, but only to keep things from building into a full riot. Good to know.

I sat down at another empty table. Hopefully the next person to talk to me would be a little friendlier.

I didn't have to wait long.

"Are you Havek?" a piping voice called from beside me. I turned to see a small creature, barely up to my hips, had snuck up. He looked somewhat like a frog, complete with large staring eyes and a wide, anxious mouth. An Iknud.

"That's me."

“My name’s Braadi. Would you be willing to protect me? From the others?”

So now I had a reputation as someone who could deal with bullies. That was good. “I don’t like bullies. But do you have something you can offer?”

“I’ve been around for a while,” Braadi said, wringing his hands. “I know a lot of the people. What they have. What they want. I could give you advice, maybe.”

Perfect.

Narrowing my eyes, I looked around the room, noting the clusters of prisoners at the tables, all carefully not watching me. “Am I going to be dealing with reprisals from the rest of the Vipers for fighting Trovok or this guy?”

“Not unless you make overtures to one of the other gangs. No one likes Trovok, but if the Vipers think you’re going to join another group, they’ll use him as an excuse. Am I doing okay? Am I helpful?”

I nodded. “You asked for protection. Does that mean you’re not a member of any of the gangs?”

“None of them wanted me. I do my best, but it’s not easy.”

“Are there others who are like you? Who don’t have an affiliation?”

“Oh sure,” he answered. “Little guys like me. Weirdos. A few loners. And some people who joined a gang but got kicked out of it for some reason.”

“And where do you sleep?” I asked.

“Wherever there’s a cell open,” he said. “Once everyone else has picked a place. Usually up on the catwalk. The gangs don’t fight for those as much. Except one time, when... Well, that doesn’t matter.”

Interesting.

Just how useful could this little guy be?

I never had much dealing with Iknuds. They weren’t strong or fast, and didn’t have much of a presence on Thodos III.

“So tell me--”

“You bastard!” A massive Fanaith charged me, a crudely-worked knife in his fist.

Fine. Apparently the room needed another demonstration.

But before I could knock this jerk into the wall, Braadi hopped in front of me, then barreled himself at the Fanaith’s knees, tripping him.

As the gray, bald head fell, I spun, kicking the side of his face in,



crushing the jutting jaw.

With a howl, the Fanaith stumbled away.

Scanning the room, no one wanted to meet my eyes.

Good.

“You all right, boss?”

Braadi pushed himself up to his knees. I held out my hand to pull him the rest of the way up. “Well, I’d say you’ve more than earned my protection,” I told him, setting my hand on his shoulder. “From now on, if anyone gives you trouble, point them out to me. I’ll do my best to make sure they stop.”

“Really? You will?” He bounced up and down on his toes.

“That’s right. I’ve got plans.”

His lips repeated the word, soundlessly. But before I could say anything else, a guard pushed past the group of prisoners and stopped in front of me.

“Havek?”

“That’s me.”

“Your advocate wants to talk to you.”

I didn’t know I had an advocate any more. The trial was already over, and even Alkard couldn’t do much for me now.

A sharp pang lanced my chest. Maybe it was stupid, but I missed my brothers. What the hell were they going to do without me there to keep shit working?

I shoved the feeling away and stood up.

“Well, let’s not keep my advocate waiting.”

## PAYTON

“Wait here,” the guard ordered when he left me in this room around five minutes ago.

The room was twice as large as my quarters on the station, which is to say, small. In the center was a metal table with two metal chairs attached to it on either side. No decorations, nothing fun or playful. Just a vent in one corner and a camera in the other, a door in each of the short walls.

“Nice place to visit,” I muttered to myself, sitting down, facing the other door.

Everything went just the way it was supposed to.

When you think about it, it’s pretty impressive what most people will let you do on fake credentials.

I always kind of assumed that doctors only get to do doctor stuff and engineers their engineer stuff because they’re smart and know what they’re doing. But apparently, it all comes down to papers and microchips. Most people don’t check you for being smart. They check you for papers and microchips, and assume that if you’ve got the right ones, you must have been given them for the right reasons.

For the past two days, thanks to a new set of papers and chips, people treated me the way they would treat an actual advocate rather than a bottle girl. When I said something, people paid attention, and then nodded as if it was incredibly clever.

They asked me if there was anything they could do to make my trip more pleasant. One person even mentioned how refreshing it was to see a human who did their species credit.

That last one actually gave me some mixed feelings, but the others were

all pretty cool. It was fun to feel respectable, even if I knew it was only pretend.

Deathgate was every bit as ugly and unpleasant as a prison could possibly be. Every hall and room was the same slightly shiny gray, and every door the same thudding metal. Even the one window I looked out didn't exactly cheer me up. Just a lot of brown, pockmarked stone, stretching out in every direction. Without an atmosphere to make them twinkle, even the stars looked limp and lifeless on this world.

The doors slid apart. Two guards stood there, with Havek in between them. I had seen Havek a few times at the club, usually standing by and watching while other people gambled.

He was tall, tall enough that he seemed thin, even though he was quite well-muscled. He stood perfectly straight and he had eyes that seemed to scan everything from a hundred miles away and the black sigils down his cheek seemed to soak up the light. Even down to the way he walked, he projected total calm and complete confidence.

I could tell from a glance that he recognized me. He was surprised for a moment, but quickly regained his composure.

"You'll pardon me for my surprise," he said, smiling. "I didn't expect to receive such an illustrious attorney."

He was smooth, that was for certain. Even when he made a mistake, he made it look good. I wished I could be that quick.

"We're taking your case very seriously," I said, then looked at the guard. "Could I have a moment in private with my client?"

"Yeah, whatever," said the guard, shoving Havek down into one of the two seats. The guard cuffed one of Havek's hands to the table before stepping back. "Just don't try anything stupid. We're watching."

Immediately, they filed out and the doors slid closed.

"All my best scheming is wasted on these meatheads." He shook his head and looked at me. "Now, would you mind telling me why, exactly, an indentured waitress is posing as my advocate?"

His anger startled me. I didn't exactly know what to expect from him, but I never really considered the possibility that he wouldn't be happy to see me.

"Technically, I'm a bottle girl," I replied instinctively.

"Oh, well, never mind. I thought you were a mere waitress, but in fact, you're a full bottle girl!" His voice grew more heated as he went on. "Do you have any sense of what I've done for this family? The things I've made

possible? Do you really think Alkard would be where he is without my technology? Without my security systems to protect him? Without the expertise which has been devoted to every one of his operations?"

"Alkard thought tha-"

"And now, when I'm in trouble and need his help, this is what I get? A bottle girl? A disposable bit of property thrown at me like a bone at dinner? And he expects me to be grateful for the help?"

He's not really mad at me, I reminded myself. I'm the first person he's been able to let his anger out since he got into this situation.

Not that knowing that made things that much easier.

"Here's what I want you to tell Alkard," Havek continued. "Tell him that I'll deal with this situation myself. Just the way I've always dealt with things. Tell him as long as I have my two hands and my brain, I don't need his scraps."

"I think we should maybe-"

"And tell him that once I'm out, I'm going to find him. And ask him why he treats someone who has served him so loyally like he is now. Haven't I done everything he's asked for? How could he just forget about me?"

I sighed and reached into the coat that Tessi gave me. I pulled out a square of paper and a pen, then quickly wrote a few words on them. I slid both the paper and the pen over to Havek.

He looked down and read the sentence I scratched on the pad.

*Is it my turn to talk now?*

He looked at me and took a breath, quickly regaining most of his composure. "Make it good."

"First of all, we're being recorded."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course we are. Please stop stating the obvious."

"But it's okay. I have a device that should scramble the audio and give us the freedom to talk."

I opened my coat to show him. It was pretty impressive, a silver mesh woven into the lining of the jacket, the very pattern of the fibers setting up an electronic dead zone, the signature of the device so miniscule to that generated by a living body that it became almost invisible to detection. By grabbing samples of nearby voices and creating a false conversation with AI, you couldn't even tell that the real conversation was being hidden.

He snorted and smiled.

"You don't have to explain it to me," he said. "I invented it." He sank

back into the chair, and flashed a bitter grin. “I guess I didn’t need to put on the angry, abandoned act.”

He looked abandoned. Angry. Hurt.

Was it really just a show?

“I’m sorry,” I said too quickly to stop myself. Why did it feel so important for this man to like me? “Anyway, Alkard is fully dedicated to saving you. He hasn’t forgotten you. I’m here to be a point of contact. I’ll tell you about the plan.”

“I see.” He crossed his arms. “And what is the plan, so far?”

“I’m just introducing myself right now.”

That smirk again. “I see. So, in other words, this meeting isn’t a waste of time because next meeting, you might have something worthwhile to say.”

“You know, I don’t have to be here at all,” I snapped. “Since you’re so happy all on your own.”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t here, I could have an actual advocate,” he replied. “You know. Someone who can actually do something.”

“Don’t you think they’re trying?” I swallowed hard. “Your family wants you back, and right now, I’m the one they sent.”

I met his eyes and did my best to look confident. I didn’t like being mad at him, and I really didn’t like him being mad at me. He seemed like a much more interesting person than I expected, and it made me feel sad that he saw little worth in me.

All the emotion dropped out of his voice. “My priority right now is figuring out the quickest route to escape. If you can’t offer me anything that’s helpful in achieving that, then the most I can do is ask you not to take up any of my time.”

“You don’t really think you can escape without Alkard’s help, do you?” I twisted my fingers in front of me.

“I think that this prison wasn’t designed to hold someone like me,” he replied, back to being totally emotionless. “And once I set my mind to it, I’ll figure out exactly how to take advantage of that fact.”

It wasn’t just bravado. I witnessed many men brag about things they knew they couldn’t really do. He believed it, completely.

Did that make him a genius or a fool?

“You don’t have any tools you could use to organize a jailbreak.”

“I have the most important one.” He tapped the side of his head, just below the first set of horns.

“But it’s Deathgate,” I protested. “No one’s ever escaped from Deathgate.”

“And it’s made the guards careless,” he answered. “Which gives me some very useful freedom of action.”

“Freedom of action to do what? You’re locked in by thermal-resistant three foot thick walls and doors that could take blast from a plasma cannon.”

“No need to use a plasma cannon if the doors are open,” he said.

“But they aren’t!” I cried. “The five doors that lead to the prison are never open at the same time. And whenever one of them is opened, there are at least two armed guards to watch it and more waiting on camera.”

“Which means my escape will have to involve disrupting the routine.” Every response came without a pause or a hint of doubt. “That cuts down on my options somewhat, but it’s not at all insurmountable.”

“Okay, but even if you get through all of that, then what? You’re still in the middle of nowhere on an asteroid with absolutely no atmosphere. If the cold doesn’t kill you, and you figure out a way to breathe, the radiation will still finish you off within an hour!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’ve been studying at least. Maybe you’re not entirely useless.” He shrugged. “I don’t have an answer for that problem yet. But I’ll find one. I got here okay, didn’t I? If they can bring me here, it’s just a matter of time before I figure out a way to make them bring me somewhere else.”

The way he said it, I couldn’t help but believe him.

He didn’t sound like he was bluffing. He sounded like he was given a problem and he was sincerely interested in figuring it out.

There was something fascinating about that. About someone who never backed down from a problem, even one as serious as escaping from a prison on an asteroid. I had almost given up on even helping this guy because it sounded too dangerous, and here he was, planning to do it all by himself with no help at all.

That was the kind of guy I respected. It might even be the kind of guy I...

But this wasn’t the time to think about that now.

“Our time’s almost up. Is there anything you want me to bring back to Alkard?” I asked. “Anything you need? Any complications we don’t know about? Maybe not the death threat thing.”

He paused to think for the first time in our whole conversation.

“Tell Alkard that I’m making my own plan,” he said. “I don’t have

anything else to do. And tell him that I regret not having time to waste, even with such a lovely lady as yourself.”

Before I could respond to that, the door slid open and the two guards entered to take Havek back to the cells.

## HAVEK

**B**raadi might have been the most knowledgeable alien on that asteroid, but he surely wasn't the most intelligent. He also liked to throw out ideas that hadn't been thought through, much to my annoyance.

Worse, he expected me to take them seriously.

I watched while he scrambled from side to side in my cell. It was break time, and most were out on the main floor socializing. I decided I wanted to take the time to plan my escape—especially because my advocate wasn't anything like I thought she would be.

She wasn't qualified for anything, not even to be an inside communicator between the family and me.

The only good thing she had going for her was her looks; I gave her that. She also had that feisty attitude, as bright as that crown of wavy red hair.

It was cute.

For a moment, the memory of her flashing eyes caught me. But then she retreated so quickly.

She was interesting. Like another puzzle, waiting for me to solve.

Of course, there was something else for me to figure out first.

“Oh! Or, we could jump. If we got some sort of jetpacks, maybe? That would be great!”

I sighed. “Braadi.”

He jumped up and grinned at me. “Yes?”

“How would we get jetpacks? We're in prison.”

“Well...” He paused, tapping his tiny, rounded finger to his chin. “We would have to plan for that, I suppose.”

“Does it seem likely that we could make, buy or otherwise acquire



jetpacks?”

“No.” He looked at the ground, dejected.

He was an idiot. But keeping him at my side did have certain advantages. He was small, for starters. If I needed to get into some computer system or behind a wall in order to access a fuse room, he would be able to help with that.

He'd been here for years. Somewhere mixed in with his blathering, useful tidbits of information dropped.

But he was still annoying.

He continued rattling off ideas, spanning from killing everyone on the asteroid to making a bunker underground. I wondered what he was in Deathgate for because clearly, he wasn't exactly a criminal mastermind.

My gaze turned to the small window in my cell, drifting past the ugliness of the asteroid to the stars that shined brightly beyond it. I thought of Thodos III and how much I missed the small things.

A comfortable bed, water that didn't have gray streaks in it, and food that didn't look like a death sentence would all be more than acceptable. Even just the freedom to walk wherever I wanted to without having to be escorted would have been enough. I just wanted out.

While watching the stars and thinking of home, the Deathgate Express flew overhead. None of us knew what the shuttle was actually called, but it was the best nickname some idiot in there came up with.

Its only mission was to take dead convicts off the asteroid. We didn't know where it took them, but it was one of the only ships that entered and exited the asteroid. I always thought they must have taken the bodies back to Thodos III due to funeral processions and family grieving matters, but I wasn't sure.

Maybe it just dumped them into the closest sun.

Either way, there might be something there.

“Wait,” I interrupted Braadi while standing up and watching the ship from the window. “There.” I pointed at it, and he slithered up the wall and peered out of the window with me.

“The Deathgate Express?”

“Yes, exactly. Other than the prisoner transport and the rail shuttle for the advocates, it's the only thing I've seen that comes and goes from this place.”

“But it only comes once a week.”

“What, Braadi?” I snapped, looking at him. “Do you have materials to

build a bunker or the strength or weapons to kill everyone on this asteroid? Are you prepared for any of the plans you've suggested so far?"

"Well...no."

"No."

"But you're not either," he countered quietly.

Although he said it quietly, it impressed me that a creature of his size would question a Vinduthi. That was another quality I might have been able to use if I needed it. I didn't know how I would use it, but if I was being honest, that was just me rationalizing.

I would never have admitted it at the time, but Braadi was one of the closest companions I had on the asteroid. He liked being around me, which was more than I ever had anyone say about me before. Also, he had a point. I wasn't ready for my plan.

"So we get ready," I replied darkly, sitting back down on my bed and clasping my hands together. "But first, we need to figure out how to get on the ship."

"We could bribe some of the guards?"

I shook my head. "With what? All our luxuries?" I motioned to the desolate cell and living room around us. "All our money?"

"Hey, will you stop with the snarkiness?"

I lifted my gaze to him with my eyebrows raised. "Excuse me?"

"If you want someone to escape with you, then treat your friends like they're a part of something, not just your slaves."

I pursed my lips.

Maybe not such an idiot after all.

I wasn't exactly known for my sociability. Unless it was dealing with the Family, my brothers and their mates, I never felt the need to bother. If I was smarter than everyone else around me, why should I tone it down?

But right now, I needed an ally.

"You're right," I admitted begrudgingly. "I apologize."

Braadi looked shocked as he sat on his hind legs and nodded. "Thank you. Now, what I was saying..."

The door to the main living area from the guard's side of the prison slammed open. My head turned toward the sound, and three of them walked in carrying a body bag.

"Open cell 28," one yelled while banging on the door.

*Damn. That was the Mondian. He had a good head on his shoulders.*

It wasn't heartbreaking to see so many aliens carried out in body bags, though occasionally, it did cast a dark shadow over the place. That's what prisoners did there on Deathgate: arrive, eat, sleep, fight, and die.

If Makar or Kovas were here, we could have taken the entire prison over on the first day. But on my own, and without enough time to gather an army to my side, I needed a different kind of plan.

If fighting wasn't going to be my way out, something else had to be. I should just play to my strengths.

"I should just get into the prison computers," I muttered, stroking my chin. "Work from there."

"What?" Braadi asked fearfully. "You know the kind of security they have on those?"

"Astroware 355."

He blinked. "Oh, you...actually do."

"I studied it when I was thirteen," I replied with a chuckle. "It's one of the easiest to hack."

"Havek..."

"What, Braadi?"

"If it's one of the easiest to hack, why hasn't anybody else thought of this plan?"

I stretched, yawning. "I meant it's easy for *me*."

He glared at me, and I realized I was doing 'it' again, the ego thing. I brushed it off and looked out into the main living area to see them carrying the Mondian outside in the bag. My thoughts about the escape continued. The dead body was a good incentive.

The Astroware 355 system was easy to hack, but only with the right tools. If I went in there without them, the mission would have been a bust from the start.

"I need equipment and tech to make this work," I mused.

"And how will you get that, Havek?" Braadi asked mockingly. "With all our luxuries and money?"

I shot him a glare before looking back out the window. That was a good question. If I found another prisoner to traffic something in for me or convinced a guard, I would have a chance of getting into the system.

Then, as clear as day, the thought came to me.

*Payton.*

She'd be perfect.

If she hadn't already left the advocate dormitories in a huff. I hadn't exactly been friendly to her on her first visit.

I rubbed the base of my horns.

I was pretty rude. And.. possibly might have told her I didn't need help.

Damn it.

I just had to convince her otherwise. And I could be very, very convincing.

"My advocate might be able to help," I declared, looking at Braadi with a grin.

Braadi scoffed. "You mean the underqualified one you were ranting about? If she can't even represent you, why would she help us?"

"Trust me. She'll do what I want."

I walked out of the cell and into the main living area. Eyes followed me with each step I took. There were members from all three notable gangs on the same floor as me while I walked, and I wondered if each leader had a different plan for my demise.

I understood why they wanted to kill the outcasts. There were murderers, assassins, and rapists on the asteroid, and they were all bored. All the pent-up energy of being trapped and having to make the rest of one's life worth living had to be externalized somewhere. If I was less intelligent, I might have resorted to their ways, too. But I knew I had a chance to live. I *had* to have a chance to live.

"Excuse me." I approached a guard at his desk, centered in the living area. I hated having my back to the jailbirds, but there wasn't a choice while in the center. "Yes?" he responded, not looking up at me. We were barely worth their attention unless they were beating us or putting us in lockdown.

"I want to request a meeting with my advocate," I replied, leaning on the desk and looking down at him.

His eyes lifted to meet mine, and he looked like he couldn't care less that I tried to intimidate him. As I said, I wasn't good at fighting. Apparently, I was also not that scary to others on Deathgate. Why would I be? I didn't have the insane urge to kill like the others, nor did I have any kind of following. The outcasts and Braadi didn't compare much to a large Mondian mafia or Volek clan.

"Fine, but the next opening is in a week." He wrote something on a slip of film and handed it to me. "Be there, and be on time, or your visitation will be denied until the following week."

I took the paper and nodded before heading back to my cell. Braadi stared out of our window as the Deathgate Express flew off the asteroid. I knew that ship would be my ticket home. It had to be, for my sake, and the others who were in peril on Deathgate.

## PAYTON

The dormitories on Deathgate weren't luxury hotels, that was for sure.

Then again, an asteroid didn't have a whole lot of options in terms of lodging.

A biodome held ramshackle dormitories that all connected via rail shuttle to the main prison complex.

A variety of shops and merchants—some legitimate and others I wondered about—lined the path to the shuttle entrances and the occasional restaurant and tavern rounded out the rest of the commercial ventures around.

The lack of any real choices meant those offering goods or lodgings could charge whatever they wanted and provide as little service as possible.

They weren't terrible like the Under of Thodos III, so that was a step up from what I was used to, but they still needed work. There were shared bathrooms in each hall, and the shower I used that morning had a problem with the drain, leaving water piling up until it was almost up to my ankles.

It was a long week, and I wasn't sure what I was doing here. I filled the time watching endless hours of reality programming on the tri-vid. Who knew there were twenty-seven seasons of *Survival Planet*?

I hadn't heard from Tessi, and Havek obviously didn't want my help.

While walking back to my room, I passed by various forms of aliens down the hall. There were some of every species in the dorms, it seemed. Some were more intimidating than others, but I wasn't afraid of being hurt. It took over five years to get a law license on Thodos III. No one with that level of education would risk losing their license to do something stupid. At least, that's what I hoped.

"Excuse me," I said quietly while sneaking past a large alien with

tentacles on his head. I hadn't seen that kind before.

It was interesting. Being there made me think of how little I knew of the galaxy. It was also an interesting paradox that the price of my freedom was to be trapped on the asteroid and sentenced to helping a Vinduthi who, clearly, didn't *want* my help.

I returned to my room and shut the door quickly behind me. Just because I didn't think the real advocates wouldn't hurt me didn't mean I liked them seeing me in a towel with wet hair.

While getting dressed, a knock sounded on my door. "Yes?" I asked, knowing it was locked.

The handle jiggled before a voice called back. "Your client has requested a meeting with you and you're scheduled for today. Shuttle goes out in ten minutes."

"What?"

"Sorry, the message just now came through." A bright laugh. "You know how bureaucracy is!"

Right. Just a snafu.

An experienced advocate would be prepared for this.

I glanced in the mirror.

Shit. I looked terrible.

"All right, thank you!"

I scrambled to throw my hair up in a bun and put on one of the suits provided to me by Alkard. At least he had *some* sense of style. Most of them were black, and they contrasted well with my blue eyes. Hopefully, they would pop to Havek.

I froze. *What? Why am I hoping he'll notice my eyes?*

When I was finally somewhat ready, I left my room and walked down to the shuttle, my heels clicking on the concrete floors while walking down with a group of advocates. The real advocates.

"What's your degree in?" a kind Mondian woman asked.

"Oh." I looked away. "Criminal law."

She chuckled. "Not one to share specifics, are you?"

"Hey, what do they teach us? Trust no one, right?" I laughed nervously.

She shot me an odd look and continued walking in front of me.

*I'm never going to last here.*

I was briefed with a quick cover story before getting on the shuttle over to the asteroid, but there wasn't time for me to get into the specifics, and so, I

studied my own ‘files’ at every possible moment.

Apparently, I graduated from Tindemitus University three years ago and represented multiple Vinduthi who were suspected of war crimes. I guess that was related to a possible mass murderer.

Tessi told me if they tried to look me up, they would see fake cases I won posted under my profile.

She even told me that, typically, they would have Havek implant the information since he was so great at hacking computer systems. In his absence, she figured out how to do it. I still don’t know how she learned, but I was grateful she did. If I got caught and sent there to live on the other side of the bars, I would have been miserable.

While boarding the rail shuttle and sitting down next to a purple sentient, I didn’t recognize, my anxiety heightened. Being there made me even more nervous about being caught. I glanced at the Mondian woman I talked to earlier and saw her staring at me suspiciously from across the shuttle.

*She knows. She’s going to tell someone. I’m going to get caught. I shouldn’t have done this.*

“Please hold onto the bars on either side of you or above your head to prevent sliding. Estimated arrival time is fifteen minutes.”

That fifteen minutes felt like hours. I felt so out of place. I just prayed the whole ride that no one else would try to talk to me.

Or if they did, I hoped I would think of something smart to say instead of sounding like an idiot.

We finally arrived, and I darted out of the shuttle before anyone else. I wanted to get to Havek, hear whatever protest he had about my existence, and get out quickly so no one had a moment to notice me.

Going through security, I held my breath.

After passing through the scanners the first day, I relaxed a little bit coming back through with the scrambler. But only a little bit. It seemed like at any moment one of the guards was going to grab me, demanding to know what I was doing there.

Once I passed through security, a guard led me to a different room than the one I met Havek in before. It was just as small and dull but felt different. “He’ll be in shortly,” the guard informed me before closing the door behind him.

As I clasped my hands on the cold table and stared at the wall, my mind raced.



*Why do I feel like this? Why do I care how he sees me? I need to do this job to get out of my contract. That's all I care about. I can't be distracted by anything else.*

The side of the room leading to the prison opened, and Havek was brought in, walking toward me with his hands cuffed in front of him. He was striking, not only because of his height and muscle build but also because of his tracery.

It almost seemed to speak to his personality. Startling, yet subtle, with more detail than one can see at first.

The guard cuffed him to the table and left after giving me a nod. When we were alone, I activated the scrambler in my jacket. Once I was sure it worked, I nodded at him.

“You wanted to see me?”

“I have a plan.”

“A plan for what?”

“To break out.”

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. “Well, I hope you're not trying to do that in this room. As you know, the scrambler works very well for audio, but the visual part is something I can't help you with.” He glared at me, and I threw my hands up and smiled. “Look, do whatever you want, but don't try escaping while I'm here. If you want to get a longer sentence, if that's even possible, go ahead. I'm not joining you on this asteroid.”

He leaned forward and stared at me intensely. “Do you think I'm stupid?”

I smirked. “Even if you're not stupid, you're insane.”

He laughed and shook his head. “It's always funny when a human thinks they can upstage a Vinduthi.”

“Even if I can't upstage you, I get to walk free today, and you don't.”

He looked shocked by my words for a moment before clearing his throat. “I can handle this. I can get out,” he replied in a calmer tone while meeting my gaze. “I just need a few small parts. You can get them. They'd be easy to bring in.” He paused and ran his eyes down my body before leaning back in the chair. “All you have to do is pretend to be...” He cleared his throat. “My girlfriend *and* my advocate.”

I laughed, raising my eyebrows in disbelief, before I realized he wasn't joking. Once my face fell, I leaned forward and frowned at him. “You really are insane, aren't you?”

He shrugged with a smirk. “Maybe I am.”

“How would that even work, huh? What good would that do? They don’t allow conjugal visits here. They don’t even allow *regular* visits from partners here. You and me sitting on a couch talking while you pull an electronic part out from beneath my blouse isn’t going to happen, Havek.”

I expected him to retort with something sarcastic or get angry with me. Instead, he leaned forward and took my hand in his. The warmth of him shocked me. What surprised me even more was that he did it so naturally.

Touching him felt right, and that terrified me.

“You’re my advocate. While they’ll watch anything we do in here, they can’t stop us.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to regain my balance.

It was true. Anything that happened between an advocate and her client was permitted, as long as the cameras were on.

That was why Tessi and Alkard came up with this plan in the first place.

I just didn’t expect Havek would use that rule quite like this.

“Listen,” he whispered. “The plan is to get on the Deathgate Express.”

“What?” I asked, trying not to think about his hand on mine. “The ship that takes away the dead bodies?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re going to kill yourself?” I asked, pulling my hand away.

My theory of him being insane got stronger and stronger with every word he said. My cheeks were on fire and I didn’t want him to think it was from his touch.

“No! I’m not going to kill myself,” he scoffed and leaned back again.

“Don’t be so uptight.”

*Don’t be so uptight.*

I heard that phrase at the Fallen Star a million times. It was code for ‘Why aren’t you letting me touch you?’ or ‘Stop being such a prude.’

The phrase must have triggered something inside me because I went into defense mode as soon as the words left his mouth.

“I think you’re just using this as an excuse to get your hands on me,” I snapped, looking him over and crossing my arms. “Not very smooth, I might add.”

He shrugged. “Don’t be so sure. But remember, you work for my brother, and that means you work for me, too. So...” He grabbed my hand again and ran his thumb over the back of my palm. “Are you going to help me, or do I need to find another advocate?”

*I can't lose my chance at breaking the contract. I need to be free of servitude.*

That was the only reason I was doing this.

Not because just being in the same room as Havek was enough to make me dizzy.

And when he spoke my mouth went dry.

Nothing to do with that at all.

Maybe it was a terrible idea, but maybe, just maybe, it could work.

“Fine,” I agreed with a sigh. “I’ll do it.”

He smiled slightly and looked at me with a glint in his eye. I don’t know what emotion it was, but it struck me like lightning. “Good,” he replied. “Now, we need to set the stage.”

“Okay,” I said sheepishly while looking at his hand on mine. “But how do we do that?”

“Like this,” he said before leaning over the table.

His hand wrapped around the back of my head, and he pulled me in for a kiss. I was shocked, and my muscles tensed at first, but as the kiss deepened and as his tongue snuck in through my lips, I relaxed into it.

*I could definitely get used to this.*

## PAYTON

**M**y body was on fire. I wondered if it was the scent of his pheromones, the tingling feeling his saliva gave me, or the danger I put myself in by living out the lie, but I loved it. It was a sense of adrenaline I never knew before, and as he kissed me harder, I kept wanting more.

He was still cuffed to the table with one hand, but that didn't stop him from touching me in ways that made me feel ecstatic. My hands wove around the back of his neck, and I pressed myself closer to him. I wanted to climb over the table and straddle him right there.

*Actually, maybe it'll make our little display more effective.*

I tried to pull back from the kiss to walk around to the other side of the table, but he held my lips against his. He didn't want to break away from me for a second, and I didn't either.

*Screw this.*

I pulled back and hit the help button on the wall behind me while maintaining eye contact with him. He looked concerned but dazed from the kiss.

“What are you doing?”

“Wait.”

A guard entered the room promptly, seeing Havek standing from his chair and leaning over the table. “Everything all right in here?”

“Yes,” I replied while crossing my arms. “I don't believe there's any reason for my client to be cuffed to the table. He's not a danger to me.”

“But the protocol-”

I leaned forward on the table, feeling my core throb between my legs. I would have done anything to feel both of Havek's hands on me, and I

intended to prove it. “Do you want to be sued for mistreatment of an inmate? Because from what I can see, that cuff is a little tight around his wrist. That could lead to major health complications in the future. Restriction of blood flow, platelet injuries, arthritis, the list goes on.”

I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes as I leaned back in my chair. “And from what I’ve seen, you all don’t exactly have the funds to provide stellar medical care, do you?”

The guard looked flabbergasted. It was like no one had ever spoken to him like that before. He gulped and cracked his neck before pulling out a key from his pocket and undoing the cuff on Havek’s hand.

*Maybe I could be a real advocate.*

I didn’t even know if any of that was true. It was all pulled out of thin air, and I still made a convincing argument.

“The help button is for emergencies,” the guard spat at me.

“Well, I consider my client’s health an urgent matter.”

With an eye roll and a sigh, the guard walked out of the room. He might have acted pissed, but I could tell I put the fear of the Night Mother into him.

My eyes darted back to Havek, who looked at me with a smirk. “I don’t say this often,” he began while walking around the table to me. “But that was something I would have never thought of.”

He put his hands on the back of my chair while leaning over me. His towering physique made me quiver, but I tried to keep my voice even. “Maybe you’re not the only intelligent one on this asteroid.”

“Clearly, I was mistaken.”

He leaned down and kissed me again before picking me up and spinning me around. It was like he read my mind. He pulled me down onto him, and my legs parted to either side while I sat on him and continued our make-out session.

I couldn’t keep my hands off him, and he couldn’t either. I even felt him get hard beneath my legs and was surprised by how big he was. I looked down during our kiss, wondering if he had a belt on that made him feel bigger than he was.

*He’s in prison, Payton. Of course, he doesn’t have a belt on.*

It was nothing but primal heat and cravings between us. I fell into it deeply, grabbing him and running my hands over his chest like he had just ordered me to please him.

I had to pull myself back mentally and emotionally from the experience.

*He's doing this to break out of prison. You're just a part of the plan. None of this is real.*

It *felt* convincing, though. I guess better for the guards as they watched the cameras. My only fear was that they would figure out it was fake and whisk me away.

Plenty of sentients grabbed me before, but none like him. His touches were calculated like he previously analyzed every part of my body and instinctively knew how to touch me. It drove me wild, and I was about to go further than we should have on camera before the buzzer sounded.

We broke apart from the kiss, and he smiled at me. "Very convincing, Advocate Payton."

"What can I say?" I responded, stepping off him and trying to play it cool. "I'm good at my job."

"Time to go, inmate." The guard busted in, almost like he expected to catch us doing something.

*Shit. Will I get into trouble before I leave?*

"I like the plan," Havek said while standing in front of me. "I'll call you again soon. On for next week?"

"Same time, same channel," I chimed before he held out his hand to shake mine.

I felt a small piece of paper slip into my palm and wondered how he hid it during our intense session. He was escorted out of the room, and I sat alone for a second, slowing my breathing and looking at the wall. My mind raced with paranoid thoughts, but I had to continue the mission. Not only to get my contract broken, but to see him again.

When I finally exited the room, I pressed the button on the scrambler to turn it off and walked down the dimly lit hallway to the shuttle. I pretended like I was adjusting my bra to slip the piece of paper into the left hand cup. Not that they would search me anyway, but just in case.

"Welcome back, advocates." The robotic voice of the shuttle echoed through the intercom on the visitors' side of the prison. "We hope you enjoyed your visit to the prison and your meetings were mutually beneficial."

*Oh, my time was very beneficial,* I thought while plopping down on a seat in the shuttle.

Usually, I would have looked around for the Mondian woman who stared me down earlier or scanned every face in my proximity to ensure no one was suspicious of my activity.

That day, I didn't care. I was lost in Havek's trance and in between thoughts. They spanned from *he must have felt the same way to this is just a job for him*. I never cared so much what a male being thought of me, especially not a Vinduthi. I always wrote them off as being callous creatures.

While sitting on the shuttle, I opened the piece of paper he gave me. It was a list of electronics. They all seemed like typical household items I would be able to find in the dormitories. Simple enough.

I let my mind wander.

Only a few weeks ago, I was nothing but a casino girl. While I rode the shuttle back to the dormitories, I realized I was undercover in two ways: one for Alkard and the mafia to relay information and another to be Havek's fake girlfriend.

I just made out with a prisoner and never felt more alive. I was a different woman, and I couldn't decide if the rush that gave me was more exciting or terrifying.

We arrived back at the dormitories, and I looked at the clock. Shit. I had ten minutes before hopping on the hologram call with Tessi and Alkard to report Havek's condition.

While walking to my room, I wondered how much I should tell them. The last thing I wanted to do was give Alkard a reason not to like me or worry Tessi any more than she already probably was.

I decided to try to keep our conversation as professional as possible but still tell them the truth. I was already unsure if I could keep all my identities straight. I didn't need to track lies, too.

When I entered my room, I sat on the bed for a few minutes, thinking of all the reasons why his plan was a terrible one.

*I could spend the rest of my life in jail. Alkard and Tessi could be caught along with me, and their fate could be the same. We all might wind up getting executed.*

None of those options were the worst outcome I could think of. The worst-case scenario that could break me more than anything was the last thought that ran through my mind.

*What if I began having feelings for him?*

My percomm buzzed, which startled me. With an exhale, trying to calm my nerves, I pressed the accept button and watched the hologram of Tessi and Alkard sitting behind his desk appear in my room. I turned the volume low, and activated the scrambler.

“Hey! How’s it going?” Tessi asked happily. Alkard remained stoic as usual.

“Hey! Well-uh-”

“What?” Alkard broke his stoicism. “Is Havek all right?”

“Yes, yeah, he’s fine! He has...come up with a plan.”

“Plan? What type of plan?” Alkard asked with a sigh.

The sigh spoke more than his words. It seemed like he wasn’t surprised at my statement, more concerned than anything. I wouldn’t be surprised if he watched Havek do things like this his entire life. The ego on him couldn’t have come out of nowhere, so I suspected that’s what the sigh was about.

“He wants to break out of prison.”

“What?” Tessi exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting up. Alkard put a hand on her forearm.

“Hold on, let’s hear her out.”

“Hear her out?” Tessi yelled. I motioned for her to keep her volume down, but she didn’t listen. “What do you mean? This is insanity! He’s on Deathgate.”

“Listen.” I shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a terrible idea.”

Tessi side-eyed me before relaxing her muscles and leaning back in her chair. “Go on.”

I sighed. “I don’t know much, it’s just something to do with the Deathgate Express.”

“Deathgate Express?” Alkard scoffed.

“Oh, right.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “The shuttle that carries dead bodies off the asteroid. That’s what they call it.”

Alkard chuckled. “Of course it is. And of course, he plans to use it.” Tessi nudged him in the side angrily. “What?” he asked her with a shocked look on his face. “It is! Also, Havek is the most stubborn person I know,” he continued, turning his attention back to me. “If he has an idea, chances are, he’s going to find a way to complete it.” He sighed. “If we don’t help him, he might try to escape in some other way that might not be as safe.”

Tessi scoffed. “Okay, hold on, how would we even get the electronic parts to him? He’s in maximum security up there.”

“Well...he said I should pose as his girlfriend.”

Alkard blinked slowly, but Tessi slammed her hands on the table in front of her with a scowl. “How is that supposed to do anything other than give you more scrutiny than you want?”



Alkard grabbed her arm and looked at her seriously. “Tessi, he’s my brother. He’s brilliant. He has a plan.”

“Still...”

Ignoring me completely, he leaned over to kiss Tessi until the tightness in her shoulders faded away. “Look at what you went through for me. What Lucia went through for Makar and Mera for Kovas. You know the family protects their own. Payton is a part of that family now. We wouldn’t let anything happen to her.”

His words seemed to calm Tessi, who relaxed and closed her eyes as she exhaled. “Besides,” Alkard continued. “If we don’t get the charges against him dropped, he’ll at least be free.” Tucking her head into his shoulder, he turned back to me.

“We’re in. How do we start?”

## HAVE K

“The shuttle is automated, so we don’t have to deal with a pilot,” I muttered. “But there’s only cold storage for ten bodies. If we can monitor the deaths of that week and ensure only eight bodies are taken on the ship, that would leave enough room for us.”

“But what do we do if more than eight inmates die?” Braadi asked, rubbing his chin.

“We hide the bodies.”

“Where?”

“Dammit, Braadi, I don’t know, anywhere! In our cells, in a supply closet, in the cafeteria. We’ll do whatever we have to in order to make room.”

“Yes, yeah, of course,” he muttered.

“Good. Then, are you on board?”

“Yes.”

*Finally, you would think they would be more grateful and less doubtful, but I guess that’s what you get when you’re locked up with alien criminals.*

“As I was saying, we stow away. There’s likely going to be inspections after we get off the ship, so we have to be ready to fight.”

“But how do we get on the ship, anyway?” Braadi chirped.

I smirked. That was one of my favorite parts of the plan. “My advocate said it first. We’re going to kill ourselves.”

“What?”

“Not really. For the next two weeks, we’re going to act like we’re having issues sleeping, stay up for a few days, and begin to lose our minds. The last thing the guards want is for us to be insomniacs. They hate this job enough as it is. We pretend we have issues with sleep and hoard the pills. Give me the

pills, and I'll synthesize a compound that will kill us, but just for a bit."

"What?"

I sighed in irritation. Apparently, that wasn't clear enough.

"Think of it as going into hibernation. We'll time the dosage so it wears off shortly after takeoff, and then we'll take the Express anywhere we want to go."

Anywhere I wanted to go. That was going to take some thinking.

I'd been with Alkard's company since before the war. Taz, Makar, Razov and the rest weren't just my comrades, they were my brothers.

Would I be able to get back to them after this?

I shoved the thought away.

First, I needed to get out of here. Make the drugs, and find a way to get into the controls of the shuttle.

Problems I could solve.

The clock on the side of the main living area caught my attention.

*Almost time to meet Payton.*

She was on my mind that week even more than escaping. It was an uncontrollable obsession with her. I remembered every word she said to me every night before falling asleep.

When I didn't replay our interactions, I fantasized about her. Whenever my cellmate was out of the room, I would touch myself at the thought of her riding me. One of my favorite things to do was imagine her soft skin moving against my hips. It made me wild.

I told her it was a pretend arrangement, just a part of a plan to break me out of prison. Once I hit the third day of fantasizing about her, I thought I had made a mistake telling her it was all fake.

I wanted more of her. Not only physically, but I wanted to explore her mind and know the little things about her that she might have thought were insignificant. I never fixated on something that much aside from developing new software or creating a new piece of tech. It was a rabbit hole that I was all too happy to jump down, and I wanted to go further.

Even if this was a terrible time to go exploring.

The guards cuffed me and led me to the meeting room. My mind raced, and my heart pounded so hard, I thought I would pass out. It was difficult to keep my face stoic and posture upright when all I wanted to do was grin at the thought of her.

The door opened, and there she was, dressed in a perfectly fitted suit with

her hair up in a bun. I imagined taking the pins out of her hair and letting it down so I could pull on it while caressing her body. I would have ripped those buttons off, sending them all over the room, if there weren't any cameras.

The guards uncuffed me at her request and left. I remained silent, struck by her powerful presence. I never thought a human could intimidate me, but she made me aware of every flaw I had. She made me want to improve myself and show her the best parts of me, something I never felt for anyone else before.

"Good morning, Havek," she said, her quick smile making me catch my breath.

I couldn't help myself. I lost control from the sound of her voice. It was what I looked forward to for a week, and I knew we didn't have much time together. I wasn't going to waste it with idiotic formalities.

I walked to her quickly and stood her up from the chair before kissing her. At first, her body was tense, but then she relaxed into me. Her taste was mesmerizing, and the smell of her made me hard even from just one whiff.

My hands moved around her waist while hers lay on my chest. I pulled her close, feeling her breasts press against me while I squeezed her curves tightly. She didn't pull away, didn't even flinch at my hard grasp. In fact, it seemed my aggressive nature made her want more.

She pressed her hips against me, and I knew she felt how hard I was. I didn't even care to try to hide it. While the feelings rising in me scared me, I also wanted her to know how I felt.

I would have taken her right there, bit her, and made her my mate. Even after only meeting her a few times, I knew. It wasn't just feelings that were rising inside me for her, it was instinct. Some biological force drew me toward her, and she didn't even know it.

My eyes caught a glimpse of the camera over her shoulder.

*The mission. That's right. She's carrying the parts.*

I couldn't ask her where they were in case the cameras caught me holding something or the guards saw me carrying a part on the way out of the room. She would have been implicated if they did so, and that was the last thing I wanted.

My hands moved to her breasts, and I felt one of the smaller components I requested. A battery from a microwave. It was in her bra, tucked into the left cup. The Family used specially designed clothing for smuggling for

years, but I never realized it could be so erotic.

I felt the edge of the device, almost losing myself in the moment, when her nipples hardened through her shirt at my touch.

Easing it out with my thumb, eventually, I was able to grab onto it and hold it in my fist before searching for the next. I felt down to her thighs, searching for anything in her pockets. I brushed against one of the larger items I requested, metal wires which I assumed she found from a lamp or by stripping a cord of a charger or television.

She moaned in my mouth as I reached into her pocket, careful to keep my hand out of view of the camera. The vibrations of her noises brought me to full mast, and I ground against her slightly while feeling her thigh through the fabric of her pocket.

I almost moved my hand to her pussy. I wanted to feel how swollen her clit was from our steamy make-out session. I hoped she was driven as wild as I was, but if we took it any farther, the guards might have broken in to stop us.

I was surprised they hadn't already. While I had rights to an advocate, we were still dancing close to the line.

My hand moved to her other pocket, but I felt nothing. Her lips moved to my neck, and I sighed, pulling her closer to me.

"My other breast," she whispered in my ear.

My heart was *racing*. Her warm breath on my skin sent tingling throughout my body. My hand moved to her other cup, and I felt it, not even caring about the hard drive I requested. I looked into her eyes and heard her sigh with exhilaration. That moment couldn't have been fake on her end, but she was an amazing actress. I saw her do it with the guard when she demanded they uncuff me.

I pulled myself out of the trance and got the last component out of her bra. I put the parts in her hands and leaned down to her ear.

"Put them in my pants."

She bit her lip and closed her eyes briefly before following my command. She grazed my cock with the back of her hand and looked at me in shock. That wide-eyed look almost had me bust right there in the meeting room.

Once it was out of her bra and in my pants, I could have stopped. The three items were all I needed to prepare my hacking plan.

I kissed her again, deeply and passionately. I had to do something to let her know that moment wasn't just an act for me. While I could have just said

it, I wasn't much one for words.

The buzzer sounded, making me jump slightly. She flinched and broke away from me. A guard walked in, ticking his tongue and shaking his head.

"Playtime's over, you two."

"We still have forty minutes," I barked.

"You're out of your mind," he laughed snidely. "You've had your full hour. If you don't let your lady love leave now, she'll be up here until the next shuttle."

Shit. Really?

I glanced at the clock, stunned. We completely lost track of time, wrapped in each other's bodies.

Payton stared at me like she wasn't sure what to say. I wasn't either, but I couldn't stop myself from telling her at least one truth.

"I'll dream about you tonight," I said while running my fingers through her hair.

She sighed and leaned into my hand before giving my palm a sweet kiss. Even that light touch of her lips made me insane.

I let the guard cuff me and walked out of the room without looking back at her. Any more glances or thoughts would have made being away from her for another week even more unbearable. As I was escorted back to my cell, a thought struck me.

*I don't think I'm acting any longer.*

## PAYTON

The way he said, “I’ll dream about you tonight,” did something to me, and I wasn’t sure why.

I *had* to keep reminding myself it was an act. I couldn’t get caught up in his pretty words, but I was beginning to think they weren’t as dressed up as I thought they were. Maybe they were meant in a more natural and meaningful state.

As the shuttle rocked back and forth and the monotone, robotic voice boomed over the intercom, I found myself getting lost in a fantasy. In it, somehow, Havek got out of the prison and made his way to the dormitories. I was asleep in my room, and he crept in to wake me up.

“Payton, wake up.”

I startled awake and pulled the covers over my naked body. “Havek! What are you-”

“I had to break out,” he said in a low tone while leaning over me. “I couldn’t take it anymore, seeing you in that suit and not being able to rip it off.” His fingers slid down my neck, and I caved into his touch as he climbed on top of me in the bed.

“Welcome back, advocates. We hope you enjoyed your visit.”

The voice and sound of shuttle doors opening jolted me out of the imaginary world. I caught my breath before standing up and walking out with all the others. While my feet were rooted in the reality of me being a fake, undercover advocate and girlfriend, my mind transported me to another dimension, one where the act was more than just that. One where he meant every word he said to me.

I told myself I was crazy. My mind said I was just bored being on

Deathgate with no one but Alkard and Tessi to talk to occasionally. Maybe I was lonely, and imagining Havek as something else was the only way to temporarily cure the feeling. There was no possible way it would ever come true.

*Right?*

I replayed the recent visit in my mind. The way he grabbed the pieces he needed from my bra made every nerve in my body tingle. When I moaned from his touch, it wasn't fake, but I was unsure if he knew that.

I felt how hard he was against me. That couldn't have been fake. There was no way. Then again, he was a male Vinduthi locked in a maximum-security prison and had needs. I was probably the first female being he had been alone in a room with in quite a while.

When he told me to put the parts into his pants, I almost lost it. I thought I wouldn't be able to do it right and was terrified I would accidentally touch him. I did accidentally graze him, and he didn't even budge. He almost leaned into me more.

All of those parts of the visit excited and entranced me because I was unsure if they were real or not, but what *really* got me was thinking about the kisses he gave me. They were so passionate and connected. It was like he tasted a piece of my soul every time his lips touched mine.

And his saliva? Oh, seven galaxies, it was amazing. It was something I wanted more and more of. At that point, I was barely even thinking about the mission anymore. I was too preoccupied with thinking about every detail of him.

Even his tracery was amazing. I wanted to run my fingers over every little line on his body and savor each squiggle of it on his skin.

"Excuse me," a Mondian said while trying to slide past me.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I responded, moving aside and realizing I was walking very slowly toward my room.

Advocates didn't have time to lose. They had clients to free and credits to make from their efforts. If I didn't get my shit together, someone might have figured out who I was. I couldn't take that chance.

I stopped thinking about Havek briefly while walking among the crowd. I used the surroundings of the dormitories to distract myself. Anything would work, an overhead light, the red, tiled floors, the sound of advocates chatting. I even eavesdropped on a conversation between the two female Talimarians in front of me to distract myself.



“He said he was going to cook for me tonight,” one squealed.

“But Sarannah, he’s an *Ewani*.”

“What?” the first responded. “He’s top of his class!”

The second one scoffed. “You’re insane for even considering it. You can’t get much lower than that.”

“Well, I’ll tell you how well it goes, whether you like it or not.”

While watching the two women walk in front of me and listening to their conversation, I felt insecure.

While they were rare, I had seen a couple Vinduthi women before. They were all gorgeous. Tall and lean and striking, their faces like carved glass.

I was a human, the lowest being on the totem pole. Even lower than Ewanis.

*Then again, he could have gotten another advocate. He could have had Alkard send in a Vinduthi woman. He said he would if I didn’t agree to help him. He could have made that call the first day I walked into the room to meet him. Why didn’t he?*

I finally reached my room and went inside quickly. I slammed the door shut and rubbed my hands over my face. The questions and fantasies spinning around in my mind only made me feel crazier with each thought.

I couldn’t write it all down in case someone found it. That would blow our cover. I couldn’t talk to Tessi or Alkard about the feelings because they would think I wasn’t taking the mission seriously.

Obviously, I couldn’t confide in someone in the dormitories about it, but I didn’t know what else to do.

“I can’t stop thinking about him,” I whispered out loud to my still, empty room. “I hate this! I hate this, I hate this.” I hung my head in my hands, sunk to the floor against the door, and sighed. “I’m losing my mind.” I shook my head. “There’s no way I can keep doing this. This is too much.”

I had a memory pop up while sitting there on the floor of the dormitory room. A long while ago, while living in the Under, I was overwhelmed with my work to the point I couldn’t sleep. I told my roommate about how stressed I was but kept minimizing my feelings. She told me something that absolutely blew my mind.

*Let yourself happen.*

She told me the more I fought the feelings, the more chaotic my mind would be. She was right then, and she was still right while I was on that dormitory floor. I fought everything happening inside my mind, and it only

made me more anxious and distracted.

*Maybe I need to let myself...happen.*

My eyes glanced at the bed, and I stood up slowly, turning around to ensure the door was locked behind me. I unbuttoned the top of my suit and took off the jacket before exhaling and removing the rest of my clothes.

I got into the uncomfortable dormitory bed and closed my eyes before wincing. *I can't do this here. I can't do this anywhere. Going deeper into the feelings will only make it worse.*

*Let yourself happen.*

My fingers moved to my clit, and I gasped. I had to let go. I had to let myself feel what was going on inside me. If I didn't, I felt like I might implode.

I rubbed my fingertips in circles on my clit, feeling the light pressure send shivers through my body. My eyes closed, and I thought of the fantasy I started on the shuttle back to the dormitories.

Havek climbed on top of me in the bed and kissed me like he always did, passionately and fully, like if he took his lips off mine, I might disappear. My hands wrapped around his neck, and I pulled him in closer.

His weight pressed against me, and I loved the way he felt on top of me. It was like I was wrapped in a safety net, and the pressure relaxed all my muscles. I felt him get hard against me, and he pressed into the outline of my pussy beneath my underwear.

"Oh, Havek," I whispered to my silent and empty dorm room.

My fingers moved faster, and I increased the pressure on my swelling clit. I exhaled but tried to remain as quiet as possible. I did have neighbors.

My mind snapped back to the fantasy. He took off his underwear, and I felt his bare cock against my panties. It was warm and firm, and I wondered if I would have to use two hands to grip it fully.

He pushed my panties aside and dove into me under the sheets. His saliva made my whole pussy tingle, and I grabbed onto the pillow next to me in ecstasy.

I did so in reality, too. I had to. Even the fantasy of his tongue swirling in circles on my clit drove me insane. Even just the *thought* of him was enough to make my back arch.

In the fantasy, he gripped my thighs and held me still until he made me come with his tongue. He lifted his head from the sheets and looked down at me.

“I need to search you for the other parts I need.”

“Yeah?” I asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” he replied while angling his cock at my opening. “But you have to be very quiet.”

“Yes,” I whispered to my dorm room. “I’ll be quiet. I promise.”

My fingers moved so fast I thought I might bruise my clit, but I needed more. I was almost there. I was too deep into it to turn back.

“Good,” he replied to my imaginary self before sliding into me.

I imagined his cock going so deep into me, it almost hurt. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted him to do whatever he wanted to me. More than anything, I wanted him to come inside me. I wanted to feel his juices seep out of me after I finished orgasming.

His cock throbbed and hit my spots to perfection.

My fingers moved faster.

“Oh, Payton.”

“Havek...”

I grabbed onto the pillow.

*Stay quiet.*

“I’ll dream about you.”

“Oh!” I screamed once I thought about what he said to me in the visitation room. My body jerked and twitched while my fingernails dug into the pillow. I inhaled sharply before closing my eyes and feeling my body relax against the mattress.

When I opened my eyes, I saw my empty room, and reality set in. *I just masturbated to the thought of him. I just made up an entire fantasy about him.*

The scariest thought was what made me orgasm wasn’t the fictional scenes I created. It wasn’t even the thought of him fucking me. It was the memory of how he said he would dream about me.

*I made myself come from thinking about the reality of him.*

I put the hand that was on the pillow over my mouth as fear shot through me. I was in way too deep. I got carried away with something that was all an act. I was going to get my feelings hurt deeply if I kept thinking the way I was.

I closed my eyes and reminded myself I was in that position to rid myself of servitude. I would have a life of my own once it was all over, and I couldn’t let some stupid hope of a Vinduthi having feelings for me overtake

that.

*That* had to be my mission. To be free. Not to get laid.

I shook my head and sat up in bed while looking at the floor. “It’s a job, Payton. It’s just a job. It’s *work*.”

While I spoke those words to the empty dorm room, a shiver ran through me. The same shiver that happened when I minimized my feelings to my old roommate. It was a shiver that only happened when I knew I was lying to myself.

## HAVE K

“Have another good time with your advocate!” the first guard said, his face the same smug grin he always wore.

“Yeah,” added the second. “Glad you have such friendly relations with your client!”

Payton rolled her eyes, but I couldn’t help finding it funny. They were so confident that they’d figured the two of us out. Just another Vinduthi who got a little too involved with a human piece of ass. At least, that’s what *they* thought.

That was a lesson I learned early on in my career. The best place to hide a secret is underneath another secret.

The door slid closed, and the two of us were alone.

Payton crossed her legs. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“After last time, I expected you’d have me pressed against the wall by now.”

“That’s true.” I pretended to be interested in running my hands along the table. “I thought that it might be nice to let you make the first move this time.”

“Me?” She smiled and stood up. “You want me to push you up against the wall?”

“I’d certainly like to see you try.”

She stepped closer, exaggerating every movement in a way that I couldn’t help finding sexy. “Well, I guess I could-”

But before she could finish her sentence, she got close enough that I grabbed her hips and spun her around into my lap. She shrieked and then

broke into giggles.

“I thought you were going to let me make the first move!” she said.

“Well, that’s what you get for trusting someone like me,” I replied and smothered her response in a deep kiss. She pushed back for a second or so but quickly relaxed into it as she always did, her hands running down my neck and onto my back.

I pulled back and, with one hand, caressed her cheek while my other slipped carefully, into her coat. With her back to the camera, the movement was invisible even if they were looking at it, and while I didn’t doubt that the guards were watching, they wouldn’t watch for that. They just wanted to see some action.

As promised, I felt the new drill bits and the power core tightly wrapped into a single bundle with copper wire. I just had to get it into my pocket, but that would require a little bit more distraction for the cameras.

“So, advocate, how’s my case going?” I asked.

She laughed. “Well, I think we’ve got solid evidence for all your major claims. The one problem is likability.”

“Likability?”

“Exactly. Can you make a judge like you?”

“Well, how about I give it a try with you?”

I kissed her again and let my hand on her cheek slip down her neck and onto her breast. Carefully, I angled her so the camera got a good view of me playing with her curves but not of my other hand slipping the bundle out of her coat and into my pants.

Making a crucial part of my escape plan happen in full view of the cameras gave me an undeniable thrill. But it wasn’t the only thrill I got from Payton, and I was almost sure that she felt it, too.

She beamed. “I think the case is going wonderfully.”

“I’m so glad you think so,” I said.

She blushed slightly, and looked shy. It seemed like she was working up the courage to say something important.

“Can I ask you something silly?” she said.

“You often do.”

“I’ve been thinking about what happens... after you escape.”

“Is that so?” I said.

To be entirely honest, I hadn’t spent much time on it. Whenever I got into a technical problem, I completely stopped thinking about anything else.

Escaping that prison was one big technical problem, and it was completely absorbing my attention. I was more sure that I would escape with every part I collected, but there were still enough variables that I hadn't had the chance to consider what I'd actually do once I was out.

Except for eating some food, taking a long, warm shower, and getting some rest. That much I knew I would do.

"Alkard says that he'll erase my entire contract once you're out," Payton said. "Which means that I'd be totally free to go anywhere I wanted. With... anyone I wanted."

She looked at me meaningfully, but my mind was still caught on her first sentence.

"What's the matter?" asked Payton. "What are you thinking about?"

But there was no time to explain. The buzzer sounded, and the doors slid open. The two guards entered, and I hurried Payton to her feet, doing my best to look embarrassed that they'd seen us like that.

"She was explaining something to me, and she tripped," I said. "Very awkward."

"Of course," said the guard as I stood up to go with them.

If Alkard promised to erase her contract, he would.

But after my escape, the spotlight would be on her.

How did he plan to keep Payton safe when I was on the run?

Would he even bother?

The thought made me bristle. How dare he do this to her?

It didn't matter, I wouldn't let it. Already, my mind raced with new problems and new solutions.

If I slipped off without her, Payton would be arrested before she even knew it was coming. And there was no way I'd allow that.

I didn't question why that was important to me. It just was. And it meant I needed something new. Something bolder. Something that would get both of us off this rock together.

The guards stopped as the airlock door opened. I stepped forward and, a few seconds later, walked back into the crowd of other prisoners. An idea was taking shape, but it was a big idea. The kind with a lot of risks and unknowns.

Then again, if it worked, I would know exactly what I'd do after all this. I'd run around the galaxy with Payton by my side. And that idea was pleasant enough. It almost entirely distracted me from the original problem.

I walked into the cell Braadi and I staked out as our headquarters. Braadi fiddled with the device I made, getting the last pieces in place. All it needed now was the power core that was currently sitting in my pocket.

Except...

"There's a change of plans," I said. "And I trust you enough to know what it is."

I outlined the basic idea as it formed in my mind. The details weren't there yet, but everything that mattered was. The equipment, the allies, the big idea. As I described it, Braadi grew paler, and his eyes stretched out.

"Gee, I dunno how I feel about that. Your first plan was so..."

"Elegant? Subtle?"

"Safe. It was very safe. I mean, as prison breaks go, it was safe. This one's not like that."

I shrugged. "No. It's not. And if you want to drop out for that reason, I won't blame you. You don't need to put in any more work on this, and I'll still protect you as long as I'm here."

"Well, I didn't say that," Braadi protested quickly. "I just don't understand it. Why are we giving up on a safe, easy plan and doing a hard, dangerous one instead? Did something change?"

"That's a complicated question."

Braadi looked down at the device, then back at me. "This has to do with the girl, doesn't it? Everyone knows about it. The guards are all giggling about her, and they've passed it on to the prisoners."

Well, that explained some of the attitudes that I got from the other gangs.

"Her name's Payton," I said. "And fine, it has something to do with her."

"I don't know how I feel about that," said Braadi. "Mixing up sex and business. It often doesn't turn out so well. Do you know the Mondian who sleeps in the next cell over? Do you know how he got arrested? It's kind of a funny story."

"I don't need funny stories right now," I said. "I'm very well aware of what I'm doing. I know this isn't the safest move or the easiest. But it's the one I'm making, and I plan to do everything to ensure that it works."

"She must be pretty special," Braadi said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you know you're doing this for her, and you know how risky it is, and you're still going for it. I've known a lot of beings who trick themselves into thinking they're doing something for smarter reasons than



they are, and even more, who just ignore it totally when something they want to do is dangerous. But you're not doing either of those things. So I guess she must be pretty special."

"Well, she's done a lot for us. She's put herself on the line, and I figure I owe her something."

Braadi eyed me suspiciously.

"All right, fine," I said. "She's pretty special."

"In that case, I'll do it," he decided. "I guess I'll work on that amplifier then."

I smiled. "You're a lot braver than you give yourself credit for, you know."

He smiled back. "You don't even know how brave I am."

## PAYTON

I wasn't able to sleep the night before seeing him again.

As I sat on the shuttle and bumped along the tracks, I thought about what he told me the last time we met up in the room. He didn't answer my question about what he would do when he got out, and I worried I overstepped my boundaries.

*Stupid.*

There were also many times throughout the week when I had to remind myself again it was nothing but a ruse to get out of Deathgate. I was a human woman who worked at a casino not too long ago. He was a hardened Vinduthi mastermind criminal. It didn't make sense for us to mix. Maybe that's why he skirted my questions.

I was even slightly concerned with how much I thought about him. Fear rose in me that almost swallowed me whole.

*What if my feelings get in the way, and we both get caught? What if I pushed too far, and now he wants to find someone else?*

"Welcome, advocates to the prison on Deathgate. We hope you enjoy your visit. The shuttle will depart in an hour."

*One hour. Only one hour with him.*

I adjusted my suit and exhaled before walking out with the crowd of other advocates. I got more adjusted to walking among them. I felt like my role in the mission improved greatly, but I could fall and crash even harder with each thought I had about Havek.

My palms began sweating as I walked through security. They barely examined me as usual and waved me through. Thanks to the near-magical clothing Alkard and Tessi sent to me, I wasn't even scared about being

searched, but I was terrified about seeing him.

Whether it was my outfit looking even slightly off to him or hearing him tell me all of it was an act, the nerves hit hard. I overthought every single part of the scenario, something I never did when working at the casino.

When I was employed there, I *knew* I was targeted, that I would get flirted with and possibly groped. With Havek, I was stuck between wondering if our façade *was* really just that or if he felt the same way. The warring in my mind brought out some of my biggest insecurities and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

The door to the meeting room opened, and I took my seat as usual. My fingers ran over each other in circles while I stared blankly at the wall.

*What if he doesn't show? What if he just needed the parts? He didn't tell me when he was leaving on the Deathgate Express. What if he's already gone, and I never find him again? Were those the only chances I had to be with him?*

Just as I made more problems up in my head, the door to the prison side swung open, and in walked Havek, escorted by his usual guard. I sat up straight, put my shoulders back, and lifted my chin, shoving down any insecurities I had.

"Good morning," I chimed.

*Don't sound too excited, Payton. What's wrong with you?*

"Morning," he replied softly. The tone made me uneasy.

*Has something gone wrong?*

The guard left the room, and Havek turned to watch him leave. I watched his back muscles flex and felt my heart palpitate. Something wasn't right, and I was scared.

"Havek?"

He didn't respond. He only turned around and looked at me with a gaze I hadn't seen from him before.

He walked toward me, and I stiffened in the chair. My eyes remained fixated on his, and he didn't break eye contact until he reached me. His eyes closed, and he smacked his lips before exhaling and dropping his shoulders.

His lips twisted into something almost like a smile. "I'm sorry, Payton."

*Shit. The mission is blown. That or he found another advocate. I'm useless after all. Maybe he had to rat me out to get less of a sentence for the crimes. I'm screwed. We're screwed.*

"Sorry for what?" I smiled like I wasn't panicking so hard my forehead

sweat.

“For this.”

He grabbed me by the waist and stood me up quickly.

For just a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

My hopes were shattered when he spun me around and put me in a chokehold.

“Havek!” I sputtered, grappling for his arm.

He didn’t choke me hard enough to affect my airflow, but he held me against him tightly enough that I couldn’t wiggle out of his grip.

Then something sharp pricked my neck. My mouth dropped, and my eyes widened.

“Havek,” I said through shaky breaths. “What are you doing?”

“Let me *out*,” he shouted while looking at the camera.

“Havek, don’t do this! Please, I-”

“I’ll kill her!” The shout echoed off the walls and hurt my ear that he bellowed into.

“Inmate! Put down the shiv!”

I glanced over at his hand. *Shiv? How the fuck did he make a shiv?*

He used a shard of glass, what looked like a part of a mirror, glued and tied it to the end of an already sharpened stylus. I was unsure if my neck was penetrated or not, but I was still breathing.

*How could he do this, put me in danger like this? I was a fucking idiot thinking he felt the same way about me.*

My rage overtook me. I was already trembling, but once the anger kicked in, it was more from a desire to tell him off or fight him than being afraid of him.

“Inmate!” one of the guards yelled, pointing their gun at him through the glass pane on the door to the room. “I said put it down!”

“I’ll tell them you had a plan,” I whispered to him with a sly grin on my face. “I’ll tell them everything. You remember that, Havek? The plan we made?” I kicked him in the shin. He wobbled slightly but didn’t go down. “What happened to that, huh?” At the end of my question, I screamed. “How could you fucking use me like this? I trusted you!”

“Stop squirming,” he whispered in my ear in his usual, smooth voice.

“Why?” I yelled. “So it makes me easier to kill? What is *wrong* with you?”

“Payton, stop.”

Something about the way he said my name snapped me back into the trance he had over me. That wasn't the same tone he used when he said, 'sorry for this.' That was his *real* voice. The one that told me he would dream about me.

"Listen to me," he whispered again.

"Inmate!"

"The original plan was dangerous," he said while I continued to squirm. While I recognized the tone in his voice, my trust in him was almost completely shot. "It would have gotten you caught or killed. I *need* you to believe me." I stopped struggling as much as I listened to his words. "I couldn't let that happen to you."

His words strangely made my heart warm.

It made no sense. I was being held captive by the Vinduthi I fantasized about all week. Why should I trust him? He flipped the plan on me without even telling me, and I was in distress. Getting caught or dying were the worst-case scenarios, but why would he do that if he knew it would make me panic?

"Why should I believe you?" I asked angrily.

"Two reasons," he whispered while keeping his eyes on the guards at the door. "Number one, there's a shiv to your neck. Number two, I'm not a liar."

"Seems like you are to me," I replied quietly. "You've deceived me this whole time."

"I know it seems like I am, but I promise I'm not."

"Put it down, inmate, or we'll shoot!"

"Listen," he continued. "I know I shouldn't ask for you to trust me right now. That's the last thing I should ask for. But give me just a little more time."

"I could be dead in a little more time!"

"You really think I would let that happen to you?" he whispered angrily. "Are you insane?"

"I'm insane?"

I believed him and wasn't sure why. The thought that he could hold a weapon to my neck and still convince me to trust him almost scared me more than a gun pointed at us.

More guards showed up at both of the doors, and a large Mondian wearing heavy body gear emerged from the crowd of guns. "Give it up, inmate!"

*That has to be the warden. Of course, they would put a Mondian in charge. Experts in battle, terrible with emotions.*

“Let me out!” Havek screamed again, this time his arms trembling from the volume and desperation in his voice. If it really was an act like he said, it was a damn good one.

The point of the glass slightly pierced my skin, and I winced. I felt him pull it back slightly the second I flinched, and I knew he told the truth. He would have held it there if he really wanted to hurt me.

But what was the plan? We were surrounded, there were cameras and audio feeds on us, and the warden had been alerted to the chaos.

*Wait. Is he going to have us shot in order to get on the Deathgate Express?*

“Is your *plan* to get us both killed?” I snapped, looking at him over my shoulder, careful not to move my neck into the shiv.

“We’re not getting killed,” he replied with a quick glance into my eyes. “We’re getting out.”

“On the Express?”

He shook his head. “No. Something better.” He stomped his foot on the ground, and my body moved with him. I kept my neck as still as I could, but the shiv still pressed into my skin a little deeper. “I’ll kill her! You really want to risk the life of an advocate?” He chuckled. “I doubt the Federation would like to hear about that, warden!”

The Mondian laughed. I saw his mangled teeth through the clear visor on his riot gear. “Go ahead! What does she mean to me?”

“An overbearing visit from your bosses,” Havek shouted. “Getting the rest of your boys tossed in here with the prisoners. How do you think that’s going to go?”

“Let them visit! Why would they give a shit about a human woman? That’s the least of the Federation’s concerns!”

*Shit. I don’t think this is going how it was supposed to.*

“Havek,” I said quietly, my throat closing up as my eyes started to well.

He leaned his head down into my neck, placing his chin where the shiv was. I felt his breath on my neck but was too concentrated on the warden and other guards surrounding the room.

They weren’t going to go for it.

It was only when I heard a clear whisper from him that I started to pay attention. “Five.”

*Five? Five what?* “Five what, Havek?”

“Four.”

*He’s counting down.*

“Three.”

My eyes darted to the warden as I watched him open the door to the room, a large rifle pointed straight at us. He was going to shoot through me to get to Havek.

I always knew the guards here weren’t exactly knights in shining armor. But this made it painfully real. They didn’t care what happened to us, as long as they didn’t lose control of the prison.

“Two.”

*Why is he counting down to our deaths? This doesn’t make any sense!*  
“Havek, he’s getting closer,” I whispered as my knees went weak.

“One.”

I shut my eyes and felt my heart race through my chest, my blood pumping so fast that I was surprised it wasn’t spewing out of the slight cut on the side of my neck. I waited for the gunshot, but something else happened instead.

A loud explosion sounded from far away, followed by a loud rumbling that got closer and closer to the prison. It was so loud that I wanted to cover my ears, and the ground shook. Havek held me tighter against him and kept our balance while the guards and warden grabbed for the walls.

Alarms blared across the prison. “Emergency Override. Emergency Override.” A monotone, robotic voice sounded over the intercom.

There was loud beeping and the sound of doors opening. All the inmates were free. Every door in the facility had unlocked.

“Zero.”

## PAYTON

Havek sprang into action, spinning me away from him into the wall so he could neutralize the warden and take his rifle. He slipped the shiv underneath the guard's breastplate and between his ribs, twisting it so the stylus would break and leave the glass and shards of steel inside him.

As blood gushed from the wound, the warden screamed and writhed on the floor.

Havek grabbed the rifle and tossed it to me. I caught it like it was some kind of feral animal. "What am I supposed to do with *this*?" I screamed.

"Point it at somebody!" Havek yelled as he went after another guard. One by one, the guards recovered their wits following the explosion. They shook themselves, stood up, and took aim at Havek, but he moved too fast.

"Not at me!" Havek screamed. I looked down and realized that I had, indeed, pointed the giant gun at him. *The kickback on this thing must be incredible!* I thought.

*Focus, Payton!*

I tried to calm down and assess my situation, but so much happened all at once that I couldn't make heads or tails of it. Not knowing what was expected of me, I just dodged the flailing body parts of the guards and tried not to slip in the blood. Both became increasingly difficult.

Finishing off the guards in the room, Havek cracked the door and looked both ways to make sure all of Deathgate's other employees were off dealing with the other prisoners. Evidently satisfied, he closed the door again and undressed one of the guards.

"What are you doing?" I asked, not in the mood to see a Mondian naked.

"What *you* should be doing! We need armor. Find some that's not too



damaged and suit up!” He kicked at the leg of a groaning figure in the corner. “That guy’s little. Pop him in the head and take his vest.”

I stared at him for what must have been a beat too long. Havek finished “suing up” and noticed. “Do you mean to tell me Alkard sent me an advocate that doesn’t even know how to shoot a gun?” His mouth was agape.

I shook my head, unable to utter a syllable. Havek busied himself with gathering weapons from the guards. When he found a small handgun, he turned and shot the guard in the corner. Undressing him hurriedly, he tossed me each piece of his clothing.

Trying not to think about what I was doing, I donned the dead Talimarian’s gear and tightened it as far as it would go. Havek switched the rifle in my hands with another, even larger cylindrical weapon. He strapped several more guns to my suit before opening the door and looking out.

“Okay, this is how it’s gonna go.” He spoke quickly and confidently. I tried not to let him know I struggled to keep up. “What you’re holding is like a grenade launcher. Pump action—you load it like a shotgun, point, and shoot. Not much recoil, and you don’t have to be that accurate.”

Right.

Not accurate.

That was good.

Because I was still in shock. I was a bottle girl pretending to be an advocate. And now I was in the middle of an armed revolt.

I never even touched a weapon more serious than a knife before, and that was just for cooking.

What was I doing?

Finding the lever, I nodded, clinging to his words. “You should have eight rounds,” he continued. “So don’t waste them. Shoot only when I tell you. I’m going to take weapons off your suit, so stay behind me, and don’t let anyone else touch you. And Payton...”

I looked up just in time to catch his blinding smile. “Try not to get shot.” He was out the door before I processed his sentence. All I could do was run after him and hope there was more of a plan than the chaos already ensuing.

He bolted down the hallway, jumping over fallen guards and prisoners. “Keep moving! Keep moving!” he shouted when I slowed to look into one’s face.

There was rubble and detritus everywhere. More explosions rocked the building, but never as big as the first. The regularity with which they went off

sounded like he set up a chain reaction.

A few hallways later, I realized he was counting between booms. *Boom...* "... two... three... four..." *Boom...* "... two..." At regular intervals between explosions, he let off a volley of shots from one of the machine guns he stole from the guards.

It was impossible to tell how long we had wandered when I fell into the macabre rhythm of booms and shots. It was like a strange, complicated dance, and Havek was the conductor and the lead. He orchestrated it: he kept time, he leaped, he shot—he was a one-being ballet.

How did he construct all of these explosives with the parts I brought him? Impossible.

Or...

Did he use the parts to get access to the guard armory, and used their own weapons against them?

"There. Shoot. Now!" he shouted, breaking me out of my ridiculous train of thought.

There wasn't any point in trying to figure out what he did.

He'd done it. And now I needed to pay attention.

Without looking at what I was shooting, I pumped the handle, pointed in the direction of Havek's finger, and shot.

Whatever that gun was, it was *not* a grenade launcher. A massive ball of green electricity left the muzzle of my weapon, sparking as it floated to a nearby wall. It dissolved into the wall and disintegrated, taking the blocks with it in a pixelated domino effect.

He was right about one thing, though. It had no recoil, and I didn't have to be accurate at all. Okay, he was right about two things.

"What *is* this thing?" I looked at Havek as though he were an evil sorcerer bent on mass destruction. As far as I knew, he could be.

"Illegal," he quipped and laughed at his own joke. "What Alkard wouldn't do to get his hands on one of those babies."

All I wanted to do was get my hands *off* of the gun, but Havek ran off in the direction of the unblocked wall before I could share. I followed as quickly as I could but lagged behind under the weight of the weaponry he stashed on my suit.

Luckily, he ran out of ammo. Tossing his guns aside, he grabbed the two largest off my back and shoved me behind an upended table just as a fireball came rocketing through what I could only presume was the mess hall.

Flames engulfed us all around. I smelled heat, fuel, burnt meat, and singed hair. I hoped none of it was mine. Screams reached us from all corners of the room, and I tried again not to think about what it was we were doing or how we would ever get out of this mess alive.

Havek must have seen the doubt on my face. “You’re doing great!” he yelled. I looked at him like he had grown another horn in the middle of his handsome face. “I mean it! Follow my lead. We’re going to go left, and you’re going to shoot through three walls in a row and keep running!”

I would most certainly *not* shoot through three walls in a row. “Ready?” he shouted. *Absolutely not.* “Go!” I ran to the left, pumped, and shot three times without waiting for the walls to disintegrate between shots, hoping beyond hope the gun would keep working how it was supposed to.

Havek whooped and took my hand, running with me straight ahead, then veering off to the right. “One more shot, dead ahead, and we’re outta here!” I gave him the shot he asked for, and just like he said, we were in the docking bay.

And there before us was a ship. Sleek and curved, it didn’t look a thing like the Deathgate Express.

“What is that?” I gasped.

Havek grinned. “The warden’s personal star runner. He won’t need it.”

As we approached, a frog-looking thing skittered out from under the craft. “You didn’t say anything about a hostage!” he oozed.

“Relax, Braadi. Plans change. Give me some cover.”

Havek took the gun from my hands and pulled a greenish, glowing power cell out from one side of my vest. From the other, he pulled some wiring and threaded it through the power cell in a specific pattern.

Finally, he pulled one of the cartridges from the launching mechanism of the gun, removed the pin, and unloaded the firing switch. All of that, of course, I learned later when I asked him what he was doing, and I never could figure out what it meant.

“There!” He presented it proudly when he was finished. “Remote control key!”

“Havek, we need to go now.”

Completely ignoring me, Havek continued chattering about his newest toy. “Now, the trick here is gonna be to *not* fire up *everything* within a ten-mile radius...”

“Havek, we need to go *now!*” I exclaimed, looking back at the prison.

Despite Braadi's efforts and the ongoing barrage of bombs, the guards caught up with us and took up positions, ready to fire.

"But you haven't even looked at—"

"*Havek!*"

"All right, all right! Keep your pants on!" He smacked me on the ass and grinned devilishly. "Or don't."

*The ego on him is going to drive me insane.*

He adjusted some wires on the power cell and pressed the firing switch, opening the bay doors to the star runner. "All aboard!" he called.

Closing the airlock with his remote control, he adjusted more wires, pressing the button again, and activating the shields.

"That oughta hold 'em while we get in the air." His cavalier attitude made me smile completely against my will.

I never met a person like this, one who came alive under the pressure of bombs and gunfire.

"Boss, I thought you said not to bring anything extra!" Braadi arrived to ruin my train of thought.

"I did." Havek crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow in a look that begged Braadi to make his point.

"So should I toss the hostage? We don't need her anymore."

Havek seemed to consider his suggestion, and I looked at him wide-eyed. I honestly wasn't sure what he was about to say or do, and that was *not* a position I relished.

"No. We'll keep her."

I almost sighed with relief.

"*We?*" Braadi repeated, an unsavory look of excitement curling on his loathsome face.

"*I,*" Havek corrected. "*I will keep her.*"

"Why?" Braadi whined.

Havek pulled me close with an expression of authoritative challenge. Holding me tightly by the waist, he stared Braadi down and, in a voice that made my insides melt, stated, "Because she's *mine.*"

*It is real.*

## PAYTON

“Because she’s *mine*.”

My mind replayed Havek’s words as we fled in the runner.

Another one of his gadgets had overwritten the system’s security and blocked the tracking.

At least that’s what he told me. I had no way of knowing if that was true.

Really, no way of knowing if anything he ever told me was true.

Each time I recalled his feral, low voice when he turned the tables to advocate for me, sensations shot straight through my body like the cold pierce of the shiv on my neck. The fire in his black eyes burned almost silver when he said it, and he almost looked demonic.

But did he mean it?

“How are you holding up, Payton?” he finally asked.

Braadi went to the cabin he claimed for his own shortly after we took off, leaving us alone. While I was thankful not to have to deal with a stranger, the silent tension between myself and Havek wore on me, making my thoughts spin out of control.

“Still processing, I think.”

“Really? What’s there to process?”

It was a question so idiotic that only a genius could have asked.

“I’ll explain some other time. My mind probably works slower than yours.”

He didn’t even go through the song and dance of objecting. His naive arrogance made me furious. Yet my every thought had him in its foreground: half unrestrained desire, half nagging doubts.

Our role-play was over. There was no need to masquerade as a

professional advocate and downtrodden client.

*What use does he have for me now?*

With a mind like his, I never knew if his words were genuine or if he planned twenty moves ahead in the eternal chess game in his skull. I held out a girlish fantasy that maybe some of his brain power was occupied by the same thoughts monopolizing mine.

I hoped he had visions of holding me down, fucking me senseless, and treating me as his plaything.

The more his possessive declaration echoed, the less I deciphered it. Maybe he said it because he'd be in hot water with Alkard and Tessi if he showed up without me, so he needed to be emphatic with Braadi.

On the other hand, I probably flattered myself into believing I was that important.

I knew all along this was a lie.

Hours later, I looked out of the ship's screens as we descended to the moonscape of Anguuna.

A glance at the comms told me it was as cold as it looked out there, covered in ice and water, but with a breathable atmosphere.

Mountain-sized stalagmites soared out of the ground. The glass forests, they were called. Havek picked this place because the formations would provide additional shielding against any search parties that might be after us.

We'd stay for a few days, let the hunt settle down, move on.

As we landed, I imagined a different life, with a permanent home, not underground or on the run.

But right now that was only a dream.

I finally got the courage to ask the question that was nagging me. I had to do it again. I needed an answer.

After the thrum of the engines, the quiet that filled the ship now that we landed pressed on me.

"Havek..." I ventured, puncturing the silence.

"Hmm?" He turned from the controls.

"So, um...What happens next?"

The corners of his mouth turned down, and his eyes looked distant as if he was sifting through the intricate database of his mind. I was certain he had a brilliant, obvious answer that would make me feel moronic for asking.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't gotten that far," he said, looking a little guilty. "I was focused mainly on the escape — and keeping you safe."

“Me? But why me, though? I’m not really yours...”

“But you could be. Very easily.”

His onyx eyes seared through me. The heat penetrated my clothing, my skin, my flesh. He flared his nostrils and licked his lips. He looked at me like a delicacy to be savored and devoured.

The word I tossed back and forth in my head like a shuttlecock came back to me: mine.

I could almost taste his pheromones.

I asked him my questions silently, with my eyes.

With the stealth speed Vinduthi are known for, he answered, slapping the controls panel off before dragging me into the other cabin.

Before I could blink, he ripped the jacket off of me, his fingers speeding over the buttons of my blouse.

His hungry, low growl filled me as his lips drank from mine. He clawed at me with his thick, powerful hands, the hands that held the power to take my life in an instant. The hands that easily could have when we first met, but didn’t.

“Tell me yes, Payton.” His touch set me on fire. “I need you to say it.”

His gaze sucked the air from my lungs, my mind going blank.

“Baby, please,” he crooned. “Say yes. Tell me you want this.”

Dizzy, I clung to him. “Yes,” I managed. “Yes.”

As my blouse hit the floor, he clutched my shoulder with one hand and grabbed hungrily for my breast with the other. His black tracery threaded his stony hands like strands of graphite, swirling from his fingertips to his pronounced deltoids and all throughout his massive, graceful body.

He kissed me deeply, his forceful tongue filling my mouth, driving into me. It was like a foretaste of that fullness I craved. I opened my mouth wider and curled my tongue into his, surprised at the softness of him in contrast to his power.

I knew he was not remotely soft at all down below. Even tucked behind fabric, I felt his hardness pushing into me.

The Vinduthis’ reputation spoke for itself.

And he wasn’t any Vinduthi.

He was my Vinduthi, and his desire to fuck me right then seemed stronger than his will to live.

Havek’s saliva evoked a full-body frisson, nipping at my lower lip, delivering a delicious painful ecstasy, prickly and sharp, sending pulsations I

felt down to my core.

Dipping his head to the juncture between my neck and shoulder, he sank his fangs in lightly. I felt the tension of his clenched jaw, as if he had to stop himself from clamping down harder. My breasts flushed, getting hot, and my nipples hardened from the narcotic euphoria of the saliva through my skin.

He opened his mouth wide and sucked hard, pulling me tightly against his mouth.

“Mmm, these are a delight,” he said through my groans. “But even then, I think they’re the appetizer.”

His lust rocked through me. “I’m starving for you. Give me the main course. Give me my treat.”

Gently, he laid me down on the bunk, then pushing my skirt up, he spread my legs wide open and looked up at me with a wolfish smile, horns crowning his head as he licked his lips.

“You’re wet for me, my human. I see your juices soaking through your panties. I smell them like heavy perfume. Did you wear those for me, my sexy little one?”

“I do everything for you,” I blurted out without thinking.

“Everything? We’ll put that to the test, my morsel. For now, my pleasure is from your pleasure.”

He delicately slid off my panties, covering his mouth and nose with the crotch of them like a rag, then licking the discharge that pooled from my anticipation of him.

“Mmm, I love your taste. Give me more. Every last fucking drop, my queen.”

His strong, impossibly long tongue dove inside with the might of a power lifter’s forearm.

He moaned with pleasure sucking me, as if he were the one being pleased and rolled his tongue in waves.

Lightening spiraled through me, tiny sparks rolling, spinning through my veins as I trembled in his grasp.

“Havek...” I managed to gasp, but he kept going, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

Shifting, his teeth nibbled over my clit, two thick fingers penetrating me, stretching me further.

And when he curled them, thrusting into me over and over, I came totally undone, quivering and shrieking, babbling nonsense.



When I could focus again, he was naked, kneeling between my legs, his gaze hot and hungry.

I pushed up on my elbows, reaching for him, then froze as I caught sight of his cock.

It was massive. I knew that already from our fevered touches, I could tell the size of him even through his pants.

But I hadn't seen the shape, the thick triangular head, the soft flanges that ran down the length of his shaft.

Hadn't imagined how they were going to feel inside me.

I was imagining it now.

Desperate to run my hand down his length, I reached for him, but before I touched his cock he pushed me back to the bed, one hand pinning my wrists over my head.

"Oooh..." I moaned, my cheeks burning. How could he make me even wetter, just by holding me down?

"Naughty girl. I'm in charge. " He dipped his head down to nip at my neck and I bucked against him, my breath shallow.

Pinching one nipple, he licked the other until I writhed, pleasure mixing with the delicate pain.

"You like that, don't you?" he crooned. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

His hand slid down my belly, fingers cupping my swollen mound as his fingertips dragged back and forth through my soaking folds, teasing and taunting until I sobbed with frustration.

"Please, Havek," I finally managed. "Please. I need you."

"I'll never tell you no," he answered, gathering me into his arms, pressing my chest against his.

Instinctively, my legs wrapped around him as he crossed the cabin in two long strides, sitting on the desk that jutted out of the wall.

"You've had your punishment," he said. "Now let me spoil my little princess."

His mouth covered mine as his strong hands lifted my hips, lowering me slowly until the broad head of his cock pushed against my swollen pussy lips.

Grunting, he thrust inside me, swallowing my moans, twining his tongue with mine until I was breathless and dizzy.

I was stretched and full, completely filled with his hard length.

And there was still more of him.

"Void, Payton," he groaned. "You make me insane."

Leaning me back slightly, he reached between us. “Look at that beautiful clit, so swollen.” He touched it with his thumb, and in an instant, I came yet again, rocking against him, clutching his shoulders.

As I thrashed in his grasp, he bucked his hips up until he was seated completely inside me, and another orgasm started on the tail of the first.

“Payton, your juices coating my cock make it feel even better slamming inside you,” he said, the lewd words heating me even further.

It was like his overactive libido had been restrained behind bars with him. When it broke free, lust poured out of him and into me with each pitched stroke.

He thrust with greater intensity, somehow gaining more vigor the longer he pumped into me.

“Mmm, God, I want to fill you,” he said.

I came so many times, it was only fair to return the favor.

“Now, Havek,” I begged. “I want you now. I need you now.”

With a roar, he broke, as if coming completely unleashed.

“Ahhh...God...Payton...my goddess....! My angel...”

In his arms, I let myself get carried away again, overloaded and overwhelmed by the rush of sensations.

One thing was for sure. The rumors about Vinduthi were true. There were some new ones that could start just from tonight.

## HAVE K

I lay in the bunk holding Payton and contemplating the possibility that I just had the most exhilarating experience of my life.

Yes, the prison break had been nice.

The planning, the new plan, the fighting.

All very exciting.

But she was something else.

Something more.

I twisted a lock of Payton's fiery red hair around my middle finger. Even in the dim light, it shone. Awestruck – that was the word for what I felt.

It went deeper than that, though. It wasn't the same feeling that I had when I invented something new, the awe that comes with the pride of knowing I accomplished the impossible.

No, it was the kind of breathtaking wonderment that stemmed from the enjoyment of something in which I had no part.

I was unfamiliar with that feeling. My sense of admiration toward an event that occurred completely apart from my will was like a lightning strike. I couldn't anticipate it or hold it down to study it. It just existed for a brief moment to astonish. And then it was gone.

The wave of reverence and fulfillment that so powerfully welled up inside me crested and found its trough. It left a chasm deeper than I could have imagined possible. If I just traveled the highest peak I would ever climb, then it was all downhill from there.

Laying there, in the arms of the woman I loved, I understood why warrior cultures considered it the pinnacle of glory to die in battle. What could compare to this?

Even as I completed that thought, however, a pinpoint of light shone into my darkness— *the woman I loved*. I stroked her back, the softest skin I ever touched.

She and I could have adventures together. She was an adventure unto herself. If we stuck together, the triumph didn't have to end. The intensity that I felt didn't have to go away.

"We'll have to keep moving," she breathed, snapping me out of my reverie. I thought she fell asleep. She sighed and adjusted the position of her head on my chest, bringing her long leg up to cross my waist so I could caress it lazily.

"Mmm?" I intoned, not sure I heard her the first time.

"If we want to stay ahead of our pursuers." She spoke as if her words were commonplace. We had pursuers—didn't everybody? "We can't go anywhere near Deathgate, and we can't stay on the moon forever. We *definitely* can't go back to Thodos III. They'll look everywhere for us, especially in places we've been before, so we have to keep moving forward."

"Mmmm," I sighed. I didn't want to talk about it. I wanted to sleep in the luxurious state of contentment that she brought me.

"So where should we go?" Payton lifted her head and rolled over to look me in the eye. That woman was relentless.

I shrugged.

"It ought to be far away. Somewhere with more air probably...I mean, the oxygen levels here aren't bad, but it would be nice to breathe easier...with more air..." she prompted, seeming to hope that I would join the conversation with my two cents.

She raised an eyebrow and settled her chin in her hand in a gesture that stated, *I'm not going to leave you alone until you answer me*.

"Of course," I assented half-heartedly. "Somewhere... more airy." Payton slapped me on the arm, and I tickled her ribs until she laughed and wiggled against me.

"Be serious!" she said when she caught her breath. "We have to keep moving, but where should we go? I thought you were familiar with this quadrant."

I gave her my best impression of innocence. "What gave you that idea?"

She rolled her eyes. "Gee, I don't know. Maybe the fact that you brought us here with barely a second thought. But now I'm asking for a third genius thought of yours, and it's like pulling teeth. Just think for a few seconds,

would you?”

I sighed.

Right now, the adventure was annoying. “Ummm, I’ve charted a few courses we could take from here. Several moons and planets with more oxygen-heavy atmospheres and common-law trade posts where we could lay low for a while. Indefinitely, even.”

“Really?” Payton looked dubious.

“Yes, really. What, you thought the plan stopped at ‘just kidding, you’re my hostage now’?”

“Well... yeah. I kind of thought that when plans changed, you didn’t have a backup. You’ve constantly told me you have no future plans.”

“Good to know how much faith you have in me.” I held her close. “I do have it all planned out now, okay? You don’t need to worry anymore. Get some rest.”

*Or, I would make up a plan quickly.*

She deserved answers, but my mind was empty from the intense sexual experience we just had. I tried to give her what she deserved, but I was running blanks.

“Okay...” She still sounded doubtful. A few minutes later, she confirmed her doubt. “But where are we going first?”

I groaned. “Does it matter? I mean, as long as we’re together, we could be anywhere, right?” She froze, and I felt her muscles tense up. I must have said something wrong. “What?”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter? Of course, it matters.” She seemed to choose her words carefully, and I knew that what I said next was important.

*Don’t fuck this up, Havek.*

“Yeah, it matters where we go. It needs to be a place where we can move and operate under the radar. But as I said, I have plenty of places charted out and lots of ways to get there. We’re safe for now, and I have our next moves taken care of, so it doesn’t really matter which place we pick.”

I kept repeating the phrase *it doesn’t matter*, hoping somehow that she would come to accept it even as she argued with me. Thankfully, her hackles went down, and she laid her head on my chest again.

*Success. Thank the seven galaxies.*

“I guess you’re right. I just wanted to know where you had planned to go next so I could be prepared.”

“Oh. Well, you can leave that up to me. I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

Her muscles tensed up again.

“I can take care of myself,” she asserted.

*What is going on? Why can’t I do anything right?*

“Of course, you can. I just mean, you don’t have to anymore, so why worry?”

She wound tighter. *Shit.* “‘Anymore’?” she repeated in a warning tone. *Really?* What could be wrong about the word anymore?

“Well, yeah.” I moved forward cautiously. “We’re together now, so I can take care of you. I mean, I can help.” The conversation suddenly felt like being caught in the middle of a minefield.

“We’re not together.” Of all the things she could have said, that one cut to the quick faster than anything I could have anticipated. She moved away from me, and I was left naked and bereft.

“What do you mean? Of course, we’re together. We’re together right now.” I tried not to sound like a mystified schoolboy, but it wasn’t working.

“We’re not a couple. I helped you escape from Deathgate, and I did. That’s it. We have to move forward together only because we have the one shuttle, but once we get on a world where I can maneuver, I’m going off on my own. I’ve earned my freedom, and I intend to use it.”

*She’s asked me what happens once I’m out. I thought she wanted this. She wanted to be mine. What switched? What is happening?*

Her words grew harsher and heavier the longer she talked. I, on the other hand, felt increasingly nonplussed. “But why?” I whined, wishing with everything in me that I didn’t sound so pitiful. “Why can’t we be... “ I sighed. “Why can’t we *work* together?”

By then, she was off the bunk and gathering her clothes from the corner of the room, perching on the desk we made love on.

Or, maybe it wasn’t making love, judging by her odd reaction.

Maybe it was just a fuck for her.

I was so confused.

She shoved her limbs through the fabric sockets of her clothes so firmly that I was surprised the seams didn’t rip. “We can work together,” she said firmly. “For now. But I need to know where I can go when you get tired of me.”

“Is that what this is about? Why are you worried about that?”

How could she possibly have worried about my growing tired of her? I would *never* have grown tired of her. Quite the opposite, in fact. The more I had of her, the more I wanted.

“I’m not *worried*. I’m just... confident. No, I’m *positive* you’ll get fed up with me. Everyone uses other beings to get what they want, and when it’s over, it’s just over. There’s nothing you can do about it—it’s just the way it is. So *when* you and I can’t work together anymore, I need to know about your list of safe places to go.”

She finished dressing and turned to face me, a defiant tilt to her chin. “Actually, I’d like to know that now. Please.”

I opened my mouth to say something, *anything* that would convince her not to leave, but just as I began to speak, an alarm tore through the silence. I jolted out of the bunk. *Fuck. What happened?*

Pulling on my pants, I ran to the cockpit to assess the situation.

“What is it?” Payton shouted over the blaring siren.

I glanced at the radar and pounded my fist on the dashboard. *Fuck.*

“Proximity alarm!” I yelled. “Five or six ships from Deathgate are approaching us!”

She looked sick. “How did they find us so fast?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” I was beginning to put the pieces together, and I didn’t like the finished product. I punched up the runner’s logs, scanning them.

One exit to the surface in the last hour from the forward hatch. And an outgoing signal.

“Where’s Braadi?”

“What do you mean?” Payton frowned. “He’s back in his quarters, isn’t he?”

Before she even finished speaking, I was halfway there.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, following me.

“Braadi!” I growled, darting to the back of the ship and banging on the door to his bunk. “Where are you, you little worm?” When I received no answer, I wrenched the door open and entered uninvited, rooting through what few belongings the reptile piece of crap left behind when he fled.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation,” Payton insisted, but I could tell by the set in her jaw that she came to the same conclusion I had. I was running out of time. *We* were running out of time.

I pulled up the history of the communit set into the desk of the cabin,

raining curses on the day I trusted that good-for-nothing piece of space dust.

“What is it?” Payton asked.

I dropped my head in my hands. “Those call codes are from Thodos III. Ten to one says Braadi’s been working for our enemy this entire time.”

“Enemy?”

I glanced at her.

“Conii.”

“Wait, then why would he help you get off of Deathgate? Why not just leave you there?”

My heart went cold in my chest. “She just wanted to twist the knife. And now my sentence carries the death penalty.”



## HAVE K

**M**y thoughts swirled, and I couldn't focus. Sensations, memories, plans, and recalculations flew through my head. How did we get here?

For some dumb reason, all I could think about was the smell of fresh-baked bread. I could really have gone for some of Makar's bread. Or a cupcake. Just anything to remind me of Thodos III and home.

I felt Payton's hand shaking me out of my reverie. "What are you doing, you jackass? Are you *asleep*? Wake up and *do* something!"

I thought about our options, none of them optimal, and hit upon the one that would mean the highest chances of survival for us. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure Payton would hate it.

"Follow me." I didn't give her the chance to argue. Rather, I grabbed her wrist and half-dragged her toward the back of the ship.

"Where are we going? What's the plan?" she demanded as she bounced down the hallway.

"No time. No time." I repeated it over and over like a mantra, settling into the rhythm of the words. There was an escape pod at the back of the ship. If we could just...

Reaching the rear dock, my shoulders sagged with relief to see the long, low oval of the escape pod.

"Are you kidding?" Payton whirled to face me. "Those things don't have the thrust to break out of the atmosphere. Even I know that."

"Do you have another plan?" I shouted. "Neither do I. So get in!"

I shouted the last portion as I shoved her inside, pulling us to the tiny bridge. I would have strapped her into a chair if that's what it took.

"Will we have the fuel to—"

“I don’t *know!* Buckle in and *hold on!*” I couldn’t think about anything but escaping. All I thought about was that the takeoff time of the shuttle was too long and we would never get off the ship in time with what little fuel it had left.

We didn’t plan to have to escape again so quickly. No matter what I thought was going to happen when I brought the shuttle here, it wasn’t my plan anymore.

If we were very, very lucky, this pod could take us as far as a neighboring satellite, but I wasn’t sure if we would make it at the rate we were going.

First, we would have to escape the small fleet on our tail and we only had one gun designed to scare off a brief threat.

But we worked with less and survived.

I started up the engine and didn’t wait to see if Payton had strapped herself in.

No time. If she had bruises and bumps, I’d kiss them away.

If we survived. Better than a fiery, explosive death.

With a low rumble, we burst out of the tail of the star runner, screeching around the maze of stalactites in our path.

“Dammit.” I slapped at the control panel. “Glass trees sounded pretty, but now they’re a pain in the ass. My instrument readings are all over the place.”

“Are they tracking us?” Payton asked, her voice shaky.

I glanced over at her. Her face turned a sickly pale green color.

“I don’t know, babe,” I admitted, wishing I could comfort her. “But I’m hoping what’s screwing with my readings is giving them a problem as well.”

Or not.

A couple of poorly aimed long-range missile shots glanced off the hull. Even though they technically missed, the size of our vessel didn’t give us any advantages. We rocked one way and rolled the other.

“How ya doing?” I asked rhetorically.

“Not so good,” she answered anyway.

“Okay, give me a minute,” I reassured her for no reason at all. If I could have gotten us out of there, which was very much in doubt, it would certainly not have taken a minute.

But the idea of her being unhappy, uncomfortable in any way, stung me.

Her safety, her comfort, was my job. And I wasn’t doing it very well.

Weaving my way through the stalagmites, I had to face the problem that was growing bigger by the second. Now that I knew the enemy pilots knew

we had ejected *and* had us in their sights, I couldn't stay among the stalagmites—they would only slow me down.

On the other hand, if I took the time to get up and over them, I would lose enough ground to be caught for sure.

I navigated on a slow upward trajectory that I hoped would take us forward far enough to stay out of reach of their more accurate short-range missiles, but would still get us over the stalagmites before they caught us.

Just another moment.

That was all I needed.

Next to me, Payton breathed heavily, as if for the first time since takeoff. I realized I also held my breath and released it. We locked eyes as I got the pod back up to speed. We weren't out of danger, but every small victory was a crucial step.

Just as I thought we could outrun them, an alarm blared that we had an incoming missile off our starboard flank. I dodged to avoid it and it crashed into the moon, leaving a crystalline trail in its wake.

It kicked up a cloud of mist that enveloped us, which would have been a good thing if I was able to sink once more into the satellite's bristling teeth. Before I could take advantage of our sudden cover, however, chunks of ice pelted the metal skin of the pod, denting it and knocking out our navigation.

"What just happened?" Payton asked as the screens before me sputtered.

"Oh, nothing, I'm just thinking about flying analog," I joked, hoping she wouldn't hear the worry in my voice.

When they sent another missile our way, I wouldn't be able to dodge it.

Sure enough, the second missile hit us square in the tail, knocking out one of our engines.

There was no way we'd break out of the gravity well now.

There might not even be any way for us to survive at all.

A third shot sailed past us, kicking up more ice chunks, rattling the hull and making the last of the screens short out.

This wasn't good.

We used too much fuel, and took on too much damage.

Not only did we lose the option of using the pod to escape into space, but I could barely see where we were going.

All I could do was run.

Ahead of us was a massive body of water, huge waves like mountains crossing its surface. Quickly I ran scans.

It was risky, but maybe, just maybe...

“What are you doing?” Payton screamed as we neared the waves.

“The only thing I can do!” I shouted as I steered us right into a crash landing. The force of the impact sent shock waves radiating through us and all of the pod’s safety measures went into effect.

The engines automatically reversed thrust to slow us down, our safety harnesses ripped at exactly the point our bones would have broken and our organs would have bruised, and the airbags deployed just in time to cushion our landing against the walls.

Even with all of these considerations, the crash hurt like hell.

“Payton!” I called the moment we stopped. “Are you all right?”

Slicing through the airbags I found her, pulling her frail human form to me.

She was breathing. She was alive.

I took that as a win.

“Where are we?” she murmured. “Are we safe?”

Ah. Chances were good she wasn’t going to like this part.

“I think so,” I told her. “I need to check something.”

The pod’s lights went out on impact, replaced by the red beams of the auxiliary power. In the soft glow, I tried to locate the communit that flew off its cradle.

Once I found it, I tuned it manually until I reached the frequency of the Deathgate ships. Goddess bless old-timey technology.

“... survived that?” I heard crackling over the airwaves.

“Don’t know,” came the reply. “Check for heat signatures.”

*Shit.* Would we ever catch a break?

“Can’t. All this ice is making my signal screwy. The whole damned thing is a heat signature. How ‘bout yours?”

“Same. They’re too far underwater to pick up anything clearer, probably sinking fast.”

*Break caught!* Now if only we could convince them we were dead without them coming down to investigate.

“I don’t want to go down into that, do you?”

“Nope.”

*Wow, two wins in a row. That’s gotta be some sort of record.*

“Looks like their power’s out. They have no way to take off again. If they’re not dead, they will be.”

“Sounds like a job well done to me, boys! Let’s go home!” We heard the sounds of engines taking off as the ships left the satellite.

“Woohoo!” I pumped my fist in the air. I could have done a happy dance, but I saw the look on Payton’s and stopped. “What?”

“Didn’t you hear them?”

“Yeah! They’re leaving! We won!”

She nodded slowly. “That’s one way of looking at it. The other way might be that we’ve crashed, don’t have a way off the planet, and it sounded like they said we’re sinking underwater.” She tilted her head to the side. “Is that true?”

“Technically…” I started, then stopped myself. “Yes. We’re underwater, but not sinking.” I coaxed the backup system’s to life, eked out enough power to get the screens running. “See? We’re on the continental shelf. Perfectly safe until we figure out our next move.”

She crossed her arms, looking doubtful. “Okay, so what do we do now?”

Right.

Now that I knew she was okay, I could do anything.

I turned back to the scanners, starting looking for options.

Anything we could use.

But…

“Oh. That’s not good.”

## PAYTON

As much as I was constantly impressed by Havek's brains, drawn to his humor, and set on fire by his touch, there were still times I could just shake the man.

"Havek. Honey." He glanced at me from over his shoulder. "What do you mean, not good?"

"The water. It looks like it has a higher than expected concentration of thakolnan-3."

I pushed my hair out of my eyes, taking a deep breath. "Let's pretend that I don't have a chemical dictionary in my head. What's thakolnan-3, and why is it a problem?"

He leaned back in the chair, rubbing at his horns. "It's an acid. Not a strong one, but enough that if you get it in your mouth or nose, it's going to damage a human's internal organs."

Of course.

"So it sounds like swimming out of here isn't going to be the best choice, then," I nodded. "What other options do we have?"

He returned his focus to the escape pod's controls. "The shore isn't far. I just need to get us up and moving."

But there was no answering hum of the engines.

"Maybe there's something I can use to make a rebreather from the supplies." He tore through the tiny drawers that were under the seats, pulling out the emergency supplies.

A signaling device, a heat blanket...

Apparently, none of that was what he was looking for.

Havek paced around the tiny cabin, a step one way, a step or two another,

picking things up and putting them down, his eyes darting about him frantically as his skin became paler and paler. Finally, he gripped the back of the pilot's seat, alternately squeezing it and letting it go, chewing his lips and staring at nothing.

I laid a hand on his arm. He shook his head. "I've got nothing." He pounded the side of the cabin. "I *never* have nothing! There has to be something, come on, come on. There has to be..."

My stomach sank, but I always knew that it could end like that.

It would have been easy to blame him, to say he could have gone with the original plan for the prison break and left me out of it, but he was right—I would have been the prime target for the officials' vengeance.

Looking at Havek at that moment, I knew he was at the end of his rope. There was no calculation he could make that would bring both of us out of this alive.

The kindest thing I could do for him then was to remove myself from the equation.

"Go without me," I whispered.

His head snapped up, and his black eyes bored holes into mine. "What did you say?" he demanded.

I was almost too intimidated to repeat myself, but I forced the words to come out.

"You need to go without me." I held his gaze, albeit shakily.

When I watched him perform complex mathematical equations in his head or plan a prison break with almost no resources, it was easy to forget that Havek was a warrior before anything else.

As he drew himself to his full height, he turned to me as he might an enemy, sizing me up with his shrewd gaze.

"Never." Steel rang in his voice.

I took a deep breath. "Havek, you have to."

"No." Obviously, he considered the matter decided and the conversation over. He turned away from me and flipped through the scanners again.

"Havek," I began again, suddenly feeling the need to say his name as frequently as possible because each time might be the last. "Havek, you're not getting anywhere with all that stuff. It's time to go now."

I touched his arm again, but this time he threw me off with such force that my hand hit the dashboard, and I winced before rage kicked in.

*Why won't he listen to me?*

“There’s no scenario in which we both make it out of here! You’re Vinduthi, you can make it! But the human body is too weak, I know that. Havek, listen to me. You have to *go*.”

His hands stilled, but I still saw his measured breathing rise and fall as if he were trying to get control of himself. It didn’t matter if he was angry at me. I had to make him understand.

I was about to tell him he had to leave again when he spoke low and deadly. “If we don’t get out together, we don’t get out at all.”

I didn’t understand what he was talking about. I didn’t want to. I shook my head vehemently. “That’s... that’s crazy talk. You don’t—”

He wheeled about and took me by the shoulders, lifting me to his face level, his eyes wild. “Together or not at all!”

I attempted to catch my breath and stare at him like a frightened animal. When I finally regained what little composure I could hope for, my voice came out a pitiful squeak. “Why?”

“Don’t you know?” His grip on me lightened, and he shook his head. He pulled back his hands and looked at them like he couldn’t believe what he just did. He searched my face as if for signs of recognition, but I was sure he found only fear. “Payton, I’m in love with you.”

What he said was impossible. His words didn’t compute. All that came out of me was a tiny noise. “Hmmm?”

He stepped back from me slightly, though his motion denoted more of a defeat than a choice. I was completely taken aback and refused to process the meaning of what he had said. He looked out the windshield at the water level that continued to rise on the cracked glass.

“Payton, I’m in love with you.” I thought that was supposed to be a good thing, but I never saw anyone look so miserable as the Vinduthi warrior who stood before me and declared his love.

*I’ve wanted him to say it for so long. Why don’t I believe him now?*

“No, you don’t,” I said softly, more to myself than to him, but there was no preventing him from hearing me.

He laughed bitterly.

“This is your response?” he questioned quietly, still looking out the window. I said nothing. “Is that what you believe?” He looked at me, sneering in his wounded pride.

I held up my hands defensively. “You’re... not thinking straight. You’re under a lot of pressure. But you don’t have time for this, Havek. You have to



get out of here! *You* can make it! I can't! You're smart. The smartest person I've ever met. You have to see this is the only way!"

He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Stop telling me to get out! I'm not going anywhere, Payton! I'm not going anywhere you can't go! I'm not leaving you here to die! *I love you!*"

"Don't say that!" I pleaded.

It was a disaster. There was no way someone like him could ever love a pathetic casino girl. He had everything to live for, and here he was, about to sink to his death in a strange ocean on a strange moon somewhere he would never have been if it weren't for me.

"Why shouldn't I say that? Isn't my deathbed the place to tell the truth?" He swept out his hands in an all-encompassing gesture. "I love you, Payton! I'll say it again until you believe it! I'm in love with you!"

I closed my eyes against the tears and shook my head more vehemently. "No, no, *no!* You're not on your deathbed. You're letting the stress of the situation get the better of you, and you can't let your emotions rule right now! You have to *think!* Think logically. You have to get out of here and *live*. And I can't come with you!"

"Why do I have to go? Why do I have to try? Why do you care?" He asked his questions rapid-fire with a triumphant look on his face that I imagined he would have if he backed a chess opponent into a corner. He looked as if he knew he was about to win.

"What do you mean? You've done so much for me, and I appreciate you, but you can't do anything for me anymore. I'm as good as dead, even if we did get out of this water, I might be killed by the atmospheric pressure alone! So you have to save yourself." His face fell.

"Appreciate? You *appreciate* me?" I suddenly saw where the conversation was going, and I felt sick.

I nodded, hoping he would take the hint and just go.

I didn't want to die, but the very thought of him sacrificing himself for me made me want to throw up.

I knew I felt the same. I knew it with every bone in my body, but if I conceded to the emotions, he would die with me. I couldn't let that happen.

"Yes," I choked out, the lie bitter on my tongue. "I *appreciate* you."

"Nothing more?" Havek set his jaw and knit his brows, looking at me with an expression of such pain that I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. I couldn't take a breath, but he was going to make me say it.

“No,” I choked out. “Nothing more.”

He waited.

“I—” I swallowed. “I... don’t love you, Havek.”

His face crumpled into a tight mask of rage, and I knew his next words would be filled with malice.

They should be. He should curse me, shout at me. Anything.

“I don’t care!” he declared. I waited for the blow to fall. “I don’t care if you don’t love me! I’m staying anyway!”

*What?* After all that work, he was still going to spend the final hours of his life trapped in a hunk of metal, traveling to a watery grave with me?

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I stood up and shouted.

“With *me?*” he spat back. “What’s wrong with *you?* You spend what could be your last breath telling me that I have to get out and save myself, but you don’t have feelings for me. Make up your mind! At least I know what I want! I’m not going to live the rest of my life without you. I’m staying here!”

Frantic, I jumped at him, pounding my fists into his chest and screaming at the top of my lungs. “Get out! Get to safety! Get *out!*”

He caught my hands in their puny attempt to make an impact and held them, caressing them as we cried together.

“I can’t!” A tear dropped down his cheek.

“But you’ll die, Havek...” My shouts descended into quiet cries.

“Then I’ll die with the woman I love.” I rested my head against his chest and wailed as he held me.

It should have been the beginning for us. It would have been if I weren’t a puny human. If I had his physique or rapid healing, we could have had a life together.

*Wait a minute...*

“Bite me,” I whispered.

“What?” He pulled back from our embrace. “You’re joking. Now?” A confused look came over his handsome face. “What good would that do?”

I spoke as fast as I could. “Tessi said that when Alkard bit her, she got some of his abilities, healing quickly and stamina and all that nonsense. It might be worth a shot!”

“But you’ll be bound to me forever, and you don’t love me!”

“No more arguments! Dammit Havek, this is our only chance. Bite me, Havek. *Bite me now!*”

He bit his lip and looked away for an agonizing heartbeat. Then, meeting

my gaze, he murmured, “There must be another way.”

## HAVEK

I stared out at the water surrounding us.

If Payton swallowed any on our escape to the surface, the burns would corrode her insides. Absent that, she'd have lifelong scarring and cellular deterioration, ending in eventual organ failure.

I looked over at my sweet human, knowing I'd trade places in an instant. But I wasn't ready to think about claiming her.

*It can't be the only option, can it?*

In my heart, though, I knew she was right. It was the only possible way out for her... And yet, I needed her to understand the full weight of what she asked me to sign her up for.

"Havek, do it!" Payton shouted.

*The real question is, have I thought about anything else?*

"I think about everything. You know that." I was deflecting, and she knew it. She beat my chest again, and I caught her hands, trying to hold back the pain in my chest.

Ever since I first kissed her, the certain knowledge that she was mine, that she was meant for me, slid under my skin.

My Payton. My mate.

I ached for her.

But I couldn't claim her if she didn't love me. She'd be bound to me forever, and while the darkness in my soul howled in delight at the thought, it wouldn't be fair to her.

Because she didn't love me.

She insisted she didn't. But then, why did she care if I survived?

Why did none of her actions make sense?

She used to want to know what would happen when we escaped. Why did she backtrack ever since we made love?

I thought that was fine, that once we were free, I'd be able to talk with her more, to understand.

But we were out of time.

"We might be safe for now, but eventually we're going to run out of air. As far as I can tell, we have three options, and only one is reasonable." She held a finger up. "One: stay here and run out of air. Quickly. Two: you swim to the surface..."

I frowned and shook my head.

"...Or, three: give me the claiming bite."

I couldn't argue with her reasoning. No other option would allow her to survive, which meant there was no other option. I still tried to shake my brain loose for any other plan, no matter how remote.

But for all my vaunted brilliance, she was the one with the answer now.

"Havek?" Her lips trembled. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," I snapped, then caught myself. "I'm sorry."

"What is there to think about?" Those sweet lips quirked to the side. "You don't want to lose your freedom by chaining yourself to a human. Is that it?"

My blood pressure rose. I had no hesitation about promising my life to the woman I loved—the only woman in my life, past or future. But I preferred almost anything to the thought of her handing her life over to someone she admitted she didn't love.

Even if that someone was me.

*Almost anything* was the operative phrase, however.

"I don't like inelegant solutions." I sighed. I knew even before I looked that she was staring at me like a crazy person. "I want to spare you any harm. Ever. And I hate the idea of having no pure, good solution."

"Why isn't this a good solution? For Tessi, it gave her some of Alkard's healing powers!"

I threw my arms in the air, scrambling to give voice to my chaotic thoughts.

"This is something you cannot reverse. You will literally change—physically, mentally, everything, even if it's a subtle change." I glanced at the screens. We still had enough air. For now. "And the really big thing, the thing that troubles me most..."

“Yes?” She looked at me expectantly.

“It’s not as simple as slipping on and off some trinket. It makes an ownership contract look like a percomm bill. This is a contract that’s signed with your blood, executed in your bones. It kills me to think of you suffering. It would destroy me to bear responsibility for it. I can’t bite you if you don’t love me.”

“Look,” she entreated. “If behind one door there’s death, and behind the other, there’s life, even with some risks, it’s still not a real choice.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I know.”

I didn’t burden her with the other parts, instead thinking about the bleak possibilities for my own future.

A bite does more than lay claim to the one who’s been bitten. It hooks its claws into the heart of the claimant, forbidding them from loving anyone else, causing physical pain to be apart from her.

If I were to claim her, I’d have heightened awareness of her mind, heart, and body for the rest of her life, from any distance—including the searing wound of the absence of her love for me. I’d constantly feel the abyss of her not loving me back.

It wasn’t a real choice in those terms either. The pain of knowing I could have saved her life but didn’t would swallow the pain of my own heartbreak whole.

But she was right. There was no other way. If this hurt me, tore my heart in two, I would bear it.

She was all that mattered.

“Come here, my little one,” I whispered. “Come into my arms. Come where you’re safe.”

I wrapped her in my arms like an infant as she cried into my chest.

“Shh. Shh,” I breathed softly. “I will protect you.”

“So…” she implored, her eyes searching mine.

“Yes, Payton. I will. But under one condition.” I tried to hold back the tension from my voice.

“What?”

“You *have* to live. No matter what. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” she sobbed.

Something flitted across her face, an expression I couldn’t catch quickly enough.

It wasn’t anger, pain, or fear. It almost looked like sorrow, like she was

hiding something she wanted to say to me.

Then her passionate kiss breathed life into me, and she pressed her mouth to mine. Our lips locked like an impermeable seal protecting me. She was my water, my air, my surface.

She was a beautiful human woman coursing with life, her wild red hair and soft skin illuminating the gray and black surface of the man shaking in anticipation of claiming her.

The energy entered my body as a fully articulated equation, then coursed from my fingertips in the form of a complete solution: I was incidental to the bite. Immaterial.

Because she didn't love me.

Maybe that was for the best.

She would have asked the same from a stranger but only posed to me would it carry no fear or obligation. Any other sentient entity in the universe—at least with a functioning cock—would celebrate the opportunity to issue a debt to a beautiful creature conditioning her survival on obeying their every command.

I made it clear that I would only give the bite under one strict condition: that she maintain her iron grip on the reins of her own life. She already held mine in her hands.

She peeled off her clothes, and I helped her finish removing them, steadying her in the small space as she slipped out of the skirt.

We shouldn't do this here. She deserved better. She deserved softness and beauty, soft armath petals and the stars.

Someday I would give them to her. We just had to survive this first.

I pulled her impossibly close to me, pulling her up to rest in the cavern of my midsection that molded to her perfectly. Her warm supple skin heated my blood and stirred me, her scent bewitching.

She buried her mouth in my neck and sucked gently, nipping me, using her adorable tiny teeth. A low groan burst from my chest. Barely holding myself back, I placed her in the chair before me.

And then, her scent changed.

“What is it, Payton?” The characteristic scent—acidic and hollow—wafted from her body to my nose as soon I said the words.

“I'm...”

“You're frightened. Of course, you are.”

She nodded, eyes lowered, shy.

“I promise, now and forever, I will never hurt you. You have no reason to be afraid.” I sighed. “We’re in this together.”

A ghost of a smile lifted her lips. “Huh. I never thought of it that way.”

“There’s so much I never thought about before meeting you,” I admitted, leaning over her where she sat.

Her mouth fell open a tiny bit.

I might have been just as shocked to hear myself say that to anyone.

But not anymore. Not when I had her.

“If anything doesn’t feel right to you, my love, stop me,” I said while pushing her hair behind her ear. It was a terrible feeling to be so madly and unrequitedly in love, but that didn’t mean I could stop myself from feeling it. “You are my charge. It’s not my role to possess you. It’s to care for you. To love you. I am responsible for your well-being, but you are responsible for nothing but your very self.”

“That’s not a whole lot for me to give back.”

“Payton,” I murmured. “You alone—just you, nothing else—are everything.”

Reaching for my waist, she gingerly undid my belt, then slid off my trousers, her eyes wide at the erection underneath it all, hiding in plain sight.

“You must have felt it against you,” I whispered in her ear. “You must have known I would already be this hard with a goddess like you wrapped against my skin.”

She thinned her eyes and drifted her hand against its length, pressing her fingertip down on the soft flanges, sending bursts of pleasure down my spine.

“Sweet Payton. You can’t know what emanates out of you, the vitality, the pure sex that surges onto me from every pore of you. And this...”

Trailing my hands down her front, I kneaded her breast, then reached lower, cupping the bursting mound of her full pussy, swollen with desire, wet with anticipation. It brimmed over with a scent like honeyed whiskey, slathered thickly on rich, ripe, juicy summer fruit, weeping moisture in the punishing sun.

I knelt before her, kissing and nipping up her inner thighs, my hands wrapped around her hips, bringing her pussy to my hungry mouth with my fingers like a retinue transporting a queen.

My tongue was coated in her even before I stuck it fully inside. I felt like I could come just from her taste.

If I had been uncertain before, there was no doubt then: *I am head-over-*



*heels, ass-over-tits, pussy-over-everything, in love with this sensual, feisty, depraved, innocent, filthy, unbelievably beautiful human woman.*

“Havek!”

She gripped my horns for something to hold onto as she writhed her legs uncontrollably over my shoulders from my lapping up the exquisite nectar funneling into my lips.

I groaned gutturally as my cock pulsed and twitched, just from her hands on my sensitive horns and her taste.

I hummed into her pussy, and her juices cascaded onto me once more.

“That feel good?”

“There’s no word for how it feels,” she gasped.

“You ready for me, baby?”

Sadness hit my chest.

I tried everything to not think about how she wasn’t in love with me. I had to focus in order for her to live. The most loving thing I could do for her was *not* think about how she didn’t love me.

But that was impossible.

She tensed up, fear clearly returning.

Sliding my hands under her thighs, I lifted her to my waist, then turned, taking the chair for myself while she straddled my legs.

Her eyes were dark, cheeks flushed, soft open mouth almost as tempting as the slick folds that pressed against the side of my straining cock.

*She doesn’t love you.*

“You’re going to look so beautiful wearing my marks. I’m going to be so proud to see them on you, honey. The most stunning being I’ve ever laid eyes on. The one who lights my fucking body on fire. And my mind. Like no one else ever has.”

She gasped at those words, knowing their significance.

“Will it hurt, Havek?”

*She doesn’t love you.*

I cleared my throat and pushed the thought aside. “I won’t let it,” I promised. “One tiny moment, then a euphoric intoxicant delivered straight to your bloodstream. It’ll make every pleasure a thousand times more intense.”

Rocking against her, she shivered again, her breath beginning to be shallow.

While she was distracted, I lifted her again, this time seating her on the broad head of my cock, slowly, steadily pulling her onto my hard length,

until I finally snapped.

I thrust forward ferociously, the physical feelings of her tight pussy pushing all the thoughts back into my mind. I almost felt possessed, on the brink of death if I didn't fill her completely with my throbbing cock, still reaching higher to get access to her like a leaf bending to the sun.

Payton clung to me, her moans and cries of pleasure a delicious babble. There was no trace of fear to her scent anymore, only heat and desire.

It was almost time.

## PAYTON

His gray physique reminded me of mother-of-pearl, rippling before me. Even knowing rationally that the bite from him would intensify all sensations, it was hard to imagine anything ever feeling better than that.

Black eyes like the fabric of the universe caught me, burning with the remnants of creation. All the questions and all the answers came together in the dark pools staring directly into me.

I should have said I loved him, but the words tangled in my throat, trapped by fear and insecurity.

I saw the hesitation in his eyes, an emotion that wasn't quite fear but close enough. Fear for me and worry over whether I would be afraid. It felt strange that I should be the one reassuring him.

"I'm ready, Havek. I want my fate to be bound to yours," I said.

He inhaled a rush of whatever air was left in the cabin as if he wasn't expecting me to say those words. I didn't expect them either, but once they left my lips, they felt right.

"You're sure?" he asked, probing. I wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement.

"Yes. I'm sure."

I pulled him to me, my hands around his head, and brought his mouth to my lips as his tongue descended into mine, thick and soft, with a character both curious and knowing, like his inventive, endlessly imaginative mind.

I caressed his horns softly with my fingers, and he let out a sweet sigh. I loved exploring his body, discovering all the ways it was different from mine, bringing him pleasure.

And through it all, he continually drove into me, the flanges down his

cock sending sparks through my core, building a fire that threatened to burn out of control over and over again.

Still, his hands were gentle on my skin, almost soothing. Even the raw, brute desire that poured out of him had the mediation of his intellect and thoughtfulness.

Where most beings have to channel their strength to make use of their powers, Havek seemed to require more energy to restrain it, like a dancer holding a static position. From the moment a Vinduthi was born, every aspect of Vinduthi culture prepared them for a life as warriors.

Havek was different because he fought a battle on two fronts. The first, the same as his brethren, waged with swords and fists. On the second battlefield, which required weapons of strategy and inventiveness, Havek had no peer.

Havek's mind and body were perfectly calibrated to each other, and together they were perfectly calibrated to me. Even before he claimed me, our union with each other transcended the physical in a way I never knew.

I couldn't lie to him.

Not with my body.

Not with my words.

"Havek," I cried. "I love you! Please don't leave me. I couldn't stand it."

He clutched my hair and clawed my back, and I wrapped my legs around him tightly. As he kissed me more passionately, our bodies clashed against each other with more fury, colliding in communion.

"I'll never leave your side," he grunted. "I never could. Would never want to."

I felt his erection growing even harder, larger inside me. Lifting up my legs, folding them practically into myself, he shoved himself fully inside again in one savage thrust.

"Ahh!" I shouted, shaking from the delightful shock of pain, turning into cascades of pleasure with his wet friction inside me.

His low voice resonated through my body, the tones so low that it felt like it bypassed my ear. I mainlined him through every sense.

"This...is preparation for what comes next, my love," he said as he pumped inside me harder than before, reaching further into me than I ever thought possible. "The pain mixed with pleasure, the violence mixed with healing, the hard and soft, the defilement and creation—"

He kissed me furiously, biting my lip, first softly, then with more pressure

in his jaws, and then he licked it. His fangs grew so long, down below his lower teeth. He had the insatiable look of a hungry predator in his eyes, and he looked at me like the most delicious, delectable, sensual prey.

The catch of a lifetime.

He grazed his fangs on my neck, biting down harder. He licked and sucked my shoulder, all the while slamming into me with the force of a freight train, only picking up velocity.

And then, the pain, the high-pitched punctures, rushed into my body like a light as it fled into a black hole. A feeling of invincibility circulated through me, every sensation magnified, every store of energy intensified, every pleasure receptor exponentially larger.

The tingling from the bite reverberated in the rest of my body. The word “orgasm” felt like a meaningless description in comparison to just the beginnings of what I experienced at that moment. What I called my body before that instant seemed like an inanimate container.

When I felt the bite that claimed me, the bite that made me his forever, I awoke from a state of anesthesia. Before that moment, I was only half myself. After the bite was complete, so was I.

He suckled from my neck on a plane of ecstasy. I felt the fire of his body in bloom, the roar of absorbing the life force of being his perfect, fated mate.

Our bodies coalesced in the act of lovemaking, opening ourselves to each other like a lock and key. Our very existence merged together as my blood became part of his being, and his salivary elixir changed my very makeup as a human.

At that moment, he came inside me with a ferocious bellow, and in my newly heightened sensation and heightened physical bond, in a visceral sense, I came harder than I ever did.

Entire body spasming, I barely heard his words as I drifted into the dark.

“My mate. I will wait for you.”

SLOWLY, I surfaced from a deep dream, something wonderful, magical, just out of reach.

“Payton,” Havek’s whisper twined around me, a beacon. “Wake up, my love. We need to go.”

What? Why?

But he called to me, and I couldn't help but answer.

Opening my eyes, I found myself curled up against his chest, his strong arms wrapped around me. Strain and worry lined his face as he peered at me.

"You need more sleep, I know. But we're running out of time."

Time.

Snuggling into him, I breathed deeply of his scent. Havek was here, with me.

That was all I needed.

But there was something else in the air.

Something stale...

"The pod!" I blurted out, scrambling to my hands and knees. "What's happening?"

Havek pulled me back to him. "Nothing has changed, but soon, even we will have trouble surviving on the air that is left."

His gaze searched my face, one hand tracing a pattern on my cheek.

Oh. Right.

I looked down at my arm, at the black sigils that dimly glowed under the surface.

It worked.

And now we needed to get out of here.

Pulling on my clothing, my body felt strangely light, my movements clumsy.

"Here," Havek buttoned my shirt for me. "From what I've seen after my brothers' mates claimings, they took hours to finish changing." Warm hands slid around the back of my neck, lifting the tangle of my hair from where it got trapped in my collar.

"We don't have time for that," I muttered, resting my head on his chest. "We've done everything we can, and now we have to take our chances."

Leaning over, he brushed his lips over mine.

"Remember what you promised me. You have to live."

I swallowed hard.

We had one shot—one chance to make it together, and we didn't know exactly what fraction of Havek's healing ability would have manifested itself in me.

Would the changes that took place in my body get me to the surface once we got in the water?

No way of knowing until we tried.

No do-overs. No room for error.

“Are you ready?” Havek asked as I fastened my shoes with a length of torn cable to my waist. He could not have chosen worse words. I was not ready to risk my life the way a Vinduthi did. They always seemed prepared, even excited, to approach death’s door.

I bit back a laugh. “Ready as I’ll ever be.” Because apparently, I was Vinduthi now, too.

Havek pressed his lips together and nodded. “Okay. On the count of three, I’m going to pull on the door and release the seal. The force of the water as it comes in is gonna be pretty harsh. It’ll knock you back a ways, so brace yourself, but don’t fight it. The pressure will equalize eventually, and...”

Unable to focus on his words, my surroundings became a blur. “Payton?” I closed my eyes to steady myself. He shook my shoulder. I opened my eyes again. “You okay?” I nodded, fighting rising nausea. “What did you hear last?”

I exhaled, realizing I was already holding my breath. Not a good sign. “Umm, something about getting knocked back?”

He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. “Okay. Too much information, I get it. Look, if you remember nothing else, remember this: no matter how intense it gets, don’t try to move until the pod fills up with water. Then climb out, kick off as hard as you can, and swim like mad.”

He stroked my face and I nestled into him, greedy for just one more moment of his touch. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Stand back and take a deep breath!” He turned the lever on the pressurized door and pulled with all his might. Fountains of strangely colored water gushed out of the cavity he created and roared to fill the cabin.

When the wall of water hit me, I didn’t have time to think. It picked me up and threw me against the opposite wall.

It was all I could do to resist the urge to gasp. I stood on my tiptoes, sucking what little air I could out of the remaining bubble at the top of the pod, and waited. Within the span of a few seconds, the roaring in my ears stopped and everything went still.

Sitting in the cold and dark, holding my breath, it was difficult to remember what it was I was supposed to do. Havek could have been a million lightyears away for all I knew. I was in outer space, alone with my fears.

The prospect of dying in that crushing blackness brought me back to myself. I kicked upward and felt the enormous drag on my clothing. I wondered how long it would be before I breathed again.

I felt my lungs burn. Was that supposed to happen? I thought they would explode. I breathed out just a little bit, releasing some pressure. *Much better.*

Coming to rest on the outside of the pod, I pressed my thoughts away from every inkling of what might be lurking in the water just beyond my fingertips. I crouched on the rounded, metal surface, gathered my wits, kicked off as hard as I could, and swam like mad.

Minutes passed, minutes that could have been hours. Remembering to release the pressure from my lungs every few strokes, I wondered if I would ever be able to make it to the surface. The darkness still seemed much too deep for me to be near any kind of light source.

I wondered if Havek was already up there looking for me, realizing I hadn't made it yet. I knew I couldn't give up, if only so he wouldn't have to bear the burden of reaching the surface alone.

Reaching my absolute limit, my strength began to fail. If I breathed in even a little, I would drown and die, but my oxygen-starved lungs were in so much pain that I couldn't make it any further.

Suddenly, I remembered what I promised Havek. The one condition that would make him bite me.

"You *have* to live. No matter what."

I kept going. If I was going to die, I was going to die swimming. Within a few strokes, I burst out of the water and onto the surface. Dragging sweet, sweet air into my lungs, I coughed and choked and sputtered and whooped and thanked the Goddess.

I was alive! I never felt more alive!

"Havek!" I screamed. "Havek! Where are you?" Something roared in my ears and the world tilted at impossible angles forward and backward, rolling me around so that I couldn't get my bearings.

"Havek!" *What is that deafening sound? "Havek!"*

"*Paayyyytooonnn!*" I heard him, but he was so far away. Why couldn't I see him?

"*Paaaayyyyytoooooonnn!*" I barely heard him over the waves.

*I held* my hands above the water as high as I could, palms up, out of the spray, cold droplets pelting them in a steady rhythm.

It was raining. It was night, and it was raining.



We were alive! I swam as hard as I could toward the source of my name while keeping my head above water. My body rolled with the motion of the waves. It had to. If I resisted and drank too much water, the victory would have been for nothing.

“Havek!” I screamed after every few strokes. I thought I heard him, then lost his sound, then thought I heard him again, then sure I hadn’t. It would have been a miracle to find him in that mess.

“Payton!” I heard, finally, very close by. It *was* a miracle! I flailed about, hoping to brush his arm or his leg, hoping beyond hope for just one touch.

“Havek! Where are you?”

“Over here! You okay?”

“Fine, you?”

“A little seasick, maybe.” He chuckled and caught my hand while we rode in the waves. “Are you feeling dizzy?”

“Yes, but I...” My voice trailed off as I saw him in front of me and caught his hand in the water. My vision stabilized, and I was able to fully take in my surroundings. I noticed the outline of his beautiful face in the starlight. *Starlight!* Oh, the stars were gorgeous!

They glimmered between gaps in the angry storm clouds overhead. Whatever rain that hit us had finally passed. I thought I would never see those stars again. I laughed and whooped.

He held me against him, shivering and laughing, but then his laughter died, and he held me at arm’s length. “We have to swim again! The shore is much further than I thought!”

“Where is it?” I shouted to be heard over the storm.

“There!” He pointed to a glowing strip that would come into view and then drop behind the waves. It was the thinnest line of dimly glowing reddish-brown light on the horizon.

“How can you tell?” I wondered aloud.

“The ice is catching the ambient light!” he yelled. “We have to swim now! Keep your bearings and swim like your life depends on it!”

“Doesn’t it?”

“You’re really getting the hang of this!” He took off toward the illuminated strip.

I followed suit and quickly realized that the tide and wind were against us. For every stroke, the tide washed me back three.

“Keep going!” I heard from somewhere ahead of me. “You’re doing

great!” I doubted that very much, but I decided to stop focusing on where I was going and how far away it was. Instead, I put my head down and swam with all my might.

The sky took on the gray hue of dawn when my feet finally touched sand beneath me. My knees were so shaky that the tide sucked my legs out from under me. I rolled for a minute, swam forward some more, and tried again.

My feet gained traction in the muck, and I shoved forward against the streaming water. As soon as I could, I scrambled forward on my knees and then my hands. Gaining the rocky shore, slicing my hands and feet on the sharp stones, and not caring, I kissed the ground and rolled onto my back.

“We survived! We’re gonna live! Havek, we made it! Havek?” I pushed myself up to scan the coastline for his tall form and came up empty. My heart plunged when I saw a black lump getting tossed back and forth in the swirling gray of the morning tide.

“No!” I screamed, forgetting the pain in my lungs and the weakness in my legs. I ran back to where he collapsed, tearing his clothes and struggling against his weight. I pulled, pushed, and rolled him up onto the shore, checking for a pulse and wondering briefly how I would know if his heart burst.

How could I have doubted his love for me?

There he lay, having secured my survival while sacrificing his own. How could I have looked into his eyes and thought he would lie to me?

I threw myself across his chest, exhausted and bereft. As the dawn grew and the sun rose on that cold, godforsaken beach, I was truly, utterly, alone.

## HAVE K

I came to, slowly. At first, my thoughts were hazy and my awareness of the world was dim. I knew that I was someplace dangerous, but that the voice in my ears was that of someone who was safe and good to be with. I knew that there was no need to hurry just yet, but that it might not be too long before there was.

There are few things I liked less than hazy thoughts.

Bit by bit, my awareness returned. After everything, Braadi betrayed us.

We ran away from the ships. There was only one choice.

“I spent so long thinking you were selfish,” Payton’s voice continued in my ear. “I kept bracing myself for the moment when you would throw me away. But you didn’t. Not even when I asked you to. Not even when it would have saved your life.”

*Saved my life?* I thought. *Wait. Does she really think I’m dead?*

“You know, I think I loved you a little from that very first meeting,” she kept on while I tried to force myself to move. “I mean, sure, you were scary. And I was pretending a bit, sometimes. But even back then, I could tell that there was something special about you. That you weren’t just a bag of neat, technological tricks. There was a real, interesting person underneath that armor. And I wanted to get to know that person.”

The spray from the ocean hitting the rocks she must have pulled me up onto landed on my face.

It was interesting to hear Payton talk to me as if I wasn’t there. I felt curious about what else she might say.

“I knew we’d make it,” she went on, and sniffled. She sounded as if she was crying for quite a while, and only now was just coming out of it. I

wondered how long I was unconscious. An hour? Two hours? More, even?

“Even when Braadi betrayed us, I knew that you’d figure out something. I always thought you would think of something. And I heard Tessi talk about the claiming bite... At first, I thought it sounded too harsh, but now, all I’ve thought about is how much I want that one person who you claim to be me. How wonderful it would be to be your one person.”

Yes, I thought, relaxing. *I could get used to this.*

“I shouldn’t have let you bite me,” she continued. “I should have made you go out that hatch on your own. You’re one of the smartest, cleverest people I’ve ever met. And what am I? I’m just another human.”

That was when I sat up.

“You are absolutely not just another human,” I said, wrapping my arms around her. “You are my claimed mate, for one thing. And no, I would not claim just any old human.”

“You’re alive?” she cried. “You’re alive and you were listening that whole time? You let me believe you were dead, you jerk!”

“In my defense, I felt very tired,” I said.

Payton responded by pushing me with surprising force backwards. I tumbled, falling backward but catching myself with ease. For a moment, I was stunned, and then I lifted my head, roaring with laughter, and I noticed Payton was smiling, too.

“Okay, I probably deserved that one,” I said. I reached my hand up, towards her. “Help me up?”

“Are you going to pull me down?” she asked, looking at me suspiciously.

“Well, I would have if you didn’t ask that.” I dropped my hand back down and pushed myself off the ground. “Feel better now?”

“Much.” She gave me a bright smile, and I shook my head as I looked away.

I examined our environment. The black, flat rocks we sheltered behind stretched out along the coast, but fortunately, they weren’t the only land nearby. About halfway towards the horizon, they gave way to dark, thick-looking soil from which small, shrubby plants sprouted.

“I don’t suppose you took the time to look for any of the basic resources?” I asked.

“You were dead!” she snapped. “You wanted me to just leave you and go foraging for berries?”

“No, I’m glad you stayed with me,” I replied. “But we are going to have

to work out some things if we're going to survive here."

"Is that the plan now?" she asked. "Camp out on whatever obscure planet this is?"

Wrapping her in my arms, I held her close, reveling in her scent.

"Trust me, after my time in prison, I'm aching for the comforts of society as much as you are. But as long as I'm with you, we can make it, I'm certain."

We walked inland, hand in hand. In a way, it was almost romantic. After all, I said that anywhere would be okay as long as we went there together. This lonely little planet would certainly prove that.

"Is there any chance of salvaging the ship?" she asked as the stone gradually gave way to soil. The sun was very hot here. We'd need shade before long, and that was if the weather didn't get worse.

"Depends what we can find," I replied. "If we can find something I can craft rope from, and something to make tools out of, I might be able to come up with something."

"I bet you can," she said, smiling. "If there's one thing you're always good at, it's thinking on your feet."

*If only I could be as confident as you are*, I thought. Being creative was all well and good, but my training was working on computers, not twining cord. Why couldn't they make uninhabited moons with a view screen and some buttons?

"The real question is what we'd do with the ship once we got it up," I mused. "We don't have anything like the tools we need to make it space worthy. We could try to broadcast an SOS, but chances are the first people who'd hear us would be Deathgate, which isn't exactly helpful."

"Well it's not so bad being here together, is it?"

I looked at her. She was beautiful as always. And most of all, she was her. "It's not exactly the life I thought I'd provide for you."

She deserved more.

My resolve hardened. If I needed to figure out how to build a spacecraft from sand and rocks, I'd do it.

Whatever she needed, I'd make sure she'd get it.

I got to my knees and plucked out one of the white mushrooms that clustered near my feet. They were a little smaller than my palm, with rows of gills along the bottom, and a small point to its domed top.

"I wouldn't eat that one," Payton said. "That's Fool's Fever."

“How do you know that?” I wondered. “Is it an Earth plant?”

She looked down, blushing.

“I had a lot of time waiting in the dorms. I might have watched all twenty-seven seasons of *Survival Planet*.”

“What?” I blinked.

“I know, I know. It’s a trashy show. But there weren’t a lot of options. And unless they were lying about everything, there was stuff that came up over and over again.”

I considered it. Weighed our options.

Reality vids were the information we had. No, what she had. Because my brilliant Payton spent her time learning new things, even from an unorthodox source.

She was perfect.

“Tell me more about the mushroom, my clever mate.”

Payton rolled her eyes. “This one is found on several planets, an invasive species that is carried by different travelers,” she explained. “They’re super good at sprouting pretty much anywhere there’s air and some kind of soil. But they’ll make you really sick if you try to eat them.”

“That’s useful” I said excitedly. “It sounds like you picked up something about foraging.”

“Just the basics.” She shrugged. “I mean, if you trust reality shows.”

“I’m not sure what else we’re going to work with,” I said. “If we were on the show, where should we go now?”

She scanned the scenery for a moment, then pointed to the largest clump of trees further inland. “Best bet’s probably over there. A lot of the best stuff loves trees. And where there aren’t any, it usually means there’s either something wrong with the soil or a lot of fire. Both of which we could do without.”

“To the trees, then.”

By night, between Payton’s foraging and my improvising, we found a spring that gave fresh water, some mushrooms and berries that were safe to eat and I got a fire going.

For the first day, we didn’t do too bad.

But as we were going to bed, Payton’s face grew tight.

“Can we really live like this?” she said, hugging herself tightly as she lay on the thick bed of leaves we gathered.

“No matter what happens, the two of us will be together,” I said,

wrapping my arms around her. “And we only have to deal with things that actually happen.”

“That’s true...” she said, staring off into the darkness.

“And besides, do you really think that some lonely planet no one’s ever heard of is going to beat Havek? Alkard’s own personal tech expert?”

She giggled, despite the tears. “No. I don’t think that’s very likely.”

“Exactly,” I whispered into her ear. “And do you really think it’s going to beat Payton Kent? The woman who escaped Deathgate prison and was claimed by none other than Havek?”

“No,” she said. “It’s not going to beat me, either.”

She spun around suddenly and kissed me directly on the lips. I caught her head and held her there for a long, deep embrace.

“Of course it won’t.”

My clever, strong, fragile mate.

I should have comforted her, reassured her.

But as she wriggled against me, I realized she had a different kind of comfort in mind.

“Are you sure you want to do this here, in the open?”

She tilted her head up, nipping in my throat lightly.

“I think if we’re going to be here for a while, I better get used to it.” Her hand snaked around the waistband of my pants. “Unless you think we shouldn’t?”

“I will hunger for you no matter where we are.”

I kissed the fingers of her left hand, one by one, then traced over the intricate swirls of her markings with my tongue until her breaths came in shallow gasps.

“I didn’t think you could become any more beautiful.” I nuzzled her cheek. “How can it be that every time I see you, you pull at me even more.”

Shuddering, she arced in my embrace, then wrapped her arms around my neck, her nails lightly scratching my scalp.

“Is this part of the change, part of the claiming?” she whispered, pulling against me, slowly drawing me back. “I should be exhausted,” she said, her breath hot against my neck. “You almost died. My entire body is different. I nearly gave up, drowned.” The lightest kiss pressed against my throat. “We’ve crashed. We’re lost and alone on this moon.” Another kiss. “And all I want is for you to be inside me.” Her teeth grazed my skin. “Please, Havek. I need you.”

That was all it took.

I tried to hold myself back, aware of the stress Payton was under, both to her body and mind.

But if my mate needed me, there was no denying it.

Her bedraggled clothing out of the way, I slipped my fingers into her wet, silky folds, watching her tremble with my every movement.

I loved this. Loved watching her face as she came, her body so responsive to every touch.

“No,” she gasped, reaching for my shoulders. “I want you in me. Please.”

I would never deny my mate. Never.

As I slid into her, she bucked, her moans of pleasure only spurring me on. Wrapped up in her arms, lost in her pleasure, I found my own, again and again, until finally exhausted, she fell asleep.

“Good night, my love,” I said, and held her as close as I could against the cold.

The soft rhythm of her breathing, and the warmth of her body against mine made our crude camp as precious as the most luxurious hotel on Thodos.

Before I knew it, light broke over the forest again.

Payton was still sleeping, so I sat up quietly and fed the remaining sparks of the fire to get it going, trying to remember what the rotation period of this moon was. It felt like a good night’s sleep, but too many things happened. My thoughts felt muddy, jumbled.

That was when I saw something in the sky.

I shook Payton awake as gently as I could.

“Payton, get up. I think there’s about to be trouble.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked, but before I could answer, she looked up and saw it herself. Immediately, she was on her feet, watching anxiously.

The shining underbelly of a ship passed directly over us. I saw the blue glow of its engines as it descended slowly towards the ground.

Dragonfly class, my brain unhelpfully offered. Eight VTOL engines. Magnetic anti-radiation shield.

But none of that was the important part.

From this distance, there was no way they’d missed us.

We were found.



## PAYTON

“Payton,” Havek spoke softly while stepping next to me. “You have to hide.”

“What?” I asked, frowning and scoffing. “Are you insane?”

“No. I’m serious.”

“And what? Leave you here to be captured?”

He nodded while keeping his eyes on the ship. “Yes. Once I’m back in Deathgate, I’ll find a way to get a message out to the family. You’re my mate. They’ll come and get you, I swear.”

“Havek.” I tried to tug on his arm, but his gaze was fixated.

I placed my hand on his chest, trying to feel his heartbeat. Once I located it, I realized it was racing.

*He’s scared.*

I couldn’t leave him. Even if I did, where would I hide? Sure, there were some strange glass-like trees next to us, but that wouldn’t provide much cover.

It whizzed over us, circling and looking for a place to land. The blue lights from the bottom of it were menacing. Funny, I always liked the color blue until that moment. It seemed even more intimidating than the red lights of the prison when the alarm sounded. Maybe because those meant freedom, and that blue meant captivity.

“Havek, look at me.”

He turned his head slowly, and the look he gave me sent chills through my body. He looked broken, like his spirit had finally cracked. “Havek, you have to have faith, all right?”

“Faith?” he scoffed and broke away from me. “We’re done, Payton. They

found us. It's all over."

"That might not be true," I responded, walking toward him and holding out my hands, but he flinched away.

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"I can't feel your touch," he responded lowly, looking at me with water in his eyes. "It's only going to make this harder for both of us."

"Havek, please! Look..." I threw my arms up to the spaceship in the sky, motioning to it while shaking my head. "If these are our last moments together, I don't want to spend them with you not wanting to touch me! What is happening to you?"

He shrugged and laughed sadly. "I guess I'm finally accepting it. This whole adventure..." He looked out to the ocean and shook his head while gulping. "It was a nice fantasy. It was a good hope but a stupid dream that we would make it out." He stared back at me finally, turning up the corners of his lips while keeping his brow furrowed. "And I found you," he said with a sigh. "And that's the greatest gift I could have ever received, but it's time to return to reality now."

"Havek!" I growled, losing my patience. "You listen to me, dammit! I love you. I'm not letting you give up on me!"

"Give up on you?" he asked, raising his voice due to the spaceship landing. "You think I would ever do that to you?"

I shrugged. "Prove you wouldn't! Hold me!"

He shook his head before finally caving and rushing over to me. He took me in his arms tightly, and I grabbed onto his chest while my eyes watered. I knew he was scared and wanted to pull away, but I was too selfish to let him do that.

"I love you," he whispered while choking back tears.

"I love you, too," I replied before pulling back from our embrace. "Listen." I dried my tears before looking at the spaceship. "Whatever happens..." I turned back to him. "I'm with you. No matter what. If we go down, we're going down together, right?"

He nodded and wove his fingers through my hair before pulling me into his chest again. We looked at the spaceship, watching the dirt fly upward as it touched the ground. My heart raced, and my palms were sweating against Havek's skin. I placed my ear on his chest, wanting to hear his heartbeat again.

If it was going to be the last time his heartbeat would soothe my nerves, I

would take every ounce of it in. I wanted to hold on to that memory for the rest of my life, however long that was going to be.

Someone once told me that a being dies three times. The first is physical, when the body passes away. The second is when no one has memories of the being anymore. They finally die entirely when their name is spoken for the last time.

*I will never forget him like he is at this moment. He will always be my mate. My clever, loving, and daring mate. Whatever happens to us, I will make his legacy live on somehow. If I have to write letters to Thodos III from Deathgate or steal a percomm to contact Tessi and tell her what happens to us, I will ensure his name is spoken for the rest of eternity.*

The gangplank descended, and my heart leaped in my chest. Havek tensed his arms around me, and I sighed into his chest. I breathed in his scent, trying to store it in my memory for whenever I needed to think of that moment. I prepared for the worst and believed the memories of him would be the only things that would get me through whatever was about to come.

A silhouette appeared at the top of the plank, and I held my breath. It was tall and muscular, with horns on the side of its head.

*A Vinduthi?*

The figure walked down the plank, and the light finally hit his face. Havek began laughing, and I covered my mouth while hot tears streamed down my face.

*Alkard.*

“You scared us,” Havek yelled while beginning to walk us toward him.

But my feet were frozen in place.

Maybe it was finally too much.

Maybe the stress of the change, of the crash, a lifetime of failed dreams, the recent betrayal had all mixed together into a sludge of paranoia.

But I couldn’t move forward. Couldn’t be happy. Not yet.

“What’s going on?” I called out. “Tell us first.”

Havek looked back at me, brow wrinkled in confusion. “Payton, what’s wrong?”

Slowly, I shook my head. “How do we know what he’s doing here? Maybe he’s going to send you back to Deathgate. Maybe there’s a deal with the Federation...”

In an instant, Havek was back by my side, his arms wrapped around me.

“Alkard would never do that,” he murmured into my hair. “He’s my

family. Your family now, too.”

A burst of laughter echoed, and I pulled back, startled.

“She’s a smart lady, your mate,” Alkard said.

Havek looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

“An agreement was reached.” Alkard’s smile broadened. “You might remember, I’m good at making deals.”

“What?” Havek’s arm dropped from around my shoulders as he stared at Alkard with his mouth wide open. “What are you talking about? There’s no way—”

“It took a while, but we found one,” Alkard said. “You’re free and clear. Both of you.”

“How?” I asked in disbelief. “What about the prison break?”

“You owe Tazhr and his new mate.” Alkard smiled and looked at me while nodding. “They did it. They found the proof that Conii set you up. We just had to give it to the Grand Judge of Thodos III.” That wicked smile again. “And maybe dump it all over the vid channels.”

I rocked back, trying to absorb this. I knew they’d worked on a plan back on Thodos, but for it to completely exonerate Havek seemed like a miracle.

“As far as the prison break goes,” Alkard replied while rubbing the back of his head and I held my breath while waiting for him to finish his sentence. “While Tazhr was working, we were putting other pieces into place. We have quite a lot of information on some of the Federation’s...” He paused and chuckled. “History.”

Havek cocked his head and squinted at Alkard, but my lips turned up into a grin. “So you’re saying...” I began but was too struck by his words to finish the sentence.

“Because of the evidence against Conii that Taz found, we were able to use that history in other ways.” Alkard nodded. “Like suggesting we could forget a few episodes, if the Alliance forgot one little jailbreak.” He shrugged. “Besides, someone walking out of their escape proof prison wasn’t exactly good publicity.”

Havek let out a whoop, sweeping me into his arms and spinning me around until I was nearly dizzy.

“Did you hear that?” he shouted. “Who would have thought Taz, of all people, would find the solution?”

I was still in shock, and when he put me down, I turned to Alkard.

“No charges?”

“Nope.”

“For anything?”

“Yes.”

“So we can return to Thodos III?”

Alkard nodded. “And finally begin your lives...” He paused with a wink.  
“Together.”

My walls broke, and I finally believed him. I turned to Havek and laughed before jumping on him and wrapping my arms around his neck.

“We made it,” I whispered through tears.

“We made it,” he responded, tightening his grip on me.

He turned around so he faced Alkard over my shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Alkard responded from behind me.

Havek released me and I ran my fingers through his hair, exhaling while still processing the news.

“Well?” Alkard motioned to the ship. “Do you want to go home or not?”

## PAYTON

The hidden greenway of Thodos III was more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. After so long trapped in cold metal environments, the vibrant colors and sweet scents were almost overwhelming. I wandered down the winding paths, soaking in the tranquility. Havek walked beside me, our fingers interlaced.

“I still can’t believe we’re actually here,” I said. “Sometimes I feel like I’ll blink and be back in that awful prison.”

Havek squeezed my hand. “This is real, my love. Our long trial is over.”

We strolled leisurely through the gardens, enjoying the rare chance to simply be together. After a night’s rest at the station, we arrived on Thodos III that morning.

Alkard was eager for Havek to dive back into work, but he mercifully gave us this one day of reprieve first. I was determined to appreciate every second.

Vibrant vines crawled up carved trellises and spilled over pots carved of dark stone. Strange but beautiful blooms waved in the gentle breeze of the recirculators, and my fingers trailed over their velvety petals as we walked.

“What’s this one called?” I asked Havek, pausing to examine a bush with delicate spiraled leaves. Each leaf seemed to glow from within, lit by some inner bioluminescence.

“Ah, that’s kalla,” Havek said. “When the leaves fall, people write secret messages on them that can only be read under certain lights.”

I smiled up at him. “You’ll have to write me a message sometime.”

“Gladly.” He plucked one of the leaves and tucked it into my hair. “A preview, for now.”

We lingered for a while in an orchard filled with strangely shaped trees that produced colorful orb-like fruit. I closed my eyes, just letting the rich scents wash over me. After so long in the sterile recycled air of ships and stations, I couldn't get enough of the natural smells.

Leaning against Havek beneath one of the twisting trees, I realized something. Here, now, I was truly happy. After everything we endured, just being with him like this was utter bliss.

"I love you," I whispered against his chest.

His arms tightened around me. "And I love you, Payton. With all that I am."

Tilting my head up, I drew him into a long, deep kiss. His hands slid down to press me closer, igniting the now-familiar heat between us. I wished we could stay lost in each other beneath the trees.

But we still had more of the gardens left to explore. Reluctantly, I drew back, taking his hand again. "Come on, I want to see everything!"

Havek laughed, letting me eagerly pull him along. My childlike excitement seemed to delight him.

We passed through rows of alien vines dangling opalescent pods that chimed softly in the breeze. Tiny winged creatures with jewel-toned carapaces fluttered from flower to flower. The path opened up into an area dotted with benches and fountains carved from the same dark stone as the gazebo.

I paused before a fountain depicting an elegant winged creature. Crystal clear water cascaded from her outstretched palms into the basin below. The serene sound soothed my spirit.

Havek came up behind me, nuzzling into my hair. "I never properly thanked you, you know."

I glanced back at him curiously. "Thanked me?"

"For not giving up on me." His voice was husky with emotion. "For believing when I lost all faith."

Turning, I brushed my fingertips over the sharp angles of his face. "You gave me strength when I needed it most. I wanted to give that back to you."

He turned his head to press a kiss to my palm, his eyes never leaving mine. In their fathomless depths, I glimpsed eternity.

"Whatever comes next, we'll face it together."

"Together," I echoed, pulling him down into a kiss filled with promise.

We had a lifetime of tomorrows ahead of us now. The future was still

uncertain, but with Havek at my side, I could withstand anything.

After lingering a while longer, we continued following the meandering garden paths wherever they led. I felt drunk on color, scent and beauty. This place was so different from anywhere I'd been before.

The spaces of the station I grew up on were cramped and utilitarian. The closest thing to nature was the occasional sad hydroponic garden.

The greenway was a feast for the senses. I wanted to imprint every detail on my mind.

We passed through a shadowed grotto where vines curtained with tiny white flowers tumbled down artfully arranged boulders. Glowing crystal formations studded the stones, refracting dazzling rainbows of light. It was ethereal.

Havek smiled indulgently as I exclaimed over every new marvel. With him, I didn't have to temper my excitement and curiosity. I could be unabashedly myself.

I paused, suddenly overcome. I turned to Havek, my vision blurring with tears.

"Thank you for this," I managed. "It's perfect."

Alarmed, he tilted my chin up. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, laughing through my tears. "Nothing at all. I just never thought I'd have this. Be free to enjoy something so beautiful, with someone who loves me." I swallowed hard. "It's more happiness than I ever expected, that's all."

Comprehension dawned in Havek's eyes. He enfolded me in his arms, one hand gently stroking my hair as I sniffled into his chest.

"You deserve all the happiness in the universe, my darling," he said. "I swear I'll spend my life trying to give that to you."

When my tears finally subsided, he brushed a soft kiss over each of my eyelids. I basked in the tender gesture. The aching sweetness of this moment was almost too much to bear.

"Come with me. There's one last part of the gardens I want to show you," Havek said, a glint in his eyes.

Intrigued, I let him lead me deeper into the gardens. In an open clearing, we came across an elegant gazebo overlooking a tranquil pond. Inside, a table was set for two, a bottle of luminous wine set into a cooling prism, two tall glasses set underneath a tall bouquet. At Havek's delighted grin, I realized he must have arranged this quiet retreat for us. Happiness bubbled up in my



chest.

“It’s perfect,” I said, turning into his arms. “You’re too good to me.”

He cradled my face in his hands. “You deserve the universe, my mate. I wish I could give it to you.”

I shook my head, smiling up at him. “You’ve already given me the most important thing. Your love. That’s all I’ll ever need.”

WHEN ONE HAS RESTRICTIONS—PRETENDING to be an advocate, running for their lives, nearing death, struggling for survival—you seize on the spare moments. Those were the brief pockets of time when one was permitted to come up with their dreams, even if they knew there was no chance of their happening.

Whenever I was on top of him, it felt like that first experience after my rebirth. It was only a few days, but it felt like a lifetime. The traumatic escape led me right toward the salve that healed me: joining with my perfect match. The story of my life was mainly one of survival, finding the bright spots in the rare places where they lurked.

With Havek by my side, I was living the first chapter of a new story altogether, with a new discovery every day.

Here in new quarters in the family compound at the top of the Fallen Star, it felt like anything was possible.

I just had to reach out my hand and take it.

And what I wanted to reach for was him.

A gentle glow came from the wall display, slowly brightening as the morning progressed.

I studied Havek’s face, the sharp angles of his cheeks, the soft lips, the spikes of horns at his temples.

How could such a handsome man be mine?

It was a mystery, an unanswerable enigma. But I knew it was the truth.

He was mine and I was his and nothing would change that.

Leaning over, I brushed my lips over his. My perfect, brilliant, sweet mate.

Mine.

Havek’s eyes fluttered open, a smile curving his mouth as he focused on

me. “Good morning, my love.”

His gravelly, sleep-roughened voice sent a delicious shiver through me. “Morning,” I murmured, trailing kisses along his sculpted chest.

With a low groan, Havek wrapped his arms around me and rolled us until I was pinned beneath him. The evidence of his desire was already pressed insistently against my belly.

“Insatiable as always,” I laughed, then gasped as he nipped down the sensitive curve of my throat.

“Only for you.” Havek’s dark gaze smoldered. “I’ll never get enough of you, Payton.”

Before I could think about it, his fingers already pushed aside my panties, and his thumb and first two fingers—each one the size of two of mine—penetrated deep within me, long enough to touch my g-spot with virtually no effort.

“Mmm!” I moaned, letting out little yelps as he rubbed me.

He flipped me around and held his body against my back. His cock felt like a coiled-out snake against me, stalking, vigilant, deadly, single-minded.

“Mmm,” I let out.

“You like that?”

He held his tip at the entrance of my ass, gliding it softly along the crack.

“On all fours. Now.”

I did as my mate commanded. I would have done anything he asked, no matter how depraved, no matter how sudden. All I wanted in life was to please him, a vow I made with my very blood.

“My good girl,” he said.

He swished the palm of his hand flat against the length of my opening.

“You’re so wet, my angel. What are you wet for?”

“You. For all of you. Your gigantic cock. I want to feel it go in.”

“And do you think you deserve that, Payton?”

“Yes.”

“I do, too.”

He spread my legs open and slapped my ass, and by instinct, I lifted up my red, raw pussy for him to have easy access.

“Yes,” he said and grunted.

He slid himself into me and held onto my hips. He dove deep into me, as far as he could go, and he barely had control over himself. He sped up his jerks forward into me, heaving himself forward with intense ferocity. His

strength was unimaginable, and it was all laser-focused on feeling every atom of me, reaching in as far and as hard as possible, stimulating me more than I ever thought possible.

He pressed his hands on my breasts like ripe fruit, sending blunt sensations throughout my upper body.

“God, your breasts feel so good in my hands. They drive me fucking wild. Holding them in my hands, I feel it all the way in my dick,” he said. “Your whole body affects every part of mine.”

I lifted my ass higher in the air and lowered my head to the bed to let him in as deep as he needed to go. It felt so good, I put the sheets in my mouth to contain myself.

The friction of his pelvis hitting my juicy ass emitted a slapping noise that sent a piercing warmth through my core, and it made even more of my juices pour out of me.

He put his hands on my hips to send me hurtling backwards, slamming into him as he drove into me, slowing down in a delicious form of teasing, almost glacial in his movements but intense in the frozen motion.

“I want to keep going. I want you to know there’s no rush. Not now, not ever. Because we’re each other’s. For life. Forever,” he said.

“And I love it when the man of my life claims me all over again. I love when you go fast, when you’re slow, when you don’t move at all. And I can’t wait to discover all the new ways I love to have you inside me.”

I turned my head behind me for him to kiss me. He instinctively put his left hand on the place that marked where he bit me. He leaned forward and suckled on it as he continued to fuck me slowly.

“I love you, my Havek,” I said.

“And I love you, my Payton. My mate.”

He flipped me over, from all fours to my back, and thrust himself inside me, hard.

“I’m too in love with you not to look at your face when you’re coming. I’ll need to fuck you a lot more before I won’t need to see it,” he said, then kissed me while wrapping his fingers loosely around my neck.

“I think that can be arranged,” I said, briefly disconnecting my lips from his.

We moved together faster, and I felt his breath on my neck. He kissed the bite mark deeply, pressing his fangs against it, feeling like electrical pulses injected under my skin.

His whole body tightened as my insides began to spasm all around him. With a loud roar, he emptied himself inside me, pushing me back over the edge of the cliff of pleasure.

We kissed for a while after, catching our breath and relaxing, until he moved once more.

“Want to go again?” I said.

“So insatiable.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

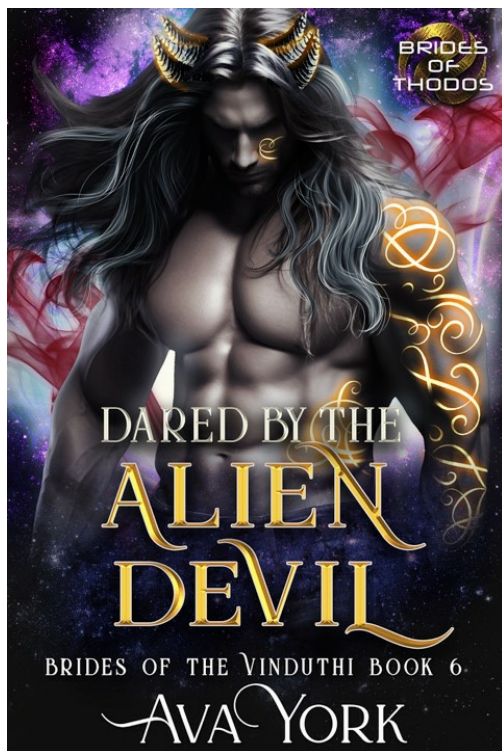
He moved again and kissed me.

I had my answer.

There was still one mystery we didn’t know the solution to: just what had Tazhr and his mate done to prove Havek’s innocence?

But as the spirals of delight swept through me with every move, I shoved the question far away.

All I needed right now was here, in my arms.



HE SAYS he needs me to help prove his brother's innocence. If this goes wrong, the small life I've carved out for myself on Thodos III will vanish - and take me with it.

HIS HEATED TOUCHES drive me to the edge, sweet words full of promises.

BUT DO I dare for anything more?

GET DARED by the Alien Devil now!

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