

THE  
SCARLET  
SPHERULE

THE SKY SAGA 2

M.K. OSMUN

THE  
SCARLET  
SPHERE



THE SKY SAGA 2



M . K . O S M U N

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## BLURB

He deceived her from the start. Now, he's her only hope.

The Deserter:

To save her friends, Sky must trust a Rebel with more secrets than her and fight in the Wild's cages for supplies and weapons. But an old enemy thirsting for revenge has caught her in a trap. She's left with two choices: lose the fight and become a slave or win and get arrested by a Queen who wants her dead...

The Rebel:

Ryan can't leave Earth until he finds the evidence he risked his life for. Teamed up with a girl critical to his success, he manipulates her again to achieve his goal. But when his plans go wildly astray, can he save her from a trap he led her to, or will he be powerless to help?

The General:

After receiving a brutal punishment for letting Sky escape, the Warlord has given General Gray a second chance. He's forced to team up with another General who wants him dead to find Sky, only if he fails this time, his lover's life is forfeit. But will he be able to forsake his soul and sentence Sky to a fate worse than death?

# CONTENT WARNING

Hi Reader,

A **warning** before you start. This story is intended for mature readers. It is the second in a series and a part of a continuous story. So, the slight cliff hangers are unavoidable.

Triggers in this book are: graphic violence, swearing, references to and an attempted sexual assault, abuse, sexual situations, and gore.

A note about some of the characters: don't continue if you are not okay reading about kick ass females (and males) with gray morals. They do NOT always do the *decent* thing.

You've been warned.

One last note: For any who like tracking journeys on a map... I've taken a few liberties with distances and traveling speed. This is a science **FANTASY** set in a new world, so everything is different, and anything is possible.

If I didn't lose you, welcome, and I hope you enjoy the adventure!

## RECOMMENDED READING ORDER

The Sky Saga and Prequels

1. [FREE short story: Reliance Sky](#)
2. [The Cardinal Sky](#)
3. [The Scarlet Sphere](#)
4. [Prequel: Broken Sky](#)
5. [The Red Traitor](#) (Feb/March 2023)



*For Mummy*

*Thank you for reading all my stories and encouraging me to  
keep writing ♥*



ONE

# SKY



*“I don’t care if they call me cold. Emotions aren’t needed to survive the Wild.” ~ Sky Argo, Reliance.*

**S**ky sprinted through the forest, weaving around trees and bushes, determined to catch the damn alien darting through the woods ahead of her. She lengthened her strides, running faster than she ever had, but even with every cell in her body brimming with energy from an alien elixir he’d administered without her permission, she still couldn’t catch him. He had a completely unfair advantage over her with those little critters swarming through his bloodstream.

It had taken her a few hours to get used to the fact Ryan was a rebel from another planet and not a failed infected like herself. In hindsight, she should’ve seen it sooner, with his lack of survival knowledge and the astonishing speed he’d demonstrated occasionally.

They’d been running a notch slower than Sky’s sprinting speed for an hour, and she wasn’t out of breath. What the hell had Ryan fed her? She found herself not wanting to know. What mattered most was rescuing John and the rest of Reliance. She owed the people of Reliance for taking her in when she’d had nowhere else to go, and John most of all. He’d become family.

Ryan dropped back until he came level with her. “You’re kind of slow.”

She tripped on a rock and quickly righted herself. “You’ve got to be shitting me. Humans can’t run this fast for this long.”

“I’m aware.” He shot her a raised brow before weaving around a trunk.

Sky hadn’t told him about her mutant status, and she saw no reason to. She was sure Ryan knew there was something different about her, but he hadn’t pushed the issue, likely because he’d had secrets of his own, but now that his biggest one was out in the open, she wondered if he would drill her for hers.

“You’re not even out of breath.” She eyed him suspiciously. “How fast can you run?”

“I can maintain this pace for the rest of the day.” He pulled ahead.

The asshat had an annoying habit of weaseling his way out of answering her questions. Not that she was upset about the speed. At this rate, they would cover the fifty-mile journey in a few hours, and they needed to hurry. After finding out John was alive and being held captive by the Cardinals, along with the rest of Reliance, she’d wanted to race straight to them, but a rescue mission of these proportions would take planning and weapons. The latter of which they had none.

The alien and her had a deal. She’d help him infiltrate the base, and he’d find out where her friends were being held, but she had lost almost everything in their last encounter with the Cardinal soldiers, or protectors as Ryan called them. Even her clothes had been so badly damaged they barely held together. All they’d been left with was Ryan’s sling bag and blanket—both nanite-based. He’d siphoned some nanites from his blanket and constructed a new crop top for her, so she wasn’t flashing her bits through the rips in her shirt. To remedy their lack of weapons, they were on their way to the nearest town, The Wild, to get supplies, and the faster they got there, the faster she could rescue her friends.

He glanced over his shoulder. “Come on, Squanak.”

She ducked under a branch. “What?”

“Ah.” He sprang onto a six-foot-high boulder.

Sky slammed on the brakes, skidding across the leaf-littered ground.

“It’s a ...” Ryan pressed a finger to his lips. “It’s a very slow animal. Moves about the same speed as a turtle on land.”

She stared. “You’re calling me a turtle?”

“A squanak.” He smirked.

A rumble vibrated through Sky’s chest. She clenched her fists and dashed forward.

“I’ll give you turtle,” she muttered through breaths.

Ryan swept past, laughing. He leaped over an eight-foot-long dip, bounded off the side of a tree, and flitted through the forest. Beams of sunlight breaking through the lush canopy hit his head, making his platinum hair gleam silver.

“Show-off,” she grumbled.

What was going on with him? He’d relaxed in the last day since revealing his identity, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about this new Ryan.

Sky trailed him as best as she could, but the uphill terrain didn’t help. After half an hour, she slowed to a steadier pace, catching sight of Ryan now and then. It had been a long time since someone had outpaced her. She and Gray had always been evenly matched, but she had never beaten her father.

If Dad had been here, she would have finally beaten him thanks to her mutation, but he was dead. Or she assumed he was. He’d been missing since the day the Cardinals launched their global attack survivors called the Pulse that threw the planet into chaos and claimed the lives of millions. He’d stayed behind because of his job at NASA, while she and her family had fled the city. She’d been angry at him for the first couple of years, for not coming with them. Until she’d realized that she would never see him again. She was sure that if Dad had been alive, he would’ve found Alex and her. Now, she tried not to think about him, because the thought of him hollowed out her heart.

They continued for two more hours until Sky spotted Ryan standing at the edge of a ridge. She joined him and peered out over the valley.

“There it is, Empire, Nevada.” Ryan motioned.

The sun hung low in the sky, peeking over the mountains in the distance and casting long shadows across the town below. Flickering orange globes lit up one by one, creating a magical pathway. The spectacle made Sky wonder if Madam—the owner of The Wild—had designed it to draw in ignorant travelers, enticing them in before she forced them into the cage. Hopefully, the clientele had been placated in the last few years, or they’d be in for a brutal night.

“It’s called The Wild now, remember?” The once sleepy town had been renamed after its largest establishment, and Madam ran the whole place.

“So you said.” Ryan squinted.

Sky followed his line of sight to a warehouse on the outskirts of town. “Something wrong?”

He snapped his gaze to her and shook his head. “No. Shall we?” He held his arm out, motioning for her to take the lead.

She studied him a moment longer, then jumped off the edge and slid down the hillside. He trailed her. It annoyed her that she didn’t have an inkling to the limits of his abilities.

The surrounding woodlands, which hadn’t been here before the Cardinals’ invasion, provided ample cover for their approach. No banners lined the outskirts, meaning The Wild was still neutral. The town’s location didn’t offer strategic value to either the Skineater nation or Matron Queendom, but it did offer entertainment and for some reason, both rulers of the opposing nations had left the little town alone.

She crouched in the long grass a few yards shy of the road marking the start of The Wild. Farther down the street, a man rocked on a chair in front of an old store that was now The Wild Watch’s guardhouse. Sky would rather avoid the patrols. The Warlord probably hadn’t placed a bounty on her yet, but just in case, it was better to keep a low profile. Even if most

people thought she was dead, she hadn't become the only female General of the Skineater nation without accruing enough enemies to fill a city.

A soft breeze kicked up a fine mist of dust, cooling her exposed skin, of which there was a lot. A large rip on her right shoulder, where a mutant infected had bitten a chunk out of her, exposed the top of her arm to her bicep. Across her stomach and back were slits, but with the crop top Ryan had constructed with his nanites, they looked almost purposeful. Her hair was an uneven mess thanks to the alien, but she couldn't hold it against him since he'd shredded it to free her from a log she'd been caught on under water.

Ryan sidled up beside her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's go." She grabbed his wrist and towed Ryan across.

They ducked behind a heap of rusting metal drums and crept along a small dirt path behind a long row of stalls, running all the way to The Wild. They reached the first stall—a large tent. Its front entrance opened to the road. The lit lanterns offered plenty of light for patrons to stroll the street comfortably, but where they traveled was shrouded in shadows, just the way Sky liked it.

They passed the next stall, and Ryan crinkled his nose. "What's that smell?"

Sky took in a deep breath, and her stomach rumbled. "Roasted goat."

"Food?"

"Yup."

Ryan scowled. "Humans have terrible food."

She thought back on their journey and realized he had barely eaten. Or at least she hadn't seen him eat much, which explained his leaner form.

The farther they traveled, the busier the markets became. They passed a few stall employees who eyed them up but said nothing. A minute later, another pair emerged, two bulky men



with short swords hanging from their hips and a shiny silver star over their left breast. Before the guards spotted them, Sky yanked Ryan behind a tree.

She leaned around the trunk to watch the pair. Ryan placed his hands on either side, pressing his chest into her back. His whole presence surrounded her and warmed her instantly.

“Why are we hiding?” he whispered into her ear, sending shivers down her neck.

The watchmen were parallel with them now.

“When are you going to ask Poppy out?” asked the potbellied man.

The taller one shrugged. “She’ll never say yes.”

They turned into a small gap, heading to the main road.

Sky pushed back on Ryan until he leaned away enough so she could twist around. “The Wild Watch might stop us.”

“Why?”

“Have you seen us?”

Ryan furrowed his pale eyebrows.

“For starters, your eyes almost glow at night,” she said.

Hers did too, but his green ones stood out more, just like Gray’s.

He blinked. “I can change the color if it’s a problem.”

“You can? I knew it,” she muttered.

A dark blue ring emerged around his pupils and seeped into his silvery green irises. Sky grabbed his chin and tugged him closer to see better. The transformation was breathtaking. A combination of vivid blues and silver-grays swirled together to create a new shade of gray-blue.

“Amazing.”

Ryan quirked his eyebrow. “If you aren’t planning to kiss me, I’d appreciate it if you’d let go.”

Sky snatched her hand back and dipped her gaze. She hadn't realized she'd pulled his face so close that their noses had nearly touched. She peeked at his smooth lips. Over the years, she'd kissed a few men, but her invisible ants problem had always muted any pleasure she might have gotten from the act. So when she'd discovered that her skin didn't react to him, a dangerous curiosity had grown within her. What would it be like to kiss someone without the hindrance of invisible ants? And her interest had piqued more after she'd found out he was an alien.

She shook her head and heat budded under her cheeks as she tried to think of a snarky response, but nothing came to her. "Sorry," she mumbled. This wasn't the time or place to be contemplating physical pleasures.

Sky hardly ever blushed, but around Ryan, it was becoming a habit.

"Is the color better?" he asked.

She chanced a look.

"It's an exact replica of the iris of a human I met in DC," Ryan said.

Sky held in her shock and exhaled a long breath. Were such detailed observations a perk of nanite-aided memory? Or was it an alien thing? The more she learned about Ryan, the more disheartened she became. The aliens had a ridiculously unfair advantage over humans.

The minor alteration did wonders, but with his perfect features, he would never blend in completely. Or maybe she was hypersensitive because she knew his identity?

"Better. Why didn't you change them before?"

"I don't enjoy the sensation, and my vision is limited when my ISA is engaged in a glamour function." He placed his hand on her hip. His thumb slipped under her shirt as he leaned in until his jaw was less than an inch from hers. "I was under the impression you avoided physical contact."

His warm breath feathered across her neck, and she tilted her head.

“Count yourself lucky. I usually pulverize guys who try to get frisky with me.”

A soft chuckle vibrated through his chest into hers. “Of that I’m certain. So, why are we still here? Those two are long gone.”

Heat returned to her cheeks, and she jabbed her fist into his ribs. He exhaled sharply and withdrew.

“Because you’re stopping me from leaving,” she snapped and slithered out.

She trudged back to the path and confirmed the coast was clear. He sauntered up, amusement gleaming in his eyes.

“Keep smirking and I’ll box it off.”

“You are welcome to try if you think you’re quick enough.” He grinned, issuing a challenge she itched to take.

This new Ryan was dangerous. Flirting was a bad idea. They were business partners with a mutual goal. Anything beyond that was unnecessary.

“Not the time or place.” She spun away and adopted a faster pace.

Ryan straggled behind, observing the stalls.

“Keep up.” The end of the strip came into sight. “The first fights start soon.”

“Fights?” he asked, jogging to close the gap, and fell in beside her. “What fights?”

Sky side-eyed him but didn’t respond. He could stay in the dark for a while. Madam had once told Sky, she had started the cage fights because her neighbors had shot each other over a can of food, and she’d thought if they could’ve fought it out with their fists instead, then they could’ve lived to fight another day. Madam had never imagined, when she’d started the practice, the fights would become the most popular event on the West Coast and make her filthy rich. Now, everything here was an extension of The Wild’s business, and people from all over came to compete. Some fought to survive. Others had grandeurs of fame.

They needed to arrive before registrations closed for the night. The street lanterns increased in frequency, and a waft of manure hung in the air. She held her breath until they'd passed the stables.

The path merged onto the main road, but the crowd was so tightly packed they could blend in. Vendors yelled out, advertising their pastries, snacks, and The Wild souvenirs—autographs and hand drawn portraits of popular fighters. Sky pushed through, with Ryan directly behind her. She didn't have to check he was there because she could sense him—a presence that had built up so much over the past week she recognized it clearly for what it was, the alien. He stopped, and a person slipped between them.

Sky whipped around and almost got a mouthful of coppery red hair. She looked over the woman's head that crested at her chin.

“Hello, gorgeous,” said the woman holding Ryan's wrist. “And where, my delectable man, are you headed in such a hurry?”

She had thought this might happen. During her last visit five years ago, Gray had attracted unwanted attention too. Sky yanked the redhead's grip off Ryan. Pins and needles—her invisible ants problem—burst across Sky's palm and finger, over every millimeter touching the woman.

“Hands off.” Sky glared, taking in the woman's whole appearance.

Dark green, almost black, skin-tight leather pants, and a fitted dark brown leather jacket. *Shit*. A Matron Elite. If Sky showed any weakness, the redhead would pounce. The elites respected strength.

The redhead twisted out of Sky's grasp. “Sorry.” She winked at Ryan. “No harm meant. I didn't realize he's taken.”

Two more elites joined them, a tall brunette woman, almost the same height as Sky, and a black-haired lady with a deep scar marring her left cheek. Sky suppressed a grimace. Things were going from bad to worse. The brunette ogled

Ryan, but Scar-Lady kept her stare pinned on Sky. There was something familiar about her, but Sky didn't want to stick around to figure it out. These women were trained killers and, as expected, armed—swords and daggers.

“Heading to The Wild?” Scar-Lady asked in a deep, smooth voice.

“What's it to you?” Sky answered tersely, reaching for Ryan. His fingers met hers and intertwined.

Scar-Lady observed their clasped hands, and fine lines fanned out from the corners of her dark eyes. “Maybe we'll see you both there.”

Sky sidestepped with Ryan, watching for movement from the females, but they stayed put. Only their gazes followed. Sky and Ryan turned, resuming their previous pace. A chill ran up Sky's neck, and Ryan squeezed her hand.

Tall torches staked into the ground surrounded the old factory, lighting up the collage of artwork on the walls, which was more beautiful in the daylight. Cheers erupted from the double-door entrance regulated by six bouncers, each equipped with spiked bats, and a line of people waiting to enter, snaked out. Above them, massive red letters lit up by hanging lanterns stretched across the dusty exterior.

THE WILD EMPIRE

TWO

# GRAY



*“I could never hate you. I don’t think it’s possible.” ~ General Scarlet, Skineater.*

A faint but annoying drip roused Gray from his dreamless slumber. He opened his gummy eyes and tried to focus through the blariness. His vision sharpened, settling on the source of his annoyance. Small drops of red liquid hit the linoleum floor, flowing together to form a small puddle of his blood. He groaned and inhaled the coppery scent along with something else. A strange, minty, pungent odor that tickled his nose. His mind was groggy, and everything ached.

“Go back to sleep. You need more rest.”

“Colt?” Gray twisted his neck, and torrents of pain erupted down his back. He yelped.

Colt’s leather-clad midsection entered Gray’s line of sight. “Stay still, you fool.” He placed his hand lightly on Gray’s shoulder. “Crap, are you bleeding again? We’ll need to redo your bandages.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad,” said Colt. “As soon as we put you on the table, Hades threw up.”

That was saying something. As generals of the Skineater nation, they had seen countless gruesome scenes. His back must have been disgusting if Hades, with the strongest stomach, had lost his dinner.

“Even with your speed healing, it’ll take a while, and you’ll scar.”

“Sky did too. We’ll match.” Gray shifted. “Help me up.”

Sky’s back had been foul after her fifty lashes. His would be worse after sixty, and part of him couldn’t help thinking it was all karma. Gray had whipped Sky, and she was the reason he’d received the same punishment.

“Are you trying to kill yourself?” said a shrill voice Gray would recognize anywhere. Sylvia or, as he liked to call her, Syl.

Syl was a few years older and had tended to Sky and his injuries for years. He was pretty sure she suspected there was something abnormal about Sky and him, but she’d never pushed the issue. She couldn’t anyway; it wasn’t her place as a Two-stud healer. Even the support staff in the Skin nation had to earn their studs. Zek said if anyone attacked, then all his citizens should be able to defend his nation. Syl had never been much of a warrior, but she’d survived the pit twice. Then she’d chosen to apprentice as a healer. It turned out she was a damn good one, and there weren’t many of those.

“No. And is that any way to talk to a general?” Gray pushed up.

She huffed.

“Help me,” he said.

Colt and Sylvia carefully aided him into an upright position. The move caused his back to light up with searing agony, and a moan escaped his lips.

Sylvia shot him an *I told you so* look.

Colt’s warm brown hair was a disheveled mess, with inch-length tufts sticking up at weird angles, and dark circles cupping his deep-set brown eyes. He turned to Sylvia. “I hope you don’t speak to all the generals that way.”

“Of course not. I don’t have a death wish.” She moved behind Gray. “We need to change these bandages,” she muttered.



There was only one general she needed to be cautious with.

“Has Faust been coming here?” Colt asked.

“A few times,” she said.

Colt growled, “I’m going to post more men.”

She placed her fingers on Colt’s arm. “They wouldn’t be able to intervene if he tried anything. You know studded warriors can’t challenge a general without dire consequences.”

“They can if they’re under direct orders to act on my behalf.”

“It would only cause unnecessary discord between you and Faust.” She tugged on Colt’s sleeve. “Please don’t anger that lunatic. I don’t want to give him any reason to attack you.”

“You don’t think I could beat him?” Colt asked.

Syl slid her hand up Colt’s forearm. “That’s not what I meant.”

Gray grinned at his blood brother and his healer. When had they gotten so close? She was cute if you liked the unkempt look. Her long brown braid was always messy, with flyaways around her heart-shaped face. Her stormy blue eyes shone brightly, her small nose had escaped breakage or had been set well if it had been broken, and her shirt and pants were always a bit wrinkled. He’d often seen smudges of ink on her fingers and cheeks because she was always writing notes for some new salve or medicine she was developing, but she was one of the kindest people he knew.

Gray cleared his throat. “Posting more guards may draw the wrong attention.”

“What he said.” Syl waved toward him.

“How long have I been out?” Gray asked.

Colt glared. “One night.”

A door banged open, and footsteps rapidly approached. Colt slipped a long dagger from a holster secured to his thigh.

“General Hawk?” a deep voice called before rounding the corner.

Gray let out a sigh. “Wyatt, what’s got you in a frenzy?”

Colt sheathed his weapon.

Wyatt marched over and saluted, thumping his fist to his broad chest. “It’s good to see you up, General.”

Wyatt was one of Gray’s most trusted warriors. He’d been in Gray’s service since the beginning. When Gray had been a scrawny fourteen-year-old with hardly any fighting experience, and even though Wyatt was ten years Gray’s senior, he had chosen to serve Gray instead of Zek. At the time, Gray had never asked Wyatt why he would swear fealty to him because Gray had just been grateful someone had chosen him.

Wyatt straightened. “It’s the Warlord, sir. He’s summoned you. And I’m to carry you if you can’t walk.”

If Gray hadn’t been in so much pain, he might’ve been surprised. “Wait outside. I’ll get Syl to change my bandages first.”

“You are not walking,” said Colt.

“Watch me.” Gray thumped the treatment table. “Hurry, Syl. We can’t keep the Warlord waiting.”

Wyatt nodded and hurried out with Sylvia on his tail.

“Don’t be a fool.” Colt grabbed Gray’s wrist. “Let us carry you.”

“No.”

Colt kicked the table leg. “Dammit, Gray! This is not about your men seeing you as weak. This is about how he sees you. You cannot become more of a threat.”

Gray adjusted his position, cringing at the pain exploding all over his back with every minute shift. “I get it, okay. Your message has come through loud and clear. I’m not his son anymore.”

Colt's eyes filled with pity. "I'm sorry it turned out this way. I know how you felt about him."

"It was never going to end well, was it?"

By a chance of fate, Zek and Gray had been together since before the lights went out. And Zek had been Gray's support when he had finally given up on seeing his father again. The Warlord had promised to protect Gray in his dad's place. They had been tight at one point, but sometime over the last five years, that vow had been lost like so much else after the invasion.

"Do you ever think you made the wrong choice to stay with him? Over your mom?" Colt asked.

Gray lifted his shoulder and immediately regretted it. "I don't know, but I couldn't have left Sky after she changed me. The connection between us was stronger during the first year. Would you have come with us?"

"In a heartbeat." Colt patted Gray's arm as if he would break.

"I don't deserve you."

Colt shot him a sly look. "None of you do."

Gray grinned for a moment, then sobered. "Zek's making a play, isn't he?"

Colt's dark brows squeezed together, creating a deep crease above his hooked nose, which had been broken too many times. "Yes. And it worries me, greatly."

"When Sky returns, we'll be untouchable."

"She's not here yet, brother."

"I have you and Hades to watch my back." Although he wasn't sure Hades would want to see his back again after the Warlord had forced him to whip it sixty times.

Colt closed in. "We can't protect you as well as she can. So, until she returns, remember you are more vulnerable than ever."

Gray pressed his lips into a hard line and gazed at his hands. They were clean today, no red at all, but he could feel it—the layers and layers of blood underneath his tan that would never wash off.

Sylvia bustled in, her arms full of bandages and clinking jars of salve. She hurried over and placed everything on a side table.

“The amount your back has healed already is remarkable.”

Gray stiffened.

“Syl,” Colt hissed. “Not here.”

Gray jerked. “You told her?” He gripped the table’s edge to control the rage budding inside his chest.

He’d told his brothers the truth and trusted they’d never share it with another soul. And Colt, of all people, had broken his trust. From Hades, he might have expected it, but never Colt.

Colt met his glower. “She had to know to treat you.”

Sylvia clucked her tongue and removed his bloodied bandages. “Colt only confirmed something I suspected all along. Both you and Sky always healed too fast, but I never shared it with anyone. Isn’t that why you two came only to me?”

He uncurled his fingers. “Sorry. I’m not used to people knowing.”

“To be expected.” Sylvia scooped up the soiled bandages and threw them in a bin under her side table, then opened a jar. “This might sting a bit.”

She smeared something across his back, and he winced.

“You mean burn.” He arched his spine.

“It’s the same stuff I put on you last night, and you didn’t mind,” she said.

Gray cringed as another wave scorched through his torso. “Because I was unconscious!”

“Suck it up. This will reduce the scarring and stop infection.” Syl spread more of the nose-tickling salve, then moved on to the fresh bandages.

Fifteen minutes and a lot of muttering later, Sylvia declared Gray was ready. The salve had settled and cooled his back, but every breath was painful. Colt helped him slip on a black shirt before they left to meet Wyatt outside.

“Where is Ravie?” Gray asked.

Wyatt glanced at Colt. “The Warlord has not released him yet.”

A heavy lump settled in Gray’s chest. He hoped Ravie was all right. He should not have let Sky go. It ate at him that he was putting Ravie at risk, but he’d always had trouble saying no to Sky. She was the other half of his soul, but Ravie had his heart. How was he supposed to choose?

The walk to the palace took longer because Gray couldn’t move faster than a hobble. The stairs were particularly problematic, but somehow, with their help, he made it. They headed directly for the open doors leading to Zek’s throne room, and Wyatt peeled off to wait outside.

As they trudged through the doorway, a knife slashed out nicking Gray’s throat. His muscles stiffened, creating waves of agony up his back. It was all he could do to stand completely still and glare into the crazed blue eyes of the fifth general, Faust.

“Not so fast now, are you, Hawk?” Faust bared his gold-plated teeth.

Faust wore his usual black leather pants and a black vest over a singlet, exposing the tribal skull tattoo on his bicep that every Skineater citizen was required to have. At his waist hung his Dao sword.

“Fuck off, Faust.” Colt shoved him away. “Let’s see if you can walk after sixty lashes.”

Faust tucked his dagger back into a sheath on his belt. “Hades must’ve gone easy on you because no one should be able to stand, let alone walk away.”

A wave of dizziness washed over Gray, and he swayed.

Colt cradled Gray's elbow. "You saw the whole thing. You know he didn't."

Faust grunted, tossing his shoulder-length, sandy-blond hair back. Except for his weapon, Faust reminded Gray of a Viking raider with his Northern European coloring and long braided beard.

The chamber's rear door opened, and Zek strode in. Faust twirled and hurried to join General Amir, standing before the throne.

Had Zek called him here to humiliate him in front of the other generals? Because it was working. Having Colt help him walk at a snail's pace was almost worse than the whipping.

Amir twisted for a gander. Gray hadn't been on great terms with Amir since Sky had left. Unlike Faust, Amir was dressed in loose beige linen pants and a black Henley shirt. His short black hair was artfully tousled, and his beard was trimmed along his jawline, with a tidy goatee framing his mouth. Amir was the oldest of the generals at thirty-five and had been the second to become general after Gray. In fact, since Gray's title had been mostly honorary to begin with, Amir was Zek's first real general, and together they had led the charge and conquered three towns, including the old Skineater's capital—where they had recruited most of their warriors from the local university. Gray held Amir's gaze, following Gray and Colt until they reached the line of generals.

Zek glared from his crimson throne, made of human bones, holding his iron scepter, and Gray tried to mask the physical and emotional hurt flooding his body. Like always, Zek's long straight black hair was secured in a low ponytail, and his dark tanned leather pants and vest were plain. Around his left wrist was a gold studded vambrace that separated him from everyone else. Only he had gold studs, everyone else's were steel.

How had they gotten here? Gray tried to recall if there was a moment when things started to sour between Zek and him. After Zek's lover, Alice, had been murdered, Gray had feared

Zek would blame him for her death. Zek had assured Gray it wasn't his fault, and he didn't hold him responsible, but maybe that had been the start of the rift between them.

Gray had never truly believed Sky's warnings that Zek's view of him was changing. And for the last few years, Colt had been telling him that Zek did not see him as a son anymore, but Gray had refused to listen. All he had ever wanted was to make Zek proud. He owed Zek everything. He wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for Zek. But after the man who was practically his adoptive father had subjected him to sixty lashings in public, he could no longer deny their words.

Zek quirked his black brow. "What? No fancy bow, Hawk?"

Gray dipped his head, but before he could bend further, Colt caught his wrist.

"Warlord. Gray is—"

"Colt. It's fine." Gray raised his arm. Razors gouged into his back, but he bowed. A thin sheen of sweat formed on his forehead. "You summoned, oh exalted one."

Zek narrowed his eyes before he shifted his attention to the men beside Gray. "Where's Hades?"

"He was face down on a table in the Red Lounge an hour ago," said Amir flatly.

Faust snorted. "Typical."

Zek's nostrils flared. "He needs a reminder in answering a summons."

"I will see to it." Colt placed his fist over his heart.

"You'd better make sure it never happens again, General Colt, for General Hades's sake." Zek rested his elbow on the armrest. "Now, to the crux of the matter. The sixth general is alive."

Faust snarled, grabbing the hilt of his Dao sword. "That fucking bitch. Where is she?"

Zek rested his chin on his palm. “Apparently on her way to the suicidal idiot’s base.”

“Why would she do that?” Amir and Sky had been friendly because Sky’s second-in-command, Karim, had been Amir’s friend.

Colt leaned forward, casting his gaze around Gray and Faust to Amir. “Alex is there.”

“Ah.” Amir nodded.

Faust grinned. “Are we going to kill them both?”

“No one is killing my Scarlet. Is that understood?” Zek’s voice echoed through the chamber.

As one, the generals thumped their fists to their chests and bowed their heads.

Zek waved his hand. “We’ll get the brat later. First, Gray has promised to capture my Scarlet.”

“Warlord.” Amir inclined his head. “I asked earlier about General Hawk’s punishment.”

Zek ran his nail over the twisting tribal design carved into his scepter. “You did. Gray let my Scarlet slip through his fingers a week ago. And you all know failure is not acceptable. Isn’t that right, Gray?”

Gray lowered his chin. “Yes, Warlord.”

“And Gray.” He pounded his scepter against the floor twice. The bangs echoed off the marble floors.

A side door was flung open, and Huey and Dewey entered, dragging a battered body. Gray’s heart stopped. He recognized the brown-black hair he’d spent hours twirling around his fingers immediately. *Ravie*. His left eye had swollen shut, and his face was a bloody mess. Huey and Dewey dumped Ravie at Gray’s feet. It took every grain of self-control Gray possessed not to cut off the duo’s heads. A rage stormed inside Gray, battering his ribs. He lifted his gaze from Ravie, his nostrils flaring. He had to get his emotions under control. Gray inhaled, reining back the storm into a simmering mass of molten rock.



“Who’s the piece of trash?” asked Faust.

Zek tapped his middle finger on his armrest. “Gray’s second-in-command and lover. Five-stud Ravie Kumar.”

Faust scoffed. “Oh, that loser.”

Gray’s muscles twitched. Zek knew. He had never acknowledged Gray’s sexual preference, and Gray had never advertised it either. Before Ravie, Gray’s love life had been a string of one-night stands. Ravie was the first he’d ever wanted a relationship with, and they’d done their best to hide it. Fingers brushed his elbow, and he followed the arm up to his brother’s face. Colt gave him the slightest nod, letting Gray know he was here for him. Gray clenched his teeth so hard his neck muscles vibrated. It hadn’t been enough to whip him in front of the entire army. Zek had Ravie beaten to a pulp too.

“Anything to say, Gray?” Zek asked.

The mockery in Zek’s tone left Gray’s heart cold and empty. Gray lowered his gaze. “No, Warlord.”

“I want my Scarlet back, and I need someone to keep an eye on Gray because I fear my incentives have not been enough. We all know how close he was to her.” Zek tapped his fingers on the bone of his armrest. “So, who to send ...”

“I volunteer, Warlord.” Faust stepped forward. “It would be my pleasure to capture the deserting bitch.”

“Very well, General Faust. The Hawk is yours to command for the duration of the mission.”

Shock jolted through Gray’s core. Had he heard Zek right? Gray glanced at Zek, and the malice in his gaze moved Gray back a step. A general had never been under another general’s command.

“Warlord!” both Colt and Amir said at the same time.

Amir quickly stepped forward and bowed. “This is most unusual. Would it not undermine the authority of the generals to do this?”

“This is part of General Hawk’s punishment. He is on probation.”

Faust turned his head and sneered at Gray.

“And Faust.”

Faust dragged his self-satisfied smirk off Gray. “Yes, Warlord?”

“If you fail, I’ll strip both you and General Hawk of your ranks, then throw you into the pit.”

Faust’s grin vanished, and he paled.

Gray almost smiled. If he and Faust were thrown into the pit together, there was no way Gray would let him leave alive. It might even be the first time he’d enjoy fighting in the blood-soaked stadium.

“Am I understood?” Zek slammed his scepter on the floor.

“Yes, Warlord.” Faust bowed.

“You have sixty days. Now, get out. All of you.”

Gray swallowed a moan and bent, reaching for Ravie.

“Your bitch stays with me as insurance,” said Zek.

Gray looked up. The hatred radiating from Zek’s glowering expression broke his heart. He turned his gaze back to Ravie. Colt slid in next to Gray and held his elbow as he knelt.

Gray brushed Ravie’s hair. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I will fix this.”

Ravie’s chocolate-brown eye peered up. “Be careful.” He coughed. “Come back safe.”

“I will.” With Colt’s help, Gray straightened. “He needs medical attention, oh great one.”

“He will get it. But, Gray, every day you are late, I will cut him. I’ll start with his toes, then cut off his fingers. After that, I guess I could move to his feet. What do you think? Feet or hands?” There was a glint in Zek’s eyes that bordered on maniacal.

“I will bring her home, Warlord. In chains, if I must.” He fought for control over the rage coiling inside him.

“If you fail, Gray, Ravie dies.”

Gray’s quivering muscles sent more pain shooting through his body. Ravie deserved better than to be used as a pawn. He owed Ravie. After Sky had deserted, Ravie had brought him back when he had shut everyone out.

Dewy reached for Ravie, and Gray caught his arm, pulling him in so he could whisper in his ear, “You better see to it personally that Ravie receives medical attention. Because if he is sick when I return, I will cut out your liver and feed it to you.” Gray dug his fingers into the bulky man until Dewy winced in pain.

“Yes, General.”

Gray released him and took one last look at Ravie, committing him to memory. A renewed purpose filled him before he lumbered out. He was bringing Sky home whether she liked it or not.

THREE

# SKY



*“If you don’t obey him, he’ll kill you, and he’ll make one of us do it.” ~ General Colton James, Skineater.*

The old, converted factory was huge, about a thousand feet long and half as wide. From Sky’s previous visits as a spectator, she knew inside was split into four sections, with the largest designated as the cage—their biggest draw. Nomads and information dealers would carry tales of the fights here throughout the land.

They approached a side entrance guarded by four men outfitted in the same brown uniforms and weaponry as the bouncers out front.

The tallest of the group spoke up, “Whores around the corner.”

Ryan’s stride faltered, but Sky didn’t miss a beat. Her fingers twitched as she kept her hard gaze on the leering idiot. She really hated walking around without a weapon. Even though the guard was a few inches taller, a foot wider, and had a spiked bat hanging from his hip, she could have him eating dirt within seconds. This moron wasn’t worth her time, and from the way he was talking to her, he had no idea who she was. Which was fantastic.

The last couple of times she’d visited The Wild, she’d covered her hair and face. After her first year as a general, she’d learned it was easier to travel in disguise when she was beyond the Skineater territory. It also helped that most people thought General Scarlet of the Skins was much older, not to

mention dead. But if Madam got a good look, she would recognize Sky. So, the faster they left, the better.

A black-haired guard behind the oaf thumped his back. “How many times have I told you? Call them courtesans.”

“Only need to around the guests,” Oaf muttered.

Sky stopped a couple of feet away. “We’re at the right entrance, unless the cage registration has closed?”

Oaf sneered, the action warping a deep scar from his nose to his cheek into something grotesque. “Sure you two want to risk them pretty faces?”

Sky shot him a bored expression. “Is it open or not?” She really hoped it was because she didn’t want to stay any longer than necessary in The Wild.

The black-haired guard stepped forward, shoving Oaf aside. Nothing on his uniform marked him apart from the others, but he carried an air of authority. “Fighters need to front. Three weapons of good quality or something of equal value. What you got?”

“We’ll be fronting ourselves as payment—if that’s still acceptable,” said Sky.

He looked them over from top to bottom. “It is. It’s five days’ service if you lose. Do you have any weapons?”

Ryan shifted behind her.

“None,” she said.

“We’ll need to double-check,” said Leader.

Sky raised her arms. “Go ahead.”

Leader stepped in and waved at the short blond guard. “Frank, check the other.”

Frank scurried over to Ryan, and Leader went to work on Sky. He patted her down with detached efficiency. She was glad he didn’t try to cop a feel because they might not let her in if she broke his arm.

“I thought it was only two days?” Sky asked.

Leader ran his hands up her legs. “The price went up last year.” He rose and stared at her breast. “Hiding anything under the bra?”

Sky glared. “No.”

He stared back with disinterest. “I’ll need to check.”

Sky curled her lip. “Fine.”

“You’ll need to surrender the bag,” said Frank.

Ryan glared at the shorter man. That was no ordinary bag—it was made of nanites.

“Besides shoes and clothes, no other belongings allowed,” Leader said.

The seconds ticked by, and Ryan did not move.

“Ryan,” Sky said.

He let out a muffled grunt before relinquishing the sling. Frank tossed it over his shoulder and eyed Ryan pensively.

Leader slipped his hands under Sky’s shirt. Thousands of invisible ants swarmed over her torso from his touch. He patted under her breasts, then pulled away.

“Sorry,” Leader said gruffly. “Had to be done.”

Sky would’ve been surprised if he hadn’t checked her thoroughly.

“You know,” Frank said, “once Madam sees your girl, I doubt she’s gonna let her leave.”

Frank was right about that, but luckily, Madam didn’t watch the cage matches much anymore, so there was a good chance they could get in and out without Madam ever knowing Sky had been here.

“Shut it, Frank. It’s their choice,” said Leader as he finished up.

Frank ignored Leader and continued, “I’d want someone to warn me if I had a woman as beautiful. There’s no way I’d risk her.”

Ryan lifted his arms so Frank could check him. “What do you mean?”

Oaf chimed in, “It means when she loses, the customers will bang her until she can’t walk no more.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Color bled into Ryan’s chiseled cheeks, but Sky doubted it came from embarrassment. He’d been showing a lot more emotions since he’d revealed his identity. Or was she only noticing more?

“You’re signing up for this?” he asked in a tone soaked with disgust.

Frank skittered away. Coarse sand crunched under his boots as Ryan came to her side. Tension rolled off him in waves. The guards retreated toward the doorway. Maybe it would’ve been smart to forewarn him, but she didn’t think it would be a problem. It was almost as if she had offended his alien sensibilities.

“That only happens if I lose. This is the fastest way to win supplies.” Sky sighed, motioning him backward. “If it upsets you, stay out here. I’ll go in alone.”

He grabbed her arm before she could move half an inch. Concern washed over the tension, then his expression fell back into his usual mask. “This is our only option?”

“I know no other way. Do you?” She threw her question to the guards, all of whom shook their heads while keeping a wary watch on Ryan. She flashed a smile. “See.”

“You signing up or not?” Leader asked, gripping and releasing the bat handle hanging from his waist.

She nodded in reply.

Ryan flexed his jaw muscles, then let go of her arm.

Frank led them in, holding Ryan’s bag. The stench of sweat and blood flooded her senses. Ryan’s nose wrinkled. Multitudes of voices and laughter echoed off the high ceiling. Long walkways hung from the metal roof, patrolled by men armed with crossbows. Sky counted five within firing



distance. A gray partition cornered off the entryway and fed them into a boxed-off area with a rectangular table manned by a woman with her head in a book. Behind her stood two more guards, almost twice the width of Frank. Many hand-drawn posters decorated the walls, each promoting different events.

Frank stopped at a row of shelves and placed Ryan's sling into a dirty red plastic basket with the number forty painted on the side.

"Here." Frank flicked a blue plastic disk.

Ryan snatched it and inspected it.

"Don't lose it." Frank tapped the basket.

"We won't," Sky said.

"You can collect your bag on your way out. See Poppy to register." Frank pointed at the twenty-something-year-old woman, then exited without a backward glance.

Prizes were listed in red scrawl above Poppy's coiled brown hair; one win equaled one hundred chips. Five years ago, it might have been enough, but now she wasn't so sure. It might be best to win a few matches to be safe.

Poppy didn't look up from her creased novel until they'd stopped in front of the desk. Heavy makeup coated her face, especially her eyelids—painted with different shades of green.

She greeted them with the empty smile of someone who had lost interest in reality. "Welcome, challengers. Individual or team entrants?"

If they teamed up, there was no way anyone would beat them, but they would probably make more from individual matches. The only fighter Sky could imagine losing to was Ryan.

"Team," Ryan answered before she could.

Sky scowled at him. He could've asked first.

Poppy's bright red lips spread into a wide grin, exposing the decay in her front teeth. "Excellent. We don't have many teams tonight. Your fronts?" She looked expectantly.

“We’ll front ourselves,” Sky said.

“Wonderful.” Poppy’s gaze glided up Ryan. “After each win, you will need to re-bet yourselves. You’ll be given the option after the fight. And the more you put yourself forward, the greater your chip pool at the end of the night. And you can use the chips at any shop in town, but one loss and it’s all over.”

“Understood,” said Sky.

Poppy had outlined everything as written on the poster behind her.

“Sign here to make it official.” She pushed a small red journal across and pointed to the next available line.

Sky scribbled S. Argo and passed the pen. Ryan wrote his first initial followed by Argo. She shot him a raised brow, which he ignored.

“Splendid. Go through there.” She gestured at a door opposite the one they’d entered. “Down the corridor to the blue room. Wait there. Someone will collect you when it’s your turn, and hot stuff here might want to shed the shirt.” She simpered. “The rips are sexy and all, but I’m sure the ladies would appreciate an uninterrupted view.” She licked her lips.

Ryan scowled, and Sky pushed him out before more of his alien sensibilities were offended. They entered the long corridor surrounded by six-and-a-half-foot-high flimsy walls Sky could punch through. Above them, three patrols monitored the patrons below from the hanging walkways.

A voice boomed through the building. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome again to The Wild!”

Whistles and clapping broke out. The volume was deafening. Suspended above the middle of the warehouse was a small platform where the announcer sat with his mouth pressed against a giant metal homemade megaphone.

“That wraps up our pre-fight entertainment. Give the ladies another round of applause.” His voice and the audience’s cheers hammered against Sky’s eardrums. She really hated loud places.

They passed a green, yellow, and red room, each hosting between six and eight fighters. Nervous energy flowed from the men and women inside. A few paced around the room. One man hung his head between his legs, and he reminded Sky of her first time in Zek's fighting pit. She'd been a bundle of nerves, but now she knew that was a waste of energy. She'd either win or lose. Worrying about it beforehand wouldn't change the outcome.

They rounded another corner before reaching a room with pale blue painted partitions. Their section was deserted, and the only things inside were a bench and a small table stocked with fraying cotton wraps—one so full of blood stains it was brown. Some water and snacks might've been nice.

She inspected the wraps, poking at the cleanest one, which was more gray than white. "Guess we won't be using any of these."

Ryan plopped on the bench, wearing a sour expression. "Is this really the best way?"

"We could rob someone," she suggested.

He growled.

"Didn't think so."

She padded back to the opening and peered out, leaving grumpy to stew. This was her first time backstage. She'd always sat in the VIP section, fending off Madam's endless offerings of men and women. Only a few servers had seen Sky without her disguise, and she doubted the plainly dressed people, carrying trays and equipment through an opening toward the crowd and cage, went anywhere near the VIPs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes, bets will close for the opening match. Remember, bets can be placed at one of the three red stations behind the stands or, in our VIP areas, hail one of our lovely attendants." The announcer's voice grated on her nerves.

She joined Ryan on the bench. "Once we win, we'll need to re-bet ourselves. I want extra chips to work with. We'll need some suitable weapons and supplies."

Ryan grunted, sitting unnaturally stiff. He needed a distraction, something to get his mind off his surroundings, and Sky had the perfect question.

“Tell me about your world.”

He whipped his head toward her. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

“I’ve changed my mind. Why are you trying to overthrow your leader?”

Ryan let out a long sigh, and the tension in his shoulders seeped away. “To fully understand, you’d need a lesson in our history.”

“Then tell me. We’ve got time.”

He scooted closer until their shoulders touched. “Two thousand years ago—”

“Seriously, you need to go that far back?” Sky raised her eyebrows.

Ryan glared. “Do you want to know or not?”

She made a zipping motion across her mouth and gestured for him to continue.

“Our people were on the verge of destruction. We were more advanced than Earth, even then. There were five great nations, and two, Toria and Daroi, were at war. They had been for centuries, but it reached a climax that ravaged parts of our world. They resorted to biowarfare, and it was a disaster. Toxins seeped into the planet, spreading through their lands. Mi—”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the announcer yelled. “It gives me great pleasure to declare the cage open and start the first fight of the night!”

Ryan touched his ear, glancing up at the announcer.

The crowd roared.

Sky leaned in farther. “Keep going.”

The side of his head bumped hers, and a faint tingle feathered through her brain and vanished before she could make sense of it.

“Millions became violently ill, and the toxins spreading through the planet only became more deadly. The problem of two nations became our whole world. Then, two families from one nation, Zuri, developed a cure of sorts.”

“Nanites.” She guessed.

“Yes. They could neutralize the toxins in the air and waters that were poisoning people. More Zuri families joined the development, and they became the original twelve families.” He paused, and his expression darkened. “It embarrasses me to admit that those families were not generous in sharing the cure.”

Repetitive thumps vibrated through the walls and blended with the audience’s blood-thirsty cries to create a rich percussion. The announcer began a play-by-play of the first matches.

Ryan continued, “They played gods and let hundreds of thousands in Zuri perish. Once they assumed leadership of the broken senate, they shared the nanites with only the Zuri people. After millions more died, and the other four nations were in ruins, they swept in and offered the survivors a chance to live.” He clenched his fists, and his voice became tight. “Those survivors became our second class, the Za, and the twelve families still rule our planet, An’Zura. The residents of Zuri became the upper class, known as the Del, and their nanites are much more advanced than the Za’s, even now.”

“You’re fighting for equality? Wait, are you from one of those twelve families?”

“Yes, to both.” He glanced at her, and there was a darkness in his gaze she’d never seen before. “But I’m not completely benevolent. I do have personal reasons for doing this as well.”

“I wouldn’t trust you if you said you didn’t.”

Sky was about to ask what his reasons were when screams exploded, and the announcer called an end to the second

match. She glanced up at the commentator, then turned to face Ryan. They were so close there were barely a few finger widths between their noses. How had she become so comfortable with him? He was a friggin' alien she reminded herself, but everything about him felt so familiar. She bit her bottom lip, and Ryan's gaze dipped before rising back to meet her eyes. Pools of silver drew her in. A pleasant buzz spread through her torso and lit up her nerve endings.

Movement in her peripheral vision stopped her lips an inch from his. He'd been drawn to her too. What was going on? She couldn't let herself get distracted by him. She had a mission, and any entanglements with him would only complicate things.

Sitting back, she turned to a scrawny teen, about thirteen or fourteen, at the entrance. The annoying announcer yelled for the start of the third match. The boy's long, slender neck curled forward, and his faded shirt gaped open to his chest as he gave a shallow bow. He held out his arm, gesturing they follow.

"We'll continue this discussion later." Sky stood.

Ryan's hand cupped her elbow as they shadowed the boy out, and she didn't pull away. Even though she knew she really should.

The attendant glided down the corridor, guiding them through a maze of dividers. Ryan's mouth held a constant tension. The drumbeats sped up, and the crowd erupted behind the flimsy barrier on their right, drowning out the announcer's commentary. They rounded a corner and passed another sectioned area—a black room, empty except for a variety of weapons mounted to the walls.

They turned again, looping back. This new pathway was different. On one side was a flowing charcoal sheet hanging from the ceiling, and it did nothing to mute the jeers and whistles. They might as well have been standing among the crowd. In the silence, grunts from the match filtered through long slits in the heavy material. She caught glimpses of the fight. Ryan halted.

“Are they locked in?” He stared through a gap.

Sky grimaced. She’d known about the fighting cage from her last visit and probably should have warned him.

His jaw muscles bulged. “This is a terrible idea.”

“What choice do we have?” she asked.

The boy stopped a few feet away and waited. Pity flashed in his dark eyes before he lowered his gaze. The Wild relied on its reputation and would abide by the rules as long as they did.

“We’ve already signed. If we don’t compete, we forfeit.” She was sure they could take anyone thrown at them. “Stop worrying. We’ll win and be on our way by dawn.”

“It will not be honorable. We ...” He lowered his voice. “I have an unfair advantage.”

Sky exhaled heavily. It was true he did, and she should’ve anticipated his reaction. He really had his hero act down pat.

She shuffled closer. “Then take a few hits. Struggle a bit.”

She’d have to do the same. If they won too quickly, people might accuse the house of fixing or them of cheating. Neither would lead to a favorable outcome.

“Make it look hard.”

He pursed his lips to one side before his shoulders dropped, and he turned to follow the attendant.

“Ouch! He won’t be walking for a while!” the announcer yelled over the cheers.

They rounded another corner and arrived at a dead end, a waiting area occupied by a single bouncer—the largest man she’d ever seen. He was as tall as Ryan, and his bulk rivaled a sumo wrestler. At his hip hung a coiled whip and a short sword.

The boy approached an opening in the curtain and drew it aside to reveal a smaller cage, large enough for the average person to stand inside. Its back gate was open, and through the crisscrossed bars she saw the fighters. Blood streamed from

one man's nose, adding more stains to the grimy wooden platform beneath him. His reactions were sluggish, but the movements of his opponent—wearing a red sash around his hip—were faster. This match would end soon.

The bouncer drew back another section, revealing a second cage, and passed the gathered material to the boy, who stood between the entrances. He eyed her and rested his calloused fingers on the handle of his black leather whip.

“Into the starting gates. One in each.” His gruff voice was barely audible over the audience's constant buzz.

Sky clenched her fists and glowered. “You never had these before.”

“They're new. Last year. We had a few runners, and when we gotta cancel fights, it damages our rep, and Madam don't trust challengers no more.” He shrugged. “If you're not in before the end of the match, you lose. Your choice.”

Ryan held her arm, studying the cages. Sky grabbed the front of Ryan's shirt and pulled. Her lips brushed his smooth cheek all the way to his ear, and he tensed.

“Could you break those bars if you needed to?” she asked.

His head turned away, then back. “Probably.” His breath tickled her earlobe. “We're going in, then?”

She nodded against his jaw and pulled away. Spinning, she stalked into the cage. At least it was bigger than the ones the Warlord liked to use. Sumo guard slammed the cage shut, and Sky immediately itched to kick it open. Ryan ducked into his enclosure, and Sumo locked him in too.

“The gate to the cage will open before your fight starts,” Sumo said.

The boy drew Sumo away and tiptoed, whispering into the bouncer's ear. They both glanced at her. Sumo's left brow bounced. Then something drew their attention to the hallway. They both straightened, chests puffed out.

Sky grabbed the bars, pressing against the metal to see around the divider. A moment later, Scar-Lady from earlier



rounded the corner. Sky stepped back, glancing at Ryan. His wary expression mirrored her own. A sly smile lifted the right side of Scar-Lady's face. Two men in standard elite uniforms guarded her rear.

Scar-Lady continued toward Sky. "It's been so long since anyone has seen you that I almost didn't recognize you, S Argo. Or should I call you General Scarlet?"

A jolt rippled through Sky. She hadn't suspected that the elites had identified her.

"You're confusing me with someone else." Sky eyed the sword at Scar-Lady's hip and the daggers strapped to her thighs.

"No, I'm not." She lowered her lashes. "You may not remember me, but I remember you. Even all grown up, I'd never forget you." She stepped closer—her cheek mere inches from the bars. "Tell me. How did you remove it?" She gestured to the large rip in Sky's shirt, exposing the upper half of her right arm. "Zek'll be heartbroken to learn you no longer bear the Skineater's mark."

Sky's fingernails dug into her palms. "Obviously, I'm not the person you think I am. Tattoos are permanent. There is no skull marking any part of my body. Check for yourself."

Scar-Lady's gaze lingered on Sky's exposed shoulder. "Maybe you found someone who figured out how to remove it. I can't wait to find out. But without the mark, I am having difficulty convincing Madam to turn you over. She wants proof, and I've come up with the perfect method."

"Ladies and gentlemen." The announcer's nasal voice boomed through the factory. "We have a very special treat for you tonight. Our next fight will be something to tell your grandchildren about!"

FOUR

# GRAY



*“You don’t see it, but we do. When you surpass him, he’ll be threatened, not proud.” ~ General Colton James, Skineater.*

**F**aust glared up at Gray from the bottom of the grand staircase. Colt and Wyatt held an arm each, supporting Gray’s weight as they descended. Gray detested that Faust was seeing him in such a weakened state.

They reached the end, stepping onto the marble floor.

Faust’s expression darkened. “We’ll never fucking catch her at the rate you’re moving.”

“I won’t slow you down,” said Gray.

Faust sneered, baring his gold teeth. “You better not, or I’ll leave you behind. Now get your ass to the stables. We’re leaving.”

“Immediately?” Colt asked. “You need to prepare. Going after Scarlet won’t be—”

“General Colt, are you trying to tell me how to do my job?”

“No.”

“Then butt out. Gray, stables, now! And don’t even think about bringing any of your men to babysit you. Having your Skins around would only muddle the chain of command. Get moving. We’re leaving straight away.” Faust spun on his heel and stalked out.

Wyatt's grip tightened on Gray's elbow. "General, this is not a good idea."

"I have no choice, and you know it. Good thing I packed before the flogging." After Zek had agreed to let him go after Sky again, he thought he should be prepared, but he hadn't thought Zek would make him leave so soon after his punishment. "Wyatt, grab my pack and my babies, please." He'd need all his best blades for this trip. "And extras won't hurt."

"Yes, General. But I really think one of us should come with you, if not me, then a two-stud. Surely, General Faust would not be threatened by one."

A soft laugh escaped Gray's lips, accompanied by dull jabs of pain. "You know better than to say that."

Colt jerked his chin. "Wyatt, stop by the clinic and get some salve and bandages from Sylvia. And be quick about it. Faust won't wait long."

Wyatt saluted. "Yes, Generals." He stared at Gray for a moment before dipping his head and sprinting out.

"Don't order my men around in public," said Gray. "You're the one who keeps harping on about how we need to be careful."

Colt slipped his arm under Gray's, and they moved forward. "We're beyond that, brother."

Colt escorted him out the back entrance of the old capitol building. They lumbered around the gallows in the center of the inner courtyard between the state buildings, which was probably beautiful pre-pulse. Now it was barren and smelled of death. Then through the parking garage and past the line of guards patrolling the perimeter. Their descent down a grassy slope took forever.

"Hades should be here," said Colt. "I'll beat some sense into him when I find him."

"Don't be too hard on him. It's worse for him than me." Gray stumbled, and Colt pulled up on his elbow. "Remember how I was after Sky? I was a mess for weeks."

Colt scanned the area, and Gray assumed he was checking for prying ears. “You were fifteen. He’s a grown man. We’ve all whipped people before.”

Gray’s muscles weakened with each step. He wiped away a bead of sweat trickling down the side of his face. He didn’t normally perspire. It usually took a three-hour sparring session with Sky to get either of them sweating. “It’s different inflicting that kind of pain on someone you care about.”

Colt grunted. “He needs to pull himself together. We don’t have time for him to fall apart.”

They reached the bottom of the slope, and Gray was grateful to be back on level ground. “Have you got something planned?”

Colt side-eyed Gray. “I need to feel out Amir. He’ll be the difference moving forward. And there’s a good chance he’ll fall on our side.”

They stepped off the sidewalk.

“You think so? Karim died because of her. And he always looks after his own interests first. He’ll flip at the drop of a coin if he thinks he’ll get a better deal from Zek.”

“Karim died because he was a threat. And I think Amir might not be as acquiescent of his friend’s execution as he pretends,” said Colt.

“Be careful with him. He could easily report everything you say back to Zek if he thinks removing you will be to his benefit. I can never figure out that guy’s approach.”

They crossed the road, and the pungent odor of manure hit Gray in full force.

“Sky had him figured out.” Colt stared at the small paddock of horses in a triangular field.

When they entered the stables, Faust and most of his men were already mounted.

“Hawk! Finally.” Faust pulled on the reins of his black stallion.

A stable boy brought out Gray's Arabian crossbreed palomino, Battle Star. He could run for miles and miles. Battle Star's gaits were smoother than most horses', and Gray could not be more thankful for that today because every jolt was going to hurt.

"Hurry up!" Faust turned and started ordering his men around.

Gray counted thirty, one woman and the rest males. All of them were in their mid-twenties to early thirties. Faust's men had a reputation of being the most ruthless, even more so than the Warlord's own, and they didn't have a long life expectancy.

Colt's shrewd gaze panned the area. "This was set up before the summons. There's no way they could have all gotten ready this fast."

"I'm sure Faust jumped at the idea of having me under his command." Gray smirked. "But he definitely wasn't told about what would happen if he failed."

Colt snorted. "I saw." He reached into his pouch, then plopped a small jar in Gray's hand. "An extra. Syl said you need to apply this again tonight and change the bandages and do it for a week. The supplies are in your pack."

"And how am I supposed to apply it to my own back?"

Colt jerked his head toward Faust's men. "Get one of them to do it."

Gray scoffed. "You can't be serious."

"Look again. Closely this time. Who do you recognize?"

Gray skimmed the group, and shock vibrated through him. He almost didn't recognize her with one side of her blond hair cut so short it was almost shaved. Gwen turned and narrowed her stormy blue eyes. There was no hint of friendliness in her expression that would've been there three years ago. The man next to her was one of Sky's old scouts, and Gray had worked with him many times.

“He’s bringing two of Sky’s warriors?” Gray’s jaw dropped. “Is he stupid?”

“Overly confident in their loyalty. Get close to them, Gwen especially. See if they can be trusted.”

“Not an easy feat, brother. Faust will be watching me.”

Colt grabbed Gray’s bicep and squeezed. “Faust will try to kill you if you let your guard down. I’m sure of it. So get those two on your side and fast. You and Gwen used to be close. Use that connection.”

Gray nodded. “You watch your back too. Zek has many things in motion.”

“You worry about yourself. We’ll be ready for your return.” Colt patted his arm.

Wyatt ran up to them, carrying a pack and an armful of weapons. Colt took Gray’s wakizashi and waved Wyatt off. Wyatt hurried to Battle Star, affixed Gray’s katana to the saddle, and loaded other supplies into the saddlebags.

Colt secured the blade to Gray’s belt and lowered his voice. “Syl thought you should be mostly recovered in a week, but I’m worried about the damage riding will do to your wounds. Her prediction was made assuming you’d be resting, not jostled around for the whole day.” A deep crease formed between his prominent dark brows.

“It might take a bit longer, but I’ll heal. You know I will.”

Colt’s lips thinned. “I know. And remember to play the invalid for at least another couple of weeks after you do.”

“Okay.” Gray sighed. This would’ve been so much easier if he had been traveling with his own men. “Be well, brother.” Gray embraced Colt.

“Stay alive,” Colt whispered.

“Always.” Gray pulled away and strode toward Wyatt and Battle Star.

“Come on!” Faust yelled.

Gray grasped Wyatt's shoulder and leaned into the slightly shorter man. "Keep an eye on Ravie and report to General Colt until I return. All of you."

Wyatt dipped his chin. "Yes, General Hawk."

With Wyatt's help, Gray mounted Battle Star. Agonizing heat blistered across his back as he settled into the saddle. He took a deep breath. It would be a long journey. Faust kicked his mount, trotting out the gate, and Gray rode out at the tail of General Faust's army.

As soon as they'd cleared the Main Street, Faust kicked his horse into a canter, and they thundered out of Salt Lake City. It didn't matter how smooth Battle Star's gait was—every stride shot pain up Gray's torn-up back. One more day of rest would have done wonders for him.

It was all thanks to Sky that he could heal so quickly. The mutated virus running through her veins had almost killed him, but after two weeks, he'd pulled through and gained superhuman abilities. The virus had changed his appearance slightly, too. His coloring had gradually lightened over the year after, leaving him with ash-blond hair and icy green irises.

Sweat rolled down Gray's neck. They rode hard for most of the day. Even on horseback, they had a lot of ground to cover to catch Sky. Gray could see Faust's haste to find her. They both knew Zek's threat to strip them of their ranks should they fail was not an idle one.

Before sunset, they stopped to make camp. Gray walked his horse past the men who had traveled in front of him all day and halted next to a brown-haired Four-stud warrior with a dark olive complexion.

The warrior dipped his head. "General."

"Theo. Give me a hand."

After tying off his lead, Theo returned to Battle Star's side and held his arm up. To minimize the amount he moved his back, Gray clasped Theo's forearm and swung his leg over the small saddle horn. Slowly, he leaned forward and slid off.



Theo moved in, grabbing Gray's waist to aid his descent, but the stirrups rubbed up Gray's back, and he had to clamp his mouth shut to stop himself from yelling out. Quickly, Theo pulled Gray toward him, and the pain subsided.

Gray held onto Theo's shoulders. "Thanks," he said breathlessly.

"Anytime."

"Once you're done helping the princess, get out there and scout the area." Faust stood with his hands on his hips.

Theo saluted—thumping his fist to his heart. "Yes, General Faust."

Faust turned to his second-in-command, Dmitri, and the two slunk off behind the trees.

"Go on." Gray pushed off, suppressing a grimace. "I can manage the rest."

"I will help." Theo made quick work of the girth, slipped the saddle and pad from Battle Star, and led him to the trough.

Gray didn't move, or it was more that he couldn't. Any shift awoke stabbing stings through his torso. So he watched Faust's men bustle around, setting up camp. A few men dipped their heads in respect as they passed, but most eyed Gray with suspicion.

Theo returned after securing Battle Star's lead to the other horses at the edge of the camp. "General, you should rest."

"I'll get there." Eventually, when his stiff body allowed him to move without making him want to scream with every step.

Theo clenched his jaw, then took hold of Gray's elbow and propelled him forward. Gray grunted. The first step was the worst. After the third, the pain in his back dulled to a throbbing pulse. Theo led him to the side of the camp, away from the campfire.

"Moving me out to the sides so it's easier to assassinate me?" Gray asked.

A soft smile curled Theo's lips. "So you can make a quick exit if you need to, General."

Gray leaned into a tree, and Theo helped him sit. "There won't be any quick exits for me for a few days."

Once Gray was settled in, Theo bowed. "I'll have Gwen bring you refreshments."

Before Gray could thank him, Theo strode away. Theo had been one of Sky's best, and he'd always accompanied her on away missions. The only reason he was still alive was because he'd been injured and ordered to bed rest when she'd left on the mission to Houston.

Gray had been so messed up after Sky's desertion that he hadn't kept track of where Sky's men had ended up. Hades and Colt had tried to take the bulk of them, but the Warlord hadn't allowed it. They'd been divided up by a lottery, and Gray hadn't been assigned any. At the time, he'd been too messed up to care, and once he'd regained his senses, it had been too late.

Gwen marched toward him. Her face was all hard angles now, and she was more muscular. But it was the look in her eyes that had changed the most. It was cold and empty, the complete opposite of when she'd been in Sky's service.

She squatted next to him, holding out a canteen and a cloth wrap. "General Hawk."

"Five-stud Gwen. Since when am I General Hawk and not Gray?" He reached for the canteen.

Her nostrils flared. "It's Four-stud now, General Hawk."

He paused. "When did that happen?" A warrior had to do something grievous to be demoted. It didn't happen often because normally they were put to death instead.

"A few days after the Warlord executed Karim." She shoved the canteen into his grasp.

*Shit.* Gray dipped his head. "I'm sorry. I was so useless during that time. I wish I could go back and change so much ..."

She lifted her shoulders in a lifeless shrug. “What is done can’t be undone. And we were not your responsibility. We were hers. You should stop covering for her. Doing so only brings you pain. Or are the sixty lashes on your back not evidence enough?” She sat next to him and offered the cloth bundle again.

“I have my own food in my saddlebag.” Gray took the bottle and sipped.

“You must be really bunged up. This is your food.” She dropped it into his lap.

“Nice to see you haven’t lost your snark.”

Her expression darkened. “Only around you, General Hawk.”

“I’m honored.” He sipped some water and unwrapped the bundle. Inside was a cheese and salami sandwich. He took a bite and smiled.

Gwen stared at the sandwich. “Is that salami?”

“Want some?” he offered.

Nodding, she leaned in and sank her teeth into his sandwich. “Hmm. My God. That’s amazing. Which store sells it?”

“Wyatt makes it himself. Took him a few years to get the process right, and no one would dare sample it but me. Helps to have an iron stomach. But he got there eventually.”

“He should sell it. He’d make a fortune.”

Gray glimpsed a flash of the old Gwen. The hard line of her mouth softened, reminding him of the woman who’d cared for Alex as much as Sky. “Maybe one day he will.”

She slipped a pack off and rifled through it. “I’ll trade you half my smoked salmon sandwich for half of yours.”

Gray chuckled softly. “Feels like old times again.”

Gwen froze, and her lips pursed. “Those times will never come back.”

He let out a long sigh. “No, I guess they won’t.”

“I’ll help you with your bandages after we eat.” She took a bite of the salami sandwich and moaned, chewing. “It reminds me of the sandwiches from a deli near my college.”

“I’ll have Wyatt deliver a batch to you.”

Gwen bent her head forward and continued eating. “So, she’s really alive?”

“Yes. I saw her.”

Her forearm shook as she made a fist. “And Alex?”

“He joined the Liberators.”

Gwen bared her teeth. “She let him leave?”

Gray finished his food. “Seems she didn’t have a choice. He left her. She’s pretty broken up.”

Gwen rocked back, chuckling. “Good! Now she knows how it feels. Too bad she knows he’s alive.”

“That might be worse.” Gray knew from experience.

“What’s worse is wondering every day what you could have done to stop them. To blame yourself for not being strong enough for them to come to you for help. That she felt so backed into a corner she decided that the only way out was to leap off a bridge and kill them both.” Moisture pooled in the corners of her eyes as she gritted her teeth.

Gray hung his head. “I’m sorry.” He should have shared with more people that they had survived the fall. Gwen, especially, had deserved to know.

“I’ll get your bandages. And don’t even think of saying no. Remember who tended to Sky after she got the same punishment.” Gwen stood and headed for Battle Star.

How had Gwen ended up in Faust’s service, and what had she endured? He rubbed his chest to relieve some of the tension. In some ways, he was as responsible as Sky for Gwen’s situation. If he hadn’t been so wrapped up in himself, he might’ve been able to have her assigned to him. Maybe he could’ve even saved Karim. But if Sky had never left, Karim

wouldn't have had to die. Karim's death had hit him too. He'd been close with all of Sky's top commanders, as she had been with his.

Why had she left? Colt thought it had been to keep Alex out of training, but things were not adding up, especially after Zek revealed it was Alex who'd insisted on joining the recruits. Gray rubbed the bridge of his nose. Had Sky really planned to leave, or had it been a spur-of-the-moment thing?

He would get some answers, and maybe Gwen was right—he couldn't cover for her anymore. Whatever the reason, she'd had her little jaunt of freedom; it was time to bring her back. Too many were suffering because of her.

FIVE

# SKY



*“Never leave your enemies alive. It invites revenge.” ~  
Warlord Zek Wong, Skineater.*

**T**he third fight had ended without Sky noticing. Red-sash man blew kisses at the audience as he exited, and two teenage boys dragged the semi-conscious loser away.

Sky gripped the bars. “What are you planning?”

“Your skills are legendary.” Scar-Lady winked. “Win the match and you’ll prove me right. Lose and ...” She raised her left shoulder.

“And I become one of Madam’s whores.”

A sly smirk pulled at her scar. “I’m sure you’d make a very lucrative one.” She jabbed her index finger toward the suspended walkways. “Madam was very amiable to my proposal after seeing you.”

Sky would bet Madam was. Scar-Lady had trapped her well. Sky had to win, even if it meant becoming a Matron prisoner, because if she ended up in Madam’s whorehouse, Madam would likely drug her up so much she wouldn’t know what day it was. The announcer’s scream interrupted their conversation.

“Everyone thought her dead. Some even prayed for it. But like a Grim Reaper, the Scarlet Death has returned, and for the first time ever, she will compete in The Wild’s cage, facing off against some of our best! This extraordinary event is a gift from the house, and no ordinary bets can be accepted.”

The curtain next to Sky dropped, exposing her to the crowd. The roar was a deafening mixture of cheers and boos. She had no one to blame for getting caught but herself.

Scar-Lady tapped a bar with her fingernail and took on a haughty expression. “Did you think no one would recognize you? You underestimate how memorable you are.”

Sky thirsted to whack the smugness from Scar-Lady’s face. She grabbed Scar-Lady’s leather jacket, and yanked, pressing her face to the metal rods. “Even if I were who you’re mistaking me for, what’s it to you?”

Scar-Lady raised her hand, and the two men behind her backed off. “I guess you haven’t heard about the two bounties on your head?”

“Two?”

“One issued by your former Warlord and the other by my Queen.”

Sky’s fingers tightened into a death grip. The Matrons probably wanted to use her against Zek, or execute her for killing their people during her time as a Skin, or both.

Scar-Lady reached through the bars and ran her fingers across Sky’s cheek. Hundreds of invisible ants swarmed under her skin.

“Don’t worry, precious. Both contracts stipulate to bring you in alive, but they do not state in what condition. There’s no escape.” Humor bled from her expression until only loathing remained. “And I’ve been waiting five years for this.”

Sky released Scar-Lady. “I signed the contract. I am protected by The Wild rules.”

It was a feeble argument, and Sky knew she was grasping at straws. The fight was obviously going ahead, which meant Madam considered the rewards outweighed any damage their reputation might suffer.

Scar-Lady reined in her emotions. “Precious, you are a fugitive wanted by both sides. Normal rules don’t apply. Why do you think they announced you? You are a legendary



opponent. It wouldn't be fair to pit you against regular fighters.”

“Get comfortable, folks. We are about to start the most epic event of the year!” yelled the announcer.

Sky glanced at Ryan. His face revealed nothing, but there was a rigidity in his hunched-over stance. He'd been smart to keep quiet. By not protesting, he might have detached himself from her. Sky would have done the same, but a strange heaviness settled in her chest. His mission came first for him. Too much was at stake to risk it for her. She was alone in this heap of shit.

“Looking for help?” Scar-Lady asked. “There won't be any. Those rules you mentioned protect him.” She sauntered toward Ryan. “Your application to fight is void, and you're free to leave, but you'll have to stay put until the match is over.”

He responded with a disinterested shrug.

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, Scarlet, precious. I almost feel sorry for you. Lover boy here couldn't care less.”

Sky ignored her and directed her attention to the cage. Her opponents paraded in. Six soon-to-be playmates, four men and two women—the redhead and brunette elites from earlier—and they were all armed.

The announcer introduced the male fighters as undefeated champions of The Wild. The first, a brown-haired man with a bulging gut, Tony the Titan, whose height rivaled Ryan's, had twenty-two kills to his name. Next, a shorter man with black hair—Ninja—had rippling muscles with the leaner tone of a martial artist and thirty kills. The third—Black Jaw—was about her height and flashed a blackened, toothy grin. His count was fifteen. The last was the crowd favorite—Gary the Chopper, who racked in with a whopping forty-four. All of them added together didn't come close to Sky's count.

The Chopper flexed his muscles and posed for his roaring fans. Each champion wore hardened brown leather over their

chests with their own unique logos painted on. They were armed with old police batons and waved to the audience as they circled the stage. The Matron Elites stood at the back, gripping wooden staffs, and Sky had a feeling they would be more challenging. Would her nanite armor provide protection against blunt weapons? She'd find out soon.

Scar-Lady pressed up against her cage, tempting Sky to rip out her throat. It would be so easy to sink her nails in and squeeze until the trachea collapsed. But then the guards would probably shoot both her and Ryan.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Scar-Lady searched Sky for something. Maybe for a sliver of recognition. When she found nothing, she straightened and backed away. "I might not have been significant enough to recall, but I bet my brother was."

Sky's eyebrow twitched, and she spun away before her expression revealed the truth. That was all the prompting she'd needed to bring up his face. An ebony-skinned male Matron warrior, magnificent in every way. His death, one at the top of the long line Zek had insisted upon, still haunted her.

"I knew you'd remember Will. He was the light in my life, and today is the first of many torturous days I have planned for you."

"Let's get ready to rumble!" screamed the announcer.

The audience howled.

"Enjoy your fight. And don't hurt my girls if you want to live," said Scar-Lady, her voice so close she was probably pressed up against the cage again.

A clang signaled the lock's release before the gate swung open, and a deafening roar erupted from the spectators. If Sky believed in karma, then this trap was well deserved. She pushed down the churning memories and stepped into the cage. The crowd's cries faded into the background as she focused on the increasing tempo of her heart.

"Sky." Ryan's voice sounded as if he were standing right next to her.

She glanced back, but he hadn't moved. She scowled at him. This wasn't the time to reveal more alien talents. She didn't need more distractions.

“Killing isn't everything,” he said. “We are all judged by the choices we make.”

Sky replied, not sure if he would hear her, “Your people might have that luxury, but here on Earth we live by one rule.” She returned her attention to her opponents and popped her knuckles. “Survival is everything.”

A hurricane of energy radiated off the crowd—blood lust, frenzied anticipation, and rage. Sky let it all seep in and churn in her core. The nostalgic atmosphere ignited a thrill within her, which she had denied herself for too long. She reveled in the cold spreading through her torso and her limbs, savoring the turbulent darkness swirling beneath her ribs as she met the gaze of her first playmate. Tony the Titan's stubby lashes lowered into a steely gaze.

“Fighters at the ready. Remember, there are no rules in this special fight. Anything goes.” The drums sped up, along with the tempo of the announcer's voice. “It's kill or be killed. I declare this extraordinary match open!”

A tumult of screams blasted her eardrums. The elites moved back and leaned against the cage bars, at the farthest point from Sky. The men shuffled forward and paused. She waited, but their advance halted a third of the way. Seemed they wanted her to go to them.

Sky sauntered toward them in time with the rhythmic beat of the bass, immersed in the atmosphere. Sidestepping to the edge, she stalked the Titan. He retreated for every step she took, and the other champions moved in time with him, keeping an equal distance between them and her.

Sky's lips thinned as she eyed her prey. She jerked forward, and the Titan stumbled but recovered quickly. He bared his teeth. The crowd jeered, as she glanced at the other three. Flexing their muscles, they exchanged a silent agreement.

*Here they come.* She lowered her stance.

Black Jaw and Titan charged, dropping their heads. Sky couldn't take both at once. She leaped forward and somersaulted over them. The world spun, but even through the blur, she knew each person's position within the cage. She landed on one knee, and two black lines from opposite directions sped toward her neck. Springing up to block, she used her momentum to stop theirs. Heat exploded through her forearms, but her bones held against the batons.

Sky twisted and punched, striking Chopper with the full power behind her rotating hips. A grunt erupted from him. She pushed off and kicked Ninja's knee.

Ninja collapsed with her foot, absorbing the impact, and jabbed. A punch with the force of a sledgehammer slammed into her back. He swung in with a hook. She ducked. His fist sailed over, and she launched herself at his midsection, elbow first. Her sharp joint connected with his ribs. He groaned, and she kept striking.

A blow to Ninja's right jaw. One to his left cheek. Another to his unguarded solar plexus. He gasped, staggering backward. Titan wrapped his arm around her waist and hurled her. Sky flew at the bars and landed on them in a crouch with the grace of a great cat. She caught glimpses of screaming fans frothing at the mouth, fists pumping into the air, before pushing off.

"Blood! Blood! Blood!" they chanted.

The thrill of the hunt awakened in her. A small smile spread across her lips. The elites hadn't made a move, meaning Sky had time to play with her prey.

Titan rushed her, roaring. She slipped right, and he crashed into the cage. Faster than he could register, Sky grabbed his hair and slammed his face into an iron bar. Crimson liquid sprayed the audience, and they went crazy. She drove her foot into his kneecap. It splintered, and he buckled, slumping to the ground, rolling and screaming. One more hit and she could end him. It was what the two men who'd raised her had taught her to do. Sky picked up his baton.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” The crowd showed no mercy.

The three remaining champions stormed her. Sky growled. They’d deprived her of her prize. The anger bubbling in her chest increased her reactions. With ease, she parried their successive strikes, gaining more speed.

Titan hobbled to the edge and banged on the gate, but the attendants refused to open it. Sky hung onto the back of Chopper’s shoulder and swung her body around, kicking out. The tip of her boot hammered Black Jaw’s temple, and he crumpled.

Chopper grabbed for her, but she slipped away, spinning, and kicked Ninja. His feet lifted off the ground, and he slammed into the bars and slumped to the floor. Chopper punched in a rapid sequence. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as she weaved and bobbed around each strike. He snarled, spit bubbling over his lips.

Sky countered, driving her fist into his mouth. He howled. Blood misted the air. Warm red liquid flowed from his nose and gums. He dropped to his knees, swaying. She rounded him, plucking out a tooth from her knuckle.

“Get up, Chopper!” someone screamed.

Black Jaw was out and Titan still argued with the attendants, but Ninja was half up, using the bars to aid his ascent. She had a few seconds. Sky eyed Chopper’s thick, corded throat. It would take a strong jerk to break. She clenched her fist and flexed her arm muscles. The elixir had not only made her faster, but stronger too. She could feel her increased power with every hit. With her new strength, snapping his neck would be easy. She would have to thank Ryan after she yelled at him.

The thought of the alien brought her gaze to him. His last words replayed in her mind. He was not hiding his emotions. Disappointment dulled his features. She paused behind Chopper, staring at Ryan.

The chill inside her warmed, melting into heavy, gooey lumps that dripped into her gut. She froze. Now wasn’t the

time for her to grow a conscience. What was the alien's issue? This world was kill or be killed, and she knew that! So why wouldn't her hands move?

She broke eye contact. That did the trick. Grabbing a handful of Chopper's greasy hair, she glanced at the alien again. There was something beyond the disappointment in his expression now—an emotion she didn't want to name. If she did, it might crack the armor protecting her heart.

*Damn him!*

Sky roared, sinking her nails into Chopper's skull. Ninja launched off the bars, flying headfirst, yelling. She yanked and heard the crack.

The audience erupted into a furor, and she reveled in it.

Ninja hit her side, and they went down. She wrestled with him. He was slick, evading her grapples. They twisted and rolled, jabbing punches into each other's ribs. From underneath, she looped her leg over his collarbone, hooking her foot, and flipped. He grunted from the impact of their combined weight. His fist flew at her face. She captured his wrist, tugged toward her torso, and yanked. His shoulder dislocated with a pop. She slid her forearm around his neck and squeezed. He flapped and wriggled, but he couldn't break her hold. She was stronger, much stronger now.

“Unbelievable! In less than two minutes, the Scarlet Death has defeated all the Champions. The General is living up to her reputation.”

A little tighter and she'd have one less fighter to worry about.

“Sky!” Ryan's voice carried over the frenzied cheers.

A streak of movement flashed in her peripheral vision. She released and rolled, grabbing a fallen baton and swinging upward. The Elite's staff splintered in half. Red didn't falter. She weaved around. Brunette twirled in, whirling the stick at Sky's neck. Sky leaned back, kicked the descending wood away, and dropped to one knee.

Sky glimpsed Ryan's face and couldn't decipher his expression. Thunder ricocheted through her skull. Brunette had clocked her with the full thrust of her staff. Her cheek throbbed. Salt flooded her taste buds, and she spat out crimson saliva.

The elites crept to her rear. These women were impressive. If Ninja had worked with them, even with her increased abilities, she might have had trouble. They attacked in succession, with a millisecond between each strike. Sky fended off their blows. Brunette fainted, and Sky grabbed her staff. The jagged end of Red's stick tore through Sky's arm, but she felt nothing. She ripped the staff away and whirled it at Red. Red flipped back as Sky twirled the staff over her head and returned to her ready position.

A gunshot exploded, silencing all within the factory.

"Enough!" Scar-Lady stood outside the Champion's entrance, pointing a smoking pistol at the roof.

Six men in elite uniforms surrounded the cage. Five trained their rifles between the bars at Sky, the last aimed at Ryan.

Scar-Lady strolled to the edge of the stage. "Today, we have proven, without a doubt, this monster"—she pointed at Sky—"is indeed the Scarlet Death of the Skins! And to prevent further loss of your favorite champions, Madam has asked that we Matrons intervene and remove this dangerous criminal before more lives are wasted."

The people cheered, chanting for justice. If Scar-Lady wanted to rile Sky, she was using the wrong approach. Sky had been called worse.

Brunette held out her hand. "My staff."

Sky flung the stick. It spun through the air, but Brunette caught it without flinching. Both she and Red smirked while Sky's lips pressed together. The champion's gate swung open, and Titan hobbled out first. Three attendants rushed in. Two dragged Black Jaw out, and the last helped Ninja. No one came to collect the corpse.

Scar-Lady marched inside and stopped, leaving a few feet between them. She wore a pin on her collar, which hadn't been there earlier. A silver rose blossom. She had been smart not to flaunt her rank as a Matron Count.

Unlike most factions that had formed in North America after the invasion, the Matron leader, Queen Athena—or Mindy as she'd been known pre-pulse—had devised noble titles instead of military ranks and had done away with all feminine forms of the titles except for hers. But they were no different really since the titles were earned, not inherited.

“On your knees,” Scar-Lady ordered, her voice barely audible over the crowd. She tossed the pistol to Red.

Red sidled around and aimed at Sky's temple, but Sky refused to move, absorbing the Count's hatred. It was well deserved. Sky had murdered her brother. Not by choice, but if it had been Alex, Sky would hunt the killer to the edges of the universe.

The Count leaned in, and Sky recognized a look she'd seen many times before—desire mixed with madness. Vindication burned in the darkness behind her irises. The Count likely craved to break Sky until all that remained was a husk begging for death.

“Kneel or I'll have your lover shot.” Her grin was all teeth.

A ripple surged up Sky's body, tensing every fiber. “You said you'd release him.”

“I lied.” Her smile transformed into a smug sneer. “You have until the count of three.”

The muscles in Sky's neck trembled with cold fear. She didn't know if Ryan's nanite armor could protect him from multiple gunshots, and he was too valuable to risk.

“One.”

Sky hissed.

“Two.”

Sky didn't kneel to anyone, not even the Warlord, but she believed the Count's threat. In a controlled descent, she



dropped to her knees.

“Release him. He has nothing to do with me.” Sky cringed at her pleading tone, but she had gotten them into this mess, so she would get him out.

The announcer chimed in, “Ladies and gentlemen, let us allow the wonderful Matrons time to process the criminal and break for a short intermission. Outside, the bunny girls are performing, and refreshments are available. But don’t go far. The next fight will start soon.”

The muffled sounds of guitars and percussion struck up. Chatter from the crowd faded as they streamed out until only the Matrons and the over-watch on the hanging walkways remained.

“Precious.” She puckered her lips and fluttered her lashes. “You’re deluded if you think I’d miss the opportunity to capture him, especially if he’s who I think he is.”

“He’s just someone I picked up to satisfy my needs.”

“Ah, then maybe he can satisfy mine too.” She pulled a knife from the sheath attached to her belt and held the flat side against Sky’s cheek. “You’re more my type, though.” She slid the blade down Sky’s throat. “Although your tits are a bit small for my liking. Must be why he didn’t fight for you. Or could it be because he’s an alien fugitive?”

Sky almost missed the word. The muscles in her scalp jerked.

“Oh? You didn’t know? There’s an order to capture him too, only from much higher up.”

Sky opened her mouth, searching for words of denial, but nothing came.

“He looks way too alien not to be one, even with his different eye color. And I should know.” The Count bent over and whispered, “Queen Athena’s working with them.” She slid up her sleeve and exposed a mark on her arm.

Sky gaped at the blood-red, embossed tattoo on the underside of the Count’s wrist. She swallowed, trying to

lubricate her dry mouth. It was the same marking she'd seen on the Cardinal soldiers' right cheeks the night of the attack, but there was something more. Her head throbbed as the line of interlocking circles, forming a convoluted maze of lines, pulled at a memory deep within her psyche. The ache in her head intensified. She cleared her mind, and immediately, the pain subsided.

Music and cheers from outside filtered in through the doors. Sky raised her voice. "What are you going to do with him?"

The Count flicked stray strands of her long black hair off her face. "Right now, you should worry less about him and more about yourself."

Sky clenched her fists.

The Count waved at one of her men and put her lips at Sky's ear. "Let's find out how much you care about your alien lover."

An Elite jogged over and handed her an aluminum baseball bat.

She pressed the butt of the bat into Sky's jaw. "Shall we play a little game? Why don't you spin around so you can see who you are doing this for?" The Count pulled away, motioning for her to turn.

Sky shot her a deathly glare before pivoting on her knees. Ryan gripped the bars so hard his knuckles paled.

The Count was back at Sky's ear. "It's simple. I'm gonna shut my eyes and swing this bat at your head and, if you flinch, even a millimeter, the Elite next to your alien will shoot his foot. Every time you move, he'll shoot, but if you remain still three times, the Cardinal will be safe. Maybe I'll even let him go? Simple, isn't it?"

Tension stiffened Sky's neck.

"Don't look so despondent. I suck at baseball. I strike out all the time."

Sky had no luck with baseball. An old memory of the only time she had ever played floated to the surface. It had ended in disaster, just like she knew this would, but she had no choice. She had to agree to this perilous game.

“I’ll take your silence as agreement.” The Count stepped back out of Sky’s peripheral vision.

Sky took a deep breath and met Ryan’s gaze. She was banking on the Count not killing her, because if it were her, she’d want to keep her brother’s murderer alive as long as possible. To torture.

The Count’s shadow moved. “Let’s play ball.”

Sky’s back trembled as she forced her body to stay still, even though her senses screamed at her to flee. A breeze kicked up the hair above her crown.

“Strike one.” The Count jumped around behind her. “My aim is so shit.”

A creak echoed through the cage. Ryan’s forearm muscles bulged as the metal bent.

“Don’t,” Sky whispered.

His face contorted into a deep scowl. He didn’t release the bars, but he stopped pulling them apart.

The Count swooped in, and her breath heated Sky’s ear. “See, I knew you cared for one another. And just so you know. We would have never killed the alien,” the Count growled.

Shock rippled through Sky. Had all her threats been empty? The Count snapped up and swung. The fluidity of her shadow’s movement exposed her intention—she was done playing.

Sky clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. Her head snapped forward, a split second before searing pain shattered the back of her skull, and she wondered if Ryan’s blank expression would be the last thing she’d ever see.

SIX

# RYAN



*“If you continue to shut everyone out and keep secrets, when you finally find someone you care about, it’ll be a disaster. They’ll never trust you.” ~ Del Cee’kar Fernari, An’Zura.*

**A** loud crack filled the arena. The lock shattered, and the gate swung open, clanging into the cage. Ryan darted forward.

“Halt!” the closest guard screamed.

The coppery stench of blood grew. He darted across the creaking stage, wasting no time to reach Sky’s side. Why had she done that for him?

“Hold your fire!” yelled the woman with the scar.

He dropped, skidding on his knees to her prone form, and stared at the red stain spreading through her platinum locks. A dark, thorny heat shot up his torso and twisted around his chest.

He pulled her limp body into his lap and cupped her head. Warm crimson liquid coated his hand, and fear rippled through him. Could her nanites heal her? He still didn’t know the full extent of her capabilities. And if they could, most of the protein solution she’d consumed a couple of days ago had gone to repairing her previous injuries. Was there enough left in her system?

“What did you do?” Ryan seethed. A wave of molten rock sped through his limbs.

The woman backed up. “What she deserved.” Her voice wavered as she fought to keep her chin held high. The woman cleared her throat. “General Scarlet has survived ordeals that kill most men. The legend is she cannot die.”

“You have the wrong person. Her name is not Scarlet.” He activated his expression suppression protocol—that had been deactivated since leaving Soren, and it had been incredibly freeing to interact with Sky for the last day without it.

She pulled her shoulders back. “I do not. I would never forget my brother’s murderer.”

Every muscle in his face fought against the protocol—his ISA ran at full strength. Soren had warned him about the Skineaters and Matrons being enemies, but he hadn’t realized how hostile they would be toward Sky. He had led her straight into this trap. His fingers squeezed into fists.

Ryan swallowed the lump in his throat. “Then, you got your revenge. She’s dying. Leave us.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. And even if she is, I couldn’t do that. I wasn’t sure until you broke out of the cage, but I am now.” The woman pulled up her left sleeve and exposed a red tattoo he was familiar with, one stamped on every servant of his family. “Lord Laxari protects the Matron Queendom.”

Ryan wanted to laugh at the absurd notion of Laxari protecting a group of humans, but he maintained his neutral expression. “Lord?”

She regained her strong, clear voice from before. “He is your lord too, is he not?”

Never would Laxari lord over him. Ryan would kill him first.

She waved her people forward. “He contacted us, requesting our aid in detaining you. And lucky me, you fell into my lap. I was told by the one called Soren that you would not attack unless provoked. Was she lying?”

He had planned to let the Matron capture them. He’d agreed with Soren that it was the fastest way to travel to

Matron, but he had not counted on them attacking Sky with such malice. “No, Soren did not lie. But I will not stand by and watch you hurt someone in my company. What are your plans for Sky?”

Ryan caught sight of shadows edging closer, along with metallic clinks. Four men behind her aimed their guns at him. It brought the total to seven with projectile weapons.

She made a fist. “Scarlet is a wanted criminal. We will negotiate with Lord Laxari for custody.”

The issuance must have been new, or Soren hadn’t been made aware of it. But Laxari’s warrant for Sky would keep her alive. He could work with that.

“Your name?” Ryan asked.

She jutted her chin out. “I am Count Kendra Tate of the Matron Queendom.”

The title meant nothing, but it was obvious it carried significance for her. He hoped her new nobility had installed her with some honor.

“You are a noble.” Ryan inclined his head slightly. “I ask for your word as a count that until Sky’s custody is granted to your people, she will remain unharmed and with me. This is the condition I give for my surrender.”

“You’re not in a position to negotiate.”

“Do not test me, human. You know not of what we are capable.” Ryan glowered.

She flinched, her hand darting to the knife at her hip. The brown-haired female warrior who’d fought Sky in the ring jogged up to Kendra’s side, leaned in, and whispered.

“My lady, bringing both of them in would give you an extra edge against the Queen.”

Kendra’s dark gaze ran over him. Her lips twitched, and she squashed them together. After a long, penetrating stare, she nodded sharply, then tossed her braids back. “You have my word. I accept your terms.”

Jingling chains approached from the right. Ryan scooped Sky up and stood. She was so light in his arms. The amount of damage her body had withstood over the past week was remarkable. She was a puzzle, one he planned to solve no matter how long it took.

The red-haired warrior crouched at his feet and cuffed his ankles with flimsy chains, which he suppressed the surge to snap. He had given his word, and so he would abide by their ways. For now.

He proceeded in small shuffles back the way they'd entered. The Count walked beside him. Her two female warriors led, and four males followed at his rear.

At the storage point, he stopped. "Collect my belongings from basket number forty, or I will go no farther. The token's in my right pocket."

Kendra jerked her head at the brown-haired warrior. The warrior gazed up at him with amused eyes as she slid her hand into his pocket, stroking his leg longer than necessary, while she located the disc, then retrieved his bag and rejoined the line. Their congregation continued outside, and he was glad to leave that swirling stench of blood and sweat behind.

They rounded the building. Periodic fire torches planted into the ground hissed against the breeze. To the right, a pair of long, dark lines stuck out of the pale sand, leading straight into a large metal warehouse.

He activated his nanite-enhanced vision and zoomed in. Inside was the train Soren had told him about. The usage of such a vehicle was strictly prohibited by the Metanoia Accords, but it was not an ordinary train; the engine car was constructed completely of nanites, but the rest were old human made carriages.

"Nice train," Ryan said—when they were close enough it wouldn't be odd to see in the dim light.

"Lord Laxari is very generous," Kendra replied. "He has provided us with many advantages."



Inside the station, more men, armed with swords, crossbows, and some guns, herded groups of people into the carriages.

There was barely enough slack in his chain to allow him to step up to the platform. “Who are they?”

“Gifts for your lord.”

Disbelief billowed through his system. It was only by the grace of his ISA that his surprise did not show on his face. He almost asked her to repeat her words, but that would have been unnecessary since he could replay the recording scene by scene in his mind.

This was worse than he'd expected. What was Laxari doing? He was violating so many regulations that it would be simple to have him removed as Earth's overseer, but for what purpose?

Earth's fate hadn't been Ryan's main reason for traveling here. He was searching for clues about a supposed dead man's location. Jo'Ord D'Rana, the former first aid of the Argini family—Ryan's family's greatest opposition.

At first, Ryan had thought Sky might be the Argini child, who everyone except Ryan thought had died in an explosion twenty-five years ago. Ryan believed that Jo'Ord stole the child during the chaos and hid here on Earth. When he'd first seen Sky, he had hoped she was the child he'd spent almost twenty years searching for, desperately yearning for there to be someone else like him. But the more time he'd spent with her, the more he realized she likely wasn't. She was just too weak.

To prove his theories, Ryan needed the backup data from the Lunar base that had exploded ten years ago, which Laxari swore had been destroyed, but he highly doubted it. The backup cube was designed to withstand much more force than the explosion on the moon. Ryan suspected there was something else on the cube Laxari didn't want him to find. Knowing his cousin, he also suspected that Laxari wouldn't have destroyed the data, only hidden it. And what better place than on Earth?

There was more at stake than this planet, so until he exhausted every lead, he couldn't leave this savage land.

A man slid a heavy wooden door open, and Kendra gestured him inside. "After you."

The car's interior was bare but for a solid metal cage in the center, bolted to the floor with large sturdy brackets. The red-haired warrior used a chunky key to unlock the gate. Ryan remained at the entrance, glancing between Kendra and the warrior through hooded eyelids.

Kendra moved in. "Take off your shoes and clothes. You can set Scarlet next to the cage. We will assist."

His grip tightened around Sky. "You will not touch her."

She stepped back and waved her hand. A few men surrounded Ryan, each carrying sawed-off rifles. Thanks to the elixirs Soren had given him, those bullets wouldn't even break his skin, but they could hurt Sky.

The brown-haired warrior took up position beside Kendra and leaned in. "Lady Kendra," the warrior whispered. "Should we be treating him this way? I know he's wanted by Lord Laxari, but... the Queen might—"

Kendra held her hand up and glared at her warrior.

The brunette dipped her head and stepped back.

Kendra gritted her teeth. "I apologize for your treatment, but detainees are not allowed personal belongings. Normally, we would have stripped you as soon as we took you into custody. And even though you've agreed to come with us, I cannot risk that you might change your mind and try to escape. So, until we are back in Matron, please bear with it. Now, please, take off your clothes and Scarlet's, or we will do it for you."

The man closest retreated a step but raised the barrel of his gun. Disrobing Sky in front of these people made his blood boil, but he had little choice. Ryan stalked in and squatted. Gently, he leaned Sky up against the side of the cage and removed her shoes and socks, then unbuttoned her pants and

slipped them off. A few fresh bruises marked her long, slender legs. Carefully, he tipped her forward and pulled off her shirt.

“Her crop top too,” said Kendra.

“This is the last layer she wears.” He pulled the strap part way down her arm so Kendra could verify his claim.

“Fine. Hand them over, then yours. Quickly.”

Ryan passed Sky’s clothes to the male closest to him, then removed his shirt. The redhead whistled, and the brown-haired warrior licked her lips. He tugged off the rest of his attire and threw it at the brunette.

She grinned. “Scarlet has good taste.” She chucked the pile in her hands at the man next to her.

Kendra’s expression became unreadable. “If you’ve finished showing off, get in the cage.”

The interior was cramped. He carefully slid Sky inside and crawled over her. His back arched as the urge to shield her flashed through him. She always looked so vulnerable when she slept. He shifted farther in. The tight space made it difficult, but he pulled her to the back corner and rested her against his chest. Her breathing returned to a deep rhythm—a good sign the hit had not done as much damage as he’d feared.

He should wait until the Matrons left before inspecting the faint bruises on Sky’s cheek and forehead, but his hand moved before he could stop himself, and he brushed the bloody strands of hair off before they stuck to her skin. A pair of dark boots shuffled to the edge of the cage.

A soft creak of leather drew his attention. In front of him, Kendra crouched at eye level. Her narrowed gaze swept to the girl in his lap. The crinkle between her brows deepened as she gripped the iron. “You had me fooled at the beginning. I thought you didn’t care, but maybe you do.”

His jaw muscles tensed as he recalled his earlier outburst. He drew his hand back and stared at their captor. “She is injured. I would do the same for any human.” The lack of emotion in his tone almost made him flinch.

“Maybe.” She stared at Sky. “What I don’t get is, why she did it?”

“Did what?” Ryan asked against his better judgment. He shouldn’t have let himself be drawn into her game, but she’d piqued his curiosity.

Kendra’s inky irises stared into him. “You abandoned her. You offered no help when I trapped her, yet she still sacrificed herself ... for you.”

An icy pulse flashed through him. He didn’t need a reminder.

“No reaction, huh? Then again, I suppose I shouldn’t expect one. You aren’t human.” She rocked back to her heels. “If I didn’t hate her so much, I’d feel sorry for her. What went through her mind when she knelt alone, knowing you weren’t coming to rescue her? Who’d have thought the Scarlet Death would develop a new weakness this late in the game?” Her lips went slack, and she tilted her head. “Did you seduce her?”

He turned his gaze toward the three men guarding the large exit, but she continued to study his expression.

She waited a moment longer before lifting a shoulder. “Whatever you did benefited me.”

A chill settled in his chest. He kept his attention away from Sky, mulling over this confounding notion. An act of selflessness, an action he would not have expected from his traveling companion. Her sacrifice unsettled him, so he needed to stay aloof, for both their sakes.

Kendra shook her head. “Even after learning she took the hit for you, you can’t even show an inch of sympathy?” A lopsided grin grew across her face. “Karma’s a bitch, ain’t it? I can’t wait to tell her all about it.”

She hopped up and slammed the gate shut. The red-haired warrior inserted a skeleton key, and a heavy click sounded. Then she shuffled around the cage until she stood behind him.

“Put Scarlet’s hand through the bars,” Kendra ordered.

At last, he relaxed the hold his ISA maintained over his facial muscles and raised an eyebrow in question. “Why?”

She clicked her fingers. Two of the accompanying escorts snapped forward, aiming their rifles into the cage. A light jingle of metal sounded behind him. The red-haired woman squatted and held out a pair of handcuffs connected by a long chain.

“We need to be extra careful with her,” she said.

The bars were thick iron rods, over two inches in diameter. He’d have trouble bending them. How did they think Sky would?

“First bullet goes in Scarlet if you don’t cooperate,” Kendra said.

There was little logic in shooting now, but he allowed them to keep the illusion of having the upper hand and did as requested. Kendra focused on Sky, her mouth forming a deep, harsh line.

“Where are you taking us?” he asked.

She remained fixated on Sky. “The Capital, old Seattle.”

“And you have a way of contacting Laxari?”

“Of course,” she said.

Hopefully, Soren was doing as he’d asked and blocking any transmissions from the Matrons. “I see. How long until they collect us?”

“That is up to my Queen.” Her features hardened. “She will decide when to contact Lord Laxari. Or she might wait until his next visit, so you might want to get comfortable.”

That meant they still had time. Their situation was looking less grim. If luck favored them, they’d escape before Laxari learned of their detainment.

“He visits often?” Ryan asked.

Kendra raised her chin. “I told you before, we are special. Lord Laxari fawns over my Queen.”

“Oh?” Laxari despised humans. Before the Metanoia had been activated, Laxari had petitioned to exterminate the entire race. His exact words had been, *they are a wasteful society not worth saving*, but the council had forbidden it.

“He visits my Queen every month.”

Just how many gifts were these humans providing for Laxari to suffer through a visit that often?

The red-haired woman snapped the last cuff around his wrist, and the result was awkward but effective. Sky’s left arm went under his right, and her right over his left shoulder. They were locked into a tangle. At least the chains had some slack, allowing him to rest Sky’s arms at her sides.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Kendra said as she and her people exited the car and slid the door shut.

He heard another bolt click into place. Whimpers and yells filtered in through the cracks, sounds of the guards herding people into the adjacent carriages. The way humans treated their own kind was barbaric.

Ryan ran his thumb over the corner of Sky’s mouth, then bent until his forehead touched Sky’s.

*ISA, Diagnose.*

*<No permanent damage sustained. Estimated consciousness is between twelve to twenty-four hours.>*

*Can you narrow it down?*

*<Unable to without access to a HolPod.>*

Ryan sighed. He had respected Sky’s privacy before, but their situation had escalated. He had to know her nanites’ capabilities.

“Forgive me,” he muttered, pressing his lips to her forehead.

More doors slammed shut, and a man outside yelled, “Locked down!”

A loud whistling noise vibrated through the walls, and with a small jerk, the vehicle edged forward. More jolts

resonated through the car until the train smoothed into a steady pace.

*Deep access.*

*<Warning. Deep access protocol is prohibited by council mandate four.>*

*Initiate bypass. We are not within An'Zura's rings. Council mandate does not apply.*

*<Bypass accepted. Accessing ... ISA detected. Version Z-5778a. Currently running silent critical mode.>*

Ryan leaned back and slumped. She wasn't the Argini child. He'd hoped he was wrong in his deductions, but he was certain now. If she had been, her ISA's ID would've started with A as all Dels' did. Her ISA's ID matched the year and version that Jo'Ord had when he fled An'Zura. It meant her ISA likely hadn't been implanted during incubation, and she was the product of Jo'Ord mating with a human. Her ISA was a replica of Jo'Ord's, which was highly illegal. If Ryan's father ever discovered her, he could push for the most stringent measure of the law—her execution.

Although Ryan knew it was unlikely, he had still held onto a small hope that his presumptions had been wrong, and she was the one he'd searched for, so there was at least one other person in existence who was the product of an illegal experiment. He sighed, gazing at her. The color of her hair was still a mystery. Was it the result of a mutation from coupling with human DNA? Jo'Ord was a Za, and all Za and their descendants had been genetically coded to have dark brown hair, so as his daughter, she should too. He brushed a stray strand from her crease-free forehead and pressed two fingers to her temple.

On the bright side, her nanites had once been part of Jo'Ord, which meant they might carry his memories of the explosion that had killed the previous leader of the Argini family. An explosion his mother was the prime suspect of causing, but he believed she had been framed, and he intended to prove it.

*List active protocols.*

*<Activated protocols: resurrection and ... >*

*That's all?*

*<Connection lost>*

*Reconnect, deep access.*

*<Connection established, attempting to access protocol list. List damaged. Six unreadable protocols. Last protocol reads contra-touch.>*

*Are the unreadable protocols active?*

*<Access denied. Unable to confirm.>*

Denied? Did that mean those unreadable protocols were ones Jo'Ord had been running when Sky had been conceived? Why hadn't he purged them at Sky's birth? Ryan rubbed his neck. To learn more about those protocols he'd need to connect to Sky through the collective. At least Jo'Ord had enabled resurrection. His assistance after the waterfall had been unnecessary. Her system would have initiated its own resuscitation. But contra-touch? He'd never heard of such a protocol.

*Define contra-touch.*

*<A dissuasion protocol against any touch made by non-nanite enabled beings.>*

Ryan furrowed his brows. Why had Jo'Ord set such a function? Did that mean for her entire life she hadn't been able to touch humans without feeling discomfort? What would that do to someone's mind? He'd also left her without any nanite-assisted speed or strength, which made her almost human. The capabilities she displayed now were the natural abilities of An'Zuri without nanites. And because her AI was running in silent mode, she couldn't communicate with her nanites, but she should still be able to use An'Zuri tech, which might come in handy when they infiltrated the Pyramid base.

He stared down at her and stroked her cheek with his thumb. He couldn't ask her if she wanted this, but he believed it was best for her. Later, he'd apologize for the assumption



when she knew the truth about her ISA. He took a deep breath and gave the command, *disable contra-touch*.

*<Confirmed.>*

*Increase speed and strength to maximum capabilities.*

*<Unable to comply. Host does not contain enough reserves to initiate.>*

*Shit. Increase settings to maximum, within limits.*

*<Confirmed.>*

*Access memory storage.*

*<Memory storage inactive.>*

*Activate memory recording.*

He waited. *ISA?*

*<Unable to activate. Protocol damaged. Recommend full reset.>*

Doing that could wipe her mind, along with Jo'Ord's memories—memories that could exonerate his mother and shine a light on the true perpetrator, which he believed to be Jo'Ord. Had Jo'Ord intentionally damaged her nanites to protect himself? Only Cee'kar—his closest friend—would have the best chance of repairing and retrieving any data from them. That meant he'd need to take Sky with him when he left Earth, and he couldn't imagine a scenario where she would agree to come.

*Disconnect.*

Ryan rocked back against the cage. Things were getting complicated. His ISA calculated that at their current speed they would reach their destination in a little over twenty-four hours, which was odd. The train was capable of much higher speeds. Ryan snorted. Laxari had probably done it on purpose because he was just that petty. But then why give the humans a train at all? Nothing was adding up.

A cool draft whipped through the cracks. Sky shivered. He pulled her against his chest and rested his head on the bars. Laxari had been a fool to leave a tri-source in a human-

controlled city. If Ryan could retrieve it, he and Soren could finally leave this war-torn land behind and put an end to whatever nefarious thing Laxari was doing to the humans. Sky shifted, pressing her cheek into his ribs, and inhaled. She smiled softly. What was she dreaming about?

He ran his fingers over her forehead. Would Sky believe him when he told her she was half An'Zuri? He snorted. He doubted she would until he showed her proof, and he had no way of doing so until they returned to his ship. After retrieving the tri-source, his biggest problem would be convincing Sky to leave with him. If he told her about Jo'Ord and her nanites, and his intention to have Cee'kar access them, would she ever agree? She hated the idea of nanites so violently that he feared how she would react. He traced her bottom lip. Warmth thrummed through his chest at the thought of bringing her. She was unlike anyone he'd ever known. So strong, yet so frail. There was something about her that drew him. He would have to find a way for the council to accept her legally; there had to be a loophole to exploit. She rolled her neck and moaned softly. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

SEVEN

# GRAY



*“I know I can’t replace her, but maybe I can help fill the hole she left.” ~ Five-stud Ravie Kumar, Skineater.*

**G**wen left when Theo returned, and they sat in silence until he insisted Gray get some sleep. Gray needed the rest, leaving him no choice but to trust Theo not to kill him while he slept. He was a little surprised to wake up the next morning.

Gwen stared at him. “Good morning, General Hawk.”

“I will get you calling me Gray again.”

She thinned her eyes and held out her hand. “Come on. We need to get moving. General Faust wants to leave soon.”

Gray grabbed her hand and rose slowly, testing his back. It was much improved, thanks to Gwen’s care, but still pinched. “Where’s Theo?”

“General Faust sent him ahead. Do you need help watering the trees?” she asked.

“You remembered.” Gray smiled. Maybe there was hope for Gwen yet if she was using his slang.

“It does sound better than taking a piss,” she said.

“I’m fine right now.”

“Suit yourself.”

She helped him toward Battle Star, and with a little boost from her, he climbed into his saddle and stroked Battle Star’s neck. “I hope you got a good rest.”

The horse snorted.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Faust and his warriors mounted up around him.

“Ride out.” Faust raised his hand and kicked into a trot.

Gwen closed in, astride her brown thoroughbred. They didn’t speak for the duration of the ride, but she kept a close watch on him, so Gray added a few extra grimaces in now and then. But his back had improved enough that he wasn’t sweating anymore, and the pain had dulled to a manageable ache.

Around the same time as yesterday, Faust called a halt, wasted no time vaulting off his horse, and stormed away with Dmitri, and three other men. Gray reined in Battle Star at the end of the group. Theo appeared at his side, his hand raised, ready to help him dismount. This time, Theo pulled him away from the stirrup immediately, and Gray collided with his chest. Again, Theo steered Gray off to the side of camp, helped him sit, and left.

Gwen popped in next, holding the same canteen and another bundle from his saddlebag, and sat next to him.

“Even if the circumstances aren’t the best, I’m glad to see you again.” Gray pulled out a piece of salami, and she accepted it with a slight nod.

“I guess hanging out with you isn’t terrible.” One side of her mouth twitched into an almost smile, and Gray silently congratulated himself for the small progress.

After the meal, Gwen helped him change his bandage.

“You know, it’s hard to see what I’m doing in the low light. If you’d let me bring a torch—”

“No,” Gray growled.

“Okay. Don’t go all Neanderthal on me. Remember, I’ve known you since you were a lanky little brat, right, so your scarred back will not make a difference to me.” She leaned into his ear. “You don’t get my lady bits all flustered.”

Gray snickered. “Even if I don’t, I still don’t want people seeing. Please, continue. And remember, you’re only six years older.”

“I feel ancient.” She slathered more salve on. “There’s more dry skin than yesterday, so that’s a good sign.”

Gray had to stop his body from tensing and inhaled a breath to calm his nerves. Like Syl, Gwen probably already suspected his abilities.

Faust’s right hand, Dmitri, approached from the campfire. Gwen sped up her pace and started the bandage wrap above Gray’s hip and wrapped his torso.

Dmitri stood in front of Gray. “Four-stud Gwen, General Faust wants you.”

Gwen nodded. “I’ll be right there.” She looped the bandage over Gray’s shoulders a couple of times and secured it. “Coming now.”

Dmitri pursed his lips and left.

“Help me up before you leave,” said Gray.

She grasped his elbows from behind and lifted as Gray stood.

“Thank you.” He stumbled forward a few steps.

Gwen hurried to stabilize him. “You should really sit.” She squeezed his arm. “Be careful, General. Don’t venture too far.”

“Ah, Gwen. I think we both know why you’re being called away.”

“I’ll signal Theo. Don’t do anything stupid,” Gwen whispered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m serious. Our nation cannot afford to lose you.”

Gray winked and waved her away. She stalked toward the campfire, glancing at him every few feet. He heaved a long sigh. It seemed Faust was making his move.

He staggered into the woods. Once he was out of sight, he picked up the pace, stretching and twisting his back to test his mobility. His skin was so tight that if he stretched too far, his wounds might reopen. He'd need to keep his movements to a minimum. He found a small clearing and sat on a large boulder in the middle. It looked as good a spot as any.

Half sitting on the boulder, Gray ran his fingers over the tightly wrapped thread around his wakizashi's hilt and stared up at the moon-stream. To the south, the leftovers from the moon's explosion ten years ago were clearly visible. Every year, it seemed to move farther and farther away. He remembered seeing the fragments straight above a few days after the pulse. It had taken a few months for the lunar debris to come together into a stream. Sky had theorized that in another decade, the only place on Earth one would be able to view the moon-stream would be from the equator because all the fragments would gravitate there and form a ring similar to the one around Saturn. She thought it would be spectacular, and they'd promised to go see it together someday. He didn't know if they'd ever be able to keep that promise now, with the way everything was headed. Could he really bring Sky back against her will? Their future weighed heavily on him. He'd always hated responsibility.

A shimmer feathered through his mind. They were coming. For the last two days, he'd been working on developing his senses, because he'd had an inkling he would need them more than ever over the next few weeks. He heard faint footsteps. They were close. Four of them, and if he hadn't possessed these superhuman senses, he doubted he would've known they approached.

They spread out, half surrounding him. He gripped his wakizashi and tanto—his katana was with Battle Star since he couldn't strap it to his back yet.

“Come on out, boys. Don't hide in the shadows.” Gray drew his weapons.

“General Faust sends his regards,” said Dimitri at Gray's four o'clock.

Two daggers sped toward the back of Gray's head. He bent and ducked behind the boulder. The men rushed forward. Gray leaped over the rock. Sharp pain exploded across his back, but he pushed through it, meeting the attacker at twelve o'clock dead-on. Gray recognized all four. Faust's second, Dimitri, and the other three four-studs were no slouches, but Faust should've set all his men against Gray if he wanted to be sure.

Gray parried and weaved. An agonizing twinge zinged across his back as he deflected another strike from the second Skin. The third slashed at his rear. Gray spun, blocking the hit with an upward strike, and followed with his tanto, sinking it into the third's side. More pain tore up his back from his movements, but he could not let it distract him. Pain was life. He kept repeating the mantra in his head and embraced the agony piercing his torso with every twitch. Gray kicked the third off and turned to Dimitri, repelling another attack.

A piercing jab lanced across Gray's spine. He growled, staggering back. Dimitri lunged, thrusting his sword at Gray's stomach. Gray weaved, but Dimitri's blade sliced his waist as he plunged his tanto into Dimitri's chest. The fourth Skin lunged from behind. Gray dodged, and the fourth's sword sank into Dimitri. The second darted in. Gray countered his strike and slashed out with both weapons at the same time, slicing across both men's stomachs. Three bodies dropped around him, and Gray was left standing in the middle of a bloody mess.

"How"—the fourth one gurgled—"are you able to—"

Gray squatted next to the man trying to hold in his insides. "I'm not human." He stabbed his tanto into the fourth's throat.

He flicked his swords and scowled. What was he supposed to do with them? He stepped out of the circle of corpses. Another presence closed in quickly.

Gray dipped behind the boulder and listened. The footsteps grew louder. This person was in a hurry and not trying to mask their approach. They stopped at the edge of the clearing.

"General Hawk?" Theo whispered.



“Are you here to kill me too?”

“No.” The vehemence in his tone sounded genuine enough. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here. I had to loop around. We knew Faust would try something, and one of us tried to stay with you, but Faust caught on. What happened? Are they all dead?”

“Show me your hands and turn around slowly.” Gray peeped over the rock.

Theo stood with his hands raised and spun. There were no hidden weapons that Gray could see on his back.

“Walk to me slowly,” Gray ordered.

Theo rounded the dead.

Gray stood, holding his wakizashi at stomach level with the tip pointed at Theo. “Why are you helping me?”

Theo stilled, holding his hands in front of his shoulders, and looked around.

“There’s no one else but us,” said Gray.

Theo took a deep breath. “Because General Scarlet said if anything ever happened to her, we should report to you.”

“But you are not loyal to Scarlet anymore. Or are your views different from Gwen’s?”

Theo’s shoulders slumped. “Gwen has had a difficult time under Faust’s command. I’ve tried to help where I can, but there is only so much I can do. I’ve been training, though, and I plan to enter the pits for the next ranking.”

“You are going to challenge Faust?”

“Yes,” Theo replied. Determination filled his expression.

“And General Scarlet?”

Theo pressed his fist into his chest. “I am, and always will be, loyal to General Scarlet.”

“Gwen isn’t?” Gray lowered his sword.

“I don’t know. There is a lot of hate. Not only from Gwen, but from many of the females previously under her

command.”

Gray motioned with his blade. “Put your hands down and help me do something about these bodies. People will miss you if you’re gone too long.”

Theo pointed away from the campsite. “There is a river a hundred yards that way.”

“Excellent.” Gray sheathed his blades and stalked back to the bodies. “Can you manage two?”

“General, you are still injured. I will take care of it.” Theo scurried around Gray.

Gray nudged Theo aside and grabbed a collar and another, lifting the two bodies without much effort, then paused to allow the sharp jab cleaving through his back time to subside.

Theo’s mouth popped open. “You’re the same as General Scarlet. You have to be. It’s the only explanation of how you healed so fast.”

Gray ignored the comment and trudged forward. Sky had always known that many of her top warriors had suspected something was different about her, but she’d never confirmed their suspicions. “Let’s get this over and done with.”

Theo only managed one body at a time but insisted that Gray wait by the river while he retrieved the last one. Gray watched the dead sink into the water. If Faust searched, they’d find the drag marks, but with the speed of the current, the bodies would be gone by morning.

Theo tossed the last corpse in, and Gray bent to rinse his hands. Theo did the same.

“Did they injure you?” Theo asked, shifting closer. “Please, let me check your wounds.”

“So you can stab me in the back?”

“No.” He pulled out all his weapons and placed them next to Gray. “Now may I check?”

“You won’t see much.”

“The moon-stream and stars are providing enough light.”

Gray shook the excess water off his hands and stood. Theo helped him remove his shirt, and Gray watched the man's brows furrow together.

"You have new cuts on your waist and arms. And you reopened a few on your back."

"More scars to add to my fast-growing collection."

"We should really clean them first," said Theo.

"Not necessary."

Theo glanced up. "Yes, General." He took out the salve and bandages from a pouch on his belt and, with a lighter touch than Gwen, spread some over Gray's arms. Then he moved to his waist. Theo's touch was so faint that Gray shivered.

"Are you cold?" Theo asked.

"Just hurry up, Four-stud," Gray snapped. It wasn't Theo's fault that Gray had reacted to the man's touch, and even though it had been involuntary, it felt like a betrayal of Ravie's suffering.

"Sorry, General." Theo lowered his head.

Gray held up his arm to allow Theo better access. "Why don't you hate Scarlet for deserting?"

Theo stilled, then moved to Gray's side. "I don't know what happened on that bridge, but I was with her at the capital before she rode out to find Alex, and I don't believe she intended to jump."

"What happened?"

"We'd returned from a recon run east, and she found Alex missing from the recruits. The other trainees said his trainer, Five-stud Greer, and Alex had accompanied the Warlord to deliver the ultimatum to Twin Falls. She emptied her saddlebags, got back on her horse, and sped out."

"She didn't take anything?"

"Nothing. General Scarlet was always prepared. If she'd planned on deserting, I believe she would've taken supplies."

Theo was right. So why hadn't she?

Theo finished wrapping the bandage around Gray's midsection and helped him put on his shirt, which had blood spatters all over.

"You need a clean shirt."

"I'll get one. You need to hurry back. I don't want to give Faust more reason to kill you. And you and Gwen have to keep your distance."

Theo pressed his lips into a determined line. "You need help returning to camp, General." He grabbed Gray's elbow and urged him forward.

Gray let Theo ferry him along. "I'm not an invalid."

"You should be with those wounds."

"I'll play the injured soldier once we get back."

Theo exhaled a long breath. "I don't think that'll be much use. You defeated four warriors, including a five-stud, less than two days after receiving sixty lashes. I know you had no choice, but you just confirmed everyone's suspicions about you."

Gray clenched his teeth. Honestly, it was amazing he and Sky had kept their secret as long as they had. Or had they? "The cat's pretty much out of the bag, huh?"

Theo dipped his head. "Yes. Although many of us always suspected. You and General Scarlet always accomplished the impossible."

Gray rubbed his chin, thinking about Sky again. "Why do you think she jumped?"

Theo slowed. "I believe someone forced her to."

"I was there. She grabbed Alex and leaped off. The only people who could make her do anything against her will were on that bridge, and no one told her to jump."

"I heard she had a heated argument with Alex minutes before. Besides you, Alex is the only one who could've coerced her to do that."

Gray heard soft murmurs and a crackling fire. He stopped, and Theo paused immediately. “You think Alex made her jump?”

“I can’t be sure. Only General Scarlet and Alex can tell you what happened that day.”

“Not that it will make much difference now. I want Gwen and you to keep your distance.” Gray pulled away. They were nearly at camp. “Now scat. You can’t be seen entering with me.”

Theo thumped his fist on his chest. “I’ll check on you later.” He spun and darted off into the trees.

Why were all of Sky’s men so headstrong? The stubborn fool would get himself killed if he wasn’t careful.

Gray strolled back toward camp, mulling over Theo’s words. He’d always thought she’d left for Alex, but what if Alex had made her leave? But why? Alex had never agreed with what the Skineater nation stood for, but he’d loved the people—Gwen, Karim, maybe even him. Why leave? Gray pinched the bridge of his nose.

Something in his gut told him he needed to figure this out. Alex’s actions were becoming more and more suspicious. Good thing he was heading in the direction where he could get answers.

He hobbled into the camp, emerging from the shadows. The men looked up, their eyes widening. Faust’s nose curled up in a soundless snarl. Gray returned to his tree and gave Faust a two-finger, old-style salute. *Better luck next time.*

EIGHT

# ALEX



*“Do what you think is right, kid, but be prepared for the consequences.” ~ Warlord Zek Wong, Skineater.*

Colonel Sara Reed paced around the small office. She’d arrived with Major Cyler less than an hour ago and taken up in one of the three offices at the Liberators’ small outpost east of Reno. The scowl on her face creased the tanned skin above her honey-colored eyebrows. “Of all the stupid things you’ve done, Mad-D, this one takes the cake.”

Lieutenant Madeline Diaz—aka Mad-D—lowered her head and kept her mouth shut, an amazing feat for her, but Alex would not let her take the blame.

He swung his hands behind his back and squeezed his fingers. “It was my idea, Colonel. I wanted to find Lee and my sister. Lieutenant Diaz only came along to provide backup because she couldn’t talk me out of it.”

Colonel Reed shot him a disbelieving look. “You?” She snorted, then redirected her glower at Mad-D. “I can never buy from them again. The owner said he doesn’t want that type of drama.” She threw her hands up. “They breed the best horses in the state!”

Mad-D touched her chin to her chest. Her long, dark brown braid slipped over her shoulder and hung by her face. Alex winced but kept his head up. The Colonel had started the chain of events.

“With all due respect, Colonel, I would’ve never needed to steal horses if you hadn’t sent Lee to lure my sister out of

hiding with a lie.”

“I should’ve never told you about the Warlord’s cleansing,” The colonel muttered, then frowned. “I’m sorry about your sister, Captain. I never expected them to run into mutant infected.”

Alex’s heart clenched so tight it hurt. Anxiety had been eating away at the back of his mind since Colonel Reed had dropped that bomb about the Warlord executing tens of Sky’s men after they’d deserted. But with everything that was happening with Lee and Sky, he’d put Gwen out of his mind. He had to believe Gwen and Sky were safe; if he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to function.

“She’s not dead.” Alex could feel it in his heart. Sky wouldn’t die so easily, and neither would Gwen. They had been through much worse. “She’s delayed.”

Colonel Reed tilted her head and sighed. “Alex, I heard Lee’s report. I’m sorry, but there’s no way she could’ve survived.”

“You’re assuming she went to save the Parson people. She wouldn’t have done that,” Alex lied.

If Sean had asked Sky, then she had probably gone to check, but she wouldn’t have gone in without an escape plan.

“Even if she didn’t go, Lee said she got scratched, and you saw the prowlers hunting the infected.”

Alex nodded. “They vaporized them.”

He clenched his fingers so hard they ached. Could he tell Colonel Reed a secret he hadn’t been allowed to tell Sky? Father had sworn him to secrecy, and the weight of keeping it from Sky had ultimately been too heavy on his soul and driven them apart.

No, he couldn’t tell the Colonel, even if Skineaters might be right behind her. He didn’t trust her after she’d gone behind his back.

“She is alive, Colonel,” he said with every fiber of belief he possessed. “And if the Warlord finds out, he’ll send hunters



for her. You'd better be prepared." It was the best he could do.

"Alex ... " There was so much pity in Mad-D's tone, he had to breathe in and hold for a count of ten to calm himself.

"Captain, I realize this must be hard—"

"She is alive, and she will come to us. You must be prepared for all the trouble that will follow."

The Colonel leaned over the table. "If you are going to refuse to believe reality, then go see the site for yourself with Major Cyler."

Alex stood taller. He'd wanted to go anyway to ascertain which direction Sky had gone. "Of course."

The Colonel rubbed the side of her chin. "Take Lee with you. Getting out will do him good."

"What about the brother and sister?"

"They stay here."

Alex relaxed his grip around his fingers to allow blood to flow in again.

"And, Alex." The Colonel narrowed her hazel eyes. "Since you aren't in mourning, I can discipline you without holding back."

Mad-D scrunched her nose. He'd known there would be repercussions when he'd decided to act, but he'd do it again, a million times over, to save Sky and Lee. Any punishment the Colonel gave wouldn't outweigh the guilt that would've eaten away at him if he had not gone.

"Lieutenant Diaz, once we return, toilet duty for a month."

Mad-D moaned. "Yes, Colonel."

"Captain Alex. As you are the self-confessed instigator, went against my orders, and stole horses, I hereby demote you to lieutenant."

"Colonel!" Mad-D yelled.

The Colonel raised her hand, and Mad-D snapped her mouth shut. "Anything to say, Lieutenant Alex?"

Alex saluted the Colonel. “No.”

“Good. You can join Diaz on toilet duty as well. Major Cyler is leaving in an hour. Before that, check on our two guests. Now get out. I need to talk to the base commander about the lax security here.”

Alex was glad to know he wasn't the only one who thought the security at this outpost was lacking. They saluted and marched to the exit.

Mad-D shut the door firmly behind them. “I can't believe she demoted you.”

The rank didn't bother Alex. He'd never wanted to be a Captain in the first place. “I disobeyed orders. There were bound to be severe consequences.”

They walked down the short hallway and out of the small command building. The Liberators' only Nevada outpost was a collection of ten small wooden buildings next to the Truckee River, surrounded by a wire fence that wouldn't stand long if the Skins or Matrons attacked.

The muggy air clung to his skin, and a constant buzz filled his ears. The river was mostly marshlands teeming with insects and wildlife. The ground squelched under his boots, and a fine mist of rain wet his face. He remembered crossing Nevada before the pulse, and it had been mostly desert. Now, there was green everywhere, and it rained every other day.

Mad-D swatted a swarm of bugs away. “Well, I think it's ridiculous. You were right. We wouldn't have done any of that if she hadn't lured your sister out of retirement. And she didn't even say sorry.”

The Colonel and Mad-D had been together since the pulse. They were pretty much family, but they rarely saw eye to eye. Mad-D was the wild little sister, and Colonel Reed was the responsible big sister. Their relationship was so different from Sky's and his.

Alex opened the door to the barracks and waited for Mad-D to enter. “She was in her right.”

“You’re way too forgiving.” Mad-D slapped her arm. “How come you never get bitten?”

Alex waved away some pests and followed her inside. He could guess why, but he couldn’t tell Mad-D the reason. “I get bitten,” he lied with ease. “You must smell better.”

A couple of off-duty soldiers eyed Mad-D. With her amber eyes, long brown hair, dark golden skin, and toned muscles, she was attractive. She was on the short side, but she was faster than most men she sparred against, except Alex.

Mad-D grinned. “Girls always do.”

At the end of the room, Alex spotted Lee and his two companions—the only survivors from a town of sixty, a brother and sister, Sean and Lisa.

They stopped a few yards away because there was this invisible barrier around Lee now. He wasn’t the same person who had set out two and a half months ago on a mission to find Sky. Alex pressed his lips together. He’d always left Sky’s depressions to Gray. He had known how to deal with her. Alex should’ve paid more attention. Then maybe he could have done something more than stare at Lee.

Mad-D raised her hand in a lame attempt to wave. “Hey. Colonel said we’re to accompany Major Cyler on a scouting trip. Do you guys need a hand with anything?”

The teenage girl, Lisa, sat on a bunk, hugging her knees to her chest. “Any news on the General yet?”

“Leese.” Sean took her hand. “We talked about this. You know there’s no way anyone could’ve survived that explosion.”

Lisa’s posture drooped, and she fell silent.

Alex gazed at Lee, but his best friend wouldn’t even peek at him. “Lee?”

Lee’s face tensed, and he turned away.

Mad-D exhaled a long sigh. “Look, we don’t know what you guys went through, and I can’t even imagine what horrors

you might've seen. Just know, we're here for you. All of you. When you're ready to talk, we'll listen."

Lee picked up the black machete lying on his bed, which had been cleaned since Alex had last seen it, and trudged over, holding the weapon out in front of him. "You should have this. I'm sure Sky would've wanted you to."

Alex stepped back, cringing. He would never willingly hold it. "Throw it away. I don't want it."

Lee's brows furrowed. "But you told me Sky kept it for years. That your mother was the one who found it."

"I don't want it! But you should keep it safe." Now that he thought about it ... "Sky will want it back. She has a morbid attachment to it."

Lee shot him a pitying look. Alex spun and stalked toward the exit, ignoring the worried whispers behind him. He needed to leave before he threw that machete into a firepit. "I'll see to the horses."

He strode out, tuning out Mad-D calling his name. Exiting the barracks, he marched for the stables and entered Storm's stall. He stroked his stallion's nose, and thoughts of that accursed blade still occupied his mind. He was ninety percent sure Sky had used that machete to kill Mom after she'd become infected. At the time, he hadn't realized Mom had been sick. Mom and Sky had done a good job hiding it from him, or perhaps he'd just been so naïve at eight and believed nothing could ever hurt his family. But over the years, he'd pieced it together.

For a while, he'd hated Sky for it and been an absolute brat to her. It was probably why she'd left so often, and it had suited him fine. He'd preferred Gwen's and Gray's company over her brooding. He knew Sky had loved Mom too, and knowing his mother, she'd made Sky do it. The first time they'd come across an infected, Mom had said she'd rather die than become one.

Alex rested his forehead on Battle Storm's neck. Even though he hated everything the Skineater nation stood for, he

missed living there and the people most of all. Sky's warriors who had always looked out for him. Gwen, who he hoped to God was still alive. And Gray ... what was he doing now? Alex still didn't completely understand why Dad had insisted they leave the Skins, but he trusted it had been for the best. He had to, because if the Colonel was to be believed, then a hundred people had died for nothing, and it was his fault. That was something he wasn't sure how to live with.

NINE

# SKY



*“Unnecessary relations are burdens. You need only care about your brother first and your mother second. Everyone else is beneath your notice.” ~ Jordan Argo, allegiance unknown.*

A constant clicking thumped in time with a dull ache throbbing in the back of Sky’s head. Her body rocked in a soothing sway, and heated silk pressed against her cheek. She rolled into the warmth and inhaled, recognizing the citrus scent with a hint of spice. This was the second time she’d woken up lying on him, and it was becoming too familiar, almost enjoyable. Even though she shouldn’t, she remained still and absorbed the simple touch of another body.

“Sky?” His voice vibrated through her face and chest.

It all came rushing back. The trap. The fight. That damn baseball bat.

Mixed feelings bubbled up. She was alive, but they were probably in a shitty situation. She sank deeper into Ryan, knowing she shouldn’t take comfort from him. That she shouldn’t savor the lack of invisible ants buzzing along her skin, but the sensation of pure touch was ... refreshing. Or maybe that was the head injury talking?

“You are quite comfortable,” she mumbled.

A brief chuckle or snort, she wasn’t sure which, resonated through him.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. How do you feel?”

Soft light and metal bars filled her vision, and beyond them was a rusted ceiling. “Like someone used my head for batting practice.”

Sky stretched out her neck. Grime-covered walls surrounded them, and a faint coppery scent wafted in the air. Behind Ryan was a steel door with a blacked-out window.

“Where are we?”

An unfamiliar emotion flashed in Ryan’s eyes. “On a train.”

That was a new one. “To where?”

“Seattle.”

A groan rumbled up her throat as she moved her arm. She didn’t get far before a clang rang out. “What the hell?” She tugged at the long chain. Metal bit into her wrist.

“Apparently, they don’t trust the cage to hold you,” he said.

She attempted to untangle herself from him but failed. Even a contortionist couldn’t have escaped.

“This is cozy.” No wonder he’d let her sleep on him. He hadn’t had a choice. “How long have I been out?”

“Nineteen and a half hours.”

Her mind slowly kicked in. That seemed too short. “Are those nanites still in me?”

“Be thankful they are. Otherwise, you would not have woken at all, no matter how hard your head is.”

“Very funny. Fine, they’ve saved me twice, but they better be gone this time.”

“After healing your latest injuries, it’s unlikely there are any remnants of the solution I gave you left in your system.”

“Good.” She sighed. Even if she owed her life to those microscopic critters, it was reassuring to hear they were finally gone.



Turning her focus to more pressing matters, she studied her bonds. Modified police issue handcuffs—easy to pick if she had the tools. The chain links were slim enough that Ryan could probably snap them. Unfortunately, Ryan’s cuffs were bulkier, medieval thick chains. These Matrons were smarter than she’d given them credit.

She swiveled in his lap, squeezing her leg in between them. His long fingers wrapped around her hip, helping her pivot until she sat astride him. She straightened, and his hands remained, his touch heating her skin. With his legs boosting her, her face ended up level with his, but he stared at the not-so-large gap separating their scantily clothed bodies.

There were few men she would straddle, but she needed to inspect her cuffs. His lips parted, and his long, silver eyelashes slowly fanned upward. She sucked in a sharp breath. The intensity in his gaze ignited a simmering pool in her belly. Every sensation he evoked in her seemed more dangerous because there was no annoying buzz in her skin to counteract it. But that wasn’t all.

“Your eyes ... they’ve changed again.” They were the same color as hers now, the same as the Cardinals’.

“This is my natural color,” he said.

The revelation made her heart thump. She chewed on her bottom lip, drawing his gaze to her mouth, and her thoughts of his new eye color zipped to the back of her mind. A new thought surged forth—*does he taste as good as he smells?*

What was wrong with her? Kissing him was a terrible idea. She dropped her gaze and remembered the deep scratches all over his torso from their battle with the mutant infected, but now his skin was smooth and unmarked. She brushed her finger over his left pec and down his silky skin to where she’d seen another deep laceration on his waist.

“You didn’t scar. Do you ever?” Watching his muscles tense under her touch was hypnotic.

“No,” he said in a deep, husky voice.

“Does it hurt when you get injured?”

She traced his delicately defined eight-pack, which became more pronounced as they contracted. Gray had suggested she seduce him to get answers, so maybe she could let herself explore.

“I’m not a machine. Are you done inspecting me?”

She raised her gaze, slanting in. “Does it bother you?”

His jaw muscles tightened. “No.”

“Did the Matrons hurt you?” She scraped her nails down the center of his stomach and relished that she made him inhale sharply.

“You should worry more about yourself.” His eyelids lowered, and he brushed his thumbs up her back, over her scars. “Where did you get these?”

The heat in her belly cooled. “Does it disgust you?”

Her scars repulsed most people, but she didn’t care about them. They were part of her. Proof she had survived.

“No, but I’d like to kill the person who did it.”

Sky leaned in until their breaths mingled. “Careful, I might start thinking you care.” Her finger slipped under the waistband of his pants. “Why did you really come to Earth?”

His hand blurs out, capturing her hand. “This is not the right time.”

“It never is,” she said. Disappointment pulsed through her. She’d been enjoying that, but she knew him well enough to recognize his tone. She wouldn’t get anything out of him. “I guess we should see about escaping.”

Ryan blinked, and his impassive mask returned. “They’ve secured us quite well.”

She twisted her wrist. “Not as well as they think. You could break my chains.”

“True. But I won’t.”

“Help me—wait. What?” She yanked her hand, clanging metal against metal.

“I won’t.”

“You’re joking?”

His hands slipped from her waist. “No.” His tone was sharp.

“You said we’re running out of time! We’re so far off course that it’ll take days to make it up.”

“Yes, time’s short, but there is an opportunity here I can’t pass up.”

A different type of heat—thorny and poisonous—blazed through her core. Her facial muscles hardened, and she pushed his shoulders into the bars until her nose was centimeters from his.

“And what about my friends?” The words seeped through her clenched teeth.

“Our deal still stands. I’ll help you free them, but there is something in Matron that will guarantee our success.”

She clamped her fists around the bars on either side of his head. “What?”

“While you were unconscious, I learned Laxari gifted the Matron a power source.”

Tension vibrated through her. “He’s the—”

“The Commander of the moon base and in charge of all Earth’s Metanoia.”

Sky rolled her eyes. “I remember.”

“You wanted a plan. This is it.”

Her jaw muscles twitched. There was one major problem. If she entered Seattle as a prisoner, there was a high probability she’d never leave. Before she shared her apprehension, a screech erupted from the door.

The rusted hinges groaned, and a slender figure wearing an elite uniform slipped inside. With a hefty push, she shut the door. By the bright coppery hair pulled back in a braid, Sky

knew it was the redhead Elite from the fight, even before she faced them.

Red stalked forward, and in her right hand was a canteen and a cloth bag. “Good. You’re awake. I wasn’t sure you would be.” She stopped in front of the gate. “Hope I’m not interrupting.” She winked.

Sky turned away. She wasn’t interested in making small talk with a Matron.

“I thought you might be hungry.”

Ryan dipped his head. “Thank you.”

“Do you need me to feed you?” Red asked huskily. “I’d be more than happy to.”

“No, thank you,” said Ryan.

“Pity.”

In the corner of her eye, Sky caught the passing of goods. Red moved around the cage to Sky and placed her hands on her hips. “I saw your brother last week.”

A jolt fired through Sky’s torso. She glanced away, hoping she’d covered the reaction, but doubtful she had. That slip of vulnerability would likely cost her.

Red pouted. “At least I think it was a week. I don’t really keep track anymore.”

Red’s gaze bored into Sky. The Elite would reveal her cards soon enough. Sky had already made one grievous error, and she couldn’t afford another. No matter how much she itched to find out more about Alex.

Suddenly, Ryan shifted. Sky grabbed his shoulders to stabilize herself. He twisted to see Red. She scuttled sideways to make it easier for him.

“Where?” Ryan asked.

Sky glanced up. Why did he care?

“East of Williams, California. He’s quite the looker. And he has a giant stick up his ass, same as your girl here.” She

pointed her chin at Sky. “Don’t know why they sent him on a covert mission. It’s so obvious he’s her brother. Nobody has eyes that color.” She stared at Ryan. “Well, no one human, which, you know, explains a lot, right?”

Sky furrowed her eyebrows. The Elite was babbling nonsense.

Red huffed. “Back to Alex. He really needs to lighten up, but I got him good. Definitely left a lasting impression.” She bounced her pale eyebrows. “Might have even been his first.” Small dimples appeared on her freckled cheeks.

Sky got the feeling Red wouldn’t stop her incessant chatter until she talked. “What do you want?”

Red beamed. “To help you escape.”

Ryan tilted his head, blinked, and did not respond. Probably because he thought this was a poor attempt at a joke too.

Sky couldn’t contain herself and let out half a laugh. “Sure, you do.”

Red’s face tensed. “Laugh all you want, but the second you set foot in Seattle, the only way you’ll be leaving is in pieces.” She jutted her small chin out. “You must know that.”

Sky grunted. Red wasn’t wrong.

“What do you mean?” Ryan leaned into the bars. “I made a deal. Sky will not be harmed.”

Red sprang up. “With Kendra, not the Queen.” She pulled a large metal keyring with four keys from a pocket in her cargo pants and pranced to the cage door.

Long, warm fingers wrapped around Sky’s waist, pulling her in.

“Is this true? Will they kill you?”

Sky shrugged. “Not straight away.”

“You’re right about that. The Queen will use you to send a message. It’s a shame for you that we snagged you, but not for me. For me, you’re a Godsend.”

No one had ever called her that before, and more unbelievable was that there was no sliver of doubt in her voice. She had meant every word.

Red clenched a large brass skeleton key and sucked on her bottom lip. “Aren’t you going to ask why?”

As intriguing as it was, Sky didn’t want to know. She had enough on her plate.

Red frowned, rotated the ring, and clasped a small silver key. “It’s simple. Won’t even put you out much.” She mashed her lips together, her gaze darting to Ryan and back. “I’ll make it worth your while.” A hint of desperation trickled into her tone. Red dropped to a squat before Sky. “I’m offering you a way out.”

“What’s your price?” There was always a price. Even the hero-wannabe alien had one.

“A life,” Red answered.

Ryan’s lips curved into a disapproving frown. “We will not kill.”

So he was negotiating on her behalf now? Sky’s shoulders wilted. Who was she kidding? If she wanted his help to free John and the others, he owned her. A hot, sludgy sensation settled in Sky’s chest.

Sky popped her index finger knuckle. “I might if it’s the right person.”

Red flashed a lopsided smirk. “I’m surprised you wouldn’t do it for free. But I’m not after a kill. It’s saving I need.”

The corners of Ryan’s mouth twitched. “That she could do.”

Red scabbled back to the gate. “You agree?”

“If you answer my questions about the Cardinal technology in your city.”

Sky’s jaw dropped. Was he crazy?

Red clasped her hands together. “Pleasure doing business.”

This alien was insane. Who made deals without getting all the details? Sky peeked at Red. And who was worth so much that she'd turn traitor to save?

“Ask away. You have about fifty minutes.” She squeezed her hand around the handcuff key.

Ryan scowled. “You never specified a time limit.”

“You never clarified.” Red fluttered her eyelashes.

Ryan's eyes narrowed into angry slits, wiping the smile clean off Red's face.

She cleared her throat. “Look, I'd love to sit and chat all day, but the best place to jump off is coming up in about an hour, and I need to bring my nephew back here so he can go with you.” She stared at Sky. “He's the one you will deliver to Reed or there is no deal.”

Sky regarded her. “How do you know I won't abandon him?”

Her eyes twinkled. “You may be a killer, but we've heard the stories. What were you—thirteen, fourteen—when your mother died? And you kept your brother alive.”

Sky's eyes widened.

She shrugged. “You were the only female General in a nation dominated by males. Does it really come as a surprise? All the higher-ups are basically celebrities now. And that you disappeared makes you even more legendary because the Skins are a life service too. Yet you've been living free for three years.”

Sky blinked. It was weird that the Elite knew so much about her. She'd thought once she left that people would forget about her. A big mistake, which was why she was in chains.

“And you want your nephew to get out too?”

“He's dead otherwise,” she said flatly. “He broke his leg a few months ago, and it healed wrong. Left him with a slight limp. He can still travel well enough,” she defended. “It started out with only the terminally ill and criminals, but lately anyone less than perfect, or anyone who doesn't contribute to

the country also becomes a donation. It's how the Queen maintains her bargain with the Cardinals."

"What do you mean, donation?" Ryan cut in.

"I dunno exactly what happens to them. We send them on the train to San Fran, then the train comes back empty, and we never see them again."

Sky's mouth hung open.

"How long have you had this arrangement?" Ryan's tone was sharp enough to cut.

"A year, that I know of. It's why we got the train. But there were rumors for almost a year before that of the sick, elderly, and disabled disappearing in the night." She clenched her fists. "It doesn't matter how young or old. Anyone who isn't in good health or deemed useful is sent as a 'tribute,' as my sister called it." She shifted her gaze downward.

Sky noted the use of the past tense. Her sister had passed some time in the last year, and now she was guardian to a child. "How old is he?" The question was out before she could stop herself.

Red looked up with hopeful eyes. "Eleven."

Sky wanted to punch something. She didn't need this shit—another life she would be responsible for. This was all Ryan's fault. If she'd never met him, she'd be happy back in Reliance, twiddling her thumbs. She glared at him, but he focused on the Elite.

"Who the hell is Reed?" Sky asked, resigning herself.

"Colonel Reed," said Red.

Sky raised her shoulders, waiting.

Red's lips parted. "You don't know your brother's CO?"

"No, I've been hiding out for years, remember? But you're in luck. I'll take your brat, but only because we are heading for those damn Libbys, anyway. He better not give any lip."

She nodded. "He knows how to follow orders."



“Fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. I’m very sorry, but we cannot help you.” Ryan bowed his head.

Red sprang up. “Why not?”

“We’re still going?” Sky asked.

“Yes. I told you before, I must see the Matron capital.” Ryan’s stare was intense. “You know what is riding on this.”

“Shit.”

“What is riding on what?” Red pressed her face against the bars.

“If you want to back out of our deal and take hers, I’ll understand.” He nodded toward Red. “But that would negate ours.”

His expression was odd, and somehow, she got the impression he was testing her.

Sky shook off the notion and considered her options. That she was even taking the time to think was absurd. It was a choice—one she’d made a hundred times before—that she should have made in a split second, yet she was hesitating. She hadn’t lived this long by being a hero. Survival was always everything, and she had done everything to ensure hers and Alex’s. But it would mean abandoning John. She didn’t even know if he was alive. So why the hell was she contemplating going to Matron with this crazy alien?

A violent growl erupted from the depths of her soul.

If she took Red’s offer, then the people of Reliance were as good as dead. John had welcomed her without prejudice, despite knowing her background, and given her a home.

“You can’t go into Matron.” Red gawked at her. “Are you suicidal?”

What kind of expression did she have? Why did Red look worried? Of course, Sky would choose survival, and she’d even save a boy. So why wouldn’t her mouth form the words?

Going to Matron meant pain and death. Ryan was inhumanly strong and fast, but they would be in the heart of Matron. Would they even have a chance? She should take the deal. Screw John and the others. Screw everybody on the planet and, most of all, screw Ryan.

Red edged forward. “You’ll do it? You’ll take Drew to the Liberators?”

Sky swallowed, trying to counter the sudden dryness in her mouth. “I—”

She glanced at Ryan. Unlike Red, his expression was unreadable, but an odd tension flooded her chest.

She sighed. “Sorry, Red. I’m sticking with him.”

Red’s mouth fell so far open her jaw was in danger of dislocating. “You are insane!” She straightened and stumbled back. “Do you know what they will do to you? They’re going to—”

“Enough!” Sky snapped, silencing her. She knew what was coming.

Red squared her shoulders and closed in on Ryan. “If you think you can protect her, you’re dead wrong. She will die in the most grotesque way.”

Ryan shrugged, disinterested.

Sky tried not to let his indifference sting.

“You’re no different from the others. I thought since you were traveling with Scarlet that you might be different—that you might care about humans—but I was so wrong.” She shook her head. “Why are you following him?” Her eyes searched Sky’s for an answer. “You are condemning my eleven-year-old nephew to death as well.”

Sky clenched her teeth.

“Doesn’t that bother either of you?” She jumped up and stomped around. “I should’ve known better. I mean, you’re barely human.” She waved at Sky. “And you’re definitely not! Argh!” Red paced around the cage. “This can’t be it. There

must be another way.” She stopped abruptly and squatted in front of Ryan. “Is one night enough in Matron?”

Ryan shifted. “It depends on how much Cardinal technology I can see.”

Red gripped the bars. “What if I could show you the vault? I haven’t seen it, but there is something in there that powers the entire city.”

Ryan dipped his head. “That would be more than sufficient.”

“Then that’s it. I’ll get you out tonight.” She resumed her trail around the cage. “I’ll have to adjust a few things. And change a few schedules. But it should work.” She pivoted toward the cage. “Right? I mean you”—she pointed at Sky—“do the impossible all the time and you”—she pointed at Ryan—“are superhuman, so we can do this. Right?”

Sky bared her teeth. *We are all going to die.*

“He is superhuman, right?” she pressed.

“Faster and stronger than anyone I’ve seen,” Sky confirmed.

She clapped her hands. “Excellent. Okay, this will work. I’ll come for you both tonight, probably around midnight, so don’t doze off. Okay?”

Sky thinned her eyes.

“Of course, you won’t. Sorry.” She moved toward the exit. “I better get back. I’ve been away too long already.” She stopped at the door. “By the way, the name’s not Red. It’s Elite Robin.” She opened the door and slammed it behind her.

Sky let out a long, haggard breath. What had she agreed to? Even with the inside help, escaping would be difficult. Ryan’s hand slipped from her as she scooted off his lap, as far back as her chains would allow, and leaned against the cage. Today might well be her last.

“Will it be very terrible?” Ryan’s voice was smooth, placating. “What will they do to you?”

She tipped her head back. “What difference does it make?” she asked, trying not to let too much resentment seep into her tone. The last thing she wanted to do was talk about it, so she closed her eyes. “I’m gonna get some more rest.”

The train clunked along, the swaying strangely calming as she prepared herself for what was to come.

TEN

# ALEX



*“You must find a way to make her leave. It’s safer for both of you.” ~ Jordan Argo, allegiance unknown.*

Alex surveyed the enormous crater, over a hundred feet wide and about thirty feet deep. Major Cyler crouched on the other side, inspecting the pit that was filling with muddy water from the light drizzle.

“Why are the trees still standing?” Lee turned, scanning the area. “It’s weird.”

None of the surroundings showed any signs of the devastation that a blast this size should have caused. The trees were perfect, and only the grass around the perimeter of the crater was gone.

The Cardinals’ red barrier thing had been ridiculously effective.

“There are no body parts. You’re sure this is the direction that the mutants brought everyone?” Major Cyler asked.

Lee nodded, still gaping at the forest. “But we felt the wind from the explosion. How are the trees fine?”

Major Cyler stood and edged around the crater toward Alex. “After seeing this, you still think your sister is alive?”

“Yes, Major. She is a survivor. There is no way she would die this easily.”

Major Cyler raised an eyebrow. “I’d hate to see what you call hard.”

Alex clenched his teeth. He couldn't share any more about Sky without breaking his promise to his father—a promise he regretted with every fiber of his being. If he could go back and do it again, he would've refused to follow his father's orders because he failed to understand how this was better.

The last time he'd seen Dad was three and a half years ago, in the Skineater Capital markets, but he could remember every scent and sound from that day like it had happened this morning.

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Gwen paused to peruse some apples at a fruit stand. It was the same place she stopped at every time she brought him to the markets. Alex couldn't understand why she liked this vendor over the others. He always thought the old lady's apples, two stalls down, looked fresher, but he suspected Gwen frequented this stand because of the handsome twenty-something-year-old man tending to it.

Gwen looked up. "Alex, don't wander too far."

He rolled his eyes and frowned. "You worry too much. What's going to happen? We are in the heart of the Skins' territory."

She shot him a pointed look that told him he should know better. "And your sister has many enemies. Or have you forgotten what the Warlord likes to call you?"

Alex scrunched his face up at her and sauntered toward the next stall. He hated the nickname that idiot Faust had come up with, *the Scarlet's Heel*. Just because Sky had beaten Faust after they'd first arrived, Faust tried to get back at her, and Alex by extension, any way he could.

"And don't forget it's Sky's birthday next week. You need to pick a gift," Gwen called.

One of Sky's Three-stud warriors, Rachel, hurried past him, stopped at Gwen, and saluted.

"Five-stud Gwen, I have a message." Rachel's gaze darted to Alex and back.

Gwen nodded and pointed to him. “Stay where I can see you.”

“I’m not a child anymore.” He stuck his tongue out.

“Then act like it.”

Alex huffed, slinking farther away. This area of the market always reminded him of a scene out of Aladdin, with the colorful sheets the vendors used for roofs and the bustle of customers hurrying past. There were fruits and vegetables, nuts, bread, daggers, and swords. He passed them by. Sky had enough weapons. He stopped at a stall selling jewelry and picked up a silver bracelet. Would she even wear it? She never really cared about her appearance. He put the bangle down and moved on. A tall man wearing a short-sleeved black hoodie bumped into Alex, and their arms touched as he brushed past.

The man glanced back, and Alex caught a glimpse of icy blue.

Alex reached for the stranger, but he wove through the crowd too quickly. Nobody but Alex and Sky had eyes that color. He pushed through the crowd, searching and moving farther and farther into the markets.

At midday, the market center was jam-packed. He hadn’t meant to go so far. Where was Gwen? She was going to be pissed. *Ugh*. He hated being around so many people. He should’ve worn long sleeves, but it was so muggy today he’d decided against it. Now, he realized suffering through the hot clothing would be better than buzzing every time someone brushed against him. Then it hit him. That man hadn’t made his skin buzz!

Shoving people aside, Alex rose to his tiptoes in search of the hooded figure. He caught the tail end of a dark cape in the alley on his right, rounding a corner. He squeezed through the throng and stumbled free. He darted down the alley, skidding around the bend, and slammed straight into a hard chest. Hands grabbed his arms.

“Let go!” Alex yelled, struggling to break free.



“Alex. It’s me,” the man snapped, and his voice triggered hundreds of memories to flood to the surface.

Alex gawked. “Dad?”

“Hello, Son.”

Alex’s jaw dropped.

“Let’s move somewhere quieter.” Dad took hold of Alex’s wrist and guided him away.

Alex’s feet moved on instinct because his mind was too numb from shock to walk consciously. He hadn’t seen Dad since he’d left their home in California after the explosion on the moon. Eight months after the lights went out, Sky had made it to Lubbock, the place they were supposed to meet Dad, but she’d found no trace of him and had assumed the worst. Alex hadn’t wanted to believe Dad was gone, but after a couple of years, he’d finally conceded. Now, here Dad was six years later, walking next to him like no time had passed.

Alex was vaguely familiar with the path they traveled. They walked down the long alley, rounded a few more bends, and stopped in a small, deserted alcove. His father released him and sat on a bench covered in graffiti.

“Are you going to sit?” Dad asked.

Alex stared. Dad looked exactly the same. His dark brown hair was short, his hard jawline was stubble-free, and though the cape covered most of his body, Alex remembered the feel of his chest when his face had slammed into it. It was rock solid, as it had always been.

Alex rushed forward, looming over him. “Where have you been? And why are you all hooded up?”

“You remember what I told you when you were younger, right? That I came from the stars. Did you tell Sky or anyone about it?”

Alex’s brows furrowed. “You said Sky would be in danger if I ever told anyone.”

Dad pressed his lips into a smirk. “You tried to tell Sky, didn’t you?”

Alex scowled. He had tried a few times, but for some reason, he had never been able to articulate the words—as if his mouth would freeze up. But why was Dad bringing up some stupid game he'd made up to entertain Alex when he was five? They had way more important things to discuss.

“What’s this got to do with it?” He stomped his foot. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you find us earlier? It was terrible. Mom died, and Sky ...” Alex swiped at his eyes. “She’s had to do so many terrible things. Dad, it’s killing her inside. I’m worried about her.”

The mirth vanished from Dad’s expression, and a flicker of emotion shone through his icy eyes. “I’m sorry about your mother, but all that matters is that you and Sky are safe. You are both very important to our people.”

“What? Dad, where have you been?”

“In the stars.”

Alex’s brows furrowed. “Huh?”

“Alex, you’re smarter than this. You must’ve suspected. Unlike Sky, I did not upload a protocol that deters you from coming to the obvious conclusion.”

“What protocol? You’re not making sense.”

Dad let out a long sigh. “Calm yourself and sit. I’ll explain.”

Alex plopped his bum next to his father but kept half his weight on the balls of his feet. Something about Dad put him on edge. He really shouldn’t have left Gwen.

“Relax, I’d never hurt you. Everything I’ve done since you were born was to ensure you would have a future.” Dad patted his forearm, but instead of placating Alex, it only made him more tense.

“Then why did you abandon us? Everything went to shit. We were attacked so many times! Sky had to kill hundreds! And I had to ...” He dropped his head into his hand, fighting back the memory of the person he’d killed.

“It was better for you both that I stayed away. And I knew Sky could and would protect you from everything. It was a risk we had to take.” He put his hand on Alex’s back and rubbed.

“Why didn’t you train me too? At least then I might be of some use to Sky. All I am now is ...” He clenched his teeth. *Deadweight.*

“I never trained you so the council doesn’t view you as a threat. Your existence is illegal and being trained to kill would only work against their acceptance of you.”

Alex jumped up. “What council? Dad, I don’t understand! You know what? I don’t care. You left us! Sky was fourteen, the same as me now, and you left everything to her!”

Dad’s shoulders sagged and his voice became solemn. “I never wanted to leave, but Sky’s still in danger. I don’t know who we can trust, so no one can know about her yet. And if the protectors had found you, Alex, with my status, they might have killed you on the spot. Then everything I sacrificed to protect you both would have been for nothing.”

“Protect us from who?”

“Our people, your people, Alex. You are half An’Zuri. Half, who the humans call, Cardinal.”

Alex backed up until he hit the wall, shaking his head. He didn’t want to believe it. When people had started accusing them of being aliens after the pulse, he had wondered. He’d even asked Sky once about their resemblance to the Cardinals, but she’d been adamant that it was just a fluke.

“You must’ve watched the Cardinal broadcast. Your eye color isn’t a coincidence.”

His heart jumped into his throat and froze there. “You’re lying.”

“You and Sky have always been different.”

“No! You can’t show up out of the blue and drop this on me!”

“I wouldn’t be here unless I had to. I’m taking a great risk, but I need you to do something. It’s your turn to protect Sky, and only you can do it. Even if she doesn’t understand, even if she hates you for it, you must do it.”

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## “BARN’S EMPTY.”

Mad-D’s voice broke Alex out of his daze. She and a soldier from the outpost, Lieutenant Forbes, approached from the barn.

“There was a giant hole in the wall of the house and some blood inside.” Forbes ran his hand through his short brown hair. “Someone was blown through the wall and survived.”

Major Cyler made his way over to them. Alex remained where he was; he could hear them fine.

“Why do you think that?” asked Major Cyler.

“I don’t.” Mad-D pointed her thumb at the middle-aged man next to her. “This is all his story.”

Forbes shot her an annoyed look. “There’s a large sliver —”

“You mean a spear. That thing was huge,” said Mad-D.

Forbes huffed. “Soaked in blood, and the blood’s only a couple of days old, putting it right about the time of the explosion. Someone pulled it out, and there are two different sets of footprints leading out the backdoor. A couple of people might have gotten away.”

Major Cyler stared at Alex. “Maybe your sister is alive, after all.”

Alex held his tongue. He knew she was alive. She had to be.

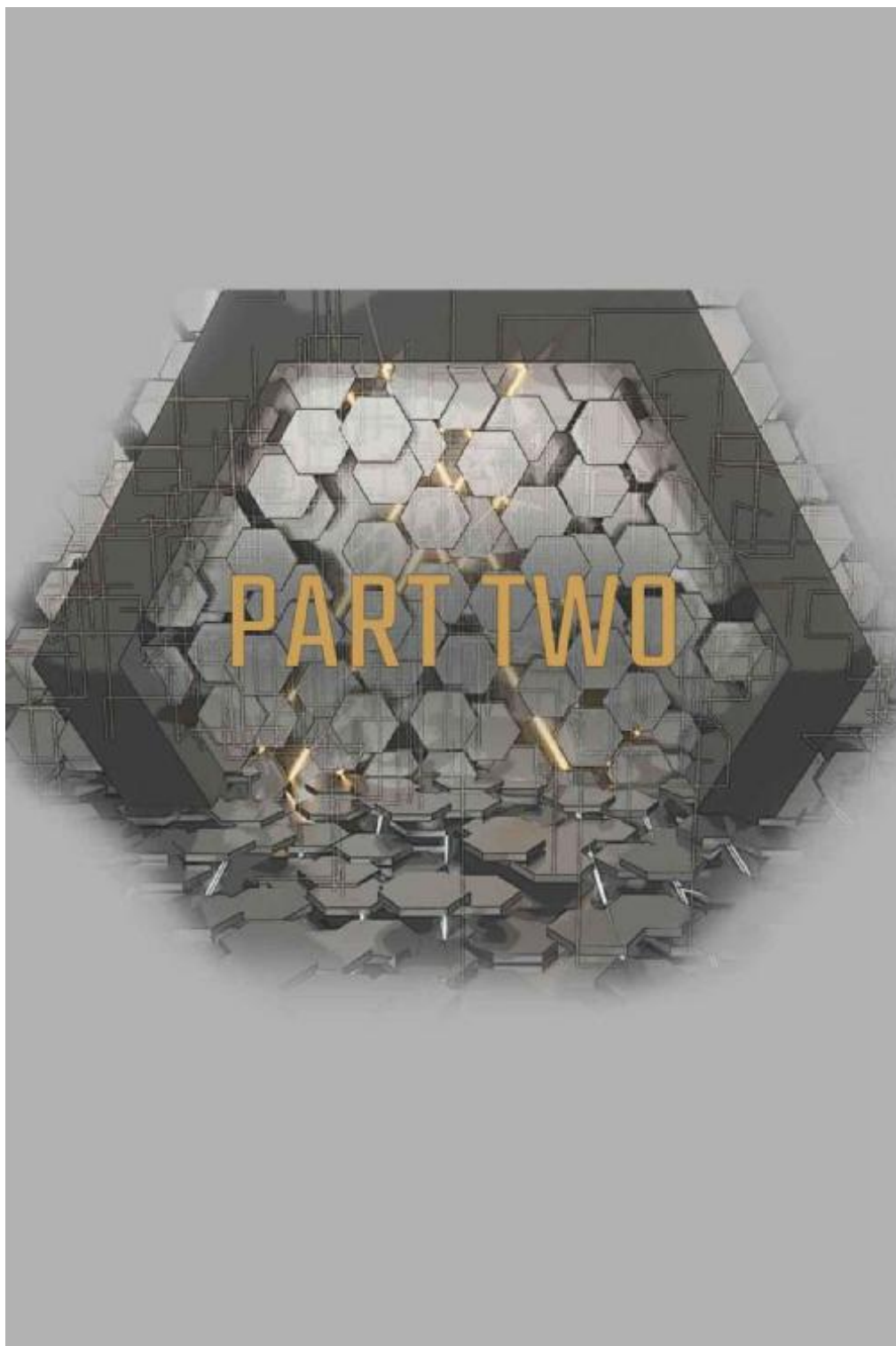
“Are we going to track the footprints?” Mad-D asked.

“Which way are they heading?”

“Southwest,” said Forbes.

“That was two days ago. That means General Scarlet will probably beat us back to Diablo. Come on. Let’s get back and report to the Colonel.”

Alex scanned the trees in the distance and thought he caught movement, but it could’ve been an animal and he couldn’t tell any of them he could see that far. His heart twinged. *Sky, where are you?* He really wished Dad were here to tell him how to handle this. Maybe he should tell Sky everything? She had a right to know since most of the secrets he kept were about her. He hadn’t agreed with his father before and still didn’t. It was time she knew so she would never attempt anything as crazy as this again. She had to know how much danger she faced.



ELEVEN

## GRAY



*“Grayson, please give me a chance. We can build a magical kingdom together.” ~ Queen Athena, Matron.*

**D**iscomfort was a constant companion, but somehow, Gray kept up with the spartan pace Faust set all the way to Battle Mountain. They made it in under four days, and true to their word, Sky’s ex-warriors had watched over him, but the journey hadn’t done Gray’s injuries any favors. Last night, when Gwen had changed his bandages, she’d been concerned because his wounds were not healing as fast as Sky’s had. Then she fussed over the cuts Faust’s men had given him before slapping more salve on. And thank God for Sylvie’s salve. It helped abate the itching from the developing scabs, which was almost worse than the pain. How had Sky managed without it? And if this was anything like what people felt while undergoing the infected transformation, it was no wonder it drove them mad.

Faust hadn’t said anything about the failed assassination attempt, and Gray wasn’t sure if he’d sent anyone to search for the bodies. But after that, Faust’s men gave Gray a wide berth.

A ten-foot barbed-wire fence surrounded Battle Mountain. It was one of three towns Zek called his first line of defense against the bitch in the north—the Matron Queen Athena. Zek and her had history. Gray did too. She was his biological mother, and she’d run out on him when he was three.

A year before the pulse, Mindy had tried to reconnect, but his father had kept her at a distance, so Gray had only seen her a few times before the world had gone to shit. He’d thought



she'd died in the chaos after the pulse since she was supposed to collect him after his dad's leave had been cancelled and had to report for duty, but she'd never shown, leaving him alone in the middle of a violent LA. Even with how things had turned out between him and Zek, he still counted himself lucky that the Warlord had found him. If he hadn't, Gray would have been bones on the side of the road.

It had been a huge surprise when Mindy had turned up with a slew of warriors in tow after his sixteenth birthday. Gray often wondered if Zek thought Mindy had betrayed him because Gray had chosen not to go with her. Maybe despite his denials, Zek really did blame Gray for Alice's death, who Mindy had captured and executed.

Gray dismounted, and a stable hand scurried up to relieve him of Battle Star.

"General, I'll take him for you." The girl, no more than fourteen, took the reins.

Gray pulled free his pack and katana. "Have him watered, fed, and brushed."

She gave a little bow. "Right away, General."

Gray turned, and Theo stood waiting for him.

"Be ready to leave at dawn!" Faust yelled, then stomped out of the stables with three men scurrying behind him.

Gwen, along with a few other men, helped with the horses. Gray strode past Theo, who fell in behind him. They crossed the road and passed a few men, and Gray stopped.

"Attend to your duties, Four-stud," said Gray.

Theo rounded him. "I am, General."

"On whose orders?"

A fierceness burned in Theo's brown eyes. "The only General I am loyal to."

Gray grabbed Theo's wrist and dragged him down the street, past a few more men and into a home kept for Hades,

Colt, and him. He shoved Theo inside the small two-bedroom house—exactly the same as it had been a year ago.

Gray slammed the door behind him. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Theo rubbed his arm. “No.”

“Then don’t say stupid shit out in the open.” Gray stalked into the living room, dropped his belongings next to an armchair, and slumped onto the brown velvet sofa, carefully leaning back. “I’m well enough now. You and Gwen need to stay away. You’re making yourselves targets.”

“I’ll tell Gwen to, but I won’t.”

Gray raised his eyebrows. “I thought you were supposed to obey me?”

“I know what General Scarlet’s orders would be.”

“Sky would want you to stay alive. Sticking with me is a sure way to die.”

“If anything happened to you, General Hawk, I wouldn’t be able to face my General when she returns.” Theo knelt before him. “Please, let me check your back.”

Gwen had been right. His wounds weren’t healing as fast as they should—the fight and jostling on horseback kept reopening many of them, but at least it didn’t hurt as much. Although parts of his back had gone so numb it worried him. What kind of damage had his nerves sustained? He sighed. How was he supposed to bring her back when Sky was likely headed for the same punishment?

Gray narrowed his eyes at Sky’s subordinate, then leaned forward with a soft smile curling one side of his mouth. “Trying to get my shirt off, Theo?” Sexual innuendo got most men to leave him alone.

A slight pink tinge bloomed over Theo’s high cheekbones. “Yes.”

Gray was taken aback. “You’d better not let Faust know.”

Loathing flittered across Theo's face, then he swallowed. "I've played my part while in General Faust's service."

"I don't need any more assistance." Gray leaned back on the sofa.

Theo reached for Gray's arm. "You couldn't have healed completely yet."

"Leave, Four-stud Theo. That's an order."

Theo recoiled and dipped his head. "As you wish, General. We will stay across the street. If you need any help, please call for one of us." Standing, he spun and stopped at the doorway. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable." He left without another word.

Gray clenched his jaw, his mind awirl over Theo's non-confession. If Ravie found out, he'd get insanely jealous, which Gray had never understood. Gray would never dream of cheating. He hoped Ravie had received medical attention. Wyatt would follow up on it; even though he didn't approve of their relationship, he'd do his duty and watch out for Ravie as best as he could. Wyatt had never liked Ravie, probably because Gray had made Ravie his second without consulting him. It had been a stupid move on Gray's part, and he was lucky that Wyatt had forgiven him because Wyatt was his real second-in-command.

In the two years he and Ravie had been together, Zek had sent Gray on so many recon missions that he had been away for most of their relationship, but Gray had wanted to change that. Then, Sky had popped back on everyone's radar and ruined the plans Gray had spent months setting up. So, instead of a romantic week together, Ravie had become a fucking hostage.

Everything that had happened in the past few weeks had made his thoughts so disjointed. He didn't know what he should do anymore. Gray rested his head on the back of the sofa and memories of what happened when he came home from his last away mission, before the Warlord had sent them after Sky, filled his mind.

He'd returned early to surprise Ravie, only to find Ravie's apartment completely empty. The fear that had rocked his system had almost crippled him. He'd been frantic and searched for Ravie at all their regular spots, but no one had seen him in days. When he'd been about to rouse all his warriors to join the search, Ravie had banged on his door with a surprise of his own.

Ravie had moved from his apartment across town to one a street away so they could be closer. The gesture had touched Gray deeply, and the two of them hadn't left Gray's apartment until Colt had dragged him out to sort out the matter with Sky. Which had escalated into this shit storm.

"General Hawk?" The deep voice coming from the front porch pulled Gray out of his recollections.

Gray recognized the speaker immediately and hurried to open it. "Five-stud Greer. Good to see you. Come in."

Greer put his hand out, and Gray shook it, then ushered the older man with a full head of silver hair inside. Greer had been Head Trainer for years. He'd been with Gray and Zek since the beginning and had trained all the generals, but he had never wanted the mantle himself, no matter how many times Zek had offered. He always produced the best recruits, but after the love of his life had fallen pregnant a couple of years ago, he'd asked to be transferred to Battle Mountain.

"It's been a year." Greer patted Gray's arm. "And I believe a lot has happened."

"Never a dull moment." Gray led him into the living room, went to the side table, and poured two glasses of whiskey.

Greer took one of the glasses and lifted it to his nose and sniffed. "How's the back?"

Gray side-eyed his old trainer. "Back's fine. Did Faust tell you?"

"He might have mentioned it to a whole bar full of my men."

"Fantastic," Gray muttered.

Greer sipped the whiskey. “If you wanted to keep your abilities a secret, this wasn’t the best way to do it.”

Gray’s muscles contracted, and he winced. “What abilities?”

Greer barked a laugh. “You’re going to deny it? Sky always used to come up with the most entertaining excuses. I swear, you two kids used to think I was an idiot.” He wiped a tear from his eye.

“We never thought that.” He, his brothers, and Sky all had the utmost respect for Greer.

“Then don’t insult my intelligence. Remember, I trained you before she arrived. I saw the jump in skills after you two did the brothers’ blood pact. And you’re moving around incredibly well for someone who was whipped sixty times four days ago. Almost enough to make me doubt Faust’s story.” He peered at Gray with his intelligent blue eyes that never missed a beat. “If I didn’t know you and Sky so well, then I would.”

Gray finished off his drink in one gulp. “What are you getting at?”

“No normal girl could be that lethal, and I don’t care if her father trained her from when she could walk. Her strength and speed were never right, but as long as she was on our side, I never questioned it.” Greer rested his elbows on the armrests. “But you were both fools to think no one would notice your abilities.”

Gray lumbered over to the side table, refilled his glass to the brim, and gulped down half the contents. The alcohol warmed his insides. “Stop beating around the bush, old man.”

“Because Zek didn’t say anything, you naïve kids thought he didn’t notice your sudden transformation, but I think he didn’t say anything because he had full control of Sky to counter your growing strength.” Greer sprang up and clumped his empty glass next to Gray. “Fill it.”

Gray topped him up and returned to the sofa.

Greer remained by the sideboard. “What are you doing out here, boy? You might be naïve, but you’re not stupid. You

must see now that Zek is moving against you. Why aren't you at the capital doing something about it?"

Gray sighed. "You never did pull your punches."

Greer raised his glass in a silent cheer and took a long sip. "Life's too short for bullshit, you know that. Well?"

"He has my lover hostage."

"Ah, Faust failed to regale us with that tidbit." Greer retook his seat. "What was his name again?"

"Ravie Kumar."

Greer wiggled his finger. "Right. He was one of Zek's, wasn't he? Before he transferred to your service after Sky disappeared."

Gray nodded. "When Zek did the restructure."

"It's funny how he popped up. I always keep an eye on all the four-studs and up, but I don't remember his elevation. Do you?"

Gray narrowed his eyes. "So? There are hundreds of four-studs."

"Three hundred and eighty-two at the time Ravie joined you, but I guess I missed one. Ravie remains at the capital to look out for your interests while you're away, right?" Greer asked.

"Yes." What was Greer getting at?

Greer ran his finger around the glass rim. "Zek's been sending you away for months at a time since Sky deserted. I wonder if you know what the capital has become."

"What do you mean?" Gray swished the amber liquid in his glass around.

"What does Ravie tell you? Or does Wyatt keep an eye on that?"

"Wyatt travels with me." Gray didn't take Ravie because he didn't want to put Ravie in harm's way, nor did he want to have to hide his abilities more than he already did. Although it

seemed he'd been hiding them for no reason at all. Ravie had always commented about his speed during training and things like his hair growing faster than normal, so maybe he suspected too. He should just tell Ravie especially since he'd finally caved and spilled the beans to Colt and Hades. He had thought about sharing his secret with Ravie a couple of times before but Sky's warnings and his fear that Ravie might view him differently had always stopped him.

"Did Ravie tell you about the slave auctions and women being forced into whorehouses?"

Greer's question ripped Gray from his thoughts. "Colt shut down the underground slaver's auction five months ago."

"Did he?" Greer rubbed his chin. "My intel must be old. Perhaps Faust was lying about a pretty blonde he purchased right before he came here."

Gray scowled and stopped swirling his glass.

"Zek has been smart in sending you and Colt away on long missions all the time. Hades is much easier to control. I believe Hades even frequents one of the pleasure houses."

"He wouldn't." Gray scooted forward in his chair. "How do you even know all this?"

Greer tugged on his earlobe. "I still have ears in the capital. Someone needs to look out for the future of this nation after we lost three of our best champions."

"What?"

Greer stared at his drink. "Funny how you don't notice what people did until after they are gone. How much that little girl did to ensure the Skin nation was civilized. She was the shadow ruler, more so than any of you other generals. And all her top-ranked warriors followed her lead, which I assume is why Zek got rid of them. That and the influence the Matron Champion spread amongst her men."

Gray needed more liquor to warm the sudden iciness that filled his core at the thought of Will and his tragic fate. Sky had never been the same after Will died and they'd spent many nights together consuming as much alcohol as they could get

their hands on. Whiskey had always been his and Sky's favorite.

"But I'm getting off track. The real question is what is going to happen now? You boys, especially Colt, must see that Zek won't let her become a general again. Her influence was too great. He'll keep her close. My guess is he plans to make her his consort, or whatever he wants to call it."

Sky would never agree to that. Hostility sparked through Gray at the thought of Zek forcing himself on her. His glass exploded in his hand, shooting shards in every direction. He stood quickly, but the whiskey already hit the sofa.

"Sorry. There must've been a crack," he mumbled.

"Indeed." Greer hopped up, rushed to the kitchen, and returned holding a towel.

Together, they cleaned up the mess. Greer took the soiled towel back to the kitchen while Gray threw the last of the glass shards in a bin.

Gray leaned over the side table, glaring down at the whiskey carafe. "Sky will never willingly become Zek's partner."

"I agree. For a while, I thought that was why she jumped," Greer said.

Gray glanced over his shoulder. "Then why do you think she did?"

Greer sat and leaned back in the armchair. "It's been a while since someone asked me that."

"Who else did?"

"General Amir did, a month after the Warlord executed Five-stud Karim. I think he wanted to have a better understanding of why his friend had died."

Gray took a new glass and filled it. "We are all still trying to make sense of it."

"What's done is done. We must move forward, and General Scarlet will have to deal with the repercussions of her



split-second decision.”

“You don’t think she planned it?”

“Of course not. If she did, she would have done it better. I don’t know what Alex said to her on that bridge, but I remember her face. Whatever it was, she was terrified, and a minute later, she hauled him over the side.”

Gray rubbed his temple and slumped into his seat. Why hadn’t he seen it earlier? Alex had made her desert. Why hadn’t she told them a week ago? And what the fuck had he said to her?

Sadness filled Greer’s eyes. “Zek has lost his way. The nation he’s created is not what he promised. I think he recognizes it too, and it’s the reason he sends you and Colt on long recon missions that never yield anything.”

Gray rested his head in his free hand. He and Colt were usually back in town at different times. When they’d teamed up to find Sky, he hadn’t seen Colt for almost a year. Ravie was supposed to be his eyes and ears at the capital while he was away. Why had Ravie never told him about the slaves and whorehouses? Had Ravie not wanted to worry him?

“Is this really the world you want to live in?” Greer asked.

Gray looked up. “Is this what any of us want?”

“You could make a different one.”

“I’m barely human. What makes you think people would follow me?” Gray asked.

Greer waved his hand in a circle. “Look around. Nothing is as it was before. There are infected humans roaming the land and aliens flying around the skies. We don’t need a human to lead us. We need someone with strength and morals of your father.”

“If Dad were alive, he’d be sickened by me.” Gray rubbed his temple. “My hands are tied. I can’t move against Zek while he has Ravie.”

Greer’s expression turned somber. “I’m sorry, but you must know that even if you bring back Sky, Ravie will likely

die. Zek will do it to prove his point and weaken you further.”

Gray growled. The glass in his hand cracked.

“Please stop breaking the crystal. They are incredibly hard to come by nowadays.”

Gray thumped the glass on the table harder than necessary. Unfortunately, he couldn’t disagree with Greer. It had been in the back of his mind that Zek would kill Ravie to spite him even if he succeeded. Before the whipping, Gray would not have thought it possible. He had held onto the hope that Zek still cared for him. He had chosen to stay with Zek over his own mother; that’s how much he’d believed in Zek’s vow to him.

“It’s time for you to use your gifts to take the throne. I don’t want my little girl growing up in this cesspool. Zek might have an army of twenty thousand behind him, but if you get Amir, we can match him. The time for change is here, and you and that warrior princess are the ones who can bring it about.”

Gray rubbed his hand through his hair, which was almost an inch long.

“You cannot give Sky to Zek. Once he has her, he’ll go after you in full force,” Greer said.

“He’ll need Alex to keep her in line.”

Greer laughed. “You’re still naïve, boy. Zek hadn’t had to use Alex in years. That self-sacrificing little girl would give herself up for tens of men and women in the Skin nation. And two very valuable ones are traveling with you. I wonder why Faust brought them along, hey?”

“I can’t sacrifice Ravie.”

“Then find a way to save them both, and build a nation your father would be proud of. Lord knows you and that little girl are powerful enough to achieve anything.”

TWELVE

# SKY



*“It’s your fault my son won’t come with me. If Zek turns on him, it’ll be on you.” ~ Queen Athena, Matron.*

The train whined to a stop, and numerous scents filtered in through the cracks. The heated metal brakes, the unwashed prisoners two cars away, and people outside the train. She couldn’t be sure, but her olfactory receptors seemed more sensitive than before. Not something she’d ever wanted. Sky kept her eyes shut. She didn’t want to deal with Ryan yet.

Loud thuds and bangs bled in through the cracks, followed by high-pitched screeches Sky assumed were carriage doors sliding open.

“Get them ready for transfer,” yelled a throaty voice.

“Clear a path! Count Kendra is coming through,” another person shouted.

Three fingers flitted across her arm. “We’ve arrived.”

She slit her eyelids. Ryan wore a soft expression, and if she’d been deluded enough, she might have thought it was regretful, but she knew better.

The rusted side door lurched open. Robin and a new brunette hopped in. The new Elite’s hooked nose was scrunched up in a sour expression, but their cohort, Robin, kept her features blank. The more Sky mulled over their escape plan, the more she was sure she was doomed. Too much could go wrong.

Three more female elites jumped in. Sour-face and the new elites took a corner each, drew Glockes from holsters strapped to their thighs, and aimed.

Robin unlocked the gate. Outside, Kendra waited, surrounded by four male guards. Dark, leather-covered hilts peeked out over the men's shoulders, and handguns were holstered on their hips.

"Unchain the Cardinal first. Keep your weapons on Scarlet," said Kendra.

Robin released Ryan's chains and guided him out. She moved back to Sky, and the elites closed in. One false move and Sky knew they wouldn't hesitate. Robin turned the small key, and Sky's handcuffs fell away.

Kendra leered. "Try something. I dare you."

Sky let her eyelids droop. If Kendra wanted a reaction, she would be sorely disappointed. Sky crawled out, and Robin clicked new cuffs around her wrists, waist, and ankles, then hauled her up. Ryan stood next to Kendra on the platform. Sky stretched her neck, expecting some stiffness, but her body felt surprisingly limber.

Kendra held her arm out, inviting Ryan to walk beside her, and they moved away. Kendra hadn't restrained Ryan. Why? That damn two-faced alien. Had he made a deal with Kendra?

Sky's ankle restraints had her shuffling forward in tiny geisha steps. She waited at the edge of the car. A spiky blonde-haired Elite almost as tall as Sky took hold of her left bicep. Sky snapped her gaze to the blonde woman. Her touch didn't make Sky's skin buzz. Robin grabbed her other arm, and Sky tensed, but her skin didn't react to Robin either. What was going on? Together, they lowered Sky to the ground in a guided drop, but Sky held her balance.

The Elites, her new shadows, retook formation around her. She craned her neck back. The station was a gigantic warehouse larger than a football field, with a thirty-five-foot ceiling. There were dozens of metal drums stacked along the walls and piles of wooden crates. A yelp drew her attention.

“Move it, rejects.” A brawny, tattooed woman shoved an elderly male forward.

The frail old man was connected by iron chains, cuffed around his wrists and waist, to a long row of people, young and old. The line was slow moving because many had a distinct limp and were malnourished. These people were the gifts Robin had spoken about. Mindy had really made a deal with the Cardinals, and Sky couldn't decide if it was brilliant or insane.

“Sightseeing is over. Load her up.” Kendra motioned to the women around Sky and turned to Ryan. “What may I call you?”

“Ryan,” he said.

Kendra held her arm up toward a sleek, black pre-pulse SUV—a BMW—with darkened windows. “Exus Ryan, please join me?”

Ryan stiffened, but Kendra didn't seem to notice. Sky assumed Exus was a title, but she could tell Ryan didn't appreciate Kendra using it.

“Walk! Murderer.” A pair of hands shoved Sky from behind.

Sky stumbled, her chains jingling, and plodded forward.

“Where are you taking Sky?” Ryan asked.

Kendra pointed to a group of men rolling an iron cage on wheels toward the black car. “Criminals ride in that.”

The men hooked the mobile prison to the trailer hitch. Sky doubted all criminals received this treatment. This was about gloating. Kendra wanted Sky on display to show everyone her conquest.

A low growl rumbled from the depths of Sky's belly. Even though she hadn't been Scarlet in years, the thought of Kendra claiming victory over her ate at her insides. Her reputation would never recover. She let out a harrowing sigh. Then again, she probably wouldn't live long enough for it to matter.

“I go where Sky goes.”

Ryan's statement made Sky trip over her own feet. She gaped at him, and she wasn't the only one.

Kendra gawked for a full ten seconds before she snapped her mouth shut and pointed at the trailer prison. "You want to ride in that?"

"Is there a problem?" Ryan asked.

She blinked a few times, then waved at her guards. "Suit yourself."

"Keep moving, killer." A female—probably Sour-face—shoved Sky.

The tip of a Glock poked Sky's spine as she moved until they converged at the trailer.

Kendra placed her hands on her hips. "Last chance to change your mind, Exus Ryan."

Ryan glanced at Sky before turning back to Kendra. "Please return our clothes."

Kendra jerked her head, and a man rushed forward and handed Ryan a wad of material. "You can have yours, but she stays without. She's a security risk."

Ryan began to open his mouth, but he would only be delaying the inevitable. This was common practice in Matron and Skineater. Zek had started it because he wanted his prisoners, especially females, to feel vulnerable, exposed, and completely defeated. Sky was grateful they'd left her with her underwear. Zek might not have, so there was no chance that Kendra would return her clothes.

"Let it go," Sky said.

Ryan's eyebrows furrowed for a moment before he nodded.

Kendra gave Sky a measured look. "Load them up."

Robin grabbed Sky's chains, dragged her toward the cage, and hopped in. A couple of men came in behind Sky and boosted her up. Robin tugged her in. Sky didn't want to appear too cooperative, so she yanked back, but she misjudged her

new strength and pulled too hard. Robin tripped and went splat on the floor at Sky's feet.

The elites raised their guns. Sky froze. Sour-face bared her teeth, her finger twitching over the trigger.

"You bitch!" Robin sprang, wrenching Sky's chain, and flung her hand out.

Sky saw it coming and decided it would be smarter not to dodge. She couldn't give Sour-face a reason to shoot. The back of Robin's fist hit hard. The crack vibrated through Sky's skull.

Robin glared. "Try that again and I'll break your legs."

Salt flooded Sky's mouth, and she spat a crimson glob through the bars. "Not my fault you can't walk properly."

In the corner of her eye, Sky saw Robin's hand fly up again. Sky braced herself, but nothing came. Ryan stood behind Sky, hunched over to fit inside, his arm extended around her, holding Robin's wrist. Robin gawked at him, but Sky ground her molars. She hadn't felt him move. The elites outside shifted uneasily.

"Count Kendra, you gave your word." Ryan's breath warmed the back of Sky's head.

Kendra bristled. "Robbie, enough. Strap her in and be done with it."

Robin hissed and yanked her hand free. Tension twitched through her features while she fastened Sky's cuffs to an overhead hook so tight Sky winced. She grabbed Sky's hair and pulled her head back.

"I'll come for you tonight. Be ready." Her voice was loud enough for only Sky and Ryan to hear.

Sky tore her head free and spat at Robin's feet to keep the charade going.

"Robbie, I said leave her be," Kendra snapped.

Robin stormed out, ramming Ryan with her shoulder on the way. She left Ryan unchained and slammed the gate. He



sat at Sky's feet.

"Enjoy the ride." Kendra sauntered over to the car and slid inside with two of her guards.

The engine roared to life, and they rolled out of the warehouse onto a dual carriage road lined with buildings.

Ryan rocked to his knees. "Here." He held up his shirt.

"Leave it. This is the way things are done."

He frowned. "This is degrading."

"It could be worse."

He pressed the nanite material to her calf. Three black lines slithered up her leg, feathering across her skin. Goose bumps exploded over her thighs and spread up over her torso all the way to her neck.

"Ryan!" Sky tried to jerk away, but the chains countered her. "What the hell are you doing?"

The ebony substance merged into the bottom of her underwear, and the top hem spread upward. Sky's breaths deepened. The new addition, resembling sheer black nylon, spread out and clung to her midsection.

"Relax. It is there for your protection."

"I don't care! Get this damn thing off me!"

He stood, bending his head. His ear brushed the bars above. Only a small clump of fabric remained in his hand. Cold blue eyes stared into hers. "No."

"Excuse me?"

Black lines trailed up his arm, and down his torso, then merged with his undershorts. "No, and I'll not apologize." He slipped on his ripped shirt and pants.

The SUV made a sharp turn. The cuffs dug into Sky's wrist as she swayed. "I am going to pummel you."

"It's a good thing you're tied up, then." He grinned and turned his back to her.

Sky glowered, grinding her teeth until her jaw ached, but he ignored her.

Fluffy, pink-tinted clouds sailed by. They passed a few dilapidated buildings overrun by vines, then made another turn. Sky had been careful to memorize the route so far. If they had any chance of pulling off this escape, she needed to know as much about the city as possible.

The car picked up speed, and a Harley roared past, a flame of ginger hair flowing from its rider. Robin had a nice bike. Another pulled up behind them. Great, Sour-face was coming too. These noisy escorts would draw more attention.

The sea air tickled her senses, and large warehouses gave way to docks teeming with people and boats, along with the distinct smell of fish. If they could get back here, escaping by water might be feasible.

They slowed and turned onto a road lined with giant trees that soared higher than the buildings. Pedestrians loitering on the sidewalks stopped to rubberneck at the spectacle driving by. On the left, patrons sat at an outdoor café, and the right, a group of laughing children trailed a young man. It was amazing, but nothing compared to the next sight that greeted her.

Her jaw dropped. Neon fucking lights! How in Cardinal hell? Ryan had mentioned power, but ...

Sky shook her head, trying to focus. This wasn't the time nor place to play a deer caught in headlights. Once the initial shock wore off, she'd continue to survey the neighborhood. *Weapons R Us* flashed above one store with a mannequin in the front window decked out in body armor and knives. The next had similar items on display, and so did almost every shop for a block. And all of them had electricity.

Sky blinked in awe. A soft thud hit a bar to her right, and liquid splattered over the side of her face. She jerked. Another thump sounded on her left, and cold wetness splashed across her ankles. At her feet lay the remains of a tomato. They had enough food to waste here. No wonder Zek had always

coveted the Matron territory. One could almost believe the pulse had never hit.

Ryan caught a tomato aimed at him and shifted to the edge of the cage, inspecting it. “Even after the Metanoia, humans are still wasting resources.”

Sky frowned and glanced away. He wasn’t wrong about that. Even in the Skin nation, Zek and his inner circle wasted tons of food and only a few miles from the capital hundreds of people barely scraped by. The trees thinned, and she caught sight of two sentries on a rooftop.

Their entourage slowed, and ahead was a towering structure that looked entirely made of ice. It was three times the height of surrounding buildings. If Mindy had been male, Sky would’ve wondered if she were compensating for something with the giant priapic symbol. Gray would definitely call her out on it if he saw it.

Outside the main entrance, a mass of people swarmed, held back by a string of armed bouncers. A roar erupted as they pulled in. A red carpet parted the throng down the middle, leading to large glass doors covered in silver filigree.

The doors swung open, and two lines of soldiers marched out, wearing freshly pressed navy uniforms and carrying silver halberds. What museum had they stolen those weapons from? One guard strode forward and opened Kendra’s door, while another three peeled off and stopped in front of their cage. The rest formed a perimeter on either side of the carpet and stood at attention with their chins held high.

Kendra slid out, waving. Many of her fans had signs ranging from expressing their love to proposals of marriage. The Matron capital couldn’t be more different from the Skins’.

Robin returned to unlock the cage.

She leaned through the opening and lowered her head as she spoke. “Exus Ryan, please follow me.” She stepped back and held her arm out.

Kendra had most of the masses enthralled, but one by one, their attention shifted. Sky felt Ryan’s penetrating gaze as he

slipped past, but she refused to meet it. He hopped down, and the crowd quieted. Hushed whispers arose as many onlookers pointed. Robin said something to him, and he nodded.

They approached Kendra, and she greeted Ryan with a welcoming smile. Kendra raised her hand, and the crowd calmed.

“Good citizens of Matron.” Kendra’s voice rang out. “Today, I return victorious with the assistance of my Cardinal friend, Exus Ryan.”

Excitement buzzed through the crowd. Many adoring gazes beamed Ryan’s way. Sky’s mouth curled up. She would bet her beloved machete that Ryan hated all the attention. Ryan didn’t counter her claim of friendship. Although what could he say? They didn’t have a choice.

“Yesterday, my elites and I, at great personal risk to ourselves, captured one of our Queendom’s most heinous criminals.” Her words bounced off the buildings.

Kendra was milking this for all its worth.

“Behold.” She pointed. “One of the Six. The vile Skineater, General Scarlet.”

The crowd gasped. A few even let out small screams. Mothers pulled their children closer. Seriously, did they not know her reputation? She didn’t kill kids. It never mattered what she did. People only ever saw her as a monster. She couldn’t blame them; she had done monstrous things in Zek’s name.

“She will face Matron justice!” Kendra roared, punching her fist up.

Cheers exploded all around. Kendra grinned and moved inside, waving to her fans. Robin guided Ryan toward the doors, and they crossed the threshold.

Sour-face entered the cage and smirked, snapping a ring around Sky’s neck. “Lady Kendra is not happy about your new clothes.”

The metal cut in, but Sky could breathe, barely. She unchained Sky's hands and ankles from the cage and connected her restraints to a chain around her waist, then moved behind Sky and shoved.

Sky's hands, knees, and shoulder slammed into the tarmac, the jolt vibrating up through her body, followed by a sharp sting before she rolled forward onto her cheek. Two halberd guards closed in and plucked her off the ground. A person pressed into Sky's back, and again there was no buzz under her skin from the contact.

"Hmm." Sour-face had foul breath. "The infamous Scarlet Death, powerless. How does it feel?"

"Get off, bitch. Your breath is disgusting."

Sour-face swept Sky's feet, but Sky caught herself before she face-planted onto the road. The crowd cried out, jeering for Sky's blood. A boot sped in from her right. Sky tucked her head in, but it wasn't enough to shield her. Heat erupted along her cheekbone. Sky braced for another kick, clenching her teeth.

"Elite!" a guard barked. "The Queen must not be kept waiting."

"Kick her again!" someone screamed.

Sky peeped through the corners of her vision. One of the soldiers had his hand on Sour-face's shoulder.

Sour-face snarled, "Get her out of my sight." She stomped away.

The guards moved in and grabbed Sky under her armpits, their bare fingers inciting mild discomfort but no invisible ants. What was going on with these Matrons? Why were none of them causing her skin to react? Her cheek throbbed, and a familiar coppery saltiness teased her taste buds. The men were around the same height as Sky, but they had no problem dragging her along, with the tips of her toes scraping across the sidewalk and up the blue glass stairs.

"Demon!" a woman yelled.

“Skin whore!” shouted a man.

A bloodthirsty frenzy—more intense than The Wild’s audience—descended upon the crowd. They pushed against the perimeter guards. Sky’s escorts picked up their pace; not wanting to be caught in a raving mob any more than she did, they dragged her inside. Four more guards rushed to close the doors behind them, muffling the calls for Sky’s blood. The walls, floors, and ceiling were made of slabs of ice, with millions of tiny blue lights embedded inside, but the floor was not slippery, and the temperature was pleasant.

Sky’s escorts continued to hoist her toward another doorway, protected by two women in purple uniforms, holding golden halberds.

The next room was larger, and at the end sat the Queen on a raised throne made of solid crystal. Sky had heard about it from passing traders, but she’d never believed it. Mindy had somehow gotten a crystal throne. Two balconies, lining the left and right sides, were filled with spectators.

The male guards let go, and two females in purple uniforms replaced them and continued to drag Sky forward. Standing in rows on either side of her were only women, all of whom were nobles, judging by the pins on their collars. Men watched from the balconies, except for one. Ryan stood to the left of the Queen, with two of those purple guards at his side.

Her escorts stopped fifteen feet from the Queen and left her standing there in chains. Sour-face sauntered up from the right. “On your knees, criminal.”

Sky shifted her gaze back to Mindy or, as she liked to be called, Your Majesty. The train of her blue velvet dress spilled down the three steps separating her from her subjects. In her left hand, she held a crystal staff. Her narrow-set hazel eyes and light olive skin were exactly as Sky remembered, but she had let herself go since their last meeting five years ago. Sky guessed sitting on a throne all day would widen anyone’s figure.

Fingers sank into Sky’s hair and wrenched her neck back. Sour-face hissed, “On your knees, or I’ll cut you.”

Sky clenched her teeth.

Mindy raised her scepter and slammed it into the floor. A boom echoed through the room. Everyone snapped to attention.

“Kneel before your Queen!” Mindy bellowed.

THIRTEEN



# SKY



*“It doesn’t have to be this way. If you work with me, we can build a better world.” ~ Queen’s Champion William Tate, Matron.*

**S**ky let out a humorless chuckle. “Why? You are not my Queen, Mindy.”

Whispers rose from the crowd behind her. Mindy hated her birth name—that much Sky knew. She had taken another name, Athena, with her crown. Mindy flicked her hand.

Sour-face lunged in, punching. Sky twisted, avoiding the strike to her midsection. Sour-face swung her other fist in from the right. Sky’s chains snapped tight, impeding her block, leaving her wide-open. She angled her jaw away, but the hit was hard. Searing pain blazed through the side of her face. *Damn brass knuckles.*

Sky shuffled sideways, hunching over. A quick check of her teeth left her thankful that none were loose. She spat out a watery red glob that stained the smokey quartz floor. Sky rolled her shoulders and straightened. “Seriously? That’s the best your little minion can do? Pathetic.”

A murderous screech exploded from Sour-face.

Sky hustled backward as Sour-face stormed forward. Out of the corner of her eye, Sky glimpsed a figure blurring in from the opposite direction. *Shit!* She couldn’t defend against another foe in these chains.

The new threat blurred past and intercepted. Ryan struck Sour-face in the gut. She flew back and slammed into the wall,

slumping into a heap. A momentary hush blanketed the throne room.

Warmth blossomed in Sky's chest. She would never admit it, but that had been incredible. Then she frowned. Were all his people this strong? He'd moved faster than she could follow.

Nearby Matrons snapped out of their stupor and ran to Sour-face's aid.

Ryan sidled toward Sky. "Perhaps you have not been informed." His voice boomed with authority. "Count Kendra gave me her word that if I cooperate, my guide will not be harmed."

Mixed emotions swirled through Sky. She couldn't figure out if she appreciated his intervention or not. On one hand, Sour-face had totally deserved the smackdown, although she'd have rather dealt it herself. On the other hand, he needed to distance himself from her. He had his mission. Exposing any kind of attachment to her would only give Mindy leverage over him. *Stupid hero wannabe.*

Mindy's nostrils flared. One could almost see the steam whistling out of her ears. Sky mashed her lips together to cover her smirk.

The Queen shot the Count a seething glare. "Is this true?"

Kendra blanched and bobbed her head.

"Do you think I would lie?" Ryan hadn't spoken loudly, but there was steel in his tone that threatened retribution.

Kendra scurried in and dropped to her knees at the bottom of the stairs. "Forgive me, my Queen. It was the only way to escort Exus Ryan here without engagement."

A low rumble vibrated in Mindy's throat. She waved her hand. "Begone."

Kendra rushed away, keeping her head low.

"Exus Ryan, that woman has slaughtered hundreds of my subjects," Mindy said.

Sky rolled her eyes. “Get your facts right before accusing me. Ninety-six. That’s how many I killed at Battle Mountain. Which is no less than your body count of Skins. It was war, not a premeditated killing spree.”

“You betrayed my champion and killed him!” She slammed her scepter into the floor for effect.

“No!” Sky yelled. Thorny knots churned in her abdomen. “He never would’ve been executed if you hadn’t left him behind. You *knew* what would happen!”

“Enough!” Mindy screamed.

Sky’s pulse thundered in her ears. “You betrayed him! I never wanted ...”

“Silence!” she bellowed, her cheeks flushing. “You have committed atrocities against my great Queendom and must pay.”

Ryan stepped forward, breaking Sky’s line of sight. A haggard sigh escaped her lips. She needed to regain control.

“She will not,” Ryan said, sounding more regal than Mindy ever could. “If you want my cooperation, you will honor the accord I struck with your subject. Or is the word of your Count worthless?”

Sky focused on Ryan’s back and calmed her breathing. Tension melted away from her muscles, and she spotted Kendra gaping up at her Queen. As Sky had thought, Kendra hadn’t known the truth about that day. Sky wondered how many of the Matrons did.

“General Scarlet must answer for her crimes,” Mindy replied.

“Is her life worth more than your own?” Ryan stalked toward Mindy.

Five guards rushed in, forming a line a few yards from the throne steps, and held their halberds out as a perimeter. They focused on Ryan, who showed no indication of slowing.

In a flash, Ryan snatched the center man’s weapon, spun it, and swept the guard’s legs out from under him. Ryan

advanced, his movements so fluid his limbs blurred. It was mesmerizing. In a second, all five lay sprawled at his feet.

If he wasn't careful, Mindy might lock him up with her. As a guest, he could probably roam around and collect more information. She would only see the inside of the dungeons.

He flung the halberd aside. It clattered to the floor and slid harmlessly away. "I promise you, Matron Queen, any attempt on Sky's life and yours will be forfeit. I will make sure of it personally."

His tone chilled Sky to her bones. Who was this person? This Ryan was deadly and intriguing. Ten guards rushed in and surrounded him, but none engaged.

The Queen gulped. "You forget yourself."

"No. You do. Do not forget who you are beholden to, human."

Numerous people behind Sky gasped, then quieted. A foreign pressure built at the edges of Sky's mind, and she pushed it away. What the hell was that? Sky glanced around. Everyone's faces were pallid. Perspiration beaded on the foreheads of the line of women right behind her. A few started hyperventilating, and others stopped breathing altogether.

Sky snapped her gaze back to Ryan. He glared at Mindy, and a visible tremor pulsed through Mindy until she panted.

Two guards staggered, dropping their halberds. The clanging metal jolted everyone out of a terror-inducing trance. A few older women collapsed as whimpers filled the hall.

What the hell had Ryan done? Did all Cardinals have his abilities?

Mindy swayed and gripped the side of her throne but recovered her composure quickly. Unlike her subjects, she didn't seem stunned. Had she experienced something similar before with the Cardinal Laxari?

"Scarlet is human," Mindy hissed. "She belongs to us to do as we see fit."

“Does she? What if I claimed ownership? That would supersede yours,” Ryan said.

Sky’s pride flared, but she squashed it.

Mindy’s leg started to bounce. “Surely you can replace her with another human. Choose. You can have any subject of mine you wish.”

A few sharp intakes of breath sounded around the throne room, but Mindy’s minions did not protest.

“I propose we let Laxari decide. I assume you have a way to contact him,” said Ryan.

Sky frowned. Was Ryan’s goal to buy more time? Because Sky was certain the Cardinal commander wouldn’t give a damn about her.

Mindy stuck her chin out. “Of course I do.”

“Excellent. Then let us ask him.”

The Queen took a deep breath and nodded. “We will consult Lord Laxari. He will, of course, respect our laws. Scarlet will remain unharmed and in our custody until then.”

Ryan didn’t move for a moment, then inclined his head. “That will suffice.”

He whirled around and approached with a predator’s grace. An awareness slammed into Sky, flooding her whole body to a cellular level. She stepped back unconsciously before remembering herself. A shudder fluttered up her back. He was completely different from the person she’d come to know. His presence had never felt so dominating, so lethal. Who was the real him?

Ryan stopped in front of Sky, leaving barely a handspan between them. His citrus scent flooded her nostrils. He took in her attire before returning his gaze to her face.

The murderous aura that had encompassed him evaporated. He rested his hand on her hip and drew her closer. “Forgive me.”

“For what?” Surprise filtered into her hushed tones, and heat crawled up her neck.

A small smile graced his mouth—a mouth Sky shouldn’t have been fascinated with. Smooth, crease-free lips. Lips that were coming too close for comfort. His hand slid to her back, and his thumb drew small circles, sending ripples of pleasure to her core.

He leaned forward. “This.”

“Wha—”

His lips cut her off, and she gasped. Waves of heat pulsed through her body. His fingers slid up her spine to her hair. He cupped her head and deepened their kiss. His tongue brushed over hers, igniting beads of desire in her belly. The sensation shot up into her chest. Sky went rigid. She’d never felt anything this potent before. A new tingle bloomed in her brain and intensified into pricks so sharp they stung. The prickles exploded out, rushing through her body. She groaned and tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip.

She snarled and bit his tongue. Ryan pulled her head back and stared, lifting his left brow. The prickles dulled to a soft buzz.

“What did you do?” Sky growled.

He dropped his hand to her neck. “You can thank me later.”

Sky gaped at him. *Thank him?* He was insane. Her mind swarmed, angrier than a hornet’s nest.

“Exus Ryan, I will show you to a receiving room. Someone else will collect Scarlet.” Robin stood beside them with her head inclined.

Sky lurched. How long had she been standing there?

Robin gestured to a doorway on her left. “Please, follow me.”

Ryan acknowledged her with a sharp nod, then drew Sky in again. “Be careful.” He released her and followed Robin out.

Sky stared after him, heart thundering in her ears. She was vaguely aware of people reorganizing around her while she grappled to understand what had happened. He'd kissed her, then he'd done something! What in Cardinal hell had he done this time? She clenched her fists, cursing him as he disappeared through the door. Anger simmered in her gut. She let this familiar heat intensify and consume her, then shifted her glare to the threat on the throne.

"Court dismissed." Mindy glared at Sky and thumped her scepter on the floor.

Feet shuffled behind Sky, and a buzz of murmurs filled the grand hall. She turned and glared at the women staring and pointing at her. Sky caught snatches of their conversations, and they were all about Sky and Ryan's kiss, but she refused to blush. She would not get embarrassed over what that damn alien had done. The men on the balconies exited more quietly, and Kendra rushed forward and kneeled before the throne.

Mindy dragged her intense gaze off Sky and stared down at Kendra with a bored expression. "What is it, Count?"

"Shall I move Scarlet to the dungeons or the tower?" Kendra asked with her head bent forward.

Crow's feet spread out around Mindy's eyes. "I will take custody of her. You can leave."

"But my Queen—"

"I said leave!"

Kendra rose to her feet, kept her head lowered, and backed away. A few minutes later, the only ones left were the guards at each exit and the six before the dais and, of course, Mindy. She placed her hand over a large jewel on the side of the throne. "Raise hook."

A glass hook, the size of Sky's hand, emerged out of the ground.

Mindy stood. Her black suede pants slipped through the long slit running up the front of her dress as she descended the stairs. The six guards formed a semi-circle around her. An intricate lattice of swirls decorated the brushed gold sphere on

top of her scepter, which she clunked against the floor with every other step.

Two people closed in from behind. Metal zinged, and the person on the left prodded Sky's back with a sharp point.

"Behave," a male said.

Mindy slowed to a stop. The guards fanned out to form a perimeter, and one darted in, looped Sky's chain to the hook, then fell back into line. Mindy did not appear as irate as Sky had expected she'd be after Ryan's little stunt. Instead, she seemed contemplative. After a moment of scrutinizing Sky from toe to head, Mindy circled her slowly.

"What am I going to do with you?" Mindy completed her circuit. "You have resurfaced at a difficult time, but I suppose now is better than later. And you did save me from sending a patrol to collect you from that little nomadic camp on the border."

Sky's jaw flopped open. Had everyone known she was alive?

Mindy clucked her tongue. "How did you do it? Well?"

Sky snapped herself out of her stupor. "Well, what?"

Mindy huffed. "How did you, of all people, manage to ensnare a Cardinal so completely?"

"Me of all people?" Sky parroted.

Mindy made a face unbecoming of a queen, displaying her irritation. "Yes. You. The Scarlet Death. You, who probably has more kill counts than all my elites combined."

Sky shifted uncomfortably. "Unlikely."

Mindy arched her groomed brow. "You're a butcher."

"I'm a survivor."

"Semantics." She waved her hand and continued to pace around Sky. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You ensnared my son at fourteen, and he doesn't even like women!"



Sky had to stop herself from shaking her head. Mindy knew too much about them. How many of her spies roamed the country?

She paused on Sky's right and squeezed her chin. "Have you slept with him?"

"Gray?"

"The Cardinal."

Sky's nose flared. "And why would I answer?"

Mindy clicked her fingers. The two guards behind pounced, and two blades kissed her throat. Mindy glided in, slid her fingers under Sky's jaw, and lifted.

Sky waited for her skin to tingle, but nothing happened. What was going on?

"I'm sure I can find suitable motivation. But why be so savage? You and I, we are not so dissimilar. And I would rather not use violence with you. Let's leave the past in the past and start over. It would be in both our interests."

Sky blinked.

Mindy sighed and stepped back, releasing Sky's chin. "I thought you were smarter than this. A survivor, by your own admission. You must have an inkling of what Zek has planned for you if you return. Even my son won't be able to stop it. And I don't want him to die trying to protect you."

Sky clenched her teeth. "I do not need protection."

She chuckled. "You are not all-powerful, dear. If you were, you wouldn't be here"—her tone hardened—"at my mercy." She studied Sky. "I wonder if the Cardinal is attracted to you because you look like them."

Sky flinched.

"Oh, don't worry. I never believed the rumors that you were an alien. There is no way they would abandon one of their own children in a world as savage as this." She did another circuit around Sky. "You will help me whether you want to or not."

“Help you with what?”

“Getting my Gray back.”

Sky swallowed. “He chose Zek.”

“When he was barely sixteen. He didn’t know any better! And he stayed because he didn’t want to leave you, and you wouldn’t leave without Alex. But Alex isn’t Zek’s hostage anymore. You have nothing holding you.” She threw her hands up. “Behold the beautiful Queendom I’ve built for Gray. He will be its heir.”

“You sold your soul to the Cardinals for it.”

Sky saw her hand, but with the blades at her neck, she couldn’t dodge. A crack of pain exploded across Sky’s face. “My Gray is in danger. Zek is moving against him.”

Sky drew in a sharp breath. Could Mindy be right? Sky had seen Zek pulling away from Gray before she’d deserted, but the boys hadn’t mentioned anything when she’d seen them. Was Mindy overreacting or was Gray really in trouble?

“I know you love him. So help me save him.”

Sky clenched her fists. “I won’t need your help.”

Mindy scoffed. “I’m not taking any chances. You will work with me. When you have your own child, you’ll understand the lengths a mother will go to. And I want my family.” Deep lines spread out from her mouth, and she stared at the floor. “I missed most of Gray’s childhood, but I will not miss my grandchild’s.”

“He can’t give you grandchildren.”

“He can, and I’ve already chosen the perfect mate for him.” A satisfied smile lit up her face.

Sky furrowed her brows. “You can’t mean me. He’s gay, remember?”

“But he loves you more than anyone, I think.”

“We tried. Before he was sure of his preference. He couldn’t get it up then, and he won’t be able to now.”

“I don’t need him to. Lord Laxari assures me I only need a sample from each of you. Did you know their race hasn’t had a natural birth in almost two thousand years? All their children are grown in artificial wombs. You won’t even have to carry the child, but it would be nice for you to stick around. And with you as its mother, Gray would never abandon it.”

Sky pulled at her bonds to cover her womb. “You’re insane!”

Mindy laughed. “That’s rich, coming from you. Why are you fighting this? I’m giving you the chance to live in a city with electricity and be revered as royalty. You can bring Alex too, and we can all be one big happy family.”

“And what about your Count? She wants to kill me.”

“I’ll deal with Kendra.”

“It’ll never work.”

“It will. My people do what I tell them to.”

Fanatical belief radiated in Mindy’s eyes. How had the rulers of the two largest new territories in North America turn out to be so unstable? But then, most people would crack under the weight of all the bodies both Zek and Mindy had left in their wake. How long would it be until she, Gray, Colt, and Hayden cracked too? Or perhaps they already had and didn’t realize it?

“I see you need time to consider my generous offer.” She pivoted, her dress flaring out as she turned and glided toward her throne. “A night in a cell will help you gain some clarity.” She flicked her hand without bothering to glance back. “Take her away.”

The two swords at her neck slid away. One guard unhooked her from the floor, and a point prodded her shoulder.

“Move,” growled the one on the left.

They steered Sky in the opposite direction from where Ryan had been escorted. Two more men joined them and marched in front of her.

“Sky,” said Mindy.

The guards in front stopped, so Sky did too, but she didn't look at Mindy.

"Don't make me wait too long," Mindy said. "I don't want to damage my future grandchild's mother too much."

They waited a moment longer, but that seemed to be all Mindy had wanted to say, so the guards resumed and entered a hallway with light gray walls as smooth as marble. There were no windows or noticeable light sources either. The clinks of her chains echoed through the corridor, and with her limited mobility, the fifty-foot walk to two steel doors at the end took unbearably long.

The escort on the left pressed a button next to the doors. A soft ding chimed, and they slid open. The stench of urine assaulted her senses.

"In," the same escort spoke.

Sky wrinkled her nose and shuffled into an elevator barely large enough for six people. The cables creaked as the last two men stepped on. The vocal man pressed the B4 button, and they started the descent to the lowest level. The stench increased with every floor until she gagged.

The doors parted, and she heaved.

Someone shoved her forward. Sky stumbled out, wondering how they could stomach such toxic fumes. Bile seared her throat. She gulped and gagged again.

A whole night in here and she might agree to anything to get out. She tilted her head up, hoping the air closer to the low ceiling might be fresher. It was not.

Sky plodded along the dank path, cringing at the slime her toes sank into and trying not to think about the filth she was walking barefoot on. Metal squeaked ahead, and a whiny gate swung inward.

A potbellied prison guard stood inside, jangling a set of keys. "New meat." Potbelly breathed in deeply. "Smells as sweet as honey." He licked his lips and smirked.

How could he even joke about sweet scents in this stench? She'd always prided herself on having a strong stomach, but these guards had guts made of titanium. Either that or they had lost their sense of smell.

Bars lined the walls, and grimy hands reached out through the gaps. Moans and groans grew into a constant background noise. The prisoners varied from teens to middle-aged, male and female. Some sat huddled in the back of their cells, others at the bars, and all had matted hair and skin covered in bloody welts.

After a long, slow march, the pathway widened into a circular room with a round table in the middle. The air smelled mildly fresher in here. At the table lounged four male guards, three of whom perked up when they saw her.

A pale, short man with orange hair shot up. "What do we have here?" He leered, snaking his tongue over his black teeth. "Welcome to the belly of hell, precious." He reminded her of a wannabe serial killer.

"Careful with this one," said the vocal escort. "Her Majesty wants her again tomorrow."

Baby Serial Killer's smile wilted. "Just when we get new entertainment, you go and ruin it."

A lanky, greasy man on Baby Serial Killer's left jerked his head left toward an open gate. "Cell over there is empty."

Her escorts prodded her forward, her chains clinking and clattering across the floor. Hopefully, Robin would spring her from this cesspool sooner rather than later. She shuffled toward a metal bench, which surprisingly was gunk free. The gate slammed shut after she'd cleared the threshold. She plonked down. The metal cooled the back of her thighs, and she rested her head against the damp concrete wall, trying her best not to breathe.

"Oi!" Lanky called to her ex-escorts, three of whom were already leaving, and pointed. "You forgot to unlock the chains."

“The chains stay,” Vocal escort growled. “Do not speak to her. Do not approach the cell. That is the Scarlet Death.” He glared at them, then turned and strode away.

Baby Serial Killer sniggered at Vocal escort’s back. A loud squeak echoed through the passageway and filled hell’s belly. The gate clanged, and Sky heard the distinct click of the lock.

“The Scarlet Death, eh?” Baby Serial Killer bounced his eyebrows. “You don’t look so scary to me. Does she, boys?”

The other two chuckled. The last eyed her cautiously.

“Nah, Nev,” Lanky replied. “She looks like entertainment.”

Sky pulled at her chains to test her range of mobility. A massive mistake, she realized once she glanced up. The clinking had solidified their unwanted attention. The men fixed their hungry gazes on her and slunk toward her cell. Her muscles tensed, and the links snapped tight. She clenched her teeth and steeled herself for a fight.

FOURTEEN

# RYAN



*“You must stop this obsession. That child died in the explosion. You are the only one of your kind.” ~ Del Cee’kar Fernari, An’Zura.*

**R**yan stared at Sky as the doors began to close. Her livid glare pierced him to his core. His chest tightened at the thought of the horrors she might soon face.

“The Queen?” he asked brusquely.

Robin glanced up. “She will join you shortly, Exus Ryan.” She inclined her head, and her copper hair fell forward.

He breathed, resetting his thoughts to focus on what he needed to accomplish. All the proof he required was right here in this city. A few moments alone and he could reach out and obtain it. Until then, his nanites would record everything he saw.

A soft chime sounded, and the doors opened. He followed Robin across an ice-blue floor encasing an endless geode of quartz crystal. It was unfortunate the crystals were only an image the nanites had formed. The design was inspirational. Had the Queen set the image or had Lax? And for him to use this unprecedented amount of nanotech, what did Lax need these “gifts” for? The whole building was a violation.

Two female guards, holding silver spears, stood at attention on either side of the double doors at the end of the wide entry hall. The door had been programmed to emulate an enormous slab of ice. Robin was five steps away when they



parted automatically, and a cloud of mist puffed out, swirling around their feet. He raised his eyebrows at Robin.

She shrugged briefly. “Queen Athena’s interior decorations were inspired by an old movie she was obsessed with as a child.”

The doors sealed behind them. “Athena? Not Mindy?”

“Definitely not.” Robin shook her head. “If you wish to remain on her good side, never use her old name. Please sit.” She motioned to a large L-shaped seat.

Everything in the receiving room was white, except for the blue tinge in the misty crystal walls and floor. The interior had a cold feeling. The title of Ice Queen seemed more appropriate to Athena, not Sky.

Ryan positioned himself so he could observe as many doors as possible. Besides the main entrance, there were four more. He sat at one end of the lounge. Upon contact with the material, he cringed. Was the seat made of animal skin?

<*Cowhide.*> his ISA confirmed.

His gaze fell to the floor as he contemplated his next move. There were many options to consider before he formulated a strategy, but his thoughts kept wandering back to Sky.

“Um ...” Robin knelt on his right. “If you are worried about Scarlet, don’t be. She’ll be kept alive until Lord Laxari grants the Queen custody.”

Had he appeared worried? Was that why Robin had employed a softer tone and knelt to his level? He knew she wasn’t in any mortal danger. Was this why the tightness in his chest wouldn’t ease? He had reprogrammed her clothes to react to danger and protect her from life-threatening damage. With the kiss, he’d confirmed the presence of the protein solution. Her injuries would heal. So why had he sighed in relief?

Robin searched his face. For what? Was his expression betraying any emotions? He tightened his protocols and met her gaze.

“I’m not worried,” he replied, tasting the lie on his tongue.

“Of course.”

She stood as an adolescent female entered through the doorway on the right, carrying a silver tray with a tall glass containing a blue liquid.

Robin nodded at the newcomer. “Enjoy your stay, Exus Ryan.” She bowed and exited.

The girl approached. “L-Lord Ryan,” she squeaked. “Some Munsha for you?”

Her pronunciation was incorrect, but he caught her meaning. Could it be? He retrieved the cool glass and examined the contents. The girl retreated to the doorway and stared.

He dipped his finger into the substance.

*<Four percent Mon’Sha, ninety-six percent grade four purified water.>*

Interesting. Did Laxari visit so often that he kept a supply here? As a weak protein alternative, the boost it would provide his system would be most welcome. He downed it all in one gulp. Not the best display of manners, but these were dire circumstances.

“Another?” He held up the glass. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

The girl rushed in. “Of course, Lord.” She took the empty glass and hurried away.

Alone at last. He went to the wall and placed his palm on the uneven surface. Athena had done well in designing this room to emulate an ice cave.

*<Accessing.>*

A live stream of all the entrances to this chamber popped into his mind. The functions available were limited. Laxari had only networked the city’s buildings to power. It would take a few moments to repurpose the nanites to find the tri-source.

A structural map of the building formed from the top down. Twenty floors, and one thousand and seven occupants.

The numbers steadily decreased as many departed through the east entrance. The Queen occupied the same room he'd left her in, but Sky was not present.

<Locating ...>

In a long corridor with four men—no, two. She disappeared. *Crap*. They were taking her to a part of the building constructed by humans. He found no visuals for anything below.

His attention switched back to Athena. She was on the move. He doubled his focus on finding the power source while tracking the wannabe royal. Athena entered the lift.

<Warning. Projecting intercept course in twelve seconds.>  
A countdown started in the top right corner of his view.

Another warning flashed.

<Server's return estimate eleven seconds.> The second counter was displayed in the top-left corner.

He followed the power out of the building, a gridwork of nanites loaded, hundreds of lines feeding the whole city.

<Nine seconds.>

He reined back. It would be somewhere close.

<Eight.>

The adjacent structures. Six potential targets.

<Seven.>

*There!* Two buildings over on the roof, a wall appeared. A cube-shaped fortress he could not penetrate.

<Five.>

That had to be it. He hurried back and sank into the disgusting material.

<Two.>

He locked his face in a neutral expression.

The girl reentered a second before the main doors parted and the Queen stalked in, her head held high and a smile on

her face.

“Exus Ryan.” Athena beamed. “Please drink.” She waved the girl forward. “I am certain Lord Laxari won’t mind if you partake in some.”

Exus, indeed. Athena’s usage of the incorrect title was beginning to irritate him, even though he knew she didn’t know any better. His fingers momentarily curled into fists before he relaxed and inclined his head as he took his refill off the tray. The girl dipped into a low bow and scurried backward all the way to the door. It was a wonder she didn’t trip over her own feet.

Ryan sipped his Mon’Sha, and a realization hit him. He almost laughed aloud. After years of insisting to Soren that he disliked his birth title—a title that set his family above other Dels on An’Zura. Here he was getting annoyed at being addressed as a lower lord. *Pathetic*. He was as bad as his father and sister.

Athena glided into the center of the room. “I must apologize for all the theatrics downstairs. I must maintain the image of a strong ruler in front of my subjects. I’m sure you understand. And I will reprimand Count Kendra for transporting you in the cage with Scarlet. You should not have been treated as such.”

“That is unnecessary,” said Ryan.

The Queen glanced at the rips in his shirt. “We must get you new clothes.” She clapped her hand. “Girl, bring the gift.”

The server scrambled out of the room, and Athena moved to the other end of the sofa, fanned out her dress, and sat. The server scampered back in, carrying a small bundle of black fabric. Athena waved her toward Ryan.

“Lord Laxari made me an outfit, but I couldn’t get used to the idea of wearing nanites. He left it with me in case I changed my mind. Perhaps you could make use of it? And perhaps we could start over since we got off on the wrong foot.”

He reached for it. A slight buzz brushed his fingertips, and thick black lines streamed up his fingers.

The little server squeaked, dropping the material. Black waves flowed up his hand. The sensation was pleasurable, but he only now realized how much after seeing Sky's reaction to the nanites sliding over her skin. When he'd clothed her in the cave, he'd been captivated by the wave of gooseflesh covering her body, and watching her small nipples tighten under her flimsy top had threatened his control over a side of his psyche he kept buried as all An'Zuri did. He pushed the image of her aside. Even though he didn't need the extra nanites for himself, it would come in handy to clothe Sky later. The new nanites covered his whole arm, fused with his existing suit, and filled in the rips he had purposefully programmed.

"Much better." Athena flourished her hand. "Could I perhaps interest you in a human celebratory drink? Champagne?"

*<A carbon-dioxide-infused drink made from fermented, crushed grapes. In large quantities, it has an intoxicating effect on humans.>*

He pursed his lips. "You recommend it?"

"Absolutely. You will love it." She clapped her hands again, and the girl slipped away.

This drink could provide the extra help he needed to lower the Queen's defenses. How thoughtful of her to provide it.

"I trust your judgment."

Her eyes radiated pleasure. She swept her flamboyant dress aside and scooted closer.

He set his expression protocols to content but interested. Coming across as too eager might give away his true feelings. "Your rooms are captivating. I feel as if I am in an ice palace."

Delight shone from her face. "Why, thank you. I'm so glad you appreciate it. It took me time to mold the nanites. From the way Lord Laxari described the process, I thought it would be simple, but it took some getting used to."

“Perhaps it was the device you used. Which one was it?” he asked, hoping to An that Laxari had not implanted this human.

“I’m not sure. It was a small silver disc, slightly bigger than my hand.”

He nodded, thanking the suns that Lax had employed a smidgen of common sense. Implanting a non-sanctioned race was a grave offense, but he would need to touch her to be sure.

The server returned with two slim glasses filled nearly to the brim with a bubbling yellow liquid that reminded him of urine. He swallowed his disgust and accepted the glass with a polite nod.

“To new acquaintances.” She flashed her yellowing, crooked teeth.

“Indeed.” He clinked his glass to hers and suppressed the nausea roiling in his stomach.

Athena took a long gulp and sighed.

He took a small sip. The sharp liquid prickled over his tongue and down his throat. He partook again and concluded that the beverage was not as foul as it appeared.

“How is it?” She leaned in and placed her hand on his now-clothed leg.

“It’s pleasant. Thank you.”

Her smile widened.

“Has Laxari tried it?” He raised his glass.

Her grin dropped faster than a meteor. “Lord Laxari has not been so”—she fixed a false smile on her face—“forthcoming.”

He tilted his head and frowned. “His loss.”

Her eyes lit up. She leaned in until her arm touched his, and he used the contact to verify her status.

*<No ISA detected.>*

“Do you have more Earth beverages?” he asked. “I would be interested in sampling more.” He finished the champagne.

Delight radiated from Athena’s face. “It would be my pleasure.” She turned to the girl. “Amy, bring the Scotch!”

Amy scrambled through the doorway while his ISA filled him in on the next beverage. How many drinks would it take to loosen this woman’s tongue?

The amber liquid soon warmed his throat, and after three glasses, Athena began to sway.

He guided the topic from her battle victories to her vision for the future.

“I have a great many things planned.” She took another gulp.

His nanites broke down the alcohol faster than it could affect his system, but he added a slur to his words for effect. “I’d love to hear about them.”

She smirked. “I bet you would, but tell me why Lord Laxari is searching for you. Are you a spy?”

He had to play his part, so he laughed. “If I were a spy, would I have arrived with one of your most wanted criminals? I’m Laxari’s little cousin, and I may or may not have snuck away from my protectors to experience the wilderness of Earth firsthand.”

Her expression became shrewd, as if the alcohol were having little effect on her. “The wilderness? And that included General Scarlet?”

“Well, I was intrigued. I met with Commander Harris in DC.”

“Ah. The leader of the Rebels in DC?” She leaned in and touched his thigh. “They are quite different from the Liberators in California.”

“Very much so. They agreed to a cease-fire, but Laxari has not granted them power as he has you.”

Athena smiled smugly.

“I was intrigued by how Laxari had turned over a group set against him, so I asked to meet with their leader, and during my time with Harris, we got onto the topic of exceptional warriors, and Sky was at the top of his list.”

Ryan’s first meeting with Harris had been tense, but he had quickly discovered Harris’s ruse. That Harris was still loyal to the human cause and had decided to try a different approach to overthrow their invaders by cooperating with Laxari in hopes of finding a weakness to exploit. After Ryan convinced Harris that he would not out him to Laxari, Harris had become a wealth of information. Ryan quite liked the human, and they’d gotten to know each other quite well. Well enough that Ryan was certain Harris would kill himself before he ever stooped to providing Laxari with *gifts*.

Athena nodded slowly. “Sky is impressive.”

“Harris met her once, years ago, and with her appearance and her skill, she left an impression.”

“Yes, her features are unusual. I understand it got her into quite a bit of trouble during the first few years after the pulse.” Athena leaned away to sip her whiskey.

“What kind of trouble?” Ryan asked before he could stop himself.

A smug smile spread across Athena’s face. “You’re quite taken with her, aren’t you?”

Ryan ran his finger over the glass’s rim. “She’s intriguing for a human.”

“Well, enjoy your little fling. And don’t worry. She won’t be harmed. I don’t plan to kill her because it would devastate my son.”

Ryan paused. “Why?”

“He’s her true love. They were inseparable before she had to go into hiding to protect her useless brother. But once my son finds out she’s alive, he will come for her. It will be such a joyous reunion. The stuff of fairy tales and legends. So don’t get too attached.” An odd glint reflected in her brown eyes. At first glance, he thought it was glee, but now he wasn’t so sure.



Ryan gulped the whiskey and savored the burn. “How quaint.” Who was this other man? He pushed the thought aside for later. He needed to focus on Athena.

“Did you enjoy your adventure?” Athena asked.

Ryan reined in his ire and smiled. “It was certainly an adventure, but I didn’t care for the food—or those abominations that almost killed my guide.”

Athena crossed her legs. “Abominations?”

“Sky called them mutant infected. But you need not worry about them anymore. I took the liberty of ordering their extermination.”

Athena’s mouth parted. “All of them?”

“Laxari agreed it must be done.” She didn’t need to know that he had not asked Lax for permission to execute the order.

The Queen scooted back again. “First the infected, then our rejects, and now the infected mutants. What great thing will Lord Laxari do for us next?”

And there it was. “I’m sorry, rejects? I’m not clear on what you mean.”

“Oh.” She waved her hand toward the wall behind her. “People who no longer contribute to society.”

“How did Laxari help you with that?”

“He took them off our hands,” she replied.

“This was your initiative?”

“I wish I could take credit. I voiced my concerns about all the mouths I had to feed one evening about one and a half years ago, and Lord Laxari offered to help. Apparently, he has some use for them.” She shrugged. “He solved my overpopulation problem and motivated my citizens to perform better. It’s a win-win.”

“A win-win, indeed. I’ll have to tell everyone what a stellar job he’s doing. His evaluation is coming soon, so I’ll put in a good word to make up for the stress I’ve caused

during my little adventure.” Ryan winked. “If you have more exemplary examples, please share them.”

“Oh, I do.” Athena painted what she believed to be a glowing portrait of Laxari helping her Queendom reconnect with modern amenities. Everything Laxari had done violated the Metanoia regulations.

The young server scampered in and bowed in front of Athena.

“What?” Athena snapped.

“Lady Kendra is demand—I mean, requesting an audience.” The girl bowed again.

Athena waved her away. “Unfortunately, as much as I would love to continue this all night ...” She rose. “I have court business to attend to.”

“Of course.” Ryan stood and dipped his chin.

“Were there any other pressing matters?”

“Not at this time.”

“Excellent.” She clasped her hands. “Let me show you to your room.”

“And where will Scarlet be residing tonight?” He followed her out of the living room and down a hallway that resembled a tunnel of ice.

“She’ll be safe in my dungeon.” She passed the first door on the left. “I really must thank you for delivering her here. When my son returns, he will be ecstatic that she’s away from that psychotic Warlord.”

“I thought she was to be punished for crimes.”

“The poor girl had no choice. She was fourteen when the Warlord forced her into his army. He used her little brother as a hostage to ensure her obedience.” She pushed the door open and held out her hand. “Your quarters.”

“I wish to see her.” He strolled in. The room was small but clean. A bed stood against the middle of a blue wall. Along another wall was a window large enough to walk through.

She followed him inside. “That’s not a good idea. For her safety, I’ll need to keep her out of public view for a time before reintroducing her as my daughter-in-law.”

Sharp jolts pierced Ryan to his core. “She will marry your son?”

“Of course.” Athena pointed to a door opposite the bed. “The bathroom is here. And feel free to enjoy the balcony.” She gestured to the window. “I really must go now. Amy will bring you more refreshments soon.” She closed the gap between them. “I’ve really enjoyed our conversation this evening.” She held out her hand.

“As have I.” He disliked the human custom of shaking hands, but to keep up his act of cooperation, he took it.

She closed her other hand around his and slid it toward his arm. Electricity buzzed around his wrist. He jerked out of Athena’s grasp and gawked at the foreign band clinging to his forearm. A pinch pricked his wrist as the band illuminated ruby red.

*<Alert! Restraint type ... >* His ISA’s voice faded.

*ISA?* He tried to connect to his AI, but there was nothing. Complete, utter silence.

Ryan sprang forward. Athena gasped. He grabbed her by the throat, lifting and slamming her against the wall.

“What did you do?” he growled.

The blood drained from her cheeks. She tugged at his arm. Faint pain pulsed in his right knee, where her boot had connected, but he maintained his hold.

“Answer me!”

Her face was turning purple. He loosened his grip, and she panted.

“Lord Laxari ordered it.”

He released his hold, and she crumpled into a heap at his feet. “Remove it. Now!”

“I don’t know how.” Fear and distrust shone in her eyes.

He snarled and stalked away, realizing he had done irreversible damage to their budding relationship. He raked his fingers through his hair.

The absence of his ISA was deafening, as if he were no longer in his own body. Fear chilled his chest. Never in his life had he been without his ISA. Not even the academy cut them off completely from their ISA for training. He'd trained without nanite-aided speed and strength, but the reassuring presence of his ISA had always been present. They hadn't done so in centuries because the loss of connection had driven some students mad. How would he complete his mission? How would he escape? His limbs felt laden, his reflexes delayed. This was no ordinary band around his wrist.

It was a Dampener.

Without direct control of his nanites, he would be slower and weaker. He needed to get a hold of himself. He filled his lungs and released a controlled breath. Even with this handicap, he was still stronger than ninety-nine percent of humans.

When he turned to face her, she was already standing, rubbing her neck.

He bowed. "I apologize for my actions. You took me by surprise."

She eyed him cautiously, sidestepping toward the door.

"Do you know what this is?" He held up his wrist.

She glanced at the exit, took two more steps, and placed her hand on the wall. A blue rectangle illuminated under her palm.

"Restrain guest."

Wires sprang out of the floor and wrapped around Ryan, faster than he could flinch. He should've been able to dodge them, but without his enhanced senses and speed, he had no chance.

Where had Lax procured a Dampener? They were highly illegal. He glanced at the glowing red strip around his arm.

Would Laxari have the human Queen try to kill him? She might be able to now.

An icy brick settled in Ryan's chest. What were Laxari's plans for him?

"I am truly sorry it has come to this." Athena frowned, worry wrinkling her forehead. "But after attacking me, I'm sure you can understand my need for caution. I'll contact Lord Laxari." She diverted her gaze to the lit rectangle under her hand. "Transfer guest to bed and secure."

The wires tightened and loosened, coiling around him. And with the assistance of the floor, they shifted him toward the bed. More wires sprang out of the wall and guided him into a horizontal position.

Heat flamed in his chest as he was secured. He was completely vulnerable, with his ankles bound together and hands chained to the bedhead.

His eyelids narrowed into slits as she approached.

"It's nice to see your kind *does* experience strong emotions. Even when you or Laxari smile, it never seems genuine." She ran her fingers over his cheek and down his neck to his chest. "So perfect. You're almost as handsome as my son."

A growl rumbled up his throat.

"Get comfortable, Exus Ryan. Unfortunately, Amy won't be able to offer refreshments in your current state, so you'll have to wait for morning." She twirled around and made a beeline for the door. "Sweet dreams," she cooed as she locked him in.

Ryan let out a long groan.

Of all the completely idiotic things. To be outsmarted by a human? He could never let Cee'kar or Soren find out, or he would never live down this monumental fuckup. And what would Sky think? How would he help her now? Fear clawed its way into his heart. Had Athena told the truth? Would she keep Sky safe? Tension rippled through his muscles, and a violent urge to protect her overwhelmed him for a moment

before he shook it off. The strength of that emotion had been astounding. Could his mind already be wavering into madness without access to his ISA? No, he couldn't let himself succumb to weakness. He had to find a way out of this and get to Sky. He couldn't trust the Queen, which meant Sky was likely in far more trouble than him.

FIFTEEN

# SKY



*“No matter what happens today, remember, I forgive you.” ~  
Queen’s Champion William Tate, Matron.*

**A** clang echoed through the dungeon as the entrance gate jangled shut.

“Alone at last.” Nev grinned.

Sky eyed the keys Lanky twirled on his index finger. Would he have the one for her chains too?

Potbelly edged closer. “Are they sure she’s ... her?”

“That don’t make a lick of sense.” Nev shook his head.

Potbelly squinted. “Where’s all the muscle you see on our women?”

“She looks scary to me,” mumbled a fourth man with wavy black hair.

The chubby gate guard rounded the corner. “The royal guards said to remind you—” He stopped short. “Nev! Rich! Get away!”

Lanky—Rich—and Baby Serial Killer—Nev—leaned against her cell bars. Outwardly, Sky stared at the floor near their feet, tracking their every breath. If the wardens decided to act on their desires, things would get ugly quickly.

“Chill out, Tom.” Rich glanced back. “A little taste ain’t gonna kill anyone.”

Rich unlocked the gate, but Nev elbowed him aside and entered first.



“You’re gonna get us disciplined! I want no part in this.” Tom hurried away.

“Tom’s right.” The fourth man leaned into the table. “Leave that one alone.”

Nev clucked his tongue. “What can she do, Ham? She’s all chained up.”

All four should’ve entered if they wanted to restrain her, and they shouldn’t have brought keys. She lifted her hands, her chains clinking in protest. The two men froze. Potbelly gulped.

Sky smiled sweetly, masking her disdain. The end of the world had taught her to never be too proud to use anything to survive. “Loosen my restraints, and maybe we might have a little fun.”

Ham scoffed. Rich’s and Nev’s gazes lingered on her exposed skin, and Potbelly made an excited snort.

Nev gleamed. “Knew you’d come around.”

Ham’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t be serious? You don’t have the keys.”

Nev dug a key from his pocket, then dropped it back. “Always pays to have a spare.” He grabbed his groin. “You want some of this? Let’s see what you’re offering.”

She had used her body to entice men in the past and killed every man who’d fallen for it. “It’s been a while since I’ve had any fun.” She swallowed the bile creeping up her throat.

Nev reached for her face and ran his grime-crusting fingers down her cheek. She masked her surprise. There was nothing again! No prickling of any kind. What was going on? Ever since Kendra had whacked her head, the prickles had vanished. Was it the head injury, or had Ryan done something?

As Nev’s hand moved to her neck, she detached herself, waiting for Rich to move closer.

His fingers stopped at her top. “What the hell?” He tried to slip his fingers under her strap, but he couldn’t separate the

material from her skin. “Don’t just stand there! Give me a hand.”

Rich tried to pinch some fabric. They were both in perfect striking distance, but she was too absorbed in their struggle. The nanomaterial had fused to her.

They shifted to her bottoms and had the same problem.

“What the hell, bitch?” Nev backhanded her face.

The sting cleared her mind, and she reacted without thought. She kicked Nev in the shin. He toppled. She grabbed his shirt, slammed her forehead into his nose, and slipped a small metal item from his pocket.

Nev screamed, stumbling back. Blood flowed from his wonky nose. Rich and Potbelly ushered him to the edge of the cage. She unlocked her chains while they cuddled Nev. Luckily, the key fit the cuffs for her wrists and ankles.

“Get out!” Ham scrambled for a baton on the table.

“Shut it, Ham. Nev’s in pain,” Rich yelled with his back to her.

Sky stood and popped her neck. “And you’ll be joining him momentarily.”

Rich and Potbelly stiffened, and very slowly, they turned. Their faces paled.

“Oh fuck,” Potbelly whimpered.

Sky did her best Cheshire cat grin.

Rich darted for the opening. She pounced, caught hold of his collar, and hurled him at the wall. He hit with a thud and slid to the floor.

Potbelly held his baton out. Maybe he hoped he could zap her out of existence? He shook so violently she almost felt bad for him. Then again, he had wanted to participate in whatever the two were planning.

She jumped, barely forward, just a playful feint.

Potbelly shrieked and barreled straight into the bars. A loud dong resounded through the dungeon. He moaned and crumpled into a blubbering puddle.

Sky blinked in disbelief at his unconscious form. He'd robbed her of a lot of fun. She spied Ham through the bars. He snapped his mouth shut and bolted. She sprang over Potbelly's legs and gave chase but caught him too quickly. She jerked him into her embrace and covered his mouth with her hand, muffling his cries for help. He thrashed against her.

“Shh. Don't struggle.”

He shivered and nodded.

These guards had no backbone. It was disappointing. Zek had always posted the most bloodthirsty men in his prisons. Would she be punished for this? Mindy wanted her alive, for now at least.

The main gate clanged open.

“Thank the Queen you're here! I think she's escaped,” said Tom.

A faint voice mumbled in response. Then five distinct footsteps hurried down the hall.

Playtime was over.

Sky pilfered the hunting knife under Ham's vest and moved her human shield into position, holding the blade to his neck. If they came in guns blazing, she could dodge behind Ham.

Robin arrived first, aiming her gun at Sky's head. Next, the tall brunette Sky had fought in the cage, then the blonde with short spiky hair and a petite woman with long dark hair, and last was Sour-face.

A second later, Kendra strode into the room. “Going somewhere?”

Sky shrugged. “Getting a little exercise.”

Kendra's lips twitched. “Let him go.”

Sky grunted and pushed Ham forward. He stumbled and landed on his knees before Kendra.

“Get up, fool.” She whacked the top of his head. “Get those idiots out,” she snapped, pointing to the three men in Sky’s cell.

Nev moaned, leaning against the wall. Rich and Potbelly were out cold.

Kendra pointed at the entrance. “Have the moron at the gate help you find your replacements. You have fifteen minutes. Move!”

Ham scrambled away.

“I can help.” Sky spun the knife around with her fingers.

“Put the weapon down first.” Kendra motioned to the table.

Sky stabbed the blade a few centimeters into the tabletop.

“Thank you.” Kendra gestured to the overcrowded cell. “Don’t make me threaten you.”

Was she kidding? Sky jerked her head toward the four guns pointed at her before sauntering back to her cage. The elites’ sights followed her every step.

“One small piece of unfinished business, then you’ll have my full cooperation.” Sky slid back into the cell, around Potbelly, and stepped over Rich. She towered over Nev, who tried his best to sink into the wall. “This is more than you deserve.”

“Sky.” Kendra’s tone carried a heavy warning, but the fact that she’d used Sky’s real name was intriguing.

More footsteps clomped through the prison. Ham and Tom would be joining them shortly.

Sky tugged Nev upright and pushed him into the bars, wrapping her fingers around his neck. “This one is vile.”

Kendra’s expression hardened. “Most of them here are.”

Nev whimpered, trying to twist out of her hold. “You fucking slut.” His voice quavered. “You’re nothing but a whore!”

Sky kicked the back of his legs, forcing him to his knees. In one swift motion, she wrapped her hands around his head and yanked. An audible snap filled her ears. She let his corpse flop to her feet.

“Was that necessary?” Kendra snapped.

Sky stared. “He touched me.”

Kendra gave a slight nod.

Ham and Tom skidded into the room.

“Get those cretins out of here before she kills them all.” Kendra glared at Sky.

Tom’s mouth gaped, but Ham rushed forward and grabbed Potbelly’s feet. “Tom! Hurry up.”

Tom scurried in and grabbed Rich, keeping his gaze fixed on Sky. Both men struggled with their burdens, grunting as they inched across the floor.

“We don’t have all fucking day.” Kendra threw her hands up. “Pem! Help these buffoons and stand guard at the gate.”

Sour-face, aka Pem, gaped at Kendra. “My lady, allow me to stay. It’s not—”

Kendra raised her arm. “I’ll be perfectly fine.” Kendra glared at Sky. “Won’t I?”

Sky knew why Kendra was here—to learn about her brother after Sky had dangled that nugget of truth in the throne room.

“Perfectly.” Sky flashed her pearly whites.

Pem growled, which only made Sky’s smirk widen.

“Move. Now!” Kendra’s voice boomed off the bare walls. “And don’t come back until the replacements have arrived.”

Pem bowed deeply. “As you wish.” She assisted the men, and they cleared the room.

Kendra sauntered forward. Robin and the other Elite shadowed her, keeping their guns trained on Sky.

Kendra gestured to the bench in Sky's cell. "Sit. I wish to talk."

"What? You're not going to bash my head in today? Or are you saving that for later?"

A lopsided smirk spread across Kendra's lips. "My anger got the better of me. I didn't plan to hit you so hard."

"Why not?"

"And lose my chance of torturing you?" Kendra asked.

"That's why you've come?"

"No. I find it interesting you healed so quickly."

Sky clenched her teeth. As an experienced fighter, Kendra knew exactly how deadly her strike had been.

"Please." Kendra motioned to the bench again, then held up her shirt, exposing her waistline, and turned. "I'm unarmed." She turned to face Robin. "Put your gun and sword on the ground and enter the cell."

Robin blinked. "But I—"

"Now." Kendra glowered.

Robin dipped her chin before complying. She slipped past Kendra and leaned against the bars.

"Laurence, keep watch." Kendra nodded to the long-haired Elite, who moved behind Robin.

"Please sit." Kendra sat on the other end of the bench. "Now that the rabble has gone, we can speak freely." Kendra's menacing stare swept toward Robin. "What are you planning with my subordinate?"

Robin snapped to attention.

Laurence adjusted her aim to the back of Robin's head.

"You didn't really think I wouldn't notice, did you?" Kendra tilted her head.

Sky slumped into the wall and groaned. There went the escape plan.

“My lady.” Robin reached for her sword, but her fingers touched nothing but air.

“Oh?” Kendra sat straighter. “You’d kill me for her?”

Robin clenched her fists. “No,” she forced out. “Not for her.”

Kendra studied her. “For Drew, then?”

Robin dropped her gaze.

Kendra let out a haggard sigh and turned her attention to Sky. “I’ll make you a deal, Sky Argo from Cupertino, California.”

Sky’s eyes had widened before she could stop them.

Kendra smiled. “I’ve done my research on my brother’s killer.” Her lips pursed together. “Or at least who I thought was his killer.”

She seemed to be waiting for a response, but overeagerness, even when backed into a corner, was never a smart tactic. So Sky said nothing.

Kendra pointed her thumb at Robin. “I’ll turn a blind eye to the Hood here.”

Robin tensed stiffer than a corpse.

“Cute. As in Robin Hood? Couldn’t you have chosen a more original code name for your underling?”

Kendra glanced Robin’s way. “I would have if I’d named her.”

All the blood drained from Robin’s already pale face.

“Robby, you didn’t really think Laurence wouldn’t check on you, did you?” Kendra asked.

Robin’s nose crinkled.

“Impressive.” Sky eyed Kendra appreciatively. “What do you want in return?”

“The truth.”

Sky stretched out her neck. “And what if I confirm I did kill your brother?”

“Of that, I’m certain. But I want the whole story. Everything.”

“And then what? You’ll let us walk out of here?”

“I will not interfere. I happen to disagree with the lengths that”—she took a deep breath—“the Queen has gone to, to appease our invaders.”

Sky glanced at Kendra and Robin. “Where’s Ryan?” If Mindy was as tight with the Cardinals as they claimed, Ryan could’ve been handed over by now.

Kendra’s mouth stretched into a sly grin. “Mindy is currently entertaining that sex-on-a-stick alien. But don’t worry. She won’t touch him. He’s too pretty for her tastes.” Kendra leaned in. “We don’t have much time left. Do we have a deal or not?”

“Return Robin her weapons, and I’ll answer your questions,” Sky said.

Kendra jerked her chin. Wasting no time, Robin sailed out of the cell and holstered her gun and knives, while Laurence adjusted her sight onto Robin.

“Your turn.”

“What do you want to know?” Sky scooted back, shifting into a more comfortable position.

“Is it true? Did the Queen abandon him?” Kendra’s arm muscles quaked.

Sky could picture Will’s face as clearly as the first day she’d met him: his smooth, coffee-colored skin, full lips, strong jaw, and nose with a slight bump. The clarity of her memory was a curse rather than a blessing. He’d been the same height as her at fifteen; now she’d definitely be taller. He wouldn’t have grown much more at nineteen.



They'd met when Mindy and Zek had joined forces to take out another community in Salt Lake City. Sky, Gray, Colt, and Hades had been chosen. From the Matrons, Will, Mike, Jo, and that bastard Rory. They'd all pretended to be part of the hopeful recruits and had been tasked with overthrowing the Salt Lake leaders from the inside.

Sky cleared her parched throat. When was the last time she'd had a drink? "Your Queen attacked Zek's convoy before we escaped the Salt Lake compound, and Will had no idea what Mindy had done. None of us did. So when Zek's guards pulled their swords on Will, Jo, and Mike when we returned, we defended them, until Zek ordered us to stand down. We'd all been exposed by Mindy's agent, Rory, while in Salt Lake and had to band together to escape." Sky sighed. "I still don't understand why she put Gray in so much danger. Maybe she didn't know he would be there." Sky shrugged. "Mindy had all kinds of plans in motion and offered a deal to the Salt Lake leader to help take out the Skins. Will and his men were blindsided. She'd offered him to the Salt Lake leader as collateral." Sky hung her head. "Zek executed Mike on the spot and sent his head back to Mindy."

Kendra's feet shuffled back to the bars. "Then what?"

"Mindy sent word she'd captured Alice."

"Zek's lover?"

Sky nodded. "And Mindy said if he wanted to see her alive, then we needed to withdraw, but never once did she ask for Will or Jo back. So we retreated to Albuquerque and took Will and Jo with us. Colt and Gray pleaded their case that we wouldn't have escaped Salt Lake without them. So Colt kept Jo and Will was assigned to me."

"Why you?"

"Zek knew within the first few days how dangerous your brother was. I guess he thought I was the least likely to be influenced. And—"

"You could be controlled through Alex," Kendra said.

"Yes."

“Did you talk to him?”

Sky shut her eyes. “He was distracting with his infectious smile. He was a prisoner and shouldn’t have been smiling, so I ignored him at first, but all Will did was talk, trying to convince me we could build a better world, telling me all his visions for the future.”

“You listened?” Sky heard the longing in Kendra’s voice.

“Eventually, he wore me down. It was a long journey.”

Kendra’s voice quivered. “The Queen told me he was killed in the attack in Salt Lake City. That you stabbed him in the back and broke the alliance and that’s why she attacked.”

Sky glared at Kendra. “Zek kept him alive for seventy-three days after we got back to Albuquerque. He tried to negotiate a prisoner swap with Mindy at least five times that I know of.”

Kendra punched the bars.

Sky hunched and stared at the floor. It was easier to continue the story that way. “Will was leashed on a long chain in my home. But after Mindy killed Alice, Zek lost it. Jo was executed within a day, and it wasn’t pretty.” Alice’s death had solidified the rift between the Skins and Matrons.

“Go on.”

“I didn’t want to do it, but Zek wanted to send a message to Mindy that his youngest General could beat her champion.” Sky dug her nails into her thighs. “And I tried to refuse but...”

“Zek used Alex to make you do it,” Kendra said.

Sky stared at her hands, and for a moment, they turned vibrant red, dripping with blood—exactly how they’d been after Will had died. “Yes,” she whispered.

Kendra grabbed a fistful of Sky’s hair and yanked her. “And you killed him?”

Sky’s lungs contracted. “He had a message for you. *Tell my sister she was right. I was a fool. Tell her she must be strong in my place.*”

Kendra wrapped her trembling hand around Sky's throat and squeezed. "What else did he say?"

"The rest wasn't for you."

Kendra's fingers dug in. "Who, then!"

Sky gasped. "Me. He asked me to fulfill his dream in his place. I told him to fight me. That there'd be no hard feelings if he won. Part of me wanted him to win because fighting in the pit was ... but he wouldn't. Not properly." She clamped her eyes shut, and her heart ached. "He kissed me, then drove my wakizashi into his heart."

Kendra hissed, spraying Sky's face with spit, and lifted her off the bench. She pulled a knife from her waistband and stabbed it at Sky's face. Sky caught Kendra's wrist inches before the blade could cut. Kendra stared intently at Sky, as if trying to peer into her soul.

"And what have you done to fulfill his legacy, besides hiding away?" Kendra edged the blade closer.

White dots danced in front of Sky's vision.

Kendra's face scrunched. "What would you do? If I had killed Alex?"

"You would be dust in the wind." Sky let the knife touch her cheek.

"Even if someone else ordered it and I was only the sword?" Kendra asked.

Sky sucked in a shaky gulp of air. "Yes."

Kendra pushed the blade into Sky's cheek. Her body stiffened, but she stopped fighting Kendra. The blade sliced, leaving a burning sensation in its wake.

Kendra released Sky so fast that her butt slammed into the seat. "Thank you for your honesty. It matches reports I've collected over the years that I didn't want to believe. Lucky for you, the Queen changed her story too, and I've decided not to hold a fifteen-year-old girl, who had no choice, responsible. Will wouldn't have wanted that, I think." She whirled around

and stalked toward the cell opening, then stopped. “But now you’ll never forget him.”

“I could never forget him ...” Sky whispered.

“You and I, we are bound because he wouldn’t have asked you to carry on his dream if he didn’t think highly of you. Were you ... did you love him?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Moisture blurred Sky’s vision. “Or maybe I was captivated by his vision. He would’ve been a magnificent leader.”

“Yes, he would’ve been. And the Queen knew it too.”

“You should take your revenge,” Sky said.

Kendra spun to face Sky. “No. I see it in your eyes. You’re emptier than I am. I’d be doing you a favor. Instead, you will honor my brother. You have the power to make a difference, so help me. We are going to build the world he spoke about, and I don’t care how we accomplish it, but we will finish what he started.”

A tear trickled down Sky’s cheek.

Kendra stared at the blood on her knife. “You owe it to Will.” She exited and slammed the gate shut. “Don’t eat or drink anything unless the person serving it is wearing my pin.” She tapped a silver T on her lapel, then turned to her elites. “Take care of it.”

They holstered their guns and pulled throwing daggers from inside their jackets. Robin stared at Sky as she moved to the next cell over and flicked the knife. A moan came from the form huddled in the corner.

“What are you doing?” Sky asked.

“Can’t have any witnesses,” said Kendra.

Robin moved on to the next cell, and systematically, the elites eliminated every prisoner within hearing distance.

Kendra clucked her tongue. “You are really living up to your reputation, Scarlet. I’ll have to report to the Queen that you got loose and killed the prisoners.”

Sky smashed her lips together.

“Get comfortable. I don’t know what you two had planned, but we might need another day to make sure the escape is foolproof.”

The main gate swung open, and footsteps echoed into the chamber.

Kendra peered down the hall and frowned, then tipped her head toward Sky and strode out with her elites in tow. New guards scrambled in, and Sky was sure, now more than ever, that Ryan had done something. When Kendra had touched her in *The Wild*, Sky’s skin had reacted, but just now, there’d been nothing. Not that she wasn’t thankful to be able to touch people normally, but she didn’t know how or why he’d done it, and it really irked her. The two of them needed to have a long talk if they got out of here.

SIXTEEN

## GRAY



*“Watch your back, little girl. One day, I will slice it open. ~  
General Bradley Faust, Skineater.*

“**T**hat’s all I know. I swear!” the Libby commander screamed, kneeling in front of Faust. “Forbes went with them. He’s the one you need to talk to.”

“Which one?” Faust asked.

The Libby commander pointed at a forty-something-year-old man with dark brown hair kneeling at the end of the line of Liberator soldiers.

Less than ten minutes ago, Gray, Theo, and Gwen had infiltrated the outpost from the rear, while Faust had distracted the Libby commander at the front gate. It had taken less than a few minutes to capture the tiny base, not even half the size of Battle Mountain. How these poor fools were supposed to defend themselves was a wonder. Although, they never would have had any interest in this base if Sky hadn’t been heading in this direction; it was a likely pit stop for them before they headed for California.

“Gray.” Faust motioned to the man.

Gray fought to mask his disgust as he closed the gap and yanked Forbes up. How could any commander give up their subordinate to save their own skin? And this was the organization Alex had left Sky to join? It was good that Alex wasn’t stationed at this pitiful excuse for an outpost, or Gray might’ve whacked him over the head. He, along with Gwen

and Theo, had checked that the little brat wasn't here before opening the gates for Faust.

"Don't lie and tell him everything, and maybe you'll survive," Gray whispered, shoving the man forward.

"General." A large man with a shaved head exited a small building behind Faust. "We've finished setting up."

"Excellent, and we have our first customer. Bring him." Faust waved for Gray to follow.

Gray escorted Forbes across the sandy grounds. The Libby commander, a fifty-something-year-old balding man, was curled up on the ground, shaking. Blood spewed from his nose, his left eye was swollen shut, and his bottom lip had ballooned.

Forbes's muscles trembled, but he walked with his head held high. Gray had never witnessed Faust's methods in person, but he'd heard stories, and if Forbes had an inkling of what he was headed for, he'd try to make a break for it.

Faust sauntered inside the small wooden structure. Gray guessed this outpost used to be a camp of some sort. The shaved-head warrior stood at the door with his arms crossed. When Forbes reached him, Shaved-head grabbed his arm.

"I got it from here," Shaved-head said to Gray.

Gray shrugged and swung around. He heard the door click shut behind him and made a beeline for the Libby commander. Gray grabbed the Libby commander by the collar and tugged him up, pulling him toward the barracks. A couple of Faust's men eyed them but returned to tying up the rest of the Libbys. Theo hopped off the barrel he'd been sitting on and followed. Gwen trailed at a slower pace.

He shoved the sniveling, traitorous commander inside. Thank goodness Alex wasn't here; he was sure Faust would ask Forbes about Alex's location soon, even if Zek had said they didn't need him.

The Libby commander scampered in and slipped in behind a bunk. "I told him everything I know."



“Maybe.” Gray sat on the only single bed, swung his legs up, and placed his katana on his lap. Theo swept past the commander and sat on a bunk farther along. Gwen sauntered in, shut the door, and leaned against it. She crossed her arms, making her biceps even more defined.

“I have a few questions of my own. But first, let’s get the pleasantries out of the way.” Gray brushed his thumb over the threaded hilt; the feeling always calmed him. “Do you know who that General was?”

The commander nodded quickly. “General Faust.”

“Good. And do you know who I am?”

He shook his head.

Gray pursed his lips.

Gwen snorted. “Guess you aren’t as famous, General Hawk.”

The commander squealed, and a wet patch appeared in the front of his trousers and trickled to the floor. “I know who you are.”

Gray crinkled his nose at the smell of fresh urine. Why’d he always get the ones with bladder control problems?

“Good. Then we can get started. I don’t think I need to explain what will happen if you’re not truthful, and trust me, I’ll know.” Gray doubted very much that this spineless fool had the guts to lie to him, but he warned him just in case. Sometimes, men surprised him. Women were usually more unpredictable. “I saw General Scarlet about ten days ago, and she was traveling with someone you might know. A cute little black-haired Libby. Goes by Lee.”

The commander sucked in a sharp breath.

“Ah, you know him. Tell me, when was the last time you saw little Lee?”

“Lieutenant Lee was here yesterday.”

“Aw, we just missed him.”

The commander nodded slowly.

“And you’re sure Sky, General Scarlet, wasn’t with him?” The commander had already shared the story of the Cardinal attack and infected mutants with Faust outside. The thought of Sky going up against those creatures again chilled him to his core, but through their connection, he knew she was alive. Although he was sure she’d been badly injured because the connection had almost faded to nothing for a few minutes, as it had right after she’d hit the water after jumping off the bridge. He clenched his fist, the need to find her surging through him anew, and he didn’t know if he wanted to find her to save Ravie or to make sure she was alive. To make sure the feeling in his chest wasn’t a phantom aftereffect.

The commander quivered. “She wasn’t here. I swear. I promise I’d tell you if she had been.”

“Who did he leave with?” Gray’s voice turned gravelly.

The commander scanned the room. Theo stared at him with a fierce expression, and Gwen shot him a dark glare that made the commander’s head sink into his neck.

“Six others. Colonel Reed, Major Cyler, Cap—Lieutenant Alex—”

Gwen hissed, baring her teeth. “General Scarlet’s brother?”

The Libby commander moved his chin up and down so fast his man boobs shook.

Gray pressed his lips together. Out of all the places Alex could have been. *Shit!* Why couldn’t he have been tucked away in the Liberator lands? “Who else?”

“Lieutenant Diaz, and a brother and sister. The boy was Sean, and the girl—”

“Lisa,” said Gray.

“Yes!”

“Does Forbes know all this?”

“Yes.”

“And who else?”

“All of us here. We don’t usually get that kind of activity, so everyone was really interested. And Forbes accompanied them every time they went out to search for General Scarlet, which lasted longer than necessary because Lieutenant Alex was so adamant that she had survived. I think Colonel Reed wanted to find proof of her death to convince him, but I heard there was nothing left of the mutants. So ...” His head sank lower.

Theo punched the bunk’s metal post. “Fuck!”

“Relax,” Gray snapped, his jaw muscles flexing. If Alex was sure, he’d trust his bond too. “She’s alive.”

Gwen stalked closer, a fiery need burning in her eyes. “How do you know?”

“I know.” Gray rubbed his temple.

But this wasn’t good. Faust had Forbes, which meant he’d find out about Alex, and with him so close by, Gray doubted Faust would pass on the opportunity to capture him. I guess the little brat was coming home after all. “Where are they headed?”

“Back to the Diablo base,” said the Libby commander.

Gray motioned his head toward the door. “You can go join the others.”

The commander jumped up and scurried toward the exit. Gwen opened the door for him. He squeaked as he passed her and darted out. Then she shut it firmly behind him.

Gray bent his knee and rested his katana on top. “Theo, you obviously didn’t pass the message along.”

Theo stood, placing his fist to his chest. “I did, General Hawk.”

“Then why are you two still following me around? Has Faust ordered you to keep an eye on me?”

Gwen’s nostrils flared. “No, Gray, and even if he had, I’d never do it!”

Gray wiggled his finger at her. “Finally got you to call me Gray again.”

Gwen glowered. “How can you be sure she’s alive? Is it the same way you two always used to find each other when you were separated?”

Gray quirked an eyebrow. Greer had been right; he and Sky had been too naïve. “Maybe. Look, I know we were close, but Faust has already tried to kill me once. I don’t want you two getting caught in the crossfire.”

“They’re our lives. We can do what we please with them,” said Gwen in a low, harsh tone.

“Did you give Sky this much lip?”

“Yes,” said Gwen. “Always. But Karim and I listened when it mattered. Plus, you’re barely a General right now.”

Gray put his hand over his heart. “Ouch, that hurt.”

“Gwen.” Theo frowned.

She shrugged. “What will you do about Alex? Faust will want to use him.”

“There’s not a lot I can do. As you said, I’m not a General right now.”

“Faust might hurt him.” Gwen’s golden eyebrows furrowed together, and her lips pinched into an expression Gray had seen many times before—one she’d always made before Sky went off on one of her impossibly dangerous missions the Warlord had been fond of sending her on.

“Aw, Gwen. Still have a soft spot for the brat?”

She clenched her teeth. “Of course I do! He was in my care for over five years. Whenever Sky was away, which was a lot, he was with me.”

Gray ran his hand over his smooth, misty-white lacquered sheath. “So, maybe you can tell me how and why he got Sky to jump off the bridge that day.”

Gwen scoffed. “You’re blaming the boy for it? Please. He was a child.”

“He was fifteen,” said Theo. “General Scarlet was leading a thousand men at the same age.”

“Men and women,” Gwen corrected. “But Sky was different. Alex was spoiled and sheltered.”

There was no use trying to convince Gwen of Alex’s possible involvement, but as she’d reminded him, she’d been with him the most. More than Sky, even.

“Gwen, did you notice any strange behavior from Alex in the months before? Like why he suddenly wanted to train? We all thought Zek had forced him, but the Warlord told us differently.”

She tugged at her lower lip. “There was one thing. We were out at the markets, and I lost sight of Alex for a while. That had never happened before. But he was there one second and gone the next. When I found him again, he was saying goodbye to a hooded man.”

“How do you know it was a male?”

“By his frame. Women can’t get those kinds of shoulders, and he was over six and a half feet tall. He’d disappeared by the time I got close enough to see his face. Alex was agitated for a few weeks after. Then out of nowhere, he started training. I don’t know if it was his idea or not, but he visited Zek a few times in the week before he started.”

“How long was he with the man?”

“Over thirty minutes.”

Gray raised his eyebrows.

Gwen averted her gaze. “I know. It wasn’t good, and I should’ve told Sky about it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“He didn’t get hurt, so I didn’t want to worry her. She already had so much on her plate, and Karim agreed it would be best not to stress her further.”

“Did he say who it was?” Gray asked.

“He said it was an old family friend, but that’s all he would say.”

A terror-inducing scream filtered in through the walls.

“What the hell?” Gray hopped up, gripping his hilt.

Gwen’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “Ignore it.”

“Is that Forbes?” Gray moved toward the exit Gwen was blocking.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Another scream pierced the silence, filled with so much pain that Gray couldn’t suppress the shudder shooting up his back. “Move, Gwen.”

Theo grabbed his arm. “General Hawk, it’s better you stay here.”

Gray glanced between Sky’s ex-warriors. Both of them wouldn’t meet his eyes, and their expressions were a mixture of resignation and shame. He ripped his arm free.

Another scream tore through the barracks.

“Out of the way, or I’ll move you myself,” Gray growled.

Gwen’s face pinched with tension before she opened the door. Gray stalked out, the aroma of blood filling his nose. The Libby commander was tied with his men, sobbing. The rest of his soldiers hung their heads. Some of Faust’s men shifted around the edges of the camp, their faces also downturned. Others watched the wooden hut with glee.

Gray marched to the hut and threw the door open. A coppery stench assaulted his senses. Two warriors inside jumped up, reaching for the swords at their waists. Gray ignored the men and entered. He didn’t care if he was under Faust’s command. No person deserved to experience this kind of pain.

“Hawk, how good of you to join us.” Madness was reflected in Faust’s bright blue eyes. In his hand, he held a long flap of skin. “Forbes here has had many interesting things to say.”

Nausea shot up his throat, and Gray gulped it down. Faust had stripped Forbes to his birthday suit and skinned almost three-quarters of his chest and stomach. Blood and urine puddled together on the floor under the table.

“What are you doing?” Gray asked, barely keeping his voice steady.

Faust glanced at the bloody piece of flesh in his hand. “Why, living up to our name. Somebody has to do it. You and Colt are too soft. You barely strike fear into anyone anymore. Hades has been so uninspired since Scarlet left, and Amir is a bore. So, if I don’t, who will? Surely, you remember who out of the six of us scared people the most. I’m just filling in her shoes.” He grinned, flashing his gold teeth. “But don’t worry. I don’t eat the skin. I tried it once. Disgusting.” He stuck his tongue out.

Gray couldn’t look at Forbes anymore. The man barely clung to consciousness. Most would have passed out by now. “What did you learn?”

“That they tracked dear Scarlet to a tunnel, but the fucking thing had collapsed so they couldn’t follow her farther. And get this. The brat is near.” Faust beamed and flung the strip of skin at the wall. It hit the floor with a squelching flop, like a wet towel. “We could use that little brat.”

“Yes, I heard.”

Faust quirked his blood-spattered brow.

“The commander had more to share.” Gray edged around the table.

Faust curled his lip. “The commander can be our next customer. This one is getting boring.”

A low rumble crept out of Gray’s chest. He slipped a throwing knife from his vest and hurled it at Forbes’s throat. Forbes convulsed and spluttered. Faust’s two warriors leaped up again.

“Gray!” Faust snapped.

“You said you were done. Sorry. I thought we were in a hurry to catch Alex,” Gray said.

Faust grunted. “Fine.” He picked up some of Forbes’s discarded clothes and wiped his bloody hands clean. “Kirk, take care of the others quickly, and get the men ready to leave.”

Shaved-head nodded and hurried out.

Faust marched to the exit. “Ride with me, Gray. We’ll need to decide how best to capture the brat once we catch up to him.”

Gray dipped his head. “As you wish.”

Gunshots exploded, and more terror-filled screams saturated the air. Gray ground his teeth. At least the other Libbys’ deaths had been quick.



SEVENTEEN

# SKY



*“Our alliance with the Matrons is over. From this day, we kill all Matron bitches on sight.” ~ Warlord Zek Wong, Skineater.*

Sky’s eyelids snapped open with the faint ding of the elevator. Four wardens, the fourth set since she’d been in this cesspool, sat at the round table in the middle. Only one man was awake, while the other three men slumbered. None of them dared to approach Sky anymore. If Robin didn’t turn up soon, she might kill a few guards in hopes of being moved somewhere else because two days of this stench was burning holes in her nose, and she needed a distraction. That damn alien had dominated her thoughts for the last forty hours. Not even her guilt over Will had expelled him from her mind. It was all because of that kiss.

Mindy had never sent for her. She wondered if the Queen had changed her mind. And was Ryan even in Seattle anymore, or had he been sent home?

There was a soft muffle before the gate squeaked, and footsteps echoed down the hall. They were light, likely female. Sky perked up and stared past the three snoozing guards. The alert guard, a rotund man with a scraggly beard, twisted in his chair and peered at the hallway opening, waiting for the owner of the faint footsteps to come into view.

Robin sauntered in, holding a tray with a bowl, a bread roll, and a cup on it.

*Finally!*

“Elite.” Scraggly sprang up. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“Obviously.” Robin eyed the sleeping guards.

“Get up, fools,” he snapped, but the men barely stirred.

“Oh, no need to wake them.” She placed the tray on the table. “It’s kinder for them to die in their sleep.”

A visible jolt shot through Scraggly, and he fumbled for the baton secured to his belt. Robin lunged forward, a small knife in hand, and slashed his throat. Scraggly spluttered and dropped.

Guard number two stirred, but before he could fully wake, she flung the blade at him. It sank deep into his throat.

Robin was swift, weaving around the remaining two semi-awake men. She finished them off efficiently. Around her, bloody bodies littered the ground. She grabbed a set of keys from Scraggly, then strode to Sky’s cell gate, twirling the keyring around her index finger.

Standing before the lock, she grinned. “What? No, ‘Oh wow, Robin, you are amazing. You took out those losers before I could even blink.’”

Sky raised her eyebrows. “How about, what took you so long?”

Robin tossed the key and caught it. “Do you want out of this cell or not, smart-ass?”

“Do you want to save your nephew?”

Robin shoved the key into the hole and wrenched the gate open. “You’re no fun.”

“You try staying here for almost three days and see how much fun you are after.”

“Fair point.” She leaned in, staring at Sky’s cheek. “I thought Lady Kendra cut you deeper.”

Sky covered the wound. The cut would probably fully heal in a week, and she’d have to redo it later to make sure it scarred. “I heal fast.”

“My lady will be pissed if there’s no scar. I think she wanted you two to match.”

“It’ll scar.” Sky would make sure of it. Kendra had been right; she owed it to Will. “Where’s Ryan? Is he still here, or did the Queen hand him over to Laxari already?”

“Chillax.” Robin held her hands up. “Stud muffin is fine. We’ve been keeping watch, and Lady Kendra found out there have been some issues with the communication device. The Queen is freaking out.”

Maybe that’s why Mindy hadn’t sent for her yet?

“Ryan’s been locked in one of the Queen’s guest rooms this whole time. His accommodations have been much better than yours.”

Sky scowled.

“Come on, let’s skedaddle. We only have an hour before the next guard change. I got clothes for you outside.” She turned and made for the hallway.

Sky paused at the tray. “Robin?” She picked up the cup, almost drooling at the clear liquid.

Robin peered back. “Oh, right. Help yourself.”

Sky sculled the contents, and the water soothed her sandpaper throat. Snatching the roll, she devoured it as she trailed Robin out. No one had brought her anything all day; at least her last meal yesterday evening had been hearty.

A few prisoners stirred, their keen gazes following their progress. “What about the loose ends?” Sky asked between bites, motioning to the witnesses. “Won’t they identify you?”

Robin’s mouth twitched. “It won’t matter.”

Outside the gate, a pair of guards lay face down in a puddle of their own blood. Unfortunately, they only had batons too. But something was better than nothing. Sky bent to retrieve one.

“You won’t need it.” Robin headed away from the elevator. “I got you covered. It’s with your pack outside.”

Sky glanced at the baton again before abandoning it. “Your security needs work.”

Robin laughed. “I think you meant to say it sucks ass. The Queen thinks that because the prison is under this fortress, no one will breach it.” She stopped at a boarded section of the wall.

“Isn’t she worried prisoners might escape?” Sky stopped next to her.

“They don’t normally hold people of your caliber here.” She sank her fingers through a gap in the board and tugged. “Give us a hand.”

“Where should I have been held, then?” Sky gripped the other end of the plank and tugged in time with her. Sky’s side popped off the frame.

Robin frowned. “Maybe you should have at it.”

Sky nudged Robin aside and yanked the board clean off. She must still have a little of that elixir in her system. The gap revealed a solid green wall about four inches beyond.

Robin gestured for Sky to keep going. “It’s a door. You should’ve been taken to the Needle.”

Sky stilled. “The Space Needle? She turned it into a prison?”

Robin snorted. “Not a prison. A torture chamber and execution platform.”

Sky returned to the wooden planks about half an inch thick. Turning Seattle’s most iconic landmark into an execution platform was something Zek would do. They really had suited each other, but it was a good thing they’d broken up well before the pulse; otherwise, they might’ve conquered the whole country by now. Sky stepped back and kicked through the board below.

“Impressive.” Robin leaned in, studying the gap they could fit through. She pushed on a grimy metal bar, which whined in protest, and forced the door open. “Out we go.” She ducked under and slipped out.

A faint outline of steps greeted Sky after she’d squeezed through.

“There’s a staircase leading up. Use the wall as a guide.” Robin stood to one side.

“Yeah, I can see them.”

“You can?” Surprise tinged her tone. “Okay then. Lead the way.”

Sky brushed past, and Robin’s fingers slid up her arm, wrapping around her elbow. The distinct lack of the prickling sensation Sky had felt her whole life made her pause.

“What are you waiting for?” Robin asked.

“Nothing.” Sky led her up three flights and stopped at the exit. “Any guards outside?”

“Not usually in this alley.”

Sky shoved the heavy metal door open and stepped out. The stench of urine assaulted her. “Don’t your people have toilets?”

Robin rolled her eyes before turning away to pull back a crate next to the door. Behind it sat two black canvas backpacks. She threw the bulkier one at Sky. “Clothes.” She put a pair of boots near Sky’s feet, then handed her a plastic bag.

Inside the bag was a wad of what looked like soggy material.

“What’s this?” Sky asked.

Robin raised her eyebrows. “Wet towels. You’re a bit, well ... filthy. I figured you’d like to clean up.”

Sky scowled.

“I scented the towels too because I figured you’d stink, and I was right.”

When Sky didn’t move, Robin waved her hand. “Come on, we don’t have all day.”

Sky growled. “Let’s see how clean you are after all the crap I’ve been through.”

Robin winked.

Sky turned away to wipe herself off as best as she could and cringed at how black the towels were after use. She rifled through the bag and put on a fitted, long-sleeved dark green shirt and khaki cargo pants—an elite’s uniform. Then she used the last towel to clean her feet before tugging on the boots over a fresh pair of socks and was eternally grateful not to have to walk farther through this piss-soaked alley barefoot.

“Here.”

Sky glanced up. Robin held out a vest in her left hand, with six throwing knives fitted into loops across the front and back, and in her right, a short sword.

Finally, she wouldn’t be walking around naked anymore. “Thanks.”

“All good?”

Sky nodded, slipping the sword into a sheath attached to her belt.

“Ready to rescue the prince from the tower?” Robin pointed up.

Sky followed her direction and panned upward. The ice palace looming overhead was sleek and stretched at least thirty floors. “We can’t climb that.”

“We have to if you want to get him.” Robin pursed her lips. “Hope you’re not afraid of heights.” She shoved a black, short-bill cap over Sky’s head, then ripped it off. “Wait, this has been bugging me since we met in the markets.” Robin drew a knife. “Your hair. Plus, if it’s shorter, it’ll be easier to hide.”

Sky backed away.

Robin opened a hand. “Come on, I just sprung you. I’m not going to slit your throat.”

Sky crinkled her nose. “Okay. Make it shorter.”

“Easy.” Robin moved behind Sky and started cutting. “When we get somewhere safer, I’ll do a better job.” She was done in a few seconds, dropped the clumps of hair down a drain grate, and shoved a cap on Sky’s head.

Sky tucked most of her hair under the hat before they slipped out of the alley and merged into the crowded street.

Robin wove through the throng of people and into another alley one building over. “This is the closest we’ll get. It’s the escape route from the penthouse. There are lines already in place, but both the roof and two entryways are guarded. Someone checks in with the door guard every thirty minutes, but the roof sentries”—she glanced at the watch on her wrist—“won’t have a check-in for another hour and fifteen. So we’ll bypass the ground security and head straight for the top.”

Robin headed for a dark alley and lowered her voice. “We can take the fire escape to the fifteenth floor. They won’t be suspicious of an elite showing up, but we’ll need to be fast about silencing them before anyone raises the alarm.” She stopped under where the ladder should have been and swore. “They were supposed to leave a rope tied to the fire escape, not here.” She groaned and scooped up the coil at her feet.

The fire escape had been modified and didn’t start until halfway up the second story, about twelve feet above Robin’s head.

A few yards down lay the rusting, mostly stripped body of a pickup. “Give me the rope.”

Robin furrowed her brows but passed it without contest. Sky dropped her pack, then looped the rope over her shoulder and around her waist.

“What are you doing?”

“Watch.” Sky jogged down the alley and turned to face the remains of the truck.

Gauging the distance, she bent her knees and sprang forward, sprinting toward the rust bucket, and leaped. Her left foot connected with the bed, and she bounded up. Her right foot pushed off the roof, hurdling her upward toward the fire escape.

Sky sailed through the air, reaching, stretching out. Her hand connected with the bottom rung, and she grabbed the metal. She continued to swing forward, slowing before she



slammed into the underside of the floor, and used the momentum to pull up. She grabbed onto the railing and hopped over.

Robin let out a soft whistle. “Glad you’re with me.”

Sky secured the rope and dropped it. Robin tossed up Sky’s pack before climbing swiftly. She clearly had good upper body strength. They made their way up the stairs, which ended two floors shy of the top. The only exit, other than the way they’d come, was a window barely large enough for her to squeeze through.

“Inside?” Sky squinted, peering through the grimy glass.

“Unless you can climb that?” Robin jabbed her finger at the remaining brick wall.

“I can, actually.”

Robin shook her head. “Okay, I’ll take the inside, and you spring from the outside.”

“How many guards?”

Robin stuffed the rope into her pack. “Four at each corner and two that rotate. I’ll do my best to distract them. They won’t attack until I do.” She frowned. “There’s one you can’t kill. Flynn. He brought you dinner last night. Remember him? Sandy-brown hair, hazel eyes, cute as a button.”

Sky nodded. “Boyfriend?” He was a little young for Robin, but she wouldn’t judge.

Robin shot Sky an evil glare. “My older nephew.”

“Ah. Got it. Don’t kill the nephews.”

“I’d appreciate it.” Robin lifted the window and slipped inside.

Sky scaled the wall with relative ease and peeked over the edge. Even with the light pollution from the glowing shops below, there were many dark shadows to utilize. Twelve feet in either direction stood two guards watching the street. She guessed they weren’t anticipating an infiltration from the alley.

The door to the roof opened, and Robin marched out. The guards' attention snapped to her, and the two roaming guards moved to intercept. Only the roaming guards had rifles strapped to their backs. The corner guards were armed with crossbows.

"What are you doing here, Elite?" the man on the right asked.

"I need to speak to Flynn."

The two men relaxed, and three of the corner guards turned back to watch the streets below. The male on her right didn't move—Flynn.

"He's on duty. Speak to him tomorrow."

Robin stepped in. "Excuse me." Her tense posture exuded menace. "Are you disobeying Lady Kendra's orders?"

"Of course not, Elite." The speaker edged back, raising his hands. "Flynn!"

The boy, about sixteen, jogged over, and as soon as he passed, Sky slithered onto the roof. She stayed low and crept toward the nearest corner watchman. There was a fair amount of noise trickling up from the streets below, even though it must have been after one. The distant chatter and laughter covered the shifting gravel beneath her boots.

"Aunt Robbie, what are you doing here?" Flynn stopped at Robin's side, so close he almost brushed her forearm.

"I have a message to deliver. Do you mind?" She shooed the other two away.

The taller one huffed before they turned and resumed their circuit.

"Sorry, Lyn Lyn." Robin grabbed Flynn's shirt and yanked.

He stumbled and Robin swept his legs out. He dropped like a sack of flour and groaned.

Sky assumed that was her queue. She darted out of the shadows as the men all snapped toward the noise. Robin struck out at the two men near her. Sky let loose a dagger. It sank into

the man's side, and she sprinted toward him. He clutched his wound and fired. She dodged, and the bolt whizzed by her ear. She slid on her knees and kicked out his legs, ripping his crossbow out of his grip. He let out a startled yelp as he fell.

Another bolt whistled by. She swung around and fired, disabling the corner two sentry.

Robin took down her second attacker. Corner three's guard sprinted toward her, aiming his crossbow.

"Look out!" Sky warned, stooping to retrieve a bolt, and loaded.

The sentry fired. Robin dove left and rolled away. Sky squeezed the trigger. Her bolt hit his chest dead center, blowing him onto his back.

Sky scanned the rooftop before returning her attention to the man at her feet. A large puddle of blood had formed under his midsection. He'd pulled out the dagger, and she knew she'd nicked something important. He might have lived if he'd left the blade in, but now he only had seconds left.

Robin watched Sky, an odd expression tensing her face as she moved to join them. Flynn scrambled up.

He spun, his mouth hanging open. "Aunt Robbie, what have you done?"

"Lyn Lyn, meet Sky." Robin squeezed his shoulder.

His glazed eyes briefly skimmed Sky, then went back to his dead comrades. "You didn't have to drop me. You could've just told me what you were planning."

"AKA the Scarlet Death," Robin added.

Flynn flinched and snapped his gaze back to Sky.

"We're getting Drew out tonight. She's gonna help."

Flynn grabbed Robin's forearm. He was a few inches taller than her. His features were similar, and they both had a little ski jump on the end of their noses.

His shoulders slumped forward. "They took him to the holding containers before my shift."

Robin put her arm over his shoulder and tapped her head to his. “I know. We’ll get him. I need you to get four horses—five if you think you can manage—and wait near Utah and Massachusetts. If anyone gives you trouble, you’re on orders from Elite Robin. That’s all you know. Got it?”

He nodded slowly.

“You’ll find a bag at our hiding spot in the stables. I packed it for you and Drew. We’re all leaving.”

“You’re coming too?” Now Sky understood why Robin hadn’t killed the other prisoners.

They both turned to her.

Robin narrowed her eyes. “Do you have a problem with that?”

She couldn’t say yes—Robin held all the cards. “At this point, the more, the merrier,” she said, tinging her words with a healthy dose of sarcasm.

Sky shifted away to examine the line anchored above the door to the top of Mindy’s building. Behind it, a solitary light shone from the top of the Space Needle—good thing they weren’t breaking into there.

“Where are you going?” Flynn asked.

“To rescue a Prince.” Robin settled next to Sky.

“What?” Flynn rounded her.

Robin pointed. “The Queen has him captive, and we are going to get him, then get Drew and meet you.”

Flynn gaped up at the wire. “You’re both crazy.”

“Yup.” Robin grinned.

“You can go with him. I can meet you at the station. I remember the direction,” Sky offered.

Robin shot Sky a hard glare. “Trying to ditch us already?”

“No, we made a deal. Fine.” Sky sighed. “Let’s do this.”

The task was simple enough: climb at a steep angle for about seventy-five feet, eighteen to twenty-plus stories high.

Sky rubbed her hands together, hopped onto a chair, and pulled herself on top of the small protrusion housing the door.

“Get going, Flynn. We’ll meet you in about forty minutes, but don’t stress if we are a bit late. And be ready to fly. Be careful.” She patted his back, guiding him toward the exit.

He whipped around and hugged her. “You too, Aunty Robbie.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and slipped away.

Sky held out her hand. Robin grabbed on, and she pulled her up. “Aunty, huh?”

“Shut up. My sister was twelve years older.” She pulled a pair of gloves out of her pocket. “Crap. I forgot to get you some.”

“I’ll manage. Are there pulleys to ride down?”

“Yes, five.”

“Excellent. See you at the top.” Sky grabbed the line, wrapped her legs around the wire, and began the climb.

EIGHTEEN

# SKY



*“We fight for a future where we will no longer need to fight.  
For a peace we can pass on to our children.” ~ Five-stud Max  
Greer, Skineater.*

One hand over the other, Sky glided along the wire. The metal rope bounced as Robin swung her legs up and began her ascent. She kept pace, following Sky up. Dangling from a wire twenty stories high was not something Sky had thought she’d ever do again. So much for retirement.

At the top, she lowered herself to the balcony and searched for a door. Robin dropped in behind her.

Sky furrowed her brows as she took in her gangly reflection in the one-way glass. She could almost pass for a stick figure. Her cheeks were hollow, and her collarbone stuck out painfully. Now she understood why her brothers had bitched about her weight so much. She hadn’t realized how thin she’d gotten over the years living in Reliance without a mirror. At least her butchered hair didn’t look half bad. Robin had missed a lock, but she kinda liked it. “How many guards should we expect?”

Robin approached the window. “None. If there were any, they would’ve seen us by now. This is the alien’s bedroom we’re breaking into.” She bounced her eyebrow suggestively. “As far as we know, he’s been locked in here since he came. Mindy doesn’t let anyone in.”

Sky frowned. Why isn’t Ryan opening the door then? “Mindy won’t be inside?”

“She’s freaking out in the communications room because they haven’t been able to contact the Cardinals since you arrived.”

That was a little too lucky. Ryan must’ve done something, the sneaky alien. “No patrols up here?”

“Not while Mindy is out. We don’t have time to figure this out or we can always zip back down and forget we were ever here. Escaping would be a lot less complicated without the alien,” said Robin.

Robin was right. The Cardinals wanted him, and Mindy likely would be frothing mad after they stole her alien prize. Which meant the Matrons would actively pursue them too. Could she really outrun the Cardinals, the Skins, and the Matrons, then save the people of Reliance? Sky’s shoulders slumped. No matter the risks, she had to try.

Robin stared at her. “You really have a thing for the alien, huh?”

Sky shook her head. “We have a deal, is all.”

“Ah-huh. And that kiss was what? A goodbye between comrades? We all saw the sparks.” She fanned her neck.

Sky huffed. She didn’t want to remember how enjoyable the kiss had been for the few seconds before he’d done something to her head. It was another reason she wanted to get him back—to find out what the heck he’d done!

“You can try and deny it, but there’s something there,” said Robin.

Sky glared.

Robin raised her hands in mock surrender. “I’m not judging. There’s nothing wrong with getting a little pleasure where you can. When we get out of here, you two can pick up where you left off. I’ll make sure you get some privacy to do the horizontal tango.” She bounced her eyebrow suggestively.

The corners of Sky’s mouth twitched. “I don’t do relationships.”



Robin examined the exterior and pressed her palm to the glass. “Who’s talking about relationships? I’m talking about one-night stands. Life’s too short. We need to take advantage of every enjoyable opportunity we can cram in. You never know which tomorrow might be your last.” Her hand jerked across the wall. “Weird. Lady Kendra said the window should slide open.”

Sky didn’t mention that she’d never entertained one-night stands because of her weird reaction to people’s touch. But now that she was free of that ailment, then maybe ...

She shook off the idea and joined Robin. Placing her hand flat on the reflective surface, she tried to slide it, but nothing happened. A second later, the glass began to move. She snatched her hand back as an opening materialized.

They glanced at each other. Robin swallowed and motioned Sky inside.

Sky drew her sword, took two steps in, and froze. Soft, icy-blue light emanated from walls that belonged in a glacier cave. What was Mindy’s obsession with ice? The room was spacious, and to the side was a white velvet love seat. A fluffy white carpet spread out from the foot of an enormous bed the size of two kings, but the star of the room was what was on top of the bed, or rather who.

“Wow.” Robin gaped. “I was not expecting that.”

Sky had no doubt that Robin was gawking at the same thing. Lying with his arms tied to the headboard and almost naked was Ryan. The predatory glint in his eyes reminded Sky of a caged white tiger she’d seen at the zoo pre-pulse. It was a sight she was sure she’d never forget. The idea of having Ryan restrained and completely at her ... she needed to focus.

“He’s spectacular.” Robin sighed. “Alien aside, you should totally go for it.” She edged forward with care.

Ryan’s gaze snapped to Robin and narrowed.

Robin halted mid-step. “Maybe you better tame the beast first,” she whispered.

Sky took a hesitant step, and he returned his attention to her. His shirt had flaked away. Tattered piles of black lay all around his body. One section was still draped over his crotch, but it was barely intact and looked like it might crumble if someone breathed too hard on it. Robin was right; he was magnificent.

Robin padded up on the other side of the bed and sighed wistfully, but Ryan ignored her.

Sky let her gaze roam over his eight-pack and defined thighs. He was leaner than the last time she'd seen him shirtless. Ryan wasn't as bulky as a bodybuilder, but he had muscle definition she'd never seen before. Another reminder of how alien he was.

Robin leered. "Definitely a Prince worth rescuing."

Ryan bared his teeth, and the muscles in his arms and chest contracted. "Are you two going to ogle me all day, or are we going to get out of here?"

"Males never like it when the shoe is on the other foot. I guess it doesn't matter what species they are." Robin trailed her hooded gaze leisurely over Ryan.

Sky dragged her attention back to Ryan's scowl. No, it was more than that. There was an edge in his tone that Sky had never heard before. "How long has Mindy kept you like this?"

Ryan twitched, and a quiver vibrated through his neck. "I don't know. Two days, I guess."

Something seemed off about him.

His nostrils flared, and he glared at her. "What happened to your face?"

"Nothing. Why haven't you broken free? And what happened to your clothes?" Sky motioned to his body.

His jaw muscles flexed. "Mindy has illegal tech."

"What?" Sky scanned the section of wall where his restraints had literally grown out of.

“Not there. The band on my wrist.” He twisted his left arm.

She spotted it—a matt-gray bracelet about a centimeter wide.

“It’s cutting me off from my ISA,” he growled.

“Your what now?” Robin piped up, leaning in to get a better view.

Ryan ground his teeth. “My nanites.”

Robin’s mouth parted. “As in little, tiny robots?”

“Yes. Microscopic critters that the Cardinals are infested with.” Sky shuddered and couldn’t keep the disgust from her voice.

Robin whistled softly. “Okay, that explains a lot.”

“That doesn’t explain your clothes. Or did you try to seduce Mindy before she got the jump on you?” Sky snapped, then blinked. Where had that come from?

Ryan’s lips lifted at the corners. “The nanites forming my clothes deactivated when they couldn’t sense my ISA because I didn’t program them to maintain their shape without one. And before you ask, without my ISA, I cannot disable the bonds holding me to this building.”

Sky looked down at her own clothing. “How come mine weren’t affected?”

“Yours don’t rely on the connection to my ISA,” Ryan said in a low, rumbling tone.

“How the hell are we supposed to break you out if you can’t?” Robin groaned. “Shit! Wait, can’t we just cut it off?” She grabbed the hilt of a knife strapped to her thigh.

Ryan shook his head. “Your human blade wouldn’t be capable. It’s nanite-based.”

“Fuck,” said Robin.

Sky’s shoulders sank. “That’s it, then?”

“No.” Ryan lifted his chin. “You can do it.”

“We can’t,” Robin snapped. “That much I know. Everything is keyed to the Queen.”

“Not you.” Ryan turned his eyes to Sky. “Sky.”

Tension filled her body. “How?”

He peered at her intently, challenging her.

“Dammit. They’re still there, aren’t they?” Sky clenched her fists to curb the sudden urge to shake out her limbs to get them out.

“What am I missing?” Robin’s gaze bounced between them.

“The damn nanites he infected me with.” A shiver crawled up her back.

“Oh.” Robin’s mouth formed a circle.

“You would’ve died without them,” Ryan countered.

“You don’t know that.”

He scoffed.

“Personally, I think it’s kind of cool. You can infect me with your nanites anytime.” Robin winked. “But as much fun as that sounds, we are kind of on the clock ... which means you two need to sort out your differences so we can get out of here.”

Sky grunted. “What do I do?”

A smile, almost triumphant, curled Ryan’s lips. “See the blue panel on the wall there?”

Sky edged toward it.

“Place your hand on it. There will be some sensation as you connect,” said Ryan.

Sky hesitated a second before pressing her palm to the metallic surface. Tingles immediately exploded through her hand, and a string of prickles shot up her arm and straight up her spine until her whole brain buzzed with energy. “This better not give me a tumor.”

“It’s completely safe. Now repeat after me. Emergency override, five-six-one-three-eight Cruro one-three.”

“In English?”

“Yes. The system will understand. Quickly,” he snapped.

Sky glanced at him. He wasn’t usually this curt with her. Being restrained obviously didn’t agree with him. She repeated the code, and as soon as she did, the panel turned white.

“Excellent. Now instruct it to release the prisoner.”

Before Sky could say anything, Ryan’s binds melted away.

He rubbed his wrists but didn’t stand. “Could you please fix my attire?”

Sky removed her hand. “Don’t you have control of your nano-things again?”

“No. You just detached my bindings, not the illegal tech.”

“As much as I’ll miss the view, he did say please.” Robin moved away and rummaged through the desk at the far wall.

Sky stood next to him. “What do I do?”

“Once you touch the nanites, they will activate.”

“You mean that black stuff around you?”

He nodded. “You need only brush your finger across a small portion. Then hold an image of an outfit. Preferably a shirt and pants, please, and instruct it to clothe me.”

“With my mind?”

“Yes.”

Sky gritted her teeth and reached out. Her fingers had barely brushed the nanite before a sensation shot through her. The critters melted together into a shiny black glob and began to rise toward her hand. She pulled away. A river of black ran over Ryan’s abdomen.

Ryan put his hands over his crotch. “Quickly, please.”

Closing her eyes, she formed an image of what he had been wearing when she met him. A faint pulse of energy vibrated through her scalp.

“Thank you.”

Sky opened her eyes to find him fully clothed.

“Well, that was nifty. I need to get me some of those.” Robin headed toward the exit. “Let’s fly.”

Ryan hopped up and stretched out his limbs. “Yes. But first, Sky, please instruct the building to lock the elevator. That should create a nice distraction.”

Robin clapped. “That’s perfect.”

Sky connected with the panel again, and once she’d verbalized the instruction, the panel flashed orange. “I think it’s done.”

“It should be. I trust you have a way out?”

“This way, handsome Prince.” Robin gave a small bow.

Ryan’s eyebrows shot up.

“Ignore her antics.” Sky marched outside. The faster they were away from all this alien tech, the better she’d feel.

Ryan stared at the wire. “Will this hold all of us at once?”

“It should, but better we go one at a time.” Robin peered at their destination.

“Robin, you go first.” Sky released a pulley and held it out for her.

“Yes, ma’am.” She winked, then grabbed the handle and climbed the banister. “See you on the other side.” She dove off.

A whirring filled the air as she zipped to the rooftop they’d come from.

“Sky.” Ryan’s expression softened. “Thank you. I wasn’t sure you would be able to escape, let alone free me.” He brushed away the hair partially covering her right eye. “And I’m sorry for putting you in that position.”

A pleasant feathery tingle trailed across her forehead, following his touch before it worked its way to the back of her scalp. Sky's heart did a funny lurch. A quiver tickled her spine as he caught her pale locks between his fingers.

"It means a lot that you came." His voice was soft and deep, vibrating through her chest.

Sky stepped back, pulling her hair from his grasp. "We have a deal. I help you, and you free my friends."

He lowered his eyelids, and when he looked up again, all the softness in his expression vanished, replaced with indifference.

Sky gestured toward the wire. "Your turn."

Without another word, he took the pulley and zipped across.

Sky let out a shaky breath. The desire in his gaze had been dangerous, as had her body's reaction. She shook her head, clearing her muddled thoughts. She couldn't allow herself to get distracted. They had a partnership out of necessity. Any attachments of friendship or something deeper would only bring pain. Sky flicked the stupid wayward locks off her face and hardened her resolve. No one else would save the people of Reliance. That was on her.

She took hold of the next pulley and leaped off the balcony. The wind cooled her face, and she relished the few seconds of freedom while soaring through the sky. She let go and rolled to a stop before the pulley hit the end.

Robin had retrieved some weapons from the dead littering the roof and was offering them to Ryan. He accepted a short sword and eyed the bodies but kept his mouth firmly shut in a hard line. Sky was surprised he didn't say anything.

"Can we carry a crossbow without drawing too much attention?" Sky asked.

"We are elites. We can do anything." She flashed a smile, but it turned sour. "Almost."

Sky strapped a crossbow and bolts to her back, and so did Ryan and Robin.

Robin pointed at the fire escape. “We can leave the same way you came in.”

“No. We must go that way.” Ryan pointed in the opposite direction.

Robin followed Ryan to the edge. “You still want to go to the vault?”

He nodded. “I must.”

Sky joined them and caught sight of a large mirror cube the size of a small room. “What the hell is that?”

“Their source of power,” said Ryan.

“As in...?”

“That vault holds a device the Queen calls the scarlet sphere. She showed it to us at court before it was installed and lit the whole city.” Robin peered over the edge. “That’s at least a seven-story drop. I don’t think the rope will reach.” She leaned farther out. “Crap. There are only tiny windows facing this direction. We’d never fit, unless you can punch through brick?”

“Not at the moment.” Ryan lifted his right arm. “This contraband device has essentially turned me human, in the sense of strength and speed.”

That wasn’t ideal. She’d been banking on Ryan to back her up, but it would be interesting to witness his abilities without the aid of his nanites.

“Well, shit. There goes one of our advantages.” Robin pouted. “Then we’ll have to find another way.”

“So essentially you’re a squanak now?” Sky smirked at Ryan, and he scowled.

“A what?” Robin asked.

Sky couldn’t keep the triumph from her tone when she spoke. “An alien turtle.”



Ryan's gaze softened, and Sky thought she caught a glint of grudging amusement before he turned away. *Ha!* Payback was sweet. That would teach him to call her a turtle again.

"It will be easier to go from the roof. I imagine there are men guarding the street-level entry points," he said.

Robin glanced between Sky and Ryan, then shrugged. "There are."

"That rope should get us halfway there." Sky spied a metal bar sticking out of the roof that could anchor them.

Ryan nodded. "That would be sufficient to jump from."

"Ah, hello? That's still a three to four-story drop."

"I've jumped from the third floor before many times. You need to roll to absorb the impact." Sky gathered the rope.

"Yes, that would work." Ryan stepped to the edge.

Robin scoffed. "It won't. Sorry, but regular people cannot do that."

"Gray and I have done it many times," said Sky, knowing Robin was right.

"I rest my case. Neither you nor General Hawk represents what a normal person can do."

"How about I add to the rope? You can climb down me, then drop," said Sky.

Robin pinched her bottom lip. "I guess."

"I'll be sure to catch you." Ryan moved to peer over the edge again.

Robin grinned. "Sold."

Sky rolled her eyes, then tied the rope off and released it down the side of the building.

"We're doing this, huh?" Robin muttered. "I can barely see the end. It's so damn dark."

That was strange. Sky could see it clearly. She'd always had better than normal vision in the dark, but there shouldn't

have been that much difference. Maybe Robin's vision was unusually low? Or had those damn critters changed her more?

"I'll go first." Ryan grabbed the rope and swung himself over. He lowered himself halfway before letting go. He landed as softly as a cat on four legs.

"Turned him human, my ass," Robin mumbled.

"You ready?"

"After you." She motioned.

Sky slithered down. At the end, she held on as far down as she could and wrapped the rope around one hand for extra grip. Robin lowered herself over Sky's back and wrapped her legs around Sky's waist, then she scooted until she was dangling from Sky's ankles.

"Let go," said Ryan.

Robin fell straight into his arms. "A girl could get used to this."

Ryan let her down and looked up expectantly. "When you're ready."

"Move." Sky waved him off with her free hand.

He shrugged and stepped back.

Sky released and landed, absorbing the impact by bending her knees without the need to roll. She should have needed to roll, but the impact hadn't jarred her legs. Turning to face Ryan, she glared. How much had his nanites changed her body, and what would happen when they finally deactivated?

Sky glanced around, then studied the twelve-by-twelve foot cube in the center of the rooftop but saw no visible entrance. "Why aren't there guards?"

"Are you serious? No one can get in there." Robin approached the mirror structure. "Not even the Queen has clearance to enter."

The surface was different than expected, and the chrome did not reflect their image.

“Wow. That’s freaky.” Robin moved around, staring at it. “How come I can’t see my reflection?”

“It has not been programmed to mimic a mirror and please don’t touch it.” Ryan moved to the middle of the nearest wall.

“Why not?”

“Without nanites, it’ll shock you,” said Ryan.

Robin edged away. “The Queen didn’t tell us about that little function.”

“I doubt she knows.” Ryan glanced over his shoulder. “Sky, I need your help.”

“Where’s the panel?” She hadn’t noticed one during her inspection.

“There isn’t one. Please stand in front of me. This will require a bit more finesse.”

Sky narrowed her eyes. Robin moved her chin toward Ryan, and Sky assumed it was her way of telling Sky to get moving. The slight smirk on Robin’s lips irked her. Robin reminded her of Gray in some ways. He always loved to joke around. As much as Sky hated to admit it, the traitor Elite was starting to grow on her.

Sky slipped into the small gap between Ryan and the cube. “Move back.”

“Sorry.” He stepped in until his stomach was flush against her back. “We’ll need to get closer. Place both your hands on the construct.”

He leaned in, pushing her forward until her face was an inch from the wall.

“Good thing you are so short.”

Sky snorted. The only person who had ever called her short was her father. A faint buzz of electricity rippled through her flesh as she placed her hands on the surface. “What now?”

Ryan nudged her arms until her palms were parallel with her mouth and placed his giant hands over hers. “Please repeat

everything I say in your mind.” His breath whispered across the top of her left ear.

She dipped her chin.

*“Pecu exiim cemul.”*

Sky focused on words, which didn’t sound as alien as she thought they would, and the buzzing sensation pulsed.

*“Reg domies Filix Or’Rian Cruro.”*

As soon as she thought the phrase, the area around their hands lit up. She flinched.

“Don’t move.” Ryan leaned in.

The section level with Ryan’s face and hers glowed. A soft blue light filled her vision, and a voice echoed through her head.

*<Raatius.>*

Sky jolted.

“Relax. Did the system respond?”

“You could’ve warned me.”

“Sorry. What was the response?”

*“Raatius.”*

“Excellent. Now ask it to open the door.”

“In English again?”

But before Ryan could reply, the wall under her hands slid away, leaving a large doorway.

Robin gave them a thumbs-up.

Sky ducked under Ryan’s arm and put some distance between them. “Well, do your thing.” She shooed him toward the cube.

Ryan’s eyes lit up with amusement. “You will need to come inside with me.”

“Why?” Sky stared into the blue-lit room.

It looked like a futuristic prison cell, with smooth blank walls that glowed, and didn't contain anything that resembled a power source of any kind. Not even a panel.

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Robin peeked around but kept her head firmly outside. "Go on. I wanna see what's in there." She nudged Sky forward.

Sky gulped. "The door will stay open?"

Ryan nodded slowly, the corners of his mouth lifting. "We won't stay long. I promise."

Sky huffed softly. "Keep your promises to yourself. Let's get this over with."

Ryan moved back to allow Sky to enter first. She dragged her feet through the doorway, keeping an eye on him. He followed a step behind, and Robin stepped in after him. A section of the floor rose, and a panel formed at the end of a pedestal, similar to the one in the tower.

"Very cool." Robin hurried to Sky's side, her wide eyes full of wonder.

"Place your hand on it, please." Ryan crowded in behind Sky.

She pursed her lips before complying. A gentle buzz vibrated through her skin on contact. Ryan placed his hand over hers, and his fingers touched the panel in the gaps between her own.

"Request Bioscan verification."

Before Sky could open her mouth to repeat the command, the panel illuminated. The floor beneath Ryan and her brightened as well.

Sky stiffened.

"Whoa!" Robin scrambled away.

"Remain calm." His free hand grasped her shoulder.

"Identification verified." A voice, not identifiable as either male or female, came from all directions. "Welcome, Filix Or'Rian Cruro and unregistered. How may we help you?"

“Open command interface.” Ryan stepped away, and Sky snatched her arm back, retreating to Robin’s side.

Robin prodded Sky’s side with her boney elbow. “Pretty amazing, huh?” she whispered.

They weren’t the words Sky would use to describe this situation.

The panel expanded and tilted to a thirty-degree angle. Fifty or so symbols glowed across the surface in seven rows.

“Is that a keyboard?” Robin asked.

“Maybe.” That was Sky’s assumption.

Ryan began to punch in a series of symbols.

“Definitely a keyboard,” Robin said.

He typed relatively fast, and after ten seconds, the walls around them rippled. Robin and Sky shuffled into the center of the vault, standing directly behind Ryan. A compartment opened on their left. Inside were six metallic tubes the size of a pen.

Ryan pointed. “Robin, please retrieve the tubes.”

Robin crept over to the compartment, testing each step before transferring her full weight.

In front of Ryan, a square section rose and was partitioned into a pyramid structure. At the very top hovered a small sphere larger than a softball.

“Sky, if you would, please retrieve the tri-source.”

“You mean that?” Sky waved her hand at the mini globe.

“That’s the scarlet sphere.” Robin clutched two tubes.

“It’s called a tri-source. It’s a battery that could power the whole country, I believe. Sorry, without my ISA, I can’t be exact, and I apologize if my English is a little off.”

“It wasn’t exactly perfect to start with,” Sky muttered, moving closer.

Inside the sphere were hundreds of glowing crimson triangles no bigger than her pinky nail floating around, held

together by a jelly membrane. It looked too fragile to handle.

“It won’t break?”

“It’s more solid than it appears.”

Sky reached out, her fingers brushing across the transparent surface. A ripple flowed around the globe. She snatched her hand back and shot Ryan a questioning glare.

He let out a big sigh, tilting his head to one side. “It will not bite.”

Sky gritted her teeth and retrieved the sphere. The surface was as solid as Ryan had promised, but it wasn’t as smooth as it appeared. Rather, it was slightly textured.

Ryan held out his arm. “Please touch it to the contraband device.” He sneered at the gray bracelet.

She pressed it to the band. A brilliant white spark erupted, and the band fell off. Sky sprang back, dropping the tri-source.

“Don’t drop it!” Ryan made to grab it, but he snapped his hand back before he touched it.

The sphere hit the ground but didn’t crack or smash; it bounced higher than a frigging rubber ball. Robin darted out to catch it.

“Don’t touch it!” Ryan roared, his eyes flaring. They glowed silver for a full second, then the light was gone.

Robin froze, the sphere sailing toward her.

“Move!” he yelled.

Robin spun out of its path.

“Sky! Grab it. Quick.”

Sky caught it on its second bounce. Ryan bent forward and massaged his forehead. He picked up the broken band and exhaled a long breath, somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

Sky studied the sphere in her fist. The tiny red triangles zipped around, reminding Sky of a snow globe that had been shaken hard, only the triangles weren’t slowing. “This won’t explode, will it?”

Ryan turned away. His shoulders trembled, and his fists were coiled tight. “No.”

Robin peered around Sky’s arm. “He doesn’t seem happy about being rescued, does he?”

Ryan whipped around, his mouth forming a deep scowl. Slowly, the muscles in his face relaxed, and his expressionless mask returned.

“Will you take it already?” Sky waved it at him.

“Give me another minute for my ISA to reactivate fully, and I will be able to handle it. Please don’t drop it again. If it had touched either Robin or me, it would’ve been equivalent to getting struck by a thousand bolts of lightning.”

Sky’s mouth popped open. Robin took a large step away.

“Well, shit.” Robin eyed the globe cautiously. “How come she can touch it?”

Good question, but Sky already knew the answer. “My nanites.” It felt weird calling them hers.

Ryan nodded and turned his attention back to the panel. This time, he didn’t type; he placed his hand on the surface, and it illuminated. He held out his other hand. “The tri-source, please.”

Sky shoved the sphere into his grasp and stepped away.

He held it out, and the triangles inside began to slow. Behind him, hexagonal rods that reminded Sky of giant pin art sliding in and out formed waves around them.

Robin huddled in, her shoulder brushing Sky’s arm. “What are you doing now?”

“Reconfiguring a few things. Another moment, please.”

Another two compartments opened. Inside the closest one was a replica of the rucksack Sky had lost to the river, only black. The smaller opening contained two small glass tubes filled with a clear blue liquid.

Sky snatched the bag, and Robin shoved the tubes inside. Ryan collected the other tubes, holding both in one hand, and



the tri-source in the other.

He offered the tubes to Sky. “Drink one.”

Sky scowled. “I will not put more nanites in me.”

Ryan huffed. “They’re not nanites. It’s ... an energy boost. It’ll give you a temporary increase in speed and strength.”

Robin closed in. “I’ll have some of that.”

Sky still didn’t take the drink.

He turned to Robin. “I’m sorry, but it will be useless to you without nanites. What are we facing out there? How many between us and escape?”

Robin gazed longingly at the alien liquid, then grabbed Sky’s arm and pushed her toward it. “You’re gonna need that. Even with Superman here back in order, the guard at the station is no joke. There are usually ten, and they have guns.”

“Automatic?”

“No, but they’re good shots.”

Sky grimaced. As much as she hated the idea, Robin was right—she needed the boost. She took the glass, which was no doubt made of a bunch of nano critters, and sniffed, picking up a faint citrus scent. “Bottoms up.”

The cool liquid slid down her throat, and she swallowed a gag, though not from the flavor because she had no idea what she’d drunk. Sky reminded herself that every little advantage counted because this escape would not be a cakewalk.

Ryan sculled his, collected her glass, and tossed them at the wall. She’d been right. They didn’t smash. Instead, they stuck to the wall and dissolved into the surface. A ripple fanned out before it returned to its smooth, flawless exterior.

Ryan held his arm out. “The bag, please.”

Sky narrowed her eyes and thumped it in his palm.

“Right then.” Robin clapped her hands. “If there’s nothing else, let’s get this show started.”

NINETEEN

# RYAN



*“I’ll help you because I believe in your cause, not because I hate your father.” ~ Soren R’Za, Roza*

**R**yan tore his gaze from Sky’s sickly expression, her revulsion painted clearly on her face. Her aversion to their technology still baffled him.

“We’ll have fifteen minutes before the power starts to fail around the city,” Ryan said.

Everything had been initiated, and he had included safeguards for the Queen’s tower. A stairwell would form outside the building to allow the occupants to evacuate. He’d pumped in enough reserve power for the nanites to hold their structure for five hours—more than enough time to ensure all humans were safely away before the nanites disintegrated into dust.

And Laxari wouldn’t be visiting anytime soon. The fool had left a direct channel to the moon base open, providing Ryan with the stellar opportunity to upload a troublesome little diversion that would keep Laxari occupied for at least thirty hours, longer if Ryan was lucky. He set a reminder to thank Cee’kar again for the application the next time he saw him.

Sky all but ran out the entrance, and Robin hurried after her. The little Matron warrior was an unexpected addition, one he might be able to glean a few more nuggets of evidence from. Although he didn’t really need any more. With the tri-source safely in his possession and the firsthand accounts of Matron city, he had more than enough to convince the

assembly. But as his mentor always said, one could never be too prepared.

He stared at the red sphere in his hand for a moment, hoping the answers he was searching for were contained within. The need to march back into the containment room and connect to the tri-source and sort through its database flared through him, but unfortunately, he'd have to wait for them to be somewhere more secure. Moving toward the exit, he slipped the tri-source into the nanite pack and sheathed it with an extra layer of nanites as a precaution. The casing around the tri-source was tough but not invulnerable, and if the casing were ever breached, this device could take out half of Earth. The containment room sealed behind him. Robin and Sky stood beneath the rope they'd left behind.

"I hate backtracking, but it's the only way off the building. Going down's not an option. There're too many guards." Robin rubbed the back of her neck. "Think Superman can give me a boost?"

A faint tingle brushed through Ryan's brain—a sensation he would never take for granted again. He savored the tingle of his ISA with all his being. He was lucky not to have lost his mind, though he was sure he'd been a tad snarky toward Sky and Robin earlier. His ISA uploaded images and information about DC comics and its rival, Marvel, and finally, he understood her reference. It was rather flattering.

"I can't fly." He smiled.

They should've asked about the X-ray vision, but they were getting off topic.

"We should hurry. And you won't need a boost because we aren't going that way." Ryan strode toward the other side of the roof.

Robin jogged to catch up, but Sky slunk along behind them.

"Um." Robin gestured at the gap. "That's at least twenty-five feet."

“It’s thirty-one feet,” Ryan supplied, again thankful for the precision his ISA contributed.

“Humans can’t jump that far!” Robin threw her hands up.

“I will carry you.”

Robin’s eyes widened. Sky stepped to the edge and peered over. The next roof over was two floors lower and mostly free of obstructions.

“Are you going to carry the both of us?” Robin asked.

“No, just you. Sky can make the jump.”

Sky raised her eyebrows. “I’ve never tried jumping this far before.”

“You can make it.” *Probably*, Ryan added silently.

*<After consumption of the vitality elixir, her chance of failure is less than 5%.>*

“You’ll soar across like Supergirl.” He motioned with his hand.

Robin snorted while Sky frowned.

“I wouldn’t have chosen Supergirl as Sky’s persona. Maybe Black Widow or Emma Frost?” Robin turned to study Sky.

“Those aren’t DC characters,” Ryan rebutted.

“Aren’t there only fifteen minutes until Matron rejoins the rest of the world in the dark ages? Tick tock!” Sky rolled her eyes.

She did that a lot. It was a bad habit she needed to stop.

“You’re right. Thirteen minutes and fifty-one seconds. We can debate more later.”

Robin inhaled deeply and exhaled. “Okay, Superman. My life is in your hands.”

There was no railing, only a protruding brick lip at the edge, which would make the leap much easier.

Robin nudged Sky with her shoulder. “You got this?”

Sky's boney shoulders jerked in a half-shrug motion. "I guess."

With his back to Robin, he knelt in front of her. "Climb on."

Robin let out a sigh. "This is so wrong." She dug her fingers into his shoulders. A shiver shook through her arms.

"Do not worry. I won't drop you, and if it helps, I've leaped thrice this distance before." On a planet with slightly less gravity than Earth, but she didn't need to know that.

"Right. You got this, don't you, Superman?" Robin clenched her fists.

Without further ado, Ryan spun, took a four-step run-up, and launched across the divide.

"Shit!" Robin squealed in his ear, then she started giggling.

They landed a couple of a dozen feet in, and he needed a few steps to absorb the momentum.

"That was awesome!" Robin slipped off his back.

"Glad you enjoyed yourself."

Robin flashed a smile overflowing with exhilaration.

They both peered at Sky. She turned away and disappeared. The seconds passed, and Robin tapped her foot.

"Think she chickened out?" Robin murmured.

Ryan didn't respond, but he was beginning to fear the same thing.

Then he saw her bounding off the roof with more momentum than she needed. She sailed across, running on the air itself. She landed a few feet farther in than he had, then dropped and rolled. A second later, she bounced up.

"Cool, eh?" Robin bounded toward her with her right hand held up.

Sky slapped it and grinned. "Very."

"Shall we, ladies?" He motioned to the exit.

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand.” Robin marched off.

His eyebrows twitched upward as a faint tingle waved through his brain. Humans had the strangest phrases.

The building interior was in disrepair but clean, and thankfully, the hallways were free of denizens. Ryan scanned, and behind the walls, he counted many life signs asleep in their beds inside the apartments. Fifty-eight to be exact.

They exited to a street peppered with people buying and selling at a night market set up along the middle of the road. No one bothered them as they wove through the thinning crowds on the sidewalks, though a few people did gawk at him. There was really no way to make himself shorter except to hunch his shoulders, but even that only took off an inch or two.

After a few blocks, Robin turned into a dark alley. “There are fewer people to blend in with from here on, so we’re gonna stick to the back streets.”

He and Sky nodded in unison.

They took the most direct possible route across the city to the station. After five minutes, the roads became deserted. Every step they took echoed off the brick walls on either side. They’d snuck across another avenue when a loud siren wailed through the buildings.

“Fuck.” Robin dashed into a dark, foul-smelling alley littered with trash.

Ryan’s nanites reacted, forming a thin film over his nostrils to filter out the stench of rotting garbage and sewage. Sky covered her nose and followed a step behind.

“The top floor is still in lockdown, and there is a minute and two seconds before the power is cut.” Ryan’s brows pinched together.

They wouldn’t have discovered his absence yet, which meant they’d found something else. He hadn’t asked how Sky had escaped. Truthfully, he didn’t want to know how many bodies she’d left in her wake.

Robin groaned. “They might’ve found some of our handiwork before shift change, which means they either got lucky or someone tipped the Queen off.” Her face tightened. “And they aren’t that lucky. Eyes sharp. I’ve a feeling we’re going to run into more trouble than anticipated.”

They increased their pace. He heard shuffling steps: four—no, five people jogging an intercept course. Ryan grabbed the back of Robin’s shirt.

“Incoming,” he whispered.

Sky ducked behind a rusted machine, while he and Robin took cover behind an abandoned van.

Robin peeped around the side as a group of people ran by, one carrying a flaming torch. She swore under her breath.

“Good catch, Superman. There will be more heading toward the tower. Stay alert.”

He nodded, and when the group was a block away, he nudged her out. “I’ll hear them coming. Have no fear.”

Robin inclined her head. “Excellent.”

They avoided two more patrols before skulking along the last street to the train station. Robin snuck behind an overturned car and waved them over.

She peeked over and shook her head. “Shit. Fuck. Shit.”

Sky was next to arrive, and whatever she saw made her slump back down.

Ryan darted in and glanced at their destination.

Flaming torches, erected every seven feet, lit the perimeter. Seven men, each armed with an AR-15, guarded the main entrance. In the center stood an Elite, and kneeling before her was a teen entering adulthood. His face was bloody and bruised, and at the back of his head, the Elite pointed a pistol.

Robin slouched against the rusting metal. “Fuck,” she said in a harsh but low tone. “It’s Pem. Lady Kendra suspected she was up to something, but this! I’m going to gut her. That bitch



has sold out to the Queen.” She made a fist so tight it trembled.

They were far enough away that there was no risk of the humans hearing their hushed conversation.

“Would they have moved your other nephew?” Sky asked quietly.

“There is no reason to. They’ve won.” She dropped her head forward.

Sky peeked over again. “Will Kendra be outed for this?”

“I’ll surrender and take the blame.” She flopped her head backward onto the car. “You wouldn’t consider freeing Drew after the train has left Matron, would you?” She snorted. “No, don’t answer that. Of course you wouldn’t. Why would you?” She sagged. “I’ve gotta go.”

Robin moved to leave, and Sky yanked her down. “We have a moment. Pem doesn’t know we are near, so don’t rush out and do something stupid.”

Sky’s gaze darted between Robin and the ambush waiting for them.

“We will save the boy,” Ryan said, considering what option they had for saving the older one too. He could get out there fast enough to rescue the boy, but their gunfire would alert the men inside the warehouse. It would be messy. But this woman had done a lot for him; it was the least he could do.

“No.” Sky shook her head.

Surprise flitted through Ryan before disappointment flooded him. Was she really so heartless that she’d abandon the teen?

Robin glowered.

Sky studied the guards. “We’ll continue with our original plan and leave with everyone. Flynn”—she motioned to the battered teen—“Drew and”—she turned to grin at Robin—“you. Come on. I expected more from you, Elite. A little carnage will be fun.”

Sky was a complete conundrum. He couldn't figure out if she was doing this for Robin and her boys, or if she just craved to cause some carnage to get back at the Matron Queen. He wanted to believe it was the former, but the smile on her face gave him the chills.

Robin's expression became anxious.

"Don't fret. We have our very own Superman." Sky looked at him expectantly. "A bulletproof Superman, right?"

This human had already learned so much about them. Could he bend the rules a little more without dire repercussions? He glanced at the guards again. They hadn't moved. In his gut, the whole setup felt like a trap waiting to be sprung, but he found no additional guards hiding in the streets or surrounding buildings waiting to ambush them.

Robin huffed. "Well? Spill, Superman. Are you or aren't ya?"

"I can be."

Robin blinked, a gleam of hope returning to her eyes. "Are you sure?"

Sky shrugged, eyeing the guards surveying the area. "Plans need to be dynamic, especially for rescues and escapes. Something was bound to go awry."

"We don't have an escape route anymore with Flynn caught." Robin peered over the vehicle.

"The train." Both women whipped around to Ryan. "I had planned to take it anyway."

"It needs a special key the Queen keeps in her tower."

"I don't need a key."

A strangled groan echoed through the night, grabbing everyone's attention. Pem gripped Robin's nephew by his hair and stretched his neck up.

"Robin!" Pem yelled. "I know you're out there somewhere, you filthy traitor. You better show yourself before I get bored and put a bullet in his brain."

Robin clutched the dagger strapped to her thigh. “What’s the plan?”

Sky nodded. “You and Ryan will surrender.”

“Excuse me?” Robin scoffed.

Ryan tried to understand the logic of Sky’s plan.

“I’m a Skineater General—we don’t surrender—and Superman can protect you while I create a distraction.” Sky ran her fingers over one of the knives attached to her vest.

“And they’d believe I would surrender?” Ryan asked.

“You’re a wild card,” she said, and Robin seemed satisfied with her reasoning.

Sky continued, “I need you with Robin to protect her and her nephew. Make Robin bulletproof too.”

“You can do that?” Robin asked.

Ryan maintained his neutral expression, but he wanted to glower at Sky. She was revealing too much.

“He can. Take my protection if you don’t have enough for her.”

His nanites buzzed as they worked to suppress his growing scowl. “I have enough.” Later, it would be imperative that he impress upon Sky the consequences of revealing too much about their abilities.

He reprogrammed the satchel holding the tri-source and extra protein solutions to merge into his clothes and siphoned off some nanites to create an armor large enough to cover Robin’s vital organs. Robin followed his every move.

“I will merge the nanites with your clothes. It will create a netting that will stop bullets and sharp objects.” He placed his hand on her forearm.

“Okay, but hurry.” Robin flinched only slightly as the nanites slid onto her skin, and she shivered.

“It will cover your torso and upper thighs, but your arms, legs, neck, and head will be vulnerable.”

She nodded. “So, a Kevlar vest.”

“Exactly. If you are hit, you will bruise.”

She nodded again sharply. “Good enough. Can you make one for Flynn when we get to him?”

“I won’t have enough.”

“Transfer mine, then.”

“If we have the opportunity.” Though he doubted they would. “I will do my best to protect your nephew.”

“Thank you.”

A second later, the process was complete, and he let go of her arm.

Robin scooted over to Sky and grabbed her wrist. “Promise me.” She squeezed harder. “Promise you will do whatever, and I mean whatever, it takes to get Drew and Flynn out. I don’t care if you have to leave me behind. You get them out.”

Sky stared at Robin with a closed expression. Ryan couldn’t read her. If anyone was a wild card, she was. She had a strange sense of honor, even though she killed indiscriminately when facing a foe. Everything about her reminded him of stories of their ancient warriors.

“They are my Alex.” Robin’s voice cracked.

Ryan couldn’t see Robin’s face, but he didn’t need to. Her tone told him how desperately she wanted to keep those boys alive.

Sky’s nose flared before she exhaled. “As long as there is breath in my lungs, it will be done.”

Robin leaned her head back and smiled softly.

Ryan got the feeling he had missed the full significance of her words. Was it an oath? Perhaps a Skineater vow?

“But,” Sky continued, “don’t think that gets you off the hook, Auntie Robbie. If you even think about getting injured, I will break every bone in Drew’s little hand. Got it?”

Robin's shoulder jerked, and she snarled, "Just you try."

"Better." Sky grinned. "Now, what's the best way around?"

"You can—"

"This will be easier." He reached for Sky's forehead.

She recoiled, glaring.

"Do you or don't you want a map of the area?"

Her lips twitched. "No kissing without my approval."

"Why would he need to do that?" Robin asked.

"It's how he accessed my nanites," said Sky.

"Woman up. If you have to kiss the hot alien to save my boys, do it and be quick about it!" Robin peered over the car again, her hand opening and closing into a tight fist.

Ryan couldn't help himself. He smirked. "All I need to do is touch your forehead."

Sky's expression went slack, and he thought he saw a flash of disappointment. "Oh. Next time, tell me what you're doing first," she mumbled.

He placed his fingers on her forehead and rested his thumb on her cheekbone. She shivered under his touch as the transfer initiated. Unfortunately, it was over in a flash. He dropped his hand and, thanks to his ISA, resisted the urge to whisper in her ear and say, *If I asked, then I could kiss you again?*

He rubbed his forehead, berating himself. He couldn't understand why he kept doing crazy things around this woman. That comment would've been inappropriate and insensitive to Robin's situation. A tight sensation gathered in his chest, and he longed to punch something hard. Perhaps he'd find an outlet during this rescue mission.

"Did it work?" Robin asked, breaking his musings.

The faintest crease formed above Sky's straight nose.

"Think of the surrounding area and it will be—"

"Instinctual. Wow." Sky's eyes lit up. "I know every street down to the barely passable cracks between buildings in a

five-kilometer radius from here.”

Robin pushed her. “Get going. Pem’s getting edgy.”

“How long until the power goes?” Sky asked.

“Three minutes fifty-eight seconds.”

Sky scrunched up her face. “That’ll be tight to do something before—”

“Here.” Robin placed something in Sky’s palm. “Take this and cause some havoc.”

And the smile that had given Ryan the chills earlier returned to Sky’s face. He saw what had incited her reaction. An M67 grenade.

Sky tucked it into a side pocket of her vest. “It’ll be easier than hunting savages.”

She turned to leave, but before she did, he caught her forearm. Sky glanced back, her gaze flicking between his hand and his face.

“Be careful.” His grip tightened. Suddenly, the thought of letting her out of his sight created a void in his chest.

She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and pulled free. “Always.”

After Sky had disappeared behind a corner, he redirected his attention to their target. Robin’s leg bounced nervously next to his.

“How long has it been?” she asked without moving her gaze from her nephew.

“Twenty-two seconds.”

“Shit.”

“Where are his parents?” Ryan hoped to distract her while they waited.

“Dead.” She let out a haggard sigh. “At least his mom, my sister, is. And his dad better be because if I find out he ran out on them, I’ll kill him myself.”

These humans were such a blood-thirsty species. “How long have you been their guardian?”

Robin swallowed. “Almost two years. How long now?”

“One minute and thirty-four seconds.”

“Must be handy having that information in your head.” Robin turned to face him. “Please, those two boys are worth more than my life. So if it comes down to a choice between them or me, choose them.”

He held her stern gaze. “I understand.”

She returned to studying the group in front of the warehouse. “Any second now.”

“You think Sky will come through?” He didn’t doubt Sky would, but he found it interesting that her enemy trusted her to such a degree.

“I know their code.” Robin unclipped the gun at her hip and shoved it into her backpack. “She won’t disappoint. She gave me the vow of the four Generals, and it is legendary. She’ll do it or die trying.”

Sky’s words had been a pledge. He would have to ask who the four were, although he suspected he had already encountered them. And from his estimation of Sky’s character, he had no doubt she would execute this rescue to the best of her abilities.

“Robin!” Pem yelled. “Any second now, chunky red bits are gonna decorate the pavement.”

“That’s it. We can’t wait any longer,” Robin said to Ryan, then shouted, “All right! We’re coming out.” She slipped her pack on and whispered, “If you see an opening, get Flynn. I’ll cover you.”

“Understood.”

Robin stood and raised her hands. “Don’t shoot. We surrender.”

Ryan followed Robin, his arms up and fingers spread.

“Keep your hands up and walk out slowly. Any wrong move and I will squeeze this trigger before you can even blink!” Pem hollered. “Where’s the Scarlet Death?”

Robin scoffed. “She took off as soon as she saw you.”

Pem let out a loud, unsavory laugh. “Serves you right for trusting a criminal. I mean, I knew you were an idiot, but this is fucking moronic, even for you.”

Pem pushed the back of Flynn’s head forward with the barrel of her gun. “You know, if you’d gotten rid of this extra baggage, you wouldn’t be in this situation. Would ya?” She grinned.

A low rumble vibrated through Robin’s chest—a sound Ryan could empathize with. This Pem woman was scum. Children were sacred. No species had a future without them. Humans were spoiled in that sense. If this civilization ever recovered, it would face the same problem every advanced society did—low birth rates and restrictions placed by governments.

Two guards standing on either side of Pem held spiked baseball bats and had AR-15 rifles resting over their shoulders. The remaining five kept their sights trained on Robin and him.

“That’s close enough. Throw your weapons down. All of them, Rob.”

They stopped ten feet short, and five rifle-armed guards closed in around them. They were underestimating him by coming so close.

“Where’s your gun?” Pem snapped.

“Kendra didn’t trust me. She took it off me after we dropped off Scarlet.”

Pem sneered. “Our lady did too little too late. She should’ve done more. Your betrayal will knock her off her high horse and put me in the Queen’s good graces. Was it worth it, Robby? Both you and your nephew are gonna die for that cripple inside.”

Robin glowered.



“Not quite,” Ryan said. “We still have a bargaining chip.”

“Oh, and what’s that, Cardinal?”

The men around them began to relax. Two didn’t even have their fingers on the trigger anymore.

“The electricity. Everything is going to get very dark in less than twenty seconds, and your Lord Laxari won’t be able to help you.”

Pem and the two men next to her laughed. “That’s not even a good bluff.”

Ryan let his true feelings filter into his tone. This woman disgusted him. “Try me, primitive.”

Pem flinched, and the men raised their rifles.

“See that glow in the sky? It will be pitch-black in five, four, three, two, one.”

The lights dimmed and blinked out, and darkness flooded the sky.

“What did you do?” Pem’s voice shook. “Bring it back, or I swear I will pump this kid full of lead.”

Robin tensed next to him.

There was a loud crash, the sound of glass smashing. Pem and her men jolted around, searching for the source.

“Intruder!” a man yelled inside.

A second later, a thunderous boom rattled the warehouse. Ryan smiled. Sky had done well.

He launched forward, covering the gap in one leap. Pem yelped, recoiling as he appeared in front of her. With an open palm form, he struck her chest. She grunted and sailed backward.

The guards charged, but they were so slow his attacks felt dishonorable. Ryan glanced back at Robin, who gaped at him.

“Robin! Fight!”

She snapped out of her stupor and dropped, reaching for her knives.

Ryan stopped a swinging bat with his bare hands. The male did not possess enough strength to puncture his reinforced skin. He spun, ripping the man's rifle from his shoulder, and struck the back of his head. The man dropped hard. Ryan flipped off the safety and fired four shots. The gun barely kept up with Ryan's speed. And in the time he did that, Robin downed two.

The men he'd shot would not die if they received medical attention in the next hour or so. He could not say the same for Robin's victims. A dagger protruded from Pem's throat.

"Next time, shoot to kill, Superman." Robin rushed to Flynn's side.

The teenager groaned as she helped him stand. He could barely keep upright.

"It's okay. I got you now."

Gunfire cracked through the air, four shots, five, six. All coming from inside the warehouse. He counted nine men, all firing at Sky.

Robin lifted her eyelids, exposing a pained expression. She was worried about her nephew. It was understandable. He retrieved a vial from his satchel and handed it to her.

"Robin, we need to assist Sky and rescue your other nephew. This will help him heal. I promise he will be fine. Okay?"

She nodded and tipped the contents down Flynn's throat. He spluttered but drank it all.

More gunfire reverberated through the warehouse's metal walls. "Good. Now I need your complete focus."

Her expression sharpened. "That blast will draw reinforcements."

"How long?"

"Four, maybe five minutes."

Three more thundering pops vibrated through the metal walls.

He had to get inside now. With his nanite vision, he could see Sky ducking by some drums. “Stay behind me. Find somewhere safe to deposit Flynn.”

“I—I can fight,” he mumbled.

“Not on my life!” Robin pulled him closer.

“As soon as you get a clear path, get him on the train. Sky and I will find your other boy.”

Robin grabbed Ryan’s sleeve. “Drew. His name is Drew.”

Ryan nodded and darted inside.

TWENTY

# SKY



*“You say you don’t save people. Then why does Gwen tell me you have warriors policing the capital behind the Warlord’s back?” ~ Queen’s Champion William Tate, Matron.*

**F**rom the rooftop of a building across the road, Sky stared at the top of the ice tower lighting up the night sky. The outage started from the tip, spread down the structure, and rushed out in every direction. As darkness spread through the city, little pinpricks of light above popped into existence. Slowly at first, then when the last light blinked out, a flood of diamonds burst forward to reclaim the night sky, millions of them twinkling in all their glory. The only lights that didn’t extinguish were the ones inside the station. Did that mean the solar panels on the station’s roof worked? Or did it have a separate power source?

Pem’s panicked voice rang out.

That was her queue. Sky sprinted at full speed. The roof ended too fast. Her foot hit the edge, and she leaped, launching herself forward.

She sailed over the road, still rising toward her target. As she flew over the barbed wire, she dropped the grenade, curled in tight, zooming for the window, and punched through the glass.

Sharp lines of pain seared across her arms and legs. Sky uncoiled, rolled across the floor, and slammed into a metal banister. Beads of blood dripped from her forearms and her hip throbbed, but she had to move. She grabbed the top railing,

flipped over, dropped one and a half floors to the ground, and grinned. Gray would die from jealousy when she showed him how far she could jump.

“Intruder!” a man yelled.

Boom!

A shock wave blew through the building. Glass shattered, blowing out with the force of the explosion. Two men on the upper walkway jumped to escape the rain of shards, and they thumped to the ground less gracefully than she had. Heat bloomed through the metal walls.

Pops of gunfire rang out, but not inside the warehouse. They came from the front, where Ryan and Robin were.

Ryan had better pull his weight because she had her own problems. She took in the nine disoriented men recovering from the blast and the three twelve-foot-long cages jam-packed with filthy, cowering bodies. Sky slid a knife from her vest and crouched.

*And the fun begins.*

She sprinted for the closest guard. He grasped for his gun, but not fast enough. She knocked his arm aside, and his pistol went off. She thrust the blade into his trachea and peeled the gun from his fingers. Aiming at another guard, she fired. He grunted, ducking behind a crate. Two other guards returned fire.

Sky sank behind a row of crates and crawled.

She'd missed!

This was why she hated using unfamiliar guns. Thank fuck no one had been around to witness it; she'd never hear the end of it if one of her brothers had been here, probably Robin too. She slipped across to another crate. Bullets ricocheted off a couple of metal drums behind her.

“Stop shooting! You'll blow us up!” a guard to the right yelled.

Behind her stood four drums, but from the clanging noises the bullets had made hitting them, they had to be empty. But

that didn't mean all were. There were many scattered around the station.

She rolled out, sighted one guard, and fired. He slumped, and she ducked in behind another crate.

“What the hell's going on? Pem didn't say anything about someone shooting up the warehouse. The Queen's gonna kill us if the train gets damaged.”

“Shut up, you idiot.”

That was good advice. Sky bobbed up, shot, and ducked before anyone could return fire. She moved along. Shots went over her head. She checked her chamber. Two left and six targets to go. She secured the pistol and switched to the crossbow.

“There's only one shooter. Get around there!”

She peeped over. A middle-aged guard spotted her, and his jaw dropped.

“It's the Scarlet Death!” he screeched.

She loosed a bolt. It struck him in the center of his neck. Who were these buffoons?

Something banged. Sky spotted the open doorway through the cracks, and two figures ducked in.

“Behind you!” the man farthest from the door yelled.

Three of them scrambled to reposition themselves, firing toward the opening. A flash of red hair disappeared behind a large wooden crate. Sky sprinted out, launched over another row of boxes, and fired at a guard's back. She rolled in behind a drum and reloaded.

Someone moaned two boxes over. She ignored it to locate Ryan and Robin.

To the right of the door, Ryan zipped out so fast the guard nearest had no chance. He was there one second and gone the next. Her nanites didn't make her that fast.

“Shit—”

The word caught her unawares. On her left, a guard gawked at Ryan too. Sky snapped out of her stupor and shot his leg. He dropped, screaming. She knew she should've killed him, but she'd been dumbfounded by Ryan's superhuman moves too, so she'd taken pity on another fool. She skidded to his side. He thrashed, reaching for his dropped gun.

"Nothing personal, but at least you'll get to live another day." She kicked the gun out of reach.

He grappled for her knife. She rolled, pulling him over, and locked her arm around his neck. He struggled for a minute before passing out.

"Robin! Look out!" Ryan yelled before more gunfire popped.

She peeped over and saw Robin and Flynn pinned down, meters away from the train, with only flimsy wooden boxes for cover.

Ryan sprinted for them. "Sky! The boy!" He pointed.

She followed his finger and saw a dirty child curled up in the middle cage. The shooter turned and fired. Ryan stopped. The man shot again, all aimed at Ryan's chest.

Sky halted in her tracks, her heart freezing. She had to get to the boy, but her feet weren't moving. Even though she'd seen bullets and arrows bounce off other Cardinals, she couldn't help but worry. Could his armor withstand a clip at close range?

"Why aren't you falling?" The man's voice trembled. "Die!" He fired until his clip ran out.

Ryan tilted his head and smiled. Unbelievable. Had he even felt anything? Was her armor that strong too?

"Do you want me to knock you out, or do you want to run?" Ryan asked.

The guard gaped at his comrades sprawled out around the warehouse floor. He was the last man standing.

Robin slid out from behind a crate and inched toward him. Her knife sliced the guard's throat so fast, so efficiently, that it



was a thing of beauty.

A low growl rumbled from Ryan. “Get Flynn onto the train.” He turned on his heel, glancing briefly at Sky, and stalked toward the engine car.

Sky had to admit that she felt guilty about killing these idiots. It had been surprisingly easy, and situations rarely surprised her. Something was off. The faster they left, the better.

She hurried to the cage. “Drew?”

The red-haired boy huddling behind a woman lifted his head. Dirt covered his face and neck. She scanned the rest of the group, and all the people around the boy looked fit, which meant they were likely criminals.

“Are you Drew?”

He gave a slight nod.

Sky smiled. “I’m here with Aunty Robby.”

He jumped up and limped to the bars. “Really?”

“Yep. She’s helping Flynn onto the train, then we are all gonna get out of here.”

The other prisoners rushed forward, pressing in behind him. “Help us.”

Captives in the other two cages started yelling.

Drew got jammed against a pole and gasped. They were going to crush him.

“Get back!” Sky pulled out her gun and aimed at the forehead of the brown-haired man behind Drew. Even though he’d been trying to protect Drew, he was doing a crappy job of it.

The crowd in Drew’s cage stilled. All fifteen of them.

“Get back,” she repeated. “Step away from the boy now.”

The man pulled back more, allowing Drew to breathe, but he didn’t step away. He stared at Sky with intense dark brown eyes, challenging her to pull the trigger. From his stance, Sky

knew he was a seasoned fighter; the muscles forming his slender frame were defined. He was about the same age as her.

Sky glared. “Try me.”

“Garrick, get back!” a scraggly woman from the adjacent cell yelled. “I heard the guard call her the Scarlet Death.”

Garrick’s eyes widened.

Sky sneered.

All of them clamored back, even Drew. He stopped next to a short, brown-haired woman of Latin descent in her late thirties. Instead of cowering, she stepped in front of Drew and shielded him, glaring defiantly, even with her right arm in a sling.

Sky huffed. “Drew, I owe your aunt a favor. We’re here to get you out.”

“What about everyone else? What about Jen?” He grabbed the woman’s frayed sleeve.

“They’re not part of the deal,” Sky mumbled. “Robin! Get out here.”

Robin came running. “What’s wron—Drew!” She sprinted to the cage. “Drew!”

He raced forward, and they hugged through the bars. “Aunty Robbie.”

She kissed the top of his head. “I’m so sorry it took me this long, Nugget.”

“I knew you’d come. I knew you would.” Tears snaked down his dirt-smudged cheeks.

“Come on.” Robin pulled back and wiped his cheeks. “Let’s get you out.”

Drew stepped back and grabbed Jen’s hand. “Not without everyone else.”

Robin shot Sky a questioning look.

Sky shrugged. “He’s *your* nephew.”

Robin's shoulders drooped. "Drew, we can't bring them all."

"Open the gates and let them find their own way. Either way, we need to move," Sky said.

Drew hugged Jen, and she put her arm around him. "They took care of me. I won't go without them."

Jen crouched. "Drew."

"You're coming too." Tears started pouring down his face again.

Robin rubbed the back of her neck, her shoulders hunched forward.

Sky backed away and searched the nearest dead guard. They needed to get at least one of the cages open, and hopefully, someone here had a key.

Ryan joined them, stopping next to Robin. "What's the holdup?"

Drew's eyes widened with awe. Jen pulled him back into the group.

Robin turned to him. "Drew wants to bring them all."

"Everyone," Drew piped up with a squeaky voice.

Ryan nodded. "Fine. Now hurry."

"Wait, we can't." Robin pointed at the cages. "There are forty people here."

"And we have a very empty train. Now please, everyone on board before reinforcements arrive."

"We need a key." Sky searched the next body along.

Ryan approached Drew's cage, and the people inside herded back. He studied the hinges, pulled out a dagger, and with the hilt struck the bottom of the pin. It popped right out. He repeated the process with the bottom hinge and swung the gate open. The prisoners didn't move, many gaping between Ryan and the gate.

"Quickly, into the train." Ryan moved to the next cage.

Drew sped toward Robin, and she pulled him in for a hug. “Nugget, get on the train.” She gave him another kiss and nudged him in the right direction.

Drew dashed away, getting the others moving, and they all filed out.

Frustration bubbled in Sky’s chest. She should’ve thought of that. She pulled out her sword and tackled the last cage. It took her a couple of strikes to free each pin, but she managed.

“Get moving, people.” Sky tugged open the last cage.

A few whispered thanks as they hobbled out, but instead of heading for the train, they congregated in the center of the warehouse, around the woman called Jen. Ryan jogged by the huddled group and disappeared into the engine car.

“Come on.” Robin waved them on.

Jen stepped forward. “That train won’t run without a key. Do you have it?”

Robin glared. “Look, you can get on and escape with us or by yourselves and be recaptured. Up to you.”

Drew tugged on Robin’s shirt.

Garrick scoffed before turning to Jen. “Let’s get out of here. We can’t trust her.” He motioned to Robin, then to the engine car. “That one has to be a Cardinal. And the last one.” He cast a deathly glare at Sky. “She’s a Skineater.”

“Retired,” Sky amended.

Garrick scowled.

Robin huffed, pulling Drew into a tight hold. “My nephew wants you to live, so I’m telling you that your best chance at survival is to get on that train. I’m getting my nephews out, and I have a deal with General Scarlet here. So she’s onboard too.”

“And the Cardinal?” Jen directed her question at Sky.

There didn’t seem any point in denying Ryan’s alien heritage, and there wasn’t time to convince them he wasn’t a

Cardinal. “He and I have struck a bargain. He’ll get us out of here. That you can count on.”

“We gotta go.” Garrick edged toward the door.

“Wait.” Jen eyed Sky, then turned toward the platform. “We’re taking a ride. Everyone, on the train.” She turned to direct them. “Jake, Garrick, and Rea, weapons. Shane and Todd, help everyone board.”

Garrick gaped, but he recovered quickly and didn’t argue. Robin sent Drew with the group and headed for the open door. A teenage girl with black hair, who Sky assumed was Rea, and an older guy with salt-and-pepper hair, Jake, moved to Garrick. They peeled away from the group and busied themselves searching the downed guards. Something Sky should have been doing too. Time would tell if having armed prisoners would be a hindrance or an asset.

A screech of metal rang out. With Jake’s help, Robin half-dragged, half-rolled a drum toward the now closed door.

Sky stooped next to a dead guard with a bullet hole in his chest. It was odd that he hadn’t been wearing armor, as if they hadn’t been prepared. This was the second one not wearing a vest, and his spare ammo was almost out. Sky got a bad feeling as she reloaded her gun.

She rocked back on her heels, taking in the warehouse. Everything was starting to feel too convenient. If Robin was right and Pem had tipped Mindy off, where were the elites? Her last encounter with Mindy, albeit years ago, had led her to believe Mindy was smarter than this. She’d outsmarted Zek and her own champion. Had the years weakened her so much? She used to be stricter with her soldiers. Or maybe these men had been expendable? Sky tilted her head. Almost as if ...

She bounded to the hanging walkway and peered through the window. *Shit*. Sometimes, she hated being right.

TWENTY-ONE

# SKY



*“I know you have many questions, but you have to trust that I’ve always had your best interests in mind.” ~ Jordan Argo, allegiance unknown.*

**S**ky scanned the platform below. “Robin, leave the door. They’re here! We have to go. Now!”

“How many?” Robin gave the drum one more shove.

Sky switched back to their impending attackers. The warehouse sat at the end of a T-junction, and forty feet down the road stood a line of elites. And behind them, astride a white horse, could only be Mindy—by the sparkle of her crown.

“Forty, maybe more!” Sky yelled over her shoulder.

“We need more time.” Jen helped a bulky man haul a box on board.

“Leave the food!” Robin ran by her and ripped open a crate. “Guns! Here.”

Robin grabbed a couple of rifles and moved on. Sky checked the status of the elites. The line hadn’t moved. She turned back. The prisoners scrambled around, grabbing weapons and supplies out of boxes before making for the train. Robin, aided by Jake, erected a barricade in front of the rear carriage door.

“Ryan!” She spotted him jumping from the tracks to the platform. “Is the train ready to go?”

“Almost. It’ll need a few more minutes.” He disappeared into the engine car.

Movement outside drew her back to the window. A woman hunched in the middle, holding up a long cylindrical object. Sky squinted. It couldn’t be. *Oh, fuck!* There was an orange flash.

“Rocket incoming!” Sky hurdled over the railing.

The projectile impacted with a thundering boom ten times louder than a grenade. An invisible force slammed into Sky, hammering hundreds of spikes into her flesh. She fell fast, smashing through a row of crates. She hit the concrete with an audible thud and tumbled.

A high-pitched ring assaulted her eardrums.

A moan vibrated up her chest.

Her head whirled, and her body burned.

She pried her eyes open. *Get up.*

The high-pitched ring persisted. Muffled hollers and cries seeped through the constant sound. The back of her head throbbed.

*Up! Get up!* Her dad’s voice yelled in her head.

Sky shook off the memory. Salt seeped into her mouth. A smoky, metallic scent filled her nostrils. She wiped her nose, and streaks of black and vibrant red smeared the back of her hand.

She rolled to her side. Pieces of wood and metal clattered off. She put weight on her right arm and yelped, collapsing back to the floor. A long, jagged piece of warehouse stuck out of her bicep, below the end of her nanite armor. Sky groaned and shifted onto her left side. She drew in a deep breath, and a sharp rod of white-hot pain lanced her chest. Grunting, she made herself stand and wobble forward. It took three wavering steps for her to catch her balance.

Grit clung to her eyeballs, but through her blurry vision, she saw the gaping hole of destruction the rocket had created.



There was too much smoke to see the elites outside, and the flames around the hole would keep them out for a bit.

A cacophony of moans rose. She scanned the devastation. Small fires burned pieces of debris. Farther in, chunks of metal and wood half-buried bloody bodies.

A prisoner a few paces away hadn't been as lucky. His corpse had almost been cleaved in two. A large chunk of wall protruded from the man's gut. His lifeless eyes stared at the heavens.

Sky stumbled away and caught sight of a severed slender arm. These people had been farther from the blast than her, yet she was mostly whole. Briefly, she wondered how much shrapnel Ryan's nanites had shielded her from. She came across a disembodied foot. She should really thank Ryan for the armor someday.

Thankfully, the blast hadn't damaged the cargo and passenger cars much, and the warehouse appeared stable. The engine car didn't have a scratch on it. People alighted the carriages and spread out. Some put out a few small fires around the train and others helped the injured.

"Sky!"

She staggered and turned. Ryan hoisted a woman up, but his gaze was on her. She threw her uninjured arm up in a wave.

"I'm good," Sky croaked. *Sort of.* "Help them." Her voice sounded clearer, and the ringing in her ears was subsiding.

She reached across her chest and yanked. The jagged skewer slid out on the second tug. She let out a low, guttural growl and tried to lift her right arm. Another groan rumbled up her throat. Her arm was out of commission. Blood gushed out of the deep gash at an alarming rate. Her whole bicep throbbed, but she repeated her father's mantra: *pain is all in the mind.*

The area around the wound tightened as her nanite clothing moved on its own and formed a pressure bandage around the laceration, staunching the bleeding. The agonizing sting

subsided. She still couldn't use her arm, but at least the little critters had made it so she wouldn't bleed out.

Without wasting more time, she pulled out her gun with her left hand. Robin and Jake worked together, pulling people from the rubble.

Blood streamed down Jen's face. "Where are they?"

Sky blinked. It took a second to realize Jen was asking her.

"Can't see. Wait," Sky replied hoarsely.

Her vision blurred again. She shook her head to clear things up. *Damn concussion.*

"Jake, get some people up there with guns." Robin pointed to the train roof.

Jake glanced at Jen briefly.

She gave a distinct nod. "Buy us some time! We have to save as many as we can."

Garrick pushed Jen toward the train. "Get on. We got this." He and the teen girl, Rea, slung two rifles over their backs, climbed the carriage, and hunkered on the roof.

At least nine people were still stuck under clumps of debris, calling for help. Sky stepped forward and grunted. Everything ached, and every time she moved, the agony intensified. She gritted her teeth. Clearing her mind, she mentally pushed down the pain again.

Sky clenched her fists and continued. The explosion had flattened and overturned most of the crates and boxes she'd used for cover. She crouched behind an overturned barrel that was mostly whole and kept watch on the new entrance.

Around the opening, the smoke began to dissipate, but not enough to give her a clear view of the enemy's approach. A figure shifted behind the haze.

"Get ready." She fell back to a metal drum and made herself as small as possible.

A few paces away, a burnt arm stuck up at an unnatural angle. She spotted Robin pushing a man onto the train.

“In! Get in, dammit!” Robin shoved hard.

Jen leaned out a window and grabbed Robin. “Drew! I can’t find him.”

Robin looked around frantically. Sky glanced back at the hole and saw a few silhouettes weaving through the shadows.

“Drew!” Robin screeched.

“I saw him over there before the explosion,” Garrick yelled from his perch, pointing toward Sky.

*Shit.* Sky scanned for any signs of Drew, hoping he had fared better than the others who’d been standing in this area. All she saw was debris. She left her defensive position and ventured into the open.

Sky knew the elites would be here any second, but they’d already risked so much for this child. They couldn’t lose him now. More shadows moved closer, falling in on either side of the hole. She stooped in behind a crumbling crate and aimed at the edge. A head appeared. Sky fired.

“Down!” a woman outside hollered.

Sky let off a few more rounds. Shots sounded behind her. Bullets whizzed overhead, punching into the sides of the warehouse by the opening.

Sky dropped and slithered over the uneven ground on her stomach. “Drew?”

An arm appeared at the side of the opening and lobbed an object. A hissing grenade arced in and landed between her and the train. Plumes of smoke spread through the warehouse, and the elites stormed in, laying cover fire.

“Drew!” Robin screamed. Jake pulled her behind their barricade as bullets struck around them.

Sky rolled sideways away from the smoke, moving farther from the train. Screams and shouts rose from the carriages. The gas stung her eyes. She blinked rapidly to clear the tears, and again her vision blurred. A few bullets ricocheted off a drum near her and more whizzed past. Yells came from every direction. It was mayhem.

The prisoners, led by Garrick, returned fire, but only six of them were spread out across the roofs. A few people fired out the carriage windows, but the wooden walls did not offer full protection. Two prisoners in the train collapsed as they were diving for cover. More elites flowed into the warehouse. They were sitting ducks.

Sky crept toward the train, continuing her search. “Drew?”

A soft voice caught her attention. “Help.”

Sky let out an exhausted sigh. Relief filled her as the little fingers wiggled, sticking out of a pile of rubble. She ripped off a sheet of metal.

“I got you.” She grabbed his hand.

“Drew!” Robin screamed, firing wildly at the attackers.

Sky pushed off another chunk of metal. “I got him!”

She wrenched him free and glanced back at Robin, who was watching on with crazed eyes. Drew whimpered but appeared whole except for a few cuts and bruises.

Fifty feet of exposed platform stood between them and the train. The majority of the infiltrators had to be inside the warehouse by now, and the train was taking on a lot of fire, but the bullets didn’t seem to damage the engine car. Sky caught sight of Ryan popping up from behind a barricade next to the engine and firing a crossbow.

“Ryan,” Sky spoke normally, unsure if his superhuman hearing could hear her voice among the crazy.

His head snapped toward her, his eyes briefly meeting hers before he ducked behind the crates.

“Get the train moving,” she said.

He bounced up and dashed inside, and the next second, a soft glow pulsed over the engine car.

“Don’t let it leave the station!” an enemy female screamed.

“Okay, Drew.” Sky pulled him in. “I’m gonna carry you, so I need you to hold on as tight as you can.”

“I can run.” His cheeks were wet with tears, but his face was full of determination.

“Not today. Today, you follow orders. And I’m ordering you to hold on to me and not let go until we reach that train. Do you understand?”

He nodded quickly.

A stray bullet struck a few feet away. Drew jumped.

Sky placed her hand on his shoulder and held his wide-eyed gaze. “We’re gonna get out of here.”

He gulped.

Sky moved her left hand to her nanite clothes and formed an image in her mind. The material responded immediately, snaking off her and onto Drew. He yelped and tried to pull away, but she caught him.

“It will protect you.”

He struggled, but Sky held firm, maintaining the image of the protective suit in her mind.

“Listen to me,” she growled.

Drew froze.

“This is gonna protect you, Nugget. Okay?”

He shivered and stopped squirming. The nanites streamed over him and fused with his clothes to create a netting over his neck. He squeezed his eyes shut as it slid over his cheeks and formed a full-faced helmet.

She had transferred most of her protection to him, leaving only a thin sheet over her back, from her head to her upper thighs. Behind the broken crate, Sky rocked to her feet, crouching into a low squat. Drew wrapped his arms around her neck. She gritted her teeth and made her right arm close around him, pulling him into her chest. His legs squeezed her waist. She dropped him as low as she could so her shoulder would cover most of his face and head, and she hoped to hell his nanite helmet held.

He seemed to respond well to his nickname, so Sky used it again. “Okay, Nugget. Hold on.”

The train inched forward, slowly at first, then gaining momentum. Soon, it would clear the station.

“Stop them!” an Elite screamed.

The engine car took on fire, but the bullets bounced off.

Robin hung on to the back carriage, firing a machine gun. She spotted Sky and yelled, “Cover!”

Jake appeared next to her and lobbed something at a cluster of metal drums.

“Grenade!”

The enemy combatants in that area scrambled away.

More prisoners had joined the others on the roof and popped off volleys.

Sky took a deep breath. It was now or never. She launched forward, sprinting as fast as her fatigued legs would carry them. Drew was a skinny boy, but his extra weight caused her fatigued muscles to quiver. Sky stumbled and barely managed to right herself before they fell.

Boom!

A gush of wind and heat pushed her along.

“Put out that fire!” a voice hollered from within the warehouse.

“Out! Get out!” another woman yelled.

The prisoners kept shooting, and the elites returned fire. A bullet punched Sky’s left shoulder. She staggered. Her thighs burned, and liquid fire pulsed through her veins. Her shoulder sent pounding agony through her torso with every step, but she kept going. She had to.

Robin hung out of the train. “Faster!”

Sky was slowing. The lack of food and numerous thrashings her body had suffered were finally taking their toll.

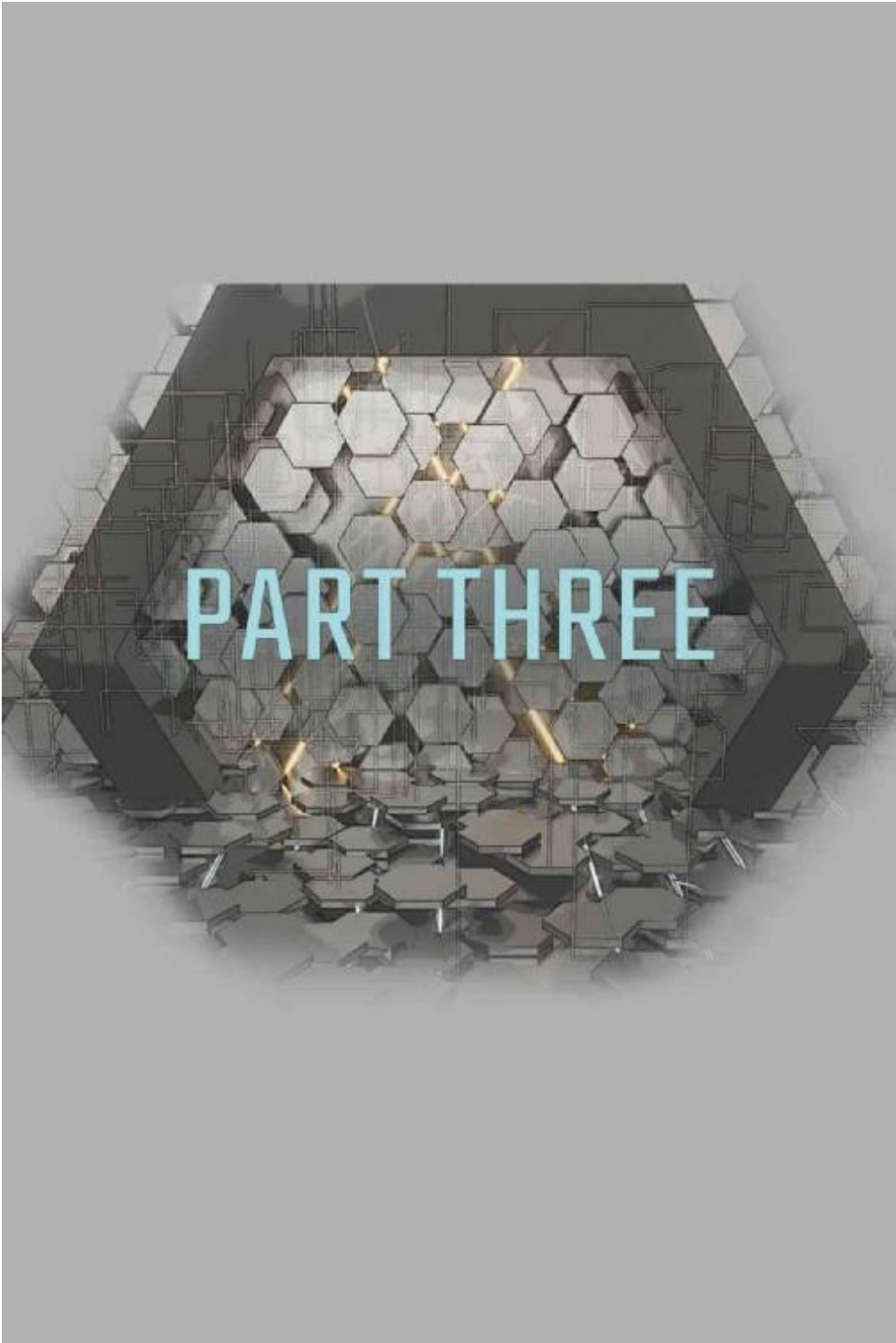
Her energy waned. Only a little farther. She just had to keep it together.

A bullet pierced her left calf. Fire exploded through her leg.

This was it.

With the remainder of her strength, she ripped Drew off and hurled him. He sailed forward, screaming. A second later, he slammed into Robin, and they collapsed backward into the train.

Her oath had been fulfilled. She stumbled and caught sight of Ryan leaning out of the train and his expression—pure panic.





TWENTY-TWO

# RYAN



*“I can’t believe you are risking this much for a child from the opposing family. You don’t owe him anything.” ~ Del Cee’kar  
Fernari, An’Zura.*

**R**yan gaped in horror. Blood spurted from the gunshot wound in Sky’s leg. Her gait wavered, her pace slowed, and her eyelids drooped.

“Sky!”

Her gaze snapped to his, but the train pulled farther away, clearing the station, and she had only two steps of platform left. His pulse thundered in his ears.

Her left leg buckled.

“Jump!” he roared.

Sky caught herself on her right foot and bounded forward. She sailed through the air, but he could see it. She wouldn’t make it. He stretched his arm out farther, holding the door handle with his fingertips. He’d never tried this on a person before. Would he hurt her? He’d have to take the risk because he wasn’t leaving her behind. He locked onto her and willed her to him.

Another explosion ripped through the station. Wind billowed behind her. His mind and the turbulence propelled her to him, and she flailed. Her fingers brushed his. He grabbed them, yanking so hard her shoulder popped out. Wrapping his arms around her, he squeezed her tightly as they collapsed into the car. His heart pounded against his chest. She

almost hadn't made it. He'd never been more grateful for his ancient An'Zuri abilities.

"Thanks," she wheezed, and she sagged into his chest.

More explosions erupted in the warehouse, vibrating through the earth, and rattled the walls of the carriage.

"Sky?"

She moaned.

"Is she okay?" Robin squatted next to him.

"I'm not sure." He shifted and cradled her in his lap.

"You're bleeding." Robin pointed at his nose.

Ryan swiped the blood from his upper lip. He'd had this reaction once before when he'd used his telekinetic gift to move a colossal boulder. Most An'Zuri no longer developed their abilities as their nanite technology could accomplish many of the same tasks with little effort, but Ryan had, mostly to entertain himself as a child. Although, some abilities, like telekinesis, were highly regulated, and using his gift on another An'Zuri, even to save the life of an illegal half-breed, might result in disciplinary action. Gently, he took hold of Sky's arm and, with instructions from his ISA, popped her shoulder in place.

Sky snapped up, almost whacking her forehead into Ryan's chin. "Drew! Where is he?"

"He's fine," Robin said.

"Here," Drew squeaked.

"Sorry I had to toss you, kid." Sky swayed and fell sideways.

Ryan caught her before her head hit the floor and jostled her gently. "Sky?"

Her only response was a soft sound.

"Shit. She looks like death warmed over." Robin looked at the crimson puddle forming under Sky's leg. "You can fix her, right?"

Finally, an apt expression, but he didn't appreciate Robin's usage at this moment.

He scooped Sky up, and Robin stood too. A clang vibrated through the floor, metal hitting metal.

"What was that?" Robin bent. "Is that a bullet?"

Ryan glared at the scrap of metal. "Her nanites expelled it. Excuse us. I need to attend to her."

"Right. Nugget, out of the way."

Ryan paused at the boy pressing himself against the wall and reclaimed Sky's armor. "Are you hurt?"

Drew gawked up at the liquid stream of nanites flowing from him to Ryan and slowly shook his head.

"If you feel unwell, find me immediately," Ryan said.

Drew snapped his mouth shut and nodded.

Ryan picked up the pace and entered the next car crowded with refugees. They cleared a path as soon as they saw him. Fear pulsed off them. The reception was the same in the car after. In the next, a few men pointed guns. He narrowed his eyes but maintained his stride. Sky was in critical condition.

The three with guns followed Ryan to the adjacent car, which had been converted to a makeshift healer's room. Eleven wounded lay on blankets spread out on the floor.

He passed through two more cars, dining and passenger carriages. Finally, they arrived at the second car. The engine car door had been programmed to only grant access to Sky, Robin, and him. The three behind stopped, leaving half a carriage's length as a buffer. Without a backward glance, Ryan entered, and the door locked behind him. At his command, a bench formed in the middle, large enough to lay her on. Her face was pallid. She'd lost too much blood. In the back of his mind, he knew she wasn't in mortal danger because of her resurrection protocol, but her frail body and inferior nanites worried him. How much damage could her system deal with in such a short period of time? He turned to the wall, and a vial filled with solution 5X emerged.

Kneeling next to her, he lifted her head. “Sky.” He held the container to her lips. “You must drink.”

She moaned, her lips parting. He tipped the contents in, and she swallowed. He laid her back and fed her another dose. Then he placed his hand on her arm to access her ISA.

*<Full recovery in four hours.>*

A seat formed against the wall, and he sagged onto it. Since meeting her, their journey had been nonstop peril. He knew from observation data collected over the last decade that North America was one of the most lawless continents on the planet, but he really couldn't have comprehended how dire it had become until he'd lived it. Although he had a bad feeling what he'd experienced was only the tip of the anthill and seeing any more of what the human civilization had degraded to would not win this species any favors with the council.

His gaze drifted back to Sky. She'd been asleep for almost ten minutes. Two doses of 5X would work quickly, so she should awaken soon. She shifted, and tension rippled over her features. He summoned her closer. The bench slid across the floor until the edge touched his knee.

Ryan swept a clump of hair matted with blood and ash from her forehead. “Sky?”

She groaned and opened her eyes.

“How do you feel?”

“Sore.” She blinked a few times. “But better.”

He exhaled a long breath. “I gave you an elixir to speed your healing.”

“More nanites?”

“No, proteins and nutrients. I wouldn't have had to give you so much if you were not so malnourished.”

“What?”

He leaned back, studying her form. “Do you not understand the word?”

She pushed up to her elbows and swung her legs around, slipping them between his. He glanced at her knees, bumping his inner thighs.

Her bottom lip jutted out slightly. “I understand fine. But I fail to see how you would think that.”

“Have you looked at yourself?” He’d caught snatches of her conversation with the Skineater Generals, and they had agreed too. “You may have gotten away with so little sustenance living your sedentary life at Reliance, but we’ve been on the run for almost two weeks, and you’ve barely eaten.”

She bristled. “Neither have you!”

“I had reserves. You were already underweight when we set out.”

She studied his form. “You’ve lost weight too.”

He frowned, knowing she was right. Tuan had said the same a few days ago, right before trying to assassinate him. “You need to eat more, especially now that I have ramped up your nanites. They will require extra energy.”

“Wait, what?”

“You will still need a few hours to recuperate.”

She grabbed his knee and leaned in. “Stop. What do you mean ramped up my nanites?”

He cringed at the slip. Was she ready for this?

“Ryan, what have you done?”

“I increased your recovery settings and boosted your strength and speed.”

Her nostrils flared. “How?”

“My ISA connected to yours.”

Her eyes went wide. “Are you saying those critters inside me have an AI?” Her voice rose, and he could hear her panic.

How could he explain it without distressing her more? He couldn’t think of anything, so he went with the truth. “All

nanites have an AI that controls them. Otherwise, they wouldn't have a purpose. They'd float around and—”

She furrowed her brows. “You mean like an OS—an operating system?”

“Exactly.” He exhaled in relief. “All our nanites are controlled by some form of AI, and some are more basic. For example, your clothes and the nanites in you, but it's still an ISA.”

She covered her face and massaged her temples. “And why are they still active?”

Ryan pursed his lips, debating how much he should tell her. He didn't think she was ready to hear about Jo'Ord, but maybe she might be more accepting of the nanites now? But how could he start a conversation about her nanites without revealing the truth about her father? She obviously had no idea who he was. Would she hate him for telling her? A few days ago, the thought of her disliking him hadn't bothered him so much.

No, he couldn't tell her yet. He'd stick to half-truths. “Because you keep drinking elixirs.”

She glanced at her right bicep and poked at the wound that had almost fully sealed. “I was expecting to be out of commission for a couple of days. The elixir is providing *my*”—her nose crinkled—“nanites a boost to heal me?”

“Yes.”

“And after you leave and take your elixirs with you, the nanites will dissolve?”

His chest twinged at the thought of being separated from her again. He hadn't been able to stop worrying about her. Had she thought of him as much too?

“With all the trouble you get into, you'd need permanent ones,” he muttered. “This is the third time in less than a week you've come so close to death.”

She scowled. “I was doing just fine until—”

A wild torrent of anxiety he'd been holding in flooded out. "Don't you have any self-preservation? What were you thinking? Running out in front of those bullets without full protection? It was foolhardy!"

She flinched, and a faint crease formed above her nose. "I was thinking I didn't want the boy to die! So I gave him my nanite armor. Or should I have let him get shot instead?"

"No, you shouldn't have." He raked his fingers through his hair. "This is so fucked up."

She raised her left eyebrow, which was also clumped with blood.

Swearing was a bad habit he didn't need to pick up from this planet. "This is all my fault. I'm the one who insisted we enter Matron."

"It's fine." She cast her gaze downward.

"It is not. I didn't realize how dangerous it would be for you."

He should have taken Soren's warning more seriously, but he hadn't expected to be cut off from his ISA and separated from her for days. "Did they keep you in the dungeon the whole time?"

"Yup."

"I'm sorry." He'd feared everything Athena had told him about wanting to protect Sky had been a lie. When Sky had appeared in his room, he'd been relieved for half a second, until he'd seen the cut on her face. "Did they mistreat you?"

"They mostly left me alone."

He ran his thumb over the faint pink line on her cheek, and she froze. She probably didn't appreciate him touching her like this, but he couldn't help himself. She'd gotten another scar, and it was his fault.

"Were you worried about me?" she asked softly.

He moved his thumb along her jawline to her chin. "Extremely."



She stiffened and sucked in her bottom lip. “But it was all worth it, right?”

He almost didn’t hear her because he was fixated on her mouth. “What?”

“The tri-source?” She clasped his wrist.

“Oh. Right.” But the cost had almost been too steep.

“And it can help us?”

“Yes.”

“Then it was all worth it,” she said, relaxing a little.

“Was it? If your jump had been one centimeter shorter, I would not have been able to pull you on board.” Barbs of fear twisted through his body. “They shot you ...”

“They weren’t shooting to kill. If they had, they would’ve aimed for my head. And they wouldn’t have missed. Mindy wanted to capture me. And what’s a few bullet holes in the limbs?” Sky shrugged.

He tugged free and grabbed her shoulders, drawing her toward him. “What if they’d misaimed? How could they take such a risk?” His fingers tightened.

She stared back at him. “But they didn’t. Don’t dwell on what-ifs. They’ll drive you crazy. Trust me.”

A faint smile tugged the corner of her mouth up, and he leaned farther.

“Is the tri-source safe?” she asked.

Dropping his grip, he drew in another long breath, and finally, his heart returned to a normal pace. “Yes. It’s powering the train, and a collective of nanites are traveling ahead to ensure the track is unblocked.”

“You have that many?”

He pointed to the panel, and the tri-source emerged. “I had enough with the tri-source’s help.”

“It contains nanites?”

“Yes, and it has the ability to produce more,” he said.

Unfortunately, making new nanites was a timely process. Luckily, the tri-source already had some in reserve.

“Are these tri-sources something your people would normally leave lying around, say on a conquered planet?”

“We didn’t conquer Earth,” he said.

Her jaw muscles flexed.

He reached for the wall, and a small section peeled off. “No, we wouldn’t.” He held the black shimmering sheet in his palm and programmed it.

“So, it’s not standard procedure.”

“Nothing about this Metanoia has been standard.” The sheet flexed and softened into silky midnight-blue material.

She watched him intently. “Won’t the Cardinals retaliate for stealing it?”

He held the cloth to her face. She flinched.

“You have blood and ash all over.”

She glanced at the cloth and raised her chin.

“I uploaded a virus to the network. It will keep them busy for at least twenty-four hours.”

He wiped her cheekbone. The nanomaterial removed the grime in one swipe. He dabbed her forehead, and she closed her eyes.

“That’s good,” she whispered.

He cleaned her other cheek and her chin. Sky’s mouth parted, and he noticed more blood. Gently, he drew the cloth over her soft, full lips, then down her neck. Her long eyelashes fanned up, and her gaze locked with his.

“Are you trying to distract me?” Her eyes twinkled, and her hand closed over his, holding his palm over her left shoulder.

“What?” His gaze traveled up her slender neck.

Her lips spread, but there was nothing warm about her expression. “From asking questions. There’s still a lot you’re

not telling me.”

A crazy wish flashed in his mind—that a madman would come running through the door. Anything to distract her from this interrogation.

“I know.” He passed the cloth to her.

She pushed up her sleeves and swiped her arms. “And you can’t use the excuse that we don’t have time because we have plenty, don’t we?”

*<Estimated time of arrival: ten hours and eight minutes.>*

“A little over ten hours,” he relayed.

“And where is our destination?”

“I thought Redding would be a good place to alight. Far enough away not to draw too much attention.”

“More than enough time. So spill. I’m not waiting another second.” She lifted her shirt and slid the cloth along her flat abdomen.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything pressing he could use to push off an explanation. “What do you wish to know?”

“From the beginning.”

He tensed. That was the last place he wanted to start.

Sky stretched to clean her sides, and his eyes flicked to the exposed skin, and as soon as he realized he was staring, he averted his gaze.

“When we first met, you didn’t need my help to climb the cliff, did you?”

Ryan suppressed a wince and resigned himself. “No.”

She shot him a seething glare. “So it was all a ruse? For what? To gain my trust? How did you even know I was there?”

The muscles in the back of his head flexed. He needed to tread carefully. “I came to investigate Laxari, and he wasn’t too keen about my purpose.”

Sky snorted. “I bet.”

“I hadn’t made much progress gathering evidence with Laxari micromanaging everything I did, so I decided to go undercover. I needed a neutral guide not embroiled in the conflicts plaguing this continent. Someone who could survive a cross-country journey so I could gather an accurate account of one of Earth’s former superpowers. You really are famous.”

He pushed a stray tendril of her hair behind her ear, and her penetrating gaze snapped to his, drawing him in.

Ryan withdrew his hand and continued, “I met the leader of the Rebels in the east, Harris. He told me about you. Your story is legendary. The only female General of the most fearsome army on this continent.”

“You knew who I was all this time?” she asked, and Ryan had expected the sharpness in her tone.

He lifted his right shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “You came highly recommended by Harris. He said if anyone could help, it would be you. And he knew you weren’t dead. He’d made it his business to find out if you’d survived, but he thought the problem would be to get you to agree to accompany me.”

One day, he hoped to tell her the whole truth—that he had specifically asked Harris if he knew of anyone like her.

Sky grabbed his shirt. “Did you have Reliance attacked?” Her voice sounded animalistic, and the coldness in her eyes chilled his soul.

“No. I miscalculated and did not expect Laxari to locate me so quickly. I deeply regret involving them, but Laxari will not risk harming your people. And I know for certain that they all are alive.”

“How?”

He pressed his mouth together and decided not to tell her about Soren. The fewer people that knew Soren was a spy the better. “I found some logs when I was connected with the system. They are being held in the San Francisco Base.”

“Well that’s something.” Her grip loosened, and she wilted back into her seat. “This is all my fault.”

“No.” He hopped over her leg and sat next to her. “You are not to blame. I am sorry for your friends, but we will free them.” She lifted her gaze, and the hollowness he saw pierced his soul. An overwhelming need to comfort her filled him. “I am sorry, more than you know, for all this deception. If you knew me at all, you’d know how much I despise it.”

Her eyelids drooped. “But I don’t know you.”

“No, you don’t.” The words created a heaviness in his chest. There was so much he couldn’t tell her.

The silence between them stretched. A faint bruise marred her jaw and her collarbone. He knew there had to be more under her clothes. Everything about her was tough except for her lips. Desire surged through him, along with a craving to taste them again. He moved back to the other bench before he did something stupid.

She rocked forward, placing her knee next to his leg, and leaned over him. “You kissed me.”

A jolt shot through him. Had his yearning been so transparent? He wasn’t suppressing his emotions at the moment, but he shouldn’t have been that easy to read. He peered into a gaze full of curiosity. The full memory of their kiss surged up, igniting a need that slammed into the walls around a part of himself he kept locked away.

She nibbled her bottom lip. “Why?”

He wrestled for control, but he could sense the cracks forming. What was it about this woman that tested him so? Then he remembered his reason for kissing her and a buzz of flickering energy swarmed his chest, sweeping away the heat and replacing it with an icky emotion he’d not experienced in years.

“I—I needed physical contact to activate the safety protocols, and it seemed like a good excuse ...” He cringed internally at the lame reason because he didn’t want to tell her the act had given him full access to her ISA and allowed him to confirm the elixir had been present in her system. He would tell her about that loophole, but later.

She lowered her head. “The whole kiss, that’s all you were thinking about, programming my armor?”

A sudden dryness spread through his mouth. He gulped. “I \_\_\_”

His ISA had known his intent and carried out the commands even when his mind had gone blank. Kissing her had been more pleasurable than he’d ever imagined, but she wouldn’t want to hear that. Would she? Probably not. She’d reminded him earlier that she’d only rescued him from the Queen because of their deal.

“Yes.” Another lie.

“It was all an act of convenience?”

An emotion he couldn’t identify sparkled in her eyes. Was she teasing him? No, she wasn’t like that. He was deluding himself. But why was she pushing this? Was she asking if he’d used the situation as an excuse to force a kiss on her? That was absurd. Wait, had he? He had entertained the thought of kissing her many times, but he would never force anyone. Yet that was basically what he had done.

His brows furrowed. “I sincerely apologize for any discomfort I caused you. I was obviously not in my right mind.” An oily sensation coiled in his gut.

Sky shifted closer. Her right hand pressed into the wall next to his ear, and with her other, she lifted his chin until he had no choice but to stare at her.

“Don’t beat yourself up.” A small smirk lifted her lips. “It wasn’t terrible.”

A hot pulse zipped through Ryan’s core. She *was* teasing him.

“But you’ve got one up on me ...” Sky dipped her gaze to his mouth and drew closer.

Desire reflected in her dilated pupils. Longing coursed through his body. Her velvety lips brushed across his, and he suppressed a groan. Her tongue traced his mouth. He grabbed her hips and tugged her onto his lap. She straddled him and he

let her tongue dart in and feather across his. She let out a soft moan that sent heat blazing through his body. Sky shivered and pulled away too soon.

Their chests rose in erratic beats.

“There.” Her voice was husky. “Now we’re even.”

His hold around her tightened. There was no way he would let this encounter end with this.

“I need only ask permission.” His fingers slipped under her shirt.

She jolted, and he hesitated, but she slid her hands over his shoulders, leaning in until their breaths mingled.

“For what?”

“To kiss you,” he said in a low, breathy voice and slid his hand up her waist.

Sky gave him the slightest nod before he claimed her mouth. She gasped, melting into him, and his mind went blank. He deepened the kiss, and she swept her tongue across his. Her arms wrapped around his neck. Ryan cupped her backside and drew her closer until she was flush against him. She rocked her hips into his hardness, igniting his core.

There was only this moment—the sensation of kissing this woman. Never in his existence had he experienced anything this intense. He ran his hand along her side, slipping under her clothes and over her ribs until he cupped the underside of her breast. She arched into him. He pushed her top up and brushed his fingers across her hardening nipple. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she curved more, pulling her mouth away. He trailed kisses over her jaw and along her neck, and her sweet, spicy scent flooded his senses.

A loud squeak, followed by an echoing clunk, broke them apart. His chest heaved. He drank in her naked breasts before he covered her and rested his cheek against hers. He needed time to calm himself, but their interloper wouldn’t wait, and there was only one person who could have interrupted them. He should have never granted her access.

Robin cleared her throat. “Sorry to barge in.” Amusement vibrated in her tone. “I see you’re busy, but unfortunately, this can’t wait.”

Sky groaned and slid off, leaving a cold emptiness in her wake. Ryan glanced at Robin, and her smirk only deepened his annoyance.

“What’s wrong?” Sky asked, all the earlier huskiness gone from her voice.

“We have a situation. The rejects are getting agitated and don’t appreciate me giving them orders. They’re demanding to speak to General Scarlet.”

Sky scowled.

He wondered if she was more upset about having to deal with the Matrons or that Robin had interrupted them.

“But ... I’m sure you could keep them waiting for another five minutes or so. Enough time for a quickie. Don’t underestimate the delights of a good quickie.” Robin grinned.

Sky’s cheeks flushed a faint shade of pink as his ISA supplied an explanation of Robin’s meaning. Ryan pressed his lips together and suppressed a smile.

“No. It’s fine.” Sky’s shoulders slumped forward. “Lead the way.”

Disappointment pulsed through him that Sky had so quickly chosen to leave.

“Okay.” Robin shot him a demure look. “That wouldn’t have been my answer.” She winked before turning to exit.

“Do you need help?” Ryan asked.

Sky paused but didn’t turn. “Nothing we can’t handle. You stay here and drive the train.”

“Yeah, you need to concentrate on driving the train,” Robin added over her shoulder.

Sky shoved Robin out the door.

“You’re injured, Sky. Take it easy,” he said.



He heard a soft humph before she shut the door behind her.

That had happened. He heaved a sigh and slouched. They had kissed, and she had run away. *Rafa's bane*. He ran his fingers through his hair. They should have never kissed at all. The first time, he could've written it off as a rash decision in a tense situation, but this ...

He flopped his head back and glared at the chrome ceiling. What had he been thinking? He knew better. Sky didn't. Could anything ever come of this attraction between them? An attraction that went against all logic. Maybe it was because she didn't know who he was? Or maybe it was the fact she was unlike any female he'd ever met? As dangerous as a Satar—an extinct predator that the old gods of An'Zura had favored.

Cee'kar had warned him that one day he might develop feelings for someone against his better judgment. But out of all the females in the universe, his stupid subconscious had taken an interest in her. Not only was she the daughter of a criminal, but her father, Jo'Ord, had framed Ryan's mother. Sky was the one female he should never be with.

He shook his head. Even though her ISA was barely active, any intimate act with Sky granted her limited access to his ISA, and if by some minuscule chance she was faking this whole persona and knew how to hack, he'd be leaving himself wide-open to her. He possessed highly sensitive information he couldn't share with anyone. It was why only bonded pairs in An'Zura had intimate relations outside the collective. Most explored sex in the safety of the collective or dabbled with other races. Soren's people were a favorite for most Dels because the Roza's base nanites were not sophisticated enough to access the An'Zuri. Would Sky's be able to access his?

If his father found out about this, he'd have one more reason to hate Ryan. It was a good thing Sky hadn't turned out to be the Argini child because his father would probably think that worse than having relations with an illegal half-breed. Ryan snorted; this might even be enough to get him expelled from the family.

After allowing himself to wallow in self-loathing, he forced his tired limbs to move and approached the control. There was one more thing to do.

TWENTY-THREE

# ALEX



*“I cannot take you with me. But I take comfort in knowing that Sky will protect you exactly as I raised her to.” ~ Jordan Argo, allegiance unknown.*

After a day and a half, Mad-D finally stopped trying to engage Lee in conversation. Alex feared his friend would never be the same again. It had taken Sky weeks to recover mentally from her first encounter with the mutant infected in Houston, and she was a trained killer. Lee was not. Alex wasn't sure if Lee had ever killed anyone before. Maybe that had changed on this trip, and that was adding to the reason he was distant.

Alex's shoulders sagged as he let out a short puff. They traveled in pairs, and currently, he rode next to the siblings who were sharing a horse. They were as quiet as Lee. Normally, Alex didn't mind silence. He'd grown up used to it with his dad and Sky. His mother had always been the talkative one, and Alex had loved to listen to her. Both he and Sky had shut down for a time after Mom had passed, so he couldn't blame the two beside him for their long expressions, but it would make the journey back even slower with the heavy atmosphere hanging over them.

Storm's ears twitched, and Alex wondered what he was hearing again. He'd been jumpy the whole afternoon. Alex peered into the woods, but he didn't have Sky's superior senses. Maybe if he'd trained more when he was younger, he might, but Sky had never wanted him to, and he'd never wanted to either.

Storm threw his head back and snorted. Mad-D's bay did too.

"What's going on?" Mad-D pulled on her reins. Her bay's rear swung out sideways as she tried to calm her.

Three horses emerged out of the trees in front, and Colonel Reed halted the line.

Lisa leaned around her brother and gasped. "Gray."

Alex went rigid. His heart skipped a beat. He reined Storm around and broke the line, urging Storm forward.

It *was* Gray. His face was more chiseled, but it was the Gray he remembered—the boy Alex had spent two weeks nursing back to health. Out of the three Generals that Sky called brothers, Gray was the only one Alex had been close to. His pale green eyes pierced Alex's soul. He ripped his regard away and skimmed the riders next to him. Sky's ex-warrior, Theo, had been one of her best scouts. Then his gaze snagged on her. A woman he almost hadn't recognized. Her strange haircut that made her look fierce and not like the kindhearted woman from some of his best memories at the Skin nation. *Gwen*. At times, he missed Gwen more than Sky. His heart squeezed at the sight of the three of them. He wished they were here on happier terms, but from the dreary expressions on their faces, he highly doubted it.

Alex took a deep breath to calm his nerves. They were here for him, to use him, to draw out Sky. He pulled out his sword and rested it on Storm's saddle. "She's dead."

Gray flashed a lopsided smile that had no humor behind it. "Nice to see you too, little brat."

Alex gripped his hilt tighter, refusing to rise to Gray's baiting. They weren't family anymore.

Colonel Reed reined in beside him. "Alex, do you know this man?"

"I'm sorry. How rude of me not to introduce myself. I'm General Grayson Hawk." He dipped his chin.

Colonel Reed stiffened, and Alex heard swords being pulled from scabbards behind him.

“Nice try, Alex. But I saw her a little over a week ago, and she was headed to you, so if she hasn’t found you yet, then maybe I should take you as a consolation prize.” Gray winked.

Heat pulsed through him, and he raised his weapon. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” He was not going back to being the Scarlet’s Heel again.

Colonel Reed sat tall in her saddle. “What business do you have here? You are trespassing on Liberator territory.”

“Gray, seems the brat isn’t infatuated with you anymore,” said a voice Alex had never wanted to hear again.

Alex’s cheeks burned; he hadn’t been infatuated. More horses emerged from the woods all around them. How had they hidden so well? Alex counted twenty-eight. There weren’t many people he wished dead, but the blond General stopping in front of Theo was one of them.

“Faust,” Alex hissed at Gray. “You’re traveling with *him!*”

Gray didn’t respond but kept staring at Alex with eyes devoid of feeling. It was a look he deserved. He had ripped Sky and Gray apart. Had Gray been as empty as Sky after?

Colonel Reed’s tanned face paled as she scanned the enemies. They were severely outnumbered.

The Skins, including Gwen, who’d once been entrusted with keeping Alex safe, raised their crossbows at him and his party. Her betrayal caused a pang of pain so sharp he nearly toppled. “Gwen?” His voice cracked.

“Aw,” said Faust. “She’s not yours anymore, little brat. She’s mine now and does what I tell her to do.”

Gwen stared at the ground but kept her aim on Alex. The urge to scream at her bubbled up. Tears threatened to spill, but he blinked the sensation away. How could she go along with this? Would she really shoot him? They should have never left. He never should have done what his father had ordered, but at the time, some unknown force inside him had driven him. And

the more time that had passed, the more the urge had morphed into an insatiable need that he'd had to fulfill. His muscles trembled. This was all his father's doing.

Faust kicked his horse forward. "Hello, Alex and friends. If you all cooperate, you might live through this." He wiggled his finger at the Colonel. "Let's start with dismounting and dropping your weapons."

"Do it," said Colonel Reed.

"Smart lady. Much smarter than your sister, who was too stupid to stay dead."

Alex ignored Faust and slid off Storm, letting his sword fall to the ground. Everyone else did the same, but Mad-D kept glaring at Faust. She needed to stop; otherwise, she'd draw his attention. Thankfully, Faust hadn't noticed yet. But he would, eventually.

A couple of Faust's warriors darted in and relieved them of their leads and led the horses away.

The Colonel stood at Alex's side and Lee on his other. Major Cyler quickly ushered Sean, Lisa, and Mad-D in behind Alex and the Colonel.

"Cut it out," Major Cyler whispered to Mad-D. "Keep your eyes on the ground unless you want to die."

Mad-D turned her glare to Cyler, then lowered her gaze. Alex exhaled a long breath. The Major then moved forward and stood next to the Colonel.

"What do you want, Faust?" Alex raised his chin. Even if they were all against him, he wouldn't cower. Sky had raised him better, and so had Gwen. His heart twinged again.

"Isn't it obvious?" Faust dismounted and strode toward Alex.

"I told you she's dead. A week ago, she died in an explosion."

Faust laughed. "You expect us to believe that?"

Alex clenched his teeth together. “They ran into mutant infected, then got blasted away by the Cardinals.”

“You don’t sound very sad about big sis dying. Do you hate her now? Is that why you left her?”

“That monster is no sister of mine.” He didn’t have Sky’s uncanny ability to read people. She said it was their expressions and mannerisms, and few people were adept at hiding their tells. Alex could lie well, and it was always easier when mixing in a truth that no one would suspect. Sky was not his sister, not by blood anyway.

Faust studied Alex, then glanced over his shoulder at Gray. “You know, I would have believed you. It lines up with the story Colt told, but it’s not what one of your Libbys at the outpost sang yesterday.” Faust scratched his chin. “Forbes, was it?”

Colonel Reed drew in a sharp breath. “What did you do?”

Faust shimmied his head. “Gray back there ruined my fun. He killed the fop before I could finish cutting off all his skin.”

Mad-D gasped, and Lisa squeaked.

“You fiend,” said Colonel Reed.

“I’m a product of my environment. Anyway, before Forbes bit the bucket, he said”—Faust grabbed Alex’s jaw, digging his fingers into his cheeks—“you were very convinced that your sister is still alive. So, where is she, little brat?”

“I don’t know,” Alex spat.

Another Skin collected their weapons.

“Stop.” Faust dismounted and pointed at the Skin holding the bundle of swords. “Come here.”

The Skin bumbled to him, and Faust yanked one from the stack.

“Gray, is this hers?” Faust drew the black blade from the sheath.

Gray’s jaw muscles bulged. “Why have you got Sky’s machete, Alex? I thought you hadn’t seen her.”



Faust shot Alex a triumphant sneer.

“He didn’t. I had it,” Lee said, standing next to Alex.

“Lee,” Alex hissed.

“Bullshit. Scarlet never lets anyone touch this.” Faust turned the machete in his hand.

Lee gulped. “She told me to keep it safe for her when she left to fight the infected.”

Faust hummed. “Interesting.”

“Faust.” Gray held his hand out. “Sky’s machete.”

The look in Gray’s eyes was deadly. Faust scrunched his nose, sheathed the blade, and hurled it. Gray caught it and rested it over his saddle.

A distinct whistle echoed through the trees. Faust dropped his grip and drew his sword. Half his men redirected their aim toward the sound.

Gray raised his hand. “It’s all right. It’s our scout.”

“What fucking scout?” Faust asked.

“The one Colt set on Sky after we lost her.”

Faust shoved his sword back into its sheath. “Bring him in.”

Gray whistled, and a minute later, a figure dropped in and fell to his knees in front of Gray.

“General Hawk.” The scout thumped his fist to his chest, swiveled on his knees, and did the same at Faust. “General Faust.”

Alex recognized him; he was another one of Sky’s ex-warriors.

“Report, Javi,” said Gray.

“I lost General Scarlet’s trail a week ago and have been following Alex since,” said Javi.

“She’s alive?” Faust asked.

“Yes, I believe so.”

Faust whipped around, pointing at Alex. “Ha!”

Alex glared. He knew once Sky left Reliance it would only be a matter of time before the Skins caught up.

“Please, General Faust.” Javi dipped his head. “I also thought General Scarlet had perished at first, but then I found her tracks. She barely got away and went over a waterfall.”

“What waterfall?” asked Alex.

“It’s not on any map. The drop was six to seven hundred feet,” said Javi.

Fear pulsed through Alex. Even Sky would have trouble with that height. She would have gotten hurt.

“And she survived?” Faust asked. “Of course she did. That bitch doesn’t die. Well, where is she?”

“I saw the tracks on the banks myself, but I lost her after that. There was evidence of another fight. I believe between her”—Javi glanced at Gray—“and her traveling companion and the Cardinals.”

Faust scoffed. “Cardinals again? What the hell is going on?”

“They are becoming more active, General.” The scout bowed his head.

Faust waved him off. “Fine.”

Javi backed away.

Faust scanned Alex’s group, stroking his beard. “So many people trying to join our party. Gray, would any of these, besides Alex and the Asian kid, be any use?”

“The boy and girl behind Alex. They traveled with Sky too.”

“Hmm, I’ll keep the bitches too. They’ll provide some entertainment.” Faust slid a long dagger from a sheath attached to his belt. “Might as well kill the spare.” He lunged at Major Cyler.

Alex sprang at Faust, collided with his midsection, and took him down. They tumbled over a couple of times until Faust pinned Alex.

Faust growled, baring his teeth. “You little shit. I oughta slice your throat.”

Gray loomed over them. “Faust, we need Alex alive.”

“Get him off me!” Alex glared at Gray.

Faust snarled. “Fine. I’ll cut a finger off. And don’t think Gray will protect you. He’s here under my command. The Warlord is holding someone far more valuable to him than you to ensure his obedience.”

Shock vibrated through Alex. Gray was under Faust’s command? Things couldn’t be worse. But he wouldn’t let Faust intimidate him, even if he was alone. He glowered rebelliously. “If you want my cooperation, then you won’t touch my friends.”

Faust brought the tip of his dagger to Alex’s cheek and pressed in until Alex felt a prick and flinched. “I could always knock you unconscious, little brat.”

“The Warlord will want him back too,” said Gray.

Alex shot daggers at Gray with his eyes.

Faust curled his lip. “Never knew you had spirit, kid. As a treat, I’ll show you something special.” He hauled Alex up, holding his dagger to his neck. “Gray, show him what happens to those who fail the Warlord.”

Gray’s nostrils flared.

“Take off your fucking shirt and show the little shit.” Spittle flew from Faust’s mouth.

Gray pulled his shirt over his head, and Alex noticed his arms were even more defined than in his memories. A white bandage was wrapped around Gray’s whole torso, and Alex couldn’t stop the shudder from raking up his spine. He knew of the Warlord’s cruelty. What had Zek done to Gray to warrant this many bandages?

Faust put his lips to Alex's ear. "It's a shame you didn't get to witness it. It was almost as good as Scarlet's flogging. Did you know that big sis took an extra ten lashings so you wouldn't have to watch?"

Alex drew a shaky breath.

"Didn't think so. Gray, take off the damn bandages already."

Gray's expression turned deadly as he unwrapped the material. Javi scurried over to help, and upon removing half, Javi gasped, gawking at Gray's back.

"Hurry the fuck up. The suspense is killing us." Faust tapped Alex's other cheek with his dagger.

Alex couldn't move. Faust held him so tight he couldn't see Lee or the others, but he wouldn't have been able to draw his attention away from Gray anyway. The last strip of bandage fell.

"The mighty Hawk got sixty lashes for letting your sister escape. The poor Hawk was tied to a post, half naked in front of everyone, and whipped by Hades. It was so much fun to watch, but nowhere near as fun as your big sis's flogging. *That* was glorious. Her sweet, young screams. The agony. The blood. So much blood. She bled more than big brother here. Because, unlike that loser Hades, Gray here didn't hold back when he flogged your sister. She was bleeding from the second hit. But she didn't scream until the thirty-fourth. I counted."

Alex tried to wrench free. He hated this. Being around them made him feel powerless. But he wasn't a little boy anymore. He needed to snap out of it.

Faust's tongue snaked out over his dry lips. "It was beautiful. I have had many women beaten since then to try to replicate the feeling I got that day. They've all paled in comparison. But soon, we'll have Scarlet back, and the Warlord has promised me she will be severely punished." He leered at Gray. "And I'm sure you will have the honors again. Maybe the Warlord will even do it in public this time. Ah, such pleasant thoughts."

“You’re sick,” said Alex.

“Maybe, but let’s not forget how your sister earned her General’s name. I’ve never seen anyone kill the way she did. It was exquisite the way she sliced your childhood friend. And I saw you watching. You can’t tell me she didn’t enjoy the power it gave her.” Faust wrenched Alex’s head to the side, forcing his gaze to Gray. “Gray, turn around.”

He turned, and Alex gasped. Gray’s once beautiful, golden back was a mangled mess of semi-closed wounds and cracked scabs. How had he withstood such a beating? Alex had spent thousands of hours staring at Gray’s back while he’d trained with Sky, memorizing the smooth contours that he would never see again. How could Zek do that to the boy he called son?

Faust snorted. “You’d never believe he was whipped just over a week ago.” He shook his head. “Still looks pretty gross, though, right? Take it in, brat. This is why we won’t fail in catching your sis. Look at all the pain she has caused.” He shoved Alex’s face closer and pressed his dagger into one of Gray’s wounds, causing his muscles, which were barely distinguishable anymore, to ripple. Faust drew the knife down, leaving a bloody trail.

Gray hissed.

“Stop,” Alex whispered. “Please.”

“Are you going to behave?”

Alex nodded.

Faust shoved Alex to his knees. “The Warlord wants her and, I guess, you to come home where you belong. So don’t fight us. The next time you resist, I will kill one of your Libby friends and give you scars to match Scarlet’s and Gray’s.” He spun away. “Secure those hostages. Scout, I want to hear more about what you saw. Now!”

Alex hung his head, fighting the bile climbing up his throat. Sky had never let him see her back until months after the flogging. Someone squatted, and by the spicy cedar scent, he knew it was Gray. Alex chanced a glance. Gray had pulled

his shirt on, and Javi trailed Faust, holding the bundle of bandages.

Gray hooked a finger under Alex's chin and tipped his head back. "Sky's going to be livid when she sees this cut."

"Mine? What about yours?" Alex pulled his chin free. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live."

Alex flinched at Gray's flat tone. There was no hint of friendliness in it.

"I'm sorry." Alex's words came out barely audible. "Our leaving wasn't supposed to hurt you or anyone."

Gray pressed his full lips together. "What did you think would happen?"

Alex clutched Gray's sleeve. "I don't know. Not this. I never imagined ..."

"Get up. And don't do anything stupid if you want your friends to live." Gray stood, slipping from Alex's grasp.

"I won't let Faust hurt them," Alex said.

"Then you better do what Faust says, little brat." Gray pulled him up and passed him off to Theo.

Theo tied Alex's wrists. Faust's warriors were doing the same with Colonel Reed and the rest. With a heavy heart, Alex trudged toward Theo's horse. He worried about Mad-D and Colonel Reed. He'd never seen Faust touch a child, so Lisa was safe, but how would he protect the other two females?

Alex looked back at Theo. "The women in my group?"

"Worry about yourself, little traitor. If it were up to me, you'd take all the punishment coming to General Scarlet." Theo propelled Alex.

He met Gwen's hard gaze, and his heart ached. She'd never looked at him like that before. He wanted to say something, but she turned away before he figured out what.

Theo helped him mount the horse and sighed when he saw Javi snatch Lisa. Javi commandeered Mad-D's bay and settled into the saddle with Lisa in front of him, and she appeared strangely comfortable with Javi. A tall warrior with black hair tied Colonel Reed, Sean, Major Cyler, Mad-D, and Lee to a long rope.

Theo settled in behind Alex. "Aren't you lucky you don't have to walk."

Gray mounted the horse beside them and shut his eyes before relaxing into the saddle.

Alex spoke over his shoulder, "Who is Zek holding hostage to keep Gray in line?"

Theo wheeled his horse around. "His lover."

A pang ricocheted through his heart. He'd always thought Gray would love only Sky, and he'd resigned himself to it. They'd always been so close, and they'd suited each other. Two of the strongest, most beautiful people he knew. He'd thought they would love each other eternally. Had Gray really moved on?

"Is she beautiful?" *She must be.* The pang returned, more painful this time.

"*He* is not bad, I guess ..."

Alex jolted.

"He was in the right place at the right time." Theo kicked his horse into a walk. "Now zip it. Prisoners aren't supposed to chat."

Gray's lover was male? And what had Theo meant about being in the right place at the right time? They headed west, and Alex hoped that Sky would be able to negotiate the release of his friends before turning herself over. He heaved a long sigh, sinking into Theo. Nothing had changed. It was going to be his fault again—his fault that Sky would be captured and taken to the Warlord. Last time Zek had enlisted her and used Alex to keep her in line, but this time ... Alex shuddered.

If Zek had done that to Gray, what would he do to Sky? He loathed being her weakness. If they ever got out of this, he was going to make Sky train him. He wouldn't take no for an answer this time, and he didn't care about his father's reasons. He couldn't be powerless anymore.



TWENTY-FOUR

# SKY



*“Be careful of smoldering men who make promises in bed.  
They are the most dangerous kind.” ~ Five-stud Gwen  
Roberts, Skineater.*

**S**ky pushed Robin to the next car. The door closed with a clunk.

Robin spun and smirked. “You and the sexy alien, huh?”

Heat flooded Sky’s face.

“I knew that yummy male would jump you the first chance he got. There’s clean underwear in your bag if you need to change.” Robin grinned like a sleaze.

Sky brushed by, fighting off another blush. She’d completely lost herself. If Robin hadn’t come, she wasn’t sure how far they would’ve gone. The memory of his mouth moving down her neck sent a wave of liquid heat through her body.

Robin hurried to keep pace. “I would’ve gotten an eyeful if I’d come any later. He was getting ready to eat you up.”

Sky’s brows pinched together. “He didn’t jump me.”

“Whoa.” Robin stopped her. “Seriously?”

Sky was still trying to process what had happened. “It started as payback, and he was trying to avoid my questions again. So I thought if I—”

“Loosened his tongue?” Robin waggled her eyebrows.

Sky wiped her lips, trying to erase the feel of his lips on hers. “That he might lower his guard.”

Robin laughed with way too much amusement. “Sorry I interrupted.”

Sky groaned. “Good thing you did.”

“Did he turn the tables on you?”

Sky hit her forehead with her palm. After she’d asked about why he’d kissed her, she hadn’t been able to get it out of her head. Who was she kidding? She hadn’t been able to get the kiss out of her head since it had happened. And she knew he’d been lying about only thinking about her armor. She might be lacking in experience in that department, but she knew desire when she saw it, and the yearning in his eyes had completely enthralled her. And that kiss. She should have never kissed him again. Now she wondered if any regular man would ever make her feel as... She shook the thought off.

“Shit! He got out of answering again!” Sky kicked the wall. “What in Cardinal hell was I thinking?”

Robin patted her shoulder. “Hon, when it comes to hot men and the end of the world, sometimes it’s best not to.”

Sky flopped her head, studying Robin through the corners of her eyes. “You remind me of him.” There was something about her.

Robin quirked a brow. “Who?”

“Gray.”

Robin opened the connecting door. “I’m honored.”

They entered the next car, filled with rows of empty seats and a few crates.

“You miss them, the Generals?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Every day.” Sky’s latest run-in with them surfaced in her mind. “They are my family.”

Robin nodded slowly. “Nowadays, we make our own families, don’t we?” Her expression turned solemn.

Sky was sure Robin didn't regret her decision to desert to save her nephew, but she didn't doubt that Robin was already missing the people she left behind.

Sky sighed and scanned the carriage. "Where is everyone?"

Robin's face pinched. "The ones demanding an audience are holed up in the next car, but first ..." She held Sky's hand in hers. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Saving Drew. I don't know how you kept running while carrying him. I—I'll never forget this." Robin cast her gaze down.

Even though Robin's touch didn't incite any invisible ants, Sky wasn't comfortable with these kinds of conversations.

"It was nothing."

Robin squeezed Sky's fingers. "It was not nothing! You went above and beyond."

"Well, someone elicited the brother's oath out of me." Sky grinned, hoping to dissipate some of the tension.

Robin fidgeted. "If I had known ... I'll find a way to repay you."

"Not necessary. And it wasn't that bad. I didn't get shot in the leg until the last few steps." Sky shifted. "I fulfilled our agreement, and let's leave it at that. How is Drew?"

"He's fine. Raving about how awesome it was to be thrown that far."

Sky cringed. "Sorry. And what about Flynn? Did you get hurt?"

"We're all good thanks to you," Robin said. "But I still can't figure out how you did it. I've seen people do some amazing things when they're pumped full of adrenaline, but you're almost like... well."

"What?"

“I know Ryan gave you nanites, but I got to thinking about all the stories about you. Some of them are so fantastical. Like the one of you and General Gray conquering the prison town when you were fifteen. I mean, you must have had men with you, right?”

Sky shook her head slowly. “It was just Gray and me.”

Robin exhaled a sharp breath. “Did you ever think you might be one of them? Although I can’t imagine why they’d leave one of their children on earth, but maybe one of your parents was?”

“No, I’m...” Dad had had the same eyes, but—

Searing pain lanced through Sky’s brain. She fell to her knees and moaned, clutching her forehead.

Robin knelt, grasping Sky’s shoulders. “Hey. Are you all right?”

The pain dulled, and Sky swayed. Robin steadied her.

“Whoa there. I guess you aren’t a hundred percent yet.” Robin wiped under Sky’s nose and her fingers came away bloody. “Should we see Ryan?”

“No,” Sky snapped. “Sorry, what were we talking about? Everything’s a bit fuzzy. The last thing I remember is Drew ... you said he’s fine, right?”

Confusion flashed in Robin’s eyes, and her brows drifted together. “Yeah. He’s good. You did good.” She took hold of Sky’s underarms and lifted as she stood, helping Sky up.

“Thanks.”

Robin stared with a pensive expression. “We should get this show on the road. If you’re up to it.”

“I am.” Sky’s strength returned, and she motioned to the door. “Do I need to know anything about them?”

Robin squeezed the door handle until her knuckles cracked. “Jen’s family and her elites were disgraced. A few weeks ago, they tried to overthrow Mindy but failed spectacularly. Lady Kendra thwarted them.”

“Were your people close?”

Robin’s upper lip twitched. “Some of us were.”

Sky took a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.”

Robin opened the next latch with care, and they were able to sneak in and peek around the divider.

Flynn stood with his back to them a few feet away. At the other end of the car was the rabble. Jen sat at a four-seater table left of the aisle, her arm still in a sling. Next to her was the vocal South Asian woman from the other cage, with a few fresh bruises on her face.

“Robin better not bring that Red Devil. We want to talk to the General,” said an older woman in her late sixties seated at the table behind.

Garrick leaned against the wall across from Jen, sporting a few scrapes on his chiseled cheekbones. Slung over his shoulder was one of the pilfered rifles. Jake and another man guarded the rear exit and had blood-spotted shirts and they too were armed with guns.

“Aunt Robbie will bring General Scarlet,” Flynn replied.

“Here she is.” Robin strode in and stopped shoulder to shoulder with her nephew.

Sky continued past into the center of the dining car. She didn’t spot Drew anywhere.

“Where’s Drew?”

“He’s safe,” said Jen.

Now she knew why Robin hadn’t dealt with this herself. She threw an annoyed look over her shoulder. Robin should’ve told her what was at stake. She’d never excelled at diplomacy, but she’d seen enough negotiations to know what needed to be done.

“Thank you for the assist.” Sky bounced her gaze over Jen and her crew. “We wouldn’t have escaped without your help.”

The older lady and Garrick narrowed their eyes, but the others nodded.

“Thank you.” Jen stood. “For freeing us.”

“You should really thank Ryan for that.”

Jen’s second shot her a questioning look.

“The male I travel with.”

The senior lady scowled. “We’ll not thank a Red Devil.”

Sky shrugged. There was no use arguing with her; her tone and body language told Sky everything. Nothing she said would change her mind.

Sky moved closer to Jen. “You wanted to see me?”

Garrick stepped in and grabbed Sky’s shoulder. “Keep your distance.” His fingers dug into her flesh.

Lucky for him he’d chosen the right shoulder to manhandle. If he’d chosen the left, she might’ve hurt him permanently. Sky ducked and twisted under his arm, knocking off his grip, and swept his leg out. He hit the floor with a thump. She pressed her boot into his neck, not hard enough to injure, but enough that he felt helpless.

The other two males whipped their rifles around, aiming them at Sky and Robin, who’d joined her with two pistols drawn.

“You think you’re fast enough, Jake?” Robin glared.

Sky glanced between the older gentleman and Robin. There was history there.

“Uncle Jake!” Flynn yelled.

Sky raised her eyebrows at Robin. “Brother?” She couldn’t see any family resemblance but that didn’t mean they weren’t related.

“Hardly.” Robin glowered. “He’s my sister’s ex-boyfriend and likes to stick his nose into everything.”

Jen raised her hands in a non-threatening motion. “I apologize for my son. He is overprotective. We mean you no harm, so I would be grateful if you could let him up.”

Son? Sky studied Jen. She barely looked thirty-five. She peered at the boy beneath her boot. No, he was definitely a man in his early twenties. His skin tone was lighter than Jen's, but there was a family resemblance. He had her attractive features.

"The next person who touches me gets a broken arm." She directed her warning to Jake and his associate as well.

Jen nodded. "Understood."

Sky stepped back.

Garrick snapped up, rubbing his neck and directing a deathly glower her way.

"Now, if we could all stand down." Jen made a lowering motion with her hands.

The man next to Jake relaxed, but Robin and Jake kept their guns trained on each other.

"Robin, is there something else I should know?"

She scrunched her face. "These rodents are all backstabbing traitors to the crown."

Jake scoffed. "Pot meet kettle. Here you are, right along with us."

Robin growled.

Sky turned and retraced her steps to the exit.

"Where are you going?" Jen asked, her tone rising with alarm.

Sky was in no mood to sit and listen to a group of bickering Matrons. "Clearly, y'all have things to work out. And I'd rather not get involved."

"Please wait." Jen swung around. "Jake! Lower your gun now!"

He flinched, and with a scowl, he lowered his rifle.

Robin sneered. "Pussy whipped."

He bared his teeth. "You snot-nosed brat!"



“Jake!” Jen snapped.

He straightened and wiped all expression from his rugged face.

“General Scarlet.” Jen motioned to the chair across from her. “Please join us.”

Robin slipped her pistols back into their holsters on either side of her waist.

Sky almost told Jen not to address her by that title, but she supposed she’d better get used to it again. Zek knew she was alive, and that meant she would have to return.

She made her way back. “General is fine.” She’d always hated the reason Zek had dubbed her Scarlet.

Garrick blocked the aisle. She halted a foot from him. They were the same height, making it easy to have an eye-to-eye standoff.

“Move, pretty boy.”

A smirk tilted the corner of his mouth. “Fat chance. You aren’t my type.”

Sky rolled her eyes. She wasn’t interested either.

“Garrick,” Jen said warningly.

He stepped back, and Sky sat across the aisle to keep some distance.

Jen conceded and retook her original seat. Robin slid in beside Sky, and Flynn remained a few tables behind them.

Sky rested her elbow on the plastic table that had seen better days. “What do you want?”

Jen clasped her hand together. “First, what do you plan to do with us?”

The old broad leaned across the table. “Bear in mind, there are more of us than you and yours.”

“Bear in mind,” Robin said, mimicking the old woman’s tone, “we have a bullet-proof alien with superhuman speed and strength at our disposal.”

Sky raised an eyebrow at Robin. This was going to take forever if they kept heckling each other at every opportunity. Where was Colt when she needed him? Or even Ryan. He should have been doing this. Heat crept up her neck as a memory of their kiss resurfaced. Quickly, she wiped it away. No, not Ryan.

“Redding, California. You’re welcome to journey with us. Those Libby idiots take in everyone. Or we can drop you off before. Your choice. I don’t need more people to be responsible for.” Sky tossed her head toward Robin. “I already got stuck with her and her boys. I don’t need forty more.”

Jen’s second scowled. “Twenty-nine. We lost twelve in the escape.”

Sky pinched her lips together. “Let me know your decision soon.” She moved to stand.

“Wait. Please.” Jen held her hands up. “We’re not blaming you for their deaths. But you have to understand, we’ve heard the stories about you. You can’t blame us for being on edge.”

“You came willingly. I didn’t force any of you to be here.”

“We had no choice.” Garrick sank into the chair opposite Robin.

“Not my problem,” said Sky.

“Garrick, we are thankful to be alive.” Jen tilted her head, studying Sky. “But I need to ask ... why didn’t Kendra kill you when she had the chance? She’d been planning it for years.”

Sky scowled. “She tried.”

“Yet here you are, with one of her most trusted elites.” She ran her thumb across her jawline. “It makes one wonder.” She moved her scrutiny to Robin.

Robin stiffened.

“Who are you again?” Sky asked.

“She was Countess Cruz. Now she’s a nobody,” Robin replied.

Garrick slapped his hand on the table.

Robin leaned back. “Their house was disgraced. I’m surprised Mindy didn’t hang you all.”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “Mindy?”

Robin ignored her. “Cruz here tried to launch a coup but failed miserably.”

Jen crossed her arms.

Garrick leaned over the table. “Mom was framed! Don’t talk like you know what happened.”

Robin glared at him.

“Well, none of that matters anymore.” Sky tapped her fingers on the table. “All of you are now exiled Matrons. Get used to it quickly and get as far away as possible. Go south or east. Pick one.”

The old lady leaned toward Jen. “Snuggling up with those Libbys ain’t smart. The Queen’ll find us in no time.”

“You think you’re important enough for her to go against the Libbys? They aren’t that weak,” Robin said.

“With what we know, she’d risk a lot,” said Garrick.

“Oh, pretty boy.” Robin stood, putting her hands on the table. “And what is it you think you know?”

“It’s the reason she framed us.” He held her gaze.

“You’re so full of shit. Your mom tried to take over and lost.”

“It’s all lies,” he defended.

“Keep telling yourselves that.”

“Garrick,” Jen warned.

Garrick threw his hands up. “She wanted to silence us.”

“Losers.” Robin leaned back.

He snarled at Robin.

“Garrick!” Jen glared.

Even if Robin wasn't interested, Sky was. "Silence you for what?"

Jake piped up, "The gifts. All the people she sends to the Cardinals. We know what they do with them."

Robin pushed off the table. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever wondered what happens to them? You must have recently." Garrick plonked into the chair.

"That's enough." The old woman gripped Jen's shoulder. "We need to be careful." Her watery blue eyes rested on Sky. "She travels with one of them Red Devils. We can't trust her."

Sky sighed. "He's not who you think. He's here to help us—the whole planet."

The old lady burst out laughing.

"Anna ..." Jen said.

Anna's chortle turned into soft snickers. "Who would have thought that the Scarlet General was a naïve little girl."

Ten different ways she could break Anna's nose flooded her mind.

"Anna, I knew you were stupid, but I didn't know you were suicidal too." Robin stepped away from the table, leaving Sky a clear path out.

Anna sobered and glared at Sky. "Haven't you ever asked yourself why they released a virus that turns humans into monsters?"

Sky flinched at the mention of the virus. Ryan's revelation about the infected not being lethal after a couple of weeks was still fresh in her heart.

"To keep us under control," Flynn answered. "If we're fighting the infected, we aren't fighting them."

Jake and Garrick snorted.

Jen let out a long sigh. "That's what Mindy wants us to believe."

“Then why?” Robin walked over and sat across from Jen. “Enlighten us.”

Jen glanced to her right.

Her second gave a slight shrug. “What have we got to lose? Robby is right. He is superhuman. We all saw him fight. If he wanted to kill us, he could.”

Sky put her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand.

Jen shifted position. “After I learned what they do with our *gifts*, I couldn’t understand how Mindy could continue to work with them.”

Robin scooted forward. “Come on, Jen. Don’t leave us in suspense.”

“They turn them into infected.”

Robin shot Sky a *she’s crazy* look. “Then why isn’t San Fran overrun with them?”

“Do I need to repeat my question?” Anna asked.

Robin slapped her hands on the table. “You think the Cardinals are using the infected for something?”

Anna’s face pinched. “We don’t think. We know.”

“How?” Sky asked.

Jen swallowed. “I heard Laxari discussing it with Mindy a few months ago. Mindy was curious too, and I happened to be there when he finally answered. They are building an army billions strong.”

“No.” Sky’s brows creased together.

Anna shot Sky an apathetic look. “An invulnerable, mindless army. What a perfect resource we are for them.”

“That can’t be,” Sky said under her breath.

“Ha!” Anna barked. “If you don’t believe us, why don’t you ask him? Ask your Red Devil what they are doing with the infected that are disappearing all over the country.”

“Disappearing?” Emptiness flooded Sky’s chest.

Robin tilted her head. “Mindy shipped out the last of ours and Reno’s infected to the Cardinal base a few months back. From us, there must’ve been a few hundred thousand.”

“But Ryan said they’re harmless after a couple of weeks,” said Sky.

“Exactly. They’re compliant, and with all that strength and speed, waiting for someone to give them orders,” said Anna.

Sky’s lips parted, her gaze skimming over everyone in front of her. A sinking feeling filled her gut. Then heat surged through her veins until her blood boiled. Had everything been a lie? Was this about controlling an army? Why had Ryan always been so interested in them? And the mutants. He’d called for them to be exterminated, but they’d kept one. He’d said for a sample. Lava spewed into her core. How had he known they’d kept it as a sample?

She stood abruptly, and her chair went flying. *Oh God.* Did he know about her? Was that why he kept giving her those elixirs? Was she a sample too?

Her muscles trembled with contained rage. “I’m going to find out!”

TWENTY-FIVE

# RYAN



*“You may enroll in the academy, but no one can discover you are my son. Having you alive is embarrassment enough.” ~  
A’an Dre’Vo Cruro, An’Zura.*

**R**yan moved to the front of the train and swiped his hand over the control panel, which had been left in basic mode. The speedometer, speed lever, and emergency brake melted away, leaving a blank, flat surface.

He placed his left hand in the center. A tingle pulsed through his palm, and a transparent overlay of the full controls appeared in his vision. He sent a command to lock down the engine car so that Sky and Robin would not interrupt him. The tri-source emerged in the center, hovering above its pedestal. He searched the controls and found what he needed on the left: a small yellow hole—the bridge port.

His closest friend, Cee’kar, had gifted Ryan a special pass he’d dubbed an infinity key. Cee’kar was the eldest heir of House Fernari, one of the original twelve families. While the Fernari family legacy was not as prominent as Ryan’s, they were powerful and wealthy, thanks to their selective breeding for increased intelligence over the generations. Cee’kar was no great warrior, but he was by far the smartest person Ryan knew. He was also an excellent code breaker and liked to dabble in the hidden sectors of the collective. The infinity key was a prime example of Cee’kar’s dabbling. Possession of such a key on An’Zura would break at least five laws, but here on Earth, Ryan could deploy it without repercussions, and with it, he could bypass the most stringent security.



He called up the gaudy gold key and inserted it into the bridge. The train faded away, replaced with the luminescent navy walls of the train's simulated reception, which was empty except for an open doorway leading to what the humans had called the virtual world but what his people called the Artificial Sectors of the Collective, or the collective for short.

Ryan connected to the tri-source and a standard interface loaded, requesting an access code. He inserted the infinity key and gained access immediately. A scrolling log of the power supplied to the Matron city popped up, but he wanted more. He swiped the window away and pulled up a list of available functions. Fifth one down, memory storage, was the one he wanted. He applied the infinity key to gain access, and it pulsed. The key only did that when it encountered layers of security that it needed to infiltrate. A counter appeared, estimating that Cee'kar's key would need a day to break through the security.

Ryan scowled. The security protecting the tri-source's inner core, where the memory storage lay, was decidedly stringent. Ryan was impressed. He hadn't known Laxari could construct such a complex web. There wasn't enough time now to break into the tri-source, so he would need to wait until they returned to his ship. He removed the key from the tri-source and disconnected.

Next, he accessed the portal to the moon and couldn't believe Laxari had only implemented three levels of security. If it had been Ryan, he would've placed a series of eight or nine locks. The infinity key broke through in seconds and he pushed his mind through the lunar portal. A rising sensation feathered through his torso as he propelled upward.

Lines of blue and green streamed around him, forming a tunnel. Through the gaps, the Earth fell away. He arrived in a small gazebo covered in vines and small blue flowers, the Earth Moon's collective reception, which overlooked a magnificent view of the blue planet.

Ryan located Lax in his quarters, and he was not alone. After the Metanoia had been underway, Laxari had sent most of his subordinates away, leaving the moon staffed by a

skeleton crew of six—as were the four bases on Earth. Six bases, including the one in DC, were completely unmanned, making a total of only twenty-nine Cardinals controlling all of Earth. He wondered what the humans would think if they found out such a small number of personnel were controlling their entire planet. But the decreased number was advantageous for Ryan. There was little chance he would encounter anyone else while visiting Earth's Lunar Collective.

After their people's previous lunar base had been destroyed, Lax had taken it upon himself to build a grander, more visible base. Instead of constructing it beneath the moon's surface as it had been before, Lax had erected a large dome for all to see. In fact, one could hardly call this a base. It was a replica of one of his family's vacation estates.

Ryan left the gazebo and followed a shimmering garden path lined with iridescent flowers not native to this solar system. They originated from Viann, a world now rich in flora and fauna. Viann was the last planet, before Earth, that the alliance had initiated a Metanoia on, which according to the records had gone smoothly, and the planet and its natives were better off for it.

He entered the main building, adorned with arches and columns. Inside, the walls were etched in crystal carvings, and leading off the reception was a grand staircase. Ryan followed it and stopped at the first door, gilded in gold trellis.

The floor under his feet glowed, initiating his physical construction. A tingle ran up his body as he took an astral form. Now anyone on the Lunar Base could see him. Cee'Kar's infinity key granted him instant master control over the whole base, thanks to Soren. She'd installed Cee'Kar's key into Earth's Lunar collective when she'd arrived a few months ago. He did a quick search for her but came up empty. Soren wasn't on the moon, and it was probably for the best they keep their distance to maintain Soren's cover.

Ryan focused on the door in front, it slid open, and he strode in, drawing the attention of the two occupants seated at the long obsidian table.

“Or’Rian!” Lax sprang off his seat. His long white hair hung loose around his shoulders.

Laxari’s vivid blue coat, fitted to his slender frame was immaculate, as nanite clothes always were, and the style, the off-center collar and the diagonal line of buttons, was the latest trend back home. Lax had always cared about fashion trends and Ryan saw that hadn’t changed. But even though Lax’s appearance was flawless, Ryan could read the frustration and anxiety in Laxari’s pale blue eyes. Ryan would have to tread carefully not to send his kowtowing cousin into an all-out panic, because if Laxari broke down, his father might send Va’Rini. And under no circumstances did Ryan want his sister anywhere near Earth or Sky.

A quick perusal of Lax’s quarters had Ryan curling his lips at the excessive opulence. The glossy white chairs were marbled with sparkling gold. That was so distracting Ryan wondered how Lax and En Floen got any work done. The floor-to-ceiling glass behind Lax overlooked a lush garden, beyond which was Earth.

“Laxari, we haven’t been friendly for over a decade. You have no right to address me so familiarly.”

Laxari was almost ten years older than Ryan, but they had attended the academy together. Laxari had been a senior during Ryan’s first year at the academy and had helped Ryan settle in, but after Laxari returned to his family’s estate during a break, he changed and took to bullying Ryan. So Ryan retaliated by outperforming Lax in combat, which had aggravated Laxari even more. Ryan had gone on to outperform Laxari in everything. The only thing Ryan had not beaten Lax in was height. Ryan was slightly shorter than average compared to most An’Zuri males. Cee’kar had theorized that Ryan’s advanced nanites required so much energy it had sapped his development.

Laxari sneered. “You haven’t changed. Still a stickler for protocol. And if you think I’ll address you by your full title, you’re as delusional as the vermin on this backwater planet.”

Ryan turned to Lax's aide. He'd met her a few times. En Floen, a rare Za, who'd climbed the ladder to become an aide to a son of the Cruro family—Ryan's family. Even though there were two original families, Ryan's was now the most powerful in An'Zura.

Cee'kar had seen En Floen's potential, but Laxari had somehow pilfered her. He hadn't seen her when he'd arrived, but now he knew who had set the security on the tri-source. Although even she would have trouble clearing Cee'kar's bug, which Ryan had inserted into the Lunar Collective earlier.

"En Floen, leave us," Ryan ordered.

She glanced at Laxari and stood. She bowed to Ryan first, then to Lax, and exited. The door sealed behind her, and Ryan was left with his cousin.

"Did you come to gloat?" Laxari asked.

"I came to give you another chance. Don't be foolish. You know, once I present my findings, the council will investigate, and you cannot be so shortsighted to think that my father won't use you as a scapegoat."

"I am loyal to our family. Your father respects that," said Laxari.

Ryan laughed. "Don't be naïve. My father is the most ruthless person I know. He'd kill me himself if he thought it couldn't be traced to him. Instead, he sends assassins to do his dirty work. Tell me, did you know Tuan's true objective?"

Laxari pressed his lips into a pensive expression. "What objective?"

"To kill me."

Laxari's nostrils flared. "I never agreed with your father's approach, but I did warn you not to upset him. Let's be reasonable, shall we? You have something on me, and I on you. I'm prepared to let you safely off that planet if we can come to an arrangement."

"What could you possibly have on me?" he asked.

Laxari chuckled; it was a weak, squeaky sound. “Come now, cousin. Did you think my protector’s sensors wouldn’t discover her?”

Ryan stared blankly, even though he knew what Laxari was getting at, but Ryan wanted to see what he knew.

“The girl. You’ve broken code Five-B,” Laxari said.

“I have not.”

“You implanted one of those pathetic humans with an ISA! Do not deny it.”

Ryan suppressed a grin, celebrating that Laxari had no clue who Sky really was. “I did no such thing.”

Laxari snorted. “Killing her before you escape won’t solve anything. I have recordings.”

“Recordings are easy to manipulate, as you well know.”

“But first accounts are not. You really should’ve gotten off your high horse and left no witnesses. My protectors saw her. That will be enough for the council.”

“I doubt they will mind much if I rectify my mistake before I leave.”

He scoffed. “You always act as if you are above us, but you are your father’s son, after all. You’ve left her alive too long. The council won’t approve, and I should know because I’ve already reported you.”

“Then there is no point in negotiating anymore.” Ryan turned to leave.

“Wait.” Laxari bounded to Ryan’s side. “I only sent a recording, which can be deemed unworthy if I see fit.” He stared down his sharp nose at Ryan. “You have to know if you stay this course, you’ll risk tarnishing your golden reputation.” Laxari waited for a response, but when Ryan offered none, he continued, “I’m trying to help you.”

“I don’t need it.” Ryan walked to the door.

“I almost feel sorry for that little human. She won’t know what hit her. Personally, I would’ve killed her when my

protectors attacked her camp or left her to die with those abominations. You could've blamed it all on me, but you missed your opportunity. Always one step behind."

Ryan clenched his jaw. "There are always opportunities. But as fun as it's been, Lax, I have things to do and places to be."

"Or'Rian! Don't be a fool. You will ruin our family if you go through with this. Are you really going to tarnish our two-thousand-year legacy for this insignificant planet?"

Ryan shrugged. "If that is the path we are on, so be it."

He disconnected from the Lunar Collective and returned to the train's reception area. After removing the infinity key from the bridge port and storing it in his ISA memory reservoir, he exited to the real.

Ryan massaged his forehead, his body swaying with the train's movement. Laxari was right about one thing: if he stayed on this path, he could ruin his family and disrupt the entire political system of An'Zuri, but sometimes, things needed to break before they could be fixed.

TWENTY-SIX

# SKY



*“Never let them see how much they hurt you. Never give them that power.” ~ Five-stud Gwen Roberts, Skineater.*

**F**our, maybe more, people trailed Sky to the next car. Her heart thumped in a cold beat. Details clicked into place. There had always been a feeling in her gut that investigating the Metanoia wasn't the only reason Ryan was here. She hastened to the next carriage and ripped open the door, and at the other end, she spotted him exiting the engine car.

Molten rage erupted in her core. Her vision tunneled, closing in on him.

He paused mid-step. “Is everything all right?”

Sky launched forward, using every bit of her new speed. She covered the sixty feet between them in a flash. He reacted immediately, dodging right. She knew he was faster, but she punched anyway, followed by three more in quick succession.

He blocked every strike. “Sky! What’s going on?”

She circled him. “The infected, why do you call them Chimera?”

His eyes widened slightly. “That’s their name.”

“It’s not a term the Rebels coined. It’s a name the An’Zuri gave them! Isn’t it?”

He clenched his jaw muscles.



Sky lunged, jabbing at his throat. He captured her arm. She twisted, swinging her knee into his kidney. He grunted and, in a blur, spun her, pulling her in until her back pressed into his torso. His arms wrapped around her chest, trapping her in a bear hug.

Sky thrashed. “You bastard. Metanoia, my fucking ass!”

He lowered his mouth to her ear. “Please stop. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She threw her head back. The crunch his nose made was music to her ears.

Ryan hissed and tightened his hold until Sky could barely breathe. Bending her knees, she threw her forearms up, opening some leeway. She ducked, wrapped her leg around his, and swept, pushing him back. They fell together, landing with a thud. She shot up his torso and jammed her forearm into his neck.

“What are you doing with the Chimera?”

He glared. “We’re not doing anything with them.”

“The truth!” She pressed harder, but she might as well have been pushing into a wall.

“It is!”

Her heart thumped wildly in her chest. “So your people aren’t collecting the Chimera to create an army?”

His jaw muscles flexed.

“Answer me!”

“Let me up, and I will,” he said through gritted teeth.

Sky glowered, her arms trembling from the strain of holding him.

Robin tapped her shoulder. “Let him talk, hon.”

Sky clenched her teeth until they throbbed. In one smooth motion, she retreated. Ryan sat up and wiped his nose. His fingers came away bloody, but his nose was perfectly straight. *Damn nanites.*

Ryan stood and brushed off his clothes. Sky remained in a crouch next to Robin's legs.

"We're waiting, Red Devil." Anna held Garrick's arm, and Sky wasn't sure if she was holding him back or using him for support.

Sky glanced around. Everyone from the meeting was here. Would Ryan open up in front of them? He'd clammed up with Lee, but then had been forthcoming with Robin.

Ryan's gaze met hers. "The Chimera, or infected as you call them, should not be on this planet. The Chimera virus was developed centuries ago when we were facing a superior enemy. The intention had been to transform lower races into invulnerable beings that followed orders without question, but immediately after development, the council forbade it. And under no circumstances should that virus have been released. The use of all nano viruses has been banned by our government for decades."

A massive tremor rushed through Sky's back. "The infected have nanites?"

She rubbed her right arm above her elbow. The phantom itch was back. She hadn't felt it in years. It took all her willpower not to gouge her fingers into her flesh.

"Yes, rudimentary ones, but they only spread through blood or saliva."

"You forgot scratches," Anna said.

Ryan's brows pinched together. "No, that's not right."

"Yes, I've seen it." Robin crossed her arms.

Jen tilted her head. "As have I. Even the smallest scratch."

A shiver sped along Sky's spine, spreading violent spirals of fear through her body.

A deep crease formed between Ryan's brows. "I've been traveling across the country for weeks on foot and only came across one infected. If what you say is true, there should be millions of them."

“There were, but your Lord Laxari has been collecting them over the last year,” said Anna.

“He is not my Lord,” he said indignantly and glanced at Sky. “You did not tell them about me?”

Sky’s muscles trembled. The itch had subsided, replaced with a heavy clump of dread bubbling in her chest. She stood and shuffled back a few steps.

“You mean your lie about coming to save us?” A heaviness enveloped her limbs, tugging her shoulders.

“It is not a lie.” Ryan returned his attention to Jen and her gang, brought his left arm across his chest, and bowed until his upper body was parallel to the floor.

When he straightened, Jen eyed him with interest. “Who are you?”

His gaze flicked to Sky for a second. “I have been sent by a special counsel to investigate Laxari’s handling of Earth. I arrived twenty-five days ago and have been gathering evidence against Laxari.”

His tone and demeanor had changed. Everything about him now exuded formality. Who was this alien that could wear so many faces? Which one was the real him?

Garrick scoffed. “Yeah, right. Mom, you can’t believe any of them. Let’s—”

“Quiet.” Jen held her hand up. “Please continue.”

“And answer the question. Who are you?” Anna snarled.

Again, Ryan glanced at Sky, then inclined his head toward Jen. “An Del Filix Or’Rian Cruro.”

“That’s a mouthful,” Robin mumbled.

Sky stiffened and studied a spot in front of Robin’s feet.

“An Del is my title. My friends call me Or’Rian.”

“Ryan’s a cover name?” Robin asked.

“I was told it sounded more human,” he said.

“Well, I prefer Ryan, if you don’t mind.” Robin shifted.

“Not at all,” Ryan or Or’Rian said.

“And An Del?” Jen asked. “What does it mean in our terms?”

“It means I have a higher rank in our home world than Laxari.”

Sky glanced up and stilled. Ryan’s intense gaze sent a wave of awareness crashing through her. Had he been watching her like that the whole time?

“Meaning?” Jen asked.

“That the council will not discount my findings. It’s the reason I volunteered. And any information you share with me regarding the Chimera and Laxari’s dealings would benefit your planet greatly.” His expression was blank.

Jen’s second leaned forward and whispered into her ear. “What else have we got to lose? I say tell him what we know. Maybe he’ll take care of Laxari and Mindy.”

Sky could hear her muffled speech, and if she could, Ryan definitely would.

“To what end?” Anna moved to stand beside Jen. “What good would come of telling you anything?”

“If it is deemed that Laxari has wronged this planet, my people will take action to right it.”

Anna barked a laugh. “What are they going to do, boy? Can they turn back time and return our dead?”

“We cannot manipulate time nor raise the dead. But reparations can be made.”

“Reparations, my ass,” Anna muttered.

“The Chimera, can you cure them?” Sky held her breath.

Ryan frowned. “It would depend. For newly transformed Chimera, it might be possible, but any infected longer than a year would be too far altered. I’m afraid trying to regress the changes would kill them. The Chimera nanos were designed to alter the host’s DNA.”

Her heartbeat echoed through her chest. A cold emptiness flooded her system as she scrutinized her hands, opening and closing her fists.

“You would have to find them first,” Anna said.

Sky spun around and headed to the exit.

“Where are you going?” Ryan’s voice rang out.

“For a walk.” She yanked the door open and marched out.

Halfway into the next carriage, a hand grabbed her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Robin asked. “You’re paler than usual.”

Sky shrugged her off. “I need to clear my head.” A violent shiver jolted her body.

“What’s wrong?” Robin reached for her again.

Sky recoiled. “Nothing,” she snapped. “I need to be alone for a while.”

Robin stepped back. “Okay, hon. I’m here if you need someone to talk to.”

Sky dipped her chin and strode away. The train cars blurred by. She barely noticed the people scampering out of her way. When she finally had nowhere else to go, she slumped and hung her feet off the end of the carriage and stared at her hands again, rotating it, trying to recall differences from her fourteen-year-old self. Because that’s how long ago she’d been infected.

She threw her head back, thumping it against the hard metal. Stupidly, she’d thought she’d fought off the infection when the gray skin had receded. But a few months later, she’d infected Gray. What would Gray think about having nanites? Knowing him, he might find it cool.

She sank her fingers into her hair and clenched, pulling at a large clump. The infected had been designed to follow orders, which meant Ryan’s revelation about them not being violent before must be true. So she’d killed her own mother for nothing. Her muscles vibrated as she tugged on her hair

harder until her eyes watered. *Mom ... Why couldn't you just wait?*

A sob racked through her torso, and she exhaled a heavy breath in an effort to recompose herself. According to Ryan, she wasn't human anymore thanks to those critters altering her DNA. Sky shut her eyes and listened to the clanking train traveling over the tracks. How was she going to tell Alex that? Were the nanites the reason she found it easy to kill others?

Trees and the occasional house passed by, and Sky cursed the day she'd saved the alien from the cliff he hadn't even needed help to scale. Her mind mulled over the past couple of weeks, and she rubbed her temples. Ryan had known she had nanites, which meant he knew she'd been infected. Did that mean she was a sample to him too? Or was it possible she hadn't been infected by the Chimera virus and he had implanted her? Unlikely. She'd seen his distaste at leaving nanites in humans. But he'd deceived her so completely that she didn't know what to believe anymore. Perhaps the kissing had been all a ruse too. Her chest ached. She had to be careful. His motives were more unclear than ever. Her head throbbed. Leaning back, she shut the world out.

Sometime later, the door squeaked open, but she didn't bother opening her eyes because she'd felt his approach from a carriage away, and his tangy scent filled her nose.

"We'll arrive soon," the alien said.

Sky huffed—she was just as alien. She hopped up and moved around him, but he caught her arm.

"Sky." His deep voice caused the hairs on her neck to stand.

She ripped her arm from his grasp, hating her body's reaction to him. She'd never had this problem with another male before. "You didn't infect me with nanites, did you?"

"No."

She raised her gaze. "You should've told me."

"Would you have believed me?" he asked.

Her brows furrowed into a glower. She loathed the damn alien for making a good point. She probably wouldn't have.

He continued, "You were so averse to them, and I wanted to allow you time to adjust."

Even though it pissed her off, she couldn't fault his reasoning. The thought of those little critters swarming through her body made her sick, but it turned out she'd had them for years. Sky pushed her fist into her forehead, and a faint buzz tingled through her brain. She needed a few rounds with a punching bag or canner.

"Are you okay?" He captured her fist, lowering it.

She tugged but couldn't break free. "You lied after I told you not to. You should've told me after the waterfall."

Ryan bowed his head. "I am sorry. You are right. That would've been an appropriate time, but I feared you were already overwhelmed with my identity and mission that—"

"That wasn't your call to make." Her heart trembled. "Am I just a sample to you? Like the mutant infected?"

"No!" He moved so fast she barely registered his fingers wrapping around her waist and pulling her.

She stumbled and placed her palms on his chest to right herself. Tipping her chin up, she glared at him. They were so close he'd only need to dip his head a few inches to meet her mouth.

"You aren't a sample." He brushed her forehead and ran his fingers down the side of her face.

Sky let her eyelids drift shut as his thumb traced her bottom lip. This wasn't being careful. She locked down her feelings and stepped back. They needed distance. She couldn't let him distract her anymore.

"I'd hate to think the deal we made was fake." She scrutinized him but caught no reaction to gauge his thoughts. "You have the tri-source?"

Ryan's jaw muscles contracted. "It's safe in my pack."

She'd risked her life to get that alien device because he said it would help them rescue John and her people. "That stupid ball better deliver and get us into the base."

Ryan's expression hardened. "It will."

Then that was all that mattered. It was what she would focus on from now onward. The lives of the people relying on her to rescue them. It was her mission and hers alone and she wouldn't let anything or anyone stand in her way. "Good. I'll see what weapons are available. Let's get this over with so we can get back to our lives." She sidestepped him.

Ryan held out his arm, blocking her. "Please, don't ever attack me again."

There was a warning in his tone that sent a shiver up her spine.

"Don't give me a reason to," she replied in an equally harsh tone, then pushed past him and exited, brimming with renewed purpose.



TWENTY-SEVEN

# SKY



*“Gwen stays with me. You can’t take her, Sky. She’s mine.” ~  
Scarlet’s Heel Alexander Argo, Skineater Hostage.*

**L**ess than thirty minutes later, Ryan stopped the train in the middle of the bridge near Redding. Sky had missed the discussion, but they’d all agreed it was best to destroy the train and the bridge along with it.

She hopped off after Flynn and turned to help Drew. Robin jumped down next, and they filed away, moving south.

Sky fell in next to Robin. “The aliens can use their nanites to build another one.”

“That’s what I said too.” Robin glanced over her shoulder at her two nephews. “But Garrick and Anna were insistent, and your lover boy agreed.”

“He’s not my lover boy,” Sky muttered.

Robin chuckled. “Sure. That’s why you were sucking his face earlier.”

“That was a momentary lapse.”

Robin adjusted the strap on her pack. “Take as many momentary lapses as you need with him. No one is judging. More than half the women here would jump at that if it was offered. Where is the stud muffin?”

Sky shrugged. She hadn’t seen him since earlier.

“He said he had to check on something,” said a new voice. “And he looked a bit flustered. I didn’t know those Red Devils

could even show emotion.”

Sky scowled at Garrick. “Walk with your own people.” She glanced at the train but didn’t see Ryan. What had flustered him?

“These *are* my people.” Garrick motioned to Drew and Flynn. “You’re the only non-Matron.”

“And you volunteered to keep an eye on me?” Sky asked, walking faster.

“Someone had to,” Garrick said, keeping pace behind them.

Robin whispered, “If Ryan doesn’t shell out, I’m sure pretty boy would be happy to step up.”

Sky couldn’t help but smile at Robin. “You’re welcome to them both.”

Robin shot her a sly look as they reached the end of the bridge. They turned off and waited for the rest of the Matrons to join them. Two people had been badly injured and were transported by stretchers the Matrons had slapped together using materials from the train. The last Matron, Jen, stepped off the bridge, and Ryan jumped out of the engine car and jogged toward them.

Robin bumped Sky’s shoulder. “If you are seriously passing on that, I’m happy to fill in.”

Sky’s gaze ran over the alien and rested on his face, and her heart did an odd thump. “Help yourself.” She marched toward a rusting car and plonked down onto the hood.

Garrick sat beside her, and Sky huffed. If he kept sticking to her like this, she might knock him out before long.

When Ryan reached the end of the bridge, he said, “Everyone, please cover your eyes in three, two, one.”

A blinding flash erupted behind him. Sky raised her arm to shield her vision.

“Shit,” said Garrick.

Sky squinted, trying to see through the glare. The light dimmed, and there was nothing left of the train, and a large section of the bridge was missing too. Only a curtain of ash remained, rippling in the wind.

“That’s crazy.” Garrick brought his necklace to his mouth and kissed it.

Jen clapped. “Amazing.” A few of her people mumbled similar sentiments. She turned to Ryan. “Thank you, An Del Or’Rian.”

“Your mom is a suck-up,” said Sky.

A low rumble came from Garrick.

“We should get moving.” Jen smiled brightly at Ryan.

“Since when is she in charge?” Sky scooted off the car.

“She’s always been in charge. You’re only realizing now?” Garrick pushed off the hood. “Come on, killer. We’ve got lots of ground to cover.”

Robin rejoined her. “What did Ryan do with the scarlet sphere?”

It took Sky a second to remember that’s what the Matrons called the tri-source. “He’s got it. That nanite bag of his hides a lot.”

“Everything all right between you and the hot alien?” Robin asked.

Sky glanced over her shoulder and spotted Ryan talking to Jen and Mina, and both Matrons seemed exasperated at something Ryan said. She snorted. She was sure she’d had the same expression many times when dealing with that alien. “Couldn’t be better.”

“Do you usually keep a line of twenty people between you?”

“He’s covering the rear.”

“Ah-huh.” Robin waggled her eyebrows. “Well, don’t look now, but I think he missed you.”

Her spine stiffened as his presence closed in. It was different to what she felt with Gray. Ryan was like a massive ball of energy that lit her nerves as he drew near.

“Sky,” he called.

“What?” She greeted him with a glare as he slowed to walk alongside her.

“I need to check something. It won’t take me long, so I’ll meet up with you later.”

She clamped her fingers around his wrist. “You’re not running out on our deal, are you?”

Ryan shot her an unimpressed look. “Keep heading south. I’ll find you before nightfall.”

“How?”

“This.” He placed a black disc in her hand.

As soon as it touched her skin, it pooled into liquid and streamed out. She managed to suppress a flinch as it wrapped around her wrist and formed a thin black band.

“Did you just put a tracking device on me?”

He nodded. “You can turn it off whenever you want. Try it.”

She glowered at him, then gave a mental command for the device to deactivate. The black nano-material streamed back to her palm, reforming a disc the size of an old fifty-cent coin.

“Please keep it on so I can find you.”

She reactivated the band. “Where are you going?”

“Just to investigate a strange reading I got. It’s probably nothing. They need you to negotiate with the Liberators, right? So stay with them.”

Sky huffed. “Whatever.”

Ryan dipped his chin toward Robin.

She grinned at him brightly and winked. “See you soon, stud muffin.”

Ryan quirked his eyebrow and shook his head. He glanced at Sky once more before turning to jog away, heading west. There wasn't much in that direction except for acres and acres of forests. She knew because she'd spent a week doing survival training with her dad one summer before the pulse.

"Where the fuck is the Cardinal going?" Garrick snapped.

Sky glowered at Garrick. "None of your business."

"Sure you don't want to go with him?" Robin asked, drawing her attention back. "You could resume your horizontal activities I rudely interrupted."

Sky directed a murderous glare at Robin, but it only made Robin's smirk widen.

"I'm good," Sky muttered. He could have his little secrets for now, but she'd interrogate him when he got back, and this time she would not be distracted.

They resumed their previous pace, heading south.

"We're going to be sitting ducks on the Memorial Bridge."

She gestured to the highway they traveled along, peppered with abandoned cars. "We're sitting ducks here too."

"Fair point." Robin glanced back at Drew and Flynn, walking a few steps behind. "Well, at least Jen agreed to let us lead. If we do come across the Libbys, between the two of us, we should be granted an escort to their base." She patted Sky's shoulder. "You must be excited to see Alex."

"You could say that." Sky's stomach churned, but it wasn't excitement.

A lump of dread had taken residence in her gut since she'd stepped off the train. She didn't know if it was intuition or fear, but she had a very bad feeling, and the last time she'd felt this way, her best friend had betrayed her.

Robin peeked back. "Garrick's really crushing on you."

"Can't you stop thinking about boys?"

"Why? Do you have something better than sex to think about? Or should I dwell on the fact my nephews and I left

everything we know, and if the Queen's elites find me, they'll kill me, and—"

"Okay, I get it. You're right. Sex is much better." Sky couldn't argue after that. What good was there to think about nowadays? Sex and war were pretty much all there was.

"I never pegged you for a prude. A lot of us assumed the three Generals were your personal harem," Robin said.

Sky raised her eyebrows. "Those three would never share. And it wasn't easy for me to have ... relations before."

Robin shifted her backpack. "How come?"

Sky rubbed her arm. "I had a mental problem. Whenever someone touched me, it was ... uncomfortable."

Sympathy flashed in Robin's hazel eyes. "But now it's better?"

Sky perked up. "Yes."

She hadn't asked Ryan about how he'd gotten rid of her buzzing skin problem yet, but it seemed to be gone for good. She glanced at Garrick traipsing behind the nephews. His muscles were long and slender, and he had a straight nose and defined jawline. And his dark eyes gave him a dangerous, bad-boy air. When he caught her watching, his gaze dipped, running down her body and back up. He quirked a brow in question. Sky snapped her head around, then a second later peeped back again. Garrick grinned. It was the sexy, lazy smile of a man who was sure of himself. Sky turned her attention forward. Things would certainly be less complicated with Garrick.

"Well?" Robin asked. "I've heard he's good in bed."

"I'd prefer to sleep with someone who doesn't want to slit my throat."

Robin laughed and threw her arm over Sky's shoulder. "For you, that might be hard to find."

Growing up, Sky hadn't had any girlfriends. Not until she'd become a general of the Skineaters had she discovered the joys of female friendship, but there had always been an

invisible wall between her and her warriors because she'd been their superior. It was different with Robin. She treated Sky as an equal.

“What about you? Why aren't you interested in him?”

Robin weaved around a car door, rusted open. “Too much of a mama's boy.”

“But if it's just one night...”

Robin's face lit with glee. “Now you're getting it. One of the guys I used to hang out with called it, wham, bam, thank you, ma'am.”

“And did you wham bam your friend?”

Robin's expression darkened. “No, but he taught me a valuable lesson that I gladly pass on to you. Don't get attached. So be careful with stud muffin.”

Robin was right. Sky needed to be extra cautious around Ryan now. As much as she hated to admit it, the damn alien had broken through some of her walls. She couldn't allow him to get any closer. Soon, he'd leave Earth, and the thought of not seeing him again shouldn't bother her as much as it was.

“What's your plan now?” Robin asked.

“I have a deal with the alien. He's helping me with something.” A soft twinge rose in her chest and morphed into a faint tugging sensation.

Sky stopped dead in her tracks. *No!* Dread flooded her. Gray was early, and there was only one reason he'd be back. It meant Colt had failed to buy her time. But she was so close! Just another week was all she needed to find John. A sharp breath escaped her lungs.

“What's wrong?” Robin halted.

Sky peered east, even though she knew she wouldn't see him. “I have to go.”

“What?” Robin asked.

“You're not going anywhere.” Garrick crowded behind Sky until his breath tickled her ear.



“You don’t speak for her.” Robin shoved him off. “And stop treating her like a criminal. For God’s sake, she saved all our asses. Just because you got hot and bothered when she beat you up and you’re trying to fight your attraction doesn’t mean you need to be a dick about it.”

Garrick spluttered. “I—I didn’t get hot and—”

“So you *are* attracted to her.”

“Robin!” he growled as Jake joined them and joined the conversation.

Sky rested her forehead in her palm, trying to drown out the bickering. These were Matron Elites, and while they weren’t in hostile territory, if they kept this up, they would draw attention. And she needed a clear head to think. Could she outrun Gray? Or maybe he could help her rescue her friends. No, that wouldn’t work.

Last time, Zek had sent his men with her brothers, which meant he would’ve done the same again. Who had he sent this time? Huey? Maybe Dewey? If it was Amir, she’d have a shot at negotiating.

“Is everything all right?”

The elites fell quiet, as Jen joined them.

Garrick pointed. “She’s leaving.”

“Why?” Jen asked.

“Look, none of you are the boss of me. I don’t owe anyone here an explanation,” Sky said.

Hurt flashed for a moment in Robin’s eyes before her expression hardened.

“I have something I need to take care of.” Sky backed away.

“I can go with you,” Robin said.

“General Scarlet.” Jen lowered her chin slightly. “We owe you a debt and wish to repay it. If you need help, then please let us assist.”

“Please,” said Robin.

Sky’s gaze swept over the people in front of her. She barely knew any of them, and they were asking her to share one of her greatest secrets. Of course, they didn’t know that.

Robin held Drew’s hand. “Tell us what’s going on.”

Sky glanced east again. She really didn’t want to fight Gray, but she wouldn’t abandon John. All her secrets weighed on her shoulders. She was tired of hiding things about herself. What would they do if she told them the truth? Abandon her? Call her a freak? Only one way to know for sure.

“Gray has come for me,” she said.

“General Hawk?” Jen asked.

As one, the elites surrounding her pulled out their swords and scanned the area.

Sky put her hand to her chest, shut everyone out, and focused on him. The tug was constant, which meant he wasn’t moving. He was waiting for her to come to him at the edge of their awareness.

She opened her eyes and pointed. “He’s stopped about a mile that way.”

Confusion filled Robin’s face. “How do you know?”

Sky thumped her fist to her heart. “Because I can sense his presence, and he me.”

Robin’s mouth dropped in slow motion.

“It would be nice to see Mindy’s son again. It’s been too long.” Jen smiled gently, but Sky wasn’t fooled. Jen was a Count, and those titles were earned through strength.

“Why’s he here?” Robin asked.

“Zek knows I’m alive.”

“Fuck,” said Garrick.

“If the Warlord knows you are alive, you’ll definitely need backup,” Robin said.

Garrick smirked. “Let’s kill some Skins!”

They separated from the injured and Robin's nephews, leaving Anna in charge.

"I haven't fought Skins in a while." Robin rolled her shoulders.

"You fought me in the cage," said Sky.

"You don't count. You haven't been a Skin for years."

Including Robin, five Matrons accompanied her. Jen, her second—Mina, Jake, and Garrick. They all followed her in silence. Everyone scanned the forest for threats.

The coldness emanating from Gray concerned her. Would he attack her? What had the Warlord done to create these feelings in him? If he was truly against her, what would she do? Gray's anxiety flared again. Something was very wrong.

When she estimated that Gray was only a few hundred yards ahead, Sky halted the line by one of the tallest Redwood trees. The forest was so dense that the visibility was less than thirty yards.

"Why are we stopped?" Jake asked.

"I'm going to take a peek," she said quietly, tipping her chin toward the lowest branch above.

Garrick rounded Robin, staring up. "That's fifteen feet. There was a branch back away that was lower."

"She can make it. Wait till you see it." Robin grinned knowingly.

Garrick furrowed his brows at Robin.

Sky bent her legs. She was sure she didn't need a running jump this time. Especially after the last dose of the elixir. "Be back soon."

She leaped, speeding upward. Grabbing the branch, she swung herself on and scaled the trunk to the next one up, then kept climbing. In minutes, she reached the top, about two hundred feet up, and caught a flash of golden hair through the leaves, but branches obscured her view. Sky sprinted forward and sprang to the next tree. She landed on her target and

hurried to the trunk in case the branch broke. Working her way around, she ventured lower and dangled to gain a clear view.

Annoyance flashed through her. Zek had sent Faust and ... Her heart clenched. He'd grown, but she recognized him instantly. They had Alex. *Fuck. How?* Air fled her lungs, and her heart froze as she watched a terrifying sight. Gray yanked Alex's head back by his hair. Alex's body shook, and she caught snatches of anger from Gray through their connection. Her fears were being realized right in front of her. It was happening again; her best friend was betraying her. Everything was unraveling before her eyes. Gray was against her, and he had Alex.

She counted the Skins, searching, hoping for some way out of this, but there were so many, and they had other hostages too: Lee, Lisa, and Sean. Those poor kids had been through enough already, and there were three she didn't recognize. Why did that stupid alien have to choose now of all times to run off? This would be so much easier with his—Sky froze. When had she become so dependent on him? Her gaze drifted over two more familiar faces—warriors who had been hers and had once been family. Were they still loyal? It was more likely they were not, especially if they were under Faust's command. *Gwen. How did you end up with him?* Sky clenched her fists.

Gray knew she was here, and by the way Faust was positioning his men, he knew too. Which meant Gray was cooperating with Faust. Repugnance churned in her stomach. How could he work with Faust? Were Hades's and Colt's lives on the line to ensure Gray's obedience? They had to be because she couldn't ... she wouldn't believe Gray would betray her willingly.

Sky sighed. It really would be easier with the alien's help, but this wasn't Ryan's fight. And Faust would never wait that long. He'd start cutting hostages if he got bored. She bounded back to the other tree, hopped down a few branches, then leaped off and landed in a crouch at Robin's feet.

"That looks enjoyable," said Robin, her eyes gleaming.

“It is under normal circumstances,” she replied flatly.

Robin’s comical grin dropped the moment she met Sky’s eyes. Jake and Garrick gawked, looking between the branches and Sky. Jen and Mina studied her with contemplative expressions.

“That was a sixty-foot drop ...” said Garrick, still gaping.

“The super juice must still be working,” Robin replied.

“The what?” asked Garrick.

Sky stepped into the middle of the group. “Gray is with Faust. They have Alex, my little brother.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“How many are we up against?” Jen asked.

“Twenty-nine Skins, including the generals. They have other hostages too. Some kids I traveled with before we got separated last week. You all might as well leave now.”

“Why?” Robin asked.

“Faust has too much leverage. He won’t hesitate to kill a hostage or two to prove a point, then he’ll send you on your way.” Sky gritted her teeth. “And with Gray against me, I can’t win.”

“I know Gray. Quite well, I believe, and I can’t imagine him ever turning against you,” said Jen.

Sky glanced at Jen. She didn’t know how Gray and Jen knew each other, but right now she didn’t care. Her shoulders slouched. “If the Warlord has hostages too, he would.”

Garrick snorted. “What a disappointment the infamous General Scarlet turned out to be. It’s like you want to go back \_\_\_”

Sky growled and lunged forward, grabbing Garrick’s throat, and slammed him against a trunk. She pushed upward until he stood on his tiptoes. He clawed at her hand but couldn’t break her hold. “Do you know what he’ll do to me when I return?”

“Throw you a party?” Garrick’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

Sky glared. “You’re right. And I’ll be the star. Displayed in chains, probably naked, after receiving fifty lashes.”

“There’s no way he’d whip you fifty times.”

“True, it’s not enough. I got that last time he made an example of me when I was fourteen. Would you like to see the scars?”

Garrick’s eyes widened, and his face paled.

“They have my brother,” said Sky. “Nothing is more important than saving him. If I have to endure torture and become the monster the whole continent feared again to keep Alex safe, I will a thousand times over.” Sky tightened her hold.

“Find a way to save him without—” Garrick gasped.

“I will not risk Alex.”

The clicks of guns cocking sounded behind her.

“General Scarlet,” said Jen. “Release my son.”

Robin shuffled to Sky’s side and tapped her outstretched arm. “Hey, let’s all calm down and think for a minute.”

Sky stared at Robin and loosened her grip, letting Garrick slump down.

“Why don’t we just wait for Ryan to get back? He’s like Superman, right? He can just zap them out of existence,” Robin said.

“You’re getting your superheroes confused,” said Jake.

Robin waved dismissively. “You know what I mean. He’s powerful. We should use him.”

Sky swung around and came face to face with the barrels of two rifles—one held by Mina, the other by Jen. “He said he wouldn’t be back until nightfall and there’s no way Faust will wait that long.”

“Even if Or’Rian were here, it wouldn’t be easy,” said Mina, lowering her rifle.

“If you go out there, you’ll die,” said Sky.

Jen flashed a smile full of reckoning and dropped her aim. “Don’t underestimate us. It means we’ll have to be extra sneaky. We are all very good shots.” She looked up. “A couple of us in the trees can provide some support. And when things go to hell, the rest of us will be free to act.”

Garrick, Jake, and Mina stared up.

Sky pressed her lips. “Flynn and Drew—”

“Will be just fine until I get back.” Robin wagged her finger at Sky. “There is no way you are going alone, so stop arguing and help us figure out a plan.”

Sky huffed. “You better not die because I’m not getting saddled with your brats.”

Robin winked.

Sky rubbed the back of her neck. “There are two Skins I don’t want you to shoot.” She couldn’t include her ex-warriors; they were too much of a wild card.

“Gray?” Jen asked.

Even if he wasn’t with her, she had to believe there was some hope. She nodded. “And the Skin with the purple vambrace. Javi is still loyal to me.”

“Do you have a plan?” asked Jen.

“Yes.”

TWENTY-EIGHT



## GRAY



*“In honor of the blood coating your body, you will henceforth be known as Scarlet.” ~ Warlord Zek Wong, Skineater.*

A white flare lit up the northern sky. Whatever had caused it must’ve been incredibly bright to be seen during the day from that far away.

Faust pulled back on his reins, slowing the line, and twisted in his saddle. “What do you think, little brat? Cardinals?”

Gray glanced back, ignoring the discomfort the movement caused.

Alex peered up. “It looked similar to the blasts we saw from a prowler.”

Faust raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you saw some action. You *have* grown up.”

Alex’s gaze flicked to him, but Gray turned away quickly to avoid the eyes that had always incited his protective instincts. They reminded him of Sky’s, only softer and more trusting, making it hard to stay pissed at the little brat. Even though Alex was eighteen, Gray still thought of him as the scared little kid clinging to his big sister’s shirt.

A faint pressure tugged in his chest, increasing with every step his horse took. “She’s near.”

Faust tugged on his reins. “Scarlet?”

Gray nodded.

“How do you know?” Faust asked.

“I have a built-in Scarlet radar,” Gray said, expecting Faust to call him out on it.

But he didn't.

Instead, Faust scrutinized Gray for a moment. “Which way?”

Gray pointed northwest, in the same direction as the flare. “If we stop, she'll come to us.”

“This better not be a ploy. The Warlord wants a report of your conduct when we return, and what I say carries a lot of weight on whether he's gonna lift your probation.”

“No one wants Scarlet back more than me.”

Faust sneered. “Right. Lover boy's life hangs in the balance. I can't understand why you'd only settle on one bitch when we can have our pick of hundreds.”

Faust reined his horse around and called a stop, then surprised Gray by dismounting and moving to organize his men.

Greer had been right, not that Gray had doubted the old man. For Faust not to question him meant that most people suspected there was something different about Sky and him. Enough that Faust had readily accepted their supernatural connection.

What did Zek think? Zek had known him since he was seven, way before Sky had infected him. Had Zek seen the change immediately, or had it taken him time? Was that why Zek had turned against him? If that was the case, why continue the charade of treating him as a son for so long? He had noticed Zek pulling away in the last few years, but he'd thought it had been his fault because of the state he'd been in after Sky had left. He was losing a father all over again.

Gray slid off the saddle, and his back protested. Gwen trudged up, staring at Alex through the corner of her gaze, took Storm's lead, and led his horse away. He wondered how long it would be before Gwen caved and went to Alex like he

knew she craved to. Alex and Theo dismounted next to him. Theo nudged Alex toward Gray, then steered his horse away toward the others.

Gray held Alex's arm and noticed that the little brat wasn't so little anymore. Alex was almost as tall as him now, and Gray could feel the strong curve of his biceps, though his form was still on the slender side. "You've grown, little brat."

Alex turned his piercing eyes to Gray. "Stop calling me that. When you do, it's like nothing's changed, but everything has, hasn't it?"

"Yes." Gray tugged Alex closer. "Don't do anything stupid, got it?" he whispered.

Alex shot Gray a pouty glare. "What do you care what happens to me?"

"I've always cared about you and your sister. You know that." He ruffled Alex's hair.

Alex and Sky had always had similar scents, spiced maple. Sky had laughed when he'd told her until she'd thought of the reason why she might. Their mother had always sprinkled cinnamon on her pancakes and would serve them swimming in maple syrup at least twice a week.

"I'm not a child anymore." Alex ducked away.

Gray observed Faust, but he could feel the brat's gaze boring into him. Faust sent men with crossbows out to hide in the bushes. Then he started separating the hostages. Javi dismounted with Lisa and edged toward the outskirts of the clearing.

Alex stepped in front of him. "What did you do with Sky's machete?"

Gray narrowed his eyes. "Theo's keeping it safe for her."

Sadness reflected in Alex's gaze. "Why are you doing this?"

Gray had to glance away. "You know why."

“I never thought ... I mean you and Sky ... I thought.” Alex fidgeted with the button on his collar. “Um ... I mean I know your lover is being threatened but is... are they really a he?”

He bent and whispered into Alex’s ear, “Does it bother you I prefer men?”

Alex’s little ears flushed instantly, and he stepped back. “No, but I always thought you loved Sky.”

“I do, but not in that way.”

“Did she know?”

“Always.”

Alex’s shoulders slumped. “Oh. And the Warlord really has your lover hostage?”

Gray clenched his teeth. “Yes, and he had him beaten black and blue before I left. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Sorry.” Alex dropped his gaze, and Gray regretted his outburst. He might as well have kicked a puppy. Faust was still ordering his men around, and Sky was taking her sweet-ass time getting here, so Gray grabbed the opportunity to find out the truth. “What did you tell Sky to get her to jump off the bridge?”

Alex stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I talked to her men. None of them think Sky planned to desert. My memory of that day is fuzzy, but Greer swears you said something, and he’d never seen her so terrified before. What was it?”

Alex squeezed his fists. “That I wanted to become a killer.”

Gray caught a slight waver in Alex’s voice. “And?”

“That’s all.”

*Little shit.* Didn’t Alex remember that Gray always knew when he was lying? Gray yanked Alex by his hair, and Alex glared up.

“What else?” Gray asked.

A strong spike of fear zipped through him from Sky. She was closing in, probably in the trees looking down on them. Under normal circumstances, he would have gone straight to her instead of drawing her out. Something he'd failed to tell Faust. He might want to take Sky home, but he wasn't comfortable being forced to by Zek, and now Faust. Hopefully, if Sky got pissed enough, she'd take care of Faust for him. If she didn't, Gray might do it anyway before they returned, especially after what he'd done to the Liberators at the outpost. His stomach was still roiling from the sight of Forbes.

“You and I are going to revisit this conversation later,” said Gray.

Alex tried to break away, but Gray spun him around and wrapped his arm around Alex's chest. “Still not strong enough, little baby.”

Alex snarled.

“Gray, get over there with the scout.” Faust pointed at Javi. “Kirk, get the brat.”

Shaved-headed Kirk trudged over and reached for Alex, but Gray tugged him out of reach.

“I can keep Alex with me,” said Gray.

“Not a chance. The brat stays with me. Remember, I'm in charge, and we are taking Scarlet back, or I will gut Ravie myself. Got it?”

Anger boiled in his chest. “Understood.” He released Alex and moved to the spot Faust had indicated.

“Where is she?” Faust asked.

“Still a while off. She's moving slowly.”

Sky kept stopping. Was she still in the trees? It's what they usually did when scouting out the enemy, but he wouldn't risk glancing up to tip Faust off.

“Can she feel you too?” Faust asked.

Gray nodded. There was no point in hiding their connection anymore.

“From how far?”

“About a mile.”

Faust snorted, shaking his head, and turned back to his men. “Keep the hostages visible. Get the brats at the front.”

The men reorganized around Javi and Gray. Alex struggled against Kirk, but then the brute said something, and Alex stilled. When Alex had wrestled Faust earlier, it had taken all of Gray’s willpower not to rip Faust off and deck him for cutting Alex. Theo and Gwen had gotten agitated too. *Old habits die hard.*

Finally, Faust had everything the way he wanted. He had positioned most of his men in the bushes around the clearing. To the left, tied to a tree, were the spare Liberators with one man guarding them, and lying with a Skin’s knee in his back was the cute almond-eyed Libby who was a different kid now. Darkness shrouded him. He’d had a bubbly naïvety, which never lasted long in the world today. Face down on the right side of the clearing were the siblings, Sean and Lisa. She was completely different too but living through a mutant infected attack would change anyone.

Gray and Javi stood separate from Faust’s group. Faust had surrounded himself with six four-stud warriors, with Gwen and Theo at the front, and behind him, Kirk held Alex. Javi glowered at the man subduing Lisa.

“Javi, quit it,” Gray whispered.

Javi shot Gray a disgusted look. Gray didn’t want to use Lisa either, and he hadn’t dared to peek at the little spitfire he’d told stories to a week and a half ago for fear of the betrayal he’d see in her expression.

“You cannot give General Scarlet to the Warlord. I fear what he will do to her,” Javi whispered.

“I’ve got no choice,” Gray replied.

Sky moved closer again, then stopped. What was she doing?

“There are always choices, General Hawk. Some are harder than others, but there are always choices.”

Gray stared at the scout. “You want me to sacrifice my lover? You know Zek won’t kill her. But he will kill Ravie.”

“What do you know about Five-stud Ravie before he transferred into your service?” Javi asked.

“This is not the time,” Gray hissed.

“It’s exactly the time, General. Knowing who he is might change your objectives.”

Gray side-eyed Javi. “I don’t care who he used to be.”

“Even if he never existed?”

“You’re not making sense.”

“You were the only General the Warlord transferred his own men to. He used the excuse of you being family, but many of us thought he was implanting spies.”

Gray shook his head. “You think my gay lover is a spy? Zek beat him to a pulp. If he was a spy, Zek wouldn’t have done that.”

“I think you underestimate the Warlord’s cunning. What better way than to solidify your belief that Ravie is loyal to you?”

Gray stilled, and Greer’s words sprang into his mind. *Funny how he popped up...*

“General Gray, the Warlord plans to break General Scarlet, which would be a fate worse than death for her.”

“He might try, but Zek is not strong enough.”

“I heard Reece boasting about some of Zek’s plans before he died, and they made me sick.” Javi dipped his chin and whispered, “The Warlord promised to give General Scarlet to Faust after he had his fill.”

Gray's stomach twisted into knots, and bile burned his throat. The thought of Faust having Sky stole his balance and knocked him forward a step. "My brothers and I would never let that happen."

"Are you sure General Colt, General Hades, and you could stop it? You all have weaknesses the Warlord can exploit. Ravie for you, Two-stud healer Sylvie for General Colt, and General Hades is growing very fond of two slaves he keeps at the Red Lounge."

Gray whipped his gaze around to Javi and squeezed his fists until his knuckles cracked. Hades had slaves! *What the fuck?* Greer hadn't mentioned that. What was going on with Hades?

Javi kept his voice low. "The truth is always there if one looks for it. I worked very hard to gain Reece's and the Warlord's trust, all in preparation for the day my General would return. The Warlord's mind is unstable and has become increasingly more so. Please, General Hawk, you must not return General Scarlet to him, especially in her current condition."

Javi's report lined up with Greer's. "Will you fight me if I try to?"

"If it would save her from the same fate as many women in our capital, I would, to the death."

Gray couldn't suppress his shudder. The revulsion in Javi's tone was enough for Gray to understand exactly what fate he was referring to. Gray shut his eyes. How had it come to this? Sky would be appalled.

While the Skin nation hadn't been a beacon, it had offered its citizens protection and order. According to Greer, it was now ruled by tyranny. And the dark underbelly that had flourished in Sky's absence had spread like cancer, encouraged by Zek's core creed that the strong ruled over the weak. Gray's vision of the future had never included slavery. Greer was right. Things needed to change, and it had only taken sixty lashes for him to see it.



“I’m glad,” said Gray.

“Will you help her?” Javi asked.

Gray pressed his fist into his hand and squeezed. What was he going to do? If he brought Sky back to the capital, how long would she be locked up by Zek before they could free her? Colt was preparing in his absence, but their men were spread across the country. Recalling them would take time. A luxury Sky didn’t have if what Javi said was true.

Sky stepped into view, wearing a Matron elite’s uniform that had seen better days. Her hair had been chopped off, and she was alone. Where the hell was her giant protector? She looked stronger even though she hadn’t put on any weight, but there was no way she could go up against this many Skins alone in her current condition.

He sensed the anger roiling inside her, and he knew she wasn’t surrendering without a fight. She glanced at him, and a hurricane of emotions sucker punched him. Her mind was a complete mess, but he caught something in the storm. Faint images of Lisa and Lee.

Gray whispered, “If you see an opening, get Lisa, her brother, and the little Libby out.” Having those kids around only complicated things.

Javi glanced sideways. “You’ll have to choose a side, General Hawk. What are you going to do?”

That was an excellent question.

“Hello, Scarlet.” Faust grinned brightly. “Did you join the Matrons? I can’t wait until Zek sees you in that uniform. I bet he’ll double your punishment. He even had special chains made just for you. It was my idea, and I can’t wait to see the collar sealed around your neck. It will be seared to your skin so you can never take it off.” He bounced his shoulders, shivering with pleasure. “I am *so* looking forward to your screams.”

“Sky! Run! Get out of here!” Alex screamed, struggling against Kirk.

“Ah, brat. She’ll never do that. That’s why we call you the Scarlet’s Heel. Big sis would do anything for you, but we’re getting off track.” Faust waved his arm out. “Look at the gifts I’ve brought for you.” He snapped his fingers. Three Skins popped out of the bushes, each with a knife to their hostage’s neck. “The little Libby you traveled with for a week, I’m told. And the brother and sister from Parson, as well. Such sweet, innocent things.”

Sky just stared with dead eyes.

“Not enough? I have more.” He clicked his fingers again. There was a sharp shuffle, and the four men in his group pulled their weapons on Theo and Gwen.

“General Faust?” Gwen raised her hands with Theo.

Two men ducked in and yanked their weapons away. Faust grabbed Gwen by her hair and dragged her to him. He pulled his knife out and pressed it to her cheek. It all made sense why Faust had risked bringing them, and Greer had suspected it. He’d planned to use them as hostages all along. Gray hadn’t known Faust was that conniving, or perhaps Zek had suggested it. It was a good plan because everyone in the Skineater nation knew the lengths that Scarlet would go to protect the warriors under her command.

Sky’s posture stiffened.

“Are you wondering how we knew you were coming?” Faust asked. “Gray told me all about your special connection. He’s under my command now.”

Sky’s gaze flicked to Gray.

“But that wasn’t all his punishment for letting you go.” Faust wet his lips. “It was almost as spectacular as your—”

“Faust,” Gray growled.

“Now, now, Hawk. Is that any way to speak to your General? Careful, or you might get sixty more lashes when we get back.”

Sky hissed, and her rage pulsed through their connection.

“Hopefully, I’ll get to do it this time. Hades obviously didn’t whip you hard enough,” Faust said. “Although, I’d much rather deliver your punishment, Scarlet.” He sucked in his bottom lip. “I wonder how many you’ll be sentenced to this time. I’m hoping a hundred, and topless in the pit like Gray.”

Sky clenched her fist, and her knuckles popped one by one.

“No!” Alex broke free for a second and Kirk pounced on him, slamming him into the ground.

Sky shifted, and her eyes narrowed into a deathly glare.

Faust chuckled. “Looks like the little brat is getting stronger. Enough reminiscing.” He pulled Gwen’s head to the side and ran the tip of his dagger over her neck. “Say hello, Gwen, baby, to your General.”

“She’s not my General. You are,” said Gwen.

Faust scoffed. “Please. Do you think I’m stupid? I see it in your eyes, the thirst to kill me.”

Gwen stilled. “I want to kill you *both* for what you did to us.”

“Ah, well, I suppose beating you into submission and having my way with you didn’t win me any brownie points. Maybe we can show Scarlet your scars later. Although I think you enjoy being in my bed now.” He licked the side of her face.

Revulsion quivered up Gwen’s neck. A growl rumbled out of Javi, and he bared his teeth at Faust like he wanted to rip Faust’s head off, but he’d have to get in line. Fury like he’d never felt before erupted through Gray. He grabbed his katana hilt, and his arm shook. He should’ve seen it before! The need to gut Faust like a pig raged through him. Why hadn’t she come to him? He would’ve killed Faust in an instant for her.

“Faust!” Sky roared.

A blustering torrent crashed through Gray, adding to his own, and all he saw was red. He stepped forward.

“General.” Javi grabbed Gray’s forearm.

Gray’s vision cleared, and he focused on Javi’s dark brown eyes.

“You’ll risk Lisa if you act now,” said Javi.

Gray grunted. It really wasn’t smart of Faust to piss Sky off this much. It would only make her that much harder to bring in. He nudged Javi farther left.

Javi shot him a questioning glance.

Gray motioned to Sky. “Get ready.”

TWENTY-NINE

# SKY



*“You are our General, our leader, and we will follow you to our dying breaths.” ~ Five-stud Karim Rashid, Skineater.*

**B**linding rage whirled through Sky, lighting a blazing fire in her chest, and smashed into her conscience. She wasn't so naïve that she'd never considered this might happen, but she had hoped she had only been thinking up worst-case scenarios. Gwen's once vibrant gaze was dead, and her animosity saturated the air so much that Sky could taste it.

Sky had failed them all. How many of her female warriors were suffering the same fate? Her soul shattered into a million pieces, and jagged shards cut through her insides as it rained down. What torture had Gwen endured because of her selfishness? Sky would soon find out, and probably much more. It seemed karma had come for her after all.

She stared at Alex. He looked so much like their father, with his lips pressed into a fierce expression Sky had seen on Dad more times than she could count. Ice seeped into her very being. Alex was in danger again and it was her fault. Dad would be so disappointed. It was no wonder Alex hated her so much. But she'd made a promise to her parents to protect him no matter the cost, and if that meant abandoning John ... she would. An iciness spread through her, and she dropped her head forward, allowing herself one last moment of weakness. *Forgive me, John.* Then she let the cold rage consume her soul.

“If you don't want the hostages to die, drop your weapons. All of them. And come to me.” Faust shoved Gwen into the

man on his left, who quickly wrapped his arms around her, then waved his hand.

The three Skins in the center tightened their holds, pushing their knives deeper into their captives' necks. Lisa whimpered, but her eyes radiated hatred. Sean's expression was pinched in anger, but Lee appeared more resigned.

Sky caught glimpses of Alex behind Faust. He was still pinned to the ground by the same bald man, and a pug-faced black-haired man sat on his legs. Both were going to die very shortly.

Faust yanked Gwen back to him. "I'm waiting."

Sky fixed her attention on Gwen, a warrior five years her senior who had joined Sky's team soon after she had become General. Gwen had been a fair fighter already, but Sky had trained her to be a fierce warrior. And it hadn't taken Gwen long to break through Sky's barriers and become her friend, then family. Sky had trusted her enough to place her in charge of Alex.

"Gwen, baby. Tell Scarlet what happens when I get angry?" Faust ran his knife over Gwen's collarbone and cut in.

Gwen clenched her teeth and grunted.

"I grow tired of waiting, Scarlet!"

Sky stepped forward, drawing her short sword, and dropped it to the ground.

"Finally!" Faust exclaimed.

Sky discarded her knives next, one by one, as she continued forward. She dropped her last knife in the middle of the clearing, twenty yards shy of Faust's men.

"That's far enough," said Faust. "Gray, shackle her." He moved his dagger at Gwen's throat. "And if you fight him, Gwen gets a new breathing hole."

Sky's chest coiled into a tight ball. Gwen's expression cooled, and the calm Sky read on her face put her on edge.

Gray lumbered toward Sky and wouldn't meet her gaze. Her insides were so numb she couldn't even feel their connection anymore. He stopped at her side and pulled out a pair of manacles. Not the old police issue kind that she might've been able to break with her new strength. These were custom made with thick gleaming silver bands and a chunky two-inch chain.

"Hands out," Gray said in a quavering voice.

If Gray handcuffed her, chances of escaping fell drastically.

"What's taking so long? Restrain her already." Faust looked over his shoulder. "Kirk, do it."

The bald man holding Alex pulled a knife from his boot and sliced across Alex's back.

Alex screamed.

"Stop!" Sky lunged forward, but Gray caught her wrist. Her breaths came short and fast, and she had to focus on calming her racing heart. Panicking wouldn't help Alex. She glared at Gray, and his grip tightened.

Lee and a brunette female hostage screamed out Alex's name.

"Faust, you fucking ass." Gwen thrashed against him.

"Ahh, Gwen, baby, you still have a soft spot for the brat. How pathetic." Faust sneered. "Scarlet, if those cuffs aren't on by the count of ten, Kirk will cut off little Alex's pinky. The brat doesn't need to be whole to be useful."

Sky held her other hand out. "Gray. Do it."

Gray stared at her hands, then over at Alex, and tension rippled through his shoulders.

"Gray!" Sky snapped.

He jolted back around.

"Hurry up." She glowered at him.



He dipped his chin and clicked the first cuff around her. The cold metal weighted around her wrist.

Faust snickered. “Get used to them, Scarlet, because they aren’t coming off for a very long time.”

The second cuff locked into place, and Gray looked up with sorrow-filled eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Get on all fours,” said Faust. “Baby, tell Scarlet what you’ve been up to these past years to entertain her while she crawls. Or don’t you want her to know what a slut you’ve become?”

Gray’s nose wrinkled into a silent snarl. Behind Faust, Kirk fisted a chunk of Alex’s hair and sawed it off, wearing a gleeful expression. Sky’s muscles trembled with rage, knowing she had no choice but to comply. She began to bend her knees.

“General Scarlet!” Gwen’s voice halted Sky’s descent. “You abandoned us, and for that I loathed you. I cursed you. But ...” She took a deep breath, and her next words spilled quickly. “Know I was always loyal. In my heart, I never renounced you for this scum.”

Faust’s arm tightened around her. “I knew it.”

“Now, I beg you, save Theo and Alex,” said Gwen. “And never kneel to them!”

“Gwen, what are you doing?” Panic gripped Theo’s voice as he struggled against his captor, but the Skin in front sucker-punched him, and he doubled over, groaning.

“Gwen!” Alex screamed.

“I should have died three years ago. I’m glad I got to see you and Alex again.” Gwen slammed her head back into Faust and drove her boot down on his foot.

Two gunshots sounded behind Sky, and the Skins holding Sean and Lisa crumpled.

Faust screeched, blood gushing from his nose. Gwen slipped under his hold and jammed her elbows into his sides.

Sky rammed her shoulder into Gray's gut and knocked him down. "Javi! Get Lisa out," she ordered, darting forward.

A third pop echoed through the trees, and Lee's captor went down. Followed closely by a fourth pop that clipped Kirk's arm and blew the pug-faced man off Alex's legs. Kirk hunkered to one side and Alex threw him off. Her little brother rolled and kicked Kirk in the face.

"Alex, run! Get your friends out." Sky motioned toward the three tied to the tree.

Faust stumbled. "Attack!"

Gwen spun and slugged Faust in the jaw.

Alex looked between Sky and his friends and hesitated.

"Now!" Sky ordered.

Another shot exploded, and the Skin standing over the brunette girl crumpled. Alex scrambled toward them, and a blond Skin near the hostages went down. Robin and Jen had given their words that they would cover Alex, so Sky could focus on killing everyone standing in her way. She sprinted at full speed, closing the gap to Faust's men in seconds. She had to work fast because if Gray joined the fight, she'd be severely disadvantaged with her hands bound.

Theo jumped his captor, and they tumbled to the earth.

Twangs sounded from Sky's sides. She dove, dodging two bolts, and sprang up at a brown-haired Skin. He slashed with his sword. She evaded left, keeping her forward motion. She blocked his arm and slammed both fists into his throat. Spit sprayed from his flopping mouth. She spun, pulling the spartan blade from his loosening grip, and sliced across the Skin's chest, then turned to face the next, with both her hands holding the hilt. It had been a long time since she'd fought bound like this, but it was coming back to her.

Hollers broke out from either side, and more gunshots went off. The Matrons didn't have an endless supply of bullets, but they had enough to keep half of Faust's men occupied. Many of the Skins stationed at the edges of the clearing fired their guns and arrows toward the phantom

shooters in the trees, but they hit nothing. A flash of red darting through the brush meant Robin was moving to attack. Garrick and Jen should be in position on the opposite side. And on cue, two Skins hiding in the bushes yelled out.

Theo was still on the ground and had his arm clamped around a Skin's throat, lying on top of him, while Gwen slugged a Four-stud and spun to face another.

"Gwen, look out!" Alex stood next to his freed friends, pointing.

Faust darted in from the side, Gwen turned, but he struck out too fast, slashing his dagger across her neck. Gwen clamped her hand to her throat. Red ... so much red seeped through her fingers. She dropped to her knees and collapsed.

"Gwen!" Sky and Alex roared.

A volcano erupted in Sky, propelling her forward.

"No!" Theo cried.

"Gwen! Gwen!" Alex shrieked again and again until his voice broke, scrambling toward her.

Their screams pierced Sky's heart. She locked onto Alex's horror-filled expression. A second later, Kirk rammed into him, and they tumbled. She had to hurry.

"Get her!" Faust motioned at Sky, skipping back. "The Warlord wants her alive, but I don't care in what shape. Gray, get in there!"

Sky thrust her sword up, stopping Two's downward strike. Three jabbed his short sword at her waist. She curved her body, but the edge sliced her arm. Ignoring the heat blooming in her forearm, she cleaved Three's hand off, and he screeched. She kicked him in the throat, and he flew back. She spun, slashing into Four. She couldn't think about Gwen; she had to get to Alex. She embraced the cold within. Alex was all that mattered now, but these idiots were in her way. She couldn't lose Alex too.

"Garrick, behind you!" Jen yelled.

Sky dodged a strike from Five and whirled, throwing her sword at the Skin charging Garrick. Her blade spun through the air and skewered the Skin, flinging him sideways. Garrick nodded at her before she turned back to her own fight. Five lunged at her, jabbing his short sword. It glanced off her ribs and sliced her arm. She grabbed at the hilt and commandeered a new weapon, then slashed. Five thudded to the ground and moaned. She whipped around to block Six, then faltered. Gray's presence closed in from behind. *No!* She needed more time. Alex cried out in a strangled voice.

Sky finished off Six, plunging her sword into his gut. "Alex!" *Where is he?*

She dashed forward, but two men charged her from either side, and she let her mind go blank. Her body reacted, twirling and twisting, striking and deflecting. Blood misted the air, and the coppery scent filled her lungs.

"Scarlet!" Faust roared. "Stop or the brat dies right here!"

Sky froze, and the haze dissipated as Skin number seven slumped off her blade. Ten warriors remained, flanking Faust, and he had Alex!

Mere steps away, a brown-haired man with a goatee held her little brother by the side of his neck, pressing his dagger to Alex's jugular. Alex was so much taller now, taller than Faust and most of his men, but he still lacked fighting skills. Blood trickled from Alex's nose, and he had cuts on his cheek, lip, and brow. Tears streamed from his eyes, which were full of grief. Sky longed to comfort him, but she had to squash the urge. She couldn't let herself cave to the sharp pang coursing through her chest. If she did, she'd lose her focus, and even though it was microscopic, there was still a slim chance Alex could escape.

All the men stationed at the edge of the clearing were either squirming on the floor moaning or dead. Theo writhed a few yards away with blood seeping from his gut at an alarming rate. Jen and Garrick shoved the three freed hostages behind a tree. Robin emerged from the brush on the other side of the

clearing carrying a decapitated head, near where Javi stood in front of Lee, Sean, and Lisa.

“You’re working with Matrons?” Faust bared his teeth, his upper lip twitching. “The Warlord will whip you until there’s no skin left on your back.”

“No!” Alex tried to wrench himself free. The dagger grazed his neck as he drove his elbow into goatee man’s side.

“You little shit.” Faust lunged, driving an uppercut into Alex’s jaw.

Sky’s heart jumped into her throat, and she jerked forward, but the warriors closest to her raised their crossbows and aimed at her, freezing her in mid-step.

Alex groaned, hunching over, and more bright red dripped to the leaf-covered dirt.

The terror ripping through Sky quickly morphed into wrath. “I’m going to crucify you!”

Faust gripped Alex by his hair and shoved him back at goatee man. “In your dreams, bitch. Have the Matron whores drop their weapons, or I’ll kill your brat. We don’t need him to control you anymore. The Warlord has plenty of little surprises waiting for you. He always thought you would reemerge someday, so he prepared. Karim will be brought out of his tiny cage and strung up for the crows.” Faust grinned. “Or Colt or Hades. There are so many to choose from.”

Dread twisted in Sky’s gut.

Gray’s mouth dropped. “Zek executed Karim.”

“Did you see his face?” Faust snorted. “All you emotional idiots were so easily duped. It could’ve been anyone under that black hood.” He ran his dagger along Alex’s neck. “Scarlet, shall I free you of your greatest burden?”

Sky’s breathing became erratic. What had happened to her men? How many were in cages? It was over. She could read it in his eyes. Faust would kill Alex and it terrified her. Faust’s thirst to hurt her had only snowballed over the years, since the day she’d humiliated him in front of all the new recruits.

She dropped her sword, raised her bound hands, and sank to her knees. “The Matron will leave. Take me. Let Alex go, and you can do whatever you want with me. I won’t fight anymore.”

“No,” Alex moaned. A fresh wave of tears flowed down his cheeks as he pulled at goatee man’s arm. “Sky, you can’t.”

Faust pointed with his bloody knife. “The brat stays, but your bitches can take the other hostages and leave.”

Sky glanced at Robin. “Get them to safety. Your debts are repaid. Leave, now!”

Robin glared and dipped her head.

On the other side, Jen and Garrick herded the other hostages into the woods. The young female brunette’s argumentative words about not leaving Alex faded into the distance. Javi and Robin vanished with the siblings.

“Gray, do your job!” Faust ordered.

Gray closed in, his hand resting on the butt of a tanto fastened to his thigh. He grasped her shoulder, digging his fingers in. His touch had never felt so cruel before. She glanced up, and her heart sank at the determined set of his jaw. Even after watching Gwen die, Gray was still with Faust. The betrayal cut so deep, it sliced into their bond. Could he feel it too?

If she’d been able to free Alex, then she could’ve met her end fighting for her freedom, but now her life would be full of pain and suffering. She’d always known it was coming for her. Her failures ate at the small remaining fragments of her soul. John, Alex, Gray, Gwen, Theo, and all her warriors; she’d failed them. Alex didn’t deserve any of this. Sky glanced at Gray again, searching for any inkling that he might aid her.

“Gray won’t help you. He’s moved on from you and the Warlord has his bitch hostage,” said Faust.

“General Hawk!” Javi’s voice drifted through the trees. “Ravie isn’t who you think he is. You have to believe me!”

“Fuck.” Faust pointed in Javi’s direction. “Kill that deserter.”

Two of Faust’s men aimed their guns into the forest and fired.

“Gray! Strip her and make sure she doesn’t have any more weapons so we can get the fuck out of here.”

Sky raised her chin. She’d known this would happen. It was the Skin way, even though she’d never enforced the practice.

A growl rumbled from Gray’s chest, and he dug his fingers deeper into her shoulder until she winced. “She’s my prisoner. I’ll decide what to do with her.”

He glanced at her and the desolation she saw in his eyes broke her heart.

“You’re only putting off the inevitable,” she said.

“No! Gray you can’t!” Alex screamed, throwing goatee man off.

“For fuck’s sake. I grow tired of the brat. Kill him.” Faust waved his hand.

A short Skin next to Faust, slipped out his gun and aimed at Alex.

An inferno pulsed through Sky. “No!”

Gray’s hand blurred, and a dagger sped across the clearing. A thump sounded as the blade sunk into the man’s forearm.

“Fuck, get the brat!” Faust hollered.

Two nearby Skins pounced on Alex, pinning him to the ground.

“Hawk!” Faust roared, pulled a pistol from under his jacket, and aimed at Gray.

Two other Skins whipped their guns out and pointed them at Gray too.

Gray’s nostrils flared and raised his hands. “You need Alex. He’s her biggest weakness.”

Faust narrowed his eyes. “True. But she needs to be punished for fighting back.” He bounced his gaze to Theo and snorted. “Useless, he’s already half dead, so there’s only one person left that Scarlet cares about.” He looked up at Gray, sneering. “You brought this on yourself, Hawk.”

Faust squeezed the trigger.

“Gray!” Sky sprang up, grabbed his shirt, and spun, as the other two Skins fired too. She shoved him down.

The world blurred as she focused on Gray. His piercing green eyes widened as he clutched her waist. A bullet thwacked into her back as they fell, blasting her into his chest. Sharp pain pulsed through her spine. Then another and another.

“Sky!” Alex screeched.

“Stop shooting!” Faust bellowed.

Gray’s eyes widened, and she saw fear creeping into them.

Even if he was against her, she’d always protect him. That was her never-ending oath.



THIRTY

# GRAY



*“Over lovers. Over blood. You are my brother to the end. I will protect you until my dying breath.” ~ General Scarlet, Skineater.*

**G**ray’s heart petrified the second the impact from the first bullet vibrated through Sky’s torso.

He grabbed her shoulders as she collapsed on top of him. Blood seeped from thin cuts on her arms, but he saw no dark stains on her chest. Faust’s gun was lethal. He used a desert eagle and had his bullets made specially, designed after the old armor piercing variety. The slug should’ve gone straight through Sky and into him, but he was fine, which meant it was embedded deep in her. Something inside him fractured and his body vibrated.

“What did you do?” The back of his eyes prickled.

She groaned and rolled her head so she could stare up. “What you would’ve.”

A loud crack of splintering wood boomed through the clearing. The next second, a figure launched out of the trees a hundred feet up and plummeted, landing in the space between Gray and Faust’s men. A puff of dust spewed into the air.

“Holy fuck,” Faust gaped.

“Now that idiot shows up,” Sky mumbled.

Gray squeezed her, and his muscles trembled. They’d shot her three times. “Sky ...”

“Don’t look so worried,” Sky whispered, stroking his cheek. “I’m wearing impenetrable armor, but it’s a good thing they didn’t aim for your head.”

Gray furrowed his brows. No armor was that strong.

“Who the fuck are you!” Faust yelled at the stranger.

The dust settled to reveal her giant. He glanced over his shoulder at Gray and down at Sky, then skimmed back to Faust and stepped forward.

“Dammit, he’s risking Alex jumping into the middle of things without a plan,” Sky grumbled. “Are you with me?”

Gray nodded dumbly.

Sky let out a long sigh. “Good.” She wiggled and brought her hands up. “Key?”

He stared blankly at her and pulled one out. She snatched it from him and unlocked her bindings. The hard metal thumped into his chest.

Then, she reached up and grasped his katana hilt. “I’m borrowing this.”

Faust and his men shuffled back.

“Shoot him, dammit!” Faust yelled.

All of his men fired at the giant, but the giant kept walking toward them as bullets and bolts bounced off him.

Sky rolled off, and all Gray could do was prop himself on his elbows and gawk at her as she drew his katana from his back scabbard.

The men fired while shuffling back until they exhausted all their bullets.

“Don’t worry about Ryan. They can’t hurt him.” She leaped up, snatched a knife from his vest, and charged toward the fray.

Gray rocked forward, dangling his head between his knees, and let out a shaky breath. His heart restarted. She was okay.

She was alive. He couldn't go through that again. He wouldn't. Squeezing his fist, he jumped up.

“Get Alex out of here!” Sky yelled at the giant.

A few men armed with crossbows scrambled to reload and Sky sprinted straight for them. Then the giant disappeared in a blur and reappeared in front of Alex.

Alex gasped. The giant slammed Kirk back, throwing him into two men, grabbed Alex, and darted away.

Sky reached the closest Skin and cut into him. “Ryan, get Theo too!” She took a second to point at her ex-warrior sprawled on the floor.

Ryan paused by Theo. A heavy lump formed in Gray's chest when he noticed the amount of blood soaking into the dirt. There was not much Ryan could do, but he stooped, lifted Theo, grabbed the back of Alex's shirt, and dashed away with them.

Gray should've done something more than stand by like an idiot. When he'd seen Gwen fall, his heart had shriveled into a husk before being consumed by Sky's raging inferno. He'd chosen too late, and now they'd lose Theo too. There was no way he would pull through from that.

Was Ravie's life worth this many? Gwen and Theo were people he cared about. People who had depended on him once. And why were Javi and Greer so suspicious of Ravie? He'd have to figure that out later. Right now, his sister needed him. Gray drew his wakizashi. If he was doing this, they couldn't leave any witnesses to report his actions to Zek. He split away from Sky and descended on his first victim.

Letting his emotions fall away, Gray focused on his sword. The razor edge could slice through almost anything. Dirt rolled under his boots as he slipped from one warrior to another, slashing and stabbing. Skins fell around him.

“Hawk!” Faust screeched. “You traitor!”

With Sky at his side, they cut through Faust's men in minutes, until Faust was left with two flanking him. Sky stopped next to Gray, and it felt nostalgic.

Faust glared at Sky. “Why the fuck aren’t you dead?”

Gray wanted to know that too. She’d been shot three times in the back, protecting him even when she hadn’t known if he was on her side. Shame rose in his chest. How had he ever thought of betraying her?

“Alien armor.” She simpered.

Faust blinked. Gray’s brows shot up.

“But I’ll take it off to make it a fair fight,” she said.

“Alien what?” Faust asked. “Holy fuck!” He scampered back along with Kirk and another man.

Gray jolted as black liquid flowed over the back of Sky’s hand and off her fingers and formed a ball in mid-air so black it looked like it could suck the light out of everything.

“Keep up. If you’re too scared, then how about I don’t use a weapon? Come on, Faust. I’m trying to let you die with a little dignity, which is more than you deserve for what you did to Gwen and countless others.” Sky whacked the black ball aside.

“I think crucifixion would be suitable,” said Gray, remembering Sky’s earlier threat.

Faust jabbed his sword in Gray’s direction. “The Warlord is going to gut Ravie.”

Sky sighed, turning to Gray, pilfered his last knife, then spun and flung it. The Skin on Faust’s right gagged, grabbed his throat, and fell, leaving him with only Kirk. She had always been deadly accurate with the knives.

Faust glanced around frantically, and Gray knew he was looking for an opportunity to retreat, but he’d never be able to outrun them. And maybe he figured that out too because he stopped suddenly, clenched his teeth, and directed a murderous glare at Sky.

“Are you going to sacrifice Karim?” Faust asked, backing up a step. “I don’t envy him, living three years in a tiny cage, only to be executed because his General doesn’t give a shit.”

A chill flooded Gray through their connection.

“I died. The Warlord should’ve treated my warriors with the respect their ranks deserved.”

Faust scoffed, taking another step. “They were tainted. Zek hated that you policed everything. Your fucking warriors were always sticking their noses where they didn’t belong. He destroyed his nation’s potential the day he made you General. He wasn’t going to let them spread your and that Matron champion’s ideals through his lands. Finally, the Skin nation is what it should be.”

“If that’s true, then Zek will be joining you in the great beyond very soon,” Sky said.

A redheaded Matron darted around a tree behind Faust, aiming a crossbow at his back. Across from her, a familiar brown-haired Matron male, Gray couldn’t quite place, slipped out and aimed a rifle at Kirk.

Faust whipped around and snarled at the Matrons, raising his sword. He was boxed in.

Redhead motioned her crossbow at Faust. “Can we shoot them already?”

“Robin, what are you doing back?” Sky asked.

“Relax. The kids are safe, and there is no way we are missing out on taking down Faust.” Robin aimed at Faust’s head.

“Gwen ...” Alex’s whisper reached Gray.

Alex had pulled Gwen onto his lap and was stroking her hair. Tears dripped from his cheeks onto her face. “Why’d you do that? This wasn’t supposed to happen. You were supposed to be safe... I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. Please ... please don’t ... I missed you so much ...”

Gray’s heart splintered along with Sky’s, but she cut off her emotions quickly. He knew why she was doing it. He sensed it. Sky was barely holding it together. She’d never been good at dealing with emotions. Seeing Alex and losing Gwen was all too much for her.

“Aw, boohoo.” Faust rolled his eyes. “Pitiful.”

Sky growled and launched forward. Kirk darted in to meet her, but Robin fired, and Kirk was knocked to the ground with a bolt sticking out of his back.

“Faust is mine!” Sky yelled.

Faust sprang to meet her strike. Their blades locked as they stared at each other.

“Let’s finish this, Faust. You and me.” Sky pushed him off. “Or don’t you think you are man enough to beat me?”

“Don’t try that goading bullshit.” Faust brandished his Dao sword. “You’re a freak! Both of you are. The Warlord knows it too!”

“Did he order you to assassinate me?” Gray returned his wakizashi to its sheath. “You should’ve done it on the first night.”

Faust’s lips tensed into a piggish expression. “I told Dmitri to, but he said it wouldn’t be honorable.”

Too bad Dmitri had ended up under Faust. “When did Zek notice we were different?”

Faust sneered, matching Sky’s step as they circled each other. “Not denying it anymore? After you two took the prison, we all knew something wasn’t right. Two normal fifteen-year-olds couldn’t have taken on fifty hardened criminals and come out unscathed. But if Zek had her”—he leered at Sky—“he could control you.”

“Then Sky left, and Zek lost his control.” Gray surmised. It was all starting to click into place, and he hated it. His whole world was falling apart around him.

“You should’ve stayed broken and depressed, Hawk. You would’ve been safe.”

Sky swished his katana. “I’ve heard enough. Time to finish this. You always loved how I killed Ben. I’ll let you experience it too. My version of a punishment the Chinese used for centuries, the Lingchi, or death by a thousand cuts.”

Faust gnashed his teeth together. “How the fuck do you know that? There’s no internet around.”

“She’s a walking encyclopedia.” Gray’s back was starting to ache from all the movement.

“My dad gave me a book on it when I was nine.”

Faust’s jaw flapped open. “And I thought my childhood was fucked up.”

Gray raised his eyebrows at Sky.

“What?” Sky shrugged. “It was interesting. Let’s see how much you enjoy being on the receiving end.”

Shaking his head, Gray moved toward a tree and leaned his shoulder into it. The Matrons closed in on the other side, closing off any chance Faust had to flee, but Gray doubted he would’ve.

Faust charged, roaring. He wasn’t a coward. None of the Generals were. Sky weaved away and spun. Their blades clashed, settling into a rhythm, but Sky was playing with him. Every other hit, she’d slice into him. Small cuts along his forearms, legs, chest, and back. Faust was an excellent fighter, and he’d more than earned his rank as General, but compared to Sky, his skill was mediocre.

Sweat and blood dripped from Faust’s pallid face. If she wasn’t careful, he’d pass out from blood loss before she reached fifty. She was more controlled than when she’d fought Ben, the boy who’d sold her out to Zek. Javi emerged from the bushes to watch.

Faust panted and stumbled a few steps. “Gwen’s screams were nowhere near as delicious as yours, Scarlet, but her moans, while I fucked her, were so sweet.”

“Sky!” Alex looked up with bloodshot eyes. “Make him hurt!”

Gray never thought he’d see the day Alex would ask Sky to hurt someone. He’d always been against violence, but grief changed people. Gwen’s death would hit Alex hard. It was



almost enough for him to forgive the little brat for ripping Sky away from him.

Two more Matrons emerged from the trees, Jen and Mina, and now Gray recognized the male. It was Jen's son. What were his spies doing here?

Faust could barely keep upright, but he kept jabbing his sword at Sky. The giant returned with Theo. Gray jerked off the tree. Theo was walking and using the giant as support to hobble toward Sky. *What in Cardinal hell?*

"Sky, what are you doing?" Ryan asked. The disapproval in his tone was clear as day.

"Delivering justice," replied Robin.

Faust had enough energy to bare his teeth at the Matron, and she growled right back at him.

"You're gonna die soon," Robin said. "How's it feel? There's no one coming to help you. And no one is going to mourn you."

One side of Faust's mouth twitched, and his shoulders slumped. "Finish it, Scarlet."

"But we are only at twenty-six. I have nine-hundred and seventy-four cuts left to make."

Faust began to shiver uncontrollably.

"Sky!" Ryan snapped.

"What!" She whirled, glaring, and wearing an expression Gray had never seen before. One of a reprimanded child. She pointed to the trees. "If you don't want to watch, go wait over there."

Frustration pulsed through their connection, along with a sliver of shame.

Faust charged at her back with more energy than Gray thought he had left. "Die, you fucking bitch."

"Sky!" Alex screamed and flung a dagger at Faust.

The blade impaled Faust in his non-sword arm but did nothing to slow him. Faust swung at Sky's back. She spun. In a blur of movement, she knocked Faust's sword away and slashed across his gut. Faust's weapon spun straight for Gray, and he reached out and caught it.

Robin whistled. "See, I told you that neither you nor General Hawk represents what normal people can do."

Faust wrapped his arms around his stomach and collapsed to his knees.

"Dammit." Sky scowled at Faust.

Ryan stepped forward, and Sky swung her sword up at him.

"Don't you dare try to save him. Go look over there." She jabbed the katana toward Alex. "See what he's done."

Gray pushed off. "He deserved much worse." He gripped the weapon in his hand. It was beautiful, but a sword that had been used for so much evil didn't belong in the world. There were some superstitions Gray did believe in.

Faust rolled to his side and flopped onto his back, whimpering. Sky had cut deep enough that if he moved his arms, his intestines would spill out.

Theo hobbled over and ripped knives from the throats of two dead Skins, then trudged to Faust. He wrenched one of Faust's hands away. It seemed the dying General had no energy left to protest. Theo laid his hand out and stabbed the knife through Faust's palm, staking him to the ground. Faust screeched. Tears and sweat wet his face. Theo repeated the process with his other hand, and Faust's cry was weaker.

Theo glowered at Faust. "I hope you live long enough to see the crows feast on your insides." He spun and stalked toward Alex.

Robin stared at Theo and whispered to Garrick, "Remind me not to get on his bad side."

"Perhaps we should all move to a more pleasant location?" Jen suggested.

Ryan scowled and marched back into the forest.

“Gray,” Faust croaked. “End it. Sky, please.”

“Enjoy your last few minutes on Earth.” Sky whirled and headed in the opposite direction to Ryan.

“Bitch,” Faust mumbled. “I’ll be waiting for you in hell.”

THIRTY-ONE

# GRAY



*“You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.” ~ Five-stud Ravie Kumar, Skineater.*

Gray took one more look at the fifth General, bleeding out on the dirt, before hurrying to catch up to Sky. She was stopped at the clearing’s edge a few paces away from where Jen and Mina emerged. They’d come from the direction the Liberators had left and strode toward Alex. Robin and Garrick stayed near Faust, glaring at him as he took his last breaths.

“What’s the giant’s problem?” Gray asked.

“He doesn’t kill.” She glanced toward where Ryan had disappeared, and Gray followed her line of sight and found the giant leaning against a trunk with his arms crossed.

“Weird ...”

The giant had that intense stare down pat.

Gray cupped her elbow. “Are you all right?”

Sky nodded, gazing at Alex kneeling by Gwen. “He’s safe.” She blew out a long breath. “For a minute there I thought Alex ...” Her neck quivered.

He inched closer. “I never would have let Faust kill him. Ever. You have to know that.”

Sky scowled and stepped into him. “You had me going for a while. When I saw you holding Alex hostage, I didn’t know what to think.”

Shame pricked his heart, and Gray mumbled a soft apology before pulling her into an embrace. A shudder ran through her, and he squeezed tighter, burying his nose into her hair. “I never thought Faust would kill Gwen.” He snorted. “Greer’s right, I’m still too naïve. I’m really sorry, Sky.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. This all happened because I left.” She rested her forehead on his shoulder. “It feels like ages ago when Lee showed up, saying that Alex sent for me. At least I made it to him, I guess.” She let out a long sigh. “But I’m not sure how to face him without bullets flying everywhere. What am I supposed to say to him?”

Gray rubbed her back. He’d guessed as much. He looked up and caught the giant glaring at him. “Can we go somewhere to talk?”

“Yeah.”

He took her hand and led her away.

Alex raced toward them. “Where are you going?”

“To have hot sex,” said Gray with a serious face.

“What?” Garrick swung around.

Alex skidded to a stop, and his mouth dropped. “But what about your lover?”

Sky peeked at Ryan, as did Gray, but the giant’s face was impassive.

“Have fun.” Robin gave them a thumbs-up. “After battle sex is always the best.”

“But—but—” Alex’s cheeks turned pink.

“He’s joking,” said Sky, peeping at Ryan again.

Robin made a disappointed moan.

Gray sighed. “We have things to discuss, okay, little brat?”

Alex scowled, his puffy eyes focusing on Gray. “If you’re taking Sky, I’m coming. She’s my sister, and I need to talk to her too!” He glanced nervously at Ryan.

Gray opened his mouth to point out that Alex had thrown her away when he'd left for the Liberators but thought better of it. Sky didn't need a reminder. She was a few pushes shy of her breaking point as far as Alex was concerned. She was avoiding him, which was never a good sign.

Garrick marched up. "I agree with the little brother. You shouldn't wander off with him. He's a Skineater."

"He's the person I trust most in the world," Sky said.

The guilt churning in Gray's chest intensified. How could she still say that with such a clear voice after what he just did?

Garrick raised his hands in defeat and backed off, but Alex seemed only more determined.

"You can't trust him." Pain flashed across Alex's face. "He's got his own agenda."

"Alex, it's Gray. What's wrong with you?" Sky asked. "We can talk later. I know it's difficult because of Gwen—"

"Gwen pointed a crossbow at me earlier today. She'd changed. They aren't the people we knew. Gray's not either. You don't know him anymore. Remember, the Warlord has his lover hostage." Alex clenched his fists.

"Who?" Sky asked.

"It's what we need to discuss," said Gray.

Sky nodded and turned to leave with him. "Of course."

Alex shuffled up. "He's going to take you back himself."

"Alex, really." Sky shook her head.

Gray chanced a look at the giant. He'd thought Ryan had been enamored with Sky the last time they'd met, but he still stood there with a blank expression.

"It's fine. The brat can come too." Anything to stop the bickering.

The two of them could argue for hours if he let them. Also, Alex was starting to make points he didn't want Sky to consider. The thought of betraying her disgusted him, but he

still didn't know what to do about Ravie. He couldn't abandon him. There were other factors to consider too, and he needed to hammer this out with her. If Colt had been here, it would have been so much easier. He suppressed a groan and grabbed Alex's hand.

To Gray's surprise, Alex's fingers curled around his. Before they left, Javi emerged from the trees and stopped beside Ryan, glaring through hooded eyelids. Gray shot Javi an innocent smile and dragged the siblings off. The three of them had spent a lot of time together when Sky and Gray weren't away on campaigns. Hades and Alex hated each other, so he'd never joined family time. Colt had occasionally, but Gray guessed Colt hadn't enjoyed it because it reminded him of the family he'd lost.

Sky exhaled a long sigh. The tension from fighting Faust was leaving her system, and now her face was filled with remorse, which always happened after a big fight.

They walked for five minutes, and Alex seemed to be lost in thought.

"Is this far enough?" Gray asked Sky. "How far can the giant hear?"

"Ryan? I don't know. But this should be good." Sky tugged her hand free and moved away.

"Do you mean that guy who saved me? Who is he?" Alex asked, still holding Gray.

Sky approached a boulder and brushed the dead leaves off. "He's an alien."

Gray's mind went blank. "Come again."

She sat and brought her knees to her chest. "He's a rebel Cardinal."

"He *is* a Cardinal!" Alex shrieked, ripping his hand away.

Gray rubbed his ear. "Everyone would've heard that."

Alex paced between them. "Gray, you have to hide us. This is terrible. We can't go back there. We have to run." Alex hurried to Sky and tugged her, but she didn't budge.



“Alex, what are you babbling about?” Sky asked.

Alex grabbed his hair and yanked it in different directions. “I’ve wanted to tell you for years, but I could never form the words.” Alex’s mouth froze open for a moment. “Fuck! Why can’t I tell you? This doesn’t make sense. You have to know, Sky. I swear.”

Gray smoothed the lines on his forehead. This whole trip was a mess. It was supposed to have been an easy snatch, but then Alex and the damn Matrons had shown up. He’d had enough of all the drama. “Alex!”

The little brat swung around, and Gray slugged him in the jaw, hard enough to knock him out but not cause permanent damage. Alex dropped, and Gray caught him before he hit the ground.

Sky leaped up. “What the hell?”

“He was losing it,” he said.

“You didn’t have to knock him out.”

“I’ll carry him, or better yet, we can leave him. That way, Zek won’t be able to use him against you. I’m sure one of his Libby buddies will look for him soon.”

Sky stepped back, the first seeds of suspicion flashing in her eyes. “Gray... What are you planning?”

“We must go now. I’m worried after Faust mentioned Colt and Hades. Zek is making his move, and we need to get back there.” Gray paced. “We can sneak you in easy enough.”

“Gray, I can’t leave.”

“What the fuck, Sky? This is Colt and Hades we are talking about! Our brothers. Not to mention my lover’s life. He was there for me after you left. I was a mess. You broke me.”

Sky shut her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know! I don’t remember. Every time I try to ... my head ...” Sky buckled over and held her temple.

Gray sank next to her. “Are you okay?”

“I have to save them.” Her pleading tone squeezed his heart. “They got taken because of me, and if I go with you now, I’ll never be able to.”

“Who?”

“John and the rest from Reliance.”

“Fuck! They’re alive? How do you know? The alien?”

She nodded.

“And you trust him? Or is the sexy alien addling your brain?”

A slight pink blush spread through her gaunt cheeks.

“Oh God. I told you to seduce him, not fall for him. Are you in love with him?” He wanted to throw his hands up and stomp around. She had the worst choice in men. She always fell for the most impossible ones. First Will, now the giant!

“No!”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “But there’s something between you two.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. There are bigger things afoot.”

“Like what?”

“How long until the deadline?” she asked.

Gray shook his head. “There are still fifty days, but I’m not taking any chances. Zek could be moving against Colt and Hades as we speak. Hades is a mess. He’ll be an easy target. You don’t know him, but Ravie, he was there for me too. And I can’t believe he’s some kind of spy. I can’t. What if he’s not? Zek threatened to start chopping off Ravie’s fingers and toes if I was late, but he might start early to spite me. I can’t give him an excuse! He’ll kill him!” Gray drew his wakizashi so fast Sky could only tip her chin back as the blade kissed her throat. “You owe it to your brothers, and to me, to help us. Or have you forgotten the oath you made?”

Sky's shoulders dropped. An ache seeped out of her into him. There was no anger or betrayal, only regret.

Gray squeezed his hilt. He would not feel guilty, but then Javi's words floated up in his mind. "Dammit! You know I wouldn't do this if I didn't have any other choice."

She smiled sadly. "Yes, I know. And I'm sorry it's come to this."

"I need your word that you'll come with me. I don't want to tie you up, but I will if you make me." He dropped his blade to her sternum so she could lower her chin.

She stared back. "If I say no?"

"I'll knock you out too."

"I won't be as easy as Alex."

"But I'll manage. You should've kept up your training."

Her mouth tugged up. "I should've." She let out a long sigh. "Gray, you know I'd do anything for you, but I'm sorry, I can't leave yet." She lowered her gaze. "If you try to take me, I'll fight you every step of the way."

"Fuck, Sky. How much more do we have to sacrifice for you?" he asked.

She flinched, but he wouldn't relent. She stepped forward. His sword broke skin before he stepped back.

"I'll come with you," she said. "Zek won't hurt Colt and Hades yet. They're too important. And we will save them, and Ravie too, but I have to save an entire camp first. And they're so close! I have to save John. I owe him."

She took another step, and the blade cut into her again. This time, Gray didn't step back. He let her push his arm instead.

"Stay with me. Help me save Reliance, and you can wrap me up in a bow and gift me to Zek after."

Gray growled at that image because he knew that's exactly what he had considered doing. "I won't ever do that." He groaned. "Where are they? The Reliance people."

Sky cringed. “The Cardinal base in San Francisco.”

Gray gasped, then bellowed with laughter. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“Ryan has a device that can get us in, and he is super strong, Gray. Stronger than the other Cardinals. I’ve seen him in action. He’s the reason I survived an encounter with fifty mutant infected. He could kill them, and they couldn’t take him.”

Gray blinked, his mind awirl with information. He didn’t know which to digest first. “I—This ... I don’t know.”

“If he’s telling the truth, we can help free the world so there’ll be no more orphans like you, me, Alex, Colt, Hayden, and all the others. There have been so many.”

Gray scowled. She had played the damn orphan card.

“Please, I can’t leave now.” She stepped in again, moving his elbow back farther. Blood trickled down her chest. She was less than half a step away, staring up at him.

A twig snapped, and a figure flew out from behind the trees.

Gray shoved Sky aside and slashed at the blur. A sledgehammer crashed into his chest and knocked him off his feet, propelling him backward. He crashed into a tree trunk. Searing pain exploded through his back.

“Stop!” Sky yelled. “Ryan, stop.”

A hand touched his cheek and lifted his face. Gray opened his eyes to find a concerned Sky. “What the fuck? He’s way more powerful than the other Cardinals I’ve fought.”

Ryan stalked closer. “You got lucky.” The giant towered over him with an expression that gave him the chills. “Why were you attacking Sky?”

Sky glared up. “He wasn’t going to hurt me. We were ...”

Ryan motioned behind him. “Why is Alex unconscious?”

Gray leaned forward, his back burning, and slowly raised his hand. “That’d be my fault.”

“Stop moving.” She grasped Gray’s shoulder.

Ryan shot Sky a look that Gray interpreted as, *What did I tell you?*

Sky hopped up. “Alex was freaking out. I might have done the same.”

She never would’ve, but Gray appreciated her saying so after he’d pulled a knife on her.

Ryan closed in and brushed his fingertips across her collarbone. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing.” She gazed up.

Gray cleared his throat, and Sky stepped back, glancing at him.

“Technically, she cut herself.” Gray tried to stand, but agony erupted through his back, and he fell on his ass, yelping.

Sky swooped in next to him. “Your back! Dammit, Ryan. You probably made his injuries worse.”

Ryan scowled. “What injury? He moved fine earlier.”

“The Warlord had him whipped sixty times for letting me go.”

Ryan hissed, and a lot of the aggression in his stance melted away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Next time, don’t charge in,” snapped Sky.

Ryan turned away, and Gray felt for the idiot. He’d only been trying to save Sky, and she was not the easiest person to protect. Gray had been right. The giant clearly cared for her, and she returned the sentiment, which was a shame because he couldn’t see any way this would end well for them. They were from two different worlds, literally.

“Give him a break, Sky. It didn’t look good.”

“Come on. Let’s check you out.” She tugged at his shirt, and he grimaced, lifting his arm up. Carefully, she pulled it off. A growl rumbled up her throat. “I can’t believe you’ve

been running around with your back in this state. And why don't you have any bandages?"

"Javi's got them. And it didn't feel that bad—before now, anyway."

"It's going to get infected."

"I've got some of Syl's salve left."

Ryan leaned over. "May I see? I can help."

Gray stared up. Shit, these Cardinals were all really tall.

Sky rubbed Gray's arm. "He can heal you."

Right, the alien had saved Theo, and getting back into full fighting shape would be advantageous. "Sure, knock yourself out."

Ryan crouched beside him and placed his hand on Gray's shoulder.

Gray's brows furrowed. "Why do I feel all tingly?"

A flicker of confusion flashed in Ryan's eyes before his mask slammed back into place. He reached into his sack and brought out a tube filled with clear liquid. "Drink this. It won't stop the scarring, but you'll be fully healed by tomorrow."

"Seriously?" Gray took the vial and glanced at Sky. "It's safe?"

She nodded slowly. "I've had a few of them."

"Okay then." Gray trusted Sky implicitly, so without a second thought, he tipped the contents down his throat. Even doing that hurt. He was so fucked up. "We're matching now."

Sky scowled. "That's not funny. So, Hades is really messed up?"

"Faust had no reason to lie. I told you before, giving is worse than receiving." He shifted and scrunched his face up.

"You've whipped someone before?" Ryan asked.

"We all have. Zek made us discipline wrongdoers," said Sky.

“And he had me whip Sky,” said Gray.

“You did that to Sky?” the alien growled and gouged his fingers into Gray’s shoulder.

Gray cried out, trying to pull away. Ryan would crush his bones if he didn’t stop, but the alien only squeezed tighter.

“Ryan!” Sky grabbed the alien’s arm and shook him. “You’re hurting Gray! Stop!”

The alien let go, leaped up, and moved away.

Gray rubbed his arm and slumped, heaving. “I told you he was smitten.”

The alien marched back. “This Warlord made you?”

“Yes. He said if I didn’t, he’d get one of his men to, and the lashes would be doubled.”

The alien spun around and punched an oak trunk. Gray’s jaw went slack. His fist had sunk in as deep as his elbow.

Sky jumped up and inspected the hole, and Gray wished he could too. She grabbed Ryan’s wrist and ran her hand over his knuckles.

“Anything?” Gray asked.

“Not a mark.”

Gray smiled. “You have to teach me how to do that.”

The alien side-eyed him, and Gray couldn’t read his expression.

Sky crouched in front of Gray. “So, are you in?” She stared with pleading eyes.

Gray heaved a sigh. They still had time. They’d get her damn people, then get back to Battle Mountain. He needed to talk to Greer again. Dammit, he could never say no to her.

“You’ll help me after we do this?” he asked.

“I promise.”

Sky smiled. And Gray couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her smile so brightly.

Gray grunted. “You win. Let’s save Reliance.”

“Thank you.” She hugged him.

Her arms brushed the top of his injury, but he suppressed a flinch because he didn’t want her to pull away. “I hate you,” he mumbled.

She pulled back and kissed his forehead. “I love you too.”

Gray caught the alien’s clenched fists in the corner of his eye and smirked. He was going to have fun tormenting this damn alien, and as far as Gray was concerned, the fucker deserved it for turning their lives upside down. He wouldn’t be joining this boatload of crazy if the alien hadn’t drawn the Cardinals to Sky.

Sky and Ryan helped him up. His back was already improving, and there was a slight tingle, which felt weird. Gray draped his arm over Sky’s shoulder and used her as a crutch.

The alien bent, plucked Alex up, and deposited the little brat over his broad shoulder.

“You better fill in the details.” Gray leaned into Sky and hobbled forward.

“I will. We have a lot to talk about.”

THE END for now...



THIRTY-TWO

COLT

# BONUS CHAPTER



## COLT

Colt stood at the corner of the sidewalk, watching Gray ride away, and sent up a silent prayer that it wouldn't be the last time he saw his brother. It had been years since he had seen Gray so weakened. It was a stark reminder that both he and Sky were not as invulnerable as they appeared, even with their abilities.

“General.” Wyatt closed in. The concern in his eyes was not appropriate.

“Mask your feelings, Five-stud. No one can see that,” Colt hissed.

Wyatt hardened his expression and dipped his head. “My apologies, General.”

They stepped off the sidewalk and strolled toward the palace. Colt let out a long breath, but it didn't help. Too much weighed on him. His family was in danger from the person who was supposed to be protecting them. Over the years, Colt had learned how cunning Zek was, which made him suspicious of what he'd done to Ravie. Was this another manipulation? Usually, when Zek got furious, he didn't stop at beatings. Or had he gone easy on Ravie because he still felt some lingering attachment to Gray?

“Any updates on Ravie?” Colt asked. “Is he a plant?” His gut twisted.

Gray had been through so much already. Colt really hoped, for his brother's sake, that his lover was not a spy. But he feared the worst because Gray had been so broken after Sky had left that it would've been the perfect opportunity for Zek to take advantage of him.

Ravie and Gray had gotten together while Colt had been away. As soon as Colt had returned, Wyatt had come to him, fearing that Ravie's intentions were not genuine because of how aggressively Ravie had pursued Gray out of the blue. But

Gray had been so enamored with Ravie that Wyatt's and Colt's words had fallen on deaf ears. They had ceased their warnings for fear that Gray would pull away and changed their tactics to monitoring Ravie instead.

"I still can't find definite proof," said Wyatt in a low voice after they'd passed a patrol. "It's like he didn't exist before transferring to us."

"I wish Karim were still alive. He knew everything." Colt ran his fingers through his hair.

The Skin nation had descended into depravity after losing Sky and Karim. He knew that most people, even the other generals, hadn't known about the vast network of eyes and ears that Sky had built throughout her years as a general, and Karim had helped her manage it. At first, she'd only started it as an extra layer of security for Alex, but it had transformed over the years into much more—a system that had kept the whole nation in line and one that Zek had not noticed until it was too late. Unfortunately, the network crumbled after both of its leaders had vanished.

Wyatt pushed his shoulder into Colt's. "I heard an unbelievable rumor last week. It came by one of Sky's ex-four-studs, Lexi. She and a few others believe Karim might be alive."

Colt froze mid-step, then quickly resumed his stride. "That's impossible," he whispered. "Zek chopped Karim's head off..."

Realization dawned on him.

Wyatt watched Colt carefully. "I thought the same until Lexi reminded me that not once during or after the execution was Karim's hood removed."

Colt's breath froze in his lungs.

"We were all too shaken by General Scarlet's and Alex's deaths to notice," said Wyatt. "But if you think about it, it's odd. The Warlord loves to make statements with the dead."

How hadn't Colt seen it before? Of course, Zek would've made a statement with Karim. He'd had Will's head staked

outside the palace for weeks after his death, traumatizing Sky even more before he'd sent Will's rotting remains back to Matron. But he had not done that with Karim. Which Colt should've noticed as suspicious, especially since Zek had accused Karim of plotting to overthrow him. Not that Colt or Gray, and probably Amir, had believed the accusation. Colt had figured that Zek wanted to eliminate Karim because of his influence over Sky's men and control over the network they'd built. Either way, Zek should've put Karim's head on display too.

"Did Lexi say where he is?" Colt asked, clenching his fists.

"No. She said it was a theory."

He gritted his teeth. "Maybe a valid one."

Wyatt raised his eyebrow. "One General Amir might be interested in?"

Colt grinned at Wyatt. "Indeed. Stay on Ravie. I'll investigate Karim."

Wyatt dipped his head and glanced over his shoulder. "Perhaps, you can start now."

Colt turned and saw Amir striding toward them with purpose.

"Bring some salami to my house tonight. I'm running low," Colt said in a louder voice, then motioned with his chin for Wyatt to leave.

"Of course, General." Wyatt tapped his fist to his chest and departed.

"Colt, I'm glad I caught you," Amir said, stopping a few paces short.

"Amir." Colt narrowed his eyes. Gray had been right about being cautious in dealing with Amir. Sky had said that Karim wasn't sure where his loyalties lay at times.

Amir held his hand toward a road leading to the south side of town. "Walk with me."

Colt shot him a questioning look but inclined his head, and they strolled down the street.

After a few steps, Amir asked, “How is the Hawk?”

Amir had seen Gray’s condition, so there was no use covering it up. “Not good. He needed more rest.”

“I feared as much. This nation cannot afford to lose another general, especially one of Gray’s caliber. Losing Scarlet weakened us severely. Don’t you find it odd that the Warlord never replaced her?”

Colt studied Amir from the corner of his eye but gleaned nothing of worth, no hints of the man’s motivations. “She’s a hard act to follow.”

“Very true. Only the Hawk was her equal. But that is not the reason I wanted to talk.”

They rounded a corner, heading toward an area of town Colt avoided.

“Oh?”

Amir turned his dark eyes to Colt. “After we lost Scarlet, you and the Hawk were away so often. I wonder if you know what your blood brother Hades has been up to?”

Colt’s brows pinched. “What do you mean?”

“When was the last time you went to the Red Lounge?”

Colt scoffed. “You know I don’t like this part of town.”

“I’m not much of a fan either, but it’s an excellent place to gather secrets.” Amir shot him a sly smirk. “Karim and Scarlet taught me that. So, I frequent the area, and every time I’m here, I run into Hades.”

Colt gnashed his teeth. “Hades likes to have a good time.”

“I understand what it’s like to be young and powerful. Parties every day. Especially since the Warlord doesn’t send him anywhere anymore. It’s almost like the Warlord is encouraging his behavior.”

Tension rippled through Colt's mouth. "I hate it when people beat around the bush. What are you implying?"

Amir lifted a shoulder. "Nothing. Just an observation. Have you met Hades's angels?"

"Who?"

Amir waved his hand toward the establishments farther down the road. "He bought them a couple of months ago."

Revulsion swelled through Colt. "Bought!"

"I know you tried to shut down the slave market, but it popped up in a new location a week later. I'm surprised Hades didn't tell you. He loves going to the parties the slavers throw."

Colt's nostrils flared. "Are you saying Hades keeps slaves?"

Amir quirked an eyebrow. "Only two that I know of. He keeps them at the Red Lounge, I assume, so you and Gray don't find out, since neither of you frequents these establishments."

Colt clenched his fist so tight his wrist popped. "And you're sure he hasn't freed them?"

"You would have to ask him." Amir smiled at two ladies sauntering by, wearing barely enough to cover their breasts.

"I will." Colt grasped Amir's wrist. "Have you any indentures?"

"The practice disgusts me," Amir snarled, ripping his arm free.

Colt had a feeling Amir had just let the real him shine through. "I'm glad."

Amir tilted his head away. "Things are changing. I'm not sure why the Warlord is so insistent on bringing Scarlet back. He used to hate the way she and Karim policed everything." His lip curled into a sneer. "Especially since he trumped up those charges to rid himself of Karim after she jumped."



Colt sprang onto this perfect opportunity. “I just heard an odd rumor.” He kept his gaze fixed on Amir, not wanting to miss a twitch. “Some of Scarlet’s ex-warriors think Karim might still be alive. They think it was odd that Karim’s head was never displayed for us to see, and we were all too preoccupied to realize it was never Karim under the hood.”

Amir’s thick brows furrowed. “But that would mean ...” His eyes widened, and he gulped.

“Of course, it’s only a rumor. A crazy one at that,” said Colt.

Amir straightened, and Colt saw an intensity in Amir’s gaze he’d never seen before. “Thank you for sharing that with me, General Colt. I will repay it someday. Today, I’ll share a caution. If I were a careful man, I would move a certain Two-stud healer out of the capital to ensure her safety.”

An icy claw closed around Colt’s heart. “Thank you, General.”

Amir placed his hand on Colt’s shoulder, and they stopped in front of a building with a red door. “I’m heading to Battle Mountain tomorrow. Perhaps we could visit our old trainer together. It’s his daughter’s second birthday next week, and he insisted I attend. I’m sure he would be happy if you joined too.”

“It would be good to pay our respects.” Colt forced a smile.

Amir patted Colt’s arm. “Very good. I’ll meet you at the stables at dawn. Good luck with Hades.”

Amir strolled farther down, and Colt stared at the red letters painted above the door of the old hotel.

Another pair of ladies strolled by. “General, are you lonely?” asked one.

Colt shot her an unimpressed look, and she shrugged, moving on with her friend. In the mornings, the streets were quiet, but at night, people crowded this area, spilling onto the streets, and live music blasted out of each building. The

number of questionable establishments had significantly increased in the last two years.

Colt marched toward the red door and shoved it open. The attendant inside jumped, yipping. The thin straps of her silky white shift slipped from her shoulder, and the semi-transparent top showed off her small breasts. “General Colt. Welcome.”

“Where is Hades?” he growled.

“He doesn’t wish to be disturbed,” she said in a quivering voice.

Colt glared. “He’ll see me.”

The thin woman shook like a leaf. Colt knew it wasn’t her fault and he shouldn’t be terrorizing her so much, but this section of town rubbed him the wrong way. Hades was the one who’d talked him into turning a blind eye to the south side. He’d said the men needed an area to relax, but Colt had never agreed to slaves and whorehouses. The brunette didn’t wear any studs. In place of the leather band, she had a tattoo of chain links. He’d seen the tattoo on the slaves he’d freed almost a year ago. Zek had assured him he would stop the practice and had placed Hades in charge of it.

*What the hell is Hayden doing?*

“Take me to him—now!”

She dipped her head and scampered out from behind the desk. “This way, sir.”

She led him through a black door, and the marijuana smoke blanketing the lounge assaulted Colt’s nose. There were a few men stretched out on the velvet couches, each with two women draped over them. The woman turned into a hallway and up a set of stairs. Lanterns dangled from the walls, and the air stank of stale alcohol and smoke. She exited to the first floor and brought him to a double door. He waved her off. She bowed and scrambled away.

Colt breathed in deep to calm his temper and pounded on the door.

“Fuck off!” Hades yelled from inside. “I said not to disturb us.”

Colt heard a giggle and pounded harder.

The door snapped open, and Hades froze, all his bits hanging on display.

“Who is it, sweetie? Is Faust back?” a feminine voice called from behind him.

A firestorm erupted in Colt’s chest.

Hades’s eyes widened, and he raised his hands. “It’s not what you think.”

Colt stalked forward, herding Hayden inside.

“Oh, yummy,” said a blonde lying on her stomach. She was naked and eyeing Colt like he was a tasty snack.

Colt scanned the suite decked out in red velvet. The bar was fully stocked, and a line of at least ten bottles ran down a hardwood table in the center of the room. Even the sofa set was red velvet and discarded clothes were strewn out across it and the dining chairs.

Another naked blonde swayed out of the bathroom, and her painted red lips formed a circle. “A new playmate?”

“Shut up, Stacy,” said Hayden. “Colt, I ...”

Colt glowered at the women, wiping their sultry expressions off their faces. “Get out!”

“Hades?” Stacy asked.

“Out!” Colt growled.

The women raced to grab their robes and scurried outside. Colt slammed the door shut behind them, leaned against it, and let out a long breath. “So, this is what you’ve been doing while Gray and I are away? You were supposed to stop the slavery, not buy two yourself!”

“No, I ...”

Colt clenched his fists. “And with Faust!”

Hades flinched. “He only comes once in a while.”

Colt shut his eyes. “That he comes at all is insane. You know what he’s like.”

“He’s not that bad. We hang out.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” How had everything gone so wrong? “You disgust me.”

Hades picked up a dining chair and chucked it at the wall. It thudded to the floor. “Don’t you dare judge me! Who else am I supposed to hang with? You and Gray are always gone, and when you’re back, you never have time for me! And Faust likes to drink. He brought me some last night to console me after, you know ...”

“I bet he wanted all the gory details too.” Colt paced around the room.

“It wasn’t like that. He tried to take my mind off it. We talked about girls and the trip to get Sky.”

Colt stilled. The inferno in his chest spread to his limbs. “Hayden, what did you tell him?”

“Nothing.” He grabbed his forehead. “I think.”

Colt shook with rage. “Fucking remember!”

“I don’t know! I was so fucked up last night. Shit. Colt, I made Gray bleed! And his screams.” He pulled at his hair. “I can’t get them out of my mind. I did that to him.” He slumped onto the bed and dropped his head into his hands.

Colt blew out a haggard breath. “I’m sorry you had to do that, but this is important. You need to think. What did you tell him?”

“I’m sure I didn’t tell him we killed Zek’s men after we found Sky and that we let her go... but I might have told him about Gray’s and Sky’s superpowers and where they came from.”

“Hayden!” Colt bellowed.

Hades sprang up. “What? I don’t know why we have to keep it a secret. They’re amazing. Everyone knows something

is different about them. They're like gods and shouldn't have to hide it."

"They are people, Hayden. Our brother and sister whom we swore to protect. And right now, one of them is very injured. You know that."

"Sky healed up in a week." Hades looked away. "Gray will be fine. I'll watch his back."

"Great job you're doing from here." Colt gestured at the room.

Hades covered his eyes with one hand and rubbed his temples. "I needed a night, all right. I was going to go sit with him before you barged in and started yelling at me."

"Do you know where I just came from? Did Faust tell you his and the Warlord's plans for Gray?"

Hades lowered his hand. "What plans?"

"The Warlord sent Gray, Faust, and thirty of Faust's men out not an hour ago to retrieve Sky."

Hades paled. "Gray can't walk. He should be resting."

"Exactly! He's weak and vulnerable. Wyatt had to help him mount his damn horse. But it gets worse. The Warlord placed Gray under Faust's command."

Hades's jaw flopped open. "But Faust didn't say. He said ... I didn't know. I swear, I didn't mean for this—Fuck!" He snatched a bottle and hurled it at the wall. "Fuck!"

Colt kicked up the fallen dining chair and shoved it under the table. "Get your fucking shit together. I don't even know you anymore. Who are you?"

"Don't you give me that shit. If you don't know me anymore, it's your own fault! We've changed! We all did after she left. You can't tell me you're the same. We all dealt with her leaving in our own way. I cared about her too. But you were too concerned about Gray to see how much it hurt me! I fucking loved her! She was my sunlight, and she fucking left." A tear slipped from the corner of his eye. "And then we find her a few months later, laughing it up in that shitty little

community with that British guy who was old enough to be her father.”

Colt rubbed the top of his head. “Jesus, Hayden. She deserved some happiness.”

Hades thumped his fist to his chest. “Why couldn’t we be her happiness? Why weren’t we enough?”

“We chose Zek. She never wanted this life. And don’t tell me it wasn’t tough for her. Zek sent her on all the hardest missions, spreading the fear of the Scarlet Death everywhere. We’ve killed for him, but she slaughtered. And she did it herself, so her men didn’t have to carry that burden. Can you say the same?”

Hades stared at the floor.

“You better pray Gray comes home. If he doesn’t, it’ll be your fault!”

Hades sank back down to the bed and hung his head between his knees. “I feel sick.”

Colt stood over him. “The lines are drawn in the sand, brother. It’s time to choose.” He swept around without a backward glance.

Colt stormed out of the Red Lounge and stalked toward the clinic. He needed to get Sylvie packed up. There was no way he’d leave her here while he went to Battle Mountain. Over the last two years, Zek had been recalling his men from the outpost and outer cities and assigning Colt’s, Gray’s, and, recently, Amir’s men to them. It meant Colt’s warriors were spread all over the country and wouldn’t be easy to mobilize. Zek had an army of ten thousand loyal to him, and most were stationed in Salt Lake. Things were spiraling out of his control. Zek was five steps ahead, and Colt had a terrible feeling that if he didn’t catch up, he wouldn’t be breathing much longer.

A scraggly young messenger, about ten, scampered up to him. “General Colt.”

“What?”

The boy presented a letter. “Orders from the Warlord, sir.”

Colt snatched the paper, and the messenger bowed before dashing away.

He ripped off the skull-imprinted wax seal and read the orders. Zek was sending him east to the middle of nowhere. “Fuck.” The trip would likely take a month there and back. He crumpled the paper in his hand.

This was it.

It was time to make a move.

Colt had never imagined the day he’d decided to move against the Warlord, that he would do it without his brothers and sister at his side. He raked his fingers through his hair. Gray and Sky would back him as soon as they met up. But Hades? Colt stared south. He couldn’t trust Hades right now, and that thought shriveled his insides. He spun and continued toward the clinic. There was a mountain of things to do before he left tonight, and he hoped to God he’d stay alive long enough to see Gray and Sky again.

# ALIEN TERMS, & TITLES



# AN'ZURI WORDS & MEANING

An ↔ Supreme Being/ God

Apatel ↔ Unregistered/ Unidentified

HolPod ↔ A medical screening table that diagnosis and heals most injuries

Hyokau ↔ An An'Zuri Battle cry

ISA (Ee-sah) ↔ The name of the AI controlling the nanite in their bodies

Jearen ↔ A slippery blue creature from Roza, like a fast-moving slug, about the size of a cat. Very difficult to catch and considered a delicacy to the locals

Kalka ↔ A traditional Za weapon similar to a human shamshir

Pecu exiim cemul ↔ Requesting emergency access

Raatius ↔ Granted / confirmed

Reg domies ↔ By authority

Satar ↔ An extinct cat-like predator that the old gods of An'zura had favored

Squanak ↔ An animal on An'Zari that resembles a wart filled green reptilian pig and moves the speed of a turtle.

Tia ↔ How

Tri-Source ↔ A sphere filled with hundreds of triangles that repels off each other constantly and create immense power. Enough to power a large human city for a hundred years. And as it is nano based if the source is not being fully utilized it can be repurposed for other things. Including production of more nanite and memory storage.

Vaikelane ↔ A novice warrior

# AN'ZURI TITLES

A'an ⇄ Leader of the An'Zuri Council

An Del ⇄ Used for the children of the council leader

Dels ⇄ A sort of lord. A general title used only when addressing the ruling class. A descendant of one of the twelve ruling families

Exus ⇄ A lower title of respect

Felix ⇄ Higher lord, used for a direct descendant of one of the six original families

Om ⇄ Base commander

Za ⇄ The normal citizens of An'Zan

Zar ⇄ Title given to the top ten warriors of An'Zan/ Rafa's warriors

# AFTERWORD

Here we are at the end of The Scarlet Sphere, Book Two of the Sky Saga. I hope you enjoyed it, and that the story and characters lived up to your expectations. My next release will be the first book of the prequel series, [Broken Sky](#), following Gray and Sky journeys from the day of the moon incident. Book Three, [The Red Traitor](#), will be out next year March.

If you'd like updates and sneak previews visit my website [mkosmun.com](http://mkosmun.com) and sign up for my newsletter. Or follow me on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook for preview reels.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can't believe I'm publishing my second book! So many people have helped me come this far. The usual suspects are my hubby, my gorgeous son, my mum and dad. Thank you for all your love and support.

A special thank you to Emily Wright for going above and beyond with her developmental feedback and beta reading. Also, to Ellie Race for her excellent insight, and my new beta reader Macy, who has brought a completely different, but much needed, perspective. A huge thank you to my editor Elizabeth for cleaning up my rushed mess. And my proofreaders Emily Lawrence and Magan.

Thank you Marina, Joy, and Colene for your constant support. And a huge shout out to Melissa for my first IG review, which was absolutely amazing! And to my Sky Team and all the wonderful people who have left positive reviews on Amazon and Goodreads, thank you so much. I've loved reading them (I will do my best not to turn Sky into a lovesick, clueless female) and I hope to read more reviews for this book too.

# BROKEN SKY

PREVIEW

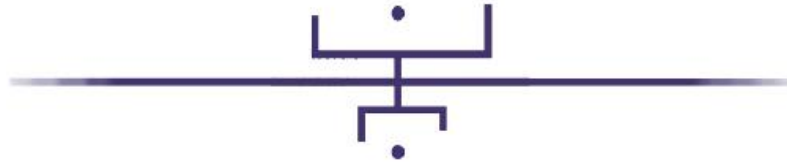


SKY SAGA PREQUEL 1

Coming Nov 16

# CHAPTER ONE

SKY



*(subject to minor changes)*

►**Countdown: -24:30Hrs**◄

*Sometime in the near future....*

Sky's world somersaulted, and she landed on a mat with a thud that sent sharp stabs through her side. Was internet access worth getting a few bruised ribs, a sprained shoulder, and a headache? She certainly thought so even as she winced from the pain.

Twenty minutes ago, Dad had caught her on Harvard's Library server reading a physics paper. She didn't see the big deal. Sure, technically, she was accessing it illegally, but it wasn't like the paper was top secret. Not like the time she'd tried to hack into NASA a few years ago. Somehow, he'd discovered her attempt before she'd barely started, and there had been hell to pay. She'd lost access for six months. But since it was Christmas Eve, Dad was giving her a chance to redeem herself. All she had to do was land one solid strike, and she would get off with only a week of barred access instead of four years.

She cradled her ribs and rolled into a crouch, watching her father's lithe form. He stood a few feet away, wearing loose fitting black pants and a matching short-sleeve wrap top, like a summer yukata, whereas Sky's was beige.

Just one strike. It shouldn't be this hard, with nearly eleven years of experience behind her. Dad had started training her from the age of three and she'd never managed to hit him



before, but even if Dad had trained three times as long, if she couldn't slip through his defenses when she really needed to, then what was the point of all this training?

Dad narrowed his icy blue eyes and beckoned with his long fingers.

Sky clenched her teeth, only two tries remained. She launched forward, staying low this time, and feinted left. He read her intention and kicked. She knew he'd see through her moves, but she wasn't done yet. She blocked, needing both arms to deflect his power, and slipped under. Coming up behind, she jabbed her fist at Dad's back. Then he spun almost faster than she could follow, and her punch caught only air.

He brushed his dark brown hair off his crease free forehead and frowned. "By now, you should be able to land at least one hit, even a glancing one. We'll have to up your regime if this is your level."

She suppressed a groan. *Great.* Now she faced no internet *and* extra torture. It was time she got serious. Sky stood, straightening to her full height. Even though she was tall for her age at five-foot-eight, she only came up to Dad's chest. She bent her lanky legs and assumed a ready position, shifting forward to the balls of her feet.

The harsh fluorescent light bounced off vivid white mats that she had to clean on her hands and knees after every session. She was sure Dad had chosen white to see how much she bled because if her knuckles hadn't split at the end of practice, then she wasn't hitting hard enough.

A rack filled with practice weapons—wooden swords, bastons, nunchaku, and bo-staffs—lined one side of the stark concrete wall of their basement. Mounted individually on the opposite wall, were blunted swords from all over the world—from a Dao sword to a broadsword, but today they were just using their fists.

"Breakfast's ready in ten." Mom's voice traveled down the stairs.

Dad didn't allow Mom and Alex in the basement. Only Sky was allowed to train with him.

"Last try, vaikelane," said Dad.

Sky didn't know what language her father used sometimes. He'd told her that word meant novice warrior, but Sky had found no reference to the word in any language, and she had spent years searching.

She sidestepped, and Dad shadowed her. They continued, completing a full circuit. Dad sprang in. Sky reacted, dodging his fist, and weaving around. His foot clipped her waist, but she ignored the flash of pain. She couldn't let it distract her from her goal, and even if she cried out, she'd get no sympathy from Dad. Darting in, she jabbed at the side of his throat. He jerked back. Her knuckles grazed his skin. He blurred and slammed his open palm into her abdomen. Sky sailed back. Crashing into the concrete wall, a clunk reverberated through her skull. She slumped down in defeat, trying to shake off the white spots dancing before her eyes.

"Dad! Sky! Mom says breakfast is ready."

Sky heard her eight-year-old brother Alex's voice through the ringing in her ears.

A pair of bare feet stood before her, and she lulled her head to the side, looking up at her father.

Dad pressed his lips together in his customary displeased expression; a look Sky was all too familiar with.

"Get cleaned up." Dad turned on his heel and strode toward the stairs. "Because it's Christmas, I'll let you off with a month's punishment since you grazed me. But do it again and you'll get no more chances."

Sky crumpled into a satisfied heap, listening to her father's soft steps on the wooden stairs. One month was way better than four years. Every ache and bruise had been so worth it, and she'd almost gotten him! It was her first time even getting close. She grinned.

\* \* \*

Sky splashed water on her face and stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She tilted her head, examining her pale skin that never tanned no matter how hard she tried. With her coloring, she could almost pass for an albino. She tilted her head. No bruises anywhere. Dad had been extra careful today, with her face anyway. The back of her head throbbed as she lifted her shirt and scowled at the purpling splotches on her stomach and ribs. Today's bruises were darker than normal. She grabbed a jar from the medicine cabinet and scooped out some cream her father always had her use after sparring. It was Dad's special concoction and would break down most of her bruising by tomorrow, although the one on her left rib might take a little longer.

She glanced at the mats and sighed. After breakfast she'd have to clean them. Turning away, she flipped off all the lights and lumbered up the stairs, ignoring her aching torso, and exited into the kitchen.

"There you are." Mom bustled up and kissed her forehead, causing a faint flutter of invisible ants under her skin.

Sky had a couple more inches before she overtook Mom. And she didn't know why she'd always had this weird sensation whenever someone touched her, although at least her reaction from Mom was muted compared to with others. The only people she didn't get invisible ants from were Alex and Dad. When she'd told Mom secretly, she might need to see a doctor about it. Mom said she'd grow out of it, because her father had too, and told her to drop the issue before Dad found out. Dad didn't believe in doctors and had never let them see one.

Mom's mouth curved in a downward tilt. "Dad took your laptop, sweetie, and your phone too. He said you could have it back when school starts." Mom's hazel-green eyes were full of sympathy. "You really shouldn't do things that upset him."

Sky let out a huff. "I know."

"Go sit down. Food will be out in a second."

Sky sat at her family's breakfast table, sulking at the injustice of it all. First her computer and now her phone. It wasn't like she had many friends who would miss her. The only person she communicated with regularly lived next door. But without internet, she was going to die of boredom over the next week. She'd finished her homework already and read every book in the house five times, and TV was for losers.

Sky hated being a kid. She wanted to be an adult as soon as possible, so she could go wherever she wanted and do whatever she wanted. Read whatever she wanted. She knew if her father would only let her take the SATs or ACTs, she could get into university, but he always insisted she didn't draw attention to herself. He was the only dad she knew who got angry when she brought home a perfect test score. At least he let her skip a grade, thanks to Mom's and the school's insistence, but sophomore year in high school was child's play.

Dad always wanted them to maintain the façade of an ordinary family, but the only person in their family that was completely normal was Mom. Sky didn't understand why, since being different was what most people strived for. Everyone wanted to be noticed, but then they wanted to conform to the social norms. It was something she had trouble understanding.

Alex slunk out of the living room with his face buried in his iPad. He was a miniature version of their father, down to the sharpness of the chin and nose, but his hair was lighter, a dark honey, thanks to Mom. Zipping and whizzing sounds exploded out of his tablet. He'd gotten a present a day early. It wasn't fair that she had to wait until Christmas Day for hers. If she even got any now, Dad might insist that she needed to learn a lesson. Alex was the favorite, and most of the time Sky didn't mind because he was pretty cute, although lately he was becoming more bratty. But she put up with it because Alex adored her, and it wasn't his fault their parents favored him.

Mom exited the kitchen with a stack of pancakes and a plate of bacon. She wore a cheesy Christmas green sweater—the same design Alex was wearing—of a jolly Santa. Dad came striding in, kissed Mom, and plonked down next to her

with the TV remote, then flipped channels to the news, like he always did. Mom wrangled Alex into his seat and served him a heap of pancakes he would never finish.

“Sky, sit up straight.” Dad shot her a look that said if she didn’t, she’d pay for it later during training.

Sky snapped her stiff back straight, causing her ribs to throb again, but she knew better than to ignore a command like that.

Mom reached across and patted Dad’s hand. “Since it’s so warm, I thought we could all go for a drive to the beach.”

Alex looked up from his game and pursed his lips. And it was a good thing Dad didn’t notice, because he would’ve snapped at Alex if he had.

“The Wilsons are also—”

A momentary blast of volume from the TV drew their attention. “We interrupt our normal programming to bring you this breaking news.”

Dad grabbed the remote and turned up the sound.

The words flashed in bold letters across the bottom of the screen. *Explosion on the moon.*