



**KERAN'S**

*Dawn*

FOR THE PEOPLE  
AND THE CROWN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**REGINE ABEL**

Braxians, Book 4

# KERAN'S DAWN



*Braxians - Book 4*



# REGINE ABEL

**Cover by**

Regine Abel

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## READING ORDER

The Braxians series is part of the Veredian Chronicles universe. While this book can be read as standalone with a complete romance arc and no cliffhanger, to fully enjoy the overarching story, it is recommended to read both series in the following order:

1. Escaping Fate (Veredian Chronicles 1)
2. Blind Fate (Veredian Chronicles 2)
3. Raising Amalia (Veredian Chronicles 3)
4. Anton's Grace (Braxians 1) - **Optional**
5. Twist of Fate (Veredian Chronicles 4)
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9. Defying Fate (Veredian Chronicles 6)
10. Keran's Dawn (Braxians 4)



## KERAN'S DAWN

### **For the people and the crown.**

When Dawn took over the management of the Braxian hybrid shelter on the sanctuary planet Haven, she never thought its last days would be marked by a series of gruesome murders against its patrons. With local law enforcement failing to capture the murderer, she makes a desperate plea for help to the Braxian Crown Prince, Keran Xeldar. Instead of sending a team, he comes in person. Like all purebloods, Keran is a massive beast of a man, with muscles for days, and brutish features that would set fear in the staunchest hearts. Even his smile is terrifying. And yet, she's never felt safer than in his presence, or more drawn to a man.

With his coronation only three months away, Keran isn't thrilled about this impromptu mission. But in light of Braxia's shameful past where hybrids are concerned, he owes them this much. The moment he lands on Haven, his entire life is turned upside down by Dawn Merrick. By human standards, she's considered plain. To him, she's the most stunning female he's ever beheld. Her intelligence and selfless devotion to the welfare of the hybrids further draw him to her. But what should have been a simple murder investigation turns out to be a blood-curdling conspiracy none of them are prepared for.

As they become entangled in a web of lies, deception, and manipulation, will Keran and Dawn survive this deadly game, or will traitors destroy the entire Braxian empire from within?



## DEDICATION

*To those who acknowledge that shying away from the horrors of a painful past is the surest way for the darkest events of history to repeat themselves. The sins of the father are not the sins of the son. Lay blame where it belongs, and let future generations build foundations based on mutual respect and understanding.*

*Violence only begets violence, and hatred fuels even more hatred. Only through reconciliation and a genuine effort to change for the better can we ever aspire to a world where we live in harmony.*

*History is not our enemy. History is not a cudgel with which to punish future generations. It is a roadmap to peace, for those who know how to read it.*



## CHAPTER 1

## KERAN

**A**s the opposing clans walked into the arena, the crowd erupted in shouts and applause. On every face, both males and females, the same feverish excitement burned fiercely. You'd think we were about to witness a duel to the death to allow an offended clan to reclaim its honor after a slight, not merely enjoy a brutal match of Beikor.

And yet, the seats of the arena were packed to capacity so that all could bear witness to the “half breed” Gavin Aldriss leading his team. Half the attendees hoped to see him and his clan obliterated. The other half were already taking bets at the insane odds that the young pup would decimate his opponents.

I belonged to that other half.

Sitting in the Magnar's box, next to my father Ravik and his mate Mercy, we had the best possible view of the arena. Their three offspring, the twins Lissy and Garruk, and the youngest Dregor, were sitting off to the left side of the box with thrilled expressions. Despite their young age—nine for the twins and eight for Dregor—my half-siblings were already promising to be as strong and fierce as their parents. I couldn't help a proud smile when all three of them joined their voices to the shouting crowd as Gavin walked towards the center of the arena, followed by the rest of his clan.

I cast a sideways glance at Gavin's grandfather, Krygor, sitting on my right. Normally, he should have been in one of the two rows below us with the rest of my father's Council and their spouses. But the bond between the Xeldars and the Aldriss had long evolved beyond king and subjects. We were family.

"I'm surprised you're letting the pup lead this match," I said, amusement audible in my voice. "I seem to recall you were itching to settle some scores with Clan Arthol."

Krygor snorted. "There will be plenty of other occasions for that. But what greater humiliation for that son of a krillik than to have his entire clan mowed down by a quarter-blood?"

I chuckled. "The boy has become quite the beast."

"He has," Krygor replied proudly. "Looking at him, you'd never think he just turned eighteen. He's already 7'2. I suspect by the time he's twenty-one that he'll be close to eight feet like us."

I nodded slowly while reflecting on his words. "Gavin has been dominating every duel. It's the first time I see purebloods shying away from a fight against a hybrid."

"The blood of our ancestors runs strong in his veins," Krygor said smugly.

"How does Dheran feel about it?" I asked cautiously.

Krygor snorted and gave me a knowing smile. "Dheran is thrilled. He wants to crush Clan Arthol. A good Clan Leader puts his best elements in the right positions. Misplaced pride and ego are the fastest path to defeat and humiliation."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said sincerely.

As Krygor's firstborn son, Gavin's father Anton should have been his heir. But being a hybrid—half human, half Braxian—Anton would have never stood a chance against the much bigger and stronger purebloods who would have challenged him for the role. Therefore, his younger brother Dheran, a pureblood, had been chosen as Krygor's heir instead. Anyway, Anton never held such ambitions, having achieved insane wealth and power on his own with his network of pleasure barges and entertainment space stations.

But his son Gavin was defying all the rules. The boy was massive, with thick, well-defined muscles that rivaled those of the purest bloodlines. The only thing that gave away his mixed blood were his features. His human mother, Grace, was a breathtakingly beautiful woman. And Gavin had definitely inherited some of that beauty. By Braxian standards, he was ridiculously handsome, even though one might disagree by galactic standards.

He had the pitch-black, shoulder-length hair of his father—a common feature among most Braxians—and the unusual amber eyes of his mother. Where purebloods had extremely strong and prominent brow, with a flat and broad nose that gave us a brutish—Neanderthal according to humans—look, Gavin had a much tamer version of those traits, which made his face softer instead of fiercely intimidating like the rest of us had.

But that, too, was deceiving.

The two teams took their positions in the large, rectangular space—twelve men on each side. Ten two-meter-tall metal pillars rose from the ground. Their clever placement ensured that you couldn't stand anywhere in the arena without being within a five-meter radius from one of them. Situational



awareness would determine the winners and losers in this game. Once the match started, those pillars would emit an electric blast over a three-meter radius at regular intervals. You didn't want to be within range when that happened.

My father rose from his seat and walked the few steps down our elevated dais to approach the stone railing of the box. A small disk, no bigger than a coin, rose from the top of the railing and came to hover right below the Magnar's chin. The four giant screens around the arena displayed an enlarged image of his fearsome features as he prepared to address the crowd.

A hush immediately descended as the more than one hundred thousand people occupying the arena settled down to listen to their king. A mix of awe and worry swelled within me. To me, no previous Magnar rivaled my father, be it in strength, values, devotion to our people, or the sacrifices he had made to help Braxia evolve from its dark, barbaric, and primitive past. And in a few months, he would abdicate in my favor.

My gaze roamed over the crowd—a record attendance for a mere match of Beikor not tied to a consequential wager. Displayed on every face, even of those who hated my father and what he stood for, the same respect could be seen—if begrudging in some cases.

I had a ways to go to earn the same response... if ever.

My entire life, I'd prepared for this day. From learning our history to avoid repeating errors from the past, to studying the economic, cultural, and social structures of other prosperous worlds, forging foreign alliances, and educating myself in all relevant fields to be a well-rounded ruler for my people, I

strived to live up to my father's legacy. But our people still found me lacking on the one thing I had no control over.

I didn't possess my father's insane strength.

Not a day of my life went by without me undergoing intense physical and combat training. I wasn't weak by any means. In fact, I took great pride in my battle prowess. I could count on one hand the males that stood a chance of defeating me in a fair duel. *No one* could defeat my father, one-on-one.

But even as that thought crossed my mind, my eyes flicked to the young Gavin. He was standing proudly near the center of the arena, a taunting smirk on his pretty face as he stared at Jorak, Clan Althor's heir.

*No one, really?*

The roar of the crowd startled me. To my shame, I realized that I'd tuned out my father's speech, too lost in my somber musings. Thankfully, it had merely been the usual opening of a match with the standard warnings about playing honorably, yet savagely enough to put on a good show.

Father resumed his seat, his hand immediately resting possessively on Mercy's thigh. She turned her stunning face to look at him with a tender expression that stirred a powerful longing within me. I rejoiced for my father that he had finally found his soulmate and the happiness he deserved. Although I felt no particular attraction to off-worlder females, I couldn't deny that she was the Magnar's perfect queen. As part of my duties, I visited every clan of Braxia. Not a single one of their daughters stirred my interest beyond their physical appeal. None had struck me as queen material.

To my right, Krygor had slipped an equally possessive arm around Hope's waist. He, too, had found his unlikely soulmate

in an off-worlder. That Hope was a pureblood Guldán, while Mercy was a hybrid Guldán-Veredian certainly gave us pause. Granted, it was purely an odd twist of fate, but considering the bad blood between Braxians and Guldans, it had raised many eyebrows.

*Is my soulmate a Guldán as well?*

I shuddered at the thought.

But the loud horn announcing the start of the game reclaimed my attention. As the circular plate in the center of the arena began parting, Gavin and Jorak fisted their hands and bunched their muscles as a deep growl rose from their throats. They were calling upon their Berserker powers. Few Braxian males possessed that ability, which made them honored and respected members of their clans.

Once active, a Berserker emitted an aura of power that spread to every member of their clan and to those they considered as clanmates or family, turning them into Furies. It not only increased their strength and speed, but also significantly heightened their pain threshold, allowing them to continue fighting undaunted even when grievously injured.

My skin tingled, and a sudden wave of power and blood lust rushed through my veins, leaving me reeling. I almost shot to my feet so that I could jump into the arena and join the fray.

“Ancestors!” I whispered, staring in awe at Gavin as the ball shot vertically out of the hole in the center of the arena. “Gavin’s power is insane.”

“You can feel his Berserker aura?” Clan Leader Boros Grumar asked, looking at me over his shoulder with the same stunned expression the other Councilmen displayed.

“Yes. My entire family can,” I said matter-of-factly, while casting a questioning look at my father.

My father and Mercy nodded, confirming they were feeling it, too.

“We also feel it!” Lissy exclaimed with a smug expression that had all of us chuckling.

She was a handful, that one. Full of mischief, clever beyond her years, and far too adorable for her own good... or rather our own. She was the perfect mix of her parents, with Mercy’s Guldan black horns recurving over her head, the viciously sharp tips pointing up, a more delicate version of our Braxian flat, broad nose, and the typical spots that adorned the sides of the necks, arms, and legs of the Veredians.

“The boy must hold you in extremely high esteem then that he would extend his powers to all of you,” Boros said in an oddly pensive tone.

“Of course, he does,” Krygor said, as if implying otherwise was offensive.

“The Xeldar and Aldriss Clans may not have blood links, but we *are* family,” my father said in a tone that brooked no argument.

The proud and affectionate glance Krygor cast towards my sire warmed my heart. He had been his staunchest ally through the darkest days of his reign. Once I ascended to Braxia’s throne, I prayed he would grant me the same unwavering loyalty.

But the clash of bodies below ended further discussions.

Both teams had rushed forward to catch the ball once it would have fallen back down. When Gavin ran straight for Jorkal—the opposing clan’s team leader—I assumed he

intended to tackle him out of the way. When he jumped instead, with his foot forward, I presumed it was to kick him in the face.

Wrong.

Having anticipated Jorkal's defensive response to grab his foot—likely to yank him down—Gavin didn't give his foe a chance to complete the motion. Instead, he placed his other foot on Jorkal's shoulder, using it as a steppingstone. His momentum helped him to both propel himself higher and free his foot from Jorkal's grasp in the process. The movement sent Jorkal stumbling forward. He fell flat on this face at the same time Gavin was catching the ball mid-air.

The crowd's ecstatic roar drowned out the one that erupted out of my companions and me. Gavin landed, dropping immediately into a roll to absorb the impact of his fall. He rolled back onto his feet, his fist already raised to punch the opponent standing in his path. His rival stumbled backward. Gavin rammed into him to finish making him fall. The boy stepped on his felled opponent while his uncle Dheran and other clanmates knocked the members of the other team out of the way.

As Gavin ran through the field, a chiming sound resonated, giving the five second warning before the first zap. Simultaneously, the tips of the pillars started glowing as a visual reminder of the impending blast. Everyone ignored them, and Gavin continued to run in zigzags all over the field, dodging or knocking down those his teammates were failing to control.

Seconds later, a luminous blast emanated from the ball, tightly tucked under Gavin's thick arm, and the tips of the pillars as they all released their electric discharge. The boy

didn't wince or falter, nor did the people standing within the radius of the pillars. The first three discharges were easily bearable. It was a sound strategy to hold onto the ball for as long as possible at the beginning of the match, while you still had the strength and stamina to endure it.

You could only score ten times during a match by placing the ball on top of one of the pillars. Once all ten pillars were taken, the match ended. Placing a ball before the first zap gave a single point. After the first zap gave ten points. Each zap after that doubled the value of the points, so twenty, forty, eighty, one-hundred and sixty, and so on. Once a team got a significant early lead, it would then rush to fill the other pillars with lesser points to keep the opponents from catching up.

And did Gavin ever rake up the points!

For the first three zaps, Gavin held onto the ball, eating the blast without flinching. After that, he got creative. While he occasionally threw the ball to his teammates, they systematically threw it back to him as soon as they could. It made sense as he was faster and stronger, more able to hang on to the ball if he got tackled.

He would throw it in the air for himself or to one of his mates a split second before the blast to spare them from taking the damage. When the seventh zap went off, three of Clan Arthol's members failed to clear the blast radius of the pillars, in no small part aided by Clan Aldriss's team kindly kicking two of them directly within range. The three men fell to the ground, their bodies contorting in pain from the brutal electric discharge.

Spurred on by their Clan Leader angrily shouting his lungs out at his son from the sidelines to take back the damn ball, Jorkal rushed Gavin. Placing the ball now would give the

Aldriss team six hundred and forty points. But waiting for the eighth zap, which was a mere twelve seconds away, would give them one thousand two hundred and eighty points. A gap nearly impossible to overcome.

The crowd appeared to collectively hold its breath when instead of trying to avoid Jorkal, Gavin ran straight for him. As if in slow motion, and with the seconds before the next zap counting down on the giant screens, we watched Gavin bending down as he rammed into his opponent. We thought he'd only meant to tackle him to the ground, but the boy straightened instead, picking up Jorkal and carrying him with one hand over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, the ball tucked under his other arm.

Everyone shot to their feet, the deafening shouts drowning the warning beeps of the seconds ticking away.

Eight... Seven... Six...

Jorkal only managed to strike his rival in the back a couple of times before Gavin unshouldered him, slamming him on the ground with bruising force.

Five... Four...

“You want the ball?” Gavin asked while Jorkal tried to get back up.

Three... Two...

“Have it,” Gavin said, dropping the ball on him.

One.

The crowd went wild as the discharge—nearly double the voltage of a standard taser—coursed through Jorkal.

“What? You don't want it?” Gavin asked tauntingly when his rival failed to respond, too busy writhing on the ground, his

body shaken by spasms from the powerful electrical discharge.  
“Never mind then.”

The little shit picked up the ball under the approving roar of the crowd and of his grandfather. To my surprise, instead of scoring on the nearby pillar, Gavin threw the ball to his uncle Dheran. He gave his nephew a questioning look. With a single nod, Gavin confirmed for him to proceed. Smiling, Dheran walked up to the closest pillar and placed the ball on top with plenty of time left to turn around and fight back the Arthol teammate who had desperately tried to stop him but arrived too late.

Even though Gavin largely deserved the credit for this astounding first score, by giving the ball to his uncle to place it, he'd made it a team win, not a personal one. The crowd acknowledged it and chanted “Aldriss” instead of “Gavin” as he had clearly intended. My respect for the boy went up another notch.

As expected, they quickly placed the next few balls with lower scores to significantly reduce any hope the opposing team had of making a comeback. A part of me almost felt sorry for them. Clan Arthol was exponentially better than this. I couldn't tell if fighting Gavin or his spectacular opening move had thrown them off their game, but they never recovered. I couldn't even call it a massacre, it was so pathetic.

That many of their teammates got severely zapped on multiple occasions during that first round didn't help. Anything beyond a tier six zap would do a serious number on anyone. And the Aldriss team had skillfully taken advantage of their opponents' obsession with catching up with Gavin to throw them directly within range of the pillars moments before



the blast went off while keeping themselves safely out of harm's way.

In an effort to both mollify the restless crowd wanting more carnage and likely to further rub salt into the wound, Clan Aldriss ran high scores again on the last three balls, ending the match with a spectacular score of three thousand six hundred and twenty points to zero for Clan Arthol.

As the crowd roared its approval, a few voices among them started chanting Gavin's name, quickly emulated by everyone else. Although he bowed his head graciously at the acclaim, I knew the boy well enough to see he wasn't quite comfortable with it. His uncles, Dheran and Gorav, both walked up to him. Standing on either side, they each took one of his hands and raised them up in a victorious gesture, making the crowd go even wilder, while the rest of his team cheered them on.

"A remarkable young man," Raylor Caldes said pensively. "Expect to hear this chant more and more often."

The way he stated those words drew my attention. He held my gaze unwaveringly. While our families had their differences over the years, things coming to a head when his first born son attempted to murder Anton in his own home, Clan Leader Caldes had come a long way in supporting our vision for Braxia. He, too, was someone I had grown to know well enough to read his expression. And right now, his words held an undeniable underlying warning.

"Meaning?" I asked.

He shifted uneasily on the thick, burgundy cushion on top of the stone bench he and the others sat on. I could see his wheels spinning as he carefully chose his wording.

“There’s a reason behind this record attendance for a mere match of Beikor,” Raylor said. “There are growing talks among the clans that the boy would make an excellent Magnar once Ravik steps down.”

“Gavin shows no appetite for politics or ruling,” Krygor sternly argued.

“Probably because it was never an option before,” Raylor countered. “But things have changed. Until now, no hybrid had ever displayed such strength. He’s undefeated in the arena, whether in sports or duels. Some even suggest that he could defeat you, Ravik,” Raylor added while casting a glance at my father.

“People clearly have too much time on their hands that they should waste their energy on idle gossip,” my father said dismissively. “The pup is strong, fast, and very smart. But none of that trumps experience one can only acquire with time.”

Krygor grunted in agreement while slowly nodding. Although I also agreed with my father’s statement, it was the absence of a categorical denial that stuck with me. By this omission, my sire was acknowledging that Gavin could indeed beat him—not now, but in the not-too-distant future.

“All these gossips are of no consequence,” Mercy said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Like Krygor said, Gavin has no political ambitions, least of all to rule Braxia. He spent his entire life preparing for the day he would finally reunite with his soulmate, my niece Zharina, in the Western Quadrant. He’s counting the days until his twenty-first birthday so that he can join her father’s peacekeeping forces to be with her. No crown, no wealth, no promises of power will make him stray from this path.”

“Hmmm,” Boros replied, looking both pensive and dubious. “I guess time will tell.”

“Time will indeed tell,” I replied nonchalantly. “While I highly doubt Gavin covets the crown, I will meet head on any challenger, whoever they may be. Until then, I will not waste my energy on gossip and conjecture.”

Raylor opened his mouth to speak, but the impromptu arrival of a guard named Joron interrupted him.

“Jakar Keran, there is an urgent message for you,” Joron said, extending a holocard to me.

I accepted it, waving two fingers over the interface to display the message. Dawn Merrick... It took me a second to remember who she was. I quickly scanned the brief note before cursing under my breath.

“Unpleasant news?” my father asked with a sympathetic look laced with a bit of mockery. He was enjoying unloading more and more of the aggravating chores linked with ruling a barbaric planet such as ours.

“It’s a message from Haven,” I said with a disgusted expression. “It appears hybrid refugees are being hunted again.”

“Son of a krillik!” my father hissed. “Are they so desperate to murder and bully innocents that they travel all the way there for that?”

“Apparently,” I told him before turning to Joron. “You can tell her the answer is yes,” I said while handing the card back to him.

“Yes, Jakar,” he replied, slightly bowing his head before leaving the box.

With my ascension barely three months away, the last thing I needed was to go off planet to deal with this kind of mess.



## CHAPTER 2

## DAWN

I sat stoically before the Council, silently seething with a burning rage. Sitting at a long, semi-circular table on an elevated dais, they towered over me with false sympathy. Despite coming here with low expectations, their casual dismissal of our plight never ceased to infuriate me.

The Twelve was the formal Council of Haven, a safe planet in the Eastern Quadrant where people of any species fleeing persecution could find shelter. Each member of the council belonged to an advanced species from a wealthy planet member of the Galactic Council. Their homeworlds funded the charitable efforts on Haven and protected its citizens as well.

Or at least to the extent it suited them.

Some of the refugee species benefited from far more support than others, especially cute ones like the Pelurians. Small in stature, peaceful, mostly vegetarian, with strong religious culture that forbade them from raising arms against anyone, even when their home world was being invaded, the Pelurians had automatically become the galactic sweethearts. Forced to flee their home, they had received an insane outpouring of support, financial and otherwise. Corporations had fully funded the construction of a new village entirely dedicated to them on Haven. Farming conglomerates had

provided them with the help and resources to grow vegetables compatible with Haven's ecosystem closely related to the diet they enjoyed on their original world.

Politicians and celebrities alike made it a point to publicize any contribution they made to the plight of the Pelurians. It wasn't so much out of the goodness of their hearts as much as the great public relations returns they got from it.

Then you had species like the Braxian hybrids I was here to represent. Braxians were many things, but definitely not cute. While the females were generally taller, bigger, and stronger than those from most other species, the males were the true issue. They were giants with muscles for days, intimidating, with brutish features, and a propensity for violent and belligerent behavior. Naturally, that had not endeared them to the galactic community. Sponsoring efforts to give them a safer and better life wouldn't win anyone any popularity contest, quite the opposite.

My flock didn't break any laws. They simply never learned to endear themselves to the people who could have helped ensure a better future for every hybrid refugee. Most of them had managed to escape Braxia at various stages of their lives, but many had landed here after their mothers—usually human—had left them here right after their births.

Taking a deep breath to control the anger I feared would seep into my voice, I leveled what I hoped to be a non confrontational gaze on Callan, the Dantorian head of the Council. As all the members of his species, he was rather attractive with his bluish-black skin and long, raven hair. His silver eyes shone almost like beacons in his dark face where even the sclera had a somber hue.



“I understand perfectly the point you’re trying to make, Callan,” I said in a reasonable tone. “However, we’re talking about people dying right now. That’s the sixth death in as many weeks. One or two would be an unfortunate coincidence. This is an undeniable pattern, especially considering the bodies found bear similar types of abuse and desecration. We need a proper team dedicated to investigating these murders and tracking down the culprit before more blood is shed. Three other hybrids are currently missing, and I fear the next time we see them it will be to put them in a body bag.”

“Your concerns are extremely valid, Dawn. You may not believe it right now, but we share your worries, and our hearts bleed for these poor males. Unfortunately, you know we do not possess the staff or resources to run this type of a manhunt,” Callan said in an infuriatingly, almost patronizingly, reasonable voice.

“True, but you could ask the planet members of the alliance to send extra patrols,” I argued. “They did it before when we had a rash of raids on the granaries.”

Callan gave me a don’t-be-absurd look that infuriated me further. “This was a planet-wide issue that affected every resident of Haven. We cannot ask the Galactic Council to incur such steep expenses for only a handful—”

“For a handful of what, Councilor?” I asked in a clipped tone, making no effort this time to hide my anger and underlying contempt. “A handful of dead Braxian half breeds is an acceptable loss not worth opening the coffers of the administration of the planet sworn to protect *all* of those who seek refuge on its soil?”

“Do not put such vile words or intentions in my mouth,” Callan replied in a much harsher tone, offended mutterings

from the other members of the Twelve echoing his sentiment. “While those deaths are indeed unfortunate, there are far less costly remedies that could be used in the short term while our local peacekeeping forces investigate to the best of their abilities with the resources available.”

Swallowing back a snide remark—knowing that alienating them further would not help our cause—I gave him a stiff nod, which I knew he’d interpret as an apology and an admission I had spoken out of turn, though it could be nothing further from the truth.

Apparently mollified, Callan rolled his shoulders, releasing some tension. His face took on once more that obnoxious understanding and paternal expression.

“There isn’t sufficient evidence that the three missing hybrids have been abducted or murdered. For all we know, they could be passed out somewhere in a drunken stupor, or they accepted some off planet offer and didn’t bother to inform you of this change in their status. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

With each of these words, I clenched my teeth a little more. Every time I sought their support for the Braxian shelter, they would always use the extreme incidents from one or two of our more problematic members and generalize it to the rest of the group to justify their refusal to assist.

“You always bring this up, but how many times has this actually happened? Once is not a pattern. But three disappearances back-to-back, after six murders, now *that’s* a pattern,” I countered.

He waved a dismissive hand. “Either way, there’s still not enough evidence to justify a large-scale intervention. If the hybrids are being hunted, there’s a very simple solution. Each of them live scattered in isolated areas, making them easy

targets. They should return to the compound that had been given to them or move into the various cities so any potential serial killer will think twice about stalking them there.”

“You know that Braxians do not fare well in city settings. There is a reason each clan lives in their own compounds,” I argued. “Haven is supposed to be a sanctuary for all those who come here seeking shelter. Are hybrids now supposed to be prisoners holed up in Genxia to benefit from that protection?”

Callan heaved a sigh. By the way his face closed up, I realized the battle was lost. “You are right, it is unfair. However, we cannot spare the resources to guard all their individual ‘compounds’ when each one is scattered far and wide from the other.”

This time, dropping all pretense, I glared at the Councilor. “If the Pelurians were being hunted, you would have no problem coming up with the funds necessary to ensure their safety,” I hissed. “The Braxian hybrids may not be cute, can be rude, love to brawl, be overly horny, and overall intimidating, but they still abide by your laws. Remember well that many of the essential resources of Haven are harvested by the sweat of their brow, and it is their strength that keeps the cities safe from stampeding wild beasts every spring.”

“We do not forget,” Councilor Linora interjected in a stern tone.

Lips pinched, the older human female leveled her disapproving dark brown eyes on me. She had often been the swing vote who had helped tip the scale in my favor on the rare occasions I managed to get anything out of the Twelve to support the shelter.

“As Callan has already stated, we mourn the losses and ache in light of the plight of your wards. But they must meet

us halfway. Until we have more clues as to who is behind these senseless killings, they will need to return to Genxia or regroup in a way easier for our limited resources to provide protection. We're sorry we cannot do more at this time, but we simply do not have the budget for it. Our decision is final."

Fighting back angry tears and the burning urge to give them the tongue lashing they rightly deserved, I rose from my chair and plastered the most stoic expression I possibly could on my face. The stiffness of my back and shoulders wouldn't fool anyone, but further burning the bridges with the Twelve would only be a disservice to those under my care.

"Thank you for taking the time to hear my request. Good day to you, Councilors," I said in a controlled voice.

"And to you, Dawn," Callan replied, having the decency to look ever-so-slightly embarrassed.

I walked out of the imposing room, the long aisle framed by countless empty rows of seats for the public feeling endless. The balcony overhead also sat empty. Although this hearing had been published in Haven's Bulletin—as required for any requests involving dipping into Haven's treasury, no one had shown up in support. Even just a dozen random citizens could have turned the tide, if only a little.

Refusing to give in to the wave of helplessness that wanted to settle over me, I tried to cheer myself up at the prospect of Prince Keran Xeldar's arrival later today.

*Not Prince but Jakar. I better remember to use the proper Braxian title.*

I had hoped to have some more encouraging news for him, such as the Twelve backing our efforts to apprehend the murderer. It already sucked to have to reach out to the Braxian

royal family for aid. But what would he think once he realized even the leaders of our sanctuary couldn't be bothered to protect the hybrids? I hated coming to him in a groveling position.

Walking hastily, I headed to the parking area, avoiding making eye contact with the clerks, guards, and civilians scurrying about. They all knew the reason for my presence here. By the sympathetic, almost apologetic glances they were casting my way, they had likely known all along what unfavorable outcome awaited me.

The spiteful part of me wanted to convince the hybrids not to participate in the culling of the wild beasts that would stampede on the outskirts of some of Haven's villages in the next couple of months. Once their pockets got hit by losses of herds, and days—if not weeks—of lost sales and work hours while everyone hunkered down until the danger had passed, maybe they would show more appreciation for the hybrids' contribution.

Obviously, I wouldn't do that. Aside from not wanting to get innocent animals slaughtered, civilians would more than likely also get injured, if not killed in a desperate attempt to save their herds. I didn't want people's blood on my hands just to make a point.

Heaving a sigh, I hopped inside my personal shuttle. It was one of five generic, slightly dated two-seaters, that the Twelve had donated to Genxia, the Braxian hybrid shelter I'd been managing for the past twenty years.

Built over sixteen hectares, the shelter had originally served as a religious compound. After the Galactic Council's peacekeeping forces settled the unrest that had forced them to flee, the congregation had returned to their homeworld. The

abandoned compound had first served as an orphanage before being turned into a Braxian hybrid shelter a little over sixty years ago.

As I began my approach, I let my gaze roam over the sprawling facilities. The main building made of brown stones and wood had previously housed the dorm rooms, classrooms, communal room, cafeteria, prayer hall, infirmary, and administrative offices of the religious colony. Countless other buildings around it had offered “honeymoon suites” for couples in need of temporary privacy, as well as many artisan and food production buildings, stables, storage, a large animal paddock, and fields to grow produce as far as the eye could see.

Today, while the hybrids still tended the fields to provide for the shelter as well as sell in the market, most of the buildings had been repurposed. Before Magnar Ravik forbade hunting down hybrids, most of the members of our shelter had taken some of the individual buildings as their personal dwellings. The dormitories had been divided into private bedrooms and guest rooms. The prayer room now served as a meeting hall. Some of the classrooms kept that purpose while the others were turned into workshops.

When I first took over the management of the shelter, the place was booming with activity. At twenty-five, full of hope, enthusiasm, and great ideas, I thought I could turn this place into the go-to reference when it came to accompanying and supporting refugees. I would give them shelter, provide them with the tools to become productive members of their adoptive society, and then send them off on the bright and safe future they never imagined possible.

Two decades later, this place had become a ghost town.

My heart sank upon seeing the paddock—now turned into a landing pad—empty but for two personal shuttles. The standard dull gray one undoubtedly belonged to Melinda, my assistant. I silenced an inward groan as I recognized the second one as being Vintor's. That male was a handful.

*But at least he showed up for the meeting, unlike everyone else.*

Although it didn't surprise me, it still hurt. You couldn't help people who couldn't be bothered to get involved in the process. They wanted me to just hand them over a solution that suited their needs and expectations. But as much as I hated to admit it, Callen hadn't been wrong in suggesting that everyone should gather here for safety in numbers until we had a better sense of who we were dealing with.

I landed my shuttle then walked with heavy steps to the entrance of the main building. As I climbed the six steps of the wide staircase to the entrance, a gust of wind blew my long black hair into my face. Flicking the locks back over my shoulders, I fleetingly wished an even more powerful wind would sweep away all our woes.

But as I opened the front door, it was the loud sound of voices arguing that kicked my somber thoughts to the curb.

*What now?*

I rushed inside to find Vintor towering over Melinda, right in front of the large doors of the meeting hall. His massive arms crossed over his chest, the muscles bulging with tension, he was glaring at my assistant with a mulish expression on his brutish face. Where hybrids possessed between mild to very prominent Braxian features, Vintor would have easily passed for a pureblood, had it not been for his smaller stature in comparison.

Although I had yet to meet a pureblood in person, it was no secret that the males averaged a height of 7'5"—up to 8'2" for the tallest—with nearly three hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle. They didn't even have to train to have the type of muscular definition even the most hardcore human bodybuilder would kill for. While most hybrid males hovered around 6'5", Vintor had achieved a very respectable 6'7" and two hundred and fifty pounds. His body was to die for, unlike his personality...

"This is fucking idiotic!" Melinda shouted. "You don't know those guys. They're buttering you up, telling you what you want to hear instead of what's truly awaiting you. And you're all falling for it!"

"We're not fucking children for you to order around!" Vintor snapped back.

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" I shouted as I hurried towards them.

"You can ask the genius over here," Melinda replied angrily while gesturing at Vintor with her head. I glared at her, but she ignored me, clearly too incensed to be reasoned with. "Since there won't be a meeting tonight after all, I'm going home. He can explain to you how everyone else is otherwise engaged."

Without waiting for my response, Melinda stormed past me.

"Melinda!" I called out after her, but she ignored me and exited the building, slamming the door shut behind her. Rolling my eyes in aggravation, I turned to Vintor. "What the fuck was that about? Where is everyone?"



Vintor lifted his strong chin defiantly, his broad jaw clenched, and a stubborn glint shining in his deep green eyes.

“They are attending the meeting with Jordan,” he said in a challenging tone. “It is the information session for all of those wanting to sign up for the various positions they have opened for us.”

“The Guldans?” I exclaimed disbelievingly. “Surely you know by now that you can’t trust these people. They’re going to use you!”

He bared his teeth, his angry frown making his strong brow even more prominent as he took a menacing step towards me. It didn’t frighten or intimidate me in the least. Most people would be cowering before him right now, but I knew better. Although Braxians—including hybrids—were quick to anger, they displayed far greater control than people assumed they possessed. Unfortunately, this largely contributed to the bad reputation of Braxian males.

While he might get into a brawl with another hybrid, he would never raise his hand to a male of a species clearly weaker, and least of all to a female.

“They’re giving us the type of opportunities no one else ever has or ever will,” he hissed. “This is our chance to finally leave this rock.”

“And go where?” I challenged.

“Anywhere! Be it Braxia or anywhere else. Any other place will always be better than here. This planet is snuffing the very life out of us. There is no hope, no prospect. They are using us as grunts. To them, we’re barely more than slave labor. You wanted us to come here to discuss the outcome of your meeting with the Twelve. We didn’t need it. We already

know they refused to do anything about this killer hunting us. So we will not stay here and be slain.”

As much as I hated the thought of them falling under the guile of the Guldans, I couldn't argue with most of his statements. Guldans were well-known for their cutthroat and less-than-honorable tactics when it came to pulling a fast one on the people foolish enough to enter blindly into any types of agreements with them. Based on the troubling incidents that had occurred a few years back on Braxia, I couldn't help suspecting that these Guldans were up to no good.

“And what type of opportunities are they actually offering you? What are you going to do? And what is it going to cost you?” I pressed him, my wheels spinning in a desperate attempt to find a way to convince him and the others that this was not the right decision for them.

“Paid security work,” he said proudly.

“Security or mercenary?” I asked in a dubious tone.

“What does it matter?” he challenged. “At the end of the day, they're offering better pay and better conditions than what we have here. They will provide us with proper training, high end equipment, and travel aboard top-of-the-line space ships. With the crumbs we get here, it would take us a lifetime to save enough to travel off world. We're almost all in our forties. These are our prime years. We cannot let this golden opportunity slip through our fingers.”

I shook my head in disbelief, looking desperately for the words that might sway him. And yet, I understood all too well his yearning. The Guldans had known exactly what to offer the hybrids to make it nearly impossible for them to refuse.

Vintor's anger and heated demeanor faded almost as quickly as it had surged. His face took on what most would deem a frightening air, but which actually corresponded to a Braxian's soft and tender expression. My stomach instantly knotted, dread washing over me in anticipation of what would come next.

"We all know that this place will be shutting down soon," Vintor said in a gentle tone. "Everyone is grown up and has moved out. You're almost always alone in Genxia. All those who haven't set roots here are currently rounding up at the meeting location. We're all going to leave Haven. What will you do then?"

I shrugged, my throat tightening. That thought had been weighing on me for some time now. I just never imagined it would happen so quickly.

"There are plenty of organizations here who could use my skills. Or maybe I'll go to Earth or one of the other colonies looking for public servants," I said in a tone that I hoped came across as nonchalant and unconcerned.

"You can't afford a trip to Earth," Vintor countered with a huff.

"I have some savings," I said defiantly. "Anyway, I would look for employment first so that my relocation would be covered in my hiring package."

"And go to some unknown place, where you have no friends and no one to look after you?" he argued.

I shrugged again. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Or you could let me take care of you."

I groaned inwardly. The speed at which he had spoken those words confirmed he had been looking for the perfect opening to slip them in. The minute his face had softened, I had known that was coming.

“Vintor, let’s not do this again,” I said in a tired voice.

His anger immediately flared once more. “Why am I never good enough for you? You have no one. I’m ready to put the world at your feet. With this new job, I will make enough to give you everything you have ever wanted. Yet still you deny me!”

“Me being alone, and you possibly making a good salary do not justify me settling,” I said, making no effort to hide my annoyance at having that tired old conversation again.

“Settling? SETTLING?!” he shouted, his face reddening with anger.

I flinched at my poorly chosen words. Even with someone less sensitive than he was, my wording would have been deemed offensive.

“What I mean is that you’re not in love with me, and I’m not in love with you,” I clarified in an appeasing tone. “Both of us would be settling if we chose to become a couple. The truth is, you only want me because you hate being denied. Had I given in to you, you would have discarded me a long time ago and moved on to a new challenge. But I deserve more, and so do you.”

While my response partially mollified him, Vintor would never accept no for an answer. He straightened, bunching his muscles and puffing up his chest to make himself appear more impressive.

“When they shut down this shelter and you have nowhere to go, I’ll be there. Just don’t wait until it’s too late,” he said in an arrogant tone before turning around and leaving.

I stared at his broad, receding back, feeling both discouraged and defeated.



## CHAPTER 3

## KERAN

The guards filed out of the compound with what looked like an endless string of hover carts carrying all of Dana's belongings to the shuttle. Lips pursed, she observed their every movement with her usual haughty expression. The whole time, our nanny Neyti stood but a couple of meters away, my infant son Argos cradled in her left arm, and my oldest Kratos hanging on to her skirt with still unsteady toddler legs.

Not once did Dana spare our sons a single glance.

In many ways, it was a blessing that they were too young to fully understand what was happening—not that they had formed any true bond of affection with their mother. Today she would part with her children, and she couldn't have cared less. In fact, I believed she was relieved.

“Well, the last couple of years have been... interesting,” Dana said, staring at me with a calculating look in her dark-brown eyes.

“They have,” I concurred in a non committal fashion.

Dana pinched her lips further, annoyed that I didn't expand or go down the path she had hoped. Considering I'd likely never see her again, I should make an effort to be nicer. But



that female rubbed me the wrong way and pissing her off gave me an ungodly amount of satisfaction.

“I hope you carefully thought things through,” she said, giving me a pointed glance. “I have many wedding prospects lined up,” she added, as if I needed clarification as to her underlying meaning.

“Believe me, Dana, I did,” I replied with a bit of amusement that she would think her statement would unnerve me or stir any type of jealousy from me. “I’m glad to hear that things are looking up for you as there was never any hope for us. I don’t love you anymore than you love me. In fact, you can barely stand me,” I said, swallowing back the fact that I absolutely despised her.

“What does it matter? Whatever feelings I may or may not have towards you never seemed to bother you before. They sure didn’t keep you from my bed,” Dana challenged.

Neyti flinched, quickly schooling her features into a neutral expression. I snorted, once more stunned by her total lack of class. Tilting my head to the side, I smiled, which immediately had her narrowing her eyes at me. Dana knew this expression well and that it heralded me saying something irreverent and provocative to rile her up.

“Of course not. I’m Braxian. We’re always horny,” I said as if it was self-evident—which it was. “You know how to expertly ride a cock, and you sure seemed to enjoy riding mine. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. You gave me the heirs I needed, you got properly pleased, and are regaining your freedom with a substantial dowry that will see you well-taken care of for the rest of your days. I’m sure this great wealth will have even more suitors banging down your father’s door for you.”

Dana scoffed, each of my comments finding their mark, then she turned on her heels to leave.

“Won’t you say goodbye to your sons?” I called out before she could reach the ramp of the shuttle. “I also do not recall seeing any visitation schedules from you.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “I renounce my rights to these boys. My future husband will prefer not to be reminded that another man’s seed quickened my womb. My duty here is done. You have your sons, and I have my dowry. Like you said, this was a mutually beneficial agreement.”

The oddest mix of relief and utter contempt swelled within me. Like Dana, my mother had merely been my father’s concubine for the sole purpose of giving him heirs. There had been no love between them, but she had been a mother to my brother and me. After she had fulfilled her duty, Mother had returned to her clan’s compound as Dana was doing now, but she had kept in touch with us. She would come visit, and we would occasionally go spend a few days with her people.

I watched Dana enter the shuttle and remained there until it took off, as if to reassure myself that she was truly gone for good. The discreet clicking sound of heels behind me announced Mercy approaching.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Mercy said as she came to a stop next to me.

“Hear, hear,” Neyti mumbled under her breath.

I chuckled, my gaze flicking towards the nanny—whose disgusted and contemptuous expression had me chuckling further—before giving my stepmother a sideways glance. The hard glint in her eyes confirmed she had delayed coming here

until Dana was gone to avoid giving her the tongue lashing she undoubtedly itched to unleash on her.

“She’s a snake and a dreadful mother,” Mercy hissed. “There is no question in my mind she would have slit your throat in your sleep had you made the mistake of marrying that wretch.”

I snorted. “Probably. But I didn’t need her maternal skills, only her strong bloodline. As she voluntarily renounced her rights, we will no longer have to contend with her delightful presence.”

“Good!” Mercy said firmly. “She would have ruined those sons of yours. But don’t you worry. These boys will never lack for maternal affection.”

Even as she spoke those words, she turned to look at Neyti, who smiled before leaning down and kissing Argos’s forehead. Mercy walked towards them and picked up Kratos. Barely a couple of months over two years, my firstborn adored his grandmother. His hand immediately reached for her left horn caressing it even as he kissed her cheek. She kissed him back, giving him an affectionate hug that had the boy purring in delight.

My heart filled with love for Mercy. She had been a blessing to my father, to this house, and to our people. With her and Neyti, my sons would indeed never lack for maternal love.

“Come on,” she said to Neyti. “Let’s take them to the kitchen. Rehata is preparing some treats for my little hellions. I’m sure there will be some for these two as well.”

She winked at me before returning inside the fortress. I smiled back, something akin to longing surging through me.

Mercy was so strong, so smart, and yet so gentle like only a female could be. How could I ever find a Dagna of my own that could live up to her?

Heaving a sigh, I walked through the imposing doors of the fortress on my way to my father's private Council room. As usual, Father met an hour early with his closest and trusted Councilmen before the rest of the Council gathered. Sometimes, it was merely to catch up with old friends, other times, it allowed us to strategize in a preliminary meeting before the others arrived to debate a topic we already knew would be contentious.

My footsteps echoed loudly as I crossed the Great Hall where my father held public audiences. Pride filled my heart at the sight of the Xeldar banner behind the throne made of stones and bones. For five generations now, it had held this place of highest honor. All around me, in between the massive windows through which light flooded the room, the smaller banners of the various clans of Braxia hung on the light beige walls.

Once more, it reminded me of the heavy weight that sat on my shoulders.

Hastening through the side door at the back, I entered the short hallway to the private Council chamber. Tagar, one of my father's two bodyguards, sat outside the room.

"They just started," he said in response to my inquisitive look.

I nodded and smiled. He smiled back before resuming reading on his datapad. I opened the door to find my father, Krygor, Fenton, and my brother Ganek in an animated discussion about last night's Breikor match. I nodded in

greeting as I took my seat across the massive table from my sire.

Leaning back in my seat, I let my gaze roam over the hunting trophies on the walls. Each one of those horns, bones, and skulls belonged to some of Braxia's fiercest predators which my father had single handedly slain.

"Rough morning with your concubine?" my father asked with a sympathetic glimmer in his pitch-black eyes.

I snorted. "Hardly. She's one headache I've finally put to rest for good."

The four males all gave me the same stunned expression.

"For good?" Krygor echoed.

I nodded. "This time, Dana didn't threaten to return to her father's compound if I didn't give into one of her countless demands. *I* asked her to leave."

"Ancestors! While I'm sure that news will sadden no one here—especially the servants—I can't help but wonder which stunt she pulled to finally make you say enough," Ganek said with an amused and curious expression.

"Same," my father said.

I grinned. "Actually, she didn't do anything... for once. I'm leaving Braxia for probably a month. You know how insufferable Dana becomes when I'm not around to keep her in check. I was counting the days until she had completed her nursing year for our younglings. Considering there are only a couple of weeks left, I decided to end it now and be done."

"I bet that went down well," Krygor said with a snort. "With her ego, Dana must not have appreciated her time getting cut short and being summarily dismissed."

“She certainly felt slighted. But making her leave while I was away would have been too rude, and you know her clan would have taken offense to that,” I said.

“That, they certainly would have,” Fenton said, rolling his eyes. “But your boys are still Clan Leader Soraj’s grandsons. As long as they remain your heirs, he will support your ascension and your reign. He simply hoped you would have made his daughter your Dagna to further secure their position with House Xeldar.”

I snorted. “And he had apparently passed that message along to her. After questioning the wisdom of my decision, Dana thought to make me jealous by claiming she has many suitors,” I replied mockingly.

The men burst out laughing, the same incredulous expression plastered on all their faces.

“Talk about being clueless,” my father said, shaking his head. “The suitors are after that overly generous dowry you gave her.”

I smiled. “With her charming personality, I knew that only such a large amount would convince her not to make too much of a fuss to leave once she’d served her purpose. This trip gave me an excuse to push her out sooner. The only reason Mercy and the staff didn’t kill that wretched female was her pregnancies. Without me around, Dana wouldn’t have survived a week. Your wife would have whipped that bladed braid of hers so fast, Dana wouldn’t have had time to squeal before her head would be rolling on the floor.”

The men laughed again, pride and respect brimming in my father’s, brother’s, and Fenton’s eyes, while an approvingly sadistic glimmer shone in Krygor’s eyes.

“I would have enjoyed that sight,” Krygor said.

My father chuckled. “I’m sure you would have, you sick fuck. But in this instance, I wouldn’t have put it past my Mercy to take her sweet time torturing her first. She couldn’t stand Dana.”

“She made that very clear a few minutes ago,” I conceded with a laugh. “Dana was a most unpleasant female, but she has good genes.”

My father smiled, his eyes going slightly out of focus as he no doubt thought of his beloved mate. His gaze then shifted back to me, his wistful expression fading.

“But tell me, Son, what is that trip about?” he asked in a more serious tone.

I sighed. “The message I received yesterday came from Dawn Merrick. She asked for assistance with the new wave of hybrid murders in Haven.”

“So, the Twelve are shirking their responsibilities again?” my father asked, his voice dripping with contempt and blossoming anger.

“Apparently,” I replied. “The question is who could be behind it? None of the clans most likely to go on such an expedition have been off world lately. Elder Pattel was also able to account for the few bigots who could want to do such a thing, and who are currently working in his battle arenas.”

“But the partial reports we’ve seen of the last four murders indicated many similarities in the killings previously performed by purebloods,” Krygor said pensively.

“Could we be dealing with a copycat or someone settling scores but trying to frame the purebloods?” Ganek asked.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been wondering and want to assess as soon as possible,” I said with a frown.

My father nodded slowly. “You could be right. Even our most rabid opponents have moved on—at least in appearance—from these hunts. We definitely need to investigate and make a brutal example of the culprit once we catch them. But why are *you* going? We could simply dispatch a unit to handle it. You have a lot of preparations to make in the upcoming weeks.”

“Because the timing of these murders, three months from my ascension, feels like a direct challenge to my rule. A test, even... If I cannot keep a few hundred hybrids safe from a killer—in a sanctuary at that—how will I protect an entire planet filled with brutal people and vicious beasts? They are implying that, as soon as you step down, Father, things will go back to the old ways.”

“I see your point, Keran,” Krygor said with a frown. “But your father is right that you still have much to prepare for your upcoming crowning.”

“I do,” I conceded, “which is why I have delegated what I could and made plans to handle the rest in-between my mission over there. But I must handle it. Unrest and dissent have increased with talks of my impending ascension.”

“You’re strong,” Father said in a stern tone.

“Strong, yes. But I’m not you. No one can be you,” I said firmly, allowing my love and admiration for my father to resonate loudly in my voice. “They *will* challenge me. And I’ll be ready.”

“For the record, Gavin doesn’t covet your throne,” Krygor stated in a factual manner. “After the match, last night, I



mentioned the rumors to him. He laughed, saying those people were funny.”

“He laughed but didn’t deny it,” I countered.

Krygor frowned and pursed his lips, taking a moment to reflect before responding. “You’re correct. He didn’t deny it in so many words. But I know my grandson. Gavin doesn’t want to be Magnar. He has no control over what rumors people spread.”

I smiled and nodded. “Whatever happens is in the hands of Fate. But should I ever be overcome by a challenger, I would want it to be Gavin. Braxia would be in good hands. Either way, the killer must be caught. We cannot have a hybrid murderer on the loose. The Ancestors willing, I’ll have this resolved in a couple of weeks. Should it look like it will drag beyond a month, I will return and leave a team to catch the killer.”

“Very well,” my father said with some reluctance. “But you *will* win.”

I loved that, even when he didn’t fully agree with my decisions, so long as he didn’t believe I would be severely harmed by them, he stood by me. He was still the Magnar and could order me to do his biddings. But Father was showing me that he trusted in my judgment and wanted me to feel empowered to take the place that would officially be mine in the near future.

“Or die trying,” I said with a teasing smile.

“My sons will bury *me*,” my father snarled. “Not the other way around. Take Tagar and Nowik with you. They’ve accompanied me to Haven in the past. Their knowledge of the planet will likely serve you well.”

“Will do, Father. Thank you.”



## CHAPTER 4

## DAWN

I ran a nervous hand through my hair while fighting the urge to shift restlessly on my feet as I watched the Braxian shuttle land. I've never met a pureblood in person before. And this one happened to be their Prince, soon to be their King.

Shame coursed through me at the pathetic welcoming party of one that I had to offer him. Granted, he had messaged me this morning to inform me of their early arrival—a day sooner than planned. Stuck with other obligations, Melinda had not been able to free herself with such little warning. I'd ended up rushing to prepare some kind of meal with what I already had here instead of the fancier one the catering service would have brought tomorrow.

Part of me wondered if it had been a mistake not to ask some of the hybrids to attend his arrival. It was unlike me to question things so much, but the Braxian Jakar represented my last hope. I had not wanted to risk the men acting up and letting their volatile tempers mess things up.

And now that I was standing alone near the landing pad, as the biggest shuttle I'd ever seen—with the kind of thick armored hull and high-end weapons one would expect on a warship—settled down, I began thinking taking a gamble on the hybrids potentially misbehaving might have been worth it.

Squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin with an air of confidence I didn't quite feel, I watched with a certain level of trepidation the ramp from the shuttle lowering. My breath caught in my throat as the doors parted revealing a beast of a male.

I had known what impressive heights and piles of muscles purebloods possessed. But reading it in paper and seeing it in the flesh were two completely different things. I immediately recognized the Prince, partially surprised to see him coming out first of the shuttle instead of after his guards would have made sure all was safe.

He was his father's spitting image, except for his eyes, which were the most intense shade of gray. His face was even more brutish and rough than the hybrids'. No words could describe how fucking intimidating he looked. Even at ease, with what would be deemed a peaceful expression on his face by Braxian standards, Jakar Keran looked like he was about to butcher an enemy and bathe in his blood.

A shiver ran down my spine. I wouldn't call it fear. In truth, I didn't quite know how to qualify what I felt in that male's presence. By human standards, people often referred to me as an Amazon. With my great height, big bones, and broad shoulders, I didn't fit the usual delicate constitution often expected for women. That I had extensive self-defense skills had always given me assurance and a sense of safety. But for the first time as the Prince and his guards closed the distance between us, I felt weak and vulnerable.

Forcing a warm smile on my lips, I respectfully bowed my head as he came to a stop a meter in front of me.

"Jakar Keran, thank you for honoring me with your presence and for answering my call so quickly," I said in a

tone that I hoped respectful enough but not subservient.

“Miss Merrick, the honor is mine,” he said in a rumbling voice so deep I could have sworn the ground vibrated beneath my feet.

To my dismay, my skin erupted in goosebumps. By the ever so subtle way his greeting smile shifted into a smirk, he had undoubtedly noticed my physiological response to him. I felt mortified. But then, Braxians expected women to be weak and skittish. He would deem this a natural response in the presence of so powerful and intimidating a male.

At 6’4”, I’d rarely met someone who made me feel small. But the Prince and his two guards made me feel tiny, with the top of my head barely reaching their chins.

“I apologize for the poor welcome, Jakar,” I said in a sheepish tone.

“There’s no need to apologize,” Keran said with a dismissive wave of his massive hand, almost bigger than my head. “We arrived sooner than expected and are grateful you still managed to accommodate us. But please, call me Keran. My people aren’t too big on formalities, least of all me.”

“Then I must insist you call me Dawn,” I said with a smile.

“Dawn it is,” Keran said, his stormy eyes giving me the impression they could see all the way into my soul.

Despite his generally warm demeanor, I didn’t miss the way the nostrils of his wide, flat nose flared as he took in my scent, seconds before his eyes almost imperceptibly narrowed. What had he picked up about me? And why did I feel it troubled him?

“These are my guards, Tagar and Nowik,” Keran said. “The rest of my team is in our main vessel. They’re already off

to see what information they can gather while you get me up to speed on what is transpiring here.”

I nodded at the other two males, who stood a couple of steps behind their future Magnar. They responded in kind, their fearsome faces unreadable. Still, a wave of hope blossomed in my heart. I’d felt so alone trying to protect the stubborn fools in my care.

“That’s wonderful news,” I said in all sincerity. “But please, come in. We’ll be more comfortable discussing this inside. And you must be tired after your long journey here. I hope it wasn’t too unpleasant.”

“It was pleasant enough,” he replied politely.

Ugh, I was acting like such a klutz. He was probably thinking I was some dumb female, gone half brain-dead for merely being in the presence of royalty. I didn’t give two shits about his rank. Yeah, his size intimidated the fuck out of me, but I was well past the initial shock. And yet, I couldn’t seem to function rationally in his presence.

“If you are hungry or need to rest first—”

“We’re fine. I want to start on this right away,” Keran interrupted. “Hopefully, we can get this resolved quickly.”

“Of course,” I replied with a stiff smile.

For some silly reason, I took this as a personal rebuke, like he couldn’t wait to be done with me and away from here. Obviously, it had nothing to do with me. The news had spread far and wide that his father would soon be stepping down from the Braxian throne in his favor. Coming here to chase after a serial killer had to rank pretty damn low on his list of priorities. Frankly, I didn’t understand why he had personally come to handle this instead of just sending in a unit. As



grateful as I felt about his presence, it also worried me that he would want to expedite this so that he could go back to his world and his royal duties.

“Our scanners didn’t detect anyone else here but you,” Keran said matter-of-factly, although his statement was in fact a question.

To my dismay, I felt my face heat with embarrassment. “All the hybrids who sought refuge here are now adults,” I explained. “They have their own dwellings. There’s still quite a bit of traffic here on specific days, when they come tend the fields or use the workshops. We also have a series of scheduled meetings throughout the calendar year to discuss matters of importance or issues we want to raise with the Twelve. But evenings are indeed quiet now.”

Goddess! I was babbling like a fool and over-explaining... not to say over exaggerating. While everything I had said was technically true, very few of the scheduled meetings took place anymore. Once we’d realized the Twelve didn’t give a shit about us, the men had stopped bothering discussing things they knew would never come to pass.

“I see,” Keran replied, his stormy eyes appearing to see right through my bullshit.

Feeling self-conscious, I averted my eyes, relieved that we had reached the door, giving me something to do.

“Do come in,” I said, opening the door and waving them in.

My initial surprise at seeing Keran remaining a couple of steps behind gave way to embarrassment when his guard named Tagar walked in ahead of us. Of course, they would want to secure the premises before they let in their future ruler.

The second guard, Nowik, exchanged a brief glance with Keran, who blinked his assent in a silent communication. Nowik followed his colleague inside, tapping some instructions on the fancy bracer wrapped around his forearm.

“There are no cameras, traps, or alarms to be triggered inside the buildings,” I called out to the men. “You can explore freely.”

Tagar glanced at me over his shoulder and gave me a stiff nod. He looked particularly ferocious with the long scar running over his eyebrow and down his cheek. He’d been lucky not to lose an eye with that injury. Knowing Braxians, he undoubtedly took great pride in that battle scar.

Although Keran followed me inside, we stood near the entrance while the guards walked farther down the hall. The silent and fluid way they moved genuinely impressed me. For males so massive, I expected them to be lumbering about, not look like they were almost gliding. The way their bulging muscles rolled under their skin-tight black shirts with each of their movements was almost hypnotic.

“Like what you see?” Keran asked, his voice startling me.

Heat crept up my cheeks to have been caught ogling his guards, even though there had been nothing sexual about my fascination with them.

“Your men are remarkable,” I admitted, forcing myself to look nonchalant. “I’d never met purebloods before. You guys are truly impressive.”

“Never?” he repeated in a slightly dubious tone, his gaze boring into mine.

Although stunned that he seemed to doubt my words, I held his gaze unwaveringly. “Never.”

He studied my features for a few seconds before appearing to come to a decision. What thoughts were running through his mind?

“And yet, you’re not intimidated by us,” he said at last, once more factually, but this time with a hint of curiosity in his voice.

I shrugged. “Why would I be?”

His left brow shot up, his air of curiosity cranking up another notch, but this time laced with a sliver of amusement.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Of course not,” I said teasingly. “But logic dictates that a crown prince wouldn’t embark on a three-day journey through space only so that he could bully a random woman he has never met before.”

He snorted. A flurry of emotions flitted over his rough features, all of them impossible to define. “I think I like you, Dawn Merrick. But where I’m concerned, it would be wise never to make any assumptions. You can’t begin to imagine the things I *would* do.”

It was my turn to raise an inquisitive eyebrow. “Now you have me curious. Should I give you a dare?”

Keran burst out laughing. Although brief, the deep, powerful, and throaty sound affected me in the strangest way. My stomach fluttered as I studied his features. He leaned over me, his face a few inches from mine. My breath caught in my throat as a slow, almost malicious smile stretched his thick lips. In that instant, Keran looked truly terrifying. Had my brain been functioning rationally, I would have taken a step back, if only out of self-preservation. Instead, I remained right there, the butterflies in my stomach going into overdrive.

“Careful what you wish for, little girl. You are *not* ready for the games I play,” he whispered in a rumbling voice filled with promises and an undeniable underlying threat.

Did my stupid brain finally get the memo and trigger my fight or flight instincts? Hell no. In a very rational response, my brain decided to make my toes curl, my skin erupt in goosebumps, and for a totally inappropriate flame to spark low in my belly. To my horror, Keran’s nostrils flared as my physiological reaction wafted to him, and his gray eyes took on the dark shades of a stormy sky.

A slow, predatory smile stretched his lips as I remained transfixed before him. The little voice at the back of my head was shouting for me to run for my life. Whatever “games” this man was into, they would rock my world and leave me a complete wreck. As much as I loved a challenge, I could recognize when I was way out of my depth.

“All clear!” Tagar called out from a few meters away.

I yelped and pressed a palm to my chest as I jerked my head right to look at the guard. Too busy drowning in Keran’s dark gaze, I never heard the guards returning. My cheeks felt on the verge of bursting into flames, my embarrassment cranking up another notch at the discreet but smug chuckle that tumbled out of the prince’s throat. I doubted his guards had heard it from where they stood. Still, despite the neutral impression on their faces, they knew their prince had just majorly affected me.

“Well, this way then,” I said, proud that my voice came out firm and confident.

I led them to my office located near the entrance, across from the reception desk. The familiar sting of nostalgia struck my heart. It felt like only yesterday when two secretaries

worked at the large, semi-circular desk to assist all the people that would come in and out at every hour of the day. Many of those visitors would make use of the wide benches and chairs of the waiting room to the left. I had them specifically laid out to give the guests a perfect view of the peaceful garden outside and of Haven's stunning landscape through the large wall-to-ceiling window framing the patio door.

In a way, I should rejoice that the new laws on Braxia had made the services we offered obsolete. The ultimate goal had always been for hybrids to be accepted by their people and to be able to thrive without constant abuse and fearing for their lives. But I had expected a different, more decisive outcome. Some momentous event that would have marked the turn of the tide, with a hero—or heroine—to be celebrated on an anniversary day for radically changing the lives of so many innocents.

Instead, Magnar Ravik had passed new laws that clans begrudgingly observed. Over time, the hybrids' constant state of fear had simply faded, and they'd settled into their new routine.

*Womp, womp.*

As I opened the door to my office for Keran, another wave of self-consciousness surged through me as his gaze roamed over the space. Of respectable size, my office had large windows on two sides, giving me a great view of the entrance and of the side of the building—including part of the landing pad. You couldn't sneak in without me seeing you first.

I had kept the original wooden furniture from the old religious colony, only having it sanded and freshly stained. As they'd deemed anything ostentatious as sinful, every piece of furniture had been designed with a focus on sturdiness and

efficiency, with simple lines and barely any adornments. A matching chair stood behind the wide, rectangular desk with drawers. In the left corner of the room, in front of the giant screen hanging on the white wall, a worktable provided seating for six people. A filing cabinet, a mini-bar, and a loveseat constituted the rest of the furniture. The only personal touch I had brought to the room were the holographic portraits and photos of the various hybrids and dignitaries who had sojourned with us at one point or another.

Once again, Keran's face betrayed nothing of his thoughts. But I didn't miss how his gaze lingered on some of the family portraits. I wondered if he had known or met some of those people back on Braxia before they fled.

"We will be more comfortable sitting at the worktable," I said, gesturing at it.

Beyond the fact that we'd be too cramped sitting side-by-side behind my desk, having Keran and his guards sitting across my desk from me would have felt awkward and maybe even disrespectful.

The Prince complied, heading straight for the table.

"May I offer you something to eat or to drink?" I added, stopping by the mini bar.

Keran shook his head. "No, thank you."

To my surprise, the two guards stepped back out of the room after giving it a quick glance.

"They're not coming in?" I asked.

"They have other reconnaissance tasks to perform," Keran said dismissively. "They'll be outside while you and I discuss the situation."

That made me a little uneasy. I'd already found it uncomfortable having those two mountains of muscles traipsing through every room of our shelter to secure the location without me. Now, the thought of having them in a separate room doing who knew what unnerved me. I wasn't skittish or paranoid, but my motto had always been "Better a threat you see than one you don't".

Failing to come up with a good reason as to why his guards should stay inside my office with us instead, I simply nodded. Silencing my irrational sense of dread, I picked up the datapad on my desk and sat on the right side of the table, facing the giant screen. Keran settled next to me, his chair slightly skewed so that he could partially face me.

"Lay it on me," he said in a commanding tone.





## CHAPTER 5

## DAWN

I gave him a stiff nod, turned on the vidscreen, and tapped some instructions on my datapad to project the murder files onto the screen.

“Over the past eight and a half weeks, these six hybrids have been found dead, their corpses mutilated, following similar patterns,” I said grimly while displaying their faces in a mosaic on screen. “Each one was found in completely different areas that failed to provide any kind of pattern or link that would enable us to identify a potential point of origin as to where the crime would have been committed before the bodies were dumped. Each new victim is always found exactly nine days after the previous one. We found Roman six days ago,” I added, pointing at the last face at the bottom right of the screen.

“Meaning the killer will dump a new victim in three days,” Keran said with a frown.

“That’s exactly what I fear,” I said with helpless anger. “The murders are gruesome. They really went all out making sure the victims suffered for a long time before they died.”

I gave him an apologetic look as I displayed the close-up shots of the corpses of the various victims. That reflex didn’t

make much sense considering the Braxian prince would have undoubtedly seen far worse on his homeworld.

“As you can see, they bear the typical marks of a culling,” I explained pointing at the various wounds on the corpses. They were beaten, then attached by their wrists to a pole, before having their legs broken so they would slowly asphyxiate while getting whipped.”

When I glanced at Keran, the murderous anger on his face, and his clenched broad jaw should have frightened anyone in their right mind. But knowing fury at the pain these poor souls had endured fueled that terrifying expression filled me with hope. This was the look of a man determined to bring the culprits to justice.

“However, that’s not what killed them,” I said.

Keran jerked his head towards me, surprise superseding his anger.

“You see these small perforations? At first, I thought they were stab wounds, as if the killer had thrown darts at them in some demented game,” I said, my voice filled with the disgust and helpless rage that always overtook me when I went over these cases. “I asked for a complete autopsy to know exactly all that they had endured, but the coroner keeps dicking me around. The peacekeeping office has only sent me half-baked reports that all more or less conclude that the men died due to the various traumas they sustained.”

“What do you think those holes are?” Keran asked.

It struck me as odd that he didn’t question why the local authorities weren’t properly assisting us. I would have to dig into that further.

“On the fourth case, we had the unfortunate luck to find the victim before the peacekeepers,” I replied, running nervous fingers through my hair. “We performed our own scans, and grabbed as many tissue samples as we could without disturbing the crime scene too much. As the death had been fairly recent, I was able to see that the perforation of the wound had not come from a projectile or sharp object, but from something inside piercing its way out.”

“Kranax Beetles,” Keran said in an icy voice filled with a seething rage.

I gave him a stiff nod. “Yes. The lab analyses of the samples confirmed a large presence of the slime secreted by Kranax Beetle larvae. Considering the number of exit wounds I was able to observe, without flipping the corpse, I suspect over a hundred eggs hatched.”

Keran muttered a curse in Braxian under his breath. “This means the next victim is already beyond help.”

My throat tightened as I once more nodded. After Kranax Beetles laid their eggs inside a host, the larvae took two days to hatch. They would then eat their way out of the body, taking the longest route to stock up on the reserves necessary for them to complete their maturity. It took many hours, sometimes up to a day.

If the killer kept to his pattern, the next corpse would turn up in three days. This meant the Kranax Beetles had laid their eggs inside the victim sometime this morning. Unless we could find him in the next twenty-four hours, the chances of saving him would be next to nil. And even if we did, the damage caused by the eggs growing inside of him before we could take them out would destroy any type of quality of life he could hope for in the future.

Over the next hour, I covered every detail Melinda and I had managed to gather about the cases, as well as any information I possessed about the victims: names, jobs, residential address, as well as a map overlaying their houses, place of work, and locations their bodies were found in relation to each other. No connecting threads gave us the slightest hint as to where to go from here.

“You have done an admirable job, considering the obstacles lain in your path,” Keran said with an air of respect that made me feel all fuzzy inside.

In my eyes, I hadn’t done anywhere near enough. But I was in over my head and didn’t know where to go next to protect my boys. I had expected the Prince to berate me for not having done more. But his words piqued my curiosity.

“Obstacles?” I repeated.

“Mmhmm. After receiving your last message, I communicated with the Peacekeeper’s Commander to have all the investigation files forwarded to me before my arrival,” Keran said, his voice hardening. “He used every possible excuse to explain why he couldn’t share the information about an investigation in progress, even after I said that I would put my far more considerable resources at his disposal to find the culprit as they struggled with a limited budget.”

Eyes wide, I gaped at him with wonder. “Damn! I wish I could have been there to bear witness. He loves throwing his weight around.”

Keran snorted. “He certainly tried to. But he learned quickly that I don’t put up with that nonsense. When he tried to shut me down, I reminded him that our Dagna’s niece is married to General Khel Praghan, leader of the Sentinels. As a high-ranking member of the Galactic Council’s peacekeeping

force, he has oversight powers over regional law-enforcement of member planets. If he persisted in his interference, General Praghan would certainly be curious to know why they were making so little progress in these cases.”

I burst out laughing as I stared at him in awe. “Ormloff must have peed his pants. It was high time someone had some kind of leverage to take him down a notch.”

“I do enjoy setting fools straight,” Keran said smugly. “He requested a week to get the files in order. I told him he had three days until our arrival and to see that everything was ready. A couple of my guards and my medical officer should be there now as we speak to perform a proper autopsy on the victims and get copies of the files.”

Truly impressed, I whistled through my teeth before sobering. “I’m genuinely blown away with how quickly you got him to move. Having connections certainly does wonders. Unfortunately, I doubt Commander Ormloff will have much to offer. He hasn’t done anything. I can’t tell if it’s laziness, genuine lack of resources, or flat-out corruption, but I’m pretty sure his team has done less than the minimum. It doesn’t help that many people dislike the hybrids—and Braxians in general. So it wouldn’t surprise me if they were dragging their heels about this because they see the hybrids getting killed as a good thing.”

“Braxians can be... challenging,” Keran said, looking amused. “Our males need intense training, brutal sports, and the ability to brawl under strict rules and great discipline. We need to vent our excess of violence.”

“Sadly, we’re not staffed to enforce this type of strict discipline,” I said, annoyed by the bitterness seeping into my voice.

“Few people are,” he conceded sympathetically. “And you are correct. Ormloff asked for a week so that his unit could try to whip up something together. We cannot rely on him to solve this, which is why my team will take over the whole thing. We do have very powerful allies. And Haven and the Twelve will *not* want us to make a galactic stink about their failure to protect those who sought refuge here. I need this resolved within the next couple of weeks. I have to be back on Braxia in no more than a month.”

For a reason I couldn't explain, that struck me hard. Considering I'd just met him barely a couple of hours ago, my reaction didn't make much sense. And yet, an odd sense of abandonment welled within me at the thought of his departure.

“My crew will be working through the night so that we may have a plan of attack first thing in the morning,” Keran continued. “Any special place the hybrids usually hang out?”

I hesitated. “Not exactly. They used to hang out here before, but the older they got, the more they began going their separate ways,” I said carefully. “However, they will attend most sports events, especially of the competitive types. And, naturally, they lurk around most of the strip clubs and adult entertainment venues.”

“I will need the list of those venues,” he immediately replied.

“Of course,” I said, my voice cooler than I intended while trying to silence the disappointment surging through me.

Under the circumstances, it was unfair to automatically assume he wanted to go there for his own entertainment, but knowing how constantly horny Braxians were, I didn't doubt he'd seize the opportunity to also get some... release.

His gaze appeared to darken as he studied my features, having no doubt perceived the sliver of disapproval in my voice. I fought the burning urge to squirm, suddenly feeling exposed, like he could read my every thought and emotion.

“The Cabaret is the most popular club, and the most welcoming to all. Some clubs will only welcome specific species, and in others, the performers refuse to ‘service’ certain clients.”

He tilted his head to the side, examining me as if searching for some underlying meaning to my words.

“I bet you had fun moderating incidents where frustrated hybrids were being denied service,” he said with disturbing accuracy.

“It is my job to see to the integration and welfare of the hybrids, here on Haven, including fighting for their rights,” I said with a shrug.

“Hmmm,” Keran replied in a non-committal fashion while continuing to stare at me.

“You have a pretty intense way of looking at people,” I blurted out nervously.

It was his turn to shrug. “So I’m told. You’ll get used to it.”

I burst out laughing. “Wow. I had not expected that response.”

He raised his thick, prominent eyebrow in an inquisitive fashion. “Oh? What had you expected?”

“I don’t know... Some kind of generic apology about it potentially making me uncomfortable,” I said, feeling amused.

“I don’t lie,” he stated firmly.



For a reason I couldn't explain, something in his tone felt like a warning.

I licked my lips nervously, wondering if he was hinting I should drop it. But my tongue had a mind of its own.

“Isn't that problematic for someone evolving at the highest spheres of Braxia's politics?” I asked.

“There are workarounds,” he said, the oddest mix of smugness and harshness seeping into his voice. “If you're clever enough, you can answer any question truthfully without revealing things you don't want to or shouldn't. Having the reputation of being a liar can make it impossible to conduct any type of viable diplomatic deals.”

“You make a valid point. It still must be difficult,” I insisted.

He smiled, although it didn't reach his eyes. “For some, maybe. But tell me about those strangers recruiting the hybrids.”

I took in a deep breath while choosing my words. “There have always been off-worlders dropping by to recruit some of the men, mostly as bouncers and security guards. In most cases, I've been able to convince them not to accept those offers.”

“Why?” Keran asked, his eyes narrowing at me.

“Because most were bad offers by shady people,” I said with conviction. “I ran thorough background checks on them, including criminal records and credit score. Many turned out to be pirates, smugglers, or mercenaries. A few of them were excellent offers from wealthy merchants, or noble houses.”

“But something is different this time?” Although he worded it as a question, it was more of a statement.

“There are two troubling factors to it,” I said carefully. “First, instead of wanting to hire only one or two men, they want to get *all* of them.”

“All?” Keran asked with a frown while straightening in his chair.

“Yes,” I said, making no effort to hide how much it troubled me. “They apparently have openings for every type of role possible, mostly having to do with security work, but also other positions as crewmates on their merchant ships. The hybrids’ greater strength is a non-negligible asset. And just like you purebloods—they are immune to psionic powers and compulsion, which makes them invaluable in any security detail. With the increased Sarenian presence over the past few years, it makes sense to want to be surrounded by people who cannot be affected by their mind-control powers.”

“I can see that,” Keran said, although his suspicions didn’t abate in the least. “And what’s the second thing?”

“And second, those off-worlders are Guldans,” I admitted sheepishly, as if I was somehow committing a crime.

My blood drained from my face when Keran jumped out of his chair with a murderous look. While I knew at a visceral level that he wouldn’t hurt me—or at least, I strongly believed it—a sliver of fear finally blossomed deep within.

“Guldans?! Why the fuck did you wait this long to bring it up?” he snapped.

“Please, don’t be upset,” I said in an appeasing tone. “Sit down... please. I will explain.”

He glared at me, his teeth clenched as if he wanted to slap the stupid out of me that I hadn’t revealed this sooner. I swallowed hard and gestured once again at his chair.

“Please...”

To my relief, although still clearly upset, he complied, his intimidating stare boring into mine.

“While I do not pretend to fully understand the fallout between Braxians and Guldans, I know they are no longer welcome on your homeworld,” I said cautiously. “However, I have found no evidence linking the murders to their presence. They arrived *after* the third murder.”

“That they arrived *after* doesn’t mean they haven’t been plotting and scheming ahead,” he hissed. “The Guldans have the wealth to send assassins here and make it look like purebloods are after the hybrids again.”

“I have thought of that,” I said in a reasonable tone. “But what would they gain from it? There are less than a thousand hybrids throughout Haven. A third are females who have settled into a comfortable life here, with their mate and children. Even if every single adult male went with those Guldans, how could they ever be a threat to Braxia? Hybrids do not stand a chance against purebloods, even in a fair duel. Purebloods like you could kill any of them with a single punch in the face. And there are millions of you on your planet.”

“You would be surprised what certain hybrids can do,” Keran replied enigmatically.

“What do you mean?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Never mind that. Tell me, have they talked of returning to Braxia?”

My stomach knotted. Something in his tone held an undeniable menace. I shifted uneasily in my seat, a million different thoughts going off in my mind.

“Wouldn’t they be welcomed if they did?” I asked instead.  
“Your father’s new laws—”

“I asked you a question,” he interrupted in a clipped tone.

“Vintor—one of the most vocal hybrids—mentioned it was a possibility, among other things. But the security guard positions for merchants and nobles seemed like their main interest,” I said, hating the nervousness seeping into my voice.

Keran remained quiet for a few seconds that felt like an eternity. The intensity with which he examined my features sent my anxiety into overdrive. I’d known finding out about the Guldans would upset him, but not to this extent. The muscle palpitating on his temple and the slight clenching of his jaw were seriously triggering my flight instincts.

“Do you know where the Guldans are located, and what they are doing?” he asked at last.

“Yes. They have rented the Sulvan Ranch located five kilometers from here,” I replied, eager to show that I had indeed done my homework, and not just randomly dismissed their presence as coincidental. “It is a three-month lease, non-renewable. They have a frigate in orbit, big enough to transport every hybrid who signs up with them and who they decide to hire. While it possesses some advanced weaponry, it is not a battleship but a merchant vessel.”

To my dismay, Keran’s tension only seemed to increase further. Confused as to what I was missing, I displayed on the giant screen the satellite imagery of the Guldan’s lair.

“As you can see, they have turned the ranch into a training camp where the interested candidates are going through an intensive program. Those who perform well will be hired,” I explained. “Most of the training occurs outside, in plain view

of any satellite surveillance. Trust me, I have looked for any sign that the Guldans were up to no good and failed to find any. But you clearly think otherwise.”

He leaned back in his chair, his expression unreadable as he seemed to reflect on how he wished to respond.

“Do you know what is scheduled to happen in three months?” he asked.

“Aside from the Guldans’ planned departure? No, I don’t,” I said, shaking my head.

“My father will step down from the throne of Braxia so that I may become its new Magnar,” he said matter-of-factly. “After multiple failed attempts to make Braxians bow to their will, Guldans will stop at nothing to see someone other than a Xeldar ascend the throne. Preferably someone they can manipulate and control.”

I swallowed hard and nodded slowly as I reflected on his words. “Okay, I can see that. But how would a few hundred hybrids help them achieve that?”

“The best way to control someone is to surround them with people whispering in their ear in a united voice. The Council and Royal Guards are extremely influential,” he said in a mysterious tone.

I recoiled. “The Council? What Braxian king would ever appoint a bunch of hybrid newcomers to his Council or Royal Guard?”

“A hybrid Magnar might,” he said.

My jaw dropped. For a second, I believed he was making fun of me, but his serious expression eliminated that possibility.

“Don’t Braxians select the strongest male as their Magnar? Doesn’t it come down to the last man standing in a bloody battle where some are known to die?” I exclaimed. “No hybrid can win.”

“Like I said, you’d be surprised what certain hybrids can do,” he countered dismissively, while rising to his feet. “Is there anything else you have deemed unrelated that you haven’t shared with me yet?”

I shook my head, feeling like a child getting reprimanded, and instinctively stood up as well. “No. That’s everything.”

“Very well. I need ten minutes to speak privately with my guards. Please, transfer all these files to me in the meantime.”

Without waiting for my response, he turned on his heels and headed for the door.

“Keran!” I called before he could reach the door. I cast a quick look outside through the large windows before facing him again. “The sun is getting quite low on the horizon. I haven’t asked what your sleeping arrangements are, if any. There are plenty of guest rooms here that you and your men are welcome to. They are humble, but clean and comfortable. Otherwise, I’ll be happy to have some rooms prepared for all of you in Jadirel. It is a fancy hotel in the capital city with free luxury rooms reserved for Ambassadors and other VIP guests and diplomatic envoys.”

“We don’t need fancy rooms. Here will be just fine. Thank you.”

With that, he stepped out of the room.



## CHAPTER 6



## KERAN

**T**oo many conflicting thoughts swirled in my head as I finished giving instructions to Tagar and Nowik. Besides the upsetting news Dawn had revealed, I couldn't decide how much I trusted her. She seemed sincere in wanting to find the assassin. A genuine glimmer of hope had lit up in her green eyes when I told her of the pressure I'd put on Commander Ormloff. And yet, she wasn't who she was pretending to be.

*I hate liars with a passion.*

To be fair, she hadn't actually lied, but she'd been heavily skirting around some truths. The question was how deep the deception ran and why. Right now, I would have loved to have one of the Veredian mind readers to evaluate her. Then again, I enjoyed a challenge. And this particular female intrigued me in more ways than one.

"Find out all that you can. Do not be discreet, and make it clear any solid clue or information will be generously rewarded," I said to my guards. "I want that killer to get nervous, and ideally to make a mistake."

"Yes, Jakar," Tagar replied.

"The security perimeter is active and linked to your devices," Nowik said. "In case of trouble, backup will arrive in

under three minutes, long before any intruder can reach you.”

“Perfect. You know your tasks,” I said.

The two males nodded before heading for the exit. Seconds after they opened the front door, Dawn burst out of her office, a panicked look on her face as she stared at my guards’ receding backs.

“They’ll be back,” I called out mockingly.

She gasped and jerked her head towards me. Her shock at finding me standing on the left side of the greeting hall gave way to palpable relief. That did funny things to me. I naturally felt protective of females, and this one definitely needed my aid. I loved the trusting and hopeful way she looked at me and listened to my words. And yet, my suspicions kept rearing their heads. Did Dawn fear me leaving because she had planned on having me assassinated overnight, or because she would never be able to solve this if we abandoned her?

“Keran,” she breathed, tension bleeding out of her shoulders as she came my way. She cast a confused look at the doors, which had closed behind my guards after their exit, before facing me again. “Where are they going?”

“To the strip club you were talking about earlier,” I deadpanned.

Shock and disappointment, quickly hidden, flitted over her features. “I see...”

“No, you don’t,” I said mockingly. “They’re going there for work, not for entertainment.”

“Right. Of course.”

My smile broadened at the sight of the heat creeping on her cheeks. She had the slightly tanned complexion of Middle

Eastern or Mediterranean humans. Her long obsidian hair and green eyes hinted at the former. But the resemblance ended there. Dawn was taller than the average human, with broad shoulders and big bones. Although undoubtedly feminine, her facial features would never be defined as delicate. She had thick lips on a wide mouth. A strong, broad nose, and big upturned eyes with the longest natural lashes I'd ever seen.

By human standards, she wouldn't qualify as even remotely attractive. Yet, my cock had perked up the minute I'd laid eyes on her.

She cleared her throat and glanced once more at the closed door. "Shouldn't one of them have stayed behind to protect you?"

I snorted. "Are you planning on doing me ill?"

"Of course not! But you're the future Magnar."

"Security measures have been taken," I said. "Now, I recall you mentioning food earlier."

"Right! I have some adran steaks that I can make with a couple of sides," she offered, that adorable nervousness creeping back into her voice. "I had planned something fancier from the catering service tomorrow, but—"

"Adran steaks sound perfect. Again, I do not need anything fancy," I said, interrupting her.

"Great. This way then." She gestured at a hallway, which I assumed led to the cafeteria.

"Tell me about yourself, Dawn. How did you end up here? Why this job? Why Haven?"

Although I asked the question in a conversational tone, I examined her face for any sign of the deception I expected.

“I just followed in my mother’s footsteps, I guess,” Dawn said with a nonchalance that revealed she had answered that question in a similar way many times before.

“You mean your *birth* mother, not the one who raised you, correct?” I said with false innocence.

Dawn froze, stopping dead in her tracks to look at me with a shocked expression. I held her gaze unwaveringly, daring her to lie.

“Shonda Merrick isn’t a public servant, and you look nothing like her,” I insisted. “So I can only presume you’re adopted.”

“Wow! I guess tact doesn’t feature very high in your list of diplomatic skills,” Dawn said, sounding slightly offended. “You don’t just throw something like this at someone’s face. It could be a very sore topic for me.”

I shrugged. “It could be, but it’s not.”

This time, she faced me full on, self-righteous anger burning in her emerald eyes. I liked seeing these sparks of fire in her. While I like females who deferred to my dominance, I couldn’t stand skittish and simpering ones. There was nothing sexier than a woman with a backbone who dared to speak her mind and let you have it when you were in the wrong.

“Me not falling apart and not turning into an emotional mess doesn’t mean I’m not hurt,” she snapped in a stern tone that I found quite the turn on. “Anyway, how is that any of your business or relevant to your mission here?”

“Like you so accurately mentioned earlier, I am the Crown Prince. For security measures, I always do thorough background checks on the people I will closely interact with,” I said in a self-evident tone.

Dawn stared at me for a few seconds, seeming torn before shrugging.

“There’s nothing special about me,” she finally said in a grumpy tone, turning away from me to resume walking towards the cafeteria. “I was the typical unwanted pregnancy. My mother put me up for adoption then continued with her charity work.”

“What about your father? He didn’t claim you?” I insisted.

“I’ve never met him,” Dawn said icily.

“Never?” I repeated in a deliberately dubious tone.

“Yes, *never!*” Dawn snapped, this time openly glaring at me. “I doubt he even knows I exist, which frankly is none of your damn business. What’s with all the prying?”

“To assess your character and honesty,” I said bluntly, my tone slightly menacing. “You lured me here to protect people who do not particularly seem like they want to be. Instead, they are consorting with those determined to bring down my house, which you conveniently kept hidden until the last minute. So yes, Dawn Merrick, I will pry.”

She swallowed hard. To her credit, Dawn didn’t wither before me. She held my gaze with a hint of defiance, refusing to cower.

I liked that.

“I didn’t keep the Guldan’s presence hidden. There was no evidence for me to think their presence could be related to my reasons for asking you to come here,” she said sternly. “For the record, I didn’t *lure you* here. *You chose* to come. I merely requested Braxian assistance since we weren’t getting any help worth mentioning from the local authorities.”

We reached the entrance of the cafeteria as she finished her sentence. Dawn opened the door with far more strength than necessary, her back stiff as she stomped towards the counter. I repressed the urge to smile. There was something sexy and entertaining about a pissed off female itching to smack you for some perceived slight.

“As for the hybrids, they *do* want to be protected. Since Haven isn’t fulfilling its duty towards them, they are rightfully looking elsewhere. They want a greater purpose, opportunities for a brighter future, all things the Guldans are offering, when no one else is.”

The meaningful glance she cast my way while pronouncing that last part hit a nerve. Yes, we had passed and enforced laws to protect hybrids on Braxia. And although we had made it known that those who had fled were welcomed to return, we’d made no real effort to set up programs and infrastructures to facilitate such migration and reintegration.

“Anything else you want to pry about?” she asked while retrieving the meat and produce from the cooling unit.

“Plenty,” I said tauntingly. “How come you’re still single?”

Dawn dropped the three thick pieces of steak on the island. They landed with a thud as she stared at me with a disbelieving look.

“What makes you think I’m single?” she growled.

I tapped the side of my nose with a smug grin. “I do not scent any male or female on you. A long-time partner marks you with a scent that even a shower won’t take away. Only a long separation will make it fade away. Even hybrids can perceive it. You should know that.”

She clenched her teeth. The way her eyes threw daggers at me had my blood rushing to my groin. Turning her back abruptly to me, Dawn retrieved some plates and pots from the cupboards, loudly closing the doors. I bit the insides of my cheeks not to laugh. Right this instant, she was likely picturing herself slamming those cupboard doors shut on my face.

“Well, Mister-I’m-so-tactful-and-considerate, you may not have noticed, but I’m not the embodiment of human beauty,” Dawn said in a clipped tone as she washed her hands. “Men aren’t exactly banging my doors down, and I don’t fraternize with the people I’m here to serve.”

I huffed and waved a dismissive hand, making no effort to hide my disdain. “Human beauty standards are overrated.”

This time, Dawn paused halfway through drying her hands to peer at me with a stunned expression.

“That was unexpected. Braxian males have the reputation of being almost obsessively drawn to human females,” she said in an unimpressed fashion. “Quite a few women down on their luck come here seeking out hybrids to offer their services as Indentured Servants to help them get back on their feet... once they’re done being on their backs.”

I snorted. “A wise approach for any woman with a sense of self-preservation. I’m sure they find handling a hybrid far more manageable. Purebloods *are* proportionally endowed.”

A slow chuckle tumbled out of my throat when Dawn’s green eyes flicked to my crotch. She immediately averted them and busied herself spicing up the meat to hide her embarrassment.

“While you are correct that Braxians have an unhealthy obsession with human females, I do not fall in that category. I

personally do not find them particularly appealing,” I said in all sincerity.

“Ouch,” she said, looking at me as if she was wondering who the fuck had raised me... and so utterly failed to teach me manners.

I laughed. “You are actually the exception.”

This time, she frowned, visibly offended. “Please, don’t insult my intelligence. I thought you said you didn’t lie?”

“I’m not. And I don’t,” I said calmly.

Leaning her left hip against the counter, she leveled a dubious gaze on me. “You’re not drawn to humans, but you find *me* attractive?”

“I do,” I said matter-of-factly as I stepped around the counter separating us to stand right in front of her. “Humans are too pretty.”

“Oh wow! Thanks a lot!”

I burst out laughing. “You misunderstand me, Dawn.”

“No, I get it,” she said, her voice slightly clipped as she rinsed the spices off her hands after rubbing them into the meat before turning to the vegetables. “Like I stated before, I’m well-aware that I’m plain.”

That irritated me, and I made it clear in a stern voice. “You are *not* plain, Dawn. I’m tired of females like you belittling themselves over some arbitrary set of aesthetics. By Braxian standards, *my* standards, you’re *too* pretty.”

She gaped at me as I let my gaze roam over her, studying every line her fitted black dress revealed, down to her painted toenails peeking at the front of her open sandals.



“Too pretty,” I repeated in a whisper. “But your body is pure perfection.”

She gasped and stared at me as if I’d lost my mind. “Perfection? I’m built like a man!”

I snorted, and it was my turn to look at her as if she’d gone insane. “You’re not built like a man. You’re sturdy.”

The flabbergasted sound that she emitted upon hearing that actually had me flinching inwardly. As much as I liked speaking my mind and going straight to the point, I also normally went out of my way to remain polite and politically correct. Something about this woman had my mouth running away with a will of its own and stirred this irrational desire to needle her.

“I hope you are far better at diplomatic discussions than you are at talking to women. Because... Just wow!” Dawn said, seeming unsure if she wanted to laugh in disbelief or feel offended.

I chuckled and took on a sheepish expression. “Believe it or not, I am usually quite skilled at conversing with people. I don’t know why I enjoy poking you like this. But I am sincere in my clumsy comments. Although it may not sound very seductive or romantic, being sturdy is a huge quality in a female.”

“Do tell,” Dawn challenged, amusement and dubious curiosity creeping into her voice.

“I’m Braxian. Humans are too fragile. You can’t unleash your passion without breaking them. But a woman like you could handle me. *All* of me...”

I smirked as Dawn’s face heated at my underlying meaning.

“You are not manly. Yes, you are tall, with big bones. Your shoulders are broad, but their curve is soft and undoubtedly feminine. Your breasts are generous and perky, the perfect size to fit in a big male’s palm. That narrow waist of yours, and the delicious way it flares at the hips would have many models drool with envy. The roundness of your behind would have any man’s hands twitching with the urge to grab and would provide the perfect grip in an intimate setting. Your legs are endless, sculpted by a master and made to wrap around a man’s waist. You have stunning eyes with the most incredible eyelashes. Your nose is a bit too dainty, but those sinfully plump lips of yours would give any man the most inappropriate thoughts.”

“Whoa... Okay. Now *that* was inappropriate!” Dawn said, her cheeks all but bursting into flames.

Despite her apparent outrage as she busied herself cutting the vegetables, my words had flattered her.

“Apologies, if I offended you,” I said in a soft voice.

She huffed. “I thought you didn’t lie?” she repeated, giving me the side eye.

“I don’t lie,” I said in a serious tone. “You challenged my earlier statement, and I defended my stance. I find you extremely attractive and stated why. But if my bluntness offended you, I truly apologize. It is not my intention to disrespect you.”

Dawn opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, words failing her. It was adorable.

“I really don’t get you,” she finally muttered under her breath.

I snorted. “Why? Because I find you attractive or because I’m blunt?”

“Both?”

I smiled, debating how to answer. A part of me wanted to continue our verbal sparring. It was turning out to be quite entertaining. But the other needed me to call her out and find out exactly where we stood before I allowed myself to indulge further in her pleasant company.

“It’s natural that I should be drawn to you,” I said, my smile fading and my gaze boring into hers. “After all, you’re Braxian.”

Dawn froze, blood draining from her face. Despite the admirable way in which she maintained a neutral expression, I didn’t miss the flash of fear in her eyes. Regaining her composure, she emitted a small laugh and glanced at me as if I’d said something silly. Unable to hold my gaze, she turned back to her vegetables as she resumed chopping them.

“Braxian? Being tall and big boned doesn’t automatically make someone Braxian. There is such a thing as the Amazons among humans,” she said teasingly. “Do I really look like one of your females?”

“Your body does. Your face doesn’t. But your scent indicates beyond the shadow of a doubt that you’re a daughter of Clan Caldes,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest, daring her to contradict me.

This time, she didn’t even try to hide her terrified expression. It stirred an irrational protective response from me. I barely kept myself from pulling her into my embrace to reassure her that all would be well. Her reaction confirmed what I already knew.

“Don’t be ridi—”

“Don’t lie!” I hissed, interrupting her. “Right here, right now, you’re about to define what relationship you and I are going to have. I can forgive or overlook many things. But don’t ever lie to me.”

Dawn put down her knife and hugged herself. The need to reassure her surged through me again. It took every bit of my willpower to silence it.

“Who... who else knows?” she whispered.

“As of right now, only my two guards and I.”

“Your guards?!” she exclaimed, horrified.

“Of course. Every Braxian—even hybrids—can smell bloodlines. Despite your nose being mostly human in appearance, I’m sure it’s sensitive enough to do so as well.”

She licked her lips nervously, her eyes flicking from side to side as if trying to make sense of something that didn’t.

“I am the Crown Prince of Braxia. Tagar and Nowik have been my father’s bodyguards for years. Both the Magnar and his Jakars regularly meet with the various clan leaders. I know every bloodline on our planet, as do my guards. Once I see the other hybrids, I will immediately know who they belong to,” I explained in a calm voice. “Does your sire know of your existence?”

Dawn shook her head, then stared at the partially cut vegetables in front of her with a haunted expression.

Walking up to the sink, I washed my hands in the otherwise heavy silence that had settled in the room. Once done, I gently pushed Dawn aside and picked up chopping the

vegetables. That snapped her out of the somber thoughts that had overtaken her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Preparing supper. You’re in shock. I’m not risking you cutting yourself and bleeding all over this fine produce. You can set the table while telling me about your parents,” I said in a slightly teasing tone to dampen some of the tension in the room.

“You’re going to cook?” she asked in a disbelieving tone that I should have found offensive.

“I’m a prince, not a severely disabled person. I can do things for myself, like cooking, as I have done many times before. Go on, and set the table,” I said gently but firmly.

Although still frazzled, Dawn complied. Despite my burning curiosity, I didn’t press her while she gathered her thoughts. There was something oddly domestic to me preparing our meal as she fetched the plates. If not for the tension knotting her back, you’d think we were a couple going about their routine.

“My father doesn’t know of my existence,” Dawn said at last, while putting down placemats on the table. “My mother had been on a mission on Jeruna. She’d gone to one of the local bars after her meeting and met him there. Apparently, she was quite the adventurous type, always up for new experiences. She’d never been with a Braxian before, and he seemed gentle enough. It was just a one-night stand. They went their separate ways the next day, and never talked again.”

“Ah yes,” I said with a sympathetic nod. “Many off-worlder females who couple with Braxians make that mistake. Unless they use condoms or contraceptives specifically

calibrated for Braxians, the chances they will get pregnant are extremely high. Our seminal fluids will override any regular contraceptive's effect. If the female is ovulating at that time, it's a done deal."

Dawn nodded with a troubled expression. "My mother found that out a few weeks later. She definitely didn't want kids. In a way, I was lucky that she was off on a primitive planet when she realized it. The medical pods on the planet couldn't perform the procedure for her. She could have requested a medical ship in the sector drop by at their earliest convenience, but that would have forced her to give the reason why."

I tossed the vegetables into the pan to stir fry them before looking up at Dawn with undisguised curiosity. "Why did she want to hide it? I know that Earth—like most other planets of the Western Quadrant—still follow one form of religion or another. But premarital sex and pregnancies out of wedlock have not been considered as sins in centuries."

She chuckled. "Yeah, that's definitely stopped being frowned upon ages ago. It's a good thing, too, or half the Quadrant would have a one-way ticket straight to Hell. My mother becoming pregnant while single wasn't the issue. That she didn't want to keep me would be a stain on her record, as it would be deemed an uncharitable act from someone working within a charitable organization. They wouldn't have fired her over it, but it would have stilted her chances of advancement. And Mother is extremely ambitious."

"Ambitious?" I echoed, this time genuinely taken aback. "Am I to understand she wasn't a field worker but an administrator?"

“Yep,” Dawn said while placing the utensils by the plates. “She would go to the location of whatever new project was being put together to secure leases, appoint the senior staff and managers, help establish the budget, and secure partners to finance the venture. She was gunning for the chairwoman role. It wouldn’t have looked good on her resume if it was ever revealed she got herself impregnated during a one-night stand, by some brutish stranger in a sleazy bar on a backwater planet. For such an envied position, her record needed to be flawless on every front.”

“So you were sacrificed to her ambitions,” I said, dropping the first steak into a hot pan.

“Yeah. She remained on Laītana for six months, where she became close friends with the medical doctor assigned to the skeleton crew on site.”

“Let me guess,” I interjected. “Doctor Shonda Merrick.”

“Touché. Her mission on Laītana was slated to end at the same time as my mother’s and as the rest of the first wave crew. She was debating about which assignment to take on next. My mother mentioned that she was heading to Haven to work on a three-month project for the Pelurians. That piqued Shonda’s interest as everyone is in love with that cute species. Therefore, she decided to tag along. I was born a little over two months after their arrival.”

“Right before the project would end,” I said, guessing where that was headed.

“Exactly two weeks before it ended,” Dawn said with a nod as she picked up wine glasses from the cupboard. “Shonda knew my father’s race, and that my mother had chosen Haven specifically because it would be the safest place for me. But

when I came out looking fully human, she decided to adopt me instead of letting my mother put me in the local orphanage.”

I frowned at that while flipping the steaks. “Why only after she saw you looked human?”

Dawn gave me an indulgent smile. It softened her features in the loveliest way and made her eyes sparkle. She was truly an attractive female. Too bad she didn’t see herself through my eyes. Still, it pleased me that her initial panic had subsided.

“It’s not what you think. Back then, Braxian hybrids were considered an endangered species. Minors were not allowed to leave Haven unless the parent or legal guardian demonstrated that they could provide the necessary level of security for the child. As Shonda had not originally planned on staying here, adopting a Braxian baby would have kept her stranded on Haven. As she was the only other person who knew of my sire’s origins, that fact conveniently vanished from my medical record. This way, when she was ready to leave Haven, Shonda would have no problem taking me with her.”

“And yet, she didn’t leave,” I said, taking the vegetables off the stove.

“She was needed here and loved working with the Pelurians. Her contract kept being extended by a few months, then a few more, until years had gone by,” Dawn said with a shrug. “I think she also stayed for my sake.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taking the steaks out of the pan so they could rest.

“I didn’t find out what I was until I was ten and asking a lot of questions, like why was I coming to school here in Genxia instead of the regular schools in town?”

“You studied here with the other hybrids?”



“Yes. Genxia was an old religious colony that had been turned into an orphanage. By the time I started kindergarten, it was already in the process of becoming a Braxian refugee shelter. My mother told me that studying here would put me in contact with people of varied backgrounds who would help me better understand the realities of the world instead of the superficial stuff regular schools would teach me. I thought it was cool back then.”

“But not after?” I asked with genuine curiosity while bringing the dishes to the table.

“I started asking questions because I realized I was bigger and stronger than other girls. Coming to school here kept me from feeling freaky, since I would fit right in with most of the other students. Even though she didn’t say as much, my gut told me that my mom had made me study here for that specific reason. She wanted me to grow up surrounded by my people and feel like I belonged.”

“And yet she made you keep it a secret,” I challenged, taking the bottle of wine she’d fetched from her hand, while gesturing for her to sit.

Dawn gave me an amused smile but complied. “Look at you being a gentleman, on top of apparently being a talented cook,” she added while casting a greedy look at the food. “Maybe you’re not a completely hopeless case after all.”

I snorted before pouring some red wine in her glass. “I’m a man of many, *many* talents, my dear. Prepare to be impressed over the next few days.”

She laughed and shook her head like she was reconsidering her statement about me not being totally hopeless. “Looking forward to it. But to answer your question, yes, she made me keep it a secret. At first, it was so that she and I would have

total freedom of movement before I reached eighteen, should we ever decide to leave Haven. After, it just made sense to keep up the charade. At the time, hybrids were still being hunted. I was twenty-five when your father finally made it illegal to hunt and abuse us.”

I nodded slowly, biting back the comment burning my tongue as to what terrible events had led my father to finally pass that law.

“Go ahead and dig in before it cools,” I said, pointing at the dishes in the middle of the table.

“Gladly,” she said with a grin.

To my delight, Dawn grabbed one of the three steaks then put a generous serving of sauteed vegetables and starchy roots. Braxian females had hearty appetites to fuel their strong bodies. It always annoyed me to see females of other species picking at their plates as their societies deemed it inelegant for women to eat a full portion. What nonsense.

Then again, Braxians had an unfair advantage over most other races. We possessed a phenomenal metabolism and naturally developed lean and muscular bodies without having to spend a single second in fitness training. Despite their stronger build compared to other species, our females were all lean and naturally maintained a healthy weight without any effort needed.

The moan that tumbled out of Dawn’s throat when she took a first bite of the steak resonated straight in my cock. The way she closed her eyes, eyelids fluttering as she savored the taste, sent my imagination running wild. The images were so vivid, I could almost feel her body writhing beneath me, and hear her moans as I pounded into her.

*Can she even handle me?*

Pureblood Braxians couldn't couple with human females without long and strenuous preparation using Denax to relax and stretch them enough to receive our huge girths. Some women even struggled to take hybrids, who were far less massive. Purebloods usually needed to handle most hybrid females with care the first few times. The lining of their inner walls normally matched those of our females, which was flexible and stretchy, not only to welcome us but also to allow them to birth our big babies.

*What if her human DNA isn't just dominant in her facial features, but there as well?*

I immediately chastised myself for my wandering thoughts. As much as Dawn enticed me, I didn't come here to have an affair. And even though she had been aroused by me earlier, it was a little presumptuous of me to assume she would actually want to act on it.

Dawn opening her eyes and refocusing on me snapped me out of my lustful musings—although it didn't silence the throbbing between my thighs.

“Okay, consider me properly impressed,” Dawn said, observing me with genuine admiration. “Adran steaks can be tricky to cook, but this is the right level of medium, the fat is perfectly rendered, and the meat is tender and juicy. I admit I never expected that from you.”

I snorted. “We go hunting with our fathers as soon as we're old enough to pull the string of a slingshot. If we want to eat, we have to clean and cook what we catch. Every Braxian boy is trained in the basics of survival and caring for themselves. Should we get stranded on a deserted planet, I could build us a

shelter from scratch, grow the food we needed, and either repair our vessel or put together a com system to call for help.”

“Wow. You sound like a multi-talented man,” she said, this time with a hint of teasing.

I loved when she did that.

“As a Jakar, I have no choice. I must be ready for every eventuality.”

“I can see that,” she conceded, before taking another bite of her food.

“So why did you stay here? Why take over this shelter?” I asked, while cutting my large piece of meat.

“Mom—Shonda—and this place gave me a chance at a decent future. I wanted to do the same for those who hadn’t been as *lucky* as me to have support and an appearance that kept me safer,” she said, flicking a lock of hair over her shoulder. “I’d been getting increasingly involved helping the former administration run this place. When she decided to retire, I offered to take over. Frankly, I never thought they would have given me the role, considering how young and inexperienced I was at twenty-five. Plus Shonda was finally ready to leave Haven for a different mission. But this was my home, and I didn’t really want some stranger coming here and upending our way of life with their presumptions as to what we wanted.”

“And yet, you got it,” I said gently.

She made a disdainful sound full of self-derision. “I’d fooled myself into thinking that I’d impressed them so much in my interview that they couldn’t deny me. It didn’t take me long to realize no one particularly wanted the role because

Braxian hybrids weren't a glamorous assignment and funds would be limited."

Although none of this surprised me, I clamped down on the anger wanting to surge within me. Our people had built a horrible reputation over the years, alienating most of our neighbors with extreme retaliation for the most stupid slight. Even with my father spending the past two decades trying to mend bridges and change our image abroad, it would take a long time to really turn things around.

"Is that why this place is so deserted now? Lack of funds and support?" I asked in a commiserating tone.

Dawn poked at her vegetables with her fork while reflecting on her answer, a frown marring her forehead. "Not really. Sure, more funds and support would have helped, but this place began its slow death once your father passed the new laws protecting hybrids."

I recoiled, taken aback by that comment.

She gave me a resigned smile. "Don't get me wrong, he did a good thing. At first, we got a massive influx of hybrids fleeing Braxia once their clans were obligated to set them free. Males and females of all ages, in various stages of abuse and trauma came flocking in. It was overwhelming at first. I'd only been in post for a year. But it was also exhilarating to make a difference for so many people."

I nodded slowly. "Yes. After that edict, there was a mass exodus for a few months, but then it ended as abruptly as it began."

"Yup. Those who wanted to leave Braxia did so as soon as the gates were open. The others decided to take a chance in a place they knew rather than to face the unknown. Apparently,

your laws were enforced because the flow of newcomers dwindled to a trickle and then completely stopped more than ten years ago. All the refugees are now adults, moving on with their lives. I thought this place still had a couple of years left in it, but with the Guldán recruiters, I doubt we'll make it to the end of the year."

Although Dawn tried to sound nonchalant as she spoke those words, I didn't miss the emotion seeping into her voice.

"What are you going to do once they all move on?" I asked gently.

She shrugged. "I may go to Earth or some other human colony. There are plenty of underfunded refugee colonies in desperate need of an administrator," she said with self-derision.

"Have you considered coming back to Braxia?"

Dawn recoiled. "Hell no! No offense," she added quickly upon seeing the offended look on my face. "I'm sure your father and you are doing a wonderful job of making it a better place, but I don't belong there. Women's rights still have a long way to go, even more so for a hybrid."

"Which makes you the perfect candidate to tackle such a massive undertaking. You've lived off-world, know what women need to succeed in their own right. You could share your expertise as well as help us better support the hybrids who remained on Braxia. I admit that we haven't done much for them. We don't even know where to start."

That took her aback. In truth, my own words even surprised me. I hadn't planned on making such an offer. But now that I had stated it, it struck me as brilliant. We could indeed use her talent and knowledge.

“You make some compelling arguments but...”

“Is it your father?” I asked softly when her voice trailed off.

She shifted uneasily in her seat before taking a sip of wine. “I know what role my family played to prompt your father to set those laws to protect hybrids.”

I frowned at the shame poking its head in her expression. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You and your father’s clan are not responsible for the actions of your brother. Gerwin attempted to murder Anton in his own home, then compounded this egregious offense by kidnapping, raping, and maiming his wife. He paid the ultimate price for his crime. He was punished for *his* poor choices. That burden isn’t anyone else’s to bear.”

“True, but where did he learn so much hatred? Who taught him that it was okay to exact so much violence on others simply because they were born different?” Dawn hissed.

“Not your father,” I said, matter-of-factly.

She stiffened, stunned by my response. Eyes flicking between mine, she seemed to want to assess the truth of my words.

“Raylor Caldes has many faults. For the longest time, he featured fairly high in the list of people I disliked. For all that, he was never a bigot,” I said calmly. “We mostly clashed on his conservative ideas, but he genuinely wants a better future for Braxia. He’s come a long way since we executed his firstborn. But Gerwin was always a horrible individual. Some people are simply born with a cruel streak, despite their parents’ best efforts. He also hung out with the wrong crowd, which reinforced his toxic behaviors.”

“I see,” Dawn said, sounding unconvinced.

I chuckled. “You do not have to make a decision now, but you should think on it. You could do the most good on your homeworld. Raylor should also have a chance to know he has a daughter, instead of only sons.”

“And become his property the minute I set foot on Braxia,” she retorted in a sharp tone.

I huffed. “It’s been nineteen years since Gerwin’s execution and the new laws were instated. That has changed. Females are no longer property. Once adult, you may make every decision for yourself, including telling your father to fuck off, if you so choose.”

Dawn laughed, her green eyes sparkling with amusement. “I’m sure that would go down well.”

I smiled. “Seriously, think on it. Raylor now sits on my father’s Council. I will keep him in mine once I ascend. Your clan isn’t the richest, but it’s very comfortable financially *and* is very influential. Should you take on this task, I have no doubt they would put any additional resources you might need behind you as your success would increase their own status. And Braxians are all about status, reputation, and honor.”

“You’ve given me much to think about,” she said pensively.

“To endless possibilities and new opportunities,” I said, raising my glass.

She raised hers, then we drank.





## CHAPTER 7

## DAWN

**K**eran inspected the guest room I had assigned to him. Although it was our best room—after mine—the accommodations would never qualify as fancy. The design of the large wooden bed shouted the fact that it was refurbished legacy furniture, like the ones in my office. However, the work had been well-done. The white beddings and pillows were clean, smelled fresh from me washing them this morning. Although not luxurious, they looked both inviting and comfortable. Unlike the presidential suites the Prince was undoubtedly used to, this room didn't boast a seating area or breakfast table. Only a wide work desk with a medium-sized vidscreen occupied the left corner of the room, near the window.

“This is one of the bigger rooms with its own en suite hygiene room,” I said sheepishly.

The indulgent smile Keran gave me in response made me want to squirm. I really needed to stop acting so apologetic about how I was receiving him. If he wanted fancy, he could have gone to the VIP hotel in town. It just sucked to have so little to offer to someone who was likely used to being received with great pomp and fanfare.

“This is perfect,” Keran said. “Thank you.”

He placed the bag his guards had brought in while he and I were discussing in my office on the desk.

“There are towels and soap in the hygiene room,” I added, feeling irrationally nervous as he merely nodded, his stormy eyes leveled on me with their usual intensity. “Is there anything else you need or that I could do for you?”

Keran lifting his left brow in surprise took me aback for a second. My eyes nearly popped out as I replayed in my mind the words I’d just said.

“No, I mean... I didn’t...”

In my mortification, I stumbled all over my tongue.

Keran chuckled. “It’s okay. I’m set for now. Good night, Dawn.”

I mumbled something unintelligible before all but running out of his room. Fuck my life! Could I make more of a spectacle of myself? I hadn’t meant to come on to him. Despite my stupid face heating up, he’d understood that. Still, it stung that he hadn’t seemed remotely interested or even flirted a bit. He’d merely politely kicked me out.

Granted, I’d been more than eager to run the heck out of there. But my bruised ego had wished for a different reaction from him. The way he’d described all the reasons why he thought my plain self was in fact attractive would probably haunt me for the rest of my days. No man had ever described me like that.

I hastened to my bedroom at the end of the hall. As soon as the door closed behind me, the sense of being exposed and vulnerable finally ebbed. Annoyed with myself, I yanked my black dress off and tossed it onto the bed. It was as massive as the one in Keran’s room, but I had double the overall space.

Where the guest rooms all had white linens and minimal decoration that would suit most visitors and species, my room had an explosion of colors.

I had a thing for dark blues and deep reds, which could be found in various degrees in pretty much everything, from the blankets to the drapes, and paintings on the wall.

Feeling emotionally drained by this crazy long day, I kicked off my sandals while detaching my bra. After also throwing it on the bed, I marched into the hygiene room. A steaming hot shower would help me relax.

However, the minute I entered the room, my reflection in the wall-length mirror called my attention. I went to stand in front of it and gave myself a critical once over. Despite Keran's affirmations—and even though he'd sounded sincere as he spoke them—my face would never be deemed attractive. I wasn't ugly, but definitely not pretty. My forehead was too broad, and the bridge of my nose too wide. I loved my eyes and crazy long lashes. They were truly feminine. My mouth, I had mixed feelings about. I had the type of full, perfectly shaped lips that many women paid ridiculous prices to acquire through expensive surgeries. But I found it too wide.

*“The perfect mouth to wrap around a man's thick cock.”*

I cringed as Sam's words resonated in my mind. That asshole had been my first boyfriend—if I could even call him that. During that less-than-wonderful relationship, I'd discovered that most men who showed me any interest really just wanted to “fuck that big mouth” and to “bone the giant freak.”

I cast away those dark thoughts as my gaze roamed down the length of my body. My shoulders were indeed way too broad compared to a standard woman. But Keran was right by

saying their gentle curve held an undeniably feminine quality. Although muscular, my arms weren't bulky like those of a bodybuilder. Just lean and nicely defined like those of a professional athlete.

Staring at my breasts, I placed a hand on the right one, gently caressing the pinkish-brown nipple. Although a good bra could fool people into thinking a woman had nicer breasts than she truly did, mine were in fact a great source of pride. Like Keran had stated, they were generous but firm and perky.

*How would it feel to have his big, calloused hands fondling them?*

As I examined my narrow waist and hips, I once more had to agree with the Braxian prince: I had a nice body. I'd always been so focused on my plain face and broad shoulders that I never really acknowledged my other qualities. I had a perfectly shaped hour-glass figure, and sexy long legs that demanded to be flaunted with crotch-length mini-skirts.

*Yes, my legs are made to wrap around a man's waist.*

I groaned inwardly when Keran's face immediately flashed before my mind's eye at that thought. Like all Braxians, he would never win a beauty contest. And yet, just thinking about him had me throbbing in all the right places. His body was insane. In keeping with Braxian fashion, he'd been dressed in a second skin of a shirt that had tightly hugged every curve of his bulging muscles. More than once during our meeting, my fingers had itched with the need to reach out and touch them.

Keran exuded a potent sexual aura. There was no doubt in my mind that, with him, sex would be savage, raw, and dirty. I immediately felt moisture pool between my thighs as my inner walls throbbed. Fuck me! I'd been celibate for far too long to

be this horny over some stranger whose cock would likely split me in half.

*If he made a move, would I go for it?*

Despite the loud ‘Yes!’ that resonated in my mind, I’d likely hesitate and maybe even pass should the opportunity arise. Had he been some random guy, I probably would have gone for it, maybe even made the first move. But him being royalty somewhat turned me off. Was I truly attracted to him or to his status and power? Was *he* truly drawn to me or simply felt entitled to bang any female that crossed his path because he was a prince?

None of his actions so far had given me any reason to assume so little of him. I was overthinking everything, as always. Then again, for all I knew, he had a full harem waiting for him back on Braxia.

*I didn’t smell any female on him.*

Or did I? There had been a sliver of a scent. I couldn’t be certain if it belonged to a female. But if it was indeed from a lover, either they hadn’t lain together in weeks, or it was no more than a passing fling, or a one-night stand a few days ago.

*Why the fuck am I speculating about his sex life and relationships?*

Once more annoyed with myself, I stepped out of my panties and then into the shower.

But damn, no male had ever affected me like he did. Instead of fantasizing about that scrumptious body of his, I should be focusing on protecting my boys. Hopefully, his guards would discover some new leads at The Cabaret.

“SHIT!” I exclaimed halfway through rubbing soap over my legs.

I had forgotten about his guards. The security system would have automatically armed by now. Once they penetrated the property, the defense droids would zero in on their position in seconds. If they didn't give the password, the droids would attack on top of alerting the local authorities, requesting immediate back up.

I quickly rinsed and dried myself up. For a split second, I considered fully dressing but opted to simply slip on a robe and hurried to Keran's room. Just as I was raising a hand to knock, Keran's voice resonated through the door.

"Come in, Dawn. It's unlocked."

Heart pounding, I complied. As soon as the door opened, I nearly swallowed my tongue. Fully naked but for the towel around his waist, Keran was standing by the desk, his laptop sitting open on it. His slightly damp hair confirmed he'd also just stepped out of the shower.

He didn't say a word, content to look at me with an expectant but soft expression. In that instant, I realized he was likely thinking I'd come to play naughty with him, and he was waiting for me to state as much or run back out if I'd suddenly gotten cold feet.

"I'm really sorry to bother you again," I said sheepishly. "It just struck me that your guards haven't returned and—"

"They're aware of your security system," Keran said in a gentle voice, interrupting me. "It is not very advanced. They will have no problem bypassing it. In the morning, I intended to offer to upgrade it for you."

"Oh, wow! Okay then, I guess everything is fine," I said, feeling insanely self-conscious.



“Everything is fine,” he echoed, his intense gaze once more messing with my head.

“Right. Well, I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“You don’t have to,” he said softly as I was turning to leave.

My head jerked towards him, and my lips parted in shock. Keran took a couple of steps towards me, remaining nonetheless at a non-threatening distance. My throat went dry while my pulse picked up.

“You can stay if you want,” he said, his meaning crystal clear.

My eyes flicked towards his bed while a bolt of lust exploded in the pit of my stomach. I licked my lips nervously before glancing back at him. A part of me wanted to just take my robe off to signal my consent. But the other was shouting for me to get the fuck out asap.

Keran tilted his head to the side as he studied my face with a bit of confusion. “It seems you overthink or overcomplicate things, Dawn,” he said gently, echoing my thoughts from earlier. “I can smell your arousal. You want me like I want you. We’re both adults and unattached. And yet, you’re denying yourself.”

*So he is indeed single!*

Even if I held no delusion of a potential committed relationship with him, I would never be anyone’s side piece. Still, my tongue had turned into lead. I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear while inwardly shouting at my brain to get its shit together so that I could respond one way or the other.

Keran closing the distance between us, a serious expression on his face, took that option away from me. My

pulse cranked up another notch when he cupped my face with both of his massive hands. The incredibly gentle way in which he touched me had my skin tingling and my nipples hardening.

My heart skipped a beat, and my lips parted in anticipation when he leaned forward. I instinctively placed my palms on his broad chest, his skin incredibly soft over the firm muscles beneath.

“I do not want a hesitant woman,” Keran whispered, his mouth a hair’s breadth from mine. “The day you come to my bed, you will be all in, or not at all.”

It wasn’t until he straightened without ever kissing me that my brain finally registered what he’d just said. To my dismay, Keran brushed his thumb over my lips, dropped his hands, and took a couple of steps away from me.

“Good night, Dawn. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Without waiting for my response, he walked back to his laptop. Still standing in front of the desk, he browsed through the messages he had received. Feeling utterly dismissed—which I truly had been this time—I walked out of his room in a daze.

Annoyed with myself, I trudged back to my room, battling the urge to return to his and convince him to utterly wreck me. I doubted he’d believe all my hesitations had faded away. The prospect of running back to him only to be kicked out was more than my self-esteem could handle.

Dejected, I crawled into bed and spent the next eternity tossing and turning, while my girly bits called me every name under the sun for depriving us of some desperately needed attention. I’d been celibate for so long, Keran would probably

need a jackhammer to break through the fossilized cobwebs I had down there.

Grunting in annoyance, I tried to find release by my own hand, Keran's face floating before my mind's eye as I rubbed my clit. But I failed to achieve any true gratification. I eventually gave up in frustration and chased after an ever-elusive sleep.



## CHAPTER 8

## DAWN

**D**istant, clanking noises tugged at my consciousness. My efforts to ignore them failed, pulling me out of the warm cocoon wrapped around me. It took me a moment to realize some external battle sounds had pierced through my slumber.

Panicked, I jerked my head towards the large glass doors to my private patio then jumped out of bed. No other sounds emanated from the shelter. The alarm system had not gone off, and the discrete control panel on the wall by the door showed no signs of intruder or other problem.

Pressing myself against the door frame, I carefully lifted the occluding shades to peer outside. My jaw dropped at the sight of Keran, Tagar, and Nowik engaged in a fierce battle in the empty paddock. I flicked the switch to fully open the shades to get a better view of the amazing spectacle. Wearing no more than the tightest black shorts I'd ever seen and barefoot, the three males appeared to be attempting to murder each other. Or rather, the two guards had joined forces against their Prince.

Under different circumstances, I would have reached for my blaster and shot the guards. But I knew at a visceral level that this was their savage version of sparring. Although he had

a blaster hooked to his weapons belt, Keran was only using a long sword and protecting himself with an energy shield deployed from his armband.

Tearing myself away from the window, I grabbed my robe, slipped it on, and went to stand outside on the balcony for a better view. However, I had no sooner stepped out than the sound of an approaching shuttle reclaimed my attention. Baffled, I glanced at my alarm clock. As suspected, it was merely a few minutes after 7:30. While everyone knew me to be an early bird, I hadn't expected any visits today. Looking back outside, I squinted, trying to guess who could be coming at such an early hour.

At first, the glare of the early-morning sun on the hull made it impossible to properly see. Once the ship began its descent, I recognized it as belonging to Jaek.

*What the fuck is he doing here?*

I hurried inside the hygiene room to wash the sleep off my face, brush my teeth, and quickly get dressed. I rushed outside to find Jaek having already landed. He was slowly walking towards the paddock, his good eye glued to the live action on display before him. I hastened to his side.

Where I could barely stand Vintor, I always enjoyed Jaek's company. Unlike most hybrid males, he tended to be quiet and introspective. The terrible trauma and savage abuse he had endured at the hands of pureblood children during his youth had no doubt played a large role in shaping his demeanor, which people often mistook for a cold and distant personality.

Jaek was a teddy bear. More than once, I'd considered dating him. Over the years, he'd not hidden his affection for me. With the impending shutdown of the shelter, the thought of parting from him if I left to find work elsewhere had clawed

at me. I wasn't in love with him. And yet, I genuinely believed we could fall head over heels for each other if I allowed it.

Although tall, he wasn't as bulky and muscular as the others, but still imposing compared to humans. He kept his hair longer than most Braxians. A part of me suspected that it was to hide some of the burn marks that marred his skin. As a child, bullies from his clans had beaten him to within an inch of his life before throwing hot coals at his face. He had turned it just in time so that only the right side had been struck. He'd lost an eye, part of his ear, and sustained extensive burns from his temple down to his nape, right above his shoulder blades. From the abuse, he'd also kept a permanent limp.

He'd been left for dead by his tormentors. One of the female servants had found him and taken pity. With the aid of other slaves—who had known and liked his mother—she kept him hidden, healing him to the best of their ability. A trader had smuggled him off planet. He was never told what it had cost the slaves and servants who had saved him.

Even though his scars didn't bother or repulse me, I always stood on his left. Jaek didn't act self-conscious about his disfigurement, but he was blind on the right. Standing on his good side was basic courtesy.

“Truly impressive, aren't they?” Jaek said as sole greeting. He had an amazing voice, deep and soothing.

I nodded, observing the three males with awe. “Men this massive shouldn't be able to move that fast.”

And they truly were, especially Keran. The way his two guards were going at him, I would have expected Keran to have already sustained some serious injuries. Granted, they were using training gear. The luminous sword remained rigid when impacting inert objects, but turned to light as soon as it



came into contact with flesh. However, the target would receive a very nasty sting similar to a high-voltage electric discharge.

Keran was doing an incredible job of parrying their attacks with his shield or sword. When the guards would lunge at him simultaneously, he'd block one with his shield while forcing the other one back with his sword. Watching him dodge a vicious swipe from Tagar by bending his back so low you'd think he was an invertebrate took my breath away.

"It's a good thing they're here to help us," I added pensively.

"Indeed."

The strange way in which he pronounced that single word drew my attention. I frowned and eyed him questioningly. To my surprise, he gave me a slow once over, as if looking for something.

"What is it, Jaek? To what do I owe this unexpected visit?" I asked, curious.

"Are you okay?"

I slightly recoiled, taken aback by the genuine concern in his eyes. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

My back stiffened when his eyes flicked towards Keran and his men before returning to me. "When I got up this morning, everyone in town was talking about a pureblood invasion."

"Invasion?!" I exclaimed, disbelievingly.

"Apparently, a whole bunch of them were seen traipsing around town, interrogating everyone," Jaek said with a frown. "Dr. Benja was a mess when I saw him this morning."

“Dr. Benja?” I asked, more confused than ever.

“He’s the new doctor who joined the forensic medical team,” Jaek explained. “I had some biochemical analysis reports for him in that case of medical negligence everyone is talking about. Apparently, the Jakar’s men took away the remains of our friends in a less-than-courteous fashion.”

I shifted on my feet, wondering just how ruthless Keran’s men had been, not that I would have faulted them. “We need answers, Jaek,” I said in an apologetic tone. “We’ve been getting blocked at every turn. In two days, we’re probably going to lose someone else. The forensic reports we’ve received from the local authorities were a joke at best. We *need* answers *now*!”

“I don’t disagree. But hearing how rough they’d been, I had to come here.”

This time, I turned to fully face him, completely baffled. “Why?”

He studied my features for a moment, as if wondering if I truly didn’t know why, or trying to decide how to answer. “Do I need a reason to come see you, Dawn? To make sure you’re safe?”

“Why wouldn’t I be safe?” I asked.

The strangest expression flitted over his features, then he appeared to take a decision. “Because you are a beautiful female alone here with three purebloods. They know your secret, Dawn. One whiff from them is all it takes.”

His words struck me like a punch in the gut. I felt my blood drain from my face. My wheels spinning, I grappled with conflicting emotions. For a moment, I contemplated playing dumb and pretending like I didn’t know what he

meant. But Jaek was too smart for me to insult his intelligence that way. Anyway, running from this reality wouldn't make it disappear.

“You know,” I whispered, feeling faint with shock.

“Of course,” he said as if it was self-evident. “I grew up on Braxia. I've met plenty of members of your bloodline. Every hybrid learned early on to steer clear of Gerwin Caldes.”

My innards twisted at the thought that my older half-brother could have abused Jaek. I'd been in denial not to acknowledge that high probability. If Gerwin had felt entitled to attack Anton Aldriss, one of the wealthiest and most influential males in the Eastern Quadrant simply because he was a hybrid, nothing would have stopped him from mistreating helpless ones like Jaek.

“I'm sorry,” I said, guilt gnawing at me.

Jaek waved a dismissive hand. “You're not responsible for his cruelty. Anyway, he paid for all his wrongs. But I know how purebloods treat hybrid females. The things I've seen...”

“No! No, Jaek,” I said, shocked as I understood at last. I placed a reassuring hand on his forearm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Keran's family outlawed those horrible practices. He wants to further empower and protect us. He and his guards have been nothing but gentlemen towards me.”

My heart filled with affection for him when his shoulders visibly relaxed. After all the trauma he'd sustained, Jaek had spent years in therapy to address his severe PTSD. The mere picture of a pureblood used to send him into such intense panic attacks, they had to sedate him. Although he'd manage to overcome that trauma over the years, he hadn't been in the presence of a pureblood since his escape. And yet, at the

thought I might be in danger, he had not hesitated to come and face his greatest fear to make sure I was safe.

*Yes. I could fall in love with him if I allowed myself to.*

“I’m happy to hear it.”

I cleared my throat and nervously scratched my nape. “So... How many of you know about me?”

He snorted. “By now, pretty much everyone.”

My stomach dropped. Surprisingly, I didn’t go into the panic I had expected. Keran pointing out it was no secret last night had apparently prepared me mentally for what I was beginning to think my subconscious had known all along.

“Why didn’t any of you say anything?” I asked with genuine curiosity.

“At first, because you clearly weren’t aware of your true nature,” Jaek replied casually. “The few of us who knew felt it was safer for you to keep it a secret. By the time the Magnar passed the edict outlawing hunting and abusing hybrids, you’d already taken over the shelter. Revealing what you were would have undermined your efforts with the Twelve. As a human, you had more credibility in their eyes. And after that, it had lost any importance.”

I slowly shook my head in disbelief. “How was I so damn blind?”

Jaek chuckled. His rough Braxian features, made even rougher by his burn scars, softened as he gave me a sad smile. “At times, you can indeed be even blinder than me, Dawn,” he said teasingly, touching the scar tissue that completely shut his right eye.

I didn't miss his underlying meaning. A part of me wanted to tell him that I was well aware of his feelings. But what would that accomplish except hurt him?

Keran and his men finishing their sparring spared me from answering. Although Jaek tensed, he didn't seem on the verge of panic.

"Good, they're done," he said, his back stiff. "I also came here to share some information you and your Prince will want to hear."

Him referring to Keran as *my* Prince did funny things to me. There had been no underlying meaning to his words, and yet they affected me in a way I couldn't describe.

*Couldn't or didn't want to describe?*

The wave of possessiveness they had stirred was definitely something I didn't want to acknowledge. The Prince attracted me in a way that defied logic, especially considering I hardly knew him. Even if we had a tumble, there would be no future between us—he would never truly be *my* Prince.

"Now, you've got me curious," I said in all sincerity, glad my voice came out firm and free of any hint of my inner turmoil.

Keran and his men approached us, their godly bodies glistening with sweat. As always, I felt fragile before them. Even Jaek, who was taller and bigger than me, looked like a teenager in comparison.

"That was impressive," I said to Keran as he came to a stop near us.

"Thank you, Dawn," he said with a polite smile before his stormy eyes turned to Jaek. The way his nostrils flared indicated he was likely assessing Jaek's bloodline.

“Keran, this is my friend Jaek. He came here twenty-eight years ago. He’s since graduated with honors as a biochemist and works with Haven’s main hospitals and research departments. Jaek, this is Jakar Keran Xeldar, and his bodyguards, Tagar and Nowik,” I said, gesturing at each man in turn.

“Biochemist? Now *that* is impressive,” Keran said with genuine admiration. “It is a pleasure to see you faring so well.”

“Thank you for coming to our aid, Jakar,” Jaek replied politely.

Although he remained a little stiff, he looked well in control of his emotions. Once again, a wave of admiration and respect swelled through me for how well Jaek was handling what had to be a traumatic experience for him.

“Please, call me Keran. And you do not have to thank me. It is both my duty and my honor to assist. It shames me that we have done too little—and often too late—for many of you,” Keran said in a soft tone.

My heart dropped when Jaek didn’t respond. His silence spoke volumes as to the fact that he indeed felt the Braxian ruling class had done far too little while closing their eyes for far too long.

“Jaek says he has information we will all want to hear,” I said before the uncomfortable silence could take root.

Keran raised an inquisitive eyebrow at Jaek.

“Yes, you will want to hear what I have to say about the off-worlders approaching us,” Jaek said with a stiff nod.

“Absolutely,” Keran said with an intense look. “Let me go take a quick shower and make myself more presentable. Then we can go over what you want to share.”

“It’s not necessary,” Jaek said with a dismissive gesture. “I don’t mind, and I have to leave soon, anyway. It won’t be long.”

“Very well,” Keran said, looking as intrigued as I felt.

“Everyone knows about Jardan Korey coming here to recruit us. But there is a second group of headhunters that are being extremely secretive about doing the same,” Jaek said, his voice tense.

I recoiled. “A second group? Who are they? Guldans as well?”

Jaek gave me an apologetic look. “I don’t know who they are. They have contacted me through untraceable messages. They claimed that they were forming a hybrid clan on Braxia. Apparently, they have already secured large, premium lands on Braxia, and the construction of the compound is underway.”

“Did they say where those lands are located?” Keran asked with a frown.

Jaek shook his head. “No. The message kept things fairly vague. But it clearly implied the imminent rise of the hybrids and the beginning of a new era. It ended by saying that if we want to know more, we must attend the information orientation meeting they will hold next week. For security reasons, they will only communicate the location on the day of the event.”

“That doesn’t sound fishy at all,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “I didn’t get that message. But then, they would have no reason to think they should send it to me as well.”

Keran stiffened, his gaze boring into mine. I smiled reassuringly.

“I just found out that Jaek—and pretty much everyone else—has known about me for a long time,” I said with self-derision. I narrowed my eyes at him when he simply nodded with a neutral expression. “You’re not surprised.”

He shrugged. “I suspected as much. Jaek and many of the others left Braxia fairly old. Quite a few of them would have run into members of your family.”

“Right.”

“That’s not the reason they didn’t contact you,” Jaek interjected. “They didn’t reach out to any of our females, only us males. Or rather, only those of us who met with Jordan Korey.”

“So it *is* linked to the Guldans!” I exclaimed.

Jaek shook his head. “Not directly. I’m convinced Jordan has nothing to do with it. I think it’s one of the clients he’s recruiting us for.”

“You think he’s double-crossing him?” Keran asked.

Jaek shrugged. “Possibly. Many of those still undergoing Jordan’s training are eager to take on one of the security positions offered. The interest in returning to Braxia is slim. Most of us don’t have fond memories of our time there.”

“So he’s trying to sway them before they sign contracts,” Keran mused aloud.

“That’s what I think,” Jaek concurred.

“We need to find out who he is and what he’s up to,” Keran said sternly.

“Agreed. I will keep you posted as soon as I hear back from him and get the location of the meeting,” Jaek said.



“Thanks so much,” I said warmly. “This could be the break we needed.”

“Any time, Dawn,” Jaek said softly. “I must go now. It’s good to see you so well.”

“And you, Jaek.”

He returned my smile before nodding politely at Keran and his guards. Then turning on his heels, he hurried back to his personal shuttle. The whole time, Keran stared at his receding back until he entered the vessel. As soon as it took off, the Prince turned his dark gray eyes towards me, their intensity making me feel bare and exposed.



## CHAPTER 9

## KERAN

A million thoughts swirled through my mind as I watched Jaek's shuttle leave. Awe, jealousy, and guilt warred with equal intensity within me. It said a lot that those emotions dominated instead of concerns over his revelation about the second group of headhunters.

I stole a glance at Dawn. The wistful way in which she looked at Jaek's vessel fading in the distance cut me. As I barely knew this female, the rabid possessiveness she stirred in me defied logic. And yet, the thought of another male touching her set my blood boiling.

"I didn't think he had made it," I mused out loud.

"You knew him?" Dawn asked, sounding surprised.

He shook his head. "I knew *of* him. But I had seen him from a distance on a few occasions during official visits to his clan. What his clanmates—including his own brother—had done to him was beyond horrifying. They bragged so much the word spread. For a short while thereafter, things got out of control with other younglings trying to one up them. My father had to intervene. But even then, there was only so much he could do. Our people had not been ready to embrace more radical changes."

I also didn't mention that Jaek's sire had been Torvin Sedrak, one of the fifteen males my father had executed for taking part in the gang rape of his first love, Lissy.

"Until my own brother fucked up," Dawn said with a sliver of bitterness.

"Your brother empowered us to make changes by attacking someone who Braxia couldn't afford to alienate," I said gently. "Braxia was on the verge of bankruptcy. Too many clans depended on the business they did with Anton's space stations to risk having him breaking all ties. Sadly, most major social changes are driven by money, not by what's right and wrong."

I glanced back towards the direction Jaek had taken. His shuttle had already faded on the horizon.

"So it's amazing to see that he survived this ordeal to become a biochemist, no less."

Dawn smiled, the pride and affection in her emerald eyes cutting me deep.

"Jaek *is* amazing. He almost didn't make it. Even though the slaves had looked after him after they found him lying in a pool of his own blood, he arrived here half dead. For a long time, it was touch and go. I was just a few months shy of turning seventeen when they brought him in. Seeing the extent of his injuries that day convinced me I needed to do everything in my power to protect others like him. That day, I decided I would take over this shelter once I came of age."

I smiled and barely kept myself from caressing her hair. "You have a tender heart. But I'm surprised by how rough his scars still remain. Modern technology could have mended most of them, or at least significantly reduced their appearance."

Dawn made a disgusted sound. “This is Haven. Unless you have a wealthy patron willing to go the extra mile, you only receive the basics here. According to the Twelve, their limited budget doesn’t allow them to splurge on fancy aesthetic surgery for a single individual, when that same amount could be used to feed an entire refugee group for a year.”

I clamped down on my blossoming anger. Yes, sanctuary planets relied on the donations and generosity of the public, the Galactic Council, and charitable organizations within their sectors. Unfortunately, they rarely pooled resources together to share them equally among all the refugees. Fundraising drives often targeted a specific subgroup, all proceeds used for their specific needs instead of benefiting the population at large.

*Nobody ever organized a drive for Braxian hybrids. We yet again failed them.*

“But Jaek adapted to the situation,” Dawn continued, the same pride seeping back into her voice. “He was disabled for a long time. While the other boys played rough games outside, he would bury himself in books. He went into the medical field to try and find a way to heal himself but ended up falling in love with biochemistry. Of all our males, he’s the only one who settled in the city.”

“He’s in love with you,” I said matter-of-factly.

An adorable redness tinged her cheeks as she lowered her eyes demurely. She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant.

“All of the boys had a crush on me at one point or another,” Dawn said dismissively. “It’s not like they had many female options back then.”

Jaek’s feelings for her went far deeper than that. I also believed she knew it. For a split second, I considered calling

her out on it but held my peace. Their relationship didn't concern me. I had no claims on her.

*But I want to...*

“Let me go shower. Then we can gather in your meeting room to go over the reports my men have put together,” I said instead.

“Sounds great,” Dawn replied, seeming relieved by this change of topic. “Should I bring a light breakfast?”

“That would be appreciated,” I said, my guards nodding in agreement.

I messaged Baldur, my ship's captain, to let him know we would be ready in the next fifteen minutes for the update as we headed inside. By the time I came out of my room, the most delicious aroma had my stomach grumbling. As I made my way to Dawn's office, Tagar and Nowik emerged from their respective rooms—where they'd also freshened up—and fell into step with me.

They were looking forward to having some private time with me to go over Jaek's revelations. After so many years working with these two males—although they were primarily attached to my father—we needed few words, and sometimes none at all, to communicate. So far, Dawn hadn't given me any reasons to doubt her. However, she had proven to be a little blind, not to say naive, about shady motives others could have. We couldn't be certain that Jaek could be trusted. But Dawn's obvious affection for him could set her in defensive mode if we implied that we questioned his honesty.

The door to the office stood wide open. We stepped in to find Dawn's worktable laden with a variety of roasted, thin

sliced meats, sautéed root vegetables, steamed leafy greens, and cut fruits.

Tagar whistled through his teeth, a famished expression descending over his usually neutral face.

“Beautiful, smart, and able to whip up an impressive feast in minutes,” he said with admiration. “I just may have to claim her as my wife before we leave.”

Nowick chuckled, although his eyes flicked warily towards me. My men and I hadn’t discussed the situation with Dawn. They followed my lead in all things and anticipated my wishes in most cases. The way Tagar glanced at me confirmed he had noticed my attraction to her and wanted to know just how serious it was. That he would express such a ‘joke’ aloud indicated that he was genuinely considering making his move, and not just for a fling.

“She’s not for you,” I said sternly.

“Then you better lay your claim before Sedrak does,” Tagar deadpanned.

I bared my teeth at him, which only made him chuckle. Smug son of a krillik... Of course, they would have picked up on Jaek’s feelings for Dawn.

“I doubt he would appreciate being called by his clan’s name,” I said in a snarky tone.

Tagar flinched, and I felt like a total asshole. He was merely teasing me while also showing me the courtesy of checking with me before moving in on a female I could already be courting. I was letting my irrational jealousy turn me into a complete dick.

“Dawn didn’t specify which last name he goes by,” I added in a gentler tone.



Tagar smiled, thus acknowledging my subtle apology. “I had noticed. I wonder why.”

“Maybe he legally has his sire’s last name and prefers not to hear it,” Nowik offered. “Or she knows of the bad blood between your families and chose not to underline it.”

I grunted, either being a possibility that our speculations wouldn’t answer.

The sound of Dawn’s footsteps approaching put an end to our conversation. She entered the room with a hover tray in front of her. The rich scent of warm breads, creamy cheeses, and spiced butter wafted to me. A large pitcher contained a reddish liquid with ice, while a glass pot seemed filled with the human version of gwar, which they called coffee.

“This is quite the feast, Dawn. We didn’t expect such a lavish breakfast,” I said with a smile.

She grinned proudly, puffing out her chest. “You are my guests,” she said in a self-evident tone. “I should have received you better yesterday. I’m making up for it today.”

“There is nothing to make up for,” I replied in a slightly chastising tone as we helped her unload the contents of the hover tray onto the table. “But you will never hear any complaints from a Braxian for being served large amounts of delicious food.”

“Ah-hoo,” Tagar and Nowik said simultaneously to express their agreement.

Dawn laughed, and we settled at the table. While my companions started filling their plates, I established the communication with Captain Baldur onboard our ship. Seconds later, his massive frame filled the screen. Although he maintained a neutral expression with his legendary military

discipline, I didn't miss the approving once over he gave Dawn. The silly female didn't realize just how beautiful she was to a Braxian.

"Baldur, apologies that we should be eating in your face like this, but every minute counts," I said in greeting.

"They do. And in your shoes, I wouldn't let such a delectable-looking feast grow cold," he said in a friendly tone. "But we do have much to discuss," he added, his tone becoming more serious.

"We're listening," I replied, bracing for what would follow.

"As you're eating, we'll leave the details on Orin's preliminary autopsy of the victims for last," Baldur said.

I almost chastised him for implying we could be indisposed out of eating by some gruesome descriptions, then swallowed it back when I realized it was out of courtesy for Dawn.

"We have reviewed every line of the file you've put together on Jordan Korey, Dawn. You've done a remarkable job, considering the limited resources you had access to," Baldur said in a kind voice.

"Thank you," Dawn said, her cheeks flushing with pleasure at the praise. "I hope it helped a little."

Baldur nodded. "It did. You saved us a lot of time trying to dig up that information. Everything checks out," he continued, this time looking at me. "He's a very well-known headhunter in the Western Quadrant. His reputation is stellar, and he runs a clean business. Over the past year, he's been wetting his feet in the Eastern Quadrant to expand his clientele."

"So nothing shady?" I asked with a frown.

“Nothing,” Baldur replied with conviction. “We actually reached out to him. He agreed to meet with you on the ranch where he trains the candidates.”

“When?” I asked eagerly, straightening in my chair.

“As soon as is convenient for you,” Baldur replied with a grin.

“Today?” I insisted.

“Yes. You can just drop by. Jordan says he’s always at the ranch.”

“Perfect. We’ll head there as soon as we’re done here,” I said, a thrill coursing through me.

“The surveillance records and security systems from planetary control have not revealed any suspicious arrivals. They’ve also not detected any stealth ships trying to infiltrate the planet,” Baldur continued. “However, their technology is fairly dated. We are not the most advanced species, but we could have fooled some of their systems. It is therefore fair to say that the killer could have snuck in undetected.”

“Aside from Jordan’s team, are there any other unusual visiting off-worlder vessels recorded in the docking manifest?” I asked after swallowing another mouthful.

Baldur shook his head. “Nothing stood out. Only the usual suppliers, a couple of ambassadors, and charitable organizations’ representatives. The smaller vessels belonged to refugees that are all accounted for.”

“How did you get access to such private information?” Dawn asked with a frown.

“We have our ways,” Baldur said with a mysterious tone. “Like I mentioned earlier, Haven’s technology is dated.”

“That’s a serious problem,” Dawn said, looking upset. “The people on Haven are counting on being safe here.”

“It is indeed a problem,” I said in a reassuring tone. “All of our findings will be brought before the Twelve and the Galactic Council. It is unacceptable.”

“And that brings us back to the autopsy reports,” Dawn said. “Did that reveal anything?”

Baldur looked at her and hesitated, his eyes flicking to her half empty plate. Dawn followed his gaze, and her face lightened with understanding, quickly followed by an ‘Are you kidding me?’ expression.

“Captain, if you’re holding back for me, don’t,” Dawn said with a slightly aggravated tone. “I found the fourth body and personally took the tissue and fluid samples that were sent to you. During my first ten years managing this shelter, I looked after countless severely battered and maimed refugees. I’m not going to faint or go queasy over whatever report you have to share.”

I stuffed a large piece of meat in my mouth to hide the smile that wanted to blossom on my lips. Despite all the progress we’d made, especially over the past ten years since my father married Mercy, and she helped our people realize how valuable our females were, Braxian males continued to struggle with the idea that women weren’t physically and emotionally fragile creatures.

“Apologies,” Baldur said, chastised.

“It’s okay,” Dawn said in a softer tone. “I appreciate that you tried to protect me from potential trauma.”

I raised an eyebrow, impressed, while Baldur puffed out his chest. She’d effortlessly defused the situation while

stroking his ego. Her years of experience dealing with the just as temperamental hybrid males shone through.

“Of course,” Baldur said proudly. “It is my duty as a male.”

Dawn smiled, but I could sense she was holding back the urge to laugh.

“The bad news is that the corpses we recovered from the morgue were in a far too terrible state to reveal much. Orin couldn’t say if they’d been badly preserved from the start, or if they’d sustained too much accelerated decay from the slime before they were found.”

“Decay from the slime?” I asked.

Baldur nodded and gestured at someone offscreen to approach. He moved aside so that Orin could stand next to him. A smile softened Orin’s wizened face in greeting, wrinkles creasing the edges of his eyes.

“Hello, Dawn. I’m Orin, Keran’s medical officer.”

“Hello,” Dawn replied with a warm smile.

It struck me then how naturally charismatic she was—a great quality to have for a female who could be my companion.

“To answer your question, Jakar, while the samples from the morgue were mostly iffy, the ones Dawn provided were quite clean. I was able to confirm that she was correct in suspecting Kranax Beetles had laid eggs inside them. Once they hatch, the larvae secrete a mucus that we commonly refer to as slime. It actually acts as both a lubricant and an acid.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “That seems contradictory.”

He nodded. “The acid component softens the tissues and muscles, making it easier for the larvae to feed off them, but also facilitates digging a path out of the body. Once the slime is exposed to oxygen outside of the body, it loses its acidic properties to simply act as a lubricant to help the larvae move onto any surface to reach the location where it will finish its maturation.”

“And you think that slime corrupted the remains?” Dawn asked.

“Undoubtedly. I’ve never seen anything like it. Usually, a person accidentally exposed to a Kranax Beetle will be implanted with five or six eggs. They won’t die from the horrible experience, but will remain maimed and disfigured, the extent of their injury varying depending on where the eggs were laid. In the case of torture or punishment, usually two or three Beetles are used, which means between ten and eighteen eggs hatching. Once again, the victim usually survives, but their quality of life is so wrecked that death would be preferable.”

“And in this case?” I asked.

“In this case, all the victims had been implanted with well over a hundred eggs each,” Orin said grimly.

Curses and shocked gasps resonated all around the table.

“Why the hell would they go with such overkill? The whole point of using Kranax Beetles as a torture device is so the victim will suffer a long time while the larvae dig their way out of the body through the longest route. This many Beetles would mean death in minutes, if not seconds!”

“That would be correct if all the eggs hatched simultaneously. Those hatchings were staggered.

Unfortunately, the bodies were in too bad a state for me to affirm this with certainty, but I believe they received some healing in between hatchings before more eggs were laid inside them. Sadly, with this much slime, their insides were all but liquified.”

“Healed? Who the fuck would be so cruel as to prolong someone’s agony to this extent, just for fun?” Dawn said angrily, tears welling in her eyes. “They’d done nothing wrong but exist! None of us asked to be born hybrids. Why the fuck would they do that?!”

I extended a hand to gently rub her back in a soothing fashion while clamping down on the fury also surging within me. Even by Braxian standards, this was beyond excessive. Dawn angrily wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Sorrow had not birthed them, but helpless rage and the need to make them pay.

“In this instance, I do not think sadism prompted their actions,” Orin said carefully.

We all stiffened and stared at him in disbelief.

“What makes you say that?” I asked, flabbergasted.

“The photos Dawn had managed to take of the corpse she found showed different types of puncture wounds,” Orin explained. “Some were clearly the exit wounds of the larvae carving their way out. But there were much smaller ones around main arteries that matched the puncture of a needle. And on both the nape and the crook of both elbows, more wounds indicated there had likely been some form of catheter port inserted there.”

“They injected them with some substance?” I asked, taken aback.

“No. I strongly doubt it. I’m convinced they drained them of something,” Orin said with a somber expression. “Once again, Dawn’s samples helped. They revealed excessive levels of endorphins, adrenaline, and cortisol. It made sense that their bodies would produce large amounts of these hormones in response to the excruciating pain and terror they were enduring. But the scans she performed also revealed an abnormally swollen pineal gland. It was almost like they’d gone into Berserker mode.”

“That’s impossible. None of them had that ability,” Dawn exclaimed, confused.

“You are correct,” Orin said with a nod. “There are only two hybrids known to have the Berserker ability, and they are Anton Aldriss and his son Gavin. In the case of these victims, they didn’t have the naturally oversized pineal gland of a Berserker. Their gland was inflamed and bruised, as if it had been battered. I do not believe the hybrids are being hunted by haters. I’m convinced they’re being used as part of an experiment for some fluid they produce.”

“This sounds like what Mercy’s brother did to the Xelixians,” I said with a frown. “But it doesn’t make sense. Xelixians possess two venoms, one of which can be turned into a highly potent and addictive drug. Varrek had kidnapped hundreds of Xelixian males and was keeping them in stasis in a factory, while milking their venom glands. But Braxians have no such traits.”

“I’m as baffled on this as you are, Keran,” Orin said dejectedly.

“If you are correct, and we have no reason to doubt it,” Tagar said, “then these are not the actions of Braxians.”



I nodded pensively. “This has Guldans written all over it. But what’s driving it? Greed or politics?”

“It is too early to say,” Baldur said grimly. “Jardan Korey has too successful a business to jeopardize it with this venture so totally unrelated to his area of expertise. So who else could it be?”

“The second group of headhunters Jaek mentioned earlier,” Dawn said.

“Who?” Baldur asked, confused.

“My thought exactly,” I told Dawn before turning to my captain.

I quickly apprised them of what Jaek had revealed.

“This could be it!” Baldur said, perking up.

“It could be,” I concurred. “We need to go see Jardan at once. If he is as clean as both your reports state, he won’t be too pleased to find out some competitor is trying to poach his candidates and murdering them.”

“Hopefully he can give us a new lead,” Dawn said.

“Agreed. Great work, everyone. Keep digging to see what else you can find. We’ll let you know how things go with Jardan,” I said while rising from my chair.

We ended the meeting and carried the empty dishes back to the kitchen—yes, we had devoured everything. Heart full of hope, I instinctively took Dawn’s hand to lead her to our shuttle. Shock coursed through me when I realized what I’d done. I’d never been the romantic type, let alone into public displays of affection. Dawn and I weren’t even remotely involved.

I felt her stiffen at the unexpectedly familiar gesture. To my surprise, she didn't try to pull away from my grasp. For a split second, I considered releasing her with some apology then decided against it. Seconds later, her dainty fingers closed around mine.

I smiled.



## CHAPTER 10

## DAWN

The oddest sense of loss filled me as I attached my safety belt inside the shuttle. The feel of Keran's strong and warm hand lingered on my skin. He hadn't planned on holding my hand like that. His shock had been as genuine as my own. What did it mean?

*Don't go imagining things that aren't there.*

Keran was undeniably drawn to me, but I believed he wanted nothing more than a fling while passing through here. That he'd involuntarily reached for me hinted that he liked me more than he intended.

*Is that a good or a bad thing?*

I immediately chastised myself for these thoughts. This tendency to overthink and overcomplicate things had always been the bane of my existence. Like he said, we were both unattached adults, and we wanted each other. Life had been so stingy with happy moments, I'd grown to instinctively shy away from the few potential ones it actually placed in my path. It was time for me to just seize the day and enjoy what I could before it slipped out of my grasp.

The flight to the ranch Jordan had rented felt both too brief and too long. The part of me that needed answers to help avoid

more deaths and senseless pain couldn't wait to arrive. And the other part, that had only ever known a simple life with limited means that revolved exclusively around the shelter, hungered for this journey to last forever.

As much as Keran constantly said he had no need for luxury, this shuttle screamed the opposite. I'd never flown inside anything this fancy. One square meter of the synthetic leather which covered our seats cost almost as much as my monthly salary. On top of individual temperature control, they also had an integrated massage function, and their own personal vidscreens. The leg room provided ample space for giants like the purebloods. The large windows all around gave the impression we were floating in the air with the unimpeded view of Haven's stunning landscape.

In keeping with Braxian aesthetic, the design boasted simple lines, more symmetrical than organic, and earthy colors with a dominance of dark grays, burgundy, and every shade of brown, from very light beige to very dark.

I stole a glance at Keran, sitting in the passenger seat next to me. Even lost in deep thoughts, the Braxian Prince looked fearsome. And yet, my fingers itched to slip through his shoulder-length black hair. Beyond trying to solve these murders, more heavy burdens troubled him. I wished I knew what they were, and that I could relieve him of some of them.

Based on what I had gathered since his arrival, his imminent ascension to the throne played a part in it. But it didn't make sense. A hybrid couldn't possibly threaten his position. After witnessing his training this morning, I couldn't see how anyone—pureblood or otherwise—could rival him. Tagar and Nowik had gone all out on him, and Keran had almost effortlessly kept them at bay.

*I need answers.*

Tagar—who was piloting the shuttle with Nowik sitting in the copilot's chair—announced our impending arrival as he began our descent. Outside, Sulan Ranch was growing bigger on the horizon. The sprawling estate had two large stables, a massive pen, and an imposing ship hangar next to the main mansion.

The previous wealthy owner had raised adrans here, a bovine animal which constituted one of our main sources of red meat. His booming business had required even larger lands. But the river to the east and the rocky ridges to the south had made such an expansion impossible. So he had moved to a more suitable location and rented this ranch for special events or to dignitary delegations that needed accommodations for large groups.

But right now, the place looked like a military boot camp.

A crazy obstacle course had been set up in the largest pen. They'd converted the second one into a battle arena where dozens of hybrids were currently sparring. As we approached the landing pad, a Guldan walked out of the mansion and headed our way. Although the hybrids continued to spar and run the gauntlet of the obstacle course, many heads turned in our direction with curiosity.

We landed seconds after Jordan stopped at a safe distance from our vessel. As soon as the doors of the shuttle opened, Nowik and Tagar exited in the lead and took position on each side of the lowered ramp. Despite their neutral expressions, their eyes didn't miss anything in our immediate surroundings in the search of a potential threat.

A wave of sympathy coursed through me for Keran. I couldn't imagine living with the constant need of security

guards shadowing you because random freaks might want to harm you over some perceived grievance.

As much as his two guards did give me a sense of added safety, I didn't fear for us, not with so many hybrids nearby. Even though the men were always highly competitive and trying to one up each other, and despite the frequent brawls and disagreements, when one of us came under threat, everyone else rallied to their defense. We were all each other had.

Jardan approached us with the warm smile of the seasoned salesman. In his mid-eighties, he still looked quite young. With his silver white hair—one of the common shades among his people, you couldn't see any graying he might have had. Unlike species like Veredians and Sarenians where everyone was drop dead gorgeous, Guldans only fit in two categories: hot or ugly. There truly was no middle ground.

Jardan fell in the former. Tall and slender, he was dressed in dark grey pants and a pristine white shirt that made his slightly tanned skin stand out. The fine cut and high-quality fabric hinted at wealth and elegance, but not excess or ostentation. His thick, black horns recurving over his head contrasted sharply with his hair. He brushed a rebel lock away from his deep forest green eyes before pressing his palm to his heart in greeting.

“Jakar Keran, I was wondering how quickly I would have the pleasure of your visit,” Jardan said in a friendly tone that sounded genuine.

He didn't look at me or even acknowledged my presence. It wasn't out of disrespect, but the exact opposite. Well, respect for Keran, not me. In Guldan culture, females were property. You always had to belong to a male: father, husband,



brother, any male relative based on the hierarchy of the blood ties, or a guardian, in that order. You didn't speak to a female without being given permission by the male who owned her, except if she was found wandering around by herself without a chaperone.

Off-world, they bent those rules with foreign females, treating us like any other person, except if we were accompanied by a male.

"Greetings, Sen Korey," Keran said politely, using the Guldan term for 'sir'. He then gestured at me. "This is Dawn Merrick. She runs the Genxia shelter."

Jardan finally looked at me, his expression friendly. "Greetings, Miss Merrick and welcome to Sulan Ranch. The hybrids speak highly of you and of the work you've accomplished at the shelter on their behalf."

"Thank you. You're very kind. But please, call me Dawn."

"Only if you both call me Jardan," he replied with a smile before turning to Keran. "Your Captain contacted me yesterday. I understand you have questions for me regarding the murders?"

"Yes. The investigation is dragging too long. The murderer needs to be stopped," he said in a stern voice.

"Good!" Jardan said with an almost rabid zeal that took me aback. "I don't know if it's incompetence or indifference, but the local peacekeepers seem more focused on scratching their balls and obstructing rather than moving this case forward."

"You've faced obstruction at the hands of law enforcement?" I asked, Keran looking as stunned as I felt.

"Non-stop," Jardan said with obvious aggravation. "I've gone four times to their offices and even tried to get the

Twelve to intercede.”

“I didn’t expect you to get this involved,” Keran said, making no effort to hide his surprise.

“Of course I would! Murder is wrong, and we cannot have someone capable of this level of savagery running loose,” Jordan said as if it was self-evident. “But I’m also here on business. I came to Haven to match these hybrids with potential employers. Dead men do not sign contracts. No contracts mean no credits in my coffers. And right now, I’m spending a great deal to rent this property, not to mention all the training installations I had to set up. I am as eager as you are to get the culprit apprehended.”

That made sense. I doubted compassion played a large part in his desire to see this situation resolved, but these murders certainly affected his bottom line.

*Which means we probably won’t get too many helpful clues from him.*

“But please, come,” Jordan said, waving towards the ranch. “I can give you a tour while we talk, unless you prefer to discuss things inside?”

“A tour would be great,” Keran said, echoing my thoughts. With luck, we would notice something that had escaped them. “I’m curious as to what led you here on Haven, so far from your usual trade area.”

Jordan smiled, not fooled in the least as we walked towards the smaller of the two pens where the men were sparring.

“Business can only grow if you expand your market and keep your offerings fresh. In the Western Quadrants, I used to have an endless pool of excellent Xelixian candidates,” Jordan said wistfully. “With the Taint, their males had no choice but

to keep fit to slow down its detrimental effects, and the lack of opportunities made them open to even the riskiest contracts. With their short lifespan, they didn't really care. But since the Veredians found the cure, it is nearly impossible to hire them. So I had to cast my net farther and wider."

"But Haven?" I challenged. "It's not exactly reputed as a military training ground."

"You are correct, Sana Dawn," Jordan conceded. "But warrior planets are already overrun by the competition trying to recruit the best men. You have to think creatively to succeed. Most headhunters are not willing to put in the work. They want candidates already trained that can simply be handed off to the client. But those qualified candidates also cost way more, and you have to overbid a great deal to get them to come with you, which erodes your profit margin."

"Whereas desperate and untrained people are easily conned into underselling themselves," I retorted in a much cooler tone as we came to a stop near the pen.

Contrary to my expectation, Jordan didn't lose his temper to thus be called out by a female. On his world, I'd be severely punished for what would be perceived as major disrespect. Instead, he rested his elbow on top of the wooden fence delimiting the pen and gave me an assessing look.

"There is a fine line between exploitation and opportunity, Dawn," Jordan said in an almost paternal tone. "Could the amount I will eventually offer them in their contract be higher? In many cases, yes. But good business means maximizing profit. I do not run a charity. However, they are getting from me something they could have only ever dreamed of."

"Not if one of your rivals shows up," I insisted.

He snorted and waved at the males training. “Four weeks ago, before I started training these men, no one would have bothered with them other than space pirates and smugglers. Sure, I could have paired them with such clients, and most of them would be dead or maimed by now. But look at them now? In only four weeks of intensive training, using the best techniques, expert instructors, and top of the line equipment, their value has already tripled on the market. Do you know how much it is costing me per day for so many of them?”

The hybrids were using similar light swords as Keran had trained with earlier, some of them fighting one-on-one, others in pairs, and one last group in what appeared to be a free for all. Three Guldan males and a human were closely observing them, occasionally interfering to correct the pugilists. In the far east corner, a fourth Guldan was teaching a dozen hybrids the manipulation techniques of battle staves.

As much as it troubled me, I couldn’t deny the men had dramatically improved in record time. Despite my best efforts, I could never raise enough funding to provide them with this kind of elite training.

“It is impressive,” Keran conceded. “And what did you demand in exchange for that training?”

“This is all free,” Jardan said, spreading his arms wide to encompass the installations of the ranch. “The only condition is that if they take on a role through a different broker that uses the skills I am teaching them, their employer or that broker will owe me an agent fee. But should they decide to walk and not work in this field at all, they will owe me nothing.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Nothing? That sounds like quite a gamble considering the amounts you’re spending.”

He smiled and gestured for us to follow him as he headed towards the second pen. “It is, but it’s a calculated one. Like you correctly alluded to, Dawn, desperate and untrained people will latch onto the first great opportunity that presents itself. This is a chance of a lifetime for them to get out of this dead-end planet, build actual wealth for themselves, and aspire to a greater future.”

“How altruistic of you,” I said mockingly.

He burst out laughing. “Hardly. Neither of you need me to tell you that there isn’t a single philanthropic bone in my body. I’m Guldán. Everything I do is about profit. Happy customers—on both sides of the deal—and a flawless reputation bring in more business. And more business means more credits. I’m offering these men an opportunity they cannot refuse. And they are offering me something no one else can get.”

“Which is?” I pressed.

“Their Braxian genetics,” Jardan said in a mysterious fashion.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” Keran asked, his back stiffening.

“Look at him,” Jardan said, pointing at Vintor running through the obstacle course in the second and largest pen.

He had pulled out of the ground a thick wooden pole that had been standing vertically. By the dirt smear at the bottom, it had been buried at least fifty or sixty centimeters deep. Slugging it over his shoulder, Vintor ran about fifty meters to a steep ramp. Using his momentum, he climbed it to enter some kind of basin filled with a thick sludge that made advancing difficult.

“How many species possess this type of strength and stamina? Most species wouldn’t even have been able to pull out that pole without some form of assistance, let alone carrying it the way he is. And he’s not even pureblood. Their endurance to pain, their regeneration speed, and natural ability to learn combat is unparalleled,” Jordan said with genuine awe. “Actually, Veredians of the Warrior breed learn combat even faster, but they have none of the other attributes.”

We followed as he continued walking towards one of the repurposed stables.

“And above all, you have something unique that no other species can offer, and for which demand has exploded of late.” As the perfect salesman, he paused to create a more dramatic effect before the grand reveal. “You are immune to negative psionic powers.”

“Why is there greater demand for it?” I asked, my surprise reflected on Keran’s face.

“The Sarenians,” Jordan said with a frown. “Fear and paranoia have always been a great boost to my business. People get scared, they want to hire protection. Thanks to the propaganda the Korletheans spread for years about the Sarenians, people everywhere are terrified of their mind control powers.”

“This isn’t new,” Keran argued with a frown.

“That knowledge wasn’t new, but the Sarenians mostly kept to their homeworld. However, over the past decade, and especially the past six years, they’ve been seen more and more in both Quadrants. It makes people very nervous. Can you imagine having an assassin walk into your house and mind control your guards into standing still while he murders you?”

Those tales were indeed terrifying. If they were even half-true, I could see why people who could afford it would want protection against them.

“The Sarenians are not the monsters they’ve been portrayed to be,” Keran countered in a surprisingly protective tone.

But then, it was no secret that his family had developed a close friendship with the Sarenian Emperor and his son.

“No species is ever *all* bad, my Prince. But it only takes one bad person to bring everything tumbling down,” Jordan said while opening the door to the stables.

My eyes widened at the sight of the stalls turned into a high-tech shooting range. The men were training with a variety of top-of-the-line weapons on holographic targets. Jordan had not been lying by saying there was a fine line between exploitation and opportunity. Few people would be able to boast about having experience shooting with this type of high-end equipment. The men would be fools not to seize this once-in-a-lifetime offer. One look at Keran’s face revealed similar thoughts were crossing his mind.

Jordan stopped and turned to face us with a somber expression that clashed with his previously almost boastful sales pitch.

“People are scared, Jakar Keran. I’ve been in this trade for half a century, but I’ve never seen such unrest. There are very dark times ahead. And those who can afford it are doing everything in their power to protect themselves. Seers and Oracles are multiplying the warnings about the impending Great War. I don’t get involved in politics, and only follow it to the extent it can benefit my business. But people are terrified of the young Sarenian Prince.”

Keran recoiled. “Zerien? Why?”

“There are countless tales of his ruthlessness, bloodthirst, and sadism,” Jordan said, genuine wariness oozing out of his voice. “In less than a year, he will ascend his father’s throne. The Goddess only knows what chaos he will unleash on the galaxy.”

“Zerien may be young, but he’s wise beyond his years. He’s a good man, and a dear friend. He has no nefarious designs as far as the galaxy is concerned. Like us, he wants his people to be on the right side of the Great War. Those rumors are unfounded and likely made up by the people whose request for an alliance with Zerien was rejected,” Keran added, giving him a meaningful look.

Jordan snorted. “It is true that my people do not take rejection too well. First we got banned from Braxia over our Ambassadors’ *heavy-handed* approach to diplomacy. Then our alliance offer gets shot down by the Sarenian Prince. There are undoubtedly bruised egos trying to lash out. The fools do not understand the basics of smart business,” he concluded, his voice dripping with contempt.

“You’re an interesting character, Jordan Korey,” Keran said with a sliver of amusement.

“Interesting in a positive way, I hope?” he retorted playfully, although the underlying seriousness didn’t escape me.

Keran nodded, his smile broadening.

“Good! Because I intend to cultivate our blossoming friendship,” Jordan boldly said as we walked out of the stables.

“Is that so?” Keran asked, his curiosity as piqued as mine.



“To be successful in business, you must plan four steps ahead. Since your father’s protective edict, there are no new hybrids coming to Haven, and your clansmen mostly stay on your homeworld. With your own ascension looming near, one might hope that, after your reign begins, you would consider making exceptions to the unilateral ban on Guldán visitors.”

Keran scoffed in disbelief, while his guards and I gasped at such shameless gall.

“You see how I operate my business,” Jardan added quickly in a pressing tone. “Once I’ve placed these men with their new employers, I have no doubt you will keep tabs on them to see how they fare. You can even have a look now at the type of generous contracts I’m negotiating on their behalf. Can you imagine how much more lucrative the contracts I could secure for purebloods would be? Some of your clans are still struggling financially from the severe recession Braxia faced. What better way to start your rule than to present your embattled people with a series of wonderful opportunities?”

Although still stunned by the sheer audacity of the male, I couldn’t help but feel a begrudging admiration for him.

Keran chuckled and shook his head. “You certainly know how to make a great sales pitch, Jardan Korey.”

“I aim to please,” he deadpanned.

Keran smiled politely. “Unfortunately, such considerations sit low on the list of my most urgent priorities. And they should in yours as well.” He waved at the two pens where the hybrids were still intensely training. “Earlier, I asked you what promises or commitment you exacted from them in exchange for all of this, to which you replied nothing if they didn’t accept an offer from someone else using the skills you’re teaching them.”

“That is correct,” Jordan said with a frown, wondering where he was headed with this.

“Well, it has been brought to our attention that you have competition here looking to convince them of doing just that,” Keran said, studying his reaction.

The way his body stiffened, all charming playfulness draining from his face erased any lingering suspicions I might have had that he was in cahoots with that second headhunter.

“Who? How?” he asked.

“We don’t know who, only that they are trying to convince the hybrids to return to Braxia to form their own clan,” Keran said.

Although I tried to keep a neutral expression, I couldn’t help casting a sideways glance at Keran. Was it wise for him to share this much information with Jordan? Although we hadn’t discussed it in so many words, it had been my understanding that we wouldn’t reveal to the Guldans the alleged motives of his competitor. Had our conversation with Jordan made Keran reconsider? I could see how. The headhunter took his business seriously and wouldn’t take kindly to anyone fucking with it. Seeing him quietly seething confirmed a ruthless man hid beneath this polished exterior. Maybe Keran had made a smart move. If we didn’t find that competitor first, Jordan would.

“Which hybrids,” Jordan asked in a cool tone.

“All the ones who have come to your ranch to be considered for the opportunities you offer,” Keran replied matter-of-factly. “As far as I know, it has only been a first contact through personal messaging, planting the seed, and promising further detail in the not-too-distant future. We had

wondered if one of your clients was trying to sway them their way. But your reaction tells me it's not the case."

"First off, my clients know better than to contact the candidates directly. All communications go through me," Jordan said in a clipped tone. "Second, none of my clients would benefit from bringing the hybrids back to Braxia. What else did you hear?"

"Nothing else," I answered in Keran's stead. "We had hoped you could shed some light on the matter," I added, deliberately omitting to mention that Jaek believed the meeting would take place next week.

"Very well. I appreciate you sharing that information. I will do some thorough investigating of my own and keep you updated, if anything turns up," Jordan said.

"Thank you for that, and for taking the time to speak with us and show us around," Keran replied in a friendly tone.

"Yes, thank you," I echoed with a genuine smile. As far as I was concerned—and Keran seemed to share the sentiment—this conversation with the Guldán headhunter had eliminated him as the potential killer.

"My pleasure," Jordan said, his charming and jovial demeanor coming back to the fore with the ease of years of experience. "Feel free to come back any time, no appointment required. I am almost always here. And if I'm absent, it's never for long."

As he escorted us back to our shuttle under the discreetly watchful eye of the hybrids, Vintor walked out of the gauntlet, which he had completed. My stomach dropped as he made a beeline for us with a belligerent expression. Keran stopped to wait for him, his face unreadable.

“The Braxian Prince graces us with his presence. How flattering,” Vintor said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Don’t be a dick, Vintor,” I said in a stern voice. “He came all the way here to help us.”

Vintor snorted with disdain. “Seems like too little, too late.”

“You’re still alive, aren’t you? It will be too late when we’re all belly up,” I snapped back. “At least he’s doing something. Do you see anyone else rushing to our rescue? He doesn’t owe us anything.”

“Doesn’t he?” Vintor countered.

“It’s okay, Dawn,” Keran interjected in a soft voice. “He’s right. We haven’t done enough for hybrids. And that needs to be rectified.”

Vintor stiffened, taken aback by this response. He’d undoubtedly expected Keran to aggressively put him back in his place. With all the men having stopped their training to see what was happening, I suspected he had wanted to show that purebloods were still bullies who had no respect or consideration for us.

“I understand you have regular meetings in Genxia,” Keran continued. “I would love to take advantage of the next one to meet with all of you. It would not only allow us to discuss these murders, but also to discuss the status of every hybrid and what we can do for you.”

Jardan’s face closed upon hearing those words. The last thing he needed was for Keran to snag the hybrids from under him when another unknown rival was already trying the same in the shadows.

Vintor hesitated, further taken aback by that unexpected offer. “We’ll think on it,” he finally said in a haughty tone before glancing at me with something akin to betrayal mixed with something else I couldn’t define.

It took every last shred of my willpower not to roll my eyes at this pathetic attempt at a display of power. Keran could chew him up and spit him out without breaking a sweat while simultaneously combing his lustrous hair.

Probably feeling like he’d had the last word, Vintor spun on his heel and sauntered off, bunching his muscles to make himself appear bigger than he was. This time, I didn’t resist the urge to roll my eyes. While Keran maintained a neutral expression, I was starting to know him well enough to recognize the sliver of amusement in his eyes. It reminded me of the way a massive dog would look at a tiny one yapping away like it thought it could scare anyone.

After a last nod to Jordan, Keran headed for our shuttle. I followed quietly, a million thoughts rushing through my mind.

Even though this meeting had not yielded the new lead I had hoped for, it at least helped clarify a few things. But tomorrow would make nine days since the last body was found, which meant a new victim would be discovered.



## CHAPTER II

## DAWN

**T**agar got us airborne as soon as we'd taken our seats. The way Keran observed me immediately made me want to squirm. Aside from his usual intensity, the speculative glimmer in his eyes had me wondering what the heck was going through his mind.

"I'm sorry about Vintor," I said at last to break the silence. "Even though it may not show right now, the hybrids *want* your help. They've just suffered so much at the hand of purebloods that they are lashing out, especially Vintor. He's always been loud."

"There's no need for you to apologize. I know his type," Keran said calmly. "They make the most noise and complain endlessly but contribute the least to finding a solution."

"I couldn't have described him more accurately," I said with a nervous laugh.

"He also wants you," Keran said in a factual manner.

I scoffed and waved a dismissive hand. "No, he doesn't. Or rather, he's a sore loser who cannot stand to be denied. He feels entitled to me and to my attention, probably because he knew I was a hybrid like him. Vintor loves to brag and show off. He just wants to be able to tell the others he was the first



to have scored with me. The minute I give in to him, he'll lose all interest."

Keran tilted his head to the side and studied my features in a strange way. "While I do not challenge your description of his sense of entitlement and vanity, I do not believe he would cast you aside and move on if you gave in to him. He sees you as a prize and a trophy that he would refuse to share or allow anyone to spoil. His little display wasn't that of a man with a bruised ego throwing a tantrum, but that of a man who feels betrayed by his soulmate."

I flinched. "Well, he needs a serious reality check. I'm not his soulmate, and I'll never be his woman. But that meeting with them is a very good idea," I added, eager to change the topic.

He smiled, not fooled in the least. "Do you think they will come?"

"Yes. I mean, there is always a possibility that a majority won't if Vintor goes on a campaign to convince everyone to abstain. I will talk to him and to the others," I promised. "But as a fair warning, it will likely be an unpleasant experience for you. They hold a lot of anger and resentment. It's not aimed at you personally, but you are the physical representation of those who hurt them, and they will want to lash out."

"I expect no less," Keran said, apparently unbothered. "When is your next scheduled meeting supposed to happen?"

"In three days," I replied.

"Perfect. It will give me time to prepare," he said in a mysterious fashion.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but his expression told me he wouldn't reveal anything else.

The rest of the flight home was uneventful.

I saw little of Keran and his men the rest of the day. The extent to which I missed him troubled me. That man confused the heck out of me. Sometimes, he sent clear signals of being attracted to me. At other times, he was politely distant though friendly.

*But he keeps pointing out all the hybrids who are infatuated with me.*

Yes, and? As much as I wanted to believe it was a sign of jealousy, I feared it was merely him realizing I was too often blind to the obvious.

Sadly, *I* was the one feeling jealous. Keran and his guards had left Genxia. He'd promised to come back but didn't know at what time. The minute he told me not to wait up for him, my mind went straight to picturing a hot little stripper at The Cabaret rubbing all over his godly body. Even though he'd claimed not to be into human women, he remained a Braxian. Their males were horny around the clock.

Despite his warning, I stayed up much longer than I should have. Finally giving up, I hopped into a scalding shower, hoping the burning heat would help release the tension knotting my muscles, although a cold one might have doused the naughty imaginings filling my head.

Seconds after I laid my head on my pillow, the security system warned me of their arrival. My heart leapt, and my pulse picked up as I strained my ears to listen to them quietly head for their respective rooms.

The next twenty minutes went by agonizingly slowly as I debated whether to go to him or not. Initially, I delayed knowing he would likely take a shower first. Then I tried to

work up the courage to go knocking. By then, forty-five minutes had elapsed. Heart pounding, I exited my room only to see no hints of light seeping under his door. My shoulders sagged with disappointment and self-recrimination.

I'd waited too long.

Crawling back to my room, I spent another restless night filled with unfulfilled desires that my own hand couldn't sate. I once more awakened to the distant sound of swords clashing. As I stood on the balcony admiring the spectacle, a sad thought entered my mind.

People had a romantic image of what being a prince or royalty was like. While it might be true for certain species, it certainly didn't apply to a Braxian. As much as I wanted to believe Keran enjoyed sparring with his men, it was also a necessity. Only the strongest male could rule as the Magnar. Anyone was welcome to challenge him for the throne in a duel. If he was ever defeated, he would be forced to step down. That meant keeping his skills at the highest level possible to be ready at all times for a potential rival.

Today, again, I barely saw Keran as he went out with his men canvassing the planet in search of the second headhunter and, worse still, of the latest victim. This morning marked nine days since we'd found the last body. Although I had my own tasks managing the shelter, I also spent many hours reaching out to each of the hybrids individually to make sure they would show up tomorrow at the meeting Keran requested. It also allowed me to check in on everyone and confirm they were safe.

When the hours ticked by with no tragic announcement, an impossible hope blossomed in my heart. There were still two hybrids missing. I had expected one of them to turn up dead.

Could Keran's presence and public investigation have sent the killer into hiding?

That night, although Keran returned early enough for us to have dinner together, I didn't go knocking on his door. Beyond the fact that he hadn't shown even the tiniest hint of flirtatious behavior towards me all day, I was too stressed at the thought of the next killing. But we received no ill news that night.

The following morning, it wasn't swords that pulled me out of my slumber, but the most delicious aroma of food. To my shock, I had slept in right through Keran's morning training. After quick ablutions, I got dressed and hurried to the cafeteria. Finding three massive Braxians cooking in my kitchen wrecked my brain. Their amused look made me realize I was just standing there gaping.

"It's almost ready," Keran said in a warm voice. "Have a seat."

"You know, I could get used to this," I said teasingly, while complying. "Having a future king and his two fearsome guards as personal chefs, sign me up!"

Tagar and Nowik snorted, but Keran gave me the strangest look while taking the meat out of the pan.

"That could very well happen. For that, you'll need to come back to Braxia with us," Keran said.

My stomach did a backflip, and I wondered if he actually meant it or was just playing along.

"If I take you up on that, remember that you offered," I deadpanned.

"I never forget a promise, Dawn."

This time, my toes curled upon hearing Keran's serious tone. Fuck me! He really meant it. Right? It was the first time in three days that he was in any way flirting with me or hinting at his lingering interest in me.

"Good to know," I replied, my stomach fluttering.

We ate in a relaxed atmosphere. Usually mostly quiet, Nowik and Tagar joined in the friendly conversation describing the beauties and dangers of Braxia, their favorite places and hobbies, all of which seem to involve either some type of extreme sport or a form of combat, whether hunting or fighting.

Throughout those exchanges, the depth of the genuine friendship and respect between the three men struck me hard. It contrasted sharply with my experience meeting visiting dignitaries from other planets. Their security details were clearly employees performing their duties. Their charge barely acknowledged their presence, other than to demand something. They showed no particular concern for their guards' welfare, except to the extent it might impact their ability to protect them.

Not Keran.

At the end of his sparring sessions with his men, Keran had picked up the water bottles left nearby, handing one to each of his guards first before opening his own. He inquired if they were okay after he'd spanked them, and forced them to go get some rest or food when they wanted to keep working over an unhealthy number of hours straight.

The way guards addressed their bosses and looked at them spoke volumes.

Where good ones would actually take a bullet for their employer out of duty, Nowik and Tagar would do so for Keran out of loyalty and friendship. They didn't look at him with the resignation of the unhappy employee, or the submissive expression of a lower-ranked staffer. Pride and affection shone in their eyes. And although they always addressed him with the deference owed to his rank, it was never servile or contrived, and he never interacted with them in a haughty fashion. In all the ways that mattered, they were equals but with different roles.

Too soon, we parted ways. While they pursued our rather stalled investigation, I went back to my administrative tasks of running the shelter, my assistant Melinda dropping by for a few hours. I left her to deal with accounting and the work schedule of the men tending our fields and harvesting our crops. Meanwhile, I completed the last efforts to convince as many of the hybrids to attend the meeting to be held tomorrow.

As hours ticked by, the tension still knotting my back continued to fade as the terrible news I dreaded failed to come for yet another day. By the time night fell, I was all but walking on clouds. Finding out that Tagar and Nowik were heading out for a couple of hours, destination unknown, gave me wings and emboldened me.

Refusing to let myself get cheated again by hesitancy, low self-esteem, and my wretched need to overthink and overanalyze everything, I ran to my quarters and jumped into the shower as soon as Keran and I said goodnight. I quickly dried myself, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair, debating the whole time if I should put on a tiny dab of perfume in strategic places. In the end, I decided against it. Scent held great importance to Braxians. To them, perfume often came

across as deceptive, like you were trying to hide something about yourself or to mislead others.

Then again, Braxian women had developed a fantastic line of organic perfumes. To many species, they would come across as odorless—as they in fact technically were. But once applied, they would enhance the user’s natural fragrance and also acted as an aphrodisiac. I would have shamelessly used that tonight, if I had any. But since her marriage to Ravik, Dagna Mercy had helped the galaxy discover the artisanal products developed by the Braxian women. And the demand from the obscenely wealthy had created shortages, which made these goods unaffordable for commoners like me.

*Who needs perfume anyway?*

I wanted Keran to be attracted to me, not some chemical enhancements. And if I hadn’t misread his comments earlier this morning, he was interested in me, just the way I was. Despite promising myself to make haste before he went to bed, I ended up wasting more time debating what to wear. After so many years being celibate, sexy lingerie didn’t exactly abound in my drawers—meaning there wasn’t even the shadow of one piece to be found.

A brief glance at the clock had my heart lurching while my stomach knotted with stress. I was taking too damn long.

“Ah, fuck it!” I hissed with exasperation.

Refusing to dwell on it further, I slipped on my prettiest robe and resolutely stormed out of my room. Since my goal was to land naked in his bed, might as well get the naked part pre-handled, and pray the landing in bed part would come true.

For once, I welcomed the thundering sound of my heart frantically trying to beat its way out of my chest. It drowned

the increasingly panicked little voice at the back of my head shouting for me to get my ‘sturdy’ ass right back to my room before I embarrassed myself.

Feeling faint, I stopped in front of Keran’s door and immediately raised my hand to knock. If I gave myself a second to think, I would wuss out and run. Once again, before I could complete the movement, Keran’s muffled voice resonated through the door.

“Give me a minute, Dawn.”

*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

Of course, my timing once more sucked! Had he just gotten in bed? Was he in the middle of a vidcall with his captain or chief medical officer? Was...?

“You can come in,” Keran called out.

Feeling even weaker, my previous determination having been shot to pieces, I stared at the door handle like I expected it to turn into a krillik’s head, ready to strike with a venomous bite if I dared reach for it.

I closed my eyes, took in a deep, fortifying breath, and opened the door. My jaw dropped when I found Keran standing outside of his hygiene room with a towel quickly wrapped around his waist.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I exclaimed, ready to run back out. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll let you get back to your shower.”

“You’re not interrupting, Dawn,” he said in a calm voice. “I finished showering more than twenty minutes ago.”

“I see,” I replied, in fact not seeing anything.

A mischievous smile settled on his lips. “You’re wondering why I’m still only wearing a towel.”



“Huh... yes,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Because I sleep naked, and that was the fastest thing I could use to avoid giving you an eyeful and spare your sensibility,” he replied tauntingly.

I licked my lips nervously, my gaze flicking to his towel before locking back up with his. Keran’s gray eyes bore into mine with their legendary intensity, this time laced with an undeniable dare.

*He knows why you’re here. Don’t you fucking let him kick you out of his room again.*

That wretched little voice at the back of my head was either a complete wuss or utterly ballsy. But *I* was the one who needed to act on those prompts.

I lifted my chin defiantly. “Who says my sensibility needs to be spared? What makes you think I wouldn’t want an eyeful?”

He snorted, his stormy eyes sparkling with amusement. “Apologies if I was presumptuous. Should I show you then?”

I shrugged and plastered a blasé expression on my face. “You don’t have to if it makes you self-conscious. But I can’t deny being curious to find out what’s the big deal about what purebloods are packing.”

Keran chuckled. Like most Braxian males, smiling made him look vicious, if not sadistic. And it was the biggest turn on.

“Aaah! Scientific research,” he said like he’d suddenly got an epiphany. “In that case, I’m happy to oblige.”

My throat went dry, and intense heat pulsated between my thighs when Keran slowly detached the towel he’d knotted on

his hip, spreading each pane wide open on his side. My stomach did a couple of somersaults at the sight of his massive shaft. I couldn't say if fear, irrational masochistic desire, or a mix of both had triggered that response.

Long and thick, his cock was similar in appearance to a human's, aside from the natural absence of foreskin or pubic hair.

*But the size!*

"Is that a big enough deal?" he asked tauntingly, his voice having dropped an octave.

Although my eyes remained locked on his huge shaft, I could feel his gaze weighing on me.

"I would say that it is of... epic proportions," I replied absent-mindedly, totally enthralled.

Keran tossed the towel onto the chair in front of his work desk. He then lifted his chin, his head slightly tilted to the side in a provocative fashion.

"I've shown you mine..." he said, not bothering to finish the sentence.

He didn't need to. The panic I expected to feel didn't come. My inner walls contracted, and my skin tingled with the thrill of anticipation.

With a boldness and confidence I didn't think I possessed, I untied my robe and parted it open. Although I didn't remove it, I let the fabric partially slide off my shoulders and kept my arms spread.

My breath hitched as Keran let his gaze roam over me, his gray eyes darkening so much they almost looked black. His jaw clenched, and the corner of his upper lip lifted into a snarl.

My breasts immediately felt heavy, and moisture pooled between my thighs in response to the savage and hungry look that descended over his features.

He prowled towards me, his steps silent, his gait fluid like a predator closing in on his prey. A very willing prey. My stomach fluttered as he came to a stop in front of me, so close I could feel the heat of his body radiating against my skin. Reaching for my robe with both hands, he pushed it down the remaining length of my arms. The garment fell to the floor with the soft rustling of fabric.

A low, rumbling growl vibrated through his chest while his abdominal muscles contracted. Despite Keran's massive girth, my mouth watered at the sight of his partially erect shaft growing even more engorged.

"Perfection," Keran whispered before slowly circling around me.

I was trembling with anticipation, my nipples painfully hard with the need to be touched as he stopped behind me. A violent shiver coursed through me when his large, calloused hand settled on my left hip. In a slow and soft caress, it traveled along my side, swerving right up my spine, all the way to my neck before brushing my hair aside.

I inhaled sharply when his chest lightly pressed against my back, his skin burning mine with the strength of a thousand fires. My skin erupted in goosebumps when his breath fanned over my exposed shoulder. The kiss I was anticipating didn't come right away. Instead, Keran deeply inhaled my scent, his face hovering a hair's breadth from my skin as he followed the curve of my shoulder, to the crook of my neck, and the back of my ear.

A second deep growl rose from his chest, vibrating directly against my back. A needy whimper escaped me, and my hands involuntarily opened and closed as I fought the urge to turn around and touch him. I couldn't tell if I had leaned back for greater contact with him, or if Keran had moved forward. Either way, his muscular body was suddenly wrapped around me, his right hand settling on my stomach to press me further against him.

I exhaled a throaty sigh when his lips brushed the slope of my neck, then pressed a soft kiss in the crook. The wet warmth of his tongue tickled that sensitive spot, sending another delightful shiver running down my spine. His hand on my stomach drew me even more tightly against his firm body. A bolt of lust laced with a sliver of apprehension coursed through me at the heightened sensation of his thick cock resting against the seam of my behind. But his spare hand closing around my left breast reclaimed my attention.

I lifted an arm, opening my chest even more to him, and reached behind me to slip my fingers through his long hair. Fuck, it was even softer than I'd imagined. In sharp contrast, the rough texture of his palm rubbing over my erect nipple as he fondled me sent electric sparks straight between my thighs.

A gasp interrupted my moan when Keran gave my neck a solid bite, although nowhere near enough to hurt or break skin. Even as he soothed the sting with a kiss and a lick, the Prince's hand on my stomach slid down towards my pelvis. Judging by the slowness of his movement, I instinctively guessed he was giving me a chance to pull away or stop him.

But this time, I was all in.

Feeling emboldened by the possessive way he held me and the maddening scent of his own arousal, I placed my much

smaller hand over his and urged it further south. Keran's approving growl greeted my gesture, and I parted my legs to give him better access and erase any lingering doubt he might have that I craved his touch.

Just as his hand was settling over my sex, Keran's left hand abandoned my breast to fist my hair on the nape. I released a startled yelp when he tugged it, forcing me to bend my head back. His mouth covering mine snuffed out my strangled moan as his fingers immediately parted my labia to scissor along my little nub.

Although I had suspected as much, the conquering way in which Keran claimed my mouth, made his dominant nature extremely clear. I gladly submitted, my lips parting to welcome his invading tongue. He greedily swallowed my moan as his thumb teased my clit.

Goddess! It had been so long since I'd been touched like this. And the expert way in which he did so had me panting in no time. While his thumb continued to bring me close to the edge, Keran inserted one thick finger inside me. It took me a second to understand the cause of his approving purr.

Of course, he'd be concerned about whether I'd inherited my mother's genetics—which would require extensive preparation and loads of the muscle relaxant called Denax to be able to take him. Thankfully, on that front, I was fully Braxian. It would still likely require some care for my body to accept his truly impressive girth, but my inner lining was made to stretch and accommodate our males' massive size and the huge babies we delivered.

The thought of Keran inside me had my inner walls convulsing around his finger. Seemingly interpreting my physiological reaction as a request for more, he growled again

and promptly inserted a second finger. I moaned and ground my sex against his hand. Keran accelerated the movement of his fingers dipping in and out of me while his thumb relentlessly massaged my clit.

My knees felt weak as pleasure built up in my core. I leaned more heavily against him and pushed my pelvis forward in counterpoint to his hand making love to me. My right hand flew up to my breast, rolling and pinching my nipple with almost brutal force. I nearly whimpered when Keran broke the kiss. But him pushing a third finger inside me had me crying out instead at the delicious burn. While it had previously felt a little tight, this was finally giving me the stretch I craved and needed as a Braxian female, and which enhanced every sensation.

“Come for me, Dawn,” Keran whispered, his lips pressed against my right ear.

His commanding, almost menacing tone, resonated directly in my pussy, making me drip with lust. But it was the sharp sting of his teeth biting the crook of my neck that sent me over the edge. I cried out, my knees buckling as my climax slammed into me. Keran effortlessly held me up with one arm around my waist, his thumb and fingers keeping me flying high.

“Good girl,” he purred while peppering kisses around my neck and nape.

The room spun as Keran loosened his hold on me only long enough to turn me around. Although still half dazed, I moaned, and a powerful shiver coursed through me at the sensation of his bare, muscular chest pressing against mine. His huge arms engulfed me, making me feel tiny, flimsy, utterly vulnerable, and yet completely safe.

In another display of his incredible strength, Keran slipped his hands behind my thighs, picking me up like I weighed nothing. I wrapped my legs around his waist and clasped my hands behind his nape. My stomach quivered and a bolt of desire exploded in my nether region when his thick cock pressed against my core.

Keran claimed my mouth with a rabid hunger, to which I responded in kind. Even as our tongues warred, he rubbed his length against me. The friction on my little nub sent electric sparks through my nether region and down my legs.

I ached to be filled again. The absence of his fingers fucking me left me hollow. As sensitive as my clitoris was—thanks to my human heritage—my Braxian genetics dominated in the sexual department. Our females mainly climaxed during vaginal penetration. Highly erogenous bundles of nerves hid right under our inner lining. As it required a substantial amount of pressure to stimulate them, males with an average sized penis did nothing for us. I'd get as much pleasure riding a standard human cock than I would using a drinking straw.

But Keran's girth took it to the other extreme. As much as I feared he might be too much for me to handle, I throbbed with anticipation. Unable to wait any longer, I slipped a hand between us to grab his cock. Before I could point it at my opening, I yelped at the sting of Keran firmly slapping my behind. Holding me with only one arm under my thighs, he yanked my hand away from his cock, twisting it behind my back.

He swallowed my words of protest in another possessive kiss, this time almost punishing in its intensity. Too many conflicting emotions swirled within me. The pleasure of Keran

accelerating the movement of his hips as he rubbed his cock against my clit clashed with the painful contraction of my inner walls demanding to be filled. The unyielding way in which he held me, keeping me effectively subdued, both turned me on with this thrilling display of dominance, and made me feel frustrated and cheated out of having my way with him.

Too focused on grinding against him to sate my burning need, I barely noticed he'd started moving towards the bed. It was only once he released my wrist still twisted behind my back and then dropped his arm holding me up against him that I realized what was happening. I gasped, seconds before landing on the soft cushion of the mattress.

Towering over me, teeth bared in a menacing snarl, Keran was staring at me with a savage expression. A bolt of fire exploded in the pit of my stomach when he wrapped his hand around his massive cock. He gave it a few slow strokes, squeezing it with a strength that had to be borderline painful. My toes curled as his gaze roamed over my naked body with a possessiveness that had more moisture pooling between my thighs.

Keran looked like he wanted to hurt me in unspeakable ways, and I wanted him to go all out.

"Please," I whispered, a hand extended towards him while holding back an almost painful whimper as my inner walls continued to spasmodically contract with desire.

I needed him inside me right the fuck now.

But Keran ignored my plea. Eyes locked on my sex, he continued to slowly stroke himself. His expression darkened, making him look even more savage while his broad, flat nose twitched, no doubt from the growing scent of my arousal.



Sprawled on my back, my thighs glistening from my essence, I had to be quite the sight. I didn't even care how desperate and needy I looked. Spreading my legs wide, I extended my other hand towards him.

My heart leapt when he kneeled at the edge of the bed, his fingers still wrapped around his cock, while his free hand settled on my left ankle.

“Did you fantasize about me, Dawn?” Keran asked in a low, rumbling voice, thick with desire. “Did you touch yourself thinking about me, like I touched myself thinking of you?”

My stomach quivered, and a burning wave of lust swirled like molten lava in my nether region. “Yes,” I replied in a breathy voice.

“Show me,” he ordered. “Show me how you touched yourself for me.”

I should have been mortified at the mere thought of complying, but this man held an unexplainable power over me. Without hesitation, I glided a hand down my body, imagining it was Keran's before settling it over my sex. With two fingers, I parted my labia, scissored my clit a couple of times, then began massaging it.

A moan escaped me, and I bit my bottom lip while fondling my left breast with the other hand. Keran emitted a throaty sound, halfway through a purr and a growl. His palm on my ankle began a slow journey up my leg, my skin erupting in goosebumps at the rough feel of his calloused hand.

There was something sinful about pleasuring myself before a witness. The reserved—not to say prudish—side of me was shouting for me to stop and cover myself. But the naughty side

of me was relishing giving in to my desires. The hungry way Keran devoured me with his stormy eyes spurred me on. I'd never felt more beautiful, or more sexy than in this instant. I wanted him crazy with lust, to make him lose that wretched self-control that made him deny me what I craved.

In my best impression of what I assumed to be an exotic dancer's performance, I caressed myself in a slow and lascivious way while gyrating on the bed. I alternated between rubbing my clit and dipping my fingers inside me. Pleasure coiled within, stirred by my touch, Keran's hand on me, and his intense voyeurism. I had never thought of myself as an exhibitionist. But right this instant, I loved showing off for my man... for *this* man.

On instinct, I pulled my hand away from my sex, brought the two fingers glistening with my arousal to my face, and put them in my mouth. The bestial sound that rose from Keran's throat as I slowly licked my own essence had my inner walls spasming in a frenzy.

I never got to resume touching myself again as Keran lunged at me.

My startled yelp died in a throaty, drawn-out moan when he buried his face between my thighs. Keran didn't tease or fool around but went straight for the prize. With his thick lips wrapped around my little nub, he licked and sucked me with a greed that quickly had me cresting. I hissed with blissful gratitude when his fingers found their way inside me again.

This time, he immediately inserted three of them, scissoring them in and out of me at a faster pace and with more strength than previously. At a subconscious level, I understood that he was preparing me to receive him as well as assessing my responses to him. But I didn't care. He had

already given me one orgasm and had me on a first-class ride to a second one as my inner walls greedily clenched around his fingers.

Liquid fire coursed through me, and my legs began to shake with my impending release. I fisted Keran's hair with both hands and lifted my pelvis for even greater contact with his mouth feasting on me and his hand fucking me. Incoherent words spilled out of me, alternating between pleas for him not to stop and praises for how good it felt.

My orgasm crashed into me with sudden violence. I shouted his name, my back arching as I threw my head back against the bed. I vaguely felt Keran pressing his palm on my stomach to force me back down as he continued to lick and suck on my clit. Wave upon wave of pleasure swelled within me, sweeping me away in a maelstrom of sensations. I felt hot and cold at once, my skin tingling as if I was about to lose consciousness or have an out-of-body experience.

Only my hands still viciously fisting Keran's hair and the searing heat of his mouth on my core kept me anchored to reality. As I started coming back down, I realized he had relinquished my clit. I suddenly felt cold and bereft when he moved away from me. Half-dazed, it took me a moment to understand that he'd paused to put on a condom.

A wave of shame swept over me. As a female—and especially a hybrid—I should have been the one to think of this. While I had a contraceptive implant, it wouldn't work with a Braxian, pureblood or otherwise. Our male's semen could override most contraceptives and manipulate a female's endocrine system to force her body into a heightened reproductive state which could accept his seed and increase the chances of conception.

But Keran swiftly rejoining me on the bed chased away those thoughts. His mouth and hands explored every inch of my body with a brutal possessiveness that had my toes curling with an equal measure of fear and excitement. It was becoming obvious that Keran wasn't the gentle lover type. I'd never really considered it something I'd be interested in, but that prospect with the Prince had me throbbing with need.

His increasingly rough touch seemed to confirm my assumptions. Keran was assessing my tolerance level. He took one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking it with increasing intensity until it started flirting with a wondrous mix of pleasure-pain. I yielded to him, my blissful moans urging him to push on.

He kissed and bit his way up my chest then to my neck before he reclaimed my mouth. His kiss was brutal, dominant, demanding my complete surrender. For a reason I couldn't explain, the need to challenge him surged through me. No sooner did I start trying to take control of the kiss than Keran's large hand wrapped around my neck. He squeezed hard enough to constrict my airway, but not to the point of fully choking me.

To my dismay, my pulse picked up, and each heartbeat seemed to echo directly in my engorged clit while I felt myself getting even wetter. Worse still, an insane little voice at the back of my head was shouting for him to squeeze even more tightly. The masochist part of me—I didn't even know existed—almost continued to challenge his dominance to see how much rougher he would get.

When I yielded, Keran slightly stiffened. A million thoughts flashed through my mind in seconds. Was he disappointed I hadn't pushed the experiment further? Was he

debating whether to pursue the punishment even though I had conceded? Did he fear he'd turned me off or frightened me?

His touch suddenly becoming gentler convinced me he was likely thinking he'd hurt or scared me. I wanted him to unleash his beast on me and go all out. On instinct, I raked my nails down his back while pressing my chest against his. Keran hissed against my lips, his body jerking in my arms. For a split second, I feared I'd been too rough. My heart sank when he broke the kiss to look at me.

“Do that again,” he urged in a hushed voice thick with desire.

My inner walls clenched, and my nipples ached in response to his lustful tone. I gladly complied and clawed his back once more with a bit more force, but still nowhere near hard enough to break skin. Keran emitted a growling moan, a tremor coursing through him.

“Again,” he commanded while hooking an arm behind my right leg, spreading me open for him.

I once more obeyed, but didn't stop this time, alternating between clawing at his back, caressing him to soothe the sting, and pulling at his hair. Judging by his response, Keran definitely loved a bit of pain. Simultaneously, he began rubbing his length against my core, coating himself with my essence.

My stomach quivered, and I started throbbing again, knowing that any minute now, he would finally give me what I craved. However, the wretched man didn't seem in any rush. He continued to rub against me until I started pleading for him to take me before I went insane with need.

“I love the way you beg me,” Keran whispered against my lips. “Before the night is over, you’ll be begging for me to stop.”

Far from scaring me, his threat only turned me on further. Even him starting to push himself inside me and my body fiercely fighting his invasion didn’t douse my arousal. His cock was massive. Despite how wet he’d gotten me and his efforts at stretching me, Keran was forced to work his way in with shallow thrusts while my body played hard to get.

My brain struggled to process the sensations coursing through me. The burn of his cock trying to sink into me was dampened by the erogenous nerve endings under my inner linings perking up under the pressure. I’d never felt so stretched and yet couldn’t wait to have all of him inside. Just as the masochist in me was rearing its head again, wishing Keran would just force himself in with one powerful thrust and get it over with, my body finally yielded.

Keran’s throaty grunt mixed with my hiss of pleasure-pain. Goddess, he was filling me to the brim... if not to bursting. I dug my nails into his back and closed my eyes, while waiting for my body to adjust to his girth. Despite the tension that stiffened him, no doubt as he struggled to rein himself in, Keran showered me with praises and words of encouragement while peppering soft kisses over my face.

At last, my inner walls started convulsing around his cock, signaling that I was finally ready for some action. Keran didn’t have to be told twice. He started rocking in and out of me with slow and careful thrusts. His gray eyes, almost black from lust, locked with mine as he studied my reaction. There was something incredibly sexy about the tension on his face. He

looked almost in pain from overwhelming pleasure and the strain of staying in control not to harm me.

But in no time, I gripped the round globes of his behind with both hands and started lifting my pelvis to meet him thrust for thrust. Heeding my signal, Keran picked up the pace, taking me deeper, harder, and faster.

Goddess! I thought I would die of bliss. Each stroke of his thick cock rubbed every single one of my erogenous nerve endings, driving me insane. It felt like each thrust injected me with a shot of liquid ecstasy directly in my core, which then radiated outward, setting my skin ablaze.

An endless string of moans flowed out of me, interspersed with little gasps and shouts as Keran unleashed his passion on me. Although it was merely an illusion, his cock felt as if it was growing thicker and longer as he started pounding into me. The world around us vanished. The burning heat of his hard body wrapped around me, his length pummeling my cervix, his mouth voraciously claiming mine, and his hands handling me with just the right level of gentle brutality became the center of my universe.

There was no beginning, no end, just endless pleasure that threatened to destroy me physically and mentally. Yet, if he stopped, I would surely die and lose whatever shred of sanity I had left.

I felt possessed, like a sex demon had taken me over as I writhed beneath Keran, taking everything he had to offer. He was wrecking me, and I kept begging for more.

My climax didn't build in waves but into a tsunami that swept me away. It rocked me, unannounced, unbidden, with the suddenness of a devastating earthquake. My spine seized as a blinding white light exploded before my eyes. I couldn't

say if I had screamed or made any sound for that matter. My mind simply shattered. Time ceased to exist as I drowned in an ocean of bliss.

I was flying high, much too high. Surely, I would reach the sun, and like Icarus, it would burn my wings, and I would come crashing back down, my body shattered into a thousand pieces.

Back down I did come. By the time I regained my senses, I was lying on my stomach. Keran's massive hands pulled on my hips, drawing them up. Before I could fully understand what was happening, he rammed his cock inside me in one powerful thrust. I cried out at the brutal invasion, the sound muffled by the mattress still pressing against my face.

Keran took me from behind at a punishing pace. In this position, he struck my cervix with each thrust. The pain should have been too much. But I found myself rocking back into him to meet his cock while shouting in ecstasy. He reached for my neck, forcing me to my knees, my back arching towards him.

"I'm going to wreck you," he whispered in my ear before tightening his hold around my throat.

Although he didn't fully choke me, black lights started dancing before my eyes. The fingers of his free hand slipping between my thighs to rub on my clit set me off like a rocket. This time, I cried out so loudly I hurt my vocal cords. I couldn't say whether I lost consciousness from the violence of my climax or from Keran choking me. After an eternity, I just regained my bearings to find Keran on his back with me lying on top of him, impaled on his cock, while he pumped into me from below.

I should beg him to stop, like he predicted I would. But I didn't want him to. I wanted everything he had to give, even if



it forever destroyed me. With the sound of our flesh meeting in a frenzy, my moans and labored breathing mixing with his bestial grunts as he fucked me within an inch of my life, I gave myself over to my lover.

Despite all the orgasms that he had already given me, Keran's relentless efforts had me cresting again. However, this time, I wouldn't be flying away alone. Judging by Keran's increasingly erratic movements, the tension twisting his features, and the desperate edge to his moans and grunts, he was finally losing the battle.

He reached between us to rub my clit. In that instant, I realized he didn't want to topple over without me. A mischievous side of me almost denied him. But I would have failed even if I had given it a real try. Keran owned me, owned my body. Even now, I knew he'd ruined me for any other male. I surrendered to the call of ecstasy. My inner walls clamped down on his cock as bliss crashed into me. And, at long last, Keran joined his voice to mine.

He slammed himself deep inside me as his climax hit him, his arms tightening around me in a bruising hold. To my chagrin, although his body shook from the spasm of his release, his seed never filled me, trapped in the confines of the condom he had donned. Although I felt cheated, I cast out the wretched thought to savor the feel of my lover wrapped around me while it lasted.

I rested my head on his chest, listening to the thundering sound of his heart while trying to catch my own breath. With an infinite tenderness, in sharp contrast to his previous roughness, Keran gently caressed my back and my hair.

"You're mine," he whispered with a possessiveness that had my throat constricting.

I smiled and tightened my arms around him.



## CHAPTER 12

## KERAN

**M**orning came much too soon. Tearing myself out of Dawn's arms proved to be a challenge of epic proportions. I almost woke her to once more lose myself in her. I had taken her more times than I could count during the night, and still I ached for her.

Ancestors! The way her inner walls squeezed me from all sides with a searing grip, caressing my length with each thrust, had fanned a raging inferno in my loins. The softness of her heated skin against mine, the feverish way she touched me, dug her nails into me as she moaned in my ear and shouted my name haunted me. I had wanted to wreck her, break her as I unleashed my passion.

It shamed me to admit that I didn't exactly qualify as the gentlest lover. I could be quite rough and liked receiving the same. With Dawn being a hybrid, I'd feared giving in to my desires would harm her. And yet, she had met me thrust for thrust, even begging me for more.

She was fucking perfect.

The way she looked, eyes hooded, her lips swollen by my kisses, her skin covered by a thin sheath of sweat as she writhed beneath me played in a loop in my mind. Images of

Dawn bound in leather straps, helpless but to take everything that I gave as I pounded into her had blood rushing to my groin.

A hiss escaped me at the sharp pain near my thighs. It wasn't the result of my overly engorge cock straining against my pants, but Tagar's blade finding its mark on me.

"Fuck!" I snapped, stumbling back.

Instead of pressing their advantage, my guards lowered their weapons, the mocking expressions on their faces pissing me off to no end.

"I'm going to beat you both bloody," I snarled.

"Not today, you won't, Jakar," Nowik retorted tauntingly. "A juvenile getting his cock sucked for the first time would have more focus than you do right now. Let us waste no more time on this training. Anyway, you have a meeting to prepare for. You can spank us tomorrow."

Baring my teeth, I lunged at him and swiped my sword in a vicious attack... which he effortlessly dodged. Both men chuckled, a mix of amusement and sympathy shining bright in their eyes.

Disgusted with myself, I threw my light sword on the ground and stomped back inside the building with a string of the foulest Braxian curses I could come up with. Decades of training and discipline had completely evaporated over a single night of passion with a female I still barely knew. My detractors would see this as further proof of my unfitness to be their future Magnar.

And yet, even as that somber thought crossed my mind, the lingering scent of Dawn on my skin had my blood heating.

*Why the fuck does she affect me so much?*

As the future ruler of Braxia, I constantly contended with the most beautiful of our females regularly throwing themselves at me in the hopes of becoming the next Dagna. Some of them had been expertly versed in the art of seduction. But none had ever made me come undone as Dawn had.

Dejected and confused, I hopped into the shower, only to feel further distraught to have her scent fully washed away. An irrational anger and possessiveness surged through me as the delicious aroma of breakfast wafted into my room. If Dawn was cooking, she had likely already showered and dressed as well. My scent on her would also be gone.

I wanted to brand her, mark her as my property. All those hybrids drooling over her infuriated me. She was *mine*. I wanted to shout it to the world, make it clear to all of them that Dawn was my woman and therefore off-limits.

*But she has not granted me that right.*

We had not discussed what type of relationship this would be. She had wanted me, I had wanted her, and we had indulged in our desires. If I were to guess, I suspected Dawn believed I slept around and maybe even used my ‘status’ to get females to grant me their favors.

A frequent misconception.

I didn’t share and therefore wouldn’t expect my female to accept sharing me. If a woman couldn’t satisfy my needs to the point that I felt tempted to look elsewhere, then we weren’t a match. Pursuing such a relationship would merely be a waste of both our times.

*But we’re not in a relationship.*

I growled in annoyance as I made my way to the cafeteria. Overthinking and overanalyzing had never been traits of mine.

Dawn was messing with my head in more ways than one. With all the shit going on in my life right now, developing such an obsession over a female was flirting with disaster.

“You guys finished early!” Dawn exclaimed when I walked into the room.

She was finishing preparing our meal, looking beyond delicious in a short, flowy blue dress, and with her hair down. Although she’d clearly dried it, her hair was still a little damp. However, her warm and inviting smile failed to hide the sliver of wariness in her eyes.

“We did. Apparently, I was too distracted to focus on battle. I wonder what could have been the cause,” I said, giving her a meaningful glance.

Heat crept up her cheeks while a glimmer of uncertainty flitted over her features. It struck me then that Dawn didn’t quite know where things stood between us, and that she was letting me set the tone of our interactions. A part of me wished she would more aggressively lay claim to me. The other part loved that she wasn’t pushing herself on me but allowing whatever was happening between us to blossom naturally. Then again, maybe she only wanted a one-night stand to add having fucked a prince to her bedpost.

The thought no sooner crossed my mind than a wave of shame flooded through me. She had never given me any reason to think so little of her.

As my guards had not joined us yet, I boldly walked over to Dawn. Her eyes slightly widened as I made my approach. She didn’t pull away or otherwise balk when I drew her into my embrace. Instead, her face took on an adorable, almost timid expression as she smiled and melted against me.



Considering all that we'd done last night, shyness was the last thing I'd expected from her.

I claimed her mouth in a possessive kiss, my blood instantly igniting with a burning need. Ancestors! This female would drive me to distraction. She slipped her fingers through my hair, first in a gentle caress before fisting it. I wished she had done so more forcefully, giving it a good sting while our tongues mingled, like she had done on a few occasions last night.

Too soon, she pushed away from me. I almost protested, but seeing her turn back to the meat cooking in the pan silenced me.

“Well, I hope you still managed to build up an appetite,” she said while turning the meat.

“I most certainly did. And in more ways than one,” I added teasingly, my hand settling on her hips.

She gasped and playfully elbowed me. Chuckling, I pressed my chest against her back and leaned in to inhale her scent before placing a soft kiss in the crook of her neck. Dawn smelled fresh, with a mix of that enticing natural scent of hers laced with the fruity soap she used. Although I expected it, it annoyed me to find none of my scent on her. She leaned back against me, and I possessively wrapped my arms around her.

“Are you all right?” I gently asked before kissing her bare shoulder.

She looked questioningly at me over her shoulder. “Yes. Why wouldn't I be?”

“I wasn't too... rough?” I asked, wariness seeping into my voice.

Her eyes widened with understanding, and the strangest mix of heat and embarrassment settled on her beautiful face. “Hardly. I’m sturdy, remember?”

I burst out laughing and nuzzled her nape. “That you are, my dear, and in the most wonderful way.”

With much reluctance, I released Dawn at the sound of my guards’ approaching footsteps. Although they knew what had transpired between Dawn and me from her lingering scent on me this morning, she and I needed to discuss where we would take it from here, and how comfortable she felt about making our entanglement public.

We ate breakfast in what had quickly become a pleasant routine laced with friendly conversations. But as we finished cleaning up then made our way to the meeting room, Dawn appeared to grow increasingly nervous.

“What’s wrong?” I asked at last.

She gave me a sheepish grin. “I’m just worried that they may not show up. Most of them reluctantly said they would be here, but it’s hard to say. Vintor was being a total idiot about it.”

I smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry. If they don’t, so be it. But my gut says they will, if only out of curiosity, or for a chance to berate me.”

And my gut proved me right.

The large meeting room, which could accommodate eight hundred people, was completely full. Among them, two dozen hybrid females had also shown up. I hadn’t realized Dawn had invited them, too. And that shamed me.

As only the males had been targeted by the killers, with all the females safely tucked away in the main cities, it hadn’t

even crossed my mind to involve them. And yet, this meeting was about more than just the murders. It was also about how Braxia and I—as its future ruler—could do better by them. It further outlined what a long way I still had to go on that front and why having Dawn help lead such an endeavor back home would be a blessing.

Standing on the dais of the former prayer hall, the altar replaced by a large wooden table, I let my gaze roam over the attendees. Animosity shone bright in the males' eyes, while distrust oozed out of the females. Such a strong reaction from the men confused me. I had seen similar expressions in the past from people who had already made up their minds and who categorically refused to be swayed, whatever argument was presented to them.

But that would not deter me.

“Thank you everyone for coming in such numbers,” I said in a gentle tone. “For those who do not know me, I am Keran Xeldar, firstborn son and heir to Magnar Ravik. Two weeks ago, Dawn informed me of the wave of murders that has been occurring here and of the lack of support you’ve been getting from the local authorities. Therefore, I came to lend my assistance in apprehending the culprit.”

“Why? Why does the pureblood royal heir suddenly care about what’s happening to us?” Vintor shouted, earning himself many approving nods.

“The royal heir, and his father before him, has cared for a long time about what is happening to hybrids,” I replied calmly. “You will recall that it was my sire who forbade the hunting and mistreatment of hybrids. We’ve been enforcing it for the past nineteen years, and it has worked so well that no

more of you flee Braxia to seek refuge here. Hence why this center is on the verge of closing.”

“Clearly, it’s not working so well anymore since purebloods are now taking hunting trips here to abuse us away from their ruler,” Vintor snarled, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

He ignored Dawn’s reproving look, glancing smugly around the room to bask in the approving nods of his comrades.

“I specifically came here fearing this was indeed the case and was determined to catch and make an example out of the clansmen responsible for this,” I conceded, denying him the pleasure of getting riled up by his taunts. “But in light of our investigation so far, we are confident that this isn’t a case of purebloods hunting hybrids in violation of our edict.”

The hybrids collectively raised their voices in protest, calling me a liar and a few other choice words.

Vintor shot to his feet, raising his hand to demand silence so that he could be heard. I forced a neutral expression on my face as the others complied while they had ignored a similar gesture from me. Dawn had been right in stating that he held tremendous sway over the hybrids. If I couldn’t get him on board, he could effectively sabotage any effort I might make to establish any kind of cordial rapport with them.

“Why doesn’t that response surprise me or any of us?” Vintor exclaimed with venom. “First, you turned a blind eye to decades of abuse and torture. And now, you shirk responsibility and hide behind denial when your authority is challenged.”

I waved a dismissing hand, silencing my urge to punch him in the throat. “Instead of trying to rile up the others with nonsense and tired old propaganda, you should try and pay attention to the important discovery we have made and are trying to share with you.”

“Propaganda?” Vintor exclaimed with outrage before glancing around the room, looking for support as he pointed an accusatory finger at me. “This is what purebloods do. Dismiss our very valid concerns, make us look ignorant or overly dramatic, belittle us to make themselves appear superior while lying to us.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Vintor, shut the hell up and let him speak!” Dawn exclaimed with exasperation. “If you only came here to talk shit, then you might as well leave. Our people are *dying*, and you’re busy being an attention whore and venting your grievances rather than allowing everyone to get the information that may help save their lives. I don’t want to lose anyone else. So please, cut it out.”

Shock, outrage, embarrassment, and anger flitted in quick succession on Vintor’s face. It took every bit of my willpower not to grin smugly at the idiot to have my female call him out like this and publicly siding with me. I couldn’t even muster the slightest guilt for the petty sentiment. However, the stunned reaction of the others, followed by an air of worry, also spoke of Dawn’s own sway over them. If my suspicions were right, she didn’t usually have these types of outbursts. They would undoubtedly interpret it as meaning they truly had grounds for concern.

Vintor made a disgusted gesture and let himself drop back on his chair in a way that implied he wasn’t conceding but merely letting Dawn have her way with a conversation not

worth his time. I barely repressed the urge to roll my eyes at this lame attempt to save face. With a certainty I couldn't explain, my gut told me that had he snapped back at Dawn, the others would have turned on him.

I almost thanked Dawn for her intervention but swallowed it back. As sweet as rubbing Vintor's face in it would have been, I needed them focused on the lurking danger, not settling scores.

"I too believed that purebloods were hunting you," I said in a conciliatory tone. "But a proper autopsy of the victims proved that the apparent ritual killings were in fact only meant to hide the more horrible things that were done to them, and which actually led to their deaths. The murderer isn't hunting you. He's experimenting on you."

A collective gasp followed by baffled mutterings rose in the room. The hybrids exchanged confused and worried glances, many of them struggling to decide whether they believed me.

"What do you mean by that? What kind of experiments, and for what purpose?" Jaek asked, his questions echoing those etched on the faces of the others.

"We do not know what their purpose is," I confessed with a heavy sigh, before giving them a rundown of our findings with the Kranax Beetle eggs and the puncture wounds indicating they had been drained of certain fluids.

Despite continuing to plaster an air of bravado on his face, Vintor also displayed the same disturbed expression as the others.

"It has come to our attention that there is a second group of off-worlders looking to recruit you," I continued carefully.

“We do not claim that they are the ones behind this, but if any of you has additional information you could share about them, it could help us zero in on a suspect.”

“Aaah! So that’s what this is all about!” Vintor exclaimed, going back to his self-righteous attitude. “You didn’t find anything shady about Jardan to keep him from recruiting us, so now you’re trying to discredit another potential recruiter.”

This time, I rolled my eyes, making no effort to hide my annoyance.

“You’re wasting your time,” Vintor continued in a haughty tone. “Whether these experiments are truly happening won’t matter in the greater scheme of things. Soon, we will all leave Haven, and they will not be able to hunt us anymore.”

“Soon, but you aren’t gone yet,” I retorted with a sliver of contempt in my voice. “Do you care so little about those who will die until then? And how about those who already died? Do they not deserve for their murderer to answer for his crimes?”

“Oh, so *now* you are worried about getting justice for hybrids? Why? Because you think you can pin it on off-worlders?” Vintor exclaimed. “But what about the purebloods? Are the ones who abused us going to answer for their crimes as well? Will they pay for the scars—physical and otherwise—that many of us still bear?”

Many of the hybrids nodded, some narrowing their eyes at me as they awaited my answer. Although I had known this question would come, I couldn’t help groaning inwardly.

“Any pureblood who violates the edict is punished mercilessly and in an exemplary fashion,” I replied. “Have you not heard about the fate that befell Gerwin Caldes?”

“Yes, but what about the previous aggressions?” Vintor insisted.

I made an apologetic gesture. “Back then, their actions were not just condoned, they were encouraged by the former Magnar. We cannot retroactively punish people for things that were legal at the time or in accordance with laws that didn’t exist yet.”

Vintor made a disgusted sound. “Typical political excuses to once more protect purebloods from any accountability.”

“They are not excuses, just reality,” I replied, surprised by how well I was maintaining my cool despite how severely he was trying my patience. “We cannot rewrite the past, only strive for a better future.”

“And what future is that?” Vintor challenged.

“*You tell me,*” I said matter-of-factly. “What future would you like to see?”

Vintor huffed. “It is for *you* to tell *us* what you have to offer, just like Jardan has done. We’re not spoon feeding you any answers. You claim you want to do right by us, show us what efforts you’re putting into it.”

Approving whispers rose in the room at his words.

“Then I’d be imposing *my* thoughts and preferences on you instead of meeting *your* needs,” I said in all sincerity. “I am not a hybrid. Beyond the abuse I witnessed or heard of, I cannot begin to imagine what your lives have been like. No pureblood has endured what you have, so we have no clue what you need today. I can speculate, but it would only be a wild guess, and probably one completely off the mark. I’m not a mind-reader. Help me help you.”



“So you want us to send a list of demands?” Vintor asked in an obnoxious tone.

To my pleasant surprise, it felt flat with the others this time. My words were apparently finally starting to get through to them.

“No,” I replied calmly. “I want us to initiate an open dialogue as to the various ways Braxia can help hybrids have a better future, be it back on Braxia or elsewhere. I also realize that after changing the law, we have done little if nothing to help the hybrids who have remained on our homeworld. For this reason, once this shelter closes, I am hoping Dawn will agree to come work with us on Braxia to define assistance and integration programs, and whatever else is necessary to help hybrids achieve their full potential and claim their lawful place among us.”

All eyes turned to my female. I hadn't meant to put her on the spot like this, and yet a shameless part of me felt no qualms at using whatever underhanded means were necessary to keep her with me. To my surprise, Vintor didn't go on another vitriolic rant but took on a speculating expression as if to assess how her coming to Braxia could serve his purpose.

“Last but not least, while we have done too little for hybrids since the edict, there is something tangible that I can make happen for all of you,” I continued. “Vintor accurately pointed out that many of you still bear the scars of the abuse you endured on Braxia, which have left some of you with permanent disabilities. I was able to secure the assistance of a Veredian healer. As their peacekeeping vessel will be patrolling in this sector next week, they have agreed to stop on Haven for a day or two to mend all the hybrids who wish it.”

Disbelieving gasps rose in the room. Even Dawn pressed a palm to her chest, her eyes filled with shock and wonder.

“A Veredian?” Jaek repeated. “Is it true that they can revert any injury, including growing back amputated limbs?”

I smiled gently. “Yes, Jaek. They can fully heal what was done to you. So I strongly recommend that none of you miss this opportunity, as they will not return to this area for at least eight weeks. All their services will be entirely free of charge.”

I didn’t add that seeing Jaek a few days ago and the terrible burn scar he still bore had given me the idea of reaching out to Mercy’s sisters. Seeing the most grievously injured in the crowd perk up with hope clearly didn’t sit well with Vintor. He clenched his teeth before glaring at me.

*What the fuck is his problem?*

“I’m sure my brothers will be grateful for whatever aid the Veredians can offer,” Vintor conceded with a condescending tone. “But it will take far more than this to bribe us.”

I recoiled. “Bribe you? In exchange for what?”

“In exchange for the loyalty of all hybrids, especially of the one you fear will dethrone you,” Vintor said with malicious glee.

Years of training allowed me to keep a neutral expression despite the shock I felt. How in the world did that son of a krillik know about Gavin’s rise in fame? Had it been brewing for a long time, and I’d simply been too blind to it until recently?

The absence of surprise from the others as they muttered their agreement confirmed these rumors—founded or otherwise—had traveled far and wide for quite some time.

“No one can secure the throne of Braxia through bribes. It takes both tremendous physical and mental strength to become and remain Magnar. While I am slated to inherit the throne as is my birthright, anyone is welcome to challenge me for the role, as per Braxian law. I will take on any and all challenges with honor and abide by its outcome. In the end, the right man will rule Braxia.”

“And who’s the right man? You?” Vintor asked with a hint of disdain.

“I can only strive to be the best possible ruler. But Fate will determine who the right man is,” I replied calmly. “As for \_\_\_”

“Jakar!” Tagar called out, interrupting me, his voice filled with tension.

He hurried to the dais from the side of the room where he’d been keeping an eye on potential trouble. A single look on his face confirmed I would hate what would follow.

He stopped next to me and showed me the interface of his bracer displaying a single sentence.

*“New hybrid corpse found.”*



## CHAPTER 13

## DAWN

I paced restlessly while waiting for Keran and his men to return. Night had fallen over two hours ago, although it felt like much longer. Of all the ways the meeting could have ended, I never foresaw this outcome.

As expected, Vintor had gone out of his way to be a complete douchebag. To my pleasant surprise, Keran had risen to the occasion and kept his cool despite Vintor's best efforts to rile him up. It had not gone unnoticed by the men, which had earned the prince their begrudging respect. His wonderful promise to have a Veredian healer come and mend the wounded had blown us all away. I couldn't believe he hadn't given me the heads up about it.

All in all, it had been turning out a success until Tagar dropped the horrible news.

My heart ached for Marug, the latest victim. When nine, ten, and then eleven days had gone by since the last murder, I had genuinely begun to think Keran's presence had scared away the murderer. It had been foolish wishful thinking. But that it happened today, right in the middle of the meeting felt far too convenient to be a coincidence. Obviously, it was pure speculation on my part. I hated feeling this helpless, which only spurred my imagination into running wild.

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the beep from the perimeter security system going off. Pressing a palm to my chest, I hurried around my desk. I dropped into my seat and brought up the camera feed. My heart soared at the sight of Keran's shuttle approaching. I raced out of the building, reaching the landing pad as Tagar completed his descent.

The ramp lowered, and the door parted to reveal Keran. I had never seen him looking so grim and tired... almost defeated.

"That bad?" I asked softly when he stopped in front of me.

"Worse," he replied in a tired voice. He took my hand and led me inside the building, his guards quietly following. "Those extra days before this killing wasn't the murderer delaying the execution for fear of our presence. He needed more time to push the torture on his victim even further."

"Further?" I asked, horrified.

Keran nodded with a disgusted expression. "Orin isn't done with the autopsy, but he confirms that on top of finding even more eggs laid inside the victim, there were visible signs of extensive attempts at healing him, far more than the previous victims. The murderer tried to prolong his life likely so that he could drain even more of whatever fluid he is after."

Angry tears pricked my eyes at such gratuitous cruelty. Why would he subject such a sweet soul as Marug had been to this type of horrific torture? Nothing justified the slow agony he had endured.

"What could that son of a krillik possibly want that he couldn't simply ask for it instead of killing us?" I asked, my anger audible. "Marug never hurt anyone!"

“I don’t know. But now I’m not even sure anymore that it isn’t a pureblood after all,” Keran said dejectedly.

I recoiled and jerked my head left to look at him. “What? Why?”

“The Xeldar seal, the arms of my family, has been carved on Marug’s forehead,” Keran replied with hatred in his voice. “He’s taunting me, letting me know that he’s well-aware of my presence, and that it will not deter him from his current course of action. But worse still, I fear that branding the victim the way he did is his way of signaling that I am—or my family is—responsible for this specific killing.”

“But that doesn’t make sense! You don’t even know these men!” I exclaimed. “How would their deaths benefit you or harm you?”

He shook his head, a frown creasing his prominent brow. “I doubt it’s specifically about me, Keran, but about my bloodline. The Xeldars have been ruling Braxia for five generations now. My father took things in a completely different direction, one I intend to pursue and push even further. Whatever is going on, I believe it is part of a greater scheme to make sure no Xeldar will ever sit on the Braxian throne again.”

A shudder ran down my spine as I reflected on the situation. “Could it be that hybrid Vintor implied would replace you? Gavin Aldriss?”

Keran snorted and shook his head. “No way! Gavin is a good kid. He would never commit gratuitous murders, and certainly not out of ambition. His grappa claims that the boy doesn’t covet my throne. But if he does, there’s no question Gavin will challenge me in a fair and honorable duel. Whoever is behind these killings is insane and bloodthirsty.”



As we reached the entrance of the shelter, Keran opened the door to let me in first. I smiled gratefully and entered, struck once more by how wrong my assumptions about him had been. His simplicity, unpretentious behavior, and genuine care for people blew me away.

“The timing of these murders, only a few months from my ascension and my family seal on the victim are no coincidence,” Keran continued pensively. “But we have no trail to follow. The assassin is doing too great a job of covering his tracks. We couldn’t even find the smallest trace of DNA to hint about who we’re dealing with.”

He rubbed his face with both hands, looking discouraged. My heart constricted for him. I understood all too well that sense of hopelessness.

“I must return to Braxia in two weeks at the latest. But the way things are going, it could very well take us a month or more to catch that son of a krillik.”

My stomach dropped upon hearing those words. Obviously, he couldn’t stay here indefinitely. But his departure had been a distant thought. Having the number of days quantified struck me harder than I’d ever admit. Shoving down those somber thoughts, I gave him a sympathetic smile.

“You’ve done all that you could do today. I had prepared dinner. Do you want me to warm up something for all of you?” I offered, not knowing what else to do.

Tagar and Nowik smiled but shook their heads.

“Thanks, but we already ate,” Keran answered for all of them before turning to his men. “You know what you have to do. But don’t stay up too late. I want to go back and scout the area first thing in the morning.”

The two guards nodded then took their leave.

Facing me again, Keran drew me into his embrace with a strangely vulnerable expression. I caressed his cheek. He turned his face to kiss my palm before leaning into my touch.

“I need you,” he rasped.

“Whatever you need from me, it’s yours,” I whispered.

My knees wobbled in response to the deep tenderness that flitted through his gray eyes. Keran picked me up in his typical fashion, not carrying me like a bride, but chest to chest with him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, my hands settling on his shoulders as he leaned in to claim my lips.

The kiss held a raw, desperate edge that had my heart constricting further as he carried me to his room. With his usual incredible strength, Keran held me up by a single arm behind my thighs while he opened the door—his lips still devouring mine.

He headed straight for the hygiene room and put me back on my feet by the wide vanity. His hands and lips were all over me as he quickly stripped me of my clothes. In his impatience, he didn’t give me a chance to return the favor and got rid of his own garments in record time. His cock, fully erect, pointed at me menacingly, making me instantly wet and needy.

He reclaimed my mouth in a voracious kiss, while pushing me back towards the open shower, which occupied the left corner of the room. With a flick of his wrist, Keran turned on the shower. His other hand dove straight between my thighs. The sound of raining water barely covered my strangled moan as he sank his fingers inside me, and his thumb rubbed my clit.

“I need you,” he growled in a pressing tone against my lips.

“I’m yours. Use me as you see fit,” I replied, the flame of desire sparking low in my belly.

He crushed my lips in a brutal kiss, his arms hooking behind my knees to lift me up. I hissed at the cold feel of the off-white tiles lining the shower as Keran propped me up, my back against the wall. The sharp contrast of his burning chest pressing me further against the wall had my skin erupting in goosebumps.

Keran rubbed his length a couple of times against my slit before pushing himself in. Despite the number of times he had ravaged me last night, my body still initially rebelled at accepting his girth. Although he didn’t ram himself in, Keran proved less patient this time, setting a punishing pace before I had fully adjusted to him.

And I wouldn’t have wanted it differently.

The way he had me pinned against the wall, I had no choice but to take all he had to give as he pounded into me with near savagery. Keran was venting all his rage at the senseless killings, his frustration at our efforts getting systematically thwarted, and I suspected countless other woes related to his impending ascension. It should disturb me to be used as the outlet to pierce that abscess. But to the contrary, I loved that he would seek and find his peace and release with me... *in* me.

I would never tire of this impossible fullness and the intense pleasure welling within with each stroke as his thick cock pressed against my erogenous nerve endings. Keran was ruining me for every other man. My inner walls began clenching around him in anticipation of my impending climax. Each contraction enhanced the sensations on my sensitive inner lining, sending electric sparks throughout my body.

I cried out against his mouth when my orgasm swept me away. Keran grunted, his fingers digging painfully into my thighs as he appeared to struggle not to also give in to bliss. For a brief instant, his movements became erratic, and he broke the kiss, burying his face in my neck while bestial growls freely flowed from his throat.

Before I could even finish riding that first wave of bliss, Keran regained his control and set an even more punishing pace, as if he wanted to break me. His hold grew more brutal, his touch more unbridled as he unleashed his passion on me.

“Again!” he ordered in a voice so thick his words were barely intelligible.

His right hand brushed against my stomach, sneaking between us to reach my clit. Between his massive cock wrecking my pussy, and his fingers frantically massaging my little nub, I detonated with earth-shattering violence.

Keran roared then abruptly pulled out of me. Although he didn't stop rubbing my clit to keep me flying high, I felt hollow, and bereft, my mind struggling to reconcile the sudden emptiness with the waves of ecstasy still washing over me. Worse still, I felt cheated when his seed shot out in hot spurts against my stomach.

He continued to kiss and caress me, whispering tender words of praises until I came back down to reality. After putting me back down on my feet, Keran proceeded to thoroughly wash me with a care and tenderness that had my eyes pricking again. This man was turning me into an emotional mess. The way he went from brutally fucking me senseless to this incredibly gentle handling gave me whiplash.

*And I love everything about it.*

We didn't speak, the silence comfortable and contemplative. Once he finished drying me and started drying himself, I hesitated about putting my clothes on and crawling back to my room. As if he'd guessed at my dilemma, Keran looked at me with an unreadable expression while drying his nape.

"Stay," he said softly, extending his free hand towards me.

I gave him a timid smile, feeling myself melt from the inside out as I went to him. Holding my hand, he drew me against his firm body. We exchanged a slow, tender kiss. When he released me, I took the towel from him and finished drying his back. As soon as I placed the towel on the rack, Keran picked me up in his arms, bride-style this time, and carried me to his bed.

He carefully laid me down before joining me. To my surprise, he leaned on his side to look at me. He placed a hand on my waist, his thumb absentmindedly caressing the side of my stomach. My heart fluttered as his dark gaze bore into mine with its legendary intensity.

"I like you, Dawn," Keran said, his voice just as intense. "A lot. I have no clue what your intentions are as far as we are concerned but know that I intend to bring you back home with me, as my woman."

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest while the most delicious warmth spread throughout my body. I had wondered if I was just another fling in a long string of affairs and casual encounters during his travels. While I had accepted that sad likelihood, his words just now drove home how much the thought of being discarded like some used goods once he left had gnawed at me.

I licked my lips nervously, clamping down on the happiness wanting to surge forward. “I like you a lot, too, Keran. But I understand that Braxians are pretty lax when it comes to... intimacy. Even though I kind of came on to you, I’m generally fairly reserved. I don’t share and don’t want to be shared.”

The tension stiffening my spine faded away when he smiled in response to my words, a glimmer of approval shining in his stormy eyes.

“Good, because I don’t share either, nor do I want to be shared. The only people with any claim over me are my two infant sons.”

My eyes widened in shock, then I immediately kicked myself for not having foreseen it. Of course he would have secured a couple of heirs. The firstborn son of every clan leader was expected to ensure the continuation of the bloodline by having heirs as soon as they reached maturity. As the Crown Prince, it would have been even more urgent for Keran.

I frowned as a troubling thought crossed my mind. “Infant sons? Why still so young?”

He smiled, his hand roaming a bit more boldly on my body. “At first, I was failing to find a female with strong enough genes to give me sons who would be powerful enough to face the countless challenges that would inevitably come their way. Then, just as I was about to settle ten years ago, my father met and married Mercy. She changed everything.”

“How?” I asked, more confused than ever.

“She made me realize just how clueless all of Braxia, myself included, were about the rest of the galaxy. Her knowledge had turned our fate around and stopped the near

financial collapse we were heading into. So I left, traveled both quadrants of the galaxy to learn about other cultures, from how their society worked to their economy, politics, and religion. I forged commercial and political alliances and tried to mend the terrible image Braxians have abroad.”

“Wow! I had no idea. That was quite the undertaking,” I said, impressed.

“It’s something I should have done sooner. Even eight years of this didn’t suffice. But I had to return home. Although I did come back in between trips, with my impending ascension, I needed to be more present and especially sire at least two heirs.”

I shifted uneasily, then reached for him, my fingers distractedly caressing his chest.

“So you finally found the woman with the perfect genes,” I said with a nonchalance I didn’t feel.

Keran snorted. To my shame, the disdain on his face gave me warm fuzzies.

“Dana indeed has the perfect genes. Her bloodline is filled with powerful and legendary warriors.”

“But?” I insisted when his voice trailed off.

“But she was an entitled, self-centered, and obnoxious little princess. In truth, I’m surprised the servants didn’t murder her,” Keran said, sounding amused. He chuckled at my horrified expression. “Relax. Despite their undeniable—and very justified—urge to do so, they wouldn’t have acted on it. My servants are loyal. Any foul play against Dana would have forced her clan to seek retribution. However, had she suffered a genuine accident, no one would have rushed to assist her.”

“Sheesh. You’re not making a very compelling case for me to want to go live there,” I said, only partially joking.

He chuckled again. “*You*, my dear, would have nothing to worry about. You’re nothing like Dana. I officially ended our contract before coming here and sent her back to her father’s compound. She relinquished all rights over our sons and declined any future visitations.”

“Are you serious?!” I exclaimed, flabbergasted.

Keran nodded grimly. “She was only interested in the boys if they helped secure her place as the future Dagna. Once I made it clear it would never happen, she had no more use for them.”

“I’m sorry,” I said in all sincerity.

He shrugged then smiled wistfully. “I’m not. She would have been a negative influence on them. But my sons receive all the love they need. So don’t worry, I won’t try to pin them on you.”

It was my turn to snort. “I’ve spent my whole life helping raise motherless young Braxians by choice, not obligation. So even if that had been your intention, it wouldn’t have scared me away. But you will have to show me pictures.”

He leaned down, his lips stopping a hair’s breadth from mine. “I’ll show you pictures. But seeing them in person will be even better,” he shamelessly added before brushing his mouth against mine.

“It would be,” I conceded. “But first, you have to convince me to come to Braxia.”

“Your wish is my command,” Keran whispered before giving me a demanding kiss.



For the next hour, and throughout the night, he gave me a thousand reasons to do just that.



## CHAPTER 14

## DAWN

Over the next few days, we settled into a comfortable routine. Keran and his men would go out investigating, while I performed the administrative tasks related to the shelter, including the process of shutting it down. If not for the dark cloud of the unsolved murders and the fear of a new victim popping up soon, this would have been one of the happiest times of my life.

Keran made me feel beautiful, cherished, and above all needed. I loved how he would lose himself in me, seek peace and comfort in my company, and ask for my opinion and advice. My entire life, purebloods had been described to me as misogynistic and sadistic cavemen. Keran and his two guards were shattering all those preconceptions. They treated me with respect and consideration, valued my thoughts, and kept me involved in the process every step of the way. I had feared they'd take over everything and cast me aside with some lame line about how this was a task for men.

While Keran was undeniably dominant, he wasn't rude or entitled. What I'd first taken for a lack of tact or social skill was proving to be merely him feeling comfortable enough around me to simply be himself. No artifice, no innuendos or hidden meanings, just the blunt truth as he saw it. As much as

it had initially shocked me, it was growing on me. Teasing him by using his own terms like my ‘sturdiness’ was also proving to be a lot of fun.

I reviewed the inventory files Melinda had sent me and added a few notes on the additional data I wanted included. As we would return Genxia to the Twelve in the upcoming weeks, we needed to list what we would—and were entitled to—keep and what belonged to the shelter. I also had to plan the takeover of the farming fields on the estate, and either end or transfer the long-standing agreements I had established with the customers purchasing our produce.

To my relief, I felt none of the devastation I’d expected to see this major chapter of my life come to an end. The writing had been on the wall for a long time, I’d just refused to admit it. Melinda had been hinting for a while that she’d be looking for a new job elsewhere as work had significantly dwindled here. My mother had invited me to join her on her new mission. They could use an administrator. Before Keran entered my life, I had seriously considered that option. Even though Mother and I weren’t very close, I loved her, and the project had merit.

But meeting the Braxian Prince had changed everything.

I still didn’t know how things would evolve between Keran and me. We were still much too early in this relationship. The wretched man had me falling hard and fast for him. The way he claimed he was keeping me still had my toes curling. But even if things ended up fizzling off between us—which I hoped it wouldn’t—spearheading a support and integration program for hybrids on Braxia had me beyond excited.

After a quick trip to town to run errands and visit my physician, I raced back to Genxia to prepare for the Veredians' arrival. Six days had gone by since we'd found Marug's remains. Our investigation was completely stalled. Keran hoped that, with their far more advanced technology, the Veredian scientists would be able to spot something we had missed while their healers took care of the men.

While helping me set up the food I had brought back from the catering service in town, Melinda buzzed with as much—if not more—excitement than I did. Neither of us had ever met one of the legendary females. The story of their survival, going from the brink of extinction, escaping decades of slavery to then becoming one of the most powerful species in the galaxy still blew my mind.

The hybrids, both males and females, started trickling in well in advance. Their faces displayed the same hope and fear that gnawed at me. What if the Veredians didn't come? What if they couldn't truly heal them? And if they did, how would it change their lives? For both the hybrids' and Keran's sake, I prayed the healer didn't let us down.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest when the Veredian shuttle finally made its approach. The damn thing was gigantic, although smaller than a chaser. The sleek lines hinted at the expert craftsmanship and crazy speeds the vessel could achieve. Entirely made of celesium—the rarest metal in the galaxy—that ship alone could sell for the price of Haven's entire GDP.

A hush descended over the room as I hurried outside to greet our guests. Keran—who had been talking with Jaek—joined me. Aside from a very discreet hum, the shuttle landed

almost soundlessly. With a stealth cloak, it could have flown right next to us, and we'd never have noticed its presence.

The ramp lowered, and the door opened to reveal the most breathtaking females I'd ever beheld. I had seen plenty of images of Veredians. They had all been stunning, but I'd assumed that, as with most marketing material, they'd chosen the prettiest among them. But the four females who stepped out all embodied perfection. They wore short-sleeved, skin-tight, mid-thigh-length, black uniform dresses with knee-high boots, which hid nothing of their flawless hourglass figures or of their beautiful, creamy brown skin.

As was common with Veredians, they kept their hair extremely long. For three of them, it fell to their thighs. On the fourth one, it fell down to her ankles, tied in a single braid, marking her as a Warrior. The difference in the cheetah-like spots that marked the sides of their arms, necks, and legs confirmed my assumption. The first three had similar markings, indicating they were of the Nurturer breed.

Three more females disembarked. Dark cesium armor fully covered these ones. Like the fourth female, their long hair had been bound in a single braid down to their ankles. However, their braid was also covered in cesium armor, a vicious blade dangling at the tip. I had heard what carnage they could inflict with those armored braids.

One of the Nurturers took the lead and approached us with a beaming smile... aimed at Keran. I cast a nervous sideways glance at him, inwardly chastising myself for feeling inadequate and lacking before such perfection. To my relief, despite the warm and friendly smile he was giving her, he showed no sign of being awed or attracted to these beauties.

The Veredian stopped near us, her companions emulating her. She pressed her right palm to her heart before waving her hand towards us in an offering gesture.

“From my heart to yours,” the female said in greeting, her voice sensuously melodic.

*Goddess, is there anything about those females that isn't perfect?*

“And from mine to yours, Thesala,” Keran replied, slapping his chest with his fist in the traditional Braxian greeting. “Please meet Dawn Merrick, who runs this shelter. Dawn, this is Thesala, one of the Veredians' Chief Medical Officers.”

“It's an honor to meet you,” I said, annoyed with how nervous my voice sounded.

“The honor is ours,” Thesala replied warmly. “Keran has told us about the wonderful work you have been doing here. My sisters and I are happy to help provide further relief to those who you care for.”

“From the bottom of my heart, thank you for anything you can do,” I said, my throat constricting with emotion. “Many of them have suffered horribly. What you are offering is priceless.”

“Then let us get started,” Thesala said gently.

She quickly introduced me to the other healers: Nalia, Chante, and Skye. They then followed us back to the shelter, with four hover stretchers trailing behind. Melinda had herded everyone back inside the former prayer hall now turned into our meeting room. When we entered the room, everyone looked at the Veredians as if the Goddess herself had graced us with her presence.



A part of me wanted to feel annoyed by the way some of the males were openly drooling at our guests. Then again, I'd had been blown away by their beauty as well. If I swung that way, I would undeniably also be lusting after them. Thankfully, there was nothing lurid or disrespectful in the awe plastered on the men's faces.

But it was the almost timid expression of the Veredians that moved me the most. I had feared that, with their incredible psionic powers and stunning beauty, they would be haughty. I couldn't have been more wrong. The gentle humility with which they responded to the mesmerized welcome of the hybrids warmed my heart.

With great efficiency, Thesala and the other three healers in dress uniforms took position on the dais with a couple of meters interval between them. Each had a hover stretcher. Thesala and Chante immediately tackled the more grievously injured people, while Nalia and Skye breezed through those with more minor scars.

It felt surreal to me that by merely laying their hands on someone, the Veredian healers could see what was wrong with the patient and heal it. While these four females were healers, other Veredians possessed varying abilities activated by touch, from hacking to telekinesis and everything else in-between.

Were I not seeing scars fading in real time, I never would have believed it. But observing Thesala working on Jaek messed me up the most. He had seemed self-conscious when she'd asked him to remove his shirt. Tears pricked my eyes at the sight of the network of puckered scars on his body, some from burns he'd sustained, and others from cuts and lacerations.

For a split second, I chastised myself for not having set up individual rooms to grant them privacy. But as I had known that the healing only required the Veredian to touch the patient's skin anywhere, not necessarily where the wound was located, I had not expected any of them would need to expose themselves.

Just as I was approaching to offer for them to use one of the guest rooms instead, Thesala gestured to one of the armored Veredians to come over.

"Your wounds are extensive," Thesala told Jaek in a gentle voice. "Fully healing them cold will cause you a great deal of pain. My sister Willow can numb your sensations so you won't feel any discomfort. Is that all right with you?"

"Fully?" Jaek asked in a choked voice. "You can fully heal me?"

"Yes. I will completely mend you, fix your limp, and restore your eyesight. There will be no physical scars left."

Jaek blinked rapidly. I did the same to hold back the tears also pricking my eyes.

"Yes. It's all right with me. Do whatever you deem appropriate," Jaek said.

I had assumed the armored Veredians had come as bodyguards for the healers. While that could still be true, I could now see that they possessed complementary powers to assist the healers in their tasks.

As soon as Willow placed her palm on his shoulder, Jaek took on a groggy expression, like someone mildly sedated who was fighting to remain conscious. His good eye flicked towards me. I'd stopped my approach a couple of meters away. He weakly lifted his hand in my direction. Without

hesitation, I walked over to him and took his hand as Thesala placed her palm on his solar plexus.

Where her sisters had healed most of the other patients in only a few minutes, it took Thesala over half an hour to fully mend Jaek. But I didn't even notice. I was too enthralled by the process. Seeing the puckered scars on his body resorb and fade felt like watching a timelapse in reverse. His eye shut by scar tissue slowly took back its former shape, eyelashes and eyebrow growing at an accelerated pace.

When Thesala lifted her hand, imitated seconds later by Willow, I held my breath. Halfway through, Jaek had closed his eyes. If not for him occasionally squeezing my hand, I would have believed he'd fallen asleep. His eyelids fluttered, and he turned his gaze towards me with both his perfectly formed eyes.

My vision blurred as a powerful emotion settled on his now flawless features.

"I see you," Jaek said in a shaky voice. "Don't cry, Dawn."

"They're happy tears," I said, feeling silly as I sniffled.

He made to sit up on the hover stretcher but almost fell back down.

"Careful!" Thesala warned, supporting his back with one hand. "I had to use a lot of your energy reserves to mend you. You will need to eat and rest a lot over the next couple of days."

"We'll make sure of it," I said firmly. "Thank you. What you have done is a miracle."

"Yes, thank you. I have no words. I can never repay you for giving me my life back," Jaek said, his voice full of emotion and gratitude.

“There is nothing to repay,” Thesala said warmly. “There is no greater gift for a healer than to see a patient restored to health.”

After sheepishly wiping the tears off my face, I helped Jaek off the hover stretcher and led him to one of the seats in the room. Only then did I notice everyone else present caught in animated discussions, happiness on their faces as they showed flawless skin to each other... or rather the females.

While Jaek had allowed Thesala to remove every single scar on his body, many of the other males appeared to have only allowed the healers to heal aches and pains but not to remove the battle scars they took pride in.

“Let me get you some food,” I said to Jaek.

He smiled with gratitude. I hurried to the large tables where Melinda and I had laid out the catering. Although the others were also picking at the food, most of them seemed too amazed by their miraculous healing to focus on such trivial things as eating.

As I filled a plate for Jaek, my gaze roamed the room in search of Keran. He and his guards were nowhere to be seen. He had mentioned that he would meet with the Veredian Scholars to go over the evidence we had found so far.

I returned to Jaek, my heart filled with joy. When I first took over the shelter, I had hoped to accomplish something big that would significantly improve the lives of the hybrids. While I couldn't take direct credit for any of this, I rejoiced that calling Keran for help had allowed this wondrous outcome.

“Thank you,” Jaek said, taking the plate from me.

I smiled and watched him eat, still flabbergasted by the transformation. “You look amazing,” I blurted out.

Jaek stopped eating to look at me, a million emotions flitting over his face, a glimmer of uncertainty and timidity sparkling in his eyes. I immediately kicked myself for my stupid mouth running away with me, even though I meant what I said.

“Amazing enough to finally have a chance with you?” he asked softly.

My cheeks burned, and I shifted in my seat. “Your appearance was never the issue,” I replied honestly. “It never bothered me.”

“Then what was it?” he asked in the same soft tone.

“If I dated one of you and things didn’t work out, then someone else would hit me up. I’d end up getting passed around,” I said in an apologetic tone. “I didn’t want to create false expectations or worse to have some people screaming favoritism if I didn’t pick them. It was just safer and simpler to avoid fraternization with anyone at the shelter.”

Jaek nodded slowly with a pensive expression. “Fair. We both know who would have shouted the loudest,” he added, casting a meaningful glance towards Vintor, which had me snorting. “But things are different now. Everyone is leaving. Most will scatter to the four winds. You could come with me.”

I recoiled. “You’re leaving, too? But what about your research?”

“Yeah. I only stayed here because of you. So long as the shelter operated, you would never leave. I turned down many great opportunities off-world. But now that nothing shackles you here anymore, you could come with me.”

I gaped at him, speechless. All those years, I'd known he'd been infatuated with me, but never would I have suspected he'd turned down jobs to be near me.

"The Prince said he'd offered you a role on Braxia to help integrate hybrids to their society," Jaek continued in a pressing tone. "It felt like a sign."

"A sign?" I echoed, confused.

He nodded. "The Braxian Queen owns the most high-tech research lab in the entire Eastern Quadrant, right there on Braxia. She's been training our females in various scientific fields. I could apply there."

"You? *You* would return to Braxia?" I asked, flabbergasted.

He swallowed hard then nodded. "Things have changed. Magnar Ravik executed my sire, which was well-deserved. My oldest brother, to whom I owed my disfigurement, has also met an untimely death. I refuse to be a prisoner of my past. You and this shelter helped me reclaim my life. You first helped mend me psychologically, and now physically," he added, waving at his body.

My throat constricted, I gently patted his shoulder. "I have no merit in this, Jaek. *You* did all the work. I simply pointed you to programs that could help you. And it was Keran who brought the Veredians here."

"Because *you* called him first," Jaek countered.

"True. But he went above and beyond any assistance I ever imagined he would provide," I said wistfully.

When Jaek didn't respond, I looked at him. My stomach dropped at the sorrow in the depth of his inky eyes.

“You like him,” he said factually, although I didn’t miss the pain in his voice.

I swallowed hard and carefully chose my words. “Keran is not at all what I expected. He’s a good man, and he’s truly trying to do right by us.”

Shame burned deep in my gut for not flat out telling him about my involvement with Keran. Now, in this joyous moment, didn’t feel like the right time. A part of me almost regretted my entanglement with Keran. Jaek was truly a wonderful man who I could have fallen deeply in love with, and who clearly loved me. But I was seriously falling hard for Keran. Calling it quits with him to go the safer route offered by Jaek would be cowardly and unfair. In truth, it would feel like a rebound. Jaek deserved better than that.

“Right now, I’m not making any long-term plans. My sole focus is catching that killer and keeping everyone safe. I need to know that you’re all going to be fine. I’ve lost too many of you already. All I can think about is the fact that Ramsay is still missing and that in three more days, we’ll likely find him mutilated like the others.”

“We will find the murderer,” Jaek said with conviction. “Your prince isn’t going to let go that easily.”

I pretended not to hear him referring to Keran as *my* prince.

“I hope so. He seems determined to do that. But with everyone scattering, I fear he’ll move on to other priorities,” I admitted. “Still no news from that other headhunter?”

He shook his head with an apologetic look. “Still nothing. The others also didn’t—”

His com beeping interrupted him. He cast a glance at the interface, and a troubled expression crossed his features.

“I must go.”

“Are you steady enough to leave on your own?” I asked, worried.

“I’ll be fine,” he said with a reassuring smile before showing me his half-full plate. “I’m taking this with me. I’ll finish eating during the flight.”

“Okay, but don’t overdo it. Thesala said you needed to rest,” I warned him sternly.

He smiled, an air of longing flashing over his face. “See? You do care more than you admit to yourself. This conversation isn’t over.”

Jaek caressed my cheek with the back of his hand then walked away.





## CHAPTER 15

## KERAN

I stared at the vidscreen without seeing it. My eyes kept flicking to the window in Dawn's office. I couldn't stop stealing glances at her while she interacted with the two dozen hybrids who had come to work the fields. She had allowed my men and me to use her worktable for our meetings. Tagar's voice sounded like a distant droning as he went over the triangulation efforts he'd performed to locate the murderer's lair.

The Veredians' insights into this case had only raised more questions. They had confirmed our initial assessment that the culprit was draining hormonal fluids from the victims. However, they had found indications that their sensory receptors had been numbed. This meant the killer wasn't getting off on watching his victims suffer. Their gruesome death was merely a result of their experiment's needs.

*A merciful murderer?*

None of this made sense. A thorough analysis of all our fluids failed to reveal what could possibly be of interest to the killer that he'd be harvesting them. This mess was dragging on too long. In a week, I would have to go back to Braxia and let my men pursue the investigation without me. Granted, I had full confidence in their ability to see this through on their own,

but me not actively taking part in solving this mystery felt like a failure.

My gaze flicked again out the window, searching for Dawn.

Another wave of jealousy surged through me as I watched her talking with one of the hybrids. Even though I had clearly stated my intentions of taking her with me, Dawn had remained elusive as to her plans. I believed she wanted to stay with me as much as I wanted to keep her. However, things were undoubtedly moving too quickly for her.

Beyond the fact that she would never agree to leave until the culprit was apprehended—or that every hybrid at risk had left Haven—what did I really have to offer her? With every waking moment spent hunting that wretched killer, I didn't have the time to properly court her. We were much too early in our relationship for me to make a long-term commitment to her. And I wasn't so special that she'd want to uproot herself to come settle with me on a planet that had been hostile to people like her.

And that was the other issue. While I absolutely didn't care that she was a hybrid, the purebloods would likely frown at it. My father had married an off-worlder, and now I was considering a committed relationship with a hybrid? Even Krygor, the second most powerful male on Braxia, had married an off-worlder.

People had muttered about Mercy as their new Dagna. But she was a Veredian—a species that the entire galaxy held in awe. Her incredible wealth and powerful connections had all also played a major part in silencing any discontent. That she was an incredible Warrior, and that she'd greatly helped in

turning Braxia's challenged economy around had earned her the respect of all the clans.

Dawn didn't have all that to bring into the relationship. I could already hear people implying that I was another one of those who thought off-worlder females were better than our pureblood ones. So much so that I'd settle for one that had nothing to offer, which couldn't be further from the truth. Fine, she didn't have Mercy's wealth or connections. But she was strong, smart, charismatic, and undaunted by even what seemed like insurmountable challenges. Her selflessness and devotion to the welfare of others were the exact type of qualities I sought in a companion.

*Anyway, I don't give a shit what they think.*

And I truly didn't. However, Dawn might feel differently about it. Was that part of her reluctance to commit to coming with me? She cared about me. Her affection shone bright in her eyes whenever she looked at me. From the start, she'd been my greatest support here, despite my disappointing performance after a great start. Dawn believed in me and in the fact that I would solve this.

*And yet, I'm going nowhere fast, except back to Braxia with my tail between my legs.*

I heaved a frustrated sigh and forced myself to refocus on the screen, only to realize the room had gone quiet. I scrunched my face as if I'd bitten into something foul when I found Tagar and Nowik staring at me with a sympathetic expression. Ancestors! When had I become so damn pathetic?

"Apologies," I said, disgusted with myself.

My men spared me the humiliation of further rubbing it in. Tagar continued as if he hadn't caught me daydreaming...

again.

“We believe we should canvas this sector next,” Tagar said, pointing at an area far north of Jordan’s ranch. “There are a few pharmaceutical labs located in that region. It’s a long shot as they’ve been established for decades. But they are within a fairly short flight from most of the locations where victims were found.”

“That makes sense,” I replied pensively. “Any chance we can get their administrators to let us take a peek inside?”

“Baldur is working on it. But I say we—”

Tagar abruptly stopped talking, his head jerking up to look out the window with a frown. I followed his gaze to see Dawn running towards the main building. I jumped out of my chair and hurried out of the room to go meet her. A million thoughts fired off in my mind as to what had her racing here. Surely a new body hadn’t surfaced already? Assuming the killer followed his original pattern, we still had thirty-two hours before we reached nine days since the last death. But I wanted to hope that he would stretch it to eleven days like with the previous victim, giving us more time.

Even as that thought crossed my mind, I flinched inwardly. Yes, more time would help us. However, that also meant the victim—probably the hybrid named Ramsay that was still missing—would sustain a prolonged torture.

At least, if the Veredians were right, his senses would be numbed during that dreadful ordeal.

In my eagerness to get to Dawn, I nearly tore the front door off its hinges as I violently opened it. I hurried down the short flight of stairs just as she was reaching the entrance. My wariness gave way to a burning curiosity when Dawn looked

at me with excitement instead of the grim expression I'd expected.

"Jaek just messaged me!" she exclaimed while closing the distance between us. "The second headhunter contacted him. The meeting is in two days, at 18:00."

My heart leapt. "In two days! Where?"

She shook her head with an apologetic look. "The headhunter didn't say, or rather he deliberately withheld that information. Here, Jaek forwarded the message he received. It is a no-reply address," Dawn said while handing me her com.

"That's not suspicious at all," I said with all the sarcasm I could muster while taking the device from her to read the message.

*"Information session in two days, on the fourteenth at 18:00. The location will be shared with you two hours prior to the event.*

*Do not discuss this matter with anyone aside from hybrids. Other recruiters are proving quite ruthless in their efforts to thwart any potential rivals.*

*Feel free to invite others to attend (Braxian hybrids only). You will not regret it."*

"I think we got him," I said pensively before passing the com to Tagar and Nowik, who had followed me out of the building. "This behavior is much too shady. No competitor would resort to this type of secrecy."

"I agree," Dawn said, excitement bubbling in her voice. "I'm going."

"WHAT?!" I exclaimed, my shock reflected on my men's faces. "It is out of the question!"

Dawn's face immediately closed off. "I'm not your property. You do not get to dictate what I can or cannot do."

"This has nothing to do with that," I snapped back with annoyance. "If this is the culprit, he's a heartless serial killer. There's only one missing hybrid left. He's out of victims for his experiment. My gut says he's gathering them all in that meeting to get a fresh supply, if not abduct all of them. And you want to walk into that trap headfirst?"

"I have considered it," Dawn said, giving me a 'Don't treat me like I'm stupid' look. "And that's precisely why I should go. Believe me, I would have preferred for one of you to go, but he specifically said *hybrids only*. If purebloods show up, I'm sure the organizer will not proceed with whatever crazy plans he has in mind. But you can put a wire and a tracker on me so that you can hear all that is happening in there. And if he tries to pull a fast one, wherever he takes us will lead you straight to his lair."

"Okay, but it's still too dangerous," I argued, hardly reassured by this. "We could put the tracker and wire on Jaek since he plans on attending. We don't need to put you in danger."

"A good leader would never ask their people to do what they themselves aren't willing to do," Dawn said sternly.

I flinched at that comment as I indeed applied that rule to myself. But she was my woman. What kind of protector would I be if I casually let her walk into danger?

"Anyway, let's go inside to discuss this rationally," Dawn continued in the same stern tone.

Without waiting for me to answer, she stomped back inside. My men didn't say a word. The sideways glance they



cast my way echoed every single emotion coursing through me. For the very first time in my life, I caught myself wishing females were still property—even though I had no right over Dawn specifically. In my need to keep her safe, I couldn't even feel ashamed for that thought.

I followed her in, forcing myself to keep my cool while mentally lining up the arguments I hoped would sway her. As soon as we settled around the worktable in her office, I opened my mouth to make my case, but Dawn immediately stopped me by raising her palm in an arresting gesture.

“Before you start tearing into me, understand that I have been thinking about this from the first time Jaek mentioned this to us ten days ago,” she said in a reasonable but firm voice. “I understand your concerns, and I truly appreciate your desire to protect me. But I also need you to trust that I'm not some airhead trying to play heroes. As much as I want to catch the son of a bitch who is killing us, I don't have a death wish of my own and wouldn't deliberately set myself up for trouble.”

“How is you going there not setting yourself up to be in danger?” I challenged.

“Because I have you, and you'll know exactly where I am at all times,” Dawn said matter-of-factly. “Because I will be surrounded by dozens—if not hundreds—of other hybrids, who happen to have undergone pretty fantastic combat training with Jordan for the past seven weeks. Unless the killer has a full-on army with him, there's no way he would move against so many of us.”

“Fair,” I conceded with much reluctance. “But what if he does come with a full army? What if only a handful of hybrids show up?”

“Then we abort and call in reinforcements,” Dawn replied as if it was self-evident. “You have a full crew on your frigate. You can have a couple of chasers standby in stealth mode following me to detect if there’s anything wonky. But if everything looks fine and many of the others are present, then this will be our best opportunity to know who and what we’re dealing with.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but I still don’t see why we can’t simply ask Jaek to wear the wire and tracker,” I argued stubbornly.

“Because Jaek isn’t attending the meeting to solve an investigation,” Dawn said dismissively. “Like the others, he’s going there to see if this is something he might be interested in. He already expressed interest in returning to Braxia to work at your Dagna’s research facility. His focus will be on whatever sales pitch that recruiter will spew, not poking around for clues, like I will be.”

“I get where you’re coming from, but I’m still really uncomfortable with sending you into danger,” I confessed.

To my surprise, instead of rolling her eyes in aggravation, Dawn took on a soft, almost tender expression.

“You’re not *sending* me anywhere,” she said gently. “I’m *choosing* to go there. But I appreciate that you didn’t say that you were uncomfortable with *allowing* me to go.”

I snorted, my reaction echoed by my men. Dawn didn’t need us to tell her all three of us were pondering ways to forbid her from going.

“Look, we have two full days to plan for every possible case where things could go wrong and come up with countermeasures,” she said in a reasonable tone. “Right now,

my plan is to attend. But if we end up with too many scenarios where things could go belly up with no proper ways to mitigate the risks, then I'll sit this one out. I'm not unreasonable."

"Then let's find all of the unmitigable scenarios," I grumbled.

"Indeed, let's," Tagar said in the same grumpy tone.

Nowik grunted his assent. Dawn laughed at our displeasure, her beautiful green eyes sparkling with mischief.

For the next few hours, we plotted and schemed, Dawn occasionally leaving for a few minutes to deal with whatever the hybrids working the fields outside required. As much as I hated the thought of my woman going to that meeting, we were indeed accounting for every possible situation and failing to find one that we couldn't handle, unless we went into unlikely extremes.

The biggest challenge was not knowing the actual location of the meeting. Was it in a forest or open field? A multi-story building or an underground bunker? The possibility of the latter concerned me the most. However, it was very unlikely. Hardly any construction on Haven possessed a basement as most of them were prefabricated, deployable buildings provided by the Galactic Council or charitable organizations.

By the time we called it a night, we had a pretty solid plan and the entire day tomorrow to set it up. As I needed a bit more time to coordinate with my crew, Dawn headed to her bedroom. I hadn't entered her quarters once since my arrival as she'd always come to mine instead.

Although we hadn't discussed our plans for the night, as soon as I wrapped up my tasks, I boldly strolled straight to her

room. I raised my hand to knock, but the distant sound of raining water warned me she was likely taking a shower. Feeling even more daring, I opened the door, relieved to find it unlocked.

The sharp contrast of colors from the mostly white and beige palette in my room took me aback. But then, it made sense she'd gone for something more neutral for a guest room. While Braxians usually went for darker colors, mostly burgundy, dark greys, and deep browns, the lighter palette Dawn had used for her room resonated nicely with me. It gave me another window into her personality.

As much as I wanted to explore more of her room, I made a beeline for the hygiene room, discarding my clothes in the process. When I pushed the door open, making enough noise to make sure she knew I was approaching, Dawn didn't even flinch or turn around to look at who was intruding on her ablutions.

"You sure took your sweet time," she said tauntingly, her back still turned to me as she continued to rub soap all over her body.

I chuckled. "My apologies," I said, slowly approaching while my gaze roamed over her.

Fuck, she was beautiful! Her body was truly sheer perfection. Dawn had become an obsession and an addiction I didn't want to be cured of. The thought of losing her...

I immediately cast it out of my mind, refusing to let my fears about our upcoming mission ruin the moment. Standing behind her, I drew my woman against my chest with one arm, the other fisting her hair and gently tugging on it. Dawn yielded with a purr, tilting her head back to receive my kiss.

Ancestors! How I loved the taste of her, the way her body fit so flawlessly against mine, and how her warmth seeped into my skin. She'd been made for me... only for me. Under the pretense of washing her, I took my time caressing her delectable curves, one palm lingering on one of her generous breasts, the right size to fill my large hand, and the fingers of the other hand zeroing in on her clit. My mouth watered, but I couldn't decide which part I wanted to suck on the most between her nipple and her clit.

I would never tire of how responsive Dawn was to my touch and the sounds she made as she shivered against me. No other female had ever stirred such rabid hunger and possessiveness in me. I'd never considered myself the chest-thumping Neanderthal—as human women loved to call overly dominant males—but with Dawn, I ached to go full-on caveman with her. After all, I already had the facial features to go with it.

And yet, while my face would never win any beauty contest, my female always looked at me as if I was a wonder to behold. With her growing up surrounded by so many attractive species, the Dantorians being at the top of that list, I would have expected her to be turned off by a pureblood's rough appearance. That she had never granted her favors to any of the hybrids had reinforced that presumption.

*But here she is, in my arms... all mine.*

Wanting to see that look again, I broke the kiss and turned her around to face me. Ancestors! The way she peered at me with an air of pure adoration thoroughly fucked with my head. Dawn wasn't in love with me. But if this was how she gazed at me when only lust drove her, what would it be like if I made

her fall head over heels for me? The powerful longing that thought stirred left me reeling.

“You’re mine,” I growled almost angrily before claiming her mouth in a brutal kiss.

Fuck me! I loved how she always submitted to my dominance but without becoming passive. Dawn remained an eager and active participant, her hands gliding over me with a fever that whipped my blood into a frenzy. I loved even more that not only she didn’t cower from my rougher ways, but she also reciprocated in kind. She clawed at my back, the exquisite burn making me insanely hard.

As if to contradict my thoughts about her submitting to my dominance, Dawn broke the kiss and pulled away from me until she stood under the raining water, rinsing off the soap on her skin. She extended a hand to me. I approached, the water getting rid of the soap she’d transferred to me.

To my shock, just as I was about to draw her back into my embrace, my woman pushed me against the wall. The coldness of the tiles against my back startled me. For a split second, I thought of how many times I’d pinned Dawn against the wall before pounding into her, and the hissing sound she invariably emitted on first contact.

But her lips roaming over my chest, down to my nipples reclaimed my attention. She nipped at the left one, giving it a solid sting that had my cock jerking with approval. Dawn sucked on my nipple, her right hand venturing further south over my stomach and down to my groin. I sucked in a breath when her palm wrapped around my shaft. Her fingers couldn’t touch due to my girth, but that didn’t stop her from squeezing me with the brutal grip I craved as she gave me a few slow strokes.

My abdominal muscles contracted painfully as her mouth abandoned my nipple to journey lower. Her tongue traced the creases on my stomach then licked my navel as she crouched before me. My breath hitched, and my pulse raced with anticipation as she stared at my length, then leaned forward. A bolt of lust set my loins on fire as Dawn brushed her lips against my cock. The exquisite torture of that fluttering caress had me craving more.

But the wretched female prolonged my torment by rubbing her face all over my shaft, kissing it and nipping at the veins that ran along its side. She was deliberately denying me what I wanted. A part of me wondered if she was trying to provoke me into 'bossing her around' like humans liked to say. Another suspected Dawn was both trying to drive me insane with lust *and* testing my willpower and willingness to let her take charge.

As she always yielded to my will during our encounters, I ground my teeth and silenced my need to be in control. This time, I would be hers to do with as she pleased.

*I'll just get even later...*

All thoughts of the fiendish ways in which I would make her beg me for release flew right out of my mind the moment the inferno of her mouth closed around my tip. I cried out, my hand fisting her hair on her nape with far more strength than I intended.

Ancestors! I had known it would be good with that stunning mouth of hers, but the way Dawn swallowed my cock had me on the verge of coming undone. My knees nearly buckled as she took me insanely deep down her throat. My woman had a wide mouth, but I never imagined she could take so much of me. With one hand, she fondled my testicles. With

the other, she painfully squeezed the base of my shaft, roughly stroking it in counterpoint to the movement of her head bobbing in front of me. Fuck, that was good!

A string of incoherent words, grunts, and moans tumbled out of me as my female cast me down into an endless vortex of bliss. If not for the wall supporting my back, I would have collapsed. The world vanished around me. Nothing existed but the searing heat of Dawn's mouth wrapped around my cock. Electric jolts coursed through me each time she grazed me with her teeth, followed by the silky caress of her tongue swirling around my shaft.

It was too much and yet not enough.

The savage beast inside me wanted to fist her hair with both hands and fuck her face with the same unbridled abandon I did when I was buried deep inside her. The more tender side of me I hadn't even known existed ached for the feel of her soft and warm skin against mine, of her arms holding me like she feared I might disappear, of her labored breathing in my ear as she whispered my name in a pleading voice between moans.

And yet, intense pleasure was building too fast, too strong within me. If I didn't stop her now, I'd be spilling my seed in no time. No fucking way I would find release before I had my woman screaming my name at least once or twice first.

"Stop, Dawn. Stop," I said in a strained and breathy voice, as I battled not to give in to bliss.

Instead of complying, the thrice damned female redoubled her efforts, her hands and mouth working me in a frenzy. When I started pulling her back by the hair, Dawn jerked her head forward, taking me deep in her throat, then started humming.



A blinding light exploded before my eyes. My spine seized so violently, I feared it would snap in half. I brutally yanked Dawn away from me, a feral roar erupting from my throat at the same time my seed shot forth. My woman cried out. I released her hair to close that hand around my throbbing shaft as my essence continued to pour out of me in the purest form of liquid ecstasy.

Eyes tightly shut, my head thrown back, I held myself up with one hand propped against the shower wall. I stroke my cock with the other until the last of my seed was spent. Feeling faint from the violence of the orgasm that had swept me away, I slowly opened my eyes. The room spun as if I'd overly indulged in Braxian wine.

However, the sight of Dawn, sitting on her heels before me, claimed my entire focus.

With both palms, she was slowly rubbing my seed all over her breasts. Blood instantly rushed back to my cock. Braxians could get hard at will. But I didn't even have to expend the effort. My body reacted with a will of its own. This female owned me.

The smug and lascivious expression on her face whipped my pride. With a menacing growl, I picked her off the floor and slammed her back against the wall, hard enough to punish her for making me climax first, but nowhere near enough to hurt her. A throaty and taunting laugh followed Dawn's initial gasp of surprise.

Heedless of my seed still covering her breasts, I pressed my chest against hers, trapping her against the wall. I rubbed my engorged shaft against her slit while baring my teeth at her.

"You've been a very naughty girl, Dawn," I growled.

“I have,” she proudly concurred. “You should punish me to teach me the errors of my ways.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m about to. Prepare to beg for mercy... although none will be granted.”

The eagerness and burning desire in her eyes spurred me on, daring me to proceed. And proceed I did. With one powerful thrust, I impaled Dawn on my cock. I hissed at the exquisite burn of her tight sheath squeezing me as it tried to push me out in protest of my brutal invasion.

Ancestors, it should be illegal for her to feel this good. As was my wont, I didn’t ease her into it and immediately unleashed the beast that had been rattling at its cage to be set free when she was sucking my cock.

I somewhat felt guilty about how often I made love to her in the shower. But I hated having a condom between us. I couldn’t pull out without messing the bed. Here, I got to feel all of my woman, from her essence coating my length to the soft texture of her inner walls fiercely gripping me.

While relentlessly pumping in and out of her, losing myself in pleasure almost too much to bear, I reclaimed the mouth that had given me such extreme delight in a passionate kiss. Our tongues warred as our bodies danced at an infernal rhythm.

My brain idled by a maelstrom of sensations, I never even saw Dawn’s orgasm creeping up on her. It was only when her body seized in my arms and her inner walls clamped down on my cock that I realized she’d toppled over. She cried out against my lips, then buried her face in my neck, clinging to me as if she feared never to come back from the high that had swept her away.

Gritting my teeth against the urge to give in to another release, I ground my pelvis against hers to stimulate her clit and keep her riding that wave a while longer before resuming pounding into her.

Moments after her spasms receded, Dawn pressed her lips against my left ear.

“When you climax, don’t pull out,” she whispered, as if she’d heard the thoughts crossing my mind.

I froze mid-thrust, my heart nearly leaping out of my chest. Jerking my head back, I locked gazes with Dawn, wanting to make sure I properly understood her meaning.

She licked her lips nervously and tightened her hold around me, as if to keep me from pulling away. “Don’t worry, it’s okay. I’m not trying to pin a baby on you. On the day the Veredians came, I had my contraceptive implant upgraded for Braxians before I picked up the catering,” Dawn explained, her eyes warily flicking between mine. “I just... I want to feel all of you.”

The depth of the disappointment I felt took me aback. For a moment, I had hoped she would say that she wanted to bear me a child. The image of a smaller version of Dawn wiggling in my arms had my heart constricting with a powerful longing.

“Why would the thought of us conceiving worry me?” I asked in a soft voice, relieved that my disappointment didn’t show in my voice. “Braxians always take pride in the offspring they sire. And now, this also includes hybrids. I would welcome a child from you.”

Her lips parted in shock. When she smiled timidly instead of looking horrified at that prospect, the tension I didn’t realize had been knotting my back suddenly faded. I didn’t know that

she actually wanted a child with me, but her reaction implied that she wasn't necessarily opposed to it.

Now that Dawn had brought it up, I would have no peace until her womb quickened with my seed. She *would* bear me a child.

“But once I spill inside you, there will be no more hiding our relationship,” I warned her. “No amount of showering will wash away my scent from you. Everyone will know you're mine.”

To my shock, I found myself holding my breath, my eyes flicking between hers as I awaited her response. The mere couple of seconds she took to answer felt like a century and a day.

“And that's a problem, why?” she asked tauntingly. “Didn't you just say I was yours?”

Her words resonated straight in my cock. A possessive growl rumbled out of my throat while a predatory smile stretched my lips.

“Yes. Because you *are* mine. And now, the whole world will know. I'm about to fuck you raw, Dawn. I'm going to fill you to the brim.”

Her inner walls contracted around my cock still buried deep inside her, as if to ask what the heck I was waiting for.

“Do your worst,” she dared me.

And I complied.

Time and space lost all meaning. Anything that wasn't Dawn, that wasn't our bodies coming together as one in a savage dance had no place here. Every cell in my being felt on the verge of combusting as I rammed myself deep inside my

woman, over and over again. She bit and clawed at me, fanning the inferno that raged within me with the most wondrous mix of pleasure and pain.

Far from breaking, my Dawn begged for more, and more I gave. I wrested one climax after another from her. Occasionally, I would join my voice to hers, my seed erupting inside her in almost excruciating bliss. After the second time, I put her back onto her feet, and bent her over, facing away from me. I took her from behind with the same relentless vigor. Her palms resting against the shower wall, Dawn rocked back and forth, meeting me thrust for thrust.

Unable to resist, I gave the plump mounds of her behind a few solid slaps, soothing the sting with a caress after each one. Dawn's approving moans, and her essence gushing between her thighs reassured me that she enjoyed a bit of spanking.

Ancestors, she was my perfect partner.

As my ultimate climax built again, I caressed her side, my hand slipping to her front and down between her thighs to rub her clit. Dawn emitted a strangled moan. She threw her head back as bliss swept her away again. Her knees buckled. I caught her before she could collapse but didn't stop my sensual assault on her until my own orgasm struck me.

The room spun, and my eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head as pleasure too much to bear slammed into me. It felt like a thousand micro-explosions were setting off throughout my body while liquid flames raced through my veins. But it was the searing heat of my seed shooting out in blissful spurts into my woman that had me coming undone.

I couldn't recall lowering us onto the floor. By the time I regained awareness of my surroundings, I was sitting on the

shower's floor, Dawn curled up in my arms, and lukewarm water raining over us.

“You’ll be the death of me, woman,” I whispered before kissing her forehead.

She chuckled and snuggled even deeper into me. “Although this doesn’t sound like too bad of a way to keel over, you’re not allowed to die on me. I’m keeping you.”

It was my turn to chuckle, my heart filling with a deep affection for her that was far too early to name. My arms tightened possessively around Dawn, a sense of peace and happiness washing over me.

“Good, because I’m all yours.”



## CHAPTER 16



## DAWN

The next twenty-four hours flew by much too fast. We went over our plan a million times. Keran and his entire crew attempted to account for every possible contingency if things went sideways.

He absolutely hated that I would be participating in the meeting. If he could, Keran would smother me in bubble wrap, lock me up inside a padded room, and throw away the key until all danger had passed. Truth be told, as much as I didn't want anyone believing themselves entitled to boss me around, I rather loved how protective Keran felt of me.

*And his men, too.*

Tagar and Nowik were starting to feel like big brothers to me. Initially, Tagar came off as possibly having a crush on me. I couldn't tell whether Keran had told him to piss off, or if he'd noticed on his own that something was brewing between his boss and me. Either way, I was grateful to have been spared the discomfort of turning down unwanted advances. Tagar was hot in his own right, but Keran had quite literally swept me off my feet.

My nipples hardened as images of all the ways in which Keran wrecked me last night flashed before my mind's eye.

You'd think after the sex marathon we'd had in the shower, my lover would have been down for the count. Fuck no. Not Keran. We had a few more rounds in bed, which forced us to go wash up again a couple of times.

Like he had stated, no amount of showering had washed his scent off me. The way Tagar's and Nowik's nostrils flared the minute they approached me confirmed there would be no more hiding the nature of my relationship with the Prince. I had expected to feel a little self-conscious about it, but only possessive pride surged within me.

However, that also meant the hybrids would smell him on me at the meeting tomorrow. As they had already met Keran, they would know the identity of my lover. While I didn't give a shit what they thought, I did care about Jaek. After he'd made his attraction to me officially known on the day the Veredians healed him, he deserved to be given a heads up.

Unfortunately, the four messages I had sent him since this morning, asking that he message me back when he would have a minute to talk, had gone unanswered. At first, I had not overly worried about it as Jaek often took a while to respond, usually because he was eyeballs deep in some research or experiment. His colleagues regularly had to chastise him into remembering to stop for a meal.

But when night fell, then morning came still without a word from him, every possible horrible thought crept into my mind. Refusing to give into panic just yet, I called his com. He never picked up. Heart pounding, I called the hospital where he worked. When the receptionist confirmed he'd not been in all day yesterday, and wasn't expected in today, I nearly fainted.

“There’s no need to worry, Ms. Merrick,” the receptionist said in an appeasing tone. “I know what terrible tragedies have been occurring to your people. But Mr. Sedrak is fine. He sent in some urgent reports this morning. It is not rare for him to work remotely when he has a lot of highly sensitive tests to run under a time crunch. Here, people never leave him alone, with one request or another.”

“You’ve heard from him?!” I exclaimed, relief flooding through me.

“Yes,” she said in the same soothing voice. “Don’t worry. He will get back to you soon enough. With that medical ethics lawsuit he’s testifying in, Mr. Sedrak is extremely swamped.”

“Okay, thank you so much,” I replied with sincere gratitude.

“My pleasure. Have a great day!”

I hung up, my growing panic having subsided but not fully vanished. It would take four more hours before my com finally beeped with an incoming message.

*“Sorry for not responding sooner. Very busy. Not sure I’ll make the meeting. Too many deadlines. But here’s the location.”*

My heart leapt in my chest upon receiving at long last the message we’d been desperately waiting for. As the hours had ticked by, the fear that it wouldn’t happen after all had taken root.

I raced outside where Keran was conferring with his guards and more of his crewmates who had come inside an impressive chaser. As per our plan, they would follow me in stealth mode to the venue.

As soon as the men saw me approaching, the same inquisitive look laced with hope settled on their faces.

I grinned and nodded. “Jaek just sent me the coordinates of the meeting. I’m transferring them to you now.”

As soon as his com beeped, Keran greedily read the message on its interface. He immediately turned to his captain, a ferocious expression on his face.

“We have exactly one hour and twelve minutes before the meeting. Send scouts ahead. I want thorough long-range scans of the entire sector,” Keran ordered. “I want a few stealth drones to keep track of everyone coming and going. *Do not* get detected.”

“Yes, Jakar,” Captain Baldur replied.

Although this left us with little time to prepare, we went back into my office to strategize further. As it was located at a mere twenty-minute flight from here, we would make the most of the minutes we had to spare.

I brought up satellite images of the region. It showed a massive building, at least three stories high sitting in the middle of a clearing. Its design didn’t match anything I’d ever seen on Haven before.

“What is this?” Tagar hissed. “We scouted that area but a few days ago. There was nothing there!”

“Could an advanced stealth shield have fooled your scanners?” I asked.

“It’s possible, but unlikely, unless their system is advanced enough to rival—if not surpass—Veredian technology,” Keran replied with a frown.

“Then it must be a deployable structure, like most of the buildings here on Haven,” I mused aloud. “Something this big would have taken many hours to unfold. This could explain why the meeting is so late in the day. They spent all morning deploying and furnishing it.”

Keran nodded. “My thoughts exactly. However, such a huge building would have required an even bigger transport ship to bring it to that location. How did we not detect it? How did space control not notice them entering their airspace?”

“Either they indeed have a far more advanced stealth system than ours, or they were already on Haven, just moving around camouflaged so we couldn’t detect them,” Nowik said pensively.

“Or hiding in plain sight,” I countered. “Haven has a lot of communities living isolated from each other. No one would blink at seeing a compound by itself in the middle of nowhere. Then again, the design of this one would draw a lot of attention.”

“Except if it changed its appearance with a hologram. We didn’t scan for that,” Tagar said, looking dejected.

“There’s no point dwelling on it now,” Keran said, still looking troubled. “If nothing else, it confirms that we’re dealing with someone highly organized and paranoid. And I’m now more than ever convinced that we’re not contending with a Braxian.”

He turned to me with a very serious expression. I braced for him to tell me that he didn’t want me attending the meeting after all. In truth, I didn’t know how I would respond. We’d taken sufficient precautions for me to believe I’d be safe whatever awaited us. But I wasn’t so reckless as to not realize we weren’t dealing with an amateur. Maybe what intel I could

gather at that meeting wasn't worth the risk I was planning on taking.

"As much as I hate knowing you are putting yourself in potential danger, we will proceed as planned," Keran said with obvious reluctance. "But remember that if anything looks even remotely problematic, you abort."

"I won't forget," I said firmly, unsure if I felt relieved or disappointed that he didn't try one last time to change my mind.

Moments later, Captain Baldur sent in a preliminary scouting report indicating nothing fishy on the long-range scanners. However, they definitely had scramblers and disruptors inside the building, making it impossible for them to perform a deep scan of the building itself. They could only perceive a massive power generator and hints of heavy machinery. But they couldn't get a clearer image without getting detected.

The only reason Keran didn't demand I back out was that the scanners only picked up the presence of eight people, although it couldn't specify their gender or race.

With barely thirty-five minutes left before the meeting, we made our way to our vessels. Keran accompanied me to my personal shuttle, his back stiff with the tension also reflected on his face.

I turned to face him while the shuttle's door opened. "Here goes," I said with a nervous laugh.

He didn't smile. His stormy eyes flicked between mine as he looked at me with that intensity that used to make me want to squirm. This time, concern for me rather than suspicion fueled it. I melted from the inside out.

“At the first sign of trouble—” Keran said in a tense voice.

“I turn around and leave,” I said, interrupting him. “Everything will be fine.”

“They better be. I care about you, Dawn. Deeply...”

I smiled, my chest warming with deep affection. “I care deeply about you, too, Keran. You’re stuck with me for a while.”

He drew me into his embrace and gave me an almost desperate kiss. The sound of his chaser’s engine starting broke the magic. With much reluctance, we broke the kiss. He pressed his forehead to mine for one more second before releasing me.

Keran remained next to my shuttle until I got in and settled in the pilot’s seat. Eyes still locked with mine through the windshield, he slowly backed away. Goddess, I hated how much this felt like a farewell. We had taken every possible precaution.

“Everything will be fine,” I whispered to myself.

As soon as I took off, Keran hurried to his chaser. They took flight in seconds, their much larger vessel vanishing moments later as they went into stealth mode. Even knowing that they were trailing me, not being able to see them anymore made me feel vulnerable.

Halfway to our destination, our joint communication channel came to life with Thanor, one of the scouts, giving us an update.

“The hybrids have started arriving. Jordan is going to lose it when he finds out who is greeting them,” Thanor said. “It’s one of his Guldán trainers, Nirkon Harag.”

The curses emitted by the others through the com echoed my sentiment. Nirkon had been working with Jordan for nearly two decades and was his right hand. Never in a million years would I have suspected foul play from him.

“That explains a few things,” I said with sudden understanding. “Jordan has been receiving tons of large equipment for his training camp. Nirkon signed off on most of those deliveries. He probably smuggled that deployable building among their other shipments.”

“Knowing he would get away with it as Jordan blindly trusts him,” Keran said with disgust. “Good job, Thanor. Anything else?”

“Nothing for now. There are over one hundred hybrids present now. Still no threat detected on my radar.”

“Keep us posted,” Keran said.

“Acknowledged. Thanor out.”

Finding a new resolve in this revelation, I completed the flight to the rendezvous, righteous anger burning in my gut. That son of a bitch had been training these men for weeks, picking and choosing his unsuspecting targets. We’d all wondered where and how those abductions were taking place without leaving any trace, not even a message where they’d agreed to meet with someone somewhere.

There had been no traceable communication because that vermin had likely asked them in person to meet for more intensive one-on-one training, or to meet with a ‘client’ outside of training hours. They would have had no reason to doubt Nirkon or to suspect foul play.

As soon as I landed my shuttle in a free spot in the clearing, I powered down the engine and walked to the door.



Even though we'd tested my wire a million times, I gave it a last test.

"Going in," I whispered. "Are you receiving this?"

"Loud and clear. Good luck," Keran replied, his voice coming through my earpiece covered by my long hair.

After a deep, fortifying breath, I exited the shuttle and made my way to the building. It was insanely tall for Haven. Most of the constructions here were either single or two-story buildings. This one not only had three, but each also seemed incredibly high, at approximately four meters.

A few more shuttles landed as I headed for the entrance. Unlike Nirkon—who frowned upon noticing my approach—most of the hybrids smiled, pleasantly surprised to see me. The rays of the setting sun gave Nirkon's heavy black horns a dreamy glow. But his dark brown eyes took on a guarded glint. He was undoubtedly trying to come up with a way to bribe me into keeping his involvement secret from Jordan.

I gave him a sickly-sweet smile and plastered the most innocent look on my face. "Sen Harag, what a surprise to see you here."

"I can say the same about you, Sana Merrick," he replied with forced enthusiasm. "The invitation was for *hybrids* only."

"I'm well-aware," I said in a sing-song voice. "Some of us don't wear our genetics on our faces."

Nirkon froze, his eyes ever-so-slightly widening with sudden understanding. His gaze roamed over my face before lingering on my broad shoulders as he was finally seeing what had been right before him this whole time. His face took on a speculating expression that made me extremely uneasy.

Although Keran wasn't speaking through my earpiece, I suspected he was raging about me revealing my secret to Nirkon. But I couldn't risk him turning me away. Whatever he wanted with hybrids, I needed him to include me in the process so that we could get to the bottom of it all. And with all my friends here, he couldn't pull any stunt on me. Anyway, I'd be heading to Braxia with Keran soon. It was beyond time to put this secret to rest.

"Right," Nirkon said with a calculating look. "Then do come in and enjoy the refreshments. You should find this meeting quite... revealing."

With these enigmatic words, he turned his attention to the other hybrids still arriving.

As I entered the room, I absentmindedly adjusted the choker adorning my neck. The gem concealed a camera which allowed Keran and his men to see all that was happening.

To my surprise, the floor was covered in the type of metal plates one usually found in a cargo hold or transport ship. Deployable dwellings usually had engineered wooden floors. It struck me then that the thick, sliding front doors had also resembled those of a vessel rather than those of a house or building.

*Is this entire place a ship?*

But I dismissed the thought as soon as it crossed my mind. While there existed spaceships of every possible design, even some with little to no aerodynamic lines, there were no visible signs of a propulsion system, and the outer walls didn't look like they could make a proper hull able to withstand the rigors of deep space travel.

However, the warm expressions of the men suddenly cooling—some flat out turning hostile as I came closer to them—brought my focus back to my surroundings. The flaring of their broad nostrils indicated they'd perceived Keran's scent all over me. I lifted my chin defiantly at those who glared at me. But the disappointed, even betrayed, glimmer in the eyes of the others actually hurt.

After all these years, they should know me better. And yet, they were undoubtedly interpreting my relationship with Keran as proof that I, too, thought purebloods superior to hybrids. Obviously, that couldn't be further from the truth. I hadn't chosen Keran because of that and couldn't help that he was literally sweeping me off my feet.

More importantly though, I refused to live my life according to other people's approval. The only claim they had over me was that I should do everything in my power to make their lives easier, as was my duty as the shelter's manager. My personal life was none of their fucking business.

I silenced the part of me whispering that I should have waited before allowing—actually requesting—that Keran mark me with his scent. Sure, I could have waited, but why should I? I didn't owe anyone anything.

Feeling a little dejected by the men giving me the cold shoulder, I walked down the greeting hall into the immense room on the right. Here, even more so than the entrance, the floor and walls screamed of this being a spaceship. The gridded flooring and the metal plates on the walls belonged in a hold or shuttle bay.

A deep sense of unease washed over me. If this was indeed a vessel, Nirkon could just take flight and abduct us all. For a split second, I thought of bailing out. Only the knowledge that

Keran was right outside in his chaser, with his frigate lurking nearby to intervene if things got ugly, helped me remain stoic.

Hundreds of benches had been lined up in multiple levels in front of a dais, forming a makeshift amphitheater. Humongous screens covered the wall behind the stage, as well as part of the front side walls. My curiosity spiked as I wondered what Nirkon intended to have playing on them.

Trying to act inconspicuous, I walked around the room, making sure to capture as much as possible about the environment with my camera, as well as the closed side doors located right below the steps leading up the stage. I wandered towards the long tables lining the east corner of the room. It offered finger foods—all of it local delicacies—and large glass kegs filled with a pinkish, clear beverage. The condensation on the kegs and pitchers indicated it was icy cold.

Although I would have preferred water, I poured myself a glass to blend in with the others who had also been indulging in the catering. Under different circumstances, I would have smiled. When it came to food, Braxian males—including hybrids—were bottomless pits. But then, they needed to fuel those godly, muscular bodies the Goddess had blessed them with.

As my gaze roamed around the room, making a mental tally of all those who had shown up, I absentmindedly took a sip of my drink. I gasped at the sweet and refreshing flavor that exploded on my taste buds. It wanted to remind me of sweet, iced tea, but it had a fruity quality, almost like some kind of berries, laced with citrusy accents. I had no idea what juice this was, but I would have to ask Nirkon about it.

Before taking another sip, I snorted at the thought. In my mind's eye, I pictured myself inquiring where I could buy the

fruity drink while the peacekeepers cuffed him for serial murder.

While looking for Jaek in the crowd, I noticed another Guldans. I didn't recognize him but made sure my camera got a good look at him.

*What the fuck do Guldans want with us?*

Keran had told me about Gavin Aldriss, but I still failed to see how roping in hybrids here would help them sit Gavin on the throne. But more importantly, why in the world would *we* influence *him* and the way he ruled Braxia in the future, should the Guldans achieve their goal?

“Him? You fucking chose *him*?!”

I yelped, nearly jumping out of my skin at the sound of Vintor's angry voice behind me. The son of a krillik had snuck up on me while I'd been lost in thought.

“Goddess! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” I said, pressing a palm to my heart, relieved that I hadn't spilled my drink on me.

The anger twisting his features suddenly gave way to horror. “He forced himself on you! Did that bastard force himself on you?!” Vintor exclaimed, his voice just shy of being a full-on shout.

All conversations stopped in the room, every eye turning our way. Those too far to have made out his words stared at us with curiosity as to the source of the commotion. Those close enough looked at me with outraged fury. Until Vintor had made that accusation, they had all correctly assumed that things had been consensual between Keran and me. But now that the seed had been planted, and considering the horror

stories from Braxia's violent past when it came to hybrid females, they naturally embraced that new theory.

“What?! No! Goddess no!” I exclaimed. “Keran would never force himself on a female. He's been nothing but a gentleman to me.”

“A gentleman? You fucking reek of him!” Vintor hissed. “You consented to this? You let him defile you?!”

“What I do and who I do it with is none of your business!” I snapped. “I'm a grown and independent woman. I do not need your permission or approval for whatever I do with my life *or* with my body.”

Vintor took a step back, an air of pure contempt descending over his rough features. He slowly shook his head, his gaze roaming over me in disgust as if he was staring at a putrid corpse crawling with maggots.

“To think we wasted our energy for decades, trying to woo you with respect and consideration. And all it took was for a pureblood to come strolling in for you to get on your back and spread your legs like a cheap whore.”

“Vintor!” Jaek shouted angrily as he approached us. “You do not speak to her that way!”

My heart leapt in my chest upon seeing him. Where the heck had he come from? As he was arriving from our left—instead of our right where the entrance was located—that meant he had already been inside the room. But I would have seen him before.

*Unless he had come out of one of those side doors.*

Before I could further dwell on that, Vintor taking on a menacing stance towards Jaek reclaimed my attention.

“*You* defend her? Of all people, *you* should be the first one to express your outrage. None of us were ever good enough for her, not even you, the intellectual,” Vintor snarled. “Even with your face all prettied up, she still went ahead and rode the pureblood’s cock.”

“I SAID ENOUGH!” Jaek yelled.

My jaw dropped, and I stared at him in disbelief as he bunched his muscles and advanced on Vintor. Jaek had always been the gentle and controlled one. Although a little smaller in height and muscle mass than the other hybrids, right this instant, he was properly intimidating. In my earpiece, I could hear the muffled sound of Keran cursing. Prior to leaving on this mission, we had agreed to keep communications to a minimum to reduce the chances of the signal getting captured.

“Dawn isn’t property. She doesn’t need anyone’s permission to make her choice. Right now, you sound just like the purebloods who abused us. Get over yourself. She doesn’t want you,” Jaek ground through his teeth, earning himself approving nods from the other hybrids.

“Or *you*,” Vintor snapped, needing to have the final word even though Jaek’s word had cut him deep.

“Or me,” Jaek conceded in a much calmer voice laced with resignation. “But that’s still *her* choice. And we all have to respect it.”

Vintor huffed. “Respect? I have none to give to this,” he said, making a disdainful gesture at me.

“Enough!” Nirkon said in a loud enough voice to be heard by all. “While I’m sure her sex life is of interest to many of you, it’s not to me. You weren’t invited here to fight over a

female. Finish your drinks and take a seat. The meeting is about to start.”

With an irritated grunt, Vintor turned to the table. Humiliation burned my cheeks as I fought the urge to punch him in the throat. As he didn't have a glass, he picked one up, filled it to the brim, and guzzled it down in one go. He slammed the empty glass back onto the table with enough force that I'd expected it to shatter. Thankfully, it didn't—although it would have served him right if it had. He then stormed off to one of the seats in the front.

The others emptied their glasses as well, placing them neatly on the table before proceeding in an orderly fashion to find a place. Those who walked past me either averted their eyes or cast an apologetic look my way.

“Thank you,” I said to Jaek, holding my half-full glass pressed to my chest like a shield.

My heart broke at the sad and betrayed look he gave me. “Is that why you were trying to reach me? To let me know of your choice?”

I swallowed hard and gave him a sharp nod, guilt gnawing at me. “I never meant for you to find out like this.”

He stared at me for a moment longer, the deep sorrow in his eyes cutting me like a thousand knives.

“It should have been *my* scent on you. *Mine...*”

Without another word, Jaek headed to one of the seats. My shoulders drooped, and I heaved a sigh. This couldn't have gone worse. I gulped down the contents of my own glass, wishing it was something much stronger instead, then placed it on the table.



Finding a spot to sit was a whole new level of awkward. Under normal circumstances, the men would be falling all over themselves to give me their spot. But right this instant, they were all clearly hoping I'd select a seat not too close to them. You'd think I had the plague.

With most of the seats already taken, I had no choice but to head towards the front. I settled at the left edge of the third row, leaving a two-meter gap between my neighbor and me.

For the first time in my life, I felt extremely self-conscious about being the only female among them. Although it didn't surprise me, I had hoped a few of the others would have invited some of our women—not that any of our females would ever return to Braxia.

A part of me wanted to just walk out of here and run straight into Keran's arms. If not for this mission being a matter of life or death, I probably would have just bounced. But one of the side doors opening wiped away any thought of leaving.

“No way!” I whispered, my eyes all but popping out of my head at the sight of the three males who entered the room first.

I had expected more Guldans. Instead, their dusky blue skin, the dozen small horns protruding from their heads like a circular crown, and their breathtaking faces gave them away as Sarenians.

*What the fuck are Sarenians doing here?!*

And collaborating with Guldans at that? From what Keran had told me, Prince Zerien—the future Sarenian Emperor—wanted nothing to do with the Guldans. It was all the more ironic that his fiancée was a pureblood Guldan herself.

*Jardan said Zerien was reputed to be sadistic and ruthless. Had he turned on his alliance with Braxia?*

I made sure to aim my camera at the Sarenians as they made their way onto the stage. To my surprise, Nirkon and the other Guldans remained at the bottom of the dais, making it clear they weren't the ones in charge.

The three Sarenians spread themselves evenly on the stage. As soon as they had taken position, a close-up image of their faces appeared on the giant screen closest to each of them. I was sitting close enough to appreciate their natural beauty. But seeing them even more in detail on those screens took my breath away.

While each of them was lean and muscular, Sarenians were slender and lithe like gymnasts, unlike the Braxians who were more like heavyweight bodybuilders. As was common with their species, they had straight, long hair, in various shades of blue, from very light to midnight blue. Occasionally, some of them would be born with black or silver-white hair, but never any other shade.

The Sarenian in the middle, apparently the leader, had raven hair to the middle of his back, which contrasted sharply with his icy blue eyes. Unlike the other two Sarenians, this one had almost wing-like appendages dangling on his back. Even though he barely looked more than twenty-five, those appendages meant he was at least fifty years old. Once a Sarenian reached that age—which was deemed their biological maturity, they grew what they actually referred to as fins. As amphibian creatures, those fins helped them swim faster underwater, but also allowed them to glide in the sky over varying distances as they rode the air currents.

They were dressed in traditional Sarenian garbs consisting of a long, ornate skirt and a sleeveless, skin-tight top, with a deep V-shaped collar that gave an enticing glimpse of their muscular chests. While their people usually wore lighter, pastel colors, these three males were all clad in black.

Three small disks rose from the floor to float right below the three Sarenians' chins—hover microphones. But it was only the male in the middle who addressed us.

“Hello, dear guests.”

His voice was soft and breathy, like a caress that had my skin erupt in goosebumps. But as beautiful as it sounded, every single one of my senses had gone into high alert. The little voice at the back of my head was telling me to get the fuck out of here.

“Although you do not recall it right now, my name is Deimos. And I'll once again be your host for the remainder of the evening.”

“What?” I whispered.

A quick glance around the room confirmed the others were just as confused.

“Before I go further into details about tonight's meeting, I must give you a few basic rules to observe so that we can make an optimal use of our much-too-short time together,” Deimos continued in a tone that was borderline patronizing. “Please, pay close attention to my companions and me as we list the rules.”

The cameras further zoomed in on their faces, focusing on their eyes. A sense of dread I couldn't explain washed over me. Just when I was about to give in to my irrational urge to

jump out of my seat and run out the door, the three Sarenians started talking at the same time.

*“Sit still, remain quiet, obey our commands, and embrace all that you’re about to be told.”*

My blood curdled at the supernatural vibration that entered their voices as they spoke. Were they crazy? Didn’t they know that Braxians were immune to negative psionic effects? That their compulsion didn’t work on us? I tried to open my mouth to challenge them, but a wave of dizziness engulfed me, and my skin tingled.

As soon as they pronounced the last word, their eyes flashed with a bluish glow, the effect multiplied on the giant screen. My body instantly went limp, and my tongue felt paralyzed.

*This cannot be happening!*

“Some of you showed a bit too much restraint when it came to indulging in the refreshments we have so generously provided. Our friends here will help you rectify that inconsiderate behavior,” Deimos added, this time in his normal voice, while gesturing at Nirkon and the other Guldan. “They will bring you another glass.”

Horror descended over me as I finally understood how he was controlling us. Something in that drink was making us receptive to their compulsion. But how?

*The fluids they’d been draining from their victims!*

No wonder we couldn’t figure it out. It had never been about extracting something from us that could be used as recreational drugs for others. It was so they could use it against us, against Braxians as a whole. They couldn’t target

them directly on Braxia. Here, isolated on Haven, we'd been easy pickings.

*“You will drink it entirely while we give you the final instructions, then you will give the upcoming presentation your undivided attention,”* Deimos added, his voice taking on that vibration again before his eyes flashed.

The two Guldans placed hover trays laden with full glasses at the beginning of each row. The trays floated autonomously down the rows, pausing only long enough for us to pick up a glass. I tried to resist the compulsion, but as soon as the tray stopped in front of me, my hand reached for a glass with a volition of its own.

Even as I lifted the glass to my lips, Keran's voice resonated in my earpiece, urging me not to do it. Tears pricked my eyes as I greedily drank the delicious beverage, hating how it was poisoning my mind while reveling in its refreshing taste.

*“A supply will be placed in your respective shuttles. You will drink a single glass a day. Just ONE! You will crave more, but you will resist the temptation,”* Deimos continued with the same enthralling voice followed by the glowing effect of his eyes.

I felt violated, body and mind. My whole life, I'd taken every precaution to keep myself from ever being at someone else's mercy. I'd even achieved advanced levels of combat and shooting training. But this? Nothing could have prepared me for this. None of our plans had accounted for this possibility—that shouldn't even be one.

My heart seized with dread at the thoughts of our plans. Keran could *not* go through with his intention on raiding this venue if the hybrids and I came under threat. While there only seemed to be the Sarenians and two Guldans here—not

counting the other three people Thanor's scanner had detected—there were at least six hundred hybrids present. If Deimos gave us the command to kill Keran and his men, pureblood or not, they would get massacred. My stomach roiled at the thought of raising a hand against the man I'd been falling in love with, or Tagar and Nowik who had become big brothers to me.

“The Great War is coming,” Deimos said in his normal voice, reclaiming my attention. “You will play a pivotal role in making sure both our species are on the winning side. For this to happen, the reign of the Xeldars must end. A new era will begin, marked by the rise of the hybrids, with Gavin Aldriss as your new Magnar.”

The face of the most handsome hybrid I'd ever seen appeared on screen. His amber eyes almost looked like liquid flames as he stared straight on, an enigmatic smile stretching perfectly shaped lips. While his nose and strong brow were undoubtedly Braxian, they were more delicately sculpted, as if his DNA had merely meant to hint at his genetics without going all out. Even just in a picture, Gavin exuded power, intelligence, and an undeniable charm. Men and women alike would be drawn to him, both socially and romantically.

“Your purpose is to serve him, protect him, and elevate him. With you as his loyal army, Gavin will rewrite the history of your homeworld. In four weeks, you will return home to Braxia to reclaim your true place and heritage. Sarenia and Guldar will stand by your side, and the purebloods will have no choice but to bow to your superiority. They will pay for all they made you endure, just like the Korletheans will pay for what they have done to us.”

My gorge rose as horrible images of Korletheans experimenting on screaming Sarenians, and other images of purebloods torturing hybrids flashed in quick succession on the giant screens while Deimos spoke.

“For this revolution to happen you must train even harder with Jordan and convince the hybrids who didn’t come tonight that they *must* attend our next meeting,” Deimos said in a passionate tone. “Nirkon will give you a special training protocol that you will include to your current regimen.”

His gaze locked on me, and I felt my blood drain from my face.

“For now, I will leave you in the good hands of my brothers. I have a little problem to go handle outside.”

Oh Goddess! He knew about Keran. I wanted to scream for them to power their weapons and retreat. To call for reinforcements. But Keran had been too quiet for too long. In fact, he’d gone totally silent moments after telling me not to drink. Had he already left?

As he turned back to face the crowd, Deimos gestured at his two companions. They once more spoke in a united, vibrating voice.

*“Korletheans are a scourge that must be eradicated. Purebloods must be controlled and submit to hybrids. Hybrids must reclaim their rightful place. Magnar Gavin Aldriss will lead the way.”*

As soon as they finished speaking those words, I vaguely noticed Deimos leaving the stage. But my eyes were glued to the central screen where anti-pureblood and anti-Korlethean propaganda played in a loop. The narrator explained all the reasons we had to exterminate the Korletheans and subdue the

purebloods. This was wrong, so why were their arguments sounding so logical? So right?

Every two minutes or so—I had lost track of time—the narrator would go quiet, and the two remaining Sarenians would repeat their message about the Korletheans, the purebloods, and Magnar Gavin with their vibrating voices.

In the distance, I perceived the sound of explosions. But I couldn't worry about that or form any coherent thought that didn't have to do with the fascinating video playing before me, and the mesmerizing voices of the Sarenians on stage.

Korletheans needed to die, and purebloods needed to be subdued.





## CHAPTER 17

## KERAN

**A** murderous rage erupted inside me upon hearing the foul words Vintor addressed to my woman. The same fury twisted my men's faces into a snarl. Were we not still airborne, I might have rushed inside to give him a proper trouncing. How dare he disrespect her like that?

Tagar had to swiftly mute the mic to Dawn's earpiece when I started cursing out loud. Even though the likelihood of anyone else hearing us through it was slim, we wanted to limit the risks of our transmission getting intercepted and would therefore keep her incoming communications to a minimum.

Despite having expected the hybrids' reaction at realizing Dawn was mine, I hated that she should be subjected to their anger and sense of betrayal. Although the camera didn't show me her face, I knew her well enough to know it was cutting her deeply. And yet, it pleased me that my claim on Dawn was no longer a secret. It had pissed me off to see them all drooling over my woman.

My respect for Jaek grew another notch when he came to her rescue. A sliver of guilt clawed at me. He genuinely loved Dawn. While I couldn't claim the same, I could see myself eventually getting there.

Nirkon calling the start of the meeting swept away my wandering thoughts. At last, we were going to find out what this was all about. As much as I ached to yank Dawn right out of there, having so many of the hybrids surrounding her reassured me. Even as angry as they were with her for choosing me, they had all been ready to intervene when Vintor had gone off on her. Had Jaek not stepped in first, I didn't doubt one of the others would have.

"She's doing a great job at giving us a good view of what is happening," Tagar said approvingly.

I nodded, my heart filling with pride. The rest of the crew also expressed their agreement. It pleased me tremendously how much my men had taken to Dawn. It boded well for the future I could foresee with her.

"What the fuck?!" I exclaimed.

The sight of three Sarenians entering the room from the side doors and stepping onto the stage shattered all warm musings about my woman. My crew's shocked gasps echoed my dismay.

"Do we know who they are?" I asked angrily.

A million different thoughts fired off in my mind as I tried to make sense of their presence here.

Tagar cursed up a storm. "That's Deimos Arrin, one of the highest-ranking officers of the Sarenian secret service."

"There's no way Zerien would have authorized whatever this mission is without informing me!" I exclaimed in disbelief.

Tagar shook his head. "Deimos belonged to Emperor Nemrox's inner circle. Prince Zerien has been forming his own council in preparation for his coronation. I understand Faolen

is gradually taking over some of Deimos's responsibilities when the transition is complete."

Faolen had proven to be an extremely effective agent when he had kidnapped Krygor, Hope, and their daughter Siona. Instead of starting an ugly war between our people, it had instead been the spark to our growing alliance and the romance between Siona and Zerien.

*So what the fuck is this?*

"Then Deimos must have gone rogue," I said with conviction. "I may not know Emperor Nemrox as well as Zerien, but he would never undermine his son. They have very different views on what alliances they should form, but the Emperor defers to his son."

All conversation ceased when the Sarenian began addressing the hybrids. However, nothing prepared me for him to use compulsion on them, and worse still, to see it actually work...

"That's impossible!" I whispered, my shock reflected on the faces of my men.

"The experiment," Orin breathed out, his voice filled with dread and sudden understanding. "That must be why they'd been draining the victims of endocrinal fluids. They were devising a method to neutralize our innate inhibitory neurotransmitters. We always suspected our serotonin protected us from psionic attacks. As chronic pain and stress causes the brain to release serotonin, torturing the victims produced tons of it. They used it to find a way to bypass the inhibitory neurotransmitters."

As informative as Orin's sudden realization was, I had more pressing matters demanding my attention. Unless he had

countermeasures that we could immediately use to break the Sarenian's thrall on the hybrids—and especially on my woman—I didn't need to hear this dissertation on what Deimos was up to.

My blood drained from my face when Deimos ordered them to drink another glass of the beverage that had been offered on the catering table. I slapped my hand on the com button to activate the microphone.

“Don't drink it, Dawn! Resist his compulsion!” I shouted, even knowing it was pointless.

I'd almost told her not to consume anything when she first entered the venue. But I'd kept my peace, telling myself I was being overly paranoid. After all, so many people around her had already eaten and drunk from the buffet without apparent negative effects.

But even as I spoke those words, the camera showed Dawn's hand bringing the glass to her face. The way her hand shook revealed her vain efforts to fight the compulsion.

I turned off the mic before addressing my men. “We need to stop whatever is happening in there, but we can't go charging in. If Deimos orders them to attack us, we'll be overwhelmed. We need to knock them out, either through stun or sedation.”

Deimos's altered voice continued to reach us through Dawn's wire. “*A supply will be placed in your respective shuttles. You will drink a single glass a day.*”

“A single glass a day!” Orin exclaimed. “So the effect wears off. He hasn't perfected it yet!”

“Orin, focus!” I snapped. “How do we knock them out without harming them?”

Orin gave me an apologetic look before taking on a pensive expression. “Sedation would be safest for them. But as Nirkon has already closed the doors, we’d have to break in, release the gas, and wait for it to kick in. So an ultrasonic beam would be our best bet. The ultrasonic pulse will reach them even through the walls. We just need to make sure we have the right frequency and amplitude to avoid causing damage.”

“What kind of damage are we talking about?” I asked, impatience and worry for my female gnawing at me.

“If we get it wrong, it could shatter their bones or even kill them,” Orin admitted nervously. “Had they been purebloods, I wouldn’t be as concerned. I know exactly what frequency and amplitude to use on us. But hybrids are more fragile.”

“Figure it out,” I snapped with annoyance. “Err on the side of caution. I need this beam functional yesterday!”

“Yes, Jakar,” Orin replied with a confidence that reassured me. “I will set it to 2Hz and 150dB. It will make them nauseous and dizzy, which will give us time to go in with sedation.”

“Get on it,” I ordered.

My blood turned to ice as Deimos’s voice continued resonating through the wire as he addressed the hybrids. “*The Great War is coming. You will play a pivotal role in making sure both our species are on the winning side. For this to happen, the reign of the Xeldars must end. A new era will begin, marked by the rise of the hybrids, with Gavin Aldriss as your new Magnar.*”

“No fucking way,” Tagar hissed. “The boy would have never agreed to that.”

“He hasn’t,” I said with conviction. “If Gavin covets my throne, he will claim it honorably. Not like this. But if Sarenians can mind control us now...”

I never got to finish my sentence. Proximity alarms went off at the same time as Baldur’s voice resonated through our com from our frigate.

“We’re under attack! Guldun Falcons have just come out of stealth!” my Captain shouted. “They—”

His cry of intense pain cut short the rest of his sentence. I opened my mouth to call out his name, but only a shout of agony escaped me. A blinding light engulfed our vessel, and the most excruciating pain exploded throughout my body, as if every single bone had shattered, every vein and capillary ruptured, and every nerve ending had been dipped into the most concentrated acid.

The faces of Dawn and my two sons flashed before my eyes in the split second before darkness swallowed me.



**T**he hushed hum of machinery pierced through the thick fog shrouding my mind. I felt bruised and battered inside as if an entire herd of karvelis had trampled me. My eyelids weighed a ton as I struggled to crack them open. The brightness in the room blinded me, making me shut my eyes once more before I forced them open again.

My blurred vision took a moment to adjust. In the end, the room turned out not to be as brightly lit as my senses initially fooled me into believing. The large space appeared to be some kind of medical lab or infirmary. Directly in front of me, a gridded platform served as a stretcher for the far too familiar



silhouette of my ship's captain, Baldur. Thick metal bands strapped his fully naked body to the platform. He was facing me straight on, the stretcher slightly inclined by maybe ten degrees. Despite being clearly unconscious, my captain thankfully didn't appear otherwise harmed.

I shifted my gaze to the left. My heart seized upon seeing Orin strapped in a similar fashion on another gridded stretcher. However, unlike Baldur who only had a drip hooked to his right arm, my medical officer also had the drip and a separate bag connected to a port in his arm and a second bag to another port in his neck. Both bags were collecting a clear liquid. Beneath each of them, a flat device slowly rocked them back and forth, like they sometimes did with blood pouches, which I always assumed was to prevent it from coagulating.

If my suspicions were correct, they had implanted Orin with Kranax Beetle eggs and were now harvesting his fluids for their demented experiment.

*But why the oldest of my crewmembers?*

The answer that popped into my head had my innards twisting with dread. Orin still had many decades left in him. Despite his older age, he certainly was not expendable. But the Sarenians likely didn't know what a brilliant scientific mind they had captured.

I swallowed back a groan as I turned my head to the right to observe the rest of the room. Even merely shifting my eyes around hurt. It felt like needles stabbing me directly in the brain. Thankfully, the handful of other stretchers—although they'd qualify more as proper medical examination tables—sat empty. No visible doctor or lab technician lurked nearby.

*Are they preparing the rest of my crew to be subjected to a similar treatment—not to say torture? And where is Dawn?*

The worst part was not knowing exactly who had been captured. My frigate's crew had only managed to inform us of being under attack before we'd sustained a devastating one of our own. Had they also managed to send a distress signal to Haven's authorities, who had been partially aware that we might need back up? Better yet, had they informed my father? Although the signal would have taken a while to reach Braxia, even an incomplete message would have sufficed to get my father to investigate.

Once more, I glanced around the room. Although my eyes continued to feel overly sensitive to the brightness, only a couple of dim lights illuminated the space, confirming that whoever had restrained us here had temporarily left. I quickly inventoried my aches and pains, relieved nothing indicated serious damage... at least for now. However, like Orin, I had both a drip and a port in my left arm. Stretching my neck indicated I also had a port near my nape. While they had been inserted, I couldn't see any bags connected to them.

I silenced the wave of fear that tried to surge within me. This could only mean that either Kranax Beetles had already laid their eggs inside me, but it was much too early for the larvae to hatch just yet, or they were preparing me ahead of the eggs getting implanted.

*But if they are already draining Orin, how long have we been here?*

The thought of them subjecting my woman to this kind of torture had my blood boiling. I wanted to believe they wouldn't do it. After going through a tragically violent past, the Sarenians had completely restructured their society and passed countless laws to ensure the safety and protection of their females. Surely, whatever political insanity Deimos and

his acolytes were pursuing, it wouldn't involve maiming and murdering females?

Ignoring my physical pain, I bunched my muscles and strained against my restraints. Although I didn't go all out, I instinctively knew that no amount of effort would break them. Deimos had made certain they would not bend to the phenomenal strength of a pureblood—even one with berserker powers.

The discreet swish of the door opening, breaking the occasional beeping sounds of the machinery surrounding us, startled me. I jerked my head towards the door, wincing at the sharp pain that crossed my head. Instant anger and a thirst for blood flooded through me as I watched Deimos casually stroll in, a smug smile stretching his lips as he gazed upon me.

“Jakar Keran,” Deimos said with warmth and enthusiasm, as if reuniting at last with a long-lost friend. “It's such a pity that we should meet like this. I have followed your evolution with great interest over the past few years. You would have made a very honorable ruler for your people.”

“If that is how you feel, then why have me shackled like this?” I asked in a calm and conversational tone, despite the fury that raged within me. “Why not release me?”

He gave me an apologetic look. “I cannot do that. You're a good man, but you cannot be allowed to rule.”

“Why? Why are you betraying our alliance?” I asked, my voice hardening.

Deimos gave me a patronizing look that made me want to punch him in the throat as he slowly shook his head.

“I am not betraying any alliance. Our people are not formally allied. You have an agreement with Prince Zerien.

But *he* is not the Emperor of Sarenia. Nemrox is. And Fate willing, Zerien never will be.”

I recoiled, shocked beyond words. As far as I knew, the Sarenians adored the Crown Prince. From a young age, he had proven to be an old soul. His own father had started delegating more and more decisions to Zerien, even offering to abdicate early so that his son could prepare for the imminent Great War the way he saw fit.

“What? How can you say this?” I asked, baffled. “And whatever your dislike of the Prince, you know Nemrox supports all the decisions his son makes. What you’re doing is treason!”

Deimos took a menacing step forward, bearing his teeth while his fangs descended. In that instant, the violent—almost feral—nature his people struggled with was plain to see. And yet, I didn’t fear that he would do me any harm... at least not right now.

“It is not treason, but patriotism,” Deimos hissed. “I do not work for Zerien. I am sworn to the Emperor and to the empire. It is my duty to protect both from external forces that would destroy us.”

“And you achieve this by sabotaging their primary alliance?”

“I’m doing this by preventing history from repeating itself,” Deimos snapped with a self-righteous expression. “Prince Zerien held so much promise. He was once strong, determined, with his head screwed on right. And then he met that Guldan female and is now entirely controlled by his cock. He’s even gotten in bed with the Korletheans.”

“Zerien is hardly lust addled. He has shown remarkable restraint and respect towards Siona while waiting for her to come of age,” I countered, even more confused. “And the partial peace he’s entered into with the Korletheans occurred long before he met Siona.”

“But without her negative influence, we would have swayed him into breaking that abomination of a truce. Korletheans are a stain on the galaxy that must be wiped out. We will not rest until every last one of them has been exterminated,” Deimos spat, his fury resurfacing. “As if allying with them wasn’t enough, Zerien even went so far as allowing Faolen to marry a fucking Korlethean and brought a bunch of them to our homeworld, traipsing about in our own fucking court!”

I stared at him in disbelief for a moment, rendered speechless for the first time in my life. He was so blinded by hatred that he no longer thought logically.

“Siona has nothing to do with any of this,” I said in a soft and reasonable voice, hoping to calm him down a bit. “It was the Great General—the young Titan, Vahleryon Praghan—who convinced Zerien of the wisdom of letting go of the past. Zerien was shocked to see Faolen with a Korlethean Oracle. You’ll recall that Faolen himself was furious that this was the hand that Fate dealt him. But she’s his soulmate. Their souls vibrate in perfect harmony. That bond is sacred.”

“Yes, it is. Which proves that Faolen is not suitable to take over my role as head of the Sarenian Secret Service,” Deimos growled with disgust.

I snorted with disdain. “Jealousy? All this because you’re mad Zerien will give your position to someone else?”

Deimos huffed. “I don’t give a fuck about that position. What I care about is Sarenia. The Korletheans caused way too much harm to get off so easy. Sorry doesn’t cut it! Entire Sarenian bloodlines have been exterminated out because of what they did to us.”

“That was their *ancestors*! Not *this* generation! You’re sounding like the hybrids asking me to retroactively punish people for acts that were legal when they were committed,” I exclaimed.

“So we should just turn a blind eye and let it slide?” Deimos hissed. “They are all the same worthless blood. Someone must answer for the genocide my people suffered.”

“They *are* making amends! Those who came to Sarenia, knowing what terrible welcome they would receive, did so to help your people overcome some of the wrongs their ancestors did to you. What more do you want? When will it ever end?” I challenged.

“It will end when the last of them has been wiped out of the galaxy. Their ‘*kah* training’ is too little, too late.”

At that moment, I realized there would be no reasoning with him. His hatred was too deeply rooted.

“Fine, you hate the Korletheans. But why kill *us*? Why put my people through this torture?” I asked in a conversational tone.

His anger instantly faded, and that apologetic expression returned on his ridiculously handsome face.

“Sadly, you are collateral damage in this war. If we had more time, we could have gone slower and avoided unnecessary casualties. But your ascension is only six weeks away, and Zerien’s will occur a few months after that. I do not

hate you, Keran Xeldar. Quite the opposite. I have studied you ever since the first talks between our people began. You're a good man. But you also embrace the Korletheans and share Zerien's views. The Oracles have confirmed that in all the scenarios where a Xeldar rules, the Korletheans live. Therefore, you cannot be allowed to reign."

"So you choose the Guldans instead? They are far worse than anything you could fear from the Korletheans!" I exclaimed.

Deimos waved a dismissive hand as if I'd said something silly. "Guldans are easily controlled. And soon, pureblood Braxians will fully be as well. Then all will be as it should."

"You know that won't work, right?" I retorted, wondering when this elite agent had lost his mind and fallen deep into this miasma of delusion.

He tilted his head to the side and looked at me as if *I* was the one speaking irrationally. "It already *is* working. And now, thanks to you, I not only get the most concentrated form of the serum, but I also have pureblood subjects to test it on. You've eliminated the one risk factor that remained in our plan, which was whether purebloods would respond to the serum the same way hybrids did. For this, I am grateful to you."

I silenced the sense of dread rising deep within. "Where are the hybrids? What have you done with them?"

"Relax, Jakar. They are fine. In fact, you saved the handful of hybrids that were still to be sacrificed to the cause," Deimos said tauntingly.

I frowned. "How?"

"By having those Veredians heal them, of course. We were milking those who were the most damaged from their difficult

life on Braxia. Those who would never have a normal life from their wounds or who had the least to offer in the greater scheme of things. But you've made them pristine again. Their performance in training has skyrocketed. Plus, why settle for hybrids when I now have plenty of purebloods? And if it's your mate you worry about, there's no need. I'm keeping her out of trouble."

"If you harm her—" I hissed.

"Relax!" he ordered, this time in a much harsher tone. "We *do not* harm females. It only happened in the past because of the experiments the Korletheans performed on us. But we're in control now."

"And yet, here *you* are experimenting on *us* to achieve the future you covet. How are you better?" I retorted.

His face closed, and he stiffened. "It's not the same. And it will be for a short time, with no permanent side effects, unlike what the Korletheans did to us. Once Braxia has a new ruler, that our alliances are solidified, and a new order has been established, your people will be more than happy to continue on with things as they are. There won't be any additional need for this. The effects are temporary anyway."

I almost argued with him. Once people got a taste of power and control over others, they tended to become addicted and refused to relinquish them. But there was no point trying to reason with this fanatic. For now, all I could do was gather as much information as I could.

"Fine. You have me right where you wanted, and your plan appears to be moving exactly the way you hoped," I conceded. "So you have no need of Dawn. As you claim you don't harm women, let her go. You know keeping her hostage has to be causing her distress."



Deimos took on that sorry expression again that was seriously starting to piss me off. “I can’t do that. I already promised her to another.”

My stomach dropped, and I felt my blood drain from my face as I stared at him in shock. A murderous rage rose within me as the image of Dawn submitting to Vintor under the Sarenian’s compulsion flashed before my eyes. That entitled son of a krillik would likely stop at nothing to get what she denied him.

“That’s rape!” I shouted.

“No! It’s nothing like that!” Deimos said, raising both of his hands in an appealing gesture. “He will not touch her without her full consent, this I promise. I understand how upsetting this is for you. Dawn and you are soulmates. It took me but a second to see that you two are Attuned and that your souls vibrate in perfect harmony.”

My heart skipped a beat upon hearing those words. And yet, they didn’t shock me. A part of me had known, had felt the deep connection from the moment I laid eyes on her. My chest warmed with affection and a powerful wave of possessiveness... almost instantly squashed by fury that this vermin would dare try to take her from me.

“Dawn will not suffer. I will make her forget you. As neither of you are in love yet, it will be easier,” Deimos continued, sounding pleased with himself. “The other male may not be her soulmate but they *are* Attuned. Had you not entered the picture, they *would* have married and lived very happily together. He’s crazy about her.”

My blood turned to ice as understanding dawned on me.

“Ancestors,” I breathed out, horrified. “It’s Jaek?!”

Deimos smiled smugly. “See? Even you, who does not have the power to see souls like we do, noticed the chemistry between them.”

“He would *never* consent to this,” I snarled, remembering how he had stood up for Dawn when Vintor had disrespected her at the meeting. “He’d never voluntarily trick her into being with him.”

The way Deimos raised an eyebrow implying ‘are you sure?’ hit a nerve. I prided myself in being a good judge of character. Despite all that he had endured, Jaek struck me as honorable.

“Love and hate can drive people to unexpected extremes,” Deimos said casually. “Purebloods made Jaek’s life a living nightmare that left him disabled and disfigured... until you had him patched up a few days ago. But he still had decades for his hatred to fester. Don’t you think it’s an odd coincidence that he should be a biochemist?”

My gorge rose as shock, horror, and disbelief crashed over me. This couldn’t be true. And yet... During the meeting with me, many of the hybrids had shown justified aggression and resentment for what they had endured. Vintor had been the most belligerent, the one I wouldn’t have doubted might be in on this. But Jaek? He had been among the few rational ones.

*Have I so utterly misread him?*

A device beeping next to Orin’s stretcher spared me from responding—not that my brain could form an appropriate response for what inexplicably struck me as a personal betrayal. Jaek didn’t owe me anything, quite the opposite. But he had stirred a protective, big brother sentiment in me.

“What are you doing to him?” I asked when Deimos went to check on my medical officer’s monitor.

“He’s providing the first samples from a pureblood. We need to see if the reuptake inhibitors you produce are more potent,” he said absentmindedly while tapping a few things on the monitor’s interface. He then turned to look at me with an almost malicious grin. “We’re making you immune to your own serotonin.”

“Leave him be,” I ground through my teeth. “If you need to experiment on someone, do it on me, not him.”

He chuckled and looked at me as if I had said something dumb. “Oh, but we will, Jakar... You’re a Berserker, which is *exactly* what we needed. You are far too valuable to damage yet. Orin here is older, and therefore expendable. He is providing the samples we started testing on Baldur,” he added, waiving at my unconscious captain. “And the serum we’ve been deriving from the old man is exceeding expectations. Imagine how much more potent yours will be? Here, check this out...”

I watched helplessly as he picked up a small vial from one of the cooling units on the counter. He placed it in a hypospray and prowled towards me.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt.”

Even though it was pointless, I fought against my restraints in an instinctive need to protect myself from the inevitable. He pressed the syringe against the side of my neck. A discreet hissing sound accompanied the slight burning sensation of the serum entering my body.

“See? It wasn’t so bad,” Deimos said, as if addressing a child throwing a tantrum. “With the hybrids’ serum, we

normally have to wait a couple of minutes for the effects to kick in. More importantly, we had the bad surprise of discovering it didn't work too well on purebloods. Your crew either mostly resisted our compulsion or its effect faded in minutes. But the effects of the serum from our dear Orin not only activate in about thirty seconds, they work like a charm on purebloods. Let's do a little test, shall we?"

Aside from the initial burn of the injection—a standard phenomenon with hyposprays—I didn't feel any different. Surely, he was mistaken?

Deimos's face lost its taunting edge, and his eyes began to glow as they bore into mine. "Tell me truthfully, Jakar Keran. What is your greatest fear?"

The unnatural vibration of his voice struck me like a boulder to the chest. My skin tingled, my blood pressure dropped, and a wave of dizziness crashed over me. Simultaneously, my lips parted with a will of their own. Horrified, I battled to still my tongue, but I had no control over it. At the back of my eyes, a prickling sensation quickly grew in painful intensity the more I tried to resist.

"I fear that I can never live up to my father's greatness and, therefore, that I will fail Braxia and its people, both purebloods and hybrids. I fear that I will bring shame to House Xeldar."

Each word felt like a scorching hot blade was lacerating my tongue. To hear myself speak aloud—to my enemy no less—of the bone-deep fears that plagued me from birth wounded me worse than the sharpest sword could. At the same time, it fanned the hatred burning in my gut for that vermin. I would make him pay a thousandfold.

His sympathetic smile only enraged me further.

“Then you can put those fears to rest, Jakar Keran. You have not failed Braxia. Your sacrifice, your imminent death will ensure the prosperity and glory of Braxia. So you see, you have fulfilled your destiny.”

Without another word, Deimos turned around and walked out of the room. For the first time in my existence, I felt defeated as despair clouded whatever will and clear thinking I still possessed.



## CHAPTER 18

## DAWN

I paced around the room restlessly, a million thoughts battling each other for dominance while an intense fear ate away at me. After forcing us to watch what felt like hours of propaganda videos, the Sarenians had allowed the men to leave but not me. I couldn't even beg the others to take me with them, because Deimos had ordered me to remain silent and follow obediently.

Over the years, I had seen and heard a lot of messed up stuff. But never had I felt so helpless, so violated to my core. When people spoke of mind control I always wondered what it would be like to attempt to resist it. Never in a million years could I have anticipated this. It reminded me of those nightmares when you were running and the ground beneath you turned into quicksand. The more you tried to free yourself from it, the deeper and the faster you sank.

One thing I quickly learned was to stop resisting the compulsion. Just thinking about it reawakened the painful pressure behind my eyes. It would radiate and gradually increase into sharp, stabbing sensations inside my brain. I didn't lose myself. My thoughts still belonged to me, but whatever command had been given to me dictated my actions.



The real problem began once Deimos ordered us to focus on the propaganda and assimilate the message.

Even now, I could feel that poison, insidious, lurking at the back of my head. My conscious mind knew better, but a seed of hatred had been planted and was trying to take root. Merely thinking of a pureblood suddenly gave me an icky feeling I never felt before. Unlike the hybrids I had cared for over the years at the shelter, I had personally never been abused by the purebloods.

*But why did they keep me?*

That question kept replaying in my head above the cacophony of confusion that raged within. The frightened part of me couldn't stop dredging up all the horror stories spread about what Sarenian males did to females unlucky enough to fall prey to them. The fool who had attacked Grace in public, only meters away from her then master, the obscenely rich Anton Aldriss—formerly Anton Myers—had lent credence to their reputation of being ruthless and single-minded predators.

The more rational part of me tried hard to cast out such paranoid thoughts. Technically, I was Keran's concubine. They could try to use me to emotionally blackmail him. The hybrids also greatly cared about me. Deimos could try to force them to stay in line with threats of harming me if they didn't comply. The fact that they demanded we drink that wretched juice at least once a day told me the effects wore off. Maybe they'd been instructed not to speak of anything that had happened here or else they would be responsible for what befell me.

Then again, maybe it was none of the above.

I glanced around the room he had taken me to. Under different circumstances, I would have felt flattered by the spacious layout of these personal quarters. While it didn't

exactly qualify as luxurious, I couldn't complain about the comfort level it provided. Judging by its size, including a two-person table—which could also serve as a work desk—a small sitting area with a loveseat, and even a basic replicator, this room would have been reserved to at least an officer. That I hadn't been thrown inside a cell, brought to a lab, or tossed into the most cramped quarters they had, gave me hope that whatever their plans for me, they wouldn't be too horrible.

A quick exploration of the room—including the private ensuite hygiene room—revealed nothing that I could potentially use as a weapon. Although I had expected it, my shoulders slouched nonetheless in disappointment.

Not for the first time, I berated myself for insisting on participating in this meeting. I should have listened to Keran. His gut had told him repeatedly that this was a bad idea. In my stubbornness, I had attributed it to him being overprotective. And yet, I genuinely believed that we had taken every possible precaution so that we could face whatever would come our way.

*But no one could have anticipated mind control would work on us.*

The question was where was Keran? Where was our backup? I recalled hearing some kind of explosion outside. I refused to believe that Keran and his men could have been killed. Worse still, my stomach knotted at the thought that they might have been captured. But how would that even be possible?

The Sarenians did not seem to have a huge team—at least not from what I had seen so far. There had only been the three using their compulsion on us from the stage. Then there had been the two Guldans and the human, two of whom worked

for Jordan. Although I couldn't swear to it, I believed they were acting under compulsion.

That said, if my suspicions about the building being in fact a camouflaged spaceship proved accurate, then a much larger crew could be currently going about their business in the part I had not seen yet.

My heart seized at the possibility that Keran could be locked up somewhere, having Kranax Beetles laying their eggs inside him. As much as I didn't want to accept that possibility, the propaganda recordings had been beyond clear. Deimos wanted Keran and the entire Xeldar bloodline gone.

Yes, if they captured him, they would kill him.

If they used the Beetles—and they had every reason to—that would give me three days to find a way to get us out of here before the eggs hatched. The other hybrids had survived that ordeal for an average of six days after that. So that would give me a few extra days to at least get him to a stasis chamber until a Veredian healer could revert the damage.

But first, I needed to find a way out whether they had him, where they kept him, and figure out how to get out of this damn room.

As if in response to those thoughts, the door chime resonated in the room, making me nearly jump out of my skin. Pressing a palm to my chest, I stared fearfully at the door as it slid open with a soft swish.

Deimos stepped in with a warm smile on his disturbingly handsome face. Where other women would be fanning themselves over him, everything about that male made my skin crawl. On him, even the plunging neckline of his

traditional Sarenian top and elegant long skirt had something obscene about them.

He directed a hover tray laden with covered plates to the table in my room, set it down then turned back towards me. Although he stopped a couple of meters in front of me, at what would be deemed a respectful and non-threatening distance, his presence seemed to suck the oxygen right out of the room. What I previously deemed as spacious accommodations now felt claustrophobic. Despite the fear knotting my insides, I forced myself to remain where I stood, bracing for what would come. In spite of my respectable combat and self-defence skills, without a weapon, I likely held zero chance of winning a physical fight against him.

With my superior Braxian strength, I could handle regular males of most species without much difficulty. But Deimos didn't fit that profile. While I didn't know for sure, everything about his demeanor, down to the way he walked, screamed lethal skills. I wouldn't be surprised to find out he belonged to some military faction or assassins' guild.

“My dear Dawn, what a pleasant and unexpected surprise it was to find you among our guests, tonight,” Deimos said in an obnoxiously charming tone.

*At least, he's not using his compulsion... yet.*

He also didn't seem to carry any weapon on him. He was either extremely confident in his ability to restrain me, or he didn't expect this meeting to turn to violence. I certainly prayed for the latter.

“I realize you have many questions. The first one is undoubtedly why you are here and what I intend to do with you. Let me reassure you right now that absolutely no harm will come to you, in any way, shape, or form. Contrary to the

slandrous rumors spread by the Korletheans, we Sarenians are extremely protective of females,” he said in a reassuring tone.

“Then let me go. This ‘guest’ has definitely overstayed her welcome,” I replied in a stern tone, while gesturing at myself, although relief flooded through me.

Granted, those were mere words on his part. However, my gut told me he meant them.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. You see, I have a much greater purpose for you. In order to achieve it, I need you right here,” Deimos said in an apologetic tone.

“People will notice I’m missing. My assistant Melinda, the Braxian Prince, and the Twelve, just to name a few,” I challenged.

I deliberately kept quiet about Keran’s crew and law enforcement who had been on standby to assist us. If they were currently mounting a rescue mission, I couldn’t risk tipping him off. I silenced the nagging voice at the back of my head insisting that ship had sailed. If a rescue was coming, it would have already happened.

My chest constricted when Deimos gave me a smug smile.

“Although your absence will indeed be noticed, no one will fret over it. You see, every single one of them will clearly recall you mentioning the extended leave of absence you were taking as you have eloped with Jakar Keran.”

My jaw dropped, and I stared at him in shock, robbed of words.

“Unlike you Braxians, other species are very easy to enthrall. Why do you think none of the docking bay and planetary controllers recorded or recalled seeing a Sarenian

vessel entering their space? People generally do not like conflict. When you tell them there is no trouble, nothing for them to worry about, they're all too eager to agree with that statement. And therefore, they did not resist the compulsion," Deimos explained with shameless pride.

"It was you!" I breathed out with sudden understanding. "The reason the peacekeepers and the Twelve refused to properly investigate the murders. You mind-controlled them into botching their work and allowing us to die for your sick plans!"

The oddest expression flitted over his features. He hesitated for a second before giving me what I recognized this time as a genuine look of sympathy.

"Yes, we suggested they should look the other way, and that there was nothing nefarious happening except a brutal people causing their usual trouble. And they were all too happy to accept it. You can only go so far with mind control. If a compulsion is truly abhorrent to you, sooner than later, your mind will rebel against it, which can result in severe brain damage. None of them fought it because it suited them. We merely empowered them to behave the way they wanted to begin with, which was to do nothing."

I hugged myself, helpless anger boiling within my veins. While I couldn't fault the Twelve and the peacekeepers for falling victim to the Sarenians' compulsion, nothing excused their lack of empathy for my people. Whatever our shortcomings, they had a sworn duty to protect us. It didn't matter that they didn't like us. So long as we followed the law, we deserved equal treatment.

"But have a seat, my dear," Deimos added, gesturing at the loveseat. "We have much to discuss, and we'll be more

comfortable doing so sitting down.

“I do not want to sit,” I snapped back. “I want to leave.”

His expression immediately hardened. “*Sit down,*” he ordered, his voice vibrating.

Angry tears pricked my eyes as my body complied with his compulsion. For a split second, I tried to resist it, but the sensation of sharp needles stabbing at the back of my eyes immediately returned, forcing me to relent. If fighting his commands could truly cause serious brain damage, this specific demand was not worth challenging. I would bide my time until I could strike.

As I took a seat, I watched the Sarenian grab one of the two chairs by the table and bring it near me. He set it down about a meter directly in front of me before settling in it. For some strange reason, my gut told me he was doing this to keep me at ease instead of sitting next to me. And I hated to admit that it did make me more comfortable.

He crossed his legs and leaned back in his seat. Tilting his head to the side, he examined me the way one would a fascinating creature that didn't quite make sense to them.

“Isn't it easier this way?” he asked in his normal voice as if speaking to a misbehaving child.

I pressed my lips together to silence the sharp remark that burned my tongue. Not fooled in the least, Deimos smirked, more amused by my rebellious personality than offended by it.

“There is fire in you that isn't obvious at first glance,” Deimos said pensively. “I can see why the Braxian Prince was drawn to you.”

“Where is he? Where's Keran? What have you done to him?” I asked, worry knotting my insides.

Deimos slightly frowned. “You shouldn’t still care so much for a pureblood. But then, I guess this case is slightly unique.”

“What do you mean?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Like you, Keran is one of my guests. Before you waste your time and energy trying to change the inevitable, know that no one is coming to rescue you.”

“We shared the location of this meeting with the rest of his crew,” I blurted out.

The indulgent smile he gave me confirmed my worst fears.

“I am well aware, and it doesn’t matter. They are also my guests,” Deimos said with a shrug. “Although we suspected—and hoped—the Prince would try to meddle in our meeting, the minute he communicated with the peacekeepers, our informant warned us. So we expected them, just not you.”

I wanted to scream with rage and helpless anger. Of course, everything we shared with the local authorities would have been passed down to the Sarenians. No wonder they remained two steps ahead of us.

“But even if the Prince’s crew had managed to communicate our location to someone else, this is a modular spaceship. We’ve been airborne for over an hour now since we released the other hybrids. We will not land again until the next meeting—which will naturally be in a different location.”

I reined in the panic that wanted to surge within me. “What are you going to do to Keran and his men? You already have your drug. Please don’t hurt him... don’t hurt them.”

The air of guilt that crossed his features struck me like a dagger straight to the heart.



“I truly am sorry, Dawn. Whatever you may think of me, I take no pleasure in this. The Prince and his men also have a purpose. But fear not, you will forget him.”

“Never!” I hissed.

“Of course, you will,” he replied, unfazed. “You are meant for another with whom you are Attuned.”

I recoiled at this unexpected comment. Even more disturbing was the fact that Jaek’s face immediately flashed before my mind’s eye.

*Could it be?*

Whatever the case may be, that changed nothing to my need—duty even—to find a way to save Keran and his men. Before I could say as much, Deimos’s eyes began to glow, and his voice took on that dreaded unnatural vibration.

*“Cast aside your infatuation with Keran. He was a fling and nothing more. Embrace the feelings you’ve always had for your one true love, the one who has been patiently waiting for you to be ready to start your future together.”*

Each word felt like a hammer. And although he never mentioned the name of this “one true love” I should embrace, my head knew it could only be Jaek.

*My head or my heart?*

Yes, I had always had strong feelings for Jaek. Had Keran not entered my life, I would have married Jaek. Sarenians—like Korletheans—could see souls and know beyond any doubt if two souls vibrated in harmony. However unpleasant his words, Deimos had been truthful with me since he walked in here. Therefore, I had no reason to doubt him stating I was Attuned to someone else. Could it truly be no more than an

infatuation with Keran? A small voice at the back of my mind was shouting no. And yet, the facts couldn't be denied.

But the Sarenian didn't give me a chance to process my conflicting emotions as his vibrating voice once more commanded me.

*“As soon as I leave, you will eat the meal I have brought you, and then get a good night's sleep to digest and assimilate all that you have learned today about the evil of the Korletheans and how to save the purebloods from themselves. Be up and dressed by eight. I will see you then.”*

His eyes flashed, sealing his command. Without another word, he rose from his chair, brought it back next to the table, and walked out of my room. As soon as the door closed behind him, with a mind of their own, my feet carried me to the table. Feeling numb, I removed the covers from the temperature-controlled plates and ate on autopilot. I couldn't even say what had been on my plate. My thoughts were too jumbled.

The minute my head touched my pillow, a blessed oblivion claimed me. I had expected sleep to elude me and to toss and turn all night. Although morning found me refreshed, my mind remained a chaotic mess. As soon as I thought of Keran, a sense of unease settled in the pit of my stomach. It gave me that icky feeling one had when reminiscing about a really bad old flame as you asked yourself what you ever saw in that person.

*These aren't my true feelings.*

It still terrified me that I should nonetheless react this way. I needed to escape before Deimos got me where he wanted. And where was that, to begin with? Why did he care if I ended up with someone else? What greater purpose was I supposed to serve?

I finished getting ready with twenty minutes to spare. As I waited for my captor's return, I evaluated my situation. Any way you cut it, I needed to get out of this room and find Keran. To do so, I had to get Deimos to trust me, or to at least lower his guard. If I played along with whatever game he had in mind, maybe I'd achieve my goal. Either way, it had to happen sooner than later. If a single brainwashing session sufficed to make thoughts of Keran unpleasant, many more could potentially lead me to hate him.

Whether my future belonged with him or elsewhere, I'd be damned if I abandoned him and his men to the horrible fate Deimos had in store for them.

The door chime put an end to my musings. Once again, Deimos entered without waiting for me to bid him come in. He'd changed into a similar sleeveless top with a plunging neckline and a long skirt, typical of Sarenian fashion. Under different circumstances, the pristine white color of his outfit might have given him an angelic aura. But all I saw standing before me was malevolence wrapped in a shell of deceptive beauty.

Nevertheless, I schooled my features to hide the violent thoughts his presence stirred in me. He smiled approvingly at finding me ready as instructed.

"Good morning, Dawn," Deimos said in a cheerful voice as he headed towards the table, followed by a hover tray. "I trust you had a good night's sleep?"

"Yes," I said in a neutral voice as he set down the tray.

Only then did I notice a strange device sitting on it next to the covered plates, and partially hidden by a full glass of the wretched juice they'd made us drink last evening. He moved

the device off the tray, then picked up the glass and extended it to me.

When I didn't take it right away—my previous thoughts of being compliant already mostly forgotten—his face lost all warmth.

“We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. I would really like to avoid the latter,” he said in a stern voice.

A part of me wanted to resist. He took great pride in claiming he didn't harm females. I actually believed it. So, he would have to use compulsion. Considering I had not been able to resist obeying the command he gave me yesterday evening to be ready by eight this morning, the effects of the juice I drank last night were still active. What would I gain from this little rebellion? Make the point I wasn't a push over? And then what? I didn't care what he thought of me. What I needed was for Deimos to let his guard down and start trusting he had me where he wanted.

“Fine,” I said just as his eyes were starting to glow.

I took the glass from him and gulped the whole thing down in one go. All tension bled out from his shoulders, and his charming expression returned.

“Good girl,” he said in an approving voice. He took the glass back from me and waved at one of the two chairs by the table. “Have a seat and enjoy your meal. You have a busy day ahead, and we do not want to waste time.”

Swallowing back the urge to tell him to fuck off, I once more complied. Like with my dinner last night, I'd only been given a spoon and a fork made of flimsy recycled material. If I tried to stab anything with any type of force, it would bend or break.

I felt like a child when I uncovered my plate to find the meal had already been pre-cut in bite-size portions, which spared me the need for a proper knife.

“I understand how angry and frustrated you must feel right now. But you, my dear Dawn, will be instrumental in helping reshaping Braxia into a more inclusive and peaceful society.”

That pricked my curiosity. While I didn't doubt it would be some messed up fevered dream, any insight I could gain into his demented plans could help turn the tide against him.

“You will spend the next few days and weeks undergoing intensive training to become a Braxian Ambassador,” Deimos said with enthusiasm.

I blinked, completely thrown off by that unexpected statement.

“People need stability, familiarity,” he continued, seemingly oblivious to my confusion. “You are the one constant for all the hybrids. Those who aren't infatuated with you, love and respect you like they would a sister, or in some cases a mother. They wholeheartedly trust you, and every single one of them would give their life for you. You have no idea of the depth of loyalty you have garnered from these men, including Vintor. His sharp words were merely spoken out of hurt.”

My throat tightened upon hearing those words. I loved them all, too. Even that insufferable Vintor... They had come to the shelter broken, battered, and traumatized. I had helped nurture them back into being productive members of our adoptive society, even when it failed to properly support us. They were family to me. With each one who had died, a part of my heart had also been ripped out of my chest.

“Compulsion can only go so far if, morally, the subject is strongly enough against it. But with *your* endorsement, with *you* promoting the virtues of the new society, they will follow.”

I shook my head while staring at the Sarenian in disbelief. “First off, you’re way overestimating my swaying powers over those men. And second, whatever makes you think I would support your insane plans to control the Braxians? Like you said yourself, compulsion can only go so far when forced upon an unwilling target. I’m definitely unwilling!”

He gave me an indulgent smile and leaned back into his chair, once more crossing his leg in that nonchalant pose he had taken last night when talking to me.

“No, Dawn. It is *you* who underestimates your charisma. As for your unwillingness, by the time your training is concluded, you will be fully onboard. Contrary to what you think, I do not wish to turn the Braxians into a bunch of mindless drones. I do want your society to be autonomous and thrive. But an intervention is needed at this time to prevent a great crime against the galaxy to go unpunished, and for an even greater tragedy to occur once the Great War comes. And you will be a key player.”

“And what kind of training are we talking about?” I demanded. “More propaganda and brainwashing?”

He snorted and slowly shook his head, not in denial but in that way people sometimes did to say ‘What am I going to do with you?’

“You are going to learn about all the big galactic players, the brewing conflicts, intergalactic politics, and diplomacy. Once you’ve been exposed to the truth and understand all the wrongs that have been done, all the plotting and scheming

currently happening, you will see the wisdom of my course of action. War is never pretty. Innocents get caught in the crossfire. But *this* will prevent true genocides.”

“But whose truth is that? *Yours?*” I asked, making no effort to hide my thoughts on that.

“No, Dawn. You will get the *truth*, the *facts* as gathered by our intelligence service. What’s the point of being an Ambassador if your counterparts deem you a fraud because all your facts are wrong?”

That gave me pause. I locked eyes with him, searching for a glimmer of deception. But he held my gaze unwaveringly. Until I saw the material he intended for me to learn, I couldn’t say for sure whether it was legitimate or doctored. However, I didn’t doubt he genuinely believed it to be truthful. To my shame, I couldn’t deny being intrigued by it all. But how was that going to help me free Keran, his men, and myself?

“Finish your meal,” Deimos said, gesturing with his chin at my almost empty plate.

I took a couple more bites before pushing the plate, sated. He got up, grabbed the device from the table, and gestured for me to go sit on the couch. I obeyed while eyeing warily the thing in his hand. He smiled tauntingly in response to my reaction.

“Relax, Dawn. I already said I wouldn’t harm you.” He raised the device in front of me. It looked like a stick, with each end narrower and slightly recurved. “This little beauty is a virtual reality set. You could say it’s a portable holodeck.”

Holding each end, he gently pulled, and the stick separated into two parts. Deimos showed me the inner side of the wider, straight end of one of the two pieces.

“This is a magnet that will keep it in place. You put it on like a visor by pressing the magnet of each half right behind your temple, just in front of your ear, like so,” he continued, placing it in front of his right ear to show me. “See? The back of the stick must be right in front of your ear for sound, and the recurved part right at the edge of your eye.”

He placed the second half in front of his left ear. I could now see how it made an incomplete visor.

“Once both halves are positioned, you merely use the vocal command ‘Activate’ to turn it on,” Deimos explained.

As soon as he did, a luminous beam shot out of both recurved tips. They connected in front of his eyes, forming a holographic screen.

“Deactivate,” Deimos said.

The beams collapsed, and he carefully removed each half before handing them to me. I instinctively took them. To my dismay, his eyes started glowing. Before he even started speaking, I knew his voice would vibrate.

*“Over the course of the next few days, you will follow the complete program at the pace dictated by the device. You will only pause when it tells you to, and you will answer the quiz at the end of each module. Pass the test, and I will allow you to see your true love. And when you do, you will be kind to him and see him with an open heart.”*

His eyes flashed and the glow faded.

To my shock, I felt none of the needle stabbing pain or discomfort his previous compulsions usually triggered in me.

*Because these ones are not abhorrent to me.*



And they weren't. I wanted to see what the content of this program was, and I definitely wanted to see Jaek—if I had accurately guessed my so-called true love's identity. Together, we could find a way out of here and free the others.

“Why can't I see him now?” I asked, trying not to sound overly eager.

“First, because he's busy doing essential work. Second, because you haven't earned it yet. And third, because you will want to wait for the lingering scent of your indiscretion to fade.”

I flinched, once more struck by conflicting emotions. I hadn't cheated on Jaek. But this fucking mind control was twisting everything.

*But if he is indeed your soulmate...*

“I must go,” Deimos said. “Put the visors on and launch the program.”

Although he hadn't used his compulsion, I didn't make a fuss. Right this instant, I cowardly wanted to escape my own mind. As soon as I activated the device, the screen filled my view, literally giving me the immersive impression of being on a holodeck. I followed the on-screen instructions and launched the first module. Behind the voice of the device's mentor, I vaguely heard the sound of my room's door opening then closing.



## CHAPTER 19

## DAWN

**F**or five days, Deimos kept me completely isolated while undergoing intense virtual training. Being a rather social person, had most of the content not been so riveting, I might have gone insane. As he had promised, the material regarding cultural customs, laws, and intergalactic politics all seemed factual. Once the training started moving towards historical retelling, especially where Korletheans were concerned, I detected a clear bias in the way the facts were presented.

No doubt because many topics fascinated me, I didn't find myself fighting the compulsion at all. However, on the third day, I noticed a change. Subtle at first, it became more and more obvious as time went by.

Initially, seeing beautiful images of Jaek suddenly flashing by in between modules of the training took me aback. I realized then that it had not been the first time. For some reason, my conscious mind had not noticed it, as the images were undoubtedly meant to be subliminal messages to further endear Jaek to me.

That I consciously saw them now was what tipped me off. I also found myself able to let my mind wander instead of the almost supernatural focus that Deimos's compulsion had imposed on me. While the ultimate test would have been to

end or pause the simulation, I thought better of it. I couldn't risk the device snitching on me. But that did not prevent me from disobeying the command of remaining seated.

Since the visor filled my entire vision with an immersive simulation, I couldn't risk trying to move around the room without falling or injuring myself. As I was still aware of my body and could feel the couch beneath me, I pushed myself up to my feet. When no eye and brain stabbing sensation manifested itself, as was usually the case whenever I disobeyed the compulsion, I almost squealed with joy.

But I had to be careful. Although there didn't seem to be any hidden cameras or microphones in my quarters, I couldn't take any chances. I also needed to pass each of the damn tests from the modules so that I would be allowed to see Jaek. He was our only hope of getting out here.

Over the next couple of days, despite drinking the juice every morning when Deimos brought me breakfast, its effects continued to wear off even earlier during the day. I started to form a number of hypotheses as to what could be the cause.

My initial thought had been that I had developed some form of natural immunity. But that seemed improbable. Otherwise, Deimos would have likely noticed it also occurring with the men. My second thought was that maybe me being a woman affected the way I responded to the serum. After all, all the victims had been males. With the Sarenians' pledge to never hurt females, they wouldn't have properly tested it on one of us. Then this morning, I noticed how my own scent had changed. At the same time my nipples had grown very sensitive.

And this led to my third hypothesis. As a hybrid female, although my reproductive systems mostly favored my Braxian

heritage, I still displayed some minor human physiological reactions. While I had thankfully been spared the bleeding and cramps during a human woman's menstrual cycle, I still got very sensitive nipples—and an overactive libido—during that time. Biology wasn't my forte, but I knew enough to be aware of the hormonal changes that occurred within a woman's body during that time. And my gut said those hormones were messing with Deimos's serum.

This also meant I had a very small window to act, not only for that temporary immunity to the serum, but especially to rescue Keran and the others. The Goddess only knew what state they were in at this point. Thinking of the purebloods now systematically stirred a negative response from me. Knowing it was artificial, I would constantly remind myself those feelings weren't mine but imposed. Had I still been under the effects of the compulsion, I wouldn't have been able to fight it like this without suffering significant pain.

On the evening of the fifth day, Deimos returned with my supper. As had become our ritual, I would eat while he reviewed the results of my virtual tests. Then he would set the program for the next day, give me a few compulsions as to what I should do in the morning, and leave.

But I stopped him before he got to that part. As soon as he finished complimenting me for my great score, I seized my chance.

“Thank you,” I said. “I do find the training quite fascinating.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” he said approvingly.

Pretending to be nervous, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and licked my lips. “I have successfully completed the

first five modules. You had mentioned that if I passed my tests, I would be able to see Jaek.”

“I never mentioned a name,” Deimos said, his eyes narrowing at me.

“You didn’t?” I asked, faking surprise.

“I did not,” he repeated firmly.

This time, an uneasy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I had naturally assumed he meant Jaek. Surely he wasn’t thinking of Vintor? It *couldn’t* be Vintor. The training had images of Jaek embedded in it.

*But my conscious mind wouldn’t have picked it up if not for the drug wearing off.*

Fuck! Realizing I was about to give myself away, I quickly found a reply I hoped would pacify him.

“But it *is* Jaek, right?” I asked, making no effort to hide the wariness in my voice. “You said that person was my soulmate, the person I had loved all along and who had patiently been waiting for me. The only person who meets that description is Jaek.”

Deimos tilted his head to the side, his icy blue eyes studying my reactions. “And what if I told you it’s not Jaek.”

I flinched, my stomach dropping. “Then we’re going to have a problem. He’s the only one I truly ever had feelings for. And over the past few days, he’s been occupying my every thought. If you had someone else in mind, then never mind.”

Deimos lifted an eyebrow. I couldn’t say if it expressed amusement or doubt.

“Why this sudden interest for Jaek?” he challenged.

I shrugged. “It’s not sudden. I always had feelings for him. Strong ones. And he’s always been so kind and respectful to me. The day the Veredian healer mended him, Jaek asked me to move to Braxia with him. I was very tempted,” I said truthfully. “But hearing you say the one who had been patiently waiting for me was my true soulmate struck a nerve and made me look at my relationship with Jaek with new eyes. I think you are right, that Jaek and I are soulmates. I just really want to see him. And I won’t lie that being locked up in this room all day by myself hasn’t been easy,” I added with a nervous laugh.

Deimos nodded slowly, his gaze still intensely studying me, no doubt in search of deceit. “And what of the pureblood Keran?”

I instinctively scrunched my face—the disgusted reaction automatically triggered by my training whenever I thought of a pureblood. While I would normally chastise myself for it and rationalize why this reaction didn’t come from the true Dawn, I welcomed it this time.

“He was just a fling,” I said, waving a dismissive hand. “I’ve been pretending to be human my whole life. By their standards, I’m not exactly an attractive woman. So I guess that having a crown prince fawn over me and call me beautiful flattered me. In the end, he was just using me, preying on my insecurities to get what he wanted. He offered me a job on Braxia, but that was likely only to give himself a good conscience. We both know the future Magnar would never marry a half-breed with no wealth, no connections, no impressive degrees or skills to bring to the table. I just deluded myself into indulging in a fairy tale.”



Even though I spoke those words to placate the Sarenian, they rang far too true to my own ears. What future would there truly have been between Keran and me?

“I’m glad to hear you finally see the truth of it,” Deimos said in a gentle voice. “For what it’s worth, physical beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You may not fit the aesthetic of some other species, but by your own, you are a stunning female. And what others think of you is irrelevant. The ones who matter see you in all your glory. To Jaek, there is no woman more beautiful than you are.”

“So it *is* Jaek!” I exclaimed, stunned by my own enthusiastic reaction.

Deimos chuckled. “Of course, it is.”

“Thank the Goddess,” I breathed out, pressing my palms to my chest. “Can I see him?”

The Sarenian pursed his lips and gave me a slow, assessing look. “It is late, and I wasn’t planning on letting you see him for another week. But you are exceeding my expectations. So yes, you may see him... But only for a few minutes,” he warned when I squealed. “Finish your meal, then I’ll take you to him.”

I nearly choked on my food, I chowed it down so fast.

Deimos chuckled as he escorted me out of my room. Although I had walked through these hallways when he had first brought me here, they all looked new to me. I couldn’t tell if the Sarenian had compelled me to forget the way here or if I’d been too distraught that day to remember. This time, I made sure to file away any information that could help me navigate these corridors. I didn’t try to hide the fact that I was looking around, as the opposite would have made him

suspicious. Anyone exploring a new place would display natural curiosity about their surroundings.

To my dismay, the ship turned out to be much bigger than I expected. Or rather, the distance between the lab and my quarters proved to be far too great. While I didn't notice any cameras along the way, we ran into a Sarenian and later a couple of Guldans, none of whom I had seen before. That, more than anything else, confirmed I'd never manage to sneak past such a long distance without getting caught. Then again, that implied me being able to unlock my room to leave.

After turning into various connecting corridors and passing a set of secured doors, we finally reached the medical and scientific wing of the ship. Multiple doors clearly indicated warnings that only authorized personnel were allowed to enter, while others requested decontamination first. I shuddered at the thought of what other fucked up experiments they might be running.

We finally stopped in front of an unremarkable door. Deimos stood in front of the biometric lock, which scanned his face before granting him access. My heart sank a bit more at that extra layer of security that I'd never be able to bypass.

The doors swished open, revealing a medium-sized lab, with only two workstations in the center of the room. Tons of counters laden with research paraphernalia occupied the left and right sides, while giant cooling units filled with flasks and vials lined the entire back wall. However, the lone figure in the room commanded all my attention.

My heart leapt, and a wave of affection and joy surged through me as Jaek abruptly lifted his head from his work to look with curiosity at who had entered his domain. His dark eyes first widened with surprise upon recognizing me, then his

features melted in an expression of happiness filled with so much love that my throat tightened with emotion.

This man truly loved me.

*And I love him...*

But was I *in love* with him? My head said yes, but my heart still wavered, a part of it timidly saying yes, while another flashed images of Keran. Even the unease triggered by the compulsion couldn't snuff out his memory.

"Dawn," Jaek breathed out with a glowing smile.

"Hey," I said in a soft voice as I entered the room and walked towards him.

"You look stunning, as always," Jaek said when I stopped right in front of him.

I lowered my eyes and shyly tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. Deimos had provided me with a wardrobe of short, draped, Sarenian dresses to wear during my stay here. Thankfully, being sleeveless, they accommodated my naturally broader shoulders. And the rest of the dress flattered my narrow waist and long legs.

"Thank you. Sarenian fashion seems to agree with me," I replied.

"It does," he said with an approving smile.

"You have thirty minutes," Deimos said, breaking the moment. "I'll return then to bring you back to your quarters, Dawn."

I nodded with a genuinely grateful expression—not that he would come back and get me, but for granting me some time alone with Jaek. Though brief, this gave an opportunity to assess how much of an ally he would be. For days now, I had

wondered if the Sarenians were using Jaek to help with their experiments. He was a brilliant biochemist. The Goddess only knew what they could make him do under compulsion.

My eyes remained locked on the Sarenian until the door closed behind him. I immediately refocused on Jaek, who was still smiling at me with an air of wonder.

“It’s so good to see you. I didn’t expect it to happen so soon,” he said with enthusiasm.

I frowned. “You knew I was here?”

He nodded. “Of course! Deimos said you agreed to join us.”

“Join you?” I repeated, with genuine confusion—and a sliver of worry.

“Yes, all of us who have chosen to move back to Braxia,” Jaek said as if it was self-evident. “Unlike the others, although I can fight, I have no interest in pursuing a training with Jardan. Deimos gave me a unique opportunity to work on a project that will benefit Braxians as a whole and increase my chances of securing a position in Mercy Xeldar’s research lab. I understand he offered you training to aspire to an even greater role on Braxia than merely hybrid affairs?”

“Right,” I said cautiously.

Did he know Deimos coerced me into this? Was he also wondering if I had somehow flipped? If the Sarenian still held him under his thrall, I couldn’t risk exposing myself just yet. But how to verify it safely?

“All the things I’ve learned about politics, galactic history, foreign culture and customs, and so much more have been invaluable,” I said truthfully. “I never thought to explore that

field. My entire life has always been about making people like us safe.”

“And you did a wonderful job of it,” Jaek said affectionately. His smile then faded, and he seemed to hesitate before taking on a nervous expression. “How are things between you and the Prince?”

I blinked, taken aback by the question. Did he not know that Deimos was holding him prisoner here?

“The Prince and I are no more,” I said carefully. “I had a lot of time to think over the past few days. It embarrasses me to admit that I just fell for some kind of childish infatuation. You don’t often run into a big and strong Berserker, who happens to be a prince with an incredible aura of authority. Things were going really badly with the murders and disappearances. I was lost and helpless to protect any of you. He showed up in my time of despair and offered what I needed the most.”

Jaek bowed his head with an air of guilt. “We all failed you. We should have seen you needed our help. But we were all too busy with our own little lives.”

“I could have asked,” I said in self-derision. “That’s always been my biggest issue. I don’t know how to ask for help from the people I love, only from the people I believe owe me their assistance, like the Twelve and the peacekeepers. In my stubbornness, I completely screwed up. It’s only once you lose your most precious treasures that you realize what you had but never fully appreciated.”

I hadn’t meant for my voice to quiver as I spoke those words, but too many emotions were swelling within me.

Jaek cupping my cheek with one hand and gently caressing it with his thumb took me by surprise.

“Some things can *never* be lost, Dawn. Some things are eternal.”

My throat tightened, and tears pricked my eyes. In his own way, Jaek had just told me that he had forgiven my ‘indiscretion’ and that his love for me was eternal. My tongue burned with the urge to tell him I loved him, too. I honestly did. And yet, when I had spoken of the most precious treasure I had lost, it was Keran’s face that had floated before my mind’s eye.

*Deimos has to be wrong. If Jaek is my soulmate, I shouldn’t still long for Keran.*

A beeping sound startled me and reclaimed Jaek’s attention.

“Just a minute,” he said in an apologetic tone.

While he went to fiddle with a machine that had been shaking several vials, I studied the room. I had no clue what any of this was. The drug Deimos had been administering us had systematically been mixed with that wretched drink. Although my gut said the countless vials in the cooling units were more of that drug, I couldn’t tell for sure.

“So what are you working on?” I asked casually.

Jaek looked up from the vials he was placing labels on before putting them in a holder to look at me.

“It’s a cure for a degenerative disease plaguing our people,” he said proudly.

“Hybrids?” I asked, taken aback by that answer.

“All Braxians, hybrids and purebloods alike, although it is rarer among us hybrids. I’m so close!”

“Oh wow! What does it do?”

“I devised an immunosuppressant that stops our serotonin from attacking us. Unfortunately, it doesn’t last and requires new doses administered daily. I’m trying to make it last longer.”

It took every last bit of my willpower to hide the horror I felt. Orin had confirmed that the murder victims had been drained of their serotonin. Had Jaek created the drug that was subjecting us to the Sarenians’ mind control? Had they conned him into believing he was curing a degenerative disease?

“That’s amazing,” I said with forced enthusiasm. “When you say you’re close, do you mean that the effects of your treatment could become permanent?”

To my relief, he shook his head. “That’s highly unlikely. But in its current state, a patient receiving doses too frequently could develop negative side effects in the long run. By this I mean if it went on for more than six months.”

“I see,” I replied, my wheels spinning. “Who are your patients? How did this project land in your lap?”

“I only started working on it a week ago. Apparently, Deimos had been following some of the research I had been performing, and he approached me about this at the meeting.”

I almost wept with relief to learn he hadn’t been in on this from the start. This further seemed to confirm Deimos had conned him into this. As Jaek had expressed his desire to work for the current Braxian Dagna at her state-of-the-art lab, Deimos would have had no problem convincing him to take on

this project. Jaek wouldn't have resisted the compulsion as this aligned with something he would want to do.

*Presented to him as altruistic research to cure people, not to control them.*

My hatred for the Sarenian went up another notch. But there would be time later to plan his comeuppance. For now, I needed to find a way to break its hold on Jaek.

“Oh, I see. But what of your patients? Are they hybrids?”

He shook his head again. “No, they are purebloods who came here directly from Braxia. I don't know their names. We merely label things Patient A or B,” he added sheepishly. “I'm also not their physician. I only do the lab work.”

“I see,” I repeated, trying to hide my disappointment. “And how is it administered?”

“Orally or by injection,” Jaek replied matter-of-factly. “Orally is best. You simply dilute the dose in water or juice.”

“Is this it, the cure you're working on?” I asked, pointing at the vials he was placing in the tray with my chin.

Jaek glanced at them before giving me a strange look then nodding. “Yes, it is. Apparently, the patients are responding well to the treatment,” Jaek continued as he carried the tray of labeled vials to one of the cooling units. “Deimos really wants me to get it all done by next week so that we can start mass production.”

I frowned. “Why the rush?”

He shrugged. “I'm not sure, to be honest. He mentioned an outbreak of the illness in certain compounds on Braxia. But I think it's more because he wants to leave Haven in the next



couple of weeks, when all of those also leaving will be making their move.”

*He wants it ready to be able to enthrall the Braxian population before the coronation.*

I stared at the cooling units as he was finishing placing the tray of vials inside one of them.

He hesitated for a second, as if debating whether he should continue. “As you can see, it’s very sensitive to temperature. It must remain cold until it is administered. If it was to get above thirty-six degrees Celsius for even just thirty seconds, it would be ruined and lose all its properties.”

“Thirty-six degrees?!” I exclaimed, stunned by this revelation. “I drink my coffee twice as hot!”

“Coffee?” he asked, confused.

“The human version of gwar,” I corrected sheepishly. “Melinda finds our version too bitter. She always drowns it with cream then add sugar.”

Although I laughed at the disgusted expression Jaek made, my mind was firing on all cylinders. This information felt too specific to just be randomly volunteered. He’d effectively told me how to neutralize the serum. But how could I leverage that knowledge? Deimos usually stayed in the room to watch me drink the damn juice, although he rarely issued new compulsions. The juice merely ensured the previous ones remained in effect.

“Does that mean that it wouldn’t work on a feverish patient?” I asked, struck by a sudden idea.

The oddest glimmer flashed through his eyes. It could have been admiration or approval, but it vanished too quickly for me to be certain.

“It would still work,” Jaek said a bit hesitantly. “But it would affect the rate of breakdown of the drug. We call it half life, where a percentage of the medication is lost. Most drugs account for such things. But when that really can’t be helped, knowing a patient might be dealing with these kinds of factors, the healer would adjust the dose accordingly to compensate such losses based on the percentage of breakdown per unit time.”

Jaek burst out laughing when my eyes glazed over. I could handle many things, but science and I didn’t mix too well.

“To put it simply, you would want to increase the dose of this specific drug if the patient suffered from high fever or was in a very warm environment. But the intense heat would only have an impact if applied immediately after the injection or consumption, like with a very hot heating blanket. That would nullify the effects of the drug, or significantly reduce its duration.”

“That’s fascinating. You’re truly brilliant, you know that?” I said in all sincerity.

The shy expression that settled on his face made me want to hug him. Jaek was such a sweet and lovely man.

“Thank you,” he said timidly.

He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before looking at something above my head. A frown creased his strong brow, prompting me to look over my shoulder at what could have caused that reaction. I noticed the clock and realized our thirty minutes were likely almost up.

My heart sank. While I wanted to believe Jaek had tried to communicate to me how to free myself of the compulsion, I couldn’t swear to it. I still didn’t know for sure where he stood

and if he would help me find Keran and the others to free them.

“Any chance we could hang out again tomorrow?” I asked nervously.

“I was just thinking we could have breakfast,” Jaek suggested promptly.

My heart soared. “I would love that! However, Deimos usually brings my breakfast to my quarters—”

“I don’t mind coming to your quarters, if you’re okay with it,” Jaek interrupted.

“I don’t mind, but I’m not sure Deimos will agree,” I replied cautiously.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle Deimos,” Jaek said with an enigmatic smile that threw me for a loop.

As if summoned by those words, Deimos entered the room, his return announced by the discreet swishing sound of the doors opening.

“Time to go, Dawn,” Deimos said in a cheerful voice. “I hope you enjoyed your visit.”

“I certainly did,” I said in all sincerity, before turning back to smile at Jaek. “Bye.”

“See you in the morning,” he replied.

“In the morning?” Deimos asked with a frown.

“I asked Dawn to have breakfast with me tomorrow morning. As I understand she always eats in her quarters, I offered to join her there before she resumes her studies and I get back to the lab,” Jaek said in a casual tone.

Deimos’s icy blue eyes flicked towards me, questioningly.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said, annoyed by the nervousness in my voice.

“Is that a problem?” Jaek asked, his voice neutral when Deimos didn’t respond right away.

“No, of course not,” Deimos said with forced enthusiasm. “I’m sure you’ll both have a great time. Come, Dawn. Let’s go.”

Baffled by what appeared to be a shift in power, I turned to look at Jaek with surprise. Smiling smugly, he merely winked at me. More confused than ever, I gave him an uncertain smile and followed Deimos out of the room.

*What the fuck just happened?*



## CHAPTER 20

## KERAN

**S**eething with rage and helplessness, I once more stop pulling against my restraints. My wrists were raw from all of my previous—and just as ineffective—attempts. Despite knowing I didn't have the strength to break them, I stubbornly kept trying. What other choice did I have?

Deimos had kept us trapped in this lab for five days now. If not for the clock on the wall, I would have no sense of time. Then again, the first wave of larvae piercing out of Orin's chest two days ago would have cued me in as to the fact we'd been here for at least three days.

He had made his clan proud—he had done *me* proud—grinding his teeth through the pain, and never uttering a single shout or pleading for mercy through what had to have been agony. Despite my reluctance to give our captors what they wanted, I went into Berserker mode to dampen Orin's pain during that last phase, stopping immediately after. A different Sarenian than Deimos had entered the room once what I believed to be the last larvae had come out of my man. Completely ignoring me, the Sarenian had tended to Orin's wounds, injected him with what I hoped to be healing nanobots, and taken the bags of fluids collected from my medical officer.

Two hours later, Deimos and that other Sarenian—who seemed to be their medical expert or scientist—returned. Using their compulsion, they forced me to remain still as they implanted Kranax Beetle eggs inside me. Normally, people using these bugs as torture devices simply placed the beetles near a deliberately carved incision in the limbs or abdomen. Using natural openings in the body, such as the ears, the mouth, the nose usually led to a quick death or extreme disfigurement. But if you wanted a slow and horrible agony, you placed them near the anus or vagina.

The Sarenian doctor did none of the above. With the type of long syringe used for spinal taps—although with a noticeably thicker needle—they poked through my navel to insert the already harvested eggs directly where they wanted. Unlike my men, I didn't receive any sedative or painkiller. Instead, they ordered me to go into Berserker mode. Having no choice in the matter, I had complied at first, but fought it every step of the way. It wasn't until much later that evening that the effects of the compulsion wore off—or rather of the serum that enabled the compulsion.

This morning, those eggs began to hatch. Pointlessly pulling on my restraints initially helped shift the pain. Now, it only added a new source of discomfort.

On top of the larvae, guilt ate away at me as my gaze landed on Baldur, still bound to his own gridded stretcher across the room from me. Like Orin, his naturally greige skin—the typical Braxian complexion—had taken a dull hue. Even now, I could see a larva poking out from his stomach and others wiggling under his skin. Thankfully, although his face was strained from pain, he was either sedated or enjoying the effects of painkillers. Whichever they had given him, it didn't suffice to fully numb his pain, but it helped make it tolerable.



I didn't want to imagine what I'd go through once all the eggs had hatched inside me. For now, I could distinctly feel two of them carving themselves a way out. The most painful—and frightening one—was moving north towards my heart and lungs. Images of me drowning in my own blood kept flashing before my eyes.

A deep grunt from Baldur interrupted my gruesome thoughts. Another wave of helpless anger crashed over me as a second larva pierced through his skin, right above his clavicle. I contemplated using my Berserker powers again to alleviate some of his pain, but that was exactly what they wanted. The last times I'd done it, they'd implanted my men with even more eggs since my aura allowed them to withstand more pain. I wanted to scream and rage, to get my hands on those Sarenians and make them pay a thousandfold for all of this. In my entire life, I had never felt so defeated.

Even with them healing us between rounds, our bodies would only be able to sustain this level of trauma for so long. No one knew where we were, and reasonably, my father wouldn't send a rescue for at least another week. Only once I failed to return by the deadline I had set and didn't check in with him to let him know the reason for the delay would he intervene. And at the fastest speed, it would take a rescue team at least two more days to reach Haven. By then, Orin would likely be dead.

My head jerked right when I heard the swishing sound of the door opening.

“Jaek!” I breathed out, my heart soaring.

Our eyes connected. For the briefest instant, a strange expression flitted over his features before his face hardened.

Without a word, he kept walking past me and headed towards Orin.

“Jaek?” I called out again in confusion. But he ignored me.

My heart sank as a million thoughts collided in my head. Even now, seeing him examine in turn Orin then Baldur, I refused to accept he could be a willing participant to this. Deimos had hinted as much, but surely Jaek was acting under compulsion. Right?

He cleaned my men’s open wounds, replaced Baldur’s almost empty drip, then collected their fluid bags, hooking new empty ones to their respective ports. After placing the full ones in a temperature-controlled container marked biohazard, Jaek at long last turned his attention towards me.

I watched him approach with measured steps, his expression hard and cold. He stopped next to my stretcher. The way his gaze roamed over my naked body, I suspected this was actually his first time entering this room. He stared at my limp cock for a few seconds that felt like an eternity, his face contorting into a grimace of disgust and hatred. Words weren’t necessary to reveal he was picturing Dawn and I having sex.

In that instant, whatever doubt I still held about his voluntary participation in this mess vanished. The question was now whether he’d been in on it all along, or recently joined in retaliation over the woman he loved.

Beyond feeling devastated that our one potential ally had turned out to be an enemy, I couldn’t make sense of this. I had never been so completely wrong about a person. I believed Deimos when he claimed Jaek and Dawn were Attuned. But Dawn would never fall for a man capable of what he was currently doing. Was that the true reason why she had never

pursued a relationship with him? Had she sensed the darkness that lurked within him?

Jaek picked up the bag collecting my fluids, giving me a first glimpse of it. The way I lay down, it was out of my line of sight. It was three-quarters full. A malicious smile stretched Jaek's lips as he gave me a sideways glance.

"Well, it appears that, aside from having brutish strength, purebloods are indeed better at some things after all. You produce twice as much serotonin with half the Beetles than the others did," Jaek said tauntingly.

"How could you?" I said, in an almost whispered voice as anger boiled in my veins. "Why would you do this?"

He shrugged and looked at me as if I'd asked a question with an obvious answer. "Revenge, of course."

"Things are changing! They are better than they've ever been for hybrids and improving every day! Why now?!" I exclaimed.

"It's too little, too late," Jaek said with contempt. "What you and your men are enduring right now is but a tiny taste of the endless and helpless suffering we hybrids endured. None of it was ever for any wrongdoings on our part, but merely for being what we were. And you, Jakar Keran, are definitely something else."

"And you think killing the very people who stand for hybrids will make things better? That it will make the past go away?"

"It won't make it go away, but it will allow us to reshape the future for the better," he replied matter-of-factly.

I snorted in disbelief. "For the better? By becoming puppets to the Guldans and Sarenians?" I exclaimed.

He huffed with disdain. “I am no one’s puppet.”

“Really?” I challenged in a dubious tone.

Jaek held my gaze unwaveringly. “I assure you, Jakar. I am not.”

He didn’t flinch or avert his eyes while a smug smile settled on his lips. Ancestors! Was he truly a voluntary participant? Had he concocted some sort of antidote for himself? Or had Deimos so thoroughly brainwashed Jaek that he had convinced himself these were indeed his beliefs?

Before I could respond, a sharp pain stabbed me from within, near my solar plexus. I barely managed to keep a neutral expression. I didn’t want to give him the pleasure of witnessing my pain. Thankfully, he resumed talking.

“When I escaped Braxia, I swore to myself that I would never again allow Braxians to abuse me or to take from me. It took me years to get over the trauma. But I did, and even learned to accept that I would forever be disabled and disfigured.”

He lifted a hand to his now smooth face, devoid of the burn scars that had previously marred it. The strange expression he had when he first entered the room and saw me crossed his features again to be quickly replaced by resentment.

“Like the others, when you first came here, I didn’t hold much faith in what you could or would do for us. But Dawn kept praising you, and all of us worship her. So we gave you the benefit of the doubt. After that stunt you pulled, calling in favors from the Veredians to heal us, you actually swayed a bunch of us. You made us believe you cared and would truly

go out of your way to give us a home. But the whole time, you were swooping in, taking from me. But no more...”

“I didn’t take from you, Jaek. I certainly never came here with that intention. Dawn and I were both single, and the chemistry between us was unexpected,” I said in a reasonable tone.

“Fuck your chemistry!” he hissed. You *know* I love her. And she loves *me*. You could have stepped aside and gone back to ruling your planet and fucking all the concubines that are undoubtedly throwing themselves at you from all sides. But no. You had to come and take *my* woman. Dawn and I are Attuned!”

I clenched my teeth, both from the pain of the larvae eating me from within, and from the possessive jealousy his words stirred.

“Deimos told you?”

Even though I worded it as a question, it was more of a statement.

Jaek lifted his chin defiantly. “Yes. But he merely confirmed what I already knew.”

I nodded slowly. “He mentioned it to me as well when I asked about Dawn’s welfare. He claimed I had nothing to worry about since you’d be looking after her.”

“I will,” Jaek said boldly.

I narrowed my eyes at him, knowing my next words were foolish in my current situation, but unable to resist. “You might be Attuned, but you’re not her soulmate. Because that happens to be me. Did Deimos tell you *that*?”

By his shocked reaction, Jaek had not known. Disbelief gave way to pain, quickly replaced by a murderous expression on his face. I cursed myself for allowing him to get under my skin enough to taunt him while bound in this most precarious position.

I forced myself to take on a more sympathetic, almost apologetic air as I continued in a soothing tone. “I didn’t pursue Dawn out of a sense of entitlement, and certainly not to spite you. Fate brought us together, and—”

An excruciating pain followed by a bout of coughing interrupted me. What I first thought to be bile rising in my throat turned out to be blood as the taste of iron exploded on my taste buds. A drop of blood pearled on my lips. I licked it off, furious that Jaek should have witnessed it.

His anger faded, replaced by an evil smile. “Fate may have brought you together, but not for long, it seems. Don’t worry. Dawn will forget about you, and I’ll be there to console her.”

It was my turn to be angry. “You’d let a Sarenian mind-control a woman into being with you?” I snarled.

Jaek recoiled, the genuine outrage on his face filling me with relief.

“NEVER! Whatever you may think, nothing matters to me more than Dawn’s happiness.”

“Then you’d let her be with her soulmate,” I challenged.

His face closed off. He squared his shoulders and took on a cold expression. “Your fate is out of my hands.”

“But you’re a part of this,” I argued.

He snorted. “I wasn’t until I smelled you on her. Your fate was sealed long before I got involved.”

That struck me like a boulder. The pain in my chest stunted my ability to think, not to mention my left lung feeling like it was deflated, making it harder to breathe. If he'd only joined them a few days ago out of jealousy, maybe he could be swayed back away from this path of madness. Or had Deimos taken advantage of Jaek's sorrow to mind-control him and had merely convinced him that he had not?

"So you seized the opportunity to punish me for taking what you think is yours," I said sternly.

"No, Jakar," Jaek replied in a strange tone. "I'm merely keeping the one I love safe. Too bad I can't say the same about you."

I blinked. "What?"

He glanced at my men, still partially unconscious from sedation. "You let them needlessly suffer. As you can see, the painkillers we give them without tampering with the quality of their hormones can only go so far. As a Berserker, you could further dampen their suffering, maybe even nullify it, while speeding up their healing. And yet, you're not using your power."

While that comment struck a nerve, I held his gaze defiantly. "You don't give a shit about their pain. You just want my Berserker hormones. Why else have you and your master not given me painkillers, unlike my men? And every time I've used my power, you've only implanted them with more eggs."

Jaek chuckled. "You're right, I don't care. And apparently, you don't either. I'll get your Berserker hormones anyway. You purebloods may be strong, but you're clearly not smart. Resisting compulsion damages your brain. You'll find that going along makes things easier."

“And be a puppet like you?” I retorted with disdain.

“Like I said, I’m no one’s puppet. But do keep resisting whenever Deimos chooses to enthrall you. Soon, your mind will be broken enough for us to just take what we want.”

Except it was another bout of bloody coughing that responded to his words as sharp pain sliced through my torso. His eyes flicked to my chest. He tilted his head to the side, as if admiring a mesmerizing phenomenon.

“Your first little friend is about to come out. Although you’re proving not to be too smart, I have to admit that you’re tough. Without painkillers, most people would be screaming in agony right now,” Jaek reflected out loud. He turned around to look at my men pensively. “Maybe we’ll stop giving them painkillers as well to see just how tough *they* are...” he turned back to lock eyes with me “...or how indifferent *you* are to their pain. Maybe then, the Berserker in you will come out and play.”

Without waiting for my response, Jaek picked up the temperature-controlled container in which he had placed my men’s fluid bags and walked out of the room. As soon as the door closed behind him, I invoked my Berserker powers. In seconds, the pain in my chest and abdomen dropped to negligible levels and the tension straining my men’s faces vanished as my aura wrapped around them.

Feeling defeated, I closed my eyes and prayed to the Ancestors that they give me a way out of this mess.





## CHAPTER 21

## KRYGOR

I glared balefully at Ravik. The wretch was eyeing me with amusement as the topic that had been poisoning my life of late finally came up in his private council. My aggravation only made him laugh further. His second son, Ganek, and Clan Leaders Boros Grumar and Raylor Caldes observed me with curiosity.

“Wait until it’s Lissy’s turn. Then we’ll see how amusing you’ll find it all,” I grumbled.

Ravik chuckled. “You’re probably right. But that’s still nine years away. And you’re assuming I’ll let the foolish male who comes sniffing around my daughter live long enough to court her.”

“Mercy might have something to say about it,” Ganek teased.

Ravik snorted. “My woman will likely be the one kicking his ass first.”

Although we all laughed, I actually shook my head. “Lissy is truly the Dagna’s offspring. Any male needs an ass kicking, your daughter will take care of it herself.”

Ravik puffed out his chest while the rest of the council nodded in agreement. He had every reason to be proud.

Despite being only nine years old, little Lissy was already proving to be a fierce warrior. It shouldn't be surprising considering she was of the Warrior breed of the Veredians—like her mother—which gave her natural combat abilities. Mercy had not only trained her daughter, but mine as well. My Siona never ceased to amaze me.

Knowing that I would lose her soon once more infuriated me. But I couldn't kill Prince Zerien for “sniffing around my daughter.”

“To answer your question, Boros, yes, Prince Zerien will be here in six months,” I said reluctantly. “Well, not *here* on Braxia,” I amended. “The agreement was that once Siona turned eighteen, he would get to spend one month courting her on Venus Hive. If she consents to marry him after that, they will return together to Sarenia for his coronation, the following month.”

“So it *is* confirmed that Siona will be his queen?” Raylor insisted.

“He waited six years for her to reach adulthood. The entire time he remained faithful and steadfast in his commitment to her. As much as I wish I could keep my daughter right here with me, there is no doubt in my mind that she will be his queen. She's crazy about him, anyway,” I added dejectedly.

“It is never easy to let go of one's daughter,” Boros said with sympathy. “But this union will cement the alliance between Braxia and Sarenia, just like Ravik's union with Mercy created an invaluable bond with the Veredians and, by extension, with the Xelixians and Korletheans. Who would have thought we'd be in such an enviable position today?”

We all nodded.

“We have indeed come a long way from the brink of bankruptcy. But the tide did not turn as favorably for some as it did for others,” Ravik said, casting a meaningful glance at Boros.

“That is undeniable,” Boros conceded.

His clan had been one of the poorest on Braxia, to the point he had considered sending his clansmen away to work as mercenaries over the winter, as he wouldn’t have been able to feed everyone in his clan. Their lands were rich in nyrian stone, that were considered as trash at the time, here on Braxia. Without Mercy, we never would have realized off-worlders deemed them luxury gems. Overnight, Boros Grumar’s clan—as well as Clan Curik and Clan Hurwas, who all shared the Jyriak Plateau and surrounding mountains—had achieved obscene wealth.

And with riches, came power...

Those left behind and whose power and status had steadily declined over the years since then resented those clans’ newfound wealth and laid the blame at Magnar Ravik’s feet.

“We will continue to work on improving the lot of the disgruntled. But for now, we need to start making plans for Prince Zerien’s ascension,” Ravik said. “We must decide who will be part of the delegation that will represent us on Sarenia, as well as discuss an appropriate wedding gift. As my son will be Magnar by then, he has provided me with a list of suggestions for the council to go over in his absence.”

“Speaking of which,” Raylor interjected, “when will Keran return? His own crowning is looming—”

Loud voices outside the private council chamber interrupted Clan Leader Caldes. We exchanged curious looks

while waiting to see what the source of the commotion could be. To my shock, I recognized my grandson's voice.

"I must speak to the Magnar NOW!" shouted Gavin's muffled voice through the closed door.

Seconds later, the door abruptly opened, Gavin effortlessly holding the guard at bay with one hand. We all jumped to our feet. Thankfully, while every council member took on a defensive stance, no one pulled a weapon.

"Gavin, what are you doing?!" I demanded sternly.

"I must speak with the Magnar and you, right away," Gavin said, his voice tense.

"We're in the midst of a council," I reminded him, my tone making it clear it should be obvious to him.

"Grappa, it *cannot* wait. We must speak, *now!*" Gavin insisted.

I gave Ravik a confused sideways glance. He was staring at my grandson, a frown creasing his strong brow.

"Speak then," Ravik said.

Gavin shook his head. "Not here. We must speak in private."

*What the fuck is going on?*

"Please," Gavin insisted when Ravik hesitated.

Teeth clenched, our Magnar gestured sharply with his head for Gavin to follow. When Ganek made to tag along as well, Gavin glanced his way before giving him a stiff nod. That worried me even more. As we left the room, the weight of the other Councilors' stares burned my back.

This spelled trouble.

My grandson wouldn't interrupt our meeting in such a dramatic fashion without a very good reason. With the growing rumors of challenges to Keran's rule, the slightest mishap would suffice to set the whole thing on fire. Right now, the Councilors would be fiercely speculating.

We exited the room through the backdoor, which led to Ravik's personal quarters. We followed the long hallway, stopping at the first door to his office, located only three meters away. Continuing farther and through the set of heavy, secured doors, would have taken us to his family's personal rooms.

Ravik entered his office first, followed by Gavin and me, Ganek closing the march.

"What's going on, boy?" Ravik demanded as soon as the door clicked shut behind Ganek.

"Keran is in trouble. We have to go get him now," Gavin said forcefully.

"WHAT?!" Ravik exclaimed, taking a step closer to my grandson, his shock reflecting ours. "What kind of trouble?"

Gavin hesitated, then cast a nervous glance my way before looking back at Ravik. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, seeming unsure how to word what he wanted to say or even if he should.

"The Magnar asked you a question, boy. Answer!" I snarled.

Gavin heaved a sigh, almost looking defeated. Then, a resolute glimmer appeared in his amber eyes, and he lifted his chin defiantly.

"I don't know what kind of trouble he's in. I just know that he needs our help, and that we must go at once."

The same air of confusion and disbelief settled on Ravik's and Ganek's faces, while I narrowed my eyes at my grandson.

"What the fuck kind of answer is that?" Ravik growled.

"I know what it sounds like, Magnar," Gavin said in an apologetic tone, "but you *have* to trust me. Something terrible is happening."

"I'm sorry, but you need to give me way more than that," Ravik countered. "What information did you get? What sign did you see? What prompted this sudden belief that my firstborn needs help?"

Gavin ran nervous fingers through his hair and swallowed hard. "I... There is something about me that only my close relatives are aware of. Sometimes I get... not premonitions, but a sense of things. It's a bone-deep conviction. And when it happens, I'm *always* right. This is one of those cases."

My stomach dropped. By the look Ravik and Ganek gave him, they clearly thought he had either gotten his head bashed a little too hard while sparring, or he had overindulged in Braxian wine. But I knew better.

Realizing Ravik was about to kick him out of his office, Gavin turned to me with a pleading expression.

"Tell him, Grappa! Remember the first time you took me hunting joarkals? I ran off towards the river. You told me to come back, but I told you we had to go to the river now and kept going?"

"Yes," I replied in a grave tone.

Relief and gratitude sparked in his eyes before he turned back to Ravik, who was clearly wondering what that had to do with anything.



“When I reached the river, I found little Gilana Veelan on the verge of drowning,” Gavin continued in a pressing tone. “A few minutes more, and it would have been too late for her!”

“I heard of that rescue,” Ganek interjected. “Elder Pattel continues to praise your virtues for saving his granddaughter. But the way he tells it, you stumbled on her while fishing.”

“It is the story *I* told,” I responded in Gavin’s stead. “Braxians do not have foresight. As I was uncertain if it had been a coincidence or a true gift, I felt it was safer to keep it quiet.”

“Was that the only incident?” Ravik asked.

Gavin shook his head. “No. There have been many more over the years. It’s not always about averting a tragedy. It can be something as silly as knowing beyond any doubt which of three chests contains the prize, or exactly where to find one of my missing siblings. I won’t be able to tell you the name or coordinates to their location, but I’ll be able to take you there on instinct. And right now, every fiber of my being says we need to leave at once. It is the same feeling I got for Gilana. If we delay, Keran *will* die.”

“We must contact Baldur,” Ravik said.

“I already tried,” Gavin countered. “There was no response. Haven isn’t so far that there would be such a long com delay. Something happened.”

A nerve ticked on Ravik’s temple while he studied Gavin’s face as if the answer to a question could be found there. He then gave me a sideways glance. After years of collaborating with the Magnar, words weren’t necessary for me to understand his unspoken question.

“His instincts have never been wrong,” I replied. “We have to go.”

Gavin exhaled audibly, his shoulders drooping with relief, while he gazed at me with gratitude.

“Very well,” Ravik said with a troubled expression. “We leave at once.”

“No!” I exclaimed, startling all three men. “You and Ganek *cannot* go. Keran’s ascension is being challenged. The two of you must remain here to remind everyone that House Xeldar still rules. We expected Keran to be back already to prepare for his coronation. One or both of you leaving now will raise too many questions.”

“If my son is in trouble—” Ravik started in an angry voice.

“*I* will bring him back,” I interrupted.

“*We* will bring him back,” Gavin corrected, holding my gaze with a dare in his.

Under different circumstances, I would have taught the boy a sliver of humility, but considering I had no clue where to even start looking for the Jakar, we would need to rely on his instinct.

I grunted my assent before turning back to Ravik. “I can justify my absence saying I took my clansmen on an off-world hunt.”

“Fine,” he growled reluctantly.

“What do we tell the Council?” Ganek asked.

“Nothing,” Ravik answered. “Gavin merely wanted to discuss personal matters. They will assume it is related to people who approached him about becoming Magnar. Let them believe it.”

Turning back to me, Ravik's dark gaze bore into mine with a savage glint.

"Bring my son back alive," he commanded.

"On my honor," I replied, striking my chest with my fist.  
"Come on, boy," I said to Gavin as I headed for the door.

With one last nod to the Magnar and his son, we walked out of the room.



## CHAPTER 22

## DAWN

I paced around the room, twisting my hands nervously as I waited for Jaek to arrive. In my mind, I replayed my plan and the various scenarios that could occur. The biggest unknown remained who between Deimos and Jaek would bring breakfast. The worst scenario would be for Deimos to escort Jaek here and treat him as a prisoner, like he did with me.

The latter option had seemed likely until Jaek asked Deimos if the two of us having breakfast was a problem. In that instant, there had been a clear power shift. But why? The only explanation I could come up with was that Deimos wanted to keep Jaek happy so he would finish the work on his serum. Jaek apparently believed I had “voluntarily joined” them in their project to relocate to Braxia. Deimos being overly controlling would make him suspicious and potentially start affecting his compulsion.

That Deimos had used his voice to order me to behave during that breakfast after he accompanied me back to my room last night hinted that he wouldn't be the one bringing me food this morning. I needed it to be Jaek for my plan to work. Above all, I needed to know if Jaek was aware of what was

happening. And second, I had to find a way to let him know I was temporarily free from the Sarenian's thrall.

*But only once I'm certain he won't rat me out because of the compulsion.*

My door chime going off startled the living daylights out of me. Despite trying to beat its way out of my chest from the fright, my heart soared when the door didn't immediately open afterward. Deimos never waited for my permission to enter.

Just as I was going to bid my visitor come in, the red light on the door's control panel on the wall turned blue, indicating my door was no longer locked. Had Jaek unlocked it, or had Deimos done so remotely? As I couldn't picture Deimos giving Jaek the key to my door, and as I doubted he wanted Jaek to know he was holding me prisoner, he had likely unlocked it at the last minute so that I could open it myself, as I would have under normal circumstances.

Heart pounding, I crossed the short distance to the door and opened it.

My pulse raced when I found Jaek standing outside with a large hover tray in tow. He looked good enough to eat in his skin-tight black t-shirt, and black pants. Since Thesala had healed him, Jaek had taken to binding his hair in various versions of a ponytail, exposing the now flawless skin of his face.

He smiled at me with that tenderness that made my stomach flutter and my knees waiver.

"Good morning, beautiful," Jaek said.

"Good morning, handsome," I replied, feeling as nervous as a schoolgirl on her first date, before waving him in. "Come in."

“Thank you.”

I stepped back to let him enter, the tray following him in. His gaze roamed with undisguised curiosity over the room as he headed towards the table to put down the tray.

“I’m jealous,” he said teasingly. “Your quarters are fancier than mine.”

“As it should be for a lady,” I replied in a similar tone.

He chuckled as he unloaded the contents of the tray onto the table, including two full glasses of the pink juice.

“Hmmm, something smells good,” I said in an enthusiastic voice as I lifted the cover of one of the trays.

“Hopefully, I got all your favorites,” Jaek said, pulling a chair for me to sit.

I gave him a grateful smile as I began to sit, my gaze taking inventory of the food in my plate.

“It certainly looks like you did! Even blueberry pancakes! How did you remember... Oh!” I said, taking on a crestfallen expression.

“What is it?” Jaek asked with a sliver of worry.

“Hmmm.. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” I said with a smile in my best interpretation of someone disappointed but pretending they were not. “Have a seat. I know you have a busy schedule ahead.”

As I had hoped, Jaek frowned and took on a mulish expression. “No, there *is* something. What’s wrong?”

I shifted in my seat and gave him a sheepish smile. “It’s really not a big deal. I noticed there is no syrup for the pancakes. But I can do without.”



I had accounted for a variety of things that could be missing, based on the types of dishes Deimos had brought me over the past few days. The pancakes couldn't have been more perfect.

Jaek blinked, his eyes flicking to my plate before locking with mine again. "Oh! I didn't realize you liked syrup. I don't recall you ever having much of a sweet tooth."

"I didn't use to," I said with an embarrassed expression. "I mostly still don't, but Melinda converted me into adding a dab of syrup on my pancakes, and the occasional cream in my coffee." gwar."

Jaek scrunched his face in disgust. "I will *not* assist you in ruining gwar with cream—not that we have any today—but I can take care of your syrup addiction."

I giggled. "It's not an addiction, but it does make pancakes perfect. Unfortunately, my replicator here doesn't make any," I said in a dejected tone. "So, I'll make do without this time."

"Absolutely not!" Jaek said in a tone that brooked no argument. "I'll go fetch some for you."

"Oh no! You don't have to do that!" I said with the proper level of guilt.

"I insist. It will only take me a few minutes. Be right back."

Without giving me a chance to argue further—not that I would have—Jaek left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I grabbed my glass and rushed to place it inside the replicator. I set it to heat, my heart beating into my throat as I watched the second go by at a painfully slow pace. The whole time, I prayed the juice

wouldn't change color, or otherwise have some weird reaction that would give away that I had tampered with it.

Although Jaek had said thirty-six degrees for thirty seconds to nullify the effects of the drug, I couldn't risk waiting that long. I needed to cool down the drink again and tackle the second glass before he returned. As I didn't know how close or far the mess hall was located, he could be back in two minutes or five. Therefore, I set it to forty-five degrees for fifteen seconds, before cooling it over forty-seconds to avoid too drastic a temperature reversal that could shatter the glass.

When I pulled the glass out of the replicator, my heart sank at finding it at room temperature instead of cold. If I spent more time on this one, I probably wouldn't have time to repeat the process with the second glass. Raising it to my lips, I carefully took a sip and almost cried with relief when the taste turned out not to have been affected by the heat.

Taking a quick decision, I put that first glass back inside the replicator to cool it for a few seconds more. While it did, I rushed to the hygiene room and turned on the faucet. Leaving the water running, I hurried back out and grabbed the second glass on the table.

I could barely breathe, my chest was so constricted with fear. Worse still, I dreaded not hearing the door chime when Jaek returned as my heart was pounding so loudly in my ears. Thankfully, this time the first glass had cooled to an appropriate temperature. I put the second glass to heat while returning the first one next to Jaek's plate.

Even if I didn't have enough time to properly ruin my own drink, its effect would wear off early as it had over the past few days. Getting Jaek free of the compulsion was my priority. I was halfway through cooling the second glass when I heard

something outside. The ship being very-well soundproofed, outside noise extremely rarely seeped into my room.

Panicked at the thought it might be Deimos coming to spy on us, or Jaek already returning, I took the drink out, distraught at finding it barely lukewarm.

*It's my drink. He won't notice!*

As I was bringing it to the table, my door chime rang. By some miracle, I managed to suppress the frightened yelp that rose in my throat. In my haste to put the glass down next to my plate, I spilled a few drops. Sparing them no mind, I ran to the bathroom and shoved my hands under the running water.

“Just one minute!” I shouted as I turned off the water and grabbed a hand towel.

I hurried back to the door and opened it, hoping I didn't look too flustered. Jaek was standing outside with a slight frown, a small bottle of syrup in his hand.

“Sorry,” I said with a sheepish expression before showing him the towel with which I was wiping my still damp hands. “I was in the hygiene room.”

His eyes widened in understanding, and it was his turn to take on an apologetic expression.

“Oh, sorry about that.”

“Don't be,” I said with a warm smile. “I was done and in the middle of washing my hands when you arrived. Have a seat! I'll just go hang the towel and be right back.”

“Sure. Take your time,” Jaek said in a gentle tone.

I sauntered back to the hygiene room, trying to act like I didn't have a care in the world. But as soon as I was no longer in his line of sight, I leaned against the wall and rested the

back of my head on it. Closing my eyes, I took in a couple of deep breaths to regain my composure. It had been too much of a close call.

Forcing myself to straighten, I hung the towel on the rack and headed back into the room. My heart seized in my chest when I found Jaek standing near my plate, touching the side of my glass with the back of two fingers.

His eyes flicked up to lock with mine, his face unreadable for a fraction of a second. I clamped down on the panic trying to rob me of rational thinking as my mind raced to find an excuse as to why that might be. But Jaek's expression suddenly changed, as if he'd flicked a switch.

"The juice isn't cold. It seems that I was distracted and poured the second glass from a freshly made jug that didn't have time to properly cool. Warm Etil juice isn't very pleasant."

"Oh... That's not a problem. I can get some ice from the replicator," I replied quickly.

"Yes," Jaek said with a slow nod. "Ice would work."

He gave me a strange smile and went to sit in his chair.

Feeling faint, I plastered a relaxed expression on my face as I replicated some ice and brought it to my glass. The whole time, I could feel Jaek's stare weighing heavily on me. Although he had taken the blame for my drink being warm, I felt at a visceral level that I had not fooled him. Jake *knew* what I had done.

Why wasn't he calling me out? Would he rat me out to Deimos instead? Could this be the confirmation that he had indeed deliberately given me the information needed to nullify the effects of the drug?

“To new beginnings,” Jaek said, raising his glass.

“To new beginnings,” I repeated, raising my glass in turn.

We both drank. Watching Jaek empty his in one go prompted me to do the same. To my relief, not only did he not appear to have any issue with its taste, he proceeded to make small talk as we ate. I became restless as he stuck to very generic topics. It made me wonder if maybe I had been wrong about him guessing that I had tampered with our drinks. Then again, maybe my room was bugged. If he was aware of it, he wouldn't speak freely.

Goddess, I hated walking blindly amidst so much uncertainty!

“Any updates on your patients?” I asked, eager to bring the discussion onto a more serious topic.

“They're faring exactly how I wanted them to. In fact, they are exceeding my expectations,” Jaek said in a mysterious tone.

“Oh, that's good to hear! How long do you expect it might take to know if they will make a full recovery?”

“Actually, they should leave us in a couple of days,” Jaek said with enthusiasm.

I felt myself blanch. What the fuck did he mean by “leave us”? I had to believe it wasn't a gentler way of saying they'd be dead. But that couldn't be if they were faring exactly how he wanted them to. Jaek was trying to cure them of what he believed to be a fatal disease.

*But he doesn't interact with the patients. He only gives the drug to the physician.*

For all either of us knew, the crazy scientist treating Keran and his men was slowly killing them. In two days, we would have been here nine days—the time it normally took for victims to die.

“In a couple of days? Why?” I asked, trying to hide the fear wanting to choke me.

“We’ll be landing for the next—and hopefully last—information meeting with the others. According to Deimos, if all goes as planned, those who choose to return to Braxia will leave with us at that time, and our patients will be on their way home.”

“With *us*? You mean all the other hybrids will be onboard this ship with us?” I asked, my heart soaring at that news, even as I panicked at the thought that time might be running out for Keran and his men.

“Yes, all of us reunited, like in the good ole days,” Jaek said with a smile, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Silencing the sense of unease settling in the pit of my stomach, I opened my mouth to respond, but a gasp escaped me instead when the door chime went off. As was his wont, Deimos immediately opened it without waiting to be invited in. Judging by the disapproving—not to say outraged—expression on Jaek’s face, he did not appreciate such rudeness.

Before either of us could say anything, Deimos’s eyes began to glow, and he addressed us with his vibrating voice.

*“Ah, so nice to see love blossom between the two of you. Unfortunately, Jaek you have work to do, and you, my dear Dawn, must get back to your studies,”* Deimos said. His eyes flashed moments before their glow faded.

It took every last bit of my willpower to stifle the victorious roar that tickled my throat when his compulsion utterly failed. No tingling, no stabbing sensation in my brain or behind my eyes, and above all, no urge to comply. But that joy died when Jaek replied to his command.

“Yes, I have much work to do. I must go.”

His voice was almost monotone, as if all life had been sucked out of him. The shock and confusion I felt threatened to expose me. I willed myself to play along and obediently nodded.

Jaek turned to me, his face lighting up again with a tender expression. “I had a lovely time. Hopefully we can do this again... maybe tomorrow?”

“Sure. I’d love that,” I said with a smile I hoped didn’t seem too stiff.

“Great!” Jaek said with a glowing smile.

To my pleasant surprise, he didn’t leave right away, but gathered our empty plates onto the hover tray before heading for the door.

“See you tomorrow,” he said in a sweet voice.

“See you,” I replied as I watched him walk out.

Deimos stared at me for a few seconds, his face unreadable, before he nodded and followed Jaek out.

Feeling numb and utterly confused, I forced myself to sit down on my couch and activate the visors so that Deimos wouldn’t be alerted to the fact that I hadn’t immediately complied with his compulsion. But how the fuck was I going to focus on this training when my mind struggled to make sense of what had just happened?

Jaek should have been immune to the compulsion like I had been. Did I not heat his drink long enough? Did the fact that I cooled his drink faster explain why its effect still worked on him? Could the effects of his previous doses be lingering? Were males more sensitive to the drug?

*Or he could be faking like I was.*

That gave me pause. If he had indeed guessed what I had done earlier, then he would have expected it and acted accordingly. Frustrated beyond words to have nothing but more unanswered questions, I launched the next module.

The sooner I got this chore out of this task done, the sooner I could reflect on finding a way out when the ship next landed.





## CHAPTER 23

## KERAN

The sound of voices pulled me out of the blessed unconsciousness that sheltered me from the constant pain that had become my entire world. My body was a bottomless pit of agony as the larvae ate me from within. I had lost all sense of time. I only knew that every time a handful of larvae carved their way out of me, Jaek would implant a few more eggs in a different part of my body. To my shame, I had caught myself wishing more than once that the next larvae would carve its way to my brain or to my heart and kill me.

Swallowing back a moan, I summoned my Berserker power. It had started taking longer to activate of late. I was too broken, too defeated to quickly summon the rage that fueled that ability. As soon as I succeeded, the intensity of the debilitating pain plummeted, shrinking by more than half. However, as much as I welcomed the reprieve it provided, I hated how it clouded my mind. It became harder to think and handle complex concepts.

Still, it allowed me to focus on the people talking.

“Why did you stop implanting eggs in the other two?” Deimos asked in a suspicious tone.

“Their hormones are too weak,” Jaek said in a dismissive tone. “Keran’s serotonin is far more potent. See?”

My eyelids weighed a ton, but I willed them open in the hope of also seeing whatever Jaek was showing my captor. Through blurred vision, I peered at the two males standing a couple of meters in front of me. Whatever Jaek had been showing him, he’d already move on from it. I’d taken too long.

“I’m keeping the others as test subjects. My version of the serum isn’t quite perfect, but it is significantly improved. You will be able to try it today on both the hybrids and the purebloods. Your man Kalal is currently doing just that with Keran’s crew.”

“I see,” Deimos replied.

“Contrary to what you continue to think, I don’t deny him painkillers merely out of spite. Yes, I enjoy his pain,” Jaek admitted with malicious glee. “But whenever it becomes too intense, he goes into Berserker mode, like he did just now. When that happens, he produces ten times more serotonin than any other pureblood. His serotonin is the purest, most powerful we could ever want. Harvesting from the others is a waste of time.”

Despite the hatred burning in my gut for the little traitor, hearing he’d stopped torturing my men acted like a balm on my broken soul.

“Fair enough,” Deimos conceded, his voice still sounding not fully convinced. “But why do you implant him with so few eggs? Wouldn’t he produce even more serotonin if you matched the number Zeory used with the hybrids?”

Jaek firmly shook his head, a disdainful expression settling on his face. “The extra amount would be negligible. There’s only so much serotonin anyone’s pineal gland can produce, and he’s already at almost maximum capacity. Implanting more eggs will only kill him faster with very little return.”

Deimos grunted in a non-committal fashion, clearly still unconvinced. That seemed to piss off Jaek whose face and tone hardened.

“If you’re going to question everything I do, then put Zeory back in charge and watch your plans fall apart,” Jaek hissed. “I don’t have time for his petty jealousy. If he had been more competent, I wouldn’t be fixing so many of his mistakes, and you’d already have a fully functional serum. Without me, you would have faceplanted hard trying to use Zeory’s hybrid serum on purebloods. My results speak for themselves.”

“I do not question the quality of the work you have accomplished in record time,” Deimos said in an appeasing tone. “But considering how important this project is to me, I have every right to ask questions.”

“Then ask *your* questions instead of being a mouthpiece for Zeory’s temper tantrums,” Jaek snapped back, hardly mollified. “We both know he would love nothing more than prove me incompetent so that he can be reinstated as head scientist on this project. We also both know he checks every single line of my reports and tests all my samples in search of a flaw as evidence against me. He has systematically failed, so he falls back on these petty questions to get you to doubt me.”

Deimos heaved a sigh and rubbed some of the small horns jutting through his raven hair.

“You’re not wrong,” the Sarenian said in a tired voice. “It’s just that time isn’t on our side. I would like us to leave for

Braxia tonight. But we don't have anywhere near enough serum for their entire population.”

This time—to my greatest sorrow—Jaek's anger melted, and he cast a sympathetic look at his companion. I had hoped their disagreement would escalate further. Dissension within their ranks could only benefit us.

“We have enough for now. And this is specifically why we need to keep Keran alive. He will continue to produce more serum for us on our way to Braxia. Once we arrive, we'll just have to get our hands on a few more Berserkers to increase production.”

Another wave of hatred surged within me for the traitor. How had he so utterly fooled me?

“Even with a few more Berserkers, that will never be enough! Their population counts in millions!” Deimos argued. “The original plan had been to milk all the hybrids who agreed to join us on Braxia. If we got all seven hundred and sixty-three of the males Jordan is training, we would have had enough in a few weeks to meet our goal, but now...”

My brain froze upon hearing those words. For a brief instant, I wondered if the foggiest created by my Berserker mode was making me hear things. Surely Deimos hadn't just admitted to Jaek that he would have betrayed his fellow hybrids, conning them into following him with promises of a better future, only to use them as serotonin factories?

“But now, you have something far better,” Jaek continued with enthusiasm in Deimos's stead when his voice trailed off. “The serum I've derived from Keran is so much more potent than you realize. With his, it only takes a fraction of the previous hybrid dose to get the same effect. If we spill it in

their water source, we will distribute it to the entire planet with none of them being the wiser.”

“The serum is sensitive to heat,” Deimos argued. “If they boil the water—”

“I’m already working on resolving that little problem,” Jaek interrupted smugly. “By the time we reach Braxia, I should have it fixed for you. And the best part, my improved serum acts even faster than before, a couple of seconds instead of minutes like Zeory’s weaker version. Let me show you.”

Jaek headed to one of the cooling units, picked up a serum vial, then fetched a hypospray from one of the drawers in the counters on the right. He walked back to Baldur and pressed it to his neck. Seconds later, Baldur’s eyes snapped open, the injection having visibly awakened him from whatever sedated state they’d been keeping him in.

As soon as he recognized Jaek, my captain bared his teeth at the traitor in a menacing fashion. Jaek chuckled, utterly unfazed. He pulled out a small device from his pocket, which resembled a remote.

“You see this little thing?” he asked Baldur, waiving it in front of his eyes. “It’s a nice little toy that will send a very nasty electric discharge to your prince when you press right here.”

“Fuck you,” Baldur hissed.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Now that’s not nice,” Jaek said, nonchalantly replacing the empty cartridge in the hypospray by the serum vial he had taken from the cooling unit. “This should help you behave in a more cooperative fashion.”

Restrained as he was, Baldur vainly tried to pull away from the hypospray. As soon as Jaek finished injecting him, he

turned to Deimos, who was observing the whole scene with a troubled expression.

“Command him to take the remote when I give it to him and to zap Keran with it,” Jaek instructed Deimos.

Visibly reluctant, Deimos nonetheless complied. Even as I braced for what would undoubtedly be extremely unpleasant, my heart ached for Baldur. His family had served mine for generations. His loyalty to my bloodline ran deep.

By the way his face contorted seconds before he pressed the button on the remote, his efforts to fight the compulsion had inflicted him severe pain. I had grown beyond familiar with the stabbing sensation. But nothing prepared me for the brutal jolt of electricity that blasted through me half a beat later. A bout of coughing followed my involuntary grunt of pain. Blood shot out of my mouth. This time, it wasn't due to a larva piercing through one of my lungs, but to me accidentally giving the inside of my left cheek a savage bite in reaction to the electric discharge.

Worse still, the larvae inside me, having clearly not appreciated that little stunt, started digging their way out of the hostile environment that had become my body in a frenzy.

“Sedrak scum. You're no better than your father. May your Ancestors curse you,” Baldur spat, his voice dripping with hatred.

While Deimos ignored him, the look that Jaek gave my captain spelled murder. For a brief instant, I feared he would strike him. Jaek's father, Clan Leader Torvin Sedrak had been one of the foulest individuals I'd ever met, and a traitor. Among his many sins, he'd not only allowed his pureblood sons and the other juveniles from his clan to hunt his hybrid son, he'd enjoyed watching the boy suffer. What kind of man



reveled in the suffering of his own seed? My father had taken great pleasure executing Torvin. But after what Jaek had endured, to be compared to his sire had to cut him deep.

“Impressive,” Deimos conceded while eyeing me pensively, apparently oblivious to Jaek’s fury. “But was that wise? I thought you didn’t want to kill him?”

Forcing his gaze away from Baldur, Jaek returned his attention to his companion.

“It will take a lot more to kill that beast. He’s in Berserker mode, which allows him to handle a great deal of pain,” Jaek replied in a dismissive tone before pointing at something beside my stretcher. “See how that increased his serotonin production?”

Deimos barely spared the bag collecting my hormones a glance before refocusing on the hybrid. “You enjoy torturing him,” he said pensively, sounding troubled, maybe even a little scared.

“Of course, I do,” Jaek retorted, as if the Sarenian had stated the obvious—which he had. “He never should have touched my woman.”

“Right...”

The synthetic voice of the ship’s artificial intelligence suddenly resonated through the com system.

“Initiating re-entry sequence. Time to landing, T minus forty-six minutes.”

“I must go,” Deimos said, his voice slightly tense. “Once we land, make sure Nirkon serves them Etil juice with the proper serum.”

“I’ll take care of it as soon as I finish breakfast with Dawn,” Jaek said in an almost taunting fashion, as if daring Deimos to challenge him on that.

The Sarenian scrunched his face as if he’d bitten into something foul but didn’t argue. Jaek knew Deimos needed him, and he was clearly leveraging his power, maybe even testing its limits.

*This won’t end well for the Sarenian.*

“Just don’t be late,” Deimos grumbled before storming out of the room.

Jaek stared at the door for a few seconds with the oddest expression on his face. His gaze flicked up to the clock on the wall above the door. The hybrid appeared petrified as he continued looking at the clock as the seconds ticked by, then suddenly burst into action.

He rummaged in one of the cupboards on the other side of the room, pulled out some kind of blanket, which he laid on top of Baldur. By the way its white color shifted to orange, I realized he’d placed a heating blanket on him.

*What the fuck is he doing?*

My entire body tensed when Jaek dug something out of his pocket as he shifted his attention to me. I braced for what would undoubtedly be another nasty electric discharge. To my shock, he brandished a hypospray instead. He pressed it against my neck, his eyes locking with mine. Despite being hard and cold, they were devoid of the hatred I had expected.

My eyes widened in shock when, seconds after he performed the injection, the pain that even my Berserker couldn’t dampen vanished.

“You have four larvae left inside you. I had hoped they would have exited by now, but they do not seem to be in any hurry. You will have to manage with them,” Jaek said in a semi-hushed tone, his voice thick with tension. “In forty minutes, your restraints will automatically unlock. This will be your only chance to escape. In this cupboard, you will find a container labeled biohazard. It actually contains basic clothes for you and Baldur. Sorry, no shoes and no weapons, but there is a map with a layout of the ship. As long as you follow the indications on the map, you shouldn’t run into anyone.”

Nothing could describe the depth of the shock I currently felt. Too many conflicting emotions were battling inside me. Was this a cruel trick to punish me further for “touching his woman”? Had pain addled my mind so much that I was hallucinating Jaek’s change of heart? Could he have been playing Deimos all along, just biding his time until he could free us?

*“I am no one’s puppet.”*

His words and the conviction with which he had stated them replayed in my mind. Had he tried to tell me then that he was indeed fooling the Sarenians?

“FOCUS!” Jaek hissed in a hushed tone.

I blinked, startled and shamed that I would let my thoughts wander at such a critical moment, and forced myself to refocus on his words. Being in Berserker mode always made it harder to think. As much as I enjoyed the bliss of a near total absence of pain, thanks to my Berserker power now aided with the painkillers Jaek had just injected me, I needed a clear mind not to screw up what would likely be our only chance at surviving this.

I shed my Berserker power, ignoring the pain that resurfaced. At least, whatever Jaek had injected me with still made it five times more tolerable than the excruciating agony that had previously torn me to shreds.

“I’m listening,” I said in a firm, but also hushed tone.

The glimmer of approval in Jaek’s eyes, although brief, convinced me more than anything else he might have done or said that this was real. I had questions, countless of them, but there would hopefully be time later to have them answered.

“The blue path on the map will take you to your men, currently held in the hold. There should be a single Sarenian with them named Kalal,” Jaek continued, glancing nervously at the clock. “I have modified the serum your men were given this morning. By the time you reach them, its effects will have already worn off or soon will. There are only four other Sarenians aboard this detachable segment of the modular ship. The other two modules have at least thirty people, both Guldans and Sarenians. They will destroy this module if you try to flee with it. Free your men, then follow the yellow path to the meeting hall where all the other hybrids will be.”

“Dawn?” I asked.

“I’m going to get her now. She’ll be in the hall with us. We’ll keep her safe.” He looked up at the clock again, his tension cranking up another notch. “I must go. Don’t fail.”

“What’s with the blanket?” I asked as he was moving away from my stretcher.

He glanced at Baldur, who was looking at us in confusion. “It will burn the compulsion serum right out of his system.”

I almost called out to him once more to make him promise he’d keep Dawn safe, but I didn’t need to. Whatever Jaek

might be up to, I knew beyond any doubt that he'd give his life for her.

My eyes flicked to the clock to assess how much time we had left before turning back to my captain. Beads of sweat pearled on his forehead from the heated blanket. Despite what had to be highly uncomfortable, Baldur held my gaze with unwavering determination.

Regardless of how much or how little he had overheard from our conversation, my captain knew that mayhem would soon abound.

“Be ready,” I silently mouthed to him.

He replied with a vicious grin.



## CHAPTER 24

## DAWN

**F**or the millionth time, I glanced at my clock. Jaek was never late. Although it had only been eight minutes, each additional second fueled my growing paranoia. My second breakfast with him yesterday morning had yielded no new information that I could have used to help free myself and the others. He had also not given me the opportunity to send him out again so that I could tamper with our drinks.

That, and the fact that Deimos had not even bothered to come compel us to get back to work crushed any lingering hopes I might have had that Jaek wasn't in fact under the Sarenian's thrall. But our ship would land any minute now. This was likely Keran's last chance to make it out of here alive. I could no longer play it safe. As soon as Jaek arrived, I would confront him about all that had been happening and pray that he could be reasoned with despite the compulsion.

*But why is he late?*

Of course, my mind went straight to dreading Deimos had found out that Jaek had indeed broken free of the compulsion and implanted him with hundreds of eggs as punishment. Obviously, that didn't make sense. Even if Deimos had caught him, he wouldn't sacrifice such a brilliant mind. He would



merely imprison Jaek and slowly break his will, like he'd been trying to do with me.

A yelp escaped me when my chime finally went off. Unlike the two previous days, the lock hadn't turned blue, indicating I could unlock it from inside. A sense of dread crashed over me when the door opened right away. Only Deimos barged in without waiting to be invited.

"Jaek!" I breathed out, shock and confusion swelling within me when I saw him standing in the doorway.

He entered my room, his face tense, and a single covered meal sitting on the hover tray following him. When he didn't greet me or otherwise respond, my anxiety cranked up another notch. The door finished closing at the same time he was placing the tray on my table.

As soon as it did, Jaek turned to look at me with an intensity that had me taking an involuntary step back.

"I know you're immune to Etil juice. So am I. Sit down and eat. We have little time," Jaek said in a tone that brooked no argument.

I froze for a second. Shock, fear, disbelief, and hope rushed through me in quick succession. Silencing the tsunami of questions burning my tongue, I snapped out of my daze and obeyed without a fuss. After sitting in my chair, I forced myself to uncover my plate, any hunger I might have felt having made an exit the minute Jaek dropped that little bomb.

To my surprise, Jaek didn't sit, taking instead the napkin from my tray as well as my Etil juice.

"In less than twenty minutes, Keran will escape from the lab where he is held with one of his men," Jaek said while methodically ripping the napkin in long narrow strips.

“WHAT?!” I exclaimed. “Is he—?”

“LISTEN!” Jaek interrupted sternly. “There is no time for questions. We only have one shot at this.”

Heart pounding, I gave him a stiff nod and forced myself to focus on his words.

“As you likely guessed, Deimos had me working on the drug to make us vulnerable to his compulsion. I only started *after* that meeting we both attended,” he said forcefully.

Jaek lifted his gaze from the napkin he was shredding to lock eyes with me as he spoke those words. In that instant, I realized he needed me to believe him. As I perceived no deception from him, I replied with a stiff nod. Some tension immediately loosened from his shoulders.

“I have tampered with the drug that they have served Keran’s crew this morning, and the one that will be served to our fellow hybrids once they show up at the meeting,” he continued while finishing to tear the last bits of the napkin.

*What the fuck is he doing with that?*

He pulled a pouch from his pocket and poured the grayish powder it contained into the glass of juice.

“The effects will only last for a couple of minutes on them,” Jaek explained while shaking the glass to help the powder dissolve faster. “We must delay as long as possible to give the Prince and his men a chance to reach us in that room. But the minute the Sarenians get on stage to start their speech, we must act and raise the alarm.”

“How?” I asked.

While Jaek quickly ran me through his plan, I watched in fascination as he put the glass down, retrieved a pair of

surgical gloves from his pocket, and donned them. Working quickly, he dipped a few strips of the napkin in the juice, then laid them flat on the table, one next to the other. It took me a few seconds to realize he was forming a blade with them, even shaping one end to be pointy. In seconds, the napkins hardened.

“Eat up!” Jaek said sternly, interrupting his description of the plan. “It may be a while before our next meal, and you’ll need the energy.”

My cheeks heated, and I shoved another spoonful of scrambled eggs into my mouth. I seriously didn’t feel like eating at the moment, but his comment made sense. If we had to run, the last thing I needed was for my blood sugar levels to drop so low I became dizzy or weak.

Jaek hurried to my hygiene room only to return moments later with a washcloth. He dipped it in the glass, the fabric absorbing most of the remaining liquid. With the same swift efficiency, he wrapped the cloth around the flat end of the makeshift blade, shaping it like a handle. However, he seemed to struggle towards the end, frequently flexing his fingers as he did so. It dawned on me then that the substance on his gloves was also attempting to harden them. By the time he finished, he had to tear the gloves off his hands as they had grown too hard to be simply pulled off.

“It is important that you do not give anything away, just like you have been doing so far,” Jaek said, as I swallowed my final bite.

“I won’t,” I said, rising to my feet.

Jaek gave me an assessing once over and frowned at the short skirt of my dress. “I’m guessing they didn’t provide you with any pants?”

I shook my head with an apologetic look.

“Figures,” he said, dejectedly.

He carefully poked at the makeshift blade with the tip of his finger, undoubtedly checking that it was properly dry. Apparently satisfied, he picked it up and extended it to me.

“How’s that?” he asked.

I took the weapon from him, impressed by how sturdy and light it felt, while also reasonably balanced for something whipped together under these conditions.

“It’s awesome,” I said, genuinely awed.

He helped me secure the blade in the folds of my dress and made me walk and move around to make sure no one would notice my weapon.

“You’re so incredibly brilliant,” I said in a breathy voice once we were ready to go.

Our gazes locked, and a silent communication passed between us. The love in his eyes was seriously messing with my head. Even though I’d been battling the indoctrination embedded in the training modules Deimos had imposed on me, some of it had stuck with me. They only reinforced the fact that I always had deep feelings for Jaek.

He cupped my cheeks with both hands and studied my face with such longing, tears pricked my eyes. This man truly loved me. Why was there still a wall between us? Seeing that love suddenly replaced by sorrow crushed me.

“I love you, Dawn. I’ve loved you my whole life. Even though you can never be mine, know that everything I do is for you... is out of love for you.”

When he drew my face towards his, I expected him to kiss me. He did, but not on the lips as I had both expected and feared. Instead, he pressed his lips to my forehead with a reverence that wrecked me. Why couldn't I reciprocate his feelings? Deimos claimed we were soulmates. My heart was bursting with love for Jaek. And yet, even with the conditioning to dislike purebloods, whenever I considered giving in to my feelings for him, Keran's face always flashed before my eyes. There had to be something more...

Jaek released me as if touching my skin was burning his hands. Averting his gaze, he spun on his heel and headed for the door.

"Let's go," he said.

By his stoic and determined expression, you'd never guess this moment of tender vulnerability and heartfelt confession had just happened. Casting aside the miasma of confusion and inner turmoil thinking of Keran and Jaek always stirred within me, I set my mind on the task at hand.

As I replayed Jaek's instructions in my mind, a sense of elation and hope warred with too many fears to count. The main concern dominating my every thought was whether Keran and his men would make it to the meeting hall.

Although he hadn't gone into many details, Jaek had confirmed that Keran had been implanted with Kranax Beetle eggs, and that he still had larvae trying to chew their way out of him. If he got dragged into a fight, he might not be able to defend himself—assuming he was even healthy enough to run out of this prison on his own power.

I also didn't know how much the indoctrination had taken root in the other hybrids. In all likelihood, they had remained under the Sarenians' compulsion this entire time. How deep

did their resentment of purebloods run at this point? Granted, Deimos hadn't tried to get us to hate them, only to feel a sense of superiority laced with a certain amount of disdain. I only hoped it wouldn't make them reluctant to side with Keran and his men once things turned ugly during our escape.

But my greatest fear was that—assuming everything else worked out, and we managed to escape this building—the remaining Sarenian-Guldan crew would come after us with a vengeance. From what Jaek had explained, the ship split in three parts. We were currently in the central module, the only one of the three that would land. That one had no weapon and no defense system worth mentioning. The other two modules rivaled a battle chaser. Considering they had managed to take down Keran's frigate, we wouldn't stand a chance if they attacked us.

Therefore, we needed to keep Deimos and the handful of crewmates in our module from sounding the alarm.

As we traipsed through the hallways leading to the meeting room, I marveled at the way Jaek made small talk like we didn't have a care in the world. It made it easier for me to play along. But I knew him well enough to see the tension stiffening his muscular back and broad shoulders.

On more than one occasion, I caught myself straining my ears in the hopes of catching some indication that the men had escaped. But that wouldn't be good. Although we had landed a few minutes ago, we needed the module to complete its on-ground deployment first. If the Sarenians discovered our plot too early, they would likely take flight and head back towards the other modules. Then we'd be screwed.

I could only pray that everything would go according to plan.



## CHAPTER 25



## KERAN

**E**yes glued to the clock, I battled the growing fear that this had indeed been a cruel joke. The minutes kept ticking by without the metal straps binding us automatically unlocking as Jaek had promised. It had been thirty-two minutes, two more than when we should have been freed. The heating blanket on Baldur had returned to its white color, indicating it had stopped working—its timer having likely expired.

As the next minute turned on the clock, our bindings suddenly opened with a soft hiss. I barely managed to suppress the victorious roar that burned my throat. In my hurry to jump off the stretcher, I scraped my skin against the edges of the open bindings. But that pain was nothing in comparison to what I'd been enduring of late. However, my ravaged innards didn't approve of the sudden movement.

I clenched my teeth at the sensation of having glass shards scattered throughout my gut and chest. For a second, I considered going into Berserker mode, but thought better of it. With the painkiller Jaek had given me, I'd be able to function well enough. I needed to remain clear-minded and would only resort to my Berserker abilities if we ended up in combat.

Baldur hopped off his own stretcher at the same time I did. Thankfully, Jaek had been treating him with healing nanobots for the past two days. While his body still bore the round scars where the larvae had exited his flesh, he didn't seem to be in any type of noticeable pain.

I made a beeline for the cupboard Jaek had indicated and found the biohazard container. Blood rose from my throat and into my mouth when I bent down to retrieve it. I swallowed it back and tried to ignore the horrible sensation of the parasites still moving through me. If 'only' four larvae could mess me up like this, I couldn't begin to imagine what it must have been like to have had at least twenty simultaneously eating you from within. Then again, at least forty to forty-five larvae had wormed their way out of me since my capture.

"How are you feeling, Jakar?" Baldur asked in a hushed but worried tone.

"Like killing some Sarenians," I replied in a similarly whispered voice. "We must get to our men quickly."

Although I had not responded to his actual question, he understood my words to mean I could handle it.

*At least for now...*

After placing the container on the counter, I opened the lid. The latch clicked then the pressurized air hissed as it was released. The sight of a bag filled with clear liquid—which I assumed to be our serotonin—took me aback. I lifted it, finding a second bag beneath it, which I also removed. Then only did I see a much larger plastic bag with clothes inside. I quickly removed them, handing a pair of pants and t-shirt to Baldur before donning the other set.

Although I couldn't detect Jaek's scent on them, I assumed those were his clothes. Thankfully, their stretchy fabric didn't fit too badly on our bigger frames. As he had mentioned, there were no shoes or weapons to be found inside. While I consulted the map left at the bottom of the container, Baldur quickly checked through the drawers and cupboards for something that we could use as weapons with no luck.

It didn't matter. When it came to combat, with or without weapons, a Braxian could wreck most opponents, even if he ended up also dying in the process. And there could be no greater glory than dying in battle while destroying the enemy.

We opened the door, bracing for what could await us on the other side. As Jaek had predicted, we couldn't see a single soul in sight. I wished I could have questioned him about the size of the crew that we would have to contend with. Fate willing, most of them would be too busy setting up the meeting to be traipsing around the hallways.

And we had many of them to cross.

Without the map provided by Jaek, it would have taken us hours to find our destination. We advanced quietly, keeping an eye out for any signs of cameras or motion detector as we crossed an entire wing visibly dedicated to research. On more than one occasion, I silenced the urge to enter one of the rooms along the way to search for a com system or weapon. But so far, Jaek's word had been good. I wouldn't risk jeopardizing our escape by going off-script.

Despite the coolness of the gridded plates covering the floor beneath our feet, us walking barefoot had the advantage of keeping our steps even quieter.

When we approached a first set of doors marking the entrance of a different section, my heart seized at the sight of a

biometric lock on the wall. As we couldn't turn back, we moved forward, ready to bash the lock to pieces. However, as soon as we came within range of the motion sensors, the doors automatically slid open before us.

*How the fuck had Jaek managed all this?*

He'd had me so convinced that he had turned on us! But then, had he not, Deimos would have never lowered his guard enough to allow Jaek to do this. After what felt like an eternity, we finally reached the corridor to the hold. As we closed the distance, the muffled sound of voices reached us through the heavy doors.

Baldur and I exchanged a look before breaking into a run. The pain in my stomach and chest flared at that basic effort. Without slowing down, I summoned my Berserker powers. This time, I didn't struggle to activate it. Between the painkillers and pre-battle anticipation at the thought of crushing one of those who had wronged us, I easily entered battle rage.

Here again, the doors automatically parted upon our approach.

The spectacle that awaited us within further fueled my anger. All fifteen of my men were lined up in front of a single Sarenian. Shock collars around their necks kept them in check. Half of them were kneeling, including Orin, hatred burning in their eyes. The other half, including Tagar and Nowik, were visibly fighting the compulsion and attempting to remain upright.

*"I said kneel!"* the Sarenian named Kalal—according to Jaek—said in that foul vibrating voice.

As he was standing four meters in front of us and slightly to the right, Kalal had not noticed our entrance. The pained growls of my men trying to resist his thrall had buried the discreet sound of the doors parting. With the legendary discipline that had earned each of them a place in my father's crew, my men didn't blink or even remotely give away our presence as they noticed Baldur and me.

The fury boiling in my veins only bolstered my Berserker aura. One by one, the growls from the men still standing lost its pained edge to be fully replaced by anger, as my aura dampened the stabbing sensation fighting the compulsion inflicted to them. The serum was also likely on the verge of losing its effects. Those standing straightened, while the ones kneeling slowly rose to their feet. The fear followed by panic that settled on Kalal's face was the biggest turn on.

*"Kneel! All of you, kneel! I command it!"* the Sarenian shouted in his vibrating voice.

When that failed to make them comply he started backing away from them while fumbling with a remote to activate their shock collar. A savage war cry rose from my throat at the same time he pressed the button. While the collars would've normally had my men on the floor writhing in pain, my aura merely had them grimacing as they continued to surge forward.

But alerted by my shout, Kalal spun around to see Baldur and me charging him. The sheer terror on his face had blood rushing straight to my cock. There was something orgasmic about seeing an enemy trembling with dread as you brought death to them.

*"Stop! Stop!"* he shouted in a desperate loop, even as it sank in that his compulsion held no sway over us.

He backed away, almost stumbling backward in the process, before remembering my men were coming at him from the other side. In one last ditch effort, the Sarenian started running towards the wall, likely hoping to circle around me to dash for the door. Simultaneously, he reached for his armband, undoubtedly to call for help on his com.

Kalal only managed a few steps before I was on him. I grabbed him by the nape with one hand, lifting him effortlessly. He kicked and struggled, reaching back with his right arm to force me to release him. But his frightened shout turned into a high-pitched screech when I grabbed his left arm with my free hand and tore it right out of its socket. The delicious scent of blood filled my nose as I tossed the severed limb at my men.

Even through the pain of the shock collar, Tagar caught it and checked the armband still attached to the wrist to make sure the Sarenian hadn't managed to activate his com. Baldur picked the remote Kalal had dropped when I picked him up and deactivated the shock collars.

“Braxians are no one's puppets,” I snarled in Kalal's face.

His eyes were rolling to the back of his head from shock and pain. As much as I would have loved to play with him, I needed to get my men out of here and find my woman. With a savage growl I punched his chest with all my strength. The bones collapsed with a delightful mix of wet and crunching sounds, his spine bending in half under the impact. A violent spasm shook his body. He emitted a brief gurgling sound then went still. I wiped the gore and blue blood covering my hand on his skirt before tossing his remains like dirty rags.

“Jakar!” Orin called out, his voice filled with worry as he rushed to my side.

I placed a reassuring hand on the older man's shoulder, pleased to see him reasonably well-recovered from his previous ordeal.

"I'm fine," I said, my words slurred by blood rage. "We must go."

My men closed in around me, the love and genuine happiness in their eyes as they gazed upon me warmed my heart, even through the fog of my altered state.

"His scanner shows two Sarenians a short distance from here, which seems to be the deck," Tagar said, showing me the interface of Kalal's bracer. "Everyone else, three Sarenians, two humans, two Guldans, and a whole bunch of hybrids are gathered at the other end of the ship on the lower level."

"Jaek said to free the men and go straight to the exit," I said, despite my urge to go and kill the Sarenians likely piloting this module.

"They could raise the alarm," Baldur argued.

"And we could get detected trying to get there," I countered, even if I agreed with his assessment.

"If just two of us use Kalal's armband to detect any camera system or incoming crewmate, we could go take out those two Sarenians and catch up with the rest of you after," Thanor offered.

"Fine. You and Baldur can go after them. The rest of us will stick to the plan," I said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Relieved, my captain gave me a sharp nod. From the corner of my eyes, I noticed Nowik searching Kalal's corpse for anything else that might be of use but came up empty. Even his shoes would be too small to fit either Baldur or me.

As one, we moved towards the reinforced doors of the cargo hold. To my dismay, the doors didn't automatically open like they had when we came in. My heart sank upon seeing the red light on the biometric lock next to the door. Of course, they would make it easy to enter, but prevent the prisoners from leaving.

"Bring the body," I ordered, silently thanking the Ancestors I hadn't destroyed Kalal's pretty face like I had initially intended.

Thanor grabbed the dead Sarenian's ankle and dragged him to us. He crouched next to the corpse and opened his eyes. He then picked up the Sarenian by the nape and held his face in front of the scanner. For a split second, my men and I held our breaths. Then the light blessedly turned blue.

With the scanner on Kalal's armband confirming both paths were clear, Baldur and Thanor headed for the pilots while the rest of us ran the long way across the ship to the exit.





## CHAPTER 26

## DAWN

Jaek and I walked around the meeting hall side-by-side, trying to look cheerful and relaxed as we mingled with the others. Our proximity and the frequency with which Jaek casually brushed my arm or shoulder, gently touched the small of my back to nudge me forward was drawing many speculating—and approving—stares. Some of them even found excuses to stroll near me to get a whiff. Although disappointed not to perceive Jaek’s scent on me, they certainly seemed pleased not to find Keran’s lingering smell.

We were playing a dangerous game. Although we weren’t flat out misleading them, we knew what conclusions they would draw from this. But we couldn’t afford them shunning or avoiding me right now. Even Vintor seemed somewhat mollified. Obviously, he didn’t like that I hadn’t chosen him, but it soothed his ego that my choice should have been another hybrid instead of a pureblood.

Another wave of hybrids poured into the building. For the first time, I wished they would have acted as usual and showed up late instead of early. I had no idea how far or close Keran and his men were. We needed to give them as much time as possible, but also to give us a chance to execute our own plan.

Trying to act nonchalant, Jaek and I walked towards Vintor, who was standing alone near the refreshment table, grabbing himself a drink. He looked surprised when I stopped next to him and picked up an empty glass. A sliver of embarrassment laced with guilt flitted over his brutish features.

“You want a drink?” he asked in the grumpy voice he always used to hide his embarrassment.

“Yeah, but finish serving yourself. I’ll take one after,” I said with a gentle smile.

He grunted in a way that meant ‘don’t be silly’ and took my glass from my hand to fill it from one of the three large drink dispensers. My throat tightened as I observed him. Vintor had always been swift-tempered and could prove fairly cruel during his tantrums. But deep down, he wasn’t a bad man. Just a little spoiled. I understood perfectly well that anger had fueled his nasty words to me, and now they shamed him. Although he would probably never say sorry, this was his way of starting to apologize and make amends. A part of me wanted to ruffle his hair and say it was okay.

But we had more important things to tackle.

As soon as he handed me the full glass, I took it and plastered an amiable smile on my face, which I knew didn’t reach my eyes as I intently stared at him.

“Do not show any shock or emotion in response to what I’m about to say,” I said in a low and conversational tone. “This is very serious, and we need you. Do you understand?”

Aside from his eyes narrowing ever so slightly, Vintor did a phenomenal job of maintaining the somewhat disgruntled

expression he had displayed when we first walked up to the table by his side.

“Of course I do,” he replied, matter-of-factly.

“This place, this entire meeting is a trap,” I continued, my heart pounding as I forced myself not to glance around in search of anyone potentially spying on us, as that specific behavior would bring suspicion unto me. “Deimos is the killer.”

This time, Vintor didn’t fully manage to hide a slight recoil. It had been discreet enough not to draw attention, and I couldn’t blame him for it. I wanted to believe that, in a similar situation, I could have shown the same level of stoicism after such a massive bomb had been dropped on me.

Leaning my hip against the side of the table to look even more casual, I flicked my hair over my shoulder with my free hand and took a sip of my drink before resuming talking.

“He has held me, the Braxian prince, and his men prisoners for the past eleven days. These meetings are not meant to provide us with information about a potential relocation to Braxia, but to brainwash us into becoming their puppets.”

This turned out to be one bomb too many for Vintor to handle. He shook his head in disbelief and cast a questioning look at Jaek, laced with a sliver of outrage.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Vintor asked.

Thankfully, he didn’t do so in a way that would reveal something might be amiss. While he didn’t believe what I had said, he had sense enough not to put us in danger if it was actually true. Having spent their youths fighting for survival,

hybrids never excluded the possibility that any situation could potentially be dangerous.

Jaek shook his head and smiled as if he had just made a wonderful announcement to an old friend. “I wish it was a joke. As we speak, Keran and his men are trying to escape to join us here. Deimos intends for all of us to leave with him tonight. Once we do, he will milk all of you of your hormones to create his mind controlling serum. And he plans for me to perfect that serum.”

This time, Vintor’s disbelief wavered but didn’t fully collapse. He frowned and cast a pensive look around the room. He suddenly smiled and nodded at one of our friends waving at him. We also smiled and waved before returning our attention to Vintor.

“We do not have much time,” Jaek said in a low but pressing tone. “You’ve been made to forget the brainwashing sessions you’ve been subjected to. But here’s a simple test. Would you hate a species you have never met and that has never wronged you?”

“Of course not,” he said with a shrug.

“Then why do you hate Korletheans?” Jaek deadpanned.

Vintor stared at Jaek, robbed of words. Under different circumstances, his stunned expression would have been hilarious. It took a lot to render Vintor speechless.

“Deimos made you hate them because they are the Sarenians’ sworn enemies. He wants to use us to wipe them out,” I said in a gentle voice.

“But how? We’re immune!” Vintor hissed in a hushed tone.

I merely raised my glass to show it to him as if in a cheer then took a sip.

“Relax,” Jaek added quickly. “This one is safe. I tampered with it before the meeting. I, too, have been his prisoner for the past eleven days. He thinks we’re still under his thrall, and we must keep it that way.”

“Understood,” Vintor replied, a hard glint shining in his eyes although his facial expression remained peaceful in appearance.

“You must be discreet and spread the word,” Jaek said. “Tell everyone to be on their guard but do not attack until either Dawn or I give the signal. If at all possible, spare Nirkon. We believe he’s also under their thrall.”

He gave a stiff nod and smiled before slapping Jaek’s shoulder. “I’m glad to hear it. You more than anyone deserve it.”

Vintor had spoken those words a little louder, no doubt to make the others believe he was congratulating us on our apparent newfound happiness together. With that, he walked away. Imitating him, we mingled with the others, making the rounds to warn as many people as possible. Through it all, the training they had received at Jordan’s hand shone bright. Despite this shocking revelation, they all remained stoic, as proper security guards should whatever circumstances or crisis they ended up facing.

Time flew by much too fast. For the first time, I wished the hybrids would have dragged their feet and shown up late as they often did back when I held information meetings in Genxia. But everyone was already here, the last stragglers entering the room with still at least five minutes to spare

before the scheduled start of the meeting. And still no signs of Keran and his men.

The sudden hush which descended over the room startled me. Seeing every head turn towards the entrance piqued my curiosity. Of all the things I had expected, witnessing two dozen armed Guldans barge in with at least five or six Sarenians in their midst had my blood turning to ice.

*Have they caught Keran? Did they overhear us spreading the word?*

To my dismay—and despite it being in character for him—Vintor stepped forward with a displeased expression on his face.

“What’s going on? What is the meaning of this?” he asked, waving at the newcomers. “Why so many armed Guldans?”

Apparently unfazed by being thus called out, the Guldans and Sarenians merely stared at Vintor, their faces unreadable, while the other hybrids nodded or grunted in support of Vintor’s questions.

“It’s okay! All is fine!” Nirkon exclaimed while pushing his way through the crowd to stand in front of the Guldans and Sarenians. “They are here to serve as team leaders for those of you who will choose to relocate to Braxia tonight. You will continue your training with them in smaller groups with a greater focus on your individual needs. Do not be troubled by their weapons. This is the standard equipment and attire that you will wear as part of your roles in Magnar Gavin’s royal guard. Please, there’s no need for alarm. All is well.”

Although far from convinced, the hybrids seemed—or at least acted—mollified by his words. It took everything in me to emulate their response. But deep down, utter and complete



panic threatened to overtake me. Beyond the fact that I didn't believe for one minute the explanation Nirkon had given, this could completely ruin our plans. All of us could fight. But without weapons against so many armed men, things could get ugly for us in record time.

Clearly relieved, Nirkon invited us to finish our drinks and take a seat. I cast a sideways glance at Jaek, wondering what we should do. He smiled and gently caressed my hair as if to say all was well. I smiled back despite the wariness stiffening my face and proceeded towards the seats.

Wanting to be in a central position so that all could hear and see us once we gave the signal, Jaek and I headed for the seats in the middle of the fifth row from the front. To my surprise, as the last of our friends sat down, Nirkon headed for the stage, getting up on it instead of staying at the bottom of the stairs like he had done last time. Deimos and his acolytes were still nowhere to be seen.

However, the armed Guldans and Sarenians reclaimed my attention. My stomach dropped as they split into two groups of twelve Guldans and three Sarenians. They spread alongside the walls on each side of the elevated rows of seats. Even though their stance couldn't be called menacing, they were clearly not team leaders but jailors.

*Deimos knows what we're up to.*

There could be no other explanation. One look at the other hybrids confirmed they shared my unease—not to say dread. I started questioning all the decisions we had made and the wisdom of our plan. Had we condemned the hybrids in our foolish desire to give Keran and his men a chance to escape?

Right now, they were probably coming to the same conclusion I was as to our current predicament. Aside from not

having weapons, those like me in the middle of their row and those whose seats were located higher in the bleachers-like setup, would be sitting ducks as we tried to get down and confront our enemies. Those closer to the sides would likely get shot before they could do anything, their unconscious bodies creating additional obstacles for those of us further in.

My wheels spinning, I tried to come up with a workaround. Undoubtedly, Jaek and the others were doing the same.

Nirkon stopped at the front center of the dais, the hover mic rising from the floor to float right below his chin. He raised his hand, and only then did I notice the flute filled with a sparkling beverage clutched between his fingers.

“My dear friends, tonight, we start rewriting the history of Braxia with you in a central role. To celebrate what we hope to be the beginning of a new and fruitful collaboration with each and every one of you, our host invites us to share a glass of the finest Sarenian sparkling wine. My friends will pass around the glasses,” Nirkon said with an almost exaggerated enthusiasm.

I stiffened, cold dread washing over me. There was no question Deimos had spiked that wine with the serum. We could no longer doubt that he knew we’d tampered with the juice that had been served tonight. And these guards would ensure we drank something that would once again leave us at the Sarenian’s mercy.

Before I could think of some way to get us out of this mess, Vintor—who was sitting just one row behind us—stood up.

“Isn’t that premature?” Vintor asked, a challenge in his voice. “During our training with you and Jordan, you both

repeated to the point of annoyance that we should *never* drink alcohol or enjoy any form of mind-altering consumable before a contract has been fully reviewed and signed. I haven't seen or signed any contract. Have you?" he added, looking questioningly at our companions.

In that instant, I could have kissed Vintor. He'd come up with a very valid argument that wouldn't give away the fact that we knew that wine would be detrimental to us.

To my shock, Nirkon's face went blank. He reminded me of a malfunctioning android that had suddenly shut down to perform an emergency reboot. He blinked, then winced, his pain quickly hidden before he plastered an overly friendly and impressed expression.

*The question triggered him into fighting the compulsion he's under.*

Jardan and his team had spent decades building a flawless reputation in always doing right by their clients. Training them to never sign a contract while impaired would be a bone-deep belief for them. Being compelled into convincing us to go against this fundamental teaching for him would obviously clash with his ability or desire to comply.

"Yes, of course. I am glad to see that you all remember the importance of having a clear mind before making any commitment," Nirkon conceded graciously. "But this is different. Beyond the fact that the alcohol level is very low and will have no effect worth mentioning on men of your physical mass, accepting this toast is also a sign of courtesy and respect to your host."

I didn't know Nirkon well as I'd only seen him in person a couple of times, but I could tell he was struggling to speak those words, subtle though it was.

“With all due respect to our host, we will wait,” Vintor said in a tone that brooked no argument, which had the others nodding and grunting their agreement.

Nirkon looked at a loss as to how to respond. He’d been around hybrids long enough to recognize when a battle was lost. Vintor and the others wouldn’t be swayed at this point.

To my shock, Jaek stood and turned around to address our companions.

“If Nirkon says it will not harm us and that it will avoid us involuntarily offending our host, what harm could a single glass of fancy Sarenian wine do?” Jaek asked.

Despite my best efforts, I didn’t doubt that my face reflected the same shock and consternation displayed on the faces of the others. What in the world was he doing? Why would he suggest such a thing? But even as those questions popped up in my mind, I suddenly wondered if he was merely trying to buy Keran and his men more time. Could he also have added some kind of antidote in the Etil juice he had prepared for this meeting?

After staring at Jaek with undisguised confusion, Vintor nodded as if struck by a sudden understanding. He smiled at Jaek with a slightly condescending expression as one would with a naive or ignorant person.

“You were always the polite one among us,” Vintor said in a patronizing tone. “However, this is addressed to warriors and aspiring royal guards, not scientists. Discipline and strength of will before temptation are of the utmost importance. Therefore, we continue to decline to drink before the contract is signed.” He then turned to look at Nirkon with a smug smile while puffing out his chest. “If this was a test to see if we have

learned your teachings, nice try. But it will take a lot more than that to trick us.”

My jaw dropped, and I looked at Vintor with newfound respect, while Jaek bowed his head in concession, an undefinable smile stretching his lips. Even Nirkon smiled with approval.

But not everyone reacted favorably to this response. While the armed Guldans continued to hide their thoughts behind a mask of complete stoicism, the Sarenians frowned, making no mystery of their displeasure.

A secret panel sliding open on the back wall of the stage ended the drink standoff. A hush fell over the room when Deimos and his two companions marched onto the dais. With a single look, he signaled for Nirkon to get off the stage. The Guldans couldn't seem to comply fast enough.

My stomach nodded at the cold and hard expression on the Sarenian's face. He stopped in the center front of the stage, his friends resuming their position on each end like they had done the first time. The giant screens on the walls behind them came to life. I remembered all too well what had occurred the last time this happened. However, I didn't doubt the efficiency of Jaek's tampering with the drink.

That said, as that had been the cue Jaek had given me as to when to give the signal, I opened my mouth to speak. To my shock, Jake grabbed my hand and gave it a firm squeeze, which I understood to be his way of telling me to keep my peace.

I gave him a questioning sideways glance. He smiled in a reassuring way. Confused, I obeyed, wondering what had changed. Sure, I welcomed any additional minute we could grant Keran to get here, but I also had a duty to protect our

friends. To my dismay, Deimos didn't even bother to greet us or pretend to be a charming host. Instead, he went for it.

"I understand that you have declined my hospitality," Deimos said, his voice cold. "It is rather rude. Allow me to insist."

"Insist all you want, the answer is no," Vintor replied in a harsh tone. "Frankly, you're the one being rude trying to impose your supposed customs on us and coerce us to do something that could potentially be detrimental to us and counter to everything we've been taught. This is increasingly starting to feel like a bad idea. Maybe you're not the person we want to associate with."

The others loudly expressed their agreement with Vintor's words. Deimos's face hardened as his gaze roamed over the attendance. I braced as soon as his icy blue eyes began to glow.

*"Take the glasses that will be passed to you and drink,"* Deimos commanded with his vibrating voice.

It wasn't until the tingling failed to manifest itself and an air of outrage descended over my companions' faces that I realized I'd been holding my breath.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Vintor hissed, jumping to his feet. "Have you forgotten that we are Braxians?"

Many of the others also rose, their muscles bulging with anger.

Cold fury settled over Deimos's frighteningly beautiful face as he turned his gaze towards Jaek. The condemnation within couldn't be more obvious.

“Confirming my suspicions,” Deimos answered Vintor, although he continued to stare at Jaek. “I wanted to believe you were smart enough to do the right thing. You would have had a good life, with the female you coveted—even though she’s meant for another. But now, we’re going to do it my way... the hard way.”

Even as fear filled my heart at the thought he likely nipped Keran’s escape attempt in the bud, an even greater dread crashed over me as his words appeared to have been the signal the armed Guldans and Sarenians had been waiting for.

To my horror, more Guldans and Sarenians started pouring into the room from the back. The ones on each side of our seats activated their armor. Using a technology similar to the one from the Tuureans—the elite military of the Veredians—the armor deployed from their weapons belt. It looked like black oil spreading all over their bodies to form an impenetrable shell around them before hardening. Obviously, it was an optical illusion. In fact, the suit was composed of small hexagonal shells that connected with each other like puzzle pieces to form the suit. While theirs would undoubtedly make them harder to defeat, the metal they used couldn’t even begin to compete with the cesium armor of the Veredians. No metal in the galaxy was as tough and impenetrable as cesium.

Moving as one, my companions lunged at the nearest Guldans or Sarenians. The ones in the front row tried to go after Deimos on the dais, but the son of a krillik erected some kind of protective energy shield that sealed off access to the stage from all sides, the shield going up to the ceiling. As I feared, the hybrids closest to the edges were shot before they could land a first blow. Some of them collapsed on their shooter, pinning them to the ground. Despite the fear I felt for

them, knowing they were getting stunned instead of killed went a long way into allowing me to focus on a way for us to get the upper hand.

But that too was cut short.

Although chaos erupted at lightning speed, everything appeared to move in slow motion, from the first man getting shot to the Sarenians lobbing a few spheres over our seats. Jaek and I barely managed to move a couple of steps forward before we saw the spheres flying above us. In the split second it took me to understand what they were, Jaek's strong arms wrapped around me. The floor rushed towards me as he tackled me before sheltering me with his body. Sharp pain exploded in my left shoulder as I banged it against the corner of one of the seats. But that pain was soon forgotten, replaced by a brutal stabbing sensation in my ear from the violent blast of the concussion grenades that went off above us.

All around me, the men grunted or cried out in pain. Despite the high pitch ringing in my ears and the wave of dizziness trying to swallow me, I heard the muffled thumping sounds of bodies collapsing all around me.

*This can't be happening!*

By the way Jaek's body went limp, crushing me, the explosion had knocked him unconscious. As its effects wouldn't last, I needed to protect Jaek long enough for him and the others to recover. Placing my palms on the floor, I pushed up to get him off me, but not so roughly as to draw attention our way. He rolled to the side, freeing me.

I lifted my head to find myself staring at the calves of my friend Rikku. A sea of bodies half slumped on the floor or over their chairs surrounded me. At the end of the rows on both sides, the Sarenians were injecting the unconscious men with



what I assumed to be a functional version of the mind control serum. Still standing on the sidelines like a bunch of cowards, the Guldans kept their weapons trained on us, stunning anyone who appeared to be recovering from the concussion blast.

Remaining flat on my stomach, I discreetly fumbled with my dress to retrieve the makeshift blade Jaek had made for me. An almost eerie silence had descended over the room, only disturbed by the occasional sound of a blaster going off, the grunt of one of my companions, and the shuffling sound of bodies being turned to be injected.

Heart pounding, I waited for the Sarenian injecting the people in my row to get closer to my position. Still sheltering behind the energy shield on the stage, Deimos was attempting to contact someone on his com. By his shocked and angry reaction, he had likely received some bad news. Was it Keran? Had Deimos just found out that the purebloods had managed to escape?

But Rikku's body getting shifted reminded me the time to act was upon me. Keeping my head down to appear unconscious, I could only see the legs of the Sarenian. In their arrogance, the Sarenians had not activated their armor like the Guldans. While their armor still had vulnerabilities that could be exploited, it would have made it harder for me to inflict a disabling or fatal blow.

I would make this son of a krillik regret the day he fucked with us.

As soon as he bowed down to brush my hair away from my neck, I burst into action. I whipped my head up and to the side, slamming the back of my skull hard on his face. Even through the lingering dampening of my hearing due to the concussion grenade, I heard the glorious sound of crunching

bones as I broke his nose. His grunt of pain died in a gurgling sound as I buried my blade in his throat, which he had kindly exposed to me in his instinctive reaction of pulling his head back and away from the source of pain.

Alarmed shouts resonated all around when our would-be captors saw blue blood gushing out of their acolyte's neck. Two Guldans trained their blasters on me. I barely had time to yank the dying Sarenian in front of me as a meat shield. Even as I reached for his blaster still sheathed in his belt, countless hybrids—who had apparently also been biding their time to fight back—jumped into action.

Although a few of them still got shot before they could get out of their seating row, quite a few made it off, aided by the fact that the Guldans hesitated to shoot because of the Sarenians standing on the bleachers with us.

I had no such qualms.

Crouching behind the now dead Sarenian as cover, I shot at as many Guldans as I could, especially the ones targeting our conscious men. But their fucking armor dampened the damage, even after I'd set the weapon to lethal. Despite not killing them outright, it caused enough pain to throw them off their game and give my companions a slight edge.

With everyone still able to move having jumped off the bleachers, the battle moved to the entrance, the more open space making hand to hand combat easier. But the odds didn't play in our favor. Their weapons and armor gave them an unfair advantage. For each Guldans or Sarenian our side managed to kill, ten of us got knocked down or stunned.

At this rate, we would soon be overwhelmed.

My blood boiled, rage steadily building inside me alongside a sudden thirst for blood. I didn't just want to kill those Guldans and Sarenians, I wanted to make them suffer and beg for mercy. Seeing Jaek stir next to me seemed to be the trigger I needed to give into my bloodlust. If we were to be captured, I'd first kill as many of those fuckers as I could.

Jumping to my feet, I ran off the bleachers, hopping over unconscious bodies before leaping onto a Guldans standing by the wall, shooting at my friends. By the time he heard my war cry, it was already too late as I landed on his back, knocking him to the floor. Before he could push himself back up, I snapped his neck.

Unlike the Sarenians, who had qualms with hurting women, the Guldans had no such reservations. Seeing me kill his friend, another Guldans roared with fury and swiped his hand at me. As I was still crouching over his dead companion, I swiftly ducked to avoid him violently backhanding me. His armored glove would have done a number on my right cheek. I didn't give him a chance to regain his balance and lunged at him, straddling his chest. Carried by my weight and the force of the impact, he stumbled back the short distance to the wall. He likely would have fallen down if not for its support.

Growling like a rabid beast, I grabbed his armored face and repeatedly slammed the back of his head against the metal plates covering the wall. His armor didn't shatter, but the wall plates bent under the forceful impacts. I could only imagine how much damage his armor was inflicting to the back of his skull. By the fourth hit, the Guldans went limp. A part of me mourned the fact that he was already done, but there was more prey to be slaughtered.

I jumped off my victim as he was sliding down the wall and turned just in time to see a massive gloved fist rushing towards my face. With barely a second to react, I dodged right, his glove grazing my left cheek. Unfortunately, I stumbled over the Guldan whose head I'd just bashed on the wall and lost my footing.

I fell hard, landing on my ass, my legs lying on top of my victim. By rights, nasty pain should be radiating through my leg and lower back, considering how heavily I had struck my pelvic bone. But I merely felt a slight discomfort. Despite my non-negligible height and size, my attacker easily picked me up and slammed my back against the wall. Once more, it struck me as odd that the force of the impact didn't stun me or make me whimper in pain.

Holding me by the throat, he pulled back his right arm to punch me. Even as I dodged right again, I brutally brought my elbow down over his arm pinning me to the wall by the throat, breaking his hold. His fist struck the wall next to my face, seconds before I shoved him away. My foot solidly connecting with his chest cut short his attempt to rush me again and sent him flying back.

He fell heavily on his ass. Carried by his momentum, the back of his skull also struck the floor. Stunned, he shook his head and rolled onto his stomach to push himself up. Big mistake... I dashed towards him and slammed my foot at the base of his spine. He cried out and threw his head back, just as I had hoped. Bending forward, I wrapped both my hands under his jaw and pulled with all my strength. A drawn-out, savage cry tumbled out of me as I strained with supernatural strength—well beyond my natural Braxian one—until his back snapped, and he ended up folded in half in an unnatural way.

Sudden movement at the edge of my vision had me spinning around, ready to defend myself. As if in slow motion, I watched a Guldans blade rushing towards me. I'd never have time to dodge. But the sword never struck me. In a blur, Jaek leapt down from the bleachers and crashed into my would-be killer, knocking him out of the way. They fell down in a tangle of limbs. Moving at ungodly speed, Jaek got back on his feet again. He grabbed the armored Guldans by the hips, picked him up like a ragdoll, and held him upside down. With a feral cry, he slammed the Guldans head first onto the gridded metal plates covering the floor. Despite his armor, the bones of the Guldans neck, shoulders, and chest caved in under the force of the impact. His head sank in so deep between his shoulders, you'd almost think he'd been beheaded.

I should have been horrified, but I'd never felt more elated, more powerful... more bloodthirsty. My skin tingled, and my skin felt feverish while an all-consuming fire burned in my veins.

All around me, the same bloodlust appeared to have taken over my fellow hybrids. The ones who had still been unconscious were stirring at an exponential rate. The tide was turning. A sudden wave of panic swept through the Guldans and Sarenians, many shouting for them to fall back. They rushed towards the exit, the movement starting from the opposite side of the room.

First, I heard the savage roars, then I saw the even more savage beasts bursting into the room, punching through armor, skin, and bone with a single blow of their fists. The purebloods had joined the fray.

In a brief instant of clarity, I realized my enhanced strength, thirst for blood, and the sudden burst of vicious

energy my companions were using to get back on top when we'd been on the verge of defeat were the result of a Berserker's aura.

Keran was here.



## CHAPTER 27



## KERAN

**A**fter what felt like an endless journey through a maze of corridors, we finally reached the lift to the lower level. Naturally, it couldn't accommodate all of us. I went down with the first group, the second one following shortly thereafter. Once again, if not for Jaek's map, we wouldn't have known which of the three branching corridors we should have taken to get to the meeting hall. But the map soon ceased to be necessary.

As we ran down the left corridor, the muffled sound of battle provided all the directions we needed. I picked up the pace, ignoring the growing pain in my gut. This exertion was worsening the internal damage the larvae had inflicted. I could only hope to make it out of here before it killed me. Above all, I hoped to last long enough to get Dawn, the hybrids, and my men to safety.

When we reached the door, Tagar and Nowik shot ahead of me. They opened it, stepping in first to make sure I could follow in with relative safety. But there was no safety to be found in the chaos that reigned in that room. A single glance sufficed to reveal how the hybrids had been on the losing side. Blind fury surged through me at the sight of countless Guldans, fully armed and armored, shooting the weaponless

hybrids. Even though the blue light on their blasters indicated they were set to stun and not kill, it still angered me that they should attack them with such uneven odds.

I didn't need to speak a single word for my men to know what to do. They descended on the Guldans and Sarenians like the Furies they became whenever bolstered by my Berserker power. Although I had not done it intentionally, it took me seconds to realize my aura had also extended to the hybrids. It pleased me tremendously watching them inflict severe pain on the aggressors.

As I stormed inside the room, the energy shield sealing off the stage where Deimos and his two acolytes were sheltering immediately drew my attention. Utter contempt compounded the hatred filling my heart for this male. He didn't even have the courage to fight his own battle, taking cover while others did his dirty work for him.

I silenced my instinctive urge to go after him and searched for Dawn instead. The panicked Guldans and Sarenians made my task easier as they started fleeing towards the exit the moment they saw us pouring in. Most of them didn't make it too far as my men grabbed them along the way, breaking limbs with almost insulting ease, and smashing their heads against the walls or the sides of the bleachers, making them explode like over ripe fruits in a shower of blood and gore.

As we cleared the bleachers to the open area in front of the refreshment tables—that had long been shattered in the brawl—and that led to the exit, I finally spotted my woman. She was fighting with a savagery that had me instantly rock hard. Watching her repeatedly stab a Sarenian in the face with the oddest-looking dagger I'd ever seen caused me to spill a few drops of precum. Dawn had told me about her combat and

self-defense training, but I never expected her to be this proficient and this feral. Nonetheless, I needed her out of here and safe. Beyond her battle prowess, the only thing that kept me from rushing to her was the number of hybrids keeping an eye on my woman as they fought alongside her.

As one, hybrids and purebloods joined forces to obliterate our enemies. Those who had still been unconscious were gradually awakening and immediately jumped into the battle. Just as the last of our opponents were either managing to escape through the exit or falling to our blows, Deimos's voices resonated through the com system of the room. We all turned to look at the stage.

From my position, the bleachers were blocking my view, but I could still see the giant screens above it. Deimos's face filled all of them, his eyes glowing. My stomach dropped as he opened his mouth.

*“Hybrids, kill the purebloods. Kill the Prince before he escapes and rallies the Korletheans against you!”* Deimos commanded in his vibrating voice.

My men and I braced, taking on defensive stances in case they turned on us. We were surrounded, outnumbered twenty to one. The hybrids recoiled, a spark of hatred flashing over their faces at the word Korletheans. But none seemed eager to comply with his order to attack us.

“It won't work, you psychotic son of a krillik,” Jaek shouted at Deimos. “I put an antidote in the juice they drank. You no longer have power over us!”

This time, it was Deimos's turn to display deep hatred laced with a sliver of madness. Had Jaek been within his grasp, he would have eviscerated him. He activated the com on his armband.

“Seal the room, lockdown all exits, and take off,” he ordered through his com while spinning on his heels.

I couldn't say whether he'd meant for us to hear this or if he simply didn't care that he'd still been in close enough range to the hover mic for it to pick up his conversation, but that lit a fire under us.

“Everyone out! To your vessels, now!” I ordered before turning to Tagar. “Baldur?”

He shook his head. “Haven't seen him.”

We still didn't know if Baldur and Thanor had managed to take out the two Sarenians who piloted this module. If they had survived and got us airborne, we'd be fucked.

“We must take the energy shield down before Deimos escapes,” I said, pointing in the general direction of the stage. The giant screen displayed an empty stage and part of the open secret door through which the three Sarenians had escaped.

To my dismay, rather than running outside with the others, Dawn, Jaek, and Vintor weaved their way through the masses towards us.

“Keran!” Dawn called out.

She threw herself in my arms, and mine instinctively closed around her. Ancestors! How I had missed the feel of my woman against me. Even the blood rising in my throat from the impact against my battered insides didn't dampen the bliss I felt to be reunited with her. But now wasn't the time to revel in my female.

I gently pushed her away, holding her upper arms with both hands. “You must go. Take the others to Genxia. We will meet you there.”

“No! Come with us!” Dawn exclaimed.

“We must catch Deimos. We can’t let him escape,” I said in a stern voice.

“But you’re wounded!” Dawn argued.

“I’ll be fine. You must go. I need to know you’re safe.”

She looked about to argue again but said nothing, worry and confusion etched on her beautiful face.

“Your men need you to lead them to safety, Dawn. We each have our duties,” I said.

Her breath hitched. By the way she rapidly blinked, Dawn was trying to hold back the tears pricking her eyes. Cupping her face with both hands, I crushed her lips in a desperate kiss for a brief moment before releasing her.

“Keep her safe,” I ordered, my gaze landing first on Jaek then on Vintor, who stood on each side of my woman.

They both gave me a stiff nod, before leading her towards the exit. I made a beeline for the stage where my men were already shooting at the energy shield with the Guldans’ blasters and bashing it with the tables and benches. It was taking too long. That the doors had not locked down as he had ordered gave me hope that Baldur and Thanor had succeeded in dispatching the pilots. But if Deimos had a shuttle back there, we’d likely never be able to stop him before he vanished.

Just as those thoughts were crossing my mind Thanor’s voice pierced through the fog of my bloodlust.

“Move! Let me through!” he shouted, shoving his way between my men.

My joy at seeing him back with Baldur in tow soon gave way to surprise when he raised his forearm in front of the energy shield. He frantically tapped instructions on the interface of the strange bracer wrapped around his wrist. In seconds, the energy shield collapsed. A million questions pressed themselves on my tongue, but they'd have to wait.

My men echoed my victorious roar as we stormed the stage and dashed through the still open secret door. The short hallway behind it opened onto a hangar containing a single shuttle. To my surprise, the large set of doors through which it would fly out remained shut. In the distance, Deimos's voice echoed through the mostly empty room, berating someone named Zeory to hurry up.

We circled around the shuttle to find the three Sarenians near the control panel by the doors. The one fiddling with it—likely Zeory—looked flustered while Deimos glared at him. The third Sarenian had an air of resignation as he observed his companions.

“Don't waste your time!” Thanor shouted to the Sarenians in a taunting tone. “You and this ship aren't going anywhere,” he added, raising his left arm to show off the bracer around his wrist.

Where many other species would have given in to panic and either started begging for clemency or displayed erratic behavior like banging on the sealed door, the three Sarenians turned to face us with defiance. As much as I wanted to make them suffer for what they had done to the hybrids, my men, and me, their reaction stirred a begrudging respect from me. They knew they were about to die but would do so fighting until the end, and likely hoping to take a few of us down in the process.

“It seems I grievously underestimated you, Jakar,” Deimos said, taking a few steps in my direction, before stopping at a non-threatening distance.

“And Braxians’ loyalty to each other, which includes hybrids,” I said in a harsh tone. “You say everything you do is for Sarenia, yet you expected far less devotion from my own people. Fanatics like you, who remain stuck in the past, almost always end up on the wrong side of history, if they’re even remembered. Despite suffering tremendously at the hands of tormentors still alive today, our hybrids decided to leave the past behind and fight for a better future. You are obsessed with revenge on people who died over a century ago.”

“They deserve to pay!” Deimos shouted, his temper flaring.

I shook my head with pity, surprised to be able to form such coherent thoughts in my condition and through my Berserker haze. “Hatred... More hatred. It only brings pain and suffering to innocents, and ultimately always ends in failure.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Deimos said with arrogance. “You may have thwarted *this* plan, but it is only one of many. We are legion, and we’re determined to bring an end to the Korletheans. You are not yet sitting on the throne, and you never will. Neither will Zerien. Our cause *will* win.”

“I’m almost sorry that you will not live to see the other traitors also be brought down,” I growled, extending a hand towards Nowik.

Although he placed the sword he’d plucked from one of the Guldans in my hand without a fuss, I didn’t miss the sliver of worry in Nowik’s eyes. But even if Deimos was a traitor, there would be no honor in simply executing him. Baldur

placed a sword on the floor and pushed it with his foot. It slid over the metal plates, and Deimos stopped it with his foot before bending down to pick it up. Tagar gestured to one of the other two Sarenians while Baldur gestured to Zeory. In Baldur's case, it was personal as the scientist had implanted the first beetles inside him.

My men spread out in a wide circle around us. The other two Sarenians moved forward, picking up the swords pushed their way. Even though we had paired for simultaneous duels, we would keep an eye on each other as crossovers often occurred in this type of battle.

The Sarenians extruded their claws and their fangs as they slowly approached us. The fluid way in which they moved would easily fool one into thinking they possessed feline DNA rather than being amphibian creatures. We circled each other, studying our respective opponents, looking for a weakness to exploit. Sarenians didn't have our strength. Their bones would snap like twigs in our hands. The challenge was to actually get our hands on them. The little shits were fast and slippery.

The nameless Sarenian attacked first, lunging at Tagar. It acted like a signal, prompting the rest of us to burst into action. Deimos charged me, but not in the savage—almost reckless—way Zeory was attacking Baldur. Anyone with eyes could see that, despite his respectable combat skill, the scientist was no warrior. Deimos swiped his sword at me in a calculated fashion, studying my reactions and my speed. Our massive size often deceived people into thinking we would be slow and lumbering behemoths.

This went on for a short while, Deimos hopping on his feet like a boxer between lunges. By the seventh time, it had become a predictable pattern that didn't fool me in the least.



He was trying to lull me into thinking I knew what he'd do next, then he'd go in for the kill. The eighth time, even as he surged forward, he shifted the position of his free arm, his fingers crooking in the perfect angle to use his claws in a vicious swipe. It was subtle enough that most opponents would have missed it.

I parried his sword attack with mine, and immediately slapped away his hand attempting to eviscerate me with its nasty claws. The blow should have broken his wrist, but the wretch anticipated my counterattack and twisted his entire body as it dropped to the ground, rolling just out of range before jumping back onto his feet. Fuck, he was slippery! The way he moved, you'd think he didn't have a single bone inside his body.

To my surprise, Deimos rushed me. At the last minute, he dropped to his knees and bent backward so low, the back of his head nearly touched the floor as his momentum carried him past me. He swiped his sword at my legs. I jumped over it, but before I could land back down, he'd already straightened and pivoted on himself to claw the back of my calves, mid-rotation.

The burning sensation was nothing in comparison to the sharp pain that radiated through my stomach and chest the moment I landed. In my battle lust, I'd all but forgotten the larvae still eating me from within. The painkillers and the dampening effects of my Berserker powers had made me careless. I tried to backhand Deimos, but he had already moved out of the way. Trying to press his advantage, the Sarenian coordinated a series of attacks with his sword, claws, and strategic kicks, keeping me on the defensive.

At some point during that time, Baldur killed Zeory. I'd seen him punch the scientist, breaking his jaw. But I'd been too busy dodging Deimos's offensive to see when he'd split his head open. Judging by the mangled and bloody mess on the floor, Baldur had stuck his hands in Zeory's mouth and pulled each side like one would to open a bear trap.

Deimos didn't flinch or otherwise acknowledge the death of his companion. By the way he steadily escalated the speed and viciousness of his attack, the Sarenian was growing overconfident that he could best me. I played along, biding my time as our swords clashed. When he next thrust his sword at me, I didn't try to parry and merely leaned to the side, letting the blade graze the side of my shoulder.

His eyes widened as his momentum carried him straight to me. He attempted to spin out of range. Having anticipated his move, I pivoted into a roundhouse kick. It struck him square in the gut, sending him flying back a few meters. My brain barely registered the approving roar of my men when Deimos landed heavily on his back with a loud thud. Visibly winded, he nonetheless attempted to get back on his feet, but I was already on him. I lifted him up with both hands over my head then slammed him back down on the ground.

The Sarenian fell at a bad angle, dislocating his left shoulder with an audible pop. Stunned, he rolled onto his stomach and struggled to even just lift his head up. Feeling generous, I kindly popped his shoulder back into its socket by brutally stomping my foot on it. Deimos emitted a sharp cry of pain, which turned into a high-pitched roar of agony when I placed my foot between his shoulder blades, bent down to grab his fins, and tore them right off his back.

Blue blood gushed out of the wounds. I discarded the wing-like appendages that had marked him as a mature Sarenian, grabbed his hair at the nape to yank him back up onto his feet. Despite his pain and still being half dazed, Deimos whipped his fist at me, striking true, right below my solar plexus. Blinding pain exploded throughout my entire upper body. Blood rushed up in my throat, nearly choking me, as the Sarenian attempted to follow the motion by clawing at my face. I barely managed to raise a protective arm before me. His claws sliced deep through my forearm. A second later, and he would have gouged my eye out.

Desperate to free himself from my hand still holding him by the hair, Deimos elbowed me, once more aiming for my gut. I twisted sideways, enough for it to connect with my ribs instead, eliciting another searing wave of agony. Enraged, I caught his arm, stopping him from elbowing me again, and smashed my forehead against his pretty face, right on the bridge of his nose. I felt the bones collapse. He emitted a strangled sound, and all his energy seemed to drain right out of him. He wavered on his feet, his icy blue eyes visibly struggling not to roll to the back of his head.

Stretching the arm he'd elbowed me with, I brought it down violently on my raised knee, breaking it at the articulation. Deimos's throaty cry turned into a long, drawn-out shout as I kicked the front of his knee, busting his leg. He collapsed in a mess of broken limbs, his midnight blue blood seeping through the cracks of the gridded plates covering the floor.

I towered over him, fury boiling in my blood as I watched him fight to remain conscious.

“Like I said, people like you always lose,” I snarled.

He didn't answer, not that I expected him to. I slammed my foot on his chest, and his rib cage caved in. Blood exploded out of his mouth. This time, his eyes rolled to the back of his head, but he didn't die right away. He wheezed through his broken chest, his breathing pained and wet.

As I turned around to face my men, it took me a moment to realize my own breathing sounded distressed. I spit the blood filling my mouth only to have more coming up from my throat. Feeling dizzy, I looked around the room that had gone quiet. I couldn't remember noticing Tagar killing the nameless Sarenian.

"Jakar? Are you okay?" Tagar asked, his worry audible.

I opened my mouth to answer but a loud sound outside had all of us looking towards the door, as if we could see through the reinforced metal. My blood curdled in my veins as I recognized the series of loud thuds that resonated in quick succession: explosions.

"Open the door," I commanded to Thanor, my voice barely recognizable, it was so growly.

He ran to the door, his fingers already flying on the interface of the Sarenian bracer. Moments later, the doors parted with a grinding sound. I approached, my steps hesitant, my head spinning, and my heart stuttering.

As soon as they finished opening, I realized we were at the back end of the building. Although we couldn't see the side from whence the hybrids were escaping, the smoke rising on our right and the distinct sound of explosions made it clear what was happening. The other modules of the ship were shooting down the hybrids' vessels.

As horror descended over me, a single thought replayed in my mind...

*Dawn.*



## CHAPTER 28

## KRYGOR

Standing on the deck as we began our descent into Haven's atmosphere I stared at my grandson with growing worry. The boy's restlessness was driving me even more insane than I already was. Even though he was doing a remarkable job of hiding his emotions, I knew him well enough to see the deep fear he felt that we were running out of time to save Keran. Over the past two days, he had forced us to push our ship to its limit in order to make the journey from Braxia in record time.

In all my years watching him grow into the formidable young man he'd become, Gavin had never acted so frantic. Whatever his supernatural sense had perceived had him—and by extension me—on edge. While his parents had entrusted his warrior training to my care, they had not been thrilled to find out that I was taking him into what would likely be a real battle. As they also dearly loved Keran and trusted in my ability to look after their first born, they had not opposed Gavin joining the mission. Then again, as the boy had reached legal maturity, he wouldn't have required their consent.

Still, I was now beholden to bring back the firstborn sons of two of the couples dearest to my heart.



As expected, the moment our ship began its descent, air control hailed us. As soon as Captain Yulan opened the communication on screen, the young-looking human who appeared began demanding we either turn back or come dock at the spaceport for proper identification. Frigates like ours—clearly a war vessel—were not allowed to enter Haven’s space to protect the various endangered species the planet sheltered.

“We are here on a rescue mission,” I replied in a firm tone. “Our Crown Prince, Jakar Keran Xeldar, is in trouble. We are here to save him and expect a great deal of hostility from those holding him.”

“What?!” the controller exclaimed through our com. “You are mistaken. Jakar Keran Xeldar left Haven nearly two weeks ago. He eloped with the human Dawn Merrick who formerly ran the Genxia shelter for Braxian hybrids.”

“*You* are the one mistaken,” Gavin countered in a sharp tone. “The Prince is here and in a dire situation. We are not turning back, and there is no time for us to come deal with your administrative steps. Send back up to our location as well as first aid. Time is of the essence.”

“You cannot enter our airspace with vessels of war,” the controller exclaimed, his youthful face taking on a panicked expression. “We do not want to initiate a war with the Braxians, but if you persist in violating our airspace, we will be forced to send troops to take you down.”

“You’ve heard my grandson,” I intervened harshly. “We’re here on a rescue. Send those damn troops. We told you we might need backup. Your failure to assist while the future heir of Braxia is in danger on your own planet will be the cause for war.”

With a gesture of my head, I indicated to my captain to end the communication. Yulan complied. Our com immediately went off with the controller attempting to contact us again, but we ignored him.

“Where to?” Yulan asked Gavin.

“North,” he replied with assurance.

“Uh... How far north?” Yulan insisted.

“Just go north. I’ll tell you if you need adjustment,” Gavin said, his tone hardening.

Yulan cast an uncertain glance my way. I gave him a stiff nod to proceed as requested. Although clearly unconvinced, my captain obeyed and changed our course towards the north. Most of the crew shared Yulan’s sentiment regarding this mission. As much as they respected my grandson, Braxians didn’t have these kinds of seer powers. A part of me regretted convincing him and his parents to keep his abilities a secret.

The harshness he had displayed since sending us on that mission had further distressed my men. Gavin always had a friendly, polite, and often mischievous personality. My clansmen interpreted this change of behavior as additional proof that something had gone awry with the boy. I saw it as a sign of the intense stress, worry, and sense of urgency he felt where Keran was concerned. I didn’t need to understand what Gavin senses were telling him, or how irrational some of his statements came across as. I implicitly trusted him.

And that trust was the very reason for the unrelenting sentiment of dread that knotted my insides. For Gavin to be this distraught, something terrible had happened—or was happening—to Keran. I didn’t want to imagine a scenario

where I would return home to Ravik with his son in a body bag.

Gavin suddenly stiffened, his greige skin—a shade in the paler spectrum for most Braxians—grew paler still, setting all my senses on high alert.

“Adjust our course northeast,” Gavin suddenly ordered Yulan before turning to me, his face tense. “We need to power up all weapons and have our men ready to take flight in the chasers. We will only have one chance.”

This time, Yulan appeared determined to challenge Gavin’s command. A part of me also wanted to tell him this was getting out of hand. We already had the defense forces of Haven coming after us in all haste. Now, with our weapons powered up, we would be deemed a clear and present danger to the safety of the population they were sworn to protect. If he was wrong and we ended up exchanging fire with Haven’s peacekeepers, it would create a diplomatic nightmare with long lasting consequences for Braxia.

And yet, I did not hesitate.

“Change course northeast and power up weapons,” I ordered Yulan before opening the ship-wide com. “All men to battle stations. Pilots and troops, prepare for immediate takeoff.”

I didn’t miss the grateful glance Gavin cast my way before refocusing on Haven’s landscape on screen. We couldn’t see anything but a sea of giant trees forming a thick forest straight ahead. However, as we closed the distance, two of the strangest ships I’d ever seen came out of stealth and began to fire on targets on the ground that we couldn’t see just yet.

Every member of my crew started cursing and burst into action, all doubt evaporated. Relief at my grandson being thus vindicated warred with the worry I felt for Keran. What the fuck had he stumbled onto? Who would be so bold to launch such an attack against the Braxian heir on a sanctuary planet?

Gavin stepped up to the navigation board, partially taking over for Yulan, who didn't challenge his actions. Normally, that would have been unacceptable, but the boy likely felt it would be easier for him to simply input the commands his infallible gut was telling him were required rather than wasting time trying to explain them to someone else.

“Do not let them align,” Gavin shouted, before turning around and shouting at the battle stations on each side of the deck. “Shoot them down! Shoot both of them down now!”

Without waiting for their response, Gavin ran out of the deck. I cursed under my breath.

“Shoot down those vessels and protect our people,” I said. “Yulan, you have the bridge.”

With that done, I ran after the boy. As I suspected, he made a beeline for the hangar and boarded one of our three chasers. I followed him in and ordered the pilot to take off. We didn't even bother to take a seat like the rest of our men already on board.

Outside, a surreal spectacle greeted us as the forest parted into a vast open space. A building similar to the strange vessels sat in the middle of the clearing, surrounded by countless personal shuttles. The two vessels were shooting both at the shuttles and the entrance to the building. A zoom in on the latter revealed the presence of countless hybrids. It took me about a second to realize they had been attempting to get to

their shuttles before coming under attack and were now racing back inside the building for shelter.

I had not initially understood the reason why Gavin had told my captain not to let the two ships align. But as we began to land, I got a better view of the underbelly of both vessels which revealed the presence of the beam used by Guldans for their Siren attack. Once two ships equipped with that lethal technology aligned and activated their siren beams, any building, ship, or structure caught in the beam's path would sustain massive ultrasonic damages. Any life form within them would sustain even more traumatic injuries possibly leading to death.

My frigate and our other two chasers began to harass the two enemy ships, forcing them to divert their attack. As soon as our own chaser landed, Gavin did not even wait for the ramp to finish lowering before he jumped out of the vessel. He rushed towards the entrance of the building where the hybrids had taken refuge. Debris from the explosions had piled up in front of the entrance, blocking them in.

To my utter shock, as soon as the hybrids saw us approach, the angry expressions on their faces faded into one of awe. When they all started whispering Magnar Gavin, my blood turned to ice. What the fuck was going on? How had the rumor being spread on our home world reached the hybrids on Haven? Although visibly distraught to have them refer to him this way, Gavin remained focused on the task at hand.

“We must remove this debris and get you out of here quickly before those two ships return,” Gavin said.

He summoned his Berserker power at the same time I did, amplifying the strength of both our men and the hybrids. But

seconds after we began to work on removing the debris, Gavin jerked his head to the right.

“Keran,” he whispered with a terrified look.

He dropped the piece of twisted metal he’d been removing and broke into a run. I cursed again, ordering two of my men to follow and for the others to free the hybrids before chasing after the boy. I couldn’t begin to imagine what else we were going to find. But before we had even advanced by a few meters, Keran—aided by two of his guards—turned the corner of the building.

The sense of dread that had been growing inside me since we began this journey reached its apogee when I saw the state the Crown Prince was in, not to mention the blue blood staining his clothes and those of his guards. Why had they battled and killed Sarenians? What the fuck was going on? And what had they done to Keran?

He appeared to be struggling to breathe as red blood trickled from the side of his mouth.

To my complete horror, Gavin emitted a savage growl then pulled out his blaster, setting it to lethal before aiming it at Keran.

“Gavin, no!” I shouted as the boy started running even harder.

Just as horrified, Tagar and Nowik raised their blasters at my grandson, ordering him to stop. When he failed to comply, they both fired at him. Despite their weapons being set to stun, it never should have come to this. What madness had taken over the boy?

Gavin dodged into a roll and activated the energy shield from his bracer as he got back to his feet, carried by his

momentum. Without slowing down, he aimed again at the Prince and fired. Tagar and Nowik shoved a half-dazed Keran to the ground, sheltering him with their bodies while raising their weapons to shoot at Gavin again, along with Baldur, Thanor, and his other men who were following him.

However, Gavin didn't shoot at the three men on the ground. Instead, he continued shooting straight ahead. Only then did we see his shots striking the stealth shield of someone behind where the Prince had previously been standing. The illusion flickered while Gavin—jumping over Keran and his guards—continued to unload his weapon on the invisible assassin. As one, Keran's men also fired at the stealth shield, which collapsed in seconds, right before Gavin landed in front of the Sarenian thus revealed.

The assassin swiped his blade at Gavin, who easily dodged it before twisting and breaking his arm. Even as he cried out, the Sarenian raised the blaster in his other hand to fire at my grandson, but he never had a chance. In one swift movement, Gavin snapped his neck. As the assassin collapsed, the boy placed his foot on his chest and pulled, tearing his head right off. He tossed it to the side like so much refuse before turning back to Keran.

An almost deafening silence descended over us as we stared in turn at Gavin and at the dead Sarenian with complete disbelief. A few seconds more and Keran would have been dead, assassinated while standing amidst his guards.

But our sense of awe instantly vanished as Tagar and Nowik moved off the Prince while Gavin crouched before him. The wheezing sound of Keran's breathing turned into a choking gasp, and violent spasms shook his body.

Gavin turned him around. Searing fury surged through me at the sight of a massive larvae worming its way out of Keran's chest. By its location, it had either perforated his lungs or travelled through his heart. Orin rushed to his side with a panicked look on his face. More blood shot out of Keran's mouth.

"The larvae are killing him," Orin said. "We must get him in stasis at once."

Gavin didn't wait for him to complete his sentence to pick up Keran. Carrying him in his arms, my grandson ran back to our shuttle. In the distance, one of the two enemy ships was plummeting to the ground, destroyed by my men, while the other was fleeing.





## CHAPTER 29

## DAWN

**B**y the time Haven's peacekeepers finally arrived, the battle was already over. Such a slow response was beyond outrageous. I couldn't tell if the mind tampering the Sarenians had done to them explained this epic failure, but the planet's defense leaders would have a lot to answer for.

Thankfully, Jaek, Vintor, Tagar, and Krygor handled them. I had no time for the local law enforcement or dealing with the massive political and diplomatic mess that would follow. My only concern was for Keran. I'd still been trapped inside the building when I saw Gavin run back to their chaser carrying the Prince. I nearly lost my mind before realizing they had found another way out of the building.

Turning around, I pushed my way through the crowd, and used the secret passage at the back of the stage to find the other exit. Under different circumstances, I would have reveled at the sight of Deimos's broken body in the hangar alongside the corpses of his acolytes. But fear for Keran's welfare overrode every other thought. I barely registered that Jaek, Vintor, and others had followed me.

Realizing there was an already open way out, they redirected the others to exit through here instead of continuing to remove debris from the entrance. To my relief, when I came

running up the ramp of the chaser, the purebloods manning it did not try to stop me or question my demands to know where Keran was. Instead, one of them led me to the Infirmary.

The longest wait of my life began at that moment. Keran had gone into cardiac arrest. Twice they had been forced to revive him, barely succeeding the second time. One larva had pierced through his heart, and another was trying to carve its way out in the same area. Considering the extreme state he was in, Orin—their medical officer—decided to put him in stasis after injecting him with their most advanced medical nanobots. They would continue to work on him even through stasis.

It took more than five hours of the nanobots diligently stitching back the most grievous internal injuries before Orin considered it was safe enough to perform surgery on Keran in order to remove the remaining larvae and patch up what the nanobots couldn't fix or would take much too long mending.

The entire time, Jaek stood watch with me, berating himself over the state Keran was in. He had implanted the eggs in the safest path possible. But making Baldur zap Keran had set them in a panic, and they had veered off, heading towards vital organs instead. He had only done it to win over Deimos's trust, never expecting it would backfire like this.

As much as I wanted to console him, I was far too consumed with worry for Keran and with horror at all the dreadful things that had been occurring while I've been helplessly sitting through the Sarenian's forced training. Just like Jaek was berating himself, I couldn't stop beating myself up as well for not finding a way sooner to help us escape. Had I been smarter, the Prince wouldn't be fighting for his life.

In light of Keran's precarious state, we remained on Haven for three days until he was stable enough to undergo the journey back to his homeworld. Orin had wisely not wanted to risk us being in deep space if his health entered a critical state that required equipment or medicine we didn't have on board.

During that time, Krygor tore into the Twelve, the peacekeepers, and Haven as a whole for all these failures. That male was a beast of a man. The glimmer of insanity in his eyes made him even more intimidating than Keran. A part of me wished I could have witnessed the Twelve squirming before this giant as he unleashed his wrath on them.

He had lodged a formal complaint with the Galactic Council, and their official peacekeeping forces, the Sentinels, would run a full investigation into this entire mess. Granted, compulsion was largely to blame for this debacle. However, as a sanctuary planet, Haven and its administrators should have established multiple stopgaps to protect its population from external attacks.

The fact that Khel Praghan—who happened to be Dagna Mercy's brother-in-law—ran the Sentinels reassured me that he would be thorough and that the Twelve wouldn't get off easy as had often been the case when they openly discriminated against us hybrids.

For all that, I didn't actually wish them ill. The work they were performing was important. For all their shortcomings, they had still provided us with reasonable shelter and relative safety for hybrids who had nowhere else to turn. I just hoped lessons would be learned and significant improvements made to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

The trip back to Braxia took three days. During the journey, Orin kept Keran mostly sedated, allowing him to

come around from time to time only so that he could make sure his cerebral functions had not been affected by his cardiac episode, and to make sure the healing was headed in the right direction. On those far too rare occasions, I'd been able to talk with him for a few minutes before his chief medical officer put him under again.

With less than an hour from landing on Braxia, my worry for Keran gradually shifted to more selfish concerns as to how the other hybrids and I would be received. Aside from the hybrid women who had settled lives in the main cities of Haven, every other hybrid had elected to return to Braxia with us. Krygor's massive frigate had more than enough room to accommodate all of us. By the time we left Haven, his men had not yet managed to locate Keran's own frigate and chasers. But they did the day after we departed.

The sound of the Infirmary's doors opening pulled me out of my musings. To my surprise, instead of Orin coming to awaken Keran, it was Gavin who walked in. I couldn't help the sense of awe his presence always stirred within me. By Braxian standards, that young man was breathtaking. I'd never met a hybrid this massive. If not for his smooth, almost delicate features, he would have easily passed for a pureblood.

Even though I realized part of my fascination with the young male stemmed from the lingering effects of the compulsion, my heart also filled with gratitude for him coming to our rescue, and above all saving Keran's life.

"Hello, Dawn," Gavin said with that incredibly gentle but deep voice of his. "How is he doing?"

I smiled before gently caressing Keran's hand. "He's doing alright, steadily mending, thanks to Orin."

I gestured for him to take one of the other guest seats next to the bed.

He smiled but shook his head. “I’m not staying long enough. But don’t worry, the Veredians will fix him.”

I nodded, my throat tightening. “Yes, that’s what your Grappa said. I’ve seen how powerful they are, and I’m grateful.”

Gavin tilted his head to the side and gave me the strangest look. “You’re in love with him,” he said matter-of-factly.

I hesitated, prompting him to raise a curious eyebrow. That question had played over and over in my head since our rescue. I loved Jaek, but I wasn’t in love with him. There was no question in my mind that whatever my feelings for him, they would never match those I would expect to feel towards my soulmate. Every time I thought of my future, Keran’s face would pop before my eyes.

“In truth, I don’t know what I, Dawn Merrick, actually feel anymore. What the Sarenians did to us, this indoctrination makes it hard to know what genuinely comes from me, and what has been implanted in my head,” I replied in all sincerity. “When I see you, the first thought that comes to mind is ‘this is my Magnar.’ I cast it out immediately after, but it’s still my instinctive reaction. My heart tells me I’m in love with him, but my head—”

“Your head was tampered with,” Gavin interrupted in a gentle but firm tone. “Trust your heart, you *are* in love with him.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What makes you so sure?”

He shrugged. “I just feel it.”

I stiffened, my gaze locking with his stunning amber eyes. “Feel it? Like you felt you needed to come rescue Keran?”

This time, it was his turn to hesitate, before he shook his head. “No. It’s not the same. But the way you look at him, touch him, worry about him reminds me of the way my mother interacts with my father. I have been blessed to be surrounded by couples who truly love each other. My parents, Ravik and Mercy, and my Grappa with Hope. Soulmates have a unique way they look at each other. You have this look whenever you’re with him.”

I smiled before looking tenderly back at Keran. “You might be right.”

“Of course I am,” he replied in a teasing way. “As for the indoctrination, do not worry about it. The Veredians will be able to help all of you on that front as well.”

I sighed, my shoulders slouching as I thought of the hybrids again.

“This whole thing is such an all-around mess,” I said in a dejected tone. “The men had great prospects presented by Jardan. They gave it all up to come serve you.”

An uneasy expression settled on Gavin’s face, and he shifted on his feet. “So I heard. Jardan is livid. He’s been arguing for hours with Grappa, claiming that since the killer has been caught, the hybrids should have stayed on Haven during their recovery, and then made a free choice whether to pursue opportunities with him, or settle back on Braxia.”

“He has a point,” I said pensively. “Most of the men cannot afford the journey back to Haven. Many may feel like they have no choice but to stay on Braxia once the dust has settled.”



Gavin slightly frowned. “So you share his opinion on that?”

I pursed my lips while pondering the matter. “Maybe. The truth is that I have no idea what awaits us there. What if the purebloods are hostile to us? It would have been safer for only a handful of us to go to Braxia and assess the situation before bringing everyone back.”

“Times have changed,” Gavin said in a firm but reassuring tone. “You’ve all just saved us from getting mind-controlled by the Sarenians. Expect a hero’s welcome when you land. You have earned the entire planet’s gratitude.”

Could he be right? Could this have put the purebloods in a more favorable disposition towards us? I frowned as a different thought struck me.

“The question is whether they’ll be grateful to us or to you,” I challenged in a soft voice. “After all, without your unexpected arrival, our escape would have failed. We’ve heard the rumors about the population wanting you as their next Magnar. Deimos was also attempting to indoctrinate us to be your loyal servants as Braxia’s new ruler. This incredible rescue will undoubtedly make them want you even more.”

Gavin frowned and shook his head even as I spoke. “Maybe some of them will try to give me credit, but it doesn’t change your part in it. And as far as ruling Braxia is concerned, Keran is our future Magnar. Not me.”

“The future Magnar is whoever wins the battle in five weeks,” I gently reminded him. “As much as I pray he will be the one, I doubt that Keran will be recovered enough for the grueling fight he will have to face then. According to Krygor, the soonest a Veredian healer can tend to his wounds won’t be for at least three weeks from now. And as I understand it, the

extent of his injuries will leave him weak for a few more weeks after that as he rebuilt his strength from the healer using up all his internal resources to mend him.”

My heart sank at the troubled look that settled on Gavin’s handsome face. Despite knowing the facts I had just laid out before him, a part of me had hoped he would have had counter arguments to put my fears to rest. I didn’t care whether Keran became a king or not. That had never been the source of my attraction to him. However, he had devoted his entire life preparing to play that role to the best of his abilities and for the benefit of our homeworld. In the weeks spent by his side, I had come to admire the man and a leader in him. I didn’t doubt that he would make the perfect Magnar. For his sake, I wanted to cling to hope.

The door opening spared Gavin from giving a response he didn’t seem to have. At the same time, the synthetic voice of the ship’s artificial intelligence announced our imminent landing. My stomach knotted once again, the tension that had receded during this conversation with Gavin coming back with a vengeance. The young man excused himself, leaving me with Orin.

The chief medical officer immediately busied himself around Keran.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea?” I asked Orin when he prepared to press a hypospray to Keran’s neck.

He gave me a sympathetic look, temporarily pausing his action to answer me. “In an ideal world, my dear Dawn, no, I would not awaken him. But everyone has heard what happened on Haven. If the Jakar returns home on a stretcher, it will give his detractors all the ammunition they need to convince others that he is unfit to rule. Our people are all

about strength. Keran must be seen walking by his own power.”

I pinched my lips, totally unconvinced. I fully understood his arguments, but at this point, Keran’s health mattered more to me than whatever any naysayer might want.

“Do not fret,” Orin said in a soothing voice. “He has recovered enough that he will be fine, so long as we keep the civilities short. He must simply walk out, let his clan and the Council see him, and then he can retire to his chambers.”

I nodded stiffly while he proceeded to awaken Keran before administering him a powerful painkiller. With Orin’s assistance, I washed Keran’s face, helped him dress, and combed his hair. Despite being a little pale, he hid his pain remarkably well. Apparently, I wasn’t doing a good job of hiding my own distress. He reached for my cheek and gently caressed it.

“I’ll be fine, Dawn,” Keran said in a reassuring tone. “So long as you are by my side, all will be well.”

My throat tightened upon hearing those words. It had been an eternity since we’d had any type of romantic or private time together. In that instant, I realized I had ached to hear that he still needed and wanted me.

“Always,” I whispered, annoyed by the light trembling in my voice. “So long as you need me, I’ll be there.”

“I will *always* need you, Dawn.”

My heart melted when he drew me into his embrace and gave me the most wondrous kiss we had ever exchanged. It was tender and filled with respect and devotion that had me melting from the inside out.

Orin clearing his throat reminded us that we had an audience.

“We have landed,” he said with a sheepish expression, which clashed terribly with his fierce features.

Keran chuckled while my cheeks burned. Despite his weakened state, Keran took the lead as we headed to the exit of the ship. If I didn’t know better, he could have fooled me into thinking he was in full health.

As we approached the opened doors of the ship, my nervousness went into overdrive. Krygor had tried to reassure me by stating only a very small party would greet us, but at least fifty people stood outside the vessel. On the right side—which also had the largest group—the people standing appeared to be clan members and staff. On the left side, I recognized the faces of some of the more famous members of Magnar Ravik’s Council. My innards twisted painfully when my gaze glided over my sire’s face.

Although I had known that moment would inevitably come, I wasn’t as prepared for it as I had believed myself to be. Next to the Council, a stunning Guldan female with silver-white hair and black horns stood with a younger version of herself, as well as a beautiful hybrid child, half-Braxian, half-Guldan. They were Krygor’s wife Hope and their daughters. I couldn’t help giving the oldest daughter a second look. Beyond the fact that she was breathtakingly stunning, I wondered how such a sweet-looking young woman would fare married to the Sarenian Prince Zerien. My recent encounter with his people left me wary.

However, the striking couple standing directly before us reclaimed all my attention. Ravik Xeldar was even more imposing in person than in the images and recordings I’d seen

of him. Even though Keran matched his father's height and size, and despite being his spitting image, the Magnar's inner power and aura of authority seemed to dwarf everything and everyone else. His brutish features testified that the purest Braxian blood ran in his veins. His smile as we walked down the ramp made me want to run for cover.

But his mate took my breath away. Dagna Mercy was the embodiment of feminine perfection. Like with all Veredians, her body had been sculpted by the Goddess herself. Dark spots, typical of her species, graced the sides of her arms and neck, those on her legs hidden by her long black skirt. Her raven hair fell down to her ankles in a single braid. Her black horns, marking her as a Guldan hybrid, sat on her head like a crown. She, too, exuded an aura of power, with a hefty dose of 'don't-fuck-with-me-if-you-know-what's-good-for-you.' And yet, the pitch-black depth of her eyes contained nothing but warmth as she watched us approach.

"Welcome home, my son," Ravik said to Keran, meeting us at the bottom of the ramp.

He pulled him into his embrace, giving him a single manly tap on the back before releasing him. At a visceral level, I believed he had ached to hold him longer but forced himself to step away because we were in public.

"It's good to be home, Father," Keran said, his voice filled with a world of affection.

Mercy stepped forward kissing him on the cheek and caressing his hair in a maternal fashion that also moved me.

"Welcome home, Keran," she said in a throaty voice that would have any man falling all over himself.

“Thank you,” Keran replied warmly before turning to who I assumed to be his brother.

They exchanged a similar manly hug. After releasing him, his brother kept one hand on his shoulder while giving him an unimpressed look.

“So you go on a mission to arrest a killer and end up violating every sanctuary law on Haven. I can’t let you out of my sight, it seems,” he said in a teasing tone.

Keran chuckled. “Apparently not,” he conceded. He then gestured at me. “Father, Mercy, Ganek, please meet Dawn Merrick. Dawn, this is my family.”

Feeling incredibly self-conscious, I smiled, shocked to have each of them shake my hand in the traditional human greeting. And yet, I noticed the way both Ravik’s and Ganek’s nostrils flared as they took in my scent. I didn’t know whether Krygor or Keran’s guards had revealed my lineage to their Magnar, but now, there would be no hiding it anymore—not that I would have tried to.

“It is an honor to meet you, Dawn,” Mercy said. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

“The honor is mine, Dagna,” I said sheepishly.

Goddess, I felt so utterly inadequate compared to the perfection that were Ravik’s and Krygor’s mates.

Mercy waived a dismissive hand. “Call me Mercy. You will find that we’re quite informal here.”

“Very well, Mercy,” I said, feeling clumsy.

“Welcome home, Jakar,” a man I recognized as Boros Grumar, one of the Councilors, called out to Keran when

Ravik gestured for us to head towards the fortress that also served as their dwelling.

“Thank you, Boros,” Keran replied as we approached.

Not wanting to get too close to my father, I lagged a little, remaining a step behind Keran. To my shock, he took my hand and drew me to his side. Every eye locked on our joined hands, before looking back up at me, their gazes taking on a speculative edge. I fought the urge to squirm and plastered a neutral expression on my face.

“We’ve been eagerly awaiting your return,” Boros continued. “Based on the report of your adventure on Haven, we have urgent matters to handle. The entire Council is here and—”

“It will have to wait,” I said in a tone that brooked no argument.

The shock on the Councilor’s face reflected the one I felt inside. I could not believe the boldness of my words. And yet, I wouldn’t take them back or stand down. Despite the stellar performance Keran was putting on, he was in pain and needed to get back to bed yesterday.

“We have urgent matters of national security to tackle,” Boros said in a tone that implied he couldn’t believe I was meddling.

I lifted my chin and hardened my gaze. “Urgent, no. Important, yes. The Prince just arrived home from a long journey. He hasn’t even seen his children yet. Your meeting *can* and *will* wait.”

When Boros opened his mouth to argue some more, Keran interrupted him.

“Your Dassa has spoken. The meeting *will* wait.”

I stiffened, his words hitting me like a punch in the gut. A stunned silence fell over the attendance. Keran had just given me the title of the spouse to a Crown Prince of Braxia. Not a concubine, not a mistress, but his wife... I cast a nervous sideways glance at Ravik. Instead of the outrage I'd expected, both he and Mercy were looking at me with approval.

"Indeed, the Dassa has spoken," my father said, with surprised awe.

My heart skipped a beat when he took a couple of steps forward, and his nostrils flared, as if to confirm what he already suspected. The way he puffed out his chest and the glimmer in his green eyes—the same color as mine—screamed of pride. That messed with my head.

"I dare hope to have a chance to speak with the Dassa once you've all rested and recovered from your journey," Raylor Caldes added.

I gave him a stiff nod, and followed Ravik as he resumed walking towards the fortress.

"What about the hybrids?" I asked Ravik as we slowed down by the entrance of the massive building made of dark grey stone and burgundy accents.

"We have set up proper accommodations for them. I will give you a tour after you're all settled in," Ravik said in a gentle tone.

"Thank you," I said, relieved, although still insanely intimidated by the man.

We followed him and Mercy inside. Dark gray walls and maroon floors greeted us. Such colors would have given the dwelling a somber look if not for the imposing windows that let sunlight flood in. As much as I wanted to explore the



fortress, I couldn't help a sigh of relief when we finally reached Keran's room. It was gigantic, just like the bed. An immense private balcony gave a breathtaking view of the Xeldar compound, which rivaled in size with most small cities on Haven.

"We got it," I told Ravik, when he seemed to hesitate as to whether he should stick around.

He locked gazes with me. I held his without flinching. He nodded in concession then cast a worried look at Keran who was removing his shirt. The Magnar looked back at me with a troubled, almost vulnerable glint in his black eyes.

"Take good care of my son," he said in a soft voice.

"I will. I promise," I vowed.

He smiled and, to my complete shock, gently caressed my cheek in a paternal fashion before leaving. I closed the door behind him. As soon as it clicked shut, Keran's shoulders slouched. All his strength and energy appeared to drain out of him.

"Keran!" I whispered, panic filling my voice as I rushed to his side.

Slipping an arm around his back, I helped him sit at the edge of the bed. Palms resting on the mattress on each side of him, Keran struggled to keep himself straight. I kneeled before him to take off his boots then helped him lie down. He crawled up the bed to rest his head on the big, fluffy pillows. His chest vibrated with a growl of relief. As Keran loved sleeping naked, I considered ridding him of his pants but decided against it. It would ask too much effort on his part after the strain he'd already subjected himself to.

As I pulled the blanket over him to tuck him in, he grabbed my hand.

“Stay with me,” he whispered, his voice slightly slurred as if he was fighting to stay awake.

“Of course,” I replied.

I kicked off my shoes and swiftly pulled off my dress before climbing into the bed with him. The searing heat of his bare chest against mine had a delightful shiver run down my spine. It had been too long since I’d felt the warmth of his embrace. I hated that it should happen under such circumstances.

To my dismay, Keran didn’t just let me lie by his side but almost pulled me on top of him. Considering his injuries, I didn’t think it was a good idea, but he tightened his embrace when I tried to pull away. A contented purr rose from his throat.

“Thank you, my Dassa,” Keran whispered, before closing his eyes.

Emotion constricting my throat, I gently kissed the corner of his jaw before resting my head on his chest. Listening to the steady beating of his heart, I thanked the Goddess for safely bringing us back home.



## CHAPTER 30

## DAWN

**I**n the days that followed, Keran recovered at a snail's pace. Despite the effectiveness of the healing nanobots and the surgery he underwent, he still couldn't resume his combat training or perform any overly strenuous activities. Under different circumstances, I'd be laughing at his restlessness. Having always led an active life, Keran couldn't sit still for very long. And the truth was that, like most Braxian males, the Prince needed to partake in regular—and preferably violent—physical activities to vent the excess energy he possessed.

The Veredian healer would not be here for some time. After much discussion, it had been agreed that one of their most powerful healers would come here. She happened to be Mercy's own mother, Maheva. As Prince Zerien had been visiting their home world to strengthen the alliance between their people, he offered to bring her along on his way here to discuss the tragedy that had occurred on Haven.

From all accounts, Zerien was livid. Obviously, he wanted to address the matter in person and reassure the Braxians of his continued commitment to this alliance. However, even at the fastest warp speed, it would still take close to three weeks to complete the journey from Veredia to Braxia. As other

Veredian ships were currently even farther away, this remained the best solution.

In the meantime, when not looking after Keran—who was enjoying it despite complaining that I was babying him—I would split the rest of my time between giving testimony to the Council, helping the hybrids settling in, and getting to know the members of Keran’s clan as well as their customs and way of living. It was one thing to read and watch documentaries about a people, and a completely different one to actually live among them. But so far, I was loving every minute of it.

Braxians had indeed come a long way over the nineteen years since Ravik had forbidden the hunting and mistreatment of hybrids. The economic revolution brought about by Mercy finally giving the Braxian females’ underground trade market the visibility it deserved played a non-negligible part in improving women’s place and rights in their society. My mind bubbled with excitement at all the ways I could further help improve their role, education, and opportunities within their clans and society at large.

But before I indulged in that future project, my focus remained on my fellow hybrids. Ravik had not been kidding when he claimed they had been provided proper accommodations. They were more than respectable. Although they called the location the barracks, it was in fact a humongous hotel-like establishment usually reserved for the intergalactic warriors who visited Braxia for their biannual gladiator games.

The gigantic building could house more than two thousand guests. It had a large cafeteria, training room, indoor pool, and entertainment room with everything one could want. It was

also located a stone's throw away from the smaller combat arena behind the Magnar's fortress. Over time, they had built a far bigger arena right outside the city walls in order to welcome far more guests as their population grew. This smaller arena was now mostly reserved for the training of the Magnar's royal guard.

I had greatly worried that the men would feel imprisoned in the barracks, gilded cage though it was. Thankfully, they did not. It probably had to do with some of the most respected pureblood Elders visiting them regularly not only to share with them the various opportunities that could open for those among them who chose to remain here, but also to listen to their grievances, the pain they suffered, and their aspirations. It proved quite therapeutic for many of them to feel heard at last.

Like me, they weren't allowed to freely roam around the compound or even go visit their respective clans—not that too many seemed overly eager to do the latter. The effects of the compulsion still lingered. As we couldn't be certain that Deimos hadn't implanted some dormant command that could be triggered at any time, it was safer for everyone concerned to keep us partially quarantined. Once again, the Veredians would save the day, as they had accounted for one of their own mind readers to accompany Maheva here. She would be able to free us of any mind-control and indoctrination we had sustained. Considering how well we were being taken care of, the extra couple of weeks we had to wait for their arrival didn't faze anyone.

From a selfish point of view, I had to admit that beyond enjoying all that I was also learning from these visiting Elders, they gave me an excuse to hide from my father. I'd never considered myself a coward, but the thought of meeting with him terrified me. My emotions didn't really make much sense.

A part of me wanted to impress him and feared he would find me lacking in some way. The other—despite knowing that the laws had changed, and that he could no longer claim me as property—still dreaded that he might try to do just that. As his clan had finally gotten back into the good graces of Keran's family, I didn't want a conflict involving me to create a new rift. But I would never submit to the kind of control their females had endured for so long.

And then a third part of me didn't want to end up being the one disappointed by who my sire might turn out to be. My entire life, I had always assumed that he was the same type of bigoted and cruel monster that my half-brother Gerwin had been. Keran correcting that misconception had made me wonder if maybe there could be a future where my father could become a part of my life. Watching Ravik and Krygor with their respective daughters had stirred a deep longing I never thought a woman my age could still have. At forty-four, you'd think I'd be over having daddy issues.

On the fifth day, my lucky streak of dodging my father came to an end. Or rather he took away my ability to do so. On my way out of the barracks after spending a few hours with the hybrids, I found him standing by the entrance. My heart skipped a beat, and a wave of panic surged through me. This was too soon. I didn't feel ready for any of this.

*But what are you going to do? Run away like a wuss?*

Shame burned my cheeks that I would even contemplate fleeing a mere conversation. Considering what I had just faced on Haven without falling apart, surely I had enough spine to handle whatever would come of a conversation with my sire?

Our gazes locked, a dare shining bright in his. It stung my pride that he would guess at the cowardly thoughts crossing



my mind. I lifted my chin defiantly and marched towards him with a confidence I absolutely did not feel. However, the glimmer of approval in his eyes as I approached comforted me in the fact that I was apparently pulling it off well enough.

“Clan Leader Caldes,” I said in a polite but distant voice as a greeting.

“Dassa Dawn,” he replied in a similar tone. “Would you do me the honor of walking with me?”

I swallowed hard and gave him a stiff nod. He smiled. His relief and genuine happiness took me aback. I had expected him to take on a haughty air, as if my acceptance had not only been expected but also his due. He opened the large doors and gestured for me to proceed. I thanked him with another nod, this display of good manners clashing with the image I’d been unfairly creating in my head of what this encounter would be like.

As we exited the building, my father took the lead, heading quietly towards the large open area between the barracks and the small arena a couple of hundred meters away. Reddish-brown stones covered the squarish place, which could be deemed a small town square or plaza. Here, people apparently used to gather to socialize and place bets before the fights, when this used to be the primary arena. It was completely open, without any obstacles that could shelter us from view.

While it could have been a ploy to show everyone that he was spending time with their Dassa, I got a distinct feeling that he had actually chosen this location for me. We were far enough from indiscreet ears to be able to speak freely, but in a public enough space that should I feel uncomfortable at any time, I would be able to walk away or call for aid—not that I expected this would be necessary.

It wasn't until we almost reached the center of the square, walking at the slow pace of two people taking a leisurely stroll in the woods, that my father finally broke the somewhat awkward silence between us.

“When Keran returned from Haven, we expected him to bring back some unbelievable news regarding what had transpired over there,” my father said in a pensive tone. “But nothing had prepared me for part of that news to be finding out that I have an adult daughter.”

“I'm sure that must have been shocking,” I said in a neutral voice.

“Shocking? No, not at all,” he replied as if I had said something silly. “Surprising, mind-blowing, yes. But above all, elating.”

I turned my head to give him a sideways glance upon hearing that last word. I hated the uncertainty I felt, and especially the needy little girl within me rearing her head in the hopes of being wanted. He held my gaze unwaveringly with his eyes disturbingly identical to mine.

“I always wanted a daughter, but Fate only ever gave me sons... or so I thought,” he continued.

“Even a hybrid one?” I countered, my tone involuntarily hardening.

He stopped walking and turned to face me with a very serious expression. As a pureblood male, he towered over me by a good head, despite my 6'4". My father wasn't as massive as Keran, but he definitely fit the big and intimidating stereotype. He kept his dark brown hair fairly short, and like all Braxian males, he had no facial hair—aside from the thick eyebrows on their almost Neanderthal-like strong foreheads—

and wore a skin-tight shirt that hid nothing of the impressive muscles of his chest and arms. I didn't know his exact age, probably late sixties, like Ravik. But by human standards, he'd look no more than in his early forties.

"Times have changed, Dawn. Granted, not so very long ago, it would have been more problematic. But there is no more stigma associated with that. New laws protect you and all other hybrids," he said in a very serious tone. His gaze roamed over me as if he couldn't believe I was truly standing before him. "I wish I had known sooner."

I stiffened, instinctive distrust and wariness making me overly aggressive. "Why? What would it have given you to have known sooner? Would you have forced me to come here?"

He recoiled. The hurt look in his eyes shamed me. So far, he hadn't given me any reason to attack him or imply he wished me ill in any way. And yet, for some reason, the urge to lash out and berate him burned my tongue.

"Ancestors, absolutely not! At least not at first," he amended, looking at me with a slightly offended expression. "Surely you know how horribly you would have been abused? I may have many faults, but I never would have wanted my own child—my only daughter—subjected to what our laws permitted. Your mother was wise to have secreted you away."

"If you were so against this type of violence, you are the Clan Leader. You could have stopped it," I challenged.

My father shook his head and ran nervous fingers through his short dark-brown hair. My throat tightened at the look of sorrow that flashed over his rough features.

“You will find out soon enough that strength and power rules Braxia,” he said in a slightly tired voice. “I couldn’t have forbidden what the law permitted, and worse still, what the previous Magnar promoted. Ravik’s father was a monster. He hunted hybrids for fun. He had an entire trophy room with the skulls sometimes even the spines of the ones he had killed.”

I swallowed hard and hugged myself, my heart breaking for all those innocents whose only crime had been to have been sired on an off-worlder.

“Gerwin would have hunted you,” my father said with a haunted look in his eyes laced with deep pain. “I don’t know where I went wrong with that boy. He always had such hatred and lust for violence in his heart. There was no redeeming him. And yet, I loved him. He was my firstborn. No parent should ever have to bury their child. Least of all watch him die in the horrible fashion he did.

“I heard some rather... concerning things about him,” I said cautiously.

My father snorted, his gaze lost in thought while he slowly shook his head. I couldn’t say if it was in disbelief or disgust... maybe a mix of both. After a beat, he refocused on me with a stern and determined look.

“There’s no need for euphemisms between us, Daughter. Gerwin was a cruel and uncontrollable beast. As much as it hurt my heart as his father, I never questioned that my son needed to be made an example of. Of course, I defended him and pleaded on his behalf as was my duty as both his sire and Clan Leader. After all, his shame was the entire clan’s to bear as well.”

As much as a part of me empathized with the pain he had undoubtedly felt at watching his heir get executed in such a

brutal and public fashion, another remained suspicious.

“For him to be so cruel and full of hatred, he must have learned it from somewhere,” I said, my intense stare making it clear I questioned what part he might have had in this.

His face hardened, and he held my gaze unwaveringly, daring me to call him a liar.

“He certainly did not learn it from me. I have many, *many* faults, but I do not enjoy torture. I find no pleasure in abusing those weaker than me. If I want to fight, it will be with someone of equal or greater power so that I can prove my worth and my strength. Only cowards challenge those they are guaranteed to defeat.”

Feeling chastised, I nodded and lowered my gaze. We stood quietly for a second, then my father turned away and started walking again at that very slow pace. I followed without a word.

“Times change, Dawn. People change,” my father continued in a calm voice after a moment. “We constantly learn and grow, if we open our minds to it. I wish I knew then all that I know now. Maybe I would have been a better father and raised Gerwin to be different. I’ll never know. But now, I have a daughter... a breathtakingly beautiful daughter, whose praises are constantly being sung not only by the hybrids, but by the royal guards and every member of Clan Xeldar.”

He stopped walking again to look at me. The pride in his voice and in his eyes did a number on me. I blinked a couple of times, screaming internally for my fucking tears not to show themselves. I didn’t want him thinking me a crybaby or an emotionally fragile woman.

“I hope you will allow me to get to know you and that you will want to meet your clan and brothers,” he added in a soft voice.

My stomach knotted at that thought. I didn't know if fear, curiosity, or longing had prompted that reaction. I'd always wanted to belong to a family. My adoptive mother had been wonderful to me, but in many ways, she had been more of a caregiver than a true mother. While we remained in contact, she had moved on with her life once I had fully reached adulthood. I had hoped for siblings to pester, to love, to rely on, and to support when they needed me. While the hybrids in the shelter had filled part of that role, it had never been the real thing.

“There's no rush, Dawn,” my father quickly added when I hesitated. “We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other. I just wanted you to be aware that we are here, and that we'll wait however long you need to make us part of your life.”

Once more, I blinked rapidly to stem the tears threatening to come out. I had tried to imagine this conversation in a billion different ways. Not once had it played out like this. I couldn't tell whether he was merely saying what he knew would mollify me, or if he was being sincere. After all, he was a high-ranking politician on Braxia. But his tone and demeanor rang true.

“Thank you. Like you said, we have our entire lives before us,” I said with gratitude.

He smiled, the genuine happiness in his eyes filling my heart with warmth. He opened his mouth, then hesitated, appearing to choose the proper words before he spoke. That got all my senses on high alert.

“You being our future Dagna is a tremendous honor for our clan and for me as your father,” he said carefully, making me even more nervous. “However, we didn’t realize at first how severely injured the Jakar had been. Over the past few days, we got a better understanding of the extent of what he endured. In truth, the Council does not believe that he will recover in time for Marghor.”

“Marghor?” I asked, fighting the sense of dread growing within me.

*Is he one of those who have been pushing for Gavin to become the next Magnar?*

“Marghor is a special celebration which happens once a year,” my father explained. “Technically, it translates as ‘Day of Reconciliation.’ But in practice it is the day of settling scores between clans and individuals. Over the years, it also became the official event where one can challenge the Magnar for his throne. It is especially difficult because all those who issued the challenge will be thrown in the arena together in a free for all, last man standing battle. It is not uncommon for many of the challengers to join forces to take out the biggest threat before dwindling the numbers down until a single victor stands.”

I shuddered. A duel, Keran might have a chance to win, assuming all went well with the Veredians when they arrived in a couple of weeks, and that he recovered sufficiently in the few days left before Marghor. But he would never survive a free for all brawl.

“I see,” I said in a non-committal fashion, waiting to see where he was going with this.

“Word of what happened and of his condition has spread far and wide,” my father continued with a frown. “Because of

that, even more people will challenge him for the throne. If he's not ready, you must not let him fight. It is better he loses and lives to fight another day.”

I recoiled, my jaw dropping as I stared at him in disbelief. “You want Keran to forfeit the throne?!” I exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“No. I want him to live,” he said in a firm tone. “Gerwin’s death and the terrible financial crisis our planet went through around that same period have opened my eyes. Braxia needs Clan Xeldar to continue ruling it. If Keran enters Marghor and loses the fight, he will be forever challenged, even if he comes back later and ends up winning. If he’s not ready this year, let another claim the throne, and then he can reclaim it in a crushing victory once he’s fully healed.”

I slowly nodded, seeing the merit of his arguments yet still not ready to side with them.

“I hear what you’re saying, but that temporary ruler could cause great harm. He could undo most of what Magnar Ravik has accomplished over the past two decades,” I argued.

“Not if Gavin enters the fight,” my father said smugly. “He is smart, strong, and undefeated in the arena. He shares all the values of the Xeldars. He will safekeep Braxia until Keran is able to defeat any challenger.”

“And what if Gavin decides he likes the job and wants to keep it?” I countered, my unease coming back with a vengeance.

Granted, Gavin had clearly expressed to me that he had no desire whatsoever to rule Braxia. But once he got a taste of power, would he still be so eager to relinquish it?



My father waved a dismissive hand. “Nothing, not even the throne will keep him here. Worst case scenario, assuming for some highly improbable reason that Keran wouldn’t recover enough to defeat potential opponents, Gavin will abdicate. He has waited his whole life to meet his Veredian soulmate in person. Once he reaches his twenty-first birthday three years from now, he will leave for the Western Quadrant to be with her. Woe unto anyone who attempts to keep him from her.”

“You have given me much to think about,” I said, rubbing my forehead.

“I hope this will include the potential of occasional visits to your clan and your sire,” he replied in a soft tone.

I smiled, suddenly feeling shy, and nodded.

He smiled back, his gaze roaming over my face again with a mix of pride and possessiveness that wrecked me. Lifting one of his massive hands, he gently caressed my cheek.

“Until then, my daughter.”

He dropped his hand then walked away. I pressed my palm where he had touched me as if to recapture the sensation.

“Until then, Father,” I whispered under my breath.



## CHAPTER 31

## KERAN

I stared at Prince Zerien's handsome face as he sat across from me in my father's private council room. Anger twisted his features. Saying the Sarenian prince was livid would be the understatement of the century. We spent the past few hours recounting everything that had happened on Haven. Even though we had shared some of the information and reports with him for him to prepare for our meeting during his long journey here from Veredia, he had wanted to hear the details directly from us, and especially from me.

"On my honor, I swear to thoroughly investigate this abominable plan and root out every single traitor," Zerien said in a passionate tone laced with seething anger. "Please, never doubt my commitment to our alliance. I rejected the Guldans from the beginning. There was never any question in my mind that Sarenia and Braxia would fight side by side in the Great War. We are friends, soon to be family," he added, casting a meaningful glance at Krygor.

"Do not fret, Zerien," I said in a soothing voice. "I do not doubt your commitment to our alliance. We both have fanatic extremists among our people. And the Guldans know all too well how to exploit their weaknesses to achieve their own goals. We must be extremely vigilant. And you may have a

similar problem brewing in the lead up to your crowning. If Deimos spoke the truth, and I have no reason to doubt it, there is a large cell of traders planning your demise on your homeworld.”

He nodded slowly, a muscle ticking on his temple. “I knew that we had some troublemakers. They have been loud for a while. But never in a thousand years would I have expected them to go to such extremes. I must return home to immediately reorganize our secret service and start hunting the traitors. We must also find out who their Guldans contacts are, and how they are recruiting our people.”

“We are also investigating on our side,” Krygor said in a somber tone. “But the fact that they had the siren technology installed on modular Sarenian ships says that they have been planning this for a long time. The Guldans do not easily share their technology. This means they have even more powerful weapons that they have not revealed yet, and that they are arming our own people against us. Be careful. You may face something bigger and deadlier than you anticipate back home.”

“I will be cautious,” Zerien said with a troubled expression. He glanced back at me with an apologetic look. “Unfortunately, there is a chance that I may not make it back in time for your coronation.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “Do not worry about that,” I said in a friendly tone. “Securing peace and order on your homeworld comes first. Keep in mind there is a chance I may not be the Magnar you will be dealing with.”

Zerien huffed and looked at me as if I’d been struck on the head once too many. “Of course, you will be. The Oracle said as much.”

I gave him a ‘You should know better’ look in response. “Oracles cannot guarantee a path. They see possibilities, not certainties. If a Seer had seen me ruling, this conversation would be moot. But not one has.”

Some Korlethean females with foresight powers could voluntarily poke into the future to see what could happen in a specific situation. They would usually see three or more possible outcomes. The choices the target would make along the way would either shift those outcomes, cancel some, or create new ones. Those females were named Oracles. Their male counterparts, called Seers, had no control on when their visions came. But when they did, whatever they saw was guaranteed to happen. Faolan, the Sarenian hunter Zerien intended to appoint as his new head of the secret service had married a Korlethean Oracle.

Zerien nodded in concession. “You are right, no Seer saw it. However, she saw eight possible paths. And out of them, there is only one where you do not become Magnar. So no, Keran, I will not be dealing with a different Magnar. The odds are ever in your favor, my friend.”

I smiled. Although I’d never admit it, his words greatly encouraged me. Despite my best effort, I’d been steadily losing hope in the probability I’d carry on the work my father had begun and for which I’d been preparing my entire life.

We wrapped up the meeting shortly thereafter. The Prince was eager to go home and get his house in order. But not before making a detour by Krygor’s compound to see his soulmate, Siona. If he was to come back here in five months to secure his engagement to her, he couldn’t delay shutting down whatever treacherous plots were brewing back on Sarenia.

As soon as he departed, I headed back to my quarters where Maheva and Dawn joined me. I'd had the pleasure of getting to know her well over the years, as she was Mercy's mother, and by extension, my step-grandmother. But to me, she was simply Nana Maheva, as she loved to be called.

For the following three hours, she merely laid her hands on my bare chest to perform her magic. Veredians of her generation could only use their psionic powers through touch. Due to the experiments the Korletheans had performed on them, the younger generations had developed additional powers that could simply be activated either by a thought or by a look. Most of them were the young Titans, who the galaxy both revered and feared.

But healing didn't come without its load of pain. In my case, Maheva insisted on me taking a mild sedative once she saw the extent of my lingering internal injuries. To my dismay, she ended up spreading the treatment over two days, making me gorge myself on our richest food, before sleeping like the dead. By the end of the second day, her reasons became painfully obvious.

I had known healing this way would use up my energy reserves and any fat I possessed. As Braxians were naturally lean, losing some muscle mass in the process had been expected. But I never would have imagined it would be to this extent. I'd become so emaciated, you'd think I'd been starved for weeks, if not months.

To my dismay, Maheva said I'd need a month of eating rich food, with lots of proteins and rest before I would be back to my old self. I didn't have a month, only two weeks before Marghor. By the looks my clan members and servants cast my

way when they thought I wasn't looking, they had also realized what outcome awaited me.

If not for Dawn's steadfast support and presence by my side, I'd likely have fallen into a depression. I hated feeling this helpless. It seemed like ever since I'd embarked on that fateful trip to Haven, any control I'd ever had on my life, on my destiny, had been ripped right out of my hands.

Despite that, if only for finding my beautiful Dawn, I'd go through this ordeal all over again. On top of nursing me back to health, she acted like the most vicious watchdog when the Council or my clanmates demanded too much of me. Once she deemed it was time for me to rest, you had better not challenge her.

Father approved of her, and picky Mercy absolutely adored her, as did the rest of my clan, which warmed my heart. Ganek half-jokingly teased me that had I not met her first, he would have wooed her himself. Considering how much he had despised Dana, it said a lot. But above all, my sons were crazy about Dawn. Neyti couldn't stop praising my woman's virtues. The fact that Dawn had all but adopted my sons as her own had earned her the eternal loyalty of their nanny and of the staff.

It bothered me that she had not started mingling with the other clans. Initially, it had been for security reasons until the Veredians had confirmed all the hybrids had been deprogrammed from the indoctrination they'd received. Since then, she had not shown any particular eagerness to play tourist on Braxia. Aside from my clan and her father's, she had only been introduced to the clan leaders part of my father's Council. Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to get all the clans to meet her, I couldn't do so just yet.



Until I knew for sure that I'd be Magnar, I couldn't introduce Dawn as the future Dagna. And the probability of that happening was dwindling with each passing day. Thankfully, Dawn didn't seem to care about any title or position. Everything in her words and actions demonstrated her devotion to me and to helping bring a better future to the hybrids and Braxian females.

Mentally exhausted after yet another meeting with the Council, I made my way to the nursery. The high-pitched sounds of my toddler's laughter had me smiling long before I reached the door.

My heart melted with love as I watched my mate playing with my sons under Neyti's approving gaze.

"I'm going to eat you!" Dawn said in a playfully menacing tone to my infant son, Argos.

Lying on the changing table wearing nothing but a fresh diaper, he stared at my woman with eyes the same gray color as mine, and his mouth opened in a wide, toothless grin. Dawn lowered her head and blew audibly on his round tummy. Argos burst out laughing, his little limbs wiggling in all directions, as she then proceeded to take fake bites out of his tummy and chewing.

"No! No eat A'gos!" Kratos shouted in his baby voice.

He wrapped his small arms around Dawn's leg to pull her away. Playing along, she pretended to be unable to resist his 'tremendous' strength and let go of Argos to hang on to the edges of the changing table, as if she needed something to latch onto. Kratos continued pulling, and Dawn let go of the table to turn her wrath on him.

“Fine! I won’t eat him... yet. You are bigger and will make a more satisfying meal anyway,” Dawn said, crooking her fingers like claws as she stared at my oldest son.

Kratos released a high-pitched squeal and let go of her leg to run away. Dawn allowed him a very short head start before she came running after him with the theatrical growl of a vicious beast. She scooped him up mid stride and tossed him into the air. Kratos screamed again while Neyti laughed. Dawn effortlessly caught him and lifted his belly to her face before blowing on it and fake eating it like she had done with his brother.

Although he wiggled and giggled, Kratos only pretended to try and free himself, begging her not to eat him in between giggles. She eventually showed him mercy, switching her fake bites into kisses all over his little face. When she stopped, Kratos stared at her with adoration, kissed her cheek then buried his face in her neck.

My throat tightened with emotion as Dawn tenderly hugged him and pressed her lips on top of his head.

“Do I get a hug, too?” I said, entering the room.

Startled, Dawn jerked her head up and turned to look at me. “Hey you! I didn’t hear you come in!”

“Papa!” Kratos exclaimed, extending a hand towards me.

“I’m deadly silent like that,” I replied teasingly as I closed the distance between us before taking my son. He hugged me. I returned his embrace and kissed his forehead.

“K’atos save A’gos,” my son said, pointing a finger at his baby brother. “Dawn eat K’atos!”

“She ate you?!” I exclaimed with an overly exaggerated shock.

Kratos gave me one big nod.

“Eat, eat, eat K’atos,” he said, poking at the different spots on his belly where she’d bitten him.

I playfully glared at Dawn. “You can’t eat my sons. It’s forbidden.”

“But I was hungryyyyy,” she said in a whiny tone before making a pouty face that had me chuckling.

“Then we’ll have to make sure Rehata cooks extra food to keep you well fed,” I replied, then turned back to my son. “You were brave protecting your little brother, as is your duty.”

“K’atos stwong!” he exclaimed flexing his left arm up in an effort to show off his biceps but only displayed a chunky little baby arm that had even *me* wanting to take a playful bite out of.

Dawn, Neyti, and I all burst out laughing.

“Yes, little man,” Dawn said affectionately. “You’re very strong.”

He puffed out his little chest proudly.

“Very strong, and also very ready for bed,” Neyti intervened.

Despite some weak protest, Kratos didn’t make much of a fuss as we tucked him into bed and kissed him goodnight.

We headed back together to my room... *our* room. I kicked off my boots and lured Dawn to the sitting area near the fireplace. I sat down and settled her in my lap. She ruffled my hair before wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

“Long day?” she asked in a sympathetic voice.

“Never ending,” I replied, sounding dejected.

“How are you feeling?” she asked with a sliver of concern.

“I’m tired of being tired,” I said, my aggravation at the situation clearly audible. “I wish Deimos was still alive so I could kill his ass again.”

Dawn chuckled and shook her head. “While I understand the sentiment, he’s definitely not coming back after the number you did on him. What you need is food and rest.”

I rolled my eyes and grunted in exasperation. “Rehata has been stuffing me like she intends for me to be the main course at the next feast. By the time I leave the table, I can hardly breathe, I’m so full. At this point, she’ll make me fat before she makes me better.”

Dawn giggled and peered at me as if I was just being a brat about this situation. “First off, Braxians don’t get fat. And second, we do need to put some meat back on you.”

Although she had said it in a teasing fashion, her words hit a nerve. Whatever my expression displayed, she noticed something was amiss, and her smile faded.

“What’s wrong?” she asked with concern.

“Do you find me too scrawny, now?” I asked, feeling stupid for being so self-conscious about my current appearance, me who had always chastised other Braxians—especially our females—for questioning their physical appeal and attractiveness based on fabricated aesthetic norms.

“You’re not too scrawny,” she replied with a frown, looking at me as if I’d lost my senses. “You have shed some muscle mass due to the healing, but you’re still stunning. Do you know how many men would kill to have a body half as godly as yours, even now?” She ran her hand over my chest in

a gentle yet possessive caress that lit a flame in the pit of my stomach. “You’re always perfect to me.”

My heart swelled to bursting as I gazed upon her beautiful face. “I love you, Dawn,” I said, laying all my feelings bare.

A powerful emotion crossed her features, and she gave me a shaky smile. “I love you, too, Keran.”

My eyes flicked between hers, searching. I didn’t doubt she meant those words. However, the insecure part of me needed additional reassurance.

“What of Jaek?” I asked in a soft voice.

She sighed and gently caressed my cheek before resting her palm on my chest. “I will always love him, too,” Dawn said, her eyes locked with mine. “When Deimos said Jaek and I were Attuned, I don’t think he lied. However, I do not believe Jaek and I are soulmates. I love him, always have, and always will. But I’ve never been *in love* with him, and I’ve never felt with him what I feel with you. Even through the compulsion, your face always flashed before me, telling me to remain true to *you*. A part of me always knew Jaek wasn’t the one. I think that’s why I never entered into a relationship with him. He is a wonderful man, and I hope he will find his soulmate. He deserves to be happy.”

I nodded slowly, trying to rein in the joy overflowing in my heart. “He is indeed a good man. The Veredian mind reader said he passed the test with flying colors. He has always been on our side, even while he was working with Deimos.”

She smiled with a mix of relief and wistfulness. “Yes, I got that confirmation as well. In my heart, I knew he couldn’t be a traitor. Mercy is quite pleased by the news. She’s been eagerly waiting to hire him in her lab. Jaek is over the moon.”

“I’m glad. He will have access to the best tools and will work alongside some of the most brilliant minds in the galaxy,” I said.

“He actually already knows what he wants to work on first,” Dawn said with a serious expression.

“Oh?”

She nodded. “He believes the Sarenian traitors still have copies of Zeory’s work on that serum. Jaek wants to devise an antidote or vaccine—I don’t know anything about science—that will prevent us from ever falling prey to compulsion again.”

“That’s wonderful!” I exclaimed. “I never want to feel this helpless again.”

“That makes two of us,” Dawn said with a disgusted expression. “It will take the Veredians a few more days to finish deprogramming every hybrid, but they are progressing well.”

“Do you know what they will do then?” I asked.

She took on a troubled expression. “Some of them intend to accept one of Jordan’s contracts. It’s mostly those who were abused by their own clans and do not particularly wish to rekindle that relationship. The others said they would stay if either you or Gavin ascend the throne. If it’s anyone else, they will leave.”

That struck me hard. It was no mystery to anyone that my chances of ascending were dwindling with each passing day. With Gavin having returned to his father’s space station—Venus Hive—I didn’t have a chance to discuss the matter with him. Unfortunately, he would only return with the rest of his

family just in time for Marghor. But I didn't doubt the prospect of having to step in was weighing on him.

"And what about you, Dawn? What do you intend to do?" I asked, hating that I should even feel nervous about what her answer might be.

She looked at me as if I had asked a dumb question. "I'm not going anywhere until you kick me out."

"You know that's never going to happen," I replied.

"Then you have your answer."

"Magnar or not, I want you as my wife, if you will have me, broken as I am," I said, feeling overwhelmed by emotion.

"You are not broken, silly man. You've been patched up, and now you're mending. Magnar or not, there can never be another man for me but you. I choose you, whatever the future holds for us," she said, caressing my hair.

"I *am* broken. I haven't touched you in nearly six weeks, and—"

"Oh Goddess, seriously?!" Dawn exclaimed in disbelief, interrupting me. "In case you forgot, you spent two of those weeks getting eaten from the inside, another week fighting for your life, and the next three recovering while also trying to save an alliance and prepare for your crowning. It's not like you've been complaining about having headaches every night or some other lame excuse. Give yourself some slack."

"Fair, but still... What kind of Braxian am I to hunger for my mate but be too weak to satisfy her?" I said with self-derision.

Dawn shifted from her position, sitting sideways in my lap, to straddle me instead. "The kind of Braxian who should

probably let his mate handle it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she silenced me with a voracious kiss. Any desire to pursue the conversation went up in flames as a bolt of fire exploded in the pit of my stomach. Although she had initiated the kiss, I took over immediately. I cupped her nape with one hand as I tilted my head to the side to deepen the kiss. My other hand glided down her back to the plump curve of her behind. I gave her left cheek a squeeze before pressing her pelvis against mine. A shiver coursed through her at the feel of my shaft quickly becoming erect between us.

Ancestors! How easily this woman always managed to set my blood ablaze!

But Dawn had apparently meant it by saying *she* would handle it. Grabbing my hand holding her nape, she pulled it away, freeing herself, before fisting my hair at the nape. She yanked my head back—sadly not as hard as I normally liked—exposing my neck for her lips to explore. As much as I enjoyed rough sex, I suspected my woman would stick to the gentler side of things for at least a couple more weeks.

I silenced my natural urge to take control and allowed her to lead. While kissing and nipping at my neck, Dawn slipped a hand under the hem of my shirt. I shivered, my abdominal muscles contracting under the heat of her palm. She caressed a path up my chest, her index finger circling my right areola, before flicking the nipple, then giving it a good pinch. That resonated directly in my groin. I took in a hissy breath between my teeth, my hand settling on her thighs, beneath the hem of her short skirt.

They caressed a path over the delicious cushion of her behind, up the slope of her back, lifting her dress in the



process. Dawn stopped kissing my neck and slightly straightened to scowl at me. I gave her an unrepentant grin for trying to beat her at her own game, as she'd also been lifting my shirt while caressing my chest and tweaking my nipple. Undeterred, she continued removing my shirt from me, forcing me to raise my arm. I gladly complied, as it also allowed me to rid her of her garment.

Except, I had no qualms playing a little dirty.

As one of us had to yield to the other, I lifted her dress until it was over her head, before pulling my arm down out of the sleeves of my shirt. As soon as she finished taking it off me, I resumed removing her dress, only to stop once the collar had cleared her mouth and nose. Dawn gasped when she realized I'd effectively shackled and blinded her with her garment. Fisting her dress with one hand to keep her trapped, I reclaimed her mouth in a voracious kiss. Although she struggled to free herself, my woman didn't put much effort into it, which pleased me tremendously.

I loved having her at my mercy.

My free hand caressed the soft skin of her back on its way to the magnetic clasp of her bra. I made swift work of detaching it. To my delight, it was a strapless bra, allowing me to dispose of it without freeing my woman from her improvised shackles. I broke the kiss and bent her backward as my lips glided along her neck, over her clavicle, and down to the perky nipple of her generous breast. Her moan had my cock jerking in my pants with need as it strained against the tight fabric.

I ached to be buried balls deep inside my mate. But I needed to pleasure her first.

As I licked and laved her little nub, Dawn started gyrating on top of me, rubbing her core against my length. Ancestors! She was driving me insane with desire. Taking advantage of my brief moment of distraction as I enjoyed her body, Dawn freed her arms trapped in the dress and discarded it. I'd expected her to try and reclaim control. Instead, she placed her hands on my shoulders for better support as she leaned back and intensified her gyrations over me.

This further fanned the fire gradually turning into an inferno in my loins. With a needy growl, I snapped the narrow piece of fabric that held her thong around her waist and slipped my hand between her thighs. Fuck me! My woman was already soaking wet for me. The scent of her arousal had my mouth watering and my pelvic muscles tightening.

I slipped two fingers inside her, my thumb massaging her clit as I continued to suck on her breasts. She ground her sex on my hand, her labored breathing interspersed with moans as she chased her climax. When she began to tremble in my arms, I lifted my head to peer at her beautiful face.

Ancestors, she was stunning!

Eyes closed in an almost pained expression, lips parted, cheeks flushed, my woman was the embodiment of feminine sensuality. I wanted to kiss her again, but the need to admire her beauty as she fell apart for me superseded that desire. And moments later, she did.

Dawn cried out, her body seizing in my arms. Her nails dug into my shoulders, giving them the most exquisite sting, before she buried her face in my neck. I caressed her back and continued rubbing her clit—her essence flooding my hand—while she rode her orgasm. I only relented when she came back down, her gyrations gradually slowing to a halt.

When she straightened and saw my smug smile, Dawn scrunched her face, looking like she wanted to smack me. That just made me chuckle. The defiant glimmer that sparked in her beautiful green eyes only had more blood rushing to my groin—as if I wasn't painfully hard enough already.

My woman wrapped her hand around my neck and squeezed, not so hard it strangled me, but enough to slightly constrict my airway. Saying it turned me on couldn't begin to give it justice. Dawn leaned forward and claimed my lips in a brutal kiss. I parted my lips to deepen it, but she took my bottom lip into her mouth, sucking on it a couple of times before giving it a sharp nip that resonated straight in my cock. I slightly hissed, more in surprise than in any real pain, and found myself wishing once more she'd done it more forcefully.

She trailed a flurry of kisses down my neck and my chest while letting herself slide down my lap. Her nails raked my skin in a downward path, the wondrous burn tearing an approving moan out of me. I parted my legs as she slid to the floor and settled between them. My woman kissed my abs and teased my navel with her tongue. Her hands unclasping my pants reminded me how painfully confined my cock was. Another hiss escaped me, this time of bliss when she set it free. I lifted my ass as she tugged on my pants to help her take them off me.

Before the garment had even finished clearing my feet, Dawn was reaching for my shaft. She didn't waste time teasing me. Wrapping her hand around the base of my cock, she gave it a tight, almost painful squeeze that had drops of precum seeping out. My grunt of approval turned into an almost feral growl when my mate leaned forward, first licking

the head and then taking me deep inside the searing heat of her mouth.

My fingers found their way through her hair as she began to bob in front of me, her hand moving in counterpoint to her mouth. It was so good. So fucking good. I'd never stop marveling at how much of me Dawn was able to take, how deep she swallowed my cock. Every time she raked her teeth over my length as she pulled away, electric sparks would go off in my loins and spread throughout my body. Her other hand fondling and squeezing my balls only heightened the maelstrom of sensations setting my blood on fire.

As with every time my mate sucked my cock, pleasure built too fast, too hard, pushing me to the brink of insanity. A volcano raged in my loins, threatening to erupt at any moment. A part of me wanted to embrace this promise of ultimate bliss. As Dawn had shown in the past, she actually enjoyed swallowing all I had to give. But I wanted my seed filling her womb. I needed that perfect body of hers wrapped around me, to feel her breath fanning on my chest, and have those sexy, throaty moans of hers right next to my ear.

“Stop and get on my cock,” I said, my voice so thick with desire it was barely intelligible to my own ears. “I need to be inside you.”

As Dawn usually stubbornly refused to comply with such requests whenever I made them, I'd expected to have to fight her on this once again. To my surprise—and utter delight—my mate didn't make a fuss. After one last lick, she climbed back on top of me, straddling my lap, her knees on each side of my thighs. Not once did her hand let go of my cock. She gave it a few additional tight strokes before aligning the head with her opening.

I placed my hands on each cheek of her behind to help support her as she lowered herself onto me, my abdominal muscles contracting painfully in anticipation. But Dawn seemed even more impatient than I was for us to be one. Eyes locked with mine, she didn't try to ease my non-negligible girth inside her and simply impaled herself on my cock. We both cried out at the burning sensation. Gritting my teeth against the violent urge to spill my seed right there and then, I drew my mate tightly against me and buried my face in her neck. I inhaled her scent and focused on the wondrous feel of her arms around me, her warm skin pressed against mine, and of her hands roaming feverishly over my skin.

But my Dawn seemed possessed. Once again, she didn't wait and started moving up and down my length in the most exquisite torture. The way her inner walls squeezed my cock with each motion kept me teetering on the edge. I'd always taken great pride in my stamina and ability to give my woman multiple orgasms before I yielded to my own release. But this woman only had to touch me to get me on the verge of spilling like a fucking juvenile.

Ancestors, I could never get enough of her.

Lava swirled in the pit of my stomach, flooding my veins, setting each of my nerve endings ablaze as Dawn rode my cock with unbridled fury. All thoughts of rest and no strenuous effort flew right out of my head as I started thrusting upward into her in counterpoint to her movements. Our tongues mingled and clashed, our hands explored, clawed, claimed with something akin to desperation. Even as I lost myself in her, I couldn't get close enough to my mate.

Drowning in a sea of bliss, I never saw Dawn's climax creep up on her. She suddenly threw her head back, crying out

as she was swept away. Her inner walls clamping down on my cock wrested my own release from me. I roared as my seed shot out into my woman. But even as liquid ecstasy poured out of me, I tightened my arms around Dawn, pumping in and out of her in a frenzy. I still wanted her... needed her too much.

Despite filling her to the brim, my cock never softened. By the time my mate came down from her high, her third climax was already building. Breath labored, skin covered in sweat, Dawn resumed moving over me. This time, she battled her own need to fall apart again. Eyes locked with mine, her hand fisting my hair on my nape almost painfully, she rode me hard until my second orgasm hit me. I thought my mind would fracture from the violence with which it crashed into me. Dawn joined her voice to mine, our movements erratic as I once more filled her with my seed.

Dawn collapsed against me, her head resting on my shoulder. I felt boneless, my eyelids struggling to stay open as the room spun around me. Even my arms holding my woman close weighed a ton.

“You’ll be the death of me,” I whispered over the roaring sound of my blood rushing in my ears. “And I couldn’t wish for a more glorious way to go.”

She chuckled and pressed a kiss on my neck. “You’re not allowed to die. Not today, not ever.”

I smiled and tightened my embrace. “I love you, Dawn.”

“I love you, too,” she replied, snuggling even deeper into me.



## CHAPTER 32



## KERAN

The next two weeks turned out to be both the fastest and the slowest of my entire life. Even though I had resumed training with my men, on the morning of Marghor, I was still nowhere near ready to battle in a free for all. Had it been a one-on-one duel, I felt reasonably confident that I could take down any opponent... aside from Gavin. But today, everyone would come at me first to take me out of the equation before turning on each other.

I felt defeated as I entered the private antechamber in the arena. Here, I could grant small audiences or simply hang out with my family or close friends before stepping out onto the royal box for the event. Despite the luminous stones embedded in the tall dark gray walls bathing the room in a pleasant light, I felt claustrophobic, like the walls of the inevitable were closing in on me.

Through the closed doors, shouts of an already excited crowd seeped through. Every single seat was packed. Marghor always attracted a big attendance, but this one was setting new records. Not a single seat remained vacant. Some people had to stand at the back or sit on the stairs between the rows of benches. I suspected even more people huddled inside their

clan's respective private antechamber to discuss their final plans for today's event.

I had sent away my guards, needing a moment to gather myself before the rest of my family arrived, which would be any minute now. The fact that I hadn't managed to see Gavin before these proceedings weighed heavily on me. As much as I prayed that the boy would step up and take on this role for the sake of Braxia until I could take over, guilt also gnawed at me. It was unfair to lay such a heavy burden on such young shoulders. Then again, Gavin was a bit of an old soul. And duty didn't care about age. Still, if I could spare him dealing with the krillik's nest that ruling such a chaotic people was, I would do it without hesitation.

My spine stiffened at the sound of approaching steps. I quickly recognized them as belonging to my father. As he was normally far more discreet, that he walked so noisily indicated he wanted to give me a chance to prepare for his arrival. I straightened my shoulders and plastered what I hoped would be a relaxed expression on my face.

The knob turned, then the door opened with a very subtle squeak. My father walked in, looking as fearsome and imposing as ever—the embodiment of everything I had always aspired to be. The softness and affection in his obsidian eyes clashed terribly with his savage features. But they almost broke the stoic façade I was trying so hard to display.

“My son,” my father said, coming to a stop before me and placing both his hands on my shoulders.

“Father,” I replied in greeting.

He studied my features, squeezing my shoulders the way one would to assess sturdiness. Although we were of a similar

height and almost identical mass, I suddenly felt like a little boy, weak and afraid.

“Today is an important day,” he said in an almost solemn voice. “Nothing more, nothing less. Whatever happens, I am proud of you, and I have faith in you. You have exceeded everything I ever wanted in an heir. I know what fears eat away at you. I know which worries have the Council beside themselves. Cast them out of your mind. You *will* rule Braxia. If not today, it will be another day. I have done what I could for our world. *You* will make it even greater. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“I am not you, Father. No one can ever be you,” I replied, hating the slight trembling that seeped into my voice.

“Thank the Ancestors!” my father exclaimed as if I had said something outrageous. “You are smarter and so much wiser than I’ve ever been or ever will be. Did you not see how often I have relied on your advice? Did you not notice how I always ask for your views on every conflict before I made a decision? What did you think that was about?”

“Testing me?” I asked in a hesitant voice.

“I just said you were smarter than me. Don’t make me revisit that belief,” he said half-jokingly.

I snorted then gave him a sheepish smile.

“You need to stop setting impossible expectations for yourself. You are more than good enough. You are better than great. My physical strength allowed me to keep this throne at a time where violence could only be broken through violence,” my father said, cupping my cheeks with both hands and his dark gaze boring into mind. “We are entering a new era. The challenges that lie ahead need diplomacy and wisdom, not

skull cracking. *You* are the man for this. Believe in yourself as I believe in you.”

“I love you, Father,” I said, my throat tight with emotion.

“As I love you, my son. You are my pride and joy. Never forget that.”

He pulled me into his embrace and gave me a long hug, which I returned. This man did not understand what a hero he was in my eyes. I only prayed that I could prove to be half as good a father to my own sons and, Fate willing, to the children Dawn and I would have together.

I released him with much reluctance, nonetheless grateful for the heavy weight his words had lifted off my shoulders. The sound of more steps approaching interrupted us. Moments later Dawn and Mercy walked in, their arms hooked together while they happily chatted. The pleased look on my father’s face reflected the joy blossoming in my heart. I loved how our mates had become sisters. Had today not been Marghor, Hope would also be with them. If not for the very obvious physical traits that marked them as completely different species, you would think they were blood sisters.

“So much beauty in a single room,” my father said looking at the women. “It should almost be deemed illegal.”

“Flattery will almost get you everything, dear husband,” Mercy said teasingly.

“Everything?” he echoed in a suggestive tone that had Dawn blushing, while Mercy cast a mischievous look at her mate.

I’d long gotten over getting flustered about those two flirting with each other.

“Come, my beast. Give the two lovebirds some privacy before you embarrass Dawn further with your innuendos,” Mercy said, releasing my mate’s arm before taking my father’s hand.

I snorted while the redness on Dawn’s cheeks cranked up another notch. Naturally, Mercy had done it on purpose to tease her.

As soon as they exited through the door on the opposite side of the room, which led to the royal box, Dawn turned to face me. She waited until the door closed to approach me and wrap her arms around my neck.

“Are you okay?” Dawn asked in a soft voice. “It feels like we interrupted something intense.”

I shook my head and smiled while brushing aside a lock of hair from her face. “We were done talking. My father said he was proud of me, and that I should believe in myself.”

“Absolutely!” Dawn said in a forceful tone that took me aback. “Stop trying to be him. Stop comparing yourself to him. You are two different people with completely different sets of qualities that make you perfect for the role the Goddess has set for you. Ravik played his part, now it’s your turn. Strength comes in many forms. Yes, Ravik’s physical strength is incredible, but so is yours. It doesn’t matter that you’re not as strong as he is. So far, no one has dared to challenge you because they knew they’d get a beating. They’re only considering it now because you’re temporarily weakened.”

“True, but I’m still not the strongest man on Braxia,” I couldn’t help but argue.

She gave me a look as if I was a hopeless case—which I probably was. “Do you not see what your greatest strength is?

You focus on the ability to fight when you're entering the last stretch before the Great War. What our people are going to need in the foreseeable future is someone with the ability to rally people to a cause. Your power is your charisma and your ability to earn people's loyalty. Your men would die for you. Gavin loves you so much he felt your need across the stars and came to save you. Even the hybrids are willing to stay here for *you*. Not for your father, not for their clan, but for *you*."

Her words left me speechless. I had never looked at it from this angle. She was right. In the few years remaining before the prophesied Great War, diplomacy and forging alliances would determine our fate once the entire galaxy would clash in a bloody battle. This was something I had prepared for over the years.

"You are the symbol and the voice of unity," Dawn continued in a passionate voice. "You have secured more galactic alliances and trade agreements than any of your predecessors. A good king isn't the one who can bash the most skulls, but one who makes people want to take part in the skull bashing with him and *for* him out of loyalty and trust. Have faith in yourself like we have faith in you. This is *your* time."

Her words sank in all the more that they echoed much of what my father had said. Was I truly this blind to what everyone else was seeing?

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I asked, my heart overflowing with affection.

"I'm not quite sure," she said with pretend confusion. "I think you're going to have to spend the next few decades making it clear to me."

"Try to stop me," I said before claiming her lips in a possessive kiss.

The oddest sense of peace washed over me as I reveled in this tender moment with my soulmate. My family was right. I'd set for myself expectations I would never demand of another. Marghor wasn't the end. Even if another won the throne today, I'd reclaim it in a couple of weeks. Who cared about a single lost battle if I ultimately won the war?

I ended the kiss and pressed my forehead to hers for a few more seconds of tenderness before taking a step back to admire her beauty. My hands glided down the soft curves of her broad shoulders to rest on her bare upper arms. My gaze flicked to her left arm, and my thumb gently caressed the spot right below her shoulder.

Dawn slightly stiffened, and my eyes flicked back to hers.

"Lose the implant," I said. "The boys need a sister."

Even though I'd stated it as a command, my stomach fluttered with nerves at the thought she might not yet be ready to have a child with me.

Dawn lifted a defiant eyebrow. "Whatever makes you think I haven't already done so?"

My jaw dropped as I stared at her, wanting to make sure I wasn't misreading her statement.

"Really?" I asked, hope audible in my voice.

Her face lost that taunting edge, and she gave me a timid smile while nodding.

"Good girl," I whispered, my chest filling with a possessive joy as images of my wife's belly swollen with our future offspring flashed through my mind.

I reclaimed her lips in a passionate kiss, pouring into it all the devotion I felt for her. Dawn melted against me. In that

instant, I realized that all that mattered the most to me was right here in my arms.

The door opening ended the moment.

“Hey, you two! Now is not the time for making out!” Ganek exclaimed, running late as always. “And where’s my kiss?”

Without waiting for a response, he pulled Dawn into his embrace, extending his cheek to her. My mate burst out laughing before kissing his cheek. Satisfied, the brat released her only to grab my face with both hands and smack a resounding—and slightly wet—kiss on my own cheek. I pushed him away while playfully glaring at him.

“Argh!” I grunted in fake annoyance as I wiped my face with the back of my hand. “Gross.”

“Lies! The ladies say I’m the best kisser on Braxia,” Ganek replied smugly.

I rolled my eyes, while Dawn chuckled some more. Irreverent as always, Ganek slipped his left arm around my shoulders and his right around Dawn’s, then led us out of the antechamber onto the large balcony that served as the royal box.

As soon as we stepped out, the loud voices of the crowd of more than one hundred thousand people erupted into raucous cheers that took me aback. Ganek discreetly released us, taking a step back as Dawn and I advanced. I waved at the crowd, their voices going up another notch. Under different circumstances, such a warm greeting would have been confirmation of their approval of me as their future leader.

We took our seats on the right side of my father’s and Mercy’s thrones in the center of the box, Ganek sitting on their



left. Tagar and Nowik sat a little further ahead on the far sides of the box. Our guest seats remained empty. Younglings weren't allowed in these events as some of them occasionally ended in rather gruesome deaths. While I didn't mind the absence of the Council, I would have welcomed Krygor's presence.

For Marghor, every clan sat together in their respective section of the arena, right in front of their assigned private antechamber. Many last-minute deals or temporary alliances were formed in those backrooms. I didn't doubt they'd been used extensively today, not only to plan who would challenge me, but also for those who sought a peaceful resolution to a conflict with another clan.

In a moment, my father would officially open Marghor for the last time of his reign. He would then invite those wishing to issue a challenge to step forward. In front of each clan's section, a small half-circle-shaped overhang allowed the Clan Leader to speak in a microphone to issue a challenge or make a statement. The emblem of each clan prominently featured on a banner attached to the railing of that overhang.

As status and power was everything on Braxia, clans constantly jockeyed for position so that they would move to a more enviable section, with seats closer to the lower levels of the arena for a better view of the action, and nearest to the Magnar's box. Clan Aldriss held such an honor, their box located directly to our right. On top of their entire clan, Anton and Grace—Gavin's parents—were also in attendance.

I nodded at them in greeting. Grace waved enthusiastically, her gorgeous face lighting up with a glowing smile as she peered at me with those unusual amber eyes she'd passed on to her son. She looked so delicate surrounded by their massive

clansmen. Anton also smiled, but it was Gavin who retained my attention. If not for his youthful features, you'd think *he* was Anton's father, instead of the other way around so impressive was his size.

The boy locked eyes with me. His mouth stretched into a mysterious smile, then he winked at me.

*What the fuck was that?*

My father standing up to approach the microphone at the front of our box forced me to cast aside Gavin's odd behavior. And yet, seeing him had erased the last sliver of worry that still knotted my back muscles. The sense of peace I'd felt after talking with Dawn once again washed over me.

"People of Braxia, welcome to my arena and to this annual celebration of Marghor," my father said in a powerful voice.

The sound system amplified it throughout the arena, and the giant screens—strategically placed so that every seat could get a good view of anyone speaking on their overhangs—magnified his fearsome face.

The crowd saluted his words with more excited shouts. He allowed them to carry on for a few seconds before raising his palm. They immediately quieted.

"It has been my great honor to serve as your Magnar for the past thirty-five years," my father continued. "Things were not always easy, sometimes even dire. But we persevered. Together, as one nation, we prevailed. Off-worlders tried to ruin us, they failed. They tried to bend us to their will, they failed. Whatever our issues—and they are many—together, we will continue to prevail, and our enemies will continue to fail."

Victorious roars and war cries resonated throughout the arena in response. I smiled, my heart filling with pride for

what he had indeed accomplished and the impossible odds he had overcome during his reign.

“Tonight, I am hosting this event for the last time, as I will soon pass on my role to the next poor sucker who will have the pleasure of dealing with your collective nonsense, countless demands, and endless grievances,” my father added with an exaggerated relieved expression.

Dawn gasped, pressing her palm to her chest as she stared at my father in disbelief. Mercy snorted, while the rest of the crowd and I burst out laughing. A few people even had the decency to look a little sheepish as they’d been among those to lay those never-ending complaints at his feet.

He smiled as the crowd once more quieted down. “Your Magnar is but one man with an impossible mission to accomplish for the greater good of Braxia. There is no ‘I’ in Magnar. It is a harsh and thankless job. But one that I would do all over again, if only to see us standing here proud, the way we are today. I cannot wait to see how much greater we will be under the rule of our new leader.”

The attendees cheered, many shouting his name almost like a war cry.

“And now, as I know you’ve all come here mostly to see your neighboring clans bash each other’s heads in, I’ll cut this short before you all start throwing stones at me,” father continued, provoking more laughter. “Today is Marghor, the Day of Reconciliation, which—as we all know on Braxia—actually means settling scores, resolving long-standing conflicts, and chasing after the ultimate prize. So if one of you wishes to issue a challenge, speak now.”

He no sooner spoke those words than sixteen Clan Leaders jumped to their feet and approached their respective

microphones. A third of them stirred chuckles or amused reactions from the crowd. The lifelong feud between Clan Colpen and Clan Hurwas had become a thing of legend. Clan Leader Lomar Colpen was in fact the first to all but race to the microphone—not that it would have allowed him to speak sooner. Once again, status dictated the order in which each clan could lay their challenge. Colpen would be fourth.

The giant screen displaying a close-up image of Clan Leader Tonor Korlan indicated he would get to speak first.

“Clan Korlan challenges Clan Sodagh for restitution for the loss of nearly one hundred reavers, poisoned by the careless dumping of toxic waste in the waters we share, despite strict environmental decrees. As Clan Leader Orgin Sodagh has refused any reasonable settlement, once we crush their champion, we demand the original value of the lost herd, and a second time that amount as punitive damages.”

Ganek whistled through his teeth, while members of the crowd oohed and aahed, others hurling taunts at Clan Sodagh. They should have settled as they didn’t possess a warrior strong and skilled enough to defeat Clan Leader Tonor in a fair duel. As the bank would automatically transfer the funds to the winner, Orgin Sodagh couldn’t even try to avoid payment. That Tonor had requested the maximum compensation permitted for his specific injury spoke volumes about his exasperation with the matter.

“A challenge has been issued,” my father said. “Clan Sodagh will you answer it, or do you forfeit?”

“We will answer the challenge,” Orgin Sodagh replied, to the greater delight of the crowd.

Even with such highly improbable odds, it was better to take a chance than just hand over such large sums of credits.

One by one, seven other clans issued similar personal grievance challenges to other clans, a single one forfeiting as the requested settlement was laughable at best. Why had they not settled prior to Marghor? Out of pure pettiness to force Clan Leader Garmon Popok to publicly whine about having been bested when bidding over a lucrative off-worlder trade agreement.

When the screen finally displayed Jorak, the heir to Clan Arthol, I braced for what I already knew would follow. My father had executed his sire, Yorbek, for being one of the fifteen who had raped his first love. Ever since, Jorak had sought an opportunity for revenge without breaking any laws. His clan had opposed any beneficial changes my father attempted to make for Braxia, fueled discontent, and generally been a thorn in our sides. Remembering how Gavin had humiliated his clan during that match of Breikor brought me endless pleasure.

“I, Jorak, heir to Clan Arthol, challenges the heir, Jakar Keran, for the throne of Braxia,” Jorak said with a haughty tone. “While we all appreciate the Jakar’s efforts to thwart a plot against us, everyone with eyes can see how strenuous that single mission was on him. We need a stronger man to lead the fearsome people of Braxia.”

Where cheers and jeers had saluted the previous challenges, a deafening silence greeted his. The wretched son of a krillik... His words didn’t sting as much as they infuriated me. But I kept a neutral expression. I could feel anger rolling out in droves from my woman. Without glancing at her, I placed a hand on her lap and gave it a gentle squeeze to let her know it was okay. We had all expected it.

“Your challenge has been recorded,” my father said in a neutral voice. “A Marghor battle will be held.”

Although his face revealed nothing of his feelings, my father wanted to run across the arena to go beat Jorak’s smug face into a pulp. As I expected more challenges to be issued, Jorak’s chances of winning were slim to none. No one would sign a hush-hush backroom deal when the role of Magnar came into play. A pity really. A part of me almost wished that snake would win, just so that I would have the pleasure of obliterating him in two weeks once I was back to my old self.

Back-to-back, six of the seven remaining clans whose leader had stood to speak also challenged me for the throne, the last one wanting to settle a dispute with Clan Zorook.

“Are there any other challenges?” my father asked.

The entire attendance appeared to hold its breath, many eyes, mine included turning towards Clan Aldriss’ section. When Gavin rose to his feet, I almost felt faint with relief. Of all the clans who had challenged me, Clan Zotan held the highest chances of winning. They were fanatics. In the two to three weeks it would take me to be able to challenge their leader, he could cause severe economic and diplomatic damage.

The somber mood that had settled over the arena immediately lifted, as the crowd began shouting its approval—the hybrids all reunited in a section of their own shouting the loudest. Grace gave her son a stunned look and attempted to catch his hand to hold him back. Anton stopped her, and leaned in to whisper in her ear. Whatever he told her, it didn’t seem to reassure her at all.

“I am Galvin Aldriss, and speak on my behalf, not on my clan’s,” the boy said with an air of authority that commanded

respect. “As seven clans chose Marghor instead of Reconciliation, I feel compelled to join the fray.”

A deafening roar erupted from the crowd. Despite the relief I felt, my heart nonetheless ached a little. Gavin smiled and raised his arms with a smugness that had people chanting his name. I snorted. The boy knew how to play to an audience. Someone who didn't know him would think he had an ego to match his incredible strength and combat skills. But he was the sweetest, humblest male I knew... until you crossed him or those he loved.

Gavin lowered his arms and gestured for people to hush. An almost electric energy thrummed over the overexcited attendance, even as they quieted down.

“But as I have stated before, I do not wish to be Magnar, and that's not going to change. Ravik has been a wonderful Magnar, and Keran will be just as great.”

His words acted like a nuclear bomb going off in the arena. Every face reflected the same shock and consternation I felt.

“So why do I enter Marghor if I do not want to be Magnar?” Gavin asked with a glimmer of amusement in his amber eyes. “Because Marghor is *not* exclusively about becoming the next ruler of Braxia. That's only *one* of the potential outcomes. Read the law. Marghor means the winner takes the most valued possession of one of the losers. As the current Magnar or his heir are the only people who cannot refuse this challenge, the throne *could* be the chosen prize but doesn't *have* to be.”

“Marghor has become a fight for the throne for centuries now!” Jorak exclaimed, sounding outraged.

“The boy is correct,” Elder Pattel Veelan said, his voice barely audible at first as he was still approaching the microphone from his clan’s section. “Marghor is *not* about the throne. The fact that it has only been used this way for generations does not change the law. Two or more men enter the arena. The last one standing can either claim the throne or one of the losers’ most valued possessions, which cannot exceed one third of that person’s total wealth.”

I felt faint as excited and flabbergasted mumblings rose over the crowd, sounding like the buzzing of a swarm of insects.

“So tell us, Gavin, son of Anton, what prize do you seek from one of those you defeat, should you be the victor?” Elder Pattel asked.

“*When* I win—and I will—I’ll take the one thing I do not possess in my own right on Braxia: land.”

The crowd gasped almost as one. I was too speechless to react.

“The law allows a maximum of five acres to be claimed in this fashion. And I can think of exactly which acres I want,” Gavin continued with an almost malicious grin as his gaze shifted intently on Jorak Arthol, then on Stamor Zotan.

The audience burst out laughing, hooting, and hurling taunts at Jorak and Stamor. Forgetting all sense of decorum, my own brother was laughing out loud, while Mercy was pressing a finger to her lips to hide her own hilarity. Where Stamor clearly displayed his displeasure, Jorak’s face was so red, I almost worried he’d give himself a stroke. Almost...

I shook my head in awe at the boy. He was truly the proud son of Anton—who was a master at evaluating and negotiating



contracts. Gavin had learned from his sire how to assess the strength and weakness of any written document and use any loophole to his advantage. In this case, to mine.

“Gavin Aldriss’s challenge has been issued,” my father said, failing to hide his amusement. “Nine Reconciliation challenges have been recorded, and eight contenders have decided to enter into Marghor. If no one else wishes to be heard, the battles will begin in the order they were entered.”

“Magnar Ravik! Clan Zotan rescinds its challenge for Marghor. Gambling our lands is *not* what we’re looking for,” Clan Leader Stamor quickly said, looking highly uncomfortable.

“Same with Clan Lorvis,” Horus Lorvis said.

One by one, the seven Clan Leaders who had challenged my reign pulled out, their humiliation heightened by the mocking crowd. I was speechless. Of all the possible outcomes, I never even thought of this one.

“Only one contender remains. Gavin Aldriss, do you still wish to uphold your challenge?” my father asked.

“No, Magnar, there is no one left that I wish to fight,” Gavin said. “But if you would allow me, I would like to say a few words.”

Although surprised by that request, my father nodded and gestured for Gavin to proceed. The boy let his gaze roam over the attendance as he gathered his thoughts. A deafening silence had settled over the arena as we waited for him to speak.

“Today should be the Day of Reconciliation. But from where I stand, it feels more like the Day of Shame,” Gavin said in a voice as hard as the glimmer in his eyes. “Keran

Xeldar is fifty years old. From the day of his birth, he's been raised to become the next Magnar. In all those years, no one, not a single one of you, ever challenged him for the throne. You know why? Because you knew you couldn't defeat him. None of you can defeat him in a fair duel. I don't think even *I* can."

My initial surprise at hearing him call this a day of shame turned into complete shock upon hearing that last statement. I gaped at him as he continued with almost barely repressed anger.

"But today, you're coming out in numbers to attack him as a group because he's supposedly weak," Gavin spat out with contempt. "*You* are the weak ones that *this* should be the time you would challenge him." He pointed an angry finger in my direction. "Keran going to investigate the hybrid murders helped save us all from becoming puppets at the hands of traitors. Over a period of two weeks, he got eaten from the inside by nearly fifty larvae, with no painkillers. With four of them still eating their way through his heart, he defeated the traitors' leader in a fair duel. AND YOU CALL HIM WEAK?!"

My throat tightened as I stared at Gavin, my heart overflowing with love and respect for the boy. Just as moved, Dawn blindly reached for my hand and gave it a tight squeeze. Like me and everyone else, we were riveted by his impassioned speech.

"Now he returns, having saved the lives of countless hybrids, uncovered a plot that could have destroyed both Braxia and Sarenia, and your instinctive reaction is to descend on him like a bunch of vultures?" Gavin asked. "Yes, he is in a weakened state after such an ordeal. Who wouldn't be? Half of

you cowards who challenged him wouldn't have survived ten Kranax Beetle larvae, let alone fifty. Shame on you, and shame on your houses. You want to prove your strength and your worth as Braxia's next leader? Fight him in two weeks when he's fully recovered. But then, we all know you won't."

The clans who had challenged me tried to make noise at being thus called out but were quickly silenced by the crowd yelling at them.

"To Keran Xeldar, the next great Magnar of Braxia!" Gavin said, slapping his chest with his fist.

As one, the attendees rose to their feet and slapped their chests with their fists while repeating his words.

And just like that, Gavin Aldriss had ensured I would sit on my father's throne.



## EPILOGUE

## DAWN

**T**he couple of weeks that followed Marghor felt surreal. I still couldn't believe how Gavin had turned the entire situation around. It confirmed what I had told Keran about his ability to rally people and earn their loyalty. But the reaction of the crowd really sealed it for me. Despite the few dissident voices, the Braxian population overwhelmingly loved Keran and supported his reign. Their dismay as the first challenges started popping up spoke volumes. In light of the prophesized hardships that loomed over the galaxy, the unity of our people would be vital if we wanted to come out on the winning side.

My life turned into a complete whirlwind of activity. Between helping with the preparations for Keran's crowning, being introduced to the various clans as their future Dagna, and juggling with the hybrids, by the time each day ended, I had no energy left.

As much as I had hated Deimos, the forced training he subjected me to really paid off. I already knew everything about the main clans, from the names of their Clan Leaders and Councils, to their main trades and the hurdles they struggled with. That I would so easily 'remember' their names and have such an 'instinctive' understanding of their woes made me extremely popular with the clans. Naturally, I didn't

tell them I had an unfair advantage instead of some kind of eidetic memory.

To my pleasant surprise, and utter relief, no one seemed to have an issue with me being a hybrid. I'd expected them to take umbrage at the fact that Keran didn't choose a pureblood, but it quickly became apparent that they hoped my off-world experience and knowledge would benefit Braxia the way Mercy's had. Although I wouldn't start any of my projects helping women grow in the short term, all the people I had mentioned it to in passing to assess their potential interest had been intrigued. Even their males offered little to no pushback.

That confused me at first until I remembered that it was the women's underground market that had largely contributed to turning Braxia's economic fate around. While this world would never become a matriarchy, in the ten years since Mercy's arrival, the men had finally understood that only once women were allowed to properly thrive would their society achieve its full potential.

My father's own clan welcomed me with open arms. Granted, awkward moments abounded, especially with my three older brothers, but we were taking it in stride. Even though my father turned out to be a bit of a braggart—a common trait with Braxian men—his obvious pride in claiming me touched me more than words could ever express. I didn't doubt that my pending status as Braxia's new Dagna played a role in it, but he also showed a genuine desire for us to form a father-daughter bond. More importantly—at least so far—he didn't seem to want to use my relationship with Keran to try and bend the rules to his clan's advantage or earn himself any special favors. I hoped things would remain that way as I truly wanted a family to belong to, beyond the one Keran and I would build together.

To my complete delight, more than two-thirds of the hybrids decided to stay on Braxia. The mama bear in me loved that I would get to keep them with me—even though many of them would in fact move to other cities far from the Xeldar compound. Quite a few had elected to give their birth clan another try. Others had decided to settle with a different clan where their skills could be leveraged or where they intended to learn a specific trade skill that clan had to offer. The Elders who had visited the hybrids in the barracks had played a major role in enabling those pairings.

Finding out Vintor would also remain on Braxia knocked the wind out of me. More surprising still, he had requested to join Krygor's clan and train with his men. With his ego, I would have expected him to ask Keran to let him join his royal guard—not that Vintor really stood much of a chance on that front. The royal guards were all insane beasts that could likely break him with a flick of a finger. Then I wondered if it wasn't simply to brag about hanging out with Gavin and his family. But then I realized he was planning long-term. In three years, Gavin would leave Braxia for the Western Quadrant, to join the Sentinel, the elite peacekeeping force run by the father of the leader of the Titans. Vintor intended to tag along.

My heart soared when Krygor accepted. If anyone could provide Vintor with the discipline he sorely lacked, it certainly was that man.

The remaining hybrids decided to accept Jordan's contracts. The Guldán agent was ecstatic. Even with just the couple of hundred who signed up, Jordan would more than make up his investment training them. He was all the happier that Nirkon had made it out unscathed from this ordeal and freed from the Sarenians' compulsion. Sadly for Jordan, Keran didn't approve allowing him to pursue recruitment efforts



directly on Braxia. However, should anyone express the desire to leave to pursue opportunities off-world, he would direct them his way.

In the meantime, Mercy and Hope embraced me like we'd been sisters our entire lives—a good thing too considering the close bond between our respective husbands. I still felt like the ugly duckling in their presence, they were so stunning. But never once did they make me feel like they found me lacking. Without their endless support, advice, and guidance, I'd probably have made a mess of many things.

Our completely different personalities should have made that friendship impossible, and yet it worked. Mercy was a firebrand with a tongue sharp enough to send even the most fearsome Braxian male running home to his mom in tears. She had zero fucks to give about anyone's nonsense, and she had the combat skills to give a memorable spanking to anyone who gave her lip. Hope was the nurturer, the mediator, and the voice of reason. She hated conflicts and always strove to find a peaceful solution whenever she detected tension between people. Although clearly submissive, Hope was neither a people pleaser nor a pushover. Just like Mercy, if you messed with her or the people she loved, the Goddess have mercy on you, because Hope would show none.

And me? I didn't quite know how my role in this trio should be described. I was just along for the ride and enjoying every minute of it. While Hope taught me how to be the perfect hostess when receiving dignitaries, Mercy taught me how to kick ass the minute she learned I had taken combat and self-defense lessons. She had been training the Braxian women as well as the Guldian females who had fled Guldar to join the rebellion that Tevek—Hope's firstborn son—was co-leading to take down the dictator on their homeworld.

It turned out that Siona—Hope’s daughter—had also been training with Mercy. On top of being as breathtaking as her mother, Siona was turning out to be as lethal as any Veredian Warrior. Mercy had given her a full set of celesium armor, including the armored braid that the young woman was using with insane accuracy. Considering she would marry Prince Zerien in only a few months, such skills would come in handy against those who sought to depose him before his reign even began.

And right now, it was a coronation ceremony Hope and Mercy were preparing me for.

Turning this way and that, I admired myself in the mirror. Aside from complementing my eyes of the same color, my forest green dress hugged my body in a sinfully sexy way. Draped around the chest in a plunging neckline, it cinched at the waist and clung to my hips down the middle of my behind, before loosening in an asymmetric line down the middle of my thighs. Mercy dismissed my concerns about it being a little too provocative for such a formal event with a disdainful wave of her hand.

“Braxians are always horny and love flaunting their trophy wives. Let them drool over their Dagna, and flaunt it while you still have it. Anyway, it would be a crime to hide legs such as yours,” Mercy said in a tone that brooked no argument before waving in turn at Hope then at herself. “In case you haven’t noticed, our outfits are just as revealing.”

I glanced at each woman in turn and had to admit their dresses were as drool-worthy, if not more than mine.

“The real question is whether *you* feel uncomfortable wearing it or just worry about what others may think of your dress,” Mercy said in a serious tone.

“I love the way I look in it,” I said truthfully. “It makes me feel beautiful.”

“Because you are!” Hope said, as if it was self-evident.

“Then you’ve answered your own question, my dear,” Mercy said, while walking with determined steps towards the door. “If you like it, if it makes you feel confident, and so long as it’s not indecent, then wear it, and fuck whatever anyone else thinks. Let’s go. We have a coronation to attend, and our men to drive to distraction.”

Chuckling, I cast one final look at myself in the mirror, marveling at the amazing hairdo Hope had done for me, braiding only the upper half of my hair and weaving jewels through it. Taking a fortifying breath, I followed the others out.

We arrived at the entrance to the Great Hall with a few minutes to spare before the beginning of the ceremony. The guests, comprised of the entire Xeldar Clan, the Leaders of every clan and their spouses, foreign dignitaries from allied or friendly planets—including Veredia, Korlethea, Xelix Prime, Dantor, Avea, and Sarenia—had already entered the Great Hall and taken their seats. Unfortunately, as he had forewarned, Prince Zerien had not been able to return in time for the coronation. The hunt for the traitors in their midst only months away from his own ascension was commanding all his attention and resources.

We were talking in hushed voices when Krygor finally stepped out of the small chamber adjacent to the Great Hall, followed by Ganek. He nodded at Mercy and me before escorting his wife inside. Ganek winked at me, then gave his arm to Mercy and escorted her inside as well. Moments later, Keran came out, flanked by Tagar and Nowik.

Although they had previously been Ravik's personal guards, as he was stepping down from the role, he had permanently assigned them to Keran, who couldn't have been happier. Same for me. Where his two guards wore their formal warrior uniform made of dark leather embroidered with the Xeldar emblem, Keran was barefoot and naked, aside from a short, magnificently stitched skirt made by combining pieces from the hides of the various lethal creatures he had defeated over the years. A large and elaborate necklace made of the teeth and bones of similar beasts rested on his bare chest. To complete the tribal outfit, a heavy crown interweaving horns and tusks rested on his head. He looked like a barbarian from ancient times, or a vengeful god descended amidst mortals to pass judgment.

And he was hot as fuck!

In the past three weeks, he had regained the majority of his muscle mass. In all the ways that mattered, Keran was fully back to his old self. My mouth watered at the sight of the battle scars adorning the bulging muscles of his chest, arms, and thighs. When Maheva had healed him of the ravages caused by the Kranax Beetle larvae, he'd insisted she not take away the visible battle scars that otherwise covered his body. I'd rolled my eyes at this silly vanity. And yet, I was the first to enjoy licking each and every one of them in the privacy of our chamber.

By the savage look he cast my way, Keran was also quite enjoying the view. I silently thanked Mercy for not allowing my insecurities to make me change into something more demure. He stopped in front of me, cupped my face with both hands, and gave me a possessive kiss that had my knees wobbling.

Too soon, he pulled away, leaving me feeling bereft. Without a word, he turned to face the large doors to the Great Hall and started heading towards them. I followed three steps behind him, as Mercy had taught me, and the guards closed the march another four steps behind me. The two guards manning the doors opened them upon our approach. As soon as they started parting, the sound of tribal drums filled the air followed by a wordless chant by the Braxian males in attendance, punctuated by a guttural shout every four beats.

Although they wore proper pants and footwear, the males were all bare-chested aside from a sash bearing their clan's emblem hooked on their left shoulders and running across their torsos. I felt tiny between the countless rows of giant pureblood Braxians on both sides of the aisle. My skin erupted in goosebumps as they slapped their chests with their fists with each guttural shout.

Despite the natural light flooding the dark-colored room through the giant wall-to-ceiling windows, fire burned in the torches on the walls, located a meter below the tall banners of every clan hanging above them.

Straight ahead, in front of an even larger banner bearing the Xeldar crest, Ravik sat on his massive throne of bones. Mercy stood to his right, holding a cushion upon which rested some kind of jewelry. Ganek stood to his left, also holding a cushion upon which rested a bejeweled blade. In a half circle in front of him, six on each side of the aisle, his Council members stood in front of the stone stools that rose from the floor in the rare instances Ravik held his Council meetings here instead of in his private chamber. They were facing us as we approached. Unlike the rest of the attendance, they weren't chanting or slapping their chests.

As we closed the distance with the throne, I finally spotted the foreign dignitaries sitting in the first three front rows on each side, with the wives of the Councilors, as well as Mercy's and Ravik's hybrid offspring.

The drums and the chanting went silent at the same time we stopped a couple of meters in front of Ravik's throne. He rose to his feet and gestured for the crowd to sit. They complied, the silence only disturbed by the rustling of fabric. Unlike everyone else, Krygor—who had been standing in front of the first Council stone stool on the left—walked into the open circle between the throne and the Council, where Keran stood, with me a few steps behind and slightly off to his right.

Ravik walked down the two steps from his throne and stopped face to face with his son, within touching range.

“Jakar Keran Xeldar, firstborn son of Magnar Ravik Xeldar, why have you come before us on this day?” Krygor asked in a solemn voice.

“I am here to claim my birthright, the throne of Braxia,” Keran said in a firm tone.

“Ravik Xeldar, ruler of Braxia and firstborn son of the late Sigmer Xeldar, you have heard your firstborn's claim. Do you accede to his request?”

“I do and proudly relinquish my throne to my son Keran,” Ravik said in a booming voice.

The love in his eyes as he gazed upon his son turned me upside down. And yet, a sliver of worry fluttered in my stomach as I forced myself to keep my head straight and look at the ritual.

“Does anyone here wish to challenge this request or this concession?” Krygor asked in a powerful voice to the

attendees.

Like in a traditional human wedding, now was the moment that someone could issue an ultimate challenge to his rule. When continued silence responded to his words, all tension bled out of my spine as Krygor returned his attention to the father and son.

“Keran’s claim is granted,” Krygor said before nodding at Ravik and returning to his seat.

“For thirty-five years, I have led this great nation that has remained unbent, unbowed, even in the face of many adversities. Today, it is with great honor that I pass on this duty to my son, with both its burdens and triumphs, confident that he will lead us into a new era of greatness,” Ravik said.

Although he stared at Keran as he spoke, he was really addressing the attendees. He gestured at Ganek, who promptly approached. He stopped next to his brother and father and presented the cushion with the bejeweled blade to his sire. Ravik took it before extending a hand to Keran. He quietly placed his palm, face up, in his father’s open hand. Ravik sliced a gash in the center of his son’s palm, then put the blade back onto the cushion. Keran remained stoic and merely closed his hand into a fist over the dark red tiles covering the floor. He squeezed, allowing blood to trickle from his wound onto the floor.

“Blood is life. Blood is death,” Keran said in a solemn voice. “It is my oath that I will give the last drop of my blood to the protection of Braxia and all its people. With the Ancestors and this honorable attendance as my witnesses, I swear to spill the blood of anyone who shall threaten our people or our allies until none of them remain.”

As one, the Braxian males in the audience shouted “Ah-hoo” in response to Keran’s words.

He reopened his hand, leaving the palm up. Ravik wetted his thumb in the glistening blood before smearing a small amount across Keran’s forehead.

“May all your thoughts and decisions always be turned towards brightening the future of Braxia and not just your own,” Ravik said, then repeated the gesture on Keran’s lips. “May every word spoken be founded in wisdom. May they rout your enemies, rally your allies, and uplift the people in both good and dark times.” He then wetted his thumb again in the blood around the gash, then rubbed a streak with his thumb over Keran’s chest. “And so long as it beats, may your heart always remain true in its undivided devotion to Braxia and to its people. May it be filled with unrelenting rage for those who would threaten our world, and may it overflow with compassion for those who would seek our protection.”

Once again, the Braxian males in the audience shouted “Ah-hoo.”

Ravik then looked over his shoulder at Mercy and gave her a discreet nod. She quietly approached, extending to her husband the embroidered cushion upon which sat what I could now make out to be two highly ornate bejeweled bracers.

He picked up the biggest one and raised it for all to see.

“These bracers have been forged by the best Braxian artisans with an alloy of the finest metals harvested by our mining clans and adorned with the rarest gems and stones on this planet,” Ravik said before clasping it around the wrist of Keran’s bloodied hand. “With this embodiment of the heart, soul, and passion of our people, I bind you to Braxia as its ruler and protector.”



Another “Ah-hoo” resounded through the room.

My stomach fluttered when Ravik’s dark eyes turned towards me. His fearsome face softened as he smiled and extended a hand towards me. My knees felt wobbly as I came to stand next to Keran.

“Keran Xeldar, is this the woman you have chosen to rule by your side?” Ravik asked.

“She is,” Keran said, the possessive pride in his voice making me even weaker in the knees.

“Dawn Merrick, daughter of Clan Leader Raylor Caldes, is it your wish to become Keran Xeldar’s wife and to reign by his side as his Dagna?” Ravik asked.

“Yes, it is,” I said, proud that my voice didn’t betray what a nervous wreck I was.

“Will you swear a blood oath of loyalty and devotion, to this man and to the people of Braxia?”

“I will,” I said without hesitation.

Once again, he picked the dagger from Ganek’s cushion and gently sliced my palm. The blade was so sharp I barely even felt the sting. Ravik didn’t smear blood on me but placed my bloody palm face down on Keran’s.

“Through this exchange of blood, I bind you, man and wife, before Braxia and the Ancestors,” Ravik said. Taking the smaller bracer from Mercy’s cushion, he clasped it around my bloodied hand. “And with this bracer, I bind you, Dawn Xeldar, to this world and to its people.”

Keran and I turned to face each other. My stupid eyes started pricking with emotion seeing him gaze upon me with

complete adoration. I barely registered Ravik placing his hands above and below Keran's and my clasped hands.

“With the sunset of my reign, all hail the dawn of your new ruler,” Ravik said. “All hail Magnar Keran! All hail Dagna Dawn!”

The crowd repeated his words in a chant between cheer and applause. But it was all background noise to me as I drowned in the stormy depths of my husband's eyes. Whatever hurdles the future would throw our way, we would face it together, with our family, with our friends, and our allies. Woe onto any who would stand in our way.

“I love you, my Dagna,” Keran whispered.

“I love you, too, Magnar,” I whispered back seconds before he reclaimed my lips.

THE END



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ALSO BY REGINE ABEL

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Escaping Fate

Blind Fate

Raising Amalia

Twist of Fate

Hands of Fate

Defying Fate

**BRAXIANS**

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Ravik's Mercy

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Keran's Dawn

**XIAN WARRIORS**

Doom

Legion

Raven

Bane

Chaos

Varnog

Reaper

Wrath

Xenon

Nevrik

Rogue

## **PRIME MATING AGENCY**

I Married A Lizardman

I Married A Naga

I Married A Birdman

I Married A Minotaur

I Married Wonjin

I Married A Merman

I Married A Dragon

I Married A Beast

I Married A Dryad

## **THE MIST**

The Mistwalker

The Nightmare

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Bluebeard's Curse

The Hunchback

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## ABOUT REGINE

*USA Today* bestselling author Regine Abel is a fantasy, paranormal and sci-fi junkie. Anything with a bit of magic, a touch of the unusual, and a lot of romance will have her jumping for joy. Hot alien warriors meeting no-nonsense, kick-ass heroines give her warm fuzzies.

Before devoting herself as a full-time writer, Regine had surrendered to the other passion in her life: video games! As a professional Game Designer and Creative Director, her previous career had led her from her home in Canada to the US and various countries in Europe and Asia.

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