



OUTCASTS OF CORIN SERIES

THE ALIEN'S REWARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLA MAVEN

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ONE

Trapt

The pain echoed throughout my body. Throbbing pulses matched every beat of my cora until I wished for the bloody thing to stop. Cease operation. Just let me rest. My ears must have been plugged, because all around me was just a thick, loud silence. Darkness surrounded me. My eyes wouldn't open. I didn't dare move even a finger, terrified to amplify the pain any more than it already was. Or maybe I should. Maybe if I raised my pain level a bit more, it would be the end of me. All this would be over. Fatas, I was so cold. So very cold.

But then, a warmth broke through the pain, a small spot of relief on my right hand. Then up higher on my chest. Softness replaced the static pain on my scales. A kind voice cut through the dark silence. "Another blanket will warm you up. Do you feel that? Isn't it soft? My mom organized a knitting club to make blankets for the infirmary. So far, it's really just her and Hap, but they get a lot done."

The feminine voice washed over me, and while I couldn't focus on her words, the rush of them replaced that dreaded frozen silence.

"You'll be okay." I could have sworn her voice shook a bit, but then she cleared her throat, and she continued, unwavering. "It's not your time. I know it's not. You have a lot to do in this life, Trapt."

She knew my name. Was this Fatas talking to me? I tried to turn my head, but my muscles weren't working. The touch on my hand grew warmer, and I realized fingers were now clasped in mine. Did Fatas have a body?

I inhaled and tried to open my eyes again. This time, I finally succeeded in my swollen eyelids raising so I could see just a sliver. At first, there was nothing but white, but then my pupils focused in the light of the room and the figure sitting at my bedside. Her pale blue skin seemed to glow, and her hair hung in a silken black sheet around her shoulders. Beaded braids were interspersed in her locks, and when she moved, they clinked together.

Her head lifted, and purple eyes locked on mine. The pain ebbed like a low tide. A warm rush of air washed over me. My cora beat faster.

Her lips parted, and her nose scrunched, highlighting the small brown dots scattered across her cheeks. I'd never seen anyone with skin like hers before. Her fingers closed around mine, and I managed to answer with a squeeze of my own. And then she did something that I knew I'd never forget, that replaced every single supposed purpose in my life. She *smiled* at me, and I swore then and there that I'd do anything to see her smile like that forever. Until the day I died. No matter *what*.

TWO

Bazel

“Come on,” I tugged on Trapt’s arm, but he remained stupidly in place.

“What are you doing here?” He glanced around nervously, but I’d slipped into the village from behind his hut. No one saw me. I was sneaky like that. I leaned against the open window in the back of his hut. He stood inside, half in the dark as I was pretty sure I’d woken him up and he hadn’t yet lit a candle. The air smelled damp and fresh, and I was excited for what the day could hold.

I pointed behind me. “I want to go swim to the river.”

His one eye not in shadow narrowed. “Does your father know you’re here?”

I hated when he did that. He was supposed to be my friend who joined me in my escapades without bringing up fun-killing things like my parents.

I crossed my arms over my chest and tilted my chin in the air. “You know, my female ancestors traveled freely without having to ask for permission. I’m an *adult*, Trapt.”

In fairness to him, this was the first time I’d ever come to his village on my own. Usually, I got him to join me in all sorts of shenanigans (my mom taught me that word) back at the Drixonian city of Granit when he visited with his clavas, but today I’d been bored. The walls had felt like they were

caving in on me. I craved an adventure, so I'd traveled to his village, Sari, to find something to do.

And while I would never tell Trapt this, it was good for him too. Even since he'd been nearly killed when the Joktals had invaded his remote camp, he was prone to quiet spells where the weight of what he considered his failures weighed on his shoulders. I didn't like to see him like that. The human women who knew him before he'd been hurt—mates of the Lone Wolf clavas warriors—said he'd been quick with his smiles, friendly, overachieving, and had a love of cooking. Sometimes I saw that Trapt still in him, especially when we were alone riding his bike or eating good food.

Trapt was my best friend. I'd sat by his bed side for weeks while he recovered from his attack. I'd talked his ear off, and he'd listened with rapt attention. Every time I'd try to leave, he'd sulk and pout, so we'd been together nearly nonstop the whole time. I liked his company the most when he remembered to *forget*.

Which was starting to happen. I could already see some of the tension leaving his muscles. The non-scarred side of his lips turned up. I knew he was self-conscious about his lopsided smile, but I thought it was charming. "You're really pulling the adult card with me?"

He was older. Much older. But relatively, he was closer to my age than most of the other Drixonians except for the chits. I was somewhere in the middle, the youngest adult Drixonian, and the oldest of the new generation of human and Drixonian hybrids, since I had a human mother and Drixonian father.

When strength and words failed to move him, I dropped his arm with a pout and went for a different tactic. I batted my eyelashes and gave him my best smile. "Please? Just this once?"

And that was all it took. I should have gone with that first. I saw his body soften, and I waited for his verbal confirmation that he'd caved. But then he did a curious thing, something he'd never done before, or not that I'd ever noticed. His gaze dipped to my mouth and stuck there. His breath seemed to stall

in his chest, and I felt a weird, warm lick of something curl in my belly.

My smile must have faded when I said in a curious tone, “Trapt?”

He shook himself, and his gaze darted away. When it returned, his expression was kind and controlled. “If you want to swim, I’ll go swim with you.”

I gave a little hop and a whoop. Immediately his gaze darted around just as a voice cut through the stillness of the early morning village. “Trapt? You okay?”

The members of his clavas checked on him a lot. I ducked down below his window just as his front door opened. “What was that noise?” A deep voice called.

I thought it was rude Kutzal didn’t knock, but then the leader of the Lone Wolf clavas wasn’t known for his manners.

“Just stubbed my toe,” Trapt lied, and I knew it hurt him to do that. Kutzal was like his father.

I could hear the concern in Kutzal’s voice. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

The door shut, and I waited a few minutes until I felt a hand tug my hair. I stood up to find Trapt staring at me with pursed lips. “That was close.”

I winced. “Sorry.”

He rolled his eyes, but he was doing that crooked grin thing he did whenever he was amused by me. “Give me a minute and let me get my shoes one. Try not to get in trouble or make noise in the meantime.”

I swiped my fingers across my lips in a gesture I’d seen my mother do that meant she’d keep her mouth closed. I didn’t know what the gesture referred to—my mom said something about a zipper—but I used it enough that Trapt knew what it meant.

He turned away with a shake of his head, and I beamed to myself. I’d won, and I was pretty proud of myself.

The river near Sari was cool, fresh, and deep enough to cool off, but not deep enough—or strong enough—to drown us. The shallows were full of small guppas with blue-silver scales that reflected the light.

I ran down the dirt bank and splashed into the edge until the qua rushed over my calves. My pants were rolled up to my knees, the scrunched edges already wet, and I wore a simple sleeveless shirt with a rip in the hem. Turning around, I caught Trapt's eye where he sat, legs dangling, on the edge of a rock hanging over the qua. His feet were bare, and he wore only a pair of cutoff shorts. The scars marring his blue scales were livid in the bright sun, and I was reminded of the rotations I spent at his bedside, worried he wouldn't survive his injuries. Of course, I'd never told him then of my concerns. I'd told myself that my job was to keep his spirits up, so I'd reassured him until my voice was hoarse that he'd live, and he did.

I had never met him before that day, when I'd walked into the infirmary to find him unconscious in bed, bloody, bruised, battered. Immediately I'd felt some sort of pull toward him, a responsibility for him, and I'd been beside myself elated when he'd woken up squeezing my hand.

But he didn't emerge unscathed. His one arm was badly mangled from the bike crash, and he often hid it behind his back when around others. Today, as was often the case when he was with just me, he didn't appear self-conscious about it, as he plucked at a reed stem with both hands before sticking the dried end in his mouth. Chewing slowly, he lifted a nubbed brow as he caught me staring. "What?"

"Get in with me."

With a crooked smile, he pushed off the ledge and dove in the qua with a splash. For a moment, he was nothing but a dark shadow beneath the qua, but then suddenly, he burst to the surface, hurling waves of qua at me. I squealed and raced away from him as he chased me, splashing and kicking qua.

One thing that always struck me about Trapt was his eyes. He wasn't like the other Drixonians. My father's eyes were experienced and wary. He carried the weight of his tragic past along with the constant surveillance needed when he'd hid my mother and me in the woods to protect us from predators in his former clavas. Daz, the head drexel, was shrewd. Observant. He studied everything around him. Even Sax and Xavy, the lovable best friends, had shadows lurking in their eyes.

When Trapt was with me, though, his eyes were nothing but warm, light purple pools. Maybe it was because he didn't feel like he had to act tough or proper around me. He could just be. And I loved that I could be that for him. One last reason that I tried to get him to leave his hut and come on adventures with me? I knew he stopped taking medis for his pain, and he hid this from his clavas. I wasn't sure of his reasons, but I guessed it was because he didn't like the reminder that he was different.

Which I understood a little bit. I was different too, as I was the first offspring of a Drixonian male and human female.

Exhausted from the chase, I waved my arms in a gesture for truce, and Trapt came to a halt in front of me. Qua dripped from his hair, which hung around his shoulders, loose locks mixed with tight braids. The qua beaded off his hair in thick drops and fell to his muscled, scarred chest.

As his eyes shone at me in the morning sun, my belly did that weird thing it sometimes did around him. My stomach cramped and warmed. I felt an ache between my legs. I shook it off as I plopped down on a rock jutting out of the qua and let the cool stream wash over my feet. Trapt sank down to sit on a rock below the surface, and the qua rushed around his narrow waist. Again, I felt that ache.

I wasn't sick, was I? Asking my mother about it would only send her into a tizzy. Because of my mixed race, she constantly worried for my health. I'd ask Val, Sax's mate. She was a healer familiar with the Drixonian anatomy as well as human anatomy. Apparently she'd been a healer back on Earth, or whatever they called them there.

Sometimes I wondered so much about where half of me came from. Earth seemed like an inconceivable place, with lots and lots of humans in big cities. Mom and the other human females talked about things called movies, which I still didn't understand.

She'd been worried that I wouldn't be accepted by the greater Drixonian population, but it was actually the opposite. I was very much treasured. Sheltered. I couldn't complain about my childhood. I'd grown up with two parents who loved and protected me with everything they had, and then I'd been accepted by the rest of the Drixonian warriors so well that it felt like I had hundreds of uncles.

I watched Trapt as he tilted his head back to let the sun beat down on his face. In comparison, he was born under tragic circumstances and raised by hard, outcast Drixonians who tried their best with a squawking Drixonian chit like Trapt. Or so I'd heard. I'd asked around a lot about him after his accident, but he was a Lone Wolf, a former Drixonian outcast, given that title if they were sired by warriors who deserted the Drixonian military. Not that any of that was Trapt's fault. And yet, he didn't harbor grudges. He wasn't cynical. Despite all he'd been through, he still took the time to splash in a stream with me.

I pulled my feet up onto the rock and propped my chin on my bent knees as my thoughts turned to the future of our people. The Joktal still loomed, their threats hanging over our heads like dark clouds that could unleash their fury anytime.

Over a hundred cycles ago, this planet had been the home of the Drixonians. But when a virus took out the female population, the remaining males left by choice to their sister planet Torin. But there, they were trapped by an enemy and were only able to return to Corin recently. They were rebuilding here, starting with the former city of Granit, which was now returning to its former glory. But in the Drixonian absence, some other species—like the Juktals—had settled here and weren't willing to share. We were more than willing to remain within our boundaries, but the Juktals weren't satisfied with that.

“Any word from Daz?” I asked Trapt. I wanted to know everything, but I wasn’t privy to much of it. Everyone in Granit kept me sheltered, and Trapt was truly the only one who I felt was honest with me.

He shook his head. “I feel for his indecision. It seems like the Joktal are waiting for us to make the first move, and Daz isn’t comfortable with that. Drixonians have always been defenders and protectors. We don’t start wars.” He braced his wrists on his bent knees. “But Kutzal thinks we should strike first. He’s argued with Daz about it a few times, apparently.”

That made me grimace. I couldn’t imagine the tense conversations between Daz, a calm, rational leader, and Kutzal, a cynical warrior who fought fiercely for his loved ones.

“What do you think?”

Trapt’s head swiveled toward me, and his nubbed brow furrowed, as if he hadn’t expected me to ask him. His fangs chewed his lower lip for a moment before he spoke. “I agree with Kutzal... and Daz. I think the Joktals are waiting for us to attack first, but I think that’s because they expect us to make mistakes. But we won’t make mistakes. Not now, not with so much on the line.”

The chits, the families, the rebuilding of the Drixonian empire. That was what was on the line. *Everything*.

“I agree with you,” I said.

“Yeah?” His voice sounded hopeful. Pleased.

Movement on the opposite riverbank caught my eye. Distracted, I turned my head as I muttered. “Of course.”

“Bazel?” His voice filtered in one ear and out the other. My mother always said I was really good at ignoring things when I wanted to. And now, I had my full attention on the hizzicula darting through the bushes. With one leap, its furry tail disappeared in a bush. “A hizzie!” I shouted. Already, I could taste the fatty, rich meat on my tongue. I leapt to my feet and reached the opposite shore before Trapt could even stand. Hand over foot, I climbed up to the top of the bank and used a

branch to haul myself into the dense bush. Behind me, I heard splashing, and Trapt calling my name, but I was already darting after the furry game.

Hizzicula were elusive, so catching sight of one was a treat. I slipped my dagger out of its sheath on my belt and raced through the foliage in pursuit. The short-legged animals were fast, but they tired quickly. I'd killed a sum total of one in my life, and I was ready to double that number.

"Bazel!" Trapt called my name behind me. I heard him crashing through the bush. He wasn't as agile as me, but he was still fast.

I burst out into a clearing and skidded to a halt to listen for the rustling of the tiring hizzicula. My boots squished in mud as I crept forward. Then suddenly, the wind changed direction. Instead of the damp smell of the wet dirt, I caught a weird stink. Foul and a little rotten. I could no longer smell or hear the hizzicula.

Trapt burst into the brush behind me, chest heaving. He sighed in relief when he saw me, but then his gaze dropped to the ground. All color drained from his face, and his eyes darkened. His breath hissed from between his teeth. He reached out and grabbed me, his hand closing tightly around my arm to the point of pain. I nearly cried out, surprised as his aggression, when he clapped a hand over my mouth and slipped us back into the undergrowth. I squirmed but went still when his mouth dropped to my ear, and he said in a tortured whisper that I'd never forget as long as I lived. One shaky finger pointed to an impression in the mud. "Joktal tracks. They've been here."

My cora sank into my feet.

THREE

Trapt

The tracks alone made my scales lift on end. It took all my strength to keep my machets from lifting. I curled my tail around us, cursing myself for not bringing any weapons or tail armor.

Bazel remained quiet in my arms, but she trembled slightly. The whites of her eyes showed as she darted glances around the clearing, looking for threats. I hated seeing her scared, and I hated that I didn't feel equipped to protect her if we came face-to-face with a Joktal and their evil hounds.

Because I wasn't the Drixonian I'd once been. I'd never been a warrior like Kutzal, but I'd been training. I'd been close. My confidence had been soaring. And now I was a mangled survivor.

Large tracks from the Joktals' three-toed feet were interspersed with the smaller tracks of their scent hounds. They were what terrified me the most. If they were still nearby and sniffed us out... I pressed Bazel closer to me. Her clawed hands dug into my forearms. They were ugly humpback animals with no eyes but noses that could sniff out a hint of a scent from far away.

I wasn't sure how long we remained like that, hunched together in the damp underbrush, muddy and trembling. I listened. I sniffed the air. But the rank smell of the Joktal was fading. A memory. They'd been here, sure, but they weren't

here anymore, and as the wind shifted, I didn't smell them at all.

Only then did I loosen my grip on Bazel. She slumped forward, hands tightened on the strong leaves of a nearby bush as she peered through them. "You think they're gone?"

"I do." I slid past her. "Stay here."

Creeping forward, I studied the prints in the mud. Now that I got a good look, I could see they were older than I'd first realized, but still too recent for my liking. And way too close to my village. I sat back on my haunches, wondering how I was going to tell Kutzal. I had to report it, but he was going to be furious when he found out I ventured this far from the village with the stolen princess. And that was *if* Tark didn't find out and flay me alive first.

A heat at my back made me turn my head. Bazel was there, leaning over my shoulder to study the tracks herself. "I told you to stay back," I whispered.

"I wanted to see," was her casual answer.

I gripped her hand and tugged her back into the bush. I didn't stop there, I kept walking, my strides lengthening until Bazel had to jog to keep up. She didn't complain though. She knew this was serious, and she knew I'd have nightmares tonight. She was the only one who really knew how my attack continued to affect me.

"I'm sorry," she said as we crossed the stream during the return to the village. Guilt weighed down her tone. "I shouldn't have chased the hizzicula."

I couldn't blame her. Not really. Many of the warriors from my village hunted those very same woods on a regular basis. We hadn't in a while because of the recent rains. But I'd have to report this. We reached the other side of the stream, and I was shaking the water from my hair when a shadow darkened the ground in front of me.

By Bazel's sharp inhale, I knew exactly who it was. Slowly, I lifted my head to meet Kutzal's furious purple glare.

“What. The. Fleck,” he hissed, anger vibrating his deep voice. Although Bazel knew he’d never hurt her, his tone was enough to make her hide behind my back. “Too late, princess,” he snapped. “I already see you.”

“I’m not a princess,” she muttered haughtily, because she couldn’t help herself. She hated that nickname. She didn’t want the special attention, but it wasn’t really up to her.

Kutzal’s nostrils flared as his eyes burned into me. “Tell me why you’re out here with her.” His thick arms crossed over his chest, and he leaned back as if settling in for a story. “This should be good. Better yet, give me all the excuses why I shouldn’t march you to Tark’s door right now and let him deal with you.”

My stomach churned. Bazel’s hand curled into my biceps. “It wasn’t his idea. It was mine.”

I closed my eyes. She always wanted to defend me, but she didn’t know she was only making this worse.

Kutzal pounced, as I knew he would. “Is Trapt a chit? Does he not have a mind of his own? Can he not say the word *no* to you? You might be a princess, but you don’t rule him.”

Oh, if only he knew. Bazel *did* rule me. Mind, body, and *sola*.

Bazel’s went silent, thankfully, but her gaze cut daggers into Kutzal. He was immune, as always. With a sharp jerk of his arm, he gestured for us to walk back toward the village. “Let’s go.”

Bazel stalked forward mutely, and I followed a step behind. Kutzal brought up the rear, and I could hear his huffs of irritation with every breath. I felt caught between the one I’d do everything for, and the one who—despite his gruffness—had done everything for me. He’d been the closest to a father I’d ever had. My mother had been one of the last females to remain alive. Since she never revealed who my father was, I had been branded a naught when I was still in the womb. I’d heard the stories about how she fought to stay alive, feverish and weak, to give me the best chance at life. Kutzal

himself had cut me out of her body when she'd finally perished. I'd been born tiny, weak, premature, and screaming.

But Kutzal had refused to let me die. The tiny chit son of naught who no one cared about. Kutzal had been young himself, barely past maturity, but he'd reared me like his own. He'd protected me from the worst of our treatment at the hands of the Uldani, who treated most of us naughts as disposable. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be alive. Disappointing him went against every ounce of my being. But with Bazel, I finally felt like I was more than just existing. I *thrived*. Despite all the failures of my life, when Bazel's attention was on me, I felt like I was doing something right for once.

When we entered the village, Tasha and Trix were there waiting for us. Trix took one look at Kutzal and his surrounding cloud of anger and pursed her lips. Of course, she would have known Kutzal was angry already. They were cora-eternals, a mating blessed by Fatas with matching loks on their wrists. Cora-eternals could feel each other's emotions, so she would have felt his anger like waves when he confronted me.

I thought maybe she'd defend me, but when her gaze shifted to mine, she only looked concerned. *Well, fleck.*

She reached out her hand to Bazel. "We'll take you home."

"You and Tasha?" I blurted out.

Her eyes narrowed. "Yes, and I think it's best if you stay here."

That wasn't what I was concerned about. I whirled around to Kutzal, who seemed ready to lay into me again. But I held my ground. "We saw Joktal tracks in the woods on the opposite riverbank."

Immediately Kutzal's posture went from anger to awareness. "Joktal tracks? Hounds too?"

"Yes."

Kutzal's gaze swung to Bazel. "And walked here yourself from Granit? Did you tell anyone?"

Bazel's bravado was fading. She swallowed. "I, uh, snuck out. I didn't know Joktals were close. I didn't see them on my way here."

Kutzal turned his attention to Trix. "Go get Lukent. Tell him about the Joktals and to organize a warrior group to escort Bazel back to Granit."

Trix, despite the seriousness of the situation, raised one dark, arched eyebrow. "Please?"

Kutzal nubbed brow dipped in confusion. "What?"

"You don't get to order me around. You can ask me nicely and say please."

"Is now the time for a manners lesson?" he muttered.

"I heard that." She folded her arms over her swollen stomach. She was pregnant with Kutzal's chit, and while she'd always been outspoken, her pregnancy made her even more so.

He signed and rubbed his forehead. "Please, cora-eternal, light of my life, the reason for every beat of my cora, go tell Lukent the news."

She smiled. "Of course."

Tasha remained behind while Trix trotted off toward the training arena, where we could hear the thuds and grunts of sparring warriors. Tasha remained, nibbling on her lip.

Bazel shifted her weight from foot to foot. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of the dangerous consequences coming here. I only wanted to visit Trapt."

"I understand," Tasha said. "And I know your mother and father don't want you to be a prisoner in Granit, but you have to be aware. It's not safe right now. And we're not sure when it will be."

The heavy footfalls announced Lukent's arrival. The big, bald, scarred warrior marched in front with a dozen warriors flanking him, with Trix walking off the side. All the warriors were armed and fitted with weapons. They were an imposing sight, and I immediately felt better about Bazel's safety. Trix was a skilled archer, but she would be greatly outnumbered if

the Joktals decided to ambush them. While the route back to Granit was firmly in Drixonian territory, the trace of Joktal tracks nearby—also in our territory—was a warning sign.

I didn't get to say bye to Bazel. As soon as Lukent arrived, he nodded to Kutzal and the warriors enveloped Bazel among them, hiding her from view. As they walked out of Sari, I caught a glimpse of Bazel looking back at me from between the muscled warrior guards. I remained where I was while Kutzal stood beside me, vibrating heavily with anger. Trix and Tasha sat on the bench under the moke tree in the center of our village, talking quietly.

“Trapt,” Kutzal barked, and I braced for his anger as his voice began to rise. “You can't—”

Suddenly he stopped, and when I glanced at him, his gaze was on Trix, who stared at him with narrowed eyes.

He started again, this time speaking with a strained voice and tight jaw. But he was no longer shouting. I wondered if Trix had instructed him to keep his voice down for my sake. I silently thanked her.

“Our relationship with Daz improves every day, but that will be in danger if we do anything to put Bazel at risk. I know she was the one who came here, but you should have alerted us immediately so we could take her back. Not go swimming and playing with her in the river like two chits.”

The thought of turning on Bazel made me sick, but he was right. Our clavas of naughts had always been outcasted, but lately Daz, the head drexel of the remaining living Drixonians, had made every effort to make us feel like we belonged. We moved from a cold outpost on the coast to a cozy village near Granit. And Bazel must be protected. Losing her would be a devastating blow to every single Drixonian. She represented hope. Our future.

“I'm sorry,” I said, because there was nothing else to say.

Kutzal stepped closer, and the way his voice dropped into something that resemble sympathy made my cora skip a beat. Kutzal didn't do sympathy. “You have to discourage her

interest in you. Whatever it's friends or more." He swallowed and looked at the ground. "It needs to be done."

As the bile rose in my throat, I nodded. "I will."

Bazel

Naomi and Gar's twins had made a mess. They'd been tasked with mixing up some biscuit dough and had succeeded in getting flour everywhere. I sighed as I swept up the powder while the twins were on their hands and knees, scrubbing up the stubborn bits. It was banquet time at Granit, a term the human females used, and the Drixonians had adopted. Every clavas would join us for a feast in The Hall—the main building of Granit where some of us lived. It was Daz's way to promote harmony and reward the warriors for their hard work in rebuilding Granit and maintaining defense. Those who didn't live in The Hall had settled into smaller homes lining the main streets of Granit.

A system had settled into the city, a mix of culture that the human women were used to, and one that the Drixonians were known for. Most of the male warriors focused on the protection of our territory, the adult women ran the everyday life of the city—setting up councils for public works, currency, and permits for craftsman. The chits and anyone else who was left were in charge of the cleaning and food preparation for the main hall of Granit. Technically I was an adult—my mixed genetics meant I had matured early for a human, but late for a Drixonian at around thirteen. Now twenty, I was considered an adult, but everyone had agreed my main role would be overseeing the growing population of Drixonian chits. I liked the job—I was a live-in baby-sitter and oversaw setting up a schedule of chores for the little ones. It gave me purpose. But there were times like today, where I was antsy. The reason the twins made a mess of the flower was because I wasn't paying attention.

The warriors had begun to arrive, but I had attention on one certain warrior. And he had yet to show up. Part of me worried if he had been made to stay behind, but I couldn't see that happening. Daz insisted everyone come unless they were physically unable. So I fretted. Was Trapt okay? Was he having pain? I hadn't seen him for close to a dozen rotations. And the last time, I was being escorted out of his village in shame. I could still see his concerned, hopeless expression watching me as I went. He hadn't come to visit me in Granit, and I hadn't dared visit him. Kutzal would surely tell my father if I did it again.

Suddenly a voice drifted down the hall, one I recognized very well. I left the twins with another bowl and the ingredients and sped off down the hall. Lu, Axton's mate, stood near the entrance of the great hall, her head thrown back in laughter. I loved all the human women, but Lu was one of my favorites. She saw me coming, and her smile grew even bigger. "Bazel!" She held out her arms and I stepped into them, feeling like a little chit even though I stood a full head taller than her. I sank into the warmth of her embrace but couldn't resist scanning over her shoulder to the warriors behind her for a familiar face. I didn't spot him as I withdrew from her hug.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good," I answered routinely, even though I hadn't been quite content. Not for a long time. As big as this building and city was, I had begun to feel stifled. Suffocated. "How's everything in Granit?"

"Busy. So many babies so little time." I smiled, happy for her even though I wasn't close to feeling any baby fever, as I'd heard some of the women talk about. Axton stepped forward with their son, a dark haired, chubby baby that seemed to be half the size of Lu. I still couldn't believe she'd been able to birth him.

I hauled Axel into my arms, even though Axton seemed reluctant to let his son go and kissed the baby's bulging cheeks. He gurgled and a line of drool dripped onto his bare belly rolls. Lu produced a wooden ring from her pocket. "Ugh,

he's teething like crazy." Axel grabbed the ring and chomped into it immediately, his black fangs denting the wood.

A voice called out for Lu from the dining hall. "Go," I encouraged her and Axton. "I'll hold this little guy for a little to give you a break."

"Oh thank you!" Lu sped off without a look back, while Axton gave me a discerning look before following his mate. While bounding the drooling baby on my hip, I watched the rest of the Lone Wolf clavas walk by, many greeting me as they passed. And it wasn't until the very end that the face I wanted most to see finally appeared.

Trapt walked with his head down, a slight limp to his step, and my heart sank. Was he in pain? I stepped in front of him quickly, blocking his path. His head jerked up, and his eyes went wide. "Are you doing okay?" I asked quickly, keeping my voice low. "Are you feeling pain?"

His jaw worked, and his lips twitched. But there was something in his eyes. Something I didn't like. But before I could question him, he simply nodded. "Hello, Bazel," and then stepped around me before continuing into the dining hall.

That was it. Just a simple hello. But the way he said my name wasn't the way Trapt usually greeted me. His tone was flat. No affect. Devoid of the friendly affection he always granted me. Trapt never failed to make me feel like I was only one in the room, and somehow he'd just managed to make me feel like a speck of dirt.

Anger rose swiftly inside of me. What the fuck? I turned on my heel and took off after him, but he had a head start, and by the time I entered the dining hall, I lost sight of him in the chaos. Bodies were everywhere. I smelled something burning. And with Axel still in my arms, I had to push aside the hurt from Trapt's words and go find out if the twins ruined a second batch of biscuits.

Usually banquet time was my favorite time. I loved seeing everyone happy and healthy in one place. The dining hall was massive, with great wooden tables piled high with food and drink, and we all sat squeezed together on benches. Long windows covered in a colored glass cast a warm glow over everyone. Raucous laughter filled the room. But on this rotation, I wasn't quite feeling the spirit of togetherness.

All through the meal, I tried to talk to Trapt. While he stood in line to fill his plate, I cut in next to him to strike up a conversation. He either didn't answer me or responded with one-word answers. When I tried to sit with him, he outright stood up and left me alone.

Tears threatened many times. Was he angry with me for sneaking into his village the last time? Had Kutzal yelled at him so much that Trapt had decided it wasn't worth it to talk to my anymore? But *fleck* that hurt. Trapt was my friend. My *best* friend. And while I tried to tell myself that I had other friends, a busy life, and a loving family, that loss of Trapt's attention was a gaping black hole sucking away at my happiness.

It was a long time later—well past the meal—that I finally caught sight of Trapt again. He was sitting with the rest of the Lone Wolf warriors drinking a heavy canteen of what I was sure was spirits. His eyes were glassy, and he swayed slightly in his seat. As if sensing my gaze on him, he looked up. Our eyes met. And he showed emotion for the first time that rotation. His face fell, a flash of longing took over, before he jerked his head away and upended his spirits canteen into his mouth. His throat worked as he swallowed deeply, and when he finished he slammed his canteen on the table with a resounding clank. His fellow warriors, thinking it was a good thing, sent up a cheer and emptied their own canteens. The animated warriors at his table hid him from my view, and my stomach churned with sickness and guilt.

What had happened to us? I had expected Trapt to remain my friend at my side for the rest of our lives. I couldn't imagine not knowing him. But now... had I expected too much? Was this really the end?

Lu tried to talk to me. Tasha told a joke. I went along with the motions, laughing where appropriate and responding where I was supposed to. But I could tell Lu noticed my darkening mood. Maisie kept glancing at me out of the side of her eye.

And I couldn't find it in me to reassure them I was okay. Because I wasn't. And Drixonians were not good liars.

FOUR

Bazel

Once I reached adulthood, I received my own room in The Hall, far enough away from my parents to feel a bit of freedom, but close enough to feel like I'd never quite be on my own.

Still, I *loved* my room. Hap had built me custom furniture, and Lu and Maisie had helped me decorate. Shelves were filled with trinkets and carvings. A vase with fresh blooms sat on the table near my bed. And I even had a large frame that held what my mom called a mirror. One of the human females figured out how to make one, and the Drixonian males had been amazed. Even now, Sax and Xavy often fought to preen themselves in the one we had in the dining hall.

The morning after the feast, I sat in front of my mirror and brushed my long black hair before braiding it into a large plait that hung down my back. I smiled at myself in the mirror in an attempt to cheer myself up, but the action only felt fake and forced. I slumped and fiddled with the hem of my shirt.

Trapt's behavior toward me left me cold. He was somewhere in this hall now, likely sleeping peacefully, while I woke up with the sun with a cramping stomach. This was stupid. *I* was being stupid. I'd just go talk to him. Maybe he was in pain last night, or he was still embarrassed about being caught. He would be fine this morning, and we'd laugh until the awkwardness went away.

Feeling emboldened, I pulled on a pair of pants and slipped into a sleeveless vest with jeweled buttons. The sun had darkened the skin of my shoulders and chest. The brown dots on my noses—which my mom called freckles—were more pronounced. But we were entering the cold season, and soon my skin would pale to a blue that was a shade or so lighter than my father’s. Tugging a fur jacket on my arms, I left my room in search of something to eat and drink.

I found Frankie, Daz’s mate, in the dining hall. Steam rose from jugs of hot tea, and sweet pastries were piled high on a platter. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of me. “Hey Bazel, you’re up early.”

My mother peeked her head out from the kitchens. “Hi sweetheart.”

I gave a wave before stuffing a pastry in my mouth. I poured myself a mug of tea and let it wash down the crumbs. “How did you sleep?” I asked Frankie.

Dark circles cut purple crescents under her eyes, highlighting her pale skin tone. Strands of hair stuck out from where she’d pulled it back in a messy bun. And she walked slightly hunched. I knew someone who was hungover when I saw one. She’d had too many of Xavy’s spirits, for sure.

Frankie wrinkled her nose. “Daz snored. He always does when he drinks.”

I smiled around my mug as I took a sip of tea. “I like having my own room.”

She let out a husky laugh. “Watch out, or I’ll steal it from you.” She sighed. “A whole night alone sounds amazing.”

“You’d miss me, my cora-eternal.” Daz’s deep voice boomed across the dining hall as he entered. Immediately striding toward the tea, he poured a mug, sweetened it with some syrups, and shoved it at Frankie. “Sit and drink.”

“Yeah, Frank,” I said. “I’ll help with breakfast and get the chits sorted. You need to sit down before you fall down.”

She plunked down on a bench and sipped her tea. “I’m a bad host.”

“You’re a great host,” Val said as she walked into the hall, her kids in tow with Sax bringing up the rear. “No one is going to remember that you weren’t at breakfast, but everyone will remember that you danced on the tables.”

That got Frankie to grin. “I was the life of the party, wasn’t I?”

“Always, my cora-eternal.” Daz rubbed her back.

She beamed up at him, and a pang pierced my heart. Maybe it was jealousy. Longing. I couldn’t be sure, and I didn’t have time to examine it, because soon the dining hall was filling with Drixonians and humans, and there wasn’t time to dwell. I helped my mother finish the breakfast and then organized a cleaning crew of the chits who were old enough to carry dishes.

And all the while, I didn’t see Trapt. While all the females from the Lone Wolf clavas came to breakfast, a lot of the males did not. Vinz and Lukent made an appearance and seemed to leave with extra plates of food. So Trapt managed to avoid me. Again.

By the time I made it out of the dining hall, it was nearly mid-day. The day after a feast was always a family day, so I wasn’t responsible for watching any chits. Normally on a day like this, I’d find Trapt, and we’d go visit the livestock. Maybe he was there waiting for me?

Feeling slightly better, I left the hall and jogged down the steps. In the distance, I could see the herd of livestock grazing. But as I drew closer, no familiar Drixonian hung off the fence to greet me.

My cora sank. Again. I didn’t want to go back into the hall where I’d just be reminded of Trapt’s absence. I’d probably end up being given a job, too. Not that I ever minded caring for the chits and the household, but I was in a bad mood. No one deserved to be on the receiving end of that.

I stomped off toward the stables, careful to be aware that no one saw me, and entered the last stall. Shoving a pile of hay aside, I pulled up two floorboards to reveal my hidden stash. I

grabbed my bow and quiver of arrows, as well as a laser gun, and a clutch of knives.

Stuffing them all into a large pack that I hauled onto my back, I snuck out the back of the stables and through a small hole in the city's walls. There, I sought the cover of the nearby woods.

Normally, I only dared to practice my fighting skills in the early morning light or at dusk. Never in broad daylight. Not with our city teeming with visitors. But I was too antsy to do anything else. I had to get out. I needed freedom. I had to *do* something productive.

I knew that Drixonian females weren't fighters. There were rare cases of some females joining the military, but in the old days of Drixonian society, we were meant to be protected in our city walls and tasked with the success of society. Those were the stories I'd been raised on when I'd lived alone with my mother and father. Before I was born, my father, Tark, had fled his clavas with my mother back on Torin in order to protect her from some members of his clavas who'd wanted to use her for breeding. But my father, Tark, believed strongly in the Drixonian creed, *She is All*. He wanted to protect my mother, and in the process he'd fallen in love with her too. They'd been blessed by Fatas as mates and bore the matching loks on their wrists to prove it.

They'd lived alone in secret on a secluded mountain on Torin when they had me, and I'd only been about five cycles old when Daz and Frankie had stumbled to our home.

We'd joined the Night King clavas then, of which Daz was drexel, and I'd come of age as Daz lead us to independence from the Uldani and as we moved back to our home planet of Corin. And in all that time, I'd met more females—smart and strong. Brave. Some were warriors just as fierce as the Drixonians males, like Trix.

And suddenly, I wasn't content for my role to be confined to life in a sheltered hall behind city walls. I wanted to fight too. When I'd been younger, I'd confessed this to my parents. My father had put his foot down, and my mother hadn't

understood. She loved organizing the crop schedules to ensure sufficient food production. She had an entire clothing production team. What she did was important, and I recognized that. But that also wasn't me. I didn't mind my role in Granit, but I also didn't feel like it was my calling. I had always loved carrying my father's weapons around and pretending to slash at our enemies. I'd even practiced my war cry. But as I got older, my parents discouraged that side of me. I'd suppressed it too, until the Joktals had begun threatening us.

Now, that inner fire had been stoked inside of me. I wanted to be ready to fight and defend my loved ones. I wouldn't be cowering inside the hall if enemies ever breached those walls. I refused to be helpless.

I made my way through the woods, careful to stay in our territory, but also far enough away from Nero's eyes, which were the sensors surrounding our borders that alerted us to a breach.

Soon, I caught sight of the small training ground I'd set up myself. A stuffed dummy on a pole with slits in the course fabric where I'd practice my stabbing technique. A bullseye board where I sank my arrows into. And a charred tree stump with rotten fruit laying around it from my laser practice.

Frustrated, angry, I decided today was a stabbing day. Opening my pack, I pulled out the clutch and unrolled it to reveal a series of knives. I'd stolen these from my father, and he hadn't noticed they were gone, as they were his older set. One day, he'd find them missing, but I'd deal with that when the time came.

After a few stretches to warm up, I flipped the knife in my fingers and began to parry the dummy. A live opponent would offer better training, but this was what I had to work with. When I'd sufficiently exhausted myself jumping around and stabbing the dummy, I pulled the laser gun from my pack and propped a half-eat guava fruit laying nearby on the stump. I had just stepped back and lifted the gun to aim and fire when a voice sliced through the clearing like the slash of a knife. "What the fleck are you doing?"

Trapt

Bazel whirled around, her eyes impossibly wide. I had a hard time taking in what I was seeing. A stuffed dummy on a pole with straw sticking out of its wounds. A round wooden target marred with arrow marks. And Bazel herself standing with a charged laser gun in her hand.

Her mouth fell open, and for a moment, she looked at a loss, until she came back into herself. Her shoulders stiffened, and her eyes narrowed. “Oh, so *now* you’re talking to me?”

I sought patience from Fatas. “We’re not talking about that now.”

A muscle in her jaw clenched. “Who decided that?”

I was already reeling from drinking too much the night before and suffering from a terrible night’s sleep because all I wanted to do was apologize to Bazel for ignoring her. This situation now was enough to put me over the edge. “Give me an explanation for this before I run straight to your father and report what you’re doing.” I went with the low blow and regretted it instantly when her eyes clouded with hurt and betrayal.

Her chest heaved. “Go ahead,” her voice wavered, and I hated it. “Go tell him. He’ll lock me up for a while, but that doesn’t matter to you, does it?”

I gritted my teeth. “Of course it matters.”

She tossed her head, eyes glittering, and her hair shone a shiny black in the sun. A breeze kicked up, tossing leaves around her ankles. Standing there, with her fur pelt around her shoulders, stance wide, a laser gun at her thigh, she was like a regal warrior princess. My cora clenched.

“Bazel—”

“What?” she snapped, but I could hear the hurt there. Her eyes watched me warily as I drew closer. My leg was bothering me this morning, and I did my best to hide my slight limp.

“I’m sorry about last night.” I *was* too, more than she could ever know. It physically pained me to avoid her, but Kutzal was watching my every move. And maybe it was all in my head, but I could have sworn Tark had one eye on me at all times, too. And he *terrified* me. He was one of the oldest living Drixonian warriors. A war hero who’d defended Corin before the virus had changed everything. Paying him the utmost respect was important. Putting his daughter in danger was an ultimate Drixonian act of disloyalty. “I’ll explain later. Can you please tell me what’s going on?”

“How did you find me?”

“I saw you leave the stables with a pack on your back. I followed you.”

She huffed out a breath and muttered, “I knew I shouldn’t have come mid-day.”

I sat down on a fallen log and waited. Bazel was like that sometimes. She needed space to process her many emotions and deal with her big cora that beat fiercely.

She sank down on the ground with her legs crossed. The gun lay at her side in the grass. She picked at the dirt with a twig. “I’m practicing.”

“Practicing what?”

She looked up at me. “What does it look like?”

“I need you to say it out loud. Please.”

Her twig pokes grew in strength as she stabbed at the dirt. “Fighting.”

This was too much. “Bazel—”

“I want to help, okay?”

“You *are* helping,” I said. “You work in the infirmary with Val. You take care of the chits, you—”

“I know,” she said with exasperation. “Those jobs are just as important as what you warriors do, but it’s not what *I* want to do. I want to be like Trix. I don’t want to feel helpless. What if there’s something that affects all of you, huh?” Her eyes watered, a trait she got from her mother—crying. And I felt my body lock up. I hated when she cried. “What if there’s a virus that strikes down the warriors? Who’s going to be left to defend us?” She sniffed and swiped the back of her hand under her nose. She looked away, but I saw a tear track down her cheek.

We could rebuild all we wanted, but the shadow of what our families and ancestors had gone through remained in our shadows. I couldn’t fault her. I couldn’t fault her *at all*. The strict roles of the previous Drixonian society had made sense at the time but had also been our downfall.

I slid to the ground next to her and took the twig from her hand. Splinters had dug into her flesh. Her skin was different than mine—she had hard scales in many places, but her palms were a thin human skin. With her hand in my lap, I pulled the splinters out with my claws. The stubborn ones I plucked out with my teeth.

She flexed her fist. More tears fell from her eyes. One landed on my thumb.

“I understand how you feel. I’m not sure that Daz, your father, and the rest of the warriors are ready for that societal change yet. And you’re... *you*.”

Her wet eyes met mine. All traces of defiance were gone from her posture. “I don’t want that pressure. It’s suffocating being the oldest of the human and Drixonian matings. When I was a chit, I was just me. And now I’m...” she waved her hand. “I represent the future, and that responsibility is slowly choking me.” She pointed to a knife still stuck in the dummy. “Out here I feel free. I feel like I’m *doing* something.” She tugged her hand out of my grip and stood up. “But I guess it’s over, because you’ll tell my father now.”

Kutzal’s words replayed in my head, but at the sight of Bazel’s sharp movements as she cleaned up her weapons, I

knew in my cora that I wouldn't be able to tell her father. I couldn't stand to see her caged.

"I mean..." She said slowly as she turned on a heel. A shimmer in her eyes made me take notice. "If you *do* tell my father, then I guess that means I'll have to tell Kutzal that you aren't taking your medis."

I nearly laughed out loud. My cunning Bazel. I leaned back with my arms braced behind me and tried to keep my expression neutral. "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I found the full vials in your room. You have a stockpile now."

"I'll return them soon. But that's beside the point. You're threatening me?"

At my casual tone, Bazel became emboldened. She went to her knees at my side. Her once sad eyes were now alight with mischief and intelligence. "I have an idea."

I sighed, because those words never meant good things. "I'm sure you do."

"How about you teach me how to fight? And I won't tell Kutzal about your medis. Then I'm no longer out here alone. I'm with you, and I'm safer that way. It's a win-win for us both."

Sometimes she used human expressions I wasn't familiar with, like *win-win*. "I don't think I like this idea."

She didn't admit defeat. "Why?"

"Joktals have been spotted. And I'm not..." I swallowed, not wanting her to see my fear, or she'd pounce. "I'm not confident I can defend you as well as another warrior."

Her expression fell, and she gripped my face in her warm hands. "You are just as capable as anyone else. And you wouldn't have to defend me all alone." She grinned. "That's your incentive to train me really well. Maybe it'll be *me* saving *your* life."

"You already saved my life once." I said, my voice strained as I remembered the pain of those days after the

attack, when I'd been able to do nothing but lay in bed and listen to Bazel fussing over me.

Her eyes softened. "You saved your own life. You fought. All I did was keep you company."

Didn't she understand her company was what kept me fighting? "Bazel, I don't know about this."

"Please?" she rasped. "This way we can spend time together without getting in trouble."

Of course, getting to see Bazel without Kutzal reprimanding me was the biggest incentive for me. I felt myself wavering, and Bazel must have felt it too, because her fingers tightened on my face. "Please?" she asked again.

And because I was a sucker. Because Bazel owned me. Because I felt guilty about last night. I said in a resigned voice, "Okay."

With a squeal of delight, Bazel leaned in and dropped a smacking kiss on my crooked nose. She leapt to her feet and immediately raced to her weapons, not realizing that she'd just taken my world and turned it inside out. Forever.

FIVE

Bazel

I didn't mean to make a deal with Trapt. And to be fair, I wouldn't have told Kutzal about him skipping out on his medis. Trapt's body was his own, and it was his decision to handle his own pain. Kutzal and the rest of the warriors wouldn't see it that way—in their mind, they were a collective body and were only as strong as the weakest link. But I wasn't like them.

Still, I was pretty proud of myself for convincing Trapt to train me. While he was a relatively passive warrior compared to most Drixonians, he was trained well by Kutzal, and knew all the fighting skills that I craved to excel at.

We met almost daily at dawn, him sneaking out of Sari and me slinking through the woods. He brought supplies too. A better bow than Trix no longer used since Hap had carved her a new one. Dozens of arrows. A sharpener for my knives.

It'd been close to fourteen rotations since we'd made our deal, and I found my muscles were growing more defined. My stamina improved. I was more agile, lighter on my feet, and my mind clearer. My body had always been a bit of a mystery to everyone, including myself. No one really knew what kind of traits I'd inherit from my parents. I really was a mix as I had no tail and a less pronounced browline with spare eyebrow hairs and smaller nubs. According to my father, I was shorter and slenderer than the female Drixonians he had known, but I

was still taller than almost all of the human females. Female Drixonians didn't have machets—the spikes that males had laying beneath their scales in their forearms and down their backs. Working with Trapt made me learn my body better and appreciate it more for its unique characteristics.

Trapt himself seemed better. He didn't limp anymore, and he used his injured arm more. He laughed freely when I made mistakes and seemed to gain more confidence in his own skills, something that he had lacked since the attack.

This morning, he drew his arm back, and with a snap of his elbow and wrist, he launched his knife at the abused dummy. The blade sailed into the chest with a swish and thunk.

We'd had to replace the dried grass and repair the dummy once already, and it looked like we'd have to do it again. The stuffing was falling out various holes.

“See?” His eyes were bright. And I realized not for the first time that I wasn't the only one gaining something from this arrangement. “It's not all about strength. It's about aim too and technique. The blade isn't going to do anything if it's not thrown true.”

That was part of my issue. My blade sometimes sank in, but the angle was usually off, which resulted in a shallow cut that wouldn't do much damage. And with the Joktals' bony body armor, if I didn't hit exactly at their weak points, the blade would bounce off ineffectually.

Trapt stood behind me and lifted my arm with gentle hands. I held a shiny blade in my fist, and he directed my limb in a slow movement of the correct technique. “Like this.” His breath was warm in my ear. His other hand lay propped on my hip, and I was every aware of all the places he was touching me. My belly warmed, and my face heated. What was this feeling? I tried to concentrate on his words, but my mind spun.

“Bazel?”

I stepped out of his grip, feeling like the planet had shifted. I ducked my head to hide my face. My pale blue skin often

showed a purple flush I inherited from my mother when I was hot, embarrassed, or...

... Or?

Or *what*?

I was an adult. I knew how attraction worked, but this was the first time I'd felt this way. And it scared me. It scared me because this was Trapt, my long-time friend, and suddenly my feelings were changing.

I gazed up at Trapt, who stared at me with a furrowed brow. The sun shone on his dark hair that hung in perfect waves around his shoulders. His full lips parted, and his shoulders bunched with muscle as he placed his hands on his hips. "Are you okay?"

Why did I feel this way? Trapt was my friend. But all I could think about was his deep rumbling voice and the heat of his hands. Oh, his *hands*.

I shook my head. "Just tired, and a little hungry."

"I brought some food—"

"I think I should head back."

Normally we ate together, but this feeling was uncomfortable. Was I getting sick? What was going on?

His concerned expression deepened. "I don't like how you look. Let me walk you as close to the stables as I can."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm doing it, Bazel."

We hid the weapons in a hollow of a tree—a much better hiding space than the stall had been and made our way back toward Granit. Trapt remained quiet, and I nibbled my lip until it was raw. I had always known what to say around Trapt. How to act. I could always be myself, but now... I wasn't so sure.

When we reached as far as Trapt dared to go without being caught, I turned around, my hands fidgety at my sides.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I tried to reassure him. “I think I didn’t eat enough this morning.”

He frowned. “Eat as much as you can and get some rest.”

“I will.”

“Let’s take tomorrow off. I’ll see you in two rotations?”

I nodded.

He smiled faintly and then lifted his hand in a wave. “Bye, Bazel.”

I watched as he walked away, until he was no longer visible among the dense trees. Only then did I feel my cheeks beginning to cool. I took a deep breath to get myself under control, and then snuck back into the walls and the stables. I always traveled this way, knowing I could use visiting the animals as an excuse if I was ever caught.

After that, I entered the hall, grabbed a bite to eat, and went in search of my mother. I found her in her office, writing on a tablet she used for food inventory. She glanced up as I walked in. “Hi there.” She placed her tablet down and laced her fingers together on the table.

My mom rarely failed to give me her full attention, and today was no exception. Guilt weighed on me for not telling her the truth about my morning escapades. I had never kept a secret this big from her. And that was probably why I sought her out now and was willing to be so honest with her about something else in my life.

We’d always been close, as I’d spent a large part of my childhood secluded with her, my father, and my pet, Brutus. Just us. Alone. I’d thought the world was only them. And then learned quickly it wasn’t. Recently, Brutus had passed away from old age, and I still missed his being furry body and warm eyes.

“How’s work?” I asked her.

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled. She called the wrinkles at the corner of her eyes crow’s feet, and then had to explain to me what a crow was, and what their feet looked like.

But other than her crow's feet, my mother had barely aged. We were still learning the effects of the mating loks on the human females, but based on some of the older women, like my mother, we were predicting their life expectancy to improve. Drixonians lived hundreds of years, and apparently humans less than one hundred. I hoped my mom lived another three hundred years. I wasn't sure what I'd do without her.

"Work is work. How was your morning?"

I knew I could go to Val or Miranda or any of the other women here, but my mom was my *mom*. When I was confused, she was the first person I sought out. "My morning was fine. Do you have some time to talk about something?"

"Of course." I sank down in a chair, and she came out from behind her desk to sit opposite me. "Everything okay?"

I nodded. "I feel awkward bringing this up but I need your thoughts."

She leaned forward, all attention on me. "Go ahead."

I took a deep breath and remembered what I'd felt in Trapt's close proximity. "How did you know when someone is more than a friend?"

Her lips parted slightly. "Oh." She propped an elbow on the arm of her chair and rubbed her forehead. "I guess this conversation is long overdue."

We'd had what she called *the birds and the bees* talk. But I'd been younger. Sex with a mate had seemed a lifetime away. I didn't understand attraction. And now... well, I was pretty sure what I felt with Trapt was attraction. But why him? Why my friend?

"Well," my mother said after a beat of silence. "There are several things that happen. You want to be around them all the time. You care about what they think. And finally, you feel attraction toward them."

"And how does that feel?"

She reached for my hand. "It can feel like a lot of things. You'll get warm. You'll feel like you had some of Xavy's

spirits when you haven't drunk a drop." Her eyes took on a bit of a distant look, and I knew she was thinking about my father. I tried not to dwell on that. "You'll want to be near them, and you'll seek out ways to touch them, or have them touch you." She focused on me. "Is this something you're feeling?"

Yes. I shrugged. "I don't know. I was just thinking about it."

"Is this about someone specific?"

I shook my head, even though that was a lie. "Not really," I hedged.

She didn't press. My mom had always had to ride a line between being a parent and being my friend. We hadn't had anyone else for so long. Only each other. "Did I help?"

I wasn't confused anymore, but my world had shifted. "You did, mom. Thanks."

She patted my hand. "I'm glad you asked me. You can always talk to me about anything."

I stared into her pretty eyes, comforted by her words. I almost blurted out what I'd been doing with Trapt, but she wouldn't be able to keep that a secret from my father, and I truly was doing this for the good of everyone. "I know."

"And you know that your father and I support you. But you also *are* special, Bazel, to everyone here. And if there's someone you like, please let us know."

I ducked my head. "Females in the old days didn't have to introduce their lovers to their family."

Her gasp took me by surprise. "Do you have a lover?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, mom. I'm just saying."

"I know what you're saying. But it's not the old days anymore. And you're not just any female."

I was so tired of hearing that. I didn't want to be special and sequestered away like a fragile thing. Sometimes I envied Trapt. He could just *be*. He was one of many warriors and he didn't stick out. But me? I was watched everywhere I went.

I wasn't a chit anymore, though. I couldn't throw a tantrum about my life. I had responsibilities I took seriously. Which was why I felt I had to do what I was doing. A lump formed in my throat. "I know."

"You seem upset."

I shook my head again. "Just thinking."

My mother bit her lip. I stared at her blunt white teeth. I'd inherited my father's black fangs. "Okay."

I didn't like her worrying. There wasn't anything to worry about. My feelings were my own. I hadn't told Trapt, and I didn't intend to. Maybe this was just my hormones that my mother had told me about. Maybe all warriors gave me a warm feeling in my stomach now, and eventually one would stand out. That had to be it.

I patted her hand and stood up. "I'm going to make my rounds to check on the chits' chores."

My mother rose. "I'll get back to work. Let me know if you need anything else, all right?"

I nodded, feeling better after our conversation, like I always did. I couldn't take more than one change at a time. Sneaking out to learn how to fight with Trapt was enough. I didn't need adding another layer of confusion by being attracted to him.

I checked in on the chits and then headed out of The Hall and down the main steps. Granit was busting with activity. Drixonian elders sold their wares along the edges of the streets and in small shops. The women had started a currency system, and while it had taken some growing pains, the city had settled into it well.

I took a detour to the training arena, where a clavas of warriors were practicing their grappling skills. All of them were shirtless, blue scales shining in the sun, and hair shimmering a shiny blue-black. They kicked up dirt beneath their booted feet as they growled and snarled at each other. Their muscles bulged. Trapt and I hadn't worked on grappling, as my size would likely prevent a hand-to-hand-combat

victory with anyone, let alone the Joktals, but I found myself wondering how I'd feel wrestling with him. Would he go easy on me? Would he be rough? I imagined him pinning me down, my hands above my head, grinning down at me in victory while he straddled me.

My belly warmed, and my face heated.

I dropped my head in my hands and sighed.

“How are they looking?”

My father's face jerked me to attention. He leaned on the fence beside me, chewing on a handful of sliced, baked tubers. His assessing gaze took in the warriors, and I focused on them as well, pushing the thought out of my mind of Trapt on top of me.

“Good,” I said. I pointed to one warrior in the far corner. “He's favoring his right leg. Might want to have Val check him out.”

He nodded with a small smile. “Good catch.”

“I know they often hide injuries.”

He didn't answer that, and I turned my head to study my father. He was one of the oldest living Drixonians. He'd been a pilot and had defended Corin while his mate had remained on-planet. They'd only been together for a short time as he'd been a young warrior when the virus killed her. He didn't talk about her, and I knew he loved my mother, but sometimes I could see the weight of loss on his broad shoulders.

His kind eyes met mine, and his big palm brushed my hair off my forehead. I swatted him away with a laugh. “I'm not a chit.”

“Ah, but you'll always be a chit to me.”

I nudged the dirt with the toe of my boot. “Any news on the Joktals?”

My dad might have sheltered me physically, but he didn't keep me in the dark about safety of our settlement. I was a female after all, and one day I'd likely hold a place on council where I'd discuss defense strategy with our top drexels.

He frowned. “No. Last we heard they were sequestered behind the walls of their city. Likely planning something. We sent a scout there, but he hasn’t returned yet.”

“What does Daz think?”

“We are defensive strategists.”

“But we took offense against the Uldani.”

“That was a different time and circumstance. We weren’t protecting any borders. We wanted something from them.”

I fell silent. “I’m just worried.”

“We all are, but we discuss this every day. And we’re in agreement to hold steady. Nero has installed more eyes outside our borders. We have scouts stationed all over. We will know when they begin their attack.”

I had to be satisfied with that. And I felt better now that I knew I was doing something about it too. I would likely have to retrieve my weapons soon and keep them in the hall. I would need them one day.

My father patted me on the back. “I’m heading into the arena.”

I watched him enter. As he strode across the dirt, the warriors straightened immediately and greeted him with the Drixonian sign of respect—their wrists crossed in front of their necks, and quiet murmurs of “*She is all.*”

I turned away, content that I’d watched enough of their grappling practice. It wasn’t until I was nearly back in The Hall that a thought occurred to me. I’d just watched dozens of warriors at the peak of their physical form, and I hadn’t felt a thing. Not one little lick of attraction. Nothing. Not until I’d pictured Trapt in my mind.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Just the thought of him grinning at me had me clenching my thighs where I stood.

I was going to have to face the reality. This wasn’t just hormones. This was about Trapt, and only him.

But did he feel any of the same feelings toward me?

SIX

Trapt

Something about Bazel was different this rotation. She'd seemed off when we'd left each other after our last session, and this time she was even *more* distracted. She kept glancing at me. She touched my arm three times with slight brushes of her fingers, which set my scales on fire.

I'd overshot every arrow. My laser fire aim was wildly out of control. And I didn't trust myself to toss a knife.

When we stopped for a break of some bread and jam, she sat so close to me on the fallen log that our thighs brushed. Normally she sat on the ground facing me. I couldn't concentrate on eating and wasn't sure how I managed to choke my food down.

Her proximity was flecking with my head. My groin ached as my cock swelled. I know what that meant—Kutzal hadn't minced words when he'd explained what would happen if I kept hanging around Bazel, and I was terrified that she'd notice. I was going to have to find an excuse to reduce the frequency of our meetings. But then...that meant I wouldn't get to see Bazel, and that was the worst thing that could happen to me.

I was so lost in my head that I missed Bazel talking until she smacked my thigh. "Hey, are you listening?"

I shook myself. "What?"

She tossed a few crumbs of bread, and a small bruppa landed in a flurry of wings. It snatched the crumbs before taking flight again. “I asked if you liked me.”

“Of course I like you.”

She turned her head, deep purple eyes meeting mine. Her hair framed her face in soft black waves. A beaded necklace decorated the graceful arch of her collarbone. Her vest ended in a low vee, and from my angle, I could see down the front to the top of her rounded breasts. Fleck, they looked soft.

Stop looking. Stop looking.

“Are you attracted to me?”

At first, I thought she caught me looking and was calling me out, but when I glanced up, her expression remained soft, curious.

I almost blurted out *of course*, but some sort of self-preservation that Kutzal had nailed into my skull leaped up to save my scales. “Why are you asking me?”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

I swallowed.

“And not just in a friend way. When you touch me, I don’t want you to stop. Your voice makes me warm. I realized I’m attracted to you, and it all makes sense, right?” She seemed to get excited as she swiveled on the log to face me. Her knees brushed the outside of my thigh. “Fatas would want us together, don’t you think? I trust you. I can talk to you. And I... I think I l—”

“Oh fleck.” My groan cut her off. I couldn’t hear anymore. This was torture. I jerked to my feet and paced around the clearing. I refused to look in her eyes, terrified of what I’d see. “Bazel, please.”

“Please, what?” A bit of hurt had crept into her voice, and I wanted to flay myself alive for putting that there.

“I can’t...this isn’t us.” *Liar*. This *was* us. She owned me, and in the old days, I would have been another warrior who would have pursued her until she was wholly mine. But that

wasn't the present. I was still a Lone Wolf, a naught, and a scarred and wounded warrior who would never be on the front lines of any fight because of the attack I'd suffered. No one would want me for Bazel's mate. Not the princess of the Drixonians. I'd already heard the rumblings of warriors who were vying for her attention, and they were the sons of great warriors. The strongest of the strong. The most talented. Wealthy. I was... *me*. What did I have to offer her?

I couldn't do this. I let my gaze trail to Bazel to find her standing now, her fists tight at her side. Her eyes were dry, but her jaw was set and her cheeks reddened.

"I can't," I whispered. "Please understand."

"You can't *what*? Explain so I understand."

My voice stalled in my throat. I knew she'd argue with me. Bazel didn't see things the way I did. But I didn't get the chance to get the words out, because a large furry form burst through the trees and sharp teeth clamped on my arm.

Suddenly the clearing was alive with bodies. Big, red, armored Joktal bodies and two sightless hounds. Flashbacks of my attack hit me, freezing me in place for a moment as pain shot through my arm as the hound tightened its sharp teeth into my scales. Bazel's scream tore through the air, and I jerked myself into action. I ripped my knife from the sheath on my belt and slammed it into the hound's neck. The animal let go with a squeal and fell to the ground, writhing as blood spurted from the stab wound. Bazel was in a fight with a Joktal, and I didn't even think. With a roar, I launched into the fray. Leaping onto the Joktal's back, I twisted his neck with a vicious snap of my arms until I heard the crack of his breaking neck. He crumpled to the ground. I caught sight of Bazel, eyes wide, and hollered, "*Run!*"

She blinked at me, clearly indecisive as a Joktal whip closed around my wrist. The burn from the glowing weapon seared through my entire body. Gritting my teeth, I snarled at her. "Bazel, *run!*"

She took a step back, and the second hound ran past me in her direction. With my free hand, I grabbed it around the neck,

slammed it to the ground, and stuck my knife through the top of its head. The Joktal with the whip yanked with a shout, and my arm was nearly pulled out of its socket. The world tipped, and I hit the ground with a thud that rattled my bones. I ignored the pain and turned to see if Bazel had gotten away. I didn't see her, and as more Joktal bodies crashed through the clearing, I staggered to my feet.

With a slash, I cut the glowing whip holding me, and faced off with half a dozen Joktals. I knew I wouldn't win this fight, but all I cared about was delaying their chase after Bazel.

Licking my lips, tasting blood, I launched myself at them. But six was too many, and soon they had me curled in a ball as fists and kicks rained down on my body. The pain seemed endless, and when I thought they'd finished me off, instead, they tossed me into a cage. I lay slumped on the floor as the cage rattled out of the woods, two more hounds pulling it with chains. Through swollen eyes, I tried to make sense of where we were going.

Nero's eyes would see me, right? As we came to the edge of the Drixonian boundaries, I gazed up to find the small cameras in tact. But a sick feeling settled in my gut. Why hadn't anyone raised an alarm?

Bazel

My fault. My fault. My fault.

I'd done this to Trapt. Sobs threatened to choke me. Blur my vision. I had run blindly back toward Granit, but I couldn't let go of the fact that I'd abandoned Trapt. Had they already killed him? Was he in pain?

I used to see crying as a weakness, but my mother had told me that it was actually a strength. A way to relieve our grief and sadness and then move on to the next emotion in whatever cycle we were on. So I let the tears stream down my face. I let

the sobs take over. But I didn't let it go on long. Because as soon as the tears began to dry up, the next emotion welling up inside of me was anger.

No way would I let Trapt alone. I had trained for this. If I went back to Granit now, they wouldn't immediately take off after Trapt. It was too dangerous. But me? I didn't have to think of an entire city. I only had to think of me. And Trapt.

I stood and listened, but there were no booted footsteps chasing me. In the distance, I thought I could hear chains and the low guttural language of the Joktals. I shuddered thinking of them. I'd never seen one up close before, and they were terrifying. Covered in a bony armor, they had thick red skin and upside-down triangle-shaped skulls and three-fingered hands. They were huge, bigger than Drixonians, and strong. If Trapt hadn't killed the Joktal attacking me, I would have been overpowered in no time.

He'd saved my skin, and now it was my time to save him.

I circled back to the clearing, stepping quietly with stealth like I'd practiced. There, signs of a struggle remained. Two bodies of their sightless hounds, ugly animals with thick hides and wiry, sparse hair. One Joktal body who lay with his neck at a sickening angle. I forced down the bile in my throat and gathered my weapons. The bow and arrows. The laser gun. All the knives. I slipped them into my pack and hauled it on my back.

Clear tracks led out of the clearing—large boot prints, smaller paw treads, and two deep grooves that had to have been made by wheels. Did they have some sort of cart? I set off after the tracks, listening in the distance to a dull rattle. I strained to hear Trapt's voice, his breathing, anything to indicate he was still alive. I didn't want to think about the alternative.

Of course, as I walked, I wondered how the Joktals had made it into our territory undetected. Nero had the area lined with small, nearly undetectable cameras that he monitored back in the city. As I followed the tracks to the edge of our boundaries, I glanced up to find the cameras still in place.

What was going on? Why didn't I hear the roar of the Drixonian bikes? Surely they would have seen the Joktals enter and leave the territory.

But I never heard the bikes. Not as I left our borders, for the first time in my life since I arrived on this planet. Not as I followed the tracks until mid-day, so far away that I could barely see the skyline of the tall city buildings.

I walked with my cora lodged in my throat, starting to second-guess this entire idea. Maybe I should have gone straight to my father. Maybe I should never have secretly met Trapt in the first place. And in the back of my mind, there was still my confession to him. Did he know that I would still do anything for him even if he didn't return my feelings?

Trapt was everything that was good. He was kind, brave, and gentle. If he was another species, he probably wouldn't have been a fighter—I could imagine him working with his hands, building furniture like Hap or cooking in the kitchen. Instead, this was his life, and I hated it for him.

Determined more than ever, I kept going. I ate the snacks I'd brought as I walked, saving some for Trapt, because I needed a reminder that he was alive. He *had* to be. He'd be hungry when I rescued him. So I rationed the food and the qua for him.

Even if I found the Joktals during the day, I wouldn't have been able to do much. As I counted the booted footprints, I knew I was outnumbered at least six to one, in addition to two hounds. I'd need the cover of darkness and a whole lot of luck.

Luck wasn't something the Drixonians believed in, but my mother had used the word a lot. And my parents had mashed it into our belief in Fatas. Sometimes, we needed a little help from her, and I silently talked to her as I walked. *"Please help me rescue Trapt. I'll never ask anything of you again. Just keep him alive and help me get him to safety. He deserves it after all he's gone through. Punish me for the lies if you need to. But please, please save Trapt."*

I didn't get an answer, as I knew I wouldn't, but talking to her kept me busy as my legs ached, my stomach growled, and

fatigue weighed heavy on my body. As the sun began to set, the tracks changed course, turning from the open fields into the cover of trees. I took a wide berth from the tracks, and as the sky continued to darken, a flickering of fire in a small clearing caught my eye. Crouched far away in a dense bush, I took in the sight before me. The flames highlighted several large bodies, giving the armored red skin an orange hue. I stood downwind and watched as the hounds slept without detecting my scent.

And then in the shadows of the trees, I spotted a familiar form huddled in the bottom of a cage. My heart leapt, and I went very still as I watched. But the form didn't move. I tightened my fists around my weapons as forced myself to breathe. I couldn't break down. I couldn't make a noise. But the sight of that blue body so still...

Then he stirred. Black hair ruffled in the breeze. An hand gripped the bars, and I could have sworn I saw the flash of one purple eye. *Trapt*. He was alive. A caged prisoner but alive. And I could work with that.

I remained crouched until the sun had set, until darkness blanketed Corin like a shroud. The hounds woke as the Joktals tossed them the remains of their dinner—bones with scraps of meat. I heard the Joktals talking. One of them kicked the cage, and *Trapt* moved, but remained silent. I clenched my jaw.

Killing them wasn't an option. I would never be able to take out six Joktals and two hounds and then free *Trapt*. I had to trick them. As I waited for the Joktals and hounds to sleep, I formulated a plan. A few mud bogs were nearby, so I scooped up large handfuls into a bundle of leaves. Then I tied up the leaves and hauled the heavy supplies of mud onto my back. This was the tricky part, where I had to travel upwind. Drawing the hounds' attention was important. I'd never outrun them.

They slept while one Joktal remained guard. Occasionally I'd see him poke at *Trapt* with his spear, and it took everything in me not to send an arrow through his neck. But I didn't fully trust my aim yet. And one wrong arrow would wake the entire camp and the hounds. I'd be doomed, and so would *Trapt*.

I reached upwind and carefully peeled off most of my clothes. I kept on my breast band and a thin scrap of underwear. Everything else I hung on a branch before quickly covering myself in the mud to disguise my scent. I coated everything in it—from my hair to my toes. Then I took my clothes and flapped them rapidly in the direction of the Joktal scent. A breeze blew through, aiding my plan, and I decided to thank Fatas for that bit of luck. I saw the moment the hounds smelled my scent lingering on my clothes. Their heads went up, and just as I slipped away from my fluttering clothes, a loud bray cut through the still night air.

The hounds leapt to their feet, and the Juktals came awake with angry cries. Grabbing their weapons, they followed their hounds in the direction of my clothes. Fortunately, I was already well away cutting back behind their camp to find one Joktal remaining guarding an alert Trapt. The scent of his blood reached my nose as I drew closer, and I gripped my knife in my mud-slick hand.

SEVEN

Trapt

I could only see out of one eye, so I focused on what I could hear—the crashing of the hounds through the trees. The heavy breathing of the remaining Joktal guarding me. And also...

Someone *else* was out there.

I turned my head toward the darkness. I couldn't see or smell a thing, but I could have sworn I'd heard the intake of another breath. And then I saw through the trees near my cage, two purple glowing eyes.

At first, I thought warriors had come to rescue me, but then a slender dark form materialized, and my cora slammed into my feet. *Bazel*.

Anger swelled inside me, swift and hot. What the fleck was she doing? She should have been back home now, safe and warm and fed. Not here, covered in... was that mud? All while gripping a knife, eyes focused on the Joktal guard. *Oh no, oh no*. Was she planning...?

I could do nothing but watch from my cage, helplessly and silently, as she continued to creep forward. Her footsteps were silent, and she moved like liquid. The blade glinted in the moonlight.

Her elbow cocked back, and then with a vicious forward thrust that made me proud, she sent the knife flying right between the armored plates of the Joktal guard. The knife sank

into the soft skin of his neck. His body jerked, and he opened his mouth hole to scream, but only a gurgled sound rumbled out.

He gripped the knife and tugged it from his neck. Blood spurted, and he stumbled to his feet, but he was too slow for a motivated Bazel. With quick, lithe leaps, she ripped the keyring from his belt, unlocked my cage and was tugging me out before the Joktal could lurch forward. Blood poured down his chest as he staggered toward us. In the distance, hounds brayed. A Joktal shouted. They were returning. Pain throbbed through my entire body, and my tongue was thick in my mouth. I hadn't had food or qua all day, but I knew I had to push through. Bazel and I had to get free.

Her hand slid into mine, and we melted back into the dense forest. My cora thundered in my chest, and my breathing sounded way too ragged and loud in my ears. My gait was off. I could barely feel my left leg, and I knew we'd never outrun the Joktals or lose the hounds in a footrace.

I tugged Bazel's hand and pulled her in the opposite direction of Drixonian territory. She followed without a word, blindly trusting me. I gritted my teeth against the pain as I continued on. She'd rescued me, and I couldn't let her down. I'd get her to safety if it killed me.

I could hear the moment the Joktals returned to camp to find their fallen guard. More shouting, and then the hounds caught our scent.

We ran on, splashing through streams and wading through muddy bogs until the territory began to look more familiar to me. We were heading north, and the air grew cooler quickly. We ran all night, only stopping for a quick breaks while the hounds and Joktals pursued us. They lost us a few times, but then would pick up our scent again and be on our trail in no time.

As the sun began to peek over the horizon, I knew we were running out of time. I gazed into the sky, seeing the round orb of our sister planet Torin where I'd spent most of my life. Bazel too.

I took us left toward the coast where large reeds of bilkin grass rose above our heads. The stink of them hit me first, and I knew the moment Bazel recognized the plan, as she inhaled sharply. By now, most of the mud she'd covered herself with to disguise her scent was washed off.

I grabbed the reeds and broke them in half. The slime inside oozed out, and I made quick work of slopping it over my head before dumping the reed on top of hers. The scent was overwhelming, a mix of decay and rot that deterred animals from eating the reeds.

Bazel gagged, and her eyes watered, but she bore through it. I tossed the broken reeds into the dense bilkin patch and then motioned for Bazel to follow me.

Skirting the large patch, we reached the cliff edge overlooking the freshas. Endless qua stretched in front of us, and it looked daunting, but I knew this area. This had been the territory Kutzal had assigned me to scout when we lived in a small camp up north. This scouting territory had been easy and relatively safe. At the time, I had thought it was boring, but now I thanked him for some Fatas-induced foresight. This once boring land would save our lives. Or so I hoped. Bazel glanced up at me with concern as the edges of her boots curled over the cliff edge.

“Now,” I said in a low voice. “We hide.”

“Hide?” she whispered.

Hounds brayed in the distance. I nodded. “Get on my back.”

Her gaze dipped to my leg, which shook with pain. “But ___”

I hauled her on a back, and she only made a squeak of protest. On a vine from a nearby tree, I slid down over the side of the cliff, hand over hand, until we reached a small ledge. And just as I remembered, a darkened cave greeted us. Yanking on the vine, it broke off from the tree above us, effectively hiding our descent method. Curling it around my forearm, I carried the vine into the mouth of the cave out of

sight from above. Bazel followed slowly, glancing around cautiously. She stopped suddenly when she saw the cave wasn't empty.

No one else was there. No one but us. But crates of supplies lined the back with thick pelts of fur stacked on top. A fire pit with dry logs sat in the center. The cave wasn't big—there wasn't room for us to do much but sit around the fire or lay down. But we were sheltered.

I sank to the floor with a groan, and only then did my body begin to process the trauma it had been through in the last rotation. My muscles screamed. My bones ached. My eye throbbed so badly that I worried it had fallen out of my skull.

Adrenaline and the need for survival had kept me upright since Bazel had rescued me from that cage, but now my body was depleted. My head spun, and when I tried to speak, my lips wouldn't move right.

“B-Baz-Baz,” I mumbled. When I licked my lips, my tongue was dry. My throat raw.

With the darkness, and my delirium, I could barely see her as she moved quickly in the cave. Crates groaned. She swore. A jug of qua was pressed to my lips, and I gulped greedily. Her soft hand cupped my face and prodded my swollen eye.

“Trapt.” Her face broke, and I tried to reach for her to assure her I was okay. I just needed sleep. Rest. Her warmth and presence. Her voice.

“Tha-Thank you,” I managed to get out.

Her body bucked on a sob. “Stop. This is all my fault.” I could smell her tears. “All my fault.”

I shook my head back and forth, wanting to tell her that no, this wasn't her fault. That we'd be okay. But the action was too much. My body pitched to the side, and as the pain took over, the last thing I felt was the soft touch of her hand on my cheek.

Bazel

Trapt was a bloody mess. I couldn't determine the source of his injuries because he seemed hurt *everywhere*. One eye was swollen shut. His hair was matted with blood and bilkin slime. His left ankle was twice the size of his right.

I shook him in a panic as his head lolled on his shoulders. "Trapt!" I cried out. "Wake up!"

But he remained still and silent. *Lifeless*. Forcing the sob back down my throat, I pressed my ear to his chest. There, I could hear the slow and steady thump of his cora. A small respite of relief washed over me, but that didn't last long. Sitting in the darkened cave with Trapt's still body, I had never felt so alone.

Trapt was so cold, and when I held his hands, I wanted to weep at the swollen and broken joints. Whatever the Joktals had done to him, he'd fought. He'd paid the price with immeasurable pain. And it was all my fault.

But I didn't have time to feel sorry for myself. I couldn't wallow in guilt in shame. I had to do everything I could do keep Trapt alive. I didn't hear the braying of the Joktal hounds, and I suspected Trapt's quick thinking and knowledge of this cave's location had saved our lives. I took stock of the supplies in the cave. I wasn't quite sure how the supplies got here, but I knew we had headed north, closer to the former home of the Lone Wolf clavas. They had been scouts, and many had been gone for half a cycle at a time, so they'd left supplies in abandoned huts, caves, or bunkers. This must have been one of them.

We had several pelts, lots of fresh qua, and a crate full of preserved food. Using the vine that Trapt had climbed down, I tied it to an empty jug and lowered it to the freshas below before pulling it back up, now full of salty qua. Stripping quickly, I used that to wash the bilkin slime off of myself and what little clothes I had left. After setting them out to dry, I wrapped myself in a fur pelt and then lowered the jug again. This time, I cleaned up Trapt so I could get a better look at his

injuries. He was no longer bleeding, and his wounds were healing. He healed faster than humans, and faster than I did. But because of his severe injuries and depleted energy, he wasn't healing as fast as I could have liked.

Digging in the crated supplies, I found a medis folder. Elated, I opened it up only to find the folder empty of medis vials. But there were some other healer supplies, like fresh bandages and some ointments. After laying him down on a clean pelt, I stripped Trapt of his clothes, as they needed cleaned of bilkin slime and blood. I'd seen Trapt naked before when he'd been in the infirmary, but my feelings toward him had changed since then. With strips of clean fabric, I cleaned him carefully, every inch of his scales, from the hair on his head to the tips of his toes. His body was ravaged, but still strong. He'd gained weight since living in Sari, and he was no longer the skinny young warrior he'd once been.

I placed a fur pelt over his lap as I worked, and when he was clean and smelled like the fresh salty qua and not bilkin slime, I worked on the worst of his injuries. A cut on his brow was cut to the nubbed bone. I splinted his broken fingers and wrapped his ankle. Leaning back, I surveyed my work, and thanked my mother for urging me to learn some healer skills from Val. I didn't have all the supplies I would have liked, but I had enough. At least, I hoped.

A breeze picked up. I'd worked most of the rotation on Trapt, and the sun had begun to set. My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything since the previous rotation.

Food didn't sound appetizing to me. I was too wracked with guilt and worry, but I knew I had to keep up my strength to care for Trapt. I chewed on some jerky and dried berries until the sun dipped below the horizon, plunging us into the dark and cold. The cave walls protected us from the worst of the freshas breeze, but I could still feel the chill air on my skin.

Still naked, I pressed my body against Trapt's and covered us both with all the pelts in the cave. His body heat had risen since I'd cleaned him of the slime, and along with my heat, we created a pocket of warm air under our pelts.

He remained still, but his breathing sounded less ragged, and his cora beat stronger. Occasionally he'd moan or roll his head. A few times, he flexed his broken fingers only to grimace.

I wrapped my arms around him and lay my head on his chest, right over the beat of his cora. Only then did I allow myself to close my eyes and rest.

The sun on my face startled me awake, and for a moment I wondered why the window in my room had been left open. A breeze blew on my face, and I wrinkled my nose before rolling onto my back with a whine. "What?" I murmured before the scent of the freshas hit me, cool and salty.

My eyes flew open. I wasn't safe in my bedroom at the hall. I was hiding out in a cave with Trapt far from home.

"Trapt!" I sat up in surprise and looked down at the form next to mine. He was still asleep next to me, his chest rising and falling with every breaths. The color had returned to his ruddy cheeks, and one of his hands held mine on his chest. When I tried to tug it free, he gripped it harder in his sleep and whispered, "Bazel."

He was so much better than yesterday, and I had every hope he'd recover well, although it would take time. But I also became very aware that he would likely wake soon, and we were lying next to each other completely naked.

I pulled the pelt to cover myself and clutched it at my throat. I tugged my arm again, and this time, his eyelids fluttered. I went very still as he opened his eyes. One was still swollen, but he was able to get it open halfway before fixing both purple irises on me. His gaze was immediately alert. Drixonians were rarely groggy when they woke. He blinked once. "Bazel? Are you okay?"

Battered and swollen, likely in pain, and he was asking me if I was okay. Sometimes I resented *She is All*. It was supposed

to make me feel treasured, but right now, I felt useless. “Don’t ask me that.”

His muscles bulged as he braced himself to a sitting position. The pelt fell to his waist. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*?” My voice was shrill. “I nearly got you killed. For a moment when you slumped over, I thought you were dead.”

He winced. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

Frustration flared inside of me. “Don’t say sorry to me. *I* should be saying I’m sorry to *you*. *I’m* the reason this all happened.”

He shook his head and reached for me. “You saved me.”

“I might have saved you, but the reason you even needed saving in the first place was because of me. *I’m* the one who insisted we sneak away to train. *I* made us vulnerable. And you...” I glanced at the bandages littering his body. “And you got hurt badly. Again.”

He surveyed his body and prodded his eye before flexing his fingers. A small grin tilted his lips. “I’m healing well.”

“Trapt,” I whispered. My hand slipped on the pelt, lowering it to just above my breasts. “Stop being so kind.”

“What do you want me to say?” he leaned closer, until I could make out every little scar on his face. “You want me to blame you? I won’t do it.”

“It would make me feel better if you were angry with me.”

He shrugged. “Well, I’m not.”

I nibbled my lip as he studied my face, and then his gaze began to roam. “Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?” He tugged the pelt from my fist, and before I could grab it back, it fell to my waist.

We both froze as he stared at my bare chest. His pupils dilated, and with a quick jerk of his arm, he snatched the pelt, held it at the base of my neck, and turned me so my back was against his chest.

There, we both remained silent as our breaths misted white in the cool morning air. He was strong and warm against my back, and the beat of his cora slammed into my spine, echoing the rhythm of my own.

“I-I cleaned us,” I whispered into the darkened cave.

He didn’t say anything for a long time, and I felt the nudge of something hard in my lower back. I knew what it was, and I felt my own body answer his arousal as my lower belly clenched. I sucked in my breath just he shifted back and released me.

I glanced over my shoulder to find him pressed against the far wall with his fist clutched in the fur pelt at his groin. His eyes were wild, his nostrils flared. “Stop,” he whispered.

I swiveled to face him. “Stop what?”

“Your... scent.”

I sniffed the air. “Do I still smell like slime?”

He shook his head, and that’s when I caught the musky scent emanating from me. And as soon as I smelled it, my stomach clenched again, and suddenly I couldn’t think of anything else. I couldn’t stop it. I could only focus on the Drixonian male in front of me. The one I was attracted to. The one I sought as my mate.

I’d found some old tomes in the basement of The Hall in Granit, detailing how mating worked between male and female Drixonians. I hadn’t known what kind of traits I’d inherited, but now that I was faced alone with Trapt, naked and aroused, I realized that when it came to mating, I was more Drixonian than human. I had read about females feeling a mating frenzy, and now I understood it for the first time. My skin felt hot, my mouth watered. My breasts swelled to the point of pain and my nipples peaked to hard points. My belly clenched again, and I crept forward on my hands and knees, the pelt forgotten on the cave floor.

EIGHT

Trapt

Her scent filled the air until I was dizzy with it. Her skin shone slick and smooth as she rose up onto her knees in front of me.

“Bazel, stop,” I murmured, but they were just words. There was no command behind them, no intent. I didn’t want her to stop any more than I wanted to die. She was a vision of blue flesh and black hair and soft curves.

I’d been taught how to please a female, Drixonian and human alike. Bazel had always been a beautiful mix of both, but right now, in this cave, she seemed all Drixonian. Her cheekbones seemed to be sharper. Her horns vibrated. And that smell... that smell filtered into my pores until I felt drunk. My cock was a hardened spike between my legs and my balls were tight lumps full of seed.

The urge to breed was overwhelming, nearly suffocating, and it took all of my willpower to resist plunging into her tight heat and filling her with me until she was bursting, until she screamed my name. Until she was mine.

But I couldn’t. Not now. Not on the coarse dirty ground of a cave.

Her hands sought me out, grabbing at my shoulders as she straddled me. Her cunt was dangerously close to my cock, and the only thing separating us was the pelt I still clutched at my groin.

I couldn't let her get any closer. This position was dangerous, and I didn't trust myself when she was so near. I gripped her around the waist and hauled her to her back onto the fur pelt she'd left behind. She squirmed in protest with a breathless moan that went right to my balls.

Her breasts were full and ripe, and I lapped at the stiff peaks with my tongue. Her hands dove into my hair, her fingers tightening around the strands as she pulled me closer. I remembered her words before we were taken in what felt like a cycle ago.

Fatas would want us together, don't you think?

I didn't think. I didn't know. I wasn't sure. But all I could do now was focus on what was in front of me, and that was a naked Bazel moaning my name as her claws dug into my scalp. "Trapt, please," she begged. "I need you. I need filled."

By might of Fatas, I was only so strong. Everything about her was perfect, from her rounded hips to her soft belly, to the way her breasts heaved and jiggled with each motion of her body. Her black hair spread out on the pelt below us, and her eyes fired up at me like indigo stars.

The taste of her skin was heavy on my tongue, and I recalled all the training I'd received even though I'd never thought, in a million cycles, that I'd touch a female. I slid down her body to where her scent was most pronounced between her legs. Her flesh shone there, covered in her glistening aroused slick.

With her legs over my shoulders, I knelt there and pressed my nose to the top of her cunt. I inhaled deeply as she trembled beneath me, and a fresh rush of slick coated her inner thighs. "Trust me, Bazel," I said just as I licked her cunt.

She might have been trying to speak, but her voice only came out on a garbled moan as I feasted on her cunt, lapping at her wet folds and swirling my tongue around that bundle of nerves at the peak. The bulb there was delicious and hard, a sweet bud that I couldn't stop sucking on. And each time I did, Bazel's body would jolt. She'd gush sweetly, and her legs would clamp around my head. She said my name. She said

please. She said a lot of things, but I couldn't focus on her words when her taste slid down my throat like the best drink. I was in sweet oblivion feasting on her. And when I plunged my tongue inside and began to push deep in my chest, the vibrations sent her into orbit. She screamed and shook before her inner walls rippled over my tongue. She came in a hot rush into my mouth, my name on her lips as she shuddered.

I didn't touch myself, but I felt the moment my balls drew up tight. As I swallowed her sweetness, my cock bucked, and my seed spurted onto the cave floor between my legs. My hips bucked, seeking a sweet heat that I denied myself. My balls drained to the point of pain, and my cock kicked unhappily in the cool air.

I pulled myself from between Bazel's legs to find her flat on her back, chest heaving, eyes staring up at the ceiling of the cave. Worried, I crawled up her body, but as soon as I got close to her face, she threw her forearm over her eyes.

I hesitated, then sank down onto the fur next to her. I covered her with a pelt, tucking it in around her. Did she regret what we'd just done? Was she embarrassed? Should I have rejected her outright?

My fang worried my lower lip until I drew blood. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I slowly tugged on her arm until she dropped it from her eyes. They were wet. She'd been crying. "Bazel, please. Don't cry."

Her body bucked on a sob, but she didn't speak.

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"Do you regret it?"

Her eyes turned to mine, and my stomach churned. "Do you?" she whispered. "I know you don't... you didn't... want me like that."

That wasn't true, but this was complicated. "I never said I didn't want you."

"You said—"

“I don’t remember getting the chance to say much of anything before we were interrupted.”

She scrunched her lips to the side and fell silent.

I sighed and lay back down, pillowing the side of my head on my arm. I drew Bazel onto her side to face me and bundled the pelt under her head. Her scent was still all around us, and I could smell my release like a shameful secret. Did she smell it too?

“We aren’t two average Drixonians. You’re Tark’s daughter, the first of your kind, and I’m... I’m a battered son of naught.”

Her eyes darkened. “We don’t use that term anymore.”

“Maybe not, but it doesn’t change who I am. It doesn’t remove the brand from the back of my neck.” I rubbed the burned mark with my fingers, feeling the raised bump of the circle with a line through it. “Your father has plans for you, mates in mind that he wants to see you with—”

“That’s not the way Drixonians work. Females can choose.”

I shook my head. “You know in your cora that’s not the way it is now. Before the virus? Yes. But not now while we’re trying to rebuild our civilization. No one wants to see me of all warriors mate and breed with the princess.”

Her eyes watered. “I told you to stop calling me that.” She shoved away from me, turning to give me her back with a haughty sniff. “Look, if you don’t want me, just say so—”

I pushed her to her back and pinned her hands beside her head. She let out a squeak before staring up at me defiantly, but I wasn’t ready for this conversation to be over. “I do want you. I have wanted you the moment I opened my eyes in infirmary. I would die for you a thousand times over. But what I won’t do is put my own desires over the promise of your future and that of our society. Maybe that makes me a coward, but that’s all the more reason I’m not right for you.” I swallowed. “But never doubt I’d give my life for you. Nothing is more important to me than you.”

Her eyes softened, and her fists relaxed. “Then be by my side,” she whispered. “Claim me.”

I dropped my head, determined to remain strong. “Please don’t ask me that.”

She squirmed against my hold, and I let her go as she sat up with the pelt clutched at her throat. With her head turned, I admired her beautiful profile—the slope of her nose, her full lips and proud chin.

“To you, am I Bazel or am I the future of the Drixonians?” Her head turned and her gaze speared me.

“Don’t—”

“Answer me. Am I a womb that should be given to the strongest warrior? Or am I a free female to choose who I want?”

My mouth went dry. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s not?” Her chin wobbled, but she held firm despite the tears spilling over her bottom lashes. “Then how do you think I feel?”

My scales prickled. My gut churned. I had been so strong in my resolve, but now I got the very real sense that I was wrong. Absolutely wrong. I fought for the right words. “To me, you’re Bazel.”

“That’s a lie,” she said with a broken voice. “You see me as a female to be won—a prize that you won’t even fight for. And all I’m asking you to do is care for me. Be by my side. Be my friend and mate.” Her next words cut me like a knife. “I had thought you were the one for me. I thought you saw me. But maybe I was wrong.”

I reached for her. “Bazel—”

She slid away. “No.”

My fingers closed around thin air as Bazel’s words echoed around in my head, each one worse than any Joktal punch. “You’re asking a lot of me.”

“I know,” she said quietly, her back to me. Her hair hung down her bare back, and she trembled slightly. “And I guess it’s too much.”

Bazel

I had no appetite. I felt my strength flagging, but food made me ill. I didn’t do much but lay on the cave floor, covered in pelts, staring at the opposite wall.

Trapt tried to get me to eat. He tried to get me to talk. He tried a lot of things, but I had gone numb. Maybe I was mourning the loss of a friendship that had never been as real as I thought it had been. But yet I still wanted him. As he moved about the cave and caught guppas to eat in the freshas below, I found myself watching him—the way his muscles shifted as he walked, the fall of his hair, the dexterity of his fingers.

When he ate, I found myself fixating on his tongue. I felt the echo of that way he’d used it between my legs, and sometimes I’d feel a small bloom of arousal at the memory, but I’d quickly snuff it out by remembering his words to me. And that was enough to stop it before he could smell it.

I knew he’d spent his release on the floor. I had smelled it. And I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I’d seen the hard spike of his cock between his legs, and sometimes my lower stomach would clench at the thought of him driving it into me.

But he’d been very clear he would not. He’d brought me to a climax to kill the arousal blooming between us. I’d been so sure all of that meant we were mates. Maybe even cora-eternals like my parents. But maybe it had just been... a male and a female taking care of our bodies.

Of course Trapt had said he’d die for me, that I meant more to him than anything. *She is All*, right? His was born and bred to feel that way. But I wasn’t special. I wasn’t Bazel to him, like I thought I was. I was a female, and a special one at

that, a female who was to be saved for a warrior who proved that he deserved to have chits.

The thought of any other warrior touching me made my gut churn. I was around warriors all the time, and they treated me well. But I'd never, in all my life, felt the way about one of them in the way I felt about Trapt. Was it possible? Did I just need more time? Had I just not found the right one?

I wallowed for half a rotation before I pulled myself out of it. There were larger issues at play here. The Joktals had begun their aggression. The Drixonians would know we were missing by now. At least, I hoped. I still couldn't figure out why Nero's eyes hadn't spotted the Joktals.

So I pulled myself up and forced myself to eat something. Trapt watched me quietly, which only irritated me. I wasn't sure what I expected. For him to speak up? I knew Drixonians. Half of me was one. He believed what he was doing was the right thing, and he'd stick to it stubbornly. I couldn't even fault him, really. I was the selfish one expecting more from him than he was willing to give.

When I finished eating and had washed up, I dressed in some spare clothes I'd found among the supplies and stood in the center of the cave with my hands on my hips. Trapt stood near the entrance, staring out into the freshas.

"We should start thinking of a plan to get out of here," I said.

He slowly turned his head. "I've been thinking of a plan this whole time."

Right, he hadn't spent his time feeling lovesick and sorry for himself. What was wrong with me? My city and family could be in danger, and I was more worried about Trapt returning my feelings. "Right, I'm sorry. I just... I have myself together now. What can I do to help?"

He heaved a sigh and squinted into the sun. "Well, not much seeing as all the vines I would have used to climb up have been cut."

My cora beat stuttered. "Wh-what?"

“The Joktals must have figured out we had gone over the side. They cut all the vines to prevent our access up.”

I forced myself not to panic. “So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying we’re stuck here until I heal enough to climb the cliff. I’ve done it before, but not when I was injured.”

“I never asked—what is this place?” I gestured around to the supplies.

“This area was my scouting territory, and I used this cave to store my rations.”

“So that’s why you know this area so well.”

He nodded. “It’s pretty safe, which was why Kutzal gave it to me.” He scuffed his boot on the ground with a small, crooked smile. “He always went easy on me.”

I drew closer to him and leaned against the mouth of the cave with my arms crossed. I had always been curious about his relationship with Kutzal. Even though I knew the older Drixonian would never hurt me, he still scared me a little. “Kutzal always seem so harsh, but that’s not all there is to him is there?”

Trapt met my gaze. “Other Drixonians are like big brothers, but Kutzal is the closest to a father I’ve ever had. He’s the reason I’m alive. He always protected me, and I think when I was hurt... it affected him the most.”

Guilt gnawed at my gut. “He’ll be worried about you.”

“And everyone will be worried about *you*.”

“Hey,” I admonished. “Everyone will be worried about *you*, too. Not just Kutzal.”

He eyed me, and this was dangerously close to our previous conversation that we couldn’t conclude. His eyes told me to drop it, and I agreed. Venturing farther out to the edge of the cliff, I peered up. The rock face was a straight incline.

“Do you think they’re waiting up there for us?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. But I can’t be certain.”

“I can climb up and try to grab a vine for us,” I suggested.

He gave me a look of horror. “Absolutely not.”

“But you said you climbed—”

“With practice on other cliffs with Kutzal waiting at the bottom to catch me. Lots of practice. And there’s no room for error here. You fall off, and the portcrewllers in the freshas will be ready to tear you apart.

I gazed down at the freshas. Large tentacled shapes moved beneath the surface. I gulped.

He strolled back into the cave, and I followed. “So what, we just wait?”

“We wait.” He rolled his shoulder and winced. “I’ll be good in another rotation or two.”

“I feel useless.”

He glared at me. “You’re not useless. If it wasn’t for you, I’d still be in a Joktal cage. Actually, I’d probably be dead.” He squatted on the ground to clear away the guppas bones from his morning meal. “I still couldn’t believe my eyes. You just... appeared, covered in mud so I could only see your eyes and the glint of your knife. I swore I was seeing things. How did you draw them away from the camp site?”

“I put my clothes upwind. That was really all it took. Those hounds did the work for me.”

He smiled. “That’s smart, Bazel. Good job.”

I wanted to preen. “Thanks.”

A loud smacking sound behind me had my cora in my throat as I whirled around. Trapt surged to his feet and leapt in front of me, his machets raised, as the edge of a vine twisted on the ground. It shook, and I could hear the soft grunts of something descending on the vine. Had the Joktals been waiting and decided it was time to finish us off?

I reached for a weapon, and my hand closed around a knife on top of one of the supply crates, but Trapt was blocking me

with his chest puffed out, his tail lashing angrily, and his shoulders rounded.

Booted feet came into view, and I braced just as a figure dropped to the ground in a crouch. Backlit by the sun, I could just barely make out the familiar markings.

A Drixonian.

He stepped further into the cave, and my knife dropped on the ground as my eyes landed on the massive form of Vinz. Trapt's machets lowered as Vinz grinned with delight. He hollered over his shoulder. "You owe me a bottle of spirits. Told you he'd be here!"

Another form dropped to the ground, and Lukent strode into the cave. "For fleck's sake," he gripped Trapt around the back of the neck and touched their foreheads together. "Kutzal is on a rampage over you. We only kept him from the search because Trix is heavy with their chit."

More guilt swallowed me. I'd caused them so much stress. Lukent released Trapt and then reached for me. I found myself wrapped in a strong hug by the big, bald, scarred Drixonian who rarely showed much emotion at all. His big palm patted my back. "So glad you're safe, Bazel." He stepped back and nodded at Trapt. "Proud of you. *She is all.*"

"*She is all,*" Trapt murmured before glancing at me. "But she did most of the—"

I pinched him, and he yelped before falling silent.

I smiled at Lukent and Vinz. "He kept me safe. I'm unhurt."

"That's good. Your father is ready to behead every Joktal by himself."

"So you know we were taken by them?" Trapt asked. "They entered our territory without anyone knowing."

"They found a way to blind Nero's eyes. They showed nothing was amiss all while the Jotakls snuck in. Nero figured out something was wrong quickly, but by then, they'd already left. He was able to recover the footage of what really

happened, and we saw they'd taken you." His gaze shifted to Bazel. "And we saw her trailing you."

"I couldn't let them get far without him," I said. "It was my fault we were there in the woods in the first place."

"That's for people above our pay grade to handle," Vinz said. "Let's get back up this cliff and back home before Tark razes the planet."

"Kutzal too," Lukent added.

I made to climb up the vine myself, but Lukent instead hauled me on his back, while Vinz helped Trapt. I was worried about him, as he was still injured from the Joktal beatings, but with Vinz's help, he was able to make it to the top of the cliff.

Nestled in the cover of some bushes were Lukent and Vinz's bike. I'd never been so relieved to see the hover bikes, and I clutched the handlebars in front of Lukent as the bike roared to life and we took off back toward Granit.

I glanced over at Trapt, but he stared straight ahead. I realized then that the rescue was the easy part. Getting home and facing my parents—and Kutzal—was going to be the real battle.

NINE

Trapt

The last time I'd talked to Daz, he'd thanked me for my sacrifice after I'd been attacked. Now, I stood before him thinking this wouldn't be as good of a meeting. We were in the grand room on the first floor of The Hall. The high ceiling rose above our heads and murals decorated the walls.

Tark stood next to Daz, glowering at me like he wanted to rip my head off, and Kutzal stood off to the side fuming in silence. Lukent and Vinz were on either side of him, and they were likely the only thing holding him back from laying into me.

Bazel was defiant, standing with her chin high as she met her father's gaze without intimidation.

As we'd ridden back into our territory, the amount of Drixonian guards lining our borders had more than doubled. Warriors were everywhere, armed to the teeth, ready to defend and protect.

"Explain how this happened." Tark spoke to me.

I opened my mouth, but Bazel cut me off. "I asked him to help me learning some fighting skills. We weren't doing anything wrong."

"If you weren't doing anything wrong, then why didn't you tell me? Why sneak out?" Tark demanded.

Bazel fidgeted before speaking up again. “Because I know you think it’s a waste of time, but I don’t. And Trapt was the only one willing to help me.”

“He was the only one willing to help you, because he’s the only one stupid enough to do it,” Kutzal spat.

I flinched, knowing Kutzal didn’t fully mean what he said, but his anger always had a mind and voice of his own.

“He’s not stupid,” Bazel fired back, and I closed my eyes, wishing to melt into the floor. This was already going south fast.

“I take responsibility for what happened,” I met Tark’s livid gaze.

“No, *I* do,” Bazel said quickly, and I wish she would stop because she was making this worse. “It was my idea to ask him to help me train. If I hadn’t made him, then this wouldn’t have happened—”

“If you hadn’t *made* him?” Tark growled. “He has his own mind, Bazel. He could have told you no, and that was what he should have done.”

That seemed not to occur to her. She glanced at me helplessly, but I knew the best action in this situation was to take my verbal beatings and move on. I was in pain, exhausted, and worried this might be one of the last times I’d ever see Bazel. And the fact that she was still trying to defend me after I’d rejected her was like poison in my wounds.

“I’m telling you, it’s my fault,” Bazel insisted. “I—”

Daz raised his hand to signal silence, and Bazel clamped her mouth shut. A muscle worked in her jaw as she vibrated with tension.

“The Joktals found a way to interfere with the signal from Nero’s eyes,” he said. “By the time we realized the issue, it was too late. You had already been taken. And Bazel had already gone after you. But this shouldn’t have happened. Trapt, you made the wrong decision. I see you the way you look at Bazel, and I was willing to let it play out. But you placed your own selfish desires to spend time with her over the

good of the whole and against *She is All*. You risked her and the rest of us.”

The words should have hurt more, but I was numb now. Numb to the fact that I’d lost everything, from Bazel to Daz’s respect. Kutzal seethed, his breath hissing between his clenched teeth, and even Vinz looked disappointed.

But the worst of it was knowing they were right. I’d flecked up.

Bazel took a step forward, her eyes wet. “Daz, please. Dad, that’s not what happened—”

“Kutzal,” Daz said. “Please see that Trapt sees the healer. I want a full report on all he knows from his capture. Have some of your warriors take him back to Sari, but I need you and your council here to discuss our defense plan.”

Kutzal nodded. “Yes, drexel.”

“Wait,” Bazel stepped toward me and reached for me, but before her fingers could brush my arm, her father was there tugging her away.

“Let’s go,” he said with a gentle grip on her shoulder. “Your mother is sick with worry.”

“But Trapt—”

“He’s not your concern.”

Those four words were the final blows. I went cold. Kutzal approached me, Vinz and Lukent behind him. His hand gripped the back of my neck as he steered me away from Bazel and out of the room. He talked, saying things like, *I told you so*. And *be glad you’re hurt, or I’d beat you senseless*. That was an empty threat as he wouldn’t actually hurt me, but I kind of wished he would. Anything was better than the empty feeling in my gut and the hole in my cora.

I felt like the walking dead as he took me down to the infirmary where Val worked on me with tight lips. Even *she* was disappointed in me.

Eventually she finished, Lukent and Vinz left, and I was alone with Kutzal as I sat on the cot staring at the ceiling.

Kutzal pushed his chair closer to me and rested his elbows on the side of the cot near my hip. I expected more yelling. A lot of growls. But instead, his voice came out a low, sad rasp. “I knew you were sneaking away from the village. I thought you were going to Granit to see Bazel, and I let it happen. I didn’t know you were in the woods teaching her how to shoot a bow and arrow. I should have followed you. I should have confronted you. Then you wouldn’t have been injured. I’m as mad at myself as I am at you.”

My scales prickled This just kept getting worse. Kutzal wasn’t responsible for any of this. I turned my head. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t do that. This isn’t on you.”

“I’m responsible for you.”

“I’m responsible for myself.”

He sighed. “Why can’t you say no to her?”

“I can,” I whispered, recalling our time in the cave. Her smell. Her tears. “I *can* say no to her. And I *have*.”

Our gazes met. I didn’t have to say more. He rubbed his forehead with an agonized groan. “This is complicated.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. She realizes now that I’m not who she wants.” Fleck, that hurt to say. Because no matter what, she would always be who I wanted. This upcoming war would have to kill me, because I’d die before I had to see her with another warrior.

“I didn’t want this for you,” Kutzal seemed to reach for me and then retracted his arm. He wasn’t the touchy type. “I want you well and whole. Happy.”

“We can’t all find a Trix,” I said with a small smile. I quickly winced as a cut on my cheek ached.

“After we take care of the Joktals, you and I need to figure out what to do with you. I’ll give you anything, Trapt. You can cook. Apprentice with Hap to make furniture. Anything but a future with Bazel.”

I didn't anticipate making it through the war. I figured it was the best outcome. "Sure." I tried to sit up. "Do you think I'm selfish for agreeing to train Bazel?"

And then he reached for my hand and squeezed. His rough palm rasped along my scales. "No, no I don't."

"She doesn't want to be treated like she's fragile. She wants to be strong like Trix. It's a lot to ask of her to represent the future of the Drixonians."

"I know she didn't ask for that. Just like I didn't ask to be a son of naught. But sometimes it's our lot in life, Trapt. Maybe Fatas will bless us differently in the next one, yeah?"

He squeezed my hand again before standing up. "Get some rest. I'll send Tinzal and Ripper to take you back to the village. I should be back in a few rotations."

He walked to the door, and after one last look at me, he offered me a brief, very Kutzal-like smile, and walked out the door.

Bazel

My mom wouldn't stop hugging me. She fretted over small cuts and bruises. She combed my hair until it shone and then braided it three times before she was satisfied. I was a grown female, but I let her fuss over me. It was likely the guilt, and the fact that my father stood in the corner of my bedroom with his arms crossed, a silent threat in his eyes to make my mother happy or else.

I mostly wanted to diffuse the situation, and after the scene in the meeting room, I was drained and confused. I knew in the deepest recesses of my cora that Trapt wasn't selfish. He hadn't put himself over others. He'd put *me* over others. And wasn't that what I'd accused him of *not* doing?

I wanted to be angry and seethe and resent him, but I couldn't. Because Trapt had never lied to me. He'd never deceived me, and now that the dust had settled, I could see he was being put in a nearly impossible situation.

I picked at my claws as my mother shoved a plate of food near me. As good as the warm meat smelled, I didn't have much of an appetite. Still, I nibbled on the food to make her happy.

Slowly, the anger seemed to bleed from my father until he slumped down in a chair at my side. I hated how weary he looked.

"I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't talk to me about your desire to learn some skills," he said.

"I never want to feel helpless," I said. "I want to be able to fight and defend if I ever have to."

He sighed. "And I wanted to believe that you'll never have to. That I'll always be here to protect you, as well as every Drixonian warrior. But I see now that no matter what precautions I take, you can still be vulnerable."

"I'm sorry." I gripped his hands. "I really am. But please understand Trapt wasn't being selfish. He only wanted to help me because he understood how I felt." And then I'd thrown it all back in his face. The words I'd spoken to him haunted me.

I had thought you were the one for me. I thought you saw me. But maybe I was wrong.

"But Trapt knew what was at stake. He knew the risks."

"Did he? We trusted Nero's eyes. We thought we were safe."

"He knew the risks," my father repeated.

I wanted the blame on me. "Please don't fault him for this. Please."

My father studied my face and then he reached out and gently brushed the side of my face with the back of his hand like he'd used to when I was a chit. "Give it some time. Emotions are high now."

A knock came at my door, and my father stood up to answer it. A warrior stood outside. "Daz is asking for you."

"Go on," my mom said. "We'll be fine."

With a solemn nod, my dad left, closing the door softly behind him. He took the tense air with him, and I finally exhaled.

My mom reached for my hands and rubbed them with her thumbs. She looked pale, and like maybe she'd lost weight in the few rotations I'd been gone. At this point, guilt was going to eat me alive. "I'm sorry, mom."

"Stop saying you're sorry," she sighed. "You couldn't have known this would happen." She glanced up, meeting my eyes. "I'm upset you didn't tell me what you were doing. I took for granted that you were always honest with me."

"I regret it, mom. More than you know."

She nodded and patted my hand. "So will you be honest with me about something?"

"What?"

"How do you feel about Trapt?"

I pulled my lips between my teeth. Released them. Tears threatened, and I blinked rapidly.

"Oh honey," she murmured just as my shoulders bucked with sobs. She pulled me into a hug, and I clung to my mother as I blubbered out what had happened. That I'd confessed to him, that I knew he felt the same way about me, but that he said we couldn't be together. I told her about the harsh words I'd said to him, and my regret. I also shared with her my fear that I'd never make it right. That our relationship was broken irretrievably. So I'd lost not only the male who I thought was my future mate, but also my best friend.

All the while she rubbed my back. When my sobs calmed, she wiped my face like I was a chit. And I felt like one too. Small and weak.

"Listen to me," my mother said. "This is not the end if it's not meant to be. I believe in Fatas as much as Tark does."

Nothing about love and relationships is easy and convenient. It's messy and complicated and damn difficult." She held my face in her hands. "And I happen to like Trapt for you. He looks at you like you hold his world in your hands."

I sniffed. "Not anymore."

"Don't say that. Let the dust settle. Everyone is on edge because of the Joktals, and a lot of us let our emotions get away from us because we feared the worst for you and Trapt. This isn't over, Bazel. I'm sure of it."

"What does Dad think of Trapt?"

My mother's hesitation was all I needed to know. I dropped my head in my hands with a groan.

"Honey," my mom said. "You have to understand he's an elder. He still holds some prejudice from the old society, but he's working on it. So to him, Trapt is not the ideal mate for you." I groaned again and she shook me. "But your father is not your owner."

I dropped my hands from my face. My mother had never spoken his direct. I glanced up to find her eyes had sharpened. "I wouldn't have allowed that from a human husband when I lived on Earth, and I won't allow that here either. We are all still finding our feet on this planet, but we will not fall into patriarchal ways. Your mate is your choice, and I know that every female on this planet will die on that hill for you and for our daughters. You understand that, right? We are the owners of ourselves. And if there's one thing I do in my life, it will be to instill that legacy on generations to come."

My mother was a strong woman, but I'd never heard her talk with this much conviction. It took my breath away. My tears no longer fell, and there was a burning in my gut that hadn't been there before. I recognized it as hope. And a little bit of inner power. Confidence. "Mom," I whispered. "I love you."

Her stern expression melted into a smile. "I love you too." She hugged me again, and I nestled into her neck, smelling her familiar scent like a balm. "Trust in Fatas," she said into my

hair. “I’m not saying she’ll lead you to Trapt, but she will lead you. I promise.”

I closed my eyes and squeezed her back. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for coming back to us safe.”

TEN

Trapt

Rotations passed while I healed in my hut in Sari. I was mostly left alone except for Lu and Maisie who kept finding excuses to deliver me food or tidy up my space. I didn't talk to them much. I didn't have anything to say.

Sometimes I'd open my eyes to find Trix standing over my bed, her protruding belly nearly blocking out the sun. I felt most guilty to her. In stressing out Kutzal, I'd put stress on her as well, during a time where she should be relaxed and taking care of herself. In addition, Kutzal was still in Granit strategizing with Daz. Most of the warriors of the village were gone, either on patrol or training. So I was mostly left alone with the females.

After three rotations, Lu tugged me out of my bed and made me sit with her under the moke tree shucking the tula husks for dinner. I flexed my fingers, relieved there were no longer aches in the joints. Physically, I had healed from the Joktal beating. I barely even thought about it anymore. Now, all that was on my mind was what had happened after in that freshas cave with Bazel. Sometimes, I swore I could still taste her, and then I shut that line of thinking down quick. I couldn't let myself go there and indulge in the memory or I'd go mad.

Lu nudged me with her foot. "Hey."

"Hey what?"

“What are you thinking about?”

Her direction question caught me off guard, and I almost blurted out everything. Instead, I just shrugged.

“Okay.” Her eyes glittered. She was not content to sit in silence. “So what happened with you and Bazel before you were rescued? You had a few rotations alone.”

I shucked with more aggression. “We talked.”

Her hand rested on my forearm, stopping my movements. “Look at me.”

Lu talked a lot, loved to gossip, and was nosey. But all those things were why I liked her. If she sensed unhappiness in someone, she wanted to fix it. I understood why Axton risked so much for her. “Talk to me, Trapt. I know something happened, and I know you’re suffering inside. Most of the warriors see you healed outside and assume it’s all okay. But I know better. All of us females do. And you know we care about you.”

“You’ve been talking about me then?” I asked with a lightness I didn’t feel.

She smiled. “Of course.”

“Do these tula husks actually need shucked or was this a way to get me out of my hut?”

Her smile widened, and I dropped the husked tula in the basket with a chuckle. “I figured.”

“So talk to me. Tell me what’s going on. Even if I can’t help, even if I can’t fix it, you’ll feel better.”

I wasn’t sure she was right, but I knew I would have to sit here until I talked, so I did. “You probably know Bazel asked me to teach her some fighting skills, and I agreed to help. She wanted to learn so badly, and I understood her reasoning.” I leaned forward with my elbows braced on her knees. “She doesn’t want to be vulnerable. The future feels uncertain to her, and she feels a responsibility because of being the oldest of the next generation.”

“I understand that too,” Lu said. “What she does will affect the rest of the chits to come.”

“But on the other hand, that responsibility is also crushing to her. She doesn’t want to be held up as some example, and she doesn’t want to have to be perfect.” I rubbed my palms together. “In that cave, she told me she wanted me for a mate.” Lu sucked in a breath, but I avoided looking at her. “And I told her that we couldn’t. That no Drixonian would accept me for her because of who she was. And that was the wrong thing to say. She said she thought I saw her for *her* and not the female that is supposed to lead the Drixonians into the next generation.” I glanced up, feeling sick to my stomach, to see Lu’s eyes glistening. “I hurt her and disappointed her, Lu. I thought I was doing the right thing, but then when we were rescued, Daz told me I’d been selfish to teach her fighting skills, that I’d put my own desire to spend time with her over the better of the society.” I turned to fully face Lu. “So I flecked up everything, didn’t I? I disappointed Bazel, Daz, and everyone else.”

Lu shook her head with such vigor that her hair got caught in my mouth. She blew it out with a sputter. “No, you didn’t disappoint Daz. He forgets what it was like when he first met Frankie. When you two were missing, he was angry and worried. But I promise he will think back on his words and regret them.”

“Not Daz.”

“Yes, even Daz. You weren’t being selfish with Bazel.”

I shrugged. “He wasn’t wrong. I did want to spend time with her. I wanted to more than anything.”

“But you put her first. You understood her feelings about being vulnerable. You just explained her feelings about her situation to me. You *get* her, Trapt, more than any of us. I never thought about how she felt about it all...” she blew out a breath. “Now I feel guilty for not taking better care of her. But you, *you* were there for her all along.”

“She doesn’t think that anymore.”

“Then you show her that you see her. You prove to her that you see her as Bazel, *your Bazel*, and not the Bazel that everyone else sees. And it’s okay to be a little selfish. Every Drixonian who has a mate will tell you a time they had to realize they deserve happiness too, that they deserve us as much as we deserve them. You weren’t selfish to teach Bazel. *She is All*, but for males with mates, there is one she that is *above* them all. As Drexel, Daz has to set an example to the rest of you, but in his heart of hearts, he would put Frankie first without hesitation.”

A burning flame of encouragement flared in my gut. “Bazel is *my* she.”

A wide smile spread across Lu’s face. “I know. And that’s who she wants to be. You just have to show her.” Her smile faded slightly as she cocked her head. “You’re a son of naught, and I only say that because I don’t think that identity should be taken away from any of you. You went through hell because of it, and because of no fault of your own. If anything, that should prove to you how strong you are. How much you truly deserve to have what you want.”

Being a son of naught had always been a badge of dishonor, but the way Lu spoke of it, the designation took on a different meaning. The skin on the back of my neck prickled.

“Don’t let anyone tell you that you don’t deserve happiness. You can achieve anything you want. This is a new society. You don’t have to fall in line. You can lead it. Be selfish, Trapt. Claim your mate. Trust in Fatas.”

I picked up another tula to shuck, and Lu fell silent beside me, letting me absorb her words. Bazel was the mate for me, I knew it in the deepest parts of my sola. Just the thought of another male talking to her, seeking her attention, touching her, made my head spin with rage.

Lu’s words filled me with a fire in my gut that had a roar rumbling in my chest. I was the male that saw Bazel for who she was. I was the male she chose. And I was the male who could make her happy for the rest of her life. I knew it. And soon, I’d make sure Bazel knew it too.

I ripped the husk off the tula in one tug before reaching for another. Lu pulled her lips between her teeth and raised her eyebrows. I smiled at her, not caring that the scars pulled my grin crooked. "I can be selfish, Lu."

She let out a little cheer with her arms in the air. "Yes."

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in many rotations.

The lightness didn't last long. Later that afternoon we got word that Daz had ordered all of us to leave Sari and shelter in Granit. The females were worried. They had built a life here around the old moke tree and abandoning it to possible Joktal raids was unthinkable to them. But they knew that the village could be rebuilt. Objects could be replaced. Lives could not.

We were to leave the next morning by sunrise, which gave everyone a chance to pack and hide any valuables. I helped Tasha cover the huts in a protective layer of non-flammable tar to minimize any damage should the Joktals light the village on fire. Maisie cried watching us work, knowing what it meant, and Lu had to lead her away as she sobbed.

We were all transplants on a new planet, finding our footing, and everyone found it daunting to once again defend our way of life.

After washing up at the stream with Tasha, we re-entered the village to find a crowd clustered under the tree. Lu spotted me and a gleam in her eyes made my body go tight. The crowd parted, and I immediately recognized the familiar form of Bazel. She stood with her back to me talking to Trix. The human's gaze found me, and Bazel turned at that moment.

Our eyes met. I stopped walking. Lu fluttered her hands near us. "Bazel and some other females came to help us with the chits and packing." She cleared her throat and widened her eyes at me. It didn't take a genius to realize she'd somehow found a way to get Bazel here. With me.

And I wasn't going to waste my time.

“Excuse me,” I said as I reached forward, grabbed Bazel’s hand, and pulled her toward my hut. She trotted along after me silently. I heard some hushed whispers behind me, but I was a Drix on a mission.

I shoved open the door of my hut, tugged Bazel inside, and slammed it behind us. In the moments that followed, our breathing was loud in the small space. The rising sun cast long shadows through the window, throwing half of Bazel’s face in shadows. But her one purple eye pierced me.

She was always confident. Mischievous. But as she stood in my hut, her body vibrated with a nervous tension. Yesterday, I would have wanted to hurl. But this rotation, with Lu’s words in my head, I felt like a different person.

I gripped her hands in mine and pulled her into the light. She came willingly, if not cautiously. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, but her eyes never left mine.

“When I look at you,” I said to her with conviction threading through my words. “I see Bazel. My friend who held my hand as I lay in the infirmary wanting to die. Who kept me alive with her stories and smiles. I see my friend who never draws attention to my limp or my scars or judges me for being a son of naught. I see my friend who’s great with a bow and arrow, slick with a knife, but could use a little more practice with a laser gun.”

Her breath hitched, and her lower lip wobbled before she pulled it into her mouth.

I went on, feeling emboldened that she hadn’t told me to fleck off. “I see you for you, and I’m sorry I made you feel like I didn’t. I see a female who’s a healer, a fighter, and a caregiver. You are so many things and so talented that I don’t feel worthy of your time or your attention. I certainly don’t feel worthy of your affection.”

She sniffed, and seemed like she wanted to protest, but I wasn’t done, and I had to keep going, I had to get this all out now that the words were unraveling like a cluster of vines.

“I don’t pretend to be the best fighter, or the smartest warrior, or many things. But there is one trait I’m confident about, and that’s my devotion to you. Take me as your mate, Bazel. I’ll spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

She stood frozen. Her chest didn’t even rise and fall. But my speech was done. The vine was unraveled. I had nothing left. On the ground at Bazel’s feet, I’d shucked the husks of myself like the tulas earlier.

Then her shoulders bucked, and a low sob erupted from her full lips. She launched herself into my arms, and I stumbled back as she clutched my shoulders and wrapped her legs around my waist.

I managed to stay upright as she buried her face in my neck. Relief coursed through me along with a surge of powerful adrenaline and something else. Maybe it was maturity. Kutzal had spoken of it before, the surge of inner strength a Drix can feel when a female chooses him.

I got it now.

“I’m sorry,” she cried into my neck. “I said horrible things to you.”

I held her tightly, wishing I could fuse her to my skin. I’d carry her around like this forever. “I deserved them at the time.”

She pulled back to look at me with tear-stained cheeks. “No, you didn’t. I have spent the last few rotations sick with regret.”

“You shouldn’t have. Both you and Daz gave me a lot to think about. I had decisions to make about what kind of warrior I wanted to be.” I smiled. “And I had a talk with Lu.”

“She schemed this, didn’t she? She’s the reason I’m here. My parents didn’t want me to come, but she asked for my help, and I begged to come knowing we’d be stuck in the walls soon for who knows how long.”

“As happy as I am to see you, I do wish you were still protected behind those walls.”

“We’ll all be there soon.”

And that would be a whole new obstacle for us. What would Daz and her father say? But I wasn’t backing down this time. I’d fight for her. I’d take on every warrior in the entire city to prove I was the best for her.

“This is what Fatas wants,” she said, her palms warm on my scarred cheeks. “I know it.”

Her face drew closer to mine. Her lips brushed my own, and before I could think of a reason not to, I did. My mouth collided with hers, and then we were gorging on each other. Her tongue slid against mine, and our piercings clicked together. She moaned into me as my knees threatened to buckle under the heady fog of arousal. My cock hardened to a spike and pressed against her core where she straddled my hips. Her scent perfumed the air around us, and I craved to get my tongue on her sweet cunt again.

I staggered toward the bed pallet, and just as her back hit the fabric, a loud siren sounded from outside.

My blood froze in my veins as fear licked at my feet. But quickly replacing that fear was a rush of anger. A surge of possessiveness. A need to protect so strong that I nearly went dizzy with it.

I hauled Bazel up and set her on her feet as we surged toward the door as one. With her hand in mine, we burst out into a frantic scene in the village. Few warriors were left as most were in the city. Those that remained were pushing the females of the village into the underground bunker rooms we’d built in case of raids. They’d be hidden there with rations, the entrance sealed off.

And in the fray, I caught sight of two figures I hadn’t expected to see in a million cycles. Anna and Tark, Bazel’s parents, stood under the moke tree, both of their gazes locked on us. Anna was breathless, relief passing over her face when she saw Bazel. But Tark had lasered in on our joined hands, and he looked ready to explode.

“Mom!” Bazel cried. “What are you doing here?”

But her voice was drowned out in the screaming of the sirens. In the distance, Joktal hounds brayed. Tark lurched forward, his arm around his mate, and snatched Bazel out of my grip. “We need to get to the bunker. Now.”

Trix ran as fast as her fuller figure could take her. She clutched her bow and arrows in her hands, but when our eyes met, I didn’t see the warrior queen she’d been in the past. I saw fear. Worry. She had a baby to protect now.

I grabbed the bow and arrows from her and helped her toward the bunker behind Bazel’s family. She kept glancing back at me, but her father tugged her along like a disobedient child. I held my tongue, knowing this was not the time or place.

In the bunker, I counted the females, accounting for all of them in the village, as well as the few warrior guards who’d been left behind. All the mated sons of naught were back in the city, so the females were understandably out of their mind with worry. Lu’s chit cried, and she rocked in the corner and shushed him with a low tone.

Tark worked the room, and the warriors immediately came to attention at the presence of the seasoned Drixonian.

I glanced at the females in the room, at Bazel’s terrified face. She met my gaze as I clutched Trix’s bow and arrows in my fist. Gasping, Trix braced her hand on her bulging stomach and her face pinched with pain. The bunker was designed for this very purpose, but I also knew the hounds would track the location easily. What if they managed to trap the rest of the Drix inside the city walls? And then the females in this bunker... I couldn’t handle it.

The last warrior inside made to close the hatch, but I stopped him. “I’m heading out.”

“What?” Bazel stepped forward, her voice sharp. The sirens had stopped. All we could hear now were hounds braying and the crashing sound of approaching Joktals.

“I’m going to lead them away from us. Let them think we fled.”

“What?” Bazel’s voice went shrill. “Are you crazy?”

“I can’t sit down here and do nothing,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “Trix will need a healer soon.” I avoided Tark’s sharp gaze as I spoke directly to Bazel. “And *you’re* here. I have to lead them away from *you*.”

She broke away from her mother’s embrace and stepped into the center of the bunker, her fists clenched at her sides, eyes wild with fear. “Please wait.”

But I couldn’t wait, and I couldn’t stay there any longer or I’d never be able to leave. I had to lead them away. I had to get help.

“I can’t,” I whispered as her lips wobbled. I met Tark’s direct stare. “Take care of her.” And then I turned and hauled myself out of the hatch.

ELEVEN

Bazel

I stared at the closed hatch door where Trapt had left a moment ago, and I had a horrible, sick feeling in my gut that I'd never see him again. I tried to take deep breaths, but an invisible band around my chest constricted my lungs.

A light touch landed on my arm, and I turned to find my mother offering me a soft smile. "He's a brave warrior."

My dad's gaze remained on the hatch for a moment longer. Then he said in a low, solemn voice. "He is."

A lump formed in my throat. If only Trapt was here to hear Tark say that. If only he knew... if only he himself believed in how valuable he was. My parents turned away to begin handing out supplies. There were blankets to protect the thin-skinned humans from the chill of the bunker. Food and water had to be rationed.

The thought of eating anything made my stomach roll. Trapt was out there, possibly surrounded by Juktals and their sightless hounds. Alone.

A bow and arrow were leaning against the wall near the hatch. My knives were on my belt as well as a laser gun. I could do something to help him. I could do something to help *everyone*.

I turned to find everyone clustered around the supplies, while I stood alone near the hatch. I'd grown up with stories

about the human females' bravery. The way Trix and Tasha fought. How Lu saved Axton. How Amber freed Vinz from the Joktals. They hadn't stood by. They'd stood *up*.

And now it was my turn.

I took one last look at my parents. Trix turned at that moment, and must have seen something in my eyes, because her mouth dropped open. She might have said something, but I was already halfway up the ladder, bow in hand. I lifted the hatch just as I heard my father's deep voice rumble my name.

I slammed the hatch shut, spun the wheel to lock it, and covered the door with our camouflage debris. Then I took off into the woods, following the faint tracks of Trapt's boot prints.

I ran swiftly and silently, a skill I'd practiced, and listened intently for signs of a battle. In the distance, I could hear hounds braying, and the tone of their barks reminded me of the sound they'd made when they'd caught the scent from my clothes. I ran harder, convinced they'd found Trapt. Trees ahead of me shuddered with disturbance. A low guttural groan reverberated off the trunks.

I came to a halt among the dense foliage lining the riverbank to find Trapt engaged in a fight with a dozen Joktals and a few hounds. One hound lay dead, his throat slashed. Two Joktals were slumped in the river, their blood dying the water.

Trapt held his left arm tight to his side and as slashed with the machets of his right arm. He was overpowered but fought on like the warrior he was. But I could tell that he wouldn't last much longer. Still, he'd led them away from the bunker and had already lessened their numbers on his own.

I shimmied up a nearby tree, and as a Joktal approached Trapt from behind with a massive blade, I aimed and fired an arrow. The tip pierced the back of his neck—the sensitive flesh below his skull and above his armor. He let out a gurgled yell before falling with a thud.

Trapt whirled around, nearly tripping over the Joktal's body as he fought two others in front of him. I took aim again and fired, this time downing a hound. Again and again, I sank arrows into the Joktals, sometimes hitting my target and other times not. But between Trapt and I, we had taken out all but two Joktals. And I was out of arrows.

I slid down the trunk and raced toward one of my victims who lay with an arrow sticking out of his eye. With a foot on his chest, I grabbed the end of the arrow and yanked it out of his skull. He gurgled, not quite dead, and to my horror, surged upright. His one good eye promised retribution as he let out a roar and lunged for me. I screamed and stumbled back just as Trapt let out an anguished cry. "*Bazel!*"

The Joktal's claws closed around my ankle and sank in deep. I hit the ground hard on my back as I felt blood trickle down my foot. I twisted and writhed, but the Joktal was too strong. Ripping my knife from my belt, I slashed at the Joktal as he pulled me closer. Dodging my blows, his mouth hole seemed to grin around his razor-sharp black teeth. I shuddered, still slashing with my knife, but he knocked it out of my hand. I screamed as his horrible, one-eyed visage filled my vision. His hand twisted, and a dull crack filled the air just as pain sliced up my calf. My vision went blurry.

Then suddenly his head was snapped back, a blue-black arm came down, and a knife slashed across the Joktal's throat. His one good eye went wide and dull. Blood spilled down his chest like a waterfall, and he tipped over onto the ground with his hand still wrapped around my ankle. I kicked myself loose and limped to my feet.

Trapt stood before me, chest heaving, covered in Joktal blood that mixed with his own. Oozing wounds marred his body, and he held his left arm at an odd angle. With a swallow, his gaze met mine. "What the fleck are you doing here?"

"Saving you," I panted.

"Why?" His body trembled. "Why do you keep doing this?"

"Because you're worth it," I said softly. "And I love you."

His expression went blank. His body stilled. “I don’t know what love is. But I do know that you’re my reason. My reason for everything.”

Joktal bodies lay at our feet as we embraced. I closed my eyes as I clutched Trapt’s back. I ached all over, and my ankle throbbed. It wasn’t until I heard Trapt mutter, “What the fleck?” that I realized there was a certain ache I was feeling. One that wasn’t from the fighting.

I pulled back to stare at my wrists as they burned. As if by an invisible hand, two black lines ran around my wrist and between them, a design had begun to appear like a thick bracelet. Shapes that my mom called diamonds touched at each tip, and inside the diamonds were elegant swirls. I glanced up to see Trapt staring at his wrists, the color drained from his face, making the blood dripping off it even more stark.

His gave met mine. “Bazel,” he whispered.

I linked my fingers with his. “I told you this was what Fatas wanted.”

“But I... I didn’t...” he blew out a breath as color began to return to his cheeks. “I didn’t dare to hope.”

“But it feels right, doesn’t it?”

He swiped at his face as a small, crooked smile curved his lips. “It feels more than right, my cora-eternal.”

The loks on our wrists glowed a bright white before dulling to a golden hue. Our union was confirmed. Sealed by Fatas. Even though I didn’t need her to tell me Trapt was the one for me.

My head pounded, and an ache formed between my eyes, like my skull was expanded. I moaned with pain as I fisted my hair and through blurry vision saw Trapt was doing the same, his expression twisted into a grimace.

And then, with a flash, I felt him. Inside my head. An aura, the mated females called it. He was a beating, live cora, the pumping of hot blood matching the rhythm of my own. He was my second cora. There with me.

I pressed against him as his head lowered. Our lips touched, and my cora came alive, fluttering in my rib cage. Trapt slanted his mouth to deepen the kiss just as the sound of a hound braying pierced the air.

Trapt grabbed my arm and turned to run. Forgetting for a moment about my ankle, I took off after him, only for my right leg to buckle. I slammed to the ground with a pained cry. I clutched it, panting through the pain.

“I got you.” Trapt’s arms wrapped around me. And despite his own pain and wounds, he hauled me to his chest and took off running. As he ran, his speed increased, his eyes glazed over, and I knew he was entering the Drixonian zone where they could run and run without sleep. I’d never seen it with my own eyes, and to be fair, I wasn’t sure all Drixonians could do it. But Trapt went there in his mind, running despite his wounds, his pain, and the weight of my body against him. Behind us, we could hear another band of Joktals hunting us with their hounds.

He ran in the direction of the city, through plains and trees, until we reached a small hut with three walls and half a roof. He slid to a halt and pulled up a dirt trap door in the floor. He leaped down, landing in a crouch, and slammed the door shut. After placing me carefully on a pile of furs, he bolted the door shut from within.

He lit a small lamp, and then bent next to me with a clean jug of qua in his hands. “Hear, drink some.”

“I had no idea we had bunkers all over this planet.”

He smiled at that. “We have lots.”

Down in the bunker, I could almost feel secluded, except the braying hounds and the Joktals shouting in their guttural language could still be heard above us. Too close.

“Do you think everyone is okay?” I wrung my hands together, watching the dirt ceiling and listening for footsteps.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly.

“I’m worried,” I confessed.

He drew me closer. “Me too.”

His hands slid down my right leg to my ankle. The pain had subsided somewhat—and now that I was able to get a good look at his wounds, most of them had sealed shut. His arm seemed to be fine. I wiggled my ankle a bit, and despite my certainty that the Joktal had snapped it, I swore I could feel the bones had already mended.

And then I remembered. The loks. They made us stronger. I had heard stories from the older Drixonians and the human females about this, that the loks had been able to heal what seemed like impossible wounds. But I’d never thought it would happen to me.

I reached out and cupped Trapt’s face, brushing at a dull scar there that a moment ago had been split scales. “I’m healing.”

“You are.”

“Maybe we could make a run for it the rest of the way.”

“I don’t want to risk showing up to the city and the gates be closed. The Joktals could have surrounded it by now...” he let his words trail off.

I tried to control my breathing. There was no sense panicking now. “What do we do?”

“We wait until they pass. And then we return to Sari. Free your father. And come up with another plan. I don’t think this is a small raiding party.” He swallowed. “I think this is an attack. *The* attack.”

“What if they find us here?” I swore the shouting outside was louder. They had to be drawing closer. Would the hounds smell us down here? Would the Joktals find the hatch?

Trapt’s face drew closer. His eyes held mine. “We fight.”

But the unspoken hung in the air. We would be overpowered. We wouldn’t have the element of surprise. It

would likely be a death match.

Dread hung on me like a cloak. The time wasn't right. But in the flickering lamplight, with the loks shining on my wrists, I reached for my cora-eternal, for the mate I'd longed for, wished for, and the one I wanted. If this was it, I wanted my last memory to be of him. The aura of his cora beat loudly and rapidly in the small space in sync with mine.

With my hands clasped on his cheeks, I pressed my lips to his. He came alive against me, as if his body was echoing the need in my own. His tongue slid into my mouth, tasting me like I was his favorite meal, and he cradled my head as he lowered me to the fur pelt on the floor.

In the low light, his eyes were early black. He retracted his claws and slid his warm palms down my body to press against my core. I arched against him, feeling my body gush in response, and we both inhaled the sweet scent of my arousal as it perfumed the air.

He moaned as he slid my pants down my legs, and I kicked them free from my ankles. With a few flicks of his fingers, my buttoned vest was opened to reveal my breasts to his gaze. I glanced down his body to see the thick bulge in his pants where it rubbed against my thigh. His muscles bunched and shifted as he trembled above me.

His breathing came heavy and fast, and his tongue snaked out to lap at the skin behind my ear. "I don't know how well I can hold myself back," he said in a guttural tone I'd never heard from him. "I want you more than my next breath."

I shoved at his pants, wanting to see all of him, and he made quick work of stripping and tossing them with force against the wall. He held himself over me, his cock hard and thick between his thighs and his full balls hanging heavy behind them. I reached down and wrapped my fingers around the hard shaft. Squeezing, I twisted up to the base of his engorged head. His back arched and the muscles in his neck corded. "*Fleck me.*"

I held him with one hand, and yet I controlled everything about him. His breath. His words. His whole body. Each

muscle. Every part of him deferred to me, and I'd never felt so powerful. I felt like I could conquer the world.

I tugged again, and he nearly entered me. But at the last minute he caught himself, eyes firing down at me. "Please let me taste you," he rasped. "I have thought of nothing but your taste since that day in the cave."

With my other hand, I dipped my fingers between my legs and swiped through the wet folds of my cunt. I drew my fingers up his chest, slicking a trail up to his mouth. His lips parted immediately as he sucked my two digits inside. His tongue swirled around them, and he moaned with his eyes closed.

When I withdrew my fingers, his powerful body shuddered. "I need it," he whispered hoarsely. "I need more."

"Take it," I responded, eager to feel his tongue again. "I need it too."

TWELVE

Trapt

I dropped to my back and hauled Bazel above me. Her knees landed on either side of my head, and there—right above my mouth—was her luscious, juicy cunt dripping with arousal. A drop landed on my lips, and I lapped at it before lowering her to my mouth. She braced her hands on the wall in front of her and buried her face in her elbow to muffle her cries.

I didn't go easy on her. My tongue speared her cunt, her back hole, and everywhere in-between. I sucked her hardened, engorged clit in my mouth while reaching a hand up and plucking her swollen nipples. She bucked into my mouth, grinding down until I could barely breathe out of my nose. And I craved every second of it, even as my head spun, my lungs screamed, and my vision darkened.

I could feel when she drew closer to her climax, and I almost let up, wanting to draw this out, but also knowing I didn't have the willpower. There might not be a next time. I wanted her, and I wanted her now.

Her orgasm hit her like a shot arrow. She slammed down onto my mouth, her soft cries muffled, and her inner walls fluttered around my tongue. She was barely finished when I rolled her onto her back, rose over top of her, and pressed the head of my cock at her sopping entrance. "Are you ready for me, my mate?"

Her eyes were glazed, her cheeks a ruddy purple. With nostrils flaring, she gripped me with sharp claws. “Take me,” she said. “I want you.”

I just managed to keep myself from slamming into her, knowing this was her first time taking a cock. With held breath, I slid in slowly, feeling each ripple of her inner walls around my rock-hard shaft. I held her gaze, studying her eyes as they winced with discomfort and then widened with pleasure. A moan slid from her lips as I reached the hilt. “Trapt.”

My mind was full of her, as her aura in my head was a live beating, pumping cora that matched my own. We were one.

I pulled my hips back and slid in again. Then again. Each time, color bloomed on her cheeks. A flush colored the blue of her small-scaled flesh into a dusky purple. Her claws dug into my shoulders. I felt a trickle of blood, and I needed it, because that pain was the only thing keeping me from rutting into her like an animal. Fleck, she felt like a home. Her heat, her slick, her heaving breasts. I fisted my hands in her hair spread out on the pelt and surged inside of her. This time her body jerked, her lips curled up into a delicious smile, and her eyes flashed. “Again. Harder.”

And then I lost my mind. Her smell intoxicated me. Her voice chanted in my head. *Harder. Harder.* My hips slammed into her with savage thrusts and her body met mine, rising up to meet my every move.

A pounding sounded in my ears. I swore it was my cora but somewhere in the distance recesses of my mind, I registered shouting. Hounds braying. Dust from the ceiling floated down on our bodies, coating us in a fine mist as we moved together like one being. She gasped, our eyes met, and my balls drew tight. I was coming, and I couldn’t hold it back any longer, not with my life dream coming true of being inside Bazel.

“Oh Fatas,” she whispered just as her inner walls began to ripple around my cock. I exploded inside of her as she let out a

soft whine. Her teeth closed around my bicep, biting hard, muffling her scream as she climaxed with a full body shudder.

One final pound came from above. The ceiling trembled. And then the hatch above us was ripped open.

Below me, Bazel's eyes went wide. Her teeth were stained with my blood, but the wound on my arm was already closing. A strength I never thought possible ignited in my core. The flames licked out to every limb. Just as a shadow darkened the mouth of the hatch, I covered Bazel's nakedness with the pelt and rose to my full height. I could have sworn the floor seemed farther away than before. The ceiling closer. Was I taller?

I fisted my hands and turned to face the hatch and let my machets rise. They shone a blue-black in the candlelight, and they seemed longer than they had before. Sharper. How was that possible?

I waited for the fear and terror to settle in. The memory of the Joktals' cruelty. But as a body dropped through the hatch to land in a crouch in front of me in the small bunker, all I felt was power. Confidence. A protectiveness over my mate. Hundreds of cycles of Drixonian strength surged through my muscle fibers. My scales stood on end. My scalp tingled as my hair floated around my head like it had a mind of its own. All the while, Bazel's aura pounded in my head, fueling my to keep her cora beating. My eyes burned as the Joktal rose with a growl and a raised blade. Except whatever he saw when he looked at me made his black eyes dull. His throat bobbed with a heavy swallow, and his hand holding his blade shook.

I became aware of every sound in the room, my vision sharpened. And just as another Joktal dropped into the space, I attacked. My machets cut through the Joktal armor like butter, when before they had glanced off. The space was too small for the Joktal whips and laser guns, so it was hand-to-hand combat. And to my advantage. The Joktals never realized what was coming. I caved in their chests, chopped off their heads. Blood ran like qua from their bodies to pool around my feet as I fought them without any clothes or protection on my body. I was a Drixonian possessed, in a concentrated space protecting

my mate, and I'd never felt stronger. More confident. Every breath Bazel took fueled me to fight harder, never give up, and eliminate everything on this planet that could harm her.

Joktals and hounds fell at my feet, piling up in the small space until I used their lifeless bodies like stepping stones to leap out of the hatch. In the small hut, I surprised the remaining few Joktals and their hounds. Within a few breaths, their lifeless bodies lay at my feet.

I listened carefully, but no more enemies were outside. I'd taken care of them all, and it wasn't until I took in the carnage that I realized I fought almost two dozen Joktals on my own. I heaved a breath. With the threat against my mate gone, my body seemed to deflate. My muscles ached. My knees buckled as the heat of the battle cooled. I hit the ground on my knees, barely staying conscious.

A soft hand settled on my back, and I blinked my eyes to find Bazel kneeling in front of me, a fur pelt knotted at her chest. Her eyes were wide with concern, and a few tears fell from her bottom lashes. I inhaled sharply. "A-Are you hurt?" My voice barely sounded like my own. What had just happened?

"Me?" she nearly squeaked. She glanced around us and swallowed. "I'm fine, but Trapt, I... I'm worried about you."

"Why?" I nearly croaked.

"You—" She gnawed on her lip. "You *grew*. And the way you fought... you were fast. So fast you were almost a blur. I've seen mated Drixonians fight with the power of the loks, but you, Trapt... that was something else."

I glanced down at my hands, which looked more like my own, not like those massive fists that had caved in skulls. I didn't even like to fight. A severed hand lay near me, and I felt the bile rise in my throat. "Oh fleck, Bazel."

"Shhh," she immediately drew my head into my neck, and I closed my eyes, breathing in her sweet scent. When I tried to pull away, murmuring about getting her filthy, she only held tighter. "Just breathe."

I shuddered against her as I became reacquainted with my body. My arms came up and wrapped around her, holding her close, and her hand never stopping stroking my hair, back, and neck. And a soft, sweet vibration rumbled from her chest, a delicious mesmerizing prush that soothed every ache in my body.

She only left me for a brief moment and returned with soft cloths and qua. She cleaned the blood from my body with careful, caring swipes. I was proud that I'd protected her, although the savagery I'd left behind made me sick. Still, I had a thought that Kutzal would be proud. I gasped as Bazel was helping me into my clothes. She'd dressed before washing me.

“What?” she jerked back. “Did I hurt you?”

“Kutzal.”

“What about him?”

“We need to check the bunker to see if your parents and the rest of the females are safe. And then we have to get to the city.”

She nodded. “I know. I had to make sure you were okay first. Are you?”

I shook out my muscles. “I'm better than okay.”

She stepped against me, her hand on my chest. “It was your turn to save me, and you did.”

I placed my hand on her cheek. “I'm sorry you had to see it, though.”

Shaking her head, she smiled. “It was magnificent, and I don't care if that makes me blood thirsty.”

“Why do you think that happened to me? I've never felt that strong or that focused. All I could think about was killing to protect you.”

“I know the cora-eternal bond between humans and Drixonians strengthens them. The females are living longer. My mother's appearance has barely changed. But maybe because I'm half-Drixonian, the cora-eternal bond must affect us even more.”

“Even more is an understatement,” I muttered.

Her hand slipped into mine. “Well it saved our lives. We never would have been able to fight off that many Joktals before the bond. Now let’s go see my parents.”

Our wrists touched. The loks tingled. And we left behind the massacre.

Bazel

We ran back the direction of Sari, and I kept glancing at Trapt, still amazed that my best friend, my mate, my cora-eternal had morphed into a killing machine. His mass had increased by at least a third. He’d fought naked, muscles shifting and bunched beneath his scales, tale lashing, machets flashing in the lamplight. He’d been Trapt then...but also more. His eyes had shone with malice as he cut down our enemies with ease. I had intended to help him, but I realized quickly that I would only get in his way. All I could do was huddle in the corner uselessly while he saved us.

I’d been in awe. I’d never felt so safe in my life. And although his body had returned to normal, something in Trapt had changed. Before, he could startle like a surprised antella as he was scarred mentally from his injuries. But now, he strode with a confident determination. Not a swagger like Xavy or Vinz. He was still Trapt, but more. This was like Trapt in his final form, and I felt so incredibly blessed by Fatas to have him as mine.

As we drew closer to Sari, Trapt sniffed the air. His hand tightened in mine, and the muscles in his shoulders bunched with tension. Dread knotted my stomach. “What is it?”

“Joktals,” he said in a low voice. “And smoke.”

“No,” my voice cracked as I dropped Trapt’s hand and took off at a sprint. He was right behind me, and I ran faster

than I ever could before. I felt like I had wings attached to my ankles.

But before I could burst out from the forest into the village, Trapt grabbed me around the waist and hauled me back. When I protested, he clapped a hand over my mouth. His lips brushed my ear. "We can't rush into the unknown."

He was right. I knew he was right. But my cora slammed against my chest, and I felt like I was going to throw up. Still, I went limp in his arms, exhausted from my run. He drew us down into a crouch to peer through the bushes into the edge of the village.

At first, my heart soared, because I didn't see a single Joktal. But then the smell of smoke hit me. Someone had tried to burn down the village. They were unsuccessful because of the tar that the Trapt had covered the buildings with, but there were broken bits of singed furniture. Smoldering roofs. And the hatch door was wide open.

"No!" Trapt didn't bother to hold me back anymore. I sprinted into the village, but I knew they were gone. I just knew it. I slid to a halt at the mouth of the hatch and peered inside.

Only two Drixonian guards lay inside. Dead.

The rest? They were *gone*.

And I rose to my feet in horror as I spun in a circle, finding the dirt marred with Joktal bootprints, hound paw prints.

And blood.

A sob rose in my throat, and I fought it with the back of my hand pressed to my mouth. Trapt arrived at my side, his body held tight. He simmered with anger, and his eyes fired a deep indigo that were ice cold.

"They're alive," he said in a deep, calm voice that was truly the only thing keeping me together. "I know it."

"How?" I whispered.

He didn't answer. His gaze focused on the ground as he knelt and touched the tracks. His eyes met mine. "If there's

one thing a Lone Wolf can do, it's track. Although, I think I now where they went."

"Where?"

He rose to his feet and pointed in the distance, where the tips of the tallest buildings of Granit could be seen. "There. They'll use them as hostages."

I sucked in a breath, my knees going weak. I prided myself on being strong, but in this moment, with my parents threatened, I couldn't think clearly. But Trapt, my mate, was there to pick up the pieces. We were a partnership, him and me. I felt like we clicked into place. We filled each other's gaps. And like that, my courage began to rise.

"And we'll save them, right?" I said to Trapt.

His lips tilted. Not really a smile, more like a grimaced snarl. "Of course."

The village had been raided by the Joktals, but it was in no way destroyed. Some huts were untouched. They'd clearly focused on finding the hiding females. They hadn't found the weapons cache, so Trapt and I loaded up with weapons we'd need for any future battle—bow and arrow, blades, laser guns, and armor.

Hands clasped, we followed the tracks leading out of the village. Trapt was able to tell how many Joktals—three dozen—how many hounds—six—and all the hostages. Some dragged their feet. Some fought. Some were injured, and Trapt said it was Drixonian blood. But he found drops of Joktal blood too. I credited my father for that, but also thought it could be Trix. My stomach clenched for her. I hoped the Joktals didn't touch her. She couldn't handle touch from anyone other than her closest friends and Kutzal.

My head swam thinking of how Kutzal would feel seeing his mate held hostage. He would feel helpless. They all would. I was nearly sick with worry and dread, but I forced myself to keep my wits about me. I needed all my senses working.

Trapt had done this before—he'd tried to save the Lone Wolf clavas when they'd been under siege, and he'd been

gravely injured doing so. He'd succeeded in the end at warning Kutzal, but he considered his injuries and inability to get to Granit for help as a failure.

I wondered if he thought history was repeating itself. But this time, he had me. He had our bond. He strode forward with sure, quiet steps, reading the tracks as well as any elder Drixonian.

The walk to Granit would have taken close to half a day, but we were faster, spurred by our need to save our family and friends. As we neared Granit, Trapt said he could smell the Joktals and their hounds. We were close.

We slipped into the forest around the gates and Trapt pointed to one of the highest trees overlooking the walls. I climbed up the trunk, and he followed. There, we looked out over the plains in front of the gates. When I caught sight of the gathered crowd outside the walls, I gasped and clutched Trapt's arm. My claws dug in to his scales.

Hands bound on her protruding stomach, Trix stood with Joktals on either side of her, their hands on her elbows. With her jaw clenched, she trembled with pain, but kept her chin lifted.

The gates of Granit remained closed, but not quiet. A fight was raging behind the walls, and Kutzal could be heard roaring like an animal. A raging, protective, out-of-his mind animal. Trapt's breath hitched at the sound. Kutzal was likely being held back from going to his mate by half a dozen Drixonians.

Daz stood at the top of the gate, flanked by his two brothers—Sax and Rexor. Rexor's white hair swirled around his shoulders. His wings were folded neatly at his back. Sax had his laser gun trained on a Joktal leader, but he wouldn't fire. He couldn't.

But what nearly had me falling out of the tree was the sight of my father, on his knees, a glowing, burning whip wrapped around his torso and arms. He looked nearly lifeless, with his head hung between his shoulders and his hair hiding his face. My mother was weeping, hysterical, while a Joktal yanked a

chain binding her hands. She couldn't reach my father, but her wailing as she called his name was worse than any pain I'd ever experienced.

"Tark!" She cried. *"Tark!"*

I wanted to die.

When all my mind wanted to do was spiral, Trapt kept me grounded. His palms were warm on my face as he turned my head to face him. He forced our eyes to meet, and despite my terror, he held firm. "We're going to do this. You and me."

"How?"

"Focus, Bazel. I can't do this without you."

And those words, those words beat the tears back. The fear. Courage took over. I set my jaw and nodded firmly. "You're right. I can do this."

He smiled grimly. "That's my mate." His hands dropped from my face as we surveyed the scene below us.

This time, I studied with the purpose of formulating a plan. "We have to separate the Joktals from the hostages. If they are safe, Daz will unleash the entire city of warriors. We outnumber the Joktals."

"We can't miss," Trapt said. "One wrong move and they will kill the hostages."

Mom and Dad.

I couldn't think about that. Still, I let my concern and love for them flood my system, the emotions fueling me rather than weakening me. I gripped my bow and arrow. "I'll shoot the ones holding Trix first."

"You pick them off from here. I'll be on the ground taking them out by hand." Before this rotation, I would have told him that wasn't safe. But I'd seen Trapt in action. I nodded as he kept talking. "We create chaos among the Joktals. They'll think they are being attacked on multiple fronts. They won't know it's only two of us. We cause confusion, break their ranks, and give Daz enough time to send out the bikes."

I rolled my shoulders. “I’m ready.”

“I’ll climb down and sneak up behind the Joktal holding your father. When you see me, shoot the Joktals holding Trix.”

He made to descend, and I grabbed his arm. Pressing our lips together, I savored his taste. When my eyes opened, his were heated. “Be safe,” I whispered before adding. “And be deadly.”

His lips turned up in a grin that would have sent a shiver down every Joktal’s spine. “*She is All.*”

THIRTEEN

Trapt

I dropped to the ground in a crouch and peered up into the tree. Bazel perched there on a branch and gave me one final nod. I crossed my arms at the wrists in front of my neck in one final sign of respect, and then took off silently on swift feet.

The Joktal leader was talking to Daz, and by the sounds of it, he wanted the Drixonians to surrender. I was sure Daz was stalling, but with Kutzal losing his mind, chaos was surely reigning behind the gates.

The Joktal holding Tark stood at the side of the clearing outside the wall, so I was able to get close enough to him while still being protected by the cover of the forest. Tark could barely stay upright. The whip had left his scales a burned, ruined mess. I had to beat back the blinding anger that threatened to take over. Tark was my mate's father. One of our elders. A respected warrior. I would relish killing the Joktal who'd done this to him.

I tuned out the Joktals' jeers as they taunted Daz with the hostages. I had to ignore Anna's cries for her mate. It was the only way to concentrate. I couldn't mess this up the way I did the last attack. I could not fail. Too much was riding on this. In fact, *everything* was riding on this.

Back then, I'd been idealistic. Reckless. I had believed good would prevail and that was why I would succeed. I hadn't realized that beating evil was a fleck of a lot of work. I

understood now why Kutzal was the way he was. And I respected him more for it. I would return his mate to him. They would have a healthy chit.

I crept closer to the Joktal holding Tark, and then glanced back to Bazel. Even from this distance, our eyes met. Hers burned as she lifted her bow with her notched arrow. I knew what happened next would change everyone's lives forever. I just hoped it was for the better. I sent a prayer to Fatas, and then I nodded at my mate.

She let an arrow fly just as I surged up, pressed my machets to the Joktal's throat holding Tark, and raked them across his flesh.

As he fell, I slashed at the whip, and the glow immediately dulled. The bindings fell from Tark as he let out a groan and tipped over.

I heard two arrows hit their targets and glanced up in time to see that Trix had been freed. She struck out at the Joktal holding Tasha, and suddenly all the females were screaming, kicking, biting, punching. Somehow Lu got a hold of a whip and cracked it in the air.

I turned and sent a blade flying into one eye of the Joktal holding Anna. He fell like a stone, and she tore from his lifeless grip to dive at her mate's side. She held his head and glanced up at me, her pretty face twisted into a snarl. "Kill them all," she gritted. "Make them pay."

Her words. The females' screams. The sounds of the gates opening and bikes roaring out from behind the walls were all I needed to fuel me. I descended into a single focus. This was no longer about defending our home. This was about retribution.

Laser fire flashed as Sax and Xavy—the best shots among the Drixonians—hollered overhead while they descended upon the Joktal lines with their bikes. The Joktal leader tried to reorganize his warriors, but it was too late. They'd lost control. The hostages were free and fighting. I saw Kutzal among the fighters on foot, slashing through the Joktal bodies in a spitting rage.

Trix and the other females had to be dragged away from the fray as they continued to fight. “Fuck you!” Lu screamed in a shriek. “You ugly red motherfuckers!”

The bodies piled up. Some Joktals broke ranks to flee into the forest, but Rexor swooped down with his white wings to cut them off while Mikko fired at them with his ejecting machets.

The leader was surrounded by a small guard, and they fought in a circle with their backs to him, protecting him, while moving toward the forest. I strode toward them, but Daz was there first. He cut through the guards one by one, decimating the leader’s protection. And then when he had him alone, he knocked him to the ground on his back. The leader rolled quickly onto hands and knees and tried to scramble away. Seeing the once proud leader crawling in the dirt filled me with grim satisfaction.

Daz didn’t let him get far. He kicked him over to his back, placed his booted foot on his armored chest, and fired a laser gun shot right into his face.

The leader’s body jerked. Daz fired again, and again, until the body was a mess of flesh and fire. Then he tilted back his head and let out a piercing whistle that made every Drixonian go still. The bikes roared to a stop on the ground. Bodies littered the dirt, and I could hear a few Joktals still fleeing through the forest, but their numbers were miniscule.

“Tinzl, Quarl, Viper,” he ordered to a few Lone Wolf clavas warriors who stood near him, chests heaving from battle. “Gather a crew, get some food and follow the rest of the Joktals back to their fortress. Makes sure it’s clear.”

Tinzl, a large, quiet warrior with broad shoulders, nodded. “Yes, drexel.” He signaled to a few warriors, who all retreated into the gates to prepare for their mission.

“Dad!” Bazel’s voice called out from the forest moments before she burst into the clearing and collapsed onto the ground at her father’s side. I rushed to my mate’s side to find Tark slumped on the ground, eyes closed, breathing shallow. Anna clutched him with one hand while she kept the other

pressed to her mouth in a tight fist while sobs shook her shoulders.

Bazel wept over her father while Daz strode forward, gathered Tark in his arms, and began to walk into the gates. Anna and Bazel followed, clutching each other. I brought up the rear.

“Sax,” Daz called to his brother. “Organize the clean up. Have Val check on all the females to ensure they are uninjured.”

“Yes, brother.” He watched the procession with a solemn gaze, and as we passed him, he held his crossed wrists in front of his neck with a bowed head. All the Drixonians followed suit, falling silent as we carried the decorated and respected warrior into the city’s walls. The silence seemed to make it worse. Bazel and Anna’s sobs echoed off buildings as we walked toward The Hall. The city was already bustling with activity after the battle—females handing out food and performing triage on the wounded warriors.

Inside the infirmary, the healers were busy tending to the injured, but as soon as Daz stepped inside, Shep gestured to an empty cot. Daz placed Tark on the soft blankets, but he remained still. Pale. His face pinched with pain.

I began to fear the worst. Would he survive? Shep fussed over Tark, dressing his wounds and injecting him with enough medis to heal the planet. But the wounds were severe and the longer they had gone untreated, the harder the medis had to work. Anna had calmed somewhat and was now seated at Tark’s bedside with a hand on his arm.

Bazel’s cora in her aura beat an irregular patter and had taken on a sickly hue. I reached out to calm her, and she turned around at Tark’s bedside, her hand immediately reaching for me. I clasped my fingers in hers, and brought her hand to my mouth, pressing a kiss to the back of it. Anna watched us, and her gaze dropped to the loks on our wrists. Her eyes shot up to Bazel, and she blinked rapidly.

“Later, mom,” Bazel said. “Let’s worry about Dad now.”

But her mom had focused on me. I began to fear her reaction, until she spoke in a voice that was surprisingly firm considering the circumstances. “Thank you. You saved us. Tark has a chance because of you.” Her gaze then shifted to her daughter. “And you.”

She brushed Tark’s hair off his forehead. “You have to wake up to see your daughter’s mate. He’s a brave warrior just like you.”

For the first time in my life, I felt like I might have understood what it was like to have the ability to shed tears.

Bazel

I stayed by my father’s bedside over the next few rotations as often as I could. My mother never left, and I only did so to bring her food, to bathe, and to sleep. Trapt supported me, keeping me company, letting me cry away from my mother, and keep me from thinking the worst.

The scouts reported that the Joktal fortress was mostly deserted, but they were searching every room for Joktals hiding out. They were also rescuing every last loris, the small, furry servants the Joktals had abducted. They Drixonian scouts would escort them back to their homeland. I knew how much those loris had meant to Amber when she was locked in the fortress, so we celebrated their freedom.

After one mealtime on the third rotation after the attack, we stood outside a bedroom door in the hall. Trapt knocked with a soft rap of his knuckles, and Kutzal’s voice called from within. “Come in.”

We stepped in, closing the door behind us. Trix sat up on a pile of cushions, fur pelts piled on top of her swollen stomach. Kutzal was at her side fussing with the pelts and testing the temperature of a bowl of soup. I’d never seen him be such a caretaker.

“Oh thank God,” Trix sighed as we walked in. “I’m so fucking bored.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked her as I sat beside her.

“She’s—” Kutzal tried to answer, but Trix shot him a death glare.

“I’m *fine*,” she enunciated carefully. “More than fine. I’d like to get out of bed now, in fact.”

“Not a chance,” Kutzal barked. “Val said you need rest—”

“*Rest*,” she emphasized. “Not *bed* rest. I’ve been here forever.”

“Three rotations,” he grouched.

“It feels like *forever*,” she huffed.

I sat down at her other side. “I rarely side with Kutzal, but I’m with him on this. You’re huge—”

“Uh, thanks—”

“And it won’t be much longer before you have the chit and then you’ll never get enough rest.”

“Traitor,” Trix muttered.

I smiled at her.

Trapt remained by the door, and I glanced over to find him and Kutzal locked in some sort of stare. Trix, sensing the change in the atmosphere of the room, squeezed my hand and fell silent.

Kutzal and Trapt hadn’t seen each other since the battle. Kutzal had been busy with Trix, and Trapt had been with me. But now, they finally came face-to-face. Trapt’s cora in my aura beat with a tense trepidation.

Kutzal made the first move, stepping forward silently. He gripped the back of Trapt’s neck and brought their foreheads together with a dull clunk. Trix’s hand tightened in mine at the Drixonian display of affection among warriors. Trapt’s aura heated, growing in excitement.

“You made me proud,” Kutzal said, still holding their heads together. “You made everyone proud.” He pulled back but kept a close hold on Trapt’s neck. His gaze dipped to the locks on Trapt’s wrists. “I’m happy for you.”

Trapt nearly vibrated. I knew Kutzal’s approval meant everything to him. He bent his head. “I learned from the best. You.”

Kutzal shook his head. “I’m far from the best, but other than convincing Trix to be mine, you’re the greatest thing I ever did.”

He then turned to me, and I stood as he approached. “And you, Bazel. You truly are Tark and Anna’s daughter.”

It was the greatest compliment he could have given me, but the reminder of my father, who remained unconscious in the infirmary, blanketed the room in a sober fog. “Thank you.”

“He’ll pull through. He has Anna and you. He’ll wake to find his daughter has found her cora-eternal, and he’ll live a long life.”

“I hope,” my voice cracked.

He patted me on the shoulder before returning to a chair at Trix’s bedside. *Help me*, the human female mouthed, and I hid a smile behind my hand.

Two rotations later, Trix gave birth to a blue, screaming, girl chit. And my father opened his eyes.

Kutzal carried the chit around The Hall in the crook of his arm, proudly showing her to everyone he ran into. He’d tell them to let her squeeze their finger, and then insist she was the strongest chit that had ever been born. Trix was finally able to leave her bed, and she ate constantly, saying she needed fuel to breastfeed her strong girl. They named her Trip.

After hearing about my father, I rushed into the infirmary to find him arguing with my mother. “This is ridiculous,” he

grouched. “Let me out.”

“Dad,” I barked at him as I threw the door open. He had one foot off the bed, ready to make a break for it. “What are you doing?”

He froze in place, eyes wide as he took me in. “Bazel,” he breathed.

I stomped inside and shoved on his shoulders. He immediately retreated back to his place on the bed. My mother huffed in irritation with her hands on her hips, glaring at him. “So you listen to her and not me?”

But Dad wasn’t listening. He held my forearms in a surprisingly strong grip and studied my wrists. “What’s this?” He blinked at my loks rapidly. “When did this happen?”

I knew Trapt had entered the room before I even saw him. I could feel the change in the air. His aura in my mind synced with my own cora beat. I didn’t have to say anything to my dad either. His gaze went to right to Trapt as he approached my father’s bed. He stood at the end and crossed his wrists at his neck. His head bent. “Hello, Tark.”

Trapt’s loks were a bright gold against his dark blue skin. My father made a sound in his throat. I couldn’t bear to hear him say anything negative about Trapt, not after all Trapt had gone through for me and for my family. “Dad—”

Dad dropped my wrists and motion to Trapt. “Come here.”

Trapt obeyed immediately, and with the help of my mother, Dad stood at his bedside wearing nothing but a thin pair of pants. Still, he was taller and broader than Trapt. Bandages covered his torso. His hair was pulled back with a tie.

“I saw you,” Dad said. “Out of the corner of my eye. You killed the Joktal who held the whip.”

Trapt nodded. The beat of the cora in his aura quickened. “I did.”

“That was risky and brave.”

“Bazel was in the trees with a notched arrow. I trusted her to have my back,” he said.

My knees went weak, and I had to sit down.

“I’m old,” Dad said, and my mother bowed her head. “I’ve lived a long life, and I still have a bit to go, but I’m not a young warrior anymore. I’m the past. And I’ve spent so much time worrying...” his gaze drifted to me. “I’ve spent a lot of time worrying about what we were leaving behind for Bazel and the chits. If we were still able to create warriors who would protect the next generation. And that’s you, Trapt. You’re the future. Along with Bazel. And it’s never been brighter.”

Trapt swallowed. Tried to speak. Swallowed again. And eventually gave up. Dad gripped the back of his neck and brought their foreheads together. They remained silent, and I held my breath.

I released it when Dad pulled back, and Trapt finally found his words. “Thank you. I’ll take care of her. Just as she takes care of me.”

Dad smiled. “I know.”

He took a step back and stumbled on weakened legs. I immediately jumped to my feet, and the three of us helped Dad back into bed even though he grouched and complained the whole time.

“No one is saying you’re weak,” I told him as I pulled the fur up to his waist. “But you need to rest. You nearly died, you know. So give Mom and I a break and take your time to heal.”

He reached for my mother’s hand. “Fine. But only for you two. I could get up right now and fight a whole bunch of Joktals.”

“Sure you could.” Mom patted his shoulder.

“Are you placating me?” He grumped.

“Never.” Mom winked at me, and I laughed.

FOURTEEN

Trapt

“Right there,” Bazel said, directing me where to place this big thing she called a *mirror*. I didn’t particularly like seeing my face reflected back at me, but it meant a lot to Bazel, so I propped it behind a large table she’d moved into my hut. She called that a *vanity*, and I was learning Bazel truly was a princess.

And she was also *my* princess.

I swiped my hands together and surveyed my hut which was now significantly more crowded. I’d previously had a bed pallet and a table with one broken chair. Now I had a *mirror*, a *vanity*, and something else called a *wardrobe*. Bazel stood in the center of the hut, tapping her fingers on her lips as she no doubt was searching for something else to rearrange. I’d already moved the bed pallet three times.

Not that I was complaining. I would sleep on sharp rocks if it meant wake up next to her every day.

“I think that’s it,” she murmured, running her hands along her vanity. “What do you think?”

I thought that I didn’t care what my hut looked like, just that she was here. I was certain she’d ask me to move into The Hall with her. I would have, although I preferred to stay in Sari. And to my surprise, Bazel said she wanted to move into my hut with me. She wanted the independence of living in Sari

and her parents respected the decisions. The threat to The Drixonians was all but gone. A few Jotkals remained, but they were being hunted down. The Wutarks had agreed to mind their own business and vowed they never had a strong alliance with the Jotkals anyway. A contingent of Drixonian warriors were escorting the loris to their homeland to be reunited with their families.

“Trapt?”

Her voice cut into my thoughts. I walked over and placed a kiss on the top of her head. “It looks good.”

“That’s what you’ve said every time I’ve asked.”

“And I meant it every time.” She rolled her eyes, but I could tell she was excited. Her cheeks were flushed with color, and she kept biting at her nails. I was eager for us to be alone, but so far too many of the females of the village had been walking inside unannounced. I needed to find a way to lock my door.

As if on cue, a knock rattled the door frame. “Shocked they knocked this time,” I muttered as I strode to the door. I flung it open. “Lu, I swear—”

Except Lu wasn’t standing outside my door with some excuse to come in. Instead, Daz stood there, looking large in the small village. Frankie peeked out from behind his large back and waved excitedly. “Hey there.”

She carried a plate of some sort of sweets and skirted the bulk of her mate to slide inside my hut. “Oh, I love what you’ve done with the place.”

While she handed Bazel the tray of sweets, Daz cleared his throat and stepped inside. My hut had always felt small, but with Daz taking up all the room, the place felt absolutely miniscule. Daz was a large warrior, but most of all, his presence seemed to suck the air out of every space he was in. Frankie seemed the only one unaffected by it.

I hadn’t spoken to Daz since the rotation he had called me selfish. I hadn’t expected to speak to him again except in passing. I never in my life expected him to come to my hut.

He glanced around, surveying my place, and I felt the need to tidy up. Apologize for the clutter and small size. Would he think this isn't good enough for Bazel? Would he threaten me to keep her safe?

His gaze shifted to me, and there it stayed. He studied my face before stepping right into my space. Our chests nearly brushed. I swallowed nervously and waited.

His voice was a deep rumble that seemed to vibrate my walls. "I tried to speak to you before you left Granit, but I missed you. So Frankie and I traveled to Sari."

I nodded nervously. Bazel's aura was as tense as my own.

"I said some harsh words to you in the past, and I reflected." Daz seemed monumentally uncomfortable. I glanced at Frankie to see her mouthing the words along with him. When he paused, she waved her hand in a *go on* gesture. "At the time, I was under a lot of pressure but that is no excuse for how I treated you. So I would like to amend my words to you. I believe you are a selfless warrior. The sacrifices you have made are appreciated by all of us. The courage you and Bazel showed during the final Joktal battle will be transcribed into our records. I thank you."

And then he reached out, clasped the back of my neck, and brought our foreheads together.

Shock coursed through my body. I was dizzy. My mouth went dry. I wasn't sure how I stayed on my feet. Daz's words in the past nearly broke me, but I felt like I deserved them. To have him show up at my hut to thank me felt like a hallucination.

I swallowed, and only managed to say, "Thank you."

Frankie clapped her hands, and Bazel joined in. Daz let me go, and I turned to find my mate sniffing slightly as happy tears slipped down her cheeks. Frankie beamed at her mate like he was a chit who just learned to walk. I was sure she was behind many of Daz's words, but he wouldn't have said them if he didn't mean them. His presence alone would have been enough, but his words would fuel me until the day I died.

The four of us left the hut to find the courtyard of Sari filled with bodies. Many of the warriors from Granit had come with their mates, and the Sari females must have known about this ahead of time, as tables filled the center of the village lined with food and drinks.

I found Lu smiling happily with Maisie while Tasha walked around with Trix, her chit strapped to her back.

Bazel's hand slipped into mine. "We did it," she whispered. "Fatas has blessed us."

"She has." I pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "Now, let's feast, my cora-eternal."

She threw back her head. "Let's feast."

What's next?

The final FINAL conclusion (I swear this time!) to the Outcasts of Corin:

[TINZEL](#)

*Thank you so much for reading *The Alien's Reward*! I'd appreciate it if you drop me a rating and review on Amazon and Goodreads!*

If you're new to my books, please check out my [website](#) for my bibliography and reading order, www.ellamaven.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Maven is the pen name for a multi-published USA Today Bestselling author who decided to finally unleash the alien world that had been living in her head for years. (Is that weird? Probably). Her books feature dominant, possessive aliens who are absolutely devoted to their humans.

She lives on the East Coast with her completely normal husband and two spawn who sure seem alien some days.



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