



EKHO WILDESS

SPACE
WOLF

RECLAIM

SPACEWOLF

RECLAIM

THE SPACEWOLVES SERIES

EKHO WILDESS



SpaceWolf Reclaim

Copyright © 2023 by Ekho Wildess

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission from the author.

SpaceWolf Reclaim is a work of fiction. The names, characters, and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design: Jaqueline Kropmanns

Editing: Kirsty McQuarrie

Proofreading: Jeanine Harell

This book is for you, Dad.

Love you to the moon and back.

Although I know you are not a child, this book is not PG-13.

You can stop reading now.

Please.

CONTENTS

SPACEWOLF

Part I

Chapter 1

Wren

Chapter 2

Wren

Chapter 3

Wren

Chapter 4

Wren

Chapter 5

Wren

Chapter 6

Wren

Chapter 7

Wren

Chapter 8

Wren

Chapter 9

Wren

Chapter 10

Wren

Chapter 11

Wren

Chapter 12

Wren

Chapter 13

Wren

Chapter 14

Wren

Chapter 15

Wren

Chapter 16

Wren

Part II

Chapter 17

Wren

Chapter 18

Wren

Chapter 19

Wren

Chapter 20

Wren

Chapter 21

Wren

Chapter 22

Wren

Chapter 23

Wren

Chapter 24

Wren

Chapter 25

Wren

Chapter 26

Kilian

Chapter 27

Kilian

Chapter 28

Kilian

Chapter 29

Kilian

Chapter 30

Kilian

Chapter 31

Kilian

Chapter 32

Wren

Part III

Chapter 33

Wren

[Chapter 34](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 35](#)

Wren

[Chapter 36](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 37](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 38](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 39](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 40](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 41](#)

Wren

[Chapter 42](#)

Wren

[Chapter 43](#)

Wren

[Chapter 44](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 45](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 46](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 47](#)

Wren

[Part IV](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

Wren

[Chapter 49](#)

Wren

[Chapter 50](#)

Wren

[Chapter 51](#)

Wren

[Chapter 52](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 53](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 54](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 55](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 56](#)

Wren

[Chapter 57](#)

Wren

[Chapter 58](#)

Wren

[Chapter 59](#)

Wren

[Chapter 60](#)

Wren

[Chapter 61](#)

Wren

[Chapter 62](#)

Wren

[Part V](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

Wren

[Chapter 64](#)

Wren

[Chapter 65](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 66](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 67](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 68](#)

Wren

[Chapter 69](#)

Wren

[Chapter 70](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 71](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 72](#)

Wren

[Chapter 73](#)

Kilian

[Chapter 74](#)

Wren

[Acknowledgments](#)

SPACEWOLF

RECLAIM

*For those lost in the darkness, never
stop searching for the lodestar. It
shines upon you even as you seek.*

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“CHOKER BABY, SPADES AT FLIGHT LEVEL TWO-SIX-FOUR-zero,” I purr on frequency 199.39, toggling steep on the sidestick as my GhostTiger jet launches into space.

I flick switches, A9 giving an extra boost to the propulsion engines, K0 to narrow wings at thirty degrees, and H6 for auto-pilot.

“Spades, contact Choker Baby, received,” Rayn’s smoky voice responds.

I always need it when reaching zero-g.

Every time gravity leaves me, a piece of Rayn does too. He’s a gamma all right, but a smart, sexy one. No one bullies Rayn. He’s got this “fuck you all” aura; he could easily call an alpha’s bluff. In my opinion, Rayn is nothing more than a zeta in denial that was rejected one time too many. And because of this, he’s neither into that power-shit stuff nor in search of a mate, which suits me well.

Thoughts of my mission pervade my mind as I confirm my destination. “Flight path, Mara della Morte, Planet 078, portal in five-two-zero. Over.”

“Spades ...” There is this sizzling silence on the line, and then I hear, “Contact Choker Baby on six-thirty-six.”

I lift my head and bring my hand up to the switchboard, air rolling the radio frequency to tune in for six-thirty-six, a private line between Rayn and me.

He was given the call name “Choker” on his graduation day because he started strangling one of our omegas on the

stage. It was rumored a dickhead said something like, “Heel, dog,” and Rayn went nuts.

“Hey, doll. I got your ass on my radar. Take care out there.”

“I’m always on your radar, Rayn. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask. Why did you add the ‘Baby’ part?”

“I want everyone on the channel to hear your voice when you call me ‘baby.’”

“Baby,” I drawl with the sexiest voice I have.

Guiding my flight path, Rayn drones, “Vortex in approach in sixty seconds . . .” And then he exhales. It annoys me when he does that. I don’t want him to care. I don’t want to mean anything to him.

“Alpha Zion and six of his *Cromancer* jets are siphoning enemy airspace 078 as we speak. Keep the blood pumping, babe, and make your way back ASAP.”

“Worst case, I die in my happy place,” I chuckle as a red glow invades my spacecraft.

Beaming its powerful energy against my visor, this giant floating portal always leaves me in awe whenever I face it.

“This happy place of yours is an unreliable space tin can you pet-named Sweet Shooter—a nightmare if you want my opinion. Next time I see you, don’t make it be in hell . . .” he sniggers, though I can tell he’s nervous because he sighs deeply straight after.

I do my best to kill the tension. “Well, if ever it’s the case, there better be some fucking *coffee* down there.”

“Take care.”

I close my eyes. Alpha Zion is a blood-lusting psychopath. Fucked up beyond reason. “Rayn, I’ll be back in no time . . . better start stroking yourself, ‘cuz I want you hard when I get back.”

“Naughty wolf . . . I’ll be ready. Over.”

I switch off the radio. I need silence.

Being Alpha Hayden's daughter has been a burden since day one. Okay, since I was young enough to remember. Maybe four or five years old, but that's not really the problem here. From boot-licking members to whatever bullshit linked to my position, I've never been relaxed when it came to my rank.

Why?

Because I have none.

I've been cursed since birth. Only a handful of people are trusted with this secret, parents included. And it's better if it stays that way.

It was only when my father said, "Pack before all," that I had this epiphany and embraced my destiny as a Chimera pilot—the cream of the crop, the cherry on top, nothing more than an elite squad of suicidals entrusted with space protection.

His sad brown eyes said it all. But there was nothing my father could do to stop me. It was my right and responsibility, after all. And the only choice left for me. As far as I'm concerned, I am not one who will have a happy ending with a mate. Because I know with the four wolves inside me, it's impossible. Anyway, my father ratified a rule that I am never to be claimed. That simplifies it quite a bit, doesn't it?

I'm a strange thing.

Some call me a good little soldier, regarding me as an easy-to-handle weapon.

But I don't mind.

I don't mind because it's the truth.

Fighting is all I've ever known . . .

And I'm okay with it.

Really.

So . . . here I am, approaching fucking nonsense of a werewolf-built space portal that's about to propel me 742 million kilometers into a danger zone called Mara della Morte.

The robotic antennae of my helmet twitch as an unknown radio frequency buzzes in my ears.

Fuck it. I'm just going to ignore it. I'm about to enter this fire ring, after all.

“Jade, let's play ‘House of the Rising Sun,’ The Animals.”

Jade is the best system operator a pilot could dream of. She's sometimes too literal for me, but hey, at least she's down for anything.

Crossing my feet on the console, I sing, trying to breathe in the lyrics before the big jump. “*And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy . . .*” I throw my head back, tighten my harness, strap my pressure-demand mask on, and try to relax.

Here we go.

I force my neck to turn to the left. It bloody gets me every time.

Streaks of light flash before me, thousands of them. Stars stripe the darkness as I tear across space. It's like I'm part of a firework, flowing and vibrating to this energy that I so fucking love. Sharp ribbons of heaven call me, thundering before my eyes as I grunt from the pressure.

I clench the armrests, close my eyes, and try not to faint.

But as usual, I live through a bit of death, rushing on my run.

And oh, do I live for this high . . .

CHAPTER TWO

SWEET SHOOTER BEGINS TO SLOW DOWN JUST AS MY consciousness returns, and there it is, the giant ball of sand called 078. I wake my engines, boosting us in a *Mach 1*, the thrust a proper wake-up.

“That’s my girl.” Lords, I love this metallic steed.

Time to proceed carefully. According to Rayn, there’s some movement not too far ahead.

I shake my numb hands and remove my oxygen mask. The two feelers on the side of my helmet flick once more. There is an enemy vessel on my radar. It’s behind me.

A Cromancer . . .

I switch to the stalker’s channel and decide to confront the prick. “Hey, buddy. Why the tailing?”

“Red Crotal to unknown spacecraft, identify yourself. Over,” a female says over the radio.

“One that’s about to kick your ass, stupid snake. Over.”

“Position locked. You’ve been warned. Over.”

I puff about myself, fuming with rage.

I activate *ghost mode* by pushing the handle beside my navigational stick. It’s like listening to millions of metallic coins clinking against the ship as mirror panels hitch and etch onto the fuselage in seconds—space piloting can be very poetic.

“Red Crotal to unknown spacecraft, show your damn self!”

She's hysterical. Haha! Of course, she is. I disappeared right in front of her eyes. Her radar won't be detecting shit now.

Mirrors, mirrors on my ship, who is the smartest of them all?

'Tis Spades.

"Suck it! Over," I cackle.

I push my throttle lever, reaching a speed of one hundred and fifty-two mph, and then yank the center stick toward me like a delusional flier.

Sweet Shooter skyrockets, or in this case, *spacerockets*, doing a perfect back flip. They call it the *Chandelle* maneuver, but I call it a *Split-Spades Chandelle*. Why? I'm making this beautiful loop, placing myself right behind this fool, oblivious to how I'm about to make a hole in her stupid ship.

Ecstatic, I lock her and place my thumb on the red button crowning my center stick.

"Nice ass, dumbass." It is impossible to sound bitchier than I do right now.

"Little cunt!" she shouts.

She must be a mid-rank member—a natural pest in every way.

For her insolence, I decide to send her body parts to rot in deep space. As I'm about to press the button, another beeping sound interrupts my thrill. An unfamiliar frequency appears. One that oddly resembles the one I detected before diving into the vortex.

"You got a pretty ass, too . . ." It's a male voice.

How did he? I mean, how come he . . .

This, here, is called a *sandwich* technique. This pilot was in ghost mode all along. But for how long? Since when? And why the hell can he see me?

Either this Red Crotal is a transmission sharer, and I better not voice out my secrets to her, or this is a target memory lock.

That must be it. We must have run into each other during one of my missions, and this guy locked me. His system must be recognizing my frequency. Wonderful.

Now I have a snake to take down in front of me and a bloody leech kissing my rear.

But hey, I'm not called the Valkyrie for nothing. I'd rather take them in my death than allow them to double take me.

I pull a fast one on this new player, sending a payload of *crystal light* like sparkler candles to spray on his cockpit. I hope he goes blind!

“Eat my white light!”

I'm far from being done.

My thumb eagerly presses the red button, and as I war cry, “Pitbull!” laser beams fly out, blasting the left wing of Red Crotal.

Her little safety pod twirling in the distance tells me I should have taken the shot earlier. But at least I won't have her death on my conscience. I always feel a *little* bad when it comes to this, anyway.

I swerve Sweet Shooter into a *jinks*. I've got to shake off this dipstick behind me.

There's something I don't understand. I'm still far from 078 space zone. This is supposed to be a simple reconnaissance mission, a simple *thermoscan* over a dead space region. I mean, it's not called Mara della Morte for nothing. I was expecting a walk in the park. Just another lazy-ass assignment!

“You're one of those mean girls, aren't you?” this raspy voice sniggers over the line.

He's a vicious one, and he's far from dropping the bone. This is one good pilot I've got here. Maybe he's one of the weak-ass kinds when it comes to women. I could give it a try . . .

“Hey, darling, I'm just a soul whose intentions are good . . .” I fake croon over the radio.

“If that’s so, I can’t wait to pound your goodness, sweetheart.”

Now, I’m vexed. “Show me what you’ve got!” I blast out.

Argh, I’ll never be back on time for Rayn or my *Netstix* show . . .

**CHAPTER
THREE**

AS I'M DODGING HIS LASER SHOTS, MY RADAR GOES INTO A frenzy of beeps. Four enemy ships have joined this little game of catch, and I'm not feeling it as much as before.

The creep brushes against my ship as I decelerate and duck deep. There's some rattling above me, accompanied by a nice big shake.

With beeps and alarms wrecking my ears, I digitally browse through my ship's body, the tactile tablet freezing every bloody second. Luckily, he doesn't know I'm beginning to sweat.

Just a notch.

Because I have to split my attention between the ship's condition and this spacial rollercoaster I'm in.

My teeth grate when I identify the source of my problem.

Warning! Oxygen tanks at a critical level.

Warning!

Warning!

Warning!

That's just great.

The impact must have ruptured some pipes.

My second screen catches my attention. Two *Cromancers* are holding back.

Why?

This stinks.

“Golden Fang to unknown vessel, surren—”

“Listen, Golden asshole. You just damaged a 35,000 *histan* ship!” my voice booms.

“You want a hug?” he husks.

Silently, I close my eyes, feeling an unhealthy throbbing in my left temple.

“Thought you should know I’m taking you down,” he says with what I guess is a smirk because this ratfink is snickering.

“I want to see that.”

His three comrades still hold back. This Golden Fang must be a beta or a gamma.

What if it’s Alpha Zion?

I blow air like a hectic, angsty hussy as if I just gave birth to some additional problems.

Why more problems?

Sweet Shooter is busted. And I’ve got a reputation to defend.

That’s it. I’m taking Golden Fang down . . . with me.

I strap my mask back and quickly scan planet 078.

If I’m about to tumble, I better know where.

“Jade, where on 078 would I land if I ejected now?”

Estimated landing location: 0.98765589-Hell’s Pit-078.

Fantastic, Hell’s Pit and its 113F°.

“Jade, send a distress signal.”

Distress signal sent.

“Jade, erase flight path, communication history, and the entire white-and-black boxes.”

Ship history erased.

Brace, Wren.

Brace.

“Golden Fang, fancy taking a ride with me?” It’s time to ensnare this jerk.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” he says with *this* confidence that makes me want to open my cockpit window and personally jump into space to thrash his head against his dashboard.

It sure is a sexy voice. Shame it will never be heard again.

As my vessel slows down, it reverses in its course and faces this tracker.

“Surprise!”

“Move, you’ll get hit!” he barks across the frequency.

So considerate of him!

Preparing for ejection, I remove my pressure demand mask—gods, do I hate doing this—bring my helmet’s visor down, fasten it round my suit’s collar, and activate air pressure. “Well then, what are you waiting for?”

I thrust the handle forth, rushing toward the nose of his ship, and pull on the ejection latch.

Crash!

My safety pod isn’t quite liking this sudden spacewalk.

Bip.

Bip.

Bip.

Brace.

Brace.

Brace.

Brace.

The landing’s going to hurt.

**CHAPTER
FOUR**

MY HEAD . . .

Where am I?

The blood stacking up in my brain hints at the position I'm locked in.

Below me is my pod's windshield.

I'm upside down ...

My eyes adjust in the penumbra, dotted with blinking colorful buttons gone mad.

Before unbuckling my belt, I realize I'm going to need a little courage. A nice crash to the ground—in this case, the pod's glassed roof—awaits me.

I need decompression and fast, or my blood will bubble up. The human body isn't fond of changing its oxygen levels or pressure. Despite my sore abs protesting, my hanging weight lifts for the decompression switch.

Decompression unavailable, the system blares.

The fuck it's not!

I turn my bloodshot head to look out of the porthole, and my breath catches in my throat.

Someone is trotting down a dune, walking with frightening determination toward my capsule. And by the look of this man's swagger, I've got two minutes left to live.

I unstrap my belt and curse all the profanities I have in stock when my head hits the ground.

It's time to get going, Wren!

Okay . . . Door latch.

I pull down the handle, and . . . nothing?

Multiple attempts later, I can't hold back a "*Fuck!*" from howling out through my teeth. The door is jammed. I guess I've got to get that kick going.

Rolling on my back, I hold the latch down and bring my legs together. Over and over, my boots slam against the door of this tiny pod fit for one person.

Again, Wren. Push!

"Come on!" Shouting at myself, clenching my teeth, grunting, and after exerting all my effort, the door finally bursts open.

Upon exiting the pod, my hand immediately reaches for my laser gun, lying nearby.

That ain't luck. It's a laser pistol called Karma. Karma for these assholes calling themselves Sang Muerta, when they're really nothing more than bloodthirsty insurgents.

I crouch for a moment. My helmet must be damaged because it's squeezing the brains out of me, but I can't remove it now. Not before I get a proper decompression.

I jolt my gaze around the desert. Where on this boiling hot wasteland am I going to find a chamber?

I suddenly scream like a maniac. My left rib hurts like the dickens.

I need a medical kit.

The pod calls for me to get one, but something tells me it'll have to wait for another time. The guy's moving fast enough that I hear sand grating against his boots.

I take flight, miserably crawling or walking. It's a mess of arms and legs at this stage. Stumbling a couple of times, I'm having a hard time adjusting to this sudden change of gravity.

"Zombie . . ." I mutter to myself as angst rises on my skin.

One of my wolves is growling inside, my nerves tingling from its fury.

Zombie is the sort to take over whether I want it or not. She has a mind of her own, and trust me when I say her mind is fucked up. No language, sanity, or communication thread between us could tell me this wolf has a soul.

Not to mention she's a fast killer, too . . .

Worry not. I've got a little device that keeps her in check. Usually found in prisons, I was exceptionally granted a *shifterguard* for my unique condition.

And as I look at my wrist, all the color in my face pools down my feet.

Only the thickness of my bone prevents the bracelet from slumping lower on my wrist, the cuff half dangling in the void.

It's broken!

Inner groans awake my blood, my heart pumping from the shifting that wants to manifest.

Shut up and stay put!

Zombie cannot take over.

She cannot.

Not now.

I can't believe I'm attempting to run in this yellow sandy unknown.

It's an absolute blur. My head hurts, I feel sick, and I realize how stupid this is because I have no water or compass.

"Freeze!" a distant voice calls out.

I've got to keep going, keep running. I just need to slide down a few dune crests in front of me, and then I'll be lost, and with a bit of luck, this dog will lose me as well.

Zap!

What the h—

A laser beam strokes my cheek in a sleek burn before crashing into the sand.

“Ah!” my weak ass cries as I fall in a mini-sand explosion.

“I can make it rain more sand if you want . . . Unknown Vessel.”

That voice, it’s . . . it’s Golden Fang!

Flat on my face with a mouth full of grit, some fiercely clinging onto my lips, I curve on myself like a shrimp from the ill-treatment my rib has just endured. Fucking fuck, it hurts!

Keep going, Wren. Now is not the time to lose heart.

I pick myself up with all the strength a wolf can muster and reach for my back.

“Freeze, I said.”

It goes without saying I don’t even dare turn my head.

I would rather have him shoot my back. But my face? Gods, no.

Not the face.

With bated breath, I moan from the taste of the air. It stings, burning my lungs as I try to build up some stamina.

It’s different from *Pallamir*.

Sweet and hot. Light and—

“Hear me out, darling.”

Did he just call me darling? It’s enough to burn my heels in a 180-degree arc.

I’ll show him my darling fists, that’s what!

Ah . . . that little warm barrel of a gun greeting my nose is trying to tell me something.

Something like, “You just got owned.” That sounds about right. He sure has fast feet.

I spit both the sand and my greeting on his face. “Can we talk?”

His wolf-shaped helmet cocks to one side. “Sure.”

“I need a little breathing spell, if you don’t mind.” Let’s play it cannily.

“I can perform CPR. How about that?”

My brows droop lower than the horizon line. Is this guy for real?

“Yeah, that’s great. You want a star sticker for that?” I growl, my sick wolf dying to take over.

He sniggers a little, half crossing his arms as he brings the hand holding the gun to his head, the barrel scratching against what could be his temple below. “Why is an Astarix Pack member flying over Mara della Morte?”

“I got lost. My sense of direction is terrible.”

It’s all hands everywhere, and I’m just making a fool of myself.

“Is that so . . .” He takes a good look at me, and I’m just going to do the same.

Golden Fang’s body is clad in a black-grained leather suit. It tightly wraps around his, well, bulging muscles.

My throat does the dirty on me as it uncomfortably clears itself. The bastard is molded to perfection, and I’m having a hard time denying it.

Tall, lean, and most probably able to dodge laser shots quickly, he seems to be as fast as he is agile. A commando member? Elite squad soldier?

Maybe a spy . . .

The man lowers his head and takes a couple of deep breaths. And as he brings it back up, he rasps across this curious black wolf-shaped helmet, “Show your face.”

“Can’t do that.”

In response, he fires a laser beam inches from my feet, making my angry self dance on the sand.

“Easy!” Godsdamn, he’s so emotional.

CHAPTER FIVE

“OKAY, I CAN. OF COURSE, I CAN,” MY PATHETIC SELF SILVERTONGUES, hands spread low and far apart. “Take it easy, boy. Okay?”

Upon unlatching my strap and pressing the pressure valve siding on my helmet, zero-gravity-pressured oxygen fizzes out as I remove my gear.

I just lost fifteen minutes of life doing so as the haunting thought of decompression urges me to take action.

But then the wind makes me forget everything, and on my skin, it travels, giving my follicles a sweet orgasm. While it blows across my curtain of hair, my body gets expressive. “Aaah . . .”

“What are you doing?”

“Just enjoying the moment. You should try it sometime,” I moan as I shake my head in the wild gusts.

Of course, I’m overdoing it. Girls gotta do what they gotta do.

He looks down at his feet. It’s a profound inclination, so much so that I can’t hold a smirk from stretching on my face.

Oh, boy! Don’t tell me I’m offsetting you? Ah!

After ten long seconds or so, Golden Fang finally lifts his chin and says, “You’re a dirty crate, aren’t you?”

What did he just say?

I shove my acid gaze in the direction of his hidden eyes and grind, “The only dirty crate there’ll be is the one smoking

in your guts after I kill you.”

Stumbling in the sand, this idiot forgets he is taking a step back. “You . . .”

“*You* what? What?” I huff.

My ears pick up a faint groan from under his gear. This perv is spoiling his eyes on me, I’m sure of it.

It’s working. Seems like I’m going to waltz out of this situation, after all. Who would’ve guessed? He’s a soft cookie.

What a simp.

Adding drama to my pose, with crossed arms and the irritated sway of a hip, I purr, “Lost your tongue, boy?”

“You’re bleeding.”

As he says this, I feel something cold and warm running over my lips and down my chin in a gentle drizzle.

Shit.

While I wipe the blood that thought well to pour down my nose, my ears prick up.

There’s a vrooming sound in the distance. It looks like his little buddies are coming to help.

“Why do you care? I’m about to be executed . . .” Then I ensure he takes in my cute little face as I articulate, “The *Sang Muerta* way!”

I have to get to lower ground. I’m not feeling so good. As I do, the sand shifts nearby, pulling my attention from my blood-cupped nose. Golden Fang is running up a dune.

I squint when this lunatic lies flat on his stomach, slowly crawling to the top.

Now, what is he doing?

As I watch him ascend the dune, an instinct of survival flashes across my mind.

I could shoot him from here.

Make a big fat hole in his back.

And why not?

My hand flits over the pistol at my back, and it's not long before I take that good old aim of mine, all too ready to say bye-bye.

But then my lungs fizzle out, and I fall to my knees, my hand dropping the gun, suddenly too weak to hold anything.

I need decompression . . .

“This is not a time for prayers, woman!” Golden Fang shouts, apparently keeping a close eye on my hostage self.

“Are you sure? I could fuck the place up, ya know. There could be some dynamite embedded in my suit!” I shout back.

He's walking up to me in a way that's hastened by his anger.

Did I offend him?

Yikes . . .

His legs come into view, and as I look up, my grin stretches uneasily.

“Do it,” he groans in a whisper.

The suicide thing has never been one of my favorite killing methods. Like, it's really not my thing. And I lied. I don't have dynamite embedded in my suit. As I ponder this, my body is taken by a rush of shivers.

“You must suck at poker,” he sniggers.

Golden Fang pauses, scratches his head, forgetting it's under a helmet, and sort of ogles me like a nasty.

He seems to have a soft spot for me. I mean, who cares who's bleeding at this stage, right? So, I ask, “Why don't you kill me already?”

Silence.

Although the wind keeps flinging my hair over my eyes, they remain focused. I'm fixated on Golden Fang's lips, waiting for words to come from them. Dying is not on my agenda, far from it. I'm simply evaluating my options for

escaping. Of course, this kind of question comes with its set of pros and cons . . . And I'm already regretting asking this stupid question because of how long it takes him to respond.

“Give me the laser gun.”

Shit, he's still alive. I'm sorry, but how he built up fourteen seconds of suspense before talking made me think he had a stroke.

My smile tenses into an ear-to-ear line of perfection. I'm unsure of the direction things are heading. “Sorry?” I dare.

“I don't have time for girly talk. Toss it!”

I pinch my lips and gather enough energy to grab it, readying it right back at him as I wobble myself to my feet.

The sound of electric energy winds up in my gun, ready for the blast. I am who I am, right?

I can aim at the side. It will probably get this nutcase running.

Well, I'll just have to find out. And like John Wayne, I pull my gun faster than my own shadow and . . .

Zap!

“You little . . . little demon!” he roars, clutching his smoking arm.

Shit, that wasn't intentional. “Oops, sorry. I must have accidentally pulled the trigger. Ya know . . . girls and guns . . .” I say, followed by a fake tittering. And I'm pulling the face that goes with it to a T.

Zap!

“Woman!”

“Sorry again. I don't know what's wrong with my finger. It must have a twitch or something.”

As we nicely exchange glares and insults, I'm taking some significant steps back because it doesn't seem to stop him from taking some forth. Nope. He's nowhere near running away . . .

His suit shields him from my—I realize now—meager shots. But I have the courage of a Valkyrie, and betting on his helmet, take one last shot.

Zap!

That's a win.

His helmet begins crisping with electricity, smoking on the side.

“You want to play with me?” he growls.

He removes his helmet and slams it against the sand like a feral beast. “I said, stop!”

CHAPTER SIX

I GAPE LIKE A MOONCALF.

Those are damn amazing eyes—orange eyes.

Beta?

I'm pulled out from this perfect moment by the growing buzzing of flying engines on approach. Although they don't sound like spaceships, their ground-speed engines tell me they are fast, hovering vehicles.

Once more, my legs buckle under me, my knees hitting the sand. This migraine, it's fucking me up.

“Your name?”

Golden Fang wants to know my name. Ha!

I'm feeling a little brave, so . . . “Fuck you.”

“Your name?”

“I told you! It's fuck you.”

“I really want to know the name behind this pretty face,” he charms, walking toward me with the kind of stride like he knows who's back in town.

“Don't come any closer,” I say, my hand extending with a shaky laser gun.

“It's not the best timing to get your little hands dirty.” Golden Fang shuns my arm and grabs my gun before hurling it behind his back.

He kneels to my level, and I don't know why, but my heart begins to derail.

I just can't detach my gaze from his.

Removing his glove, he reaches for my throat, slides under my hair, and forks his fingers behind my nape.

What's happening?

His eyes keep switching from my left to my right eye as if he's puzzled about their color. I promise there is nothing special about them. Really.

A maddening pull jerks my head back, and I gasp.

I breathe steadily, observing him from all angles.

He's definitely a psycho.

"There's really no need for such brutality. I promise I can be a good girl," my cowardly self mutters.

Fuck, it's a disaster.

With a fist still full of my hair, he exhales deeply, "A good girl . . ." before skating his eyes all over my face and body again.

The guy is missing a screw or two, there's no denying that.

He blows between pinched lips and stares intently at me as if I've ruined his day or something.

"What is it? Never saw a girl with a hitch!" I grunt.

He probes my body, and I wince from one pressured hand gone too far.

"I don't have any more guns if that's what you're looking for."

His hand stops at my sensitive rib. "You're in pain."

Lifting his head with a weird growl, this lunatic lightly nods.

Did he just mutter *fuck*?

"Hey! What are you doing?" I bark because, seriously, he's beyond touchy right now. "My crotch is not weaponized, dickstick!"

“Can never be too sure,” he jests before glancing swiftly behind his shoulder. “Why are you here?”

“Come on, you know why.”

“For the iron crystals?”

I should’ve shut up.

I don’t know why, but I let him remove my gloves. I guess it’s one of those days when you just have to let it go.

Golden Fang sort of freezes like a big chunk of ice.

Slowly defrosting, he grunts, “What’s this?” before grabbing my wrist to examine it.

“What do you think it is?”

His eyes dart right back into mine. “Only felons are forced to wear shifterguards.”

Maybe I can extract myself from this situation, after all . . .

“Why are you wearing a shifterguard device?”

Shake me all you want; my secret will remain sealed.

“I-I . . . yes! Yes, I’m a felon. I escaped a prison mothership and stole one of their weird-looking spacecrafts. And lightyears later, here I am. Told you, I got lost.”

His almond eyes thin, focusing on mine, and I just smile back like a frail idiot.

“So much brains for such a small head. It takes some neurons to learn how to fly those.”

Is that sarcasm I smell?

I’m about to pull the lamest excuse ever when human voices catch our attention.

Remnants of a discussion reach us, the wind bringing bits and bats of the exchange. “I’ll go left. You check the pod.”

Shit! This is it.

They take no prisoners, that I know.

I saw enough to know that I'm about to dig my grave in the sand before receiving a nice clean shot in the head.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Hush!”

Golden Fang cradles me in his arms and begins walking backward. With each step he takes, the other foot runs across the footprint smoothly. He's erasing his tracks, but why?

Growing shadows soon absorb us. I peep behind Golden Fang's shoulder and find giant protruding rocks.

In utter disbelief, I whisper, “Why are you hiding?”

“Shut up.”

“You're a rogue, aren't you? Let me fucking go!”

“Shut. Your. Pretty. Mouth,” Golden Fang growls lowly.

Bip . . . “Oscar, five to base. We're on the site.”

“Whoever this is, he mustn't be far.”

“I'll take a look inside the pod.”

They're going to find us!

In his arms, I twist with masterful silence until my feet finally touch the ground. But then I gasp when pain infuses my left.

“Jax . . .” a voice calls out.

“What?”

Then there is silence . . .

Behind a massive rock, we hold our breaths.

Someone is coming.

While holding me tight against him, Golden Fang stretches out his left arm. Positioned horizontally flat on the stone, he aims at head level.

He is waiting for the approaching footsteps to pass us by.

Isn't he one of them?

“Don’t make a sound, little wolf.”

**CHAPTER
SEVEN**

“SHE’S LUCKY, YOU KNOW. I MEAN, THIS GIRL COULD HAVE died, Kilian. Didn’t you see the signs?”

Who’s there? It’s the voice of a woman.

“Her nose bled, and she was shivering, but I thought it was shock and trauma caused by the crash.”

That voice . . . Golden Fang?

“She could have had a stroke!”

The lady’s worried. She’s hissing like a cat.

Bleeping sounds echo in my ears.

“How long will it take her to wake up?”

Golden Fang, I’m waking up all right . . . Why do I feel this way?

There is a hardness to my vision.

Slitting my lids, I distinguish blurry figures moving across my lashes. It stings, though.

In my veins, a cool sensation runs like a current. I squint my eyes as an air bubble rises by my face, followed by hundreds of them, obscuring my vision.

I bring my arm forth. Tubes!

And as my arms wave, I realize I’m in the . . . water!

Water!

Bipbipbipbipbip.

I bring my fist to this glass prison, banging over and over.
I've got to get out of here!

"Help!" I scream with no sound escaping.

I rush my hand to my mouth.

No. A mask around my face is drowning out my cries.

Across this fog-like water, dark silhouettes rush to a weird-looking machine.

Growls and the sensation of my skin tearing apart make my heart skip inhumanly. My wolves want to burst out of me, and it won't be long until they succeed.

This can't be happening.

The water is engulfing me.

It's going to kill me!

"Open the hatch! She's having an anxiety attack!" shouts Golden Fang.

"I can't. It is scheduled to run for another hour."

"Open the hatch, now!"

"The woman is shifting! How can she turn? She's been sedated with 5mg of *stagbane*."

No shit, lady doc!

"Did you hear me, Laura? Open the bloody hatch!"

"There's an emergency button behind the cylinder," this Laura shouts.

As I bang my life against the glass, it begins to crack.
Crack, motherfucker!

Golden Fang runs toward me and halts in front of this fucked-up aquarium, his face inches from mine. Why are you marking time? Can't you see I'm dying?

The water. I can't breathe. I can't breathe!

"Since when do wolves have four different kinds of eye color?"

Golden Fang, you're too curious.

A hiss and a vacuum-like sound follow, the water rushing around me.

I can't stay here!

My vision goes rogue, kaleidoscoping in thousands of colorful clusters, and my body is finally thrust into the unknown.

I hit something hard, and not a second later, millions of sharp, jagged edges shake my bones like a rattle toy. My screams deafen me. An unimaginable force is roiling through me beyond comprehension.

Power outage.

Power outage.

“She just got fried! Why didn't the power go out sooner?” rages Golden Fang. “Get the other nurses!”

“Yes, Alpha.”

My wolves are furious, Zombie growling her fury at them to stay back. She's tearing at my skin for hers to appear.

I howl as my wolf teeth and gums shatter my mouth.

Someone drags me from the ground to something warm.

Arms?

The ground turns around me, my legs breaking as my feet crush into murderous paws.

Something lands against my ear. It sounds like the warmth a sun is made of.

“Breathe, wolf, breathe . . .” The whispers stream through my mind like water on silk. “Remember, girl . . . remember on the dune. Remember what you felt when you removed your helmet. Feel it. The wind dancing through your beautiful hair. What a color you have . . . like dark wood, deeper than malt,” the voice hushes against my jerking ear.

Golden Fang . . .

“Feel these threads of yours dance on your skin. How they flow across your face, gently washing over your freckles. Can you hear the wind, how it sings to you?”

Wind . . .

“Feel its gusts as it whispers your name.” He squeezes me harder.

A hand strokes my head in repeated motions as I roar in pain. “Hold on, little wolf. It won’t take long.”

I try looking at him, and I growl when his eyes open, staring vividly into mine.

“Colors of . . . every kind,” he mutters.

“Blood has only one color!” *Rip his face off, suck his bones, lick the pulp out of his skull.*

“Hurry, Laura! I . . . can’t . . . hold her . . . any longer!”

My claws drill into the tile. To take this snack down with my weight. “Dinnertime!”

“Inject her with the full dose!”

Talking food.

Needle?

CHAPTER EIGHT

SLURP THE JUICE FROM THEIR BRAINS, TEAR LIMBS, AND CHEW ON their spines as their organs squirt.

“Rah!” I try to clutch my pounding chest, but . . .
“Shackles?”

After taking a moment to situate myself, I realize I’m on a military bed, my lovely bracelets hooked on each side of an iron bed frame.

From my handcuffs, my eyes scan up to Golden Fang, sitting on a black stool at the far end of a modest spaceship cabin.

“We wouldn’t want a Spacewolf on the run, would we?” he says flatly, a glass in his whirling hand.

I am stuck on his smugly smile, dazed. Right below it, is a small beauty spot.

Mhm . . . cute.

“Bad dream?” he asks.

“It’s—it’s nothing,” I blabber before swirling my eyes over the walls.

“Food?”

I shake my head, feeling my bile about to do a hike.

“I met your wolf, by the way,” he ventures, filling up another glass of—I squint, it’s pretty far—whiskey.

The guy’s loaded because that’s a Dralmore 64, and based on the contents of his glass, he just poured 4000 *hestans* in it.

As whiskey fills the glass, my tongue does a complete 360-degree rotation on my lips; I could so do with a drink myself.

And then Golden Fang's words hit me. He met my wolf?

Resigned, I blow out a breath. "Did you have tea with her?"

"Well, she was more of a steak kind of girl. She got a little upset because I didn't have any," he jests back, a sexy smirk spreading across his face.

And I return his smile. It's a real one, too. No hidden intent behind it whatsoever.

It's clear to me that I've lost all sense of dignity. But I'm in a position where I couldn't give any fucks.

It's a nice moment; let's not ruin it.

My curious eyes drift to the side and soon swirl across all the walls.

There are hundreds of pictures plastered on all four sides. I bring my head to the left, to the wall beside the bed, to be precise. It's always the same little girl. Either eating cake, swimming in a river, playing with toys, hugging . . . Golden Fang. What a cute boy he must have been . . .

There's a pang in my heart. And not the right kind.

A hurricane of questions swipes through my mind, and as much as I want to utter them, I don't think they are good conversation starters.

I pluck my eyes from these black-and-white slices of life and redirect them to my abductor.

"Why am I here, and what happened?" I should have structured my flow, but hey, these are legit questions.

For all I remember, I was with Golden Fang behind a rock, and then nothing. It's a blank page for me.

"You forgot to tell me you didn't decompress, fruitcake. That's what happened."

“My apologies, Golden Fang. I wonder why I didn’t tell you sooner. Running from the enemy shouldn’t be a priority.”

“No need for that snarl of yours. You nearly died,” he says, undisturbed.

“It’s not a snarl. It’s a smile I decided to dedicate to you and only you. Now, be kind and tell me where I am.”

There’s a pause, and I narrow my eyes.

He umms and ahhs, my impatience mirroring his as my lips pull into a silent gaping *Ah*, pacing about my mouth.

Finally, he clears his throat and grumbles, “You’re on our mothership, the Demeter. You’ve been treated, washed, and given some warm clothes.”

Clothes?

My eyes transform into flying saucers as they land on my body. The typical gray sweatpants, probably twice the size of my leg width and as much in length, are layered on me street-style, and, of course, let’s not forget the black T-shirt.

“So, you’re that kinda guy,” I sneer.

“I like to be comfortable.”

I take a whiff of them. You never know.

“They’re clean, woman,” he fusses.

“Sorry for checking,” I hiss back. “The cuffs are really unnecessary, don’t you think?”

“They stay, and don’t look at me like that. If I turn my back on you, I’ll probably end up dead in a corner.”

“Probably a wise decision then. Speaking of cuffs, I need my shifterguard,” I say as I realize it’s no longer where it should be.

“I’m working on it.”

He’s working on it?

“Where is it?”

Swirling his glass like a condescending prick with his elbows on his tiny kitchen counter, he says, “I heard rumors about you, Spades . . .”

Not only does he ignore my question, but now it feels like he’s stabbing me with his orange eyes.

I could smash the pulp out of them, but they are out of this world.

Wait? Did he just say “Spades”?

CHAPTER NINE

I BRING MY LEGS CLOSER TO ME. I'D LOVE TO WRAP MY ARMS around them, but the extent to which I'm restrained only allows me a chin-to-knee kiss.

“What about Spades?” I try spoofing.

“Your helmet. It had data.”

“Clap, clap.” Yeah, I voice it out—no need to explain why. “You know my call name. High five to you.” And then, I can't avoid hissing, “You have nothing on me.”

“You give yourself away by just being you, Spades.”

“Enlighten me,” I say with a plastic grin firmly in place.

“This tattoo on your right arm. It's an old winged helmet. You're the Space Valkyrie, the Forbidden One. Daughter of Alpha Hayden.”

Well, shit on a stick.

“I'm just a space pilot named Spades. I got inked on a mission. The team was drunk. Everybody has one.”

“Really . . .”

He pours another round and halts his glass to his lips. “The *shifterguard*, it's for your wolf, isn't it?”

“As you noticed, my wolf is sensitive.”

“You can't control her?”

I pull my shoulders up to my ears. It doesn't concern him . . . “No.”

“What color are her eyes?”

“You know curiosity killed the cat, right?”

“Color?”

“Green like mine. Like any wolf, we share body and mind. But you know that.”

“Your eyes went through all the colors of the rainbow back there.”

“Where?”

“In the medical facility.”

“Not every day I get blood bubbles, abducted, and nearly shot in the head by your little friends. And, needless to say . . . you seem to be a person of interest, too.”

“Rank?”

That tone, it’s one of a commander. Who is he?

His voice coarsens. “Rank?”

“Omega.” He’s going to think I’m an easy slut. Fucktastic. I should have said gamma.

“An omega. Funny . . .”

“Why?”

“You’re far from being submissive.”

“Depends on the circumstances.” Why did I say that?

“So, you like to play.” He traps the bottleneck between his digits, takes his glass, and walks toward me.

Okay . . . he’s a doer.

I keep my eyes on him, putting on a “pretend to act normal” face, trying to keep my shit together.

“In space, yeah . . .” Keep. The. Poker. Face, Wren.

“And on land?”

That’s too close, boy. There’s enough space on this bed to sit anywhere but against my distressed legs!

Why did I say omega already? Ah, that's right. I'm an idiot.

"Sometimes, like everyone, right?" My chest tightens as he slinks even closer to me.

"Are you claimed?" he says, downing the rest of his glass.

What in the actual fuck is this question? "That is none of your concern."

Golden Fang leans forward, grabs the collar of my T-shirt, and pulls the hem down. The collar is large enough that it exposes a good part of my shoulder and back.

His lips skim my neck, and I shiver.

Looks like my body decided to grow some independence because my head is dangerously angling toward his neck, and I don't know how to stop it.

The smell of pine and honey is strong on him. It's somehow soothing . . .

As soon as his skin comes into contact with mine, my breathing decides to quit.

Heat surges through my body, pumping blood fast, and I'm pretty sure I look like a nice hot *khili* pepper right now. Wish I could bury my head somewhere else . . .

Gently, he moves my hair and lightly glides his fingers over my shoulder blade. "You're trembling."

"The air is crispy," I lie.

What is wrong with me? In normal circumstances, I would have punched his face enough to turn his nose into a mashed *fotado*.

"There is no mark. You could've just asked, you know."

"Why?" the perv asks.

My head jerks because, seriously? "Sorry?"

Golden Fang repeats as if it wasn't out of place. "Why are you not claimed?" And as he does, he moves away and pours another round of this liquid gold.

Geez, he can just have it IV-style at this rhythm.

“Because it’s life. Some have mates, others cats . . . you know. Shit happens, or maybe I’m better off alone like a successful space pilot who doesn’t need a man for a fulfilling life.”

He stares deeply into my eyes.

I try holding his gaze. I really do. But eventually, my head tucks to one side.

He’s so . . . so pretentious!

“You’re lonely.”

“I’m not. Trust me. I have a lot of people.”

“Yeah, inside your head,” he sneers.

He’s not exactly wrong. Nonetheless, he just pushed the wrong button.

Despite the metallic bangle cutting into my wrist, I snatch his glass lazily beneath my nose.

Splash!

With expensive liquor dripping down his face, Golden Fang flashes blood-red eyes at me, and I’m gradually beginning to think I should have had the drink instead.

My nerves fray, and with a weak voice, I ask, “What’s your rank already?”

“Alpha.”

CHAPTER TEN

“ALPHA WHO?”

“Kilian.”

“That’s a nice name.”

But then . . .

“Ahahahaha!” This must be the most ridiculous thing someone has ever told me to impress me.

“Please uncuff me. There are tears in my eyes. I need to wipe them away. Haha!”

“What’s so funny, girl?” he grates, essentially tetanized.

His face. His face is . . .

“Haha. I’m so sorry. I don’t want to . . . haha . . . offend you.”

Kilian looks like a lost pup. His eyes are flitting from side to side, searching my face for clues as to why I’m busting a gut.

But then his expression smooths as he watches me. There’s even a shy smile starting to appear.

He doesn’t get it, and it makes me giggle uncontrollably.

“The only recognized leader . . . sorry, I need to catch my breath . . . of 078 is Alpha Zion,” I snigger.

My spine stiffens at once as I hear an intense growl, goose bumps scrambling up my spine as my whole body tenses.

It's a thrumming so powerful that my laughter instantly falls away.

My ass buries deep into the pillow at my back and my restrained arms force me to hunch over. Bloody shackles!

"Alpha Zion doesn't exist! I am the only recognized leader of Galathena."

Galathena? Is that what they call 078 these days?

"It's a scheme!" His teeth are growing at an impossible rate, eyes glowing rufous as his chest rises steadily.

My tongue slides briskly over my dried lips as I say, "Kilian, slow down."

The man is nervous. Would a little foot nudge appease him?

Kilian glares down at my affectionate toes brushing against his thigh.

His eyes are wide as he looks back at me, not to mention there's something adorable about his crooked eyebrow.

"You're new at this, right?"

"New at what?"

"Being an alpha."

"I'll get you some water."

As he seems to do, he ignores me when the question doesn't suit him.

"Can you unshackle me?" I dare, watching him doing what must be a glimpse of his daily routine. Opening the only kitchen cupboard of this place, taking a glass out, and turning the tap on. Not forgetting the sponge that goes wiping the droplets on the counter. This is one little maniac I've got myself here.

"I really like your humor, girl," he says, wringing the sponge above the sink.

He's got that nice squeeze . . . and the athlete veins that go with it.

Well, I guess it's time for the unwanted plan Z to take effect: making the captor go soft by sexing my way out of captivity.

Occasionally, it works. Well, that's what they say at the academy. The only thing I need to sacrifice is a part of myself. It's all right . . .

Thank the Gods he's not ugly.

. . . Far from it.

Let's face it. It's not really that much of a burden.

Think like a man, Wren, and enjoy the ride. Get a shag and steal a ship for *Pallamir*.

Yeah, that sounds like a plan.

Do it savage-style, Wren!

"Kilian?"

"Alpha Kilian," he corrects, walking toward me.

"You're not my alpha." I shun his glass of water, a specific kind of drink in mind.

"In this space zone, I am." Kilian pinches his lips at my rude gesture and gulps the water in one go.

I'm not that thirsty, jerk. If you think you're annoying me, you're doing it all wrong.

Kilian is apparently an endless source of thirst because he's just grabbed the whiskey bottle at his feet and is pouring another glass. And when I say he's concentrating on filling it, it's an understatement.

Okay, it's time to speed things up a bit.

"Alpha . . ." I purr.

"What are you doing?" he says, creasing his forehead, waves of lines drawing near his eyes.

"Calling you 'Alpha' as you asked."

A glass of that lovely whiskey liquor comes hovering under my nose. "You may have a sip if you promise not to spit

it on my face.”

“I’ll be a good girl.” Gods, am I itching for a drink.

“Yes, you said that once before.”

Kilian carefully places the rim of the glass between my lips, and this, my friends, is when my performance begins. As I swallow, I gaze straight into his eyes, allowing him to catch a glimpse of my soul.

From the lump jerking in his throat, it looks like my strategy is working like a charm.

For added effect, a golden drop falls from my lips as he removes the glass. It runs past my chin down my throat.

Kilian bends over and places the glass on the ground.

When he brings himself back up, he gets stuck on the crook of my collarbone, where a little pool of gold must be shimmering.

“Come,” I rasp lowly.

“You ordering me around?”

“Yes . . .”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A TIGHTENING SENSATION SPREADS ACROSS HIS LOWER JAW, AN ever-increasing pressure building in his chest.

“Tell me something . . .” I cock my head and open my thighs, feigning relaxation. “Where’s your mate?”

“I’m looking for her.”

“You know what she looks like?”

“Yes.”

“So, what’s the issue?” I say as I tilt my head back, parting my lips slightly.

The man pauses. Only a hand aiming behind his ear breaks his frozen state. And as he scratches behind it, he eventually mutters, “She doesn’t recognize me.”

“How do you know?”

“There is no reaction from her.”

He’s looking everywhere but me. Why don’t you look at me, Kilian? I’m pulling my best game here.

“I don’t know how these things work, but maybe it’s not what you think?”

Kilian locks his amber-diamond eyes on me, and with that smoky tone that makes many things coil at once, he says, “You don’t know how it works?”

I’m struggling to hold his gaze. Right now, a jammed accelerator is in my chest, skipping beats like a broken-down spaceship. If this continues, I’m going to need a defibrillator.

I clear my throat. “I’ve never had a *wolf calling*.”

He draws his head closer to mine. “It’s not the calling that tells you anything. It’s something that’s deep inside you. Something that’s within you since the dawn of time.”

A look of disinterest fills his face as he turns away from me. “Anyway . . . I need to find her fast.”

“Why?”

“One of our priestesses shared a prophecy.”

“Priestesses? Are you worshippers of the old gods?”

“Old?” Kilian scoffs. “Even though we may not have your technology or bustling cities, we have something that you have long lost.”

“Which is?”

“Faith.”

A churchgoer . . . great.

“Tell me more?”

“Why am I telling you this? You’re a hostage. A stranger at best.”

“Maybe because I’m a stranger.”

Silence feeds off my last words. Biting my lip, I try to resist breaking it.

“Are you?”

“What?”

“A stranger.”

He’s lost his rockers, that’s what. No wonder he didn’t find her. She probably saw him, and her wolf bailed out.

I snicker at my thought. And as I bare my teeth, my spine makes a wrong move, a couple of ribs not sharing my sense of humor. “Ouch!”

“May I?” Kilian reduces the gap between us and lifts my T-shirt enough to see my breasts.

I should have played this card earlier . . .

He glides a hand over the bandage and then swings his gaze from my breasts to my eyes.

“Never saw a naked woman before?” I ask, placing a foot on his chest. His hard chest . . .

“Not like you,” he says stiffly, gripping my ankle tightly.

“Like me?”

I watch him, looking straight into his scorching irises as he leans over me.

The man’s got some sex drive.

“Spades.” Kilian braces a knee on the mattress, tilting his torso toward my trembling body.

The way he looks at me . . .

“I’ve been following you.”

“Follwingmei?” I burble. My tongue has forgotten where vowels go because it’s a syllabic catastrophe.

“Each time your squad violated our airspace to inspect our mines or the war raging below . . .”

What is he talking about?

“I could’ve pulled the trigger so many times.” His lips hover above mine, never touching.

I want them so bad. My own are drawn to them like magnets. I summon his. “Kiss me . . .”

His head jerks back by just an inch. *Where are you going?*

“I constantly watch you dance your ship between our shots.”

“My ship?”

“Painted on it is a warrior goddess riding a winged horse.”

Running his fingers smoothly over my belly as he talks, my breathing eclipses every word he says.

“It’s this ship we all recognize as ‘the Forbidden One,’” he whispers, diving slowly toward my neck.

As he brings the second knee onto the mattress, I feel more than just caged, his hands firmly latching onto my wrists.

“And now, look at you. So vulnerable.”

A whisper barely escapes me. “You’re scaring me.”

His hand slips down my pants, slithering closer to where I want him to go.

I shut my eyes to what just crossed my mind. What am I doing? I’m out of my right mind. This plan sucks!

“Kilian . . . stop.”

He stares at me; his words might have left him, but his wont is more present than ever. I can see it in his eyes and how he massages my clit religiously.

“Stop this?” Kilian flicks his finger skillfully, swirling over my entrance with pressure. “Or this?” he rasps before entering me with what feels like two alpha male digits.

**CHAPTER
TWELVE**

MY LEGS QUIVER.

I need more.

“Your breathing is telling me what, to stop?” Kilian focuses on my neck, licking the path of the whiskey drop, my curled toes cramping as he does. “Because your silence tells me otherwise . . .” he croons.

As I feel his lips on my skin, my thighs rub against his hand, telling him to keep working on my throbbing channel.

He has something in mind because he abandons my throat and my wetness.

My head follows after him in vain. His scent is an unexpected drug, pulling me, and I’m puzzled as to why.

Straddling me like I’m his new favorite steed, Kilian clamps his hands around my waistband, crawls backward, and, as he does, pulls my pants all the way down to my feet, then completely off.

This game is definitely not fair.

On his knees, he then grabs my ankles and lifts them up.

This is crazy . . .

Bringing one of my feet closer to his face, Kilian stops it an inch from his mouth.

This cheeky fool cocks his head to one side, his snarky gaze filling me up.

And I internally melt.

Smooth velvet lips graze the tip of my toes. Some audacious nibbles accompany them, and it's getting me high to the nth degree!

My leg jerks, and to this, Kilian jerks it right back. It's a dominant tug, telling me he's not one to give others a choice in bed.

And the man doesn't stop there. Keeping his lips pressed against my skin, Kilian slides his tongue between them, trailing its tip down the length of my foot.

My heart just dropped down my clit, pulsing like a galactic explosion.

Alpha boy's ominous gaze penetrates my being as he slowly spreads my legs apart. I try resisting, but he keeps going, gently but surely.

And I shiver.

He's transfixed by my sex without shame. I'm transfixed by him, swallowing in waves. I couldn't be more out of joint. I know it's the name of the game but I'm seriously losing control.

"I'm still waiting for you to be a good girl," he rasps, rubbing his thumbs over my inner ankle bones. "Will you be a good girl?"

"Yes." *Fuck.*

As Kilian dives between my legs, my frustration grows. He's dressed, and I want to free the beast stretching his trousers.

"Unshackle me. I'll treat you right," I tease.

"Really? But I like you like that. A little omega to toy with."

"Toy?"

"Toy . . ." He yanks on one of my legs, and my body slides beneath him, the pillow falling to the floor. "A war trophy, to be precise."

Those words rattle my shackles.

His lips brush mine, and I moan. If only he knew that I'm one kiss away from killing him. One kiss away from strangling his neck with the snap of my feet. And yet . . .

This voice of his is bending me to his will. Kilian's aura ... it's so powerful that I can't bring myself to look at him.

“Open your eyes, Spades.”

As I do, Kilian doesn't even allow a breath between us before he crashes against my lips.

Carefully, Kilian flicks his fingers inside me, exposing the muscly bulge near his shoulder every time he thrusts a little deeper.

“Kilian!”

“Need a breathing spell again?” he asks, his smirk against mine.

“No . . .”

And as he twirls into my core, my back arches.

A dirty snicker comes out of his perfect lips. “You like that, don't you?” And then he braces a hand behind the small of my back, ensuring it remains curved so it can't fall back on the mattress.

At Kilian's mercy, I'm being held by a powerful hand, moaning as he grazes against my nipple, then rolls the tip between his teeth.

Like a conductor, he plays with my body as if he always knew how.

And soon, my voice joins his rhapsody as my dangling head moans and cries.

“Unknown Vessel not so unknown anymore . . .” he rasps against my areola.

His hand glides up my back, making my abdomen contract, my core squeezing around his fingers for more.

And as he holds my nape, he orders, “Watch.” Then keeps my head up to help me witness those digits thrusting inside

me.

I feel his stare as I moan louder, my eyes crinkling from the coil building inside.

His thumb rubs my clit, and my wrists tense, trying to hold onto him, but they only make a rustle out of nothing.

My arms are strung, and as my handcuff chains strain under my pull, streaks of passion leak from me, soaking the mat.

I'm losing control.

He removes his hand from my nape, and it's only then that I remember I have a neck.

He clasps my jaw and orders, "Now, look at me."

As I do, he increases the weight of the friction.

Eyes like somber sunsets feathered with the color of deep night ensnare me in their mysterious world. In tangent to Kilian's ominous irises, his steepening eyebrows are akin to waxing crescent moons in every way. He's staring with steely determination, never blinking; only a faint growl tells me he's athirst.

Kilian pushes deeper inside me. My wolves are agitated, dying to howl at his gaze, which is nothing more than wild at twilight.

Shit!

"Kilian . . ."

"Surrender, Spades."

"Kilian!"

I climax, failing to contain my shy grunts against his lips. On the other hand, he feels victorious as he keeps thrusting, pleasuring me, although decreasing the motion.

Now, that's what I call a gentleman.

When my breathing returns to a normal state, only then does he release me from his amazing grip.

Alpha Kilian needed on Platform Seven. Descent in sixty-two seconds. Crew, prepare for landing.

Is that a kiss on my cheek?

Kilian dismounts from me, walks toward the kitchen, grabs a sort of electronic device on the counter, and begins . . . heading out?

Was that my shifterguard?

“What did we just . . . I mean, what is . . . where are you going?” My confusion at this point is palpable.

“You seemed in need, so I helped.” The brat then winks. “Don’t sweat, Spades. I’ll be back in an hour,” Kilian coyly says, the hatch door opening as he steps out.

“Hey! At least pull my pants up. Hey! My shifterguard, at least—come on.”

I hear a faint, “Working on it” before the hatch closes behind him.



WEREN’T WE SUPPOSED TO LAND AGES AGO?

Don’t fret, girl. Everything about this ship is beyond bizarre.

I eye my gray sweatpants lying on the floor.

I try everything. To twist, grab it with my toes, and squeeze the flesh out of my bonds. However, none prevailed.

I release a very, very long breath. I don’t think Kilian and I have the same concept of time. I’m watching this holographic clock that seems more like an excessively long new year countdown.

I’ve been waiting for him for hours.

Wow!

My bed shakes. In fact, the whole cabin shakes.

Crash!

His bottle of whiskey didn't make it.

Warning. Warning.

Breach level six. Breach level six. Breach level six.

Intrusion.

Intrusion.

Warning.

Shit!

The door hatch opens, and I instinctively bring my knees to my chest.

“You haven't been gone two days, and I find you pantless?”

“Dad?”

**CHAPTER
THIRTEEN**

“WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG!?” I FUSS, TAKING IT OUT ON MY father like he’s responsible for those pants on the floor.

“Perhaps picking up a distress signal in space and a location crash site in a desert the size of *Pallamir!*” Dad fusses, firing at my bonds. “To tell the truth, your shifterguard’s tracker did all the work.”

“Alpha Hayden, we must hurry!” I catch from outside.

Is that Bret?

I grab Kilian’s pants, and as I pull them up, familiar hands wrap tenderly around my shoulders.

“Come here, Winnie.”

“Humph!” That’s a big squeeze.

“Sweet Shooter,” I mutter in my father’s arms.

Yeah, I’m that daddy’s little girl who doesn’t lose sight of what she wants, and I’m not going to wait for another birthday to get a new ship.

“We’ll fix this. Here, take this.”

A fucking Sun Saber pistol lands in my palm. I can sure do with that.

“Alpha Hayden, please.”

Yep, that’s Bret’s voice, all right.

Zap!

Zap!

“Lass, it’s time to steal the show.” Dad then whispers louder, “Fire and maneuver. You heard that, Bret.”

“Copy that.”

“Winnie, you’re gonna open the way.”

“With pleasure, Daddy,” I snark, my fight juices kicking in.

I hit the hatch button and take a deep breath. Come on, Wren, are you a troublemaker or not?

Okay . . .

One, two, three, here we go.

I slide my body across the width of the corridor until I reach the other side.

It’s dark.

I try merging my back with the rounded wall.

Hiding behind this iron structure ringing this rubbish corridor is more strenuous than I thought. I have like eleven inches for a shield. That is if I stay glued behind it. And we all know that’s not going to happen.

On my left is a tunnel of sliding doors.

On my right, I see movement in the shadows. Here’s where the party’s at, then.

I grip my laser pistol tightly and pull on the slide, waiting for the iron crystals and electrons to warm this baby up.

Only the red emergency strobe lights help me to more or less see what’s going on. That aside, the streaks of laser pistol beams aiming at us help a little.

As if that wasn’t enough, an alarm blares its hatred at me.

“*Spades!*”

Kilian?

Zap! Was that shot for me!? Bastard!

“We’re not stopping till we break through, so take your best shot, buddy!” I shout across this mess.

I aim for the unknown. *Zap! Zap!*

A body falls—one out of the way.

“Look how I’m striking, Hound Dog! You want to be next?” I bark at Kilian, releasing more rounds toward the far end. While I can’t see them, I can estimate how many there are based on the number of shots taken.

A furious twelve, that’s what it is! And if the sound of distant running footsteps is anything to go by, soon to be thirty-something.

Zap!

Zap!

As my two rescuers crouch at the entrance of Kilian’s quarters, Bret fires at the cabin’s door-lock system and jams the whole thing.

“Pretty little wolf, why don’t you sit back and go play nice!” shouts Kilian.

Zap!

“Can’t hold me down, Alpha Zero!” The nerve, I swear.

I hear my father snicker as he brings a half-consumed cigar to his mouth. “You’ll have to tell me that story.”

Zap!

“Trust me, Dad. You don’t want to know,” I shout-whisper across the corridor.

An awkward pause ensues.

It’s as if both sides are waiting to see who will shoot first.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Dad says, hitting the crystal ammo in his laser *Dingo*.

Zap!

Zap!

I brace myself—my heels lifting from the ground, fingers spread apart on the cold gridded floor, readying myself for a sprint.

But then, I stop in my tracks when I catch, “Shoot the runner!”

Stupid Golden Fang . . .

“I’m having fun. Don’t put me down!” I shout back.

I find Dad sniggering when we make eye contact.

“What?” I mouth. But only more sniggering and nodding follow.

Fathers . . .

My sigh rushes through me. I’m still stuck behind this iron railing and haven’t moved an inch.

This is going to take forever.

Taking a courageous peek from behind the rail, I find an angry alpha running with a gun pointing at my father. “I don’t think so. That’s my dad, asshole!”

Zap!

Zap!

“Spades!” Kilian shouts, ducking to the side.

It looks like I grazed his head.

Thank the Gods, I missed. His brain splattering would have ruined my day.

Holding it with two hands, my father begins to fire his laser-heavy machine gun. “Go!” he orders.

I sprint for the other door hatch. This corridor has doors every fucking ten feet.

“Dad, we must override their open-and-close control system!”

We’re not even trying to hide our voices anymore. Why bother? Everybody’s shouting. This corridor is basically a rave with laser guns.

“Who do you think is on it?” Dad shouts, his arms jerking from the machine gun recoil.

Mum is here?

Taking a break, Dad strokes his bald head and asks me, “You have matches?”

“What? Why would I have matches on me? I’m in fucking sweatpants, and they’re not even mine!”

Sitting on his heels, my dad leans back toward his beta, his long brown beard dancing from his chin. “Bret, you have matches?”

“Yep.”

He catches Bret’s matchbox, strikes a match, and lights his burnt-out cigar. “Ahh. There’s nothing better than the smell of leather. My mum always said cigars tasted like victory, and trust me when I say she’s never wrong,” he hums, puffing out a perfect circle.

I’m grinning.

This is one of my favorite moments.

“Let’s give those guys a taste of our heat.”

Dad likes to play with fire. Not to mention, he’s an old-school type of man when it comes to explosives. Bringing out dynamo charges from his cargo pockets, he ignites a couple of wicks.

“I suggest covering your ears. It’s about to pop,” Dad exhales, his cigar smoking up the corridor. And with a powerful throw, he sends his dangerous party popper toward our hostile hosts.

We all tuck our heads between our legs. It’s going to get shaky in here.

Bam!

Breach level three.

Breach level three.

Breach level three.

My father talks into his headset mic that’s squeezing the cheek out of him. “Jana!”

“Hayden, six minutes!” I think I hear.

“Make it one!”

“The fucks, I give a shit! I’m being showered here. Try hacking their system with one hand while holding a gun with the other, little f—”

My father hangs up and smiles. “She’s on it.”

My mum is like that.

“On one!” barks Pops. “One!”

I race for my life as they cover my back and slink behind another rounded structure curbing the corridor.

My turn.

Deep breaths.

“Two!” I shout.

I begin unloading, the drilling of laser shots disrupting Kilian’s little infantry. It’s going well, good enough for my father and Bret to pass by me and gain ground.

And then the fizzing sound of our salvation floats to our ears. All the doors open at once. My mum aces it, and I’m not afraid to say she’s the best hacker in the whole damn galaxy.

“Flight!” shouts Bret, picking himself up at the speed of light.

We’re making this the run of our lives.

“Argh!” I fall flat on my face and somehow muster enough strength to heave myself up. As I do, I look down to where the sting radiates. Some stupid moron took a shot at my leg!

Pain shoots up past my waist, and I’m left with no option but to summon Nara.

“Nara!” The wolf has resilience I cannot fathom when it comes to pain, and although the situation sucks big time, she is my only *reliable* option when it comes down to my wolves.

I thought you’d never ask, she mind-links me.

“Wren, not now!” Dad barks, looking back as laser streaks whiz between us.

“It’s okay. We’ve got this. Run. I’ll be right behind!” Argh, fuck. I try to keep my focus as I shift, shooting until I can no longer hold the gun.

Claws and paws soon replace my hands, and my vision turns black and white.

Nara is in control now.

I rush through the dark corridor, squishing my blood with every touch of my back paw.

I pass our alpha in no time, his inner wolf growling with appreciation. I bow my head respectfully, but when a laser beam shaves his scalp, I snap.

While the beta escorts our alpha, I revert my trajectory and crash into the enemy line, knocking their weapons out of their hands.

My teeth latch onto the jugular of one, and . . .

Nara, no! I scream in our minds. She’s stubborn beyond reason.

I simply toss him to the side.

“Who is this wolf?” *shouts this other alpha.* “Down, wolf!”

I growl and take him to the ground, my teeth closing in on his sweaty face.

And . . .

Mate!

**CHAPTER
FOURTEEN**

No!

Fucking wolf, run! Nara is bloody ignoring me, like always.

The alpha grabs my head and pulls me toward him.

Against his panting, we're at the mercy of our eyes.

I feel his heart beat in mine . . . his thoughts racing in my mind.

A burning sensation hits my flanks.

Throughout this tunnel, my growl echoes.

A soldier leaps back in fright, a smoking pistol in one hand.

My, oh, my . . . a dead man walking. For the blood I spill, I'll let their guts flood this place!

Nara, please. No!

I howl as I dive back on this alpha, in pain and furious as I lose control.

He dodges and rolls to the side. It's his lucky day.

Or is it mine . . .

"Nara!" My alpha calls me. I should obey.

I should . . .

Our gazes meet again when a laser flashes across his shoulder.

"Argh!"

I'm chomping at the bit, growling toward my pack to back off.

Nara, fuck! I shout at her.

I won't let your thoughts get in my way, Wren. We found our mate. He's there.

As I take a step back, coldness runs through me.

To stay by his side is where my place is. Warmth . . .

He grabs my paw. "Spades, I know you're there. When are you going to wake up?" he grunts, clutching his wounded shoulder. "Or are you going to be another cog in the scene!"

Kilian . . .

Nara, my speed demon, I need you to show me what you're capable of. Please, Nara! I beg you. Run!

It's getting to the point where I'm giving up because smooth talking doesn't work with Nara. I can't get my fucking wolves to listen to me. Not one!

"Nara!" My alpha calls me once more.

I will find him again. Whatever it takes.

Eventually, the distance between my alpha and me closes.

My beta is playing with cables, and soon, the door closes behind us.

My ears perk up at once. Laser impacts from the other side dot the metal in growing bulges.

"They won't shift. They're in gear for space piloting. We'll be fine," Alpha says, walking toward me with a deceitful look.

"Nara, shift!"



“SHIT, WINNIE. WHY DID YOU HAVE TO CALL HER?” DAD asks, taking his tight leather jacket off.

Well, trying to take it off, it seems.

“Argh. She’s—she’s the strongest and fastest after Zombie . . .” I say in agony, my naked body twisting in pain. Truth is, it was either Nara or my future in a body bag.

This little shit doesn’t respect me. I have a long history with my wolves, and if there is one thing we all agree on, it’s that we hate each other. Well, aside from one, but she’s a coward, so that doesn’t count.

“Get your ass over here. We’re about to fly, honey,” Dad calmly says over his mic.

My big paps then brings a knee to the ground to cover me with his XXL jacket.

My father is called the Bear of Wolves for a reason; he’s ripped to the bone. His clothes never seem to fit, never seem to be the right size. Always too small or too clingy. It’s his nemesis, a nightmare that never seems to end.

Dad switches his cigar from right to left. The man is nervous. “Winnie, you’re gonna be fine.”

Bret squints on my stomach. “Alpha, that’s a lot of blood.”

“Bret, don’t get dramatic and remove your jacket . . . and now your shirt.”

My dad has this look on his face, and I don’t like it. It’s wrinkled with bad news.

“I thought strip night was next week?” Bret teases.

This wiseass never misses an opportunity when it comes to kinky stuff, and while revealing his skin, he smirks at me as if wanting some banknotes slung under his belt.

But I also know Bret is putting on a brave face because he keeps fidgeting with his fingers . . . precisely the reason why he will always suck at poker. Well, at least more than I do.

Dad’s knee comes into view again. In his hand is a piece of Bret’s sleeve, and without warning, he wraps it around my leg,

tying it tourniquet style.

Fucking fucks!

“Arsh!” Squirming like an eel, I grunt my fucking pain out, my nostrils too small for my enervated lungs.

“For the rest, Winnie, brace!” Brace, Dad says. Brace . . .

“Are these . . . Cromancer jets?” exclaims Bret as he walks toward a large glass panel beside us.

It’s a festival of abs. What better day to get shot? I’m ready to take another round of lasers if that’s what it costs for Bret to go shirtless. He sure understands the assignment . . .

“Cromancers! Haha, what a treat,” my dad says, leaving me for his first love—jets.

He’s ecstatic but not as much as my punctured waist, and as it spasms, I gargle up some blood.

My father sees it and pinches the tip of his mic. “Jana, where the fuck are you?” He then turns his back on me, swirling his head from left to right, his fists balled into rocks.

“Dad, I’m okay. I just need to pop som’. Is there any Morphine on you by any chance? A little stress reliever. Xanax? Methadone?”

“Winnie . . . don’t start,” he grumbles without looking.

It’s no secret. The Chimeras are an elite squad of space pilots in the Alliance. There is no higher distinction a pilot can attain, but it comes with its own set of problems.

We live through so much shit—our PTSD kicks in as soon as we touch the ground. And sometimes, some pills become habits, and then everything goes sideways. But I need some.

Now.

Soon, a hand slips around his back. “I’m here, Alpha pup.”

“Jana . . . that’s the last time you will join me on a rescue mission.”

They’re groping each other all over, some delicate hands maneuvering down my father’s buttocks.

I used to cringe at their display of affection, but now, I'm increasingly envious of what these two love birds have between them.

"You say that every time," my mum's warm voice rasps.

My father passes his hand over his bold, tattooed, and awfully blood-drenched scalp and then smooches the love out of what I can only guess is my mother. Is that my blood?

"Where is Winnie?" I hear mum say.

My father takes a step to the side, revealing my wormy, flattened-out self.

"Winnie!" She jumps on me, checking my vitals and cupping my cheeks, breathing her strawberry-infused anxiety at my face. "What happened?"

"I made some new friends," I say, pearls of sweat salting my lips.

"We're in luck," Bret says, peering through a large doorway. "The takeoff zone is right behind this door."

"Jets?"

"Yes, boss—about twenty," confirms Bret, sliding his pistol into its holster, snugly strapped across his chest.

The leather suits him like a glove. I need one of those. It definitely adds dramatic spice during a shooting scene. That is, if I lose my clothes in the process. Worry not. If there is a reason to, I'll find it.

"The last time I flew one of those beauties, I must have been sixteen." My father is reminiscing about his past again as if the timing was perfect . . .

"Speaking of jets, what happened to yours, Dad?" I manage to mutter.

"It got a little roughed up upon our arrival here." And then my father grunts, and I understand why when I follow his gaze.

An angry raffle is melting the door from behind.

“They’re gonna break in!” Bret shouts, launching his back against the door, a pistol in hand.

**CHAPTER
FIFTEEN**

DAD PICKS ME UP BRIDAL STYLE, FLIES DOWN SOME METAL stairs, and trots us toward the ship closest to the grand space exit gates.

Mum and Bret's skittish footsteps follow behind. Dad keeps his head low, hugging the walls, in this case, the airframe of the vintage masterpieces—true spaceship killers in every way. There's no doubt that these jets are at least a hundred years old, perhaps even older. Despite this detail, they still appear to be in excellent condition. Sadly, this model's been discontinued. Nobody wants to buy a spacecraft piloted by the enemy, right? And it's a shame because, just like my father, I adore Cromancers. I never had a chance to fly in one, but today might be my lucky day.

“Fucking budge!” Bret is using a wrench to forcefully open the windshield.

It finally works. The massive bubble canopy slides backward while Bret pushes it with grunting effort.

He then takes a break on the jet's nose, looking curiously smug.

“I'm fit to lead, guys!” he says, holding his wrench like a sword high above his handsome head.

“Over my dead bones,” my old man says with a laugh that means “don't push it.” “For now, you can hold my daughter.”

I'm shoved into Bret's arms and get hit by a wink as I look up.

Bret's golden gaze is so hot it screams sex on the tarmac. It always does . . . but then his gaze hardens. "Are you in heat?" he sternly whispers.

I murmur as harshly as my blubbering throat can allow, "Whatareyouimplying?"

"Hey, finish your chit-chat already. It's time to fly!" Dad grunts, arms extended toward us.

Since Kilian's incident, if we can call that an incident, I'm feeling a little heated. My body is warming up like the reactor next to us. And I can't figure out why.

I probably need my fix. That's all.

I go from Bret's strong arms to the mighty ones of my father, and not a second later, I'm placed on one of the only two passenger seats.

At the front, Dad begins flipping a few switches. "Ah . . . nice. Found the cannons. I remember this little guy having some good firepower." The jet suddenly jerks forward and then stops. "I've got no clue what I'm doing, but it seems I'm doing fine," he chuckles. "Right, strap up, people!"

Bret stiffens. "And who's going to open the space hangar door?"

My father smirks, turning toward his beta. "Bret, love . . ."

"It's 'darling,' not 'love'!" Bret snarks before leaping out of the spacecraft.

I turn to my left and watch him run to the side of the hangar door. As he violently elbows a box, we're all biting our nails with the suspense building up. And when it finally opens, the jet fills with stressed-relieved exhales.

While he fiddles with what I can only guess are cables, Bret's stupid allegations come ruining my thoughts. What did he mean by *heat*? I mean, I've got my PMs like any woman . . .

Whatever.

A continuous grinding sound scrapes our ears as those massive doors slide back—the growing crack between them revealing the eternal night.

Space . . . at last.

“Dad, watch out for Bret!” I shout.

As much as Bret is a top soldier, he’s not indestructible. And watching him dance among laser shots on the tarmac like an old lady with rats, triggers some ugly memory I’m not ready to live through again.

My father is fast to grip the jet’s stick between his legs and fires at the enemy.

“Move your pretty ass!” he shouts, covering Bret as he sprints back to us.

A laser beam fizzles across the fuselage.

I take a peek, and across the long window shield, I find Kilian roasting a couple of his soldiers, even jerking one violently.

I think he’s having a bad day.

I’m sure he’ll get over it.

“Bret, get the fuck up here.”

“Roger, Alpha.”

Bret darts back in seconds, dodging a few shots, and swiftly climbs inside, ending this fucked-up tension.

Taking a position in the copilot seat, he pauses to catch his breath but then high pitches, “What is this junk?”

“Get with it, boy!” groans Dad, flicking so many tabs that I wonder if we’re ever going to take off. The man has no idea what he’s doing.

“Okay . . . hem. Windshield locked. Air pressure stabilized . . .”

Mutters after mutters, I think Bret’s insides are dissolving from stress.

“Crystal levels?” my dad asks while gunning the hangar with the jet’s heavy machinery.

“Half.”

“Half?”

“It’ll do,” Bret says, flying his lost hands over the dashboard.

“Really?”

“It’ll have to do!”

“Bret, you’re a cool guy. Stay fucking cool!” growls Dad.

“Okay . . . people, did you hear El Jefe? We gotta keep cool,” Bret jests, slipping a cheeky tongue on his lower lip. “People, are you strapped?” he then says, toggling a few switches.

“Not really,” I grunt, trying to slide my arms into the straps.

As I spew hideous words at the back, Bret stretches his torso beyond his seat, settling his gaze on me. “Darling, let me help you.”

Bret has always been off-limits. And I wonder if it’s because of this precise reason that he and I are always somewhat flirty with each other.

I give him a poor smirk. Sadly, it’s all I have.

“Where is Jana?” my dad barks.

“Here, Alpha Pup,” comes a voice from the rear, followed by some shuffling and tinny clinking. “There must be a med kit somewhere!”

While Bret straps himself in, his head darts from left to right like a mad hatter. “Where is the navigation pad?”

Some toggles later, wings unfold at 180°, a rusty sound wincing on each side of the structure.

“There ain’t any,” my father coyly says, pushing a handle forward, turbines roaring as we accelerate.

“What?” Bret’s voice turns into a choirboy’s.

I must side with him. What jet doesn't have a navigation pad?

My father points to a square pad covered in tabs and other push buttons. "You have to enter the coordinations manually with a keyboard."

Bret has just consumed half the jet's oxygen levels because he sucks in the biggest breath in all space piloting history. He joins his hands and makes his finger bones crack as he stretches them out. "Okay . . ."

I hear some computer keys being sluggishly pressed, and a giggle escapes me.

"Take your time, Bret. It's a lovely day," my dad says ironically.

"Flight path Orso Narius, Planet *Pallamir*, zone nine," snarks Bret, grinning like he's about to pull an Elsa.

And we all know that when he lets it go, he lets it go full steam.

At full thrust, we speed up, melting half the tarmac—because who gives any fucks at this stage—and propel into space.

We haven't even been in space ten seconds when a signal com waves through.

Bip!

"Golden Fang to Vessel Eight, we're escorting you back to the Demeter. Pull the breaks!" barks Kilian.

**CHAPTER
SIXTEEN**

MY FATHER LIFTS HIS SHOULDERS CHILDISHLY AND TURNS TO me, a face full of weird, strange lines. “Your boyfriend is having a hard time letting you go. I really want to hear the story when we return to *Pallamir*.”

The smile I give in return is one of guilt. And although it wasn't the one I intended to pull, it's too late now. All I can do is accept what is and die inside.

“Vessel ahem . . . Eight to Golden Fang, how do we do that? Is there a manual on board?” Dad jokes. Though I'm pretty sure he's telling the truth.

We all laugh, and I think my father forgot to cut the line because, on the other end, Kilian loses it.

Our left engine explodes, sending Mum crashing over the opposite side of the jet.

“Jana, strap up, for goodness' sake!”

“Love, there's a medic at work here,” she hisses, wiping the blood off her nose as she crawls in the back, a very suspicious box in one hand.

Her tenacious face approaches me.

Not feeling it ...

“Winnie, darling. It's going to hurt. A lot.” She brings out a tiny sewing kit, and my face scrunches.

She blows some hair out of her eyes while attempting to thread the needle, but her boyish pink cut keeps sliding right back.

Mum grunts from the turbulence, pricking her finger a few times. “Damn hair!” she grumbles, passing a hand over her scalp. “Perhaps I should go glabrous like Daddy,” she giddily says.

Will they ever be over their honeymoon? It was twenty-three years ago!

“Bret, can I have one of your licorice sticks?” she calls.

“Yep.”

“Here, Winnie. Bite it hard.”

The needle enters my flesh, and the pull of the string has me banging my head against the seat multiple times.

In the same breath, the jet decelerates.

My father grabs the radio speaker and jeers with unabashed pride, “Golden Fang, hold your fire, boy. You won’t need it anymore.” Gods, he’s loving this! Releasing a large ring of smoke, he scrutinizes his brown stick with satisfaction and hums, “And this, guys, is the true smell of victory.”

“Hayden! How many times do I have to say it? Not in the jet, stinking wolf!” my mum roars, shattering my ears as she roasts the man.

“Ahh, Jana, if only you knew . . .” says Bret before receiving an alpha’s tap behind the head.

I look at my mum, puzzled.

“You think we’d come without backup, sweetie,” she says with a smirk.

“Vessel Five, Vessel Six, Vessel gods, how many of you are there? Well, all of you, you are no longer in the space area, Mara della Morte. You are now in an International Space zone. Follow us without a fuss. It goes for you too, Golden Fang.”

Although I can’t see his face, I’m pretty sure my father is grinning like a possum right now.

“You have no authority,” spits Kilian.

“No, but we have gunpower and forty-six ships aimed at your little squad. Communication over.”



I OPEN MY EYES AND FIND A HUGE GRAY WOLF LYING AT MY side. He’s so big his back legs slink down, paws touching the floor. I simpers because this idiot can’t avoid sneaking in whatever bed I find myself in.

“Rayn, wake up,” I whisper, weaving my hand in his silver hairs.

He mustn’t have slept much . . .

His big snout yawns at me, and I shut my eyes, not from his warm breath but from the steam that landed on my face.

“Rayn . . .”

His massive tail wags like a lab, and I can’t avoid chuckling. He shifts, and then here he is, naked like a worm, spooning me.

“Missed me?”

“Not your wolf’s breath!”

“I don’t like cooked food.”

“You’re a weirdo.”

“What a perfect match we are then . . .”

While huddling against me, Rayn snuggles his salacious fingers under my ass. My squeak hits the ceiling. He smirks at it, drawing his face closer to mine.

His angelic self halts on the verge of my lips.

“Wren, you smell . . . different.”

PART TWO

**CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN**

“I JUST ESCAPED 078. I DON’T NEED AN INTERROGATION session right now. I already have one coming my way. I can feel it.”

Why do I feel nervous?

He lifts himself, and by the way his teeth grate, something tells me he’s got something to unpack.

I don’t have time to blink before Rayn is already at my neck, tugging my hospital dress down my shoulders.

“Hey!” I fuss, pushing him back.

“You smell of a male wolf.”

“Yeah, well, I was handled by a couple of them. What date is it?”

“Monday, 23rd.”

“Pfft. Not even two days ago.” I couldn’t have been knocked out for that long?

“You shifted. I recognize the scent of two of your wolves . . . Zombie?”

“My shifterguard broke.”

“New one?” he says, passing his fingers over the new gadget strapped on my wrist. “Can you walk?”

“I don’t know.”

He looks at my bandage, well aware we wolves are fast healers.

“Looks like you’re healed, Spades.” With that, he rips the bandage off, and I grunt a little. “Stop whining and come with me.”

“Where?”

He leans toward my ear, sheltering his words like a child. “To the shower.”

“What if the nurse comes in?” I chuckle.

“I’ve locked the door.” Rayn is grinning like a Cheshire cat, an evil plan in mind.

I’m feeling playful. And when I return Rayn’s satanic smile, I realize it’s the green light he was waiting for.

Soon, arms snake over and under me as I’m jerked out of bed. With haste, Rayn skips us to the bathroom, his grip tightening around me but not as much as his intoxicating expression. Maybe it’s the twinkle in his eyes casting some unusual vibes. Maybe it’s how his eyebrows furrow that triggers a feeling of prey in me. I generally don’t mind his shenanigans. Most of the time, it turns me on. In this case, however, I’m feeling weak-kneed about it, and I don’t know why.

Rayn isn’t fooling me. I know what he’s doing. He wants to wash away the scents on my skin. He probably thinks I reek . . . of Kilian.

“Do I need a scrub that badly?” I ask as soon as my feet touch the cold tiles.

“Yes,” he says, eyes glistening as his hands flit down my back.

I’m too soft when it comes to Rayn. He gets everything he wants when he gets me alone . . . so easily. Like it’s nothing.

It’s okay because *nothing* is the sum of who I am . . .

Gently tugging on the straps of my gown as if afraid he’ll break me, his breath travels against my skin. “I’m chasing your love, Wren. And I gotta have it.”

Delicately sliding the robe down my arms, he fondles with my fingers, caressing my scars. He knows where they come from . . .

He knows all about me.

When my gown falls, Rayn takes on a completely different speed with his T-shirt. Yet somehow, this black tee manages to steal the show, pulling all of our attention to it as it refuses to budge.

“Pull harder,” he simpers in his struggle.

“But I am. It’s your shoulders. They’re too big!” I laugh back, pulling on the hem of his sabotaging T-shirt like my clit’s life depends on it.

Finally, the useless rag drops at our nudging feet, and everything reaches a standstill.

Two hands clasp my cheeks, soft fingers fluttering in waves under my eyes. “Girl, you are the reason I look up at the stars.”

And then a whisper of warmth penetrates my mouth. “I suffer when you leave ...” His lips trace mine, my skin prickling at his hushed words. “And I ache for you just as much when you return from your missions ...”

I snort at Rayn’s words, and our mouths separate.

“I’m being serious, Wren.”

I don’t want to hear the word serious, not when I’m about to ride the bony express. I ignore his declaration and drop my forehead against the beating of his frantic heart. It’s too strong.

Too nervous.

Too invested ...

While taking note of Rayn’s pulse rate, I run my hands up and down the wolf’s arms, and it’s hard not to sigh ... “You worry too much.”

The man shakes his head in response.

Rayn ... come on. My fingers tangle around his, and I soften my voice. “What about I play up to you?”

Rayn’s fingertips detach from my own to rap over my skull with hastening speed, the sudden strokes behind my head bringing a purr to my lips.

The oh-so-good massage is halted by a tight clamp of hands, forcing me to look up.

Rayn’s piercing eyes stare at me, blinking coldly. “Then play,” follows a growl that leaves me in a shambles ... Enough for an undercurrent of forbidden desire to stream throughout my body down to my sensitive spot. As my heart pounds, I squeeze my thighs and embrace the lustful force between them.

I shove a hand down my playmate’s pants and cup his sack. “I’m playing,” I whisper, with a sudden urge to be fucked when I catch Rayn’s lips shiver out a breath. On tip-toes, I tease his tongue again, purring my desire in wet strokes, “It’s so big under there, doesn’t it hurt?”

A corner of his lip curls, and my muscles tense with untamable lust.

“Set it free,” he orders, clutching his crotch with my hand trapped underneath.

To the sound of a belt unbuckling, my eyes stall in his baby-blue gaze.

“If I could drown in your eyes, Rayn, I would.”

“Let’s drown under something else,” he says, our feet trampling on his now-floored pants. Switching the shower on, Rayn’s hand slides behind my back, his cock flexing against my belly.

My hand wraps around it, and as it strokes down, his sex twitches.

It’s about to *Rayn* . . .

“Slow down, girl. I’m sensitive today,” Rayn croons into my neck.

I'm sparking up at lightspeed.

Rayn knows it.

And as water courses over our throbbing bodies, my flight dispatcher takes me down with him on the tiles of the walk-in shower.

Moving myself under the flow, I straddle Rayn, where it feels hard and warm. I've got to have him.

All of him.

Running his hands up my waist ever so gently, Rayn chases my goose bumps that keep spreading from his touch.

Embracing him, I lift my hips and center my core on his hardened tip. And as we stare at each other, he gapes when I take in his length entirely. "Feel me, Rayn." I moan, my center gloving his thick sex, diligently veering around it as every inch of his rim triggers a wave of growing pleasure.

I want to challenge him, so I raise his hand and take hold of two long fingers. They find refuge inside my mouth, my tongue cradling them, sweeping across them as my breathy moans reverberate against the tiles. Rayn's cock flickers inside me.

"I'm so deep in you, Wren. You have no idea."

I tilt my head because come on. That's not cute.

It's frigging adorable. And although it could be a lust killer, mine just climbed the ladder.

We both chuckle, but soon Rayn's smile leaves him when mine continues to swirl around his fingers. I'm sucking them diligently, giving him a hint of what awaits if he behaves.

His eyes close as a grunt hikes up his throat. My own are wide open, beginning to play with my mind as I rock myself, grinding my clit against his member.

My hands fall into his as I breathe louder, my little lips soaking with fever.

Our eyes take in each other, his mouth calling me, and soon something makes me feel like I've been checkmated.

Watching his chest quiver as our mingled hands clasp my breast, my coil constricts, freeing my soaking juices.

My heart submits to his name, his touch, a memory still too fresh . . .

“Kilian . . .”

“Kilian?”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Open the room! Alpha Hayden requests your presence.”

Double fuck.

**CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN**

MY CHEEK IS STILL BURNING FROM RAYN'S EMOTIONAL outburst.

Getting slapped across the face while his cock still oozed inside me is not what I call climax material.

Little fuck . . .

With a towel around me, I run for the door, all too happy to end this exchange.

My body jerks back, and I see red.

“Don't touch me!” My growl is threatening but not as much as Zombie's. And tilting toward the hand that thought it a good idea to land on my shoulder, I'm still assessing whether to unleash her or not.

I'll turn his eyes into pulp . . . Oh, to drink from his sockets, the brain juices running on my tongue . . .

Mhm . . . probably not.

Rayn spins me aggressively.

This slow piece of work doesn't seem to get the memo, so I'll have to spit it in his face. “Don't put your cum-drenched fingers on me!”

“I'll track him,” he says, snarking red shit at my face.

My eyes follow the streamlets of blood coursing down his chest. Something tells me I should have punched his nose harder.

Sinking his sharp nails into my jawline, he lifts my head and grates, “I won’t let you run away from me, Spades.”

You think you know a man until shit hits the fan . . .

“Wren, let us in! Now!”

I shut my eyes. Bret . . .

“Dan, find the nurse. I’m tired of her bullshit,” the beta says.

Rayn sniggers, “Seems I’m not the only one.”

“Fuck off!” sputters out of my mouth as I turn to hit the door hatch button.

Rayn snatches my wrist. “I’ll find him, Wren. And when I do, I’ll bring you his head as a trophy.”

“He’s not what you think!” I hiss back, twisting my wrist out of his grasp.

“You’re siding with him?” Rayn’s teeth are showing a little too much to my taste.

“Remove. Your. Hand. From. Me.”

“Hey. Open the gods damn door!”

On this military base, women bashers aren’t really the flavor of the month. Let’s say those who lay a hand on a woman get it back tenfold or more. Sometimes, in the middle of the night . . . sometimes, in a lonely corridor or toilet.

So many toilets and sinks ruined in blood, so many . . .

“What if I snitch,” I leer at him, my wicked smirk bitching for me.

He knows well what I’m implying.

His own fucked-up smile leaves him. In fact, it drops flat.

I’m not just anyone’s daughter, and I think only now did it ring a bell.

He’s probably wondering how the hell he’s going to escape a furious alpha.

My wandering hand finally hits the button, and this world-class asshole takes a step back as it does.

As soon as the hatch doors slide open, I'm greeted by Bret and two gammas.

A grimace stretches across Bret's face when he sees me wrapped in a towel.

As he stares at me, he crinkles that never-ending squint that makes me feel like I have salad forever stuck between my teeth.

Rayn walks straight past us, bumping into our shoulders as he waltzes out naked.

"Hey, Choker! I've been looking for you everywhere," growls Bret.

Despite this, Rayn doesn't even turn his head.

"Rayn!"

"I need to fetch some clothes. I'll be back in an hour," the mongrel says with a flick of his arm.

"What's going on?"

"He came to say hi. What is it?" I breathe.

Bret firmly grasps my hand. "You're shaking?"

I take what's mine and shove it under my armpit, both hands, as a matter of fact. "What do you want? I've got to join my squad."

"Why? So you can get high with your little Chimera junkies?"

What can I say to that? Small circle. Private life. Clear mind. Happy heart. I still need to work on the last two parts, though . . .

"You could spare me the hassle . . ." I lean toward Bret's ear, my voice low as I ask, "And give me what I want. Do you have any on you?"

Mister Proper widens his eyes as if I insulted his mother. "Stop this! We said no. Your father wants to hear no more of

it. I want to hear no more,” he grates before pushing me back.

I huff for the change of clothes he just plastered against my chest.

“You have two minutes. We’ll be standing right here.”

“Mind sharing some info?”

“Alpha Hayden wants to talk to you. Now, get movin’.”

Bret punches the button on the corridor’s wall, my nose leaping back as the doors kiss each other.

I run a hand through my hair and down my face. It’s damp from the shower. But the pearls of sweat dewing on my nose aren’t.

I look down at my military uniform, drooping on the floor. I can barely hold it.

My mind, it’s hazing again . . . My fix, I need my fix.

I pull my heavy eyes away from the floor—and when I say it’s a drag, trust me, it’s not an exaggeration. They glide toward my hospital bed, a specific object in mind.

Gotcha.

A balled-shaped Nurse Robot is drowsing under the bedside table.

“I-Nurse, wake up.”

Its digital eyes square up in green as it begins rolling toward me. “Patient O2A, how can I soothe you?”

“Call the nurse.”

“I am I-Nurse, ready to soothe you.”

I pinch my brows.

Fucked-up can.

“I-Nurse, please call a human nurse. A human that breathes with emotions.”

“I-Nurse has twenty-seven emotions. Patient O2A, how can I soothe you?”

A vein in my forehead just burst.

I'm going to smother the motherboard out of it . . . "I-Nurse, please call Freia!" I'm arguing with a tin, making my lines cringe beyond crumbled-up foil.

"I-Nurse calling Medic Freiana Hatchins."

Thank the gods it's over.

"Patient O2A, how can I soothe you?"

Just as I'm about to pull its cables out and strangle myself with them, some voices erupt from behind the door.

"She called me. Let me in."

"Then I'm coming with you."

I look up at the sterile white ceiling, neon tubes stripping my vision, and then, exhale.

Bret, why can't you let me be . . .

Just for once.

**CHAPTER
NINETEEN**

BRET FOLLOWS FREIA, MIRRORING HER STEPS LIKE THE predator he is.

I don't know if I'm more bothered by Bret harassing me or Freia's gaze. It's as if anger and worry fused together and gave birth to a regard of controlled terror or terrifying control.

Perhaps both . . .

From this point on, my back hits the bed frame as a destabilized me creeps back.

Ahh . . . at last.

A smile.

I mean, Freia's face is wrinkling into something close enough to resemble one.

But I can tell she's troubled.

And I get it. I really do.

Her son killed himself. She knows how this whole Chimera game works. War trauma, toxic stress, skeletal pain from too much G-force, our sleeping patterns beyond fucked up, and the ensuing addictions.

We are often summoned into her office. A proper roast—throwing some tramadol at our faces . . . which we finish in two days.

So, voilà!

Freia is sounding a bell for us—filling out forms, making complaints . . . the whole admin headache. But no one is ready

to listen or spend a few bucks on additional therapists and other mental stuff.

I did ask my father to help, but it's an international committee thing. Star Alliance Confederation, they call it, other alphas sitting at the board. So, we all know where that goes from there . . .

“Hi, Freia. I have pain on my left side. Mind checking?” I get comfortable on the bed, pretending to hiss in pain as I sit.

She bends toward me a little and runs a cloth over my damp forehead before feigning a hand slide over my rib.

“Looks like it's still a little swollen,” she says swiftly. As her hand shuffles in her pocket, a box of pills “accidentally” drops near me. She pulls out her torch and blinds me with its light. Freia then drowns the whole comedy with her portable scanner, running the object over my body.

“Nothing to worry about, but I'd keep an eye on it.”

She then turns toward Bret, who's like a leech on her back, and snorts, “I have other patients to see. Do you mind?”

Bret sternly looks at her, suspicion searing his eyes and teeth. “Sure,” he finally grates, clearing the way for her.

And then this watchdog plants something warm in my hands. “Here.”

A sandwich.

I gnaw at it like I haven't eaten for . . . days.

“Ready when you are.”

“I still have to get dressed. What does my father want?”

“Alpha Hayden wants you to identify someone.”



DAD STANDS IN FRONT OF HIS BIG WINDOW. MAINLY LOOKING at jets landing on the platform below, taking drags off his Magato cigar, blows of his hitting the glass.

“For the moment, they are being interrogated. We’re trying to gather intel about the wars raging over 078. We need your help. This faction is disrupting iron-crystal exportation.”

I’m barely listening, too absorbed by those semi-static waves of smoke filling the air. I can’t imagine the state of his lungs. It’s a mystery to me because he shows the most incredible stamina.

“And gods damn, do we need those.” He turns toward me, smoothing a hand over the skull inked on his scalp.

“Tomorrow, I’m counting on you to identify this leader.”

I should probably get myself another tattoo. Shave the left side of my head, and add a wolf skull . . .

“Winnie!”

“Yes.”

“You’re listening?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow what?”

“Tomorrow, I have to identify the leader,” I repeat as if a parrot was stuck in my throat. Perks of being a Chimera? You get the best mental training. Well, to a certain extent . . .

He sneers a little and draws his cigar back where it always is.

“King Daryl wants to meet him. He wants to be there when you point your finger. And I want you to be on your best behavior. I mean it, Winnie.”

Next to me, Bret sighs nervously. I don’t think he’s too fond of King Daryl. Personally, I can’t judge. I’ve never met the guy.

“Dad, this is not the Sang Muerte Pack.”

“Winnie, they destroy planets! These crystals, we can’t allow them to manufacture more bombs out of them.” To this, the cigar goes face-planting in a black ashtray. “Listen, I know it’s confusing. But the war is mind-bending. Intel keeps changing, IDs are trafficked, and spies are becoming better at blending in.”

“It is not the Sang Muerte Pack behind this!”

I’m on edge today. I need some time for myself.

Yes, a good snooze and a bag of crisps . . .

My father simply growls. He knows I’m not one to lower my head.

My eyes follow his arm as it extends over his desk. “You don’t realize how important the stakes are.”

In his clutch is the object of discord. “See this, girl?”

A stunning crystal gem, reflecting light like a mother of pearl, floats in front of his face as he loses his gaze in it. “If it continues, we’ll run out of these before the end of the year.”

He puts it back where it was, its sole purpose being a vulgar paperweight.

“Where do you think the energy and air we breathe come from? Windmills? This Golden Fang, you know what he looks like. I can’t even put a face on these soldiers. There were too many shots going on. But you’ve seen his face.”

A holographic screen appears, and Dad shoos us away with a *get-out-of-here* head motion.

No need to ask me twice.

The doors shut behind me. I shoot off before I’ve got a beta on my tail.

Lady’s bathroom one, locked.

The trembling exhale I’ve been refraining from releasing finally escapes my lips.

The toilets are my refuge. They always have been.

I don't know why. It's probably because I constantly feel like shit on land.

I'm about to meet the Chimera team and must mentally prep myself. Honestly, I'm too proud to go full gelato on them. Nobody wants to witness an adult meltdown . . .

Seeing the water splatting against the mirror, I wince from what's across it.

I look worse than Zombie. Blue rings circle my eyes as if I got beaten in a drunken brawl. Maybe it's a bruise? I don't know.

I need sleep. Real sleep.

I turn the tap off, grab a couple of paper towels, and dry my fugly face.

How Kilian looked into me as if siphoning the depths of my soul . . .

When I look at myself, I see nothing.

Just green, tired eyes. Dry skin. Withered lips and hair that's as depressed as me, if not more.

Clasping the sink's edge, I shut my eyes, knowing too well I'm not being honest with myself. *Sweet Shooter* . . .

I could have made the *captain-never-leaves-his-ship* move. It did cross my mind. To have my burnt corpse float forever in space.

I'm okay.

It's just that sometimes, I feel like I don't belong in my skin.

And sometimes, I wanna end it.

Shit. I'm crying again.

I wish I didn't fucking hate myself.

The first time I ever felt like I fit in was on the Demeter. Fucking why?

I was shackled, shot at, and nearly brainwashed.

He's just a stranger. Forget him.

But then . . . I remove my shifterguard.

Nara?

Say the word.

No. I just want to talk.

With me?

Will you . . . How did it feel?

Nara?

. . . Nara, please.

It was like . . . a winter's breath. It ran through my blood like ice and fire.

Tell me more.

There was this feeling. Like I finally found my place, a reason to live.

A place where only souls meet . . .

Where worlds collide . . . and blood reunites.

It was a taste of . . .

Fate.

Yes.

But this feeling, it can't be described unless you live it yourself.

I clip my cuff back and stare at the dullness that's my face.

The beat in my heart . . .

It's not mine. It's Nara's.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY**

“HERE SHE IS! THE REVENANT,” I HEAR, MY BLACK BOOTS trailing me toward my squad.

“In the flesh!” I beam my retort.

Tyrius, Joy, and Rio are lazing in the park fronting the military base’s cafeteria like they always do.

One is missing . . . Where is Hataro?

Three fist bumps later, I drop myself onto the fake grass and numbly stare at the artificial sky. There is nothing organic about this place. Pallamir is a dead stone with giant glass domes on it.

Fake and artificial.

It makes me think . . . maybe a little too much. We’re known for our spacecrafts and military forces—number one in weapon export. Our *carbonite* mineral is the best in the galaxy, Pallamir being the only planet composed of it . . .

“My little finger told me the Valkyrie met Alpha Zion . . .”

And here come the questions. I already regret coming here.

“Tyrius, you know what they say . . . not everything you hear from the grapevine is ripe,” I coyly quip, crossing my legs as I try to relax.

“Never heard that.”

Well, of course, you haven’t, Tyrius. I just made it up.

Joy climbs on me like I am her new girlfriend and begins toying with one of my dry, in-need-of-some-TLC strands. She

leans forward, and my giggle runs free.

“I wasn’t aware of my effect on you, Moon-Wrecker,” I chuckle.

Joy huffs a laugh and buries her head in my neck. Seriously, people need to calm the fuck down with my scent.

“So, *who* was the alpha?” Joy cries, pretending to orgasm as she rocks herself on me.

I crack a smirk. “Unlike you, I don’t try to go *meat to meat* with the first stranger I stumble upon.” My upper lip twitches a tad when Kilian’s fingers come racing across my mind.

“He’s a big one,” Joy says. “His scent is strong.”

“Well . . . yes. I was . . . a little manhandled.” This is going south, isn’t it?

“In which way?” Rio whispers, and so snidely that I could thrust the beer he’s holding between his lips down his throat.

Is this an interrogation?

Stop the paranoia, Wren. Yeah, it’s paranoia. I’m just going to answer normally, like during the debrief session. “We exchanged pistol shots. It got a little heated.”

Very heated . . .

“How did you find yourself on their mothership?” Rio is too fucking curious.

Perhaps I should shove that glass bottle in his throat, after all.

“I crashed on 078.” That was painful to say, I must admit.

“Woo, the Valkyrie cramped a wing?”

“The whole ship, Rio darling.”

“Sweet Shooter . . . aw.” Rio’s puckering his lips, extending his beer which I take with hastened pleasure.

“It’s a tragedy! I’m in mourning,” I snicker, rupturing myself in the process. Yes, that sound was forced. Because I’m devastated . . .

“Rumors say Zion’s got wolf ears like the horns of a devil and fur blacker than midnight. And they still don’t know which one he is,” says Joy dramatically.

Add a tent and a torch beaming under her chin, and she’d be the perfect storyteller.

“Look who’s coming,” Tyrius mutters, wetting his lips, his chest heaving up and down like a seesaw ridden by two kids having a sugar rush.

It’s this prick again.

The nerve!

Tyrius has a thing for Rayn. He can have him.

I’m out.

“Hey, death trolls. What’s on the menu today?” says this idiot, towering over us with his leather space pants.

He’s doing nothing but spoiling our view over this splendid sky made of AI glass. Now that I see him in a brighter light, this thin skunk needs to hit the gym.

“Tanning and chilling before heading back to 078 . . .” Joy says coyly, with a wink that means, “While you’re stuck on Pallamir.”

“Tomorrow’s mission’s been canceled until further notice.” Rayn winks back, killing Joy’s vibes.

Fuck, I want to thrash his fucking face.

“Why?” I drawl, pulling a slutty grin.

I’m afraid it’s all I’ve got for the moment. Although I’m itching to savage him, teeth and claws included.

“Alpha Hayden wants you crazy asses on the dock tomorrow morning, a weapon in hand. Don’t ask. It’s a little parade to welcome King Daryl, I guess.”

“Hey, Choker, what happened to your nose? That’s nasty.” The sass in Joy’s voice cannot amount to her sneering.

Jest, like you know how. Jest, Joy.

Rayn turns his snarky face toward me, ignoring the question. “By the way, I wanted to inform you, Spades.”

“Tell me, Cho-cker?”

“It’s Choker Baby,” he whispers, vibing some odd main character.

“Whatever . . .” I roll my eyes because it’s just air. Toxic at best.

Every time I want to retract into the caves of my mind, I end up shackled in Kilian’s bed. I can’t avoid it being my happy place, especially since I landed back in Pallamir. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“You’ve been assigned a *Thunderhorse*,” Rayn says.

A Thunderhorse fucking trash can?

He then leaves as if it’s nothing. May he choke on his lunch and die.

“Is there trouble brewing?” asks Rio.

“There is nothing between us anymore.” End of story.

But Joy disagrees with this, preferring to keep hitting the nail. “No wonder, love. You do realize you are covered with an alpha’s scent. And it’s not your daddy’s if you know what I’m talking about.”

Joy, love. Stop!

“We wrestled in the sand and not in the way you think,” I say before pulling myself up. “Anyone seen Hataro?”

They all shrug, uncertainty flashing across their eyes, knowing well that death is part of the job. By their reaction, they don’t know where our pinkie member is.

“Where you going?” asks one of them, but I am too tired to recognize who.

I’m out of this conversation.

“I need to relax.” My gaze lingers far, my next destination in mind—my bed.

“Oh, come on, Wren . . .”

“Catch you later.”

“Wren . . . come back.”

The less people you chill with, the less problems you deal with. “It’s fine. I’ll see you for dinner.”

Not.

As I walk back inside, some thoughts begin to spin anew.

Where is Hataro?

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE**

HEADING TOWARD MY QUARTERS, I PULL THE BOX OF PILLS OUT of one of my jacket's inner pockets, pop the lid, and drop a pill on my tongue.

“Just one.”

I swallow it whole.

It's just one.

“Hello, Jade.”

Hello, Spades. Welcome back.

Jade isn't only my system operator for ships but also for anything domestic.

Sometimes, I get scared thinking she's my only true friend. The one that sees me binge-watching series, exercising, and talking to myself in a frenzy of angst before, after, and during missions . . .

I slouch on my couch, which looks more like massive white pillows stitched to one another than anything else. Some say it's contemporary; I call it snugly.

I know I need to get a proper wash with soap and all, but I'm zapped.



YOU HAVE A GUEST.

I lift one lid and then the other, and without thinking, babble, “Jade, open.”

What a mistake that move was . . .

Rayn walks in like he’s at home, throws his jacket against a chair, and goes for the cabinet, where I stash my liquor.

“Come on in, feel at ease,” I growl, baring my teeth.

I keep my eyes on him as I bring myself up, ensuring there is no blind spot between us.

But as I’m wiping away the remnants of whatever glues my hair to my cheek, I freeze as he sits on the armchair in front of me.

“You’re humiliating me.” He’s profoundly staring at his glass of vodka, his expression broken.

I’ve hurt the man.

The feelings Rayn has for me . . . I always thought his sweet nothings were part of his charisma.

There is one thing I’m sure of, though. I’m not into uppercuts.

“There was never anything close to a claim between us, and you know it.”

“That’s because it’s the law.”

I won’t answer because he just shot himself in the foot.

“You reek of the enemy.”

“I do? And so . . .”

“So, it’s . . . it’s . . .”

“It’s what?”

A few moments later, he switches his seat for my couch, his thigh against mine.

I’m staring into the distance, focused on my laundry bag, which is frighteningly full. And somehow, I find comfort in

doing so, even though I have to call maintenance because Jade is mechanically reluctant to do it.

I guess the hate of laundry is a universal thing.

“I have no issues taking back what’s mine.”

“What is yours?”

“My honor.”

He leans toward me, swiftly moving my hair from my shoulder, exposing the neck everyone’s been taking a sniff of today.

“No, Rayn.”

“I’m not asking you for permission.”

Rayn crashes on top of me, clamps one hand around my wrists, and begins unzipping my pants.

“Black leather suits you so well,” he rasps as he tugs on them.

“Rayn, don’t be an idiot.” I’m panting like a dog, my thighs glued against each other, blocking my pants from getting lower.

“I have no rank, forbidden to have a mate. I’m fucking free to do what I want,” I rush out as if it could pump his sex breaks.

“Not with the enemy,” he says before sinking his fangs in my fucking throat.

A kneecap in the nuts later, Rayn rolls on the floor, banging his fist on the felt lining the entire base floors.

“Bitch,” he croaks.

“Bitch, you too,” I breathe, jumping over the sofa.

“Come here!”

Our bodies are bouncing around my oversized couch, and I’m desperately trying to get closer to my pistol without awaking suspicion. And there’s an issue with that because it’s on my desk at the entrance.

“Jade, open the doors.”

Doors open.

“Get out!”

“No.”

I run for my pistol, but he grabs it first, and all I can do is lift my hands because the guy’s lost it.

“Calm down.” I’m breathing a mile a minute.

There’s toxic shit coming my way, and I’m not sure I want to climb on that train.

“I’m calm.”

“Can we stay friends?”

“No,” he deathly whispers.

“Rayn, stop this!”

He shoves me against the desk, my head deep diving into a shelf full of my picture frames, souvenirs from planets, and other childhood trinkets.

“I won’t be rejected twice.”

And . . . everything falls into place. No wonder . . .

“Rayn, plea-se stop this,” I try saying as his hands squeeze around my throat.

My vision is blurring big time.

“I’ll fuck you knocked out if that means reclaiming what’s mine.”

“Jade . . . call Bre . . . t.”

Calling.

“How long will he take, you think? Thirty minutes?”

He brings my panties down, and I have a strange feeling I’m about to go down as well.

A laser sound pierces the room, and something hits Rayn, his hands slowly gliding down my body as he falls unconscious.

“You’re driving the men nuts, Wren!” Bret says, accompanying my body as it slinks to the floor.

“Breathe, just breathe. In and out. Yeah, just like that.”

While trailing his fingers over my throat, his eyes plugged into my searing skin, Bret doesn’t meet my gaze. He never does when we get this close.

Never.

It’s like one-foot distance is okay for a wink and a smirk, but if we find each other a nose-kiss away, no can do.

He’s always so protective of me, and I have no clue why. I’m the worst person to chaperone.

“He doesn’t seem to have crushed anything.”

“Choker . . .” I don’t know why I said that. Probably because Choker Baby lies flat near my legs or because I was choking not a second ago. Our lips lift uncontrollably, regrettably not fitting the situation.

Bret ducks his chin as he sniggers, probably from the weird joke and nerves, and then chokes—gods, this is amusing—at what he sees.

My exposed crotch . . .

I can’t resist laughing. “Bret, I know you’re far from being a virgin.”

He gets up in a flash and turns his back to me, twisting his wrist, pistol in hand, muttering, “Just-just pull your pants up.”

“Bret.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell Dad,” I ask, a zip-up later.

“I’ll be your watchdog for the night. Get some sleep,” is the last thing I hear from Bret as he pulls Rayn by the legs out of my room.

Please don’t tell your alpha, Bret . . . I think I need another chill pill.

The hatch doors haven't even finished closing on themselves when I shout, "Jade, full lockdown."

Cabin locked.

Nobody in. Nobody out.

I'm done.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO**

“PRETTY WOLF . . .”

Fingers and familiar lips flutter over my belly.

They graze over my skin like ribbons of silk. One hand runs down my waist while lips fleet up toward my heaving breasts, writing safe whispers on their path.

“It’s time to go back. To where the wind sings to you.”

His words paint my mind with bright, yellow hues, blinding my thoughts.

A wild heart pumps hard against my own, its vibrations shaking my bones, and it utters, “Where are you hiding, Spades?”

Spirals made of sand unfold in my mind as gentle fingers fork into my trembling ones.

“My love won’t run away from you . . . this gravity won’t allow it.”

Lips chase my own, folding over mine when they find them.

Love . . .

A kiss drops on my forehead, sprinkles of them soon falling down my nose ridge.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” As words rasp over my face, a hand lands against my thigh. It glides down to the place where lovers fold, meet, join . . . rage.

Warmth. Hard warmth at my entrance, muscles waving over my body.

Slow and deep, his desire enters me, meeting me inside, the water of our friction allowing the skin on skin to smoothly enter my core. There's a tide, waves of it, heavy and thick.

"Space is reducing, the stars aligning . . . Little wolf, can't you feel their pull?"

Lips collide across breathy moans. They increase after each thrust, a penetration always heavier and more profound.

And when I open my eyes, 078 floats in the dark.

Orange splendor . . .

The first time I felt the wind. The first time I felt free.

Kilian . . .

"Watch the wolves fight for their land and run as one. Watch them howl at the three moons of Galathena, breed in the sand, and love in the wind . . . Watch, Spades."

Across my hair, his lips murmur, "Awake . . ."

"Wake up . . ."

"Spades! Wake up!"

Bang, bang, bang!

"Time to go!"

I moan into my pillow, "I'm coming, Bret. Be there in a sec."

I rise, pull my legs down the side of the bed, and grab my box of pills.

Fuck.



MY EYES RUN UP SHINY LEATHER KNEE BOOTS TO DARK CARGO pants tucked in them. They pause for more than a second on a big fat pistol at the belt.

A hand comes into my vision, inviting me to look up.

“Spades . . . that’s your call name, right? I’ve heard many great things about you. The unforgiving Space Valkyrie that takes down entire units.” He’s smiling his sharp fangs at me, a scar disrupting what could have been perfect lips.

And then my foot moves of its own accord, my back bumping against Bret when I meet King Daryl’s gaze.

Bloodshot eyes, nonexistent pupils. A hybrid.

Lycan . . .

Why does no one tell me about these things?

“Bow to King Daryl.” Bret clamps my nape and forces my neck to submit.

There was no need for this. A little trust is all I ask. Geez.

“I wanted to thank you personally,” he says, setting his bloody-orbed gaze on mine.

This man definitely needs to get his eyes checked.

My father is pulling a face born from a graveyard, averting his eyes, doing his best not to look at me. Talk about being the center of attention.

“For what?”

“My lord,” Bret blows in my ear. “For what, my lord!”

I pinch his leg. And smirk when I hear an exhale of pain behind me.

“You brought us Alpha Zion, my dear. And on a beautiful platter, I must say.”

This king must be either blind, which I’m ninety-nine percent sure is the case, or blatantly stupid. Either way, he clearly needs direction, so I’ll give it to him.

“Alpha Kilian, you mean.”

King Daryl laughs, his crooked nose curbing even more as he does. “I love your daughter’s sense of humor, Hayden,” says Royal Freak as he turns to my father.

“Yes, she’s full of it.” Dad’s tone could not be more serious.

It’s triggering a little anxiety, my nostrils flaring uncontrollably from this song and dance shit show.

“I wanted to give you this.” Daryl glides over to me as if skating over ice. The man is surely made of grace.

In his palm, a tiny disk flashes a holographic beam.

“Are these shares?” I’m hovering between two states: confusion and suspicion.

If King Daryl thinks I’m going to buy his fish tale . . .

“Three percent of the crystal mine of Hell’s Pit,” he says with this sort of head bend that expects some joy to splurt from my throat. “To thank you.”

“I don’t understand.” I really don’t.

But I think he gets it from the way his wrinkled grin stretches further up to his red-currant eyes—an ugly fuck indeed.

“Star Alliance records missions. From flight speed to maneuvers. We also record everything that appears on radars as well as conversations.”

I hiss in some air, my teeth happy to smile their sharp sarcasm at my father. “Dad! Did you know about this?”

“Listen to what King Daryl has to say,” he thunders, his feet rooted in the same place for the past ten weirdest minutes of my life.

“Your report was intriguing enough that the Strategy Buro decided to analyze it. They discovered that a faction ship kept following you, never shooting, never locking, and believe me, it could’ve many times.”

This Lycan looks at my father, who returns a simple nod. It’s the go-ahead one.

What’s going on?

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE**

“THIS LITTLE BRACELET OF YOURS IT’S A STRUGGLE, ISN’T IT? Affecting your sense of smell, your wolf call . . .”

The taste of iron fills my mouth, my teeth preferring to sink into my tongue rather than into this king’s neck.

I don’t answer.

Not to this.

I won’t.

“Anyway, you couldn’t have known. But it came to mind that this specific person developed a rather interesting fixation on you. Do you remember your last mission?”

I swallow. My throat has a dry feeling, and it’s not from thirst. “I just came back from it.”

“I’m not talking about this one. I’m referring to . . .”

“So what?”

“Winnie!” roars my father, his face redder than cinnabar.

King Daryl nods toward my father, most probably as a thank-you gesture. Then he breathes in a little air and keeps going. “Your shot hit an enemy vessel, but behind it was another jet in the same trajectory. Your team member. He was close enough that the cockpit broke.”

Right. I’m out of here.

“I fucking beg you to behave . . . please!” Bret twists my wrist, his murmurs calling my attention.

King Daryl pinches his lips and . . . Is that empathy creasing his eyes?

“She’s not over it, my lord. It’s a tricky subject.”

Thanks, Dad, you’re one hell of a wingman . . .

This meeting is a waste of time.

King Daryl seems unaffected by my extreme need to storm out. “But you might not have realized that a ship was behind you, ready to take you down. And you know what happened. This person of interest fired at his own team member. The man saved you.”

“What?”

“So we decided to take the bet, you see. We sent you alone on a reconnaissance mission. We knew patrolling units were in this area.”

King Daryl finally leaves my comfort zone, dance-walking across the room to my father. “Everything went according to plan,” he says enthusiastically, rubbing my father’s shoulder like a good old farm *dhogg*.

Dad huffs a smile, slightly rocking back and forth, though his crossed arms and the fingers scratching his elbow don’t seem to come from fucking enjoyment.

I’m planted, my body unresponsive, my eyes trying to find refuge in my father’s.

But they don’t meet mine. They are too busy gazing at the ugly blue carpet.

“Dad? Did you know about this?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, okay.”

Okay . . .

After a while, I lift my head and gut King Daryl’s bloody eyes with my green ones, making this whole exchange very butchery. “Your plan failed, I’m afraid.”

“Pardon me?”

Yeah, angle your head like a bewildered stray.

“This is not Alpha Zion.”

His glare darkens, and I take a step back.

“It is.”

I narrow my eyes on this mouth. His lips are slightly curving. What’s so funny?

“You are mistaken, King Daryl.”

I will not avert my eyes. I’ll keep them right where they are, on this twig that, despite looking forty-something, is probably as old as the world. And his soul, if he has one, should go to rest because clearly, he has a hard time recognizing people.

This is not Zion, for fucks sake.

“It’s Kilian,” I mutter, my heart shaking my ribs as if in a prison cell, begging to leave.

Nope, little heart. We’re in this together. We die together.

“She’s—she’s been through a lot . . .” stammers Bret, hooking an arm with mine.

“Kilian is the Alpha of Galathena. I was with him not even an hour ago, little girl,” splutters King Daryl, his claw-like fingers scraping my father’s desk, the wood curling under his nails. “We want to be rid of Zion and his rebels.”

Have I become nuts, and I’m having hallucinations? Is this place a ward for the ones gone with the fairies?

I know it’s Kilian. I remember him. How emotional he was, how his hand shook around his glass, how waves of whiskey crashed against its rim at the express mention of Zion.

I remember everything. His chest. His heart. How it beats . . .

“It’s not Alpha Zion, I insist. It would be best if you released the real Kilian and gave him this joke of a share because this planet is his.”

“She’s a Chimera; we encourage them to be . . . bold.”

I can't believe my father just played this rubbish card. There are so many better ways to discredit me!

King Daryl saunters toward me and leans forward, flexing his bony knees to remind me how small I am. "I've heard about their reputation. It's okay," *Kingsplainer* says, still wrecking my gaze.

Hold steady, Wren. He's a prick.

"And this pup has no rank, I was told, too. She must feel so lonely."

Go do one, Dick Daryl, strain your consonants as if their sharpened intonations could hurt me.

I know what he's doing.

My nostrils twitch. If this sleazebag doesn't move his head away from mine, he's in for a treat.

King Daryl must sense a headbutt on approach because he sniggers and rises, three-quarters of basalt jawline aiming at my father. "Hayden, I have a ceremony opening on Planet Taragor. I need to leave in an hour. Shall we proceed?"

"They're on platform nine." My father grabs his jacket, and I gape when he pulls out two pistols from his desk drawer.

I turn toward Bret, unleashing my doubts, "Bret, please explain to me why my dad needs weapons?"

"It's okay, Spades."

What is okay?

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR**

“I’M TELLING YOU, IT’S NOT ALPHA ZION!”

“Level nine,” says Bret as we enter the elevator.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

Level nine confirmed.

“I don’t have time for this, Spades.”

He’s sweating. And I think I care too much for Bret because my hand wipes the sheen coating his left brow.

This emotional mess snatches my helping hand and barks, “You know what? I’ve seen heads rolling at King Daryl’s feet for less. So from now on, shut up and let your little finger speak for you!”

I swallow my words, too poisonous to utter. I don’t want the guy to die from cardiac arrest. And I’m only cooling down when an ultra-satisfying image cracks open in my mind: me grabbing his hair and thrusting his condescending face against the elevator wall.

This adult nanny brings his head closer, aging on the spot as lines of stress engrave his face. “Why are you smiling?”

“For nothing.”

The elevator jerks and soon picks up speed as it descends.

Zombie keeps scratching at my door, and she never does that. It’s making my skin rise because this wolf’s instincts never lie. They are honed enough to slice an atom.

“We just want you to recognize your abductor. That’s all.”

I grab Bret by the shoulders because no one seems to get it.
“Bret, hear me now. This man is not Alpha Zion!”

“Stop shaking me.”

Level nine, please watch your step.

The elevator doors open to a vast airstrip. Red Hawks are landing their jets as Bret and I walk along the side. We zigzag among crouched mechanics, their noses stuck in engines and other jet parts.

“Hi, Spades. Where’s Sweet Shooter?”

“Sweet Shooter is forever in space,” I say.

I don’t have time to wave when Bret pulls on my hand.

“Focus.”

As he pulls me along in his stride, I hiss, “Alec is my grease monkey!” I then tug on his arm, wanting a reaction. Anything.

But Bret stays silent, and this might be the first time I witness him mute. Usually, nothing shuts him up.

While making our way between crystal crates and other toolboxes, a glassy voice travels to my ears. “Hey, Spades. Long time no see, girl!”

It’s Lydia, a Red Hawk.

Waving her helmet, blondie rushes down the steps of her jet as soon as I wave back.

Fuck. Why did I wave again . . .

Red Hawks are scavengers. They scour space in search of survivors or safety pods taking too long to land. They rip off busted jets and take the remaining crystals, their ships equipped with lobster claw-like clamps. Hyenas . . .

She breaks off when my gaze meets hers. I hate the girl. Evading her has become a skill I’ve mastered to perfection. This time though, the bleak face I’m pulling is beyond sincere.

With a hand wrapped against the metal railing, I mirror my steps with those of Bret. The clanking of our feet on the grilled

floor reminds us of the sharpening of knives. It's a death march, and unfortunately, I know it's not for me.

To this hypnotizing sound, a plan unravels: I could throw my gun at Kilian and snatch those at my father's waist. We could play it *us-against-the-world* style. Race for a jet and take off. Never to be seen again.

What am I thinking? I nod at my fucking nonsense and soon halt.

Bret releases my hand, taking a step aside. And, like a nice little beta, gets in line next to my father.

I'm not feeling this whole thing. I've always struggled with formal events. And this one, in particular, is not my jam.

No wonder. I've never experienced this before.

We're told to shoot on sight, to leave nothing in our path. Here we go . . .

The hostages are sitting on their weak knees, hands behind their heads, helmets on the tarmac with their written call names well in evidence.

I shiver, not from their hands behind their heads but from their faces. Some have been tortured. Noses crushed, strips of blood, stale, crackling lines running down their chins, ears, and eyes . . .

My feet won't stay in place.

I keep turning toward my father.

And then I see King Daryl.

It's his idea. I'm sure of it.

Something is revolting about his stance; he holds his chin high, strolling in front of these poor men as if he's at a fruit stall, undecided which one to pick. His minion following him gives a nice kick to one of the captives, making his head hit the tarmac—the sound of it wrenching.

“Dad! Is this how we do things now?”

“Wren, not now,” he grates before stalling his eyes back on the row of men.

“Don’t worry, girl. Soldiers are keeping them in check. Take your time,” says King of Fucks.

I look at him, balling my fists. I can’t even hide my snarl anymore. It’s come down to this.

In front of me are men in black pilot suits, all cramped together in a perfect line.

One sits on his heels for only a second, that is before a soldier docks his barrel under the poor sod’s chin and raises him back up on his knees.

“Dog stays up,” he mutters before spitting at his face.

I turn my head away, in fact, the whole of myself.

I can’t do this shit.

“Spades! Which one is it?” my father barks.

I freeze on the spot.

“Girl, don’t make me repeat myself.”

There has never been a time when my father raised his voice at me.

Just do it, Wren, and be done with it.

My feet are so heavy it’s a burden to trail them. They stop at the first man: he’s got blond hair and a swollen eye beyond contusion.

I keep going, ambling, marking time as much as possible. I keep doing this until my eyes land on a black wolf-head-shaped helmet.

Boldly written in red is Golden Fang.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE**

I KEEP MY EYES LOW. I CAN'T LIFT THEM. THE MOMENT I DO, it will be over for Kilian. I know well what happens to alphas that don't side with the king.

“Wren? Is it him?”

Bret, stop breathing down my fucking neck!

Unsteadily, I raise my gaze, and a trembling sigh rushes out as soon as I do. With his dark hair, some threads floating before his eyes, and skin the color where sand and sun meet, he steadies on me.

Our bastard selves didn't give these men any water. His shoulders are stooped, his torso heaving at each working breath.

Undoubtedly no older than me, he stands dignified. He, more than anything else, is the most honorable of all our men.

My lips uncontrollably part from the smile he has the strength to give me—shy, determined, and slightly snarky.

He nods as if encouraging me for something.

I try to hold his gaze, but the fire withheld in his eyes burns my stare away. I'll never amount to his courage. Not in this life or the next one.

My eyes well up at the shuddering of his lips. He knows what awaits.

What does he want me to do?

I glance down the row of men, and I breathe. Now, I know where I'm standing.

“Give others the blame. The blood will always leave a stain anyway . . .” groans Nara, overriding my mind.

Shut up!

Choose any. They will never know. A sacrifice for the greater good . . .

What fucking greater good? I’m not going to send someone to die for another!

I shut my eyes.

“So, Wren?” insists Bret, stroking my back as if I were a cat.

“None are Kilian.”

“You mean Zion,” he corrects, pulling me away.

“Thank you for your help, Spades,” grates King Daryl as we head for the . . . exit?

“Bret, just fucking let me go.”

I pull my arm out of his clench. I’m fed up with him. He’s been tailing me all day.

I need a break.

This fucked-up mess forces Bret to push us into a corner, the best blind spot at sight.

“What’s happening here is beyond our control. Do you think I agree with this? You think I don’t want them to have a fair trial, justice applied rightfully?” Bret shudders, pearls of sweat trickling down his temple.

What’s this noise?

Buzzing and whooshing sounds from weapons warming up rip through the air. They reverberate throughout my body, and I deaden. My eyes are fixed on Bret.

Slightly shaking his head, he breathes, “Wren, don’t.”

In a whirlwind of strength, I pull away, and we both stumble out, his unwavering clasp gripping my wrist tightly.

King Daryl crouches at the brave soldier with Golden Fang's helmet at his knees. "If your alpha isn't here, we'll have to send him a message."

Zap!

The body falls on the floor with a thunk.

Time seems to halt. The blood runs slowly on the tarmac, flowing from his beautiful head . . . it runs in my own veins, screaming hate.

"N—!" I'm pulling and twisting from Bret's grip, his hand around my mouth driving me insane.

My veins burn, and the blood searing in my eyes blurs my vision as rage pulses in my chest.

A swift glance out of the corner of my eye catches King Daryl from afar, huffing in derision at me as his hazardous hand aims at the next soldier.

"Watch the wolves fight for their land and run as one. Watch them howl at the three moons of Galathena, breed in the sand, and love in the wind . . . Watch," chants the targeted man.

King Daryl pulls the trigger, but another voice takes the relay, "Watch the wolves rise through hell's gates . . ." Another gruesome shot is taken, followed by a guttural cry.

But the rebels won't stop. "Watch their fury reign, their valor awaken. Watch . . ."

Zap!

Growls emerge, the line of hostages thrumming. This is not good.

"Watch the wolves shed blood. Watch them live again!"

Where is this new voice coming from? It just boomed out of nowhere!

We look up. All of us do.

An ominous growl pulls us out of our puzzlement.

A rebel wolf jumps out of the line, soon followed by all, tearing the weapons out of our soldiers' hands.

“They're shifting!” screams a comrade. “Full fire!”

I stay planted there, witnessing chaos unfolding before me. King Daryl is hurled away toward his craft, followed by his sentries.

The coward!

“Wren, get out of here!” Bret pushes me toward the stair railing with such force I collapse on the steps.

I begin crawling up, but gunshots ripple against the metal inches from my face.

With a hand over my eyes, my body jitters at the sound of lasers ricocheting on the guardrail. Where are these gunshots coming from?

Our soldiers shift in return. And so does my father . . .

Too many shots blast the place, jets collapsing as wolves clash against them. Their fangs drip blood as growls echo across the platform.

And then gunshots and the death cry from one of our own catch my attention.

I squint across the brawl. Two soldiers dressed in our black space combat uniforms unload their guns on us.

It's such chaos that no one seems to notice them.

I grab my pistol, ready to spill their guts. Traitors are the dregs of Pallamir's society and must be eliminated.

No matter what . . .

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX**

“SURE IT’S HER? I MEAN . . . SPADES, SHE’S BEEN MORE THAN brainwashed. She won’t tag along easy, man.”

“Trust me; I’ll hold the leash short.”

“No, Kilian, this shit ain’t funny. She’s gonna make a hole in my head. She’s-she’s—”

“Perfect!”

Yes, this little wolf is the one. I’m sure of it. Watching her walk before my men, how she stands proud, a face full of . . . sadness.

Spades, don’t fear.

A wolf is *huffing and puffing* behind me, and I confirm it’s far from being a threat. Hataro’s going full melodramatic again.

“I’m freaking out. I’m freaking out. My chest, it burns . . . Fuck!” he squabbles, unzipping his jacket, rubbing his neck, pawing the ground, the complete panic attack act.

“Stop it!” I grunt, shaking the angst out of him.

Hataro may be my best pilot, but damn, does he suck with close combat situations.

I tap the kid’s cheek. Although I don’t have time to play big brother, I have to pull my hat off. He’s the one that got closest to Alpha Hayden.

Who knew an eighteen-year-old could play spy? And he’s pretty good at it, too. He’s weak, full of ticks, and lacks confidence beyond Galaxy AR3. But his loyalty, tech skills,

and capacity to blend in easily make him the best beta I could dream of. I never had second doubts about it. The kid's a blessing.

"Wonder if I went missing, would anybody miss me?" he squeaks.

"The entire Sand Rose Pack would mourn, though maybe not your singing . . ."

I bend down, picking up the weird headgear Hataro gave me. "All right, let's ride this thing out." I place the helmet over my head, and . . . it's beyond words. "I could get used to this . . ."

My eyes adjust behind the visor, a digital screen awakening as I motion my head from side to side.

It analyzes everything.

And I mean everything. Threat level, body temperature, you name it.

"There's even music. Just voice a track, and it'll play it," Hataro says.

I could sure do with some. "'House of the Rising Sun,'" I voice.

"Since when have you become so old!" This kid has some nerve.

"Hey! Respect your alpha. This song is fire!"

I peek from behind the wall. The situation is heating up. My gaze fixes on the king. I could pull the trigger on this Lycan . . . yes, he is right in front of my screen.

And risk Galathena being pulverized.

No.

"Come on, let's get our little wolf." I wink at him, but Hataro is as white as a sheet. "Hataro, we're doing this. Just don't die."

"Is that what you call a pep talk?"

“Stay behind me and shoot on sight.” My whispers are as low as our crouch-walking.

I want to take us to a jet over there. It’s parked at the far end of where my gammas are.

“What does that even mean?” the kid brambles.

“Shoot at whatever you see.”

“Really?”

“Except me and Spades!” Oh, brother . . .

With a tug on Hataro’s reluctant shoulder, we rush from the space docks and crouch behind a jet’s wheel.

I settle my eyes on that beautiful wolf.

Come on, Spades . . .

“So, which one is it?” says this guy that’s a little too touchy for my taste.

She stops in front of Tanis. It may work . . .

“Say the name, girl.”

A rush of something nasty races up my spine. I turn to Hataro, needing confirmation. “A trial, you said. Nothing more.”

“Yeah . . . We have a strict judicial system here. They’ll be judged and incarcerated, worst case, sent to the mines.”

If the kid says so . . .

Zap!

Tanis!

I’ll kill Daryl. I’ll kill him with my own fucking hands!

“Fuck!” I hiss, strangling a cry in my throat.

“I-I don’t understand. Kilian, I swear!”

“Hold your breath, kid.”

It’s time to sharpen our fangs on plan B. If these asses think they’re the smartest people in the room, they’re in the

wrong room. Apparently, these fools forgot what a Trojan horse looks like.

“Watch the wolves fight for their land and run as one. Watch them howl at the three moons of Galathena, breed in the sand, and love in the wind . . . Watch—”

Zap!

“Watch the wolves rise through Hell’s gates . . .”

Zap!

Shit!

“Time to warm up our guns.” My veins harden, my eyes staining red as I stare at the blood. I’m in for a fucking kill! “Hataro, remember lesson number one? Don’t announce moves. Confirm arrivals.”

Oh, my . . . Let’s work this shit out! And as I pull the slide of my pistol, I cry-rally this creed that makes us who we are. The proud sons and daughters of the Sand Rose Pack, wolves of the desert. “. . . Watch the wolves shed blood! Watch them live again!”

My second-in-command gamma jumps first, followed by the bravest of wolves.

My own. Elite fighters trained under scorching temperatures, violent winds, and treacherous terrain. Brutal.

This is it.

While unloading my fury on these fuckers, something stops me in my tracks and catches my breath to shove it right back into my lungs.

A wave of hazel hair swirling in the air as this fierce warrior rages on her trigger has my fire roaring.

With Hataro in my peripheral vision, we leap over bodies, racing toward this savage girl. “You take the guy, kiddo. I’ll handle this fast shooter.”

“Duck.” I thrust Hataro forward as laser blasts converge on us. One flies an inch from the kid’s head, plowing into a jet’s

fuselage behind. “Watch your steps!” I yell in all this bloodbath.

While my fellow soldiers show me how carnage is done, blood splatters across my face. They are destroying the Astarix Pack. May these bastards peg out on the tarmac.

Wait . . . Someone is missing!

“Kilian!”

I swallow hard at the sound of my name being yelled. Way to go, kid . . .

As I rotate on my heels, my eyes cross with those of a big man. He looks like an alpha to the hilt. It only takes three winks for him to begin blowing hard, his gaze at daggers drawn in his hands. I’d love to chew the cud with him but I’m running out of time. My feet jounce toward where this jarring mistake came from, a stumbling idiot.

I crouch and grab his upper arm. “Hataro, why don’t you scream my name a second time? I think they didn’t get it the first time!” My teeth strum as I give Hataro a leg up.

“Golden Fang, there’s no escaping this!”

I glance behind my shoulder and curse. The big guy is bursting out of his clothes, and he doesn’t look happy.

That’s a big alpha. Fucks, the wolf is enormous.

I give Hataro a flying start and join him in his mad dash.

As I do, I can’t help singing, “Watch me!” to this man mountain.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN**

I WATCH THE FURY WINDING IN MY BROTHERS' FUR, THEIR solid hind legs springing forth as they charge at this monstrous beast.

They won't be able to hold him long, though.

"Hataro, get going!"

"Where? I can't see a thing. My eyes are full of . . . red slime!" he cries, fumbling next to me.

"It's not slime . . ." I say, trying to shift all my attention onto Spades.

It's a challenge, blood . . . not . . . being . . . Knuckle down, Kilian! My eyes finally steady and settle on this feisty woman shooting her furious laser beams at me. I follow every move of hers, every impulse on her trigger, every gorgeous snarl . . . I won't let Spades stray from me. No, not this time.

I lift my helmet's visor.

I want nothing between us.

She locks her deep greens with mine, and all I think about is how I'm going to bathe in them while I teach her how things are done.

I smirk at my thought, but soon I wince from teeth slicing into my lips. I have rage in me, and it keeps spreading. Tanis . . .

My mind is going a hundred lightyears an hour, but my feet are steady, my will determined, and my aim unforgiving.

Truth is, while my gunshots prevent her from running up those stairs, I don't know if I want to fuck her or fuck this place up.

My sprint lands me at her feet, my sliding legs tackling this succubus enough to floor her.

This girl sure loves to wrestle. But there's plenty of time for that after we get out of this warzone. I pick the petite thing up and pull her body flush against mine.

I slam us against the wall. There ain't time for a French kiss, though I could smother her lips right here. And as this hurricane twirls between my arms, I tighten my grip.

I want her close, and I deserve this body for the shit I endured for her.

"Little wolf," I say, my laser gun nudging her tiny waist. "I got you."

"Drop your gun!" shouts that beta, a ridiculously small pistol aiming at us.

There are two options here: I take this weasel down for showing such disrespect toward an alpha, or I let the kid do his job.

I'll go for the second option. I don't want to kill Spades' dog.

"I think you should drop yours . . ." I say, winking with the kind of slyness wars are born from.

The mutt hasn't released his weapon when Hataro clubs him with his own pistol's grip.

The kid's got arm strength. It's disarming.

The guy falls to his knees, head diving on the hard, cold floor. May he stay there. I don't want to have to snap his neck. He reeks of Spades, and it's driving my senses around the bend.

I focus my attention back on the pilot in my arms. "Now, Spades, be good."

But then, the mouse sinks her canines into my arm. This suit is useless. Second skin, my ass.

“Gnnsh, little bi . . . bunny!” The jaws!

Expected no less from this warrior . . .

But gods damn, those teeth are sharp.

“Bunny?”

“Hataro, why don’t you reload your gun?” I groan.

The kid’s got a point, though . . . What the hell, Kilian.
Bunny?

The girl’s trembling like a leaf.

“Don’t be scared. I won’t touch one hair on that head of yours.”

“I’m not scared of you, little bitch,” she says coyly.

I don’t scare her . . . I zone out, staring at absolutely nothing, my rogue lip curling up. Kilian, my man, you’ve passed the point of no return. May the trip be worth it . . .

And then my brows flump. Did Spades just call me a little bitch?

“I’d watch my tongue if I were you. I’ve got a nice mouthpiece on the Demeter, and I won’t hesitate to use it.” I force my growl like a tike.

And fuck did it sound fake.

She’s got this thing on me. The way she casually muttered, “Yeah, whatever . . .” like she’s waiting for a good spanking. Wait for it, Spades, just . . . just wait for it.

And soon, the perfume of her skin swims up my nose. It’s crawling over me like a spell. Glazing against her hair, I bend my head lightly. She doesn’t deserve to know how she drives me crazy.

And yet.

A part of me wants to pull the trigger, rip off this jugular pulsing below my fangs. I could make Spades pay for all the misery her father brought on Galathena, on my pack, Tanis . . .

“Kilian, this peer pressure thing is giving me the spins. Can we go?” the fluffy beta mutters, but Hataro is right.

There's a party cluster at the far end of the platform, and my little finger tells me we shouldn't overstay.

"Kid, lead us to some fast birds and, ideally, a quiet airstrip."

"Platform thirteen, Kilian. It's been left to rust."

"You don't know who you're fucking with!"

Could Little Miss Sunshine be afraid?

I grab them real tight . . . I mean, I hold her real tight.

"I'm about to find out . . ." My lips dive into her neck, my fangs rasping against her skin, a savage envy to punish her. How she talks to me in front of my beta . . .

"I really don't need a spot in your lousy crew."

I snigger at this cute monkey giving me the best of her wiggles. "Tell me when you got so cool, Spades?"

She sharply turns her head to the left. Precious.

Just keep wiggling, Spades . . . Wiggle.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT**

“LEVEL THIRTEEN!” BLOWS HATARO AS WE THROW OURSELVES into an egg-shaped elevator.

Level thirteen confirmed.

“Surely, you’re aware this lift records everything. Expect to be greeted the Astarix way when we step out,” says Spades, a very firm grip on my arms.

Ever since I caged her in my embrace, I’ve been clenching my jaws like a gator. And this harpy keeps sinking her nails into my suit, deeper and deeper. It wouldn’t surprise me if they pierce through and reach the bone.

Hataro and I briefly goggle at each other like idiots. The woman has a point.

“Abort! Level nine, level nine!” shouts Hataro.

Level nine, please watch your step.

“Out! Everyone, out!” I look at my *G-gear Rover monitor*.

Within a few minutes, I’ll need to send the signal out.

Time’s pressing on us.

“Hataro, some ideas?”

A smile scribbles across the kid’s face as he swings his head from side to side, hands raised in an “I have no fucking clue what to do!” motion.

But he does have one, his finger showing me the way.

I follow where his shaky limb points and move my chin down to Spades. She shifts her weight onto her other leg, her

rear rubbing my crotch as she does. I think she felt my cock twitch because she lifts her head, snarling her bright teeth at me.

Pretend nothing, man!

“Spades?”

She needs some encouragement, so I knead my pistol into her back. It arches slightly when I do. Receptive girl . . .

“Darling, my patience has its limits.”

“The far end of this corridor, there are bathrooms. There’s a hatch in the ceiling, some ducts leading to level thirteen.”

Someone’s hiding spot, I see . . .

“Let’s get going!”

“You’re leaving your wolves to die out there!”

“No, Spades. My wolves are going to teach Alpha Hayden’s pack a lesson.”



I CAN’T BELIEVE I FIT IN THIS SHIT. IT SMELLS OF DEAD RATS and other things that make you gag.

Spades leads the way, her ass in my face as she crawls into the smallest tunnel I’ve ever managed to squeeze in.

Behind me, someone is deeply sucking all the oxygen out of this duct.

“Hataro!” I hiss.

“It’s too narrow. I’m stuck!”

“You’re not. If I’m here, there’s enough room for you to do the splits! Now, get moving.”

Spades halts at once, my face smashing into her rear.

“So you know you’re in human form, right? Because for a minute, I thought a dog was sniffing my ass for a *hello*.”

“A warning, lady, is all I ask!”

“Sshh!” Of course, she shushes me. Her timing is always so irritatingly perfect.

Both hands on the grid, I follow her gaze down. There’s a stew of voices dispelling across the gills of the grid. Twenty soldiers, I’d say.

“Why have we stopped?”

“Shut it, kid.”

Hataro ducks his chin, sheens of sweat running down his copper skin, pearls of it dripping on the metal.

I bite my cheek like the asshole that I am. “Hey, Hataro. You’re doing good. You’re doing good, boy.”

A discreet nod is all I get in response. Once we get home, I’ll give him some space—anything the kid wants.

Spades is seeking my attention. And she’s got it.

Rubbing her ass against my pistol as if about to sit on its barrel, she whispers, “I could sing, you know. Be a little whistleblower.”

Here I am, trapped in a three-foot-wide metal tube with a woman who’s not only playing with my patience but also my growing cock. And when I say it’s begging to detonate inside her, I’m being literal.

I stay silent.

She could indeed betray us.

She can.

Out of caution, I press my gun deeper against her rear.

She moan-gasps, and I’m minutes from needing a paramedic.

This is some foreplay I could get used to. Yeah, I picture her all right, short skirt, knee-high socks, bouncing on my cock and screaming, “Alpha, more.”

Fuck, I need to get out of here.

“Move,” I grate, feeling my pants straining down the middle.



“A *GHOSTTIGER*?” IN FRONT OF ME IS A TWENTY-YEAR-OLD jet—these are so expensive, it’s pretty much the first time I’ve seen one in real life.

“I’m sorry, Kilian. I told you this place is a dumpster.”

“It’ll do the job, Hataro.”

Spades has been pressuring my arms, but not in a battling way. I let the girl walk free and remove my helmet. I need a short break myself.

Waltzing in front of me with a sharp chin thrust, kitty Spades purrs, “Of course, these beauties do the job.”

I tilt my head to one side, my smirk rebelling as it curves up. “You pilot those?”

“Sweet Shooter was a *GhostTiger*. This marvel, here, is the only jet that can carry an internal payload of four weapons without compromising its stealth. But what really makes the difference is the *computing* power. It’s got a situational awareness like no other.”

She walks her fingers over the jet’s nose as if it were a breathing creature; the chica is head over heels for space piloting, there’s no doubt about that. She turns her shiny eyes toward me, and I realize I’m just planted there, listening only to her raspy voice. It’s tomboyish, broken, and has that smokiness to it. I could breathe her in myself . . .

“And I’m sure you know, in combat, situational awareness is worth its weight in gold.”

“Absolutely, pretty wolf.”

What did I say now? The girl went from livid to baby pink in a nanosecond.

“Hey, girl. You good?”

“I’m—I’m fine,” she snorts, crossing her arms.

Ahh . . . there goes her little hip sway. Damn, I love when she does that.

“Hataro, can you pilot those?” I turn to my sidekick when a lightning bolt slices through the air.

Zap!

“Kid?”

“I’m . . .”

“Hataro!”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE**

CATCHING MY BETA IN HIS FALL, MY EYES THUNDER TO THE source of this shot. A piece of fuck stands at the far end, a smoking laser gun in hand.

“No one leaves!” the stink barks.

“Rayn . . .” Spades reaches into her jacket and pulls out a tiny pistol that she quickens to point at us.

I should’ve done a full body search. Serves me right for daydreaming in a woman’s hair.

“Looks like Zion’s in a tight spot,” she breathes, her aim whirling all over the place.

She could take a shot; it would land on the floor.

I glance down my arms, watching Hataro gargle on my lap, blood trickling from his mouth.

“Relax, kid. We got this.” I need a medical kit.

“Looks like this is going better than I expected,” Spades’ number two dog says.

Slowly, my hand slithers down my thigh. I’ve got to keep this exchange going.

“Hey, man. Do you know where the space gear is? Those jets need pressurized air suits.”

“Are you fucking kidding?” he hisses.

“Can’t blame me for . . .” One quick pull of the trigger and . . . bullseye! In the shoulder. “Trying!”

“Arh, motherfuck!”

“Come here, darling.” I scoop Spades against me before she whirls that tiny pistol in my direction, a gun resting under her beautiful chin.

I’m not too keen on using her as a shield. But she’s also covered in his scent, and that’s not one of social proximity. That’s the smell of sex. And I’m beginning to wonder if this girl has even an ounce of self-esteem. That being said, I’m going to scare her lover away. No matter how much I hate pulling that card, it’s the last one I’ve got left.

“Easy, Zion. Let her go, okay?” he says, picking himself up and cursing some weird shit as he clutches his arm.

I’d say he’s a gamma by his tone and expression. Rebellious.

“I’m not fucking *Zion!*” My grip goes emotional, the barrel delving into Spades’ throat a little too much.

I’ve got to focus on the kid. Stay calm, Kilian.

It’s time to take things up a notch.

While I cock my laser gun and rest it against her cheek, I can’t hold my lips from grazing down her temple. On her soft skin, my whisper tries to be gentle. “Play with me, Spades.”

Not only does she get the message, but she gives me the okay nod, and that baffles me. The word *play* can go full collateral damage, and as a military pilot, Spades knows what that means . . .

Behind this Rayn guy, sets of heavy feet are getting closer. And I’m feeling slightly on edge because a dogfight is clearly not in my schedule.

“Space suits!” I bark, my gun starting to wind up with crystal energy.

“No.”

Right, he’s an idiot and a stumbling block.

“I’m sorry, Spades,” I whisper down a delicate ear. “It’s going to sting a little.”

“Okay.”

Okay? Kilian, just do it!

Zap!

“Ahh! Do as he fucking says, Rayn! Gods damnit!” she roars at this scum, hopping on her leg while grappling with me.

“Okay, okay. Hold it! Just—just hold it. The space gear is in the lockers over there on your right. Help yourself and release her, all right?”

“Step out the doors,” I growl.

“Can’t do that. Not without the girl.”

I glance at Hataro.

He’s wheezing; his lungs must be touched.

Once more, my eyes close, and I pull the trigger.

Spades’ legs buckle under her as she squeals.

“You stay in my arms, wolf.”

“Do. As. He. Fucking. Says,” my little beast grunts.

“I see you, Alpha . . . and you won’t get away with it,” *Rayning* shit grinds out, wearing a defeated smirk that flushes his face; I can tell it’s not the first time he’s pulling this expression.

He’s nothing but a big shot with small bullets.

As the doors close on him, my ears vibrate when this loser says, “We’ll meet again, *Kilian*. That’s a promise.”

In one shot, I kill the open-and-shut system box above the push button, sealing us for good.

Spades relaxes in my arms, and as I follow her frozen stare, I find the jerk still standing behind those thick plexiglass doors.

“You’re finally understanding, pretty wolf. Aren’t you? Is your vision becoming clearer, Spades?” Grating my lips against her ear, she doesn’t respond. “The question is can you handle it?”

And then her raspy voice dynamizes my bones. “Fuck you.” In the wrong way!

I release her without further ado, her ass smacking the ground. I’ve got no time for some outer space politics explanations.

Following a failed attempt at opening a locker, I fire it, pull out a dark marine-colored space suit that could meet Spades’s size, and dart back to the nymph.

“Suit-up time.”

“You shot me twice in the feet! Never thought of a grazing shot to the thigh or something?” she fusses.

“I don’t think that would have been convincing, love.”

She stiffens like an ice pick. And as she does, my eyes glaze over her gorgeous little curves, *them* curves that need a little dressing session going.

Hataro and I are geared from before. But the girl needs a suit.

“Come here.” I pull her legs toward me, but she takes them right back.

“Don’t touch me, Golden Bitch!”

This is the second time she’s called me the B word. And apparently, I’ve got to get used to it because the woman is foul.

Shaking her rattles, I growl, “Obey!”

“Okay. No need for violence.”

Is she kidding me?

“Kili-an . . .”

Luckily, the kid regains consciousness, enough for his bloodied fingers to clamp around my ankle.

“Hey, Hataro. We’re getting out of here.” I stroke his scalp. He’s growing a fever out of a flare’s sun. “It’s gonna be fine.”

I race my stare up to Spades’ lips, which tremble. “He’s hemorrhaging . . .”

“You’ve got paramedic skills?”

“My mum used to be a—”

“Great! You’ll fix him in the jet. Now, strip!”

**CHAPTER
THIRTY**

“A LITTLE HELP, PLEASE?” SPADES ASKS, HUDDLING HER knees as she shivers.

Is she ill? The girl’s been in a flat spin ever since we reunited.

“Yes.”

I can’t believe I’m undressing her.

I help her pull the sleeves out of her jacket and begin unzipping her casual wear.

In the process, she takes off her shifterguard and then removes her bra, which I hasten to yank out. What? No metal against the skin. High-pressure flights won’t allow staples. But yeah . . .

What she freed . . . I forgot how exquisite these are. My mouth is watering at the thought of devouring one of her juicy nectarines, my cock barking at twelve o’clock.

But there’s no time for some.

I pull her pants down, uncovering her silken legs, and my veins throb with adrenaline as our hands get in the way.

“Nope. Not my thong . . . I—it’s . . . Yes. Thanks. No.” She’s stuttering like a babe in the woods, and I can’t help but smirk.

But then, as soon as I open my mouth . . .

“Sorry. Okay. Like this. Here I go. No . . . Ah. Okay. I’ll pull,” I dish out like a bloody creampie!

I've never seen anything so dramatic. I thought I was out of this pre-puberty phase, but here I am with Spades, thrown into some B-rated teen series.

I snatch her delicate ankle and remove her blood-soaked boot.

“Arshh! Fuck.”

Like a parent putting socks on a kid, I roll up the suit sleeve legs, stretching a gap for her bloody foot to pass through.

“Now, the other, Spades. I'll be gentle.”

She whimpers, holding onto my neck. I lean further, allowing her a proper grip. If only she knew how bad I feel. How fucked up all of this is.

“Hips up, darling.”

Before rolling on her back, Spades flashes a glare of hatred at me. And then I don't know if it's from where I'm sitting, but the way she thrusts her hips up, I think my heart just burst.

“Ahh . . .”

She moaned. She just moaned.

Kilian, man. Move a fucking finger, at least!

I know she's in pain, but this body posture . . . I mean, come on.

When I thought I'd seen it all. Here I am on enemy ground, undressing the daughter of an alpha and on his tarmac, too, asking her to lift her hips, and she moans as she does it. I need whiskey.

I pull the suit past her arching hips, and someone's gotta believe me when I say the swallow is hard when my fingers drag the zipper across her breast. I swear I can hear the angels sing as I gradually seal these domes together . . .

“Kilian, thanks. I'll take it from here,” she hisses, strapping her gadget back over her tight-covered wrist.

What's left of my numb state is a pathetic growl. "It's Alpha."

Her eyes draw back, her lips parting. "Alpha, let go of the zipper, please."

Sounds like I've got the upper hand, but for how long? That's the real question.

For now, Spades seems cooperative, but I'm unsure if I should rejoice or be concerned about it. I can see the fire in the woman's eyes. Those flames.

Kilian! You weak dog.

Yeah, I can't have her undermining me before my men. It's not so much my name that's the issue, it's the behavior that comes with it.

She's like a rogue. And I have growing doubts about her being an omega.

As I grab the flight boots, I warn, "It's not going to be pleasant, sweetheart."

Her feet scream inside them in muffles as she buries her head in my chest.

My hands are addicted to her silken chestnuts; I can't help soothing her and pulling her chin up, I rasp, "Brave wolf."

She opens her green eyes and focuses them on mine, and I think my lungs may have collapsed.

Those green gems . . .

Ones of a colony long gone.

Those of the First.

"Need a magnifying glass?" she spits.

To this, I throw her the gloves and shove the helmet down on her head.

"Humph!"

Well, that shut her up.

I turn my knees toward Hataro and activate his pressurized air. My ears perk up once more. Men are laser-sawing the doors. By the look of it, I've got ten seconds.

I'm shifting from one folk to another like a weathervane on ecstasy.

I lift her visor and peek through. "Mind the lift?"

As if it was a question.

Spades curses at me as I take possession of her waist. And hauling her up, I keep her real tight against me. This ricura better get accustomed to it because this is the maximum space I'll allow between us from now on.

As we begin making our way toward the craft, she screams like a banshee. "Wait!"

"What is it?"

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE**

“MY MEDS. THEY’RE IN MY JACKET.”

“What meds?”

“I need my fucking meds, so get them!”

Meds?

I crouch, the bird in my arms, and with one hand, start fishing in her jacket pockets.

“Methadone?” I grunt, raising my clutch as Spades tries to snatch the pills from me.

“It’s for Hataro!” she cries.

“You’ll wait till we’re in space, then.”

She grumbles, and I’m slowly starting to connect the dots.

“Activate pressurized air,” I order, flipping down her visor.

“Ahem . . . I don’t know if you know, but I’m a pilot. And according to my observation, we’re still on land.”

“Oh, darlin’.”

She’s getting on my nerves. I clamp her tedious head, shove it down real low to where she’ll soon pleasure me, and fucking switch on the air pressure behind her helmet.

“Okay . . . Alpha. Relax,” she *moanishly* titters. “Fucking, Rayn. My feet . . .” she then brambles.

“Spades, how do we open these?” I say, feeling a tingle of angst rotting my spine as I glance toward the jet.

“With a key.” She’s not smirking anymore.

“Open the windshield!” I grate.

“With what, asshole? My feet?”

I tighten my grip, ensuring she gets it, and whisper, “You call me asshole one more time, and this asshole will teach you how much it knows about itself, starting with yours.”

“Yep, sorry. ‘Twas just a slip of the tongue . . .” she sniggers. “I meant Alpha.”

My eyes uncontrollably rush to the ceiling; I feel like I’m about to break a tooth. I can’t do this. This little wolf is driving me nuts.

Shit. What a crew.

My space gear! I can’t turn into a *wolf* . . .

Focus, Kilian.

I breathe, trying not to *turn* too much. My suit begins to stretch, my body swelling. Just a little bit more . . .

My *Were*-strength in check, I jump on the windshield and hook my claws between the cockpit window and the armature. By Galathena’s moons, these spacecrafts are so small; we’ll never fit.

A fizz follows an undocking sound.

I slide down the side of the craft, snag the lady up, and fling her inside. “Hop you go.”

“Bastard!” I hear as expected.

I’ve got no time to strap her. It’ll have to do.

There are six jets.

The boys will have to hurdle. I flick my wrist and press my *G-gear Rover monitor*. “Golden Fang to Red Crotal, ready for takeoff, over.”

“Red Crotal to Golden Fang, awaiting *your* visual. Over.”

Time to howl.

I release a bestial cry enough to crack the air. The howling in the distance tells me the fam’s about to barge in anytime.

I pick up a sickly Hataro and slink him behind the front row. I slide into the pilot seat, pull the handle of the windshield, seal the whole thing manually, and . . .

“What the hell is this?” There’s a dashboard with ten switches. No keyboard. A tab with a password and one stick. Where’s the wheel? “Spades!”

“What?” She looks at me with that fake coy stare like she just won the lottery.

“Close the gates; they can’t take off!”

My gaze crosses the windshield. Men are running behind the spacecraft.

“Girl . . .” My throat is thrumming, my nerves splitting into two as I stare at the insolent woman.

Don’t shift, Kilian. Whatever you do, don’t shift.

“Who’s in charge?” the snake sibilates, her green almonds narrowing in my direction.

“I am.”

Shit, the doors are closing on us.

“Wrong answer,” she purrs, dancing her fingers up and down the stick.

There’s a stretch behind my pants. And from how Spades stares at my crotch, she knows I’m growing impatient.

“Spades. Bury your doubts because you’re fucking with the wrong man.”

“I’m far from doubting.”

I grab her by her elfin neck. “Put your little hands around the navigational stick or whatever it is and take us into space!”

This despicable creature is blushing. For what? I have no clue, but the words that come out from Spades’ sweet mouth are hashed without a wince. “Who. Is. In. Charge?”

My fingers are about to add pressure on this shrimp’s delicate neck when I realize how scuffed it is.

I release her at once. “Who did that to you?”

A sideways glance reveals the white of her eyes.

I take a deep breath.

I don't have time for this shit. It's time to bounce, and I have to find the medical kit.

"You are, doll. You're in charge. Now, show me how you take control of this beast," I rasp as she eyes my crotch like a filthy little sucker fish.

"Atta boy! Now give me my pills, cuz my feet can't take it no more," she says with that rewarding bitchy voice, my ears buzzing from the fucks I want to scream.

At-Atta boy!

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO**

“YOUR FEET AND LEGS?”

Well, he shot me in the feet, and now he worries about them?

He shouldn't.

“I'm piloting a jet, not hoverboarding,” I bite back.

Kilian shot me for tactical purposes. That I'm sure of . . .

“I'm sorry, Spades . . .”

Like those of distant echoes, his murmur coursed through me, penetrating the deep canyons of my heart, rumoring beyond my hardened walls. How Kilian's eyelashes caressed my cheek as they closed on his guilt and the shot—tender feathers of every angel's wing made pure and gentle.

By then, he was already pardoned.

I know what kind of man he is.

I know . . .

Above me, burnt-gold eyes glare. I can only imagine how adored this man must be by the stars. A sun wept at the beauty of Kilian's soul, and its tears fell upon his eyes.

This isn't me. It must be Nara hacking my head!

I can't possibly be *cheesing* about this right now.

The man is a sorcerer. It's black magic!

I need control.

Control, take it. *It's yours, Wren.*

A surge of cold invades my bloodstream as my eyes flit over the dashboard.

I'm trying to hold onto the lever, but my grip keeps slipping.

Is this what I'm doing? Taking a road to nowhere . . .

What if all of this is a big mistake?

I bite my tongue at the doubts festering inside me. It's killing my flight-or-die vibes, and I wouldn't say I like it when that happens.

No, I can't look back now.

Breathe.

"Spades . . . are you fit to fly?"

My spine's about to break from that hand wrapping over my clutched one. "I was born in a jet. So, relax and deal with that little traitor at the back before he goes six feet under. "

"Alpha. Wren . . ." Kilian husks gently, tilting his head with a more than bated breath. "Is that what you were told? You were born in a jet?"

He smirks as if I made the whole thing up, but then the more I watch him pour his almond flames onto my eyes, the more he's making me doubt.

Distractions are fucking abounding in this spacecraft!

Shaking my head doesn't help. That—that thing back there, hiding behind his suit, is already hard enough to process. No pun intended.

Sweat stings my eyes, its salt pouring into my vision. There is no end to my thoughts. As if a hurricane, my heart doesn't know which emotion to turn to, fluctuating between sadness and fear to excitement—adrenaline starting to burst through every fiber of my being.

There is nothing I can do but bury myself in my palms.

I need five seconds, just five, to gather my thoughts.

Shit. I'm losing everything.

Dad, forgive me . . .

“Spades . . .”

A warm hand slides up and down my back, and I can't look up. Lasers are damaging my ship, and here I am doing some sort of self-love therapy, with Kilian taking notes.

“Let's go home.”

Home . . . How Kilian speaks to me, it's like he instills a sense of family between us. Something bad must have happened for him to hang onto that kind of quirk.

The moment I finish rubbing my face, Kilian is gone.

Good. Tension tends to clot my thoughts.

With switch K1, I steepen the wings for a proper air catch and H8 for manual takeoff.

The engine is taking eons to warm up.

What's taking this craft so long? I can't hear a thing.

You must breathe, Wren.

Finally, destiny rings its bloody bells. The engines spit at the back, cracking their coughing flames on the asphalt, roaring for space, just like I want it to.

“Where's the med kit?” the wolf huffs as he struggles across the narrow gap between the seats, trying to squeeze his shredded lot through.

Those hips . . . Dear lords, save me!

Don't look at him, Wren. Focus on lifting this baby off the ground. “Overhead locker C, green box. Give Hataro three pills while you're at it. It should reduce the pain.”

Pills . . . I'm in control. *I'm* in control.

There's just a tiny gap, enough for two jets side by side to take off.

The doors are closing too fast. There needs to be more time.

A thin stream of air silks across my lips, my grip on the handle fierce. And sliding my gaze up to my course, I close my eyes.

I have nowhere else to be but here. This feeling of belonging in times of being held at deadly gunpoint . . .

Speed runs across my body as I open my eyes to the thrust.

Thirty-four mph . . . Fifty-five mph . . .

My eyes keep skipping from the airspeed indicator to the airstrip, its white markings being swallowed by the tip of this GhostTiger as it speeds up . . . ninety . . . one hundred and sixty.

One hundred and seventy-nine mph! Up we go, baby. Flames trail the jet as it takes off.

Majestic.

And as I pull this bird up in the dead of night, my eyes bulge on the crystal-level monitor.

I stare at the number.

6%.

It's there in bold fucking red, blinking at me.

I forgot to check the crystal-energy levels in my nerve-wrecked state.

Six fucking percent!

“Fool!”

“What is it?” Kilian asks, probably detecting the fear in my voice.

Thing is, it's not there, buddy. It's etched over my body, dripping down my skin in astronomical quantities.

PART THREE

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE**

I COULD TELL HIM, “WELL, WE DON’T HAVE ENOUGH CRYSTALS for 078. Perhaps a twelve-hour flight. But hey, Kilian. It’s okay. It’s not like I’ll have to use half of what’s left in the tanks to navigate through the chaos Pallamir’s military force is about to unleash on us. Oh, well, ‘twas nice meeting you.”

“It’s you,” I say, trying to browse 078’s location on this outdated freezing tablet.

Nothing wants to work today!

Fuck, what did I say? *It’s you*. Now, girl, I’m sitting on the edge with a bag of nuts as to what you’re going to say next. Idiot!

“Me?” he asks, gobsmacked.

Lad, I hear you. I’m a disaster mystery to my own self . . .

“Yeah . . .” I say, highly hindered by the crystal news and my mind-boggling inability to keep my emotions in check.

He doesn’t say a word. There is no sound aside from the faint whistling of air molecules rubbing against the fuselage, the engine, and the occasional tweeting of the blinking radar. I swallow, sit back and let the tension dissolve.

“Golden Fang to Red Crotal, positive climb.”

Who is he talking to?

I turn my head a notch and find a sort of com-gear strapped to his wrist.

Back up?

“Red Crotal to Golden Fang, your visual is confirmed,” says the voice from across the device.

“Protocol *Star Rush* activated. Follow the trail,” Kilian orders, worry lining his forehead as he cards Hataro’s long dark hair, webbing out his helmet.

“Confirmed,” says this Red Crotal.

I don’t know why, but my ears stiffen at her voice.

“Spades, cruising speed. Wait for my *wolves* to pick up speed.”

“Excuse me, Al’. I just remembered that I have to waltz down the aisle with my food trolley. Here, sir, are your *I-don’t-think-so* snacks and a *you’re-stark-raving-mad* drink. Today’s menu: dream on!”

“Spades, do as I say.”

“Hold!” I tug the stick like a psycho. A laser beam comes grazing the jet’s belly as I space-rise us high. “Phew, that was a close one,” I chuckle. “What were you saying already? Ah, yes, cruising speed.”

Despite his intense gaze at me, his brows remain intertwined in a singular overlap. I don’t know if he wants to smile or cry . . .

“Golden Fang to Red Crotal, where the boys at?” he grunts, his eyes training from me to Hataro to me to Hataro. He’s panicking.

“Six friendly jets spread out on your horizon line, two on your left and four on your right . . . including mine,” she purrs.

I don’t like her. There, I said it.

“Tell them to pick up speed!” I roar across the cockpit, shaking from a volley of crystal beams drilling our rear.

Red Crotal heard me, all right. “These jets are unknown to them, Golden Fang . . .”

“Spades?”

I'm going to have a severe neckache if this head-turning thing continues.

Kilian . . .

Every inch of his body breathed brutality when I saw the man for the first time in the desert. And now, with Hataro's head on his lap, Kilian looks nothing more than a helpless mutt.

"Switch K7 and K9 for *Machs*, then push lever four all the way down, and fucking navigate the ship with the stick!" That should do the trick. I don't have time to give them a five-year condensed training.

"Heard that?" croons Kilian.

"You want a private line?" I ask at Kilian's end.

"Positive," the bloody reptile says, and I know she's *smurkling* by the way she *throaggled!* Yeah, it was a giggle trapped in the throat.

The smile spreading across Kilian's face as he raises his head is one I could stomp my pistol grip in. It wouldn't surprise me if he and this snake share the same DNA. I can picture them smirking at each other, trying to find out who is the smirkiest.

"Would the wolf be jealous?"

"No," my dry throat says, my own slumping self clutching the stick like it's my only anchor left.

I jog my eyes across the immense blackness before me, thinking about how Kilian belittles himself with his snarky comments. You need a reason to be jealous, Alpha, and I have none.

"Red Crotal is my zeta. Would you believe me if I said this woman is fighting for a planet that's not even hers? Yeah, her planet was taken, and you wouldn't need a picture if I told you by who." He's looking right at me, his teasing eyes soon dimming into something too serious for me right now.

My hands curl around whatever directional stick is saving me from the tang of discomfort.

The sound of gargling and vomiting breaks this awkward silence that thought well to sit between Kilian and me.

“Spades, you said your mum used to be a what?”

“I remember you cutting in before I could say it. A war surgeon on the front line.”

“I could use some of her knowledge. Now!”

I can't take my eyes off my screens; we're being chased, and I'm dodging crystal beams in a flurry of tight maneuvers.

“Alpha, be my eyes. Tell me what you see?”

“He's choking blood. The pad is soaked. There's . . . blood . . . blood everywhere.”

“Okay.”

Fuck.

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR**

EVERY FEW MINUTES, I REPLACE HATARO'S GAUZE, LEAVING little bleeding if I keep doing this. My mind struggles not to dwell on the ooze. I try not to rest my eyes down there. The blood . . .

Instead, I find refuge across the porthole, catching glimpses of what lies below.

Thousands of neon lines race across my vision. I squint across the night haze. Plasma, alive and running, line impressive towers up to the top—Pallamir City!

All this wealth . . . Something cold slams into me. They took everything from us.

“We could turn back and hide in Kirsens Wastelands. It would be ideal, you know. For Hataro, I mean.” I catch from the front.

What is the girl implying? With my left hand pressing down on the kid's wound, my other one flickers stealthily around my gun's grip. My men and I are always at the ready. To take back what's ours. And this chica, here, better not play hooky with me . . .

Tenser than a kink, my teeth warn, “Fly us out. My men are counting on us to lead the way out!”

The things she makes me and my men do. I'm sure she took a shot at my brain, which I am just starting to notice.

They will make it . . .

They have to.

She turns in her seat, takes note of my weapon, and dashing her gorgeous green eyes at me, quickens to say, “No worries. We can do this.”

There’s stiffness in my neck. Two key phrases just leaped out at me, searing my nerves: “No worries” and “We can do this.”

Crinkling her nose at me, she immodestly throws her attention back to the flight controls.

I peek across the seat and get hung up on her fingers. This helmswoman’s pushing the toggle tabs like a virtuoso, the speed of her movements making my head hurt.

Over the dashboard, her hands are flying faster than a weapon’s trigger. Her ability to dissociate and talk despite that intense focus fascinates me. Yeah, she’s mumbling as if cursing at someone.

“Let’s pretend everything is fucking all right . . . I really wish you could suck up less, you mother . . .”

I frown and dare a hasty look around. Who is she talking to?

“Spacebound in eight minutes, Alpha.”

To this, my hand slackens, sliding further down the holster, and I relax. As I do, my eyes slope, and soon, they draw a bead on the kid. He’s like death warmed up.

“Spades, Hataro needs medical care!”

A bleep cuts the urgent matter short, and to this, Spades immediately flicks a switch.

“GhostTiger OP nine, return to base!”

“Spades to base, negative,” she bluntly says.

“Spades, pull the fucking breaks and return to base!”

“*Circus move impossible, Choker Baby, over.*”

“*Spades!*” The girl switches the channel off and turns to me. “Did you give him three?”

“Three what?”

“Pills.”

Shit, yeah.

I grab the box from a waist pocket and pop the lid, sliding out three green oval-shaped capsules.

Hataro’s helmet will have to stay on. And tapping it for some life, I insert the drug into his mouth.

“Swallow, boy. Just bear with me.”

“Did he swallow?”

“Yes.”

“It means he’s conscious.”

“Open the first-aid box, take a little bottle of sterile soap, spurt it on your hands, and wash them, you know,” she says, flicking some additional switches, the thrust sending my head banging against the wall.

“Lady!”

“Take the laser cutter, and rip it out of the packet, *delicate flower*.”

Okay. Spades is heading for a timeout, Kilian-style . . . While my teeth pull one glove at a time, I’m ensuring there’s always a hand in the medical kit, sifting through paper-wrapped medical equipment.

“Cut into his suit where the wound is. You need to clear the area, so squirt some soap on the wound . . . Done?”

“Yeah.”

The craft shakes like a kid playing a cup and ball game.

“Sorry, my family’s having a hard time letting me go,” she sniggers.

She could not be more beautiful than she is at this very moment.

“Alpha, hang on to something now!”

The jet nosedives and jibes on the left, the G-force squeezing my lungs.

“Sorry, we’re being tailed by some angry little Chimeras.”

“What?”

I know what Chimeras are. They better be the best of my pilots.

“Just focus on Hataro. Where you at?”

“I cleaned the wound.”

“Okay. How does it look?”

I look at my red hands, and I’m starting to feel a little bit unsettled.

My brother surges in my memory. His little body emptying as a pool of blood encircled his five-year-old frame. “Kilian, I don’t want to die . . .” There was too much blood that day. Too much . . .

“There’s too much . . . there’s too much . . .”

Put a madre, there’s too much blood!

“There’s too much what?” the savage screams, knocking the numbness out of me.

“Blood!”

“Okay. Put your hand inside and find its source.”

“Inside?”

“Yes, under the ribs!” she shouts, the jet violently quaking.

I slide my hand among the squishiness of his insides, and I’m mere seconds from spewing my moonshine on the kid.

“I think I found it.”

“What movement can you feel?”

“The same as breathing.”

“Lung. Plug your finger in the—the hole, and with the other hand, grab some tubes.”

At this stage, I’m holding both my tears and my stomach’s content. Honestly, I’m not sure how much longer I can keep going. I grab a pack and bring it to my teeth to rip it.

“Insert one in. Make the orifice bigger if necessary, by incising it with a scalpel.”

Scalpel. I’m drowning my hands in sterile packs, squirreling through so many items, fast-reading the labels, and looking for what reads as *a scalpel*.

“Um, wait . . . I’m not too sure,” she says, her breathing sounding louder than the jet’s engines.

“You’re not too sure?” My teeth mumble as they try to tear the scalpel pack open.

“I’m not a surgeon, Alpha. You know what, just do it!”

With the scalpel in hand, I inhale deeply, staring at a livid young boy with thin black strands trailing over his damp forehead. Even his lips seem bleached.

Here we go. Rolling on my knees, one hand still inside the kid, I bring the other equipped with the lancet and reunite them at the bloody meeting spot. I feel some tissue tearing. Damn it.

A cry shakes the spacecraft. “No, wait!”

Que te den! My working wrist halts, my eyes zeroing in on the blood dripping down Hataro’s leathered waist.

“Okay. Is there a medium-sized container or bottle with what looks like water inside it?”

With rushing fingers, I dig into the box like an animal. Bottle of water . . . water . . . water!

“I think I found it.”

“Can you read out the la-bel?”

The ship violently veers to the left. I’m hunching over Hataro and this green box, my other arm clamped on a ratchet strap fixed on the floor. Spades is handling things like an ace, which is probably where her call name comes from . . .

“You little fuck!”

Something tells me this queen is in a mood because the spaceship thrums as it releases what I suppose is a strafing of

laser beams.

Bam!

The hull echoes with the sounds of stomps as if we entered a belt of asteroids. The bird must have sundered a ship, its shattered pieces peppering the jet as we fly through them.

I exhale. “UWSDs, solution for Under Water Seal Drainage.”

“Excellent. There should be two openings on the lid. Unseal them.”

I remove the wrapping around the lid and squint at the blue-colored labeled bottle. I’m not feeling it.

“What now?”

“You should have a set of two tubes. Both have a tip and a tail. Their tips should be slightly coiled. Insert the tails into the openings. Not the tips. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I’m entering the tubes’ ends into the holes, and—

“Stop!”

I obey. I stop breathing. In fact, I hold in everything. I’m beyond frozen, the tubes, like straws, dangling down this weird bottle.

Then I hear, “Only submerge one tail in the water. The other one has to linger above it, never touching the surface. Understood?”

I manage to drag out a “Yes.” I’m a real mechanical ventilator at this stage. It’s sporadic, but still, it’s working.

“I need you to slide the tube’s tip, which tail is submerged in the solution, under his ribs, at the very edge of his ribcage, under the lung.”

What the fuck now?

I shut my eyes—this whole procedure is making me very wary of my lungs. So I exhale again as slowly as possible,

attempting to tame my trembling hands. The tube slips in, and I think it's not in the lung. Maybe next to it.

“In.”

“You're doing great, Kilian. There should be a letter beside each hole on the lid. Can you read them out?”

I stare at the two openings, and all this feels very kindergarten-like. “A and B.”

“What tube is in A?”

“The one that's in Hataro.”

“Amazing,” she says. “Amazing . . . Grab the tube that's plunged into B and bring its tip to you. Ensure its tail is not in the water!”

Keep it in, man. Hataro spasms, his back arching from what can only come from pain.

“He's waking up!”

“Now, suck it!”

“Please repeat that sentence.”

“Suck it.”

Suck it . . .

Suck it?

“With?”

“Your mouth.”

My mouth.

I died, and this place is nothing but my hell.

“Now!” she barks.

I suck until there's less to . . . suck. Dead-eyeing the container in my hands, it soon turns red as a rush of blood stains the water.

“I think it's working!”

“Don't remove the tube inside Hataro just yet. You're going to clamp the wound. There should be a packet with

clamps in there.”

Clamps . . . clamps . . . Where are the clamps? I’m smudging blood all over the med kit. I can’t see what’s what.

“And where you pull the tube, bring in the clamp, and squeeze the source of the perforation.”

“Squeezed.”

“Now, turn on the cauterizer.”

“The what?”

“The thing that looks like a laser gun! And it’s important that you burn the tissue enough to seal the whole thing as soon as you remove the clamps. Is it on?”

“Yes.”

“Place something hard between Hataro’s teeth.”

There are pockets made of mesh along the jet. Probably to stash weapons during heated times. It seems like the material is sturdy enough to handle the task. I rip a piece, the job, an actual workout session.

My hand brushes Hataro’s forehead. I hate seeing the kid suffering like this. It’s breaking me.

“Has Hataro a bite?”

“Yes.”

“Take the cauterizer and burn the upper wound until smoke appears. Continue pressing for ten seconds.”

As I proceed, Spades switches from surgeon to pilot mode. “Entering space in three, two, one. Entered.”

It’s fascinating . . . I’m pulled out from my hell for a short relieving bliss when Hataro screams between the piece of mesh.

Not two seconds later, the kid collapses.

“Hataro!”

“He breathes?”

His chest is still rising.

“Yes. Yes, he breathes. He’s breathing.”

“Now, plaster a pad, strap him tight so he doesn’t get shaken like a fruit smoothie, and come sit next to me.”

As I drop into the seat beside her, I try to process what happened.

This ordeal has taught me one crucial lesson: never forget the whiskey flask.

“Well done, you officially performed a manual thoracostomy on a perforated lung,” the legend says as if I’m the one who deserves an erected statue in my name. And then Spades’ eyes begin sparkling with green when she whispers, “Alpha Kilian just saved a life.”

At that very moment, laser beams fly past the craft. I’m fixed on her smirk crescenting as she tangoes the jet across the aggressive streaks. The girl’s made of magic because I can’t seem to blink. Maybe I don’t want to blink. Perhaps I want to watch her, not miss a lip curl, a sigh, or a tremor. Her red lips pinch with every spacecraft she takes down, slinging fire out of her delicate fingertips. And—she keeps throwing me those stares like she knows I’m hers.

Yes . . . right now, there is nothing I want more than to kiss her.

I wish it was time to tell her everything. That I had the strength to ask her to stay with me, to open this cage her mind is trapped in, and set her free.

For it would free us all . . .

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE**

I GLANCE TO MY RIGHT AND TRAIN MY EYES TO SEE WHERE Kilian's looking. There's nothing but faraway twinkling dots. Little is visible besides Pallamir and the Twin Suns at our back.

My handsome captor is keeping his hands above his lap, fingers spread out like bent-out fork prongs, hovering and never touching anything.

"Red looks good on you," I tease.

A look of concentration spreads across his face, his shaky fingers spanning wider as he zeroes in on them. "Yeah."

Kilian . . .

"We'll wash them later, Alpha. Don't worry. It's all right . . ." I try to be reassuring. He's shaking like a leaf. His eyes are a little too shimmering to my taste. I frown at them and then shove my head to the side. There's nothing worse than feeling exposed.

That's trauma. I recognize it all too well. Kilian, boy, what could you have witnessed?

Bip.

Bip.

Two ships *in approach*. We have fifteen minutes.

"Things will get a little rough from now on. Tighten straps."

"Tightened," he mutters, eyes back into the sheet of blackness spread out before us.

I know where he's at. Space can be as beautiful as it is lonely . . .

And it seems my body is feeling lonely, too. Eyeing my hand folding on Kilian's bloodied one, as if an *outta* body experience, I gulp, my throat bobbing against my tight suit's collar.

"Hey, I got you . . ." I breathe, my face tingling from the blood that bailed on me.

I'm brave, not temerarious.

And mostly stupid.

A third of Kilian's basalt jawline confronts me. "Pretty wolf, you're right. I am."

"You are what?"

"A fool."

"I was just kidding," I chirp, a hand steering the stick toward . . . Quamire Moon.

When I'm going to tell him about the crystal levels is beyond me. May as well let it trail a little.

"Only fools risk it all for a girl . . ."

His beautiful eyes peer into my soul.

His fingers adjust to what was supposed to be my grip a moment ago, forking his fingers . . . softly into mine.

"And chase her across space." Kilian's jaw tenses as he spills those words like a cowboy during a drought—gritty.

And full-bodied.

Like his whiskey . . .

I don't know what to say. It's like living my first time all over again. I'm frigid beyond a freezer turned to the max, my bones shriveling from Kilian's boldness that ran over me like a bullet train.

"Why are you chasing this girl?" I catch myself rasping, swallowing my question mark, my amnesic breathing forgetting when to exhale and when to inhale.

“She’s special.”

Switching my flushed face to the dashboard, I decelerate us. It’s strangely quiet on the radar.

“What’s so special about her?” I say as I fiddle with random tabs.

“I can’t tell her. She wouldn’t understand.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Her wounds, they show too much. She’s too fragile.”

“Is that a reference to my feet?”

“Not your feet,” he chuckles.

The way I feel.

I throw a glance at my shifterguard. Nara . . .

A deeply repressed breath escapes my lungs as I say, “Her name is Nara.”

“Nara?”

“Nara is the name of your mate.” I unload this like a stone-hearted, cold-blooded bitch. But he needs to know.

“I have this condition . . .”

“I know you have more than one wolf, and that’s okay.”

“No, they have independent minds. Zombie had a mate, too.”

“Had? What happened?”

The two of us tacitly crease a smile, and soon light chuckles fill the cabin.

“No . . .” he sniggers.

“Yes!” It’s not really funny when your mate eats you. But our over-stressed nerves, flaring like firecrackers, are desperate for an outlet.

“Guess it’s one challenger out of the way.”

“Alpha, I’m not your mate. Nara is.”

“She’s not,” he rasps, and then, I feel like my body is bursting out with thousands upon thousands of aggressive butterflies when I hear, “I already have my mate.”

Kilian’s hand firmly grips mine.

I turn to face him, and . . . Kilian. He’s just . . . there, profoundly staring at me with . . . godly charged mysteries in his eyes. He’s making me . . . I’m . . .

“You’re a paradox, little wolf.”

Kilian narrows his eyes into fine flares only a sun can release. They are coated with softness, a fierce edge, and this warmth only an experienced heart can give off. I internally eye-roll at myself.

Damn, Wren . . . What a poet.

“Nah! I’m just a dox. I mean a dog!” I shake my head, furiously wanting to send this jet into a providential asteroid. “A wolf, I meant,” I say, my tongue lashing every consonant against my palate, shutting my eyes, ashamed of this idiot I embody.

“Not any wolf.”

“I’m more of a vessel full of orders. A good little soldier, you know,” I titter.

“I don’t think so, Spades.”

Tittering at him, I free myself from my harness and make my way to the back. I glance at Hataro. His breathing is stable . . . Fuck, it looks like a crime scene in here. After sorting through the drenched gauze and other displaced medical equipment, I smile at my finding: a small alcohol-based sanitizer bottle, hiding under a bloodied sterile package.

“Here you go, Alpha.”

Kilian catches my gift, flits his eyes on me, and mutters, “Thanks.”

As I take back my seat, alpha boy scrubs away the blood on his hands. A deep masculine exhale ensues. He then flicks a tab that has been blipping for the past ten seconds and throws

himself against the backrest, relaxing his gaze into the deep dark. He frees another of his full-hearted blows, which reflexes into my own lungs, both of us holding onto long seconds of silence as if words might be beyond our grasp.

This silence. My heart is triple racing at it. As for my pulse, it's skyrocketing into a whole new realm. With eyes swirling all over the place, I'm sweating at a feeling I've never experienced. What is more disorienting is how familiar it is.

Kilian's raspy voice finally returns, and I jitter at it, "There's a place I'm looking for."

Soon, eyes glide over me with such earnest want that I'm frazzling from within.

For my part, I know nothing with any certainty. But the sight of his fiery gaze, like two stars in every way, is throwing me into a dream. We must have crashed, and this is nothing but a brain glitch.

"What's this place?" I hear myself drawl.

"Anywhere . . . "

Ah . . . here we go again. His usual cryptic shit. I better get used to this . . . Seems to be a signature line.

"Anywhere?"

"Anywhere my mate is."

My eyebrows lower at an angle between 0 and 0.1 degree. It's a puddle of words. I'm trying to reorganize his sentence but it's a piece of work. "Where is your mate, Kilian? Where is this anywhere?"

And then his orange sneering gaze stabs me deep into my eyeballs. "You tell me."

The grunt that follows, saying, *back off*. Yes. I'm pretty sure it does.

I push him back because—"Haha!"

"What?"

I'm hiding behind my visor, the latter covered with my hands as I chew on my lower bottom lip, barricading whatever hilarious spasm is pelting me from inside.

"You're not making any sense! I'm trying. I'm trying to understand, I swear!"

He flicks his visor down. "I'm pretty sure you got it."

I frown. "But I didn't."

"I want to say something to your face, but I won't."

"Why?"

Hold your laugh. Hold it, girl!

"Because I don't break women."

"Pfft."

Kilian leans over me, his visor glass a molecule's width from mine. Oh, fuck.

"This place is . . . is . . . anywhere because wherever she is, it's somewhere I want to be," he says sharply.

As I mollify in his luminous gaze, flashes of white pull our attention toward the window. A shower of meteorites is pouring out of the dark sea, scattering gold in the never-ending expanse.

We both lift our heads, the corner of my eye catching his glance as it slips down to me. It lasted a second, but I saw it.

"That's why I love space . . ." This murmur softens the ambient air. And lulled by it, I listen for more. "For those moments. Everything seems floating, running wild. There is a sense of freedom, a place where anything is possible, you know." As I watch the herd of meteor flakes crack into thousands of sparks, spreading light throughout, I can't help feeling this very light invade my being.

Warrior fingertips, those as leathery as wolf paws, drift across my nape. This drift becomes a clasp of control, cradling my head in its solid hold.

As this man shifts closer to me, electrifying energy flows through me and perhaps down under . . .

“We see right through everything . . . yet everything is veiled.” Keep purring in my ear, Alpha. “And if you travel well into this darkness, you’ll find those unique stars, binary ones wildly orbiting around each other. Whatever their composition is, or whether they withhold a molten or a rock-hard heart, gravity won’t change . . .”

We breathe the same words and they entwine and our voices merge but not as much as our gazes. “Their course.”

I stay still, my eyes tracing the ovals of his red moons. I’m inches away from Kilian, but it’s not enough.

I watch him bring a hand under his chin, the fizzing sound of pressured air steaming across us as he removes his helmet.

Those messy dark threads, short waves tiding in all directions . . . I chase *them* shadows down his nose bridge and land on his lips. Their quivering bares a rush of breath. “I want to see you, little wolf.”

My head is freed, Kilian setting my helmet beside me, my eyes always fixed on him.

“Can you see me now?” I think I just whispered, my brain in overdrive mode.

Kilian’s taut body adjusts to mine and descends on me, a tame fist of my hair bringing me down in his fall.

There’s a whirlwind of glances, safely and closely anchoring each other. A slender nose tip grazes mine, downing my vision toward where our bodies come together. I hum at Kilian’s wild strands feathering down my cheek while wisps of his breath glisten over my skin.

“I want to see you more . . .”

Running down my body, a zip *descends* past my oval, allowing the crispness of the jet’s air to touch my skin, raising my pulse. And as Kilian draws fresh air across my body, my eardrums buzz from pulsations too strong for silence.

I can taste our shared breath and feel the thud of our combined heartbeats as we fumble in our desire to merge.

Using a tender whisper, my captor presses his lips against my collarbone. “Be mine, Ina . . .”

Who the fuck is Ina?

“It’s Wren. My name is Wren.”

“Spades, is—is there a problem?”

My cheek glued against the side window, I’m squinting my left eye onto the glass, death glaring at the far horizon like *a Becky staring at her empty bank account*. And yes, there is a fucking problem!

“These are not meteorites, but high-range laser beams blasting toward us, and they are furious!”

Harness whatever this is and get on it, girl.

“Are you ready for it?” I say, disengaging a latch lock above my head, the laser gun undocking above the jet. I can picture it unfurling its metallic casing like a blooming flower in motion—already blissing out. It better be!

“For what?”

“For the hall of fame, Top Dog.”

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX**

WE FALL BACK INTO OUR SEATS AND HARNESS OURSELVES.

“Spades, give me control.”

“I’ll give you better than that, Alpha . . .”

The floor splits between my feet, a dashboard undocking from below with two sticks rising between my legs. A holographic screen descends from the ceiling, positioning itself right in front of my face.

This technology . . .

The hottest thing on the block winks and succeeds in cracking a smile out of me. “I’m giving you firepower.”

Keep sending those winks, sweetheart. I’m collecting them.

Soon, I’m red-lining these *tailers*, blasting those hostile wolves midway. Spades assists me, her thumb depressed on the blast button as she navigates the jet like a space queen.

As I make a double strike, taking two crafts down, my eyes, like magnets, can never stay away from her for too long.

And once more, they settle on her as she mutters, “Golden Fang . . .”

I’m waiting for the rest of her words, but they don’t seem to come.

Could I have succeeded in impressing this girl?

“You can do other things with your fingers?”

Apparently, it takes a little bit more than doing a two-in-one shot.

My facial muscles drop, abated by the soul-crushing sarcasm Spades' mouth just molded to fucking perfection.

I release my frustration with a grunt and hand over the headgear this sassy chick forgot to put back on. "Your helmet."

"Thanks."

Although it sounded like "Thanks," I'm unsure Spades meant it because she waited three seconds before snatching it from my hands. There's even a grumbling hum in her voice as she brings it over her head.

"Activate air pressure, Spades."

"No. I hate space combat with my helmet's visor down."

"I'm sure you don't hate them as much as pressure drops."

There are no words to describe what my vocal cords scuttered up. And following this weird grunt, I slink the visor back down this brat's face with a fierce flap.

"I said, 'I hate space combat with my visor down.' Get it?" Spades hisses, lifting the visor right up high.

This little fish that's been so hard to catch is not an omega.

No, she's definitely not.

My dark side wants to let loose, but the more I stare at this savage, the more my senses numb.

I watch her lips motioning, her cute dimple cresting above her mouth as she fusses.

She's there . . . in front of me.

I finally found her. That small twirling flash of red in her poppy flower dress, pigtails spinning in the wind . . .

Ina.

She didn't even recognize herself in the pictures . . .

Spades must hear my teeth grating because she says, “About my visor, Alpha, this jet is equipped with pressure-demand masks. I can’t see well with a shield over my eyes . . .” She gestures with her index and thumb the size of a space gap and sort of titters, her head goofily angling. “It gets a little blurry for me sometimes.”

“Because you allow your pretty eyes to burn in solar radiation and other energy outbursts.”

I’m cringing at myself.

Whenever I inhale this girl’s presence, all that comes to mind is the word *pretty*. The worst part of this is that this cuckoo isn’t pretty. She’s hotter than a sun’s core.

She must think I’m nothing more than a two-sentenced lad . . .

“Increasing power thrust on engines eight and nine,” she states, lifting two blue levers simultaneously.

Crash!

“It’s okay. It’s just an inboard aileron where the ghost mode mechanism was,” Spades sneers before clearing her throat.

I take a peep from across the windshield.

There’s a massive hole in the wing. It’s just as well we just entered space. Gravity would have been the death of us.

One thing is for sure: she won’t live past her twenty-fifth birthday if she continues living on a razor’s edge—it’s another reason to keep her close because the woman isn’t all quite finished in there.

“Little imp, you want a dose of this!” she growls out of nowhere.

And this, people, is when I begin to realize the exact number of screws she’s missing.

“We’re gonna give them what they want.” There’s an unstoppable rush in her veins, her lips breathing like a summer’s gush.

And as my gaze drowns on this girl, I notice sweat pearls dewing under her chin.

“Alpha—my pills, please.”

I hesitate ...

“Pills!”

With hands too busy to care for herself, she gapes wide open, mostly likely waiting for me to drop one in.

With a sigh of resignation, I pull the box from my pocket and open the lid ...

“Two others, please.”

“Your hunger has no depth.” But not as much as the irony in my voice.

“Don’t look at me like that! It’s 2.5 mg. I’m good.”

“We have to talk.”

“Just put them on my tongue!”

Maybe she knows what I feed her is junk because she doesn’t thank me.

And I’m grateful for it.

This bad-blooded girl goes beyond her screen and weaves us across flares launched by an enemy vessel. She’s thrusting us into the fire like a dragon wanting more. The girl is dodging the Ripper, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she knew him personally ...

“I’m the *real*est in the game, uh!”

A massive explosion occurs before our eyes, enough for our craft to go into a chaotic storm of beeps and flaring alarms.

“I’ll take you to the grave!” Spades shouts, red light strobing across her face every second or so.

She’s a demon.

It could explain *Zombie* ...

And this *possessed* vixen simply drops everything and starts victory-waving her arms in the air. “That’s what we call

a flex! I spit heat. I melt your face. I grind your mother's bones!"

No . . . that definitely can't be human.

She strikes another ship, and I creep back—just a little—at the cackling coming out from this straight-up villain, the ship blaring beyond distress. It's making me nervous enough that a growl escapes me.

"Valkyrie strike, bitches!"

There are some people that dance into a prison break, and they make a trip into deep space out of the left field . . .

An awareness tightens my throat. This psycho is holding my last breath in her clasp. "Spades."

She turns to me and cocks her crazy head. "What?"

"I-I . . ." She's flummoxing me, fixing her maddened gaze on me because my smile decides to drool.

"Sorry, Alpha. I'm the *baddest*. I thought you knew," she sniggers.

And most certainly the humblest . . .

"Ah, yes. What an awful *captain* I am," she leers, her grin stretching at an impossible angle, pushing my buttons deep and challenging my patience.

Keep it in, Kilian. You'll train her on the ground. Turn her into an adorable little mutt, ready to follow her alpha's commands.

And gods, my cock can't wait . . .

"System, hem . . ." She's bringing her eyes closer to the dashboard, reading the silver serial number carved on her upper right. "A, Z, zero . . . nine . . . six!"

Oh, boy. She's as blind as a bat.

Yet, her aim is on point . . .

System AZ096 activated.

The ship is equipped with a vocal assistance system.

“System *AZ096*, download *Jade*.”

System downloading Jade.

Jade operational.

“Jade, play ‘House of the Rising Sun,’ The Animals.”

“House of the Rising Sun.” Could the little wolf possibly remember?

She’s on a roll. And my eyes die on her lips singing, “many a poor boy . . .” as her delicate body jerks from the turbulence, I . . .

“Like the song?” Her freckles wave, dancing to the flow of her smile.

There she is. Her . . . she’s fucking beautiful!

Her face sublimed, glowing purple . . .

Purple?

Neon light infiltrates the ship, blanketing every surface with a dark and gloomy glow.

We’re getting closer to this massive ring of energy.

Pallamir’s famous space portal . . .

Suddenly, I hear fear bursting out of her. “Fuck!”

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN**

SPADES SWITCHES THE TRANSMITTER ON AND BARKS, “SPADES to Base, activate portal!”

“Choker Baby to Spades, are you high?”

“Spades to Choker Bitch, perhaps. Confirm, now!”

“No!”

She whispers to me, “I forgot a little detail, Alpha. It’s okay. I’ve got this.”

On the other side of the line, there’s growling followed by the roaring of what can only have come from Alpha Hayden. “Get out, everyone out!”

“Winnie! What’s happening? Are you at gunpoint? Is he forcing you to do this?”

“Dad, I’m asking you to activate the space portal.”

“Winnie, get back here!”

“Space portal!”

“No.”

Inputting a few controls on her pad, she turns to me and says, “Alpha, take command.”

Thank you very much! It did take her a while to realize who’s in charge. But she came around.

A swallow sits in her throat, leaning forward as she tightly hugs herself with one arm. “Sometimes . . . I need you to trust me,” she murmurs. “I need you . . .” She pauses and tucks her chin. Spades then looks at me with this smile that’s about to

burst into tears. “To trust me on this one, Dad. I don’t know why. But it’s a gut feeling. Please.”

There is silence, and Spades looks away, hanging her head low as if in pain, a faint whimper escaping her. Girl . . .

“Remember that training exam a couple of years ago? You had to roll those dice . . .”

Spades’ chin lifts as if it’s been flea-bitten. “Yes. *Smoke ‘em and gas ‘em* tactic.”

“Well done. You passed. Communication over!”

“Fuck!” she shouts.

I toggle the switch she just used. “I have your daughter at . . .” I look at this darlin’, her glistening eyes. “Gunpoint. And—”

“Golden Fang, listen to my voice very carefully because the next time you hear it, it will be with Pallamir’s full military force, and boy, is our fleet heavy!”

“Hayden, how does it feel to have your daughter taken? To be robbed and stripped of the person you love the most. The difference is that I ensured you wouldn’t die at the fangs of my gammas! Let her go. She’s never been yours. Now, open the fucking portal, over!”

Spades is ogling me, looking paler than a new moon.

“What was that? You just messed everything up for us!” she squawks.

Maybe I was too emotional on that one . . .

She’s staring into nothing, completely immobile. Nothing good can come out of a silent woman . . .

“Spades, talk to me. We can take the long road. It doesn’t matter.”

“Well . . .”

“*Well*, what?” I rasp, angst kicking in like a sixth tequila shot.

“I was counting on the space portal to speed things up. An economy flight kind of thing.”

Why is she ogling this smile at me?

I dart my eyes to look at the dashboard, looking for the crystal-fuel flowmeters.

2%.

“Spades!”

“You chose to steal an empty jet, not me. By the way, thanks for replacing me. I’m taking back the wheel.”

I guess my leadership on this jet was brief. She apparently has no concept of pack hierarchy, leading me to the conclusion: Alpha Hayden sucks at parenting.

“When were you planning to tell me?”

“Later . . .” she says, glaring uneasily at me.

“Golden Fang to Red Crotal, flight status.”

“Behind you!” my wrist-wear shouts. My zeta is having some difficulty.

“Spades, we need to provide assistance.”

“I’m already busy assisting us!”

“Spa—”

In a tight somersault, the jet nosedives again. I’m breathing like a fish out of water, trying to find the cause of her reflex.

“That was a close one,” Spades laboriously breathes.

We’re taking Gs like never before. The girl’s got strength.

Another incoming com signal bleeps. This is sure to be Spades’ time in the spotlight.

“Moon-Wrecker to Spades, took one benny too much?”

“Joy, stay back,” my wolf girl barks.

“Comet-Ripper to Spades, are you in command?”

“Positive, both of you stay back—last warning.”

“Comet-Ripper to Spades, why are you doing this?”

“Tyrius, never thought what you were doing wasn’t right? Fighting over a planet that’s not even fucking ours?”

There is a grizzling sound over the combined channels.

“Folks, don’t get in my way. You’re already stalemated!” Spades is in a cold sweat, blinking many times as the signs of her anxiety drip into her eyes.

“We’re not in your way. We’re just signaling you, honey . . .”

This picture-perfect girl freezes in her seat, her grip on the veering stick sliding down as she loosens it.

“Why don’t you give yourself a good old *Mach 9*, Spades . . . Go before the team changes its mind, over.”

Chimeras’ legendary team is hardwired and soldered. The trust they have in each other is like a school of fish, they made this decision in a fraction of a second.

Spades turns to me. “Is Hataro’s helmet pressurized?”

“Yes.”

“*Mach 13* it is.”

Mach fucking what?

“Jade, increase oxygen to ninety-six percent, leap in five, four, three, two, one.”

The batshit . . .

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT**

INA!

Ina!

“Ina . . .” My waking eyes twitch, flickering from a migraine born from a Mach bloody 13.

I free a grunt, the force of our speed aching me to the bones.

Stretching my neck, I tilt my head from shoulder to shoulder, and when I lean my spinning head to the right, I realize Spades is passed out.

This *Jade* operating system keeps blaring in loops, and I wish she could shut up.

Automated system override.

Automated system override.

Decreasing speed.

Engine six and four reverse thrusts Mach 4.

Speed decreasing.

Speed decreasing.

Energy level critical.

Energy level critical.

Speed decreasing.

Speed decreasing.

Automated system override.

Automated system override . . .

“Spades, wake up. Hey, girl, wake up!” I remove my harness and make my way to her.

Her face is dangling to one side. She looks dead.

From the vital signs data appearing on my helmet’s visor, she’s far from it. The bird is in deep slumbers. Her ECG is waving rhythmically, steadily . . . peacefully.

“Spades.” I shake and nudge her head a little, lifting her visor up. It bothers me to see her unconscious.

“Mmm, what is it? Just five minutes. I’m coming, Bret . . .”

Bret?

My hands, not me, get a little tense, and with a firm grip on her shoulders, I strive to remove any remnants of this Bret from her.

“What the—Where am I?”

I smirk at this impossible woman, who thinks danger wasn’t pressing enough, so her brain decided it would be best to sleep a little while.

Speed decreasing.

Spades settles in her seat and taps her cheeks before breathing heavily.

I trail my eyes where hers have stopped.

Destination: 078 orbiting moon, Quamire.

Pre-destination distance: 384,400 km.

Crystal Level: 0.1 % ▲

“Jade, manual override. Increase speed to Mach 6. Activate economy mode for the passenger compartment.”

“We need to save as many crystals as we can,” she mutters. And looking all around, she suddenly snaps. “Jade, turn off the Anti-Gravity Field.”

“We’re flying too fast, girl. Let the system decrease speed. Obey!” I can feel the sting of gray hair pushing on my scalp, and fuck am I too young for those.

This *wildfire* unstraps herself like a furious hurricane, grunting as she frees her arms, manhandling the straps like they are a threat to her life.

My nostrils flare when this small doggo rises to my level, well . . . to my chest level.

She removes her gloves and slaps them against the dashboard, but they barely float toward it. The woman takes off her helmet and throws it across the cockpit. But it only flutters into a corner, softly bumping into it as it bounces back in the air.

I remove mine, feeling she’s leveling at something I should do too—a good face-to-face.

“Kilian! Yeah, I said it! Kilian.” With her gorgeous threads eerily floating like tentacles before and above her eyes, she looks nothing more than a mermaid in a rough sea. Or a Kraken . . .

While Space Medusa spits, I flick my wrist and scroll through the small screen of my com-gear, searching for Red Crotal’s last transmission. But there’s nothing.

“I am in command so f—”

That’s it!

“Your place, Omega!”

“My place? My place! You wanna know where I’m standing?”

I’ve never seen a face so red in my entire life. It’s close to Planet Dafra’s great volcano, thick lines of magma veining the white of her eyes.

“I have no rank,” she blows in an angry yet—how she voices it—sarcastic purr.

I’m removing my gloves, challenging this girl’s ferric gaze. It’s so full of heated hate. It’s indecent. She’s spewing

her anger out like she has no dignity, stripping every inch of frustration and flinging it at my face like I'm her new laundry guy.

Keep it cool, Kilian.

Don't grab her tiny throbbing neck. Don't draw blood from these heart-shaped lips . . . Don't be rough on her . . .

Keep it inside, man.

"It doesn't matter who you are or who King Fucking Daryl is. The only people who have authority over me are, well, yes, indeed, my father and my mother. For the rest, I'm equal with every one of you little bitches, so suck it." The devil ends her rant with a cold-ass smile followed by a middle finger, which is still gracefully lifting toward me.

I was right.

She has no sense of hierarchy.

I'll teach her.

"Growl, growl, come on. Give me the full version of yourself, Kilian. Wait! No. I suddenly realize." She snarls her teeth at me and sings, "I can't give any fucks! So sit like a good dog and let me do my thing."

I gulp many times, my tongue racking the slate that is my lower lip. At the same time, my neck begins to swell from a heart pumping too much blood at once.

This organ is nothing but as confused as me. It doesn't know whether to beat to the music of her voice or to destroy my rib cage to the meaning of her words.

She sits and tightens her grip on both armrests. The swallow that follows is harsh and cough-heavy.

Despite this apparent discomfort, the cold queen keeps gutting my eyes in silence.

What is she thinking? That I'm going to chicken out from a death glare?

She then lifts her chin and clears her throat, apparently in distress.

Yeah . . . I bet you are, Spades.

“Kilian?”

Say my name, darling . . . Your smoky voice is getting me, all right.

Her diamond-shaped face turns crystalline as my legs move for me, fueled with rage I can no longer control.

I dance my eyes over her, over her gripped fingers as she crosses the seats.

“Kilian, easy.”

Easy . . .

I could talk, but my answer wouldn't be pleasant.

Throwing myself between those same seats, I follow her to the back of the jet. I don't know where she thinks she's going, but she's trapped.

The only thing positive about her skittish moves is that the rear is wider.

I glance to my right. Hataro is sleeping, his skin flushed and looking healthier already.

No witness.

“Stay back!” she threatens me, a hand on her shifterguard.

Winching myself from handle to strap to machinery sides, my hovering self finally halts.

Latching onto some handles, I invade her personal space, an arm at each side, caging this succubus's head. “Look what I found . . . a cornered little fawn.”

Spades turns her head away from me, uncovering her carotid artery.

It's pulsing . . .

Under this delicate skin, there's fast-pumping blood. It's furious, charging into her neck.

Can Spades' heart be beating as much as mine?

Catching every detail, every line, every scar, I bring her face up to me, my hand numb as I grasp this fighter's jawline. "Don't resist, woman."

She's so close now, her lips rising to meet mine, that I'm dying to breathe her in.

Copper butterfly paws are spotted across her cheeks and nose, bringing a small smile to my face.

"You want to unleash Zombie?" I say, twirling one of her chestnut threads.

I can taste her fear in her breath, sip in the fury in her frowning and the regret quivering over her lips . . .

"Don't hurt me," the mouse squeaks, a hand over her cuff as if about to pull out an old Ben 10.

"Hurt you?" My chest is thumping like a hammer crashing into the pad of a high-striker game, her goose bumps spreading on mine like contagion. "No, Spades . . . I'm going to ravage you."

**CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE**

I'M LOSING GROUND, SPADES' EYES BURNING INTO MINE.

Our gazes are screaming at each other, spearing with glimmers of light, unwilling to cultivate the silence between us.

My teeth grind, and my vision sways over her greens and down her tempting lips. I don't know what's going on. My pounding chest is too unstable to give me a focal point.

I have no choice but to anchor my eyes onto these brims of hers. They part, revealing an adorable gap between her front teeth. This timid aperture stops something inside me. It's more than automatic. It's cardiac, and I don't know how to start it back.

But then . . .

How much longer can I hold my breath?

To keep hers inside me . . .

She's captured me, whisking me away into the *greenness* of forests, transporting me over hills of never-ending wildness I will never see. I chase her eyes as she chases mine . . . true wolves on every hunt.

Bip.

Quamire Moon in approach.

Bip.

Bip.

I'm seconds from smothering her lips, taking everything from her, invading her mouth, and ransacking her sweet-cherry red.

But no.

The one who takes everything is Spades.

The woman pushes herself from the ground and flies up to my mouth like an angel without wings—call her Lucifer all you want. She holds my soul, and I don't mind if she crushes it. It's always been hers.

Lips run across mine. They're cautious, probing my own, not wanting to force anything on me.

Oh, little wolf, if only you knew . . .

While this woman takes notes on my willingness, her fingers, like an unknown entity, wrap around my head. She's not bringing me to her. She hauls herself on me and brings her lips to a standstill.

"I've missed you so much," my murmur blows as I hold this lapping wolf.

She closes her eyes as if submitting. Is she remembering?

I nudge her mouth with mine. I need her gaze more than anything. I need to check that this is real. That she's real.

Her eyes open again.

Gods, she is . . .

My hands barely holding onto her waist, I kiss her ten times back, grasping every bit of tongue and lips.

I've fallen.

The woman has succeeded in altering my being, fiddling with my will because I can hardly move. I'm just there, with my lips on hers, as hard as a rock, feeling I undeservedly walked away with a prize.

"Kilian," she whispers, pulverizing my *brains*.

I need to escape with this wolf. I can't mix my emotions with this cock between us. And yet, I just want to get lost in

the moment, spacefuck her like no other.

“Ina . . .” Holding her gaze, I adjust her floating self to my level with a simple clasp of her chin, zero gravity turning her weight into zilch.

“Who is Ina?” Holding that whisper close, Spades takes me with her in her slow twirl, drifting into the back of her yonder. Or the jet.

Nothing else matters now. We wander where ceiling and ground have no importance.

My thumb sails into this deep curb below her lip, docking it under her velvet hem. “The name of my mate,” I rasp, falling on her lips.

“I’m not Ina.”

Spades’ voice, loose and easy like a yawn, ripples into moans when my hand slips out of my control. It’s taken possession of her crotch, kneading into her warmth while she yields against it. The more she moans, the more I caress what hides between her thighs.

“What would you know about it, Spades?”

“Know . . .”

I savor her frisky smiles against mine and realize she’s just a bottled-up rainbow trapped in a human body. She’s bound my neck, moving her lips around mine, breathing her sex-loaded moans into me.

My, this girl . . . I’m fully packed.

Spades goes full-on sensorial, opening my psyche, tasting my feelings, drinking me in as much as I quench for her.

I smooth my remaining hand down her neck, over her breast, humming, “Yes . . . I know you. You know me.” I’m losing it further, but she stops me, keeping it against her beating heart.

To these vibrations, my tongue *dolphins* inside her mouth, and I discover she’s more than just attraction. She’s the very oxygen my soul was missing.

My feet have left the ground, but gravity or not, I'm already in space somewhere, just with Spades. And I inwardly simper, thinking as my fingers weave across this galaxy of hair the color of chondrite, how it's the case and how I could die now, for I reached nirvana.

This living aphrodisiac begins dancing her hand down my chest, a zipper in her pinch.

"Under there . . . You've been hiding something. I want it," she prints on my ear.

Oh, lady, you can have it. It's all yours . . .

She retreats her lips, but I find comfort in her gaze that she thinks well to moor in mine.

Each time the tip of her nail or finger comes in contact with my skin, my brain short circuits and my cock is prone to fireworks, the rockets buzzing to explode in her.

She's too slow.

I grab her zipper, bolt it down to her crotch and pull off her spacesuit like she doesn't have a choice. It was a challenge to put it on her at first, and now, look at me, yanking on the sleeves to help her pull her arms out.

She's tearing across mine, my arms trying to help this hungry wolf as she grunts her frustration in my mouth. Our hands are everywhere, violating each other's skin as we tug on our suits; scratching our skin for kneading is not enough. To penetrate each other, every inch of our pores, layer after layer, to fuck everything that makes us.

I clasp her jaw, not to stop her from devouring me but because I need to look at her, see her. An expression of dirty, starving lust flashes across her eyes and strikes deep into mine. My cock is ready. It's been hard ever since she said my name.

It's time for her to scream it now.

**CHAPTER
FORTY**

AND WHEN THERE'S NO SKIN LEFT TO FREE BUT A FOOT NOW healed from *Wereness*, blood shivers up my dick.

She's smiling at me, maybe feeling a little shy. She doesn't have to be nervous. She's perfect. How can this floating goddess be embarrassed?

"Little spacewolf," I mutter, smearing her visually. There are lines of scars running over her chest and down her belly. We all have them. They come from the friction of harness straps. Though I must say, she wears those like jewelry. They are in perfect symmetry with her body.

"Alpha?" she purrs, running her hand down those lines.

Things are escalating nicely. One of her feet comes floating at eye level. I catch it and rasp, "Time to get undone."

Spades bites into her lip with a moan that turns my ears red. My eyes narrow down where her legs join—which I know will be my final resting place.

She's circling her fingers around her clit, and it's giving me a real fucking kick.

Keeping my gasp hidden, I clench my jaw. This beauty has all of my attention now.

She moves her lips slowly, barely audible, and says, "Come closer." As Spades does, her slutty hand jives up from her clit to her mouth. And here she is, licking her hot damn fingers, staring intently at me. Okay ... she's not shy.

In response, my nibbles pause at the base of her foot. "I'm not going to come closer. I'm going to come inside you."

I grasp both ankles and lower myself onto the woman, sending her back to press against the ship's porthole. Her body rolls in the wake of me stretching her legs over her. Her ass lifts, and my cock, already slick with desire, twitches at the motion of her curves. She frees a moan in her stretch and a second one when my cock greets the warmth between her thighs.

Juxtaposing her tiny ankles on each side of my neck, I smirk against one. "I put these here, an inch from my lips, ready to be nibbled at."

Spades is eye-defying me, tilting her head like I could kiss her to death. "You like my feet, Alpha?"

I caress her cheek.

I'll answer. I just need a few seconds to take in the softness of her skin.

"I've got an unhealthy obsession with yours," I admit, kissing that very cheek I'm stroking. "Enough to chase them across space and take their owner hostage."

She sighs. It sounds like a purr. Breathily, with a slight thrum, under-toned with sexy notes. A corner of her lip lifts. "The owner wants you to fuck her."

I grunt. Not at the woman's bewitching words but at her wet mess pressing against my impatient cock.

"Tell her I'll fuck her now." I slip my arms behind her back and firmly clamp her traps. As I do, Spades' feet slide further down, allowing the back of her thighs to press against my shoulders.

With my chest on her breasts and her lips against mine, we're nothing more than a fort made of flesh and lust.

A lust that is unbridled by gravity because it isn't there.

And indeed, my lips find a way to crash on hers.

She titters out of breath, but I can't stop myself. It's not only her feet that caused all this. It's also those lips of hers.

These begin to evade me, and I follow them. Her eyes turn to a bent kneecap. “Seems I’m in a tight spot,” she chuckles.

I smile defiantly. “I confirm you are.”

There’s a sudden whirl in my thoughts. I close my eyes and move my chin down a fraction. My eyes open, but I can’t seem to get my bearings right. Spades’ on top of me ... *Gravity*.

The lack of it is affecting my sense of direction. I feel a sudden urge to hold onto something. Someone ... I clutch Spades’ waist with one hand, the other clamping her nape.

“Alpha ...” she says, her nails scrapping at my pectorals. I steady my gaze on her, struggling to figure out where my mind is. Spades is there, her cunt idly hovering above my cock, the length of her legs coursing up to my ears. She’s straddling me.

In this madness, she begins toying with one of my threads, drawing me always further downwards or upwards toward her lips, the game of dominance distorted by gravity’s absence. The thought that Spades might believe I’m at her mercy makes my cock thump, no matter how much I enjoy handling my women.

“Alpha ...” A hand takes a firm grab of my hair. It’s a good tug. I gasp at Spades’ roughness as she drags me to her mouth. While she does, I watch her swallow, watch this throat bulging so slightly, and it’s making my cock scream. “Fuck me, I said.”

I can’t help but clasp her head, her strong jawline a little square, a little character . . . fucking sexy.

With stars behind her, there’s no gravity to hold us. Nothing but us. Nobody but us. She’s on me, or is it me on her . . .

What matters is this freckle here. And this one over there. I release her legs, my fingers eager to explore her face. I glide one down her nose, and with my thumb at lips’ reach, I begin rubbing perfection.

She crams her head in my palm, and I remember what we’re doing when she takes in my thumb . . . and begins

sucking it like a-a—

“You like that?”

Do I like it?

I’d give her my cock. But to be honest, I just want to dive into this body and ground myself in her.

Her naked self swaps my thumb for my mouth, cladding her lips with mine. And I groan when she starts playing with my cock.

Hold it, Kilian! Ah, shit. She can’t do that.

I slap her ass with both hands and grab real tight, syncing her core with mine.

This golden monkey’s on it because those tight legs are clamped around me with hungry strength.

I won’t let her wait any longer.

Holding her thighs, my fingertips on the inner side test the field, hoping she’s ready to receive me.

The wolf is dripping wet.

I don’t let another breath escape before my cock slides inside.

Spades moans loudly. She wants it.

She’s getting it.

I grunt from her tight walls, the friction heating my cock with want.

She’s going to have to work for me. I pull on her hands, freeing my neck as I do. Her torso falls backward, some of her wandering threads tickling my legs, and as I flex my knees slightly, I allow my thighs to ground her. She sinks her nails in them, and now I’m in control again, my hips thrusting without kindness, making her jolt out and right back on my cock.

Soon, Spades begins cursing her heat at me like I care.

“Fuck, ah!”

And I do.

Her breasts, my new dashboard, encourage me to pound her faster. The more they bounce, the more I delve into her, for I want them never to stop jittering.

I'm no longer hard; I'm radioactive steel. And I don't know how much more I can hold.

It's a shivering party. Not one muscle, breath, the slightest moan isn't barbing the air. My pulse is spiked. I've got my eyes wide open on Hurricane Spades, and I'm not sure I'm going to survive this storm. A source of shivering heat is given off beneath my fingertips as goose bumps form. Spades' body is not only pliant, but it's also bristling with raw fire. I tighten my grip around her wrist and push into her harder.

And harder . . .

"Alpha, fuck me . . ." she gasps, pearls of sweat glistening on every shadow of her face. "Like you hate me."

My teeth go rabid, my lip paying the price to keep it in. I shut my eyes, wincing as a grunt of mine escapes . . .

Hands start to slip, her arms trembling from the effort. Her body's showing signs of weakness.

Seems the spacewolf needs some encouragement. "Come on, Spades . . ."

The girl is not tired. She's about to get to the big O without me. She's wincing, putting so much effort into keeping it low. But I don't want that.

"Hit me harder," she jags out.

My snigger roars. And so does her throat.

"Ah!"

Yes. Sing to me, Spades . . .

Adjusting my hips to this lady's needy core, kneading into every curve of her anatomy, I'm learning every part of her body. Luckily, I'm a fast learner . . .

And while dicking her deep for my name to come out, I pull her up, a fistful of hair. There it is, the sweet melody of Spades' moans as she husks out my name. "Kilian . . ."

Slinging my hands around her neck, I bring my sex maniac forth and adjust her left thigh against my hip.

“Unload, I beg you . . .”

I’m as desperate as you, little wolf . . .

She dives on me and buries her cries in the crook of my neck, suffocating her heat against my skin, and I grunt from it. This *need* to touch her. It won’t leave me.

My hands wrap around her tiny waist, her thighs tensing with every thrust.

Spades does the same, scratching the small of my back, and then she just forks her nails into my working ass. The girl’s got nerves!

She’s bewitching me, her wild strands floating as if in water, and when she whispers, “Alpha . . .” I feel a swelling.

But when I hear, “Kilian,” I cream her, smearing her insides, my release unforgivingly heavy.

She’s holding her breath, but I keep pounding, my cum mingling with her juices as her cunt strangles my cock. It’s like wrestling in sugar . . . Not that I’ve ever done that.

My hands float over her ribs, stroking her spine as she keeps waving over me, her core pumping my cock dry.

And—

She bites hard into my shoulder, sinking wolf fangs that just sprung out of nowhere.

An alpha . . . claiming me?

Shit.

Would she know? She did say she has no rank.

I bite her right back, claiming her as mine.

She yelps, still in her climax, her body lifting up and down, and then she just crashes against my chest as if submitting.

From here on, she’s the Sand Rose Pack’s Luna. No matter how many wolves she has, mate or not, they now belong to

me.

And to me alone.

She is the wind in my fur, the earth below my claws, and the moonlight in my eyes.

And as my fingers slowly close over her nape, I know nothing and no one can stop us . . .

**CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE**

QUAMIRE. IT IS THE ONLY SATELLITE AROUND GALATHENA whose orbital distance is closest to our trajectory.

It's unbreathable, pitted with bursting acid geysers, and suffused with lightning bolts. Everything is thick with smoky gray steam. Yeah, this planet is nothing more than a giant nightclub gone wrong. Honestly, it's impossible to tell what's going on.

Then again, the only spacial object closest to us is this one.

Quamire in approach, breaking into the atmosphere in sixty seconds.

Consider reducing speed.

Warning.

Jade's metrics are going crazy, and I understand.

This is no piece of cake. This space zone, may I remind you, is called Mara della Morte. I heard it means Sea of Death, derived from a dead language. Spanish, I think.

It's overly unstable and gravity-crushing. According to Pallamir astronomers, there's a black hole not very far, which probably explains how bizzaro this whole solar system is. The case of Aphos, the second moon after Quamire, rotating jitterily or Galathena's solar flares exploding every two days on average.

Overall, explaining why 078—I mean Galathena—resembles a gigantic oven.

Kilian's gaze falls on me. I know this because it's crushing my composure to pieces.

I can't meet his eyes.

I just can't.

I'm in the middle of landing a jet with close to zero iron crystals . . . plus, how he drooled over some other girl like I wasn't even there!

"*Ina, Ina . . .*" he squeaked. I'm gonna shove him some Ina down his throat. I'm just waiting to land this jet, and then he's gonna hear about Ina all he wants!

It will be endless.

Prick . . .

"*If that's what it takes to have a zero-gravity fuck, he can call me anything he likes.*" Yeah, I know that's what crossed my filthy mind while he was rounding up my clit.

But now that it's been tamed . . .

"Jade, empty the oxygen tanks," I *protocol*, igniting all engines and sterilizing my emotions as much as possible. My mind needs to be clear for this big dark mass in approach. Quamire . . .

K9, K1, N8, N9 . . . I'm dripping like a melting icicle. I can see my reflection in my visor. It's glow time for me, but the sweaty kind . . . it's nasty.

"Narrowing wings at 30°, sea-level indicator?" says Kilian, accidentally plying his digits over mine as they learn how to operate the instrument panel.

Kilian boy sure is a natural. He's got that evident knack only the gifted possess, starting with that cock of his. And don't get me started on his fingers . . .

That's enough drooling, Wren!

The man's hand glides over mine, and of course, I have to freeze like a dumb woman. All of this feels very gender-specific and *cringy* . . . I know. Ergh . . .

“Spades, are you like these sensory on-and-off objects? Because I can touch you again if this means turning you back on,” Kilian whispers, his voice sexier than ever, traveling through my helmet.

After that, I smile. A transmission born from Kilian’s lips is worth crashing on Quamire, isn’t it? Not that both things are related. And, Alpha Kilian darling, you seem to be just as bad at gushing fluff as I am. Yet, I can’t think of anything more pleasant than being your nightstand lamp.

I kind of feel like he’s nuking my brain. He is, isn’t he? And he isn’t even trying . . .

Wren, you’re pathetic.

His eyes waver over me. There’s this fire I can no longer control. And I just love how he drops them on me without dejection. It’s a shameless gaze. It strangely reminds me of my father when given a juicy piece of meat to eat.

He wants to get a taste of my bitterness, a glimpse of my bland sleazy side. Sorry, pal, no can do—the bitch is perfect.

I lightly turn on my seat and open my thighs wide, oh, wide. The fingers I glide over my suit, they’re sleeker than sensual. And by the unanimated dog before me, I’d say it’s a win.

“Yes, Alpha. Please, touch me . . .” I over-drawl.

Kilian’s eyes are stuck on my crotch. Even behind the helmet, neon lights automatically turn on when it gets dark. These lights are snitching about where his gaze lands.

Seems I’ve got the power to *thirstify* my baby alpha . . .

I think Kilian is trying to learn how to breathe. And then, after three long seconds, he nods in a snigger. “You’re in for the night of your life once we reach Galathena . . .”

“I wanna see that,” my chuckles fizzle out.

His stabbing orange eyes stare into my depths like it’s easy. “I’ll whip my racing horse until she collapses.”

My thighs are just about pooling about my suit . . . and it took him a couple of keywords, a tilt of a helmet, and a pair of eyes. Don't riposte. Just don't, Wren.

"You don't know, but I'm the kinda ride that never tires . . ." And look at you riposting . . . of course, you do.

The kinda ride that never tires . . . Is this the best mushy-washy line I could come up with?

"It's not what you were blurting out back there . . ." he coyly says.

Blu-blurting?

Mr. Snarks snarks, his eyes snark, and his snarky smiles snarks.

I can't be brewing about nonsense, but I cool off at the subtle gleam his eyes render.

And then I grunt and shove my attention back on our death star.

A chorus of cracks ebbs across my shoulders as I swing my head from left to right. I need some small talk, mainly to divert my attention from the stress.

I turn to him and kick out this massage need from my tongue.

"Kilian, how good are you at massaging?"

He sniggers derisively. It's the snigger of the "Fuck, she can't be asking this of an alpha, surely."

My fucking lids drop midway, my nose creasing up as if wanting to hug my depressed brows. Make fun of me all you want, Kilian . . . I'll show you.

Kilian cheerfully hums and says, "I'm quite good with leather if a couple of strokes and a few bones back in place is what you need."

I . . . shit, how does he do that? It's like he's got this ability to shock my clit just by breathing. Maybe it's this canine showing a little behind his smirk or his eyes cut-smiling at me . . .

We're thirty seconds from dying. Yet, here we are, giving absolute zero fucks about it, fool-sexing like we're in Pallamir's Dreamland Brothel.

I smack my lips against Kilian's, because why not, and shove down his visor for closure—then mine.

Alpha boy likes my kisses because he warmly simpers straight after that.

Note to self: he seems to be on a diet of kisses. Feed him more.

Let's talk about where I can drop those another time. Right now, I need my focus on landing this poor jet on a frigging spatial hazard.

They thought well to call it a moon when all it is, in reality, is a radioactive swamp clamped on a rough giant asteroid orbiting around 078. It's nothing near mother-of-pearl goddess moon Astra . . . made of vaporous air and pink skies.

“Spades, shield?”

As gale rips and tears through the fuselage, a loud sound of perforations coincides with additional alarms. I'm beyond sorry for our ears.

My father will disinherit me for the number of spaceships I'm wrecking . . .

And then my mouth wrinkles as I atrociously pout. Thrusting my navigational stick forward for the big dive, I realize I might just as well be *persona non grata*, let alone *wanted*. There might already be a bounty on my head. I'm hoping they used a flattering pic . . . Oh, gods, I hope so.

“Spades, activate the shield!”

**CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO**

“SPADES, SHIELD!”

Shit . . . I drifted again. “We don’t have enough energy to activate the shield.” I rattle my throat because I already know how Mister Perfect will react. “A pill, Alpha.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“N.O.”

“Givememygodsdampills!”

“Focus on piloting this thing, Captain Spades!” he leers, the corner of his lips licking his ears.

He doesn’t understand. This is not a game.

“Kilian, please. I need them to land the jet. I can’t control my shaking.”

Grunting, Kilian plays with the switches to retract the back wing.

Finally, he gives me a look. It’s a deep stare, the top of his iris lost in his brows. “I’d like to help you back on Galathena . . .”

“Okay . . . whatever you want. Just give me a pill. No, make it two.” I’m only able to pull off a vapid glance, trying to hold this expectant expression on my face, all in an attempt to hide the sudden onset of withdrawal.

I eye the two pills, and I know I’ve got this. I can control this.

. . . I thought I could handle this.

I just can't.

“Spades, please focus!”

“Yes.”

More than ever, I'm beginning to recognize the raw instability of our flight path. Quamire is belted with thin layers of dust imperceptible to the naked eye.

Kilian wets his lips and voices, “Jade, distance from sea-level estimation.”

Jade remains silent. Of course, she does. She's programmed to recognize my voice and my voice alone.

He nods his head, his authority slipping. I hear a faint grunt across my embedded earphones, reminding me there is more to hear or see from Kilian.

It's not about being an alpha. It's about space piloting, and Kilian is Golden Fang, the one who struck me enough I had to sabotage my own ship . . .

“Jade, memorize a new voice,” I say, smirking at my rebel wolf before slanting my chin toward him, inviting him to talk.

“Jade, Kilian speaking. Calculate the distance from sea level to the jet.”

Voice recognized as Kilian's. TigerGhost-980 3560 feet from sea level.

Kilian doesn't look at me, concentrating solely on the remaining crystals. “Spades, everything is about to shut down.”

“Okay.” We're as good as dead.

This moon has an especially unique inward acceleration toward its core.

Meaning we need all engines at full thrust to breach the zone between orbital and *atmo-penetration*. Just imagine an arrow darting across a line.

Typical low planet orbit re-entry speeds are near 17,500 mph, nothing more than a Mach 25 . . .

We're going to need a little more speed for Quamire.

"Jade, pressurize the cabin at 0.5 *pounds of pressure*."

"Kilian, activate 0.5 psi."

"Same goes for you," he says, leaning toward me, a swipe of my visor down my eyes. He toggles on the switch of my helmet and forces me to repeat. "Say 0.5 psi."

Apparently, I wasn't the only one traumatized by what happened in this Demeter fish tank.

A spontaneous grin touches his lips and boomerangs on mine for absolutely no reason. I think we're just losing our minds, our hearts beating each time we get too close, an impending death at the door. And we're here smiling our nerves out like we'll have all the time in the world once in heaven . . .

"0.5 psi," I repeat, my helmet's air pressure adjusting to my vocal orders. "Alpha, I kept the speed at Mach 13 to glide us until Quamire came into sight and—"

"I know, Spades. I get it now," my copilot says.

He removes his straps and heads toward the back, and soon a fizzing sound freshens my ears, probably Kilian adjusting Hataro's helmet's air pressure.

As Kilian comes back into view and buckles up, my tongue scoots once more. "Hitting the breaks would have meant using crystals . . . I needed to save up."

"Air pressure optimum level." How Kilian sling-shots the conversation means I'm squawking like a terrified android. This isn't the place for him to get all prissy over a damsel. And I get it.

Kilian gets it.

We get it.

Why do I suddenly need to justify myself? Ah, yes. Death might be on the horizon.

I need air. I lift my visor and breathe.

Ah, that's so much better.

"Have you made a successful landing on Quamire before?"

"No, I never dared." And I'm still evaluating if I should.
"You?"

"Once, with the Demeter. The tanks were full. It had a landing zone. Unfortunately, the location of this landing plant is at latitude 90°, which is hours from now." Kilian throws a glare at me, followed by a bark. "Spades, put your visor down and activate air pressure."

"I need my full eyes." My vision tends to blur from probably arterial pressure . . .

I hear him inhale, maybe wondering if he should shake and thrash me against the wall or just . . .

Kiss me?

"Spades," he pleads against my lips.

When did he even move so fast?

I take a deep breath and slush the thing down.

"Alpha . . . I need you to sit at the back, near Hataro," my helmet says.

I very much dislike closed spaces., and a helmet is tiny. Jets, okay. Ducts, okay. Closed helmets, not okay!

"Give me the commands," voices Kilian across the radio vibes.

It's a sexy tone of voice, just like the first time I heard it.

"Kilian, I went full thrust to save us energy and refused to decrease the speed because—"

"You didn't want to use crystal energy to decelerate. It would have used too much of it. I know. You just have enough for descent and landing."

"No. I don't have enough. The nose will probably hit first. I'm asking you to go to the back."

“I’m staying right here, wolf. Share commands, and we’ll pull the emergency levers together.” There is a confidence in him that I cannot overcome.

“Come on, cariña. Where’s that smile?” He turns to me, slightly ducking his head toward me with a good smirk, his eyes so loving.

Golden Fang . . .

My thighs still burn with desire for him.

Okay . . .

He manages to make me puff out a smile. And although we’re gonna die in the gloom, there’s something comforting about this day. In retrospect, I realize I hadn’t appreciated even one in years.

The jet enters Quamire atmosphere, Jade shouting, *Decrease speed, entering Quamire atmosphere, decrease speed.*

We’ll pull the levers at 2670 feet, full thrusts, all engines.

I *mic*, “Jade, all engines’ reactors to 90°. Kilian, engines eight and nine, face down inclined at twenty-five. Same for engines three and four.”

“Here we go.”

The force of gravity is crushing my bones to my seat, my lungs partially trapping my breath.

My concentration is transfixed on the shaky pad as we enter the atmosphere.

I’m waiting for the altimeter to point at 2670 to lever all handles, and with a shuddered sigh crashing inside my helmet, I grate, “Kilian, now.”

With the reactors now facing down, the jet suddenly jerks, adding so much pressure on our bones as it fights its own speed, dangerously nearing Quamire soil.

Brace.

Brace.

My hand is squeezed, and as I look up, Kilian's facing me. I can see his eyes, the frame of his visor neon-illuminated.

And then his voice over the channel. "Everything's going to be okay . . ."

I'm breathing like a chainsaw, and I've got to stay focused, for this handle needs to remain low.

Engines three and eight spit their last before turning and derailing into nothing.

Soon, engine nine defects, and just as we needed it the most, engine eight coughs, allowing the hard fire air to grind against it.

I squeeze Kilian's hand in return.

It's not gonna be okay.

"Kilian!"

"Spades, breathe . . ."

And across the tin lifting, the smell of smoke and heat swelling the windshield, I hear what sounds like a lullaby.

"You are my flesh, my blood," he whispers, eyes facing the windshield, straightening his gaze on the impact location.

"Kilian . . . stop."

"Little wolf, trust these words when I say." His voice is measured, a growl behind his consonants, chanting a death battle. "Watch the wolves . . ."

"We've got this," I say, refraining from letting my tears drop.

". . . Enter the night. Watch them breach into the light."

"Kilian!" I cry, my fear screaming for a sudden church call. I'm heading back into the tunnel for my soul to burn, and I'm not quite ready for that yet . . .

Fuck!

His clenching hand won't let me be. It tightens firmly around my knuckles.

“Breathe, little wolf. Breathe.”

**CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE**

“RED CROTAL, SEND A RESCUE TEAM,” I HEAR.

It’s Kilian.

I can tell he’s struggling to simultaneously talk and breathe.

“Golden Fang! Fuck, where were you?” Red Crotal must hear it, too. “I’m sorry, Alpha. I was out of line.”

There is a spitting sound, followed by a cough and then a grated hiss, “Send a rescue team ASAP. Two people in urgent need of medical care.”

“Alpha, your vitals?”

“Breathing, standing. Hurry.”

“Location?”

“Shit. Ehm . . . Quamire Moon, dark side, latitude, 0.68 N, 23.43 E.”

“Received.”

I open my eyes, and everything is ghostly blurry due to the steam and Quamire’s forty-five-degree temperature.

Geysers are fizzing all around. I try opening my eyes, but I can’t distinguish between the sky and my visor. Everything is darkly glassy.

There’s warmth next to me . . .

I hear Golden Fang’s cussing followed by some metallic sound as if pulling on the hem of torn steel, perhaps the fuselage.

Again, that breathing warmth. Hataro must be lying next to me.

He's all very snuggly.

And I chuckle. We're fucking alive.

But somehow, when I try to laugh, it's—

“Spades!”

I'm choking, my visor turning red as I spill out my bloodied guts.

“MyUrglk vi.” I try saying my visor is cracked, but all that comes out is a gurgle. I think the atmosphere is melting my lungs or something . . .

“Shit!” Kilian is panicking, and this is the first time I've actually seen him like that.

I feel like I'm on a boat being rocked, but I know I'm on the ground.

It feels so good . . .

Kilian is trying to find the crack, but it's so dark it's like searching for a needle in a haystack.

I manage to clear my throat enough to mumble, “Kilian, it's okay.”

He's holding my head, an apparent grip that's both frustrated not to be able to remove it and about the result if he ever did.

His eyes are twisting and turning, his chin following a slope from my blurred visor, which looks more like a mini hammam than a 3200-*histan* super-military gear.

“Spades, minimize your breaths.”

A ten-second silence follows.

My neck finds enough strength to turn to the left. I can hardly distinguish Kilian. I think he's sitting, legs gathered, hands dangling over solid kneecaps. Okay, okay . . . I can't tell whether those are solid kneecaps. The only reason I know is that I've seen them before . . .

By the strength of my father's bones, I lift my head to where Kilian is staring. In the distance is a silhouette of a smashed tin can smoking like a bonfire. I can't . . . not one part of my body can withstand a muscle contraction. Immediately, my head drops back onto the rock.

"We're gonna swap helmets, beautiful. Now, hold your breath." Kilian's panting like he's got two paper bags for lungs.

The thought makes me gag a little because mine must look like gooey, squished gum.

"Kilian. It's good. I've been ready for a while."

"Girl, you'll tell me your issues later. Right now, I don't want to solve them, and to be quite frank, I don't really care!"

He takes a significant intake of air, his skin beginning to burn from the acid suspended in the air.

He removes my headgear, his eyes widening at my revealing sight.

I must be pretty to look at . . .

His helmet is shoved onto my head, and mine is placed onto his.

"The leak is bigger than I thought." Kilian is trailing a finger over the visor's glass, trying to find the source of our suffering. "I can't find the dent!"

"We're just going to lay down for a while, minimize our movement. Okay, pretty wolf?" he murmurs in a wild elegance only seasoned warriors possess.

The way he folds his hand over mine. It's layered with fear. Overprotectiveness . . .

I know what he's doing.

If there is one person with an appetite for destruction, it's me.

While removing my helmet, I realize my shifterguard is no longer there . . .

It doesn't matter anymore.

“Here, Alpha. Take your helmet back.”

Within a few nanoseconds, Kilian switches from angelic to cranky. “Put it on. Now!”

But I don't.

I'm sick and tired of this. I'm constantly shown what I can't have.

Kilian opened my eyes wide, making me see the light for the first time. And the fight to keep this light is too much for me. I can't sustain it.

Nobody wants to see me keep it.

“Spades, it's time to push things forward.”

I swallow the lump that bulged dryly in my throat.

“Please, Spades. Fight . . .”

I've become an outcast, some might say a space junkie, and a broken pilot without a good backbone, which seems rather apt right now.

At first, it started out, “Wren, take your medication. Just calm down.” to “Spades, I don't have time to debrief mission AQ8. And at least, make yourself scarce when taking those.”

Who cares . . .

I'm so out of touch with everything that this space trip was more a form of escapism than a life-changing revelation.

Then . . . it's not entirely true.

This spark of hope, how Kilian ignites my bones.

Hataro, how he looks up to the man.

And that creed, *watch the wolves* . . .

Astarix Pack doesn't even have a creed or a motto of any sort.

Kilian carries his heart on his sleeves like no other man.

He's one of those romantic types I usually run from. The thing is, it's so pure and genuine that I'm left to reflect on how cold my world was until now. I can testify men on the base are square-minded and veritable gaslighters . . .

They call him by his name. They care for him. He doesn't even know how to behave like an alpha. It's as if he grew up without one . . .

It was nice experiencing this. This laidback approach, it's a change from my military upbringing.

"Stubborn girl!" Kilian shouts, retrieving his helmet once more.

There is reddening in his eyes. As he quickens to put my helmet back, a tear falls.

Kilian, don't you know? Men don't cry.

"You don't need to be the brave one each time," he says.

My voice is no more than a murmur. It hurts so much to speak. "Kilian, I barely know you."

"We were close, Spades." The grate of his voice shakes me so much it hurts.

I was close to a faction leader? "Close like how?"

My chuckle goes rogue from this heresy before it embrangles in another choke.

"Spades, stop talking, I beg you."

A hand wraps over mine and powerfully holds it, Kilian then bringing this clasp against his chest.

Silence dwells between us. Heartbeats. I take these in as they wave across his chest to my hand. Strong heartbeats . . . one . . . two . . . fifteen . . .

Soon, a timid husky note I've never picked up before slivers darkly across his gentle whispers. "Your pack and mine used to have strong ties, strong enough to merge as one and be led by two alphas. My uncle and your father. The Jade and the Sand Rose Pack once howled at the same moons, side by side."

“There’s no such thing as two alphas. Seems you’re breathing in the foul air faster than me,” I tease.

He breathes out a simper, hardly graspable but furiously sardonic.

“We used to play in an underground river, now long gone. Swim in the waters, always together. And our wolves spoke.”

“Kilian, I wish your tales were true.” *Cough! Cough!* “But I was raised in Pallamir. You’ve met my father . . .”

Kilian’s clenched hand hardens, so much so that my numbing self remembers what pain feels.

“Your father, Spades, clamped a bloodied hand around my small leg and begged me to protect you no matter what before dying.”

My heart . . . its rate is increasing. It’s a struggle to breathe, my vision tarnishing from oxygen too scarce to keep it pumping.

“Spades! I screamed for your name and ran after you. My legs could no longer carry me; shifting into a pup wouldn’t change a thing. Do you know what it feels like to run over a hundred bodies to reach for you? To reach this little girl, the sole survivor of the Jade Pack taken as a trophy? To howl like a mutt as a shuttle left with you for some unknown skies? And fuck did I howl that day.”

“I don’t want”—*cough*—“to hear anymore.”

“It’s the truth.”

“O-kay . . .”

“Spades, I’ve been looking for you ever since!”

What is that in the sky? That’s one bright light we’ve got here. Is this an angel?

“I’ll tell you what it feels like.” Everything is becoming strangely effortless.

“What?” Kilian squeezes his folded hand over mine so much that my blood is at a standstill.

I breathe slowly. My mind is spinning in a drowsy circle . . . as if streaming down a galaxy, Kilian . . .

“To fly in the sky. It’s so quiet there . . .” Perhaps I am hallucinating, but I’ve never been so in touch with someone. It’s like Kilian sings my dreams to me . . . and I never even told him about them. I want his story to be true. But sadly, I already have my own. And those are not intertwined . . .

“I don’t want the sun to burn without you, Spades.”

“It’s o-kay. The-re are ma-ny m-ore . . .” Sleep . . . sleep is calling.

“More what?”

I can’t feel him anymore. Only his faraway voice, so far . . . makes me wary of his presence.

For him, I have perhaps a few more breaths in me, perhaps a few seconds . . . “There’s mo-re . . . time a-fter this.” I cough blood, clearing my throat for more words. “You ju-st need to r-
e-move . . . your helmet . . . an-d ho-ld . . . my hand . . .” Yes, he just needs to hold my hand.

“The party’s over.”

Our eyes widen at a voice that is not Hataro’s.

“Take them!”

“All of them?”

“No, leave the dying one.”

“I want those two.”

“Right, boss.”

A strength alien to me erupts in me, enough to mumble, “Ra-yn?”

“Spades, I told you. I won’t let you go.”

Kilian’s chest pounds against mine, and his arm slides down my thigh to reach for his pistol strapped to his waist.

Kilian!

My alpha falls unconscious on me. “Rayn, ple-ase list-en to me. Kilian needs hel-p.”

“I’ll let King Daryl decide on his ‘medical’ treatment. He’s lucky he tasted the crook of my gun and not its shot!”

“King . . . Da-ryl?” I try to lift myself, but my chest is burning. And as I wheeze in my crawl, everything turns black . . .

I’ll crush your bones and suck your splurting heart tubes, quench on your guts!

“Keep your wolf inside you, Spades!”

What interest this dying vessel has for you!

“You can’t shift here, Spades. Hold your wolf! It’s an order.”

Orders are for servants.

“Stay back!”

Are you scared of a wolfman with a growl more powerful than yours?

“Spades, hold Zombie!”

Zap!

There is a coolness in my brain and a feeling of release.

I’m dying . . .

Beautiful universe, spirals of blues, clouds vaporous, wavering their brumes, celestial light . . . fast-forwarding in a rush of stars. A flash of fire sweeps over my vision. And I cry.

A burnt-colored planet coated with ochre sand levitates before me. . . . Galathena Gorgeous Galathena. There’s a howl, its echo traveling through this space I breathed for. And a voice, familiar yet never heard, penetrates me whole.

As a wolf, I have been tortured and chained for too long . . .

Human, my name has never been Zombie.

It is Tar, and I am free.

Tar, stay.

Stay with me . . .

Tar.

I'm sorry.

Hopelessness . . . dread . . . Emptiness . . . For failing you.
Please fight!

I'm failing her.

I disgust myself.

A useless being incapable of listening to the cries of her wolf, a wounded soul, to identify its suffering. The broken one was never her . . . it was me. My inability to keep her safe.

I've failed every single person and wolf.

Fright thrusts into me, and soon, a nightmarish void sucks me in its endless vacuum. I want to shout my rage. Her warmth . . . Tar's warmth. It detaches from me like my veins are being stripped off my exposed bloodied flesh.

Tar! I cry and whimper, but my tears won't flood out from me. Frustration clads me. I'm burning from anger, from my own misery orbiting wildly around me. It won't stop. And it grows ever faster. I want to shout. I can't even voice anything.

I can't process what is happening. My brain feels like it's been microwaved and splattered against my skull . . . Yet, I can think. Align words in my head . . .

I don't understand.

And everything is so dark . . . Kilian . . .

There is a river flowing in an underground cave. It shines a rumor made of children's laughs.

If one enters this crack, feet soon trudge on white sand, its bank leading to the purest of waters. An eternal spring like no other.

“Ina, play with me . . .”

**CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR**

HELL'S PIT, GALATHENA (ENEMY ZONE)

ACROSS THE DIM CELL, SPADES' BODY LAYS MOTIONLESS. HER lifeless eyes stare at something the little wolf will never see again.

Sitting against the wall, I feel my cold, sad ass going numb, but not as much as my shackled wrists securely placed above my head. The more I twist these, the more my skin burns from an electric current. Crystal plasma ...

I stay transfixed on her bloodied forehead. And something cracks in my mouth, anger taking over my wielded teeth.

At the end of the day, what am I left with? A dead girl? A dead heart?

Oh, I'll tell you what it is—it's a dead future I'll make them pay, my fists already balling at the thought of it.

Not only for the laser hole drilled between her eyes but also for how they dropped my girl's dead body as if it was trash, allowing her head to smash against the metal grate floor unperturbed.

Fuck.

A flood of shudders washes over me, emotions violently spasming across my chest. I've lost.

Everything.

“Kilian, you need to relax,” this Rayn had said, injecting me with a kind of sedative, perhaps thinking I could tear the

place apart.

I hardly blink. I can't. There's too much water in my eyes. If I close them, my weakness will be evident.

Ina . . . She's bound. I take a look around, feeling a shade disoriented. *Why would they place restraints on a dead girl?*

"Kilian, like your bracelets? Hope so, 'cuz you're gonna keep them for a while . . ."

"I hope these manacles are deeply hinged to the wall for your sake!"

"You're funny." It's this Rayn guy again. He's cowardly standing behind the radiating bars of this wretched guardroom.

He's got my gun in his hands, eyes redder than blood, cheeks wet with depressive tears. I'd like to kill this motherfucker neat and put an end to his psycho-born sufferings. No, I'm not that nice kind of guy . . .

Blood and I . . . we've got history. But I'm at the stage where I'm considering this whole shitshow as exposure therapy, Rayn, here, being the perfect stimulus. I just want to soak my paws in the crimson waterfalls of his throat and let his main arteries paint my fur red.

Fuck, I'll kill him.

I'll kill him . . .

"Mmmh."

My eyes put in a burst of speed toward the sound of a crazy resurrection. By the goddess Luna, whatever he injected into me, must be some next-level shit . . . I'm spacing out. And I never do when it comes to tranquilizers. I squint to the slow motions of a girl I thought was lost in limbo, staring at fingers slowly waving against the floor, awaking from the . . . dead.

My chest thuds.

My stoked mind doesn't understand.

I don't know if my lips tremble or my eyes mist up first.

"Are we on the Demeter?"

“Spades!” The freaking wolf’s a cat. She’s got lives in stock!

She picks herself up, unbound, except for those cuffs tying her wrists and ankles together.

“Girl, you got me worried for a minute,” I try to say casually.

That hole in her forehead is—I track up the bridge of Spades’s nose. Twice, as a matter of fact, positioning my gaze for the direct hit between her eyebrows . . . it was real! The number of unanswered questions I have is staggering.

“What is it, wolf? Is this new to you?” Rayn struts his stuff, a touch bemused as if he held the key to the universe’s secrets. “Galathenans can be so primitive.”

He’s right. He has no idea how primal I’m about to get.

Spades rapidly finds her bearings, her eyes quick to shimmer liquid as she gasps.

To this, Life of the Party doesn’t miss an opportunity to shine and goes mimicking her small cry, not forgetting to sound an overrated cackle behind his jest. He’s overdoing it somewhat, and it makes me cringe. El Cheapo is bad at intimidation tactics, leaving much to be desired . . .

“Oh! Wren. Are you surprised?” He feigns a snowflaking voice, making her face frizzle in panic.

She knows something I obviously don’t.

My wolf growl slips across my lips.

He sensed it. Across the beaming poles, I catch his hand, enlacing what I can guess is the black rubber hilt of a combat dagger. “Maybe I should check if you’re as immortal as Spades . . .” Spawning a cancer-inducing snigger, he swings around to stare intensely at me, the now-confirmed knife dragging out of its leg-strapped sheath.

I narrow my gaze and release a gritted blow.

Spades’ gaze on me doesn’t help, her hand pawing toward me not helping, but her voice, though . . . “Kilian, don’t bite

back,” she whispers from across the room.

I wish I had gotten over my aversion to knives. I inhale deeply, shaking off the vision of my brother’s butchered stomach.

That’s the sharpness of a black *nimorium oxide* blade. It’s got a lethally toothed edge . . . He strikes the closest energy-fueled pole to him, and soon, the foul egg odor of sulfur follows as crackles and sizzles erupt from this wrong blend of iron crystal in fusion with that weapon. I turn my head away, cackles following my spin.

“What is it? Not fond of knives? Come on . . . I thought you were the real deal. I’m so disappointed.”

I can’t show fear to this bastard. Even one against a hundred, even shackled and restrained or wounded. It’s going to take a lot more than that to get me down.

Although between you and me, the situation could be much better.

Rayn hasn’t moved. He may be waiting for the drugs in me to kick in. Here’s the thing, they never seem to have the slightest effect on me. I’m my doc’s worst nightmare, left to bear the brunt of the pain, no matter the stitch.

He’s still there, standing stiff like a perv behind neon-yellow strips, beaming up to the ceiling. I can only guess we’re in an underground base somewhere. Only Rayn’s sly eyes darkly motion as he cocks his head, like a vicious Hydranite, his dear knife well in sight.

“Don’t touch him, Wren.”

That tongue of his, I wouldn’t be half surprised if it was forked.

“Fuck off,” she snarls.

Tucked snugly against the wall, she rises with difficulty, moaning from a pain I can only imagine is coming from her head by how she cradles it.

“Anything broken?” I lance.

She rubs her neck and flashes some smirking eyes at me. "I'm good."

The querida's happy? But about what? I watch her every move under the ceiling's blue LED lights, deathly blanketing our cell. They glow softly, basking on her enlivened skin. Not perfect skin. Experienced skin . . . the scars that make her, ones my finger have touched, traced, tracked . . . her lines are beacons that carry my lips to her lips . . . I blink hard. And again, harder, a possible concussion taking over me.

Pushing herself on arms too weak not to oscillate, Spades still manages to take in all this incandescent light, and I think I'm hallucinating when she musters the strength to smile at me.

That smile. I sigh at it; mine struggles to curve in response. My addled brain is at sea. The only time we die is the first time . . . that I know.

Life.

There's a bulge in my throat, and a low grunt of mixed pain and relief stems from it. My eyes bow at her. Every inch of my sore body does, my soul splitting at the seams. Of all the feelings space bears, alive and moving, nothing is bred that is stronger than my love for her. Several breaths wrestle to stay tame within me. A deep sense of gratitude infects me all over. The wince crossing my face I can't control but the crying, that I can.

If she had died . . . I would have found a way to hunt down every single one of these scumbags and then slowly kill them.

"Kilian, are you okay?" Tethered, she crawls and hops toward me.

I inhale deeply at her touch, my silent mouth unprepared to shape words of fucking thankfulness.

"Kilian, the Astarix Pack is ruthless with traitors," her voice cracks.

As her joined hands pass over my chest, they open like butterfly wings upon reaching my face. Probing my bones,

caressing me under my eyes, they bring my head to hers for a kiss I thought I'd never get to experience again.

"I thought you died," I say. This time, I can't harness the quiver that shakes my tongue.

My head drops at her touch as she cups my cheeks, and I shut my eyes, sealing this liquid salt that wants to come out. Savoring her warm softness, taking in her breathing voice, I'm allowed respite, a second of it worth my life. Nothing else matters.

"What now, Alpha?"

"We put our best foot forward, darling."

"They're going to execute us."

"No."

"Why?"

"I have a tracker chip under my skin," I whisper faintly; it's barely audible on her lips. The last thing I want is *Lame Brayn* to chop my arm off.

"Kilian, something happened inside me."

"Sure did, girl. It's called a laser shot."

"No," she adds, focusing her glare to the side.

"Spades, move back," Rayn hollers. "And pull yourself up against the wall!" He's just standing there, scowling between the whirring bars.

I pinch my lips when she stares daggers at him. There's this strong desire for Spades to perhaps play it low, but it's not even worthy of hope.

"Hey, Rayn. Why don't you give yourself a try and suck your own dick?"

I can't avoid a weird dismissive head shake to what Spades just spat at his face . . . and I'm not going to allude to my shy exhale that's disguising a nervous laugh.

Rayn flicks his attention to me, and I've never felt so honored. "What is it, Kilian? What is so funny? Come on,

share!” The glower he shoots at me is not as vile as mine.

This buffoon scoffs at it, arches a brow I could slap the bitch out of, and moves closer to a face lock pad. As I spy him scanning his eye, a small smile plays across my face. I’m barely faking it. Truth is, if I was alone, I’d be quite content. It’d be the opportunity I was waiting for to break his snotty nose. But there is a little issue—I am not alone. Spades is here in the middle. And she’s not what I call a tight-lipped lass. My muscles tense.

He’s coming for a hello . . . My legs wrap around Spades’ petite waist, and the girl is fast to hunker her arms around my neck.

I cloak my adoration for her into a feathery murmur and chant it in her ear, “Stay calm, little wolf. He’s just boasting.”

I can smell her fear, and Spades rarely reeks of it.

An artificial feminine voice emits from the control pad, *Authorization pending*.

Drawing a breath, Rayn stashes *my* gun behind his belt and pivots on the spot, chewing on his nails. Below his curved fingers, a dagger is hitched flat in his palm . . . Of course, it’s just a question of seconds before Chatterbox begins spewing his monologue. Ah, here we go. Another round of self-advertisement.

“Is it the fact that we took your planet, your resources? Or that we stole your identity and everything else that made you? Mmmh, maybe a little bit of everything, no? What do you say? There’s nothing easier than destabilizing an underdeveloped planet. Schemes are more difficult to identify, technology isn’t sped up fast enough to counter the threat. It’s sad, really . . .” the jerk snots.

There’s a rush of supercharged breath I free. This guy. He’s got issues, like the real mummy ones. “Hey, you seem to be the guy that never gets the girl, am I right?”

Man, I think that hit him in the guts. Rayn brushes his scalp; he’s working on his feelings, probably working on reigning in his frustration. But he’s not succeeding. He drops

his head low, eyes surfing morbidly up toward me. And when they still on mine, he grins, thirty-two teeth—I'm about sure one is rotting somewhere—glinting at me.

Authorization granted.

Perhaps, I should have just whistled out a tune because Spades' clasped hands harden around my neck. As our cell's bars dissolve, the piece of shit steps forward. I challenge Rayn's stare. I'm feeling some kind of retaliation on my way, and my jaws wield together at once.

“Get off me, Spades!” I warn, my leg desperately shoving her to the side. “Grnf!” *My jaw! Okay. He's got bones . . .*

“You liked that? It's called a knee-strike or as I like to call it, a knee-pounding.”

I nod my gods damn pain away, not forgetting to spit a little blood at his feet.

With my thigh belting Spades extra tight against the wall, I lift my head and give him a bloody death glare. *Maldita la puta mierda . . .* is the genuine response I feel right now!

“You know what else I'm about to pound now?” Rayn nudges his boots against my now other retracting leg, my breathing furiously increasing.

Ina . . .

**CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE**

I'VE GOT A BAD FEELING.

Spades feels it, too. Clinging to my arm, she hurdles against my shoulder and pushes against me as if trying to absorb herself. I wish she could.

I keep glancing at the exit, feeling the goddess could be on my side . . . Indeed, the sharpest tool in the room forgot to reactivate the cell bars, throwing this idiot straight into Dumbass Dom.

Rayn drags his filthy boots toward her and stops a mere inch from her trembling body.

She's quaking. Her chin tucked deep in the crook of my neck, hunched, trying to make herself as small as possible. This fucker already had a go at her, I can tell. The bruises on her neck . . .

"I'll show you who's the man without the girl."

"Don't touch her!" I thrust against my chains, my hands may be cuffed against the wall, but I still have legs. They scurry enough to make Rayn fumble.

The guy stumbles with a hissing grunt, and as soon as he finds his balance, he flaunts his knife at us. "You want a taste of this?" Stooping over me, Rayn begins dancing the blade along my neck, exhibiting teeth I'll be more than delighted to break. "Stupid Alpha, wrestle all you want. Those shackles are charged with anti-shifter matter," he sneers, bringing his filthy breath near my ear. "Look at you . . . You just can't help having that condescending gaze, no matter how close you are

to death. Like you're there, in the moment . . ." There's sarcasm at work here, but it's having a hard time expressing itself. Rayn seems so serious; it's like he's hitting at me. "Memorizing every line of my face to haunt me. You know, when you'll be no more than a dead bag of flesh!" The psycho cackles.

The guy's a freak.

And Spades' trembling lip tells me she just discovered a whole new aspect of this screwball's personality.

As it turns out, Hataro wasn't the only one playing double games.

"It's okay . . . It's okay," she mewls empathetically.

The one who needs comfort is her, not me.

In one motion, Rayn grabs her by the hair and clings to her. "Such soft skin, Wren. My sweet disaster, leaving me in the cold, cold rain." The knife is dangerously drifting down her cheek. I'll stab him . . .

Hard.

I slam my gaze to the ground, feeling the pressure build in my chest.

Spades is sensing something I'm not. Because when I dare look up again, she's clamping both hands on Rayn's wrist, keeping it at a distance from her, and then, by the way she anxiously breathes out, "I'll do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt him!" I die inside.

The dove may not know this, but she just shot us both in our feet. He's going to try to break me through her. I can feel it.

"Wren, I've been neglecting you, and I'm sorry," he whispers down her throat, a fucking hand slinking around her thigh.

He can't do that.

She doesn't fucking want it!

The cell is open. Someone will come.

“Stop!”

“What is it, Kilian? It’s just my claim. She’s mine, and I’m reminding her who’s in charge,” he sneers, slimily kissing her forehead, all eyes on me.

The lad could have been an acceptable mate, but he’s got that yuck factor that makes him a poor choice. And that last detail cannot be more rooted in truth.

I follow his hand, which will be the first thing I rip off whenever the opportunity arises. It’s gliding under the rag they’ve dressed us in. They’re no more than oversized white gowns made of unnaturally thick neoprene, and that’s it. We’re naked like worms, and if he or his coffin-dodger king think it makes me feel vulnerable, they need medical attention.

Still . . . I could advise him to contact his paramedics as soon as possible, but I won’t do that. Nothing beats the thrill of the unexpected. And I want to see his wild stupid eyes when —

“Rahhh!”

“What’s the matter, Alpha Zion . . .” this brainsick chortles, firmly fixing her waist against him. “I mean, Alpha Kilian. Sorry.” Then, his stinking lips go sullyng her own evading ones. “What’s not to like about shows like this?”

I’ll destroy him. That, on the other hand, won’t be a surprise.

He’s already dead. He just doesn’t know it.

The gap between her teeth widens when he chuckles, “Are you warm for me, Spades? You want me to heat you up?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I insist.”

This messed-up situation has me roaring, “Get off her,” to then uncontrollably spit-fuse, “Fffu-uck!” as I bang my head so many times against the wall, it’s deadening.

“I’ll show you how Spades likes it.” He then nips at her chin, forcibly staring at me. “What do you think of a little

demonstration, Spades?”

“It’s okay, Rayn. Let’s keep things *adult* here, okay.”
Spades is shaking again.

Her pills . . .

“Adult? Spades! Are you ill?” he darkly jokes, pinching her ass with a perversive hand I could fucking flame-torch.

“Turn around,” he orders.

My throat feels tight.

“No, it’s okay,” her fragile mouth mutters.

“*Turn the fuck around!*”

I grunt from rage. In a hammering motion, the bastard strikes her cheek with force and pins her against the wall.

Something splits inside me when she silently mouths to me, “Close your eyes, Kilian.”

Seeing a tear course down her cheek, I feel one fall down my own.

“Yes. That’s it. See, Spades, I knew you missed me.” He unzips and pulls out his cock.

“Pull all you want, Kilian. Those chains are solid.”

Rule number one: don’t listen to anyone telling you what you can’t do.

Rule number two: do the exact opposite.

Come on!

Pull!

“Kilian, you should watch. Take notes and all,” this sicko croons at me.

I won’t. I can’t.

There is not one part of my body that isn’t working. My muscles are overstrained. My veins stretched out as if they might burst at any moment. I’m giving it my very best.

Clunk!

Shack!

“Kilian!”

My head brushes against Spades’ belly, breathing new life into her safety as I stroll through, my eyes fixed on my prey. It’s not clear whether this is product testing, which I hope for their sake it is, because I’ve just proven how ineffective these shackles are at containing a furious, vengeful wolf, and boy, am I vengeful.

My paws stalk him in a black-and-white vision as he crawls back on all fours.

I won’t give him a chance to shift.

“Argh!” With my claws on his chest, I scrutinize this sicko.

Soon, Spades joins me.

Seems my girl needs closure. “Shhh, Rayn,” she whispers, a hand pressing against his mouth.

I’ll give it to her.

As I said, his hand would be the first limb I’d rip off.

“Arsh!”

Time to shut him up for good.

Watching her little body shaking, I see the power she possesses over me, no matter how defenseless or hurt she is. She’s stronger than I shall ever be. The ability to wink at me in the face of horror and adversity speaks volumes about her resilience.

This woman . . .

My woman.

“Kilian, you’re a dead man!” this pig grunt-muffles.

I gnaw at his jewels and tear his entire nutsack away. I throw the pocket of flesh against the wall. Soon, a fountain of blood spurts out between his thighs.

I could let him bleed to death, oozing his sickening fluids out of his bitten-out core.

But no.

I'm going to remove him from this world for the emptiness I found in Spades' eyes a moment ago.

I cage his crying head between my jaws and growl for Spades to remove her hand from his mouth.

My jaws close as I let her arm slip between my teeth.

The crunch and sound of flesh and tendon rupturing are so internally satisfying that my tail wags.

Zap!

Zap!

There is a scuffle at the far end of the basement, and laser beams are starting to strike the cell from the other side of the corridor.

“Kilian . . .”

I turn to face Spades.

“Seems like fate doesn't want me to live, no matter how hard I try,” she chuckles, blood lining her chin.

My eyes flow down her hips. There's a rift wide enough to pass a hand through!

I rush toward her, her fingers clasping my fur as I help her down to the floor.

I shift at once.

“I don't know why. But I was ready to follow you wherever that was.”

“Spades!”

**CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX**

“SPADES!” I SHAKE HER, TAPPING HER CHEEK UNTIL I SLAP her. I’m fucking hating myself, but the bird won’t wake up! Her body . . . Seeing her like this. I never realized how small she was. How vulnerable. “Spades. Hey, wake up, querida.”

I can’t hold her without making her tremble, riling to something I don’t want to face. I hug her, trying to tame this fear. This damn fear that’s *shaking me up*. I should react to feet running on asphalt, getting closer, gritting the ground harder, the stomps multiplying. I should turn at the sound of hushed voices and respond to the lasers blasting above my head. But my senses are halving into numbness. Dissolving down my cheeks to fall into her beautiful amber-colored hair.

“Sorry, I was stuck in traffic!”

My dead eyes spring to life to see Nathair. I drift my gaze away from her. It’s a brief nod. As brief as my tears of weakness, and I thank the gods she didn’t witness them.

A fraction of Nathair’s jagged jawline turns, the adder’s wide jaw tattooed on the side of her mouth, gaping as if about to devour her nervous breath.

“The girl . . .” she mumbles before flashing her horrified eyes at me. “What happened?”

“It got ugly.” I’m trying to keep my cool, praying for the bird in my arms to have more than just two lives. My gaze slinks down to this dove in my arms. She’s hyperventilating. “We have to move and now!”

“Copy that, boss.” A toothpick inserted between sharp teeth later, Red Crotal, better known to us as Nathair, turns on her heels and scrunches her body into an offensive crouch. Her bulky, heavy machine gun she calls “Baby” comes resting on her shoulder, and soon, the sound of crystals warming up in her gunner starts whistling. “Shut your ears. Baby’s about to roar!” she cries, hurling electric mini rockets at where the bursts of lasers originate. “Your tracker isn’t on point, by the way . . . miles a life decision!” she quickly fusses between her blasts.

“Did the gammas make it?” I shout across the deafening madness.

“All except Pako, Joss, and . . .” A knee still on the ground, she pauses and stares down between her splayed thighs. It’s a flash. A split second, but it’s long enough to know she’s hurt. My heart also aches for her, and I wish I could give her time to grieve her twin. “Tanis.”

“Nathair, we need to fly,” I grunt, lifting an inanimate Spades in my arms. I still have hope for this breathing miracle.

But then I don’t want to push my luck and end up with Nathair’s shattered heart, not grieving over a brother but a cold mate.

“Need some help, stray pals?”

Nathair and I stare up at the voice we don’t recognize.

It’s a woman.

I glance over at her. The girl is beautiful, no doubt about it. She’s got a camo spacesuit open halfway, skin darker than night, and a laser sniper rifle dangling down her shoulder. It’s still smoking at the barrel. Although she’s hiding her features inside her wolf-shaped helmet, she’s most certainly the man-eater type.

I cast an eye down at Spades, noticing similarities between the two. Their bodies, personalities, and quirks. Training after training, the same language spoken by team members, same accents . . . In the end, you’re bound to blend in with your teammates—body and soul.

Pallamir must start them young.

Chimeras . . .

“What kind of help?” hisses Nathair, placing herself before me, crushing the toothpick between her teeth.

“I’m coming for Spades,” she says, bobbing her head to the left, trying to look behind our shoulders.

“Name?” I growl.

She takes a step back and immediately says, “Moon-Wrecker.”

She, on the other hand, has the qualities of an mega.

“Is this the war bed we’re supposed to be gardening in?” comes another voice.

Strobe lights from pistols are blasting up the corridor, filling the air with fizzing sounds. But the baritone voice is powerful enough to mute everything around, and I expect a twelve-by-twelve giant to ball in with it. But all I see is a sort of young boy, nineteen at best, with weasel features and green hair gelled down his scalp like wet *spinachare*.

“And you are?” I grate, my finger searing the hot trigger.

“Comet-Ripper. But you can call me Rio. And there’s another one of us, Tyrius. He’s holding the line with your wolves. I don’t wanna tattle, but a . . . ahem . . . I saw sparkles in one of your gamma’s eyes. They’ll defo overstay if that means unloading their fire together.” This dork then covers his mouth like it’s a matter of secrecy. “True love at first sight,” he sniggers.

Like I have time for matchmaking chit-chat.

“Let’s go.” I pick up Spades with grunting effort and stiffen when this revenant opens her eyes to me.

“Nara . . .” she mutters before her head drops beyond the curve of my arm.

I’m so stooped that I accompany her movement, vacillating so slightly as she numbs in my arms.

I cradle her all the more.

Spades, stay with me. Three moons of Galathena, I beg you. Please don't take her away. I swear, every Sunday, I will pay respect to the priestess, even if it kills my life and joy.

I feel a squeeze in my chest. My skin rises as water forces its way into my eyes again. My soul is wailing in desperate search of a presence that just disappeared into nothing but emptiness.

I stagger as we run. And realize I don't know where we are.

Kilian, man, buckle up!

"Red Crotal, I need a minute to adjust," I pant against my com-gear monitor.

I think I just felt what it feels like to lose a mate. I don't know if I want to laugh out of sadness or cry from happiness; Spades is still breathing in my arms.

Nathair keeps running, her voice double-downing to a murmur. "Hell's pit, Harken mountains, enemy base."

"Situation?" I swallow, spitting stale blood to the side.

"Seven jets in Harken's black canyon. Twenty minutes from here."

"The kid?"

"He's been dropped on the Demeter. Laura's with him."

I'm breathing better, although there have never been so many faces I don't trust around me.

"Retreat! Retreat!" I catch the familiar voice of one of my gammas—Arko.

We're sprinting out of the base, blasting anyone on sight.

I take a few burns on the shoulders and back, but nothing my alpha *Wereness* cannot handle.

Although Nathair humbly grumbles in silence, I know the sting she felt was harsh—her cheek bleeding from a laser that went licking her skin.

“Crystal grenade! Cover your eyes,” someone barks from behind.

Swoosh!

**CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN**

“ALPHA! READY FOR TAKEOFF WHEN YOU ARE.”

Men are running on grit or dust.

“Hurry, boys!” some odd voice says. I swear I’ve heard it somewhere before.

It’s hot. Even behind closed eyes, I can feel this big ball beaming its hate at me.

There’s the familiar sound of engines warming up. Jets . . .

The military . . .

An acute pain penetrates my stomach as I lift my eyes.

Above me, handsome Kilian breathes rapidly as I dangle from his arms. His eyes point in a particular direction, blinking madly, but not as much as this heart beating against my ear.

“Open the hatch and strap her on the floor. I think she’s in pain.”

“But, Kilian, there’s no wound . . .”

“Keep. Her. Safe. Flat. On. The. Floor.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I open my shabby eyes and attempt to map some features out of my blur. Hell.

“Hey, Ina. Remember me?” a voice rings out.

Is Ina here?

Ina is here! A spasm jolts my body for a moment.

“Easy, girl. You’re probably a little confused.”

Then there's an old-fashioned walkie-talkie sound, like those in historical movies. Galathena is poorer than I thought.

They don't stand a chance with this rubbish. Their military equipment is not outdated, it's archaic . . .

"Boys, time for takeoff. I need a shower! Don't make me wait."

I have a feeling this woman is a leader.

Kilian. There's a sudden hammering in my chest, my eyes searching frantically for my alpha boy. "Where ... What's happening? Where's Kilian?"

It still seems as if gray linen hangs over my eyes.

"Flying back to Tirlem."

"Tirlem?"

"Back to base."

"I want to stay with him."

"But you are. We're in the same jet. He's the pilot, babe."

"Kilian?" I flutter the meagerest voice I ever managed to voice until now. It's grotesque.

"Little wolf, swear you will stop dying in my arms. It's starting to—I mean only slightly beginning to destabilize me," he says, and although I can't see him, I can guess his canny smirk accompanying his voice, and gods, do I love that sound.

"I'm losing my wolves, Kilian," I babble amid an unsteady eruption of tears at the thought of Nara and her last thoughts as she said goodbye.

"For all the freedom you never had, I'll think of you when I hunt in the skies."

I don't understand. My mind is breaking. It's as if Nara wasn't talking to me but to a fellow wolf.

"She's going in and out of consciousness, Kilian. Could we increase speed?"

Two soft hands, one of a woman, are clasping my cheeks, their thumbs stroking me lightly as my head rests on her

crossed legs.

Upon contact with this kind person, another row of tears flows out.

Rayn left an indelible impression on me.

Sure did . . .

“Spades . . . it’s Spades, right? Wakey-wakey.”

Well, hello . . .

That is one cute blondie. She’s got blue eyes and a very in-your-face kind of snake tattoo slithering down her cheek, its fangs about to gnaw at her lips.

A bad little wolf . . .

And then I internally clasp my head as I die inside. Ina is beautiful, and I’m about to sob, my confidence narrowing to minus zero.

Jinx, my lunatic wolf, awakens from whatever psychosis she was in.

“Hey, sunshine,” this soldier purrs, her gaze flashing an ethereal glow.

Mate . . .

And here goes another round of fucks.

While this beauty parts her lips, her complexion goes through all the colors of the rainbow. I feel for her.

I really do because Jinx is a handful, her name fitting her like a glove. This wolf actress can mimic my slightest characteristics as a wolf, pretending to be me. It’s a drag . . .

As Jinx retracts in the cave of my mind, I scrutinize Ina for a moment.

By the time I finish examining her face, it becomes clear why Kilian is so fond of her. It’s like looking at the sun but with a glow that’s more than easy on the eyes.

Whatever word she wants to utter, it is regrettably absent. So this gorgeous girl goes for a chuckle instead. And, of course, I have to chuckle in return.

The more I stare at her, the more I want to get lost with her somewhere.

And there's nothing in this world that can remove this envy from me.

My only desire is to forget my past and grind myself against her while Kilian watches, of course.

Her transmitter buzzes. "Bloody Claw to Red Crotal, safe zone reached."

Fantastic . . .

This is not Ina.

It's. Red. Crotal.

Of course, it is. I'm not even surprised anymore. It's just one cluster fuck after the other.

Kilian's voice travels across her intercom. "What's going on at the back? All okay, girls?"

She's slow, her eyes never detaching from me, but then she brings the radio transmitter to her mouth and says, "I think we've got a situation here . . ."

PART FOUR

**CHAPTER
FORTY-EIGHT**

I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING SO BEAUTIFUL.

Dunes—waves of gold, the very color of every ember made scorching and bright—are claiming my eyes, my mind, my entire being . . .

To put it simply: it's a fucking bleeding twilight hijacking my soul, a ruby sky ravishing the horizon as if lining the back of beyond with fire.

Stunning is an understatement.

It's as if the sun is spewing magma into an ocean of glowing copper. No. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my whole life. I'm probably overdoing it, right?

Here's some context: Laura gave me some opioid agonists as soon as I woke up. Everything was going well. Every day, she came to check on me. On the Demeter, I was beginning to get my bearings. Starting to feel quite at home, if you ask me. Kilian's cabin, our little sex den . . . But after a week, the beast had to say, "It's time to go home."

We only landed this morning, and it didn't take long for drama to be around the corner, no matter where I look. Kilian thought it well to empty the contents of my last box of pills down the drain as soon as the space shuttle made its touchdown.

"Contain yourself, savage woman!" he had said, struggling to keep me within his grasp while my only desire was to rip his handsome face to shreds.

Imagine starting the day with the worst withdrawal symptoms ever. You're not able to relate? Good.

Relatable? Find Kilian. He will ruin one day but will save many more.

Anyway, Saint Kilian aside, I've been a sweaty mess since then, my mood swaying from a weird form of nostalgia to sadness to euphoria to peacefulness. There's nothing I can do. I'm just one big emotional wreck.

He and I . . . This connection, this thing we have, there's no explanation for it. It's like a newfound awareness. Every time I look into his globes of embers, they manage to tear at my darkened mind, breaching through, allowing cracks of a light—alien to me—to blind me. He's shattering me piece by piece, and I can breathe for the first time.

My mind is still learning to swim at the magnitude of this terrifying power Kilian has over me. There's a possibility in every breath he draws, a fantasy alive in every kiss on my skin, and a longing at every touch of his. Whenever he speaks, it's as if the stars align. It hasn't been long between us, yet it feels not like a lifetime but a dream.

And yet, I can tell when he's overwrought. He keeps his head away from me whenever he asks for an answer that might be uncomfortable to hear.

And he's doing it right now. "How are you feeling?"

My face buries in his shoulder, and with my lips grazing his upper arm, I say, "I'm in a good place . . ."

I know I am. I'm feeling anxious, loaded with tremors, and swathed in cold sweats, but it's the healthy kind. And for the first time, someone is helping me and cares enough that I don't feel alone anymore.

If only I could remove this angst from him, though . . .

Apparently, on that famous Rayn day, I had a seizure on the jet as we flew to the Demeter. The trip must have been trippy enough to silence Nathair, for I haven't heard from her since.

As soon as I awoke—after a five-day induced coma, cough—the first words from Kilian were, “Spades, I want to show you *something* . . .”

This, here, isn’t just *something*. *This* is how dreams are weaved. I don’t even know what to call *it* because there’s no word for it.

The only beauty I’ve ever witnessed was from space, losing my mind in colorful nebulae, marveling at galaxies spiraling their tails as they died, sucked up in black holes. Beautiful . . . and cold.

Stark and dark, just like Pallamir, like my life.

Then again, things aren’t quite the same as they used to be. As of now, at least . . .

My vision tips *sideways* as I expose the side of my neck. And the *smile* that goes with it, just as much.

There’s a hushing sound. “Loba bonita . . .” The words spilling from his five-o’clock-shadowed mouth burn my cheeks so fiercely that I wouldn’t be surprised if I incinerated on the spot.

His words trigger something . . . Mara della Morte.

Spanish.

There is still life in this dead language because a variant of it is Galathena’s . . .

Without a doubt, everything I’ve been told about this planet has been a lie. At the thought of Pallamir, I feel ill to my stomach, the taste of betrayal and deceit acidifying my hiking bile.

And here it goes again, my heart racing at a frightening speed, probably a *Mach 3*.

“Spades, you’re safe with me.”

I turn to this gritty voice that fucks me up so much I can’t get enough. Under his chin, my scalp rubs him softly, my *simper* richer than sugar.

You can't fluff me. It's diabetic-inducing for anyone watching me for too long. The fault lies with Kilian, who's been stuffing me with sweet nothings ever since we arrived in *Tirlem*.

His embrace strengthens in response to a hiccupping spasm of mine, the specter of Rayn rotting my day.

I turned out to be what I feared I'd become without my daily doses—a gold-medal wimp.

But it's okay.

Kilian is there, drinking my tears dry. He's this thin sand you knead into. This liquid silk, running across your fingers, flowing smoothly against your being. Gentle but unbreakable. A rock to hold onto. And yes, it's exactly as I'd predicted: among all the cookies in the alpha jar, Kilian is the softest.

Well . . .

Now that I think about it, not that soft.

Like all things in life, it's always a question of context. Here is a striking example.

Yes, I dare say it. Kilian's second name is Stealth. Hardened body, taut skin on dry muscle, sun-glazed complexion, long wings for eyebrows, a generous span, shielding a gaze born from a goddess of love in Pandemonium . . . All the nice hard things that make you wet, really.

And then, there is his wolf form . . .

**CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE**

I SNUGGLE DEEPER AGAINST HIM, THE THOUGHT OF HIS WOLF form making me rush a shiver only felt in mausoleums; I'm at ground zero for creepiness.

And no matter how Kilian's gathered legs cage me from the world or his arms belt around my waist, he cannot remove the wolf sitting *right* behind me.

A giant ghost with eyes the color of dark blood, a size unknown to me. One similar to Zombie, but by all means, bigger. Does that even make sense?

What caught me was Kilian's fur. It was near-white, shades of brown to reddish hues streaking down the length of his body.

The only true thing about the hearsay is that Kilian's ears were curved on the inside, like two true moon crescents, their tips kissing each other.

Joy, you were right. Kilian has the devil's ears.

He's a different breed.

Not a sick one like mine.

Just different . . .

"Say it again," I ask, my mouth clicking as I do.

I'm nervous, and I don't know why. Maybe I do. A father about to unleash hell on us, a little withdrawal, my dead wolves, Rayn, a little bit of everything . . .

This nibbler inches his way up my throat and rasps to my pleasure, "Loba bonita."

My head drops against his chest. I surrender.

I must have died on Quamire. Or I've been captured and induced into *reclusion perpetua* sleep because this relationship cannot be valid. It's—it's a supernatural experience.

Talking about experience, Kilian's ascension is slow, his teeth softly cradling my skin. I don't know how many women he's kissed in his life, but far too many for my taste.

In all cases, I'm in love.

It's stupid of me denying it any longer. It would get old to say the contrary.

I close my eyes, once more savoring the gliding lips moving up my throat. Kilian's dancing about my neck like a vampire. If only he knew how much I want to suck him dry . . .

Lips. I'm referring to lips, of course.

"You wouldn't know, pretty wolf . . ." whispers those love stampers, the tingle they induce, budding every nerve ending of my being. "I've been barely breathing . . ."

There's a hand traveling on my back.

"Almost not living . . ."

It stalls on my nape, and I moan at a forking stroke, Kilian tucking his muscular fingers deep into my locks, their grasp possessively firm.

"Hardly being . . ." he husks.

The gushes are so powerful that my head oscillates like a broken pole, my threads flagging in the wind.

But I'm held.

I'm safe.

"Without you." The back of his hand lands against my far-reaching cheek and strokes it closer, drawing my unhinged self toward him.

His eyes kiss mine, our lashes wrestling as he mouths, "Living wonder."

The breath I release is heartfelt.

It is liberating yet wrenching. And because of the latter, I hate myself for being so weak.

Chimeras do not feel. They're not supposed to.

They keep everything locked away.

It's a necessity.

Vital.

As elite warriors, we are taught to behave that way, killing our enemies with a smile, hard and cold.

But I don't want that anymore.

What I want is the hand securing my quaking chest, never to release me.

"Spades, don't cry," Kilian rasps, his talking lips brushing against mine.

He's numbing me enough that my mind doesn't hear that idiot ghost howling in my ear about how terrible I am.

His touch is a conduit for warmth, most importantly, soothing and alleviating this fuckiness in me.

"If you could see yourself beyond the physical, you would bow at your own feet," he murmurs.

One teardrop runs past my cheekbone, the wind leaving a frosting sensation in its path.

"This one belongs to me," Kilian mouths, kissing it away.

He's just so fucking sweet.

And then, at this precise moment in time, I want to protect him.

From . . . my father.

Shit.

I have to find a way to reach out to him. Tell him what is happening.

"Let's head back," he growls *toe-curlingly*.

It's stronger than me. But I can't find my words with him. All I'm left to do is navigate through these *feels* and try coming out with at least something that's nearly making sense. In this case, toe-curlingly.

I chuckle when the climb of his lips becomes a rushed glide behind my ear.

It makes me jolt forward. I roll back on my knees and pivot to face the man. His orange eyes are impishly expectant, but not as much as mine.

"For my massage, you promised me . . ." I try slipping my fingers into his messy swept-back hair.

Naturally, I can't resist sweeping it forward. Messing it ten times more, I turn him into a sexy electric-shocked-looking mutt.

And then decide to melt on his lips because I can.

"I didn't promise anything, little wolf," he fusses. But all it is really is a warm tasty croon on my tongue.

My eyes drift over the sand toward our footprints. Blown away into small mounds and crates, they seem whirling in nostalgia. Nothing ever stays . . .

And at the birth of our fading tracks, at the very bottom of the dune, is Red Crotal.

How long has she been there?

"Alpha, I—we need you. The mission in Hell's Pit was a success, but . . ." She cradles her arms, her throat flexing a dry swallow as if Kilian is about to go into wolf mode—the big bad one. "We have a hostage. He wants to speak to you, and to you alone."

**CHAPTER
FIFTY**

THE FIRST THING KILIAN DID AFTER WAKING UP WAS HEAD TO a weird-looking station. From then on, some sizzling sounds and undoubtedly exotic smells began crisping the air. That's when I realized Kilian was flaunting his questionable cooking skills, and so, here we are.

“Eat.”

There's no need for that growl, Alpha! My angsty hand flays the sheet near the suspicious dish, its weight making the mattress waver. We've been on it for a long time now. There are many reasons for this, and none are related to sleep or bedroom play. It's because of these weird-looking squares he calls fried ronatoes. Ergh . . . I wasn't even aware there was food on this barren planet.

“Can't you give me one of those protein pockets? I like those.” I hate them.

“I'm out of them . . . Spades, please eat. It's aquatic Menish. It's dead, and it won't bite.”

What the hell is aquatic Menish? It's even more suspicious now.

“Ahaha,” I chuckle as if facing a slaughterhouse, my death nearing at an unprecedented pace. It's a disaster.

“Eat.”

“Kilian, it's not that I don't li—”

“Eat.” That scowl of his.

Sitting in a crossed-leg position, a pillow hiding his nice baby-maker, Mr. Naked rests against the window beam, his eyes locked on mine, an unnerving madness to them. My lips pucker in a putrid frazzled circle. It must be the first time I want this glass to shatter behind him; for Kilian to be sucked away in the void . . .

My exhale is one of despair. There's actually a queue of these ready to be let loose.

I smile at him—fakely, of course.

Kilian isn't buying it, if the expression on his lifeless face is anything to go by. Oh, brother . . .

Okay . . . You can do this. I glance down at the black plate, its contents beautifully gemming the mattress with orange stomach-puzzling cubes. My fingers play around with them, probing one, the consistency squishy . . . I suck in my cheek.

Get comfortable, Wren, because you're going to be there for a while . . .

“Laura's fluids were really potent in nutrients. I'm full, Alpha.” I wink. Feigning satiation is tricky because I'm starving.

“Spades, you're trying too hard. And yet, you're not. I've got things to do. Eat.”

“Go, then.”

“Not before I see you eat everything on that plate.”

“Can't we pretend I ate?” The room is so suffocating.

“Eat . . . “

It's a one-sided conversation, and I'm stuck in it.

I blow on this dish, causing a cube to flip.

“Eat!”

Yes, I got you the first time!

I pinch one between my digits and drop it as soon as it sponges out some dark juice.

“I can't. I can't eat this!”

Kilian's eyes shut as if to refrain from stuffing something . . . down . . . my . . . throat. Yeah, maybe wise to gulp at least one.

“One would do? You'd be happy?”

“Spades. I'm losing patience.”

This food looks like shit. I really want to say it to Kilian's face. But I won't . . .

“Okay.”

I pick up a piece and bring it to my lips, and as I open my mouth, I pray for an earthquake, a blaring alarm, a surprise attack . . . anything.

“Good girl.”

While death-glaring at his smirking face, I dare not even touch a tooth on this poison. I simply swallow it whole. And thank the gods it's gone. It. Was. Tasteless.

“Another one.”

Fuck me.

Kilian unfolds his expanse of arms and legs, and I gasp when his thighs clamp my waist solidly. In the flash of a wrestling move, Commando Kilian drops down on the mattress, bringing me down with him.

Now sprawled over his stealthy torso and feeling a little unsure about all this, I laugh inwardly. “Hi, Alpha . . .” Blowing some of it into this space of high tension.

As I perish in his scorching eyes, fingers drift behind my ear, hooking a thread behind it. What's also drifting is another hand, cupping my bum cheek fully. That's fine with me. But this very hand pressures down on a hardened cock, and with one twitch . . . I perish, henceforth, twice.

The dog smirks coyly at me and says, “What would you like in your mouth?”

It's a trap. Don't answer, Wren!

The corner of my eye catches a blind arm roving over the bed, his gaze still dead-set on me.

A bloody orange cube comes floating before us.

“Menish food is a blessing. You want to know why?” Kilian impishly says, thrusting this piece in his mouth before vocalizing a hum of satisfaction.

“You can have them, Kilian. It looks like your fave. Take them all as a matter of fa—”

My eyes bulge at what he just stuffed in my gaping mouth. Force-feeding me, I see.

“Think of your favorite food.” As soon as he says this, a tasty piece of Ardod meat aroma floods into my mouth, the smoky notes of braze engulfing every taste bud on my tongue.

“So, how do I taste?” Kilian’s smirk is toothy, and soon, he can’t help but find his jest comic because I now have entire rows of teeth gleaming at me.

“You place too much importance on your cock,” I try flatly saying.

“I place too much importance on your ass and mouth. It’s different.”

My eyes smile and roll, and before I can jest back, my neck is clamped. I can’t say much after this. An enchanting tongue is ballading around my mouth, and so, I tragically perish thrice.

It’s beyond remedy.



IN THE END, BREAKFAST WAS QUITE ENJOYABLE, EVEN THOUGH it started off horribly, progressed mildly, and finished, yes, I admit it, deliciously.

The last bite of ronatoe hasn't finished melting on my tongue, and I slide down Mount Kilian as he rises. While he leaves me to my own devices, whatever those are, my gaze follows him to the opposite wall. Every part of this man's body should be beautified. That iron-sculpted ass, muscles carved on the side, the curve almost a shadow hinting at a forbidden desire. It's a crime to not look at it . . .

Kilian opens a big rusty metallic chest. It must be burning hot because it's collated next to a massive stack of hardware, nothing more than old junk roaring silently. My two hands paw the bed, and I tilt my head to one side for a peek. Inside this container is a pile of neatly folded black T-shirts and, besides this pile, a collection of black and gray sweatpants.

I internally snigger. Kilian follows the "simple is best" motto to the letter.

Everything is well-ironed and precisely folded.

I simmer to this control Kilian seems to need so much. No wonder when you're born in a war-wrecked world.

My . . . my . . . look at that, Wren . . .

Yeah. I see it . . . I see this hot bod crystal clear.

I don't like being left stranded, so I crawl from the bed to the coffer on all fours. As Kilian grabs a T-shirt from the pile, he capsizes everything.

"Let me help you," I pry, forcing his working wrist away and nudging him a little on the side.

"Little wolf . . ." he gasps.

I smirk at him. "Did I scare you?"

"You? You're the source of never-ending anxiety."

I chuckle. But then it trails off when I notice a frenzy of fingers motioning over his clothes.

He is nervous, over-folding them.

It's the blood. It's the kill. He doesn't like it. And he knows he's going to have to kill the enemy. Because this is the way of the alpha.

Pack before all . . .

We'd come back to his cottage after the dunes, postponing the hostage chat until the morning.

"I'll go in your place, Kilian," I say, my hand curling against his cheek.

He staggers in his crouching, holding a T-shirt in his frosted fist.

I understand his silence as a confirmation.

"I'll go," I tell him firmly, raising myself up.

As my hand leaves his cheek, he snatches it and pulls me down to his level, my ass crashing into the piles of clothes, my gaze at six o'clock. Damn, even at this angle, his attributes are more than heavily impressive.

"You're staying here," he growls, his eyes warning me with their red glow.

"You hate blood, Kilian. I'm sick of people pretending to act strong when they don't always have to."

He leans over me, a thrum that means only one thing: I trespassed on his alpha boundaries.

One hand is clenched in the fluff next to my head while the other strokes down my temple. "I'm grateful. I really am. But I need my message to spread. I need to keep my head up when I act," he says with an unexpected tremor.

He's not punishing me? I just invaded his territory and minded his business as my own.

"As an alpha, the blood is on *me*, Spades," he growls soothingly.

In the suspense, my hand thought about fussing with his hair, alleviating some tension, but the clock just stopped for me.

Burning embers rage into my eyes, and I'm soon chasing a high only his gaze procures. I wish he would let go of his commanding attitude, which feels more like a covert than anything else.

But then, the more I stare into his tiger eyes, the more I see him and the more hopeless I feel. Like the freckles spread here and there and the dots licking his pupils, streaks of gold netting his eyes as if to prevent whatever resides inside him from escaping. He is so camped on everything, starting with this strict thought process, calling me Spades all the time, like uttering my real name hurts or something . . . Perhaps it is not to break, not to show how deep inside he's *scarred* like the rest of us. And somehow, the mere fact that he could hide this brokenness hurts and infuriates me . . .

"I have a real name, Kilian. It's Wren," I say, trying to roll or do something to bring my ass out of this chest. There's nothing more ridiculous than not having a grip when it's most needed.

"Who told you that nonsense?" he laughs, grabbing my hand as he stands up.

In his pull, I huff, "My birth certificate."

"Tomorrow, I'm bringing you to the Demeter to be checked." A smile spreads across Kilian's face as he pulls up his pants. There's something sly about it.

My face crinkles. "I'm feeling good. There's no need. Promise." Gods, please, no aquarium or other cryogenic stasis bullshit.

"Each time we said your name, you had a seizure."

"No, I didn't."

"Spades, you awoke three times in a confused state."

My legs spring up, my fucking lame assertiveness dance-tiptoeing. "Excuse me?"

"You began foaming at the mouth every time I called out your name, shaking like I never want to see again." Frowning with smiling eyes—seems my character building is not pulling off the desired effect—Kilian swings his arms around my swaying waist.

In my defense, dating a huge guy is somewhat physically diminishing . . .

“I convulsed to my name? I’m Wren, Kilian.”

“This is why we had to induce you into a coma. We didn’t know how to make the seizures stop.”

“Say, ‘Wren.’”

Kilian blows out a long stream of air and says, “Wren.”

I look all around, searching for a sign, waiting for a quiver, a vibration in my bones, a brain switch gone wrong. “Ah, wait, I feel something. Ah, no. It’s just a draft.”

“Your name is not Wren, honey,” Kilian says as he glues his naked body against mine, making me tilt my chin upward to meet a very steep gaze. I guess I’m small . . .

He can believe whatever he wants. Apparently, he’s a few cards shy of a full deck . . . It goes the same for their head of medical staff.

Kilian leans a little and grunts the lowest sound ever in my ear, “I can’t wait to whisper it while you get a mouthful of me.”

I gape because he’s just too raunchy out of nowhere. I wouldn’t call it shock. It’s more this feeling of being turned on abruptly, the effect of a tequila shot at seven in the morning.

“Can you feel this?” he murmurs, pressing harder against me.

My perverted self flushes against him evermore, my pussy begging to grind against his stealthy rod.

“It needs soothing, Alpha,” I say, holding his heaviness in my grasp.

Kilian sighs in amusement. After that, he squats again, grabs the first pair of pants and tee shirt on top of the freshly folded piles, and slips them on. “I’ll join you in your sleep, don’t wait for me. There are *Harounds* in one of my space jackets if you need to get some food. Spend as much as you like.”

“Wait?”

He stops in the entryway, the steel doors sliding open wide.

“Can you tell me where I can find this food of yours?”

“There’s a market near the runway. Just follow some people. All the bridges lead to the same place.”

The door shuts.

I goggle at his leather space jacket hooked against a wall and release a blow of semi-relaxation semi-*wait, did Kilian just manipulate me with sex?*

As I change, I slip on one of Kilian’s black T-shirts and stroll to his quarters’ unique big window beam.

My gaze drifts to the left and stops at his tech, which occupies the entire wall of his room. It’s rundown, not to say ramshackle.

Kilian’s apartments are what they call pods. They are carved in the walls of this vast cavern and look like brood cells such as those found in hives, sort of like honeycombs.

They all face the same direction. Can’t say it’s a bad idea.

They get some rays of sunlight. The sun spearing into the mountain’s guts is enough to have decent daylight.

I lean against the window giving out to drones and other flying droids. Below are the jets and the airstrip.

Living here is like living in an old hangar for jets.

When you’re hiding from the enemy, things can get a little spartan, I guess.

Right, let’s go for a walk. I’m dying for something, and it’s not food . . .

I’m letting my legs take me wherever they want. To be honest, I don’t know where to go.

What I know for sure, though, is how fascinated I am by this place. I’m obsessing over the cavern’s roof to those falling rufescent towers of stalactites as they head for the ground. These are still high enough for any departing or landing jet to

avoid touching, their mineral tips adorned with crystal LEDs for visibility.

My hand slides along the corded railing . . . it's so strange. This blend of an archaic way of living and modern technology.

For the first time in my life, I catch a scent as my feet clank against the steps.

My *Wereness* isn't as suppressed as before. I bring my bare wrist forth, scrutinizing the flesh once hidden by a shifterguard. It's whiter than snow.

It feels good. My eyesight has improved, and I never knew I had issues with it.

My hearing is inducing a migraine, though. Every little talk, laugh, sliding door, falling coin, thrusting reactor, and blaring alarm . . . it's all there.

“Ouch!”

“Are you okay? I'm sorry,” says a thick voice.

I unglue myself from the rock I just bumped into and lift my eyes farther up a muscly chest. I need to take some steps back to avoid a neck snap from such an inclination.

That is one giant hulk . . .

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-ONE**

“YEAH. NO. IT’S ME. SORRY,” I BLOW, MY LUNGS TRYING TO reinflate from the collision.

This *Bruno* takes a good look at me. He furrows his brows and sort of takes a whiff. “You’re a woman.”

What’s wrong with his eyes? Cataract?

“I’m supposed to be one, although sometimes it’s hard to tell,” I chuckle.

“No. I . . . I didn’t mean to sound rude. It’s the first time I’ve met a woman who is not our doctor or zeta.”

A simper escapes me. “You’ve never seen any other women?”

He’s one big block but the very sexy kind. I don’t get it.

With a sadder hue to his eyes, this stranger overly explains, as if to get something off his chest, “All our women were poisoned by water, a nano-arsenic that only had an effect on XX genes . . .”

The lad scratches his head while his empty gaze lingers above my own.

“I don’t know why I said that. What a way to greet someone,” he sniggers uncomfortably.

I look down the runway. Behind the grizzled fence is the market with droids selling goods behind stalls. My eyes hover from one passerby to another, scanning their features.

Soon, my blood curls.

There are no women.

He massages his temple and then looks at his . . . Excuse me, is that a watch? Did I just make a massive jump in time?

“I’ve got to go.” He’s still eyeing his wrist but parts his lips as if remembering something tragic. And then his gaze slants into the distance. Is he okay?

“I’m new around here and would love a little help finding the alpha. Can you help me, please?” I try.

“Sure, princess. He’s in zone thirty-three.”

To ease my sight, he moves to the side and says, “At the end of the airstrip, there’s a fret area converted into offices and mission controls.”

Without a squint, I recognize forty huge hangars or containers, all cramped one against the other in rows, parked in one square area.

“Though, I’m unsure you should go. There’s some activity you may not want to see.”

“Why are you not with them?” I’m puzzled. He’s definitely the type any alpha would approve by *their* side.

“I’m blind. That means early retirement for me. Flash crystal grenade . . .” He laughs a little, but I can feel the prejudice behind his smile.

I grab his hand. I don’t know why; I’m not the cuddly type. It’s not just well-known, it’s legendary—the iconic ice queen at all things bonding. Yet, I grab his hand.

What slips out of my mouth is words. Real words. Not my usual ones, no. I take it upon myself to keep track of their whereabouts because most of them are foul. And these words here, they are kind strays. But certainly not mine.

As extraterrestrial as they appear, they have decided to intrude on this moment like I’m not even here . . . “Blind is just a word. Some people have sight, but it doesn’t mean they see. And you, I’ve got a feeling you see things clearer than what you think.” My lungs are blushing, and my cheeks are deflating. Maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe not!

The man removes my grip from his hand, although gently, but with a certain roughness attached to the tip of his digits. I wince a little at the thought that whatever direction my mind took, I never choose the right path. It can't be my fault when all I'm offered to take is either "the same old mistakes" or "the glorious new mistakes" roads.

"The hardest planets often have the softest cores; it's probably why these are so overly protected . . ." he says, bringing both of his hands to my face. Although his unexpected move springs out of nowhere, I allow him to touch my staggering self. He's coursing a thumb under my eyes, another under my jawline. "You know something else, girl? I've never touched beauty before, and I've met a lot of knock-outs when I was a young mutt . . ." Following his words, a cute and short chuckle goes rolling deep from his chest. It's relaxed, born from the belly. And it feels odd because I'm about to tear up. "And you might be right about my sight because, at this very moment, I'm feeling its true form." He smirks, perhaps sensing his metaphor is not that far off.

I'm unable to move, and my body is no more than a formless rock, deeply incrustated in the ground. I don't even know where my core is or if I have one. Talk about softness.

Leaving my cheeks with utmost caring strokes, he hums, "Farewell."

And while those little hums fade away with him striding forward, his words remain with me. It's a real fusion, leaving my heart molten as I try to absorb them. Processing, how I've never felt so . . .

At home. "B-ye . . ."



ALTHOUGH IT APPEARED TO BE WITHIN REACH, IT WAS A nightmare to get there.

Bridges, tunnels, many fences to navigate . . . all in all, it was quite the maze.

And here I am behind a metallic door with a big “33” painted on it, trying to silently squeeze in some fingertips in the crack and praying for the door not to scream.

There is a flow of voices coming from inside.

“Step back, it’s about to get . . . bloody.”

“Alpha, please wait. This worm crawled toward us, begging us to spare him.”

“What am I supposed to understand, Krin?” I recognize Kilian’s *baritone*.

“He insisted on speaking to you.”

I squish myself in the crack as silently and discreetly as I can.

Don’t breathe, Wren . . . Yep. That’s it.

As soon as I’m in, I crouch, smack my hands on the floor, and begin crawling like a *spidra*.

It’s a vast room, a somber one with one single hanging light. Under it, there is one chair with a person seated on it, a black mesh bag over his face. And about fifty-something men standing around, Kilian at the center facing the chair-bound man.

Upon reaching my far left, I slide up the wall and discreetly creep closer as if my toes are pushing me forward like fingers on piano keys.

“I want to see his face.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Is that “Bre—”

“Hush, Chimera. Our alpha dislikes blending women’s matters with work,” says a snake as she covers my crying mouth.

She forces us to hurdle into the penumbra. This serpent doesn’t want Kilian to know I’m here. Little bitch.

“Why don’t we go elsewhere? I smell this hostage on you. A friend? That’s another reason why I don’t want you to see this.”

Ah. Nathair is not a troublemaker.

But there’s just one problem here . . .

I am.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-TWO**

“I WANT TO SEE HIS FACE.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Krin slinks forward to reveal the identity of our captor, and I recognize a smell I want nothing to do with.

“Br—”

My ears perk at once, my sense of smell forking down an electricity rush down my spine, my gammas bobbing their heads toward the far end. It’s okay, I want to believe Spades is a mile from here. At the market. Where she’s supposed to be . . .

“Who’s there?” growls a pack member.

“It’s a simple buzz from the light bulb,” I catch at the back.

I damn hope it is.

Grabbing the bag’s hem, Krin tosses it over the lad’s neck. He’s the biggest bully of the pack, and that’s perhaps why he’ll never be my beta. But Hataro is on the Demeter, and I can’t be without one, or in this instance, the third in line . . . *Nathair; doll, why can’t you show your pretty face when needed.*

“Ta-da!” The snide grunts, it’s a psychopathic lilt that strains on the *d*.

No, I’m not a fan of Krin. Punchable to the hilt.

And fuck, I sensed it right away. It’s Spades’ dog from Pallamir.

He’s been roughed up.

My growl comes forward as well as my legs.

“You’re a dead man, Alpha!” he spits, quite literally, at my feet.

“*Hold!*” I bark.

My pack is on edge, the wave of growls that just surfed in my ears is a bloody confirmation.

“Don’t you know, wolf? I’m a ghost . . . I’m already dead.”

Threats, always threats. For years on end. Threats raised us, humming explosive lullabies as we huddled in abandoned bunkers, the apocalypse rocking us to sleep.

He sniggers as if I’m missing a huge chunk of a story. “They’re coming. It’s a matter of days.”

“They can keep trying. Let the suckers come!” I can’t lose my cool. My gammas take steps backward, maybe sensing my shifting.

I’ve got to keep my foot off the gas. He’s pushing buttons against my authority, my nails clawing from his threats.

“We’ll see about that.” The man is either suicidal or knows he’s already a dead man.

The powerful throaty growls of my men are burning into my soul.

“Untie him!” I order.

“I’m not here to fight. I’m ready for it.”

“My position as alpha would be disgraced if I killed a restrained man.”

There’s a tear slivering my ears as I fucking remove my shirt. I’m playing it rough and gruff. A few years ago, I had no idea I would be recognized as a pack leader among a bunch of survivors, orphans, and wanderers from decimated packs. But here I am, from sigma to alpha.

Krin cuts the plastic handcuffs, well-ensuring to nip his knife into the man’s flesh. “Does it hurt? I’m assuming it does. I’m sorry I don’t want to upset you too much.”

The bastard can't help overdoing it. And I'm not talking about Pallamir's scum wincing as his blood circulation returns.

As my gammas' eyes focus on me, I swallow hard. They're eagerly waiting for me to punish our surprise guest.

Taking in each of their faces, I snarl darkly at this circle they have drawn around me.

War injects bloodshed, revenge, and poison into our humanity. I can see how my people have changed from it. Desensitized . . . Unfortunately, this is how it goes. There will always be two sides to a story, which mirrors vendetta, the very essence of war.

While my father's wise words linger in my mind, I flick this dog's chin from side to side. Seems Krin wasn't too tender with him. The bridge of his nose is collapsed, a bloodied eyelid so tumefied it cannot be opened.

It's going to be a long night for me with Spades.

Maybe not.

Maybe she'll never find out . . . she doesn't need to.

"Your name," I grunt.

"Bret Kirjan, Beta of Alpha Hayden."

I swiftly round my gaze on my men, intently watching them. Hatos is panting on the spot, boring a disgruntled face, most probably his late daughter in mind. All have a stare darker than deep space will ever be.

I could do with some whiskey . . .

"Give our alpha your best!" Krin barks, kicking the chair enough for it to sway briefly on its two legs.

Soon, a strong scent emanates from the entryway, followed by muted footsteps within its shadow.

"General," growls Krin. "Why is our zeta so secretive?"

"Hold your tongue before I rip it off," Nathair impurely draws.

Krin's eyes catch mine. A frown lines his face as if he's discovered something I just became aware of.

Shit.

Nathair's got a frosted grin, and I can't blame her.

"Zeta, are you okay?" I ask, juggling my eyes from Bret to Nathair.

"Never been better," she sniggers.

Her body jerks forward. That's enough for us to take a step back as we widen our circle. Krin is the first to reach for his pistol.

"No, Krin. No need for that . . . I swear." Nathair isn't feeling it, and neither am I.

And then, I fucking see red. The shadow behind Nathair is following her footsteps.

"The Chimera!" roars Krin.

I wish he would stop flame-baiting this shitshow.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-THREE**

“KILIAN, THE PRIESTESSES WERE WRONG! SHE IS NOT THE one.” Hatos detaches himself from the group and strides forward like a fool with a laser gun aimed not at Nathair but at Spades.

“Hatos, darling, it’s really unnecessary. Spades seems to have the trigger easy . . . Just-just take some steps back, will you.”

“Hatos, back off!” I wouldn’t have sunk my claws in his shoulder if his body hadn’t resisted my pull. My one and only warning.

“Can’t you see, Kilian? We’ve allowed the hydra to enter our base!”

Next, Dead-Man-Walking Bret expresses himself without fucking permission. “Spades, King Daryl wants you dead. There’s nothing that will stop him. You need to run! He’s coming!”

To his words, all my gammas pull out their laser guns.

“Hold your fire!” My growl bites me.

Pain, furious and sharp, slices my lips as my bones and teeth slowly *Were* . . . And the iron coating my tongue can’t fuck me more than what’s happening here.

Krin slaps him in the face. “What do you mean he’s coming? He doesn’t know our location!”

The dog snarls in silence, panting, deeply staring toward the dark end. Toward Nathair.

Toward . . .

Spades.

Whatever is currently veining or flowing into my body feels as if being drenched in a tank full of ice or fire . . . I'm scorching mad.

“Shit!”

I turn to Bret, near-missing the note of panic in his voice.

I observe his body language. He stops wiggling, stops moving. The guy is sweating.

He's scared. And how he's eyeing the corner, it's not for him.

It's for Spades.

Why?

“Spades, ru—”

“*Quit talking!*” Krin headbutts our trickster, making the chair reel once again.

“Drop your gun, Chimera!” I order.

Oh, little wolf, what are you up to . . .

“This one is mine,” Spades growls, energy winding up in her gun.

The girl's not kidding. She pushes Nathair to the side and begins walking as if impermeable to future laser shots. My wolf girl's a fucking nutcase.

“Kill me. Life is only what you make it,” she says with a sly wink slanting toward me, her gun pointed at Bret. “Right, boys?” She then grins, parading her insolent teeth across the room.

“Spades, you're in trouble.” My arm instinctively rises, not to prevent the animal thrums growing in the back, but to keep my beasts at bay from her.

“No, Kilian. you are.”

Bloody harpy.

She breaches our line like she's a fucking queen, destabilizing my men and me, who just moved to give her way to her pet.

I grab her arm and shove her against me. "Quit whatever this is!"

"Alpha, play with me!" she hisses, pulling away.

My men snark out a laugh, probably recognizing a line from me . . . I'll let them.

She's a fire I can't control.

No man can.

Some take in all the sun, inhale its fire, and unscathed by dark matter, turn every moment into a trip to the moon . . . Yeah, I'd say she's one of them because she's making me sweat from her strutting in the room.

Spades has this stare, one of a conqueror. But then, she murmurs close to a muted breath, "Please," before turning to Bret.

Whatever she has in mind, it better be valid.

"Hey, Bret. How are you?"

"I'm good. You?"

"The best I've been in a long time."

"You don't look like it. You look like shit. But it makes sense. You committed treason on your own."

The way she brushes the barrel against her cheek as she mocks a moment of reflection makes me uncomfortable. I want her far from weapons. I wish I could get her away from this crap.

"How can I take a side? How can I not see this for what it is? Like Zion and Kilian . . . How King Daryl sets his moves, the mood of this war. Now, tell me something. Where are you, Bret?"

"What?"

"Where are you?"

“On 078.”

“Is this where you come from?”

“No. What are you doing, Spades?”

“I loved you like my brother.”

“Spades, what are you fucking doing?”

“I’m doing what a pack member should do.”

“Turning coats is not what I call loyalty!”

“You are the wrench of this world.” Her grin is trembling, and I shudder so lightly when it morphs into a sneer, canines honed like an *Akturian* blade.

“Spades, have you gone mad? It’s Bret. Your beta! We grew up together, for gods’ sake!”

“You condemned us all!”

A cloud of growls settles over the room. The Chimeras are there.

Not only can I hear them, I can smell them. See them, their wolf eyes shining in the dark. Looks like my guests are using my hospitality unashamedly . . .

“You have a shifterguard on you,” Spades spews, her shout of hatred bursting against the walls.

“So what?”

“Shifterguards have trackers, you piece of shit.”

Bret flicks his eyes on Krin and glares at him longer than the simple stray of an eye should. His eyes darken. When they meet the floor, he grinds out, “You’re finally going to meet your family, Ina!”

The bastard!

The white of my eyes spread as a flash of light enters Bret’s skull. The sound of the chair and its occupant hitting the floor still resounds as blood pools toward my feet.

My past immediately frosts my bones. “*Kilian, it’s just a little blood. Don’t be afraid . . . Save Ina.*” Mother . . .

The Chimera wolves, all a color of midnight smoke, eyes yellower than a newborn star, dash toward Spades. One of them snaps her jaws to Nathair as it yelps at its falling sister.

“Enough!” My roar turns into a threatening growl, forcing a silence to snuff out the brawl, the smell of urine wafting from one of my men, hinting at my authority.

I only killed one of mine once. It was needed. A gamma’s disobedience is not something an alpha can afford to overlook. The recentness of the event still haunts me.

It was either a clean death from me or my pack ripping him to shreds. Yes . . . not only is Spades my *querida*, but she’s also the promise of a brighter future. For the *prophecy* alone, my men would die for her. They believe harder than stone that she can change things for the best, and I wholeheartedly agree. Here’s another thing we agree on. Whoever gives up on hope and runs to the enemy has already died, and that gamma knew it.

“Krin, destroy this armband and burn the corpse!”

“Consider it done, Alpha.”

Spades . . . I drop and fold myself over her, holding her convulsing body. *Little wolf* . . .

“Nathair, warm up the jet! We gotta bring her to Laura immediately.”

Hold on, Ina.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-FOUR**

“IT’S WHAT WE CALL A *WOLF SPLICE*. HERE, HOLD THIS.”
Laura plasters two glass vials against my chest, freeing her hands to open a white packet.

And here I am, juggling the mini bottles like they’re on fire.

You’re an idiot, man.

It’s possible, but I’m not fond of medical stuff. The only person I find appealing in this environment is Laura and only Laura.

When I first saw those hazel eyes and plump cheeks three years ago, I would have never imagined that behind them was a talented doctor from Pallamir . . .

Iron crystal bombs were exploding, and people were terror-stricken. During the battle, I was injured by an N-54 grenade. Well, there she was that day—a true miracle that turned her coat and has saved many of my people ever since.

One of my feet leaps in terror when she pulls an extremely long medical device out of the pouch.

“A Wolf Splice, Kilian!” That again.

Laura’s pitch startles me enough I take a second step back. Honestly, I don’t like this place.

The thermal scan pad she is looking at catches my attention. Placing the medical weapon on a metallic trolley table, she enters some data on the tablet, typing like there’s no tomorrow. I don’t know what she’s doing, but the woman has some skill set. For sure, she has.

“Ah! Up it goes.”

I follow her darting gaze as it aims at Spades. Sleeping Beauty hasn't woken up yet, and I wish she would. Mhm . . . on second thought, this hyperactive darling is easier to handle as is—strapped on the table, nowhere near danger.

“What's a Wolf Splice?” Nathair's been so silent that she made herself invisible.

From where she stands, though, I'm happy to discover I'm not the only idiot in the room.

“I'll tell you what it is. Come closer.”

My leather-gloved feline leaves the dark corner she's collated against and strolls forward. If I didn't know Nathair, she'd make an impression on me, her snake tattoo, enlightened by a diopter magnifying lamp, threatening us as she leans over Spades.

My eyes align with hers.

Floating imagery waves above my little wolf's enigmatic body, replicating it perfectly. And like a floating soul, it hovers over her.

I wish I could offer Laura state-of-the-art technology. But that's all I can afford for the moment—some twenty-year-old equipment I found in a ghost spaceship.

My doc points to an energy line contouring Spades' body. “See this yellow glow. That's a wolf.” She then swirls her nutty eyes toward us, the look of a satisfied teacher to find her students struck dumb by a discovery. “Nathair, fond of the girl who tried to kill you, I see.”

The chuckles Laura releases are contagious enough that I laugh in return but not for long. This simper of mine leaves me for *Suspicionland*, my closest stroking Spades' hair in a way that is not sisterly . . .

“Mind if I take your spot, lover girl?”

“Uh?”

Indifferent to Nathair's answer, Laura gently nudges her away.

I'll need to have a word with my general; Spades is not a playground she can play in.

Laura takes one of the vials from my stupid embrace. She then takes the horrifying object she pulled out from a sterile pack earlier and inserts it into the vial's entrance to suck in its liquid. She lifts Spades', well as it is, my T-shirt and—

“Doc, easy on the girl!” My groan goes wild. With this thing that shouldn't exist, Laura thought it best to strike her in the thorax like a butcher stabs a steak!

“Kilian, Alpha *dearest*,” Laura huffs amusingly. “I couldn't have inserted this harmless needle more softly than I did.”

As much as I want to convey a sense of indifference, it's not there. The fact is, blood and other injections don't work for me.

“It's well-known that our Alpha has issues with needles,” Nathair sniggers, tilting her head, bedding her mocking quaking chest in her crossed arms like she's the new favorite comic in town.

Make fun of me. We'll see who's crying my name because there's a *spidra* in her shower.

Laura turns to the hollow-like tech hovering above Spades, two fingers turning the monitor's rotating button. “Now, look.”

Spades' replicated energy field oscillates as if shaken by electricity. “See. That's another wolf, just there!”

“It's not a secret, Laura. She has a full pack in her,” I sigh, my skin on Spades', every inch of my finger's nerves karmically blending with my woman.

Truth is, I could caress this forehead for eternity.

“Alpha love, first, it's not my point. Second of all, she doesn't have a full pack in her but two wolves. The worst part of this is that she might have had many more if you tell me she

took a bullet in the head. Regarding the one we discovered just now, well, it may be hers. And by that, I mean original.”

She straightens her long white blouse and slicks back her dark, strangely squared-off hair, which she cuts herself. “Remember all those questions I asked when she was brought in the first time, and I screamed at you because you were so glued to her it affected my ability to work? Gods, she was in a bloody state . . .” She throws me this look of sufficiency like I’m gonna take it with a smile. Carajo! I want to rip her neck off . . . She then titters oddly, muttering, “Sorry, Alpha. I didn’t want to . . . It didn’t come out the way that . . .” She’s blabbering in response to, most certainly, my glower.

I would snicker heavily about this. However, I am surfing on a different vibe right now. “Go on, Laura.”

Blowing raspberries as she lingers on her boots, she then beams up as if she saw the second coming of Luna’s daughters. “I asked you if you called her Ina before. And you said yes. And we couldn’t understand why she kept reacting to this word. The seizures and all.” Her lips clench, locking her eyes with mine as she exhales. “I think it’s got to do with the fact that just one wolf is layered over her now. Only one. Her memories are trying to push through this wolf parasite, and her mind can’t handle it.” A weak smile brushes over her pale complexion. My arm tenses when cold fingers like feathers wrap around mine. She’s always been incredibly caring. Sadly, it’s rare in our world. “Kilian, from now on, it’s going to be a bumpy road for her.”

I exhale quickly.

Laura’s words . . . they hit me with relief; relief to know Ina is in there somewhere. I knew it already, but proof is everything. There is also a part of her that occasionally erupts, hinting at this proof, making my eyes sting. And the salt this bird keeps inducing in my eyes each time this happens couldn’t blind me more than a shower of meteorites.

I inhale long and hard. Laura’s words also strike me with anger.

It's sizzling like a jet's reactor charring my cheeks. Actually, anger is overrated. Fuck, I want to kill 'em. I'd be vicious, my retribution a thousandfold. I'd hijack this wolf splice technology of theirs, stuff them with so many alien souls, bugs, and other creepers and watch them crawl in agony.

I breathe, my clinging hand wrapping over Spades' smaller one. Her warmth is unlike any I've ever felt. And I've flown near many stars.

My eyes dune over her tranquil body to land on the monitor. I stare at the screen, the lines weaving up and down as I envision her little heart.

This woman . . . So feisty, so fragile. How can one do this to a child?

How can someone do this to mine—my wolf?

The One . . . Confusion lingers but only for a beat as it melts into horror.

The thought of the priestess's prophecy comes haunting my mind without knocking at the door. I stare at my girl, my blood pressure hitting a new record high. She is the Forbidden One, the one that's not to be taken down. My naming, my orders . . . I nod in confusion, a flash of skepticism eating my hopes away. What if this is just some other random self-fulfilling prophecy bullshit!

I don't even look at Laura's insistent stare. I can see her watching me out of the corner of my eye.

"Is this really her? The girl of the prophecy?" I turn to the sudden sharpness that is Laura's voice.

She talks to me like the affair we had two years ago is still ongoing. Women and hierarchy are a game of fucks. So, imagine when you slept with one who's supposed to call you, "Alpha." There's no need to scold. I have no authority whatsoever over the women who cross my life.

While my coy gaze sticks on her, I then remember something. Hearsay, nothing much but . . . "Rumors talked about a curse."

“Rumors, my ass.” Laura turns the monitor off and, pinching her lips as doctors do before saying bad news, leans against her desk. “Back in the days when I was a med student, I got pretty . . .” She coughs like a lady who swallowed her tea the wrong way. “Close to one of the most renowned surgeons . . .” She then marks a pause and utters a low but potent, “Fuck.”

Fuck?

My nostrils flare when she wets her lips, a shade of gray gradually veiling her face as she does.

“What happened in med school?” Nathair’s on edge. But not as much as I am.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-FIVE**

MY LUNGS UNLOAD A BLOW OF IMPATIENCE, AND AS NATHAIR and I swiftly stare at each other, a feeling of impending doom rushes over my skin.

“Don’t play with our nerves. If you have something to say, say it.” I didn’t mean to sound gruff, but I’m not a small-talk kinda guy. And the slight lowering of Laura’s head suggests she got my message.

“This renowned physician wanted to know if I wanted to be part of a controversial research program.” Laura swallows harder this time.

I can’t take it anymore. I grab her tumbler, which by the smell of it, is full of coffee, and no matter how much I try to do it politely, I shove it against her, almost spilling the content on her.

“Thanks!” A throat clearing later, her thoughts finally flow out. “They were practicing research on war prisoners. I left when I saw what they were doing. It was wrong on so many levels.” She shivers as she says so, bringing the cup to her lips.

“Alpha.”

I turn to my general’s voice. She’s holding Spades’ little hand lovingly—too lovingly. “Your girl’s waking up.”

My eyes sprint to the worst storyteller in Galathena’s history. “Laura, spit it out.”

“It was about removing the wolf within a person and placing it into another convict.”

There's a silence I want to kill, a ghost of fear streaming across me.

As we take in Laura's words, several blips accompanying Spades' vitals buzz. And it's buzzing all right because that's all we can hear.

After a few seconds, both her words and our faces return to life. Like we have time . . .

"Neither the donor nor the host would survive the process. To my knowledge, only two hosts survived. They were sent to the frontline. I never heard of this story again because I left soon after realizing we were playing God."

"Can you tell me the fucked-up reason for this?" It's making me feel sick enough to find refuge in Spades' monitor, her beating heart my anchor.

"Near immortality. Super soldiers if you like. Trial tests showed that following a lethal wound, the last wolf layered within the host would die. But the wolf layered below would heal the wounded immediately. It was messed up, Alpha. The host would have phases of euphoria and then deep apathy. I think it came from a loss of identity. I left. And a few months later, I heard the military had taken over the program."

"My mate is dead."

We all turn toward Nathair, who smiles weakly at us. "I had a connection with Spades. But now I understand why."

Now that explains why she's clinging to Spades like a lifeline.

"It wasn't Spades. It was a part of my mate."

"Nathair, a mate is more than a *Were* connection."

"Kilian, it is fate who decides this. How much holier do you want it to be?"

"If I'd allowed fate to decide all my actions and consequences, I'd be dead. It's faith, Nathair. Faith in what you feel beyond a simple mate connection."

“Well, Alpha, connection or not, I will never know. But it’s fine . . .” There is a welling of emotion in her eyes as she stares at Spades, and I wish I could stop it. “With the war, our mates die before we can meet them, and if we do meet them, we die anyway . . . so whatever,” she dryly says.

“Laura, can we remove this unwanted wolf from her?”

“I’m not going to try, Kilian. Spades was part of an experience gone well. And it’s a miracle. I suspect Pallamir’s military is trying to create super soldiers. Here, it is a pilot.”

“Or perhaps to suppress memories if you tell me they get confused.” Nathair may have a point.

Laura nods. “Or suppress memories. This could also explain why the sound of her name triggers her.”

“I need to bring her to our priestesses. Maybe they’ll know what to do.” They have to.

There is something that’s been trotting in my head for a while, I guess this is the best moment to ask. I encircle an arm around Laura’s neck, wishing to preserve Nathair from whatever other gruesome revelation this doc might say. She’s already shaken as it is.

“Spades mentioned that one of her wolves believed I was her mate. Can this be possible?” I whisper as lowly as possible. Laura knows very well I had my calling a long time ago . . .

Laura inhales and, mirroring my voice, breathes out, “It alters the perception of things. So I wouldn’t be surprised if a wolf took someone else’s memory for hers, and it glitched for some reason. The Moon Goddess only sings once, you know . . .”

Soon, our six eyes widen like saucers.

“Kilian . . . Do you have more of that whiskey in your cabin?”

I turn, and my mouth flexes without control.

“Spades . . .”

“Top Dog.”

“You’re grounded until further notice!” I emote as I lift her, holding her so fucking tight. “In my room.” And to my whisper, this demon silently chuckles.

She won’t be laughing for long . . .

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-SIX**

“MY FATHER . . . I MUST CONTACT HIM.” I TIGHTEN MY KNEES against my chest, trying not to tremble.

“Kilian, can you hear me?”

No matter how hard I grip myself, my balance keeps tittering on this single mattress. I need a fix. Anything will do at this stage—whiskey, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, whatever there is to take.

Click. Claaack

“I hear you, pup.”

Busy cleaning his weapons, his naked back is all my eyes can glance at. It’s scarred beyond simple laser impacts. There’s a coil in my heart to think I recognize whip lashes. The shit he must have gone through since he was a child . . . I won’t ask.

I don’t want to know.

Not now.

Let’s just keep my focus on these muscles tensing with each of his moves as he unlocks, cocks, slides, and whatever assembling he’s doing with them. He’s got a complete collection of snipers, laser gun machines, and other pistols shelved next to each other, under each other, stacked in never-ending rows. And as some charge on their crystal stations, the entire wall glows blue—Kilian, the spitting image of a rebel leader, from *gun* to toe.

I didn’t even know these were there until Kilian pressed a small button next to the sidewall. It went completely unnoticed

by me. And here I was, gawking at the wall as it flipped over, revealing military gear out of this world.

World . . . War.

I dock my chin on my kneecaps, hoping to get a reply from Kilian. As long as I ask him nicely, he will comply. He has to.

But then, what if the outcome isn't what I expect? I've been obsessing over my father's reaction. Will he turn his back on me, give me the roast of my life?

Or allow bombs to rain on us?

The mere thought of it has my gaze sinking to the sheets. In his bed, I feel safe and don't want to leave it. I don't want to go anywhere. I'm drained, drained about absolutely everything.

And what about these wolves? Parts of souls that don't belong to me. I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know who my dad is either.

My father? Hayden. Alpha of Pallamir. A ruthless warmonger . . .

"Kilian?" I semi-dare, tears of sweat glistening down my brows. I keep wiping them away, but they keep coming back.

"We grew up together." Bret's wistful face keeps haunting me as I tick like a metronome, craving some pills.

I fucking hate myself more than ever. And now that I'm feeling this way, this hatred ultimately gravitates toward my father, toward Bret. Can I hate someone I turned against? I left my family behind and betrayed them. How am I supposed to feel? What should I feel?

"Kilian, give me something. Ask Laura. Whatever it takes. Please!"

He pauses, a gun in his hands. The whole morning, Kilian has been working on this arsenal. He needs a break. If not, I need one.

"No."

No?

“No, what? No, I can’t talk to my father, or no, I can’t have a pill?”

“Both.”

I paw the bed to crawl onto the floor that is nothing but glazed cement and try to gather myself up. But I can’t even muster the strength. A withdrawal like this is worse than being shaken in a vintage tumble dryer. Imagine being awkwardly spun like a forgotten sock—worthless and lost.

“Listen, I’m trying to absorb the crazy shit that has become my life. Bret was like a brother . . .” Fuck, I’m crying again. “Let me talk to my dad.”

Kilian’s shoulders slump, his sigh irritating me to the core.

My face becomes a mess of lines. “Am I a burden to you?”

“Calm down. You’re upset.”

Regla de oro: never tell a woman to calm down when it’s *fucking legit*.

I try to keep my cool as a thin voice sweeps across my stressed lips, my finger in his face closing a gap with my stupid thumb. “A tad. But I mean, just a tad, Kilian.”

“It’s because of those pills of yours. You’re emotional. It’s okay,” self-proclaimed Doctor Kilian says, pulling his gaze away from me every effing second to fix it on his gun.

Emotional? The man is going to die.

“You keep telling me my life wasn’t what it was, calling me with this name that is In—”

A whirl of heels whips Kilian’s eyes to mine. “Don’t say it!” he brutally cuts.

“Why?”

“Don’t say the name. Just—just don’t.”

He crouches enough to meet me at eye level, his feet stamping lightly and his hands digging into his pocket.

“Look, Nath—um . . . Laura gave me these.” Out of his pocket comes a tiny silver box. There is an old look to it.

“What is this?”

“It’s a . . . some opioid agonists. It’s . . . it’s to help you. Take one.”

Just like that?

I smell a rat.

“Thanks.” My tongue dances around this strange pill. It’s minty and sweet, flavored with honey and pine.

The little—

I won’t say a word. It’s nothing but some mint. Candy of no value.

He’s subduing me, thinking it could have a placebo effect on me.

I’m in need, not want. Need. So, I clamp my arms around Kilian and hug him fiercely, my weeping wetting his chest. How can I blame him for trying to help me?

“We’ll make something out of this mess. I promise . . . How does it taste, little wolf?”

“It’s a cough pastille, Kilian,” I snivel.

Sexy Wren, hellooo? No? Not here . . .

“No, it’s not,” he whispers, scratching behind his neck several times.

I’ll kiss him for this white lie. “Okay . . .”

“Yeah, it is,” he admits, returning my kiss ten times more. “And now, I can’t get away from your lips. Look at me?” he teases in a raspy voice that makes my tongue curdle. “Completely addicted to you . . .”

After a moment, I feel a hand wrap itself over my jaw, lifting my weak-ass face to meet his iridescent eyes.

“The outcome of this war is on our side, Spades. There’s no need—”

“You don’t understand. He’s King Daryl’s first ally for a reason. Pallamir’s military force is outstanding. My father’s going to crush us!”

Anger and fright consume my insides as I turn my head to the side.

And then . . .

I fucking freeze, staring at this massive window beam leading to the airstrip.

It's empty of jets. What happened to Cromancer ships? Why did they disappear?

“Kilian, what's going on?” I stutter, my gaze stuck on this suddenly abandoned runway that looks like nothing but a scene from a horror movie.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-SEVEN**

“YOU DON’T NEED TO CONTACT YOUR FATHER. I TOLD YOU, everything’s in good hands. There was a sighting of Pallamir’s fleet near Mara della Morte. Seven of my best squadrons are fighting up there. From what I hear, victory is close, Spades.”

No . . .

“Kilian.” I grab his cheeks, trying not to burst into tears. “When did you send them? I didn’t hear a thing.”

“For sure you didn’t. You were snoring like a bear,” Alpha boy chuckles.

Does he think this is funny?

“You do understand that this is a military tactic.”

“What are you on about, girl?”

“Pallamir would never send just one spacial unit. It would send ten thousand of them. The entire fleet! This little attempt is to weaken your line.”

There is a push from him, his knees now towering over my head. As usual, he runs from the obvious, especially when the answer doesn’t suit him.

“Impossible, Spades.”

“Let me talk to my fucking father. *Now!*”

The way he looks at me. He’s a leader, all right. Tall and proud. But then that gaze of his trails off into the void to a distance only Kilian can perceive. I sometimes wish I could be wherever he is . . .

“I don’t play with my enemies . . .” he mutters.

Even though the man grew up in war, he never received a proper military education.

Here we have another instance of injustice. The constant bombing of a population that hasn’t grown socially and economically does not stand a chance to defend itself properly. Bastards!

“The art of war, Kilian! There are so many strategies you don’t know.” I crumble to his feet and grab his dangling hand. “We’re all going to die if I don’t reach my father. They know where we are!”

Bret! Fucking idiot. My face slides down Kilian’s leg at the thought of my father’s beta, my hopeless self clamping down on my tears as if they could change a thing.

As I’m about to face the floor, Kilian leans toward me and saves my chin from touching it. “Okay. We have a Paroijan channel. But it’s so expensive to use. The crystals are sucked in at a rate of three hundred pounds per minute.”

“Please!”

“I’ll take you to the Control Platform,” he says, crouching once again to my level. “But not before I get this sweat out of you.”

Fingers weave along my temples, massaging them tenderly. Fuck.

Kilian . . .

Two dawning suns stare back at me. What if I never get to see these again . . .

I hold Kilian’s gaze as if it were the last time, soaking in every golden hue, spot, and line of his blazing orbs.

And then, as if my eyes found closure, I shut them from the rest of the world. Only Kilian’s eyes will ever be the last thing I want to see.

The warmth of his body blanketing me as he lowers me to the ground; it’s a different kind of drug . . .

“Why are you like this, Kilian?” I barely breathe, his tender clasp on my nape submitting me to whatever he wants.

“Because I love you, Spades.”

I slingshot my arms around his neck.

In a clash, I take possession of him. His lips. His skin. His threads I weave, tug, pull closer. Kneading in his tenebrous fluffed hair, I just can't get enough of him.

Eating.

Licking.

Every. Inch. Of. His. Face.

My panties are the only clothing that prevents him from claiming me. And his fingers know it. There's a dark growl from the man as he slips them inside, and a moan just as raucous escapes me. My breathy self gasps against his lips, air hardly coming in, as Kilian conquers this place where tongues mate.

The air is electric.

A storm of strokes thunders in our hair.

A hurricane of hands swirls against our skin.

A blizzard of lips pelts over our faces and necks.

We can't get what we want. Become one, devour ourselves alive.

His pants flash to his knees.

They won't go farther.

I don't want to wait a second.

I can hardly breathe, for it's an invasion of Kilian, my airways filled with a possessive tongue, my breasts caged by feverish hands.

“Kilian.” My thighs clasp around his hips, and I purr at the hand skating past my oval to carouse near my entrance. It's now brushing against my channel, nudging a cock against my clit.

“I want to be inside you . . .” his lips say, but all I hear is his shaft introducing itself, slowly, unrushed, the slip of it is decided and smooth. “And never leave.”

“Promise me,” I rasp, trying to exist through him.

But then, he pauses, two burning stars settling on me.

They ignite a rush of adrenaline that shocks my entire being.

Why? I don’t know, but there’s this song that comes flying into my mind. “They call the rising sun . . .”

Kilian’s chest begins to pound much harder, hammering my own thirsting heart. There’s an unusual start to it, catching up to my pace as we ache for each other. My . . .

“Alpha.” A vocal reflex bounces out my throat from fingers flash-forking into mine.

In a blink, Kilian dives into my neck, his body becoming a pressure vital to my being. Never in my life has gravity felt so good.

From this attraction, a new husk is born, “And it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy . . .”

Something awakes in me. I try holding onto this new kind of *feeling*. Try to cultivate this vibration vining up my bones. It’s coming from this tsunami named Kilian waving over my body, his cock a tide I never want to stop. It’s as if I’m connecting with him, my roots ebbing within him. What is this feeling . . .

I fold my fingers hard over Kilian’s. This gentle beast is rocking my body with mastered thrusts, harvesting this orgasm I’m struggling to tame.

I swallow. Try to uncoil this *clitoric satiation*. But my pumping blood has other plans for me. It decides to dwell in my core, swelling my walls, pushing them to cave in as if wanting to keep their visitor inside for eternity.

And then, this new sensation I felt moments ago, darts through me in no time. It’s a fire of love and it’s mingled with lust. It’s engulfing my mind, sparking the tip of my nipples,

scorching my heart, to the smoothness of his hip strides, or is it the rush of his breath crashing behind my ear?

“Be mine forever.”

Or his words . . .

Kilian . . .

I love you so fucking much.

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-EIGHT**

KILIAN AND I HEAD TOWARD THE CONTROL PLATFORM. HE'S leading me down the many stone bridges of this suspended city with an iron fist. Steely is the word. And it's nowhere near releasing me. I play the game, clutching even harder because I think somewhere down the line, we're the same.

I've been beating my way through the cold expanse, never knowing my end goal. Running from myself all my life, firmly convinced I belonged where I was.

In space's darkness.

And Kilian . . . This ebony-haired man is changing how I feel, my mind twisting and turning from an awkward reboot.

After following me for so long, he's outrunning my fears, chasing my memories.

Yes, we're the same.

Because if we ever had to lose ourselves again . . . we would lose it all.

Even so, my insecure self chuckles. "Hey, Pimpollo, I'm not going to run away."

Blood shoots up my brain from a harsh twirl, that shoulder grip of his making me spike a breath.

Just what the fuck?

"What did you say?" Wolf eyes stab me right in the brains, their glow feeling like a proper chokehold. Where have my lungs gone?

That is some shifter mastery I'm unaware of . . .

At this very moment, words can't describe my stupefied state.

"I didn't say anything . . . I—I just said I'm not going to run away." Of course, the stuttering, Wren. Because, hey, why work for your words when, just in a jiffy, you can retract your comments.

"No, before that?" Kilian's worried irises jitter from left to right.

Did I insult him? I'm starting to doubt now . . . This kind of shit happens to me a lot.

"Starboy?" I did say Starboy, right?

The embrace that follows is mind-boggling, fogging my brain.

I hug him back, spreading my fingers over his nape, weaving them in this hair I love so much. "Where else can I go, Kilian?"

Yeah . . . now, it's a certainty. We're indeed the same. The man's as damaged as me.

"I've got you," he whispers. And as his hold strengthens, something breaks in me. "I've got you, girl. I've got you . . ."

"Yes, you've got me," I murmur softly. "You've got me, Kilian . . . It's okay, I'm here."

What's the meltdown for? The man could do with some chamomile tea, a pinch or two of Prozac swirling in it.

He shivers at my whisper, and only a, "Hey, guys! What's up?" from a top-shaped Hataro wakes us from this strange exchange.

I missed him . . . Hataro is the best ensnarer ever when it comes to rounding enemies up. He's got that swift dodge, his jet a flexible blade.

I exhale, liberated to find him strolling up a bridge on solid legs. It will never be known to these two, but Hataro was mere breaths away from death . . .

“Kid!” Kilian picks him up, disheveling his thin strands with a mushy pat.

“Alpha, I’m back in the game.”

There’s no beta here. It’s just a little brother . . .

In other words, I fear Kilian’s goal is to keep him close to him, just as he wants me to be with him.

“Mind if I join?”

“Paroan Station, Hataro. The little wolf wants to call her daddy.”

Both Hataro and my eyes spear each other.

“Wren, don’t.” Again, he’s fussing, munching on his nails, his fingers not much more than slimmed-out play dough heads.

He always fusses. Hataro’s ability to cope with stress is the lowest I’ve ever seen. He was admitted to the Chimera solely because of his piloting skills. Everything else mental about him stinks.

“Telling me what to do, now?”

“Hey!”

“Hey, what? Remember who you’re talking to. So quit it!”
I snap.

“You’re not my team leader anymore, Wren.”

A frosty gaze forms on Hataro’s face; Jinx is at my door, scratching like a feral mutt.

I always say, don’t let anyone ruin your day. Be that strong woman. Ruin it yourself.

I’ll ruin it for you!

“Go play in the sandpit, kiddo. Let the adults handle it.” *This little man-boy has been toying with me since day one. He’s nothing but the weakest link!*

“Spades, calm down. We’re all on the same side.”

Alpha what-not wants to play mediator . . . My fur bristles, softly plucking through Wren's pores . . . "Tell me, what side is this, Alpha Shit!"

This big billy gruff takes a step back, hiding a snarl.

"Am I saying something I shouldn't?" I snicker, feeling so damn good to be back in the outside world . . . I'll take him down here. Yes . . . It does sound like a plan. "You are not my commander. You're nothing!" Wren's nails give way to my claws, assassin, thirsting for an alpha's blood.

"Hataro, I think I spotted one of your Chimeras near zone three . . . Joy, I think. She's fiddling with some rusty space jet. Go help her." The Stray orders, if it could be called an order.

"Yes, go and play elsewhere!"

Hataro takes off on his heels, not forgetting to bare his white gnashers at me. Pest!

Wren's puppy swoons over me like I'm his mate. This soft dipstick can wait until the end of time because it will never happen.

"Spades, breathe." He's muttering his sweetness to me. It's so concentrated that it sickens me.

"I'm breathing fine!" Never felt so good, as a matter of fact.

"Boton de rosa . . . my sweet one. Breathe."

The f—

"Pimpollo . . . mi aliento es solo tuyo . . ."

What did I just say?

**CHAPTER
FIFTY-NINE**

“I’M SORRY,” IS ALL I CAN SAY RIGHT NOW.

I’m mortified. A little piece of me is dying inside after learning Kilian met Jinx.

This wolf is a *freak*. Speaks like me, but uses me like a vulgar skin glove.

She tricked my father more than once. She’s an absolute bitch.

And where the hell did this Spanish sentence come from? Kilian’s face. It was gone. Livid, blood-drained . . . Now he seems unable to even mention this part. Jinx is not a freak. *I am!*

“This Jinx of yours doesn’t like Hataro. Why?” Kilian asks.

I try not to fumble, gripping the rope tightly for the guardrail as we descend those rocky overpasses, Kilian’s own clenching hand propelling me forward with every step he takes.

“He’s not what I call all-around material. And Jinx despises anything soft. Don’t ask. I tried to reason with her multiple times, but she’s crazy.” All this huffing of mine, it’s as if we’re having *walking* intercourse, minus the cock.

“We’ll find a way to remove her. Watch your head, sweetheart. It’s bulky around this corner.”

I stop in my tracks. “Remove Jinx?” *Ouch!*

“Laura is working on it.” Our feet take a break. “I insisted on it.”

“Kil—”

I’m shoved against his chest, my nose squashed between two pecs. Soon, a soft rub lingers over my sore scalp. He doesn’t know, but I just got knocked twice . . . Those are black-market muscles. Definitely not approved for sale . . .

“Why would you want to remove her? She’s been a part of me for as long as I can remember,” I muffle against a cotton T-shirt. Even his sweat smells good. Arf . . . someone shoot me.

“She’s not your wolf, Spades.”

My breath-holding self pushes away. “Jinx’s a living soul. She takes over when I’m out of resources. I gain courage from Jinx. When I need to take that shot, Jinx’s there. When I pull the trigger, she’s there. Don’t you know I’m a coward without her?”

His lips pinch, dragging his head toward the runway. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he splays his legs, drops his gaze back to his feet, and sighs. Am I annoying the fuck out of him?

But soon, there’s a hand snaking around my wrist, my mouth filling with air as I watch it fold fingers over me.

“No, you’re not. These wolves stripped you of who you are.”

“Stop talking like that!”

Huff! That pull. I’m annoying him. Confirmed, right there.

“Is that Jinx again?” Kilian says, dragging me behind him.

“No!” I spit-cough, struggling not to walk on his heels.

“See, you’re just like her, a harpy.”

“A-a harpy?” If I could knife this back of his.

Idiot girl . . . you could never.

“Yeah.”

“Come here!” I command, pulling the brakes all the way.

Kilian plants on the spot, towering over me, his gaze burning my eyes. I think I accidentally pushed his alpha button. Maybe I should just start walking the other way . . .

“Here, you mean?” Kilian’s words melt on my lips, silking his whispers in glides of his tongue. “Confrontation isn’t something new to me, darling . . .”

My tongue moves over his skin. “Doesn’t confrontation reveal whom you’re dealing with?”

With featherlight ease, he glides his fingertips under my top, skimming my ribs. Phew! It’s hot in here.

And then I disintegrate to the following murmur, “I wouldn’t be able to tell. You corrupted my heart, Spades.”

I should push those buttons more often . . .

The few sunrays that managed to enter this massive rock shelter are subliming the place in hues of ochre and sulfur. Warm gold just like . . . Kilian’s eyes.

Coasting down the inner side of the cave, we cross stony platforms leading from one level to another. My eyes keep wandering from the runway below to the glass dome habitations flanking the mountain’s inner walls. At this time of the day, it’s beautiful.

I shudder. The landing strip is deadly empty of Cromancer jets. “You made a mistake sending them all.” I’m bitching and fussing because my father’s diversion sticks out a mile.

There’s a tug followed by my face crashing against his chest.

“It’s no mistake . . . I want a celebration. I want my people to rejoice in victory, no matter how small it may be. I’m not stupid. We’re just a bunch of rebels with old weapons. It’s just a matter of surviving as long as we can. Desperados . . .”

I need to stop this!

I look up, my teeth clenching from emotion as a gulp resounds deep in my guts. This is not a cheesy statement, and I’m not trying to be cute. We all know the feeling of a heart dropping below our knees when in love. It can’t be helped.

The butterflies in my stomach are devouring me; no matter what I do, they just keep feasting. I need proper deworming at this stage because these are not beautifully winged and soft bugs. They are flesh-eaters!

“Can a pretty wolf grant me her trust?”

My . . .

Kilian.

Tiptoeing, I clasp his cheeks and husk in return, “Am I not by your side?”

I can’t even handle the smile he gives me. The need to protect Kilian is unlike anything I have experienced before . . .

Bam!

**CHAPTER
SIXTY**

A CRASHING SOUND ECHOES FROM A BURSTING DOOR slamming against the rock.

A couple of earthbound copilots burst out of the built-in-stone hangar. By the look of it, some need a breathing spell. With their com-gear over their heads, they shout at what I presume to be their pilots fighting in the fire of battle. My eyes soon crease with concern as the door springs back and closes.

Silence reigns over Kilian. Every eye bat, every contained heartbeat and soft motion of his breathes resilience. And yet, his head is turned away from me. He can't accept the fact I could be right. There's no doubt about it.

Because, as I anticipated, it is not going well.

One space controller is leaning against the stone, an inch from the entryway, holding his head in his hands, hunched. I sense despair in the man, probably from a cut-off communication that never came back . . .

Gods, I know that feeling all too well.

We stop at the entrance, and a retinal scan flashes a small wave of light into Kilian's eye. I only saw these in history books. I'm fascinated, to put it mildly. He then opens the door, an inviting arm gesturing me to step in.

Hello, ANDY-30 to serve you. Control desk 09B is ready to use. Follow me.

“Well, hello there, big boy.”

What a cute robot. They've put a child's voice in its program, and although its limbs are uncovered, it feels so

lifelike. There isn't a layer of skin on the robot. It has a skeletal look, with bars and rotators flexing in and out and iron crystal tubes shooting out at every move.

"Not now, Andy," snarls Kilian as he attempts to circumvent this impressive bright red robot.

ANDY-30 to serve you. Control desk 09B is ready to use. Follow me.

Andy doesn't seem to get the message. *He's* a social *one* because he's sticking around, shifting his body to counter Kilian's. Can't blame Andy. It's a fact that I am a magnet for robots, especially those with repeat modes . . . My flatlining brows of apathy confirm this.

ANDY-30 to serve you. Control desk 09B is ready to use. Follow me.

Kilian huffs. I simmer, and he hears it because he beams a look of amusement to me, eyes smiling from this *androic* comedy.

"He's stupid. Let's ignore him. All he knows is where to find free console desks for copilots," he says with a shoulder shrug.

"I've got the same at ho . . . I mean, Pallamir's medical droids are just as thick," I laugh back.

"Come, it's over there."

I follow Kilian across this vast area. Massive recurved screens dominate the center of circular tables, dropping endless codes and scripts. I jog my eyes around them, helmsmen shouting in their mics, cheering or calming their pilots. It's a stressful clattering, my ears brimming with brouhaha.

As Kilian walks me through the Control Platform, I catch, "You tire me, Pharos! With your headlocks, your jinks, and your loops. Can't you just listen to me for once! Lock the scumbag already!" Everyone is under pressure. None want to lose their pilots.

My eyes can't detach from those hundreds of teammates assisting their pilots in flight maneuvers, anticipating the next enemy move, quickly analyzing algorithmic predictive indexes, and other graphs rushing down the screens . . .

And then I stop in my tracks, Kilian's grip making me stumble only once.

A colossal projection at the far end. It's an ominous screen, one radaring Pallamir's fleet in real-time—thousands of red dots in motion and a handful of blue ones . . .

We're as good as dead.

And then, the more I observe this room, the more I think I might be wrong.

The Sand Rose Pack is far more knowledgeable than Pallamir will ever be. Astarix members rely so heavily on instant technology that we could never accomplish what they do. Basically, the work of AI.

This fighting style also appeals to me. To never be alone, even when the space ripper knocks at your door. Somewhere you know your copilot is there with you . . .

When we, Chimeras, go into war, we are left with ourselves once through the space portal.

No one is there.

But us. Burping our last breath in a shady jet firework as we explode in micro pieces . . . how romantic.

“Follow me, Spades.”

We walk into a room. Darkness surrounds us. It looks nothing more than a janitor's locker with a rusty android siding the door and cables dissipating into the penumbra.

Soon, however, a golden light stretches across the room as Kilian pulls a lever—lamps switching on one after the other with a muted flap-like sound.

An Elliptis!

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-ONE**

FARTHER ALONG THOSE LARGE TUBE CABLES SPIDRAWEBBING the floor is a miracle of technology. Right in the center of the room is a radiant glow strobing from the bottom to the ceiling, pulsing in its brilliance, a light liquid, and alive. Elliptis are so fucking rare . . .

“The second Paroan ever created. It can send radio waves as far as 2500 million lightyears away.” There’s this look of pride on Kilian’s face as I gape. Dork.

“We call those Elliptis. How did you get hold of one?”

“I stole it.” Feeling proud about it, hey? Keep your chin high, Kilian; you can be proud.

Indeed, there is something legend-like about an Elliptis. Few have ever seen them in real life.

“A rebel and a little thief. Do you have anything else up your sleeve?” I tease, winking at this adorkable, smirking man.

Kilian’s eyes dart away from me as he laugh-gasps shyly.

“You have a code with you?” he then asks.

“I know it by heart.”

“Daddy’s little girl, I see.”

Shit, that lip curl of his . . .

“I’m always my daddy’s little girl,” I snarl, but then this incursive sharpness in me leaves. My dad led a fox into the hen house . . .

“Here.” Kilian pulls a chair deemed as ancient and invites me to sit at a desk, sweeping some old papers out of the way.

When was the last time I saw paper? Ah, yes. At the City Center Museum.

I settle in my seat and bring the old keyboard to me.

Right . . .

///100*_0*JiOp#**/LLIM/A

I press *Enter*, and soon, a radio signal switches in response.

Kilian hands me a black box and says, “Speak into it.”

“Distress signal alpha code LLIM/A to Pallamir Base, zone nine.”

My call is immediately picked up. Of course, it is.

“Pallamir Base, zone nine. Awaiting key.”

“J98767823.”

“Pallamir Base, zone nine, received.”

I hope it works.

This guy is supposed to rush to my father. I mean, it’s a top-line emergency code, so this fucked-up Bear of Wolves should take it.

Please pick up . . .

“Alpha Hayden speaking, line secured.”

Kilian folds his fingers over my shoulders, and it’s enough for me to summon my courage.

“Dad.”

“Winnie!”

“Please listen to me.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Fun question to ask when you sent Bret to kill me.”

My gaze lingers on the extreme amount of dust sprayed over the desk.

A sea of specks just as numerous as my doubts . . .

“Where is Bret?”

“What?”

“Winnie!”

“He’s dead.”

After some shuffling, a whispery stream of “Fuuuck . . .” follows.

“King Daryl is on his way along with our fleets.” He’s smoking. I can hear his blows and puffs through the mic. He’s dragging in his cigar like a chimney.

“I’m with Kilian. The real Kilian.”

“Line compromised.”

What?

“Line compromised like my wolves inside or the fact that you experimented on a child,” I spit.

There is silence. And I pray and pray the line won’t cut.

“Mistake me not, Winnie. The truth came to me. There is more at stake than meets the eye . . .”

What the fuck is wrong with him? Is he drunk? What is this gibberish nonsense?!

“Mistake you?”

“A child, Winnie. You are a child. One of an alpha. Never forget this. But you know well that crossing the Alpha of Astarix means death.”

“You want to kill me? You took me away and played with my soul!”

“Witness the atrocities of war, and it changes a man. To start life anew is every soldier’s dream . . .”

What in the actual fuck is he on about?

Once again, my tears burst forth.

“Why did you put these wolves in me? Yeah, I know a little more about myself since I left.”

“War is ugly. I won’t explain this to you.”

“No, you won’t. Rather than confronting what is right from wrong, it is better to hide behind excuses, right? Following orders shields us from guilt. You do that, Dad. Or should I call you Hayden?”

“There is always more than meets the eye. Rest assured that the traitors will be punished. We are coming.”

“You—you’re ready to kill us all?”

“Smoke ’em and gas ’em, Winnie. You’re good at it.”

Line disconnected.

Bip.

Line Disconnected.

My mind goes blank.

That. Didn’t. Go. Well. At. All.

...

“We must fly out of Galathena now, Kilian!”

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-TWO**

THERE'S NOTHING TO SAY.

A father doesn't go beyond blood ties.

It doesn't go beyond progeny.

To think love is the key.

How wrong of me.

How wrong.

“Wolf of mine . . .”

I stay in my darkness, my eyes shut, the dams that are my lids broken for the flow is unstoppable.

In usual circumstances, I would have gone to a bar and played Drussian Roulette with the Chimeras, our wasted selves middle-fingering life and death. I'd have most probably got my drunk self that tattoo I never dared to get and enjoyed my last supper with my crew.

But things have changed.

It's because of Kilian. He's messed up my mind and poisoned my heart. And I can't function if I think something could happen to him.

My chair swivels to the left, and his body's warmth soon moves between my knees. It's a torso embedding itself against my thighs.

“You, um . . .” Kilian surfs his hands over mine, his words barely audible across my sobs. “Once said to me that it's in the sun that you rise, in the stars that you shine, and . . .”

The pressure of his fingers unveils my face, the exposure of it brutal.

“And in the wind that you let go.” His warmth, his words . . . they resonate in me like faraway echoes.

My only feeling at this moment is that of abandonment. There is no way to describe how lost I am.

As I sit here, the call to take methadone is stronger than ever. *Shit.*

It seems that the lone wolf has not been left behind . . . She’s been sentenced to death by her father.

Father . . .

Kilian’s rasp pulls me out of my sad dizzying state. “Please look at me.”

As my gaze collides with him, Jinx begins to writhe, whimpering from a force powerful enough to constrict my heart. Two planets appear before me. There are layers of atmosphere encapsulating them, those thin films of burnt orange coating their surfaces.

Out of space. Kilian is an out-of-space experience . . .

I watch this man sit on his heels, clasping my hands as if praying with me.

In every swipe of his thumb over my skin, I fade, thinking my actions are wrong. How can I not feel loved when his hands are holding me this right? How can I regret losing my family when his presence feels like my first choice?

“Pretty wolf, come with—”

“Hurrayyyy! Yayy!”

We both blink at each other, baffled by the shouts and cheers behind the door. And that door swings wide open, making every bone in my body jump.

“Alpha! Pallamir’s fleet. It’s—they are retreating. We won!”

Joy and Hataro are sweating. This excess of effort, don't they know it's for nothing?

But then, while one is naively grinning, Joy channels her doubts into mine with one look. Under her blue eyes, the white of them shows more than usual.

We're not stupid.

Those fists of hers, how they fold, veins starting to appear as she tightens her fear in them. "Spades . . ." I hear. It's as if she's far away—a rumor coming from her lips as I envision this place turning into a furnace.

"I'm okay." What else can I tell her? That tomorrow, nothing will remain aside from charred bones?

And Kilian is right to call Hataro a kid. Even if his brows crease from time to time as he catches his breath. To think Pallamir would submit to a twenty-four-hour-old battle is foolish.

"Hataro, let's find the other Chimeras. We need to—to tell them the great news," Joy mutters.

Her clasp over Hataro's hand, it's one of a mother. In the face of war and its lethal outcome, awareness transcends reason. Feelings and emotions surge inside us because we know this is our last breath. What they sense is not the last ray of hope. It's death.

In Kilian's throat, a lump bulges as the duo's skittering feet leave us.

His smile seems tired.

The Alpha of the Sand Rose Pack is faking it.

But then, we all do at one point. Do we not?

"Congratulations, Kilian," I titter in between spasms.

Despite my tears, his thumb prevents them from falling.

"We can celebrate now." And to my words, he transfixes my running wet lines, smearing the liquid salt slowly over my cheek.

He knows it now.

My father will strike. He won't wait.

“Tonight is our last night together.”

“Don't say that,” Kilian growls. “You are missing something you once had so much of in you.”

Once . . .

What makes people hesitate to tell me the truth? “Why don't you let me pronounce this *name*?”

“Little wolf, it's time for you to meet *them*.”

“Who?”

“They are the reason why we keep fighting. Come.”

PART FIVE

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-THREE**

“WHO ARE WE MEETING?” I ASK, CRINGING FROM THE DEMITONS of sand that thought well to lodge in my boots.

“You’ll see.”

As always, Kilian is secretive. And I’m suspicious about it. It’s like those *surprise* interventions no drug addict sees coming . . . The sort that’s legit and helpful but painful to live through. I hope it’s not one of those.

We’ve left the cave, and oh, brother, does it feel good to be under this bright orange sky. The idea of clogged-up stone vaults gives me the creeps; far better under the yonder . . . Far better.

There’s this sense of belonging as the wind blows at my back, the sun my second love, kissing me whole.

“Your skin is turning golden, little wolf. As it should.”

“*As it should*. You like bronze-skinned women, Kilian?”

“I love only one woman; she was born under this very sun, her skin remembering for her.”

Shit. This thing isn’t a fling. It’s a scam. The dawg can’t be real.

The glance I steal from Kilian is immediately returned, and it’s been like this for the past thirty minutes.

I pretend nothing, looking straight ahead into this golden expanse that stretches as far as the eye can see. Well, as the eye would see. Because it inevitably lands back on Kilian.

An organism has hijacked my biology. I bet my late Sweet Shooter on it. Because I can't see any other rational explanation for my oozing, fluffy self.

And as soon as my peripheral vision detects nothing on me, I glance back like an idiot.

“You want to ask me something?” he asks.

This time there's no stolen glimpse. Kilian's staring stiffly into the distance, jaw tense.

Yeah, right, you think taking control of this hair-brained back-and-forth babyish eye joust, kindergarten-style, Kilian?

Well, not today!

“I think *you* want to ask me a question.” My grin is sparking.

Honestly, I want to slap myself right now because I'm not faking it. Mellow stuff here, and there's no need for a sample to know it's real. Where's my legendary dignity gone? It's legendary, right? I mean, I have dignity.

Do I?

Sigh.

He throws me this look of “you're overkill,” a hardly detectable nod, and a faint smirk—his Saturday night special.

That charmer is soaking my crotch to the bone.

Ask a goddamn question, Wren. Any will do. Let's try to stop this leaky clitaster, shall we?

Okay. Maybe I do have a question. I've been swimming in it for a while, but now, it's crashing in waves in my mind.

“How old was I when they took me?”

Kilian stops in his tracks, his feet gritting the sand with a muted crunch. “Thirteen.”

The shit he just fed me is of a new level. The problem isn't that number thirteen is unlucky.

It's because my thirteens can't be better etched in my memory. In this scene, I'm living it up at height: I'm in a

cosplay costume, getting my first tattoo, and I've got my proud dad sitting next to me, who's also getting inked.

Chill, Wren . . .

"It's so strange, Kilian," I say coyly, holding onto my hips, pushing on my bones as if I could stretch up to meet his eyes without having to fucking look up. "I remember losing my first tooth on Pallamir at the tender age of six. It's pretty vivid—a rogue drone hit me square in the face."

There's a sarcastic huff. "Actually, it got tangled in your hair first," Kilian fudges, his shifty feet plodding in the sand. It's like he's always a step ahead of whatever situation we're in. "And it wasn't on Pallamir but near the river *Tirga*, which is no more than a dried riverbed now."

I stop, now eyeing my foot as it digs into the sand. Maybe it's a hole, and I want to go inside it.

And die.

Everything about me is a mess: my childhood is bits and bats of manipulated souvenirs—meddled grains of memory just like the sand under me. Laura did say *they* played with my brain but to what extent . . . What other things did Pallamir take away from me?

I'll ask no more. I will never have another day like the one I'm having now. Amid the chaos about to descend, it is blissful.

And that's how I want it to stay.

I know it's crazy to feel this way. My usual self should be with the Chimeras, filling the jet tanks in mad seconds before shooting off for the stars.

Far, far away from this hellhole.

I should be weary, my blood pumping in despair to the impending threat, yet Kilian doesn't seem to be bothered by it. It's like he's got this warrior aura harnessed to perfection. It confuses me because it implies confidence for the future, and this confidence is taking root in my being.

The mere presence of this man gives me *peace*, and no matter how *alien* it is to me, I should accept it without further question.

For the first time in my life, I'm—*eyes on Kilian, I realize how this new concept breathes out of him*—feeling like myself.

We've only trekked a mile or two, but we're close enough to Tirlem's grotto entrance.

There's some social clattering behind us. Men are trading Galactic trinkets, other pilot vests, weapons, and electronic junk. People enter in and out with droids carrying air-gliding carts loaded with crystals. Where do they get those? In the sand?

They all seem oblivious to what lies ahead—they seem tranquil.

“Kilian, shouldn't you have warned your pack by now?”

“I already have.”

“But when?”

“When we left the Control Platform.”

“That muttering ‘Dawn ahead’ in your wrist gear?”

“Yes.”

“That's it?”

“We're always ready, Spades. It's nothing new to us.”

“Yes, there is. This time, it's game over, Alpha. Your pack needs to leave. Save yourself before it's too late.”

“We'd rather die on Galathena than watch it being taken from us, *cariña*.”

And then a goddamn wink slides across Kilian's lips as if there were many more tomorrows to come.

He's removing his shirt . . .

“Run with me.”

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-FOUR**

I'M CURRENTLY STANDING ATOP A DUNE'S CREST, OBSERVING my man undressing without shame, one of the perks of having a pack constituted of ninety-nine percent of men, I guess.

"I don't think it's a good idea." Seriously, just like that?

Kilian is hopping on one leg, grunting bestially, trying to remove his last foot from a possessive pair of jeans. A couple of "fucks" follows before those pants eventually fly in the air.

I can't help but laugh. "Your disarming sense of balance leaves me speechless."

This wolf shoots me a gaze of death. "I'm on a slope and in the sand."

"Yeah . . ." As I struggle with my giggles, I try not to sound cruel. There are times, however, when the cutest things get the worst treatment. Kilian gets to have it all.

"Girl, what are you waiting for?"

Holy Moons of *Dafnar* . . . Even from this distance, Kilian's attributes are all I can see—heavily geared.

"Taking my time . . ."

Kilian's jaw drops a little as I chew my smirk.

He's walking toward me, his bludgeon stiffening with every step he takes—it's gradually pointing toward me. My *estranged* cheeks are on fire. Estranged because I decided to part ways with my nampy-bamby body of mine!

Take back the commands, woman!

Faking an interest in the world around me, I breathe out a heavy moan. It should counter this attack.

“Stop doing that,” Kilian grinds.

“Doing what.”

“That thing with your lip.”

I chuckle.

“You can’t do this to me.” He seals the distance between us, pressing his heated, flexing cock against my belly.

He’s hiding it. Adorable mutt.

“Hi, Alpha. Going for a run?” Krin shouts from afar, handing over a block of iron crystals to some fella.

At Krin’s feet, there’s presumably a recently purchased box. I squint a little. By the looks of it, it’s a black crate brimming with laser grenades. That Sand Rose wolf is a merchant that sure loves his rainmakers . . .

“Yes! There’s no better time of the day than right now.” And then there is this muttering as Kilian hides his embarrassed self in my neck. “I’m stuck.”

We both puff out sniggers against our intertwined necks, our lips laughing against each other’s skin.

I’m not done with him.

“Stop it,” he nags, brushing my hand away from his throbbing cock. It’s in a state it could ejaculate in one blow.

“We could go behind a dune?” Musing, I reach out for his hand and place it on one of my breasts, letting him know I mean it.

He smells my neck deeply before breathing warmth over it. “You’re in heat.”

My coil bends as that growl sounds inside me.

“Perhaps . . . you want to do something a little crazy, a little wild?” I tempt. There’s a little laughter from him, and I can’t help but be drawn by it, my nose tip brushing against Kilian’s. “Baby Alpha, you and I . . .”

“With me?” he asks groggily, scratching humorously behind his head.

“Of course, with you!” I’m unsure if we’re on the same page here.

“Me . . .” He rests his head in my hair, relaxing from my answer.

Why? I will most probably never know. We fucked more than a couple of times, so I don’t get it.

His cock finally slides down my belly. Kilian is cooling down and, as he separates his perfect muscle-bound proportions from me, says, “We need to go now, Spades. Some important people are eager to meet you. Time to shift.”

“I-I—”

“What is it?” With a thin line of lips brushing across his face, Kilian bobs his head.

Boy, is he patient—I would have already finished myself many times by now.

“I can’t. Jinx or any of my wolves . . . it’s not like I can control them.”

Kilian’s smile is impish when he says, “Climb on me.”

“Wait—”

Fuck, is that a beautiful wolf, the sunset bleeding pastel red on its fur.

Kneeling with one paw, Kilian awaits, his crimson gaze paralyzing me.

I let my feet lug me toward this beast of wonders, the breeze swirling the grains like gold dust.

Dreams are real . . .

My fingers sprawl in the deep layers of his fur, and I exhale. It’s like no other softness.

I catch snapping teeth near my ankles, followed by an impatient growl.

“All right, all right!”

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-FIVE**

THE HEAT OF SPADES' DELICATE BODY ON MY BACK HAS ME vibrating as if she were made of electricity. How this beauty straddles me, her fingers meddling in my fur, legs rubbing my ribs at each of my strides . . .

“The wolf has stamina,” I catch, her voice dissipating in the wind as my paws thrust into the sand.

The mere sound of her increases my speed. She gets my heart pumping so damn fast. So much so, I'm struggling to send this mad rush of blood in my hind legs so as not to swell something else . . .

Keep your dick in check, Kilian. Oh, brother . . .

While skimming the flanks of Tirlem Mountain, I notice smoke from afar.

The Oracle Pit is burning. The hags know I'm coming with the girl. It's a mystery how they get to know those things . . .

Spades' clenched arms tighten around my neck as the temple comes into view.

“Kilian . . . it's—it's incredible!” she marvels as the structure grows larger with every kick of my paw.

Yes.

Any soul who sets eyes on the *Three Moons Temple* for the first time finds the sight liberating.

Born from the mountain's hard rock, twirling towers stand like jewels on the wall, cobalt-blue crystal roofs gleaming in the sun.

I think it's making an impression on Spades, her quivering hands running through me, tingling.

Keep doing that, girl . . .

There's a continuous humming coming from this place of worship. It's here that I go whenever my nerves get the best of me. And these old women's thrums are enough to lower my pulse a level or two . . .

We're here. Time to get off, woman. A little groan, and this dove is quick to get the message.

Soon after I transform into human form, she runs to me and collars my neck, lapping kisses over my chin.

I cage her, a groan of *want* scuttling up my throat. I'm dying to explore her body deeper. "Those lips . . . I've got a special gift for them." I can't move my thumb away from her parting cherry plums. I could devour them so much, and here I am taking a taste out of them. I tighten my grip around her jerking nape, my tongue disorienting her.

Spades, I can't wait to take all of you off-guard.

I shield my eyes from the sun. It's touching the horizon line. "Let's move, pretty wolf. Oldies rarely like to wait."

"Oldies?" She's holding her hair with one hand, the wind batting her freckles.

I wish those were edible. Fortunately, they can be licked. *There.* With Spades' sweet taste on my lips, I squeeze my staggering girl's bum cheeks real tight. I want her to fuss. I want her to growl and her eyes to narrow. Because when she does, it always burns me down the middle . . .

"Harder, Kilian," this puss purrs. *She can't do that.*

I feign a relaxed attitude, my snigger suggesting she will get it hard sooner enough.

The place is grim, as always.

Glowing crystals encrusted in the walls are the only way to tell where to put our feet.

While we plod in the sand-filled alley, *spidra* webs clog our path so much we must push the cords out of the way, if not bend under them.

These hags live in one of the most stunning temples ever built and treat it like a garbage dump. While I may not be a priest, I know the value of things, and below my feet is black *Orixian* marble worth more than I have in space jets.

“Kilian, where’re you taking us?”

With my mouth shut, I turn my head away from her.

Again.

She must think I’m an illiterate sod.

My tongue is latched against my palate, barricading an answer I’m unsure how to deliver. As for Spades’ questions, I’ve avoided them not because I don’t wish to help but because I can’t go through those seizures of hers again. There’s a piece of me that dies each time she convulses.

But mostly, I needed confirmation of where I stand with this bird since she was brought up in such a callous manner.

It’s not that I don’t trust the girl. Actually, I do . . . most of the time.

It was her father’s late exchange that motivated me to show her what the stakes really are. The skin Galathena hides.

“I want you to see something, Spades.”

A sudden gust sweeps across the vaulted alley, stopping us in our tracks.

“Look who we have here. A naked alpha!”

Moorena and her cackles . . .

The temple fills with these old witches’ voices, their deadly hisses slithering from the darkness up to our ears. Spades’ fingers constrict around my hand. I grip them harder. “Scared, little wolf?”

“The Demon Ghost has returned.”

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-SIX**

“*YES, SISTERSSS . . . AND HE COMES WITH A GUESSST . . .*”

Generally speaking, I don’t consider myself an aficionado of these twisted women. No.

But it’s my church, and they are the triplet priestesses. You don’t always get to choose your *madres*, right?

“Priestesses of the Three Moons, I come with In—”

Man, really?

I rattle my throat like a jerking compressor. “Spades from Pallamir.”

I squint like a bastard, trying to get a visual of the three crones. But these crows know how to make themselves invisible. Concealing themselves in the dark, only their old frayed rags dangling down the wall tell me their withered asses are sitting on their high-raised thrones.

Guess the mere fact that they are crystal gazers is enough to propel them to royal status.

But really, there’s nothing queenly about those weasels. Queens of *Shrewdom* at best . . .

“*Tell us your name, girl.*”

Spades looks at me with a frown that means “they must have Alzheimer’s.” My jaw is burning from my teeth grinding too much. She better behave.

“You need some *eartronics* because he just told you,” she spurts.

The air starts to stir. I just hope the priestesses are in a good mood today.

“Tis herrr . . .”

“Yes!”

“Without a doubt.”

I don't want to face Spades, trying to hold my gaze onto one of their frazzled gowns as they sway from the draft. I don't think it makes a difference. This pretty wolf's burning glare is making a hole in my left cheek, searing me to the bone.

And then I hear this hyper beast whisper, “Are you related? Because it would explain a lot! All these cryptic words and other secretive sentences that don't mean a thing.”

“Come closer, pup!”

“Which one?” Spades roars.

I guess the “pup” word is a no-no. Without a doubt, my little wolf is nervous. Because what does a wolf do when it's nervous? It bites.

“Your manners, girl,” I grind out.

She's making me sweat. If only she knew how these three women could change her life in the sticky muttering of a word. They are wicked beyond black magic. My gammas won't even step inside for fear of discovering their death time, date, location, and precise numbers of minutes of suffering before exiting into oblivion.

“The one with a tongue of fffire,” snickers what I guess is the bony Arena.

“Just go.” My push causes her to grunt, and I can't hide this smirk of mine.

“Your name?”

“Spades,” she flatly says.

There is some snide snickering along with some eerie whispers that are too low to make out.

“She doesn’t know her name?”

“What a sssituation.”

“We can’t tell her. Twil change the course of fate.”

“You wanted to meet me? Are there any agenda items, then?”

“The brat’s got life!”

“Expected no lesss . . .”

There is a silence; these harpies adore cultivating tension. They do love to showcase . . .

“You are the one we’ve been looking for.”

“Galathena needed . . .”

“The missing piece. Yesss.”

Arena chuckles loudly, eliciting a row of *shushes* and other ushering. These ladies are nothing but bicentenary children.

“You are the trigger!”

“The catalysssst . . .”

“In her death, a new tomorrow will be born.”

Death!

“Rubbish!” I shout, my nails daggering my fistful palms. “She did not ask for this!”

“Son of Galathena, it has been foretold.”

“The one who will restore balance. Give a fighting chance for Galathena’s sssoul.”

“Soul?” The bird is perplexed. But she won’t be for long.

“Alpha, would you show her?”

There’s a sunk-in level beneath the priestesses’ walled thrones, and as I lead Spades down some spiraling stairs, I catch, “Why ‘Demon Ghost’?”

I inhale deeply, concentrating on my footsteps, trying not to fumble as memories cut through my mind, visions I’m unable to carve out of me. “We were the last standing pack.

The Star Alliance had purged the planet of most others . . . I guess they came back to finish the job.”

Her grip around my hand tightens. I grip hers harder. Little wolf . . .

“Forget I asked, Kilian,” she bursts in my back.

I look over my shoulder. There’s a look of trauma on her face. Lips scrunched and her complexion paler than a moon shade.

I smile. “I’m good with it.”

And I swallow when my gaze returns to the path, concentrating on the stoned steps, the gleaming mineral embedded in the walls, and my destination.

As we move further along, ever deeper into the mountain’s depths, I continue, “Back then, when they took you, the only one to return to the Temple was me. The sole survivor aside from the priestesses. Apparently, the Star Alliance didn’t know about this place of worship. Moorena and her sisters must have been looking down from their mountain perch and saw me from afar, dodging blasts from a squadron of spaceships. I’m a fast runner. Besides, my features stray quite a bit from other wolves . . .”

I exhale painfully. “The sisters witnessed only one wolf pawing their holy grounds that day, comforting me as they could. I can let you imagine the motherly words that came out of their wrinkled mouths.” What is faster than wind, has fur more diaphanous than air, and carries horns . . . “All the answers I gave them were wrong. They were hysterical. ‘Tis a Demon Ghost! For to survive those demons, one must be one or dead.’ Moorena then granted me a pat on the head, and ever since, this name has been following me like the plague.”

“What about the others?”

Curious wolf . . . finally showing interest in your pack.

“Those mutts are the last of long-gone packs, survivors like us.”

“How did they find you?” she huffs behind me.

I shake my head at how fast I'm going.

“First, you save one life. Then two save two other lives, and so on and so on . . .” I finish this with a snigger, taking stock of what it means to be alpha. “We salvaged whatever tech we found that wasn't destroyed and rebuilt the pack. It's not perfect, but it's worth everything.”

Spades lets go of my hand. I halt, my triggered heels spinning for me. Any loss of contact with her brings about uneasiness. Trying to locate her was one thing. To keep her close . . . never to lose her again is hard-won . . .

There's a draft streaming across this vaulted tunnel. It's carrying her hair, stretching it endlessly. Threads flutter, swaying from side to side. She's a bloody enchantress. I retrace my steps, reaching out to touch her. Cradling her cheek is not enough, and soon, my fingers go astray. A couple ripple over her generous, heart-shaped lips . . . sending her bottom lip to softly bounce.

With digits still resting between her smile, this temptress decides to utter my name.

And I scald.

This ricura grasps my other hand and sends me into a galaxy of unknowns. Those eyes of hers . . . I can't help but run a thumb under one.

“I'm sorry, Kilian.”

“Don't be. That's life. It's beautiful. It sucks. It takes . . . and gives.”

On tiptoes, Spades rises to my face. “What did it give you?” Her whispering voice comes forth, erasing this thin line between us.

I really want to clear this chit-chat out of the way. My eyes glaze down her little body and hover over her generous hips. Those curves . . . I smirk at them. “Your well-rounded ass.”

“Well-rounded what?”

I tilt my head to one side, mentally taking notes about her poor hearing. I glance down at her, fixing my hands on each

side of this narrow tunnel. Her nose crinkles up like a hissing tigran. I love it. My gaze deepens as I hunch over her, doing my best to ensure she hears it this time, “Your. Generous. Meaty. Ass. I. Could. Eat.”

An intriguing snort along my cheek goes jabbing my chin as she swirls her head to face me.

“What’s the fuss?”

What is the fuss! I straighten, putting on a casual demeanor, though my eyes narrow to such animosity.

Spades is cultivating this deadly silence to perfection, profoundly frowning at me as she masters a newly acquired skill: mutism. Did I say something wrong? From the way she’s chewing on her left cheek, I must’ve. And possibly I did from how she’s taking a teapot pose, an aggressive hand clamping her waist.

Women! They are a hermetic mystery way deeper, colder, and more hostile than a black hole.

After giving me the most ludicrous silent treatment, Spades spits, “Keep moving and take me to wherever you’re taking me.”

One of my eyebrows goes astray, arching at her bluntness. Better not to ask why or what. I can sense Spades’ anger flaring up, and I’m still learning my way around her temperament. It’s a tough challenge by itself, and I’m unsure I can handle it.

“Whatever you like, fruitcake . . .”

Her inaudible cusses cut short.

I turn and find Spades with her shoulders slumped. In fact, all of her muscles seem to sadden. “This place . . . I . . .” The girl flashes me a look of stupefaction, a deep crease forming at her brow.

Seeing her troubled eyes scanning the area over and over, my lungs jam at once from a rush of air that refuses to flow out. Maybe this is it. Maybe she remembers. There is a light walk between us. I only end it when my body folds over hers,

and my whisper does the same against her temple. “This is why we fight.”

Before us, a soft water ocean splits into infinite rivers. Spades can't know this, but it spreads over the entire planet, and only a thin layer of crust covered in sand hides it from the world.

She's gonna love this. In the dark, I wander along the underground shoreline, looking for a very precise stone: it must be round and flat, with smooth edges.

I look down and smile. This yellow quartz at my feet should suffice.

“Spades, watch this.” I crouch and send this stone rushing across the tranquil surface. It ripples five times before sinking into the unknown.

The liquid responds to my intrusion and begins emitting an eerie blue and purple glow as the immersed crystals awake.

Beneath the surface, an array of giant translucent blocks lit up in the thousands, highlighting the silhouette of aquatic life and valcons, one of my favorite underwater creatures. They have pectoral fins wider than jet wings, giving them the appearance of flying serpents.

Bathing my eyes in this liquid dream, I think aloud, “It's those crystals we fight for. They keep this ocean alive. Keep us alive. As for Daryl, he wants more than just those crystals.”

As if reading me, Spades finishes my line. “El Mar de las Mil Estrellas . . .”

Fuck, she does remember. She blinks a couple of times and shakes her head. I've got to take it easy on her. She drops her gaze to the ground, nodding.

“He wants the water, Spades. The most precious of resources.”

Her legs buckle, her expression collapsing before my eyes.

Swiveling on the grit, I fly to her.

“I've got you.”

I have her. Her emotions, her raised skin, I've got all of her shaking being.

I hold her firmly as she kneels to the ground, my body joining hers. Whatever she is mulling over, I have her in my grip.

“Little wolf . . .”

“My mind is going crazy, Kilian. I don't know what's going on.”

I sit on my knees and cradle her with might, keeping this bird in a cage of my arms.

In response, she grabs my arm hard. My chest sinks at the pain she's trying to alleviate. Shutting my eyes won't change anything, my silent breath neither, perhaps not even my words, but what else can I do?

“It's okay, Spades.”

I wish every kiss landing on the soft crown of her head was one less tear she'll ever shed in her life. Nothing makes me feel worse than watching her suffer a pain I cannot bear in return.

My hand flits above her skin, brushing a finger over her Valkyrie tattoo.

“You have the heart of a fighter,” I melt this whisper into her ear like it makes my head haze.

“I'm a runner, Kilian.”

“Yeah . . . that too. Girl, you sure have legs, and don't get me started with those wings of yours . . . At what age did you learn how to fly?”

“Fourteen.”

“That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“You pilot like a hormonal lunatic.” The lady bites into my palm, and I laugh painfully. “Biting the hand that fingers you?”

“Kilian, let’s pretend you didn’t say that.”

There is a pause.

Followed by spasms and a few chuckling squeaks.

“Say what already?” I tease.

“*Stap!*”

My head falls as I follow her nectarish scent, and drawn to her, I can’t help but trap this ear that’s too close not to nip at. I keep her tip between my teeth. If what I felt was hunger, she’d already be bone gleaming . . .

In a scoff that’s more like a laugh, she shrugs away. Despite that, I bring her face back and keep it against my chest. The pretty wolf can disguise her frayed nerves by relenting her heart pace, but she can’t dupe me. People are so good at hiding their monsters these days; it’s a knack to decode one’s garbled mental script. The good news is I’m a nerd to all things ciphers . . . My fingers entangle behind her nape, my chin resting on her head as she quiets. As I gaze at the dormant waters at the other end, pangs begin rumbling in my chest. I want her to know it. Keep it in mind.

So my murmur insists on it, “But you have the heart of a fighter. I want you to never forget that.”

“Forgetting seems to be my alias, Kilian.”

My lips crack at this nutty comment, and, shifting position a little, I grab her head in a clamp and tilt her brooding face up to meet mine. “Come on, Spades. Your ticker is a torch. Don’t let some breeze snuff it out.”

To this, Sunshine shies away and buries her chuckle in my chest. “Ticker . . .”

She doesn’t know what a ticker is?

I clarify. “Your organ.”

“That’s very medical.”

The giggle that follows is like uncontrollable contagion, and as I dissolve into laughter, I repeat, “Organ.”

“I know what a ticker is!”

As Spades looks away, I wipe away a forgotten tear of hers. She’s allowing too many soundless seconds to exist. I slant my head to the left and draw her chin close to mine. Our gazes do more than meet; they defy each other. She holds steady. I won’t submit either. The glow reflecting in her eyes . . .

She’s never been more beautiful . . . I know exactly how to uplift her.

“You know how to swim?”

She looks at me with those impossible eyes, and I guess it’s a no.

“I’ll hold you. Come . . .”

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-SEVEN**

SPADES PANICS AS WE PICK OURSELVES UP, STUTTERING, “I’M- I’m not a fish, Kilian. Really. I’m seriou—”

“Shh . . .” My chest throbs with a savage want to kiss her.

Soon, the animal inside me takes over, and swimming no longer matters.

It’s like my whole body is telling me to sully the girl as I draw a neat line from the corner of her mouth to the middle of her chin. The salt of her skin is turning my cock into stone, and as I kneel, my tongue races past her belly to this place I need to reveal.

“Aren’t these holy grounds?” she sniggers, her hands making love to my scalp, her fingers kneading into my hair like she could be handling something else . . .

Pulling her pants slowly down her legs, I press against this place and speak to it, “The only grounds I wanna worship, Spades, are yours.”

The moan that she frees as I run over her pink sails stiffens not only my tongue but burns my cock so much it aches.

“I wanna taste you,” she breathes.

She doesn’t need to ask me twice.

Immediately after stepping out of her boots, my hungry self guides us toward the shore, the small waves soon lick her ankles. There is warmth in this ocean, but it doesn’t compare with what’s pulsing between us.

My tongue obsesses over her hips, my hands grasping her love handles, enticing her knees to give in.

I growl when I meet resistance and this wolf giggles, yet she soon submits when my teeth snarl.

“Whatever you desire, Kilian . . .” she drones.

“Desire, girl, is your second name . . .” My knees grate against the sharp stones as I rush toward this fire goddess.

My actions seem out of control, governed only by impulses.

If that doesn't add more fuel to the torch that I am, the scent of her arousal rumbles through my brain like a furious gust. The lady's not in heat.

She's in flames.

And bearing my body tightly against this woman, only her moans engulfing my mouth, makes me realize how bestial my grip around her neck is. I find myself fisting her hair, roughing her nape as I sink deep into the cavity of her mouth.

“I want you to lose yourself . . . inside me,” her voice quails while I move her head as I wish.

She is this mouth-watering candy I can't stop eating, and because of this, I need to swipe over every gum, tooth, and tongue.

We stagger on our knees, only our lips striking each other, giving us a semblance of balance. Yet, I keep swaying forward, for Spades's moans are weighing heavily on my cock.

“Alpha, remember when I said I wanted to treat you right?”

My nibbling teeth stop as I chuckle, “I do . . .” And she did. Spades gives me *head* like no other ... in a dark alley, behind a jet ...

Taking my time, my hands pinch the hem of her T-shirt, dancing it up her perfect body. My lips don't want to separate from hers. And only when I have no choice do I leave them to pass the collar over her head.

As soon as the top flies off, I shove my demon to the ground and straddle her. Spades huffs, a smirk tainted with glimmering kiss-prints.

“And I also remember you wanting to go harder . . .” my voice rasps.

This girl’s pounding chest hypnotizes me, my hands blazing down her as my gaze melts on her tits.

I don’t waste a minute. My teeth crash on one of them, and as Spades quivers from the cool of my saliva, I capture her nipple.

“Harder, yes.” At the sound of her whisper, I close my eyes.

But when I open them again, fuck is my vision messed up. With Spades’ parted lips, I can’t look away.

My fingers reach for them as two fingers of my other hand dig into her core without a proper introduction. I’m taking her temperature, deepening into her tight body as she whimpers across my fingers. I want to be everywhere . . .

Like a snake, her tongue latches on them, choking my name on my digits as others flicker inside her.

I’m about to fucking implode.

“You are like a little fish. Look at you, gasping for air.” My breathing teases as Spades vocally responds to the flesh I put into two of her holes.

Below me, her walls are swelling, my fingers tenderly embraced by her seeping muscles. I’ve got a feeling Spades likes her tits rolling between my teeth.

She mutters a curse that straightens my cock like a bar of steel. “Wolf, fuck me!”

Fuck, I will.

Soon, her cunt starts strangling my fondling. She’s not orgasming like that; I won’t allow it.

I pull my fingers out and taste her. She’s the very essence of sex. And from then on, she can count on two fucks every

day. It's a promise I'm ready to keep.

She pulls my hand away and whispers, "My treat."

Her legs latch around my waist, but that's not how I intend to take her.

And neither does she with me, apparently. With the strength of a warrior and my willingness, this feline shifts our position in her favor.

A Valkyrie is mounting me, wheels of green flames staring into my soul as my back cools against a beach of stones.

My standing cock thinks it's going to enter *Inaland*, but it's wrong.

Spades slides down my waist, and as I lean on my elbows, her gorgeous face blows my mind away. She's licking her smirk, eyes shining like crystals.

The gods are with me. The fuck they are. Behind my cock is a woman loading my cannon, her fingertips sending a shiver down my thighs. These goosebumps go viral, spreading up to my scalp.

My groan escapes when I fixate on her lips: they pout at first, and then, a tongue comes out of them. It laps over my tip, gliding around it, measuring its circumference. She's testing the field.

She winks at me with such haughtiness that I want to slap her depraved ass. I would've already if my hands could reach it.

And then, as if nudging my cock wasn't enough, she starts to nibble, shyly licking its agonizing head. I feel like ice cream, wondering if that could not be the best life of all—to melt in her mouth.

"Spades, you are a good girl . . . a very good girl."

This feral beast slinks my cock inside her mouth with such haste she could terminate this session in one stranglehold if I don't keep my focus.

And down it goes into her throat, its head vibrating to the songs of her gasping vocal cords.

This predator is sucking me deep, slurping my load like a cannibal.

A burning coil spreads across my crotch, down my thighs, as she plays with my balls. Juggling them with one hand, she's leaving me no respite—her other rubbing my member in long strokes.

She's sucking so well, lapping her tongue around my rim, that I groan a second time. I can feel my cum building inside me—vaporizing!

My fingers fork into her hair, helping her with a cadence that will soon free me.

There's a whimpering in her gags, the sound of suction meddled with moans, my own breath jerking from her unforgiving clench.

“Cough!”

I pull her hair, her head swinging right up as my cock springs out of her mouth. She needs a bit of air.

There's a blush mantling her cheeks as she openly drips with lust.

“Deeper,” I growl.

I'm beyond gone. All I want is to let loose my cock in Spades' body, no matter the hole.

She tilts her head, her lips brimming with my meat. “Yes, Alpha,” she mouths on my tip.

Her emerald eyes stare at me longingly as her mouth gloves my cock so fucking slowly . . .

While she stares at me intently, my cock disappears in the heated cave of wonders that is Spades' throat. And only when her lips touch the skin of my crotch do I realize how far I reach inside her.

Back and forth she goes, tears strolling down her cheeks from the strain of my length.

Something sparks in me, and my hand uncontrollably smacks the crown of her head, for this mouth-fucking session is heaven.

Santa fuckin' Lunas! My cock detonates.

Thank the gods it's just a dick, not a gun, or she would already have a hole in her skull.

It swells into her mouth. I savor the sensation we both share in this warm thickness. And my hazing self squints when her lips tighten around the head. She's the hungry kind that doesn't leave crumbs . . .

And as she swallows my cum, she plants her acid almond eyes on mine, killing me with one look.

"I went deep this time," she purrs with a smile.

At that, my head drops.

Here I am, wanting to ravage her, and she just played me the other way around.

A brutal retaliation is on the way . . .

Bip.

Spades stares at my com-gear strapped on her wrist. I'm so engrossed in this woman that my bell only rang ten minutes after I started racing across the desert. I never go anywhere without it; even if that'd mean carrying it between my jaws . . .

"Red Crotal to Alpha. It's Pallamir's fleet. Please come!"

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-EIGHT**

THERE'S A CHILL RUNNING DOWN MY SPINE. IT REACHES MY feet, shuffling in the sand from vertigo. Down this giant dune, Kilian's men encircle us by the thousands.

He stands proudly before them.

My alpha.

He's wrapped in a black combat suit, his helmet tucked under his arm, dark red paint slashed across his face, bearing the markings of a fierce warrior.

I watch Kilian's arm pull a box out from the shadow of his vest.

He strikes a match, phosphor rubbing against the matchbox, fizzing my ears as the stick ignites.

Howling and cheering engulf the night as he tosses the match into a heap of carts and flammable debris.

Across the desert, dusk, and Galathena, Kilian rules my heart.

He has all of me.

With a mighty hand in mine, he steps forth—the flames shooting for the sky, glowing gold in his eyes.

And then, a smile draws on his fire-licked face. Soon follows words, growling in echoes against Tirlem Mountain. "Wolves of The Sand Rose Pack, tomorrow marks the beginning of a new era, one of our own! Tomorrow, we rejoice with kings and queens, sink our fangs in our enemies' skin, and feel their last breath rush as we become *alive*! Let us forge

the way, one of justice. Tomorrow, our enemies will watch us rise! They will watch!”

A loud thrum emerges from the crowd, and in unison, these wolves war cry, “*Vu-raaaaah, vu-raaaaah, vu-raaaaah!*”

I can’t help but think this bonfire is an omen to what awaits us. It’s a matter of hours now. As drums and strange tribal music sound across the wind, I think of the bombs about to fall on us.

Pallamir’s fleet was spotted near Quamire. The spaceships seem to be waiting, perhaps for King Daryl’s armada . . .

“So, this is it. You bring me to your priestesses, shove some cryptic omen in my head and a dick in my mouth, and as soon as we’re back, we party till we die?”

I’m contemplating this massive blaze taking shape, my feet sinking into the sand. To be honest, the whole of me is sinking. Not in the sand. Inside.

“I said we would celebrate our latest victory, and that’s what we’re doing,” Kilian whispers.

The iris of his eye resembles the flames, red gems appearing against the dark. In every way, he lives up to his nickname: the Demon Ghost.

This very demon glides a thumb under my wet eye, the smoke running between us, confusing my spleen with burning stings. The gusts are violent tonight, and as the elements blow against my back, I bury myself in Kilian. I’m trying not to wince, and I’m trying to maintain my brave soldier persona, as Rio likes to say. But I can’t. And as much as I want to hold them back, my thoughts whisper, “My life will end tomorrow.”

Arms want to make me believe it’s not the case. They press down on me, ensuring I stay against this endless source of warmth.

A murmur touches my lips. “No one will die tomorrow. I’ll be your watchdog, bodyguard, and shield, little wolf.”

I don’t need a protector. I need a fucking jet! “Why don’t we fly away? Hide in the Demeter?”

My thoughts are spinning again. I push myself away, a strong urge to howl at the three moons above us.

My wrist is immediately snatched. My heels whirl in the sand, and soon, my chest bumps into Kilian's.

"The Demeter was *locked* by three Pallamir warships two hours ago. Laura and the rest of the passengers have already been evacuated. If we go there, we die," he grates.

"They are going to make a big hole, like a massive crate, stupid wolf!"

"Spades!"

Kilian's losing it. He's full of ticks. Scratching his head every two seconds, shaking his wrist, chewing his lip like it's a constant itch.

I knew it. He knows it's over.

But then, the finger sliding down my nose bridge deflects my stress.

"We'll fly in *ghost mode*. It's familiar territory for us. The crevasses and the canyons. Please, Spades, have hope."

He ends his words in my mouth, shutting down my own.

Hope may not be in my hands, but a drink sure would be good.



KILIAN LEFT ME FOR SOME SOCIAL ALPHA CHIT-CHAT WITH HIS gammas, and here I am, left to hunch over a metallic board temporarily serving as a bar, my feet submerged in grit, boots somewhere, probably lost under a mound of sand. What? I love the feeling of sand under my toes. I mean, who doesn't?

They drink *Cadonite*, an alcohol that's as old as the world, distilled from recycled water and macerated roots of

a *Mustar* plant that grows anywhere it's seeded. Hats off to the savant who created the Mustar. Because now, the whole galaxy can get squiffed no matter the planet or conditions.

“Spades . . .”

I turn my tired head to the left. “Hi, Joy.”

“What’s with the long face?” she says, snatching my cup away from my weak grip.

“I’m ecstatic, can’t you see? We won a battle. Isn’t it great?”

“I know,” she chuckles. “If we celebrated every time we won a victory, Pallamir would be an all-night club.”

Our sniggers align into one.

But they don’t last.

“The crew is leaving. Just came to say goodbye.” Joy’s voice is broken but not as much as my state.

Her words just shattered a place in me. Its scope is so broad that I am still trying to pinpoint where the pain comes from.

Leaving . . .

“So, you’re feeling some heat on approach and let the wingless die in the sand? Way to go, Chimera . . .” Fuck.

In my cup, my eyes find refuge, the liquid clearer than air, like Joy’s rationale. Who could blame the Chimeras for wanting to live for another day? Certainly not me.

Joy’s left cheek is sucked in. There’s no need for guilt, girl. I get it.

“While I was fiddling with my jet, an order came through. Alpha Hayden wants us to return. On ship thirty-two, to be precise,” she says, turning her head upward.

“Joy, you *do* know you’re going to be arrested, right?”

“He’s our alpha and always will be. Orders are orders.”

Pfft, wolves and their loyalty . . . Thank goodness my relationship with hierarchy isn’t like theirs.

Uncomfortable laughter follows. “We’re going to try to play the *rescuing-your-daughter* card. It will work.”

“Well, good luck with that. The old man wants nothing to do with me.”

“Keep the faith, Spades,” she says, leaving me with my last, lone self.

“Wait!”

My sharp intonation catches her eye. “What is it, Spades?”

I can feel her heart hanging in the air. Count every ragged exhale.

I’m aching.

United, we said.

The word forever is part of our creed . . .

Twelve years.

Twelve years of training, entering the Chimera squad, and fighting together.

A team. Flying as one.

It’s all I know.

Airborne . . . we danced among the stars.

Together.

It’s all I know . . .

And I watch it go.

**CHAPTER
SIXTY-NINE**

“WHAT A RIDE IT’S BEEN WITH YOU.” I TAKE IT REAL SLOW. I’m not fragile and composed. I’m fucking breaking down.

She stalls.

I will never see her again.

The glimmers forming in Joy’s eyes show she may already know.

She brings a clenched fist to her blazoned chest. “Chimeras never die. They fly forever in the endless skies.”

She turns and walks away, to never look back.



I FREE A *NOT* SO LIBERATING EXHALE, HALF MY LUNGS suffocating from a tight throat. I’m still in the same place, soaking in Cadonite . . .

Damp skin skims mine. It’s soft and cold, probably from the wind. Red Crotal . . .

I take in her scent without making eye contact. At this point in the night, I’m the drunkard who just wants to be left alone.

As she mirrors my posture, forearms crossed on the bar and presumably gazing at nothing, Nathair sighs. “I still think

about the old days when stories went the same way, and we had time to waste. Now, places keep changing names, renaming areas that used to be streets. Bomb sites that were once villages . . .” I’m on her. Watching her straight, unblinking stare, and then I slide my eyes to where her lips quiver out. “Tanis . . . another memory lost in this shitty vacuity of desolation.”

I turn to this woman, her snake tattoo eating her smile. Kilian’s eyes often sparkle with a similar sadness. I had to ask, and he told me. So I know the answer already . . . But when I see Nathair grieve like this, I need to go slowly, probing her pain . . . try to take it away. I know by experience you need to voice these out . . . or maybe she doesn’t want to, and I’m wrong. I don’t know, but anyway, I ask, “Your broth—”

“My twin,” she cuts in, sharpening her broken eyes on me. “Do you mind, honey, if we don’t trudge on this now? I’m not feeling it,” she drawls, the shine of a tear dreading the moment. “Kilian’s been playing mummy with me, and it’s not helping. Nothing can,” she wheezes before taking a sip of liquid courage, and from the way her breath harshens, it’s like fire.

I was so very wrong. My lips are so pinched not even a spreader tool could open them, and only when the rim of my tin reaches them do I allow a tight, near nonexistent slit to set on fire whatever tenth-rate words might still be down there.

My beating heart, going more than jelly, is racing at triple speed right now. I’ve never been good at giving cuddles of this sort. And so I won’t. There’s this knack I don’t have in me when it comes down to those situations. The nurturing gene is obviously missing in my genotype, and by no way do I want it to show. What I mean is that finding the right words is not difficult; it’s just unattainable.

Maybe I have some, like, “It’s going to be okay, Nathair.” That’s the only line I can come up with. Of course, I’m not going to say this joke when we all know it’s not going to be okay for any of us. I just need to, maybe, I don’t know, kill the subject. *Gods, you fucked up, Wren. No pun intended either!*

Slit your throat already. Maybe I should. But tomorrow is already Judgment Day . . . so why rush things?

Anyway, speaking of rush, there's no doubt I've used all my bluntness quota in one thought . . . Argh . . .

Come on, girl. Right now, it's not about you; it's about Nathair. Here I go, then . . .

I take one of those breathy flat, toothy smiles that screams "have mercy on me" and rust out, "You're not dancing with a mutt?"

My voice is husky from the liquor. I've been indulging in this Cadonite for the past thirty minutes. It dries my throat so much that I'm dehydrated. So here I am, quenching my thirst over and over again . . .

"I was, but a lone wolf caught my attention. I took pity on it, and so here I am." Nathair is smirking at me, one eye closing with friendliness.

I would have never guessed that this girl who was making drills into Sweet Shooter was the friend I'd been seeking for so long.

But who cares? It's too late now.

"Girl, tell me your problems," I mumble.

"I have none."

"I can tell you have a lot on your mind . . ." The war paint on her face is fading with tears. She can't hide that. The girl is wasted.

"None of that matters *anyway*." Aye, beyond the shadow of a doubt . . . "And certainly not as much as you." She dangles a bottle in front of me and sniggers, "Here, let's drown them, shall we?"

"Or us," I simper.

"Or us."

"Let's drink ourselves to death. I'm dead anyway."

“You went to the temple?” she asks, knowing well I did, and as she does, this faker refills my cup right up. What a friend, indeed.

Anyway, I nod.

“Sometimes these three oldies say stuff, and it’s all very metaphoric. Please don’t take it too literally. They’re just a bunch of old *decrepits*.”

Nathair is feeling chatty tonight. It might very well be the most extended conversation we ever had.

“Then, why do you worship them?”

“Our priestesses can see the future. Rather than solving issues, they empower us to *solve* them for *ourselves*. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“Are you all churchgoers around here,” I sneer.

She’s gazing up at the dune, smoldering her eyes on the bonfire. And after letting seconds run between us, she mumbles, “There’s nothing wrong with having faith.”

“I prefer to trust fate,” I echo in my can.

Nathair’s face darkens. “At least you get to spend your last breath with your mate.”

“My mate . . . Kilian? I never had the *Calling*.”

“What?” She looks stunned.

It’s no secret.

“No,” I flatten out.

I wish Kilian were my true mate so damn hard. But no. He’s not.

“Well, that makes two mateless she-wolves among a thousand men. How unlucky can we get?” She’s giggling her drunkenness out like it’s frigging cute.

So cute that I can’t take my eyes away from her. “It’s not that true . . .” My gaze is drawn up her cheekbones. Nathair is as if she was born from marble, with a smudge of shadow slipping over her cheeks. Finally, I manage to rasp, “You

know, even if you'll never meet your mate, there's still a part of her in me. Jinx. She's yours." Phew, the alcohol is sure kicking in.

Suddenly, she's looking at me with full blue eyes like the Mil Estrelas—that was another fucked-up episode of mine, now that I think about it.

Nathair's soft voice trails off. "Jinx . . ." She pours me a glass and says, "Meeting you was fate."

My smile spreads across my face because, quite obviously, our exchange is going down the drain. "Where's your faith gone?"

"It's with me always." Her voice is no more than a murmur.

In a similar tone, I say, "I wish I could have yours . . ." I wish I could believe in better days. Fuck, I want to.

"I can share it," she purrs, turning her entire body toward me.

Why is the time so slow? I watch her hands draw closer to me and become frozen as they cup my head.

"Please do." The words that come out of me are not mine; if they happen to be, this thing happening here is new, and I have no control over it.

I can feel her lips gliding against mine, but then they creep back, making me flush all over.

"It's okay . . ." I hear.

In a playful game of threads, her fingers slip behind my neck, inviting me to her lips once more.

A twirl of softness invades my mouth as I try to process what is happening.

"What is the purpose of this cavity check?" The question comes with an intense masculine growl, and right now, I'm fucked.

Hand caught in the bag, we push ourselves away.

“Kilian . . . it’s-it’s—”

“Nathair!” I cut in. “You wanna run with Jinx?”

“With Jinx?”

“Yes.” I’m trying to avoid Kilian. But I can’t. Fortunately, I don’t seem to interest him.

With nostrils flaring in silence, he’s dead-eyeing his zeta like he’s about to kill her.

However, she doesn’t seem to care in the slightest. In fact, the more I watch her, the more her face glistens like a child under fireworks. And not a minute later, there she is, naked like a worm, shifting as I ponder the manner of things.

I guess it’s time to go jogging. And it’s going to be chaotic because I can’t tell my left from my right.

Jinx, you’re free to go.

Nathair, at last . . . I press my head against hers. I want to feel her, touch her, smell her . . .

“Where do you think you two are going?” It’s this man again.

In response, I turn my attention to him, my clapping snarl sharper than ever. “Alpha, you can’t catch us!” I channel.

We thunder off, beating the sand, our fur teasing each other as we take over the desert side by side.

“What? Hey!” the human spurts.

“Jinx, how far can we go?” *Nathair mind-links.*

Ablaze with brown fur, this perfect dove is the wolf of wolves, the heart of my heart . . .

The one for me . . .

At last.

“As far as you’re willing to go with me.”

Yelps, it’s all I have for her. Weak, but I mean weak, weak yelps. That’s how she makes me feel, and I don’t give the slightest shit.

I howl with joy as we blaze off into the night, reunited at last.

But then, another howl that is not mine ripples through us.

I twist my neck to find a massive white wolf tailing us, a chuckling groan huffing at each of his shuffling paws.

I internally grin.

He'll never catch us . . .

**CHAPTER
SEVENTY**

I HAD TO PHYSICALLY PULL THIS STUPID WOLF AWAY FROM Nathair before they sex-pounced on each other.

It was delirious. Nathair, blind drunk, zigzagging in the desert to nowhere while I'm wrestling with a wolf half my size, trying not to kill it.

Fuck, did it have might!

The idiot bit my snout. If it weren't for Spades, I would have snapped Jinx's neck.

I had to suffocate this feral creature to get it to shift back into my girl.

Now, I'm trying to walk straight, my legs struggling to carry me back to my quarters.

"On the left, Nathair." Of course, she's going to the right. "The other left, woman!" Could someone please tell me why I have to live so far up this cavern?

As I'm goading a drunk woman home, another one rambles Spanish in my arms. "Es que te amo tanto no lo puedo ni explicar."

I stagger from what I hear. Spades, if you knew . . .

There are too many thoughts to think deeply about. I'm so tired, internally receding, fear latching onto my bones at the idea that Spades could get hurt. The alcohol in my blood feels heavy, but as I lower my head to take in her scent, this wolf here makes the weight disappear.

I rasp over her lips, “Spades, quiero que sepas esto. Fue fácil para mis ojos encontrarte y difícil para ellos dejar de mirarte.”

This girl. I can never avert my eyes too long from her. Never.

“Alfaaa,” Nathair drags out, *leading* the way up those god-awful twisty alleys.

I’m not sure if *leading* is the right word here. Trust me, she’s far from doing that. I’m nudging her back, pushing her forward with each struggling step.

“Hang in there, girl. We’re here.”

With an unconscious Spades in my arms, I have no option but to kick the door button . . . Or do I have other options? Like I care. I’m fucking incapacitated here.

Miserably falling on my ass as I do, Spades’ weight goes crushing my balls. “Mmmppffff!”

Keep it cool, Kilian. It’s all part of the game.

My doors still swipe open, and it’s a miracle, or I’ve got this martial art suppleness I wasn’t aware of. I die walking inside and crash like a brick on the bed.

“Here, pretty wolf. Hasta mañana!”

There’s some clanking behind me.

I can’t see a single thing. However, based on the sounds of falling objects, it seems like Nathair tripped over some hardware machines lying on the floor.

A journey from alpha to babysitter . . .

I shouldn’t have drunk that last glass, and, oh, man, that midnight run was a mistake. It just accelerated the full effect of it.

“Nathair . . .”

I’m walking on my fours toward her. That’s how gravity is sucking down my muddled self. Or is it the whirlpool spiraling in my head?

“Girrrl, over here.”

My . . . I need to sleep.

“Alfaaa, my body won’t obey.” Giggling, she creeps on one side like a *craben*.

My tanked self internally sniggers. *She definitely has a penchant for the right . . .*

With the strength I have left, I seize the slithering red snake by the ankle and trail her to the bed. I can’t give a damn about carrying her. I’m pissed beyond human limits.

A huff later, aside from an extreme amount of sand, I’ve got two ladies in my bed. Which in my state is an achievement. Though my proud facial lines soon shrink as I watch these two females.

Yep . . . that makes the hard floor my bed, I guess.

I shift into my wolf; it’s my first time sleeping like one on a mattress. But hey, it’s fur and the closest thing I can get to comfort. I try inserting my paws between their limbs, hoping not to trample my female . . . and Nathair.

A little bit of my zeta gets shoved to the side. She can have a leg out of the bed. I have three-quarters of my body on the cold slate.

At least I can enjoy and cuddle with Spades. Squeezing my head up between the bed and her breasts, I lift her body enough to insert my snout between her two delicious *charlies*. Life.

I can hear the drums still shaking the air and pedestrians hushing as they pass my quarters walking home.

My body gets heavy.

I need to rest.

Tomorrow is a big day.

We’ll make it . . .

The jets are ready.

My men are geared and briefed . . .

“Alpha?”

This little voice isn't sleeping?

I groan, ensuring Spades' adorable heart gets my “sleep” vibes.

“*Alpha.*”

That, on the other hand, is not Spades' voice. I open my eyes as Spades pushes my head away. And as I release the bed to leave these mutts some space, I find two feminine silhouettes rising in the penumbra.

I immediately shift. “What are the both of you doing?”

I'm too messed up for some late-midnight talk. Really.

“You forgot to undress *usss*,” Nathair spurts.

Zeta honey, that state of yours . . .

“And to tuck us in.”

My, that purring voice of Spades' doesn't help.

“You want me to tuck you in?” What does she mean?

“Real hard like you know how.”

**CHAPTER
SEVENTY-ONE**

WELL, WHAT FOLLOWS, FOLLOWS . . .

Not a minute later, there's a thong between my teeth. My knees touch the ground as I help it glide down my stunning girl's legs. Streams of kisses wash over her skin, as my lips flow over and under her shivering thighs.

Spades, darling, you're going down.

My cock's head is barking at the moon impatiently. But not quite as much as my frantic but failing hands trying to lift her top.

However, I can always count on my general for a helping hand. I sense her legs on my back, and then I catch, "Hush, Spades, we're gonna take good care of you."

I don't know what the *we* implies, but if there's one thing I agree on, it's the *take good care of you* part.

To Nathair, I drizzle a snarly, "Thanks."

And before anyone knows it, I spin my bitch against a surface—I have no clue where we are—and drive my cock into her.

My Ace of Spades gasps when I hurl her head toward me, my fist firmly entwining her light umber threads.

To her *ahhhs*, I grunt against her small ear, "You little stray, feel this? It's going to straighten your spine . . ."

As I send the first thrusts, I shove her head down so her hips jolt against mine. Her moans dive deep into my desk. Yes, I think I'm fucking her against my desk. Her curses are flying

across the shit I've amassed over the years: maps, *Erio* compasses, and other tech of mine. I'm pounding her like my life depends on it, forcing her to sing as I ravish her.

But Spades' knees buckle, leaving my desperate cock to taste the air.

"Not enough strength in those legs, love? Don't worry about it," I husk, picking up her spent body.

Of course, my bladdered self stumbles, and here we go, speeding toward the floor. I blow out a stupid, "Shit!" and by a miracle, my hand goes cushioning her head as we hit the concrete.

Darling Spades slides up the mat, her eager hands tugging my hair as if she could pull me up.

"Kilian, you clumsy dog," she mutters.

"You're going to feel how clumsy this dog is . . ." my mouth growls, crawling up her curves, not forgetting a little lick up her channel. As I stream up Spades' body, my tongue indulges in more of her skin. I'm famished.

Soon, I reach her lips, and my hardened member reaches her entrance as well. And that's when we meet again.

Slowly, I enter my temple and start pumping my passion into her. The heat of Galathena sweats between us, my crotch tingling from the wet friction. I'm hazing up big time, my head spinning like a weathervane, yet the stealth my cock is made of tells me I've got some strength left. Better use it efficiently . . .

It seems Nathair needs to rest, too. She crouches down and sits in front of me, swaying before freeing an exhale. I could give her water, but I'm busy defiling my girl.

Why is Nathair's thigh so close to my head?

Kilian! Maybe you should ask yourself why you're doing Spades in the fucking room while your general watches?

I grunt as I look up. I can't see shit, but I feel her skin, all right.

Who told her she could rest on Spades' face?

I would slap the bitch out of her, but I'm weak, my cock too obsessed with the perfect mold that is Spades' cunt.

My lady's groans are muted, suffocated against the leaking lips of Nathair, who, on the other hand, is very talkative. "Sing louder, girl. Just sing louder!"

I don't know what's going on. But right now, it feels so right.

Although it's dark, I shut my eyes to the inevitable, while the scent of a familiar male invades my nose.

And then, the voice of a revenant tickles my liquor-doused anger, and from the coolness of steel pressing against my skin, I'm guessing there's a laser barrel aimed at my neck.

"Hey, buddy. I'm sorry to interrupt. But time is pressing."

**CHAPTER
SEVENTY-TWO**

“NATHAIR!”

“There’s too much blood!”

“Where’s she hit? Where’s she hit!”

“The heart.”

“The heart?”

“She’s going to wake up. She has to.”

“Is she waking up!”

“Hey, Spades? Spades!”

“Spades!”

“Spades? Wake up.”

“*Rah!*” I clutch my burning chest. *Oh, mierda infierno, que nos duelen!*

“She’s back . . .” This same voice chuckles hysterically. “She’s awake, although I’m not sure her brain sustained! She’s rambling some gibberish shit!”

“It’s Spanish, Grah! Asshole! Grrrn!”

Kilian?

I open my eyes, blur veiling my vision, and turn my head toward the sound of a fistfight. On the ground, I see a naked Kilian wrestling with . . . Krin? Isn’t he one of his gammas? They’re choking each other. This is surely not my typical rise and shine . . .

There's some crazy shit in the air, and it's not love. Flashes thunder across the room. We're being fired at?

"Hi, Daredevil, remember me?"

I gaze upward, and above me is . . . a fucking ghost.

Put a Madre . . .

Brown hair, golden eyes. That bitchy smirk.

"Bret?" Well, fuck. Galathena's Cadonite is really something.

I blink a couple of times when this ghost clutches my shoulders.

The fucker is real!

"Bret, you little scumshit!"

Next thing I know, my nails deep-sink into this traitor's eyeballs.

"Gahh! Spades, for the love of gods!" He snatches my wrists, plastering them against the mattress right up above my head. "Bloody Chimeras," he brambles.

With a hand rubbing his eyes, Bret aims like an irresponsible numpty and pulls the trigger, sending a blast of energy across Krin's skull.

The bastard collapses on Kilian, blood splurting all over the place like a broken sprinkler.

"Alpha Kilian!" I bark. "Alpha, get with it!" Kilian is frozen, Krin's crimson waterfall splattering on his face. "Alpha!"

Kilian finally turns to me and sort of wakes up from a fog of shock, shoves this butchered Krin to one side, and roars, "Let's gear up! Nathair, you know what to do!"

With Kilian back to his usual self, Bret gets to have all my attention. I spit all the rage I've got, and trust me, with this lingering hangover, my saliva must be acid!

"Woman . . ." Bret growls. "Forget everything."

He wipes the venom from his cheek and lowers his head enough to brush his lips against my ear. “It was all my fault. I thought it would be a good idea. King Daryl offered this treatment. Your dad wanted you to forget. Have a happy life. Something new. Erase your past. I was ridden with guilt to find out what it really entailed. I volunteered myself so you wouldn’t have to experience this alone.”

That monologue can’t be hurled at my face like that.

“Bret, do you really think it’s time to do this?” My tears are about to barge in any second now, and I won’t allow it.

“When is it a good time, Wren? If I’m not mistaken, I hadn’t time to talk through it with you after you shot a laser at my head,” he grates.

“Aren’t you supposed to be rotting somewhere, then?”

He sniggers, his ears turning a strange red hue. “Well, it’s a funny story, really.” Bret nods, a satanic grin slashing across his face. “Listen, right after you turned my brain into jam, I woke up, and guess what?”

“I don’t know. You brushed your teeth?”

“Wren.” His clasp just stopped inches from my cheeks. I think he was about to squeeze the pulp out of me, but he refrained. “My arm gets hacked off. So I passed out from the shock, you know, the usual.”

He then giggles for more. He’s not right up there . . .

“But, girl, I wake up again! And I’m burning, flames eating my body as I smell my flesh crisping!”

“What’s your point, Bret?”

“The point, Wren . . . is . . . how many times do I have to *fucking* die to get to you?”

“Well, I’d say three times?” I titter.

Gods, he’s heating up, his eyes steepening. He’s not going to shift for this? It’s ridiculous!

“Hey, triple O, need a gun?” Kilian says to Bret, breaking up this awful exchange.

Lords, thank you. My alpha's timing cannot be more perfect.

"There's more heading our way!" shouts Nathair from the back. "We need to move. Tirlem's under attack!"

Since when are we all friends? Is this another fucked-up dream of mine?

"Is this a custom from Galathena I'm unaware of? Ya know, blissing out, aiming shots at the sky kind of celebration?" I shout across the loud zaps.

"No, sweetheart! Bringing you *live updates* from the last rampart of a free Galathena!" she chuckles.

My, the girl is still damp from Cadonite.

"We were having quite some fun before this showstopper . . . em . . ." She stops and twirls her pistol with a finger in the loop, pinching her nose bridge, deeply thinking, or so it seems. "What's your name already? Ah, yes, Brat. Brat, here, needed a chat. Kilian and I were sort of more or less inclined, aside from a few fists flying here and there . . ." She cracks a smile, walks toward Kilian's famous wall, and hits the button.

As expected, shelves of weapons appear. She undocks a heavy machine gun from the charging station and continues, "But then a crystal grenade came to say hello. Next thing we know, Krin stands above your busted chest, a smoking pistol in hand." She pulls a few latches, winds up this weapon, and finishes with a wink, "You know the rest."

There's a throat clearing, and I realize Bret is in full bloom, a weird-ass smirk assaulting his face. "Erm . . . It's Bret, gorgeous. Bret."

Nathair throws him a glare of disinterest, so this fool says, "But for you, beautiful, you can call me anything you want."

"Do I look like I give a fuck?" she says, her hips swinging to the right, resting this fat gun against her shoulder. "Little shit," she then snort-mumbles, eyeing Bret from eye to toe.

And I'm just lying here on this, now that I look at it, blood-soaked mattress, straddled by Bret, listening to this confusing exchange taking place between him and Nathair . . . like it's normal.

"Little shit? I'm good with that. I—I kinda like the sound of it."

"Spades, is this dog really acquainted with you?"

Nathair, if only you knew . . .

Pushing him, I lift myself up. "He's not his usual self!" I say, my eyebrows crashing with dark interest.

"Spades, let your beta show you how we handle goddesses."

Ah . . . fuck. He's doing it again. Bret's a hopeless romantic. He just can't help it.

Nathair's composure slips, but not in the way I expect from her. As she gazes forward, she takes gulps of air, stroking her hair like a maniac. It's already flattened out, girl!

Suddenly, a metallic object rolls on the floor. My eyes dart to Kilian, who, rushing to his combat suit, stops to jump his troubled gaze to mine.

He shouts, "Crystal grenade! Cover your eyes!"

BAM!

"Spades!" Kilian sprints over to me, carrying combat gear in his hand.

Despite the situation being more than dramatic, I can't help chuckling as he grabs my foot. "I can change on my own, you know."

"Yeah . . ." His palms lightly press on my cheek. "Sure you can." he rasps, a little fear contaminating his gorgeous eyes. "Hurry now. We got to get moving," he says, shoving the suit in my arms.

I haven't finished zipping up my attire when we all stall at once. There's Hataro outside, and he's not in the best of company . . .

“Alpha! We have your beta!”

“What is your name already? I know Alpha Kilian doesn’t like unannounced guests . . .”

“Shut up!”

Hataro, boy. Just don’t play it that way. With despair in my eyes, I glance at Kilian. Bringing his index finger to his sealed lips, he edges closer to the entranceway—the doors ripped in half from a heavily crystal-charged rocket blast. I can only suppose this. I wasn’t very *living* when this happened . . .

Nathair’s whistle catches my attention, and I’m quick enough to grab the pistol she throws at me. I pull the slide and warm up this beauty.

Bret rolls to the left and crouches on the other side across from Kilian.

And I, well, I waltz out.

**CHAPTER
SEVENTY-THREE**

THIS BLOODY PSYCHO WALKS OUT OF THE PLACE LIKE SHE'S going to a fucking meet and greet. "Spades!" I fizz, my spit meddling with vowels and other drops of sweat.

The brat just glances at me like it's easy.

I sign two fingers to her underdog. Less than three seconds later, he reacts and begins shooting.

Through the sideway, I analyze my surroundings and aim. *You've got to do what it takes, right, man?*

My heels burn the ground as I speed out to join Bret's attacks, unloading my weapon on thirty-something soldiers. These are not Pallamir's soldiers. These suits and blazons belong to King Daryl . . .

As I dive-roll from a furious laser beam, I back myself against this new player, feeling quite cocky. *He's a good shooter, this lad . . .*

"Don't get shot . . . might traverse your organs, and I don't want a hole in my expensive suit," Bret snarks as his back jerks against mine from the drawbacks.

"I'm not used to getting holes in my body. You are," I joust across my blasts.

Bret sniggers faintly, and I don't know why but a simper escapes me.

"Switch!" he says.

The guy needs a reload. *Very well . . .*

As we change sides, my eyes dart to the left from a tigress's grunt.

Spades is covering my beta, and at her feet, a pool of guts and two dead soldiers lie. "Others are coming from the left!" she shouts.

"It's okay, Spades. I'll open the way." Nathair's knee hits the ground, dust bursting from the mini but firm impact. *Baby* on her shoulder, Nathair begins gunning down the enemy squadron, inching closer to us.

I swing my head down the cliff, reactor engines attracting my attention. My gammas are warming up the jets.

I guess this is it.

Spades, I've got to get her out of this hell hole.

The Temple . . . Yes! The Temple. I'll hide her there.

"Let's roll. I've cleared the way, guys," Nathair chants, nuzzling her weapon.

What a mother she'd be . . . I mean, who knows?

Here we are, jogging down these alleys, skipping as our watchful selves scan every inch of rock and angle.

Zap!

Zap!

Zap!

BAM!

BAM!

I look down at the airstrip. My grip latched over my laser gun is so full of hate I can feel the ore bend under my clench. *Relax, Kilian, two of your jets just went up in flames . . .*

There's a party down there, and my bones are telling me we won't be able to escape this. There's Spades' safety in my mind and those hags' omen infecting my thought process. *My men . . . there is no way I can leave them under fire.*

"To the runway!" I shout.

I halt, tapping Bret's shoulder for him to keep running, and hush to Nathair, her hand in Hataro's, "Stay together and keep the kid in check!" I save the best for last and capture this wild electron that is Spades. My keyed-up hands clamp on her shoulders, shaking them like maracas. "You irresponsible bi—"

"Bitch?" Spades is pouting like a sensuous witch, her irritated hip sway numbing my brain.

"No . . . I was going to say . . . biological wonder. What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking my chances, mi amor. You wanted to fight, so here I am, fighting." The girl is pale.

That spitfire attitude is gone. She talks Spanish more than she ever has. And there's a twinkle in her eye whenever I catch it. It could burst into a moon drop anytime . . . *Keep calm, Ina. No one is going to die.*

"I'm taking you to the Three Moons' Temple." My whispers are on her lips, her scent hazing my mind, her body against mine.

I want to fly us out. Fuck, I want to. But we would be taken down immediately. I can't risk it. No, I can't.

Zap!

Zap!

"Shit!" I tuck her under me, grab her hand, and fold my fingers so tight around hers that if she ever escapes, she will be missing a hand. "Stay behind me, understood?"

"Well understood, but not agreed!" she says coyly.

And then I don't know how I can explain this. My blood dries, and my veins shrink while my nerves burn down. This little piece of—of woman runs in the middle of this warzone, and I gasp. I was holding her so fucking tight!

In my pistol visor, I watch my shots slice through the shadows that want to devour her, red-lining the cowards aiming at her back. For the first time, my eyes are fixed on something other than the battlefield, watching this gracious

nymph dance across this blood-shedding arena. She's as supple as a grass blade, cartwheeling with one hand while the other fires shots.

My left eye is twitching wildly. *Maldita loca loba!*

ZAP!

ZAP!

ZAP!

The wolf within me erupts with anger, my teeth grunting at the tear in my suit. Containing a wince before it spreads over my face, I clutch my wound and look down to the sound of blood, dribbles of it splatting on the ground.

The glinting of the sun on these droplets catches my attention. *We're two miles from the cavern's exit.*

I can see the dunes from here.

Right, let's do it.

I follow Spades in this mess and cross the war field. Everyone is shouting, men on both sides falling, yelling, bright lasers streaking about my head.

My growl suddenly splits my vocal cords when a bastard hurls her to the ground. I'm about to send him to hell when this feral woman grabs his neck, and I have to blink twice at the sight of nails *wolwing* into claws. My breathless lips lift so slightly when they slice into this fella's throat, and a shower of blood comes spurting out of it. *Compa, that's a lot of blood.*

I'm feeling . . . engrossed. By what, it's still simmering as I try to think.

Mierda . . . There's a rolling head strolling past my foot as I run after her. But then I shake off this horror shitshow I just witnessed casually. My focus is on her and only her. And, gods, is this *psycho girl* swift, fast, driven . . .

And . . . hit!

Time for me stops, and only my lungs seem to function. "Spades!"

My eyes track her body as she flies across the tarmac, and I shiver when her head violently hits the ground. I shouldn't be shifting; my spacegear is a backup option if I ever had to fly us out.

But then my spacejets are being destroyed, and I've got a hole in my gear . . .

Even though Spades is hurt, the fire inside her rages as she continues to unload her pistol.

I said I'd be her shield. Fuck, Kilian!

Okay, time to bring out the big bad wolf!

My gammas take my shifting as a signal, and I can't blame them.

Soon, all my men turn into colossal wolves, their timing perfect as they surprise those assholes. There's a storm of growls, claws, and blood spurts.

I go for the kill, place myself above a moaning Spades, and gnaw at whatever scumbag crosses me. I spit a chunk of neck and take a glance under me.

"Kilian . . . I think I need a plaster," she shivers, smirking.

Shit! Her artery is touched. As much as our *Wereness* heals us. Hemorrhages are not a big favorite among wolves.

"Save the girl," shouts Nathair from the far end of the runway. Bret is helping her set up an automatic gunner. "We've got this!"

"We sure do, beautiful," my ears catch.

This Bret. I like him. He doesn't lose sight of what's important . . .

How I ache for my girl, watchfully scrutinizing our enemies approaching us. My fur reddens to a few shots, but I grind and bear it, my focus on this woman.

My only hope lies in the Temple. Spades must live.

Groaning at her, I lie flat next to her, my snout helping her onto my back.

Kilian, time to get those paws flying . . .

**CHAPTER
SEVENTY-FOUR**

MY GRIP ON KILIAN'S FUR IS TIGHT, BUT NOT AS MUCH AS MY jaw. He's sprinting across thunderbolts, his legs sharp barreling to the left, then to the right.

I can see the dunes defining themselves neater and neater, the sun's light dimming with each of his racing steps.

Something is wrong.

Galathena has no clouds.

It can't be more than noon . . .

There's a growl under me, Kilian suddenly jerking on the left.

"Kilian!"

He took a shot! Where?

Suddenly, I'm thrown to the side, and I would have fallen if not for my firm grip on his fur. I jitter again, the pressure of his hair in my clasp digging into my skin. Someone is gunning us down, crippling Kilian's gait.

"Stop!" I shout. But Kilian keeps running like he always has. "Stop! Stop running. Kilian!"

It doesn't matter how loud I ask, I know the man. No matter the amount of blood dripping down his fur. No matter his wheezing or his hobbling left paw. Kilian won't stop. He just won't.

The way I feel is hazing me. To lose him again . . . in an ugly war.

I don't know where we're going or if we can hope for a tomorrow, but solo sé que quiero ir contigo, Kilian . . . And only you.

I've been dying over and over, never understanding the value of a lost life. There was never an interest in it. Not as much as now, anyway.

The worst part of this is that I cherish my life more than I ever have. My life even has color now. And it bursts in jeweled tones with each smile Kilian gives, a kaleidoscope from under every fingertip, breath, and sound behind his chest.

But there is something frightening about this new concept, one of value, I mean. It's frightening because I could easily toss it away if Kilian had to die.

So easily . . .

My head lands in a place of safety between his shoulder blades and neck, and with my whole self being rocked, my eyes finally surrender. My leg doesn't hurt as much. Does it really matter?

Kilian's strides slow down. As much as I want to raise myself, my heaviness only allows me to roll my eyes up.

It's dark.

And then, Kilian breaks for good.

We're behind a dune, the wind blowing a bad omen toward us.

And as I manage to heave myself up, this fight in me dies. The horizon is darkened by thousands of spaceships veiling the sun.

From the color of those flashing lights blinking in the sky, there's as much blue as red. Blue . . . Pallamir's crest. The Blue Star I've been fighting for all my life.

A loud cutting sound strikes the air as two jets flash above us like furious rockets. They skim the desert, low enough that I recognize Rio and Joy's spaceships. They are scanning the area . . . readying bombs at the intended target.

My spine stiffens. We are about to die. It's a matter of seconds now.

Under me, skin tightens among growls. Kilian's body is shrinking. It does it until there's nothing between Kilian and me but human flesh.

The man flips me over, probing my leg. "The blood's clotting, little wolf."

Kilian stares down at me, my head warming to his strokes. "Forgive me, Spades. I should've listened to you . . ."

My hands shake, and they only stop when they cradle his cheeks, fear scalding my heart to see Kilian's bleeding body.

"Your Faith, Kilian . . . I need it." My lips tremble, anger sowing through me.

"It brought me to you, little wolf. And that's all that matters."

Withering, his caging arms vibrate from the overstraining effort. Having lost his strength, Kilian then drops onto the sand. "I'm okay. Don't worry about me."

Don't worry, he says . . .

Something in me suddenly ignites.

It is true.

I did die today.

Hope or not, my instincts are out of control. I'm ready to face it all for Kilian. He's outrun my fears, so why couldn't I outrun his?

The pain thundering in me won't stop me.

My hands thrust in the sand as I push myself up. I gotta keep running. Keep his faith alive.

"Spades!" Kilian shouts.

Spades?

"Spades! Please, stay hidden against the dune!"

Spades . . .

“Ina!”

This name?

I turn to face him, childhood memories bursting out of my eyes. And then, my tongue frees itself as if unbound from an old crumbling spell. “Kilian, eres ... la historia más bella que el destino escribió en mi vida.”

This feeling I thought I hardly tasted with Nara was just a little, it’s washing over me, stronger at each passing wave, warming throughout my body, my mind and soul altogether . . . It had never been her *calling*. It had been mine. One I once had a long time ago . . . My true wolf was howling it, over and over, and I never knew.

Walking lamely up the highest of dunes, I take in the deepest of breaths and release my wolf.

Me.

I uncover this wild skin I’ve been hiding for too long. White fur awakens from a long sleep, paws touching a desert it hadn’t in years.

And I howl like *never* before.

I want Alpha Hayden, my father, to see who I am—my true self.

I want him to watch me stand proud on the dune, watch me howl at the Three Moons of Galathena, how my fur and claws will never tire, for I am Ina, and bone-deep, I know, I am the Luna of the Sand Rose Pack. I can’t see the goddess, but I feel every recursiveness of her whispers, breezing across my fur, infusing her molten blessing under my paws, from her world to mine, howling her hastiness over my skin, singing my past . . .

Melodies, tunes of a destined path . . . My mind is whirling about them. My thirteen-year-old self . . . This song Kilian and I used to listen to while watching the sunrise. Images of a blurred teenage boy as I opened my eyes under the water. My first kiss . . .

My mate.

Kilian's wolf joins me, his head stroking against mine.

Ina . . . I missed you so much.

Te amo más que a mi propia piel, Kilian . . .

Our heads cradle against each other, knowing too well our fate.

The first laser beams blast across the sky, hitting the desert, a mile from us.

It works.

My father sees me . . .

The sun is long gone, obscured by this ominous dark mass that spreads for miles on end, but it won't change how I feel—proud.

A quiver of air escapes me as I take a peek above Kilian's back. Pallamir's ships are breaching King Daryl's perfect front line.

Silently, they hover over the desert, above our heads, as slow as the tear falling down my fur. And when the squadron flies over us, beyond the Tirlem Mountain, and turns their ships' noses to face King Daryl's fleet, I remember who raised me.

Smoke 'em and gas 'em, Winnie . . . I chuckle internally at my father's last words. My father smoked King Daryl, all right. My old man must have known the communication lines were compromised, and poor Bret must have been sent to localize me.

As I piece everything together, I start to see the big picture. My father's intentions were never wrong . . .

A father goes beyond blood ties.

It goes beyond progeny.

To think love is the key.

I was right.

It isn't the end. It's only the beginning. The battle has yet to come, and no matter the outcome, my faith in it has never

been so strong.

I am Galathenan. I am Alpha Hayden's daughter, a Chimera, but beyond all, I am found.

Beside me is my alpha, and together, we will win it all.

Some words I was once whispered erupt in me. Kilian's younger voice, stroking my ear with sweet nothings . . . I remember them well. But this time, these words are not sweet nothings, they are my everything.

Because *he* is the wind in my fur.

The earth below my claws.

And the moonlight in my eyes.

And as my head rests against Kilian's, I know nothing and no one can stop us . . .

My wolf tongue laps over his snout, and as I receive as many licks, I channel, *It's in your two suns that I rise, in those stars that I shine, and in your heart that I grow . . .*

RECLAIM ME.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hi, there!

This has been a wild ride for me and still is.

The independent publishing journey is like a trip into space. Not that I've ever been there ...

I mean it. It's a beautiful, scary place filled with wonderful people and weird aliens.

In addition to meeting friends, I was lucky enough to bond and create solid ties with some of the authors of the community.

And while I've embarked on a scary but thrilling journey, I never felt alone. There's no doubt that without their support and energy, the bad boy that is SpaceWolf would have never seen the light of day.

Yes, Kirsty, I'm using your words. And I'm going to start by thanking you. You may not know this, but you've been pushing me to go further with my stories. The amount of confidence I have is as small as an atom, and I couldn't have come this far without your help. I appreciate you realigning every sentence I've ever written. Thanks to me, your aspirin lives long and prosperous. The same goes for you, too, Jeanine. I can imagine you going through the pages like a roadrunner. I'm sorry for squeezing your brain juices in such a short period. But hey, you made it, and I cannot thank you more for it.

SpaceWolf embodies a little bit of everything I like—the stars, my kids, my husband, and all those chatty people in my head. Yes, I wanted to be an astronomer. But I can't align 1+1, so I had to stick with my weird, creative side. And if I don't pen it down, I can't see a reason for having one.

So, after writing about a little thief who gets into trouble with snake shifters, I began looking at the sky. While I didn't hear some howling cracking into the night's air, I still had this funky idea of mixing werewolves and spaceships.

And that's how SpaceWolf was born.

Skylark—the shy creature who doesn't want me to mention her real name—has been riding this rollercoaster with me since day one. From tears to laughs to tears to laughs, she never left my side. You might even find a bunch of her sentences in there, too. Ameira, your fight juices keep me going. I will never be grateful enough for the shoulder you give me to lean on.

I like to think SpaceWolf was made with friendship and love. And that's what this book's about.

Most importantly, I wanted to close a door in my life and open a new one, and this book allowed me to do that.

SpaceWolf doesn't always follow the rules. I'm not really good with those. I think Kirsty and Jeanine can testify to that. But when it comes to my characters, I don't know why but language is everything. And it is entirely personal. But sometimes, it's good to break some rules from time to time ...

And so, with coffee, I began breaking some rules on a piece of paper—or computer—and gods, do I love the word fuck.

Sorry, Mum.

I hope you enjoyed your spacetrip with Wren and Kilian!

Ekho Wildess



SPACE
WOLF
ECLIPSE

A SPACEWOLVES NOVEL

COMING 2024

To find out more about SpaceWolf, visit my social media pages or visit
ekhowildessauthor.com.

 [authorekhowildess](https://www.instagram.com/authorekhowildess)

 https://www.goodreads.com/ekho_wildess