

SAVED

FATED MATES OF DA'ROU'EA
BOOK ONE

JUNIPER GAEL
JUNO WELLS

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For Mom...

*for your immeasurable patience,
support, and belief that I'd get there.*

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FOREWORD

Confession.

This is not my first attempt at telling this story. I'm not even using the same name (yes, a pen name) that I used to tell the first version. That said, this book is a complete rewrite of that first attempt.

Why I took another go at it? I got the tone wrong that first time around, and I took half an eternity to get my lovers together and staring into each other's eyes. That all said, if you're interested in reading the first version—which is not complete—it's available on Kindle Vella [here](#), under the pen name Helena Jaren Jones. While that is a very nice name, it is way too long to plaster on a book cover. So, I chose a new one which I like very much.

And whether you are reading this book or my first attempt, I hope for you happy reading and a wonderful day!

VIVIA

Vivia took a deep drag on her cigarette, pulling the silky smoke deep into her lungs. She was bent with her forearms resting on the cool metal banister of her fire escape. The night's stars were choked out by the city lights, and distant sirens and the soft purr of car engines lulled her into a sense of normalcy.

She took another drag on the cigarette, blazing its tip as she pulled more air through. It was a nasty habit but was the one vice she allowed herself. Besides, the nanos flooding her body would undo any damage the cigarettes did.

Behind her was a small, spartan apartment devoid of almost all belongings. It wasn't because she'd just moved in or was getting ready to move out. Vivia had learned to live on the run, and that meant living light.

Flipping the cigarette from her fingers, she watched it tumble the three stories of building it took to reach the shadowed alley.

“Burn in hell, Xavia,” she mumbled. Vivia's twin sister had brought an end to all their family members, all for the Life Years that could be gained from them. That was the inheritable gift from family members—the right to live a little longer.

Vivia's Life Years were the only ones left Xavia could lay claim to—but she'd have to take them from Vivia's cold, lifeless body.

“Good luck with that,” she snickered. Her nanos had fucked up her sister's plan. Hard to kill a girl that very expensive tech simply wouldn't let die. Selling her liver eighteen times had covered the cost. Freaking insanely painful surgeries. The first dose of nanos was enough to undo the effects of anesthesia, meaning they cut her open while she lay there, screaming.

Worth every moment.

Ping.

Something metallic ricocheted off the banister.

“What the...” Vivia began but didn't finish.

Thwap.

Thwap.

Thwap.

Two darts lodged in the side of Vivia's neck, emptying their loads into the soft tissue of her body, making its way into her bloodstream and quickly crossing the blood-brain barrier. The third dart sank its stainless steel needle directly into Vivia's temple—no blood-brain barriers a concern for it.

“Fu—“ It was the only sound Vivia managed before she toppled, head first over the banister.

Her body slammed into the pavement below, fracturing her skull, breaking her back, and shattering her pelvis.

Fucking bitch... Those were the words that would have filled Vivia's head if the gray matter inside had been intact

enough to allow it. Instead, only silence echoed inside her head before the lights went out.

Vivia's illegal nanites got to work.

"Fucking bitch," were the first words on Vivia's lips when her eyes spasmodically fluttered open. Harsh overhead light blazed against her retinas, making her want to turn her head away, but hands she was still too weak to fight held her still.

Her fuzzy vision cleared in time to recognize the absurdly long, slender needle being positioned above her eye.

"No no no no no!" she rasped.

Hands held her head in place. Fingers kept the lids of her eye open. It happened too fast to scream, but her entire body stiffened as the needle's tip punctured her eye. A burning trail sank deeper than she knew it could, causing pain where she hadn't known she had nerves.

Vivia lost herself to a violent seizure that snapped at least one newly healed bone. When she came to, her sister, Xavia, was in a heated argument with a white trench coat wearing man with a hooked nose and nerdy glasses that might have been in fashion... never. The words they hurled at each other were still a jumble to Vivia's ears. She couldn't follow what they were saying.

"You bitch, what have you done to me?" Vivia asked as she managed to roll onto her side.

The arguing stopped, and Vivia gained Xavia's full attention.

"You narcissistic bitch!" Xavia screamed. "Nanos? You got fucking nanos? All of this"—she twirled a finger in the air—"it's on you. Where you're going, it's on you. I didn't do this, you did this!"

Vivia didn't miss the huge, clear gem that glittered on Xavia's finger. The woman was engaged. No doubt she'd finally managed to get an offer to marry up by using her shared Life Years as a dowry. She'd get rich and her betrothed would get to live longer.

Getting the nanos had been Vivia's attempt at a tech driven fuck-you.

It was looking like the nanos weren't enough to really drive that fuck-you successfully home.

Now Xavia was calling her a narcissistic bitch for not being someone she could murder—or, you know, die. Ever. Theoretically, at least. A person could, however, be dismembered and put into separate containers, as was the government's answer to the use of the technology by some people. Given that wasn't an outcome most people wanted to risk, breaking the law to get the nano tech was extraordinarily rare.

Vivia sneered at her identical twin and gave her the middle finger, which sadly corkscrewed sideways rather than stood up straight.

Unperturbed, Xavia moved to grab Vivia by her broken leg. "Come on, help me," she demanded of the lab-coat wearing attendant. His humanity showed through an ever so slight amount in the form of a minuscule hesitation. Xavia's snarl snuffed it out. Each grabbed a leg.

Vivia was dragged to a waiting, glowing portal. Her attempt to grab at anything they passed merely added to her existing wrist, arm, and finger fractures.

And so it was without any aplomb that the world titled, existence stretched, and Vivia found herself still on her back

but looking up at something much different than a ceiling lined with long fluorescent lights. Instead, her sight was met with sky... and a lot of moon. In fact the moon took up nearly a quarter of the visible sky.

Vivia stared at it a moment. She was aware she'd been thrown through a wormhole portal that had taken her to a new planet. She was aware that she knew nothing about it. And, she even knew that the portal was used in connection with an intergalactic fated mates program established by nobody-knew-who. But what she didn't know was whether or not that great big moon was about to smash into the surface of her new planet and squash her.

She laid still, staring. She picked a spot on the huge moon's pocked surface and watched. She held her breath and counted. The crater she chose to stare at seemed to have moved a tiny bit to the right, but it hadn't gotten any bigger.

Vivia released her breath. Non-crisis averted.

She stretched. She arched. She moved broken bones into alignment, and they healed. The mended spots would be weak at first but would strengthen over time. Sensation tingled in her left leg, making her realize it had been numb with paralysis. But it took little more time than a floating leaf—shaped like a boxed Chinese lantern—to make it from one side of the clearing to the other for her to sit up to take her surroundings in more fully.

“That fucking bitch,” Vivia said when she glanced at her forearm an inch above her right wrist. There, an insert with a round light the size of a pebble within it was lit green. Vivia shook her head in disbelief. “You fucking bitch.”

She'd heard the stories. Every woman of earth past a certain age had. Xavia had entered her into a fated mates

program, of which there were many. She had no idea what the colors meant before you got swept through the wormhole, but things changed once you reached the planet. A pale, pale green meant that she had a fated mate but that he hadn't made it to the planet yet.

She poked at the insert. It didn't have any buttons, but she hoped for some interaction nonetheless. "Where am I?" she asked. Her heart soared when she got a response.

A holographic word appeared above the light. She did her best to sound it out. "da'Rou'ea."

"What's my evade window?" she asked the device, then poked at it when it didn't answer fast enough to suit her.

A holographic timer replaced the planet's name. "Five days," she said on a sigh. That was as short as she'd ever heard of one being.

Fated mates weren't sent into the universe with no way back. They had the right to refuse their so-called fated mate, if they survived long enough to do so. The joining of some fated mates was the end to both involved, giving birth to a third completely different creature that lived on with the joined memories of the pair. Many philosophers argued whether it was a death or a metamorphosis, but none of those philosophers ever stepped up to find out first hand—and neither was Vivia.

Vivia climbed to her feet and took in her surroundings. She could run and battle a potentially hostile planet. She could hide. Or, she could fight.

She took in her newly mended body. Her wounds were healed. Her internal parts were knitted back together, but fragile.

Fighting was out.

Running would lead to fighting the planet, she was sure. She'd heard stories that insisted that this place embraced bonded fated mates but sought to destroy anyone else, including fated mates not yet bonded to each other. So, since fighting was out and running would lead to fighting, then running was out, too.

“Hiding it is.”

She'd find a way to outlast whoever her so-called fated mate was. There was no way in hell she was going to allow herself to become bonded with some creature she'd never laid eyes on before.

She was going to go back to Earth to reclaim her Life Years from her sister.

“That fucking bitch...”

RO'MEE

Wind swirled around Ro'mee's feet as he stepped onto the pillar shaped transport that would take him from the Below, through the band of the Indefinite Waters to the unending openness of the Above.

His hand encircled his wrist and rubbed. Under it was an insert he'd gotten many cycles ago, one that had remained gray and lifeless for so long he'd assumed it was defective. He'd once tried to pry the thing out of his arm, considering it a lost cause. But the thing had refused to budge from where it had been implanted.

Long stretches of time passed when he didn't think of the gray, lifeless insert at all, until this day. Its dormancy had ended with a low vibration and a glow of gold. The sight had ripped his journey's path to a harsh edge. It diverged his path from a desperate act that would have forced him into the existence as a runner at the bottom of the fathomless crevasses. Instead, he had a mate—a fated mate. He had a person destined to give life to his children. He had someone whom the gods themselves had chosen for him.

He—*he*—had a mate.

One of his two hearts failed to keep proper rhythm with the other, and he sucked air deep into his lung to increase pressure against his errant heart in hopes it would stabilize.

He had a fated mate.

Not only that, but she was already on da'Rou'ea waiting for him. He'd signed himself and his brothers up for the fated mates program as soon as he—the youngest and Head of Kin—had come of age. His birth had been the death of both his parents, and so he had become legally responsible and honor bound to be to his brothers what his parents could not. The responsibility had rested newly on his shoulders from the time of his birth.

Ro'mee glanced at the golden glow coming from his wrist once again and willed the lift to go faster as it moved from the gloom of the Below and entered the algae band of the Indefinite Waters. The lift remained lit, glowing into the eternal darkness as it climbed through the various density bands of water. It allowed him glimpses of the life that thrived within, but the world of Vayu had not been as kind or as accommodating to beings such as himself, a Vayu'un—a being, not simply a creature but instead a person full of wants and needs beyond which the planet could provide—such as a mate. Females of his kind were rare of birth. Making matters worse, a great sickness had decimated their numbers so that those of his lowly status had no chance of ever being paired with a female.

His eldest brother, Ebryl, had fared better than him, though. He'd fared better than even their parents. Adopted by a High-borne family, Ebryl had been given every opportunity to thrive—yet even he still had no mate.

“He will agree,” Ro’mee muttered to himself to counter the raging doubts within himself.

Ro’mee’s youngest brother, Taob—still older than Ro’mee himself—had attempted to trick a female of their kind into taking him as a mate by making false claims regarding his status. The clever bastard had shocked Ro’mee with his audacity. He’d shocked most of the population of Vayu, but that would not save him from his slated execution.

“He’ll agree,” Ro’mee said again, again in an attempt to convince himself. Ebryl was Taob’s only chance at survival. The fated mates program would allow Ro’mee to get off world. Once he’d proven himself as an accepted and successful mate, Ebryl would be allowed to follow... then finally Taob. Securing Taob’s temporary release and then hiding him until his insert lit with his own match was what had to happen now—and Ebryl was the only one who could make that happen. He was the only one of the three of them with the clout and funds to pull it off.

Ro’mee’s lift burst clear of the Indefinite Water’s surface. Ro’mee was careful to keep his vision focused at the receding surface of the water before finally closing his eyes altogether. Every part of the lift was transparent and there was no other way to shield his sight from the never ending horizon or the void of sky above. It was not until the shadow of the High-borne city Ebryl lived within further dimmed his perceptions through his eyelids that Ro’mee dared open his eyes once more.

The lift clunked into place below the city then began its horizontal journey to Ebryl’s location, wherever that might be. Wherever Ebryl was, was the only place Ro’mee was allowed within the High-borne sanctuary. Of course, no such

demeaning restrictions applied in reverse. The High-borne were allowed to travel the Below at will, and many did in search of things only the truly destitute and desperate were willing to do.

Ro'mee adjusted his stance impatiently and glanced at his insert again. He'd heard stories of da'Rou'ea and the dangers that lurked there. His mate could be struggling for her survival that moment, and here he was attempting a last moment bid to save one brother's life instead of doing his best to acquire tools and weapons for the struggles ahead. It was everything Ro'mee could do not to slam his fist into the wall of transparent stone that made up the lift. Thankfully, it wasn't an urge he had to resist for long as it rose once more vertically. Its movement stopped and its doors opened, allowing Ro'mee exit onto a private, covered platform outside a personal abode.

Ro'mee did not request to gain entry through the custom forcefield that would have kept anyone else out. There were some benefits of being Head of Kin that his brother had no ability to deny. What he hadn't expected was Ebryl's gracious welcome.

"Brother!" Ebryl exclaimed, holding a four-pronged goblet in the air. It was made of the same clear stone as the lift, and its singular value could have provided a comfortable life for a hundred others in the Below. In the goblet wafted dark vapors above a rich, deep amber liquid which called and enticed Ro'mee to it by simply being in the same room. Serink was, simply put, an intoxicating drink that calmed the soul and eased the mind into a graciously happy stupor. That was what it did for the normal minded among the Vayu, but Ebryl was a Wormer. For him, that magic elixir made from fermented serpent ink lulled his worm into a gentle slumber from which it only slightly stirred. To be sure, Ebryl was not free from the

worm's sociopathic effects while imbibing serink, but he ceased to disappear within the convoluted lies the worm wove for him altogether.

“You know why I've come?” Romee asked. His eyes drifted to the vivid blue and brilliant yellows of Ebryl's skin to the glass again. He licked his lips without wanting to, then forced himself to focus solely on his eldest brother once more.

Ebryl had been a kind, even a sensitive, child. Ro'mee's earliest memories were of Ebryl's fierce protection and his gentle reassurances, and Ro'mee had not understood what he was doing when High-borne came and asked Ro'mee's permission to adopt the older boy. Ebryl had the elegant features held in esteem among those of their kind who lived in the light of day instead of the diluted glow of the Indefinite Water's effervescent algae band. It only took being in Ebryl's presence for the leached, pale blues and creamy versus vibrant yellows of Ro'mee's skin to stand out in stark contrast to him.

Their lives had diverged on that fateful day. Ebryl had received the best education his kind had to offer along with the minerals and sun support his body needed to thrive. Ro'mee had gotten sweet billique for allowing the adoption of his eldest brother.

Ro'mee had betrayed Ebryl without understanding what it was he was being asked to do. But that was not when the true betrayal happened. That had been when Ebryl's adoptive father had returned five cycles later, asking permission to give Ebryl the worm—a literal worm which would be allowed to burrow inside Ebryl's head to make his views more palatable to his peers. His peers. For they were not—and never had been—Ro'mee's or Taob's peers. Ebryl had been too empathetic to suit the sensibilities of those he lived among, but the worm put

an end to that and more. That betrayal had been Ro'mee's. Fully. Completely. Ro'mee had been starving. Toab had been wasting away and had been heading for a calcified death.

The worm had saved them all. And Ro'mee would have dug his fingers into his brother's brain and swallowed the thing himself if he thought it could now save Ebryl from the foul creature he'd become. He looked like a Vayu'un. But he was not. He was a monster.

Ebryl swished the contents of his drink in its cup with a smile on his lips. It wasn't the sort of smile that curved his lips, but yet it existed plain as day for any who knew how to see it. The man was enjoying himself, enjoying the leverage he now held over his Head-of-Kin brother, Ro'mee.

"I can't save him," Ebryl said, still not looking at Ro'mee and still gloating in his all but absent smile. "You know that, don't you."

Ro'mee resisted glancing down to the insert just above his wrist. He didn't want to draw attention to it. The change it beckoned would be coming to Ebryl as well, whether he wanted it to or not.

"Can't or won't?" Ro'mee asked, ready to disbelieve either answer his brother gave.

Ebryl lounged a hip against a ghostly table, shaped by force field and filled with a fine, swirling, hauntingly luminescent mist. "Does it matter," he countered. "The result is the same. Your better brother is dead... or will be."

Anger rose within Ro'mee. "You don't care, do you?" It had been phrased as a question, but in truth it was an accusation.

Ebryl's returning glare flashed venom... for a moment. Ro'mee had struck a chord. Ebryl did care. A lot. Either that or he cared that he didn't care—one or the other. But which?

“Your visits tire me, brother,” Ebryl said. He had no defense against them. Ro'mee could come and go from his life as he chose, and it was the one thing Ebryl had no power over. But that was about to change. “However,” he added, “I am glad to see you this time.” He smiled his non-existent smile and added, “At this time.”

Ro'mee's nervous system sent warning tingles through his body. His extremities twitched with the need to act or to prepare to defend, but he did not yet understand the threat and so could do nothing.

“What game are you playing at, Ebryl?” he asked.

“Only the permanent kind. What other type of game is worth playing?”

Ro'mee's muscles bulked with the fueling juices that would give them explosive power. “What game?” he asked again.

Ebryl rolled his eyes and gasped with faux exasperation before leveling Ro'mee with an unflinching gaze. “You still don't get it, do you? What the game is doesn't matter—only the result.”

Ro'mee's lung ached as it stretched to greater capacity, further readying his body for fight or flight. “What game?” he asked again. This time his voice carried a low vibration of authority. Ebryl's eye twitched, and Ro'mee knew the command in his voice had connected with Ebryl's nervous system as intended. If Ebryl's deadened ability to care about anything had any cracks in it, it was his hatred of Ro'mee's

ability to affect him at will. But rather than spark with anger, Ebryl surprised him with an unfettered laugh.

“Enjoy your tricks while you can, Ro’mee. They’ll be your last.” Ebryl pushed off the table, crossed the room and waved his hand before a doorway. The mist-door cleared. The sight within the room, now visible, staggered Ro’mee backwards. The tingles throughout his body became stabbing knives.

“Ebryl, you haven’t. You can’t have.” Ro’mee took a shaky step forward toward a creature who lay lifeless. A female of his kind. It was the first he’d ever seen in person. There were so few left after the great sickness. So few. And every female of his kind received High-borne status at birth. Their lives stretched so much longer than any male could ever dream. Yet this one lie dead. Her life ended.

Ro’mee tore his gaze from her to look at his brother. “Tell me you didn’t do this. Tell me, or I’ll kill you myself here and now.”

“Run, brother,” Ebryl told him in the same calm, almost bored voice that was his usual. “Run, and maybe you’ll have a chance to evade the Overseers.” He took another sip of Serink.

Ro’mee stepped closer. Threatening. “Did you do this?”

“Brother! Remember! The game. What I have done or not done does not matter. But this is the outcome.” The top of his head inclined itself toward the woman. “This is your outcome. Run, brother.” The message was clear. The woman’s murder would be pinned on Ro’mee.

Ro’mee arm struck. His hand wrapped itself around his brother’s neck, and he lifted his free wrist to eye level before Ebryl.

Ebryl's eyes flared wide as they locked on the sight of Ro'mee's glowing insert.

"Intervene for Taob," Ro'mee commanded. "Keep him alive long enough... for this." He shook his gemmed arm.

Ebryl still stared at the insert, now alight. "When?" he asked. A reverence had entered his tone, one that gave Ro'mee hope. Maybe his brother was not as fond of his lofty status after all. Maybe he was as trapped as the rest of them.

"Twenty keys ago."

"That color. Where is it for?"

"da'Rou'ea."

Ebryl's pupils involuntarily widened. "Land planet," he whispered. "Large. Undeveloped."

Ro'mee nodded, taking in every nuance of his brother's reaction. "Freedom," he added.

Ebryl's nod was deliberate yet barely perceptible. Ro'mee had long since gleaned that careful control of one's responses was crucial for survival among the High-Borne. He could only imagine what treacherous schemes Ebryl had managed to tread and survive.

They'd be free of the different struggles of both the Below and the Above on da'Rou'ea. More simply put, they would be free.

"Did you kill her?" Ro'mee asked one last time.

Silence dragged with no indication at all the Ebryl had heard him. Finally, the answer came. "More that I did not save her."

"But the end is the same," Ro'mee followed.

Ebryl nodded. “Finally, you understand. Only the outcome matters.”

Ro’mee released his hold on Ebryl and stepped away. It was rare that he got the chance to see the man more than the worm, and the gods knew the worm was good at disguising itself as the man. To whom did he speak? The worm did not have an identity. No ego. Just need. Survive. Exist. Thrive.

Outcomes.

Given that, did it matter who was in the driver’s seat of Ebryl’s mind?

“Can you save Taob? Can you delay the... outcome?”

“His execution?” Ebryl clarified. Assuming a false identity for the purpose of tricking a female into a breeding addiction was punishable by death. It was trickery that not even Ebryl had attempted. He had never stooped so low.

“Can you?” Ro’mee asked again. A vibration from the insert above his wrist let him know his time was up.

“I can try.”

That would have to be good enough.

“It’s time,” Ro’mee said.

“This is your second chance to save us,” Ebryl said. “Don’t get things wrong... this time.”

“On my word, brother. And Taob?”

“On my word,” Ebryl repeated the solemn oath.

In a cascading pulse of light, Ro’mee ceased to exist where he had been and became some place new.

da’Rou’ea.

VIVIA

The air shimmered, then popped as it was instantly displaced. It wasn't a sound Vivia heard. It was more like an instant change in air pressure felt in her ears.

It was at that moment that her mate—her so-called fated mate—appeared.

Vivia froze the breath in her chest and fought the instinct to scrunch down lower in her hiding spot. She'd dug a hole in the ground, one just deep enough for her to kneel down in, but shallow enough to burst out of and run in the event she were discovered. But nothing prepared her for what actually happened.

A big blue beast of a man popped into existence close enough for her to reach out and touch with a long pole, if she had a long pole. Muscles adorned his unclad chest. His sides dove down in a V from wide, powerful shoulders to his waist, and a ground length skirt hung low on his tight hips.

“Holy mother,” Vivia mouthed without uttering a sound. He was her fated mate?

Da-yum.

Her heart fluttered at the sight of him. She'd been expecting her fated mate to be like one of the many horror

stories she'd heard: a blob shaped slime creature that caught and dissolved its mate, a sentient mold spore or a creeping fungus, to name a few. She didn't know what the last two did with their mates, but she imagined it couldn't be good. Or fun.

But this guy, was there a chance he could be... fun? Should she even care about fun?

"Wow," she mouthed, her eyes unblinking. She drank in every detail about him. That was, before he lifted his face to the sky... and then fell flat on his face.

Vivia jerked, whole body, when he hit the ground as if she herself were the one who would feel the harsh impact. She stared, a part of her wondering if the fall were a trick. Her mind rushed through all the possibilities. She'd never heard of a fated mate disguising the way they looked to attract their mate to them, but that didn't mean it never happened. Maybe she was not in fact looking at a big blue beast of a man. Maybe she was looking at a slimy salamander creature who wanted to dissolve her skin and add her internal skeleton as an armored shield to its back. She'd never heard of such a thing, but that didn't mean it didn't exist.

Vivia stayed crouched where she was, watching for any signs of movement, any signs of trickery. Something that looked between the cross of a butterfly and a bird fluttered past. A tree-mushroom dropped a webbed veil from its underside, caught the bird-butterfly and then pulled its webbed veil back up for a treat.

Yet still Vivia didn't move.

The part of her brain that was still intent on killing her sister and had no interest in being linked to any mate of any kind whittled through her options.

Run.

Continue to hide.

Kill him.

All the other parts of her mind did an absolute veto of the third option. That left run or hide. And, she could always do a combo of the two. She could put some distance between herself and her BBG—big blue guy—and look for a better hiding place to wait out the five days on her return timer. Spending five days crouched in a tiny hole did not sound practical. Thirst and hunger would become issues. And, a variety of bodily this and that would eventually want to come out. Frankly, there wasn't enough room for her, her self-dignity and the this and that which would eventually come out all in the same tiny hole.

So, that settled it. She'd need to run and search for a better hiding place to wait out the clock. Maybe she could find a cave, someplace with a stream nearby. She could survive on water alone if she had to. Her nanos would be able to eventually fix any damage five days of starvation would do to her body, but dehydration was a different matter. The nanos might keep her from dying, but she wasn't sure they'd keep her brain lucid. The timer could run out, the wormhole could open, and she might think it was the eye of Sauron coming to get her. She might run away from it in her delusion rather than run into it. And if she did manage to go into it, she'd be in no condition to defend herself against her twin if Xavia were ready and waiting for her return.

Vivia assumed there was only one fated mate for her in the universe, but she was sure her dear sister would think of some other creative way to be rid of her. Killing her was out because of the pesky nanos, but Xavia was nothing if not clever—and

Vivia didn't want to risk giving Xavia the opportunity to be clever with the rest of her existence, which according to the very illegal nano salesman was likely to be a very, very, very long time.

Something in the fern-like vegetation caused a rustle, pulling Vivia's attention away from her so-called mate. Thoughts of running left her as she froze once more in wait of what danger would emerge. But instead of a gasp, she murmured a soft "ahhhh" when an all but transparent caterpillar wiggled its way out of the forest's dense and varied growth. It was as long as a picnic table and as wide as a picnic table's bench seat. If standing next to it, she suspected the cutie's back would reach the height of halfway up her shin. But, her "ahhhh" quickly became an "ohhhh!" when the darling little creepy crawly paused at her fated mate's feet then proceeded to swallow the big blue guy whole, an inch at a time.

"No, no, no, no, no! Bad caterpillar!" Vivia exclaimed in her loudest whisper. The caterpillar paused in its pursuit of swallowing her mate, rolled a comically large droopy eye to look at her, then seemed to shrug—actually shrug!—before returning to his goal of downing its huge snack feet first.

Vivia glanced all around her as if looking for someone else to pop out of the odd forest to stop the critter, but no one came. Uncertainly at first, Vivia unfolded her body into a low crouch. "Bad caterpillar! Stop that!" she chided in her sternest whisper.

The caterpillar ignored her.

"Stop that right now!" she demanded, this time slapping her open palm against the ground's thick loam for emphasis, which failed to even make a sound.

The caterpillar did not stop. In fact, it didn't even slow down.

Vivia growled, glanced from side to side, and fully emerged from her hiding place. She allowed the loam covering she'd had draped over her like a blanket to slide from her back. She reached the caterpillar just in time to keep the big guy from swallowing her not-mate's head. (She'd only just met the guy and hadn't even exchanged a word yet. There was no way she was going to credit him with being her actual mate.)

Vivia squatted down next to the caterpillar's head and began to lecture. It wasn't like the thing could swallow her, too. It's mouth was a tad full at the moment.

“Stop that this instant,” she told it.

It gave her its full attention, looking up at her with an eye that could have belonged to an adorable basset hound. She did her best not to melt under its gaze, but it was hard!

She stroked the top of its head like she would a cat's. “You don't want to do this,” she told it. Within its transparent flesh, she could easily see the figure of her not-mate. No harm seemed to be coming to him as of yet. No bubbling. No apparent dissolving. And being so close to the caterpillar gave her an up close—albeit a little distorted—look at her not-mate. He was face down, so she couldn't study his features, but his back was exquisite. It was a map of muscles she craved to trace with her fingertips. His blue skin approached the rich, deep color of cobalt and was intricately lined with forking, jagged lines of pale yellow. Squinting to blur her vision, the lines took on the look of lightning ripping across the sky on the cusp of darkness.

He—this not-mate of hers—was beautiful. Taller than any basketball player ever dreamed of with wider and more powerful shoulders than any linebacker ever hoped for.

Vivia knew she should be doing more to get the guy out of the caterpillar instead of squatting next to his cocooned body staring at him. At least his head hadn't been swallowed up yet, so he'd be able to breathe.

Vivia shifted uneasily. Could he breathe? She was making a huge assumption about how he breathed. Maybe he was a skin breather and the cute huge-little caterpillar was suffocating him at this very moment.

Was her not-mate moving? Breathing? Studying him, she thought he was. But maybe those were tiny death throw movements of him trying to breathe. She knew she could check his mouth for breath, but what would that really tell her? That air was coming out of him? It wouldn't tell her anything more. It wouldn't tell her if that was part of the process used to keep him alive or merely an act of desperation by a body on the brink of death.

“Come on,” she told the caterpillar. “You gotta let him go.” She tapped ever so lightly on the spot where she guessed its nose might be, if it had one. “Bad, caterpillar. Bad. Back up. Squeeze off.”

The little guy didn't budge. He simply continued to stare at her with that big adorable eye of his.

Biting the inside of her lip, Vivia held one finger out with all her others curled under. Carefully, slowly—threateningly—she moved the tip of her thin yet sharp fingernail toward the caterpillar's adorable eye. Closer and closer. So close a grasshopper's sneeze would have had trouble making it between her nail and its eye.

“Awww!” she wailed, throwing her head back and dropping her hand. She couldn’t bring herself to hurt the little-big guy. He was simply too adorable. Maybe that was his super power, his weapon. Too cute to kill.

Refocusing on the challenge before her, Vivia pressed her lips together in a firm line. “You’re coming off of him, young man,” she said in her most scolding voice.

Repositioning, she straddled the caterpillar and her mate, held to the caterpillar’s sides, squatted into a snow-skiers bend and pulled. The caterpillar felt like dense jello in her grip. She squeezed and tugged with all her might, but nothing about it budged.

Moving to a new position, this time at the caterpillar’s widely stretched mouth where it had stopped at her not-mate’s arms a few inches below his shoulders, Vivia put her hands on the unfairly cute beast, leaned in with all her weight and might and pushed.

Nothing.

It still didn’t move an inch. Not even a hair’s width.

Vivia’s gaze involuntarily glanced around her in search of a sharp rock or a splintered branch, anything that might be able to cut through the gelatinous beast. But she caught herself, refocused on the cutie, and said, “No.” She had to figure out another way.

“Okay, if you won’t get off, maybe you’ll go more on.”

Vivia moved to stand behind the caterpillar. Its big eyes swiveled and searched for her. She swallowed hard, rubbed her hands together, then took a racer’s starter position but with her hands on the caterpillar’s butt end. “Come on, little guy. Swallow big and don’t stop.”

With that said, she pushed. Her hands sank into the green, translucent flesh enough to leave hand shaped impressions but no further than that.

“Cat” mewed in what she interpreted as a complaint.

Vivia cringed at the mew, but she didn’t give up. Instead, she changed positions, and butted Cat’s butt with her own and said, “Come on! You can do this!”

Cat mewed again. This time he sounded... snotty. But he moved forward, not much though. Not enough. Getting Cat off the big blue guy had to go faster than this. There was no telling when he’d wake up, and she did not want to be around for that.

“Think,” she urged herself. She glanced around, but nothing jumped out at her. No inspiration came. “Come on!”

She needed a plan!

She looked into Cat’s big, adorable eyes and said, “Please.”

It mewed at her. This time, the sound was less snotty and more pitiful.

Vivia stopped pushing and instead sat on Cat’s butt end, thinking.

Vivia reconsidered the situation. She was making progress. Slow progress. Too slow. Cat could end up with the guy’s head in its belly for a lot longer than he could go without air. She turned a concerned eye on Cat. If that happened, she’d have to tear into Cat with her bare hands. She did not want to do that. She wasn’t even sure she could do that. She’d pushed pretty hard on Cat’s bulbous body, and while it felt gelatinous, it gave her the impression it would be unimpenetrable.

Giving up her position at its rear, she moved to the stretched mouth of his front and squatted down near his big, dopey eye. Her nails dragged delicate swirling patterns on top of its head.

“I need your help,” she told Cat. “I can’t leave until you stop whatever this is that you’re doing, and I’ve gotta go. How ‘bout it. Help a girl out. Spit this guy out for me.”

Cat trilled his pleasure.

Heartened by its response, Vivia gave a last encouraging tickle with her nails and then duck walked to a few feet in front of it. She held out her arms and wiggled her fingers. “Come on. You can do it. Come to me. Come on.” She called Cat like she would a puppy. And Cat rewarded her. He inched forward, his whole body rippling in the process. His mouth was wrapped around the blue guy’s neck when it stopped.

Vivia swallowed hard, knowing what would happen next. The blue guy’s face was about to get covered up. He wouldn’t be able to breathe, and Vivia wasn’t sure she’d be able to get him out.

“Okay, that’s good,” Vivia said, though she didn’t feel nearly as certain as she sounded—and she sounded pretty damn uncertain. “Come on. That’s great. A little further.” She stretched forward and gave Cat a tickling scratch before scooting further away. “Come on. A bit more.”

Cat’s body rippled again, and this time not only did the blue guy’s face get swallowed up. It moved halfway down Cat’s body.

“Yes!” Vivia exclaimed, punching the air.

Cat shrank back.

“No, no, no,” Vivia said, her voice soft and encouraging again. “It’s okay. I was just happy.” She tickle-scratched some more until Cat’s eye was lulling around in happy response. “Come on. Let’s get that guy out of you.” Vivia scooted away again. “Come on!” She patted her knees as she called.

Cat’s whole body did another ripple wave, and the big blue guy fully exited Cat’s southern end, leaving him slimed with an impressive amount of goo. He’d literally passed through the belly of the beast, but Vivia had no plans of sticking around to tell him that. Not that she could, considering they probably didn’t speak the same language.

Cat wiggled and shimmied toward Vivia, and she tickle-scratched him all the way down his back in reward. But possibly it had been too much reward because Cat zipped around faster than Vivia had imagined would be possible for the plump critter and did a surprisingly fast rippling crawl to the big blue guy’s feet again.

Cat opened his mouth wide, his intent more clear than his body.

“No!” Vivia screeched. She bounded forward and planted herself on her knees between it and the blue guy’s feet. “You don’t want to eat him again. You’ve no idea where he’s been!” It was the best argument she could make that might appeal to the caterpillar.

Maybe she could talk Cat into coming with her instead.

“Come on, let’s you and me go somewhere warm, safe, and with lots of food.” She had no idea where that might be or what it might look like, but they could find it together. Cat could even turn out to be good company—if he didn’t eat her in her sleep. “What do you say? Wanna come with me?”

She stood and strode away, then turned back to face Cat. “You coming?” She patted her thigh.

Cat rippled in place, seeming to consider the invite. Then, thankfully, he turned away from the big blue guy and did a rolling inch-worm crawl toward her.

Vivia smiled, pleased, but not quite for the reason she expected. “I’m glad to have you along,” she told Cat. “I think I’ll like the company.”

Vivia covered her not-mate with debris before she disappeared into the alien forest.

RO'MEE

Coming to was gradual for Ro'mee, until it wasn't. He went from partially conscious to high alert without going through any stage in between. A sticky goo covered his body, and debris covered his face—organic debris, yet different than anything he'd ever smelled or touched before. There was a musky quality to it, one that was fresh instead of stale. Full of life—or the promise of life. Light filtered through it, letting him know it was still day.

His instinct was to brush all the debris away, but that would have left his face—and sight—completely exposed to the nothingness above. So instead he lay there, trying to assess the situation by sound and smell. The air was heavy with the scent of his fated mate, and it took every ounce of self-control to push his senses past being filled with her... and only her. He couldn't say why he knew it was her other than every cell in his body called out for her.

Ro'mee heard rather than saw movement to his left, and he tensed in response. But it wasn't anything threatening—just the gentle flutter of the ground's alien vegetation caught in a breeze. That same breeze brought her scent closer to him yet again. He breathed in deeply, wanting to fill himself with her.

It felt impossible, but he managed to reach his senses past her once more.

Forgiving ground beneath him. Fresh air, laced with unexpected moisture. Plants rustling from the wind.

He needed to find her. He couldn't stay here, exposed and vulnerable. But he couldn't go out into the open, either. He would have to find someplace safe before he could continue his search. And then... he would find her. His mate. The one who was meant for him.

The only other smell was that of the debris itself. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, but it was strange. There was something else.

He was sure he was surrounded by more of the same debris, or rather not debris. He was surrounded by vegetation of the likes he'd never seen or heard of before. Possibly, he should have been afraid—terrified, even. But instead, he was filled with wonder. He was one of the very few of his kind to ever set foot on this world, and he was determined to discover its secrets.

Slowly, carefully, he rolled over so that he lay face down, giving him only the ground to look at instead of the sucking void of the sky above. It was a view he could handle, one that wouldn't cause his brain to shut down once again. But the disturbance of the debris that had been piled atop him brought with it an explosion of scent, stronger than before. Again, his fated mate. So close.

He froze, afraid to move and break the illusion that she was near. But it wasn't an illusion. His mate was here, she was real, and she was on this planet with him. He had to find her.

Ro'mee pushed himself up, gritting his teeth against the onslaught of sensations bombarding him. The covering of goo was on its way to drying, and bits of it flecked off.

The ground was spongy beneath him, and he had the strange sensation of sinking ever so slightly. It was different than on Vayu, his homeworld. This world sank down from his weight, but it also pushed back, adding a spring to his step as he moved. Keeping his vision focused on the ground and while holding a piece of vegetation over his head—something large that felt almost like fabric—he managed to cross the short distance that would take him inside the planet's alien forest.

It was there, inside the planet's incredible plant growth, that he was finally able to lift his sight and take in his surroundings. He took in the sounds at the same time. Coming from a planet reigned by water, this place was different to him in almost every conceivable way. There had been forests of a sort on Vayu, but the forest of this planet was beyond anything Ro'mee had ever seen before... or even imagined. There was so much to look at, so much to see, it was almost overwhelming to his senses.

His surroundings were composed of short plants that joined to other plants, creating fractal structures. Some plants—some trees—were made up of multi-coloured translucent fibers. They were a marvel to stare at, and he would have done so for hours if he did not have other more important and pressing matters. Yet, he could not restrain himself from simply standing and taking in as much as he could before venturing on. Everyplace his gaze fell, there was something new to see. Some leaves appeared to be plump things you could lay your head upon to rest. Others were sharp, serrated and shaped like eclipsed moons. Some plants oozed sweet-smelling nectar.

As for the sky and its unrelenting void, it was barred from his vision by the trees themselves. Where he stood, the trees formed a canopy above him, a fact that was true over most of the surrounding forest. Their reaching arms wove together to create a latticed vault shape. His gaze traced the lines of them to the ground. Their trunks were rippling and swirling layers of a blue-tinged exterior. He reached out a hand to touch one and found it to be smooth and cool, like polished stone.

Beyond the grove within which he stood were more alien plants to be seen. They were giant, most of them much taller than him, with bright red caps stretching like enormous plates. Their rims were edged with pale, ghostly flesh that hinted at a gentle luminescence from within. And then there were the smells. The air was thick with them, heady and sweet and intoxicating. He wanted to fill his lungs with it, to breathe it in until it was all he could taste, all he could smell, all he could feel.

This place was a wonder, a marvel of riches in all that it offered compared to the barren lands of the Below of Vayu. Ro'mee's hearts quickened at the thought of his brothers getting to see da'Rou'ea as well. It was beyond all that he'd ever imagined. But them ever laying their gaze upon this world was dependent on one thing: him securing a fated bond between himself and his mate—wherever she might be and no matter who she might be.

He focused with intent. He had to find her.

He breathed deep, filling his lung with the scents of the world—and one scent not of this world. She was there. Under it all... through it all... on top of it all... His mate. His fated mate. He needed her, wanted her. He'd been promised her.

“Stop it,” he told himself with a growl. He’d been promised nothing. Maybe she was his fated mate, but she was not his. Not yet. But that would change. He’d make sure of it.

His gaze searched his surroundings as if that would give him some clue as to where his mate had gone. Why had she gone? And, how long had she been gone? Why did she leave his side? She was here for the same reasons as he, was she not? To meet her mate, to be together. So then why leave? She had been here when he’d arrived, he was sure of it. His memory of her was vague, more a sense than anything he could envision from memory. The void above had sucked his senses from him too soon, causing him to lose consciousness.

But she had been here. Though she was here no longer by the time he’d woken up. She’d hidden him by piling plant debris on top of him. She’d left, but she’d had time to conceal him before she’d gone.

Ro’mee glanced around himself again. Was there a slow encroaching danger he was unaware of? Maybe she’d heard a slow-moving beast approaching from the distance and had risked herself to cover him before fleeing. He did not know much about who or what his mate might be in terms of features or build, but he suspected she was not as large or as strong as he. And if he were right about that, there would have been no way for her to carry him before needing to run in order to preserve her own life.

She’d risked herself to protect him by staying to cover him.

Ro’mee’s eyes blurred with bitter anger. It was his burden, his responsibility, his honor to keep her safe. Not the other way around.

He had to find her.

His journey started with a step, then another step. Each placement of his foot was a new experience, a step forward on his learning curve regarding da'Rou'ea. He had no idea if the ground beneath him would give way. Was there a hidden warning in the minute changes of color of the ground? Would the gentle sweep of a plant against his cheek deposit an organism destined to eat away his skin until a hole revealed his skeleton's bones? At least the goo had dried, fallen away in flakes, leaving his body otherwise clean.

But as for the rest, he knew nothing of any of those questions except for what experience told him as it slowly built upon itself with each step he made. What he did know was the scent of his mate. It called to him, both mocking and enticing. Luring and cajoling. A soothing balm and an unforgiving taskmaster. He was hers to command whether she yet realized it or not. For now it was the lingering scent of her that drove him onward. He trembled to imagine what he might do at the sound of her voice.

The land changed as he progressed, becoming something completely new as he traversed it. He skirted groves where the trees became more spaced out, threatening exposure to the empty sky beyond. His journey took him over craggy rock outcroppings and through a crystal clear stream of water cold enough to turn his bare feet nearly white. Shoes were seldom needed in the Below of Vayu where the ground consisted of the tiny flakes of silt that drifted down from the bottom of the Indefinite Waters encasing the planet like a shroud. The soles of his feet were unaccustomed to the varying terrain of da'Rou'ea. He had not had time to prepare for being pulled through the wormhole to be laid so indignantly at the feet of his mate.

Maybe she had not left him because of danger. It was a possibility he had not considered—but one he should. His hearts fell out of rhythm with each other as the now obvious possibility slapped him in the face. Why would she want to stay with a mate who fell unconscious the moment he was presented to her?

This was where his thoughts were as he hopped off a small ledge of rocks to land on a steep hillside sloping downward. His feet held steady on the steep ground as he took in his surroundings. He was someplace new. Someplace different. There was a quietness here, a sanctity held within it.

The ground led down into a grove of trees within a small basin. It was like a bowl in the landscape with trees of all the same type throughout. They were unlike anything he'd seen in his limited experience on da'Rou'ea. The tall, slender trunks were the color of brown-gray rock with a pocked appearance that made them look as though they could actually be rock. Living rock.

The leaves were a vibrant green, almost fluorescent, in the indirect sunlight of the sunken grove. But that was not the most unique thing about the place. Deep-throated white flowers hung like steps up the trunks of the trees.

A peaceful tranquility filled the space, as though the very air was soaked in it. It was a place of rest and rejuvenation. Yet it was a place that jolted his being to his very soul, ripping from him his new-found belief in a love that would never die. Because it was here, in this place—so tranquil, so beautiful—that his love ceased to exist.

It was as though time itself had stopped in this space. The silence was deafening. There were no birds, no animals, not even the rustle of leaves betraying a gentle breeze.

Ro'mee's hearts clenched painfully in his chest. He could not smell his mate. He could not feel her. It was as if she were gone from da'Rou'ea, and all his hopes for a better life for himself and his brothers were gone with her.

"It's an illusion," he told himself. "This place... it's lying to me." Those were the words he said, although he did not believe them. The very fiber of his being told him she was gone and that she was never coming back.

Moving as though his legs were made of lead, Ro'mee made his way deeper into the grove. He went so far that he was soon on his way to walking out the other side. And when he reached the top of the steep basin on the far side and moved beyond it, he fell to his knees with the return of his mate's scent.

She was still here on da'Rou'ea. The chance to have all that he wanted had not been taken from him.

There was still hope.

He would find his mate, and he would prove to her that he was a man worth staying for.

VIVIA

Vivia gasped for air as her shoulders breached Cat's spread mouth. She felt as though she was being born again, goo and all. Her ejection then came forcefully as Cat gave her a final heave as a rolling ripple pushed her the rest of the way out. Vivia was a green, glistening mess. Cat's act of kindness had saved her life, but the after effects were nothing short of disgusting.

"Ohmygod. Ohmygod." Vivia rolled around on the ground, squirming and rubbing against everything, trying to get the sticky stuff off of her. "I can't believe you just did that. Ohmygod. Let the thing eat me next time. This is so.... Soo..."— She was on her hands and knees, back arching as her body attempted to retch. Her body heaved convulsively, and a glob of green goo loogied onto the ground beneath her. "Ohhhhhmyyygod!" she wailed.

She collapsed onto her side, breathing hard. "Let the thing eat me next time," she begged with panted breath.

Cat simply looked on, his large yellow eyes unblinking. He seemed almost apologetic. Almost.

Vivia wasn't sure if Cat had actually saved her life or not. The nanos would have most likely kept her alive if the creature

Cat had swallowed her to protect her from had gulped her down. Of course, getting chomped into mincemeat by what looked like the beak of a car-sized, winged, snapping turtle would have really put her nano's death escaping abilities to the test. Not to mention her sanity. While the nanos were good at keeping her alive, they did absolutely nothing about pain.

Vivia shuddered at the memory of being trapped within Cat's translucent body. She'd thought her new-found buddy had turned on her when he'd grabbed her legs with his mouth, tripped her into falling, then swallowed her whole. She now knew he'd only been trying to help. And in truth he had, despite the discomfort and confusion that had followed. She would never forget the sight of that enormous creature emerging from what had looked like empty woodland. It had sauntered over to Cat, lowered its head and eyeballed her through the green tinged, translucent skin of Cat's belly. It had then nudged Cat with the top of its beak. It had been a simple, no-nothing move. Nothing special. But, Vivia still felt the remembered pain of her ribs cracking from the nose nudge. Real fear had gripped her when the beast had opened its maw and had clamped the serrated edges of its beak down on Cat. But, it turned out that Cat was even tougher than she had ever imagined. He was like a gummy bear that refused to get chewed. His limp sausage roll of a body simply deformed when the creature bit down. Vivia had thought her body would get pressed through Cat, or at least half of her. Like a toothpaste tube. But, Cat quickly got spit back out and the enormous creature had smacked its beak in a way that made Vivia think it had just tasted something it had no interest in tasting again.

Vivia reached a hand forward and did something she had failed to already do. "Thank you, big guy," she said, patting

one of his gelatinous ridges. The impact of her hand patting him rippled out like still water when disturbed by the splashing down of a sinking stone.

Cat trilled a song that sounded like happiness. The sound had Vivia smiling.

“You’re a good friend,” she said and meant it. Given that she was on an alien world she didn’t want to be on and knew nothing about, having a friend was an unexpected blessing. “A really good friend.”

Cat trilled again and this time the sound was joined by the happy sounding tweeting of what she would have guessed to be a nearby bird. Vivia lifted her head to see the blue and white bird perched atop a nearby tree branch, its long tail feathers fanned out behind it like a cape of fine, feathery hair blowing in the wind. It was the most beautiful bird-like thing she’d ever seen. It was the only bird-like thing she’d ever seen—on this planet.

“You think it’d be wrong to try to catch it and eat it for dinner?” she asked Cat. It did feel wrong, given she’d just been saved from being made something else’s dinner.

The tweeting turned into a long, drawn out wheeze that sounded like a very offended ‘hell no’ followed by a guttural sneeze and fart.

Vivia chuckled, looking up at the beautiful creature. “Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Then to Cat, she said, “Let’s get out of here before Mr. Beaky comes back for round two.” She started to stand, but the bird sneeze-farted again, then took flight. But, Vivia realized, she wasn’t the one who had upset the stunning alien creature. It was something else, and that something else was making the forest’s odd undergrowth shift and stir. The

disturbance let Vivia know the thing heading toward them was bigger than a toddler but smaller than a VW Bug.

Vivia glanced around for something she could use as a weapon but found nothing. She then looked to Cat. “Any ideas?” she asked her new friend.

Cat blinked a doleful yellow eye at her, then focused on the approaching disturbance.

“Me neither,” Vivia said. She shifted her stance into one that would either allow her to flee or fight. She didn’t want to do either. Fleeing would probably mean leaving Cat behind, and her heart sank at the thought of that. And fighting? She doubted her fists would be much use against most of the creatures of this world. But, it didn’t mean she wouldn’t try.

She raised her balled hands in front of her and deepened the bend in her knees.

The undergrowth parted and the thing that stepped into view stopped Vivia’s heart. “Ohmygod!” Vivia crossed the distance between them and threw her arms around a woman. An Earth woman. At least that’s what she looked like. A worn out, tired, dirty, exhausted Earth woman.

Vivia didn’t care what she looked like or how bad she smelled—and she did smell. Bad. But none of that mattered. Vivia was just glad to see another human face.

The woman, who had stiffened as Vivia rushed toward her, now slumped into Vivia’s embrace. Vivia felt the woman’s cheek rest upon her shoulder before shaking arms enveloped her. They clung to each other for long moments, just being grateful for the human contact.

“I thought I was the only one,” the woman said, her voice muffled against Vivia’s neck.

Vivia pulled back to look at her. “You’re not.” She brushed her thumb over the woman’s cheek to wipe away dried dirt. “I’m Vivia.”

The woman sniffed and gave her a weary smile. “I’m Lily.”

Lily had felt frail in Vivia’s arms. But, she stood a head taller than Vivia with broad shoulders and a solid build. Vivia imagined she could have once been a swimmer or a cross-country runner.

Lily’s vibrant red hair was cropped short in an adorable pixie cut to perfectly frame her oval face. She was dressed in a suit fit for a stylish yet high-powered executive, all the way down to the blood-red shoes with shiny, silver stiletto heels she’d tucked into her belt. She was thin, a little too thin, but Vivia could see the strength in her despite her weary eyes.

“How long have you been here?” Vivia asked.

Lily’s eyes darted around the small clearing as though she were looking for something—or someone. “Too long,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. But she followed that up by lifting her arm to check her implant. She tapped the crystal’s oblong face and was presented with the information she wanted. “Three and a half weeks.” Her voice had turned hoarse. “Eight more weeks to go.”

Vivia’s mouth dropped open and her eyes went round.

Lily’s eyes narrowed as she took in Vivia’s expression. “How long do you have?”

Vivia felt almost embarrassed to answer. “Five days.” She’d felt cheated by her situation. She’d been a naive fool.

The strength in Lily’s face gave way to despair. Unshed tears filled her eyes, making them glisten.

“I’m so sorry,” Vivia whispered.

But Lily shook her head. “It’s not your fault.”

“What happened?” Vivia asked. “How did you end up here?”

Lily sighed and her shoulders slumped. “I was on my way to a conference. I was going to give a presentation. I was in the freaking air!” She paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “A wormhole opened up right next to me on the plane and pulled me in. I got this damn implant seven years ago!”

“Life Years?” Vivia asked.

Lily nodded. “I was almost out and desperate.” She shook her head. “But it didn’t save me. I would have already been dead because the gem didn’t activate.”

“No mate?” Vivian asked.

Lily shook her head. “Not then. Not when I needed it.”

“Then... somebody...”

Lily nodded. “My aunt died and I got some of her Years.” She shrugged. “Then my grandmother. It was enough to keep me going. Then I met Paul and got married, and he had enough Years for both of us.”

Vivia’s hand lifted to press her fingers into her lips. “You have a husband.”

Lily’s blue eyes this time overflowed with her tears and she nodded her head. “Yes, and I want to get back to him and my children.”

“I’m so sorry,” Vivia whispered.

Lily sniffed and swiped the tears from her cheeks. “It’s not your fault.” Her gaze scanned the area around them, her composure shifting to one of alertness. “I need to get moving again.”

“What’s, uh... What’s after you?” Vivia asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Lily’s eyes widened, and she looked at Vivia as though she were seeing her for the first time. “I don’t know what to call it. It’s one of those blob things.”

Vivia swallowed involuntarily, and her lips pressed tight together. “The kind that, uh...”

Lily nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

Lily’s fated mate would dissolve her into nothing if it caught her. From the puddle of their combined remains, a new creature would be born. What that was, Vivia didn’t know.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” Vivia asked.

Lily shook her head. “I don’t think so. The two of us together would just give the thing a bigger trail to follow.” She took in her surroundings again before asking, “Do you know what sort of creature your mate is?”

Vivia shook her head. “It didn’t look like anything I’d ever heard of. He was big—bigger than me, anyway. Maybe seven feet tall. Blue skin with pale lines zigging like lightning all over him.”

Lily’s brows scrunched in thought and her jaw slid to the side with her lips pursed. “It rings a bell. I dug up everything I could on possible mates after I got the gem. I obsessed over it. I recall a description like that, but it was from an old source.” She shook her head and stared downward as she thought, but

then a memory seemed to have her brows darting up as she lifted her face once more. “Babies!”

Vivia cocked her head sideways. “Babies?” She wasn’t sure she liked this sudden and drastic skip forward from fated mate to babies. Her family was gone. She wasn’t looking to start a do-over. With her tract record, it wouldn’t end well.

“Yes,” Lily said. “The men get pregnant.”

“Oh!” Well, that was sounding better.

“It jacks them up on hormones, turns them into superman’s version of a baby incubator. Strong. Aggressive. A bull on steroids.”

“Great,” Vivia said, feeling anything but great herself. She shook her head, pushing away her thoughts for herself and forcing a smile. She and Lily were about to part ways, and she’d probably never see Lily again. Vivia hadn’t done a thing to help her. It made parting feel wrong. Vivia’s nanos would keep her okay, yet she only had to survive five days. Life was beyond unfair. She wanted to tell Lily sorry again, but she didn’t want to make things weird. Things were already weird enough.

“Good luck,” Lily said as she gave Vivia a hug.

“You, too. Any advice on how to survive?” she asked.

Lily’s gaze took in their surroundings yet again. “Trust nothing,” she said, her voice a whisper. And with that, she was moving. She disappeared into the foliage as quickly and as easily as she’d appeared.

Vivia stood watching the movement of the foliage stop, leaving no sign that Lily had ever been there at all. “She’s so fucked. And not in a good way,” she whispered to no one in particular.

Vivia continued to stare, her mind adrift in thought. There was nothing she could do to help Lily. Even if she wanted to, even if she could, there was nothing. She didn't know where Lily was going or what her plan was. The only thing Vivia could do was focus on her own survival and hope that Lily would be okay.

Vivia turned and took a step without seeing where she was going. She stumbled on something unseen but caught herself before she fell. That didn't save her from the shock, though, because the unplanned movement brought her face to chest with a big blue creature. She looked up to see his eyes glowing brightly.

“Shit,” Vivia swore as she scrambled to twist out of arm's reach, but the attempt was futile. A hand with an ironclad grip wrapped itself around her throat and lifted, bringing her to her toes. Regardless, Vivia fought to get away. And in the recesses behind her mind's panic was the single thought, this is not my mate. Every aspect of her being rejected him all the way down to her cellular level. She could feel it, the absoluteness of it. He was huge, much larger than her mate had been, whom she abandoned lying prone on the ground unconscious.

In his free hand he held a beautiful white flower with iridescent pearl-like pedals.

“Let me go,” Vivia wheezed through the squeeze he had on her throat.

He sneered. “Not until I give you my baby.”

Too bad Vivia didn't understand a word he'd said.

RO'MEE

“**W**here are you?” The scent of Ro'mee's mate had fled him again. Evaporated. But this time he did not let her disappearance to his senses undo him. He continued in the direction he had been heading, trusting that his senses would find her again eventually. The alternative was unthinkable, yet the unthinkable caused his feet to hurry. He broke into a run.

The spongy ground absorbed the impact of his feet and made his journey one of near silence. He stayed to the densest, darkest parts, yet streaks of sunlight burst through the canopy and puddled on the ground in pools of yellow light along his way. He splashed through gently moving streams. He leaped over fallen trees. And he dodged the grasping vines and branches that seemed to want to hold him back.

His course was not a straight one, but he did not hesitate in his pursuit of his goal, though he ran blind of any help of how he might reach that goal. That was until a scream tore through the air, so faint it was like a whisper carried on the wind.

“No!” Ro'mee's hearts threatened to beat out of his chest as he put on a burst of speed. The scream had come from the direction that angled off of the way he'd been heading. He knew in his bones that the scream had come from his mate.

He tore through the foreign forest, running headlong down a ravine only to race up a steep embankment on the far side. The forest's growth was thick and seemed to continue forever in front of him, yet it all fell away into nothingness as one step further took him to the abrupt edge of a sheer cliff. He barely caught himself before hurtling over the edge. The forest's canopy remained thick above him, and he was forced to step backward, deeper into its shadows lest he succumb to the effects of the unending void of sky beyond. But nothing stopped his sight of the mirroring cliff that faced him now.

"No. Please no." It was a woman. Beautiful in ways Ro'mee had not known possible. She was fighting a man. A Vayu'un like himself. Except this one was pregnant. His broad, bulging shoulders and thickened chest made it obvious. The pregnancy had boosted his body's ability to protect itself and the offspring he carried within. The bones of his chest, behind which the undeveloped infant was carried, had thickened into an impenetrable plate. Ro'mee knew that the Vayu'un's protective instincts would be heightened to that of the greatest warriors of his kind. And there was Ro'mee's mate, fighting him. She'd fallen before the beast.

Ro'mee screamed a warrior's cry as he watched the pregnant Vayu'un male reach down and pick Ro'mee's mate up by her ankle. She hung upside down, but rather than dangle limply, she kicked the Vayu'un under the chin. His head snapped back, but he did not release his hold on her. She kicked again, this time at his exposed throat. It was a glancing blow, and the thickened muscle of the Vayu'un's neck seemed to protect him from any damage. But, the blow was more impactful all the same.

The Vayu'un's grip on Ro'mee's mate's ankle weakened, and she slipped further down in his grasp.

Her kicks landed repeatedly on the Vayu'un's wrist next. His free hand attempted to grab her assaulting leg, but she evaded his every attempt. But it was what she did next that had Ro'mee dropping to his knees for the second time that day. She lodged her free foot against the Vayu'un's muscle ripped stomach and pushed. Her body arched in mid air as her stomach-braced leg straightened. Her arms wrapped themselves around the thigh of her caught leg and she pulled, bending her knee toward her upside down chest.

"No," Ro'mee whispered, watching in horror. There was no more room on the cliff's edge where they fought. A second later, Ro'mee's worst fear was realized.

The pregnant Vayu'un male lost his grasp on her. Her ankle slipped free from his hand, and Ro'mee's mate somersaulted into the nothingness of open air.

Ro'mee didn't have to scream. The pregnant Vayu'un did that for him. His rage echoed between the chasm of the two facing cliffs as Ro'mee watched dumbstruck.

His mate fell to her death. Her body landed on the rocks below, her body bent in ways he doubted would be possible for any species to survive.

Her death would be the destruction of everything. Ro'mee and his brothers would be doomed. The pregnant Vayu male would die as the baby within him moved into its rapid growth stage. It was the same way Ro'mee had killed his own father after his mother had died from fatal shock syndrome upon his father's attempt to transfer Ro'mee's undeveloped fetus to her. Knowing that was the only thing stopping Ro'mee from succumbing to his own rage.

He would not hunt his mate's murderer down to kill him. If that pregnant Vayu did not have a mate available, the child

within him would be his doom. Ro'mee would gladly cut the child out of the dead Vayu'un's chest himself if he were to stay on da'Rou'ea long enough—but for now there was nothing that could keep him from the broken body of his mate. He'd failed her. Completely. His fated mate.

Ro'mee considered throwing himself off the cliff to let the fates join them again in some other place, but the sight of her body, lifeless, unmoving, spoke of other obligations. He would tend to her. He would give to her the most sacred burial of his kind. He would give her body over to flame and would sing her ashes to the heavens.

Reaching his mate's body was a long and arduous journey with many detours. The loss of Ro'mee's mate had not cured him of the empty sky's effect. It was the cause of his mate's loss of life. His weakness was her death. Hatred did not even begin to describe what he felt for himself. A seething hatred consumed him beyond any measure so that he was a walking cloud of disgust and self-loathing.

Night had fallen upon this new alien world by the time he entered the deep ravine, cut like a gash through the rock by a river that was all but dried up. Smooth yet heavy boulders canvassed the path the river had once taken. And it was on these rocks that he found his mate's body, wedged between two large boulders.

A part of Ro'mee that ached to protect his sanity begged him to turn away from the sight of her, but he could not. For a thousand suns, he could not. Her broken form... It was the end of his everything. And he didn't even care. Everything else had lost its value. Even his brothers, for whom he had been responsible since the first moment he took breath. Not even they compared to what she was to him, even though he'd

never truly met her. Not really. She'd seen him and abandoned him as the flawed, defective male that he was.

And now she was dead because of it—because of him.

He wanted to join her. He wanted to be with her in whatever way he could, even if it meant dying and being reborn as one of the stars she was now looking down upon. But he could not. He had to stay to honor her, to release her body in the way befitting the most honored of his kind. And so he stayed, even though every second was torture. Every breath was a reminder of what he had lost—and of what he never had but could have had.

Ro'mee knelt beside the one who had been his mate. He didn't even know her name. It was a truth that left score marks on him bone deep within his body. He could feel them etching as his body revolted against what had happened. Ro'mee stared at his loved one's delicate face, her dark hair fanned out like a halo. The ethereal beauty of her face was unmarred. Yet, there was no sign of life in her. No rise and fall of her chest. No flutter of her eyelids. No moan of pain. Nothing. She was gone. Her body was broken. Her back was bent in grotesque ways. Her legs were twisted. One shoulder lay flat as if deflated, as if everything within had been shattered into tiny pieces.

A numbness overtook Ro'mee. It was like an aftershock following a wave of pain too intense for his mind to maintain. The taking of air in and out of his lung burned, and both his hearts ached with a searing pain that made him wonder if ending his own life to be with her would be necessary. It was possible that his own body—understanding that it had lost the other half of itself—was doing the job of ending himself for him.

But, there was a yet unborn child that would be without a father or a mother. It would die trapped within the tomb of its father's chest if there was not someone present to cut it out—that is if the father did not use his dying moments to free the child himself. But even then, how long could it survive without the aid of anyone. And on such a planet as this, there was no one to help—except Ro'mee.

The truth that it was not his time to die, to join his mate, filled Ro'mee's sight with a murky haze that cast the night into further darkness. It would appear that death was a luxury he could not accept. Not yet—possibly not ever, depending on what the fates held in store for him.

When Ro'mee regained the internal strength to stand once more, he rose to his feet as a different being. He would ignite the eternal flames which would carry his beloved's body to the ethers. He would give her that honor.

He turned his back on her to venture back into the forest to search for anything that might burn so that he could create a pyre.

Behind him, unseen, Vivia's smallest finger twitched.

VIVIA

Vivia woke into a miasma of sensations. She was lying prone on her back. She knew that. She knew that the material under her was uneven and pressed into her body in unforgiving punctuations of hardness. And there was not enough air. It filled her in desperate, rapid, shallow gasps, but she still felt like she was drowning.

Sounds reached her next. A crackle. A pop, followed by a shift in whatever was beneath her.

The skin on her head burned. It was like she'd been bitten by a thousand fire ants. And her arms simultaneously itched and burned. The skin felt as though it wanted to break and tear instead of stretch.

Vivia opened her eyes. Or she told herself to. But, she didn't feel the movement. She didn't feel the contraction of muscles or a change in pressure from her eyelids parting. Though she told herself to open her eyes, she existed in absolute darkness—a darkness so complete that it was as if light had never existed at all.

Vivia's mind seized as her body bucked, her arms flopping wide and her chest heaving upward. Naked, raw flame was sucked into her lungs, eating at the already seared flesh within

her. Her muscles contracted. The folds of her voice box engaged as an explosion of air expelled itself, but the sound was silence.

BANDS OF STEEL wrapped themselves around Vivia's body. Encasing her, enveloping her, lifting her. The ground dropped away but then slammed into her again. It then dropped upon her, smothering her.

Vivia fought without knowing what she was fighting against. Everything that existed beyond her own body was against her, trying to end her.

She swung her arms without feeling where they were swinging. Her legs kicked without the feedback that they were kicking. She sucked in air but took in no oxygen. Panic flooded through every synapse of her mind, drowning her anew, suffocating her inside an endless nightmare with no boundaries.

She didn't know how long it took, but things changed. That which existed beyond her stopped trying to end her. She felt confident—although not sure—that her legs and arms now lay still. What she did know was that she was now gasping. Air was filling her lungs, and from it oxygen, in some tiny, minuscule amount, was making its way inside her body, her brain. The panic ebbed. She no longer felt swallowed up by an existence she didn't understand. She could feel her own body, for whatever blessing or curse that brought with it.

She hurt. All over. Inside and out. Every cell. Every bone. Her body radiated with pain, for it seemed too big to contain

within herself. The pain inside her body spiked and dipped. Jagged, mangled bones mended. Organs regrew. Soft tissue regrew. Her lungs pulled a greater amount of oxygen in from the air she breathed.

Darkness found light. Not brightness. Not a flooding of light that brought with it information about her surroundings but simply an interruption to the absolute absence of light that had existed before.

Next came the shadows. The shadows formed shapes. The shapes moved. They gained color. Reds. Greens.

Her head turned. Her newly re-grown eyelids blinked. And she saw. A man. A man with blue skin and lightning golden veins.

Vivia's ability to breathe constricted in an instance of terror, but the eyes of the man she saw were not the same as those she'd stared into as she'd fought for her life. This man was different. This man was someone else. This man was her mate—at least he was the man who the universe was presenting as her mate.

The sensations that filled Vivia's body ebbed away from pain to overwhelming tingles. They were her nanos at work. Rebuilding her. But what had happened to her?

She searched for what she remembered last. Falling. She'd been falling. Before that, she'd been fighting.

It all came back to her now. Everything.

Pain streaked through her neck and down into her shoulder as she turned her head away from her mate to look at the body-sized fire which blazed less than ten feet away. Vivia put together the events that she'd been too far into oblivion to know or understand. The man beside her had believed she was

dead and he'd tried to burn her body. It was an act that had taken effort—care, even. He'd shown compassion toward her with nothing at all to be gained.

Turning her head to look at him again brought with it more pain but less than before.

Vivia took in the man's muscular features despite her pain. Her newly found vision made his beauty too obvious to deny or even ignore. Laying there, on the ground, still too weak and broken to move, Vivia took in the sight of him where he crouched next to her.

His broad shoulders. His strong arms. A jawline and cheek that begged for the gentle touch of her hand. Eyes that mirrored the color of his veining—a pale, washed out gold yet with small specs of brilliant luster.

It was among all this beauty that her gaze fell upon the angry blisters of his arms and hands. A bare leg, shaped firm with sculpted muscle stuck out from the long slit of his skirt. There, too, blisters and charred skin marred his otherwise perfection.

The sight told her everything she needed to know. Her mate had submitted to the fire's fee to pull her free from its clutches. He'd saved her—or so he thought—and he'd willingly paid a price to do it.

Vivia dared move an arm. This time she could feel her limb move. She could feel her muscles complain and her newly mended bones ache. But she did it anyway because she felt an obligation to give back something that was lost on her behalf.

She raised a shaking palm to her lips. It took some work to build up some saliva inside her still healing mouth, but she

managed to do it. In a move she doubted anyone would consider ladylike or graceful, she spit in her hand. She then let gravity flop her arm to her side, yet with a directed aim.

Her palm connected firmly with her so-called mate's arm. As if on instinct, he tried to jerk away, but Vivia's hand with its elegantly long fingers banded as far as it could reach around his forearm.

-0Vivia knew that the nanos that existed within her saliva would not function for very long outside her body, but she hoped they would lend their healing properties to his skin. Her mate jerked again, but Vivia's hold held fast, so much so that her whole body jerked when he tried to pull away. A wave of pain rolled through her. The anguished moan that escaped her seemed to freeze her so-called mate in place. His eyes were wide with what she could only describe as panic—panic because of her and the pain he had so obviously caused her.

It was finally with the most delicate of touches that his fingers urged hers to release him. He moved away from her then by way of shifting his weight above the leg that was bent beneath him. It was only then that his gaze shifted to where her hand had held him.

If Vivia thought she would receive thanks for what she'd just done for him, disappointment would have reached her next. But her well-earned jaded nature had long since schooled her to release any expectations when it came to others. Still, what happened next hurt her.

Words came out of his mouth. The sound of his voice resonated through her at a cellular level like a vibration, a rippling wave echoing out through her and over her, over and over again.

The meaning of the words he spoke sat just out of reach of her consciousness, like she should know what they meant even though she didn't and had never heard the likes of them before. The buzzing in her ears that accompanied the words didn't help, but was instead an annoyance that came close to drowning them out. It was like a million bees dancing atop her eardrums all at once. Deafening without making a sound for anyone else.

But while she didn't know the meaning of the words from hearing them, she knew it from the expression on his face.

Horror. Contempt. Distrust.

She was no longer a person to him. She was a thing, a creature. In an instant she had become something other... something else. Something he could never relate to.

She saw it all in his eyes, all in the way he now stood and backed away, putting distance between them.

Her so-called mate held the arm she had touched in his other hand as if she had harmed it, as if it now needed the support. He looked from his skin—with its lessened blisters and returning vibrance—to her and then back again. More words, stilted and sharp, sprang from him like an assault.

Vivia sank into an acceptance of his rejection. It was a familiar place, home. It wasn't until she returned to it that she realized she had held onto the ever so momentary spark of belief that he might have seen her as a mirror of himself: someone beautiful and worth loving.

Closing her eyes, Vivia did her best to brush away her self-disdain at having allowed herself the misguided belief that he could be something more to her. Something real. Someone not

transient. Everyone in her life left her. Everyone. Of course he would be no exception.

She chuckled and doing so hurt. But Vivia didn't care.

Maybe the big blue guy really was her mate. It was the only way she could explain being sucked into a belief—or a want—that his life could be shared with hers. How else could she feel the loss of someone she never had?

Absurd.

He'd either leave her or betray her. If she had to thank Xavia for anything, it was for that singular lesson. It was one that had never failed her yet.

Movement caught Vivia's attention from the corner of her eye. Something large had moved close to the ground.

Vivia dared raise her head, choosing now to ignore her mate's abhorrent stare, the one mimicked by endless "good people" as they pointed fingers back on Earth all those years ago as they dared whisper, yell and curse, "Witch!" He could think anything he wanted of her. She'd be gone in less than five days. He'd never have to see her again, and she wouldn't miss him.

The ground-moving thing undulating her way was another story, though. "Cat," Vivia croaked with the newly healed folds of her voice box. Her fingers lifted to wave without her arm rising from the ground. It was too low for Cat to see, she knew that. But the caterpillar meant something to her. It was a friend. Her only friend here. "Cat," she called again, this time a little louder. Her heart swelled at the thought of the caterpillar caring enough to find her.

Vivia's mate lunged outside her field of vision, a move Vivia ignored and didn't care about. He no longer mattered.

That is until he returned to her field of vision, this time carrying a flaming branch. The guy was indeed out to burn something, just not a witch. He was going after Cat!

“No!” Vivia cried, but the effort to scream locked up her voice and only a squeak came out. She levered herself up on her elbow, forced her legs to bend and accept her weight. Stars danced within her darkening vision as unconsciousness tried to pull her into the encasing well of its clutches. But Vivia held on, forced herself to stay awake, to stay aware. “Cat,” she cried again as her mate closed those final inches between himself and the impenetrable caterpillar. But fire, that’s a different thing. Vivia heard a gut-churning sizzle, smelled a stench of burnt sulfur, and heard a retching cry that felt as though it made Vivia’s eyes bleed.

It was what Vivia needed to make the impossible possible. She leveraged herself onto her feet, then powered forward in a stumbling fall that tackled the big blue guy behind his knees. He fell hard on top of her, re-breaking her newly mended back.

The last thing she saw was Cat shrinking away before lifting his head and stretching his mouth to a size large enough to swallow a small car. Cat’s gaping maw was pointed at her mate, not her.

Regret for undeveloped loss sank down the rabbit hole of unconsciousness with Vivia—and a sorrow she wasn’t ready to accept.

RO'MEE

A solid mass hit Ro'mee from behind. Right behind his knees. He fell while simultaneously still trying to defend himself against the ensuing attack. The creature that had come at him had a mouth the size of a small cave, but the sensation that tore through Ro'mee's awareness froze every other thought he had.

Bones had snapped beneath him where he had landed, the bones of his mate. He knew it as soon as his body came in contact with hers. She was beneath him, and not in any way he would have ever wanted. Her body was shattered... again. And this time it was because of him. This world and everything here had destroyed her, and now he could lump himself in with that group. He was part of what had destroyed her. Him. Not some desperate Vayu'un male. Not some charging, hungry monster. Not the dried up river bed she'd fallen into. Him.

Ro'mee froze, unsure of what to do with himself. Should he lean left? Should he lean right? Was she still breathing? Was she alive? He no longer trusted his ability to answer that question. He'd thought she was dead when he'd tried to burn her. Her hair had scorched from her head, her skin scorched

and eaten by the flame. He'd done that to her. And now he'd crushed her beneath him.

He deserved to be eaten by the monster—but she did not. If she were still alive... He might be able to give her nothing, but he would sacrifice his life to protect her as long as his body continued to respond to his will. He would not falter. It was absolute.

The darkness of the sky above him softened as light crept in. The day was coming, and the void above would be unending and merciless. His useless body would become like the dead moments before he would actually be dead, ended by the creature.

Ro'mee pushed upward through the heels of his feet with a surge of strength that lifted him completely off his mate's unmoving body. He held fast to the lit torch from the funeral pyre, catching his body's weight on one hand as he tumbled backward in a one-armed somersault. As soon as his feet landed again, he was moving forward, this time to straddle his mate's body, each of his feet planted on either side of her small frame. He surged his body forward without moving his feet, shoving the lit end of his torch into the gaping maw of the monster. It screamed again, a torturous trill that traveled up the length of Ro'mee's spine to set the base of his brain alight. It seemed to make it hard for his body to function as if the functioning of his nervous system was being interrupted. Some small portion of his brain had to instruct his lungs to continue to pull air in and out until the undoing past.

The great creature pulled away swinging its lifted head out of his reach. Hope surged with momentary belief he had bested it, that was until it swung back and hit him with the strength of a braided rope ten times his size.

The collision rocketed through him in the same way it exploded his body from where he'd stood and sent it flying through the air in a great arc that had him landing twenty body lengths away. It was only with luck that he landed in a spot of the ground that was covered with well worn stones that were smooth, small and which cushioned his impact by absorbing the force through their movement. Ro'mee heaved his body from side to side as his mind tried to catch up with his body's understanding of what had just happened. It was during this thrashing that his gaze landed upon a sight that sent waters as cold as ice through his veins. There, at a distance, was a shape he recognized instantly—a Vayu'un male. His brain didn't have to reach far to conclude what male it was. It was the one who had fought with Ro'mee's mate. It was the pregnant Vayu'un desperate for a female to take the child within him into herself. Ro'mee sympathized with the male's plight, for the man carried his own death within his chest. But Ro'mee would not sacrifice his mate or the fate of his brothers for the sake of the Vayu'un male's life.

But that did not alter the threat posed by the Vayu'un male. Regardless, he was not the threat that was the nearest or the most dire. The monster worm was now circling around his mate, with slow calculation, evaluating. Nudging.

Ro'mee imagined the horrific. He imagined the great worm squeezing the vessel of her body so hard that what was inside her became her outside before the worm swallowed what was squeezed out as a formless tasty morsel.

Ro'mee forced his nearly broken body to stand. The torch had been dropped from his hand, but it lay ready for his retrieval on his way back to confront the creature. He was there and wrapping it once more within his fist when he spotted that the Vayu'un male had moved from his position

where he had been only standing and watching. Complacent no more, the male was headed his way. Ro'mee could not imagine how he could face both the worm and the male—his body huge with muscle and his reinforced bones designed to protect the small being within—but Ro'mee had no other choice. There was no backup to call upon. No help. There was only him and the absolute truth that he must protect his mate, no matter what the cost. So, rather than divert his focus to the male heading his way, he held his target true to the monster before him.

For whatever reason, the worm was not making a fast snack of the tiny female. Maybe it was because it did not feel the need to hurry because it did not deem him a threat against its goals. Yet, the worm lifted its head and opened its mouth and screamed again. It nearly caused Ro'mee's knees to buckle beneath him before returning once more to its encircling, nudging inspection of his mate.

Ro'mee spared a glance at the encroaching male. There was no point in warning him to keep his distance. He had his reasons for being there the same as Ro'mee. And he was as desperate as Ro'mee, to be sure. Ro'mee would not insult him by attempting to barter, negotiate or threaten. Lives were at stake. So many lives, more than the Vayu'un male knew. So it was with great shock that Ro'mee saw the male's focus shift to that of the worm. The huge, bulking male rushed at it with a warrior's cry. A sharpened stone with a wicked tip was raised high in the air. The Vayu'un leapt and his arm thrashed downward but, in an almost comedic result, the worm bulged out its side to meet his attack and the pregnant male bounced off and catapulted backwards. Without a further care, it returned to its encircling of Ro'mee's mate.

The pregnant male was not there to fight him. He was there to save himself by saving the Earth female. It appeared that their goals coincided, at least until she was saved.

And so it was with the sky progressing to a gentler, lighter hue that the two Vayu'un males assaulted the worm over and over. It was finally with one last screech that tore through their nervous systems and disrupted the neural operation of their body's most primal functions that the worm surged into action. It turned inward with its mouth wide.

Ro'mee stood stunned as the great creature swallowed his mate whole starting with her feet and ending with her head. But, somehow, the act was gentle. Careful. When done, her whole body was encased within it and her head was cradled within its open mouth. That done, the worm did not waste time by looking in the direction of the Vayu'un males. It sped away with its treasure held fast.

Ro'mee's body was bleeding, bones were bruised if not broken. He had been thrashed and wounded but yet the worm had been gentle and careful with the female. It was at long last the realization dawned on him that he might have misunderstood the worm's goal. Possibly, possibly... The worm had not come for an easy meal. It could have had Ro'mee and probably the pregnant Vayu'un male as a treat. They'd been no match against it despite their best efforts. Yet, the worm's unwavering focus had been on the female. Just like them. Could it need her, want her for the same reasons? He didn't know. He did not yet understand this planet or the creatures here—but he did understand the one that turned to face him now.

"I'll try to make your death fast," the Vayu'un male told Ro'mee. The sharpened stone, once dropped, had returned to

the grasp of the giant's hand.

Ro'mee understood the pregnant man's confidence. It was not arrogance. The hormones that flooded his body were designed to provide protection to the child within. The Vayu'un male was quicker than him, stronger, smarter, and had a skeleton reinforced to withstand the most brutal attempts at damage. It was how their kind had evolved. The child started within the male and gave the male incredible strengths—all for the protection of the child within.

There was no way Ro'mee would be able to best the man in physical combat—that is if the child within had not already begun to grow. Ro'mee saw the Vayu'un male's labored breath, shallow and quick. He saw how he did his best to limit his steps and exertion. Breath, or rather the ability to breathe, was not his friend now. The child within was taking that from him. It needed the space.

“You can't have her,” Ro'mee declared. He moved in tandem with the pregnant male as he advanced, stepping away as the bigger male stepped forward. Ro'mee chose his route to be one that offered the most difficulty. With an ease that belied the damage the worm had done him, Ro'mee leapt atop a boulder.

It was ridiculous how easy doing the same was for the pregnant male, but Ro'mee was ready for that. He did not stay and fight when the giant joined him on the boulder, instead he ran—or rather leapt. But he didn't go far. Where he went was just out of reach, off the boulder and onto another one. The pregnant Vayu'un's gaze flicked with annoyance at the new distance that stretched between them.

“Coward,” he growled at Ro'mee. The giant male bent his knees and leapt. It had been necessary for Ro'mee to jump

down from one boulder, race across the ground and vault onto the next, but the pregnant Vayu'un male was able to cover the distance in a single jump.

But Ro'mee was not there waiting for him when he got there.

“Fight me!” the pregnant male raged.

Ro'mee did not fall for the goading. To stand and fight would be to the pregnant male's advantage—not Ro'mee's.

Ro'mee's gaze did not need to lift to the sky to know how much it was brightening. Panic built within him as light crept toward the reveal of the sky's endless void. There was nothing he could do to calm the panic. All he could do was try to hasten the pregnant male's defeat.

Ro'mee turned the fight between himself and the giant into a dance of catch and chase. He offered himself up again and again as an easy prey, only to reward the pregnant male with more chase every time he caught up. Yet the sky continued to brighten and the panic within him continued to grow. He hid his weakness lest his opponent use it to his advantage.

Finally, Ro'mee left the pregnant male gasping for air as he leaned his back against a boulder. Rather than use his winded state to his advantage to try to stay and fight the pregnant Vayu'un, Ro'mee returned his focus to that which was most important to him: finding and protecting his mate. She had not died after falling from a cliff. She had not died when half consumed with fire. She would not die now, he told himself. The worm would not eat her. He'd find her, reunite with her and do whatever it took to create a future together.

VIVIA

Many minutes had passed. Most certainly hours had passed. Potentially days had passed.

“Not again,” Vivia groaned as she came to enough to understand her surroundings. Her arms were pinned at her sides and her legs were all but immobile. Above her, a veil of pale green cast the darkness with a happier, more vibrant veneer than she was sure it naturally had. She recognized her situation instantly.

“CAT, spit me out. Throw up, already.” While she did recognize where she was, it took a few seconds longer to remember how it was she’d gotten there. The fire. The fight. Her mate’s attack on Cat.

“LET ME OUT,” she said with more urgency. The sizzling sound of fire touching Cat came back to her. She needed to know the caterpillar was okay.

THE GREAT BIG guy seemed more sluggish than usual as a wave of contractions pushed Vivia out. She was birthed on the

floor covered in the now familiar slimy goo.

Vivia moaned. "I'll never get used to that." She climbed to her feet feeling a little stiff but otherwise okay. She gave her body a shake similar to what a dog might do. Her clothes hung on her in singed tatters, ready to fall off with the barest encouragement.

Vivia shivered as she took in the chill of the cave. The rocky walls glistened from the waterfall's misty spray. The air was heavy with the smell of dampness and an underlying earthy scent. The waterfall's water shed was thin and emanated a gentle glow from the day's light beyond. The rumble it made was closer to a hum than a roar.

VIVIA TURNED her attention to Cat as she strolled slowly around him while doing her best to wipe the goo from her body. The goo felt thicker than last time, as if she'd been inside the caterpillar longer than last time—and she was sure she had.

Everything had happened so fast when maniac grabbed her. It was almost the last thing she remembered. Cat had tried to intervene but had backed off after the guy had picked Vivia up by her neck and body slammed Cat with her body like she'd been some limp rag doll. Cat had backed off after that, probably for fear of Vivia getting hurt more. Despite that, he'd stayed watchful and had come to her when she come back to life on top of the funeral pyre.

Cat's great head turned this way and that to watch as Vivia walked around him but did not offer to move beyond that.

VIVIA STOPPED in place and stared when she reached the spot of blisters where her mate's torch had come in contact with the caterpillar's skin. She didn't have a clear memory of what the injury had looked like before, but her gut sank at what it looked like now.

THE TISSUE of the wound and around it seemed to have degraded, almost like the broken cells of a rotting cucumber. The wound wept with a clear liquid that ran in narrow rivulets down Cat's side, almost like tears. The tissue of the wound itself seemed to be holding steady even though it looked soft instead of how the rest of him looked, like the super connected tissue of a ultra tough gummy bear.

"I'VE GOT THIS. We'll fix this," Vivia reassured without feeling reassured herself. She spit in her hands, this time giving no thought to whether it was ladylike or not. She built up an abundance of saliva in her hands and then with a moment's hesitation, her hand hovering in place and ready, she laid her palm flat against Cat's side.

Vivia held her breath, waiting.

"OKAY, okay. We're doing this. Everything's okay." But her fear-laden hope came to an abrupt end when Cat mewed. It was a sound of distress.

VIVIA JERKED her hand away and stared at where her hand had been, once more holding her breath. But that breath rushed out of her in a flurry of words. The spot she had put her saliva on had degraded fully and sloughed off the wounded space,

sliding down Cat's side like pale fluorescent joke snot. Except it wasn't a joke. It was her friend and her friend was in trouble.

CAT MEWED, the sound full of distress again.

"OH-GOD, OH-GOD, OH-GOD OH-GOD," Vivia chanted. "We'll fix this. I'll fix this" She raced to a pool of water that had collected in the basin-shaped floor of the cave.

VIVIA FELL to her knees before it and scooped as much water as she could in her cupped hands. That's when she saw her reflection looking back at her from the water's surface. It wasn't a sight she saw for very long, given the rippling disruption to the water's surface her hands had made, but it was a startling sight nonetheless.

Her hair was gone. She was completely bald. She didn't even have eyebrows. The fire had burnt it all away, though the nanos had restored her once scorched skin.

"LATER," Vivia mumbled to herself and her reflection.

WITH HER HANDS held together in the shape of a ladle, she got to her bare feet and rushed back around to Cat's other side to drizzle the water down over his wound. But the amount of water she'd brought was little more than an ineffectual spray of droplets.

Vivia rushed back to the pool and this time pulled the charred tatters of her shirt off. Her bra was mostly intact and

remained on.

Vivia sank the scorched tatters of her shirt into the pool. Parts of it crumbled and broke away, damaged from fire, but what was left soaked in more water than her hands alone had been able to carry. Bundling the cloth in a wad, Vivia cupped her hands beneath it and rushed back to Cat's side. There, she squeezed the shirt's water over Cat's wound. This time the mewling sound Cat made was one of relief.

"I've got you," she said as she ran back for another soak of water. Each time she drenched Cat's wound with water, the great caterpillar seemed to deflate a little more with relief. She continued until she no longer saw any change in him or the wound. She looked him over from head to tail. "Rest. Get better. Please." He'd saved her life... again. What had she done for him? This. A creature unkillable by most the world had been brought to his lowly state now just by knowing her, choosing her.

She shook her head. "Please get better," she whispered again.

Cat's normally translucent hue had grown milky. It was taking on a spotty look of dried salt, powdery and craggy, but the spots were quickly growing, converging to cover the whole of Cat. Vivia picked off a small, lonely flake with the tip of her fingernail. It came off easily. Her expression turned grim as it disintegrated into powder when she rubbed it between her fingers.

"PLEASE DON'T DIE," she whispered again. She didn't know if Cat was healing or dying.

RETURNING TO THE POOL, she soaked her shirt again and returned to Cat's side. Squeezing the shirt, she let the water flow down over her big friend. The chalkiness, now covering most of Cat's body, got wet but didn't wash away. As soon as the water drained off his body, the crusty white hue returned.

MOVEMENT CAUGHT Vivia's eye and her chin snapped up to take it in more fully.

“You!” she exclaimed.

It was her mate... or the creature the universe had laughingly decided was her mate. That didn't mean she had to accept him, though, no matter what effect he had on her. He was standing close to the wall near the opening of the cave, tucked into a divot of shadow.

SHE COULDN'T SAY why she was sure it was him and not the other monstrous blue guy, the one she sort of died fighting. She simply knew, despite the fact that she could barely pick him out.

HE STEPPED AWAY from the rock wall to stand with his back to the cascading waterfall. His body was a tantalizing silhouette standing tall and proud against the luminescent wash of light flooding him from behind. His muscular frame and alluring features captivated Vivia, and she felt a longing in her heart so deep that she almost forgot why she'd run. She wanted him, despite all the reasons why she shouldn't.

“CAN’T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE?” she asked, a weariness in her voice that belied her strain.

Her mate spoke then, and just like all the times before, the sound of his voice was a balm on her soul. It eased her, caressed her. It wrapped her in a love that seemed to grow every time she heard him.

“No,” he said.

VIVIA STUMBLED BACKWARD. She’d heard his voice. He’d said a word. But this time the word had meaning. Her ears had buzzed like they had when she’d heard him speak before, but the noise had not been as loud. She was certain the word he’d said had not sounded like the word no, not in her native tongue. But it was the meaning her mind had attached to it.

WITHOUT THOUGHT, she wrapped her hand around her wrist which had the implant and twisted, rubbing. She guessed the little bugger had finally outmaneuvered her nanos, or possibly her nanos had finally accepted what it was trying to do. Whatever the case, it seemed that a balance between the two pieces of tech had been reached.

IT WAS time for some answers.

“COULD you understand what I’ve been saying all along?”

HER MATE NODDED HIS HEAD.

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME?” she asked.

“RO’MEE,” he answered in that voice, like silk covering gravel. It vibrated through her and left her wavering on her feet. Her heart beat harder in her chest, and her breath came faster.

She wondered if she had an effect on him.

CAT TOOK A DEEP BREATH, enough to stress the calcified layer covering him. The sound that accompanied the breath was like peanut brittle being crushed in a bag. Spiderweb fissures broke the otherwise solid coating.

A liquid wept into those fissures. Not enough to drip down Cat’s side, just enough to fill the gaps. It was only moments before that liquid turned milky, then crusty, making it look as though there were never any gaps to begin with.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?” Vivia asked. “And I don’t mean here,” she said, pointing at the ground. “I mean here, on this planet. Why did you come here?” She already knew the answer, if she allowed herself to know it. But she needed to hear it from him.

HIS PRESENCE WAS both captivating and overwhelming. She felt as though she was reliving a dream she’d had a thousand times, even though she’d never had it once. He was a familiar taste, a familiar song, a familiar harmony in her head she couldn’t quite remember.

“I came to find you, to be united with you,” he said in a deep, rich voice that left her feeling drunk.

“BULLSHIT,” she spat, doing her best to hold onto herself, hold onto who she was without him. She couldn’t let their connection recreate her reality as a lie, despite the fact that she knew the words he spoke were the truth. She could feel it. She just couldn’t accept it. “You don’t even know me,” she countered. “So how is it that you could come here to find me? Me? You know nothing about me, and I know nothing about you. We are nothing to each other. Do you hear me? Nothing!”

RO’MEE’S BROWS KNIT TOGETHER, tenting in the center in an expression Vivia could only describe as confusion.

RO’MEE’S GAZE trailed down her body and stopped low on her arm. He then lifted his own arm, where a mirroring insert sat on his wrist. It’s soft, pink glow was a delicate accent against his beautiful blue skin.

Vivia found her fingers wanting to caress that skin, to slowly explore it. But that desire was just some sick trick by the universe. She did not know this man. He really and truly was nothing to her. It had to be a trick. None of it made sense otherwise. How else could her heart be aching so badly for her to be enveloped in his arms, to be held close to him, to feel his body breathe and his heart beat?

“I AM HERE TO FIND YOU,” Ro’mee said again, this time pointing a finger from his insert to her insert. “The same as you.”

VIVIA LAUGHED, a sound laced with bitterness. She shook her head with something between scorn and pity. “I didn’t come here for you. I came here because my murderous, conniving bitch of a sister couldn’t kill me and needed to find some other way to get rid of me.”

Vivia lifted her arm, the one with the insert. “I didn’t do this,” she said with a wiggle of her arm. “My sister put this thing in me without my approval. It was not my choice to come here—and I had no desire... to find you.” She almost said she had no desire for him but hadn’t been able to bring herself to utter those words.

She wanted almost nothing more than to go to him and throw herself into his arms. But there were reasons why she couldn’t do that, one of which lay in a dormant state behind her. She was one of the reasons for Cat’s condition. The man in front of her was the other.

“YOU HURT MY FRIEND,” Vivia said. She squared her shoulders and feet. She’d fight Ro’mee if she had to. She would not let him harm Cat anymore, not if she could help it. She doubted she could win in a fight against him, but she also knew she could never truly lose. Her nano’s wouldn’t let her. “I want you to leave,” she declared.

RATHER THAN TURN AND GO, Ro’mee stepped closer. His strides were slow and purposeful, his eyes never wavering from hers. When he was in reach, he sank gracefully to his knees. The high, front split of his skirt revealed well-muscled

thighs and promised a tantalizing mystery of what else had not yet been revealed, causing Vivia's heart to flutter.

Ro'mee, her fated mate, sat with his arms held down between his open thighs, his palms facing each other in a gesture of supplication. Vivia felt her breath catch in her throat as she looked at him, and the questions she had about what might exist beyond were suddenly overwhelming.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” she asked. The moment was absurd, yet she couldn't bring herself to scoff at it.

“I AM OFFERING MYSELF TO YOU,” Ro'mee said.

“OFFERING?” Vivia's mind tumbled to catch the full meaning of what he was saying. “Are you asking me for sex? Now? With my friend possibly dying behind me? Seriously?” This guy was not her mate.

“I AM OFFERING MYSELF,” Ro'mee said. “All of me. My now in every presentation of it. It is yours and everything that I have to offer within it for all the nows I have left in me.”

VIVIA GULPED AGAIN. She nervously rubbed the back of her neck and shifted her feet. She'd had her share of one night stands, though never a boyfriend. Never someone who truly cared about her.

Well, that wasn't true. If she picked up the stink of caring from any guy, they went in the ditched pile. She never hooked

up with them again. Entanglements had not been something she'd wanted. It would have muddied her lifestyle and added risk, a weakness, a fulcrum which Xavia could have used to put pressure on her. Love—or even deep affection—had not been a risk she'd allowed herself.

BUT, things had changed. Xavia wasn't here. She wasn't in the solar system, and she might not have even been in the same galaxy. She was not here—and that meant Vivia was free.

But... Vivia didn't want Xavia to be free from her.

She wanted Xavia to pay.

She wanted Xavia to hurt.

Xavia had killed their whole family. All of them, except her—and that was only because Vivia didn't give her the chance.

“GET UP,” Vivia told Ro'mee. “You're embarrassing yourself.” It wasn't true, not in the slightest. What he'd done was the most romantic thing Vivia had ever seen. Ever. It was true she didn't have a lot of reference to pull from when it came to romantic gestures, but she was sure this one ranked pretty damn high. Right at the top.

What was worse, she believed every word that had come out of Ro'mee's mouth. He really was dedicating himself to her, offering himself to her.

“IF YOU REALLY WANT TO GIVE ME your all, then do as I say and leave me alone,” Vivia told him.

RO'MEE SHOOK HIS HEAD. "It doesn't work that way. Dedicating myself to you means living my life for you. It does not mean abandoning you."

CAN the guy be more annoying? How do I get him out of here? Vivia's eyes searched the ceiling for answers but found none there. The only real answer was to tell him the truth—or at least part of it.

VIVIA LEVELED her coldest gaze on Ro'mee. She needed him to hear her, to really hear her. "I've only got five days here on this planet. I don't know how long is left, but I know it's less than five days now. And I am not staying any longer than that. I'm going back to Earth. I didn't want to come here. This was done to me, against my will."

RO'MEE WAVERED in place as if he were fighting to keep his body from shutting down. His gaze went somewhere else, somewhere far, far away. A thousand yard stare to nowhere. But then his focus sharpened to a spot a couple of feet past Vivia.

IN A BLINK, Ro'mee was on his feet and had twirled Vivia behind him. His hand kept hold of her arm until she stabilized, and then both his hands were held in front of him, wide and at the ready.

IT WAS a sorry ten seconds before Vivia saw the reason for Ro'mee's sudden change. Numerous six-legged things like colorless glass had crept their way on top of Cat.

Vivia's eyes narrowed as her mind ran through the possibilities. Were they a new version of Cat? A transformation? Were they tiny mites?

They weren't actually tiny. They were the size of the center portion of a dinner plate. But, they were tiny compared to Cat. And Vivia had no clue whether they were here to help her Cat or not.

All she could do was stand, watch, and wonder—that was until one of the mites did something that left Vivia's body feeling drained of blood. It had sat in one spot tapping everywhere it could reach with the tips of its legs. Once it had found a spot of Cat's crust it was interested in, the thing's butt went straight up, leaving its hind legs wiggling in the air. But its front legs dug a path down through the calcified crust into the layers beneath... into Cat.

VIVIA DIDN'T BREATHE. She also didn't move. That was until Cat jerked, then trilled a scream.

Vivia dashed under Ro'mee's uplifted arm and was at Cat's side in a flash. Her hand found the hole the mite had gone into, and she pushed her hand in after it. Her arm sank almost all the way to her elbow, inside of Cat himself, but she managed to grab hold of the mite.

Burning pain infused her hand. The pain turned excruciating by the time she pulled her hand out with the mite trapped in her fist.

She slung the mite across the floor with an anguished cry. Her breath came in hisses as she examined her hand.

“Acid,” she said. It must have been excreted by the mite. It had marred her flesh, turning it red and blistered. But the pain faded fast as the nano’s did their recovery work.

“We’ve got to get these things off of him,” Vivia said.

But Ro’mee had already burst into action. He was brushing the mites off with huge sweeps of his arms. That is, until the mites turned their attention to him... and swarmed.

RO'MEE

Ro'mee held his arms out wide to his sides rather than fight the swarm of mites. They moved like a living floor to crawl up his body to cover every part of him, some stacking two and three deep, holding onto each other to have a place on him. Vivia's expression looked stricken through the crystal clear body of the mite that covered his face.

Vivia took a step toward him, her hands lifting with purpose and intent, but Ro'mee took an equally large step away—then another. It was a message without words: stay away. She seemed to understand. He did not want her near.

The swarm seemed to be content with assessing Ro'mee more than attacking him. The tips of their legs vibrated as they explored. *Tap tap tap*. They were searching.

Ro'mee knew the mites' efforts would not remain so subdued forever. They would try to discern his weaknesses, and then they would do everything they could to use his weaknesses to their advantage. It was what they had done with Vivia's Cat. But Ro'mee had a different plan for them, one he hoped to set in motion before their behavior progressed past the level of gentle evaluation and moved forward to destroy and devour.

He turned, moving so that no part of him touched any other. With arms wide and legs bowed, he walked toward the cave's opening looking like a cowboy who'd just completed a thousand mile journey on horseback.

The light brightened as he neared the waterfall where it fell a foot beyond the end of the cave's floor. Ro'mee closed his eyes against it and the void he knew existed beyond the water's cascading curtain. When his toes reached the ridge where the rock ended and open air began, he curled his toes over the wet and worn edge. He readied himself. The pounding of the water was deafening. The sound itself vibrated through him, and the mites themselves twitched and moved with increasing agitation.

One breath. Two breaths. Ro'mee pulled air deep into his chest, filling his lung.

Pain scored Ro'mee's back as one of the mite's sliced an inch of skin.

Ro'mee jumped. A mighty push from his thighs and feet sent him vaulting into the water's churn. The plummet to the water's surface was almost instant with very little distance to travel.

Ro'mee no longer cared if the mites got disturbed. In fact, disturbance was what he wanted. The water's churn caught his body, twisting and pulling it in a multitude of directions all at once.

Both clumped and individual mites were pulled from him. They twirled and somersaulted in the waters around him, clinging to each other, trying to climb each other. But they all sank, every one of them. Their dense, gasless bodies were no match against the gravity that pulled them down into the water's depths.

The mild burn of diluted acid reminded Ro'mee of what he had escaped but was now too weak to cause him harm.

Ro'mee's powerful arms stroked wide in a surging thrust that took him once more behind the water's curtain. He emerged at the cave's edge from whence he'd jumped expecting nothing for his efforts. Instead, he got Vivia's hands on his face, pulling him higher. Her lips found his in a desperate kiss. A first kiss. Ro'mee's only kiss.

It didn't last long enough. If it had lasted the rest of his life, the kiss still would have been too short. But, the feel of it lingered.

Vivia pulled back and looked into his eyes with an expression of disbelief and wonder.

"Sorry," she muttered as she pulled away. She stood, then took several steps backward.

Ro'mee's powerful arms and legs moved with purpose as he broke through the water's surface and climbed onto the cave's ledge. Rivulets ran down his body, outlining his muscular frame. His soaked skirt hung heavy, low on his hips.

Before him, his mate gaped, her eyes wide.

A sense of satisfaction filled Ro'mee, one he'd never known before—one he'd never realized he craved. But that was forgotten as soon as he realized what it was that she was gaping at. His skin was sparkling. Blue fractals of every shade and shape moved and changed with the shifting angle of the light.

He'd never experienced anything like it before.

What was not forgotten was that kiss Vivia had given him. His first.

His gaze returned to her. Despite the change in him, she was far more interesting to look at than himself. He wanted her to touch him again. Caress him. Hold him. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to feel the heat of her, the softness of her.

But she wasn't his. Not yet. But he could change that. Their time on da'Rou'ea was not yet over.

Ro'mee moved with a powerful grace, his eyes never leaving Vivia's as he approached. His arms and legs moved with purpose but he maintained an air of stillness and composure that spoke to the intensity of his desire.

Slowly, Ro'mee knelt once more. The blue fractals of light still sparked and shimmered across his body in a mesmerizing dance. Her gaze darted here and there upon him before calming to slowly trace his form.

Ro'mee's throat turned dry as he stared back at her, awestruck at her beauty. Her raven hair fell in ringlets to her shoulders and framed an angelic face with full lips, high cheekbones, and pale skin. Her wide eyes shone for him the way his skin now did before her. She was his future, if she'd allow it.

"My now is yours," he told her again, returning to the vow he'd made before the mites had attacked. "Every now I have is yours, from this moment until my death. I am yours whether you claim me or not. I tell you this, I will die protecting you, loving you, in honor of you—or I will die alone. There is and never will be anyone before you."

The words tore at Ro'mee's hearts as he felt the absoluteness of his words. Their completeness. Their utter truth. His responsibility as Head of Kin crumbled beneath his vow. He'd never imagined he would forsake his brothers—but

he just had and a part of himself threatened to die because of it.

Ro'mee's balance faltered. It was Vivia's quick hands, cupping his face, that saved him. Saved him and killed him—for the person who had existed before was gone. He was now and forevermore only her mate.

Vivia smiled softly at Ro'mee. She shifted a hand to stroke her thumb across his lips. "I cannot accept your vow," she whispered.

Her words stabbed at his hearts and made it hard to breathe.

He leaned into her touch, feeling the warmth and softness of her skin before drawing away, reluctantly breaking their connection. He stood, unsteady on his feet. She reached for him again, but this time he moved away. He'd never felt an emotional wound feel so physical. He'd expected nothing of her when he'd made his vow, yet her lack of reciprocation had left him feeling gutted. He even went so far as to touch the flat muscles of his belly then check his hand. No blood. A silent chuckle caught inside of him at the wonderment of it. If he didn't know better, he would have thought she'd just killed him dead.

Ro'mee's dark eyes met Vivia's, his gaze unwavering. "That does not sway my dedication to you," he said. He was so completely hers. He was not sure she understood how much. He wasn't sure he did. He simply knew it, down to the powder of his bones.

The sound of feumlards fighting rumbled. Vivia slapped a hand over her bare stomach, and her cheeks brightened with an adorable pink.

“Are you ill?” Ro’mee asked. His muscles bulged with the need to take action, but how could action be taken against the invisible?

“No, no, nothing like that,” Vivia said with a chagrined smile. The sound happened again.

“Has something burrowed inside of you?” Ro’mee asked, his sense of urgency growing. He moved to her, dropped to his knees, and grabbed her hips with the intention of pressing his ear to her stomach, but Vivia pivoted out of his well-meaning embrace before he could follow through.

“No!” she said. The pink in her cheeks had turned a bright red.

Ro’mee stood. “Tell me,” he demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m hungry!” she exclaimed. “Okay? I’m hungry.” She walked around Cat, seeming to inspect him, but Ro’mee could tell that her focus was faked. “I haven’t eaten since I got here,” she admitted with a shrug of one shoulder. “I’ve been strangled, fallen off a cliff and been burned alive.”

Ro’mee involuntarily cringed. Her list made his lack as a mate sorely evident.

Vivia continued. “What I haven’t done is eat a meal.”

“I can fix that.” The eagerness that rolled through him to please her was at the level of absurdity. He felt it, knew it, yet didn’t care. There was something she needed that he could provide. There was something he could do for her... his mate. “But,” he said, “you have to come with me.” He couldn’t leave her alone. It wasn’t safe.

Vivia shook her head, her expression determined. “I can’t,” she said simply. She pointed at Cat. “It’s too risky. He needs me.”

Ro'mee blinked in surprise, then chided himself for not realizing before that this would be her answer.

"I could go get us food," she offered in a sudden twist. "You could stay here and watch over Cat."

"What?" Ro'mee's ears burned. Her suggestion incinerated his pride.

"I'm kinda hard to kill," she said, "if you haven't already figured that out. Makes more sense for me to go in search of food. Could be dangerous."

Unfiltered curse words flowed silently past Ro'mee's lips. He found his voice with a resounding, "No."

Vivia snorted, one brow lifted. "Really? No?" That she found his declaration funny was colossally evident.

Ro'mee turned and marched for the cave's opening. "I go; you stay here," he said, not giving her a chance to have it any other way.

"Won't you just, you know... pass out again?" she called after him.

A deep growl reverberated through Ro'mee's chest as he dove off the cave's ledge and into the water beyond. He had a mission: get them food, take care of her, and don't let her die. Or... at least not kill her himself. Again.

VIVIA

Vivia's impatient footsteps were muffled, her bare feet scuffing the soft soil near the entrance of the cave in a cavalcade of miniature steps, a soft unending scrape that carried with it the faintest hint of hopefulness. Her shallow breaths left her throat tight and ragged, and her teeth bit against each other as she listened for any sign of Ro'mee's return.

He'd been gone too long. She never should have let him go. It should have been her. She was the one who couldn't die.

Hunger gnawed at her stomach, but she ignored it. The sensation wasn't nearly as powerful as the fear that seized her chest, suffocating her.

Vivia stopped in her tracks, shocked with a revelation she'd known but hadn't allowed herself to be fully aware of.

"Dang it!"

Caring about her so-called mate hadn't been in her plans, but here she was, doing her best not to lose her shit.

Vivia closed her eyes. "I'm such an idiot." She'd said those words about her feelings for Ro'mee, but they echoed in her head for very different reasons...

She should have never let him go.

She should have made him stay behind.

What if he were hurt?

What if he were dead?

“Stop it!” she exclaimed to the cave’s ceiling before starting her pacing again.

Beyond the waterfall’s cascading curtain, Vivia knew that night was coming. The setting sun had turned the falling water dancing hues of pink and orange.

Cat lay in the same spot as before, a little off-center of the middle of the cave. He was still dormant, but seemed to be doing well. He’d take an occasional huge breath through a thin, silk-like webbing near his mouth. The breath would expand his body, his calcified coating would crack and then those cracks would fill, then dry. The change led to the same result every time: a seamless, calcified coating over his entire body.

The big guy was looking larger than ever, and Vivia no longer worried about whether he was dying or healing. He was healing. She was sure of it. And while she was happy for Cat’s slow but steady recovery, it fortified her guilt for having insisted Ro’mee go out into the world alone.

Vivia rubbed her palms over her face in an effort to disperse some of the stress. Second guessing her choices based on what she knew now did nothing for what she hadn’t known then. It changed nothing. The worry and second guessing changed nothing. Yet still, her insides roiled, at odds with itself, like a choir of angels singing out of tune. Every note discordant and shrill, an alarm bell that could not be silenced.

Sinking to her knees, Vivia focused on her breath in hopes of stilling her mind. She'd never felt such panic over anyone in her life. Not for herself. God help her—not for her family, the very loved ones Xavia had killed.

Only Ro'mee.

“Fucking fated mates!” she snarled. It had to be the reason. It was like the fabric of her being was no longer her own. It was theirs. His and hers. Together. Entwined and inescapable. It left her wanting to dig at her chest until she tore herself free of him.

Fuck him! I should kill him. Then I'd be free of him.

Vivia felt more than heard or saw a change in the cave's atmosphere.

Ro'mee!

She turned just in time to see him surging up from below the water's surface to appear at the cave's ledge.

He was back. Suddenly, everything was okay again. All her worries gone, all the ache.

She watched in silence as Ro'mee made the transition from water to land. One boost from his strong arm had him sitting on the cave's edge, his feet still in the water.

Water flowed off of him. The kaleidoscope effect was back. Staring at him was to gaze upon glimmering, constantly shifting fractals of vibrant blues and flashes of gold.

Mesmerizing...

Hers...

Vivia shook her head, determined to break the spell staring at him cast her under. He was so beautiful. It was hard to do

anything but stare, doe-eyed and unblinking, but she did it. She blinked, then she looked away. She came back to herself and forced herself to see him for what he was: just a guy from another planet, stuck here, just like her.

Ro'mee leaned forward and pulled a log from the water.

Okay... Vivia thought. She realized she didn't know what his kind ate and that possibly she should have been more specific when she'd asked him to go find her something to eat.

Shifting her weight to the balls of her feet, she stood in one fluid motion and made her way to him.

She did her best to ignore the dancing, glowing colors of his body as she closed the distance between them. He was half way to standing up when she caught his face in her hands and kissed him, yet again. It was a glancing peck at best.

I've got to stop doing that, she thought as she pulled away.

She did her best to cover her embarrassment by focusing on what he'd brought back with him. Yet, as he stood to tower over her, putting her face inches away from his bare, chiseled and sparkling chest, a sigh of contentment escaped her lips.

Vivia's brain exploded. Her cheeks burned hot, and she wished with all she was that she could crawl back inside Cat's mouth and simply hide there for the rest of her unnatural life. That was until Ro'mee's hand was cupping the back of her neck and his mouth was coming down on hers.

Ro'mee's kiss was like a jolt of electricity that surged through her. Her heart raced as his lips pressed firmly against hers. His hands moved from her neck to down her back and pulled her close, making her feel as if they were truly one.

Vivia wasn't ready for when he pulled away. Ro'mee's kiss left her panting, her knees weak.

She pushed away from him by putting her hand flat on his chest.

That had been a mistake. Electricity coursed through her again, all of her, every nook and cranny. Her toes curled, her eyes rolled back in her head, and it took real effort to keep the moan within her from coming out.

Vivia moved to put distance between them and gasped to catch her breath.

Ro'mee reached a hand for her, concern pulling his brows tight, but Vivia stepped further out of reach.

“No, no... None of that,” she said, holding up a finger between herself and him. She refused to meet his gaze or even turn her face toward him. Instead, she returned to Cat's side and threw every ounce of her energy into inspecting how Cat was doing.

“Did you bring something to eat?” she asked. A sharp curttness which she had not intended to be there had infiltrated her tone. “I can't eat a log,” she snapped.

The thing he'd brought back with him didn't actually look like a log. It was more like the misbegotten child of a cork and an ancient, gnarled oak tree. It didn't seem real, and looked like a CGI effort gone wrong.

Vivia dared look directly at Ro'mee again, and her heart skipped a beat. She snapped her eyes closed, stilled herself and took a deep breath. She wanted to scream at Ro'mee for making her feel this way, but it wasn't his fault. Not really. Not intentionally.

Vivia opened her eyes to study Cat some more as a distraction more than anything else. “Fucking fated mates,”

she said under her breath, a sneer making the sound come out more like a snarl.

“I have what we need here,” Ro’mee said, smoothly picking the log up and walking with it to a spot near the cave’s far wall. If he’d noticed her bitchier-than-thou attitude, he pretended not to.

Ro’mee bent a knee. He fiddled with one end of the log. Seeming to get frustrated with that, he hit the log with the heel of his hand.

The log cracked open from start to end. It was hollow. The gentle creaking sound of Ro’mee prying the long crack open echoed off the walls of the cave like playful noise sprites chasing each other.

A bounty of kindling revealed itself from within along with a wobbly, off-white, square slab of seal fat—at least seal fat was how Vivia would have described it if she’d been pressed to do so.

“What is that?” she asked, the too-dumb-to-live snottiness now gone from her voice. Curiosity had overcome her need to cover her uncomfortable vulnerability with layer after layer of ugliness.

“It is the inner layer of one of the large flat-topped plants,” he said. Ro’mee reached a thumb and finger inside the band of his skirt along his side. They reappeared holding a yellow pebble. He dragged the pebble down the length of each piece of kindling and then returned the pebble to its hiding spot inside his waistband.

Taking a piece of kindling in each hand, Ro’mee struck them together with a glancing blow.

Vivia stepped back in surprise as a thick spark arched off the wood toward her.

Ro'mee struck the wood again, and the two pieces ignited in a strong, sudden blaze. He then made short work of lumping the kindling into a pile to create a cozy fire. The heat from it was instant.

Vivia found herself instantly drifting toward the fire's warmth. She hadn't realized how cold she was until she'd felt its heat. For the first time, she was glad for Ro'mee's presence. He'd done something, and her life had gotten better. He'd taken care of something so that she didn't have to.

Life suddenly felt... easier. Having one's creature comforts met had a way of softening the most rigid of hearts. Vivia didn't even curse the feelings of affection that bloomed within her this time. Instead, she looked at Ro'mee, really looked at him.

He was handsome enough. More than handsome enough. If people on Earth didn't get stupidly hung up on his blue skin, there'd be companies lining up to ask him to model. She could see it now, him on an eighty foot billboard in his underwear.

The thought brought a smile to her lips.

But it wasn't just Ro'mee's looks. He seemed... nice. Decent, even. Sure, he was a little intense with all the "I dedicate all my nows" and all that, but she could feel his heart was in the right place. He seemed like a guy who would care even if they weren't being wrapped up and twisted by whatever it was that being fated mates did to a person.

Fated mates...

She didn't even know what that meant. Was it like soul mates? Twin flames?

She'd heard about twin flames. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, twin flames were a freaking train wreck. A person who met their twin flame could say goodbye to everything they knew and liked about their life. Everything would get turned upside down. That's what this felt like to her. It wasn't fluffy. It wasn't song birds.

It was a battle cry by a thousand cupids doped up on heroin and wayyyyy too much caffeine.

Vivia blew out a breath and released some of her built up tension with it. Ro'mee's gaze scanned the cave's floors and walls.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Something to cook on."

A man who brought home the bacon and fried it up. Had to love that.

Vivia searched the area of the cave near the entrance. There, she found a large, flat rock that had sheared away from the rock cliff above and landed on a side section of the cave's ledge.

Picking it up, Vivia's arms strained as she carried it back. But Ro'mee's quick response and rescue had him taking the heavy rock from her long before she reached her target.

Ro'mee placed the rock on the fire with its smoothest, flattest side up. He wiggled it to settle it onto the crackling, popping wood a little deeper before jerking back when a flame licked at his arm.

Ro'mee stood, then, and stepped back. He watched the glowing flames and embers beneath the rock outline its shape as its surface began to shimmer from its growing heat. It wasn't long before an aroma of hot minerals scented the air.

The tang of iron. The fleeting sulfur smell of a newly lit match.

Vivia scooped up the slab of tree pulp before Ro'mee could reach for it. She gave the thing a rinse at the cave's edge before bringing it back and handing it over to him. He'd found it, so she figured he should have the honor of introducing it to the heat.

Taking it from Vivia with a nod, the corner of Ro'mee's lips twitched in what could only be read as a smile. But another rumble from Vivia's stomach had him throwing the jiggly pulp on the rock slab without any further delay.

Sizzling, snapping delight reached Vivia's ears almost instantly. Her lips parted in surprise as she inhaled its scent. It was as if the most buttery steak had gotten it on with a portobello mushroom that had been soaked in pork lard for hours. Hands down, its mouth watering scent was better than anything she'd ever experienced while serving customers in some fancy restaurant. Better by far!

Vivia looked over Ro'mee again and licked her lips. And, it was only a little bit because they were about to eat. The rest of the reason was all about Ro'mee. Her gaze traveled over every inch of him. There was nothing sexier than a man who cooked. God help her, if he did the dishes, she was a goner.

Good thing they didn't have any.

Still...

She looked him over some more.

Maybe she could have a little fun with him before heading back to Earth.

RO'MEE

Ro'mee watched, transfixed. Vivia's eyes fluttered shut, bliss bloomed pink in her face, and her finger flexed before curling. She exhaled sharply before her features softened, easing into a languid contentedness. It was only then that her mouth curled into a smile, her shoulders relaxed, and a satisfied moan escaped her lips.

All because of her first bite of dinner.

Warmth flooded Ro'mee's chest. He was drawn to her. If there were a thousand females waiting for his consideration, he would not turn his head to give them a glance. It was not possible for there to ever be more for him than her.

She was his fated mate. He knew it. Felt it. There was no separation from it, from her.

And yet...

Vivia had plans to leave. To go back to Earth.

The knowledge gutted him. He only had a few cycles before the wormhole would open back up, and then she'd be gone.

He was not sure he would survive it.

Without thought for what he was doing, Ro'mee lifted a piece of the now-cooked tree pulp to take his first bite, but he stopped before it reached his lips. The scent of it gave him pause, made him linger. It had a smokiness that caused his mouth to water.

He took his first bite, letting the morsel slip between his lips. There it was again, smokiness, but this time with sweetness joining in. They mingled with salty and savory. The flavor's complexity deepened as he chewed, and when he swallowed, a pleasant warmth lingered on his tongue.

Ro'mee took another bite. It was unlike anything he'd ever tasted before. Exquisite. He closed his eyes and savored the taste. When he opened them again, Vivia was watching him. Her face was lit with an infectious grin, her eyes sparkling, and the corners of her lips curled in mischievous delight.

Her effervescent beauty and relaxed easiness left him off guard when she asked a very serious question.

“What will it be like for you when you go home... to your world?” she asked, her voice soft and low. “What will be there for you?”

Ro'mee wondered if he should protect her from the harsh realities that awaited him. His future was bleak.

What would he want from her: truth or a lie designed to make all seem well?

He considered. He didn't have to look far within himself to know the answer. He'd want the harshness. He'd want the truth.

“It won't be good,” he told her, his voice heavy. He kept his gaze on his food and not on her. Some things were hard to say, and he didn't need the nakedness of her understanding

stripping away his defenses as he said them. “My brothers are in trouble. I had hoped to provide the chance of a better life for them. Here.”

“What’s bad about life there?” she asked.

Something about her voice caused Ro’mee to lift his gaze to look at her. Vivia’s brow was furrowed, and she held herself, her arms crossed and her hands clasping them.

What was he to say? There were so many hard things about life on Vayu. Yet, he was staring at someone who could make life infinitely better. She was the answer to so much, and she didn’t know it. So, he’d tell her. He’d give her a glimpse at life for him and his kind.

“There are very few females on Vayu. There have always been fewer females than males, but, when I was still but a child, a sickness ravaged their numbers down to possibly only one for every twenty males.”

Vivia winced. “Must make for some interesting relationship dynamics.”

Ro’mee shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t sure where to begin, and he didn’t know Vivia’s frame of reference. “What are... relationship dynamics like where you come from?” he asked.

“On Earth?”

Ro’mee nodded, then added another scrap of wood to the fire. It sat dormant a moment before crackling and popping as it caught flame.

Vivia shrugged. “Not much to tell. People who like each other hook up. Those who don’t hopefully don’t hook up. Some people get married and stay together their whole lives. Other people switch partners.”

Ro'mee's brow furrowed as he considered her words and the implications behind them before he gave another nod to confirm that he understood. There were indeed many differences between finding a mate on Vayu versus on her Earth.

"The females—they don't suffer ill effects from leaving their mate?" he asked.

Vivia's eyebrows shot up, her eyes widening in surprise. Her lips turned down in a slight frown, obviously considering Ro'mee's question. A crease formed on her forehead before she brow shrugged. "I mean, some exes can be jerks about it, sure. Not everyone likes the idea of being left." Vivia's eyes narrowed as she studied him. "Do guys on your planet not take getting left very well?"

Ro'mee sensed the danger in her question. It felt as though he were being invited to step into a readied attack. "The men of my planet rarely get left by their mates."

"Of course not," Vivia said in a flat, dry tone with a glint in her eye. "Are the men of your world so perfect that the women can't imagine ever leaving?"

The atmosphere grew heavy as the challenge of her words seemed to edge him closer and closer to danger. Ro'mee didn't understand why she found what he said to be threatening, but he knew there was a need to proceed carefully. But that was hard to do when foraging into the dark.

Ro'mee cleared his throat before giving her a wary glance. "Vayu'un males release an addictive chemical during mating, which is why females rarely leave their mated male." His voice trailed off at the sight of Vivia. Her mouth had dropped open and her face had gone blank. Ro'mee swallowed hard.

Vivia's eyes narrowed, her jaw clenched, and her voice dropped an octave. "Come again?"

"It is not so on your Earth?" he asked, already knowing the answer from her reaction but he was at a lack of anything better to say.

"No." Her voice was soft yet the single word reverberated through the air like an echo. "And had you had plans to share this little tidbit of information before we got it on?"

Sex... She had to be talking about sex, he was sure of it even though the translation that came through for him was more jumbled than usual.

He thought about her question, and he felt his body's heat fall. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "It had not occurred to me that things were different for your kind."

Vivia curled her lip in disdain and let out a huff of contempt, her breathing rapid and shallow. Her slitted eyes were a penetrating cold that left Ro'mee feeling daggers up his spine, but her body seemed to soften once her gaze dropped to the food they were sharing and she took another bite. She eventually shrugged her shoulder.

"Doesn't matter anyway," she mumbled. "I'm not sticking around and we're not gonna get all jiggy with it."

Eager to change the subject, Ro'mee asked her the question she had asked him. "What will you do when you return to Earth?"

Vivia brightened. "Oh! That's easy! I'm going to kill my sister." A wild grin spread across her face.

Ro'mee's hand missed its intended target of picking up another piece of the succulent pulp as a chill ran through him.

“Kill... your sister.” Kill a female. Her family. Everything she said went against every layer of being within him.

He stood from where he sat on the cave’s floor and walked away rather than continue to sit near her. The shadows of the cave deepened with a gnawingly cold, lingering, invasive touch with every step he took away from her.

She wanted to kill her sister... But was he not doing the same to his brothers if he did not set aside himself, his prejudices, and return to her? If he gave up trying to convince her to stay, then he was condemning his own brothers to an almost certain death, one of a nature that went beyond what he could bear to imagine.

And so, with a knot in his stomach, Ro’mee reclaimed his place on the ground before their small fire. He could at least hear what more she had to say on the matter of... killing her sister.

The idea of it twisted in his gut and made his head swim. Yet, he sat in quiet contemplation and forced himself to think of his wormer brother, Ebryl. The man was contemptible. Vile. Ro’mee had wanted to end him more than once.

Maybe it was so with her sister. Maybe her sister was also a wormer. But that would mean there was a chance her sister could be saved, didn’t it?

Vivia’s soft, haunted voice cut through his wonderings to put an end to his thoughts.

“She deserves it, just so you know.” Vivia’s voice was barely audible and her face contorted in something akin to anguished torment. The flickering embers of the fire illuminated her features, casting eerie shadows along her

cheeks and jawline. “She murdered everyone I ever loved and she would have killed me, too, if she could have.”

Ro'mee paused for a moment, studying her intently. He could tell there was a truthfulness in her voice. He held himself in complete stillness, and then he motioned with his head, a slight nod of acceptance, to let her know he believed her.

After all, it was not in his best interest to not believe her—for the sake of his brothers. It was one of those harsh truths.

He still needed to win her heart. They're only hope was him convincing her to stay. It was the only way the fated mates program would allow them to move forward with meeting their own fated mates, and that was the only thing that would give them a chance at life.

Silence dragged between them once more as they ate, but something more niggled at Ro'mee, pestering him to give it voice. It was something that had been on his mind since her return to life from within the fire of her intended grave.

Ro'mee steadied his gaze on Vivia, studying her, searching for deception in her answer to the question: “Are you an adjoress?”

Vivia's eyebrows furrowed, and she chewed on her bottom lip. Her head tilted slightly to the side as she questioned, “A witch-god?” Her gaze hardened with confusion and suspicion as she studied him before lighting up as if what he'd asked had been asked as a joke.

Confused, Ro'mee considered what he'd said. “An adjoress?” he asked again.

The frivolity left Vivia, and she shrugged, sincerity in her confusion. “Sorry. I don't know what that is.” She waved at

her head. “All I’m hearing is a lot of buzzing and then the words ‘witch-god.’ Don’t get me wrong, that sounds pretty damn cool, but I’ve never heard of one and I’m pretty dang sure I’m not one.”

Ro’mee closed his eyes and released a puffed breath, but then nodded as he considered how to explain it to her. Looking at her again, he said, “An adjoress is a female of my kind who takes on the pregnancy of her mated male and then shuns him, choosing to endure the madness of mate loss. It is believed to give them special abilities, powers.” He looked her up and down. “You survived the fall from the cliff, then the fire. Surely you are a ‘witch-god,’ as you say.”

“Ohhh, no. Sorry. That’s all tech based. I paid someone a lot of money to load me up with three full nano transfusions.”

When Ro’mee said nothing, she continued. “They’re like tiny, miniscule robots that swim all up in me and fix whatever goes wrong.”

The silence continued when her explanation stopped, so she continued some more. “They fixed my bones, organs and skin from the fall and the fire.” She ran a hand over her bald head. “Guess they don’t do anything to instantly regrow hair.” She shrugged one shoulder, her lips upturned in a small, wry, lopsided smile. “What’s a girl to do when she doesn’t want her homicidal maniac of a sister to be able to kill her?”

Ro’mee’s mind filled with the image of his brother, Ebryl, and let it mingle with her description of her sister. The thought overcame him, and he threw his head back and laughed, a deep reverberating sound that filled the cave and bounced off its walls. “I think I understand better now,” he said. “I have a brother who I’ve thought of throwing into the Indefinite Waters more than once.”

Vivia's eyes glimmered with unshed tears, then, even as a large smile lifted her cheeks and crinkled the corners of her eyes. Though she was smiling, he saw the bitterness of past pains within her eyes. The same echoed through him. He knew that pain well. He had no doubt their situations were not exactly the same, but the emptiness carved out within them by it was.

Ro'mee bent his head, nodding to himself, as a new level of acceptance of her earlier words sank deeper into him. If his mate wanted to kill her sister, he would accept—and embrace—that she had her reasons.

“What now?” he asked, lifting his gaze once more, willing to follow her anywhere and do anything with her.

The bitterness and pain vanished from Vivia's face, leaving only her warm smile.

“We get this guy to wake up,” she said with a head nod at Cat. “Then we go help someone who needs it.”

VIVIA

Ro'mee and Vivia knelt in front of Cat, examining the glistening web of impenetrable silk that covered the area in front of his mouth.

Vivia picked at it, pinching it with the tips of her fingernails. She pulled, it stretched, creating a miniature tent, before it snapped back as if nothing at all had happened. The stuff was like flexible steel, unbelievably strong. Nothing Vivia had done had managed to penetrate it. And through it all, Cat had remained completely immobile.

Vivia bent down further, dropping to rest flat on her forearms. She did her best to peer into the silk webbing but settled for simply talking through it instead.

“You in there, Cat? You doing okay?” She hadn't heard him take one of his big breaths in a while. She was worried the worst might have happened.

“Has he gotten bigger?” Ro'mee asked, standing next to Cat with an arm on his shelled back. “Do you think he's changing inside?” He tapped on Cat's covering crust with his knuckles, producing a hollow sound.

“You mean like change from a caterpillar to a butterfly?” Vivia asked. Her mind filled with images of a magnificent

butterfly dive bombing the jack-off who'd tried to knock her up with his chest baby. The idea had her smiling, but the smile was fleeting.

Vivia's mouth pulled to the side as she considered the issue some more. "Could be," she said.

"You in there, Cat?" she asked yet again, this time stroking Cat's encasement as if to offer encouragement. The thin webbing over Cat's face might have been impenetrable, but maybe there was a weakness where the webbing connected to the shell.

Searching, she found a tiny little divot near where the silk veil merged with Cat's shell. The divot was smaller than the tip of Vivia's pinky, and she'd only noticed it on her third pass of searching the area.

Vivia tapped on the spot with the tip of her nail. It felt thinner, more brittle, fragile than the rest of the shell. She scratched at it, then she dug. The chalky substance wore her nails down better than a diamond nail file, but powdery flakes of encasement seemed to come away as well.

"I think I'm making headway," she told Ro'mee, feeling excited. She picked a bit more, then broke through to reveal Cat beneath.

A strange, coppery smell filled the air.

Within, Cat wasn't moving, not at all.

Vivia poked the tip of her finger through the small hole in the crust. It sliced at her finger with tiny micro cuts as if it were made of jagged shards. But when she touched Cat, she felt a cool warmth unique to him. Suddenly, he shifted slightly. "He's still alive," Vivia said, relieved. "And his color looks

good.” That is to say, he was a translucent green that edged toward the fluorescent variety of the color.

The sound of the waterfall covering the mouth of the cave was like a dull, distant thunder against the rocks at the entrance. Inside, the chill of the cave walls brought with it the scent of dampness and earth. The air was heavy with stillness, as if the outside world had been left behind. The peaceful atmosphere inside the cave provided a contrast to the tumultuous sounds of the waterfall outside.

Vivia twisted her neck to glance over her shoulder at the darkness that now hid the waterfall’s constant presence. Night lay beyond.

“Are you sure we should be trying to wake him?” Ro’mee asked, pulling her attention back to him and echoing her doubts.

There was no way they’d find Lily, not tonight. Not while it was so dark.

Vivia shook her head. “What I think is that we should get some rest.” Saying that had warning alarms echoing in the distance within her. Her time on da’Rou’ea was limited. This was her one chance to ever be on this planet. There’d never be another way back, and she had what she guessed to be only three and a half days left to make the best of it. The clock was ticking.

Still, sometimes the best way forward was preparation, or in this case rest.

Fatigue took that moment to wrap itself around Vivia in its siren call and the cold of the cave crept closer to her bones. Her clothes were in tatters, she had no hair on her head, and

she had died or almost died more times than she cared to count.

Okay, twice.

Sadly, she'd had worse days, and deadlier.

Vivia lifted her head to peer at Ro'mee. She didn't know what fatigue looked like on a Vayu'un, but if she had to guess, she'd say it looked how Ro'mee did now. Even in the low light from the fire, Vivia could see that Ro'mee's color had paled. The blue of his skin had taken on a bleached quality, like a picture left exposed to the sun for too long.

Vivia stood and did a more studied assessment of Ro'mee. His eyes were dull. They had the distant, hazy quality of stoners everywhere. Give him some pizza and a goofy laugh and he'd fit right in.

"When'd you sleep last?" she asked.

Ro'mee shook his head, his eyes heavy and unfocused. "I don't remember."

"Have you slept since you got here?"

Ro'mee shook his head, the features of his face hardening. "Not on purpose."

Vivia chuckled. "Same."

Her easiness seemed to reach Ro'mee, and his expression softened into one that now fell short of raging shame.

"You need to rest," she told him.

Ro'mee's shame raging rigidity returned. He shook his head. "I need to make sure you are safe."

Vivia ignored his unspoken, stubborn assurance that he was fine. "I need a mate who will be well enough to defend

me.”

Every inch of Ro'mee's body went into high alert. Bingo. The warrior's attitude was back.

“Mate...” Ro'mee echoed.

“That's the word I used.” She knew it would trigger him, and she felt zero guilt about manipulating him by using it.

Ro'mee stared at her unblinking a moment before glancing to all the furthest shadows of the cave and the cave's entrance. It was as if he were doing a threat assessment. When his gaze returned to her, he stared again before flicking his gaze from top to bottom. “Mate,” he growled. “It's been said now. You are mine. Agreed?”

Vivia shook her head. “Nope. You don't own me. Nobody owns me. And us being fated mates has nothing to do with who we are or what we want. It's just a thing, like a zit on the end of your nose.”

Ro'mee seemed to contemplate her words before countering. “But everything that has happened since we got here, that is us. The choices we've made, the things we've done, that was us. Not our fated connection.”

Vivia didn't 100% agree with that statement, but she also believed he wasn't completely wrong either. Him being here in this cave with her had been his choice. Him helping to fight off the mites, provide warmth and food, and dedicating himself to her—those things had been all Ro'mee. Not the fact that they were fated mates.

If she had any doubt about that, all she had to do was think about Lily and her fated mate. The creature wanted to dissolve her into a puddle of goo. What a shit show that was.

By comparison, Vivia's mate was a perfect prince. Some small part within her sighed with contentment.

Damn it!

Vivia's shoulders drooped. She was liking Ro'mee way too damn much, and she wasn't even fighting it anymore. Not only did she want him to rest, she needed him to rest. It hurt to see him so tired and less than perfectly okay. It hurt her heart.

Fuck fated mates!

Vivia shook her head with violence. It was infuriating that she didn't know where she ended and the fated mates stuff began. She hated not knowing herself, not knowing which feelings she could trust as her own and which she couldn't.

But... she'd be damned if she let that freeze her into doing nothing with her life at all. Weird cosmic influences or not, her life was still hers and she was going to live it.

Vivia extended her hand to Ro'mee, an invitation for him to take it to help her stand. She didn't need his help, of course, but it wasn't really about that. It was about allowing a connection.

He took it, and she stood in a singularly graceful move that would have dancers sighing around the world, if there were dancers around the world to see it. But as there was only Ro'mee, she watched his eyes to see if he'd be affected by her. The satisfaction that came when he was, made her smile.

"I'd like you to help keep me warm while I rest," she told him.

Ro'mee's head turned to the fire he'd made.

"Not there," Vivia told him. "I want to snuggle up with Cat at our back."

Confusion flickered in Ro'mee's eyes, but he nodded.

Vivia allowed him to retain his hold on her hand as she led them to the center of Cat's length. Once there, still holding his hand, she let herself fold until she was sitting with her back against Cat's encasement. She then looked up at Ro'mee with the silent question of what he was going to do.

Ro'mee hesitated, then sat beside her. But rather than be content with that, he surprised Vivia by slipping his arms behind her back and knees. Her hand went to his chest as he lifted, and she felt no effort in his movement at all.

Score one, Ro'mee, she thought to herself. Her graceful stand had nothing on his sexy strength.

Ro'mee settled her on his lap. His strong arm acted as her backrest and his chest, shoulder and lap were her bed.

Vivia sighed as she melted into his warmth, this time not even caring that she was enjoying his presence... and his touch.

Vivia tucked her legs up close to maximize snuggling in. "What's sex like for your kind?" she asked. There was no reason to be coy, at least not by her. She'd been around a block or two... or three. But by all counts of what Ro'mee had said so far, there was a very real possibility that her fated mate had never experienced the baser joys of life.

Ro'mee shifted, the movement causing her to look up at him. "I've never had a mate."

His bold admission took Vivia off guard. She'd thought he'd at least be a little flustered by her very forward question. And while it was true she'd been wanting to have a little fun at his expense, their limited time together was a very relevant excuse for being direct.

Vivia quirked a brow. “You telling me you don’t know how the birds and bees work?” she asked.

Confusion was back in full force in Ro’mee’s expression. “You’re asking about how the animals of Vayu mate?”

Vivia chuckled. “No, I’m asking about the act of making love between two people.”

She felt his body stiffen.

“I’ve been taught about it,” he said.

Vivia couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or just uncertain. Either way, she shifted to straddle his lap, her hands cupping his face.

“Do you know enough about it to know if there are ways for two of your kind to get jiggy without any inconvenient after effects?”

“After effects?” he said, his voice dropping lower.

“Mmmhmm,” she said, her voice a caress. “The kind of after effects that might cause us both to be stuck together.”

Ro’mee’s eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. She could see the struggle within him. He wanted her to stay, to not go back to Earth. He wanted the after effects. He wanted the complications.

Vivia wanted to keep things simple... and easily left behind. But yet, she didn’t need to prod him a second time for an answer.

Ro’mee nodded. “I have heard of ways. It’s common for a pair to explore before committing to the possibility of... after effects.”

Vivia's smile was slow and satisfied. She'd found her answer.

"Good," she said, her voice low and husky. "Then let's explore." She leaned in, hovering her lips above his skin as she traced the line of his jaw. "What's safe? What's not gonna get you knocked up or turn me into a blue-man junkie?"

Something in the lower part of Ro'mee's body did its best to stand up and say hello to her body.

Vivia's smile broadened. "At least it's feeling like we're compatible for a little down and dirty," she teased. Leaning in, she caught his jaw in a little nip. Her own jaw tingled in sympathy with what she'd done to him.

Ro'mee's chest vibrated in a low hum akin to a purring growl.

"Hello kitty," she teased, giving him another nip. "So tell me, what are the tricks to not having to get cosmically hitched?"

Ro'mee's hand cupped her neck before tangling his fingers in her hair. He pulled her in for a kiss that curled her toes and had her seeing stars. When he finally pulled away, his lip traveled over her cheek to her ear. "I could kiss you... somewhere else."

A wave of anticipatory pleasure traveled up Vivia's spine and rolled over the top of her head, causing her to arch her chest into him. "And what about you, do I get to kiss you somewhere else?"

"Not unless you want to chase the madness when you return to your planet." His lips trailed down her neck, leaving shivers in their wake.

“Do you even know how to kiss... somewhere else?” Vivia asked.

“I’m a fast learner,” he murmured against her skin. “Tell me what you like.”

Vivia’s breath hitched. For a guy who’d had next to no experience with the ladies, he was saying all the right things.

“You ever even kiss a girl before, like this?” she asked, leaning in, her lips barely grazing his before consuming him in a passionate kiss that left her trembling.

Their connection was electric, a charge that pulled them infinitely closer until their bodies were seamlessly melting into each other—at least that was how it felt to Vivia. The feel of him on her lips had sparked an inferno within her, one which threatened to consume her. Her head spun.

It was his chemistry, the chemicals he’d spoken of. It had to be. It was doing something to her.

Ro’mee spoke and the sound of his voice focused her, grounded her into her own body once more, brought her back to herself instead of wherever it was that she’d just gone.

“Never,” he said, answering her question. He pulled her in for another kiss, but her arched back had her leaning away so that their lips would not connect.

“Then how do you know how to kiss me like that?” Vivia asked with accusation laced words.

Ro’mee froze, his expression perplexed. “I can feel it. Can’t you feel it?”

Vivia’s breath hitched. She knew what he meant as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Her gaze softened as a gentle

smile graced her lips. “Fucking fated mates,” she said, this time coming forward to meet his kiss.

This time, it was different.

This kiss was filled with a promise of something more, something beyond the physical. This was a kiss that could bind two hearts forever, a kiss of a fated mate.

To her surprise, Vivia wasn't ready for anything more. She was standing at the edge of an abyss. Ro'mee was at the bottom, and her life as she'd known it was at the top. With every kiss, every touch, every soft rumble of his chest, she leaned a little closer to the abyss's edge. One little slip, one step too far, and she'd be falling in. But she wasn't ready for that. She'd never be ready for that.

I'm going back to Earth, she told herself.

She believed it with all her heart.

So why then was it starting to feel like a lie?

RO'MEE

Ro'mee stirred, his sleepy mind knitting together the strands of past and present like a tapestry. An unusual chilly warmth had overcome one foot as briliage eels swarmed it within the remnants of his dream.

With effort, Ro'mee peeled his heavy eyelids open to discover that his foot had somehow disappeared inside of Cat's mouth. Disappeared was an overstatement since Cat himself was somewhat translucent. Cat's large doleful eyes met his with an innocence usually reserved for small children and the happily insane.

"Cat," Ro'mee said, his deep voice gently chiding the enormous worm.

Rather than allow Ro'mee's foot to slip free, Cat slurped his leg a little deeper.

Cat was free, yet Ro'mee still sat firm against the encasement that had held him. Ro'mee surmised that Cat had crawled free of the thing by breaking through one of its ends.

"Cat," Ro'mee intoned again with the unspoken instruction to spit out his thankfully still attached foot. This time the chastisement was unmistakable.

Vivia stirred upon Ro'mee's chest. It took her less time to go from asleep to awake, and as soon as she spotted Cat in the process of procuring a morning snack, she threw herself at the big worm with arms wide. "Cat!" she exclaimed. There was not the tiniest fraction of reprimand in her voice for Ro'mee's situation. There was only unrestrained joy.

Vivia's happiness made Ro'mee content to have Cat stay on his foot for as long as he liked. She hugged Cat's great head, snuggling into his soft form before pulling away to coo her praise of his fast recovery.

Cat ate it up. Figuratively, of course.

Vivia turned to Ro'mee. "Cat's okay!" she exclaimed, still over brimming with joy.

"I can tell," Ro'mee said. He wiggled his foot, the one that was still inside the adorable beast.

Vivia finally seemed to take notice, and her joyful laughter echoed off the cave walls.

Sunlight shone through the waterfall at the mouth of the cave. It danced in occasional flashes of prisms of light. Day had come. It was time to get going on Vivia's mission of mercy to assist in the survival of the Earth woman she'd met.

Getting Cat to follow them out of the cave was easy. Ro'mee suspected it would take an army to stop the great worm from following Vivia wherever she went.

Ro'mee himself getting out of the cave was equally as easy. He dove under the water, swam to the water's edge and climbed out with his eyes shut and his ears covered so that the sucking void of the sky didn't have him planting face first into the dirt again. At least that had been the plan. But, a huge serpent slithering between his legs had caused Ro'mee to jerk

his eyes open. That so-called serpent had been Cat, and it was the last normal thing he saw before the planet became a thing that threatened to throw him off.

Ro'mee hadn't remembered the trees seeming so far away. They telescoped in front of him as the distance stretched to an impossible length.

His balance faltered as his legs threatened to buckle as he stumbled forward. The world around him blurred and spun. His breath became ragged, and his hearts beat a frantic rhythm.

The muscles of his legs grew weak and felt like useless dead weights. *I'll put Vivia in danger if I pass out.* The words were a blasting alarm in his head, but they did nothing to stop the chill that raced down his spine or the urge to spin and vomit. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he tried to will himself to right.

But then the world slipped beneath his feet, and the ground rushed up to hit him.

The sun went black.

Time passed—how much time, Ro'mee didn't know. He lay still, his eyes closed, his breathing slow and steady. He could feel Vivia's gentle fingers running through his hair and could hear the sweet sound of her voice humming softly. If he opened his eyes, he knew the moment would be over, so he stayed still and relished the warmth of her touch and the tune in her voice.

Vivia's gentle laughter filled the air. "I know you're awake now," she said.

Ro'mee opened his eyes slowly and looked up into her face from where he lay with his head cradled in her lap. She

smiled down at him knowingly.

She was breathtaking, mesmerizing. Her piercing blue eyes glittered with an inner light. He felt as if he were drowning in her beauty, unable to save himself from the impending loneliness that would flood his heart when she left. He knew his life would have no meaning without her in it. He knew he should care for the sake of his brothers and what losing her would mean to them, but he didn't. Losing her would mean losing himself. She was a part of him. He almost couldn't bear the thought of her walking away, leaving him behind. Almost. To do otherwise would be to betray her wishes, and that he could never do.

Vivia shifted and he knew it was time for him to sit up.

“Again?” he asked. He stared at his slime covered foot.

Vivia chuckled, eyes twinkling. “Cat helped me pull you into the...” She glanced around them, then said with a whirling flourish of her finger, “Whatever this is. Forest?”

“These plants are different than the ones you have on Earth?” Ro'mee asked.

“Oh yeah... A lot different. It's like most the stuff here... I don't know. Everything reminds me of mushrooms in one way or another, like mushrooms but with a cosmic joke for a twist.”

Ro'mee's head tilted as his insert tried to provide the translation for mushrooms. “Fungus?”

Vivia laughed and nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.” She dug her hand into the rich ground and pulled up a handful of dirt. Working her fingers, she slowly crumbled the clump. Multicolored threads wove throughout it, providing something of a netting to the soil itself. When the dirt was gone, she still

held in her hand the threads that had provided so much structure to the dirt. “We’ve got something like this on Earth,” she said. She picked at the threads. “But what we have isn’t as, I don’t know... robust.” She lifted her gaze to look around some more. “Everything here is similar but different, like a version of a version of a version I’ve seen before.”

Ro’mee followed suit and took in his surroundings as well. It was nothing like he’d known on Vayu, and to him that was a good thing. Here, life out of the water was in abundance. On Vayu, everything outside the water lived off the decay that left the water. His kind survived in the cesspool of the planet’s system. This, here, on da’Rou’ea was better. It was a place of hope, of possibilities.

He glanced back at Vivia, studying her. “We could make a new home here,” he said. “You could stay.” He didn’t need her to say anything to know her answer. He could feel it. She wouldn’t stay—not for him, not for anything.

Rather than answer with words, Vivia gave him a tight-lipped smile and squeezed his hand.

An enormous splash pulled their attention toward the body of water into which the waterfall fed. Ro’mee turned just in time to see Cat follow up an initial launch out of the water with what could have only been described as a very worm-esque belly flop. A thing with many spiral wrapped flaps had been attached to his face, but Cat blew it off his face and high into the air before catching it again a moment before resubmerging into the water.

“He’s been at that since you passed out,” Vivia said with amused pride in her voice.

Ro’mee inwardly flinched at the mention of him passing out. He adjusted their touch so that he was holding her hand.

“You deserve better than me. I’m sorry I’m not the fated mate you wanted.”

Vivia’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t want any fated mate,” she exclaimed. Then her voice softened. “But if I had...” She shrugged.

“If you had,” Ro’mee prompted.

A smile tugged at her lips. “If I had,” she echoed, “then I’d want one like you.” Her soulful eyes held his. “I’d have wanted you.”

Ro’mee raged within. He had everything he wanted in her. Everything! But he couldn’t have her, all because she wanted vengeance. She was willing to throw away generations of good for the sake of an ending that would help no one. Not her. Not the sister she wanted to kill. And not the family she’d already lost.

He compressed his anger to a burning spot of rage held trapped within him. He wanted to scream at her that she was killing him and his family to honor the memory of her family who were already gone.

He stood, turning his back to her as he strode away. His still-wet skirt hung low and heavy on his hips. The tension of all he had to lose and the nothingness she had to gain consumed him.

“We should get going,” he said without turning around.

“Sure. No prob,” she snipped in a tone that told of anger of her own.

Ro’mee stood, waiting, as he heard her stand.

“Tell you what,” she said. “Let’s call it here. You go your way and I’ll go mine.”

Ro'mee turned to face her with a rigid back and two hearts on their way to turning to stone. But what he saw undid him to the core. It stripped away all his rage and threw his hearts at her feet once more. Hers. Always hers.

Vivia's eyes were red rimmed and shiny with unshed tears.

He gulped and the sensation pained him. He sank to his knees with his hands open between his thighs. It was his body's answer to hers, and it had required no thought.

Vivia glowered. "You're kidding, right?" She rolled her eyes when he said nothing in reply. "That's it," she snapped. "I'm leaving you behind."

Ro'mee was on his feet and moving before the last syllable had left her lips. She stepped toward the opening of the forest near the water's edge, but he caught her before she reached the open sky. He pulled her to him and captured her face in his hands. "You make me crazy. Is this what love is? This torture?"

Vivia knocked his hands away and stepped into the open light, the open air, beneath the void of sky where he couldn't go. "I make you crazy?" she yelled. "I'm the one who said you were my perfect guy and got nothing back! You got up and walked away like you wanted nothing to do with me! Well, fuck you!" She flagged her hand into the air as if waving off a wild beast. "Me and you, we're done!"

Ro'mee threw his head back and cried the scream of the ancients. The sound drowned out the noise of the waterfall, the plants moving in the wind, the animals that skittered through the forest. A fury he'd only ever felt one other time in his life filled him past his being and into the world beyond.

When he came back to his senses to look at Vivia again, it was to see the blurred silhouette of her standing on the other side of Cat. The giant worm had placed himself between her and Ro'mee, then reared up so that no part of her was reachable without first going around—or through—the worm. She was not covered on the other side of him, though. She looked ready to fight.

Ro'mee stepped back further into the covering of the forest, away from the void that would steal all his awareness.

“You are a coward,” he called to her. Through Cat, he saw Vivia step to the side, but Cat curved his body so that he remained between the pair of them. It was only by wrapping her arms around him and using him as a pivot that Vivia managed to step in front.

“Me?” she said with a thumb pointed toward her chest after she'd released Cat. “I'm a coward? I tell you that you're the love of my life and you say nothing in return?”

“Stupid woman,” Ro'mee snarled. “I want you more than air, more than life, but you're willing to throw me away just to hold onto an idea of something in your head. Revenge will sour in your mouth once you have it... and I will be as good as dead.”

Vivia stumbled a step back as if his words had been a physical jolt, but then she was running. She covered the distance between her and Ro'mee and didn't slow down even as she launched herself onto him, wrapping her legs around his waist and latching his ears in her hands.

“Dead how?” she asked, her voice calm and her gaze steely.

Ro'mee's hands went to her waist. Her flesh was hot under his touch, her skin supple, and her body delectable. The heat of her on him had his mind swimming and his hearts pounding. "Get off of me, woman. Get off of me before I lose myself."

"Dead how?" Vivia demanded again in the same unflinching tone. She did not budge from her spot. Her thighs were like unforgiving bands around his waist, her eyes like ice.

"Either hunted and killed in the sport hunts or tortured to death by the Overwatchers," he told her.

"Fuck that," Vivia growled, her eyes now blazing. "What's it gonna take to save you? You getting knocked up? What?"

"You staying," Ro'mee told her.

Vivia's thighs softened and she slipped from his body to land on her feet. She stepped away, her body angled, her head down and her shoulders up as she sneered at him. "Some things are asking too much," she said, her voice now a murderous whisper.

"Death it is," he said.

It was the only option left.

VIVIA

Emotional blackmail! That's what it was.

Vivia fumed as she paced the shoreline of the waterfall-fed, oversized pond that gave way to a river. She felt as though two halves of her were being torn apart. The pain scored her down her center, searing through her heart. It hurt to breathe. It felt as though a hand were squeezing her lungs and heart, making it almost impossible for her diaphragm to expand.

She pounded atop her chest as if she could dislodge the thing hurting her so much.

If she stayed with Ro'mee, Xavia would get everything she'd killed their family for. If she left Ro'mee, Ro'mee would die—at least that's what he said.

Even though she was pulling air into her lungs, Vivia's body felt as though it were drowning. She fell to her knees. She fought through the emotions ripping at her. Could she leave her fated mate? She was beginning to doubt that. She suspected it would kill her—and that was okay. What wasn't okay was Ro'mee dying because of her need for justice.

Vivia's body slumped as tears of guilt and regret pooled in her eyes. She cradled her head in her hands.

How could she leave? Tears of frustration streamed down her face. She wanted to scream at the air, but she knew it would give nothing back. This was all on her... her wants, her needs. But she wanted and needed two different things. She needed Ro'mee to live—and she needed justice for her family.

Something needled within her as the truth scratched at her inner core, demanding to come out.

No, it wasn't justice she wanted. It was revenge. It burned like ice within her, consumed her, made her want to turn her back on everything else.

Everything but Ro'mee...

Vivia stumbled to her feet, wavering and unsteady. Her hot gaze tore into Ro'mee where he stood inside the forest's covering.

"You're killing me," she said. No one and nothing could end her because of the nanos in her blood, and yet... this one man was destroying her without lifting a hand.

"You're killing me and my whole family," Ro'mee shot back.

Vivia gasped, staggered, then steadied. Her gaze leveled into him and her warring parts quieted. "And what if you're pregnant when you go back. Would they kill you then?"

Ro'mee's chin jerked up, his head snapping back, but then his shoulders softened as his shock turned into appraisal. "No, *they* wouldn't kill me."

Vivia heard what was left unspoken in what he'd said. They wouldn't kill him, but the baby would. "Can't they get the baby out of you without killing you?"

“It’s never been done. Both child and father die, so now it is tradition to let nature take its course so that at least the child can live.”

That had been the fate of Ro’mee’s own father, Vivia knew.

“And what if we both went through my return wormhole when it opens? What if we both went back to Earth? Together?”

Ro’mee shook his head. “Won’t work.”

Vivia kept her gaze trained on Ro’mee as she began pacing, back and forth in a short path like a caged animal. She touched the insert on her wrist and asked. “Can my fated mate go back to my planet through my wormhole?”

The answer was instant. “Incompatible vibration signature. Wormhole absorption would occur.”

Vivia hung her head and dropped her arm to let it hang limp at her side.

Destroy Xavia, kill Ro’mee and his brothers.

Let Xavia get away with killing their family, save Ro’mee and his brothers.

“Fuck me,” she muttered. She felt like hitting her head on a rock. Repeatedly. Maybe then she could escape what felt like an impossible situation.

She lifted her face to look at Ro’mee. He was still in his spot, feet wide, large shoulders squared, body ready, watching her. He had not given up hope. She could see it in him, but seeing it made another little part of Vivia die inside.

Ro’mee reached out his hand, and Vivia discovered her feet moving before she’d given them permission to take her to

him. She stepped up onto a clustered root bundle and was in his arms and enveloped in his hold, melting into him. His breath was warm against her cheek. His body smelled of musk and something akin to warm vanilla, leather and old books. His strong arms were wrapped around her, warm and sure, a blanket of love. His chest rumbled, pulling a moan from her. Home. She was home with him.

Vivia lifted her face from where it had been tucked against the inside of his shoulder. She stretched on tiptoe. Ro'mee met her half way. The kiss was slow, the kind of kiss that said, I love you no matter what. No matter if they were the end of each other. No matter if there were universes and life and death between them.

Vivia's head said they should pull away, but instead she deepened their kiss, pulling Ro'mee closer and closer until their hearts beat as one. Forever intertwined.

Ro'mee's hands went beneath her arms and he lifted as Vivia's legs wrapped around his waist. Then his arms were around her hips, crushing her body against him.

Vivia's hands held the sides of Ro'mee's face as she kissed him, her lips pressing fiercely into his as the heat between them rose. Her hands slid so that her fingers could lose themselves in his hair as one of his ran up the length of her spine to settle cupping the nape of her neck.

"I need you," she said, her lips moving against his, urgency in her voice.

Ro'mee's answer was to move to the trunk of the nearest tree and press her between it and him as his lips traveled down her neck. His hands roamed, mapping out the landscape of her body, and Vivia felt a deep sigh escape her. His touch and kiss

were the only thing keeping her from shattering into a million pieces.

She trembled in his embrace as Ro'mee kissed his way back up to her mouth, his lips claiming hers once more.

Vivia's heart thudded wildly, their bodies pressed together, their breaths mingled, their hearts beating in time. Who and what they were to each other burned its truth inside her soul. They were fated mates. No matter what happened she was his, fated to be his, and her heart belonged to him. Eternally.

Death and distance was nothing to them. They were two circling stars, destined to merge into one. Their fate was inevitable. No worlds, no beings, no godly jokes could keep them from their fate. No one and nothing.

Ro'mee's hands ran down Vivia's sides, caressing every inch of her body as she kissed his neck, his jaw, his lips. His touch sent sparks of pleasure through her that left her trembling with anticipation.

Vivia moaned deep and inviting when Ro'mee's hands moved down to cup her hips. He pressed his body against hers and she could feel the heat radiating from him. She moaned as he deepened the kiss, their tongues exploring each other's mouths with a familiarity that was ingrained in their beings.

Her hand found its way to the woven clasp that held Ro'mee's skirt on his hips. Her fingers fumbled and fought but soon found their way to sending his skirt tumbling to the ground. She was ripping the tatters of her bra over her head next and the shared shuffling of their hands and bodies had the remains of her pants and panties sliding off her feet.

"You'll get pregnant. You'll die," Vivia whimpered as he nipped her neck. The fight within her was gone. She was his,

at least for now, at least until she came back to her senses. But maybe that was wrong. Maybe the fight would come back when she embraced her insanity once more. Maybe this, now, was the only true thing to know, the only thing that could be fully trusted and believed.

Them. Here. Together.

“I’ll die anyway.”

Vivia gasped, her eyes rolling back in her head as tingling waves rolled up her spine from Ro’mee’s low, gravelly whisper in her ear.

She reached between them, dragging her nails down the ridged muscles of his stomach.

Ro’mee groaned, his body tensing. His teeth captured Vivia’s earlobe and pulled as his stance adjusted, his hips fitting into hers, and his hard length pressed against her core.

Vivia gasped again.

There was no reason, no logic, no thought. All there was, was them, and the merging of two souls.

Vivia’s hand found what she’d been searching for, and she wrapped her fingers around Ro’mee’s stiff member. Then she froze. She locked wide eyes with Ro’mee. “What are those?” she whispered, her thumb dragging over a small wiggly thing protruding from his thick length. It was accompanied by other soft wiggly things covering every glorious inch of his thick, hard girth. They pulsed and throbbed beneath her touch.

Ro’mee choked on a groan as her finger rolled over one of his wiggly little fingerlings. His body shuddered and a deep, guttural groan escaped him.

“Ohhhh.” A wicked, playful smile spread across Vivia’s lips. She ran her thumb over one of the little nubbings again and gleefully watched Ro’mee’s body stiffen, then shudder.

Ro’mee’s eyes glazed over, becoming half-lidded. It took a moment for him to come back to himself, but when he did his eyes were dark with deadly want.

“Yeah, you like that,” Vivia teased before nipping his chin. She twirled the whole of her hand around him and looped her arm behind his head in order to hold on.

“You are a witch-god,” Ro’mee said, his voice raspy.

Vivia laughed. “Not hardly, just a girl who knows what she likes.”

“And what is it you like?”

“You... overcome with me,” she breathed. She pulled herself forward and pressed her lips to his. She adjusted her hips, then sank lower, taking him in. She breathed out and he filled her as if making room for all that he was and all that they were together.

The fingerlings on Ro’mee’s shaft pulsed against her inner walls, curling and probing, getting thicker, then smaller as he moved within her. And when they found one of her happy spots, they seemed to know it, working it until she thought she might get swept away on the unending waves of pleasure that built within her, ebbing and flowing over and over, surging to greater heights until she thought she might lose herself altogether. That’s when she noticed it. A warmth that built at her core and then slowly spread throughout the rest of her. It traveled down her legs, up her hips, up her back, through her breasts, up her throat, filled the backs of her eyes and then settled into her brain.

Addiction.

She leveled her gaze on Ro'mee, breathing out in time with his body moving in. He'd told her. Warned her. There'd been no deception, but she hadn't truly understood.

Addiction.

It had her. She could consume him right then and there. Take her fill of him in every way. Cut him open, move inside his body and wear him as a coat.

What. The. Fuck.

The part of her that had carved out a corner in her own brain to hold onto her own sanity questioned what it was that was happening to her. Whatever it was, it wasn't right.

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she lost herself. Ro'mee's strong arms shielded the tender skin of her back from the scratchy, twiggy, moss-like covering of the tree's trunk but she craved the cuts it could give her now for the sake of grounding her in her own flesh rather than the euphoria that had muddled her mind with undulating and unending waves of pleasure. She was drunk on him, mad with him.

"Ro'mee," she moaned, her voice barely above a whisper. His name was a plea, a demand, a prayer. She feared her body would be so lost to bliss that it would forget how to breathe. She barely remembered her own name. She couldn't say where she was from or who she had been.

"Ro'mee," she moaned again, his name like magical music to her ears.

"Mine," Ro'mee answered with a deep, guttural growl, his hips working with hers.

An explosive burst of pleasure that rippled out in every direction through Vivia's body had her crying out. That explosive burst was followed by another, then another. The pleasure built to overwhelming, an exquisite death like no other. Vivia'd thought she'd been with men before, but they'd been nothing, nothing compared to now. Nothing compared to Ro'mee.

The vibration in Ro'mee's chest from his now constant growl grew as did the power of his hips. Vivia tightened her legs around him, pulling him in, demanding he not leave her until she got what she wanted, what she needed, from him. It was instinctual, a key to the lock that had been built within her brain by the mating chemicals his body exuded.

His species had figured out how to keep their women—but that drug, that bliss... made it so Vivia didn't even care.

The last thing Vivia remembered was Ro'mee's great roar before they both sank as he fell to his knees with her still there, on him, with him, joined. Together.

Fated mates.

I am so fucked, were Vivia's final coherent thoughts before drifting away into blissful oblivion.

RO'MEE

Ro'mee lay on the moss-cushioned ground with Vivia in his arms, their naked bodies pressed against one another. Her breasts pillowed into the side of his chest, her scent a sweet musk and a flower he couldn't name, yet could imagine.

Her legs intertwined with his, and her head rested in the crook of his shoulder, her lips slightly parted as she breathed soft breaths. She was beautiful. She had never been more beautiful. Her pale skin flushed from pleasure. Her eyes shut, peaceful in sleep. Her body relaxed, accepting him, fitting him. His mate. His fated mate. How had his life changed so much in such little time? It was less than a handful of cycles ago that he had not known a fated mate existed for him, but now here he was, with her.

Hers.

He wanted to take her again. Slower this time. He wanted to feel her slickness, the tightness of her body as he filled her. He wanted it all.

“Come back to me,” he whispered with a kiss atop each of her lidded eyes. If they'd created a child within him, it would be with no regrets. He'd gladly sacrifice himself to any life they made together.

Vivia stirred, her eyes fluttering open. But she didn't say a word. Instead, her hand pushed upon his chest to roll him onto his back and she climbed astride him. Her breasts swayed forward as she bent to claim his lips with her own. He could smell their joined pleasure and it aroused him as much as her touch and her want and need for him.

When she sat back, she did so in a way that had his ready-again member cradled at the apex of her thighs. He throbbed, his length bobbing with the sudden hard synchronized pulse of his hearts.

She looked down to where they were almost joined, and a chuckle escaped her. "You're pink. Your cock is pink." Her head tilted sideways. "Or is it purple?" She squinted. "It reminds me of something. What is it?" Her voice trailed off. She played with his cock's qailae, running her fingers along them, between them, stroking, teasing. Ro'mee dug his fingers into the soft moss beneath him as he did his best not to let her curious touches overwhelm him.

"A sea cucumber!" Vivia exclaimed. "That's what you look like. A. Really. Big. Sea cucumber," she said, her voice dropping low as she dragged her thumb up the length of his underside.

Ro'mee gasped, then groaned, his hips giving a quick buck.

"Ohhhhh," Vivia purred. "You like that?" She twirled her hand around his shaft with a slow, delicate touch that took its time to brush her caress over every length, every tip, everything of him.

"Are all women as cruel as you?" Ro'mee asked through gritted teeth.

“Yesss,” she teased. “Did you lie to me?” she asked, continuing to touch him in a way that had him desperate for her wet heat.

“No,” he answered, his voice tight as he struggled to remain still beneath her.

“Are you going to even ask about what?” she asked, her voice dropping to a low purr as her hands made him arch beneath her.

“I don’t have to. I haven’t lied about anything,” he said.

“So you’re telling me that you knew how to move just right against me, how to hold me, and what to do with yourself without ever having been with anyone before?” Vivia’s voice held more than a little skepticism.

“I could feel what you wanted, what you needed and how you needed it,” he said, his voice becoming a growl. He released his hold on the now destroyed moss and wrapped his hands around Vivia’s hips. Her flesh was soft and pliant beneath his firm grip, and his palms drank in the warmth of her body.

Ro’mee dragged Vivia forward so that the wet heat of her core moved over his ready shaft and held him in an agonizing state of bliss between his belly and the sanity awaiting him deep within her. He relished the control he had over her... a control that was illusion. It evaporated into the nothing that it had always been when Vivia did one simple thing: she shifted with a leisurely arch of her shoulder and a tilt of her hip, she shifted against him, slipping him a little deeper within her folds.

Ro’mee’s entire body arched from his neck and shoulders all the way down to his feet, lifting the whole of his middle off

the ground. A moan escaped him, one born from the depths of his soul.

His body eased, sinking to the ground, and Vivia began to move, her hips taking on a rhythm that teased, urged and demanded, all while denying him entry. She took him to the edge of sanity before letting him rest... only to begin again. A sweet torture that Ro'mee had no choice but to endure.

A desperate heat built within Ro'mee. He clung to Vivia, his body shaking with the effort of holding back, of holding on so that she could do with him what she willed, for as long as she willed it. All the while, he felt as though his mind would shatter and his body would explode. The intensity of the pleasure was sheer bliss that had evolved into exquisite pain.

Just when Ro'mee thought he could take no more, Vivia shifted, allowing him to enter her completely. He buried himself deep within her warmth and felt the entire universe open up around him. With each thrust, the universe expanded, until finally, Ro'mee found himself soaring, his body and soul one with hers. Complete.

Vivia had been there with him, her voice raised in the same song, her body shaking and trembling with the same intensity, until finally, together, they'd found the stillness of release. That perfect spot, a moment between time, when the universe hung suspended in a single breath.

Ro'mee had never heard of anything like it. The stories that had told him what it was like to be with a woman had not described this, this perfection, this complete unity. This had been so much more than physical. It had been the joining of their souls. It had been their fated mate connection, the heat of their passion used as the conduit for something... more.

Ro'mee held Vivia, now, as her body lay atop his, her breath warm against his chest. Neither of them said a word.

The universe had changed, and they both knew it.

There was no more denying, no more doubt, no more lack of comprehension of who and what they were to each other.

Somehow, Vivia managed to have the strength to break their connection first by pushing her body off of his. The loss of her weight left a part of him reeling.

“Come on, Romeo,” she teased, twisting his name into something else. “We’ve got to get going.”

He watched as her slender, graceful form moved from shadow into light as she made her way to the lake. She waded in thigh deep, then dove, breaking back through the surface a moment later.

Ro'mee shifted into a sitting position, bending his knees and tucking his feet close in. Watching Vivia wade out of the lake, water dripping from her curves, was even sweeter.

She slapped the water’s surface with her palm a couple of times before emerging altogether and called out, “Cat, come on! We’re going!”

The big worm breached the water’s surface like a magnificent sea monster, crashing down onto the water to create a wave that rolled all the way up onto the land, crashing into the back of Vivia’s legs as it did. She merely smiled, seeming proud of the great worm.

Bending, she gathered a large clump of moss and pulled it free from the ground before returning to the water. There, she squeezed and released it several times before making the journey back to him.

“Here,” she said, holding the dripping clump up to his chest. She pressed it against him and rivulets of water ran down his chest, legs, and the member that had found its home within her. A few more trips to the lake had Ro’mee’s front washed and his back free of debris.

Vivia found the tattered remains of her clothes and began putting them on.

“No, wear my skirt,” Ro’mee told her. It was in much better shape than the what remained of the coverings he’d burned from her body. She could wear it with its waist beneath her arms so that it would not be too long for her.

“And have you running around naked?” Vivia chuckled, giving him an impish glance. “I don’t think so. Might give Lily ideas when we find her.” Her gaze traveled the length of his body, burning a trail over him in its wake.

Ro’mee considered pushing the issue, but she was halfway to dressed, her mind clearly made up. Ro’mee put on his skirt as Cat emerged from the water to return to his place on land, although he did slurp down another one of those odd, multi-limbed creatures which had plastered itself to Cat’s face before coming to stop beside them.

Ro’mee’s gaze scanned the forest. His ability to discern one plant from another had increased as his familiarity with the forest had grown. No longer was every leaf and stem completely foreign and new to him. His mind had expanded its concepts of all that he’d thought he’d known of plants and simple-cell life to include more and more of da’Rou’ea’s strange and wonderful world.

“Do you know which way?” he asked. Vivia’s answer didn’t matter. Not really. He’d follow her anywhere.

Vivia took in their surroundings. “I think this way,” she said, pointing in a direction that had a gentle slope to the land.

She moved off in that direction, her back straight, her shoulders rigid. Ro’mee did not have to ask her anything to know of the war that raged within her. She’d thought she’d known what she wanted. Now he suspected she didn’t yet fought to believe she still did.

For him, there was no raging battle, no resistance between her and him. He would live for her. He would die for her. He would raise a family with her. Life for him had become simple because the answer to any question was her. Always her.

They walked in silence, making a long trail between them with Vivia at the front, Cat in the middle and Ro’mee at the back. As early morning crept into the high of day, their positions changed but their onward push did not.

“How did you find me?” Vivia asked as they crested the top of a hill only to see a mountain beyond it.

“Your scent?” Ro’mee smiled as Vivia paused in thought before doing a quick sniff check of her armpits.

“Can you smell others of my kind?”

“Other humans?”

Vivia nodded.

But Ro’mee shook his head. “Only you. You became like a beacon to me from the moment I arrived. The scent of you lit up my brain.”

Vivia turned to follow the crest of the hill, and Ro’mee and Cat followed. They again walked in silence until Vivia spoke the words that had gone unspoken between them since they’d shared their bodies at the lake that morning.

“I still don’t know that I’ll stay,” she said without looking back down the trail at him.

Hope surged within Ro’mee, filling his heart. Vivia’s absolute resolve to leave this planet—and him—had ebbed to reveal an underlying doubt. It was as if a mountain had decided it might instead be air. The boundaries between what she’d believed to be true and what could be true had blurred. Acceptance of the possibility of what had been believed impossible had taken root.

Ro’mee stopped as the soft, diluted light adorning Vivia gave way to brilliant sunshine. Vivia turned to face him then lifted her face to the light, closing her eyes. Her chest filled with a deep breath, and a gentle smile touched her perfect lips. He could have stood and stared at her for hours, but her focus shifted as she turned to look to either side of herself. Flat rocks and pebbles shifted beneath her feet, lending her movements sound instead of the usual silence afforded them by the thick moss that carpeted the forest floor. The forest had broken with a gap wide enough for fifteen Cats to lay head to tail and barely reach the other side.

“There’s no covering here,” Vivia told Ro’mee with her gaze still searching what lay to either side of her. “It’s like something came through and plowed a path through everything as far as I can see. Miles, maybe.”

Cat wove figure eights around Ro’mee and a nearby tree, showing his impatience or boredom.

Vivia lifted an arm, pointing. “There’s some big growth that way. It doesn’t cover the entire gap, but it’s narrower than it is here.”

She started walking and Ro’mee kept time with her under the forest’s canopy. It wasn’t more than a few steps before

Vivia said what was on her mind.

“Do you think you got pregnant, you know, from this morning?” Her voice was quiet, almost hesitant, as though she feared the answer almost as much as she wanted to know the answer.

Ro'mee shook his head. “Don't know. Too early to tell.”

Vivia ran a hand over her head as if she'd meant to run her hand through her now absent hair. Her glance upward spoke of her annoyance at finding it gone.

“How soon will you know?” she asked, her words abrupt enough to come out sounding miffed.

“Not soon enough,” Ro'mee answered, his voice gentle yet the message unforgiving.

“Can't you, like, hook up with another woman or something to have the baby?” Vivia asked. Ro'mee took a breath to speak, but Vivia cut him off. “No, don't answer that.”

A muffled litany of swear words hung in the air just out of reach of Ro'mee's ability to identify them, though their meaning was clear.

Ro'mee held his tongue, watching Vivia as she continued walking, her gaze on the ground. The two of them were lost in their own thoughts as they made their way to the spot Vivia had seen. As she'd described, the two edges of the divided forest were much closer here.

Ro'mee held his tongue against all he wanted to say to her as she left the forest's gap and came to him. Vivia already knew everything he would have said, every argument he could have made. And if he tried, if he pushed for her to see reason, she would only buttress the barricade against what it was he wanted her to do. It was only by not pushing that her defenses

would drop enough for her to hear what he believed—what he hoped—was a two sided argument within herself. That of leave him or stay.

“Want to close your eyes and put a hand on my shoulder?” she asked.

Words of vitriol ran rampant through Ro'mee's brain, each a jagged crystal shard that cut him, leaving scores sure to become scars.

“No,” he said, refusing Vivia's help with a sweep of his arm. He rolled his shoulders. “I can do this.”

“It's not that big a deal,” Vivia said, the humor in her voice was unmistakable. “Let me help.”

Ro'mee didn't have to look at her to know she was smiling. For her, crossing that open ground was nothing. It was trivial, and her jovial easiness raked at his pride.

“I can do it,” he insisted. A not so tiny voice within him mocked him. Why would Vivia ever want to stay with a man who couldn't cross an open swath of ground without passing out?

He took a step forward, then another, willing his vision to tunnel to block out the open sky above. The sound around him changed the moment he reached the sparse vegetation at the forest's edge. His surroundings felt infinite, as if he could be blown away in a sudden gust. Without even looking up, he could feel the sky telescoping above him, moving into a cyclone to suck him into the boundless openness of space.

Ro'mee took a deep breath and willed his legs to take another step.

“Come on,” Vivia called behind him. She was no longer even bothering to hide her humor at what for her was no doubt

a ridiculous struggle. “What if you pass out. It’ll take time to wake you up.” She paused, then as if seeing that her argument wasn’t working, she upped the stakes. “Cat would have to help drag you to the trees again. Your foot would get all gooey!”

Outright open laughter reached Ro’mee’s ears, making them burn.

“I can do this!” he roared, forcing his legs into action three more times to force them into taking three large strides which placed him almost at the center of the gap.

Vivia screamed, a sound which cut through Ro’mee like a sharpened blade. He spun in time to see Cat charging at him. Beyond, Vivia sat crumpled at the base of a tree. Unmoving.

Ro’mee dropped his stance low and readied for impact with his hands raised. Ro’mee was certain that a punch from him would do nothing to the great worm, but he hoped to be able to restrain him through grappling. At least that had been his intent. In actuality, he swayed on his feet as his head spun, quickly losing his sense on which way was up and which way was down. Air had lost its substance to his lungs, no longer fueling his body, and his vision was growing dark at the edges.

“Cat,” Ro’mee said in a last ditch effort to reason with the wild creature. Beyond, Vivia stirred and was already climbing to her feet when Cat reached him.

The impact of the seemingly gelatinous beast was brutal. Ro’mee’s entire body caught air as he was thrown backward, his body hitting the ground with a force that expelled all the useless air from his lung.

But that wasn’t the end of the attack. Cat surged toward him, mouth open.

Ro'mee tried to make himself wide by spreading his legs and arms. He didn't have time to do more, but his attempt to save himself failed. Cat was on him, swallowing him doubled, bent at the waist.

Ro'mee fought, pushing against the creature's sides, but there was no rigidity to Cat. When Ro'mee pushed, Cat's body moved with him, bulging but never giving way. But if his situation with Cat was bad, it changed just as suddenly as it began when Cat spit him back out under the canopy of the far-sided forest.

Ro'mee was on his feet and running back toward the gap, back toward Vivia, before his body even registered the sudden change in direction. He gave no thought to the void of sky which hovered above the openness or what had happened to him. He made it two steps before Cat's bulbous body slammed into him, throwing him backward and deeper into the forest.

With a wild burbling screech, Cat charged.

I'm dead. It was the only thought Ro'mee had time for before Cat reached him... and then zipped past.

Ro'mee got halfway to his feet in preparation to run again but instead fell backward, his feet slipping out from under him when the space between him and Vivia exploded in an upward gush of hues of purple and blues. The rocks within the gap, caught in whatever it was that Ro'mee was now seeing, floated upward. Ro'mee scrambled to his feet and watched the display, dumbstruck. Next to him, a now docile Cat brushed against his leg, trilling as if in apology for what he'd done.

Vivia was barely visible beyond that upward rolling cascade of purple, blues and occasional oranges that now filled the space between her and him. She stood, staring up in awe before searching through the light to lock eyes with Ro'mee.

Determination set her mouth as she started forward.

Cat reared up, towering above Ro'mee. A shrill scream tore from him that vibrated the insides of Ro'mee's ears, threatening to rupture them.

Ro'mee doubled over in pain, his hands clamped over his ears as he fell to his knees. He dared lift his head and search for Vivia once Cat's screams had ceased.

Although bent double, Vivia was still standing. Her hands fell away from her ears, and she took a step forward only to scream herself. This time she did fall to her knees as her hand covered one eye. But Cat wasn't screaming. No one had screamed but her.

"Vivia!" Ro'mee yelled. He took a step forward, but Cat knocked him off balance, causing him to fall back a step instead. There'd be no getting past him, Ro'mee realized.

Vivia fell forward onto her one free hand, but another scream tore from her the moment she hit the ground. She collapsed onto her side, her body jerking, kicking as if attacked by some unseen tormentor.

"Vivia!" Ro'mee screamed. He tried to push past Cat only for Cat to knock him back again.

Vivia tried to get to her feet and failed. Again she tried, only to fall hard onto her shoulder before succumbing to a fit of convulsions.

Ro'mee wrapped his arms around Cat and did his best to lift the beast. If he could not push past the great worm, then he would take Cat with him. But, that effort proved itself as worthless as all the others as Cat writhed in his arms, making keeping hold of his great form and mass too unwieldy.

Beyond the veil of cascading light, Vivia rolled rather than walked. When she'd gotten closer to the forest's edge, her roll became a crawl until she collapsed on her front, arms splayed out. That's where she stopped... and stayed. Unmoving.

"Vivia," Ro'mee choked. "Wake up."

VIVIA

Vivia lay on the ground, unblinking as she stared at the purple, blue, and orange waves of energy dancing before her eyes. It looked like an artist's dream of the aurora borealis, flowing upward out of the ground like a waterfall emptying into the stars.

It pulsed, its intensity fluctuating. Vivia could feel its power. She moaned, only twitching, when more of her nanos exploded like tiny acid bombs in her skin, scalp, kidneys and left eye. The explosion of energy coming out of da'Rou'ea was killing her. Her brain sat swollen inside her skull and the pain enveloping her body was such that she couldn't actually feel her body. She was simply a being of pain, like a cloud of dust. No real shape. Just existing.

Vivia grunted, a half-dead sound of surprise. She hadn't thought anything could kill her. There was a level of amusement and relief in the discovery. Freedom. A way out. She didn't have to be stuck living beyond the loss of everything she'd ever known. She didn't have to stay longer than her own sanity lasted.

Her sight shifted, fixing on Ro'mee. She could see that he was screaming, but her burst eardrums couldn't hear him. He

fought to get to her, to pass through the upward avalanche of energy, but Cat kept him away.

“Good boy,” she whispered. He’d saved them. He’d known what was about to happen, just like how Earth animals could feel an impending earthquake. He’d known and he’d done everything in his power to keep them safe.

Vivia lay where she was, staring, as a tear fell free from the corner of her eye. She had to move, she had to get clear of Ro’mee’s sight. It was the only way he’d stop fighting to get to her. They’d find each other again—hopefully—but not through this, not right now.

“Go,” she cried, but it was the strangled whisper of someone who’d been lost adrift at sea for a hundred days. “Go,” she called again, this time lifting her fingers just enough to wave him off. It might have worked if they’d been inches apart instead of a quarter of a football field. “Go,” she said again, but this time no sound came out at all.

The nanos within her continued to burst, continued to rupture synapses, put holes in the lining of her stomach, and fill her mouth and throat with open sores.

“I’ll find you,” she whispered without making a sound before turning her head to look away. Not yet able to stand, she crawled on her belly. Rather than go around bushes, she crawled under them, through them, and eventually over them when the other options failed. Shaky legs lifted her from the sunken den of a creature she didn’t want to meet as she transitioned to crawling on her hands and knees. Standing came next followed by the shambling walk of the nearly dead, her body bent, tilted, but upright, moving. Faster now. More distance covered now.

Then she was running. A falling run that had her scrambling back to her feet time and again until finally even that gave way to a sprinter's gate who had spent time as a cross-country runner.

Her body healed as she ran. The pain ebbed so that she was no longer one singular being of pain. Now she could feel her spine, the grinding of bone on bone, the blistering ache of her skin, and the needle stabbing sensation behind her left eye. But even that ebbed, becoming softer, more distant. The pain eased into a nuisance and then something that could be ignored altogether.

By the measure of time, the transition was quick. By the measure of living it, it had been the time-expanding experience of someone trying to hold their arm over a single flame. Every second had seemed an eternity with no promise of an end in sight. That had been the lie her mind had told her, one that had given way to the truth that was her.

Vivia stopped, leaning over with her hands on her knees as she panted to catch her breath. The lace drape of a moss curtain waved in the slight breeze. A hard yank had it pulled down and wrapped around her shoulders as if it were a threadbare shawl she'd inherited from her great, great grandmother. And just as such, it was soothing to her senses as she took in her situation.

The wall of light and energy that had burst out of the ground was a mesmerizing sight to behold. It towered above the canopy of trees with vibrant colors which alluded to its continuing strength and seemed to dismiss the sun to instead welcome the night. Those colors dissipated in surges of pinks, purples and blues that tried to paint the stars but couldn't make their pigment stick. Only the oranges lingered, but even they

grew faint, eventually giving way to the pure clarity of the heat absent space beyond.

The wall of light reached for the heavens in both directions as far as she could see. There was no crossing its line to get back to Ro'mee. She doubted that the burst of energy started at the planet's surface. She suspected it came deep from within, which meant that there was no digging under it either.

"Ro'mee," she whispered, her heart aching more than she ever imagined it could. A coldness seeped into her bones that had nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

Vivia settled onto the ground under the tree. If Ro'mee was able to make it back across the barrier, he'd be able to scent her out. He'd be able to find her. Just like it was best to hug a tree and stay put if you got lost in the woods, Vivia settled into where she was. Her body shivered and her teeth chattered as shock took over. Curling into the fetal position, Vivia dug up thick clumps of moss and piled it around her. And when sleep came, she gave into it. No fight. No struggle. She would rest. Time would pass. And Ro'mee would find her.

That's what she told herself...

She woke once as day drifted into night. She woke again as a warbling creature walked by her in the dark, casting a deeper shadow within the darkness so deep, so intensely absolute, that it made her wonder for a moment if she had lost her sight.

The next time she woke was to find the soft, diffuse light of morning greeting her. It illuminated the landscape, but it also shimmered off the wall of energy that had separated her from Ro'mee. It was still there, still stretching and surging to reach the heavens. Nothing about it seemed lessened, weakened or diminished in any way.

And her time on da'Rou'ea was running out.

She had a choice. She could linger, waiting for her time to end there in that place, hidden amongst the stars in some unknown galaxy, or she could get up and pursue some purpose.

Help Lily.

There was no getting back to Ro'mee. She couldn't get close enough to the energy field to try to communicate with him through it. Something about it interfered with her nanos, causing them to explode. She'd thankfully not lost them all, but she didn't want to push her luck by going back to the energy barrier.

Vivia stood, unfolding herself until her back was straight and her body tall, though she bit her nail while staring at the towering barrier, surging above the tree line in the distance.

"He'll find a way," she reassured herself. "He'll get back to me in time..." before her timer ran out. He had Cat with him. If there was a way for him to get back across, Cat would know it and would lead him to it. Heck, the big guy might expedite things by swallowing Ro'mee up and carrying him. It'd be the fastest way to bypass any stubbornness or resistance from Ro'mee against doing whatever it was Cat wanted to do.

Vivia smiled at the thought of Cat zipping through the forest with Ro'mee's arm sticking out of his mouth, flailing and fighting him the whole way.

"They'll get back to me," Vivia reassured herself again, this time believing it a whole lot more than before.

Taking a deep breath, Vivia slapped her hands together and rubbed her palms. "Time to get to it."

She looked around, taking in her surroundings. In truth, she was as clueless now about where Lily might be than she had been before. The best she could do was wander around and hope to get lucky. But without Ro'mee with her, there was a chance she could move faster. She was sure she couldn't outrun Ro'mee, but she was sure she could recover faster than he could from fatigue.

She started out at a pace that could barely be called a jog but was moving with long, sure strides soon enough. She climbed hills, jumped into valleys, risking sprained ankles and twisted knees to save time, knowing she would heal fast enough to make the shortcut worth it. There was even a Tarzan moment on a swinging vine across a slender trench with white water rapids at its bottom. It was a distance that would have killed anyone else if she'd fallen, but it was merely an opportunity to cover more distance if she'd fallen. Which she didn't.

Day drifted once more into night. Vivia ate what she could find. Slept when she needed to sleep, only to push on when she awoke again. Each step she took stole another piece of hope from her heart, turning it hollow. But there was nothing for her to do but to continue on as if everything would be okay. It was a better option than giving into the despair that was already threatening to suffocate any belief in any other outcome than the worst.

So she walked, trodded, ran, and searched. And eventually, she found...

Vivia stopped to sniff the air. A ghostly hint of wood smoke—there, then gone, then back again—shaped the directions she chose. It teased her at first, but grew strong and steady as she locked in a direction that made greater and

greater sense. The scented air had collected to lazily travel the bottom of a dry creek bed at the bottom of a mountain-sided valley, and Vivia followed the valley's floor as it sloped gently upward. The smell of a campfire intensified while also taking on new notes, notes she didn't yet recognize.

The valley bent in a slender curve, and Vivia found herself facing an empty waterfall. The rocks had been worn smooth with a groove cut into a spot that seemed to turn the two mountains into one. It was an empty, rugged place, somewhere it looked as though no human—or alien—had ever set foot. Yet, the smoke lingered, smelling more pungent than ever.

A whisper of gray caught her eye. It spiraled upward before dissipating altogether. It looked as though it were escaping from a rock fissure about as wide as the tip of Vivia's pinky. Placing her hand over it, Vivia felt a coolness that was slightly warmer than the surrounding area.

"Down," Vivia said. Wherever that fire was, it was at a lower spot than where she was now.

A rock strewn path large enough for a miniature goat wound its way up to what looked like a sharp ledge. Vivia climbed, squeezing between the mountain and ancient boulders to follow it upward. It finally took laying on her belly and stretching the full length of one arm to hook the high ledge's rim with the curl of her fingertips.

She pulled, dragging herself up to a spot where the air was smoky, sweet, and unmistakably alive. Vivia's mouth fell agape, but she was careful not to make a sound. She could see the fire and the extended leg of a Vayu'un presumably sitting in front of the fire. Rock outcropping kept her from being able to see everything, but what she could see was not what she had expected. A vast field of green lay out before the Vayu'un and

his camp fire. It was remarkably flat, like Earth's dried salt flats. A twiggy, velvety moss covered the entirety of it, with occasional pink buds that looked like tiny spheres with delicate petals peeking out of their tops.

As for the Vayu'un, the leg sticking out looked as though it belonged to a gym bunny on steroids. It wasn't Ro'mee. It was the psycho preggo.

Moving as silently as she could, Vivia pulled herself up to the ledge's sharp edge and then climbed over it to the other side. Everything was different on that side, as though inside a basin tucked away within the mountains.

Finding Lily might have been beyond her, but she'd found the threat she wanted to protect Lily from. Second best option.

She'd follow the predator to make sure he didn't find his prey.

RO'MEE

Ro'mee's finger twitched once, twice, before he sat bolt upright. He was on his feet, crouched in a deep knee stance, before his brain had time to catch up with the situation his body was already reacting to. Goo dripped off of him and pooled around his feet. The slathered stickiness enveloping him from head to toe was the last thing to register.

“Nooo,” he said with a groan about the goo despite his awareness of what towered in front of him. The blue, purple and orange field cascaded upward into the sky. Its almost imperceptible hum permeated him to what felt like a cellular level.

Above was a thick canopy of the forest, its gnarled and twisted branches stretching towards the sky as if they had been there since the time his ancestors had lived. Ro'mee surveyed his surroundings, guessing at how much time had slipped away. It was day, and the light held the softness of early morning—the same way it had looked when he was last with Vivia. But, a ravenous ache in his bones told him that his time away from her had been much longer than what he could gauge from just considering the morning light.

After being swallowed, Ro'mee had fought to escape the stubborn worm for what had felt like an eternity. He'd fought

until his vision had blurred, his heartbeats had become erratic, and his breath had suffocated within his own body. Blackness had come next, a blackness that had continued until now.

Ro'mee glanced over his shoulder at Cat. "How long has it been?"

Cat twirled his body around the trunk of an enormous tree, corkscrewing upward as far as his body would reach before relaxing to turn into a looping circle at its base.

It was not the answer Ro'mee was looking for. It was no answer. Yet, Cat had done for him what he was sure he would not have been able to do for himself. Cat had delivered him to an opening within the barrier separating him from Vivia.

He had to get back to her.

Ro'mee stared at the thing that stretched into the sky before him. It was a shimmering wall of blue, purple and orange light that twisted and spun like a celestial tapestry. He could feel its power humming through him. It felt as though he were standing at the very edge of a raging river, one capable of drowning him in its depths. But there was one thing different about this spot than any other. It broke apart, as if yanked open like a curtain. The gap was wide enough for him to pass through.

It was there that the ground looked different than the surrounding area. Grays ranging from dusk of evening to the deep blacks of lightless caves glimmered with swirls of crystalline pink that seemed to pulse and glow. It was at once delicate and rugged, its surface smooth. Flawless.

And it was to this spot that Cat had delivered him. Here, he'd be able to cross over to reunite with Vivia.

Ro'mee turned once more to look at the great worm. "Thank you," he said, his voice quiet yet full of appreciation.

Cat blinked once, slowly, as if he understood.

Turning his back to Cat, Ro'mee stepped forward. As soon as the shadow of the forest slipped away, alerting him that there was now only open sky above, Ro'mee felt his body sway, as if the ground had suddenly shifted beneath his feet. Dizziness washed over him, like being on the edge of a great precipice with strong crosswinds whipping past in every direction.

He stumbled, no longer certain which way was up or down, yet the distance between himself and the gap in the barrier shrank. His breath came in desperate gasps that felt as if they did nothing to fuel his body with the air he took in and pushed out, and still he neared the gap. He entered it.

Ro'mee fell to his hands and knees and crawled, focused on getting through. The lies his body told him didn't matter. Only getting back to Vivia mattered. Time stretched to an eternity as blackness wavered in and out of his peripheral vision, but he remained focused on his goal of getting through the barrier, of getting back to Vivia.

But his hearts were not the masters of his senses, his bones, and his skin. Energy coursed through him unlike anything he'd ever felt before. He no longer felt the ground beneath his hand as he slapped his palm down flat against the smooth stone. He no longer felt anything about himself, or rather he felt everything at once, as if he were one cell, one singular being where the parts of himself were the same as the whole. No differentiation. No separation. There was even an absence of split voices in his head, ones that told him Vivia would leave, others which told him she would stay. They

disappeared and he was filled with the hummm. The energy's hummm. It became him and him it.

Space and time ceased to move. Day gave way to night. The void above him filled with swirls of pink and purple, tubing in spirals in all sorts of sizes, reaching, stretching.

Ro'mee blinked. He blinked again. The day remained night. The stars remained blocked by the swirling, reaching tubes. They sang to him a chorus of song, filling him, becoming him. The ground beneath filled with its vibration so that it disappeared, becoming indistinguishable from himself.

Ro'mee blinked again. And again.

He had to get back to Vivia. Her memory grounded him, gave him something to feel besides the song. She called to him. His fated mate. His one. His complete.

He blinked again, then gasped as air rushed into his lungs and night blinked away to restore the day and the never ending void above. He was on his back and had no sense of how long he'd been like that.

Flipping over without shifting his location too far to either side, Ro'mee returned to a crawling position on his knees and elbows. He breathed in the cold air that clung to the smooth black, gray and pink swirls of stone. Then he moved, crawling, inching forward, never stopping despite the screams of his senses that he should stop. But he didn't, not again.

It was not until Ro'mee felt the shadow of the forest above him that he allowed his body to rest. Falling to his side, his breath came in shallow gasps as his brain churned in an effort to restore itself, re-orient itself. Find itself. He could feel his own body again. He could feel the ache of his knees, the scuffed skin on his elbows and forearms. His head hurt as if

his skull would open and split in two. It throbbed with each beat of his hearts.

Shifting further, Ro'mee rolled onto his back and stared upward into the underside of the forest. What was it he'd seen while between the two edges of the barrier? Day had evaporated to show him something else. Swirls of light. Tubes, moving, spiraling.

Alive.

And he had not been the only spectator. He'd felt it. They had been aware of him. He wasn't sure they'd known he was seeing them—the spirals—but they'd felt him, his life force, his being, his presence. He was sure of it. It was like a thread of memory, of knowing, within him.

Sitting up, Ro'mee watched Cat through the barrier's opening. The big worm was pacing back and forth beyond the opening. Once every few passes, he'd dive toward the opening only to zip away just as quickly.

Ro'mee wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or not, but Cat seemed to bubble without rupturing the surface of his skin, almost like water rolling while boiling. He could see it when Cat would approach the barrier, but his body would ease when he zipped away.

“Don't worry, friend,” Ro'mee called to him. “I'll find her.” His gaze scanned the length and height of the barrier. It had not always been there. It was temporary, and Cat would be able to pass over to their side once it subsided once more.

Ro'mee stood, his legs shaky beneath him. He again wondered how long had passed since he'd been with Vivia. Their time was running out, and he still hoped to convince Vivia to stay.

With him.

With Cat.

She'd be leaving them both and all of this... this world with its lush abundance of unexplored wonder. A world of hope, potential and possibility.

Ro'mee nodded to the big worm and raised his hand. "Thank you," he said again, then turned and ran.

He could smell Vivia, his mate. She was a blurring that permeated everything. There, but not there. A hint without direction. So, he ran. When the hint would lose its luster, Ro'mee shifted his direction. When its luster grew, his run grew fevered, anxious and desperate.

He would find her. He would reunite with her. This world could not hide her from him. He would find his mate so that she would know what it was she was taking from him when she stepped back through the portal to return to her own world.

She'd be taking his hearts, both of them.

He had no use for them without her.

VIVIA

Vivia watched in fascination as the pregnant Vayu'un threw embers of fire onto the bog. Tiny explosive puffs burst from each of his casts, briefly adding brilliance to the already lit day. The sight was mesmerizing and oddly beautiful, and for a moment Vivia forgot about the situation she was in, what was at stake, and everything she was willing herself to lose.

What if Ro'mee didn't find her before her clock ran out? What if she never saw him again?

She ran her thumb over the opalesque insert on her wrist and whispered the question that was so loud in her mind. "How long before my return portal opens?"

Words filled the air above the insert. "5.3 hours"

Vivia swallowed hard, forcing back the heavy lump of worry that formed in her throat. The reality of leaving her soul's love was an icy chill which ran through her veins and made her heart tremble in her chest.

She could handle losing Ro'mee, she told herself. She could handle leaving him behind. But she wasn't sure she could accept not even being able to say goodbye.

Her vision blurred with unshed tears, but she blinked them away as she pressed determined yet trembling lips together.

There was little she could do for herself, but she could still try to aid Lily.

With new resolve, Vivia shifted her position amongst the high rocks to keep the pregnant Vayu'un in constant sight. The guy was huge, with thick bulging muscles and a chest as strong and sturdy as a cage. But despite his size and strength, he moved stiffly and awkwardly—as if he were in pain. His breathing was labored, and he moved with a certain economy, maximizing outcome for every minimal movement. Slow and steady. And it was that slow and steady walk that took him right out of his hidden camp.

“Shit!” Vivia exclaimed.

Vivia carefully, swiftly descended from her hidden perch in the rocks. As she moved, the air around her felt heavy with the smell of musk, burnt wood and something else, something acrid, something she couldn't quite call out by name.

She paused at the opening of the shallow cave where the Vayu'un had made his camp. A smoky haze lingered in the air from his dying fire. His possessions were scattered everywhere, if they could be called that. There was a bowl made from a scalloped rock. A few caveman type weapons in the form of sticks, vines and more rocks. A few tidbits that could have been food, maybe, but it did not look as though he'd fared as well as her Ro'mee had in the foraging department.

Vivia shifted her gaze warily, taking in every detail she could. The silence was deafening - only broken by da'Rou'ea herself, the faint chittering whispered screech of creatures in the distance, the creek of trees in the wind, the tumble of a pebble as a roach-mouse scurried up the side of the Vayu'un's cave to disappear inside a crack in its ceiling. Vivia's own

breath seemed too loud for her own comfort, and her heart raced faster for every second she stood still, in the open. If the Vayu'un turned back, if he returned and caught sight of her...

Turning away from the Vayu'un's makeshift home, Vivia hurried to follow after him. As she did, the beauty of this planet, da'Rou'ea, was undeniable. Breathtaking.

There were rolling hills of deep green grass, jagged mountains with rocky cliffs, lush untamed forests made up of ancient and odd trees, tangled undergrowth, and rugged ravines filled with trickling streams. Every now and then, a ray of sunlight broke through the dense canopy above her head, giving her journey an ethereal feel. Yet, it was based on the mundane, the commonplace for here. The smell of damp dirt, fresh, clean air, and the sometimes minty-musk of the leaves. A brook babbled some twenty feet below her feet at one spot, hidden in a crevasse edged with wild flowers of the likes she'd never seen before—and would never see again, not if she left this place. Left Ro'mee.

Vivia shook her head, reminding herself of her goal of warning Lily. It was easy to convince herself her efforts were meaningless, that they'd be no help at all, but there was no way to know if that were true—not even once her efforts had stopped and she was gone. But to sit back and do nothing and then wonder for the rest of her life if she could have made a difference... Well, that was enough to keep her going.

Rounding the corner of the trail, Vivia all but threw herself backward. There, out of sight, she froze, breathing in open-mouthed pants which she hoped made only enough sound for her own ears to hear. Preggo had been standing in the middle of the path, stopped with his shoulder to her. Thankfully, his

eyes had been scanning the thick foliage of the forest up the slope.

The Vayu'un had traveled a path that had been easing downward, his pace slow, steady, and measured. The ground had grown more mossy, more silent beneath Vivia's feet, but also more silent for his as well. While the directions he chose did not always allow her to keep him in a direct line of sight, it had been allowing her to hear his heavier footsteps—until now.

Vivia looked down the path in the direction from which she'd come. "Fuck!" she mouthed. There was nowhere to hide.

Could she outrun him if he came back and spotted her?

Doubtful.

Closing her eyes and holding her breath, Vivia waited with her back plastered against a moss-sided boulder sticking one end out of the mountain's descending slope. But, when a hand didn't clasp around her neck to break the tiny bones inside it, she dared open one eye. Then another. Leaning forward, she peeked once more around the edge of the boulder.

Preggo was gone.

"Shit!" Vivia swore again.

Keeping her stance low, she ran-walked the length of the trail as it went down a harsh drop in the land before it made a hard turn. But that's where she stopped.

A sound came to her on the absent wind. It hung there, daring her ears to reach for it, to believe in it.

There... again.

Weeping.

Vivia's heart quickened as she left the trail, drawn forward by the whisper on the wind. Taking each step carefully, she strained her eyes to pick apart the foliage from that which did not belong here—someone like her, someone from Earth, someone who didn't want to come here.

It took getting on her belly to crawl under a long cluster of tightly interwoven shrubs. Light gave way to night as she tore through roots and plant limbs that reached upward only to loop back down and bury themselves again in the ground. They thickened, clustering, threatening to bind her and hold her from being able to push forward or even go back, but there was no going back. Not really. Being here would never be taken away from her, nor would the wound having come here would leave inside of her.

Punching forward, Vivia broke through to be welcomed by silty light and the sight of Lily... with her mate, the one who would dissolve Lily's body into its basest parts, completely undone from anything that could have been once called human.

"Lily!" It was a strangled cry no louder than a choked whisper.

Vivia clawed at the ground, tearing and yanking at the thick brambles which clutched at her skin with a vengeful grip. Hot, desperate tears streamed down her cheeks and onto the dirt, mixing with it in an anguished plea for freedom. Her heart thundered in her ears as terror clawed its way through her throat at the sight of the long, slender tendrils of Lily's mate dancing in the soft wind all around Lily. Her every fiber screamed at her to break free. Now. Now!

The plants gave way to Vivia's ripping hands and thrashing shoulders, and she broke through their strangling hold with a

gut-wrenching gasp. She scrambled to her feet, her heart hammering in her chest. Then she paused, taking in the scene before her.

Lily was surrounded by a nightmarish yet delicate being, its mass undulating in the air like a ghostly apparition. Wisps of it reaching out and around Lily, everywhere yet never touching.

Despite its formless appearance, Vivia had no doubt of its deathly attachment to Lily. She was its mate. Its fated mate. Bound by something beyond love, hate or hope. Bound by a force more ancient and powerful than time itself.

The air seemed to still as though time itself were holding its breath. Vivia's own breath caught in her throat as she watched the two of them, bound together in a moment of silent understanding. Feeling a strange kinship with them, she suddenly realized how much she wanted to be a part of something so deep and powerful. Something that could never be broken.

A pang of envy scored her heart with this wish that this could be her and Ro'mee.

The words, "Please don't hurt her," had been ready on Vivia's tongue. But they weren't needed. They didn't belong. Not here, not in this moment. Lily's mate could dissolve her to nothing... if it touched her. But it wasn't touching her. Lily's hand would reach, fingers extended, seeking. But her mate would bend and curve, staying ever near without letting her actually connect.

From it, she was safe. But... she was not safe.

"Lily... Lily." Vivia stepped closer. "Stop crying," she said.

Lily's expression was one of anguished joy, and her tears trailed down her cheeks to drip off her chin, glinting in the sunlight like tiny jewels as they fell.

Lily spared Vivia a glance from the corner of her eye, but she didn't move from her spot on her knees at the edge of nothing. Sky stretched beyond her and nothing else.

"Lily, there's this guy," Vivia whispered. "He's desperate. He's gonna die and he's trying to save himself. And that means you and me." She waved her finger between the two of them. "Thing is, I'm pretty sure he'd kill us trying to get what he needs."

Lily refocused on her fated mate, her gaze lifted as her hands reached, trying to touch it. Her sobs floated on the air, quiet and wrenching to the depths of Vivia's soul.

"Please, Lily," she pleaded. "He's near. You have to be—"

Lily's eyes went wide, and she screamed, throwing herself sideways so that she lay on the ground as Preggo raged forward with the seeming heft of a thousand pound linebacker, his feet thundering against the ground and his shoulders seeming wide enough to wear a boat's sails as a cape.

It was as though he came out of nowhere, but in truth he'd found another passage up the hill, one that had not included ripping through bushes—bushes that Vivia fell backward into as Preggo charged past.

There was no sound from Lily's fated mate. Only action. It drew itself around Lily like a ball, creating a yellowish brown encasement that darkened as its body thickened into a smaller space. Rather than continue to look scared, Lily's expression turned into one of amazement and awe. Her hand reached out

to touch the encasing wall of her beloved, but that wall stretched away, leaving the tips of her fingers untouched.

Preggo arched above Lily, hands joined in a giant hammer of fists, and smashed downward. The protective covering of Lily's fated mate didn't even dent. At all. But, a color change rippled across its surface, going from a very opaque tint of yellowish-brown to a brownish cream that was nearly not see through at all. Each strike was blocked, and each strike left the same ripple of change in its place.

Lily's scream cleaved the air, primal and visceral. Horror sculpted her features into an image Vivia would never forget. Neither would she ever forget the sound of Lily's cry as she screamed, "You're killing him!"

Preggo's pounding fists, now pulled apart and hammering into the shell like pistons, didn't even pause. The death of Lily's fated mate meant nothing to him.

Nothing.

Vivia's feet were running before her head had made the decision. She launched herself onto Preggo's back, latching with her legs and wrapping a hooked arm around his neck to lock it in place with the other. It was a strangle hold, but it was nothing to the brute she held onto. His breath was labored, but she was a gnat. She felt the truth of it as he continued to pummel Lily's mate with no change in effort.

Giving up her attempt to strangle him, Vivia went for his eyes. She held onto him with her hooked arm and used her other to gouge at his eyes.

Preggo didn't even scream as her fingers sank deep into the sockets in his skull. What he did do was jump straight up

into the air, kick his feet out in front of him and land flat on his back.

Vivia's ribs cracked. All of them.

As Preggo rose from his position atop Vivia, his huge hands closed around her neck in a vice grip. Struggling for breath, she had no choice but to take in shallow, desperate gulps of air as he picked her up off the ground like a rag doll.

Letting his arm fall limp yet not relinquishing his hold on Vivia's neck, Preggo began walking away, dragging Vivia away with him.

Vivia's feet and legs kicked out reaching for anything that might slow him down or, better yet, stop him. But the soft moss offered no resistance and the gnarled trees tore at her feet rather than offered any help. In the growing distance, Lily's screams of anguished rage filled Vivia's ears until it became the haunted cry of a banshee somewhere else, some time else in some place that never existed... as the world around Vivia threatened to slip away.

Vivia's lungs burned with shallow, wheezing breaths. Her head spun and her vision blurred and faded as her consciousness ebbed. It would have been handy if her spine had broken, if her body had fallen limp, as if she weren't even there anymore, but that didn't happen. What did happen was the skin on her feet shredded as the path the Vayu'un took moved from soft moss to rocks as she fought against him each step of the way.

Sometimes she launched herself forward, trying to use his own inertia against him. Other times she did her best to trip him, and other times hooked her legs around his in an effort to make him stop.

None of it worked.

But her nanites did. They fixed some small bone that broke in her neck—twice. They fixed her cracked ribs, mostly. And they healed the broken capillaries in her eyes only for them to burst again, over and over, until her sight grew hazy with red.

Somewhere, Vivia thought she heard her name screamed by the wind. But it was an illusion.

It had to be.

RO'MEE

The air rushed fast enough to turn into wind as Ro'mee ran, pushing his body to the edge of what it could do before demanding more. That wind carried with it a forlorn cry of Ro'mee's soul—a desperate call for Vivia, his fated mate, his everything. His legs burned and his breath came in ragged, searing gasps. His hearts beat against his chest as he drove himself forward, propelled by his sheer will and determination to reach her before her time ran out. With every passing second, her presence grew stronger—as if she were lying right beside him, as if the essence of her lingered on his skin.

Vivia's scent filled the air, making it thick and heavy. It spread through him like a blanket of warmth and love. As the smell of her engulfed his senses, time seemed to stand still. It drove him like a man crazed, like a man an inch away from the water's surface after an unfathomable dive into the darkness.

He had to find her. He had to reach her before her time was up.

Ro'mee's pounding feet fell with an absence of noise. Vivia's scent had her near, almost touchable—but so was the forest's edge.

Ro'mee skidded to a stop with only the last reaching limbs of the forest left to shelter him from the sky's void. But while it was still shielded from his senses, the sight of Vivia being strangled by the pregnant Vayu'un was not. He had her on her back, her knees parted. One of his giant, powerful hands was wrapped around her neck. The other was reaching for a rock large enough to replace Vivia's head.

Beneath him, Vivia fought. She clawed at his arms, her fingernails cutting deep gouges into his skin as she tried desperately to free herself. But his blood only seemed to make her struggles harder as his skin grew slick.

As for the Vayu'un, though his taut muscles flexed with every movement, his movements were slow, lazy. Easy and bored. Vivia's strength was nothing against his... Neither was Ro'mee's.

But at least Ro'mee had the advantage of surprise, and he'd use it.

Flexing his shoulders back, Ro'mee filled his single lung to its full capacity. His chest expanded to the point the bones within creaked, at the edge of cracking. When he released his warrior's cry, the forest's floor shook.

The pregnant Vayu'un froze, his head snapping to look over his shoulder. His gaze found Ro'mee and their eyes locked. The muscle bound monstrosity sneered, his lips curling back to reveal his teeth as everything else about him broadcast his contempt.

But the pregnant Vayu'un wasn't the only one who looked. Vivia did too, her eyes growing wide with a mix of shock and hope, both of which were quickly replaced by resolve as she shifted her body to focus on the Vayu'un. A swift hike of one

knee jammed into the back of the Vayu'un's elbow, into the side that should not bend.

It bent.

The Vayu'un's grip on Vivia faltered and his scream of pain projected outward from his campsite's shallow cave to flood echoes through the forest in visceral waves. His arm had inverted in an unnatural direction.

Vivia twisted away, shifting her body in a roll that had the Vayu'un's hand holding onto nothing more than dirt when done. Rather than scramble to her feet to run, though, as Ro'mee had thought she would, she dove... straight into the ground, and the ground swallowed her. At least that was how the initial shock of the sight had seemed. But the rippling rise and fall of the green field into which Vivia had dove told Ro'mee that it was not ground that had swallowed her up. It was water—plant-covered water.

The colossal Vayu'un staggered to his feet, every motion of his body a visible display of pain. Bending forward, he screamed his rage at the once-seeming solid ground. He took a stance of one leg and shoulder forward, looking ready to charge after Vivia, but instead he stood and glowered at the space where she'd disappeared. The hand of his good arm was curled into a fist. His injured arm hung limply behind him.

He did not dive in.

Why?

Ro'mee was acutely aware that his mate was not yet safe, with him, in his arms. Yet he stood, watching the Vayu'un who would destroy her in an effort to save himself. It wasn't the child within that the muscle-bound Vayu'un cared about most. It was himself. All that it would have taken to save the child

was for him to ask for Ro'mee's assistance when the time came... and the time had come. The Vayu'un's labored breathing—shallow and constricted, almost gasping—told Ro'mee that. There was no survival possible for him now. Death was his only way out, and yet... He was filled with a madness to survive.

Ro'mee had seen it before in others. The pregnancy-driven need to survive overrode the realities. The man the Vayu'un had been before had gone. The man was dead, and the creature left in his stead couldn't accept that truth.

So why wasn't he diving into the waters after Vivia? Why wasn't he fighting for what he saw as his last chance at life? Survival?

Ro'mee's gaze shifted away from the Vayu'un to stare at the now settled surface of the water. The plants atop it had gone still once more with no more rise and fall, no shuffle or nudge between them.

Ro'mee's hearts plummeted into his stomach.

"Vivia," he whispered. The blood drained from his face. Something was wrong—so wrong that it stopped the crazed Vayu'un in his tracks.

The surface of the plant-covered water exploded as Vivia surfaced like a creature from the depths. Powerful. Unstoppable. She rose to where the water only reached halfway up her ribs. Light glinted off of her as the water cascaded down the length of her body, but in less than a heartbeat later, that light turned to fractals, casting her in an array of colors.

Vivia's movement's slowed, the swing of her arms becoming jerky in a sudden stop and start motion. She shifted

her head slightly, just enough to meet Ro'mee's gaze with her own wide eyes. Nothing else about her moved, and time itself seemed to freeze.

Then, as if she were a statue being dragged down to the depths of a lake, she tilted and disappeared beneath the surface once more.

Panic shot like lightning through Ro'mee's veins, pushing and searing its way to his core. He and the pregnant Vayu'un shared a look. A moment. Less, even. Then the giant was moving. With a strangled scream of desperate rage, he waded forward in huge, sure strides.

Ro'mee spared one glance toward the covered heavens and the endless void he knew existed beyond the tree's bows, then he ran.

One step.

Two steps.

A leap.

He dove, breaking through the water's surface. If he died, it would be trying to save Vivia.

It was all for her.

He'd save nothing for himself.

VIVIA

C old...

So. Cold.

Vivia's heart raced as fear's icy tendrils squeezed the oxygen from her chest. She was trapped beneath the water with no way out—its piercing embrace suffocating her, its touch so cold it burned.

Vivia's vision blurred as her eyes etched over with crystals. They clung to her body, wrapping around her. They'd even found their way into her mouth and nose, making panic's grip her new closest, loudest friend, screaming at her to do something, anything!

Her nanos could fight injury. They could bring her back from death. They could undo the damage done from the inside out. But this? Frozen in an alien version of liquid nitrogen? They'd save her just so she could die again, over and over. Here. On da'Rou'ea. In some far galaxy away from everything she'd ever known, away from every life she ever thought she'd have.

So cold...

Vivia's lungs burned with the need to breathe, but she resisted. Her eyes were open, without focus. Her breath was

caught in her throat, trapped. Screams tore from her core as terror set in, silent screams that couldn't make it past the crystals reaching into her throat.

A whispered voice of sanity inside her head reminded Vivia that Ro'mee was out there. Near. She'd seen him. He'd be trying to get to her, save her. It spurred a spark of hope, but that hope only highlighted a reality.

He'd die trying to save her.

Literally.

He wouldn't just tempt death as he fought to save her. He would, in fact, die. Now. In this watery grave with her... if she didn't save herself.

And so her fight began. Vivia struggled against the unyielding grip of the shimmering crystals that had molded to her skin. With every flex of her limbs, the crystals seemed to resist her efforts, stubbornly clinging to her body like sparkling armor, though with some edges sharp, like tiny serrated knives.

The water's taste registered as a smell, one of faint alchemically-infused fumes, beneath which was a hint of something almost rosemary and cooling like menthol. Pings reached her ears, the sound of cracking ice, as if her efforts to move were shattering a thousand miniature frozen shards.

Yet still, she wasn't free. She couldn't reach the water's surface that was so near.

Vivia's lungs constricted with icy fingers of panic clawing at her chest. Terror took hold of her body and it thrashed blindly, desperately, as if it could fight its way out of the clutches of death. Every ounce of Vivia's being was desperate to survive. She could hear her blood pounding in her ears, feel

her heart quiver with panic, taste the metallic notes on her tongue as she fought against gasping water into her lungs in search of air.

The murky, shaded colors of her underwater world began to fade... her vision dimming.

A jolt, almost like a zap of electricity, shot through Vivia's core. It centered her, focused her and pulled her separate from the panic drowning out her ability to think. Through the haze, through the blur, there was a shimmer. The water itself started to hum. The crystals covering her, filling her mouth, her throat, her nose, vibrated with an imperceptible feeling that found its way to the core of her ear drums to reverberate in a thousand notes at once.

The shimmer, close yet out of reach, coalesced, taking shape. Twinkling green gave it form, then purple, blue... and orange. The universe tore, and through it, on the other side, was Earth.

Vivia's Earth.

Trees that looked like trees, the kind she knew, the ones she'd grown up with. There was a park and a lovingly worn, wooden bench. The barely perceptible honk of a car horn...

Earth. Her Earth!

Home. Freedom.

Revenge...

She'd have the chance to kill Xavia if she went back. She'd have the chance to avenge her mother, her father, her brother. She'd have the chance to strip away Xavia's ill-gotten gains.

And if she didn't go back?

Xavia would win.

Vivia managed to shift, bringing her body a tiny bit closer to the rift. She could almost touch the portal with her outstretched hand. Its ethereal hum called out to her. Composed of a million notes, they blended and worked together to forge a clear, crisp tone.

It called to her, beckoned her. She was sure if she touched the portal, she would be pulled through. Back to Earth and away from the bog that held her agony-soaked body in its grip. There, she'd have a life free of the hopelessness that had her now.

Ro'mee...

She was almost there. She could almost touch it. Just a little more. If she reached her arm, bent her body...

Ro'mee...

The portal's hum was beautiful. Intoxicating. Irresistible. But if she fell into it, she'd never find her way back. And as alluring as it was, its song was not near as sweet as her soul's song for Ro'mee.

My love...

His smile. His devotion. His care. His want of her and all that life had to offer. He was her beginning and end.

She knew that, felt the truth of it. Believed it.

Took ya long enough, a little voice inside her head chided.

Vivia's lips curled into a smile even as her vision darkened further at the edges. Her body bucked and jerked with the beginnings of its death throes.

And still the way out was right there, taunting her now with its presence... But there'd be no saving herself. Not that way. Not by leaving Ro'mee.

An underwater wave billowed against her. Then another. It was enough to shift her even closer to the portal.

Nooo! It was a desperate scream inside her head. She was too close. One touch and she'd be gone, through the portal with no way back.

Vivia fought against her panic to focus on what was happening. The water had moved. But, it'd been completely still when she'd seen it from the shore. That meant she was no longer alone.

Preggo?

Ro'mee?

Both?

One wanted to save her and would die trying.

The other wanted to use her to save himself.

Another swell of water surged past Vivia, threatening to send her hurtling back to Earth. Desperation gripped her heart and clenched her stomach in an icy fist. She had tasted the wonders of this planet, felt the soft heat of Ro'mee's touch, heard the whisper of his voice, smelled his citrus scent, seen the love in his eyes, and felt his heart beat against her cheek. He had become her home. Her family. She wanted to be by his side. To love, to laugh, and if need be... to fight.

No matter what the cost.

She would not leave him. Not now... Not ever.

Vivia scrambled against the sharp edges of the crystals, her hands forcing themselves to ball into fists in hopes of cracking the frigid coating. The crushing encasement weighed her down, and every movement drove a million pin-pricking daggers plunging into her body, serrating her skin, shredding it at a microscopic level that promised to eventually eat its way to her core.

Vivia's limbs flailed, or tried to, and the menthol cooling in her throat drifted deeper into her lungs, making the tender, delicate tissue within feel bitten with frost. The water's cold embrace now seemed distant to her, as if the crystal itself was now the coldest thing touching her.

Despite everything, even as her vision continued to dim and her loss of oxygen made her dizzy, she managed to edge further away from the portal. A familiar drunken feeling told her the nanos were hard at work inside her head, doing their best to extend the oxygen's usefulness, helping her hold on to consciousness.

Another underwater wave rolled past, edging her closer again to the portal and undoing her efforts to stay—stay on da'Rou'ea, stay with Ro'mee.

Nooo...

The murky depths of the water closed in around Vivia, the dim light fading to inky blackness. Still, a faint glimmer reached her awareness from the portal to Earth, shimmering like a star in the night sky.

The crystals on Vivia's tongue, the roof of her mouth, between her gums and cheeks... they were gritty, rough, and violently sharp.

She swallowed. Hard. She scored her tongue, squeezed her cheeks. She forced the crystals to cut her, sink into her skin and come into contact with her blood. The nanos loved her blood. Her veins were their super highways. And she hung up a huge sign for all travelers to stop here. See the sights. See the crystals. Recognize what was killing her—because it wasn't drowning. It was the murderous water itself.

The tang of iron flooded her mouth just as her eyes rolled back, deep into her skull, immersing her in a world of nothingness.

Pressure. Crushing pressure around her throat. A giant hand tightened its grip, dragging her up until she breached the surface.

Vivia gasped, every breath a struggle, each inhalation agonizing. Her lungs pleaded for relief, and the desperate longing for oxygen was relentless.

Air flooded her mouth, throat and lungs. Vivia reveled in the sharpness of the crystals cutting into her tissue like broken glass. Their coldness burned, but a glow of warmth was growing around it. Her nanos. They were on the job, saving her. Even her vision had glazed over with a pewtery tint, giving her a front seat view of the nanos themselves.

All around her, the crystal encasement thickened as the bog's water met the air again. It formed on her skin like frost on a windowpane, except these crystals set in place in rigid, unforgiving scaly shard-like razors.

The hand which held her by the neck had crusted over, too, joining them together. Vivia moved her head what small amount she could, anything to cause the crystals to cut her even more.

She didn't have to lift her gaze to know that the person holding her by the neck wasn't Ro'mee, but she did anyway.

Preggo...

What she was surprised to see was how his breathing seemed more labored than hers. His chest heaved in shallow gasps as if his lungs could only expand enough to take in a small amount of air.

His icy gaze passed over her as his rigid figure shifted toward the rocky shoreline of his cave.

"Give up," Vivia managed to croak out as he dragged her through the water face up by the neck beside him.

Preggo's only response was to crush her throat so hard her wheezing breath became nothing more than a rasping whisper as he continued forward in a slow, determined trot.

Everything else was stillness. It was peaceful, beautiful even. It was the kind of stillness that begged a person to stop and stare and simply take it in. But for Vivia it was a nightmare, one in which she was losing—or had already lost—everything.

Behind her, at the end of Vivia's dragging feet, the waters parted. The sight caused Vivia to stifle a choked gasp. Out of the thick stillness of the bog, Ro'mee rose like a vengeful god. Droplets of water, glimmering in the air like diamonds, transformed into an armor of crystal shards over his face, arms and chest.

He took two large strides forward and wrapped his arms around Preggo's waist, trapping him. Then he leaned back in a defiant arch, hoisting the more powerful man's feet off the bog's murky bottom.

Vivia witnessed the crystals fuse the two men together.

A sharp, wrenching, searing agony exploded over Vivia's neck as Preggo's hand jerked itself open. The change was accompanied by the icy release of a thousand crystalline shards cascading into the bog like a fine dusting of rain. Close behind were swirls of red, fine rivulets of blood, which now wept from Vivia's neck where a thin layer of flesh in the shape of Preggo's hand had been ripped away.

Vivia fell free from Preggo's grip. But this time she was ready for her body's limitations, and she twisted and bent so that her feet found purchase in the bog's muddy bottom. Her first instinct was to sink low, to bend her knees, to use her body's own weight to break through the crystal covering, but that would have simply bobbed her up and down in the water, allowing it to coat her in layer after layer of crystals.

But she had a new ally on her side: her nanos. The glittering crystals had been joined by a thin layer of glimmering pewter beneath it, eating it, destroying it.

Vivia stretched her arms out to either side of herself as far as the crystal would let her, then she jerked them toward her chest, pulling her elbows forward and curving her back, with all her might. Crystal shards fell in a fine dust of twinkling stars all around her as if they'd exploded outward.

With that done, it was impossible for her not to refocus on her portal home. It was a swirling vortex of blues and greens with streaks of orange-silver dancing around it. Its beauty was breathtaking, mesmerizing. It captured her gaze and held it. It melted the struggle away, the fight. It was a sweet lullaby to all her senses that everything would be okay—if only she stepped forward, if she just touched it... if she just let it take her home.

“Go!” Ro'mee roared.

Ro'mee's body was curved in a bow, his back arching in an effort to keep Preggo firmly in his grasp. Preggo's expression was one of unbridled fury. His eyes wild and his mouth open in a snarl as he strained against Ro'mee's grip. Preggo's body swelled as every muscle in him tensed, bulging and knotting as he fought to break free.

The snap and ping of their joined crystals cracking reverberated in the otherwise still air. Ro'mee's hold was slipping.

"Go!" Ro'mee yelled again, his line of sight going past Vivia to focus on the one thing that could save her from Preggo's reach. His meaning was clear. He wanted her to save herself. He wanted her to abandon him.

No fucking way...

Vivia wouldn't leave him—not now, not ever.

She twisted her hips hard. A cascade of pops and cracks accompanied her taking a step, then another—away from the portal. But then her step faltered when she snagged on something under the water. It moved against her skin, and Vivia felt a chill as it slowly made its way up to the tranquil water's surface, parting the plants that floated upon it.

Vivia gasped, shocked. Her eyes drank in the horrific sight of a woman, forever trapped in a coffin of crystal. Even in death, the woman's expression was one of anguish, like an eternal scream trapped on her porcelain face. Vivia's breath caught in her throat as she stepped forward, gingerly reaching out a hand toward her.

A stillness in Ro'mee's fight with Preggo ensued as both men, frozen like statues in a timeless battle, shifted their

attention to look at the woman, herself frozen in time and terror.

Dread filled Vivia. If a different time, a different situation, this could have easily been her fate.

Preggo's eyes went wide, his mouth fell agape. His stare went glassy, then his features hardened.

The dead woman was Preggo's mate. She had to be.

With his lips twisted in a snarl, Preggo tried to twist out of Ro'mee's grasp. He succeeded in lashing out with a vicious kick that would have struck Vivia's face, but she stumbled backward out of reach. It was a move that had her crying out when her arm brushed a hair's distance from the portal that would take her away from Ro'mee. But she found her balance and began a march toward the bank once more. It was a trajectory which took her directly past the two fighting men.

Preggo kicked at her again as she neared. His foot brushed against her arm with a force that probably would have broken bone if it had connected. And while Vivia was able to walk past without having to so much as blink, Ro'mee was rocked forward.

Preggo's feet hit the ground, and rather than be bent backward again, he tilted forward. Ro'mee had lost the fight for control and now only held on as a dampener to Preggo's efforts. But there was no more stopping him.

Vivia pushed forward with determination toward the shore, toward Preggo's camp. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her movements were slow, but she didn't need to be fast. She just needed to be faster than the psycho who wanted to kill her to save himself.

Vivia plodded slowly. The level of the murky water dropped to her thighs and a thin layer of glittering crystals formed to cling to her skin as the air met with the frigid liquid. With each step forward, her body grew heavier from the gathering crystals, like a diamond encrusted cloak draped over her sodden form.

The sound of Preggo's labored breathing and Ro'mee's grunts were loud in her ears as she expelled every ounce of energy within her to increase the gap between herself and Preggo.

She didn't have a plan for beating Preggo other than to outlast him. It was clear he was in bad shape. His breathing was labored and uneven. The baby inside of him had made him incredibly strong, but now it was killing him, and it didn't seem he had a lot of time left.

He was insane to think he could save himself by passing the baby to her at this point. His pregnancy had gone too far. The infant had already grown inside his chest. No one could save him now, but he was too crazed to accept that—or too selfish. She wasn't sure which.

Vivia's step faltered when she caught sight of movement at Preggo's camp. Yes, there. A figure unfolding and refolding itself as it climbed down the rock face that ran down the side of Preggo's cave.

A surge of shock ran through Vivia when she realized what she was seeing. It was Lily! Yet... different. She radiated the same insanity that Preggo did, the same determination. Hatred. Untethered ferocity. Her humanity stripped away, leaving a wild, feral and rabid beast in its place.

Something glinted in Lily's hands. Something long, silver and slender. It took Vivia a second blink to realize what they

were. They were the broken off heels from Lily's stiletto shoes.

Lily took a step forward toward the bog, and Vivia yelled out to stop her, to warn her. But it was as if Vivia was not even there. Lily's eyes were fixed elsewhere, and Vivia was certain the woman's gaze was for no one else but Preggo.

"You killed him." Lily's voice dripped with venom as she uttered the words. The coldness in her tone sent a chill through Vivia's entire body. The woman she'd seen only minutes prior was barely recognizable now. "You killed my mate!" Lily screamed with a naked ferocity that made Vivia crave to flinch away.

Lily waded into the bog, her shoulders curled forward and her eyes promising a savagery beyond anything the simply sane could do.

Vivia staggered to the side as the larger woman waded past. Twisting her neck, Vivia watched to see what would happen next.

With a feral scream, Lily scrambled up Preggo's body as Ro'mee once more arched him backward.

Preggo's face was contorted in a tortured grimace as he fought against Ro'mee's hold. The veins in his neck bulged and his knuckles were a bluish white as he tried to wrench himself free, but Ro'mee didn't budge an inch. His arms were firm around Preggo's body, his stance like an immovable wall of stone.

Lily scaled Preggo's body with a deadly grace. Her crystal-encrusted toes found a perch atop Ro'mee's arms and her knees pressed into Preggo's chest. She towered over him, her eyes gleaming with unfathomable rage. She pressed the tip of

one stiletto heel into Preggo's forehead, forcing him to lift his face to meet hers. Once she had him there, there was no hesitation. With a scream that would ring in Vivia's nightmares for the rest of her life, Lily plunged her other stiletto deep into Preggo's eye, breaking through the coating crystal and sinking deep into his socket.

Preggo's agonized howl pierced the air as his entire body tried to jerk away from the monster he'd created. It was a force strong enough to unbalance them all and send them tumbling into the bog, but it was too late to stop Lily's stiletto from slicing through to its intended mark deep within Preggo's skull.

With a desperate lunge, Vivia flung herself forward, reaching for Lily, trying to stop her from sinking under the water's surface. If the crystals got in her lungs, they'd be shredded.

Time slowed to a crawl. Vivia's arms were outstretched but still too far away. But Ro'mee's arms tore away from Preggo's torso just as the water cascaded outward from beneath them. His hands met Lily in a heaving push that sent her upward as Ro'mee and Preggo sank under.

Vivia's arms were around her next. "Lily... Lily, we have to go." The woman who'd felled a beast had turned into a ragdoll in Vivia's arms. "I need you to walk, Lily. Walk." Vivia pulled the larger woman's arm over her shoulder and slipped her own arm around Lily's waist. "Walk," Vivia encouraged again.

There was no churning of the water as they made their way toward the shore. When Ro'mee emerged once more, it was with Preggo draped over his shoulder. Unmoving. Lifeless.

The crystal encasement that held the two men together fortified further as Ro'mee carried Preggo to the pebbled shore. It was a wonder that Ro'mee could see enough to know which way to go. The crystals had formed a thick coating over his head that extended halfway down his face.

When he reached the shore, he continued on into the shallow cave. There, rather than attempt to ease Preggo's body gently to the ground, Ro'mee heaved upward and then threw their bodies down together. The crystal joining them shattered, freeing Ro'mee from their bond.

"Help me," Ro'mee said, urgency in his voice. His mask of crystal had shattered in a jagged slant that left him looking as though he belonged as the haunt of some ancient opera house. But, the change had freed his face enough to allow him to see.

Vivia's heart raced as she watched him struggle for air, his usually vibrant blue skin turning pale. "Are you okay? Can you breathe?" He'd been under the water, and she feared what the crystals might be doing inside of him.

"It's the baby," he said. A wet, rattling cough followed, leaving the corner of his lips coated with something purplish blue. "We have to get it out. I need a rock, something, anything, to break through his chest. We have to get inside."

Lily cowed in the corner of the cave, ashen-faced and trembling. Her athletic frame seemed to shrink, her wide eyes glazed and distant. Vivia knew then that nothing would be able to pull her from the abyss into which she had fallen. She wasn't going to be able to help. Her fated mate had died, and now she was simply trying to hold on to continuing to exist without him.

Vivia flew into action, rummaging and searching with scrambling fingers. Her hand passed over just what she

needed, and she stopped, grabbing up a crudely crafted rock resembling an ax's sharpened head. But when she turned back around to return to Ro'mee, she lurched to a halt. A few feet away, a rip in the universe revealed another realm. Its sky glowed a pale greenish-yellow and flecks of white-gray drifted silently past like snowflakes. The terrain was flat and everything glowed with an endless gloom.

It was Ro'mee's world—Ro'mee's portal home. It didn't hum for Vivia, didn't call to her. She felt no inclination to get near it, and she instinctively knew she would not be allowed to pass through it.

But Ro'mee could.

He'd be able to take Preggo's baby and go home. That's what this had all been about for him, hadn't it? Procreation? His people had very few females among them. But now he had a baby... and a way home.

Ro'mee stole a glance towards Vivia, still on his knee beside Preggo. His gaze fell upon the jagged stone, his vision lingering upon the rock's sharp edge.

"Yes, that should do." He extended his arm, reaching his hand for it.

"Ro'mee," Vivia said, her eyes flicking to his portal.

"Vivia, please..." Ro'mee said, giving his hand a shake for emphasis.

Vivia handed over the sharpened rock. She then stood back and watched him work. What he did next, he did quickly.

Ro'mee drove a corner of the ax head into Preggo's sternum. He pressed hard, his muscles bulging, as he forced a deep slice into Preggo's abdomen. Just like on Ro'mee's lip,

the fluid released by the cut was a purplish-blue, confirming Vivia's suspicion. Ro'mee had coughed up blood.

Gripping the two sides of the incision, Ro'mee pulled it open and held it spread. His arms trembled with the strain. "Vivia, quickly. Reach inside and up to get the baby."

Sparing another quick glance at the portal, Vivia threw one leg over Preggo's body and sat atop him. Gently at first but soon finding she had to press hard, she probed inside the warm, wet chamber of his chest cavity and foraged through the entanglement of organs. Her hand stilled abruptly when she touched a tiny foot. It kicked inside the delicate hold of her fingers.

Joy surged through her heart, followed by pure awe and unbridled love. It happened in an instant. Everything about her life changed. Every priority and every want.

Vivia, desperate and arms shaking, reached into Preggo's chest with a strength she knew existed only in that moment. With one final heave, the precious baby emerged from within. Vivia gazed at the infant in wonderment, as if she had never seen anything so glorious and miraculous in her entire life.

Ro'mee gently wrapped his arm around Vivia, enveloping them both in his warm embrace.

Vivia's heart thumped as her eyes lifted from the precious bundle in her arms to the nearby portal, swirling with its many colors like a beacon to beckon Ro'mee home. She nervously glanced at him, apprehension heavy in her chest.

The lump in her throat threatened to choke her, and the crystal shards still embedded in her tender tissues seemed to ache in response to Ro'mee's pale pallor. He seemed even more drained of color than he had been a moment ago.

Vivia had no choice but to speak the words that tore out her own heart. “You should go,” she said, doing her best to hide the tremble in her voice. Her gaze was drawn to the trace of blood on his lips. If he stayed, he could die. She couldn’t have that. Wouldn’t allow that. He had to go.

“You’ve got to go back,” she said, this time her voice stronger, more vehement. “Maybe they could save you.” Her voice broke, overcome by what she was asking her heart to endure by losing him. But watching him die was a fate far, far worse. She now had a glimpse into what Lily had endured, and it was beyond unbearable.

Ro’mee’s eyes were a mix of gold and emerald, and he gazed deep into Vivia’s eyes and declared in a low, throaty voice, “No matter the distance, no matter the universe, I shall always find my way to your side. I love you and choose you with every breath.” He leaned in, his heat joining hers as he kissed her temple and breathed his warmth against her before saying, “My home is with you. It’s always with you.”

Vivia blinked away the tears that filled her eyes, letting them fall to bathe the baby in her arms. A family. She had a family.

She couldn’t match Ro’mee with his romantic words. She couldn’t capture the beauty and power of the love she held for him. All she could do was hold him tight and whisper, “I love you, too. Always.”

RO'MEE

Ro'mee and Vivia held each other beneath the star-filled night, their baby in Vivia's arms and Vivia in Ro'mee's. Before them, Lily stood illuminated by the swirling glimmer of the portal that would take her back to Earth. She was going home—home to her beloved husband and children who had been left for months not even knowing if she was still alive.

Tears of joy trickled down Lily's porcelain cheeks, and a smile of profound gratitude lit her face. "You saved me," she whispered. Her recovery had been slow as her devastation eased to be replaced by appreciation.

Vivia let out a sweet laugh. "We all know it happened the other way around. You saved us."

Vivia reached for Lily and pulled her into their shared embrace.

Almost two Earth months had passed since they'd put Preggo down. They never managed to learn more about him than what they'd experienced—but all they would ever tell the child he gave them was that they would be forever in his debt and grateful for his gift of little Yer'rym. They would tell Yer'rym what they could of his mother, that she traveled across galaxies to be with his father. They would tell him all

that they could to make sure he knew he was loved by the people who gave him life.

A small but cozy starter home resembling a wooden cottage stood behind them, set between two trees in the middle of a sprawling meadow of glowing violet and yellow flowers that stretched in all directions. In the distance, rolling hills lit by the evening moon reached for the horizon. A gentle breeze blew through the trees, carrying with it the sweet smell of the meadow flowers. Cat had managed to climb one of the trees to lounge half in the tree and half on the cottage's roof, where he dozed in happy slumber.

A pang of loss filled Vivia's heart now that she was faced with a woman she would gladly call a best friend. But Lily's eyes shone with excitement... and hope. Coming through the loss of her fated mate had almost killed her, but she'd found reasons to live, reasons waiting for her on Earth.

"I'm going to miss you," Vivia said, her lips trembling as she tried to hold her smile in place. She was happy for Lily, but it was mixed with so much sadness for herself. She'd never see this dear, sweet, ferocious woman ever again. "You won't forget?" Vivia asked.

Lily's gaze sharpened and her smile turned determinedly purposeful. She took Vivia's face in her hands and rested their foreheads together. "I won't forget," she whispered.

"Thank you," Vivia mouthed as her voice fell absent. A tear slipped free to slide down her cheek.

Lily dipped her head to kiss Yer'rym's forehead. "I'll miss you, little one. Your dad was a dick, but you're kinda awesome."

Vivia's bark of laughter brightened her heart, and this time she blinked away happy tears, letting them fall from her eyes.

Lily wrapped her arms around Ro'mee's neck next. "Take care of my girl," she told him with a warning glint in her eye.

Ro'mee inclined his head, a gentle smile tugging at his lips. "I will miss you, too," he told her.

Lily stepped away then, taking her closer to the portal behind her. Lily's portal didn't sing to Vivia, didn't call to her. It was Lily's and Lily's alone and seemed to almost reach for her.

Lily didn't linger further. She clasped her hands over her heart as a sign of her love for them, then turned and stepped through the portal that would take her home. The portal's colors swirled, circling in until the vision of Earth—and Lily—were gone.

Vivia buried her face in Ro'mee's chest and allowed herself to release the aching sob she'd been holding back.

Other than Lily and Preggo—and, of course, Ro'mee—she'd met no one else on this world. She and Ro'mee were now alone with little Yer'rym. As fates went, it was not a bad one. But she had hoped for more. Who would Yer'rym have to love someday? Who could he tell his secrets to, run and play with? Who would he call his one and only?

"More will come," Ro'mee murmured against her soft, newly grown hair, almost an inch long now. "We are not alone, my love. Others will come."

Vivia nodded, her heart still aching, but comforted by Ro'mee's words. She held him close as she watched the shimmering portal fade, then disappear.

Vivia sniffed away her tears and turned to look up at Ro'mee, her smile turning playful. "I guess a kid couldn't ask for a better play pal than Cat."

Ro'mee's brows went up as his face grew animated. "If that worm slimes our child one more time!"

Vivia laughed, a sound full of happiness, more happiness than she'd ever thought she'd have.

She patted Ro'mee's chest and her eyes narrowed. "You know, you've been looking pretty beefy lately. You sure you don't have a little stowaway growing in there?"

Ro'mee's gaze turned heated with want as he stared down at Vivia, leaning in close with a voice that melted her from the inside out. "Maybe... But I think we should up the odds later..."

Vivia's heart fluttered in her chest as she smiled up at him, her heart swelling with love. Despite the odds, she and Ro'mee had found each other, and together, they would make a life for themselves and for Yer'rym on da'Rou'ea.

Yes, she thought, this was a fate she could live with.

And it was only the beginning...

EPILOGUE

Xavia surveyed her reflection in the looking glass. Her gown of cream colored silk was trimmed with the finest lace. She'd never looked so beautiful.

She smoothed the skirt and turned slightly, admiring the way it caught the light. Today was her wedding day, and she couldn't wait for the moment when she would meet her rich and powerful husband to be at the altar. This had been what she'd worked for, what she'd sacrificed everything for. This. Today. She'd have everything she'd ever wanted.

The door to her exquisite dressing chamber creaked open, and Xavia turned to greet the statuesque woman who entered.

The woman's eyes widened in surprise. She stared for what felt like an eternity, and in those infinite moments, a myriad of expressions rippled across her features. But then, as if remembering herself and why she'd come, the woman's face softened and she stepped forward. A pleasant smile brightened her features as her eyes twinkled with the excitement merited by such a day—Xavia's wedding day.

"I'm Lily," the woman said. "I have a wedding present for you—from Vivia."

Shock drained the blood from Xavia's face. She gasped but that was all the reaction she had time for before Lily was

lifting and shooting a tiny pistol. The explosion registered to Xavia's ears at the same time that a stabbing pain bloomed in her shoulder.

“What—” was all Xavia managed to say as she stumbled forward, only briefly able to detect the smirk on Lily's face before everything grew blurry and her world spun out of control.

Xavia crumpled to the ground, her vision fading to black.

XAVIA AWOKE ALONE. Her eyes snapped open as her heart beat hard against her ribs. She lay still, trying to control her breathing. The air felt thick and heavy, like damp cotton.

She tried to move, but her movements were sluggish and her limbs felt like lead.

She didn't have to recall what had happened. She remembered it all. Clearly. But a quick dart of her gaze around the room told her she was alone. Again.

Tottering to her hands and knees, Xavia scrambled on what felt like drunken limbs to the door and turned the lock on its handle before taking a moment to fully take the situation in.

She felt her body sway as she settled back onto her heels but managed to steady herself. The cold chill of the marble floor seeped through the billows of her wedding gown. Everything from the sound of the ticking clock to the scent of roses seemed to remain unchanged.

She slowly examined every inch of herself. She felt the graceful line of her throat, the softness of her hair, and the

warmth of her body. Everything was pristine. Everything was the same.

Hanging her head, closing her eyes and leaning forward on her hands, Xavia laughed her relief. All was still right in the world. All was as it should be.

She breathed a sigh of relief, tilting her head back as she smiled to the heavens. But a thought, a tug from reality, had her eyes flying open once more and caused her heart to bounce off her ribs.

A strangled cry escaped her lips as a terrible foreboding washed over her. Her gaze faltered, and she looked down to find what she hoped she would not—a glimmering oblong gem embedded in her arm just above her wrist. A fated mate gem.

A chill settled into the depths of her soul as the full gravity of her situation came crashing down.

“Noooo!”

Xavia’s fingers wrenched at the oval jewel, desperately trying to free herself. Sweat beaded her forehead and upper lip as she pulled and tugged at the ghastly thing, yet it showed no sign of surrendering. A searing pain raced up her arm as she dug her nails in deep around it. But while there was plenty of pain for her, the gem was unmoved and unfazed. Frozen in time.

Xavia’s anguished cries filled the room, reverberating off the walls like shattering glass. Her horror peeled away, leaving in its wake a fierce rage. Her eyes burned with the vengeance of one who had murdered loved ones before, each and every one for her own personal gain.

“Vivia, you fucking bitch! I will kill you for this!” she snarled, her voice low and deadly. “I swear to you, I will see you dead.”

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