

ENVIRONMENTAL DANGER!

EXHAUSTING FREEZE-DRYING

HEAVY CHALLENGES TO

THEIR BODIES

RUPY DIXON

RESONANCE WHIP

SURVIVING SKARR

ICE PLANET
CLONES



SURVIVING SKARR

ICE PLANET CLONES

BOOK TWO

RUBY DIXON



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Photo: VJ Dunraven Productions

Cover Design: Kati Wilde

Editing: Aquila Editing

Proofreading: Fortunate Books

 Created with Vellum

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SURVIVING SKARR

Overnight, my life has changed to one of sheer survival.

I wake up on a strange alien world covered in ice. I have no memories of myself, not even my name.

And I've resonated to the biggest braggart on the planet. Skarr is a chest-beating alpha male gladiator with lizard genetics and an intense case of self-love. He tells everyone within hearing distance how amazing he is. Bleh.

I want nothing to do with him, but according to the khui, we're soulmates. This means we're bound to have babies and live our lives out together...forever...

Not if I have anything to say about it.

To survive, I'm going to have to figure out who I am, what I am...and what to do about the man who won't shut up about how incredible and perfect I am.

It has to be an act... doesn't it?

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE?



(As of Flor's Fiasco)

The fruit cave has been raided, its precious contents stolen. No one from Icehome Beach has any idea what has happened. Who could have taken it all and why? A party heads to the fruit caves to investigate, among them R'jaal of the Tall Horn Clan (from the Islands) and Tia, a human woman who was abandoned with Lauren and the others.

Meanwhile, Daisy, O'jek, Flor and I'rec decide to go to the Elders Cave (aka the ship of the ancestors) to read the strange writing Penny claims to have seen upon the walls. Daisy can read alien languages and is curious if the message there holds the secret to who is stealing the fruit.

As the first party arrives at the fruit caves, the second party splits up, with Daisy and O'jek heading on for the ship. Alone, Flor and I'rec discover a scatter of stasis pods in a snow-filled valley. The pods are filled with clones, strangers with no memories of how they arrived on the planet or why. There are multiple human women, a lone human man, several 'splices' (clones made from the mutated genetic material of several races) and a few empty pods...

This is where our story picks up.

CONTENT WARNING



In an effort to be transparent with readers, I'm including a list of things that readers might find upsetting or triggering in the story. Not all triggers hit everyone the same, so if I've missed something, please feel free to reach out and let me know so I can update the list. Note that while my story might sound like it has heavy topics, all of it is dealt with in a lighter tone as I do not take myself (or my characters) too seriously.

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- Amnesia
- Kidnapping/Abduction
- Pregnancy and the discussion of whether or not to have the baby
- Animal Injury (the animal gets a HEA)
- Character Injury (broken bones, no long lasting trauma)
- Death and Dismemberment (off screen references)
- Feelings of isolation
- Parental loss (vague not specific)
- Loss of identity
- Cringe situations (look, some of us just have a hard time reading that sort of thing, and I get it!)

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CHAPTER
ONE



THE STRANGER

I wake up to brutal cold leaking into my room.

Gasping, I sit up in bed—and hit my head on what feels like a lid. With a whimper, I rub a hand over my face and I’m startled to feel a breeze. My eyes are unfocused and I need to get out of bed and find my contacts. But when I go to swing my legs over the side of the bed, I realize I’m...not in bed at all.

It’s some sort of coffin. Or pod. Something with sides. A warm box surrounded by ice cold. I squint at my surroundings, terrified.

Am I dead? Did I just wake up in a morgue?

A breeze caresses my hair and sends a chill down my spine. I ditch the “morgue” theory and head right to “graveyard.” A graveyard in...winter? I squint, trying to make out my surroundings but it’s near impossible without glasses or contacts. My vision has always been horrendous and I’m trying not to be too terrified of the fact that I don’t know where I am or why I’m not wearing warm clothes. The strange box-thing I’m in is dark, but the rest of the world looks pale. Pale white and gray.

I lick my lips, not sure if I should call out. Surely there’s been a mistake somewhere.

“You awake?” a woman calls out.

Oh, thank goodness. Someone else is here.

I raise a hand into the air timidly, trying to make out a person in the endless white. When she comes up on my other side, I have to fight back a shriek of fright at being startled, but she clasps my hand and her skin is warm.

“I’m Flor, and you need to know that you’re safe, okay?”

What can I say to that? I manage a nod. It’s clear she knows what’s going on and I don’t, so I’m content to let her lead.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s get you out of that pod.” She gives my hand a firm tug and pats the side of the pod. It sounds like metal, and when I climb out of it, it’s so cold that my skin sticks ever so slightly to the side, which is a horrible feeling.

Even worse? When my feet touch the ground, it’s icy. I let out a whimper of distress, then bite my lip to keep silent. My feet are bare, and glancing down, it looks like I’m stepping on some sort of yellow-brown spongy grass that ends near my pod and extends outward.

“You’re on the edge of the group, so you’ve got a bit more to walk,” the woman says with an apologetic note, propping an arm around my side as if to support me. “But we’ll get you over to the fire and get you warm and figure out some clothing, all right? So just hang tight. We won’t let you freeze.”

I manage a nod.

“Great. You’re doing great.” She beams up at me, all sun-browned skin, dark hair and white teeth. My vision’s too blurry to make out who she is, but her eyes seem oddly blue and glowing bright in her tan face. “What’s your name, my friend?”

Opening my mouth to speak, I pause. Something that should be easily in reach just...isn’t. I search through my memories, looking for something that sounds like a name, but I don’t have anything. Anything at all.

It’s a blank.

Panicked, I cling to her arm. “I...I don’t know.”

“It’s okay, honey,” she tells me in a soothing voice, continuing to lead me away from the “pod” and towards the blurry distance. “You’re not the only one that doesn’t know your name. Probably some medication side-effect and nothing to panic over. Let’s give you a name for now, okay? Just so I don’t have to call you ‘Hey you’?”

“Okay,” I manage in a small voice.

“How about Vivian? That’s my sister’s name and I always thought it was pretty.”

Vivian. Vivian. I test it and it doesn’t bring anything in particular to mind except one thing. “Like...from *Pretty Woman*?”

“Exactly like it. How’d you guess?” She chuckles, and the sound is friendly and kind.

I want to tell her that I hate the name. That it makes me feel awkward, because I’ve never been pretty, not even in the slightest. I’m nothing like my sister. I have a gawky frame and wide-spaced eyes that look strange in photographs. My boobs are nonexistent and my hair is flat and limp and sad. I don’t want to be Vivian. I don’t want anyone to realize where the name comes from and laugh at me.

But Flor seems to know what’s going on and I don’t, and my confused terror mingles with my desire to blend into the background, and so I say nothing at all.

She leads me over to what looks like a fire, and others are huddled close by. A man moves, covered in a strange blue jumpsuit that covers his entire body, and it takes me a moment to realize that it’s not a jumpsuit, but that he really is blue. Another muffled gasp escapes me, and I flinch backward.

Flor is there to pat me on the arm again. “That’s my husband, I’re. He’s an alien but I promise he means you no harm. Just trust me, okay? I’ll explain it all once everyone is safe by the fire.”

An alien...?

Numb, I sit on the boulder she indicates and something warm is tossed around my shoulders that feels like a fur coat. Shivering, I search it for armholes and find none, so I just wrap it around my body and try to make sense of what’s going on around me as I huddle near the fire. Others are being led towards our fire and I can hear someone crying. I desperately wish I had glasses or contacts with me because this is triggering all my old fears about going blind. That my vision—bad since early childhood—will continue to get worse until

I can see nothing at all. I touch my face furtively to make sure that I'm not wearing my glasses, and I'm relieved that I'm not. That's something, at least.

My teeth chatter and I hunch over, trying to make myself small. Why are there aliens here?

Where is *here*?

"You," the blue man says, pointing in my direction. His accent is thick and he sounds irritated, which just makes me quiver even harder. "You are still cold?" When I manage a nod, he makes an impatient sound. "You and the female next to you, huddle together. Share warmth."

"Right," says the woman next to me. "I should have known that." She opens up her blanket and I move in next to her, tucking mine around our legs. She's got blonde hair and seems to be about my age. "I'm Sabrina. Do you know what's going on?"

I shake my head. I genuinely have no idea. "I don't have my glasses either."

"Shit." Sabrina tucks the blanket closer around us. "I wish this was a bad dream."

Me, too.

"What's your name?"

Inwardly I wince, but I offer the one that Flor gave me because I still don't have anything else. "Vivian?"

"You say it like it's a question."

Oh, it is.

Flor returns a few moments later with another blurry-looking person and then announces, "I have more blankets if anyone's still cold."

God, I would love another blanket. I could sleep in a pile of them and still be cold. But I don't want to be a problem. Well, more of a problem than I already am. I bite my lip, waiting to see if there are any left as others get up and grab another blanket, and when they're all gone, I'm disappointed

in myself. Even in this strange, terrible situation, I still can't find the courage to speak up for myself.

Some things never change.

"Food," the alien man barks, holding something out to a figure nearby. They take it and then pass it along, and it makes its way to Sabrina. Someone coughs and then Sabrina digs in the bag, getting a handful of what looks like trail mix. She passes the bag to me and I take a small handful, because I need to leave enough for the others, and then turn to pass it to the person on my other side. To my surprise, it looks like a man with green skin. He takes it from me, and when I lean in enough to make out his face, I'm startled to see that he has scales on his face, dotting his brow, and pointed ears that wing up. His eyes have slitted pupils and a yellow sclera, and despite all this weirdness, there's something handsome and strangely appealing about him.

He studies me as I hand him the bag, and then his expression grows dismissive, his gaze focusing on Sabrina instead. It's something I'm very familiar with. No one finds me interesting. In this scenario, that's not a bad thing, though. I mentally dismiss him, too, and return to my seat.

Sabrina's making little choked noises as she tries to eat. I hesitantly nibble on a bit of what feels like granola, and immediately start coughing. Is it made entirely of pepper? My mouth burns and I cough.

"I think you just pepper sprayed my mouth!" someone cries out.

The bluish alien harrumphs. "Trying to save you," he mutters, stabbing at the fire. "Eat, don't eat, I don't care."

"I think that's everyone," Flor announces when she returns. "Ten women, five men, and three empty pods. Did anyone see where they went?"

The alien gets up and moves to her side, and they talk quietly, ignoring us for a moment. I glance over at Sabrina, and her expression is that of stoic despair.

“Do you remember how you got here?” she asks me. “Or what day it is?”

I shake my head. I keep trying to pull thoughts forward—where I’m from, what this place is, how I know Sabrina or any of the others—and I’m drawing a blank. Your name, I prompt myself. Try to remember your name.

I’m...

I’m...

Shit. I guess I’m Vivian, because I’ve got nothing. I glance down at my hands, because I have a mental image of a tiny finger tattoo in my mind. A quotation mark, to remind myself to speak up. I got it once because I was always looking at my hands when I should be saying something...didn’t I?

Because my hands are blurry, but there’s no black ink anywhere on them.

I turn my palms over, studying my hands again in case I missed something, and that’s when I notice the slender silver bracelet on my wrist. Even though my vision is horrid, I can still make out what looks like a red button on the underside. Curious, I run my fingers over it, and as I do, it flashes. I hold it closer to my nose, and then push the button firmly.

The air crackles, like a speaker with feedback, and then an image appears, projected from the bracelet itself.

I gasp in shock, holding my arm out as if getting the image away from me will somehow help. The picture looks three-dimensional and features an older-looking woman with the same blue skin as the alien and a wealth of tattoos on one side of her face.

“Lucky you,” the image says, clapping her hands once. *“Turns out, you’re a clone. And not just any clone, but an illegally made one. Normally an illegally made clone is immediately euthanized, but someone with a lot of credits paid to have you dropped off somewhere safe and hidden away. So, here you are.”* The recording spreads her hands wide. *“It’s a little chilly here, but the locals are nice and they’ll take care of you. Tell Daisy and Mardok I said hello, and that I hope*

they're getting keffed hard and regularly by their respective mates. As for you, my little clone, I left you some supplies. Play nice with your new buddies and have a great life."

Clone? Who's a clone?

Me?

Frowning, I hit the button again, and the loop starts to play once more. At my side, Sabrina touches her wrist and the same communication pops up, with the same recording.

"Lucky you. Turns out, you're a clone. And not just any clone—"

"—but an illegally made one."

A chorus of recordings hits the air, the message layering over and over again.

"Normally an illegally made clone is euthanized—"

I slap at my bracelet, trying to get it to turn off. If this is some sort of joke, it isn't funny.

"Is a clone what I think it is?" someone asks in a small voice. "Like a duplicate person? Are we all duplicate people?"

"But...that doesn't make any sense," says another woman.

"Does *any* of this make sense?" asks another. She's got a thicker accent, either Spanish or Portuguese, and dark hair. "Because I can't think of a reason why my ass is naked in the snow next to a blue guy. There's either some really good drugs involved or this is legit."

"Drugs would be nice," Sabrina says wistfully. She reaches over and pinches me.

"Ow!"

"I think we're awake. Do you feel drugged?"

I shake my head, rubbing my arm. "Just cold."

"I don't feel like a clone," someone else says. "What does a clone feel like exactly?"

My stomach churns. I don't feel like a clone, either. I feel normal. But I can't help but think of Flor and her question to

me earlier. *What's your name?* And I still don't have an answer.

“So what happens now?” I whisper to Sabrina.

She just shakes her head, her eyes wide. If there's answers, she doesn't have them, either.

CHAPTER
TWO



SKARR

Just like with every new environment I find myself in, I assess the situation.

Cold.

Cold is not ideal, as my ssethri biology doesn't do well with cold. It's one reason that I was spliced with mesakkah genes—a stiff and slow gladiator benefits no one. I'll have to be extra careful, push a little harder, just because I'm handicapped with the frigid temperatures. Even now, my joints ache and my tail feels like an icy log and I've only been out here a matter of minutes.

But I'll deal with it. It's just another challenge, and I've dealt with challenges before.

I crouch low near the fire, watching the others. I'm trying not to make my discomfort obvious, and failing. New plan, then. I let them think I'm more affected than I am, so when I fight, they don't use their full power. I can make this half-frozen state work to my advantage. Lifting my hands toward the fire, I surreptitiously eye the others.

There's both males and females mingling together. That's...new. I skim through my memories, looking for implanted fights that aren't gender-based and find none. Hmm. Perhaps this is a survival game of some kind, then? Whoever succeeds in staying alive the longest wins? This makes more sense to me.

"We're clones?" one female sobs, as if the idea horrifies her.

Is it a surprise to the females, then? I have always known I am a clone. All splices are grown in labs and implanted with combat rules and regulations. I have distant memories of an older "Skarr" that won many battles, hence I have been created from his genetic material.

It makes sense to clone the best, after all.

As my gaze skims over the females, mentally, I dismiss them as combatants. They are not fighters. Even now they huddle and look soft and useless. Prizes, then. Or distractions. If they are surprised they are clones, they have not been implanted with battle memories and rules. They will not know how to play.

I eye the other splices nearby. The one nearest to me watches the females with glazed eyes. Praxiian dominant, if I don't miss my guess. There's a full-blooded praxiian as well, and what looks like a moden splice. And there's even a soft-looking human male, his form hunched over with his arms crossed over his chest.

I size up his build. Another prize, I decide. That one won't be winning any sort of combat trials.

All right. There are three other gladiators that look problematic and one mesakkah wearing furs and tending to the fire. I don't know if he's a combatant but he looks strong enough. This many females for so few males is puzzling, though. Do we win them through bouts? I'm not sure I want to win multiple prizes.

One female will be plenty.

I shift on my feet, sliding my tail closer to the fire. No clothes, no weapons. All right. I'll have to rely on my teeth and my strength. I don't have claws like the praxiians do, or horns like the mesakkah and one of the splices, but my scales are good armor. It'll even the odds.

Kef, it's cold. I'm not going to have to play up being sluggish. Everything in me aches. Truly, whoever is running this particular battle scenario could not have come up with a worse one for me. I move a little closer to the warmth yet again and cast another look at the gladiators. The other males have slitted eyes, assessing one another and I don't want them to catch me doing the same. I focus my attention on the females instead.

If they're to be prizes, I should pick out the one I want. A tall one, I decide. Perhaps the one with the bright yellow hair. She's sharing a blanket with a smaller, softer-looking female

who is terrified. Our eyes meet and she hunches down, quickly glancing away. She moves closer to the yellow-hair and I plan how to separate them and steal the one I want. Females tend to kick and scratch and flail, but a quickly snapped neck might do the trick. She won't be more than a temporary problem. As I watch, she taps the message on her bracelet again, playing it once more.

“Okay, guys, listen up.”

A fur-clad female with golden skin and glowing blue eyes moves to the center of our huddled group, her hands raised to her shoulders. “Put your bracelets away. They probably all say the same thing. We don't know if that's the truth or not, and whoever dumped you here isn't around to tell us. So here's what we're going to do. You're all safe here with us. You're probably tired and confused. You're not going to think straight coming straight out of one of those pods. Trust me, I know. We'll rest here overnight and then we're going to get you khuis.”

Safe.

Khuis.

I narrow my gaze, watching the other males. They seem just as on-edge as me. No one is buying this “safe” nonsense. If they know what a “khuis” is, they're not saying. They're like me, ready to spring into action once the alarm sounds, or the bell rings, or whatever indication we have that things are beginning.

We're waiting for the rules of the game.

The fur-wearing female isn't aware of this, though. She continues to smile at all of us, turning to look at both females and males alike. “This planet requires that you have a symbiont to take care of you. With the symbiont, you'll heal faster, and you won't be so cold. You won't feel it inside you, either, so don't worry about that. Some of our friends are headed this way, and then we're going to help you go back to our village on the beach. We'll get you set up and comfortable. I just want you to know that you're safe with us, and there are no alien overlords or slave owners or anything.”

That makes me pause. It sounds like no one is in charge of the game?

Perhaps there's no game after all. Perhaps we've been cast out for being defective. My gut clenches. I don't care what the bracelet or the woman in the image says. I know one thing and one thing only—how to battle. It doesn't make sense for me to be here if there's not a fight.

But the female must notice my skeptical look. “We have friends that used to be fighters and are now living peacefully with us.”

Peacefully...? I doubt that very much. Likely they are playing a long game and this foolish creature has mistaken it for peace.

I decide to test that theory. The cold makes my jaw clench, makes it difficult to spit words out. “What if...we...don't want...to stay?”

She has an answer for this, too. “We'll get you set up on your feet and give you enough food and clothing, and then you can go. No one's keeping anyone captive. You're free to do as you like. But we hope you stay and become part of our people. Our family.”

Family?

Fools. I am on a planet of fools.

Rubbing my hands near the warmth of the fire, I'm trying to keep from laughing aloud at the female speaking to the group. She thinks this place is friendly and kind?

Clearly she has no idea what is going on. Then again, neither do I. Is that part of this particular game, then? Are we to locate some sort of data pad with rules? Is that the first piece of the puzzle? I consider this.

The female with the glowing eyes continues to talk to the prizes—the soft ones that are clearly not here to fight—and reassures them. She tells them how she woke up here confused but the blue male with the horns helped her out. I eye the two of them together, and it is clear she is his prize.

So that is his method. He has tricked the female into coming to him. Clever. Very clever. I shall have to watch that one closely, see if I can learn his tricks.

“We don’t have a lot of technology here. We have to hunt to survive,” the glowing-eyed female says.

I prick to attention at that.

Hunting?

Hunting I know well. There is a game here after all.

CHAPTER
THREE



SKARR

As if we are all not in competition with one another, we are given warm blankets to wrap in and handed hot food. I eat mine quickly, the heat of the stew in my belly doing more for my stiff limbs than the near-useless blanket. As it grows late, the females cry more and are comforted. They pile together to “share warmth” in a lean-to crafted for them, and the female in charge goes to join them. I wait to see if they will copulate with one another—a trick some females do to distract a particularly vicious audience—and I’m disappointed they do not. They seem to be sleeping.

If they are combatants and I am wrong, they are the worst combatants ever.

The other splices and I remain near the fire. So does the blue-skinned male with the horns. He watches us with a knowing gaze, and I suspect he is very aware of the game that is being played here. We will need to tease answers from him. We all wait for a signal, but there is nothing.

The male—I’rec—speaks up after a time, stoking the fire with a crude spear. “I have seen your kind before,” he says to the nearest splice. “Fighters. Glad-taters?”

I was right about a game being played here. It takes everything I have not to beat my chest with smug pride. Do they think they shall fool Skarr? I am on to them.

The moden answers the blue one’s question. “Does it matter? We are here now, as you say.”

“It matters because you are fighters,” the horned one points out. “And you are looking at my mate with interested eyes. I am telling you now that she is mine and if you so much as put a finger on her, I will gut you and drag your innards across the valley.”

I laugh, because this language I understand. Do not speak to me of helping hands and living peacefully. Tell me which female is yours so I know what you will fight over. This, I

appreciate. And because he speaks so plainly of his interests, I decide I will speak plainly of mine. “There are many females here. Who do we fight to be given one as a prize? You?”

He shakes his head. “You do not have to fight anyone. These females are not slaves. They are free to come and go as they please. Just as you are.”

“Then how do we win females?” the gray one asks. “If we do not fight?”

“You do not win them at all. Your khui decides. It will choose a mate for you. It chose mine for me, and it will choose one for you, too.” The fur-wearing mesakkah-hybrid is clearly trying to be patient with us, as if we are misunderstanding.

One of the cat males rubs his chin. “So we fight this khui? And it rewards us with strong, healthy females to rut?”

“No. Let me explain...” He pauses when someone’s stomach growls. “More food?”

No one says anything. I eye the praxiiian and notice he is eyeing me back. We might be hungry, but no one will admit to such a weakness. The fur-wearer, I’rec, seems to realize this after a time and picks up a leather bag, takes a chunk of dried meat out of it and then hands it down to the nearest person. When it gets to me, I grab a large hunk of the jerky and pass the bag on to the praxiiian, noting that he yet has his claws. Good to know.

“We have other glad-taters here,” I’rec continues. “Two with red skin, one with golden scales, and one that looks similar to you.” He points at the part-praxiiian splice near him. “They were confused when they arrived, because they expected to fight. You are not here to fight. You are here to survive.”

“And if we survive, we get the women as prizes, yes?” The splice leans in. “Is this a breeding program? Only the strongest shall mate and produce offspring to be trained as the strongest of gladiators?”

I exchange an impressed look with the praxiiian. If this is a breeding program, I count myself lucky. To live with the

singular goal of impregnating as many females as possible might be a dream come true. Then again, I would be quite content with one female to enjoy and a series of regular battles that were not slanted against me.

Seeing as how we have landed in icy weather, it seems that might not be the case. I take a large bite of jerky, and it offends my senses with the spice of it. I keep eating anyhow, because I will need my strength.

“No, no,” I’rec says with a shake of his head as the jerky bag goes around again. “We do not fight each other. We hunt to survive, to bring food back to the tribe. We hunt to prove our strength to our companions and keep them safe and fed. There is no contest. There is nothing to win. Merely survive.”

We are all silent, digesting this. I chew on another bite of jerky.

The moden splice leans forward. “I do not understand.”

I’rec groans. “Which part?”

“The part where we do not fight.”

I nod agreement, and gesture at the sleeping females. “Why send us down with prizes if we are not fighting?”

I’rec shakes his head again. “They are *not* prizes. They are stranded here, just like you. They have been *abandoned*, just like you.”

“So you admit we are not wanted,” the moden says slowly.

“Not by those that created you, no.” I’rec gestures at the wristband that each of us wears. “That is why you were sent here to our world. The one that dropped you here has brought others. If this message is correct, you have been brought here to live because you are not wanted on other worlds.”

I rub my chin, considering this. It does not bother me that I am not wanted, according to him. Obviously this is a mistake. I am an excellent, fierce gladiator. It is more likely that they cloned too many from my sire—because he was the best—and I was the unlucky one sent with the other rejects simply due to logistics. That’s fine with me. I can conquer rejected gladiator

clones as easily as other gladiators. But this I'rec brings up an interesting point. "So if no one wants the females...we can take them?"

The other males perk up, looking to I'rec.

"No. No one is taking anyone. The females are your equals."

I burst into laughter. So do the others.

I'rec does not laugh, and it occurs to me that he is serious. "Females are not equals. Females do not fight males. They fight other females, or they are given away as prizes to males that win."

"You will change that thinking fast," I'rec tells me. "A female might not be as strong as you, but I have met plenty that are smarter. If you are not wise, you will end up alone and full of regret."

Bah. Wits. I was not bred for wits. No one is. "Tell me more about the females." I lean in. "Someone will come and take them away soon, yes? Because they have been accidentally abandoned here with us?"

Again, I'rec shakes his head. "Females live side by side with the males in our encampment. I remember V'dis told me that when he was a glad-tater females were kept from them, but you are no longer gladiators. You will become part of our tribe, and everyone in our tribe is welcome to come and go as they please."

"We are no longer gladiators," the praxiian echoes, a blank look on his face.

"There is no need here for such things. Here, you are just a hunter or a tribesmate. There are no battles to be fought or won upon this planet."

A feeling like grief comes over me, and I rub my chest. I don't know what I am if I'm not a gladiator. I can tell from the faces of the others that they are thinking the same. All I know—all I have ever known—is the arena. I know how to fight. I know how to eviscerate an enemy.

I do not know anything else. I have not been created to just “exist.” The thought is appalling and strange. “But...we can stay with the females, yes?” I clarify. “We will not be kept away?”

“The females come and go as they please.” I’rec’s mouth quirks. “I cannot tell my mate where to go or who to see. You have met her. She would have my sac in a vise if I tried to tell her what to do.”

I recall his mate—the small bossy one with the golden skin and glowing eyes. She told everyone what to do, and I did not care for that. I cannot imagine any male that does. And yet... he seems pleased by this admittance. Very pleased, as if he wishes for nothing more than a fierce, demanding female.

“I don’t care where they go,” the praxiiian declares. “I just want to claim one for myself.”

I’rec holds up a hand. “You can’t do that.”

Now I am really confused. “Why not?”

“The human females are here just like you. They come from a place where they have freedom and were not claimed. They are allowed to do as they wish.”

We exchange a look. “So the females are here but we cannot touch them...are you certain this is not a test of some kind?” the praxiiian asks. “An endurance challenge?”

“No challenge. You cannot touch an unwilling female.”

Aha. “But we can touch all the willing ones?” I ask. “How do we make them willing?” I have no experience with such things but I am willing to learn the rules of this particular game.

This, I’rec is confident in. He leans back, a smug look on his face. “Wait for resonance. You will not be disappointed.”

I search my installed memories for this word, but I do not have it. Is it a game of some kind that I do not know the rules for? A law for this particular planet? A medical condition I should expect to attack me shortly?

“I do not know what resonance is,” says the moden.

I'rec taps a finger under his eye. "You see this? That I glow here? That is from my khui. I was born with one, but my mate had to acquire one because the air here would slowly poison her without it. It is a...thing that lives inside you. A khui has another purpose than just keeping you healthy, though. It chooses a mate for you so you can create offspring."

Offspring? "Then this *is* a breeding competition."

"No competition. You may never resonate, or you may resonate the moment you receive your khui." He shrugs. "It is impossible to predict. I have been around the females for several turns of the seasons now and yet I resonated to F'lor only recently. My khui has decided she is mine and I am hers...and it was worth the wait."

I am not as patient as him. I don't care for waiting. Or for offspring, but I am intrigued by the thought of having a female of my own. "How does this work, then? The female's creature in her chest compels her to mate with me? And I should just lie back and allow it?"

Another speaks up. "Is she taken from me after we mate?"

I'rec shakes his head, frowning. "No one is taking anyone away."

"I wish to know when we fight," says another. "There must be a reason there are so many gladiators dropped here with prizes so close nearby."

"No fighting," I'rec continues, raising his hands in the air. "You do not need to be glad-taters any longer. Just hunters. We fight to keep our people safe and to protect the others. We hunt animals to feed the tribe. There is no need to fight one another, and no one fights over the females."

"Even though they wander freely?" asks the moden.

"Perhaps the creature in the chest is a mind-controlling creature," I suggest. "That is why a female will wish to ride you the moment it activates."

I'rec dismisses all of this. "Bah. A female is more easily pulled to a male with pleasure than with mind control."

“Pleasure?” the praxiian asks. “Her pleasure or yours?”

“...hers?”

“Why pleasure a female? Is she not here for our pleasure?”
This seems strange to me.

I’rec laughs at my puzzled expression. “You had best be glad it is me you speak with and not my mate. As for why, the answer is obvious. There is no greater satisfaction than pleasuring your female.” He shakes his head slowly, glancing over at the pile of curled up women before turning back to me again. “You think it is all about you, but you have no idea what it is like to tease a female’s body. When you feel her cunt slick with hunger, something changes inside you. Your own pleasure becomes less important, and sometimes you do not even need to come to enjoy. Sometimes it is good to simply bring her to climax.”

“This sounds suspiciously like mind control,” the praxiian mutters.

“Then let me put it to you another way.” I’rec looks amused despite our doubts. “My people have a saying that you catch more fish with delicious bait than an empty hook. If you want a female to fall into your furs, be someone that the females will want.”

“And then we will khui?” I ask.

“Resonance happens when it happens. Some believe that their personal wants influence it. Some even take a pleasure mate before the khui decides. Some take many, or so I have heard. The females are free to do as they like.” I’rec glances over at his mate again. “I dabbled in the idea but now I am glad I waited for my mate.”

“Wait,” says the splice. “So females can approach us outside of resonance for copulation? As often as they wish?”

“If they wish so, yes.”

“But they will expect pleasuring,” I point out.

“This is true,” I’rec concedes. “I doubt they will return if there is none.”

I rub my chin scales. This is excellent information, the unspoken rules to this new game-not-game we find ourselves in.

“What if we are pleasuring a female and they resonate to another?” asks the moden.

“You fool,” I scoff. “If you do it right, she will resonate to *you* instead. Were you not listening? There is mind control involved, but they call it pleasure here. You pleasure the female, she does what you want. Not that you would know. You don’t even know how to pleasure a female.”

“And you do?” He eyes me with plain distaste.

I do not. But I am here to learn all the rules of this new competition and use them to my advantage. “I will learn it, and I will be the best at it, just like I will be the best at any competition.”

I’rec groans wearily, rubbing a hand down his face. “*No* competition. How many times must I say it?”

The bag of peppery jerky makes its way back to me and I eat a double handful this time. If it is a race to pleasure females the moment they awaken, I must be ready. I must be strong enough to entice any that I want away from other males, if necessary. I’rec says there is no fighting here but if I have claimed a female and she is being pleased by me, I will tear apart any that try to step in. Chewing, I eye I’rec, waiting.

The praxiian at my side grabs the bag from me and eats in silence as well.

I’rec’s expression grows uneasy as we are all quiet. “What?”

“Teach us,” I say.

“Teach you what?”

“How to pleasure the females here so they will insist upon being ours.”

The fur-wearing mesakkah rubs his face again. He sighs heavily, thinking. “They like tongues.”

“Go on...”

CHAPTER
FOUR



VIVI

The second day on the new planet is just as bad as the first.

I try to hide the choking despair I feel as the blisteringly cold weather continues. There aren't enough furs to go around, so I share with Sabrina again until Jason moves to her side. The moment he slides in on her left, the blankets creep in their direction and I'm not bold enough to pull them back. I wish I was, but I'm finding it more difficult now than ever to speak up for myself.

It's hard when I'm in a normal environment. Right now? I'm just completely and utterly overwhelmed.

The big gray-skinned man lumbers through the camp, paying no attention to the women huddled near the fire. That suits me just fine—all of the men here are more than slightly terrifying to look at. There's fangs and claws and horns and one is even part lizard. My vision prevents me from making out a lot of what's going on, but I don't say anything because the last thing I want is to call attention to myself.

There's a tearing sound nearby. Something hot drips on my arm and I swipe it away, then jerk to my feet when I realize it's blood.

"Apologies, female," one of the strange-looking males says. "I did not mean to make a mess on you." He grins, showing long fangs and a furry face, and brightly glowing eyes. He turns his head, then spits what looks like a wet baseball aside. It rolls away from the fire. "There. Do you want this one?"

"This one w-what?" I stammer.

"This one for the parasite. The khui?" He shoves something soft and limp into my arms before I can confirm or deny. "Your eyes need the glow." The horrible man gives me a thoughtful look. "So you can resonate and be full of pleasures."

What the fuck is he talking about? I stare down in mute horror at the headless creature he's just thrust into my arms. The thing he spit away? I think it was its skull. My throat works as I gaze down at the body of the thing, and there's a glowing filament inside the bloody mess. "Um."

He sighs. "Let me do it." Taking the creature from me, he mutters something under his breath that sounds like "equals" and then rips it in half with another thoroughly disgusting show of force. I flinch backward as more blood splatters on me and the ground nearby, and then he grabs my arm.

I jerk away from him, but he's too strong. With one claw, he digs into my arm and draws blood, then slaps half of the mangled creature against my arm. Something wriggles and burrows into my flesh, and I try to twist away as icy-cold filaments crawl through my veins, but the monstrous man holds me fast.

"Chalath!" Flor screeches as everything goes dark and fuzzy around me. "We ask for permission before we implant!"

"I thought permission was for pleasuring!" the male bellows back. "Make up your mind!"

The world fades to black before I can hear the answer.



WHEN I WAKE UP, I blink, staring up at what looks like the ceiling of a tent.

Still on this horrible planet, then. Ugh. I rub my face, and then I notice that my eyes aren't blurry. I...can see?

Holy shit, I can see. I sit upright, staring around me in wonder. Everything's so freaking *crisp*. I can see each stitch in the leather tent above my head, right down to a scratch across the leather near the entrance of the tent. Outside, I can see snow drifting down and people moving around, talking in low voices. The scent of smoke from the fire lingers in the air, but I notice that while I'm cold, I'm not painfully so like I was before.

This is due to the...parasite? The khui? They mentioned something about it keeping its host healthy but it was hard for me to concentrate yesterday. I was too overwhelmed. I glance down at my arm, running my fingers over it. There's no wound. Rubbing at my skin to make the dried blood flake off, I glance out the tent. I'm not sure I'm ready to join the others.

Socializing has never been my strong point.

If anything, I'm absolutely dreadful at it. I've always been painfully shy. It comes from a childhood of bad vision and ugly glasses and parents who loved me but seemed put out every time I needed something, because we were poor. I was the kid that desperately needed braces, expensive glasses, the kid that needed corrective surgery for my eyes far too young, and so many other things that cost money. To make things worse, my sister was vivacious and pretty and I was not.

I learned that it was easiest to fly under the radar rather than become a problem, so I did my best not to speak up, not to draw attention to myself, not to ask for anything.

That's...going to be a problem if I'm stuck here. I lick my lips nervously. My stomach growls but I'm in no hurry to leave the tent's safety. I need to think. What do I do? How do I get home?

Then I remember the horrible recording. *Lucky you, you're a clone.*

I rub my temples. Those aren't my memories, then. It wasn't my sister. Wasn't my parents. Wasn't me with the buck teeth and the severe myopia since childhood. It's difficult to wrap my brain around the concept of the memories in my head not being mine. Still no name in my head, though. Try as I might, I can't come up with any name other than Vivian. Vivi. Viv.

Guess that's me now.

Biting my lip, I pull on warm clothing and peer out of the tent. Others are moving around our encampment, everyone seemingly busy. I can actually make out faces today, which

brings me intense relief. Whatever this madness is, at least I don't have to go through it half-blind.

The scent of cooking food draws me out of the tent, my stomach growling. Now if I only have the courage to ask for food today. Yesterday I froze up. Couldn't say anything at all because I didn't want to be a bother. Today it's going to be different, I vow to myself. Today I don't have to be shy.

I glance down at my bare feet, my toes curling against the frosty yellowish grasses. This is the only area without a thick layer of snow, and I heard someone mention something about a ship burning away all the snow when they deposited us. Does that mean most of this world is snowy, then? A vague memory flashes through my mind, of sled dogs and mountains and laughing in the snow. Of someone shoving a snowball down the back of my coat and me squealing in horrified delight.

The memory is gone as quickly as it appeared, but I'm just grateful to have something in my head. Okay. Maybe I'm used to snow. Maybe whoever I was cloned from—*don't panic, Viv, don't panic*—was a winter-loving sort. I shift my weight on my cold feet and wrap my blanket tighter around my near-naked body. Other than the blanket, I don't have warm clothing.

The big blue scary male stops in front of me, a frown on his face as he looks me over. "You are awake. Are you good?"

I swallow hard, thinking of shoes. Food. Clothes. Instead I nod, because that seems easiest, and then I want to kick myself for being so passive.

He grunts, looking harried. "Good. Go see my mate. She will take care of you."

Right. Flor. I watch as he hurries away, heading to stand by the slow-moving guy with the reptile skin and the permanent smirk on his face. The smirk turns into a scowl when I rec speaks, gesturing at a yellow-scaled guy a short distance away.

A sob draws my attention back to camp.

The women here look just as devastated as I am. Two cling to one another, sharing a blanket, and their eyes are glowing bright blue. Another woman rocks herself, weeping, and yet another hunches by the fire, staring at the fire-making implements in her hands as if they're snakes. Flor pats one of the dark-haired women on the back awkwardly as the stranger sobs. "I know, honey. I know," Flor tells her. "It's a lot to take in. Cry it out, then put your big girl pants on and we'll all get to surviving, okay?"

The woman sniffs and wipes at her face. "I...I guess. It's just so *cold*."

"The men will be back soon and you'll get a khui, and then you'll feel much better. I promise." Flor looks up and brightens at the sight of me. "Just like Vivian here! Look at her all blue-eyed and sassy now. Doesn't she look warmer?"

I curl my toes against the chilly grasses again and manage a weak smile. Okay, now is probably not a good time to ask for shoes. Or another blanket. I give a shaky thumbs-up and Flor shoots me a look of encouragement.

She hops to her feet and races over to me, that same careful smile on her face. "You feeling okay? Everything in working order? Nothing vibrating?"

"V-vibrating?"

Flor pats my shoulder absently, looking down at the woman making a muck of starting a fire. "Just me making a resonance joke. Pay me no mind. Let's get your name written on your shirt and then we'll see about getting some hot tea started, okay?"

I glance around at the others near the fire and no one has warmer clothes. We're all barefoot and wearing scraps under our blankets. I guess it'd be pointless for me to ask for more. I nod, because what else can I do?

She races away and comes back a moment later with a chunk of coal. Beaming at me, Flor gestures at my front. "There's a lot of new people and no one's good with names

right now, so I'm labeling all of you guys so it's one less thing to worry about. You okay with that?"

Swallowing hard, I watch as she points at the woman near the fire. DAWN is written across her front in big blocky charcoal letters. The women sharing the blanket have something written on their chests too, but I can't make out more than a few lines because they're huddling together.

I...I don't want to be labeled. I know what it'll say. I'll have VIVIAN written across my chest because that's the name Flor assigned to me. And it feels weird, because Vivian sounds glamorous and makes me think of *Pretty Woman* or Hollywood starlets of old and I could not be less like those women. I want to tell Flor that maybe I could just be Viv or Vivi, but all I manage is another nod, my throat tight.

"Great! Thanks, Vivian. Hold your tunic for me so I can write on it."

A few moments later, I'm branded VIVIAN with the N half hiding under one arm and I feel like a fraud. Hunching under my blanket again, I take a seat by the fire and watch Dawn awkwardly smack the strikers together.

"How's that coming?" Flor asks, leaning over her.

"Oh great," Dawn says sarcastically. "Doesn't it look like I know what I'm doing?"

"You—no! You can't kill it before you bring it to camp, Valmir! It does no one any good that way! We have to have the animal alive to take the khui! All you brought was lunch if you killed it out in the field." She races away, her expression a mixture of annoyance and patience. "We talked about this."

"At least I brought something back," the cat-like alien growls. "This one is useless! What has he brought for the prizes?"

"Hey?" the human guy—Jason—says. "What the fuck, buddy? I'm trying just like everyone else."

"You are not trying hard," the alien snarls at him, his voice thick with a strange accent. "Go sit with the females if you cannot hunt—"

“You need to bring it down a notch, Valmir,” Flor tells him, stepping between the two men. “Let’s not start a fight, okay?”

“I want to fight,” the scaly green one says in an eager voice. “Who is setting up the battles?”

“No battles!” yells I’rec, and things turn into chaos.

With a sigh, I huddle under my blanket and watch as Dawn gives the strikers another go. Instinctively, I know she’s holding them wrong. If she wants to start a fire from scratch, she needs to protect the spark and not just let the wind snuff it out. After watching her bang miserably on the strikers for a bit longer, I clear my throat. “Um...hey?”

Dawn turns and gives me a weary look. “I know I’m shit at it, okay? If you’ve got ideas, I’m all ears.”

I hold my hands out.

She hands me the implements with an expression of relief, and I can tell she’s just glad that it’s someone else’s problem now. I lean in closer to the fire pit, setting the fuel chips—that look a lot like cow patties, if I’m being honest—into a loose pyramid and adding a nest of dried grasses near the base so my spark has somewhere to go. I try shaving the rock in my hand like magnesium, and I’m not surprised to see little curls of it appearing on the nest. This must be the alien version of magnesium.

“What are you doing?” Dawn asks.

“Making it easier for the spark to ignite.” I strike again, and this time the spark lingers in the nest. Leaning forward, I blow gently on it to add oxygen to the ember. It sputters for a brief moment and then grows, catching on the tinder.

Dawn gasps, leaning in close to me. “How did you do that?”

“I-I have a memory of this,” I whisper. Well, not exactly of this. But I feel comfortable with this, and my head is full of half-baked images of cozy nights around campfires and family vacations in the wilderness.

“Thank god.” Dawn squeezes my shoulder. “If we needed fire to survive and it was down to me, we’d be fucking goners. You’re a lifesaver, Vivian.”

I don’t feel like a lifesaver. I’d give all of my fire memories for just one syllable of my name.

CHAPTER
FIVE



SKARR

This day does not allow me to properly show off my talents. Frustrating.

We do not get to pleasure the women when they wake up. We are told we must wait for *permission*. Bah.

First, we're told no one is to fight despite the females getting khuis. I want to go hunt with the others to demonstrate my prowess, but I'rec insists I help him around camp, and he watches me closely. Perhaps I have been pretending a little too hard at being feeble in the cold. I go with him to retrieve supplies from the main encampment, all so I can get a look at things.

It's not that I don't trust the male...well, actually I don't.

He's not exactly mesakkah, either. His coloring seemed off to me but I dismissed it as my head full of chemicals. But his horns are different and his chin and arms are hairy. He does not have the plating that the mesakkah do, either, and I'm pretty sure I see his color ripple when he is surprised.

So that is something I need to keep an eye on.

The village is as crude as I feared, with stone huts and leather roofs. The encampment is on a hostile-looking beach, the waters crusted with icebergs. Everywhere, it is cold. It is not just here in the mountains, but the shore, too. I have a khui now thanks to I'rec, but my limbs stiffen abominably when I ride atop the drakoni's back and the wind bites into my scales.

No more dragon rides for me.

When we return, no one seems to pay attention to the fact that we have brought food and clothing. No gratitude is lauded upon us. We are not adored by the females for bringing things. They *expect* it. Hmph. And now I have wasted all day at I'rec's side instead of picking out my prospective female. Already I see the praxiiian is talking to a female with darker

skin, and I narrow my eyes at him, my competitive streak prickling.

I have to pick out the best female before they are all taken, or before this “resonance” strikes. I need to remind it that I am the best, and therefore I need the best female. If I’rec says we can influence it, I need to be around my chosen female constantly, to lurk nearby so my chest can call to her.

Unfortunately I have to be near the fire first, to unthaw my limbs.

The other splice is there, seated near the warmth. His furry face is a mockery of the refined human features, and he is clearly the ugliest creature here. Even the moden looks normal, for a moden. He just looks...well, like a lot of random bits were thrown together and made into a gladiator. I’m always jarred by the sight of the splices. There’s always something vaguely *wrong* about them. Still, they are good warriors. I move opposite the fire and immediately the last remaining female by the flame gets up and leaves. I grunt with amusement.

“They are not excited about resonance,” the splice says, a smirk on his face. “They have been avoiding me all day.”

They have? Good. I had worried that the males would be having to fend off the pleasure-hungry females at all times and I would return to find them all resonating to one another. I want to be the first, and it sounds like there is still opportunity for it. “Do all have their khui?”

“Most. Kyth needs a new one. He killed his.”

“Kyth?”

“Moden.”

“Ah.” They are rather large. Even the moden here is a splice and the breadth of him is still twice as large as the human male. I eye the splice. “You?”

He taps his chest. “Silence.”

I nod. “Anyone at all?”

“Not yet. Perhaps the resonance is waiting for something.” He shrugs. “They say it is best that way, to give the females time to accustom themselves to the idea. I say, best for who?”

I step closer to the fire, my hands now warm, and turn sideways so my heavy tail can benefit from the heat of the flame. As I do so, I think. I eye the splice. “You are...Chath?”

“Chalath,” he corrects. “Skarr, yes?” He studies me. “Ssethri and mesakkah?”

I nod. It’s a mix that allows me to excel...unless the entire keffing planet is ice, that is. “Did you spar with anyone today, Chalath?”

He shakes his head. “I hunted some, but we have been told over and over not to spar. Not to battle one another. That it is not wanted here.”

“And we have been told it is good that the females do not resonate yet, yes?” I stroke my chin, the puzzle pieces of the day teasing themselves together. “What if the two are tied? What if a good, fierce battle to show our skills will cause us to resonate?”

Chalath perks, his triangular ears flicking. “What’s that now?”

“I am simply thinking.” I prowl around the fire, circling to make sure that the bossy human female Flor and her strange not-mesakkah mate are not around, since they seem to be in charge. “How will the females’ khuis know if we are excellent warriors if we do not display our skills?”

He frowns suspiciously. “You have a point. They told us not to battle one another, and we have not. And at the same time, no one has resonated.”

“Exactly my thought. If the two are connected, perhaps they are telling us to wait because they want what is best for the females...but I am interested in what is best for Skarr. Just as you are wanting what is best for Chalath, mm?”

The splice gets to his feet and crosses his arms. “I want what is best for my female, too—”

“Hsst!” I cut him off before he can argue more. “You think this is not good for the females? Were we not told resonance is good? That we will all enjoy it? Why would we deprive them of such a thing?”

“You...may have a point.”

“I know I do.” I tap the side of my temple viciously. “They think they can *outsmart* me, but I am smart. I am clever. I hear what they are not saying to me, and I tell you this. I want a female of my own. I want this resonance.” I cut a hand through the air. “I do not want to wait until it is right for them. I want it to be right for *me*.”

Chalath’s newly blue eyes flare with excitement. “And you think if we spar this will be the answer?”

I spread my arms wide. “How else do you show a female you are the strongest? The best? By sitting here by the fire with your claw up your keffing rear?”

His expression darkens and I can see his jaw clench with anger. Good.

I pound my chest again. “Fight me. Let us test our new khuis that should help with healing. Let our blood heat with battle. Let us show these females what strong, fierce mates we will make.” I give him a determined look. “They will *all* resonate to us.”

Chalath grins with excitement, showing wickedly sharp teeth. “Pick the place, then. Let us fight.”

I cast a look around the encampment, trying to determine the best place to have our battle. Not near the fire— much as I enjoy its warmth, I have suffered burns in the past—I think—and it is a painful recovery. I would prefer to avoid that. Too far away from the camp, though, and no one will get to see our display. As I watch, two females start to set up another one of the strange tents a short distance away. There is a clear spot next to them, large enough that we can brawl.

And both nosy Flor and her mate are on the very far side of the encampment. Good.

A light snow is falling, and the mossy carpet has been covered with a thin layer of white powder. I gesture for Chalath to follow me and we move near the females. The two women give us uneasy looks but continue with their task, ignoring us.

They will not ignore us for long. I drag the leather heel of my new boot on the ground, marking a circle. “We will fight inside this circle,” I whisper to Chalath. “Whoever steps out of the circle first loses, or whoever draws first blood. Nothing lethal—just enough to display to the females our skills.”

He nods slowly. “I like this. You are wise.”

“I know.” I step inside the circle and pull my new heavy tunic off. It is warm and feels good against my scales, but it is also bulky and lined with fur and will not help in battle. I will need quick movements, fast movements, because splices are deadly and their reflexes are enhanced. I am a splice, too, but Chalath could have abilities I am unaware of because he could be any mixture of things. Best to be cautious at first.

Not that I need caution. I will win.

He pulls off his tunic, casting it at the feet of one of the women. They look over at us, and one female gives us a puzzled look. “You guys feverish or something?”

“Or something,” Chalath calls out, and then raises his fists to his chest, assuming a protective stance. He flicks a finger at me, indicating I should come at him.

With a feral snarl, I lunge.

The females scream, scrambling away as Chalath and I begin to spar. Immediately I am comfortable once more. This is what I am born to do. I grapple his arms, ignoring his claws as they dig into my scales. I can see the same crazy excitement in Chalath’s gaze as I feel—for the first time in days I feel *alive*. He shoves his weight at me, forcing me backward, and I swerve, ducking as he rakes his claws through the air. Within a few quick moves, I know what kind of fighter he is. He is all brute force, not sly intelligence or dexterity.

Unfortunately for him, I am all three.

I kick at him, turning and lashing him with my tail when he tries to roll away. I turn, keeping the upper hand, and lunge at him, trying to grapple. Back and forth we go, swiping at each other and circling, and I land a fist in his face when he tries to duck my swinging tail. He grunts and shakes it off, then tackles me and flings me to the ground.

“Stop it!” a female shrieks. “Where are Flor and I’rec? They’re fighting! Someone make them stop! Kyth! Stop them!”

The big moden splice just grunts, standing nearby to watch, and I know he will not stop us. He might want to fight me next, and I welcome the challenge. Grinning, I snap my teeth at Chalath and try to knock him over even as he seeks to sink his claws into my flesh. They bounce off my scales harmlessly and he growls in frustration.

Then I am being grabbed and dragged backward, even as Chalath has a stranger’s arm locked around his neck. It is I’rec, a look of fury on his face as he pulls Chalath away from me. I struggle to break free from my new attacker, and when both my arms are quickly pinned, I make the only move left to me—I stomp at Chalath’s face, my boot connecting with his nose.

Blood sprays and I laugh with delight. I have won. “Good match,” I call out as we are dragged to separate ends of the camp.

“Idiot,” the praxiiian—Valmir—growls in my ear. “Rules are made to be followed.”

Bah. I ignore him. I shake off his grasp and fling my arms in the air, reveling in the looks of shock the females send my way and the sour looks the males do. They are just jealous they did not think of it first. My blood is roaring in my ears, and I feel good.

No, I feel keffing fantastic. I beat a fist over my heart, roaring with pride, and storm over to the fire so all can look upon my glory.

“Oh fuck off,” one woman mutters.

I raise both hands in the air again, stalking around the fire and letting all of them admire Skarr, he who has won the first sparring match here on this dismal planet.

Someone throws a handful of snow at my back. "Keep it down," calls another female. "You're giving me a headache!"

Slowly, I lower my arms and try not to show my frown to them. I...do not understand.

They should either love me or fear me. Both reactions are to be expected when faced with a triumphant, dangerous gladiator. They are giving me neither reaction. They are not begging to be pleased.

Do...do they not know how to appropriately judge a battle?

I thump my chest again and then sit on a rock near the fire, my back stiff and my tail moving back and forth with agitation. I wait.

If my theory is correct, I shall resonate. I eye everyone within range of the fire's light. The blonde female (who ignores me), Valmir (who gives me a look of disgust), and Chalath (irritated that I won, no doubt). Another two females hurry away, and another makes eye contact with me and bursts into tears.

Only one remains by the fire, the bland female with unremarkable features. She pokes at the flames with a long, skinny bone, then glances over at me with narrowed eyes.

"Ha!" I cry, beating my chest again. My tail sways back and forth, and I thump a fist over my heart once more. I do not need the adoration of that female to celebrate my win.

She curls her lip in my direction, turning back to the fire and poking at it with the stick once more. She is dismissing *me*. Clearly she missed the fight where I showed my strength.

I give my chest another proud thump, pacing back and forth, and then I feel it. There is a tickle in my chest. I pause and wait, curious. It grows stronger, the tickle turning into a vibration. A humming.

A song.

Yes.

I have *won*. I have made this parasite, this khui, realize that I am the strongest of males, and so I should get the best of the females. I thump my chest again, triumphant, and the song only grows stronger. “You see?” I cry. “I resonate! I am the greatest of gladiators! My khui all but demands that I claim a female!”

“Oh brother,” someone mutters, and I turn.

It is the female—the bland one. She makes a face at the fire, rolling her eyes, and I am not certain if that is directed at me or at something else. Surely she is impressed, just a little? I am the most clever of males to have figured out how to drive resonance. I am the total package—strength and cunning. She should be in awe.

She pauses, and then frowns. Her hand goes to her chest.

Then, I hear her song, too. She is humming with resonance.

She is humming with resonance to me. The realization sends a tickle to my groin and another charge of elation through me.

The human female looks down at her chest. She puts a hand to her heart as if not truly believing the song is coming from her. It only grows stronger, and the tickle in my cock turns into the urge to extrude and thrust. If I grab the female now...

But she makes another strange face, rubbing her chest. “Oh fuck no.”

And she turns and leaves.

CHAPTER
SIX



SKARR

W e just resonated.

The bland female whose features I cannot recall just resonated to me, the greatest of warriors. There must be something special about her if my khui is selecting her to be my mate, some sort of hidden talent or intelligence that makes her worthy of pairing with me to create incredible offspring.

So why is she *leaving*? She should be fawning at my feet, eager for my cocks to give her my seed.

I give my chest another thump, waiting for her to return.

Everyone just stares at me with astonishment. Are they stunned that I am the first to resonate? Are the other males going to follow suit and attack each other to get their blood roaring in their veins? But no, everyone only stares in stunned silence.

“Was that...” Kyth, the big moden, finally asks.

“Yes.” I give him a look of triumph, standing straighter. “I have claimed the best of females for my own.” I need to take another good look at her. Perhaps I did not notice her physical attributes before because she was quiet. My khui has noticed something, and that is all that matters.

“I’m not certain she wishes to be yours, brother,” he points out, gazing off into the distance where the female retreated. “She looks like she’s running.”

I frown. “Nonsense. She is beside herself with delight.”

Kyth’s wide mouth draws up in a smile. “If you say so.”

“I do.” He knows nothing. Moden are not bred for their intelligence, after all. They are spliced for their sheer size and endless stamina. He does not know what he is talking about. I scan the encampment, looking for my female, but I have to admit that I have no idea what she looks like. All I recall is that she had hair and eyes, like the other females...and that she

must be the best. Frowning to myself, I stride forward, heading for the females that linger on the edge of camp. I will find her and claim her, and all will be well.

Chalath steps forward, lifting his chin at me. “I did not resonate. Fight me again.”

“You did not resonate because you did not impress any of the females,” I point out, continuing forward. “I clearly did.”

“Exactly. So you should fight me again.” He wipes blood from his nose. “I will win this time.”

I snort. Highly unlikely.

Just then, Flor and her mate come running forward. “What the fuck?” Flor cries. “Someone said you guys were fighting? What’s going on? And why is he bleeding?”

“All is well,” I reassure the frantic female, trying not to sound too smug. “I incited violence to ensure resonance.”

Her eyes go wide. “What the fuck?”

“We are gladiators,” I tell her, as if this is not obvious. I raise a bicep and flex it just in case she wishes to admire it. “You said a khui will select the best of males to mate with the best of females. What better way to show a khui that I am the best than to show off my fighting prowess?”

The female stares at me. She turns to her mate and shakes her head. “You handle this.”

“I do not know what there is to handle, my F’lor.” I’rec rubs a hand down his face and scowls at me. “You know this is not how resonance works, yes?”

“It seems to work for me. My hot blood has shown it what a fierce warrior I am. That I am the best.”

“And the most modest,” the female snarks. Then, she looks around the camp. “Okay, I’rec, you handle Skarr here and I’ll go after Vivian.”

I pause, rubbing my thrumming chest. “Who is Vivian?”

The female stares at me. “Your mate, dummy.”

“Ah. She ran off.” I continue to rub my chest, and then wonder if I should rub lower, because parts of my anatomy are definitely aching. I pause. “Should I go find her? Pleasure her? Surely now she will want it, and then I will win the breeding competition.” Already I have a leg up on the others.

The female—F’lor—shakes her head. “You wait here with I’rec. I’ll go find her and talk to her.”

“But I am the one that resonated,” I point out. “I should find her in case she wishes to mount me.”

I’rec snorts, casting a look over at his mate.

F’lor just shakes her head. “Something tells me that isn’t going to be a problem, buddy.”

She steps forward, only for her mate to tug her arm, stopping her. I’rec shakes his head. “No, my mate. He is the one that resonated. Let him go and speak to her. I know you want to help, but you cannot help this.”

“I can talk to her—”

“You have talked,” he says gently, pulling her close to him. “She knows how resonance works, yes? Let them work it out between them. You would only be in the way.”

They share a secret look and she leans in close to him, whispering. “Something tells me their resonance isn’t going to work out as easily as ours.”

“I don’t think anything is going to be easy with that one,” he says, and grins over at me. “Good luck, my friend. You will need it.”

Friend? Friend? Is that like...an ally? A teammate? But needing a second person in a battle implies I am weak. I draw myself up to my full height, glaring at the amused male and his mate. “I do not need friends,” I inform him. “I am strong enough on my own. I am the best, the fiercest.”

“That poor woman,” is all F’lor says.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



VIVIAN

If I'm keeping a tally of pluses and minuses for this day, I'm afraid we're veering into the negative.

It started out good. I got shoes and warm clothes. Plus and plus. I worried nothing would fit because I can't remember what size I am. I can't even remember what my face looks like. I just know I'm tall and leggy and my hair is this muddy blondish-brown and hangs past my shoulders. I asked Flor for a ponytail holder of some kind and she handed me a pointed bone, so I jabbed it into my bun, Flintstones-style. The shoes are hand-stitched with lots of warm fur on the inside, and the tunic has stitching that goes up the front so it can be fitted to the person wearing it. Everything fits and I feel less like a rejected clone and more like a *human being*.

Lunch was hot and tasty and I didn't even have to watch anyone butcher any animals to make it. Another plus.

I remembered camping and how to make fire. I'm useful.

These are all pluses, and it gives me a feeling of relief to be able to sit by the warmth of the fire and continually poke it to keep the embers bright. I'm doing something instead of just crying, at least. Maybe this will jog more memories for me and I'll remember things like where I live and my name.

Even just a syllable of a name would be nice.

Flor tells us that we're going to be heading out tomorrow for her home. It's on a beach, where the cliffs keep the worst of the winds off of them and the temperature is slightly more moderate than here in the mountains. A more moderate temperature sounds like another plus to me. I'm even looking forward to meeting the others stranded here, because I'm hoping that more conversations will spark more memories. I'm looking forward to warm housing too, of course, but right now, the memories are bothering me more than the weather.

But then the half-lizard guy, Skarr, sits next to me and the day rapidly starts to slide into the minus column.

He beats his chest like some sort of Tarzan wannabe and bellows at the top of his lungs. He tells everyone how amazing he is for picking a fight with another guy and winning. He struts through camp like some sort of green peacock and I decide that living with someone like Skarr for the rest of my days is going to be a checkmark firmly in the minus column. Even Flor doesn't like the guy. I see the annoyed looks she keeps shooting in his direction, like she wishes he would shut the fuck up. I'm glad I'm not the only one thinking that.

Skarr saunters next to me by the fire, and it takes everything I have not to get up and leave. He's obnoxious, but even obnoxious guys deserve to get warm. Given that he's got scales, he's probably part lizard. If he's cold-blooded, it's going to be rough here for him. I should feel sorry for him. When I look up, he flexes and gives me a triumphant look.

Ugh. So much for feeling sorry for the guy. I hope he gets an icicle up his tush to fix that attitude.

But then something alarming happens.

My chest quivers. At first I think I'm shivering again. That I've caught a cold. But then the quivering gets louder, like someone's starting up a lawnmower nearby. I look around for the source of the sound, and it takes a moment before it dawns on me—the reason why it's so loud is because I'm the one that's making the sound.

I'm vibrating.

Resonating.

Frowning, I press my hand to my breasts, which feel like they're being motorboated by my internal organs. I look up—and see the lizard guy's triumphant expression.

He's resonating, too.

Oh hell no. That's for me? He's supposed to be mine?

There's an expression about dating and plenty of fish in the sea, but I wonder if there's also an expression for throwing back the catch you don't want. Because I most definitely do not want this absolutely obnoxious, pompous jackass.

He smirks at me and thumps his chest again, the gesture one of triumph.

Yeah, no.

I get to my feet and leave. I imagine my minus column just filling with endless negatives, one after the other. Nightmare. This is a nightmare I can't wake up from. I see a sympathetic look on Sabrina's face, but I avoid her. I don't want to hear her say sweet things about how it'll all work out for the best. Another woman looks miserable as I stagger past, as if she's realizing that we can just as quickly be fucked over by this "resonance" thing as we can be rewarded. I don't want to talk to her, either. I don't want to be comforted by anyone.

I just want to get away.

To run. To escape this hellish nightmare I've woken up to and never look back.

I hug my fur-trimmed tunic tighter to my body and keep walking. We're in a valley—it's apparently where all the clones were dumped—with high cliffs nearby. I avoid climbing out of the valley bowl, sticking near the walls and walking in the shadows of the rocky cliffs. I don't know if I'm much of a climber.

I don't know anything.

Well, I do know one thing—the lizard guy sucks.

What the fuck, khui? What the everloving fuck? I thought we were friends. If not friends, that at least we had a common goal—survival. But that guy is the worst. Maybe my khui is unhinged. Maybe it's faulty and it'll just resonate to anyone and anything. There has to be a logical explanation as to why it would pick a bully for me right away. What the hell does that say about me and who I was?

My thoughts spiral as I continue walking. The valley walls ease away, and I see a cluster of trees on the horizon, swaying on the breeze. The ground slopes, the purple and white-capped mountains ubiquitous in the background, a constant reminder that this isn't home, because home was...

I pause, waiting for the thought to finish itself.

It never does.

With a growl of frustration, I continue on, arms hugged to my chest. I concentrate on those words, trying to force my mind to finish. Because home was...what? *Home* was...? Home *was*....??? I chant this mantra, trying on different things as I walk and walk.

Home was...cold? But not this cold?

Home was...hot? The desert?

Home was...the ocean?

Nothing fits quite right.

The crunch of footsteps in the snow tell me that someone has followed me. I turn my head—and recoil when I see it's the lizard guy. He's followed me out here. I face forward again, scowling. "Ugh. What do you *want*?"

There's a pause, as if he didn't expect that kind of greeting. "I wanted to look at my female."

"I'm not *yours*," I point out. "I don't belong to you."

"Of course you do not."

His scoffing tone makes me pause. Is this guy reasonable after all?

"It would take more than a paltry sparring session for me to be permanently awarded a female body-slave."

Nope.

So much for that hope. With a disgusted look in his direction, I decide to keep walking.

He races in front of me. "Wait. Stop."

I stop, glaring at him.

"All I want to do is look at you." He raises his hands in the air. "Do you not wish the same of me?"

His words make me pause. I have to admit that I haven't done more than glance at him since we arrived, because I've been lost in my own headspace, fretting over my lack of memories. Maybe studying him will show me what this khui

of mine finds so appealing. Even now, just standing close to him, it's revving like an engine, purring up a storm and making my entire body quiver. He rubs his chest and it's only through the greatest of efforts that I don't mimic the action automatically. "Fine. Look at me, but that's all."

He grins, showing a flash of pointed teeth that curve slightly inward. "Unless you wanted to mount me, that is."

"I can assure you, nothing is further from my mind."

He looks abashed at my heated retort. "Just looking, then," he finally says, and then spreads his arms. "You can look at me as well."

"Quit posturing and just let me *look*," I tell him, impatient. Good lord, he poses more than a wrestler trying to excite the crowd.

"I posture because I am excited," he says, all grinning. "I knew I was the best and this just proves it, our resonance."

"Are you going to keep talking or will you be quiet so I can look at you?"

"I will be quiet." He puts his hands up and then pauses. "Can you not look and talk at the same time?"

Oh, I can, but he's annoying me with his incessant questions and I'm too busy trying to be angry and frustrated at the world. "Does it matter? I've asked you nicely. Or do my feelings not matter at all?"

I know I'm being a little nasty to him. I'm just so damn frustrated and he's so darn unlikeable. I want to sink down into the snow and weep that this guy and this icy snowball of a planet are somehow my future. Which deity in the heavens did I piss off for this to happen?

"I am Skarr." He eyes me. "What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't say, and you didn't ask." I don't point out that I don't know my real name. That my mind is a blank. It feels like a dirty shameful secret that I need to keep hidden. Like I'm flawed or unworthy.

He doesn't look abashed this time, just shrugs at me. "I am asking now."

"Vivi," I say resentfully. "Everyone's calling me Vivi."

His mouth presses, his jaw flexing as if he's tasting the word silently. "Vivi. I like it."

As if he gets an opinion. As if I'd change it if he didn't. "Can I look now?"

"I am not stopping you." He raises his arms again, in a wide, expansive gesture, and then remembers that I didn't like him posing. He lowers them again, hesitating, and then raises them once more as if deciding that he doesn't care. It makes him flap his arms back and forth like a bird, and I snort with amusement at the sight.

His name is Skarr. It sounds very pro-wrestler-y but where those guys seemed like all glitz and theater and kayfabe (seriously how is it I know so much about pro-wrestling and not my own name? My head sucks), there's a hint of menace to Skarr. Like he'd bodyslam you and then bite your face off just because.

Maybe it's the posture. His build. Because he's smiling, but there's still an air of menace to him. It's in the way he holds himself, like even now he can't relax. Like a coiled serpent, waiting to strike. He stands at least a foot taller than me, making me feel uncomfortably fragile near him, and I get the vague impression that this doesn't happen. That I'm a tall woman and used to looming over men.

Maybe it's the scales. He's covered in green scales all over...at least I assume they're scales. Everywhere I can see a bit of exposed skin, he's a pale jade, with a striated scale pattern not unlike a snake. He's wearing super heavy layers of furs, but his tail is exposed to the cold, and it reminds me of nothing so much as an alligator's tail. It's thick and heavy and tapers to a point that brushes against the snow. Even now, it twitches, as if he wants to lash it back and forth in agitation.

Maybe it's his face. He's handsome enough, I suppose. His bone structure is prominent, his features regular. His jaw is

square, his nose prominent and scaled heavily like his brow, his eyes deeply set. As if to offset all this hardness and the harsh angularity of his face, his hair is downy, almost baby-soft in its fineness. It hangs close to his jaw like some sort of fairy tale prince, all rippling, shining tousled waves. That's not the problem, though. It's his gaze. His eyes are blue like everyone else, but his pupils—a slightly darker shade of blue than the rest of his eye—are vertical. They're a slit of darkness amongst the sea of blue and give off a menacing vibe. I don't like it.

I don't like *him*, either.

All of this adds up to a “no thank you” from me.

“Well?” he says, and he smiles again, as if he expects me to suddenly shower him with compliments.

“Well what?”

“You like what you see, yes?”

“No.”

His expression falls. “Bah. You do. You are just uneasy because I am the only ssethri splice upon this planet full of mesakkah.”

“Mesakkah?”

“The blue ones. Did you not hear Flor say that there are many of them here?” He shakes his head. “They are terrible gladiators. Some armor, but not much in the brains department. I can easily take them.” He pauses and then adds, “At least, the splice I come from can easily take them.”

Skarr looks momentarily troubled and I feel a flash of kinship, that we're both struggling with this cloning thing. That we both don't know who we are. “They seem nice.”

“Nice does not win battles.”

“No one said there are battles here.”

The look he gives me is condescending and pitying. “Of course they say that. Mark me now, though, there is always a fight to be won.”

I roll my eyes.

Skarr rubs his chest again, and his song grows stronger. He smiles at me, the expression crawling over his face slowly, as if it's taking him a little time to realize that looking at me makes him happy.

“What?” I ask defensively.

“I am looking at you, just as you looked at me.” He continues to rub his chest in a way that makes me feel awkward, especially with heat pulsing between my thighs. “Is that not allowed?”

Giving a little shrug, I remain still so he can look all he wants, because he allowed me to gawk at him, right? As long as it's just looking, it can't hurt. A small part of me is curious what he thinks, too.

Skarr circles around me, rubbing his chest as if rewarding his khui. “Mmm.”

“What's that mean? That ‘mmm’?”

“Just that I approve.” He reappears in front of me, the smirk on his face again. “Your appearance is a little quiet, but I imagine it is because you are stealthy and clever, yes? So I approve. My khui would only pick the best to mate with me. You do not mate a zelft to a thrombox, after all.”

I blink at him, utterly repulsed. If he asked to check my teeth next, I wouldn't be surprised. I'm not a person to him. I'm some sort of sexual accessory to make him look good to others. He doesn't care about me, just appeasing his own ego.

It's rather gross.

I turn and start walking away again.

“Wait, where are you going?” Skarr chases after me, his heavy leather cloak flapping. “Female, I said wait!”

“I just told you my name!”

I wait for him to say it. To be a normal person and apologize. *Vivi, I'm sorry.* It's short. Simple. Easy.

Instead, he jogs next to me. “Remind me of it again?”

Ugh. This is the worst. The worst of the worst. I keep storming away, speeding my steps up. I don't know where I'm going. Just...away.

He grabs me. Snags me by the arm and tries to stop me.

And I lose it. I halt abruptly, plant both hands on his chest, and shove. I might even let out a feral little scream of rage.

Skarr tumbles onto his back in the snow. Instead of looking furious, though, his eyes light up with enthusiasm, as if the thought of me fighting him excites him. "That is more like it, my mate."

"Ugh! You are revolting!" I fling my hands into the air in disgust and stomp away again. "And I am not your mate!"

"And here you said there were no battles to be won," he calls out after me.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



VIVI

Since I don't have anywhere else to go, I stomp my way back to camp.

I'm tempted to leave, though. To just keep on heading out and see how far I make it. I know the answer to that already, though: not far. I don't know enough about this planet (or even myself) to make that a viable option. So I head back to the encampment where the other clones are waiting by the fire. What other choice do I have?

Skarr is standing with a cluster of the men—the other splices—and they all give me fascinated looks when I return. Except for Skarr. There's a hint of annoyance on his face, as if he's downright inconvenienced by the fact that I won't jump his bones.

I resist the urge to snarl at him, but only because he'd probably like it.

Pretending nonchalance, I warm my hands by the fire. I can't help but notice that all conversation died when I approached. No one's talking, and it makes me feel more shy and vulnerable than ever. Like I'm a problem. Like I'm contagious with something all because my khui decided that the worst guy on the planet is my forever man.

It's not as if I chose him. It's not as if resonance is catching. I can't even be mad at them for avoiding me, though. If there's even slightly a chance that my resonance would affect theirs, I'd avoid me, too. No one wants to be stuck with one of these guys. I flex my fingers, waiting for someone to say something to me. Anything. I glance over and Colleen averts her gaze. Natalie chews her nails anxiously and watches me, saying nothing. Dawn and April whisper when they think I'm not looking. It's not malicious. We just don't know the rules of this new place and I've been tapped by the unluckiest hand there is.

Sabrina—the sweetest and most outgoing—fusses over Kyth, tucking a blanket around him and I notice his eyes are dull again, the light of his khui gone. Flor would talk to me, I think. Reassure me that all is well. But she's not around. Maybe she's catching a few moments with her mate, the guy she eats up with her eyes when she thinks no one's watching.

If I were a braver soul, I'd sit in one of the vacant spots near the fire and start a conversation. Tell everyone how awkward I'm feeling. Heck, if I were braver, I'd approach the cluster of men near Skarr and give them my version of what it's like to resonate. I suspect Skarr's version is more enthusiastic than mine. I should probably be flattered instead of wanting to run away screaming.

Too bad I'm not a braver soul. Because I can't take another minute of everyone staring at me. It's too much of a reminder of when I was in high school, when I was the weird kid at the back of the class that wore all black and never spoke and...

Oh my god. I just had a high school memory.

It's a tantalizing glimpse of who I was, and far more important than anything out here by the fire. I need to concentrate. Frantic, I turn and race away from the group, looking for a quiet spot. The tent we'll be sleeping in looks empty and I head straight for it. Let them think I'm sulking over resonance. I need to get my head back—my *me* back—and they can think whatever they want.

I crawl into the tent, flopping onto my back in the tumbled sea of furs that we've all been sharing. Someone joked last night that the tent was like a big slumber party. It was probably Sabrina trying to cheer us all up, actually. But if it was a slumber party, that still makes me the weird kid at the back of the class. I press my hands to my brow, trying to force memories free from my foggy brain. I picture...boots. Not cowboy boots, but black leather boots. Boots with lots of shiny silver buckles and thick rubber tire-tread soles.

Another memory flashes through my mind. Of picking mud out of those huge treads with a stick and cursing the entire time.

“If you weren’t such a stubborn ass, you’d wear the proper footwear to go camping.” The words are harsh but there’s amusement threading through his voice.

“When you’re me, this is the proper footwear for camping, Dad.”

I remember him laughing. Dimpling. Oh my god, do I have dimples? Frantically, I smile to myself, feeling my cheeks to see if there’s an indent there. When I don’t find one, I want to cry. I play that same tiny tidbit of memory through my mind over and over again, hoping that my name will pop up. Hoping that his face will be more than just a blur and a memory of dimples. There’s sandy-brown hair and a red and black checkered flannel shirt, but I might be self-inserting those at this point. A quick tug on a long hank of my hair shows it’s sandy-brown, too.

So me and my dad went camping? Despite me being a goth-girl, I was into that sort of thing? Was it because Dad was? I’m hungry for more memories, and at the same time I’m hit with bitter loss, mourning a person I never met and wouldn’t want to meet me. I’m a clone of his real daughter, and I don’t know what happened to her.

I just know I’m not her, and these memories, however much I might want them, are as borrowed as the clothing I wear. A frustrated tear escapes my eye and slides down my cheek, and I angrily dash it away.

“Knock knock,” calls out a voice. Flor. The petite woman has been nothing but friendly since I first met her, doing her best to be the voice of knowledge for us. I’m not surprised that she’s come to seek me out. “Thought I’d check on you. Want some dinner?”

“I’m not hungry.” And then because that statement makes me sound like a petulant child, I add, “Truly. I don’t think I could eat.”

Flor sits down on the furs near the entrance of the tent, giving me space. She crosses her legs and makes herself comfortable. “Look. I get it. I know what you’re going through. Resonance can be difficult.”

That makes me sit up in surprise, because she and I'rec are clearly in love. They're a strong, unified team together. For all that he's all cranky and alpha male, when Flor barks an order, I'rec doesn't argue. He just gets to work. It's clear he respects and adores her, and she does the same for him. I can't imagine them ever being at odds like myself and Skarr. I study her face. "You and I'rec...it was like this?"

She blinks in surprise and then bites her lip. "Well no, actually. We've been all over each other since we resonated. But we've been friends for years so we knew we liked each other's personalities. My point was that I've seen a lot of resonances happen over the last while, and there have been several that weren't happy campers. Everyone—even the ones that don't dislike each other—seems to struggle with it at first."

"Everyone except you two."

She grins, her expression downright impish. "Everyone except us, yeah."

That doesn't help me much. "So how did the others turn out? The ones that didn't like each other? Did they figure out how to turn it off?"

Her grin turns into a grimace. "Actually you can't turn it off. But if it makes you feel better, everyone else fell in love with their partner and they've all been extremely happy."

"All of them?" I'm suspicious.

She nods. "Every single one."

"Was anyone's personality like Skarr's?" When she hesitates, that tells me everything I need to know. "So I'm just the lucky one, then. It figures that I'd end up with the guy that was spliced with a lizard and a...a...peacock!" The moment I blurt it out, I know it fits. Skarr is exactly like a peacock—all strutting and prancing and wanting everyone to look at him. He's absolutely a peacock. I snort at my own imagination, picturing him with a fan of feathers for a tail instead of his gator-like one. "He's a peacock," I state again, proud of myself.

“I have to admit that he’s...a bit special.” Flor manages an awkward smile. “But look at it from his point of view. He’s just as lost as you are. The gladiators are brought up with very specific memories and all he knows is how to be a fighter. If he’s retreating into showing off and picking fights, it makes sense. It’s not fun to be around, but in his weird way it makes sense. He’s never been taught how to be friends with people, just how to fight them. We had a few gladiators with us when we first arrived here and they were absolutely clueless. No idea how to survive in a wilderness situation. All they knew was battles and glory.” She tilts her head, regarding me. “So be patient with him while he tries to develop a personality.”

Me. Be patient with him. Understand that he’s a jerk and... what? Be his mate anyhow?

I laugh, because it’s so ridiculous. No one’s telling him to stop being a jerk. I’m just supposed to overlook that he’s a perfect ass and just...what? Fall into his arms anyhow? My laughter continues, growing higher-pitched and slightly hysterical.

I’m trapped. Everywhere I look, every way I turn, I am absolutely fucking trapped.

I’m stuck on this planet.

I’m stuck with Skarr.

I don’t even know my own *name*.

“I’m supposed to wait for him to develop a personality,” I manage between gasping, frantic laughs. “And I don’t even know my own name? Is he going to wait for me to get a personality too?” I laugh harder. “Wait, I don’t think it matters. He doesn’t care if I have a personality as long as I jump his bones.”

My laughter is turning dangerously close to tears.

“I’m sorry, Vivian,” Flor’s tone is gentle. “I know it’s a lot. I wish I could help you with the memories thing. Maybe more will come to you as time passes, maybe not. But as far as personalities go, *I* like you.”

“What’s there to like? I’m a blank slate.”

She shakes her head. “You say that, but I see someone that’s strong in the face of all kinds of shit thrown at her. You aren’t flinging yourself off the nearest cliff. You aren’t weeping about the cruelty of life. You aren’t scared of your shadow. I’ve been watching all of you over the last few days and you’re one of the strongest here. Not physically—mentally. You’ve got your shit together even if you think you don’t. And you’ve tried to help out around camp. Have you seen anyone else helping with the fire?”

“It’s because that’s one of the few things I know.” She makes it sound like that’s a big deal.

“That’s right. And instead of disassembling or picking fights or crying or clinging to the nearest person and begging them to do it for you, you just got to work.” She reaches out and gives my closest limb—my lower leg—a squeeze of affection. “I’m not ragging on the others, mind you. I know just as much as anyone else that you’ve all been thrown into the deep end of the pool. They’ll figure it out. But it helps to have people like you here. I know I don’t have to babysit you.”

But I’m not being strong. I’m just...afraid to ask for help. Afraid to be a bother. And now I’m afraid to correct her assumptions.

She pats my leg again. “Just don’t be too hard on yourself, okay? Once you remember your name, we’ll all call you that. For now, is Vivian okay? Is a female pronoun okay? Or would you prefer something else?”

It’s nice that she asks. I appreciate that. “Maybe Vivi instead. That feels a bit more...me.” I pause and then add, “And female, yes. Definitely female.”

“Vivi, then. Got it.”

I watch Flor as she gets to her feet. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“I wish I could be more help. Talking is easy.” She shrugs, offering me a wry look. “I came in here to warn you about resonance, though. It’s totally your call on how much time you want to take with the whole Skarr situation, but I have to point

out that the longer you resist, the more resonance is going to push the two of you together. It wants you to have a child together, and it's going to make you want to jump him despite yourself. If you don't feel like yourself for the next while—and instead you feel like a much hornier, sexed-up version of yourself—well, you know why.”

Part of me wants to point out that I don't know what “myself” feels like anyhow, but it just feels like pouting at this point. “So I can't do anything to avoid resonance? Nothing at all?”

“Not if you want children, ever.”

“And what if I don't?” I'm still trying to figure my own head out. I don't have the bandwidth for thinking about children right now.

Flor hesitates, and hope surges up inside me. “So there's a gal back at camp named Veronica. She has a special khui that lets her heal people. I know it sounds hokey, but it's true. If you want, she can turn your khui off...but it fucks you up bad.”

“More than being stuck with Skarr for the rest of my life?”

She makes a face. “I'm just saying that there is an answer, but it's not a good one. Turning the khui off makes you numb to everything. It's not a solution I'd recommend.”

I nod, but I can't stop thinking about it, even after Flor gives me a sympathetic pat and leaves.

A healer can turn off my khui. Mute it, so to speak. It's not a good answer, but it's an answer. And it's a hope. I curl my toes in my boots and lie on my back again, staring up at the ceiling.

Do I want children? I genuinely don't know. It feels like a lower priority right now. Top priority? Figure myself out before I lose my mind.

What little I have, anyhow.

I try to call up the memories of camping with my dad again, but instead, new things float through my head. Things

like Skarr spreading his arms as I look at him and giving me that smug expression, like he knows I'm going to find whatever he's got pleasing.

It's going to make you want to jump him despite yourself.

As if we're somehow connected mentally, Skarr laughs outside. I can tell from the distance of the sound that he's still by the fire, but I can pick out his voice, his tone. He's louder than the others—because of course he is—but there's something pleasing about the quality of it. There's a richness when he speaks, even when he's saying bullshit. My hand slides to the waist of my pants and then between my thighs. I'm wet and slippery, and I imagine him prowling into the tent, giving me that cocky expression and—

Oh my god, what am I *doing*?

I jerk my hand out of my pants, horrified, and squeeze my thighs tightly together.

I don't even *like* him. I want him to jump off a cliff. I want him to wander out of camp and never come back. Why would I touch myself to the sound of his voice?

And why am I still itching to do it???

CHAPTER
NINE



SKARR

My female is avoiding me.

It's obvious to everyone, even the dim ones such as Kyth or the human Jason. After we feasted upon each other's looks, she grew skittish and left me. Perhaps she found the sight of me overwhelming. I can understand that. No doubt someone as powerful as me is a lot for a human female to handle. That night she retreated to the tent and did not emerge.

The next morning, we broke down camp and hiked toward the beach village, and she made sure to stay very far away from me. I attempted to talk to her twice, but each time she ignored me, staring straight ahead despite the singing in her breast.

"Give her time," I'rec tells me over and over again. "Let her adjust to the situation. It is all very new for her as well as you."

In truth, I do not mind that she plays games with me. I enjoy the thrill of the chase. I enjoy the challenge of enticing my female to my side, to figuring out the way to impress her enough that she will fling herself into my arms. I just need the right *sort* of enticement. Until then, I shall study my prey.

And I like what I see so far.

Vivian is commendable. I did not notice her at first because she was not as brilliantly colored as some of the others. Her hair is a soft, gentle brown and her skin an unremarkable shade of pale beige. Her breasts do not bounce as openly as some of the others, nor is her backside as heavily rounded. She is slender but strong, and she is tall. She might not have the brilliant plumage of some of the others, but it is a clever disguise, I think, to allow her to be stealthy. To blend in amongst the others and hide in plain sight. I approve of this. I do not need jiggling mammaries to see her worth...

...though I admit I would not mind if hers jiggled. Just a little.

No, Vivian is not flashy. She is the silent, stealthy predator, and I have great respect for this. She speaks very little as we travel, preferring to remain quiet. I suspect she is taking in all that the others speak of so she can use it against them.

Information gathering—a wise strategy.

Vivian also gathers dung chips as the group walks, placing them into a pack. No one else does this, but when Flor—I’rec’s annoyingly chatty female—notices her doing this, she praises her openly for thinking ahead. The chips are fuel, and Vivian is making sure no one runs out.

Again, I approve of this strategy. She is quietly making herself invaluable to the others. No one will see it coming when she strikes. It’s a different strategy than what I use—making myself so fearfully impressive that they do not dare challenge me—but I have to admit that it is extremely effective.

I watch her as we travel, impressed at her calculating mind, and I come around on her coloring and appearance, too. I thought perhaps she was choosing a bland appearance, but I was wrong. The more I look at her, the more striking she becomes. Her mane is the perfect, glossy mix of yellow and brown. Why be one when you can be both and be both exceedingly well? Her eyes are bright and her face is symmetrical and pleasing, her mouth pink and soft. Her legs are strong and long and I watch her walk.

Granted, she is always walking *away* from me, but that is easily solved.

“What is it?”

I’rec has come up behind me, glaring at me.

“What is what?” I ask.

“You are slowing. Is the cold too much for you? Do I need to carry you?”

I scoff, offended. “You mistake me. I am not ailing. I am merely contemplating.”

His expression grows wary. “And what is it you contemplate?”

I stroke my chin. “How to lure my mate into my grasp. I am thinking, perhaps, some sort of trap. It is clear she is too skittish to approach directly.”

I’rec starts to shake his head before I even finish speaking. “Bad idea. Very bad idea. Humans do not take kindly to being trapped.”

“Then what is your suggestion?” I ask, irritated.

He thinks for a moment. “Presents.”

“Presence?” I consider this. “My presence is already awe-inspiring. Or do you mean I should fight again?”

I’rec raises a hand. “No. *Presents*. Gifts.”

Gifts? Shower her with trophies as if she has won something? She has won *me* and is acting sour about it. “Bah. Reward her for withholding herself from me? I think not.”

“You are going about this all wrong,” I’rec tells me as we walk. “I realize you still think like a tater, but you are a tater no longer. Now you must think like a tribe hunter. She is not a thing to conquer. She is your partner.”

A partner? Vivian? I laugh in his face at the very thought. “I would lose any match for certain if she was my partner. She is strong and agile and clever, but she is still a female.”

I’rec throws his hands in the air, shaking his head at me. “You are a lost cause. I have tried. Do not come crawling to me if she tries to kill you in your sleep.”

I actually find that thought arousing. Of my female in bed next to me, grabbing a weapon and looking at me with bloodlust in her gaze...hmm. I like that idea a lot. She will not succeed, of course, but the trying will be quite enticing. “You are not much help anyhow.”

I’rec scoffs and then pauses. “A’tar.”

“Eh?”

“The dragon. A'tar. You should talk to him when we return. He was a tater as well. Perhaps he will have advice for you on how to woo your female.”

I sneer at him, walking on and considering plans for capturing Vivian. I need no help from anyone. I need no gifts to bait my snare. I will entrap my female all on my own.

CHAPTER
TEN



VIVI

“Oh lord, they just keep going,” someone whispers.

Another person giggles, and then we hear Flor moaning. It’s nighttime, and we just crawled into the tent to sleep. It’s like the moment they were alone, Flor and I’rec were all over each other, and we get to hear everything. Every gasp, every wet slap of skin, *everything*.

I should be horrified that we can hear them having sex, we can hear Flor demanding that I’rec lick her harder, that we’re all hideously aware of everything they’re doing. Instead, it makes me throb between my thighs because of resonance. Even thinking about how much I loathe Skarr doesn’t make the needy pulsing go away, and that’s incredibly disturbing. Flor says that resonance will push me toward him at some point unless I get it turned off, but the turn-off is worse than the resonance.

Right now I don’t know that I believe that. Because Flor and I’rec clearly adore each other. They have no problems sharing a bed or their lives. They were friends, she said, before resonance hit.

And I’rec is nothing at all like Skarr. Skarr is like...the shittiest personality traits rolled up into one lizardguy with long, pettably soft curls.

And then I get mad at myself for thinking his curls are pettable. Ugh. I pull the blankets over my head.

“Good idea,” says Colleen, who’s at my side.

Flor starts moaning even louder, and another woman in the tent groans. “How are we supposed to sleep?”

“Maybe they’re exhibitionists,” says Sabrina, her voice cheerful even in a whisper. “We shouldn’t judge.”

“If I can hear you eating someone out, I’m going to judge,” Gabriella retorts.

“Go to sleep,” another person whispers, and things quiet down.

Maybe it’s just me, but I actually sleep pretty well that next night. We’ve got furs to block the cold from the ground, and the tent keeps out the wind. I sleep pressed between Dawn and Colleen and we share a blanket, and it reminds me of... something. I chase that something feeling all night but it never materializes into a memory.

I wake up and pull on my boots, then head for the fire. I actually really enjoy tending to the fire. It’s comforting for me, something I remember doing even when I don’t remember my own name. It’s become a bit of a game, too, to keep the coals burning bright while trying to use as little fuel as possible.

A few others are seated by the fire this early. Two of them are the guys—the human one and the big grayish-blue one that’s from a race called a “moden.” His name is Kyth, and he seems more relaxed than some of the other men—other gladiators—we were dropped here with. Sabrina is awake, too, and she’s peering into Kyth’s eye with distress.

“No glow,” she says. “Are you sure you feel all right?”

Kyth shrugs. “Just tired.”

“And you didn’t feel it fade? Or die? Or anything?” When he shakes his head, she purses her lips. “Maybe it’s hibernating.” She glances around, looking over at me. “Vivi, let me see your eyes real fast.”

I resist my natural urge to shrink away and hide from attention, because now everyone’s looking at me. But Sabrina has been nice and friendly, so I force myself to take a step forward and let her peer into my eyes.

“No, hers are still glowing just as bright as Jason’s,” Sabrina frets. “Maybe you got a faulty one, Kyth.”

“Twice now?” Jason asks.

Skarr approaches, much to my dismay, but Sabrina immediately pounces on him. “Let me see your eyes.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason says. “Even from here I can see his glowing. His khui is fine. It’s just Kyth’s that’s a problem. Mine is good. Vivian’s is good. Yours is good. It’s just Kyth’s.”

“Vivi’s khui is more than good,” Skarr immediately states. “It is clearly the best.”

My face flushes with mortification at his words and I stab at the fire, wishing the ground would suck me up. A convenient sinkhole would be nice right about now. Even worse? My khui started purring at the sight of him, but at his words it’s getting even louder, as if it approves.

“A khui is a khui,” Sabrina says, furrowing her brows at Skarr. “There’s no better or worse, I don’t think.”

“There is better,” Skarr says confidently. He moves to stand next to me and I immediately circle the fire, moving away from him. He doesn’t seem to notice, too intent on correcting Sabrina. “Her khui knew to choose me out of all males. That makes it the best. It is enhancing her already powerful and clever nature, and she is beautiful and wise. That makes her khui the best.”

God. Is he fucking with me? I don’t dare make eye contact with him in case my khui’s song really goes crazy, but the stuff he’s spouting is strange and illogical and embarrassing. I wish he’d go away.

Even as I wish that, my body pulses with heat right between my thighs. Stupid khui.

Others gather around the fire, and I’m relieved to see Flor and I’rec join us. People snicker and share smug little smiles at the sight of the loving couple, but I don’t care about their escapades last night—I’m just happy they’re drawing the heat off of me.

“How is everyone this morning?” Flor asks.

“Kyth’s khui died again,” Sabrina says immediately.

“I had a rough night of sleep,” Valmir adds in a sly voice. I didn’t even hear him come up. He stands across from me by

the fire, his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his strange face. “Someone kept screaming.”

A few of the women give tired chuckles.

“Yes, well, someone was having an excellent time.” Flor isn’t ruffled by the teasing. “Kyth, let me take a look at your vitals. Everyone else feeling okay?” When no one else volunteers any aches or pains—or khui death—she nods at her mate.

“We will be breaking down the tents and heading out for the village,” I’rec tells us. “You will like the beach. It is protected from the worst of the winds and snows and there is plenty of fishing. Food is shared between all and there are many friendly faces.”

“Sharing,” Skarr mutters. “Bah.”

“Is there a problem with sharing?” Flor asks even as she holds her fingers on Kyth’s big wrist, taking his pulse.

He shrugs, his jade-green skin stark against the white furs bundled against his skin. “I would rather compete.”

“I would compete, too,” Chalath adds. He rubs his hands, and I can see wicked claws tipping his fingers. “I am ready.”

“There are no competitions,” I’rec tells them in a hard voice.

“You lie,” Skarr replies, all confidence. “You told me yourself that hunting is a competition. That we compete to get the most meat to feed the females. And then of course, there is the breeding competition.”

Breeding competition? Oh my fucking god. My head jerks up in horror. “What—?”

“Breeding competition?” another woman screeches. “No fucking way! You guys are having a competition to get us pregnant?”

Flor shakes her head. “What? No! No one’s doing that—”

“I am doing that,” Skarr replies. “My mate has been chosen by my khui. All that is left is to best her in a fierce

battle and give her my son.”

I can feel people staring at me. I can also feel my mouth drawing into an expression of pure, abject horror. “That is not happening,” I say in a small voice, and when it doesn’t properly convey my anger, I say it again, louder. “That is *not happening!*”

“I’rec, handle this,” Flor says. “I need to check Kyth out and I can’t right now.”

I’rec grabs Skarr by the collar and drags him away from camp, no doubt for a nice “talk.” That is one way of handling it, though I suppose it’s too much to ask that he comes back wearing Skarr as a pair of boots. I breathe a sigh of relief as they leave, but everyone else is still watching me, waiting to see what I’ll do.

I do what I always do. I duck my head and escape. I head for the tent, where I decide I’ll hide out until it’s time to break it down.



THE DAY DOESN’T GO AS PLANNED. Kyth is given another khui from a small rabbit-like thing, but it dies before lunch, making Flor fret. One of the tents falls over, and I help fix it up again, because Isadora and Natalie have no idea what they’re doing, and I...do? Sort of? Vague memories rush through my mind as I pull the tent together and drive stakes into the frozen ground while they watch.

“Shouldn’t you angle those?” Natalie asks me.

I shake my head. “Straight is better.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re supposed to be angled,” she replies. But she doesn’t pick up a rock to hammer them in, so she’s clearly not confident in her answer.

“What if we’re replicants, you guys?” Gabriella is saying nearby. She’s scraping furs, learning how under Flor’s tutelage. “Like in *Blade Runner*? They only lived for four

years. What if we fall apart after four years? Because the clone pieces stop working?”

“Will you quit scaring us?” Isadora says. “We have enough to worry about.”

“I’m just saying!” She puts her hands in the air.

My insides clench with fear. What if she’s right? What if we’re discards? What if we’re flawed in some way? Is that why they ditched us? Because we’re a shitty batch of clones and we got thrown into the galactic trash?

But the conversation draws both Natalie and Isadora away. I finish hammering the stakes in and make sure the tent is taut and won’t fall over. Yasmin is there scraping furs, too, and I wonder if I should learn how to do that. Nothing in my memories has surfaced about hides or furs, so whatever past I might have had with camping, it didn’t involve skinning.

“How does the whole ‘replicant’ thing work anyhow?” Yasmin asks.

“The movie was kinda vague. Just that they were people created to do human jobs and they only lived four years and didn’t have proper emotions.” Gabriella shrugs. “But some of the replicants had emotions anyhow. Maybe that’s why we’re on this planet. Someone created us all fresh and new and realized we had emotions and just like, tossed us down here like scraps.”

I pause, running my hand over the edge of the tent, because that does sound possible.

“Wait, they made us? Fresh and new?” Yasmin looks as if she’s just now figuring out the implications of this. “Are you saying I might be a virgin?”

I look down at my hand, where the tattoo should have been, and my skin is pristine.

“I would be happy to help you with that,” Skarr says, walking up.

My jaw drops and I look up to see the lizard-alien staring down Yasmin with a challenging look.

What the fuck? This guy gets worse by the day.

“Okay now,” Flor says. “Women are allowed to discuss sex without men propositioning them, all right?”

“I am not propositioning,” Skarr says. “I am simply letting her know I would be glad to assist with any learning needs.”

“Uh, that’s exactly what a proposition is, my dude,” Colleen retorts. “I’m not sure what planet you’re from.”

“I am not certain either,” Skarr replies, distracted. He turns and gestures in the distance. “And someone is coming.”

I’ve heard enough. I can’t believe that the guy I resonated to—not that I want him!—is already propositioning other women. What an absolute creep. I shake my head to clear it and retreat away from the campfire. I need fresh air.

No, I need to escape. I hug my leathers closer to my body and head away from camp. Not so far that it’ll be dangerous, but just far enough that I can pretend that I’m somewhere else. It’s daylight, so it should be safe. I sit on a rock and gaze up at the two moons hanging in the sky, one flirting closer to this planet than the other. Another memory pricks at my mind, and I try to follow it.

“Stars are gonna come out soon. Think you can pick out which one is the North Star?”

“No. Can you?”

Dad laughs. “Honestly? No. It’s supposed to be easy but they all look the same to me.”

And I laugh, too.

Dad.

I went camping with my dad. He’s the man I keep getting fragments of memories about. A wave of yearning hits me so strong that my eyes tear up. I wish I was back on Earth with my father right now. That he could reassure me that I’m not a flawed clone. That I’m his daughter. That I’m not on an ice planet but camping with him instead.

But...he's not truly my father. That's the mind-fuck of all of this. Even if I was on Earth, he wouldn't be my dad. Is the original Vivi there? She must be. She must know her name, too. She's probably camping with him even now, her boots stretched out by the fire, telling her dad about some creep that's hitting on her at her new job...

"Hey, Vivi?" A voice calls into the darkness.

I brush the tears away and turn to see the speaker. It's Natalie again. She's followed by someone, and I'm dismayed to see that it's Skarr.

"Come get your man," Natalie says. "He's grossing the rest of us out."

Like I want anything to do with that sleaze. "He's not mine. I don't want him."

There's a masculine sound of protest and then Skarr stalks over to my side. "How can you not want me? I am the most excellent of males." He slaps a mittened hand at his stomach. "Feel how strong I am. How lean. You will know me for the warrior I am."

"I don't care about your muscles. You literally just propositioned another woman for sex while I was in earshot."

"No, I didn't." He looks baffled.

"I have ears! I heard you!" I gesture back at the camp. "You just hit on Yasmin!"

He tilts his head. "I did not hit her. She declined."

I feel like I'm going crazy. This always happens when I try to have a conversation with Skarr. It doesn't help that my pulse is humming in my veins at his nearness. That the khui's song is moving through me, making heat and need spread across my limbs. "Skarr. I was less than ten feet away. She said she was a virgin and you said you would help her with that."

"A virgin fighter, yes. I am pleased to spar with anyone so they can enjoy my prowess."

He says it with such a straight face that I believe him. “It wasn’t about fighting, you twit.”

Skarr frowns. “What else would it be about?”

“Sex!” I practically bellow out the word and then wince when my voice carries across the snow. “She was talking about sex.”

His expression of confusion grows deeper. “But...I would not mate with her. I have already resonated to you, and you haven’t even let me attempt to pleasure you.” He gestures back at the camp, where Yasmin is still sitting by the fire. “If we were in the arena I would say that she cannot mate because she has not won a battle, but I’ve told me the rules are different here. Is there another set of rules I am unaware of?”

I just stare at him. I don’t even know that I can be mad. He’s clueless. Not just that, he thinks everything ties back to battle. I think about what Flor said—about how I had to be patient with him as he tries to develop a personality. I’d scoffed at her words but now I’m starting to realize the severity of the situation.

Skarr doesn’t know how to think outside of gladiator battles and fights. To him, everyone is an opponent.

And somehow I’m stuck with his crazy ass.

“The rules—” he begins.

I cut him off with a raise of my hand. “Stop talking.”

“Vivi,” he says. “Why would you think I would wish to touch another female when my khui has already led me to you? You are the best amongst these females. You are strong and clever. You—”

I cover his mouth with my fingers, because he keeps on talking, and because some small, strange part of me wants to touch him, wants to feel what his skin is like. It’s not scaly like I thought it would be. It’s warm and smooth and supple, and the scaly look is more of a pattern, except perhaps on his brows and the bridge of his nose.

His gaze flares with interest when I touch him, and his tongue slithers out to caress my fingers.

I jerk away...but I didn't hate that. Not even a little. And that makes me even more messed up inside. "Just...just stay away from conversations about virgins, okay? When they talk about that, they're talking about sex virgins, not battle virgins."

"Why would I touch an inferior female when I can touch you?"

But he can't touch me. Or can he? Because the longer I stay around him, the more resonance pulls me toward him. "I need to go," I blurt out. "Don't follow me back to camp."

"What if I walk at your side—"

"Still no!"

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



SKARR

This female is impossible.
I love it.

She challenges me, and there is nothing I love more than a good challenge. Of having to utilize my wits as well as my brawn in order to conquer a fierce opponent. And truly, Vivi is the fiercest of opponents. Any other female would surely be impressed by my prowess and fling herself to the ground to allow me to breed her, but not Vivi. She requires more from me. She knows she is the most worthwhile female ever, and thus I must work that much harder to win the privilege of touching her.

I smile to myself as I return to camp. Every time she tells me no, it just means I must dig deeper.

Ah, I love the hunt.

She avoids me for the rest of the day, but that is fine. I watch her furtively, noticing her movements. She ties the laces of her boots once and then wraps them around her ankle and ties them a second time. Her dominant hand is right. She sometimes squints when an object is far away. Her long mane sometimes blows free from the knot at the back of her head and bothers her, so she tucks it behind her ears.

I memorize all these details, and they all delight me.

“No breeding yet?” Valmir asks.

I shake my head. “She is still having me hunt her. It is like she knows all the things that arouse me. Truly, there is no greater female.”

“If you say so.” He seems less impressed with my mate, but he does not know her as I do, does not watch her as keenly as I do...and if he tries to watch her as keenly as I do, I shall gouge his eyes out.

Flor watches over the females closely, and I am content to stalk my female from afar. She listens intently as the female

explains how to skin a kill, and watches with close attention. It is as if she wishes to learn everything about how to survive on this world, and I could not be more pleased. Vivi is smart enough to know we must have knowledge in order to thrive.

The lessons are interrupted when Kyth's newest khui dies and a new one must be attained, this time from a larger creature. Valmir and Chalath go hunting for it, but I stay near camp, watching Vivi and enjoying the thrum in my chest that reminds me at all times that she belongs to me. My nearness bothers her, because I catch my female touching her chest and frowning, and then her gaze seeks mine.

It is hard not to smile at that, especially when she scowls in my direction. She plays a challenging game...but I like competition.

A creature called a dvisti is brought into camp and slaughtered for Kyth's second khui of the day and the meat is butchered and roasted over the fire. Newcomers arrive—two of them—and both Flor and I'rec recognize them. One is a male that looks similar to I'rec. Like I'rec, he is strangely hairy with coloring all wrong for mesakkah. The other is another human female, this one the softest-seeming of all. I compare her to my Vivi and find her lacking. Even the clothing she wears is all wrong for stealth. Her leathers are trimmed with pink fur, as if that is a thing that occurs in nature, and she is loud and giggly. Her name is D'see or Day-see or something. I care not. What is interesting is that she is the mate of the male, O'jek, and he watches her as if he wishes to both devour her and behead anyone else that gets near her. They resonate, but their sound is subtle, like Flor and I'rec's.

Their resonance is finished. It does not have the demanding rumble that mine does. This means O'jek knows how to lure his female into his furs with promises of pleasure. I can learn strategies from him. This is excellent.

It is decided that we will stay one more night out in the open, and then will journey back to the beach village, the Icehome, starting in the morning.

I do not care, personally, where we are—be it mountains or beach (though I have never seen a beach)—because my focus is entirely upon Vivi. Do I try to get her to challenge me this night so I can conquer her and breed her? Or do we enjoy the chasing games for a bit longer?

Choices, choices. I stroke my chin and consider.

“Are you going to stand around all day like a bump on a log, or are you actually going to help around camp?”

I turn to look at the speaker. It is Jason, the human male. He is larger than the females, but scrawny compared to my own impressive build. He is giving me a look of disgust that I will not tolerate, so I hiss at him, baring my fangs. “I am contemplating.”

His brows go up and he gives me a derisive look as he moves to stand at my side. I notice he has a satchel slung over his shoulder, and I realize he has been going around the canyon, collecting the dung cakes for fuel for the communal fire. He has not hunted like the others. I am certain he is capable in his own way, but there is no question that he cannot go toe-to-toe with myself or the other gladiators.

Again, my mind classifies him as “prize” and not “competition.” I flick a hand at him. “Go away.”

“What are you contemplating?” He forms an aggressive stance, as if he means to get in my face. “Who you’re going to attack next?”

Bah. Idiot. Does he think he is a threat? I will not even honor that with the appropriate response. “If you must know, I am contemplating how to win my female to my side. I am debating what sort of challenge will impress her.”

He turns to look at the fire, where Vivi is crouched nearby, tending to it and quietly listening in on conversation. He eyes her, and I frown at him, because he is looking at her for a very long time, and I do not like it. I give him a light shove, because he is likely delicate.

“A challenge, huh?” Jason ignores my sour mood and laughs in my face. “I don’t think that’s going to impress her,

buddy. She looks like she's shy."

"A ruse so fools like you will let your guard down around her. Let me reassure you, she is a wily one." I eye Vivi with pleasure, watching as her fingers brush against her ear and she pushes the lock of hair back behind it. Even now she is listening in on another conversation. Can Jason not see that she is gathering intel on the enemy? It is obvious.

"If you say so."

I scoff at him. "As if you know anything about enticing human females."

"Are you kidding?" He breaks into a grin. "Buddy, I've been around them my whole life. I'm the expert on this planet."

That makes me pause. I eye him with new appreciation. He has been around females before? Clearly he is a clone, but whoever's memories he has imprinted in his mind is clearly comfortable with the females. I have seen him talking and sharing blankets with several in a friendly manner. They accept him easily and show him no fear, unlike myself and the other splices. I stroke my chin again. "If that is so, then how do I win her over?"

"Well, you've got to show a girl you have game."

"I have *game*? I have already told her we are in a breeding competition." I gesture at the others near the fire. "She does not care that the more time we waste, the less likely..." I trail off as Jason shakes his head at me. "What?"

"No. Not a competition. Game. Like you have *game*." When it is clear I do not follow, he continues. "You know, compliment a woman, make her realize you like her, that you're into her, and then you break into a conversation."

Is he blind? "Fool, what do you think I have been doing?"

"No, my guy, whatever you're doing? That is the opposite of game." His grin broadens. "You're going around and telling everyone else that you think she's great, that you're the best and she's the best. But have you told her that directly? Have

you looked her in the eye and told her what you like about her? Have you made her realize that she is special to you?"

This lines up—suspiciously—with what I’rec said. “I’rec suggested a present to woo her.”

“Presents are good,” Jason agrees. “You have to show her in little ways that you like her. That you’re into her. That you want more than just sex from her.”

But...all I want *is* sex from her. To copulate as the khui demands. To mate and create a child.

He sees my skepticism. “Look, as a guy, I get it. You might want just sex from her, but you don’t want her to think that, understand?”

“So you wish me to win her by trickery.” This I understand.

“No, no. Man, talking to you is a mess.” He shakes his head. “I’m saying that you take the time to be her friend. Get to know her. Tell her directly the things you like about her. If you tell everyone else that you like her and you don’t say it to her, what’s she going to think?”

“She will think that I am a male that appreciates her?”

“She will think you want everyone else to think that you like her but you really don’t. Human women want to be approached directly.”

“With presents?”

“Sure, with presents.” He claps me on the shoulder. “You’re starting to get it now.”

“And if I do this, then she will yield to me?”

He winces. “I mean, not necessarily?”

I throw my hands in the air. All this information and it is useless? “Then what is the point?”

“The point is that you make her aware of your interest. You make her feel special. You talk to her. You tell her you like her. Over and over again, you do this. Over time, it’ll win her over.”

“So you are saying I chip away at her defenses until she is vulnerable, and then she lets me in.” It is a classic tactic, but one I had not thought to use upon my female. “I will give this more thought.”

And I will consider what a human female would like as a gift.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



VIVI

There's a lot going on with the newcomers arriving at camp. Flor seems a little worried about what they talk about, and it's decided that we'll all head out in the morning. Some of the women are packing stuff up, the men have caught fresh meat for us to cook, and I'rec and his mate seem to be busy, so I take it upon myself to tend to the fire. If I sit near it and keep it going, it's an important task, and it lets me hover near the others without calling attention to myself.

I remain there even as people come and go. Jason gathers fuel from around the canyon and empties his bag of dung chips near me, which is handy. I use a long, sharpened bone to prod at the coals, and listen to Gabriella explaining the plot of *Blade Runner* to someone for what feels like the eleventh time that day.

A shadow falls over me and I automatically glance up, only to cringe when I see it's Skarr. Oh no. What does he want?

He holds something out to me.

I don't know why, but I hold my hand out, palm up. My khui is humming wildly inside my chest at his nearness, and I know his is, too. The shivers of its song moving through my body send prickles of arousal through me, which are deeply annoying, and I try to ignore them. He plops the object into my hand and I stare at it.

It's a scale. It's about the size of my thumbnail, and hard like a poker chip. It's deep green, like the scales on his brow and back are. "Um...why did you give me this?"

"So you can think of me, of course." He grins encouragingly at me, and I hate that his grin is attractive. Sure, it's all fangs and green mouth, but for some reason, I like his smile.

I toss the scale into the fire.

Someone snickers nearby.

This doesn't deter Skarr. He crouches near the fire and warms his hands, and I go back to ignoring him, stabbing at the coals. They're burning just fine, but I need something to do, so I pick up a frozen cake of dung and wedge it into the ash at the bottom so it'll burn slowly.

"You are good with that," he tells me.

I glance over, not certain if he's speaking to me. "I'm sorry?"

He nods at the dung on the fire. "That. You are good with it."

"It's literally a piece of shit."

"Yes, you are excellent with shit."

Again, someone snickers nearby. I can hear Dawn mutter under her breath. "Dear god, this is painful to watch."

"Your hands are big and strong for a puny female," he continues. "You should be pleased."

"At my man-hands?" I eye him. "Can you just stop? Please?"

"I am complimenting you. I am giving you game." His smile is encouraging. "And I would love to pleasure you."

Dawn snort-giggles, and again, I find myself wishing for a sinkhole. "Please be quiet, Skarr."

"I am merely pointing out how capable you are," he says. "What is wrong with that? You are my female. Is it so wrong to point out all the ways you excel?"

If he is, he sure has a funny way of doing it. I get to my feet, putting my stick down. That's enough fire tending for me today. Skarr gets to his feet, too. "You want to play a game? With me?"

His eyes gleam. "I would love nothing more."

"It's called 'keep away,'" I tell him. "You see how long you can stay away from me, and I with you. Whoever holds

out the longest, wins.”

And I turn and walk away. I pray that it works, because if he keeps following me around and complimenting me on handling shit with my man-hands, I might have to murder someone.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



SKARR

I am not a fan of this “keep away” game. It goes on for far too long.

We “keep away” from each other for the rest of the night. We “keep away” in the morning as camp is broken and we set out for the beach village. I went there with I’rec upon the drakoni’s back, and I know how far it is—not very. But the large group is not moving very fast. There is much to carry and the females take their time, wading through the snows. The wind is cold and biting this day, and ice pellets hit my exposed skin, making it a miserable experience. I wait for someone else to point out that this weather is terrible, that we should not go anywhere.

They do not. They walk on toward the village, and I have no choice but to go with them. Bah.

As the day stretches past, I grow impatient with the “keep away” game. I do not like to lose at anything, but I also do not like keeping away from my female. Vivi walks at the back of the rambling, spread-out group, talking to no one. I am at the front, because of course I am. They can admire my form as I saunter past, and I hide from no one. But it occurs to me that Vivi again is wiser.

She is at the back because she watches everyone else to learn their weaknesses. Clever. Very clever.

The winds grow colder and my fingers stiffen up, along with my exposed tail. It grows more difficult to keep my form loose and easy, especially when the frigid air rips at my leathers. I do not wish to show the others that I am suffering, though, so I make a great show of looking for my mate and drop to the back with her.

“I have decided I cannot lose this game if I do not play,” I announce.

“What game?” She doesn’t look at me, her tone defeated.

“This ‘keep away.’ It is a foolish game.”

“Mmm.”

When I continue to walk at her side, Vivi tries to ignore me. I keep watching her, because I notice everything about her, and today she seems...less herself. There is no spark in her gaze, no defiance in her shoulders. Her posture is slumped. I do not like this. “Something troubles you.”

Her mouth quivers. “Please, can you just leave me alone today, Skarr? I’m not having a good day.”

That is easily fixed. I grin at her, and it is so cold it makes my teeth hurt when my lips pull back. “Then your mate is here to make it better.”

Vivi says nothing. Her expression turns to one of despair and she swipes at her eyes. It takes a moment for me to realize they are dripping water.

“Vivi, you are leaking. What happened? What broke?” I stop her and grab her by the shoulders, peering into her face. “Are your eyes melting?”

She pushes away from me, her distressed sounds changing to ones of laughter. “My eyes aren’t melting! I’m crying!”

Someone glances back at us, and at my scowl, quickly turns away again. I focus on my mate, reaching for her face again only to be swatted away by her hands. I have seen the other females crying, of course. They sob and wail and make disgusting wet noises with their misery at being on this planet, but I did not realize that their eyes watered and leaked. It is all the more distressing that Vivi—strong, canny Vivi—is now falling prey to weeping. “You should stop. I don’t like it.”

Another incredulous laugh escapes her and she swipes at her eyes again. “Heaven forbid I do something you don’t like.”

“It distresses me,” I admit. “Are you in pain?”

Vivi shakes her head. “What, you don’t cry when you’re upset?”

“Bah, of course not. I am a gladiator. I do not get upset. I get revenge.”

She makes a face at my words. “Tears have nothing to do with being a gladiator. They’re because I’m feeling emotional.”

“And are you emotional because of me?”

Her mouth twists and she wipes at her eyes again. “For once, no.” She gazes off at nothing. “I dreamed of my father again last night.”

“Your father,” I echo. It is not the thing I expected.

Her expression grows defensive, her mouth pursing as she gives me a defiant look. “I know what you’re going to say. That I’m a clone. That he wasn’t truly my father...but the dreams feel so clear. So real. They felt like my memories.”

Truly, does she think so poorly of me? “I was not going to chastise you. I am envious of such things. My memories have no father, no family.”

“Oh.”

We walk in silence, and I tug the fur wraps closer to me as the wind seems to grow more aggressive with each step. My fingers ache, cold and exposed to the open air, but I cannot wear mittens, not when the other males are carrying spears to protect the females. I cannot hunt in mittens.

But Vivi seems less angry at me this day. Sad, yes, but not nearly as challenging. Perhaps she is seeing my worth after all. I continue to walk at her side, thinking she has picked a poor day if she wishes me to showcase my talents to impress her. My tail is half-frozen and my steps stiff. Hopefully no one else has noticed this. I glance over at her and she is still lost in thought. “What does your father do in your memories?”

“Hm?” She turns to me, as if surprised I am at her side.

“Your father. You say you dream of him. Doing what?”

“Oh.” Her cheeks are bright spots of color, but it is from the wind, I suspect. Even so, it makes her eyes sparkle and I much prefer that than the crying. “I dream about us going camping. Of us being in the outdoors together. And we argue,

but it's fun arguing, you know? Like we're giving each other shit because that's our way of showing affection."

"You give each other shit?"

"Not like that." She chuckles, and the sound is so lovely and unexpected that it staggers me with the beauty of it. She is oblivious to my awe, though, and continues. "When I say we give each other shit, we're teasing. Giving each other a hard time."

"Like how you give me shit," I agree, pleased. I knew she was not immune to my appeal.

Vivi looks horrified at the thought. "What? No, that's different."

I nod sagely. "Even now, you give me shit. I approve."

"No. I just—you know what? Never mind." She shakes her head and grips the straps of her pack tighter. "It's not worth the argument. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You said you have no family memories, but you seem more...with it than I am. You're not freaking out about being a clone. You're taking it all in stride. Why is that?"

I shrug. "Because I have memories of being a clone. I have always known I am one."

"Is that what your memories are? Of being a clone? What does that entail?"

"Battle. Battle rules." I pause. "Preparing for battle. Resting after battle. Training for battle."

She makes a face at me. "Really? That's all you have memories of?"

I do not know why she seems so displeased. I think they are perfectly good memories. Very useful for any upcoming sorts of competitions. "What else is there?"

"People? Do you remember anyone?"

“I remember ripping the head off of a particularly fierce opponent.” Ah, that was a good moment. How the crowd roared as his blood sprayed over my skin. It is my favorite memory, I think.

But Vivi makes a sound of distress. “I meant like a friend, Skarr.”

“Oh, do not be so concerned. He was very much not a friend. It was a good thing to rip his head off, trust me.”

The look in her eyes is soft and confused, as if she does not know what to make of me. “Have you ever had friends?”

“Like a partner in battle? I am a solo fighter.”

“No, like friends. Companions. People you enjoy being around. People you have good times with.”

“Bah. I do not need such things.”

“Everyone needs friends.”

Do they? I smile at her, because all the things she described are things I expect in my mate. A person I wish to be around? A person I wish to spend time with? It is Vivi. She is the answer. “I have you.”

She flinches at my response, though, as if she does not like it. “Oh boy, lucky me.”

“And lucky *me*,” I agree, adjusting my cloak over my hands again because they feel like ice. I nearly stumble but manage to catch myself before she notices. My foolish, poor knees are locking up in the cold and making it harder and harder to move. “But it is not luck as much as it is skill and our khuis acknowledging that we are the best specimens on this planet, and so we must make strong offspring together.”

She looks over at me. “You okay?”

“I am incredible. I am strong. Powerful. The best gladiator.”

“Mmmhmm.” She pulls a layer of fur off from around the inside of her cloak, one she had wrapped around her neck to

keep it warmer. It is a thick, fuzzy square that looks quite inviting. “Here. Put this over your hands to keep them warm.”

Does she sense my weakness? I will not show it. Not to anyone on this planet. I eye the other males further up in the line so they do not notice me being handed furs. “Keep it. I do not need it. This weather does not trouble me.”

“Maybe you can just carry it for me, then.” She folds it in half and then drapes it over my hands.

The thick fur immediately blots out the bitter wind and my fingers immediately feel better. I watch suspiciously, waiting for her to call attention to my weakness, for her to point out that I have a flaw, so another will battle me and I will be forced to show my strength in front of her. After all, Vivi is the best of females, and she deserves the best of males, even if I must prove it time and time again.

But she says nothing. She has provided it simply for my comfort. A strange warmth spreads through my breast. She... she thought of me. She did something nice for me. Just because she wished to be nice. She does not mock me for my weakness and shares with me instead.

Vivi is my partner, as I’ve said. The realization humbles me. I did not imagine that a human female could be a partner to a gladiator, because our strengths are not equal. But this is not about strength.

This is about so much more.

I decide in this moment that if anyone else makes her eyes melt or makes her cry, I will destroy them. A protective feeling surges inside me so strong and fierce that my khui sings loudly in response, and my cocks nearly extrude from the sheath at my groin.

I beam at her, and I don’t even mind when she doesn’t smile back. She has already shown her loyalty. I do not need demonstrations. All I need now is patience, and she will fall into my arms.

I contemplate, instead, what other gifts I can give her to wear down her defenses.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



VIVI

Skarr walks beside me for most of the day. I expect to hate it, because...Skarr. But it's actually rather nice. He doesn't try to talk to me constantly and is content to be at my side. And if anyone else tries to come up and talk to me, he drives them off. That suits me just fine, as I'm not in a chatty mood.

Dreams of my father—of someone's father—are plaguing me. It's making me crazy, because I keep dreaming about a man I've never met, and it's making my head even messier. So I keep to myself and ignore the looks of pity that the others are shooting in my direction. Skarr and resonance are turning out to be part of a much bigger problem—how can I commit myself to anyone or anything when I don't know who I am?

This thought bounces around in my head over and over.

If anyone else is having a mental crisis like this, they're hiding it well. They gather near the fire—tended by someone else—and make camp, all the while talking. Some of the women are struggling with the cold and the activity, but most seem to be settling in well. Daisy chats with Sabrina and Dawn, making a stew from fresh meat, while others set up tents in the snow. We've picked a spot between a few bluffs to keep out the worst of the wind, and we're told that tomorrow night we'll be at Icehome Beach.

Our new home.

I don't participate in any of this. I hover just near enough to the fire that it feels like I'm "there" and far enough that no one will talk to me. I listen to the others without really paying attention, and no one offers me soup and I don't demand any for myself. Funny how I can stand up to Skarr and his preening all day long, but the moment I need to point out that no one passed the soup bowl all the way in the back to me and my mouth locks up tight.

As for Skarr, he is enjoying himself near the fire. He talks with Valmir about battles in the past, gesturing with an animal bone about stabbing something in the gut. Valmir looks as if he wants to roll his eyes, but there's a smile on his face. O'jek listens nearby, shaking his head and butchering another kill.

"You just have not seen it for yourself," Skarr says suddenly. "I know this. I have been near her ever since we resonated. She is stealthy but wise. Only a true fool would show all their strength at once. That is why she is quiet. She hides in plain sight." The look on his face is nothing short of utter pride, and when he scans the group, I know he's looking for me.

Oh no, not again. Not this weird crowing about how I'm the best just because his khui happened to pick mine. It's downright embarrassing, and all the more so because it's not true. I hunch my shoulders and try to look busy, fiddling with the straps on the pack I've carried all day (and now sits across my lap). Maybe if I shrink down enough, he won't notice me behind Gabriela, because she's tall.

"Vivi! Come forward!" Skarr says, a note of delight in his voice. "Let me show you off to Valmir! He does not believe me when I say you are strong and lovely!"

Oh god. The man is a walking, talking pile of cringe. I get up and quickly leave the group by the fire.

"Vivi," Skarr calls again. "Vivi!"

I ignore him, hurrying a bit faster. I can't go far—only an idiot would wander into the endless snows at night—but I want to get away, if only for a little bit. I head in the direction that we're supposed to be using to go to the bathroom, pointing at a designated bushy area when I pass by the moden, who is on perimeter guard. If I pretend I'm hiding in the bathroom (so to speak) for a few hours, no one will come after me, right?

But once I get to the designated potty bush, I keep on going. I follow the side of the cliff, heading deeper into the night. I tell myself just a little farther and then I'll sit and collect my thoughts. Every time I consider stopping, though, I

hear the laughter from the group, or someone shouting something, and it makes me keep walking.

Then, the clouds clear overhead and the moons come out, and the tight, narrow canyons of rock open up. The stars unfurl overhead, bright and endless, and I stop, awed by the sheer beauty.

I don't know which one is the North Star, or if it's even visible from where I'm at. But looking at the stars eases some of the anxiety racing through me.

“Vivi!” Skarr's voice. He's followed me.

The anxiety returns.

I hurry on. The snowy path slopes and I follow along, my footsteps crunching in the snow. There's an icy layer on top since there was no fresh snow today, and I pause when I see tracks illuminated in the moonlight. New tracks, heading toward camp.

Crouching, I study them, determined to make out what sort of creature it is. In my memories, there's a bit of knowledge about tracks, about the angle of the feet and how they strike on the snow. I've tracked before, and the knowledge fills me with a giddy warmth.

These are strange, though, because one side of the tracks are crisp footprints, and the other side is a smear. Are there animals here that have only one set of feet on one side? Or is it injured and coping? I get to my feet, dusting off my pants and looking around for a likely culprit. I take a step to the side—

—and immediately flail.

In the moonlight and shadows, I misjudge a solid-looking pile of snow, only to have it collapse under my feet. I sink into a crevasse, my hand smacking hard on the ground and the bones crunching as I try to stop my fall. I let out a gasp as white-hot pain lances up my arm and it buckles.

“Vivi!” Skarr races to my side, and he hauls me out of the crevasse.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” I try to push off his hands as he holds onto me. “Really. It wasn’t that deep of a crevasse.”

“Are you hurt?” His eyes glow in the darkness, scanning over me as if looking for weaknesses.

“No,” I lie, ignoring the pain throbbing in my hand. The last thing I want is to show weakness to this guy, who makes everything a competition. I’m worried he’s going to think an injured Vivi means I can be easily “conquered.” “I said I was fine.”

He frowns in my direction and gestures at my arm. “You say you are fine, but I am reasonably certain that human fingers do not bend in that direction.”

I glance down at my hand...and want to throw up. My pinky is sticking out at a weird, broken angle about halfway down, just past the first knuckle. I must have landed on it trying to break my fall.

Before I can contemplate what I’m doing, I reach out and straighten it.

Bones crack and grind against one another. Hot pain sheets through me and I stagger, whimpering, even as the world gets dark around me. Somewhere nearby, Skarr grunts and puts a supporting arm around my waist.

“Blink it away,” he says in a solid, reassuring voice. “The pain can make you vomit, or pass out, and neither are good for a warrior. Blink it away. Focus on something else. Shall I tell you of the time I bit another gladiator’s fingers off and one got lodged in my throat? I nearly choked on the sands and died. It was quite embarrassing.”

That’s a horrifying story, made all the worse by the casual way he speaks of it. The man’s insane. “Please...please don’t tell me more stories like that.”

“Alas, those are all I have. If it makes you feel better, he punched me in the gut with his good hand and dislodged his fingers from my throat, and I went on to win the battle.”

Why...would that make me feel *better*?

“Here,” he says, grabbing the edge of his tunic. He rips off a long strip and holds it out to me. “Bind your wounded finger to the one next to it. It will help it heal straight.”

I take the strip from him, but when I touch my hand, pain flares through me again. I shake my head, holding the makeshift bandage back out to him. “You do it for me. I don’t think I can.”

“You can,” he reassures me. “And you will do it yourself, because you are strong and capable...and because if I do it wrong, you will blame me.”

Despite the pain, a laugh huffs out of me. He’s not wrong. I eye my trembling hand and hold the strip over it. “Distract me, then.”

“I once fought a full-blooded ssethri male,” he says immediately. “And I never want to do so again.”

“Why?” I ask even as I take deep, steadying breaths, preparing myself to wrap my fingers.

“He was a good fighter,” Skarr muses. “That was not the problem. I grabbed him by his tail, because it seemed like a smart way to use leverage, and it fell off. Did you know that ssethri can discard their tails? I did not, and I found out the hard way. So there I am, holding a useless tail while he scrambles across the sands to get to the weapons laid out for us.”

“But...you...won?” I begin to wrap my hand, whimpering through the pain. I want to stop, but I know I can’t. The pain is awful, but I also know there’s no other choice. I can’t have a bad hand in this landscape. I need to be able to use all of my limbs. I need my finger to heal properly.

Skarr makes a scolding noise in his throat, his gaze on my hand. “Do not ruin the story for yourself. Let me continue. Good, keep wrapping.”

Through a haze of pain, I wrap my pinky to my good ring finger, and all the while Skarr continues with some story about fighting a gladiator with a snout and razor-sharp teeth and a

tough hide. How they were neck and neck, trading blows and breaking weapons.

When I've completely wrapped my fingers, I tuck the end in and then sag, all of the adrenaline in my body vanishing in a heartbeat. Skarr catches me, letting me lean against him. "Very good. And do you know what my opponent did next? After he broke his staff upon my arm?"

"No, what?"

"He spat poison in my face. Shocked the kef out of me. Not only does my tail not fall off, but I do not have poison venom. I feel very cheated."

I laugh despite myself. Not at the poison spit, but at Skarr's indignant tone.

His hand cups the back of my neck, his fingers cold. "And you have done very well, my Vivi. I knew you were strong."

He says the words like a caress, and I should probably shake his hand off so he doesn't get any ideas, but I'm tired and in pain and for some reason, I actually appreciate the reassurance. A broken finger won't stop me. I can handle everything. I can.

So I push him away, gently. "Why did you follow me, Skarr?"

He tilts his head, and it's clear he's puzzled at my question. I can't help but notice how un-lizard-like his features are compared to the opponent of the story he was telling me. He has no snout full of jagged teeth, for starters. His features are strong and broad like the other aliens, but still vaguely human. The most alien thing about his face is perhaps the color, or the line of ridged scales that goes across his brow and down his nose. Out of the men dropped here—well, other than Jason—he's truly the most human-looking, especially with his soft, wavy hair.

"Why did I follow you? Because you are my mate, of course. I was worried I had offended you in some way." Skarr seems frustrated at the thought. "I do not know what I did wrong."

My hand throbs dully, and I remind myself that he coached me through wrapping it. That he's here, supporting me instead of crowing about how amazing he is over by the fire. I need to be understanding. "I don't like it when you keep calling attention to me," I tell him. "It makes me upset."

He tilts his head, and for a moment, he looks very reptilian. "Why?"

"Because I'm not any of those things you say!"

He blinks. "Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. I don't know where you're getting all this nonsense. You barely know me."

That smug smile curves his mouth. "Yes, and in the time I have gotten to know you, I have seen you keep calm when others wept. I have seen you work to collect fuel and ensure the fire was warm and blazing for the others. You have pushed me away despite resonance because I have not yet impressed you enough. And just now you have broken a finger and set it again. I see all these things and they tell me you are strong and capable and clever. Where is the lie?"

My mouth falls open. A wordless protest escapes me. He sees all that and thinks it's strength? To me, it's just panic. Sheer, undiluted panic. "I don't know who I am, Skarr—"

"You are Vivi," he says, as if it's the simplest thing in the world.

"But I'm not. That's just a name that was given to me because I don't really know who I am. I don't have enough memories."

"Then I will help you figure out who you are." He grins again, showing sharp canines. "It is my duty as your mate. I will help you discover the truth of who you are and point out all your merits so you see them."

Oh boy. "Can we tone it down on the whole merits thing? I really find it embarrassing."

"There is no shame in being strong and competent."

He really doesn't get it. I try a different tactic. "Okay, but if you tell them all of my strengths, then I have no secret skills to go into battle with. Remember how you were surprised by the poison spitter? It makes sense to keep some secrets hidden, so we have an advantage."

It's the right thing to say. Skarr's eyes light up with delight. "You are so *wise*."

"Thanks. I try." I wiggle my hand a little and bite my lip at the surge of pain. "Fuck, this sucks ass."

He blinks, eyes going wide, and regards my hand. "It... what?"

Oh. Oh, he won't understand the human phrasing of that, will he? My face gets instantly hot. "I mean that this is unfortunate."

"Sucking ass is unfortunate? Such a thing is not welcomed?"

Oh my god, he's not going to let this go. "I mean...it's just a saying. My hand getting hurt is unfortunate. It doesn't have anything to do with actual ass-sucking."

"So you would still enjoy an ass-suck?" He looks deadly earnest.

"I-I don't think I'm going to answer that."

A smug, knowing look crosses his face. "That is all I need to know."

Something tells me that he's assuming that my lack of response means that I do, actually, want an ass-eating. To be honest, I don't know if I do or don't, but I do know I'm not giving him any more ammo. With my luck he'd bring it up at dinner tomorrow around the fire and launch into how perfectly he's going to eat my ass. Just thinking about that scenario makes me whimper.

Skarr touches my shoulder again. "As for your hand, it is indeed unfortunate, but we will hide it from the others. We will not tell them of your accident." He thinks for a moment and then pulls off his outer layer of furs, offering it to me.

“Carry this over your hands to mask them, like you did for me.”

I take it, surprised that he'd offer his wraps so quickly, because he needs them to protect himself from the cold. “Why would we not tell anyone I hurt myself?”

“Because we are partners. I will hide your weaknesses, just as you hide mine. Wounds are a liability, and I will not allow anyone to see you as anything other than strong and capable.”

I'm strangely touched at the support, no matter how odd it might seem. “I...thank you, Skarr.”

He nods once. “Of course.”

Maybe Flor is right and he's developing a bit of a personality after all. Maybe I've been too hard on him. We're not friends. I don't want to pounce on him and have sex.

But it's a start.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



VIVI

S karr doesn't give me grief when I walk at the back of the group the next day. I just hold a blanket over my hands and he nods at me like we're sharing a secret. He also doesn't come and walk next to me, which I can't decide if I'm annoyed by or not. I spend my time observing our surroundings, how the craggy mountains slope downward, giving way to flatter and flatter land. How the snows are thick here, but there are more tracks, because more people tend to come and go.

It makes me think of the tracks I saw the other day. It makes me think of my memories of my father, too, but when I try to call them up, I get nothing. I focus instead on trying to identify the tracks I see, and to determine how many different people have walked through here.

One of the blue aliens—O'jek—drops back to check on me. "Are you well, V'vian? Do you need help with anything?"

I give him a small smile. "I'm fine."

"You walk behind the others at all times," he points out. "I wanted to make sure you are not hiding an injury."

I don't tell him about my finger. "I just like the quiet."

He nods, as if understanding. "Being around so many can be hard at times. You will be able to take your quiet when we get to the village, too, never fear. It will be more people, but they respect a hunter's need for peace."

Here is someone that gets it. I smile wider, nodding. "The only memories I have are really of my father, and hunting and tracking with him. I was watching the tracks in the snow to try and jog my memories. We're near the village, then? I've seen a lot of tracks made by people, some small enough to be children."

O'jek walks at my side, and I can tell he's impressed at what I've picked up. "Yes, we are near the trails where the

hunters bring their children to practice their skills. We should be in the village before long. You have a good eye.”

“Just matching tracks with what I know,” I say, though his praise fills me with pleasure. If nothing else, I have a few skills I can rely on. My thoughts move back to the tracks I saw last night. “Is there a creature that has paws bigger than my hand on one side, and a tail on the other?”

“A tail?”

I describe the tracks I saw last night, how the left was clearly marked but the right was nothing but drag-marks.

He looks concerned. “Were there toes in the tracks or were they rounded?”

“Toes. Definitely toes.”

“Rounded tracks or long like a sa-khui foot?”

“Rounded.”

He grunts. “This is concerning. The only thing that large would be a full-grown snow-cat, but they do not drag their tails in the snow. The only thing that would cause drag marks could be an injured leg, but an injured snow-cat is dangerous and must be taken care of. Where did you see these tracks?”

For some reason, I don’t want to tell him. Maybe it’s my injured hand, or maybe I’m just feeling strange about the fact that I’m a dumped clone, but a creature being “taken care of” when it’s just trying to survive bothers me. “Oh, it was way back,” I tell him. “At the camp where our pods were found.”

He looks relieved. “Tell me if you see the tracks again.”

“Of course.”

Snow crunches, and I’m not entirely surprised when Skarr jogs up to join us. “What are you talking about with my mate?” he demands of O’jek. “Why are you making her smile? Her smiles are for me.”

O’jek rolls his eyes at Skarr. “I have a mate, fool. I was checking on yours.”

“I don’t need checking on,” I point out. “I’m fine.”

“She’s fine,” Skarr states bluntly, glaring daggers at O’jek. “Leave her alone.”

O’jek turns to me, his expression calm. “If you see the tracks, let me know. If you require anything—speak up.”

I nod quietly, and O’jek leaves, Skarr immediately moving to my side and glowering. The big green alien matches his steps to mine, and when I don’t speak up, he finally does. “He needs to leave you alone.”

“He has a mate. He was just checking on me. He was being nice.”

“I do not want anyone being nice to my mate. She can take care of herself.” He scowls at the backs of the people ahead of us. “Did he notice your injury?”

“No.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Good.”

I give him a puzzled look. “It’s just a finger. I’m sure it’s not a big deal.”

But Skarr shakes his head. “In my experience, a wounded gladiator is a liability. You never let anyone know you are hurting because you can be gotten rid of in an instant.”

It’s appalling to think about, that he would conflate an injury with death. But then I think about what O’jek said about “taking care of” the snow-cat and I realize I don’t know enough about these people and our situation. I’m thinking like a human back on Earth, just like Skarr is thinking like a gladiator, and trying to keep me safe. “I hope you’re wrong.”

He flashes a smile at me. “I hope I am, too.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



SKARR

The beach village is full of many nosy people, just as I remember it from my brief excursion with I'rec from the other day. They are all prepared for newcomers, with a large fire blazing in the midst of the village and a feast being prepared. I am on alert, watching over my mate carefully until I see that one male limps amongst them with a false limb. He has four arms and looks strong, but if they did not get rid of him when he lost his leg, then it is safe for Vivi. I point him out to her and she nods.

But then there are people everywhere, and we are being greeted by all kinds. I lose track of Vivi as strangers greet me, and amongst them are two a'ani who claim to be gladiators as well. There is a splice here, too, though he avoids conversing with the rest of us, and the gladiators all cluster together and discuss battles. Ashtar, the big drakoni, joins in.

"I promise, there are no gladiator battles here, no contests of strength," he says, amused at our insistence. "Sometimes we have games on the beach to celebrate, but they are silly games like catching the most fish, and everyone participates."

"Then what is the point?" Chalath asks, clearly perturbed. "If we do not fight to show our glory, what is the point of having gladiators here?"

"You're not supposed to be here," Vordis points out. "You were abandoned. No one cares if you are a gladiator or not. Now all you can do is survive and help the tribe. Trust me, there is life outside of the arena."

Valmir says nothing, but his narrowed eyes say he does not quite believe this. I do not know if I believe this, either.

"And this one already resonated," Ashtar says, grabbing me by the back of my neck and pulling me into a headlock.

I twist, trying to break out of his grasp, and slap my tail against the back of his knee. He releases me with a laugh, and I immediately shove him. And laugh, because he is grinning

like the sparring pleases him. “Just because there is no arena does not mean we are helpless,” I point out. “We can remain ready for battle.”

“Oh, there are plenty of things to keep you occupied here,” Vordis agrees, arms folded as he eyes us. “You will have your hands full hunting and fishing and doing your share, trust me. There is always more that needs to be done.”

“Like finding another khui for Kyth,” Valmir says, voice sly as he looks over at the big moden splice.

Kyth just rubs his chest, grimacing.

“Not again?” I ask.

Kyth shrugs. “Sabrina says it is fading again. I will worry about it when it happens. Today is for meeting the village.”

“And impressing the females,” Chalath adds. He eyes the group by the fire, where the women are talking excitedly with the other humans and ignoring the rest of us. “Perhaps we should have more battles tomorrow to try and force resonance like you did, Skarr.”

“Force...resonance?” Thrand—the other a’ani—asks, and then snorts with amusement, elbowing the big splice named Gren. “As my mate would say, yeah right.”

“It happened,” I tell him, standing taller with pride. “I sparred with another and won, and my mate’s khui was so impressed that it immediately resonated to me.”

“Which one is your mate?” Ashtar asks.

I turn and eye the circle of women near the fire, laughing and talking and crying. Then, because I know Vivi, I keep looking. I swing my gaze beyond the fire and find her sitting on a rock at the edges of the group, alone. She has her knees hugged to her chest and her eyes are big as she listens to everyone and watches. More observing, I realize, and my chest swells with pride. She will be full of their secrets. I point at her. “My mate is the beauty right there.”

“She looks like she wants to hide,” Thrand comments.

I scowl at him and then glance at Vivi again. She does seem rather miserable, upon second glance. I remember what she said, about not knowing who she is. About her worries. It hurts me to see her like this, doubting herself and her ferocity. She is by far the most beautiful of females, tall and strong and clever. If only she realized this. I eye the males that live here on the beach. Thrand and Vordis are arguing with Chalath and Valmir about adding an arena to the village, while Kyth and Gren listen in.

Ashtar is looking at my female, though, and I nudge him out of irritation. “Quit staring at her. She is mine.”

“She reminds me of my shy flame and when I first resonated to her,” Ashtar says with a grin. “My Veronica was very meek and mild. It was adorable to see.”

Meek? Mild? My fierce warrior Vivi? Bah. He is clearly wrong. But his mate has accepted him, and mine has not. I consider this and gesture to Ashtar that I would like to speak to him in private. He nods and we walk away from the group, moving towards the roiling, unpleasant-looking mass of water that must be an ocean. I have never seen one before, and I will probably be more interested in it later, but right now my thoughts are of Vivi and resonance.

I rub my thrumming chest. When Ashtar and I are away from the others, I stop and glance back at my mate. “I am troubled and look for advice.”

“Go on.” The drakoni crosses his arms over his chest, his stance easy.

“My mate is strong-willed,” I say. “Even though her khui has decided I am the best one for her, she is not yet decided. I am trying to court her because resonance is not enough to drive her into my arms. She will not yet let me suck upon her ass and it is a very fine ass.” I eye him. “So I look to you for advice. You said your mate was like mine?”

The look he gives me is knowing. “So it was with my Veronica, yes. Resonance flustered her. It was very charming.”

“And she did not fall into your arms right away?”

He purses his lips, considering. “Well, no, she did. But she likes to pretend that she waited to fall in love with me.” His gaze moves over to the fire, to someone standing there, but I cannot tell who. All the human females—with the exception of Vivi—look the same to me. “Veronica was shy at first, but I am quite lovable and so it did not take long.”

I grunt. “My female is a warrior in spirit, even if she looks shy. She pushes me away. I do not know how to impress her if there are no gladiator battles.”

“Try wooing her,” Ashtar says. “Win her favor by showing her you care. Give her something. What do you think she wants?”

Looking over at Vivi, her shoulders are hunched. Someone is talking near her, but she looks uncomfortable and miserable. I remember all the times she clung to the back of the group, wanting no attention. “I think she would like a place to hide, if I am being honest.”

“Aha,” Ashtar says, snapping his fingers. “You could build her a home. Many of the males here built huts for their females. Humans like to have a dwelling to call their own, to have a private place where no one will bother them.”

It is a genius idea. I look around the beach, at the scatter of crude huts with animal hides stretched atop stone walls. Bah, I can easily make something like this. And I know instinctively that Vivi will like it. A private place to call her own where no one can bother her...except me, because I will surely be at her side and in her arms as she shrieks my name. “This is an excellent idea, my brother. I shall start on it now.”

“Start on it in the morning,” he says, clapping me on the back. “For tonight, we celebrate that our strange little tribe is growing.”

I scowl. “But I want to court her now. I want her to be impressed with me.”

“Then go talk to her instead of the gladiators.” Ashtar gives me a shove forward, indicating I should head to her side. “Get to know her. Listen to her needs and show her that you

care about more than just her cunt.” He pauses, and then adds, “Or ass-sucking.”

“I care about more than just her cunt,” I tell him, wounded. “I care about all of her. It is all attached.”

He shakes his head at me. “Talk to her about something other than resonance, ssethri fool. Talk to her about something that shows you value her thoughts. Make conversation, flatter her, learn about her, and it will lead to the ass-sucking.” Ashtar pauses. “Though knowing my mate as I do, it is probably best if you start with kissing before you lead into the ass-sucking.”

“Kissing?” It is a word I have heard before, and it takes me a moment to place it. “The strange mouth-massages that Flor does with I’rec? And O’jek and Daisy do to each other?”

“That’s it. Humans love kissing. You can ask her to show you how...but make sure you don’t start with kissing or she will think you only want her cunt. Remember, talk about things that interest her first.”

Mmm. I consider this even as I cross the sands towards my mate.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



VIVI

I listen to the endless chatter around the fire from a safe distance. When I start to feel overwhelmed—which doesn't take much—I edge to the back of the group and just absorb what others are talking about. It's not that I dislike anyone or don't want to participate. It just feels like too much. Like someone's going to ask something I'm not prepared to answer—like my name—and it's better to hang back and let others handle all the conversing. It's more comfortable that way.

Even so, I'm not surprised when Skarr approaches me, a frown on his face.

He drops onto the rocky seat next to me and eyes the fire, then eyes me again. I can see in his mind he's calculating just how far I'm sitting from the others. I hug my legs and pretend to ignore his expression of annoyance, because I know I'm hanging back. It's just...there's so many strangers. I'm still getting used to our small group and now there are so many more to greet. For a shy person like me, it's downright painful.

Skarr's not shy, of course. He flicks his cloak back with a flamboyant gesture and leans in, all show, like he's the prince of the beach deigning to speak to one of his subjects. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

I shake my head, even as my stomach growls loudly.

He narrows his eyes at me.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I stare back at him. How do I get him to understand that I want nothing more than to retreat from the crowd? That getting up and demanding food and drink from the laughing, merry group is beyond my capability at the moment? I freeze the moment a stranger even looks in my direction.

He grunts and gets to his feet again. "Stay here."

As if I have anywhere else to go? If I did, I would be there already.

I watch, tensing inwardly as he moves to the fire and gets food and drink. Knowing Skarr, he could just as easily snag it for himself and then eat it in front of me with a scowl, daring me to get my own. That would absolutely be on-brand for him.

He doesn't, though. He returns to my side, cutting through the group, and then sits next to me again, balancing the dish on his knee and indicating we should share. "Lucky for you that I am a wildly generous male," he says. In his other hand, he holds up a skin. "I brought drink, too. They call it sah-sah."

"Thanks." I want to be sour at his back-patting but I'm just relieved that he's sharing with me without forcing me to go and get my own. I pluck something that looks like a rib out of the dish and nibble on the meat. It's so tender it falls off the bone and flavored with herbs that are both pungent and appealing at the same time. I devour it in a few quick bites and then put the bone back in the dish, reaching for a long, skinny tuber. It tastes a bit like a boiled potato, and I nibble on it, watching Skarr as I do.

He's not eating. He's watching me eat and holding the plate for me. I swallow the mouthful I'm on and put a hand to my mouth to cover for crumbs. "Are—are you not eating?"

"I want to make sure you're full first. What kind of mate would I be if I ate all your food?"

Oh. I should probably point out that him getting me food doesn't mean we're mates now. That it doesn't mean anything at all. But I'm exhausted and overwhelmed, and right now Skarr is what's familiar. So I don't say anything at all, I just keep eating.

He leans in close as I take another rib. His voice drops low. "How is your finger?"

"Better today," I admit, flexing it a little. I've still got it bound to my ring finger but it doesn't throb and ache like it did yesterday. How long do fingers take to heal? I genuinely don't know.

“And yet you retreat from everyone?”

The reproach in his voice makes me shrink down into myself again. “It’s just...kind of overwhelming. First this planet, and then the clone thing, and now this.” Everywhere I look, there are people. There are humans wearing leathers and carrying half-alien babies, and alien men of all different shades of blues and even a few red. The beach looks as forbidding as the mountains, and the waves crash against the shore like they have a personal vendetta. Nothing about this seems inviting or homey.

We were told the camp on the beach was sheltered. Safer. This doesn’t feel safe. It looks like a primitive camp on the unfriendliest ocean ever. I don’t know what I was expecting but...not quite this.

It’s a lot to take in.

Skarr grunts, eyeing the group. He offers the waterskin to me. “Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

I take a cautious sip of the drink. It tastes like juice with a bit of a tangy kick, though I can’t tell what fruit it reminds me of. It’s good, though, and I take a bigger sip as I eat another tuber. Skarr’s still watching me, and I feel the need to explain. “I just need time to get used to everything. It’s all different than what I’m used to.”

He huffs. “Don’t I know it. Out of all these people, not a single one wants to spar. It’s downright baffling.”

His indignation strikes me as funny. I giggle around a mouthful of potato-tuber and wash it down with a sip of juice, then offer the skin to him. “You do know that fighting isn’t everything, right?”

Skarr takes a big swig of the drink, gives it a look of appreciation, and then downs another hearty gulp. He offers it back to me, and I drink a bit more, just so he won’t hog it all. “For you, it is not,” he says. “But for me, fighting is all I know.”

“Then you’re in the same situation I am,” I tell him. “Now we both have to learn how to live here. Now we’re both

starting from scratch.”

He grunts, sounding as displeased as I feel.

I nudge the plate toward him as I take another rib. “Eat some. There’s plenty for both of us.”

He grins at me and leans in and takes a bite from the potato I hold in my hand. It’s a very lover-y thing to do, and I should get mad, but he grins like a mischievous child and all I can do is giggle at how ridiculous he is.

“Eat your own,” I clarify, but I’m smiling. I’m also feeling pretty good. Pretty loose. Some of my anxiety is wearing away from being around the others. I’m sure people are watching me and Skarr but I can’t find it in me to care too much. I bet the sah-sah has alcohol in it. I’ve also had enough that I no longer care, and I take another drink.

Skarr tries to take another bite of my potato, but I hand the whole thing to him and take the skin instead, drinking more of the wonderful juice. He seems to be having a great time, but then again, when is he not? He always looks eager to take on the world. I envy that. “How is it that you’re not upset?”

“Upset about what?”

I gesture at our surroundings. “At any of this. At being stranded on a planet where it snows on us all the time. I think I saw an iceberg float past in the ocean. That means it’s cold here all the time.”

He shrugs, tearing a chunk of meat off with his sharp teeth and chewing. “Why would I be upset about being on this world? Where else should I be?”

“Well, where’s home for you?”

He shrugs again. “I am a splice. I was created to be a fighter, a gladiator. I was not created to make a home.” His eyes flare with enthusiasm as he eyes me. “You are my home.”

I ignore that and focus on his earlier thoughts. “Speaking of...how is it that you’re not upset that you’re a clone? That you were made by someone in a lab somewhere and discarded?”

Skarr continues to eat, absently handing me a rib before he takes another, and we both chew as the welcoming party goes on around us. I watch him because the khui hums in my chest, and it makes his every movement fascinating. I like the way his lips brush against the meat, how his tongue snakes out to catch a droplet of grease, how his jaw clenches when he chews. He's pretty, I realize.

He's a jerk, but he's pretty.

And he's familiar, which means I don't mind sidling a little closer to him when someone starts dancing near the fire. Sabrina pulls Kyth toward her and does a twirl, laughing as someone pulls out a drum and the antics pick up a bit. A blonde starts shaking her ass in front of a scarred blue alien, who has a baby in his arms and looks less than amused at her shenanigans, and there's laughter everywhere. Everyone's so *happy*.

It's strange. This place is miserable, and yet they all look so very content.

I look over at Skarr again, and he's licking his fingers. Oh. The tip of his tongue flicks out and I can't be certain, but it might be forked. My eyes glaze over at that, and the khui in my chest hums even louder, making my breasts ache and a tingle start between my thighs. Someone said that resonance more or less drives you toward the person it wants you to mate with, and I get it. Because the more time I spend around Skarr, the less I hate him, and I don't know if it's resonance or reality. I do know that I've never shivered at the thought of a guy having a forked tongue but I'm shivering right now.

He licks his thumb with a smacking noise and tosses the bone on the plate, then glances over at me, nodding at the skin. I take another gulp and then pass it back to him. He drinks, too, and then shrugs. "I have always been."

"Hmm?" His words don't make sense to me, and I realize I've forgotten what we're talking about. Oh. Clones.

"I do not fret over the past," Skarr continues, gazing at the fire. "My mind is full of the present. I live in the here and now, because it might be all I get." He shrugs and glances back to

me. "I want to be the best, to get the best female, and to make the best children and make them first. Winning is all I know, and I wish to continue in triumph."

I snatch the water skin from him, annoyed by his answer. "Is that all I am to you? A win?"

"Yes." He pauses, eyeing me. "No. It is...not the same. It is that, but it is more than that."

I can tell he's confused by his own thoughts, and for some reason, I find this pleasing. I nudge him with my elbow. "Don't strain yourself thinking."

He snorts, watching as I take another slug from the skin. "I strain myself over nothing. It is true that you are the best female on this planet, and I am the best male, so it is natural that we should resonate and make the best babies. But...it is more than that, too."

"In what way?"

Skarr shrugs, and it's clear he's unable to articulate what he's feeling. "It just is." He plucks another rib from the plate and holds it out to me. "You should eat more. You deserve this food as much as anyone else. Look at how much the others are eating, and you worked hard for several days as they all moped and cried. You tended the fire and gathered fuel and set up tents."

He's being a little unfair to the other women. If ever there was a situation that called for weeping and being paralyzed with fear, it's this one. Even so, I'm flattered he noticed me, and I don't know why. Usually I hate it when I get noticed, but today...I don't mind. Maybe it's the alcohol, because my head is definitely swimming, but I'm feeling rather flattered. "I just like staying busy."

"Because you are smart and capable and strong," he agrees, saying each word like a caress. "And you are allowed to eat as much as the others."

"I'm good on food, but I wouldn't say no to a bit more drink." I give the near-empty waterskin a little shake.

“As my female wishes.” He gets up and speaks to someone, exchanging our empty skin for one bulging with drink. I notice a few people giving us friendly, inquisitive looks, but I’m not ready to be social just yet. I’ll stick with Skarr, because no one’s going to want his annoying ass around.

He returns with the drink and instead of sitting down next to me, pulls the empty plate from my hands and holds it enticingly. “It is noisy here. Do you want to get away for a bit?”

Magic words, because do I ever. I’ve been wanting to get away since we got here. I nod at him, and he gets to his feet and holds a hand extended down to me.

And maybe it’s the humming khui in my chest, or the fact that Skarr seems to listen to me when I’m anxious and miserable and wants to help, but the hand he holds out feels sweet and romantic. I put my good one in his, and my fingers are warmer than his. His eyes flare with appreciation as he notices this and he squeezes my hand tighter. “I am going to have to keep close to you for warmth,” he murmurs in my ear as I get to my feet. “You feel good.”

“It’s the alcohol,” I say, but I feel pretty good, too. I take another drink and stagger against him. The sah-sah tastes like juice but man, it hits hard.

“Come,” he says, with his arm around my waist to support me. “We will go somewhere quiet.”

Valmir smirks as we leave the group, but I’m feeling too loose to care. This is the first time in several days that I haven’t been beside myself with fear and doubt, and it’s all thanks to the alcohol...and Skarr.

He’s probably being nice just to get into my pants, but right now? Seems like a fair exchange.

Mentally, I picture handing my leather pants over to Skarr and him putting one heavy green leg through, and I chortle to myself.

“Perhaps you should slow down on the drink,” he says against my neck as we wobble away from the group. “I do not know how hard such things hit humans.”

“Did you get a lot of drinks as a gladiator?”

“Not many. Only when I won.”

“So you didn’t win a lot?”

“Bah, of course I did. What a foolish question.” He casts his gaze down the beach, looking for a spot. “Let us go near the string of huts along the cliffs, perhaps. I imagine it is safe there. We should avoid the water.”

“We should,” I agree. “The water is scary.”

“I have never seen this much water. Or this much ice. There is not a lot of call for ssethri splices to be taken to colder climates.”

“This place sucks,” I agree cheerfully. “You can say that, since we’re stuck here.”

“It is merely challenging, but that is why they sent the best here,” Skarr declares as we walk along the shore, a good distance from the water’s edge.

“But we’re not the best if you lose all the time—”

“Female! I did not say such a thing!” He gives me an indignant look.

I just giggle harder, like I know all of Skarr’s dirty secrets. He sure is sensitive about his winning record. If I was sober, I’d probably poke at that more. As it is, I just like the funny faces he’s making. “Someone’s cranky.”

“Someone is being insulted by the very female he is trying to impress.”

“Are you trying to impress me?” I lean back—not an easy feat given the fact that I’m leaning against him. I swivel forward and he has to put his other arm around me to ensure I don’t flop to the ground.

Skarr frowns down at me. “Of course I am. You have not realized this?”

“I just thought you were being...you know...you.”

“I am trying to impress you so that you will accept that you are my mate.” He pulls me into his arms, like we’re hugging. “And then we will breed babies together.”

Ugh. Babies. I put a hand on his face and push him away. He releases me, and I tumble backward into the sand...which makes me laugh harder.

Man, being drunk is *fun*.

I lie on my back and stare up at the night sky. So pretty. The sand feels soft underneath me, and I move my arms and legs back and forth, making a sand angel. Skarr thumps down next to me, sitting, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s quiet.

That’s...not like him.

I sit up, squinting my bleary eyes at him. “What’s wrong?”

Skarr watches me thoughtfully, his pretty hair floating around his face gently, like some sort of lizardy cartoon prince. “You do not want children?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I never thought about it before now. Before here.” I tilt my head, considering. “At least, that I know of. Maybe I did, but I can’t remember.”

He grunts.

I nudge him with my boot. “But you want children?”

“It was not an option I thought I would have. I would not mind it, though. I will be the best of fathers.”

“Because you’re the best at everything, right?”

My teasing words please him. Skarr smiles. “Obviously. And you will be the strongest, fiercest mother.”

I ponder this. I could be a fierce mother, sure. “Our kid would have to learn tracking. And how to build a fire.”

“And how to kiss.”

I explode into laughter, toppling onto my side. “You crazy man. I’m not going to show my kid how to *kiss*.”

“Why not? It is an important skill to learn, is it not? For humans?” He looks deeply concerned. “I think he would need to know.”

“Kissing is for two adults to do between them. Not for a mother and child. Those are different kinds of kisses.” I sit up, reach out and poke him in the nose. “Silly peacock.”

He gazes down at me, his bright blue eyes blazing. “So you could show me how to kiss?”

“Uh, yeah, if I wanted to.”

“Perhaps you should. I bet you are the best at it.” His eyes gleam. “In fact, I *know* you are the best at it.”

I know I am, too. But even drunk, I’m a little suspicious of what seems like a great (and fun) idea. “You don’t know how to kiss?”

“I do not. I have never had the opportunity.”

My eyes go wide. “You’ve never kissed? Never ever?”

“Never.” His back goes up. “But it looks simple enough. I just don’t see how it’s pleasurable.”

“Pffft. That’s because you’re a silly peacock.”

“I don’t know what that is.” His mouth twitches with amusement. “And you are very drunk.”

“Very,” I agree, but I’m having the best time. I don’t even mind being on the beach here with him. I don’t mind that my chest is thrumming and purring desperately, or that I’m thinking all kinds of naughty things right now. I’m just enjoying the moment—the drunken, drunken moment. “So you want me to show you how to kiss?”

“Only if you want to. Only if you are suitably impressed with me as your mate. If I must work harder to win you, I understand. I should be worthy.”

He sure is talking a lot for a man that wants to kiss. I squint my eyes at him, considering, and then decide to go for it. Sitting up, I fling myself at him and wrap my arms around his neck and plant my mouth on his.

Skarr makes a choked sound of surprise, his hands going to my sides.

I bite at his lower lip, and his mouth is softer than I expected. His lips are really nice, plush and giving against mine, and it turns out that kissing him feels pretty amazing after all. I brush my mouth against his and moan, because it feels so good. My fingers twine in his silky hair, and when he groans low in his throat, I feel powerful and sexy. I stroke my tongue between his lips, teasing him, and I can feel him gasp in astonishment.

Boy, he really doesn't know how to kiss. The realization that I'm the one that gets to show him is pretty satisfying. No one gets to kiss Skarr but me. No one gets to nibble on this pouty mouth but me, or tangle their hands into his pretty prince hair. He's mine to play with.

And so I keep playing with him. I pour everything I've got into the kiss, every bit of feminine wile and excitement, and when he pulls away, gasping, I nip his lower lip again, sucking on it with a slow, deliberate release.

"That is...you are..."

"Pretty awesome," I agree, panting. "Let's kiss some more."

I lean in, but Skarr tilts his head to the side. "Wait."

That makes me pause. "Wait for what?"

"I must know." He eyes me. "Are you kissing me because you are drunk or because you wish to teach me?"

I roll my eyes, playing with his hair a bit more. "Duh, because I'm drunk."

His expression changes to one that is completely crestfallen. "Then I do not want it. I want you to want me."

"You don't want to play?" I pout at him, running my hand down his chest. "What if I touch your chest?"

"Oh, I want to play," he says, his voice strained even as he pushes my hand away. "But you are inebriated. It is not the same."

“What if I put my hand on your thigh?” I purr enticingly, and do just that.

He groans, closing his eyes. “I will still push you away.”

And he does.

Well now, he’s just being ridiculous and I’m still having fun. “What if I rub your cock...”

And I plant my hand between his thighs.

It’s strange, because at first, there’s nothing. It’s smooth like a Ken doll. But then, a split-second after I register this, something shoots out, like it’s emerging from his body. Oh. He must be a grower.

Then, a second bulge shoots out.

My drunken, flirty mind sobers instantly. Two bulges?

Two is not normal. I jerk away, giving him a wide-eyed look. Skarr just watches me, his eyes heavy-lidded and hungry.

I’m no longer playing, though. My brain has flipped to panic mode. He’s an *alien*.

Two bulges.

I scramble to my feet and run for the hills.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



VIVI

When I open my eyes the next morning, I have a throbbing headache and a vague memory of the night before. I'm dimly aware that after leaving Skarr's side, I raced back to camp, threw up near someone, and then crawled into a tent and slept against someone's feet.

It's shamefully embarrassing. I sit up, and I'm covered in sand, still wearing last night's clothing. I really must have been sloshed. I put a hand to my forehead and wipe away more sand, and then grimace as more memories flood back.

Who did I puke on? It might have been Kyth. Then, I think I cried and belly-crawled to the tent. I look around, and I'm relieved that I'm not curled up with strangers but instead nestled against several of the other "clone" women I was rescued with. At least they're familiar. I wipe at my mouth, the sour taste of fruit lingering at the back of my throat, and get to my feet. A rain of sand follows my movements, and I grimace.

I emerge from the tent to the sight of a lot of strangers. Everyone's gathered around the fire again—well, not everyone, but quite a few people are—and someone's handing out steaming bowls of warm breakfast. Everyone's looking at me with a mixture of amusement and pity and I really want to just crawl away and hide and never come out again. Mortifying. Absolutely mortifying.

"Want breakfast?" a woman says, holding a bowl out to me.

Even though I'm hungry, I shake my head and shyly retreat a few steps. Taking the food means talking, and I just want to hide with my shame.

I kissed Skarr last night. Like really, really kissed. Like porn-levels kissed.

And it was fun.

And I groped him.

And he might have two dicks, but that might also be the alcohol talking.

“Oh no you don’t,” the woman says, smiling. She marches over to my side and puts an arm around my shoulders. “I know you’re shy, but you need food. And we don’t bite! Come sit for a bit and I promise we’ll leave you alone. You’re safe with us.”

She steers me back toward the fire, and I want to protest, but my stomach rumbles again, loud enough to be overheard. So much for that. I slump and let her guide me toward the group, though I feel wildly uncomfortable.

“My name is Callie,” she says, her voice cheerful. “My mate is M’tok. If you see the one with the big tall horns that looks like he’s about to start some shit? That’s him.” She says it with a touch of pride in her voice. “And my baby boy is M’cal but M’tok is watching him so I can take my turn making breakfast. You want some? I made it sweet, because I like it sweet.”

I thump into the seat she more or less drags me toward and give the others nearby an awkward smile. Callie—who has dark hair and a beautifully embroidered leather tunic covered with flowers—serves up a bowl, slaps a carved spoon into it, and then hands it to me. She gazes at me expectantly.

Right. I take a small mouthful. The texture is a little odd, a bit like a paste with a few larger chunks of what feel like seeds, but it’s sweet and reminds me of oatmeal, or maybe even grits. I nod, managing a smile. “S good.”

“I know, right? Sweeter is better.” She gives an older black woman near the fire a smug look. “I tell them if they don’t like the way I make it, *ellos no tienen que comerlo*.”

“That isn’t the point of making the community breakfast,” the older woman says with a friendly roll of her eyes.

“It is when I make it.” Callie pulls out a bone cup and dips it into a second bag, then pauses. “You might not be ready for tea. You want water instead?”

I blink. Why wouldn’t I be ready for tea?

The older woman sees my expression and smiles. “The best caffeine kick here is from shrimp shells. We steep them and pick the shells out. We call it shrimp tea, but it takes some people some getting used to.”

My hungover stomach rebels at the thought of picking dead shrimp out of my drink. My nostrils flare, and the mouthful of paste in my mouth suddenly feels like glue.

“Uh oh, back up,” Callie says. “She’s gonna blow. No tea for you.”

“Breathe in slowly through your nose,” the older woman says, coaching me. “Deep breaths, and look up at the sky. You’re not gonna puke. I’m Gail, by the way.”

I take several deep breaths even as my mouth fills with saliva, but I manage not to vomit. When I can breathe easily again, I give Gail and Callie an awkward smile. “I’m Vivi... but I don’t really remember my real name.”

Gail just nods. “Well, we’ll call you Vivi unless you wanna change it. You can go by whatever you like. Just know that you’re among friends.”

There’s a warmth to Gail’s presence that relaxes me, and I manage to take another bite of food as I watch the women. Callie seems nice, too, though she could be my age and it seems strange to think of her as a mother. Then again, the khui wants me to make babies with Skarr, so I suppose it’s not that strange.

I think about last night and how I touched him and inwardly cringe at my actions. It’s going to be really hard to convince him I don’t want resonance now, after I grabbed his dick...*dicks*. Maybe I was so drunk I imagined two. I don’t know if I find the thought of a double-dicked lizardman exciting or terrifying.

Both, I decide. It’s both.

I finish my food quickly and Callie holds a hand out to take the bowl from me. “Thank you.”

She waves a hand at my words. “Think nothing of it. The tribe works together. We make breakfast at the main fire each

morning and anyone is welcome to come eat. Some people like to make their own meals, but for those that don't cook or are going hunting, we rotate chores so someone is always up very early and making breakfast. There's usually a dinner on the communal fire, too."

I bite my lip. "I don't think I know how to cook."

"You can learn," she says with a shrug. "Or if not, you hunt. Or you work hides. Or something. Everyone figures out what they're good at and contributes in some way."

It sounds really nice but also a little terrifying. "What if we don't contribute enough? What if someone feels like we're not pulling our weight?"

"You'll know," Gail says. Her expression turns sympathetic. "But really, we haven't had that problem before. Not everyone's a hunter, but everyone helps out. There's no checklist of chores you have to complete to get fed, though. Just do your best. We all know it's hard, especially at first."

"It's a lot," I confess in a small voice, the reality of my situation threatening to overwhelm again.

Gail moves over a seat to sit next to me, placing a comforting hand on my arm. "We know. But that's why you have everyone else to lean on. We've been through the same thing."

"Are you a clone, too?"

She grimaces. "Okay, most of the same thing. But I was snatched from Earth, just like you. I was held captive by aliens for a few years before I ended up here. The point is, no one comes here well-versed in everything they need to survive. We all have to learn this place."

Callie nods, gesturing at herself with the wooden spoon. "You got questions? You come ask me. I'll give it to you straight. About resonance, about babies, about whatever."

"I already resonated," I add in a timid voice.

"Oh, it was you?" Her brows go up. "To the lizard guy? I heard he was kinda...a lot."

A mortified giggle escapes me. “That’s a good way of putting it.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, my mate was an absolute shit to me when we first resonated and I wanted to choke him.” She puts her hands in the air as if to shake an invisible throat. “But we figured each other out and we’re happy. So don’t give up hope. The khui usually knows what it’s doing. And you’ll probably make pretty babies. He has nice hair.”

He does have nice hair, I have to agree. But I don’t want to point out that I’m not sure about the babies part. That I’m holding in my pocket what Flor told me—that the healer can turn things off if we need to. I got the impression that it’s the nuclear option, so to speak, but it’s an option at least.

“She doesn’t want to think about resonance right now,” Gail says defensively. “If she did, she’d be with him instead of sleeping with the other ladies. Give her time to figure things out.”

Callie looks like she wants to say more. She frowns in our direction and then shrugs and turns back to stirring the food. “Some of the other ladies should be waking up soon.”

It is rather quiet. I sip my water, glancing over at Gail. She has a basket near her old seat that looks like it’s full of sewing. Another woman approaches, this one freckled with red hair, and she’s leading a few young boys and has a younger child in her arms. No men, though. In fact, as I look around at the scattered huts, I see a few with smoke coming from their tops, and a person or two standing out by the shore, but I don’t see the other gladiators that arrived with us.

I don’t see Skarr anywhere. I rub my chest, because the constant resonance thrum that’s been present since that fateful day is silent. It’s...odd and vaguely unpleasant, like my khui is punishing me for not doing the deed with him yet. “Where is ...um, everyone?”

“Everyone, or just Skarr?” Callie asks.

“Hush,” Gail scolds her as my face burns. “She came out here for a meal, not an interrogation. And as for the others, I don’t know. Some of the women are sleeping in. Some have babies and husbands and get started later than others. It’s still pretty early, but you can see a few people are fishing over by the shore.” She points at the forms in the distance. “Everyone’s got things to do, even though there was a party last night.”

“A few of the men headed out super early,” Callie volunteers. “Hunting.” Her attention turns to the freckled woman. “Morning, Harlow. You want bowls for everyone?”

“Yes, please.” Harlow situates the children, and Callie grabs bowls and fills them.

Is that where Skarr went? Hunting? I know he loves to show off, but for some reason, I thought he’d make sure I was okay first. Why do I care? I ask myself that, and the only reason I can come up with is that he’s been protective of me. He handed me his leather cloak when it was obvious he needed it, all so I could cover up my injured hand.

We will not tell anyone, he’d reassured me. We are a team.

Maybe that’s why I feel vaguely bothered by his absence this morning. He talked about “team” until we arrived and now he’s gone and I’m here awkwardly trying to converse with two strangers.

“If you’re asking about Skarr,” Gail says in a low voice at my side. “He disappeared with Ashtar early this morning.”

I nod. I’m not sure what else to do. I appreciate the information, but it doesn’t solve anything for me. Why did Skarr run off? What’s he doing?

Why’d he leave my side when he knows how nervous I am about being here in the village? Is he mad I grabbed his dick—dicks?—and ran off?

“Oh, here’s Penny,” Callie announces as she dishes out food for the redhead and the children with her. “Have you two met?”

“Hi,” Penny says, sitting on the other side of me with a smile. Her arms are full with a little girl with delicate, pale blue skin, fat cheeks, and dark hair twisted into two knots atop her head. The child’s horns are tiny nubs and she sucks her thumb, even after Penny pulls her fist out of her mouth.

She’s adorable.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Penny says to me, beaming. “I love that we’re getting more people! New blood is always welcome, you know? And more hands to help out around camp.”

“That’s Vivi,” Callie says, spooning more of the strange porridge out. “She’s the one that resonated.”

Inwardly, I cringe at Callie’s words. Is that what I’m going to be known as? The gal that resonated to Skarr?

Penny’s eyes go wide. “Oh, I’ve heard good things about you! That you’re already a whiz with fire and you pick things up quickly. If you want a mentor, I’m going to call dibs.”

“Hey,” Callie protests “What if I want dibs?”

“Dibs are whoever calls it first and I just did,” Penny tells her with a laugh. She pulls her daughter’s thumb out of her mouth again, and then winces. “Oh, my stomach is crap this morning. I think I need to go get my tea.”

And then she hands me her daughter, as if I’m not a stranger.

Penny puts the bowl of gruel into her daughter’s hands. “Miss Vivi’s going to help you eat, Brenna. You be good and Mommy will be right back.” She wrinkles her nose. “Two jifs. Gonna barf and get my tea and I’ll be back in a flash.”

Oh. I stare after her in surprise.

“Pregnant,” Gail explains.

Ah. I hold Brenna in my arms and while it doesn’t feel familiar—my memories don’t flood with babies, which might be a good thing—it’s also not unpleasant. She smells sweet and giggles at Gail as she eats a spoonful and Gail makes faces at her.

“I miss when my boy was that little,” Gail says wistfully. “Z’hren’s getting so big now. He went hunting with his papa this morning. I’ll introduce you to them later.”

Brenna solemnly dips her spoon into her food and tries to offer it to Gail.

“Thank you,” Gail says, and pretends to eat, which makes Brenna giggle.

Surreptitiously, I lean in and sniff Brenna’s baby pigtails. They’re soft and curly and dark and remind me of Skarr’s hair. I don’t know why I’m thinking of him, or why I’m still hurt that he left without saying goodbye. It’s not like I’ve agreed to be his mate. If we have sex, there will be babies.

Babies like Brenna, with cute fat cheeks and sweet-smelling pigtails.

Oh no. I wonder if the khui makes me baby-crazy, too. I’m alarmed at the thought and I want to ask, but I also don’t want it getting around camp. The last thing I want is for Skarr to find out that I’m asking about babies or how resonance makes you feel.

If there’s anything that needs asking about, it’s the plural-dick situation, and I don’t know how to ease into that conversation. Do all aliens have two dicks? Is Skarr an anomaly?

Where does that second dick go? I mean, there’s an obvious hole but...

Flustered at the thought, I automatically eat the spoon of food Brenna shoves at me, much to the child’s delight.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



SKARR

I set off early in the morning with Ashtar, and he brings along the human Jason. I am not thrilled about the addition to our party, but he says Jason wishes to learn how to build a hut as well. I understand this. We are the smart ones, looking to impress females with our skills. Let the others sleep in while we gain the advantage.

I will need every advantage I can get in order to impress my Vivi.

So Ashtar shifts to a dragon and takes us several coves away, where we can pick through the tumble of rocks and look for large ones that will make up the base of the hut. When Ashtar is in his “battle form” he can haul extremely heavy things, and he will fly them back for us. We only have to pick out what we need and try to fit it together.

I walk the beach, looking for the best, the most perfect rocks, and I think about Vivi.

Last night has been playing through my mind, over and over again. How beautiful she was when she laughed, how her eyes sparkled in the moonlight. The drink loosened her inhibitions, making her relax and forget her worries. And *she* kissed *me*.

Kissing. I can definitely see the appeal of it, now that I have experienced it. Vivi knew what she was doing. She flung herself at me and planted her mouth on mine and then coaxed her tongue into my mouth, taking control. It was incredible, and realizing that she was kissing me only because she was drunk ruined the moment for me. I do not want her kisses when she is out of her mind with drink. I want her kisses because she wants me.

Then I tried to stop her, and everything went wrong.

Vivi gave me frisky touches, and it took everything I had to push them away. She reached for my cock and rubbed, and I

immediately extruded both upper and lower cock, like an untouched boy.

Immediately, she ran.

It was humiliating.

I don't even know what I did wrong. Were my cocks not large enough to please her and she realized I was failing her? Was it that I extruded right into her grasp even after I turned her away? I wish I knew the answer. While she has no memories of her name or where she comes from, I have no memories when it comes to touching females. I assume I am good at it, but doubt eats away at my confidence and leaves my mood sour.

I find a large slab of rock in a vaguely triangular shape and wave both Jason and Ashtar over. They examine the rocks and Jason makes a pleased sound as he hops down to another rocky outcrop right below. "We might have enough for both floors right here. Now we just need to piece them together like a jigsaw."

"Jig-saw?" I ask. "What is this?"

"A puzzle," Jason continues, still gazing down at the rock. "Though I suppose we could mortar any cracks with smaller stones and some sort of cement mixture. Did I tell you guys my dad was a builder? I remember a few things he taught me, and I think we can work with this."

Ashtar turns to his battle form and pries the first large hunk of rock from the side of the beach while Jason and I stand nearby, watching it rain down sand and bits of shell.

I eye the human male. He is smaller than I am. Much smaller. His shoulders are not as broad, and he is only a bit taller than Vivi, who is among the tallest of the human females. Perhaps I am too well-equipped? Could that be it? Are my cocks too large to please her? "Jason, are human cocks puny?"

Jason sputters.

Ashtar immediately turns to human again, discarding the large slab of rock and letting it land with a heavy *THUD* on

the beach. His face is wreathed in an amused grin. “Sorry, I’ve got to hear this. What’s this now?”

The male drakoni is naked, as he does not wear clothing when he shifts between forms. I have seen him naked before, but now that I am thinking about cock sizes, I study his closely. The size looks to be equitable to mine, and Ashtar is also larger than Jason. So I gesture at him. “You are large enough. I know I am large enough. I am curious if Jason’s cock is tiny. If all human males are under-equipped.”

“What the fuck, bro.” Jason puts his hands on his hips. “Are you asking me to pull my dick out and compare with you?”

I shrug and start to undo my belt. “I would not mind that.”

Jason puts his hands up. “No, no no no. I am not whipping it out just because you’re curious. I want to know what brought this on.”

This seems a fair enough question. “I was getting somewhere with my mate last night. She touched me and ran. I wonder if it was my size that intimidated her. That perhaps she is used to small human cocks instead of mine.”

“Ugh. You are full of yourself. Are you sure she didn’t run because you were talking?”

“I am certain. She does not mind my talking.” Well, much.

Jason rolls his eyes. “Then she’s the only one. You won’t shut up about how awesome you are and it gets on everyone’s nerves.”

It does? “Why would I be shy about my strength and cunning? It should be reassuring. The tribe will know I am a good, competent hunter. Not just competent, but the best.”

Ashtar says nothing, his hand pressed to his mouth. It looks like he is trying to hide a laugh or a grimace.

“If you’re so incredibly awesome, wouldn’t we already know this?” Jason demands. “Why shout it?”

“Because—”

“Children, children,” Ashtar finally speaks up, stepping forward toward us. “You sound like my boys right now. We’re all friends here.”

“I am merely trying to understand if it is the size of my cocks that is the problem,” I point out.

Jason blinks. “I’m sorry, did you say cocks?”

“I did.”

“I think we found out the issue.” Jason smirks. “You really have two cocks?”

“Of course. I am a ssethri splice.” I fail to see where this is strange.

Jason points at Ashtar then at himself. “He doesn’t have two cocks. I don’t have two cocks.”

“He is drakoni. You are human.” I shake my head again. “As I said, I am ssethri.”

“But your mate is human,” Ashtar reminds me. “And she knows nothing of other races of people in this galaxy. Not like we do.”

Is this so? Is that why Vivi panicked? Because I had one more cock than she expected? It is not the size of it or my reaction to her? “I cannot make one of my cocks vanish. When they extrude, they both extrude at once.”

“Extrude?” Jason’s brows furrow.

Ashtar uncurls a finger in an almost bouncy motion, demonstrating.

“Oh shit, *extrude*.” Jason’s eyes widen. “Well, now I want to see this shit after all. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

So now he wants to see my cock? Bah. “I am not going to extrude for you. Only for my female.” I pause, considering. “So you think it was the number of cocks that made her panic?”

“A thousand percent,” Jason agrees.

I do not know what to do about that. I cannot change how I am built. It is a depressing thought, that Vivi might not like my body because of how it was created.

“Shall we get back to work?” Ashtar asks. “Pick out the pieces for the hut’s flooring and let’s get going before it gets too late in the day.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY



VIVI

Gail makes it clear that I'm welcome to stick to her side all day, and that she'll introduce me to people without pressuring me to converse. She has a sweet, easygoing personality and I immediately trust her. It makes the day not terrible, sitting at her side and learning how to patch clothing with a bone awl and cord made from sinew. Gail chats with everyone, giving people my name so I can meet them and then immediately turning the conversation so I don't feel on the spot.

Everyone else in the tribe seems pretty nice, too. There are a lot of babies and a fair amount of stern-looking, very tall blue aliens, but Gail reassures me that they are all kinder than they look, and I see more than one cuddling a baby or playing with a child, which eases my anxiety. The most intimidating one is actually a bossy blonde named Liz who seems to give everyone shit. She follows I'rec around, teasing him about "taters" or something, and I'rec does his best to ignore her.

I try to avoid her entirely, because I don't think I can handle someone teasing me. I'm sure it's meant in fun, but even so, I want no part of it.

Gail's mate Vaza is an older male with deep blue skin, and their son has four arms and does not look even slightly human. I don't ask about it. It's clear they both love him and they are very much a family. Gail showers them both with kisses when they return, and when the little boy proudly holds up a dead animal he hunted, she exclaims over it as if he's brought her diamonds. It's cute.

But then more people start to trickle in toward the fire, hunters returning from their treks. It gets crowded and noisy, people talking over each other. A big alien with four arms kisses his mate and child and then immediately starts to butcher a large animal nearby, which makes several of the newcomers retreat. I stay where I am, pulling another stitch through the tunic Gail is helping me with. I can manage, I pep

talk myself. It's not so bad being around a bunch of people who all know each other and are all nice enough. They will be my new family. I can handle this. I can.

Then I feel it.

My khui hums in my chest, the song picking up. The dragon flies overhead, and I catch a glimpse of green on his back. Just Skarr being this close is enough for my chest to burst into song, and I notice the woman sitting next to me eyeing me with curiosity.

I get up and set the sewing in the basket, stepping over someone and retreating before Skarr can return to camp.

"You okay?" Gail asks me, noting my attempts to extricate myself from the group.

My fingers go to my brow and I don't stop moving. "Headache, going to lie down."

I am *such* a chicken.

It's just...after last night, I'm not sure I'm ready to talk to him. I'm definitely not ready to have a confrontation in front of all of the others, and I know Skarr likes to pose and preen in front of them. What if he tries to talk about kissing and me grabbing him around the fire? I will die. I will just simply die. Wither into a ball of humiliation and die.

Let him come and seek me out so we can talk in private.

I sit near the entrance of the tent the newcomer women are sleeping in. There was a cave offered, but since the men didn't want to sleep "together" it was considered better that the males take it rather than setting up multiple tents for singular people. In the cave they can spread out and beat their chests to their hearts' content while the women more or less have a cuddle-puddle to share warmth.

Or you could be like me and end up sprawled over their feet in the morning.

Time passes, and my khui hums stronger, and I know Skarr must be close. I can hear the others laughing and talking by the fire. The suns go down and it gets dark, and still Skarr doesn't

come. I yawn and curl up in the blankets, and I must doze off because when I wake up, Colleen and Isadora are crawling into bed, and it's late.

Skarr didn't come to talk to me.

Well...fine. I didn't want to talk to him, either.



THE NEXT FEW days feel agonizingly slow.

I sleep fitfully each night, piled in with the other women sharing blankets. It's innocent enough, but my dreams are full of Skarr and I wake up throbbing and yearning. The last thing I want is another woman snuggled up against my back when my khui is humming out of control. When I'm not dreaming about Skarr, I'm tending to fires or fishing in the woods, talking to a person I can't see. My surroundings are full of mountains and tall green trees, and I wear black waders with the pants and boots built into a float at the waist. We laugh at how ugly my pants are, but that the color is a good choice because I always wear black.

Those dreams are always more disturbing than the ones about Skarr, because I wake up aching and missing the person in my dreams. I think it's my father, but I never see his face or remember his name. Just that I loved him.

The days are not much better than my troubling nights. Skarr keeps away from the main camp, and because the other women are sticking close, I do, too. Gail, Flor, and the other women who have been here a while take time each day to try and show us skills—how to skin a dead animal, how to butcher it, how to make food over the fire with the tripod bags and hot stones that are slipped inside the bag to warm the contents. There's sewing and the making of clothes, since we'll be in charge of dressing ourselves. There are skins to be worked, fish to be gutted, seaweed to be dried, roots and herbs to be collected. It's an exhaustive, never-ending list, but the women here support each other and tackle the chores as they

come. No one is expected to be superhuman or skilled, just to give it their best effort.

So I do my best to learn everything that's put in front of me. I sew an ugly tunic for myself that fits and is warm. I help cook food and gather herbs and roots. Instinct takes over and I seem to already know how to scale and gut a fish, and one day I get stuck gutting everyone's fish, which isn't my favorite, but at least no one tries to approach me and make conversation.

I'm still not comfortable speaking. They all yet feel like strangers.

Skarr is avoiding me, too, I think. If resonance keeps him up at night, he doesn't show it. He's up bright and early, going hunting or working on his "secret project" with Jason and Ashtar. He doesn't come near the fire when I'm there, and at night, when a large group gathers to tell stories, share food, and enjoy company, I retreat to give him a chance to talk to me privately.

He never seeks me out, though. He never comes looking for me, and it bothers me. Am I the only one being woken up with wet dreams? Does he not get hit out of the blue in the middle of the day with need so strong that it makes his limbs shake?

Is he not troubled by resonance at all? Or is he tired of pursuing me?

I could go after him, of course. Demand that he sit down somewhere quiet and talk to me. I could make the first move.

In theory, anyhow. In reality, I'm too tongue-tied. Every time the idea of talking to him crosses my mind, I think about how I grabbed his privates and then ran like a virgin. Maybe there weren't two. Maybe he was just really big and I mistook girth for two dicks. I obsess over that moment.

Okay, to be fair, I obsess over every moment as I work. I play our conversations back in my head and scan the beach for him even though I tell myself I'm not interested. That I'm going to talk to the healer about shutting things off any day now. That I don't want him. Or babies. Or resonance.

Truth of the matter is, though...I don't dislike Skarr.

He's a blowhard, yes. A braggart and a bit too enthusiastic about violence. He loves attention. We're complete opposites in that respect. But he's never been openly unkind to me, just clueless. He's taken care of me in the past and tried in his own way to be caring.

So no, I'm not as horrified as I was about resonating to him. It just feels complicated, especially after I ran.

Three days pass. Then three days more. Skarr continues to move in different circles than me. We don't run into each other on the beach.

And all the while, my dreams get filthier and filthier.

After a week of avoiding each other, I wake up just before dawn, aching and aroused. In my dreams, Skarr opened his pants to reveal a line of cocks going down his leg, and I rode every single one of them. It's a ridiculous, stupid dream that shouldn't make me wet, but it does. My khui throbs and hums constantly, and I know it's not helping. I get to my feet and put on my shoes, but when I come out of the tent and see a cluster of people by the fire, I don't want to join them.

I don't want to sit by the fire today. Or anyone, today. I just want to be left alone.

So I move to the first person I see that's preparing to go out hunting. It's Penny and her big mate, S'bren. She's got snowshoes in one hand and a spear in another, watching as S'bren straps their toddler into a carrier on his chest. I tap her on the shoulder and give an anxious smile of greeting. "Hi. Do you know if anyone has skis I can borrow?"

Penny blinks at me in surprise. "Skis?"

"Yes. Skis." I keep my voice casual, as if it's no big deal to ask for something so I can go off wandering the hills by myself. I'm not worried about danger. I can take care of myself, and in one of my dreams I'd been cross-country skiing through those mountains I've dreamed about. "It's something I've done before. I'll be fine."

But Penny just gives me a long, thoughtful stare. "Skis."

“Yes.” Why is this a big deal?

She turns toward Harlow—the freckled redhead—who is beside the fire. “Why don’t we have skis?”

“Skis?” Harlow seems just as surprised.

“Does no one here ski?” I ask in a timid voice. “I thought since there were snowy mountains...”

Penny turns back to me and gives a helpless shrug. “I think most of us are from the south or not sporty. No one has skis.”

Well, that seems rather ridiculous to me. “Oh. I can make some.”

Harlow moves toward us, a thoughtful look on her face. Nadine—one of the women here and a hunter on her own—also seems interested. “I think Liz probably tried to make skis once but no one had any skill with them,” Harlow continues. “But it wouldn’t hurt for us to learn if you know how to use them.”

I just nod.

Nadine wiggles her eyebrows at me. “I am all about some ski action. Can I help?”

“Sure.” I smile at her. Maybe this is what I need—a distraction from Skarr and his avoidance of me. A new task to keep me busy and out of camp so I don’t feel the ache of him missing.

After all, it’s silly to miss someone that’s been thrown at you. I should be glad that he’s not here.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



VIVI

“We might have to try a few different sorts of materials before we find the right one,” Nadine says to me as we hike through the snows. Her dark skin glows against her pale leathers, and she looks radiant with excitement. “I’ve got three different things in mind at the moment, so we can gather a little of everything and experiment.”

We’re at the rocky base of the mountains a few hours away from camp, and the landscape changes dramatically, just as I remember. The cove of the beach is protected by high cliffs, but once you get past those, the cliffs continue to scale up and up, the snows growing deeper and the winds more bitter as you get to the base of the mountains proper. I’m starting to get used to the cold weather, and thanks to the khui and my new, better-fitting clothing, it just feels brisk and refreshing instead of life-ending.

It’s so nice to be away from the camp, too. Everyone has been lovely and so helpful, and I’m glad we’re at the village instead of living alone in the mountains. I’m not ungrateful, but the introvert in me loves the peace and quiet of this particular day.

Going out with Nadine also shows me that a competent woman is trusted out on her own. I wasn’t sure, because some of the men have been extremely protective of their wives, but this morning, Nadine twisted her thick hair into a knot at her nape, handed her baby to her mate, gave them both a kiss, and then headed off with me, no questions asked. It’s clear she knows her way around the mountain trails, too. She uses the end of her spear like a walking stick and pokes at drifts before she steps forward, and her pack is full of supplies in case we get into trouble—rope, extra knives, fire-starters, and food. She also knows the locations of things called “hunter caves.” From the sound of it, they’re safe “pit stops” where extra food and weapons are kept in case someone’s stranded in bad weather.

It's all practical and smart and feels vaguely familiar, and I wonder if I grew up with someone that practiced this sort of thing. A survivalist. An image of my father flashes through my mind again—sandy hair and dark eyes, pointing out tracks in the mud and joking about the number of flies caught on the fly paper in the cabin.

It fits. A survivalist. Today though, the strange bits of memory don't make me sad. They feel comfortable, like a favorite shirt.

Nadine leads me along the paths through the cliffs, pointing out landmarks so I can tell where I'm going in the future. I have no doubt I'll be doing this on my own soon enough. I can't wait to go out and have a peaceful day alone in the snows, enjoying the beauty of nature before I have to return to the noisy hubbub of camp.

"We're going to head to a spring first," Nadine tells me as we hike along. "There's these fish that have lightweight but really hard reeds on their heads. Devi says it's some sort of cousin to keratin, like your fingernails or a horse's hooves, and if those will work, it'll be easy to get everyone outfitted in skis. I figure if nothing else, we can use them for ski poles. You'll know we're getting close to the spring when you smell it."

"Smell it?" I ask, curious as I step into the tracked path she's made for me.

"Oh yeah. This planet is full of volcanic activity—again, Devi's theory—and there are a lot of hot springs." She flutters a hand under her nose. "Smells like rotten eggs, but the water's toasty warm and nice to bathe in."

How fascinating. I'm intrigued at the prospect. "Are there a lot of earthquakes, then?"

"Not so much, though a volcano did blow not long after we first arrived. Flooded the beach for a few days and then rained ash on us for a month." She gives me a wry look. "You're going to find most of the explosions happen between people, though."

“People?”

“Well, it’s a small beach and a lot of big personalities,” she says with a laugh, picking her way forward through a patch of deeper snow. “And then of course, there’s always resonance. Speaking of which...how’s it going for you, if you don’t mind me asking? You look like you’re not sleeping well.”

She says it with such a friendly, offhand tone that I don’t take offense. I knew it was bound to come up. How can it not? Like she said, it’s a small beach. Even if I’m quiet about the situation, I am guessing Skarr is very much *not* quiet. “I am not, no.”

“Resonance is hard,” she agrees, not looking back at me but studying the landscape instead. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s also delightful, and the babies are amazing, but it still fucks your shit up. Instead of a ‘me’ you become a ‘we’ overnight.”

I grimace at the thought. “I noticed. It doesn’t matter if we’re together or not, everyone pairs Skarr with me in their minds, as if it’s already decided.”

It’s come up in conversation a few times, and people have mentioned us like we’re a couple.

“Look at it from their perspective. In this generation, resonance does decide. Everyone pairs up happily. I’m told that it wasn’t like that in the past, and the stories of Rukh and Raahosh’s father and mother – and how much they hated each other – are legendary. But for the most part? In these people’s eyes, a resonated couple is a happy couple. But I wanted you to know that you’re not trapped.”

Strangely enough, her words choke me up, and a knot forms in my throat, hard to talk around. “I’m not?”

“You’re not,” she says firmly. “Resonance is a force of nature. I’m not telling you what to do, but if you hate Skarr and can’t stand the thought of being with him, you get a little drunk, you have a night of the worst sex ever, and then you go on with your life. We’ve all had a heinous one-night stand that we regretted in the past, but you don’t have to shack up with

the guy. If you can't get along, as long as you can co-parent, no one will blame you if you go your separate ways."

I stare at her back. "You make it sound so easy."

She laughs, stabbing at another drift of snow and then skirting around it, gesturing that I should do the same. "Oh, it's not. It's not easy at all. There's a baby involved, and I know how overwhelming resonance can feel. It's just that everyone's painting you one specific picture, and I'm letting you know that you can make your own future. It can be what you need it to be, as long as you fulfill resonance."

"Or get the healer to turn it off."

That makes Nadine stop. She turns and gives me a long look. "I'm not pro-resonance or trying to talk you into anything, but I did see what happened to Mari when she had Veronica shut off her resonance. She was like a zombie. Well, not completely. Just totally out of it, like she was numb. No one should have to go through life like that. If you're totally opposed to being a mom, there are other people here that would happily raise your kid, no questions asked. If you don't want to stay with this tribe because Skarr is here, there's another one farther inland. I'm not here to talk you into anything one way or another. You get to make your choices, okay? I'm just being a friend and letting you know that you don't have to have the white picket fence like everyone thinks you do."

I manage a wry smile. "A picket fence would look stupid on the beach."

She snorts with amusement. "Yeah, it would. Come on, our stream isn't too far ahead. We'll start to smell it when we go around that ridge."

Nodding, I follow after her when she starts again. "I appreciate the talk. It's just a lot to think through. And...I know he can be difficult, but I don't hate Skarr."

"Girl, you don't have to tell me about difficult, obnoxious men. Have you met Thrand?"

I pause. "I actually don't think I have."

“Well,” she drawls. “He is a piece of work. And I say that with love as his mate. Let me tell you about the time he—oh, tracks. Hang on.”

She crouches in the snow to examine a line of tracks nearby, and I do the same, wanting to learn. To my surprise, they’re the same tracks I saw from before—the drag on one side, and the big paws on the other.

The wounded snow-cat is here. It’s following us.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO



SKARR

I take a few steps back and admire my handiwork in the late afternoon sunlight. It is a good hut, I decide.

No, it is the *best* hut. Because Vivi deserves the best.

I have worked hard to make this the perfect home for her. I know she does not like to be in the thick of things, so I have made her hut at the far edges of the group, at the farthest end of the cliffs. The door is facing toward the cliff, as well, so anyone that comes in will have to circle the platform to approach. Ashtar thought this was odd, but I like it. It adds a level of privacy for my Vivi that I know she will appreciate. The roof is tall and well-angled so the smoke can escape out the hole at the top, and the floor is made with the smoothest rocks I could find, joined together with the mortar that Jason helped create out of sand, seashells, and clay. The interior has a large dip in the center for a firepit, lined with more rocks, and the walls are bricked together with more mortar and smaller rocks in a repeating pattern. I do not have furs or goods for Vivi to put inside yet, but Ashtar says the tribe has more than enough and she can pick out her own.

I am eager to show it to her. I hope...I hope it makes her like me despite the fact that my body is different than hers. I've heard that human females like presents, and I hope she likes this.

I adjust the covering over the door one more time and then step down from the stone platform and onto the beach sands. This end of the beach is quiet, but the main tribal sprawl is farther ahead. Vivi will be there, spending her time around the fire and absorbing information. She is so clever, to learn as much as she can from the others. Perhaps if I did the same, she would look upon me with interest.

But I know she is avoiding me. I am not stupid. She has made it clear that my presence offends her, and so I have tried to give her space. Tried to keep my focus on the hut I have

been making for her, because being near her and not being able to touch her is maddening.

Vivi's kisses have made everything worse. Before, I knew that touching her would be pleasant, but I did not realize how much I would need her. How much I'd crave her mouth on mine again. Now I know what she feels like when she rubs up against me, and what her lips taste like. It has made fighting resonance that much more difficult.

I hope with the gift of the hut...I hope we can start over, or that she can get past the offense that my body creates in her. I might be tall and strong, but I also have two cocks, and this, Jason assures me, is why she panicked. She is clearly appalled and disgusted.

Rubbing my chest, I decide it is time. Time to give Vivi her gift. I head down the sandy beach, feeling the thrum of my khui in there. It grew quiet earlier, sending me into a panic until the a'ani Thrand mentioned that Vivi had gone hunting with his mate Nadine. She must have been out of range, but she is back now, because my chest is full of song once more. I head toward the fire, ready to confront the strongest, most perfect of females and to demand—no, *ask*—that she be mine.

This section of the beach is full of activity. There are females showing others how to sew leathers, and another is mixing a smelly dye concoction over a small fire. The main fire has food cooking and many people around it. Sabrina is deep in conversation with I'rec, Kyth standing near her. Valmir and Chalath are discussing weapons with Vordis and Raahosh. Two males skin their catches and show children how to butcher them, and someone else is laying seaweed out to dry on a rack. Everywhere here, people are laughing and talking, chatting despite their chores.

I do not see Vivi, but then again, she would not be in the thick of things. It is not her way.

So I head through the thick of things, not stopping to join the weapons conversation (though I would love to) or to pause to eat a quick meal by the main fire. I do not stop to tell I'rec that I have made the best hut, though I know I have. I do not

challenge any males to a skirmish, though I know Valmir is itching for a fight. Vivi is the most important thing.

There, at the far end of camp, past the latrine huts and near the tiny cave where B'shit does pottery, my beautiful, strong mate is talking with a dark-skinned female. Thrand's mate. They test the bend of long, pipe-like reeds and gesture at the length. Her back is to me, and she has not noticed my approach.

I stride boldly forward, my khui's song loud and intense. "I must speak to the best female on the planet."

Vivi stiffens, and Nadine hides a smile. My mate turns to look at me, a betrayed look on her face. "I'm busy, Skarr."

"It's all right," Nadine says, putting the pole back in its place against the rocky cliff once more. "I should be getting back to Thrand and Deenie. Can you put these in the cave when you're done looking at them? We can regroup in the morning."

She nods at Nadine, not making eye contact with me as the other woman strides away. This is not how I'd hoped my approach would be welcomed, but it is also not surprising. Vivi is displeased with me, and this just confirms it. I do not please her as a mate, and the realization is crushing. I do not understand it. I am an excellent fighter and I know I will be among the best of the hunters. Yet she still does not want me. It fills me with despair.

Vivi puts the reeds back in place and gives me a wary look. "Do you have to do that?"

I am puzzled. "Do what?"

"Keep going on and on about how I'm the best female ever? To everyone?"

This offends her? "But why wouldn't I? They should know how amazing you are."

"I'm not amazing!" She makes a frustrated sound. "Why do you keep saying that?"

“Because it is obvious you are! If they do not see that, then they are fools.”

She smacks a hand to her forehead. “You going around and saying shit like that is going to make everyone look at me funny.”

“Then let them look! What does it matter?”

“It matters to me!”

“Why?”

She pauses and stares at me, as if the answer should be obvious. But it is not, not to me, so I gesture for her to explain. Vivi sputters, gesticulating. “I...I don’t know! I don’t like attention!”

“Why?” I prompt again.

“Because...because I don’t know who I am,” she replies after a moment. “Because they’ll see me as a fraud. You keep saying I’m amazing and when I’m not, they’ll make fun of me.”

“No they won’t. They will mock me, not you, if they think I am wrong.” I shrug. “And I will not care, because I know I am right. To me, you are the most incredible female, with a sharp mind, a lovely body, and a strong spirit. No one can convince me otherwise.”

Her shoulders sag and she sighs. “Oh, Skarr.”

That sounded...oddly sad, and the last thing I wish is to make her sad. “Come with me,” I say, waving her forward. “I wish to show you something.”

Vivi’s expression changes to one of skepticism, and she shakes her head, turning back to the poles. She lines them up against the rocks, pretending to be busy. “Why should I? After you’ve ignored me for days?”

My chest puffs up with pride. So she did see I was avoiding her? “You noticed my absence?”

Running her fingernail along a hairline crack, she pulls one pole to the side and barely glances at me, and yet I can tell I

have her full attention. She is just pretending not to be affected by me. It is a feint, a fantastic strategy to lure in an opponent. Or it would be if her khui was not singing to mine so boldly.

Vivi rubs her chest, as if coming to the same realization, and frowns over at me. “Of course I noticed. I notice everything you do. We’re resonating. I was just waiting for you to come and talk to me in private.” Her gaze flicks to mine, accusing. “And you never did.”

Wait.

She wanted my attention?

I am stunned. How could I have misread her signals so badly? “I did not know, Vivi. I thought you wanted me to leave you alone.”

She gives up any pretense of selecting the poles and turns to face me. “How could you not know what I wanted, Skarr? I’ve told you over and over how much I like privacy. How much I hate it when you bring things up in front of everyone. Why would you think I’d want to talk to you in front of everyone? I left each time you came to the fire so we *could* talk. So you could come to *me*.”

“I...I...” I trail off, speechless.

I am stunned. I pride myself on my cleverness, and yet I have missed this entirely. I thought she wished for me to leave her alone because I was not worthy of her attentions. That I should work harder *to* become worthy.

But we have clearly misunderstood each other and in doing so, I have wounded her. Made her think I did not care.

“Vivi,” I breathe. “Do not think that I avoided you because I wished to. It was agony to know you were close by and that I should stay away. It is just...” I dig my hands in my hair, frustrated. “I know how to please a crowd, yes? I know how to make the audience get on my side. And I know one of the biggest things is that when the crowd is turning against you, you lay low. You make yourself scarce until you can return with something that will impress them and bring them back to your side.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her expression vulnerable.

“I do not know how to please a female, to please *you*. That much is obvious. So I have fallen back on my training. I have approached you—us—as if you were a tournament battle. I thought if, perhaps, I was not around, you would forget why you hated me until I returned—”

“I don’t hate you. Why does everyone think I hate you?”

I grin, hiding behind cocky words. “Because you do not swoon in my arms?”

Vivi rolls her eyes and gives me an annoyed look. “Remember what I said about everyone being in our business? This is why I hate it.”

I don’t point out that she ran away from me. It seems not wise to point that out in this moment. “Well, I am here now, and I have returned with something I wish to show you.” I reach out and take her hand in mine. “May I please show you?”

“You don’t have to bribe me. Just talk to me.” Her expression is soft now as she leans in toward me. “You and I probably have a lot of talking we need to do.”

“Talk. Yes. Talk is good.” I tug on her hand. “But may I show you first?”

“Show me what?”

I grin, delighted. I know she will love this. It will make her realize what a good mate I will be for her. I cannot wait to show her the new hut. “Come. I will lead you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



VIVI

Skarr leads me down the beach, holding tightly to my hand as if he fears to let go. As if he's afraid I'll run away if he releases me.

While I think it'd be more productive for us to have a good, honest conversation, I let him tug me along. It's clear whatever he wants to show me has a lot of meaning for him, so I can do this. After days of avoiding each other out of sheer misunderstanding, I'm just relieved we're clearing the air, bit by bit.

I've been indignant and hurt that he hasn't come after me and I'm the one at fault. He assumed I needed time alone. If he'd have asked anyone...they would have also told him to leave me alone. That I'd need time. It's me that's not communicating my needs. For all that he looks and acts very human sometimes, I forget that he doesn't think like us.

When the crowd is turning against you, you lay low.

His words hurt my heart. I keep realizing that Skarr is just as alone as I am, and he's handling it so much better than I am. He's been nothing but enthusiastic about meeting me and being tied to me, and I've been a jerk. I've been wallowing in my own misery and I've made him feel worthless.

It's not a good feeling.

So I squeeze his hand tightly and he flashes me another excited smile, one that makes me ache. He can't wait to show me whatever this is, and I vow to myself that even if it's a boatload of dead fish—because who *knows* on this planet—I will exclaim and be excited and thrilled.

Because this means a lot to him. He's been a good friend to me, and I haven't been the same.

“Have you seen this tide pool?” he asks, pointing at it as he leads me forward. “There was a large scorpion-crab caught in here earlier.”

“Is this what you brought me to see?”

He grins, his expression sly. “No, but I figured if we are pretending to enjoy the sights, it does not look obvious that we do not cut through camp. It will draw no attention.”

My heart aches all over again, because of his thoughtfulness. “I would like that.”

“Then let us admire this creature for a moment before moving on.” He gives my hand a reassuring shake, and we pretend to admire the tide pool and its contents, and all the while I kick myself mentally because Skarr is a braggart and loves attention, yes, but when has he *not* had my back?

He’s always let me set the pace. He hasn’t pressured me for anything.

We take a leisurely walk along the beach, pointing out the distant glacier. No one from camp approaches us, though I can see a few are watching. It will be all around the fire tomorrow that we were walking together and holding hands, but for now, I can just enjoy the moment. Skarr sizes up the large shapes moving on the glacier. “Someday I think I would like to go and hunt them,” he tells me. “Gren says they are dangerous creatures, but I think it sounds like a challenge.”

“Just don’t enjoy a challenge so much that you end up leaving me here alone,” I reply tartly, a little horrified at the thought of Skarr hunting something *because* it sounds dangerous.

Then I realize what I’ve said and my face goes crimson even as he grins wider at me.

“We are almost there,” he tells me excitedly, moving faster as we head further down the beach. “Come and see.”

I’m curious what exactly he means to show me, and so I follow along, my steps picking up as we jog past a meandering trail of little huts, with a shell-lined path linking them together. It’s charming enough for the prehistoric vibe this place has, but I’m not familiar yet with who lives where. I’m not sure who we’re visiting and why they are part of the surprise.

Then Skarr stops in front of the last hut and gives me an expectant look. “Well?”

“Who lives here?”

“You do,” he says proudly, and throws his shoulders back as if he’s about to beat his chest out of pure pride. “I made this for you.”

“You...made me a house?” I’m stunned. This is what he was working on all the time he was avoiding me? I knew he was flying off with Ashtar and Jason, I just didn’t realize it was for this. “How...why?”

“So you can have a place to call your own,” Skarr replies. “I know you like the quiet, and I cannot imagine it is very quiet in the tent with the other females.”

It isn’t. It’s crowded and noisy and someone is always snoring, but I’ve tried to make the best of it. Here Skarr was thinking of me again, and I had no idea. “You...you are so sweet.”

He makes a face. “I am a strong, tireless gladiator. I am not *sweet*.”

“You’re sweet to me.” I give his hand a squeeze. “And I like it.”

“Then I will accept it as a compliment,” he says, but his voice is grudging. “Tell me that you like it? That I built you the best hut on the beach? On the planet?”

“I’m sure you did,” I murmur, amused. I study the hut, my hand over my humming heart that might be racing for reasons not entirely related to the khui. He built me a *hut*. Of all the things he could have done for me, this might be the most perfect, the most thoughtful. I gaze at the stone walls, admiring the large slabs of rock that make up the base platform. It’s raised off the sand, but not as much as the wooden huts. It looks more solid, though, and with a stone floor I won’t have to worry about a spark catching fire on my surroundings. “This is incredible,” I tell him, and then I realize there’s no entrance. “But where is the door?”

“In the back,” he says, releasing my hand to hop up on the slab of rock. He holds a hand down to me to help me up, even though it’s not a huge step. “There was not a way to make a wooden door, as Jason says you have back home, so I have put a privacy flap like the others have. But I knew it would feel exposed, so I made sure the door was built to the back. Now no one will be able to look in.”

Oh. It’s just another way he’s showing his thoughtfulness. I’m touched, and my eyes get suspiciously wet. “It’s a really good idea,” I admit. “The privacy flaps don’t feel all that private to me just yet.”

“I wanted you to have the best,” he tells me, all excitement. “Come inside and see.”

The interior is just as wonderful as the outside. It’s the size of my bedroom back home, with a large, stone-lined firepit in the center. The slabs of rock that make up the base have been mortared together to make one large floor, and although the interior is empty, it muffles the sound of the nearby village. There’s a hint of light coming in from the smoke hole, and while the build is very similar to the other huts I’ve seen, this one is even better because it’s *mine*.

Skarr watches me expectantly.

“I don’t know what to say.” I’m overwhelmed with emotion. He’s worked so hard to craft this for me, and I’ve been avoiding him and resenting him.

“Say that you like it.” His face is tight, anxious. “Say that it is the best hut on the planet and it pleases you.”

“It is and it does.” I take a step toward him, putting a hand on his furs-covered chest. “And it makes me want to give you a kiss.”

He grins at me, leaning in...and then pulls back before our lips can meet. “Do you wish to kiss me because you are grateful?”

“Yes.”

Skarr shakes his head, his expression flashing with disappointment. “Then I do not want it. I only want your

kisses if you want to kiss me. Not because you feel you should.”

I understand what he’s saying. I pat his chest, clarifying. “I wanted to kiss you because I’m happy and because you’re the one that made me happy. It felt like the right thing to do, not an obligation. I suggested it as a way to show my happiness. I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t want to kiss you.”

He gazes down at me, thoughtful. “But...Vivi, I still have two penises.”

My face heats. We’re going to talk about this *now*? “Okay, but I was talking about kisses. You’re taking things to eleven.”

“My body does not please you. I can build you huts and kiss you all day long—and I would love to kiss you all day long—but it will not change the fact that I have two cocks. I will never be the mate you want me to be.” Skarr is somber, holding me loosely, as if he’s afraid that I’ll pull away again.

I realize that I’ve hurt him, and I feel even worse. How many times have I felt awkward in my own skin, being too tall and too plain? It’s a feeling I recognize, a memory I have, and I hate that I’m making him doubt himself over something out of his control. It just makes me feel worse.

I gaze at his chest, unable to make eye contact. If I do, I’ll never be able to spit out the words I clearly need to say. So I fuss with the leather strap that crosses over his pectorals and attaches to his belt. It keeps the leather wraps pinned to his body and prevents his belt from sagging on one side when his belt pouches are full. I know it’s a practical sort of garment, but I think it looks a tiny bit rakish and I like it. I fuss with it, straightening it and trying to think. “We should talk.”

“I thought that is what we are doing right now?”

Ugh, he’s not making this easy for me. “I was very drunk that night and I acted in ways that I would not normally act. I certainly would never grab a man’s crotch without asking permission.”

He’s silent.

I pluck at the strap, flustered. “So you can’t hold it against me that I ran away. I was startled to learn about the... differences in our bodies, but that doesn’t make it gross. There’s nothing wrong with you. I was just surprised.”

“But it still does not appeal to you?”

“I have genuinely never given it much thought before now,” I admit, face hot. “Is it um, a normal situation for guys like you?”

“Ssethri males are born with two cocks, yes.”

“And do they both, ah, get hard at the same time?”

“They do for me, but only one carries seed.” His khui is humming louder under my hands, making me very aware of this conversation and the husky way Skarr tells me facts about his body. “The other just experiences pleasure.”

I have so many questions, but I don’t know how intrusive they would be. Do lady ssethri have two vaginas? Are his penises the same size? Does one feel better than the other? Get harder faster? It seems nosy to ask, but I don’t get the impression that Skarr minds. I think he likes me asking about his penis. Penises.

I manage a tiny smile and nudge the leather strap with my fingers again. “See, there you go. It’s normal for your people but not for mine, and that’s why I got startled. I didn’t run because I thought you were repulsive.”

“So you would have continued to kiss me?”

“Not if you didn’t want me to.”

“Would you kiss me now?” he asks, voice low and husky.

It sends heat curling through my system. “Only if you want me to.”

He gazes down at me, eyes bright. His fingers stroke along my jaw, lightly caressing. “I would like that.”

I nod, licking my lips nervously. Then I pull on that strap across his chest, tilting him toward me. I’m nervous, but not

afraid. This is Skarr. He might be alien, but he's made it clear that he *worships* me. It's heady stuff.

His mouth descends towards mine, and I rise to meet him. Our lips brush ever so gently, and a bolt of pleasure flares through my body at that small touch. I kiss him, putting all of my sincerity into the touch of our lips. I want him to know how I feel. That I never meant to hurt him. That I'm terrified of what the future brings, but it's not his fault. That kissing him has been one of the few pleasures this new world has brought me.

That I miss him when he's gone, and it makes me feel strange to admit that.

Our mouths play against one another and he's content to let me lead. My kisses are soft and gentle, giving promises and teases and only the barest graze of tongue. He groans against me and then I pull back, studying his expression.

"I know I've been wrapped up in my own head," I confess to him, my mouth throbbing and soft. His is flushed a deeper green, and I want to kiss it again, but I also want him to reach for me. "But I promise I'm going to do better."

He rubs his nose against mine, drinking in my scent. "My lovely, perfect Vivi...I do not know what that means. Do better than what?"

Oh. Heh. I smile wryly. "It's a human saying. I'm going to try harder to figure this out between us."

"What is there to figure out? I am your mate, you are mine." His mouth brushes over mine in an almost-kiss, a teasing flirt of lips, and it sends a flutter straight to my thighs. "Resonance has decided, yes? We are together because we are the best ones for each other."

"Yes but—"

Skarr pulls back, eyeing me. "What 'but'?"

"I'm anxious," I admit. I'm still clutching at his clothing, and I have to force myself to uncurl my fingers and let him go. "I'm scared of what the future means because I still feel as if I don't have a past. Can we go slow? You and I?"

He strokes my cheek with his fingers, and I have to admit, I like the soft, careful touches. Like he can't get enough of me and has to steal just a bit more. "What does it mean to go slow, Vivi? Tell me honestly because I do not wish for there to be more misunderstandings between us."

"I want us to spend time together. I want us to get to know each other. Not just as mates but as friends, too. I want to take a bit of time before we...before we get pregnant." It feels silly to state it that baldly, but I need him to understand exactly what I'm saying.

He tenses, a hint of a frown on his face. "So no kisses?"

"No, we can kiss. We can do other stuff too, but if I say I want to go slow, I mean..." I fumble around for the words, thinking. "Like if we're touching and kissing and I tell you to stop, I want you to stop."

He pulls back, his expression offended. "You think I would not *stop*? That I would ignore what you want?"

Oh, I'm really messing this up. "No, I don't mean that, Skarr. I think you would. I *know* you would. I am just setting the expectation that I might say no at inconvenient times and I don't want to feel pressured."

Skarr gazes down at me with a look of vague displeasure.

"What is it? Tell me so we can talk about it." His expression is making me anxious, like I've gone and borked things already.

"I am tempted to go find a human male and shake him. Are they all so terrible you must give me warning after warning?"

"Not at all," I protest, scrambling. "But it used to be different amongst our people, and...actually you know what? I'm not going to defend men. I'm just being extra cautious. I would like for us to start with kisses and spending time together before we get to...you know."

"Before we get to two cocks," he agrees, grinning at me.

"Exactly."

"Very well, I shall not go and push Jason into the sand."

I smother a horrified giggle. “Please don’t.”

He grins at me, pleased at my laughter. “I should like to spend time with you this day, Vivi. Shall we pick out blankets for your new home? And I can bring food and we can eat in here.”

“Honestly? That sounds absolutely lovely.”

“But I would like to kiss you again before all of that.”

We’re being so polite, he and I. With another giggle, I nod. “I would like that, too—”

I can’t get out the words before he pulls me against him, his mouth on mine. This kiss isn’t timid like mine, either. It’s hungry and devouring, showing me all the pent-up hunger inside him and fanning the flames of mine. Skarr’s tongue teases against mine, stroking and caressing and leaving me weak in the knees. I’m aching and my demanding khui is humming when he pulls away and gives me one final, possessive kiss.

So much for being polite.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



SKARR

I want to strut around the camp with elation as I go to get food for my Vivi.

She loves the hut. She wants to spend time with me. She wants to kiss me and get to know me before I extrude both my cocks at her again. She likes being with me. I grin as I wait by the fire for the food to be ready, listening idly to the conversations without paying attention. My thoughts are full of Vivi and how her mouth turned so pink when I kissed her. How sweet her lips felt against mine, how she pressed her body to me, hungry for more.

Initially I worried that the khui would mind-control me into wanting to pleasure her, but now I fear I am the one mind-controlling her. What if she does not truly want me? What if she is not telling the truth? It will destroy me. I must talk to her about it when I return. Confess that I've told me all about the khui taking over our minds and making us want to pleasure each other. She has been honest with me, so I must be honest with her, even if it will ruin our fragile truce. I hate the thought.

To think she was worried I would treat her like the human males treat females. I would never. Just thinking about it makes me angry. True, when I first arrived I thought of her as a prize to be won, but now I see her so much more clearly. She truly is my partner, and I cannot fathom not listening to her wise suggestions.

The female making dinner—Colleen—hands me two bowls and I give her a nod of thanks. Jason approaches the fire, talking to Sabrina.

I stick my foot out and trip him as I walk past.

He tumbles to the ground with a yelp. “Hey, what the fuck, man?”

“My mistake. I thought you were someone else,” I say, continuing on. That one was for Vivi and the other human

females.

As I approach the new hut—Vivi’s hut—with the steaming bowls, I hear the sound of soft humming from inside. It’s Vivi, making happy noises as she moves around in her home. My heart aches with wanting her. Wanting *us*.

I do not want her gratitude, or her obligation. I want her to want me because I am fierce and strong and the best male for her.

Waiting outside the door of the hut, I clear my throat. “May I come in?”

She appears in the doorway, holding the flap aside. There’s a radiant smile on her face, and my khui sings even louder, even as my heart aches at the sight of her. “You don’t have to knock, Skarr. You made this place.”

“I made it for you, and I want you to feel as if you have a retreat. I do not mind knocking.”

Vivi waves a hand, dismissing my words. She takes one bowl from me and gestures at the interior of the hut. “I grabbed enough furs from storage for two beds. I hope that’s all right.”

Two...beds? “Why are there two?”

“I thought maybe you could sleep here, too.” Her voice is soft, her eyes full of anxiety. “I know it probably isn’t what you wanted, having two beds, but I don’t know that I’m ready for sharing one just yet.”

“You would share your hut with me?”

“Of course.” She holds her bowl up. “You’re sharing with me. And I did say I wanted us to get to know each other.”

This is more than I dreamed of. So much so that I fear it truly is mind-control. I must tell her about this. “Vivi, I am worried that this is not something you want.”

Her brows go up.

“I think I am somehow controlling your mind.”

She blinks up at me, absorbing my confession. “Is...is this a ssethri thing?”

“No. But I’ve warned me that after resonance, mates want to do anything to please the other. And everything that is happening is so perfect that I worry I am influencing you away from what you truly want.” I gaze down at her, trying to will her to push back a bit more. To hate me a little, because then I will know she is herself.

But Vivi just bites her lip, smiling up at me. “That’s not mind control. That’s just someone coming to care for you. I can assure you that I’m not being mind-controlled by the khui.”

“But how do you know?”

“Because I’m still not ready to have sex with you? If it was truly mind control, we’d have already been all over each other. Instead, we’re waiting.”

Perhaps I am the one being mind-controlled, then, because I desperately want to mate with Vivi, to feel the warm clasp of her body around mine. To touch her and drink in her scent. I do not share this aloud, though, because if I am being mind-controlled...I am fine with it. “If you are sure...”

“I’m sure.” She gestures at the two pallets of furs now opposite from each other by the fire pit. “Pick a spot and let’s eat.”

It’s dark inside the hut, the only light from the smoke hole above and the glow of our eyes. I can see fine in the dim light, but I remember that humans don’t have keen senses. “Should I make a fire?”

“I can do it. I thought we’d wait until after we ate, because of the whole fuel thing.”

Ah, very wise. “Let us eat, then.”

We share our meal in silence, eating from the borrowed bowls. When we’re done, I take them down to the water’s edge to clean them while Vivi starts a fire, and fill one of the bowls with sea water so she can rinse her hands. The weather is picking up, a bitter chill in the air, and I suspect tomorrow

morning will be cold enough to make my fingers and toes ache. Perhaps it would be wiser for me to sleep in the big cave with the other males, tucked between baskets of storage and with the warmth of several bodies keeping the place warm, but I want to stay with Vivi.

When I return with the water, she beams at me from over the flickering fire. “Perfect, thank you.”

“Is the fire pit a good one?”

Her smile grows broader. “It is.”

I am prouder of this than of winning a fierce battle.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE



VIVI

I wake up in the middle of the night to a bitter chill. I sit up in the furs, my breath frosting in the air in front of me.

The fire has died and taken most of the warmth in the hut with it. I can bundle up and tuck an extra fur around my feet, but I think of Skarr and his ssethri heritage. He probably needs the fire.

So I crawl over to the firepit to poke the coals and see if there are any alive.

Skarr is asleep in the mountain of furs on the other side of the fire pit, his back to me. If I've woken him, he gives no indication, the lump of blankets not moving at all with me stirring. I smile to myself, rebuilding the fire with a few more dung chips. I'll have to go collect extras to make sure we have ample supply if Skarr needs them. I don't mind—I like walking in the hills and snowy valleys beyond the cove.

Tonight was nice. After dinner, we sat around the fire and just talked. I asked him about his earliest memories, and I went over mine, too. He told me of some of his fights, and we discussed other skills that might be hiding in my memories. I'm excited to try to make skis, but Skarr doesn't want a pair for himself.

“I like my feet on the ground.”

“You mean two feet deep in snow?” I teased.

He made a face at that.

But it was nice to just sit and talk the two of us, with no expectations for more than conversation. To be open and honest with each other instead of skirting around things. We haven't yet talked more about resonance, or babies, or if we'll seek out the healer. There's time for all of that. For now it's just nice to exist and not feel like I'm doing everything completely wrong.

I lean in and blow on the fire to build the flames, and accidentally knock my fire-poking-bone with my foot. It clatters on the stone floor, and I wince and look over at Skarr again.

No response. Not even a twitch.

For some reason, that worries me. I get to my feet and creep over to his side of the hut, shivering. The floor is like ice, the air ridiculously frigid. If I were back home I'd say a blizzard came in and we're several degrees below zero, but it's hard to tell without thermometers. I kneel next to Skarr as he sleeps and peel the layers of covers back. He'll be annoyed I've woken him, but better safe than sorry. He rests inside the cocoon of blankets, one hand palm up next to his face.

I gently brush my fingers over his hand.

He feels like ice.

"Skarr?" I whisper, taking his hand in mine and squeezing it. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't stir. My khui is humming at his nearness, but the hum isn't the normal, frantic one. It's slow and measured, and Skarr's song is so faint I can barely hear it. I reach out and tap his cheek with my cold fingertips, expecting to meet warm skin.

He's colder than I am. There's no warmth to his flesh.

"Skarr?" I grab him and shake him, panicking. His head falls back, lolling, and I whimper. He can't be dead. He can't. I can hear his khui. I push him onto his back and press my ear to his chest. He's still wearing multiple layers of clothing under the blankets, and yet it doesn't seem like enough. His heart is beating, but the steady thump of it is sluggish, and I'm reminded that he's part ssethri, and they're cold blooded. I don't know how that mingles with warm blood, but clearly not well.

He needs warmth.

I immediately grab my furs from my side of the hut and pile them atop him, then slide under the furs. Pressing myself against his side, I wrap my arms and legs around him, trying to

share my warmth. It's like hugging a corpse, and the only thing that stops me from panicking is the slow, slow thump of his heart under my hand and the even slower song of his khiu.

“Wake up,” I whisper in his ear. “Please wake up so I know you're all right.”

Skarr continues to be limp in my grasp, and I fret that I'm not getting him enough body heat. Does he need more, or am I too late? Should I undress to share skin-to-skin warmth? After a few moments of indecision, I decide yes, I need to undress him. I roll him onto his back again and tug at his leather clothing, pulling ties open and revealing cold green skin. I manage to get his thick overwraps and tunic open, but I can't get the clothes off his arms without flipping him again, so I abandon them for his pants.

I blush as I undo his belt and tug the pants down his legs. His groin is smooth, no sign of two cocks anywhere, and I remember how they seemed as if they sprang into my hand when I touched him. Lizards back home don't have dangling dicks (at least not that I'm aware of) so it must be tucked inside his body somehow.

Once he's as naked as I can get him, I toss his leathers aside and then strip mine off. I press my bare body to his, wrapping a leg at his waist and rolling our joined bodies onto the side again, with his back to the fire and his front pressed to me. This is better, I think. I hold him tight, sliding my hands underneath his open tunic and caressing his back. My khiu is loving this—the purr grows louder with every breath I take, but I'm far more concerned with Skarr waking up than with fulfilling resonance.

“Skarr?” I try again when his flesh feels as if it's warming. “Can you hear me?”

To my intense relief, his eyelids flutter, and he seems to shake himself awake. “Vivi?”

“Yes! Good! You're here!” I tighten my arms around him, hugging him close. “I was so worried.”

“Tired,” he murmurs thickly, his eyes closing again.
“Are...you naked?”

“I think the cold is affecting you.” I press myself closer to him. “Your body was like ice.”

“Bah. ’m...strong.”

“The strongest,” I agree softly. “Now go to sleep. I’ll stay here and make sure you stay warm.”

He nods and tucks his head against my neck, nuzzling his face against the curve of my throat. He breathes in deep and then sighs with contentment, drifting back to sleep.

I stay where I am, stroking my hand up and down his bare back, my legs twined with his. I should be overheated with the fire going like it is and the sheer number of blankets, but Skarr’s body seems determined to bleed away heat. We’ll have to figure something out, and I mentally debate fur-lined sleeping bags with room for two and fuzzy boots and gloves for him.

I don’t sleep for most of the night, getting up occasionally to tend to the fire and just holding Skarr close. I don’t think I’m in love with him, but he’s become a friend, and I’m not going to let anything happen to him. The wind tears at the hut, whistling through a few chinks in the walls, and I’m grateful to be inside with Skarr. I can’t imagine how he would have handled being in the cave. I don’t think he would have liked waking up to cuddling with Kyth or Valmir or Chalath. Jason, maybe.

The thought makes me giggle.

The wind stops howling, replaced by a soft quiet that reminds me of snow. I bet if I look outside, I’ll see a white blanket of snow covering everything except the slushy waves of the sea. Skarr sleeps heavily, his face nuzzled against my neck and then later sliding to rest against my breasts as he burrows deeper into the blankets. Definitely a sleeping bag of some kind, I decide, my mind drowsy.

Maybe one with sleeves for him...

And mittens...

I wake up to the sound of a low groan and lips brushing over the curve of my breast. A whimper of pleasure escapes my throat and I dig my fingers into Skarr's soft hair. "You're awake?"

"I'm angrier that I slept through this," he breathes against my skin. "Your teats are magnificent. Have I slept against them all night?"

"Mmmm...more or less." His mouth feels good against my skin, and I rub my fingers against his scalp, not wanting to ruin this drowsy, delicious moment. "You were too cold."

"Warm now." His tongue slithers over the tip of my breast. "So warm now. Can I touch you?"

It occurs to me that he already is, that asking for permission at this point is like asking to let the horse out of the barn once it's already in the pasture. But it feels good to press against him, and his mouth against my skin feels even better, so I make a sound of assent and steer his head toward my breast.

Skarr groans, capturing my nipple in his mouth and sucking on the tight bud of it. His hands roam over my back, pulling me tighter against him as he teases my breast. He sucks on the tip until it's hard and aching, and then teases his long, slender tongue against it. I'm not certain, but I think the very tip of his tongue is forked, and the idea of what a forked tongue will feel like sends an erotic curl of heat straight to my groin.

Something hot and protruding bumps against my backside, followed by another bump.

"Ignore that," Skarr murmurs against my breast, his teeth lightly scoring the curve.

"Wh-what is it?"

"I extruded," he says, and then turns his head to toy with my other breast.

My breath hitches as he nips the tip and then soothes it with flicks of his tongue. I rock my hips against him, and sure enough, I can feel the thick heat of his cocks pressing against

my backside. Now that the shock of it has gone away, I'm curious what two cocks will look like...and more importantly, what they'll feel like. So I slide down against him, circling my hips and trying to drag against the parts he just told me to ignore.

Skarr hisses against my breast, glancing up at me. His eyes are sultry with arousal, and as I stare down at him, he rolls my nipple against his tongue. It's forked, all right. "I thought you did not like my cocks, Vivi."

"They're growing on me."

"They are indeed." He rubs up against me, and it feels like one large thick rod of flesh pressing against my backside.

"That's not what I meant," I say, but I smile and cup his face in my hands. "How do you feel?"

"Like I just won a tournament." He rubs his mouth against my breast. "Now I think I should have fought harder when a female prize was up for the winning."

"I'm going to choose to be flattered by that," I tell him, stroking a hand over his skin. There's a bumpy line of scales up his spine, but other than that, he feels smooth and supple. "But I meant how do you feel this morning. Is the cold bothering you?"

"My cocks are cold. We should find a warm place to put them."

I roll my eyes and snort-giggle. That might be the worst pick-up line ever. "I guess you feel better if you're saying shit like that." I stroke his soft hair back from his face, searching his gaze. "You sure you're all right? I was really worried last night."

He presses another kiss to my nipple, then reluctantly drags his gaze from it, looking up at me. "I don't remember very much of last night. Just that it was cold and it was hard to move. The ssethri are a warm-weather people."

I'll bet they are. "Unfortunately for you, you landed on a cold-weather planet."

“I do not feel very unfortunate right now,” he says, and rocks his body against mine again. This time I distinctly feel the heads of two separate cocks drag against my skin. “In fact, I am quite content.”

“Are you?” I can’t resist a smile. It’s hard to try and stay focused on worrying over him when he’s clearly amorous. “Just for the record, we’re not having sex.”

“This is not sex, no. This is just enjoyable.” He buries his face between my breasts and makes a happy sound.

I chuckle again, sliding my hand to his front. “Maybe you should stay in the hut today. It sounds like we had some weather blow in and I don’t think you should go out.”

That makes him lift his head and frown at me. “And let the others know of my weakness?”

“We won’t let them know anything,” I say. “We’ll tell them we’re getting to know each other because of resonance. No one will bat an eye.”

“Mmm.” He sounds unconvinced.

“I’ll tell them the cold bothers me and you’re going to keep me company. It’s a bait and switch. If anyone suspects anything, they’ll think I’m the weak one,” I say, my tone encouraging. Maybe if I put it like it’s a battle strategy, he’ll be fine with it.

But the thought brings more displeasure to his face. Skarr frowns deeply at me. “No one should think you are weak. I don’t like that at all. They should know that you are clever, and capable, and—”

I put my fingers over his lips. “Yes, yes, and the best female on the planet.”

He nods against my fingers.

“It’s just a fake out. Truth is, I don’t want you going out in the snow today. Okay? I want you to stay here in the warmth with me. Listen to how quiet it is outside. Everything’s buried in snow and that muffles sound. Until we can tell how you handle the intense cold, it’s better to stay close.” I tap his nose.

“Remember that we’re a team. We have to do what is best for the team.”

He considers for a long moment and then gazes down at my bare breasts again. “Will you stay naked?”

“To share warmth? Probably. Skin to skin *is* best.”

Skarr brightens. “Then I think I should stay, yes.”

I don’t even care that he’s being obvious. I’m pretty obvious, too. All that matters is that he’s not going out in this mess and we’ll stay inside, where it’s warm and safe. “I’ll go get the morning meal and you can get the evening one. Deal?”

He grumbles, but I get my way.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



SKARR

The cold of this world presents a problem. I've always valued my ssethri blood in the past. Ssethri are canny, strong fighters with malleable joints and impeccable dexterity. But all of my battles in the past have been in temperate climes, on warm arena sands.

I am not a creature for an ice world.

Vivi is realizing this, and her face is full of worry this morning. She dressed in layers of leathers to go get food, her gaze on me the entire time. I watched her teats jiggle with appreciation until they were covered, trying to hide the fact that I do find it quite cold without the warmth of her body against mine. Even the layers of blankets and the fire aren't helping much. My fingers feel like ice, but I do not want to admit this to Vivi.

"I will keep the fire going," is all I say. "And when you get back we will kiss more."

She smiles at me and then ducks out of the hut, and the chill that comes in just that small lift of the flap is enough to send me huddling back under the furs. I watch my breath frost in the air and hate that I must hide away. What if Chalath demands a rematch this day? What if hunters are needed to get another inevitable khui for Kyth?

I cannot stay inside forever.

The interior of the hut seems to grow colder by the moment with Vivi gone. I poke at the fire, but I do not have the skill with it that she does, and it does not feel like I am doing anything to help it. I stab a frozen cake of fuel and toss it onto the coals, but even that does not seem to help. She has been gone for a long time. I pull the furs tighter around me, moving closer to the fire. What if something has happened to her? What if she got lost on the small stretch of beach between this hut and the main fire? Why was I a fool who decided to build her hut so far down the shore?

I need to go after her, I decide. Clutching the warmest furs to my skin, I drag them across the hut with me to retrieve my leather pants, and then my boots. I pull one boot onto my foot —

—and the door flap swings open, letting in frigid air and a swirl of snow.

“Whew!” Vivi says as she comes back in, her arms laden. “It is *cold* out there!”

“It is cold in here, too,” I grumble, but I notice her cheeks are flushed pink and she is smiling. She *likes* the cold weather, and I feel a sharp stab of despair. Perhaps I am not the best mate for her after all.

“Good news. There’s a blizzard,” she tells me cheerfully, shifting a pack off her shoulders and setting it onto the floor of the hut.

“Why is that good news?”

“Because it means that this sort of weather isn’t the norm. It’s the outlier.” She tosses down a few more furs and unhooks a couple of bulging bags at her belt. “There’s no community fire this morning. Gail flagged me down when I was heading toward it and invited me into their hut for a few minutes. They gave me some supplies since they figured we didn’t have any and told us to hole up like everyone else. No one’s going anywhere.”

She seems pleased by this statement, even as she busily pulls a few large sticks out and starts to set them up at the edges of the fire pit.

“I should have helped you with all this,” I grumble, flexing my hand under the blankets. It aches, just like my feet and the tip of my tail do. Actually, everything aches with cold right now.

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” Vivi replies, bending the poles to lash them into a tripod. “You can help prep the food if you like. I have some dried meat and roots and we’re going to make a hot stew. Gail also gave me a skin full of tea, though it might be lukewarm by now. Did you

know there's a shell here that looks like a funnel? I'm going to have to find one for myself. Handy little thing. It made getting the tea in the skin really easy."

She's talkative this morning, and I can't help but feel more like a useless fool at her side. "I can make the food," I grumble, and dig through the packs. There are two different kinds of roots in the first pack, and I pick the first one up, holding it out to her. "This root?"

Vivi takes it from me, and as she does, her fingers brush mine. "Skarr, you're like ice again!"

"Am I?"

I watch as she immediately strips off her clothing, her lips pursed with focus. She flings her tunic aside, revealing her pretty, bouncy little teats again and then her boots and leggings come off. I open one corner of the furs, inviting her in, and I love that she immediately sprawls against me, pressing her warm—so keffing warm—body against mine.

Groaning with the pleasure of it, I immediately extrude again, like a foolish boy. "Ignore that."

She chuckles and slides her arms around my neck, tilting her face toward mine. I kiss her, brushing my lips against hers, and her tongue teases against mine. For a long moment, the world is silent as Vivi kisses me, all hot, wet mouth and thrumming khui. When she pulls away, she lets out a little sigh of pleasure and wriggles against my throbbing cocks. "Better now?"

"If I say yes, are you going to get up?" I pull her closer so I can feel her nipples drag against my skin. They get tight and hard when I touch her, little pebbles of flesh that I'm just dying to take into my mouth again. "Because if that is the case, no. I am frozen solid and need your body against mine at all times."

My joke lands poorly. Her smile turns into a line of worry, and this time when she runs her hands over me, there is no desire to it, only fear. My cocks shrivel and threaten to slide back into my body. "Skarr, I want you to tell me when the cold

bothers you. I don't want to get into the same situation like we did last night."

"Last night, when I woke up with my mouth upon your teats? I did not mind that."

Her expression hardens. "Last night when you were so cold and unresponsive I thought you were dead."

Her tone is as wintry as the landscape, and my cocks retreat fully. "I am not weak—"

"It's not about weakness! It's about knowing your vulnerabilities so they can be accounted for!"

"Bah. I have no vulnerabilities."

Her nostrils flare and she looks enraged. "You're being a stubborn ass and I want to kick you right now."

"You want to spar?" I am not sure I will be at my best, but if Vivi wishes to try me out, I will go easy on her.

"No, I just want to inflict damage because you're making me angry." She presses her fingers to my face, testing my skin, and then gets up again, unfolding her long legs. Her teats tighten to pricks of pink in the chill of the hut, and she adds a few more cakes to the fire and finishes the tripod.

I remain quiet, because I do not know how to appease an angry female. Nothing in my arena training has prepared me for this. I know how to put an opponent in a headlock, not how to make them smile at me. I need more of the resonance mind control, like I've suggested. Presents work, and pleasuring her.

Ah, I should pleasure Vivi. I eye her naked, shivering body as she chops food for the stew. I try to help with the knife, but she glares at me so hard that I pull my hand back. I offer her a fur to wrap over her shoulders instead, and this she takes—but glares at me anyhow.

Pleasure, definitely, I think. She liked it when I licked her teats, but it did not make her cry out like Flor did when I've been touching her. Then again, Flor screamed that she was sitting upon his face. So he could tongue her cunt? He

mentioned that before, as well. I lick my lips, eyeing Vivi's lean form as she stands. There's a teasing little tuft of hair over the cleft of her cunt, hiding everything from my sight.

I bet I could lick her there and she wouldn't scowl at me.

But if she doesn't come to join me under the furs again, how will I get her to lie down? Should I tackle her and twist her into a leg lock? I contemplate the grappling moves I know, looking for one that hurts the least and will still have the desired result of prying her legs apart.

Females are so complicated.

"Here," she says, interrupting my thoughts. She thrusts the waterskin toward me, the contents sloshing. "This is the tea Gail made. It might still be warm. Drink it while the stew is heating."

"You should come and drink some, too," I encourage, pulling out the plug of waterproofed leather that fits in the mouth of the skin. I tilt it back and grimace at the taste of the tea. It's warm, all right, but it also tastes like leaves. Not my favorite. I hold it out to Vivi and she gestures that I should drink again.

"I'm mad at you," Vivi says when I lower the skin. "I'm mad at you and I'm trying to remind myself that you don't think the way I do, so I'm going to talk about it instead of turning and leaving like I want to do."

My eyes widen and I automatically reach for her. "I don't want you to leave."

She tries to pull out of my grasp, retreating away a bit. "I don't want to leave either, but Skarr...remember when I broke my finger and you looked out for me? You being affected by the cold is no different than that broken finger. If we really are a team and we're going to look out for each other, that means you have to let me look out for you, too."

"But this is different."

"*How* is it different?"

I stop the words before I say them. *It's different because it is happening to me* will just make her angry. I know her well enough now to realize this. "Because I am supposed to protect you as your mate."

"What about me? Can't I protect you? We're supposed to be equals. That's what a partner is."

Frowning I imagine a scenario where Vivi might be able to "protect" me. I imagine us in the arena, with opponents rushing toward us, and a hot stab of fear makes it impossible to think straight. I do not want her anywhere near that. I certainly do not want her standing at my side, toe to toe. She should never be in danger, not when I'm around. "I...I don't know."

She tilts her head at me, her expression exasperated. "I can take care of myself, Skarr. You have to trust that—and trust me—if we're partners. Do you trust me?"

I know what the right answer is, and yet I don't know that I can give it. "I am trying. I do trust you."

"But not enough to sit back when I say sit back?"

I hesitate again, because it goes against everything I am to "sit back" and let someone else take care of things. I am always in the lead. I am the instigator. It is how I have been trained. Yet Vivi does not seem pleased with this, and I desperately want to please her. "I will...try? How far back must I sit?"

Her lips twitch and she gives me an exasperated smile. "Please try. I trust you, you know."

"You do?"

She nods. "You've proved yourself to me. Apparently I have farther to go to impress you."

It wounds me that she thinks she is not perfect in my eyes...and yet this is the opportunity to sway her thoughts, to use the mind control that I've hinted at. "If you trust me, then we should wrestle."

Confusion moves over her face and Vivi straightens, putting the last of the vegetables into the pot to let them cook. “I’m sorry, what?”

“We should wrestle,” I state again.

“Like...to get blood flowing? Or is this some sort of ceremonial thing?”

“No, nothing like that.” I hold my hand out to her and get to my feet. My breath puffs white in the air and I immediately want to return my naked body to the blankets, but this will not take long. Vivi has said herself that she is no fighter, and I have no wish to truly wrestle. It is simply to get my way. “I will not hurt you. We will be quick. You trust me, right?”

I can see on her face that she feels cornered. Her skepticism is plain to see, but if she backs out, she has made a liar of herself. Her jaw clenches, but she puts her hand in mine. “I trust you, but if this is a trick, I’m going to be really upset with you.”

“You will like wrestling.” I give her my best smile and shift my feet on the icy floor. “Just tell me to yield if you are uncomfortable, but I know I will not harm you. I am an expert.”

Vivi looks around the hut. “Okay, well, how do we want to do this?”

“We should seat ourselves, perhaps in the furs. The goal is to end up on the floor anyhow.” I sit down on the furs and toss one over my lap to warm my legs and tail, and give her an encouraging look.

“Floor wrestling?” Her brows go up, but she sits across from me, resting on her knees, and then gestures that she is ready.

This is too easy.

I loop an arm around her waist and rock our bodies backward. It is clear that she has no idea how to block me, because the moment one of her legs goes up, I push it aside with my knee. She is on her back with one swift move, and in

the next one, her legs are spread and pushed against her chest, her feet near her ears.

And she is beautifully spread out for me to enjoy.

“I won,” I tell her, stating the obvious as her eyes go wide. I pin her legs with one arm and run a hand down her flank. Just touching her makes arousal flare through me. “Can I lick your cunt now?”

She stares up at me in surprise. “Is that what this is about?”

“Among other things.” I trail my fingers up and down her leg and she shivers. “So...can I?”

Vivi wriggles in my clutches. “You know you can just ask me? There’s no need to throw wrestling in.”

“I am asking now. Can I?”

She goes still, her cheeks flushing with color. “If you want to.”

Oh, I do. I am salivating at the thought of it. The scent of her body is all around me, so heady I can taste it in the air. I smell the musk of her scent and the heat of her skin, and I want to put my mouth all over her. I lean over her, rubbing my face against the inside of one thigh and groaning as I drink in her scent.

She shivers, and I immediately sit up. Blankets. Furs. We need warmth. I do not want to freeze my tail off while I pleasure her. “Stay there.”

While Vivi sputters, I toss the blankets over her body and burrow under them for warmth. Now I am trapped under here with her, and her scent soaks my surroundings. My mouth waters again, and I run my mouth along her soft, soft skin. I like this. I like her scent and her naked body. I like being able to put my mouth all over her. My khui is singing loudly, demanding that we mate, but it will have its due soon enough. For now I simply want to pleasure my female.

I think this means my mind is fully under control, but I do not care. Let me be a slave to her whims. I will gladly do whatever Vivi wants, so long as I can taste her.

My tongue slips from my mouth and I lick the delicate bend of her leg where it meets her cunt. She sucks in a breath and goes still under me, one of her hands straying to my hair. She twines her fingers there and makes a soft sound in her throat. It sounds like encouragement. Good. I want to be good at this. I want to be the *best*, so she knows I am the perfect mate for her. I need to pleasure her so fiercely and so well that she wants nothing more than to stay in the furs with me forever.

The thought is such an enticing one that I bury my face between her thighs and lick.

Vivi jumps, her body jerking with surprise. A little squeal escapes her, hand tightening in my hair, but the sound just encourages me. She is sensitive here. I lick her, moving my tongue over her cunt and folds with long, sweeping strokes. Kef me, her taste. It's incredible. Why did no one say that licking your female's cunt would be so addictive? No wonder I've had his mate sit on his face—he is wasting no time and going straight to the source. Smart male.

I wrap one arm around her hip, circling the top of her thigh and anchoring her in place so I can focus my attention on the slick heat of her cunt. The hair that teasingly hides her cunt from me is springy and thick with her scent, and I nuzzle it before returning to long, lapping strokes of her cunt with my tongue. There is so much to explore here. Her folds are irregular, some longer than the others, and frame the cleft of her sex enticingly. The entrance to her body is flushed a deeper shade and enticingly wet. I tease it with the tip of my tongue, and love when she whimpers and jumps. There is a nodule at the apex of her slit, but I am not certain what it does for her—my memories do not provide anything on human anatomy. I touch it with my tongue, circling around it—and a ragged whimper escapes her.

Fascinating. I tap it again, and she lets out another choked moan.

Perhaps this is like the head of the cock for her, where she is most sensitive. This is fascinating, and I lick her again,

loving the taste of her on my tongue. “I could stay here all day, I think.”

That makes Vivi moan again, and she arches her hips against my tongue. “God, you’re killing me.”

I pause, lifting my head. That doesn’t sound good. “Should I stop?”

“No!” She tugs on my hair, dragging my face back down against her cunt. “Keep going. Touch my clit.”

So bossy. I love when she is demanding and confident. “I will, if you point out which part is a clit.”

She makes a choked sound and then her hand steals down her belly, pushing past my face. She teases a circle around the nodule with one fingertip, and her breath quickens. “Here.”

Mmm, so it has a name. A clit. Vivi continues to touch it and I push her hand aside. “My turn.”

“Then do it,” she demands, her tone peevish.

I smirk, because her impatience makes my cocks want to extrude right out of my body. Already the bulge of them is pressing hard against my groin, demanding out, demanding that I seat myself deep inside her. Later. For now, I am enamored of her taste, of the little quivers her thighs make when I lick her, and I want more of this.

Who knew mind control could be so pleasant? All I want is more of this, more of the clench of Vivi’s legs tightening against my ears, of her breathless sounds, of the slick arousal that her body produces every time I tongue her. I toy with her clit, using the same motions she did, and then impulsively lean in and suck on the small bead of flesh.

“Oh,” she moans, her legs squeezing tight around me.

Aha. I feel as if I am unlocking all her secrets. I suck harder, tapping at her clit with my tongue, and she writhes against my mouth, making another choked sound. “Skarr, Skarr,” she pants. “Just like that. Oh, keep going.”

I groan at her excitement, my cocks extruding despite my best efforts to stay focused on her. The cold hits my shafts and

I immediately press them into the furs, enjoying the pressure as I concentrate on sucking on my mate's cunt.

To think, I have not even gotten to the ass-sucking and she is making such delightful, erotic sounds.

"More," she pants, her voice rising as I continue to tease her. "More, more."

I cannot possibly tongue any faster, though I try sucking harder. That elicits a squeal and a violent wriggle. "Ow! Not like that!"

I lift my head, grinding my cocks against the blankets. "Tell me how, then."

"Mouth...fingers..." She tugs on my hair, trying to pull me back down. "Please...fast...I don't want to lose my orgasm."

It can be lost so easily? I'm displeased at the thought. I lower my head and redouble my efforts on her clit, teasing and swirling the skin around the bump of it with my frantic tongue. Her breathless cries tell me I'm going in the right direction, and then she starts to call for more once again. I tongue her harder and then remember that she mentioned fingers. Of course. I am a fool.

I skim a finger through her cleft and she whimpers, her thighs trembling. When I tease one at the entrance to her body, she arches to meet my touch. And when I sink it into her, she makes a muffled sound and then she is squeezing my finger tightly, her cunt fluttering with her body's release.

Vivi tenses, a soft cry escaping her, and I groan, elated that I made my mate come. Her body shivers underneath mine as I continue to lap at her, because she tastes finer than anything I have ever had before. This is better than sparring, I decide. The victory is just as delightful as the battle. "Was I good at that?" I ask, pressing my lips to the inside of her thigh. "The best?"

"Amazing," Vivi breathes, a note of wonder in her voice. "Definitely the best."

Her praise makes my cocks jump in response and it is my turn to groan, scraping my teeth against her inner thigh. "I like

it when you tell me I'm the best."

"God, you are." She sounds awed. "No one's ever made me come so hard."

I grind my cocks against the blankets again. "Tell me more. Tell me how good I am."

Her fingers tighten in my hair. "You work your tongue like an absolute champion."

Oh kef, I like hearing that. I gasp, reaching down to stroke my cocks at her words. Finally she is acknowledging that I am the mate worthy of her, and my spirit soaks it up like the sands soak up a gladiator's blood.

"You made me come so hard. You paid attention to what I needed and gave me just that. And you sucked on my clit so good. You made me feel like you liked going down on me."

"I did," I groan, stroking my primary cock and then roughly dragging my hand over the secondary. "I love it. I want to do it again."

"I want to touch you first," she tells me.

I immediately jerk my hand away from my cocks before I am too far gone. "You do?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"If you are seeking to control my mind, know that it is already yours and I do not care," I reassure her. "I am already gone and happily so."

"Control your mind?" Vivi giggles, the sound so sweet and lovely that it makes me ache. "What if I said I like your mind?"

"I would say that with so many compliments, you are still dazzled by my tongue."

She chuckles again and pulls the blankets back to regard me. Her face is flushed and she's breathing hard, but she is lovely. More than lovely. She is perfect in every way, right down to the shy curve of her lips. "It's a very fine tongue."

I hiss, squeezing my eyes shut to concentrate. “If you keep complimenting me, I will come for certain.”

“I’ll be quiet.”

“I didn’t say that.” I open one eye to regard her. “But if you want me to hold off, you must tone down the erotic compliments.”

She chuckles again and then pushes at my shoulders. “Want to wrestle instead, then?”

With my vulnerable cocks extruding? I most definitely do not. “Perhaps I just yield to you right now instead and we promise never to speak of my defeat.”

My human mate grins and pushes at me again. “Then get on your back so I can claim my victory over you.”

Such words should not sound nearly so erotic, especially since they hint that I have somehow lost a battle. Yet Vivi’s eyes are shining and her naked form presses to me and I cannot help but give her everything she wants. I roll onto my back in the furs, leaving my abdomen and cocks vulnerable and open. “Take what you want.”

She doesn’t even look down at my sprawled body. She just grins and puts a hand to my neck, leaning in to kiss me. I kiss her back, devouring her sweet mouth and loving the hungry stroke of her tongue against mine. Pleasuring Vivi has only made her more enthusiastic, it seems, and I note this as carefully as I would any opponent’s vulnerabilities. She nips at my lower lip and sucks on it, and I feel this all the way to my groin, gasping when her teeth score my skin.

“That’s better,” she whispers, and pulls the blankets over both of us, hiding my body away under a mountain of furs.

“You don’t want to look?”

“I do, but I don’t want any important bits freezing off.” Her fingers run over my chest and circle my nipple. “I figure I’ll look with my fingers until it gets a bit warmer.”

I want to protest because I shamelessly enjoy her gaze on my body...but the blankets are quite warm and the chill of this

planet is never-ending. “Then touch me all you like.”

She tweaks my nipple with a little smile and leans in to kiss me again. I close my eyes, enjoying her mouth on mine... and my breath hitches when she scrapes her thumbnail over my nipple.

“Lower,” I murmur.

Vivi giggles. “You’re very demanding, you know that?”

“So is my mate. I learned it from her. She gives the throttiest little demands when I am between her thighs—” I tense as her hand slides down my belly, distracting me.

“Tell me if I do something you don’t like,” she whispers, and then ever-so-lightly strokes her hand over the head of my primary cock.

As if there could be such a thing. Everything my Vivi does is deliberate and perfect, right down to her demands. I immediately push into her palm, wanting the friction of her hand against my skin. Even so, I am tense—I wait for her to find flaw with me, to point out that my cocks are nothing like a human cock and that it displeases her in some way. That she will run from me again.

I hold my breath as she silently explores me with gentle, light touches, tracing the head of my primary and then gliding down the shaft, only to pause at the base. “No balls?”

“What balls?”

She leans in and kisses my lower lip again. “Where your seed comes from.”

“It...comes from inside me, just like blood.” She wishes to have an anatomy lesson right now about something like that? When I am practically pulsing in her hand? “Why is this important?”

“It’s not. Hush.” She silences me with another kiss and her traveling fingers graze the base of my primary, then move to my secondary and slide along it, learning the shape and size. “You’re very big. The biggest I’ve seen.”

More flattery. Kef, she knows right where I am vulnerable. “Keep talking. I love your words.”

“We’ll have to make sure I’m good and wet before we have sex, because you’re so big. Both cocks are large.” She toys with the tip of my secondary and then pauses. “Where does this one go?”

“Eh?” It’s hard to concentrate when her hands are all over my cocks, sticky with my arousal and throbbing in time with the khui’s endless song.

“Where does this cock go?” she asks again.

“In your body...?”

“Yes, but where? Like...the back door?” At my puzzled look, she clarifies. “You know, the back? The anus?”

“I...thought that was for sucking? I am happy to drive into it, too, if you like.” Actually, the mental image of that is quite nice. “But I thought we might go with your cunt first. I’m eager to feel it.”

She presses her fingertips to my mouth and shakes her head. I kiss them, wanting her to put her hand back on my cocks again, but she continues to shake her head. “No, Skarr, I’m confused. Why do you have two cocks? What’s the purpose?” She taps my lip. “Pretend like I’m completely ignorant of ssethri anatomy, because I am. Do both cocks serve the same purpose?”

I nod, my eyes glazed. I want her to go back to touching me. “Same purpose.”

“Then why have two?”

“In...case one gets tired?”

She purses her lips, and the sight is so charming and yet erotic. It makes me imagine pushing a finger between her soft pink lips...and then later, something else. “So you don’t use them both at the same time?”

“No. Just one.”

“Do they both have to come?” She blinks down at me. “Before you’re satisfied?”

“It feels better when both are pleased, but only one will carry my seed at a time. Is this...bad?” Is my body going to make her run away again?

Vivi kisses me again, fierce this time. “It is absolutely not bad. I’m just asking so I know what to expect. You’re my first ssethri.”

“You’re my first partner.”

Her eyes brighten with pleasure and she leans in and kisses me again, her tongue twining with mine. As we kiss, she slides her hand down my belly again, a sultry tease as she edges closer and closer to my cock. When she finally wraps her fingers around my primary again, I want to sigh with relief.

Instead, I pump my hips into her grip.

“Can I make you come?” she asks, ever so quiet. “Can I watch what happens?”

“I am yours, remember? You claimed victory over me.”

Her throaty chuckle makes my loins tighten. “So I did.” She traces a finger over the head of my cock in teasing circles. “Lie back and let me play with you, then.”

As if I want to leave this moment, ever. I am fully her creature, my mind controlled by her light touches and heady kisses. Vivi’s mouth is on me again, and then she takes me in her grasp and tugs. Her hand tightens as she begins a slow stroking rhythm, pulling on my cock similar to the way I work it when I jerk off, but far more gentle.

I think I can come like this anyhow. Just the fact that it is her hand makes me harder than anything. I rock my hips in time with her hand, my lips playing against hers. “Talk more. I like it when you talk.”

Her mouth curves in a sweet smile and she presses another kiss to my lips. “What kind of talk?”

“I like it when you are fierce and demanding.” Nothing gets me more aroused than seeing her fiery determination. If

she snarled at me I might come in an instant.

To my surprise, she leans closer, not quite touching me, and then whispers even as her hand works my cock. “You’re not going to get my pussy until you earn it, Skarr.”

My breath hitches. Kef *me*.

“Just because resonance says we’re together doesn’t mean I have to just bend over and do whatever you say. If you want me as your mate, you have to show me that I’m your partner. You have to impress me.” Her words are firm. “That means hunting together and working together like equals. But since it’s cold outside, I’ll go easy on you. You’re going to let me play with your cocks—both of them. You’re going to let me work you until I’m done with you, and then you’re going to lick my pussy again.”

Oh kef, I’m going to come. I make a ragged noise, my hips jerking frantically.

“In fact,” my female says in a soft, low voice as she runs her hand over the head of my cock and teases the wetness beading there down my shaft. “I think we’re going to stay in this hut all day. I’m going to learn your body, and you’re going to learn mine, but we’re not going to fuck.”

I groan. “No?”

“No. You’ll know when I decide.”

“You...want to sit on my face?” I ask, breathless and utterly entranced. She’s *magnificent* like this.

“Maybe I will. You don’t get to decide it. I do.” And she bites my earlobe.

Everything explodes. My release boils over and I clutch her tight to me, growling as she works my primary cock. The climax rolls through me, sharper than it has ever been, and the khui in my chest sings so loud it drowns out everything else.

Her hand, wet with my release, moves to my secondary cock, and she begins to stroke it as well. There is no moment to catch my breath, no moment to recover, and within a matter of moments, I am boiling over anew, coming hard as she

works and squeezes my cocks, milking every drop of my release. All the while, her naughty tongue does obscene things to my ear.

When my muscles finally uncoil, my spent cocks begin their slow retreat back into my body. She kisses me again, lingering on my lips. “Breakfast is almost ready. Hope you’re hungry.”

She says it so casually, as if she has not completely remade me in the last few moments. As if I am not, even now, struggling to catch my breath, to think coherently. All I can think about is a future with Vivi at my side.

Vivi touching me.

Vivi demanding I pleasure her as she rides my face.

I...might be the happiest gladiator alive.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



VIVI

All right, so two cocks isn't as weird as I initially thought it would be. I'm a little embarrassed that drunken-me ran away the first time. Yes, he does have two cocks, but they both feel normal, the delicate skin over the hard shaft and a bulbous head, just like a regular cock. The only weird thing other than the number is that he doesn't have balls to play with, but I figure two cocks would keep my hands full anyhow.

We clean up after breakfast, and I warm some water so we can wash. It cools down almost right away, and I hate to hand it over to Skarr. I'm still worried that the temperature here on this planet might be too much for him, but there's nowhere else for us to go.

Strange that I'm thinking "us" now. Strange also that I don't hate it.

Skarr pulls the slit in his groin carefully apart, pushing to have his cocks extrude again so he can clean them off. I watch him out of the corner of my eye, fascinated at the unusual workings of his body. His cocks are flushed a deeper shade of green than the rest of him, but they're...rather pretty. They're not insanely veiny or fat, just thick and smooth and pleasant, with no wrinkled nutsack dangling underneath. It actually looks...tidy. I decide I like it.

"If you keep watching me touch myself, I'm going to extrude all through the day," he tells me in a low voice. "And then my magnificent cocks will shrivel off from the cold and you will be sad."

I snort at that. "First of all, I wouldn't let them get that cold. And second of all...we're staying in all day, remember? So you can extrude all you want."

He gives me a heated look and as I watch, one thick cock pushes out from his groin, followed swiftly by the second. "Now you've done it," he mutters, but he doesn't seem

unhappy at my attention. I bet he's preening inside, my ridiculous peacock. It makes me smile.

I need to remember that Skarr is a virgin. It was clear when he was going down on me that he was new to things—a fast learner, but definitely new. The thought rouses my protective instincts, weirdly enough. Like it's another vulnerability of Skarr's that I'm going to keep secret, as a partner should do. He's so very proud that anything to puncture a hole in that ego of his would be devastating.

And strangely enough, I don't feel like taking him down a notch. I'm growing oddly fond of his ridiculous brand of self-hype.

Fooling around in bed also confirmed a few memories for me, too. I'm not a virgin. Or at least, the person I was before was not. I have faint memories of old boyfriends, hotel rooms and nights in cozy tents and a faceless summer fling from Anchorage.

Alaska. All my scattered memories of hiking and skiing and the mountains are suddenly making sense. My dad loved Alaska. Loved the independence of it and having a cabin deep in the woods and coming up for supplies when he had to. That's where I've gotten all my knowledge from. Now I'm remembering that Dad didn't like the Anchorage boyfriend because he just wanted sex from me.

Turns out Dad was right.

The memory makes me smile instead of frustrating me. I don't mind that it's a piecemeal sort of memory because I don't need details. All I need to know is that I've got a lot more experience than Skarr when it comes to this sort of thing. I'm going to have to take the lead if I want him to know how to pleasure me, how to make me come. Luckily he's eager to learn.

Once we've cleaned up, we snuggle under the furs by the fire again. I peek outside and see the snow isn't going anywhere, so I sit in his lap, naked, his limbs curled around mine as we discuss everything and nothing in particular. We talk about the weather, and I tell him about Alaska, which was

so beautiful in the summer and so unforgiving in the winter. I tell him a little about my father, and then I try to explain how skis work to an alien man who has never seen snow before landing here.

It goes about as well as you think.

“I still do not understand,” Skarr says in a grumpy voice, his arms around my waist and his chin on my shoulder. “Two oversized planks on my feet would slow me down, not speed me up.”

I’ve been laughing at his confusion for a while now, because he’s so delightfully clueless about skis. “I told you—they’re oiled. You glide over the top of the snow instead of sinking in. That’s how you go faster.”

He grunts. “Oil up anything and it will glide faster. I don’t see why it has to be a giant wooden plank strapped to my foot. You are pranking me.”

“I swear I’m not!”

He makes a sound that says he clearly doesn’t believe me, and it makes me laugh even harder. “I’ll show you when the weather gets a bit better. Hopefully the sun will come out and melt some of this snow away.”

“There are two suns,” Skarr reminds me, pressing a kiss to my bare shoulder and sending shivers of delight down my spine. “And if you think those puny things can melt anything you are crazy...which might explain why you want to strap wood to your feet and hike through the mountains.”

“Bone,” I remind him, giggling. “There’s not much wood here.”

“Bone. That’s even worse.”

“That’s for later, though,” I say, sliding my hands over his and linking our fingers. His are still a little cold, which means I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. “The first order once it’s warm enough to leave the hut is to go out and pick up more fuel. I know there’s enough for everyone in the supply tents, but I want to have a stash of our own for the really cold nights when we need to burn more.”

“Like last night?”

“Exactly.” I don’t tell him that I’m also thinking of ways to make the hut warmer, like lining the walls with stitched-together leather to make yet another layer to protect us from the outside. I’m also thinking thick rugs to cover the stone floors, and so many furs in bed that Skarr will be sleeping like the princess and the pea with twenty mattresses under her.

“I will help,” he says, pressing another kiss to my shoulder. “Even though it is beneath a gladiator of my caliber to shovel shit like a drudge, but if you do it, so will I.”

“That shit keeps you warm,” I remind him, tilting my head so he can keep kissing my neck, because it feels amazing. “The others aren’t going to give you a hard time for hanging out with the women, are they?”

A few of the gladiators—Valmir and Chalath namely—have balked at the thought of learning some tasks because they are “not warrior work.” I’m not sure how Skarr feels about it.

He shakes his head, his mouth trailing up to nibble on my ear. “They only say that because Valmir is frustrated with a female and Chalath is jealous that no one has resonated to him.”

“A female?” I ask. “Which female?”

Skarr shrugs. “The weak one with the dark mane.”

That could be literally anyone. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that.”

“I don’t know. They all look the same to me because they are not you.” His tongue traces the curve of my ear. “Why do you taste so good, Vivi?”

“Mmm, you’re biased?” I know I am, because his mouth is making me crazy.

His hand slides down my belly, brushing his fingers over the curls between my thighs. “Can I touch you?”

I bite my lip and nod, leaning back against him. We’ve been casually touching all morning after our make-out session and my khui is humming so loud it feels feverish in my chest.

I know this isn't going to do anything but temporarily scratch the itch, but damn it's fun.

Thinking about the khui also makes me think about resonance. "What do you think about babies, Skarr?"

With one finger, he circles my clit. Such a fast learner. I bite my lip to keep from moaning aloud. "I do not think about them at all, if I am being honest."

"Well, resonance comes with babies."

He slips a second finger down to my clit and then frames it between his digits, rubbing from both sides. "Ours would be the best baby ever, obviously."

I press back against him, gasping as he teases me. It's difficult to concentrate when he's determined to make me come all over his fingers. "Yes...but...do you...have you...been around...babies...?"

"Never."

His response is like a splash of cold water. Reluctantly, I lift his hand from my pussy so I can concentrate on my answers. I don't want to be distracted. "We'll need to figure out how we feel about babies before we move forward."

Skarr immediately puts a hand to my breast, plucking at my nipple. "What is there to figure out? Resonance makes babies, does it not? There is no deciding anything."

He's both right and wrong. "Flor told me that the healer can stop resonance, but it doesn't feel good. That would mean no baby and no link between us except for what we choose. Or if we decide to have the baby but we're not ready to be parents, we can give our child to someone else to raise. It sounds callous, but if you're not going to be a good parent and I'm not ready to be one, we might want to consider it."

"Give our child away?" Skarr seems shocked at the suggestion.

"Only if we can't hack it ourselves. I would rather the baby have two loving devoted parents instead of two crappy ones."

“How do *you* feel about being a parent?” he asks. “You have not said.”

No, I haven't, because I don't want to influence him. He needs to be honest with how he feels about babies before I state how I feel one way or another. If I tell him I want a baby, he'll declare that he does, too. If I say I don't, I worry he'll agree just as an attempt to please me.

I'm honestly not sure of my own mind right now. Two days ago I would have said I didn't want resonance or a baby at all, but everything has changed so quickly. I've never given thought to being a parent, but I think about how cute Penny's little girl Brenna was and how sweet her hair smelled. I need to think about babies seriously myself, too. Luckily the camp is full of them, so I can watch how the parents here handle raising their children. I can't imagine that being a mother in this environment is a cake walk. Maybe it'll be too much for me.

“I haven't decided,” I answer him honestly. “I'll let you know when I do.”

His hand creeps down my belly again. “If I am honest, I have not given much thought beyond mating.”

“Me either.” And I don't want to think beyond enjoying myself right now. There's plenty of time for that tomorrow. I guide his hand between my legs, and this time when he teases my clit, I slide my other hand behind his neck and hold on to him.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up to Skarr's mouth on my breasts. His weight is over my thighs, his lips tracing patterns on my skin. “Good morning,” he murmurs between kisses. “Can I lick your cunt?”

My thighs automatically spread, because resonance is making me ridiculously aroused, and he's getting better with his tongue every time we're together. Skarr makes a pleased noise and slides lower, gripping my hips and burying his face

between my thighs. I whimper, sliding my legs over his shoulders, and I'm not surprised when he rolls onto his back, carrying me with him. I sat on his face last night and he absolutely loved it, coming so hard that he'd sprayed my back with his release.

I rock against his hungry mouth as his tongue plunges into me, and he groans, the sound muffled and full of hunger. He spears me with slick thrusts of his tongue and I lean forward, bracing my weight on my hands so I can angle things just right and rub my clit against his nose. Skarr can hold his breath for an insanely long amount of time, and it makes him going down on me that much more intense.

I ride his face until I come, and then I slide off of him, collapsing in the furs and panting. He watches me with heated eyes, his hand on first one cock, and then the other. I press my palm to my forehead, trying to catch my breath, and notice that it doesn't frost in the air of the hut despite the fire we've kept going. "I think the weather is better this morning."

The grunt he makes tells me that he doesn't give a fuck about the weather right now. "Play with your teats for me," he says, his head falling back in the furs, his gaze locked on me. "Make your nipples stand up."

"Hey now, I'm the one that gets to give orders around here," I tease. "Maybe I don't want to."

He groans, stroking his primary cock harder at my sass. I glance down his body at his hard cocks, and notice that the larger of the two—the "primary" and the one he reaches for first—is leaking a line of pre-cum down the head and over his fingers.

I lean over him and carefully pry his hand away. "It's my turn to touch you."

"Do it," he rasps, his eyes wild with need.

I do, but I reach for his secondary cock first. I stroke it, working him with my fingers, and then I give my palm a messy, thorough lick and wrap my hand around him again and

stroke. His breath stutters and his eyes widen. It'd really blow his mind if I licked him...

So I do just that. I lean down and lick his cock. Just once, and then he's spurting his release all over my face and hands. He makes a sound that might be horrified, might be just relief at coming, and I stay still until he's done. He drops back onto the furs with a sated sigh.

"Good?" I tease.

"Next time it will be better. I will be more ready for the glory that is your mouth."

I chuckle at that, getting up to wipe my hands off with the nearest scraps of fur. When I'm done, I sit next to him in the bedding again, and he pulls me close. "Ah, my foolish mind," he muses. "I do not miss the control of it."

I poke his chest with my finger. "Quit acting like it's mind control every time we touch each other."

"It is true, is it not? Before I met you, I thought about battles and sparring and how to spring a move on my opponent. Now all I think about is your nipples and your clit and when I get to lick them. If that is not mind control, I don't know what is."

Sigh. This ridiculous man. Maybe the khui does have a touch of mind control, because instead of me being annoyed by his words, I find it...cute.

Pretty sure that means I've lost my mind, too.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT



VIVI

When the twin suns are high in the sky, I poke my head out of the hut and test the air. I have to run to the bathroom anyhow, and right now I feel more like going to the tent-like latrines set on the far edge of camp rather than doing my business in the hut again. I want a privacy screen for that section of the house, I decide. I'm comfortable with a lot of things in this world but...not that comfortable.

I jog across camp, waving back awkwardly at the people that wave at me. I'll probably never know how to strike up a comfortable conversation with anyone, but it'll get easier with time. I hope. The weather does seem warmer, and several of the hunters have their skins spread on the pebbled sands, scraping them clean. Someone else is setting out drying racks for fish and seaweed, so I think it's safe for Skarr to emerge. I finish my business and head back to my hut.

Just thinking about it fills me with a strange sense of joy.

My hut.

The hut that Skarr built for me. A private hut with the door facing the inside wall of the cliff so I can be as isolated as possible while still being in the village. It's just so thoughtful of him and it makes my heart warm to realize he spent so much time and effort on this to please me.

He's a good guy, even if he's a little loud and overly in love with himself. Thinking about his boasting just makes me smile as if it's a charming quirk, which means the khui is definitely doing a number on me. How have I gone from wanting him to fall off a cliff into finding everything he does adorable and sweet? I'm a little disgusted at myself, and amused, too. Is this all because he gave me a hut and I got a few orgasms? Or is it because we're finally starting to understand one another?

I hurry past the fire and then pause, slowing down. Veronica—Ashtar's mate—is there with her two small

children. She's talking to Penny, her hand on her arm, and one baby in her lap while her older son sits nearby, spooning breakfast into his mouth. There are others by the fire, of course, but I'm interested in Veronica's children.

This might be a good time to test how Skarr is with kids.

Returning to the hut, I duck inside. Immediately, Skarr grabs me by the waist and pulls me against him, kissing me. "Mmm, you were gone a long time."

"I was not." I slide out of his arms, crossing the hut. "Get dressed. I want to go sit by the fire with the others for a bit."

"You...do? That does not sound like you." He puts his hands on his hips and regards me, a skeptical eyebrow raised. "Is something wrong?"

I pick up his tunic and shake it out, then hold it up for him. "Not at all. Just trust me. You'll see what I mean when we get to the fire."

He makes a few grumbling noises and it's obvious he'd rather crawl back into the furs and let me sit on his face again. Okay, I might like that, too, but I also need answers. I need to know if this strange bond between us is going to work or if we're going to have to take more drastic plans. "How many children are in this camp, do you think?" I ask casually. "Nearly every family seems to have at least one young child."

"Do they? I hadn't noticed." Skarr folds his tunic over and then belts it.

I immediately grab another fur wrap and stuff it under his tunic, around his neck, to add warmth. Am I fussing? Absolutely. I haven't forgotten what it felt like to find him limp and unresponsive in the hut, his skin ice-cold. "Bundle up just in case."

"Bossy," he says, but his eyes gleam and I can tell he likes it.

Getting dressed to go out into the frigid air is a production, but when I'm convinced that Skarr is warm enough and that the only part of him that's exposed is his face and his tail—I need to make him a tail wrap of some kind, I realize—I toss a

warm cloak over his shoulders and then lead him out of the hut.

Veronica is gone by the time we get to the fire, which is disappointing. Another woman is there, though. Her name is Steph, and she's breastfeeding an infant while she chats with Penny and S'bren. Others are coming and going by the fire, but they look as if they're sitting for a few. Good.

I take Skarr by the hand and all but drag him across the encampment, toward the fire.

"You must be quite hungry," he comments, letting me lead him.

"Famished," I agree. We make it to the fire circle just as Steph puts her baby on her shoulder, burping her. I point at the open seat next to Steph. "You sit there. I'll get food."

He does as I ask, and I grab a few bowls of "breakfast"—which just looks like a warm fish stew—from Lauren, who's on food-and-fire duty today. I watch Skarr out of the corner of my eye as I do, and I'm a little worried to see that he barely glances over at Steph and her baby. If anything, he seems as if he's avoiding looking in their direction at all.

"Can Skarr hold your baby, Steph? He was curious about infants," I call out, deciding to take the bull by the horns.

Skarr sits upright, his eyes widening. He seems to notice Steph and her baby for the first time and stares.

Steph just grins at us, fixing the neck of her tunic and wiping the baby's face. "I would love that. My mate's off with our son practicing their traps, and I would love a break." She holds the baby out to Skarr, watching him. "Have you ever held a baby before?"

The look on his face is one of sheer terror. After a panicked look in my direction, he turns back to Steph and shakes his head.

"Her name is Jethani. She's a wriggler so make sure you hold her tight, but not too tight. Just let her sit on your leg and keep her occupied. Make sure she doesn't put anything into

her mouth.” She looks over at me and winks, then continues speaking to Skarr. “Think you’ve got it?”

He takes Jethani—a fat, sweet-looking girl who seems barely old enough to crawl—and holds her at arm’s length with an expression of consternation on his face. “Should she be drooling like this?”

“She should,” Steph says, trying not to laugh. “And it’ll be easier if you put her on your lap, like I suggested.”

He gives me another alarmed look. “What if she wants a teat?”

“Then you hand her back to her mother,” I tell him.

“How will I know?” He pulls Jethani a bit closer to him, that mystified expression remaining on his face. “She is very small and squishy. Is this normal?”

Steph is the soul of patience. She doesn’t panic when Skarr awkwardly settles the baby on his knee. She just reaches over and plops the baby against his chest and maneuvers his arms until he’s holding her securely. “Like that. And yes, it’s normal for her to be small and fat. Babies don’t look like adult humans for a while.”

“She is wearing a loincloth,” he points out in a voice of sheer awe, touching one of her small knees when she wriggles her feet. “And tiny boots.”

“That’s a diaper,” Steph says. “It’ll be a while before she’s old enough to know how to use the bathroom like an adult. For now she relieves herself in the diaper and I change it.”

He jerks in surprise, eyes wide, and lifts the baby off his leg, holding her into the air again. “Right now?”

“Not right now. In general.”

Jethani squirms, reaching for his hair. She grabs a handful and jerks on it, playing with the strands. To his credit, Skarr does not blink, just continues to hold the child and fires questions at Steph. “Is that why her legs are short and flailing like that?”

“Exactly.”

“And her head looks like a lump?”

“It’s not a lump!” I protest, trying not to laugh.

“All of her is a bit like a lump,” he whispers as I sit down next to him with our food bowls. “I am not saying it to be cruel. She should know her strengths and weaknesses so she can compensate for them.”

“Babies are very little humans,” Steph continues. “They won’t look like adults for a long time.”

“How long until they grow up?” he asks, fascinated.

“About twenty years?” Steph says.

Skarr’s jaw drops. He shoots me another panicked look and then glances back at Steph. “You have to change her diapers for twenty years?”

I can’t help it. I burst into giggles.

“Not twenty years,” Steph reassures him. “Only until she’s old enough to figure out how to tell me when she needs to relieve herself. It’s different for a lot of children, but some learn in less than two years. It’s hard to say because Jethani is a hybrid of myself, a human, and my mate, who is an Islander. If you don’t mind holding her for a bit longer, I’m happy to answer as many questions as you like. Babies must be new to you.”

“Very new. And I do not mind holding her,” Skarr says. Jethani jerks on his hair and giggles, and his face breaks into a grin. “She likes me best out of all the warriors here. I can tell already. She knows she is in the arms of a champion.”

Steph, to her credit, does not blink an eye at the self-aggrandizing. She just calmly puts a burp cloth on his shoulder and pats it in place. “You’re going to want that.”

The baby wriggles, her legs dancing and bouncing on his strong one. He holds her carefully, watching her moves with fascination. “Is she trying to spar?”

“No, I’m pretty sure she’s going to puke.”

I lean away, and sure enough, the baby lets loose. Skarr looks horrified. “Did I do that to her?”

Steph continues her lesson in her soothing voice. “Nope. She just got excited. Let’s clean her up and I’ll show you how to play peek-a-boo with her. She loves that.”



WE STAY by the fire all day, holding children of various ages and teaching Skarr about babies. Steph stays all morning, until Jethani is tired and cranky and she puts her down for a nap. She sends Pak out to sit with us when he returns from fishing with his father, and Skarr gets into a mock-fight with the little boy, complete with fake punches. He sprawls on the ground when Pak lands one, groaning dramatically. “I have been felled!”

I hide my smile against Aayla’s hair as she plays with a leather doll in my lap.

“Excellent work, warrior,” Skarr tells the boy. “You will be one to fear soon enough.”

Pak’s rabbit-like tail flutters happily.

“Now fight me,” Z’hren says, bounding forward and putting up his fists in a boxing pose.

“I do not know if I dare,” Skarr tells him, all seriousness. “You have so many fists I am certain to lose.”

Gail shoots me an amused look. She’s sewing a fur ruff onto a hood, seated next to me by the fire. There have been people coming and going all day, but Gail seems to do a lot of her work by the fire. She says she likes to help out if anyone needs it. I suspect she just likes being in the thick of things, unlike me. She’s really nice, though. She makes a stitch in the fur and then leans towards me. “For someone that’s never been around children, he’s good with them.”

“He is.” There’s a sincerity to children that meshes well with Skarr’s loud personality. He tells them he’s an incredible fighter and they believe him, because children believe adults.

And so when he solemnly tells them that they have real promise as warriors, they preen with delight.

“Show me how to throw a punch,” Liz’s oldest daughter Raashel demands, racing up to join the sparring group.

He nods at her, gesturing for her to come forward, and demonstrates how to position her fist, and how to hold her thumb.

“Is this the first time he’s been around the kids?” Gail asks me. “You guys have been here for a few days now.”

“I think this is the first time he’s truly noticed them.” He’s been caught up in resonance. We both have.

“Well, he’s going to be popular with them, I can tell. You’re going to have a lot of little faces at your hut each morning, wanting to play.” She smiles, shaking her head as she sews. “Just warning you now.”

“It’s fine.” And surprisingly, I realize that it is. I don’t mind children showing up on our doorstep wanting to spend time with Skarr. Children don’t make me uneasy.

“Did you see my doll’s hair?” Aayla asks, lifting her doll to show me. “It’s in two buns because her name is Princess Leia.”

“Very pretty,” I agree, and wonder how a child born on this planet knows anything about *Star Wars*.



LATER THAT NIGHT, Skarr curls his big body around mine in bed. He presses his mouth to the crook of my neck, his favorite spot, and kisses me. “I think I like children.”

“I think I do, too,” I whisper back.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE



SKARR

ONE WEEK LATER

“I promise you, this is how they’re supposed to look.” Vivi shoots me an amused look as she straps one of the skis to my boot. Just her bending over in front of me like that is enough to make my cocks want to extrude and my khui is singing loudly. Resonance presses upon both of us hard, but Vivi has not indicated she wishes to mate yet, so I wait.

And wait.

Truly, the waiting is not so bad. Vivi and I spend most of our time together, and at night we are in the furs, kissing and touching. But the longer this goes on, the more difficult it becomes to control my cocks. I extrude in my sleep and wake up grinding against her. I think about mating constantly. I ache with hunger for her. My cocks constantly throb with need.

I hope she decides we are mates soon, but until she does, I must control myself. I give her rounded backside a hungry stare and then bite back a sigh, forcing myself to look at the ski on my foot instead. “It looks ridiculous.”

Vivi laughs, unoffended. “It does not.”

“It does look a bit like a canoe,” Nadine offers, watching from nearby. She has been helping Vivi with skis for days now, both of them trying different versions before settling upon this one. I see them together often, their heads bent, smiling and laughing, and I am glad that my Vivi is friendly with her...and I am jealous at the same time.

I want all her laughter. All her smiles.

And because I am a jealous fool, when they suggested trying out the skis, I insisted I join them. Now I have a slippery wood-thing strapped to my boot. Nadine hands me a pair of poles and I lean on them while Vivi slips the other ski on my foot. By the time she is done, I am sliding back and forth on the snow, trying to remain in the same spot and failing. “I am drifting!”

“Turn your ski,” Vivi instructs without looking up.

Nadine finishes strapping hers to her feet and braces herself on her poles, testing them out. “Not bad, not bad.”

“Let me put mine on and we’ll give them all a test run.” She grins with excitement up at the others. The skis are twice as long as my feet and not very wide. I turn slowly in the snow, lifting each foot as I prepare myself. We are bundled up heavily and have taken to the hills just above the cove to test the skis out in the snows. Vivi worries they will not stay together well enough, so we’ve picked a “small” hill to ski down.

Now that I have these bone sleds attached to my feet and I feel how uncertain my stance is on the ground? The hill looks very large indeed. “The bottoms of my skis feel very slippery,” I confess as Vivi finishes strapping her skis to her feet and stands upright. “Are they supposed to?”

“They’re slippery because they’re greased,” Vivi tells me. “So we can go faster, remember?”

“If you don’t want to try the skis out with us, I can go get Thrand and you can watch Deenie instead.” Nadine’s tone is sweet.

“Bah,” is all I say. I should be the one with the skis on my feet, as it is my mate’s idea. “I will be excellent at skiing. Wait and see.”

“I’m sure you will, babe,” Vivi tells me, and poles her way forward a bit, testing the skis on her feet. “This version seems to be holding. That’s a good sign.”

“They feel sturdy,” Nadine agrees. “Much better than the reed ones. I think the length and width helps, too.”

Vivi makes a humming noise. “They’re not as long as I want, but maybe that’s a good thing? We’ll just have to take it slow and make sure we don’t topple over as we go downhill. You remember what I told you, Skarr?”

I remember some of it, but I had also been admiring how strong and fine she looked when she was instructing me. “Balance my weight on my knees. Do not lean forward too

much. Crouch. Steer with my knees. Turn to the side when I get to the bottom so I can stop.”

“You’ve got it.” Her eyes sparkle and she skis over to me, then puts one of her poles in the wrist loop and pulls a hood over my head, tucking a scarf around my neck. “How’s your tail sock?”

“Warm. I like it.” She made me an attachment that ties to the back of my leggings that covers the majority of my tail and helps me stay much warmer. I do not care for the festive pom-pom she put on the end, but it makes her smile and I like her smile, so it stays.

Vivi beams at me and taps a finger on my nose. “I’ll go first.” She turns to the other woman. “Nadine, you want to go last so you can help Skarr if he gets stuck?”

Nadine nods. “Will do.”

My female flashes a smile at us and then shuffles to the edge of the hill we are upon. She pushes off and crouches low as she glides down the side of the hill, picking up speed as she goes, her poles lifted horizontally under her arms. Near the bottom, she wobbles, almost losing her balance, and my heart leaps into my throat. I start forward to go after her, but she rights herself and I can breathe again.

When she gets to the bottom, she turns her skis and straightens to her full height, waving and giving us a thumbs-up gesture that means she is happy.

“Go for it, Skarr,” Nadine says. “You’re up.”

I bite back a heavy sigh. I will be excellent at this, I am certain. I just...do not want to do it. I like my feet on firm ground. But Vivi is gazing up with an expectant look and I do not want to disappoint her. Gritting my teeth, I move to the edge of the slope and hunch over.

The skis move forward a handspan, nothing more. And they do so agonizingly slow.

“Push off,” Nadine says. “With the poles.”

“I know this. I was just testing.” I try to push myself forward with the poles, but the angle is wrong.

“You want me to give you a nudge—”

“No,” I snarl at her. “I have it.” I shoot Nadine an indignant look and try to push myself forward again. This time I start to slide forward and pick up speed, and the snowy slope begins to rush past me. My heart does not beat as I fly at high speed down to the bottom of the hill, and I laugh in triumph when I make it all the way to the bottom. I knew I would be the best!

But...then I keep going.

I stand up, surprised, and look back over my shoulder at Vivi as my skis keep on carrying me across the snows, the momentum of my speed propelling me way past my mate.

“You have to turn your skis to stop,” Vivi calls after me. “Otherwise you’re going to keep going.”

“I am simply testing them,” I call back to her.

“Of course you are, babe.” Her laughter is sweet on the air, taking the sting out of her words.

I finally figure out how to turn my skis and when I do, I flop over onto the ground. Hmph. I will need to work on that part. I suppose I cannot be amazing at everything right away. Getting back on my feet proves to be a bigger challenge than the hill. By the time I manage to get upright again, Nadine is down the hill and standing with Vivi. I slide my way back to them and I have to admit, it does let me move across the snow quickly.

Vivi’s eyes are bright with excitement. “Let’s try going across the snow down here and go cross-country for a bit. I want to give the skis a real workout before we call them a success.”

We ski for a bit longer, but then one of Nadine’s blades breaks, and then the two women spend a long time examining the broken piece, looking for flaws and discussing how to make it stronger for the future. “I should head back anyhow,” Nadine says, glancing up at the suns and their position in the

sky. “Thrand and Deenie are going to be wondering where I am.”

“We’re going to stay out for a bit longer,” my mate says. “If the weather holds, I want to ski out to one of the supply caves. Don’t wait up for us.”

“Oooh, a sexy honeymoon. You know I won’t.” She winks at us and then waves, picking up the broken pieces and hiking back up the snowy hill to the trail that leads back to the beach camp below.

“We are staying out for longer?” I ask Vivi, surprised. “For a sexy honeymoon?”

My mate moves closer to me, skiing to my side. She bumps into me and grins, and then adjusts the scarf around my neck again. “Not exactly. We’re partners, right?”

“Right...?”

She gazes up at me. “Do you trust me?”

“You know I would follow you anywhere.”

Vivi pats my chest. “Good, because I’m about to ask you something crazy.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY



VIVI

I see the tracks again.

The moment I landed at the base of the hill, I noticed the heavy drag mark next to the paw prints, and I realize the same snow-cat that followed us across the mountains is still in the area. I forget all about the skis and the weeklong project I've been buried in.

A plan forms in my head.

Part of me knows we should be getting back to camp. Sabrina is organizing things for Flor and I'rec's wedding feast, and I should go back to help cook, or tend the fire, whichever way I can contribute. But if this snow-cat has a busted leg, he deserves our help. I've been thinking about this ever since my finger broke and healed up so quickly thanks to the khui. If his leg is broken, it likely healed wrong. This means that I can re-set his leg and it will heal properly and he can go back to being a normal snow-cat.

I don't know why, but it's important to me that I help it. I just need to get Skarr on my side to see that what we're doing is right.

"There's an injured snow-cat out here and we should help it," I tell him. "I think it has a broken leg. I want to fix it."

"You want to...hunt it?" he corrects.

"No, I want to help it. I want to re-set its broken leg as best we can so it has a chance of surviving."

Skarr gazes down at me, a frown of disapproval on his face. "But it is a fierce animal. Everyone says that snow-cats are dangerous. I brought no weapons, and I do not like the idea of you going near a wounded creature."

"We're partners, remember? You have to trust that I know my limits. And my idea is a simple one. Hannah showed me this herb that grows nearby on the cliffs. It makes you sleepy and you pass out. We can pull a kill from a cache, stuff it full

of the herbs and wait for the cat to eat it. Once it's asleep, we tie him up and fix his leg, and then we release him again."

"But how do you know he will eat it?"

"If he's got a busted leg, he's probably starving. He'll eat it," I say confidently, even though I have no idea if my plan will work or not. I'm just winging it, but I also don't want to sit back and do nothing and wait for someone else to kill it. The sitting-back-and-feeling-sorry-for-myself phase of my life is over, just like my old life. I'm Vivi now, and Vivi doesn't wait for shit.

Vivi makes shit happen.

"Come on," I tell him, adjusting my poles. "Nadine showed me where the closest hunter cave is." I point at a distant peak. "If we get to the other side of that, there's a cliff that has a fat double rock on top of it, and the cave is just underneath. We'll supply there and get weapons, and then track the cat."

"You're sure this will work?"

"Not in the slightest, but we're doing it anyhow," I tell him confidently.

I wait for him to object. For him to tell me that my plan is stupid, or that he thinks we should leave it alone. That messing with a predator is dangerous. Instead, a slow smile curves his mouth and he grins at me. "I love it when you're bossy."

That's good, because I like being bossy.



THE SKIS MAKE TRAVELING EASIER. We glide over the snow, avoiding hills when we can and just hauling ourselves over the mostly level terrain in the valleys. I pause a few times to gather leaves at the plant Hannah showed me. It's easy to pick out because the leaves have a gray underside with a V pattern, and they're plentiful. I fill my belt-pouch with them and we continue on. We're still sweaty and winded by the time we make it to the supply cave, but the light is just starting to fade

when we find it. Nadine told me that it was at least a day's travel away from the camp. That means we crossed nearly a day within a few hours.

I like it. The skis held up, too, though they're showing a bit of wear. I'm pleased.

We find the fat double rock and comb the cliffs until we see the entrance to the cave. Just as Nadine described, there are supplies in here, though they're not put away as neatly as she said. They look as if they've been rummaged through, and I'm guessing that whatever hunter was here last was a slob.

Doesn't matter. I spy several bone spears in the back of the cave, a basket full of fuel cakes, and furs. The temperature is dropping with encroaching nightfall, and I'm reminded again that Skarr needs warmth. I've been checking with him all day to ensure that he's not too cold, but he's been fine. The extra layers I've added to his leathers this last week have helped, along with the tail-sock. His tail isn't thin and whip-like like the sa-khui. His is thick and meaty and has a lot of mass, and he loses a lot of warmth when it's naked in the cold.

I'm not risking him for a snow-cat, no matter how much helping it means to me. "We'll build a fire and I'll work on getting some snow to melt while you take care of it. Do you need help with setting up blankets?"

"No." He flexes his hands and lifts his arms, flexing his biceps. "Your fierce warrior has plenty of energy."

I don't bat an eye at his showing off. "It's not your energy I'm worried about but your temperature."

He lowers his arms. "It's much warmer today. Nothing aches."

"You'd tell me if it did? So I can prepare accordingly as your partner?"

Skarr nods. "The only thing troubling me today is resonance."

Me, too. I focused on skiing for the last few days because it helped to have a purpose, a goal in mind. But skiing with Skarr today reminded me how strong he is. I'm sweating and

winded after all that skiing but he just looks warmed up. He could probably go all night, and the graceful way that he handled his poles after a bit of practice? It made me weak in the knees. Even now, I'm staring at him a little too hard.

I'm...not entirely sure what I'm waiting for, I realize. To remember my old name? I'm realizing today that it no longer matters to me. At some point I've stopped thinking of myself as a clone, a strange replica wearing someone else's skin. I'm not a faceless nobody, or Vivian the clone. I'm Vivi, a bossy human woman who resonated to Skarr, the most arrogant gladiator on the planet. And I'm good with that.

"You don't think anyone will come after us, do you?" Skarr asks as I crouch near the fire pit, setting up fuel cakes at the center. "If they do, should I chase them off?"

"They won't come after us."

"How do you know?" He doesn't share my confident assessment. "I would come after you."

"That's because you're my mate," I tell him lightly.

He grunts. "True."

"I know they're not going to come after us because of what I told Nadine," I explain. "When we don't come back, they're going to assume we are holed up in a hunter cave, fulfilling resonance."

Skarr nods, expression thoughtful as he hands me another fuel cake. "Do you think they will believe our feint?"

That's adorable. He still thinks it's a feint. The more I think about it, though, the more I decide I like the idea of us taking tonight for ourselves. After all, there's a lot of downtime at night, and our little cave is very isolated. I like that thought a lot, so much that it makes my khui sing louder. I mentally command it to quiet down, because if Skarr realizes we're going to fuck tonight, he's not going to want to do any sort of preparation for the plan.

"Here's what we're doing," I tell him in a firm voice once the fire starts. I get to my feet and stretch. "We put away the skis and poles and I need you to make a bed for us with the

furs here. I'm going to take one of those spears and find the nearest marked cache—we passed one close by—and pull two small animals from it. One for us for dinner, and the other to stuff with the leaves. I'm also going to get some snow for us to melt for water. You're going to stay in here and make things cozy so when I come back I can just relax.”

Part of me expects him to gripe about the role reversal—I'm basically telling him to stay and keep the home fires burning—but he just nods. “If you are not back by dark, I will come looking for you.”

“I'll be back,” I promise him. And then I lean in and give him a kiss full of promise that scatters his thoughts.

He gives me a dazed stare as I pull back, and it's clear he wants to kiss me again. “I'll make up a bed.”

I grab a spear and a leather satchel, test the heft of the weapon in my hands, and then head out.

By the time I come back, Skarr is waiting at the entrance of the cave, the firelight glowing behind him. He brightens at the sight of me, taking the two frozen beaver-like hoppers from my belt hook. The bag I've carried slung over my shoulder is now full of snow waiting to be melted, and I fill the extra carved bone bowls and pouches with slushy snow while we wait for the first batch to melt. The truth of the matter is that a huge bag of snow only amounts to a very small amount of water melted, so we have to be careful with every drop unless we want to work on melting it all night.

“I started a tea in the pouch,” he tells me as I strip off my cloak.

I beam at him as he moves the privacy screen in front of the cave entrance and pushes it into place. “That's wonderful. I appreciate it.”

“I know. You washed your hands? I don't want you getting sleep-leaf all over yourself.” He moves to my side and pulls one of my boots off when I raise my foot. “I plan on licking your cunt at least twice and I don't want you falling asleep on me.”

“As if I could fall asleep when you’re doing that,” I tease, my lower belly fluttering at the thought of him going down on me. “I should probably wash up first.”

“I can wash you.” Skarr gives me a lascivious look. “It will be my pleasure.”

That makes me smile, because it’s a blatant attempt to get me naked and touched. “Will you, now.”

“I will. Am I not the most generous of mates?”

“So generous,” I murmur, lifting my other foot for him to pull the boot. He tosses it aside, and a loose dark curl falls over his forehead, making him seem boyish, and my heart melts at the sight of it. This man is mine tonight, I decide. Ours might not be a conventional romance, but it doesn’t have to be. It’s going to be *ours*. He’s my mate and I’m his. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“If we had a baby, would you want a boy or a girl?”

Skarr pauses, thinking. After a long moment, he states, “That is difficult to answer.”

My heart freezes in my chest. Is he having second thoughts, then? “Why?”

He considers this, expression lost in thought as he gazes at the fire. “Either could learn my fighting tricks. It would be impossible to choose...but I might like a female. I like the thought of another fierce female in our hut.”

I laugh with sheer relief. “So you still want a baby?”

His expression becomes uneasy. No, I realize. Not uneasy. *Shy*. It’s not something I’m used to seeing on Skarr. He picks up one of the furs and runs his fingers through it, avoiding my gaze. “I never thought I would be chosen for breeding,” he admits. “A ssethri splice is not a common splice. Audiences do not like us much. We are weaker than moden or praxiians. I know I am an excellent gladiator now but...I had to work very hard to be that much more aggressive and clever than others because I was not always successful at combat.”

My heart squeezes. No wonder he's so fixated on being the best. He's worried about letting me down. "Well then that settles it," I say softly. "We'll make a baby, and it'll be the best baby on the beach, and everyone will wonder how we managed to make a being so damn perfect in every way."

Skarr grabs me and hauls me against him, kissing me fiercely. I wrap my arms around his neck, returning his kiss with equal enthusiasm.

"Now?" he asks between kisses. "Here?"

"Yes. Here. Now." I curl my fingers in his ridiculous, soft hair. "I want to be your mate. Do you still want to be mine?"

His hungry gaze roams over me. "More than anything, Vivi." He leans in, kissing me again, but this time with more gentleness. "I can't wait to stuff you with my cock...and then stuff you with my other cock."

I moan, because it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard and yet I want that, too. "I want both of your cocks inside me at the same time."

He tears at my clothing, a ragged sound escaping him. "I want you bare. I want to suck on your teats and rub your cunt until you are dripping with arousal. I want you to come on my hand...and then I will give you my cocks."

Dirty talk. I whimper, loving what he's whispering to me. "I want you naked, too."

Skarr grins at me and rubs his nose against mine, then gives me a lingering kiss. "This planet has far too much clothing," he confesses. "I would rather it be as it is in the gladiator arena, with your form as bare as my own."

The thought is titillating, but I rather like this planet, snow and all. I like the mountains, and I love my cozy hut, and even the cold feels invigorating. Best of all...he's here. I put my hands to the neck of his tunic and start undoing laces. "I don't know. I like the thought of unwrapping you each day like you're a present."

He grunts. "I think I like that idea."

I smile up at him, loosening his tunic and then helping him pull it off. It does take time to undress, true, but I skim my fingers over him as I do so, teasing him with light touches until we're both panting by the time he's fully naked. Then it's my turn, and he deliberately runs his hands over my breasts the moment my tunic is open, cupping them and teasing the tips as he kisses me. I love the devotion on his face, the intensity as he touches me, as if I'm the most important thing in the universe.

The khui in my chest sings wildly, as if it knows it's finally about to get its wish. Skarr's is singing just as loud, the small cave filled with constant thrumming.

He falls to his knees in front of me, tugging my pants down my legs, only to get stuck at my boots. I chuckle at his impatience, and we sink to the furs together, trying to extricate my lower legs. When I'm finally naked, Skarr pulls the blankets over both of us and hauls me against him, our bare bodies rubbing against one another. It feels incredible to press skin to skin, to kiss and rub up against the heat of him. He hasn't extruded quite yet, but I feel the bulge of him protruding against his groin. Soon, he'll be too hard to contain it all, and then he'll extrude both cocks out and I'll get to enjoy them.

Skarr kisses me, one arm locked around my waist, keeping me pressed against him. His hand goes to my pussy and he slides a finger through my folds, testing my wetness. He doesn't need to worry about that—I'm soaked. I've been in a constant state of near arousal since we first started to touch each other. "My mate," he whispers against my lips. "My fierce Vivi."

He rubs a delicate circle around my clit, and I whimper with pleasure at the sensation, sliding my thigh onto his hip so I can keep my legs parted for him. Immediately, he extrudes, his cocks easing out of his body with a wet slide. Skarr's breath hitches and then he lifts his hips, pressing them against my thighs even as he teases my clit.

"I want you inside me," I tell him, arching my body against his fingers. "Please, Skarr. I want to come with your

cock in me.”

“Bossy.” There’s a wealth of affection in his voice. He rolls us until I’m on my back, his weight pressing over me, and his fingers work my clit faster, until I’m biting my lip with my efforts not to cry out. How did he get so good at touching me so quickly?

Then, he presses his cock to the entrance of my body, and I gasp at the sensation. The thick head pushes against my skin, sending flickers of hot need all through me. I nod when he pauses, waiting for approval, and then sinks in slowly.

It’s like being completed. I dig my nails into his arms as I hold onto him, my face tight with sensation. It’s a ridiculous thing to think—that Skarr feeding his cock into my body should make me feel like that. But it’s as if a puzzle piece has suddenly been slotted into place. Everything feels *right*. Like this is how it’s supposed to *be*.

And even though I’m his fierce Vivi, I want to cry with the strange beauty of the moment.

Skarr groans, pressing his mouth to my forehead as he pushes deeper into me. He adjusts something between us, and then a heavy length presses between my labia. Oh. He’s inside me with his secondary cock, the primary’s thick heft slicking along my folds. “Kef me, you feel incredible, my warrior.”

I rock my hips in silent agreement.

He pushes his primary cock against me, dragging the length of it against my clit as he pumps inside me, and my breath hitches at how good it feels. This wasn’t how I expected him to use his cocks on me, but I love it. I love how he’s pumping into me, driving his secondary cock into my body even as the heavier, thicker one rubs through my sensitive folds and drips pre-cum all over my skin, adding to the slick wetness between us.

Hot arousal curls through me, the slow build-up of an orgasm, and I hold tightly to him, trying to match his rhythm. “Please,” I breathe. “Please please.”

I don’t know what I’m asking for, only that I need more.

Skarr groans, tilting his head and leaning over until he has my ear in his mouth, teasing it with hot licks and nipping bites as he shuttles in and out of me. Even more arousing than his lips are the soft sounds he makes into my ear, the breathless *haaa* and *unh* noises that tell me that he's losing control. And as I tighten towards my climax, I make ridiculous little sounds of my own, kittenish whimpers and mewls that would embarrass me in daylight, but are nothing but encouragement right now, animalistic sounds that demand that he move faster, that he make me come.

Then it hits me—the flutter in my belly turns to tight, spiraling pleasure and everything clenches. My breath stutters as I cling to him, muscles locking with the force of my climax, and I squeeze around him tightly as I come and come and come.

It feels incredible. It feels so right.

I'm dimly aware of Skarr pressing kisses to my neck and my ear as I float down from my orgasm, of him pausing in his efforts, his big body braced over mine. He murmurs my name in my ear, and I'm starting to love how *Vivi* sounds, especially when he says it. When I sigh with contentment and stroke a hand down his spine, he slips out of my body and presses a fierce kiss to my lips.

Before I can catch my breath, he turns me over in the furs, raising my hips into the air. I barely have a moment to shift my weight before his cock is pressing into me from behind, and this time it feels bigger than before. His primary cock fits me to the point of being near uncomfortable, but I'm wet and relaxed and when he gives me a sharp thrust, it feels incredible. It's like every bit of him is sliding against all of my sensitive spots, and I cry out, grabbing fistfuls of the blankets underneath me.

He makes a low growl, gripping my hips and fucking me hard and fast. It's like he's using me for his own orgasm, and I love it. I love the slap of him as our hips meet, the sting when he thrusts hard, the rub of his secondary cock brushing against my thighs. I love that he's losing control, that he's so lost in the moment that he's forgetting about everything except

getting off. My name is a guttural sound on his lips, chanted over and over, and when he buries himself inside me for the final time and surges forward, pressing me down into the furs even as something cool spurts inside me, I love it.

I fucking love all of it.

Skarr's weight on top of me feels delicious, and I stroke his arm as he shudders and comes to himself. He presses absent kisses to my neck, languid and sweet, and then heaves a long, drawn-out breath. "I can do better than that."

I chuckle. Count on Skarr to want perfection in all things. "I personally thought it was lovely."

"Yes, but you only came once. I can make you come more than that."

"There's plenty of evening left." I trail my fingers along the scales of his spine. "I'm not worried. Are you...happy?"

It feels like a silly thing to ask. I know I'm happy, and I know he just came inside me. This is the culmination of our mating and yet part of me wants to hear the love words. I need to know that he feels as moved as I do.

Skarr lifts his head, a frown of consternation on his face. "My khui is still humming. Did we do something wrong?"

"The healer told me that it takes several times for some couples. I wouldn't worry." I'd approached her for grease for my skis at Hannah's suggestion, but Veronica had thought that I wanted the grease for sex, and what had followed had been a quick primer on how some splices couldn't make their mates pregnant right away and if we needed assistance she would help and be as unobtrusive as possible. Which is incredibly awkward when all I wanted was grease for my skis.

But I still have that grease with me...

I slide a hand down to Skarr's buttock and squeeze it. "How are your cocks feeling? All emptied out?"

He nuzzles against my neck. "Hardly. I have more stamina than that, female."

My lips twitch at his disgruntled tone. “Oh, I don’t doubt.” I trace a circle lightly on the skin of one buttock. “Want to have sex again?”

“Already?” He lifts his head and grins down at me. “You are hungry for more?”

I nod, giving him a flirty look. “Have you ever thought about putting both of your cocks into me at the same time?”

He groans, resting his forehead upon mine. “Constantly in my filthiest dreams.”

“Well...I have some grease that is safe to use on you and on me. I wonder if you could fit both of your cocks inside my pussy at once...and what it’d feel like.”

“In the same...spot?” His eyes glaze over as he imagines it. “Will your body take it?”

“You can grease me up and we can find out.” I’ve never thought of myself as particularly adventurous in bed but being with Skarr makes me want to try all kinds of wild things. To think that I ran from his cocks initially and now I’m begging him to stuff them both into me at once. “But only if you’re comfortable with it.”

Skarr gives me a fierce kiss. “I am very much comfortable with it. Tell me what to do.”

I get up and retrieve the tiny container of grease I’d brought along just in case we needed it for skis. It’s made from herbs and animal fats, but through my embarrassing conversation with Veronica, I know it won’t give me bad reactions, either. That others use this exact formula when they need a lubricant in the furs. I was mortified the other day but I’m grateful now, and I move back to him, handing over the small pot. “Want to grease me up? I’ll do you and you do me?”

“Is there a best way to do it?” he asks, dipping his fingers into the pot and then rubbing the slickness between his fingers. “I am not familiar with such things, though I have greased myself before a battle to make it more difficult for my opponent to grab me.”

Why does that sound incredibly sexy? I'm envisioning Skarr, his sleek body gleaming, as another man tries to put his arms around him and they slip away. It's an erotic mental image and I'm dying to suggest we have some naked greased wrestling at some point...but for now, I want to try this. I'm already aching with the need for him to fill me again.

Resonance is *potent*.

I sit on the furs and recline back, propping up on my elbows. My knees are up slightly and when he greases his fingers a bit more, I spread my legs in silent invitation. Heat flares in his gaze and he groans, looking up at me. "You smell like me."

"Good."

Skarr makes another incoherent sound of pleasure and his tongue snakes out, the forked tip tasting the air, and I wonder if he can smell me like that, too. Don't snakes scent through their tongues? I shiver, intrigued as he presses his hand between my legs, teasing my flushed, wet skin. I'm already messy from our prior round of lovemaking but I don't care. Judging from the hungry look in his eyes, Skarr doesn't either.

He pushes his fingers into my channel, stroking in and out. My body makes wet noises, as if trying to suck on his fingers. He teases my clit with his thumb, and my legs tremble at how good this feels, the gentle glide of his digits slipping into me and then back out again. He adds a third finger to the first two, and then a fourth, looking up at me to see my reaction.

I just moan and nod, spreading my thighs a little wider. "Can I grease you, too?"

Skarr nods, shifting his weight and pointing his cocks toward me. His hand leaves my pussy and I want to cry at the loss of it. It doesn't matter that his body temperature is slightly lower than mine—I love the way his cool fingertips glide over my skin. He sits back on his haunches, watching me, and I'm tempted to just plant my face in his lap and suck on him, playing with one cock while I tease the other.

"God, I love your body," I whisper as I crawl over to him.

His gaze brightens with my compliment, and part of me wonders if he hypes himself up so much because of uncertainty. Like he has to put on a front to assure the others that he's just as strong and capable as the rest of them. It makes him a little more vulnerable in my eyes and makes me fall a lot harder.

"I could lick you all over," I tell him, pressing a kiss to his shoulder and then one pectoral as he holds the small bone pot of grease for me to take. "We're going to do that when we get home. You're going to spread out and I'm just going to bite and nibble on every bit of you."

He groans out my name, and a dribble of pre-cum slides down the shaft of his primary cock.

I lubricate my fingers and then rub my hands together after setting the pot aside. My skin is slick and fragrant with the herbal scent, and Skarr watches me with heated, hungry eyes. Our gazes locked, I reach down and grip the larger of his two cocks in my slippery hand.

A hiss escapes him, almost snakelike. His eyes flutter and he throws his head back, groaning.

Okay, so that must feel pretty good. I stroke his length, working one hand up his shaft and then switching to the other hand. I start at the base and drag my hand up his cock, adding as much pressure as I think he can stand, and then reach for the other. I stroke them in tandem, tugging on one and then the other.

He grips my shoulders, his breathing ragged. "Wait. *Vivi*. I am going to come in your grip if you don't stop."

Well, that wouldn't be such a terrible thing. I smile sweetly at him and give him another jerk.

Skarr growls, flinging me back down on the furs. In the next moment he covers me, his mouth on mine, his body heavy over mine. His hand steals between my legs and then he's stroking me with hungry fingers. I lift one leg to his hip, whimpering with need as he works me.

"You want my cocks inside you, my fierce warrior?"

“Yes.”

His thumb is all over my clit, teasing me beyond endurance. “You want me to fill you full? And then when you are so full you cannot stand it, I will push the other cock inside you, too?”

I moan at his sultry words. “Does that make me a freak?”

“It makes you *perfect*.”

“Then that’s exactly what I want.” I give him an expectant wriggle. “Give me everything.”

He gives me a hungry look and then strokes into me with his fingers once more, pumping harder. He adds his fourth finger, and my body accepts him, my khui humming with excitement. He’s practically got his entire fist in me, and it shouldn’t feel nearly as good as it does.

But it feels incredible.

“You think you can take me?” he asks, working his hand in and out of my slick channel. “All of me at once?”

“I want that,” I whisper, arching in time with his fingers. “Give it to me, Skarr.”

“So bossy.” His words are like a caress.

His hand moves away, and I whimper at the loss of it, aching and hollow. I need him to fill me up. I need him inside me, pumping away. I need him giving me his seed, giving me his baby, giving me his everything. I hold tightly to him as he moves over me, his cock pressing into me again. He feels good, but after his hand has stretched me, I want more. I make a needy sound and he shushes me, thrusting deep. “You want your mate?”

“Yes!”

“All of your mate?”

“All,” I demand, panting.

He rears back and gazes down at our joined bodies. I feel him shifting his weight, and when he pushes in again this time, he moves with aching slowness, his hand on his cocks to guide

them. I hold still, trying to stay relaxed, because I can't tense. If I do, I'm going to make this impossible. He's already huge, and he might not be able to fit both.

His breath hisses out and his eyes flutter closed as he feeds both heads into my body at once. "Tight."

It is. My body is on the edge of what I can take, and the pleasure is dulled at the edges with discomfort. But I want this. I want to try it, and so I breathe through it and murmur words of encouragement as he sinks slowly, oh so slowly into me.

And I am so very *full*.

When I can't take any more, I give my head a little shake. "That's enough...are you in?"

"Halfway." He gazes down at our joined bodies as if fascinated. "Is it still good?"

"It is, but this is all I can take."

Skarr nods, distracted, and jerks his hips. I gasp at the sensation of fullness, and he makes a low humming noise, as if deciding what to do.

"Does it feel good?" I ask.

"Feels...incredible." His hand moves to my pussy, stroking over it. "Never imagined that you would take...all of me."

I haven't, but it seems a bad time to point that out. I want to kiss him, but he's seated upright, carefully moving his hips and watching my body for any sort of pain reaction. Even now, he's so careful with me, and it fills my heart with affection.

I could love my peacock, I realize. I might already be in love with him.

His thumb skims over my clit and then he flicks a glance up at my face, watching my response. When I make a sound of encouragement, he rocks his hips again, setting a slow rhythm as he toys with my clit.

Our movements are awkward and slow this time, but I'm so full that every sensation feels heightened. When I come, it's with a low, aching curl deep in my belly and a sigh of pure

delight as the release ripples through me. The tension in my body tightens to near-pain with my release and when I gasp, he makes a choked sound and pulls his lower cock out of me, thrusting deep with his primary and madly pounding into me with his second, even wetter release.

I hold him tight against me, burying my nose in his ridiculous boy-band hair that I love so much. Even if we decided to just fuck resonance out of our systems, Skarr has ruined me for other men with his two cocks and his love of touching me. There's no coming back from this, I realize with a small smile to myself, and press a kiss to his shoulder.

And I'm perfectly fine with that.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



SKARR

When I wake up the next morning, a scent is tickling my nose. Vivi's mane is in my mouth, my own is damp with sweat, and our skin is sticking together. We're also still resonating, which is the only thing that ruins this otherwise perfect moment.

I remain still as she sleeps, listening to the incessant thrumming of the khuis in our chests and wonder what we did wrong. We mated. Isn't that enough for resonance? Is it possible there was something else we needed to do in order to sate our khuis? Or am I yet not enough to satisfy her? The worry churns in my chest, building as I listen to her doze.

What if her khui declines my body? What if my seed is not satisfactory to her? What if her khui decides that it does not want a ssethri splice for a mate after all? What if—

"Mmm." Vivi rolls over in the furs and moves toward me, tucking her face against my chest. "You smell good."

I open my mouth and flick my tongue out into the cool morning air, wanting to taste all of her scent...and then cough. The over-sweet smell of old meat is in the air. "Our kill is starting to reek."

She sits up, her eyes sleepy slits, and her mane tumbles over her glorious shoulders. She squints into the cave, looking around with a yawn. "Guess we'd better get up, mmm?"

"If you like. Are you tired?"

Her smile curls and she burrows back under the covers against my side. Her hand goes to my chest and she draws circles over my nipple, teasing it. "I'm wiped because someone kept me up all night."

I chuckle at how adorable she is like this. All of the fierceness is gone from Vivi, replaced by a sleepy, shy female who wants nothing more than to touch me. Truly, I am the luckiest of gladiators to win her mating rights. Then I

remember that we are yet resonating, and my smile dies. “Vivi...listen to your chest. Is it possible we did something wrong? We still resonate.”

She pauses, listening, and then presses her lips to my skin. “That. Yeah. Veronica said it might happen after a few nights. Some couples have to mate a lot before it takes. I hope you’re okay with that.”

“I will suffer in silence.”

That makes her snort with amusement. “I know you, and you have *never* suffered in silence. In fact, I’m not sure you’ve *ever* been silent.”

“Cruel warrior.” Just for that, I ought to finger her until she’s squealing. The thought is extremely appealing. But then I breathe in, and the stink in the cave hits my nose. “Can we get that thing out of the cave? It’s killing the mood.”

But Vivi shakes her head, sitting up again. “We want it nice and ripe. We want our friend to smell it.”

“Something the next valley over is going to smell it at this rate.” I hold my nose, coughing.

She bats at my chest. “It’s not that bad.”

“You say that because you have human senses,” I grumble.

“I do.” Vivi lets out a heavy sigh and yawns again. “But we should get up. We have a lot of skiing to do today.”

I watch her appreciatively as she climbs out of the furs. Her long legs are sleek and beautiful, her buttocks each just the right size for fitting in my palm. One has a dimple in it and I find that incredibly erotic. I need to bite it. I need to drag her back to bed and push my cocks into her. Last night we mated many times, and yet I hunger for her this morning even more than I did before.

It is as if now that my khui has had a taste of her, it is ravenous.

There are a few small bruises on her thighs in the shape of my fingers, and I wince at the sight of them. I get to my feet, running my hands over her as I do. “Did I hurt you last night?”

“No. Why?” When I point out the marks, she laughs and waves them off. “We both got carried away. If you hurt me, I’ll let you know. I’ll punch you in the mouth.”

“Oh, good.” I am relieved. That is a signal I will not miss.

Vivi laughs even harder, shaking her head at me. “Skarr, you’re bigger than I am and sex is physical. We’re probably going to mark each other up every now and then.” She runs her hand down my arm, where I carry marks of her nails as they dug into my skin. “But I will tell you to stop if you ever hurt me, all right? I’m not the type to suffer in silence. I will make sure you know I’m not happy.”

“Please do. The thought of hurting you destroys me. I-I do not want to mess this up, Vivi. This mating. I want to be the best mate. You deserve nothing less.”

She tilts her head back, gazing up at me, and then pulls on my neck until I lean in and kiss her. “So far, you are doing an excellent job. Ten out of ten, no complaints.”

“Good.” Because Vivi has become the most important thing in my world. Not battles. Not victories. Not sparring with worthy opponents. Not breeding faster than anyone else on this planet.

Just Vivi and her smile. That is all I want.

“Let’s clean up,” she tells me, her hands moving to her hips as she surveys the cave. “We made a bit of a mess last night. We’ll clean up and air the place out, and then we’ll ski back to where I saw the tracks for our snow-cat. Once we find him, we’ll deliver the package and hopefully, fix him up so he can have a new start.”

“It might be kinder to kill him,” I point out. “The sa-khui do not eat much predator meat but they will not turn their noses up at it. We can kill him and be back at the main camp before dark.”

But Vivi is shaking her head emphatically. “Just because he’s got a flaw doesn’t mean that he should die. If he’s fighting this hard to live, I want him to live. He shouldn’t be killed just

because someone else has decided that he's not worth the trouble."

Now I understand why this means so much to her. "You mean like us?"

"Exactly like us. Someone discarded us because we weren't what they wanted, whatever that was." She shakes her head, and I love the fierce, determined expression on her face. "But we're living, breathing creatures that deserve a chance. This cat does, too. And if there's a hope that we can help him out, I want to do it. If there's not...then we'll put him down peacefully. But I want to try. I have to try."

And because Vivi wants it, I will make it happen. "Say no more."



"OH MY GOD," Vivi breathes. "Look at how thin he is."

Her face is full of sympathy as we get the first look at the creature we've been tracking all day. It has been a journey to find him, but Vivi reasoned that if he was injured, he would not be able to go far. Once we found his trail again, we followed him until we saw a small, rocky cave. Vivi felt confident this was his hiding spot, so we tossed our dead hopper onto the snow and retreated. We've been waiting for him to come out, and all the while it grows colder and the suns continue their journey toward the horizon. It will be another night in a hunter cave, I suspect. We will not go back to the village this evening. My khiu hums in my chest and I am foolishly pleased at the idea. I like spending time alone with Vivi.

At least, I am in a good mood until I see the creature.

Vivi says he is thin—but that does not matter. He is as tall as she is through the shoulder, his head heavy and full of fangs. His hipbones jut out even as his tail lashes back and forth, and he stalks forward, sniffing out the scents we've left behind.

“Poor thing,” she breathes, and I stare at my mate as if she is crazed.

That “poor thing” could destroy her with one swipe of its paw. I know a formidable opponent when I see one, and it does not matter that this snow-cat is injured or thin. He would make short work of her. “I am having second thoughts, Vivi.”

“I’m not. Look at his leg. The front one.”

We’ve placed the dead animal stuffed with leaves in the midst of a snowy clearing so we can chase off anything else that approaches our kill. We settled the drugged meat on the snow-cat’s trail in the hopes it would be the first thing to come after our lure. It has, and as it lopes forward, its gait is all wrong. There’s a strange bend to its front leg in a place there should not be a bend, and it’s clear the snow-cat is avoiding putting his weight upon it.

Vivi doesn’t take her eyes off the creature. She reaches out and grabs my hand, holding me tight with excitement. I have misgivings about the sheer size of the cat and the fact that it’s wounded. It will fight harder, knowing it cannot run.

“What if the leaves don’t work on it?” I whisper to Vivi. “What then?”

“We ski away and hope he doesn’t catch us,” she whispers back. “Watch, he’s taking the bait.”

I look over at the injured snow-cat again. He’s nosing the dead animal and looks around again almost as if he suspects the trap. I could swear his gaze lands on us for a brief moment, and I hold my breath.

But then the snow-cat grabs the dead animal in his mouth and swallows it in two bites.

Vivi makes a strangled sound of excitement, shaking my arm.

“I see it.”

“I don’t know how long it’ll take for it to work,” she hisses at me, her gaze locked on the cat. “We’ll follow him when he leaves and watch for signs of him slowing down.”

This seems like yet another terrible idea. What if he returns to his cave? I am not letting Vivi go down inside it to check if the animal is drugged. Absolutely not. I do not care how fierce my human mate is, I will be that much fiercer if she even suggests such a thing.

The cat lowers his head again, sniffing the trail, and takes another shuffling step forward. His mouth opens and he tastes the air, his head swinging towards us again. A low growl starts in his throat and I grab my spear.

Then, the cat sways and topples over in the snow.

“Shit, that was fast,” Vivi exclaims, racing out from our hiding spot behind a fall of nearby rocks. “Did we give him too much?”

“Wait.” I grab her by the waist before she can charge forward. “Wait and make sure he stays asleep before we get close. It might be a trap.”

“It’s not a trap.” But she waits at my side and we watch the creature for movements. When it remains unmoving in the snow, she looks over at me again.

I nod. “All right. Let’s check it out.”

Vivi skis over to the snow-cat’s side with gliding movements. I stumble after her, less skilled on the skis, and then give up and jerk them off my feet, racing to her.

She prods the creature with the end of her ski, testing him. There’s no reaction, and she looks over at me. “I think he’s out. Either out or dead.”

“Not dead. He’s breathing.”

Vivi nods, discarding her skis and kneeling next to it. “So thin. He’s starving. He probably can’t hunt because of that bad leg.” She runs a hand over his side, eyeing the animal. “I don’t see any other injuries. Let’s get him tied up so if he wakes up sooner than anticipated, he won’t attack us.”

I pull out the rope and get to work.

A short time later, the enormous snow-cat is tied up. I’ve wrapped rope loosely around the huge muzzle to slow him if

he tries to bite. His two back legs are lashed together, and then the third is lashed to the back ones. The only leg that is free is the broken one, and Vivi runs her fingers over it, frowning. “It’s healed badly. The bones don’t move if I push on his leg. It’s an old break, I think. Remember how quick my pinky healed? It would have frozen in place all wrong if we hadn’t set it and splinted it. That must be what happened to him.”

“What do you want to do?” I await her order—if she wishes to kill him out of mercy, I will do it for her. She only needs to say the word.

Vivi considers for a moment, burying her fingers in the soft fur of the creature. Then she looks at her ski pole and nods to herself. “We’ll break one of the poles and use it to splint the leg.” Her gaze flicks to me. “And we’re going to have to re-break it so it can heal properly.”

“We?” I arch an eyebrow.

“My big strong mate is going to help me, yes. You’re a gladiator. You’ve broken bones before, right?” She gives me an encouraging smile.

I swallow hard. There is a difference between snapping a limb in the heat of battle and this. For some reason, the idea of re-breaking the limb is making me queasy, but Vivi is giving me such an expectant look that I cannot fail her. I wipe my sweaty palms on my fur cloak and inwardly brace myself. “Show me what you would like done.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



VIVI

It's a long, awful afternoon.

In my head, I'd foolishly thought that we'd find the cat, pop the leg and send him off again, right as rain. The reality is a lot more intense. Re-breaking the bone is hard, tricky work, because we have to make sure we're doing it just right, and that we're doing it clean. We discuss how to approach it, and Skarr handles the worst part.

I know I'm going to hear the sound of that cracking bone in my dreams, though.

Once it's done, I set the bone as best I can. It might not be perfect, but it feels as if it will heal straight if it remains in place. I snap my ski poles in the middle and wrap them around the wounded limb, snaking leather straps in and out to hold the poles in place against the leg. They form a crude cage around it, but I think with a few days of it being braced, it'll be better than it was.

I hope. I'm not a veterinarian, and I've never set a bone before. Why did I think we could do this?

Because there's no other choice, that's why, I remind myself. It was this or a mercy killing. We still might have to come out here in another week or so to finish him off if it doesn't take, but I'll handle that when the time comes. For now, the leg is splinted and the cat remains asleep.

"Come," Skarr says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "It's getting late and there is no more we can do."

"Oh, but...should we leave him? He's vulnerable like this." I bite my lip, hesitating. "Something could come across him and eat him."

"And if that is the case, then there is nothing more to be done for it."

Even so, I fret. "What if he pulls the bandages off? What if ___"

“Vivi.” Skarr helps me to my feet. His expression is gentle as he looks me in the eye. “You have done all that you can. We will take the ropes off and check on him in the morning. If something happens between now and then, you have done what you can. Remember that this is a fierce predator who has been hungry for a long time. You do not want to be around when he awakens.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. I’ve just invested so much in giving this cat a second chance. Logic tells me to leave before it wakes up and decides we’re prey. “What now, then?”

“Now we retreat to our cave and wait.”

I hesitate. We’re a few hours away from the village, with a hunter cave probably about a half-hour from here. Skarr needs a warm place to sleep tonight, and I’m exhausted from this day, mentally and emotionally. Part of me doesn’t want to leave, but I remind myself that this wasn’t about fixing him. It was about giving him another chance.

That’s why we’re on this planet, right? This is our second chance after the universe decided we’re rejects. We’re not guaranteed anything, and I’m fine with that. I just want the opportunity to create my own happy ever after.

I want the cat to have the same. So I untie the ropes holding him down and let Skarr lead me away. “We’ll be back in the morning?”

“Absolutely.”

We skip the skis, since we have no poles, and make our way back to the hunter cave on foot. It’s late by the time we get there, the moons high in the skies and the dark bitter cold. My boots feel wet and slushy and by the time we get to the cave, I’m relieved to start a fire. Skarr doesn’t complain, but when we cuddle under the blankets, I can feel the chill setting into him. I kiss my mate and roll him onto his back, and this time I ride him until I come, taking turns on both of his cocks. Skarr comes moments after I do, and we hold tightly to one another under the furs, listening to our khuis sing.

I'm happy, I realize. It's strange to think about, but I'm happy. I have a mate and a home. I have friends, and at some point, I'll have a family. This might not be what I'd envisioned my life turning out to be, but those were someone else's dreams, someone else's life.

I make Vivi's future, and I'm liking how it's shaping up. I run my fingers over Skarr's touchable green skin, and I'm struck by the lack of the tattoo on my finger once more. The quotation mark, to remind me to speak up.

Doesn't feel like me anymore, that symbol, but I think I'd like something there. "I think I'm going to tattoo my finger in the morning," I tell him. "I heard that if you rub ash into a mark, it'll leave a permanent stain. I think I'll try it out."

Skarr's hand lazily trails up and down my spine. "You can tattoo me, too."

"I have to make sure it's going to work, first," I tell him, grinning. "But I can try it. What sort of tattoo do you want?"

He shrugs, his body rippling under me. "What are you going to have?"

I hold my index finger up to him, pointing at the side of it. "I'm going to put a tiny cat scratch here. Just to remind me that I'm in charge of my own fate."

Skarr slides his hand down my backside, giving my butt a squeeze. "Perhaps you can put your name on me."

That makes me pause. "You want my name on you?"

"Why not? You are the best thing that has happened to me. Is it wrong to want to wear your brand proudly?"

"We'll talk about it," I tell him, leaning in to kiss him again. Maybe just a small V somewhere on his body, because I don't want the others noticing. I like our secrets. I like having things that are just ours.

There's plenty of time to decide, though. We have all the time in the world.

EPILOGUE



VIVI

Flor's wedding feast is the biggest party that they've thrown on the beach, Elly tells me from our spot at the edge of the group. Elly's like me in that she likes to quietly hang out on the fringe of things, and I've noticed her and her mate saving a spot for us near the back of the seats around the main fire. It's nice to have a friend, and even nicer that Bek and Skarr get along well. It's also nice to know that others get exhausted by being social and aren't afraid to leave a party early.

Skarr is in his element, though. I watch from my seat near Elly, sipping a bit of hot tea as he gestures, telling a story about a battle he won. Pak and Rukhar are seated in front of him, listening intently. Z'hren has his thumb in his mouth, one of his other hands clutching his tiny spear as if he can't decide whether or not he wants to fight along with the story or if it scares him.

Bek returns to Elly's side, their daughter tucked under his arm. He brings her a bowl loaded with food and sits down with a scowl on his face. "I still do not understand why everyone keeps calling it a ding ding feast."

"It's because of Liz," Elly tells him in her soft voice.

"Enough said." He settles his daughter on his thigh, pulling a chunk of root out of Elly's bowl and blowing on it before handing it to little Emma to gnaw on. He glances over at me. "You and your mate did not see any of the Ancestors when you were out in the mountains?"

I shake my head. "All we saw were snow-cats."

It's a bit of a lie. We only saw the one snow-cat, and less of him than I'd liked. We'd remained out in the mountains for another day, looking for the wounded cat. When we'd returned the next morning he'd been gone, a chewed leather strap the only thing remaining in the spot we'd left him at. I'd fretted over that, worried he was going to chew off the splint and ruin

our hard work. I haven't seen him since, but I've been out in the hills, looking for tracks every day since. And while I don't know for sure if my snow-cat is still in the area, I haven't seen the drag-marks again. Once, I saw snow-cat tracks that looked as if it was favoring one leg slightly, the spacing between the paws off, but not necessarily injured. I like to tell myself that it's him, and that he's doing better. I might never know the truth, but I'm at peace with it.

We gave him a second chance, it's up to him to take it.

Skarr and I expected to get a lot of grief about being away from camp for days, but not long after we returned, more strangers arrived. Two of them were missing tribespeople named Tia and R'jaal, and they brought with them a handful of four-armed strangers. *More* aliens, these from an underground village. It's enough to make a human's head spin. They're here at the feast, too. They don't speak the language, so there's a lot of gesturing to try and include them in conversations.

"Do you want a wedding feast like this, Vivi?" Elly asks me, taking a delicate bite of meat.

My eyes widen at the thought. "God, no. Flor likes attention, and I bet she loves this party. That's not my thing, though."

"Yeah, that's how I feel, too." She gives an encouraging smile to her mate as if trying to point this out. "I don't like a fuss."

"I would fuss over you if you wished it," he tells her in a low, intense voice.

"Oh, I know." Her hand goes to his thigh.

I glance over at my mate, amused. My khui hums a gentle song as our eyes meet and he jogs over to my side. That's another change in the last few days since we returned and others arrived—our resonance song has lost its frantic edge. I think that means I'm pregnant now, but I haven't approached the healer to find out. I figure I'll give it a few more days before confirming. I sure don't want to bring it up tonight, not with a party on.

Tonight is all about Flor and I'rec, and I'm happy to keep the focus on them.

Skarr collapses dramatically at my feet. "Did you catch my story, Vivi? It was an excellent one, and you haven't heard it yet."

"It's too noisy," I tell him, running my fingers through his floppy curls as he rests against my legs. "I can barely hear myself think."

He nods agreement, his gaze moving over the crowd around the fire. Everyone's here tonight, with bowls of food piled high on every surface. Raven and U'dron have their musical instruments out and Flor and I'rec are seated at the front of the group, wearing crowns made from leaves. I'rec is watching his mate with unabashed devotion, as if nothing exists but her. Flor is eating all of this up, as I knew she would. She chats excitedly with people as they hand her presents, and there are so many faces and voices around the fire that they all blur into one.

"Does anyone know why Sam and Sessah left?" Bek asks, eyeing Skarr. "You are friendly with Ash-tar. What have you heard?"

My mate shrugs. "Just that they wished to visit his family in the Coldtown village."

"Croatoan," I correct gently, grinning.

"Bah, as far as I am concerned, it sounds like Coldtown. A bunch of huts inside an ice crevasse? You will catch me dead before I go there." Skarr leans back, gazing up at me. "Would you like a plate of food, my fierce warrior?"

I nod and he hops to his feet to make me a plate. He's not wrong, I realize. We'll never go to the other village, Croatoan. It's in the mountains, where the weather remains far colder than the cove here at Icehome. It would be dangerous for Skarr, and I'm not about to risk him for anything. There's nothing over at the other village for me anyhow—just more strangers.

Someone passes me a skin and I sniff it. Fruity. I shake my head, passing it on to Elly and Bek. That drink got me into trouble before. Besides, I might be pregnant now. That changes everything. I resist the urge to touch my stomach to see if it feels any different and look over at Elly and Bek instead. Their little girl is seated happily on her father's lap, chewing on baked roots. Elly reaches over and brushes a lock of dark hair out of her face, smiling, and Bek gives his wife a look that could melt stone. They're so happy together.

That's going to be us, I decide. We can even make a tiny set of skis for our baby when she gets old enough and she can go out into the hills with me and her father. I like tracking, but more than that, I like exploring. I'm not going to be one that stays at camp and never leaves. I want to wander around in the fresh air and snow and enjoy nature.

My dad would have loved this place. The thought of him makes me fond instead of miserable. Maybe if we have a boy, we could name it after my father...if I ever remember his name. If not, well then, we pick something else. I'm not going to stress over who and what I am any longer.

The music gets louder and someone—Vaza—starts singing in a low, ululating voice that decides it wants to hit all notes at once. I try not to wince, because Vaza is giving it his best, but alien singing is definitely an acquired taste. Someone claps their hands and two of the children get up and start dancing by the fire, which makes Flor laugh with delight. She's having a wonderful time at her ding ding feast.

I look for my mate, wondering if Skarr is much of a singer. He's not paying a bit of attention to the antics by the fire. He's busy loading a plate with food from several bowls while deep in conversation with Valmir. The cat-like splice has been slinking around camp in a crappy mood for the last few days now, and Skarr told me this morning he resonated to April, who refused him. I scan the people by the fire, but I don't see April. No doubt she's avoiding resonance.

She'll get over it soon enough. I think about how hard I tried to get away from Skarr at the beginning, not realizing that underneath all that bluster was a very tender heart and a

man who turned out to be exactly what I needed. She probably won't want to hear from me, but maybe I'll find her in the morning anyhow and offer moral support.

Skarr returns after a few minutes, thumping down onto the ground at my feet again. He holds the plate up to me and I pick up a rib of something, giving it a nibble. "What was that all about? You and Valmir?"

He shrugs and eyes my rib. I hold it out to him and he takes a bite, then licks his lips meaningfully. "Doesn't taste as good as you."

My face gets hot. "Don't change the subject."

He just smiles wider, sending me a heated glance as he relaxes at my side. Mari steps over his sprawled legs, carrying her child to bed, and Liz and Harlow bring out bowls of dried fruit and offer tidbits to everyone. Skarr continues to eat the rib in the most blatant way possible, his tongue sliding along the bone and making me blush.

When the others finally get past, I lean in close again. "So what was it with Valmir?"

"He resonated to April and she is not impressed. He wants to win her with a show of strength. He wishes to fight me but insisted I throw the battle, and I said no." He licks his lips. "I asked him 'how would that look to my mate? He said you were already under my mind control and it didn't matter."

Oh lord, not the whole "mind control" thing again. "There's no mind control—"

"If you say so, my mate."

"—and tell Valmir he can't go around punching people to try and impress women. It doesn't work that way." I pluck a mushy root from the plate and taste it. It's covered with spices and falls apart in my mouth, forcing me to lick my fingers.

As I do, Skarr's gaze focuses on my mouth. "I punched Chalath and I got you."

"That was coincidence."

“Mmm, I do not agree.” He offers me another root. “I told him I would fight him, but it would have to be a fair fight and if he lost, it would not help his cause any. He said he was trying to come up with a new plan and would keep me alerted.”

I can only imagine. Valmir is far too sly for his own good, watching everyone with a cold, assessing gaze. He’s a bit too much of an opportunist. At least Skarr is honest, if rather loud.

“Perhaps he should fight one of the newcomers,” Skarr muses as we eat. He flexes his arms. “You know, the ones with all the limbs.”

I smack him lightly on the shoulder. “No, and hush. They’re friendly. Not everyone wants to fight.”

“They look like they wish to fight to me.” Skarr wiggles his brows in my direction. “Did you see how strong they were? Perhaps I will ask them to spar instead of Valmir.”

“Just make sure they understand it’s sparring before you do?” I give him a pleading look. “I’m just now starting to like you. Maybe you don’t give anyone a reason to decide they want ssethri-skin boots?”

“As if they could best me.” He gives me a challenging smile.

“You *are* quite impressive,” I tease back. “I hear you’re the best gladiator on the planet.”

His gaze heats. He loves it when I flatter him. “You know I am.”

“Get a room, you two,” Liz says as she strolls past again, holding the dried fruit basket. “Your flirting stopped being adorable five minutes ago. You’ve moved on to the cloying stage. Fruit?”

I snag a piece from her and decide to give a little sass back. Liz intimidates the heck out of me, but I don’t want her to know that. “You’re just jealous.”

“Hell yes I am. The first bloom of resonance? Without three kids hanging on your legs?” She tilts her head to the sky,

sighing dreamily. “All resonance is great, but there’s something special about your first one. I hope you two are enjoying it.” She glances around the crowded fire, looking for her mate. I look for him, too, and have to stifle a giggle when I see him. Fierce Raahosh has a stoic expression on his face. He is holding a bowl for his youngest daughter to pick at, with her on his knee. On one side is his daughter Aayla, playing with her doll and talking to her father, and on his other side, Raashel is painting swirls on his face with a determined expression.

“He looks miserable,” I comment with a giggle.

“Are you kidding? He’s loving this shit and he’s never looked sexier.” Liz sighs at the sight of her mate. “There’s nothing better than a girl dad, trust me.” She takes her basket and saunters over toward her mate, who wears a hint of a smile when he sees her.

“I should like to be a girl dad,” Skarr comments, watching them.

I’d like that, too.



BY THE TIME the food is down to scraps, we’ve heard far too many people sing, a few drunks have danced, and it looked as if Sabrina was flirting with both Kyth and Jason. People start disappearing from around the fire, and Elly and Bek take Emma to bed.

I finish my last bite of food and then produce the wedge of dried fruit given to me by Liz earlier. “Want to split the dessert?”

“What’s dessert?” He leans back, eyeing the small yellow slice.

“It’s something sweet and delicious you eat after your meal for pleasure.”

“I have something like that already.” He gives me a lascivious look. “It is my mate’s cunt.”

I yelp and cover his mouth with my hand, looking around in a panic to see if anyone else heard that. No one's looking in our direction, and I breathe easy. "Not so loud."

"I don't see why not. They already know you are the finest female on the planet. Of course I should enjoy tasting your cunt." He leans close, his mouth drifting toward my ear as I pop the fruit into my mouth. "Though I have yet to suck your ass like you requested."

I promptly choke on the slice.

"You like that idea. I can tell." He grabs my hand and hauls me to my feet. "Let's go do it."

This man is ridiculous...and yet I'm not going to say no. I've still got that pot of grease in our hut, and maybe we'll put both cocks to use again tonight. I've never had anal sex, but I also never imagined mating a half-lizard alien man, and he's re-defined my idea of "sexy." If anything, he's making me think we should try a lot of things, because everything is fun with Skarr. Nothing is awkward or embarrassing.

Actually, a lot of it is awkward, but we're awkward together, and it ends up being enjoyable.

I let him lead me by the hand towards our hut, anticipation building with every step. The farther away we get from the main fire, the quieter things get, and I can hear the low hum of resonance in our chests, and just hearing it makes me happy. He lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses the back of it, grinning at me. "Did you notice your song has changed?"

"I noticed." I bite my lip. "Are we happy?"

"As long as you promise me that whatever baby comes out of you is going to be smaller than Steph's baby, I am happy, yes."

I snort-giggle at that, because Jethani is a fat, wriggly baby that's probably two feet tall due to her large alien father. "They don't come out that size, you dork. Our baby would definitely be a lot smaller at first."

He heaves a sigh of relief, pressing his free hand to his brow. "Thank kef. I admit that thought has been keeping me

up at night.”

I can't stop laughing, and even when we get into the hut and pull our boots off, I'm still giggling at his strange assumptions about babies. It's so cute. He's so cute. I kiss him, and the kiss quickly turns from playful to heated. I pull off his scarf, revealing the V tattoo I've made for him at the base of his collarbone, at the divot there. He wanted to be marked where everyone could see it, but it gets covered by layers more often than not. My finger tattoo does, too, but just knowing we have them is part of the pleasure.

I keep kissing him as we undress, peeling layers off of each other until we're both naked. He leads me over to the bed of furs and then gives me a wicked look. “Give me that pretty ass of yours, my Vivi. I've waited long enough to suck on it.”

He really is? I bite back another chuckle and get on hands and knees in the furs, pushing my backside into the air and spreading my knees. “Maybe try licking instead? That's generally more pleasurable—oh!”

The moment I lift my hips into the air, his mouth is there, lapping at the pucker of my ass. I squeal, unable to help myself. I didn't realize he'd be so...enthusiastic. But Skarr groans with pleasure, licking and kissing and pressing his forked tongue into that surprisingly sensitive spot. I clutch at the furs, whimpering as he lavishes attention on my backside. Okay, we've been missing out, because his mouth down there feels incredible.

“Oh god.” I fist the blankets as he teases a finger into my channel, his tongue working against my backside non-stop. “Oh god. Skarr...wait. Wait.”

He makes a sound of protest, lifting his head just enough to scrape his teeth over my buttock. “What?”

“Want to have sex? In both holes?”

“Yes and yes.” He nips my butt, making me squirm again. “Can we do that? Will I fit back here?”

He runs a finger along the rim of my ass, sending shivers up my spine.

I nod against the blankets, pushing back against his fingertip. “Grease,” I pant. “We’ll get the grease.”

“Where is it?”

I point at my bag, hanging on a hook by the privacy flap. There’s still not a lot of stuff in our hut, but I imagine it’ll fill up with time. Skarr all but leaps to the bag, and I can see he’s already extruded, both cocks out and gleaming wetly in the low light of our hut. They’re thick with arousal, and my mouth waters at the sight of him. Mine, all mine.

“Aha.” He holds it into the air and then strides back to me with two big steps, all but flinging the lid aside in his haste.

“You...you want me on hands and knees or on my back?” I pant, and then a slick, greased finger is teasing at my ass. I let out a whimper. Okay, I guess I’m on hands and knees.

He pushes his finger against the rim of my backside, and when it slips inside, he groans. “Look at how pretty that is.”

“Cock, too,” I manage, then bite down on a knuckle as he continues to tease my rim with his fingers. It’s both unnerving and erotic, and I can’t stay still. I squirm against his touch constantly, needing to move against those invading fingers as he pushes a second one into me.

“I love this,” he breathes, voice reverent. “Let me stretch you so you can take me.”

He goes slow, moving his two fingers in and out with gentle motions and then slowly adds a third. By this time, my pussy is aching and soaked with need, and there’s a hollowness in my belly that’s hungry to be filled. “Skarr. I need you.”

“You think you’re ready, my fierce warrior?”

I have no idea. I just know I’m going to go insane if he doesn’t give me more than a few fingers soon. I nod frantically.

His fingers slide out of my backside, and then I hear the sound of him slicking his cocks with the lubricant. A moment later, one is pushing at the entrance to my core. I make a sound

of pure need, lifting my hips to meet him. When he fills me, it feels so good I practically come from that alone.

Then I realize something fat and heavy is rubbing between my buttocks. It's his primary cock, the bigger one of the two. He drags it along the cleft of my backside, and I want to tell him to switch, to use the smaller one back there, but then he'd have to leave my body and I'm already clenching around his length, hungry for more.

"Ready?" he whispers, his hand skimming over my flank.

I nod and then he's pushing into me. He doesn't sink in like he does with my pussy. He pushes against my backside, and then surges forward when the tight muscles there ease enough to let him in. We both groan at once.

The feel of him in my backside is tight and not entirely uncomfortable, but I can hear Skarr panting as if he's losing his mind, so I know it's good for him. I close my eyes and relax, getting comfortable as he pushes slowly deeper, and then he's filling me in both holes. It's both too much and strangely pleasant, and I do my best to stay still as he settles in.

"My fierce warrior," he grits, stroking gently into me for the first time.

I cry out, the dual sensations powerful. Oh god...there are no words. That's incredible. He pumps into me again, gripping my hips to hold me in place. I moan as he settles into a rhythm, thrusting slowly and then picking up speed. I start to move with him, pushing back as he surges forward, until we're both lost in the moment.

"I need to touch myself," I pant as he drills into me. "Want to come with you."

"Do it." His voice is a hollow rasp full of tension. "Hurry."

As if I'm going to last long. The moment I steal one hand between my legs and touch my clit, everything in me tenses. Being filled by him like this is driving me to the edge, and with two strokes of my fingers I'm coming, my body tightening around him as the world shatters.

I'm lost in the waves of pleasure, barely aware of Skarr driving into me, his movements jerky, and then he's coming, too, shuddering over me and whispering my name a thousand times as if it's a prayer.

When the weight of him presses down on my back, I slump forward into the blankets, sweaty and exhausted. He flops down on top of me, a graceless pile of green muscle and cool skin, and then kisses my neck.

“Vivi...that was...”

“The best on the planet?” I ask, breathless.

He chuckles. “How did you know?”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello there!

Thank you for reading, and for continuing to read the ice planet shenanigans. If you're in this deep and continuing to read, I have nothing but love for you. This world and the people here are still endlessly fun for me, and I'm happy to have more stories to tell. That being said...it's been a hot minute since I last released an Ice Planet book! January was R'jaal and Rosalind and I had every intention of writing the next book quickly.

(Narrator: She did not, in fact, write the next book quickly.)

This year has definitely been a bit more scattered release-wise, but I'm going to take a quick break from IPC with the next release and then come back to Tia and Rem'eb's book, where we'll get to know all about the ancestors, their weird-ass politics and how things will play out. I'm looking forward to it! For the longest time, Tia didn't 'speak' to me as a character. I always know when a character is ready for their story when I start hearing their dialogue in my head. Tia was silent for the longest, and I realized it was because I was trying to pair her up with one of the Islanders and that wasn't working for me. Now that she's paired with Rem'eb (in resonance at least) she won't shut up, which is an excellent sign.

But let's talk about Skarr and Vivi!

With every book, it's my goal to first have fun with the story, and to showcase different aspects of living on the planet. I want every hero or heroine to be slightly different than the last, and so I'm always asking myself "How is this character different than the ones that came before?"

How was Skarr different from the other gladiators we had before?

In a word, Skarr *sucked*.

Which was fun to think about. What if your soulmate, your 'hero'...is an absolute jackass and a braggart? What do you do in that situation? Vivi was busy trying to figure herself out, and here comes this guy that won't shut up and won't leave her alone. To me, Skarr was a lot like Ashtar, but whereas Ashtar was flirty and cute and didn't take himself seriously, Skarr was the opposite. He looked at everything as a challenge. He wanted to *win* all the time. He wanted others to see him as a champion. In my head, he was like Andy Clark (Emilio Estevez) from the Breakfast Club. He needed everyone to see him as a hero.

So naturally I had to pair him with Ally Sheedy aka Allison aka the weird goth in the back of the room.

Vivi's got issues of her own, but she's also one of the strongest female characters. Someone had asked me once why I hadn't written a survivalist heroine. The answer? It's just too easy. You ever read one of those books where the heroine travels through time and automatically has a bag full of amazing stuff that makes her life in the past super easy? Yeah, I hated that as a reader. It felt like cheating. So making a survivalist drop on the ice planet felt like an unfair advantage...

...unless I gave her a bevy of other issues.

So yes, my darling Vivi knows how to start fires and make skis and hunt and track. She also doesn't know who she is or her own name, is insanely shy, and, well, she's saddled with Skarr.

I don't know if you can tell, but this was a really fun book to write.

Oh! And once I decided one of the splices was ssethri (the alien 'lizardman' race) I became fascinated with giving Skarr all of the lizardy trappings, right down to the crocodile-like tail and, well, the hemi-penises that tuck inside his body. I cannot tell you how many times I had to google "reptile penis" while working on this book, and I should point out that at no time ever did it present me with anything good. Ever. Like, just don't do it. It'll ruin the fantasy.

Another random inspiration for this story came to me via my backyard. As a kid, I grew up in a tight suburban neighborhood that had no wildlife, and I dreamed of one day having a house where I could see all the squirrels and feed all the birds. We have a few acres now and while I don't feed the birds (because it would be an owl-and-coyote buffet), we do get a lot of deer crossing through our yard. Being a city kid did not prepare me for what happens when *injured* deer wander through your yard. This last fall, a buck with a broken leg came through and drank and ate some grass, and stopped outside of my office window. His front one was bent at an odd angle and he limped as he moved through the yard.

I am the most tenderhearted SOB and was absolutely crushed to see this. I had to do something! So I checked with the local wildlife rescues and found out that they wouldn't help. They would just put him down. Yet here he was, wandering in my yard and eating like it was no big deal. Did he deserve to be put down when he was still walking? A lot of googling told me that it was best to actually do nothing for a deer with a broken leg. It would either survive and the leg would mend, or it wouldn't survive and circle of life and all that.

I cried about it, talked with my husband, and decided that we wouldn't do anything about it. We wouldn't interfere. I saw him twice and then didn't see him again...for six months. When he returned, he was just fine, his leg healed (but still at a weird angle, the only way I recognized him) and he moved only slightly slower than the rest of the deer that wander

through. I was happy that he ended up making it through but it also made me think about bone-setting and wild animals on the ice planet, where things heal quicker than they should thanks to the khui. What happens if a bone gets set wrong? Should the animal be put down? What the hell do you *do*?

(Vivi does all the things I wish I could do, because she's a do-er and I'm just a writer.)

I hope you enjoyed this more clone-centric story! R'jaal and Rosalind's story ended up being more focused on the Ancestors due to their situation, and this story is almost the opposite. In the next book, the Ancestors will feature a lot more than the clones will. Tia will finally get a mate! The Ancestor questions will be answered (well, some of them). People will be horny! Someone will be called a tater! Good times all around!

Much love,

Ruby Dixon

PEOPLE OF NOT-HOTH

Icehome

Mated Couples and their kits

Liz – Raahosh’s mate and huntress.

Raahosh (Ra-hosh) – Her mate. A hunter and brother to Rukh. Co-leader of Icehome beach with R’jaal.

Raashel (Rah-shel) – Their oldest daughter.

Aayla (Ay-lah) – Their second daughter

Ahsoka (Ah-so-kah) – Their third daughter.

Angie – Adult female at the beach camp. Pregnant with mystery baby when awoken. Gives birth to Glory (a clone female). Resonated to Vordis.

Vordis (Vohr-DISS rhymes with Floor-Miss) – One of the red “twins,” ex-gladiators of a race called a’ani. Longtime friends/brothers with Thrand, another clone. The really devoted one. Hot sauce. Resonates to Angie.

Glory – A qura’aki clone baby, implanted in Angie. Cute as hell.

Violet – Younger daughter of Angie and Vordis.

Veronica – Healer to the Icehome Beach tribe. Resonated to Ashtar upon arrival. Bit of a klutz. Has enlisted Hannah to be her assistant. Mom to Katamneas and Varukhal.

Ashtar (Ash-TARR) – Flirty golden ex-gladiator and former slave. Drakoni male who can shapeshift to a “battle form” as a dragon and has the ability to communicate telepathically. Resonates immediately to Veronica upon arrival to Icehome. Stud. Doting dad to Katamneas and Varukhal.

Katamneas (Ka-TAHM-nee-us) – Older son to Veronica and Ashtar.

Varukhal (Var-oo-call) – Younger son to Veronica and Ashtar.

Willa – Adult female with a southern twang. Lo’s friend. Gren’s most ardent defender. Resonated to Gren. Mom to Shade. She and Gren are currently trying for another child.

Gren (rhymes with HEN) – Beastly, feral ex-gladiator male. Attacks on sight. Resonates to Willa. Soft and fuzzy, according to Aayla. Father to Shade.

Shade – Small, fuzzy son to Willa and Gren.

Thrand (rhymes with “bland”—no one tell him this) – One of the red “twins,” ex-gladiators of a race called a’ani. Longtime friends/brothers with Vordis. The hotheaded, competitive one. Ketchup. Resonated to Nadine. Father to daughter Deeni.

Nadine – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Huntress and go-getter. Resonated to Thrand. Mother to Deeni.

Deeni (Dee-nee) – Daughter to Nadine and Thrand, is being spoiled silly by her doting father.

Steph – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Former psychology student. Neolithic bisexual therapist.

Resonated to Juth. Mom to (adoptive) son Pak and (biological) daughter Jethani.

Juth (Joooth) – Outcast male who snagged Raven in exchange for goods. Adoptive father of Pak. Eventually joined the tribe at Icehome Beach and resonated to Steph.

Pak (Pack) – Littlest outcast! Adoptive son of Juth and Steph, big brother to Jethani

Jethani (Jeth-ann-ee, rhymes with Bethany) – Daughter to Juth and Steph, has the same stub tail as her dad. It's cute.

Samantha – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Quiet. Secretive. Former barista back on Earth and loves caffeine. Really fucking loves being on the ice planet, which no one else can figure out. Resonates to Sessah.

Sessah (Ses-uh) – Youngest son to Sevvah and Oshen. Grown into a big, hulking hunter like Aehako but with his father's quiet personality. Resonates to Sam.

K'thar (Kuh-THARR) – Hunter, de-facto leader of Strong Arm, resonates to Lauren/Lo. Owner of Kki/Fat One.

Lauren/Lo – Adult female at the beach camp. Once had glasses. Likes to be a problem solver. Resonates to K'thar, is pregnant for a second time. Friend to Marisol.

Fat One/Kki (KUH-kee) – Nightflyer pet of the clan

K'then (Kuh-THENN) – Their young son.

J'shel (Juh-SHELL) – Young hunter of Strong Arm, resonates to Hannah. Very cheerful. Long braid. Dirty talker.

Hannah – Resonates to J'shel when the island tribes arrive. Resident busybody. Now assistant to Veronica and in

charge of herbal stores.

J'hann (Juh-HANN) – Their young son.

N'dek (Nuh-DECK) – Hunter of Strong Arm, recently lost a leg in a kaari attack. No longer depressed and sitting around the fire a lot. Resonated to Devi and has prosthetic leg.

Devi – Chatty adult female at beach camp. Scientist nerd. Hair flipper. Loves dinosaurs. Resonates to N'dek. Loves everything about Icehome beach.

N'rav (Nuh-RAV) – Their young son, who is as chatty as his mother.

T'chai (Tuh-SHY) – Hunter of Tall Horn, resonated to Marisol. Attacked by sky-claw on the island and nearly dies of wounds, so the healer stops his resonance. Eventually re-resonates to Mari.

Marisol – Terrified adult female at beach camp who is fond of hiding. Gets stranded with Lo on the island. Resonated to T'chai. Due to his sickness, their resonance is “turned off” by the healer. Re-resonated to T'chai. Mother to T'mar.

T'mar (Tuh-MAR) – Their son.

M'tok (Muh-TOCK) – Hunter of Tall Horn, resonated to Callie. Likes things neat and orderly. Bit of a sneak.

Callie – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Harry Potter fan. Resonated to M'tok. Also hated M'tok for a long, long time. She gets over it.

M'cal (Muh-cahl) – Their young son.

S'bren (Suh-BRENN) – Tall Horn hunter, brother to M'tok. He's the brawn (the Pinky?) to M'tok's brains. Goober around women. Steals Penny for himself and resonates to her.

Penny – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Learning to hunt. Human sunshine. Loves adventure and a good time. Was stolen by S'bren and gave him hell for it.

Brenna – Their young daughter.

A'tam (Uh-TAMM) – Shadow Cat hunter, said to be the handsomest on the island. Not much of a fish hook. Finally resonated to Bridget. Whew.

Bridget – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Friend to Veronica. Hooked up with A'tam. Broke up with A'tam. Resonated to A'tam. It's no longer complicated.

A'bri (Ah-bree) – Their young son.

U'dron (Ooh-DRONN) – Hunter. Fisher. All-around sporty type. Plays a mean drum. Late bloomer, proving-wise. Resonates to Raven.

Raven – One of the adult females at the beach camp. Blonde, despite her name. Hippie parents. Likes to sing and dance. Turns out her real name is Louise, she's not a hippie after all, and was a stripper. Still awesome. Finder of Juth and Pak.

U'rav (Ooh-rahv) – Their young son.

Vaza (Vaw-zhuh) – Widower and elder. Loves to creep on the ladies. Currently pleasure-mated with Gail and at Icehome beach. Adopted father to Z'hren.

Gail – Divorced older human woman. Had a son back on Earth (deceased). Approximately fiftyish in age. Pleasure-mated with Vaza, adopted mother to Z'hren.

Z'hren – Their son, formerly of Strong Arm clan.

Harlow – Mate to Rukh. Once “mechanic” to the Ancestors’ Cave. Currently at Icehome beach.

Rukh (Rookh) – Former exile and loner. Original name Maarukh. (Mah-rookh). Brother to Raahosh. Mate to Harlow. Father to Rukhar. Currently at Icehome beach.

Rukhar (Roo-car) – Their son.

Daya (Dye-uh) – Their daughter.

Bek (Behk) – Hunter. Brother to Maylak. Mated to Elly. Bit of a crank-monster but Elly doesn’t mind.

Elly – Former human slave. Kidnapped at a very young age and has spent much of life in a cage or enslaved. First to resonate amongst the former slaves brought to Not-Hoth. Mated to Bek.

Emma – Their very loud daughter (which is surprising to both Elly and Bek).

Flordeliza – Adult female at beach camp. Once a nurse. Kind of a clown. Oldest of the “new” group. Filipina. Talented with a needle. Was expected to resonate to R’jaal but resonated to I’rec instead. Loves to gossip and take care of “her people.”

I’rec (I-WRECK) – Clan leader. Bull in a china shop sort. Kind of a shit-stirrer and hard to get along with. Used to being

in charge. Resonated to Flor and promptly forgot all other women existed.

Daisy – Dropped on the ice planet by Mardok's old friend Niri. Former slave for over ten years and speaks/reads several alien languages. Was very beautiful and obsessed with her appearance, but recently had an accident that destroyed her looks. Working on improving her survival skills. Resonated to O'jek.

O'jek (Oh-JECK) – Hunter. Quiet. Likes to cook. Rumored to be shy. Juth's biological brother. Resonated to Daisy in what was the greatest day of his life.

R'jaal (Arr-JAHL) – Clan leader of Tall Horn who has also taken on a leadership stance at Icehome beach. Was rather lonely, now total Wife Guy. Resonates to Rosalind at the sight of her.

Rosalind – A shy librarian. A human stranger that was taken by the ancestors. Resonates to R'jaal. Also a fanfic-writing nerd who wants to learn how to make an Icehome library.

Tia (tee-AH) – Last remaining unmated human female of the Icehome group (and youngest). Was living at Croatoan for a time. Kemli's herbalism apprentice. Recently returned to Icehome, only to disappear from the fruit cave, also stolen by the ancestors. Resonated to Rem'eb.

Rem'eb the Fist (HREM - ebb) – Chief's son of the underground people. Resonates to Tia.

Skarr (Scar) – A ssethri splice with green scales and a lizard-like tail. Tends to slow down in the cold weather. Resonates to Vivi and loves to tell everyone how amazing she is.

Vivi – A human woman that has no memories of her name. Dubbed Vivian by Flor, after one of Flor’s sisters. She decides that she’s Vivi instead. Has survival skills and makes skis for the Icehome villagers. Resonates to Skarr and actually seems to tolerate him, much to everyone else’s surprise.

The Newcomers (so far)

Female Unmated Clones

Sabrina – A wedding planner. A cheerful sort who is determined to make the best of things.

Natalie – A human woman that has no memories of her name. Dubbed Natalie by Flor, after one of Flor’s sisters.

Isadora aka Dora – A blonde clone who refuses to acknowledge that she’s a clone. Has memories of a flower shop in Oregon.

Yasmin – A human clone.

Bianca – A human clone.

Gabriella – A human clone.

Colleen – A human clone.

April – A human clone.

Dawn – A human clone.

Male Unmated Clones

Kyth (kith—rhymes with “smith”) – A clone of a moden gladiator. He is extremely large and has webbed fingers and toes. His first khui died.

Valmir (VAL-meer) – A clone of a praxiiian gladiator. He is very catlike.

Chalath (CHUH-lath—rhymes with “bath”) – A male splice that looks to be equal parts mesakkah and praxii.

Jason – A human male clone. They do exist!

Ancestors

Set'nef the Wanderer (SET-neff) – A male of the ancestors with a penchant for traveling. He sympathizes with R'jaal and helps him escape.

Tal'nef the Swiftest (TALL-nef) – A male of the ancestors. Brother to Set'nef the Wanderer, and leaves for the surface when his brother does.

Noj'me the Attendant (NAWJ-may) – A female of the ancestors. Can speak the old Sakh tongue thanks to her “communication” with the oracle (which is a downed escape pod).

Kin'far the Tainted (KIN-fawr) – A creep. An exiled creep.

Bel'eb the Mighty (BELL-ebb) – The chief of the ancestors.

At Croatoan

Mated Couples and their kits

Vektal (Vehk-tall) – The chief of the sa-khui. Mated to Georgie.

Georgie – Human woman (and unofficial leader of the human females). Has taken on a dual-leadership role with her mate.

Talie (Tah-lee) – Their first daughter.

Vekka (Veh-kah) – Their second daughter.

Jorvek (Jor-vehk) – Their youngest, a son.

Maylak (May-lack) – Tribe healer. Mated to Kashrem.

Kashrem (Cash-rehm) – Her mate, also a leather-worker.

Esha (Esh-uh) – Their teenage daughter.

Makash (Muh-cash) – Their younger son.

Sevvah (Sev-uh) – Tribe elder, mother to Aehako, Rokan, and Sessah

Oshen (Aw-shen) – Tribe elder, her mate. Resident sah-sah expert.

Ereven (Air-uh-ven) – Hunter, mated to Claire.

Claire – Mated to Ereven.

Erevair (Air-uh-vair) – Their first child, a son

Relvi (Rell-vee) – Their second child, a daughter

Stacy – Mated to Pashov. Unofficial tribe cook.

Pashov (Pah-showv) – son of Kemli and Borran, brother to Farli, Zennek, and Salukh. Mate of Stacy.

Pacy (Pay-see) – Their first son.

Tash (Tash) – Their second son.

Nora – Mate to Dagesh.

Dagesh (Dah-zhesh) (the g sound is swallowed) – Her mate. A hunter.

Anna & Elsa – Their twin daughters.

Esther – Youngest daughter.

Megan – Mate to Cashol. Mother to Holvek.

Cashol (Cash-awl) – Mate to Megan. Hunter. Father to Holvek.

Holvek (Haul-vehk) – their son. Has a pet, Thunder, an orphaned dvisti with a twisted leg.

Jewel – Their second-born, a daughter.

Marlene (Mar-lenn) – Human mate to Zennek. French. Sly sense of humor. Likes hearts.

Zennek (Zehn-eck) – Mate to Marlene. Father to Zalene. Brother to Pashov, Salukh, and Farli.

Zalene (Zah-lenn) – daughter to Marlene and Zennek.

Ariana – Human female. Mate to Zolaya. Basic school “teacher” to tribal kits.

Zolaya (Zoh-lay-uh) – Hunter and mate to Ariana. Father to Analay & Zoari.

Analay (Ah-nuh-lay) – Their son. Has a bit of “the knowing” like Rokan.

Zoari (Zoh-air-ee) – Their daughter.

Tiffany – Human female. Mated to Salukh. Tribal botanist.

Salukh (Sah-luke) – Hunter. Son of Kemli and Borran, brother to Farli, Zennek, and Pashov.

Lukti (Lookh-tee) – Their son.

Aehako (Eye-ha-koh) – Mate to Kira, father to Kae. Son of Sevvah and Oshen, brother to Rokan and Sessah.

Kira – Human woman, mate to Aehako, mother of Kae. Was the first to be abducted by aliens and wore an ear-translator for a long time.

Kae (Ki—rhymes with “fly”) – Their quiet daughter.

Hakeer (Ha-keer) – Second child, a son.

Kemli (Kemm-lee) – Female elder, mother to Salukh, Pashov, Zennek, and Farli. Tribe herbalist and mentor to Tia. Kemli and Borran have welcomed Vadren, an elder, into a three-way mating.

Borran (Bore-awn) – Her much younger mate, elder.

Vadren (Vaw-dren) – Kemli’s age mate and once-pleasure-mate. He has joined a three-way mating with Kemli and Borran and shares furs with them.

Josie – Human woman. Mated to Haeden. Currently pregnant again.

Haeden (Hi-den) – Hunter. Previously resonated to Zalah, but she died (along with his khui) in the khui-sickness before resonance could be completed. Now mated to Josie.

Joden (Joe-den) – Their first child, a son.

Joha (Joe-hah) – Their second child, a daughter.

Shae (Shay—rhymes with play) – Their third child.

Rokan (Row-can) – Oldest son to Sevvah and Oshen. Brother to Aehako and Sessah. Adult male hunter. Now mated to Lila. Has “sixth” sense. Visiting Icehome.

Lila – Maddie’s sister. Once deaf, recently reacquired hearing on *The Tranquil Lady* via med bay. Resonated to Rokan. Visiting Icehome.

Rollan (Row-lun) – Their first child, a son.

Lola (nicknamed Lolo) – Their daughter.

Hassen (Hass-en) – Hunter. Previously exiled. Mated to Maddie. Currently at Icehome beach.

Maddie – Lila’s sister. Found in second crash. Mated to Hassen.

Masan (Mah-senn) – Their son. Owns a dirtbeak named Millicent.

Asha (Ah-shuh) – Mate to Hemalo. Mother to Hashala (deceased) and Shema. Pregnant for a second time.

Hemalo (Hee-muh-low) – Mate to Asha. Father to Hashala (deceased) and Shema.

Shema (Shee-muh) – Their daughter.

Farli – (Far-lee) Adult daughter to Kemli and Borran. Her brothers are Salukh, Zennek, and Pashov. She has a pet dvisti named Chompy (Chahm-pee). Mated to Mardok.

Mardok (Marr-dock) – Bron Mardok Vendasi, from the planet Ubeduc VII. Arrived on *The Tranquil Lady*. Mechanic and ex-soldier. Resonated to Farli and elected to stay behind with the tribe.

Farlok – Their infant son.

Harrec (Hair-ek) – Hunter. Squeamish at the sight of blood. Also a tease. Resonated to Kate.

Kate – Human female. Extremely tall & strong, with white-blond curly hair. Resonated to Harrec.

Mr. Fluffypuff aka Puff/Poof – Her orphaned snowcat.

Rennek – Their son, but they call him “Hopper”

Warrek (War-ehk) – Tribal hunter and teacher. Son to Eklan (now deceased). Resonated to Summer.

Summer – Human female. Tends to ramble in speech when nervous. Chess aficionado. Resonated to Warrek.

Wrek – Their destructive son.

Taushen (Tow—rhymes with cow—shen) – Hunter. Mated to Brooke. Experiencing a happiness renaissance.

Brooke – Human female with fading pink hair. Former hairdresser, fond of braiding the hair of anyone that walks close enough. Mated to Taushen.

Hazel – Their daughter.

Unmated Elders

Drayan (Dry-ann) – Elder.

Drenol (Dree-nowl) – Elder. Friend to Lukti. Hates to lose at chess.

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Enjoy!

