


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MIRANDA MARTIN



**EXPERIMENT
D4L4h**

RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS

EXPERIMENT D₄L₄H

RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS (SEASON TWO)
BOOK TWENTY-FIVE

MIRANDA MARTIN

CONTENTS

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Join Miranda's Reader List](#)

[Also by Miranda Martin](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright © 2023 Miranda Martin
All rights reserved.

GET A FREE BOOK!

BE THE FIRST TO KNOW WHEN THE NEXT RED
PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS STORY IS OUT!



[CLICK HERE](#)

“Oh great, my favorite. Green slop,” Alex says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

My stomach grumbles as the spoonful of mush drops on my plate. This is my day’s rations. Specifically calculated to provide the exact minimum of calories and nutrition to keep me alive. This is what we’re down to.

“I like it better than the yellow stuff,” I say.

“That is debatable,” Alex says.

The noise of the mess hall is a constant clatter of cutlery, dishes, and conversations that are dominated by complaints. No one is happy, but at the same time, no one wants another riot. That was awful. And scary, never forget the scary part. Alex and I hid inside one of the maintenance tunnels which kept us safe, but that does nothing to lessen how terrifying it was.

I grab my utensil, scoop the slop, and swallow as fast as I can. It has a lingering chemical taste that is impossible to wash down. The only thing I’ve found that helps is to not let it sit on my tongue for too long.

“I think we can activate that subroutine this afternoon,” I say.

Alex grimaces as he swallows his ration, his face twisting and contorting as he forces it down. He then takes a long gulp of his water. I arch an eyebrow. Water is probably the only thing in shorter supply than food.

“Sorry, can’t stand it,” he says, panting.

He darts his tongue around his lips to capture every last remnant of water. A habit we're all in. It's not like it was any better when we were outside the bunker, water wise anyway. The world outside is a massive desert because that's our luck.

Our generational ship wasn't supposed to be here. Somewhere, millions of lightyears away, there is a beautiful, terraformed planet sitting empty and waiting for us. A place that we'll never see, not now, because our ship was attacked by space pirates.

"Can you believe it?" I say, musing out loud.

"Believe what?"

"Space pirates," I say and snort. My cheeks warm, I hate it when I do that, but every time something strikes me as funny it happens. "What are the odds?"

"Well," Alex says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully like he's running the calculations of the odds. Which he might be because numbers are his happy place. "It could have been worse."

"Worse?"

"Oh yes, it could have been space hamsters."

I stare in disbelief as I try to process his words into something that makes sense. He looks earnest, but he has to be kidding.

"What?"

"Oh yes," he says, waving his spoon in the air between us. "They're incredibly dangerous. Rare, of course, but let me tell you nothing can compare. When a ship is attacked by a space hamster, it actually inhales—"

"You are so full of shit!" I cut Alex off and he bursts into laughter.

He's laughing so hard his normally pale skin flushes beet red. He pounds the table and shakes his head, tears streaming down his face. I sigh and roll my eyes while he looks apoplectic.

"Is he all right?" a deep voice asks, causing me to jump.

I half-spin in my seat and strain my neck to look up at the Zmaj who's standing behind me. It's one of the new guys, the Franks as folks have taken to calling them. He has an extra set of arms attached to his side, but the extra ones stand out like a sore thumb because they're blue, not tan like the rest of him, though they kind of match his eyes.

"Yeah, he'll be fine," I say.

The Zmaj stares with his sky-blue eyes like he's trying to process the scene into something that makes sense.

"If you are sure," he says, then turns and walks off.

I can't help but notice his tail. All the Zmaj have tails, that's normal, but this one and the other Franks who were experimented on are different. There's an angry red scar about three quarters of the way down where the original tail was chopped off and a replacement was grafted. The new one is black with a sharp point that looks deadly. I'm sure it is too. The Franks were made for battle after all.

I tear my eyes off of him and force myself to look at Alex, shaking my head.

"Thanks," I snap. "You're going to get us in trouble."

"Trouble? For what?"

"Rumors of space hamsters probably," I say, rolling my eyes and Alex laughs. "Enough b.s., let's get to work."

Alex smiles. He has a winning smile, one of his best features. He keeps his thick, curly blond hair cut short and it frames his softly round face. I don't know how many times people around us have assumed we're together, but that's not the case for either of us. We're best friends, but that's it.

I love Alex, but not in any sexual way. He's smart, funny, and a bit off the wall, but I don't think he sees me like that either. No point in screwing up a good thing. We've been working together for years, and I wouldn't trade our friendship for anything.

He takes my plate before I can grab it, so I follow him to the turn in. With that small chore done, we head back to work.

Getting anywhere is a task of its own. The bunker was never designed to hold this many people. Make-shift doesn't begin to encompass what we're doing here. Every spare closet has been turned into bunks for people to sleep in. The halls are crowded and almost impossible to get through and never quickly.

Overcrowding is true for most of the bunker but not for the warehouse where we're working. Or the cold storage as it is called derogatorily. This room is massive and filled with huge metal tube-shaped containers. Pipes connect each tube into the system and inside of each one is a person in suspended animation. We don't know much about these frozen people, but a lot of them have had experiments done on them.

All of this happened long before we humans became a blip in the planet's history. The Zmaj civilization was destroyed in what the survivors call the Devastation. All I know of that is it sounds like World War III on Earth if the major powers hadn't backed down at the last minute, barely preventing the total destruction of the planet.

The big difference is that this galaxy had multiple species and weren't human exclusive like our home system. Those species had been at war for a long time already and it culminated in the destruction of this planet.

The other thing we know is that the scientists in this bunker were doing evil things. The Franks that we found when we moved into this bunker to escape the alien invaders who were about to wipe us out, are proof of the terrible things that were happening here. And the figures viewable inside these tubes prove the Franks we know are just the beginning.

An army sleeps in this warehouse. Waiting for untold years for the command to wake up and do their part in a war that ended a long time ago. Other people are working on understanding what they were doing here, but that's not our job. Alex and I are tasked to find out how the systems work.

Zmaj technology is not compatible with human tech, but the concepts are very similar. Humans advanced with silicon,

Zmaj use crystals, but our theory is that the math and construction principles are the same.

Alex leads the way through the tubes. Each of them is six foot eight inches tall from floor to top. They are exactly four feet three inches apart and eight feet in length. The width of a tube is five feet four and three quarters of an inch taking in the protrusion of the base. Three tubes run end to end, then there's a break for a walkway.

The warehouse has a constant buzz. We've already determined that there's an electro-magnetic field here that makes you a little uncomfortable. That effect contributes to keeping this area from being used for more space. Short-term, even a day or two doesn't bother anyone, but it builds up and then people get weird. See things, hear things, in general getting weirded out and acting crazy which is the last thing we need.

The entire bunker has a Faraday cage effect which protected it from the electro-magnetic pulse of the bomb we used to stop the Invaders. It's also shielded against radiation, hence our ability to survive inside. Which observation shows that the people who built this place planned for it to survive the Devastation and beyond.

"Do you think they planned it?" I ask.

"Huh?" Alex asks.

"The guys who built this place, did they plan it? The Devastation."

Alex bows his head slightly and his shoulders tense. He's thinking about it.

"I mean, it seems like they at least had an idea it could happen, doesn't it? They were creating these," he gestures with one hand to encompass the tubes we're walking through, "and the place is designed to withstand the bombs."

"Yeah, creepy, huh. If they planned this so well, then where are they?"

"That's only mildly terrifying," he says with a half-hearted chuckle. "Thanks. I really didn't want to sleep tonight."

“You’re welcome,” I laugh. “It’s free of charge to join me on my nightmare train.”

“You can say that again,” he says. “Are you sure about that subroutine?”

“I am,” I say. He holds open the door into the control room so I can enter first. “I’ve traced all the hooks for it. It only ties into the memory banks which should give us access to the records that we’ve been trying to get into.”

“That would be huge,” Alex says. “And the translator routine is working?”

“RaiAnne says it’s working with seventy-five percent accuracy.”

“Better than nothing then,” Alex says.

We set to work. In an hour we’re both sweating. The environmental controls are straining to keep up as well as everything else. I’ve grown used to the odor, which is like an unclean gym locker, but the heat isn’t something I can come to terms with or ignore.

Both of us are down to our undershirts, and I’m wishing I could strip more, but it wouldn’t be appropriate. My clothes are drenched in sweat and my hair is matted to my face. We must get out of the Bunker soon. I know machines well enough to have no doubts that it won’t be long before the environmental control gives up the ghost. Once that happens, it’ll be only a matter of time while we slowly cook.

“There,” Alex says. “You ready?”

“Do it,” I say.

He touches two crystals then presses his hand on a glass panel. The crystals light, then the panel glows with a soft green light. The screen we’re watching is black. Neither of us breathes, waiting and hoping this works. Right when I’m about to call it, the screen flashes twice then scrolls with information.

“Yes!” Alex cries.

“I’ll run the translator.”

I go through the steps and the Zmaj letters scrolling on the screen transfer over to the scanner. A moment later the information is readable by those of us who can't read Zmaj. Alex sits down with it and digs in. This is his area. He was a genetic engineer on the ship, not a computer engineer like me.

While he works on that, I walk out of the control room to stretch my legs. I pace along the wall letting my thoughts drift as I stretch and roll my shoulders to work out the kinks.

A metal clank pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Hello?" I ask, looking around for the source.

Prior to the riots I never felt nervous, but having seen how crazy people can get, I'm acutely aware now of being a woman alone. I turn and walk towards the control room while looking all around for any sign of trouble.

A large, shadowy figure stands next to one of the tubes causing me to jump as I pass the opening. My heart is in my throat, thumping hard, and I yelp. The shadow turns and steps towards me. I back up against the wall, muscles twitching with adrenaline, ready to run.

"I am sorry," a deep voice says.

As he emerges into the light, I see it's one of the Franks, but I can't tell which one. He has the blue arms, but different eyes than the one I saw in the mess hall. At least he's not the one with the spider-looking extra limbs.

"I did not mean to frighten anyone."

"It's fine," I say, forcing the lump out of my throat the best I can and waving a hand. "It's, uhm, fine. I didn't expect anyone in here is all." He nods and turns away. "What are you doing?"

He stops and his head lowers as his shoulders knot. "Visiting a friend."

"You know, uhm, one of them?" I'm not sure how to mention the Zmaj in the tubes without sounding unkind.

"I do."

"Is he, or was he—"

“Like me?” he asks, cutting off my stumbling attempt to ask. “Yes. He was a Frank. One of my team. We were all experimented on.”

“Oh,” I say, unsure how to respond. The nickname of Frank is derogatory or feels like it should be but he says it without a hint of rancor. Does he know the source of it? It’s a human story so he may not. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” he asks, turning back around. “You did not do this. Your people were not even here when this happened.”

“No,” I agree. “But it doesn’t mean I can’t imagine what this must be like. I am sorry you have had to experience so much pain.”

“You are very kind,” he says, and touches the tube next to him. “I must return to my duties. It was a pleasure to meet you...”

He trails off, waiting for me to fill in my name and I oblige.

“Shaun,” I say, sticking my hand out, then looking at it and dropping it back to my side. I don’t know if Zmaj shake hands or not. All this time on this planet and I don’t honestly know much about them at all.

“Shaun,” he repeats. “I am Bahr.”

I nod and smile, feeling awkward. He turns and leaves without another word. I sigh and shake my head, then walk over to the screen on the tube he was standing at. The vital signs on this one are strong so the occupant is alive. I activate the pad, and with a few moments effort, I’m able to read the designation, D4l48h.

“Dl-eight,” I sound it out. “Doesn’t sound Zmaj enough... Dala-guh. Dalagh.”

Another Frank. Maybe, sooner or later, we’ll be able to awaken him and the others. When supplies aren’t so incredibly tight and we’re not teetering on the brink of extinction.

“Shaun?” Alex calls. “Where are you? You need to see this.”

The screen on the tube changes and shows an image of the occupant’s face. He’s good looking and my stomach tightens.

“Coming,” I answer.

I turn away hurry back towards the office and the sound of Alex’s voice. When I see him, I can’t tell if he’s excited or terrified.

“You aren’t going to believe this,” he says, eyes darting around.

“What?”

“No, come in here,” he says, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Can’t let this get out too far.”

“Now you’re going to be secretive?”

“Believe me, this is... big.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me into the office, carefully shutting the door behind us, then he stares out the window.

“Are you seriously looking to see if I was followed?”

“Yes,” he says, then, apparently satisfied, he locks the door and goes over to the translator. He touches the screen and scrolls up before stepping to the side and pointing. “Read it.”

I read the screen. My mouth is dry. I shake my head, blink, then read it again.

“No, that can’t, I mean, could it? No.”

“Yeah.”

“We have to tell the Council,” I say.

“You sure about that? This could be,” he looks furtively around for those same insidious spies, “explosive.”

I frown and think it over.

“No, information isn’t something to hide. We let them know the truth and they can do what they think is best. This is too big for us to decide.”

“There are Zmaj on the Council.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. I close my eyes, steel my resolve, then unplug the translator and put it into a carrying case. “This is too big to sit on.”

We stare at each other in silence. I chew my lip as I try to imagine every possible outcome, but it's impossible. There's no telling how this will turn out except to just do it. Sighing, I shake my head and make the decision.

"I'm going to do it."

Alex frowns, but nods his agreement.

SHAUN

The bench is hard and uncomfortable. We've been sitting here for at least two hours, long enough that my butt is numb and hurts no matter how I shift around. Nervously, I turn the translator over and over. Every time the door opens I jerk my head up, expecting to be called in, only to be met with disappointment as one of the other people waiting is called.

"We were here before her," Alex mutters as another woman walks into her audience with the Council.

"Yeah, we were," I agree.

There are still three more people besides the two of us in the waiting room. I shift my butt again, desperate for some relief. Is this part of the Council's plan? Make the seating so uncomfortable that people give up before they have to deal with them?

The translator slips in my sweaty hands and I fumble, trying to catch it before it smashes on the ground.

"Careful!" Alex yelps, thrusting his hands in to try and catch it, which only makes the situation worse.

The delicate instrument dances in the air, spinning one way then another, as we both try to capture it before it shatters on the floor. When my fingers close around it, I think I have it, but I don't allow for how slick my sweaty hands are and it slips again.

“Oh,” I exclaim as it drops towards the ground in some kind of metaphysical race with my stomach to see which one hits bottom first.

Alex dives off the bench, holding his hands out, and the instrument drops into them instead of the ground. My heart is racing. I stare at the machine where it peacefully rests in his hands. I am stunned by the luck of his catch and the absolute horror of how bad it would have been to break it.

Alex cradles the instrument as he slowly rises to his feet then resumes his seat next to me. I reach to take it back, but he clasps it tight and turns away.

“Uh-uh,” he says. “You had your chance. I’ll keep it now.”

I want to protest but I can’t. He’s right. My hands are still sweating and not only from the heat. My heart hasn’t stopped pounding since we arrived, and the longer we sit here, the worse it’s getting.

Recently there were elections held and that shook up the original Council members, the ones I knew. All these new people I don’t know makes an outcome harder to predict. Slowly the room empties until there’s only Alex and I left and still we wait. Anticipation gives way to frustration, which is turning into anger.

“This is bullshit,” I mutter.

“Think they planned it?” Alex asks. “Maybe they don’t want to hear from us.”

“Why? We’re not the problem.”

“No, but we are almost always the bearers of bad news,” he says, raising his hands and then dropping them.

I open my mouth to protest then snap it shut because he’s right. Arguing with it would only be petty and stupid. When we’ve come to the Council, it’s never been good news. This though, it isn’t bad, really, maybe?

“It’s your turn,” an old sounding male voice says with a snap to it. I don’t recognize the man holding the door open who is

staring at the two of us with a baleful glare. “Well? Are you coming or do I have to stand here all day?”

“Coming,” I say, standing up.

“Thanks Mr. Chamberlain,” Alex says as we walk past.

“Save your thanks,” he says. “I’m too old for it.”

He’s definitely the grumpy old man stereotype but the grin on his face shows it’s all a façade. He is old though. His heavily lined face has one rheumy eye and the other one shows the milky signs of cataracts. He’s stooped, with short cut gray hair.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Now your thank you I’ll take,” he says with a mischievous grin. “Never turn down nice words from a pretty girl. That’s what I say.”

My cheeks warm and I can’t keep eye contact. I’m saved by Alex who pulls me through and into the Council chambers. Mr. Chamberlain chuckles softly as he shuts the door and shuffles to sit in a chair to one side.

The Council sits behind tables that form a semi-circle. In the middle is Rosalind, the Lady General in her gleaming white space leathers. She’s an imposing figure, dominating the space with her sharp features and with her presence. You can’t not know she is there. Silent, austere, and she demands your attention.

Next to her, where her mate Visidion has always sat, is a new Zmaj. One I don’t know, but he’s a massive figure, even for a Zmaj. Wide enough they have allowed him an entire table where normally two people would sit. Even seated he towers over everyone, but despite his size, he barely competes with Rosalind’s presence.

We’ve been before the Council often enough to know most members but not all, so I study them as we enter. I know them by name only from the prior election ballots. The new Zmaj is Pdraig. A miner named Elmer, that I know in passing as a constant rumormonger, replaced Calista and there’s another former miner named Sabrina.

“You requested a meeting?” Rosalind asks.

My mouth is so dry I don’t know if I can speak. I edge closer to Alex and swallow.

“Yes,” I say.

“We found information that the Council should know,” Alex fills in.

“But it could be…” I pause and look around the room. Beth, the Council secretary, sits to one side dutifully taking notes. Mr. Chamberlain is behind us listening too. “It is sensitive in nature.”

“Sensitive?” Padraig asks. “What does this mean? It is soft and delicate?”

The Council chuckles, but watching his face, I think he’s serious. This is not off to a great start. I give Rosalind an imploring look.

“How sensitive?” she asks.

I purse my lips, frown, then say, “Very.”

Rosalind nods then looks at Beth. “Clear the room please.”

Beth gathers up her things and walks to the door. She tells Mr. Chamberlain to come too and he does with a lot of grumping and noise. We wait in silence until the door clangs shut behind us.

“What is it?” Rosalind asks.

I look at Padraig because he makes a deep grumbling harumph sound, but Rosalind doesn’t even glance in his direction. Instead, she drums her fingers on the table, which seems much louder than it probably is.

“We know how the suspension system works,” I say. “We can now awaken any of them we want.”

“Why is this sensitive?” Elmer asks.

He has a whiny pitch to his voice, almost like he’s pleading when he speaks. It makes my skin crawl.

“Because in order to do that, we had to decrypt and translate a lot of files,” Alex steps in once again, filling the pause as I organize my thoughts. “And that is how we found this.”

“This?” Rosalind asks, arching an eyebrow.

The rest of the Council watches with expectant looks.

“RaiAnne made a translator,” I say, pointing at the machine in Alex’s hands. “It allows us to read Zmaj—”

“Hmmp,” Padraig interrupts. “Reading brings nothing good.”

“Counselor Padraig,” Rosalind admonishes, still not looking in his direction. “Allow them to speak.”

He grumbles and crosses his arms over his chest. Each bicep is as big as a small tree trunk. I can’t help but feel intimidated by his size, but he doesn’t say anything further.

“One of the questions we’ve all had, I think, anyway,” I say, looking at each person in turn, “is why?”

“Forgive me,” Sabrina says. “But I am new on the Council. Why what?”

“Yes, sorry,” I say. “Why the scientists in this bunker from before did what they did to the Fra—, I mean the, uhm, the Experiments.”

I stumble over my words when I slip and almost call them Franks. That’s not a proper or scientific name and I have no idea how the Council would react to it. The only one who shows any emotional reaction at all is Elmer. He seems to take some kind of perverse joy in my slip or in the way I handle it. I’m not sure which, but I don’t get the feeling that he’s a good person.

“And what is it you discovered?” Rosalind asks, guiding us back to the topic.

“The experiments are clones,” Alex blurts out.

The room erupts as Council members raise their voices to be heard. There is shouting and pounding on the tables. Padraig growls as he pushes himself back and rises to his full height. My stomach ties into a hard knot. I grab Alex’s arm and pull

him back. I knew Padraig was big but standing it's insane. He must be eight feet tall. His horns are scraping the ceiling.

The Council members shout questions and demand answers. The room has become total chaos. Amid it sits Rosalind. She is perfectly still and calm. They grow louder but she is the eye of the storm, unaffected, not taking her eyes from Alex and me. There's something about her, her demeanor, her ability to sit in the chaos as if she is above it. She is an observer.

Rosalind moves her hand across the table and I would swear she is moving in slow motion. A nonchalant gesture without meaning or implication. She grabs the handle of a gavel and raises it without looking at those around her. The gavel hangs in the air then she slams it down. Once. Twice. On the third time, the crack of the wooden object echoes through the room that is now silent.

The members of the Council resume their seats. They grumble and complain but in a subdued manner, unlike they were just moments before. Rosalind waits until they're in their seats and quiet. Her pursed lips, narrowed eyes, and creased brow are the only signs of emotion.

"Thank you," Rosalind says, and I have no idea who she is thanking, us or the Council? But it doesn't matter. "Can you please explain your statement so that the Council might have full *understanding*."

She emphasizes the last word. It's more of a rebuke than if she yelled. Not a single person behind the table doesn't hang their head. Even the massive Padraig looks abashed, or as abashed as a scaled alien Zmaj can.

Alex shifts his weight. He's doing a good job of hiding it, but I know he's trembling. I don't blame him. That was a terrifying moment and I had flashbacks of hiding from the riot that is all too recent in everyone's memory.

"This is Alex's area of expertise," I say, buying him time to get a hold of himself. "But it makes sense."

"Yes," Alex says, stepping forward.

"How certain are you of this?" Rosalind asks.

Alex's jaw tightens and he darts his eyes at me. Telling them the truth about the accuracy of the translation is something we debated before coming. We know enough and the numbers will only confuse a non-scientist was my position, while he wanted to be blunter and more honest.

"Sure enough," he says.

Rosalind nods, her fingers drumming on the table.

"What does this mean for us? We have pressing matters before us, why is this necessary for the Council's attention right now?" Rosalind asks at last.

"It explains why the... Experiments can go outside for longer and not be affected by the radiation," I say, jumping in because this I understand.

Rosalind is silent, studying us. The rest of the Council shift in their seats or move papers, but no one speaks up.

"You're not saying everything," Rosalind says at last.

Alex and I exchange a look. I shrug and he sighs.

"The records seem to indicate that the, uhm, source material that was cloned comes from the group referred to as the Order."

You could hear a pin drop in the chambers. No one moves or speaks. The Order was mostly wiped out, but a few of them are still amongst our numbers.

"I see," Rosalind says. "And? There is more, tell us in full please."

"It is possible," Alex says, hemming and hawing. "We're not sure. This is vaguer, but the signs indicate—"

"Say what you mean," Rosalind cuts him off.

"The genetics show signs of long-term manipulation," Alex says.

The Council members look from one to another, none of them understanding the implications of what Alex said. He is trembling and shuffling his feet, uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

“Which means?” Elmer asks.

I look at him, trying to decide what it is about the man that makes my skin crawl. Every time he speaks it rubs me wrong, no matter how innocent sounding his words. It’s like you know you’re handing him a knife that will be in your back, sooner or later.

“At some point the Zmaj were genetically engineered for Tajss,” I say.

And then the Council explodes. Again.

While everyone is shouting to be heard over each other, I can't take my eyes off Padraig. He growls, opens his wings, and his tail slaps the floor as his chest heaves. He angrily clenches and unclenches his fists. All through this he glares at Alex and me like he wants to break us into pieces.

"Enough!" Rosalind shouts as she rises to her feet.

Silence is instantaneous as the Council immediately stops at her command. Most of them look around then resume their seats, all but Padraig. Rosalind steps up, and despite the fact that the Zmaj physically towers over her and looks wide enough for her to stretch out on his shoulders, it's clear that she isn't intimidated. She tilts her head back and meets his glare without a hint of hesitation.

"No," he huffs.

"Padraig," she says, not raising her voice and with no hint of a tremor. "Take your seat Counselor."

Padraig huffs, shaking his head. They continue to glare at each other then suddenly the tension drops. His tail stops slapping, and he closes his wings before stepping around her and taking his seat. Rosalind resumes her own, adjusts some papers in front of herself, and then looks at Alex and me like nothing happened.

"Two questions," she says, her fingers drumming the table. "One. How certain are you of this as fact and not speculation?"

Alex darts a glance at me and I shrug.

“Eighty percent,” he says. “The indicators of manip—”

“Eighty percent,” Rosalind says. The drumming of her fingers is almost hypnotic. Tap-tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap. “Not sufficient for creating an uproar such as this.”

“The signs are unmistakable, the only thing I’m not sure of is how many genera—”

“No, it is not enough,” Rosalind cuts him off once again. “You saw the reaction in this chamber. Knowledge such as this is dangerous. We cannot survive another riot.”

Several Council members murmur agreement and even Pdraig lowers his head thoughtfully then nods.

“Right,” Alex says. “That’s why we came here first.”

“Good. Second question. What difference does it make?” she asks.

“Huh?” Alex asks, confused by the question.

Alex is a scientist through and through. Information and discovery makes his blood sing, but he often doesn’t see the implications of what new knowledge can bring. He misses the human element and the emotional reactions of people, such as we just saw happen in this microcosm of the bunker.

“First, this is supposition, not fact,” Rosalind says, holding up one finger. “Second, this information does nothing to aid, ensure, or continue the survival of our two species,” she says as she adds a second finger. “Lastly, as was aptly demonstrated by this Council, it is inflammatory and factually dangerous, thereby not suitable for broad distribution.”

She adds the final finger as understanding dawns on Alex’s face. He swallows and nods. I feel bad for him, so I move a little closer to give emotional support.

“Oh,” he says.

Rosalind turns her attention towards me. My cheeks flush as I’m the one on the spot now.

“The Experiments,” she says, redirecting everyone’s attention deftly and easily. “You say that what was done to them increases their resistance to radiation.”

“Yes,” Alex says. “And one of the suspended ones I’ve been studying, his resistance should be even higher.”

Rosalind leans forward, her hawkish nose homing in on this useful fact.

“Explain,” she says.

“We know their tolerance is higher, but they are still subject to it,” Alex says. “What I’m seeing is that their cells break down the radiation naturally. It was part of the, well the experimentation. They were created for war, going into hot zones. The research implies that those hot zones, as our military would call them, were actually hot, as in radiated, and these soldiers were created to go in and clean up any pockets of resistance.”

Padraig growls while others on the Council lean closer to one another and whisper.

“And you are studying one who is what, later in the chain of experiments?” Rosalind asks.

“Yes,” Alex says. “His genetics, what his records show, are levels beyond what we’ve seen in the ones who are, well, awake.”

Rosalind nods then looks back at me. “And you know how to wake him alone? Safely?”

“I do,” I say with confidence. This I am sure of, while Alex’s theories I follow and understand the gist of the science behind them, but are way outside my training.

Rosalind leans back in her chair. Other Councilors comment and discuss but it’s background noise. I’m watching Rosalind as inscrutable thoughts play out on her face. Her fingers drum softly on the table but watching her is fascinating.

This is how she became the Lady General on the generation ship. A role that was traditionally held by a man. She was famous. Everyone knew her or of her and her brilliance. I

always thought the stories were just that though, stories. Over exaggerations of some much simpler truth, but watching her, seeing her handle the disparate views of the Council, I have to wonder if the stories were not under exaggerating.

“We must vote,” Rosalind says at last.

“Vote?” Padraig asks.

“I propose that we awaken this experiment,” Rosalind says. “Immediately.”

“Why would we do this?” Elmer asks. “We can’t feed the mouths we have, why add another?”

“Because we will ask him to find us a place to go,” Rosalind says.

“Impossible!”

“It’s not time.”

“It won’t work.”

“It’s our only hope.”

Every Council member expresses their views in another round of shouting. Rosalind slams her bare hand on the table. The smacking sound cuts through the noise, and everyone stops.

“We have no choice,” she says. “Each of you knows the numbers as well as I do. The supplies will not last. The scavenging teams are coming back empty handed as often as not.”

“But the radiation,” a lithe Asian woman says.

“Yes, Jolie, the radiation,” Rosalind says. “We know it’s dropping, faster than expected. If we have a destination, a safe place to go, we can move everyone.”

“How do you think this will work, Rosalind?” Elmer asks.

She purses her lips but doesn’t look away from me.

“There is a stockpile of epis that I’ve had in reserve for just such an occasion,” she says.

The noise comes again but Rosalind and I are in a private exchange. The shouts and arguments of the Council are like a

storm outside a sturdy home. I'm aware of it, but it doesn't affect me. I'm in awe of her. She planned for this. How, I have no idea, but she was prepared for everything that has happened.

"Go," Rosalind mouths.

I nod, grab Alex's arm, and leave the Council chambers and their arguments behind. I know what Rosalind wants and I'm going to deliver it. The Council be damned.

The angel descends from the sky, bringing comfort. The kindness of her eyes is my only relief from constant pain. She reaches her hand out, but no matter how hard I try to take it, it is always just out of reach.

“He’s waking up,” a male voice says.

“Increase the feed,” another answers.

Vision swims as the blackness fades. Something is on my head. I try to rise but my arms are bound. Muscles tense as I try to break free. I strain but to no avail. A machine beeps faster, louder, and I hear people moving.

“This is a problem,” the first voice says.

“No,” the second answers. “It’s not. Feed increased, increasing again.”

My vision swims then I am falling. The angel tries to reach me, but I am gone.

We march through mud that clings, pulling us down with each step. I flap my wings, straining for lift to make the forward march easier.

Pausing my motion, I dig into my pack and remove a small case. Opening it, the still glowing strands of epis glisten in the light of the moon. I take part of a strand, slip it into my mouth

under my tongue, then close the case and put it back into my pack.

The warmth of the epis in my stomach causes a rush and renews my strength. I look around as the others do the same, then we adjust the harnesses of our weapons and resume our march.

“Breakers never quit,” Bahr says.

Bahr. That is not his name, it is his number. We are numbers. We are not real...

The world spins as it turns to black.

The angel calls. I cannot see her, but I hear her. Her voice is music that does not quite ring clearly. She is close. I strive to open my eyes, but they refuse to respond. I know her. I feel her and my dragon roars, answering her call. Can she hear me? Will she find me here in the darkness that I have been condemned to?

“We are pinned down. Get that sniper,” Drogor yells.

“I see it,” I respond.

I pull the plasma rifle up and take aim, inhaling deeply. I lean out and rapid fire. The bolts burn through the air, tracing their way up the building towards the sniper.

“Down!” Othim yells.

The world explodes. As blackness closes, I know nothing is real.

“The memories are not taking,” the voice says.

“Use frequency twelve point two,” another says.

“He will not survive that.”

“Then he does not survive.”

Before blackness comes, my body is flooded with electricity. Involuntarily, I buck and fight against the restraints as my body is wracked with pain. Then the world is gone again.

“Dalagh, why are you doing this?”

“You know I must,” I say. “Tajss needs me.”

“No, I need you,” S’khan pleads, grabbing my hands and jerking me around to face her.

I touch her beautiful, round face. Her green eyes burn with intensity. I brush the golden curls of her hair away from her forehead then kiss her there. She grabs my horns and jerks my head back, exposing my throat.

“S’khan,” I say.

“You promised,” she hisses.

“I know but—”

“No, no buts. You promised me forever. You know we are one, how can you leave? For this?”

“The war is coming,” I say. “You know it as well as I do.”

“That is not our problem,” she says.

“But it is,” I say. “How can we even consider spawning children when the future is so uncertain?”

“Because Tajss provides.”

“And Tajss needs,” I respond. “I must do this. For Tajss. For us.”

“I am going to lose you,” she pleads.

“Never,” I say. “Nothing can ever separate us. Not time, not space, I will conquer death itself for you.”

“Bold words,” she says, but her grip on my hair eases and I pull her closer until our lips meet.

*“I love you,” I say into her warm and inviting mouth.
“Always.”*

“And I you,” she says. “Stay. Please, I know this is going to go so wrong.”

The ships appear in the sky all at once. An armada arriving on Tajss. It is supposed to be impossible. We are protected. Off limits. No one would dare. All that we did, every mission was to prevent this, but now the day is here. I look at Bahr... no not Bahr, that is not his name. Is it?

I shake my head. Of course it is Bahr. He is my squad leader. We, the Breakers, follow him.

“Captain?” Othim asks.

Bahr curses, staring up at the sky.

“Those are Imperial ships,” Othim says. He grabs a pair of goggles and looks, adjusting them before dropping them back to his side. “No.”

“What is it Othim?” I ask.

“They are not alone,” he says. “Look past the transport ships, deeper. Close your lenses to cut the glare of the suns.”

I do as he suggests, we all do. When I see it, my stomach drops and my scales tingle. The palms of my hands itch because I know there is nothing we can do.

“The space boys,” I say.

“Do not stand a chance,” Othim says. “If that is what I think...”

He trails off and we stand in silence.

“Breakers,” Bahr says. “This is it. Our one chance is Bunker 42.”

S'khan, I'm sorry. I am so sorry.

The pain is unbelievable. Consciousness comes not in waves but in an explosion of whiteness. Everything is white, then black, then white again. It does not stop. It hurts so bad I want to retreat. Run away, but I cannot. She is close. I hear her. Feel her.

The angel is calling. S'khan has come for me.

“Experiment D4l48h is a failure. The procedures are not holding, making future control questionable. Until further research can be done, and better tools for the implanting of memories is developed, he will be put into storage.”

“It is too bad,” another voice says.

I cannot see them. Why can I not see?

“This one’s responses are off the charts. It would have set a new standard.”

“Yes, too bad, but not a total loss. We have learned a lot and perhaps, in time, the neuropsychologist will develop this tech further.”

“You are right, of course. Goodbye D4l48h. Perhaps we will meet again.”

Cold. So cold I cannot keep from shivering. I fight, or I try to, but my body does not respond. I do the only thing I can. I scream. But even so, there is no sound.

SHAUN

“Can you believe that?” Alex asks for at least the twelfth time.

“Yes,” I say, because saying no hasn’t gotten through to him.

“I mean, they just—” he pauses, frowns, then looks at me. “Huh?”

“Alex, I get it. I do, but we have work to do. The Council is made up of people too. They’re as scared as the rest of us. Maybe even more than we are because they know more. Don’t let it bother you.”

He rubs his forehead, then runs his hands through his hair and sighs. When he’s finished he drops his hands to his sides, and the look on his face is edging on despair.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“You know it is,” I say softly. “Now we have work to do.”

“Did she mean it?”

“Rosalind?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, she did. This is what we need to do. We’re going to wake him up.”

“Are you sure we’re ready for this?”

I smile and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Not in the slightest. But,” I laugh, “we’re going to do it anyway. Because what else are we going to do?”

“You’re nuts, you know that?”

“I’ve been called way worse.”

I stare out the window of the office at the tube in which he rests. The last member of the Experiments team. Part of me feels like I should tell them we’re doing this. I keep thinking it might be a good idea, but then I don’t. I’m not sure how they’ll react or how he will react to them.

I know I can wake him up safely, but I don’t know what the time in suspended animation has done to his mind. There are oddities in the brain scans. Alex and I both have been trying to figure them out, but the best we can do is guess.

This technology is completely alien to us. If humans had had something similar on Earth, then our generational ship would have been an entirely different thing. Alex and I have whiled away a lot of hours daydreaming about stuff like this. Yay for being nerds.

“All the monitors look good,” Alex says. “Are you ready?”

I nod and walk out the door of the control room, heading straight to the tube with Dal in it. I don’t know when I decided to call him Dal, but I realize I have been, in my head at least, for a long time now. I’ve studied him and the machine holding him for so long I feel like I know him.

On some level, I guess I kind of do. I know him by the waves on a screen showing his brain activity. The numbers measuring the slow beating of his hearts. And more, or worst of all, the records we’ve translated of what he’s been through. It’s unimaginable and heartbreaking.

I lay a hand on the cold metal of the tube and close my eyes, offering up a silent prayer to whoever or whatever might be listening. Let him be okay.

Waking from suspended animation would be traumatic enough without his history. Having been through what I know he has, I worry about his mental state and what it will be like when he returns to awareness. The time for worry is well past though. He is our best hope of survival. Whatever he wakes up like, we’ll have to deal with it.

“Alex? I’m starting now.”

“Ready,” Alex says.

I touch the screen and it lights up. A wave sine pulses across the top two thirds while symbols scroll across the bottom. I can’t read them directly, but I know what they mean in general from having worked on this long enough.

Pressing a finger to the top right corner, the screen changes. Symbols now display inside of the boxes. I’ve memorized the sequence of steps to start the cycle of awakening the occupant. One at a time I go through them. The tube hisses, groans, and the readouts change as the status shifts. The tube opens partway and a white, billowing fog rolls out.

“All good?” I call to Alex.

“Heart rate is high,” he yells back. “Brain activity is... oh.”

“Oh? Oh what?” I ask, tension knotting my shoulders as my blood pressure leaps.

“The brain activity,” he yells. “Shaun, get back, this is off—”

Before he can finish the sentence, my world is shook to its core by the sound of screeching metal as the top half of the tube blasts open. Stumbling backwards, I crash against another of the tubes. I throw up my arms up to protect my face.

“Raaaaaaa,” a loud, rumbling voice echoes in the emptiness of the warehouse.

In a blind panic I run. This isn’t rational or thought out, it’s pure instinct. One hundred percent pure ‘get away from the danger’. My heart pounds and my head throbs. Feet slap against the hard, concrete floor as I head for the imagined safety of the office.

“Alex!” I scream as he appears in the door.

“Shaun loo—”

Before my foot hits the ground for my next step I’m swept off my feet. The world tilts, turns, then the ceiling is ahead. I’m still running, legs flailing even as I arc through the air. I

scream but barely hear it over the thundering rush of blood in my ears.

I fly up into the air then I'm free falling. Tumbling as gravity takes hold and calls me back. I choke on my screams, unable to give them voice.

The roaring comes again then I'm snatched from the air like I'm a rag doll. Nothing makes sense. I can't process what is happening fast enough for it to add up in my head. I'm crushed against flesh and then I'm bouncing up and down.

The roaring sound rumbles against me and vibrates in my chest. I'm pressed against hard muscle that is cold on my skin. Wind rushes past as my stomach and thoughts try to catch up.

It takes an effort, but I turn my head. I'm moving through the warehouse. Fast. As if on cue, the view changes and I'm flying up into the air. The flapping of Zmaj leathery wings covers over all other sounds.

Suddenly I understand. He has me, Dal. He woke up. Okay. He's confused. Probably scared. Welcome to the party, so am I. My heart hammers and it's hard to take a full breath because he's holding me so tightly. But he's not hurting me. He won't, if I'm smart. Not on purpose anyway.

"Dal," I say, but my voice is muffled against the bulging muscles of his chest.

Damn he has massive pecs. Covered with cold scales that press into my skin giving him a thoroughly alien texture no human man could ever have.

He lands on top of the tubes and is bounding from one to the next. His wings open with each leap and we glide further and further, going over two then three as he finds the rhythm.

He's not going to hurt me. He's not.

I tell myself over and over because I'm scared. Rightfully so.

"Dal, stop," I say.

I'm shortening his name, or rather his designation, because the full thing is a mouthful and I'm not sure I can say it right. He

growls. The most response I've gotten. Or I hope I have, that he's growling in response to me and not something else.

We're almost to the edge of the warehouse. If he hits the main tunnels there will be panic. The people going about their lives out there are already on edge and seeing a crazed Zmaj experiment will not be good. I can't let that happen. Another riot will destroy the slim chance of survival both our races have left.

Shifting and squirming, I manage to get my left arm free. I reach up, blindly because I can't tilt my head back far enough with the way he's holding me, and stroke his face, running my fingers down his cheek. He stumbles as he lands.

His foot slips and we're falling. He twists mid-air, and lands with a heavy thunk on the ground with me on top. He has me cradled protectively in his arms, having twisted around to save me.

"S'khan," he says with the rush of air as he impacts.

He hits hard enough I worry he might have broken something. His vicelike grip eases and I take the opportunity to slip free. Scrambling to my feet even as he rolls onto his knees and begins to rise, pushing himself off the floor with all four of his arms.

Four. Shit. They did their twisted experiments on him too. You poor soul.

He raises his head, and our eyes meet for the first time. My heart skips a beat then two. My breath catches in my chest, waiting. My stomach tightens.

I know those eyes.

"S'khan," he repeats, rising.

He stands and keeps going up. He's as tall as Padraig, towering over me as he looks down. He takes a slow, hesitant step forward. He frowns, his eyes going unfocused. Those eyes.

Gray, cloudy like storm clouds. Piercing, sharp, and deeply intelligent. He has heavy, bruised looking bags under them. He

frowns and his forehead wrinkles, pulling his horns down with it. The horns shimmer in the dim light of the warehouse. His hair is long and thick, dropping to his shoulders. The dusky tan of his skin is accented by the emerald green on the edging of his scales.

One hand raises then drops again like he's also suddenly unsure. He looks around and the confusion on his face is unmistakable. A deep rumble comes from him. I step closer and put my hand on the top of his stomach. He looks back to me.

"Dal," I say.

He nods, then grumbles and reaches towards me with his natural arms but then drops them back to his side. He shakes his head, mouth moving like he's trying to find words to express his thoughts. I get it. I am too.

Instead of doing something useful, anything at all, we simply stare at each other. My mouth is as dry as the desert outside. Feelings, so many feelings that I can't sort one from the next. Time is no longer a thing. I have this sensation that I've been here before, in this same position, same moment. That this has already played out and we're now racing towards something that can't be stopped, but I don't know what that ending is.

I'm drawn to him. Like gravity pulling, but not on my body, no it's pulling on my heart and my soul. His gray eyes are so full of pain and loss it leaves me aching. An ache as deep as my bones. A cold emptiness of eternal loss.

I don't blink and neither does he. This is too strange. I assume it's the same for him. His hearts are beating so hard that I feel them thumping just above where my hand rests. I drop my eyes to my hand and he lowers his head too.

"Shaun!"

Alex skids around the corner but he's not alone. Armored guards are with him, carrying the handful of still working bolt throwers with them.

The moment shatters. I turn my head, opening my mouth to shout, but before I can make a sound Dal grabs me with two

arms and leaps.

*S*afety. *Must find safety.*

My angel is in danger. First is safety for her, then I will destroy.

I do not know how this all came to be, but it does not matter. Niggling doubts and fear creep through my thoughts.

Is this an illusion? One of their games?

Even if so, it does not matter. It is her and, real or not, only time will tell. She looks different. Completely and strangely so, but at the same time, she is exactly the same. I know her, in my hearts.

Shouts arise behind us as our pursuers give chase. I cannot stop now. I look everywhere, trying to see everything. The fog over my thoughts is slowly clearing and, as it does, I recognize this place. We are in the bunker.

Bunker 42. We are in the depths of despair. How? How is she here?

I have to get her out of here before they hurt her too. These evil, twisted males. The outsiders who run this place cannot be allowed to have her. I will tear this place to the ground. I will destroy them.

Shouts from our pursuers and the rush of wind past my ears drown out her voice at first, but when I get far enough from them, running along the wall using the assets they added to me, I hear her saying my name and look down.

“Dal,” she repeats. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

She repeats the same thing over and over, but she does not know. Cannot know. Because they killed her.

Images of ships appearing in the sky and the first bombs falling fill my head and I gasp, losing my grip on the wall. We slip and then we are falling. I twist, open my wings, and turn the fall into a glide to the ground.

She squirms against my chest, trying to get down but I cannot let her go. We are not safe. I hear them still, their footsteps echoing in the large room. I tighten my grip to keep her safe and dash for a corner. If I recall correctly, there is an air shaft in this corner that will hide her.

“Dal, stop. It’s okay. They’re my friends.”

I growl, hunch over her, and run faster. Maybe they have brainwashed her too. They tried to do that to me. So many times. I was only able to hold on mentally because of her. Fighting my way back to her time and again because I promised I would not leave her.

I promised. And she is here. Unharmred, it seems, but they are insidious. Working not only on the flesh but the mind. Inflicting pain and agony that scars your hearts and soul instead of the body. Pain that never ends.

Glancing up, I see the vent I remembered. I look over my shoulder and do not see our pursuers as of yet, so I leap to the wall. The extra limbs grab hold and I use my tail to help make my way to the ceiling. I pull the grate open with one hand, holding her with my other two arms. Once the gate is out of the way, I lift her into the shaft and set her down.

“Dal, no, it’s okay,” she says, reaching for me, but I shut the grate and latch it.

She pounds her fist on the metal mesh, but it holds firm. She calls my name and begs for me to open it, but she does not know. This is okay because I will help her understand once we are safe. Right now, I must eliminate those who would capture us.

“S’khan,” I say, my voice deep and rusty from lack of use. Saying her name feels as if I am tearing the flesh of my throat to force words out of it again. “Stay.”

I drop to the ground and land in a crouch. Inhaling deeply, I find their scent. Now I hunt.

After a fast assessment I move quickly and silently, slipping between the tubes. Pressing my back to one, I close my eyes and listen. My pursuers are good, but not good enough. I hear their feet sliding on the floor and the occasional rattle of their weapons as they move.

I wait, letting them come closer. Distantly I hear S’khan yelling and wish she would be silent. There is no way they will not know where I hid her. Unfortunate for them, I will have to kill them to keep her safe.

I climb onto a tube and then lie flat. I work my way towards the inside edge, moving slow enough that I do not make noise. They are coming closer, now it is a matter of patience. I push up into a crouch and stay inside one of the shadows cast by dim lights.

Below, six opponents approach. I watch as they move in a basic formation. They are trained, scanning not only their front but their sides and looking up as well. I slip back, deeper into shadow, depending on sound to measure their progress.

Behind me S’khan shouts, but in front is them. I filter her out and focus. The sound of their breath is enough for me to know where they are. They are nervous and breathing fast. Their armor creaks with each step. I wait. They are almost where I want them. Almost.

When they are directly below, I leap into the air, spreading arms and wings wide. I am a shadow, blocking the light. They look up at the last instant as I drop into the middle of their formation.

Their shouts turn to screams as I grab three of them by their throats. I lift them off their feet and shake. They are small, like S’khan’s new form, and weigh very little. The three I have gurgle as I tighten my grip on their soft flesh.

Pain slams into my right shoulder and one of my arms goes numb, causing me to drop the male I am holding. He lands in a heap then crawls away.

I roar, turning to face the attacker. He has a weapon, some kind of tiny gun. He raises it to his shoulder and fires without aiming as he backpedals, trying to stay out of my reach.

The gun fires a purple bolt that crackles through the air. It sings my ear and makes the side of my face numb and tingly. I growl and reach for him but he is too far.

Shot after shot hits my back, pushing me forward with crackling force. The numbness spreads across my limbs and into my lower back. I swing my tail and connect, taking down two assailants then rush the two standing in front.

They try to fire but I am too fast. I kick one and he flies backwards, slamming against a tank then slumps to the floor. I grab the other with one arm and throw him into the air. As he drops, I ball a fist and swing.

“Dalagh, stand down!”

I stop mid-swing. That voice. It cannot be.

I look over my shoulder, letting the soldier I threw into the air slam to the hard floor. He whoofs as his air is knocked out and he does not get back up.

Across the pile of bodies stands a Zmaj in shadow. He walks closer and I narrow my eyes. The fog in my head has mostly cleared, but I still do not know if this is all a trick or real. They have done this to me before, but if this is one of their imaginings, it is better than any that have come before.

“Commander?” I ask, eyes narrowing, trying to ascertain if he is real.

“Yes, Dalagh, it is me,” he says. “Stand down soldier.”

“Sir,” I say, still doubting. “Are you real?”

He steps into a pool of light, and it is him. As real as anything. I squint and tilt my head, but he does not shimmer or change. He is older than I remember. That is a detail they would not have thought of, would they?

“It is me Dal,” he says, moving forward but slowly. “It is good to see you. You are the last of the unit to wake and I have missed you.”

“Last? Are the others...” I trail off, not wanting to say it.

“No, sorry, Dal. They are alive. We are together. Again. Come, I will take you to them.”

“Dal, don’t hurt them!” S’khan’s voice is strained, drifting through the open space of the warehouse.

Bahr looks up and past me towards the sound. “Is she okay, solider?”

“Of course she is,” I say. “Sir... Bahr. Is this, are you sure?”

He closes the last bit of distance between us and clasps my shoulder tightly. Tight enough that I feel it in spite of the numbness from the electrical bolt the others hit me with. The alien males are slowly climbing to their feet and I watch them warily, waiting for one of them to make a move while still talking with Bahr.

“It is Dal,” he says. “There is a lot to catch you up on, but it is real.”

“How?”

Bahr shakes his head. “Truthfully? I do not know. How about we get the girl down and we will talk this over?”

The dragon rumbles, paranoid, and I struggle to not give into it, but this is too clever. Too perfectly the way to get me to let my guard down. If it is her, and he is here, how do I know he is not working for them too? He could have been broken.

The small males move into a formation but none of them attacks. I watch them to be sure, then stare into Bahr’s eyes, looking for any hint of betrayal. I see nothing but sincerity.

It is the Commander. I trust him. Of course, I do.

I open my mouth to say as much but then one more thought comes.

He is the one who led us here in the first place.

Trust is not freely given, it is earned. We will see what comes of this, but for now the best thing to do is go along. Let them play their game and if those evil monsters are behind this, then they will reveal themselves. Sooner or later, they will slip and when they do, I will destroy them, once and for all.

“Dal, no!” I scream.

My throat burns with the force of the words. I pound on the mesh to no avail. The air vent is big since it was designed by Zmaj, which gives me enough space to turn around. I try using my feet to kick the grate open. Every time I hit it, the sound echoes loud enough to hurt my ears, but I can't stop.

I hear guns fire, the impact of flesh on flesh, and grunting. I can't see what's happening, but I have to get out of here and stop this. I don't want anyone to get hurt. Dal is confused. He's probably scared, and I have no doubt he's suffering from post-traumatic stress. I don't know everything he's been through, but what I do know is enough to break the strongest of people.

I shout and kick the grate several times. I pause and shift myself around to see my progress. The grate is unphased by my efforts. The only difference I can see is that I've knocked a lot of dust into the air. Determined to break free, I twist to turn back when I realize that it's quiet. Instead of turning, I press my face against the grate and try to see. A shape approaches in the darkness, resolving into Dal.

“Dal,” I call. “It's okay. Let me out. Please.”

He looks up and his lips curl into a half-smile. He climbs the wall as easily as a spider, clinging to it with his extra limbs and opening the grate with his natural arms.

“Come to me,” he says, his voice rumbly and hoarse.

My tummy flutters as I scoot forward. My body tries to stop as I approach the drop, but I push myself through the hole, putting my trust in him. It's one hell of a fall if he loses his grip.

There's nothing to fear. He cradles me in the crook of one arm and in moments we're on the ground. Six armed guards stand in a semi-circle, warily watching. One of the Franks and Alex stand closer, inside the guard's arc.

"Shaun, are you okay?" Alex asks.

"I'm fine," I say, standing close to Dal.

He's big, hulking and yet strangely comforting in his presence. I feel, in some strange way that I don't understand in the slightest, like there was this hole in my world. I didn't know it was there, that hole was hidden. Only now that he fills it am I aware it existed.

Alex frowns, opens his mouth, then snaps it shut and shakes his head. It doesn't matter though because his eyes say the words his mouth doesn't. He wants to know if I really am fine. The concern is written large on his face so I nod and give him a reassuring smile. I am fine, after all.

"Welcome back, soldier," the other Frank says, stepping forward and holding out one of his natural arms.

I feel Dal's hesitation more than see it. I don't think anyone else is aware of it, or if they are they don't react to it. Dal takes the offered hand by the wrist, clasping tight. His hand is so large it engulfs the other's wrist, fingers wrapping fully around. He's almost a foot taller than the other Frank.

"Thank you, Commander," Dal says.

Is his voice always this husky? Or is that a side-effect of the suspension chemicals? He has a deep, rumbling voice which fits with what you'd expect given his size, but it's very hoarse too.

"Come, you need nourishment and orientation," the Commander says.

One of the soldiers groans as the others shift their weight. They still have their weapons ready in anticipation of further fighting even though it seems clear that it's over. Dal hesitates. It's subtle, but before he answers his eyes dart around and he smirks before nodding.

As he nods, he slips an arm around my waist in the most natural way possible, like this is something we always do, not like we just met. I don't even realize it myself until we're walking. I'd never let this happen with a guy I just met, but here I am rolling with it like it's no big deal.

The guards trail behind while the one Dal named Commander, that I recognize as Bahr from earlier, leads. Alex boldly walks at his side while Dal and I follow. I don't know what to do with all the emotions and feelings crashing around in my head, so I do what I always do. I retreat to coding.

One subroutine runs, triggering another, and all you want it to do is get the product. I don't focus on the overall program. I build the parts one at a time. One part connects to the next and I debug each one, one at a time. I treat this like that. Working out this subroutine first which is to get to where we're going then do a full debrief of Dal.

The overall program is to get his agreement to go out and find a new home for us. We don't have time to waste either. Supplies are desperately low. We have months at the most before we're in serious trouble at which point the semblance of a civil society will break down. I have a suspicion that months is an exaggeration too. I think it's weeks.

That's the program. Get him to go. First subroutine, wake him up. Check. Now we need his agreement, which means understanding. We need to understand him, and he needs to understand the mission and why it must happen.

Good, I nod to myself as I work out the immediate steps. It's an unconscious habit, normally, but I become aware of it when I realize that Dal is staring. I look up into his stormy gray eyes and my heart patters faster, my stomach tightens, and my cheeks flush. He doesn't say anything but a knowing smile

curves his lips. Knowing what, though? How does he know anything about me? What is he thinking?

I know what he's thinking. I don't want to admit it, but on some level I do. Obviously, he wants to mate, but that's not all I know about his thoughts either. I get the idea that he knows what I'm doing. That I'm breaking down the steps. How? How can he know that? That doesn't make sense, so I file it in the basket of "unknowns" and leave it, for now.

We enter the control room. Usually Addison is in here working and Melchior, her mate, is close to hand but she isn't today. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. She has medical training that might be helpful, but Dal seems to be okay. He's certainly ready to fight, as witnessed by all the excitement.

The control room isn't big enough for everyone and I wonder how they plan to handle that. Alex opens the door, and Bahr pauses before stepping through.

"Thank you for your assistance," he says to the guards. "As you see, it is no longer necessary. Dalagh is fine."

"You're not in charge," one of the men says.

He's a burly man with a thick, dark brown curly beard that lays on his chest. He has a pudgy face that shows all the bulk is not pure muscle. He bristles as he strains his head back to glare at the Commander, holding his rifle protectively across his chest.

Bahr doesn't visibly react. He looks at the man who is a solid two feet shorter than him and probably half his weight at the most, not considering the degree of fitness in the slightest.

"You are correct," the Commander says with a slow nod. "I am not in charge of you."

"Right, then we're not taking or—"

"But," the Commander raises a finger, cutting the guard off. "He is my soldier. I am responsible for him and his actions, as I am all males under my command."

"That's well and goo—"

“I am not finished,” Bahr cuts him off, but remains calm. The rest of us watch this play out with bated breath. The looks on the rest of the guards’ faces, and the way they lean away, make it clear they’d be happy to go away. “I will take full responsibility for any of his actions. Your Commander Rosalind will accept my word. Do I need to contact her to give you assurance?”

The burly man’s face pales at the casual way Bahr invokes Rosalind’s name. Everyone knows you don’t want her attention on trivial or inconsequential matters. She’s busy and known for dealing with fools harshly. It’s like I watch those thoughts play across the man’s face as clear as day. Finally, wisdom or fear of regret wins out and he shakes his head, stepping back.

“Fine, but if this goes wrong, it’s on you buddy,” he huffs. He’s trying to save face.

“I agree,” the Commander says, giving the man his out.

“Come on, we’re done,” the burly man barks, motioning at the rest of the guards.

An audible collective sigh of relief comes from the guards as they turn and march away. Their makeshift armor and weapons clatter as they leave. The Commander watches until they are gone before he enters the control room. Alex follows then Dal steps back to let me go first. I smile. It’s a stupid little thing but that doesn’t matter. It’s chivalrous and tickles the pleasure centers of my brain.

Alex rushes around the room, gathering up seats which we take. I thank Alex and he nods, his cheeks flushing. He darts constant glances at Dal then back at me. Curiosity burns in his eyes but now is not the time. I’m glad for that because I don’t know what I would say.

Retreating from Alex’s questioning looks, I turn my attention to Dal. He holds himself with perfect posture. Even seated he towers over the rest of us, including the Commander. His ramrod straight spine puts him a full head taller.

“Dalagh, I am glad you’re with us again,” Bahr says.

“I am sure you are, Commander,” Dalagh says.

There is something in the way he says it though. I can't put a finger on what, but I see the reaction in the Commander's face. The words are fine, but it's the way he says them. Only when I examine the tone do I notice it. Dal is in doubt. Doubt of what?

“Yes,” the Commander continues.

“Do you feel okay?” Alex asks, inserting himself into the conversation.

“I am well,” Dal says, but his eyes never leave the Commander. He squints and oh so slightly tilts his head like he's trying to see something clearly or there's a blinding source of light he's trying to filter out.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

My seat is next to his, but two feet separate us. He turns his head and when he looks at me, the suspicion and doubts are replaced by a half-smile and a softness in his eyes. He nods then turns his attention back to the Commander. The instant he does, the suspicious look is back.

“What is the mission?” Dal asks.

“Dalagh,” the Commander says. “You have just awoken. There is time for you to adjust, wake up. Orient yourself.”

“The mission, sir?” Dal repeats.

The Commander inhales deeply then lets it out in a long sigh. He lowers his head and for only an instant his shoulders and wings droop before snapping back up. As they do, he raises his head and meets Dal steady gaze.

“Of course. There is a mission,” Bahr says.

“We are the Breakers, sir,” Dal says. “The mission?”

“In time, soldier,” the Commander says. “You need to be debriefed, then briefed.”

“Debrief, sir?” Dalagh asks, stiffening. “That is simple, sir. I was put into suspended animation. I broke free of their programming. Once I did that once, it was ineffective no

matter how many times they tried. The only solution they had was to put me away.”

His voice is devoid of emotion. He is stating facts as if they have no impact. Tears well in my eyes as I process the enormity of what he is saying. Programming. A tear breaks free and trails down my cheek. The Commander stares with his mouth open.

“Programming?” the Commander asks.

“Of course, sir,” Dal says. “You received the same. I watched. Do you not recall?”

The Commander shakes his head. He closes his mouth and squares his shoulders.

“Holy—” the small male’s voice trails off, not finishing the exclamation.

“What is the briefing?” I ask, ignoring the alien male.

I do not let any emotions through. They would be a distraction, so I hold them at bay by not looking at the female. It does not keep me from feeling her, though, there is no escaping the awareness of my angel. That would be like trying to ignore the suns in the sky. An impossibility. No matter what you do you are as aware of them as I am of her.

“Dal,” S’khan says, placing her hand on my forearm. Warmth explodes through my limb, racing towards my heart. It is an attack on my mental armor, melting the walls I have built around myself. Her touch becomes everything as it triggers a memory.

“No, no buts. You promised me forever. You know we are one, how can you leave? For this?” she says.

My stomach lurches. The intensity of the memory, it is as if I am there again. Denying her once more, except now I know how it turns out and that alone makes it so much worse. I know how wrong I was which brings a flood of regret on which I choke.

The pain in her eyes is clear but then I see the strangest thing yet. Her eyes fill with moisture and as I watch, a single, clear

drop breaks free. It trails a slow path down the edge of her nose and across her cheek.

I have never seen anything like this. I search my memories but there is nothing to compare to. My hearts shatter watching that drop trailing down her face. Moving slow, to avoid startling or doing the wrong thing, I raise my hand to her face. I place my thumb beneath the drop and then swipe up, catching it.

I hold the drop before my eyes. It sparkles in the soft light, refracting tiny rainbows. My throat clenches. There is beauty in this tiny, simple manifestation of sadness that rips at my soul.

“Dalagh,” Bahr says. “Give yourself some time.”

“S’khan,” I murmur, tearing my gaze off the drop and looking at her again. The ache in my guts is so deep and painful that I cannot speak.

Bahr’s head jerks towards her and his eyes widen.

“No...” he hisses. “Can it....”

He does not finish putting his thoughts into words, but it does not matter. I know what I know. The dragon knows. We promised each other forever. This must be what forever looks like. Not what I expected, but then what is? Nothing has turned out like we meant it to, but Tajss provides.

“Shaun, what is happening?” Alex asks.

She meets my steady gaze. The moisture glistens in the corners of her eyes but no more drops break free. She knows, but I see her doubts and confusion. I will wait. She will figure it out in time, when she is ready.

Taking a deep breath, I force my attention back to the Commander.

“Briefing?” I remind him.

Bahr narrows his eyes. His scales are duller than I remember and there are new scars too. His horns are bigger, longer, all signs of age. How long was I under?

Time has been malleable. The machines they used to implant memories into us confused our sense of time at first. They had to do that to implant memories that did not happen. Those memories had to seem real, which means the time for them to happen had to exist. At least in our heads.

This is another implant.

No. I am not sure it is not. But, if it is, then this is the best one they have ever done. Is that what they said before I went under the last time? That they would try again when their evil technology had improved?

I tilt my head, squint my eyes, and try to focus on the edges of people and things. That is how I figured it out before. The edges never look smooth. The implanted parts stood out, being laid over the memory of real locations.

“Yes,” Bahr says. He looks at S’khan for three beatings of my hearts before turning his attention back to me. “You know how we ended up here, of course.”

“I do,” I say, carefully keeping my voice neutral, but anger rushes alongside his simple words. The bijass surges as the dragon roars. I know exactly how we ended up here. Bahr volunteered us. All of this is his fault.

“These people call themselves humans,” he says, pointing at S’khan and the male that is like her. “I am sorry, I do not know your names.”

He gestures at them. The male shifts his weight around as if he is nervous and his soft, unprotected skin glistens as if he is wet.

“Alex,” he says, his voice cracking, and he points at his chest as if I am deaf. I nod.

“S’khan,” I say, looking at the female. My hearts speed up and I am breathing faster.

“Shaun,” she says with a soft shake of her head.

The word sounds wrong in my ears. As if she mispronounced her name. I frown but stop myself from correcting her. She is not the same, obviously, but it is her. But this is not a

discussion to have here or now. It will be a private matter when the time is right.

“Ssshhh-an.” I work out the sound as she said it. My tongue does not want to form the middle ah sound. It feels wrong and the way the s sound is soft instead of hard is difficult. It is so natural to call her by her name, the name I know her by, but I figure it out with her help.

She is kind. Never a hint of recrimination on her face or in her eyes. She repeats the word, slowly, sounding each part out until I say it perfectly. When I do, her face lights up and her eyes burn with an intensity that bores into my soul.

“Good,” Bahr says.

I resist the urge to punch him for interrupting the moment I am having with the female. He has no right to insert himself. Once he was the Commander and I would do anything for him. But now his judgment is not something I can trust. How could I? He led us here.

“Briefing,” I say, guiding him back to the point.

It hurts him. I see it in his face, but he covers it quickly.

I take a small sense of satisfaction in his pain because he deserves it. His momentary discomfort is nothing compared to what we have all been through.

“Yes. Of course. The humans were traveling on a ship, apparently massive, that crashed onto Tajss. They were attacked by Zzlo and the ship was severely damaged. That is how they arrived. They are from a planet,” he says a word that I do not know but it sounds like urt, which must be one of their alien words.

“Outside our galaxy?” I ask.

“Yes, we were the third and fourth generation of humans on the ship,” S’khan says.

The sound of her voice is the sweetest of music. An angelic call that balms the low anger that lies beneath the veneer of social manners I am using to keep it under control. I nod and give her a smile before returning my attention to Bahr.

“They have been here a while,” Bahr says. “Many turns of the suns. Long enough that it is known they are,” he hesitates glancing at S’khan, “compatible.”

“Compatible?”

“There have been children born to the union of human and Zmaj,” Bahr says.

That makes my hearts skip a beat and the shock leaves me stunned, unable to speak for a moment. I slowly turn my head to look at S’khan. Children? I had not thought it could be. My hearts resume but now they are racing against some unknown biological clock and intent to win.

“I see,” I say, my throat dry and scratchy, making it hard to say the words.

I force my thoughts away from all the beautiful and unexpected implications of this statement. The one thing that does not make sense sticks out like a pulsating star. The incongruity of all of this is not lost on me. It is impossible, but I cannot see any signs that it is one of the scientist’s games. Pulling on the loose strings is my best chance of figuring this out.

“Why are they in the bunker?” I ask.

“It has been a very long time since the Devastation. Tajss is coming back to life, and it seems other members of the Empire survived as well. The Pertinaxians were raiding, to what end I do not know, but then they attempted a full-scale invasion.

In order to stop them, the humans and the Zmaj who were with them set off a nuclear bomb. They have remained in the bunker, waiting out the effects of it.”

“Other Zmaj? From outside the bunker?” I ask.

“Yes, Dalagh,” Bahr says, reaching one of his natural hands, but I shift, pulling back.

I do not want him to touch me. The sting of his betrayal runs too deep. The slightest of frowns is his only reaction but it is enough.

“They survived?” I ask.

“Yes,” S’khan says. “They had a hard time and as far as we know only males survived.”

“Males?” I ask, turning all my attention to her.

She is so different than what I remember. Now smaller and softer, where before she was tall and strong. Her scales are gone, of course, but the coloring of her hair and her bright green eyes are the same. In this new form she has curves that were never there before and I must admit, they are intriguing. The most disconcerting thing is the lack of tail and wings.

None of that matters though. It is her. Whatever body she inhabits, I know her.

“Yes,” Bahr says, jumping back in. The sound of his voice is like sand between my scales. A fine grit that makes you itch and annoys you, but there is nothing you can do about it. “That brings you up to speed for the most part.”

“Right, but you need something,” I say, and my voice is harsher than I intend. I must continue to play along if I am going to figure this out. I do not want the ones pulling the strings to know I am onto them. I dart a quick glance at S’khan, if this is a trick, I am not sure I want it to end. “What are the marching orders?”

I speak to ease the tension in the room and lower his suspicion. He nods accepting this because it is the way I always was. He has no idea, if it is really him at all, that I am in the know now. I know what these monsters did to us, and it is so much worse than what they did to our bodies.

“Yes,” Bahr says. “The survivors who retreated to the bunker were only able to bring a limited number of supplies. Unplanned things happened—”

“They always do,” I interrupt, and for a moment it is as if nothing has ever happened to us or between us. It feels like before. Before we ever came to this den of evil called Bunker 42.

“You got that right solidier,” Bahr says with a chuckle.

I slip, for the briefest of moments, into a state of ease. The old comfort and familiarity flow over us and it is natural. Then

Bahr moves and his extra limbs shift, shattering the illusion.

“Your ask?” I say, cutting through the ease and familiarity to get to the chase. I cannot let my guard down, not for an instant.

“What was done to us,” he waves a hand up and down himself, “changed our bodies. As you can imagine there is still a high radiation count outside, but we are able to withstand it, longer than any human or normal Zmaj.”

“That does not answer why you woke me up? If your supplies are short, why add another mouth to feed?” I ask suspiciously.

“Because what they did to you is even more than what they did to the others,” S’khan says.

Not S’khan. Shaun. This is Shaun and she is not real. She may be all I dream of and all I want, but they would know that, would they not? Of course they do. They have been all through my head. They know my hearts’ true desire and now they use it against me.

I will destroy them.

“More?” I ask.

“All our tests show that you can survive even longer than the other Fra—, Experiments,” she interrupts what she was going to say and changes the word, but I do not know why.

“I see,” I say, lowering my head to give myself time to think. “You need me to go find supplies?”

“No, Dalagh,” Bahr says. “We need you to go find a new home.”

“And how am I to do that?”

“We have some information, but it means exploring. We need you to go and see what is there and if it is safe.”

There it is. The ask. Go and put yourself in danger, again. It is for the greater good, of course. That is how they hook me in, pull me along and get my agreement with their plans. Same as they did before. Come and fight. Protect Tajss and the ones you love.

The memory of saying goodbye to S’khan is sharp and painful. It was a mistake then, it is a mistake now.

“And if I say no?” I ask, not looking up.

The silence in the room is heavy. No one moves a muscle. I do not think they even breathe, and the moment stretches. At last Bahr shifts, his tail scraping across the floor.

“The Breakers—”

“Are gone,” I cut him off before he pulls the loyalty and oath card. “Bunker 42 saw to that.”

“Yes,” he says with a heavy sigh, and he lowers his head too as his shoulders slump. “They are. I will not, no I cannot order you. I do not have that right, not any longer.”

This is not real. It is the hook. This is how they drag me deeper into their illusion. If I go outside they will bombard me with radiation, overwhelming amounts, until I give in. This is how they break me.

I will not break. I will destroy them.

I straighten, square my shoulders, and wait for him to sit up straight as well. The humans watch the two of us but even though one of them is S’khan, no Shaun, this is not about them. This is facing the past. Denying the control that I once gave to this male.

“No,” I say.

“No?” Shaun asks, her voice trembling, but Bahr knows. His eyes widen, his mouth opens then he drops his head again.

“No,” I repeat, my decision made.

“No,” Dalagh says.

The single syllable echoes in my ears like the sounding of a death knell. Which it is. He said no. I can't believe it. This isn't what was supposed to happen.

No one speaks. Alex and I stare at Dal agape, waiting for him to... what? Get a big shit eating grin and say 'kidding'? I've never seen a Zmaj do anything like that and can't imagine it's about to happen now.

He said no. We are facing extinction and our best hope just gave us a single syllable denial. A single syllable that condemns both our races.

It must be that he doesn't understand. That's all. All we need to do is make him see the situation, and once he does, he'll agree to help. He will. He must. But... why would he? After all he's been through, all that's been done to him, what does he owe us or anyone?

The conflicting thoughts crash like two ships colliding. The exploding debris they leave in the wake of their destruction is random concepts and images, none of which gives me a clue as to what to say or do. The four of us shift our stares from one to another, all while silence reigns, until I can't stand it any longer.

“Uh-hum,” I clear my throat, “Dal.” Bahr and Alex look at me with budding hope on their faces, thinking that perhaps I have some deep insight for whatever reason. My stomach clenches because I don't have any such thing. “I get it. It's fine.”

Seeing the light on Alex and Bahr's face die hurts but it's true. We can't force him to do our bidding or to help us. Dal nods. Somehow the motion of his head is gentle and kind. He's staring at me so intently like he's studying me. So much so that he almost completely ignores the others. Warmth creeps over my chest and neck but I can't hold his steady gaze.

"Is there food?" Dal asks.

"Hmm, wha—oh, yes, of course," I say, stumbling over my words.

I didn't even think about feeding him. Or where we're going to put him up. Or a dozen other things, because we all expected him to jump on board and head out to save us all, I guess. We sure didn't have a plan in place for him saying no.

Bahr's tail is twitching, making a rasping sound as it drags across the floor. I stand up then glance at the other two and shrug. Maybe in time Dal will come around. Right now, there's nothing to be gained by sitting here and being uncomfortable.

"Come with me," I say, moving towards the door when neither Alex nor Bahr offer any objections.

Dal rises and I lead the way out of the office then through the warehouse. The soft whir and occasional clank of the machines gives way to the bustle of the tunnels which seem even fuller than usual.

The press of bodies is almost impossible to get through, especially when some group decides to go against the flow. I'm only peripherally aware of the people, though. My attention is mostly in my head where my thoughts are twisting between Dal saying no and the way he looks at me.

"Watch it," someone yells, then I'm crushed against the wall as the crowd shifts and I'm trapped.

It's almost impossible to breathe. I can't move my arms or legs. Panic flashes along with memories of the riot. People shout then there's the sound of flesh striking flesh as a fight breaks out.

I close my eyes and try to squirm my way free, struggling not to panic. A roar drowns out all the other sounds. I snap my eyes open and see Dalagh.

His four arms are spread wide, his tail is over his head, and his wings are open. All of which is an imposing enough sight, but what's worse is the look on his face.

Rage. He roars again and people cower as they scramble to get away. He pushes through those who are too slow, shoving them to either side. He grabs two of the people holding me against the wall and tosses them over the head of the people crowding the hall like they're nothing.

"S'khan," he says, the s soft and hissing. He crouches so that we are eye to eye, concern clear on his face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, breathing freely at last. My cheeks warm before his steady gaze. "Fine, it's okay. Don't hurt anyone."

Something flashes across his face. It's only there for an instant but I would swear my words hurt him like a knife to his heart. It's gone as fast as I see it. He steps back and now the hall is as empty as I think I've ever seen it.

He drops his arm, closes his wings, and his tail hits the floor with a slap. When he offers me one of his natural hands I take it, even though that makes me flush even harder. My heart is beating fast for more than one reason.

"As long as you are okay," he says.

The remaining people are muttering, and in their whispers I hear ugly things. The memory of the riot is fresh in everyone's mind. There is no doubt that the entire bunker is a powder keg ready to explode. You can only push people so far before they reach their limits.

"I am, we need to go," I say, pulling him along by the hand he offered.

As we walk, a bubble of space remains around us like everyone knows what just happened and no one wants a repeat. While I don't think this is the case, I also don't want him to lose his temper again. It won't do anyone any good if he hurts people trying to protect me.

Protect me. He acted that way because he thought I was in danger.

Dal looks around with great interest but doesn't say anything. While he watches the surroundings, I watch him. He must know the bunker from before, but I don't know how much of it he has seen. How did the experiments go down? Was he willing? Did he volunteer or was he forced into it?

A million questions float through my thoughts but none of them feel right to ask. I don't want to pry or stir up bad memories. How much of it does he remember? Does it still hurt?

Emerging into the dining hall, I realize I don't have a token for him. Damn. I don't have any choice, so I decide I'll give him one of mine. Maybe Rosalind and the Council will reimburse me. Or not. Since he is refusing to go out, maybe they'll write him off and me too. It doesn't matter though, I can skip a day's rations.

I take him through the line. Fortunately, the incident in the halls doesn't seem to have spread this far, yet at least. There isn't much in the way of secrets in the Bunker, not since the Black Market collapsed. Everyone pretty much knows everyone's business, wanted or not.

No one in the mess hall gives Dal a second glance. They've grown accustomed to the other Franks and in my experience, to most humans who aren't intimately familiar with the Zmaj, they all look alike. We join the line to get him a meal and wait our turn.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

"Hmm," he growls softly. "That I have not seen so many people in one place in a very long time."

"You mean since before the Devastation?"

"Yes." He turns a circle, staring up at the ceiling, then tilts his head and looks around the room from that position. "This is very good. There is no tearing."

"Tearing? What do you mean?"

He startles and jerks his head around to look directly at me like he's surprised I heard him. I arch an eyebrow and wait for him to answer.

"Nothing," he says, clearly covering over something. "Musings. It means nothing."

"Okay," I say. There's no doubt he's lying. About what and why I don't know but he is.

We continue through the line. I watch him in my peripheral vision, trying to figure out what he's thinking and doing. He doesn't look around anymore, though, and his face seems carefully schooled. Blank. He stares at the floor as much as anything, barely giving a glance to his surroundings. Which is also suspicious.

I hand over my token. My stomach tightens knowing that's my tomorrow meal. The server hands me a tray, which I take and hold out to the next person in line. The server behind the warming counter ladles a spoonful of green slop onto the tray. Dalagh grunts, a wordless sound, but doesn't say anything else.

I pause at the end to get a utensil, then scan the room for an empty table. There is no such thing as privacy in the dining hall. In the bunker at all, really, but I do spot a table without anyone at it. The table is empty but there will be no conversation that isn't overheard. The other tables are crammed too close to accommodate how many of us there are in the bunker.

It is what it is though, so I guide him to the table I've chosen, set the tray and utensil down on one side then take the seat on the opposite side. He stares at the tray, the table, then at me before taking the seat.

He places his top two arms, the natural ones, on the table and stares at the slop. I sit in silence and watch. There's nothing to be said about it, this is what it is. When he looks up the confusion on his face makes me laugh. I don't intend to, but it slips out before I can stop it.

"I do not understand," he says, frowning.

“Sorry,” I say, but now I’m laughing even harder. “Your face is... sorry.”

I struggle to get control, but the laughter keeps on coming. Once it starts, it seems there’s no stopping it.

“What is funny? This food is worse than anything I have ever been served and I have been in the military for most of my life.”

I snort, shaking my head. Tears blur my vision and I wipe them away. It’s a struggle but I finally get control back.

“Yeah, well it’s not great and it tastes worse.”

“Is that possible? It looks... awful.”

“It is awful, but when you’re hungry enough, you eat what will get you through the day.”

He frowns then takes up the utensil. He takes a small portion off his plate. I grab his wrist stopping him.

“You do not want to do that.”

“Do what? Eat it?”

“No, take small bites. Scoop as much as you can up and get it down fast. Trust me.”

He nods and scoops the utensil full. Then he pops it into his mouth. He nods, frowns, then his eyes widen and he swallows fast before sputtering. He looks around wild-eyed.

“That is truly abominable,” he says.

“Warned you.”

He smiles warmly as his eyes light up. “Would you care for the rest?” he asks, grinning.

I laugh. “Gee, thanks.”

Then I remember that is my tomorrow ration, and rather than waste it, I take the utensil, scoop the remaining food up and send it down the hatch.

The taste isn’t anything to me now, not because it’s not bad. I’m just used to it. This is what we’ve been down to for a while.

“Thank you for sharing food,” he says very solemnly, like this was some grave act of kindness.

“Sure,” I say, waving a hand because I don’t want to think about how bad everything is. “When you finish eating, you bus your own trays. Follow me.”

I grab the tray and show him where the return bin is. That done, I set about trying to figure out a place for him to stay. Why didn’t we think this through before we woke him up? Simple answer is that there is no place and I know it. Every space in the bunker has been spoken for. After the powers that be took down the black market, the space they were using has been filled too.

I look around the dining hall. The number of swollen bellies on the girls even in my line of sight is not a good omen of what’s coming either. For some reason everyone thought it’d be a grand idea to go and get pregnant. Ever hear of pulling out people?

That’s an unkind thought. I shouldn’t be mean. It serves no purpose.

“What do we do now?” Dalagh asks.

“I’m thinking,” I say.

Dal laughs. “You always do that.”

“Do what?”

“Wrinkle your nose when you are thinking,” he says.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you, S’khan.”

He says it casually, a simple statement of fact. I stare and blink, trying to wrap my head around it, but it’s too much so I smile and shrug like I agree or understand. Which I most certainly do not.

Slowly, the only possible conclusion as to where to have him sleep becomes clear. The one I’ve been trying to avoid but there is literally no way around it.

“Follow me,” I say.

“As you wish,” he says agreeably.

If it's nothing but being agreeable why does my chest flush hot and my cheeks warm? Pushing that aside I lead him towards the last place I expected to take him.

My bedroom.

As I follow S'khan, the situation these people are in becomes clearer. It is bad. If it is real. Which is the problem. I cannot tell.

I have not spotted any of the signs I noticed in their previous attempts to implant memories. None of the things I used to keep myself from being sucked into their make-believe reality. No tearing at the edges of my vision, no odd blurring, nothing that looks not quite real.

And S'khan is here. No, Shaun. I must remember to call her by her new name. She definitively feels real. My wrist warms as I remember her touch. Her new body is incredibly warm which makes her touch new and fresh.

And her scent! It is exotic and enticing, pulling me in and igniting desire. It makes me remember the smells of cutting open a nefetter fruit, the sweetness that lingered on the air made my mouth water when I was young.

Which memory brings me back to that slop they are calling food. That was awful. If that is what they are living on, then I need no other sign to know that they are in trouble. I will have to find out more about this, but for now I am happy only to be near her. Yet, I cannot let myself be too happy. Happiness is a trap, as is comfort. It is the lure they use to entice you in, setting you at ease until you lower your guard and then they rip it away.

I will not break. I will destroy them for what they have done.

A growl slips and Shaun jerks her head, turning and looking over her shoulder. I force a smile and shake my head. She returns a faltering smile, but I do not miss the tension in her shoulders when she turns her attention back to leading us through the tunnels.

Dimly I remember these tunnels. It has been a very long time since I walked them. When the Breakers first arrived, we were quartered in this tunnel. Or one very similar to it. As I recall, the bunker was a confusing maze. Intentionally so, or so Othim and I used to say.

The walls are marred with stains and what looks like burn marks. A nice touch. Would they have thought of it? Surreptitiously, I trail my fingers along the metal of the wall. When I look at my fingers there is soot. I lift and sniff. A burnt smell fills my nostrils.

If this is one of their illusions, then their technology has advanced further than I could have ever imagined. It would seem impossible, yet it cannot be real. Can it?

Forcing my attention outward, I try to take in everything. The walls, the ceiling, and every detail. The people passing us smell of dirt, sweat, and a stinging tang of fear. However, my eyes and attention keep returning to Shaun.

The round swell of her ass. The curve of her hips. The way she sways as she walks, each step sending that beautiful heart shape left then right. I want to bury my face between her thighs and give her pleasure.

Which thought is a distraction and if this is one of their attempts to rewrite my mind, then she is the most dangerous thing I have encountered. She is my weakness, the one thing I always hid from them. Or thought I did.

“Here we are,” Shaun says, stopping before a heavy door.

I remember these doors. Bunks are on the other side. She turns the wheel and it loudly screeches then it sticks. She leans into it, but it still does not move. She curses softly under her breath. I step closer to help, but in doing so I am acutely aware

of her. She is like a tiny, self-contained sun burning hotly. It takes my breath away even as I grab the wheel and turn.

It turns easily but I do not move back. Unable or unwilling to break this slight contact between us. She does not move either, the two of us sticking in this moment. She turns her head in slow motion, tilting it back and looking up.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

She nods even as I see her swallow. As one we step apart, but is she feeling the same reluctance that I do? Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips and she blinks rapidly, then she shakes her head as she grabs the wheel and pulls the door open.

The sound of conversation emerges from inside. I wait for S’k —, Shaun, to move past and enter first then I follow. I have to duck my head to enter. It is as I remember. A sitting area with two couches and a table in the middle for eating. Three humans, all female, sit on the couches. They stop talking the moment they see me.

“Shaun?” one of them asks. All three staring in obvious confusion.

“Hi guys, yeah, uhm,” Shaun says. “This is Dalagh.”

I raise three of my arms in greeting. Real or not, there is no sense in not being friendly.

“Why is he here?” another of the females asks. This one has short, dark hair and a lithe form. Her face is thin and sharp.

“That’s the thing,” Shaun says, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t have any place to put him up and, well, I thought, you know, maybe—”

“Are you kidding?” says a female with fiery red hair that is the color of the primary Tajss sun.

“Uhm, no, I thought maybe—”

“Shaun, he won’t even fit in one of those bunks,” the dark haired one says. The third has not spoken, but she is staring like the other two. “He’s freaking huge.”

It feels strange to stand here being the subject under discussion without being involved. They are speaking Zmaj so I understand them, but I do not know what I would say anyway. I do not need a bunk. It certainly would not be the first time I slept on a hard floor.

“But there is no place—”

I stop Shaun by placing my natural hand on her shoulder. As I touch her, static sparks, stinging me and making her jump too. Her cheeks flush a shade of soft pink, and her eyes widen.

“It is fine,” I say.

“No, you don’t understand, there is literally no space,” she says.

“And you think we have space here?” the red-haired female asks.

“No, I mean, I was going to give him my bunk,” Shaun says.

A warmth forms in my core as she says that. She was going to give her sleeping space to me. This is a kindness that I have not felt since... since I lost her. My smile is genuine. This may or may not be a simulation, but she is everything I remember and more.

Can this really be some kind of sim? How much thought did they put into this? Would the evil monsters who came up with this place be able to create something like this? If it was them, would Shaun still be S’khan, in the body I remember, not this alien form?

It might be real. Doubts creep in but I push them down. The only way to know for sure is to be alert. Continue until I am certain. How I will find that certainty I do not know, but there will be something. Until then I cannot let my guard down.

“You are most kind,” I say. “It is not necessary. I have been a soldier for most of my life. This will not be the first time I have slept uncomfortably. Might there be a blanket I can use available?”

The distress on her face causes an ache in my chest. Wings flutter in my stomach, worry at causing her to feel like this. I

tighten my grip on her shoulder, keenly aware of how warm she is and also how soft. She has no scales, her skin is smooth, and I imagine what it might taste like.

“Yes,” she says without hesitation.

“Not your only one,” I say, and her face falls. She bites her lower lip. “It is fine. I will be fine.”

“It’s not fair,” she says.

“I’m not trying to be mean,” the dark haired female says. “None of us are, but you know how tight things are. Where is he from? How does he not have a bunk already? Have you talked to the Council.”

Shaun looks afraid. It is subtle but despite this not being the body I know her in, I know *her*, and the tell-tale signs have not changed. She bites her lips, her fingers tremble, and she is not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“I’ll talk to them,” she says. “It’s fine. Not a thing at all. We need to go, Dal. Let’s get you set up in the, uh, in the Control room. For now.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you females,” I say to the assembled women, stepping between Shaun and them.

They nod and give pleasantries back. Warmth rushes through my belly. I accomplished my goal of stopping them interrogating her further by inserting myself between them and Shaun. I back up, pushing Shaun to the door and she gets the hint. We leave without further conversation.

After she shuts the door, she stands still and rests her forehead against it. I am not sure what to do so I wait. She sighs, stands up, then forces a smile that does not reach her eyes as she shrugs.

“Sorry,” she says. “I guess I didn’t think that through.”

“It is fine,” I say.

“No, it’s not.”

Her eyes glisten brightly as she turns and walks back the way we came. I follow along behind her, trying to decipher what

she means. No matter how I look at it, I do not get what she is upset about. As I try to understand that another thought occurs. Who would think like this? No Zmaj that I know would give a second thought to such matters. If no Zmaj would, then does that mean this is not a simulation?

Something flutters in my chest. I can barely recognize the sensation as it has been so long since I felt it. I consider it for a long time before deciding that yes, it is what I think it is. Hope.

The halls are stuffed with people which prevents us from talking. I turn my attention outwards once more, studying, looking for any of the telltale signs that this is not real. I become so absorbed in this that I bump into Shaun who has stopped. She is staring up at me. There are soft lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes formed by worry.

“Are you okay?”

“I am fine,” I say. I must cover what I am doing. If they figure it out, they will adjust the simulation. They cannot know I suspect. “I apologize. I was lost in memory of when I first came here.”

“Oh,” she says, nodding. “That makes sense. Were you, uhm, did you come, uhm, voluntarily?”

“I did,” I answer.

She resumes walking but now the hall is mostly empty. One quick glance and I know we are close to the warehouse. Do they not allow others in that area? What is the reason they do not? It is clear they are tight on space. Judging by what I have seen, there are at least ten times as many people in the bunker than it was designed to house.

“Why did you do it?” she asks.

“Do it?”

“Volunteer, to be,” she glances back and then waves her hand up and down my torso, “experimented on.”

“It was our duty,” I say, toeing the line with the lie that they would want to hear.

A shadow passes over her face. She doubts my words but does not pry further. If she was working for them, she would pursue this line of questioning. Disagreement with duty is one of the things they searched out and then would implant new memories until it was gone.

My doubts grow stronger. Perhaps this is real. The experiments were supposed to prepare us to counter-strike, but we did not know against what. Did the Devastation that came wipe out the ones running this? Or is that memory not real either?

“That’s a lot of commitment to a duty,” she muses, opening the door back into the warehouse.

I step through and pause, thinking about her words as I look out over the massive space and all the cryo-tubes it holds within. Each of them has, or at least had, a being inside of them. Some hold enemies, some hold other Zmaj.

The scientists used it all for their research. Treating beings like they were nothing more than matter. They gave no thought to those they worked on as intelligent, self-aware creatures. They did not care about the person, only the results of their ‘forward’ thinking.

Cold creeps over my limbs as the enormity of the horror blossoms again. No matter how many times I come to the same conclusion, it leaves me like this. Chilled. Horrified. How can anyone do this to another being?

Shaun moves to my side and wraps her arm around mine, leaning close. The warmth she radiates chases away the cold. I want to wrap myself around her and move to do so, but then I stop myself when she stiffens.

“I apologize,” I say.

She shakes her head. “No, it’s, it’s fine.”

“S’kha—Shaun, please know you need never lie to me. My advance was unwelcome whether you will say so or not. I would prefer you say it.”

Her cheeks color a rich crimson as she drops her eyes and rubs the back of her neck with one hand. She gives a half nod then

walks away. I follow, not unaware, again, of her ass. The intimacy of the moment that just happened is too fresh and my body responds to her the way it always has. With raging desire.

It doesn't matter that she is different. This new form she is in is alien and exotic and I look forward to exploring it. I want to know every inch of her. I want to know what brings her pleasure. What drives her wild. I want her nails digging into my back, hands pulling my hair, and her voice screaming my name.

I shake myself to stop my thoughts from running amok. My primary cock throbs, aching with the need for release but I know where this path leads. They have fooled me too many times and I cannot let it happen again.

Regaining my composure, I follow her into the control room. I am thankful she does not look back before the tent my cock is making of my pants subsides.

Inside the room she makes a circuit. I stand inside the door and watch as she paces, staring at every station as she does. She is frowning and deep in thought. Her beauty is incomparable. The tips of my fingers tingle with desire to touch her new, soft flesh.

"This is not great," she says at last with a heavy sigh. "There's no place for any privacy or anything."

"I do not require privacy," I say. "I am well used to being watched."

She jerks her head towards me with surprise on her face, but it is true. The scientists who worked here monitored us always. We had no privacy and expected none. It was what it was. Why should now be any different?

"I mean, it's so," she stops and shakes her head as her shoulders drop. "Of course."

She walks over to one of the storage lockers. When she bends over to rummage through it, my cock rises once again to involuntary attention and my mouth waters. Her ass is incredible. I have seen many alien species in my life, so it is

not only the lack of a tail. No, it is the shape. Round, full, and if I tilt my head slightly to the left it makes the shape of a heart.

My heart. My mate. My treasure. The dragon rumbles deeply, agreeing with the sentiment.

“You know we belong together, right?” I blurt out without thinking.

She jumps, bumping her head inside the locker before crying out in pain. “Ouch.”

She stands up, rubbing her head, and stares. Her lips tremble, only for a moment, but I do not miss a thing. Slowly she shakes her head side-to-side.

“Are you okay?” I ask, stepping forward and raising my arms, then stopping myself.

I want to go to her, hold her, kiss her head and any bump that might be there. I want, so much, but I am not a stupid male. I can read the look on her face, the confusion, and beneath that I sense a fear which does the most to keep me at bay.

“I’m fine,” she says, rubbing her head and staring at the ground. “Uhm, there’s a blanket here.”

She turns to the locker and grabs it out. When she turns back, I walk towards her, moving slowly. I do not want her to think I am trying something, I would never force myself on her, but I do not know what she is thinking.

She holds the blanket out but avoids eye contact. I take it and my fingers brush her skin. It is electric. A thrill that runs up my arms and shocks my hearts into racing double time. I inhale sharply, she looks up, and our eyes meet.

I lose myself in hers. A sea of green that I fall into as if they are an alien planet. No, an alien universe. But in truth they are home. We are drawn towards each other. Inevitably, no more deniable than the pull of gravity holding us to the ground. I raise a hand, reaching.

“Shaun?” a male voice interrupts, breaking the moment.

We both jerk apart. I am breathing heavily and so is she. There is a sheen of moisture glistening on her forehead. She glances at me, her mouth partially open, then blinks and closes her mouth. She takes another step back then moves around me.

The shattering of the moment is painful. A stabbing pain in my chest like millions of pieces of shrapnel tearing through my soul. The bijass surges with anger and I growl as I whirl to confront the interruption.

“*Y*eah?” I ask, stepping to one side then past Dal so I can see Alex directly.

There’s a growl from behind me. The hair on the back of my neck rises, goosepimples dotting my flesh in time with an explosion of fear. I spin and I’m face-to-face with Dal’s incredible abs. How did I miss that he has eight of them? And they are rock hard as my poor nose can attest.

Thunder rumbles from inside his chest. He pushes forward, moving me along with him. Alex yelps and I hear him fumbling with the handle on the door to the control room.

“Dal!” I shout, pressing my hands against his chest.

His muscles are like boulders, they don’t give an inch. The hammering of his hearts thumps against my palms with a crazy, erratic rhythm. His wings open and he raises all six arms. Alex is making a constant, low whine as he strives to get out of the room. I dig my heels in, trying to stop Dal’s forward progress.

“Dal!” I yell at the top of my lungs. “Stop.”

He does. Dropping his arms, his wings rustle as they snap shut, and then he steps back.

“I am sorry,” he says. “That should not have happened.”

“You are damn right,” I snap. Anger is making my skin burn. I’m not going to put up with him acting like this. “Alex is my friend. You must not ever hurt him. Or threaten him again. Do you understand?”

Part of me is surprised by the vehemence and anger I'm displaying. Let's not forget the fact that Dal towers over me and there's literally nothing I could do to stop him from doing whatever he wants to. This is a total David versus Goliath scenario, and I am not Goliath.

Despite this, Dal not only acquiesces to my demands, he also looks ashamed. He keeps his head down, eyes not meeting mine, and unless I miss my guess, the color of his scales and the look on his face is one of shame. He really does regret whatever just happened.

"I do understand," he says, speaking softly. "I am sorry Alex. It was a momentary lapse. I will not let it happen again."

"It's, uhm," Alex clears his throat, and his voice returns to something closer to his normal pitch, "it's fine. Yeah. Fine."

"Thank you for accepting my apology," Dal says, not looking up. He's backed himself away from Alex and myself and now I feel bad for him.

"It's okay Dal," I say.

I raise my hand to reach toward him but contact between the two of us is too confusing. For him I think, but for me I know. The feelings and sensations are too much to sort through without proper time to understand. Best not to tempt fate. I stare at my outstretched hand for a moment then awkwardly drop it.

Alex clears his throat as he walks forward. It gives me and I think Dal too, something to focus on besides our own internal thoughts since we both look over, perhaps too quickly.

"I didn't realize you would, uhm, both be here," Alex says. He looks between the two of us, then shakes his head like he's clearing away the last remnants of fear. "Why are you here?"

"I don't have a place for Dal to sleep," I say. "You know how crowded in we are. I thought perhaps he could rest here. At least for tonight."

"Oh, uhm, yeah, right," Alex says, looking around then nodding. "Hadn't thought of that. Wow, guess we were jumping ahead weren't we. I mean I never thought he'd say

—” he cuts himself off with a fast look at Dal, his eyes wide and mouth open before he snaps it shut. “I mean, you know. Didn’t really plan. That’s all.”

“Right,” I say, covering for him. “Silly us, right?”

Dal watches both of us but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to, but I can’t imagine anything more uncomfortable. As it stands, it feels like there are millions of bugs marching over my skin and it’s all I can do to keep from madly scratching myself.

“Right. Sleeping here, uhm,” Alex looks around. “You found a blanket. I think I have an extra pillow in my bunk. I could donate that to the cause.”

“That is very kind, but it is not necessary,” Dal says.

“I’m not using it,” Alex says. “Mostly, but I mean, I want to help. We woke you up.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” Dal says. He looks around the control room, his stormy gray eyes clearly studying everything. “Might I ask a question?”

“Of course,” I say.

“Where are the other Breakers? Do they have a bunk they share?”

“The others...” Alex says, trailing off and looking at me for guidance.

Like I have a clue what to say to this. I’m not going to lie, but does that mean I tell him the truth? Or do I dodge around the question? And if so, where do I dodge? What do I say? Dal finishes his inspection of the room, settling the full weight of his gaze on me which comes with an impressive amount of gravitas.

“They are, uhm, you see, uh, each of them,” my cheeks flush and I’m burning up. I raise my hands, wave them through the air, drop them, then rub the back of my neck trying to cool the rising flush. Dal watches and waits, implacable as a stone.

“They’ve each got, uhm, mates I guess you would say.”

“Mates?” Dal asks. “They have found their treasures?”

“Uh, yeah?” Alex answers because I can’t. My throat has swollen shut. Blood pressure is rising as my heart races towards some unknown finish line like a thoroughbred giving it it’s all. “I think that’s what you would call it. Right Shaun?”

I can’t speak so I nod, trying to cover while I strive to regain my cool.

“Treasures, that is new,” Dal murmurs so softly I’m not sure I heard him right.

“New?” I ask, forcing the word out, but it sounds like I’m choking. Dal’s eyes dart to me with clear cut concern and he takes a step towards me before stopping himself. I clear my throat before speaking again. “You said it’s new. What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” he says quickly. Too quickly. He steps away, turning as he does. I’m missing something because clearly it means something to him, even if I don’t understand it. “Will it be a problem for me to sleep in this corner?”

He points at the farthest corner from where we’re standing.

“That will work,” Alex says.

I study Dal’s back. What is going on with him? I can’t put my finger on what, but something is wrong. He’s clearly preoccupied with something, but what? Is it lingering nightmares from the cryo sleep? Is he suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress? Is it something else? Did the things they did to him break his mind?

I don’t think that could be the case. He doesn’t seem the slightest bit crazy. He’s been nothing but kind. And lucid, for the most part at least. Outside of the occasional vague comment like this. He walks to the corner and lays the blanket out on the floor.

“If you do not mind, I am very tired,” he says. “I would like to sleep.”

“Right, I’m out of here,” Alex says and quickly leaves the room.

I linger behind, watching. Dal kneels on the floor and arranges the blanket with great care. Smoothing every wrinkle out before he moves to lie down. Only then does he see me, silently watching. He doesn't speak and neither do I. We watch each other, waiting. I don't know what I'm expecting to happen. It feels strange because it's awkward and yet comfortable at the same time.

"I'll let you sleep," I say at last.

"Yes, that would be best."

I take a step back, then another, but don't turn around. He doesn't move either, crouched on the ground halfway to lying down but holding until either I'm gone, or this strange moment is over.

When I come up against the jam of the still open door I turn and walk through, but I pause as I step outside.

"Good night, Dal," I say. "I hope you rest well."

"Thank you, Shaun."

When he says my name, it feels like a feather caresses my skin. It makes my breath catch in my chest and I don't breathe as I close the door. I watch for a few more seconds through the window. He lies down, pulls half the blanket over himself and his eyes close. In moments it looks like he is asleep.

I force myself to turn and walk away. He'll be fine. No one besides Addison comes into this area usually. I'll let her know he's here.

What did he mean 'that's new'?

I turn that over and over trying to make sense of it. I can't help but feel like that statement is the key to figuring him out. If I can understand that, then I can understand him. And I really want to understand him. I want to get to know him. But my obvious attraction, which would be all well and good in any other circumstance, is something I don't have time for.

Who has time for mates, mating, or even sex when all I can really think about is the looming doom that is rushing for us if we don't figure out a way out of the bunker?

And soon.

I keep my eyes closed and even out my breathing. Waiting. I count over one-thousand beats of my hearts before I slit my eyes and look. She is gone. I am alone.

An aching, empty sensation fills my chest making it hard to breathe. I cannot seem to inhale deeply enough to satisfy my lungs. I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. The pipes that run across it show signs of wear and age. Beads of moisture condensate along them and there are spots of rust that I have never seen before.

Is this real? Are they this clever?

I assess the catalog of notes I have been mentally keeping. Every oddity I have seen and filed away as I try to decide if this is one of their tricks. They are clever. That I know from experience. They found many ways to infiltrate my thoughts and make theirs seem as if they were my own. If they were not so clever, then my brothers in the Breakers would never have fallen for the brainwashing.

The Breakers. That was real. They are here, but that is expected. The entire point of this implanting is to make our team stronger. That proves nothing in either direction. The strangest point, the one that fills me with doubt and keeps sleep at bay, is S'khan.

If it was her, as I knew her, then I would file it as a fake out. An attempt to gain my agreement with their illusions. That is how I figured them out every other time. They would insert something that I would want to agree with, and it built from

there. One agreement on my part seemed to open the door. But, they have never used her before.

The first few times their implanting worked. Then one time it did not. I did not buy what they were presenting, which led to me realizing what they were doing. That all of us were being subjected to lies. I do not know if any Zmaj can trust his memory because I do not know how far reaching their programs were. These were the leaders behind public figures. Pushing their agendas for their own, unknown reasons.

All of which brings my thoughts back to the one thing I do not understand. Her. I know it in my hearts, in my balls, and in my soul, that she is my mate. But it is not her body. She is an alien, in form, but inside that form I know her.

Would they think of this? Could they?

I do not think so. This is more than clever. It is too subtle. Despite everything they had done before, once I understood what they were doing, none of their illusions were this complicated. I do not think they were capable of an illusion of this depth. A story with this many twists in it seems to me to be beyond them.

Which means it is true.

Shaun is my treasure and now I have a second chance to save her. Not only her, an entire species.

If I do what they want.

If this is real and I am not being fooled.

Which, no matter how much it does not seem likely, is still a possibility.

I press my palms against the floor. It is cool and hard, not giving in the slightest. There must be a way to determine the truth. If the scientists continued researching, then I have no doubt they have improved their machines. This new reality I find myself in is beyond anything I could have conceived. Light years improved from what they used previously. If it is them.

I slam my fists on the floor in frustration. There must be some way to know. If this is real, then I must help her. If it is not, then I will destroy them. Taking a deep breath, I hold it and close my eyes. Anger will not resolve my dilemma.

Sitting up, I look around. I move my head quickly, watching my peripheral vision for tearing or glitches but I find nothing. I cross my legs then rest my hands on my thighs. The blanket I sit on smells like her. Exotic, sweet, with a hint of a soft musk. I pull it up to my nose and inhale her. My hearts beat faster and my cock stiffens.

Idly I stroke the shaft, imagining that it is her small, delicate hand moving across my stiff member, a low, familiar tingling sensation. I imagine the sway of her ass. Hmm. Delicious. I am no xenophobe, and have nothing against my brothers who were attracted to non-Zmaj females, but that was never me before.

S'khan and I found each other early in my life, so perhaps she spoiled any desire or taste for the exotic. I always appreciated her, more than any other female, including her tail. A female with no tail, prior to this, was strange and a turn off to me.

But Shaun, who I know is my S'khan, her ass is perfection. Full. Plump. I imagine the way it will shake as I pound my cock into her. The sounds of her pleasure rising as I bury my cock inside her warmth.

I hear, in my imagination, the sounds as I slap that amazing ass. The soft, pink marks of my handprint and her yelps crying out for more as I take her. Making her mine.

Mine. My treasure.

I growl and my cock spasms in my hand. I am gripping it tight and about to explode. I know how to prove if this is real or one of their games.

Jerking my hand out of my pants I leap to my feet and run for the door.

SHAUN

I can't sleep. Every time I begin to drift, I think of Dal. Lying on that hard, steel and concrete floor. Alone. Possibly scared. Not that I think he'd ever admit as much. He's much too alpha for that.

I think of the feel of his flesh. How hard he is. Hard everywhere. Hard in places he has no right to be hard. And speaking of hard, I didn't miss his erection. He seemed embarrassed so I did my best to not call attention to it, but damn!

No one else is in bed right now. All my roommates work opposite shifts than I do and rarely are sleeping when I am. Or I'm trying to.

I slip my hand under the hem of my panties and over my unkempt mound. I press down and rub the top of my pussy, putting pressure down onto my protected clitoris. I bite my lip to keep from crying out. I may be alone in here, but that doesn't mean the sitting area is empty.

Pleasure builds quickly. My thoughts are filled with everything he might do to me. All the dirty things a good girl never says out loud, but I'm pretty sure we all want. He's big and clearly strong enough to take me in every way I could possibly imagine.

A soft moan slips as I slide two fingers into my wetness. I rub down, pushing my fingers in, and press as I pull out. Keeping that building pressure on my clit. I've never been able to get off on vaginal alone, I need the clit stimulation too. And I'm

trying to hurry. The dim, rational part of my brain hopes that if I do this, I'll be able to sleep.

KNOCK* *KNOCK* *KNOCK

Jerking my hand out of my panties, I sit upright and immediately conk my head on the low ceiling.

“Damn it,” I curse, rolling off the bunk.

It's dark in the room. Energy conservation went into full effect after the riots and lights in the bedroom were one of the ways we cut our consumption. I feel around, trying to find my pants. I jump when the pounding knock sounds again, echoing off the steel walls of the sitting room beyond my door.

“All right, I'm coming!”

Is no one out there, seriously? And who would be knocking like that? I'm angry enough that I don't think this through. It must be something important because they pound again.

At last I touch something soft and then struggle into a loose pair of pants that barely hang on to my hips since I've lost weight with the latest round of ration cuts. Barefoot, I step out of my shared bunk.

The sitting area is empty. I don't know where everyone is. Maybe they're eating or had to work extra. The pounding on the door hits again and out here it's even louder. Anger overrides the probably more rational fear.

“I said I'm coming. Damn, give a girl a minute,” I yell, padding across the cold floor.

I grab the wheel that locks the door and turn. It sticks partway, and as I struggle the uninvited guest chooses that moment to pound the door again. It startles me and I jump, cursing.

“It's stuck, hang on!”

I lean into the wheel with all I've got and it doesn't budge. I shift my position and grip, then lean back against it. The wheel squeals as it breaks free and turns. My feet slip and I fall, hanging onto the wheel as the door is thrown open by the person pounding.

I end up half in and half out of the sitting area, hanging on the wheel and exactly face level with Dalagh's crotch.

"Hello?" I ask, but I don't look up.

I can't look away. His cock is rock hard, tenting his pants out and the tip has to be level with my mouth. I push down the ridiculous urge to pull his pants over it and suck. This must be a dream, right? I did fall asleep, and this is my idea of a hot wet dream.

Dalagh growls, a deep rumbling sound that vibrates in my chest. Damn that is sexy. I move my feet, trying to find purchase to stand up, but he doesn't wait. He grabs my waist and lifts. I fly up into the air in a quick motion.

He steps into the bunk's sitting room and the door swings shut behind him, clanging loudly as it snaps into place. He doesn't stop, moving around the small table towards the still open door to my bedroom.

I should protest. Say something. Do something, but what? The not so rational part of my brain also wants to know why? Isn't this what I really want?

He lifts and shifts until I have my legs wrapped around his waist and my arms around his neck. Still moving, he grabs my hair and jerks my head back. His hot mouth kisses my neck and moves lower.

He intersperses nibbling bites, licks, and sucking kisses as he works his way down from my cheek bone to my collar bone. I groan with pleasure and grind myself against his hard abs, enough to put a pressure on my pussy that is absolutely delicious.

He has an arm around my waist and as I give myself over and put my trust in him, I lean back enough to pull my shirt over my head. He barely pauses the work of his mouth long enough for the cloth to get out of the way.

I undo my bra and free them to his attention. He pauses, seeing my tits for the first time. For an instant I'm self-conscious. Are they not good enough? Too little? My nipples are kind of big, I've always hated them.

But then he growls and the vibration in his guts hits my pussy and all those thoughts are gone. He dives forward taking most my left tit in his mouth and sucking hard. I cry out, unable to contain how good this feels. His tongue is rough, like a fine grit sandpaper, lavishing my nipple, the areola, and around with all the attention and desire that I could ever hope to feel.

I go wild too. Bucking my hips against him and getting enough pressure that I'm going to come too fast. He seems to sense this because he pulls off my tit and tosses me onto one of the lower bunks.

I land hard on the thin mattress. He drops to his knees and jerks my pants and panties off in a single motion, his nails scraping my hips and thighs. He grabs my legs and forces them apart, leaving my wet pussy exposed.

The light streams in from the sitting room, enough that I can see his face. I've never seen anything like this look before. The burning need and desire. Then he licks his lips and I fucking melt. He lowers himself between my legs and that talented tongue goes to work on my pussy.

I come in almost no time. Or maybe it's a long time, but at this point time doesn't matter. I've never felt such intense pleasure before. He drives his long tongue in and out, licking my clit, working the folds.

His tail curls around then works its way under my ass. I'm not sure what he's doing until I feel the tip of that pushing against my rear. I tense, unsure, but then he flattens his tongue deep in the folds of my pussy and drags his way up.

I groan, lost in the pleasure, and when my senses come back, the tip of his tail is fucking my ass. It feels amazing. He pushes the tip in and out slowly while his tongue works an entirely different pace on my pussy.

When he tops all of this by shoving two fingers deep in, I scream his name. There's no holding back. My pussy, no, my entire body is spasming as an orgasm rips through. It comes in waves, again and again, without an end in sight.

When it's over I'm a quivering mess lying half on and half off the bunk. He is holding me close, whispering in my ear.

"S'khan," he whispers. "My treasure. Always."

A shiver races through my body. I turn my head and claim his mouth. Our tongues wrestle and desire ignites anew. I turn into him, pushing my hand down to find his cock. I stroke his thick, alien dick. He has hard ridges along the top, but the bottom is soft like a human cock, so I focus my attention there.

As we kiss and I play with his dick and balls, it isn't long before I feel it growing bigger. I roll on to my back and shift down so that he has a clear shot onto my tits. I stroke faster and in moments his dick stiffens, he grunts, and then the most massive load of cum is pumping onto my breasts.

I'm coated in it. Literally. In part I'm surprised. He's so alien, but his sperm is as white, thick, and sticky as any human's. Isn't that interesting?

His cock softens in my hand. He grabs my chin and lifts until I'm looking up at him.

"My love," he says, his voice hoarse and deep. "It is you."

I don't know what to say. He thinks I'm his former lover or something, which I don't know anything about. I am attracted to him, though. And fuck he's really good at sex. I could do with a lot of this. Before it gets awkward, he kisses the top of my head then sits up, looking around.

"Is there a towel?" he asks, rising fully to his feet.

Once more his cock, now flaccid but perhaps even more impressive in this state, is in front of my face. But now it's swinging back and forth like the pendulum of a clock.

"Yeah, here," a new voice says.

Oh. Shit.

I look towards the sitting room. Elouise stands in the door holding out a towel.

SHAUN

The blanket slips through my fingers as I fumble, trying to cover myself. My face is burning hot as Elouise throws the towel, which lands perfectly on my cum covered tits before she turns away with an indecipherable look on her face.

Dal turns, grabs the towel, and then crouches. He carefully cleans my tits, even taking time to lift and make sure that the underside is clean too. He then picks up my clothes and hands them to me one piece at a time.

All the while he remains gloriously and comfortably naked. His swinging cock continues to pull my attention which leaves me flustered. I can't believe any of this happened. I just fucked an alien, which is more than enough to process, but to have my roommate walk in on us? That's just a lot.

What do I say? Do I pretend nothing happened? Blurt it out? Ask for forgiveness? For what am I asking forgiveness anyway? It's not like we all don't either have or want to have sex. Why do I have to apologize for that?

Except, having sex with an open door in a shared space and quite possibly, nope not possibly, definitely did, make a mess on said roommate's bunk.

Shit.

Biting my lower lip, I pull the sheets off her bed and bundle them in my arms. I look around but there are no clean ones in here because I changed my own sheets right before lying down.

Dal watches as he pulls his pants on, which is all he wears like all the Zmaj. And why not? If you got it, flaunt it, and the Zmaj all have it. If *it* is an incredibly ripped body that deserves all the attention you can garner.

I drop the bundle of messy sheets to one side then take the sheets off my bed. Once Dal ascertains what I'm doing, he silently helps make Elouise's bed with the clean linens. That task done, I give him a half-smile and a shrug. He flashes the briefest of smiles.

Now we're back to this. I have to go through that door to wash the sheets. Elouise is in the sitting room. Is she angry? Of course she is. She just walked in on us banging on her bed. How could she be anything but upset.

My stomach flutters with nervous gas bubbles as I try to mentally prepare myself. It will be all right. Even if she is mad, she will get over it. Sooner or later. My cheeks are burning as hot as the double suns of Tajss itself, but I've delayed facing her as long as I can. I take a first step towards the door, then the second, and then I'm stepping out into the brighter sitting area.

Elouise is sitting on the couch with her legs curled beneath herself. She has a well-worn, scuffed reader in her hand. The same one we've all been sharing since entering the bunker. The eight of us in this bunk all pitched in together to get it back when the Black Market was still going. It gives us an easy bit of entertainment. Personally, I wish it had more than four books on it, but no matter, it was a heck of a find.

"Which one you reading?" I ask, struggling for a way to break the ice.

"The sci-fi one," Elouise says, not looking up.

My cheeks burn hotter. Dal steps out too, bumping into me. I'm acutely aware of his crotch pushing my ass forward. Especially since my ass is comfortably sore, like that's not a total oxymoron.

"Oh, I liked that one," I say.

"I know," she says, still not looking up.

I don't know if she's mad or if she's trying to act like nothing happened. All I'm sure of at this point is that it can't possibly get more awkward. I shift my weight from side to side, trying to come up with something else to say, but I've got nothing.

"What is a ssscifi?" Dal asks, mispronouncing the Common word.

There isn't an equivalent in Zmaj, and all of us, us humans anyway, have gotten used to interspersing the two languages together into a kind of hybrid hodgepodge.

"It's a type of story set in the future but with its basis in science," I explain.

He frowns and shrugs, clearly not getting the concept. I could go into it further, but all I'd be doing is avoiding the situation at hand. Which gives me an idea. "I'm going to walk Dal back to where he's sleeping."

"Mmm-hmm," Elouise says, not looking up.

"It was a pleasure to meet you again," Dal says as I step out the door to the hall.

"You too," Elouise says. Then softly, so soft I'm not sure I hear it right, "nice cock."

My cheeks flare supernova and I rush out into the hall, pulling Dal along with me. As I shut the door behind us, he makes a noise. I look over my shoulder and then my eyes widen in shock.

"Are you laughing?" I accuse him.

"No," he says, schooling his face, but I'm onto his game now.

"I can't believe you," I say, shaking my head. "What the hell was that anyway? And now, ugh, oh man, Elouise will tell... everyone. I can never show my face in public again." Dal's lips tremble as he struggles to keep his face under control. "You are impossible."

He loses the fight and bursts into a loud, deep, rumbling laugh. Once he starts, it seems he can't stop. It goes on and on. While he laughs his tail slaps the floor, his wings rustle, and he raises and drops all his arms.

“Seriously?” I ask, arching an eyebrow.

It doesn't cut through the laughter, but he touches my face with his natural hand and trails his fingers along my jaw. His touch is cool, almost cold, and soothes my hot cheeks. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, then exhale it sharply.

“Impossible,” I mutter again, and push passed him to walk down the hall.

I feel the weight of his gaze on my ass and I put an extra swing into my step. It might be petty, in part, but it also makes me feel sexy in a way that I've never felt in my life. Dirty, slutty, and ultimately desirable. Besides, he laughed.

*M*y second cock stiffens as I watch Shaun walk away. By Tajss she knows how to work that perfect ass. The sway is mesmerizing. She is several strides away before I shake myself back to the moment and follow.

While there is no time measurement inside the bunker that I have seen, it feels as if it is night. If that is because it is outside or not, I do not know, but it has been a very full day and I would like to sleep. I am mostly certain, now, that this is not one of the scientist's attempts to implant memories.

I could be wrong, but I do not think so. It must be impossible for them to have come up with something this complicated. The sensations, the interruption, the smell, sight, and taste of her are too unique. Different than anything I have experienced, so where would they come up with material to create the scenes with?

Nighttime or not, the halls are still full of people. Ahead of her I spot a Zmaj I do not know and the bijass floods my thoughts. I growl and move faster to catch up to Shaun. I grab her shoulder. She turns but I push ahead of her, placing myself between her and the stranger. Only now does the Zmaj notice me. He frowns, his eyes narrowing, and his wings open partially in a querying way.

“What are you doing?” Shaun asks.

I keep my grip on her shoulder and move her to my side, shifting my arms and hooking two of them around her, one at

her shoulders the other around her waist. I watch the Zmaj carefully as we squeeze past each other.

He nods sharply and I return the gesture but do not relax my guard. He is a threat in ways that these other, tiny males of her species could never be. I strain my neck to watch him as he continues on his way, making sure he does not come for what is mine.

“Dal?” Shaun says my name, insisting I give her my attention.

I wait until the Zmaj turns a corner before answering.

“Yes?”

“What was that?”

I smile and shake my head. “Nothing, my treasure.”

“I never agreed to that,” she says, raising a finger and waving it in the air between us. “And you’ve never asked.”

She may resist or deny all she wishes because I know the truth. Her protests are nothing. I have tasted her and I know what brings her pleasure. She will figure the rest out in time.

“I’m serious, Dal,” she says, placing a hand on her hip.

“I can tell,” I say.

She rolls her eyes and heaves a heavy sigh before resuming the lead. I follow, alert, but we make it back to the warehouse without further incident. In the warehouse our footsteps echo as we cross the space. I have let her keep the lead if for no other reason than I love watching her walk. In the control room she shuts the door behind us and points at the blanket.

“Are you going to be okay, now?”

“No,” I say, moving closer and into her space so that our bodies are touching.

“What—what do you...” she stumbles over her words, mumbling.

I put my lower hands on her waist and pull her close, letting her feel the arousal of my second cock as it presses against her.

“You,” I say, finishing her unspoken thought. “I need you. Always.”

“Dal, this isn’t the time or the—”

I cut her protest off with a kiss. Her mouth opens and our tongues find each other, wrestling. I lift her up and she wraps her legs around my waist.

“Fuck,” she gasps, breaking the kiss.

“Yes,” I agree. “You will scream my name.”

She shakes her head no, but she does not unwrap her arms or her legs. Protests may be on her lips, but she is saying yes with her body in every way that matters.

“We can’t—”

I slide my hand into her pants, curling my fingers inside, turning her protest into the first groan of pleasure. I carry her to the blanket and lie her down.

SHAUN

*R*esting my head on his bicep, which is more than big enough to serve as a pillow, I can't believe any of this. Stress and worry have been constant, unending companions since shortly after entering the bunker. But right now, at least for the time being, they are forgotten.

My pussy aches and so does my ass in a not unpleasant way. My thighs still feel weak from all the orgasms that he brought me to. So many that I lost count, but I do know one thing. He was right. I did scream his name. Thankfully this time we were alone.

That's a sobering thought. I'll have to go to my bunk, sooner or later, and deal with the aftermath of what Elouise walked in on. There's no avoiding that, but for the moment it's in the future. I focus my thoughts on the here and now. For now, I lie cuddling with Dalagh, letting the future take care of itself.

"You are satisfied?"

"I am," I say. "Very."

"This is good."

"Yeah, but I'm still not agreeing to anything."

"You will."

"You don't know that. There's a lot going on, I don't have time to think about relationships, much less anything long term. I've got responsibilities."

He doesn't answer right away, but the silence is comfortable. He has his arms crossed behind his head. I shift to rest my head on his chest and listen to the double beat of his dual hearts. His tail sticks out below the blanket and I watch as he idly flips it from one side to the other.

"What is it you need of me?" he asks at last.

"What?" I ask, rising onto my elbow so I can look at him.

He is staring at the ceiling, not shifting his gaze. I know what he said, but I have to make sure. Does he mean what I think he does?

"I said no," he said. "Now I am saying yes."

"I didn't..." I trail off, not wanting to be crass, but this is going to bother me if I don't say it. "I didn't fuck you to change your mind."

"First, you did not fuck me," he says, locking me with his storm gray eyes. "We made love. Second, I took you, not the other way around. I had to, so I could know."

"Know what?" I ask in confusion.

He smiles and shakes his head. "It does not matter. I will help. Tell me what you need."

I sit up the rest of the way, crossing my legs. I watch him for a long moment, trying to figure out what he is hiding. I don't want to let the mystery of his words go, but in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter why he's now willing to help. If he doesn't, both our species are going to die. And that sobering thought outweighs my curiosity.

"We need you to go to a site. It's too far for anyone else to make it there and back without protective gear but you should be fine because of, well, you know."

"Why this site? What is it?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "The Council has some kind of intel, from where I don't know, that it's a viable place with room for all of us. It's far enough away from ground zero, over our heads, that the radiation should be nominal."

“They do not know what I will find there?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head.

He shifts around, then reaches up with his natural hand. He trails his fingers along my cheek, down my neck then cups my breast.

“I do not wish to leave you,” he says, his voice rich and husky. I don’t miss the rise forming under the blanket.

“I haven’t committed to you,” I say, breathless.

“You will.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

“Yes.”

I stare, heart racing, breath catching in my throat. I don’t want to leave him either. And why stay here, anyway? Except I can’t go outside. The radiation levels are dropping, faster than we expected, but they’re still deadly if I’m exposed for more than a few minutes.

Unless. I gasp as an idea occurs.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I think... I might...”

He waits for me to work it out.

“It’s crazy, but it could work. Maybe.”

“And you will go with me?”

I bite my lip. My heart is hammering and butterflies dance in my stomach. Will I? Should I? It’s dangerous. Stupid even, but I’d be with him, and he’d keep me safe.

Except even he can’t keep me safe from radiation. Monsters and the generally deadly life that calls Tajss home, sure, but radiation isn’t something his brawn could do a thing about. Unless my idea is possible, if the Council will agree. No, not the Council. Rosalind. If Rosalind will agree.

Besides, what does he know of what humans need? He’s so big he’d have a hard time running the equipment to ascertain if the radiation levels are safe or not. That’s more reason for me

to go, because I know what must be done. I have the training and the experience that he doesn't.

“Good,” he says, reading my face. “But first...”

He hooks an arm behind my neck and pulls me into a kiss as one of his two cocks pushes the blanket up. I swing my leg over his hips and lower myself onto him. This will be the last chance we have for this, one way or another, might as well make the most of it.

“*A*nd this way we can be sure of the readings,” I say.

My mouth is as dry as sand and I can't quit rubbing my hands. Rosalind's steady gaze is impassive and unreadable. I wait, trying to decipher every line of her face, every twitch of her eye, any sign that might let me know what she's thinking. All I have to go on is that she drums her fingers on the desk. It's the only indication of anything and I don't know what to make of it.

“I see,” she says at last.

I nod, too sharply I'm sure. I struggle to not shift my weight. Grabbing one hand in the other, I force myself to quit rubbing them. My nerves are getting the best of me. I don't know if this is better or worse than I expected.

I thought I'd be giving my presentation to the entire Council, but when I walked in, Rosalind was alone. The room, which isn't that big, feels somehow smaller with only the two of us. It's totally some kind of mind trick I'm playing on myself, but that doesn't make me feel any better.

“I mean, I can show him how to run the machines, of course, but being able to and knowing what you're doing are two entirely different things. I'm sure you understand that but there's a lot of science and if he was to get one setting off then it could read as safe when in reality it isn't. Why risk it? Right?”

Rosalind frowns and I shut up because I'm clearly talking too much. Damn, why can't she just say something. Good idea.

Stupid idea. I don't know, yell at me or something.

The door behind me opens with a scrape that makes me jump. Visidion, Rosalind's Zmaj mate, walks in then shuts the door behind him.

"I did not realize you were in a meeting," he says.

Visidion was on the Council until the vote. He was probably the most surprising one to lose his seat. All of us non-Tribe folks figured they'd band together to keep him on. It seems like a serious rebuke of some kind that he was replaced by another Tribe member, Drosdan.

Maybe they think he's too close to the City folk?

"Hello my love," Rosalind says.

Visidion takes this as a welcome to stay because he walks around the desks, right up to Rosalind, and kisses her. No, that's not a kiss. Kiss is not a strong enough word for what he does. They do. It's full of quiet passion despite the fact that they've been together for years. When they part, the way he looks at her is adoring and admiring. Rosalind motions to a stool and he takes a seat.

"What is happening?" Visidion asks.

"Shaun wants to use my suit to accompany the new Experiment to the site," Rosalind says.

"Oh," Visidion says. "Do you think this is necessary?"

It takes me a minute to figure out he's talking to me, not her. I startle, blink rapidly, then nod as if I'm mute. I force the lump that's trying to grow claws in my throat down and find my voice at last.

"I do," I say, and he looks at Rosalind.

"She is the expert, is she not?" he asks.

"As expert as any available," Rosalind answers.

My cheeks warm because I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult. Best to let it lie because this is far from my area of expertise. I do know how to work the machines, though. I have that going for me.

“I know this is a lot to—”

Rosalind cuts me off by raising on finger. She purses her lips then sighs as she leans back in her chair. “I haven’t worn the helmet since prior to the crash,” she says. “I am not sure if the suit is in full working order.”

“Are you,” I pause to moisten my lips because I can’t believe this is working, “— you’re saying yes?”

“I am,” Rosalind says.

“Thank you!” I squeal, but she cuts me off again with one finger.

“There are conditions.”

“Anything, of course. I mean, right, uhm, what are they?”

I’m talking faster than I’m thinking. I could be agreeing to anything in the world. Excitement bubbles in my guts like I’ve been asked out on my very first date, which is ridiculous.

“If the site isn’t viable, find a different one,” she says. “We must have a new home, *no failure*.”

Her proclamation hangs in the air with a weight that no two words should ever be able to convey. I swallow hard, blink, then nod agreement, taking on the absolute enormity of this task. Beyond my excitement to go outside, and my interest in spending time with Dal, this is a matter of life or death. And not just for the two of us, but for every person in the bunker.

If we don’t succeed, every man, woman, and child; human, Zmaj, or crossbreed will die.

No pressure. No pressure at all.

The airlock opens exactly as I remember, loud and annoyingly slow. I amuse myself watching Shaun tug and pull on the white leather suit she has borrowed from the Commander named Rosalind. She is two fingers shorter than the Commander and her hips are wider. The suit fits, but not exactly.

Still, she fills it out in the most interesting of ways and I have nothing better to do than appreciate her in all her beauty. Even if she is uncomfortable. She grabs folds on each of her thighs and tugs, wiggling her hips as she does.

“Ugh,” she grouses. “This is really uncomfortable.”

“You could stay behind,” I offer.

“No way,” she says. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

I smile and do not disagree, but I do know. I have been down here longer than she has, after all. But there is nothing to be gained by pointing this out. The air hisses as the doors seal behind us.

“Put the helmet on,” I say.

“I’m working on it.”

I pick it up from where it rests on a bench and hold it out. She jerks it out of my hands with a sound of exasperation. As she slips it over her head, I move behind and gather her hair up then tuck it inside the suit. She slides the helmet the rest of the way down and it clicks with a hiss as it locks into place.

“How is it?” I ask.

“Fine,” she says, squirming around and tugging. “It’s cool, which is great. Still pinches here and there, though.”

The pressure rises and my ears pop as the air changes. I roll my shoulders, touching the lochaber on my back. The familiar weight of the weapon feels good. I have missed having one there. On the outer door the panel glows red, pulsing.

“Almost,” I say, watching the readout.

The panel turns green and then the door hisses as it slides open. Red sand blows through the opening carried by a hot wind. I inhale deeply, the first fresh air I have tasted in so long I do not remember when the last time was.

I take the lead, walking out onto the soft sand. My feet sink to my ankles and the warmth is beautiful. Welcoming. It makes me feel alive. Reborn even. Which in a way I am.

The double suns are almost directly overhead, bearing down from a clear red sky, not a hint of a cloud in sight. The striated dunes roll away for as far as I can see, stretching to the hazy horizon. Heat makes waves as the suns’ rays bounce off the desert, creating mirage shapes.

I take another deep breath and stretch all my arms as I open my wings. The warm air tugs and calls, inviting me to run free.

Free.

Niggling doubts flutter around my head. No matter how real it feels, no matter what I believe, this could still all be part of the trap. I could be falling for it, again.

I must continue to stay alert and look for clues, but at the same time, I am going to enjoy this. If it is part of their trap, at least I can pretend I am outside. It *feels* like I am and for now, I am going to be happy.

“The cart should be over here,” Shaun says.

She walks with a heavy step, making the sand crunch with each footfall. She sinks with each stride because the way she carries her weight makes it hard for her to walk. Watching her,

I frown. This environment is dangerously radioactive. We will never make it to our destination if she travels that slowly.

She stomps around the door that leads down into the bunker. The door is partially submerged into a dune and its top and sides are covered by sand. She fights her way around and I follow. As she said, there is a sand sled waiting.

We go through the supplies already loaded on it, verifying that we have all we will need for a journey including food and some wood for a fire. The nights can be very cold, and a fire can keep many threats at bay. I set to work on rearranging the packs and boxes.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Making room.”

“Room for what? That’s all we’re bringing.”

“Yes.”

She falls silent as I continue. I can tell by the way she is watching me that she does not understand, but she will. I fix the sled so that there is an empty area that runs along the middle. Satisfied with my work, I grab Shaun by the waist. She yelps and struggles, but to no avail as I set her in the newly created space.

“What! No, I can walk, this isn’t necessary!”

“Yes, it is,” I say, testing the packs and crates to make sure that they are secure and will not fall. I do not want one of them coming loose and hurting her.

“No, it’s not. I can travel on my own. How are you going to handle all this extra weight?”

“You do not weigh much, and this will be much faster.”

She frowns, chews her lip for a moment, and then nods.

“Right,” she agrees. “You’re sure?”

“I am,” I say with a smile and nod of my head.

“If you get tired or it’s too much, you’ll tell me?”

“Of course, my treasure.”

“Nope, still haven’t agreed to that.”

I give her a knowing smile and do not argue. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head but does not argue further either.

I move to the front of the sled and gather up the leather harness. It takes a bit of trial and error to figure it out, but I get myself strapped in. There are several points of connection which is smart. I see how it will distribute the weight of the cart to different muscle groups, easing fatigue for the puller.

“Are you ready?” I ask, looking back.

“Yeah, uhm, let’s do this. Charge?”

I laugh and lean into the straps. The cart is partially buried in the sand and does not want to move. I lean further into it and dig my feet in. The cart jerks into motion. It starts slow but the faster I move, the easier the sled slides.

Once I get it moving smoothly, I open my wings and run. The hot wind blasts into my face as the desert slides by. I cannot keep from laughing. My muscles sing as they work. The sensations are almost as good as sex. Almost, clearly, but the comparison stands.

I have been trapped underground for ages, experimented on, had my mind messed with, and lost everything while it happened. This simple act of running across the desert is an act of freedom that fills me with joy.

“Wheee!!!!” Shaun yells, and she too is laughing.

I love the sound of her laughter. It is light and bubbling, expressing a depth of joy that matches what I feel. With a smile on my face, I keep running. As I climb a larger dune, we slow down but then we reach the top. I can see incredibly far. The rolling, red-white striated dunes stretch to the horizon.

“Which direction?” I ask.

“There,” Shaun points.

I nod, adjust the sled so it is pointed in the right direction, then step back onto the runners that protrude past the front. I kick off with one foot. The sled teeters at the edge of the incline until at last gravity grabs hold and we are off.

The sand speeds by in a blur as the sled races towards the bottom. Grains of sand slap against my face and scales but I welcome the abrasive grit. This is home. It's as if Tajss is welcoming me back. We reach the bottom of the dune and slide halfway up the next before the sled loses momentum.

I step off and make the rest of the climb. We repeat this cycle over and over as the suns make their way down towards the horizon. Eventually the shadows are stretching, and it will not be long until full dark.

Shaun pulls out one of her machines and holds it out to the side of the sled as I continue pulling. The machine makes a loud crackling noise that does not stop. I glance back, knowing it is measuring the radiation count, but I cannot see the read out.

"How is it?"

"Still too high for a human," she says. "But it's a lot lower than we expected it to be this close to ground zero."

"That is a good thing?"

"Yes," she agrees. "Strange, but yeah."

"Why is it strange?"

"Because it shouldn't be. There has to be a reason for it, that doesn't just happen. I don't understand how and that bothers me."

"Tajss provides."

"You sound like one of the cult members."

"What cult?"

"Well, they're not a cult, really, or, I don't know, maybe they are. They're not harmful, just a bit weird I guess."

"That does not answer my question."

"Oh, right, it's a group that believes Tajss is, I can't say I really understand it, but they think the planet is talking to some of them. Giving them messages or something. I don't know, sounds crazy to me."

“Why does it sound crazy?”

“Because planets aren’t sentient.”

I travel in silence, thinking about what she is saying. I do not know anything about this group she is talking about, but I do believe there is a force, something more, and that I commonly think of it as Tajss. It may be something else, fate, destiny, or the like. I am no philosopher and never made any study of it, but I do know that Tajss does provide.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Shaun says.

“I am sorry,” I say. “I was thinking over your words.”

“And?”

“I do not have an easy answer,” I admit.

“Do you think the planet is sentient?”

“I do not know,” I say. “Do you believe that there is more to the universe than you can see?”

“Sure, science proves that. If not, then there’d be nothing new to discover.”

“Exactly.”

“What’s that have to do with anything?”

“I believe in love,” I say. “Do you?”

“Love? Yeah, I mean. I think I do. I like the idea of it. I’m not sure it is quantifiable though.”

“You are right, that is my point,” I say.

Now she is silent. I continue, running when I can, riding down the backside of dunes, and climbing hard when I fight to get us to the top.

“A lot of the girls,” she says, speaking at last. “They talk about fate. The Zmaj do too, more than the girls. Is that what you’re talking about?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “There are things we cannot label. That maybe we cannot understand. But I know that love exists. That it is something beyond these bodies we inhabit. I know I love

you. With all that I am, more than my heart, more than my body, with... everything.”

“Oh,” she says, falling silent.

“If they want to label that love, that destiny, the pull I feel to you, as Tajss, then who am I to disagree?”

She is silent and night is falling fast. I am not tired yet but traveling the open world at night is far from safe. The sismis will be hunting soon and they are not the only threat. It is much harder to spot dangers in the dark, but the real threat is the invisible killer, radiation.

“Do you need to stop?” she asks.

“I think it best we continue as long as possible,” I say. “Can you get out one of the torches, please?”

I stop while she rummages in the packs until she pulls out a torch. It is a metal rod about the length of my forearm. The handle is wrapped with thick leather strips. The other end has been dipped in a flammable oil. I hold it at arm’s length, inhale deeply, and belch a ball of flame. The fire spews out, igniting the torch. Shaun gasps and I look to make sure she is okay.

“Wow, I’ve heard about it, but never seen it. That’s crazy.”

I shrug and smile. My scales are warming oddly under her admiring gaze. An urge to do more displays of strength forms, but that is silly. She is mine, whether she yet accepts it or not.

“All Zmaj can do this. It is not something that was done to me like,” I lift my extra limbs and drop them.

She purses her lips as she looks at my extra limbs. It makes me uncomfortable so I turn away. I adjust the straps while holding the torch in an extra hand, then pull. The night sky is clear. The stars twinkle brightly and the moon casts its pale light. I locate Sulperna’s Tail and adjust our direction towards it as my guide.

Shaun does not speak for a long time, and I do not either, but my thoughts are racing. Beneath everything there is a nagging fear that I am being fooled. The last thing I remember them saying is that they would only awaken me when their

technology was improved enough to fool me. Is that what this is?

I will destroy them. But what if they are gone? Could it be? Did they reap the rewards of their own hubris?

I am so lost in my thoughts that I miss the signs until the ground is trembling hard enough to make the sled jump.

“Dal?” Shaun asks, the pitch of her voice rising.

“Hang on,” I command. Leaning forward, I spread my wings and run full on.

The sled jumps and skips across the sand as I strain to get away. The ground rumbles. I swing the torch around, trying to find solid rock. The sand is dancing. Long rivulets run down the dune I am struggling to climb.

Where is it? It is coming fast, but from where?

The ground to my left explodes as the zemlja bursts through the surface. Rock and dirt clods pelt us. The sled is sent tumbling.

Shaun’s scream echoes in my ears.

SHAUN

When the ground first trembled, I didn't think anything of it. I saw the sand was bouncing but it looked like it was a side-effect of Dal running with the sled. I should have known better.

Now I grip the sled with all I've got as it flies up and up into the air. I'm turning end over end. Things fly around my head. I scream.

It's happening in slow motion. Like a scene in an old Earth vid.

I'm absurdly aware of the most mundane things. A leather pouch drifts in front of my face, spraying pieces of dried meat. Hundreds of grains of sand are floating past.

Slowly I tilt along with the sled, rising higher as my stomach drops. I try leaning into it, hoping to keep the sled upright, but the force is too much to overcome.

The sled reaches its apex, tilts hard to the left, then time rushes to catch up. The sled, the supplies, and me all hit the ground at once. It doesn't even hurt it happens so fast. I know it should. No, I know it will, but the impact is nothing more than an awareness, for the moment at least.

As soon as I crash, I'm tumbling in a tangle with the sled and supplies. Rolling over and over. Sky, sand, sky, sand repeating until I come to a sudden, sharp, and hard stop. The expected pain slams in. I grit my teeth but force my eyes open because whatever made this happen isn't going to be done yet.

No matter how much it hurts, there's no time to lie around whining. I need to move and move now. I try to take a breath, but the impact knocked out my wind and left my lungs in shock. I try to stand, but my legs don't want to work either, so I roll.

The sand is still jumping and roiling like an earthquake.

A Tajssquake?

I roll until it feels far enough and push myself onto my hands and knees, then I crawl away from the noise. I can't focus my eyes, I don't know what's attacking, or where Dal is, but the first thing I need to do is find safety. Or some semblance thereof. Only then will I be able to help.

I move forward. Sharp, stabbing pain blinds me as I move. My right arm is very likely broken, it hurts bad enough to be at least. I quit trying to use it and let it hang, dragging it along. A deafening roar fills my head, bouncing around inside my skull.

Away. Get away from that.

I move faster. Wetness drips into my eyes and I want to wipe it away, but my only working arm is too busy trying to move me to safety, so I clench my eyes and keep moving.

“Shaun!”

Dalagh's call is a rallying cry and a roar of defiance. Relief rushes over me knowing that he's not dead. I don't know if he's hurt or not, but alive is good. Alive is great. I try to blink my eyes clear, and it sort of works.

My vision is blurry, but anything is better than nothing. The ground undulates and I'm thrown up into the air again. I twist mid-air, pulling my injured arm up against my body. I manage to land on the opposite side.

Fortunately, the sand is relatively soft, and it doesn't hurt too much. Trying to get up this dune is a royal pain in the ass. The sand is running down like it's water and I'm trying to swim against the current.

Then it all stops.

The ground isn't rumbling. There's no sound. Whatever was happening is over.

I roll onto my back and lie still, taking a moment to catch my breath. The sky is a rich shade of black that's almost blue. The stars are so incredibly bright and white. It's peaceful, but this is Tajss. Peace never lasts for long.

I push myself into a sitting position. The desert is dotted with the detritus of our supplies. The cart lies upside down in the middle of it all.

None of that is what I want to know.

"Dal?" I call.

To the left there's a massive crater like a bomb went off, or a meteor struck. We've had meteorites before, but nothing big enough for that. Not that I know of. What made that? And where is Dal?

I'm hurt. My arm throbs and I've got multiple contusions but even that doesn't matter as much as finding him. I struggle to my feet. Half-way up I pause, tears filling my eyes, but then I grit my teeth and finish standing.

My feet slip in the loose sand. I fight for every step, stumbling my way towards the crater. I call his name again, but silence mocks me.

The ground is rough rock, dirt, pebbles, and loose sand mounded around the newly created hole. I edge closer and closer until at last, I can see into it.

It's massive. At least thirty feet across, and it goes down and down into pitch blackness. The problem is, I don't see Dal. I don't see anything.

"Dal?" my voice trembles as I call his name again.

The zelmja has me in its mouth. Legs spread wide, I have found purchase enough to keep it from swallowing me. For the moment. Its concentric rows of teeth still work to pull me down, tearing at my scales.

Shaun. Must get to her. Fight.

Darkness pushes in, closing around my consciousness. I struggle to break free of its grasp.

My throat is too tight. I cannot breathe. My lungs burn. I cannot move my arms, cannot reach my weapon. I twist, trying to break free, but it does not work.

One last chance. Dangerous. No choice.

I relax my legs. The teeth pull me further down, but my tail is free. A mental command compresses the poison sacks they implanted, pushing it into the tip of my unnatural tail.

It may not work. The scientists never did figure out why it would work sometimes and not others. If it does not, I will die. Shaun will die.

No!

I stab into the soft flesh of the zelmja's throat. It undulates wildly. Its mouth and throat spasm, squeezing me with crushing force. What little air remained in my lungs rushes out as my muscles are forced to contract.

I sense the angle I am at changing. Outside the walls of flesh there is an explosion which brings some hope. Above me the

mouth opens. I claw my way up the throat, striving to reach that glimpse of night sky.

The zemlja screeches. The sound is deafening and makes my ears ring. I am almost out. My fingers are closing on the edge of its open mouth when it snaps shut.

I inhale and let out a roar of my own, punching the thing. I strike it over and over, not relenting. It must open. Shaun is out there, alone. She needs me.

The teeth dig in and tug, trying to force me towards the stomach. If I am to be a meal, I will be its last.

I strike faster, harder. Stabbing with my tail as I slam my fists into whatever I can reach, looking for any weakness.

Most of the flesh is hard sinew, barely giving to my blows. Still, I twist as I punch, seeking. Striking again, my fist goes deep and the zemlja shudders. The mouth opens as a new screeching scream rips past.

The smell is horrific. My stomach would rebel if there was time. I fight my way up again and this time I get both hands on the edges of its mouth. When I find purchase with my second set of hands, I know I've made it.

I jerk myself up with all my might and pop out of the thing's mouth.

It is fully extended from the ground, at least four wingspans up. I tumble out of the mouth covered in spit and slime. My wings refuse to open as I fall towards the ground. The zemlja screams again.

I roar in defiance and will my wings to work. They snap open and I catch the thermal winds, avoiding another crash to the ground.

Landing with something resembling grace, I run the moment my feet touch the sands. As I move, I pull the lochaber off my back.

"You threaten my treasure," I yell, spinning around so fast that sand flies up as I skid to a stop in an offensive position with my lochaber ready.

The creature is mindless. I know this. But it does not matter. Rage burns in my chest so hot I must release it. I run at the thing, lochaber held low. I scan the creature as I approach, noting the lay of its scales, picking my target.

“Dalagh?” Shaun yells my name and I make my biggest mistake yet. I look. “Watch out!”

The ground rumbles. As I turn and run from the hole, the sand beneath my feet begins to buck. I don't know what's happening, but falling into a massive pit is the last thing in the world I need.

The dune surges and I'm thrown into the air. Below me the sand is moving like the waves of an ocean as I float above it. It's only for an instant and then I'm racing down and crashing. Again.

I try to protect my already screwed arm by twisting, but this time I'm not graceful enough. I do manage to land on my back which jars the devil out of my broken arm, but I don't think anything else broke.

The rumbling continues then something explodes. I don't have time to get up, so I roll, and I keep rolling until the ground beneath me stops moving. Only then do I raise my head to look around.

“Dalagh!”

His name tears out of my throat like razor blades slicing through flesh. Painful. I've never seen a zemlja this close, but I've heard the stories. We all have. The 'monster' of Tajss. The sand-dragon, the apex predator that even the Zmaj prefer to give a wide-berth.

And monster it is. The thing is huge. It bursts out of the ground and rises into the air like some kind of organic skyscraper, going up and up and up. Stretching until it reaches

a height of thirty or maybe even forty feet. Once there, it remains upright, undulating like a tweaker at a rave.

The monster opens its mouth and screeches and then, unbelievably, Dalagh crawls out. I crab crawl backwards. Anything to get away. I'm not going to play the part of a fool. I can't help him, the best I can do is not put myself in danger while he either gets away or does whatever he can.

Please don't get eaten. Please. Please.

I see his muscles straining, veins bulging visibly even through his scales. Breathless, I watch, afraid to even breathe. Suddenly he pops like a cork from a champagne bottle. He flies up, over, and then he's tumbling down.

Wings. Use your wings! Wings!

I can't form the words. My mouth is full of sand and too dry. I scream them in my head like he can hear me. Suddenly his wings open with a snap and at the last possible moment he's gliding. His legs are running before he hits the ground and as soon as he does, he grabs the lochaber from his back. The long-shafted weapon expertly spins in his hands, stopping in an offensive position as he turns back towards the monster.

"You threaten my treasure!" he roars.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. He's going to attack it. He must think I'm in it or over there, or something. I have to stop him.

"Dalagh!" I yell. He pauses long enough to glance in my direction, and at that exact moment the stupid, overgrown earth worm twists and slams its body down. "Look out!"

I watch in horror, seeing this play out and unable to stop it. The zemlja is crashing towards the sands and there's no doubt in my mind that it will crush Dal. That thing must weigh thousands of pounds at least. There's no way he will survive this.

Dal looks back but it doesn't seem like he has enough time. I see his eyes widen then sand explodes, blocking my view. I cry his name as tears fill my eyes. Momentarily, I'm thankful

for Rosalind's suit, without it I don't think I'd be able to breathe.

The sand cloud blasts through, but the air remains full of swirling dirt and remnant particles. I can't go forward, if that thing is still there it will kill me and I for sure won't be of any use to Dalagh then.

A slithering sound emerges from the blankness that makes my skin crawl. Cautiously, I creep forward. I don't want to make any noise because I remember that these things hunt by vibrations. I ease each foot down, setting my weight onto it slowly.

I don't yell. I don't speak. I barely let myself breathe.

The dust is slowly settling, clearing the air. The creature is gone. It looks like it retreated to the underground where it came from. There's a concave where it slammed down. I edge closer, alert for the slightest of changes or vibrations that should, I hope, preview the thing's return.

"Ow," Dalagh groans.

"Dal?" I whisper his name.

"Shaun," he says, also whispering.

I pick up my pace as much as I can without creating noise. When I reach the concave, the sand is almost solid from the mass of the thing. It's, effectively, a half-pipe. At the bottom, buried in the sand, lies Dal.

"Are you okay?" I ask, climbing over the lip.

As soon as my feet touch down on the inside of the crater, I slip then slide down to the bottom. I come to a stop next to Dal, my heart and breathe racing. I press my hands to the ground, searching for any sign that the monster is coming back.

I wait, silent, wishing my heart would not be so loud until I'm sure we're safe. Dal lies still too, simply breathing, which is more than I could have ever hoped for. He has his eyes closed, blood trickles from his nose, and there are wounds up and down his body.

His pants are torn and I see the tip of his cock peeking out. Great, Shaun. Focus on the man's cock when he's hurt. You're a real class act girl.

I touch his face. The gloves of my suit create a barrier I really want to get rid of, but that would be foolish. He opens his eyes, sees me, then smiles.

"You are okay?"

"I'm not the one that needs to be asked that," I murmur. "You look fucked up."

"I have been through worse," he says with a chuckle as he pushes himself up onto his elbows. He groans loudly.

"Shhh," I hush. "And take it slow. Damn, you're going to bring that thing back."

He presses his hands to the sand and closes his eyes. I don't know what he's doing so I wait patiently, if for no other reason than I don't want to risk making noise.

"It is gone," he says at last.

"How can you be sure?"

"I was too much trouble to eat." He grins.

"Makes sense," I say. "You were probably too spicy for it."

"Yes," he chuckles. "Too spicy."

He stands up. There's still blood from his nose on his face and on his body from his other wounds.

"I need to clean you up," I say, looking back up the pit. I'm not sure I can climb the smooth packed sand.

"Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine," I say, studying the wall of sand.

"Your arm, what is wrong with your arm?"

I look down and my stomach revolts at the same time as a wave of dizziness hits. I look away, clenching my eyes tightly while clinging to consciousness.

"Oh yeah, that's not good."

“It is broken,” he says. “We must go back to the bunker. You need care.”

“No,” I say, gritting my teeth and shaking my head.

The nausea stays, but the dizziness recedes.

“Shaun, you are seriously injured. This mission is a wash.”

“No,” I snap. “Don’t you see? We don’t have time. If we go back now, by the time you get to the site and figure out if it’s safe or not, then back to the bunker, we’ll all be dead. We don’t have the supplies. This is not optional.”

He grimaces but nods. “I have field training,” he says. “But you are not going to like it. Are there any painkillers in the supplies?”

“Nothing strong,” I say. “Another thing we don’t have much of. The drug supplies were raided early on, then there was a riot. Pretty much finished off what was left.”

“This is going to hurt. A lot.”

“I can take it,” I lie, doing my best to put on a bold face and look braver than I feel.

He doesn’t call me out, but if that’s because he believes me or not, I can’t tell. I do my best to hide the fluttering of fear in my chest and keep the anticipation of the coming agony suppressed. He turns away but not before I see his grimace.

I cradle my arm while he goes to the sled. It’s sitting at an angle, being partially buried in the sand allows it to keep its crazy cant. Because it’s made mostly of metal, it weighs a few hundred pounds at the minimum. Dal doesn’t seem worried in the slightest.

He grabs one side and pulls. It doesn’t budge but he isn’t deterred. He strains, grunting, his muscles bulge bringing out every one in stark contrast to each other like he’s a professional bodybuilder and all I need to do is cover him in oil to have a winner.

The sled shifts, slightly at first, but he keeps the pressure up then dances back as it falls onto its skids. Sand puffs up and I

look around quickly, terrified that the sound will attract the attention of the zemlja.

Dal must have the same thought because he crouches and places both his hands flat on the sand. Neither of us speaks, waiting. I hold my breath until my lungs are burning and only then do I let out a long exhale, slowly to avoid even that much noise.

Several minutes pass with no signs of a problem. Dal nods to himself, stands up, then begins gathering the scattered supplies. I want to help but I'm useless. My arm is an unending, throbbing second heartbeat of pain.

I have to do something to take my mind off of it, so I walk around and find some of our supplies that landed down here to make it easier for Dal to focus on putting them back on the cart. By the time we finish, the first pink rays of the primary sun crawl across the horizon.

I'm sure the pain isn't helping the wave of exhaustion I feel realizing we've been traveling for almost an entire day now. Neither of us has slept, but Dal has to be really feeling it. He's done all the work while I've been riding on the sled. And he was eaten by a zemlja. That alone should warrant a nap.

"We should try to sleep," I say. "I can keep watch while you get some rest."

He looks over the large box he's carrying to the sled with an arched eyebrow and a frown.

"You are injured."

"Yeah, but it's not so bad. Mostly numb actually."

His frown deepens. He sets the box down on the sled and shifts it around until it's in place, then turns around.

"That is not good," he says.

"It's fine," I say, waving my good hand uselessly around the air. "Seriously. I'll be fine. You've been going non-stop and pulling me along. You should rest."

He walks closer. No, he stalks closer. A predator approaching its prey, and for one wild instant I think he's after my heart.

Metaphorically, of course, but it sends a thrill through my body that blunts the pain even as I shiver.

“Shaun,” he says, standing too close. He fills my vision, consuming the world, becoming the center of everything. I’m high on adrenaline or something. “I will never rest until you are cared for and safe. Never.”

His voice is deep, rumbly, and dominating. He’s laying a claim that I don’t know I’m ready to give, but then he’s not giving me a choice, is he? I never asked for this, but then why does it feel so right?

I’m nodding, but I never thought that through. My body is reacting while I’m spinning on a cloud of emotion and dopamine. He touches my helmet but my body acts like he’s stroking my skin. Goosepimples form on my cheek and race down my neck.

“You,” it’s hard to form words around the lump in my throat and my mouth that is suddenly too dry, “You need care too.”

I force the words out, struggling to make them contain the thoughts and concepts in my head.

“Soon,” he says.

When he turns away, I stumble forward like he’s the gravity of the sun. He walks to the sled, beginning to rummage through the packs. He finds two more of the torches, the entirety of our supply. He holds them up to the soft dawn light and then comes back to me. He places one of them against my good arm with an appraising eye. Satisfied, he nods.

“This will serve,” he says.

He returns to the cart, digging until he finds one of my very few blouses. He grabs the hem before I realize what he’s about to do and rips.

“No!” I shout. He looks over but doesn’t stop ripping the blouse into long strips. “That’s one of my only ones.”

I feel its loss like an empty ache in my guts. We have so few things that are ours since the crash. I didn’t realize how

strongly I'd been clinging to them until he tore one up like it was nothing.

"I will get you new ones," he says, matter-of-factly.

Holding the strips in one hand he comes back and kneels.

"Lie down," he commands. Feeling numb with shock and loss, I obey his command. "It would be best if we took the suit off, but there is too much danger in that. I will do my best to set it inside the suit. But Shaun..."

I wait for him to finish but he doesn't. He's frowning and there's clearly a debate going in his head.

"What is it?"

"I do not know how bad the break is," he says. "I can set it, but when we reach safety, it may need to be reset again. It is very likely you will lose at least some mobility."

I close my eyes and grimace. Great. I know what he's not saying but I don't want to say it either. Resetting it means he'll have to rebreak the arm. That's not going to be a good time.

"And if we don't set it, it will begin to heal like this," I say, looking down at my arm that has a sickening crook to it.

"Yes," he agrees.

"Do it."

He doesn't waste time or breath with more niceties. He puts his hands on my arm then I scream, and blackness takes over.

*H*er cries of pain cut me sharper and deeper than any blade. It took all my will to finish the job, and then only because I know how much worse it would be if I did not. I have seen too many times the results of a poorly set bone. Not that hers is right, but it is as close as I can get it without taking off the suit, which isn't an option.

I create a pad of blankets in the center of the sled then carry Shaun to it and lay her down. I find another blanket to cover her, and a softer pack that I mold into a pillow. She looks peaceful and I take a moment to watch my mate breathing while the suns crest the horizon.

It is time to move. I am tired, but this is no place to rest. I slip the straps into place and pull, not leaning into them hard because I do not want to jar Shaun more than I absolutely must. The sled sticks, but I am relentless which wins out over friction, eventually.

The suns climb past the midday and still I keep moving. I enjoy the sensation of their warmth on my scales. It has been so long since I have breathed fresh air, felt sunshine, or had the freedom to move.

The world stretches out before us in unending, rolling dunes of sand that span every direction towards the horizon. To the east a rock formation breaks the skyline, but that is not our goal.

North, to the mountains. The place the humans want investigated is that way, so north I travel. Sometimes I think I can sense the radiation. An itchy, crawling sensation that

worms its way between the overlap of my scales. It does not seem to be affecting me in any noticeable manner, so I do not worry about it.

The desert seems strangely empty. Normally, Tajss is full of life if you know where to look. Insects and small creatures that bury themselves in the sand to escape the direct suns. Plants are not common, but they exist. I do not know how far we have traveled because there is nothing to measure the distance by, but there have been almost no signs of life.

This is what it was like after the bombs dropped the first time.

Before that, the Empire had been in a state of civil war for decades, but Tajss had remained untouched. It was off-limits. All the various races that made up the Empire, and even those who were trying to secede, agreed.

Tajss was the source of life. The only place in the galaxy that epis would grow. They had tried, for lifetimes, to grow it off-planet, but they never succeeded. Epis was unique to Tajss and so Tajss remained sacrosanct.

Until it was not.

We knew that planet killer weapons existed, but they had never been used. No one was that desperate or that stupid. In the military they were viewed as a deterrent. A 'you use yours and we will use ours' mentality.

A stupid idea. It relies on rational beings who are not bent on destruction. It did not account for insanity. Did not allow that any people would elect a leader or give power to someone willing to burn it all down and see what was left.

And that is what happened. I do not know what race did it, or why they chose to break all the traditions and target Tajss. Tajss had to be first though. We would have heard about any other planet being hit, would have been prepared.

Someone, somewhere in the galaxy, decided to flip the table over rather than lose the game. Absolute insanity and this is what is left.

The sled shifts against my pull. I glance back and see Shaun is pushing herself to a sitting position.

“Easy,” I call to her without slowing down. “You are okay.”

She puts a hand to her head, but it is blocked by the helmet.

“How long was I out?”

“I do not know,” I say. “Half a day or so.”

“Oh, man.” She shifts, grabbing the rail with her good hand, and pulls herself up, but this shift of weight causes the sled to jerk side-to-side.

“Please lie still,” I admonish. “You need the rest.”

“I’m fine,” she argues, but the sled swings again and she bumps her arm against the edge and cries out in pain. I stop running and turn to go to her, but the straps tangle and I have to stop to fight them.

“Sorry. Sorry,” she says.

“You are okay?”

“Yeah, that hurt.” She lifts her broken arm and stares at it.

The two torches I used to splint it into place are too long. The break is in her forearm, but the torches are closer to the length of her entire arm. They protrude past her elbow. She shakes her head.

I untangle the straps and slip out then go to her. Kneeling next to the sled, I grip her shoulders. She turns her head and inside the helmet she has a small smile.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” she says, leaning in until she is resting the helmet against my horns. She touches my face with her good hand, and I wish she could take the suit off. “Wish I could kiss you.”

She whispers the words, but they cause a surge of warmth to rush through my limbs.

“And I you,” I say softly. “Soon. We must keep moving.”

“You need to rest. And eat. I’m starving.”

I frown, then stand up and go to the back of the sled. Opening the top crate, I pull out the machine that measures radiation. I hand it to her, and she takes it without questioning. She does

something and it begins making the clicking static noise. She fiddles with the knobs for a moment then scans the area.

“What does it say?”

“How far do you think we’ve traveled?”

“Maybe half the distance to the target,” I say.

“First, wow. You’ve really been moving.”

“Thank you, the readout?”

“Yeah, this doesn’t make sense.”

She shifts until she is on her knees. She tucks the machine under one arm so she can use her hand. I realize what she is doing almost too late, but figure it out in time to help her stand up and step out of the sled. She drops the machine in the process, but I retrieve it for her.

“What is it saying?”

“The radiation count is about half of what I expected,” she says. “It shouldn’t be this low, not yet.”

“Which means what?”

“It’s not safe for long term exposure, but it’s not going to kill us. Well, me. You’ll be fine.”

“Isn’t this what was supposed to be happening?”

“Yes, but not this fast.”

She frowns, drawing her eyebrows together and forming a crease. I went to kiss the lines on her forehead.

“Tajss provides,” I say and smile.

She chuckles but shakes her head, not disagreeing, but obviously not buying the simplicity of the platitude.

“It is safe to eat then?”

“It should be fine,” she nods, staring at the machine. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Good,” I say.

I dig into the rations while she unfastens the helmet. Air wooshes as she releases the seal. She tries to pull it off, but cannot with only one hand. I pause what I am doing and help. Her hair is wet and sticking to her face. I brush it away from her eyes and she smiles, casting her gaze down.

“Thank you,” she says, her voice barely a whisper. “I’m a mess.”

“You are perfect.”

I do not want to stop touching her, but she must eat so I return to preparing a simple meal of dried rations. I get a water skin and hold it ready while she chews a tough strip of meat.

“You need to eat too,” she says.

“I will, once you are done.”

“You don’t have to wait.”

I smile but do not bother answering. She knows I do, not from any societal demand, but because she has only one hand and cannot get what she needs. She comes first. She always has and always will. She is my reason. The only thing I truly need in the universe.

If she is real.

No. I push that thought aside. She must be real. The monsters were smart, but not this smart. This is too good. It cannot be one of their games. I hand her the water skin and she drinks deeply, then sighs.

“If you are full, we should keep moving,” I say.

She nods, looking around with a wistful gaze. “It really is a beautiful planet,” she muses. “If only everything wasn’t trying to kill you.”

I look around us too.

“It is beautiful. Everything is not trying to kill you, though. Everything has its place in the order of things. Each thing depends on the next to survive. It is a delicate balance. Miraculous really, when you think about it.”

She snorts and shakes her head. I give her a questioning look.

“Leave it to you,” she says by way of explanation, which explains nothing. “All of us humans, all we see is the danger and how bad everything is. You, after all you’ve been through and all they did to you, you still come out here and have this delightful and beautiful insight into how the world is actually a good place.”

I shrug and shake my head.

“I am no philosopher,” I say. “But I have seen a lot of this galaxy. Nowhere I have been is more in balance or more beautiful than Tajss.” I pause, turning back and locking eyes with her. “Except you. You have always been my anchor. No matter how far I have traveled, I always come home for you.”

Her mouth forms an ‘O’ as her eyes widen and she shakes her head.

“Dal...” she trails off while her mouth continues moving as if she is trying to find the words. I do not need them. I know. Or I think I do. “I’m not, you can’t,” she shakes head. “Dal you need to stop. I’m not ready for all of that.”

A punch to the gut would hurt less.

Watching Dal's face drop makes my stomach clench into a hard knot. I don't want to hurt him, but I also won't lie to him. He may be all in, but I'm not there yet. The fate of two races relies on the success of this mission, and I really don't have the bandwidth. I can't spend my time figuring out what I feel and what my next move with him is until this is done.

I'm not a Zmaj. I don't believe that love at first sight happens. Even if I now feel like a total jerk. Should I lie to him? Play along? It's not like I don't like him. I do. A lot. But liking someone isn't a forever kind of love.

Being someone's anchor, the reason they live, that's not something I'm going to take lightly and it's more than I'm ready for. I can't and I can't lie to him. I'm not that kind of girl. I won't play him like that. Silent, he packs the food and secures the crates.

While he works, I try to get the helmet back on with my one good arm. It's heavier than it looks and difficult to handle with only one hand. I get a good grip and lift it over my head, but figuring out a way to put it over my head while gripping it at the same time is another thing entirely. I try to lower it but then my grip slips and I bonk myself on the head.

"Ouch," I yelp as it cracks my skull.

"Wait, I will help," Dal says.

"I can do it," I snap.

I'm angry. Not at him, but at myself. That anger makes my voice a lot sharper than I intend. It's clearly not enough that I already hurt him with what I said before, now I have to depend on him for the simplest of tasks? Can't I let him be?

I struggle to figure it out on my own, feeling worse because now he's watching. Frustration continues to build and I just want to get the damned helmet on and travel. I also want him to stop looking at me like a puppy I just kicked.

"Damn it!" I yell, cracking myself in the head one more time.

In a fit of anger I throw the helmet. It bounces across the sand. I glare at it angrily. It didn't even have the decency to fly very far, landing not more than ten paces away. I'm so pissed I'm shaking. I ball my good hand into a fist and shake it at the offending helmet.

Dal quietly walks over and scoops the helmet up. Standing with his back to me he shakes it free of sand then inspects the inside. I watch as he attentively brushes it clean. Everything he is doing makes me feel worse, which in turn makes me even angrier. When he finishes, he turns and walks over but he keeps his eyes on the sand, not even looking at me. He holds the helmet out, gripping it between both hands.

"I will help."

"Fine," I snap.

There's no way I'm going to get this thing on by myself, and even if I do, I won't be able to seal it because that takes two hands. I duck my head, like he doesn't already tower over me, and he slips the helmet into place. He crouches and works the fasteners. The clear visor fogs over, obscuring my view, but then air rushes in as the suit mechanisms activate and in a moment it's clear again.

I thank him then look around. I want to walk but that's stupid. If my real problem is the limited time available to save our two races, then me walking is pretty much the dumbest thing I could do.

Sighing, I move to climb back onto the sled. I grip the side with my good arm as I step over the edge. When I put my feet

down on the blanket that he laid out for me while I was out, my foot slips. I fall with a yelp.

Right before I land, I'm stopped. Dal somehow manages to catch me before I slam down. I'm grateful and angry at the same time. I can't even manage to do this without hassling him.

"I have you."

"Thanks," I say, cheeks burning.

He lowers me into the sled like I'm a baby doll. Which, in his arms, I basically am. It makes me feel even more helpless and worse because I can't not depend on him. Which is fine if we're friends, which we are, or I thought we were. But he wants so much more and, in his head, that's the way it is. How do I do this and not hurt him?

"Are you comfortable?" he asks.

"Dal, I'm fine," I say. "I don't want to—"

I cut myself off because I don't have the words for what I don't want. Don't want what? To hurt you? Depend on you? Play you? All of the above?

"I understand," he says, and that causes a cold ball of ice in my stomach that chills my limbs because I believe him.

I think he really does understand. How, I don't know, but if he does, then I shouldn't feel bad, right? Yet here I am, feeling like a jerk. And I didn't do anything. I didn't lay claim to him, didn't shout out 'I love you' or anything else.

Maybe, in time, I will. He doesn't say anything else as he moves to the front of the sled and slips himself back into the harness. Staring at his silent back, I could see myself loving him.

He leans forward and the sled picks up speed as he gets moving. In moments the wind is rushing past us and he's bounding across the sand, pulling me along.

I do like the way he makes me feel. The way he looks at me. And I know that the Zmaj are great. All the girls talk about

how much they love their mates. I'm not ruling it out, but I want to be sure. That's the right thing to do, isn't it?

If it is, then why does it feel so bad?

I need to give her time. It is the one thing we have plenty of. I pick up speed until I am bounding across the desert, focusing on running. It helps to keep my doubts and worries at bay.

Her words are painful, but I do understand. Or I think I do. She does not seem to recall her former life and I do not have any idea how this works. Would you want to recall dying? I have been close enough to death so many times that I imagine you would not. If nothing else, the pain is unbelievable.

The exertion is enough to keep me in the moment. It feels good to run free like this. I have been cooped up in the bunker for so long. Even our exercise was done inside. There is nothing that compares to feeling the double suns warming my body as I push my muscles to their limits.

When exhaustion comes and my muscles begin to fail, I push harder. At first it feels like I have hit a wall. There is resistance. My body urges me to rest. A stitch forms in my side and breathing burns, but I will not stop.

Soon, I push through the pain and on the other side is a freshness that is incredible. I am alive in ways I have not felt in forever. So long I had forgotten how good it can feel just to exist.

As I run, I scan the horizon, alert for any new dangers. I will not get caught unaware again. That mistake almost cost me everything. I cannot let my guard down now.

The desert was dead before, but now I see signs of life. A krinika skitters across the sand, its blended coloring makes it hard to spot. To the east I see a slithering zmeya. On a dune to the west, I am relatively sure I see the iridescent green vines of a nadzem. Life. The planet is coming back to life after yet another attempt to end it.

We crest a dune and I pause to take my bearings. I close my protective lenses to filter the light and it brings the far distance into focus. Shaun shifts around in the sled.

“What do you see?” she asks.

“Checking the direction,” I say, not turning around.

She needs space. Space and time.

Something pulls my attention closer. Looking down, I see the sand is trailing down the dune in front of us. I drop into a crouch and press my hands into the sand.

“What is it?” Shaun asks, noisily climbing around the sled.

I hold up my tail and shake my head. A low rumbling vibration comes through the sand. Another zemlja is close. Damn it. Shaun is silent now, but something else is still making noise. A lot of it. I look over to my female, but she is looking back into the sled. The sound is coming from one of the crates.

“Quiet,” I whisper.

She shakes her head, leaning across the sled and digging into the crate. She opens it and the noise is louder than ever. The rumbling of the ground is too. The sand dragon is coming closer. Shaun holds up the source of the noise. The radiation detector is the problem. It is crackling madly with loud pops.

“The count is crazy high,” she says.

“Shaun, shut it off,” I plead. I glance over my shoulder, down the dune, and what I see makes my hearts skip a beat. “Now. Silence. Now.”

Tall dunes create a circle below us, like a basin or bowl. At the bottom of the bowl the sand is swirling as if it is a whirlpool.

Turning faster and faster. I hear Shaun poking and fumbling with the machine.

It is taking too long.

“Stupid machine,” she curses the thing.

A zemplja breaks the ground, then dives below the sands again. As it does, another surfaces as well. There are at least two, possibly three of them. I have never seen or even heard of anything like this. Zemplja are supposed to be solitary, crisscrossing the planet on their own.

I reach for the machine, intending to crush it so that it will stop, but at that moment she manages to make it quit. She is staring with wide eyes, and I hold one finger in front of my lips then point below.

She nods without moving. Smart. She raises the machine and looks at it. I do not know why but she frowns, looks up and down, then back at the machine. I cannot ask her why right now. We must get away from here without attracting attention. That means no noise.

I motion for her to sit, and she carefully lowers herself onto the sled. I take hold of the harness, pulling it tight without moving. Once I have the slack pulled out, I stand up and take a step, slowly placing my foot.

I repeat the process, one step at a time. The suns drop across the sky and are setting by the time I think we have put enough distance between us and the zemplja that I stop. I slip out of the harness and roll my shoulders to ease my aching muscles.

“What was that?” she asks.

“I have never seen anything like it before.”

She still has the machine in her hands, lowering her gaze back to it.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before either,” she says, gesturing with it.

“What is it?”

“The radiation levels back there, they were dropping.”

“Is that not what we want?”

“Sure, but that was fast.” She is frowning thoughtfully. “I think...”

“Think what?” I ask when she does not finish the thought.

“I think they were eating it.”

“Eating it?”

“The zemlja, they were, somehow, removing the radiation.”

“Impossible,” I say, shaking my head.

She climbs off the sled. She almost slips and I rush forward, stopping only when she catches herself without falling.

“No, think about it,” she says, pacing the sands. “You’ve never seen more than one of them together, right?”

“True.”

“And the readings, they were dropping. I mean there is no other way I can explain what was happening. The radiation was being, I don’t know, filtered, I guess. Filtered out of the sand.”

“You said that the radiation level was dropping faster than your people expected,” I say. “That would explain it. Tajss is cleaning itself.”

“Yes,” she says jumping up and down. “Yes!”

I smile, basking in her joy. It is so much better than the tension of before. I never want it to end. She turns and locks eyes with me and the tension returns immediately. The weight of our gaze on each other is like gravity, pulling us towards each other.

She swallows. I watch her mouth work. A trickle of moisture runs across her cheek as she takes a step forward. I hold still, not wanting to ruin the moment. She takes another step, then she runs into my arms.

I grab her up and spin her around. We fumble with her suit, stripping it off quickly, then use the sled as a bed. I take her in every way possible.

SHAUN

I am an idiot.

I promised myself I wasn't going to play him but there I go, banging him again like that isn't the very thing I promised not to do. Toying with his heart. Cursing myself, I let him help me back into the suit.

I don't know what I was thinking. I got so excited and then I saw him and it just kind of happened. Like my smart brain shut off and my primal, sexy brain took over and the next thing I knew we were fucking.

He helps me onto the sled, and I settle in to try and deal with my twisting thoughts. I keep saying I don't have time to deal with this, but that's a lie, isn't it? I've got nothing but time. He's doing all the work, after all.

What am I avoiding?

Truth time, Shaun. I try to smooth the wrinkles out of the suit pants. Stupid suit keeps bunching up on my thighs. I'm thicker than Rosalind and shorter.

The empty sand slides past. I turn my attention out and watch for a bit, letting my thoughts stew.

I like Dal. And he makes me feel good in all the right ways. What else do I want? I'm attracted to him. We've proven that more than once as my mild soreness will testify to. It's not about the sex or sex at all though. Sex is fine, pleasure is great, but we're not talking about sex. We're talking about my heart.

And what am I afraid of? As far as any human can tell, once a Zmaj chooses you, that's it. For them at least. I've never heard even a hint of one of them cheating or even so much as looking at another girl. Ever. They just don't. They're not wired that way, but humans are.

What if I get bored? The way the Zmaj dote on their women, it looks suffocating. I mean, sure it's going to be nice, for a while. I'm thinking long term though. How long can I stand having a man waiting on me hand and foot?

I've always been an independent gal. I've lived on my own since I was sixteen. My parents were fine, but I knew what I wanted and didn't want to wait to get it. They supported me in my endeavors without question.

Now though, I'm not just looking at moving in with a guy. If I agree with Dal, if I say yes, that commitment to him is forever. Am I ready for that? Forever is a long time and let's be honest, it's not like I've been around the dating pool much. Life's been more than a little busy what with crashing on an alien planet and all.

And my thoughts circle back around to the same thundering question. How do I know? What if this is a huge mistake? If I think I hurt him before, what if I figure out that this isn't right for me? That these nascent feelings budding in my heart for him aren't real. They're just hormones or whatever?

I chew my lip, trying to come up with an answer, but I've got nothing. The weight on my chest is crushing and it's hard to breathe. I just don't want to screw this up. No matter whatever else, I do care about him. He's nice and he's a person and no one deserves to have their heart broken. I sure don't want to be the one that does it.

"Dal?" I hate the way my voice quavers. I swallow hard and take a breath, trying to steady myself.

"Yes?" he asks, not stopping, but he does turn his head to the side.

"How do you know?"

"Know? Know what?"

My heart speeds up as regret comes in like the waves of an ocean threatening to drown me. I've gone too far to stop now.

"That I'm the one."

He chuckles and my cheeks burn.

"I'm serious Dal. Don't laugh."

"I am not laughing, not at you," he says. "But it is such a question!"

"Fine, but can you tell me?"

"How do I know that the suns will rise in the morning?" he asks, his wings flapping as he drags the sled up another dune. "It simply is a truth I know. I do not know how to explain it any better than that."

"But it could be hormones. Some chemicals in our brains, then what? We commit to each other then in a few weeks, or months, or whatever, we figure out that we really don't like each other."

"That will not happen."

"You can't know that!" I shout. "It's impossible. I've got quirks. Terrible things I do that you might hate. You don't know me. I don't know you. You've barely been awake for what, a few days now? This could be the biggest mistake of your life."

"It is not."

"Gah, you're impossible. Don't you see? Won't you even look?"

"I will do anything for you."

"And that's my point! You can't say that. If I tell you to jump into that pit of zemplja back there, would you? Cause that's a thing I could ask of you."

"Would it have made you happy?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Because if it would, then I would have."

He says this with such seriousness that I'm speechless. The simplicity of his world view is incomprehensible to me. I don't feel like he's listening, or at least that he doesn't understand. I force my mouth to close and shake my head.

"You're an idiot."

"Perhaps," he says with an absolute air of nonchalance. "But nothing will change how I feel about you. Besides, you would not have asked that."

"But I could have, you said you'd do anything for me."

"And I would."

"You don't know me. You don't know I won't ask you to do something terrible. Or stupid, or whatever."

He slows and comes to a stop, turning around so we're facing each other fully.

"Shaun?"

"What?"

"I do know you," he says. "The moment I laid eyes on you I knew. I knew before that. While I was in the sleep, I heard your voice. In the cryo dreams you were an angel. When I woke and saw you, even like this," he gestures up and down my body, "I knew."

My throat closes tight around a hard lump of feelings I can't process. The knot of them digs sharp claws into my esophagus and refuses to let words past. Tears swell in my eyes but I'm not going to cry. I'm not. Nope, not going to do it.

"Dal," I choke on his name, but it breaks the lump free. I shake my head and swallow the remnants. "The things you say, they're beautiful. They make me feel... special."

"You are," he says, kneeling next to the sled and grabbing my good hand. "Very much so."

"Don't you see," I say, tears falling. "I don't deserve all this. I want to be sure."

"Okay," he says.

“No, damn it, it’s not just ‘okay’. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He frowns, staring into my eyes for a moment that stretches until it feels like an elastic band that will snap at any moment. Anticipation of the coming pain builds as the seconds tick past.

“You will,” he says. “It is inevitable.”

“Wow, that was a lot darker than I expected.”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “It is a truth. Couples, any couple, will fight. They will hurt each other and the pain they cause each other will be deeper and more painful than any other could do. This is a fact because it is life.”

He stops talking but he tightens his grip on my hand.

“Pretty deep there, Dal.”

“I am sorry.”

Now I squeeze his hand back and, for the first time, my fears are at least eased if not gone. He does understand and he’s not running into this blind or expecting some kind of perfect fairy tale. That at least feels better.

“You don’t have to be sorry. I appreciate the honesty. All these people running around falling in love, they act like they’re in a fairy tale. I’m not stupid, nobody’s life is that perfect. No one is that happy.” I take a deep breath and debate what I’m about to say, but I feel like we’ve both come too far to not say it. “I like you. A lot and I never want to hurt you.”

He smiles but it’s a fast-fading affair that doesn’t touch his eyes.

“I appreciate that.”

“I’m afraid to jump in,” I admit. “What if we’re wrong? What if I’m not the one you think I am? You clearly had someone before, what if I’m not as good as her? Or I annoy you?”

“You are her.”

I roll my eyes. “You can’t possibly know that. I’ve never been anyone but me.”

He smiles and nods but doesn't argue the point. I could press the issue, but it's getting off the topic and point.

"If you do annoy me, I will tell you. Does that help?"

"Yes," I say then shake my head. "No. Maybe?" He laughs and I do too. "See? Now I'm being indecisive."

"We will work it out," he says.

"To be clear, I'm still not saying yes."

He nods, and I hold up a finger.

"Yet. But thank you. This helped."

"I am glad I could help, though I do not know what I did to do so."

I roll my eyes and push him away.

"How about you get back to mushing? We have quite a ways to go and time is moving fast if we're going to save two races. We'll figure the rest of this out later, huh?"

"Yes, my love."

"Bold choice of words."

"Treasure?"

I shake my head. "How about we stick to Shaun, for now?"

"As you wish."

He straightens out the harness and gets us into motion.

*W*armth suffuses my limbs and I run with renewed vigor. She is remembering or at least accepting. Progress.

It is not real.

No. I push that thought away. This is real. The scientists are dead and gone. Their evil has been stopped by the inexorable march of time itself, leaving me trapped in my sleep until my angelic treasure found and rescued me.

Doubts are like the fluttering wings of a flock of attacking sismis. Diving in and out, always circling, ready to pounce on any opening. They make my stomach churn. This must be real, no one could create this.

Could they?

The night passes as I run and struggle with my own thoughts. The dragon rumbles but offers no answers. How can it? That embodiment of all that a Zmaj is was also fooled by the things they did to me. To us.

Never forget, they did this to all the Breakers. I do not know if I will ever know which of my memories are real and which are created, but I am certain that the Breakers were a unit. That we did serve together, before the experiments.

“Shaun?” I ask, breaking the silence between us.

“Yeah?”

“Did your people find their bodies?”

“Huh? What bodies are you talking about?”

“The scientists, the ones who ran the bunker. Were there bodies when your people moved in?”

Her silence is all the answer necessary, but I cling to the scraps of hope until she speaks.

“Not that I know of.”

“Oh.”

No bodies. They are not gone, but then where are they? Why would they leave their stronghold? All of their machines, all of those of us they experimented on, left behind. It makes no sense.

“Why do you ask?”

I lower my head but do not stop running. Every grain of sand passing beneath my bounding feet becomes individual and more real. I look up quickly, watching for tearing at the edges of my vision. Any strange blurring or flashes of things that do not belong.

Nothing.

This must be real. She must be.

“No reason,” I lie. “Curiosity, that is all.”

I cannot let them know I suspect.

Something in my peripheral vision pulls my attention. There are black specks circling in the air. I adjust our direction to avoid an intercept. Sismis fly in packs. Fighting them is not terribly hard, but still dangerous.

Ahead is one of the few mountain ranges that stretches across Tajss. It has been growing closer and now it dominates the horizon. We should reach the foothills by nightfall if I keep pace. I am tired, but it should not be a problem.

Shaun shifts behind me, then I hear the crackling of the radiation machine. The sound is soft, much lower than it has been previously. Only the occasional pop breaks the steady buzz, not even keeping a regular rhythm.

“Yes,” she exclaims.

“What does it say?”

“The radiation levels are safe for humans.” She shifts around, causing the sled to skid on the sand and I have to tug on the harness to keep it under control. “We haven’t traveled far enough for it to be this low.”

“Tajss takes care of itself,” I say.

“Apparently,” she says, and shifts around again before settling. “I’m no biologist, but this really needs to be studied. If the zemlja can, what, eat radiation, or whatever it is they were doing, that is a huge discovery.”

I am not surprised. The zemlja are a part of what makes Tajss unique. They are like the lifeblood of the planet. Every Zmaj knows this. That is why killing them was avoided at all costs. No zemlja, no epis. No epis, no life on Tajss.

The Krixians once tried transplanting the zemlja to their home world, thinking the environment was similar enough. It did not work. The zemlja need Tajss and Tajss needs them. I keep my musings to myself for now. No need to share them when I am not sure she is real.

She is real. This is real.

I know it. No, I feel it, but then the next thought casts doubt filled shadows.

Then where are they? Why no bodies?

I do not know and not knowing is the entirety of the problem. The scientists and all those involved in the project must have gone somewhere or their corpses would have been waiting when these newcomers arrived.

Is this the sign I have been searching for? The flaw in their make-believe world that they are using to push false memories into me?

Or, simpler, did they leave? If so, where? And why?

The enormity of the problem threatens to overwhelm me. I turn it over and over while forcing myself to keep most of my

attention on the world around us. Fake or not, this is Tajss. Unawareness is death. When I reach the top of another dune, I notice faint tracks and slow to a stop.

“What is it?” Shaun asks.

“Guster.”

“Can we avoid them?”

I frown and shrug. She knows what guster are, which is good. Vicious pack animals that hunt for meat. If they are close, they probably have already picked up our scent. I loosen my lochaber in its scabbard to make it easier to draw. It will bounce as I run, but that is a tradeoff I am willing to make.

“We will see,” I say, then lean into the harness and run.

Opening my wings, I catch the warm breezes of Tajss and bound forward. One leaping step glides into the next. As I gain speed, the sled moves easier, skimming across the sand as if it is as smooth as crystal.

The suns climb as we travel and hope blooms like a delicate flower opening its petals to their lifegiving rays. We are going to avoid the danger.

“Dal,” Shaun calls my name and the fear in her voice is unmistakable.

With one glance over my shoulder, the blossom of hope is crushed beneath the foot of inexorable fate. The pack not only has our scent, but they are also closing fast. One thing is clear. I cannot outrun them.

As if to make this point for me, the alpha opens its mouth and screeches.

The moment he says guster, a cold chill races over my limbs leaving goosepimples in its wake. I've run into those things before and they are terrifying. They look like some kind of old Earth prehistoric monster. A huge lizard thing that runs on four legs with wide, webbed feet. They have hulking mounds on their backs covered with protective spikes. Worst of all is their massive, razor-mawed mouths.

Dal leans into the harness and takes off. He's running so fast I have to hold on with my one good hand and still I'm tossed side to side. I cradle my broken arm protectively close to my chest to avoid banging it. My head is on a swivel as I try to see all around us at the same time, scanning the horizon for any sign of the creatures.

One guster would be a problem, but they don't hunt singly. They live, travel, and hunt in packs. I cannot imagine that one Zmaj and one half-broken human are going to present much of a challenge. The best thing for us is to escape without a fight. Maybe something else will catch their attention.

My heart pounds like it's trying to keep time with Dal's feet. He bounds forward, using his wings to glide and his tail swings to keep himself straight. Every time he leaps into the air, the sled jerks up then slams with jarring force. My broken arm throbs painfully with every impact.

I want to ask him to slow down it hurts so much, but that would be a terrible idea. No way I'm going to do that. I have so much adrenaline pumping that it's making me shaky. It's also, probably, dulling the pain I'm feeling which is a sobering

thought. If it hurts this bad right now, I have a lot worse to look forward to.

The suns climb. The desert flies past and a glimmer of hope forms. We're going to avoid them. We'll be safe. And right as I dare to believe, they crest a dune behind us. Not far enough away at all. Close enough that I can see the one at the head of the pack open its mouth.

"Dal," I call out a warning, hating the tremor in my voice.

Rows of razor-sharp teeth glint in the sun, then it makes a horrible cry that sounds like a blend of a dog's howl and a cat's hiss mixed into an awful warbling tone that makes my skin crawl. I don't know if I've ever been more afraid than I am right now.

The zemlja was terrifying, but this is not the same. The massive sand dragon was indifferent. The zemlja wasn't particularly after us, we were simply an annoyance, in the way. The pack of guster chasing us have intention. They have our scent and now they want our blood on their tongues.

I force myself to tear my eyes off of them and look ahead. Dal is pulling so fast and hard that the sled is going airborne, lifting off the sands and bouncing forward instead of sliding. I see there are two massive rocks protruding from the sand and that's where Dal is taking us.

I don't know what his plan is and, honestly, I can only hope he has one. I don't want to die. Worse, if we die, it's not only us, but probably everyone that's left in the bunker too.

It can't end like this.

As the rock's shadow falls over us with cooling grace, Dal skids to a stop. The sled slides and bounces against the rock face, jarring my broken arm. The pain is blinding but it passes as I'm lifted out.

Dal pushes me up over his head. My head is spinning. The rock face flashes past as a wave of nausea clenches my stomach and I'm struggling to not lose my last meal. The guster screech and it sounds so close that fear overrides the

nausea. I scrabble at the cliff face with my good hand to no avail.

“I am sorry,” Dal says.

“Wha—”

I can't finish the question because I drop down then he thrusts upwards and I'm flying. I thought the cliff face was flashing past before but it was nothing compared to this. The wind rushes outside my helmet as I travel in an arc.

“Hah!” Dalagh roars.

The sound of his lochaber whistling through the air fills my ears as the ground comes fast. I barely have time for a yelp before I crash. I don't know how many new bruises I gain because my broken arm overwhelms everything.

Someone is screaming and it's only as the blinding whiteness coalesces into a red sky that I realize it's me. Blinking away tears, I roll onto my knees and force myself to stand. Dal is in danger, and I am too. Lying here in pain is a luxury I don't have.

My head spins and the world tilts crazily. I wave my good arm around until I find my balance and can at last see clearly. The perspective is wrong. Looking quickly around, it takes me a second to realize that he threw me up the rock formation so that I landed on top of it.

“Damn it Dal,” I curse, but at the same time warmth suffuses my chest and limbs.

He did this to protect me while staying below to fight the pack. An entire freaking pack. I move close enough to the edge that I can see. His roaring fills the air, drowning out the screeches of the guster.

I'm ten or fifteen feet above the fighting. There are five guster still standing and three lie bleeding out on the sand. At the head of the pack is what must be the alpha. That one is half again as big as the others.

They move with terrifying intent, working together. The guster are spread in a half-circle around Dal who has his back to the

cliff wall and his lochaber swinging in front of himself. The blade glints, the edge reflecting the red suns while the flat part of the metal is covered with blood.

The guster look wrong. As I blink away the last of my tears, I try to figure out what it is about them that seems off. One of them darts in on Dal's left. Dal swings his blade to meet the attack, but as he does, the alpha charges from the other side.

"Dal!" I screech, but he's ready.

The lochaber reverses direction so fast it's a whistling blur. The alpha dances back but it's too slow. The tip of Dal's blade catches the beast's jaw, drawing blood. The alpha roars, in pain or in anger I don't know.

The one that had fainted on his left sees the opening and leaps forward. The lump in my throat keeps me from screaming again but I see it happening and I'm sure that I'm about to lose my protector.

Dal doesn't turn to meet the attack though. Whether from some preternatural sense or years of training, he thrusts the lochaber backwards without turning his head. The bottom of the long shaft has a metal spike on it that drives into the guster's open mouth.

He hits with enough force that the tip of the lochaber drives through the monster and emerges out the back of its skull. The guster's screech is cut off mid-scream.

It drops dead, but as it falls it pulls the lochaber from Dal's grip with its weight. Dal roars. He crouches, reaching for the dropped lochaber, but the alpha sees the opportunity. It leaps, mouth open, rows of teeth glistening wetly.

Dal ducks and rolls. The guster's leap carries it over the Zmaj as he rolls beneath it. My heart is pounding in my throat. I think he'll keep rolling and give himself space to fight, though he'll be unarmed against four guster.

He doesn't continue the way I thought. Surprisingly, he stops the shoulder roll right behind the alpha, and before the monstrous creature even lands, Dal is on his feet. He grabs the

guster by the tail with all four of his arms. Dal leans back, pulling with all he's got, lifting the alpha off its feet.

The guster screeches as it flies. Dal follows through like he's throwing a discus in the Olympics. The three other guster leap out of the way but one of them is too slow. The alpha, wielded by Dal, and the slow one crack together with a sick crunch.

The slow guster drops, blood pouring from its mouth. Dal finishes the swing by slamming the alpha against the cliff wall. Its screech cuts off as its skull is caved in.

Dal shouts a wordless cry, all four of his arms and his wings spread wide. It's a challenge to the remaining guster. Having lost their alpha, they also lose their nerve. The creatures take several steps back, then turn and run.

Dal lets out a primal scream of rage and dominance. His arms flex and his wings flap as his tail slaps the sand. He stalks forward and for a moment I think he's going to give chase, but he stops.

I swallow the lump in my throat and take a deep breath, trying to slow my racing heart. Dal turns and looks up. The fire burning in his eyes and the blood covering his face is the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

I want to throw myself at him. To claim him. He's mine.

My treasure.

*J*roar, a battle cry of triumph as the guster retreat. My blood is hot, the red fog of the bijass surges as it tries to lay claim to my thoughts. I stomp after them but then I stop myself. This is not my purpose. Shaun is.

Closing my wings and lowering my arms, I look up and see her looking down from the top of the cliff. A halo surrounds her, light bouncing off the gleaming white armor. Beyond the clear visor, I see her smile and now my hearts race for a different reason.

She brings her gloved hands together, thumbs touching, and then she arcs her fingers so that they also touch. It makes a shape and I am ashamed of how long it takes me to figure out it is a heart she is representing. She presses her hands against herself then moves them towards me. It is a stiff, awkward motion with her broken arm and she grimaces in pain as she does it.

It warms my own hearts. She pushed through her pain to make this gesture. I bend my knees and then leap. I get high enough to grab the edge and pull myself over. Shaun steps back to give me room.

The moment I rise, she rushes forward. I wrap all my arms around her and hold her tight. Resting my head on the top of her helmet encased head, the only thing that could be better is if she did not have to wear the suit.

Neither of us speaks, it does not seem necessary. I know what she is thinking. What she is feeling. I understand her. And

every bit as important, I am understood. She is accepting our truth. We are meant for each other.

I hold her without consideration for the passage of time because time does not matter. No matter what, we will find a way. Even death will not keep us apart forever. She is returned to me and now I am complete.

The bitter taste of regret slips through my thoughts but it does not matter. Of course, I have regrets. I made wrong choices, but that has not stopped the hands of fate. This. This is what I live for. These moments with her.

I do not know how long we hold each other, but no matter how long, it is not enough. I never want to let her go, but the world does not wait. She steps away first, and despite my regret and the way my arms feel empty without her, she is right. All the people living in the bunker are depending on us and time is not on our side.

“How do I get down now?” she asks, looking over the edge.

“In truth, I have not thought about it.”

She nods and steps away. “That’s a way down. If my arms weren’t broke...”

I get on my knees with my back to her.

“Wrap your good arm around my neck,” I order.

“I don’t know if I can hold on,” she says.

“Trust me.”

She does not argue further, wrapping her arm around my neck and her legs around my waist. I curl my tail over my shoulder so that it runs up the length of her, locking her into place on my back. Now all I have to do is climb down with her.

At the edge, I lower myself over. Parts of the cliff crumble as I work my way down. We make it halfway when my left handhold gives way. Shaun yelps in fear and surprise. My right arms are screaming in pain as our weight drops hard onto them.

I scramble my feet against the wall, seeking purchase, any grip to take the pressure off. My fingers are slipping from the crevasse. I cannot find anything that does not give way as soon as I try to put pressure on it.

“Drop me, I’ll be fine,” Shaun says.

“Never,” I growl.

Pulling my natural arm back, I stiffen my hand as if it is a blade and I drive it into the cliff wall. It hurts, but the soft rock gives way and I push in far enough to find purchase. Clinging to the cliff wall, I take a moment to let my right side muscles recover.

Shaun is breathing heavily. The rasp of the filters on the suit echo in my ear but we are safe. She is safe and that is what matters.

I climb the rest of the way down without further incident. On the ground, I get onto my knees and then drop my tail, letting her stand on her own. Her hand lingers on my shoulder as she walks around in front of me.

She lowers her head and rests it against mine. Her helmet rubs my horns. There is no reason for this to create a sensitivity, but it does. It makes a shiver run down my spine and my wings rustle. I put my hands on her waist and once again we just hold each other.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Of course.”

“Dalagh?”

“Yes?”

She’s breathing heavily. I wait for her to speak, but my hearts speed up in anticipation.

“I do love you,” she says at last.

It takes all my will to not leap to my feet and swing her around. Knowing she is injured and doing so would hurt her being the only thing that keeps me under control.

“I love you,” I say.

“I know,” she chuckles. “I know.”

It feels as if my chest is going to explode with the storm of emotion that swells within. We stare into each other’s eyes, and I need to kiss her. To touch her skin. But that is not a good idea right now. We must continue to minimize her exposure to the radiation.

“We—” I cannot finish the thought because there is a lump that rests in my throat. I have to clear it twice before I can speak. “We should move. We are not far away from the target.”

“Right,” she says, not moving.

Slowly I rise, keeping at least one hand on her the entire time. I will not be able to stay this way, but I want to, with all my heart.

“The sled,” I say.

“Yeah.”

I check the packs and boxes on the sled to make sure they are still secured, then I pull it off the wall and point it in the direction we need to go. She comes to stand at my side, and with our arms around one another, we stare off at the looming mountain range.

“It will not be long.”

“Got an estimate?”

“Half a day. See that rise there? It is the first of the foothills. The sand still covers that one but beyond it there will be little to no sand.”

“Really? I thought all of Tajss was sand.”

“No,” I shake my head. “Well, mostly. The mountain range is long and broad. Foothills like that one there form a sort of wall that keeps the sand at bay. Then as we climb, it will fade to none.”

“Makes sense I guess.”

“And there is also the jungle.”

“What?” she asks, her voice rising in disbelief.

“The jungle. On the southern pole, there is a small continent that is covered with jungle. It rains there.”

“You are kidding me.”

“I do not understand. Why would I kid you about this?”

“We’ve been stuck on this planet forever and none of us had a clue that there was anything but sand for, I don’t know, like forever.”

“Mostly, it is. That is Tajss. There is only the Southern Ocean, which is not large compared to most planets. It is on the pole and that creates a different biosphere.”

“Fascinating.”

“You should climb in, we need to move.”

“Right,” she says, her hand still in mine and she does not move.

I cannot bring myself to break the contact either. We stand together for a long, quiet moment that stretches over many heartbeats until at last, she turns to the sled. I help her step into the middle, then make sure she is settled and comfortable.

Once she is, I slip into the harness and resume our journey. My steps are lighter, and it feels as if the sled weighs nothing. I am satisfied and happy. She is mine, again. I knew she would be, that it was a matter of time, but that does not take away from this sense of joy that fills me.

As we enter the foothills and begin the climb into the mountains, my happiness continues.

Until I see a glint ahead and to my right.

There is no mistaking it. That was a flash of light off metal. We are not alone.

When Dal slows down, I assume it's because the going is getting harder. We're into the foothills now and the incline he's pulling us up is less sand and more rocky terrain. I can only imagine how much harder this must be for him to pull the sled with all our supplies and myself.

"I can walk," I offer.

He doesn't speak, but only shakes his head. The hairs on the back of my neck rise to stand on end. Something is wrong.

A light sense of panic makes my heart speed up. Sweat forms on my chest and arms but the moisture is quickly pulled away by the suit, which is a blessing. The suit uses all my own body excretions as fuel for its environmental controls.

I look around, trying to spot the threat he must be tracking already, but nothing stands out. I want to ask, but that would be stupid too. He obviously isn't wanting to talk which means he must think noise is a problem.

All I can do is keep my head on a swivel and try to see everything. Look harder, as my mom used to say to me when I couldn't find something.

Dusk is settling over the hills. The mountains loom before us, casting a dark shadow which further reduces sight. My muscles twitch in anticipation but nothing happens. He slows more and my fear ratchets up to a new level.

Then I see it. A flash.

There's no mistaking the glint of the last rays of the sun off something metal. An innocuous thing, in and of itself. It could be anything, after all. Could be, but it doesn't feel like it's nothing. It feels like a problem.

Moving slow, I push myself to a sitting position then work my way around until I'm resting on my knees. I'm in a better position to jump or move in response to whatever might happen. The motion of the sled keeps me feeling off balance, so I use my good hand to keep myself steady.

I stare in the direction of the glint but then something in my peripheral flashes from the opposite direction. I whip my head in that direction. Was that real? Imagination?

My heart leaps into my throat as my pulse thunders loudly in my ears. Something moves and I half-spin to face it. A hulking, shadowy shape emerges from behind a boulder.

"Hold on," Dalagh shouts and then he bursts forward.

I'm thrown backwards. I strike my broken arm and yelp as pain blinds me. I fight my way through the agony, holding tight to the sled side with my good hand. The sled is bouncing over the rough terrain. Every slam jars my entire body, pushing the pain button anew over and over.

Gritting my teeth, I pull myself up far enough to look. The shadow moves through one of the dying patches of light and my stomach clenches. It's a Zmaj.

I only see him for a second, but there's something about him that looks feral. It's terrifying. His horns are bigger, and his face is sharper. Worse, he's chasing us.

Something catches my attention from the other side and I tear my eyes away from our pursuer. Coming from a new direction is another Zmaj. He also looks brutally feral. He makes a sound, deep and growling, which is answered by the first one.

Our pursuers carry simple clubs, not lochabers. Neither of them is as big as Dalagh, but does that matter? They're Zmaj, possibly insane, or lost to that primal instinct that all Zmaj struggle with.

Bijass. They call it the bijass.

Thank you, random fact generator. Vitally important that I know what they call that right now when I'm so scared I can barely breathe. My stomach is doing its level best to consume itself as more as more acidic fear pours into it.

If these two primal monsters are lost to their bijass, then they only want the most basic of urges. Dominate, survive, and breed. And who knows how long it's been since they saw a female?

Desperate, I look around the sled for something I can use as a weapon. Despite all our preparations, this isn't something we planned for. How did these guys survive? Both the Devastation and the bomb we set off? And how did we not know they existed?

I guess no one ever explored this far from the City. The Tribe's home is in the opposite direction and the mining settlement was also. It's not like we had idle time to explore and map the world on our hands.

"They're closing," I say.

Dalagh is running for all he's worth. He's doing a bounding run. He takes six long strides, which he fully leans into with all his arms pumping, then he leaps, wings spread wide, and catches the wind to glide forward.

But the incline is growing steeper and he's pulling a fully loaded sled. The ground is getting rockier too. He's dodging around large boulders that the sled bounces off, causing it to shimmy as it tosses me from side to side.

I bite down on my cries of pain because they're a distraction that Dal doesn't need. Rough, scraggly brush appears as we climb higher, another thing that he has to shift our path to avoid. When I glance back, I don't see our pursuers.

Relief rushes in, but when I turn to tell Dal we've lost them, my stomach drops. Four Zmaj step out from behind a set of boulders. Two of them have a rough-woven net that they fling at Dalagh.

Dal roars.

He throws his arms up, trying to stop the net, but there are weights along its edge. The net wraps around him, and though he struggles to break free, all that happens is he becomes more entangled.

The sled is still moving. It and I slam into Dal. The sled tilts up, dislodging most of the packs and me. I tumble over Dal and crash to the ground in front of him.

Pain is blinding. I try to breathe through it but even that is almost impossible. My lungs are rebelling and all I see is whiteness.

“Hold,” a voice I don’t know says. Dal is thrashing against the restraining net.

“Shaun, run!” Dal screams, his voice tearing with the volume.

I want to answer but I can’t make my voice work. My vision is swimming and for a moment I’m sure I’m passing out. I fight against that, knowing how dangerous this situation is. Suddenly my lungs take in air. It burns all the way down my throat but pushes back the blackness closing in on my thoughts.

“Dal,” I gasp, still unable to see clearly. Everything is white and gray blurs.

“Grab it,” another voice says.

Something grabs me by my arms. As my captor clenches my broken arm I scream in pain. The blackness rushes in and the last thing I hear is Dal’s roar.

“I will kill you all!”

That was the worst dream.

I stretch. No, I try to stretch.

What? Huh?

Everything hurts. As I try to move, one arm flashes white-hot pain and the other hits something solid. My eyes are crusted shut. They tear as I force them open and that hurts too, but the other pains are enough to make that one seem minor.

I'm lying on my back, staring up at smooth rock. I push up onto my good elbow, blinking as I look around. A flickering fire casts red-orange light. I'm in a rock alcove that's only a few inches taller than I am sitting.

I sit up the rest of the way and look around. A fire crackles happily in sharp contrast to my fear. I don't see anyone or anything else. Outside this alcove are stone walls that look too smooth to be natural.

Trying to orient myself, I look around. I'm sitting on a pile of cured leathers that make a bed of sorts. Scooting out of the alcove, I stand up. It's a room. The stone of the floor and walls is smooth and definitely hand worked. Along the wall there are six alcoves, each matching the one I woke up in. They're carved into the walls, further proof that this is all done intentionally. Noting the leathers in each, it's clear that they are set up to be sleeping areas. A bunk.

The fire is set into a pit in the floor with flat stones around the edge to keep it contained. I swallow, trying to get moisture

back in my mouth, and look around. The dancing shadows obscure the door until I step closer to where it is, then I find it.

It opens onto darkness. In the distance I see other fires crackling. Where am I? Where is Dal? Is he all right?

This has all gone wrong. New Zmaj survivors? And they're feral? My heart is racing and I'm shaking, but I've got to think this through and figure it out. Dal needs me and so does every single living being in the bunker.

We were being chased by warriors and, barbaric or not, they're still Zmaj. They're noble by genetics, right? All the ones we've met have been nice, eventually. There's been some culture clash, of course, but none of them have been monsters.

Honestly, though it hurts to admit it, the humans have been the monsters in our history to date. Nice, reassuring thought. Except, who did the experiments? If all the Zmaj are good people, how could they have done that?

Great. Cold-water thoughts when those are the last thing I need.

"Ah!" I yelp and jump when something moves next to me.

"Food."

The shape coalesces out of the shadows, stepping into the dim light from the fire in the room behind me. It gestures, holding out what looks like a plate. The scent of the food fills my nose and my stomach grumbles loudly, betraying any thought of refusing it to appear strong.

I don't want to take food from a shadow, so I step back into the room, moving into the light. The shape follows. He is a Zmaj, much darker in color than any I've met before. He has the same long horns and sharp face I noted on our pursuers previously.

He holds the plate out silently, waiting for me to take it. Succulent looking meat is piled high alongside some kind of greens.

"Where is my friend?" I ask.

His eyes narrow as his mouth turns down into a deep frown. He grunts and pushes the plate in my direction again. I cross my arms over my chest and shake my head. He growls. I take a step back, waiting.

“Defiant,” he grumbles.

“Damn right. Where’s my friend? The Zmaj I was with when you attacked us?”

“Waiting.”

“Waiting? For what?”

“To be judged. Eat.”

“Take me to him.”

“Eat.”

“Not until you take me to him.”

His eyes narrow as he shakes his head. He gestures with the plate.

“Eat. Now.”

“No.”

My stomach rumbles but I’m not going to give in. This is the one piece of leverage I might have because he does seem to have an interest in me eating. If I don’t hold firm now, I’ll give up the only advantage I’ve got. We glare at each other, and I can feel his ire growing.

Finally, he grunts, shakes his head and turns. As he walks out the door, I realize I’ve lost.

“Wait,” I call, moving after him.

He stops in the door and looks over his shoulder. “Eat?”

“Take me to him, please.”

“No.”

He doesn’t wait for me to say more before he steps out and manages to disappear into the darkness. I go out too and try to spot him, but his dark scales blend perfectly into the gloom. I

take a few steps in each direction but I can't tell where I am, and getting lost in here seems worse than waiting this out.

Giving up, I try to return to my room to wait.

But I guess I came farther than I thought I did. I slowly spin, trying to find the door I came from, but I'm standing on the edge of pathway that drops into darkness below me.

I take a step backwards. The walkway is about six feet wide and stretches off into the shadows in either direction. Staring out into the abyss that it drops into and studying the other fires, I get the idea that I'm in a cavern.

I think that the walkway goes around the edge of a pit, cavern, or whatever you call a big hole underground. Staring up, there are no stars, no moons, no hints of light other than more orange dots indicating other fires.

What have we gotten into? Dal, be okay. I need you.

*A*wareness returns. Not slow or creeping, but instantly.

“Kill you all,” I roar as I try to rise.

All my arms, my tail, and my wings are tightly bound. I can barely move to sit up.

“You will kill no one,” a voice says. “Until you fight in the arena.”

I blink away the fog that fills my head, remnants from the bijass and being knocked out. What little light there is comes from behind the voice, making it only a shadowy figure. The shape though is a Zmaj, I do not have to see clearly to know this, the outline is enough.

“Where is the female?”

A chuckle comes in answer. I throw myself forward, straining against my bonds.

“Where is she?”

I barely recognize my own voice. I sound feral, mad, and maybe I am. All I know is that I must save Shaun and that I will kill anyone that stands between me and my treasure. But first I must get free.

The shadowy shape saunters closer. A low growl escapes my lips.

“The female,” he says, his voice so low it almost hisses. “Yes. She will be a fine prize.”

“She is mine!”

“By what right?” he asks, leaning close so that for the first time I see him clearly.

His scales are a dusky dark color that lends itself well to the dim cavern. He has soft brown eyes and horns that are larger than average that end in sharp points. The bijass surges and I strain to break free.

“My treasure.”

“If that is so, you will need to prove it,” he laughs. The ropes binding me creak. “Save that strength. You will be given your chance.”

“The arena?”

“Yes,” he says as he grabs my jaw in a vicelike grip. “Where we all prove our worth.”

“Let us go,” I say, jerking my head free.

He smiles and all his teeth are sharp points.

“Soon,” he says. “When the Al’fa says.”

I throw myself at him, but it is to no avail. The Zmaj steps back as I realize that my ankles are bound too. I fall on my face and the tang of blood fills my mouth.

I squirm my way back up onto my knees, glaring. He watches impassive.

“I look forward to our challenge,” he says. “Here is your meal. Prepare yourself.”

“Untie me.”

“I would have,” he says with a shrug. “But I prefer to see you eat like a bivo.” He pushes a plate across the stone floor with his foot. “Eat.”

I am shaking with rage, but he ignores me. He turns and walks away.

“If any of you hurt her—”

“Right. You will kill us all. Your threat is empty. Besides it is not as if females are so plentiful that we would harm one.”

Red rage pulses with every beating of my hearts. He disappears into the shadows, leaving me alone. I close my eyes and focus on breathing. Emotions get in the way of logic. I am better than this. My training takes over and calm settles my thoughts and body.

These Zmaj obviously survived the Devastation. They have a hierarchy and societal rules that they obey. There are no females. I had gleaned as much since I awoke from Shaun and listening to the others.

The arena. If they want a fight then I will give them one. And I cannot fail because my treasure's life depends on it.

The sound of cheering pulls me out of my cavern. It reverberates off the stone walls, filling the air. As I emerge onto the ledge, there's a red-orange glow from below. I scoot closer, fighting against my nerves telling me to stay back. As I glance over, my stomach drops and a momentary wave of dizziness comes. I stumble back, terror making it impossible to look.

"Get it together," I mutter.

I've never had this much trouble with heights before. I think it's because I don't know how far down it is or the condition of the ledge. I can't see, that's what makes it so much worse. It makes the back of my neck tingle, heart race, and cold sweat pour out.

I force myself forward, sliding one foot in front of the other. The guttering light is brighter, which actually helps as it illuminates the edge. When my toes are right at it, I tilt my head down just enough to look.

As soon as I see I jump back, heart racing. Below is further than I thought it would be. I'm at least four stories up. In that one glance though I saw enough. There's a ramp, which is what I'm standing on. It winds its way around and angles slowly down. There are dozens, if not more, dark spots that I'm pretty sure are doors to rooms, probably like the one behind me. A few torches are mounted on the wall and there are dozens of Zmaj moving about.

At the bottom is what looks like a wide-open area with four bonfires creating a square. A lot of shapes were moving around down there. Something is happening, obviously, but what? And where is Dalagh?

“Are you ready?”

I yelp as I jump towards the voice.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you.”

This isn't the same one who brought me food earlier. He has the same dark scales, but his face is softer, almost round. His horns rise to sharp points, his nose is flat, and he smiles.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Yes, the contests are about to begin. You, of course, are invited to watch.”

Something about his smile makes me cold.

“Why ‘of course’?”

He frowns and shakes his head. “You do want to watch the contests, correct?”

“I don't know anything about what is happening. Where is the Zmaj I was captured with? Where is Dalagh?”

“Dalagh? That is his name?”

“Yes, where is he?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest obstinately to look tough, but in truth to keep from trembling with fear.

He shakes his head and shrugs. “Come. You will see.”

“No. Tell me where he is. I am his treasure.”

I use the word that I think will end this. All Zmaj recognize that right? Fated mates should be the end of this craziness. Once they know that Dal and I are meant for one another, they will bring me to him. The Zmaj tilts his head as his eyes narrow. He frowns, then sighs and exhales.

“I remember that,” he says, and there is a wistful tone to his voice. “Before the Devastation changed everything.”

“No, it changed nothing. He and I, we’re meant for each other. We belong to one another. He is mine, I am his.”

I keep talking, feeling desperate, because it’s clear from the look on this guy’s face that my words are making no difference. He gives a little shake of his head.

“The Al’fa will decide,” he says, and something in his tone is different. A note of fear or something that I can’t quite put my finger on. “Come.”

He doesn’t say anything else, he simply turns and walks away. I watch him go, debating standing here in defiance until I get what I want, but as he fades into the shadows, I realize that the only way through this is forward. Staying here will accomplish nothing.

“Wait,” I call as I rush after him. He stops and waits for me to catch up. “Can we have a light? I can’t see.”

“Oh,” he says. “I did not realize. Up ahead.”

We walk past other caverns. Most are too dark to see inside, but two of them have torches and they are very similar to the one I was in. Three of them we pass have thick leather hanging over the entrance way serving as a door. Those have light inside too that I see around the edge of the flap.

The Zmaj takes a torch off the wall, holds it at arm’s length, and belches fire to light it. Being able to see goes a long way towards calming my nerves. The ledge we’re walking along is wide enough for three Zmaj to stand side by side, if they don’t mind being right on the edge of the drop off, but I’m not that brave.

My guide resumes walking in silence as I try to get a feel for this place. We’re at an incline that goes down close to a forty-five-degree angle. The stone has had something done to it to make it rough, giving traction as we angle down to the next level.

We get to the next ring and have to walk around again, continuing past more rooms, all of which have been carved out by someone. Doing rough math in my head, considering that I saw at least four layers of these and how big this place is, I’m

positive that we could house every person in the Bunker with a room of their own.

This is better than what we hoped to find. Except for the apparently hostile Zmaj that already live here. I came to be an explorer, not an ambassador. People skills are not my strong suit, but here I am. I have to figure out a way to settle things with these people and form an alliance.

Great. Send the introvert. Good idea.

“What’s your name?” I ask. Good place to start, right? Know a person’s name and you know something about them, establish a level of friendliness.

“They call me Chanka.”

“Chanka?” I repeat, both to commit it to memory and because it’s unlike any other Zmaj name I’ve heard.

“Yeah,” he says with a shrug.

“How many people live here, Chanka?”

“I do not think I am supposed to talk about that,” he says.

“Not supposed to?” I ask. “I take it you have a leader then? Is there, what a Council, or is it one person?”

“The Al’fa is the final decider in all matters.”

“Can I meet the Al’fa?”

He glances over his shoulder and the look on his face causes a chill to race over my skin. I am not sure what it means, but it doesn’t look good.

“You will.”

His words are cold and carry an ominous weight. My mouth is dry and there’s a lump in my throat. “Is he,” I have to swallow again to try and force moisture into my mouth. “Is he nice?”

“He is the Al’fa.”

“I’m not familiar with this word. What does it mean?”

“The strongest,” Chanka says without looking back.

“Oh, so your group decides things by strength?”

“Yes.”

We’ve come down three of the four layers as we talk. Other Zmaj move past us and all of them take a moment to stare at me. I wish that Rosalind’s suit was less form fitting. I would just as soon not be attracting all this attention to my curves. It’s making me even more anxious.

“What’s about to happen?”

“The Arena.”

The way he says it emphasizes the word, giving it importance. This obviously means something to him, but I don’t know for sure what. I have to extrapolate it out.

“The arena? A fighting ring?”

“An event,” he says, which is what I’d assumed.

“Chanka, I’m not from this planet, can you explain this?”

“It is the way we survive,” he says, like that explains anything.

He glances over his shoulder and must see my confusion because he continues without prodding. “Strength is all that matters since the Devastation. Our society is built around knowing who falls where in matters of strength. Any newcomer goes into the Arena to learn their place within our ranks.”

“Learn their place?” I turn this over, muttering more than repeating.

“Yes, of course.”

As this idea becomes clearer, a cold realization causes ice to flood my veins. “And the strongest get first choice.”

“Of course, that is their right.”

“Dalagh is going to fight.”

“You get it,” Chanka says and laughs. “He will find his place with us. It is a good thing.”

Good for who? Because the implications there are terrible. If Dal isn’t the absolute strongest and best, then he won’t have the right to his claim on me. They’ll give me to whoever wins.

I think I'm going to be sick.

*M*y limbs itch as blood flow returns. The extra arms that have been grafted onto me almost always ache or itch. That has been a constant irritation for so long that I am no longer aware of it. Most of the time. It simply is, but having been bound by ropes for so long, it is worse than ever.

I stretch each arm under the watchful eye of four armed Zmaj. They do not bear the traditional lochabers, but instead wield crude clubs. Two carry blunt sticks, but the other two must be more creative for they have each bound a round stone to the top end with thick strips of leather.

The weapons may be crude, but they are dangerous nonetheless. Surreptitiously, I study my captors. Long faded memories tug against the fog of the bijass. Dimly I recall an offshoot of society who adapted to living underground. Knowing what I know now, and what happened in Bunker 42, I wonder if this was not an effect of evolution, but rather something done to their ancestors.

What I recall is that they were feral. Boogeymen of children's stories, much like the Zzlo.

The Zmaj guarding me are smaller than I, but that is not unusual. I have always been taller than most, but I think compared to a normal Zmaj, they would still be a handspan shorter. Each of them is broad and their fingers have thick claws that would be good for digging through dirt and rock, but also for fighting.

“How do you avoid a zemlja tearing through here?” I ask.

Three of them ignore my question but one, who must be the leader, shakes his head.

“Mountains.”

“They do not cross under the mountains?”

The leader grunts. “You are wasting breath. You fight soon.”

As if on some cue, loud cheers and applause echo into the stone room in which I wait. Two of my guards grunt, and one of them walks out of the room before glancing down. He shakes his head as he returns, looking dejected.

“I told you.” The speaker has green eyes and a narrow face.

“Cannot believe he lost,” the one who looked says.

“You owe,” green eyes says.

“And I will pay.” The one who looked has amber eyes and a broad nose that has been broken more than once. “You doubt my word?”

He bristles with harmful intent, his wings partially opening as his tail rises between them.

“No doubt your word,” green eyes says, raising his hands in supplication.

“Good,” amber eyes says.

“Enough,” the Leader snaps. “Take him out. It is time.”

The guards move closer and the bijass surges as my dragon roars for dominance. I could fight. I might win, but then what? I am still captured and do not know where Shaun is. I must play along. Get information. The one thing that seems clear is that this group respects strength proven in their arena.

If they want strength, then I will give them it. I will do whatever it takes. For Shaun. My treasure. My heart.

I allow them to march me out of the room. We turn left and walk down a hall. This might once have been a cave, but they have worked the stone until the walls, ceiling, and floor are all smooth. Torches are mounted every two full wingspans, keeping the hall well lit.

The air is a mix of dampness, soot, and a faint hint of mold. As smooth and nice as the stone of the hall is, there are signs of decay. There are cracks in the wall and ceiling where moss grows. Unchecked, it will eventually destroy all of their work.

As I am marched down the hall, the sounds of a crowd grow louder, resonating off the walls and filling my ears. My hearts speed up and my muscles tremor in anticipation. Pre-fight nerves. Bahr called them the jitters.

What is the matter Dal, got the jitters?

I hear his voice as clearly as if he is standing by my side. Almost, I can feel the weight of his hand on my shoulder as he would reassuringly squeeze it. I shake my limbs to keep them loose and roll my neck.

We pass by rooms that have thick, treated leather for doors. No light emerges from them, leaving me no clue if they are used or not. One thing I am sure of, there is a lot of space that these people have made for themselves, and I have not seen that many of them.

The hall comes to an end ahead, and the closer we get, the louder the cheers and chanting become. People are stomping their feet and clapping in a rhythm. Something about the sound is primal, awakening my dragon.

It roars in response, singing the hymns of battle and conquest. The bijass swells, swamping my thoughts, pushing down everything but what matters. Winning. Dominating.

We step out of the hall into an open floor. The ceiling is so far above I cannot see it, but there is a ramp that runs around the outer walls circling up in layers. Each layer has rooms, some lit up, some dark.

The open floor has a low wall defining its space, which comes up to my knee. Not a barrier, but a marker.

Outside that wall there is some form of riser on which dozens of Zmaj sit and stand. Possibly more than a hundred. The most Zmaj I have seen since my awakening. They jeer as I appear, shouting insults.

I ignore them. They are nothing.

My guards stop at a break in the low wall. The leader turns around and faces me.

“You will fight,” he says.

“Who? With what?”

“All challengers,” he says. “Until you cannot fight more. With what, there.”

He points to his right. There is a rack with crude weapons, all of them blunt clubs of various sizes and shapes.

“Rules?”

“Rule is do not lose,” he says. “Try not to kill. Dominance does not require death. Accept a surrender or give one when you are done.”

I nod understanding and choose three clubs. The other guards gasps and mutter, but no one stops me. I do have an advantage with my extra limbs.

“Where is my female?” I ask.

A half-smile forms on the leader’s mouth. He looks past me and points, so I turn and look where he indicates. On what looks like a small balcony one level up, is Shaun. She is surrounded by six Zmaj, two of whom are much bigger than the average here.

The biggest one is at her right side. He makes her look small and vulnerable. That one must be the Al’fa. He wears a breastplate made of bones and has the skull of a guster on his head.

My blood boils. Him. I will destroy him. The dragon roars and I open my wings as my tail involuntarily raises.

“Save it, you will need all your strength,” the leader with me says. I growl in response. “Enter the arena. Tajss will decide your worth.”

He puts his hand in the middle of my back and pushes. I walk into the arena to face all comers.

“Dal!” Shaun shouts, jerking my attention to her. “Look ou—”

Something slams into the back of my head.

J rush to the edge and grab the low wall.
“Dalagh!”

His name rips my throat as it tears its way free. The four Zmaj guards grab my arms and pull me back as tears fill my eyes. Below, in the arena, Dal fights another Zmaj. Dal stumbles away from his opponent, shaking his head, one hand touching the back where the blow landed.

My fault. Idiot.

I shouldn't have shouted, but he was looking at me and I didn't think he saw his opponent who wasn't waiting.

“Let me go,” I demand, jerking myself free of their grip.

The Al'fa, who was waiting in this box when my guards delivered me here, chuckles. He isn't quite as big as Dalagh, but it's close. The breastplate of bones he wears rattles as his chest rises and falls. His dark scales are offset by the brightness of his eyes which are a rich amber that reflects the torchlight.

“I see why he would choose you,” Al'fa says. “Brave.”

“He chose me because we're meant for each other,” I snap.

“We will see,” he says with a shrug.

“What does that mean? I'm not going to be with anyone but him.”

I cross my arms over my chest as I turn to face him, leaning my head back and glaring. He stares from his much greater height, matching my glare with an implacable look. Slowly a smile spreads on his face, lips turning up and pulling back until they reveal the gleaming white, sharpened teeth.

“You will do what you are told.” He doesn’t raise his voice, and though the words are threatening, there’s no emotion to them which makes it scarier.

“The fuck I will.”

“You are the first female we have seen in longer than I have been the Al’fa. Since the Destruction. Strange and alien though you may be, you are a treasure.”

“Yes. His,” I say, stabbing a finger down at the arena behind me.

The sound of fighting is accented by random cheers and groans. My stomach is a tight knot as I struggle to not look, trusting that Dal is okay. My best chance is to reason with the Al’fa. If I can convince him of the truth, that Dal and I are meant for one another, then maybe I can stop this madness before Dal ends up hurt.

“If he proves himself,” the Al’fa nods, rattling the bones on his chest and causing the bleached white skull on his head to slide down, hooding his eyes.

“No,” I shout, balling my hands into fists and raising them like he’s going to be threatened by me. “I am his. Period. No proving. We are meant for each other. Tajss put us together.”

My voice rises and cracks. Fear, anger, and desperation are a volatile mix of emotions. each of them vying to be in charge.

“You, female, speak as if you have a choice.”

“And why would I not? Are females less in your eyes?”

He growls and the five guards around us shift their weight. They, for their part, seem to be trying to pretend they’re not paying attention, but there’s no doubt that they are. Maybe that’s the key to controlling this? Is this Al’fa’s dominance something I can challenge?

“Less? Who knows, we have not had one in so long and you are alien,” he shakes his head. “What matters, what lets us survive, is strength. The strongest lead, the weak follow. You think you can challenge any of my warriors?”

“In anything that involves your simian brains and not your caveman muscles, yeah, I could.” Some of those words were Common so the Al’fa probably doesn’t even understand what I just said.

Still, somehow he manages to loom larger, all without doing anything obvious.

A club smacks flesh three times in quick succession and the crowd cheers. I can’t not look, darting a quick glance into the arena. My stomach clenches when I see Dal stumbling backwards then he falls onto his butt.

The Al’fa, the guards, and I, are in a viewing box, one level up from the arena. There’s a retaining wall that’s about the height of my waist that I grab onto and lean out. For one instant of likely insanity, I contemplate jumping over the edge.

It’s too far. I’d probably break some more bones and what good would I be to Dal then. Dal is crab crawling backwards from his opponent, getting distance. He still has two clubs, the third being left behind.

His opponent stalks, swinging his single club. The weapons are primitive, lacking the elegance of a lochaber. Everything that I’ve seen since we were captured has been like that. Lacking in any sophistication. All very basic and primal.

Dal gets enough distance that he jumps to his feet, springing off his tail. His wings open as he gains air. His two clubs swing from opposite directions, aiming at his opponent’s head.

The other Zmaj blocks one blow but the second connects with a loud and sickening smack. The Zmaj’s head rocks to the side, his eyes roll up into his head, and he drops to the ground like his bones turned to jelly.

Dal lands behind the downed opponent. He raises all four of his arms and roars, then turns towards me and the Al’fa. Dal

points one club at the Al'fa, challenging him. The Al'fa steps forward to stand next to me. Slowly he nods and claps.

“One,” the Al'fa says. “Continue.”

The next must have been waiting for this command, because another Zmaj steps into the arena and rushes Dal. The sound of his feet pounding on the dirt covered arena floor echoes into my ears. Dal whirls to face this new threat.

“How many does he have to fight? When does he win?” I demand.

“As many as he can,” Al'fa says disinterestedly, waving a hand.

He goes to the back of the box where an ornately carved bench is and takes a seat. He nods his head to the open space at his side. I bite my lip, trying to decide if defiance is the way to go right now.

Knowledge is power.

Bacon. Random that I remember an ancient philosopher from old Earth, but his name always stuck with me. In school we used to debate whether it was a pseudonym or not. Seriously, who is named after a breakfast food?

Either way, the idea has always served me well. Throughout my life when something scared me, I did all I could to learn everything about it. When I was six years old and figured out that we were in a giant metal box speeding in an absolute vacuum, I was terrified.

One of my ‘friends’ had showed me an Earth vid where some astronauts were in a ship that depressurized and then showed me one of the few publicly accessible viewports on the ship. I couldn't sleep for a month after that, terrified by the idea that if one thing went wrong, everyone I knew and loved would be dead.

Then I figured it out. If you understand something, it becomes a lot less scary. I studied everything I could get my hands on about the ship we were on. As I learned about the safety procedures, all the fail safes, and the history of space travel on Earth, my fear became less and less until it was gone.

Knowledge is, after all, power.

And that's the problem right now. My captors are Zmaj, but they are not like the ones I know. They are an unknown. They act differently, at least on the surface. They can't be that different though, can they?

Earth was populated with nothing but humans, but before the population boom there were wars between artificial divides known as countries. That was a hard concept to wrap my head around, but I did figure it out eventually.

Though they were all human, they had different cultures, which is what I seem to be dealing with here. My captors are Zmaj, but their culture is different than all the ones I've met. And what is the best way to handle the unknown? Learn.

Forcing myself to relax, despite the echoing sounds of fighting behind me, and knowing that Dal is down there, I walk over and sit next to the Al'fa. I won't get a better chance to understand these new Zmaj than this.

"Is this what you always do?"

"Is what?" the Al'fa asks.

"This arena is obviously a big part of your group," I say, pointing forward. I can barely see over the retaining wall and right now I can't see Dal or who he's fighting at all. They're too close to the box and out of my line of sight. "Does everyone fight in it?"

"Yes," the Al'fa says. "It is how we know."

"Know? Know what?"

"Who is strongest."

"Why does that matter?"

He turns his head and looks at me with what I can only see as utter disbelief. He frowns, his long horns pulling down as his brow furrows.

"You are serious?"

I simply shrug at him.

He shakes his head. “The Destruction,” he says like that says it all.

When I continue to stare at him blankly, he snorts, which makes his nostrils flare.

“I’m not from here,” I say. “Remember? Alien.”

I point to my chest and instantly regret it when he drops his eyes to my hand. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end when he licks his lips and nods. Ew.

“Yes. Alien.”

I move my hand quickly and clear my throat.

“What about the Destruction?”

The Zmaj I know call it the Devastation but this must be the same world ending event.

His eyes rise back to mine and a surge of relief races through my body.

“It proved the point,” he says, waving a hand through the air as his tail twitches, making a scraping sound. “Only the strong survive.”

It’s a sensible conclusion. The crowd ahh’s loudly enough that it jerks my attention back to the arena. I stand up to see what’s happening.

Dal stands over another opponent. He points one club at me and roars.

“Mine!”

My stomach clenches tight as another opponent walks onto the sand. Dal is prepared this time and turns to meet his new match. I force myself to resume my seat. Information. That is what I can do here. Learn. Find a way to take control of this situation.

“Your, what do you call it, a group?”

“Society.”

“Your society operates on strength then. As the ruler, you are the strongest?”

“I dominated the arena,” he says, pride in his voice as he puffs out his chest and squares his shoulders.

“And what if someone challenges you?”

“Then I will dominate them too.”

“But if they won?”

He turns his head towards me in slow motion, frowning. “That will not happen.”

The guards shift their weight in a quietly telling moment.

“But if?”

The Al’fa glares, then shakes his head. “It will not, but if I was beaten, the victor would be the Al’fa.”

“I see.”

I let this lie, but an idea is forming. I think I have a way to save all of us. The weight on my shoulders makes my muscles tense, but if this works, then I will have found our escape from the Bunker.

And it only depends on Dal being strong enough to beat all comers.

*B*lood trickles into my eye. I swipe it away with the back of a hand. The fourth opponent landed a blow to my head. I wish I could say it was lucky, but it was not. I was too slow.

Each opponent has been stronger and faster than the last. I understand the pattern now. It takes no stretch of imagination to grasp the structure of this group.

The bijass, our primal instinct, rules them.

Instead of fighting it, they have leaned into it.

These Zmaj follow strength. Everything revolves around knowing who can dominate who. As my new opponent walks into the arena, I look up at the viewing box. My hearts thunder seeing Shaun.

She leans on the smooth stone retaining wall. Her eyes are wide and glistening. Her lips purse and she blows a kiss. I smile as a renewal of energy rushes through my body, refreshing my tired muscles. I nod, but the cheers of the onlookers warn me that my next opponent is entering the arena.

He swings his crude club in a wide arc, loosening his muscles while sizing me up from across the open square space. I slump my shoulders, keep my extra limbs hanging limp, and my head bowed.

I give the appearance of a much greater weariness than I am feeling. He strides towards me with an air of confidence. I

shuffle my feet as I move to meet him. When I am within arm's reach, he raises his weapon, but I strike faster.

I swing my lower limbs, each holding one of the crude clubs, aiming at both his sides. He blocks the left but the right hits. The sound of his ribs breaking, the widening of his eyes, his mouth dropping open even as he leans forward, trying to bend around the blow, all tell the damage done.

A spray of blood flies from his mouth, splattering across my face as his breath is forced out. He stumbles back but before he is out of my reach, I strike with a closed fist on his jaw. His head snaps back and he drops unconscious to the ground.

I step back and allow the waiting attendants to rush to his side. Three Zmaj, all of them small and obviously low in the pecking order, move about him. I do not pay them much attention until two of them hook his shoulders and drag him out of the arena.

I got lucky. He was overconfident. I don't know how long I can keep this up. How many of them must I fight before I have established myself high enough to claim what is mine? I look around the arena. Close to one hundred Zmaj have gathered. Must I fight them all?

I will, but I am not a fool. All it will take is one mistake. One instant of being too slow. A single blow and I could lose. There must be a better way. I cannot risk my treasure.

I stop on the viewing box and stare at the Zmaj next to Shaun. The Al'fa. He is the leader. If I beat him in a fair challenge, then surely none will stand between me and Shaun.

"You!" I yell and point one of my clubs at him.

A hush falls over the crowd. I do not even hear anyone breathing. The Al'fa has a tight smile but his eyes narrow.

"You are not done," the Al'fa says.

"I challenge you."

"You are not worthy," the Al'fa says, ending with a snort and shake of his head that causes the woven bone breastplate to rattle.

“You are afraid.”

“I fear no one,” the Al’fa yells, placing both hands on the low wall and leaning forward.

“Face me.”

“That is not our rules.”

“Your rules say I must what, face all comers first?”

The crowd watches and now I know what I must do.

“That is the way.”

“And who made these ‘rules’ as you call them. You?”

“They are the way it has always been,” he says, straightening and smiling. He swings one arm in a wide, encompassing arc.

“It is how we survive.”

“Then these rules were made by a coward.”

The gasp of all the onlookers comes as a single breath. Feet shuffle on stone and tails drag, but no one moves to intervene.

“Cowards?” the Al’fa growls. “You think us cowards?”

“Not us,” I correct. “You.”

“You dare—”

“I do,” I cut him off. “This society values strength above all. What display of strength is it for the mighty Al’fa to face an opponent who is not at his best? Already I have beaten five. How many more must I face before you are willing to test your vaunted strength against me?”

I have them. I feel the assembled Zmaj following my logic. It is palpable, I can taste it on the air.

“That is not the—”

“Of course it is not the way,” I interrupt. “That would require the Al’fa to truly be the strongest. I challenge you, Al’fa. One on one, right now.”

Shaun is bouncing her head back and forth between the Al’fa and me. Her eyes are wide, she parts her lips and the desire to kiss her thrusts itself unbidden into my thoughts. A distraction,

yes, but a welcome one. She is what I fight for and the reason I cannot lose.

“You dare,” the Al’fa hisses.

“Dare?” I taunt. “This is not a dare. It is a challenge. Is that not my right since I am in the arena?”

I am gambling on that. They have rules and I do not know them, but I suspect this is how it will work. The crowd’s attention is on the Al’fa. I have put him in a tough position, if he does not fight me he will look weak. If he does, then it is on me to win.

“I will fight,” another voice says and a different Zmaj steps up next to the Al’fa.

This one has the same dusky color to his scales. An old, white scar runs over his left milky eye. His right horn is broken half-way up, his chest is a crisscross of scars, and his right arm, that he raises and points at me with, has badly healed burns on it.

“But a challenge needs a prize,” this new Zmaj says. “If I win, I claim the female you say is yours.”

My hearts stop and I barely keep myself from falling forward. Put Shaun on the line? She already was, but not in an open challenge like this. I look at her and her face is paler than normal. She is chewing her lip, looking from the challenger to me. She then gives me a subtle nod.

“And if I win?” I demand.

The Al’fa opens his wings and raises his tail. “You get the female and become my Second,” he declares.

The scarred Zmaj nods his agreement. The hush of the crowd is broken by a gasp. I only have eyes for Shaun. Her lips tremble and her face is even paler than normal. My body hurts. Blood is dripping into my eyes. I do not know if I can win.

Shaun clenches her eyes tightly, furrowing her brow and pulls her mouth down into a frown. I see her inhale deeply. Her chest rises, and as it does, she squares her shoulders and tilts her head back. When she opens her eyes, they lock onto mine.

She nods, a smile spreading over her face. Her faith and trust are inspiring. A fresh wave of energy floods my body, washing aside my aches and pains. The exhaustion that had left me feeling drained is gone.

“Agreed,” I say, without looking away from Shaun.

The challenging Zmaj puts one hand on the low wall and then leaps over the edge. He lands on the arena floor with a thump. Dust billows up as he rises. He holds out one hand and someone comes forward to place a club in his open palm.

He makes two test swings, then nods. He stares at me with his one good eye and a smile twists his lips.

“It has been long since a female was with us,” he says. “Fight with honor.”

I nod then we rush forward.

SHAUN

This might very well be the absolute dumbest thing I've ever done. I don't know what came over me. Why did I think this was a good idea? What possessed me?

I just didn't know how much longer Dal could keep fighting. He'd already done so much, how much more could he take?

He was covered with cuts and blood was dripping down his face, but they kept sending in more opponents. How they considered it a fair fight is beyond me. What if they killed him? What if one of his opponents landed a bad blow?

I had closed my eyes because I was scared. Certain that sooner or later, he would fall. The moment I did though, something changed.

That's the part I don't understand.

I knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that this was the thing to do.

He wouldn't risk me without me telling him to. I knew that as well as I know my name. I had to order him to do it, but I also knew, beyond weird as it is, that he would win. That this was our opportunity.

None of which makes watching the fight below any easier. The grizzled Zmaj facing Dal is good. Really good. And as much as I don't want to admit it, I think he's better than Dal. Even as the thought comes, the veteran lands a blow.

The club strikes Dal in the head with so much force it hurts me and I'm nowhere near it. The crowd oohs while the Al'fa at

my side grunts like he's not surprised. Dal stumbles back, one hand raised to his temple, but his opponent isn't letting up.

Another blow, and another, then the club is swinging up from below. Dal tries to block it, but he doesn't get his club to the right spot fast enough and the strike lands. As the club comes up almost from the dirt to hit Dal in the chin, I scream.

Dal's head jerks back and he lifts off the ground with the force of the hit. His back bends in an arc and then he lands headfirst on the dirt floor in a heap. I'm gripping the stone retainer wall so tight I can't feel my fingers.

"Dal, get up, you have to move," I shout, but I don't know if he can hear me because the crowd is screaming too.

The veteran Zmaj approaches slowly, and I can't tell if it's caution or arrogance. He walks with a haughty swagger, but his focus never leaves Dal.

Dal groans loud enough that I hear it, which brings the relief of knowing he's not dead, but he's still down. There's no way he can get up after that blow. I'm amazed he's not dead, which right now is what matters most. I don't have the brain space for anything else.

The veteran stops maybe four or five feet away, staring down at his opponent. My entire body is numb. This can't be real. I trusted some blind intuition, and this is where it's gotten me. It was the worst decision of my life. I've caused Dal to be hurt.

My heart is beating in slow motion. One long beat, pause, beat, pause. I don't breathe, even though my lungs are burning. I try to will Dal to rise. To show me he's okay. I don't care if he can fight, I care that he's not permanently injured.

Dal shifts. His four arms move into position and he lifts himself partway off the ground. Hope surges as he rises. He's okay. He's getting up.

But then my hope is destroyed when he collapses.

The assembly of Zmaj cheer so loudly it echoes in my ears like a unceasing, incessant buzz. My stomach clenches and for a moment I'm sure I'm going to be sick. Tears fill my eyes, and I don't try to hold them back.

What was I thinking?

The veteran turns his back on Dal, holding his arms out wide, waving them up and down which makes the crowd cheer louder.

“He fought well,” the Al’fa says. “You can be proud.”

“Yes,” I say, utterly numb.

I don’t bother turning to look at him. I can’t take my eyes from Dal, lying broken on the ground. “He is my treasure.”

“Do not worry,” he says. “Zat’an will give you all you could ever need or want. He is—”

Dal rises. I want to cheer but there’s no way to clear the lump in my throat.

“I am not done,” Dal cries out.

He bends to pick up his dropped clubs and weaves as he does, almost falling. I try to call his name but still can’t force the words out.

Dal is not steady on his feet, but he has two clubs and is standing. I can barely believe it. If I wasn’t seeing it with my own two eyes I wouldn’t. Watching him, staring at his backside, that sense of calm certainty returns. This is the right choice. I know it.

I look at the Al’fa and can’t stop myself from smiling.

“You were saying?”

I was out. I did not block the blow in time and that was it. All was black. As I lay there, however, floating in the nothing, I felt... something. As if I was being cradled in a warm embrace, and with the warmth came strength.

Enough to open my eyes, then enough to push my body back upright. The warmth was like the breath of the dragon, fiery, igniting my muscles and my passion for Shaun. I cannot fail, my treasure needs me.

My opponent has his back to me. I will not attack without honor, so I announce myself. He turns and his one good eye widens in surprise.

“How?” he says, but then shakes his head. “It does not matter. I admire your tenacity, but it will not matter in the end.”

My body is heavy, sluggish, but the pain has receded. I watch his approach, moving back as he comes closer, drawing him in.

I let my arms hang loose. I do not know how much strength I have right now, or how long I can count on this mysterious second wind. The way I see it, I have one shot. If I fail, then I lose Shaun.

My dragon roars and its burning breath pushes the bijass across my thoughts. Focus. He drops his left shoulder before he attacks with his right. I watch for that, as it will be my opening.

Backing away, I continue drawing him in. We circle the arena. He feints multiple times, but I see it for what it is, that tell of his shoulder dropping is not there. I move to block every time, but I watch that shoulder, waiting for the real attack. I need him to commit.

“She is mine,” I growl. “You are not worthy of her.”

“Worthy?” he retorts, a wry grin on his lips. “You come to my home with your female and your, whatever it is that you let someone do to you, and you dare to say I am not worthy?”

“Yes,” I say. “You have no honor.”

His eyes narrow. “I’ll show you honor,” he says, and the shoulder drops.

I step inside his swinging arm and punch him in the bicep with all my strength. His eyes widen before he cries out in surprise. Striking the muscle and nerves in his arm causes his hand to convulse. The club drops.

I drive my elbow into his nose, feeling it break beneath the impact. Blood sprays from nose and mouth and some of it gets in my eyes, blinding me.

Still, my opponent does not go down. His arms wrap around my middle and he squeezes, lifting me off my feet. I slam my fists onto his shoulders repeatedly. The muscles of his back are like striking solid rock and there is no obvious effect.

His grip tightens until I cannot take a breath then he roars. Darkness pushes into the edges of my vision, calling me back to its empty embrace.

“Dalagh!” Shaun yells my name and strength comes from somewhere.

Hitting his neck and shoulders is not working so I drive my elbow down onto the top of his head. My arm goes numb but his grip loosens. I grab his horns and jerk, pulling his head back. When I see his eyes, I drive my forehead into his already broken and bloody nose.

He screams in pain and drops me. I stumble back, taking a deep breath as I try to keep my feet. The blackness along my

vision recedes.

“Give,” I growl.

“Never,” he says, wiping his arm across his broken nose.

He lowers his head and rushes. I try to dodge but I am too slow. His shoulder slams into my solar plexus, knocking my wind out in a whoosh. He lifts and throws me over his shoulder.

I flail my tail and try to open my wings to control myself, but it happens too fast. I land on my back and what little breath was left in my lungs is exhaled.

Acting on instinct, I roll and only just in time. His foot stomps where my head was. I keep rolling to put distance between us while my lungs refuse to reinflate. I sense him stalking. This is not working.

I reverse my roll. Instead of moving away, I roll towards him. I do it fast enough to catch him by surprise. He tries to leap up and over, but I slap his shins with my tail as I pass under. My opponent hits the dirt face first.

Leaping to my feet, I jump onto his back before he can get up. He struggles, his tail slamming against my back.

He rolls and I move with him, striving to remain on top. He flails but I get my tail around his legs, giving me more control.

His elbows drive into my ribs over and over and at least one of my ribs breaks. I roar in pain and anger but my extra limbs give me the upper hand.

I wrap my two lower limbs around his waist then get my upper arms underneath his. I jerk them up and hook his shoulders. Then I arch my back and pull him tight. He is pinned, unable to continue.

“Yield,” I demand.

“I do not,” he hisses, breathless.

The pain he must be in should be extreme. I cannot believe he is not giving me the win, but he strains and I almost lose my grip.

“Yield, you cannot win.”

“Finish it,” he demands.

“It is done.”

The crowd has grown silent. Before they were cheering, oohing and ahing each turn of the battle, but now no one speaks. I do not even hear them breathing. They wait to see what will happen next.

“I do not wish to harm you,” I say.

“I am not giving you a choice,” he huffs, shifting his weight as he struggles to break free. “Finish it or let me go and I will end you.”

“Why are you doing this?” Some of the tension in his body eases, but he does not speak. “Please, tell me what you are doing. You cannot wish to die.”

“I do,” he says in a voice so soft I am not sure I heard him right. “End it. I am done.”

The fight may not be out of him, but it is me. I am not going to kill another Zmaj for no more reason than he has given up. I understand it, but I will not be the instrument of his demise.

There is always hope. S’khan and I are proof of this. Tajss will find a way.

I let go. He does not move, lying on top of me.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Ending this,” I say.

He rolls off and then climbs to his feet and I do as well. We stare at each other, and the confusion is clear on his face.

“This is not over.”

“It is,” I say, and I extend my own hand out in offering. “Brother.”

He stares at my hand with his one good eye then meets my gaze.

“No, I do not accept this.”

“Believe me, there is hope,” I say.

“What hope?” The sound of the assembled onlookers shifting in their seats gives a deeper weight to his question.

“That is my treasure,” I say, pointing up at Shaun. “Yours is out there.” I point in a direction I assume is away from the mountain.

“Mine is long lost,” he says.

“So was mine. She is returned.”

There are a few gasps in the crowd. Trusting him to not attack me from behind, I turn so that I am facing the assembled Zmaj and the Al’fa at the same time. “Yes. It is true. I lost my treasure in the Devastation. As I am sure many of you did.”

“They are gone,” my opponent says. “And that is an alien. You have lost yourself to the bijass.”

“She is an alien,” I agree. “In body. But her, her spirit, she is my treasure returned.”

“And if we were to believe you,” the Al’fa says, his voice booming over the arena. “What difference does this make to us? If you have claimed the one female, we are still without our treasures.”

“I am no Prophet, nor a Priest. I am,” I pause, look at Shaun and her face that is glowing with pride, then down at all that has been done to me. “I was a soldier. I do not pretend some great understanding, but I know what I know. She is my treasure.”

“Well enough,” the Al’fa says. “It changes nothing.”

“It changes everything,” Shaun says, interjecting herself. All eyes shift to her. Her cheeks color a rich red color, but she squares her shoulders and turns to meet the Al’fa’s gaze. “I am not the only female.”

“Explain yourself,” the Al’fa says.

“She is but one of many of her species,” I say. “Their spaceship crashing here seems like an accident, but I believe it

was fate. There are others, of her species, that are also treasures returned.”

“You are fooling us,” the Al’fa says, suspiciously.

“To what gain?” I ask. “I had won. You already promised me my prize, will you renege on your word?”

I walk forward until I am right below him, both to challenge but also so that I am within an easy leap of his box and Shaun. I am done playing their fighting games. The next fight I take will be the Al’fa himself.

“I do not know,” he says, eyes narrowing with suspicion. “But your words... they cannot be.”

“They are.”

“He’s right,” Shaun says. “There are a lot of human females, and males too. We’re trapped in a bunker and need a new home.”

“The bomb,” the vet says, having come to stand at my side.

“Yes,” Shaun says. “We set it off to stop the Invaders.”

The Al’fa is silent, considering. I glance at the vet at my side, and he gives me a nod.

“I claim my prize,” I say. “I am the new Second. As such, I recommend that the humans and those in the bunker be welcomed to our home.”

The silence that meets my proclamation makes my scales itch. The Al’fa is studying me with an intensity that I have never seen.

“If this is a trick...” he says, but there is no need to finish the threat and he seems to know it. Instead, he nods. “So it shall be. Bring these newcomers. Let us see what it is that happens. Tajss provides.”

“*H*ere?” I ask, as I wipe Dalagh’s wounds with a wet cloth.

“Mmmm, yes,” he says with a wince and only pulls back a little.

As gently as I can, I clean the wound. There are so many of them that if I was to bandage them all, he’d look like some kind of Earth entombment ritual where they wrapped the body up in strips of cloth.

“This is all unbelievable,” I muse as I work to clean and put salve on his back.

“Any more than you returning to me?”

“Stop that,” I mutter.

“That truth is what won them over.”

“Just because it’s true for you doesn’t make it true for me,” I say. “Isn’t it enough for you that I love you? Me, this me, not some former me I may or may not have been?”

He moves too quick for me to dodge despite all the bruises and the broken rib, grabbing me by my waist and pulling me around and onto his lap. I yelp and try to protest but he cuts off my words with his mouth.

His kiss is electric, dismissing my disagreement, melting it away with the heat between us. He slides one hand between my thighs and up, rubbing through my pants in a way that makes me almost instantly wet.

I cling to the last vestiges of my resistance only because I really want to know the answer. Pushing his hand away from my core I put a finger on his lips.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“I thought my kiss would be all the answer you need.”

“Dal, I’m serious, I need to know. Am I enough? Me, right here. Right now.”

He frowns as he realizes I’m serious. I wouldn’t normally consider myself insecure, but this worries me in ways I don’t think I’ve ever felt. I need to know.

“Shaun, you are more than enough,” he says. “How do I prove this to you?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t like being measured against someone I don’t even know. I know you believe in reincarnation and that’s great, but I don’t. I guess it’s possible. But possible and real are not the same thing.”

He brushes my hair away from my face, listening intently. One of his multiple hands is rubbing the back of my neck and shoulders, not in a sensual way, in a caring way. Easing my tense muscles.

“This makes sense,” he says. “You do not recall your former life. I do not know if I have lived before either. Perhaps, perhaps not. How about we make it simpler?”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

He smiles impishly. “You love me?”

“Yes, that I’m certain of.”

“Good,” he says. “You are my treasure. I know this. My dragon claimed you the moment I saw you. Before even, as I dreamed of you in stasis.”

“Okay but you said simpler,” I remind him.

“I did, that is it.”

“What is?”

“You are my treasure. I am yours. That is all.”

I purse my lips, feeling like I should argue because this doesn't really resolve anything, but before any words pass my lips, I think about what he's saying. And, after all, it does make sense.

“Oh,” I say. “No reincarnation?”

“Would it matter? Truly?”

“I suppose not.”

“I believe what I believe, but as you say, belief is nothing more than conjecture. An idea. What I know, and I think you do too, is that you and I are meant for one another. That is what my dragon claims and it is why you are my treasure.”

Every time he calls me that, warmth pulses in my core. It's possessive, dominating, and something so much more. It's a promise. A promise of tomorrows. Of love and care into a future that looks bright and beautiful.

He watches me, not making a move, despite the fact that I know he wants to. The pulsing of his rock-hard cock beneath my ass is all the proof I could ever need.

“And you are mine?” I ask, my mouth and throat dry.

“Forever,” he says, his voice even deeper, huskier. “Always.”

“Tajss provides,” I whisper, unable to get more volume out of my voice as his hand resumes what he was doing.

“Mine,” he growls, rising with me in his arms and carrying me to the bed of the spacious quarters we've been given.

“Claim me,” I grin. “If you want me, take me. Now.”

He lays me onto the bed, which is a thick layer of furs and blankets. I undo my pants while he drops his own. I start to undo my shirt, but he doesn't wait, pushing me back and sliding his cock into me in one fast, slick motion.

As his cock bottoms out in my pussy I wrap my legs around his waist and cling to his neck.

“*T*his way?” I ask.

“Yes,” the Zmaj behind me says.

“How far do these tunnels go?” Dalagh asks.

“Too far,” Zat’an grumbles.

“What does that mean, old one?” Dalagh asks.

I spare a quick glance over my shoulder. It’s amusing to me that Dal calls Zat’an old. It’s not just the way he looks, all grizzled and scarred, but he *feels* old. It’s like an aura surrounding him that exudes age, and wisdom too. It’s not in the way he moves, that’s for sure. Having watched him fight Dalagh, he’s as tough as anyone I can possibly imagine.

“There are things under the ground that are better left undisturbed,” Zat’an says. He rolls his right shoulder and almost imperceptibly glances at the burns on his arm.

“That’s where those come from?” I ask.

He grunts in response but says nothing more.

“Those are not from a zemlja,” Dalagh says. “It looks like acid.”

“Yes,” Za’tan says, pushing past the two of us standing in his way, and strides down the tunnel, now in the lead.

Dalagh and I exchange a questioning look, but we silently agree that it’s best not to press him further. We follow along with another mountain Zmaj whose name I don’t know yet.

That one is surly and silent. I asked him his name when we all met up and his only response was a grunt.

The surly Zmaj carries a torch, its flickering light enough to illuminate the path ahead, but not much more. Za'tan moves with the easy confidence of someone who knows the way he's going well.

I walk with more caution. The stone of the walls and floor has been smoothed but that doesn't make me feel any less cautious. I don't know how far underground we are but I'm aware of the weight of the mountain overhead. It's not oppressive, just different.

After a short while of silence there seems to be a soft glow ahead. Dalagh blocks most of my view but I'm sure that something is coming up. When we emerge into a natural cavern, I gasp in surprise.

It's beautiful.

We've emerged into a massive, open cavern illuminated in shades of glowing turquoise and emerald. Stalactites and stalagmites thrust from all around in shades of blue, the walls and ceiling between them are all different colors of green.

"Wow," I exhale.

"Yes," Za'tan says. "Tajss is beautiful in all places."

"What is this place? This is not epis," Dalagh says.

"No, epis only grows from the passage of the zemlja," Za'tan says. "These fungi are merely edible and we cultivate them as our main source of food."

I crane my neck, looking around the cavern in awe. I can't see the far side it's so big. Working among the stalactites are Zmaj carefully harvesting the fungus.

"Are there no predators?" Dalagh asks.

"Of course, there are," Za'tan says. "We are prepared."

"Thank you for trusting us with this," Dalagh says.

"You are the Second," Za'tan replies.

I detect a hint of bitterness in his voice, but it's subtle, and if Dalagh notices he chooses to ignore it.

"Winning a fight is not earning trust," Dalagh says. "That is something I will do, if you will give me enough time."

"Humph," Za'tan grumps but his eyes soften, and he nods.

"So there won't be a food supply shortage if we bring the rest of us here," I say out loud.

That's the entire reason we asked about this. Food supplies are non-existent in the bunker and we can't move everyone here only to be in the same situation we're in now.

"With proper farming, no," Za'tan agrees. "We have plenty of surplus."

"You mentioned dangers," Dalagh says.

"Yes," Za'tan says.

"What are they?"

"Many and varied. If your people stay in the areas under our control, they will be fine. If they wander outside those areas, you will lose your people."

Dalagh nods, but I know in my heart we're going to lose people. If there's one thing that should never be underestimated it's the stubbornness of some of my species. And their absolute certainty that they know best, no matter what the situation.

Still, this is perfect. Food, safety, and no radiation to worry about. Along with a lot of new, unexpected allies. I smile at Dalagh as my heart swells until it feels like my chest is going to burst.

I never expected any of this, but maybe, just maybe, there is a hand of fate. If so, I am truly blessed.

On impulse, I throw my arms around Dalagh's neck and give him a kiss. I don't care that the other two are watching. Let them. I can't contain my happiness, or I will explode. Dalagh wraps all four of his arms around my waist and pulls me tight.

Tajss provides.

EPILOGUE

I stare in wonder at what's going to be our new home.

"Can you believe this?" Tamara asks.

I shake my head and rub my arms for warmth. Warmth. On Tajss. That's a statement that seems oxymoronic, but here we are, and it is chilly.

"I guess it's better than the bunker," I say.

"We're trading one hole in the ground for another," Annalise grouses.

"Are you kidding?" Tamara says. "This is, I don't know, a billion times better. Look at all this space!"

Tamara throws out her arms, turning in a circle to encompass the space around us. We're standing more or less in the middle of a circle. Around us are layers upon layers of rooms. It's like the atrium on the ship where there was this massive tree and rows of shops going up floor after floor.

There's a walkway that leads up to each floor, but right now all of us are grouped together and mostly listening to Rosalind. Except she's boring. I get it, she's the Lady General, our fearless leader, blah blah blah.

"Listen to the Zmaj," Rosalind says, "at all times. Do what they order first, understand the why later. This is for the safety of all of us. They are welcoming us into their home. Be good guests."

People are muttering, some agreeing, some complaining. I get what she's saying and it's fine, but also distracting. There's so much to see. And so much space!

"You think we can ever go outside again?" I wonder.

"Sure," Tamara says, like she has some inside information that the rest of us aren't privy to.

I can't keep from looking around. Outside this, what, arena? It kind of looks like that might be what it is because all along the edges are stone bleachers. On those bleachers are literally hundreds of Zmaj.

I think they're Zmaj. That's what they claim to be, but they're different. Shorter, stockier, and something about them looks more feral. Their horns tend to be longer and look sharper. They all seem to have thicker hands and fingers that end in definitive claws. They're also darker in coloring than the Zmaj we all know. Before they were all shades of tan, but these guys are dusky and darker.

As I scan the room, I meet the eyes of one and my heart stops. My mouth turns dry and my lungs seize up. I can't take a breath. It feels like the entire world shifts.

He's different.

One horn is broken and his exposed chest is a map of scars. His right side is covered with burns and one milky eye has a scar across it. But that other eye, the one that is locked onto me..., it's a piercing green that looks right into my soul.

Involuntarily I stumble forward. No, I'm pulled towards him. My heart thumps into action and I gasp.

"You okay?" Annalise asks.

"Yeah," I say, not looking away from that piercing, beautiful eye.

My stomach does a flip as a tingle races across my skin. I've never felt anything like this, it feels like an awakening, but of what?

"Tamara," Annalise says.

“Huh?” Tamara asks, turning to us. “Abs? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m fine.”

The Zmaj smiles and it makes my heart beat faster. His chest expands and he lowers his massive arms, flexing the muscles of his chest. Annalise presses a hand to my forehead. I pull back, breaking my gaze with the Zmaj.

“No fever,” she says.

“I’m fine, guys,” I say, chuckling.

“I don’t know,” Tamara says, but she’s not looking at me, she’s looking where I was. At the Zmaj who’s attention has now shifted to Rosalind.

He stands on the same balcony as Rosalind, the Zmaj they named Al’fa, and the Frank, Dalagh. I force myself to not stare.

“You like him?” Tamara whispers.

“No,” I shake my head. “Of course not. I don’t know him.”

A conspiratorial smile forms on her face. Her and Annalise exchange a look, then they both laugh.

“Girl,” Annalise says. “You’ve got bit.”

“Bit?”

“Oh yeah,” Annalise says.

“It’s true,” Tamara says. “No cure but one.”

“Cure?”

“Yup, it’s time,” Annalise says.

“What are you two going on about?”

They exchange a knowing glance, then Tamara takes my hands in hers and looks serious.

“You must do the horizontal bebop,” she says.

“The wha—, you guys, stop,” I protest.

But the warmth in my stomach has tightened into a tense heat and it’s moving lower.

“Yup, unfortunately it’s the only cure,” Annalise laughs. “It’s high time anyway, you’re twenty years old, how long are you going to keep all that to yourself?”

My chest and cheeks burn hot, but when I dart a glance at the Zmaj, part of me knows. He’s the one.

“Right,” I mutter. “We, uhm, we should get to our jobs. We’re supposed to be helping sort out the supplies that came with us.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Tamara says.

They tease me more, but we go about our duties. All the while, though, I can’t stop thinking about that Zmaj. The way he looked at me. The way he made me feel.

This is going to be interesting.

THE END

If you missed it, start at the beginning with [Dragon’s Baby \(Red Planet Dragons of Tajss Book 1\)](#).

If you want to know more about how the survivors arrived on Tajss read the prequel [Red Planet Dragons of Tajss \(Red Planet Jungle\)](#).

JOIN MIRANDA'S READER LIST

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUBSCRIBE TO BE THE FIRST TO KNOW WHEN THE
NEXT RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS STORY IS
OUT!



[CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

ALSO BY MIRANDA MARTIN

[Complete List of My Books](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Miranda Martin writes fantasy and scifi romance featuring heroes with out-of-this-world anatomy that readers call ‘larger than life’ and smart heroines destined to save the world. As a little girl, she would sneak off with her nose in a book, dreaming of magical realms. Today she brings those fantasies to life and adores every fan who chooses to live in them for a while.

Though born and raised in southern Virginia, Miranda Martin is a veteran who’s traveled to places like Korea, Hawaii, and good ‘ole Texas. She’s since settled in Kansas, the heart of America, with her husband and daughters, a cat, and wishes for a pet dragon or unicorn. When she’s not writing, you can still find her tucked away somewhere with a warm blanket and her nose in a book.

Get in touch!

mirandamartinromance.com

miranda@mirandamartinromance.com

