

JENNIFER JULIE MILLER



Vilin

VIN



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Jennifer Julie Miller

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ADRIAN) ARTIST

Beta Readers:

Lorene Palmer, Rick Miller, Ethel Nance.

Editors:

Partners in Crime Book Services, Randy Henry.

Photographs:

Brittany Henry & Rick Miller, Shutterstock.

Imaginational inspiration crew:

Jewel Shipley, Amanda Hall, Joann Herley, Vicki Adrian.

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CHAPTER I

EMBER



The sound of my heels clicking across the pavement has everyone turning towards me. I flip my long red hair and smile sweetly even though I'm highly agitated at the moment, but as Mother constantly says, *Someone is always watching you, so never give the cameras your bad side*, and snarls are not a good look on me.

I APPROACH one of the individuals, who seems to be shouting orders out to everyone else, tapping my foot impatiently as he continues to ignore me. When it appears that he isn't going to acknowledge me at all, I interrupt them. "Gentlemen, excuse me for a moment, but I have asked for an explanation several times on the way over here, without a civil reply from the overbearing men sent to retrieve me. Would one of you like to explain to me what the big hurry is all of a sudden? I was enjoying myself immensely this afternoon and was in the middle of my going away party when your goons, I mean men, simply rushed in and forced me to leave. This was very inconsiderate of you, as my father paid a substantial amount of money to throw that get together for me. Not only was it rude to the people in attendance, but your abrupt entrance made me cancel the photo shoot I had planned with each individual as a remembrance to take with me into space. My father will hear of this as soon as the phones are operating again." I glance around. "Speaking of Father, where is he?"

I STEP BACK, startled, when the guy snarls at me. “Miss Wayne, we are sorry that trying to save your life is an inconvenience, but the launch schedule has been moved up due to the incoming storms. Your father is in flight as we speak and should arrive shortly. However, you are not our only client. It would be helpful if you could cooperate and come with me. I need to get you prepped and safely into the pod, then launched within the next hour.”

“I’D RATHER WAIT for my father, if you don’t mind.”

“THAT’S NO LONGER AN OPTION. I spoke to him only moments ago, and he said to proceed without him. If you don’t come with me now, I can’t ensure you will even get launched at all. Things are quickly deteriorating here at the facility and we already had one pod stolen. No one was shocked more than I when one of the workers here overrode the system and launched his own daughter in a pod that was supposed to be used for a senator’s son.

“UNFORTUNATELY, for all of us still here at the facility, security is continuing to lessen by the hour the closer the storm system gets. Money nor this job means anything. Many are leaving in vain as they try to reach their family members as quickly as possible. Honestly, if you want to have the slightest chance of surviving the next few hours, you need to do everything I say. All the workers here gave up their chances of escaping this world-ending storm in time so that a few of you could survive. We are doing the best we can to save the human race and we would all appreciate a little bit of gratitude.”

I STOMP MY FOOT. “I’m absolutely not leaving without my parents. Daddy said that we were all going together.”

ANOTHER GUY GRABS me by the elbow. “Miss Wayne, did you not hear a word he said? We don’t have time to cater to you. Move it, or stay and die! It’s your choice. And just so you know, you should be grateful you’re getting the option at all because there are only a handful of you lucky enough to be leaving this doomed planet. The rest of us have less than a ten percent chance of even surviving until nightfall. So excuse me if I don’t feel sorry for your pampered ass.”

HE PUSHES me forward before I can say a word. “How dare you! I’ve never been talked to like this. Where is your supervisor?”

HE DOESN’T SAY another word, just keeps dragging me towards what looks like a bunch of rockets. Stopping at the first one in line, he shoves me inside roughly. I stumble when he lets go of me.

“IF YOU LEFT a mark on me, you will regret it.”

“SUE ME,” he replies before stomping away, screaming out, “What a fucking shame, the pods are being wasted on the likes of her!”

I FIGHT the tears forming behind my eyes, refusing to let them know how much his words bother me. “Miss Wayne, I need you to change into this suit. It will protect you from the G forces the rocket will experience upon take off, and it will also help to keep you healthy during your extended travels into the unknown.”

HE HANDS me the most horrible-looking outfit I have ever seen. “I am not wearing this! Can you imagine what their first

impression of a human would be, if this is the first thing they see me in? I sent you my preferred travel clothing and the necessities I believe I will need on this trip before coming here. You were supposed to have them all stored inside the family pod so that we would retrieve them upon arrival.”

HE SIGHS WEARILY as he rubs his hands through his messy hair. “Miss Wayne, did you even read any of the information about this launch procedure?”

“I WILL ADMIT, I only skimmed through it. Daddy sat me down one evening, telling me that we were going to leave Earth because of an asteroid or something like that and that I should pack accordingly. Just so you know, I was heartbroken when I wasn’t allowed to bring all my luggage. Daddy made me repack it three times before he finally agreed with what I was bringing. A few days later, we were having dinner, and he said that we would land on another planet somewhere out in space and that it would be our responsibility to reestablish our society. I asked Daddy how we planned on doing that. He told me that you had sent workers ahead to prepare a place for us. Also, several of his business partners, their wives, and children, are also going on this adventure with us. Daddy said that it wouldn’t be long after we landed that we would be back in as high a standing as we are here. I asked him how we got chosen and if there was a way I could bring a few friends. He said no, they would all be fine here. That the government was preparing to take most of our society underground, and once we were settled, he would send for my friends.”

THE WIND PICKS up and my hair whips around my face, and it feels like the rocket thingy sways slightly under my feet before settling back in place. The guy who is trying to explain things to me shakes his head, whispering, “Lord, your ignorance.” When the next hard gust of wind hits, he yells.

“WE ARE OUT OF TIME, princess. Put this suit on over your clothes and listen to me. I’m going to try and make this simple so that you can understand what’s happening to you. In the meantime, I’m going to do my best to make sure you land somewhere else in one piece.

“MISS WAYNE, unlike the stories you’ve been told previously, we don’t know where you are going to end up after you take off. I hate to be one to say this, but your father lied to you about everything. You will be on your own out there and everything you have come to love will cease to exist within a few hours here on earth.

“THE PODS ARE PROGRAMMED to keep traveling through space until a human-friendly planet is located. No one is going ahead of you, as these are the first and only pods that will be launched. If you listen to a single thing I’m saying, take this to heart. Wherever you land, it’s not going to be Earth or anything like Earth. You will be an alien on another alien planet. So the fact that you’ve had everything handed to you your whole life will more than likely come to an end abruptly. Your best chance of survival would be to travel with your family, but that’s no longer an option as I don’t believe they will even make it here to be launched.

“THE MOMENT you open your eyes again, try not to freak out or talk down to anything around you. You are not going to be anyone of importance somewhere else, and the only reason you are here is because of your father’s money. Your survival will depend on you.”

HIS WORDS RUN through my mind, but none of it makes sense. I bite the inside of my lip, trying not to cry as I slide the ugly suit on over my cute summer dress, but at the last minute decide to leave my heels on.

“HERE, put this translator behind your ear. It will feel odd until you get used to it, but it’s the best we could do in such a short amount of time. Remember, you are the alien landing on another planet, so try to be pleasant, if you even know how to behave that way.”

HE GRABS my arm and pushes me back into a small cylinder, and before I can say anything else, he straps a mask over my face. Belts come out of nowhere, surrounding me, and I screech when they begin to tighten down. I struggle against them, but they won’t budge. Several times I try to talk through this mask, but he either can’t hear me or is choosing not to.

HE STEPS BACK ABRUPTLY and hits a button that closes a clear panel down right before me, and that’s when it dawns on me what’s happening. Up until this very moment, even with all the preparations and goodbye parties, I didn’t really believe we were leaving Earth. Tears flow down my cheeks, and I can feel myself starting to panic.

“LET ME OUT! I don’t want to go. Please let me out!” I scream, but he ignores me.

THE GUY who had been hooking me up to this one-way trip to nowhere steps back and slams the main door of the rocket. He doesn’t even glance back up at me; I don’t think I have ever felt such indifference. The moment the door closes, the silence is almost deafening as there is absolutely no noise in this tube. Without warning, something starts clicking all around me. It sounds like someone is trying to light a grill, and the shuttle shakes aggressively.

TERRIFIED, I fight against the restraints, and just as I get one hand free, I'm jerked back hard as the rocket launches and within seconds, it feels like my skin is being peeled off my bones slowly. My mouth opens in a silent scream, but I can't seem to make a single sound. The pain quickly becomes so intense spots form before my eyes. My breathing becomes erratic and I begin to cough uncontrollably, smothering like something hard is pushing against my chest. There is a moment of relief when a cool mist blows across my face, only for my world to go dark.



CHAPTER 2

EMBER



A pleasant fragrance and the feeling of multiple hands touching my skin awakens me abruptly. The surrounding air seems overly sweet, each breath almost nauseating, but relaxing all at the same time.

OPENING MY EYES, everything seems fuzzy and out of focus. It sounds like children are giggling somewhere around me, but the sound is not right. It's like I'm hearing them through a tunnel. A whimper leaves my lips as I try to stretch out. Finally, my body starts moving slowly, and I swear I feel bruised all over. My head clears slightly as the colors that had been fuzzy before become clearer. Staring up, I find myself looking at drawings on the ceiling above me.

I JERK when little hands start touching me gently all over again. Turning my head, I come face to face with a...small muddy face. It tilts its head sideways, multiple eyes blink in sequence as it stares back at me. My first reaction is to move away, but my body seems sluggish and unresponsive.

ITS SMALL MOUTH OPENS, and the creature makes a clicking sound. Similar to something you would do to an animal you are trying to coax it. *Like here kitty, kitty...or look how pretty you are, you want some lovins?* The little muddy thing pats my face softly. Its hand is rough and warm with what looks like

three chubby fingers. I can feel other ones touching me too, but I don't have the strength to move away.

THE LITTLE MUD monster alien thing starts moving its hands all around in the air, motioning for me to look at something. I'm not sure if I should be scared or what at this point. So, I try to think back to what the guy who shoved me in the pod told me to do, but it's like my mind is blank, and I can't seem to focus on any one particular thing.

WHEN I FINALLY MANAGE TO RAISE MY head up some to look around, there are at least a dozen or more of these little muddy aliens all around me. Hundreds of eyes stare back at me from little faces that seem fake. Their muddy or clay-like features give them a puppet-like appearance. The tallest one that I can see can't be more than a few feet tall. They all seem to be dressed the same way, in dark-colored robes that flow all the way to the dirt floor. The one closest to me waves its hands around again and they all start chanting together. I lay back as a wave of dizziness hits me. Right now, they don't seem to want to hurt me, but my head is so fuzzy I don't know if I would even care.

THE AIR SMELLS SO WEIRD. One minute it's thick and flowery, the next I swear it smells like sulfur or even smoke of some sort. The room is stuffy, and my skin feels clammy all over. One of them pats my shoulder and I turn my head towards it again. A muddy hand holds what looks like a small cup up to my mouth. It takes me a second to rise and I hesitantly take the container out of its hand. Something deep down tells me to be scared, but for some reason, I can't figure out why. They seemed so friendly so far.

THE MUD alien motions for me to drink. Hesitantly, I take a small sip. Even though it is just a couple of swallows, it tastes refreshing, and I immediately crave more. I hand it back to the

one who seems to be trying to talk to me and motion for more. I swear its muddy little face smiles as it starts moving its hands again. Multiple clicking and whining noises seem to surround me. I have no idea what they are saying to each other, but they are so excited. I open my mouth to say something only for the one closest to me to put its dirty fingers over my lips. If that happened at any other time in my life, I would be furious. Now I think I'm almost relieved. After all, what do you say to the mud monsters?

I FINALLY PUSH myself up and swing my legs over the side of what looks like a bed made of dark gray flowers. No wonder the smell was so strong before; I'd been laying on them all this time. I glide my hand across the one closest to me, only for it to flutter, and a puff of what looks like purple pollen floats out of its center. I immediately get that dizzy feeling again. The crazy thing is, I swear it's like I'm drunk, but how?

LOOKING AROUND, I try to figure out where I'm at; it appears that I'm in a cave or an underground cavern. There seems to be some sort of natural light in the room, but its red tint looks odd against the colorful paintings on the ceiling and walls. As I glance around at the colorful pictures all over the place, they appear to be a story painted in different scenes.

A FEW OF the little muddy things grasp hands and sing out as they twirl in circles under the largest of the drawings in the center. As in each of the pictures, these little brown alien things are there, but the one in the middle has a taller pale figure with long red hair in it. *How odd, that could almost be me*, I think to myself. Before I can dwell on it any further, something pulls on my long hair and then somehow, another small drink appears in my hand. Without thinking, I swallow it all.

MY MIND CLEARS FOR A SECOND, and I try to think past the celebration before me. *Where am I, and where is the pod? Am I the only one here? Where are my parents?* Hot air suddenly surrounds me and that's when I notice I'm no longer in that horrible jumpsuit thing the grouchy guy made me put on. I'm in a slip-like dress that barely comes to my knees. Who changed me? These little guys seem too small, but there isn't anyone else here. At least I still have my ankle-strapped Louboutin shoes on. I think I would've rather woken up naked than lose these shoes.

ANOTHER TUG on my hand has me looking down, and the one who has been giving me this drink motions for me to get up. It takes me a few tries, but I manage to stand on wobbly legs. A few of them back away as I stand up and suddenly they don't look so friendly anymore. Their small mouths are full of teeth and their multiple eyes flash a weird gold color. Tripping on the uneven surface, I stumble forward. When I get too close to one of them, it scratches my arm and snarls up at me.

I YANK MY ARM BACK, rubbing at the minor scratch, only to be pushed forward again toward what looks like an archway. Another drink appears and even knowing I shouldn't take it, I do. I'm just so thirsty at this point I don't care what I'm drinking. There is something wrong with me and that something is important to what is happening around me, but what is it?

THEY KEEP PUSHING me by the back of my legs. Attempting to make my way up a couple of steps, I fall several times, scratching my knees up. Flowers drape all over what appears to be an archway, and the floor is covered in their loose petals. When I step forward, their pollen releases, and I begin choking from the sudden thickness of it in the air. My head is so fuzzy, I sway back and forth. I don't even try to fight them. Hundreds of hands start wrapping my arms and legs in flowered ropes, securing me in place.

THE PLATFORM DRIFTS forward as I stand here, nauseous and drunk. My stomach sours and sweat starts to bead on my forehead. Making myself swallow several times, I try not to throw up as I sway back and forth on this thing I'm standing on. Abruptly, I'm being pushed forward. I can't think straight. Too much is happening too fast and I can't seem to separate any of it. Music, or maybe it's drums, pulse throughout this room. Their intensity is so loud, it's making the platform I'm standing on vibrate under my feet. Every inch I move, the hotter it's getting all around me.

I TRY to ask them to stop several times, but no words form. My mouth seems to be full of cotton and my tongue feels thick. That's when it dawns on me, *I have been drugged*. Standing before an enormous crack in the ground, I close my eyes and try to center myself. Bright red flames burst up in random places and, as I follow their path with my eyes, I can see what looks like a river of lava flowing below. A fireball shoots directly in front of me. I jerk back, trying to get away, only to find the ropes clasp me tight.

UNEXPECTEDLY, the platform tilts forward. My arms are jerked backward roughly by the ropes holding me in place. I struggle against the restraints, but the more I move, the faster the floor tilts forward. The drums stop abruptly, and I swear it looks like the lava river is rising in the cavern below. Something sharp pierces my side and this time, when I open my mouth, a real scream leaves my lips. My legs buckle as my blood seeps out of my side and down my leg. One rope suddenly snaps and my body jerks forward. Panicking, I grab the remaining one, only for it to start breaking, too. Falling forward, the last thing I hear before fainting, is them cheering as I plunge toward my fiery death.



CHAPTER 3

VIN



I set the shuttle down in the desolate area of Targres Four. I've searched this region for over half an Orbital rotation section by section, only to find nothing. If I don't find something soon, I won't be able to stay out here much longer without being called back. This mountainous area is one of the last places left on the grid I have not looked. The odds of anything surviving an impact with their denseness is highly unlikely, but I'm using every excuse to stay out here longer.

"FALCOR, run an interior scan and see if you can see any caves or openings in the surrounding areas?"

"CAPTAIN VIN, my scanners cannot penetrate the dense crust of the terrain you are currently located in."

"CONFIRMED, I will set out on foot, and should rendezvous back in half a rotation."

AFTER SETTING the cooling tanks on automatic, I grab my bag out from the back and then exit the main ramp.

STANDING in the middle of nowhere, I baste in the pure joy of the intense heat beating down on me. Its warmth gathers inside

my main core, but no matter how I will it forward, I don't seem to bring forth the fire my soul craves.

THAT'S the sole reason I volunteered for this endless hunt for the unknown. I was hoping the heat of Targres' suns would heal whatever was blocking my transformation. Many times, I could feel my skin stretching. For a moment, my scales merged and glowed, but then my core grew cold once more.

I FIND myself consumed by dark thoughts as I reflect on the curse of this weakness that has plagued me since birth. The purpose of my mixed heritage was to aid in the salvation of our kind. Instead, it created something else... me. It's not that I'm not proud of who I am or my parents, but in times like these, I let the differences bother me. Often, I wonder if my brothers experience the same thing, as all of us are the best and worst of our kind.

MANIPULATING fire comes naturally to my kind. Even younglings can wield it, but my core has never been able to hold the heat needed to project it. Mother never seemed to be concerned about it. Many times she has told me *the fire would be there when I needed it the most*. However, it's been many a rotation since I was a youngling and I have never once been able to manifest it, no matter the circumstances.

THE HEAT ENVELOPS ME, and I absorb it eagerly like a parched sponge would water. I dread the idea of going back to the cold of the Destroyer.

THE LORD OF LIGHT knows I enjoy all my brothers' company, but there are times I simply must get away. I was slowly losing my mind due to the noise and crush of bodies on the Destroyer. Not including the intense cold of space that no one

seems to feel but me. Even installing heat lamps in my personal cabin has not helped keep the chill away.

I DIDN'T EXACTLY LIE to EvO or Father when I told them I saw something break through the atmosphere. There was something. I simply didn't care what it was as long as it gave me a reason to escape for a few rotations. I had full intentions of locating whatever it was that caught my attention when I started this mission, but it seemed to evade me. According to the information I recovered from the sensors, an unknown object crashed in this particular vicinity, but nothing is shown on the scanners.

HESITATING, I glance around, not wanting to lose sight of the shuttle out here. The desolate area is unmapped and unknown, so all the sensors are of little help. Everything looks the same on the surface, and it would be easy for me to get turned around out here. Very few, unlike me, can survive in this harsh environment. The lack of resources like water and shelter would be a struggle in itself for most, but the heat many can't withstand.

I TAKE off walking north of the shuttle and quickly come up on signs of life, something I didn't expect to see. Now that I have had time to scout this area, I believe there is a lot more out here than meets the eye. If you know what to look for, you can see worn tracks in the hardened soil all around. There is something, or someone, surviving out here, away from the prying eyes of others. By the number of tracks, it's more than just a simple few.

AFTER WALKING A WHILE, I stop to check the coordinates on my personal com unit, only to find the screen flickering on and off. This doesn't worry me much, as Falcor has warned me many times to remember that the heat will mess with most of

my electronics while I am planetside. However, it makes mapping this area out harder, as I have to do it manually.

SINCE THE COMM isn't working right. I make myself stop regularly, physically logging the distance I've traveled on foot in case I get turned around. My handheld scanner also seems to be glitching as it is suddenly picking up anomalies underneath my feet. It's frustrating because I don't know if the readings are accurate or not. After walking half a rotation around the shuttle's coordinates, I decide to make my way back to the craft to check in with Falcor. He can usually narrow down the search area from the data I've been able to acquire so far.

TURNING BACK, I have only taken a few steps when the air surrounding me suddenly seems charged, and the sun's harsh rays dim quickly. Small particles of sand start swirling around on the ground's surface at my feet. I put a hand in front of my face to keep the small grains out of my eyes, as the wind gets stronger with every step I take. A roaring sound behind me has me looking back. It takes a second for my mind to comprehend what it's seeing. There is a giant funnel cloud moving toward me quickly. I didn't even know a storm like that could form in an area such as this. I commence to run towards the shuttle when a simple step forward has the ground opening up and swallowing me whole.

FALTERING as sand and debris plummet me from above, I slide down what appears to be a long, round shoot. Descending uncontrollably, I grab wildly at the slick sides, trying to slow my descent. Tumbling over and over, my gear bag is torn off my back and the harness holding my ax snaps. My claws dig trenches into the loose soil on the sides as I try to grab onto anything to stop my rapid fall into the unknown.

THE SHOOT suddenly opens up into an open cavern. I land hard, feet below its exit, rolling as soon as my body hits the ground, trying to lessen the impact of the immense fall. Instinctively jumping to my feet, I grab my ax off the ground and hunch down with my claws extended, ready to fight off whatever has trapped me in this underground lair. Luckily, a faint red glow penetrates what should be complete darkness and I can see around me.

WHEN NOTHING ATTACKS, I stand up to assess my injuries. A few minor scrapes on the backs of my legs and a broken claw seem to be the worst of it. Warily, I bend down and grab my gear off the ground, my senses on high alert. I don't know what type of animal could have made that type of hole from the surface of this tunnel.

THE SOUND of beating drums suddenly enters the enormous cavern. Their sound echoed off the walls. Turning, I try to figure out what direction they originate, only to be disoriented by their noise as the long tunnel stretches out in many unknown directions.

WALKING over to the cavern walls, I realize instantly what I'm seeing is a hardened lava tube. The walls are still warm to the touch, so this means it's still an active passage. I could be trapped if the lava becomes too pressurized and rises quickly. Glancing back up towards the ceiling, I wonder if I can claw my way back to the surface, but the ceiling is curved, and the distance is too high for me to jump.

I TAKE A MOMENT, trying to determine which way to go. The tunnels behind me seem to darken and a shiver wracks my frame as I hate the cold. Then the sudden sound of a female screaming echoes all around me. I don't hesitate to advance as I allow my training to take over. We've been taught from a young age that females are precious and we protect them at all

costs. The sound of my large footsteps pound throughout the tunnel as I run headlong into the unknown.

I SKID to a stop when the tunnel opens suddenly, barely stopping before plunging headfirst into the huge cavern that appears before me. My body stretches as it immediately starts absorbing the massive heat coming from the lava below. Lava rises quickly out of its banks and heads my way.

AN ODD SMELL catches my attention and has me looking up as hundreds of flowers rain down on my head. It takes a second for my eyes to see a larger, shadowy figure falling toward me quickly. Instinctively, I reach out, catching the slight form in my arms. A grunt leaves my lips as we collide. Taking a step forward to balance myself, I look down, only to be shocked.

I'M NOW HOLDING in my arms a bundle of pale, womanly flesh. For a second, I believed she was a youngling until I noticed the small breast pushing against the flimsy material draped over her body. I don't have time to even process this thought any further when I hear an odd name being chanted from above.

“VULCAN, Vulcan, Vulcan, Lord of fire! Please, accept our sacrifice and preserve our home. Halt the rise of your deadly rivers and walls of fire. Accept this sacrifice and appease your hungry nature.”

I'M SHOCKED by the way they all bow down to me from above on a small ledge. My mind tumbles through the different species that could survive under these dismal conditions. It takes me a moment to recognize the species hovering over me, as I tend to stay away from most damp and dark places.

THE ONLY ONES that come to mind are the Muldars. They live and work deep underground, doing jobs that most don't want. But how did they come to be in Targres Four and no one knew about it? They must be mining something, and that means there has to be a way out of these tunnels and back to the surface.

HOWEVER, the small Muldars seem to be confused by my sudden appearance as now they are acting like I'm the deity they've been praying to all this time. The only thing I can think of is it has to be my markings. They must believe I'm linked to the lava flows somehow. I hate to disappoint them. Lord of Light knows I enjoy its heat immensely, but that lava is just as deadly to me as it is to them. Although, I'm not going to be stupid enough to point this out to them. The Muldars are known cannibals and I'm way outnumbered, even as small as they are, their numbers are mighty. This female was lucky to have escaped their clutches with her skin fully intact.

THE SUDDEN FEELING of wetness on my side has me pulling the female away from me slightly. I'm horrified when I see her life force flowing freely down her long legs. A sound escapes her lips and I glance back at her face. Vibrant green eyes peer up at me and her small form trembles in my arms even in this heat. Her body goes limp as her eyes roll back in her head. I shake her, trying to awaken her, but she is unresponsive.

PANICKING, I commence to lay her down so I can retrieve the med pack out of my bag, only to realize the lava has practically surrounded me and is now flowing freely down the tunnel I just came from. I jump up to a higher outcropping, picking my steps carefully with this extra burden in my arms.

A LAVA BUBBLE burst close to us, and even though I dodged out of the way, I didn't manage to block her tender skin in time. A small molten rock lands on her shoulder and I flick it

away, only to be shocked at the damage it did to her skin in a mere second. I placed her in a secure position in front of me and used my body to block the flames. I make myself take deep breaths and concentrate on each step, as I'm not used to the feeling of another against me. Wrapping my arms around her, I try my best to shield her from any more injuries as I scale the rock wall.

I DON'T TAKE the time to stop and look behind us again. I just keep climbing up the rock face. The intense heat behind me indicates that the lava is still rising rapidly. The soles of my boots are getting hot and the skin on my lighter side is starting to burn from the intenseness of it. I cringe when another lava bubble bursts, but my scales reflect it with minor damage to my underlying skin on my other side. This is the first time being of multiple races has worked for and against me at the same time.

THE CHANTING HAS STOPPED and I can hear the Muldars running away from the rising lava lake that is headed quickly towards us. I make myself concentrate on each step as her legs tangle with mine. One last jump and I pull us into a higher lava tunnel that is angled off to the side. This one is at least cool to the touch, so it's possible the lava has not risen this high in quite some time. Either way, we won't be able to stay here long, but I should have long enough to tend to her wounds and rest for a moment until I can get my bearings.

WITHIN A FEW STEPS, the tunnel darkens and I can't see my hand in front of my face. I snarl and the female jerks in my arms. I absolutely loathe the dark. Even though I hate to lay her down in the dirt. I need to get the auxiliary light out of my pack and I can't do that and hold her, too.

SHAKING HER LIGHTLY, "FEMALE?"

SHE DOESN'T RESPOND, so I slide her down, trying my best to ignore the feeling of her smooth skin rubbing against my own. Leaning her back against my legs, I pull my bag off my back and reach into the side pocket, retrieving the lantern. I smile to myself when it is exactly where I put it, *nothing like always being organized.*

I CLICK the button on its side only for it not to come on immediately. Hitting it a few times against the side of my leg, it finally clicks on, but dimly. I take a moment to cast the beam around the tunnel before tending to the female at my feet. When everything seems to be clear. I put it on the ground so that I could get the med pack out.

THE LITTLE FEMALE hasn't moved, and this begins to worry me as I have no actual way of stabilizing her, nor any idea of how to get her to help quickly. Opening the med bag, I lay the female the rest of the way onto the floor gently. Then hold the scanner up to her forehead so that it will inform me exactly what species she is. I believe she is the same as Father's Kira, but I've only seen a few of the human females and talked to them even less. This one looks nothing like the others; besides her vibrant red hair, she is plain and ugly. Unlike Father's Kira, she is quite beautiful in a very graceful, feminine way. Whereas XuL's female's dark hair and eyes make her appear very exotic, and I catch myself watching her way too often.

MOST OF MY brothers seem to be fascinated by this soft species. However, they've not gathered my interest in the same romantic way, as they seem weak, helpless, primitive, and needy. A female would have to be much sturdier to handle my home world.

I PULL the thin garment up her long pale legs to look at the cut in her side and once again, this just confirms their weakness. This small of an injury would only be an inconvenience to me. I can see her bones held together by meager muscles and blue veins pulsing under thin skin.

UNLIKE THIS WEAKLING lying before me, even pinching the skin together has not stopped the flow of her life essence. I pull the cauterizer pen out, hesitating to use it. The pen will stop the blood flow, but it will mark the skin permanently. Glancing over her slight form, the only other marks I can see are some random specks of dirt here and there. I try to brush some of them off her hip, but it seems they've somehow sunk into her skin.

SHE IS SO EXCESSIVELY PALE, this new mark will be hard to hide and I know how vain most females are about their bodies. Unfortunately, I didn't pack much when I left the shuttle. I have the basics for survival, but not the equipment to do this effectively.

I CURSE MY IGNORANCE, as my training has taught me better, but I never thought past simply locating the object I saw fall from the heavens. Tracking things is simply what I do best, taking care of others... not so much.

HER ENTIRE BODY trembles as a moan leaves her lips. As much as I hate to inflict this permanent reminder upon her, I have no other choice. Pinching the skin together, I start the process of closing her wound. Suddenly, her body arches up and I flip my leg over the lower half of her body to hold her still until I can get the wound closed.

IT ONLY TAKES me a few seconds, but it felt like I was holding her down forever. I grab a few wipes out and clean away as

much of the blood as I can from her skin. I growl when I catch myself rubbing a hand down her pale leg. The texture of her skin is unlike anything I've ever felt before, and my mind has nothing to compare it to.

SUDDENLY, a clattering noise has me looking up at her face. I put my ear closer, trying to understand what I'm hearing. Her teeth are clicking together, and her lips are turning blue. The cold affects me negatively, but not as quickly as it seems to be her. I reach into the bag, looking to see if there is a cloak or other garment stuffed into the bottom. I hate the feel of clothing against my skin. If I am to be covered, it has to be loose, so this means I seldom have any extras with me.

THE ONLY PIECE of cloth I find is a roll of binding that I didn't even know was in the pack. Pulling it out, I try to contemplate a way of making her some extra covering with it. I stretch the material out and then pick her up gently, laying her in the middle of it as I wrap it around her slight form.

IT ONLY TAKES me a few minutes to bind it around her, but at least her core is now covered, even though the tight wrap makes her look even smaller than before. I pack my bag back up and place it firmly on the wall of the cave, then pick the female back up, sitting her in my lap, trying to share my heat with her while I still have some.

MY BODY IS LOSING energy quickly in this darkness and, as tempting as it is to head back toward the lava, it's too unpredictable and the female already has been badly burned. I touch the darkened skin on her shoulder softly as I tuck her head under my chin. The burn is deep and is now draining a yellow liquid. I used all the wipes I had to get the blood off her skin and there is nothing in the med bag to treat a wound such as this.

SHE IS DAMAGED, and the longer I'm in this cave system, the weaker I will get until my body shuts down completely from the cold. I bang my head lightly against the wall behind me. I need to find a way out of here quickly, for both of our sakes.

ALL I CAN GIVE her is rest right now. Hopefully she will awaken on her own soon, and we will make our way out of this place. I pull her body close, wrapping my arms around her, shocked at how well she fits up against me. Pulling her legs up against mine, something sharp stabbing the inside of my thigh has me lifting one of her legs. She has on some sort of aggressive shoe. I try to tug one off, only to see a small strap wrapped around her ankle.

MY LARGE FINGERS are too big to undo the clasp that seems to be holding them on, so I leave them for now. She lays against me, completely emotionless. If it wasn't for her chest moving in and out, I would believe she had already passed from this world.

EVEN THOUGH WE need to get moving, I'm not looking forward to her awakening. I know she will be terrified of my appearance, as most are, and if her story is anything like the others of her race, she is now new to this world.

I'm not sure I would want to wake up with me either. I'm not blind, I know my differences are extreme. Why couldn't she have fallen into the arms of one of my brothers? Father would never forgive me if I didn't do all I could to get her out of here, but I'm not the best male for this job.

HER SMALL TEETH finally stop their clicking noise and I can feel the warmth settling back into her skin slowly. I pull her long red hair away from her extremely small ears, looking to

see if she has a translator, only to find nothing but smooth skin.

I HIT my head against the wall behind me. Frack... not only will my appearance scare her, but she also won't be able to understand a word I say. I lean my head back and take a deep breath. This rising just keeps getting better and better. Hopefully, I will be able to navigate our way out of these tunnels. If not, at least I know it won't be long before Falcor reports to Father that I haven't checked in. The Lord of Light knows I wouldn't mind seeing his snarling face right about now.

CHAPTER 4

VIN



Ember

Jerking upward, I hit the top of my head on something hard. “Ow!” I lift my hand to rub my forehead when the back of it hits something odd. Blinking several times, I try to comprehend what I’m seeing directly in front of me.

TWO BRIGHT YELLOW eyes stare down at me from a broken in half scaled face. A scream bubbles up in my throat, only to be stopped by something covering my mouth. I bite down hard on the hand pressing against my lips, only for its skin to cut my bottom lip.

IT GROWLS some sort of nonsense at me before yanking its hand away. Fighting its grip on my waist, I finally manage to get loose and scramble backward until my back hits a wall. Pain shoots up my side and I grit my teeth, gripping it tightly, breathing hard as I try to fight the terror flooding my mind.

THE THING that had been holding me doesn’t move. It just sits there watching me with piercing eyes that are framed by the complete darkness surrounding us. I glance around quickly, trying to figure out where I’m at, but I can’t see anything past... IT.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH, Ember, I tell myself. The last thing I remember is... the mud monsters throwing me off a cliff right after the little bastards cut my side wide open. But... just as I was about to land face-first in the melting river of death, something caught me. Is this the being I was being sacrificed to, or is this thing... something else?

TEARS START FLOWING from my face. "Please don't hurt me." My words echo all around us like I screamed them out. My mind is racing now that I'm no longer being drugged. I've no idea what to do. I'm completely alone in a dark tunnel on an alien planet being stared at by the devil himself. My mother always told me not to put myself in situations I didn't know how to get myself out of and this definitely qualifies.

NONE of this was meant to happen. Daddy was supposed to be here. He always handles everything, and I didn't realize how much I relied on that until now. IT's just sitting there watching me. I wipe the tears that are refusing to stop away from my face since crying isn't going to fix anything. It only makes my skin blotchy, and that's not an attractive look for me, not that I want to be attractive right now, and now I'm rambling in my own mind.

THE ABSENCE of words is very noticeable. IT's only response after staring at me for a few minutes is to start getting to its feet. I push back against the wall harder as it keeps growing taller and taller, and I swear it looks like one side of its skin is glowing. It takes a step towards me. I know I should be up and running like hell, but all I can do is stare. It stands before me like it's awaiting my reaction, allowing me to take in its appearance as my eyes roam from its head to its toes. Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought, but I force that thought away, as there is no way I could have made this creature up on my own.

IT TOWERS OVER ME. Two arms and two legs are where our similarities end. It's half one thing and half something else, but whatever it is, it's all male. Huge chest muscles ripple underneath what appear to be large straps crossing its body. His slim waist is lined with more muscle definition than I knew was even possible, and it tapers down into dark, flowing pants. One side of his face, from what I can see, is orange. His skin seems to be shiny, and it immediately puts me in the mind of a dolphin. The other side is not as friendly, more snake or dragonish in nature...not that I've ever seen a dragon. The color is nearly black, and it has a layered texture similar to scales or skin pieces. It seems to be peeling off that side of his body and the skin under his scales is glowing out between the cracks or separations. It's like he was pieced together right down the middle. He is sleek with fine lines on one side and rough, with what appear to be small spikes sticking out of his shoulders and elbow on his darker side. Even in his oddness, there is no denying his otherworldly beauty.

HE MUST HAVE GOTTEN tired of my ogling him and holds out an enormous hand toward me. I just stare at it. He motions for me to get up, but instead of putting my hand in his, I scramble up on my own. My weak legs tremble under me as I grasp my side tightly.

HE LOOKS at me for another minute before turning to grab a bag I hadn't noticed on the floor. Slinging it over one shoulder, he then picks up a large ax that has been sitting next to him against the wall this whole time, which I also missed. Turning, he walks off and I just stand there looking at his back as the darkness seems to swallow him whole.

I DON'T KNOW if he felt sorry for me when I started sobbing uncontrollably or what, but he turned back. Two steps later, he is standing so close I can feel the heat coming off his body. Shivering, I close my eyes, terrified of what he is going to do to me.

HE PUTS A VERY large finger under my chin, lifting my eyes to his glowing ones. I'm not sure what he sees, but he growls something out.

SHAKING MY HEAD. "I don't understand you."

HE POINTS TOWARDS HIMSELF. "ViN." But it comes out like INNENN.

Then he points at me. It takes me a second to realize he is asking for my name. "Ember." I point at him. "IN, right?"

HE SHAKES his head and tries again. "ViN."

"OH, didn't catch the first part. ViN."

HE NODS yes and then reaches down to take my hand in his massive one. He tugs on me slightly as he turns and starts walking down the dark passage. I stumble behind him, my shoes clicking with each step on the hard dirt.

THE DARK ENCLOSSES us completely quickly. He stops suddenly, and I run right into his back, screaming out when my shoulder hits him. The pain is so intense it makes me shake all over. Saliva pools in my mouth as I fight not to throw up. A dim light suddenly clicks on right in front of my face. He cast the light around us like he is trying to figure out why I screamed. I grab his hand and pull the light over towards my shoulder.

THERE IS a large patch of dried blood covering my shoulder and half of my arm. Hesitantly, I reach over, trying to pull the material of the original gown the mud aliens put on me off, but it's stuck, so I leave it alone. My side is hot to the touch and my shoulder is throbbing so badly it's making me nauseous.

HE TURNS to look at me, only to growl under his breath again. If I didn't know better, I would think that he would prefer I was not here. He doesn't even give me a minute to recover, simply grabs my hand and keeps pulling us forward. Tunnels seem to branch off in every direction and I really hope Tall and Growly knows where he is going. I'm practically running trying to keep up with his large strides, but with every step, I can feel myself getting weaker. Twice now, I jerk on my hand for him to let me go so I can walk at my own pace, only for him to tighten his grip on me. He seems urgent about leaving. I mean, I get it, but I'm not at my best here.

MY HIGH HEELS are clicking loudly on the floor and I swear the noise is making my head pound. Usually, I enjoy their unique sound, but the walls seem to be closing in on me as their clatter echoes out all around us. Something flutters across my face and I scream, flinging my free hand everywhere, trying to get it off me. I managed to pull my other hand away from him when I started struggling against what I believe is a wet spider web.

HE TURNS RAPIDLY with his ax in hand. I'm so wrapped up in trying to unwind myself from the web that I don't notice his look of disgust. When I finally sling the mess off my head, I glance up. At this point, I could care less about what he thinks of me, and he looks appalled at my actions.

“GROWLY. I HATE spiders, worms, snakes, and anything creepy-crawly. You can stare a hole through me all day and you will never change the way I'm going to react if faced with

one. You might be in your element here, big guy, but I just got dumped into this pit of darkness, so a little bit of common courtesy would be great.”

I RUN my hands down my chest, making sure all the web is off me. I suddenly notice my outfit. Appalled, I stomp my foot. “You have got to be kidding me! I can’t wear this! What is it, a big ace bandage? My mother would have a heart attack if she saw me right now. This is completely unacceptable.”

A SCREECH ECHOES AROUND US, and I sprint forward, gluing myself to his side. He looks down, shaking his head before turning around and stalking off in the direction we were originally going. This time, he doesn’t pull me along behind him, and I almost lose sight of him several times.

I FINALLY QUIT TRYING to talk to him because all I’m getting back are grunts and growls. He has made it obvious that I’m nothing but a nuisance. It’s not like he is getting the Hero of the Year award either, even though he saved me from the alien mud monsters. Even as sheltered as I have been my whole life, I realize he is my only way out of here right now.

MY MIND REWINDS the last few conscious days of my life and the way my luck is going. The way things are going, this may end up being paradise compared to where we’re headed. I would freak out if I had the energy, but right now, all I can do is put one foot in front of the other one.

CHAPTER 5

VIN



Pulling her small form close, I have just closed my eyes trying to figure out what my next move is going to be and possibly take a minute to rest when I feel her breathing change and she was waking up.

IT ONLY CONFIRMED the moment she bit my hand that she can't understand me. I put my hand over her mouth because I didn't want the Muldars to realize we were still close. I knew how she was going to react when she saw me and she responded exactly the way I figured, terrified and uncooperative, just like most females.

SHE DARTS AWAY from me the moment my hands release her. Instead of trying to pull her back, I let her go. She stares at me, huge green eyes roam from my head to my toes even though I should be used to it by now. It still rubs me the wrong way when others gawk because of my intense coloring.

AGGRAVATED BY HER REACTION, I decide to give her a minute to herself and scout ahead, but she must think I am leaving her behind. Because she immediately starts crying the moment I am out of sight. I will admit, her sobs bother me more than they should. I've learned quickly, she seems to turn them on and off like a faucet, and I won't let her tears sway my actions again.

FINALLY, she settles down slightly, but it still takes me several tries to make her understand my name. I can tell by her expression she isn't sure if I am a threat or not. I've done all I can to provide for her up to this point, but she is still being completely irrational and foolish.

THERE IS no way for me to make this any easier on her. We both have been thrown into this situation and not being able to communicate is simply making things worse.

I COULD PACK HER, but I need both hands free to defend us from the unknowns down here. There have been several times now that I could have sworn I heard something following us, but she is so loud it's hard to tell.

WE'VE BEEN WALKING SLIGHTLY UPHILL for some time now, and this main tunnel seems to have no end. I'm pushing her hard, but time is not on our side. The longer I'm down here, the worse our chances of survival are, because this cold is sapping my strength quickly. I can feel my core cooling down already. I can go risings without food or water, but heat is something I learned the hard way as a youngling that I can't go without for long. Shaking off the bad memories, I stomp up the incline as she mumbles behind me.

I DON'T BELIEVE the female comprehends that I can understand her human words as she continues to ramble on and on about the most ludicrous of things.

HER SHOES ARE SO loud there isn't a predator in the area that doesn't know we're headed their way. If I could plug my ears or pull out my eardrums, I would. Between her constant whining and hysterics, she is driving me crazy. I have never

seen a female act like this. She has either been extremely sheltered or is just spoiled. Either way, I don't know how much more of her I can take. Several times now I have been tempted to leave her, especially when she went to complain about the looks of her clothing. I've never been around one this idiotic.

LOOKING BACK ONCE AGAIN, she keeps falling farther behind. I make myself stop long enough for her to catch up. Watching as she picks her steps carefully in those ridiculous shoes. She watches me warily as she approaches. Her lips are turning blue again, and she has her arms wrapped tightly around herself. There is no denying she is struggling. I would be more understanding if she was complaining about her injuries. Instead, it's things like the dampness ruining her hair and breaking a nail. Utter nonsense simply keeps spewing from her mouth.

SHE IS TREMBLING LIGHTLY, and it takes me a minute to realize the little female is terrified, and doing her very best to hide it the only way she knows how. I sling my bag off my shoulder and pull out a hydrating pack, handing it to her.

SHE LOOKS down at the pack and then back up at me. I can't stop the growl that leaves my throat, and she takes a step backward. Grabbing it out of her hand, I tear the top off before giving it back. Then motion for her to drink. She smells it first before taking a small sip. When she realized it isn't poison, she drinks the whole thing before handing the bag back to me. I look down at it and then at her as she runs the back of her hand over her lips.

“SORRY, I should have asked if you wanted some. It's just that I'm starving and it tasted good, for alien water.”

HER STOMACH GROWLS RIGHT THEN, and I watch as she bends over slightly. Frack, it never occurred to me that she might be hungry, and I've been pushing her hard for over half a rotation. Looking around, I know there has to be more in these tunnels than just us, as I have seen multiple burrows and scratch marks on the walls as we've been walking forward. I need to hunt.

“I WILL FIND FOOD. Sit, I'll be back.”

SHE SHAKES HER HEAD, a confused expression on her face. “Look, I don't understand a single thing you just said, but can we stop for a couple minutes? I'm not sure which is hurting the most: my shoulder, side, or feet.

I SIGNAL for her to sit and she inspects the area, shifting from rock to rock until she discovers one that satisfies her. Her behavior puzzles me as she brushes the dirt off before sitting down. I turn away, only for her to stand back up abruptly and yell out.

“VIN! PLEASE, DON'T LEAVE ME.”

THE SOUND of my name on her lips makes the spines on my left side quiver. Before I can process that thought any further, she is up, stumbling towards me. I barely catch her before she falls face-first right in front of me. I pick her up by her arms and sit her on a rock in front of me, motioning for her to stay, and then I mimic eating. Taking a deep breath, I try to strategize how to make her stay here, noticing tears in her eyes. I try to show her what I'm going to do with my hands, only for both of us to get frustrated.

“VIN, I'm not good at charades.”

I MOTION to the rock again, and as I turn away again, she starts talking so fast that my translator is having a hard time converting her words.

“OK, I get it. You want me to stay here? God only knows why, but I will sit here like a good girl. Don’t worry about being in any hurry to get back. It’s not like I have anywhere else I need to be. Might as well sit here in the dark, wrapped in a bloody ace bandage with a half-man, half-dragon snarling at me. Ain’t got anything else to do.

“SHALL we do a quick review of what has transpired today? I woke up drugged and completely alone somewhere in the cosmos surrounded by mud monsters that apparently wanted to throw me into a lake of fiery lava... only for you to catch me right before I met my eternal doom. By the way, I still haven’t figured out if you did that willingly or not, and I’m trying not to think about it too hard because I’m already freaked out.

“ON TOP OF ALL THAT, I don’t understand a word out of your mouth. And... not knowing what you are saying is only making it more interesting for my brain to make up its own version. Let me give you an example. Is there a possibility that you are taking me to your nest or home? I will warn you that if you’re planning on making me a slave, it will never work. Because I have zero skills when it comes to housework or anything physical, for that matter. Maybe you only saved me to sacrifice me to something else? Because I’m having a hard time believing you are doing all this out of the goodness of your heart. People, aliens, whatever, don’t do anything without gaining something. I feel like a stray dog following you around, begging for scraps and attention.”

SHE WIPES a lone tear off her face before whispering, “I should’ve never let them put me in that shuttle. I ought to have waited for my parents. At least I wouldn’t have been left alone.”

HER VOICE GETS QUIETER the longer she talks. You would be blind not to see the sadness on her face. I make myself stop for a minute and try to put myself in her place, but I simply can’t picture it. I turn away, only to realize she will be left in complete darkness if I do, and I can only imagine the hysterics that this is going to cause.

INSTEAD OF LEAVING, I sit down and rummage through my bag, looking to see if I have any rations with me. It’s very unlikely, as I normally hunt for my food when I’m out scouting, but there it is. In the bottom, ground almost to dust, a single rations bar. I pull it out, grimacing at how bad the wrapper looks, but it’s the best I can do for now. I will need to find us something soon, but with all the racket she is making, finding a meal won’t be easy. Handing the package to her, I await the next fit she is going to throw.

CHAPTER 6

EMBER



He rummages around in his bag before handing me another package of some sort. I take it hesitantly; hell he could be handing me a bomb for all I know. He motions for me to open it and no matter how hard I pull, it won't budge. The growl that leaves his lips has me jerking as he yanks it out of my hand.

“DAMN, YOU'RE FUSSY AS HELL!”

WHAT HE HANDS BACK to me looks like powder. I just hold the package. It's not like I know what to do with it. ViN motions for me to eat it and when I hesitate, he growls again. At this point, if he isn't growling, it would seem odd. Why couldn't I fall into the arms of a nice alien... thing? Instead, I get Mr. Alien Sourpuss. I stop the giggle that seems to bubble up in my throat at that last thought. I don't believe he would appreciate my humor, hell for that matter, I'm not sure if he even knows what a smile is, as it doesn't appear that he smiles easily. That's probably for the best. Undoubtedly, he is hiding shark teeth or something worse behind those tight lips of his.

I TAKE the end of my finger and press some of the powder on it. The moment my tongue touches the stuff, I start to gag. It tastes like ground-up liver and vinegar. My stomach turns as

bile comes up in my throat. Throwing it on the ground, I try my best to spit it out.

“WHAT THE HELL are you trying to do, poison me? That had to be the nastiest thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

HE KICKS the package off to the side and gets to his feet. I don’t even realize he is leaving until the surrounding light dims. Panicking, I stand up quickly, my legs trembling as I try to walk forward. My heel gets caught in a crack that I don’t see because he has the light and I fall hard, twisting my ankle.

I JUST LAY HERE FACE FIRST in the dirt. I truly believe my entire body is hurting at the moment, and honestly, he could leave me here for all I care. To my complete terror, he does. The tunnel is completely black now that he is gone. I can’t even hear his footsteps. The second I can’t walk; he probably ran as quickly as possible to get away from me.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES, I make myself get up. My ankle is throbbing and I can tell it’s already swelling. It takes me forever to undo the strap on my heel in the dark, but I finally manage to get it loose and have to hold back a scream when I pull my swollen foot out of it. I rub my ankle, gently running my hand down my foot, feeling all the raw places that used to be blisters. I have walked in heels since I was big enough to wear shoes and this pair has always been a favorite, but it’s apparent they were not made for spelunking in an alien world. *Hell, neither am I.*

I STRETCH my legs out and sit there looking at absolutely nothing in this complete darkness. There isn’t a single noise. It’s eerily quiet to the point my ears seem to be ringing. I lay my shoe on my lap and wonder how long it will take for me to die here. How many days can a person go without food or

water? For that matter, how long have I already gone without either of them? My stomach suddenly cramps so hard I'm forced to breathe through the pain. My arm feels like it's going to sleep. I keep shaking it, knowing it's not a good sign.

I WAS ALWAYS SLIGHTLY CURVIER than my mother would've liked me to be, but now I'm scary thin. Wasted tears flow down my cheeks and I lay back in the dirt curling up, wondering how all this happened. Are my parents going through the same nightmare somewhere else? Did they even make it in time to get launched? Will I ever see them again, or anyone from Earth, for that matter? The ground is hard and cool. My teeth are chattering so hard it's making them hurt as the cold seems to be seeping into my bones.

I DON'T KNOW how long I lay here in a daze, but I jerk when strong arms slide under me, lifting me with ease. I don't have the energy to open my eyes, but by the rumble in his chest, it's my ill-tempered alien. *He came back for me.* The warmth of his body draws me closer and I snuggle up as close as I can get to his chest. His footsteps are quiet as he makes his way forward. I doze back off to sleep, only to awaken when he starts to put me down. I cling to his arms, dreading feeling the cold again, but the ground here is warm to the touch.

HE GRUMBLES something under his breath, and I look up at him, marveling at his alienness, such a beautifully sculpted face separated by such extremes.

HIS YELLOW EYES peer down at me, and I wonder what he sees when he looks at me. Do I look as odd to him? He sits me down gently and I instantly miss his warmth, even though it doesn't seem as cold here.

“WHERE ARE WE?”

HE SHRUGS as he walks away. I stand up, only to realize I only have one shoe on. Somehow, I had managed to hang onto the strap of the one I had taken off earlier and now I'm dreading trying to put it back on. I sit there contemplating how I'm going to get this one on when he turns back towards me with something in his hand.

HE SITS DOWN SO close to me that his knees bump into mine, looking at me hesitantly before tearing a small strip off what appears to be a burned piece of meat. My first thought is, *What type of mystery meat is this?*

"I THOUGHT YOU... LEFT ME," I whispered.

VIN SHAKES HIS HEAD NO, then motions to the meat again. I reach out for it, only for him to shake his head no again. He brings a small piece up to my mouth and I force myself to take it because it smells weird. A growl leaves his throat when I snarl my nose. I'm tempted to hold my breath when it first hits my tongue, but to my surprise, it's not horrible.

I SMILE UP AT HIM. "Wow, that's not bad at all for mystery meat."

HE RETREATS, gazing at me intently, before offering me another piece. I try to take it out of his fingers, but he refuses to give it to me. He watches me closely, making sure I swallow every piece before tearing off another one.

WHEN I FINALLY MOTION THAT I can't eat another bite, he rips the remaining meat apart and devours it in just a couple of

bites. He stands up and I reach out, grabbing his arm before he can leave.

“THANK YOU, ViN. For more than just the food; you could’ve simply left me back there to die.”

HE NODS AT ME.

“WAIT, A MINUTE. CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

HE NODS YES.

“HOW?”

HE POINTS BEHIND HIS EAR.

“THAT MAKES no sense to me. Why can’t I understand you? I have ears too.”

HE LEANS DOWN, pushing my hair away from my ear, running a long finger along the skin behind it. Then shakes his head no. My skin tingles where he touched me.

“I SO SUCK at guessing games, but I’m assuming I don’t have the same thing behind my ear that you do. Is there a way I can get one?”

HE SHRUGS AGAIN and turns away, walking behind a small wall.

“HEY, I wasn’t done talking to you. Where are you going now? Don’t you know it’s rude to just walk off like that?” I don’t think about it. I simply start waddling behind him, up and down awkwardly with one heel on.

AND THE MOMENT I round the corner, I regret it. I put my hand over my mouth and I’m not sure if it is to keep from screaming or puking the meat I just ate back up. A large hairy rodent-looking thing lay on the floor, in pieces. ViN is on one knee, cutting long strips of meat off the creature with a knife, completely unaware of my revulsion. I’ve never seen anything this barbaric in my entire life. For that matter, I don’t believe I have ever seen raw meat. Mother would never allow me in the kitchens; it was for staff only.

“Is that what you just fed me? Did you really feed me... rat? Oh my god, I’m going to be sick. Do you realize how nasty those things are?” My whole body shivers as I try to hold back the gagging sounds leaving my throat.

HE LOOKS UP AT ME, and I swear if looks could kill, I would perish on the spot. He starts talking, and it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know he is pissed. Maybe it’s a good thing I can’t understand him right now. I stumble away, practically jumping on one foot. He stands up quickly, his hands covered in blood and god knows what else, and stalks my way.

MY ANKLE GIVES OUT, and just as I begin to fall, he grabs me with those nasty hands. I struggle against him. “Ew gross, stop touching me!”

HE IGNORES me completely as he lifts me onto a ledge, then takes the shoe I’ve been holding in my hand this whole time

away from me. Then, to my absolute horror. I watch as he snaps the heel completely off and then pulls the whole shoe apart, making it wider. He puts the now-destroyed shoe back on my lap and reaches down for the other one.

I HAVE no idea where the strength suddenly comes from, but I fight him like a madwoman. I claw at his arms as his large fingers work the small clasp apart. When he yanks the other shoe off, my foot feels like it's been skinned and I scream out. He doesn't even miss a beat as he rips the heel off the other one and then stretches this one, so hard he practically tears it in two. He tosses it onto my lap before walking away, roaring out his contempt for my very presence.

I GRAB a rock lying next to my hand and throw it at his back. Of course, it misses. I was never good at sports. Pulling both shoes up to my chest, I start crying so hard I can barely breathe. "You fucking beast, how dare you! Do you have any idea how much these shoes cost?"

WHEN HE TURNS back towards me, I should have been scared just from the look on his face, but instead, it just reinforced how alone I am now. I hug the torn shoes close, refusing to look back at him. "These were more than just a pair of shoes. They were all I had left of home, of me."

I PULL my legs up and lean my head down on my knees, crying until my tears run dry. He is sitting directly across from me on the ground, skinning what seems to be a piece of hide from the animal he killed. From this height, I can see that he found a part of the tunnel that was still slightly open to the lava below. Apparently, he cooked the raw meat on the edge where a crack was open. *Great, fried rat with a hint of dirt for seasoning.*

HE IS COMPLETELY IGNORING ME, and that's fine with me. I wiggle to the edge of the rock he placed me on and try to slide down, but before I can reach the ground. He is in front of me again, lifting me back up to where I was.

"LEAVE ME ALONE. I don't want to sit up here and be fumigated by burned alien animal hair."

I TRY a few more times to get down. Finally, he lets me, and the moment my bare feet hit the ground, I'm scrambling from one foot to the other. Instinctively, I raise my arms for him to pick me up. I swear I think he is trying his best not to smile as he sits me back on the ledge.

I SHOVE my hair back out of my face roughly and sigh. "Ok, I get it. The floor is hot and I don't have any shoes on, but who's fault is that?"

HE SNARLS his lip and turns away again.

"BIG OVERGROWN ASSWIPE," I mumble under my breath.

CHAPTER 7

VIN



The female is exasperating. I long for silence from her constant yacking. The very fact she believed I had abandoned her angers me greatly. No respectable male would ever leave a female in such a place, no matter how tempting the idea at the time. I simply couldn't take her with me hunting because she does not know how to be quiet.

I KNEW there was game in this area from the multiple high nests I had seen as we walked through the tunnel. However, the cave rat's ears are sensitive and that would make them extremely hard to hunt in normal circumstances, let alone with my female.

I GROWL at that last thought; she is not my female.

MOVING THE SKIN AGAIN, I focus on not scorching the hide so the fur doesn't fall off, while she continues to mumble nonsense behind me. Her actions constantly puzzle me. The Lord of Light did not bless me with the patience to deal with such hysterics. I've contemplated leaving her several times... only for a short time, to scout on ahead, but she would be easy prey for any predator in this total darkness alone.

THE HIDE of the cave rat has become warm against my fingertips and by the constant shivers that wrack her slight frame. I believe that warmth, if nothing else, will be appreciated. If the animal had been larger, I would've prepared a covering for myself as the heat is escaping my body quicker than the small amount of heat this room can replace. I was becoming sluggish quickly, and that's a good way to get killed in an environment like this.

I TURN the skin once again, scraping it with my knife until the inside is smooth and soft to the touch. These animals' hides are thick as they are adapted to survive and thrive in this environment. I'm taking more time than I should preparing this for her, but we both need a break.

HOLDING THE PIECE UP, I try to determine the best place to place the hole needed for her head. As much as it would please me, I know I won't receive one of her rare smiles when I wrap this around her slight form. I anticipate she will fight me like she has done every step so far, but her body can't survive much longer without some sort of covering, and right now, this is all that is available.

HER SMILE FLASHES through my mind again, and I will admit to being shocked at how it changes her features. She went from plain to stunning, all with a simple lift of her lips. I have never seen one's face change so abruptly. If she only understood the power of that smile, she would use it to her advantage more often, as most males would do anything only to witness that again.

NOT THAT I'M such a male, but I can understand how others could be easily swayed. The cave rodent's meat was tough and bland, but at least she didn't act as if it was killing her like she did the rations bar I gave her earlier. The meat helped me regain some of my strength, but it won't help for long. I need

to find a way out of this darkness before my body gets too weak to defend us and we both perish down here.

IF WE COULD COMMUNICATE, I would've tried to convince her to stay in this room while I scout ahead, but that's not an option. One thing I have learned quickly is she isn't one to do as she is told. Multiple times, I sat her back on that ledge because I didn't want her bruised and raw feet burned on the floor below, but she was determined to get down. I had to bite the inside of my jaw to keep from smiling when she reached her arms up like a youngling after feeling the heat under her tender feet.

BUT THOSE SHOES... Even though I had her best intentions at heart, I never dreamed she would respond in such a negative way. Her feet are torn and bruised terribly, and even though the foot coverings were making them worse, she still refused to take them off.

SHAKING my head at her foolishness, I continue to turn the fat I had scraped off the inside of the hide, letting it warm. My original plan was to use it to lather her feet. The substance would soothe their rawness, but now I'm not sure she will allow me to apply it.

FEMALES GET ATTACHED to the silliest things. I once watched a youngling pick up a random rock on the ground, only to smile like she had found a fortune. I can still remember her tears when she lost it later on. No matter the race, I simply can't figure them out. Thank the Lord of Light, I have no need for one.

TAKING A DEEP BREATH, I prepare myself for the fight coming as I stand with the hide in hand. She watches me come closer

and scoots as far back against the wall as she can. I motion for her, but she shakes her head no.

“EMBER, COME.”

SHE DOES THE EXACT OPPOSITE. She pulls her legs up under her and slides away from me as far as she can while still holding those shoes. *Here we go.*

I GRAB hold of one of her small ankles and gently tug her towards me until she is just barely on the edge of the ledge I sat her on. The whole time I'm trying to ignore the softness of her skin and how small her bones feel in my grasp.

I HOLD THE HIDE UP, trying to measure it against her slight frame, moving it one way, then another. Quickly realizing there is no way for me to fasten it around her without using the wrap I originally put on her. So I'm going to have to unwrap her, fit this against her body, then re-wrap it in place.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING, ViN? Remove that repulsive thing from my presence.” Her voice is so loud it echoes through the tunnel.

“EMBER, you can't survive much longer here without this. You need to stop fighting me if you want to make it out of here alive.”

SHE PUSHES a slender foot against my stomach, swatting at the hide as she tries to crawl away from me again, and my patience snaps.

I THROW the hide to the floor and grab her by the waist, pulling her against me as I work the knot I had tied in the wrap loose. Her heart is beating so hard I can feel it against my skin. Her small fist pounds against my chest as she struggles. New tears flow from her eyes as she tries to free herself. I growl down at her when her knee almost unmans me.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” I yell out as I pull her back, shaking her roughly.

SHE SETTLES DOWN, but if looks could kill, I would’ve been a goner. Setting her on a lower ledge, I unwrap the bandage quickly. She practically folds in on herself trying to cover herself, as now all she has on is the sheer dress the Muldars put her in. Reaching up to her throat, I start to rip the gown off because of the blood that is caked on it. Only to stop when I realize it will at least provide some sort of barrier between her skin and this animal hide. She is trembling so hard that her teeth are making that weird clicking noise again.

HOLDING her in place with one hand, I reach down with the other, grabbing the hide off the ground. Instead of taking my time, I cut a rough hole in the middle and yank it over her head. I should have noticed she got quiet. Instead, I’m too focused on getting this thing on her.

I TUG her arms up and over my shoulders, yanking her against me as I wrap the bandage around the outside of the hide, pulling it as close to her skin as I can get. I tie the knot and lift her back up onto the ledge.

BEFORE SHE CAN DO another thing, I pull up her feet and apply the fat mixture that has been warming on one of the stones. I then reach down to grab the shoes, sliding them onto her feet, re-buckling the small clasp, only to realize there was no way

they would stay on now. I had stretched them too far and her small feet are now falling out of the front.

THIS SIMPLY MAKES ME MADDER. “Out of all the females in existence, how in the fates did I get stuck with you? The amount of time I’ve wasted catering to you is unheard of. For all I know, I could have been out of here already, soaking up the rays while drinking with my brothers. But no... I heard you scream... and had to investigate. Now here we are!”

I GRAB the broken strap off my bag and cut it in two, tying the shoes to her feet. I stand her on the ground before me, grabbing her rougher than I should. Large green eyes stare up at me, suddenly completely unfocused.

I SNAP my fingers in front of her face as she wavers. “Ember?”

SHE BLINKS a few times before looking down at her feet. “At least you didn’t tie them on with its tail. I look like a rat kabob... If my friends could only see me now.” I barely catch her before her eyes roll back in her head and she crumbles.

“EMBER.” Laying her across my lap, I curse myself for my behavior towards her as I shake her gently, patting her face. I have no idea what happened, surely to the gods she didn’t pass out over her clothing. One moment she is fighting me tooth and nail, the next she collapses lifelessly in my arms.

MY ANGER immediately retreats when I see sweat beads suddenly form on her face and her body seems overly hot even though she is shivering.

HER INJURED ARM falls off my lap and when I go to pull it back, I notice red streaks running down it from her shoulder to her elbow. Infection... it must be settling in that burn quicker than I thought. I need to get that cloth off, but there is no way to soften the material. If ripped, it could cause her more harm than good.

I ROCK her back and forth as I try to settle my thoughts. I empty my bag's contents on the ground, hoping for something I missed, only to find precisely what I knew was there... nothing. Then it hits me. If the fat could be used to soothe her feet or at least protect them, then I should be able to use it to soften the dried blood up enough to get that material out of that wound.

PICKING HER UP GENTLY, I walk back over toward the animal. Even though it is awkward, I refuse to put her down as I peel the few pieces of skin left off the cave rat. Once I've torn them off, I set them on the fissure to soften, still holding her close.

THE MOMENT the fat starts bubbling, I peel it off the skin and immediately apply it to her shoulder. It takes a few tries, but finally, the material releases. But her arm starts bleeding freely again. I squeeze the wound, hoping the blood will help push out the majority of the infection.

I WILL SAY this is one of the worst burns I've ever seen on anyone, and as particular as this female is about what she is wearing, this mark on her skin is really going to bother her. My mind wonders, maybe SAGE will have a solution when we return. What I wouldn't do to see her about now!

SMOOTHING the hair away from her face, "Ember, come on little one, wake up. I would rather hear your complaints than this silence."

HER EYELIDS FLICKER as she fights her way back to consciousness. Blinking a few times, she looks around and then back up at me. “I was hoping you were a bad dream.” A sob leaves her throat, and even though I refuse to admit it, the sound bothers me. She looks so lost.

“DO YOU THINK YOU CAN STAND?”

SHE BURIES her head in my chest, wrapping her arms around my neck, and instead of getting aggravated, I simply set back and let her cry. “Frack, Ember, what am I going to do with you? You are driving me to madness.”

FINALLY, her tears stop and she relaxes against me, and as much as I would love to rest some myself, I know we’re going to have to get going. Picking her up gently, I swing my bag over my shoulder. With one hand under her butt, and the other holding my ax, I walk forward.

CHAPTER 8

EMBER



I've been awake for a little while now, but there is nothing for me to see in all this darkness. So I simply hang loosely onto Grouchy with my eyes closed. He has been carrying me like a toddler now for what feels like hours. If my friends could only see me now. I'm not sure if they would be envious or terrified, as I don't know how I feel about this situation either. Every step he takes hurts like hell and there have been a few times I've had to bite my lip to keep from screaming out, especially if I move my arm much. My whole body is sore and beat up, but the pain in my shoulder is relentless and my side is throbbing with every heartbeat.

I DON'T KNOW how he is making his way through this darkness. Even with that dim light he has tied to his ax handle, I can barely see him and my face is resting on his shoulder. Several times he has stopped to readjust me in his arms, but other than that, he just keeps walking.

I DIDN'T REALIZE he was getting slower until I felt a shiver run through his whole body and his breathing is labored against my chest. I lift my head reluctantly, getting ready to ask him if he wants me to walk, when suddenly, a dim blue light flashes on the ceiling above us, he hunches down. He pulls me away, sitting me gently on the ground. Then puts his finger on my lips and motions for me to be quiet.

VIN MOVES AWAY, and I instinctively grab for him, but he is quickly out of reach. He is so silent that if I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have had any idea he was there. He peers around a large rock hesitantly.

LOOKING BACK AT ME, he disappears around its side and out of sight. He isn't gone long, but to me, it feels like forever. Shadows are dancing along the ceiling and, at one point, I put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming out when a large cricket-spider-like thing walks right above me.

WHEN I HEAR footsteps heading back my way. I curl up in a ball, trying to make myself as invisible as possible.

“EMBER.”

Unraveling slowly, he motions me forward before disappearing around the rock again. It takes me a few minutes to get my legs steady, not to mention trying to figure out how to walk in these broken shoes, but finally, I manage.

THE MOMENT I'm around the rock, the pain and my shoes are temporarily forgotten. It's a pod! I run out into the opening, yelling.

“Hello, is anyone here? Mom, Dad!”

VIN GROWLS and motions for me to be quiet.

“QUIT SHUSHING ME! I refuse to be quiet. Don't you understand? There could be others lost down here. God knows they have to be as scared as I've been this whole time. Not everyone will be lucky enough to be saved by their own Grouchy Alien Lava God, you know.”

He puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head. Then points at the pod, then at me.

WALKING CLOSER TO THE MACHINE, I can see that the drawers and cabinets have all been ransacked. Whatever was in them has either been taken or lay in shreds all around it. That's when I see it. The jumpsuit the rude space guy back home made me put on over my clothes.

I PICK IT UP, this time hoping that it's in one piece, only to see that it had also been cut to shreds. "So much for getting out of this rat suit," I whisper before throwing it to the ground, my emotions all over the place as my mind catches up with the fact that this is the pod I come here in.

LEANING AGAINST ITS SIDE, I slide down slowly to the ground while ViN tears open the few doors that are not open. Deep down, I was hoping he would miraculously find a couple of pieces of my luggage stored away in them, but with all the other empty doors. I know that's not a possibility. His growls have become almost constant. He must be cussing someone out. I would, but I don't have the energy.

"LET ME GUESS, all those growls leaving your lips interpret the fact that they sent me away with absolutely nothing but the clothes on my back. I wonder now if they did it on purpose. They knew my chances were slim the moment they strapped me in this destroyer of dreams."

I SMACK my hand against its side. "What I don't understand is why did they even waste their time? If what they said was true and the world was destroying itself, why didn't they just let us all perish together? They knew there was no way I would ever make it out here on my own... They simply sent me somewhere else to die... alone."

I HUG my knees up to my chest, laying my head on them. The rough, stinky fur tickles my nose as I stare out into nothing. ViN is trying to figure out how to get the lights out of the main chamber that has lit up this part of the cavern we're in, but the moment he unplugs one, it goes out. After trying two more, he finally gives up and comes over to sit next to me.

I GLANCE up at his face. This side is smooth, not even an ounce of stubble like you would've seen on most men after a few days. His eyes don't miss a thing as he assesses everything around us, while I simply look at him.

HE HAS the longest eyelashes I've ever seen, and I think I hate him for it. Most females, including myself, would die for those. I wonder how many hours I wasted trying to put the fake ones on? It's times like these that he doesn't seem real, but even with my imagination, I couldn't make up all these intricate details. I can tell he is tired, but he hasn't complained once that I know of, anyway. Lord knows I have done it enough for both of us. That's when it hits me... He could've walked off and left me at any time.

I STILL DON'T TRULY UNDERSTAND why he has helped me, but I'm grateful, even though I haven't done a very good job showing him that. I reach over and take his huge hand in mine. He glances over at me, the contrast of his face is so severe from one side to the other, it's disturbing.

"THANK YOU, ViN. I haven't made this easy on you, and I won't promise that I will be any better in the future, but I will at least try to be less of a burden from here on out. I understand you've done the best you could for me under the circumstances, even though your clothing selection seriously sucks. As much as I hate to admit it, at least I'm warm now.

Now, I could've done without you destroying my shoes, but what's done is done, as Mother always says.

“I KNOW you can understand me mostly, so I'm going to ask you a couple of questions and I'll try to make them a simple yes or no. You are trying to get us out of here, right?”

HE NODS his head yes after running his hand through his long black hair.

“ARE YOU FROM DOWN HERE?”

HE SHAKES HIS HEAD NO.

“SO, YOU'RE LOST HERE TOO?”

I GET ANOTHER YES. Then he starts drawing an image in the dirt between us.

“WELL, you're never going to be a Picasso, but let me see if I get this right. You were walking and fell down here. This stick guy is you catching me, and this is us now.”

NODDING, he takes his hand and erases all the stick figures, and starts over.

THIS TIME, I have to look at it several times. “Ok, I'm not sure of all this up here, but I'm going to guess this is a bunch of people like you flying around in the sky even though I've never seen wings on you. Are you hiding them somewhere?”

HE GROWLS, and I hold my hand up.

“I WILL TAKE that as a no. So back to the people in the sky, wait a minute... are you trying to tell me that all these people will be looking for you?”

HE SHRUGS and then draws multiple directions and stick people walking everywhere.

“THEY ARE LOOKING ALL OVER, right? But they don't know where you are?”

HE NODS YES, then goes to stand up.

“WELL, at least someone cares enough to look for you. Unlike me, I have no one...”

HE HOLDS his hand out for me, and I take it as he pulls me up. My feet keep sliding around in the inside of my shoes, but at least they are not hurting anymore.

“WHO KNEW that rat fat was good for blisters? Don't let that secret out. They will be hunted to extinction,” I whisper to no one.

I STUMBLE BEHIND HIM, trying to walk, but my feet keep sliding out. After a few steps, I sit down, determined to just take them off and walk barefoot. “ViN, wait a minute.”

I AM SO focused on getting this strap loose. I don't see him until his fingers pull mine away, stopping me. "My feet won't stay in these now. I'm just going to take them off."

HE MOTIONS for me to stop. Then he walks back towards the pod. He cuts off a couple pieces of straps, then comes back, wrapping them securely all the way around each foot. He then pulls me up, holding my hand until I take a few steps.

I SMILE UP AT HIM, shaking my head at the collaboration on my feet. "They will never win any awards, but they fit."

REACHING OUT, he touches my cheek, moving it up and down, frowning.

"WHAT? Do I have something on me?"

HE JUST STANDS there staring at me, then shrugs his shoulders and turns away.

"IS THAT A YES OR A NO?" I rub my hands all over my face. "We need to work on our communication, mister. I didn't study Growl in high school."

CHAPTER 9

EMBER



He doesn't respond to my last comment, but the frown on his face seems harsher than before. For a split second back there, I thought we were making progress, but that is just wishful thinking on my part.

FROM THE MOMENT I opened my eyes in this world, it's been one horror after another, but he is at least a slightly familiar nightmare now. He is pushing us hard, trying to find a way back to the surface, but what does that mean for me? I'm trying not to think about tomorrow, as simply surviving right now is enough, but what's going to happen to me if we ever make it out of here? For that matter, what if we don't find a way out? My mind is all over the place as I put one foot in front of the other.

"VIN, do you think we could stop and take a break soon?"

HE GROWLS OUT SOMETHING, and this is the first time I realized he isn't growling. That's just how deep his voice is. His words roll all together in long syllables.

"AT SOME POINT in the future, I'm looking forward to understanding you. I've been making a list in my head as we have been walking about the things I would love to learn about

you and...everything around us. Even though I know this is going to be hard to believe. This experience is not on my list of things I want to do again...ever. If someone asks, I'm definitely not going to recommend it, that's for sure."

HE GROWLS a few more times and I just ignore him. "Hey, just keep on walking, don't worry, I can completely entertain myself back here.

"Do you know what I'm craving right now...Chicken Broccoli Alfredo. I would dive headfirst into a big bowl of that if it was here. However, if I'm going to pretend we are somewhere besides the cave of misfortune, let's go big. Can you imagine how wonderful a hot shower would be right now? Oh, it would be awesome to finally get all this nastiness off me! Next, well, let's see. An open wardrobe at a nice boutique with shoes that fit would be pretty cool, too. We could add an extremely good pain reliever to this list as well. Actually, I might put that at the front of the list because it would be highly appreciated right now, let me tell you. Have I told you that my arm is hurting so bad I just about can't lift it? Well, now I have. I feel like I've been run over by a bus and dragged at least three miles. On top of all that, this walking is just fabulous.

"HOW ABOUT YOU? What is the first thing you're going to do when you get out of here?"

HE TURNS AROUND QUICKLY.

"IF I WOULD'VE KNOWN ASKING you that would get you to stop, I would have done it sooner."

HE STANDS there with his normal snarl on his face, waiting for me to catch up. I'm only a couple of feet away from him when something large descends in front of me. I don't even have time to react before multiple legs grab me, lifting me straight up into the air. A roar echoes through the surrounding cavern, and whatever has ahold of me suddenly lets go. Arms pinwheeling, I'm suddenly free-falling. Only for another creature to catch me in midair. I'm being tossed from one monster to another as they quickly pull me away from ViN. I feel like I'm in a pinball machine and I'm the ball.

SOMETHING STABS me in the back of my arm within seconds. The light that ViN had is gone, and I can't see anything. The spider-cricket creatures move so fast that it takes me a moment to realize I can't hear him behind me anymore. All I can hear around me are multiple clicking and scraping noises. For a minute, I wonder if they grabbed ViN, too. Whatever has me in its claws is crawling along the ceiling, and I'm practically hanging upside down.

I'M THROWN ONCE AGAIN. A weak screech leaves my throat before something even larger grabs me out of the wall, pulling me into a hole. Suddenly, I'm being spun in circles so fast I can feel my hair lifting up. I fight against its hold, but nothing is responding. My thoughts are becoming sluggish quickly, but for a fleeting moment. I can breathe as the pain disappears and my body goes numb.

DARK SPOTS FORM in front of my eyes as the wrap gets tighter and tighter. Suddenly, I'm struggling to take a deep breath. My life passes before my eyes. I can see my Mom fixing Dad's tie before an important event and the small smile on his face before he kissed her on the forehead. If I focus on it enough, I can still feel their hugs when I graduated from college. Random faces blur together, but the last one lingers longer, my alien grouch.

CHAPTER 10

VIN



There were several times I thought I heard something above us, but my light wasn't bright enough to cut through the thick darkness surrounding us in this part of the cavern.

THE GROUND HAS BECOME rough and there is a thick dampness in the air now that wasn't in the part we just came from.

AT SOME POINT, we must've left the lava tunnels and entered into an actual cave system. When I first started hearing the scraping noises above us, I originally thought it was the Muldars following us. I know they are mining something in this area, but so far there have been no signs of them or what. By now, they've figured out that I was not the god they were praying to. However, if they come after us in my weakened state, I'm not sure if I can fight them off. Every step is getting harder to take.

EMBER HAS RATTLED on nonstop since we left the pod behind and just as I turn to tell her to be quiet. The largest Araneid cricket I have ever seen drops from the ceiling. It grabs her, stabbing its numbing fluid into her arm before I can even raise my ax against it.

I SURGE AHEAD, pulling myself up onto the rocks, trying to keep them in sight as they scramble away with her in their grasp. The attack caught me off guard. Simply reacting, I barely stop myself from throwing my ax to strike it down midair. The female would die if I knocked it down from that height. It stops momentarily on a lower outcropping and I launch myself towards it, grabbing its large, hard frame from behind. Instead of it dropping Ember as I hoped, it slings her to another and turns on me. I barely catch myself before it raises up, trying to dislodge me from its back as it tries to crush me against the ceiling.

GRABBING onto a ledge with one arm, I swing out with the other, my ax cutting its head off effortlessly. It takes a second for the body to realize its head is missing before it tumbles to the ground below. Swinging myself up onto the ledge, I scream, “Ember,” with no answer.

THE MOMENT I struck the first one down, I expected the others to attack, but they all crawled away farther into the darkness.

I YELL out Ember’s name several more times, hoping to hear anything back from her since I have no way of even knowing if she is still alive at this point.

TAKING IN MY SURROUNDINGS, I try to figure out where they may have gone. There is a large ledge that seems to go further back into their territory that I might access. However, I’m not sure how to track her in this maze of broken boulders that lay on the cave’s floor, when she was taken from the ceiling. Swearing, I carefully scale back down the rocks. As much as I would love to charge forward, I can’t go on without my light or the few rations I’ve left.

IGNORING the shivers that are running up and down my frame, I gather my stuff up, contemplating what to do next. I'm already weakening and I can barely feel any heat left in my inner core. The Lord of Light knows I could spend risings looking for her in this maze of darkness and never find her.

HESITATING, I've never been this torn on how to proceed. I know there is the slightest possibility that I could go forward and find a way out of here quicker now that she isn't with me. When I got back to the shuttle, I could send someone back that's more adapted to this environment with the proper equipment to find her, but there were too many IFs.

HER SMILE FLASHES in front of my eyes, and I rub a hand through my hair wearily. I don't know why I'm wasting time even thinking about it. I can't and won't leave her, even as aggravating as she is. She has to be terrified, and there is no way I can consciously walk away, knowing I might have been able to save her if I had stayed.

"FRACK!" I scream out. We're both going to die down here. All my father is going to find left of us is a pile of bones when he makes it, and I know he will, eventually.

CLIMBING BACK up the rock face, I look for the best route to take. The Araneid will be able to fit through things my larger form can't. The ledge looks solid enough, but it will be slow going because I'll have to crawl through parts of it. If I take the ground, I'll have to climb up over the fallen rocks and hope that I don't come to a complete cave-in at some point. Grabbing onto the ledge, I pull myself up, readjusting my bag onto my side, and start forward.

FOR HALF A ROTATION, I have been crawling and climbing through this part of the cave. Even though I've made it a point

to stop and look around every few feet, there has not been a single sign of her. There were a couple of handfuls of the Araneids on the ceiling when they took her. There has to be tracks. I'm just missing them. Several times, I have been tempted to call out her name, but I don't want them to realize I'm pursuing them. Especially since there are thousands of them and only one of me.

MY MIND HAS BEEN GOING through the attack over and over as I make my way forward into their territory. It must have been a hunting party out looking for easy prey for their main nest. They immediately fled the area when they grabbed her, so they had been hunting us for a while. She was the smaller target out of the two of us, and I'm sure the smell of blood on her skin didn't help matters any.

WHILE SHINING THE LIGHT AROUND, I almost miss a gap in the wall only a few feet in front of me. Multiple marks scar the outside rock, and stuck in a crack, dangling about chest high, is a single long red hair.

I TURN the light off to give my eyes time to adjust to the total darkness. Looking into the opening, I can see there is a pale shimmer on the walls. It's not much light, but it's enough for me to be able to make my way through. When I start to crawl in, my ax scrapes along the floor, the noise echoes throughout the surrounding cavern. I tense up, expecting to be attacked at any moment.

WHEN NOTHING APPEARS, I slowly pull myself through the hole. Stopping at the edge, I peer hesitantly around the corner. When I don't see anything, I pull myself through. The crystals on the walls seem to be pulsing. Their light dances across the ceiling and walls randomly.

I CREEP FORWARD, flattening myself against the wall, only to stop dead at the sight ahead of me. Hundreds of cocoons hang from a low ceiling above me.

I BARELY HAVE time to move out of sight when several Araneids enter from another entrance I hadn't seen, holding what appears to be another spun cocoon in between their long arms.

I BACK INTO the shadows of the room, hoping my coloring doesn't catch their attention as I watch them hang their newest catch. Ember has to be here somewhere. A couple of the cocoons seem to be moving from the inside, so that means they catch and harvest their prey alive. If I can find her, there is the slight possibility she has survived, but how will I ever locate her in all these?

AS I STAND HERE LOOKING AROUND, several more enter the room, only to leave as quickly as their catch is secured to the ceiling. It seems like they are harvesting everything they can. The cocoons in the middle seem to be darker, so those must be older. Circling the edge, I keep my ears tuned into every noise, as I know they can and will probably arrive back at any moment.

I MAKE my way to the far side of the room where they just hung the last cocoon, for once grateful for my height, as I can just reach the bottom of the ones here. Grunting, I struggle to pull the webbing apart on the one they just hung.

BEFORE I CAN CATCH IT, a small Muldar falls out, crumbling at my feet. I reach down, checking to see if it is still alive, but I can't find a pulse. I grab the next one, but this time I take my time separating it so that whatever is inside doesn't fall out immediately, only to find the same thing.

IT SEEMS THAT THE ARANEIDS' primary source of food is the Muldars. The sound of scraping echoes through a tunnel right above my head and I grab the dead Muldar and back against the wall, hoping the Araneids don't notice me or the torn cocoons.

ON THE OTHER side of the cavern, a massive Araneid waddles in. It grabs one cocoon, inserting a long antenna-like protrusion from its face. I watch in horror as the cocoon flattens completely, it then discards it for the next one.

I GRIP the handle of my ax tighter, determined to destroy it before I allow it to eat another pod, only for it to turn away once the second cocoon is emptied, going back into the tunnel which it came from. The moment it is gone, I throw caution to the wind and start tearing into everything within reach.

I HAD BECOME SO focused on finding Ember that I almost missed her as I was working my way through the ones closest to me. A whimper has me stopping dead in my tracks. I scan the cocoons, looking for any type of movement, and that's when I see it.

I COULD SEE LONG red hairs matted into the thick webs a few feet ahead of me. Just as I start to grab her, the room is filled with screeches. I had become so focused on finding her, I didn't pay attention to the mess I was making, or the sudden sound of multiple feet moving my way. This is a rookie mistake I would've never made if I had been at full strength.

WITH FORCE, I break open the cocoon that holds Ember captive. She falls out and I drop my ax in order to catch her.

Some of her hair is caught in the webbing and I grab the knife off my hip and cut it away just as a pincher grazes my side.

MY SCALES DEFLECT IT MOSTLY, but I still can feel a slight sting as their poison enters my system. I throw Ember over my shoulder and grab my ax off the ground, swinging it around wildly with one arm while my other one holds her securely against me.

I TAKE off dodging through the cocoons, trying to get away from the pack now chasing after me. The ground under my feet starts shaking and the Araneids that had been chasing me suddenly stop. I don't wait around to see what has spooked them. I simply pick the closest tunnel and run as fast as my legs will carry us away, thankful for the small amount of light the crystals are projecting on the walls.

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG for my breathing to become labored as I fight the weakness invading my entire system. Luckily enough, only moments from collapsing, I find an outcropping tucked into one of the tunnel walls. Pulling Ember around, I hold her close as I crawl back into it, tucking her in my lap as I practically fall to the ground.

SMOOTHING her hair back out of her face, I glance down at a face that is becoming less plain with every glance. She has a few light brown marks on her face and I run my fingers across them gently, trying to brush them off only for them to remain. Their presence confuses me, as do some of her other features. Her tiny ears have a stone embedded in them and she has hairs above her eyes that move independently with her expressions. All these oddities on one small face.

“EMBER? Come on, little one, wake up. I would like to see your eyes one more time before my body succumbs to the

poison and this cold.”

HER EYES FLUTTER and she whispers my name, but other than that, she lies unresponsive in my arms. Darkness invades my vision, and with the last of my strength, I pull her close. Rubbing my lips against her soft skin, I marvel at its uniqueness.

EVEN IF SHE AWAKENS, she won't make it long, since I lost my bag with the last of our provisions in it. “I'm so sorry I failed you, little female. I would've loved to have seen another of your rare smiles once again.”

MY LAST THOUGHT IS, one rising in the future, someone will come along and find our skeletons intertwined like this. It will either be for a short while or possibly an eternity. It saddens me because the dreams and hopes we both were searching for will never be fulfilled. The darkness settles heavily over my last thoughts as I pull Ember closer, allowing myself the feeling of her slight frame curled trustingly against mine.

CHAPTER II

DAR



“F alcor, have you been able to track ViN on the surface?”

“NEGATIVE COMMANDER. I sent a message to Hugo earlier, asking for his assistance, but he has failed to respond as of this time.”

“IT’S STILL darkness on Targres Four. He is probably resting and, unless you marked it urgent, he wouldn’t be notified until rising.”

“WOULD you like me to reissue the message?”

“No, ViN is more than capable of surviving in that environment. This is more than likely a false alarm and he is laying in the sun somewhere soaking up the rays as we speak.”

“COMMANDER, I believe your last statement to be false. This last rising, I had to remove the shuttle from his last known location because it was overheating. I have scanned the entire area in a grid pattern. I have found zero evidence of him anywhere.”

“FALCOR, I believe the other AIs are rubbing off on you. I believe that last statement was given with a touch of emotion.”

“FORGIVE ME, Commander, I will work harder not to allow that to happen in the future.”

LAUGHING, “I wasn’t saying that as a bad thing, Falcor. Go ahead and contact Hugo, see if you can get his grumpy ass out of bed.”

I PACE the floor awaiting his answer when a cup of what Kira calls alien coffee appears on my desk. “Thank you, SAGE.”

“THE PLEASURE IS MINE, Master DaR. May I be of assistance? I can tell you are agitated.”

“AT THIS MOMENT, no. Is Kira still at rest?”

“YES, Master, she is sleeping peacefully. Ickis, however, appears to be agitated this rising and is walking the perimeter. He has not done that since his female came to live in the outer garden. I have set the sensors to high alert just in case he can sense something I can’t see.”

“AFTER I TALK TO HUGO, I’ll go out.”

“HE IS LINKING UP NOW. Would you like me to put him on screen?”

“PLEASE.”

“FRACK, DaR, the last thing I want to see at first rising is your ugly face, especially when I was wrapped around my mate. What do you want?”

“GOOD RISING, TO YOU ALSO, HUGO.”

“OH, frack off. I know that look. What am I not going to like about this conversation?”

“I SIMPLY HAVE A FEW QUESTIONS, nothing that should get you too riled up. Do you know of anyone who can navigate the forbidden zone accurately? Or do you have a way of scanning deeper than Falcor can?”

“THERE ARE a few mining bots that have deep surface scanning. However, there is nothing out there but a few active volcanoes.”

“I’M AWARE OF THAT, and you might not remember because of the turmoil that was happening at the time of his departure. ViN took off right after you gained control of the facility on Targres Four and has been mapping out that sector ever since. When they were helping you put the fire out, he said he witnessed an object falling through the atmosphere. He believed at that time it was another pod.”

A GROWL LEAVES HUGO. “I know you believe me to be simpleminded, DaR, but I remember the male, frack he was hard to miss. However, I was not notified that he was in the desolate area alone all this time. You are aware that we call it that for a reason and not to take that name lightly.”

“I’M REALIZING I should’ve taken this more seriously, especially now that he has not checked in for several rotations. ViN is my best tracker, and he thrives in environments such as this, so I was not concerned until recently. ”

“LET me deploy a few of the mining bots. As far as I know, there’ve been no reports of any new eruptions, and there are no caves or mines out there, either. If my bots haven’t responded by the end of this rising, you need to be on the next shuttle here. I will do some reconnaissance and see if anyone has heard anything as we wait for their return. If this had been in one of the other sectors, we would have had the results in real-time, but the heat out there blocks most transmissions.”

“HOLD FOR A MOMENT, HUGO.”

“YEAH, I got all rising to just wait on your ass.”

I TURN to hide the smile on my lips, lord how I love tormenting that male. “SAGE, is there a way you can assist with the communication issues Hugo says occur with the mining bots?”

“THAT IS above my current programming, but let me ask SCOUT. He is currently linked up with the Destroyer as they are trying to expand the radar systems range that are looking for more pods in the outer sector. One moment, please.”

SMALL ARMS WRAP around my waist from behind. “You must be in deep thought for me to sneak up on you.”

I UNTANGLE her arms and turn her to face me, laying my head upon hers, enjoying the smell that is only my Kira. “I knew the moment you entered the room, my little human.”

“GOOD RISING, Kira, I see the old man interrupted your rest also?”

“OH, hello, Hugo. I’m sorry I didn’t realize you two were connected, and yes, you are correct. I don’t sleep well once he rises in the mornings. How is Miya? I haven’t spoken to her in a few days.”

“SHE IS up to something with AMI as usual, other than that she is perfect.”

I KISS Kira’s forehead before turning back toward the screen. “Perfect, you say, huh? I could argue that no female other than my own holds that title.”

“QUIT IT, you two. I swear, I think you guys just enjoy arguing. It doesn’t matter how stupid the subject is. Hugo, dear, tell Miya I will comm her later and I’ll leave you two to whatever orneriness you are cooking up this time.” She pulls me down, thinking she is going to get a quick kiss and then go on her way. I surprise her by grasping her tight, backing her up against the wall out of the screen’s view, devouring my little human until she is practically panting in my arms. “Go back to bed. I’ll be in shortly to finish this.”

HER GIGGLE as she runs through the doorway lightens the heaviness in my heart and reluctantly I return to Hugo. He has a knowing grin on his ugly face.

“THEY GIVE OUR WEARY LIVES MEANING.”

“I BELIEVE that is the first time I have ever agreed with you willingly.”

“WHAT RISING IS THIS? Let me log the date as a day to remember.”

SAGE APPEARS, hovering above the desk. “Master DaR, SCOUT, said that the mining bots on Targres are more advanced than he is. He assured me that their special programming should pick up any anomalies in that area.”

“I HEARD HER, DaR. Send me the last check-in point for ViN and I will get busy. I’ll be in contact later.”

THE SCREEN GOES dark and I immediately turn, heading towards the bedroom and my awaiting human.

“MASTER DaR, you are getting an incoming message from Commander ZoD, and there is a sensor failing on the outer wall.”

“FRACK, inform Kira that I’ve been detained, and patch ZoD through.”

CHAPTER 12

DAR



D aR

“ZoD, what can I do for you?”

“I’M SIMPLY BEING COURTEOUS, something you didn’t do for me. Recently, I allied with some miners on Targres Four and wanted to inform you that unmanned transport ships will be making regular stops there from Zodiqua. It was brought to my attention that you bought the Scientific sector and are now monitoring all activity in that spaceport area. I will have the ships programmed to notify you of their entry and departure due to the regulations of Targres Four.”

“YOUR INFORMATION about me acquiring the Scientific sector is correct. General Hugo is policing that area as I am needed elsewhere. As for your comment about me ignoring this common courtesy between commanders. We tried to contact you before I came into your territory. The Jynrel pirates were holding my son and his mate captive and were refusing to release them. The solar flares were stopping me from contacting you properly and I didn’t have time to wait until they passed.”

“YOU WIPED out the entire crew, DaR. I found their ship free floating in the outer quadrant, all the cargo lost.”

“I DID, and you would’ve done the same in my place. They were told who they were holding and still refused to give him medical treatment after they beat him for no reason. Nor did they release him when I demanded it. No one messes with mine and lives. It is known.”

“DULY NOTED, but I’ve one other objection. You said they knew they were holding your son? I have no records of that knowledge. From the recordings I recovered from the ship, your son never informed them of who he was. That specific Jynrel ship was one of many out looking for the female your son was hiding. She had a huge bounty on her head, due to the sudden deaths of a group of royal Waldrins she had been sold to in the pleasure sector.

“AFTER REVIEWING THE RECORDS, it seems to me that he isn’t the only male in your family hiding a species that should have been brought and introduced to the elite council. From my understanding, the females in your residence are quite deadly, their blood is even fatal if ingested. It has also been said that they destroyed their world by robbing it of all its natural resources and the only reason they’ve been found in our galaxy is because they are looking to do the same to ours. There are whispers you’ve taken a mate from this unknown species and you have destroyed many to keep her safe.”

MY RUNES PULSE red and I know my eyes match them presently. “Are you threatening my mate, because that wouldn’t be a smart move on your account, ZoD!”

“TAKE IT AS YOU WILL. You understand the process as well as I do, DaR. You are simply holding yourself above the laws of our kind. Laws that we helped put in place and swore to protect. The moment these others were discovered, they

should've been turned over to the scientific council until deemed safe to be introduced into our society. You took it upon yourself to harbor this unknown species. Something you have no right to do. Until they are tested, they are deemed a threat to us all.”

“I WILL DESTROY you or any others before I would allow them to touch my Kira, or the others under my protection. The few that remain of their kind are of no threat to our world, or any other, for that matter. They've been brought before the council and preliminary tests were run. SoL's mate Alana took it upon herself to approach them directly when the rumors first started. They were satisfied with the findings and that was the last we heard from them. It seems your spies are behind their times. Our mates have never been hidden, just greatly protected, as their uniqueness makes them highly sought after.”

“DAR, how many of your sons have attached themselves to this unknown species? Does this not concern you? You've got a responsibility as a commander to help populate the outer quadrants, which are already having a hard enough time conceiving. Not attach yourselves to these...others.”

“I DID my part and have twenty-two, well, three sons. I refused to participate any longer before I ever took a mate. As to how many of my sons are mated... it's several. Not that it's any of your business.”

“WHEN YOUR SON SoL took on your responsibilities of Falcor and Darverius security, he took on all the requirements of being a Commander.”

“SoL IS MATED, and that relieved him of that particular responsibility. I think you need to worry about your own and let me take care of mine. I understand your concerns, and

that's the only reason I'm taking the time to answer your questions. However, be warned this is the last and only time I will tolerate this disrespectfulness. I've several things that need my immediate attention and we need to wrap this conversation up. What are you purchasing in such a bulk off of Targres Four that you would need transport ships to haul it?"

"THE MULDARS FOUND a cavern in the deserted area rich in rare Silk Lava Crystals. I'm not sure if you are aware of this or not, but we use these crystals to power the reactors on Zodiqua. They are scarce and highly sought after, and as of right now, the Muldar agreed to an exclusive mining contract with us. Their only stipulation is that their facility remains secret."

"ZoD, we were not aware of any mining in that area, and that sector is under no jurisdiction. So, its inhabitants can do as they wish. Can I ask when your first load will be picked up?"

"NEXT RISING IS the first shipment. We were informed that they will notify us of the landing coordinates when the ship enters their atmosphere. They also informed us that the receiving port will be moved every rotation."

"I WILL NOTIFY Hugo and the spaceport of my approval." I place my fist over my chest and nod. "Until next time... strength and honor."

ZoD REPLIES THE SAME, and the screen goes black. I take a moment to gather my thoughts.

"SAGE. Have you fixed the outer sensor?"

“NEGATIVE, Master, but I’ve bots standing guard around the perimeter. Ickis is still walking the wall looking over towards the dark forest, but my sensors are not picking up any heat signatures besides the Selin in the immediate area.”

“NOTIFY me if things change and get that sensor fixed immediately. Is Kira still resting?”

“SHE IS in the garden drinking her morning alien coffee.”

WALKING OUT OF THE ROOM, I head towards the garden, determined to spend some time with my Kira before the world tears me away again.

The sight of her sitting there in the morning suns takes my breath away. She must have sensed me behind her because she turns bestowing a smile that still makes my heart thump hard inside my chest.

I DON’T EVEN REMEMBER WALKING to or picking her up, but suddenly she is in my arms and my world is complete. It’s terrifying how attached I’ve become to her, and I’m not scared of anything.

“YOU SEEM AGITATED, love. What’s wrong?”

I HUG HER TIGHTER, winding my fingers through her long hair. “VIN is missing. I just got a disturbing comm from ZoD, and you didn’t wait on me in bed.”

KIRA REACHES up and kisses me lightly on the lips and then wiggles out of my arms. “I waited for you, but it didn’t take

long to realize you were going to be a while, and coffee was calling my name.”

“I’M SORRY, my Kira. I don’t enjoy telling you I will do something and then not follow through.”

“SIT DOWN, sweetheart, and have some coffee with me. Don’t stress over the little things, dear. I know you’re busy. These boys and your responsibilities keep you on your toes.”

“IF I HAD KNOWN the trouble they would all be, I would’ve stopped at one.”

KIRA’S LAUGHTER makes me smile. “You are so full of it. These boys and their adventures keep you young. Now, tell me, how long has ViN been out of contact?”

“SEVERAL RISINGS NOW. I should’ve gone sooner, but he has always been my most level-headed. ViN should be in his element in the desolate area of Targres Four, but Falcor can’t find him on the surface anywhere and his comm isn’t working. I need a better way to keep up with all of them since these comms seem to always be failing.”

“Do you think someone might have taken him, or would it be possible that he could’ve been attacked?”

“THEY WOULD BRING ViN BACK. He is not sociable. Out of all my boys, he seems to thrive in solitude. EvO is the only one even remotely close to him. He is the best tracker I have because nothing distracts him. I watched him walk right past

the Bordellos on Targres Four and not even glance their way... I mean, not that I was looking either.”

KIRA’S LAUGHTER could be heard across the garden. “Ok, I’m calling bullshit on that one.”

“KIRA, you know nothing could replace you in my eyes.”

“I DIDN’T SAY you were looking for a replacement love, but you’re not blind either. You can look all you like, but you are not allowed to order off the menu. The one thing I can definitely say about this world of yours is the array of exotic beauties and the extreme uglies, male and female alike, it offers.”

“YOU’VE NOTICED THESE BEAUTIES, other males?”

“OF COURSE.”

“WHO DO I need to kill? I refuse to worry about another catching your eye.”

KIRA DOES EXACTLY what I was hoping for. She gets up and crawls into my lap. My Symbots reach for her, craving her touch as much as I do.

“PUT YOUR SWORD AWAY, oh mighty destroyer of beauty. You hold my heart in your hands, but I’m not blind either. You will simply have to spend your days keeping me so enamored with you that all others simply fade into the background.”

“HOW DOES one go about making others disappear?”

“WELL, for starters, I didn’t make the bed?”

KIRA WRAPS her arms around my neck when I pick her up. Her long legs clasp my waist tightly. Giggling, she nips on my ear as I grasp her luscious ass. SAGE appears, hovering before my eyes.

“EXCUSE MY INTERRUPTION, but Hugo just commed.”

LOOKING DOWN at the desire in Kira’s eyes torn, I decide the world can wait a few more minutes. Kira cups my cheek before looking over at SAGE floating beside us.

“SAGE. Get DaR’s stuff ready to go. We will only be a moment.” SAGE disappears. “How quickly can you satisfy your woman, oh destroyer of manly beauty?”

I GROWL at her as I sprint into the bedroom. Throwing her on the bed, her giggles lighten my heart. When I emerge from the bedroom, much later, I head out with a smile on my face.

HUGO IS PACING in front of the comm in my office. “Frack DaR, what the hell took you so long? Ahhh, never mind, I can tell by the smile on your face. Nope, don’t tell me I don’t want that picture stuck in my head, the rest of this rising. I’ve been getting updated readings back from the bots and let me inform you. There is quite a bit of activity going on in a sector that was supposed to be uninhabited.

“THE MOUNTAINOUS REGION where ViN last checked in has a vast tunnel system underneath it. Some of them seem to be active lava flows, but others, they’ve been there awhile. The caverns are huge according to the deep scans I’m getting back. The first set didn’t show any activity, but when I set the depth further, it started picking up heat signatures.

“THERE ARE multiple species according to the scans, but the only ones that I can recognize are a group of Muldar. How they would’ve even gotten into that region is beyond me, but there are several hundred of them if my calculations are correct.”

“DID you find any sign of ViN?”

“THE IMAGES ARE INCONCLUSIVE, DaR. They show movement all over, but none seem to be his size. Of course, the scans don’t always show exact shapes. There was one anomaly I picked up that made me look twice, but I can’t clear the image up. However, we have another problem. The bots are not able to find an entrance. It seems like the mountain range changes form regularly because of the shifting sands on top of it. So, even if I could say he was there for sure, I don’t know how we would get to him.”

“HUGO, I may be able to help to obtain a way inside, but if they are as large as you say, we could be hunting him for risings and he won’t make it long underground. I will be there shortly. We are going to need help and I have just the male for the job.”

THE COMM GOES dark and I stand there for a moment, trying to get my thoughts together. “SAGE, contact RaZ.”

“CONNECTING NOW.”

“FATHER?”

“RAZ, I need your assistance off planet. I know you are not comfortable leaving Katherine, but ViN is missing and we believe he is lost inside a large series of tunnels underground in the desolate area of Targres Four.”

“YOU SAID HE IS UNDERGROUND? Those conditions would weaken him greatly.”

“I’M aware of that and he has been offline several risings now. I’m afraid if we wait much longer, he will be past the stage of recovery. That’s not the worst of it, we can’t pinpoint his location either.”

“LET me tell Kat and see if she wants to head up to Grandfather’s. Do you want me to meet you on Falcor?”

“YES, I’ll be awaiting your arrival and we will leave immediately for Targres Four. I have one thing to check on before heading up. I will meet you there shortly.”

HE NODS HIS HEAD, and the screen goes dark. “SAGE?” She appears in front of me. “Lead me to this sensor you are having issues with.”

“YES, Master DaR, it is strange because I keep resetting it and it works for a few moments then goes back off. It’s like someone is turning it off manually.”

I SPRINT across the flat field that leads to the outer wall of the dark forest, jumping up on the wall that surrounds my main dwelling. Ickis stands only a few feet away from the sensor. I crouch down, looking at it, noticing that the main lens has been knocked off and that the case is open. Several rocks lay on top of the wall, but the sensor would've picked up any movement before they could've been thrown.

“SAGE. You didn't receive any feedback before the sensor went offline?”

“NOTHING.”

ICKIS LETS out a hiss and I immediately stand, only there is nothing. “Ickis what are you seeing, my friend, that I am not?” The blades on his tail emerge and immediately my Symbots react as they sense his aggression.

A LARGE SLITHER glides through the tall grasses on the other side of the wall, but other than that, I can sense nothing nearby. SAGE hovers. Ickis finally calms down, then turns towards me, jumping on my shoulder.

I SCRATCH him under the chin and jump off the wall. “Ickis, our Kira will be alone this rising. I want you to keep her in your sight.” He nudges his head against mine before he wraps his long tail around my waist so that it doesn't drag the ground.

WALKING INTO THE MAIN DWELLING, we head straight to the bedroom where I left Kira, only to find her asleep. Ickis jumps off my shoulder, heading to his normal perch above the bed. I

lean over and kiss her gently on the head before pulling the covers up over her shoulders. Then, with a heavy heart, I make myself walk out of the room, realizing every time I have to leave her behind only gets harder.

“SAGE. Contact Father and inform him that I will be off-planet in case Kira needs something.”

“CONFIRMED, Master DaR... Don't worry, I will watch over her.”

CHAPTER 13

RAZ



Diving off the outer balcony, I circle until I spot Katherine and Ola playing with the newest Selin pups. I land softly outside the nest.

“LOOK at what a brood you had this time, Ola?”

SHE GROWLS, snapping her teeth playfully towards me when I pick the smallest one up.

KATHERINE’S LAUGHTER lightens my heart as she sits in the nest, leaning up against Ola like she is a big teddy bear and not one of the most lethal animals alive on this planet.

“I HATE TO INTERRUPT, but I need to talk to you for a minute.”

“OH, I’m getting the RaZ serious face. What’s going on?”

“I HAVE TO LEAVE. ViN is missing and Dad needs me.”

“OK.” She shifts her focus from me for a minute.

“Do you want me to take you to Victoria and Gramps?”

“No, I think I will hang out here while you’re gone. I’ve been meaning to follow Thorn these last few days to see where he is going. He has been acting strange, and I saw Ghost snap at him this morning, so something is up with those two.”

“YOU’RE ALRIGHT with me being gone?”

“I WILL NEVER BE ok with you being gone, but it is important and this is the first time your father has asked for your assistance since we returned. You are used to being right in the middle of all the action and you’ve separated yourself from all that to stay with me. Go... be the badass you were born to be. I assure you I’ve had plenty of time to adjust, and I have plenty of company right here without bothering Uncle TY and Vic. If I need them, they are a simple call away.”

“KAT, I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I’ll contact you as soon as I can, I promise.” Reaching down, my wings wrap around her as I grasp her close. She snuggles into my chest as I hold her tightly. I didn’t realize how hard it would be for me to leave her, but I have to go. She pulls my face down and the tears pooling in her dark blue eyes practically gut me.

“ALL I ASK IS that you take care of yourself! I wish I could go, but no more space flights for this girl.”

“KAT, you know I love you more than anything, right?”

“YEP, I believe I got that memo somewhere. You hold my heart, RaZ. Now go on, your family needs you.”

I KISS her quickly and launch upward before I lose the willpower to do so. I circle around her a few times. She waves, and I throw her a kiss before meeting the personal shuttle Falcor sent to pick me up midair.

I TUCK my wings in and land effortlessly on the ramp, making my way to the control panel as the shuttle rises. “Falcor, notify Father that I will arrive shortly.”

“MASTER RAZ, it’s nice to have you back. He is awaiting you in the shuttle bay.”

CHAPTER 14

KATHERINE



Standing here, I watch RaZ until he is out of sight. I know I'm holding him back from all his duties, but I've been too selfish to let him go up until now. I wipe a random tear off my cheek and take a deep breath. After losing Mom and Dad... the thought of something happening to RaZ practically pushes me into a panic attack, but I can't put him in a bubble as much as I would like to.

SECRETLY, I would love to seal us in somewhere together where no one or anything could ever bother us again, but that is unrealistic.

OLA GETS OUT of her nest, her colossal head nudging me from behind before she too walks off into the darkness. Ghost and Glory come running around the house playing with some of the Selin pups that they have seemed to adopt as their own.

“**COME ON**, you guys, let's go for a walk.”

GHOST TUCKS his head under my hand, demanding attention, while Glory runs ahead, the Selin pups yipping and growling playfully as they try to keep up with her. Ghost's familiar presence calms my racing heart, as my mind seems too quiet.

I've taken for granted RaZ's constant companionship, and at this moment I feel lost.

WE ENTER into the total darkness of the forest around us and I stop for a minute, closing my eyes. A gentle breeze floats by and for a moment, I swear I can smell my mother's perfume and the gentle touch of her hand upon my face.

"YOU ARE NEVER ALONE, DAUGHTER."

MY EYES JERK OPEN, and I look around, only to see Ghost staring at me. I could have sworn I heard Mom's voice in my head. Grasping onto the hope of her somehow still being near, my heart feels lighter and I press on into the forest, enjoying the quiet and the uniqueness around me for the first time since we landed here. I've tried my best to hide my struggles from RaZ with jokes and laughter, but I've never felt like I belong until now. Maybe I simply needed the alone time to see that some things remain the same, even if different. Beauty and love still surround me just in a different package, or should I say, planet.

I SENSE Thorn ahead and make my way toward him. Shockingly, I find him lying in front of the ethereal figure that has been eluding me from day one here, Ellaria.

SHE IS SITTING BEHIND HIM, stroking him lovingly. Neither seems to notice me standing here watching until Ghost growls. She jerks up. Thorn immediately is on his feet, standing protectively in front of her.

I HOLD OUT MY HAND. "Thorn, it's just us. Be calm... I see that you've made a friend. I have been worried about you these last

few days. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"I ASKED HIM NOT TO." She starts to fade away.

"PLEASE DON'T GO! I mean you no harm, and I would love to talk. You're Ellaria, right?"

"I BELIEVE that is my given name... Yes... it is. Sometimes I don't remember. Some risings come and go quickly and then others go on forever. You are the one haunting the inner castle. I see you walking in front of the windows at all hours searching for something with your eyes, but I don't believe you've found it yet."

"AND HERE I thought you were the ghost all this time."

"WE ARE all searching for something. Many times I thought it was within my reach, but I could never hold on to it because of my limited understanding of the world around me. The things I believed to be true seem to keep changing. There are no real truths, only more questions."

GHOST WALKS PAST ME, and I watch Thorn push Ellaria back away from him. The oddest part is that she seems more solid when he is touching her.

ELLARIA FLOATS a few inches above the ground, her form flickering in and out. "I've never seen Thorn attach himself to another. It pleases me that you have embraced his protective nature. Hellhounds bond for life and he has been lonely for some time now."

“I HAVE WATCHED him wander for risings; he has a sadness in him that matches my own. He was hesitant when I first approached him, but he has become a huge comfort these last days. Are you going to demand his return?” Her eyes flash red and I take a step back.

“THORN IS free to do as he pleases. I was simply worried about him because he was pulling away. I didn’t want him to be alone.”

“WE ARE ALL ALONE in the universe, are we not, Katherine? Even in the mix of a crowd, you feel like you’re outside looking in. You are probably one of the few who truly understand how it feels to be me. I’ve always watched from afar, but can never truly participate. My destiny is to roam this world, only to observe from afar.”

“KNOWING my name wasn’t something I expected from you.”

SHE RUNS her hand down Thorn’s side. “He must’ve told me because I didn’t either.” She starts to fade again.

“ELLARIA, please stay. I would love to talk. I believe there are things we can learn from each other.”

SHE BACKS AWAY, shaking her head. “It’s too painful.”

“WHAT IS?”

“YOUR EMOTIONS... they overwhelm me and I don’t know how to absorb them. They force themselves inside me and it

fractures my mind further. With every rising, I lose more and more of myself...before long, all that will be left of me will be a memory. Because the louder the thoughts and emotions come, the harder it is for me to maintain this form. That's why I've stayed here in the dark forest all this time. It's the silence that strengthens me. I fight the pull of the beyond because I have never found what I'm searching for."

"ELLARIA, maybe I can help you. What are you trying to find? You're not in the in-between. Your spirit is unique, but I don't believe you are truly dead."

SHE SMILES SADLY AT ME, then looks away, her words faint.

"I SEARCH FOR COMPASSION, passion...peace... If there is one thing I've learned, it's not to look back and not to look forward. Both will take today's happiness away and it's truly all you really ever have."

ELLARIA FADES COMPLETELY, and Thorn growls at me like it's my fault. "I'm sorry Thorn, I won't intrude again. I would never willingly hurt her."

GHOST NUDGES me and I turn, wandering through the forest, not paying attention to where I'm going as my mind replays Ellaria's words. I'm missing something important with her that I just can't grasp. Our emotions hurt her, and she fades as if she is in the in-between, but I know she is not truly there. She has always felt different to me; she is more than a spirit, but what is the real question?

I FIND myself back at the house. Looking up at the illusion RaZ has set around the place. Pondering the changes that have

taken place in my life within this last year. *Don't look back or forward.* Those words seem to hit me hard, and a smile forms on my face.

I RECKON there are times we simply need to be reminded that things are not always what they seem and to enjoy the moment. Because this one second in time is precious. I've spent too long looking behind, wishing to change things that have already happened. Now it's time to embrace what's now and let tomorrow work itself out.

GHOST PLAYFULLY POUNCES ahead and we take off running together, my heart lighter than it has been in ages.



CHAPTER 15

RAZ



After going over the details the mining drones acquired and listening to Dad argue with Hugo all darkness while we traveled to Targres Four, I was ready to get out of this shuttle. My wings have become spoiled with constant use since returning home and the tight quarters of the shuttle barely allow me to open them halfway.

I ONLY HAD a moment to comm Katherine last darkness. I was relieved to see her curled up on the bed with Ghost, reading. Her bright smile on the other side of the screen lightens the worries I have of her being alone while I'm gone.

MY WINGS TWITCH as we walk down the steep ramp, looking around. There was no missing the large red Phlox male waiting for us at the bottom. Dad grabs his arm, bestowing upon him the warrior's embrace. Something I've never witnessed him do with anyone who was not immediate family.

"HUGO, I know you two talked all darkness, but let me formally introduce you to RaZ, one of my oldest sons."

HE REACHES OUT, shaking my hand very humanly. "You poor bastard, you have this ingrate's blood in your veins. I will

watch and see if it affects your actions as impulsively as it does your father.”

I CAN'T HELP but laugh at the look on Dad's face. “Hugo, it's nice to finally meet the male that makes my dad speechless from time to time. And just so you know, I've not suffered any ill effects from his blood so far.”

“WELL, you're still young. It could happen at any time. It's a good thing you have those wings of yours. I've got a feeling they will come in handy, as I still don't know how your father or myself will be able to board this transport ship without them realizing it.”

I STRETCH MY WINGS OUT. “They come in handy, except in tight spaces. If you two still have things to discuss, I would prefer to get out of this intense sunlight. Targres Four is closer to our suns, and its rays are irritating me.”

“COME, there is no reason for any of us to be uncomfortable while we anticipate its approach. We will await the transmission in the spaceport's main lounge. Have either of you come up with an alternative plan in case RaZ can't infiltrate the shuttle?”

“HUGO, right now, that seems to be our only option. I've been studying the layout of the caves the bots sent. If I can manage to get inside, my sonar should help me locate ViN within the rising. At first, I wasn't going to take anything with me, but ViN is huge. There is no way I will be able to fly him out of there because the tunnel walls are too narrow for them to stretch out fully to carry his weight. Do either of you have any suggestions on how to warm him up quickly?”

HUGO STARES off for a second before turning. “RaZ, give me a moment to contact someone.” He walks over to a center console. “AMI, I need to know if we’ve anything portable to help someone if they are deprived of warmth. I’m not talking about it in a minor way either. Whatever it is, it has to be able to transmit an extreme amount of heat that most people’s skin couldn’t tolerate.”

A ROBOTIC FEMALE voice comes back over the transmission. “Master Hugo, I should be able to recalibrate the heating pads I normally use on the surgical beds, but the best I can do is make them hot to the touch. I can pause their activation until they are taken out of the package for easier transportation. They also have a light adhesive layer on them that can be applied directly to the skin as well.”

I SHAKE MY HEAD YES. “ That should help some, and easy enough instructions. How do we get them here?”

“AMI, you heard the male, how quickly can you get a first aid bag together and here to the spaceport? Oh, and possibly, add in one of your magical potions as well. Those adrenaline shots help drastically in a pinch.”

“MASTER HUGO, I am currently readjusting the security settings on the pads, and I will have one of the maintenance bots deliver these to you shortly.”

“RAZ, is there anything else you can think of?”

“NOT AT THIS TIME, but when I finally get him to an entrance, we will need immediate pickup. You said earlier that part of

the planet tends to mess with the communicators. If mine fails, how will you find us?”

“I AM GOING to set one of the mining bots directly over where you enter. I’m hoping we never lose sight of you.”

FATHER IS PACING THE ROOM. “Son, maybe I should accompany you. ViN has substantially more bulk on him than you do. If he is down, it will be a struggle to get him to the surface, let alone if you have to fight off any hostiles along the way.”

“DAD, the help would be appreciated, but there is no way both of us will be able to get past the Muldars. I will have a better chance of slipping past them alone.

“THE MINING BOT scanning the area is better than nothing. If my comm fails and I lose contact with you, I will simply persuade the Muldars to send a signal out. They have a station hidden somewhere or they couldn’t connect with the transport ships.”

HUGO LAUGHS. “How are you planning to convince a couple hundred cannibals to help you? Instead of them capturing you and roasting your pretty little wings over a fire like a rare bird?”

I STRETCH MY WINGS OUT, shaking them aggressively. “As small as they are, I’m sure they are scared of heights.”

HUGO PATS me on the shoulder, smiling. “That would work on me.” His comm unit goes off and he walks over to the door

where a large guard bot hovers above the ground with a bag in hand. He starts to turn back towards us when something catches his attention. “Frack, is that the transport ship there? I thought they were supposed to report in?”

DAD SNARLS, “They were. Is there any way we can follow it?”

“THERE ARE no personal shuttles here, but if we hurry back to the compound, we can track the ship from the air. It will take them some time to load the vessel.”

“LOOKS like you two have a plan, and I have a ship to stow away on.” I grab the bag and take two steps out of the terminal, launching myself into the sky. The suns are uncomfortable on my wings, but I choose to ignore the slight pain as I approach the ship from above.

AS I CIRCLE AROUND, it is apparent that the entire thing is sealed with no windows or hatches on the top or sides. I’m going to have to time this just right because it appears that the only entrance is the loading ramp. Depending on the entrance, I’m not sure I’ll even need to board the vessel or simply follow it inside the mountainside. Either way, I have to find a way to keep from being spotted. I hate not having a plan in place, all that does is allow mistakes to happen.

MY WINGS TWITCH as the heat rises in the area. Thankfully, it’s still early rising and the suns are not at their strongest yet or I would be extremely uncomfortable right now. Hitting a strong thermal, I let the wind carry me above the ship as it makes its way out into the desolate area, and they are correct. There is nothing out here as far as the eye can see.

GLANCING down at my personal comm unit, it's blinking green and blue, which means that Dad is tracking me. The ship turns suddenly towards a large mountain range to the north, its altitude slowly descending as it gets closer.

JUST AS I think it is about to crash into the side of a mountain. The entire top peak rotates, revealing a huge cavern inside. The ship hovers momentarily before it lowers slowly down. Grabbing onto one of the outer vents, I tuck myself into the shadows of one wing.

AS SOON AS the ship clears the peak. The mountain top starts to re-close above me. *Frack*, this will make things harder. There is no way I can fly us out of here without being seen. I will have to find another exit. I can hear the Muldars below, their hissing and clicking noise is unique to their kind.

CONCEALED behind the bulk of the ship, I fly down to the ground only after the ramp has been opened and their voices become distant. My eyes adjust to the dark quickly and the surrounding heat signatures brighten as I focus on the outer tunnels. *Darkness, my old friend, how I enjoy your cold caress.*

I SPOT several cave rats scurrying around above on high ledges and can detect the closest active lava tunnels deep below. The shadows hide my form well as I walk along the walls, trying to figure out where to start my search.

LIFTING OFF THE GROUND, I take the closest tunnel, my sonar warning me ahead of time of low-lying rock ledges, as I twist and turn, heading deeper into the mountainside. Only stopping several times to look for tracks in the loose dirt below me.

I COME upon the carcass of a Cricket-Spider between two boulders, but there are so many marks around it, that I almost miss the boot print. I try to maneuver through the tight opening, but my wings won't fit between the ledge and the ceiling.

BACKTRACKING, I send out a signal, looking for anything out of place. Unless he is dead, I should be able to at least pick up ViN's breathing, as it would have some heat in it, but there is nothing.

COMING TO AN INTERSECTION, I land once again, looking for any signs that he has been this way. This time I'm puzzled by the tracks. If this larger footprint is ViN's, then something is following him. The prints are unlike anything I've ever seen before. One part is flat, while the other has a sharp dragging point.

SCREECHES ECHO throughout the cavern as a pack of Cricket-spiders crawl along the ceiling above me with multiple cocoons in their arms. I start to dismiss them, but then it dawns on me that they are the dominant predators down here. If multiple ones converged on ViN at once, they may have been able to capture him.

I'M SHOCKED they've not noticed me underneath them, so when they pass, I follow behind closely until they duck into a large hole. Hesitantly, I pull my wings close and crawl inside. I hate doing this because it makes me vulnerable to attack, as I can't maneuver in these tight quarters.

PULLING myself out of the hole, I shudder. *Frack, I hate tight places.* It takes all my willpower not to shake my wings out, but I leave them tucked in close as I make my way forward quietly.

THIS MUST BE their main feeding chamber, as it hangs heavily with cocoons. I skim the wall, noticing several of them look like they've been ripped open from the bottom, but there are no other predators in the area that would even attempt to be found inside this cavern.

LARGE FOOTPRINTS COVER THE AREA, so ViN or someone of the same size was definitely here. Ducking around a few cocoons, I follow the footprints when the sight of several long red hairs on the ground stops me. I reach down, picking them up, rubbing them against my nose, smelling them, trying to figure out what or who these would've belonged to.

BUT THE SMELL of decay reeks so heavily throughout the room, it's hindering me from being able to detect anything useful from the few hairs in my hand. Throwing them back to the ground, I continue to follow the footprints out of here. There is a splatter of dark blood on the floor, but I can't tell if it's fresh or not.

ANOTHER OPENING APPEARS BEFORE ME, and I head through it, tracing the prints. He seems to be taking longer strides now and the footprints are deeper in the soil. It appears that he was carrying something as he ran from here. There are scratches all around, so he was being chased.

WHAT THE FRACK happened down here?

THIS SMALL TUNNEL opens up into a vast one and I stretch my wings out, flying forward, each flap of my wings taking me deeper into this massive cave system. The whole time my mind is trying to process how I'm going to get him out of here this far down, especially if he is injured.

A COUGHING NOISE stops me in midair. Hovering, I see a small heat source tucked into an overhang. Landing softly just out of sight, I watch the heat source move around, but the image is blurry. The rock wall and the lava crystals surrounding the area are messing with my vision. Walking closer, I'm shocked when I hear a female's voice.

CHAPTER 16

EMBER



I wake up coughing, fighting against whatever is holding me. When it releases me, I hit my hip on the ground hard. Looking around in a panic, it takes me a second to realize I had fallen out of ViN's arms. It's just the two of us tucked into what looks like a small hole in the side of the wall.

I PRACTICALLY LAUNCH myself at ViN as tears flow down my face. "You didn't leave me!"

WHEN HE DOESN'T MOVE or make a sound, I pull away slightly, looking at his head that is laying limply against his chest. "ViN?"

I SHAKE HIM GENTLY, and his arms fall away from my sides. Placing my hands on his cheeks, I raise his face up. "ViN?" The light from the small crystals surrounding us is just enough for me to make out his relaxed features. That's when I notice his skin is cold to the touch, and his breathing is slow.

I START TALKING TO MYSELF. "Ok, ok don't panic Ember. He is still breathing. It's possible he is just resting. Have you ever seen him sleep? No, I've not... Think damnit, was he injured the last time you saw him? No, but he kept telling you he was getting weaker." I climb back onto his lap and straddle his

waist, tucking myself into him, placing his head over my shoulder. Getting as close as I can, I rub his arms and back quickly, trying to warm him up.

WHEN I RAISE my hand back up, it comes away wet. I lean over his large shoulder, trying to see how badly he is hurt, but the light is too dim from this angle. “Dammit, he is hurt.” I look around us trying to find his bag, only it’s nowhere in sight.

HE LEANS HEAVILY AGAINST ME, and the pressure on my chest makes me cough. I tuck my head into his arm, trying to dampen the sound because the last thing we need right now is for something to find us.

WHISPERING INTO HIS EAR, “VIN, come on, grouchy ass. You need to wake up and tell me what to do.” He doesn’t move, I lean against him, willing what little heat I have into him, and I swear with each minute his body is getting stiffer under my fingers.

PUSHING him back against the wall, I jerk my hand back when it grazes one of the shiny crystals that is putting off the low light. Hesitantly, I reach out, touching it again, only to realize it’s hot.

TAKING MY FINGERNAIL, I loosen it until it falls into my hand, only to drop it again when it burns me. The small stone glows even brighter now that it is free of the dirt that was holding it. Looking around, I can see that there are thousands of these in the walls all around us. If I can get a bunch together, maybe I can place enough of them on him to warm him up.

IT TAKES a few minutes for me to unwrap myself off his lap and, at one point, my crotch is right in his face. Even with him unconscious, I can feel myself blush.

I START on the stones closest to us first. After collecting a few of them, I lay them on his lap only for them to burn straight through the thin pants he has on. Knocking them off quickly, I pat the material, trying to put the small embers out, only to realize I'm fondling more than just his legs. Jerking my hand back, I glance up at his face, mortified that he may have caught me touching him inappropriately.

HE DOESN'T MOVE, *crap*... Now, to figure out how to hold these against him. I glance down at the fur thing I have on and could jump for joy when I notice the wrap ViN had put on me to keep it in place.

QUICKLY, I untie it. Holding it in front of me, I turn it in several directions. Finally, I decide to fold it in half so that there would be a piece of material between his skin and the stones. I think his scales would be fine, but the other side has multiple scars now, so that skin isn't as tough.

IT TAKES me forever to get it wrapped around his enormous frame as he hangs here like an extremely large rag doll. I check the cut on his back now that I have him leaning forward and it seems to have stopped bleeding, but I wrap this thing around it anyway, just in case.

IGNORING the pain wracking my body, I begin prying more of the stones out of the walls. Every time I get a handful, I tuck them in between the folds of the wrap I put around him. Thankful that the stones didn't seem hot enough to burn through it like they did his pants. I can still feel their heat

through the material, so hopefully I'm not blistering my fingers for nothing.

VIN GROWLS, and I crawl back over to him. Pulling his head up, I tap his cheeks gently, but he doesn't respond. "Hey, you still in there?"

THE FACT that he reacted at all makes me more motivated. While holding onto my side, I have to stop and cover my mouth a few times to prevent coughing loudly. The pain pulsing through my body has me swaying unsteadily on my knees from all the injuries I've sustained while being here, but I don't let it stop me. I just keep repeating over and over in my head. *I have to save him; I have to save him.*

HIS BODY HAS STARTED to loosen up, so the heat has to be helping some. I don't want him to die down here. He has a family and a life waiting for him on the surface. Unlike me, he has plenty of reasons to live. The ends of my fingers are bleeding where my nails are broken off into the quick. Most of the blisters from the heat of these stones have burst, but no matter the pain. I must keep going. He wouldn't be in this shape if not for me. I can't believe he came after me, even injured.

AFTER LOSING everyone I've ever cared about, I refuse to let him die because I quit. A sound behind me has me stopping and I crawl back over toward VIN. Listening... There it is again, scurrying around him I grab his ax. Only to bite my tongue from crying out as I wrap my raw fingers around the handle. But I refuse to put it back down. Whatever is out there is going to go through me. It takes the last of my strength to pick it up off the ground. *How did he pack this around so effortlessly?*

I RAISE the ax when I see movement in front of the hole ViN had put us in. I have no idea how to use this thing, but whatever is creeping near doesn't know that. A dark figure appears suddenly and I swing the ax, knocking myself off balance in the process. A large hand catches the handle, moving the ax and me forward.

I KNOW my eyes are as big as saucers as the figure becomes clearer in the dim light. You would think the large black wings stretching out behind a dark gray body would be what catches my attention first. Nope, it's the long fangs encased in the face of a god.

“LORD HELP US, YOU'RE A VAMPIRE.”

HE SMILES, and I swear if there had been anything in my bladder, I would've peed all over myself. Looking past me, his features suddenly change. He moves forward and I don't know where my sudden strength comes from, but I push him back.

“GET AWAY FROM US, go suck on someone else.”

“BE AT EASE, female, you are in no danger.”

“YEA, says the guy with the big teeth.”

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH HIM?”

“NOTHING...HE IS JUST SLEEPING.”

THE VAMPIRE GUY looks at me and then back to ViN. “How long has he been like this?”

“GO AWAY. I’m not telling you anything. Just leave us alone. Wait a minute, how am I understanding you?”

“I TAUGHT myself English a while back on an adventure similar to yours.”

HE STRAIGHTENS UP, still holding the ax, and looks down at me. I try my best to hide my trembling. “Forgive me, little female. Where are my manners? My name is RaZ. That male you are trying so hard to protect is my little brother. You are?”

“RIGHT, you’re his brother and I’m the tooth fairy. I might be new to this world, but have you looked in a mirror? Because I can’t seem to find the family resemblances anywhere.”

HE PUSHES PAST ME, barely able to get into the opening. I grab onto one of his wings, only to not be able to hold on because my fingers are bleeding so badly.

“GREAT, Ember, bleed next to the vampire.”

HE LAUGHS AT ME. “You’re in luck. I’m not hungry right now, and my mate would be extremely upset if I fed from another. What are these stones you’ve placed all over him?”

SUDDENLY, the fight leaves me and I plop the rest of the way to the ground. “Look, you know I have no way of defending us. If you are going to kill me, will you just go ahead and do

it? I'm tired of this alien world and I just got here. So far, everything is out to eat you, sacrifice you for the greater good, or in his case," I point at ViN, "simply putting up with ya."

VAMPIRE ALIEN DUDE pulls a bag off his chest, then hands me a clear container and what looks like a granola bar. "Little female, you are looking at this the wrong way. These types of adventures simply build character."

"I WISH it would build me a cheeseburger or possibly a hospital."

HIS DEEP LAUGHTER echoes throughout the cave. "Eat that. It will help." He pulls what looks like sheets out of the bag. "When you're done, I will need your assistance. These need to be wrapped around him quickly. We need to wake his ass up. The big bastard is too heavy for me to carry all the way up this mountain."

LAYING the stuff he handed me on my lap, I stare at him. "You really are not here to kill us?"

"NOPE, I told you, I'm his brother. He has been missing for a few rotations now. Our father sent me down first to see if I could locate ViN. We had no idea about you or I would've come better prepared. I'll get all of us out of here one way or another. You just need to remain strong a little longer."

FROWNING, I look around, shaking my head. "Hell, for all I know I'm hallucinating right now on mud alien juice and the only character I could come up with was a vampire. So, vampire RaZ, it's nice to meet you. I'm Ember, by the way." He smiles and I have to stop myself from flinching.

“YOUR NAME IS EMBER, and he is a fire element. The fates didn’t work too hard with that one, did they?”

“EXCUSE ME?”

“I’LL EXPLAIN IT LATER. Right now, I need to get him stable and on his feet, and you should eat. You’re going to need all the strength you can gather in order to get out of here.”

WHEN HE SEES me struggling to open the container, he reaches over, then opens it for me with his teeth.

“SEE, THESE COME IN HANDY SOMETIMES.”

“I TAKE it you’re the jokester in the family?”

“NO, ACTUALLY, I’M THE ASSASSIN.”

I TAKE a bite of the bar he gave me to keep from laughing. *Of course, you are. What else would an alien vampire be? If I’m hallucinating, I need to come up with better material.*

I WATCH as he maneuvers ViN around effortlessly. In such tight quarters, I can feel the heat radiating off those sheets. Within minutes of them being put on him, ViN starts twitching. His fingers and legs spasm as his body absorbs the warmth.

RAZ BACKS away from him with a frown on his face. “This is going to take longer than I anticipated. You should rest while

you can. We will move out the moment he can walk.”

“SURE THING, I’ll just snuggle down inside this cozy, soft bed and take a power nap. I’ve half-convinced myself this isn’t really happening, anyway.”

HE STARTS to say something and I hold my hand up, stopping him. “Just wake me up. Wait a minute, you are planning on taking me with you, right?”

“YOU HAVE MY WORD.”

IT’S MY DREAM. Might as well take the word of the hot vampire dude. I lay down on my good shoulder and curl my hands up, trying to block the burning pain of my raw fingertips. Tears leak out of my closed eyes as I try to fight off the pain surging through my whole body. Although I’m aware I should be grateful for my existence, I’m finding it difficult to find reasons to be at the moment. I must have dozed off because I jerk straight up when I hear ViN’s voice behind me.

I CAN’T RECALL how I got up or how I ended up sitting on his lap, but I found myself clutching his face in my hands. “You’re awake.” Before I think about it, I pull his face down to mine, kissing him quickly on the lips. “I was so scared.”

FOR A SECOND I thought his eyes flashed silver, but I must have imagined it. He doesn’t say a word, just looks at me, puzzled. Smoothing his dark hair back out of his face, I run my hands down his cheeks and over his chest. “You’re warm.”

HE SHAKES his head yes and then looks over at RaZ, growling a string of words out. “Yeah, little brother, I can understand her. She is okay; you taking a nap just scared a few years off her life is all.”

HIS EYES GET big and he pulls me away, looking at me intently before more growls come out.

“FRACK, ViN, don’t take everything so seriously. I didn’t mean that literally. If you are so concerned about her, how about we get your big ass up and get the hell out of here?”

ViN LIFTS me off his lap, but I can feel his arms trembling when he does. “RaZ, I don’t think he is ready yet. Could we wait a little longer?”

“THOSE SHEETS WILL COOL RAPIDLY. We need to move while they are still working.”

I BACK OUT of the way as RaZ helps maneuver ViN out of this hole. My hand brushes the wall behind me and I bite my lip to keep from making a noise.

RAZ LEANS ViN UP against the wall and reaches back in to help me out as it is several feet down to the main floor. He stops me on the edge, finally taking a minute to look at me. “Ember, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were this hurt earlier. Stay there for just a second. I may have something to help you. I just don’t know how long it will last or if it is even safe for a human. Never mind, there are too many unknowns; we will make do. I simply don’t know how to get both of you out of here. It would be easier for all concerned if you could walk on your own.”

“JUST GIVE IT TO ME, whatever it is. If I make it, fine, if not, no one will notice. If I fall behind, just leave me. I’m not worth either of your lives. You have a family here, I don’t. You came for ViN, so your first priority is to save him.”

VIN PRACTICALLY YELLS out something and the noise echoes all around us. RaZ snarls back at him and I step back a few feet.

“REALLY, ViN, if you weren’t sick right now, I would kick your ass. Of course I’m not going to leave her. You should know better. Ember, we have a couple of options. I can give you this shot and there is the possibility it will give you enough strength to follow me, or it might make you worse. Another option is you could remain here and I will come back once I get ViN out. I can camouflage this entrance, but I would be leaving you with very few rations. I’ve no idea how long, or how much longer, you can go in the shape you’re in now and it’s possible it could take me a couple of days to get back here.”

VIN TURNS around and holds his hand out for me, growling at RaZ again.

“WHAT IS HE SAYING?”

“HE LIKES OPTION ONE; he said he would carry you if he has to. We both know he is in no shape to do that.”

“GIVE ME THE SHOT. I would rather die trying than sit here and wait for it to happen.”

HE DOESN'T ASK me again, just helps me off the rock and then pulls out what looks like a big ink pen. "This will probably sting. Try not to jerk away."

VIN HAS LEANED BACK ENOUGH to grab my hand in his, and even though my hands are raw, I clutch onto him tightly. One of RaZ's wings coming around my back distracts me momentarily, and he uses that to stab something into the side of my neck. A small moan leaves my throat as my legs feel like they're going to crumble as the medicine burns through my system.

"BREATH THROUGH IT, Ember; we will wait a few minutes to see how your body reacts."

I DIDN'T REALIZE until he spoke that his wing was holding me up. ViN pulls me out of RaZ's grasp, holding me in front of him, watching me intently. I smile up at him. "I'm ok, let's get going."

HIS EXPRESSION TURNS dark and my smile fades. "Look, I understand I'm a burden, but it didn't kill me. I don't feel any better, but I'm not worse either. Stop snarling at me and just go on."

I JERK AWAY from him and turn back to RaZ, who is watching us with a smirk on his face. "He is growling, so he is fine, and thank you for trying. Let's go while we still can."

RAZ TUCKS A SHOULDER UP under ViN's arm to help support his weight before looking back at me. "Don't fall behind,

Ember. Too many things down here would love to have you as a snack. If you feel yourself getting weaker, let me know.”

“I’VE BEEN PLAYING this follow-the-leader game for a few days now. I understand the rules.”

WE START FORWARD, climbing over the rocks that are littering the floor from previous cave-ins. At this point, I’m just going through the motions, my mind and body sort of on autopilot, as I don’t seem to be able to focus on anything in particular. ViN looks back at me from time to time, but other than that, no one says a word. RaZ is pushing us hard to get ViN out of here while the warming sheets are still working.

HIS ENORMOUS FRAME LOOKS ODD, wrapped up haphazardly, like a mummy. RaZ’s wings flex as he pulls ViN along through the narrow passages. Neither of them makes a sound, so you would have no idea if they were struggling or not.

A CLICKING NOISE has all of us stopping at once and RaZ turns toward me, motioning for me to get down and be quiet. He leans ViN against the wall and disappears right before my eyes. The darkness swallows him whole.

EVEN THOUGH THE clicking gets closer, I remain perfectly still. I see ViN tense up, and I know whatever is headed this way is bad. I have to put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming when RaZ touches my shoulder from behind. *Where in the hell did he come from?*

HE MOTIONS for me to come with him, and I glance back at ViN. He nods yes and I turn back toward RaZ, who grabs me around the waist a second before he launches us up into the air.

This time I can't stop the small scream that leaves my lips as he flips and turns us in the air like we're on a rollercoaster.

I TRY TO LOOK UP, but the wind is too strong there and dirt particles are falling on top of us. He turns midair, sitting me against a rock wall. "Don't move a single muscle. Do you understand?"

"YEAH, I get it. You scared the shit out of me."

"WELL, the excitement isn't over yet, and if you step in either direction; you are not going to like the outcome. I've got to go get ViN. You will feel the brush of my wings when I come back up here, but whatever you do, don't move."

SHAKING MY HEAD, he rotates around and plunges back into the darkness. I catch myself leaning forward, trying to see as the sound of grunts and squeaks come up from below. I almost yell out to see if they're okay when I hear the sound of his wings coming closer. Moving back as far as I can without moving my feet. I feel a light brush across my stomach as he flies by, the wind so strong I have to grasp the rock behind me.

"EMBER, I'm coming back down. Be ready."

"WHERE THE HELL do you think I'm going?"

RAZ'S LAUGHTER comes toward me as he grasps me again. This time, the flight is much slower, and he lands with me. "You good?"

“I RECKON. Where is Vin, and what now?”

“I PUSHED him out onto the ledge.”

“WHAT?”

“OH, sorry, that came out wrong. He is fine. As a matter of fact, he should be as good as new by the time Dad gets here.”

“WHERE IS HERE?”

“WE ARE near an opening at the top of the mountain.” He motions for me to look at a watch-like thing on his wrist. “You see these little blue dots? That means Dad is on his way, and by that sound, he must have been close by. The suns out there are brutal right now, so when we leave, it will be quick. I love the darkness...the suns, not so much.”

HE PUTS a hand behind my back, moving me towards a crack where I can finally see some daylight. When we hear voices, he grabs me again. “Close your eyes, Ember.”

THE AIR around me changes so abruptly it takes my breath. The heat is so intense I feel like I’m smothering. I try to open my eyes for a second, only to close them tightly against the brightness of the world around me. Then the light dims and cool air caresses my skin.

“EMBER, you can open your eyes now. You’re safe.”

THE FLOOR under my feet moves abruptly and I start to fall, only for an enormous set of arms to catch me from behind. When my eyes adjust, I glance up at the most beautifully terrifying male I've ever seen. Bright yellow eyes peer down at me and I'm struck silent at the perfection of the face they are in. I could look at him for eternity and never get tired of it. *At least, if I'm still in a dream. I'm getting better with each character.*

RAZ SAYS SOMETHING, and it's like his words come at me from a distance. Another moves into sight; this one is red with large horns on his head, all of them are staring down at me like I'm the alien here. Their faces become fussy as the adrenaline that had kept me moving suddenly wears off and darkness claims me.

CHAPTER 17

VIN



Laying back against the rock face, I grit my teeth as I tear this sticky-ass blanket thing off my body. I'm thankful for the heat it provided, but frustrated because it's now blocking the sun's rays I need.

I TENSE UP WHEN I see a shuttle approaching quickly across the sands. Immediately, I recognize it as one of ours, so I lay back and stretch my arms out, pulling as much warmth into my body as possible. My core pulses as the heat from the suns finally penetrates my scales. I can hear RaZ talking to Ember still inside the mountain, but her voice is too low for me to make out what she is saying. A growl escapes my throat uncontrollably. I hate that she can speak with him, but couldn't understand me.

I SEND OUT A PRAYER. The Lord of Light knows how grateful I am to have a family I knew would not forsake me. Without RaZ's help, we would've perished in that cavern within the next darkness.

AS I SIT HERE SOAKING up as much heat as possible, I can still feel the soft press of her lips against mine. In all my rotations, I never dreamed I would ever experience this human kiss. Or the feeling of her small body pressed against me willingly. I have watched Father do this with his human many times. They

seemed to last much longer, but the fact that she did this on her own puzzles me. Like a youngling, I was struck completely speechless afterwards. She pressed her small body against my own, even with our differences, but I will remember that moment for all time.

EVEN IN MY WEAKENED STATE, my shaft moved when I felt the heat of her core pressed against mine. When RaZ took her out of my arms, comforting her before the injection, it took everything I had not to attack him and yank her out of his arms.

I SHAKE my head at these irrational thoughts. I should be concentrating on regaining my strength, not the small female who has been nothing but trouble from the moment she landed in my arms.

THE SHUTTLE PULLS UP CLOSE to my location and I push myself up on unsteady legs. I start forward when the ramp lowers. RaZ flies by, Ember held close to his body. I have to grit my teeth at the odd feeling of jealousy that flows suddenly through me. *I should've been the one to pack her to safety, but no... My big brother had to save the day...including me.*

JUMPING, I hit the ramp, and the shuttle sways under my weight. I'm still weak, but the sun's rays helped pull the worst of it out of me. The shuttle ramp closes and we bank hard as the pilot turns us sharply back towards the Scientific sector.

MOVING TOWARDS THE VOICES, I stop abruptly when I see Ember hanging limply in Father's arms. Rushing to her side, I pull her from him.

“WHAT THE FRACK HAPPENED? She was fine moments ago.” Holding her close with one arm, I brush her long red hair out of her face.

HUGO IS the one who finally answers me. “We can’t decide if she passed out from all her injuries, or if it was his ugly face. She stared up at your father like she was looking at a god and promptly fainted.”

I SHAKE HER LIGHTLY. “EMBER?”

RAZ SNAPS HIS WINGS ANGRILY. “Frack ViN, you know she can’t understand you. All she is hearing is growls. Bring her over here and lay her down.”

I SHAKE MY HEAD NO. “I’ll hold her until we land, but can one of you get the rest of this wrap off me?”

FATHER WALKS OVER, motioning me to turn around. The moment the wrap loosens, small rocks fall out all over the floor. I bend slightly, looking down at them. “Are those lava crystals?”

RAZ KICKS the one closest to him away. “Ember was digging them out of the walls, placing them against your skin, trying to warm you up when I found you. Her quick thinking probably saved your life. Look at her fingers. You will see the damage she did to herself trying to save you.”

PICKING HER TINY HAND UP, I cringe at the sight. They are covered in burns and blisters. Her whole body is riddled with

multiple cuts and bruises. I close my eyes. Never have I felt as worthless as I do right now.

FATHER PUTS his large hand on my shoulder, looking down at her. “ViN, we will land shortly. You did the best you could under the circumstances. She is alive, and that’s all that matters. AMI will have her fixed up in no time. You will find out quickly these females are tougher on the inside than their soft skin is on the outside. She will have marks, but she will heal. Come, sit down, you’re trembling. Both of you’ve been through a trial, and I’ll wait until you have seen a healer before having you debrief me on what happened.”

SLIDING DOWN THE WALL, I prop her up against me, my head laying on top of hers, zoned out as the others talk around us. The pilot sets the shuttle down so softly I don’t even notice it until they are all standing in front of me.

RAZ REACHES down to take Ember from me, and I snarl. For a split second, I could’ve sworn I saw fire engulf my hand, but when I blink, it is gone. He stands above me, a smirk on his face. Father and him both reach down, and grab my forearm, pulling me to my feet while I still hold her in my arms.

I HAVEN’T TAKEN two steps down the ramp. That a small dark-haired human female emerges from the compound running towards us. Hugo lifts her into the air like a youngling before pulling her close, kissing her gently before sitting her back down.

HER EYES GET large when she sees Ember in my arms. “Oh, forgive me. This is wonderful. I didn’t realize you had actually found someone. Please, follow me. AMI, we have incoming; prepare a full body scan, please.”

“I’M SITTING the equipment up now, Miya.”

RAZ’S VOICE has me looking back. “Looks like my job is done here. If you’ll excuse me, I have a mate awaiting me back home. ViN, I’ll contact you later this rising.”

“RAZ!” He turns back around. “Thank you... for saving me... us. I won’t forget this, ever.”

“I KNOW you won’t because I’m going to spend the rest of my days reminding you of it every time you try to get out of family gatherings. Go get healed up and enjoy your female.”

“UGGHHH, now that I know this, you should’ve left me in the cave, and she isn’t my female.”

“GO AHEAD and lie to yourself, brother, if it makes it easier,” he yells back before I hear the door slide behind him.

MALE LAUGHTER ECHOES throughout the room. I can’t stop the small smile on my face as I turn back around to follow Hugo’s female through the corridors.

“HERE, lay her down, then help me get this...thing off her so AMI can scan her injuries correctly.”

I PULL my knife off my belt and cut the hide at her shoulders so we can slide it off and from under her more easily.

“Wow, this thing stinks. There is no way she enjoyed that being wrapped around her. AMI, send me a disposal unit immediately. This thing is nauseating.”

“IT WAS ALL I could provide at the time, and she was freezing.”

“I’M NOT KNOCKING your methods, ViN. Your name is ViN, right?”

“CORRECT, THIS IS EMBER.”

“I DON’T SEE a translator in her ear. How were you able to communicate?”

“WE DIDN’T.” A shiver wracks my body and I have to grab the side of the bed in order to keep from falling.

“HUGO, DaR, get your asses in here!”

THEY BOTH COME RUNNING into the room. “Get him in a bed immediately.”

“I’M FINE. She needs you worse than I do.”

“MAYBE SO, big guy, but in here, AMI and I are the bosses and you’re in just as bad a shape as she is. Get in that other bed willingly or I’ll have them put you in one. AMI can multitask, so you are not taking away from her to heal yourself. Since most of your wounds look superficial, you will be back on

your feet in no time. Even without the scans, I know she is going to be here for a while. You need to take care of yourself. Your female will need your strength when she awakens.”

“SHE IS NOT MINE.”

“OH, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t just assume. You just seemed to care about her. I’m sorry I read more into it.”

FATHER MOTIONS for me to get on the bed and I climb up into it, groaning at its softness. Within moments of laying down, red beams start running up and down my body and the bed begins to heat up. Large lights from above lower their heat, penetrating the cold that feels like it has seeped into my very bones. I glance over toward Ember, watching as multiple arms clean and stitch together her different injuries.

SHE LOOKS SO small laying there with all those tubes and arms surrounding her in that large bed. For one second, I allow myself to want more, but then I remind myself that I have no need for a female, nor anything to offer her, so I turn away from the temptation. A warm mist blows across my face and I feel my body start to relax. Sleep pulls me under, no matter how hard I resist.

FATHER SMILES as he looks down at me. “It won’t do you any good to fight it, son. When the gods set your path, you have to walk it, regardless.”

MY LAST THOUGHTS before I slip away are troubled. *Is he talking about fighting sleep or the attraction I suddenly have for the little female?*

CHAPTER 18

VIN



E mber

The lack of pain and the sound of someone humming wakes me up gradually. I hesitate to open my eyes because the last time didn't work out so well for me. A soft gentle hand pushes my hair away from my face and I open my eyes, shocked to see another human.

“HI, AMI told me you should be waking up anytime now. How are you feeling? I'm Miya, and just so you know, you're safe.”

“UGHH, hi, thank god... you're human. Finally, I dreamed up someone familiar. The fear I felt made me scared to open my eyes.”

“I SEE you're still at that... *I'm dreaming* stage. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I'm real.”

“OH, well, it was nice while it lasted.” Stretching out, I wiggle my toes and move my shoulder around, amazed to be only slightly sore. Lifting the sheet, I smile up at her, tears in my eyes. “No more rat suit! What a shame; I was beginning to get attached to that thing.” I put my hand over my mouth, making myself stop the sobs trying to get out. “Sorry, it's just so nice

to be clean and not in misery. I'm Ember, by the way. I don't know who cleaned me up, but thank you so much for your kindness." Looking around. "Since you're real, I should ask. Where is ViN?"

"EMBER, you're welcome, and it's nice to meet you. You are going to have thousands of questions, and I will try my best to answer everything I can. ViN and the others brought you in. Then AMI and I immediately got to work patching you up. ViN and you both were in bad shape, but besides a few fresh scars, you should feel a thousand percent better. Now, if you really were getting attached to your stinky dress, I can see if AMI hasn't destroyed it yet."

HER LAUGHTER HAS ME SMILING. "It's going to be hard to let it go, but I don't want to put you out any." Glancing around the room, I notice the other bed in the room.

"IF YOU ARE LOOKING for ViN, AMI released him a little bit ago. He came over and checked on you before leaving to meet with his father. DaR isn't the most patient guy out there, and he wanted to know what happened to you guys down in those caves. I don't know how much you remember, but the big gray guy with the black things dancing on his arms. That's dear old Dad."

"NO WAY? He didn't look much older than ViN or RaZ."

"GIRL, it's just us in here. You don't have to hold back with me. Every female in existence recognizes the raw sexuality that man projects just by being in the same room. I swear he has the face of a god and the personality to match. I think my heart still flutters slightly every time he walks into a room. My own mate is just as extreme in looks and personality. That seems like one thing all these guys have in common."

“HOW DID YOU GET HERE? And who is AMI?”

“OH, forgive me, I take it for granted, everyone knows. AMI is our medical AI. She takes care of everything in the Scientific Center and she is a wonderful friend. You will meet several like her that go out of their way to enhance our way of life. As of right now, don't be shocked if any of these three SAGE, SCOUT, or ANDI pop in at any time. AMI, come say hi.”

THE ROBOTIC ARMS that were hanging above my bed suddenly recessed into the ceiling and a large eye peers around the corner, coming my way slowly. “Hello Mistress Ember, I hope my appearance isn't too alarming. Your race wasn't as advanced as we currently are and I make some uneasy. It has been a pleasure watching you heal, and I'm thankful I had the knowledge to provide for your care. Just so you know, I am programmed to respond to you throughout the facility, so if there is anything you may need, please just say my name.”

I LOOK up at Miya and then back at the weird eyeball thing. “Ughh, thank you, and yes, you were not what I was expecting when I asked who AMI was, but I appreciate everything you did for me. I will always remember your kindness.”

THE LARGE EYE blinks before turning away. “I will let you girls continue your conversation. There are some tasks I have to attend to.”

THE EYEBALL and the arms all disappear into the ceiling and the room once again is quiet. “I almost freaked out when she... that popped into the room. Did you feel the same?”

“YES AND NO, I had been told I was going to wake up in unfamiliar territory and my eyes were messed up so bad when I came out of hibernation that I couldn’t see the figures behind the voices. Hugo was the one who found me, and between him and AMI, they nursed me back to health. I won’t lie to you. It hasn’t been easy and there are days I still feel lost. We will probably always go through that now and again.

“THERE ARE ONLY a few of us left now that Earth is gone, and we have to be more careful than some of the other females, or races, I should say. One thing all of us had to learn about ourselves is we will adapt. I was lucky in the circumstances that I was found, and even though I miss my family and the familiarity of Earth, I’m happy. If you are open minded, you will find happiness here too.”

“SO YOU WERE IN A POD, TOO?”

“YEAH, my dad was one of the scientists who put the entire program together. He was told that if he stayed, he would be promised a pod. Two days before the scheduled launch. They came to him, telling him they had given my pod away to a senator’s son, and that they were sorry. That didn’t stop my dad. To make a long story short, he stole the one I was in. I was lucky I survived, but I did, and here we are.

“UNFORTUNATELY, because of our rarity, we’ve become a commodity that some want to possess, but it’s not all doom in gloom, even though everything is different now. Our numbers keep growing and that is a blessing in itself. If things hadn’t happened the way they had. I would’ve never met Hugo, and even though I lost my parents and everything I ever loved. I can’t imagine my life without him.

“KIRA, DaR’s mate, and several of the other girls were going to come down when I told them you were found, but I told them to give you a couple of days to get your feet under ya. They were ecstatic. It gives us hope that more of us will be found and not all was lost. ViN will help you adjust quicker than anything. Nothing like a set of muscular arms to pull you through when all seems lost.”

I LOOK AWAY FROM HER. “I don’t believe he feels that way about me, or that he will want me around, but I appreciate you trying to make me more comfortable. He was able to understand me the whole time we were trapped down there, but I couldn’t understand him. It made things much harder. Even without words, there was no missing what a burden I was to him. He always kept me at arm’s length if you know what I mean. Back on earth, his consistent cold shoulder would’ve been a sure sign to leave him alone, and that he wasn’t interested. Is Earth...is it really gone?”

“RIGHT NOW, you need to concentrate on healing. There is plenty of time to talk about what we left behind. You will be happy to know AMI inserted a translator behind your ear while you were in healing stasis, so now you will be able to understand him and all the others.” She raises her dark curls up. “Look, it’s just like mine. Sometimes their words don’t translate just right, but you will figure that out quickly. Once you guys are able to talk, it will help. I’m sure you just misunderstood some of the things he was trying to do. He spotted your pod right after I was brought here. I was shocked he found you alive, especially since you landed so long ago. He has been out there looking for some time.”

“HAVE ANY OTHERS BEEN FOUND? My parents were supposed to be with me. I was told they would be launched later.”

“I DON’T KNOW ALL the specifics, but one of DaR’s sons was sent on a mission to see if he could locate any other pods floating in the outer quadrant where mine was originally found. You have been the first one found in another pod besides myself, but don’t lose hope. They just started looking. There is a chance your parents and many others are out there somewhere.

“LISTEN TO ME RAMBLING ON. You must be hungry. I’ll be right back. I can’t promise it will taste the same as it did at home, but I’m getting pretty good with this food replicator.”

MIYA WALKS OFF, her dark curls bouncing with every step. Reaching up, I rub my temples as a massive headache is headed my way. This is when I hear his voice outside the room I’m in. Before I think about what I’m doing, I scramble out of bed, heading toward the growl I know belongs to ViN. The door slides open silently as I walk forward barefoot, my feet not making a sound. His words to stop me dead.

CHAPTER 19

VIN



When the darkness comes and there are no others around, I catch myself looking over at Ember constantly. Cleaned up, she is practically unrecognizable. I start to ask AMI why she hadn't cleaned off the small dots that marred her pale cheeks, but I don't want them to think I care.

AFTER WHAT FEELS LIKE FOREVER, AMI finally gives me the go-ahead to get out of bed. I don't realize Miya is in the room when I approach Ember hesitantly. She seems so small laying in a bed made for things much larger than herself. A voice jerks me out of this trance.

"SHE SHOULD WAKE up in a few hours."

I BACK AWAY, resisting the urge to touch her one last time. "Is she healing properly?"

"YEAH, just slower. Us humans weren't constructed with your alien super healing genes."

A FEMALE COMPUTER voice comes over the room. "Master ViN, your father is requesting your presence in the adjoining room."

I TURN AWAY, refusing to give the female a second thought. Ember is in safe hands now and is healing, so my job here is done. I grit my teeth as I make myself walk out of the room.

FATHER IS in a deep discussion with Hugo when I walk in. When I hesitate, he grabs me, grasping me tightly for a moment before pushing me back. “Son, you look much better. I take it the heat rays helped.”

“YES, they were miracle workers, Father. I feel more like myself. It’s been half a rising since the last chill left my system. Thank you... for sending RaZ after me. I wouldn’t have made it much longer in those conditions.” Those words leave a nasty taste in my mouth. I hate speaking of my failures.

FATHER SHAKES HIS HEAD. “Nonsense. I believe your little female would have found a way. RaZ said she was determined to get you out of there. Even as damaged as she was, she kept you alive long enough for us to retrieve you, and I will personally thank her for that later.”

I GROWL out harsher than I need to, aggravated that they all assumed I should simply make her mine because of the circumstances. “I wish everyone would quit saying that! She is not my female. I’ve no use for one, especially one such as her. That female is nothing more than a spoiled, ignorant, ungrateful child.”

“VIN.”

“LORD OF LIGHT, help any male that gets cursed with her every rising, as there is no pleasing her. No matter how hard I tried, she went out of her way to make everything harder than it needed to be.”

“VIN.”

FATHER KEEPS TRYING TO INTERRUPT, and I can tell he is getting angry, but I am on a roll. “I would have been out of that cavern and safe had I not had to pamper her ungracious species. If she was the last female alive, I would throw myself into the darkness of space and let it suck out my soul. That would be less painful than being in her presence any longer.”

“VIN! ENOUGH!”

FATHER’S EYES ARE RED, and his runes are pulsing. I rarely see him this way and I wonder what has made him react this way until I hear her behind me. I turn and my heart hits hard against my chest. Standing there with her hand pressed against her mouth is Ember. She has tears in her eyes because she has heard every word I just said. I take a single step towards her, only to catch myself. She turns away, but not before I see tears flowing down her cheeks. Snarling, I turn away. “I will send you a detailed report once I return to my post on the Destroyer, Father, if you have no objections.”

HE SHAKES HIS HEAD, and this is the first time in my life I have seen my father look at one of his own like he is me right now. I believe the only thing saving me from a good thrashing is the fact that I’m his son. “You’ve brought shame upon yourself and this family, VIN. I raised you to be a better male than you just showed the world. Get out of my sight until you can quit acting like a complete dick.”

I GLANCE OVER AT HUGO, who has been standing here with his massive arms crossed, watching all this time. By the snarl on his face, he doesn't have any better of an opinion of me at the moment. I turn to head out of the room, not realizing I am going to walk past her in the med bay. Her sobs tear at me as I walk past, but I refuse to look at her. I stumble steps from the exit. My heart demands me to stop and make this right, but my mind pushes me on.

I'VE nothing to offer her and no use for a needy female or that's what I tell myself as I exit the building heading towards the spaceport and the first flight off this planet. No matter how quickly I walk, I can't escape the sound of her sobs or the look on her face.

EVERYONE MOVES QUICKLY out of my path as I stride forward. Anger pulses through my system. *How did I become the bad guy? She wouldn't be alive right now if not for me and now I'm the dick! Frack all of them.*

FEMALES... turmoil is all they're good for. If this is what awaits me planetside, then I welcome the icy darkness of space. I hit my comm unit. "EvO, I will be rejoining you shortly."

"BROTHER, it's good to hear your voice. I will send our new coordinates to your comm. I will meet you in the lounge upon your arrival with two large Brytos in hand."

"THAT'S the best thing I've heard in awhile."

CHAPTER 20

EMBER



Curled up in the blankets, the feeling of Miya gently rubbing my back only makes me cry harder. There are voices in the room all around me, but I don't care. My mind is all over the place. ViN's words were not unexpected, but it was the way he said them that hurt the most. I wish I could blame it on this translator, that the words I heard were not the ones he spoke, but I know I'm lying to myself.

MY WHOLE WORLD has been turned on its end and I'm lost. I didn't realize how hard I had leaned on him until he walked out of the room, not even looking back. His are not the first unkind words I have heard in my lifetime, but they penetrated much deeper.

WHAT DID I expect out of him? In the back of my mind, maybe... I was dreaming, secretly, of the unconventional fairytale. Something I would've read in one of the many romance books I've always had lying around, but I never could have imagined this outcome.

GOD KNOWS I wanted to scream for him not to leave me when he walked by, but I refused to say the words. The pressure on my chest worsens as reality hits me hard. I had been so focused on surviving these last days that I didn't take the time to comprehend anything else. What am I going to do? I'm on

an alien planet, with no money, no skills, and no family. I might as well be an orphan no one wants, and I have never felt so alone.

MIYA IS BEING KIND, but they won't keep me here long. The dreams of my childhood had been molded by my parents and our standing in society. *Who am I?* A doll you can dress up and show off, only to be put back in the box when no longer needed? Is that what my life had been up to this point? Was I always just my father's daughter, a face with no name... or worth... other than my last name? *God, I am so confused.*

RIGHT NOW, I wouldn't mind being put back in the box of ignorance. Especially if I thought I could hear my father's voice one last time. I know he never dreamed of this reality for me or he would've prepared me better. *Or am I just telling myself that?* None of us had any idea what lay ahead when father paid for our passages in those pods. If he was right beside me, things would be no different.

I CAN SEE VIN's strangely beautiful face staring down at me in contempt in my mind. How many times could I tell he wanted to leave me? If I am completely honest with myself, I don't have the right to be angry or hurt. If he hadn't been there, I would have died at the hands of those mud aliens. I don't know at what point; I started seeing him as something more, but I did.

NO MATTER how hard I try, the tears won't stop. Suddenly, a cool mist blows in my face, and I welcome the instant silence.

CHAPTER 21

DAR



I walk into the med chamber, only to hear Miya tell AMI to sedate our newest female because her vitals were going all over the place. She looks up at me, shaking her head.

“SORRY, DaR, I know you wanted to speak to her, but damn, I could have punched ViN myself when he walked out of here. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone cry like that. She was tearing my heart out.”

HUGO WALKS OVER, pulling Miya into his arms, her face tucked into his chest. There is no missing how upset everyone in the room is, and it’s taking all of my willpower not to track ViN down and remind him of his manners.

“AMI, how long will she be out?”

“THE REST OF THE RISING, Commander; her body needs to heal and the state of one’s mind plays a large part in that healing process. If she awakens under duress, I will put her back under once again.”

“I UNDERSTAND, AMI. I never foresaw this issue, and I’m not sure how to deal with it either. Kira is awaiting me back home

and I'm torn on how to proceed."

MIYA LIFTS her head off Hugo's chest, looking over at me. "DaR, you don't need to stay. She is welcome to remain here with us. She is going to need time to adjust to everything that has happened to her.

"OUR CIRCUMSTANCES on how we both arrived here are very different. She asked me if her parents were found, so she didn't expect to wake up alone. She looks vaguely familiar to me, but I can't place her right off. If her family was coming with her, then they were well-to-do. Whereas my father stole my pod."

I RUN a hand through my hair, aggravated... that I'm aggravated. "Miya, please let me know when she awakens. I would like to thank her personally for the part she played in saving ViN's life, even if I would like to thrash his ass right now. Kira and I will need to discuss how to handle this further, and I'm sure she will want to meet her personally. Did she inform you of her given name?"

"HER FIRST NAME IS EMBER. I didn't think to ask further. I'm sure ANDI can find out more if need be. Actually, that might not be a bad idea all around. AMI, can you connect me with ANDI? I need a favor."

"TRYING TO CONNECT NOW."

"I WILL RETURN to Darverius and will be in touch." Hugo nods and I walk out of the room, heading towards my personal shuttle docked at the spaceport. The emotions projected by the newest female were hard to block, but it wasn't my place to

comfort her. An unattached human female under my protection is something I've not had to deal with before. It may be wise to bring her to Darverius so I can protect her better. I believe ViN cares more than he wants her, or any other to know, but I cannot force a bond if one is not willing.

THE LITTLE FEMALE will be overwhelmed when the rest of my sons realize she is unattached. She isn't the beauty my Kira is, but her features are unique. The thought of my Kira has me smiling and I walk faster as I'm ready to be home with my mate.

CHAPTER 22

EMBER



“Mistress Ember, you can open your eyes. I know you are awake.”

I PULL the covers up over my face, only to hear someone giggle.

“YOU MIGHT AS WELL COME ON OUT. I think I may have just the thing to cheer you up.”

“UNLESS YOU COME with a rewind button, I’m not sure I will ever feel happy again.”

“HAPPINESS IS A STATE OF MIND, Mistress Ember. Let me assure you by the end of this rising I will get a smile out of you. I’ve made it my personal goal for this day.”

PULLING THE BLANKETS DOWN HESITANTLY. “Wow, what are you? And where in the gods’ name am I now?”

SHE TWIRLS AROUND AND CURTSEYS. “I’m SAGE...I have a technical name, of course, but none of that matters. I promise we will become the best of friends. As for where you are.

Master Hugo brought you here this rising because Miya thought you would be more comfortable waking up in a normal setting than in the med room. No one likes those rooms.

“HOWEVER, I have some superb news to share with you. AMI was able to remove most of the scar tissue that had formed over your wounds while you were under this last time. She said the one on your shoulder was still slightly visible, but that it will fade in time. Still, if its appearance bothers you too greatly, I will get you some skin makeup to cover it until it fades. Worst case, we can discuss it with Kira and see if we can sneak you into one of the medical healing chambers.”

“I HAVE HEARD the name Kira several times now. Was she found too?”

“IN A SENSE, yes, and then no. Kira’s story differs greatly from your own. Each of you have been brought to us under different circumstances. Kira has been here the longest, and she is my best friend. I’m sure you will hear all about her and the others in due time. Kira is also Commander’s DaR’s mate. I wasn’t sure if you were aware of that.”

“YOU MEAN the big gray guy, ViN’s father?”

“YEP, THE VERY ONE.”

“SHE MUST BE one hell of a woman or possess a powerful sense of worth. I would worry every time he was out of my sight. I can’t believe he doesn’t fight the females off. He was scarily beautiful.”

“I HAVE BEEN TOLD that multiple times, and although I try to look at him in the same manner, I simply cannot see the beauty that you all do. Now, my SCOUT... Whoooo, that’s a male that gets the circuits moving.” I can’t stop laughing when she starts fanning her face.

“SEE, I made you laugh, now my rising is complete. Come on, let’s get you up and moving. You’ve a new world to explore and I’m just the holo girl to show you around. The bathing chamber is through that door there to your right and it should have everything you may need. Are you ready for some substance? I was told you haven’t eaten since you arrived.”

JUST THEN, my stomach growls, and she laughs, hovering right in front of me. I slowly swing my legs over the side of the bed and stick my finger out, trying to see if she is real. Giggling again, she disappears before I can touch her. Only to pop back up a few feet away.

“EVERYONE WANTS TO DO THAT, and it tickles. Go refresh yourself. I went ahead and ordered your breakfast. It should be here shortly. I will wait out here for you. I brought with me a change of clothes and a toothbrush to hold you over temporarily this rising.”

STANDING UP SLOWLY, I test out my legs and feet, thankful to feel like my old self again. I stop the moment I walk into what I’m assuming is the bathroom. Things are slightly different, but not to the point that I’m unable to figure them out. The first thing noticeable is the sunken bathtub in the floor. I’m half tempted to get in, but I’ve laid around long enough.

BRUSHING MY TEETH, I turn towards the pale yellow sundress with matching panties laying on the counter. I pick it up, and out of habit, the first thing I do is look for the tag to see what

brand it is, only to find nothing. Pulling the dress up to my chest, I close my eyes. Tears form behind them, but I refuse to let them fall. *How do I stop being me?* I'm cried out, and I am done feeling sorry for myself. I slip the dress on, surprised at how well it fits. Smoothing my hands down the soft fabric. I slide on a pair of simple sandals and walk out of the room. "Thank you, SAGE, the dress fits surprisingly well."

"I WOULD HOPE SO, as I'm the one who sent CIP your measurements. There will be a holo comm brought in with your breakfast, for you to order your new wardrobe. This device has plenty of options for you to pick from, unless you would like to design them yourself. There isn't much he can't make and if you need help with designs or layering, we always can contact Alana or Victoria depending on your preferred styles. I love watching you girls decide what you prefer to wear from day to day. As you can see, I'm wearing a new dress myself today."

"THE CUT on that one is very flattering, SAGE."

"I DOWNLOADED the latest files ANDI was able to restore from Earth and there was an entire section on designing for your body type. The nice thing about my body is I can shift it around the dress, versus designing the dress around my body. The girls here had to be made slightly larger to hold this top up, but I think I may leave them like this. I caught SCOUT looking at them several times, this rising."

"I TAKE it SCOUT is similar to you?"

"THAT'S another yes and no. He is substantially more intense and loves to play hard to get. I've been trying to wear him down for risings now, but he is finally coming around. I stared

up at those angles on Solanar for Orbital rotations before he finally noticed me, but the wait was worth it.”

THE DOOR SLIDES open and a small robot-looking thing with a tray in its hands comes through it, sits the tray on a low table, and hovers back out.

“I ORDERED a little bit of everything. Why don’t you sit while I talk?”

SHRUGGING, I sit down. SAGE waves her hand and the lids just disappear. The sight of what looks like scrambled eggs and pancakes has me tearing up again, but I hide it by grabbing the drink closest to me. My eyes get big after the first sip. “You have coffee?”

“YES, and no. I’ve said that a lot, haven’t I? It seems that things are the same, but different for each of us. Kira calls that drink alien coffee, but it appears to be a drink that all of you prefer in the mornings back home. I’m going to give you some background on where you are, and some other stuff I think you should know. I have learned quickly that knowledge calms the mind, and it seems to help you adjust quicker to your surroundings. You’ve been thrown into an environment where you have no knowledge of what’s good or bad, and your mind doesn’t cope well in those environments.

“OH, and Miya just contacted me, saying she will be here shortly. She is working on something personal for you as we speak, but I hope that by the time this conversation is over, you will understand that you can call on me for anything. I may not be flesh, but my entire goal is to keep you safe and happy. Ok, I’ll get right to it... Between bites, can you tell me your full name?”

“PARIS EMBER WAYNE.”

“DO YOU PREFER PARIS OR EMBER?”

“EMBER PLEASE.”

“THAT’S WHAT ANDI SAID, but I like to double-check these things. Your pod crashed into Targres Four. It’s a large moon that circles a gas giant in our solar system. Targres Four is divided into four sectors. All of them are under a different jurisdiction, and each has its own set of rules. This is similar to your countries back home. In our universe, there are hundreds of settled and atmospheric planets. You are going to see things...beings... you can’t imagine. However, because of your mark, you are under the protection of the House of DaR and most will not mess with him or his sons.”

“WHAT MARK? I WAS MARKED?”

“RAISE YOUR RIGHT ARM UP, PLEASE.”

I PUT the fork down and raise my arm, but nothing is there. SAGE immediately looks confused. “I know Commander DaR gave the command for you to be marked, but I can’t find the order. It doesn’t matter. I will talk to him as soon as we’re done and get that taken care of. We will need to keep you close until this is done.

“ANYWAY, where was I? Ohhh ok,... right at this moment Commander DaR has the Destroyer. That’s one of the main defensive ships protecting this sector, looking for more of

these pods that your kind sent you out in. We are optimistic that more humans will be recovered, but so far none have been picked up.

“YOU ARE CURRENTLY RESIDING in the Scientific Sector of Targres, which is governed by Miya and Hugo, but you have other options if you decide this place is not to your liking. Several others are on Darverius where my main dwelling is located and also on Falcor, Darverius’ battle cruiser. I can only assume that you feel very alone right now, but I promise you are not, as you will meet the other females soon. Kira has already contacted them all and they are working on an exact day to come here to meet you. One thing you females have in common is they’ve all been where you are right now.”

A KNOCK on the door has Miya sticking her head in. “SAGE is she...? Oh sorry, I didn’t see you. Good morning Ember, you look a lot better today.”

“GOOD MORNING AND, yeah, I feel better.” I point at SAGE, then wave my hand up and down her compact figure.

“SHE IS SOMETHING, isn’t she? Wouldn’t you love to have had her back home?”

“I WILL SAY I’ve enjoyed her company immensely so far, and her taste in clothes isn’t bad either.”

“GIRLS, I’M RIGHT HERE.”

“SORRY, SAGE. We all take you for granted, only because we wouldn’t know what to do without ya.”

SAGE TWIRLS AROUND AGAIN PLAYFULLY. “Flattery will get you everywhere, ladies. Well, Ember, now that Miya is here, I will leave you two alone for a little while. I have several projects that need my complete attention. You girls are not the only ones with a life after work, you know. Ember, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to yell out. I will hear you. There are sensors everywhere. Miya, will you see that she knows how to order clothing from CIP before you leave? She is going to need more than a single dress quickly.”

“I’VE GOT THIS.”

SAGE THROWS US A KISS, nods and disappears.

“WOW.”

“EMBER, you are going to have a lot of wow moments. Best get prepared now. After a while, I promise, nothing will shock you. Let me go see if there is a pair of scissors in the bathroom. As soon as you get done eating, I’ll try to straighten your hair up, it looks like someone took a chunk out of one side.”

PANICKING, I run my fingers through my hair. “I didn’t even take a minute to look at my appearance before I stepped back out of the bathroom. That in itself shows how screwed up my world is. Usually, it takes me hours to get ready. Just how bad is it?”

“YOU’RE FIXABLE.”

“FIXABLE IS THE WORD, isn’t it? My nails are broken, and their polish is almost nonexistent. Now, my hair is missing huge chunks. I don’t have an ounce of makeup to cover up these damn freckles I hate so much, or the means to get any. The only thing missing now is you informing me that huge dark hairs are growing out of my chin that matches the hair on my legs. I’m a hot damn mess. No wonder ViN ran like hell.” Tears immediately form in my eyes, but I fight them off.

“STOP IT, you are not a mess. We will have you fixed back up in no time, and if a guy runs off because you have hairy legs, then good riddance. You realize you were stuck in a pod for god knows how long. The odds of you coming out of that thing looking like a beauty queen were pretty much nonexistent. All the cosmetic crap is easily fixed. It’s the other stuff that takes a while.”

“I KNOW you’re right and all of this is just physical, but my whole life has rotated in that direction. My appearance, posture, the tone of my voice, my accomplishments. It is all I’ve ever focused on, and now I’m not sure if it was because it was expected of me, or something I wanted.”

“EMBER, we are all guilty of painting the outside, only to hide that the inside is in shambles.”

“MIYA, I’m spinning around with no way to stop myself, and the sad part is... it feels like it all just happened. On day one, Dad told me we were going to leave. I didn’t really believe him until I was thrown in that pod, and then I woke up on day two with the mud aliens who were trying to sacrifice me. Here I am on day three. There is no in-between. It’s just a blur of events, one on top of the other.”

I RUB my hand down my face. “Hell, I’m still not sure if ViN was even real at this point or if I made him up, too. What I really want is for all of this to just be a bad dream and when I wake up, I’m in my room back home.”

MIYA SMILES SADLY at me as she rubs a gentle hand up and down my back. “If you’re done eating, head over to that chair. Let’s get your hair evened back out until Brittany gets here. She is the pro at this crap. I’m just hoping I can wing it enough to get by.”

I SIT down and flip my hair over the back, waiting until she comes back out of the bathroom with a brush and what I’m assuming are scissors. When she starts brushing the tangles out, I shut my eyes and listen to her calm voice.

“MY CIRCUMSTANCES WERE SLIGHTLY different from yours. My father worked at the facility that made the pods, and even though Mom and Dad kept a lot from me, I knew things were getting bad. I have shed many a tear for my friends and my parents since I got here. You will too. It’s easier to accept that you’ve been thrown into the great unknown and you are going to be lost more than on familiar ground. Our lives were torn away from us Ember and we didn’t have a say in the matter. You are allowed to be upset, but this is the new reality for you. Each day, it gets easier and harder. I had Hugo to lean on, and he helped me focus on the gift that my father gave me when I was sent away. I am truly happy here and hopefully, in time, you will be too.”

“SO WE CAN’T GO BACK?”

“I THINK it would be easier to show you than me to explain it. I had ANDI pull everything he could about you and your family’s lives and load it onto this holo comm so you could

scroll through it when you need and want to. Kira put something like this together for me and there have been many times I needed the comfort of my mother's face on the pages. There is nothing for us to go back to, Ember. Everything and everyone we've ever known is gone, and they have been for quite a while now. What feels like yesterday to us was years to others. When in doubt, you have to remember our parents loved us and that's why they did everything they could to get us to safety. There was no way for them to know what was awaiting us on the other side. I know you went through hell in those caverns, but you survived the crash and the horrors below. So, you're tougher than you think. Just keep walking forward. It really is all you can do."

"MIYA, I couldn't have done it without ViN."

"YOU DON'T KNOW that for sure, but I'm going to assume you are right. I know his words hurt you, but I don't believe for a minute he meant anything he said. If you had seen how torn up he was when he packed you into the med chamber or the fact that he wouldn't see to his own injuries until he knew AMI was healing you first. You don't do that unless you care. It seems like the tougher they are, the more they fight their inner feelings. Mine did the same thing in the beginning, but you know us earth girls, we become very determined when we want something."

"I'M NOT sure what you have with Hugo is anything like the relationship ViN and I had. For the most part, he couldn't stand me, and it was obvious. But...there were moments when I would look at him and his exquisiteness would take my breath away. He became more than an alien to me, but I don't know how to label it. I wonder if I would have attached myself to anyone at that point. Or if it was really him, I was drawn to him, even with our extreme differences. There was one time I felt like he let his walls down. I glimpsed the man inside was tortured and sad, but the walls came back up quickly and he

was back to his grouchy-ass self. When he collapsed because of the cold, I would've done anything to hear him growl again. No matter how much we would all like to have a type of happily ever after, that wasn't in the cards for me, at least with ViN. I need to find something to do and make my own way here. I simply have to figure out where to start."

"EMBER, lean up just a little. Let me brush this last part out and I think you're good to go. No one will even notice this side is slightly shorter than the other now. I'm more talented with a pair of scissors than I thought, and before I forget to tell you, the bathrooms are hiding everything you need to feel more like you, in drawers you can't see. I swear, it had to be a man who designed them because there is no way a woman would've done that. We like to see our stuff. If I take something out and lay it on the counter and walk out of the room, when I come back, it's gone. There has to be a bathroom ghost or something and in the beginning, it freaked me out. I've even tried to catch it and can't."

I CAN'T HELP but laugh at her.

"THERE IS ALSO a makeup bot that you will want to try out. It takes half the time and the colors are always perfect with whatever you're wearing. Anything you can think of is in there. I bet there is even a magical potion to get rid of that chin hair. You're so concerned about it."

WE BOTH LAUGH and her teasing lightens my heavy heart some.

"NOT TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT, but I knew I recognized you earlier. I couldn't put my finger on it when they first brought you in and it wasn't until I was looking through your comm that it clicked where I had seen you before. You were in the

tabloids because your parents owned a ton of vacation resorts.”

“YEAH, the paparazzi are brutal. They followed me everywhere, especially when I went away to school. My parents had been grooming me my whole life to take over once they retired. I had just finished college and was finishing up my first proposal on a company I wanted my father to invest in when...well, all this happened. What good is any of that going to do me here?”

“YOU WOULD BE SURPRISED, but is that something you still want to do, or is that what you were expected to do?”

SHRUGGING MY SHOULDERS. “There were parts of it I enjoyed. To be honest, I have no idea. I never had the option to think otherwise, but here I am, eating your food, while you clothed me and put a roof over my head. I have no way of repaying you. So I need to figure it out soon.”

“No, really, you don’t; that’s the last thing you need to be focusing on right now. Take my word for it. The small amount of credits you’re using are not being missed or counted. DaR is the principal commander of Darverius, and from my understanding, he is beyond wealthy. Credits have never been an issue here. If we need something, it’s ordered, and that’s the end of it. Hugo and I are not doing too bad either, so get on that clothing comm and have one hell of a good time ordering as much as you want. Because I guarantee you when Kira gets here, she will make damn sure you have a piece of everything. You should see her and Victoria’s closets. They couldn’t wear all of it in multiple lifetimes.”

SHE HANDS me the one she had set on the table. “I’m gonna leave this other one for you to look at later. The past isn’t

going anywhere, so there is no rush to subject yourself to more tears. Wait, a few days before you go through this and if you have any questions, just yell. If I don't have, the answer SAGE is your girl. There is not much she doesn't know."

I JERK when a computerized voice echoes throughout the room.

"MISTRESS MIYA, Master Hugo, needs you in the receiving bay."

"THANKS, AMI, tell him I'll be right there. Ember, feel free to explore the compound all you want. Just don't go outside the main gates. You can't miss what I'm talking about once you're outside. The bean crop here keeps me busy most of the day, but we will all have dinner together this evening unless you're not up to socializing. The place is quiet with just me and Hugo here right now, but when DaR and the others show up, the hallways are so busy we are all tripping over each other."

"THANKS, Miya, I think I'll just stay in today. I've had enough adventures to last me a lifetime. I was wondering, is there a way for me to communicate with ViN?"

"AMI, can you get a direct link to the Destroyer for Ember?"

"I can ask Falcor to forward a message or have the person this is concerning contact us directly. Communicating with the outer ships is not in my main programming."

"MIYA, it's not a big deal. I don't want to be a problem. I just wanted to say thank you."

AMI'S VOICE ANSWERS, "If that's all, I will have Falcor forward that message on. I will keep an open feed once the communication starts in case they respond."

"THANKS, AMI, there is plenty to say, but I won't."

"RELAX EMBER, I'll see ya in a few hours. AMI will let you know when it's time for supper. Just follow the lights on the floor. They will show you the way."

"THANKS," I whisper as she walks out of the door.

I PICK up both little screen things and sit down in a large lounge chair, hesitating to open either of them. If I start picking out clothes, then it means I have to admit that I'm staying here. If I open the other one, it will show me why I'm here.

SITTING them both in my lap, I stare out at nothing, allowing the tears to flow while no one is here to see them. ViN's words echo through my mind, as does the beauty of his face. I know he never wanted to be strapped down with me, but what I wouldn't do to be curled up in his lap where at least I felt safe.

MY WHOLE LIFE was planned out, and now I'm adrift with no land in sight. I can't pick up the phone and call my mom or send a text to a friend. I will never walk hand in hand with my dad to an event or shop for the perfect gift for the man who had everything. In my heart, I know they meant well when they decided to send me away and now I wonder if they knew they were not going and he just told me all that so I wouldn't put up a fight. So many questions and no one to answer them.

I CAN'T GO BACK and I don't know how to go forward.

THE TEARS WON'T CEASE, even though I'm tired of crying. I wonder if I will ever be whole again or always feel like the hollow shell I do right now.

CHAPTER 23

VIN



“Thank you.”

THAT’S IT, NOT ANOTHER FRACKIN’ word. Why did she even waste her time sending that message? I’ve started to respond half a dozen times, but what do I say to that? Oh, I have plenty I would like to say, but I don’t believe it’s anything she wants to hear.

I’M A WEAK, cowardly male who practically ran out of that compound trying to get away from her and the feelings she stirred up inside of me. So why am I allowing those two words to bother me when what I said was much worse?

I HAVE no need nor use for a female, especially one as needy as she is. Then I question myself on how many more times I am going to tell myself that same thing over and over. The words that spewed out of my mouth haunt me, along with the look on her face, when I turned, only to find her standing behind me.

I WONDER how she is doing, and then curse myself for thinking about her. A shiver moves through my body and I snarl as I lie in my room under the heat lamps. Rolling over in the bed, I

stare out the porthole at the distant stars carpeting the dark sky and wonder where her world once was in all this.

THE DREAM I had last darkness haunts my mind this rising. Ember is laughing, spinning her arms around in circles as she ran through a grassy field. The suns' rays glisten through her long red hair that is flying all around. I pick her up, holding her slight form above me as she blesses me with one of those rare smiles. When I awakened, I could still feel her slight weight in my arms.

I HAVEN'T LEFT this room in the last two risings. I can't seem to figure out what to do next. The door chimes and EvO walks in.

“EVER HEARD of announcing yourself before you enter someone's chamber?”

“I HAVE, but I didn't figure you would answer. Do you think you could get it any hotter in here? It's a wonder the walls are not melting. I would watch that seal on the porthole if I were you. I'm not sure they were created to take such extreme temperatures from each side. Frack, quit snarling at me. You've always been a hateful ass ViN, but this is even beyond normal for you. Besides the single drink you had with me when you arrived, you have done nothing but hide in this room. The only communication I've been able to get out of you are growls. Father has commed several times and I'm running out of excuses as to what you're doing or where you're at.”

I TURN AWAY FROM HIM. “EvO, I don't even like myself right now. Why should you be any different? As for Father, I am not ready to hear what a disappointment I've become to him, so

keep stalling him. Now go away. I'm not hurting you or anyone else staying in my room."

"WHAT THE FRACK are you talking about? Father may not agree with your actions, even though he won't tell me what you said that has him so pissed off. Lord of Light knows I have asked him half a dozen times without an answer, but you are still his son and my brother. When you left for this mission, I was hoping you would find your purpose in all that heat. Instead, you've come back to me a shell of what you were."

I CAN'T LOOK at him as the words flow out. "I was unnecessarily cruel and I fear trying to protect myself simply added to the pain of another."

"So, in other words, you are normal. When cornered, ViN, most come out fighting."

"IF YOU COULD HAVE SEEN that look on her face. Rotations, I watched her struggle, saw everything that was important to her destroyed and still she smiled. But...I fear I may have taken the light away that was inside of her. That worries me more than it should. Father being disappointed just rubs it in."

"WHY DON'T you head back while you still can? If this is bothering you so bad, find an excuse and use it. I know Hugo can always use an extra set of hands down there. You could use that reason as a justification to be near her. If you care about her at all, let things develop naturally."

I JERK TO MY FEET, standing inches from my brother, pushing the claws at the ends of my fingertips into my palms to keep

from tearing him apart. “Don’t you get it?” I snarl down at him, trying to intimidate him with the few inches of height I have over him. “I couldn’t save her. We were going to die in that bitter cold. If RaZ hadn’t shown up, the rats would’ve eaten us and all you might have been lucky to find were the bones that remained. I failed her and myself.” I sling my arms out before waving a hand up and down my whole body.

“THIS FORM IS USELESS; my core is unstable and a set of hands is all I’m worth, and I’m defective. What right do I have to take a female as my own when I can’t even protect her?”

“ViN, frack that shet. Now you’re just looking for a reason, because here you are standing, alive, and so is she. It took both of you down there to keep the other one going. Neither of you left the other one, no matter how many times it might have been easier. RaZ said she fought him like a baby Suet when she thought he was going to hurt you. The fact that you’ve never been able to pull the power from your core doesn’t make you less or more, ViN. You trained harder than most of us and you know your skills are unparalleled when it comes to tracking something. You are simply coming up with any excuse available because you’re scared.”

“GET out before I forget you’re my brother.”

EVO SHAKES his head and turns away, only to stop and look back at me when the door slides open. “ViN, if you feel something for this female, don’t deny yourself or her the happiness you may be blessed with. True love is not a myth. Without it, or even the dream of one rising finding it, all of us would be spiraling down the hole of endless darkness. Don’t be you, be a bigger version of yourself and go grovel if you have to.

“I ORIGINALLY CAME to inform you that we won't be in orbit much longer. SCOUT was able to enhance the scanners and I'm going to take the Destroyer into the heart of the Nebula. I believe some of the pods are trapped in there and its mass is so thick we can't see them. Once we're inside, the ship will be locked down. If we are lucky enough to find any of the pods, we will send the bots out to retrieve them. As long as they are stable, they will remain outside the ship until we search the entire area. The gasses in the Nebula are too strong for me to open up the docks. If we had a breach, it could kill everyone on board and I won't take that chance. In other words, you will be stuck, no matter the circumstances.”

HE WALKS AWAY and I fall back on the bed, my whole body trembling no matter how high the temperature of the heat lamps in this room. I sit here with my hands in my hair, gripping it so tightly my scalp hurts. My mind is all over the place, but the one thing I know for sure is...I can't go back.



CHAPTER 24

EMBER



Finally, I break down and order a few outfits, just because I can't wear the same thing every day. Scrolling through the options, I'm not really seeing the pages in front of me. I've always enjoyed online shopping, and there is no other way of categorizing this, but it doesn't seem as important now as it always was.

WHAT WERE my parents thinking when they sent me away? They had to know I would never fit in and would have no idea how to survive wherever we landed. Was this just another thing to brag about before our world crumbled around them? I can hear it now. *We sent our daughter off-world. We just couldn't let her perish here when we had the money to save her.*

I HADN'T MADE it through more than a few screens before I shut off that other comm unit. Somehow they managed to get all my social media feeds, and it was like looking at a stranger. *Was I always that high maintenance?* I was so caught up in my thoughts that I almost fell out of the chair when AMI's voice echoed throughout the room.

"MISTRESS EMBER, forgive me. I didn't mean to startle you. If you would like to follow me, the others are awaiting you for last meal."

IF MY BELLY hadn't taken that moment to growl. I think I would've said no, but I can't hide in here forever, even though it's tempting. I walk out of the room, following the lights on the floor until a wall completely disappears in the middle of the hallway and I hear voices inside.

STEPPING IN HESITANTLY, I almost step back out when I hear Miya's voice talking to another. "Oh, here she is now Kira. Ember, come here. Quit hiding in the hallway. I want you to meet Kira."

WHEN I DON'T MOVE IMMEDIATELY, her head pops around the corner and she grabs my arm, pulling me along with her. A huge screen takes up most of the wall in front of a table lined with a few dishes.

"HELLO, Ember, I'm so happy to finally meet you. Miya has been telling me all about you. I'm Kira, by the way."

"Wow, you are beautiful. Sorry, I didn't mean to blurt that out."

A LARGE GRAY presence walks behind her and I watch as he pulls her close, kissing the top of her head.

SHE SMILES lovingly up at him before turning back to us. "Thank you for your kindness, dear. There are times I still feel like I'm looking at a stranger every time I look in a mirror, but that is a story for another day. I commed to give you guys a heads up that we will arrive in the morning. Brit, XuL, and the kids will be with us too. I know you don't feel like company,

Ember, but I promise all the hugs and support will be worth putting up with this rambunctious bunch.”

FOR ONCE, I was thankful for the training my mother had put me through on how to deal with difficult circumstances. I put on my best face and reply, “I appreciate everything you all have done for me. Not many would help or take in a complete stranger.” I have to make myself stop wringing my hands together.

“YOU SWEET, sweet child. Miya, hug her. Sadness is radiating off her and I swear I can feel it all the way here. Ember, things will get easier with every rising. Right now, everything is overwhelming. Once you sort through it all, things won’t look so grim. You are no stranger to us, either. None of us are related by blood, but we take care of our own. The moment one of ours found you, your family just expanded greatly.”

MIYA WRAPS her arms around me, and seconds later, a huge red set settles around both of us.

“CAN I get in this group hug? No one ever tells Miya to hug me? Now, I think my feelings are hurt.”

MIYA GIGGLES RIGHT before she smacks his enormous chest with her hand playfully. I can’t help but feel like I’m the third wheel here, but I appreciate the effort they are all going through to make me more comfortable.

“EMBER, this enormous, red badass is my mate, Hugo. He was one of the three who came after you and ViN.”

THE VERY SOUND of ViN's name has me looking down as I fight back the tears.

A DEEP, angry voice echoes throughout the room. "I swear I'm going to skin that male alive. Little female, please don't go leaking. Your sadness is tearing at my old heart and digging a bigger hole for my son."

THE VOICE IS COMING from the holo screen and I'm shocked to see that it's ViN's father talking to me. Black things move all over his arms and over Kira's shoulders as they both watch me from lord knows where.

"I APOLOGIZE, and please don't be mad at ViN. He did everything he could to get us out of there, no matter how much harder I made it for him. He could and probably should've left me several times, but he never did. I don't want to cause turmoil for him or your family when the only thing he did was speak his mind. Did his words upset me? Yes, but that's not the first or the last time it will happen in my life and I know that. I just wish we could've at least remained friends."

HE NODS. "Ember, I will consider your words. Try to rest this darkness as we will arrive early next rising. Hugo, Miya until then." The screen goes blank.

HUGO MOTIONS for us to head towards the table and I try not to appear shocked when he pulls Miya into his lap and starts immediately feeding her before taking a bite himself. Hesitantly, I take a few small pieces from the dishes closest to me, biting tiny pieces off each one until I find a few I like.

“EMBER, don’t pay any attention to us. Hugo hasn’t figured out that I can feed myself or that there are times I need my own dance space, so I spend a lot of time in this exact position.”

HE GRUNTS, biting her on the shoulder playfully. This is another thing that shocks me because there is nothing that says ‘play’ with me on this guy. He is terrifying as shit and I’m having to make myself not stare at his horns.

“EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT, but it’s obvious you two are happy, so don’t stop being you just because I’m here. I will try to stay out of the way as much as possible until I can find a job or a place to stay.”

HUGO LOOKS up at me mid-bite. “Miya, who said she had to get a job? Is she saying she needs credits or employment? What am I missing here?”

MIYA SIGHS LOUDLY. “Hugo, don’t get your feathers ruffled. I have told her several times that she doesn’t need to worry about money, but she was raised in a world where what you have is what you’re worth. You can’t change that way of thinking overnight.”

“I DON’T HAVE FEATHERS.”

“I’M WELL aware of that, love.”

HE LOOKS AWAY before turning his full attention back to me. “Hum, Mistress Ember, you are our guest here. I understand you may not be used to being idle and I think it’s an honorable

thing to want to work and better yourself. What is it you would prefer to do? If we can assist, we will in any way. Your happiness is important to both of us.”

“I WISH I knew because I have no idea what there is for me to do...here, but I can’t sit in that room and feel sorry for myself forever. As much as I appreciate everything you have and are doing for me, I was raised that you don’t overstay your welcome anywhere. I need something to keep my mind busy because the longer it takes me to find a purpose, the more depressed I’m going to get. I don’t want nor need the free time to think. Right now, my mind is my worst enemy, and that cave shook up my previous way of thinking.”

MIYA LOOKS at me for a minute and I can tell she wants to say more when she asks me. “What was something you enjoyed doing for your parents or at college?”

HER QUESTION PUZZLES me for a second. “The only thing I can think of is, I enjoyed planning parties and excursions for the resorts. There was always a meeting that needed coordinated or a wedding reception with a list of decorations needed for one of the many ballrooms. Many come to the resorts to do something exotic. Those trips were always fun to put together.”

MIYA TAPS her fingernails on the table. I can tell she is thinking about what I just said. “Hugo, do you have any contacts in the Vacation district that you could get a hold of that might want some help? Preferably, it would be something she could do remotely from here. It’s not safe for her to travel alone from sector to sector.”

“NEXT RISING, I will send out a few inquiries.”

PUTTING the napkin on the table, I stand up. “Hugo, Miya, thank you. If you guys will excuse me, I’m still a bit tired and I think I’ll go lie down for a while.”

I DON’T WAIT for them to say anything. I just get up and walk out of the room. *God, what a nightmare.* I need a way to support myself, but the moment they tell me the job is mine, all of this will become too real and I don’t think I’m ready for real.

MIYA APPEARS HAPPY, and so does Kira. They both seem to glow from within, and I feel... hollow. I follow the lights back to my room and flop down on the bed, hiding my face in the pillow as I scream. I must have dozed off to sleep at some point and I have no idea what wakes me up, but I’m immediately alert and wide awake.

DESPITE THE DARKNESS, I can still faintly see around the room. Nothing looks out of place and there are no noises, but now I can’t go back to sleep. I start to open the holo comm but stop right before my fingers can activate the screen. I can’t make myself deal with the images right now. What I really want to do is go outside, but I never asked if that was ok or not. “AMI?”

“YES, MISTRESS EMBER?”

“I’M sorry to disturb you, but is it safe for me to go outside? Is there a balcony or something where I could get some fresh air? I feel like the walls are closing in around me.”

“THE DARKNESS IS ALMOST OVER. If you would like to step outside, I see no harm in it. I will lead you to the main entrance of the compound. The outer fields are walled in and you are welcome to walk around wherever you please inside of them.”

SINCE I STILL HAVE MY clothes on, I just get up and walk through the doorway, following the flashing blue lights on the floor. Shocked at how many turns we take until a large door slides open and I step outside.

“MISTRESS EMBER, my sensors are weaker in the outer corridors, but there are guard bots patrolling the area at all times, so you are perfectly safe inside these walls. They have been updated with your information, so you have nothing to worry about if one approaches you.”

STEPPING out into the dusky darkness, the fresh air smells unlike anything I’ve ever smelled before, and I can’t stop the gasp that leaves me at the sight of the sky above me. A huge planet takes up most of the skyline. The clouds surrounding it almost look like they are holding it up or maybe back. “Wow, there is all the proof you need, Ember,” I say to myself.

TAKING off in no particular direction, I walk around, trying to absorb the differences surrounding me. I pass a few large gates in the wall and what looks like a landing pad for a helicopter. The bean crop I heard them talk about line the surrounding fields all around me. The first thing I notice after walking for a few minutes is the silence. There are no crickets, no frogs, not a single sound besides the surrounding wind.

WHEN I COME upon what I’m assuming is a guard bot, it scares the crap out of me. I don’t know what I had pictured in my mind when she said bot, but a square box with a gigantic

eye on top wasn't it. I expected it to ask me for my name or something, but it simply turned away from me after a few seconds.

LEANING AGAINST THE WALL, I close my eyes, struggling to still my mind. However, all I can visualize is that cave. I was convinced when those cricket spider things grabbed me that I was a goner, and I never expected to wake up again. My thoughts weren't on my parents or friends at the time, but on ViN. There were so many of them all around us. I was sure they would kill him too. Maybe that's why I stopped fighting. If he was gone, what was the point? When I woke up in his arms, things changed for me. The things that had always been so important no longer mattered.

I HOLD my hands over my ears, trying to stop the echo of his words in my mind. I didn't realize how much I had come to care for him until he walked away. I refuse to let myself dwell on it now though because I can't change a damn thing, no matter how much I wish I could.

A SQUEAKING sound has me opening my eyes, but I don't see anything around me at first. However, the closer I look, there seems like a door or maybe a gate is open a little further down from where I'm standing. I immediately start to turn back towards the compound, but then I remember AMI saying her sensors pick up everything. I'm sure if I am in any kind of danger, she would alert me.

HESITANTLY, I walk forward, and when I don't see any movement around the open door, I stick my head around the corner. Beautifully colored plants line the wall and they distract me momentarily before a dark figure appears practically out of nowhere. My heart hits my throat and I try to move back before it notices me.

I DON'T REALIZE I stepped through the doorway looking at the plants until I start to step back and I feel it close behind me. A guard bot hovers over the top of the wall and I can tell it's looking straight at me and the figure in the cloak.

LARGE, glove-covered hands push back the hood and I sigh in relief when his face is revealed. "Lord, you scared me half to death. I didn't know you guys had already landed." His face on the holo screen seemed slightly different, but we all look different on camera. "Why did you guys land outside the walls?"

HE TILTS HIS HEAD, looking at me oddly before a smile graces his beautiful face. "It was still early, and the females wanted to stop by the market before we come in, so we landed at the spaceport. I was checking a few sensors on this side before heading back to them. Unfortunately, there is no keypad on this side, so we will have to walk back to the main entrance."

"HOW DID YOU OPEN IT, THEN?"

HE LOOKS up at the guard bot and smiles. "Come, the others are sure to be on their way here by now, and the main entrance is just on the other side of these plants." He reaches out to take my hand and hesitantly I take his, not realizing he didn't answer my question. He smiles down at me, his eyes flashing silver as he turns my arm over, running his hand up to my elbow.

I TRY to pull my arm away, but he must have realized touching me like this is making me nervous. His size alone is intimidating, let alone the power I swear I can feel radiating

from his skin. “You’ve been here several risings. Where is your mark?”

IT TAKES me a second to realize what he is talking about. “It was mentioned when I first awakened by SAGE, but until you brought it up, I forgot all about it. Thankfully, it was you outside that gate or this could have turned out much worse for me.”

HE TIGHTENS his grip on my hand and begins walking swiftly away from the wall through a path that apparently only he can see. “DaR—can I call you DaR or should I put commander in front of it? I’m not exactly sure how to address you or some of the others. Can you slow down a little? These shoes were not designed for walking in this kind of area. Are you sure you know where you’re going?”

“NAMES ARE NOT important and it’s just a little further ahead. Speaking of names, what is yours again? I’ve been so busy it’s slipped my mind.”

“IT’S, EMBER.”

“YES, YES, NOW I REMEMBER.” We come around a tree and the area opens up. He turns looking at me in that odd way again. “Come here, you have something on you.”

I DON’T HESITATE to go to his side. He turns my head to the side, then brushes my hair back away from my neck. Suddenly, something stings me, and immediately, I sway on my feet.

LAUGHTER SOUNDS like it's all around me as my knees
crumble, and darkness invades my vision.

CHAPTER 25

EMBER



Slowly, I come to. Looking around, I don't recognize anything. When I try to move, I find myself strapped against a wall. Struggling, I pull at the restraints holding me in place.

"CALM YOURSELF, female, we'll have none of that. I can't have the merchandise bruised before the buyers get here." I scream when he simply appears inches in front of me.

"YOU'RE NOT DAR, ARE YOU?"

"WHAT GAVE IT AWAY? THE RESTRAINTS?"

"WHO ARE YOU? What do you want from me?"

"OH, don't take it personally. You're just a pawn in a much bigger game of revenge."

"PLEASE, LET ME GO."

“SORRY, as tempting a morsel as you are, your sale will fund my little adventures for quite some time. You see, delicate little females from Earth are highly sought after, and the moment he didn’t mark you, let’s just say you became fair game.

“I WANT to thank you for making my job much simpler when you appeared at that door. I had just managed to get it open. I planned to sneak into the compound and abduct you while the others were asleep. The fact that you walked away with me willingly, how do you humans say this...yes it was priceless. Oh, how I wish I could be in that room when they replay the footage showing all that.”

“WHO ARE YOU REALLY? How did you change your face to look like DaR?”

“CHANGE MY FACE, don’t I wish! I was cursed with this face! You honestly don’t know anything, do you? You were not even worthy enough for them to tell you about us because you were not mated to one of the chosen ones. Lord of Light, this is funny. I don’t know if I should congratulate you or pity you.”

HE RUBS a gloved hand down my cheek, and I jerk away. “It hurts, doesn’t it? To know the others were all worthy, and you were not. I understand that more than you think.”

“WHAT MAKES you think you know anything about me, or how I got here?”

“I MAKE it my business to keep up with everything going on with my father, and I pay my spies well.”

“WHO IS YOUR FATHER? Look, stop talking in riddles. I’m over people thinking I should be able to just figure shit out.”

HIS LAUGHTER ECHOES throughout the room. He picks up a piece of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers. The snarl on his face changes his features from beautiful to terrifying, instantly.

“FOR A MOMENT THERE, I contemplated keeping you for myself. Unfortunately, your plainness does nothing for me, and you don’t have to be intelligent to figure out who Daddy Dearest is. DaR is my father, along with twenty-two others. He spouts off some shet that he didn’t know about me, but that’s inconceivable; he knows everything. Or he thinks he does anyway, but that leads us to this moment. I bet he didn’t see this coming. I will admit there are a few things I don’t know. Like how you showed up all of a sudden or who brought you to the compound. Why don’t you save me the trouble and tell me?”

“I’M NOT TELLING you anything. We’re not pals here, buddy. Let me the hell out of these restraints. It’s not like I can overpower you. What’s the harm in letting me out of these?”

“UNFORTUNATELY, you are going to have to remain right where you are. I do hope you don’t have to pee soon because that’s going to make such a mess and I hate it when my toys become messy. Relax while you can; in half a rising, you will wish you were still in my company. I’ve got a feeling your new owners won’t want you for conversation.”

“WHAT MAKES you think DaR or the others even care what happens to me? I’m a stranger.”

“YOU BEING TAKEN right under their noses goes against everything he stands for. Those exact morals are what I’m counting on. I want him and hopefully a few others to come looking for you. I have a surprise awaiting their arrival and I’ve even left a few bread crumbs along the way for them to follow. If your buyers are late, you may or may not make it out of here alive, but some sacrifices need to be made.”

TEARS FLOW down my face and he wipes one off. “Don’t be sad, little one. These droplets of water will never save you. Others can’t stand the sight of tears, me...well, let’s just say they are a sight of a job well done.

“WHAT DID I originally come in here for? Oh yes, I need to make you appear...well, a little more roughed up. Now, don’t look at me like that. I’m not going to hit you.”

HE PULLS A GLOVE OFF SLOWLY, and I watch as long claws grow out of the ends of his fingertips. “Where to begin?” He slashes at my dress, nicking my skin a few times when I flinch, trying to move away. When he sees the blood, he becomes angry, pushing his full weight against me, then snarls.

“LOOK at what you’ve done, marred that perfectly pale skin of yours all for what, modesty? Females are so foolish, but so tempting at the same time.”

A WICKED SMILE forms just before he grips the top of my dress, shredding it all the way across. My breasts sting and I scream out as the cuts burn across my nipples. He stands back, looking me over as I fight against the restraints. “Much better. Not enough blood to be a turnoff, but enough skin to tempt even a saint. Such a delicate figure hidden beneath these rags.”

“YOU’RE A FUCKING MONSTER.”

“THANKS FOR THE COMPLIMENT. I strive to be so much more than what others expect of me. Now, take a deep breath and calm down. You might just enjoy the show. I’ve got a few things to go check on, don’t go anywhere.”

HIS LAUGHTER FOLLOWS as he simply fades away into a mist. I close my eyes, willing my tears to stop.

WHAT HAVE I ever done to deserve this fate?

CHAPTER 26

VIN



EvO finally forced me out of my cabin by restricting any deliveries to my room. The growling of my stomach this last rising has come to a point of discomfort and I shove my feet into the boots laying on the floor. Normally, my quarters are neat and organized, but my mind has been elsewhere. I look around at the mess and shake my head, disgusted with myself and my wallowing.

STRAIGHTENING UP MY CLOTHES, I slide on the vest EvO makes the whole crew wear, hating how it rubs against my scales as I stomp down one of the corridors. The few who pass me try to speak, but quickly turn away when I snarl at them. Grabbing the first thing I see in the mess bay. I shove it down my throat just as EvO's voice comes across the speakers.

“ATTENTION ALL PERSONNEL. We will come out of warp drive soon. As the ship drifts forward, we will start shutting the outer haul as a precaution before we enter the Nebula. It will remain closed for an unaccountable amount of time. All maintenance crews, I expect a full report within half a rising, and if anyone sees my brother, send him to the control room.”

A FEW GLANCE over at me, but I don't give them time to say anything before I head toward the main control room of the ship. The door slides open and I see EvO standing before one

of the main screens, talking to the navigator about an entrance point. He nods when he sees me, motioning for me to give him a moment.

RESTLESSLY, I pace the room behind him, waiting impatiently for him to get done. I swear I see him smirk a few times as he glances back at me. Father's face appears on the side screen just as I'm about to leave. I step out of the way so that he can't see I'm in the room.

“EvO, SCOUT was just updating me on your status. I take it you will enter the Nebula soon?”

“YES, Father. SCOUT has guaranteed me that we won't lose complete contact, but that the messages will not be real time. I did my best to talk him into staying with me here on the Destroyer, but he declined. He said he was needed back home. I think he simply didn't want to be away from SAGE for that long.”

As EvO and Father joke about the AIs. I stand off to the side, watching and waiting for Father to ask where I am as he has commed me several times and I haven't answered. Suddenly, a holo comm comes on behind his head. He turns abruptly, growling out when Hugo's face appears suddenly. “DaR, I know you are in the middle of a comm, but we are having a bit of an emergency here and I didn't have time to wait until you were done. Ember is missing.”

I'M at the control panel before I realize I even moved. I hit the main conference channel slightly too hard because it bursts apart under my hand. “What do you mean, she is missing?”

“EXACTLY THAT. Miya went to check on her when she didn’t show up for first meal, only to find her room empty. We’ve searched the inner compound, and she is nowhere to be found. AMI said she took a walk at early rising, but that she lost her on the sensors soon after. She didn’t think to notify us because it happens regularly. We are trying to get the feed up on the guard bots now, but there is some sort of interference.”

“I’M COMING.”

“VIN, WAIT A MINUTE!” I hear EvO running to keep up behind me as I sprint toward the dock. Jumping in the first shuttle, I find. I fire up the engines. He grabs my arm. “ViN, the dock is closed. You can’t get off the ship.”

“I’M GIVING you two minutes to get it part of the way open or I’m blasting my way out.”

“FRACK, you stubborn ass male. Give me a second and don’t you dare hurt my ship.” I watch as he runs to one of the gates and I can tell he is trying to override the codes that shut down the exterior. I maneuver the shuttle around, double-checking the coordinates, and ease forward. The gate moves and the second I know it’s wide enough for the shuttle to clear I launch.

I PUSH THE SHUTTLE HARD, refusing to back off even when alarms start going off that the main thruster is overheating. I patch through directly to the compound as I’m entering Targres’ atmosphere. “Hugo, I will sit down in the outer field. Is the strip open?”

“NEGATIVE VIN, your father’s shuttle is also docked in that location. It will be a tight fit, but I believe you can squeeze yours in if you bring her in slow.”

I HAVE to make myself pull back and slow my descent upon approaching. The moment the ship is settled, I trigger the ramp to lower, then jump off the end before it even hits the ground. Father and Hugo are awaiting me. I don’t give either of them time to speak. “What have you found, and where was she last seen?”

SCOUT APPEARS ABRUPTLY and I draw back, ready to hit him out of instinct until I realize who it is.

HE STEPS BACK AWAY from me. “I apologize for the sudden appearance, Master ViN. I was able to get through the scrambling device, and it is as I feared. Master DaR, you will not be happy with what I recovered.” He holds out his hand and a projection appears right in the air in front of us. Immediately, you can see Ember walking around the perimeter. Nothing looks out of place until she stops for a moment, looking up at the sky. Suddenly she jerks and I see her expression change as she walks slowly ahead. A gate is open and I watch angrily at her foolishness as she looks around the wall, only to stroll right out the gate. The scene changes and we are now watching from a different angle.

“THIS IS the feed from the guard bot.”

I SEE Ember take a couple of steps back, only for the door to close behind her. She appears scared, then suddenly relieved when another figure walks into the frame. When the being takes off his hood, we all cuss at the same time. Especially when he smiles up at the guard bot, it’s...SiN.

THE SCREEN GOES black and I'm immediately moving towards the gate I just saw, only to find it firmly shut. I push against it, only for it not to budge. "How did he get this open? And why did the Guard bot fail to fire on him?"

SCOUT APPEARS upon the wall momentarily walking around, then I hear him land on the other side. The gate clicks, swinging open slowly. Laying on the other side is a handheld cutter, and the main panel is pulled out of the wall. "This is how he opened the gate. I will have all these access points removed immediately. The Guard bot wouldn't take any action against this male, its programming had approved entrance to the compound. The bot scanned the male's face, confirming it was DaR, and moved on."

I WALK AROUND as SCOUT replaces the wires hanging out of the wall. Motioning for Father and Hugo to stay back as I walk out, tracing their steps. "She didn't even struggle."

HUGO IS the first to reply. "She didn't have any reason to. Several times, she referred to him as DaR. She did not know SiN was playing with her."

"I SHOULD'VE NEVER LEFT."

FATHER SNARLS, "At least now you realized you screwed up. Hopefully, this female won't pay too greatly for your indecisions."

I REACT to Father's words before I think about it. Grabbing him, I shove him against the wall. "Don't push me right now, Father, my fuse is already lit."

HE SMILES at me even though I have him braced roughly against the wall. I see Hugo and SCOUT both advancing on me from the corner of my eye. Father raises his hand and they both stop. I shake my head and step back, ashamed of my actions.

“FORGIVE ME, FATHER.”

“WHY? I’m proud. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen that type of fire in your eyes. You need to realize the feelings that are driving you to find and protect Ember right now are bigger than you have given them credit. I hate that her disappearance pushed you to this point, but I believe it was the only thing that would have ever made you accept they were there. Now, do what you do best, and let’s go find your girl.”

MY GIRL, until he said those words, I never pictured that, but now I know only one female will ever fill that position. Maybe all this time, I craved someone to need me.

TRACKING their steps through the overgrown foliage around the wall is easy, but then their tracks simply disappear. I walk the entire area only to find nothing. “SCOUT, can you see if there were any crafts here, or any messages sent out?”

“ONE MOMENT... An encrypted message was sent to a Jynrel ship. The only thing said was *package acquired*, but they transmitted several coordinates. I’ve sent each of them your comm units. As to how they exited this field, I cannot detect anything at this time.”

HUGO SIGHS. “You know this is a trap, right? SiN is smart, and he is leading you all in different directions for a reason.”

I PULL up the map of all the coordinates, stunned at all the locations marked. “We don’t have time to investigate these one by one. Two of them are on opposite sides of this moon. Father, I’m taking this one in the Pleasure district and I’ll work my way from there. You and Hugo start in the Vacation district and work your way towards me.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT. SiN will not be alone and you can’t take him on by yourself.”

A NEW VOICE rounds the corner. “He won’t be alone. I’ll be with him. Danny is going to stay here and watch over our females. If he had been a few years older, I would’ve sent him in my place. Especially since, right now, he has been the only one able to hold SiN, but I’m not willing to see the youngling unnecessarily hurt because of his youth. Nothing else will get through that little warrior that he can’t handle.”

I GRAB XuL in a warrior’s handshake. “Brother, it’s good to see you.” Before I can say another word. Keida vaults over the wall, landing lightly on her feet in front of us.

I GRAB her around the waist and throw her into the air, even though my heart is heavy with worry and it’s taking all my willpower to not run into the streets screaming Ember’s name. The sight of little Keida always tugs at my heart.

XuL’S VOICE has me turning back to him with her still in my arms. “Keida, return to your mother at once.”

“I WILL, Dad, but I had to tell Unka ViN something first.”

I LEAN DOWN, realizing she has grown considerably and how much of it I’ve missed while searching the desolate area. She reaches up, laying her hand on my cheek and immediately I calm down.

HER EYES TWIRL and the words that come out of her no longer sound like a child’s. “You will find peace when you look for war. The key to your female’s heart is learning that she will feel the compliments as deeply as you feel the insults. Let her fire feed yours... Break free of this wall holding you back. When the darkness is too much, you need to be real when nothing else is.”

“HOW DO I FIND HER, baby girl?”

“THE SIGNAL IS behind her ear. Follow it even in the quiet.”

I RISE, her words echoing through my soul. She motions for me to lift her back up. We all watch as she grabs onto the top of the wall and disappears over the other side.

“SCOUT, is she safely on the other side?” XuL asks.

“MISTRESS KEIDA IS RETURNING to the compound as we speak. I’m not sure how she got through that force field above the wall, though. I will have to look into it closer at a later time.”

“WHAT DID KEIDA MEAN? The signal is behind her ear?”

“MASTER VIN, I think she may be on to something. Each of our translators puts off a signal. They are all different because they calibrate to the user’s needs. If I can pinpoint a signal from one of the coordinates I pulled from the signal SiN encrypted, it would help narrow the search.”

SCOUT TURNS away from all of us, and I pace. “She doesn’t have time for us to guess. She has already been with him too long.”

FATHER PUTS his hand on my shoulder, making me look at him. “SiN isn’t going to hurt her, ViN. She is too valuable.”

“IF HE GETS her off this planet, the odds of us ever finding her again goes down greatly. SCOUT, comm me if you can narrow down the search, but I can’t simply stand here. Two of the locations are within walking distance. I’ll start there.” He nods his head before disappearing.

“HUGO and I will head to the Vacation District. It’s usually so packed, he could easily hide right out in the open.”

I TURN, running across the empty field that separates the Scientific sector from the Pleasure district, not shocked to hear XuL’s heavy steps behind me. Once we clear the main entrance, I make myself slow down as people begin noticing us walking up the main street. Several of the pleasure workers approach us and at first, I turn them away, but then an idea comes to me.

A SWEET-SMELLING COCOTE APPROACHES ME, her pink feathers combed back to show off all her hidden assets. “Hello,

handsome. You look so hot that I'm willing to lose a few feathers just to get to know you better."

XUL SNORTS BEHIND ME. All the workers know better than to approach him as his mating mark's pulse shines brightly along his skin, marking him as unavailable.

"HOW MUCH WOULD some information cost me? I'm looking for a human female."

SHE HESITATES, looking around before she slides right up to me. Motioning for me to lean down, she whispers in my ear. "Your father seems to prefer the establishment at the end of the lane. You might look there, but I've not seen him this rising."

I FLICK a coin her way and nod toward XuL to follow me.

"BROTHER, we are going to end this imposter, this rising, as he not only has my female, but he is destroying our father's good name."

"ALL YOU HAVE to do is tell me who to kill. It's been ages since I was in a good battle. I don't mind even getting scuffed up a little. The amount of attention my Brittany will bestow upon me is well worth it."

"THE DOMESTIC LIFE keeps you close to home, brother. I envy the peace I see in your eyes."

"YOU JUST WAIT, your rising is coming. One day, we will all look back on these adventures and wonder where our youth

went.”

“THEN WE BETTER MAKE THIS a good one.” We take off, jogging lightly down the street as I near the first coordinates. It’s the same building the female had just told me about.

I START in the door when XuL grabs me. “I understand, you want to barge in there and attack everything in sight, but you can’t. We don’t know if this is the place he is holding her for sure and there are innocents in this building. We don’t want to fight the guards in this area until we have to, and we need to locate her first. SiN will not hold her in plain sight, and we can’t destroy every building he gave false coordinates for. You need to distract them until I can get in the back, and can search the lower levels.”

I RUN my hands through my hair. “Frack, I hate it when you’re right.”

XuL STARTS around the corner looking for the back entrance while I go in the front. There are females of every species lying around in various stages of dress; all of them perk up when I enter. The main madam approaches me first.

“MASTER, how may we be of assistance? Do you have anything, or anyone in particular, in mind?”

WHEN SHE RUBS her hand down my chest, I hold back the revulsion I feel at her touch. “Looking for my father, he may have brought his own entertainment with him this rising.”

SHE SHAKES HER HEAD. “He has not graced us with his presence this rising, but you are welcome to look around. Is it possible that you may have the same taste in delicacies as he does? He tends to pick Melina over all the others.”

SHE MOTIONS her hand and a female Valerian stands up. Her long, dyed red hair flows down her slender, naked form, hiding as much as it shows as she walks gracefully over to me. She is quite beautiful for one of her kind and I immediately wonder how she ended up in a place like this.

“So, you are one of the many.” She walks around me slowly, running her hand softly across my back, and I feel my inner core pulse in disgust. “Come.”

I MAKE myself follow along behind her and up a narrow set of stairs. She opens one of the many doors and I follow her inside. Before she can say another word, I have her up against the wall, my hand surrounding her throat. She fights me until she realizes I have very little pressure against her.

“SO, YOU LIKE IT ROUGH, HUH?”

“HAVE you seen a human female this rising? Where would your newest additions be held until they are put on the floor?”

“THERE IS A ROOM BELOW, but it’s empty right now. No human females ever graced this establishment. The madam told your father he was not allowed to bring any of them here because of the problems that accompany them.”

“HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS?”

“I FOLLOWED him one darkness after he left my room. I’ve come to care deeply for him and was going to ask him to take me away from here when I came upon him talking to the madam. His fascination with humankind has hardened his heart towards the ones who have serviced him well all these rotations.”

IT TAKES everything in me not to inform her that she is not servicing my father, but SiN. However, I leave that fight for another day. There is a slight knock on the door and I release her, opening it slowly. XuL shakes his head no. Before I leave the room, I throw a couple of tokens on a stand and walk out.

HE MOTIONS for me to follow him and even though it’s a tight fit, we exit through a back entrance. We don’t make it two steps that SCOUT appears.

“I BELIEVE I have her location. I’ve notified your father and Hugo, but we don’t have time to wait for their assistance. There is an abandoned warehouse between the Scientific and Pleasure districts that was erased off the map of Targres Four. I didn’t log the coordinates at first because it was supposed to be an empty field. A cloaked ship just entered the atmosphere and is en route to that location as we speak. Master ViN, it’s a Jynrel pirate ship.”

SECONDS AFTER HE SAYS THIS, a flyer appears around the corner of the building, the door opening before it even powers down. SCOUT motions for us to board and before we clear the door, it’s rising above the buildings. “Hold on,” is all the warning we get before the flyer takes evasive maneuvers, flying quickly over the rooftops in the Pleasure district.

“MASTER VIN and XuL I’ve downloaded all the information I can provide into your comm units. There are additional weapons in the cargo hold, and we will be landing in less than sixty seconds. At this time, I’m counting fifteen life forces entering the building.”

“CAN you see where Ember is located?”

“NEGATIVE, the Jynrel are a smaller race and their heat signatures are so close together I can’t separate her from the others. However, the signal of her translator confirms she is here.”

SCOUT LANDS behind a small dirt mound. I jump out immediately, heading towards the building. XuL and SCOUT are beside me within two steps. I look over at SCOUT. “Where are you going?”

“WITH YOU, Master ViN. It’s time I tested my reflexes out in this new form, and you will need all the help you can get. The Jynrel are deadly.”

“BROTHER, YOU HAVE A PLAN?”

“NOPE, I plan on ripping a few heads off. Whoever makes it to Ember first, protect her with your life.”

I RIP the front door off the building and the sight before me practically has me falling to my knees. Ember is strapped to a wall at the back of the building, her dress torn so badly a single breast is bared for all to see. Bright red blood trickles down her sides and legs. One of the Jynrel is reaching up into

what is left of her dress as she struggles to get away from him. All of them are focused on her. I have already snapped the closest two's necks before they realize what is occurring.

SOMETHING PIERCES MY SIDE, and my vision turns red. Ember screams and everything around me starts moving in slow motion. I can feel my body getting larger as my core pulses so hot it feels like my insides are melting. A roar unlike I have ever heard shakes the building and, instead of them running towards me, they turn, heading away.

THE FIRE that leaves the tips of my fingers incinerates everything in my path until I'm inches from the male who has caused my female pain. I don't take the time to look at Ember after I see SCOUT put his enormous form in front of her. But her sobs and the sound of my name on her lips tears at what little restraint I have left.

"Now, little brother, let's talk this over. You know, I was just trying to get your attention. Your female looks worse than she is." He pulls a pulse gun, firing it at me multiple times. I barely feel the impact and this makes me smile when he realizes his weapon is ineffective on my new form.

HE TURNS, sprinting away from me when his form starts to dissipate. I throw everything I have at him. Fire engulfs him, and I hear a distant scream as his shadowy particles light up like embers all around his now-fading frame. As I'm chasing him out of the building, suddenly his laughter surrounds us.

STOPPING, I turn only to see SCOUT brace himself against Ember a mere second before the bright white light of an explosion throws me backward. The last thing I hear is Ember screaming my name.

CHAPTER 27

VIN



My ears are ringing and there are spots before my eyes, but I'm back up on my feet in seconds. The walls of the building have been blown away, and the roof is completely gone. In a panic, I run back to the place where I last saw Ember, fighting my way through the debris.

SCOUT LIES UNMOVING, his large body wrapped protectively around something under him. Hesitantly, I reach down, rolling him over carefully, only to see Ember curled up in a ball between his arms. Her eyes flicker open and the moment they land on me, the smile that lights up her face knocks down the remaining walls I had left around my heart.

MOVING SCOUT'S arm off of her, I reach down, pulling Ember into my arms. She clings to me, mumbling something that my ears are still having a hard time understanding from the ringing inside my head. A piece of the wall moves and I untangle her from around me, tucking her behind so that my arms are free to fight.

XUL CRAWLS out of the rubble, looking around at the damage all around us. Ember darts past me and to **SCOUT'S** side. Her small hand on his face as his form seems to be fading right in front of us.

“VIN, he isn’t responding. I felt that blast go through him like he wasn’t even real, standing in front of me. He even flickered in and out for a minute until his arms formed solid around me before we fell.”

XUL IS on SCOUT’s other side before I can even lower myself all the way to the ground that seems slightly farther than usual. He hits the comm unit on his wrist, but there is no response.

“FRACK, comms are down. Whatever that explosion was, it affected more than just this physical building. Are you two okay?”

I SHAKE my head yeah before looking over at Ember.

“OH, I’ve been much worse, just a few cuts and some bruises. I’m more worried about this big guy. He went down within seconds of that blast hitting us.”

XUL RUNS his hand all over SCOUT looking for any injuries or visual damage while telling Ember about him. “SCOUT is an AI; we’re not exactly sure how he even projects this image of what he pictures himself looking like. He isn’t real in the same way we are, but he is a valuable part of our team and our lives.”

EMBER LOOKS up at me and then back down. “This is SCOUT? Oh no, SAGE is going to be so upset.”

WE SLOWLY STRAIGHTEN up SCOUT’s colossal frame, only for his body to flicker several times before disappearing altogether.

EMBER FALLS back on her butt, a small scream leaving her lips. “What the hell just happened? Did he die or something?”

“FRACK,” XuL yells out before standing up. He hits his comm unit several times, only to hear static. “Without the comms, there is no way for us to know if he simply returned to his main processor or if it’s something much worse. We depend on these comms way too much for them to never work.”

EMBER’S DISTRESS is easy to see, so I immediately gather her back up in my arms. Rocking her gently as her tears soak the skin on my shoulder. XuL and I both try our comm units several times, but they are both showing offline.

I WATCH XU L WALK AROUND, assuring that the pirates are dead. The sound of footsteps approaching quickly has him stepping in front of me and Ember with his ax drawn.

FATHER RUNS into what’s left of the building, Hugo right on his heels. There is no missing the instant relief on his face when he sees both of us still alive and well.

PICKING HIS FOOTSTEPS CAREFULLY, he walks up to us. Ember looks up from my shoulder and I see her pull back, her body shaking slightly in my arms. I rub her back affectionately; my hand covers her entire back. She seems smaller than she did before. I will have to make sure she eats better from this point forward.

“THANK the Lord of Light you all are well. My old heart was in my throat when we landed and saw the damage to the building. I tried to get a hold of you on the comm units, but it

seems the system is offline. Our shuttle even shut down shortly after we landed.”

I LOOK DOWN AT FATHER, and he is studying me intently, frowning slightly.

“VIN, you ok? It seems you are slightly larger than normal. I don’t remember ever looking up at you.”

XUL SLAPS me on the shoulder, a huge smile on his face. “Father, you should’ve seen him. He was like an avenging god, tearing through those pirates like they were made of paper. I almost forgot to defend myself when he tossed that first fireball. The moment it touched the flesh of that pirate, he immediately turned to ash. It was the coolest thing I’ve witnessed in ages. ViN had to show off his new powers, and he incinerated half of them before I even got to swing my ax once.”

HE POINTS TOWARDS EMBER, who is still clinging to me. “I believe he might have had some incentive, though. See how much larger he is, even his scales are more defined. Looks like little brother finally was able to access his mother’s heritage after all these rotations. His runes glowed just like yours, Father. Dancing like flames all over both sides of his body. It was quite the sight.”

I PUSH EMBER AWAY, holding her by her waist, making sure my skin is not burning her, only for her to pull herself back against me, tucking her dress around her more fully. A shirt appears before me and I wiggle it over her head and her exposed chest without noticing where it comes from.

FATHER LOOKED AROUND. "I'm going to assume SiN escaped once again?"

EMBER GASPS, turning her attention towards Father. "He really wasn't you, was he?"

"No, my dear, we are definitely two different beings, but there is no denying simply by appearance alone that he is my son. Come, let's leave this place."

"YOU CAN LET me down now, Vin." Ember pushes against me and I lower her down reluctantly. She looks so small and fragile standing before me. "Thank you for coming after me once again. There is no way for me to repay your kindness." Taking her hand, she wipes her tears off my shoulder. "I'm sorry I cried all over you. I forgot my place, but I won't keep you any longer." She tugs on the shirt I put on her and walks over toward Hugo. It takes everything I have to let her go. He looks up at me, a question in his eyes before holding out his hand to help her over a piece of wall laying on the ground.

I HAVE to make myself stand still, or I would rip his hand off. She looks back at me again and I can tell she wants to say something, but stops herself before turning back away. For a split second, I start to let her go, but my arms reach out for her before she can take another step away from me.

"EMBER."

TEARS FLOW down her cheeks freely. "Put me down, ViN. Stop acting like you care. I fell for that once, and I won't do it again. I have lost enough already."

I SMACK her gently on the butt. “Stop fighting me before you fall.” Father clears his throat and motions that they are going to go on ahead.

SHE PUSHES herself back as far as my arms will allow. “Listen, ViN, you’ve no idea how grateful I am for all you have done for me. I will admit that I’ve come to care for you probably more than I should, but you don’t owe me anything. Please, my heart is in shreds and I don’t know how much more I can take.”

“WHAT HAVE I done to make you think I don’t care?”

“OH, probably saying you would rather die than be with me. I think those words made it all pretty clear.”

“EMBER.”

SHE HITS my chest with her small fist and I have to bite my cheek to keep from smiling. “Don’t you Ember me! Every word out of your mouth— Never mind... You walked out of that room and never looked back, and I know this because I watched to see if you would. You made me feel like I was completely insignificant. In this world, I’m no one important, but quit rubbing it in. Would you have even come for me this time if they hadn’t asked you to?”

“I’M HERE, AIN’T I?”

“OH, you big ass, that’s not what I’m asking.”

WHEN SHE STARTS STRUGGLING to get out of my arms, I realize I'm screwing things up all over again. Refusing to put her back down, I walk out of the debris, looking for a safe place for us to sit and talk. The moment I sit us on the ground, she scrambles out of my arms to stand in front of me with her small arms crossed over her chest defensively. Minor cuts mar the flesh on her legs, bruises line her wrists and ankles. If I ever get my hands on SiN, he will pay dearly for every mark he has put on her body.

"IT LOOKS like your father and Hugo are gone. Can you show me the way back to the compound?"

IRUN my hand through my hair, and I swear I feel my body shrinking slightly. "You scared me, Ember."

"I'M sorry I put you out. I hadn't planned on being kidnapped this quickly."

"THAT'S NOT what I meant. Yes, that terrified me too, but before at the compound, when Father cornered me about you, I simply reacted. I did not know you were behind me, and I swear I didn't mean a word I said."

SHE STARTS TO SAY SOMETHING, and I hold my hand up for her to stop.

"YOU MADE me wish for something I thought I wasn't worthy of having, nor did I know I needed. I don't know how to care for you other than providing protection. Lord of Light knows I've failed at that several times already.

“THE FEMALES where I grew up differ greatly from you. They are bigger and more aggressive. If you wanted a mate of your own, you had to fight her for the honor of mating with her. Your customs and mating rituals are unfamiliar to me, leaving me unsure of how to act around you. I still don’t.

“I AM FRACTURED, Ember. I’m part of my mother’s people, but I have the heart of my father. In my mother’s world, your skin shows your status. I didn’t even have scales for Orbital rotations and Mother was preparing to send me to Father permanently when a female of our race started showing an interest in me. Not because she found me attractive, but she knew without my scales or the internal heat of my core, I would be easily defeated. All she wanted was the honor of mating with a son of DaR.

“I HAD HARDENED my heart when I found out that female’s intentions and told myself over and over that I did not need one. Then you fell into my arms and wrecked my whole world. My mind and my heart have been fighting against each other ever since. I beg for your forgiveness.”

SHE SITS down in front of me and I reach out, grabbing her small hand rubbing my thumb across her soft skin. “What are you saying to me, ViN? I don’t take hints well.”

“IF YOU GIVE me another chance, I promise I will spend the rest of my existence proving my worth to you. The moment I walked away from you at the compound. I left the most precious gift I could’ve ever received, and I was too stubborn to see it at the time. The only thing I could think about when Hugo told me you were missing was, if I got the chance to say I was sorry, I would beg for your forgiveness. Ember, no matter what I have to do to provide the comforts you are accustomed to, I will. My goal from this moment on is your happiness.”

“YOU HURT ME!”

I HANG MY HEAD, my heart heavy with those words.

“VIN, LOOK AT ME.”

I RAISE MY HEAD, expecting to see hatred on her face. Instead, she smiles. “You don’t know the power that smile has on me, my little female. My soul reaches for you every time you bless me with one. Have mercy and stop ripping my heart out.”

“VIN, we need to get a few things clear before this goes any further. First of all, I don’t love freely. If I give you my heart and you trample on it all over again, I’m giving you fair warning that you could possibly perish in your sleep.”

“I’LL STAY vigilant at all times.”

“YOU KNOW I have no skills or anything I can bring to this relationship besides myself. So this takes on a whole other meaning to being high maintenance.”

“IT WOULD BE my honor to care and provide for you.”

“ALSO, I just got on this planet and I have only been introduced to a handful of different beings, aliens, whatever. I might just find another more appealing.” She smiles playfully up at me.

“YES... this is true and, just to warn you, no matter how many arms they may have, I will rip them all off if another dares to touch you in that way.”

“YOU REALLY KNOW how to sweet talk a girl.”

“I’M SLIGHTLY out of practice, but I’m a willing student.”

“SO, WHAT NOW?”

“I WAS THINKING of finally kissing those lips that have been driving me mad for rotations now. Then I plan on tracing those little dark specks on your skin with my tongue while showing you all the beauty my worlds have to offer you. You’ve only witnessed death and darkness, and I believe we are both in the need of a good vacation. Targres Four is the top vacation spot in this part of the sector. It would be a shame for you to be this close to all its beauty and never get to experience it.”

“WHEN YOU PUT it like that, I believe I could use a vacation about now.” Apparently, the look on my face strikes her as funny and her laughter can be heard throughout the surrounding clearing.

CHAPTER 28

EMBER



The look on ViN's face is priceless, and I will say I believe this is the first time I have ever seen him smile. The fangs peeking out behind his lips would've terrified me before. Now they're just one more thing.

HE GRABS me off the ground, and I grasp onto his thick neck quickly. "A little bit of warning next time, big guy. Do you realize you are substantially larger now than you were the last time I saw you? Have you been eating your Wheaties?"

I GET this odd look as he approaches what looks like a pill capsule. "Never mind, it's an Earth joke. Hey, that gives me an idea. I could write a book full of Earth jokes and probably make a fortune. Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

HE PLACES his hand against a panel and a ramp appears, and both of us laugh when we see his father and Hugo lounging on the inside, apparently waiting for us.

HUGO SHRUGS HIS BIG SHOULDERS. "We need a lift. We started to head back, but our shuttle isn't responding. This one seems fine, but it was further away from the building, and I think this mound of dirt protected it from that energy blast."

“HAVE EITHER of you been able to contact SCOUT? This is the shuttle he brought us here in.”

FATHER SHAKES HIS HEAD, “No, our comms aren’t working out here either. Hopefully, once we’re back at the compound, AMI can reach him. I’m not too concerned right now. I may regret that later.”

“ONCE I DROP you two off, I’m taking Ember to the Vacation district. We need a few risings to ourselves.”

“UNDERSTANDABLE, son. We will be here for several risings. Kira wants to visit with Ember, but there are plenty of things to keep her and the others busy for a few risings. You are welcome to use my suite in the Hoxton. I bought the entire top floor for privacy reasons and we won’t be using it on this trip. SAGE has a direct link to that suite, so she will be able to send clothing and other things to you quickly.”

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS NEXT SEEMS like a whirlwind and I catch myself missing parts of it as my face is glued to the window of this shuttle, looking at the sights all around us. In my mind, this is straight out of a Sci-Fi movie. Shuttles of every size and shape zoomed around in no particular order or fashion. I even caught myself ducking a few times when one would fly too close above us.

VIN HAS LAUGHED at me several times and I can’t seem to get this smile off my face. Hours before, my world was spinning on its axis and even though it still is, everything isn’t so scary now, with ViN by my side. As much as I miss my parents and the world I left behind, I’m looking forward to this new experience. I know one day in the future all of this will hit me hard and I will have to sort through all the madness I’ve been through in such a short time, but it’s not going to be today.

MULTI-COLORED buildings line the skyline in every shape and size. ViN heads toward the tallest one a little too fast. “Pull back on the stick, hit the brakes, or whatever it takes to slow this floating pill down before you slam us into that big green giant up ahead.”

“ARE YOU SIDE-SEAT DRIVING ALREADY?”

“OH, you think this is bad? Just wait until you ask me where I want to eat. You have no idea what you have gotten yourself into.”

“MAYBE NOT, little female, but I’m willing to try it all out.” He lands the shuttle on the rooftop so softly I barely feel it.

“SHOW OFF.”

THE SIDE OPENS and ViN motions for me to stay here. I unbuckle the thousand straps he wrapped around me and stand on the ramp, waiting for him to come back out. When I see him headed toward me, I start walking down, only for him to pick me back up.

“YOU WERE SUPPOSED to wait for me.”

“I’M PERFECTLY capable of walking on my own. I’ve been doing it for quite some time now, but I will say I’m beginning to get used to this type of transportation.”

“ I ENJOY HAVING you in my arms.”

“ARE you going to stay this size forever?”

“NO CLUE. I could comm my mother and ask, but we are not close.”

“SORRY TO HEAR THAT. I am, or was, closer to my father, too. My mother and I didn’t have a good relationship. To her, I was just a doll to dress up. I loved her, but she wasn’t someone I could have a heart-to-heart with.” My train of thought completely derails when we get inside. “Wow, would you look at this place? It’s amazing!”

“FATHER LIKES NICE THINGS; this is just one of many he owns like this now. He didn’t take a moment for himself before Kira came along. It does my heart good to see him finally living some.”

HE LOWERS ME DOWN. “Here is what you guys call the bathroom. Go get cleaned up and I will order us some food and see if I can get some clothes delivered. Is there anything else you might need?”

“MAYBE SOMETHING FOR THESE CUTS. Now that the adrenaline is wearing off, the ones on my chest are stinging like crazy.”

HIS EYES FLASH bright silver and I take a step back. “Chill, big guy, I’m fine. Forget I said anything.”

HE GRABS my arm gently when I turn away from him. “Sorry, the image of you strapped to that wall, and that male putting his hands on you when I came into that building, will be

forever burned into my brain. Your cuts are a reminder of my failures.”

“IF IT MAKES you feel any better, it’s all a blur to me. What I remember clearly is you tearing the door off the place and looking like an avenging Lava God coming to save the day. Which you did quite well, I would say. Those fireballs were pretty impressive, but if you still feel bad, you have plenty of time to make it up to me later. Right now, I smell and I’m in desperate need of a hot shower.”

“UGHH, I’m not sure they have a shower here. Water is rationed on Targres Four, but the Ion cleanser is amazing too and it won’t burn those cuts of yours.”

“SO, IT’S A SHOWER WITHOUT WATER.” He nods. “Well, why not? Show me how it works before you do your thing.” I turn to head into the bathroom when he stops me.

“WAIT, I know someone better suited to this job than me. SAGE. Are you available?”

I NO MORE BLINK MY eyes than she appears floating in front of us. “Hello, you two. How can I be of assistance?”

“SAGE, Thanks for coming so quickly. We need everything.”

“THAT’S A BIG ORDER, Master ViN. Let’s see if we can narrow it down a little. I can tell you both need clothing. I’m simply going to assume some nutrients wouldn’t be a bad thing, either.” She floats around me. “Mistress Ember, there are

several nasty-looking cuts on your legs. I believe I have just the thing to fix you right up.”

“VIN SAID they don’t have showers here.”

“OH, come with me, dear. Let me show you the next best thing. I promise it will be something you will use regularly. All the other females love it because it’s quick. Master ViN, there is a separate refreshing area on the other side of the room and the robe hanging on the door should be large enough to cover your frame until I can get a clothing delivery scheduled.”

VIN WINKS AT ME, and I turn away from him, following SAGE into the bathroom. “I’ve preset this unit to a temperature I believe you will enjoy. You can go ahead and undress, then get in.”

“YOU WANT me to get into the phone booth?”

SAGE LAUGHS, “That’s not the first time I have heard it called that. You will have to tell me what you think of it when you emerge. There is a smaller robe available for you also behind the door. While you are in there, I will see what I can do to get the other things delivered quickly.”

HESITANTLY, I step inside the small square and the door slides closed. A humming noise is all the warning I get before I’m surrounded by what looks like dry steam. After what seems like seconds, the door opens and I step out. Instantly, I’m amazed at how clean my body and hair feel.

WALKING OVER TO A DOOR, I grab the robe off the back. A huge mirror forms on the wall in front of me and several drawers slide out of the wall. SAGE's image seems to float inside the mirror.

“WHAT DID YOU THINK?”

“I WILL ADMIT, that was pretty cool. I'm a firm believer in a bath, but I could get used to that.”

“YOU HUMANS ARE SO DELIGHTFUL. I never know what's going to come out of your mouths. I've ordered a few things to make you more comfortable. A first aid kit, clothes, and substance should arrive momentarily. I thought I would let you know ViN is patiently pacing outside your door.”

“THANK YOU, SAGE. I'll be honest. I was glad to see you appear in such good spirits. The thought that SCOUT might be badly injured had me worried.”

“EXCUSE ME?”

“I DIDN'T THINK you would show up if he was hurt. I could tell you are very fond of him.”

“SCOUT, HURT? WHEN DID THIS OCCUR?”

“YOU DON'T KNOW?”

“EMBER, I’m trying my best to figure out what you’re talking about. Please tell me all you know quickly. The comm units went down half a rising ago and I simply assumed SCOUT was blocking me for safety reasons.”

“SCOUT GOT HURT PROTECTING me from some guy they’re calling SiN that looks just like DaR. I’m sorry, I thought you knew, or I would’ve mentioned it sooner.”

“EMBER, I have to go. Something is happening on Solanar. If you need me, it may take some time for me to reply, but I will.”

I GRAB a brush out of the drawer and head towards ViN. He is only steps away when I open the door. “SAGE didn’t know SCOUT was hurt.”

“FATHER JUST CONTACTED ME, telling me to stay put for a few risings that some of our security measures were glitching and he would like to have one less son to worry about. He is having a new comm unit sent over for me. It seems it was only ours that stopped operating. It must’ve had something to do with that energy blast SiN put off.”

“VIN, that guy is insane. The look in his eyes when he talked about your father, was intense. Did you see how he would just appear in places out of nowhere? How do you fight something like that? What has made him hate DaR and you guys so much?”

“IT’S A LONG STORY, but I believe I hurt him. The particles around his body were on fire seconds before we heard that

maniacal laughter of his.” A buzzer goes off and ViN heads towards an entrance I hadn’t noticed.

SEVERAL BOXES ARE BROUGHT in on a cart, and just as ViN goes to shut the door. Another buzzer has him opening it right back up. Small trays fly in, hovering slightly above a table before landing.

VIN CLOSES the door and walks over to the table, lifting the covers off the trays. “Ohhh, look at all of this. Remind me to tell SCOUT to give SAGE a cyber hug. She definitely takes care of us. Come on, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

“TALK about a whole new meaning for delivery.” I sit on the opposite side of him, tucking my short robe around my legs. His robe is draped open, showing off all the ridges and impressions of his chest muscles. Neither one of us says anything as we dig into the food like we haven’t eaten in weeks. I’m pleasantly surprised at how well some of the odd-colored things taste.

VIN’S GAZE keeps drifting toward me. I got so wrapped up in all the food that my robe had slipped down and part of one breast was showing. I start to pull the material back up, but decide to enjoy the way he is looking at me.

“WHEN YOU FINISH EATING, we need to treat those cuts. I don’t want a mark left on you by that male.”

“OHH, is that what you were looking at?”

HE PUTS HIS HEAD DOWN, pretending to cut up a piece of meat, and I swear I see him blush. Right then, I realize I no longer see two sides of ViN. All I notice is the male I've come to love.

HE GETS up when he sees me staring at him and motions for me to sit on one of the large couches while he opens the boxes that were delivered. Pulling out a smaller one, he comes back and sits down on the floor in front of me.

HIS LARGE HANDS dwarf the box and when I see him struggling, I take it away from him, popping the small latch on the side.

“THANK YOU. I don't believe these hands were crafted to handle things this tiny. Hold your arm out. I'm told you won't feel a thing. Originally, I was going to wait until we were back at the compound and have AMI do this, but I'm not taking the chance with us being here and the comm units down. If you happen to get separated from me, this gives you funds to get back and protection if I can't.”

HE PULLS my arm all the way out, then turns it over carefully. “Wait a minute, what are you doing exactly? I thought this was a portable healing machine or something like AMI.”

“No, this machine shows the entire universe where you belong. It's my father's mark, the mark of The House of DaR. I will explain how he got this honor later, but I want to do this quickly so I can start treating your wounds.”

“AND YOU'RE okay with me being marked permanently? That SiN guy told me only a few were chosen to get this. He was

enjoying the fact I wasn't marked. Even though I still don't completely understand it myself."

VIN RUNS his hand along the inside of my arm. "Ember, I want you tied to me in any way I can. We have lots to learn about each other and I'm sure there will be risings you will want to push me out into the voids of space, but that's just part of being a couple. I won't walk away from you again, no matter how hard it gets."

"VIN, my emotional state is like a rollercoaster ride. I lost my home, family, you, but here we are. My mind tells me to stop. There are too many things that could go wrong. However, my heart says go for it, you have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain. Well, I think you have already experienced me at my worst. The girl I was when I got here is not who I am now. The lessons that cave taught me were hard, but I'm a better person now because of it. If you're willing to give us your all, then I am, too. Do your thing with that little machine and let's hope that we don't kill each other in the years to come."

HE PLACES it firmly against my skin. There is a slight pinch and my arm gets hot for a couple of seconds, but never to the point it is uncomfortable. VIN watches me intensely, trying to judge my reactions. A small beep goes off and he lifts it away slowly before rubbing his hand down what looks like a really neat tattoo.

WHEN HE LETS GO. I twist my arm around, amazed at the intricate design. "It's quite pretty. Let me see yours. Do they match?"

HE HOLDS his massive arm up to my small one. Both symbols are exactly the same and this makes my heart hit my chest

hard. I believe this means a lot more than I fully understand right now, but it's nice to feel like I belong.

VIN PULLS out some sort of cream from another box. He starts at my feet, working his way up. No matter how small the injury, he lathers it on heavily. The warmth of his large hands is playing havoc on my senses and small chill bumps form all along my calves.

HE LOOKS up at me suddenly. "Are you in pain?"

I GIGGLE. "No, it's a normal reaction to your touch."

"THIS REACTION HAS RAISED several of your dark spots. I have rubbed them several times, but they won't come off your skin."

I REACH DOWN, pointing at my leg. "Are you talking about my freckles?"

"FRECKLE, I don't know this word."

"OF ALL THE things in this universe that you could wonder about, it would be the one thing I have always hated about my pale skin. The sun leaves its mark on me easily, especially if I get burned."

"YOUR SUN WAS SO close it would burn your skin?"

“UGH, no, that’s not the case at all. My pale skin doesn’t tan, or should I say my body doesn’t like the harsh rays. If I forget to put sunscreen on, these marks appear. Some will go away, but most want to stay. All the ones I have now I got when I was little and not a care in the world. I’m lucky they’re not worse because so many with my hair color are covered.”

“FASCINATING.”

“IF YOU SAY SO, BIG GUY.”

CHAPTER 29

VIN



Touching her like this and seeing my family's mark on her is testing my hard-earned control. Even sitting on the floor below her while applying this cream, it's hard to hide the massive erection I have right now. The robe she is wearing parts a little more every time I adjust her leg, and the temptation to rip it off her beguiling body is almost too much temptation to bear.

THE SILKEN TEXTURE of her skin against my hands makes me want to rub my head against her like a Suet in heat. I find everything about her fascinating, and I intend to explore every luscious inch of her multiple times tonight. I held her in my arms in that cave night after night, yet I feel like I'm seeing her for the first time. She's sprawled out on the couch, allowing me to tend to her injuries with a level of trust that shakes me to my core.

I CAN TELL by the way she is biting her lower lip that she's trying not to squirm as I apply the healing cream to each cut, no matter how small, with infinite gentle thoroughness. She has finally laid back amongst the various pillows, gazing at me with heavy-lidded eyes and shallow, panting breaths.

WHEN I ADJUST the robe to treat a cut higher on her thigh, the sight before me robs me of breath. There is a small thatch of

red curls hiding her feminine treasures. I allow the back of my hand to brush against her dewy folds, shocked by the amount of moisture I find there. When Ember doesn't immediately move away from me, I tempt fate and do it again. The soft, throaty moan she emits is a reward I savor like a starving male devouring his first taste of food.

AS I PART the robe she's wearing the rest of the way, I bare her body to my lustful gaze. Her firm, supple breasts beg for my attention as my mouth waters for the first taste of her cool, air-hardened nipples. The peaked tips beckon to my mouth. My large, rough hands span her small waist as I pull her towards me. My robe parts, exposing my nakedness fully, just as her core straddles my hardened shaft.

"YOU HAPPY TO SEE ME, big guy, or is that a gun in your pocket?"

I MUST HAVE HAD an odd look on my face.

"APPARENTLY, I'm the only one getting these Earth jokes."

I RUB my throbbing shaft against her and she lets her head fall back, grinding her wet center against me shamelessly as she shoves her breast in my face. The wounds that mar her delicate flesh infuriate me and I hear myself growl; my rage reignited by the physical reminders etched into her flesh.

"Now, none of that. The girls here need your attention, and I swear I can feel your hands getting warmer. Don't make me beg for it, ViN. Make me yours."

HER BODY TREMBLES under my touch as I run my hands gently up her slender back. I allow them to circle her neck, trail down her collarbones, and cup her breast firmly in each hand. Using my hold on her beautiful breast, I apply pressure, urging her without words to lean back against the side of the couch. I can no longer ignore the temptation and I run my long, forked tongue around her nipple, gently tugging it as I knead and roll the other one between the tips of my fingers. A gasp leaves her throat that causes me to glance up from the tasty treat I have in my mouth. I find her looking at me with a small, secretive smile on her face.

RELEASING her nipple from the confines of my hot mouth, I pull her close, allowing my mouth to claim hers for the first time. I had planned on taking this slow, but the taste of her sweet mouth and the smell of her arousal destroys what little control I have left. My lips ravage hers as my tongue demands access to what's mine.

SHE DESPERATELY GRASPS MY HAIR, pulling me closer as I grab her by the throat to move her head to a more accessible angle. I keep nipping and sucking at her lips until I figure out what my little human likes best. Her small hands cling to my shoulders, her little human claws scratch at my skin as my other hand maps the peaks and valleys of her lush little body.

AS I PULL AWAY, I nuzzle her throat and allow my fangs to lengthen. The base instinct to taste her is beating at me unmercifully. This is something I have never felt the pull to do before. Even scraping them as gently as I am capable of, a small drop of her blood wells to the surface and the ambrosial taste of it hardens my shaft further. My scales flutter with the sensation of dancing flames floating along my skin. This unfamiliar sensation does nothing but build the more I feast upon my lovely little human Ember. Her name is apt as she stokes a fire deep within me that will never be extinguished.

THE MUSCLES under my skin feel like they're stretching. It's like I'm wearing a suit that's too small and I'm ready to burst from the seams. My shaft pulses and for a moment, I wonder if we will even fit together. She is so much smaller than I am, but if my brothers can make it work, so can I. Kissing my way down her body, I lift her gently as I run my tongue between her breasts and down to her beguiling, little belly button.

SHE GIGGLES, trying to squirm away, and I grasp her firm butt cheeks in both hands, holding her still and at the mercy of my explorations. As I sink lower, the smell of her arousal makes me weep with pre-cum. It's preparing itself to ravage her tight little slit. Her folds glisten, beckoning me to taste them. I run a finger through them, slowly gathering her natural essence, bringing it up to my mouth for my first taste of her. At the sight of me tasting her, Ember whimpers.

“LET ME PLEASE YOU, EMBER.”

THE HEATED LOOK on her face as she gazes back at me from her luminescent green eyes obliterates the last of my resistance. I gently lay her back on the couch, my heart full to the point of bursting with the trust she is bestowing upon me right now. Gripping her thighs, I push them wide open and toss her limber legs over my shoulder with wild abandon.

MY LIPS PRESS to her right thigh, crawling up to her channel with light, teasing kisses. I bypass the tempting morsel between her thighs to apply the same teasing torture to the left thigh. I continue my teasing journey from thigh to thigh, allowing the anticipation to build within my precious Ember. With a self-satisfied smirk, I make my way to the treasure trove before me. Exhaling, my breath moving over her folds, and she lifts her hips, whimpering in desperate need. With one

hand on her stomach, I keep her from moving while I ease forward. Rubbing my face in her natural essence, my body absorbs it like she is the brightest sun in the universe. My core pulses roughly as my body aches for its own release.

SWIPING my tongue from the bottom of her soaking wet folds to the top, where her clit has emerged from its hiding place, causes her to emit a sharp cry. Her hips are grinding against my face as she desperately seeks out more of the pleasure. I am forcing her body to feel. Circling her hardened pleasure nub, my forked tongue wraps around it with one part of my tongue on each side of her clit, fully engulfing it in the textured confines of my sinuous tongue. At the same time, I slowly insert two thick fingers inside of her, stretching her tiny body to accept mine as I plunge them in and out of her tight channel. Every time she gets too close to peaking, I pull back, only to fill her once again, adding another finger into her channel each time I do so. By the time I've added a fourth finger, her body is finally ready to take my throbbing member.

HER BODY STARTS to tremble violently under my hands the quicker I flick her delicious little nub. She grabs my head, forcing me harder into her wetness, and I lick and suck on her like a starved male, using my unique tongue to torture her clit in a manner she's never experienced before. My other hand reaches up, pinching her hardened nipples as her body tightens around the fingers that I've been mercilessly pumping in and out of her in a slow, steady rhythm.

HER BODY ARCHES with the force of her crest as she screams out my name. A wave of her pleasure hits me, causing my eyes to fall close in euphoric joy. Her climax feeds my core unlike anything I have ever felt before. Pulling my fingers out, I suck her essence from them as I slowly allow her body to come down from this crest long enough for me to make my way back up her sweat-covered frame. I lick and nip at her soft skin before settling my weight over the top of her delectable

body. My shaft is so hard I'm having a hard time not plunging it inside of her.

TAKING MYSELF IN HAND, I rub the head of my shaft up and down her dewy fold, gathering copious amounts of her slick to ease my entrance into her tight channel. I slowly insert the head of my shaft into the tight confines of her body. Her body is trying to allow mine entrance but still resist even though her body eagerly took four of my fingers. My shaft is larger still. I feel her body tensing beneath me with only the head of my shaft within her. I twist us around, sitting on the couch while I pull her astride me.

HER PALE SKIN is slightly red in places where I have tightly gripped her. I caress her skin, loving the feel of it under my rough hands. She wiggles, taking a little more of me, while I reach between us, rubbing her point of pleasure before pulling her lips back to mine.

I CONCENTRATE on kissing her this time, fighting the urge to slam her body down on mine so my shaft is seated as deep within her body as I can possibly get. Even though it's complete torture, I refuse to rush this. Her body is slowly relaxing as I sip at her lips and massage the delicate pearl between her legs. Ember breaks our kiss and smiles at me before recapturing my lower lip between her teeth as her body finally submits and allows my shaft full entrance into her body. Tiny tremors pulse within her tight channel, massaging my shaft in a manner I've never felt before. This pulsating sensation tightens and relaxes the grip her channel has on my shaft in a mind-numbing cadence, causing me to almost spill within her prematurely, like a youngling.

SHE SLOWLY LIFTS HERSELF UP, only to slide back down my shaft in the same leisurely manner. Our combined juices ease the acceptance of my body into hers. I become consumed with

watching her reactions and the sounds of her moans with each thrust. Her long red hair teases the tops of my legs when she tilts her head back, baring her throat to my hungry gaze, eyes closed as she rides me, seeking her pleasure.

GRABBING her hips with both hands, I brace her body against mine as I thrust in and out of her with increasingly rapid strokes. My core starts to pulse as I feel her body tighten around mine. I scream out her name as my release, almost painful in its intensity, leaves my body. My hands pull her hips viciously into my pelvis as I empty myself fully inside her tight channel while she simultaneously reaches her own world-shattering crest.

AS EMBER LAYS limply against me, she tucks her head under my chin. Our breathing is labored and my entire body is tingling. I open my eyes after a moment, only to find Ember's skin changing right in front of me.

SMALL FLAMES LICK across her skin and dance underneath crimson runes running down the length of her left side. I pick her arm up, fascinated as they curl in elaborate details all the way to the tips of each finger. I have never seen another kind take on the markings of my kind. Is that what this is? Have I harmed her in some way? When I go to move, she whines.

“EMBER, DO YOU FEEL OK?”

“I THINK I'M DEAD. Just leave me here. I'm finally enjoying this part of the dream if I am in a coma.”

HER WORDS CALM my racing heart and I decide as long as she isn't hurting or actively complaining, we will deal with this

next rising. I can't stop the laughter that bubbles up out of me as I hug her tight, enjoying her slight weight lying upon me while my slowly softening shaft still resides inside of her. There's never been a time in my life when I've felt this complete. I send a small prayer out, thanking the Lord of Light for allowing her to fall into my arms.

I PULL her around in front of me and lay us both down on the couch together. Tucking her against me, I slide a leg in between her thighs, maneuvering her body into the ideal comfortable position. Her breaths even out quickly and I know she has drifted off to sleep. My exhaustion pulls at me as I allow myself to fully relax for the first time in rotations.

CHAPTER 30

EMBER



A wakening to the overwhelming sensations of a full bladder and boob sweat. I struggle to untangle myself from the snuggle ViN has me trapped within. I strategically aim my elbow in ViN's stomach to get him to release me, since wiggling around isn't doing the trick. ViN grunts a few times but finally loosens his hold enough for me to slip out.

DOING the little girl pee-pee dance, I squirm my way into the bathroom. Enjoying the fact that my body is sore in all the right places, I yawn, trying to shrug off the remaining traces of sleepy drowsiness clinging to my mind like cobwebs.

AS I FINISH up on the space age toilet, I notice how sticky I feel. The combination of sweat and bodily fluids is a bit too much for me to ignore. Just as I reach to open the door to the magic shower, a large body looms over me from behind. I can't stop giggling as he playfully nips along my neck. His large fingers tickle up and down my sides as I try to squirm away. Crowding in behind me, ViN hits a button inside the small booth and the area fills up with steam, somewhat similar to a sauna I frequented on Earth. Facing the wall, I brace my hands against it, allowing my head to fall forward, as I grind my bare ass against his enormous erection, teasingly.

VIN EMITS a low growl in response. He grabs my hips, kicks my legs apart, and pins my hands against the wall above my head. His hands are so large it only takes one to hold me easily in place as he uses the other one to explore me at will. Closing my eyes, I bask in the attention as he runs his free hand all over me. His deliciously, wicked and talented fingers slip around to pinch my nipples. This fans my desire higher and I lift my hips slightly. This allows ViN to notch his erection between my thighs and I rub myself back against him shamelessly. My slick soaks both of us and I crave the feeling of him utterly possessing my body in wild abandon again.

“FRACK, Ember, you test a male’s restraint. Are you sore, baby? I wasn’t exactly easy on you last darkness.”

I TRY TO TURN, but he has me thoroughly pinned in place. I groan as he lifts me the remaining distance he needs for his shaft to part my folds. His colossal body is tense behind me as he fights the urge to thrust inside me in one long, decisive stroke.

“I WON’T BREAK, ViN. Make love to me.”

I DON’T GET the last word out of my mouth before the beast behind me comes unwound.

“MINE!”

HE BELLOWS out right before thrusting his massive shaft into my needy, grasping channel. Impaling me in one stroke, he uses the grip his free hand has on my hip to force my ass into his groin. This motion, combined with the upward jut of his hips, lifts my feet off the floor. The way he is holding me, I am

completely at his mercy. I am enveloped by him. My body to do with as he so chooses. My pleasure is his, and this is his way of showing me that he owns my body and pleasure. As if the marathon of sex from last night didn't solidify that fact. ViN is hammering at my g-spot in this position. I can feel my body tightening as my release builds in my lower pelvis. My release finally explodes across my senses and I scream out my pleasure until my voice is hoarse. Quickly, he has made me a slave to only the pleasure he can provide.

I SAG INTO THE WALL, exhausted, as his large frame absorbs mine from behind. He reaches around with that sneaky free hand to pinch my pleasure nub, which causes my overly sensitive body to tremble. He's still buried deep within me and picks up a steady, thrusting pace with renewed vigor. A hoarse, almost broken scream leaves my throat when he bites down viciously on the side of my neck; his fangs slide into the soft skin easily. It only takes an instant for the desire-laden saliva he injected into me to hit me. It engulfs my body with a wave of pure, unadulterated heat and lust. My second climax hits me so hard I can see spots swimming in the air in front of me.

MY ARMS FALL LIMPLY to my sides. His hands grip both of my hips tighter as he releases the hold his fangs have on my neck. The sensation of his fangs sliding from my skin causes his shaft to pulsate inside of me as his release hits him with the force of an asteroid. Hot jets of his release fill my core. I am completely spent, my body sagging weakly. The only thing holding me upright is his still hard shaft tunneled deep within my channel and his hips, now gently cradling my ass. After a few heartbeats, he pulls out of me and I can feel his seed dripping down my thighs as his long, sinuous, forked tongue licks my shoulder. When I manage to open my eyes, I blink a few times, not trusting them.

“ViN, are you seeing what I am?”

“OH, yeah, and I’m enjoying the view immensely.”

“STOP IT, I’m being serious. Look!” I hold my arms out.
“Should I be worried?”

“DO I LOOK CONCERNED?”

HE TURNS ME AROUND QUICKLY, pulling me close, the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on him now gracing his lips. He hits the button again and I tilt my head back as the steam seems to clean away our newest mess. My body tingles all over as it feels like something is dancing underneath my skin.

THE SECOND IT BEEPS, he picks me up, that smile never leaving his lips, only to sit me in front of a vast mirror. Standing behind me, he dwarfs my slight frame. When he runs a hand down my side, the marks get brighter, almost like they are chasing after him.

DARK RED SWIRLS line one whole side of my body, curling around my arms, legs, and all the way up my neck, ending or beginning where he bit me. I run my hand hesitantly down my arm. I know my eyes are huge, as I watch what looks like fire dancing behind these elaborate designs that have appeared overnight on my skin. When I move my hand away, they lighten back up. I’m not sure how to feel about this.

“VIN, WHAT ARE THESE?”

“THEY ARE CALLED RUNES. They are a gift from my father’s side. These show the universe you are mine. Seeing them form

on your skin after I bit you for the first time was a shock to me. I've never heard of another race taking on the mating marks of my mother's people. At no point in my life did I envision ever having such a special bond with another. We have so much to learn about each other, but these link us in this life and the next. I don't understand the how's or why's that some couples are blessed with these and others are not. I refused up until now to let myself dream of something I believed I would never have because of my mixed heritage. My heart has never felt so full.

“EMBER, I come from a race that frowns upon breeding outside their own kind. My mother's family practically disowned her for taking the seed of my father, even knowing the status it would give them. She never let me forget what she sacrificed for her people, either.”

“VIN, I don't understand what you just said. I take it your mom and dad hooking up was against the rules?”

“FORGIVE ME. I forget you know nothing about me or any of my brothers. To make a long story short, there is a lottery all the commanders have to enter into. Their seed is raffled off and whoever wins is injected with my father's or another commander's essence. That's why neither me nor any of my brothers look anything alike. We are all from different planets and mothers, each of us unique or freakish in our own way. Bearing the child of a commander is a great honor. It protects and provides for the child and the mother for their existence. It was originally started to help those worlds who were having a hard time conceiving. The commanders are the strongest of their race and the scientist believed their essence would strengthen the weaker species.

“SOME OF THE mothers have a relationship with the commanders, but my mother only saw it as part of her duty

because our race is slowly dying out. As far as I know, she never spoke to father more than a handful of times. The moment I was old enough to leave for training, she sent me off gladly. Then took a mate of her own choosing. She has never conceived again.

“I ALWAYS KNEW she was ashamed of me because I wasn’t a pure-blood like her. As a youngling, I didn’t understand her indifference to me and craved the attention my father gave me and the others. So, leaving her to live with them all full time was not a hardship for me. Especially after I watched the others with their mothers. I stopped trying to stay in contact with her rotations ago.”

I TURN in his arms tracing his marks, slowly fascinated that mine seem to react the same as his. “These are permanent?”

“A SOUL BOND can’t be broken, even in death.”

HE REACHES up to my shoulder and I pull away from his touch as the skin seems overly tender where the lava scarred me. Glancing over, I look up at him, then back again. Small scales seem to be growing out of my skin, covering the scar completely.

“OH MY GOD... are those scales? Will I look as you do before long? It’s not that I’m complaining or anything. I’m just trying to understand what’s happening to me and fighting the urge to freak completely out.”

“No, you won’t look like me. I don’t think it works that way. Right now, this seems to be the only place my scales have formed on you. It may be for some type of protection. I truly

don't know. I will have to ask Grandfather. He will have the answer if no one else does."

RUNNING my hands all over him, I take my time admiring ViN's body. I've felt it under my hands but have never seen it with my own eyes as he is now. Looking at him is like peering at two unique entities living in the same space. My hands run over his arms, amazed at the different textures of each side. One side is firm and slick, while the other is hard and textured. His whole body is like two sculptures merged together.

"WE WILL COME BACK to my marks in a moment and I don't want you to take this wrong, but I'm assuming your scaled side you take after your mother? If you are uncomfortable talking about it, that's fine. I'm just trying to learn more about you."

"MY SCALES MARK me as Vinzel. They evolved in an atmosphere of scorching suns and volcanos. My scales protect me from the elements as my inner core absorbs the radiation the suns put off because of their close orbit of our planet. My father's genes fought for dominance in the womb and this is what happened. As far as I know, I'm one of a kind."

"VIN, you're beautiful. I could stare at you for hours. You're nothing short of a miracle. You've been taught, or brought up, to believe something else, but they are wrong. Your god created you perfectly, despite the possibility of being born with disabilities or disfigurement. Your mother should've been grateful for every breath you were given. Not bitter because you were not the same as all the others."

I GENTLY TRACE the indentions of his waist with the tips of my fingers, his shaft hardening the more I pet him. Leaning, I run my hands across the back of his legs and down to his ankles.

Leaning in like this, my face is rubbing against his erection. Sliding my hands back up his body, I slowly grasp his firm, meaty ass cheeks in both my hands.

I FINALLY STOP TORTURING both of us and take his impressive shaft in hand, marveling at how each side intertwines into this massive shaft. He sucks in a breath as his hips twitch to the sensation of me tracing the small scales that rise slightly off the bright orange skin underneath. They circle the mushroom-shaped head, beckoning me to taste it. I glance up and smile a secret feminine smile when I see ViN gritting his teeth as my small, soft hands slowly stroke his straining member. Hot pre cum glistens out of his slit the more I tease him. It's thicker than I expected it to be but it's not a deterrent for what I have in mind.

I'M pleased to feel his skin is still hot to the touch, even though we have been inside, adding my other hand. I stroke him again harder, working them up and down his shaft firmer. "Why are you not cold right now?"

"I CAN'T THINK with you doing that."

"OH, I CAN STOP." I act like I'm going to move my hands away and he grips both of mine in one of his, grasping them tighter against his shaft, showing me how he likes to be touched.

THROUGH GRITTED TEETH, he grinds out. "Don't stop Ember. I'm close, baby. Your climaxes are feeding my core. Every time I bring you pleasure. My body absorbs the energy like a junky. No other heat will ever fill the hole inside of me now. I crave the feeling of you inside of me."

HE MOVES both of my hands under his more vigorously as his hips snap back and forth, using my hands to stroke his pleasure higher and higher.

“YOU MEAN we could’ve been doing this the whole time? If we had known this in the cave, we could have lit that place up.”

HE IS PRACTICALLY PANTING, his huge legs braced hard as his release starts to crest. “I was in denial... didn’t deserve the pleasure you are granting me with your tiny hands right now.”

I EXTEND my tongue and lick the head of his shaft. The taste of cinnamon explodes across my tongue and I know that I will quickly become addicted to the taste of him. I lean down and engulf the crown of his shaft in my mouth and he roars out his release. I swallow rapidly, my jaw stretched as far as it can go, desperate not to waste a drop of the delicious cinnamon treat I’ve discovered. Suppling my tongue around his shaft here, I stroke ViN slowly, allowing him to enjoy the aftershocks I see dancing under his luminescent skin. He takes a deep breath before picking me up and walking us back into the Ion shower. “I think I understand why everyone likes these things so well. We are going to wear this one out at this rate.”

THE DOOR HAD JUST OPENED when I hear another beep. “Take your time and get dressed. That’s Father dinging my new comm unit.” I shake my head yes and he kisses me on the forehead before heading into the other room.

“YOU DO REALIZE you’re naked, right?” Teasingly, I yell out.

I CAN HEAR him cussing playfully in the other room and shake my head, amazed at how quickly things have changed between us. I've never experienced this level of comfort with anyone before. It's like we've been together forever and it's all new at the same time.

WALKING BACK over to the mirror, I take the time to look at the marks all over me. As much as those damn freckles bothered me, you would think I would be livid about these, but they are unique and oddly beautiful. Their coloring matches my hair perfectly, and the swirling underneath them is mesmerizing. A couple of times, I could've sworn I felt his emotions. I have so much to figure out, but instead of dreading it all. It'll be interesting to see where our lives take us.

I GRAB a pair of leggings and a long t-shirt out of the closet leaving off my bra and panties as I've got a feeling this outfit won't be on long and head into the other room only to find ViN sitting out on a balcony moving his hands up and down, playing with a fireball. It jumps from one hand to the other, back, and forth.

“WHATCHA DOIN’?”

“EMBER, I have never been able to do this. My core was never strong enough to create fire with a single thought. I was so envious of the other younglings, practicing with the power of their inner core when I was younger. No matter how hard I tried, I was always too cold. It made me an outcast quickly, and I became bitter and angry over it. I prayed to the Lord of Light for rotations to make me whole.

“I DOUBTED he could hear my prayers many times. However, he proved me wrong. He did, just not in the way I imagined. When I had given up all hope. He set me on a journey that

tested my strengths and my weaknesses, then placed my mate in my arms. He gave me everything I ever wanted, and I almost lost it all.”

ViN LOOKS over at me and I can see the pain and the love he has for me in his eyes.

I RUN my hand down his smooth cheek and nudge his legs open to sit on his lap. When I finally get settled, I gaze out over the balcony. “My goodness, would you look at that view? This place is amazing.” Neither one of us say anything for a while. We just sit here together enjoying the view and quiet comfort of each other.

“WHAT DID YOUR FATHER WANT?”

“HE WANTED to tell me that we could head back to the compound. There has been no sign of SiN anywhere and that’s a good and bad thing. However, we are not in any rush to go yet. We can stay as long as you would like.”

“DON’T TEMPT ME, but ViN, they come here to see us. It would be rude to keep them waiting long.”

“EMBER, you will learn quickly. I don’t share well with others.”

I CAN’T HELP but smile at the face he is giving me right now. “You know grumpy alien lava god isn’t a bad look on you at all.”

GROWLING, he stands up quickly, throwing me over his shoulder as he turns back inside. Laughing, he smacks my ass playfully as I squirm, trying to get down. Flipping me over quickly, he throws me onto one of the big couches, his body landing lightly on top of me, pinning me down. I run my fingers through his thick dark hair and he reaches over, kissing the inside of my wrist. He looks at me like he has never seen me before.

“EMBER, I have no words for what I’m feeling right now.”

“I UNDERSTAND, ViN. I love you too.”

“I DON’T KNOW this word, love, but I promise I will do everything in my power to be worthy of it even if it takes me the rest of my life span. I will strive to erase the hurts I have stained your heart with. You will never doubt my affections again.”

CHAPTER 31

EMBER



Hours later, we reluctantly leave this little piece of heaven and head back to the compound. I hesitate when the ramp lowers down. The last day had been magical, and I am scared for a second that the moment I step out of this shuttle, it will all end.

VIN WATCHES me from the bottom of the ramp, and he must've noticed me stopping. Holding his hand out for me, I take it in mine, closing my eyes, drawing strength from him.

WHEN I OPEN THEM, there is a creature standing in front of me that looks unworldly in her beauty. She can't be ten, possibly twelve years old, but her eyes look much older. Pink swirls stare back at me, a small smile on her face as she watches me cling to ViN. She reaches a small green hand towards me, and I take it without a second thought. ViN releases me, but she never lets go of my hand. "Ember, this is my niece, Keida."

I'M dumbstruck by the child. She is vibrant and so full of life. I want to hug her and run from her all at the same time. I am so focused on her that I don't see the young man standing behind her until ViN starts talking to him.

VIN MOVES AWAY SLIGHTLY, but the child doesn't release my hand. I swear it's like she is peering into my very soul. When she speaks, her words are soft and un-childlike, like something is talking through her.

“YOU ARE UNLIKE THE OTHERS, but I do not know the role you will play yet. Soul bonds are rare, but their tests of time are usually steep. Come rest your mind, there will be no more trials this rising.”

SHE TURNS, pulling me along behind her gently. I glance over at VIN and he nods his head as the boy and him follow behind. Taking a deeper look at the young man. He first appeared alienish too, but the more I look at him, the more he appears human.

BEFORE I CAN ASK how he got here, I hear others coming toward us. The young girl's features seem to change right in front of me. She looks down at our hands and shrugs before letting me go to run on ahead. I watch VIN's father come around a bend. He grabs her, throwing her up into the air like she is a little girl. Her laughter echoes out around us.

HE PLACES her on his shoulder as he walks towards us, who I'm assuming is Kira walks beside him. She runs ahead of him slightly, instantly engulfing me in a hug. It is one of those hugs that you feel all the way to your soul. I have to fight back the tears forming behind my eyes as I hug her back tightly. When I let go of her, there is no missing the small black things wiggling around her wrist. It appears we all have been changed in one way or another.

SHE UNWINDS her arms and takes my face in her hands. “DaR, would you look at this? Ember, my dear, you are stunning. Look at the runes, now gracing all that perfect pale skin. I am

so glad you're safe. Come on, I've planned us a pleasant picnic where we can have a glass of alien tea and get to know each other better, while the guys do boy stuff."

VIN MOTIONS for me to go on and just as I turn to leave, DaR steps in front of me. His hand raises my chin, looking at me, and then over to ViN. "Soul bonds are rare. I'm happy for you both. Seems like things worked out for you two. Ember, do I still need to whip his ass?"

I LAUGH because I can see the humor on his face. "No, I think I can handle him if he gets out of line again."

"WELL, the offer is still there if you ever need me to tune him up. Thank you for putting a smile on my son's face. I'm indebted to you. Go on with the others. We will be there shortly."

SMILING, I follow along with Kira as she points out some of the surrounding things, as we walk towards a vast blanket with plates of food lying under an arbor. This morning I was worried about meeting his family and within seconds. I have never felt this comfortable. Voices coming our way have me pulling on Kira's hand to stop her.

"IT'S OK SWEETHEART, that's just Brittany and XuL. You will get to see firsthand that your coupling is not the only odd one in the bunch. Before long, you won't even notice the differences. All of DaR's boys are a little over the top. Brit called them rainbow monsters when she first got here, but they all have hearts of gold. I promise you have never been safer in your life."

I'M thankful for the forewarning because I believe if I had seen XuL first I would have run screaming. He is terrifying, but the way he looks at who I'm assuming is Brittany, there is no denying she has him wrapped around her beautiful little finger.

KIRA MOTIONS for me to take a seat next to her and when Brittany sees me she kisses XuL on the cheek and runs over her knees, hitting mine as she plops down. "Holy cow, and I thought my marks were pretty. Look at you, and that fire-red hair, girl, you rock that look."

I LAUGH AT ALL her energy. She has to be close to my age, but somehow she makes me feel much older. The pretty green girl also runs over. Brittany opens her arms and the little girl plops down in between her legs. Brittany immediately starts brushing her long, white, pink, and brown hair with her fingers.

BRIT LOOKS OVER AT ME. "Have you met this little bundle of joy yet? This is my daughter, Keida."

THE LOOK on my face makes everyone around me laugh.

"SORRY, we love doing that to people. We always get that *are you sure* face...I swear, even though you have to look closely. There is some of me in all this. She is mine and XuL's. Unfortunately, she is growing up on me too fast." Brittany starts tickling her, and she squirms away, running off towards the boys.

KIRA TAKES MY HAND. "How are you adjusting?"

“IF YOU HAD ASKED me that two days ago, I would have given you a different answer than I am now. I’ll be honest, my emotions are all over the place, but they are getting better. Miya told me that ViN would help, and she was right. Once we got a few major things settled, everything didn’t seem as grim anymore. I won’t lie. I have a million questions, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to face the answers yet.”

“EMBER, there is no right or wrong. You are simply sorting through this in your own way. Miya and Hugo will be out in a little bit, but did she give you the holo pad we had ANDI make for you?”

“SHE DID. I believe it’s still here. I didn’t have anything with me when, I think he is called SiN, grabbed me.”

“OHHH, that male does nothing but cause turmoil and trouble. One of these days that is going to come back on him tenfold and I feel like he won’t be able to grovel enough to get the others to forgive him for all this foolishness. I just wish we knew how he knows our every step and how he is getting through our sensors.”

BRITTANY LOOKS AROUND. “Hey, speaking of sensors, has anyone seen SAGE today?”

WE ALL SHAKE OUR HEADS.

“OK, that’s just weird. I’m so used to her practically being my shadow that I didn’t think about her being gone. SAGE?”

WHEN SHE DOESN'T APPEAR, Brittany gets up and heads towards XuL. She squeezes in between all their large frames as they stare down at her. She looks so tiny in the middle of all those muscles.

DAR LOOKS OVER AT KIRA, and she shrugs her shoulders. He hits that watch thing. I think they call a comm unit and I can tell he is not happy with the answer he is getting. All of them immediately come our way.

“MY KIRA, I'm sorry, but we are going to have to cut our visit short. There seems to be some type of interference happening on Solanar and SoL is requesting us to return to Falcor immediately. I've tried to contact SAGE, SCOUT, and Father with no answer.”

“I'M READY, Ember dear. Please forgive us for rushing off. We will get together soon, I promise. Wait a minute... Before we go, I brought you something. DaR makes all his boys wear one of these and I thought as much trouble as they are always in. The females should have one too, so I had CIP design all of you unique comm bracelets. I picked random colors for everyone, but you can change them if they are not what you prefer.”

SHE HANDS me a pretty green box covered in swirls. Within it lies a smaller watch version of the one ViN wears, but with a dainty jeweled bracelet.

“DON'T THINK for a moment about those jewels. CIP assured me the bracelets wouldn't break, but the worst-case scenario is if you get stranded somewhere with all communications down, these jewels may be worth just enough credits to get you home.”

“Wow, thank you, Kira. That was very thoughtful.”

“GOTTA TAKE care of my girls. Now, I know we are rushing off, but where are you planning on staying?”

I LOOK OVER AT VIN, not sure how to answer that question. Suddenly Hugo comes around the corner.

“VIN, your brother is on the holo comm inside.”

“CARE TO NARROW THAT DOWN A LITTLE?”

“THE PURPLE ONE.”

VIN COMES OVER and takes my hand, leading me away from Kira before I can say another word. Walking inside, I hear Miya laughing as she is talking to someone.

“OH, EvO, here they are now. Safe journeys we will talk when you get back.” She hugs me quickly before walking out the door.

“EvO, how are you contacting us right now? I thought you would be in the Nebula by now.”

“I SHOULD’VE BEEN, but my brother blasted out of here so quickly, trying to get back to his little female.” He winks at me, and I shake my head at his playfulness. “That he fried the outer seal on that dock. So, I’ve been waiting not so patiently

for maintenance to fix it. You two have plans for the next half an Orbital rising? I have some pretty nice accommodations prepared for my older grouchy ass brother who just happened to find his mate.”

I LOOK UP AT VIN, not sure what he is asking.

“EVO, GIVE ME A SECOND.”

“TAKE YOUR TIME. I’m just floating around out here.”

“EMBER...EVO’s ship is in the outer quadrant, looking for more of your kind. He believes they are trapped inside a huge gas nebula. Now, before you get excited, we don’t know that for sure. If we go back to the ship, we will be stuck on it for a while.”

“YOU MEAN he could possibly find my parents?”

“YEA, AND POSSIBLY OTHERS.”

“BUT WAIT A MINUTE, space freezes you to death. I don’t want you suffering if you don’t have to. We will stay here.”

HE REACHES DOWN and kisses me softly on the lips. Someone clearing their throat has him standing back up. “Brother, we will be there as soon as I can acquire some of the things Ember is going to need and a shuttle to get us there. I sorta shorted out the one I borrowed from you.”

“ANTICIPATING YOUR ARRIVAL, and can’t wait to meet the female who brought you to your knees in person.” The screen goes blank.

“VIN, we can’t go. You need to call him back and tell him that. I’m not going to have you freezing just because I would like to be there if they find my parents.”

“HOW HAVE I ever come to deserve you? Ember, I haven’t been cold one moment since our souls bound themselves together. If you want to be on that ship so that you can be there to help others of your kind, it’s not a problem. I’ve been EvO’s second in command since the moment he took over the Destroyer. I’m used to the darkness and cold of space. What I’ve not experienced is you by my side.”

BITING MY LIP, I look up at him. “I feel like it’s what I should do. I would like to help in any way I can.”

“THEN IT IS SETTLED. Let’s get you packed and tell the others of our plans.”

CHAPTER 32

EMBER



The sight before me I could've never imagined. Space is like a huge void of darkness sprinkled in sparkles that seem so close you can touch them and then, so far away, you can't fathom the distance.

VIN HAS TOLD me all about the Nebula we are heading into and all the dangers it could cause to the ship we will be traveling on. I'm not sure if he was trying to talk me out of going, or just wanted me prepared. Either way, I am determined to go.

THE DESTROYER SEEMS to just pop up in front of us, and I'm eager to begin this next chapter in my life. My mind slips back home and where I thought my life was leading. In my wildest fantasies, I could never have imagined the course I would be set upon. Even though the odds of my parents being alive are slim. I refuse to give up hope. That's why I won't look at the holo comm explaining everything that happened after I was sent away. If we don't find them, then I will watch it...maybe. I don't know if it would be easier knowing or not.

I LOOK over at VIN and his confident profile as he maneuvers the shuttle into the side of this bigger ship, landing gently. He untangles his large frame from the seat and holds his hand out

for me. I feel like at this moment he is asking me to trust him with more than helping me out of this seat.

SMILING, I reach out, grabbing hold of him for dear life. The ramp lowers and I get my first glimpse of the workings of such a large vessel. Small robot things open the back hatch of the shuttle, carrying our boxes and things away.

I HAVE BARELY STEPPED on the floor when someone grabs me, swinging me around in a circle. Before I can make a sound, I am set back on my feet. “Hello, my new best friend.”

A HANDSOME, very purple male stands before me with a huge smile on his face. ViN grabs me out of his arms, growling. EvO’s smile is addictive and you can’t miss the mischievousness of it.

“KEEP YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF. Go find your own female brother.”

HE WINKS at me and I can’t help but laugh. “Dearest Ember, welcome to the Destroyer. I hope you will come to love her as much as I do. If you would like to follow me, I will show you and Grumpy back there to your new accommodations.”

“WHAT WAS wrong with my old room?”

“EMBER, forgive my brother. He has no idea about the needs or the wants of the opposite sex. I fear you have lots of training to embark on with him before he behaves appropriately.”

“I’M GOING to behave you in a moment, little brother.”

“SEE, he always reverts back to violence.”

I WASN’T EVEN WATCHING where we were going because of these two picking playfully at each other. ViN seems more comfortable around EvO than any of the others I have seen him with and it’s nice to see him relax some.

A DOOR SLIDES open and we walk into a set of rooms I would’ve never imagined could be on a spaceship. I was expecting a small, cramped space and even argued with ViN that I was sure there wasn’t room for all the things he was ordering for us to bring along.

HOWEVER, not only is it the size of the rooms, and the pleasant decorations. It’s the view. The entire wall in front of me is open to the darkness beyond us. It’s so clear it looks like you can simply step right out of it. ViN and EvO are talking, but I soon tune out their conversation as I explore the surrounding space. Movement in an adjoining room has me entering it hesitantly. Small little robot things are unpacking the boxes, hanging up clothing, and putting things away neatly in drawers.

“DO YOU LIKE IT?”

I TURN to see ViN leaning up against the door frame, his arms crossed. He must have been watching me for a while now.

“IF YOU ARE TALKING about our rooms, they’re beautiful. The Destroyer... Well, it’s scary and unreal all at the same time.” I

point over at the robots. “These little guys sure are handy, that’s for sure.”

“SCOUT PROGRAMMED the multiple bots on the Destroyer to act independently as it’s not a sentient ship like Falcor or ANDI. He keeps a close eye on them and us from Solanar.”

“So, neither SAGE nor he will just be popping in?”

“No, we may even lose contact with them when we enter the Nebula. Everything about this trip is unknown. It was an adventure I was dreading until you arrived. Sit down on the bed. I have something for you.”

I BOUNCE on the bed like a little kid. “Like a present? Ohh, I love presents. Give me, give me.”

HE SWATS me on the butt, and I fall back, giggling. ViN sits down on the side of the bed, pushing a piece of my hair off my face before placing a small box on my stomach.

SETTING UP, I tear into the wrapper like a kid at Christmas. Popping the top off, the tears immediately start flowing as I pull out a pair of black high heels, cradling them to my chest. “How?”

“I KNOW I didn’t act like it, but your tears tore me apart in that cave. I felt like a savage brute when I saw how much they meant to you. When we were found and you collapsed on me, Miya and I were cutting off what you called the rat suit so that AMI could treat your wounds. I took your old shoes and gave them to SAGE. These were delivered just a few risings later. I

don't understand the purpose of wearing shoes this inappropriate, but they meant a lot to you. And I wanted to replace them."

"ViN, I never want to go back to that girl again. It took the cave and losing everything, including you, to reset my previous ways. I never plan on being that girl again, but I will always have a weakness for these types of inappropriate shoes."

I YANK my sandals off and slide them on. Of course, they fit perfectly. Hooking the small buckle, I get up and walk around the bed, stopping in front of ViN. Slipping the dress I have on off, standing before him only in a thong and these heels. His eyes flash silver and just as he reaches for me, I step back. "Are you feeling the power of these shoes now?"

"I'M BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND, but you may have to show me a bigger demonstration."

"I THINK I'm up for the job. After all, EvO said I needed to work on your training." Lifting my foot, I place it in the middle of his chest, forcing him back gently. Once he is lying flat, I crawl up his legs, settling my full weight on his hard shaft. My runes pulse under my skin and I watch ViN's brighten as I run my fingernails down his sides.

"YOU KNOW, it wasn't too long ago. I thought you were the most aggravating female in existence. Seems I simply needed a little guidance. I'm all yours to devour at will. Proceed." He lays his head back, puts his hands behind his head, and smiles.

RUNNING my hands down his massive chest. I lean down and bite one of his nipples gently. “Let the training commence,” I whisper.



EPILOGUE



S iN

I LAND my shuttle rougher than I intended, but my hands are not operating correctly. Stumbling out of the door, I try to mist only for the intense pain to force me to stop.

PRACTICALLY PANTING, it's hard to avoid the many Seline patrolling in this area. Especially when I can't simply mist past them, but after a few close calls, I finally make it to Mystic. She is the oldest guardian of her kind and my only genuine friend.

LEANING AGAINST HER VAST TRUNK, I take several deep breaths, dreading the toll it's going to take on my body to mist up into the safe haven she has always provided for me. Gritting my teeth, I will my body to fragment, but I can't hold back my painful scream.

WHEN I START to lose my form only feet from the opening. I feel one of Mystic's large limbs push me up. Stumbling onto the floor, I fall to my back, gasping for breath. Part of my body is burned and I need to get these clothes off, but I don't have the strength to move.

MYSTIC CLOSES her limbs around me, surrounding me in the darkness of her foliage. An odd scent drifts towards me, and I reach out for it only to find my hand closing around a slender neck.

FORCING MY EYES OPEN. I find my haven has been contaminated by another. An angel with violet eyes and a bruised face.

THE END

OTHER BOOKS FROM THIS
AUTHOR:

The Water Skippers series

Water Skippers

(Kyle and Eden)

A Dragonfly's Whisper

(Nora and Roman)

Earth Shadow

(Lorene and Garret) part one

Shadow Reborn

(Garret and Lorene)

Petal

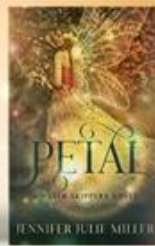
(Randy and Petal)

Miranda and the Dragonfly King

(Miranda and Tagon)

Stand-alone novel

The Playboy and the Waitress



Water Skipper Series

Jennifer Julie Miller

FORSAKEN SERIES

The Forsaken series

Forsaken

(Lucas and Emma)

Betrayed

(Tavish and Eve)

Forgotten

(Tyberius and Victoria)

Spin off to DaR



DARVERIUS

DaR

(DaR and Kira)

XuL

(XuL and Brittany)

SoL

(SoL and Alana)

RaZ

(RaZ and Katherine)

A House of DaR Celebration (novella)

Tordan

(Tordan and Luna)

Hugo

(Hugo and Miya)

AvX

(AvX and Ivy)

SAGE (novella)

ViN

(ViN and Ember)

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

I hope... I have made you laugh, and possibly... even squeezed a few tears out of ya. Writing has been a lifelong dream for me, and our dreams are the only thing we have to build on!!!

So GO for it!!!!

Reading is a passion of mine as well. I believe there are Dragons, Unicorns, and multicolored Kitty Cats, because our imaginations are our own uniqueness.

I am thankful for the support of my family and friends.

To my readers, thank you for encouraging me to continue writing even though my worlds are a little different.

After all, I'm Appalachian, and I talk Appalachian. Therefore, I write Appalachian. All my books have country girls in them, and that's mainly because I only know how to speak country girl correctly.

Then to the Lord above, whose blessing gave a poor little girl from Ironton a chance to dream!

If you enjoyed this story, or any of my other ones, I ask that you take a few minutes of your time, and leave a review on Amazon, or Goodreads. It really helps new and older authors alike.

If you would like to stay in touch, hear about new releases, give some advice, or just drop a line. I love to talk books.

AUTHOR LINKS

You can find me on Facebook.

<https://facebook.com/JenniferJulieMiller>.

On Twitter.

<https://www.twitter.com/jenniferrick>

Or email me at:

Jenniferjuliemiller@gmail.com

Follow me on BookBub.

<https://www.bookbub.com/profile/jennifer-julie-miller>

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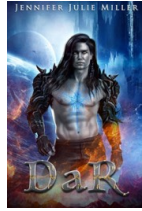
<https://amazon.com/author/jjm5325903>

And sign up for my email if you want to learn more about Darverius and DaR's twenty-two plus sons.

<https://eepurl.com/cfrL8X>



DAR



Kira

In the blink of an eye, my whole world has collapsed around me. Headed towards my dream vacation, I was snatched right out of the air. My husband, the love of my life, was destroyed right in front of my eyes. He fought bravely, trying to protect me from a horror neither one of us could have ever imagined. I find myself standing in the spotlight on a stage. Mutilated and tortured, the blood from my body flowing freely down my legs along with my will to live. Piercing yellow eyes emerge from the darkness, but even the shadows can't hide his imposing form. Gentle, but terrifying arms reach out for me and within their embrace, can I find the will to live again?

DaR

I am a bad ass, known throughout the galaxy for my brutality as a ruthless and feared commander. With that being said, somehow, I still got coerced into purchasing a slave. My eyes fall upon a small female whose very essence and eternal light is leaking out of her onto the floor below her. I watch in awe as she accepts her fate, willing her nightmare to be over. I almost turn away from her and the unnecessary cruelty in this room, but the very thought of her dying on that floor surrounded by the very monsters that have done this to her disgust me. I walk up among the beings surrounding her and pull her from the stage, daring, or should I say, hoping, they try to do something about it. The moment I put her in my arms, everything changed. The attachments I have avoided my

whole life become unavoidable. Will this damaged slave be able to replace the shadows in my life? One thing for sure is that I will destroy the entire universe to keep her safe. No one touches what's MINE!

XUL



Brittany

All my dreams and wants were stolen from me in the blink of an eye. Awakening, in the middle of a nightmare, I realize I'm being sold like an animal to be studied and dissected in the name of science. Then tragedy strikes, leaving me abandoned and sick. I am only moments from taking my last breath when strong arms pull me from the darkness. I thought it was a blessing that he had found me, the green man who had haunted my dreams. I let myself believe, for just one moment, I might find a small piece of happiness in this unknown world. But what is the old saying? *'Don't count your chickens until they hatch!'*

A blood sucking parasite is eating me alive, literally, and no matter what, I'm not going to survive this horror story. My body is failing me. I beg him to let me go; I just want the pain to stop, but he won't listen. He holds me down and I struggle weakly against his immense strength, choking as blood fills my lungs. When I can't fight any more, Death opens its arms and invites me in.

XuL

My harsh, brutal features have deterred all females, no matter the species. I long for companionship and love. Then I find her, my Kismet, the only one made just for me. The one precious thing I would worship above all others. But the fates are cruel, especially to a male like me.

I am being forced to destroy the fragile bond that has formed between us, as I have to make the hardest decision of my life. One that will make me lose her either way. I hold her small, struggling body against me. Tears flow down my face as she begs me to stop. My heart is crushed as I watch the light leave her beautiful eyes. Upon her final breath, I vow not even Death will keep what's mine.

SOL



Alana

The question is, do I allow this dark moment in time to rob me of the life I could possibly have here? I have never known such horror or fear. If I hadn't experienced it myself, I would have never believed any other living thing could possibly do this to another. The scars may be gone on the outside now, but they will remain forever in my soul. They tell me I can never go back, all that I have ever known is gone. Where does this leave me in the world of monsters? He beckons me, promising me...the fairytale... the impossible dream. Everything I have ever wanted to hear! But I don't know if I'm strong enough to go forward as long as the shadows of our past pull me backwards.

SoL

I knew she was withholding the truth from me. I had no idea who I held in my arms until it was almost too late. The moment her true essence was revealed to me, my body reacted, reaching out for the one thing I had been searching for my whole life... my Inamorata. The very mistress of my heart and now that I have finally found her. I will follow her through the sands of time... no matter how long it takes. I will find my way back to her... because she is MINE!

RAZ



Katherine

How do you go on when all of your wants and dreams have been destroyed? My loved ones were snatched right out of my hands, leaving me alone in a world of unknowns and terror. I'm lost in the in-between with no familiar paths to follow until the sound of a heartbeat and a whisper draws me back to the land of the living.

RaZ

The moment I laid eyes upon her face, I knew there would be no distance I wouldn't travel to make her my own. Unknown forces try to steal her from my very arms and even if I have to fight the very essence of her world, the universe, or the very Gods we pray to. Nothing will stop me from making her MINE!

LUCAS AND EMMA



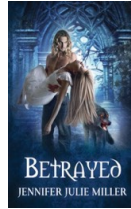
Katherine's parents

The one question she often asks herself is *why*. Why has she never been enough? Why doesn't anyone truly want her? She was reminded daily that she was nothing but a worthless girl and only another mouth to feed. The last time she saw her family was the night they dumped her in a ditch on the side of the road and left her to die.

A kind woman took her out of that ditch and gave her a home. Her new family was every girl's dream until a single poisoned scratch took it all away. Emma was tossed away again, becoming a prisoner and a slave to her circumstances. The one person the Cook enjoyed beating regularly. The day Cook sold her body, all of her hopes and dreams were destroyed. But one fateful night, after fighting for her life, she escapes this, Hell.

He finds her on the brink of death, naked, beaten, and barely alive. She thinks he is the Angel of Death, someone who will save her, but he is a real monster. Did she just trade one Hell for another? Will the memories he steals from her dreams soften his heart enough to make him care for something more than himself? Or will he turn her away, just to *Forsake* her, like all the rest?

TAVISH AND EVE



It seems the ones we love the most are the first to Betray us! One such Betrayal cost me everything: my home, my dreams, and almost my life. The second I started running, I knew I would never be who I was or may have wanted to be. All of my choices were taken away with two last breaths, hers and then my own.

The dreams of my youth were destroyed because of the selfishness of others. I fear my life will become nothing but a cold existence of shadows and detachment.

The poison consuming my very soul is nothing but an excuse for me to lash out at the unfairness of it all. It's exactly the justification I need to deliver the pain others have inflicted on me my entire life. Will the emotions of my untried youth destroy my future as I'm forced into a world I truly don't understand?

My own mind has become my worst enemy, and my fragile heart can't withstand another break. I know he's a deceiver, a devil in disguise, sent to collect my grieving soul. He is the real monster my mother warned me about under the bed. If I let him, he will destroy me in the end with his mischievous smile and lying angel eyes.

To be loved is the only dream I have left, but we all know Betrayal is the one thing you can always count on to crush you.

TYBERIUS AND VICTORIA



(DaR's father)

I have known this evil was coming for me my whole life, but that doesn't mean I have looked forward to it! I have run from every sign of the darkness, even to the point of being invisible to the ones around me. I've spent my whole life lurking in the shadows of my family. Keeping myself separate from the ones I love, living my dreams, and wants through their eyes.

I had become so wrapped up in their worlds trying to ensure their happiness that the day he appeared in front of me. I never once questioned what I was supposed to do. The one thing my family could always count on is that I'm loyal to fault. Even though I made sure never to get too attached because I was terrified the darkness would take them also, it will do anything it can to defeat me. My goal is to survive and to finally see the light.

I have prayed to every God, for this to pass me by, only to know they can't answer. This is my destiny. I will suffer agony unlike anything my mind can imagine, but to be worthy of the light. I need to find a way to face this darkness.

I will never show him an ounce of weakness, but I scream silently for help. I refuse to let him win because he wants me here for eternity. A soul withered in ice, and loneliness, Forgotten in this room of horrors.

All the stars line up for us one time or another. I just have to wait my turn.

TORDAN



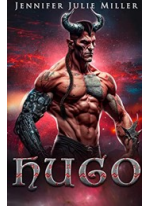
Luna

They stole my dreams, my hopes, my very identity, and I had no idea. Years went by and I did everything I was told, I was always the perfect specimen, and the perfect lab rat. I was dissected, even maimed all in the name of science. Then one day a strange smoky voice entered my head, and I knew things were not as they seemed. He promises me that he will never leave me, but my new memories tell me differently.

Tordan

What is it about that one person that attracts you like no other? My mind can't figure out that riddle, but the moment I laid eyes upon her I knew my life would never be the same. When I finally held her in my arms, I swore I would never be without her again. If they think they will get me to comply by using her to control me, they're right. What they don't know is...I will tear this compound, and all that's in it apart, to protect what's MINE.

HUGO



Miya

I awaken to the touch of cold metal hands and talking holograms. Paralyzed and dependent on the Others. They tell me a story... at first; I refuse to believe. A story of no return and extreme loss, but one of the voices is different. He projects anger and distrust...but his hands... even though cold and hard, are always gentle. I have come to crave the sound of his growls because I know within moments he will hold me in his arms. When my sight returns. I was not prepared to see what he really was, but when he collapsed in front of me, his body failing. Why do I suddenly feel like this is my biggest loss yet?

Hugo

I have done everything in my power to prepare a safe world for her once I'm gone. I fought my attraction, knowing I was unworthy of her trust, but I crave her like no other. Unfortunately, my mind is no longer my own, and the only way to destroy the monster who has invaded my head is death. All that matters in my end... is that she survives... because I would rather die than share what I know is MINE.

AVX



Ivy

Why are the last words ever spoken to our loved ones in anger? I knew the moment I left it was a mistake, but my stubborn pride urged me forward. I've awakened to unimaginable horrors, pain unlike anything the human mind could conceive, until him. Now, I'm too scared to trust my own feelings, as they have only led me astray. I push his kindness away, striking out in a rage of harsh words and unwarranted anger. As this new future is revealed to me, I crumble away inside,...slowly and insidiously. How much more do I have to lose before I realize my sole chance of happiness is standing in front of me?

AvX

She is like a wild animal, cornered and frightened, unwilling to accept any sort of kindness. A fiery soul trapped inside a mind littered with insecurities and heartache. I ache for a kind word or a gentle touch as my body reacts to her slightest touches. How do I convince her to put aside the pain she has endured and take a chance on the unknown,... on me? The fates put her in my path for a reason, and I will find a way to tame the fire that consumes her.

THE PLAYBOY AND THE WAITRESS



Jenna

I was always told never to forget that I was worth something, too! We all know that every little girl dreams of her knight in shining armor. A man who will ride up and save her from the evil things trying to destroy her. Then, of course, we all know they live happily ever after. My knight was untouchable... A Playboy, a man who stole my heart right out of my chest and with very little effort on his part. Unfortunately, he was also a man whose world I would never fit in. You can take the girl out of the country. You can dress her in nice clothes, have her smile beautifully as you parade her on your arm, but you never really take the country out of the girl. I reach out for the brightest of stars... only for him to leave my heart in pieces, crumbling at my feet.

Dage

I watched her for weeks. Every smile she bestowed on me captured me in a way no others had. Circumstances throw us together over and over and no matter how many times I hold her in my arms, it's never enough. I didn't know what I was missing until she walked away. I know, I can't have them and her... so who will lose?